

Comprehension of the Buddhist path



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Bhante Pemasiri Thera
Sri Lanka — 2015



CHAPTER 1

FOREWORD

I came across the Buddha's teachings after trying to work with various Western and oriental philosophies, psychologies, and even esotericism. I was amazed by the beauty and perfection of the Dhamma, with its scope for exploration and absence of dogma – and a heart-warming promise of unconditional liberation. Gautama Buddha revealed the truth about vanity, emptiness and the pointlessness of everything mundane. It was like sweet nectar pouring into my heart. I had found answers to eternal questions about the suffering that riddles the deluded mind, lost as it is in endless illusions of its own creation.

For a few years, I studied the Dhamma on my own and attended various lectures on Buddhism in Moscow. Ultimately, I found I wanted to immerse myself in meditation and find a teacher who could help me do that, because it appeared that following the Buddha's path could be a straightforward and joyous process under the guidance of a knowledgeable mentor. All one need do was diligently follow his advice.

The decision to write a book came about a year and a half after my first meeting with the Sri Lankan teacher Pemasiri Thera.¹ He is the abbot of “*Kanduboda Sumathipāla Na Himi Senasun Arana*”, a meditation centre near the city of Colombo. Bhante Pemasiri has trained thousands of yogis from all over the world and is a legend in his own country, where he is held to be a successor of the renowned Burmese meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw.

Bhante Pemasiri balks at any fuss around his own reputation. He almost never does media interviews and will not permit his meditation centre even to have a website, brushing aside any concerns that a low public profile could make it look more like an exclusive club than the open, international centre for Buddhist practice that it is.

However, I thought it would be utterly unfair not to share with others what I learned from this teacher. Although there are many personal stories in this book, it has not been my intent to write Bhante’s biography. The stories are simply a backdrop for revisiting what the Buddha himself said, so much of which nowadays has been buried in a succession of distortions, conjectures, mysticism and empty ritual. I have tried to capture, in words, the very core of His instructions for the development of mind, meditation and the attainment of true calm.

Bhante agreed to do a series of interviews with me and I must say that, as a journalist and philologist, they proved to be the hardest I had ever conducted. A good interview is always a bit of a provocation: you start with praise, inquiring gently, and then you come out with the harder questions and look for the reaction. Even subjects experienced in the interview process can still be thrown off and reveal their true feelings through their facial expressions, their eyes, and tone of voice.

¹ A *Thera* is an elder, experienced monk. In this book, I will also often refer to Pemasiri Thera in the respectful term *Bhante*, and as *Lokuhamudurowo*, Sinhalese for “accomplished monk”.

Pemasiri Thera was different. He answered questions without hesitation. He was so calm and composed, it was impossible to catch him out or knock him off balance. He bears a sharp and impeccable sense of humour and has a phenomenal memory, recalling what he said and when he said it, many years back. And he will never say too much. Ordinary people can often be very attached to their own persona, constantly making self-references. Even when they hold something back, it can all be part of an effort to create intrigue and garner attention. Not Pemasiri Thera, who is delighted not by attention and fame, but by solitude. However, if he sees that a person sincerely wants to learn the Dhamma and to clear his mind, he will do everything he can to help him.

Bhante welcomes people regardless of their ethnicity, gender, education or social status; he is adored by politicians, pop stars, businessmen, and ordinary Sri Lankan villagers. One might see him having a cup of tea in the company of a science professor, a police inspector, or a rural grandmother. He is equally patient and kind with everyone.

What are the kinds of things Bhante's students say about him? "I have completely transformed;" "I behave and act totally differently than before meeting Pemasiri Thera;" "Only now do I understand what it was meant in the suttas²".

Many of those who became loyal students first had come to him with serious personal problems: deeply depressed after divorce or illness; grieving the loss of loved ones or property; with drug addictions; or with suicidal thoughts, having lost all faith and the

² The term "*sutta*" ("*sutra*" in Sanskrit) means "thread" and is related to the English term "suture". Thus, a *sutta* is a threaded, or connected, series of teachings on a given theme. The *Pali Canon* is also known as the *Tipiṭaka* (ti = three; pitaka = basket), meaning the Three Baskets, or Collections, of teachings: *Sutta Pitaka*, *Vinaya Pitaka* and *Abhiṭṭhe Dhamma Pitaka*.

desire to live. Despite their varied backgrounds, these people were united in their unlimited gratitude to this teacher, who has devoted his life to helping those who come to him.

Pemasiri Thera speaks fluent Pali, the language the Buddha spoke. Therefore, I have used quite a few Pali terms. I hope the elegance of Pali, in combination with the English translation, has succeeded in preserving the true meaning of Bhante's instructions, which should help the readers of this text understand the essence of his lectures and will give answers to many questions worrying them.

I express sincere gratitude to everyone who helped me in writing this book – Anil Barnas, Artashes Gazaryan, George and Natasha Lyapkini, Konstantin Komochkin, mechi Nadezhda, David Young, Evgeniy Shpagin, Tatyana Shkolna.

I used the translation of Bhikkhu Bodhi and others translators in this book.



CHAPTER 2

A MEETING

— *His name is Pemasiri. Yes, Bhante Pemasiri! He will instruct you how to meditate. He is a very experienced teacher!*

— *I am from Russia. Yes, my name is Jane, and I want to come to Kanduboda.*

— *For how long?*

— *Probably for a week or two, I don't know yet...*

What can compare to meeting a Teacher? A genuine Teacher will not use an external source to answer your inner request. He will help reveal what has been hidden: the potential inherent in your own being, but which you had been unable to use without wasting or scattering it. While trying to follow someone else's path, you neglected your own light and, like a lost traveller, you would at times run too fast, exhausting yourself, or, listening to false mentors, you would take a wrong turn. Or you would refuse to walk altogether, having lost stamina and faith.

I left Russia on the eve of my thirtieth birthday without any special plans or understanding of what I wanted to find in the new and unfamiliar space of South Asia, where everything is so strikingly different from what I was used to. I was leaving behind a successful career in finance, my friends, the nonchalant comfort of Moscow and a predictable, office-bound future with its endless rounds of meetings, evenings hanging out in clubs, the delicious spiritual bonbons of yoga and retreats,³ and of visiting Buddhist teachers convened in the former Young Pioneer Camps built in the time of the Soviet Union. I found myself thrust into a whirl of new experiences in Asia, with an excitement and freedom I had never known before.

How satisfying it was to dump the boring banker's dress code in favour of loose-fitting, cotton Indian pants – the must-wear for all Europeans who journeyed to the subcontinent in search of “the truth”. How wonderful it was to wake up in the midst the Nepalese wilderness with a sunrise view that travellers called “the Himalayas for breakfast”. The proud, snow-capped peaks gazed down at me as if in silent reproach for my overlong stay in the concrete jungle. How my heart pounded as I hurtled along on a motorbike over winding mountain roads. How madly impetuous was the emerald Indian Ocean, throwing itself against the rocky shores. How exciting it was to light small candles in Lumbini, the Buddha's birthplace – in honour of that highest and precious Teaching, which He delivered to the world and which two and a half thousand years later inspired a Russian girl to set off on a travel to places where Tathāgata⁴ used to live and preach.

3 Retreat: a period of withdrawal from daily norms in order to do religious exercises and meditation.

4 Synonym for the Buddha

Some of my Muscovite friends admired my courage; some were jealous; some thought I was nuts. I did not care – I was daydreaming of Nibbāna!⁵

A whole year passed in just such state of blissful ecstasy. But once those initial bursts of enthusiasm passed, everyday inconveniencies started to come to the surface: the unusual food, loneliness, resistance to many things alien to my Western mind, things that Asians took so calmly. The biggest disappointment was the discovery that Buddhist countries were rife with exactly the same vices as everywhere else in the world. I felt deceived: the game of life that we called, “renunciation of creature comforts in the name of Awakening”, did not justify itself and I, having left behind everything I’d had at home, had gained nothing in return.

“Hey, baby, you wanted a deal? It looks like you lost”, I was repeating to myself bitterly.

Buddhist monasteries were packed with crowds of sufferers, among whom I felt like an alien and eccentric white girl, learning Pali and grinding her way through ancient texts. Meanwhile in the meditation centres, teachers were uttering banalities, while the system of monkhood turned out to be a men’s club – no women allowed.

It was a time of eerie despair, with feelings of hopelessness, and complete disillusionment. I decided to quit studying in the Buddhist Academy of Sri Lanka and to find myself a cave for meditation somewhere in the mountains to see what would happen – all or nothing!

But just before embarking on that quest, I decided to visit Kanduboda Meditation Centre, as had been suggested by a few different people I had come to know. I would go there simply for the sake of proper closure, without any expectation that it would really change anything – with virtually no hope whatsoever.

5 (Sanskrit – Nirvana), the highest goal in the Dhamma.

It was a beautiful May, scorching hot, just two days before the major Buddhist holiday of Vesak⁶, and there, set in the green rainforest, was Kanduboda, teeming with life as people prepared for the festivities. An affable, blonde German woman, Juliana, helped me settle in and took me to “have a look” at the man at the centre of this institution.

2.1. Be that bird!

A slight man, not tall, with light olive skin, Bhante Pemasiri radiated strength and energy. He used a big umbrella as a cane when he walked. He was seventy years of age, but still there was something amazingly youthful in the easy movements of his flexible body, in his simple and natural manners, a sense that he was untouched by the breath of time.

It seemed like nothing could be concealed from his large, piercing, hazel eyes. His whole being exuded an unflappable confidence. He had a remarkable smile: very open, very frank. Meeting him for the first time in the mango tangles of Kanduboda, I was deeply touched by the way he smiled at me, just a stranger from Russia, and that he had made time for an interview with me despite the long list of duties that faced him as the holiday approached.

Although I was nervous during this first, fleeting encounter, I nevertheless could clearly discern his unflinching calm. The surrounding world could be full of threats, but in this space, near this person, it seemed simply that nothing bad could happen. This feeling was new and strange, because by then, I had long forgotten how to re

⁶ Day of birth, Awakening and *PariNibbāna* (physical death) of the Buddha.

ly on someone else. Pemasiri Thera asked me what I did before coming there. I sat with one pulsating thought: I was no longer wandering in the dark, but suddenly walking along a road firmly holding the hand of the guide.

What can I say to praise this man sufficiently? Compassion without limits, an embodiment of wisdom and the skill of “reading” people – these are just clichés and cannot express a fraction of his qualities. Pemasiri Thera is fluent in Pali and knows almost all of the Tipiṭaka by heart. When answering a yogi’s question, he doesn’t pause for a second in reciting excerpts, and can even name the page number of any sutta. He believes that it is better to study the Buddha’s words in the Buddha’s language, because terms in Pali are so much more accurate and poetic than their English counterparts. As he recalled Tipiṭaka passages, his eyes half-closed, his slightly coarse, melodious voice could transport anyone listening centuries into the past.

“Train your mind, and nothing will be able to deter you or to make you lose heart. When a bird-catcher puts up a net, one or two birds still manage to escape. Be that bird! Follow the Path, leave everything behind”, – he recited during one evening Dhamma class, sitting on a thin straw pillow, sublimely watching the crimson sunset.

2.2 Spiritual experiments and monkhood

At the age of six, Pemasiri started a series of bold spiritual experiments. After reading the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta,⁷ he decided to train his attention and awareness on his own actions and behaviour. He also

⁷ The Four Foundations of Mindfulness, one of the most important suttas in the *Tipiṭaka* (*MN.10, DN.22*)

started meditating around that time and was able to achieve samādhi.⁸ Then, in order to advance in his practice he set off in search of teachers.

In the middle of the last century, the island of Ceylon was just as rich a ground as India for people seeking Truth, and Bhante had a chance to meet various mentors.

“All my attention was focused on techniques of working with the mind. I never dreamed of becoming a monk or of pursuing any kind of religion. I was only interested in trying one practice after another; and my family would ask me with irony, ‘So, what next?’”

“I could hypnotise people and make them do what I wanted. I studied magic and created an ‘astral body’, read books of various religions, practiced yoga, Quigong and Tai Chi. I was extremely attracted to the idea of teleportation. Oh, I dreamed of flying!”

The sight of old people affected the teenage in a rather strange way. His home was located near a cemetery, so death was seen as a normal thing. But the sight of seniors, bent by old age and illness, caused very conflicted feelings within him. One day, he saw a man on the road soaked in his own blood and he said it scarred his memory for the rest of his life.

“In one sutta (*MN.130*), Yama, the king of death, asks newcomers whether they had ever seen an ill man, an old and a dead man and whether it then occurred to them that their body had the same nature and they would not escape their lot. If Yama asks me that question, I will be able to answer him, ‘Yes, Lord, I saw such an ill man,’” Pemasiri Thera said with a smile.

At fifteen, he felt that wasting time on school studies was madness and, having no expectations from mundane education, he quit school. His family was not happy with the turn of events. His brothers and

⁸ See the chapter about contemplation.

sisters were planning to continue their education at university, yet the youngest did not want even to attend secondary school!

He decided to devote himself to meditation wholeheartedly, and day after day would make the exhausting, several-hour journey from his home to Kanduboda, where monks from Burma⁹ taught Satipaṭṭhāna practice. They were amazed by the adolescent's diligence and abilities and predicted a great future for him, saying he would likely become an extraordinary man.

There he met his future teacher, Sumathipāla Na Himi (Nayakohamuduruwo), from whom he received ordination into the Buddhist order.

It was time when the young man felt really free: there was no need to study at school and he easily and wholeheartedly immersed himself in contemplation, leaving the burden of unnecessary concerns behind. But for some time he was haunted by a vision during meditation in which he would see the gilded domes of Catholic churches over and over again.

“You must have been a great saint in your past life”, one bhikkhu said to him.

Having taken the decision to become a monk at seventeen, he left his home before his ordination and started living in the street alongside beggars in order to test himself. Would he, a young man from a well-off family, be able to lead such life? It was a brave experiment. Although he did not beg, he ate what beggars ate and he slept where they slept, on the street or in the shade of trees.

Realising that her son was not going to receive a normal education and lead a normal life, his mother agreed that he become ordained, which for her was better than seeing him on the street looking like a beggar. But his father never accepted his monkhood and refused to

⁹ Now called Myanmar.

speak to him. Throughout his life, Bhante would try again and again to engage his father, but each time he would run into a virtual stone wall.

When he became a monk, he received the name Pemasiri. “Pema” in Pali meant “love, attachment”, and “siri”, “shine, glow”.

In Kanduboda, the young bhikkhu encountered the caste issue – this time it arose around speech.

“Speech was of utmost significance”, said Bhante. “The language you use in talking with various people. I spoke the way I was used to speaking in my childhood, but after the initiation, it became a source of many conflicts. Other monks thought that the expressions I was using were meant to show off, to demonstrate my higher status, but all I did was follow the old family tradition. If I sounded unceremonious, it was not because I was arrogant, but because it was my normal speech habit. People around me complained to my teacher, who instructed me to stop!”

In those times in Sri Lanka, every caste had its own dialect and manner of communicating with others. While in Russian, for instance, there are just two forms of the second-person singular “you”, formal and informal, in Sinhalese, there are dozens of modes of addressing one another.

In those days, the area around Kanduboda was a kind of rural village, but Bhante was seen as an “urban”. Upon hearing his manner of speech, some other monks concluded that he considered himself superior to them. It took him several years to adapt to the new living conditions – a life free of castes – because in Kanduboda, people from all walks of life came together.

“Just as, when the great rivers reach the great ocean, they give up their former names and designations and are simply called the great ocean, so too, when members of the four social classes—

*khattiyas, brahmins, vessas, and suddas— go forth from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, they give up their former names and clans and are simply called ascetics following the Sakyan son*¹⁰. *This is the fourth astounding and amazing quality that the bhikkhus see in this Dhamma and discipline*". (AN.8.19)

When he ordained Pemasiri, his teacher assigned him to learn the *Dhammapada*, the treasure of the Dhamma, by heart. He thumbed through the book and the next day he was able to recite all the poems verbatim. Other monks had trouble remembering even a few lines.

In addition to a phenomenal memory, which he'd had from birth, the young bhikkhu once again proved to be a head taller than his brethren, in learning the Dhamma. Teachers eventually asked him to leave the class during group lectures because he would tend to lead the discussion at too difficult a level, and others just couldn't keep up with him. So, he had to study separately.

"If I had developed pride on account of that, it would have been disastrous for me", he noted.

After becoming a monk, the Venerable Pemasiri remained in contact with his family, especially with his mother – a habit, he confessed, that was very difficult to break. Every time he was unwell, he would instantly miss his family. If he needed a bus ticket, he would go home for help to get it, as he didn't yet have sponsors among laypeople.

According to the rules, every initiated bhikkhu had to undergo a five-year "dependency" (*nissaya*), which involved living under the care of an older monk. Ven. Pemasiri followed the Vinaya, the monastic code of discipline, with fervent devotion and reported every

¹⁰ One of the synonyms for the Buddha.

day on even his slightest breaches. His mentor soon advised him to slow down and relax.

The Dhamma-Vinaya embrace so many areas of life, in minute detail, that no newcomer is expected to master them quickly. So the Buddha established a period of learning during which every new monk would train under the guidance of an experienced bhikkhu before he can be considered competent enough to take care of himself on his own. If, upon the expiration of that period, the mentor is not satisfied with his protégé, the term can be extended to ten, or even twenty years or more. Sometimes, it might last to the time of death. (Currently, very few monks follow this tradition, Pemasiri Thera noted. It has become standard to gain a higher ordination and then immediately to start move freely among various temples and teachers).

Bhante's teacher, Sumathipāla Na Himi, did not test his young student for the whole period of five years, seeing how different Pemasiri was from everyone else, having grasped the whole Teaching so quickly and having started meditating when he was still a child.

From the age of fifteen, he practiced Satipaṭṭhāna as taught by the renowned Burmese teacher Mahasi Sayadaw, and by whose grace the ancient Buddhist tradition of mindfulness and awareness meditation was reborn in Ceylon.



CHAPTER 3

TEACHERS

...Magandiya, associate with true men. When you associate with true men, you will hear the true The Dhamma. When you hear the true Dhamma, you will practice in accordance with the true The Dhamma. When you practice in accordance with the true Dhamma, you will know and see for yourself thus: 'These are diseases, tumors, and darts; but here these diseases, tumours, and darts cease without remainder.

(MN.75)

3.1 Mahasi Sayadaw

The late Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw was born in the year 1904 at Seikkhun, a large, prosperous and charming village. At the age of six, he was sent to receive his early monastic education. Six years later he was initiated into the monastic Order as a samanera ¹¹ and

¹¹ A novice monk

given the name of Shin Sobhana (which means Auspicious). He was ordained as a Bhikkhu of November 1923. Sumedha Sayadaw Ashin Nimmala acted as his preceptor. Within four years, Ven. Sobhana passed all three grades of the Pali scriptural examinations conducted by the government.

Ven. Sobhana went on with his own studies of the scriptures, being especially interested in the Mahasatipatthana Sutta.

The Mahasi Monastery at Seikkhun (whence he became known as Mahasi Sayadaw) fortunately remained free from the horror and disruption of war. During this period, the Sayadaw's disciples prevailed upon him to write the "Manual of Vipassanā Meditation", an authoritative and comprehensive work expounding both the doctrinal and practical aspects of satipatthana meditation.

It was not long before the Mahasi Sayadaw's reputation as a skilled meditation teacher had spread throughout the region and came to the attention of a devout and wealthy Buddhist, Sir U Thwin. U Thwin wanted to promote the Buddha Sasana by setting up a meditation centre directed by a teacher of proven virtue and ability. After listening to a discourse on vipassanā given by the Sayadaw and observing his serene and noble demeanour, Sir U Thwin had no difficulty in deciding that the Mahasi Sayadaw was the meditation teacher he had been looking for.

Then, at the personal invitation of the then Prime Minister, U Nu, Mahasi Sayadaw came down from Shwebo and Sagaing to the Sasana Yeiktha (Meditation Centre) at Rangoon, accompanied by two senior Sayadaws. Thus began Mahasi Sayadaw's guardianship of the Sasana Yeiktha at Rangoon. On 4th December 1949, Mahasi Sayadaw personally instructed the very first batch of twenty-five meditators in the practice of vipassanā. As the meditators grew in numbers, it became too demanding for the Sayadaw to give the entire initiation talk to all the meditators. From July 1951, the tape-recorded talk was

played for each new batch of meditators with a brief introduction by the Sayadaw. Within a few years of the establishment of the Sasana Yeiktha at Rangoon, similar meditation centres were inaugurated in many parts of the country with Mahasi-trained members of the Sangha as meditation teachers. These centres were not confined to Burma alone, but extended to neighbouring Theravādan countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka. There were also a few centres in Cambodia and India. According to a 1972 census, the total number of meditators trained at all these centres (both in Burma and abroad) had exceeded 700 thousand.

Mahasi Sayadaw was honoured in 1952 by the then Prime Minister of the Union of Burma with the prestigious title of Aggamahapandita (the Exalted Wise One).

At the historic Sixth Buddhist Council, which was inaugurated with every pomp and ceremony on 17th May 1954, Mahasi Sayadaw played an eminent role, undertaking the exacting and onerous tasks of Osana (Final Editor) and Pucchaka (Questioner).

In 1957 the Buddha Sasana Council of Burma sent a Theravāda Buddhist mission to Japan. Mahasi Sayadaw was one of the leading representatives of the Burmese Sangha in that mission.

Also in 1957, Mahasi Sayadaw undertook the task of writing an introduction in Pali to the Visuddhimagga¹² Atthakatha, to refute certain misstatements about its famous author, Ven. Buddhaghosa.

Considering these fruitful activities in promoting Buddhism in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, we might describe Mahasi Sayadaw's missions to these countries as "The Dhamma-vijaya" (victory of the The Dhamma) journeys.

¹² *"The Path of Purification"*, written approximately in 430 CE. It is a comprehensive manual condensing and systematizing the theoretical and practical teachings of the Buddha.

It was characteristic of the Venerable Sayadaw's disinterested and single-minded devotion to the cause of the Buddha Sasana that, regardless of his advancing age and feeble health, he undertook three more missions to the West (Britain, Europe and America) and to India and Nepal in the three years (1979, 1980 and 1981) preceding his death.

From the memoirs of a contemporary (Shattock E.H. *An Experiment in Mindfulness*. New York):

“By the end of the first week of my retreat, Mahasi Sayadaw came back from the hospital, and invited me to give him a daily report. He looked sick and tired, and yet immediately impressed me as an example of remarkable self-control. He was a tall, well-considered man, his face expressed curiosity. I felt that this was a man of great understanding and sympathy, without narrow concepts of truth. I was encouraged by the idea that he might approve of my questions and that from him, I wouldn't have to settle for a formal, doctrinal response. It was not coming from self-absorbed ascetic; his face radiated power and confidence and serenity”.

The lost generation

I studied Mahasi Sayadaw's photograph on an old picture stand in Kanduboda. A strict face, a bit tired, but full of life and will, with classical regular features looking directly at the camera without posing.

What kind of person was Mahasi Sayadaw?

Pemasiri Thera contemplated for a moment, as if uncharacteristically confused: how is it possible to say something just in passing, in a few words, about such a person?

“One could never say enough describing Sayadaw”,¹³ he said at last.

“His wisdom, his concentration and awareness – all these qualities were developed to the highest extent in him. He was a person of integrity”.

“When he walked, he was focused on walking without looking around as people normally do. When walking or in a car, he always looked straight ahead. He was always fully aware”.

Was his technique distorted after his death?

“We should understand that in fact there is no such thing as a ‘Mahasi Sayadaw technique’. But there is Satipaṭṭhāna – the one method, which helps all beings to clear the mind, reach The Far Shore, and attain Liberation. It is Buddha’s method”.

“Training in Satipaṭṭhāna is extremely difficult, and cannot be learned quickly, as many are trying to do at short-term training courses. The true practice has been almost completely lost among these emerging commercially oriented meditation organizations, which are more interested in popularity and monetary gain”.

“Certainly, virtually no one is practicing the way Mahasi Sayadaw taught. As the third generation of his students has grown older, most of them teach other things. I saw that when I visited Burma in 2013. Meditation instructors add something of their own, something from other teachers, and the result is a watered-down mix”.

“The way the Master taught was flawless, but his followers now do it wrongly”.

13 Respectful term for a senior monk

I was impressed reading Mahasi Sayadaw’s books by the fact that he so openly talked about attainment of Nibbāna. As if it was something ordinary...

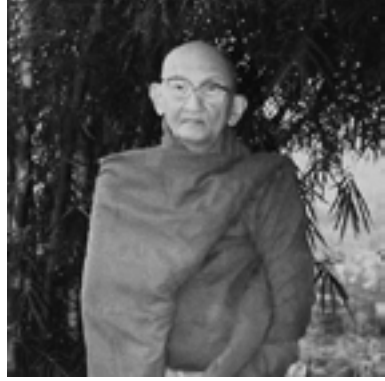
“That is so true! However, Mahasi Sayadaw did not write books himself. There are several of his works in Burmese, but now it is impossible to find them. Sumathipāla Na Himi did keep a few of the books said to be written by Sayadaw”.

“Anyway, it is impossible to repeat the experience he described just by reading the book. I know that some people try it, but unfortunately, it is an exercise in futility. In this, only live, direct instructions are sufficient”.

“What he was preaching was wonderful. It was something very enlightened, but only few are able to attain it and overcome all obstructions”.

“There are only a few ‘big’ teachers in the world. Not many are left. There may be some more out there, but they lead a very quiet life. So, it is becoming more difficult to find them”.

As Pemasiri Thera spoke these words, his voice became softer and softer, as if feeling enormous compassion for the world – a world that is losing its great mentors one after the other without understanding the bitterness of the loss, without even shedding a tear.



CHAPTER 4

SUMATHIPĀLA NA HIMI

...When a bhikkhu is endowed with faith, virtuous, and learned; a speaker on the The Dhamma; one who frequents assemblies; one who confidently teaches the The Dhamma to an assembly; an expert on the discipline; a forest-dweller who resorts to remote lodgings; one who dwells having contacted with the body those peaceful emancipations, transcending forms, that are formless; and one who, with the destruction of the taints, has realized for himself with direct knowledge, in this very life, the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom, and having entered upon it, dwells in.it, then he is complete with respect to that factor.

A bhikkhu who possesses these ten qualities is one who inspires confidence in all respects and who is complete in all aspects.

(AN.10.9)

4.1 The Dhamma's mission

Sumathipāla Na Himi was born in Ceylon and was initiated as samanera at the age of seven. He was sent to Burma three years later where he took ordination and met Mahasi Sayadaw, who became his mentor, and where he lived until his sixtieth birthday.

He returned to Ceylon in 1952 and never went back to Burma. He and three other Burmese bhikkhus had been entrusted with a mission to revive the Satipaṭṭhāna tradition on their Indian Ocean island.

It was decided to launch this effort in concert with the Buddha's 2,500-year anniversary. After a series of discussions, the Ceylonese government concluded that among all Theravāda¹⁴ nations, the strictest and most authentic meditation practices existed only in Burma. Ceylon officially requested Burma to send teachers for the training of monks and laypeople. Mahasi Sayadaw was assigned to help out and sent four of his students to the island.

The founding of the Kanduboda meditation centre was initiated at the highest level. Prime Minister John Kotelawala and his successor, Solomon Bandaranaike, expressed genuine interest in the project and gave it the green light, with the intention of helping spread Mahasi Sayadaw's interpretation of Satipaṭṭhāna.

Local residents actively participated in the construction of the one-hundred-acre centre, which was completed in record time. The location was ideal: nestled in the lap of nature, but close to the capital, Colombo. It started accepting yogis in January, 1956.

The atmosphere was profoundly ascetic, with minimal amenities. Yogis' houses resembled small boxes and were made of coconut palm leaves. Adherents' interest in meditation was so strong that they

¹⁴ *Theravāda* is the oldest surviving branch of Buddhism; literally means "the Teaching of the Elders".

were ready to put up with any inconvenience, and thousands of yogis eventually went there to practice.

In Burma, a change of government over this period brought down a virtual iron curtain, and monks there were prevented from visiting other countries. At that time, teachers at Kanduboda started training foreigners and going abroad, with the first monk seconded to England in 1958. Thus did Kanduboda start to become known worldwide.

Originally, Sumanhipala Na Himi's plan was to fulfil the mission in Ceylon and return to Burma, but just after he boarded the ship to depart, a crowd of people ran to the harbour and literally did not let the vessel leave the bay!

4.2 Without any conflict

Pemasiri Thera talks about Sumathipāla Na Himi

“Nayakohamuduruwo¹⁵ was the kind of person whose behaviour towards you wouldn't change depending on whether or not you were in his company. Unfortunately, some people might praise you while you are present, then as soon as you're gone, say something quite the opposite. He was never like this”. He practiced *samatha* more than *vipassanā*,¹⁶ but to understand the depth of this teachers' immersion in meditation, one has to know in principle – and very well – just what meditation is.

“It is very difficult to describe his character. It was Burmese, nothing at all like that of Sinhalese Sri Lankans. Sumathipāla Na Himi was brilliantly competent in the Burmese language and in Hindi”.

¹⁵ Literally means “an old monk”.

¹⁶ Samatha (calming meditation); vipassana (insight meditation).

“He could read people’s minds, and many thought he possessed the ‘divine eye’ (*dibba-cakkhu*¹⁷). So, nobody in Kanduboda could steal anything. He knew all. If someone in the centre wanted to commit an evil act, to steal or to cheat, the Teacher would come up and stand by them. The evil would not happen”.

“Once, a monk who loved to worship a sacred relic decided to steal it. Nayakohamuduruwo knew it, but did not prevent it. He knew the monk’s intent was not to sell the relic, but to cherish it”.

“If someone was walking by in the street and the teacher was inside the building, he could tell exactly who it was. He knew which yogi would talk to him the next day and what he would tell him, and he knew all news in advance”.

“He could enter the state of *jhāna*, a high state of contemplation, with ease. While living in the Himalayas, he meditated on *kaṣiṇa*¹⁸ and was exceptionally good at using the technique, and could teach those who were ready for it. When he trained someone he could see what was happening in his meditation due to *kamma*, and what was not linked to causes from past actions. Thanks to that skill, he could steer yogi in absolutely the right direction”.

“For instance, Sumathipāla Na Himi prohibited husbands and wives, or children and parents, to meditate at the same time and in the same place. It impeded their progress, as they could get distracted and not meditate in a wholesome way. He considered that while a couple meditated at a retreat, they should be on their own and follow their own paths”.

17 The ‘divine eye’, is one of the 6 higher powers; knowledge about kammic destination of living beings.

18 *Kaṣiṇa* meditation is a concentration practice — earth (*paṭhavī kaṣiṇa*), water (*āpo kaṣiṇa*), fire (*tejo kaṣiṇa*), air, wind (*vāyo kaṣiṇa*), blue, green (*nīla kaṣiṇa*), yellow (*pīta kaṣiṇa*), red (*lohita kaṣiṇa*), white (*odāta kaṣiṇa*), enclosed space, hole, aperture (*ākāsa kaṣiṇa*), bright light (*āloka kaṣiṇa*).

“Nayakohamuduruwo adhered to a very high level of morality (*sīla*¹⁹). Once, we went to (the city of) Kandy to teach lay students and were going to spend the night in a house, but it appeared that there was a woman sleeping there. And although the house was big, he preferred to spend the night on the street and meditate rather than go inside”.

“He liked playing with children and they loved him. He never scolded them even if they went into his *kuti*²⁰ without permission and turned all the contents upside down”.

“Both children and adults, animals – even insects – everyone and everything felt safe with him. Mosquitoes didn’t bite him. Wild rabbits escaping from dogs would jump on his chest and hide there. He wasn’t in conflict with anyone in this world”.

4.3 Ordinary-looking

“I commuted to Kanduboda for meditation on a daily basis since I was fifteen. I tried to be as close to Sumathipāla Na Himi as possible. When I met him I was just a boy, and for me it was a blessing that he paid attention to me and let me come closer. I was filled with trust at first sight”.

“He looked totally ordinary and if one hadn’t known any better, one could take him for a common monk. People often judge others based on certain external features and their own concepts. To understand and to appreciate the inner world and the spiritual level of such teacher is an impossible task, as any attempts to evaluate him will only be from one’s own projections. It is necessary to live with such a person for a

19 A code of conduct that embraces a commitment to harmony and self-restraint with the principle motivation being non-violence, or freedom from causing harm.

20 A small house for monk or meditating yogi in Asia.

very long time in order to fully understand him and appreciate him. With Sumanhipala Na Himi, I lived a quarter of a century”.

“His daily routine was as follows: he woke up at three in the morning, then he worshipped Buddha (he did that three times a day throughout his life); he meditated, had breakfast, then meditated again and then he interviewed yogis”.

“During the day, he made his round of the kutis and checked on all meditators. Even if five hundred people were there, he would find the time to check on all of them. He knew about every one and about all their problems. It did not matter whether it was raining or even if there were thunderstorms, he made his rounds and saw whoever was practicing and how they were doing. He never showed any laziness. He never slept during the day, not even to nap. After midday, a general group meditation would start and he would practice along with everybody else”.

“At three o’clock there was a tea break. Nayakohamuduruwo never had tea himself and did not eat after midday, but would only take some fruit juice without pulp, or herbal water. At four o’clock he had a Dhamma class and answered students’ questions. Following that there was another group meditation. If someone was missing, he would find out why”.

“When the Code of Discipline was read, all monks had to be there on time and not a second later. Nayakohamuduruwo was very sensitive to punctuality and to a sense of responsibility”.

He lived in extreme modesty. Even such accepted conveniences as a washing machine were unheard of. He was against amenities that were any more than minimal. He did not have hot water or a shower stall and washed up using just an ordinary bucket. He would start by lathering up his body first so that someone else could use the same bar

of soap. It might seem like a small thing, but it speaks volumes about his character.

