

An Inquiring Mind's Journey

a book about a life with Buddhism

by Bhante Kovida



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Chapter 1: Awakening

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Memory is a most interesting phenomenon. One can sit at a desk and remember almost anything if one has the time. If one is sitting in a cave or in a meditation hall or in prison for long periods of time, without the outside stimulation of books, radio, television, and conversation, one's memory will travel further and further back in time with vivid clarity. Some people spend a great deal of their lives clinging to unhappy memories and regretting the past while others are obsessed with the future.

There are times when I'm able to recall scenes of early childhood--crawling on the floor, learning to walk and falling, being held and looking over someone's shoulder, crying for no apparent reason, being around dogs and cats, and so on. After learning to walk, I can remember spending a lot of time outdoors, exploring and playing in the family's backyard, often by myself, and finding the world of plants, vegetables and flowers, animals, birds, fishes and insects totally fascinating, wonderful and magical. There was no television around to catch my attention and so my wild and fertile imagination was never tamed.

I remember picnics by the sea on Sundays and on public holidays with family and relatives, playing in the sand and by the water's edge, learning to swim and almost drowning several times, and the happiness of being a fish, finally, swimming confidently underwater. I remember how particularly delicious the picnic food was after being in the salty environment for a few hours, and the calmness of the sea after the afternoon rain. One felt so healthy and relaxed after a day by the seashore. The smell of sea breeze and the sound of gentle waves usually bring back these early memories.

Life on a tropical island seemed like paradise and people were mostly gentle and kind and full of fun and humour. There were the usual childhood fears and periods of illness and I think that it was during these periods of being sick in bed, alone in my room, that

my inquiring and reflective nature began to manifest and grow. I started to ponder over the meaning of life and death. Why do we have to get sick? Why do we have to feel pain? Why do we have to go to school? Why can't we play all the time? What exactly is death and where do people really go after they die? Do children really go to Heaven when they die? Life seemed so mysterious and unpredictable, full of wonder and so many things to worry about. Through the window I would gaze at the tropical landscape and the bluish-green hills in the distance and a deep longing to fly over them in search of adventure and answers to my questions would arise in me. My contemplative and romantic spirit had awakened.

After starting to attend church and Sunday school, I began questioning the nature and existence of God, Satan, angels, original sin, and so on. My imagination ran wild. I wondered about the exact locations of Heaven and Hell and what life would be like in both places--no, I had no desire to go to Hell! I pondered over the life of Jesus Christ and the words he used, and I seriously questioned the validity of the bible as God's Truth or Ultimate Truth. As an early seeker of truth, I soon surmised that books and words had some use or purpose but they were often confusing and misleading and therefore limited. I would often wander through the cemetery across the road, read the headstones of the graves and contemplate the mystery of death. At night, I had to deal with the fear of ghosts and spirits.

I was enthralled to learn that there were other planets in the solar system and that there were millions of stars like the sun. This opened up my young, inquiring mind to a larger dimension of existence and my awareness expanded out into the night sky. I began looking for the bright morning and evening "stars", and when one of my childhood dreams came through with my father deciding to build a movie theater, I promptly named it "Venus". My career as a space cadet had begun in earnest, you might say. I would look up in awe at the Milky Way in the night sky but only later did I come to know the spiral shape of the galaxy, its relationship to the solar system, and the existence of countless galaxies in the vast universe. By then, my sense of space had expanded considerably and my sense of time had a totally different meaning, but more on that later.

And as I got older, I found myself questioning the behavior of my parents and of other adults around me, also the integrity of politicians whenever they came around to give dramatic speeches before the elections. I observed how adults were caught up in their narrow-mindedness and pettiness, in their opinions and prejudices; they seemed so serious and complex, and somehow I didn't want to become an adult. I was beginning to learn that human beings had their weaknesses and limitations along with their good qualities. At this stage, I can clearly recall feeling that people were far more important than money and material things. Later, I was to realise that this feeling was the virtue, intelligence and freedom of loving kindness and compassion.

If memory serves me right, the turning point in my life occurred during the fourth year of high school, around my fifteenth birthday. I found myself losing interest in studies. Up until then, I had been doing quite well in school; my mind was bright, imaginative, and fairly untroubled despite the boisterous and regimented atmosphere of boarding school.

Due to my mother's influence, I had taken confirmation lessons at the Roman Catholic Church nearby and shortly thereafter, I was confirmed by the bishop. This was the high point of my "religious life", it seemed, when I was allowed to take Holy Communion, and I was hopeful that this privilege would eventually lead me to salvation--whatever that was I wasn't exactly sure. But by the fourth year of school, I was deeply disturbed, confused, and bored with the school environment and bored with going to church, which was compulsory. I was full of questions, yearnings and emotional turmoil. I felt dissatisfied with education and the Christian religion, and for the first time I began to worry about the future. Would I be able to leave school and fulfill my heart's desires? Would I ever find truth, understanding and happiness?

Would I ever become a doctor or an engineer or a world-famous scientist? Would I ever get married and have children? I dreamed of travelling and exploring the world in search of the exotic and the mysterious, the weird and the wonderful, and the sublime. I dreamed of sitting on a flying carpet and moving freely among the clouds; I felt trapped in a prison, shackled and earth-bound. I longed to be like Superman and chase horizons.

So many thoughts, images and emotions raced through my head. Hormones raced through my blood stream and I grew uncomfortable with my physical body. I began to dislike physical exercise and social activities, and I felt a sense of isolation and loneliness as I became increasingly preoccupied with my mental-emotional states. I could no longer appreciate the beauty of the tropical environment; I grew tired of the greenery and the heat and glare of the sun. Life on a tropical island no longer seemed like paradise. One day, I remember being aware of my restless mind, thoughts going several miles a minute, and suddenly I wondered whether it was possible for thinking to stop. Instinctively, I felt that there was something beyond the thinking process but I had no idea how to get out of the swift current of thoughts. Thinking seemed so automatic, mechanical and all consuming. There were no books available at that time about the ancient science of yoga and meditation, but I had a growing interest in learning judo and karate from reading magazines although I never made an effort to find an instructor. By chance, my interest in art resurfaced and painting became my meditation as it were; it helped me to focus my mind in a beneficial way, thus decreasing my mental anguish and emotional turmoil from time to time.

Finally, I somehow managed to finish high school four years later and was fortunate enough to get the opportunity to study overseas. I felt a great burden was lifted and a sense of elation and freedom came over me. I was indeed ready for a change of scenery and life-style. I wanted to travel more than I wanted to study but, at least, this was my big chance to leave the island. The future looked optimistic and full of many possibilities; the road to adventure, exploration and discovery was about to begin. While I was preparing to leave, my mother died suddenly and I remember feeling happy and relieved for her: that all her problems and conflicts were over and that she was finally at peace. I did not see her death as a personal loss but, rather, an end to her mental, emotional and physical suffering. And, so, whatever sorrow I might have felt at the time--more shock than sorrow, I recall--it quickly faded away leaving me with a deep sense of love, tenderness, understanding and wonder. And as I continued to paint, putting shapes and colours on

canvas, I was able to reflect on the profound and inescapable fact and mystery of death with a feeling of equanimity and joy. My mother's passing made me realise that no one could give me permanent happiness and security. I had to find happiness, peace and security somehow for myself.

In retrospect, I guess I had to attend university in order to realise that I didn't really want to be there, that I wasn't missing out on anything special. It was a period of discovery and adaptation, deep soul-searching, anxiety, frustration, depression, experimentation and revelation. It was a period of putting formal education into perspective. It was a necessary stepping-stone on the way to self-knowledge and liberation. Questions regarding the universe--infinity, eternity, time and space, the beginning and end, creation and creator--still burned fiercely in my inquiring mind. At the end, I knew one thing was for certain: that I had to travel the world and educate myself; learning from books, passing exams and obtaining a science degree seemed totally inadequate and unsatisfactory. Getting a job and settling down seemed so mundane and mediocre. There was so much to see, do and experience, so much to explore, discover and learn. Besides, I found the materialistic values of N. American society terribly superficial, self-centered and boring. I was indeed ready for the big adventure and journey of a lifetime. Around this time, I met two individuals who had travelled to India and Nepal via the overland route from Europe and I was very enthralled and excited listening to their experiences and adventures. Exotic, mystical and romantic images came to mind and I knew that this was exactly what I wanted to do. The ancient culture of India had always held a strong fascination in my young mind and the thought of hiking in the Himalaya Mountains and travelling to Tibet was most appealing indeed.

In October 1974, I began my journey in Europe, namely, Holland, Belgium, Italy and Greece. Then on to Asia Minor [Turkey] and eastward to Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and finally, India and Nepal. I felt that I was on a great quest, a pilgrimage of the heart, and when I reached India I knew that I was "home", that I had arrived in the land of my dreams. Mother India had beckoned and I had answered her call. Looking back, this overland journey and pilgrimage was the most important thing I ever did; it was the experience of a lifetime and it marked the culmination of my spiritual search in which all my inquiring energies became focused, awakened and actualized. There was no more confusion or doubts, no regrets or turning back, no more wandering blindly or groping in the dark. The path to self-knowledge, wisdom and freedom became clear. There were profound experiences that lead to deep realisations and insights; there was a feeling of total transformation and rebirth. My real life had begun. Incidentally, I never did get to Tibet; the closest I came was at the border with Nepal with some Swedish friends in their VW van. We were met by hostile Chinese soldiers--we could go no further. [This was, of course, before foreign travellers were allowed into Tibet]. I recall seeing propaganda magazines showing coloured photos of smiling Tibetans harvesting crops with beautiful mountains in the background. The caption read: Happy and prosperous Tibetan peasants after being liberated by the glorious People's Republican Army.

During the overland journey, I began to lose the conditioning of the mind: judgments and discriminations began to fade away, leaving a sense of childlike openness, innocence and

acceptance. There was joy and an elating sense of freedom being on the road. Also, I was able to let go of fear, fear of the unknown and of physical danger. I became very trusting and spontaneous, and the spirit of adventure allowed me to accept and endure physical hardships and discomfort along the way. It was all a part of the romance of travel, adventure and exploration. I learned to eat with my right hand, use a squat toilet, and sit comfortably on the bare ground, overcoming my aversion to dirt. So, by the time I reached India I was totally in harmony with the crowds and street life. Unlike the culture shock of those who fly directly to India from the west, I was not disturbed by the street dwellers, the beggars and children, the lepers and other deformed people, the dirt, dust, and noise, the unpleasant smells and the spicy food. It was all intense, interesting and fascinating. I was indeed in another world; an ancient, exotic, mysterious culture and I embraced it with open arms. I felt extremely fortunate and happy to be in India, for this was exactly where I wanted to be; my pilgrimage had begun. Unlike many travellers I'd met, I had no desire to visit any particular ashram, or spiritual center, or to meet any particular guru or spiritual teacher. I was just open and receptive to everything on the streets and without knowing it an all-embracing sense of empathy arose within me. My heart was open with loving-kindness and compassion. I felt a sense of ease and harmony despite the poverty around me; there were smiles everywhere. I soon began to realise that poverty was a relative thing. At first, it can be shocking to see people living on the roadside with very few belongings and can still be laughing and joking with their friends and street companions. I couldn't help reflecting on the many people in affluent countries who were unhappy, frustrated and lonely, and plagued by stress, craving, worry, fear and insecurity. People in the west had a much higher standard of living but there was indeed a great deal of mental suffering in modern society.

