

JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF THE LOTUS

Unlearning “Buddhist” Meditation



AJAHN BRAHM

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Ajahn Brahm

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Three Questions: Taken from the collection ‘*What Men Live By, and Other Tales*’
by Leo Tolstoy, as translated by Louise Maude and Aylmer Maude.

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Find more information on Ajahn Brahm at bswa.org

Watch a video about the monastery where Ajahn Brahm resides
[at youtu.be/GOL5RTd-WDk](https://youtu.be/GOL5RTd-WDk)

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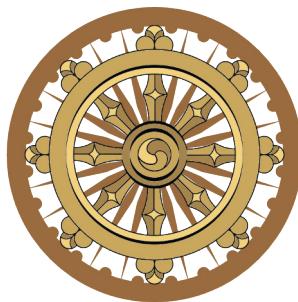
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*The gift of the Dhamma excels all gifts;
the taste of the Dhamma excels all tastes;
delight in the Dhamma excels all delights.
The eradication of craving overcomes all suffering.*

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*“The Buddha taught the eightfold path
because you need all eight parts.
There is no shortcut. Every part is important.
This means you can’t get enlightened just by being mindful.
You need to keep precepts,
you need to have Right View,
and you also need jhāna, the eighth factor of the path.”*

AJAHN BRAHM

Ajahn Brahm is a beloved spiritual teacher who has inspired millions of people on several continents. While his infectiously happy smile brings warmth and joy, even to people in distress, his teachings shed light on how to find the path to the ultimate happiness.

One of Ajahn Brahm's great visions is to create a place for lay people to practise meditation. The first one is Jhana Grove in Serpentine, south of Perth, Western Australia.

Journey to the Heart of the Lotus is inspired by and based on the talks given by Ajahn Brahm during the 2023 Easter retreat at Jhana Grove and is an easy-to-follow step-by-step guide to meditation and beyond.



Jhana Grove has seen a great number of retreatants enjoying Ajahn Brahm's teachings, discovering the happiness of meditation and leaving the retreat with a heart inspired, a mind more settled in peace, and a straightforward guide to walking the path as laid out by the Buddha.

This book has been lovingly compiled and organised by the Wisdom & Wonders Book Project team with Ajahn Brahm's permission to celebrate the 50th anniversary of his ordination as a monk. Any errors are ours, and ours alone. We sincerely welcome all feedback to improve the book.



*You yourselves must do the work,
the Realised Ones just show the way.*

DHAMMAPADA
[DHP 276](#)



GET SET

*Difficult it is to gain a human birth;
Difficult is the life of mortals;
Difficult is the chance to hear the true Dhamma;
Difficult is the arising of Buddhas.*

DHAMMAPADA
DHP 182

A TASTE OF HAPPINESS

I first practised meditation over fifty years ago. I still remember the place. It was in the Wordsworth Room of King's College in Cambridge.

The meditation was only about ten minutes long, but I still remember the amazing feeling that I experienced the first time I closed my eyes and followed the instructions. I really loved being able to relax and become happy, calm and peaceful without anything to stimulate me. Having experienced that, I became addicted to meditation straight away.

Not every meditation session will be peaceful, but many will. I've said many times that pleasure and delight in meditation is an important part of what meditation is and how it develops. In meditation you learn to get happier and happier.

People often ask me what to do to get good meditation.

The answer is simple—NOTHING.



HERE IS A GLASS OF WATER.

*How do I keep this water perfectly still?
No matter how hard I try, it keeps moving!
Maybe I need to be more mindful?*



Many of you have been meditating like this for years, and you think you can't do it. But there is an easy way to keep this water perfectly still for as long as you want. It's very simple.

PUT THE GLASS DOWN.

Let the mind become peaceful by itself.

This is called:

'Right Effort'.



By understanding that *the goal of meditation is stillness*, we can learn how to meditate and cultivate calm and happiness in the mind. A still mind is a joyful mind.

LEAVE IT ALONE

We are chronic doers. Our mind is often agitated, always moving around, always thinking of this and that. It's very hard for us to leave things alone, especially when we're watching something.

It's almost like we're a back-seat driver. Even though the person driving the car may be a good driver and know which way to go, we may find ourselves saying, "Go left... that's much better... Put your foot down, I'm in a rush!"

Can you just watch what's going on without interfering? It's very hard to do that. Instead, we tend to get involved. We think we're helping, but we're actually disturbing the ride.

In meditation, we should just let go and leave things be. We let the mind become peaceful all by itself. The less you do, the more peaceful you are. From this peace, energy and joy will naturally arise in the mind.

During my final examinations as a theoretical physics student at Cambridge, I had to do a three-hour paper in the morning and a three-hour paper in the afternoon, six days in a row. After the morning session, instead of taking lunch, I would walk back to my room, sit on a cushion, meditate for half an hour, and then walk back to the hall for the afternoon exam.

The first thing that came into my mind when I sat down to meditate was thinking about how I had done in the morning exam. It was illogical because however I did, I couldn't change it; the paper had already been submitted.

So I tried to let go of the past, but as soon as I let go of the past, the next thing which came into my mind was the thing on which my future would depend: the afternoon exam in half an hour!

I thought I should get up and do some last-minute revision and not waste time meditating, but I knew that what was important was to prepare my mind and body for the afternoon exam. Not by working but by resting. So I let go of concerns about the future.

What came next surprised me.

When I stopped thinking of the past and the future and became aware of my body, I noticed that my body was shaking. I never considered myself a nervous person, but because I'd only been thinking about the exams, I hadn't been aware of my body. That awareness gave me feedback on what to do, and it was then very simple to calm down my body and relax. Soon I became still and peaceful.

The next thing which I noticed in that space between the exams was how tired my mind was. But when I stayed in the present, my mind gained a huge amount of energy, and once that happened, I found my mind became clear and recharged.

With a spring in my step, I walked into the afternoon exam with a big grin on my face. Later, my classmates told me I was the only student who was smiling as I came into the exam room. They all thought I was cheating!

This experience told me not just how to succeed in life but also how to find joy and energise myself.

Letting go works.

THE EMPEROR'S THREE QUESTIONS

My job as a teacher is to make you trust the process so that you don't keep interfering with it.

In the beginning of the meditation, you just sit down, get your body nice and comfortable, establish enough mindfulness by watching what's going on without interfering, and see what's happening right now. That's enough to begin.

If you want more instructions, you can do the emperor's three question meditation, which simplifies the path of meditation beautifully. It comes from a story by Leo Tolstoy, called the Emperor's Three Questions.¹ In this story, an emperor thought that he would not know

1. See page 128 for the full text.

failure in anything if he knew the answers to the important three questions. I've reworded the questions a little. Here they are:

When is the most important time?

Who is the most important person?

What is the most important thing to do?

When is the most important time? The most important time is always right now. It is the only time you really have and the only time you can do anything. Your future is being made from the quality of your attention in the present, so if you care about your future, put your attention in the present.

Who is the most important person? When I read this story as a student, I always thought the most important person would be some big shots, like the pope or the Buddha. That wasn't the right answer at all. Then, I thought, "Ah... it's me!" I thought I should look after myself! Both these answers are wrong. The right answer is very powerful, and it has changed much of the way I look at life. The most important person is whoever is right in front of me.

What is the most important thing to do? The answer is: to care. If you come and talk to me, I'll give you my full attention. That way we can actually communicate. When we care, we're being mindful and compassionate.

Those are the emperor's three questions. So, what's that got to do with meditation? Well, when you sit down for meditation, close your eyes and ask yourself:

When is the most important time?

Now.

What's the most important thing?

It's what's in front of you right now. Your mind.

What's the most important thing to do?

To care for it.

Open the door of your heart to this moment, no matter what it is. Then you'll find that your mind can't wander around, and there's no way you can be restless. If you care for this moment, the mind will open up to you. As your mindfulness increases in strength, you'll see that striving isn't necessary. You can see much more, and your experience becomes so joyful.



READY, STEADY, STOP!

*Respect and humility,
contentment and gratitude,
and timely listening to the Dhamma:
this is the highest blessing.*

MAÑGALASUTTA
SNP 2.4:9.1–9.4

WITH A LAUGH AND A SMILE

It's useful to have humour in our spiritual life.

What does laughter do to you? It gives you energy, relaxes your body, and it's excellent for your respiratory system, but most of all it takes away the seriousness which people have about their spiritual practice.

Laughter actually helps and supports our meditation. People who are overly serious might appear composed, but that's only on the outside. Controlling and holding things tight, they never get into deep meditation.

During my first year as a schoolteacher at a grammar school, I had to give a spiritual teaching to hundreds of children at a morning assembly for five mornings straight. I went to the principal and asked if I could teach meditation to the children, and he said yes.

I told the students that we were going to do a bit of meditation for five minutes. I asked them to sit cross-legged on the floor, with their back straight and their right hand over their left hand, and then close their eyes. I just guided them through some breath meditation, and they all went for it. The most amazing thing was that not a single child giggled or complained. Once I finished, they erupted in applause, with laughter and big smiles on their faces! Somehow, I'd touched something in their hearts.

Many years later, a gentleman came up to me and asked if I remembered him. He said that he was one of the children that I'd taught meditation to years ago. It changed his life.

If you keep things strict, people get stressed out. They get tight in the body and tense in the mind. I find people get more work done when they're happy and in a good mood. If a person is motivated, the quality and the quantity of their work increases.

The same principle applies in meditation. Even though you really want to meditate, if you do it without happy thoughts or feelings, you'll find your meditation doesn't get deep at all.

DON'T FIGHT THE DEMONS

One of the important questions which people often ask me is: “My mind is always wandering around all over the place. What should I do?”

When I was a young meditator, I was taught to ‘just bring it back’. However, after four or five years of doing that, nothing worked! So I started asking: “Why does the mind wander off?”

The answer is: the way we treat our mind makes it wander!

When I was about thirty years old, I was in the north of Thailand in a beautiful monastery. I was all by myself, with nothing to do, and after a while my mind became very restless, and the restlessness soon started turning into sexual thoughts. I was embarrassed and ashamed of these thoughts, and so I’d tell myself, “Come on, go back to your breathing,” but the harder I tried, the stronger those fantasies became. It was driving me crazy. I was living there by myself with no one to talk to, and I wouldn’t tell the lay people what I was experiencing for fear they’d chase me out!

So, what did I do? I went to the Buddha statue, and in desperation, I bowed three times and asked for help. An inspiration came: “I’ll make a deal!” The deal was that from three to four p.m. each day, I would allow my mind to think of anything it wanted. All I asked for in return was that for the rest of the day, I’d be left in peace. That felt like a fair deal to me.

What happened really blew me away, and it taught me a lot about how the mind works.

The next day I found my mind was still battling with lustful thoughts throughout the day. Three p.m. was approaching, so I went to my hut, leant against the wall, and said to my mind, “OK, now is the time. Think anything you like!”

Do you know what happened? For the next hour I was aware of every single breath without missing one!

That taught me that when I was fighting those demons, I made them stronger. When I let go, the breath was there, waiting for me.

The purpose of the first part of meditation is for us to be able to stay with the breath for a while. And how do we achieve that?

Make friends with your breath.

Imagine I said to you, “You’d better watch your breath, or you’ll be in big trouble!” You’d either get tense, scared or rebellious because I was being a control freak.

No one likes a control freak. Our mind wanders off because we haven’t got a good relationship with our mind. We say: “Right, mind! We’re just watching the breath. Nothing else!”

If somebody treated you like that, you’d want to run away, but when you have a good attitude towards your mind and are kind to it, the mind could feel almost... excited! “Yeah! We’re meditating again! Let’s go for it.”

Now is the only time you’ll ever have in this world. The most important meditation object is what you’re experiencing right in this moment, so be kind to it.

DON’T TRY TO BE PERFECT

The body can be tricky at the start of meditation because we may have aches and pains in the body, but I find that if I’m sending kindness to it, the body soon relaxes. After five or ten minutes, my body is like... ‘Wow, there’s no ache or pain anywhere.’ If we let the body be, the body will balance itself out.

Sometimes you may feel hot spots in your body. People sometimes come to me in meditation interviews and ask what those hot spots are. When that happens, I always smile and say, “Well done.”

When Ajahn Chah² was growing up as a monk, there was a lot of malaria in the jungle, and he would often get sick from it. When his body was weak, Ajahn Chah would come down with a fever. One time in his meditation, he decided to direct his mind to go inside the body to

2. Ajahn Chah was Ajahn Brahm’s teacher.

where he felt was the hottest, where the fever was raging. Even though the forest around him was cool, he felt like his body was sitting in the middle of a forest fire. Interestingly, where he was sitting in the middle of this rampant fire, in a calm place of awareness, it was very cool. He allowed the heat he felt enveloping him to get so hot that eventually it erupted and exploded.

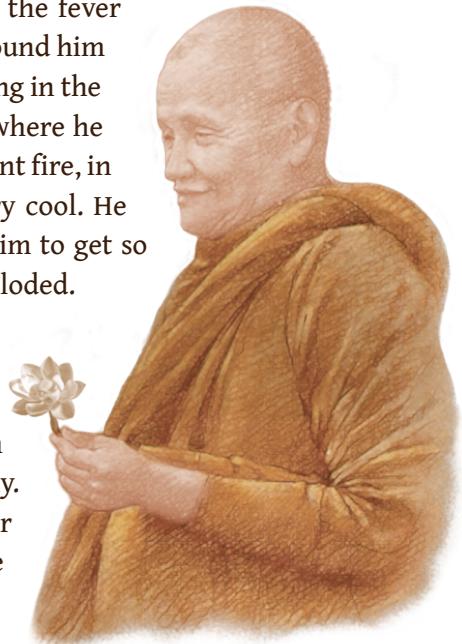
Bang!

That was the end of his fever. After that, he never got malaria again. That's the kind of thing which could happen if we use our mind wisely.

You could have an incipient cancer in your body. If you're relaxing the body and just letting it be, the energy of the body would be allowed to go to that spot and might be able to heal it. If we just leave things alone, the body could get healed by itself. After all these years of practising, I've got incredible faith in the body's ability to heal itself. We just need to get out of the way and let it happen.

I remember when I first started meditating, sometimes my body would slump, and then it straightened up. I knew I'd done nothing. I never told my body to straighten up; it did it all by itself. I love those experiences when you're perfectly mindful and the body just straightens up all by itself. It made me start to trust my body. My body knew exactly what to do, and I could just leave it alone and just watch it happen, almost as if it weren't my body.

You don't have to keep fixing your body, just leave it alone and let it settle in. Once it starts to settle in, even that much is joyful. Your body will be at ease, which is an important part of meditation, no matter what kind of meditation you're doing.



THE SOFT ROCK

When I was a young monk in a small town in the north-east of Thailand, I suffered from sloth and torpor. I would fight and struggle with it, but after five or ten minutes, I tended to fall asleep.

When I went to Bangkok to renew my visa, I stayed at a temple which had an air-conditioned room. It was like going to heaven! At Ajahn Chah's monastery, we had to get up at three in the morning, but when we were in Bangkok, we got up at four. Having that extra hour of sleep made me more energised and more awake. With an air-conditioned room to meditate in during the early morning before the alms round, I had no problem at all with my meditation; sloth and torpor just weren't there. It was a physical problem, that's all. Once you have physical comfort, it's much easier to be mindful.

Another time when I went to visit our monastery in the UK for the first time, I felt very tired, and I thought it was just the change of climate. But one of the monks said, "No, I've been watching you. You're not eating enough rice." Such a simple solution to something I thought was complicated. I was tired simply because I wasn't putting enough food into my body.

A lot of times if you're kind to your body, then the body and mind will cooperate with you. If you try and force it or criticise it, your body will throw a tantrum. Do you know what those tantrums are? They're all the thoughts and plans that you have when you're trying to meditate! When you relax and the body co-operates, there's nothing to do. It's really peaceful.

Imagine you go for a long walk in the mountains. After walking a long time, you're tired and need to sit down for a rest. When you look around, all you can find is a rock to sit on. It's bumpy and lumpy and really cold, but you decide to sit down on it anyway. The rock is uncomfortable and drains all the heat from your bottom. However, the longer you sit, the warmer it becomes! And then the rock starts to feel smooth and comfortable as if it had changed into a soft upholstered sofa.

That's how it feels when you start meditating: like sitting on a cold rock, but if you're patient and kind, the experience transforms into something soft and comfortable.

FREEDOM

In every forest I've ever been in, I've never seen one tree which is perfect. They're all bent, crooked, and damaged; they may be burnt with limbs falling off. This is just like us. If we're damaged, it means we belong. It also means we're some of the most beautiful people, just like the most twisted trees in the forest will have the most beautiful character.

Some people want to improve their mind. Please never try to improve your mind. If you try to do that, it always gets worse. Instead, be kind to your mind.

If you care for your mind, your mind brightens up, and the two of you can stay happily with each other for a long time. You'll find that the longer you and your mind stay with each other, the more peaceful, clearer and happier the mind becomes.

I don't know who your favourite friend is. Mine is my mind. Wherever I go, I take my mind with me. We're kind to each other, so we have a good time.

I never want to improve my mind. It's one of the big mistakes in spiritual practice: to want to improve, to become wiser or happier. You'll find that setting such goals gives you more tension. Instead, please just be happy where you are.

There's an old simile relevant to this teaching: a prison simile.

Are you in prison here at Jhana Grove prison camp?³ You've got to get up at a certain time. You've only got a small room to stay in. What happens if you don't like the food? Can you get a pizza delivered? Yet

3. Jhana Grove is the name of the Meditation Centre.

you know how hard it is to get a booking and how much you want to stay here.

A few kilometres down the road from this meditation centre is Karnet Prison Farm. It doesn't matter how great the choices of food are on the menu over in the prison, or how much softer their beds are, or even how much more entertainment is provided than what we have here. Even though it seems much more enjoyable in a prison, everybody in prison wants to leave.

So, what is a prison, and what is freedom?

What's the difference?

The difference is that a prison is any place you don't want to be, whilst freedom is any place you're happy to stay. No matter whether it's a monastery or a retreat centre, real freedom in your life is when you're happy to be where you are.

As you're reading this, is there nature close by? Perhaps a beautiful tree or a moonlit sky? All those things are amazing when you have time to enjoy them. If there is, please go out and find a flower or a leaf and look at it—there's so much beauty in nature. After you do that, sit down, close your eyes, and start to watch your breath.

If you haven't realised this already, ever since you were born, you've never breathed in two identical breaths. Every breath is original. Also, there is always space when the in-breath is finished, and the out-breath is yet to begin. Once you are mindful enough to start noticing those things, you'll start to see the beauty of every breath you take... It's magical.

