A close-up photograph of a person's lower legs and feet. The person is wearing a dark, possibly black or deep red, robe. They are walking barefoot on a light-colored, sandy surface. Several distinct footprints are visible in the sand, leading away from the person. The lighting is bright, casting soft shadows. The overall scene suggests a journey or pilgrimage.

*Gone Forth,
Going Beyond
Ayyá Medhánandí*



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Gone Forth, Going Beyond

DHAMMA REFLECTIONS 1996 – 2007

Ayyā Medhānandī



A Sati Sārāṇīya Publication

Gone Forth, Going Beyond

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Dedicated to my father and mother,
Jay and Lea Fiksel,
and to all my teachers

May they know the highest blessings

Contents

Everything is There to Teach Us	page 1
The Food of Kindness	11
Chariot to Nibbāna	19
The Guests Come and Go	31
Sitting on the Dhamma Egg	39
Whatever it Takes	51
Joy is Hidden in Sorrow	61
Come from the Shadows	75
Gone Forth, Going Beyond	87
Glossary	101



Everything is There
to Teach Us

Everything is There to Teach Us

Across the globe, political and religious extremists are spreading terror and causing trauma through increasingly desperate acts of violence. The typical response is more of the same – reprisal following aggression – whether between nations, families, or individuals. What happens on the outside goes on within us too and the spiral of hatred escalates. Where does it stop?

Though we may feel powerless to effect change on a global level, we can nurture our ability to reconcile and restore harmony and trust in our own lives. With the balm of

forgiveness, we learn to soothe old rancour and make way for optimism and joy in our relationships.

Six special qualities, the *sārāṇīya dhammā*, are conducive to reconciliation: moral integrity and conscientiousness; threefold loving-kindness in what we do, say, or think; generosity – a selflessness that enables us to give not only of our physical resources but also our time, knowledge, and friendship; and Right View – seeing life as it really is – the first link of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Unwavering dedication to goodness is our best defence against the disintegrating forces of grudge and malice. To resist their undermining influence, we must go beyond merely paying lip-service to ethical precepts and performing token acts of generosity. We have to be scrupulous, inclining our minds towards goodwill in every way and treating others with respect and consideration – whatever we feel about them.

This demonstrates a willingness to reconcile with persons both close and hostile to us: even those we would not ordinarily tolerate warrant a gesture of peace. But the value of forgiveness is independent of the response or outcome it elicits. Positive or not, it matters only that we do what is right. Our overt attempts may be misinterpreted, poorly received, or simply too late. What if the person has died? Whether they are present or not, our spiritual recovery and well-being are served when we silently forgive them – and ourselves.

Right View, essential to this process, delivers the mental clarity we need to understand the laws of karma: that skilful acts lead to wholesome results and unskilful acts to harm. Secondly, we perceive the impermanence, suffering, and impersonal nature of all conditioned existence. Once we recognise our ability to affect our karma, our insight into these truths moves us to live accordingly: we take care to avoid causing harm in any way.

By abandoning all that betrays what we hold dear, the *sārāṇīya dhammā* begin to bear fruit. But that may require us to make changes in our life. Most of us have little time or interest in investigating our experience. Mesmerized by sense-pleasures and anxious about our commitments, we are perpetually busy chasing after the latest gadget or fun-packed event, a promotion at work or a more satisfying relationship. So how will we gain that clarity and perspective?

Take time to stop and inquire, "What's troubling me?" Do you feel angry, broken, or distressed? The world is rife with these afflictions, but all our insurance policies and wealth, our comfortable homes, or rewarding jobs offer only passing relief – not the ultimate refuge that comes from knowing the nature of our stress and how to free ourselves from it.

A monastery can feel like a secure place. We leave the world behind only to join an exclusive society of robed, shaven-headed confrères with shared aspirations, striving to

live by the highest principles. But don't think that monks and nuns float around in saintly harmony and meditative bliss.

Monastic community is a melting pot of temperaments and karmic predicaments – with the heat turned up and the lid fastened tight. Being dependent on alms and denied our habitual escape routes – entertainments and free choice as to how and with whom we spend our time – render us vulnerable and teach us how we must let go. Yet, in spite of our commitment to awaken and purify ourselves, sometimes we break down or 'break' each other down because we are human – and fallible.

When we fall, our monastic siblings, much as our friends or family, hold up a mirror for us to reflect what we are doing and how we have strayed from the Path. That can be humiliating and galling. The opportunity to reconcile emerges when we ask for forgiveness, a practice core to the *Vinaya*, our moral code of discipline. Under the protective canopy of community, we help each other forward and re-establish rapport according to prescribed conventions: we acknowledge our error, are formally forgiven, and begin again.

As wisdom matures, we learn to swallow the bitter pill of honest feedback. Without it, we keep believing – wrongly – that others are to account for our distress or outrage. When there is no 'need' for forgiveness, when we can live in harmony, pure loving-kindness naturally arises – and we no longer blame.

Curious to try hermetic life, in 1999, I stepped outside the monastic cloister. The following years without the support of the sorority were a test of my refuge, compelling me to rely on the qualities of compassion and forgiveness as never before. Still bound by monastic precepts, living on my own stirred feelings of anxiety and insecurity. From day to day, I did not know how my needs would be provided. There were no guarantees.

In time, the dragons of greed, anger, blame – all the desires in the mind – rose up menacingly to break me into small pieces. Although my spiritual sisters were no longer physically present, so many years of having them mirror back to me my frailties helped me see myself more clearly. Alone, I continued to benefit from the committee of their 'voices' and I would ask myself, "Why am I afraid?"

Those challenging times taught me where discontent begins: with fear, with wishing to be safe, with lack of faith, with wrong view about the nature of Reality. It was only when I was aware of the internal disquiet that I could calm my mind whereas being upset that no one had come forward to help only exacerbated my distress. I had to accept the situation to gain any measure of serenity and be grateful for those tough blessings.

You don't have to take up the robe to practise in this way. Wherever we are, the earth under our feet is the place of our spiritual work. And the people we are in contact with are our best teachers – not least those who refuse to toler-

ate our foibles and temper tantrums – because they highlight our weak points. So you might consider feeling grateful to them. Their rebuffs may be an unsung blessing – not acknowledged, not likely to be appreciated, and certainly not what we would consciously invite into our lives.

Sometimes people comment disapprovingly about our *Theravāda* tradition, "Good life if you can get it." Not long ago, I was waiting in a clinic. A woman sitting next to me asked about my lifestyle. "How do you pay for the doctor?" she pressed. When I explained that my supporters looked after me, she became indignant. "Not bad," she huffed. "You don't even work and you get everything for free."

I pondered her limited view. How would she know what I faced everyday living as I do? More than stamina, I had to draw on all my conviction to survive as a mendicant, depending on others for my every need.

How was I blessed by this difficult moment? I could bear her ungraciousness because the judgments of the world are not the measure of what I do or how I live. Even if people blame or belittle me and I feel misunderstood, I must be patient with their criticism and not take umbrage – or lose heart.

Ask yourself, "What is this person teaching me?" Stay with the breath, allow painful or uncomfortable feelings to arise and fade away in their own time – according to their nature. Trust in this awareness, not in the nice things people say. As soon as you're praised, in the next moment,

you'll be blamed. See their effect: how success and failure, happiness and unhappiness, pain and pleasure impinge on us and how letting them go frees us. Everything is a teaching.

Would you be willing to learn from the person you don't like? Can a bully also be your teacher? Unwittingly, they may point out our flaws and attachments but we would hardly say to them, "You're my teacher." Our readiness to learn is no indication of the other person's ability to understand or respond skilfully. Sometimes we have to say, "I'm sorry." That demands humility. And sometimes we set boundaries – that's tough compassion. Once you draw the line, honour it.

So how can we be kind to someone who mistreats us? Are we even aware of the bombs we detonate within our own minds? We CAN make peace with life just as it is and assume responsibility for the grenades we hang on to – having already pulled the pin. Put down your weapons. Realise your own shortcomings and don't blame others. If we keep doing these two things, we will be able to approach suffering without wallowing in it and uplift ourselves. From our brokenness will come healing and joy.

Don't worry about how it will be tomorrow, just do this one step at a time. Moment by moment. That's the practice. Practising kindness means not practising hatred. Every time we entertain a moment of hostility, we condition ourselves to be more hostile. And every time we let go that

hostility, we practise the Path: knowing when we're hanging on and when we're able to let go – and letting go.

For each of us, this journey is unique. Wherever we are, whatever we profess, we have to give up the dragons we grab and cling to, believing them to be our friends. Purifying ourselves, we infuse the qualities of gratitude and loving-kindness into all that we do. When we act from a good heart, our life gains beauty and meaning.

Where does the violence stop? It stops with me. Remember the ten Amish schoolgirls in Pennsylvania, five of whom died when they were shot by a crazed milk truck driver. How compelling the forgiveness of their community when they publicly embraced the family of the murderer.

We may not be able to control the violence on the outside. Forgiveness is seldom easy. But it is possible.



The Food of Kindness

The Food of Kindness

*For if you should enter the temple
for no other purpose than asking
you shall not receive.
And if you should enter into it to humble yourself
you shall not be lifted;
Or even if you should enter into it
to beg for the good of others
you shall not be heard.
It is enough that you enter the temple
invisible.*

KAHLIL GIBRAN: THE PROPHET

My alms bowl is central to my life. A symbol of the *Theravāda* Buddhist monastic tradition in which I trained, it is the soul of my mendicancy – coming empty-handed before the laity to receive material

nourishment and responding to their generosity. Sometimes that means reciprocating with a teaching from the Buddha, sometimes with a blessing chant or simply an expression of gratitude and kindness.

I am a beggar, and I must also be true. It is not easy to be a true beggar. I have to be worthy to be fed by the kindness of others and have all my needs provided. This way is rare and precious, as are acts of generosity in a world so driven by greed and selfishness.

Cultivating the spiritual path with integrity demands much of a beggar, primarily a faithful allegiance to the *Vinaya*, the code by which I live, as well as a sincere appreciation and respect for my supporters, their devotion and hard work to obtain, prepare, and bring offerings even at considerable sacrifice. It also calls for contentment with little – a simplicity of being and a commitment to renounce on many levels.

These qualities develop through a vigilance of heart that is difficult to practise in a large, well-funded institution. In those days when my monastic requisites, especially meals, were complete, assured, and generally abundant, I used self-abstinence to remind myself of the value of all that was given to us. On occasion, we also went on *tudong* or walked for alms in the nearby villages, accepting whatever we received as our meal for the day. But these were temporary privations – not a sustained way of life. They bore the flavour of heroic adventure but could hardly reflect the daily grind of spiritual endeavour.

It was only after I left the mother monastery to live on my own in New Zealand, a non-Buddhist country, that I came to know true choicelessness, at times facing physical hunger or a powerless isolation. This propelled me into a level of faith not demanded of me before, especially on days when I received very little, if anything, that would serve as a meal.

And so I learnt to meditate on the emptiness of my bowl – consciously relinquishing desire for food and accepting hunger. Bearing hunger with faith led me beyond despair to a gratitude and joy for what I did receive – a feeling of fullness that was not borne of food.

These hardships ripened me. I have gone hungry. But I have been able to keep going because every part of my body is made up of the loving-kindness from generous people who have cared for me for years and years, and my life is composed of pure kindness and thanksgiving.

Now, in my passage through Malaysia, I have again taken the opportunity to walk *piṇḍapāt* in the local market of Penang where it is surprisingly easy to beg. I knew I would be well-fed. With my bowl secure in its harness around my shoulder and cradling it in my palms, I stood between the main fruit and vegetable vendors and rows of flimsy stalls that display a collage of baby clothes, ladies' handbags, jewellery, household items, and colourful trinkets.