One day I was travelling on the train with some companions from Sweden when I met a man who had the most serene face I had ever seen. He was English-educated, dressed in western-styled clothes, clean-shaven, and he had a very blissful glow in his eyes. We easily began to converse. He asked about my country of origin and whether or not I was enjoying my visit to India. I said that I liked India a great deal, that it was a wonderful and fascinating country despite the over-population, the street dwellers, the beggars, etc. I also mentioned that I was a spiritual seeker but for some reason had no desire to find a teacher at this time, that I was learning a lot from just observing everything around me and how gentle and friendly people were.

He smiled warmly and said: "I used to be a politician because I thought I could help my country in that capacity but very soon I found out that it was a very corrupt business, blatantly corrupt, everyone seeking bribes, perks and higher positions, more power. I became very frustrated, despairing and depressed about the politician's life and I couldn't find a way out of my dilemma. A friend of mine suggested that I go to see his spiritual teacher or guru but at that time I was very skeptical about gurus and the superstitions surrounding the ancient Hindu religion. I saw myself as a modern, pragmatic Indian and I had no patience or sympathy for "religious" people and ceremonies. I believed that India was decaying because of the weak-minded, superstitious people, politicians included. But, finally, I decided to go with my friend to see this guru as I was hopelessly depressed and sad as if I was at the bottom of a deep, dark well and I felt there was really nothing

left to lose, I had lost all interest in life. The guru turned out to be a simple, unassuming man with a kind, peaceful face. We exchanged greetings and pleasantries and he looked at me with large, penetrating but warm eyes. I felt uneasy in his presence due to my skeptical nature and mental state. In contrast, my friend's face was glowing with love and adoration gazing at his guru; my friend seemed so happy and child-like, full of trust and devotion. The guru closed his eyes for a seemingly long time although only one or two minutes had passed; my mind was restless, agitated and perturbed. The guru opened his eyes as if awakening from a deep trance and slowly began to tell me about some very intimate details about myself and my life, things that only I knew about, not even my wife or siblings shared such intimate details. My reaction was one of profound shock, I was totally surprised and amazed, so much so that, quite unexpectedly, I felt my heaviness of being began to lighten, as if a great burden was being lifted from my shoulders. His ability to read my mind overcame my skepticism and eventually I became his student and devotee. This was the beginning of my spiritual life when I accepted this simple, kind and profound man as my revered guru. He taught me yoga and meditation, and guided me towards liberation and peace. I am so grateful to my guru for showing me the way out of ignorance and darkness."

I looked at the former politician with amazement. His face was glowing with joy. I was most impressed and taken in by his story and extraordinary presence.

"Can you tell me about meditation?" I asked.

"Normally," he replied, "we look outside of ourselves for happiness and security: in people, material objects and property, position and prestige, and in ideas and beliefs, but all these things are impermanent, unstable and unreliable. Meditation is learning how to go within yourself, to make your mind calm and clear, free from agitation, desire and confusion, therein lies your true happiness, security and peace."

"What happens if you keep doing meditation?" I asked naively.

"Well," he replied, "you get to a stage where thinking stops, where all mental activity comes to an end and the mind becomes completely silent and free."

My eyes widened, a bell went off in my head, my heart skipped a beat, and adrenaline rushed through my bloodstream.

"Really?!" I exclaimed excitedly, "Believe it or not, for the past few years I've been wondering whether it was possible for thinking to stop, for one to get out of this restless, all-consuming thought process. You see, where I grew up in the West Indies there were no books on yoga and meditation. So, here I am in India ten years later and meeting someone like you. I can't imagine my mind without thoughts unless I'm unconscious or in deep sleep or if I'm dead."

He laughed knowingly and said, "Most people have that idea because they're caught up in the thinking process, but actually, the silent mind during meditation is awake and alert

but very calm and still, so alert and still that thoughts cannot enter such a mind. Also, when the mind is silent and still there is just restful awareness, there is a conservation of mental energy so one needs less sleep."

I was in awe. I tried to imagine my mind without thoughts. I was earnestly thinking about my mind not thinking, which was futile, of course; trying to think of a state of mind where there are no thoughts is impossible, needless to say. My mind was full of thoughts, ideas and images. But I was deeply impressed and inspired by this serene man with the blissful eyes. I asked him to recommend some books on yoga and meditation and he wrote down a list of titles and authors for me. He smiled warmly as I thanked him and told him how happy and honoured I was to meet him. The train came to a halt at my station. He looked out of the window at the crowd of people dashing about on the platform and shouting noisily like school children. It was a chaotic scene but this serene man was at the center of the storm of people as he observed the moving crowd with great love, compassion and tenderness. I can still see his radiant face even after twenty-two years. He was my first spiritual guide and inspiration, a stranger on a train and I had forgotten to ask him his name.

Some weeks later I found myself in the pilgrimage town of Rishikesh by the Ganges River, north of New Delhi. It was a very peaceful area where the river flowed out of the lower foothills of the Himalaya Mountains. There were several Hindu temples along the river plus rest houses for travelling sadhus [renunciate monks] and lay pilgrims. There was also a famous yoga ashram [center] founded by Swami Sivananda; some of the yoga teachers who established centers in the west were students of Swami Sivananda's. My travelling companions and I were staying at a rest house owned by a local swami [Hindu monk]. There were several other westerners staying at this place, mostly from Europe. The swami never conducted any classes in yoga-meditation but he was a delightful landlord, very kind, funny and radiant. He would mostly sit on a platform under a tree in the courtyard, beside him was a framed picture of Lord Shiva, one of the main Hindu gods depicted as the great yogi ascetic sitting on top of Mt. Kailash in a blissful state of eternal peace and divine illumination. Everyday the swami would place a fresh garland of marigold flowers around the picture, join his palms together as an act of devotion to Lord Shiva and recite the mantra or phrase, "Om Namaya Shivaya." As a young monk, the swami used to travel all over India visiting temples and holy sites, living on alms offered by lay devotees, and practising various yoga disciplines. Now, he was passed middle age and content to be a landlord for western travellers and spiritual seekers; the rent money was enough to make him comfortable and content. Everyday and evening there was a party out on the patio area where people could easily chitchat and exchange personal histories and travel stories. There were nationalities from England, Ireland, France, Sweden and Jamaica. One Australian traveller, who lived outside of the rest house, would visit and join the parties. He was dressed like a young swami, in loose saffron-coloured clothes, his unkempt blond hair stood out like a lion's mane; apparently he slept in a large cardboard box beside one of the local restaurants--it was all a part of the romance of being a spiritual seeker in India.

After a few days I grew tired of the parties, the idle chatting and socializing, and I felt a strong urge to be alone by the river. On the last day in Rishikesh I got up early, had breakfast at a restaurant nearby and headed down to the Ganges river via a narrow dirt path. The path came to a clearing that revealed the river and the forested hills in the background. There were many smooth stones of various sizes along the bank of the river, which was surprisingly wide, and the water reflected the emerald green of the hills. The early morning sun gave warmth, light and colour to the awakening landscape and cast long shadows everywhere. It was a most peaceful and enchanting area and I wondered why I hadn't visited this place earlier. This side of the river was sandy. I sat on one of the smooth stones and gazed at the wide, flowing river, the green hills across the water and the clear blue sky; there were the sounds of birds and the soothing song of the river and one entered a timeless, magical, care-free world reminiscent of childhood in the tropics. One felt a benediction upon the earth, far away from the bustling crowds of towns and cities.

The water looked inviting, the sun was getting hot. I had travelled all the way from Canada to be by this sacred river, it was time for a holy dip. The Hindus believe that to bathe in the Ganges was to cleanse one's soul of past sins or unwholesome actions. I was a non-believer from the west but I liked rivers. The water was breathtakingly cold and I believed then that the source of this revered river was from melting snow and ice high up the Himalayas. I stayed in for as long as I could, got out shivering and wide-awake, then sat on the sand near the water. In the warm sun I felt clean and refreshed, relaxed and healthy, it was indeed wonderful to be alive at that moment. I crossed my legs, closed my eyes and listened to the sounds in the environment. My mind became more and more relaxed and calm, I became aware of my breathing and the heat of the sun on my skin. I totally forgot about my travelling companions back at swami's rest house. My mind entered a peaceful reverie, images of Europe came to mind, places and faces came and went, faces of friends and family back in Canada appeared and disappeared. Images of Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India came and went. It all seemed like a wonderful, romantic dream, too good to be true. I thought, "I wish all my friends were here with me right now." There was a feeling of love, fondness and gratitude for these friendships. The reverie continued for a while longer and then I slowly opened my eyes and I was once again back by the Ganges river in Rishikesh, in an area of peace and timeless enchantment. But this time, my mind being in a deeply calm and receptive state, one became totally overwhelmed by the beauty of the brilliant blue sky which now contained a few cotton clouds, the green, forested hills and the light on the wide expanse of flowing water. Utterly speechless, I felt a strong rushing sensation up my spine to the brain; there was an explosion of ecstasy and supreme joy. I was enveloped in wave upon wave of bliss and sacredness, an all-embracing benediction beyond words and symbols.

Then, quite unexpectedly, without effort or desire, the unthinkable happened: all thoughts came to an end. The automatic, mechanical thinking process came to a standstill, stopping by itself. It was as if that blissful, intense energy had burnt away all traces of memory and movement. There was only a sense of absolute stillness, deepening silence and expanding space and bliss, beyond measure. The mind was empty of all mental activity and chatter and so it had space and tranquility. A restless, agitated, busy mind has

no space and clarity; there is just clutter and confusion. Silence, space and peace go together. There was also the ending of time: past and future had mysteriously faded into the eternal present moment--only the present moment existed, it was a completely different dimension. Later, I was to have a deeper understanding regarding the nature of thinking and psychological time--thought and time are intricately connected.

The absence of thought is not the end of consciousness or existence but rather the awakening of clear awareness, bare attention to the way things are. It is seeing once again with innocent eyes, free from the layers of conditioning, seeing without labels, words and discrimination. As a child, I remembered having this innocent state of mind, this original or beginner's mind, before it became "contaminated", programmed and conditioned, when everything was fresh and magical and full of wonder, mystery and beauty. This "mystical" experience by the Ganges River was indeed a great awakening or re-awakening. It was a return to one's original mind, a blessing and benediction beyond measure, beyond value. It was not the end of a search or the "ultimate" experience or goal, but rather, it was the essential opening or beginning of the journey of insight and self-knowledge, wisdom and freedom.