“He never asked anyone to take care of him and he even washed his own drinking cup”.

“He had three sets of robes (*civara*), which were kept in immaculate condition. I mended any holes in them. My other responsibility was to shave Nayakohamuduruwo’s head. I was the only one who did that. Once I cut his ear deeply enough that it dripped blood, but he didn’t even flinch. He simply said: ‘It’s okay, Pemasiri, I have one more ear!’”

“He loved cleanliness and insisted that everyone keep their living space and the meditation hall in an ideal state. When I was still an adolescent, I would sometime let my hair grow really long and have ‘elf-locks’, which were hard to comb. The teacher would reprimand me and encourage me to tidy myself up”.

“Nayakohamuduruwo was always ready to teach and to answer any questions students would come up with. That said, he never forced anyone to meditate, because what would be the point? If there is motivation, a person will make the effort”.

“One of his students was a Canadian nun named Dhammadina, a high-level yogi who possessed supernatural abilities. Indian teachers trained her in samatha, but at some point she realised that she needed a new mentor. Using her psychic powers, she ‘viewed’ the world and saw Nayakohamuduruwo standing near a mango tree in Kanduboda. She immediately went to Sri Lanka and started learning from him. Soon, her magic abilities left her, which shocked me, but did not discourage her from continuing to practice. Finally, she was able to practice vipassanā, and all her abilities came back to her”.

“Such stories are not jokes and they are told for a reason: if a person wants to reach the depths and is ready for it, the most wonderful things will happen to him”.

4.4 Teaching to his last breath

“Nayakohamuduruwo was exceptionally kind to me. From the very first day of ordination he gave me whole-hearted support and never forced me to do anything against my will: to take part in ceremonies and *puja*,²¹ or to study or visit laypeople in their homes. If I wanted, I could do any of these things, and if not, then I was simply to meditate”.

“He taught every day until he died, whether he was ill or well didn’t matter. If laypeople brought offerings (*dāna*), then he would always have a conversation about the value of generosity. If someone behaved poorly or went astray, Nayakohamuduruwo could explain his mistake to him in such a way that the person would not feel hurt. If tension or conflict erupted in the centre, he would talk to the parties involved once or twice, but not for a third time. People needed to understand their own responsibility”.

“He was very generous and always helped others. He looked after the sick. He inspired people around him to act with kindness, to have gentle manners and be agreeable. He was offered a position of chief monk at thirteen temples, but he refused them all. He was a great and compassionate man. People who visited him and were willing to follow him would benefit with all kinds of things, such as *jhāna* and realisations. I don’t know if there was a teacher anywhere in the world who was his equal”.

“His mind was firm and totally disciplined. He understood remarkably well what name and form (*nāma-rūpa*²²) were, and the difference between them. He never confused them with ‘I’ or ‘mine’”.

21 Ritual of offering flowers, candles etc.

22 Mind and matter, or name and form.

“He knew the day and hour of his death in advance. Literally a few hours before that time came, he delivered a lecture on the value of generosity and morals, after which he suffered a heart attack. I rushed to his kuti”.

“His last words were: ‘I will now leave you, Pemasiri. Take care of this place. Do not worry about me. Be concerned about yourself and make utmost effort to attain your Liberation’. It was almost the same advice as Buddha gave his disciples and students in the last moment of his life”.

“I know of only one other person, the bhikkhu Dhammadassi, who died in the same manner and with such purity of mind. I, as in the case of Sumathipāla Na Himi, stood beside his bed, when he was ready to leave this world. He suddenly opened his eyes, reached over to me and pretended that he was giving me coins”.

“‘I have something for you, Pemasiri’,he said. ‘Give me your hand’”.

“‘One, two, three, four’,he counted out. ‘It is my gift to you – the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*cattārosatipaṭṭhānā*)’.He laughed and then died”.

Why would I need to look for other mentors after having lived so many years with such a teacher?

“Nayakohamuduruwo was buried in robes that Mahasi Sayadaw had once given him. Right after his death, I searched his kuti thinking I would find some valuable relics. There was nothing. He lived on what he was given without keeping anything or saving it for the future. There was no property, no money in the bank”.

“I lived following the Path he taught me. Learning everything from him was very easy and natural. I always received anything I needed from my Teacher. I was fabulously lucky: I had the best

possible teachers alive. Nayakohamuduruwo always gave me total liberty, allowing me to learn from other mentors. He had five main students, but never insisted that we should follow only him. He always set us free”.

“If I told you, ‘Jane, you should only be with me’, it would be a mistake. From time to time, we need to go to other places and communicate with other teachers. I let my students go and do not consider them ‘mine’.



CHAPTER 5

LIFE IN THE FOREST

*...So be it! I will go alone to the forest, praised by Buddha;
For the self-resolute bhikkhu, dwelling alone, it is pleasant.
Pleasing, and joyful to sages, haunted by rutting elephants,
Seeking my goal alone, quickly will I go to the wild forest.
In the well-flowered Cool Garden, in a soothing mountain grotto,
Having anointed all my limbs, I will walk back and forth, alone.
When indeed shall I come to dwell all alone, without companion?
In the great forest, so pleasing! My task accomplished, without taint?..
(Thag.10.2)*

5.1 In harmony with nature...

Three years after his ordination, Ven. Pemasiri went to live in the jungle together with several other monks. There, in the wild, totally void of the comforts of civilisation, in a small forest temple (*arannya*), he lived for twelve years, visiting Kanduboda from time to time –

when Nayakohamuduruwo needed his help. He stopped visiting his family and did not see any of them for all those years.

The *arannya* was situated in a hard-to-reach location and he had to walk one and a half to two hours one way for his alms rounds (*piṇḍapāt*). Life for a forest bhikkhu was very hard: a lack of water, little food (the nearest village was extremely poor); his kuti had enormous holes, which allowed snakes and scorpions in; a total lack of medical aid. And there were many wild animals around the temple.

But Bhante also recalled the wonderful harmony with nature he enjoyed there. There were very few mosquitoes and all kinds of butterflies and cicadas, which weren't scared of people. They would sit right on their hands and chests.

A leopard would come and treat himself to curds. A wild elephant that was fond of one of the monks lived near the temple. A troop of monkeys used to come “to listen” when one other bhikkhu recited protective suttas (*paritta*).

Several of these instances of co-existence between Bhante and wild animals are starkly reminiscent of canonical stories. Once, a baby elephant ran to a monastery and had fun to play with boards and bricks, throwing from one side to another. Hearing the noise, Bhante come from his kuti and approached the animal and asked it quietly to stop destroying the kutis. The elephant moved back, lowering its trunk and let the bhikkhu get up to his feet. The animal then slowly walked back into the jungle.

“I’ve found poisonous snakes and scorpions on my pillow”, Lokukamudurowo told us matter-of-factly. “One time I was meditating and felt something warm and heavy on my thigh, having remarked on it in my thoughts as ‘heaviness, heaviness’”. It was a cobra that came to warm up – snakes do that sometimes. Then she slowly crawled away.

“One time, I tried to save the life of a tarantula. Little flies were attacking it. Those flies DON'T bite people, but I was trying to save tarantula from him, and he got angry. I still have a scar on my shoulder. Back then I ignored the strong pain and suffered from it for a few years. I lost consciousness”.

“Now, because of my diabetes, any bite could be fatal for me, but back then, when I was a young bhikku living in the forest, I did not care”.

Plenty of magical things happened to Bhante during those long years in the forest. At the age of fifteen, he had engaged in contemplation in the caves of Arankale (117 km from Colombo), in an ancient place where *arahants*²³ used to meditate. (Now it has turned into another tourist attraction, but half a century ago it was pristine, quiet and uninhabited).

One of the caves was ill-reputed among bhikkhus. Huge snakes lived there, although they did not disturb the young Bhante. In full lotus, with his eyes closed, he immersed in samādhi and then had a feeling as if mountains “were coming together” and found himself not in the cave, but on the grass in front of it. He had been thrown out!

Perhaps, the creatures that lived in that cave did not like that he considered the place his – one cannot own such places. When Bhante completely gave up the idea of ever settling in the cave, all problems disappeared.

5.2 Ascetic practices

Living in the jungle, Pemasiri spent days and nights in meditation, allowing only two or three hours for sleep and observing three night

²³ An arahat is one who has fully destroyed his defilements and attained *Nibbāna*.

watches.²⁴ He recalled spending nights in cemeteries and never experiencing any discomfort with that. At that time, he was obsessed with ascetic practices, removing all furniture from his kuti and living next to a human skeleton, training himself in the perception of volatility and death.

He wanted to know what kind of results he could achieve practicing asceticism.

Bhante smiled recalling all this now, but the two years of hardship were very hard to endure. He ate only once every several days, grew a beard, and meditated while walking for ten to twelve hours in one go (because of which he would suffer pain in the legs for the rest of his life). His body had weakened, bones and joints became fragile. He contracted malaria, but continued refusing to eat after midday.

Pemasiri Thera drove himself to such a debilitated state he was barely able to drag his legs along while he walked. Two years later, he stopped the ascetic practices that, if he'd continued, could have killed him. He would come across other ascetics again later on in India, where he spent much time making a pilgrimage in the footsteps of the Tathāgata and meditating in various places across the country.

He confessed that life in India was a real test for him, with its heart-breaking poverty and plethora of diseases. He was even thrown into jail there: police suspected some of the wandering ascetics that he'd been travelling with of a crime and he was detained with them, spending several weeks in custody until he was cleared of the charges.

24 «*Bhikkhu, in the first watch of the night, while walking back and forth and sitting, purify your mind of obstructive states. In the middle watch of the night you should lie down on the right side in the lion's pose with one foot overlapping the other; mindful and fully aware, after noting in your mind the time for rising. After rising, in the third watch of the night, while walking back and forth and sitting, purify your mind of obstructive states*». (MN.107)



CHAPTER 6

OBLIVION OF THE BUDDHA IN THE LAND OF THE BUDDHA

Bhante, was there anything useful for you in India?

“Samatha is known in many spiritual teachings, especially in Hinduism. The number of people who were able to attain jhāna was uncountable. Even before Buddha Gautama, Indian yogis had known about jhāna. Hatha yoga is also good for calming the mind – if meditation is done right after the completion of the exercises”. Beyond the Dhamma, the only thing I found useful was this calm provided by yoga, but even that I cannot call really significant. Yoga without the spiritual context becomes purely physical, and the Vinaya prohibits monks from engaging in sports. If a bhikkhu engages in yoga for health reasons, then it is a desire to extend the lifespan (*bhava-taṇha*²⁵). “I haven’t found anything higher and deeper in this world than Buddha’s Dhamma.

25 Craving for “becoming” or “existence”; the main cause for suffering.

After all my experiments, I came to understand that Satipatṭhāna practice and Vipassanā are the ones that have the highest value”.

Did you have teachers in India?

“Yes, in Calcutta I lived in the ashram²⁶ of Muninraji. Nayakohamuduruwo knew him. In 1970s, the Goenka²⁷ Centre was there, too. At that time there wasn’t yet a Goenka technique, but it was well-known as the method of Burmese teacher U Bha Khin. It was different, not like the one taught now. U Bha Kin studied him from Ledi Sayadaw, thus, the technique of observation of sensations in the body was the same as I was taught by Mahasi Sayadaw. These teachers are no longer alive and their followers adjust the methodology to the way they like it”.

“I spent a lot of time in India, but I can’t say that its teachers influenced me that much. In that country, especially in Puri, I saw something which I only read about in canonical texts: extreme ascetic practices. Reading about them is one thing, and I didn’t really believe all of that existed. But in India, there are still a lot of nighathas (naked ascetics) -- people who eat grass, sleep on nails, and sit close to fire until their body is covered with burns”.

“All that pain affected me in some way. I learned through my own experience that it was not a path to Liberation. The Buddha allowed bhikkhus to practice asceticism only in the following way: to live in the forest; to wear robes made of clothes thrown away by people; to sustain themselves by begging for food from door to door without choosing the itinerary; to sleep at the roots of trees (without a roof above one’s head); to live in a cemetery; to eat once a day; not to lie

26 Hindu place for meditation and learning about spiritual practices.

27 S. N. Goenka was a Hindu, but was born in Burma and established a large network of meditation centres.

down; and not to have a fixed, planned lodging for the night”. “Still, Indian practitioners believe that it is possible to achieve clear mind by torturing he body”.

Is there a certain “Buddha spirit” in this country still to this day?

“Many people there do not know anything about the Buddha, or that such person even existed, and that he attained Awakening”.

“Some residents of Bodhgaya, the sacred place where Bodhisatta Gautama became the Buddha, do not understand what brings pilgrims there from all over the world. ‘What happened here?’ they wonder”.

“It appears that in Buddha Gautama’s homeland, he is known far less than in other countries”.

I read in one sutta that all Buddhas of the past and future were and will be where India is located now. Why is that? What is so special about that land?

“It was said because three Buddhas of the past (before Gautama), indeed, had been born on the territory of modern India”.²⁸

“In the future, there will come a time when this planet is destroyed. After some time, there will appear a new planet, but it will be put together differently, in a different manner. Everything changes. Sri Lanka, too, is not in the same place where it used to be, say, a million years ago”.

28 “*The Buddha Vipassi was born of Khattiya race, and arose in a Khattiya family; the Buddha Sikhi likewise; the Buddha Vessabhu likewise; the Buddha Kakusandha was born of Brahmin race, and arose in a Brahmin family; the Buddha Konagamana likewise; the Buddha Kassapa likewise; and I, monks, who am now the **Arahant** and fully-awakened Buddha, was born of Khattiya race, and arose in a Khattiya family*”.
(DN.14)

“People have the illusion that the world is in some stable state, because they see sunrise and sunset at the same place, thinking that they are located in the same place, but in reality the distance between them and their next day is thousands of miles! The planet rotates. Only with approximation, and for the sake of convenience of communication, is it possible to say that countries are located where they were yesterday”.

“Buddhas are born in a land where the climate is appropriate for the *Sangha*²⁹ to live in the open air – in the forest or in the mountains. The climate in India in Gautama Buddha’s lifetime was soft, moderate. Even if it was snowing in the Himalayas, it would not turn into real frost, which would have made the life of the Sangha impossible”.

“Residents of the country treated ascetics with respect and provided them with everything necessary for their living, such as food, clothes and accommodation”.

Some Russian Buddhists worry that they were born in “the wrong country”, with false views and, therefore, they have a bad *kamma*.³⁰

“In this day and age, there is no point in talking about a certain place as unfavourable for the practice. The Dhamma has long stopped existing only in the homeland of the Buddha and has spread to other countries. Two and a-half thousand years ago it wasn’t possible to fly by airplane and move so freely. Therefore, being born in the one land with the Tathāgata at the time he taught was of principal importance”.

29 Community of monks (bhikkhusangha), or Community of students of the Buddha who attained a some level of realisation.

30 Sanskrit – “karma”, refers to the principle of causality where intent and actions of an individual influence the future of that individual.

“Teachings started spreading with the help of merchants, who came to India for commodities. Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan were Buddhist lands a long time ago at a time when Sri Lanka and Burma were not. The Soviet Union, by the way, was located very close to northern India, and one of the stories in the *jataka*³¹ took place in the territory of the USSR. So it is not possible to reach conclusions about kamma on such grounds”.

“Even in countries where wrong views (*ditṭhi*³²) are extremely strong, there are always people who follow their own path. It is hard for them to move against the flow and they are forced to conceal their way of life, otherwise they could be punished. In Kanduboda, a married couple from Iraq used to meditate, as did people from other Muslim countries”.

“If your kamma was bad, how would you end up in Kanduboda?”

6.1 Flight from fame

At about the age of thirty, Bhante started training his first students. Young, charismatic and full of energy, he quickly gained popularity, mentoring yogis for six or seven hours every day. In Sri Lanka, he was held to be one of the main students of late Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw, who at that time was at the peak of his popularity.

Bhante did not like any heightened attention on his persona and focused only on training, refusing to write books about meditation. Over his lifetime he, just like Sumathipāla Na Himi, did not produce a single line.

31 Stories about past lives of the Buddha.

32 Wrong views are the main cause of suffering. The Buddha, according to the discourses, having attained the state of the Unconditioned, is said to have passed beyond the bondage, ties, greed, obsession, acceptance, attachment, and lust of view.

The modern-day abundance of books on meditation was shocking to Bhante – he thought it dealt an enormous harm to yogis, because as a rule, people who write such books do not have any real understanding of either jhāna or of vipassanā.

“It is impossible to learn to meditate by reading books”, he sighed. “This is delusion. It is like learning to swim – you should just jump into the water instead of reading instructions on the breaststroke or crawl!”

“In the past, yogis didn’t read books on meditation. If they didn’t know the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, that was good! So, many of them were ready to follow the teacher in everything. One day, I collected all books on jhāna from the library and burned them! I felt an immense relief”, he said, laughing. “New books will have the same fate: I will burn them, too”.

He received a certificate from Mahasi Sayadaw at thirty-five confirming his high qualification, but Pemasiri Thera soon threw it out, along with other documents and titles he’d received. Friendship with those in political power did not impress him, either.

“Presidents of Sri Lanka have a clear idea that the country must be Buddhist, but it is practically impossible to teach them meditation”.

The desire to avoid popularity and the hassles and fuss associated with it haunted Pemasiri Thera throughout his life. He doesn’t give interviews and avoids TV cameras, shunning the opportunities to speak even at official ceremonies and passing the task to other monks.

I remember one instance during a retreat for Malaysians at Kanduboda. While walking in the street, a female yogi saw Bhante and – taking him for an ordinary monk – asked him where she could throw her trash. But without even waiting for his response, she just tucked the bin bag into his hands. He took it silently and carried it to the dump. The woman never did learn that she gave her garbage to

the chief monk of the centre (the retreat was conducted by another teacher).

Once, inspired by Bhante's charm and wisdom, a female artist from Belarus painted his portrait. He accepted the painting calmly, but after a while it disappeared. Nowhere in the centre is there a single image of Ven. Pemasiri's face.

A guest at Kanduboda will see portraits of Mahasi Sayadaw and Sumathipāla Na Himi, but only the most discerning eye will recognize the head teacher of the centre, in a faded black-and-white photograph of an adolescent with long hair, standing with his back to the camera.



CHAPTER 7

PAIN END ENDURING

...What taints, o bhikkhu, should be abandoned by enduring? Here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, bears cold and heat, hunger and thirst, and contact with gadflies, mosquitoes, wind, the sun, and creeping things; he endures ill-spoken, unwelcome words and arisen bodily feelings that are painful, racking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, distressing, and menacing to life. While taints, vexation, and fever might arise in one who does not endure such things, there are no taints, vexation, or fever in one who endures them. These are called the taints that should be abandoned by enduring.

(MN.2)

Diabetes – the scourge of his family – struck Pemasiri Thera at a rather young age and prevented him from continuing to live in the forest, as he had to go under continuous medical observation. All his adult life, he has had to stick to a rigid diet and undergo regular medical checks.

Many students wanting to ease his illness send him medicines and give advice, which he does take or not follow. Almost half of his room is filled with boxes of medicines, and the number of pills is constantly growing. He doesn't complain, he simply states the facts:

“Today I have a backache”, or, “I have stomach problems”, and replied to my anxious concern, noting, “You are also ill – every day”.

He is always frank on questions of his health. He doesn't hide his illness, but he doesn't create mental suffering out of the physical disease.

Bhante, how did you train in tolerance to pain? Or were you born with it?

“We should keep it in mind that we are not entitled to demand that others take care of us. My pain is my problem, my kamma. All conflicts in the world happen because people have expectations and blame others around them for not paying enough attention to them. There shouldn't be any guilt games – we are born alone and we die alone”.

“Mind should be trained in that direction”.

“The body is afflicted, weak, & encumbered. For who, looking after this body, would claim even a moment of true health, except through sheer foolishness? So you should train yourself: ‘Even though I may be afflicted in body, my mind will be unafflicted’.

That is how you should train yourself”.

(SN.22.1)

How do we not lose heart at times of physical pain?

“The Buddha told us about the need for patience, which plays a key role in everyday life as well as in meditation”.

“I have taken two pills already, but I still have the same pain! What else can I do?” a man might whinge”.

“He has perceived the Dhamma only at the intellectual level – as a philosophy. While experiencing pain, he doesn’t see its cause – the contact, which is the precedent of unpleasant feelings. Feeling should be seen as a feeling, as an effect of the contact, without the involvement of ‘I’ and without identifying it as ‘my pain’, ‘my suffering’.”

“A good yogi is able to discern a pleasant feeling as a pleasant feeling and an unpleasant feeling as an unpleasant feeling; nothing more and nothing beyond that”.

Can we consider an example? Say, I have a toothache. So?

“If there is a toothache, then we observe the solid element (the enamel), and then the mind, which steps in after that contact (it recognises the pain)”.

“All this is just a cycle of cause and effect without any substance within”.

“We should regard the physical pain without aversion, impartially – this is a real Dhamma practice. This is a simple observation free from affection or hatred”.

“Pain appears as a manifestation of great elements (*mahā-dhātu*³³), which are a part of nature. Elements fall into disharmony with each other and this causes painful feelings in us. If we understand the nature of such feelings, we will not have any problems”.

“Buddha had a backache and a sore foot after his cousin Devadatta dropped a slab of rock on him. Ven. Sariputta, too, suffered from a stomach disease and headaches”.

33 Great elements – fire, earth, water and wind. See *MN.40*

“The arahant, as all other people, has a body and feelings associated with it, but he is not attached to them: while being unwell, the arahant is void of mental suffering”.

“A yogi should catch the instant in meditation when he is attached to pleasure and feels aversion to pain. No one likes unpleasant feelings in meditation, all want ‘the sweetness’, but it is necessary to understand their causes”.

Lokuhamuduruwo liked to tell the story of what happened to him in his thirties when, to test his patience, his teacher sent him to look after a monk who was diagnosed with paranoia and had a dreadful character.

The monk was gravely ill and had a habit of cursing everything around him and seeking constant attention. Bhante spent one and a-half years with him, which was a heroic deed, as all family and friends had deserted that monk. While in hospital, he shouted at doctors and nurses, saying everything that everyone did around him was wrong. Right up to his last moments, he was brushing people off. He was convinced that evil spirits were chasing him.

When the monk finally died, Pemasiri Thera gave the monk’s kuti to a young bhikkhu, who at first was very happy to receive such gift. However, he soon started complaining that it was impossible to live there because of strange screams. Bhante decided to stay there overnight himself and said that around midnight, he felt an icy touch. He remembered his father’s warning, that very cold hands belong to demons and, getting out of his bed, he saw the monk sitting like a ghost and waving his hands angrily at him.

Bhante just looked at him for a minute and then went back to bed.

But the demon continued living in that kuti and because of that, one monk after another left it.

This happens because some people believe that others must look after them, Bhante told me. Forget about it, and bring yourself up in the following spirit – “Anything can happen to me: paralysis, amputation – and accepting it is my Dhamma practice”.

“This way we can put an end to all feelings and unpleasant contacts”.



CHAPTER 8

SUPERNATURAL ABILITIES (*IDDHI*)

...And bhikkhu, with mind concentrated applies and directs his mind to the various supernormal powers. He then enjoys different powers: being one, he becomes many — being many, he becomes one; he appears and disappears; he passes through fences, walls and mountains unhindered as if through air; he sinks into the ground and emerges from it as if it were water; he walks on the water without breaking the surface as if on land; he flies cross-legged through the sky like a bird with wings; he even touches and strokes with his hand the sun and moon, mighty and powerful as they are; and he travels in the body as far as the Brahma world...

...He knows and distinguishes with his mind the minds of other beings. He knows the mind with passion to be with passion; he knows the mind without passion to be without passion. He knows the mind with hate to be with hate; he knows the mind without hate to be without hate...

(DN.3)

8.1 Heavenly messengers and past lives

Did you have the ability to read other people's minds since childhood or was it something, which appeared after meditation, Bhante?

“Jane, if you meditate for a long time, you will have such ability, too. I can't say that I read somebody's mind, but I understand how he thinks. You need long years of practice to do that, and it is very difficult to explain how it works”.

“A meditation teacher should understand what is happening to a student under his care, not only from their words, but from a number of other signs: the expression of their eyes, the way they walk, the way they react to questions. For instance, you came to Kanduboda and started learning to meditate under my guidance from the very beginning, like a child who studies the alphabet without knowing anything about the written language before that. While you meditate, I understand what is happening to you: what was in your past, what is going on with you in the present, and what will be in the future – I know that. I know your future because I know your past and present; what you will tell me tomorrow, and what will happen to you in a week from now, in a month and years later. However, if you quit meditation and leave, my knowledge of you will also disappear”.

“This is a very practical skill, which appears after meditation: the skill of understanding how other people's minds work”.

“As a child, I had other abilities from birth, but because of my elder sister, I lost them”.

Seeing through walls?

“Yes, since childhood I could see what was going on behind a wall: who was there and what they were doing. I had the ability to say there was such and such a person on the other side of the wall, and what colour clothing he was wearing”.

“This would occur to me somewhat naturally, but I couldn’t talk about it at home, because my sister thought I peeped at things beforehand and scolded me. Thus, I stopped telling other people about it”.

“When I was twelve, I discovered the ability to cure other people. Monastic code prohibits bhikkhus from engaging in medicine, but before the ordination I could do that. I could predict events. Say, a cyclist passed by me and I foresaw him falling, and then he would indeed fall. When I lived in the forest, I felt who would come to see me and when, and it would always come true. I had such abilities from birth”.

“Another inexplicable thing is meetings with people whom I knew, which later turned out to be an illusion. For example, I would come home from school, see my mother and talk to her, and then I would find that she wasn’t at home at that time. I would ask her, ‘Mum, are you home?’ She would reply saying, ‘Yes, I am’, and I would enter the house and then would see that she wasn’t in. This could be quite scary, if you consider that it had been happening since my early childhood – and sometimes it happens to me now, too”.

“Thus, for instance, I might ‘see’ my relative or a student, talk to them, and then it turns out that they were in a different place at that time. Once, a student, a general, came during a lecture I was giving. And it wasn’t just me, but all those present in the classroom saw him. He apologised for disturbing the class and said he wanted to go to his kuti. After a while I realised that there wasn’t any general in the centre and never had been!”

What’s the meaning of these things? Who are these people in the disguise of people you know – ghosts?

“I don’t know! The human mind cannot explain it. If it was just me seeing these ‘ghosts’, then we could say that it was just all in my head, but everyone who is around me sees them, too. My mother used to come to me like that, and Anil, and other students. I even asked you once: ‘Are you the real Jane?’” he recalled, laughing.

“Sometimes, people insist that they are real, and later it turns out that it wasn’t true. As a hypothesis, I can suggest that some immaterial creatures who are linked to me by kamma take the shape of my acquaintances in order to tell me something or to accumulate merit for their own purposes”.

“It all happens in the daytime, not at night! I am fully conscious, and I am not in samādhi. During periods of intensive meditation such things do not happen to me, that’s the thing. My grandmother lived long after her death in our old house as a spirit and looked like a normal person. She could talk. If a stranger would come who didn’t know her before, she could have a small talk with them. I often saw her standing near the pillar in the dining room. It was frightening and nobody wanted to stay too long in that house. My sister and her relatives avoided visits there in the evening”.

In my early childhood I used to tell my relatives that I actually had a family and a house not far from the city where we lived. I behaved very differently in the moments when I talked about it and I was quite convincing. Could it be memories of the past life?

“When a child is born, for the first few years of his or her life, there might be memories of previous births. Do you really want to

know your past lives, Jane? Why? Imagine if you remember being rich and powerful and now you are not, it's going to upset you. And if you remember times when you lived in poverty and pain – you will feel resentful and hurt”.

“Childhood memories of past lives are not related to Higher Knowledge at all. Children under seven often remember them, especially if their death was forced or sudden. Their experience of their new life is too short and their past life lasted much longer, therefore their memory can sort of ‘pull out’ chunks of the past”.

“The ability to remember past lives in meditation is a very significant achievement, which only a few can have. This memory is attained from jhāna and is called *pubbe-nivāsanussati*. This shouldn't be confused with memories of ordinary people”.

“I used to know one Sinhalese boy named Dhamma-Ruvan, who lived in Kandy. He remembered his past lives, how he lived next to Acharya Buddhagosa in the ancient city of Anuradhapura. He managed to find that very place when he went to the city. He could also remember that he lived in the times of Buddha Sakyamuni in Kusinagar,³⁴ and his name was Navia”.

Dhamma-Ruvan was able to recite suttas in the old Sinhalese style, which he mastered all on his own, without anyone's help. When he grew up, he forgot about all of these, and became a travel guide.

“Apart from children, disabled people, deaf or blind people also remember their past lives more often than others”.

“Animals can also remember. I know of such cases in Sri Lanka. One household owner was reborn as a bull, in the same village and in the same home where he had been human. That bull always tried to go into the house, creating lots of problems. He really wanted to go to ‘his’ room and to ‘his’ bed”.

34 The place where the Buddha attained final Nibbāna.

“There is also a sutta in which a Brahman who had criticised the Buddha was reborn as a dog. Years later, a dog saw the Buddha walking by and barked at him. He smiled and said, ‘Again you are attacking me’. The Brahman’s son was furious, but the Buddha advised him to check his words and let the dog find a treasure hidden in the house. The dog found it!”

“There are people who can prepare horoscopes by taking birth times of a person. One blind man was able to make forecasts about people’s futures even better than doing it with horoscopes”.

Does it mean that ordinary people may have *iddhi*?

“People had supernatural abilities before the Buddha. Despite the high interest on the part of laymen about such abilities, they do not constitute any special value of their own”.

“There is some truth in all those abilities claimed to be possessed by this or that person. But when it becomes public, those abilities become exaggerated”.

I read in one sutta from the Anguttara Nikai that if a person follows the Dhamma, its stream carries him. Can we say that a modern follower of the Buddha is protected by *devas*³⁵?

“In the Pali Canon, a lot of the Buddha’s conversations with devas are described. Such beings used to come to Anāthapindika’s ³⁶ grove, illuminating it with their light. Nowadays, a lot of readers skip these stories, taking them as fairy tales, but all of that had really happened”.

35 One of many different types of non-human beings who share the characteristics of being more powerful, longer-lived, and, in general, living more contentedly than the average human being.

36 Anāthapindika was a banker and one of the chief patrons of the Buddha.

“When I lived in the jungle, I liked climbing on a high mountain in order to meditate there all night and then would come down in the morning. Once, around two o’clock in the morning, the mountain suddenly lit up with a very bright light emanating down from beyond the peak, even illuminating the ground for the tiniest crawling insects. The light was so bright, it resembled spotlights used in cities to light up buildings. That light was coming from the sky”.

“Once, I was lost in the jungle on my way to the temple and took a wrong turn. I had been wandering for quite a while when I heard a voice from a tree, which said, ‘Bhante, you need to go back, turn to the left and then go straight ahead’”.

“Another monk was lost, too, and was suffering from a strong thirst. He suddenly saw a tree with succulent fruit. He managed to quench his craving with the very sweet fruits. That tree didn’t grow in Sri Lanka at all – that’s the surprising part of the story”.

“There is less and less possibility for the unusual now, as forest temples have electricity and all other amenities. Many caves where great ascetics of the past used to meditate have been turned into dumps or tourist traps”.

“The stream of the Dhamma is still there in the world, but in order to receive its benefits, a person should be exceptionally honest. He should possess true compassion and loving kindness towards all living beings, and have very pure intentions”.



CHAPTER 9

AMITY MEDITATION (Mettā – bhāvanā)

*...May all beings be happy.
Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen, those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born — may all beings be happy!
Let none deceive another, or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will wish harm upon another.
Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings!
(SnP. 1.8)*

9.1 Living for the sake of others

The tiny room where Pemasiri Thera lives – with just a bed, a table and a chair – resembles a bus station: from early morning until late in the evening, a steady stream of people go there. But he says it doesn't weary him.

“I might feel physically tired from being in the company of other people, but not mentally”, he said. “Such an attitude needs to be cultivated, it does not come on its own. If one doesn't train oneself, it is difficult to associate with many people, with the ill, with the old. Some people bring their children to the temple, even though they regard them as a hindrance to their own practice. This is wrong. In fact, children can follow the wholesome example of their parents. It is necessary to recall one's own childhood and stop seeing it as a problem”.

Many consider Bhante to be their spiritual father and all of his students know that any of them can go to him at any time to ask for help.

With my temperature running as high as 39C, and sharp stomach pains, I once dragged myself to Bhante's room. It was late evening and I felt uncomfortable bothering him, but there wasn't anyone else who could help me. Totally composed and calm, he arranged for a car and an escort for me, and then followed up with instructions on the phone late into the night on what to do and which hospital to go to. The next morning, a big bag was brought to my room with soap, towel, shampoos, and after I was discharged, Pemasiri Thera generously treated me to diet food from his own rations.

“Some people think that after becoming bhikkhu, they can forget that it is necessary to help people. But if you lack simple human qualities, how can you talk about higher realisations?” he asked, rhetorically.

Every word and every gesture of Pemasiri Thera manifests his great compassion: in the way he communicates with people and responds to their concerns. He even lets those who dislike him stay in Kanduboda.

He visits sick students in hospital, helps them cope with the loss of loved ones at funerals, and even organises financial help. It is not uncommon for the centre to have visitors who come not for meditation instructions, but to ask for money. There was a time when he had to find cash for a man who had lost his vision, in order to send him to a hospital in India. He's also found jobs for beggars.

It is almost impossible to give a gift to Pemasiri Thera – he doesn't need anything, sleeps in an old bed and doesn't have any belongings. Many students, wanting to provide a treat for their favourite mentor, bring him organic food and delicacies, but he won't touch most of it.