I chanted for each person who stopped to make offerings. Within minutes, my bowl was weighed down with

fruits, biscuits, pancakes, rice and coconut delicacies, and fried noodles – each wrapped in a colourful plastic bag.

The early Sunday morning shoppers, primarily local Chinese, know what to do when they meet someone in robes going for alms. In this society, Buddhist nuns rarely go *piṇḍapāt*, and the monks who beg often accept money. Today they saw a nun – a foreigner – receiving only offerings of food into her bowl.

Word spread. Whenever people tried to give money, I had to be quick to cover my bowl with my hand. Amazed, they returned with sweetmeats, sticky rice, or fruits. More came, and when my bowl was brimming, they piled their offerings into a growing collection of pink plastic bags at my feet. With all this attention, I was distracted from my normal practice of focusing on the bowl and meditating on emptiness.

The first time someone knelt and made *añjali*, I quickly removed my sandals before chanting a blessing, *Sukhi hotu, averā hotu, abhāyapajā hotu*. I had not wandered out barefoot as the Buddha would have done because of the rubbish everywhere but it felt wrong to receive her respect wearing shoes. Remembering how I had thrown off my sandals and walked the filthy streets of Yangon last year to beg for alms inspired me to be barefoot again.

I continued to stand, softly chanting to myself the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* and giving blessings each time someone placed more food in my bowl. I felt the turning of

the wheel of *Dhamma* and reflected on the thousands of years that this way of begging and receiving has nurtured the faithful. And here again, it was being upheld by simple acts of kindness – now a child with a bag of fried rolls, now a woman with jackfruit, now an Indian man curious to know from which country I hailed.

Some asked whether to place their offerings directly into the bags at my feet when they saw the bowl overflowing. I wanted at least to accept each offering with my hand if I could not in my bowl, and so create a sense of connection and relationship, chant a blessing, and bear witness to their kindness.

It was in one of these moments between the overflow of the bowl and the rush of generosity that I suddenly felt a hypocrite. I was well-fed, staying with my devotee, lacking nothing, and the bags were spilling out beside me. What right did I have to stand there and beg? How could I dare hold my bowl out to be filled again and again when so much had already been given? What right did I have even to begin to beg?

Stifling and sweating in my robes, these questions crowded my mind. I remembered the story of the 'Sorcerer's Apprentice' who tried to clean while the brooms multiplied and kept bringing more water. It seemed absurd to be juggling so many bags of food when I had no hunger in my belly.

Not even half an hour had elapsed. Embarrassed, anxious, and feeling unworthy of receiving the tide of

generosity, I fretfully looked about hoping my devotee would return soon to collect me. And then, to calm my mind, I began to chant more loudly.

Contemplating the Four Noble Truths, I watched the feet of all who passed – sandals of every colour and style, high heels and broken shoes, human beings of all ages, shuffling, hobbling or brisk in pace. Looking at their faces, I saw the bent, disabled, and healthy, the dishevelled and well-dressed, the shrivelled and overweight, smiles and frowns, worn and distracted expressions, mothers, infants, a father grasping the hand of his small son, bicycles and litter, traders shouting and the smells of the market, the world – the World.

My heart grew bright with compassion. I knew that I was standing there to let my bowl be filled again and again by those who love Truth. Hungry or not, I had every right to receive what they freely gave.

I was not abusing that beauty because it was not for me that they filled the bowl. I was a beggar for love of that blessedness, and the filling and emptying of my bowl was the natural process of each of our lives being remembered and honoured in random acts of kindness.

I receive and I give back.



Chariot to Nibbāna

Chariot to Nibbāna

*A chariot... of faith and wisdom ... forever evenly-yoked.
Moral shame, its brake, mind, the reins; mindfulness
as watchful charioteer.*

*Adorned by virtue, renunciation as chassis, its axle – meditation,
Energy its wheels, equanimity balancing the chariot's load.
Its weaponry – loving-kindness, harmlessness, and seclusion,
With forbearance as armour and shield, it rolls towards
security from bondage.*

*This divine vehicle, unsurpassed, originates from within oneself.
In it, the wise depart from the world – victorious.*

MAHĀVAGGA, MAGGASAṂYUTTA, SN 45.4

Venerable Ānanda saw the brahmin Janussoni riding out of Sāvattī in a magnificently ornamented white chariot. Later, reporting what he had seen to the Buddha, he asked what was the most divine

vehicle according to the *Dhamma-Vinaya*. The Blessed One named the chariot to *Nibbāna* as unsurpassed among vehicles, likening its components to the qualities we need for spiritual awakening.

As a nun I am a passenger in this noble chariot. Ancient and well-proven, its chassis is the *Vinaya*, our monastic code of precepts which serve as guide and guardian of my life. I climb into this chariot trusting that I leave behind the metropolis of greed, hatred, and confusion as I head towards sanctity and peace.

Setting out on pilgrimage in such a vehicle requires special provisions including a map of the teaching as well as faith and wise insight, our sturdy white mares, to support our passage. Through the most forbidding terrain, moral responsibility and mindfulness are compass and charioteer while remorse and conscience serve as brakes. Ever mindful in daily life, we must repeatedly ask: "Have I caused harm? Am I causing harm? Will I cause harm to myself or anyone? If so, how?" And, more importantly, "How can I stop myself from going astray again?"

What stirs the spiritual traveller to contemplate in this way? Knowing the hazards of addictive desire, malice, and all that cloud and confuse us, we practise virtue. Just as we tug on the reins of our horses to control their pace and direction, we choose to speak and act with scrupulous care and attention.

The first verses of the *Dhammapada* tell us that everything we say and do is coloured by our state of mind just as the wheels of the cart follow the ox that pulls it. Virtue protects us not only from the seductive influence of sights, sounds, smells, and tastes but also the subtle undertow of craving, memory, obsessive thought, and idle musing that brew in consciousness.

Whatever ethical code we espouse, whether five, eight, ten precepts or more than two hundred monastic training rules – consistency and single-pointedness from beginning to end are essential. Any slack in these may hinder and cause us to turn back or go astray.

However sincere our commitment to mindful and harmless living, it does not preclude human error. There will be times when our choices are unwise and we unwittingly cause distress. Yet we learn from this: seeing the root of pain, how to avoid it, and the peril even of minor neglect or transgression. Now, more than ever, we resolve not to risk the slightest harm to anyone.

Still, merely conforming to ethical rules and conventions, sitting in meditative postures, notching up attendance at retreats, and appearing calm and composed will not make us immune to dark thoughts and feelings – and their paralyzing effects. We must practise reining in the wandering mind to uproot unskilful tendencies. To discard such mental habits is not loss. As with moral commitment, its restraining action bears fruit. Less free to dissipate our

energy in following desire, we nurse a pure and steadfast awareness.

In this silence of the mind, concentration, rightly called the axle of our vehicle, and wisdom deepen. Such a mind – open and still – is also stable, tolerant, and resilient and no pawn to desire, aggression, weariness, or doubt. Armed with equanimity, it steers us safely through the perils of our pilgrimage. We know and see reality as it is – not just when we meditate – but in everything we do.

Ajahn Chah gave a graphic image of a spider that builds a web and then sits very still in its centre. When an insect flies into the web, he catches it, covers it in a silky thread, and tucks it away in the corner for dinner. Then another insect lands and he does the same thing. He wraps it up and piles it in his little stash of frozen meals.

With extreme emotions such as anger, it is from the still centre of a silent mind that we can learn from the spider – wrap it with mindfulness, know and reflect on its inherent nature, and penetrate to the truth of that feeling in a way that frees us. If you are distraught with grief, smouldering with resentment, or crippled by worry, just drop each one like a red hot stone. Stop making a meal of your misery – believing that it defines who you are. Put it down!

In the increasingly narcissistic culture of our times, this is hard to do. Seeking recognition, we mulishly indulge in, and identify with, our hurts and pains – to our detriment. Endlessly recounting our grief and our wounds to the tired

ears of friend or therapist, we wallow and luxuriate in them publicly as if such morbid excesses were in some way heroic.

Masked in this protracted suffering is the fear of letting go and the belief that our pain gives us legitimacy. It certainly buys us attention, however desperate. We nurture it, unaware that it enslaves us. Yet, if we hope to honour the past and minister to accumulated traumas, we must live authentically NOW and accept the transitory nature of all things. We never forget the heartache for it enriches us. And the moment we open to it is the blossoming of true compassion and understanding.

Like the splendid steeds evenly harnessed to our chariot, we carry ourselves and our life's burden so that our vehicle does not tilt precariously to either side or flip over. Even with such a degree of skill and awareness, should we become lost in yearning for what was once ours, make detours to the shopping mall – or meditate just to 'bliss out' – we will surely forget our original aim.

As pilgrims, our perseverance develops in two ways: with heroic diligence and measured effort. Just as the smooth and continuous turning of the wheels propels the chariot all the way to *Nibbāna*, so too, through frustration and inhospitable conditions, we sustain our momentum and commitment undeterred.

Especially at the outset, we may falter or grow dispirited. Just as when you take up yoga, at first, all your

muscles hurt – you feel clumsy and tentative. But gradually, if you keep working out, the aches and pains disappear and you savour a new freedom of movement and wholeness.

To stay in the middle, we avoid the extremes of over-indulgence and asceticism. Our grasp of the reins must be neither too loose nor too tight – giving our equine friends the space they need to canter freely without choking while, at the same time, keeping them on course. So with meditation practice; if we exert too little effort, our concentration fails to stabilize. But if we are overzealous, our focus and energy dissipate like a fire of straw quickly dying out.

How many of us try to beat ourselves into enlightenment only to despair and give up? If we take care not to force the mind to be still, or try too hard, we will make better progress. Learn what works for you – and what doesn't. Go gently, respecting your limits and pressing the boundaries just enough to be challenged. Living on the edge can draw out the best in us. Compelled by a sense of urgency, we act as "one whose hair is burning seeks a pond".

The weapons of a spiritual pilgrim are loving-kindness and compassion. Recall the pithy verse in the *Dhammapada*: "Hatred cannot be conquered by hatred but by love alone. This is an eternal law." To what extent can we live by this principle when we are in conflict with ourselves?

A loving heart is harmless. It is not passive but poised and open to forgive. Realizing that we are all capable of acting from ignorance, we can respond not with aversion or aggression but tender composure. We acknowledge our interconnectedness – in harming any living being, we bring harm to ourselves. As the mind is purified, it inclines towards non-harming at the deepest level.

There we can know ourselves intimately. Polishing the inner mirror, we dispel delusion and come face to face with ourselves in the solitude of the heart. This is more than physical seclusion and non-engagement in worldly affairs. Neither guarantees spiritual insight. But *cittaviveka*, real seclusion of the mind, is the place where wisdom is refined.

Through that purification, we find no 'one' and no single condition to blame for our suffering. Instead of investing in excuses and believing *Māra*'s many guises, we expose the source of our pain. Finally, seeing through loneliness, we no longer depend on others to define who we are so that we can feel whole.

With such an awakening, a genuine connection to family and friends can evolve. We stop meeting through empty form and convention, competing with, or demanding anything from each other. Only then is it possible to really love one another. We're not saying, "You be something for me, and I'll be something for you." That's a business deal, a ransom of love for security, acceptance, power, wealth, or sense-pleasure.

Many relationships disintegrate in this flawed dynamic. It follows us into monastic life too. As long as the mind is beset by selfishness and unresolved negativity, we may look 'good' – but under the veneer of calm, we long for approval, ooze with self-pity, or bristle with disdain for our companions.

Inquire into your true nature and plant the seed of loving-kindness. Love yourself and others – not in a controlling or dependent way – but with an understanding of the fleeting quality of the conditioned world and our unquestionable interdependence.

When I lived as a hermit nun, I scabbled up steep summits and was sometimes jolted off my seat in the chariot to *Nibbāna*. Six years of seclusion both from the mainstream of life as well as from my peers – particularly in times of trial – left me vulnerable and worn.