Some weeks later, in Nepal, I went trekking in the Himalaya mountains and this state of consciousness would begin to arise at increasingly frequent intervals: thoughts would effortlessly come to an end as if a cleansing process was taking place; perhaps this was due to the strenuous physical activity of trekking up and down the mountain slopes plus the fresh air of the higher altitudes plus the spectacular scenery of the Himalayan range which seemed to float endlessly from horizon to horizon like an incredible and unbelievable mirage. The scenery was so stupendous and awesome that you felt totally transported as if in an amazing dream high above the world and very far away from known existence, far removed from the busy, anxious, and complicated world of mankind. The silence, beauty, and timelessness of the environment cleansed the mind of the burden of thoughts as memory, past experience and knowledge, and so there was freedom, innocence, vast space and great joy. One felt immense gratitude and love for all things on earth.

After several days in the mountains, I returned to the city of Kathmandu, which was a big culture shock as you may well imagine. I felt like I had landed on a very strange and crowded planet. I would wander around in a daze staring at people in the market places wondering where they all came from. I would sit in restaurants, read menus and eat a wide variety of meals as if in a dream; life in the mountains was so basic, austere yet sublime and deeply satisfying. The city was really a totally different world. I visited Tibetan temples and met Tibetan refugees who were very hardy and fun-loving people despite their difficult plight. They had a strong devotion to the Dalai Lama and a profound faith in Buddhism. I began reading books on Buddhism and Tibetan culture; later someone recommended books on the teachings of J. Krishnamurti, D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, Christmas Humphreys, Lao Tze, Herman Hesse, and so on. My real education had begun.

During that first visit to India and Nepal, I spent two weeks in Goa, on the west coast south of Bombay, living in a fishing village and enjoying the tropical environment. Every evening at 6 p.m. we would go down to the beach and watch the sun set on the Arabian Sea, the evening sky would be ablaze with colours and magical enchantment. On one such evening, my mind was unusually calm and silent from the soothing sea breeze, the endless waves and the golden orange clouds in the distance. The evening "star" had appeared out of nowhere in the blue sky above the horizon and it became brighter and brighter in the slowly, darkening sky. The big orange ball of the sun began to descend into the sea it seemed, the mind became more still and focused, then suddenly one realised that the sun was not moving, it was not going down into the ocean but rather, it was the planet which was turning away from the burning star, thus creating the illusion of the setting sun. One actually felt the revolving motion of the planet; for the first time there was the revelation that I was really sitting on a large sphere spinning endlessly in space around the sun. The space in the mind expanded into immensity so vast that it contained the entire planet, the evening "star", the sun, and the entire solar system. For the first time the solar system became a three-dimensional reality, not just a two-dimensional perception or idea. One's being was just vast space in which the whole world and the entire solar system was happening. The sense of self or ego--the "me" center--had dissolved into that vast, spacious awareness, the conditioned self had disappeared in the complete silence of the mind with the ending of thought. Later, I was to realise that the self or ego entity was a construction of the thinking process as memory, past experience and knowledge. I remember I used to see the moon as a two-dimensional object, like a flat disc of light in the evening sky; my perception of it had no depth. But after this experience on the beach in Goa, I was able to perceive the moon quite easily as a three-dimensional sphere regardless of the different phases--crescent--shaped, half moon, or full moon. It was indeed a blessing to feel at home once again in the universe and no longer a stranger, an isolated being separate from Mother Nature and the amazingly immense and timeless Cosmos; one had regained that sense of unity that one had felt during childhood. Out of that vast immensity, that spacious, boundless awareness, beyond thought, measure and discrimination, came that which was most sacred and holy, a deep and all-embracing love and compassion for all things on earth and in the whole universe. There was the ecstasy of sublime beauty, child-like wonder, and grace. One was overwhelmed by the mystery and immensity of existence. There were tears of profound joy, freedom and gratitude. One had awakened.

Silence and space give immense depth and freedom to the mind; the activity of thought with its self-centered desires and fears is linear, shallow, fragmentary and isolating. There is space around thoughts and the "I, me" center, limited space in which all our conflicts, fears and problems breed and manifest. The immense and timeless reality/dimension of the universe is always around us, always omnipresent. We exist in this vast, timeless reality but we are not aware of it because we are caught in the small dimension of the mind; we are prisoners of the thinking process, the rapid-flowing mind-stream; we are trapped in the small, narrow space thus created. Also, the mind is time-based because thinking is time as past and future, and thoughts usually dominate our consciousness. A silent mind with clear, spacious awareness is timeless, eternal. I used to think that eternity was billions, trillions of years in the future but during these "mystical", awakening

experiences one realised that eternity was now, the timeless and limitless state of the universe, no beginning and no ending, always was and always will be. Cosmic consciousness is that state of being, beyond time, beyond measure, beyond thoughts and feeling. Physical age becomes utterly meaningless; the physical organism, the mind-body process is just a biological manifestation of cosmic energy, composing of the four elements--earth, water, fire and air--which has come together because of causes and conditions and will disintegrate after awhile due to causes and conditions. We are apertures, openings through which the universe becomes aware of itself. Birth, existence and death are like the opening and closing of these apertures. Birth, existence and death are just parts of a process in a much vaster and timeless Reality. To be imprisoned and enslaved in the small reality/dimension of the mind--thoughts, ideas, ideals, conclusions, images, feelings and emotions--is to suffer, to grasp and to cling, to crave and to be attached, to suffer from ignorance and delusion.

When I returned to Canada, I experienced horrendous reverse culture shock. I was so open and childlike, and profoundly affected and transformed by my experiences in India and Nepal that I felt very vulnerable to the realities and superficialities of modern, materialistic society. After being in a culture where communication in public was easy and effortless, I found people quite self-centered, isolated and lonely, and shopping in supermarkets terribly cold and impersonal. It seemed really amazing that one could buy a lot of groceries, go through the checkout counter, pay your money, and not have to utter a single word. In Asia, it is the human contact that is important, the product that you are purchasing is secondary; in modern society it is the product and its cost that are important, human contact is secondary, seemingly unimportant. I found the environment very sterile, uninteresting, superficial and isolating. I just wanted to turn around and return to South Asia, to the ancient, exotic, mystical, and very human culture of India and Nepal. I felt like a fish out of water, but I could not afford to return to these countries; one felt trapped and so alone, there was suffering and conflict in the mind. I then realised the time had come for mental cultivation, mental training and development. I had to learn to be peaceful and harmonious with myself and the environment. I began to practice Hatha Yoga and zazen (sitting meditation), read Dharma books, and learn to play the sitar, which was a form of meditation in itself. I had been shown the way to wisdom and freedom, now I had to tread the ancient path with right effort, determination, patience and understanding. The door to liberation had been opened wide.

That was twenty-two years ago [1975]. Since then, I've been back to India three more times during which periods I managed to travel all over the subcontinent, and spend many months in the mountain region of northern India during the hot summer seasons living a life of quiet contemplation and simplicity, and meeting many spiritual seekers and adventurers, temporary refugees from western society like myself. It was a time for healing and deep introspection. Living a simple life close to nature was most beneficial in establishing a foundation in meditation, mindfulness and calm attention in daily life plus a deep appreciation for the retreat life--flowing gently, effortlessly with nature, in harmony with the Tao, the way of all things. I found that mindfulness came naturally in daily activities--carrying water, collecting fire wood, picking wild vegetables and herbs, preparing and cooking meals, answering the calls of nature, washing clothes, bathing by

the waterfall, sitting and walking. It was easy to be mindful moment to moment, this quality of calm attention came naturally, effortlessly because the mind was in harmony with the environment--peaceful, empty and timeless.

The Buddha and those early monks spent most of their time in the forests and rural areas of northern India 2600 years ago. They lived a very simple life practising mindfulness in daily life in order to make the mind firm and concentrated, calm and clear, so they could reflect deeply into the nature of existence and gain self-understanding and wisdom, and freedom from suffering and mental dis-ease. They walked mindfully back and forth along the forest paths; they walked mindfully to the villages and towns, alms bowl in hand, to collect food, waiting patiently in front of each house. With calm attention, they walked back to the forest, sitting and eating mindfully in silence, washing their bowls, washing their robes, sweeping leaves, etc. And sitting under trees and establishing mindfulness on the in-breath and out-breath, thus focusing the mind with clear, calm energy and reflecting deeply into the nature of existence, into the nature of the physical body, and the phenomenon of experience regarding the six senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling touch sensations, and thinking and imagining. It was through these six sense doors that the Buddha realised the beginning and the ending of the world, the arising and passing away of mental and physical phenomena.

Constant mindfulness and reflection lead one to the sky-like quality of the mind, that spacious awareness which sees the true nature of phenomena or reality. When the mind is firmly established in the present moment with calm attention, one is in touch with birth and death, the arising and passing away of mental, emotional and physical phenomena. Physical birth and death are only one aspect of reality. There is also the arising and passing away of thoughts, ideas, images, feelings and sensations, moods and emotions, perceptions, and consciousness regarding the six sense doors. One sees clearly the changing and impermanent nature of phenomena, its absence of a permanent, unchanging self or ego entity, and the grasping, clinging nature of the conditioned mind--the restless, agitated and reactive thinking process.

Life itself is our greatest teacher. The more we learn about life the more we learn about ourselves. Self-knowledge leads to wisdom, compassion and freedom. Learned people [scholars, professors, intellectuals, professionals, etc.] who do not know themselves are really unintelligent, unbalanced individuals; they are not free from ignorance, delusion and suffering, from self-centered craving and attachment. In self-understanding there is the whole of existence, it embraces all the struggles and conflicts of humanity, all the dissatisfaction, disillusionment and dis-ease of mankind. The Buddha was awakened to the eternal truths of existence and he pointed the way to those truths. He taught the way to peace, harmony and freedom through the path of morality, mind cultivation and wisdom. He helped people to understand themselves, to understand the nature of the human condition and experience, and the cause of suffering in the mind.

In 1987, I went to Sri Lanka as a volunteer development worker for a soya food project. It was very challenging work that got increasingly demanding and stressful when a communist insurgency swept the country in the hope of overthrowing the government.

The civil war between the Tamils and Sinhalese in the northern part of the island had seemed far away but this communist insurgency affected the rest of the country, spreading fear, confusion, chaos, and violence in the population. People were threatened to close their businesses and offices under fear of death on certain days in order to disrupt the normal running of the country. Many foreign workers left the island but we had to stay and keep the project going as best as we could under the circumstances. By that time, the project was confined to the urban areas of Kandy and Colombo as all our rural activities had to be postponed. I didn't feel personally threatened but there was always the possibility of being in the wrong place at the wrong time regarding exploding bombs and flying bullets. I had to call upon all my spiritual resources to remain calm, patient and positive as everyone around me were suffering from fear psychosis: the family I stayed with, my staff members and friends, acquaintances and the population at large. It was an island of tension and uncertainty made worse by daily rumours and endless speculations. It was a most challenging time indeed. Eventually, the insurgency was put down and the leaders were finally caught. Many people were detained and many were killed. It was the end of a living nightmare and everyone was greatly relieved. Sadly, the conflict in the north continues to this day between the Tamils and Sinhalese.