The best reward for him is his student's progress. If he sees a genuine desire to follow the Path and develop the wholesome qualities of mind, he will teach for long hours, day after day, devoting all his energy to such a student.

During one Dhamma class, two very old monks suddenly entered. Bhante left with them for a while, and then came back and told a story. One of the monks was over eighty, but he was younger than Bhante by a count of rainy seasons (*vassa*.³⁷)

They had met in a prison where Pemasiri Thera had been involved in inmate rehabilitation programmes. The man was serving a term for murder, having killed his neighbour with an axe in a fit of anger during an argument about a plot of land. Meeting with Bhante and having long conversations with him changed the man altogether. Enchanted by this "taste" of the Dhamma, he was granted privileged conditions

37 In Buddhist tradition the age of monks is equivalent to the duration of Vassa, the rain retreat. The Vassana period from July-August to October-November corresponds with the monsoon season in South- and Southeast Asia.

in the prison and won an early release, after which he became a monk. In time, he became a well-known teacher with many students. Now a very old man, the monk decided to live the rest of his life with the person who introduced him to the Dhamma. Bhante granted him permission, and the modern-day Angulimala³⁸ became an integral part of the slow rhythm of life at Kanduboda.

9.2 Be happy!

Pemasiri Thera is a living example of zealousness and compassion: he does not discriminate among people who come to him for help, maintaining an impeccable politeness. He addresses adults as “Mister” and “Miss”. It doesn’t occur to him to judge anyone based on their material status or reputation.

All-understanding and all-forgiving – that is what one can say about him. He never judges anyone. Everyone can be assured that, whatever horror about yourself you’ve told him, he will not shudder or refuse to talk to you.

Bhante’s concern about people around him shows in a million different ways. Thus, he waits for everyone to arrive before starting a Dhamma class, and during a conversation he never talks into empty space, but addresses his every word to a specific student: “this one is for him”, and “this one is for her”. For many years, along with the regular lectures, he taught his Sri Lankan students in Sinhalese every Sunday, regardless of how much fatigue he was experiencing by the end of the week.

38 A ruthless killer who was redeemed by a sincere conversion to Buddhism, a famous hero in the Tipiṭaka.

If a student was far away, he would have someone send them an email in response to questions (Pemasiri Thera doesn't use computers himself). The interests of people who have been associated with him were always in his heart.

During Vesak, he organised treatment for hundreds of local laymen and arranged trips for Western yogis to Buddhist places of interest on the island. If any of his elderly students were left homeless (in Sri Lanka, there are no government pensions and children do not always support their aged parents), Bhante offered to have them live in Kanduboda for free for the rest of their lives.

The only time Pemasiri Thera spent on himself was a one-and-a-half hour rest in his room alone starting at noon, following an insulin injection.

He accepted donations from laymen without looking at the gifts, but always pronouncing, "Be happy! Wishes of highest merit to you". But Bhante didn't like it when someone asked him what he'd done with any gift:

"When donating something, you should let it go. You simply give it away without being interested in the further destiny of the gift. If a person throws it out or gives it to someone else, it is none of your business. You do not ask questions. The gift, which is based on impartiality, is the highest donation".

"When a person makes a donation, he feels not only the virtue of generosity, but many other good qualities: wisdom, morality, impartiality. Therefore, we shouldn't practice just one factor; they rely upon each other and support each other".

"Donate without the idea of there being someone who is giving and someone who is receiving".

Pemasiri Thera's kindness extended not only to people, but to all living beings. He asked workers not to collect mangoes hanging in heavy clusters on tree branches, as it is food for the squirrels so numerous in Kanduboda.

Many people try to drive monkeys off because of their mischievous tricks, but Pemasiri Thera let them come to the centre and eat fruit and leaves, because before humans arrived, it was the monkeys' territory and they have the right to be there, even if their hopping on the roofs of kutis could cause damage and inconvenience.

He still remembered an incident from his youth: a troop of monkeys used to visit the monastery, feeling safe near the bhikkhu. But a neighbouring farmer, fearing for his crops, shot one big monkey in the chest. Heavily bleeding, the animal went to Bhante several minutes before his death and showed him his wound. He remembered that sight for the rest of his life, feeling compassion for the suffering of the “younger brothers” of human beings.

“The Dhamma is the Teaching of kindness and wisdom. Kindness changes even the condition of blood, even the relation of wild animals and insects to us. Such people make others around them feel safe. Any meditation technique should be built on kindness; otherwise, there will not be any benefit from it”.

9.3 Divine abodes

Pemasiri Thera often gave lectures on the practice of loving kindness and compassion. Below is a collection of his quotations on the subject from different periods of his life.

What is the best way to start meditating on loving kindness (mettā-bhāvanā)?

“Start by practicing generosity, good deeds and fair speech; start with the development of good features of character”.

“*Piya-cakkhu* (the loving eye) should be one’s attitude when looking at other beings. During the day, you can practice loving kindness towards all the people and animals you encounter. Usually we tend to look at people with distrust and judgement, and it’s difficult to see this quality as beneficial. It is a certain mental detriment dwelling within us”.

“*Mettā-bhāvanā* is not the chanting of suttas³⁹ – it is a practice conducted from morning ‘until night. Without loving kindness and good disposition toward others, it is impossible to be successful in any other meditation practice”.

Some yogis think that *mettā* (loving kindness) is just a “warm-up”, a commonplace practice for beginners. They only want to do *vipassanā*! This is the wrong attitude, because *mettā-bhāvanā* is what the Buddha himself practiced before attaining *Nibbāna*.

There are eleven benefits from this practice:

- one sleeps well;
- one awakens happily;
- one does not have bad dreams;
- one is pleasing to human beings;
- one is pleasing to spirits;
- deities protect one;
- fire, poison, and weapons do not injure one;
- one’s mind quickly becomes concentrated;
- one’s facial complexion is serene;
- one dies unconfused;
- if one does not penetrate further, one fares on to the Brahma world.

(*AN.II.16*)

39 A very popular tradition in Buddhist countries.

“The peculiar feature of mettā-bhāvanā is that in the very beginning, it brings very pleasant feelings, but then can wear off and become bland. One way or the other, it is necessary to overcome that and not to dismiss the practice”.

“It is said that a bhikkhu who develops amity toward all living beings, at least for the duration of his alms rounds, earns the food donated by laymen⁴⁰”.

“This is not just a momentary thing – it is the attainment of jhāna and the state of the divine abodes (*Brahma-vihara*). After attaining the first jhāna, one can start practicing vipassanā and thus come to Nibbāna”.

“Mettā should be perfected, and this will bring enormous benefit that can be seen even in this life”.

Buddha said that there is no one in this world dearer to us than us. How do we find harmony towards ourselves without falling into narcissism or excessive criticism?

“Self-criticism is not a helpful method to move along the Path. If you are angry with yourself, stop that habit”.

“Some practitioners, while performing meditative scans of their body, start hating it, considering it dirty and disgusting, even though they have been told about the advantages of being born in a human body. Understanding the nature of the body and hatred towards it are different things. It shouldn’t be treated with contempt”.

40 “*Bhikkhus, if for just the time of a finger snap a bhikkhu pursues a mind of amity, he is called a bhikkhu who is not devoid of jhāna, who acts upon the teaching of the Teacher; who responds to his advice, and who does not eat the country’s almsfood in vain. How much more, then, those who cultivate it!*” (AN.1.53 (3))

“It’s the same with the mind – it is extremely important to see one’s own *kilesas*⁴¹ and know about them, but there is no need to suppress them, to insult one’s own mind or be disposed against it”.

“We should be compassionate toward ourselves – not pitying, but truthfully compassionate. It is very difficult”.

“Only by possessing such an attitude toward ourselves are we able to feel it towards others. Rude and cruel behaviour means that a person doesn’t have compassion towards himself and he doesn’t take care of himself”.

“Sometimes a person can be strongly attached to his own morality and be very critical of others. There are many such people, especially among Europeans. Western bhikkhus are often rather particular in observing rules of conduct (*pāṭimokkha*), but one can observe all the rules and still completely lack in compassion”.

“Once, a bhikkhu – who was considered an advanced practitioner – was meditating and a dog came running up to him. That made him so angry that he took a stone and threw it at the dog, breaking several of its ribs”.

Oh!

“Yes. When one is being judgemental toward others, it is impossible to accept criticism”.

“One day, the robe (*civara*) dropped off the shoulder of Ven. Sariputta, a Dhamma ‘general’ and one of the most senior students of the Tathāgata. A samanera boy made a remark about it and Thera, folding his hands in respectful greeting, thanked the younger brother”.

“It didn’t even occur to him to say: ‘Who are you to make remarks to me?’”

41 Afflictions, defilements, mind poisons.

“A person of sublime mind is able to accept criticism and totally renounce the judgement of others”.

How does one achieve that?

“Comparing one’s self with others is an ordinary human inclination. We think in categories of, ‘I am better’, ‘I am worse’, or, ‘I am just like that’”.

“Often, we think of someone as a good person only because of our egoism and conceit: we like people whose opinions are similar to ours. If someone is gushing with admiration for another person, then it very easy for the one being idolized to falter. The tiniest offence can result in them being held up to shame, and all previous adoration – even that which he might have earned – will be immediately forgotten”.

“Therefore, I feel a certain discomfort when people praise me, because they change their opinions quickly and forget the good you did for them”.

“It is necessary to train oneself not to be excited by compliments from others and not to depend on them, nor to be upset by criticism. The Buddha was exposed to a lot of insults, but they did not captivate his mind”.

“It is usual for us to judge people around us, but this habit is not wholesome. Mind can start feeding on criticism and prejudice, therefore we shouldn’t think about other people’s mistakes”.

“Usually, people judge others after just a few encounters with them and make far-reaching conclusions on that basis. In reality, we can only say whether a person is good or bad in a specific situation, otherwise how can we know what will happen to him or her in the future? People change”.

“I am often asked: ‘Bhante, how can you communicate with that horrible character?’ The answer is that I renounced the habit of judging others. Even wonderful people have flaws and even criminals have certain merits”.

Can we say that anger is an unavoidable human trait, as even babies from the very first moments of life can display anger?

“Yes, anger arises of its own. It is harder to be agreeable than to be angry and to express hostility. It is important to restrain oneself, at least from hatred and cruelty. Anger is momentary and does not contain intent, while hatred can have totally opposite qualities”.

“The stage of ‘slight dislike’ (*arucci*) is, to a certain extent, necessary in life and it is very brief. It depends on concepts, on conceit and can also manifest itself as a desire to stay away from others: ‘Who is talking there and disturbing me while I practise my vipassanā?!’”

Aversion (*vyāpāda*) is the next stage, when something or someone irritates to such an extent that one cannot stay near them. It gives rise to the desire to do harm, to bring suffering to them. At this stage, one already cannot meditate, so it all should be prevented at the stage of ‘I don’t like it’.

“When a slight sense of unacceptance appears, it is necessary to detect it, because vipassanā should not be practiced with aversion. It blocks all insights, as the mind is too captured by the unwholesome”.

It seems that anger functions as a kind of self-defence in life...

“Anger is always present inside, and it is not related to external factors directly: the other person might not even know about your fury toward them. Sometimes the anger can appear without any apparent

reason at all – it just happens. It is universal for all people; only the causes and objects are particular in individual circumstances. What angers one person may leave another totally indifferent and calm”.

“The same applies to craving: someone may feel a desire to see a beautiful woman, another might prefer seeing a beautiful house. Not only humans, but also animals and even immaterial beings (except the residents of the Brahma world) are also able to feel angry”.

“Practice loving kindness or impartiality. The Pali Canon describes how one Brahman insulted the Buddha, but he said he would not accept the insulting remarks”.

“In the same way, Brahman, that with which you have insulted me, who is not insulting; that with which you have taunted me, who is not taunting; that with which you have berated me, who is not berating: that I don’t accept from you. It’s all yours, Brahman. It’s all yours!”

(SN.7.2)

9.4 Compassion without suffering

It seems to me that it’s easier to sympathise than to share the joy of others.

“That is true. Mettā, at the beginning of the Path, is in fact the practice of compassion (*karuṇā*). It is easier to be compassionate than to be well-wishing”.

“When a person is compassionate, they involuntarily put themselves higher than their object of compassion. When practicing mettā, they wish happiness to others in the same measure as they would wish it to themselves. As for *muditā*, that is joy for those who

have more and who are happier than us. People are rarely inclined to be happy for others; therefore, *muditā* is the hardest”.

“We start practicing with people close to us and we practice for a rather long time, gradually enlarging the number of persons to whom we send our love. Thus, we come to impartiality and equanimity”.

“Say, there is one person next to us who is suffering, another one happy and a third person is in some kind of neutral state. Having *mudita* and *upekkhā* (equanimity), our attitude to all three is the same, without discrimination or rejection. This is a great state of mind, hard to attain. Many try to draw line between loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuna*), altruistic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*), although, in reality, they are all parts of the whole, and in cultivating one of them we develop the others, too”.

“*Karuṇā* and *muditā* also develop as a result of practicing loving kindness. It is not necessary to try to develop shared joy purposefully, it will come by itself”.

“Progress in the meditation of loving kindness accomplishes equanimity to all beings”.

Is compassion without suffering a Buddhist approach?

“*Karuṇā* seems pretty easy to practice, but it is not so. Usually, people are sorry for those in a difficult situation, be it a human or an animal, and this feeling is mixed with sadness and with upset toward the one who is the cause of that suffering. This forms attachment to the notion of a ‘victim’. Thus, compassion is turned into poison”.

“We should not grieve because someone feels bad. Grief is part of anger. Anger can reveal itself even in such states of mind as sorrow, sadness, and fear. Anger and sadness are two sides of the same coin”.

“Bhikkhu Channa, an attendant of the Buddha, was very much attached to him and tried to protect him by being very critical towards other monks (except family members of the Blessed One)”.

“The Buddha remembered his childhood friendship with him and considered him to be the only one who helped him during the times of renunciation; all others were novices and strangers. Due to his criticism towards his brethren, Ven. Channa had not attained any fruition from practice, even though he’d lived in the Community all his life. However, Buddha knew about Channa’s potential to attain Liberation, and before his own death,⁴² prohibited all bhikkhus from talking with him or paying any attention to him. As a result, Channa became aware of his wrong behaviour, started meditating extensively, and attained arahantship”.

“The punishment for that bhikkhu was Buddha’s demonstration of great compassion (*mahā-karuṇā*)”.

It is not at all easy to be friendly towards wicked people.

“One should be able to see the best in a person. If someone did a lot of bad deeds, but also some good, remember only that. The Buddha was compassionate even to those who were completely deprived of wholesome qualities”.

“A cruel person, in fact, deserves more compassion than anyone else, because his lot is darkness and misery. He might enjoy comfort in this life, but it will not save him from coming suffering. If someone drinks alcohol and tells deliberate lies, his companions may experience discomfort as an effect of that, but the main victim of the

42 “— *After my passing, the monk Channa is to receive the brahma-penalty.*

— *But, Venerable Sir, what is the brahma-penalty?’*

— *Whatever the monk Channa wants or says, he is not to be spoken to, admonished or instructed by the monks’.* (DN.16)

alcohol and lies is first of all he himself. Transgressions torment their ‘owner’, prolonging his time in saṃsāra over and over again”.

Is it necessary to help such people?

“Yes. There is nothing wrong in understanding other people, even the evil ones, and trying to help them”.

“Everyone suffers, due to his kamma. For instance, the kamma of a person forces him to encounter criticism and scolding from people around him. We try to help him somehow. Understanding his state of mind, we can help him out a bit. But if we hold everything too close to our heart, that can catch us, too. We haven’t done anything wrong, and our intention was good, but we do experience a certain negative effect”.

“Many times it’s happened to me. I helped failures and poor people throughout my life, and quite often it entailed various troubles for me. In any case, it doesn’t mean that one should stop helping others: we try to act wisely and skilfully, for the benefit of others and ourselves”.

“We travelled long in different worlds, and we entered relationships with other creatures, and there is a multitude of such relationships”.

“Usually, a person is kind to those who are kind to him. The real mettā and karuṇā are something totally different – an equally earnest approach towards friends and enemies”.

“Buddha was equally kind towards his son Rahula, and his cousin Ānanda, and to all other people”.

Is it possible to send mettā to the deceased?

“There are two ways of performing this practice: with the object and without the object, and in the first case the object should be alive.

It must not be done with the deceased, because we do not know in which world the person is now”.

“I consider, for instance, that my teacher completed his journey in saṃsāra. Therefore, I never perform the practice of sharing merit with him”.



CHAPTER 10

NEW KANDUBODA

...Happy indeed we live, friendly amidst the hostile. Amidst hostile men we dwell free from hatred.

Happy indeed we live, friendly amidst the afflicted (by craving). Amidst afflicted men we dwell free from affliction.

Happy indeed we live, free from avarice amidst the avaricious. Amidst the avaricious men we dwell free from avarice.

(Dhmp.25.198-199)

10.1 Vipassanā in the centre of the capital

Despite his unwillingness to be famous, Pemasiri Thera was becoming more and more well-known, training thousands of yogis and travelling not only in Asia but in Europe as well.

(He never learned to speak English, so European students were entirely dependent on the availability of an interpreter.)

He endured the death of his parents, and in 1982, the world lost three great Buddhist masters almost simultaneously – Mahasi Sayadaw, Sumathipāla Na Himi and Sayadaw U Sujato, who all died within one month of each other.

“When the teacher died, I remained in Kanduboda in order to teach people. I was thirty-nine. For the next seven years, I looked after the centre”, Bhante recalled.

Afterwards, he moved to Colombo, where he headed the Lanka Vipassanā Bhāvanā Centre.

Some people might find it strange for a meditation centre to be located in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the city, but Bhante liked to emphasize that Buddhist practice doesn’t only mean meditating in the lotus position in complete silence. He said that the Buddha himself sought out the solitude and calm of the forest only for brief periods, and spent most of his time talking to people in villages and cities.

“Some yogis complain to me about the noise”, Pemasiri Thera said. “But here we need to understand that we live in a sensual world (*kāma-loka*), which is filled with sounds! If you do not like them then you should have been born in a formless realm (*arūpa-loka*), where indeed, sense organs and their objects do not exist. For now, we need to learn to live in harmony with sounds, designating them accordingly, such as ‘hearing, hearing’, or ‘sound, sound’”.

“Meditation can be compared to training a wild elephant: an untamed forest beast slowly and gradually becomes meek under the effect of its training driver. Thus, a novice yogi should not try and leave for the jungle or mountains immediately. He needs to start meditating from an ordinary place within a city”.

“I shall fasten you, mind, like an elephant at a small gate. I shall not incite you to evil, you net of sensual pleasure, body-born.

When fastened, you will not go, like an elephant not finding the gate open. Witch-mind, you will not wander again, and again, using force, delighting in evil.

As the strong hook-holder makes an untamed elephant, newly taken, turn against its will, so shall I make you turn.

As the excellent charioteer, skilled in the taming of excellent horses, tames a thoroughbred, so shall I, standing firm in the five powers, tame you.

I shall bind you with mindfulness; with purified self shall cleanse [you]. Restrained by the yoke of energy you will not go far from here, mind”!

(Thag.5.9)

“When I just started training yogis, I decided to make soundproof windows in the meditation hall, but Nayakohamuduruwo prohibited doing that”.

“You want to spoil the centre?” he reproached me.

“I tried to make people’s lives more comfortable because living in kutis made of coconut leaves without any means of communication wasn’t easy. If my Teacher saw today’s Kanduboda, he would severely reprimand me!” Bhante smiled.

“Of course, a certain level of comfort is necessary, but making the conditions of practice easy does not mean making meditation itself easy. It doesn’t guarantee at all that a person will attain *magga-ñāṇa* or *phala-ñāṇa*⁴³”.

43 Path knowledge and Fruition knowledge. This is the wisdom that occurs in the *citta* (mental state) that is called *magga-citta*. *Kilesas* are completely destroyed by the power of *magga-citta* and the yogi becomes *ariya-puggala* (Noble One).

The Lanka Vipassanā Bhāvanā Centre under Bhante’s leadership worked in the same mode as all other centres of Mahasi Sayadaw’s tradition, with a strict daily routine of getting up at three o’clock in the morning and virtually non-stop meditation until late at night. Bhante would personally ring the bell early in the morning, and he trained yogis from Sri Lanka and the West. He would conduct interviews that lasted only about three minutes.

“With a strong yogi, it is necessary to talk every day – any mistake can become fatal. If a person is on a very high level, he needs only a little training. He will figure out everything himself”, said Pemasiri Thera.

10.2 Shelter for everyone

While living in Colombo, Pemasiri Thera thought more and more often of returning to Kanduboda, which held memories of great mentors.

“This ground is pure, natural, and calm – therefore, I chose this place”, Bhante explained. “Arahants used to live and meditate here. For many years, a lot of good yogis attained jhāna and Path Knowledge in Kanduboda. My whole life is connected with this place”.

With the help of lay students, he managed to buy the land back and organised, from scratch, the construction of the new meditation centre, which was called Kanduboda Sumathipāla Na Himi Senasun Arana.

It opened in 2004, featuring small, cosy cabins equipped with all the necessary gear and with beautiful landscaping, a stupa, spacious meditation hall, and a nice library. Here, Pemasiri Thera gave up the customary training style, with its strict schedule.

“It is correct to have rules and timetables”, he said. “For novice yogis it is useful, and later on, a teacher can give them more freedom. A person should learn self-discipline; otherwise, what’s the point in imposing external rules? But is it possible to meditate one’s whole life just because someone rings the bell? Rigid timetables don’t work equally well for everyone, therefore I gave up that system”.

“People of different age groups gather in the meditation centre. Some of them have health issues, such as stomach problems, and therefore cannot forego afternoon meals. Some are unable to get up very early all the time. We have to take into account all such things”.

The new centre became a place where strict adherence to the old ways could be left behind. Bhante stopped training yogis with the ordinary regimen and didn’t even insist that everyone there had to meditate. Rather, the centre became a place where everyone could find something special for themselves. An enthusiastic yogi would find silence and the opportunity to practice under the guidance of mentors; a person tired of the rat race of normal daily life would find a calm, relaxed environment; a scholar could get reliable information about the meaning of certain terms from the Pali Canon and traditional commentaries.

“When I just started teaching, I had ambitious plans to create a meditation centre where a lot of people would have high achievements, become *ariya*.⁴⁴ I do not have such ideas any more. Now, I do not dissuade anyone from changing their practice and following my method. If someone wants to live in Kanduboda for a week, I say, ‘Fine!’ If someone wants to leave, I also say fine. If someone asks me to ordain them, I will do that, and if they want to return to the lay life I will not discourage them”.

⁴⁴ A noble person who has attained one of the spiritual realisations.

“I let people do what they like to, with the exception of cases when they are on a totally false path, or when they violate the rules of the centre. In any case, monastic life, observance of rituals, reading of suttas, attendance at The Dhamma lectures is good, it is *kusala*”.⁴⁵

10.3 A piece of Brahma’s world

Pemasiri Thera’s approach to everyday life at the centre was amazing: he resolved household issues; watched over construction; and spent all of his free time with workers during the building of the stupa. This was a person who was really interested in what was happening. On his shoulders rested the management of Kanduboda – from Dhamma lectures to resolving the issue of how to mow the grass and how to treat allergies to insects.

Bhante would engage in small talk and willingly discuss rather mundane matters. He watched the news on TV, DVD movies about nature, and gave candies to children.

Only after watching him closely would one realise that some part of him remained totally motionless. He spoke a lot, but it didn’t tire him. Apparently, he didn’t talk to himself – he was free of the endless internal dialogue most of us endure.

Once, when talking about ways to build a relationship with spiritual teacher, Pemasiri Thera gave an example. A young man asked a Zen master what his mentor would look like – he wanted to recognise him as soon as he met him. The Master replied that he would have a long beard and a dirty face. Surprised by the description, the

45 And extremely important word in The Dhamma, meaning “wholesome”, “skillful”, “good”, which leads to a final goal. The Buddha pointed out many times that he was discovering for himself and others what *kusala* is and how to reach it (non-hatred, non-violence, non-greed and non-delusion).

lad nevertheless started his search and was so engrossed in it that he lost track of time.

Many months passed, and now in despair, he crept up to a lake to wash his face and suddenly he saw in the clear water a reflection of a dirty face with a long, messy beard.

Pemasiri Thera, being a man whose hand has held those of thousands of grateful students, wouldn't draw anyone close to himself nor push anyone away. Everyone could warm themselves equally in his light, but he was not troubled by people's comings and goings. Once he told an old student from Germany, "I will be happy if one day you will be able to leave me and go your own way".

After attending to the practice and health of a young couple from Canada, I watched him as he said farewell and just matter-of-factly wished them success – the very embodiment of non-attachment.

Yogis might stay for free, no-one would utter even hint about the need to leave a donation. If the Teacher saw that someone was trying to help, they would be allowed to stay as long as they wished without paying anything at all.

In Kanduboda, there are very few traditional Asian rituals, and Bhante himself was not bothered by formalities. Thus, he allowed Europeans to adhere to the conduct they were used to, without the need to bow before monks, as is done in Asia, or to wear only white clothes, as is considered appropriate in the *Theravādan* tradition.

Bhante, I have a feeling that all of Your life, you have been going against the current, a kind of a revolutionary, shunning conventionalities. Is that so?

“A good question! I don't move against the current, but I do detest various social traditions. However, it shouldn't be a cause to create

conflict and confrontation, for instance, banning women from visiting holy places, which happens in some Burmese temples”.

“This is wrong, but people are used to it, and this tradition has been followed for centuries, because there is a legend that if woman touches the Golden Buddha statue (which according to legend still has eight strands of the Buddha’s hair), it will collapse”.

Why are women are so discriminated against in Asia?

“It is hard for me to discuss this topic as I am not an expert, but I was often criticised by other monks for teaching women. I don’t even wish to talk about it!”

“It happens sometimes that a bhikkhu not only refuses to teach women, but even to accept offerings from their hands. I don’t know where it came from in Buddhism, but I am not interested in that. That would mean I could come home to my mother, and she wouldn’t be able to feed me? This is simply insane”.

Traditional Asian Buddhism leaves an impression of a rather stagnant, bureaucratic structure, where everything is strictly regulated. Did it ever occur to you to quit monkhood and become an independent ascetic?

“No. When I was very young I had this idea for a very short time, but I abandoned it”.

It seems to me that in Asia they ascribe enormous significance to the ritual side while the Buddha himself only advised us to follow the Aryan Path, where there are no rituals at all.

“Ritual is something that is impossible to shun or give up, something to which there is a strong attachment. Commitment to ethical rituals and traditions is called *sīlabbataparāmāsa*.

Some monks like to demonstrate to others that they stay in samādhi all the time and choose a place where laypeople and other monks can see them in the lotus posture”.

“One monk I know, who is ill with a grave form of diabetes, refused to wear sandals and continued walking in bare feet despite the fact that any wound could lead to a fast death. The Buddha allowed an easing of restrictions for sick bhikkhus, but some modern bhikkhus want to be more saintly than the Buddha!”

“The Vinaya says that monks should sew their robes from pieces of discarded clothes. In those times, it was a sign of modesty and humility. Nowadays in Buddhist countries, monks have full support and robes are sewn in factories from good fabric, but are often designed in a way to look like they are made of tatters. This is just fashion, a show-off”.

“Maha Kassapa⁴⁶ spent his whole life in a robe that the Buddha had given him as a gift, and when he advised him to wear some fine new clothes that had been offered by merchants, he refused. This was not because of ritual, as it is now, but out of concern for future generations: the great ascetic inspired his students and future descendants to decline a great deal in order to end desire”.

“In the practice of sīla, there is absolutely nothing bad as long as it is not turned into a ritual. In the Dhamma there are no rituals, but there is training in ethical behaviour”.

Pemasiri Thera disapproved of many traditional holidays:

46 One of the main disciples of the Buddha, a follower of ascetic practice.

“My God, they are like children”, he sighed once, after hanging up the telephone receiver on New Year’s Eve. “To follow traditions is not that bad, but when I hear, ‘Bhante, Happy New Year! Wishes of happiness...’”

He never celebrated his birthday, although zealous students, of course, managed to congratulate him every year and give him presents. In response to “Happy Birthday”, he always said, “It’s not ‘Happy’, it’s Dukkha⁴⁷ Birthday”, and made everyone laugh.

47 Misery, unfortunate, suffering



CHAPTER 11

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

*...If you don't gain a mature companion,
a fellow traveler, right-living & wise,
wander alone like a king renouncing his kingdom,
like the elephant in the Matanga wilds, his herd.
We praise companionship — yes!
Those on a par, or better,
should be chosen as friends.
If they're not to be found,
living faultlessly, wander alone like a rhinoceros.
(SnP.1.3)*

It is difficult to find kind friends (*kalyāṇa-mitta*) these days.

“Even though it might be difficult to find a friend who would lead you to Nibbāna, at least it is necessary to avoid those who lead you

astray. Nowadays, people take everything too seriously; it becomes impossible for them to live with someone who has no relation to the Buddha's Teaching: they can only live with other Buddhists".

"Those who have the right understanding of the Dhamma can influence others instead of becoming an object of unwholesome influence from them. It is possible to live with a thief without starting to steal".

"In the Pali Canon there is a description of a woman who was a *sotāpanna*⁴⁸, whose husband was a hunter. They had seven children and all of them attained the first step of Awakening".

"Anāthapindika became *sotāpanna* at sixteen, and lived all his life after that as a businessman with commercial interests in many countries and had family, with three sons and three daughters".

"Society may operate with thought patterns other than ours, and it is not a problem".

All people have different development levels as far as the mind is concerned, and we must accept it".

The Buddha said not to associate with stupid people.

"And who is a stupid person, in your opinion?" Bhante asked me.

A cruel person

"No. Angulimala was not stupid at all".

"A stupid person is not a cruel or uneducated person, as it is normally considered".

48 "Stream-winner" — one who has eradicated the first three fetters: identity views, skeptical doubt in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and clinging to rites and rituals.

The Buddha talked about a fool as someone who leads others astray from the Path. For instance, you practice morality, contemplation and wisdom, and someone tells you that there is no law of kamma, meaning that everything appears without cause, there is nothing prior to and after this life and hence, your practice is pointless.

“They damage you and, therefore, they are stupid. As is said in the *Mangala sutta*:

*‘Do not enter friendship with the stupid,
But befriend the reasonable, praising those,
Who should be praised —
That is the highest blessing’.*
(Khp.5)

“Of course, there are situations whereby someone is caught up in doubts or restlessness and those around them may contract such phenomena from that person, just like a cold. If your friend is inclined to mental problems, it may affect you too”.

Should such people be avoided?

“To a certain degree, yes, they should. The Buddha suggests avoidance as one of the methods of fighting defilements. If you are easily angered, then you shouldn’t associate with people with a similar flaw”.

“In order to develop awakening factors in the mind, it is very useful to spend time with people who already have such factors in their mind. It is also good to communicate with people who know how to reduce defilements”.

Is it right to be friends with people who have false views (micchā-diṭṭhi)?

“There were a lot of people with false views around the Buddha. That is normal, and such people should not be avoided. In Sri Lanka there are monks who do not let the monks of the Mahayana tradition stay in their temples, treating them with arrogance – without even knowing which kind of practice they pursue. I know some Mahayana monks who are truly ethical, and from time to time, Sri Lanka’s monks could learn from them”.

“It is necessary to be able to talk with people. We cannot start with criticism and tell a person that everything they are doing is wrong. This is totally pointless. They should be given a chance to speak and we should talk to them. Students of other religions used to come to the Buddha and stay with him overnight. There weren’t any problems, as they didn’t interfere with the followers of the Blessed One. In the *Brahmajāla Sutta (DN.1)*, one Brahman said to the Buddha that he had faith in him and that his friends did, too, but they nevertheless were going to continue their own practice of worshipping Brahma”.

“In the *Sutta Nipata*, an ascetic, Bavari, said something similar; he sent his students to the Buddha, and they all attained arahantship, but he remained at his level”.

“All these ascetics followed other traditions, but they commended the Buddha’s qualities and had respect for him. Some would visit him just as they would other spiritual teachers, without any special reverence, and only after talking to him would realise who he was”.

“Buddha’s conversation with followers of other teachings always started off with a courteous and amiable talk, and later on, even his opponents gave him due credit”.

“When I was in Colombo, a Catholic priest often visited me asking me to train him in samatha. He also used to send his students to me. Hindus used to come to me to meditate, and indeed they made an effort and their practice went well”.

“I do not see any problem with that”.



CHAPTER 12

TO EMPTY A BOWL

*...The Wise One doesn't bother with theories,
ideas, popular opinion;
He is not moved by the notions
That sway others.
He has left behind all worldly ties,
He is not bound by various beliefs.
He is in peace...
(SnP.v.756)*

12.1 Beyond the limits of all religions

Acceptance and letting go – that is how Pemasiri Thera's character could be described in a few words. "Let it go! Let it be!" That's what his students hear most often from Bhante. Happiness or pain, beauty or ugliness, success or misery, easiness of meditation or inability to attain samādhi, "Let it go, let it go, let it go".

He is ingenuous much as nature itself is, answering any question spontaneously, and greeting people warmly, but he will forget about you the next second as he moves his glance elsewhere. He does not hold to any object in his memory.

The inability to let go can become a stumbling block for meditators. Bhante said: “The Dhamma was revealed to us to train our own mind, to acquire confidence, and after all, to attain complete Liberation. All other goals are just impediments, similar to setting our own traps for ourselves”.

Full of plans and expectations we might set off to Asia, start meditating, attend retreat after retreat, observe vows and study the Tipitaka, looking down on those who do not appreciate it. We can thus find ourselves always in a state of conflict, anxiety, and trying to achieve something.