TRUST YOUR BREATH

You don't know when your body is going to start breathing in or out again, but it will. You pause and wait, doing nothing; you wait for the body to do the breathing.

My breath has never let me down in over seventy years now, so I trust it. It can breathe in fast if it wants to, or slow if it wants to, and my body will carry on breathing, so I trust it.

With this trust, you can just watch the breath, knowing each breath is completely unique. You feel so free doing something as simple as watching just one in-breath or one out-breath. Then, the breath starts to appear beautiful, even gorgeous. You're happy to watch it, without wanting anything in the whole world. If the meditation's working, go for it and enjoy it to the max because sometimes that happens.

There was a retreat in Sydney some years ago. A Vietnamese monk was teaching it. As part of the schedule the group was to sit for half an hour of meditation before the evening talk at eight. Eight o'clock came, and the retreatants were waiting for the monk to ring the bell to signal the end of the sit and the beginning of the talk. Minutes went ticking by, but he never rang the bell; he just kept his eyes closed and kept on meditating. Over the next few hours, one by one, the retreatants started filing out of the hall and went back to their rooms to sleep.

When they came back in the morning, they saw the monk still sitting in meditation. That monk went on for the next seven days without moving. He didn't go to the toilet, eat food, or drink any water. The retreatants would check on him day and night, but he never moved.

Now, that's what you call meditation!

When he eventually came out of meditation the retreat was almost over. He apologised and said that when he sat down the first day, he meant to meditate just before giving a talk, but he went into *samādhi*.⁴ The retreatants said that he didn't need to apologise at all, as seeing him sitting there was so inspiring that it was better than any talk, and it made them understand that these states are possible.

Would you like that to happen to you?

If you want it to happen, it never will.

4. *Samādhi* means stillness of mind.

When you want something, you're always tense. The space between where you are and where you want to be is a state of suffering. So, if you're happy to be here—where you are is where you want to be, you'll feel free and peaceful. If you're striving, if you set any goals, I guarantee that you'll be disappointed. Even if you reach one goal, there's always another one, and another, and another... It's endless. Instead of going for goals, go for contentment.

Ajahn Chah used to say, “Searching for peace is like looking for a tortoise with a moustache. You can imagine it, but you'll never find it. Instead, stop looking, and the tortoise will come to you. Peace comes into your heart.”

That's how it works.

Many years ago, when I was still a lay meditator, I was talking with one of my meditator friends. He asked me how my meditation was going, and I said I wasn't really getting anywhere. “Are you sure you're not getting anywhere?” he asked.

At the end of every meditation, before he opened his eyes, he said he'd ask himself questions like:

Does my body feel more relaxed?

Am I more kind?

Am I more peaceful?

He may not have experienced a *nimitta*⁵ or *samādhi*, but he was certainly more peaceful, calm and relaxed. “The progress is slow. You have to look for it; otherwise, you can't see the progress you're making,” he told me.

If you really look, you can find that something good has happened to your body and mind.

That's a great way of starting meditation.

5. *Nimitta* is a mental perception before *jhāna*.



A WALK IN PEACE

*You get fit for travelling,
fit for striving in meditation...
And samādhi gained while walking lasts a long time.*

CAÑKAMASUTTA

AN 5.29



DON'T BE A ZOMBIE

You can do walking meditation anywhere you find quiet and solitude. Make sure you have a nice clear path. The length of the path is not so important.

In our forest tradition, we have walking meditation paths that are about twenty-five steps long, which is quite good as you can really get into the walking. If you're limited by space, you can make the path shorter, and it will still do nicely.

You just walk from the beginning of the path to the end, then you turn around and walk back again. That's how you do it!

Try to keep the mind quiet and peaceful. Keep your attention on your feet and your lower legs. Put your mindfulness on the movement of the legs, not on your breath because when you're focusing on breathing, you're not really noticing where you're going.

How to be mindful of your legs?

Try wiggling your toes now. Don't look; just wiggle them. Can you experience them? That's what we do when walking meditation; we experience the sensation of the path on our feet. So, if you can, take off your socks while you're doing walking meditation. It's also much more enjoyable as you can easily feel the sensation of your feet on the floor or the ground.

Now, lift one of your legs. Did you feel the sensations when lifting your leg? This is what you do when walking meditation. You start to experience many different movements when lifting your leg. As you're lifting the leg, does it go straight up? How does it move? I've noticed that when I lift my leg to do walking meditation, it goes back, and when I move it forward, it doesn't go straight, it moves in an arc.

Which part of your foot leaves the ground first? Which part leaves the ground last? What's the last part of the sole of your foot to lose contact with the ground when you're walking? When you step down, what part of the foot touches the ground first? These are simple bits of mindfulness, but they make the process of walking interesting.

You're becoming aware of something you've been doing for so many years, and now you're paying attention to it and feeling it.



Please note that you're not making these steps unnatural. You're simply being observant of the movement, mindful of it. After a while, you'll find that there's so much to experience in this movement of the legs. It's becoming more and more

fascinating. Then, your steps will slow down naturally. I say that they slow down naturally because you don't need to go slow deliberately; it happens by itself.

One time a group was using Jhana Grove. I was over in Bodhinyana Monastery, and some supporters asked me if they could go over to Jhana Grove and take a look at the retreat centre. I said they could. When they came back about twenty minutes later, their son, who was about ten or eleven years old, was really terrified. I asked him what happened, and he said, “Ajahn Brahm, there are zombies in the retreat centre!”

“Zombies?”

“Yeah, all the people there are walking really slowly!”

To this day, we call slow walking meditation ‘zombie meditation’. So, keep it natural and walk at a pace that's comfortable for you.

When one step is finished, you move your attention to the other leg, and you prepare to transfer the weight of your body from one leg to the other. This action frees the second leg and allows it to start moving up.

Now you observe. What part of the other foot leaves the ground first? What leaves it last? Is it the same with the left leg as with the right leg? How does it move upwards? How does it move forward? How does it move downwards?

At first, you may think this is boring: “I can walk. Why do I have to pay so much attention to it?” But when you start focusing attention on

simple things like this, the mindfulness starts to increase. Do you know what happens next? It becomes delightful!

It's part of the practice which I emphasise because I feel that many meditation teachers don't emphasise this enough. The joy, the happiness, and the interest in the simple act of walking.

When you realise you're at the end of the path, turn around—mindfully. This way, you become mindful of how you turn around. Once you've turned around facing the way you came, you walk slowly back again.

SAY NOTHING

If you can, keep your mind as silent as possible, just feeling the sensations in your legs without making any commentary about them. Seeing things for yourself is much closer to reality and much more enjoyable.

There's a cartoonist from Melbourne, Australia, called Michael Leunig. He's very smart and perceptive. One of his cartoons is just one image. On the right side of the image, there's a father and son watching a television which shows a beautiful sunrise on it. On the left side, there's an open window with an actual sunrise, which no one is watching! I've often said that descriptions are never as close to reality as the experience itself.

So when you're walking, don't say anything to yourself. The lovely thing about walking meditation is that in just one step, you can be totally satisfied. There's enough going on, so you don't really need to be distracted. After a while, you'll get absorbed, not through force, but through the feeling in your legs drawing you in. It's almost irresistible. This is when we really start



walking meditation. You can get very close to beautiful, deep meditation. Though it's not a jhāna yet, it feels amazing.

HEAR NOTHING

One day while I was a novice monk living in Bangkok, I was walking meditation in the main hall of the monastery. It took me half an hour to walk from one end of the hall to the other. I wasn't trying to walk slowly, it's just that when we get into walking meditation, there's too much going on to rush it.

I was getting very peaceful. It was delightful, just watching all the intricate feelings in my legs as I moved back and forth in the hall.

Then, I heard a sound. It was almost like a supernatural sound. My attention was taken away from the feelings in my legs to this weird sound. “What on earth is that?” I wondered. It was quite soft, and I could barely hear it. As I focused my attention on the sound, I realised it was a Thai monk shouting my name, “Brahmavamso! Brahmavamso!”⁶

I then remembered I was supposed to be at a meal offering in somebody's house. I hadn't turned up because I had lost track of time. The abbot had sent this young monk to fetch me, and even though it sounded like he was a hundred miles away, he was actually standing right next to me, shouting in my ear!

I knew I had to come out of meditation, but it took me a full minute to move my head around so that I could look at the monk. I was in this beautiful world all to myself. Everything was going so slowly. I was alert to my body, but my sense of hearing was basically turned off.

That's what it's like in walking meditation—you get into your own private world. When you're finished, you slowly walk to your seat. Then, you sit down for some nice quiet meditation. You're already halfway there as you're so aware, so still, and your mind is so peaceful.

6. Brahmavamso is Ajahn Brahm's full monastic name.

When you sit down, the breath is clear and delightful, and it's easy to go into a deep meditation.

WALK A LOT, SIT A LOT

Many of you feel stiff, or even have aches or pain after sitting for a long time without getting into a deep meditation. My advice is that if you want to build up a momentum of silence and stillness, then alternate between walking and sitting meditation.

One of the monks whom I really respect was a farmer in the north-east of Thailand. One day he was doing some business in the town of Sakhon Nakhon when Ajahn Mun's⁷ funeral was taking place. Out of interest, he walked into the proceedings and heard a monk giving a sermon: "If you want to get enlightened,⁸ you have to walk a lot and sit a lot." That's all he heard.

Since his children had grown up and his wife was happy to let him ordain, he became a monk. He didn't have any other teaching than this: "Walk a lot and sit a lot." So that's what he did.

When he got up in the morning, he went on alms round, got his one meal of the day, cleaned up, and then walked on his walking path. When he got tired, he sat right there on his walking path. When he came out of sitting meditation, he simply got up and carried on walking. Sometimes at night he would even sleep on his walking path. Being a simple villager, he was used to ascetic conditions, and so he didn't need blankets or a mattress. That's how he practised.

When I went to see him, he was a strong and powerful monk. Some monks believed he was fully enlightened.

7. Ajahn Mun was a famous Thai Buddhist meditation monk.

8. Enlightenment means freedom from suffering. *Nibbāna* in Pāli.

DON'T RUSH INTO CONTEMPLATION

Walking meditation can be beautiful and powerful, but please don't use walking meditation for contemplation. Some people do that, and it's a mistake. They're walking backwards and forwards and trying to contemplate the Four Noble Truths, or Dependent Origination, or some other deep Dhamma.⁹

There's a sutta¹⁰ called the 'Pānsudhovakasutta', or 'The Panner' ([AN 3.101](#)), which talks about the obstacles to getting enlightened. These include thoughts about family, reputation and so on. It then talks about a lingering obstacle that you have to get through to experience the *samādhi*, which will bring you to enlightenment. It's *dhammadvitakka* or thinking about the Dhamma! When I first mentioned that, some of the monks argued that this was what they were supposed to do: think about the Dhamma! I responded with: "Only at the right time."

Sometimes I've had an experience where my mind is so peaceful that I feel I could give the most brilliant Dhamma discourse, but then I realised this is a last ploy of Māra¹¹ to stop us becoming enlightened. Our mind hasn't fully given up the five hindrances yet, and so we're not seeing the true Dhamma.

What we're supposed to do is to get so still and peaceful that *jhāna* appears. When you come out of *jhāna*, when the five hindrances are gone for a long period of time, you don't even need to think about the Dhamma; the Dhamma just appears. That's the Dhamma which is the most valuable, which will create experiences of enlightenment.

The insight you think you have during contemplation while the hindrances are active is not real insight, so please don't contemplate Dhamma on the walking meditation path. Just keep being quiet and observe how still your mind can become. When your mind becomes still, go and sit down and get into deep meditation. Afterwards, your

9. The teaching of the Buddha is known as Dharma, which is spelt Dhamma in Pāli.

10. The Suttas are the Buddha's discourses.

11. Māra is the Evil One or the Tempter.

mind will be so strong that you'll realise the power of the teachings by the Buddha.

So that's walking meditation.



EVERY WAKING MOMENT

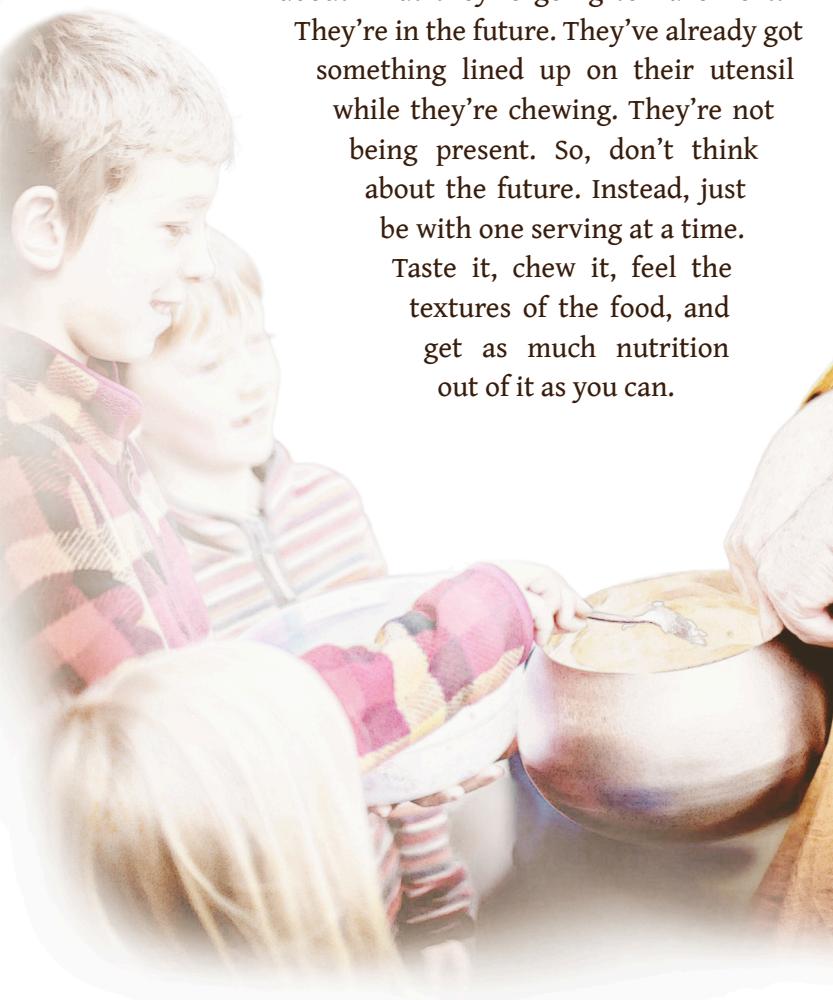
*We will act with full awareness
when going out and coming back...
when eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting...
when walking, standing, sitting, sleeping, waking,
speaking and keeping silent.*

MAHĀASSAPURASUTTA
MN 39:11.2

EATING MEDITATION

This chapter brings us to a few ways of meditating that are rarely mentioned.

The first one is eating meditation. When you're having your food, how do you eat? Many people, while chewing their food, look down at their bowl and think about what they're going to have next. They're in the future. They've already got something lined up on their utensil while they're chewing. They're not being present. So, don't think about the future. Instead, just be with one serving at a time. Taste it, chew it, feel the textures of the food, and get as much nutrition out of it as you can.



When you swallow, take a moment to experience the food going down your digestive tract. Only then should you put the next serving on your spoon.

Be in the moment. Don't rush. Take your time and enjoy eating. It's good to develop gratitude for the food that's on your plate. You can take a moment to acknowledge the generosity and kindness of the people who made it for you, or if you made it yourself, all the things that were necessary to be able to bring it to your plate. Dedicate the meal to your practice and know that the food that you're eating is helping nourish your body so that you can continue to practise the beautiful Dhamma of the Buddha and share that happiness with others.

Doing this means that you're not just doing walking and sitting meditation, you're also doing eating meditation.

LYING-DOWN MEDITATION

We've talked about sitting meditation, walking meditation, and eating meditation. How about lying-down meditation?

When some people get sick, they find it hard to sit or walk. Does that mean they can't meditate? Of course not! Lying-down meditation will probably be the last posture you ever meditate in. It's very suitable when you get old, sick or bedridden. That's one of the reasons it's useful to develop this meditation.

When you're lying down in meditation, the first thing is to never lie in the same position as you sleep in. I go to sleep lying on my left side, and sometimes on my right side with my hand underneath my head, but I never fall asleep on my back, so that is the position I reserve for my lying-down meditation. That means when I lie on my back, psychologically I'm telling my mind that I want to meditate.

When you've found your best lying position, make your body comfortable as best as you can. Then, you do body-scanning. It's a great

start as you can really relax to the max. After the body scan, you can start watching your breathing.

This posture is helpful because you don't get sore from it. It's a very comfortable posture for your body, which means you can have a nice, peaceful meditation.

When I was about twenty-four years old, I contracted scrub typhus and was the sickest I've ever been. It was over Christmas time, I was in the monks' ward in a very basic third-world hospital in Ubon Ratchathani in the early seventies, and there was only one nurse on duty.

When I first got admitted, they put a drip in my arm. The nurse was present during the day, but in the late afternoon, the nurse just disappeared. At six-thirty p.m. the replacement nurse hadn't shown up, so I asked the monk in the bed next to me where the night nurse was. He told me there was no night nurse. "What happens if somebody gets really sick?" I asked. "It's just unfortunate kamma,"¹² he replied.

That wasn't reassuring at all!

I had a fever for weeks and felt really weak. One day Ajahn Chah came to visit me. I was just a young monk, and this great hero monk had come to visit me! I felt so honoured. I was waiting for him to give me an inspiring talk or some nice *mettā*,¹³ but instead, he just said, "Brahmavarmso, you're either going to get better, or you're going to die." Then he left.

How can you argue with that piece of Dhamma?

I didn't get better and didn't know what to do, so I decided to meditate. There was no way in the world a person in my weak condition with a high fever and no energy could sit up to meditate. So, as I was lying there, I decided just to let go.

I'm not quite sure exactly what I did or what happened. Maybe it was based on the story of the *Emperor's Three Questions*. I may have asked myself:

12. Kamma is the Pāli spelling of karma and means deed. 'Unfortunate kamma' here was used to mean 'bad luck'.

13. *Mettā* is loving-kindness or friendliness.

What's the most important time?

Now.

What am I aware of right now?

A yucky fever, a body with no energy.

What's the most important thing to do?

To care for it.

And with that type of attitude, I soon got into an incredible, deep meditation. Imagine you're sick with a high fever and are aching all over, and now you're blissing out!

The first thing I noticed when I came out of that meditation was my posture. I know that many people say that we have to sit cross-legged with a straight back, and we've got to have our right palm on the left palm with the thumbs slightly touching to keep the energy connected, but if you're sick in hospital with a fever, your body is all over the place. That was the posture I found myself in. I've never seen such a posture in any book on meditation! But it worked for me. I could let go of my body.