During all this time in Sri Lanka, I had the idea at the back of my mind of one day becoming a monk and devoting the rest of my life to the Buddha's teachings; it seemed like a natural stage in the evolutionary process. I had been visiting the local temples and meeting the local monks plus some of the western monks who'd been in Sri Lanka for several years. We'd have stimulating discussions about the Dharma, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, travelling in India, and the life of a western monk in South Asia. They had fascinating stories to tell and some of the monks were very encouraging. One of them introduced me to his teacher, Ven. Balangoda Anandamaitreya, a very kind and simple monk who was a noted scholar and meditation practitioner. Balangoda was the name of his hometown. I was most impressed by his humility and charm and I decided that I would ask him for ordination when the time was right. He was ninety-five years old at the time and quite healthy. During the troubles, he left for the U.S.A. where he continued to teach the Dharma and write. At the end of my contract, I returned to Canada for three months, and then flew back to Sri Lanka to meet Venerable Anandamaitreya. I was ready for monkhood and a long retreat, the soya food project had left me completely exhausted and I needed to slowly recharge my batteries. Ven. Anandamaitreya was still in the U.S.A. so I decided to revisit India and Nepal after an absence of ten years. It was a wonderful experience and it revived my spirit for adventure and romance. I was also able to visit Indonesia, finally, after many years of wanting to get there. The cultures of Sumatra, Java and Bali were very beautiful and exotic but in the end I became physically exhausted from the humid heat, traffic pollution and cigarette smoke on public transportation. My life as an intrepid world traveller had come to an end. I was really in need of a long rest and spiritual retreat. Ven. Anandamaitreya returned to Sri Lanka and he ordained me into the oldest religious order in existence, that of the Buddhist Sangha which began over 2500 years ago. I was very happy and a new phase of my life had begun. I was able to do a long retreat of study, mind cultivation and reflection with my teacher's guidance and loving kindness. After three years, I had to leave Sri Lanka due to health problems. I visited Thailand for three months and had immediate access to the

Buddhist culture with the help of a Thai monk as a travelling companion and guide. I was asked to do some teaching during this time and this continued during my visit to Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Korea, and after I'd returned to Canada after an absence of six and a half years. Sharing the Dharma is a rewarding learning experience and I hope to continue doing so for as long as possible.

May all beings be well and happy and free from suffering. May all beings be peaceful and free from fear, conflict and delusion. May all beings be awakened to the truth of Dharma, to life itself.

With metta--loving kindness,
Bhante Kovida
Toronto, 1997.

Chapter 2: Questions and Answers

From: An Inquiring Mind's Journey:
a book about a life with Buddhism
by Bhante Kovida

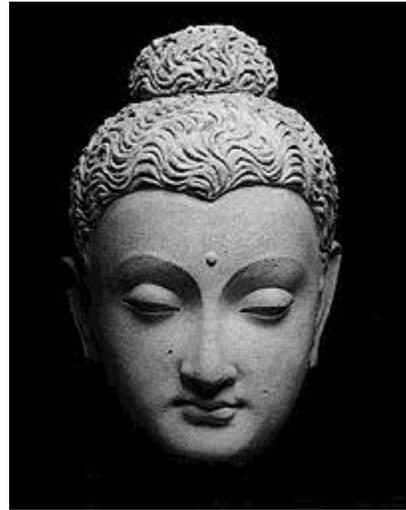


Image courtesy of [Buddhism Depot](#)

Q: Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy?

A: Buddhism is not a religion in the traditional sense where one has to believe in a creator God or accept a prophet as one's personal savior. It is a doctrine taught by the Buddha, it is not a dogma nor a revelation made known by some supernatural agency. Buddhism is a spiritual path based on personal inquiry and experience, self-knowledge based on the understanding of the human condition and the nature of human suffering, and how to overcome suffering following the path of wholesome living, mind cultivation and wisdom. The Buddha was, in effect, a great mystic [a seeker of truth], a psychologist and psychotherapist, a healer of mental conflicts and dis-ease.

The majority of traditional Buddhists in Asia and S.E. Asia do not see Buddhism as a spiritual psychotherapy. It is mainly understood as a religion. And the scholars who study the teachings of the Buddha tend to regard the Dharma as a philosophy. These two ways of thinking can be viewed as two extremes; the Middle Way of the Buddha is to see the Dharma as a form of psychotherapy. I would say that if Buddhism were introduced to modern society as a spiritual psychotherapy, then the message of the Buddha would be correctly understood and appreciated. The danger of seeing Buddhism as religion is that it tends towards dogmatism, supernaturalism and the occult. The danger of seeing it as just another esoteric Indian philosophy is that this perception separates it from our real day-to-day lives. The Dharma is to be studied and learnt, but more important it is to be practiced in daily life, for without practice one cannot appreciate the truth, and above all it is to be realised: immediate realisation through mindfulness and intuitive knowing is its ultimate goal. Thus the Dharma is compared to a raft, which is meant for the sole purpose of getting us away from the bondage of ignorance and delusion to the shore of wisdom, peace and compassion.

So Buddhism is not an abstract philosophy based merely on intellectual ideas and concepts; the word *philosophy* means, "the love of truth". It is the path of awakening to the truths of existence and laws of Nature, to the way things are. The Buddha's method of teaching was unique; he encouraged people to think for themselves, to reason out and test for themselves and not to be bounded by any blind beliefs and superstitions. He criticized the enslaving ways of the traditional religious authority and emphasized the importance of free thought, inquiry and investigation so as to awaken one's own intuitive intelligence and wisdom.

Q: I was reading about the different schools of Buddhism and it all seems very confusing. Can you comment on this?

A: I, too, was confused in the beginning when I began to read about Buddhism, about the different traditions of Theravada [Hinayana], Mahayana, Zen, Vajrayana, the Pure Land School, about the worship of Amitabha Buddha of the Western Paradise, and the Bodhisattvas of the Mahayana School. It all seemed complex and confusing indeed. We have to go back to the time of the Buddha in ancient India in order to have a clearer perspective of his life and teachings, and how the various traditions evolved after his death.

When Siddhartha Gotama renounced the worldly life of a prince in order to find Truth and a cure for sickness, old age and death, he was following an already ancient path of the yogi or sadhu or samana, the path of the spiritual ascetic and forest dweller, which began in the Indus Valley several centuries previously. The Buddha and his order of monks lived most of their lives in the forest areas of northern India but by the time of his death, forty five years after his enlightenment, there were some established monasteries built by wealthy devotees plus forest huts and shelters scattered over certain areas of the countryside. The Buddha taught the path of simplicity and detachment, wisdom and mindfulness, loving kindness and compassion, which lead to peace and freedom from suffering. At that time there were no official Buddhist temples, no Buddha statues and chanting ceremonies. The latter evolved for the benefit of the lay devotees and supporters who were unable to devote their lives to simplicity, renunciation and meditation. Pali chanting was also used by the monks and nuns as a means of memorizing the teachings in the oral tradition, as there was no written language at the time.

During the first few centuries following the Buddha's death, several schools of Buddhism evolved, including the Mahayana tradition, which developed the Bodhisattvas--human symbols, personifications of human virtues [compassion, wisdom, patience, generosity, etc.] when the mind was purified of defilements [ignorance, delusion, craving, attachment, hatred and ill will]. Images were made of the Bodhisattvas and soon people began to worship them as living deities contrary to their original purpose: that of reflection and inspiration for making the effort to purify the mind of defilements. The Mahayana School spread north and then east to Tibet, China, Korea and Japan, where it further evolved according to already existing cultural beliefs, traditions, superstitions, and temperament. The Pure Land School evolved in China with the worship of Amitabha Buddha [the Celestial Buddha of Infinite Light] and a few of the Bodhisattvas. This is a

purely devotional tradition in which the devotees believe they will get to the Pure Land in the Western Paradise after death by chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha.

Vegetarianism and the practice of generosity are aspects of the Pure Land tradition, and it remains a popular tradition to this day in Chinese temples around the world, as it doesn't require renunciation from worldly pleasures, materialism, and family life. It is easier for the Chinese to relate to the Buddha as a deity than as a forest recluse living on daily alms.

The Zen or Ch'an School was founded at the famous Shao Lin temple in China by an Indian monk named Bodhidharma. This tradition focused on liberation through long periods of sitting meditation and intuitive insight, and it later spread to Korea and Japan. Zen Buddhism was brought to the west by Japanese masters during the early part of the twentieth century.

Tibetan Buddhism [the Vajrayana School] evolved over the centuries as a combination of Mahayana and Tantric teachings and practices from India plus the native shamanistic Bon religion. Their belief in reincarnation came originally from the Hindu culture.

The Theravada School [the Path of the Elders] comes closest to the original tradition of the Buddha especially the forest traditions of South and Southeast Asia [Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia]. Rural and urban temples tend to focus more on ceremonies for the benefit of the lay devotees and supporters as they did centuries ago in India. The forest tradition focuses on renunciation and simplicity, mind training and cultivation based on the four foundations of mindfulness [body, sensations, states of mind, and mental objects and perceptions]. The vinaya rules of conduct tend to be more strict in the forest tradition; the precepts were meant to be flexible guidelines for mindfulness training and reflection in order to overcome defilements but over the centuries monks have become rigid with even the minor precepts--they lack common sense and intelligence and so they experience conflict and confusion.

Devotees and scholars of the Mahayana School [the Greater Vehicle] referred to the Theravada School as Hinayana [the Lesser Vehicle], which is considered to be a derogatory term by those of the Theravada tradition. Many Mahayanists believe that the "Hinayanists" are inferior for they seek enlightenment and emancipation only for themselves alone whereas the Mahayanists would like to believe that they seek the same for all sentient beings out of universal compassion. This is an ignorant and arrogant view, of course, for anyone who makes the effort to follow the Buddha's Path, regardless of tradition, would naturally want to help others awaken from suffering out of their own freedom from ignorance and delusion which manifests as wisdom and compassion.

So, if you are ever confused about the different traditions and about conflicting beliefs and teachings, you always go back to the life and teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha in ancient India, especially regarding the Four Noble Truths and the Three Characteristics of Existence [impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self].

Q: Do you have to become an official Buddhist in order to understand the Buddha's teachings?

A: No, you don't have to become an official Buddhist in order to understand the Dharma. All you really need is a sensitive, inquiring mind and a deep wish to understand yourself and the nature of existence better. Many Buddhists do not understand what the Buddha taught; they say they're Buddhists because their parents were Buddhists by tradition. Similarly, many people call themselves Christians because their parents and grandparents were Christians but only some of them really understand the teachings of Jesus Christ. They may go to the temple or church every Sunday but they remain ignorant and superstitious. The Buddha wasn't a "Buddhist" and Jesus wasn't a "Christian". Both teachers were great mystics and spiritual beings who had made the effort to overcome human weaknesses and defilements--ignorance and delusion, craving and clinging, hatred and ill will. Personally, I do not consider myself a "Buddhist"; rather I'm a student of the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha. Siddhartha Gotama did not become a Buddha through Buddhism; he was awakened to the Dharma [the truths of existence, the laws of Nature]. You can say that the Dharma produced a Buddha, and the Buddha proclaimed the Dharma so that we, too, can become awakened to the Dharma and attain freedom from suffering, ignorance and delusion.