During the last winter retreat, there were frequent gaps between the daily meal that was offered – some planned and some not. On the two days a week when no meal was scheduled, I grazed on offerings of fruit, bread, and hot drinks. This only intensified my anticipation for cooked food on the remaining days. But not knowing whether my supporters would arrive too late – or forget and fail to come altogether – compounded an anxiety that sabotaged my well-being.

One morning, after a day of fasting, I awaited my meal. It didn't come. This was not an intentional test of my resilience, but by nightfall, alone with the waves pummeling the shore, I sat by the diminutive light of a candle – my faith in shambles. "Can I survive this way?" Shrouded in my woollen robe, I looked hard at the face of the Buddha on my shrine.

I felt like the spider sitting in his web and realised that I had been nibbling for years on long-expired frozen meals of fear, self-pity, and habitual anxiety. Then I remembered my lifetime vow to practise as a nun. Would I allow hunger to be the yardstick of my faith? Or fear and insecurity to jeopardize what was most precious to me?

Pondering how the Buddha himself had overcome much suffering in his long years of ministry, I rekindled my resolve. Chanting, I called on my refuge in the Triple Gem. I would summon every shred of courage and patience to persevere one moment at a time through uncertainty, hunger, and every other hardship.

To be a noble charioteer, we must recognise how the mind's deceptions veer us from the path. Determined not to abandon it, we endure discomfort, sickness and the decrepitude of an aging body – every imaginable impediment to our practice.

Radically patient, resolute, even surrounded by the fires of *saṃsāra*, we honour this purification to free our

hearts. That intention of honouring is in itself peace, and our very breathing with pure awareness is ground enough for our last breath. At that moment, we leave behind only the body, knowing that no 'one' dies.

For *Nibbāna* is not the chariot – it is the sacredness where this path ends.



The Guests Come
and Go

The Guests Come and Go

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival, a joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your
house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honourably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
Meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

JELALUDDIN RUMI: THE GUEST HOUSE
(TRANSLATED BY COLEMAN BARKS & JOHN MOYNE)

Stress is the price we pay for the happiness we seek. Driven by busy schedules, obligations, needs, and ambitions, or caught up with worry, even while on holiday, we hardly leave our cares behind. Hurling

ourselves into work, entertainment, or physical distraction brings only temporary relief – for the root of our suffering is within us. What exhausts us – more than the hectic regime of daily life – is our constant thrashing in the rapids of thought, mood, and memory.

How then do we find peace? Even at the centre stage of life, whether we are reeling from personal misfortune or coping with ill-health, the practice is always the same. Internal and invisible, it requires that we train ourselves. We learn to let go the past and future, and grow calm by taming our troubled thoughts.

Meditation helps us fine-tune this process. The Buddha likened the mind to a guest house. [AGĀRA SUTTA, SN 36.14]. Whatever is happening around us, be it in a condo or bungalow, alone or in community, our dwelling place is teeming one moment, tranquil the next. Likewise, the pleasant, painful, worldly, and unworldly feelings passing through the mind are to be treated like guests.

Sitting quietly, we practise being more mindful and observant. With sharpened attention, we monitor every sense experience and thought, and begin to see more precisely how the mind is influenced. Are we aware of old disturbances and reactions that continue to echo long after the people or situations that created them have gone?

Brooding over the conflicts and careers of long ago – words left unsaid, family or former friends still unforgiven, or skewed perceptions frozen in time – the tapes of the past

play on while the future is dimmed by anxiety. Taking these thoughts to be real, we circle helplessly under long suppressed burdens and fret about what will be. Though the guests have come and vanished, we tenaciously wait on them – for months, years, even decades.

Is it not time to let them go and move beyond the isolation of bitterness, regret, and fear? Having faced loss or hardship, we know what it is to grieve. Just as we know the past is dead and the next moment beyond our grasp, until we can trust surrendering to this reality, the peace we yearn for remains elusive.

Security is here in the dark night, in the centre of our grief. Ready to be with what we feel, no matter how terrible, we touch a primordial stillness. We know that what passes through the mind – sometimes a raging storm, sometimes a protracted longing – is all fleeting, stressful, and not who or what we really are.

In the small silent oasis of one moment, practise turning inward for rest and refuge. Realising how the events of life harden our attitudes and thoughts, tend to your emotional baggage and discard assumptions that have exceeded their expiry date. Receive all the guests – even the poisonous feelings of disappointment or outrage – with courage, curiosity, and fresh awareness. Gradually they will change or fall away – for that is their nature.

We mature with each moment of compassion and forgiveness towards ourselves and others – because we

have let go. We have given the guests of the mind all the space they need, here and now – trusting enough to feel authentically what we have been denying for years. This true connection to the present moment reclaims the energy dissipated in our pursuit of worldly happiness. Now it is ours to tap, and it becomes for us the very fount of our awakening.

Last year, at the start of my three-month retreat, I woke up deaf one morning. Prescribed steroids, it would be six weeks before I could have an MRI to confirm whether there was a tumour. For years, I had been the one to counsel and encourage others during illness and loss. Now, alone and in silence, could I walk my talk?

I fought to maintain the simple rhythm of each day, cleaning, meditating, chanting, feeding the birds, and going for walks. But this time, the waiting without knowing had an edge that caught me by surprise. Fractious thoughts defeated every effort to coach myself with scriptural readings or reflections on karma. All too soon, an insistent restlessness wrung the last vestige of calm from me.

I could only watch the guests come and go and feel all that I was feeling. Even as my faith shrivelled, I knew there was no other way to be – no escape but to face things as they were – and persevere. I determined to make this waiting time part of my meditation practice, not separate from it, prevailing with as much patience and candour

as I could muster. So I prepared myself to befriend, unconditionally, every guest that came to my door.

We have to practise being present no matter how excruciating. In our fury or fear, we want to scream, "Enough!" But can we bear the pain a little longer? Without wishing it to subside and disappear, or demanding that it change, are we able to accept it? Can we prepare a generous space for it in the heart and make peace with it – just as it is?

Consciously letting in difficult feelings and keeping watch in this way, we empty the heart and allow truth to preside as we meet each new guest. No longer do we need to defend ourselves, defying them or locking them out. We know that they will change or depart just as they came – of their own accord – leaving us in the still silence of pure knowing. This is an eternal law. Each time we clear the rubbish, set out the mats, sit down and wait – delving into the darkest corridors of the heart – is a gift to ourselves.

Let the guests of the mind come and go. Know the generosity of welcoming them instead of chasing them away. But like any guest who overstays his welcome, show him the door. To the heart shrunken with fear or preoccupied with its own misery, these dark moments are the very intruders we would have run from. Now we can greet them and let them go without judgment, for they may carry hidden blessings.

We rejoice not because they have gone but because we are at peace. And, letting them be, we sample the exquisite freedom that takes us beyond the confines of this narrow house to the vast frontier of an open heart.



Sitting on
the Dhamma Egg

Sitting on the Dhamma Egg

This path of liberating the heart is a spiritual ladder we ascend step by step. We cannot skip a single rung lest we lose our footing and fall. As we climb, our stamina, commitment, and faith are tested in ways that are sometimes subtle, sometimes fiery. Nor do the obstacles vanish further up. The higher we climb, the more the challenges appear to intensify, even to the point where we may lose heart. But never give up!

At the end of a recent retreat, almost everyone reported experiencing some level of pain and anxiety during their meditation. There was nothing wrong with their

practice. They simply witnessed the truth of the human condition. Being stretched beyond our limits opens us to the miraculous. And if we hope to grow and mature in wisdom, we have to be willing to do the groundwork that will ready us for the trials to come.

The scriptures liken a spiritual aspirant dedicated to the work of awakening to a hen incubating her eggs. (NĀVA SUTTA, SN 22.101) Sitting on them, she creates the right conditions for her chicks to hatch. She can't speed up the process by cracking open each egg and pouring out the contents. The baby chick emerges only when all the necessary conditions are ripe. Patience is everything. Then, at the right moment, the chick pecks through the shell. Likewise, if we rightly develop the Noble Eightfold Path, we are bound to succeed as long as we fulfil all the factors needed to awaken.

No matter how sincere or steadfast, the student who fails to qualify will not graduate. In the same way, those who commit violent crimes cannot benefit fully from this teaching. When King Ajātasattu and his retinue of five hundred chariots arrived at Jīvaka's mango grove, he became alarmed at the sight of the Buddha meditating with 1250 *bhikkhus*. Once he appreciated the profundity of their silence, he prostrated and sat down to receive the teaching.

Sadly, the Buddha's discourse would do little to spare the king from the weight of his karmic debt, having mercilessly imprisoned his own father and starved him to death.

When Ajātasattu departed, the Buddha told the monks, "He's doomed," meaning he would spend eons in hell realms.

We are wiser than this king of ancient times. We aim to live according to ethical principles, and are fortunate enough to be able and willing to listen to this teaching, understand it, and practise. Our *Dhamma* tools guide us: precepts, techniques for concentration, and ways to uplift faith, clear the mind, and balance effort.

Awakening demands an impeccable moral standard – beyond mere etiquette or the agility to tiptoe mindfully from room to room. For the spiritual seeker, conventional *sīla* that restrains conduct and speech does not go far enough. We must raise the bar of the mind's abiding through meticulous care of our thoughts. And work with greater earnestness than the fizzled effort typical of exercise regimes. We have to train like a marathon runner.

How much energy do we dissipate each day idly distracted? There are so many lost moments in life resulting from poor mind states. We may not be violent or aggressive but underneath the veneer of smug composure, our thoughts sometimes betray us. If we slacken in our integrity, we may lose the stability of heart to reel them in. We are even more vulnerable when things go awry. Unaware of threads of negativity unravelling inside us, we may suddenly turn aggressive and say or do something we regret.

For good or ill, intention precedes every action or choice we make. So to avoid the reefs of greed, aggression, pride, or confusion, steer well. A reliable compass to navigate us out of the morass of impure mind states is Right Intention and its able twins, *vitakka* and *vicāra*, applied and sustained thought.

Vitakka works like the lens of a telescope. It aims, directs, and focuses the mind on one object. So we begin by channelling our attention instead of allowing the mind to wander aimlessly. Then, piercing thought with undivided attention, *vicāra* takes over. Fixing it to investigate microscopically and evaluate what we see, we train ourselves to inquire continually, "What am I thinking?"

Together, *vitakka* and *vicāra* help us implement the Buddha's advice on five ways to abandon distracted or unskilful thoughts. (VITAKKASANṬHĀNA SUTTA, MN 20) First, they capitalise on the mind's ability to devote exclusive attention to one thing. Using skilful thoughts to displace impure ones, we free the mind to turn to, and rest in, purity. Just as loving-kindness drives out ill-will, or a "skilled carpenter or apprentice might knock out, remove, or extract a coarse peg by means of a fine one". Then the mind grows stable, silent, single-pointed, and concentrated.

Second, just as a youth fond of ornaments would be "horrified, humiliated and disgusted if the carcass of a snake, or a dog, or a human being were hung around his neck", seeing the danger, the wrong, or the suffering

caused by indulging in and paying heed to unwholesome thoughts, we are compelled to remove them. And we vigilantly sweep them out.

Should these fail, the Buddha suggests more robust measures such as ignoring impure thoughts the way we shut our eyes to avert a terrible sight. Or pacifying and settling the mind so that it ceases to churn out thoughts and cools. As a last resort, with "teeth clenched and tongue pressed against the roof of the mouth" we can "beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind" to try to suppress stubborn thoughts that continue to harangue us.

Such heroic efforts not to harbour anger or hostility may seem exaggerated. You might think, "It's just a whisper in the mind. I'm not hurting anyone." But we hurt ourselves because this invisible internal dynamic contaminates our intentions and eventually spills over to infect our lives. Leaving our thoughts unchecked, before we know it, we lash out at someone.