So, if you're lying down in meditation, especially when you get to that time of your life when you're sick and dying, don't worry too much about where your legs or arms are as long as you're comfortable.

When you're sitting in meditation for an hour, your body can get a bit tight sometimes, but when you're lying down meditating, you'll be more comfortable and can become peaceful easily. This is because when you look after the health and comfort of your body, one big distraction has been taken away from you.

RELAX TO THE MAX

One way of developing mindfulness is simply by asking your body: "How are you, body?" When you ask such a question, you'll get an

honest answer. Don't ignore the answer. As soon as I ask the question, I become aware of my body and the best position for it.

Treating your body that way means that you are kind to your body, and then you can close your eyes and just be aware of things like your breath or whatever is on your mind. You'll then get some nice peaceful meditation.

This is how we do meditation: starting with awareness of our body. That's why the Buddha sometimes says that we've got to start off our meditation with *kāyagatāsati*, or mindfulness of the body. One of the reasons for doing so is to be able to relax the body. I call it 'relax to the max'.

I remember teaching mediation in Malaysia for the first time many years ago. I was told that the biggest problem people had when they were doing meditation at that time was a *samādhi* headache. *Samādhi* means peace and stillness, but your *samādhi* creates a headache?!

I found out what the problem was: they were focusing on the tip of their nose all the time. Try this: keep your eyes open and focus your attention on the tip of your nose.

I bet you went cross-eyed! People had their eyelids closed because they were meditating, and then they went cross-eyed underneath their eyelids and that tension caused a headache. I told them they didn't need to watch the tip of their nose, they just needed to be mindful of the breath.

These days I just tell people who haven't meditated before to close their eyes and count three breaths, and after the third breath, they can open their eyes. Anyone can do that with no problem at all. Then, I ask them how they knew the breath was going in or going out. They all say, "I just know." You know whether your breath is going in or going out without any need to focus on the tip of the nose or to locate it in your body. Just know it is going in or going out. That's all you need to know.

That is far more effective because the purpose of meditation is to be able to let go of our body. The body is very irritating. You don't have to be old to realise how irritating the body is. Even fit and healthy

young people get irritating bodies. It's so beautiful when you're not aware of the body at all. You're aware of the breathing, aware of other things, but not of the body.

Part of meditation is to let go of the external five senses. We're not seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, or touching anything. All the five senses are suppressed, they become silent, and then they disappear. It's beautiful when that happens. You feel free.



THE BEAUTIFUL BREATH

*Mindfulness of breathing,
when developed and cultivated in this way,
is very fruitful and beneficial.*

ĀNĀPĀNASSATISUTTA

MN 118:22.1

DON'T DISTURB THE NOISE

Many years ago, when I first started teaching at Bodhinyana,¹⁴ I got some advice from the boss at that time, Ajahn Jāgaro. One day he said to me, “Ajahn Brahm, you’re very good at teaching about *nimitta* and *jhāna*, but not many people can get there easily. Why don’t you focus more on the beginning part of meditation? How can we watch the breath with ease?”

I really took his advice on board.

As you know, I’m a bit rebellious, and I’ve always found rebellion to be important. I was encouraged to be rebellious when I was at university. When we are doing something like theoretical physics, we have to see things in a different way to get breakthroughs in science. So, when I started meditating and was given some good advice, I questioned it.

For instance, when the Buddha instructed his followers on *ānāpānassati*, or mindfulness of breathing, in the *Ānāpānassatisutta* ([MN 118:17.1](#)), he said to find a secluded, quiet place.

First of all, how many secluded, quiet places are there in the world? Even here at a meditation retreat, there’s always somebody telling silly jokes (me?) and people laughing their heads off, making a lot of noise, or somebody coughs, bangs a door, or something. The sound of the door banging finished hours ago, but we keep thinking about it and complaining about it. That’s called disturbing the noise.

It’s hard to find perfect silence anywhere, and when you’re in a town or city, it’s even harder to find a quiet place. So the first thing is to learn how to make the place quiet by not disturbing the noise. It’s one of the skills I learnt from Ajahn Chah that I’ve found very useful when meditating in a less-than-ideal environment.

A few years ago, the Burmese community here in Western Australia wanted to stage a peaceful protest against the government in

14. Bodhinyana Monastery is a Buddhist forest monastery in Western Australia. Home to Ajahn Brahm.

Myanmar at that time, and they invited me to join them. Because monks don't protest, I asked them what they wanted to do, and they said, "We're just going to sit in meditation opposite the Hay Street Mall in Perth."

I remembered that there was a Uniting Church outside the mall, and we could sit on the pavement just outside the church. That was allowable as a monk. So I agreed. Not because I was joining in any protest, but because I wanted to see if I could sit for a couple of hours on the hard concrete pavement with no cushion and with all the noise. It was like a test.

When I got there, I found it was noisier than I'd expected. Opposite the church was a video game store with music which was much louder than the traffic. To make the place quieter, I created an imaginary bubble around myself which didn't let any sound come through. You can try this yourself. It just takes a little bit of imagination.

So, I was inside this bubble. At first, I could hear the sounds, but I wasn't listening to them. Hearing a noise and listening to it are two different things. When you listen, you're trying to figure out what it means, and that engages your mind and disturbs the noise. But because the noise from that store as well as the traffic noise was fairly constant, it soon disappeared. That's how the bubble works. When you don't give importance to the noise, it vanishes.

This is how you can find a calm and peaceful spot to meditate in, anywhere in the world. It's possible to do so, and once you know it's possible, you don't need quiet all the time.



VANISHING SENSES

Even though you can meditate anywhere, at first it's easier to do *ānāpānassati* or breath meditation in a place where you've got little to disturb you. So first try to find a nice, secluded place.

The next thing is to sit up with your back straight. I took that seriously for a while and always tried to make my back straight, but how about people with back injuries? The last thing you want to do is to torture such people when they're meditating. The answer is just to sit in a posture which is comfortable for our body. The reason for this is that the overview of meditation is to calm your body down enough so that it disappears.

In meditation, when your body becomes still, the senses start to gradually fade away. When you close your eyes, you can't see anything, so the sense of seeing is gone. In the beginning the sense of hearing is active, but as you go deeper into the mind, sounds fade away also. You can't smell, or taste anything, and physical touch also starts to disappear. When your five physical senses disappear, the only sense left is the sixth sense: the mind.

Many people have all sorts of theories and philosophies about what the mind is, but in meditation, you come face to face with your own mind. Now you can understand what this mind of yours is, and that's important data from which you'll get insight. One of the interesting insights which you'll get when the five senses vanish and the sixth sense manifests is that it'll be the end of any fear of death.

What is death anyway? Death is when your five senses disappear. You can't see, hear, smell, taste, or touch. If a doctor comes to try and find out whether you're dead or not, what do they do? Simple things like shining a light in your eye. Or they speak to you, "Hello, are you alive?" Or they poke you. When you don't respond, they think you must be dead.

That's when the five senses vanish, and it's an important piece of information. So, if you see somebody in deep meditation and you can't

see them breathing or notice any activity, don't panic. The main difference between a person in deep meditation and a person who is dead is the warmth of the body. Your body is still warm when you're in a deep meditation.

MAKE MINDFULNESS MATTER

Let's come back to *ānāpānassati*. So, you go to a reasonably quiet place and sit down in a comfortable position because the last thing you want is for the sense of physical touch to keep bothering you with uncomfortable feelings. You can meditate and get into deep meditation with pain or even chronic pain, but it's much more difficult. Usually, it's easier with a comfortable body, with not many aches and pains. Comfortable without being sleepy. That's why sitting up straight is great if you can do it.

After we find a comfortable position, the Buddha says to establish mindfulness. Here in the *Ānāpānassatisutta*, we encounter the word *parimukha* in Pāli. Many people translate this word as 'in front of you'. But what exactly does 'in front of you' mean? In front of my nose? I've never identified with my nose. Where are we supposed to put our mindfulness? I don't think this is an accurate translation of the Buddha's words in this context.

'In front' here doesn't mean in front of a particular spot on your body. Rather, it means to put mindfulness in the front of your list of things to do or to give mindfulness priority at the beginning of meditation.

So, the phrase '*parimukham satim upatthapetvā*', as it occurs in the sutta, should mean 'having made mindfulness a priority'. To prioritise mindfulness, you apply any type of skilful means or technique to get mindfulness really strong. Otherwise, you won't be able to stay with the breath.

So, neither mindfulness of the breath nor mindfulness of anything in particular. Just mindfulness.

Make mindfulness strong, first and foremost.

BODY SCAN WITH KINDFULNESS

I remember there was a meditation teacher leading a retreat nearby and one of our monks went to attend his retreat. He was honest with our monk, telling him that he couldn't stay with the breath for long—his maximum was watching five breaths in a row and then his mind would wander off. His main issue was that he didn't create enough strength of mindfulness first to help make it easy to watch the breath.

So, how do we make mindfulness strong?

When I teach meditation, I usually encourage people to start with a sweeping meditation of the body. It's very helpful for building up mindfulness.

How are your toes feeling? How are your feet feeling? How are your ankles feeling? Do the body sweeping very slowly. Usually when I do a guided meditation, it takes at least twenty minutes just to go through the whole body.

The reason I start at the toes is that they're usually not a problem, so we can develop mindfulness and kindness easily. By the time we get to the upper part of the body where there are lots of aches and pains or even diseases, our mindfulness is already quite strong.

Sweep up your body and if you feel there's something not quite right, just know that there's something off there, but you don't have to give it an accurate description. Stay there with your mindfulness and add kindness, or what I like to call 'kindfulness'. You'll find that the body can relax, and some unpleasant sensations disappear.

Once I had a serious case of food poisoning. I was in my cave at the time, and I wondered if I should crawl out to the nearest phone to call an ambulance, but I decided to meditate instead, feeling the body and just being with it, not trying to escape. Whatever was in front of me was the most important object in the whole world, and at that time, it was the feeling in my tummy and the sound of me yelling, "Ahhhh!" I couldn't help it; the pain was intense.

Then I noticed that the intensity of the pain lessened as I added kindness to my mindfulness, making it ‘kindfulness’. The cramps in my tummy hurt less each time I sent kindness there. After half an hour, there was no pain or cramp at all. How does it work? I don’t know.

I had a sort of imagined explanation. Food poisoning is usually some bacteria multiplying in our tummy, wrecking the peace of the stomach. So while I was meditating, I imagined that all those bacteria with their little appendages sticking out of them were sitting cross-legged with the appendages one on top of the other, quietly meditating in my tummy. After a while, they stopped causing problems.

We’re not all health professionals, so we perhaps don’t have the language to describe the feelings we are experiencing in our bodies, but this is fine as we don’t need language here. All we need to do is to learn that our body is getting more at ease, and the kindness is getting stronger.

When you activate kindness, it makes your body feel good. This is very useful for meditation because during a body scan, your feelings of the body only exist in this moment. You’re not really concerned about the pain to come in the future or the feeling that happened a moment ago.

Body scanning centres you in the present moment.

Once you’ve done that basic kindness and strengthened it, it’s very easy to let go of the body.

I recall doing a lunchtime meditation session for executives in Singapore. I was surprised by the results. Some of those executives told me, “I was scared. I was sitting there, and then my hands disappeared!” It was just the feeling in their hands that disappeared. They were getting peaceful.

What disappears first from your body when you meditate? One of the strongest sensations I feel when I start meditating is the pressure of my buttocks on the cushion. That feeling disappears first because it doesn’t change, and after a while, I can’t feel it any more. You may have a little itch somewhere, but that can disappear very easily. After a

while, your body is comfortable. Then your body becomes still and then disappears.

What happens when the body disappears? You can't feel your head, you can't feel your arms, you can't feel your legs—your body is basically not there. But then there's one thing which is still moving: your breathing. It's the only thing left for you to watch.

LET THE BREATH COME TO YOU

You'll find that when the breath comes to you because everything else has disappeared, it is much more peaceful and easier to watch. The reason is that when you do anything, you tend to control it—it's just psychology. You can't just stand back and watch from a distance, even with our breathing! But your job during meditation is simply to watch the breath as a passenger, not as a driver nor as a backseat driver.

When the breath comes to you, it will be easy to watch. And it will be peaceful.

Breath is a fantastic meditation object. Give it importance. Respect it. Honour it. Your job is not to tell the breath what to do. Your job is to be a friend to it. I like the idea of being a friend with what you're watching. This will give it both importance and kindness. You love your friends. You love being with them. This means that the breath will stay with you much more than five breaths. And even if it does go, it will come back.

Let me give you a simile to show how being kind to your friend works really well.

In the dry season in Thailand, the villagers would always take their water buffaloes out to the fields to graze. When they took the water buffaloes past our monastery, the buffaloes would get spooked because a forest monastery was like a jungle which could house tigers. One owner of a water buffalo had a little string tied around the buffalo's neck to lead it to the fields. When his water buffalo got spooked, it lifted its head up. The farmer tried to hold the water buffalo

back as it ran off, so the string wound around the farmer's finger and pulled the top of his finger right off! He came to our monastery, and we took him to the hospital to get his finger bandaged.

Later, we felt grateful to him for the story. If he'd let go and hadn't tried to hold the water buffalo back, the water buffalo would only have run maybe twenty or thirty metres, and the farmer could have just walked after it, gently taken up the string and led it back to the fields. Then we wouldn't have had a great lesson on how to be with our mind during meditation.

When you're watching the breath, the mind sometimes wants to go off somewhere. So you say, "Off you go, dear." Later, you can walk after it and be with it again, or it will just come back to you. With friendship, it's easy.

BEAUTIFUL BREATH

Sometimes you can make the breath a little bit more interesting by observing whether it's a long breath or a short breath. But don't try to give it a specific label. Short, medium, or long—it doesn't really matter. It just means you have something more interesting to watch the breath with. If that doesn't work, you can use a mantra. In the Thai forest tradition, we use 'Buddho', referring to the Buddha. Breathing in, you say, "Bud," breathing out, "dho." For those of you who are Buddhists, the breath is what the Buddha watched. That's how the Buddha meditated. So, respect it and honour it. It's a fantastic meditation object.

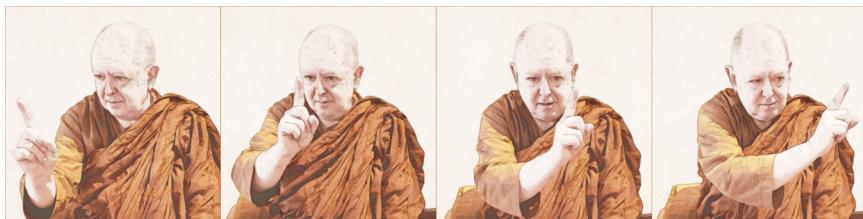
When I came here and tried to teach 'Buddho', the Australians didn't like it at all, as it didn't have the same meaning for them. I had to invent some more mantras with the breath, something more meaningful. The first one I told them was: "As you breathe in, say 'shut', and as you breathe out, say 'up'. 'Shut up!'" Laughter is good for meditation, remember?

These days I tell people to breathe in ‘peace’ and breathe out ‘happiness’, which is what you want in your mind. You can breathe out ‘sickness’ if you’ve got some illness. It’s always letting go of something. Letting go of anger. Letting go of wanting. Letting go of tiredness. But you don’t write a big essay with every breath. Keep it simple.

When you make the breath interesting, it’s easy to watch it, and after a while, once the breath is there, you don’t need to use those mantras to support your effort because it’s nice just to watch the breath. As you get calmer, it becomes more peaceful and easier to be with.

In the next stage of *ānāpānassati*, you can see the whole breath. This is where it starts to get interesting.

LOOK AT MY FINGER.



It’s moving slowly from left to right, and then right to left. I can notice every time the finger passes my eyes. The next stage of meditation is as if you saw the finger from the very beginning from the left, all the way to the right. You see a pause there, then the finger moves from the right all the way back to the left. You see the whole of the in-breath and the whole of the out-breath. You don’t miss any of it. This is natural. It just happens because you really start to focus in on the breath. When you focus in on it, naturally there’s nothing else disturbing you.

You start to notice evenness or constancy in the breath because you’re just focusing on the experience of breathing in this moment and there’s hardly any difference between the in-breath and the out-breath. It all becomes quite even.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga*¹⁵ compares this to sawing a piece of wood. First of all, you can see the handle of the saw as well as the teeth at the beginning and middle of the saw, but as you focus in more and more, you can only see the few saw teeth which are touching the wood. Likewise, all you can see is breath happening, but you don't know if it's an in-breath or an out-breath, beginning or end. You just see this particular part here, and that's important because once that happens, the physical breath starts to disappear.

Anything which is even or constant, such as background sounds, will disappear. You can't hear it any more. The feeling of your bottom against your seat—a moment ago you couldn't feel it, but now you can because I've just pointed it out to you. So the breath starts to disappear. When you reach this point, don't worry; it's supposed to happen. The breath is calming down.

When you do this properly and you are really with the breath, your mindfulness starts to become powerful and whatever you see after meditation becomes beautiful. Sometimes when you come out of meditation, you open your eyes and feel: "Wow, the room is so interesting with different colours and textures." Things become beautiful when the mind becomes simplified and strong. That's the nature of the beautiful mind.

BEAUTIFUL MIND

With a beautiful mind, you start to experience joy and happiness, or *pītisukha*.

Where does the feeling come from? At this stage, you're not feeling the breath with your body any more. The Buddha called this *cittasaṅkhāra*. *Cittasaṅkhāra* is coming from the *citta*, or the mind. It's what the mind adds to the breathing. The beauty and happiness is not inherent to the breath; it's what the mind adds on to it. It is *cittas-*

15. The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is known in English as the Path of Analytical Discernment.

anikhāra that you're seeing: the joy with the breath. And the breath becomes very delightful.

There's a monk whom many of you know: Ajahn Gunha. When he came to Perth, we asked him to give a talk about meditation because he's a really good meditator. The only thing he said was: "Breathe in... 'Sabai' Breathe out... 'Sabai'" 'Sabai' is a Thai word meaning comfort or ease. That's all the instruction he would ever give, but it's brilliant because *pītisukha*, or happiness and bliss with the breath, starts with comfort and ease.

So before you read on, take a pause for a moment, close your eyes, and breathe in the most beautiful, delicious, wonderful breath you've ever breathed in your whole life, then breathe out the most amazing breath you've ever breathed since you were born...

...Could you do that? Was it joyful? Okay, close your eyes, and do it for another three hours!

You finally get to this natural state of just watching yourself breathe, and it's simply wonderful. After you have experienced the whole *cittasankhāra*, you calm it down, and it becomes nice and peaceful.