In the last twenty-five centuries thousands of books have been written which seek to elaborate or simplify the Dharma. Religions have been formed around it and countless practices [rites, rituals, ceremonies, etc.] have been advised in its name, all of which tend to separate the Dharma from life, from everyday existence--all of which glorify and venerate the pathfinder [the Buddha, various mystics and their followers]--yet which ignore the Timeless Path and the qualities of nobility needed to even begin on the spiritual journey. This ignorance [ignore-ance] in which the bewilderment of suffering and confusion have their base, has been the reason why the one continuing advice of the Buddha has been continually ignored. What is this advice? Satipatthana [mindfulness, calm attention]. To be mindful of life. To pay attention, to be alert and awake! To examine and reflect sensibly and without preset views and opinions the physical and mental states of phenomena. To be aware of "what is" from moment to moment.

Each of us must therefore be mindful as we tread the ancient way of the Wise Ones. Each of us must see the path through our own eyes. Each must know the Dharma through one's own experience. Just reading books is not enough; the value of the Dharma isn't to be found in books or in rites, rituals and ceremonies. Those are external appearances of Dharma; just fingers pointing to the moon, they're not the realization of Dharma as a personal experience. If you realise the Dharma you realise your own mind, you see the truth there. When the truth becomes apparent it cuts off the stream of delusion. We must be mindful of our methods and conditioned habits of reacting, of forming opinions and prejudices. Through mindfulness, we may strip life of its illusions and complexities, its pretenses and hallucinations, its fears, anxieties, tensions and so on. We are able to experience the wordless truth of seeing things as they are in the flame of attention, in the clarity of perception, free from the conditioning/programming of the mind--labels, judgments, comparisons, criticisms, likes and dislikes, desires and aversions. The Buddha taught the way of Satipatthana through which the Dharma may be clearly realized. Mindfulness and reflection in daily life lead to insight, self-knowledge, wisdom, compassion, freedom and harmony.

Q: Do you have to become a monk or nun to follow the path of the Buddha?

A: No, it isn't necessary although being a monastic does give one more time to devote oneself to study, mind cultivation, and reflection. One can practice equally as well as a lay person; the important thing is the seriousness of one's intention and the effort made. If one has an inquiring, contemplative mind then one will be motivated to go deeply into the Dharma to attain self-knowledge and increased awareness, mindfulness and attention, which lead to wisdom, compassion and freedom. Some monks and nuns do not have inquiring minds; they become monastics for reasons other than spiritual--family expectation, escaping an unhappy marriage or a stressful life situation or poverty, and so on. Some monastics become lazy and corrupt; some remain worldly-minded, ignorant and deluded. Instead of cultivating humility and simple living, they become obsessed with building temples and monuments, and how to get more funds for their egoistic schemes. They try to glorify Buddhism in the vain hope of glorifying themselves in the process but they cannot escape from suffering.

Sometimes becoming a monk or nun can be a hindrance to awakening: without proper training and guidance the deluded ego gets easily caught up in the image of being someone very holy and special and so a lot of suffering and conflict is experienced. As in lay life, deluded monks and nuns, if they get into positions of power or influence, can also cause a lot of suffering and problems in the temple and monastic environment. Power is indeed corrupting, aggressive, violent and destructive unless there is wisdom, compassion and mindfulness.

Q: What is the most important thing in following the Buddha's path?

A: The most important thing in following the Buddha's path is first recognizing our human defilements [ignorance and delusion, craving and clinging, hatred and ill-will] and then making the effort to purify our minds and hearts of these defilements which cause us suffering and dis-ease, and disharmony in society and the world at large. Liberation means letting go of suffering. The Buddha's advise was: "Do good, refrain from unwholesome actions, and purify the mind." Many Buddhists do not make the effort to purify their minds so they remain greedy, self-centered, fearful and superstitious, envious and jealous, proud, arrogant, and conceited, and resentful of others. In short, they remain ignorant and deluded. They do not know the freedom and virtue of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Following the Noble Eight-fold Path of wholesome living, mind cultivation and wisdom leads to the ending of suffering. In today's world, it is essential that we learn to relax and let go of tension, stress, agitation and anxiety in order to recognize our defilements and to look deeply into the true nature of existence, into the way things are. Mental repose is essential to mind training and cultivation, to mindfulness and insight.

If one reflects on the life of the Buddha, there are essentially three qualities that stand out: renunciation and simplicity, loving kindness and compassion, wisdom and mindfulness. It is no coincidence that these qualities lead to the attainment of Nirvana, a state of peace and contentment. In the context of the three defilements and the repeated

arising of suffering, discontentment and dis-ease, we can see that renunciation and simplicity is the antidote for craving and clinging, loving kindness and compassion is the antidote for hatred and ill will, and wisdom and mindfulness is the antidote for ignorance and delusion. Through cultivating these three qualities one is able to eliminate the defilements and attain the peace and bliss of Nirvana. So it is no coincidence that these qualities should stand out so prominently in the Buddha's life.

Q: How is the Buddha's teaching relevant today in modern society?

A: There's a great deal of mental suffering in modern society and the Buddha's teaching is about understanding the nature of suffering and how to overcome suffering. He called this the Four Noble Truths--the truth of suffering and mental dis-ease, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering. This teaching was relevant 2500 years ago and it's most relevant today in our consumer, materialistic society where there's a lot of stress, self-centered craving, greed and attachment, fear and insecurity, frustration, loneliness, isolation, depression and sadness. Although people today are more educated, sophisticated and literate, they still suffer from ignorance and delusion, craving and clinging, hatred and ill will. In modern society people have an absurd sense of "I", "me", and "mine", they are far too self-centered and take themselves far too seriously, and so they experience a great deal of suffering, craving and fear.

Most people do not understand themselves, their own minds and the laws of Nature. Their minds are restless and confused and so they're caught by greed, resentment and delusion. There is constant grasping and clinging, craving and attachment to worldly things including to ideas, concepts, ideals, views and opinions, to personal preferences. There is a great deal of fear, anxiety and insecurity, including the fear of death and of letting go of attachments. Due to ignorance and delusion, we do not see death as a natural phenomenon any longer. We see it as the cruel end to the self or ego-personality with its many attachments, its pleasures, enjoyments and habits. We don't see that death, sickness and old age exist simply because there is birth of the physical body; that all these natural conditions are inseparable, and that there is no permanent self or ego personality within us. All that we are is a mind-body process consisting of water, earth, fire and air. The ego-personality is only conditioning based on memory and past experiences. Our very existence is based on constant change and impermanence yet due to ignorance [ignorance] we crave permanency in our relationships, in pleasure and enjoyment, in being and becoming, in having and possessing, in our attachments, and so there is the fear of these things coming to an end--we don't want people, material things, and situations that we're attached to change. So there is suffering--craving and clinging, fear and anxiety, frustration, despair, and dis-ease.

The realisation of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and the non-existence of a permanent, concrete and separate self leads to peace, harmony and freedom. In Dharma practice, we come to realise the unsatisfactoriness of sensory experience; when we expect to be satisfied from sensory objects or experiences we can only be temporarily satisfied, gratified maybe, momentarily happy--and then it changes. This is because there is no

point in sensory consciousness that has a permanent quality or essence. So the sensory experience is always a changing one, but out of ignorance and delusion, we tend to expect a great deal from it. We tend to demand, hope and create all kinds of illusory expectations, only to feel terribly disappointed, frustrated, despairing, sorrowful and fearful. Once we understand non-self, then the burden of life is lifted. We'll be at peace with the world. When we see beyond the conditioned self, beyond the idea of "me" and "mine", we no longer cling to happiness and security, and then we can be truly happy, peaceful and secure. We are able to let go without struggle--to be light, innocent, joyful and free. By knowing our own body, heart and mind, we can let go of grasping and clinging, let go of mental--emotional states instead of being caught and deluded by them. We can be content with little, with simple living and wise understanding.

Q: Can you speak some more about the nature of suffering [dukkha]?

A: Dukkha is anything that disturbs the natural peace and balance of the mind. The mind [and body] is an aspect of nature, like the leaves, grass, pond, etc. It has its own peace and equanimity but this is easily disturbed because it follows moods and emotions, it reacts and becomes upset, like the wind that blows the leaves and grass around and disturbs the calm surface of the pond. So, dukkha covers the whole range of human experience--craving, greed, envy, frustration, disappointment, despair, depression, sadness, sorrow, grief, hatred, jealousy, resentment, ill-will, fear, worry, anxiety, guilt, obsession, loneliness, boredom, and so on.

Dukkha also means that all things--physical, mental and emotional--are impermanent and transitory, and are therefore unsatisfactory and unreliable. Nothing in the world--people, material possessions, sense pleasures and enjoyment, feelings, ideas, etc.--can give us permanent happiness, satisfaction and security. After all, happiness [and unhappiness] is only temporary mental states, only changing conditions of the mind. A happy feeling, a pleasant sensation or experience, a comfortable situation is not permanent, it doesn't last forever. It has to change sooner or later. And when it does, it produces mental pain, disease, frustration and disappointment, and despair. The Buddha realised that the world--conditioned existence, inside and outside of ourselves--was a constant, ceaseless flow of changing and unsatisfactory states. Nothing is fixed and everlasting.

Dukkha also includes birth, sickness, ageing and death; being with unpleasant aggravating persons and conditions--hot or cold weather, rain, floods, storms, earthquake, etc.; being separated from loved ones and pleasant conditions, not getting what one desires, not having things the way we would like them to be, unfulfilled wishes and expectations, and so on.

The cause of dukkha is mainly due to self-centered craving and attachment, grasping and clinging. There is craving for pleasant experiences, craving for material things, craving for eternal life, and craving for eternal death. We all enjoy good food and drink, lovely music, pleasant company, etc., and we want more and more of these things. We try to prolong these enjoyments and we try to get more and more of these pleasures using a great deal of effort, time and money. And yet somehow, we are never completely

satisfied. If we eat our favorite food again and again we soon get bored with it. We try another kind of food, we like it, enjoy it and again we get bored with it. We go on to look for something else; we get tired of our favorite piece of music. We get tired of our friends [and lovers]. We look for new experiences. Sometimes this chase after pleasant experiences leads one to very unhealthy forms of behavior such as alcoholism, drug addiction, infidelity and sexual obsession, and compulsive shopping. It is said that trying to satisfy one's desire for sense pleasures is like drinking salt water to satisfy one's thirst: rather than being quenched, our thirst only increases.

The desire for wealth or material possessions is involved with three major sufferings or problems. The first one is the problem of getting it. You have to work a lot and save enough to buy that house or car or whatever, there is the mortgage and interest payments, etc. Secondly, there is the worry, anxiety of protecting and maintaining these things. And finally, there is the suffering of losing them because sooner or later these material possessions will fall apart. Likewise, our friends and family members do not last forever.