“In the modern world, religions have a dangerous trend: people get too attached to them, they become intolerant, fly off the handle, and become furious in the face of the tiniest criticism. Society needs a religious component, that is normal. But sooner or later, a person should leave the limitations of any religion and stop clinging to it”, Bhante said, becoming silent, as if weighing his own words.

You often say that it becomes increasingly hard to teach people...

“It is incredibly difficult to teach people these days: they come to the monastery with their own set beliefs and ideas”.

“The difficulty with the modern Buddhists is that they receive an enormous amount of fragmented, chaotic information about the Dhamma. In Sri Lanka, for example, there are too many talks and

conversations held by incompetent teachers. This leads their listeners to even more confusion than before meeting them”.

“The Buddha said that the Dhamma should be listened to at times appropriate for it:

‘Words about the Dhamma, said at the right time, are the greatest blessing.’

‘(Kālena, the Dhammasavaṇaṃ etaṃ maṅgalamuttamaṃ)’.

(Khp.5)

“I don’t force such confused people to leave Kanduboda, but I do not make any effort to teach them. They will, in any case, leave again and go to other teachers – it is a waste of my time. I let them stay and I don’t tell them that they are making mistakes, in order not to upset them. It is better to keep silent: let them continue going the way they are used to. But it is not that clear and straight Path that the Buddha opened to us”.

“There is a type of spider in Sri Lanka – they seemingly move all the time. However, when you leave them in a corner in the morning, you will discover in the evening that they are in exactly in the same place where you left them. They move in circles”.

“Nowadays, the majority of yogis are similar to such spiders: they go to retreats year after year and, seem to be very active, but they don’t achieve any results, staying in the same corner”.

Could it be because we live in a “dark time?”

“Almost all people who wish to meditate have the potential to move along the Path”.

“Some yogis have remarkable merits, very strong, positive kamma, and I know that they could achieve success quickly, in a month. But they spend years, decades, without any achievement. Sometimes, in their whole lives they never embark on the right Path. This is not related to kamma at all, and not even to the yogis – it is the fault of certain teachers, who do damage to students because they do not know the Dhamma. The students’ whole potential becomes completely wasted, and even a good teacher will not be able to do anything with such students”.

“Na-in, a Japanese master, received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself”.

““It is overfull! No more will go in!””

““Like this cup,”” Nan-in said, ‘you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?’

“Thus, it is necessary to empty one’s own bowl and then go to a teacher. Then he will enjoy helping you. But trying to change someone else’s practice, redirect it to another groove, is a very daunting and futile, thankless exercise”.

12.2 Expectations and letting go

Whatever Pemasiri Thera said, he was always really talking about letting go and non-clinging. He talked about the need to remove expectations from one’s practice.

“Sometimes, a person starts thinking as follows: ‘I have done this and that; I am at such and such stage.’”

“Or starts contemplating his past and future: ‘It is interesting, what came first – my consciousness or kilesas? If I die tomorrow, which world will I enter?’” Pemasiri Thera said, gesturing vigorously with his hand.

“The Satipaṭṭhāna sutta says that a bhikkhu’s mindfulness relates to the thought: ‘The body exists, as there is a need for it, only for the sake of knowledge and mindfulness, and he lives without being attached to anything in this world’.”

“And how do yogis start meditating nowadays? ‘I must attain jhāna! I must attain this, I want that...’ It’s all about having expectations!”

“If one’s first teacher is allowed to tell a student that they have to achieve, say, a stage of sotāpanna at least, in order to avoid being born in lower worlds, then during his practice such conversations should be avoided. And telling a yogi that they became ariya – will mean putting an end to their meditation. I can’t tell a yogi that they are sotāpanna; they should know it themselves if that happens”.

Pemasiri Thera often explained Buddhist terms in ways entirely different from the traditional view. Thus, the word *santutṭhi* is usually translated as, “satisfaction with material wealth”, while Bhante defines it as absence of expectations from practice, and satisfaction with what one has here and now.

“If a person has good qualities, they should not scatter them, but continue cultivating them further. Maha Kassapa had *santutṭhi* from the time he was born”.

“Living with expectations is always anxious and tense – there is no space for relaxation, acceptance, or compassion. The world and the objects are simple by nature, but we can’t live in simplicity, and concepts of the sensory world change the concepts of meditation. Being fixed on results, we cannot achieve them”.

“But it is extremely hard to let go of expectations – we are used to thinking in terms of achievement of success, and expect it in exchange for our effort. Lack of results leads to disappointment and depression”.

Bhante, it can happen that a yogi feels desperate due to the extreme difficulty of attaining Nibbāna. It is possible that it might simply be impossible. How does one not lose heart in such a situation?

“There is no need to fall into depression because of failures in practice. In the times of the Buddha, there were people who attained Nibbāna after hearing just one or two sentences from him. Those times are irreversibly gone. Nowadays it is impossible. One needs enormous patience and readiness to proceed along the Path with perseverance, overcoming all difficulties, all pain and discomfort, not quitting the practice”.

“If a yogi doesn’t experience hardships, how will they learn *dukkha*?⁴⁹ If they do not learn *dukkha*, how will they learn impermanence and non-self? And how, in such cases, will they attain the goal? It is simply impossible. Life becomes easier and simpler without expectations. No one can force emergence of such qualities within. They come naturally along with the attainment of strength”.

“There are people who are able to attain Path knowledge instantly, or after years of practice, or at the moment of their death, or in the next life. Based on that, there is no point in being upset that higher goal has not been attained in this life. Not a single effort on the Path will be wasted”.

49 No single English word adequately captures the full depth, range, and subtlety of the crucial Pali term *dukkha*. Over the years, many translations of the word have been used (“stress”, “unsatisfactoriness”, “suffering”, etc.). Each has its own merits in a given context.

“Mind, with its expectations, does not exist in what is taking place in the moment, but is always caught by what has already gone or what hasn’t happened yet”.

“The Buddha told his lay student Santati ⁵⁰who grieved due to the loss of his beloved: ‘Do not cling to the past and do not dream of the future; and what lies in between do not grab, thus, you will deliver yourself to Peace’”.

50 A minister of Pasenadi. Because he quelled a frontier disturbance, the king gave over the kingdom to him for seven days, and gave him a woman skilled in song and dance. For seven days Santati enjoyed himself. The Buddha met him on a road, and Santati saluted him from atop an elephant. The Buddha smiled and passed on. When questioned by Ananda, the Buddha answered that on that very day Santati would attain arahantship and die.

Santati spent part of the day amusing himself in the water, and then sat in the drinking hall of the park. The woman came on the stage and sang and danced, but she had fasted for seven days to acquire more grace of body, and, as she danced, she fell down dead. Santati was overwhelmed with a mighty sorrow, and straightway became sober. He then sought the Buddha for consolation in his grief. The Buddha preached a four-line stanza, and Santati attained arahantship and asked the Buddha’s permission to pass into *Nibbāna*.



CHAPTER 13

DEVELOPMENT OF MIND (*Bhāvanā*)

*...The end of the world can never be reached
by means of traveling across the world;
yet without reaching the world's end there is no release from
suffering.*

*Hence the wise one, the world-knower,
who has reached the world's end and lived the spiritual
life, having known the world's end, at peace,
does not desire this world or another.*

(AN.4.45)

13.1 Learning of one's nature

Pemasiri Thera started meditating as a child without bookish knowledge and theories: nothing else in the world interested him.

But now you would rarely see him sitting straight-backed with his legs crossed. However, it is not possible to discern meditation from non-meditation in the case of someone who lives with mindfulness and clear comprehension (*sati-sampajañña*); who is aware to the extent that he can notice the trembling of someone's eye lashes, the touch of the breeze on skin, and who possesses a clear mind in every second.

The Pali word *bhāvanā* is usually translated as “meditation”, but it stems from the verb *bhaveti*, which means “to build, to erect”.

Bhāvanā refers to the development of the mind, mental cultivation; when all wholesome qualities, all factors of Liberation, start working simultaneously. Its foundation is morality; its completion is Direct Knowledge and the attainment of Nibbāna, the end of all suffering. *Sīla* (morality) means taming of the body and speech; *samādhi* (contemplation) is taming of the mind; and *paññā* (wisdom) is the dissolution of all constructs and concepts.

“I always ask new yogis a question: ‘What three things occur automatically during our entire life and without our participation in it?’” Pemasiri Thera said during one class, surveying the audience. “They are breathing, thinking and aging. Sitting under the tree, the Buddha did not try to find anything unusual: he contemplated his mind and body. In meditation, it is possible to ‘solve’ them – it is unnecessary to look anything up in books”.

“We do not aim at switching off everything or hindering anything – no. We try to understand what is happening: our breath, thoughts, consciousness, to understand how we change and grow old”.

“We use natural things for meditation: inhalation and exhalation, a feeling of lightness or heaviness, heat or cold; the position of the body: how it stands, lies, sits, walks; we meditate on thirty-two parts

of body and on the four great elements.⁵¹ All of these meditations do not contain anything more than what is in us from birth, and they are sufficient to achieve the highest results. We do not try to move contrary to life or to negate it – that is impossible”.

“Let the nature be the nature. If one doesn’t try and find the ‘self’ in it and doesn’t wish to put everything under one’s own control, then it is possible to live in this world peacefully and with ease”.

13.2 A wonderful chariot

Buddhist meditation is normally divided into samatha and vipassanā. However, Pemasiri Thera asked his students not to play with terms and not to mull over what they are practicing at the moment because everything is so intrinsically connected.

“Some teachers say that samatha and jhāna are nothing, and vipassanā is everything. The Buddha never taught anything of the sort!”

51 Kinds of observation in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

“*Bhikkhu reviews “In this very body from the soles of the feet upwards and from the scalp downwards, enclosed by the skin and full of manifold impurities: “In this body there are head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, mesentery, bowels, stomach, excrement, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, tallow, saliva, snot, synovial fluid, urine”.* 649 *Just as if there were a bag, open at both ends, full of various kinds of grain such as hill-rice, paddy, green kidney-beans, sesame, husked rice, and a man with good eyesight were to open the bag and examine them, saying: “This is hill-rice, this is paddy, this is green gram, these are kidney-beans, this is sesame, this is husked rice”, so too a monk reviews this very body: “In this body there are head-hairs..”.* (DN.22)

“Thus, Ānanda, the purpose and benefit of wholesome virtuous behaviour is non-regret; the purpose and benefit of non-regret is joy; the purpose and benefit of joy is rapture; the purpose and benefit of rapture is tranquillity; the purpose and benefit of tranquillity is pleasure; the purpose and benefit of pleasure is concentration; the purpose and benefit of concentration is the knowledge and vision of things as they really are; the purpose and benefit of the knowledge and vision of things as they really are is disenchantment and dispassion; and the purpose and benefit of disenchantment and dispassion is the knowledge and vision of liberation. Thus, Ānanda, wholesome virtuous behaviour progressively leads to the foremost”.

(AN.10.1)

Success in meditation depends on so many causes, including very mundane conditions, such as the cleanliness of a room, suitable climate and nourishment, absence of disease, and certainly, competent mentoring.

Bhante, being an advocate of cleanliness, compelled yogis to tidy up their kutis and maintain the area around them in an ideal state. Coming from him, the remark that someone was, “wearing dirty clothes”, suggested a serious lapse. The Path to purity of mind starts with simple things: from a clean room, from generosity.

“For meditation, cleanliness is important; a simple life is important; an absence of judgement of others; and the readiness to make the ultimate effort. Alas, these days, people try to meditate using force and pressure, being restless. Even ordinary life is difficult for such coarse people, not to mention meditation”.

“I do not expect the attainment of Nibbāna from all of my students, but I expect, as a minimum, that they will not cheat and go astray. The mind can be full of cunning, but if bhāvanā is moving in the right direction, a person becomes honest in a natural way. In order to achieve the best results in meditation it is necessary to start with basic simple things”.

“If a yogi is honest with themselves, if they are not afraid of looking into their mind, progress might be quick”.

Pemasiri Thera emphasised the need for yogis to ask everyone they’d been guilty of wronging in some way for forgiveness before starting to meditate. If a person with whom they’d had an unpleasant relationship was dead, it was still possible to go to the cemetery and clear their conscience. Unresolved conflicts, especially with people who are at a high spiritual level, are very dangerous. If one offends a sotāpanna and doesn’t ask for forgiveness, it will not be possible to enter the stream.

Pemasiri Thera gave an example of a woman who studied under Sumathipāla Na Himi and who at one point experienced serious health problems that prevented her meditating – her body was literally paralysed. The teacher, being able to understand the root causes of various hindrances, came to the conclusion that these problems derived from the woman’s behaviour toward her husband, who was a good meditator. She insulted him several times and once even kicked him when he was in samādhi. Sumathipāla Na Himi urged her to apologise to her husband because her attitude with him was a stumbling block to her practice.

The Buddha advised us to make a chariot in a very poetic manner:

*“The straightway’ that path is called,
And ‘fearless’ is its destination.
The chariot is called ‘unrattling’,
Fitted with wheels of wholesome states.
The sense of shame is its leaning board,
Mindfulness its upholstery;
I call the Dhamma the charioteer,
With right view running out in front”.*
(SN.1.46)

How incredible it is to ride such chariot!

The Path is wonderful – no traffic jams or potholes, bumps or crashes. There is no space for concepts, for craving or attachment.

“One who takes Refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha lives in happiness because his conduct and way of life are pure”, said Pemasiri Thera. “He is much less involved than others in what is happening in the world”.

“If disaster happens, he will not be shattered. If he encounters illness, the vipassanā practitioner – unlike an ordinary man – will not be overwhelmed, but will be able to accept it. It will not make him ‘burn’. If he loses his dear ones, his wealth or health, it will not make him totally distraught, because he sees the external and internal phenomena without involvement of a ‘self’. He can accept whatever happens”.



CHAPTER 14

DEFILEMENTS (*Kilesas*)

*...Always frightened is this mind,
The mind is always agitated
About unarisen problems
And about arisen ones.
If there exists release from fear,
Being asked, o Blessed One, please, tell me!
(SN.2.17)*

Bhāvanā is intended to destroy or abandon five things. This first five – *pañcanīvaraṇa*, are the hindrances. (Pemasiri Thera said sadly that, unfortunately, they are our closest friends):

- anger or aversion (*vyāpāda*);
- sensual desires (*kāmacchanda*);
- restlessness and worries or remorse (*uddhaccakukkucca*);
- doubts (*vicikicchā*);
- sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*);

The five spiritual faculties (pañcīndriyāni):

- faith or confidence (saddhā);
- effort or energy (vīrya);
- mindfulness (sati);
- contemplation (samādhi);
- wisdom (paññā).

“Most people’s minds are in a state of agitation all the time. Their minds run here and there, flapping like flags in a strong wind, scattering like a pile of ashes into which a stone is tossed”.

“There is no coolness or calmness, no silence, no peace. This restlessness or dissipation of mind might properly be called the waves of mind, reminiscent of the water’s surface when wind is blowing”, says Sayadaw U Pandita.

Vivid metaphors were used in the suttas for the description of the five hindrances:

...Imagine a bowl of water, heated on a fire, boiling up and bubbling over... In the same way, Brahman, when a man dwells with his mind possessed and overwhelmed by anger...

...a bowl of water mixed with lac, turmeric, dark green or crimson dye... In the same way, when a man dwells with his mind possessed and overwhelmed by sensual desires...

...a bowl of water ruffled by the wind, so that the water trembled, eddied and rippled. In the same way, when a man dwells with his mind possessed and overwhelmed by restlessness and worries...

...a bowl of water covered over with slimy moss and water-plants. If a man with good eyesight were to look at the reflection of his own face in it, he would not know or see it as it really was. In the same way, when a man dwells with his mind possessed and overwhelmed by sloth-and-torpor... (SN.46:55).

The Buddha compared meditation to a situation where a hen lays eggs and hatches them diligently. She doesn't have to worry when her chicks are hatched because it happens automatically. Similarly, there is no point for her to speed up the process: without nesting and without maintaining the right and constant temperature for a certain period of time, no chicks can be hatched, even if the hen desired it very much.

Likewise, a yogi should try to develop kusala and cast away akusala, and when all wholesome features come into balance, then the attainment of Path and Fruition will come. They should learn flexibility: knowing when mind should be encouraged, when it should be hurried up, and when it should be delighted and inspired.

14.1 Mind is one thing and defilements are another

...Bhikkhus, just as sandalwood is declared to be the best of trees with respect to malleability and wieldiness, so too I do not see even one other thing that, when developed and cultivated, is so malleable and wieldy as the mind.

A developed and cultivated mind is malleable and wieldy.

(AN.5.47(7))

All defilements can be divided conventionally into three types: gross (associated with lack of wholesome conduct), medium (eliminated after observance of strength and attainment of sati and samādhi), and hidden (completely eliminated only through wisdom combined with the attainment of magga-ñāṇa and magga-phala).

Rest (*viveka*) is not a physical rest, but a state without defilements, the attainment of Nibbāna.

Bhante, You said that you feel disappointment when even gross kilesas in Your students are not lessening...

“I didn’t mean all students, of course. Unfortunately, the tendency of our times is such that many people visit a lot of Dhamma classes and various courses without applying the knowledge in practice”.

“I do not have an objective of ‘tying’ someone to myself, but if a person was sick and visited a doctor for medicine, then after the prescription is given they should buy the medicine and start taking it! And nowadays it is as if the patient leaves the doctor’s and reads the prescription. And they read it over and over. What good is that?”

Is it possible that mind itself enjoys defilements, for example, ill-will?

“Mind is one thing and defilements are another.⁵² If a person does not know reality, his mind might work all the time in a certain direction and create problems for itself, because it does not distinguish between what leads to suffering and what leads to the end of suffering”.

“A real follower of the Buddha should work on lessening the kilesas: if he is angry, then cultivating that anger should not become part of his life. He should try and resolve situations that caused anger, talk to the person who caused that anger, etc”.

“If you are being insulted, then it is possible to analyse the reasons and resolve the situation. If the criticism is groundless, you can accept it as a manifestation of old kamma and not react in order not to create new kamma both for yourself and others”.

⁵² “Luminous, bhikkhus, is this mind, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements”.
(AN.1. 5.50(10))

“Imagine a situation where you had an argument with someone and even though both of you have, say, ten-points worth of anger, and later on you managed to lower your anger level down to five, but your opponent increased it up to twenty. He was thinking of all the bad things to do with you. Not a single good thought about you occurred to him; he was thinking only of your mistakes, only about the dark side. If you got yourself into trouble, he would be happy about it”.

“Hence, that person cultivated his anger and got a certain kind of pleasure out of it. Other defilements work in a similar manner: sensual desires, laziness, worry”.

“The mind on its own is pure and shining, but these days many yogis’ minds are very gross and rough. Therefore, I say be malleable, be flexible”.

Is there a certain order of working with kilesas? For example, starting from anger then move to working on craving?

“The first thing to destroy should be wrong views, *ditṭhi*, in order to get rid of doubts. If the oil is pure, the flame burns easily.⁵³ One cannot practice correctly while having false ideas, and such people are very hard to train: they are unable to let their convictions go. At the initial stage, a teacher should help a yogi ‘clear’ their views, knowing

53 “Of those, right view is the forerunner. And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong view as wrong view, and right view as right view. And what is the right view that has fermentations, sides with merit, & results in acquisitions? ‘There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits & results of good & bad actions. There is this world & the next world. And what is the right view that is without fermentations, transcendent, a factor of the path? The discernment, the faculty of discernment, the strength of discernment, analysis of qualities as a factor for Awakening, the path factor of right view in one developing the noble path whose mind is noble, whose mind is free from fermentations, who is fully possessed of the Noble Path. This is the right view that is without fermentations, transcendent, a factor of the Path.

how to do it, and only then can he teach them how to practice samatha and vipassanā”.

“Ditṭhi combined with anger is the scariest combination. The Buddha was indifferent to all views, whether of eternal soul or self (sassata-ditṭhi) or views of no self whatsoever (uccheda-ditṭhi). All these views are based on a false presumption of existence of the philosophising subject”.

“The Buddha said, ‘I do not have doubts, therefore, I do not have the desire to argue with anyone in this world. I do not have any views because I have Knowledge’”.

“Views and craving are usually hidden and turn into concepts. One has to be able to intercept a concept and not let it grow”.

“All philosophies in the world are born out of doubts, and all religions out of fear. In any case, they have a common root – ignorance. Buddha’s Dhamma is not a religion. After the elimination of views, all other vices will still exist: even a sotāpanna may experience anger and craving. They are afraid of them. Putting an end to false views, it is possible to start working on other kilesas”.

“In fact, meditation is easy. Only people themselves complicate it”.

The Visuddhimagga talks about the different types of personalities and that for a certain type there are certain kilesas, which are suitable for certain kinds of meditation.

What do You think about this?

“This is a complex issue, because many people have a tendency to some mental impurities. But often they are so intricately combined with each other that it is impossible to figure out which kilesas are involved and say ‘Go work with that!’”

“The same applies to good qualities: some people may have faith, wisdom, energy”.

“There are people who are dominated by ill-will or craving for sensual pleasure. Usually these trends are quite obvious. An angry man is good for training, ironically, because anger is very easy to recognize. It brings a lot of problems to its ‘owner’ and he, as a rule, wants to get rid of it and is ready to make an effort at that. He is able to make rapid progress on the Path”.

“A little harder to train are practitioners with a tendency to sensuality. Unlike anger, it produces pleasant sensations, which are harder to want to rid from oneself”.

“It’s a similar situation with intellectuals. Often their knowledge and intellect become a hindrance in meditation, due to habits of thinking, analyzing and reflecting, which make it difficult for them to concentrate and ‘release’. Teachers of these students also find they are prone to excessive skepticism and arrogance, and also to argumentativeness. For them, it is not difficult to understand the weaknesses of others, while not recognizing their own defects”.

“Anyway, whatever kilesas are present in the mind, the only answer is to practice Satipaṭṭhānā: it will help to get rid of all the evil seeds sown and growing in our minds. Satipaṭṭhānā allows us to completely destroy them and not allow new unwholesomeness to arise”.

“No other way exists”.

Poems by the oldest monks and nuns (thera-theri gāthā) are alike in one key way – the authors express deep disenchantment with the world and a passionate desire to save themselves from all that burden and bustle.

“Seeing the world’s deepest sadness, we left our homes...”

As far as modern yogis are concerned, there is a feeling that people are a long way from dreaming about Nibbāna. They just want to relax in a monastery. Is turning the Buddha's Teaching in the West into a sort of psychotherapy technique the beginning of the end of the Dhamma?

“Disenchantment with the world (samvega) has, indeed, nearly disappeared. People come to the meditation centre in order to spend some time in silence and as a distraction from everyday concerns”.

“This is not a purely Western phenomenon. In Sri Lanka it is the same. It is good to remember that the Buddha did not teach all and everyone the attainment of Nibbāna: sometimes he only taught morality, generosity, taking Refuge. People who were able to enter the stream, he only taught up to that level”.

“Often people came to Him without a desire to practice meditation. Kisa Gotami⁵⁴ wanted to revive her dead little son and asked the Buddha to do it, but later she became aware of the nature of life and death”.

“Many say, ‘I meditate’, but in fact it is not meditation, but is, in the best case, preparation for it. A person can say he or she meditates only when they have already attained the Path and the Fruition”.

14.2 Kamma and meditation

And what about kamma? Perhaps many people cannot have a successful meditation practice because they committed some evil deeds in their past lives?

⁵⁴ She became a bhikkhuni (female monk) and attained *arahantship*.

“We can neither ‘cut off’ our kamma nor justify everything by it. It is worth keeping in mind that the Dhamma is not a doctrine about kamma (kamma-vāda), but a teaching about causes and effects. We accept the significance of kamma as a mighty force, but it doesn’t account for absolutely everything. That would contradict what the Buddha himself taught”.

“For instance, in describing the probable causes of a person’s illness, he would point to kamma as only one factor along with ordinary causes. If a person has lung cancer and has been smoking all his life, can we blame his kamma for that? Some people even refuse to take a medicine, saying their disease is only a result of past deeds”.

“A woman came to me asking for instructions in meditation. She had been driving a car in India and hit a man crossing the road, killing him. She tried to meditate, but as soon as she closed her eyes, she would hear the brakes squeal and see asphalt covered with blood and the painful grimace of the man she had hit. She would just cry, and it was some time before she was able to calm down and begin to meditate properly”.

“When someone says that everything happening is due to kamma, then it would be impossible to practice Noble Path – because what’s the point of moral conduct and practicing samādhi if everything is predestined?”

“No, the Blessed One talked about something totally different – about responsibility for one’s kamma”.

If a yogi encounters problems in meditation, does it mean that past evil deeds are being eliminated and that old saṅkhāras⁵⁵ are being purified?

⁵⁵ *Saṅkhāra* refers to conditioned phenomena generally, but specifically to all mental “dispositions”. See further explanations later in this text.

“In the very beginning of meditation, many encounter a situation where hard memories come to the surface – from childhood, youth; old hurts and unresolved conflicts. Often, the burden becomes so unbearable that people simply leave, blaming meditation for their failures”.

“You could for a long time not realise that there was a snake in your house, and you let it come too close to you, or you take a little poisonous snake for a harmless python. A viper is lethally poisonous, but you didn’t know that. One day it will bite you – that is its nature”.

“All of this happens because of inability to recognise defilements, due to lack of sati — sampajañña; you should be able to see kilesas and not just try to hide them. The trash should be burnt completely and not hidden in the corners or buried in a pit”.

“Herein, friend, when a person with a blemish does not understand it as it actually is thus: ‘I have a blemish in myself’, it can be expected that he will not arouse zeal, make effort, or instigate energy to abandon that blemish, and that he will die with lust, hate, and delusion, with a blemish, with mind defiled.

Suppose a bronze dish were brought from a shop or a smithy covered with dirt and stains, and the owners neither used it nor had it cleaned but put it away in a dusty corner. Would the bronze dish thus get more defiled and stained later on?” — “Yes, friend”. — “So too, friend, when a person with a blemish does not understand it as it actually is thus: ‘I have a blemish in myself’, it can be expected... That he will die with mind defiled”.

(MN.5)

“When you start digging out the trash, everything everywhere smells worse, and the amount of it exceeds expectations: there are not

only bits and pieces, but cigarette butts, food leftovers. It might cause panic and disappointment, but a yogi must be brave”.

“When a person starts sorting the trash in order to make his life easier, some of it has to be burned, some of it taken further away to the dump, and some of it to be destroyed organically”.

“We are not talking about ‘clearing saṅkhāras’, because saṅkhāras are what we create every minute throughout our whole life. How is it possible to clean them up?”

“We can say that practice brings up what was hidden. But, seeing the problem, one should start working on it”.

“The idea of purifying kamma came to Buddhism from Hinduism, as late Buddhism came very close to Hinduism”.

As, for instance, in the promotion of vegetarianism?

“Yes. Theravāda monks may not advocate a vegetarian diet because it would be contrary to what the Buddha himself said. Ven. Devadatta suggested making bhikkhus vegetarians, but the Buddha refused that”.

So many unspeakable atrocities happen in the world out there that one keeps wondering how to explain it. Are they the results of past kamma, too?

“Sometimes it might be related to kamma, sometimes not. Humankind produces way too much weaponry, with a huge potential for destruction. Chemical weapons were used in Syria, in Japan, and many people died, including children. In addition to that, there are natural disasters: in Sri Lanka, Thailand. Devastating tsunamis took

thousands of lives. My student's daughter survived the tsunami, but her husband and two children died".

"Another student happened to be in the epicentre of explosions three times during the war between the Sinhalese and Tamils, and each time she remained safe and sound. One was an explosion in an office and everyone died except her – bits of the bomb fell on her head, people were simply torn into pieces, there were streams of blood everywhere. And there wasn't even a scratch on her".

"We need real wisdom to understand and to accept the causes which brought to certain results. Sometimes it is kamma; sometimes it is actions of other people or one's own behaviour".

What happens to the bad kamma of an arahant – does it get "burned up?"

"It is impossible to attain Nibbāna by eliminating the results of one's evil actions; however it is equally impossible to 'leave without paying the bills' either".

"Kamma does not burn, but a very good and strong kamma may not let bad kamma manifest. For instance, the kamma of a sotāpanna will not allow him to be born in the lowest worlds; the kamma of an anagamin – in the sensual world; the kamma of an arahant – to be obligated to be reborn at all".

"Fear forces people to ask higher beings for help, but no one in the whole universe has power to rid us of our kamma. Our travel in saṃsāra does not have a beginning, and over that time we have committed an innumerable number of horrible things, which may lead us to being born in the lower realms. Bad deeds are usually very easy to commit, while useful ones demand a lot of diligence".

“Bhāvanā is the gradual elimination of the strength of kamma’s reproduction potential. By using wisdom and awareness, we lower the possibility of kamma to reproduce new births and to bring it to complete depletion”.

“In any case, one should not think too much about one’s bad deeds. There is no point in doing that. Just let it be”.

Fifteen minutes without unwholesomeness

The Buddha taught bhikkhus that it is hard to attain the elimination of defilements. It is a gradual process, which includes many stages and phases.

Pemasiri Thera would call upon a yogi to look into his mind in order to see defilements clearly, fixedly, persistently, “face to face”. It is absolutely normal to be frightened during this, as sometimes one might not have a clue what’s been going on in one’s head.

Bhante described one situation where a novice yogi was starting to meditate:

“A normal yogi should start meditation with the sensual world”, he said with a cheerless chuckle. “He has anger; he has sensual desires – he lives in the epicentre of all that. And he wants to start meditating only after all that disappears, is this a doable task? If there are no defilements, why he would want to meditate?”

“A yogi should look at the appearance and disappearance of anger, at the appearance and disappearance of laziness, doubts, anxiety, and craving. He should understand how hard it is for his mind because of defilements. His mind beseeches for calm; it is tired. If a yogi seeks calmness before beginning to meditate, it is insane”.

““Oh, how sweet, how nice. I am in harmony with the universe”. When I hear that, I know a person hasn’t even started meditating yet.

I like it when they speak the truth: ‘My mind is unbearable; it runs away all the time. My legs hurt. I want to go home. Everything is so complicated’”.

“Very slowly, the mind starts to calm down, and then it’s possible to see the nature of defilements. The one who sees the defilements can calm down for two or three minutes. If a yogi says that he stayed without kilesas for fifteen, twenty, or thirty minutes – I will not accept that. Five minutes of calm per day is already a great achievement. It influences one hour of ‘pure’ mind. But no one admits that his mind was only free for a couple of minutes”.



CHAPTER 15

Panditārāma Shwe Taung Gon Sasana Yeiktha

*...In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally,
or he abides contemplating the body as a body externally,
or he abides contemplating the body as a body both internally-and
externally*

*Or else he abides contemplating in the body its arising factors,
or he abides contemplating in the body
its vanishing factors, or he abides contemplating in the body
both its arising and vanishing factors.*

*Or else mindfulness that 'there is a body' is simply established in him
to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness.*

And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

That is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

(MN.10)

15.1 Tough discipline

At three o'clock sharp in the morning, the sublime peace of the Asian night is disturbed by the piercing sound of a gong, and twenty minutes later hundreds of people start plodding their way in complete darkness across a long, steep bridge. Some of them young, some not so young, women and men, Europeans and Asians – they are all united by one goal: the desire to look within themselves. All day long, with their legs crossed and backs straight, they will try to calm and understand their minds, watching the movements of their abdomens rising and falling, surrounded by blooming gardens and lotus ponds.

This is Panditārāma, a huge meditation centre in Burma one and a-half hour's drive from Yangon (formerly Rangoon) and headed by the Burmese teacher U Pandita, who piously keeps all the traditions left by Mahasi Sayadaw. The centre can accommodate up to a thousand people, and each year there is a two-month international retreat that includes the period covering Christmas and the Western world's New Year. So Sayadaw U Pandita liked to say that the retreat provides people an opportunity to give up meaningless congratulations and good wishes for the new year in order to attain something much more valuable in return.

The centre holds to very strict discipline – a distinctive feature of all Mahasi Sayadaw centres: the extremely early wake-up call followed by meditation for fourteen hours a day. If someone misses a session, there can be only one excuse – they are so sick that they are not only unable to meditate, but even to walk or eat.

“If a yogi can walk and eat, they can meditate too:” that is Panditārāma's motto.

There is a list of ten causes for success in meditation:

1. Attention directed toward the impermanence of all objects of consciousness.
2. An attitude of care and respect in meditation practice and maintaining an unbroken continuity of awareness.
3. Continuity of mindfulness.
4. Courage.
5. An environment that supports meditation.
6. Remembering circumstances or behaviour that have been helpful in one's past meditation practice so that one can maintain or recreate those conditions, especially when difficulties may arise.
7. Cultivating the qualities of mind which lead toward Nibbana.
8. Willingness to work intensely in meditation practice.
9. Patience and perseverance in the face of pain or other obstacles
10. Determination to continue practicing until one reaches the goal of Liberation.

Each meditator makes a promise to observe eight principles of morality,⁵⁶ which, in addition to the standard five, include a ban on all entertainment, jewellery and make-up, eating or drinking anything but water after noon, and sleep or rest on high and luxurious beds.

Every moment is monitored, with teachers constantly checking on students to ensure they are observing the requirements, which include an obligation to do everything very slowly.

Meditation is done only in the lotus or half-lotus posture, and not in any of the more relaxed body positions acceptable in the West. Yogis cannot move – at all – for an hour at a time.

While walking, while in the canteen or during lectures, they are prohibited from looking sideways or even to look at Sayadaw U Pandita speaking. Talking is not permitted, except to speak to one's meditation instructor. The interview process is quite simple – the yogi

⁵⁶ These are *Uposatha* rules.

should be able to communicate the essence of his practice in about ten minutes.