What happens after you calm it down?

This is when you experience the *citta*, the mind. This is called *cittapatissamvēdi* in Pāli. But what does that mean? The joy at this stage is so strong that you get a direct perception of your own mind. This is when a *nimitta* appears. The *nimitta* is a beautiful and bright light. It's like looking at the sun, but you're not seeing it with your physical eye—you're seeing it with your mind. The *nimitta* generally appears as a light because sight is our dominant sense. We're perceiving the mind by the closest analogy in the five senses, and because the sense of seeing is often most dominant, it appears as light. It's not a light. It's just how we interpret it. That's one of the reasons why a *nimitta* can be as bright as you want. It won't make you blind, even though sometimes you feel it might!

If you've not given instructions early enough, you may think you can't carry on like this. You could feel afraid of going blind because the

nimitta is so strong and beautiful like the sun. But you're not seeing it with your eyeballs. It's with your mind.

The *nimitta* is right inside the delightful breath. The joy gets stronger and stronger, and then these beautiful lights or *nimittas* come to you.

When you experience a *nimitta*, you don't need to control it. You don't need to get excited. It's come because you're ready for it to come. Don't try to alter anything. Just be calm and stay with it peacefully.

A STILL FOREST POOL

This experience can be explained with the simile of the still forest pool. This is what Ajahn Chah told me personally. He said sometimes in the old days when monks wandered around to find quiet spots to meditate, called 'tudong' in Thailand, they would go to jungles. When travelling through jungles, they had to find a source of water in the late afternoon to fill up their water bottle, to have a wash, and to wash their robes. When they found one, they would set up their mosquito net, called a 'klod' in Thai, about ten metres away from the water's edge, and sit there all night.

Sometimes on a full-moon night, they could watch wildlife come out of the forest to drink and bathe. The nature of animals is to be wary, especially of humans. If they think there's a human being close by, they go back into the jungle and won't come out.

If you sit perfectly still, the animals won't be able to sense you, so they will come out to have a drink or bathe. Sometimes a whole family will come out with their cubs, playing in the water. Sitting still, you can see and enjoy all that. Sometimes, some incredibly rare, beautiful animals will come out to drink, bathe and play in your 'still forest pool' mind. Ajahn Chah said that these are *jhāna*.

You just have to be still. Don't react. Don't get excited. Don't be afraid. Just wait, and they'll come. It will be amazing.

This is the stage of *ānāpānassati* when you see your mind. You've reached what is called *sampasādana*. This means having confidence, so you don't need to do anything. It also means the *nimitta* will get stronger and stronger. If your *nimitta* is a light, the light gets stronger, and so does the joy and the bliss.

When you get to these stages, you don't have to worry about what you should be doing because the bliss is so strong and lovely. It's one of the best experiences you've ever had.

We now come to the last stage of *ānāpānassati* where we enter *jhāna*. It happens naturally.

I've spent most of this time on the beginning stages of meditation on purpose because once the beginning stages are in place, the later stages, like experiencing the beautiful breath and experiencing the breath through the mind or the *nimitta*, will just happen naturally.



THE LOTUS

*Suppose there was a blue water lily,
or a pink or white lotus.
Though it sprouted and grew in the water,
it would rise up above the water
and stand with no water clinging to it.*

PUPPHASUTTA
SN 22.94:8.1

ĀNĀLAYA

This is a good time to introduce one of my favourite similes. I call it the ‘thousand-petalled lotus’ simile. A lotus has always been a key symbol of Buddhism. There’s always a lotus somewhere in a Buddhist temple, and there are many wonderful similes of lotuses.

The simile of a lotus growing in the mud refers to the fact that we all grow in difficult situations. Life is never easy, and each one of us is often embroiled in difficult situations, which is the nature of human life. Good lotuses grow through them all. The mud, the difficulty or the suffering in life, is important as sustenance and fertilisers to drive us up out of the dirt and through the surface of the water towards the sunlight above.

Another lotus simile is very useful for the time when we’re affected by other people’s attitudes towards us. We can imagine or visualise being a lotus when people are criticising or even praising us, because when water falls on lotus petals, the water always drips off and leaves no residue. If somebody urinates on the lotus, the lotus doesn’t keep any of that—it all drips off, and it still smells beautiful. Likewise, if people pour perfume over a lotus, the perfume drips off, leaving no residue. In the end, the lotus always smells like a lotus.

Each one of you, no matter who you are, will receive a lot of criticism. Some of it is deserved, but most of it isn’t. Other people don’t really know who you are or what you do.

Do you know what Ajahn Chah said about criticism? In the north-east of Thailand, one of the worst things anyone can call you is a dog. Ajahn Chah used to tell the monks that if somebody called us a dog, we shouldn’t get upset. The first thing we should do was to look at our bottom to see if we had a tail. If we didn’t have a tail, then we weren’t a dog. End of problem. However, if we had a tail, then we should say: “Thank you for pointing that out to me.” In other words, you don’t need to have a negative reaction to criticism.

When anyone uses bad speech against us, we should act like the lotus and let all the bad words drip off. Even with the nice words you hear, let them drip off also. You may be in situations where people are cursing you or praising you. You can't stop it, but at least you can let it slide and walk away, allowing no residue to stick. You don't react. You're being a lotus.

This is actually one of the four ways of letting go which occurs in the suttas. It's called *anālaya*, or non-clinging—nothing sticks to you. Things happen in life. You may have a beautiful meditation or a terrible meditation. Neither belongs to you. Everything just drips off, and afterwards, you're still peaceful. You hold on to nothing, and you keep nothing.

THE THOUSAND-PETALLED LOTUS

If you look at a lotus at night, it's all closed up, but if you look closer, you can see that the outermost layer of petals aren't really petals—they're more like a sheath, thick and strong. It's those outermost petals which take all the damage from the wind, the dust and everything else at night. They protect what's inside the lotus.

In the morning, when the sun comes up, the light and the warmth of the sun on the outermost sheath opens up that lotus. You can't peel the lotus open, as that would damage it—you have to wait for the light of the sun to open it and reveal the next layer of petals. The warmth of the sun stands for kindness, and the light mindfulness. In short, the warm light of the sun is kindness.

If this body is still painful and active, you can't be aware of your mind. When you look at your body and mind with kindness, you can actually see it as it is, and because you're kind to it, shining warm light on the outermost petals of your lotus, your body will soon relax and disappear. Then you can go inside the first layer of petals in the lotus to the world of the mind.

Sometimes people confuse the thoughts about the world with the mind itself, but thoughts aren't the mind—they're almost like echoes of the body and the five-sense world.

When you are totally peaceful and the body vanishes, you can go into the world of the mind, the inside of the lotus. You use kindness to stay there and see what happens. This is when you feel like you're going into what we call the 'centre of time'. You go into the present moment.

Many meditators tell me they can become present only for a moment and then they go off into the past or the future again.

How can we let go of thinking about the external world, the past and the future?

The answer is: by adding kindness.

Kindness is the missing factor to help you let go of the past and the future. I don't know what you did yesterday. Did you make some mistakes? Did you break any of your precepts? If you don't have this beautiful kindness, which includes forgiveness, you can't let the past go. It will keep coming up and bothering you. But if you give it kindness, it's amazing how easy it is for those things to vanish.

With kindness to the past, you can forgive everything. You've got a choice. You can't change the past, but you can choose to change the way you regard it. You can be negative about the past, or you can think of it as wonderful fertiliser.

THE NIMITTA PETALS

The origin of the fertiliser simile comes from my experience during my first years as a monk. I was allowed to leave the monastery after my basic training. In my wanderings, I found a beautiful cave and used to spend a lot of time meditating in that cave. Right outside that cave there was a papaya tree, and it got all of the poo from the bats that lived inside the cave as they flew in and out of the cave entrance. That particular papaya tree gave the most delicious papaya I've ever eaten. I

realised that when I was eating the fruit, what I was really eating was bat poo, transformed into delicious papaya.

If you've had some difficulties in the past, try to see their benefits. There are always benefits in there somewhere. When you can see those benefits, then you're using the terrible experiences, or the bat poo, with kindness, and you can let go of difficulties more easily, no matter what happened to you, or what you may have done. That attitude of being kind to the past and the future also encourages you not to be afraid at all, and it means it's easy for you to let things go.

With kindness and wisdom, the past and the future—time—disappears. It is as if the petals of the lotus were opening up. The present moment is right in the middle of time. Each one of these different layers of lotus petals gets more beautiful, more fragrant and more delicate. And then right in the middle of the present moment, you'll notice that you're being silent.

There's nothing much to say about now. Most conversations are about what happened in the past or what might happen in the future. You can't say much about what's happening right now. You can't fantasise because fantasising is like dreams of the future or memories of the past.

Being in the present, you get silent.

Imagine you were listening to some music. You can't have past or future when you're listening to great music. You have to be right there in this moment to really appreciate it and enjoy it. Right now is where the beauty is.

When you have that silence, it's like the thousand-petalled lotus is opening up, and you're going inside it. Silence is in the middle of the present moment, in the middle of time. Time is in the middle of your mind. And the mind is in the middle of your body. You feel like you're going inwards.

This is an important point. So many people feel that they have to go onwards, always onwards to the next thing, the next level. But in meditation, you don't go onwards, you don't go backwards—you go inwards right into the centre of silence.

The present moment has opened out. Silence has opened out. And right in the middle, you can feel your breathing. Breath is coming in. Breath is going out. You don't do the breathing; it's just the nature of the body. When you don't go looking for the breath, but just experiencing it, the breath always gets very beautiful. The deeper you go into the lotus, the more refined the colours of the petals, and the deeper and more beautiful the fragrance is.

A reason I explain this simile is that people often ask me what they have to do next after watching the breath! “Now what do I do?” “Have we got there yet?” “Is this Jhana?” “Is this Nibbāna?” Instead of thinking like that, enjoy the present. Be with it. Be mindful. Be kind. Then, you'll find those petals of the mind open up.

Do you know what you find in the middle of the breath? The delightful breath.

That's the way the mind sees the breath. It is one thing when you see the breath by feeling it with the fifth sense of the physical touch. It is a different thing when you experience the breath with your sixth sense, your mind. It's the same thing, but it appears different. That is one of the reasons why when your mind starts to see the breath, it starts to experience delight. Now the breath is a happy, delightful, enjoyable breath.

When that happens, I often call it the tipping point of meditation. Because once the joy starts to come up, you don't need to put effort into it any more. You don't need to struggle, to strive. You don't need to ask, “How long must I sit in meditation for?”

The tipping point comes, and meditation starts to become incredibly attractive. You want to do it. You can feel the benefit in this moment as well as the benefits that come afterwards.

The lotus petals are now very beautiful and very fragrant. You can just watch and enjoy that all day. The lotus has opened up to the delightful breathing. And the delight from the delightful breath gets stronger and stronger. And then that delight opens out...

Do you know what's inside there?

The *nimitta* petals.

The *nimitta* is right inside the delightful breath. When the joy gets stronger and stronger, these beautiful lights, or the *nimitta*, come to you.

When you first get to know these *nimittas*, they may appear complicated, but after a while, they become simpler. It's our reactions to them that are the problem. Some people have expectations and can experience too much excitement. What you should do is to remember that these are just petals in the lotus, there are more petals inside this layer. After a while, the mind settles down, and the lotus will fully open.

Sometimes people get a delightful breath and the *nimitta* comes, but it doesn't really stabilise and it moves away from the delightful breath. It's like the person is in between the delightful breath and the *nimitta*. To use our lotus simile again, it's like their petals are only half opened. You can see the *nimitta* inside, but you can also see the delightful breath.

At this point you should not focus on the *nimitta* nor on the delightful breath. You do nothing, except being kind and mindful. If you have enough letting-go energy, then the petals will fully open. If not, they will close up but may open up again later. When the *nimitta* stabilises, there's so much joy and fun to experience. Those lotus petals are gorgeous.

OPEN THE DOOR OF YOUR HEART

Some people may say, “It's only a *nimitta*. What about *jhāna*? I need a *jhāna*. How do I do that?”

You don't do anything. Remember: just be mindful and be kind.

It's beautiful being kind. The best description I have of kindness is to be able to open the door of your heart, no matter what you're observing, whether it's a beautiful stable *nimitta* or a *nimitta* fading away. Whatever it is, open the door of your heart unconditionally with no judgement. Just let things be. Part of kindness, or *mettā*, is letting things be.

So we're observing this *nimitta*, and if we're just being kind and aware, it opens out, and in you go. Now, you're going into *jhāna*. *Jhāna* hasn't got any width to it; it is *ekaggatā*,¹⁶ which is one of the reasons why it's hard to describe when you're in there, but easy to describe when you come out afterwards.

Jhāna is right inside the *nimitta*.

Sometimes you're just on the edge of the *jhāna*, having a lovely *nimitta* experience. It's like the *jhāna* is right in front of you, and you ask yourself: "Shall I go in? Shall I not?" It seems scary at first simply because you don't know where you're going or what's going to happen. Going in is very joyful! Go for it. Let yourself go. Let the joy and the bliss overcome your fear. After a while you'll go deep into a beautiful meditation.

Some people may ask which particular *jhāna* it was. Please don't worry about such thoughts until after you've come out of it. Once a *jhāna* is complete, you will have a good memory of it. You then can turn the memory around this way and that way to discover whether it was a *jhāna*. If it was, which particular *jhāna*. It's a powerful experience that's different from what you've experienced before, and that's why it leaves such an indelible memory. *Jhāna* is powerful, stable, and long-lasting.

Some experiences are what I call ping-pong *jhāna*. You just go in and go out, but that's not really a *jhāna*. It's just a bit of a glimpse.

A real *jhāna* is when you're in deep meditation for a long time. The deeper the *jhāna*, the more time you're in. There's no way you can be in a deep *jhāna* for ten minutes or half an hour. You're in these states for hours. Sometimes it's hard to come out.

16. *Ekaggatā* means unification or oneness of mind.

SET THE JHĀNA ALARM

Don't be afraid of jhāna. If you're worried, you can try programming your mind when you feel you are getting close to having a jhāna. When you start meditating, tell yourself three times, "If jhāna happens, I'll come out by eleven o'clock," to get your mindfulness programmed.

If you want to get some confidence in this technique, before you go to bed tonight, set your alarm clock five minutes after your intended wake-up time. That will relieve your fear of being late. Then tell yourself as you're ready to go to sleep, "I'll wake up at four a.m." Say it in your own words, as simply as possible, and give it as much attention as you can. Once you've said it, forget it. The message has gone through.

During my first meditation retreat I was told to do that. I'd never done anything like that before, but it worked every morning. I woke up when I told myself to wake up, within one or two minutes on either side of that allotted time. I did set the alarm clock, but I never needed it. It's amazing just how your mind can take that kind of instruction.

Even sometimes when there's something I have to do, instead of writing it on a piece of paper and putting it on an office wall, I just make the resolution. "I must remember to send an email to BSWA in a day or two." After a day or two, I get the email sent. Our mind, when it's well trained, is like an obedient little dog.

So you get to a jhāna, and right inside the first jhāna, right in its centre, you experience the second jhāna. The difference between the first jhāna and the second jhāna is a different type of bliss.

In each one of these jhānas, what are we watching? Are we aware of the breath? No. We're still breathing, but we're not aware of that. Instead, we're aware of a beautiful mental bliss, and we don't have to force our mind to be aware of it. It's incredibly satisfying and great fun.

Some non-Buddhist meditators seemed to have experienced the first jhāna, and they called it a union with God. If you've experienced jhāna, you know why they make that statement. It's because you feel

like you've disappeared. Your sense of self has gone, and it's an incredible bliss. It's not just intense pleasure; many times people interpret it as pure love. There's hardly any difference between the experience of pure, powerful love, or *mettā*, and that of bliss. So, some people feel that they've had a union with God.

There are some interesting stories about *jhāna* experiences. I remember one monk, Venerable Sudhammo, from Java in Indonesia. When I met him, I could feel straight away that he was a powerful monk.

He told me that when he was young, he decided to go into the jungle in Java to meditate like a rishi or hermit, even though he wasn't ordained. He said that one day when he was meditating, he got very, very still, and a star, like an angel, came to him, and he married that star. His English wasn't perfect, but you could understand that he was talking about a *nimitta*. He didn't mean that he and the star had some sort of marriage ceremony, he meant that he united with the star—he went into it.

When he came out of the meditation, it was many days later; he knew that because the whole jungle looked different, with trees fallen over and water everywhere. He found some villagers and asked them if there was a flood in the forest and they confirmed there was. He then realised that the very spot he'd been sitting in meditation must have been submerged under metres of water! Even though he was underwater, he didn't drown. He didn't need oxygen as he was in deep *samādhi*. After that, he had some amazing powers.

When you experience that first *jhāna*, it's a certain type of bliss. In the second *jhāna*, you go deeper in, and the bliss of the second *jhāna* is the bliss of perfect stillness. It is called *samādhija pītisukha*, or happiness born of stillness. That's where your 'will' vanishes. You can't move; there is nothing to do the moving. You're incredibly stable. In the third *jhāna*, the quality of the bliss called *pīti*, which is the rough aspect of the bliss, vanishes. You now have a better form of bliss.

When you get into one of those *jhānas*, you may think, "Wow! This is it! There's nothing higher than this." But there are other kinds of bliss to come. It's like climbing what you think is the biggest mountain

in the world, but once you're at the top of it, you can see there's another one that's even higher. When you go inside the second jhāna, you find the third jhāna right in the middle. And right in the middle of the third jhāna, you find the fourth. The lotus is opening up, petal by petal. It's amazing what you find inside.

The fourth jhāna is contentment, but really, that description does not meet the bliss of such stillness. It is a more refined bliss. It's the fulfilment and the perfection of mindfulness: *satipārisuddhi*. This mindfulness is the best mindfulness you can ever experience.

FORMLESS ATTAINMENTS

After those four jhānas, we have *arūpasamāpatti*¹⁷, or formless attainments, right in the middle of the fourth jhāna. These formless states are where your mind starts to vanish.

Your body is already gone by the first jhāna, but now your mind is vanishing. In the second jhāna, you realise that the part of your sense of self called 'will' is gone. In the *arūpasamāpatti*, your 'knowing' starts to vanish.

You go stage by stage until you're in the fourth *arūpasamāpatti* — neither perception nor non-perception. What on earth does that mean? Are we aware or are we not?

The point is: your sense of knowing has almost stopped. From this point on, you're not knowing anything at all. The mind is gone. Everything which is perceived or experienced ceases. The mind stops. It will start again afterwards, but it stops for a while.