Despite all the problems and frustrations of life we all crave for eternal existence. This is due to our strong attachments to family and friends, material possessions, money, power, fame and status, also, to our knowledge and experiences, to our ideas and ideals, views and opinions, concepts, theories, beliefs and superstitions. We cling to the past, to bad memories and negative emotions, to our likes and dislikes, and we worry about the future. We cling to our bodies and appearance, hence the fear of growing old and unattractive, getting fat, growing bald, losing our hair, dying, and so on. Clinging to that which is changing and impermanent results in suffering and dis-ease. Then there is the desire for annihilation or non-existence, what we might call the desire for eternal death. This expresses itself as nihilism and in suicide. Craving for existence is one extreme. Craving for non-existence is another extreme.

The root cause of craving and attachment, grasping and clinging, is ignorance and delusion. Ignorance is not seeing things as they really are, or failing to understand the reality of experience or the reality of life itself. Without the right conditions, right training and right instruments we are unable to see things as they really are. For example, none of us would be aware of radio waves if it were not for the radio receiver. None of us would be aware of bacterial and microbes in a drop of water if it were not for microscopes. Likewise, planets and galaxies were it not for telescopes. If we do not train our minds to have calm attention and insight, then we would remain ignorant of the true nature of things. We are familiar with the fear that we experience when we see a snake-like object at night while taking a walk or a dark shape while lying in bed. That snake-like object may be just a piece of rope or garden hose and the dark shape in your bedroom may be just a jacket on a hanger. Yet it is due to our ignorance and delusion that we get scared and quicken our steps or hide under our blanket and perspire with fear. If there were light we would not react with fear, we would not be fooled or deluded by the snake-like object or the dark shape. We would see the piece of rope or garden hose or the hanging jacket for what it is.

Specifically in Buddhism, we are speaking about ignorance regarding the self or ego, taking the self as real, as a permanent, fixed, separate and independent entity. This is the fundamental cause of suffering or Dukkha. We see the world in terms of "I", "me", and "mine". We take our body or ideas or feelings as a self or belonging to a self, an independent ego just as we take the snake-like object for a dangerous creature or the dark shape for a ghost or a potential assailant. Upon enlightenment, the Buddha realised that the mind-body process was a constantly changing phenomenon and that it did not contain a fixed, independent and permanent self. We are not the same person [mentally and physically] from one moment to the next. That the self seems unchanging and separate from the rest of existence is a deep-rooted illusion. The Buddha realised that the self was only a result of conditioning, based on memory, past experiences and accumulated knowledge, that "I", "me", and "mine" were just concepts in the mind, created by the thinking process. Because of this illusion of a solid and independent ego-personality, separate in time and space, we become very self-centered, we take ourselves very seriously, and we spend a lot of effort trying to satisfy, protect and magnify this self and its images. From this notion of self, we have persistent craving and attachment, aversion and ill will. We become attached to our likes and dislikes, to our ideas and opinions, etc. Out of the root and trunk of ignorance and delusion grow self-centered craving and clinging--desire, greed, envy, jealousy, hatred, competitiveness, pride, arrogance, conceit, the whole lot. All these branches grow from the root and trunk of ignorance and delusion, and these branches bear the fruits of suffering, discontentment, dis-ease.

According to the Buddha's analysis, all the troubles and problems in the world, from little personal conflicts and quarrels in the family to big wars between tribes, nations and countries arise out of this selfish craving. From this point of view, all economic, political and social problems are rooted in this self-centered grasping and clinging, greed and attachment. [And yet we all have to die and leave this world some day]. Great statesmen and diplomats who try to settle disputes and talk of war and peace only in terms of political and economic terms touch on the superficialities, the surface of human conflict, and never go deep into the real root-cause of the problem. Mankind has been trying to solve its problems with a mind that is the problem. The mind, the restless, confused, reactive, untrained mind is the problem-maker, the creator of selfish desires, hatred and delusion.

In summation, the cause of suffering is ignorance and delusion, a false way of looking at reality. Thinking and believing the impermanent is permanent, the changing is fixed and concrete, that is ignorance and delusion. Thinking there is a permanent, unchanging, separate and independent self when there is not, that is ignorance and delusion. From ignorance is born craving, greed, hatred, fear, insecurity, jealousy, and countless other sufferings. The path to liberation is the path of looking deeply at things in order to truly realise the nature of change and impermanence, the absence of a separate, isolated self, and the interdependence of all things. This ancient path is the way to overcome ignorance and delusion. Once ignorance is overcome, suffering/dis-ease is transcended. This is true liberation. There is no need for a self for there to be liberation. Once you understand non-self, then the burden of life is gone. You'll be at peace with the world. When we see

beyond self or ego, beyond "me" and "mine", we no longer cling to happiness and security, and then we can be truly happy, secure and free.

Q: If the Buddha was a human being, why do I see people bowing and praying to Buddha statues?

A: Normally, we bow to the Buddha statue not to worship the Buddha as a god or supernatural being but rather to pay respect and reverence to a great and extraordinary teacher for sharing the sublime Dharma with mankind. Also, in doing so we remind ourselves that we, too, have the potential to become like the Buddha, to awaken from our ignorance and delusions, thus manifesting wisdom, compassion and peace. So, in bowing to the Buddha statue we are also bowing to our own Buddha Nature, even if dormant, in the process. The act of bowing to a Buddha or Bodhisattva statue or to a monk or lay teacher is beneficial if done with the right understanding and intention as it engenders respect and humility so as to overcome pride, arrogance and conceit which can only lead to suffering and conflict.

Some "Buddhists" see the Buddha and Bodhisattvas as gods with supernatural powers, Beings to pray to in times of difficulties and distress or for good fortune in family and business affairs. Many people find it difficult to relate to the Buddha as a simple forest ascetic who had realised the fundamental truths of existence by reflecting and examining the human condition and the nature of human experience; also, as a renunciate who had taught the benefits and freedom of non-grasping/craving and non-clinging/attachment as well as the virtues of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

Q: What is Enlightenment and how can I achieve this?

A: Enlightenment is the process of removing ignorance and delusion from the mind regarding the perception and understanding of ourselves and the world at large. It is the awakening of intelligence, self-knowledge, wisdom and compassion. It is the understanding of our conditioning [which includes the ego-personality and the thinking process] and going beyond its limitations thus freeing the mind of suffering, conflict and dis-ease.

Ignorance and delusion are a result of our conditioning, which causes us suffering due to self-centered craving and attachment, hatred and ill will. Human conditioning is likened to the layers of dust that accumulate on our window of perception--one's original or beginner's mind is like a clean, clear window pane--so we perceive ourselves and the external world through these layers of dust: labels and images, ideas, ideals and concepts, opinions and prejudices, judgments, comparisons, criticisms, likes and dislikes, desires and aversions. Our minds are conditioned to react, to judge, to criticize, to compare, etc., and this is a major cause of our conflicts, disharmony and dis-ease. The idea of a permanent, unchanging ego-center or self is strengthened by this conditioning and it is this deep-rooted illusion of a permanent and separate self which is the root of our problems and conflicts, fears and worries, craving, greed and attachments.

Enlightenment is the process of removing the layers of dust. It is the understanding of the nature of our conditioning, seeing its place and usefulness [including thoughts, ideas and knowledge] in daily life and transcending their limitations using awareness, intuitive wisdom and compassion. Through insight one sees through the nature of the self, the conventional "I" or "me"--as just a collection of memories, a construction of the thinking process--and realises one's true Self or unconditioned nature: vast, open, expansive awareness, beyond thoughts and feelings, pleasure and pain, likes and dislikes. One's true Self is vast, unlimited space in which the whole world is happening, including birth and death--the arising and passing away of phenomena, physical, mental and emotional.

One's true Self becomes one with the Universe, there is the experience of Cosmic Consciousness which contains everything. Out of this immensity beyond measure comes that which is most sacred; one experiences a bliss beyond description and compassion for all of existence and loving kindness for all things on Earth. One has intuitive insight into the interconnectedness and interdependence of all existence; one feels the oneness of all phenomena in the Universe. All dualism is transcended, including the individual self and the world. One emerges from enlightenment [self-knowledge and wisdom] with an incredibly different attitude--selfless, loving, compassionate, strong and secure, honest, creative, wise, patient, able to solve daily problems. One experiences a sense of universal brotherhood. One is aware of everyone's true-nature [wisdom mind] even if dormant; one sees clearly the ignorance and delusion in the human condition.

The "I" or ego cannot achieve Enlightenment as this ego-center is a part of our limited conditioning. It is the understanding of the conditioned, conventional "I" or self and going beyond its limited dimension, which leads to wisdom and freedom. This is the path of awakening and intelligence.

Q: What is Nirvana and is it a permanent state of mind?

A: The root meaning of Nirvana or Nibbana is "letting go", a state of mind which is free from craving and attachment, grasping and clinging, free from all self-centered activity. It is a state of calm and peace, restful, expansive awareness. The mind is clear, simple and spacious, free and innocent, compassionate, patient, and blissful.

The question of Nibbana being a permanent state is due to our conditioned idea that mental and physical phenomena are permanent and concrete or that there is a permanent and fixed ego-personality experiencing permanent, unchanging mental-emotional states. Whenever we are in conflict we believe we're a permanent entity experiencing a permanent problem but this is ignorance and delusion. With calm attention and insight we begin to see that whatever we're experiencing in the moment is only a temporary mental state, only a changing condition of the mind, that it's unsatisfactory and not self. Happiness comes and goes, sadness comes and goes; they are not really happening to a being or person, we only believe this because we automatically identify with temporary phenomena out of conditioned habit, we personalize and impose the "I" onto what is happening in the moment thus creating duality in consciousness with the resulting conflict and dis-ease. The idea of permanency is really due to the mind's conditioning of

time, created by the thinking process. Thought is time, as past and future. Man is time-bound and that bondage to time is the movement of thoughts in consciousness, from past to future. So where there is an ending to thoughts and therefore to time, there is total attention and insight.

So, Nirvana is not a permanent and fixed mental state as some would like to believe but let us say that this sublime state of being arises more frequently when we make the effort to purify the mind following the path of morality, mind cultivation and wisdom. Nirvana can arise unexpectedly especially when one is alone with nature, when the mind is suddenly quiet and calm without effort or desire, when one is peaceful and content in the moment, open and receptive to the beauty and wonders of existence, when there is no self-centered desire or craving, fear or anxiety, no mental conflict or dis-ease. Or Nibbana can arise when you're with others but you're calm and relaxed, open and receptive to their needs and problems, when you can listen in silence with empathy and patience, when there is no anxiety to give advice or wanting to change them, when in listening there is loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

Nibbana is the very essence of meditation. This quality of meditation is very different from formal practice--mind training and cultivation, in effect. This quality of meditation comes when there is order in the mind, when there is the understanding of the thinking process and the "me" center and going beyond their limited dimension, beyond self-centered grasping and clinging, beyond the habitual reactions of the mind. When the mind is thus free, simple and silent, then that which is most sacred comes into being. This benediction can be found neither in so-called sacred books or ideas, nor in religious rites and ceremonies. It comes when all selfish striving, struggle and hope ceases. Then meditation comes in waves upon waves of bliss. Then love is not self-centered desire, pleasure or attachment; it is warmth and affection, loving kindness and compassion.