Of course, no internet, no books and no phones are allowed!

Burma's climate is generally humid and very hot, but with unexpectedly cold nights in December and January, and scorching heat in all other seasons. It can be difficult to breathe in the stifling conditions, and as one's body can be covered with sweat, it makes meditation a real challenge, especially under the military-like discipline.

Many leave Panditārāma after only brief stay, despite the competent mentorship, good food and the beauty of the surroundings. It can be just too difficult to function under such vigilant oversight without any external stimulation.

15.2 Main exercises

In sitting meditation, the yogi is to observe only one object – the rising and falling of the abdomen. If the movement is not obvious enough, then the yogi may put his hand on his abdomen to aid in maintaining attention. The yogi is to place, repeatedly, all of his attention on this breathing process without distraction, to note each movement, and then return to the object of meditation. If another object impinges so strongly on the awareness as to draw it away from the rising and falling of the abdomen, that object must be clearly noted. For example, if a loud sound arises during the meditation, one consciously directs the attention toward that sound as soon as it arises. When the sound fades, one comes back to the rising and falling. This is the basic principle to follow in sitting meditation.

Yogis are to make maximum effort to watch the movements of the abdomen from the very beginning to the very end, noting the slightest detail and mentally articulating “rising” and “falling”.

The goal is for the yogi to attain such a degree of one-pointiness on the object of concentration (*nimitta*), that everything else simply ceases to exist.

When contemplating rising and falling, the yogi should maintain full attention on that movement. He will then come to know the upward motion of the abdomen on breathing in, and a downward motion on breathing out.

A mental note should be made of “rising” for the upward movement, and “falling” for the downward. If these movements are not clearly noticed by merely fixing the mind, one or both hands should be placed on the abdomen. The yogi should not try to change the rhythm of his natural breathing: he should neither attempt slow it down by the retention of his breath, nor quicken it, nor do deep breathing. He must just keep to breath’s natural pattern, and proceed with the contemplation of rising and falling.

Over time, the mind becomes more and more quiet and tamed. It even stops its attempts to wander, being blissfully happy with the strict attention on, and oneness with the movement of the element of air. All concepts of the form of the abdomen disappear, leaving only the process of rising and falling.

Later on, these movements become even finer, as breathing become virtually untraceable. The teacher might then assign a new object to the student, such as just watching the process of sitting (“sitting, sitting” – he repeats to himself over and over). And if that feeling disappears, the yogi contemplates the touch of air on his skin, or the sensation of clothes on the body. And as that, with time, becomes more and more obscure, they can then observe only the very fact of presence, of awareness itself.

“When breathing disappears in *samādhi*, it is not necessary to look for a new object. One simply has to remain in that state, without the fear of emptiness. It is the ego which is scared of disappearance, of ‘losing you,’” Pemasiri Thera advised.

The second exercise taught in Panditārāma is walking meditation, which is to be taken as seriously as sitting practice. With the help of walking meditation, it is possible to penetrate deeply into what mind and matter actually are. Walking practice also helps to balance formal sitting and avoids accumulation of pain and discomfort in the body. The yogi watches each step through four stages: lifting the foot; moving it forward; putting it down; and touching or pressing the foot on the ground.

There are five benefits from walking meditation:

- One can do long hiking;
- It is useful for the maintenance and revival of energy;
- Good for one's health;
- Helps digestion;
- Helps concentration;

Mahasi Sayadaw wrote that the beginner should not try to cope with everything, but should start with a few basic things, and then he or she will discover the real nature of their body quite soon:

“The Buddha himself used the language of concepts and would say, ‘I am walking’, instead of saying, ‘this is a process of walking’. Although you meditate using the language of concepts like, ‘walking, bending, stretching’, as your sati and samādhi grow stronger, all the concepts disappear and only the realities like support and moving appear to you.

When you reach the stage of the knowledge of dissolution, although you meditate ‘walking, walking’ neither the legs nor the body appear to you. Only the movements are there. Reality. Truth.

“Some learned persons think that you have to learn them before you meditate. Not so. What you learn are only name concepts. Not realities. The meditator who is contemplating the rising mind and matter knows them as if he were touching them with his own hand. He need not learn about them. If there is the elephant before your very eyes, you need not look at the picture of an elephant”.

15.3 Accusations

Mahasi Sayadaw at one time faced criticism from a number of Sri Lankan monks, who accused him of promoting an unorthodox meditation technique. They said that the method was not mentioned in the Tipiṭaka, and thus was not taught by the Buddha. They said that following the movements of the abdomen was a “frog’s meditation”. What the critics didn’t realize was that it wasn’t Mahasi Sayadaw who developed the technique. It had been known of for thousands of years and was entirely in accordance with canonical texts about working with awareness of the element of air (*vāyo-dhātu*).

Mahasi Sayadaw never adhered to a narrow, sectarian approach, and if someone didn’t feel comfortable focusing on the lifting and lowering of the abdominal wall, he suggested anāpānasati in its usual form (mindfulness of inhalation and exhalation at the opening of the nostrils). Following the rise and fall of the abdomen is actually considered a more simple exercise, because the object is classified as “gross”, or easily identifiable and therefore appropriate for beginners.

“The Buddha chose the object of contemplation based on students’ characteristics”, said Pemasiri Thera. “He found a way to the hearts of very different people: some needed to meditate on a corpse, and some needed an image of a beautiful flower”.

“The *Tipiṭaka* has descriptions of forty objects for meditation,⁵⁷ but today only two or three are known to the world, and it has become customary to give everybody the same nimitta. Usually, teachers do not know anything besides one and only one method, in which they believe firmly and to which they hold dearly, therefore they cannot give their students more than that”.

⁵⁷ 10 objects for *kasina*, 10 – *asubha* (non-attractiveness), 10 – recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, 4 – amity-meditation, 4 – for formless absorption, 1 – impurity of the food and 1 — four great elements.

It turns out that if a person can't watch his breathing or sensations in the body, the teacher will simply expel him from the monastery. What can he do then? Nowadays, there are too many talks about anāpānasati, but some people, for certain reasons, cannot do that practice. And if such a person came to Mahasi Sayadaw, he would recommend they not practice anāpānasati formally, but instead watch their inhalations and exhalations from the moment of waking up until night”.

Pemasiri Thera's father was one of the most vigorous critics of Mahasi Sayadaw, writing one disparaging article after another about the method in newspapers and magazines. But in his son's case, the criticism only fired up his interest.

“There is nothing wrong with anāpānasati”, Bhante concluded. “But conflicts among various meditation traditions are the real vice. Followers of Mahasi Sayadaw can criticise Goenka's method without having the real experience of its practice, and vice versa. They don't even realise that both these teachers were coming from one Burmese tradition, that of Ledi Sayadaw, from the Satipaṭṭhānā tradition! Some teacher might stress one technique, another a second technique. Doesn't matter! Observation of bodily sensations, focusing on the rise and fall of the belly or breathing in and breathing out – all these methods are based on *kāyānupassanā*, mindfulness of body.

“All this criticism is a manifestation of prejudice, self-conceit and intolerance.

“Even if your method is entirely correct, another method has the right to exist, too, and is able to lead you to the truth. In fact, this criticism is ridiculous. It is worth trying for oneself without making conclusions by default and checking against the Buddha's words in order to avoid discrepancy with the Pali Canon”.

“I can let all traditions and conventions vanish, therefore, I am saying that. Sometimes, it is useful to leave one method and try something entirely different”.

“People are sometimes too enchanted by their own traditions, therefore, they cannot move further”.

15.4 “Sitting, standing, touching”...

The obligatory condition of a successful practice is maintenance of mindfulness, not only during the periods of formal meditation, but in everyday life as well. A yogi should not miss a single object, and for that he has to do everything much slower than in ordinary life.

The areas to be watched are extensive: the body (postures, movements, breathing); feelings (pleasant, painful, or neutral); mind (how it is at this moment: calm or restless, happy or in pain, relaxed or tense, serene or confused); mental phenomena (sounds, forms, smells, tastes, touches, thoughts, memories, planning). Each body movement should be watched, be it bending the elbow, turning the head, changing the position of the body; every act of seeing and hearing; every thought, and many, many other things! This is called awareness of each object arising in the moment.

“Watch everything that is happening here and now with your body and mind: hearing, seeing, walking, sitting, thinking -- this is a yogi’s objective”, Sayadaw U Pandita said sternly. “He doesn’t have any other objective. A yogi should work with diligence and fortitude. He should watch all objects appearing every moment. If he neglects this duty, he lets himself down; he lets down The Dhamma and the meditation centre. Every missed object is a loss. If a yogi loses the object of his observation, he should correct himself”.

A yogi should mentally articulate everything that happens: “sitting, sitting”, “touching”, “hearing”. Satipaṭṭhāna practice is not meant for thinkers. A practitioner should abandon all his habits of analysing, thinking and reflecting. If, in his conversation with the instructor, a well-read meditator wants to tell him about his knowledge of the Tipiṭaka, he will be harshly interrupted: one should only talk about his own experience. (Most often this fault occurs among Western students, who come from a culture that celebrates intellectual debate.)

Gradually, the mind starts enjoying practice immensely. It has been so used to doing everything mindlessly, meandering amidst its own fantasies, incessantly linking various thoughts and ideas, heading off to new objects and concerns all the time. Then all of a sudden, that unquenchable fire stops receiving new fuel, and the flame stops flickering. Silence comes, followed by gratitude for this new state, where only one moment exists – only one moment.

All of a sudden, the “real” world created by that same mind stops existing, the consciousness, in a way, narrows – but, to put it more accurately, it finally becomes wide and open and void of concerns apart from one: stepping with the left foot, stepping with the right. Material things stop being a bother and the mind switches off all planning and memories, all anxieties and expectations.

The yogi is not worried even about the attainment of knowledge of the Path and the Fruition. Of course, it’s wonderful to end all one’s suffering, but there is also no point in trying to hurry nature along: from seed to sprout, from sprout to flower... There comes a complete detachment from the sensual pleasures with which we’ve been obsessed. The blissfulness of calm, the happiness of non-ownership and contemplation – not a single joy from food, smells, or tastes can compare to those things. The Buddha used to say of even his most loyal students that if they had not yet attained samādhi and didn’t

know its bliss, they would still attach to sensual pleasures and not know of liberation from them.

A yogi experiences unspeakable happiness surpassing human joy (*amānusi rati*): the body becomes weightless, soaked with a bliss that seizes one for no discernible reason. This is a happiness that goes unimaginably beyond the common pleasures of the flesh. It might seem to a yogi that he is levitating, that some force is just taking him away. His body is filled with delight; his mind becomes light and full of energy. It seems to the practitioner that he is hovering a few feet off the ground or floating on water. He feels every cell of his body.

“He makes the rapture and pleasure born of concentration drench, steep, fill, and pervade this body, so that there is no part of his whole body unpervaded by the rapture and pleasure born of concentration. Just as though there were a lake whose waters welled up from below and it had no inflow from east, west, north, or south, and would not be replenished from time to time by showers of rain, then the cool fount of water welling up in the lake would make the cool water drench, steep, fill, and pervade the lake, so that there would be no part of the whole lake unpervaded by cool water; so too, a bhikkhu makes the rapture and pleasure born of concentration drench, steep, fill, and pervade this body, so that there is no part of his whole body unpervaded by the rapture and pleasure born of concentration. And right there the meditator might be caught up in a trap masterfully furnished by his mind”.

(MN.39)

15.5 When kilesas “recede”

“If a yogi is too engrossed in pleasant sensations in meditation, he lets the akusala arise. It is possible to get attached not only to the feeling of happiness, but to neutral feelings as well, which are also quite pleasant”, meditators are warned at Panditārāma. Pemasiri Thera often told a similar story from his youth, when soon after his ordination as a forest bhikkhu he attained unshakeable calmness of mind, beyond the reach of any external anxieties. It didn’t matter to him who was there next to him, whether he was sick or healthy, or and what was happening around him. He then spent a few years in a state free from all disturbances, living as it was described in the suttas:”

“A bhikkhu is free from grief and joy, but is calm in an impassive balance of consciousness in full mindfulness and awareness.

“N’eva sumano hoti na dummano, upekkhāko viharati sato sampajāno”.

Everyone around him considered him arahant. But one day while walking on a path, Bhante saw a huge a small piece of a frond, and he thought it was a snake. He wasn’t paralysed by fear, and didn’t stop. However, in the depths of his mind *something* flickered momentarily, for just a fraction of a second – something that resembled an unwillingness to die.

He realised then that he had retained some almost imperceptible and very subtle aspiration towards continuing to live. The incident made a deep impression on him. Bhante knew that contaminations of the mind could remain dormant for years, and he then became rather sceptical of someone being declared arahant, as happens quite often today.

“During a very intensive and continuous practice, defilements recede; tranquillity and bliss blossom in the mind. Many practitioners are cheated by such states of blissfulness and start considering themselves as great yogis. This is exactly what upakilesa are. Upakkilesa indeed undermine meditation, as they are more dangerous than the much more obvious feelings of anger or craving. A yogi can mistake temporary liberation from defilements as the attainment of Nibbāna.

“This is not the fault of meditation, and a person should continue practicing. In fact, he hasn’t started really doing that, but already considers himself great, while just being complacent with temporary calm”, Pemasiri Thera said.

15.6 The goal of bhāvanā

Bhante, I returned to the city, and as soon as the doors of Kanduboda slammed behind me, I lost all of my happiness and calm!

“I am very happy about that!” Bhante said, beaming with a smile.

?..

“I am very happy”, he repeated, “That you lost the blissfulness. In fact, it is not lost: it is always within you, but a person who practices vipassanā will never grieve for the loss of tranquillity. He knows that everything is temporary: all kinds of feelings come and go”.

“Many yogis look very happy because they’ve hidden their kilesas, but in reality, haven’t destroyed them. Seeing such

‘enlightened’, joyful practitioners, others start calling them arahants. It should be understood that if meditation is done correctly, a person will, indeed, feel moments of strong bliss and excitement. Bhāvanā can be compared to travelling: a traveller is going towards destination, and on the way he sees beautiful bodies of water and admirable cities, but he shouldn’t stay there too long, because he has a final destination”.

“So why does a meditator prefer to linger on these ‘stops’, intoxicated by the new-found excitement, if the goal of his practice is Nibbāna? The main task of a real teacher is to lead his student to Path knowledge. A yogi should strive for the highest goal, devote himself to the highest goal, and dwell with his mind tirelessly, zealously devoted to the highest goal”.

“The teacher must see their students to the goal, to the stage of ariya: from sotāpanna to higher. This reminds me of the friction of two sticks rubbed against each other; you should do it until you make fire”.

“Quite often in meditation, images of the Buddha and deities appear; various voices sound. Many become quite enchanted by this and forget about the goal of bhāvanā. At a certain point of contemplation, a yogi stops breathing. This happens due to the fact that he temporarily stops communicating with the external world, with attraction and alienation, and then breathing kind of dissolves. In fact, it disappears only in the fourth jhāna, but the calming to such an unobtrusive level delights the meditator very much”.

“And not only breathing, but all matter in the body becomes unusually soft, light, and the skin becomes very pleasantly fragrant”.

“A person attaches an immense significance to that, considering that he has touched divine worlds. Instead of continuing his practice as usual, he starts telling others about his successes, tooting his own horn. Having said that, not a single real arahant will shout out that he

attained Awakening! Not a single real practitioner who attained the jhānas will inform others about it!”

“In the times of the Buddha, there were a lot of people who, even without being his followers, possessed various iddhi. For instance, they could recall their past lives. But it wasn’t looked at as something supernatural. And now? If anyone would recall even one past life, he would immediately write a book about it!”

“Reading the Canon, we can see how modest and quiet the real arahants were; how they sought solitude and only continued to maintain relations with others out of compassion. They destroyed their vices for themselves, is that anything to shout about?”

15.7. Contemplating defilements

Bhante, how to REALLY destroy all defilements?

“We have to be honest; we must be aware of the presence of defilements, explore them – only that will help us get rid of them. Sometimes it is incredibly difficult to see them: they are so deeply hidden. Yogis fool themselves, hiding their defilements deeper and making conclusions that they attained ariya-hood and became great”.

“Kilesas do not manifest themselves, going deep down ‘into hiding’. Quite often, a yogi thinks that they overcame some contamination only to find out that it returned later on with even stronger intensity. This is not uncommon”.

“There are meditation techniques that help subdue and mask contaminations in such a way that they are not visible. This is self-deception”.

“Look at them again and again. There is no need ‘to build a dam’ to obstruct them. Instead, one should face them closely and honestly when they appear. It is necessary to look at their features, trying to capture the very first moment of the arising, the very beginning. The real reduction and elimination of defilements is a very long and slow process”.

“I believe that our world does have arahants,⁵⁸ but when I hear about yet another ‘enlightened monk’, I don’t believe it. Even if someone indeed attains it, I will not believe him”, Bhante said, smiling”.

“In fact, I did know two people who were real arahants, but I do not trust modern and widely advertised teachers”.

“At the end of the past century, one Thai monk was acknowledged to be an arahant, and after his death, everyone was waiting for his body to soar and ‘disappear into the element of fire’. Thousands of people came to watch the event, but nothing happened”.

“When I just started meditating and came back home many thought I was a very high- level yogi. My mother was happy about the way I changed, as before, she used to cry quite often because of my behaviour. After that, something happened, and I fought with one boy and my reputation became worse than before”.

“In fact, I did not consider myself to be a strong practitioner; it was only the neighbour’s opinion. That neighbour’s mother told everybody that a meditator from Kanduboda beat her son and I felt ashamed even to show up in the street”.

“That’s what sometimes happens after retreats!”

58 In *DN.16* the Buddha made a prediction that while monks follow the *Vinaya*, this world won’t lack for *arahants*.



CHAPTER 16

RETREATS

Is there any real value in retreats? Apparently, it is impossible to live in the city maintaining sati-sampajañña through every second of change, as they teach in meditation centres.

“For a layman, the main task is learning to ‘control’ their everyday life, attain mindfulness and clear comprehension of it. Usually, a layman has sati-sampajañña from time to time: they lose it at certain moments and build it up at other times. And that is understandable, because unlike a monk, they have a social commitments and the need to sustain their lives”.

“As for retreats, they are normally criticised by those who do not have their own experience of retreats and just listened to other people’s feedback”.

“The system of meditation solitude, when laymen live next to monks and follow their schedule, appeared long before the Western infatuation with retreats. It existed for hundreds of years and that is recorded in Sri Lankan chronicles. Traditionally, yogis used to spend

the rainy seasons with bhikkhus and learned meditation from them. Afterwards, they practiced at home. Certainly, I am against retreats where teachers have limited knowledge and experience, but mentor others regardless. It leads to problems and even to various mental illnesses and insanity among students”.

“Alas, the situation is such that a person undertakes some short-term course where he is taught anāpānasati, and then starts organising meditation groups, all those ten-day, twenty-one-day meditation courses. A big mistake is to think that spiritual realizations can be attained within certain periods of time. This is a false path; sometimes after such retreats, teachers give certificates, that yogis became sotāpanna or sakadagamis”, said Pemasiri Thera, rolling his eyes..

“It happens that such a teacher might say that he is my student or Sumathipāla Na Himi’s student, using our names for the sake of their own goals in order to find success and money. Such things happen in the world”.

I know one American who lived in an ascetic Burmese temple for seven months. Now he drinks alcohol and even smokes marijuana. How much time is needed to attain any kind of results at all?

“Even if one meditates a hundred years in such mode, there will not be any achievement. A yogi needs morality, at least at the level of observing the five precepts. Without it, there won’t be any progress. If he wants to undertake more, say, eight precepts, that would be good, too. These are very basic things: not to kill, not to take intoxicants, not to lie”.

“Sometimes a person who is used to cruelty, whose mind is rough and uncontrollable, all of a sudden comes to the temple and

they tell him, ‘Be attentive to every moment, do everything slowly, train awareness’. He starts following the instructions, but instead of becoming calmer he becomes even more agitated and restless”.

“In Sri Lanka, there was a man who had been meditating in the centre for a long time and even started considering himself a sotāpanna, and then he went back home, sold his cow for meat in order to get some money. This is what lack of sīla means”.

“Prior to meditation, in addition to ethics rules, it is necessary to at least sort out for oneself who the Buddha is, what the Sangha is, because some Western yogis think that the Sangha is a monk who wears special yellow clothes”.

“You mentioned an American who lived in Burma for seven months, and there was an American monk who lived in Sri Lanka for many years. Upon his return to the United States, he built a large meditation centre, wrote a book and earned good money, and, finally, died of venereal disease (he had sexual relationships with his students)”.

“It all happens because people do not have feelings of remorse for saṃsāra and the desire for Nibbāna, but just want to learn something new and then sell it”.

Meditation is trendy now...

“Oh yes, and I became part of that trend – involuntarily”, Bhante said with a smile.

“Some people come to me with statements like, ‘I have reached certain high levels in my concentration and now I don’t want to be taught anymore!’”

“A yogi must ‘prove with his body’ what he knows in theory. But now we have the reverse of that, just endless and empty talk: ‘Jhāna is this, jhāna is that;’ ‘Oh, I have excitement, it means that I am in the

first jhāna. Excellent! Now thoughts should leave me. But why aren't they? Or maybe it's *arūpa-jhāna*⁵⁹ already?"

"When people in jeans and smart outfits with make-up and jewellery come to Kanduboda, I do not feel anxious knowing they lead ordinary normal lives. But when I see yogis coming to interviews and start telling me about jhāna, then I feel scared for those people".

"If a yogi says that he understands how nāma-rūpa works, I will ask him a question about what he did yesterday, because if today he indeed attained vision into the stream of mind and matter, then yesterday he should have been practicing in a certain direction. It is very easy for me to define when someone is talking about his personal experiences and not about what he read in a book. There are moments when a teacher should simply listen without commenting so the student doesn't imagine something unnecessary".

"Otherwise, the meditator is simply engaged in wishful thinking. Mind can act in rather cunning and keen ways, cheating itself. Sometimes a person does attain clearance of mind (*citta-visuddhi*) without prior clearance of views (*ditṭhi-visuddhi*),⁶⁰ and attains a temporary disappearance of defilements. The teacher commends him without understanding that the achievement was just momentary".

"The only aim of real meditation practice is attainment of the Path and the Fruition, and a good teacher expects from his students just that. 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 own".

59 Formless absorption.

60 See the seven stages of Purification in the *Visuddhimagga*.

Is it acceptable to charge money for retreats?

“It is normal to take money to cover costs. Kanduboda depends on donations: we must do renovations, maintain kutis, prepare food and so on. I am talking about people who make profit out of the Dhamma without, in fact, knowing anything about meditation, but having a talent to sell anything attractive to the mob”.

“If anyone has business acumen, plus some knowledge of Buddhism, he can without too much struggle create an alluring ‘spiritual product’, for which there will be a real demand. And nowadays a lot of money is made that way”.

“This is very dangerous: the fame, the interviews”.

“Half a century ago, there were very few meditation teachers. Today, an enormous number of people position themselves as Buddhist mentors”.

Don’t crowds of people interfere with the practice – in Mahasi Sayadaw centres, there are hundreds of people at a time?

“If you arrive at a retreat where there are a hundred or even a thousand meditators you should be alone and not communicate with others. If after the discussion about the Dhamma you start discussing what you heard with someone else, that will be the end of your meditation”.

“One must not share details of their practice with people around them and ask their advice or give recommendations. All discussions should be only with the teacher. Talk is the enemy of practice! One must not tell others even about their object of meditation”.

The Buddha likened his students to the fields ploughed by a farmer. He starts planting seeds, beginning with the most fertile field and then he moves to the medium, and, finally, to the poorest. Do You follow the same method?

“Yes, I follow the same method. If a person is talented and diligent, he doesn’t need to be taught for too long: he will quickly understand everything himself”.

“If a person is hopeless, no matter how much effort is invested in him, a teacher should not waste his time on him because there are other, more capable students. It doesn’t mean that I will stop communicating with the one who doesn’t listen to my advice: if he changes his mind, I will be ready to teach him again”.

“In the past, I used to spend a tremendous amount of effort and could even teach in the middle of the night if necessary! Students were diligent and intelligent; I can’t say that all of them attained magga-naññā, but all of them were genuinely interested. Working with them, I was full of inspiration”.

“These days, I do not exert myself too much. It is now quite rare to have someone who could be trained. Whatever you say, the majority of them judge from the point of view of their own theories. They move from teacher to teacher, from retreat to retreat, without following your advice”.

“A yogi should fulfil all instructions, try to attain attentiveness, awareness, and be diligent. If I see enthusiasm and energy, I want to help such person as much as I can. In the meantime, people come to the meditation centre for a planned period of time, for two weeks, a month. They do not understand that it is their mentor who should define the term, how long they should actually spend in retreat”.

You often criticise modern books about meditation, of which there are so many. Is it possible to regard suttas as guides for practice?

“Even in suttas, it is impossible to find meditation instructions”.

“Certainly, reading the Tipiṭaka is wonderful, and all suttas are very practical, but the meditation practice is chosen individually for each yogi: it cannot be found in books. The tradition of meditation goes from teacher to student, over thousands of years”.

“Only afterwards, one can read the Pali Canon and say, ‘Oh yes, indeed, it is what I experienced!’ “The path is not something to play with. When you look in the mirror, you see the reflection very clearly. Similarly, the Noble Path can be seen very clearly. There is a straight road to Nibbāna”.

Does a yogi have to check his or her progress regularly? Once a month, for instance?

“No need to do that as far as this teacher’s concerned. A yogi wants to evaluate him or herself only due to doubts and restlessness. Only those who meditate long and successfully can evaluate their own practice”.

“Sometimes, a meditator thinks everything is bad with their practice, but a teacher knows that it is not true, or on the contrary, the meditator can be satisfied with their practice but the mentor sees how he is failing. The mentor knows which stage his student is at, but will never inform them about it with comments like, ‘You’ve reached the stage of entry in the disappearance of phenomena’,(bhanga- ñāna ⁶¹) or, ‘You entered the third jhāna!’”

61 Second knowledge (of nine). See *Patisambhidamagga.1*

“He is interested in student’s progress, therefore, will never say things, which destroy all achievements”.

“Practice never goes the way the student expects, therefore a mentor is critically important and necessary: having experience, he corrects yogis’ mistakes and guides them on the Path until they gain the highest bliss of the Dhamma, which is lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle, lovely in its end, in the spirit and in the letter, and displays the fully-perfected and purified holy life”.



CHAPTER 17

THE FIVE SPIRITUAL FACULTIES (Pañcīndriyāni)

...As long as a bhikkhu does not perceive the disappearance of the five hindrances in himself, he feels as if in debt, in sickness, in bonds, in slavery, on a desert journey.

But when he perceives the disappearance of the five hindrances in himself,

it is as if he were freed from debt, from sickness, from bonds, from slavery, from the perils of the desert.

(DN.2)

In one Dhamma class there was a question about how to attain balance between effort and calm, because excessive energy may lead to excitement and anxieties. Pemasiri Thera thought it was a good question.

“From time to time, in many yogis, certain qualities blossom”, He said. “However, this happens without balance, spontaneously: either

faith is too big and hinders the development of wisdom, or there is too much energy, and it hinders the emergence of samādhi”.

“In reality, two factors should be balanced: wisdom (*paññā*) and faith (*saddhā*). If *saddhā* and *paññā* start working in the same manner, then energy and concentration will appear automatically”.

“When all five faculties come into balance, then even five minutes of such state a day is a great achievement. At this point, *jhāna* may appear. For *jhāna*, purity is needed – when the mind is free from hindrances of anger, sensuality, doubt, laziness, and anxiety”.

“If a yogi is aware, then Liberation takes place through either faith or wisdom. Nevertheless, both these qualities should be developed to the same extent”.

“Thus, one person earnestly believes in the Awakening of the Tathāgata, and it has huge influence on him. Another person regards objects with wisdom, seeing all of them through appearance and disappearance. *Sati* helps to develop both of these qualities”.

“The Buddha spoke of putting an end to becoming again and again (*punabhava*). There is a belief that it is possible to put an end to the stream of being, and it is very rare in the world (even among Buddhists)”.

“In order to have such belief, it is necessary to make efforts, and these are not just bodily efforts, like, ‘I can sit in the lotus posture for three hours at a time’. But it is the effort of the mind that seeks and keeps the wholesome. The real *saddhā* is born from the fear of *samsāra*: fear of old age, death, sadness, sorrow, lamentation and despair. It is useful for all of us to think about these dangers, although nobody likes doing that”.

“By having faith, we acquire indifference to worldly pleasures (*nibbida*), because we know of their opposites: of pain, which is hidden in the inconstancy of pleasures; of their, ‘being like a dream and bringing little joy, but much disappointment’, as the Buddha described it”.

“Nibbida doesn’t mean aversion, as it usually is translated into English. It often happens that a man, having problems in life, wants to get rid of them by rejecting both communication with others and taking care of people close to them. That’s not renunciation, but just an expression of anger. Renunciation requires a wise attitude, which is not expressed in a depression, but just the opposite!”

“A practitioner of the Dhamma can’t be a gloomy, dark man. Some people, thinking they’re ‘retired’ from the world, force themselves to look at everything in a black light, refusing to recognize the beauty of the surrounding world and looking only for flaws in it. Poems by awakening monks and nuns are full of joy and delight, and enjoyment the splendor of nature.”

*“When I see the crane,
her clear bright wings outstretched
in fear to flee the black storm cloud,
A shelter seeking, to safe shelter borne,
Then doth the river Ajakarani give joy to me.
Who doth not love to see on either bank
clustered rose apple trees in fairy array.
Behind the great cave of my hermitage or here
the soft croak of the frogs, well rid of their
undying mortal foes proclaim:
Not from the mountain streams isn’t time today To flit.
Safe is the Ajakarani. She brings us luck.
Here is it good to be”.*
(Thag.4.1)

“You can enjoy beauty without wanting to pick it up, get hold of it. You don’t want to own a mountain or the moonlight; you don’t

want to take away the blue of the sea or the reflection of sunlight on the ocean, no!”

“Nibbida is knowledge of the flip side of pleasant objects: about the pain that lies in their variability”.

“In this case, a yogi doesn’t need to specially generate energy, it will come by itself. *Virya* is a force, one which doesn’t let our wholesome qualities dilute and which helps translate faith into real action”.

“Sati is a pure form of effort, which comes through faith. Sati painstakingly keeps the wholesome. Everything wholesome is rooted in sati. When there is sati, mind is free from defilements; and if they suddenly appear, a yogi knows it”.

“Virya should not be excessive, otherwise samādhi may not appear. When awareness, faith, and effort come into balance, samādhi appears. Samādhi is very important, because with it the appearance of defilements becomes impossible: all kilesas are well hidden and give way to wisdom. Thanks to wisdom, one day all defilements will disappear altogether”.

“All factors of the Aryan Path should also be balanced and brought into equilibrium. Knowledge of the Path is a result of balancing all factors, and knowledge of Fruition is a state of mind of a yogi who, following the direct Path, has come to its final destination”.

“There are reasons why the five hindrances appear and grow, and reasons why they diminish and disappear. It is similar with the development of spiritual faculties”.

“The Buddha compared it to the body’s need for food: the body exists only if the hunger is appeased. And the factors of Awakening exist only due to a need to ‘recharge’, and disappear, if this energy is not being supplied”.⁶²

62 *SN.46.51*

Hindrance	Causes for arising and growing	Cause for destroying and decreasing
Anger <i>Vyāpāda</i>	The theme of resistance and inappropriate attention	A good will, compassion, appreciation, or equanimity and appropriate attention (<i>mettācetovimutti</i>)
Sensual desire <i>kāmacchanda</i>	The theme of beauty and inappropriate attention	The theme of unattractiveness and appropriate attention
Laziness and apathy <i>thīna-middha</i>	Boredom, weariness, yawning, drowsiness after a meal, & sluggishness of awareness and inappropriate attention	The potential for effort, the potential for exertion, the potential for striving and appropriate attention
Restlessness and worry <i>uddhacca-kukkucca</i>	Non-stillness of mindfulness and inappropriate attention	The stilling of awareness and appropriate attention
Doubt <i>vicikicchā</i>	There are phenomena that act as a foothold for uncertainty. To foster inappropriate attention to them is a food for doubts.	There are mental qualities that are skillful & unskillful, blameworthy & blameless, gross & refined, siding with darkness & with light. To foster appropriate attention to them is the lack of food for doubts.

And what about Seven Factors of Awakening (*Sattā Bojjhaṅgā*)? It is not quite clear how to balance joy (*pīti*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*).

“The development of the *bojjhaṅgā* is not about achieving a balance: they have to be built one after another and be developed to the level of real wholesome factors”.

“*Sati, dhamma-vicaya, viriya, pīti, passaddhi, upekkha, samādhi* (mindfulness, analysis of qualities⁶³, effort, rapture, serenity, equanimity, contemplation), all of them have to be developed to perfection. Rapture, serenity, contemplation, and equanimity are fruits of effort, mindfulness and analysis of qualities. There is no point in cultivating only one factor, because they condition each other and depend upon each other”.

“In any case, you should develop only the first three factors: *sati, dhamma-vicaya, virya*. The rest will appear as a result of them: *pīti* can be compared to the feelings of a person who wanted to buy a certain thing so much, and then at last, saw it in a shop, ‘Hurray!’”

“He buys it, feels happy, and then after the purchase he calms down (*passaddhi*) and attains coolness towards the purchase (*upekkhā*)”.

“*Bojjhanga* blossom naturally, without pressure. This is something very enlightened, very advanced. To meditate means to develop the Factors of Awakening”.