Now you realise that the mind can't be yours. You know that this world isn't you. I can explain that to you, and psychologists and psychiatrists can do experiments to prove that, but when you experience it for yourself, it's something totally different.

17. *Arūpasamāpatti* are the 'formless' or 'immaterial' attainments

These are the experiences which give you the data to get real insight into the nature of things. It is scary but very pleasant. This is the joy, the bliss, and the delight in the whole process which draws you through.



INSIGHT

*There are two conditions for the arising of right view:
the words of another
and attention to causes.*

MAHĀVEDALLASUTTA
MN 43:13.2–13.3

BARE ATTENTION

Now that our mind has become peaceful, we think we are ready for insight. So let's talk about what insight is, how important it is, how it works, and how it's used.

Insight means seeing things clearly, but a lot of times people don't see things clearly.

Let me tell you a story from one of my friends from Cambridge. His name is Bernard Carr, Emeritus Professor of Mathematics and Astronomy at Queen Mary University of London.

Some time ago at the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) of Cambridge University, one of Bernard's colleagues announced that they'd discovered the secret of levitation. A demonstration was to be held in one of the lecture theatres at Imperial College London. Many professors were excited to attend the event.

Bernard's colleague brought in a flowerpot and held it so that the audience could see that no strings, wires or anything else was attached to it. After putting it down on the table, he said, "You're all experimental physicists with good reputations; you're trained observers. I'm going to show you how to make this flowerpot levitate." The audience looked at each other, sceptical, but he continued, "Before we begin, I want you to help me create an atmosphere in this room. I want each one of you, despite your religion, to please chant the holy word '*Om*'."

With cameras charged up to record what happened, all the professors, lecturers and researchers started chanting, "*Om... Om... Om...*" Suddenly, the flowerpot rose into the air! It worked! The cameras caught it; there was evidence to show that the pot had actually lifted itself up.

After the pot came back down on the table, he asked the people who'd witnessed the event with their own eyes what happened. Many confirmed that the pot had indeed risen into the air, but some of those trained observers said the pot never rose at all.

The pot actually did rise up, and the reason it rose was that there was a huge electromagnet hidden under the table. The magnet demanded such a huge current that when it was switched on, a buzzing could be heard. So they asked the audience to chant “*Om*” to mask the buzzing sound and hide the trick.

Some of those scientists didn’t know about the trick, and because in their scientific view it simply couldn’t happen, their brain filtered out what had happened.

That was the whole purpose of the experiment: to show that even though something happens right in front of you, with all the supporting evidence to back it up, if it challenges your beliefs too much, you’ll wipe it out of your brain.

That’s one of the reasons why I say that bare attention is not enough to get the insight to see things clearly. Whatever you’re watching, whatever you’re feeling, or whatever you’re hearing, your brain always adds or subtracts from that.

What your mind brings to your attention is already filtered. That’s what the experiment had proven.

DISTORTERS OF TRUTH

So, how can you trust anything? You may experience a *nimitta*, but is it a real *nimitta*? Are you sure? Has your mind added anything to it or taken something away from it?

That’s always the problem with knowledge and truth. Why is it that there are so many highly intelligent human beings, and yet we can’t agree on what the truth is? It’s because what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and know is filtered.

This process of filtering what comes into our mind and into our awareness is what the Buddha called the five hindrances: desire, ill-will, sloth & torpor, restlessness & remorse, and doubt.

We think we can be aware of those things, but can we really?

Sometimes desire presents to you what you want to see. Ill-will hides the truth. There are some things that are so hard to accept that you bury the truth. That's where the problem of abuse in the past comes from. It's such a terrible thing to think it has really happened that you can't even see it.

Desire and ill-will distort reality and present to you a world which you think is true but actually isn't.

How many times does it happen in relationships when one partner says, "I can't stand you, I'm leaving!"? It's a shock to the other partner because they didn't see it coming. They may say, "Why didn't you tell me what was bothering you? I could have done something about it." The response might be: "I've been telling you for years!"

It's not because the person is being stubborn. It's because the thought of separation is so distressing that they can't even see it. People always bend the truth to fit what they want to see, and this is done almost subconsciously. These hindrances bend the truth. What you see is not real—it's got distorted.

That's also the case when you've got sloth and torpor, and the world is very dull and grey for you. You can't see anything clearly because there's no energy in the mind.

It's the same with restlessness and worry. Your mind is wandering all over the place. You can never stay still enough to see what's truly there. I've said many times that when restlessness disappears and you're still, it's amazing how this world just opens up to you.

If I really open my eyes and look at this world, isn't this world suffering? Yes, it is, but there's an incredible amount of beauty in it, as well. In the 'Auguries of Innocence', William Blake said:

"To see a World in a Grain of Sand
 And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
 And Eternity in an hour"

When you see a world in a grain of sand, that's an insight practice. To see 'a heaven in a wildflower' by the side of the path is where you find there's incredible joy in life and you're holding 'a whole infinity in the palm of your hand'. When you see 'an eternity in an hour,' you can understand that time has no meaning any more.

That is the kind of insight which sometimes people don't expect. We can't work that out through logic. Once you see it, then you can justify it through logic by working backwards, but to get there without some experience of the mind opening up to something clearer than you've ever seen before is quite rare.

The last hindrance is doubt. What is doubt? It's very hard to describe it. One of the metaphors for doubt which works for me is being lost in the desert.

Here's the story of a guy who got lost in the desert. He was lost for days and didn't know which way to go. He also had long since run out of water. Just when he was losing hope, in the distance he saw something shimmering on the horizon.

"It's just a mirage," he thought and didn't give it much importance, but then it came closer to him. This sounds crazy, but it appeared to be... a person on a sled, being pulled by husky dogs! "I really must be losing my mind," he mumbled. But then he heard the husky dogs barking.

The dog sled came right up to him, and a man in a large, white fur coat stepped out. The lost man rubbed his eyes, shook his head in disbelief, and said, "This can't be true. I'm hallucinating."

Just as he thought that, one of the dogs started licking him, and the man in furs said, "Are you okay? Here... have some water," and offered him a flask.

The man gulped down the water, some of it spilling onto his chin. When he'd had his fill, he shouted: "I was lost for days, but now you've found me! I'm saved!"

It was then that the Inuit said, "...And you think you're lost!"
I can't help telling jokes... I just can't!

Now, back to doubt. How do you know how to meditate? Yeah, you can listen to me and say, “Ajahn Brahm’s a good meditator. He’s been doing this for such a long time, so it must be true.” But that doesn’t really count, does it?

The Vinaya,¹⁸ the code for Buddhist monastics, forbids us to go into too much detail about any amazing experience we’ve had, but I’ll tell you a story so that you can see that you can recall your past experiences even though they happened a long time ago.

Once upon a time in a land not so far away, there was a meditation monk who lived in a forest. One day after coming out of a deep meditation, he decided to do a little experiment. He asked himself, “What’s my earliest memory?”

Straight away, he experienced himself in a pram as a newborn baby. It wasn’t a memory in the same sense as you remember what you had for breakfast this morning; it was more like ‘re-experiencing’—he was back in his pram. He saw the black and white pram, and then he spotted his favourite toy, Porky! It was a blue ceramic pig that his mother had given him. It had some beans inside that made a noise when he rattled it.

He could remember everything in that pram. He could also recognise his mother, not by how she looked but by how she smelled. At that particular time, as a little baby, he recognised his world by how it smelled.

As he was re-experiencing that early life memory, he had no doubt at all that it was him. The memory was clearer than seeing a piece of furniture in his meditation room. It was as if he were right there in the pram.

So, through deep meditation, one could recall an early life memory and even go back earlier to see past lives. The reason one could do this is that one’s five hindrances have gone. With such an experience, the fifth hindrance of doubt vanishes. It’s not an intellectual position; it’s an experiential one.

18. The Vinaya is the monastic law for fully ordained Buddhist monks and nuns

When the five hindrances are gone, you can see things clearly. You're not deluded.

There's one way to know the five hindrances are gone, and that's through jhāna. When you emerge from one of those jhānas, one of the clear results is that the five hindrances disappear for a while. The deeper the jhāna and the longer you experience that jhāna, the longer those five hindrances are absent, when you don't have any desire or aversion. This information is from the Naṭakapānasutta ([MN 68](#)). That is one of the reasons why, if you're enlightened or even have just had a deep meditation, nothing can upset you.

It is not just the five hindrances that disappear but two extra hindrances are also absent: *arati*, or discontent, and *tandi*, or weariness.

With *arati* absent, it's like you're walking on air. Sometimes you've got a stupid smile on your face as you're full of energy and positivity. Nothing can upset you. If you're old like me, sometimes you feel weary when you get up in the morning. But after a deep meditation, that weariness is gone. Sometimes you have so much joy and energy that you get bubbly. That happens when the five hindrances disappear.

A TADPOLE AND A FROG

The Buddha says that *samādhi*, otherwise known as jhāna, is the cause for seeing things as they really are.

In between jhāna and seeing things as they really are is the suppression of the five hindrances. After you have entered and emerged from jhāna, your five hindrances aren't there for quite a while, and because they're not there, there's nothing to distort your perception.

What you see now is real. What you see is true.

I call what we see this way 'real data'. With the mind free of those hindrances, you have an opportunity to see clearly and understand what it means.

There's the simile of a tadpole and a frog. The tadpole was born in water and has lived all its life in water, so it doesn't matter how intelli-

gent that tadpole is, it can't understand water any more than a fish can. A tadpole is different from a fish though, in that eventually it grows arms and legs and becomes a frog. One day, that frog jumps out of the water onto dry land. It's a weird experience. Something that has always been there—the water—is missing. Now, the frog has a chance to gain insight into what water actually is.

In *jhāna*, something that's always been there has gone missing. In the first *jhāna*, it's not exactly seeing what's there as much as seeing what's missing—what's always been there is now gone.

The first thing to disappear in a *jhāna* is your five senses. Some people may argue, “I don't experience my five senses when I go to sleep or when I'm under an anaesthetic. So, what's the big deal?” The big difference is that in *jhāna*, the mind is very aware, and you have a full experience of what it's like to just have the mind sense, the sixth sense, while the other five senses which are normally always there are now gone.

Once you jump out of the five-sense world, that's a totally different experience. The experience of a deep state of meditation is so intense that you can never forget it. One important thing to note is that while you're in those states of *jhāna*, you can't really do any contemplation because you're too still.

However, when you come out afterwards, you can look at the experience and start to understand exactly what it was, what was happening, and why it was happening. You see all the details. That's the raw and very rare data from which a deep insight can come. It's not seeing things in an ordinary way. You're seeing things in a way which is very rare.

When people ask me about *anicca*, the explanation that it means ‘rise and fall’ is not the full picture. The full picture is that something which has always been there, though you may not even notice it, is gone.

Have you ever seen darkness? Real darkness? I was nineteen years of age when I first experienced real darkness. One night I was walking home from a pub with my girlfriend. I was born in London, so there

were always street lights, but that night there were no lights. It was totally dark, and we couldn't see anything. I thought that I knew what darkness was, but I only truly understood it the first time that this thing called light had totally vanished. Sometimes we assume we know things, but we don't know them until they're not there any more.

Imagine all the physical senses are gone, but you don't need to be afraid because they'll come back. That may be a strange experience, but it also tells you a little bit about what happens when you die.

What is death anyway?

I'm not talking about dying. Dying can be unpleasant. Some people feel pain and struggle to stay alive. Death itself, when you go past a certain point, is irreversible. Ahh... What freedom! You don't have these heavy five senses to worry about. Freedom at last!

When you let go of the five senses, it's all freedom. All your trauma from the past, your bad memories, and all your fears of the future are about five-sense stuff, nothing to do with the mind. So, take away their importance and let them go. Imagine how free you'll feel, with no worries about the five senses at all.

When you can do that, you'll be an *anāgāmī*, a 'non-returner', never coming back to this world, because it doesn't make any sense for you to come back. Having let go of the importance of the five senses, you'll never come back to the five-sense world again.

See how insight works? These insights are experiential. This is when you get *nibbidā*, or repulsion, towards the five senses. What is there to come back to?

If I gave you a choice, would you like to become a non-returner and never come back to this world, or would you like to have another round in the five-sense world? You might think, "Well, I got things wrong in this life, but now I've learnt something. Now I know how to have a healthy relationship." So you would want to come back.

A PRISON GUARD NAMED WILL

Let me tell you the story of a man who was born in jail. He lived in jail and grew up in jail. He was a very good man who worked hard and had a good reputation, so they gave him a really nice prison cell with a nice garden outside. Then, he found another nice prisoner, a woman, and they went to the dances in the jail and fell in love. They got given a nice big cell in the married section of the prison, but they still worked very hard because they had to pay a lot for the mortgage on this prison cell.

Soon they had a couple of nice children, and they looked after their children well, sending them to school in the prison. Sometimes they would go on holiday, to see another part of the prison. They were having a wonderful time.

They couldn't always do what they wanted to, but it was okay; everyone else was pretty much the same. Compared to others, they thought that they were doing pretty well until one day somebody with a shaven head visited the jail and said to them, "Don't you realise that prison is suffering?" "It's not suffering," they countered, "You monastics are so negative!"

Seeing that they didn't want to leave their prison, the monastic said, "Look, you can have a better life in jail if you learn how to meditate. You can get your work done more quickly and with higher quality. You won't argue so much with each other, and you can be so much more peaceful with your kids, too."

So the two prisoners agreed to try. While they were meditating, it was as if they found a tunnel in their cell, and that tunnel led outside of the prison. They went through the tunnel and saw the world outside, and for the first time in their life, they realised what freedom was. It wasn't a theory; it was a real experience.

That experience changed their whole life. They realised that all these years they'd actually been living in prison! The prison of the five senses.

The prison officers all had the same name: Will. Will tortured them by never allowing them a moment of peace. When they were trying to watch their breath, Will said, “No, don’t do it this way. Do it that way,” and “You should be doing something better than meditation. Do some volunteering. Have a cup of tea. Do something!” This Will fellow never allowed them to be peaceful.

That’s why when we’re meditating, we trick our will to be calm, and eventually the little prison officer falls asleep, and that allows us to go into deep meditation. That’s what happens in the second jhāna.

In the second jhāna, we jump a bit further to where something else which has always been there is now missing. Something which people are so possessive of, the will, is gone in the second jhāna. Will, or choice, is no longer there. Just like the simile of the tadpole above. Now the tadpole has turned into a frog and jumped onto the land, he realises what is missing: water. He now knows what water is, what ‘will’ is.

It’s amazing when you can understand what the will is, where it comes from, and then see how it disappears. It’s not that you decide not to exercise the will, but that there simply is not any will. Freedom from Will. That’s the bliss of a second jhāna.

It’s an unmissable, strong, and powerful experience. The only reason why some people who get into deep meditation and have such an experience don’t get enlightening insights is that they don’t know how to understand them. That is one of the reasons why it’s important to have teachers who do know and can lead us on the path.

That’s why the second thing which you need in order to see the Dhamma is ‘*parato ghoso*’, the word of another enlightened being.

WORDS OF THE WISE

This is one of my favourite insight stories.

In his last years of life before he had a stroke and couldn’t speak any more, Ajahn Chah was getting sick. We Western monks studied the Vinaya and discovered one thing that wasn’t well known in Thailand.

In the time of the Buddha, there were saunas for monks. So we decided to build one for Ajahn Chah to help him keep healthy.

Another reason for building a sauna was that we had an excuse to invite Ajahn Chah to come over every week to Wat Pah Nanachat, where we stayed, to take his sauna and give us a talk.

Usually when he came over, I'd listen to his talk and then go and help him with his sauna. However, one particular week, he gave a brilliant talk. It went right inside of me, and I started blissing out while listening to the Dhamma. There were enough monks to look after Ajahn Chah, so I went round to the back of the hall, sat down on the concrete, and did a nice two-hour meditation. When I came out of that meditation, I was really happy, and the first thing I thought was: "Maybe, there's still some time to help my teacher." I started walking towards the sauna but realised I was too late because I saw him walking along the path towards the car to take him back to Wat Pah Pong.

Ajahn Chah walked towards me, looking me right in the eye as we approached one another, about to cross mid-path. I could feel Ajahn Chah reading my mind. It's a hard thing to describe, and often I'd be embarrassed, but at that moment I'd just come out of a very deep meditation, and for once, I was happy he was reading my mind.

He looked at me firmly, and then really fiercely and sharply asked, "Brahmavarinso! Why?"

I paused. "I don't know," was all I could say.

Whenever we Western monks said something stupid like that, it's amazing that these great monks would just laugh their head off. They thought it was so funny. People with all these big degrees from the West were so idiotic.

Then, Ajahn Chah screwed up his face and said, "I'll tell you the answer." He was obviously seeing that my hindrances were gone for a while, and he really wanted to see if he could enlighten one of his disciples.

"If anybody asks you the question 'Why?' The answer is: 'There's nothing.'" He paused, then asked, "Do you understand?"

"Yes," I replied.

“No, you don’t,” he responded. Then he walked away.

It was a wonderful experience, even though I didn’t understand it at the time. Deep Dhamma takes a long time to penetrate.



STEP BACK

*When the heart's release by love
has been cultivated, developed, and practised...
Your mind quickly enters samādhi.*

METTĀSUTTA
AN 11.15

STILLNESS

In the last chapter we talked about the big insight, but we actually use insight from the beginning of meditation all the way to the very end. So let's step back a bit.

Many people find that even just being aware of the breath is difficult. Why? It doesn't mean that you're not putting enough effort in. It means that you're putting too much effort in, so the mind can't rest and be still.

The first insight is to get good simple instructions, not unhelpful instructions. One of the unhelpful instructions is that *samatha* means 'concentration'. Please delete that from your brain. *Samatha* means 'stillness'. The very fact that you're starting to understand that the goal and meaning of meditation is stillness makes a big change.

So, how can you be still?

First, you need to be aware of the causes of stillness. That's insight into the causes of stillness.

Second, you need to know why sometimes that stillness doesn't happen. People laugh when I say that, but they don't realise it's much deeper than just making a funny comment. It's an important part of meditation. People think meditation is fierce. If we want to get something, we've got to put everything into it. It's true in one sense—you have to relax to the max.

When you start meditating, are you relaxed? Do you know what 'relaxed' feels like?

We start the meditation by having a body which is really at ease. When the body is settled and relaxed, it doesn't cause us any problems. This helps us let go of the body.

TRUST THE BODY

When you want to do some nice meditation, you've got to make sure everything in your body is good enough and that everything is settled. Then, you relax it to the max so that the body won't disturb you. You will then find it's easy to have a nice free time. Sometimes we have some itches or aches in the body, though. It's okay. It's natural.