Yet many of us remain unmoved. We don't take the time to train in these ways. What do you do when you wake up? Do you meditate? Or do you procrastinate and then 'forget' because there's something more interesting to do, or find you're suddenly too 'busy'? It becomes harder to set aside those few moments to meditate. It is the same with acts of compassion. Caught up with life, we believe that we can't help or choose not to see when someone is in

need. What meaning can our lives have if we are unable to dedicate ourselves to goodness?

Just as plants need light to grow, when complacency, laziness, weakness, or desire set in, cultivating awareness removes their dark influence. Set aside time to stop and be with yourself. Whenever you notice negative thinking, apply the antidotes: loving-kindness to drive out malice; compassion to destroy cruelty; joyful empathy to crush jealousy; and equanimity to stabilize mental agitation.

There will be times when we're too upset or obsessed, fraught with worry or derailed by loss to practise. Even though you close your eyes and resolve to pay attention, or try to overcome desire with wise or calming reflections, nothing happens. Loving-kindness and compassion remain elusive. In such situations, trying to radiate loving-kindness by repeating the formulaic phrases, "May I be well, may I be happy" is more likely to drive you crazy.

There is no automatic switch to force joy into the heart. With all our intentions to be kind, in seemingly innocuous, unconscious moments we can end up being insensitive or callous. We're not bad because we don't pay attention or have angry thoughts. They are a natural karmic repercussion of an untrained mind. But unless we consciously cultivate the antidotes, we will habitually dwell in impoverished mental states.

So how can we conjure genuine feelings of empathy, forgiveness, and tolerance? No matter how angry or

frustrated we are, abandon those negative thoughts, knowing that holding on to them is like grasping a poisonous snake. Seeing anger, frustration, or any mood of the mind as impermanent as a storm, let it arise and cease with forgiveness, not allowing it to overwhelm us.

The Buddha did not give us impossible instructions. We just don't follow them consistently. Understanding the nature of harmful thoughts and the danger of being caught in them, we must reject, ignore, silence, or drive them out of consciousness before they harm us. Gradually, we find safe refuge within. When we miss a step, rather than beat ourselves up and spin more negativity, we simply take up the slack and renew our efforts to live with assiduous mindfulness.

We don't have to be in our 80's or 90's to feel *samvega*, the urgency to practise. Life is uncertain. There is no way to predict or control how many years we have left to purify ourselves. So we can't afford to sit back casually and let the practice unfold as it will. Once we realise the truth of our own mortality, we act on that natural longing to be free from the cycle of birth and death.

While meditating in Burma as a young nun, with my first insight into the transitory nature of life, I was overcome with fervour to end desire and delusion once and for all – and I wanted it instantly.

Rushing to see my teacher, in my excitement I bowed as respectfully as I could and announced, "Sayadaw, I

want to teach *Dhamma*." He chuckled and asked what I had experienced. When I explained, he gave a brief discourse on the six temperaments of those who practise. "You're the angry type," he declared. "No, I am not!" I protested.

Bursting with *samvega* to free my heart, I could hardly contain myself. There was so much fire there – the anger of lifetimes. But this encounter humbled me – coming before the master and receiving his clear reflection. "You're still caught in it: greed, hatred, and delusion. Go back to your practice."

We cannot change just by wishing our untrained habits away. Nor can we wish ourselves into enlightenment. We need to sustain an unshakeable commitment and work hard, with simplicity and devotion, adeptly using the tools we have honed. Diligence – not just in meditating but in mindful and wise reflection in daily life – is generosity to ourselves. So when we are at work, shopping, or scrubbing a pot, we ask, "Where is the mind? Who's scrubbing? What am I thinking?"

Standing in a room, feel the pressure of your feet on the floor. Sitting in a temple, feel the energy in the body, the contact with the cushion, the space above your head. Come back to each moment. Throughout the day, pay attention to familiar touch points – putting on shoes, walking through a door, turning on a light. Because at each point

we choose, for that moment we are aware, present, awake.

Then, a minute later, the mind is off again. Thinking, wandering, distracted. Keep returning to the body, using the mind's strengths, and knowing its weaknesses. Train to see the contents of consciousness – mental objects and the mind that knows them. That's all! We look at awareness and the activity that takes place in awareness.

Here and now we commit to being the Buddha, to seeing the *Dhamma*. We fill the mind with brightness and cultivate friendly thoughts, beautiful thoughts, thoughts that liberate us from the heart's torturous labyrinths and contractions to rest in its boundless purity. We treasure that vast, interior quiet because it brings us a sense of connection and well-being. Reconciled within instead of broken and separate, we don't just heal ourselves. We heal each other, and the world.

Do not be led astray by thoughts. So many beings live in chaos, fear, and confusion, unable to hear or understand let alone apply this teaching to their lives. So when you leave here and walk out the door, as you reach for it, check, "Where is my mind? What am I thinking?"

This is difficult to sustain but it is possible. Then, when someone who irritates us appears, we won't snap at them. We won't be rude, unkind, or condescending. We will see them as brother or sister on the Path – a spiritual colleague. Why? Because we are both human beings subject to birth,

old age, sickness, and death. So ask, "How can I be present for this person? Compassionate? Forgiving?"

Such thinking conditions skilful mind-states and a kindness that redeems us at every turn. One step leads to another. Then, before long, the work begins to happen more naturally and spontaneously. When conditions ripen, the egg breaks. The little chick cracks through its shell, tumbles out, and is free.



Whatever It Takes

Whatever It Takes

The determination, or *adhiṭṭhāna*, to take up spiritual practice, stay with it, and see it through to its fruition depends on a special quality of perseverance. First we have to make our intention very clear and firm. Appreciating our limits, we gird ourselves to press beyond them and face conditions that might be difficult. We align our will with what we mean to accomplish – whatever the obstacle.

When what we set out to do is hard, after an initial burst of enthusiasm, we may become bored, impatient, or distracted, losing faith in what we have undertaken. Disheartened, we may even give up. Just as in a marriage, when the realities of life set in – you hunt for a way out.

In today's culture of dilute commitment, divorce has become commonplace. Many now opt for informal partnerships to ensure an easy exit. Have we lost this quality of *adhittāna*? Do greed and self-interest make us intolerant? Can we determine to fulfil our vows and – if the relationship sours – do all we can to salvage it?

Apart from situations of wrong sacrifice that are better abandoned, the best allies of steadfastness in our commitment to each other, as well as to our own spiritual journey, are the qualities of renunciation and forbearance. In the face of grisly conditions, we try to bail out. But first we search for every possible means of reconciliation – braving rebuff, disappointment, humiliation, or hurt. Ironically, it is through wrestling with our frailty that we begin to gauge the true dimensions of our strength.

In the practice of meditation, determination fuelled by willpower alone will not sustain us beyond the initial stages. Here, too, we rely on restraint and patience, stilling our hearts to develop the calm and concentration necessary for clear seeing. Otherwise, our interest in investigating our experience will flag.

To persevere in the longer term, we must also have the stamina and willingness to bear with physical discomfort or emotional turbulence. Defying unhealthy attachment and addiction, we adopt an attitude of enduring forgiveness. Only then can we open to the lessons of life's unremitting challenges and attain inner peace.

With tenacious resolve, we temper our worldly pursuits to devote ourselves to liberation, *Nibbāna*. We cannot serve both. Overindulging in the delights of the world compromises our ability to wake up to Truth. We must decide our course, then give ourselves to it fully. This giving is an intentional surrender.

In studying the subtle workings of the mind, ask: "What is the quality of my attention? Can I sacrifice pleasurable thoughts and withstand what is disagreeable for a moment of clarity? What are the roots of my unhappiness?"

Sometimes we are overwhelmed by greed, besieged by craving for sensory delights. We succumb to angry thoughts or memories of terrible things we've lived through. We may feel obsessed, discouraged, distracted, or anxious – too stressed to be with our experience let alone concentrate on the breath. Whether in daily life or in practising mindfulness of breathing, pause and consider: "What am I doing? How am I living my life?"

When it is impossible to approach the mind's furies head on, tack like a sailor guiding his vessel. Leave the breath for a moment to draw gently near a sensation of pain in the heart or care for the place of greatest distress. Attend to that point of tension, then come back to the breath, investing every ounce of energy to being fully aware and present, moment by moment, be it painful, disorientating, or unbearable. Stay with it. Steady yourself.

Slowly recoup strength and confidence, trusting the barometer of mindfulness.

We might not want to look at pain but we don't always have a choice. A pain in the knee – lovingly tended to – can also nurture our practice. We might wonder, "What does an aching knee have to do with freeing ourselves from suffering?" Our instinct is to run in the opposite direction from what we dislike. But every irritation is an integral part of the journey. We study our suffering and recognise its origin. Even as we continue to wrestle with confusion or resistance, a sense of being lost, helpless, or beyond redemption, we coax ourselves and steer towards safe harbour.

Through repeatedly examining our experience with enough curiosity and perspective, we come to see the blessings of acting as pure witness and accepting life's many contours unequivocally. As we distil a history of denying or coping with neuroses and brokenness into a gradual process of self-healing, we discover how this helps us both to mature discernment and open our hearts.

Moral discipline adds another benefit to this dynamic. Moral restraint means giving up indiscriminate freedom – we make sacrifices for what we value – faithfully observing precepts and inviolable ethical boundaries for our own well-being and for the greater welfare of all. We commit to harmless living by following a path of choices based on integrity and wisdom. Rather than blame others for our pain

or unhappiness, we take responsibility for our speech and actions. It is not a casual route but one that is clearly defined – and held sacrosanct.

It is this quality of one-pointed discipline that we rely on to purify our mental habits. Without sharp and steady focus, we will be unable to concentrate on the object. Our attention will wander. While this may not be morally harmful, it tends to destabilize the mind and weaken our immunity to the attractions and distractions of the world.

And so, meditation becomes an invisible yet exalted form of internal generosity – beginning with ourselves and ultimately reaching out to others. The quality of our attention and our ability to be present for what is arising in consciousness profoundly influence what we say and do. How well we direct the mind naturally impacts the very tenor of our life – how we choose to spend our time and how much kindness we extend. Even a transient knowing of the heart's movements can significantly shape our interactions.

So striking is the connection between moral commitment in daily life and peace of mind that when we fail to discipline our speech and conduct, we invite harm internally, to ourselves, or externally, into our relationships. Either way, we cannot be peaceful. Inner agitation and disturbance lead to coarse thoughts and deeds which, in turn, render impossible pure attention and understanding of our experience. We may be able to pacify the mind to some

extent but eventually we come to a point beyond which we cannot deepen or progress – without further purification.

How can joy settle in a heart that is on fire? Unless we restore balance, how can a mind that is agitated or hostile reflect our innate goodness? In the midst of all our suffering, we know instinctively that we have to tame the heart – because when we live skilfully, in harmony with each other, practising kindness, compassion, and harmlessness, we are blessed. We realise that whatever we do on the inside reflects outwardly. And whatever we do on the outside reflects inwardly.

Endurance develops with each sacrifice we make. Believing that our happiness depends on getting what we want, it is hard for us to recognise that selfish desire alienates us from the true source of that happiness. We can scarcely renounce desire unless we see that what we should want is the ending of desire. It may be the hardest thing to achieve but it is essential for our spiritual work.

To go beyond the cycle of self-concern, we empty the mind of thought again and again. This emptying delivers us to the safety and purity of the present moment. When I stand for alms and people come to offer food into my bowl, how can I properly reciprocate if my attention drifts or my thoughts are tainted by what I hope to receive? My bowl is already crammed with expectation.

Once, I stood downtown during a cold windy morning. After an hour, no one had put anything into my bowl.