Bojjhaṅgā

1. <i>sati</i>	}	Causes HETU
2. <i>dhamma-vichaya</i>		
3. <i>viriya</i>		
4. <i>pīti</i>	}	Results PHALA
5. <i>passaddhi</i>		
6. <i>upekkhā</i>		
7. <i>samādhi</i>		

⁶³ *Dhamma-vicaya* is a complicated term to explain, because the word “*dhamma*” has many meanings. Here it is mostly about analyzing the nature of mind and matter.

Factor	Cause for arising and growing	Cause for destroying and decreasing
Mindfulness <i>Sati</i>	There are mental qualities that act as a foothold for mindfulness. To foster appropriate attention to them: this is the food for mindfulness .	Not fostering attention to them (see the stich on the left).
Analysis of qualities <i>dhamma-vichaya</i>	There are mental qualities that are skillful & unskillful, blameworthy & blameless, gross & refined, siding with darkness & with light. Not fostering attention to them: this is lack of food for analysis of qualities.	Not fostering attention to them (see the stich on the left).
Effort <i>Viriya</i>	There is the potential for effort, the potential for exertion, the potential for striving. Not fostering attention to them: this is lack of food to effort.	Not fostering attention to them (see the stich on the left).
Rapture <i>Pīti</i>	There are mental qualities that act as a foothold for rapture as a factor for Awakening. To foster appropriate attention to them: This is the food for rapture	Not fostering attention to them (see the stich on the left).
Serenity <i>Passaddhi</i>	There is physical serenity & there is mental serenity. To foster appropriate attention to them: this is the food for serenity	Not fostering attention to them (see the stich on the left).
Equanimity <i>Upekkhā</i>	There are mental qualities that act as a foothold for equanimity as a factor for Awakening. To foster appropriate attention to them: this is the food for equanimity	Not fostering attention to them (see the stich on the left).
Contemplation <i>Samādhi</i>	There are themes for calm, themes for non-distraction [these are the four frames of reference]. To foster appropriate attention to them: this is the food for contemplation.	Not fostering attention to them (see the stich on the left).



CHAPTER 18

FAITH (Saddhā)

...Just, O king, as if a mighty storm were to break upon a mountain top and pour out rain, the water would flow down according to the levels, and after filling up the crevices and chasms and gullies of the hill, would empty itself into the brook below, so that the stream would rush along, overflowing both its banks. Now suppose a crowd of people, one after the other, were to come up, and being ignorant of the real breadth or depth of the water, were to stand fearful and hesitating on the brink. And suppose a certain man should arrive, who knowing exactly his own strength and power should gird himself firmly and, with a spring, land himself on the other side. Then the rest of the people, seeing him safe on the other side, would likewise cross. That is the kind of way in which the recluse, by faith I, aspires to leap, as it were by a bound, into higher things.

(MInp.)

18.1 Abandon doubts

Saddhā is always in the forefront of other abilities – the whole Aryan Path has a source in faith, starts with faith.

Pemasiri Thera said that no one can attain confidence in the Dhamma only through listening or thinking about it, although all of that is necessary for initial motivation. However, only through the individual practice is the real saddhā, which is born from experience, attained.

“A person who has faith has accepted what the Buddha taught, but not immediately and not unconditionally, no. Rather, he has reflected upon his words, studied them, as well as having practiced generosity and loving kindness’.

There are two kinds of expression of trust: the first one includes reciting of the suttas, helping build stupas and pagodas, and participating in ceremonies of donation of clothes, food, and medicines to monks’.

The second kind of expression of trust in the Tathāgata and the Dhamma is the practice of Satipaṭṭhāna. But without the first expression, it is very hard – even impossible – to implement the sutta’s exercises’.

The Buddha described himself as a person who perceived the essence of kusala. Having trust, we also try to perceive what wholesomeness is and how it frees us from hardships. Many followers of the Buddha try to do that one way or the other, but most are inhibited at some point in the search: some at the stage of observance of rules and offerings; some at the stage of practicing mental calmness; some at the stage of ordination as a monk.

A person who follows the direct and right path will not stop at any of the crossroads. Like a river flowing directly to the ocean, he or she zeroes in only on the most virtuous, aspiring to Nibbāna’.

An ordinary yogi, as a rule, has a certain level of trust, but because it never reaches its culmination, always remains in a kind of limbo, risking a shift to another religion or to nihilism. A person who possesses saddhā will never revert to any spiritual teacher besides the Buddha, and will never accept refuge in any other teaching besides the Dhamma’.

The following lines are from the *Tipiṭaka*:

“The unbeliever, ungrateful, who understands the Uncreated, who has cut off the fetters, who has put an end to occasion of good and evil, who has eschewed all desires, he indeed, is a supreme man”.

A superficial reading of that might lead one to conclude that an arahant is without any faith at all, but in fact an arahant is someone in whom it reaches its fullness, its climax, its culmination; someone who has turned their trust into the attainment of Liberation”. Unshakeable, strong faith is a mark of a Stream-Enterer who has fully destroyed all doubts in:

- The Buddha;
- The Dhamma;
- The Sangha;
- Past;
- Present;
- Future;
- Cause and effects;
- Noble Path.

All manner of uncertainty about the past, present and future means that person holds to the notion of an “I” (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*⁶⁴)

“This is how he attends unwisely: ‘Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been that, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been that, what shall I become in the future?’ Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the present thus: ‘Am I? Am I not? What am I?’”

(MN.2)

First, the fetters of these doubts weaken and then, with the attainment of Path Knowledge, they are completely eliminated.

The practice of mindfulness of the Triple Gem can fill a yogi with unprecedented enthusiasm, which gives their body the sensation of weightlessness and flight; their mind emanates joy, which leads to the attainment of samādhi with ease and enables it to perceive the Truth.

“Faith is not an insignificant achievement, it is a great gift”, Sayadaw U Pandita said. “When practice affirms that the Buddha was right, faith becomes unshakeable. It is impossible not to believe when you see the results. Faith never appears on its own, but is accompanied by wonderful states of mind (*sobhana-cetasika*), complete reluctance to do evil (*hiri-ottappa*), and ease and light in the body and in the mind”.

64 ‘Personality-belief’ is the first of the 10 fetters.

18.2 Seeing Buddha

The word “faith” itself, nevertheless, is often hard for Western yogis to appreciate because it is associated with the kind of blind faith that cannot be questioned, something many of them rejected in the religion in which they were brought up.

According to Pemasiri Thera, *saddhā* is not about worshipping and not about carrying out rituals.

“If people come to me asking to tie ‘a protective ribbon’ on their wrist, I will fulfil their wish. Of course, I do not believe that a ribbon can bring happiness – how can it do that? But you cannot tell a baby, ‘Don’t crawl; walk properly!’

“It is impossible. A child doesn’t know the Dhamma, but watches how mother offers flowers and incense to the statue of the Buddha, and starts following her example”.

The majority of Europeans who, by the will of destiny, end up in Asian temples, try to avoid religious ceremonies.

“Western yogis find it hard to vest their faith in a concrete human, a person. (Still) in this case, it is possible to develop faith in the Dhamma within oneself, and it will be sufficient, because the Buddha himself used to say that he who sees the Dhamma sees Him, too”.

“These days many Buddhists love to observe rituals and visit temples and pagodas, but one can build a pagoda in their own heart by practicing the Dhamma-Vinaya. Then you will be able to see the Buddha!”

18.3 The Door to Nibbāna

Is it possible to meditate without faith? Goenka, for instance, said it did not matter if you believed in rebirth. Thus, we are not talking about sammā-diṭṭhi, a foundation for practice.

“I don’t know in which context Goenka said that, but I advise my students to forget all speculations about the past and the future when they stay one-on-one with the object of meditation. I can tell them to stop thinking even about the Buddha or the Dhamma during the retreat”.

“A yogi must stay in the present and work on the development of attention and awareness. Materialistic views are very strong in communist regimes, and even in Sri Lanka there are people who believe neither in past nor in future lives. If a yogi finds it hard to believe in past and future lives but adheres to moral behaviour, it is acceptable”.

“However, it is an entirely different issue when the Dhamma is studied out of pride and as a scientific discipline for the sake of becoming famous and humiliating others in philosophical debates. With such motivation, people can completely ignore morality and not observe any vows”.

In the West, many Buddhists prefer to ignore all references to devas and other “supernatural stuff”, rejecting it...

“Usually, a meditating person doesn’t see either divine or lower worlds – only the world of humans and animals”.

“At the same time, in our consciousness there is a potential for the divine world (*deva-loka*), if it is permeated with loving kindness,

wisdom, and the desire to learn; for the lower fate of existence (*niraya*), if the mind is cruel and full of hatred; for the Brahma world (*Brahmā-loka*), if it is clear and elevated. All these worlds are created here and now, in this one body”.

“Being born into a certain destiny doesn’t happen at our will, but under the influence of kamma. All the time, we create the potential for being born into a certain destiny, bright or gloomy. Even without clairvoyance it is possible to see one’s own generosity, purity, greed or hatred, which will lead to new births”.

“A long time has passed since the time of the Buddha, and the minds of many of his followers refuse to accept some unusual things. Maybe indeed, such things do not happen in the West, but only in Asia. However, all of this is perfectly real, but in order to accept it, the mind should be ready to rise up to the required level”.

“Real faith always becomes evident in action – in the sincere desire to reach the end of suffering, which is possible only with the help of Satipaṭṭhāna practice, when the mind is directed at the search for kusala. Faith, in combination with wisdom, opens the doors to Nibbāna and helps overcome all difficulties”.

“There are monks who, after many years, give up their ordination and change to other religions or marry their female students”, said Pemasiri Thera. “It means that, in fact, they never had any faith”.

“I know a woman who always led a very ethical way of life, observed the full-moon days, participated in various Buddhist ceremonies and seemingly had a strong faith. Then she fell ill very badly and suffered so much that she gave up the Refuge and the Dhamma”.

“To accept all tribulations and changes, keeping one’s faith in one’s heart – that is the true practice of the Dhamma”.



CHAPTER 19

MINDFULNESS (SATI)

*... There is, bhikkhus, this one to the purification of beings,
for the overcoming of sorrow and pain,
for the disappearance of pain and sadness,
for the gaining of the right path,
for the realization of Supreme Bliss — that is to say
the four foundations of mindfulness. What are the four?
Here, monks, a bhikkhu abides contemplating body as body
ardent, clearly aware and mindful,
having put aside hankering and fretting
for the he abides contemplating feelings as feelings;
he abides contemplating mind as mind,
he abides contemplating mind-objects
as mind-object — ardent, clearly aware
and mindful, having put aside hankering
and fretting for the world.*

(DN.22)

“Whichever meditation a yogi practices, if he ignores Satipaṭṭhāna there won’t be any benefit from his practice today or tomorrow or ever”, Pemasiri Thera stated firmly.

Bhante talked about sati extensively and often, and what follows is based on his lectures during 2012-2014

The Pali word “sati” is translated as “mindfulness”, although in fact it stems from the verb *sarati*, “to remember”. *Paṭṭhāna*, means “establishment”, or “foundation”.

Thus, Satipaṭṭhānā means establishing mindfulness and clear comprehension. “Mindfulness” has come to be the accepted translation of sati into English. However, the word carries a kind of passive connotation which can be misleading. Mindfulness must be dynamic and confrontative. At Panditārāma, “observing power” is preferred as a translation of sati rather than “mindfulness”, because it should leap onto the object, covering it completely, penetrating it, not missing any part of it.

The Four Foundations of mindfulness include:

- *Kāyānupassanā* — contemplation of body;
- *Vedanānupassanā* — contemplation of feelings;
- *Cittānupassanā* — contemplation of mind;
- *Dhammānupassanā* — contemplation of objects of mind.

Sati doesn’t just appear out of the blue – it needs *sīla* for its development. *Sīla* here is not just the five precepts, it is *indriya-samvara-sīla* (literally, self-control of the senses with the help of morality). It’s the development of the right attitude toward all phenomena, which begins with skilful attention and ends with sati, attainment of the *jhānas*, and the development of wisdom.

Guarding the sense doors is a virtue that helps prevent dissatisfaction and suffering, which happen due to contact with external objects: sounds, forms, ideas. The yogi controls his interaction with the world, therefore, attraction, aversion or delusion (*lobha, dosa* or *moha*) cannot occur in him: he does not go into the detail and characteristics of objects. It is that kind of natural morality that frees him from the habit of getting angry and from craving.

If *silā* is not present, *samādhi* may not manifest, because during meditation sensory images continue attacking the mind, which remains unprotected.

19.1 Skilful attention

Indriya-samvara-sīla and *sati-sampajañña* start with wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*). We learn to be attentive towards things that occur automatically: towards the way we breathe, stand, dress, and wash up. We try to notice even small things, and for that we need to undertake all actions slowly in order to feel them completely.

It is impossible to be one-hundred-percent attentive to everything we encounter during a day, but it is possible to start with little things and gradually increase the number of observed phenomena. For example, something happens and a yogi notices it; and then another contact appears, a sound or a touch, but he doesn't realise it, he misses it. Over time, these missed objects become fewer and fewer. If the meditator is able to be attentive to half of what's occurring, it is a wonderful sign.

A yogi should have a good attention, but attention alone is not enough. Even a young child possesses attention. On its own, attention does not constitute *kusala* or *akusala*, because it's attention's nature to

switch from one object to another. It's dependent on the object to make it wholesome or unwholesome. Controlling and keeping attention on a chosen object at will is an action of a higher order than just attention given to some strong contact.

Unwholesome attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*) forces one to recall something that might provoke anger from old hurts or some other past misdeeds, which causes regret and anxiety in the present. And memory of the desired object leads to the emergence of craving again. A hunter chasing prey or a thief at work – they both act very attentively, but *samādhi* can arise only in the case of wholesome attention that is void of attraction or aversion.

We can talk about *sati* only at a very advanced stage of the development of the mind, and when we are not giving attention to *akusala*.

There is no benefit in paying attention to thoughts like, “I am so tired of this”, “I am fed up”, “When will it be over?” Similarly, there's no good to come of going into detail about desired objects. When a *yogi* controls his reaction to sensory contacts, stopping them at the level of simple hearing, seeing, thinking, he stops the usual tendency of the mind to be caught by what comes into contact with it.

“Just like a drop of water will always slip from the lotus leaf, so the wholesome will not attach to any of those he can hear or sens”.
(*SnP.2.14*)

Accompanied by *sati*, attention always inclines towards the wholesome. *Sati-sampajañña* is a result of wise attention, and is directly associated with the wisdom and understanding of things in accordance with their true nature.

One Western yogi who meditated for many years used to come to Kanduboda. Once he quarrelled with his roommate because he was being noisy.

“I told that yogi that there was no point in his practice because he was not guarding his mind and it was still weak, despite of all the meditation he had done”, Bhante recalled.

A good meditator having sati will not allow the irritation to come up. For instance, if he hears a sound, he doesn't take it further, thinking, “Who is it? What kind of new bird is that? Who is whispering in the next kuti?” Seeing the image... apprehending the object... experiencing the feeling... tasting the taste... smelling the smell.... Whichever object he comes into contact with, he can stop; he can decline any perception, feeling, image, or sound. He does not harbour what belongs to the senses.

19.2 Casting aside attraction and rejection

Bhante

“A strong faculty of sati is not something we are born with, but something that is necessary to cultivate, to grow. In Mahasi Sayadaw centres, teachers emphasise that it is easy to develop sati, because it is sufficient to know what is happening at the moment, and to know about the attitude with which the mind interacts with thoughts, ideas, forms, sounds and smells. Is it fascinated? Or trying to get rid of them? Are there hindrances preventing the emergence of wisdom?

The way of Satipaṭṭhāna is very simple: knowing the feeling, knowing the body, the mind and knowing the objects of the mind – diligently, zealously, earnestly.

You are devoted to the present, dissolved into what is happening now. You do not rush ahead and create plans, and you are not left behind, stirring up the past. Sati is not just attentiveness while a yogi walks slowly, eats slowly, and washes up slowly. Sati is a relationship with objects, but one that is void of attraction and rejection.

It is not necessary to read the whole *Tipiṭaka* in order to learn this. In the times of the Buddha, very ordinary people, from the lowest castes, uneducated, could build mindfulness. Don't try to justify why you can't do the same.

Diligently, without missing a thing, it is necessary to train oneself to be attentive to what is happening inside and outside, and soon it will become a wholesome habit. For that, you don't need to be in the lotus posture. In each moment of life there is awareness, there is a feeling and there is perception. One has to simply see it!

A yogi can sit with his legs crossed and a straight back, or lie in the lion's posture, or even stand balancing on his tip-toes or on his head – it doesn't matter! When he stands up from sitting meditation, he shouldn't think that he stopped meditating. He simply changed his posture.

Practicing that way, he will attain true calm, a right attitude to the practice, and stable awareness. The mind will stay continuously in the state of sati. Grief will have no chance of turning into a huge problem, entrenching itself in the consciousness; anger and craving will not captivate it, and at a higher level, they simply stop occurring. This does not happen at once, however, and in the presence of sati, there still is the knowledge of negativities, but there's no need to even try to prevent them: they appear by themselves.

By practicing this way, a yogi attains a state of mind where kilesas might not yet be eliminated, but are already clearly discerned and are in dormant or subdued condition. At this stage, one should not stop or

discontinue the practice by any means, even if he has returned home from the temple. There is no point in blaming others if the meditator has a problem meditating at home. His relatives aren't at fault, the deficiencies in his own mind and lack of sati are”.



CHAPTER 20

NIBBANA AS A CULMINATION OF WHOLESOME

*...Bhikkhus, remain with your minds well-established in
Satipaṭṭhāna. Don't let the deathless be lost to you.
(SN.47.41)*

Pemasiri Thera usually says that a true follower of the Buddha does not go to war with anyone in the world, because he knows everything as it is. He knows feeling as feeling, perception as perception, and consciousness as consciousness, and knowing all that, what can he be in conflict with? What can he cling to? Below is his explanation of this subject

The “crown” of sati is the attainment of the Path and the Fruition. If the meditator attained one result, he should move on to attaining the next, higher, achievement.⁶⁵ This is also the highest manifestation of sati as a wholesome quality.

⁶⁵ Until he will reach a final Liberation of mind from all defilements.

One part of Satipaṭṭhāna is samatha, and the other is vipassanā.

We start the practice by observing the rising and falling of the abdomen or by focusing on breathing. This exercise is described in the beginning of Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, where vipassanā is not even mentioned: only attentiveness to the body, to its postures and movements.

Nowadays, the word ‘vipassanā’ is used everywhere, often without any connection to the real meaning. It is applied to mettā-bhāvanā or anāpānasati, or to simple attentiveness to bodily activity. All of this is quite useful, but insight into the nature of reality is something different.

If attentiveness is well developed and if mindfulness and awareness are in full harmony, then wisdom starts flourishing within the yogi. He sees various phenomena, which are related to the object examined by the mind at a particular moment. Here, the aspect of attentiveness leaves the mind, giving way to Knowledge. This is what sati-sampajañña is: when mindfulness and wisdom are born in the mind at the same time, eliminating unawareness.

The yogi is no longer doubtful in relation to internal or external objects, he has learned their substance. All actions of the mind and the body become wholesome: the yogi is shuttered from evil. He is not just attentive to his body, but he knows exactly the nature of the five aggregates.⁶⁶

It all happens by itself. Without pressure or duress, samatha turns into vipassanā. Where samatha has rather general rules for all practitioners, vipassanā is individual for each person. What happens in it is the perception of everything. The yogi attains the jhānas and one of the Fruits. He comes to realise that there is no “I”, but there is only a stream of changeable experience.

⁶⁶ Aggregate of body, feelings, consciousness, perceptions and volition formations.

The practicing yogi had started by observing inhalation and exhalation with a conviction that it is *he* who is breathing and it is *he* who is observing it. After a while, something happens in his consciousness, a turning point.

Then, only breathing itself remains. Each inhalation is totally new and each exhalation is different from the previous one. Watching over the breathing, he knows whether it was a short or long inhalation, whether the breathing is slow or fast, whether or not it is accompanied by craving, rejection, or unawareness. This breathing is entirely a part of nature: the element of wind on the outside merges with element of wind inside.

There is breathing and there is mind that knows this breathing. There is nothing else.

The Satipaṭṭhāna sutta says: “So the bhikkhu abides contemplating body as body internally, externally, and both internally and externally”. There can be a serious misapprehension in what exactly is meant by external and internal (*ajjhataṃ* and *bahiddhā*). Many teachers explain that the external is something different from what we are, objects like leaves, grass, or cars. This false interpretation migrates, as it were, from one book to another, from one lecture to another.

What the Buddha meant was that a bhikkhu meditates either with “I” or without “I”. Try to practice without “I”, without the involvement of the conceptual mind, without appropriation. Otherwise you will not be able to turn to vipassanā.

Even one hour a day with sati-sampajañña provides enormous benefit: the mind is wide open and free from all interferences. Allocate one hour, or even ten minutes per day, and it can change your life dramatically. You should inspire yourself to follow the Path and put an end to suffering, seeing the fear and dissatisfaction in saṃsāra.

Buddha Gautama opened Satipaṭṭhāna for us, the ancient Path, the only road to ending all suffering».

Sayadaw U Pandita

Sati has three characteristics:

- To hold the object in the field of vision.
- To encounter the object “face to face”.
- Not to let the mind wander: one moment of sati gives life to another moment of sati, then to the third, the fourth, and so on.

Sati keeps us from grief, but it doesn't appear on its own, it demands a lot of energy. Through practicing sati, we are able to properly grasp an object; the mind has a direct knowledge of it. Without that, it is impossible to understand three characteristics of existence, because the mind is ensnared in enjoyments, sounds and tastes, or in hostility and jealousy.

Sati triggers several factors of the Path into working mode: mindfulness, effort, contemplation, and wisdom. Virtue works as a foundation – thus, everything is involved in our practice.

If you have sati for a minute, then during those sixty seconds your mind remains in the state of purity. Thus, for ten minutes, it stays pure for 600 moments. And if sati is with you for one hour, or two hours, or the whole day?

When we abandon contact at the level of simple vision or hearing, it prevents the occurrence of anger and craving in relation to the object. We know what is present in that moment: an eye, a form, and a visual consciousness. There is no place for akusala, or the mundane kusala, but only *bhāvan-kusala*, which leads to Liberation.

This is direct knowledge, after which craving and action caused by it do not appear. This is how suffering is stopped and how a human reaches the island of calm and easefulness. If the whole world followed this path it would turn into a really good place, free from cruelty and violence.



CHAPTER 21

EFFORT (VIRYA)

...Rouse yourself! Sit up! Resolutely train yourself to attain peace. Do not let the King of death, seeing you are careless, lead you astray and dominate you. Go beyond this clinging, to which devas and men are attached, and the pleasures they seek. Do not waste your opportunity. When the opportunity has passed they sorrow when consigned to low realm.

(SnP.2.10)

Sammā-vāyāma is usually interpreted as “right effort”, but Pemasiri Thera disagreed with such an interpretation.

He said the word *sammā* is used only in relation to the Tathāgata itself – *Sammā Sambuddha*. It means “ideal”, “perfect”. Even in relation to a *Paccekabuddha* (one who on his own has freed himself of all vices and attained incomparable Awakening), the attribute of *sammā* is not used, because he does not possess the ability to teach others.

Sammā-vāyāma, Ideal Effort, does not appear accidentally and cannot be caused artificially. In order for it to arise, Perfect View (*sama-*

diṭṭhi) is necessary, and again, these are not views that are “right”, but are the ideal and perfect views of the Buddha himself!

These views are about what suffering is and what the ending of suffering is (*dukkhañāṇa* and *dukkhasamudayañāṇa*).

The Buddha never talked about anything abstract or impractical. He came to realise what our body and mind are. He left his life in a palace in order to understand that, and for the sake of finding the answer to this question he had to endure a great deal of suffering.

“When a person understands suffering, then the desire to attain liberation from what constitutes the cause of it blossoms in him, those who don’t discern suffering, what brings suffering into play, & where it totally stops, without trace; who don’t know the Path, the way to the stilling of suffering: lowly in their awareness-release & discernment-release, incapable of making an end, they’re headed to birth & aging”.

(SnP.3.12)

A person who understands dukkha lives without inflicting harm on anyone; his deeds, speech and actions are noble and pure. He is compassionate towards other beings.

Effort has nothing necessarily to do with sitting for hours in the lotus posture or doing walking meditation.

“All the time, a bhikkhu directs his mind towards the wholesome, the good, puts all his energy into it”, Pemasiri Thera said. “There isn’t any mystique in it when they say, ‘I feel subtle energies; my body is permeated with energy channels.’

“This is not energy; it is simply an imbalance of material particles (*rūpa-kalapa*). Virya is the opposite of laziness and sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*).

“Some Western yogis tell me, ‘I feel drowsy; that means I am possessed by laziness!’ In reality, thīna-middha is not associated not with physical fatigue. When a person comes from another country, his

body experiences stress due to the change of climate and new food, so we can't talk about laziness or apathy in this case.

“Thīna-middha is the mind when it is tired of looking for the wholesome. For instance, when a yogi who wants to go to the meditation hall, but instead decides to attend a puja, or instead of puja, engages in idle talk with someone, thus giving preference to something less wholesome than he could do, or not doing anything wholesome at all.

The Buddha told us what kusala is and how to attain it”.

The Four Efforts (Cattāro Sammappadhānā):

There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavours, activates persistence, upholds and exerts his intent for:

- The sake of the non-arising (*anuppādāya*) of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen.
- The sake of the abandonment (*pahānāya*) of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen.
- The sake of the arising (*uppādāya*) of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen.
- The maintenance (*thitiyā*), non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, and culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen



CHAPTER 22

CONTEMPLATION (Samādhī)

...Secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered and dwelled in the first jhāna, which consists of rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by thought and examination. With the subsiding of thought and examination, I entered and dwelled in the second jhāna, which has internal placidity and unification of mind and consists of rapture and pleasure born of concentration, without thought and examination. With the fading away as well of rapture, I dwelled equanimous and mindful and clearly comprehending, I experienced pleasure with the body; I entered and dwelled in the third jhāna of which the noble ones declare: 'He is equanimous, mindful, one who dwells happily. With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous passing away of joy and dejection, I entered and dwelled in the fourth jhāna, neither painful nor pleasant, which has purification of mindfulness by equanimity'⁶⁷.

⁶⁷ A common refrain in many *suttas*.

22.1 Not being a stone

Samādhi can be literally interpreted as “composed mind”.

Given his perfectionism, Pemasiri Thera was not satisfied with the English translations of the Pali word samādhi as “concentration” or “focus”, because they carry connotations of rigidity, of a narrowing of consciousness.

According to the Buddha Himself, samādhi did not mean anything of the sort. “Samādhi is a fixed, stable state of consciousness”, Mahasi Sayadaw said. “An ordinary, untrained mind has a habit of wandering infinitely in various places. Such a mind is impossible to control because it chases every idea, every thought or imagination”.

There are a number of stages of concentration:

- one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*);
- serenity (*samatha*);
- contemplation (*samādhi*);
- absorption (*jhāna*);
- High Knowledge (*Abhiññā*);
- Liberation (*Nibbāna*).

In the state of samādhi, the mind is completely free from hindrances and contamination, and is able to perceive the Truth.

When the ascetic Gautama became the Fully Awakened One, he remembered Alara Kalama, who taught him jhānas, as the greatest among humans, and wanted to teach him first before all others because Kalama had attained unprecedented purity of mind, but did not know how to entirely leave behind mind’s limitations. In the state of samādhi, his mind was completely free of the power of *Mara*, the King of death.

In order to attain concentration, it is necessary to have an object towards which mind has a living interest and a desire to know it completely, turning away from everything else: the yogi should merge with this nimitta, become one and whole with it. Without that, it is impossible to attain concentration of the mind. It is better to enter contemplation with the same object, training the mind to it.

Once merging with the nimitta is attained, a yogi can understand that the nature of the mind is not just its wandering, but that nature is also a calming and serenity free from all anxiety. In starting meditation practice, it is necessary to invoke a child-like state of mind, forgetting all knowledge.

“Sometimes the mind becomes ‘impregnable’ and the yogi concludes that he had attained jhāna, when in fact there is no trace of it”, Pemasiri Thera said. “And the examples are plenty in India: a person turns into a ‘stone’ or into a ‘pillar of salt’, stops reacting to anything, and people around him consider him to be a great meditator.

Some conclude that their mind is the source of all suffering and are filled with a desire to destroy it. They become insensitive and hard, which can lead to degeneration into a creature without perception (*asañña-sattā*), but not to Nibbāna. In order to follow the Path, a yogi needs calmness, not some sort of trance where he no longer sees or hears anything. It is better to fall asleep for that. In fact, the yogi should see and perceive everything, but with a calm, serene mind.

“The insensitive mind is in a ‘deep sleep’ mode (bhavaṅga-citta⁶⁸), which is rather comfortable because external irritants are not a bother. And then all these books appear and talks about jhānas. In the meantime, the Buddha, with his level of samādhi, had never been like some rock! This is a completely wrong approach.

68 A term from *Abhidhamma*, sometime translated into English as ‘subconsciousness’

“Samādhi is a full awareness of all phenomena that come through the senses. You are concentrated on one object, but you are aware of all that is happening around you. The mind enjoys the object it chose for concentration, but is aware of others too, if they come. This is not a stiff, ‘drugged’ state”.

I like the state of silent emptiness in meditation – not even of happiness but more of a void, a zero...

“Neutral feelings, different from pleasant or unpleasant, are difficult to recognise, and they can be associated with wisdom as well as with ignorance. Usually, meditators like them, and quite often they are taken for calmness of the *arūpa-jhānas*, while that can be simply fatigue of the mind, which has been too active for a long time and then fallen into such a ‘zero’ state, free from thoughts.

“In other cases, a certain level of equanimity (*upekkhā*) can appear if a person has encountered a problem that cannot be resolved, but only accepted; he stops reacting and puts up with the situation.

“An equanimity toward all formations as they are (*saṅkhārupekkhā*⁶⁹) is a totally different matter. Here, the yogi comes to know the Truth, and this doesn’t occur without reason. The same can be said about fourth jhāna, in which there is *upekkhā*, and which is very difficult to attain. Only arahants are fully freed from the fetters of restlessness and worry.

69 See *Visuddhimagga*.

22.2 Moving away from the sensual world

Bhante about contemplation

“Some yogis who seemingly possess samādhi can be difficult for other people to associate with: they behave arrogantly and demand complete silence from everyone around them”.

“In reality, a person who is capable of entering jhānas is strikingly different from an ordinary person. He avoids everything related to akusala. Living in the sensual world, he is detached: physically he is in the world of humans, but mentally, in the celestial spheres. He is an extremely loveable person for others”.

“They often say that in the first jhāna, thoughts and reasoning are present. It is necessary to understand that these are not the same thoughts humans are used to. Jhāna is a mundane achievement, however it is not from the world of sensuality, but from higher planes of existence.

“In the second jhāna, not only are thoughts about sensuality absent, the very ‘self’ is absent! The sense of ‘I’ so common to everyone completely disappears”.

“Mind in jhāna enjoys its purity, and all good qualities are balanced. All impurities and fears are gone. An ordinary mind is always afraid of something: other people, hunger, pain, and that ‘I’ will fall into bad circumstances. In samādhi, all of that disappears, and the mind wants to understand what the Truth is”.

“For that, it needs joy and happiness that do not depend on external conditions. Joy plays an important role in meditation: it makes the mind and body soft, light and flexible”.

22.3 Moving towards jhānas via Satipaṭṭhāna

The culmination of jhānas are the six Higher Knowledges (*chalabhiññā*):

- “higher powers” (*iddhi — vidhā*);
- “divine ear” (*dibba-sota*);
- “divine eye” (*dibba — cakkhu*);
- “mind-penetrating knowledge” (*ceto-pariya-ñāṇa*);
- “remember one’s former abodes” (*pubbe -nivāsanussati*);
- “extinction of mental intoxicants” (*āsavakkhaya*).

“These days, very few people in the world attain jhānas, not to mention the Higher Knowledges. That’s because attaining jhāna is one thing, but staying in it, leaving and entering it upon one’s will at any time, is a completely different thing”.

“It is incredibly hard to become ‘a master’ of jhāna. It happens sometimes that a yogi attains mental absorption, retaining it for a short while, without understanding that he was in the first jhāna. He attained it accidentally and briefly. But one who’s attained real mastery is able to stay in it as long as he wishes”.

“Jhānas must be constructed immaculately, one after another, after which a yogi should let go of the meditation objects and immerse in the emptiness of the formless jhānas. In this case, the practitioner has a chance to attain a complete halt of all sensation and perception (*nirodha-samāpatti*) and *abhiññā*”.

“I always say that it is necessary to move to the jhānas through Satipaṭṭhāna, then whichever of the six kinds of High Knowledge the meditator sets his eye on he can attain. He has involved wisdom in his Path and he does not risk getting entrenched in the focused

absorption of consciousness. Samādhi and jhāna are wonderful, but without vipassanā they cannot bring an end to our journey in saṃsāra. The yogi who wants to stop suffering forever should sooner or later turn towards wisdom. If the factors of jhāna (*vitakka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, upekkhā, ekaggatā*) are present in the mind at the moment of death, then deliverance into the world of Brahma will follow. But we aspire not to a higher rebirth, but to the attainment of Nibbāna”. The Buddha taught us a noble contemplation, which takes place along with awareness of causes, conditions, and results. One samādhi is associated with keeping everything, while *sammā-samādhi* means letting everything go”.

“Jhāna, which came through wisdom, does not yield attachment and does not hinder further progress because the yogi sees the three characteristics of being, and he does not aspire to just experience joy and excitement or peace and balance. He knows that jhāna is a conditioned state and that the *ākiñcaññāyatana* (the sphere of “nothing”), or *nevasaññānāsaññāyatana* (the sphere of “neither perception nor non-perception”) is created via volitional effort of consciousness, therefore should be left to the right moment”.