To look after my body, I usually let my body look after itself. I ask my body how it feels and what it wants to do—that's another description of what mindfulness is. We shouldn't assume. We ask.

If I want to find out how you are, I don't just look at you and assume I know what's going on with you. I ask you, "How you are feeling today?" When you ask with mindfulness, you get an answer, and you might see something much deeper. Here is a story of what an amazing answer you could get when you ask with mindfulness.

The mother of a disciple of mine was comatose in hospital. The doctor asked my disciple if they should turn off the machines and let her mother die. She asked me what she should do, so I told her to go and stand next to her mother and ask her, "Are you still there, Mum?"

A couple of days later she asked me to visit her mother again. Sitting next to her mother's bed, I made my mind peaceful and calm and listened to her mother. I told the disciple that her mother was so exhausted that she just wanted to die. That wasn't psychic power; that was just being sensitive.

When I visited her once more a week or two later, I sat next to her bed again and felt that her stream of consciousness had left her body, but the machines were still allowing her body to carry on.

My point is: if you ask questions, you get some really interesting answers. If that's your mother or father in hospital, and you want to know what you're supposed to do, just be quiet, get some physical contact by holding their hand, and ask the question, "Mum, are you still there?" You'll know if the body is just being kept alive by life

support or if your mother is still alive and might come back to consciousness again.

You should do this with your body as well. I trust my body when I'm mindful of it, and then I get insight into being kind to my body. If my body needs a rest, I give it a rest. So I rarely get sick. This is the beginning of insight: an insight into having a calm and healthy body.

When you sit down, ask your body, "Body, do you want to meditate now?" Sometimes I ask my body and my mind, "What do you want to do now? Do you want to sit down and have a glass of water or go for a little stroll and explore some of the flowers in the grounds at the monastery? What do you want to do?" I trust my body, and I find my body never wants to indulge and waste time doing stupid things. It always wants to do innovative things.

When you learn how to relax to the max, you're being a friend to your body. It's then that you get the insight that being a friend rather than a controller is the way to peace.

This gives insight into how to have a peaceful and healthy body. Even if you have chronic pain, rather than fighting it, you can understand it and be kind to it. With all the unpleasant experiences in life, everything that comes up in our life is like a teacher to us. So, if there's pain, try to learn something from that by giving it kind attention. If you open the door of your heart to that experience, it's amazing what you can learn. These insights aren't ordinary insights. You can get useful information about your body and how to look after it, and that means you can learn how to relax the body to the max.

The Buddha said that we should always start our meditation with *kāyagatāsati*, mindfulness of the body. When we watch our body first, it prepares the mind for the meditation. Some people may say no; they just want to get straight to the *nimitta*. They want the fast-track meditation, but when you follow the Buddha's advice, you realise that his advice is the real fast track.

WAIT IN THE PRESENT

I've done lots of building work in my life as a Buddhist monk. The most important part of building is always the preparation, to make sure you've got really good foundations. Before you paint, you prepare the wall by removing all the grease until it's clean. If you're making a garden, most of the work in the garden isn't planting the seeds but preparing the soil. The preparation is always important. The same applies to meditation.

You may hear some monks say that meditation is really easy—all you need to do is go into the *nimitta*. Just watch your lotus with loving-kindness and mindfulness, and the lotus will open. It sounds really easy, doesn't it? But the most important part is the preparation: making sure you have strong mindfulness and kindness to be able to focus that on the lotus and not interfere when it starts to open up.

Ajahn Chah once told this story when I first came to train under him as a young monk. It was the story that Wat Pah Pong was a mango orchard, and the mango trees had been planted by the Buddha himself. Now all these mango trees were mature and full of ripe, juicy mangoes. He said if I threw a stick up at those mangoes to knock one down, I would never be able to get it. If I shook the tree, the mangoes would never fall. If I tried to climb up the tree, I would never reach the mangoes. There was only one way, Ajahn Chah said, to get any of those sweet, delicious mangoes: to sit perfectly still underneath the tree and hold out a hand. Then, a mango would fall.

I was a trained scientist, and to me, this story seemed irrational. I know that many people like to believe that the Buddha went to this and that country, but I'm pretty sure the Buddha never went to Wat Pah Pong in Thailand. Even if he had, he wouldn't have been planting mango trees. And mangoes falling? Totally illogical. So I forgot about it. Or so I thought.

A wonderful thing about the Dhamma is that a teaching which we've heard may sound silly at that moment or may appear to be so far

away from our current stage, but some of the message could get stored away in a little corner of our mind. We don't realise it until one day when we're getting close to those great experiences in meditation, the information just comes up. Something clicks, and we remember.

It's just like the seeds in the middle of Australia's deserts that stay dormant for years, and then one day a rainstorm comes, and all those seeds sprout and come to fruition.

The only way to get some of those beautiful fruits of the practice is to stop trying to get anything. Stop trying to make anything happen. Just sit perfectly still. It is easy when you stop trying, but the hardest thing is to stop trying.

We're so addicted to trying. Sometimes we don't even know what it's like when we don't do anything. You may get frustrated as nothing's happened in your meditation yet, even though you've tried so hard. It's at these times when we should remember to relax to the max and open our heart with kindness. Then, you can be still and at peace with whatever happens.

That's when the mangoes fall.

THE DONKEY AND THE CARROT

To understand this better, I've developed a simile for the insight into how these things happen. It's the story of a donkey and a carrot.

The donkey is one of the most stubborn animals in the world. Sometimes farmers try hitting the donkey with a stick to get it to move, but the donkey has a lot of endurance. Instead of punishing the donkey, you should tie a stick to the donkey's neck so that the end of the stick is a few feet out in front of the donkey. At the end of the stick, you tie a carrot on a string.

The donkey sees the carrot dangling just ahead of its mouth. Now, what does the donkey do? Because donkeys like carrots, it moves towards the carrot, but as it moves, so does the carrot on the string. The more the donkey moves forward, the more the carrot moves away,

so the carrot is always a few feet out in front of the donkey. The donkey can see and smell the carrot and can almost taste it, but it can never reach it.



Does this story have any similarity to your life? Happiness, success, deep meditation, or whatever else you want in life is always a little bit out of reach, isn't it? You've been running after *nimitta* and *jhāna* and insight, but have you got them yet?

So, how does the donkey catch the carrot?

If the donkey has been paying attention, it would know how to catch the carrot. It's the easiest thing in the world.

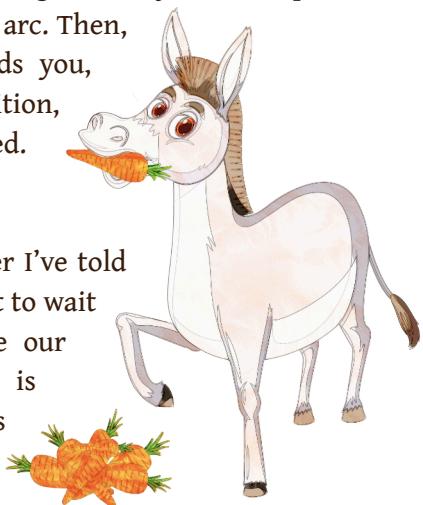
It just has to stop.

The carrot has been moving away from you as you chase it. So, when you stop trying to get it, because of the forward momentum, it will continue moving away from you. Likewise, when you relax to the max in meditation, you may think nothing's happening; in fact, you may even think the mind is getting worse!

The carrot in front of the donkey swings far away and then pauses when it reaches the top of its wayward arc. Then, it slowly starts swinging back towards you, back a little faster to its original position, and now it's coming to you at a top speed.

You've been chasing it, and now it's chasing you!

It's just like our breath. Remember I've told you not to go looking for the breath but to wait for the breath to come to you? Like our donkey, you wait until the breath is swinging towards you. Of course, it's more than the breath—it's the *nimitta*, *jhāna*, and everything.



The last instruction you must always remember is to sit perfectly still and wait in the present moment under the mango tree with your hand of kindness open. Compassion is really crucial here. That's how many people get their first deep meditation experience. They go chasing it, but when they stop and let go, a beautiful meditation experience happens.

THE NĀGIRI STRATEGY

Some people know how to stop, but they don't know how to stop long enough. They're really relaxing, and a nice *nimitta* comes up, but then they try to develop the *nimitta*, or try to do something with it, like going inside it. That was a problem for me too. What you need to do is to learn to keep doing this 'relaxing to the max' all the way, with kindness. Then, you can get into some really nice deep meditation.

Another issue is when you're peaceful while watching the breath and the breath is disappearing, but there's no 'oomph' in the meditation. It's just flat. I call this a pause or a blockage. What I would do is not to try to put forth any effort because that will mess things up. It's like you come across a brick wall in your meditation and you keep banging your head against the wall thinking you can break through. That's a silly response; it's not going to work.

I would imagine that I was just standing back a bit and seeing what the problem was. Then, I'd find that to the left there's a door which is open, and I can just walk through it. To the right, there's a ladder, and I can climb over. If I stood back even further, I'd find that the government couldn't afford to finish building the wall. To the right and left, it's empty—no wall at all!

I'm not sure about you, but the biggest hindrance I had was ill-will. Kindness is the best antidote. So, whenever I was blocked anywhere, I'd always remember kindness to the whole process. "You don't have to get enlightened today, Ajahn Brahm. You don't have to do anything." I'd shine that kindness all over. Once you see the obstacle,

give it kindness and the obstacle will vanish. I call this technique the Nālāgiri strategy.

When Devadatta¹⁹ was trying to take over the Saṅgha,²⁰ King Ajātasattu helped Devadatta by using a huge elephant called Nālāgiri.²¹ They got Nālāgiri mad with strong drink and let him loose on a path where the Buddha and his monks were walking on an alms round. The elephant was running down this narrow street, smashing everything in its path. In the opposite direction, the Buddha was walking calmly and mindfully.

According to the story, many of the monks who were with the Buddha jumped into the houses along the sides of the street. Only Ānanda,²² the Buddha's faithful disciple, remained with the Buddha. With this huge, powerful and destructive monster of an elephant running at full speed towards them, Ānanda stood in front of the Buddha and said, “Let the elephant take me. I'll give my life for my teacher.” But the Buddha just brushed Ānanda aside.

With his enormous psychic power, the Buddha could have very easily grabbed Nālāgiri by the trunk and thrown him over the Ganges River a couple of hundred miles away, but that wasn't what the Buddha did. The Buddha gave this drunken mad elephant loving-kindness, and Nālāgiri stopped and bowed his head down to the Buddha.

Kindness was what subdued the mad elephant. So, when you have an attack of any of the hindrances, no matter what hindrance it is, no matter how strong it is, employ the Nālāgiri strategy: “Hindrances, the door of my heart is open to you.” Kindness is a powerful antidote, and the hindrances can't harm you.

One of the insights you will have from meditation is the power of loving-kindness or *mettā*. This means that you get an insight of being kind to your body and your mind when you're meditating. And it's a beautiful way of living, too.

19. Devadatta was a monk who split the Saṅgha and attempted to kill the Buddha.

20. The term “Saṅgha” refers to the Buddhist monastic community of monks and nuns.

21. See the [page 133](#) for the full text.

22. Ānanda was the Buddha's cousin and attendant



INTO THE HEART

*No jhāna for one without wisdom,
No wisdom for one without jhāna.
But one with both jhāna and wisdom—
They are in the presence of nibbāna.*

DHAMMAPADA
DHP 372

WHEN (I THOUGHT) I WAS ENLIGHTENED

We've talked about insights, but what about the big insights? What are you doing all this for? Let me tell you the story of when I became enlightened.

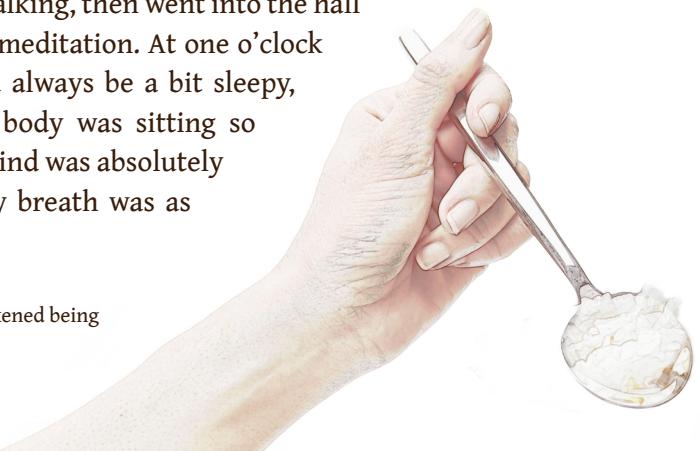
It was my fourth rains retreat, so I'd already been meditating a while. I was staying at a very peaceful monastery in the north-east of Thailand with very little work to do. I was senior enough to know the basics, but not senior enough to have any responsibility. It was a wonderful time.

One evening the moon came up bright, lighting up the forest, so it was easy to do walking meditation under the trees. I'd already had some nice sitting meditation, and my practice was going really well. I had lots of energy and clarity. As I continued doing the walking meditation, great insights started to come in. Every time we have a really nice insight, we see things in a totally different way, and this gives us so much joy and energy. So, even though it was late at night, I didn't really want to go to sleep. I enjoyed walking and seeing all these different ways of looking at the world.

It was then that the big one came. "Wow! Amazing!" I was now seeing the world in a totally new way. Straight away I thought the world had another *arahant*.²³ Oh, that was so lovely. Can you imagine what it must be like to become enlightened? Nothing left to worry about in the whole world. Perfect peace and happiness!

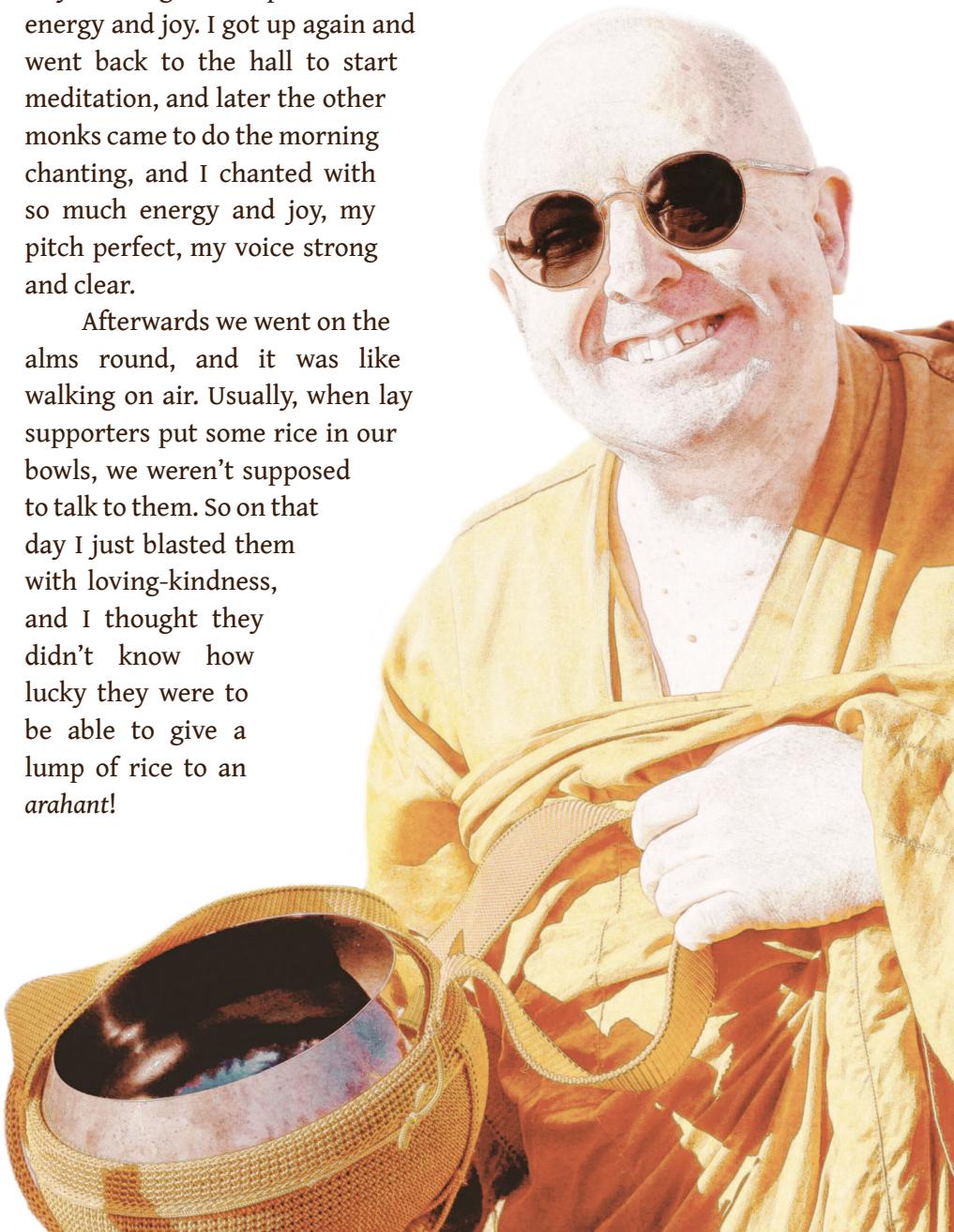
I carried on walking, then went into the hall to do some sitting meditation. At one o'clock in the morning I'd always be a bit sleepy, but this time the body was sitting so straight, and the mind was absolutely clear. Watching my breath was as easy as pie.

23. An *arahant* is an awakened being



At about two o'clock, I thought I should have a rest before all the monks met just after three. So I went to my hut and laid down, but no way could I go to sleep with so much energy and joy. I got up again and went back to the hall to start meditation, and later the other monks came to do the morning chanting, and I chanted with so much energy and joy, my pitch perfect, my voice strong and clear.

Afterwards we went on the alms round, and it was like walking on air. Usually, when lay supporters put some rice in our bowls, we weren't supposed to talk to them. So on that day I just blasted them with loving-kindness, and I thought they didn't know how lucky they were to be able to give a lump of rice to an arahant!



For our one meal of the day, we'd usually have one pot of curry to go with the rice. It was always rotten fish curry²⁴ with fish collected from the paddy fields and fermented in jars. The curry might have some banana shoots or whatever else they could find. It really stank.

That morning we had the usual pot of rotten fish curry, but next to it was another pot. It was a very rare treat of lovely pork curry! “Ah... the heavenly beings must be celebrating a newly enlightened monk in the world,” I thought.

In our practice, when food was offered, the head monk would have the first choice. The head monk took one big ladleful of the pork curry and put it in his bowl, and then another one, and another! Three huge servings! “You can’t eat all that!” I found myself thinking, but then I thought, “Oh, it doesn’t matter. There’s plenty left for me.”