Q: Many Buddhists believe in reincarnation but didn't the Buddha speak about rebirth? What is the difference?

A: The belief in reincarnation and in a permanent, unchanging and separate self was prominent in the culture of ancient India before and during the time of the Buddha and still exists today in the Hindu religion. The Buddha was the first mystic and spiritual teacher to realise the true nature of the self or ego, that it was not a permanent and concrete entity, that it was only an idea in the mind based on past conditioning--memory, past experience and knowledge. Normally, people believe in a permanent self or soul because we have memories, ideas, images and opinions of ourselves and of others but we don't realise that these mental constructions are changing and impermanent in themselves. Thought can give continuity to something it thinks about--pleasurable or painful memories. It can give the idea of permanency to a word or image, to an idea or concept, or to a tradition. Thought thinks itself permanent by its automatic, mechanical and repetitive movement but this is an illusion. Nothing is permanent either on earth or in ourselves. So, the Buddha was the first person who didn't speak about reincarnation, which was most radical indeed. Throughout the many centuries many Buddhists have embraced the prominent belief in reincarnation simply out of wishful thinking and due to

their inability to develop the profound insight of anatta [the non-existence of a permanent, concrete and separate self or ego-personality]. As long as one is caught in the thinking process one will naturally cling to the idea of a permanent self and believe in reincarnation, in the idea of past and future lives.

The Buddha spoke of rebirth but I feel that most people, including scholar monks, have misunderstood and misinterpreted what the Buddha meant by rebirth. They speak of rebirth the way others speak of reincarnation but they say that instead of a self or an ego-personality going into a new body after death, it is the kammic energy of the individual that continues [i.e. one's consciousness along with the after-effects of one's actions]. Again, this is speculation and wishful thinking. They use this idea of rebirth to explain child prodigies and children who can recall past lives. I could be wrong, of course, but I feel the Buddha meant something quite different.

It is said that the Buddha upon his enlightenment was able to recall numerous past lives. Apparently he uttered: "Through many a birth I wandered, seeking but not finding the builder of this house. Sorrowful indeed is birth again and again. O House Builder, you have been seen; you shall not build the house again. Your rafters have been broken up; your ridgepole is demolished too. My mind has now attained the unformed Nibbana and reached the end of every sort of craving." In the Dhammacakka Sutta, his very first discourse, the Buddha, commenting on the Second Noble Truth, states: "This very craving is that which leads to rebirth. This is my last birth. Now there is no more rebirth for me!"

From my own experience, insight and understanding, I feel that when the Buddha spoke of rebirth he was actually referring to a psychological phenomenon as opposed to a physical one, viz. mental rebirth--i.e., the repeated arising of the self/ego-center out of ignorance and delusion, craving and clinging, hatred and ill-will. So, when the Buddha spoke of recalling numerous past lives, he was simply referring to the many times in which the self or ego manifested out of ignorance and delusion, etc., prior to his Supreme Enlightenment. If you reflect, you can see that just in one day alone, the self can arise many times out of ignorance and delusion, out of self-centered habits, impulses and interests, right? When he was finally able to see through the illusion of a permanent and fixed self ["The House Builder"], he was free from craving and clinging, mental suffering and dis-ease. His mind was calm, spacious and serene, beyond self-centered thoughts and feelings. And so when he said, "This is my last birth, now there is no more rebirth for me", he was not speaking about not returning again in physical form but rather, that he was now free of self-centered craving as his mind was purified of the three defilements.

Q: If the Buddha didn't teach about reincarnation, why is it that so many Buddhists speak about karma from previous lives?

A: People speak about karma from previous lives because they want to believe in reincarnation and in a permanent self out of ignorance and delusion, and they also want an easy, convenient answer to explain things which they cannot comprehend or do anything about. For example, they would often ask, "How can you explain why a kind,

generous person would suffer from cancer or a stroke, or get badly injured in an accident?" Or "How can you explain why innocent women and children get killed during civil wars and conflicts?" They answer, "It must be karma from past lives, they must have done something bad in a previous life and now they're paying for it. Past karma has ripened, now they're reaping what they've sown." Karma is viewed as a process of retribution. Christians would say: "It's God's will and punishment", and the Muslims would answer: "It's the will of Allah". People seek comfort and security in easy, convenient answers because they don't understand the law of dependent co-arising or dependent origination: that things arise and pass away due to certain causes and conditions.

Many Buddhists use the idea of past karma to explain physical and social inequality: why some humans are born with birth defects or with weak constitutions while others are born whole and healthy, why some are born to poor circumstances while others are born into wealthy, affluent families, why some are gifted with brilliant minds while others are dull and ignorant, why some people are born to enjoy long lives while others pass away at a young age, why some are physically attractive while others are not, and so on. Again, an easy and convenient explanation due to ignorance of the law of dependent origination--causes and conditions obviously include biological and environmental factors and random selection. Unwholesome behavior and mental suffering arise obviously from our defilements--ignorance and delusion, grasping and clinging, hatred and ill will.

Karma is the law of cause and effect, action and reaction, and you can see this clearly in daily life if you are mindful: how we create negative or unwholesome karma by intentional and unskillful action or speech, how we create conflict and suffering due to ignorance and delusion, due to selfish desires and attachments, hatred and ill-will, envy, jealousy and resentment. According to the Buddha, we can eliminate negative, unwholesome karma by making the effort to purify the mind of the three defilements thus cultivating human virtues and ending suffering, conflict and dis-ease.

Karma is willful action and action is the outcome of our past conditioning. Karma is the reaction that arises from certain causes and produces certain results. Karma is this chain of cause and effect. Essentially the process of time is karma. As long as there's a past, there must be the present and the future. Today and tomorrow are the effects of yesterday. [Karma as generally understood is a process of compensation]. Karma is a process of time and mind is a result of time. What we have done in the past [good or unwholesome] determines what we are in the present. But the past background is not a static state. It is undergoing constant modification. You are not the same today as you were yesterday both physically and psychologically, there is a constant change going on. So the mind is not a fixed state. Our thoughts are transient, constantly changing; they're the response of the background, past conditioning [memory, past experiences and knowledge]. The "I", or "me" or thinker is created by thoughts, it is not separate. The thinker is a result of thoughts. Thoughts create the thinker, giving him/her a permanent fixture in the mind amidst the transient flow of thoughts. This is the illusion that thoughts create, tricks that thought is playing upon itself.

The response of this past conditioning is karma as in willful action. The response of memory is called action but it is only reaction, this "action" breeds further reaction and so there is a chain of so-called cause and reaction. But is not the cause also the effect? Neither cause nor effect is static. Today is the result of yesterday and today is the cause of tomorrow; what was the cause becomes the effect, and the effect the cause. One flows into the other. There is no moment when the cause is not also the effect. Only the specialized is fixed in its cause and so in its effect; the acorn cannot become anything but an oak tree. Karma is the process of time, the past moving through the present to the future; this chain is the movement of thought. Thought is the result of time, and there can only be the immeasurable, the Eternal, the timeless, only when the process of thought has ceased. Stillness of the mind comes with mind training and the understanding of the thought process and the thinker with its conditioned habitual responses and impulses--the ending of ignorance and delusion, grasping and clinging, hatred and ill-will.

The breaking of the chain of karma is not a matter of time. Karma must be understood as a total process, not merely as something of the past. The past is time, which is also the present and the future. Time is memory, the word, the idea, the tradition, and the belief. When the word, the name, the association, the experience, the self with its many cravings, is absent in the clarity and stillness of spacious awareness, karma comes to an end. This is the bliss and freedom of the Buddha Mind.

Q: The Buddha's teaching about "Non-self" and "Emptiness" is very difficult to understand. Can you please explain these concepts as simple as possible?

A: Initially, "non-self" and "emptiness" may seem like abstract concepts to the beginner but with mind cultivation, reflection and insight, they become direct experiences and realisations; one recognizes them as actual states of mind, a dimension of being outside of our thoughts and conditioning.

Non-self means the non-existence of a permanent, fixed, separate and independent self. In daily life we do have a conventional self, which is quite natural, but we have to understand that this self or ego is not a permanent and concrete entity. This is what the Buddha realised very clearly upon his Enlightenment which was quite radical to the already existing belief in a permanent self or soul. Who we are or who we think we are as a personality when we say, "I" or "me", is only a collection of memories based on past experiences and accumulated knowledge. Or you can say that the self is a construction of the thinking process as a response to memory, past experience and knowledge. And this self is not a fixed, concrete entity as it expands on a daily basis with new experiences and knowledge, right? You can never refer to yourself without referring to the past [or future]--because the self is intimately connected to the thinking process, we project the self into the future as personal hopes and dreams, plans and ambitions, right?

So, this self is based on past conditioning, habits, impulses and reactions. You can call this the conditioned self. Then there is the unconditioned state of being, that aspect of the mind that is not based on past conditioning: this is awareness, mindfulness, bare attention, which is always in the present moment. It is clear, unlimited, intuitive and

intelligent; this is the Buddha Mind, the one who knows, the one who is awake, calm and alert. Only awareness can free us from our thoughts and images, which are the main cause of our delusions. In the moment we become aware that our thoughts are just thoughts rather than reality itself, we wake up from their spell and can return to present reality. It takes practice to wake up, to emerge from our mind-created worlds. Thoughts, images and moods are not necessarily connected with reality, with what is actually happening in the present moment. That is why the Buddha taught us to be aware of them before we are influenced or caught by them. We have to be alert, mindful, and awake.

Emptiness doesn't mean a void or nothingness. It simply means empty of self, empty of a permanent, separate entity. A separate, individual self is an entity that exists completely on its own, independent, isolated from other things. Nothing can exist independently from other things. All things depend on other things for their existence. From interdependent origins all things arise and all things pass away. Also, a cup can be said to be empty of liquid but full of air and space. Likewise, an empty mind is silent, empty of thoughts but full of spacious awareness--it is energy without the "me" center. The state of loving kindness and compassion is an expression of emptiness because the self/ego is absent, the "me" center is not in operation. There is no self-centered craving and attachment. This is the virtue, beauty, and freedom of the four sublime states--loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

Q: What is the most direct way to realise "non-self" apart from the expression of loving kindness and compassion?

A: As long as we are caught in habitual, conditioned thinking, we tend to see ourselves [and others] as ego-personalities, right? But with mindfulness, calm attention, we begin to see mental and physical phenomena [nama-rupa] instead.

The most direct way to realise "non-self" is literally under your nose. When we become aware of the breathing process, the physical sensation of the in-breath and out-breath inside the nostrils is physical phenomenon [rupa], likewise, the rising and falling of the chest-stomach area. And the awareness of that sensation is mental phenomenon [nama]. Or during walking meditation: the movement of the feet and legs is, of course, physical phenomenon; and the awareness of that movement is mental phenomenon, right? Or while eating in silence: the motion of the hands and the chewing, tasting and swallowing sensations are physical phenomena; and the awareness of the entire eating process is mental phenomenon, right? It's really quite simple, isn't it?