“Nowadays, there’s too much talk about jhānas, and many are inclined to attribute an enormous significance to them. Jhāna is called a pleasant experience of the here and now, however, that’s not what we should become attached to: we should let it go when the vision of how-it-is is attained. When you see reality, the mind calms down in a natural way”.

“Samādhi based on guarding the doors of feelings and on morality is incredibly wholesome. In jhāna, happiness is truly great. However, there is more. There is also *sukha-vihāra* – a life without conflicts, without attraction and rejection, which is delivered by sati.

Sati knows the nature of any inner or outer phenomenon: appearance, continuation, and then disappearance”.

“In one sutta,⁷⁰ a sick bhikkhu complains to the Buddha that he’d lost the ability to attain samādhi due to his illness, to which the Bhagavan responded with a question: ‘Have I ever taught you that the objective of holy life is to attain samādhi?’ (In India, samadhi was often considered the top of spiritual achievement)”.

“Then later on, he asked that bhikkhu whether form was permanent or impermanent, whether consciousness was, or whether feeling, perception or intention were. That was how Buddha turned the mind of Ven. Assaji away from regrets of lost samadhi and towards wisdom. The bhikkhu then attained arahantship”.

70 *SN.22.88*



CHAPTER 23

WISDOM (*PAÑÑĀ*)

*...Enough with teaching the Dhamma
That even I found hard to reach;
For it will never be perceived
By those who live in lust and hate.
Those dyed in lust, wrapped in darkness
Will never discern this abstruse this Dhamma
Which goes against the worldly stream,
Subtle, deep, and difficult to see...
(MN.26)*

Wisdom includes three main types Knowledge:

1. *Nāma-rūpa paricheda-ñāna* – Knowledge of difference between mind and matter.
2. *Paccaya-pariggaha-ñāna* – Knowledge of causes and effects, and how they differ from each other.
3. *Vipassanā-ñāna* – Knowledge of impermanence, suffering, and impersonality.



CHAPTER 24

THE FIRST KNOWLEDGE (Nāma-rūpa)

...I will give you an analogy; for there are cases where it is through the use of an analogy that intelligent people can understand the meaning of what is being said. It is as if two sheaves of reeds were to stand leaning against one another. In the same way, from name-&-form as a requisite condition comes consciousness, from consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form.

(SN.12.67)

When the meditator is able to draw a line between mind (*nāma*) and matter (*rūpa*), he starts to understand that *nāma* perceives the object (is inclined towards it), while *rūpa* does not possess the ability to know, being just a grouping of the four elements.

Mahasi Sayadaw wrote that an ordinary person does not even think about the division of mind and matter, and considers that body can stand, walk, eat, etc., just by itself:

“When a yogi attains sati, his ability to contemplate grows along with clearing of the mind. He understands the difference between

nāma and rūpa: now he knows that the function of the mind is to know and that matter is the object of knowing”.

24.1 Nāma

*...Form is like a glob of foam;
feeling, a bubble;
perception, a mirage;
volitions, a banana tree;
consciousness, a magic trick —
this has been taught by the Kinsman of the Sun.
However you observe them,
appropriately examine them,
they're empty, void to whoever sees them appropriately.
(SN.22.95)*

Does wind exist?

In a Dhamma class at Kanduboda, a Spanish yogi asked if the Buddha ever explained what the mind is (in Pali, viññāṇa, citta, manas). Pemasiri Thera's response caught everyone by surprise. This is what he told us:

“In fact, there is nothing in this world that we could call mind. Does wind exist? Are you sure that it does? How do you know it? We know about wind only because we feel its touch or we see how leaves are fluttering on the trees”.

“The same happens with the mind: when an eye meets a form, or when an ear meets a sound, or when a mental object emerges in the mind, a contact arises, and from that contact consciousness arises

(visual, audial, etc.), and from consciousness arises sensation; from sensation arises perception and intention.⁷¹ If the sense organs are damaged or if there aren't forms, smells, or sounds near us, then consciousness cannot arise. It arises only with the object. There is no 'pure' consciousness that exists on its own. Mind is a process of cognition of the object”.

“Many Buddhist teachers say, ‘Look into your mind’, thus advising to look at what does not exist. All that exists is arising and disappearance of consciousness, senses, perceptions and intentions. Everything within us and outside us changes so rapidly that it seems as if mind exists. The function of consciousness is to cognise: it ‘recognises’ an object and dies instantly, giving ‘life’ to a new consciousness. Every moment of consciousness consists of tiny units: in the time it takes for a flash of lightning, millions of such units, or thought-moments, may appear. They change at such a speed that we cannot discern them”.

“Let’s imagine that you want to prepare a tasty mint cocktail. You take water, ice, syrup, herbs and mix them. When the cocktail is ready, you enjoy it, but you cannot separately sense the taste of water, ice, herbs, or syrup, all tastes are combined into one, turning into a bouquet of sweetness, spice and bitterness.

“Similarly, mind includes many different, extremely fast-changing phenomena, which, coming into one, create an illusion of something stable and continuously existing”.

“A real practicing yogi can discern one phenomenon from another, thus, penetrating into what is called mind”.

“Hearing a sound, he is able to note several phenomena: the sound itself as an external object, the process of hearing, and the perception of the sound by the mind. He doesn’t mix all these processes and does not look for the ‘I’ in them”.

71 See *MN.38*

“Mind never arises without an object: it is not a thing in itself, but what only appears due to the object”.

The Abhidhamma names locations for all senses, but for consciousness, for some reason, it names the location to be that of the heart (hadaya-vatthu). Why not the brain?

“Consciousness doesn’t have ‘a home’ in any cell of the body. It is invisible and does not have a fixed location; like music, which is not located anywhere. You can read about it in the Vina (Lute) Sutta”.

“Suppose there were a king or king’s minister who had never heard the sound of a lute before. He might hear the sound of a lute and say, ‘What, my good men, is that sound — so delightful, so tantalizing, so intoxicating, so ravishing, so enthralling?’ They would say, ‘That, sire, is called a lute, whose sound is so delightful, so tantalizing, so intoxicating, so ravishing, so enthralling’. Then he would say, ‘Go & fetch me that lute’. They would fetch the lute and say, ‘Here, sire, is the lute whose sound is so delightful, so tantalizing, so intoxicating, so ravishing, so enthralling’. He would say, ‘Enough of your lute. Fetch me just the sound’. Then they would say, ‘This lute, sire, is made of numerous components, a great many components. It’s through the activity of numerous components that it sounds: that is, in dependence on the body, the skin, the neck, the frame, the strings, the bridge, and the appropriate human effort. Thus it is that this lute — made of numerous components, a great many components — sounds through the activity of numerous components. In the same way, a monk investigates form, however far form may go. He investigates feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness, however far consciousness may go. As he is investigating form... feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness, however far consciousness may go, any thoughts of ‘me’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am’ do not occur to him”.

(SN.35.205)

24.2 Life in the cemetery

Bhante

“Mind is like a fiery ring, like a stream of water: it looks continuous, but consists of innumerable numbers of very small, constantly interchanging elements”.

“When poured into a glass, it takes the shape of the glass; when dye is added, it changes the colour. Mind resembles water: it takes the shape of the object that it beholds, thinks about. If you add yellow paint to a glass of water, it will become yellow. If the paint is black, the water will be black. Consciousness itself is neutral like a camera; just as a camera is not interested in what exactly it photographs, in the object’s beauty or ugliness, similarly consciousness only perceives what arises as a result of sense contact”.

“When mental factors are associated with evil, mind becomes ugly, dark; when it is associated with wholesome objects the mind arises as pure, open, and elevated”.

“Feeling, perception, volition, contact, and attention – these are called mentality”.

Seven universal mental factors (*cetasika*) are present at any moment of perception:

- contact (*phassa*);
- feeling (*vedanā*);
- perception (*saññā*);
- intention (*cetanā*);
- one — pointedness (*ekaggatā*);
- life’s energy (*jīvitindriya*);
- attention (*manasikāra*).

Why the Buddha called that consciousness is like an illusion?

“Because people feel that they live with a stable consciousness, no one discerns a contact as a contact, a sensation as a sensation, perception as a perception, being immersed instead in the chimera that is *maya*. This maya attributes substantiality to the mind, while mind, ‘windy’ in its nature, is actually only a merging of various phenomena: memories, ideas, plans, and feelings – in myriads of fanciful combinations. Nothing on its own represents mind; everything arises interdependently, only to burn off in that same second, to disappear, giving life to something new, and in that manner – again and again and again”.

“If we are not familiar with the object, then the perception will not arise: it is unable to deal with what it never encountered before. For instance, the perception of an ordinary person does not know Nibbāna, therefore is unable to ‘take it’ as its object. *Saññā* lets us live in the world of familiar objects, rapidly recalling all that is related to an apparently concrete person or place”.

“Where does perception come from? It is a complex chain of associations left in the memory, which looks like haze, like the vision of an oasis in the desert: in reality there is no water, but its image seems very real. No one is free from feelings, perception, intentions, and consciousness. No one is free from mind.

“Mind creates what in fact does not exist: it remembers the past, and that past forces it ‘to add on’, to create something bigger that it is in reality. We recognise friends whom we know, but in reality there aren’t any continuous substances, or beings. Perception entirely depends on previous impressions and constructs, and people are inclined to consider their perception as the only right one – all conflicts in the world come from this”.

“Mind creates something out of nothing. In itself, not a single thing is either good or bad – the value of the object is always in the mind. The more important and dear the perception of it is, the bigger attachment to it that arises. What is money, for instance? People consider it extremely valuable, but on its own, it is nothing more than pieces of paper”.

“Many people like to meditate in a certain place, saying that it is beautiful and helps them calm their mind. However, in reality, it is nothing more than a concept, which exists in perception. Some practitioners tell me, ‘Bhante, I like to meditate near the Bodhi tree! My mind gets so quiet and peaceful. How nice to be in Bodhgaya!’⁷²

“In fact, you should be able to meditate wherever you are right now, and if not then the problem is not in the place but in your mind. No city, no bricks and mortar are able to make you happy, until you have sati”.

“No one can ‘disable’ mind, but you can learn to perceive objects and not exaggerate them. If there is sati, it becomes possible. It is impossible to live without perception and discerning, but it is possible not ‘to add on’ and not to enlarge anything with one’s perception, not to praise and not to exaggerate. Sati is perception that does not impart value onto objects”.

“From morning till night, all kinds of impressions take place via the six doors of our senses, causing lust or aversion. There are more unpleasant feelings in life than pleasant, but not many people realise that – and fewer still understand the nature of feelings”.

“Saṅkhāras arise in the mind from perception and feelings. The word “saṅkhāra” has many meanings: in the context of the five aggregates (*pañcakhandha*), and in dependent origination (*paticcasamuppāda*), it is associated with volitional impulses – intentions”.

72 The place in India where the ascetic Gotama became Awakened.

“Saṅkhāras in the body are inhalations and exhalations, and in speech they are thoughts and considerations. Thoughts accompany us all our life: they can arise hundreds of times every minute. If they are related to sensuality or anger, they become unwholesome. In its turn, wholesome thoughts can be related to contemplation of the Dhamma, the desire to meditate, attain magga-phala, etc”.

“And finally, saṅkhāras, in addition to the above, are simply aggregates of something, a process of connection among each other of every phenomenon. Consciousness is not present all the time and, when it disappears, mind can do something on its own within itself: that which arises before the disappearance of consciousness”.

“So, what does appear before the disappearance? Saṅkhāras! This is actually very hard to explain. Once consciousness disappears, we remember something, so it has not disappeared entirely – that is what saṅkhāras are. We keep planning something all the time, we aspire towards something, by doing this we collect ideas, plans, in a word, saṅkhāras. It is the attachment to objects and to ideas of objects”.

“That’s how mind is designed – it clings to something, stays in something that has disappeared already or has not come into being yet”.

“True Peace is established when the pleasant and unpleasant disappear”.

24.3 Rūpa

...The four great elements and the material form derived from the four great elements - these are called materiality.

(MN.9)

- earth element *pathavipañhavī-dhātu*;
- water (or liquid) element *āpo-dhātu*;
- fire element *tejo-dhātu*;
- air (or wind) element *vāyo-dhātu*.

Mahasi Sayadaw explained that beams and pillars, bricks and stones and clots of earth are matter. They do not possess the ability of knowing at all. Similarly, the matter that forms the living body does not possess the ability to know. The matter in a dead body is the same as in a living body – it does not possess the ability to know at all. But there is a widespread notion among people that matter in a living body does have the ability to know phenomena, and that it loses that ability only at the time of death. In actual fact, this is not the case: matter in a body does not possess the ability to know, neither when dead nor alive.

All material possesses certain qualities:

- rootless (*ahetuka*);
- conditioned (*sappaccaya*);
- unclean, connected with defilements (*sāsava*);
- dependent (*saṅkhata*);
- belongs to worldly realm (*lokiya*);
- connected with sensuality (*kāmāvacara*);
- not able to cognise (*anārammaṇa*).

“Usually, we understand a fraction of what our body is”, Pemasiri Thera said. “We are used to seeing it as a whole, as an entity, while the body is an assembly of small parts”.

Matter in Pali is *kaya*, which means “collection”. Our body is a collection of bones, flesh, and liquid – all of which are part of the four elements and their derivatives.

“Body is unpleasant by its nature and is uncontrollable; [made up of] simply natural elements, which exist according to their own life cycle”, noted Sayadaw U Pandita.



CHAPTER 25

THE SECOND KNOWLEDGE: HETU-PHALA

*...This dependent origination it is profound and appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this doctrine that this generation has become like a tangled ball of string, covered as with a blight: tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe, the ill destiny, ruin and the round of birth-and-death...
(DN.15)*

25.1 Myriad mutual connections

Pemasiri Thera often talked about the Dhamma being a Teaching of causes and effects (hetu-phala). He frequently elaborated on this topic from different angles. Below is a record of his comments at various times.

‘The stream of mind and matter exists as an efficient mechanism, which possesses the ability to self-reproduce. The number of

interconnections is uncountable: the mind governs matter, ordering it to move, to perform some action, and the body allows the consciousness to appear (eye and form lead to the formation of visual consciousness; the tongue and the taste – to the formation of the taste consciousness, and so on). ’

Mahasi Sayasaw wrote:

A yogi reflects: ‘Material processes of bending, stretching and so on, follow mental processes of intending to bend, stretch and so forth’. He goes on to reflect: ‘One’s body becomes hot or cold because of the element of heat or cold; the body exists on food and nourishment; consciousness arises because there are objects to notice: seeing arises through visual objects; hearing through sounds, and also because there are the sense organs, eye, ear, etc., as conditioning factors. Intention and noticing result from previous experiences; feelings (sensations) of all kinds are the consequences of previous kamma in the sense that material processes and mental processes take place ever since birth because of previous karma. There is nobody to create this body and mind, and all that happens has causal factors.’

‘Nāma affects rūpa. For instance, calm mind yields quiet slow breathing; excited mind leads to a quick pulse and nervous breathing. The mind associated with melancholy or sentimentality brings about the element of water (tears); embarrassment or nervousness brings about the element of fire; and excitement brings about the feeling of flight (the element of air).’

‘When we sit, in every instance, there is a vibration of intention impulses coming from the mind – to keep the sitting position. The body would become flabby and wouldn’t be able to sit if the mental factors didn’t order it to do that. Thus, mentality yields materiality. If the weather is warm, our body warms up, and this is an example of materiality which conditions materiality. ’

‘And when we hear, the contact between the ear as an element of matter and the sound yields the consciousness of hearing, that is, materiality forces mentality into existence. ’

‘Sati allows one to see the consequences of one’s actions, just as a person who knows about plants understands that a tiny seed grows into a white shrub with certain blossoms of a certain shape, likewise, a yogi understands all four elements of matter and how they appear. Nāma-rūpa are interconnected with myriad combinations, which constitute what in everyday speech is called a human, a person, a man or a woman. ’

‘*Sakkāya-diṭṭhi* are founded on “three pillars:” self-conceit, craving and the false idea of a person (*taṇhā, mana, diṭṭhi*). The destruction of the view that there exists an “I” leads to Stream Entry, or sotopanna. For that to happen, fine sati and samādhi are needed. ’

‘Liberation from notions of selfhood cancels the possibility of falling into lower worlds: the human then aspires to find Deliverance. ’

25.2 Two concepts

*...This being, that is;
from the arising of this, that arises.
When things become manifest
To the ardent meditating Brahman,
All his doubts then vanish since he understands
Each thing along with its cause.
(Ud.1.1)*

“Buddha emphasized that the Dhamma is a law of nature and the Tathāgata discovers it anew and awakens towards it”.

“Whether or not there is the arising of Tathāgata, this property stands — this regularity of the Dhamma, this orderliness of the Dhamma, this this conditionality. The Tathāgata directly awakens to that, breaks through to that. Directly awakening & breaking through to that, he declares it, teaches it, describes it, sets it forth. He reveals it, explains it, makes it plain, & says, ‘Look’. From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications. What’s there in this way is a reality, not an unreality, not other than what it seems, conditioned by this/that. This is called dependent co-arising”.

(SN.2.12.20)

“There are two main philosophical concepts in the world from which all other notions are born. The first concerns some unchangeable essence that exists in the stream of mind and matter (*jīva-attā*), and rules over it and everything else, and that is a grand, almighty being that does not abide by the laws of change and of which every soul is part”.

In canonical texts this notion is described as follows: *“This is the world – and this is “I” After death I will remain constant, unchangeable, eternal, and immune to changes. I will exist that way for eternity”.* (DN.1)

“Adepts of the second concept assert that a being is born by accident, appearing from non-existence and disappearing into it after death without any causes.

“Craving for this sort of cessation of being (*vibhava-taṇhā*) is not a desire for suicide, as many think, but a notion that after death there is nothing, and before birth there was nothing either. It is nihilism. No matter what good or bad you do, there will not be any consequences. One may give to charity every day for one hundred years or turn the earth into a bloodbath – it doesn’t make any difference!”

“Neither of these notions has anything to do with the Dhamma: students of the Tathāgata do not accept theories about the eternal soul and God-the-creator, or the appearance of everything out of emptiness. We put an emphasis on causes and effects; when they come together, a being appears”.

“The Buddha told us about the causes of birth and existence of not only humans but of other living beings as well as of natural phenomena”.

25.3 How does a being come into being?

“A person who perceives the difference between mind and matter knows life as a stream of interconnection, as an ocean of causes and effects”.

“He understands how and why a being appears: because of ignorance, craving and involvement (*avijja*, *taṇhā* and *upādāna*), which, in their turn give birth to a cycle of actions and their results (*kamma-vipāka*), which determine the birth in a certain world of *saṃsāra*”.

“The whole circle of being starts with ignorance. Let’s take an example: there are many ways of committing a murder, but the most reliable one is shooting someone in the head. “In order to complete our *saṃsāric* journey, we must ‘decapitate’ ignorance – the mother of all contaminations. Ignorance cannot be pointed at, although the whole world is held upon it. “If it wasn’t there, the whole world would not come into being. Every new life only increases and strengthens the roots of the existing ignorance, due to which a vicious cycle is created, which the Buddha mentioned:”

“Five aggregates of existence, burning in the fire of attraction, passion and attachments, from moment to moment assert themselves in the habit of existing, firing even stronger passion towards external objects. It increases the mind and bodily weight, pain, heat, and lead to even more suffering in the future”.

(MN.149)

“Avijja is unable to see itself – this ignorance is the lack of knowledge of defilements. Blinded by this lack, a person constantly craves something, and that craving forces him or her to act, causing newer and newer kamma”.

Involvement with something – wholesome or unwholesome – causes a coming into being (*bhava*).

“Bhava is the “collecting” of attachments as potential for future existence in a certain world. If good and bad exist, then there is existence. Enlightened intentions and actions can bring about the birth of devas and Brahma, while dark ones can bring about unhappy destinies. However, the root of all saṅkhāras is just this: ignorance and clinging (*avijjā* and *upādāna*).

Upādāna always appears along with other taints: envy, resentment, craving, self-conceit”.

There are four types of clinging:

- kāmupādāna – sensuous clinging;
- diṭṭhupādāna – clinging to views;
- sīlabbatupādāna – clinging to mere rules and ritual;
- attāvādupādāna – clinging to the personality-belief.

“Each of us has five aggregates of clinging: physical form, feelings, perception, consciousness, and volitional constructs, or intentions. Would these come into being if craving and clinging weren’t in the

past? Leave past lives at peace – think of what is happening to your five aggregates today. Was there a moment when clinging to them, involvement with them, wasn't present in you? Answer the question honestly.

“In this life we are especially strongly attached to our mental activities, feelings and perceptions”.

“The Buddha looked into the past and saw only craving. Everything that can be remembered from the past is craving and clinging – no one can remember only mind and matter without clinging. The arahant also has the same mind and form within which an ordinary person would have craving, but the arahant does not cling to them, because he has discovered their nature and eliminated his ignorance. The five aggregates and the five aggregates of clinging (*pañcakhandha* and *pañcaupādānakhandha*) are not the same: in the former, there are the five groups but there is no clinging to them, hence there is no potential for new birth. The *Uraga Sutta*⁷³ says that an arahant has left the five khandhas as a snake leaves its old skin”.

“People are obsessed with their forms and are inclined to compare them with those of others: “He is more handsome than I am”, or, “I am more handsome”, or, “We are similarly handsome”. Again and again, there is upādāna. Hence, there is being, and hence, there is suffering”.

Can you remember when these five aggregates appeared in you? Can you remember their origination? The stream does not have a beginning, but it may have an ending”.

25.4 Seeds and fruits

“One stream of mind and matter become the cause of another stream, but in the next life. Empty elements flow along their own course; one mental or material factor gives birth to another one. A new

73 *SNP 1.1*

world is created right here in this world: we create new causes for new births. One pañcakhandha dies but another one appears after it”.

“Meanwhile, older formations do indeed completely deplete and die, and totally new mind and matter come into being. At the same time, within the five aggregates there might not be enough potential for the creation of the next groups in the new birth. We can compare it to an empty seed, which cannot grow on new ground: its shoot simply dies. There is no new tree, and no fruits. Groups of existences were destroyed and nothing appeared in their place”.

“An arahant’s consciousness is called “unfixed”, therefore it does not “catch any object”.

“From the time when a bhikkhu no longer regards feeling as the self, or the self as being impercipient, or as being percipient and of a nature to feel, by not so regarding, he clings to nothing in the world; not clinging, he is not excited by anything, and not being excited he gains personal Liberation and he knows: “Birth is finished, the holy life has been led, done was what had to be done, there is nothing more here”.

(DN.15)

“Other seeds successfully grow and yield fruits. In speaking of rebirth, we mean the energy of kamma, which on its own doesn’t have consciousness or matter, but it isn’t something totally separate from them either. When we start speaking of kamma, people imagine a certain set- in-stone process, some sort of icy predetermination. But kamma is not that, it’s something different; its strength becomes mighty at the moment when the previous kamma ends, say, at the age of seventy or eighty years. If that energy encounters elements of matter that are “in tune” with it, a new group of existences comes into being, whether in the womb of a human or an animal, in the world of devas, Brahmas, demons, or hells”.

“Thus, certain khandhas were destroyed and others appeared. Nothing went from one life into the other, but the rebirth still took place because there were causes created for it”.

“The Buddha looked for something totally free from causes and conditions, void of perception and senses. Therefore, even the formless absorptions did not bring him satisfaction: he knew that it wasn’t a complete ending, and that even those arūpa-jhānas were constructed by the mind. He was looking for something outside consciousness and outside the law of conditionality. He looked for cessation, an Ending (*Nirodha*). He was seeking the un-aging, un-ailing, deathless, sorrowless and undefiled supreme refuge from bondage”.

“Having understood conditional appearance, he felt great happiness – the light of Truth was turned on. Full realisation of the law of causes and effects meant Deliverance. Dhamma is a Teaching of causes and effects; understanding them, a person steps beyond them with the help of the Aryan Path, which is also a group of causes and effects, but leads toward something that is free of them (*asaṅkhatā*)”.

“Where there are no saṅkhāras, there is an Ending, a calming down of all forming (*sabbe saṅkhārā samatha*)”.

Liberation is the ending of the process of the formation of new phenomena and defilements. Fetters do not give rise to new fetters; therefore, there is no new birth.

“Contaminations cease. Causes and effects cease. This Supreme Calm was discovered by Gautama Buddha for our well-being; it is the elimination of passions, and a miraculous Liberation”.

25.5. Ending

How can the conventional bring about the Unconventional?

“This is a valid question. How does the constructed bring about the Unconstructed? How can the Path, which is woven of conventions, rid us of conventions and the influence of bad and good kamma, the realm only of Nibbāna?

“Jhānas, the practice of morality and of mindfulness – all consist of interdependence and interconditionality (*saṅkhatā*)”.

“When in vipassanā we observe impermanence, misery and impersonality, we also observe conditioned phenomena. Although Nibbāna possesses the quality of impersonality, only Aryans can see it, so we can’t meditate on Nibbāna, but only on mundane phenomena. But as a result, we come to the knowledge of Reality. The yogi knows when and why taints appear in the mind, and that leads to the desire to get rid of them”.

“He becomes compassionate and dissipates all thoughts about violence in relation to other beings. This allows all evil to leave him, and that is renunciation”.

“Yogis study what consists of causes and conditions for the sake of attainment of the Unconditioned. They look into the mirror of the Dhamma and see Nibbāna for the first time. The strength of that moment eliminates the potential of birth in the lower realms”.

“Conditioned phenomena always appear in the sphere of doubts. Sotāpanna, the conquerors of the Stream, eliminate all doubts. Once freed of them, they see the dissolution of constructed phenomena, or to be precise, the conditions for their further appearance. In other words, following the Path, a person dissipates the taints, which are the background of all phenomena”.

“We meditate on the three characteristics until we arrive at Path Knowledge, after which there immediately appears the result – Fruition Knowledge”.

And these Knowledges – are they, too, conditioned phenomena?

“No. They cannot produce new effects, new results, otherwise Nibbāna would not be described as undelivered, uncreated, unconstructed, unconditioned (*ajataajātaṃ, abhūtaṃ, akataṃ, asaṅkhatam*). In the Unconditioned, in Nibbāna, there aren’t changes; there aren’t causes, conditions or results: nothing is born or dies there. Mind or matter, suffering or happiness, dark or light does not exist there. It is entirely outside the limits of the world. And where formations and causes end, there is Nirodha. It is the end of suffering. The end”.

Their past is extinct with no new arising, their minds not drawn to future birth; Their old seeds destroyed, desires no more growing, the wise go out just like this lamp.

(SnP. 2.1)



CHAPTER 26

THIRD KNOWLEDGE: *TILAKKHANA*

...Bhikkhus, whether the Tathāgata arise or not, there persists that law, that stableness of the Dhamma, that fixed course of the Dhamma: ‘All conditioned phenomena are impermanent...suffering... and non-self The Tathāgata awakens to this and breaks through to it, and then he explains it, teaches it, proclaims it, establishes it, discloses it, analyses it, and elucidates it thus.

(AN.3.136.4)

Pemasiri Thera

“The Buddha discovered the Path to solemn peace, calm, and the end of becoming, to the elimination of birth, old age, agony, disease and death”.

“Meanwhile, every person is born and grows up with three perceptions: permanence, happiness, and substantiality (*nicca, sukha* and *attā*), – this can be defined as some sort of inherent biological feature, along with, say, hunger or thirst”.

“Our life is nothing but a constantly changing stream of materiality and mentality. This is anicca”.

“We like to consider it as constant. This is dukkha”.

“Neither mind nor matter follows our wishes, and they are impossible to control. This is anattā”.

“Just observe. There is nothing outside this stream of mind and matter”.



CHAPTER 27

IMPERMANENCE (ANICCA)

...Just as a dewdrop on the tip of a blade of grass quickly vanishes with the rising of the sun and does not stay long, in the same way, Brahmins, the life of human beings is like a dewdrop – limited, trifling, of much misery & many despairs. One should touch this truth like a sage, do what is skillful, follow the holy life. For one who is born there is no freedom from death.

(AN. 7.70)

27.1 Dynamic Universe

Pemasiri Thera said that there isn't anything besides impermanence that we need to know directly:

“Anicca veditabba — impermanence should be studied”.

The whole understanding of the Buddha's Teaching is based on the acknowledgement of the changeability of the world, and the discovery of the untainted, pure eye of the Dhamma is always accompanied by

the understanding: “Everything that sums up – will be restrained.”⁷⁴”

This knowledge means stepping into the stream.

“People do not accept impermanence, because they live under the control of craving and ignorance”, Pemasiri Thera said. “They chase various things. However, if death is accepted as an unavoidable ending of all and everything, then the chase by itself will lead to completion”.

“We must accept the fact that because there was birth, there will be illness, old age, death and parting from everything that is dear and beloved. It is impossible not to see this inconstancy: it’s as if it is shouting to us all the time, ‘I am here!’”

“Everybody sees it, but almost no one is able to accept and place the knowledge of inconstancy deep in their heart”.

Once during an evening lecture, Bhante asked a female student, who was an experienced doctor, whether she had managed to perceive the illusory nature of her own body after so many years of performing surgical operations, of seeing so much degeneration and death. She said, “No!” Even doctors who see decay and death every day do not perceive impermanence as a future threat to themselves. Looking at something is far from the same thing as actually seeing it.

Often, old men do not like encountering other old men. Thinking of our appearance and eventual disappearance, we can only think of our departed relatives and friends, or of the fact that Buddha appeared in the world and with him appeared his great disciples, but now not a single one of them is present on this earth.

Gross acknowledgement of impermanence is expressed in the reflection of birth and death of everyone in the world, and beyond that in the cosmic world order, with the appearance and inevitable destruction of all planets in the universe:

74 “...While the householder Upali sat there, the spotless immaculate vision of the Dhamma arose in him: “All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation”.588 Then the householder Upali saw the Dhamma, attained the Dhamma, understood the Dhamma, fathomed the Dhamma; he crossed beyond doubt, did away with perplexity, gained intrepidity, and became independent of others in the Teacher’s Dispensation”. (MN.56)

“Bhikkhus, as far as the sun and moon revolve and light up the quarters with their brightness, so far does the thousandfold world system extend. In that thousandfold world system there are a thousand moons, a thousand suns, a thousand Sinerus, king of mountains, a thousand Jambudpas, a thousand Aparagoyanas, a thousand Uttarakurus, a thousand Pubbavidehas, and a thousand four great oceans ...a thousand Brahma worlds. As far, bhikkhus, as this thousandfold world system extends, Mahabrahmathere ranks as the foremost. But even for Mahabrahma there is alteration; there is change. Seeing this thus, the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted with it; being disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate toward the foremost, not to speak of what is inferior”.

(AN.10.29)

It is interesting to compare the words of the Buddha with the words of modern science. Renowned physicist Stephen Hawking, from *A Brief History of Time*:

“Our Galaxy is one of a few hundred thousand million galaxies which can be observed in modern telescopes, and each of these galaxies in turn contains hundreds of thousands of millions of stars... The old idea of an essentially unchanging Universe, that could have existed, and could continue to exist forever was replaced by the notion of a dynamic, expanding universe that seemed to have begun a finite time ago, and that might end at a finite time in the future”.

“Is it possible to find someone who escaped old age and was never ill?” Pemasiri Thera asked rhetorically. “Even a person who lives one hundred years, he must die at the end. To understand old age, decay,

and death means leaving behind dissatisfaction and craving. The one who knows it is content and full of patience. It is a good state of mind.

“Sometimes, people meditate a lot and observe traditional rules in the days of the full moon, but if something undesirable occurs, they say, ‘Oh, how this could happen to me!’”

“Almost all Sinhalese have a clear idea that if they do good, nothing bad should happen to them, and if it does they whinge. Such thinking doesn’t mean having no knowledge of the Dhamma. People talk about it, but in reality they failed to attain any kind of benefit from that knowledge”.

“We must accept any situation in our lives, and this will be a sign that what the Buddha taught is of benefit”.

27.2 Appearance, appearance! Decay, decay!

“The real perception of anicca has little to do with knowing that ‘nothing lasts forever’. Everyone has heard that many times”.

“The Dhamma speaks to a much subtler impermanence – of changes that take place every moment, every instant, every second. To know inconstancy to this extent is to know that there is nothing on the inner or outer that will last: everything is in a state of continuous flow. The stream of mind and matter only appear to be reliable and solid, but in fact this is life’s greatest illusion – a picture made up of a mosaic of kaleidoscopes”.

“Mind consists of a succession of infinitesimal units that change so quickly that a person is unable to track them. It’s the same with matter: we all live with the notion that we have a solid, dense, constant body, but in reality each of the four elements keeps changing endlessly. Particles of matter appear and disintegrate, giving way to new particles – and this goes on twenty four hours a day”. Everything

that exists is only a vibration of matter and mentality, which appear and disappear by the millions every minute. One thought replaces the other; inhalation gives way to exhalation; the body temperature rises and falls; the eye meets a form and immediately after that, visual consciousness is replaced by aural consciousness”.

“A river looks constant, but if you scoop a handful of water, it will not be the same water as the next handful you scoop”.

Bhante’s smoothly flowing lecture was suddenly interrupted by a ringing telephone. He went to another room and came back a few minutes later with a curious smile:

“A person who picks the phone and the one who hangs up after the conversation are two different people. Multiples of ‘I’ are constantly created and dissipated. Whatever comes into being is an object of future dissolution and disappearance. Usually, we do not see impermanence, but if we are attentive we can detect it. When we do not see it, we suffer, trying to keep things stable. Every moment of our life is a totally new instance for the body and the mind”.