Just as I was thinking that, he lifted up the lovely pork curry pot and poured it into the stinky, rotten fish curry, stirred it all up, and said, “It’s all the same. It’s all the same.” “If it’s all the same, why did you take the nice curry first?! You should have mixed everything up first!” I was fuming. The first decent meal in a month, and it was all wasted.

It was then that I realised enlightened beings don’t get upset!

You don’t really know what depression and disappointment is until you think you’re enlightened and find out you’re not! That was a bad day for me.

I’m telling you that story because it shows how we can deceive ourselves.

BIG INSIGHT

Now, let’s go back to the simile of the thousand-petalled lotus. One of the other things I like about that simile is that it shows you how the whole path works.

24. ‘Rotten fish curry’ is curry made with fermented freshwater fish.

When you get into a jhāna, it's like you're experiencing the inner petals of the lotus. The lotus only opens up through the simple qualities of kindness, mindfulness, and patience.

There are two types of patience. The first kind is waiting for something in the future to happen. The second kind is waiting in the present. Please practise the second kind of patience.

While doing sitting meditation, open yourself up more and go deeper inside the delightful breath. It's not that you have to go and get it from somewhere or go out to make it happen. The beautiful breath is hidden inside all these other layers of lotus petals.

Jhāna is inside you.

What you need to do is uncover jhāna by opening the outermost petals and seeing what's inside. As the petals open up, what's inside the first jhāna is the second jhāna, and inside the second jhāna is the third jhāna. When the third jhāna opens up, the fourth jhāna is right there inside it. Beautiful, gorgeous contentment.

By that time, the petals are so thin that they're like gossamer—you can almost see through to the next layer of petals. They're very refined, out of this world with their beauty and fragrance, and they give so much joy.

Many of you may know that in the Vajrayāna tradition, there is a chant '*Om mani padme hūṃ*'. *Om* is like *namo*, meaning 'homage to', and *hūṃ* is like *sadhu*, meaning 'well said' or 'excellent'. Both express reverence to *mani*, which is jewel, and *padme*, which is lotus. This chant is to worship the jewel in the heart of the lotus. That is you.

As you open yourself up, after those last layers of petals open, you can see the jewel in the heart of the lotus, at the centre of you.

Do you know what that jewel is?

It's 'nothing'.

DRIVERLESS BUS

There's a simile of the driverless bus that can further explain this.

Your life is like a bus journey. When you're riding in your bus, you look through the window and there's rolling green hills, lovely trees, and waterfalls. So you ask your bus driver, "Can you slow down? I want to take in the scenery." What does your bus driver do though? He puts his foot on the accelerator and speeds out of there.

Sometimes you go through the toxic waste dumps of life, and you tell the driver to put his foot down and get out of there quickly, but what does he do? He slams on the brakes and slows down.

Why is it that the unpleasant, difficult, awful times of life last much longer than they should?

Maybe you can teach the driver to do what you want. But to be able to teach them that, you've got to locate the driver first of all. So you get out of your seat and walk to the front of the bus to find them, but when you get there, you find the bus driver's seat is empty!

What happens next? You walk back to your seat and stop complaining. There's no one to complain to. There's no bus driver there, so how can you tell the bus driver to go somewhere you like? When you see that the bus driver's seat is empty, you find that desire and ill-will can no longer happen. There's no one driving your bus.

The driver of your life, what you think of as choice and will, is just nothing. The bus driver's seat can be seen in the second jhāna. It is there where you find that there's no one there.

That's what you see deep inside the lotus.

Emptiness—that's the jewel.

Let me say more about this issue of the will or the doer. One of the most meaningful experiments which I saw when I was a student at Cambridge University was an event organised by the Society for Psychical Research. They used to have unusual people come to give a talk, including a hypnotist. Because we were young students, everyone would volunteer.

Some people can be hypnotised easily, and some can't, but there was always one student who was a great subject. Once the hypnotist hypnotised a student, telling this student, "After I take you out of hypnosis, I'm going to touch my left earlobe. When I do, you'll stand up and sing the British national anthem."

So after the hypnotist had finished making this student do all sorts of embarrassing things, he took him out of hypnosis and sent him to sit down. During the next twenty minutes, being a great entertainer, every now and again he'd pretend to move his finger to his ear, but then scratch his nose. He did this again and again throughout the show until he had us all on the edge of our seats.

Finally, he touched his ear, and this poor student stood up and started singing "God Save the Queen!" at the top of his lungs. He sang the whole national anthem, even though we were wetting ourselves with laughter. When he finished, the hypnotist asked him, "Why did you do that?" and the young man gave what, to him, was an apparently excellent reason.

That's when I got chills down my spine. That student was convinced he'd freely chosen to sing, but it was obvious to us that he'd just made up the reason—he sang because the hypnotist told him to.

How many times did I really make those decisions when I thought I'd freely chosen to do something? How many times was I conditioned to do that?

It's one of the reasons why I don't mind spending a lot of time and effort teaching you. I'm brainwashing you. But in a good way. That's what the Buddha did. The Buddha Kassapa²⁵ did that to our Buddha. The Buddha did that to his disciples, like Ānanda and Sāriputta,²⁶ and they did that to their disciples. Eventually the teachings were passed to Ajahn Chah's teacher, Ajahn Mun. Ajahn Chah did that to me, and now, I'm doing it to you. It's good brainwashing because it's how we learn to let go.

25. Buddha Kassapa was one of the previous Buddhas mentioned in the Pali Canon.

26. Sāriputta was one of the Buddha's chief disciples and foremost in wisdom.

Parato ghoso, the words of another. It is one of the most important things to become a stream-winner²⁷ and to see non-self: to see that there's no doer in there.

STAGES OF DISAPPEARING

When you go deeper into that lotus, deeper into meditation, you can see that this idea of a self is conditioned. It's not an absolute eternal entity. It's empty. Nothing there.

Sometimes people find that hard to accept because of their attachment to the sense of self. People want to do things, want to be the doer, want to be the knower,... And that gives them a huge identity. But the more spiritually advanced you are, the less of you there is.

Jhāna are stages of disappearing where there's less and less of you. When there's less of you, there's less of a target for suffering. There's more peace and more happiness. You're not weighed down by anything any more.

Success or failure, praise or blame—none of this means anything. Even the Buddha received a lot of blame as well as a lot of praise. He said there's not one human being in this world who only receives praise and never blame. It's not what you do; it's largely the defilements of other people that create criticisms. So, if you keep on practising letting go, you will, after a while, have less and less which you own. You become possession-less. You don't attach to anything, which means that the whole idea of attainments disappears. Then you understand that the path of freedom is a path of having less.

If somebody asks you, “Are you enlightened?” you say, “Who?” Is Venerable Khemā sitting here enlightened? Who is Venerable Khemā? Is it her body that gets enlightened? The *vedanā*?²⁸ The *saññā*?²⁹ The

27. Stream-winner is the first stage of enlightenment.

28. *Vedanā* means feeling, sensation.

29. *Saññā* means sense, perception.

*saṅkhāra?*³⁰ When you put it like that, it shows just how meaningless it is to think of these as attainments. Which of your six senses is enlightened?

Thinking you're enlightened shows you that you're not.

30. *Saṅkhāra* means mental formation.



LET THE END COME

*My mind became serene,
like a fine thoroughbred steed.
Then, taking a lamp,
I entered my dwelling...
I drew out the wick.
The liberation of my heart
was like the quenching of the lamp.*

PAṬĀCĀRĀ
THIG 5.10

BREAK FROM THE HERD

This chapter will be about how you can apply what you've learnt and practised to your everyday life.

In your work, maybe you've been disappointed that your boss promoted somebody else instead of you. I've given so many talks in Singapore, and people there are really keen on being promoted. I ask them, "What happens if you get promoted?"

People want to be promoted to have more status and more money, but actually they'll have more worries and less time. Yes, you do get an increase in salary, but it's never enough, and you have to work harder. Is it really worth it?

Wouldn't it be better not to get promoted? You won't get as much money, but if you know how to live simply, you'll have less stress in your life as you don't have pressure on you. In many places I've visited, I've heard people complaining that they don't have enough time for themselves or their loved ones, let alone for a meditation retreat. They're wealthy in the sense of the amount of money in the bank, but they don't have enough time to pursue the real wealth of happiness.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if rather than doing something they had to do for their career, people did what they wanted to do, such as go on meditation retreats?

There's an old saying that's inspired me all my life: 'When everybody thinks the same, no one thinks at all'. If you think the same as everybody else, then you're not thinking, and you're not really getting any insight. You're just following the path which other people follow because it's easier in the sense that no one will criticise you.

If you go on a meditation retreat, some people may criticise you because of what you've been doing. "You say you've been meditating? What are you doing that for? Life is short. Enjoy it! There are so many beautiful places to visit."

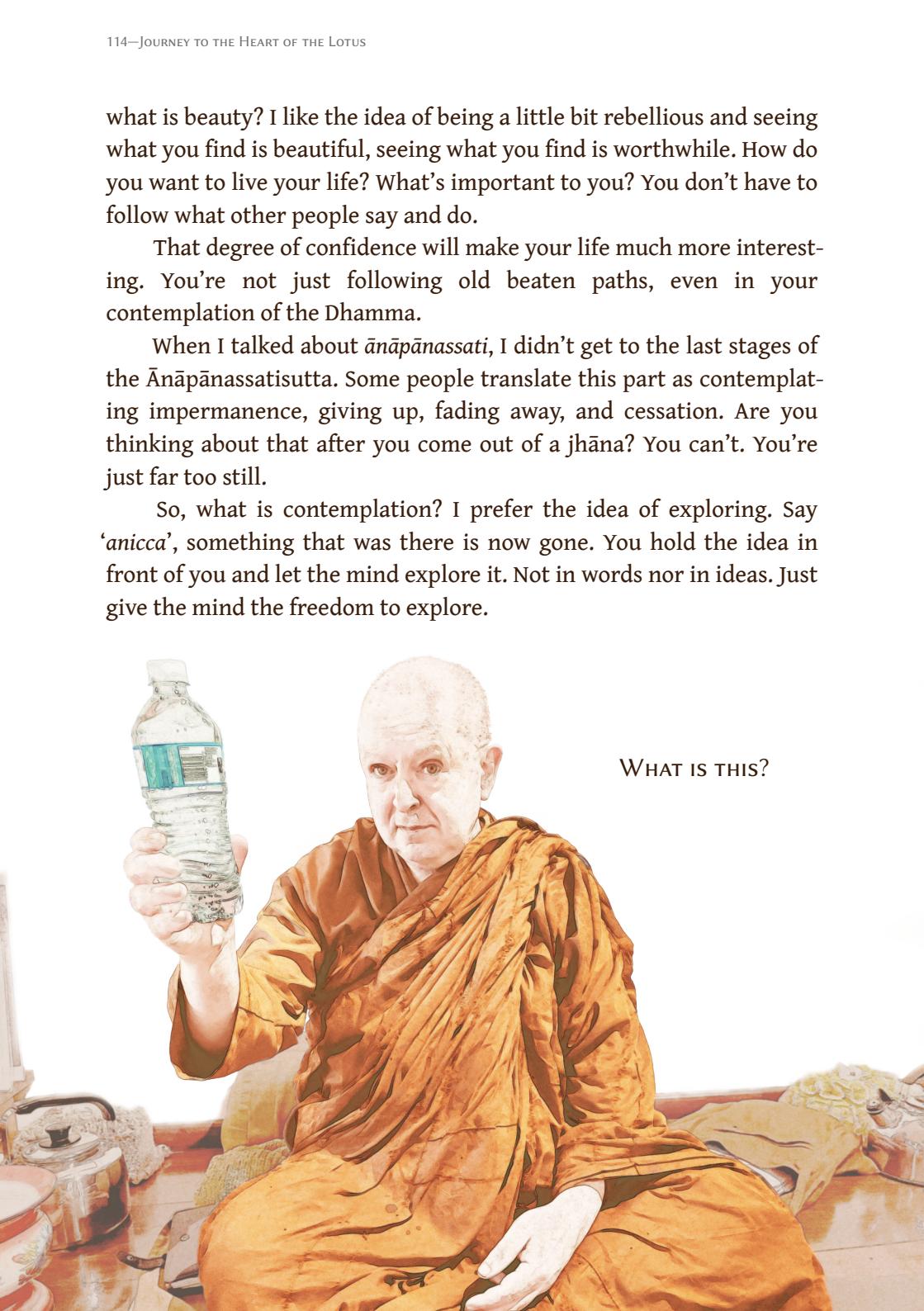
We believe what other people say, so some places become tourist attractions simply because other people think they're beautiful. But

what is beauty? I like the idea of being a little bit rebellious and seeing what you find is beautiful, seeing what you find is worthwhile. How do you want to live your life? What's important to you? You don't have to follow what other people say and do.

That degree of confidence will make your life much more interesting. You're not just following old beaten paths, even in your contemplation of the Dhamma.

When I talked about *ānāpānassati*, I didn't get to the last stages of the Ānāpānassatisutta. Some people translate this part as contemplating impermanence, giving up, fading away, and cessation. Are you thinking about that after you come out of a jhāna? You can't. You're just far too still.

So, what is contemplation? I prefer the idea of exploring. Say 'anicca', something that was there is now gone. You hold the idea in front of you and let the mind explore it. Not in words nor in ideas. Just give the mind the freedom to explore.

A photograph of a monk in orange robes sitting at a table, holding a clear plastic water bottle in his right hand. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is plain white.

WHAT IS THIS?

You look at a water bottle and find out it's far more than a water bottle. Some of the things in your life are far more than what you've been told or taught they are. When you really look at it, you find all sorts of different ways of looking at it and making use of it, and that makes life fascinating.

There was a movie many years ago called 'The Gods Must Be Crazy'. A pilot flying over the Kalahari Desert threw a glass bottle of Coca-Cola out the window. An African tribesman who lived a very simple life discovered it and brought it back to his village. As he'd never seen it before and never been told the use of it, he used it for all sorts of interesting things. His wife would use it as a rolling pin. And sometimes to hit him on the head! That was not a very good use. Nonetheless, this story shows an example of somebody who'd never been taught anything and so was able to see things in a totally different way.

With stillness, not thinking, you'll be able to get an insight by allowing your mind to explore the Dhamma. It's almost like you let the thing teach you, rather than trying to find out what it means. With meditation—you don't do anything, but you let the breath come to you. With insights—you don't go seeking, but you let the wisdom come to you.

STOP TRYING

One of the things I mentioned but didn't fully talk about is: you've been trying way too hard. You may think you haven't, but you have. There's a very famous story of Ānanda's enlightenment to demonstrate how trying too hard isn't going to get us anywhere.

After the Buddha had passed away, the other members of the Saṅgha decided to hold a meeting to collect all of his teachings.³¹ They wanted Ānanda to be part of it, even though he wasn't fully

31. The origin story of the communal recitation is given in the Khandhaka at [Kd 21](#)

enlightened because he had heard and remembered so many talks given by the Buddha.

Imagine how Ānanda, merely a stream-winner, must have felt when he got invited to join in the meeting with the other four hundred and ninety-nine fully enlightened *arahants*!

The night before the big meeting, in an effort to break through to the Dhamma, Ānanda meditated all night, watching his breath come in, watching his breath go out. When dawn came up, he was still unenlightened. There are certain things that you can't rush or force with willpower.

It was depressing, knowing that in a few hours, he'd have to face all his friends and colleagues, all fully enlightened, except for him. He couldn't do anything about it now. He'd tried his very best. There was still some time left before the meeting, so he decided to take a nap. He went to his room, and as he lay down, just before his head hit the pillow, he became enlightened.

So if you've tried all other ways to become enlightened, and nothing hasn't worked, try the Ānanda method of enlightenment!

Ānanda got enlightened because he'd stopped trying to attain anything; he was really letting go. He wasn't a donkey chasing a carrot any more. He stopped, and the carrot came to him.

TRUST THE MIND

When you have a problem in meditation, it's usually because either you're trying too hard, or you fall asleep when you let go. Or, it's because when you really let go and get a *nimitta*, you start working on it, trying to hold it. What you can do when you have some problems which keep on coming up at a certain stage in your meditation is to program your mindfulness.

One of the problems many people have is that when a *nimitta* comes up during a very deep meditation experience, they either get excited or afraid. If we get excited, desire arises. If we get afraid, we

attempt to stop it. Either will ruin the whole meditation, and we go back to square one. If we try and get more complicated at this stage, the meditation gets destroyed. So, how can we solve the problem?

The programming of mindfulness means that at the very beginning of the meditation, you sit down comfortably and tell yourself three times: “If a *nimitta* comes up, I won’t get excited.” Listen to what you’re saying with as much mindfulness as you can, and then discard it. Don’t even try to remember it; it’s already been programmed into you to be used at the right time. It’s amazing how that works. When you’re having a good meditation, and a *nimitta* comes up, you’d normally get excited, but this time, sub-verbally, the mind remembers: “No excitement,” and you can get past the hindrance.

You can also use this programming of mindfulness for other purposes, like when you want to meditate for an hour and have to come out for an appointment as I already mentioned in an early chapter. When you start meditating, say to yourself three times slowly, carefully and meaningfully: “I must come out of meditation by eleven o’clock.” Make sure you get the right a.m. or p.m. because you don’t want to come out of meditation an hour before midnight!

Sometimes when there was a problem in my meditation, some amazing thing happened, and I found a solution to it. Where did that insight come from? I traced it back and found that it was something Ajahn Chah told me years ago! It was stored somewhere in my mind, ready to come up when it was really needed.

That’s why we teach like this.

So please, at the end of the retreat, don’t think: “Ajahn Brahm, you always talk about *nimitta* and *jhāna*, but I couldn’t even watch one single breath. My best practice was half a breath!”

Don’t mind that because these teachings have been programmed into you. At the right time and the right place, they will come to fruition, and then it will work. When that happens, you can ask yourself: “Where did that come from?” It’s either myself or some other really good teacher. Now you understand it, having put the teaching into practice and seeing that it works.

THE END

To finish, let's come back to the topic of big insights, one of which is Dependent Origination.

The flame of a candle depends upon three things: the wick, the wax and the heat. When those three things come together, you get a flame. If any one of those three things runs out, ceases or stops—the wick is all burnt out, there's no more wax left in the candle or someone blows the heat away, then there's no more flame

There was a wonderful woman in the time of the Buddha who got fully enlightened and became one of the best teachers of that time. Her name was Paṭācārā.

Paṭācārā was the only daughter of a wealthy family in Sāvatthī. She fell in love with one of her household servants, and going against the wishes of her parents, she ran away with her lover.