My precept is not to eat after 12 o'clock. With only minutes before the hour, shivering and weary, I was seized by a whinging anxiety. "I'm hungry, I need to be fed. Will anyone put food in my bowl?" I could no longer meditate.

There I stood. I looked like an alms mendicant. I had the bowl, the robe, and the shaved head, but my mind was full of desire. Seeing the empty bowl in my arms, I reproached myself, "Can my mind be as empty as this bowl?" I then poured all my effort into mirroring that emptiness. "Okay," I thought. "It doesn't matter."

Even if I were to go hungry, I felt grateful that I could still walk for alms just as the Buddha and his disciples had nearly three thousand years ago. Suddenly I looked down to see a man bowing to me on the pavement. When he stood up, he offered me a meat pie.

A vegetarian even before I became a nun, my first thought – an ungracious "oh dear" – when I recognised the smell of the beige wrapping paper, quickly evaporated. As soon as the beauty of that moment sank in, I was awash with gratitude. "A stranger just bowed on the street and put food in my bowl!"

No longer hankering for fruit or other food, I received his gift with a blessing chant – grateful for meat pie. "Never mind, I can nibble the crust." It was not what I wanted. I may not choose what I'm offered but I choose the vulnerability of a *samaṇa* and this simple life.

Should people give us what we don't want, we can notice if our automatic response is benign – or critical. Even when those inner complaints grow shrill, we keep coming back to our true aspiration, remembering, "I chose this."

How much am I willing to give up for what I value? Am I able to calm my mind and heart enough to bring peace to the situation? Can I hold true?

Determination is saying, "I will," when the way feels impossible. We take a deep breath and open to the gift disguised in that impossible moment. We touch the blessing in what seems to defeat us. Resisting craving so that we can uphold what is noble, we empty the mind of everything that is impure and so reveal its natural radiance.

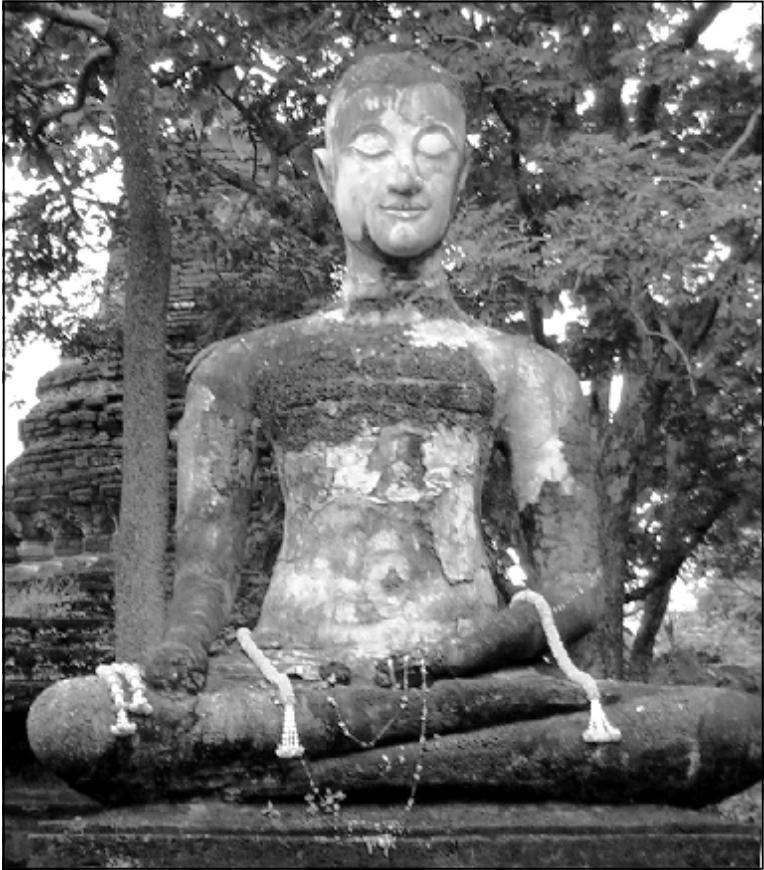
To understand the mind's true nature, we have to die to our desire for pleasant experience; we have to be empty enough to love the moment exactly as it is. You will have seen in your own lives the alchemy of patient endurance, determination, and renunciation working in unison. Whenever we exert ourselves to serve and manifest what we deeply value, the blessings seem to flow.

Then we leave the meditation hall to resume our daily routine brimming with new resolve. Now how do we respond when things fall apart? How do we safeguard our new-found conviction once we return to the swift pace of life? In the midst of our duties and practical dealings at home and in our professional environments, the constant impingements of the world may be wearying. Adding

spiritual practice to this weariness could further isolate us and make us feel out-of-step with everyone. Nevertheless, we train – knowing what we must relinquish for the sake of our highest goal.

Above all, it is through unfaltering moral discipline and a commitment to virtue and kindness that we follow the path of holiness. Seeing the danger of selfish desire and lack of awareness, we understand how seemingly innocuous currents of thought and behaviour undermine us; how our wish to look good influences our decisions, how complacency compromises our principles, how laziness saps our energy and dulls our worthier aspirations.

The false security of these negative inclinations blinds us to their potential harm. In letting them go, we are free to turn towards the mind's native brightness, releasing the priceless strength and energy that empower us to live benevolently – with joy and ease rather than tension, with loving wisdom instead of aggression. We stay the course.



Joy is Hidden
in Sorrow

Joy is Hidden in Sorrow

During these days of practice together, we have been reading the names of our departed loved ones as well as those of family and friends who are suffering untold agony and hardship at this time. There is so much misery around us. How do we accept it all? We've heard of young and vibrant people lost to suicide, cancer, aneurysm, AIDS, and motor neurone disease. And so many elderly who still cling to life even while suffering chronic poor health, physical and mental pain, poverty, disability, and isolation.

Death is all around us especially as we come to the end of the year and the start of the winter season. This is a law of nature. It's not something new. And yet we go about our lives oblivious to the fact or acting as if nothing will ever happen to us – as if we're not going to grow old or die, as if we'll always be healthy, active, and independent.

We are inclined to identify with our body and mind, defining ourselves by our appearance, profession, our possessions, social connections, even our thoughts. But when tragedy strikes, these habitual perceptions can destroy us: "I'm ugly, I'm redundant, I'm depressed, nobody loves me, I'm a traumatised person, I deserve better".

Dwelling in such negative perceptions, we are not able to stand like those oak trees along the boundary of the Amaravati meadow – patient through the long winter, weathering every storm that comes their way. In October they drop their leaves so gracefully. And in the spring they blossom again. For us, too, there are comings and goings, births and deaths – the seasons of our lives. When we are ready, and even if we are not ready, we will die. Even if we never fall sick a day in our lives, we still die – that's what bodies do.

When we talk about dying before we die, that does not mean that we commit suicide to avoid suffering. It means that we use this way of contemplation to understand our true nature. In meditation we can go deeply into

the mind to investigate who it is that we really are. Who dies? Because what dies is not who we are.

Death can be peaceful. A peaceful death is a gift, a blessing to the world; there is simply the return of the elements to the elements. If we have not realised this, it can be frightening and we might resist. But we can prepare ourselves to live consciously. Then when the time comes, we can die consciously – totally open – just like leaves fluttering down the way leaves do.

Chasing shadows – what is it that we are really looking for in life? We're searching for happiness, for a safe harbour, for peace. But where are we searching? We desperately try to protect ourselves by collecting more and more possessions, having bigger locks on the door, and installing alarm systems. We are constantly arming ourselves against each other, increasing the sense of separation with more wealth, more control, feeling more self-important with our college degrees and our PhD's.

In our culture of instant gratification, we expect more respect and demand immediate solutions. So we are always on the verge of being stressed or disappointed – if our computer seizes up, if we fail to get a promotion at work, or we don't find the perfect partner.

This is not to put down the material realm. We need material supports: food, clothing, and medicines. We need shelter, protection, and a place to rest. We also need warmth and friendship to make this journey. But because of

our attachment to things and our efforts to fill and fulfil ourselves through them, we find ourselves plagued by hunger and restlessness – because we are looking in the wrong place.

When someone suddenly falls ill, loses a limb, has a stroke, or faces imminent death, what do we do? Where is our refuge?

Before his enlightenment, when the Buddha was still Prince Siddhartha, he had everything. He had what most people run after while they push death to the edge of their lives and shove the knowledge of their own mortality to the farthest extreme of consciousness. He had a loving wife and a child. His father tried in vain to protect him from the ills of life, providing him with all the pleasures of the senses including a different palace for every season. But one day the prince rode out and saw what he had to see: the Four Heavenly Messengers.

The first messenger was an old man, weak and decrepit. What's so heavenly about a withered old man struggling along the roadside? He assumes the role of a divine messenger simply because suffering is our teacher. Through our own experience of suffering and our ability to contemplate it, we learn the First Noble Truth.

The second and third messengers were a sick person and a corpse riddled with maggots, ready to be fed to the flames of the funeral pyre. These heavenly messengers opened the eyes of the Buddha-to-be to the truth about life

and death. The fourth heavenly messenger, a monk, inspired him to renounce all the riches of his worldly life to discover the Truth within himself.

Many people want to climb Mount Everest. But actually, there is a Himalaya here within each of us. I climb this Himalaya to reach the pinnacle of human understanding by realising my own true nature. Everything on the material plane – the fame, success, pleasure, and happiness that we avidly seek – pales in comparison with this potential transformation of consciousness.

So that's where these four celestial signs pointed the heroic prince. They set him on his journey. And they can do the same for us. These messengers can direct us to the Way of Truth and release us from the shroud of ignorance, selfishness, and sorrow. However distant we are from our pain, our fear, our sense of loss – that is the distance we are from our true nature.

Our minds create that chasm. What will take us across to discover who we really are? How can we touch the centre of our being with pure awareness and wise insight? To realise pure love itself – that sublime peace which neither grasps nor rejects anything – we must be able to hold every sorrow and pain in one compassionate embrace and endure. And as we come closer to that truth, we learn the difference between pain and suffering.

What is grief really? It's only natural that when someone dear to us dies, we grieve. We have memories of times

spent together. And we've depended on each other for many things – comfort, intimacy, support, and friendship. So we feel loss.

When my mother was dying, her breath laboured and the bodily fluids already beginning to putrefy, she suddenly awoke from a deep coma. Her eyes met mine with full recognition. From the depths of Alzheimer's Disease that had prevented her from knowing me for the last ten years, in that moment she became fully conscious, smiling with an unearthly, resplendent joy. A light fell upon both of us. And then in the next instant she was gone.

Where was the illness that had kidnapped her for so many years? As I watched her in the moment of her dying, I glimpsed the emptiness of form. She was not her body. There was no Alzheimer's and 'she' was not dying. There was just impermanence to be realised, and my witness to the falling away and dissolution of the elements returning to their source.

Through knowing the transcendent and recognising that we are not our body, we come to the realisation that we are ever-changing. We touch our very essence – that which is deathless. We learn to rest in pure awareness so that in our personal life journeys and relationships with each other, wisdom becomes our refuge.

That doesn't mean that we don't love or that we don't grieve for those we love. It means that we're not dependent on our relationships with our parents, partners, children,

or close friends for our well-being. We no longer believe that our happiness depends on their love for us or on having them near. Though we may suffer when we lose them, we learn to surrender to the rhythm of life and death, to the natural law – the *Dhamma* of birth, ageing, sickness, and death.

When Marpa, the great Tibetan meditation master and teacher of Milarepa, lost his son he wept bitterly. A disciple asked: "Master, why are you weeping? You teach us that death is an illusion." And Marpa said: "Death is an illusion. And the death of a child is an even greater illusion."

Marpa showed him that – while he understood the truth about the conditioned nature of everything and the emptiness of forms – he could still grieve. He could completely surrender to that loss and weep unabashedly.