When a person discovers the real nature of phenomena, he or she sees that they disappear and reappear all the time. They realise that both phenomena and the mind watching them are in a stream of constant change: after they come into being, they disintegrate. This knowledge brings boundless happiness to the one who realises it fully.

*“Whenever one reflects on aggregates’ arise and fall
one rapture gains and joy.
The Deathless for Those-who-know.*

Yogis meditate with the aim of seeing the appearance and disappearance of khandhas – they look at this process again and again, at the birth and death of consciousness, feelings, perceptions, intentions, matter. Over and over, again and again. They come to a clear perception of body and mind as empty and impersonal; they

see that these are just appearance and disappearance, and there is no substance, no personality behind them.

Pemasiri Thera warned that every person has the sense that all five khandhas are constantly present: consciousness, body, feelings, perceptions, intentions – they all were here yesterday, they are today, and they will be tomorrow, stable and constant. Mind creates this illusion, day after day. To dispel it, we need sati: watching over the appearance and disappearance of the five aggregates of clinging helps to eliminate taints that have been present in the stream of being from aeons ago. In Nibbāna there is no mind or matter.

“Whatever you do, look at the appearance and disappearance of mind and body. This leads to the emergence of impartiality and unbiasedness. This is a wise attitude”.

“Usual perception doesn’t see the constant flux. We meet an acquaintance years later and we are horrified at how his looks have changed – ‘Oh! He has aged so much!’ – without understanding that these changes were not instantaneous: they had been taking place every moment. Think what has happened to your mind and to your material form within just the past hour. They change, don’t they? And yet we try to hold everything in our fist”.

“One mental or material factor replaces another. And we do not let feelings vanish – we live with feelings that have died, or with feelings whose reasons have not appeared yet”.

If the perception of anicca is correct, aversion and attraction will not arise. Consciousness appears and disappears every moment, millions, trillions of times. We experience new feelings all the time, new perceptions and new moments of consciousness. This is because there is faith that all of these exist continuously; hence rebirth.

The whole world is a continuously and rapidly flowing stream.

“If you are meditating in the right manner”, Mahasi Sayadaw taught, “you will soon discover that everything you see disappears; everything you hear disappears; everything you feel disappears. Disappearance, disappearance, disappearance... Seeing all these clearly, what can you fall in love with here? What can you hate? What can you be attached to? If you are not attached, then craving and capture cannot appear”.

27.3 War with nature

With sati, a yogi does not bear in mind just the present moment, but also understands its essence – inconstancy. The impermanent nature of everything becomes apparent, and a depth perception of inconstancy can lead to the state where nothing is born, nothing dies.

However, it often happens that a yogi doesn't do the full contemplative work on inconstancy, but instead starts fighting with it!

He might be doing breathing meditation, but at some point his mind tires of watching only inhalations and exhalations. It needs a new object, so the yogi starts struggling with that rather than simply watching the changes. He might assume he has bad kamma that's not allowing him fulfil his practice, but, of course, that can be just an easy way out.

Meanwhile, what is he missing? Breathing is not a sustainable and stable thing: every inhalation consists of a multitude of small inhalations, and each exhalation, of many exhalations. Why not try to see that?

Everyone loves a state of meditation that has a perception of impermanence and blissfulness, but once a session is finished, suffering arises again.

Neither body nor mind stays in a stable state, but the yogi thinks it would be wonderful sometimes if the mind didn't change, if it froze in some pleasant immobility – in a dead state!

If feelings change, a yogi might conclude that his meditation is not successful, because he doesn't like the changes occurring within him. He wants everything to remain in the state of constancy, although it is obvious that it is an unrealistic objective, and goes against our nature. The Buddha told us that he had never seen anything in the whole universe that could move more quickly than the mind,⁷⁵ that thing that is right here with us! But does anyone really wish to study its nature?

Alas, almost all meditators dream of sitting for hours with the same state of mind! They reject *anicca*, fight with it – fight the nature of a universe based on changeability, a universe that is woven from changeability. The majority of yogis expect that they will sit in meditation with their backs perfectly straight and wearing the mysterious half-smile they see in statues of the Buddha, in a sublime state of stability. If they manage to sit like that for an hour, they feel very happy.

It is not what Dhamma practice is in reality. Periods of happiness occur, but we must be able to let them go when the time comes. One could stay with pleasant feelings for a year or one hundred years, but there is no benefit in it.

Only when a person sincerely wants to see the dissolution of mind and matter does he turn to *vipassanā*. Once a yogi perceives the constant flow of mind and matter, conflicts between him and the world become fewer and fewer.

Water may look the same, but it flows and changes all the time.

⁷⁵ See AN.1.48

A yogi cannot expect “the same samādhi as I had this morning”. That would be a bitter mockery of his or her practice.

Upon seeing anicca, a yogi starts to understand the world as it is: it is the five groups of existence. Accepting this fact and reflecting upon it, he stops clinging to any of them. His mind becomes free, clear, and capable of letting go. This is exactly what understanding “body in the body” means, and of which the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta speaks.

The world comes into being and dissolves all the time. Its constancy is only a hallucination, but one which people believe wholeheartedly, and which leads to arguments, fury, and craving.

Instead of taking care of others, people try to possess more and more as if the possession will last forever. Very few understand what their mind and body are. If only people could see this stream, this succession of instants of appearance and disappearance – pointless, uncontrollable, and empty, but which looks so constant from the outside.

If everyone could uncover this enormous illusion, would anyone want to continue coveting this life and desire rebirth?



CHAPTER 28

SUFFERING (Dukkha)

*...— Friend Sariputta, what is happiness? What is suffering?
Rebirth, friend, is suffering. No rebirth is happiness.
When there is rebirth; this suffering is to be expected:
cold, heat, hunger, thirst, defecation, and urination; being
afflicted by fire, sticks, or knives; and relatives and friends get
together and scold one. When there is rebirth, this suffering is to
be expected.
(AN.65(5))*

28.1 Life under anaesthesia

The Buddha said that his Teaching contradicts the conventional view of the world: what ordinary people perceive as happiness, ariyas consider suffering, and vice versa. People find joy and solace in illusions – Tathāgatas are free of illusions.

These days, a positive Buddhism is in high demand, with eternal smiles, tree hugging and a vegetarian diet. The actual deeds of Gautama, who renounced everything for the sake of dissolving the craving that inevitably leads to rebirth over and over, and which in essence is suffering, haven't proved to be quite as popular among people in the twenty-first century.

The Buddha said that suffering is the biggest fear in *samsāra* (*Satto saṃsāramāpādi dukkhamassa mahabbhayanti*).

Usually, people tend to dismiss their *dukkha* and have a whole arsenal of means with which to do that – various methods of anaesthesia that help them put up with the unavoidable cruelty of life, but which does not put off its inevitable ending: old age, illness, and death.

First-place honours among these painkiller medicines go to religion: there isn't a more reliable means of easing suffering than believing in a Supreme Being from whom everything comes, and where everything ends – in the form of an eternal soul. Religions can be simple and unpretentious, or full of mysticism, divine revelations, and elegant philosophy. But the essence is the same, namely, religious systems help human beings tolerate the vicissitudes of life, whether easy or hard, and strengthen one's faith in oneself, especially in otherwise unbearable circumstances.

Other methods of trying to avoid *dukkha* include various sensual pleasures, the pursuit of material success, and in so many ways trying to bury one's head in a constantly busy involvement with daily life.

According to Pemasiri Thera, *saṃvega*, which has all but disappeared from the world, was the feeling that moved young prince Siddhārtha to search for and to find what that which was beyond the limits of birth and death. *Samvega* is a complete and honest acceptance of the total futility of existence, whether in a higher or lower world.

The majority of people spend their lives in kind of lethargy without realising that the body undergoes gradual decay and faces inevitable illnesses, until one of the afflictions overwhelms them and leads to death.

*“...Seeing creatures flopping around,
Like fish in water too shallow,
So hostile to one another!
— Seeing this, I became afraid.*

*This world completely lacks essence;
It trembles in all directions.
I longed to find myself a place
Unscathed — but I could not see it.*

*Seeing people locked in conflict,
I became completely distraught.
But then I discerned here a thorn
— Hard to see — lodged deep in the heart.*

*It's only when pierced by this thorn
That one runs in all directions.
So if that thorn is taken out —
one does not run, and settles down”.*
(SnP.4.15)

People learn about this sad reality only when they come to a point where the deterioration reaches its nadir and it is too late to do anything about it. The same cycle awaits them in the next existence: birth, illness, old age, and death.

“It is through ignorance that we enjoy life. But in truth, there is nothing to enjoy”, Mahasi Sayadaw said. “There is a continuous arising and disappearing by which we are harassed ever and anon. This is dreadful indeed. At any moment we may die and everything is sure to come to an end. This universal impermanence is truly frightful and terrible”.

“The Buddha saw endless births and deaths, accompanied by sorrow and the grieving of loved ones, and great compassion seized his mind. If a picture of human reality was depicted on its real scale, there would not be enough space on the earth – it would need another space at least as big. The impression of that discovery on the Bhagavan was so deep that all his long life after the Awakening he spent helping human beings get rid of suffering”.

28.2 Body and mind are frightening

Throughout the time I spent around Pemasiri Thera, I would rarely hear him talking about dukkha, but sometimes he would refer to it with shocking bluntness:

“If anything exists at all, it is suffering. If nothing exists, it is the absence of suffering. If wisdom really existed in this world, the world would not exist”.

“There are four ‘floods’ (*ogha*)”, Pemasiri Thera said during one talk, asking that the words be written on a whiteboard. “Due to which beings are reborn again and again – and continue their run in the wheel of saṃsāra : the floods of sensuality, of becoming, of ignorance, and of views (*kāma, bhava, avijjā, diṭṭhi*)”.

In the state of samādhi we truly perceive the nature of the mind and matter.

“Mind and matter overpower us; they bring us suffering – they are scary”, said Mahasi Sayadaw. “Meditate on them as scary things. Take everything as it is”.

Pemasiri Thera said that all people like birth: they greet it with fireworks, cakes, candles. But while celebrating birth, they do not think of the other side of it: old age, illness, and death. Not thinking about it and saving for a rainy day, they make endless plans, and that is exactly what blindness is. For some people, the enjoyment of life and desire to continue it are expressed quite strongly; in others it might be hidden very deep within.

Is it possible to live without it? The Buddha lived forty-five years after his Awakening.

Every day at evening puja, yogis recite the following:

“All formations are suffering. One who wisely reflects on it, becomes weary with suffering. This is the Path to Purity. Sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā’i, yadā paññāya passati, atha nibbindati dukkhe, esa maggo visuddhiyā”.

“These lines are incredibly, stunningly deep”, Pemasiri Thera said. And it is an obligation for each of us to direct ourselves towards kindness, towards Liberation, and while following this Path we should bear in mind the Truth of suffering and its ending”.

“The point where a yogi turns to vipassanā, according to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, is when he or she contemplates the body, externally and internally, as well as simultaneous external and internal contemplation of the body. It is at this point in particular that a person starts seeing the body as a process, which only leads to sorrow and unhappiness and is void of substance”.

28.3 Appreciating suffering

Bhante, you said there is nothing that could be called mind. Matter is essentially also just an interlacing of changeable particles, each of which lives less than an instant. It looks like there is nothing, but then why does suffering exist?

Pemasiri Thera looked at me and said without pausing for an instant:

“Your sufferings will diminish to a certain extent, just as much as you are able to understand three characteristics of existence. If you see the impermanence, the burdensomeness and the impersonality – that rids all suffering”.

“It is a characteristic of the human mind to brush aside dukkha – and invariably be chased by it. The human mind tends to be satiated rather quickly, even with pleasant things, in pursuit of new, more invigorating images. It gets bored very quickly. It is inclined to reject suffering and to welcome comfort; however, if we follow the Path in the right direction, our mind reaches the state where it all of a sudden does not need to reject suffering. It stops rejecting it because it is headed towards a place free from boredom and pain; a place, where it is impossible to be over-satiated”.

“Why do we suffer? Many of the monks and laypersons who come to Kanduboda have boasted to me on different occasions that they understood anicca. What does annica have to do with dukkha?”

Yad aniccam. tam. dukkham.– What is impermanent is suffering.

Yes, suffering in body and mind exists for everyone who is born, and you don't need to study the Tipiṭaka to know that. But suffering and the understanding of suffering are two completely different things. Ordinary knowledge of pain does not rid us of its causes – the defilements. A human being simply suffers without knowing why and for what.

Dukkhañāṇa and dukkhasamudayañāṇa is the Knowledge of suffering and its origin. It is a liberating Knowledge, because only through learning dukkha might one come to its cessation. The Buddha said that a person who understood the Aryan Truths was the happiest on Earth. All that is perceived as permanent is dukkha. We like seeking out and looking at beautiful things. However, form carries with it a danger, a threat: a human may be blinded by it, or the form may lose its attractiveness or disappear.

The nature of the world is to be engrossed in sensual pleasures. Dukkha is something we try to ignore. Though we tend to reject it, it comes to us anyway. It comes from ignorance. Only a small proportion of people really want to know that ignorance and abandon the world of the senses: the majority want to be delighted by the world, seeing things as stable and bringing happiness.

This is not about the desired object being disgusting, no, but about it being dangerous because of its inevitable tendency to disintegrate. Knowing that can rid us of attachment to it, and hence free us from suffering.

The Pali word *asubha*, which is often translated as “disgust”, in fact means that a certain object is not attractive because it is not permanent, and that is its danger (*ādinava*). If we know that, we do understand reality: “*Yathā bhūtaṃ pajānāti*”.

The Buddha encouraged us to remember about both sides of beauty and not just its pleasant aspect, so we are able to overcome

dissatisfaction and insecurity related to forms and external objects. He taught that sensual pleasures bring little satisfaction but much despair and have enormous flaws.

If we perceive a certain desirable object while consciously being aware of the danger hidden in its impermanence, then there won't be a conflict and mind will be inclined towards kusala, the wholesome. We must learn about the danger of impermanence in every object we encounter. This does not happen by itself; this knowledge must be cultivated, because it is a natural habit of the mind to grasp and hold.

Meanwhile, mind and matter are in a process of constant change. They deteriorate. They bring pain and suffering. All suffering is associated with this constantly changing stream. In reality, there is nothing to hold onto, and there is nothing to throw out.

From a yogi's diary at Panditārāma:

“The mind keeps planning something all the time, it contemplates and creates: living with such a ‘companion’ is like living with a madman. It talks and talks and talks; it makes up things and lies all the time, creating its innumerable fantasies.

“And the body... In ordinary life we are compelled to change postures in order to soften the imbalance of its elements, which are almost never in harmony. We stretch our legs, we exercise our shoulders, and what happens if we don't do that every ten to thirty minutes? The body turns into a mass of pain, a factory of suffering. It becomes numb and painful here and there, every little contact creates discomfort, heaviness or stiffness. Very few pleasant sensations are created in the body by itself: mostly it makes for discomfort and heaviness”.

“A yogi sees that all he thought was him – his consciousness, his body – is constantly appearing and disappearing, and nothing about those qualities can be anything pleasant. Everything he tries to grasp turns out to be emptiness”.

Mahasi Sayadaw

“This body, one of the khandhas, is a heavy burden. Serving it means carrying the heavy burden. When we feed and clothe it, we are carrying the burden. That means we are servants to the aggregate of matter (rūpakkhandha). Having fed and clothed the body, we must also see to it that it is sound and happy both in the physical and psychological sense. This is serving the aggregate of feeling (vedanakkhandha). Again, we must see that this body experiences good sights and sounds. This is concerned with consciousness. Therefore we are serving the aggregate of consciousness (viññanakkhandha).

These three burdens are quite obvious. Rūpakkhandha says: “Feed me well. Give me what I like to eat; if not, I shall make myself ill or weak. Or, worse still, I shall make myself die!” Then vedanakkhandha also says: “Give me pleasurable sensations; if not, I shall make myself painful and regretful”.

Then viññanakkhandha also says: “Give me good sights. Give me good sounds. I want pleasant sense-objects. Find them for me; if not, I shall make myself unhappy and frightful”. Then we shall have to do its biddings. It is as if all these three khandhas are perpetually threatening us.

The aggregate of volitional activities (saṅkhārakkhandha) is another burden. Life demands that we satisfy our daily needs and desires and for that satisfaction we have to be active. We must be working all the time.

Criminal offenses are committed mostly because we cannot carry the burden of saṅkhāra-khandha well. The aggregate of perception (saññā-khandha) is also a great burden; because it is with perception that you train your faculties like memory to be able to retain knowledge and wisdom which can discern good from bad and reject from your mind unwholesome things produced by unpleasant sense-objects. Regrets and anxieties arise because we cannot shoulder the burden of saññā-khandha well.

For all these reasons the Buddha declared the five aggregates of clinging (upādāna-khandha) a heavy burden. We carry the burden of our khandhas not for a short time, not for a minute, not for an hour, not for a day, not for a year, not for one life, not for one world, not for one eon. We carry the burden from the beginning of the saṃsāra, which is infinite. It has no beginning. And there is no way of knowing when it will end. Its finality can be reached only with the extermination of the defilements of the mind, as we get to the stage of the path of the Noble Ones (arahatta magga)”.

Sayadaw U Pandita

“We revolve in the cycle of suffering, but almost no one can see it happening. Usually, people think that it is a good thing – to look, to hear, to smell, and to feel – that all of that is joy, and the biggest fear is that one day it will come to an end.

For instance, our body is dukkha, but we think of it as something pleasant.

Grasping (*taṇhā*) perceives suffering as happiness, and clinging (*upādāna*) holds on to it all, including views about the creator, the soul, and the desire to become again and again. Nāma-rūpa is the truth of suffering and needs to be perceived by making the mind and body

a basis for understanding, for seeing them as they are, and not using them habitually as ground for growing weeds – the defilements.

Suffering is caused by people holding onto an object and finding pleasure in it. The Dhamma is very deep and difficult to understand. There needs to be an enormous mental effort to see it: ordinary mind cannot behold the stream of mind and matter.

The majority of people like pleasure, which exists in the world of feelings. But all worldly happiness is completely unreliable. Crimes are sometimes committed for the sake of pleasant feelings. Even good deeds are caused by ignorance and lead to new results and new existences.

The wheel revolves again and again. Each new life feeds the ignorance that already exists, and having it, a person is doomed to be born again.

Only during sleep can people get some relief from the burden they carry from dawn to dusk – the burden of mind and matter created by craving and the ignorance of reality.

Craving appears in the absence of sati. Sati gives real, pure happiness, but ignorant people think it leads to death and destruction, and that it's frightening if there aren't forms, sounds, feelings, and ideas. They find joy in hearing, seeing, thinking. The third truth of the cessation of suffering is still unclear to them”.



CHAPTER 29

IMPERSONALITY (*ANATTĀ*)

*...Bhikkhu, 'I am' is a conceiving; 'I am this' is a conceiving;
'I shall be' is a conceiving; 'I shall not be' is a conceiving;
'I shall be possessed of form' is a conceiving;
'I shall be formless' is a conceiving; 'I shall be percipient' is a
conceiving;
'I shall be non-percipient' is a conceiving;
'I shall be neither-percipient-nor-non-percipient' is a conceiving.
Conceiving is a disease, and by overcoming it,
bhikkhu, one is called a sage at peace. And the sage at peace is
not born, does not age, does not die; he is not shaken and is not
agitated. For there is nothing present in him by which he might
be born.
Not being born, how could he age? Not ageing, how could he die?
Not dying, how could he be shaken?
Not being shaken, why should he be agitated?
(MN. 140)*

29.1 Impossibility of control

Pemasiri Thera talks about anattā

Anattā is usually referred to as the teaching of the absence of the soul. However, in reality and more precisely, the Buddha taught that nothing can be controlled. And the “controller” himself does not exist. Nothing happens just as we wish it to.

From birth to death, we try to build our life according to our desires. All misery and lamentation come from this wretched need to control. We constantly try to do things the way we want and have things the way we want them, but it is impossible.

Parents want to direct their children in the way they feel is right, from their adult point of view. But how can they do that if they can’t even “direct” their own body away from its pain and ultimate demise? If anyone did indeed possess their own body, they would undoubtedly rid it of illness, old age, and death. But nothing in this world abides strictly by our desires.

Dispelling the illusion of control, we should learn to fulfil our duties without attachment and conflict. Association with anything, and the inevitable expectations that arise from that association, all bring only pain. People live with the hope that although today everything is bad, tomorrow everything could be better! No one asks for an invitation to enter the womb, but after birth the notion appears automatically in mothers’ minds, that, “This is my son”, or “This is my daughter”. What about children of other people – whose concern are they?

Everyone wants a guarantee, therefore they think, “I have lived this many years and so I will that many years more”. But there are no guarantees: no one knows what will happen with these five khandhas. There is no stability whatsoever. There is no control whatsoever.

Nonetheless, a lot of practitioners have certain ideas about meditation and try to conform their practice to those ideas, keeping everything under control. We may have certain wholesome qualities in this life that can help us attain jhāna, and even Nibbāna. These blessed qualities appeared due to bhāvanā, but we do not have control even of them: they appear dependent on causes and conditions. They, too, are *anattā*.

All three qualities of reality are always at hand, in any object, in any situation. Instability is near us, at arm's length. Suffering is near. Impersonality is near.

But people cannot live in the world with such perceptions. Only Aryans will not return to the death traps of permanence and selfhood. As for an ordinary person, he or she has the feeling of constancy and a very strong sense of self, and only sati and wisdom – the seeing and understanding of causes and effects – can help rid us of it.

We should reflect on our minds in relation even to small objects (“my pillow”). The illusion of control is automatically present in us: “my house, my children, my car”.

Everything should function the way I want it to!

One day, all of these will deteriorate and disappear. Due to that, every object we encounter in life has the potential make us unhappy. There is nothing in this world that does not have the potential to cause suffering – if we interact with it in the wrong way. Practice non-attachment, and your mind will become calm and accepting.

Even at a “raw” level, it is possible to discover that nothing inside or out is in sync with our desires. Our body becomes diseased and gets old; objects around us undergo decay and break down. If a mouse ruins your pillow, you become angry because you thought it was *your* property, but ridding ourselves of biases even to external things, is it possible to learn *anattā* in relation to mind and matter?

29.2 Aggregates without addiction

*...One who looks upon the world
as a bubble and a mirage,
him the King of Death sees not.
Come! Behold this world,
which is like a decorated royal chariot.
Here fools flounder,
but the wise have no attachment to it.
(Dhmp.13.170-171)*

The desire to grab something out of this stream of mind and matter and hold on to it is unskillful: we're always grabbing emptiness, but the natural pattern of mind and matter is to reproduce itself again and again, again and again. What can we grab? What to hold on to? Whom to save? Everything exists just as it is only for a moment before that moment dies.

In meditation, there comes a point when the stream of consciousness appears as a random waterfall of segments of thoughts, inhalations and exhalations, heartbeats – as a cascade of mental and material phenomena void of any core.

All of a sudden, the meditator is seized by an unspeakable horror: he has lived his life with all attitudes pertaining to “self”, with a conviction of “selfhood”, then suddenly... The Buddha called the self (notions of it and attachment to it) a disease (*rogam vadati attāto*).

According to Mahasi Sayadaw, people cling to the self because they think they have been the same person their whole life. Once it is clear from one's own experience that life is but made up of things that arise and pass away incessantly, one sees there's no self to cling to.

Wisdom is the understanding of the five aggregates of clinging. To attain complete understanding of them means to put an end to one's meditation, because nothing will be left to meditate about. Saṃsāra is not something external – it is mind and form, which appear again and again. Within these constantly changing elements, there is no personality. There is nothing that could be called a “self”.

“I” is not located in a body or form, and it does not exist somewhere separately from the form. “I” is not it, “I” is not outside it, and “I” is not equal to it”.

Sometimes, we do not associate our selves with one aspect of the five khandhas, but with another. Even very young children have a rather certain sense of self, related for the most part to feelings. When we realise that this sense is a great deception, all problems will stop, because just *who* is having these problems? The texts say that no misfortune can happen to one who is not attached to name and form.

From the very beginning, the five khandhas in us are mixed with the “I”, which functions as an inalienable part of them. Only the right kind of meditation makes it possible to see the five aggregates without clinging to them. Otherwise, they bring much suffering, because of the arising of the illusion of constancy and control.

To watch what is happening with mind and body while being disengaged is one scenario, and another is to engage in everything related to pañcakhandha. Our ordinary, worldly perception is to see our self as one, monolithic and stable, but in reality, we can only find that which, moment after moment, arises, abides and passes away; is born, exists and dies. There is no constant “I” – but there is an inconstant “I”.

The Buddha exclaimed:

*“For countless births have I passed through
this cycle of births and deaths,
seeking the builder of this tabernacle, but in vain.
Sorrowful indeed is this cyclic repetition of births.
O builder of the house,
I have seen you;
you shall not build the house again.
All the rafters are broken;
the ridge-pole is sundered.
Mind has arrived at dissolution (nibbāna),
having attained the extinction of all cravings.
(Dhmp.11.154)*

And what happens to us? After we find the builder, we start grabbing the building materials and helping him! Throughout our lives, we are under someone else’s influence: parents, school, bosses, books, or public opinion. All have made us what we are, or at least our understanding of whom and what we are, has come to us from external sources, from others. Our mind was created by all these ideas, which make the perception of anattā almost impossible. The world lives by fundamentally different notions.

You must let these go; you must free yourself from all that!

The Buddha advised us to become an island of our own and a refuge to ourselves, without seeking another refuge outside (*attādīpā viharatha*). Here, *attā* does not carry its usual meaning of a substance within mentality and materiality.

The Buddha used the word “I” and its possessive forms “my” and “mine” freely, in a relative way. He would say, “When I was a bodhisatta”, “my bhikkhus”, “my bhikkhunis”. And from this, some people mistakenly try to draw conclusions about a soul that migrates

from life to life attaining and Deliverance at the end. We also constantly say, “This is Jane”, or, “This is Dan”, but there really isn’t any “continuous” Jane or Dan.

“Yogis want their five aggregates to attain Nibbāna”, Pemasiri Thera said with a disarming smile. “But in reality, there isn’t anyone who’s attained it. No one and nothing migrates from one life to another, including the consciousness; believing the opposite means believing in attā”.

Only the realisation that mind and matter just flow by, according to their own natural laws, with no one and nothing behind them, can impress upon one’s mind that there is no attā.

“It’s fabulous: just moment after moment of these phenomena with no self behind them. No one home. This discovery brings a sense of great relief and ease of mind”.

“Some people who come here to Kanduboda are used to living in luxury, but they are ready to give it up temporarily, to live without hot water in a small kuti, hoping that in the future a certain ‘I’ will reap the rewards for these ‘deprivations’”.

29.3 Door to the Deathlessness

Bhante, could You explain what is meant by emptiness (suññatā)?

“There are four words in Pali that relate to that subject:

- asāratatthiya – absence of substance;
- avasavatatthiya – absence of control;
- asamitattthiya – absence of a “creator”, actor;
- suññatātthiya – voidness.

“We are naturally inclined towards formations, constructs – towards saṅkhāras. When the tendency towards making conclusions, opinions, planning comes to an end, it is *suññatā*, or freedom from constructions”.

“Our minds are full of the tendency to collect. We always collect various things, always creating new *saṅkhāras*. Whether we participate in this process intentionally or not, it happens anyway. When this tendency to collect all these things stops, this is *suññatā*. This is the simplest description”.

“Another word for *suññatā* is *anattā*. When a person is on the Path to Liberation, we say that he attained *anattā*, and when he attains Nibbāna we speak of *suññatā*”.

It is rather fashionable these days to find parallels in the Buddha’s words with science. For instance, it’s said that the discovery of the atom confirms *suññatā*, because atoms consist of emptiness.

“There is nothing wrong in comparing what is written in the Tipiṭaka with the achievements of modern science. On the other hand, no science can actually study what goes on in human consciousness, therefore there is no need in proving in this manner that Buddha was right”.

“I was interested in physics and have had a few conversations with student-physicists; however, the *suññatā* that the Buddha spoke about has little to do with that”.

“Liberation of the mind through the attainment of emptiness (*suññatā-vimokkha*) is the riddance of saṅkhāras, both wholesome and unwholesome. The appeasement of constructs – all that leads to further growth”.

“When the person attains arahantship, he enters *nirodha-samāpatti*, during which the activity of the mind stops, but the living energy continues to exist. This may last up to seven days, after which

a person resumes his contact with the world, with saṅkhāras, but now on a different level”.

“Nirodha-samāpatti is attained within the last jhāna through entry in three characteristics”.

There are three “doors” to Deathlessness:

- animit्तānupassanā — signless deliverance of mind through contemplation of impermanence;
- appaṇihitānupassanā — signless deliverance of mind through contemplation of the desireless;
- suññatānupassanā — signless deliverance of mind through contemplation of emptiness of all phenomena.

In a word, suññatā cannot be perceived or comprehended through the study of physics. The creator of the atomic bomb, Robert Oppenheimer, said shortly before his death that it was an enormous blessing for him to devote his life to studying the Dhamma, but he would not express a similar view about what he had been engaged in professionally.

Abhidhamma is about absolute reality – about the world, that is only a conceptual construction of the mind, created from the “raw” material of the dhammas. If we think about it, it’s frightening: we live as if in some sort in a permanent dream...

“We can read the Cula Suññatā Sutta, which describes the arahant’s abiding in voidness, but this makes no sense to ordinary people because they are not in a state of mind that a liberated bhikkhu is in”.

“Whatever recluses and brahmins in the past entered upon and abided in pure, supreme, unsurpassed voidness, all entered upon and abided in this same pure, supreme, unsurpassed voidness. Whatever recluses and brahmins in the future...in the present, all enter upon and abide in this same pure, supreme, unsurpassed voidness. Therefore, Ānanda, you should train thus: ‘We will enter upon and abide in pure, supreme, unsurpassed voidness’”.

(MN.121)

“You should not try to live at the level of Abhidhamma, the level of the highest reality – it is impossible. Only an arahant is capable of that. When those who have not been awakened try to desert the relative world and transfer to unconditional Truth, it has no benefit”.

“The Buddha didn’t reject relative reality; he didn’t argue with the world; he recognised the existence of the objects in it. He helped people solve their everyday problems and challenges, training each of them pursuant to their abilities”.

“Studying Abhihamma as philosophy will not rid us of hardships and could lead to even more confusion. Once I told my mother that in fact she was only nāma–rūpa”, he said, laughing. “It took me a long time to redeem my good relationship with her”.

“When people who do not have real spiritual achievements try to conform to the reality that *Abhidhamma* tells us about, it turns into a serious problem.

“Sometimes they stop taking part in social life, in communicating with others, in helping people, or displaying generosity. Such a yogi sits in the lotus posture and says, ‘There is total emptiness around. Nothing exists. All I need to do is not take part in anything’”.

“He doesn’t want to help others but only takes care of himself. It is the wrong understanding of emptiness”.

“Some think that participation in a ceremony of donating of robes and alms bowls is a meaningless thing to do, but it was the Buddha who established that ceremony and spoke about the immense benefit of donation for the monastic community”.

“He allowed people to follow their own Path, albeit one sometimes extremely slow, but right”.

Is the world, after all, just a mirage?

“First of all, it needs to be clarified what the world is considered to be in the Dhamma:”

“What is the All? Simply the eye & forms, ear & sounds, nose & aromas, tongue & flavors, body & tactile sensations, mind & ideas. This, monks, is called the All. Anyone who would say, ‘Repudiating this All, I will describe another’, if questioned on what exactly might be the grounds for his statement, would be unable to explain, and furthermore, would be put to grief. Why? Because it lies beyond range”.

(SN. 35.23)

“To begin with, we need to understand what the mind and body are, and to free ourselves from our passion for them. We can say that the world is a mirage because we live with objects in our mind that no longer exist, with memory that is based on past perceptions”.

“And the whole mankind lives exactly like that, therefore, no one is surprised”, Pemasiri Thera said nonchalantly, but remaining serious. “Even people who perceived the essence of the world continue pursuing that mirage”.

“In order to understand suññatā, it is necessary to practice Satipaṭṭhāna”.

Nowadays, pure Dhamma is being distorted in a variety of ways. Real teachers who teach as Buddha taught are rare to see. What will happen with the Teaching – will it disappear altogether?

“There will always be people who follow the Path, who follow the Path opened by the Buddha. Few are those ready to see the Truth. Few are those who are capable of overcoming all difficulties”

Looking back now, do you regret anything in your life?

“No, no!” said Pemasiri Thera, shaking his head firmly.

Do you have any plans for the future? Do you intend to keep teaching?

“I don’t think about future at all. It is pointless, because I may die tonight”.

“If they come to me asking for help, I help. If you come – I will help you. If someone else comes – I will help them”.

My final question to him was, “And how are You, Bhante?”

He suddenly switched to speaking English: “I am waiting for my one-way ticket”.

I can’t help thinking that if not for the people in Kanduboda, who need him here alive and engaged, he would not have lived to this old age. Pemasiri Thera doesn’t live for himself. The energy that

maintains his life comes from taking part in the destinies of other people. For someone like him, there is no need to fill one's self with ordinary passions and desires. He looks like someone who made all of his decisions a long time ago.

Bhante stands up and slowly walks into the depths of the blooming garden. I follow him with my eyes until they're strained by the effort of trying to keep him in sight, tormenting myself with the thought that despite long hours of interviews, I could not solve this mystery.

The coolness of the morning air gives way to the inevitable tropical heat. Swinging with the rhythm of the wind, tiny bells near the library tenderly sound their tinkling rings in every direction. Monks cast their eyes down, take up their bowls and head off for their alms rounds.

A new day starts in Sri Lanka.

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