They went to live in a faraway village, and in time she had a son, but she always longed to go back to visit her family in Sāvatthī despite her husband's objections. One day, not able to resist any longer, and even while heavily pregnant with her second child, she set out for Sāvatthī, taking her son with her.

On realising what she'd done, her husband followed her and caught up to her on the way, pleading for her to return, but she refused. She gave birth on the road, and then a storm blew up, so she asked her husband to prepare a shelter. While her husband was out in the rain gathering materials for a roof, he was bitten by a snake and died. In the morning, Paṭācārā found her husband dead. With deep grief for the loss of her husband, she continued to her parents' home with her two sons.

She came to the river Aciravatī, and because of the heavy rain the night before, it was flooded. The water was too strong for her to cross carrying both her sons at once, so she decided to cross the river with the newborn first, deposit him on the far shore, and return for the young boy. Just as she was returning after placing the newborn on the far shore, a hawk swooped down and snatched the baby.

Crying out, she rushed back to the shore to try and save her baby. Her elder son waiting on the other side of the river heard his mother's voice and thought she called him, so he slipped down the riverbank and was swept away by the current and drowned.

With so much pain, she continued towards Sāvatthī. On the road, she saw a man and asked him about her family. He told her that the previous night, her parent's house had collapsed, killing her parents and her brothers.

This means that within twenty-four hours, she lost her husband, children, parents and siblings. The grief was too much for Paṭācārā, and her mind snapped. She cast off her clothes and stumbled around, naked and senseless, through the streets of Sāvatthī. In her aimless wandering, she wandered into Jetavana monastery, where she came across the Buddha. With his words of kindness, she regained her senses and covered herself up. The Buddha then gave her a teaching and at the end of the discourse, she became a stream-winner.

She joined the order of *Bhikkhunīs*³² and practised well, and one night, after meditation, while she was watching the flame in her oil lamp, the wind blew in through her window and flickered the flame, and the flame went out. She understood the meaning of what she saw: *anicca*. That was the end of all her other defilements.

When you find out the cause of things, then when those causes disappear, the result disappears. That's what dependent cessation is. The cause of our mind consciousness is *nāmarūpa* or the objects of consciousness. When the objects of mind consciousness stop, our consciousness ceases.

When this happens, our consciousness is not just in a dormant or suspended state like a TV screen, but it is as if when the TV program stopped, the TV itself vanished—the TV was not there any more. When there's nothing on the screen, the screen vanishes too.

That is a quick glimpse of dependent cessation.³³

32. A *bhikkhunī* is a fully ordained Buddhist nun

33. For more on Dependent Cessation see the booklet *Dependent Liberation* by Ajahn Brahmali at wiswo.org/books/dlbl

*...Spend time with a true person,
intelligent and learned.*

*Having understood the meaning and
putting it into practice,
one who understands the teaching
would find happiness.*

NĀVĀSUTTA
SNP 2.8

NOTES

ABBREVIATIONS

AN	Aṅguttaranikāya
Dhp	Dhammapada
DN	Dīghanikāya
Iti	Itivuttaka
Ja	Jātaka
KN	Khuddakanikāya
Kp	Khuddakapāṭha
Kv	Kathāvatthu
MN	Majjhimanikāya
Snp	Suttanipāta
Sutta	Suttapiṭaka
Thag	Theragāthā
Thig	Therīgāthā
Ud	Udāna

The references above are from the Buddhist scriptures called the Pāli Tipiṭaka, or the Three Baskets of the Pāli Canon.
See suttacentral.net/pali-tipitaka

References are to the numbering scheme used in
the English translations published by
SuttaCentral (suttacentral.net)

PEOPLE, PLACES & TREATISE

Ajahn Chah

Phra Bodhiñāṇathera was a highly respected Buddhist monk in Thailand, and Ajahn Brahm's teacher. He was instrumental in establishing Theravada Buddhism in the West.

Ajahn Mun

A famous Thai Buddhist meditation monk. Along with his mentor, Ajahn Sao Kantasilo, he established the Thai Forest Tradition, with emphasis on meditation, that subsequently spread throughout Thailand and abroad.

Ānanda:

the Buddha's cousin and attendant, renowned for his zealous devotion and for memorising the teachings.

Bodhinyana Monastery

a Buddhist forest monastery in the Darling Range, near the small town of Serpentine, Western Australia. Home to Ajahn Brahm and his Saṅgha.

Brahmavaṁso

Ajahn Brahm's full monastic name. 'Brahmavaṁso' means lineage of Brahma.

Buddha Kassapa

one of the previous Buddhas mentioned in the Pali Canon. The word 'Buddha', meaning the Enlightened One, is usually applied to Buddha Gotama, the founder of Buddhism of today.

Devadatta

a monk, a close relative of the Buddha, who split the Saṅgha and attempted to overthrow the Buddha and have him murdered.

Māra

generally regarded as the personification of Death, the Evil One, the Tempter.

Paṭisambhidāmagga

The Paṭisambhidāmagga or “Path of Analytical Discernment” is an advanced critical treatise in thirty chapters on Buddhist practice, which the Pali commentaries attribute to the Buddha’s disciple Sāriputta. This text introduces a number of terms and ideas of great importance in later Buddhist philosophy.

Sāriputta

the Buddha’s disciple foremost in wisdom.

THREE QUESTIONS BY LEO TOLSTOY

Taken from the collection:
'*What Men Live By, and Other Tales*' by Leo Tolstoy,
as translated by Louise Maude and Aylmer Maude.
This work is in the public domain.

It once occurred to a certain king, that if he always knew the right time to begin everything; if he knew who were the right people to listen to, and whom to avoid; and, above all, if he always knew what was the most important thing to do, he would never fail in anything he might undertake.

And this thought having occurred to him, he had it proclaimed throughout his kingdom that he would give a great reward to anyone who would teach him what was the right time for every action, and who were the most necessary people, and how he might know what was the most important thing to do.

And learned men came to the King, but they all answered his questions differently.

In reply to the first question, some said that to know the right time for every action, one must draw up in advance a table of days, months and years, and must live strictly according to it. Only thus, said they, could everything be done at its proper time. Others declared that it was impossible to decide beforehand the right time for every action; but that, not letting oneself be absorbed in idle pastimes, one should always attend to all that was going on, and then do what was most needful. Others, again, said that however attentive the King might be to what was going on, it was impossible for one man to decide correctly the right time for every action, but that he should have a Council of wise men, who would help him to fix the proper time for everything.

But then again others said there were some things which could not wait to be laid before a Council, but about which one had at once to decide whether to undertake them or not. But in order to decide that,

one must know beforehand what was going to happen. It is only magicians who know that; and, therefore, in order to know the right time for every action, one must consult magicians.

Equally various were the answers to the second question. Some said, the people the King most needed were his councillors; others, the priests; others, the doctors; while some said the warriors were the most necessary.

To the third question, as to what was the most important occupation: some replied that the most important thing in the world was science. Others said it was skill in warfare; and others, again, that it was religious worship.

All the answers being different, the King agreed with none of them, and gave the reward to none. But still wishing to find the right answers to his questions, he decided to consult a hermit, widely renowned for his wisdom.

The hermit lived in a wood which he never quitted, and he received none but common folk. So the King put on simple clothes, and before reaching the hermit's cell dismounted from his horse, and, leaving his body-guard behind, went on alone.

When the King approached, the hermit was digging the ground in front of his hut. Seeing the King, he greeted him and went on digging. The hermit was frail and weak, and each time he stuck his spade into the ground and turned a little earth, he breathed heavily.

The King went up to him and said: "I have come to you, wise hermit, to ask you to answer three questions: How can I learn to do the right thing at the right time? Who are the people I most need, and to whom should I, therefore, pay more attention than to the rest? And, what affairs are the most important, and need my first attention?"

The hermit listened to the King, but answered nothing. He just spat on his hand and recommenced digging.

"You are tired," said the King, "let me take the spade and work awhile for you."

"Thanks!" said the hermit, and, giving the spade to the King, he sat down on the ground.

When he had dug two beds, the King stopped and repeated his questions. The hermit again gave no answer, but rose, stretched out his hand for the spade, and said:

“Now rest awhile—and let me work a bit.”

But the King did not give him the spade, and continued to dig. One hour passed, and another. The sun began to sink behind the trees, and the King at last stuck the spade into the ground, and said:

“I came to you, wise man, for an answer to my questions. If you can give me none, tell me so, and I will return home.”

“Here comes someone running,” said the hermit, “let us see who it is.”

The King turned round, and saw a bearded man come running out of the wood. The man held his hands pressed against his stomach, and blood was flowing from under them. When he reached the King, he fell fainting on the ground moaning feebly. The King and the hermit unfastened the man’s clothing. There was a large wound in his stomach. The King washed it as best he could, and bandaged it with his handkerchief and with a towel the hermit had. But the blood would not stop flowing, and the King again and again removed the bandage soaked with warm blood, and washed and re-bandaged the wound. When at last the blood ceased flowing, the man revived and asked for something to drink. The King brought fresh water and gave it to him. Meanwhile the sun had set, and it had become cool. So the King, with the hermit’s help, carried the wounded man into the hut and laid him on the bed. Lying on the bed the man closed his eyes and was quiet; but the King was so tired with his walk and with the work he had done, that he crouched down on the threshold, and also fell asleep—so soundly that he slept all through the short summer night. When he awoke in the morning, it was long before he could remember where he was, or who was the strange bearded man lying on the bed and gazing intently at him with shining eyes.

“Forgive me!” said the bearded man in a weak voice, when he saw that the King was awake and was looking at him.

"I do not know you, and have nothing to forgive you for," said the King.

"You do not know me, but I know you. I am that enemy of yours who swore to revenge himself on you, because you executed his brother and seized his property. I knew you had gone alone to see the hermit, and I resolved to kill you on your way back. But the day passed and you did not return. So I came out from my ambush to find you, and I came upon your bodyguard, and they recognized me, and wounded me. I escaped from them, but should have bled to death had you not dressed my wound. I wished to kill you, and you have saved my life. Now, if I live, and if you wish it, I will serve you as your most faithful slave, and will bid my sons do the same. Forgive me!"

The King was very glad to have made peace with his enemy so easily, and to have gained him for a friend, and he not only forgave him, but said he would send his servants and his own physician to attend him and promised to restore his property.

Having taken leave of the wounded man, the King went out into the porch and looked around for the hermit. Before going away he wished once more to beg an answer to the questions he had put. The hermit was outside, on his knees, sowing seeds in the beds that had been dug the day before.

The King approached him, and said:

"For the last time, I pray you to answer my questions, wise man.

"You have already been answered!" said the hermit, still crouching on his thin legs, and looking up at the King, who stood before him.

"How answered? What do you mean?" asked the King.

"Do you not see," replied the hermit. "If you had not pitied my weakness yesterday, and had not dug those beds for me, but had gone your way, that man would have attacked you, and you would have repented of not having stayed with me. So the most important time was when you were digging the beds; and I was the most important man; and to do me good was your most important business. Afterwards when that man ran to us, the most important time was when you were attending to him, for if you had not bound up his wounds he would

have died without having made peace with you. So he was the most important man, and what you did for him was your most important business. Remember then: there is only one time that is important—Now! It is the most important time because it is the only time when we have any power. The most necessary man is he with whom you are, for no man knows whether he will ever have dealings with any one else: and the most important affair is, to do him good, because for that purpose alone was man sent into this life!"

THE LETTING LOOSE OF NĀLĀGIRI

This is a translation of [Kd 17:3.11.1–3.13.4](#)
by Bhikkhu Brahmali,
and sourced from Sutta Central

At that time in Rājagaha there was a fierce and man-killing elephant called Nālāgiri. Just then Devadatta entered Rājagaha, went to the elephant stables, and said to the elephant keepers, “We who are relatives of the king are capable of having people promoted and getting them a raise. So then, when the ascetic Gotama comes walking along this street, release the elephant Nālāgiri down it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Then, one morning, the Buddha robed up, took his bowl and robe, and entered Rājagaha for alms together with a number of monks. And the Buddha walked down that very street. When the elephant keepers saw the Buddha coming, they released Nālāgiri down the same street. Nālāgiri saw the Buddha coming. He blew his trunk, and with ears and tail bristling, he charged toward the Buddha. When the monks saw Nālāgiri coming, they said to the Buddha, “This elephant coming down the street is the fierce, man-killer Nālāgiri. Please retreat, venerable sir.”

“Come, don’t be afraid. It’s impossible for anyone to kill the Buddha through an act of violence. The Buddha won’t attain final extinguishment through an act of violence.”

A second time and a third time those monks said the same thing to the Buddha, each time getting the same reply.

On that occasion people had ascended their stilt houses and even their roofs. The foolish people with little faith and confidence said, “The elephant will hurt the handsome, great ascetic.” But the wise people with faith and confidence said, “Soon the great man and the great elephant will meet in battle.”

The Buddha then pervaded Nālāgiri with a mind of love. Feeling it, Nālāgiri lowered his trunk, went up to the Buddha, and stood in front

of him. And while stroking Nālāgiri on the forehead with his right hand, the Buddha spoke these verses:

“Do not, elephant, attack a great man;
 Painful it is to attack a great man.
 For a killer of a great man,
 The next birth is not good.

Don’t be intoxicated or heedless,
 For the heedless are not happily reborn.
 Only do those things
 That take you to a good destination.”

Nālāgiri sucked the dust from the Buddha’s feet with his trunk and scattered it overhead. He then walked backward while looking at the Buddha, and returned to his stall in the elephant stables. That is how tame Nālāgiri had become. On that occasion people chanted this verse:

“Some are tamed with sticks,
 And some with goads and whips.
 Without stick or sword,
 The great sage tamed the elephant.”

And people complained and criticized Devadatta, “How evil and indiscriminate he is, this Devadatta, in trying to kill the ascetic Gotama so powerful and mighty!” Devadatta’s material support and honour declined, whereas those of the Buddha increased.

GLOSSARY

PĀLI TERMS

Arahant

awakened being. One who has gained insight into the true nature of existence.

Arūpasamāpatti

‘formless’ or ‘immaterial’ attainments

Bhikkhuni

a fully ordained Buddhist nun, a female mendicant.

Dhamma

Here it refers to the teachings of the Buddha. In Buddhism, Dhamma is the doctrine, the universal truth common to all individuals at all times, proclaimed by the Buddha. The Dhamma, the Buddha, and the Saṅgha (community of Buddhist monastics) make up the *Tiratana*, the Three Jewels or the Triple Gems, to which Buddhists go for refuge. In Buddhist metaphysics the term in the plural (dhammas) is used to describe the interrelated elements that make up the empirical world.

Ekaggatā

unification or oneness of mind.

Kamma

Here it refers to actions of moral significance which result in consequences in this life or future lives.

Mettā

benevolence, loving-kindness, or friendliness. The cultivation of mettā is a form of Buddhist meditation.

Nimitta

a mental perception appearing before the entry to jhāna.

Samādhi

perfect peace of mind, stability of mind, stillness of mind.

Saṅgha

the Buddhist monastic order of monks and nuns.

Saṅkhāra

there are several sides of the application of this word. Here it refers to mental formation, one of the five aggregates.

Saññā

sense, perception. One of the five aggregates.

Suttas

the scriptures and discourses of the Buddha.

Vedanā

feeling, sensation. One of the five aggregates.

Vinaya

code of ethics, monastic discipline, rule, rules of morality or of canon law. In this sense it is applied to the large collection of rules of the Buddhist Canon.

ENGLISH TERMS

Enlightenment

a translation of the Pāli word Nibbāna, meaning the sense of well-being, ease, and happiness, experienced through the knowledge of the freedom from suffering in oneself.

Rotten fish curry

a curry with fermented freshwater fish. The fermented fish, ‘pla ra’, has a very strong, distinctive smell.

Stream-winner

the first stage of enlightenment (also known as stream-enterer). There are four stages of awakening in Early Buddhism and Theravada, *Sotāpanna* (stream-winner), *Sakadāgāmi* (once-returner), *Anāgāmi* (non-returner), and *Arahant* (awakened being).

Ajahn Brahmavamso Mahathera, known to most as **Ajahn Brahm**, was born Peter Betts in London, United Kingdom on 7 August 1951. In the late 1960s, he received a scholarship to study Theoretical Physics at Cambridge University, where he first met other Buddhists and joined a Buddhist group. A few weeks after the age of 18, he saw a monk for the first time, and he knew then that was what he wanted to be.

After graduating from Cambridge, he taught at a high school in the UK for a year before travelling to Thailand to become a monk. He was ordained as a monk by Somdet Buddhajahn at Wat Saket in Bangkok, Thailand, on 5 December 1974. In January 1975, Ajahn Brahm travelled to Ubon Ratchathani in the northeast of Thailand to become a student of meditation master Ajahn Chah at Wat Nong Pah Pong. He later became a founding sangha member of Wat Pa Nanachat, an international monastery not far from Wat Nong Pah Pong. This new monastery was established by Ajahn Chah to cater for the increasing number of Westerners who were coming to ordain and train with him.

Ajahn Brahm was the Vinaya (code of monastic discipline) master at Wat Pah Nanachat from 1975 until his departure in 1983. His Vinaya notes are still authoritative for most Western Buddhist monks in the Theravada tradition. In 1983, Ajahn Chah asked Ajahn Brahm to go to Perth to assist Ajahn Jagaro in teaching duties supported by the Buddhist Society of Western Australia (BSWA). Later that year, BSWA purchased a rural forested property south of Perth to build Bodhinyana Monastery, the first and largest Buddhist monastery in the Southern Hemisphere. In 1995, upon the departure of Ajahn Jagaro, Ajahn Brahm became the Abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery.

In October 2004, Ajahn Brahm was awarded the John Curtin Medal for his vision, leadership and service to the Australian community. In June 2006, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the late king of Thailand, conferred upon Ajahn Brahm the title of Phra Visuddhisamvarathera, the rank of Phra Raja Khana in the ordinary class (Vipassanā or meditation category).

In October 2009, he was instrumental in facilitating Bhikkhuni ordinations at his monastery. Apart from empowering women in Buddhism, Ajahn Brahm is also a supporter of LGBTQI+ rights.

In September 2019, Ajahn Brahm was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia, General Division Medal, for significant services to Buddhism and to gender equality.

Ajahn Brahm is currently the Abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery, the Spiritual Director of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia, Spiritual Adviser to the Buddhist Societies of Victoria and South Australia, and Spiritual Patron of the Buddhist Fellowship in Singapore.

Ajahn Brahm has authored several books, including *Opening the Door of Your Heart*, *Happiness Through Meditation*, *The Art of Disappearing*, and *Bear Awareness*. His Dhamma talks are downloaded millions of times a year.



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