There is nothing incongruous about feeling our feelings, touching our pain and, at the same time, understanding the truth of the way things are. Pain is pain; grief is grief; loss is loss – we can accept them. Suffering is what we add when we resist.

Today, while I was reading the names of my grandparents who were murdered during World War II together with my aunts, uncles, and their children, their naked bodies thrown into giant pits, I was suddenly overwhelmed with a grief that I had not been conscious of. Unable to breathe, I felt a choking pressure. As the tears ran down my cheeks, I continued to bring awareness to the physical experience

while breathing into this painful memory and allowing it to be. I'm not a failure for having felt these emotions. They are not a punishment but an intrinsic part of my human journey.

The difference between pain and suffering is the difference between freedom and bondage. If we cannot be with our pain, how can we hope to accept, investigate it, and heal? And if it's not okay to grieve, be angry, feel frightened or lonely, how will we ever feel what we are feeling or hold it in our hearts and find our peace with it? When we run from life, we are further enslaved because where we cling is where we suffer. But when we open to pain, our suffering dies. That's the death we need to die.

Through ignorance and not understanding who we are, we create prisons. We are unable to awaken, to love the people closest to us or even ourselves. If we can't bare our hearts to our deepest wounds, if we can't cross the abyss the mind has created through lack of wisdom, how can we know love or realise our true potential? We can never finish the business of this life.

When we take responsibility for what we feel, and for what we say and do, we lay the foundation for the path to freedom. We know the good result that wholesome action brings for ourselves and for others. When we speak or act in an unkind way, are dishonest, critical, or resentful, we are the ones who suffer. Somewhere within us remains a residue of that posture of the mind, that crippled attitude of the heart.

In order to become whole, we have to approach that brokenness to see it clearly. We have to be honest about every imperfection, to acknowledge and fully accept our humanity, our desires, and our limitations with compassion. We have to nurture the intention not to harm anyone, including ourselves, by our actions, speech, or even our thoughts. Then, if we do, we must try to forgive ourselves, and start again. We understand karma: how important it is to live heedfully and walk the path of compassion and wisdom from moment to moment – not just when we are on retreat.

Meditation does not take place only in formal situations. It is to be practised at all times so that we can experience complete peace with all conditions. As long as we're holding one negative thing in our hearts – towards ourselves or anyone else – we cannot be free.

So how can we truly take responsibility for our actions? By engaging in this very process of reflecting on our choices – guided by moral conscientiousness and knowing that our virtuous conduct supports our practice. The momentum of our mindfulness, wisdom, and trust, and the purity of the mind's energy keep us going.

Contemplating things that we don't feel good about can bring a cloud over our consciousness. In fact, this is wholesome because it means that we are experiencing a sense of moral shame and moral fear, *hiri-ottappa*. Once we admit that we've done something unskillful and feel

compunction, moral fear becomes the seed of our ethical recovery. And our pure intention and resolve not to harm further propel us towards goodness and harmony.

This process unfolds through understanding that greed conditions more greed, and hatred conditions more hatred – whereas loving-kindness is the cause and condition for compassion, well-being, and unity. Knowing this, one would think that we would be dedicated to living more skilful lives. But are we willing to acknowledge our poor choice, limitation, or weakness? Can we forgive – and begin again?

Once, when the Buddha was giving a teaching, he held up a flower. And the Venerable Mahākassapa, one of his great devotees, smiled. What did he see in the flower? The ever-changing essence of conditioned forms. In the flower we can see the nature of beauty and decay. We see its 'suchness'. And we see the emptiness of experience. All teachings are contained in that flower: the teachings on suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering. And if we bring these teachings to life in each moment of awareness, it's as if the Buddha is holding up that flower for us.

Why are we so afraid of death? Because we have not understood the law of nature and the truth of non-suffering. If there is birth, there is death. If there is the unborn, then there is that which is deathless: the Undying, Uncreated, Love, the Supreme, the Magnificent, *Nibbāna*.

When we are in pain, we burn. But with mindfulness we can use that pain to burn through to the ending of pain. This is not negative. It is sublime – a moment of freedom from suffering born of intuitive insight – not because we have rid ourselves of pain or hold only to what is pleasant. We may still feel pain, but we accept it just as we learn to accept illness or death. We are no longer afraid or shaken by them.

If we are able to come face to face with our direst fears and frailties, we can step into the unknown with courage and openness and penetrate the mystery of this life with authenticity. Touching what we fear the most, we transform it. We see the emptiness of it. In that emptiness, all things can abide, all things come to fruition. In such a moment of penetrating insight, we can free ourselves.

Nibbāna is not 'out there' in the future. We have to let go of the future and let go of the past. This does not mean we discard our duties or commitments. We have jobs and daily schedules to keep and families to take care of. So in each thing that you do, pay close attention. Open to and allow life to come towards you instead of pushing it away. Not bound by mental and emotional habits, see things the way they really are. Let this moment be all that you have.

Each candle on the shrine gives light. One little candle from this shrine can light so many other candles without itself being spent. When we are not defeated by tragedy nor by our suffering, we shine. If, with grace, we accept the

fiercest emotion or unspeakable loss – death itself – we can free ourselves. And in that release, there is a radiance. We are like lights in the world, and our life becomes a blessing for everyone.

Rumi wrote: "The most secure place to hide a treasure of gold is in some desolate, unnoticed place. Why would anyone hide treasure in plain sight?" And so it is said: "Joy is hidden in sorrow." Did Marpa's tears invalidate his wisdom? Or are they the expression of a humble man who both feels the natural grief of a father while making peace with the inherent impermanence of every conditioned thing?

I encourage each one of you to keep investigating. Keep letting go your fear. Remember that fear of death is the same as fear of life. What are we afraid of? When we deeply feel and, at the same time, truly know that experience, we come to joy. It is still possible to live fully as a human being, completely accepting our pain. We can grieve and still rejoice at the way things are.



Come from the
Shadows

Come from the Shadows

“The poison of ignorance is spread through desire, passion and ill-will. One who abandons the arrow of craving and expels the poison of ignorance is one rightly intent on Nibbāna.”

MAJJHIMA NIKĀYA, 105

What do we hope to achieve by protesting against war and injustice? Can we ever think of fighting the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion ‘out there’ when they are so much inside of us? We need not wait until we are perfectly at peace with ourselves before we join in vigils or rallies and march for peace in the world: they are not mutually exclusive. Still, it is vital

that we find ways to disarm ourselves in order to live more peacefully.

Inner peace depends on harmlessness in daily life, integrating a set of ethical principles that guide all our actions and speech – even when we think no one is watching or listening. We are responsible for any pain that we cause intentionally.

Sharpening moral vigilance, we nurture the interior work of a spiritual disciple and focus on issues that give insight into our emotional states. What are we struggling with? Are we still holding onto old grudges and resentments?

Being unaware of our destructive emotions does not render them any less harmful. It is exactly when we care for the mind and learn how to calm the forces disturbing us that we can ever hope for peace. These blessings will then permeate our relationships and the ways we respond to life.

Inner turmoil and negativity are by-products of our reactions to the worldly assaults on our six senses. Pierced by the arrow of craving and poisoned by ignorance, we stand defenceless against *Mara's* band of rogues that tempt us and crowd our thoughts in their many guises. Beguiled and believing in their promises, we fall in line.

Our chronic clinging to and grasping after the delights of the material world – thinking they will make us happy – perpetuate lifetimes of conditioning. Whenever we are stressed or overtaken by anxiety, bitterness, loneliness,

grief, or guilt, we automatically look for an escape through some form of gratification: we reach for the remote control, grab a snack, or call someone so that we can talk – and hear ourselves.

We may think that we are in charge but all the while, balancing on the precipice of expectation, we either rush towards what we want or away from what we hope to avoid. We dread waking up. And behind a facade of contentment, we keep frenetically busy. Then how will we find time to stop?

More to the point, do we really want to stop? No, because then we may have to deal with what is difficult and painful. For this whirlwind of activity numbs us to what is real. We're not shifting around just to find a comfortable posture or the right set of conditions, but as long as we keep moving, nothing will touch us, neither anger nor grief nor the phantom gnawing of a subconscious angst.

Preferring to ignore our suffering and remain oblivious to its cause, we apply snake oil and become addicted to the latest therapies, new-age gimmicks, pills, even retreats, in futile attempts to gain perfect health and mental composure. These are fine to some degree. But even meditation techniques – wrongly applied – are little more than placebos that temporarily relieve without ministering to the illness itself.

Intuitively, we realise that if we carry on in this way, we are just like robots. We may be busy rushing from one

'important' activity to another, but as long as we are not present in our bodies and minds, consciously aware of what we are experiencing, can we authentically connect to what we feel?

Those of us who become estranged from our innermost feelings fool ourselves into believing that we are detached when all we have done is learn to cope. And the more unskilful the ways of coping we adopt, the worse our condition becomes – until the mind gives up, or wakes up.

From the marrow of our own pain and stress – disappointment or anger at ourselves or our friends, loved ones, colleagues, our jobs, our bodies, our lives – an intensifying cry of urgency, *saṃvega*, betrays our desperation. This may be the first glimmering of waking up to our vulnerability and the immanent danger we are in.

Such awareness marks the transition to healing with the gift of intuitive insight that flourishes in the mind's stillness. It is sometimes revealed when we stroll quietly in a park and feel a sense of joy and calm. Unexpectedly, the emotional tumult and endless thoughts that spin us around on the ferris wheel of *saṃsāra* – the desires, craving and restlessness, the opinions we have about ourselves and others – fall silent.

For a moment, we are not thinking. The incessant chatter of the mind stops and we are left listening to the sounds of the world or witnessing the tremulous light of

dawn with clarity and wonder. How long since we could hear or see so mindfully is a telling indicator of how fragmented we've been.

But now our involvement with thoughts and memories, whether cherished or regrettable, dissolves. In these times of pure being, the vast space of consciousness suddenly opens and we enter the silence of the heart.

It is a silence that protects the mind's seclusion, *citta-viveka*. We see, hear, feel, and know the world with curiosity, unsullied attention and amazement – the way a mother might tenderly gaze at her newborn child or a devotee approach Kuan Yin, Mother of Compassion, to light the flame on her shrine.

Unconditional love cares for the moment. And so we sit with the interior candle and give ourselves to it. All the resources that we need, all the ingredients for illumination are already there – the wax, the wick, and the match; mindfulness and discernment, our immediate impression of life, and clear perception of it in consciousness.

Their coming together in the right way will ignite the flame of wisdom – if we can be patient and forgiving enough to let each moment unfold independently. There is no 'one' to interfere with, manage, dress, or filter our experience according to what we want. Inside the temple of the heart, we rest in the pure untainted energy of enlightenment that is our natural inheritance. Learning to take refuge

in it, we no longer fall prey to the vagaries of worldly attachment.

Even as we experience this harmonious quality of the mind, discomfort and disquiet are already propelling us towards the dazzling delights and excitements of the world and away from what is true. But we are not to be snared so easily this time. We have been trapped long enough in *saṃsāra*, poisoned by ignorance, not feeling nor daring to see what we really need to feel and see.

Now we take up our spiritual scalpel to excise the poisoned arrow, making good use of incisive mindfulness and its trusted allies – measured effort, faith, and courage. True disciples of the moment, we meditate through the seasons of the heart and feel our ‘stuff’ with acceptance and compassion rather than judgment. We drop our old views of who and what we are, cast in the shadow of our thoughts and attachments to an illusory ‘self’ – the architect of our suffering.

The hooligans of the mind appear harmless enough on the surface. But now, familiar with their tricks, we know we have to face them down and sweep them out. This may seem a daunting prospect, but how else will we free ourselves from their grip? Once given shelter, however tenuous, they proliferate undetected. Anxiety breeds anxiety, greed provokes greed.

They deceive and rob us of present-moment awareness no matter what we’re doing, especially since we are

prone to act from unguarded impulse and seek distraction. Their sole mission is to prise us away from direct knowledge of Truth through an endless range of panaceas and 'needs' that have to be met immediately – trawling the malls, surfing the net, or simply having a cup of tea.

Come back, just come back. Be present while drinking that 'cuppa' and begin a new moment. Observe the mind's restless thrashing – forever toppling us into the past and spilling us into the future. By stopping and returning to this moment, we create the right conditions to examine and feel our distress or rage with honest openness and understanding. That's the balm we need for our festering wound.

So we tenderly approach our fear, despair, joy or excitement. And, as they subside, we can truly be with ourselves. We shed layers of distorted perception to witness the instability and inherent emptiness of everything of this world. All the memories and projections, fantasies and moods, judgments and obsessions that once overwhelmed us and our habitual reactions to them – craving or resisting – now appear as relentless currents of impermanent phenomena arising and ceasing. At last, we taste the peace of pure knowing.

But even while we savour that moment, it is already fading and disappointment lurks on the horizon. What must we do if we are not to be caught again? Beware of the blaming or guilt-laden thoughts in the mind, the aimless

conjecture, or negativity. They will never free us for they are the bars of our self-made prison that keep us from the source of a lasting wisdom and happiness.

Evict those hooligans – not with hostility or impatience but firmly. Let them all go without wanting or demanding that they be other than they are. As we free ourselves from the spectre of their charade, they collapse and no longer influence how we feel or what we do. We are able to enter the unexplored caverns of the heart. But that can be unsettling. We would rather die in the ruins of our fear than brave the refining fire of Truth.

When I left the monastery to practise on my own, I foolishly thought that I would be able to overcome every conceivable obstacle. Resolved to live according to my Rule even after giving up the protection of established community, I naively trusted that faith in the Triple Gem and my practice alone would sustain me.

In effect, I walked away from a guarantee of my basic requisites. And though my faith and resolve remained intact, I was a stranger to the dimensions of anxiety this would produce. Just as when I was first inspired to leave lay life and become a nun, I could not gauge the height of the mountain I had set out to scale nor the sacrifice that would be required at every stage.

It's not as if we ordain and renounce and that's the end of it. Every day is a letting go that we can scarcely imagine or predict before its time. Once outside the

monastery gates, I was confronted with a helplessness and insecurity I had not encountered before – not knowing where I would live or how I would be fed.

The unremitting stress to survive without an assured system of support whittled away my confidence. It was no good wanting things to be different. The only way through was to sit with and face the situation, encourage myself, and discard the debris of the mind's tantrums day by day.

Viktor Frankl wrote, "What is to give light must endure burning." We want to give light but we're afraid to suffer, not realising that our very freedom lies in penetrating to the middle of that suffering – and knowing its nature. But the poison arrow doesn't simply vanish, nor does the wound heal by marvelling at it, "O what a grievous injury, what a spectacular wound!"

We can't light the candle of discernment on the altar of life until we burn through to clear insight of the way things are. Rather than spend our energy in denial, resisting change, or getting lost in self-doubt and pity – unwilling to trust or accept what is real – we must care for ourselves and tend to our *dukkha*. Letting faith cradle the heart, we can grow silent and strong enough to hold pain of impossible depth – and remain unshaken.

Our commitment to this spiritual excavation delivers us from the poison arrow. But we have to be both diligent and thorough, probing every facet of our experience and shining the light of *Dhamma* on all areas of our life. Our

goals, lifestyle, fundamental values, profession, and even friendships come under scrutiny.

With the help of these insights, we move towards restoring ourselves to wholeness – reconciling with a family member or making amends for harm we have caused. Above all, we bring about life-altering changes that will align us with core values which we resolve not to compromise. The outcome is never sure but if we strive for Truth and come from the shadows, we will not live in darkness.

What we do know from the cramped tightness held in the heart is how much armour we are carrying. It is not the armour of forbearance but an impenetrable shield that we have used to fend off hurts too terrible to deal with or remember.

Unconsciously, this defendedness feeds an inner violence – a fire of annihilation rather than illumination. But we have discovered the way to safety, exchanging the intoxications and exotic distractions of worldly life for a simple, humble diet of clear pure presence and patient endurance.

As long as we are selfish and complacent, our life is cheapened and we continue to circle in the realms of existence, slaves to ignorance, cowardice, and mediocrity. But lighting the candle of discernment, we reveal the heart's natural radiance, and are no longer ransomed to the desires and neurotic thoughts that prey on us.

The fruit of our practice is just this: an invisible ripening and a gradual unfurling as we wake up and rub the dust of lifetimes from our eyes. Even when it seems as if nothing is happening – stay with it. Live in joy and ease, free from fear, free from danger.

Following the way of the Buddhas, walk out of the ghetto of illusion and take refuge in wisdom. Know the diamond purity of the heart – neither through showmanship nor asceticism – but in silent witness to, and awareness of, eternal Truth – in the flame of no flame, in the cooling of the last ember.

This is right refuge, this is freedom.



Gone Forth,
Going Beyond

Gone Forth, Going Beyond

My name, '*medhā*' and '*ānanda*', translated from the Pāli, means 'penetrating wisdom and bliss', hence, 'the bliss of wisdom'. Since I am still aspiring to that, I think of it as 'love of wisdom'. And when I am not wise, I wish to be patient until my eyes open.

I have been weaving the fabric of my life with strands of peace, knowing it is possible to rise to the highest in myself. I have to work – to remember every day how much I want that balance and clarity so that I can release myself from the shackles of the wanting mind and 'go beyond'.

When I lay aside blame and discontent – not lash out against anyone – I know and taste the freedom of forgiveness. In times of loss, despair, upset, and injury, I have to rein

in the mind but also give it enough space and time to heal – instead of sulking or feeling sorry for myself. I can only bring peace to others when I overcome the mighty obstacles accumulating over lifetimes.

I don't live in a war zone nor am I under immediate threat from terrorism or disaster. The danger I find myself in stems from being human, vulnerable to the moraine of sorrow, disease, pain, and loss and stumbling through it as I make my way out of darkness back to joy. In those times, something inside me cries out to understand what it is that discolours my sense of the moment and prevents me from finding a clear way through.

The way through is not by shutting down, or giving in to destructive emotions but by recognising that there is no problem outside of me. Instead of wrestling with mental anguish, I recycle it, filter and purify it, and turn it on its head as I tease out the truth. I change the way I see – how I hold the world, and myself in it.

Much of the strength I gather comes from trusting deeply that one day I will bring the low and high tides of my heart into balance and so resonate with the exquisiteness of all things. I do not wait for that. But I sustain my faith in it – and thereby in myself – knowing that I will gradually excavate and reveal all the gems of this passage with the spade of my endeavour and earnestness. For now, I learn to settle into my dwelling space in the care of my supporters and the benevolence that works through them.

I try not to have many needs. But just to look after this body, to live as a human being in this world, so many things arise: medicines, batteries, toiletries, robes, shrine candles, electronic things – a computer! I live on the kindness of others. I write and study and meditate and when friends gather we share *Dhamma*.

One blustery morning, my bowl took me into the village on *piṇḍapāt* to receive a hot meal – ahh! real *dāna*. Even if I return with nothing, I still feel the gratitude of a daughter of the Buddha. And then a second offering comes as I walk back along the road to my hermitage chanting the *Dhammacakkavattana Sutta* quietly to myself. An elderly lady waits on the sidewalk some distance away. As I approach, she cheerfully adds an apple to the hot noodles already in my bowl.

How wonderful an apple can be given in this way, spontaneously connecting two strangers through the goodness which sustains me. But it's never sure. Sometimes there is lack; often there is overflow, enough for the real suburban beggars that abound – birds and local strays.

Uncertainty generates a working faith I've never known before. It's a space where whatever kindness trickles in feeds me mysteriously on other levels too, with stamina, confidence, courage, and gratitude.

I still have to survive bouts of anxiety and feelings of isolation when the mind begs not for a meal, but for the

company of another *samaṇa* – to give encouragement and to hear and hold the rantings that well up. For that I have had to rely on the sea and a night full of stars to help clear out the rabble of 'oghas'. In the aftermath of such communion, there is joy. It refreshes and renews me so I can keep going.

Today is gift and blessing. I am an unpolished mirror trying to reflect perfectly that glorious pure presence to the world. I want no lies or deception from myself or anyone. Spiritual friendship is a channelling of Truth, an intimate dialogue with the Friend inside me. Into that clear mirror I cast no shadow and can come close enough to see through my delusions with humour and hope.

It has been important to shine that light of *Dhamma* especially when things look bleak, to turn away from malice and open to an authentic unconditional love through humility. If I am unable to accept conditions as they are, how shall I develop true insight, how shall I be wise?

The strength of heart I need for this Path will emerge from constantly giving up selfishness, devoting myself to Truth, and rekindling a love for it in others. I know my patterns, and am grateful to be reminded how wilful and stubborn I can be, how I hang on to control, thinking I had already let it go through years of renunciation. An honest eye to that knows there's yet rubbish to sweep out: brightening the mind so that the mirror is clear – that's the clarity I want.

In meditation, I spin silence and celebration together the way I learnt to at the feet of my first teacher. Alone as hermit, I am never really alone. I sit here and chant and listen to the morning, growing in Light and Fearlessness to fulfil his legacy in this worldly form.

I sometimes wonder why I delayed for so many years to take up the call to 'Go Forth'. There is a thread of simplicity that runs through my life. What may appear ascetic is for me an emulation of him: shaven-headed, eating little, and devotion to the Path. In that spiritual oasis, I discover diversity and beauty, suffering and sweetness.

I am a renegade, choosing the solitary way to be closer to the heartbeat and suffering of ordinary folk. I recognise the dangers and have tasted hardship but I endure, and pray for strength to continue this way without diluting my practice.

Patience is all things on the spiritual path. Sometimes I feel I have been here for many lives. Time stops and the world slips away in the raging winds and native birdcall. A wilderness of trees hugs the coast and draws me skyward. This is sanctuary.

I have no wish to go anywhere and yet, already, the sad edge of going will come too soon. I sense a deep restfulness. No mask to wear nor any barriers to defend. I am alone and yet protected, and all my energy is free to flow towards the still point where Knowing and Being coalesce.

Perhaps the hardest thing continues to be the factor of one, having to rely on myself to weather discouragement or weariness, pain or weakness. As I get older, they will only increase. But my greatest foes are consistently the wanting mind and its coterie of expectations, phobias, judgments, assumptions, and the turbulence they stir up.

While in the monastery, I dreamt of a solitary life. Now to live that dream as a *Sangha* of one, a new truth dawns. I see exactly how suffering is born – wherever I am and whatever conditions surround me. Faith makes it possible to stay in the middle. For me it has to be faith in myself. To trust that it is okay to give boundaries to people no matter how much I depend on them. And to trust their goodness as I would my own. I become so afraid of making a mistake, of hurting someone.

Sometimes a *Dhamma* warrior, sometimes a shell tossed helplessly ashore and crushed in the sand, even in the darkest moments I continue to reflect upon and taste the sublime refuge of this Path. And it seems my life is a river of gratitude emptying from one breath to the next.

In a world choked with tragic events, I found myself living near villagers who fled the tsunami and lost everything. Long after the truth of *anicca* burst into their lives, goodwill poured in – and then they were forgotten. How can I seal myself once more inside the monastic cloister when suffering comes so glaringly close?

We do not know what laws are at work here. These pains we endure may purify some dark karma to release us from them forever. In the very depths of pain, a greater strength of spirit is born, more than courage, more than patience, more than ordinary love – one that makes us resilient. Maybe that's the hidden blessing of this *dukkha* – as of all *dukkha* – if we allow ourselves to be changed by it and surrender to it even when that feels impossible.

Bounteous sun melding with monsoon puddles. So it is with the fear and stress in our hearts. It's good to be heard and also to hear oneself. To listen and ponder wisely. This is friendship with the lovely, within and with each other.

Our losses and deaths can be terrifying and beautiful at the same time, and our dying does not make us any less for the truth of it. Because of what we see, the way we see, and what we are unable to see, we are tormented. Otherwise, death might be just one magical out-breath, or a long breathing in of all light and darkness and the dance of seasons in between.

I wish all weariness to fall away and leave us restored, especially when facing what is hard. Often I turn the beads of this theme in my heart. Chanting for the health, happiness, and peace of all beings, I grow wide-minded and serene. All will be well.

We are giant trees stretched up into the Infinite. If we could only know pure Reality, would we not rejoice and

respect the beginnings and the endings and all the moments in between exactly as they are, just as we love winter or spring – each for its own beauty?

It is a tranquil morning beside the straits that lead to the sea – apart from a few waves tossing themselves home on a stretch of beach cramped between concrete towers, and a pair of starlings assiduously building their nest above my window. What a privilege to be a human being in such fortuitous conditions rather than an orphaned cat scavenging for scraps. Though the internal quiet of the heart comes belatedly sometimes, knowing that it is possible is constant refuge.

As long as I lead my mind back to gratitude and contentment for the simple joys of life, for the four requisites, for good health and noble friendship, wanting nothing more, there is a chance to dispel the inner suffering. That in itself is a training, naturally unfolding over a lifetime of sacrifice, purification, and loving-kindness towards all as to oneself.

In looking after others, I care for the jewel within – that is most important. I remind myself to relax from the stress of life and lean towards too much rather than too little compassion.

I hope I can be strong enough, wise enough, to protect others as myself – before the storm and after the storm – for we are each of that same essence, that same fragrance infusing every flower. The confusion and chaos of the world out there reverberate within us too. And yet we

have the choice to be as radiant and loving as the sea that holds the sky on its bosom, like a mother. Whether we are in robes or not, the heart's fragrance is the robe we wear.

Solitude reveals where I am with myself and with the world, and bestows authentic refuge. I see how I am caught and work to free myself, taking time to recover and making peace with the conditions I face. The old habit of seeking external approval or security is not liberating but it's easy to fall into that trap. I use all my mindfulness and awareness to slash through its tenacious fetters again and again – confident in what I know to be true from the core of my being.

I'm forced to try harder to discipline myself. Neither be arrogant nor veer towards the extreme of self-neglect. Just be in this body as it cries out, not shut my ears to it even when that is painful. Today I must accomplish nothing more than enter the stillness in myself enough to lead others to it.

Though I may be an outsider looking in, physically remote from my monastic siblings and – in keeping my Rule – also separate from the lives of householders, at the same time I am in their midst. Living on the same streets, watching my neighbours wave their children off to school, or hearing their comings and goings, I share the minutiae of their world. This vantage only enhances my sense of connection and kinship with them all.

Yet I remain apart. But to live just for myself, that's not enough. Am I only to be fed? Sometimes I don't want to eat

any more, just eating what others think is good though I may not be able to digest. The hardest renunciation of all is being helpless because of this choicelessness. I feel resistant to it. Ultimately, aren't we all helpless? It is fantasy to think we are anything but powerless to escape the inexorable rhythm of birth, suffering, and death.

How much we are reduced to the present moment in old age – to the body's immediate needs and what we can know or connect to today. I once believed it would be better to start old and grow into youth. Though heartbreaking, I realise now that it cannot be any other way, for nature is wise. In the end, we are compelled to focus on the present moment and let go everything of the world.

I refuse to put much store in what is said about the future or worry about what does not and may never exist. This is wasted energy. I don't dwell there so as not to miss the present – what I can truly know – at the same time not to exaggerate what I can do.

I have no great work except to be with, and receptive to, what is arising in each moment. How difficult that is! Listening to these inner murmurings, gently and diligently I distil all goodness in the heart, expelling every trace of hostility. To what end? So that no harm might come to anyone. So that I plant no karmic seeds.

For peace to work through me, I stop so that I can feel what I am feeling. Am I disgruntled, critical, defensive, or appeasing? Why? Am I not whole enough yet, not fully integrated? We are so tangled and torn inside.

Slowly I sort through the debris of my life, not to shut the door on any part of me – however wretched it may seem. Otherwise something in me dies, and if it doesn't die, it festers. Someday, somehow, it leaks out and infects my interactions with others, bringing harm in its wake.

I choose not to go this way but to reel in my irritation and recognise the good in myself and others, not to let unkind chatter deafen me to that goodness. I can choose kind words, chant, and forgive.

People ask me what I do, how I serve? If I live with mindfulness and kindness, I serve. Wherever we are in life, the small moments and simple acts of generosity to family, friends, ourselves – all beings – are service. Then our life becomes one seamless blessing.

In the world there are different kinds of servants – those who attract attention to their service and those who quietly look after others. They care nothing for limelight, praise, or reward. To live the Buddha's teachings, I move toward this quality of selflessness, doing what I do pureheartedly.

The sky has turned crimson and black. Bulbul calls echo deliriously for miles. A sheer fresh wind demands its space and propels its timeless breath through my window. This beauty asks nothing of me while endowing me with unquantifiable peace. I touch it but for a moment and am spared the wraiths of the mind.

More than the small comforts of my days: cups of coffee, walks by the sea, and intoxicating views of the hills, it is attachment and fear – and lifetimes of habit – that deflect me from resting in the unassailable quiet of the heart. I bridge that distance with letting go what I believe I must have, emptying myself to sit and bask in the luminous presence of this moment.

Stopping is compassion. Sometimes I long just to be with others and not have to be wise for them. When I ponder more deeply, I see that these impulses are not 'mine'. They are the baggage we need to shed: the angst and the craving for human contact, the insufficiency within, the tantrums and tears.

For the present moment to be true and nurturing, I cannot honour it with my mind churning or spilling over. I have to be equanimous and impart equanimity instead of being fearful and imparting fear; to be a wave that yearns for the shore where it can stop and rest forever.

Clambering over the rocks of my wayfaring, I learn to be vulnerable and trust, to make a bouquet of forgiveness and acceptance for all that arises in my heart. Compassion unlocks the gate of my refuge. I become complete – not because I have given up wanting but because I am content not to want or have.

I can be empty and feel full in the same moment. Alone with myself, the world is with me.

Glossary

<i>Adhiṭṭhāna</i>	determination, iron-will, unshakeable resolve
<i>Ānanda</i>	joy, bliss, delight; name of the Buddha's attendant
<i>Anicca</i>	inconstant, impermanent, all things being transient have the nature to arise and cease; one of three essential marks of existence
<i>Añjali</i>	Buddhist gesture of respect, pressing both palms and all fingers together and raising them to the head
<i>Ayyā</i>	Venerable lady, honorific for a <i>Theravāda</i> nun
<i>Bhikkhu</i>	a fully-ordained Buddhist monk living on alms according to a strict moral code (the <i>Vinaya</i>)
<i>Bodhisattva</i>	in <i>Mahāyāna</i> Buddhism, one dedicated to attaining <i>Nibbāna</i> who works first to save all sentient beings
<i>Cittaviveka</i>	the mind of non-attachment, mental seclusion
<i>Dāna</i>	cultivating generosity; freely giving alms food or any of the four requisites to the <i>Saṅgha</i> with no expectation of repayment
<i>Dhamma</i>	qualities of mind developed to realise our true nature and the Truth of the way things are; inherent principles or natural laws; the Buddha's teachings which perfectly describe them; the second Refuge

<i>Dhammacakka-pavattana Sutta</i>	the Buddha's first sermon after his enlightenment; verses on Turning the Wheel of <i>Dhamma</i>
<i>Dhamma-Vinaya</i>	doctrine of the Buddha's teachings (<i>Dhamma</i>) and its moral code of discipline (<i>Vinaya</i>); epithet for the Buddha's teachings
<i>Dukkha</i>	suffering, affliction, stress, pain
<i>Four requisites</i>	of the <i>Saṅgha</i> : food, robes (clothing), shelter, and medicines
<i>Gone Forth</i>	being ordained as a monk or nun, one has gone forth from the home life into homelessness
<i>Going Beyond</i>	from the <i>Mahāyāna</i> Heart Sutra, "Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond, O what an awakening!"
<i>Hiri-ottappa</i>	a sense of moral shame and fear of wrongdoing; conscience and concern
<i>Kuan Yin</i>	venerated in the East as the <i>Bodhisattva</i> of Compassion, known to Westerners as the Goddess of Mercy
<i>Mahāyāna</i>	the 'Great Vehicle'; Buddhism practised in China, Korea, Tibet, and Japan, believes in the Buddha as eternal, immutable, and omnipresent, and in quasi-divine <i>Bodhisattvas</i> devoted to ultimate knowledge and saving all sentient beings
<i>Māra</i>	malevolent deity personifying evil; 'Tempter' bent on distracting us from, and obstructing, our spiritual practice

<i>Medhā</i>	penetrating wisdom, sharp discernment of mind
<i>Nibbāna</i>	extinguishing greed, hatred, and delusion; the Unconditioned, supreme happiness and peace of liberation from all suffering; the final goal of the Buddha's teaching
<i>Ogha</i>	one of four mental floods or impure outflows: sensuality, views or opinions, becoming or craving for existence, and ignorance
<i>Pāli</i>	liturgical language of the <i>Theravāda</i> Buddhist scriptures
<i>Piṇḍapāt</i>	colloquial form of <i>piṇḍapāta</i> ; alms round – a Buddhist monastic receiving food offerings in the alms bowl
<i>Samaṇa</i>	a contemplative, an earnest recluse or ascetic striving for religious perfection
<i>Saṃsāra</i>	the round of rebirths sustained by craving and ignorance
<i>Samṃvega</i>	religious fervour or sense of urgency to practise
<i>Saṅgha</i>	the order of Buddhist monks and nuns; the Buddha's followers, lay and monastic, who have attained the highest stages of awakened realization; the Third Refuge
<i>Sārāṇīya dhammā</i>	factors conducive to amiability; qualities of reconciliation
<i>Sayadaw</i>	Burmese, lit. venerable teacher, honorific for a meditation master, elder or senior monk of a monastery

<i>Sīla</i>	Virtue, moral behaviour
<i>Sukhi hotu, averā... abhāya-pajā hotu</i>	traditional blessing chant: "May you be happy, may you be free from ill-will, may you be free from fear"
<i>Theravāda</i>	oldest surviving school of Buddhism, the 'Way of the Elders'
<i>Tudong</i>	Thai word for <i>dhūtanga</i> ; traditionally, forest monks' ascetic practice dating back to the Buddha's time, to wander and live at the foot of trees; lit., 13 austerities meant to purify mental defilements
<i>Vicāra</i>	sustained thought, examination of the meditation object
<i>Vinaya</i>	the Buddhist monastic code of discipline; driving out defilement
<i>Vitakka</i>	directed thought, initial application of attention to the meditation object

Abbreviations

- MN *Majjhima Nikāya*
The Collection of Middle Length Discourses
- SN *Samyutta Nikāya*
The Collection of Kindred Sayings



A Sati Sārāṅīya Publication

Sati Sārāṅīya means wise reflection and reconciliation
May these be the guiding principles of our life

We do not know what laws are at work here. These pains we endure may purify some dark karma to release us from them forever. In the very depths of pain, a greater strength of spirit is born, more than courage, more than patience, more than ordinary love ~ one that makes us resilient.

Maybe that's the hidden blessing of this *dukkha* as of all *dukkha* if we allow ourselves to be changed by it and surrender to it even when that feels impossible.

– Ayyā Medhānandī