So, you may ask: "Who is eating?" or "Who is walking?" or "Who is breathing?". Obviously, not the "I" or ego-personality as we normally would think but rather, nama-rupa, mind-body process or mental-physical phenomenon. The self arises only when reactive thinking arises, right?

Reflecting on the breath leads one to insight. Awareness of in-breath and out-breath is something immediate. The changing, impermanent nature of the breath is not ours, is it? Having been born, the body breathes all on its own. It's an automatic and often

unconscious process; we're not aware of it most of the time. In-breath conditions out-breath, out-breath conditions in-breath. As long as the body is alive, the breathing process continues. We don't control any of the bodily functions, breathing included. Breathing belongs to the changing conditions of nature; it doesn't belong to us. It is non-self.

When we develop mindfulness, calm attention, we begin to realise the mind itself, where there is no conditioning, where there is no sense of "I am", "I am a meditator", "I am a monk", "I am a man", "I am a woman", etc. With mindfulness we can recognise what the unconditioned mind is. Without mindfulness, we tend to not notice this; we are caught in the reactions of "I am this"; "I am that"; "I should be this"; "I shouldn't be that". But with mindfulness, mental formations--thoughts, ideas and concepts--cease in the mind. What is left is awareness, intuitive knowing. This is not a personal quality of mind but rather its unconditioned state--non-self.

Q: What is the relationship between non-self and dependent origination/dependent co-rising?

A: To have a deeper understanding of non-self [anatta], it is beneficial to understand the law of dependent origination/co-rising. Reflecting on interdependence, interconnectedness is very important. All things depend on each other for their arising, development and passing away or decline. Without dependent co-rising, nothing could exist. Within one thing exist many connecting factors. Nothing exists as a separate, independent and isolated entity. When we are caught up in the automatic, mechanical and all consuming thinking process, we tend to see ourselves and others as separate, isolated ego-personalities--separate from the environment, separate from nature, and separate from the rest of society. [This is why city dwellers often suffer from the feeling of loneliness and isolation]. Some people feel separate from their physical bodies to such an extent that they feel aversion, uncomfortable, and trapped inside the physical form of skin, bones, flesh, organs, etc. This is the illusion of duality, of division, created by the conditioned thinking process. Thus, our perceptions of ourselves and the world at large are limited and superficial. Thinking is a necessary part of existence and survival but it is limited and a powerful source of delusion and confusion. Thoughts, feelings and emotions cannot possibly enter the immensity of life. Thought is linear reality, the immensity of life is a multi-dimensional phenomenon; thought cannot possibly grasp this reality, this complex web of interconnecting energies. Thought is limited, isolating, divisive and fragmentary. Only when we learn to calm our minds and look deeply at the true nature of things, that we begin to see the intimate and wondrous connection of everything in nature and in the universe including the five aggregates which make up a human being--body, feelings or sensations, perception, mental formations and consciousness.

Take, for example, a flower--soil, rain, seed, tree, insects, clouds, sun, oceans, space--all these elements have enabled a flower to come into existence. If just one of these elements was missing, the flower could not exist. Another example is a sheet of paper--tree, soil, bacteria, earthworms, birds, insects, rain, clouds, sun, oceans, rivers and lakes, space, the person who cut down the tree, the person who transport the tree to the paper-making

factory, the tools, equipments and vehicles involved, the people who work at the factory, human consciousness--all these factors are involved in producing a sheet of paper. Likewise, a car is a sum of its many parts and components plus the engineers and factory workers who design and put the parts together. All things, organic and inorganic, rely on the law of dependent co-arising, dependent origination. The source of one thing is a combination of all things in the universe, including your own awareness. The conditioned self is a result of thinking consciousness based on memory, past experience and knowledge, which is based on the five aggregates which depend on social and physical environment; the four elements of earth, water, heat, air, food, sun, clouds, oceans, space, the solar system, the Milky Way Galaxy, the Cosmos. Contemplation on dependent co-arising helps to break through the illusion of a separate, independent and isolated self or ego-entity, and also the fixed and narrow belief that the universe was created by some supernatural being or god.

Q: When the Buddha said, " In this very body, six feet in length, with its sense impressions, thoughts, ideas, and emotions, I do declare to you is the world--the origin of the world and the ending of the world. Likewise Nibbana and the path leading to Nibbana." What exactly did he mean?

A: It is also written: "From the world, the Tathagata is set free from having completely understood it. The arising and ceasing of the world had been fully understood and realized by the Buddha!"

The world here means not the external or empirical world but rather the world of the mind-body process, mental and physical phenomenon [nama-rupa], consisting of the five aggregates. A person is made up of the five aggregates--matter, feeling/sensation, perception, mental formation and consciousness. In ordinary language we speak of a "being" or an individual, but in fact there is no such "being" or personality; there is only a manifestation of ever-changing psychophysical forces or energies. These forces or energies form the five aggregates and what we call a "being" or person is nothing but a combination of these fleeting and ever-changing five aggregates. There is not a fixed, permanent, independent self or ego-entity to be found. Matter consists of the four elements, and feeling/sensation, perception, mental formation and consciousness are based on the six sense doors--seeing a form, hearing a sound, smelling an odour, tasting a flavour, touching some tangible thing, and creating mental objects [thoughts, ideas and images].

Due to our conditioning, we normally see the world as something outside of ourselves. In our ignorance [ignore-ance] and shallow perception, we view ourselves as a separate individual or personality living in a separate world, a place where we try to find permanent happiness, contentment and security. But when we begin to train the mind and practice mindfulness and look deeper into the nature of human experience, we begin to realize that the "world", as we know it, is actually what the mind-body process [the five aggregates] is experiencing moment to moment via the six senses--what the eyes are seeing, what the ears are hearing, what the nose is smelling, what the tongue is tasting, what the body is feeling by touch, and what the mind is thinking and imagining. And it is

this "world" of the senses and the mind's perceptions and reactions that the Buddha said that we should really see the truth of constant change and impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and suffering, and the absence of a permanent, unchanging, separate and independent ego personality. Of course, the physical world outside of ourselves is also constantly changing and impermanent but it is our perception and reaction to this changing, uncertain world that determines our sense of balance, equanimity or dis-ease.

Initially, the five aggregates of experience may seem complicated and difficult to understand. But here is a simple example of how they manifest in daily life: say you're taking a walk in a park or forest area and you suddenly hear a sound and then you see something move. This is the physical body [matter] with its sense organs [ears and eyes] in operation--there's the arising of hearing and seeing consciousness, right? You focus your eyes and you see that it is a snake; this is perception at work, which is related to memory, so you're able to recognise the moving object as a snake reptile. From this recognition, arises a pleasant or unpleasant feeling /sensation depending on whether you happen to like or dislike snakes. If you like snakes, then naturally you'll experience a pleasant feeling and become happy and delighted; but if you happen to dislike snakes, obviously you'll become scared and terrified, and aversion will arise. Sometimes a neutral feeling or sensation is experienced on perceiving a snake [or a frog or a rabbit or an earthworm] but most people will experience either a pleasant or unpleasant sensation depending on individual temperament and past experience. From feeling/sensation, arises mental formation with intentional action: if you are pleasantly surprised and happy to encounter the snake, then you'd perhaps have the idea to watch its movement for a while before it disappears in the undergrowth, or maybe you'd wish to take a stick and play with it, or try and catch it and take it home to add it to your private reptile collection. Or if you have a camera handy, take several photos of the lovely snake. But if you're having a most unpleasant encounter with the slimy snake, then perhaps you'd get the idea to either run quickly away or pick up stones or a long stick and try to drive it away or hurt and kill the horrible creature. It takes all sorts.

So you can see how from the body with its sense organs arises consciousness, then perception, then feeling/sensation, and then mental formation with intentional action. Upon reflection you can see how the five aggregates are at constant interplay, interdependent on each other, during daily activity--while shopping, while driving or taking a walk, while at work or at a party, meeting people, etc. The Buddha taught to look at the five aggregates as five flowing rivers, which contain nothing that could be called separate, independent, permanent or unchanging. Matter or form does not contain a self, because form cannot exist independently. Within form exist the four other aggregates. It is the same with feelings/sensations: feelings do not possess a self because feelings cannot exist independently. Within feelings are form, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. The same is true for the other three aggregates. No aggregate possesses a separate entity. The five aggregates depend on each other to exist, to arise and pass away continuously. Thus the five aggregates are all empty of a separate and independent self or entity.

The origin and ending [the arising and ceasing] of the world signifies the constantly changing and interdependent nature of the five aggregates [the body-mind process] in daily experience. In his very own body, the Buddha saw that the world of birth and death had its origins, and in that same body was the means to transcend the world of birth and death. He saw the truth of change and impermanence, emptiness, birthlessness and deathlessness of all phenomena. Having completely understood this, the Buddha was free from suffering, fear and sorrow, from grasping and clinging to the five aggregates as a self or belonging to a self. In his formulation of the Noble Truth of Suffering, the Buddha says: "In short, the five aggregates of clinging as "me" and "my" are suffering and unsatisfactory".

Q: What are the benefits of mind training and cultivation as taught by the Buddha? Is meditation practice a way of acquiring psychic powers?

A: Mind training and cultivation [bhavana] is included in the Eight-fold Path--right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right concentration, right mindfulness, right understanding and right attitude--which leads to the cessation of suffering, discontentment and dis-ease. Calm and insight meditation [samatha and vipassana bhavana] involves right effort, right concentration and right mindfulness.

To purify the mind of the three defilements--ignorance and delusion, craving and clinging, hatred and ill will, the Buddha taught calm and insight meditation. First we learn to calm the restless, confused, agitated, reactive mind by focusing on the in-breath and out-breath, the movement of the feet while walking, etc., and then we observe the flow of thoughts, images, ideas, desires and fears, regrets about the past and anxieties about the future, and sensations in the body as they arise and fade away. We observe the mind and body to see how mental states and physical sensations come and go, to see how transient, ephemeral they all are. We can note them--"worrying, worrying", "planning, planning", "regretting, regretting", "thinking, thinking", "wanting, wanting", "resenting, resenting", etc.--and let them go. We bring back our attention to the breath or to the movement of the feet so we don't get caught or carried away by the all-consuming mental-emotional process. It's so easy to be deluded by our thoughts and images, ideas, desires, fears and obsessions. This is the way to train the mind to gain peace and wisdom. To purify the mind of negative states [hatred, ill-will, resentment, jealousy, envy, aversion, etc.] we do loving kindness practice--metta bhavana--sending peace and goodwill to all beings, ourselves included.

This method of noting mental states and objects [as taught by Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma] helps one to see them more objectively as temporary conditions of mind rather than personal problems and conflicts. Also, it helps us to get out of the contents of our thoughts and images, out of our mind-created stories and mini-dramas which can seem so real, solid and permanent. This noting method, though beneficial, can become a problem when used unskillfully, when the practitioner keeps noting obsessively without knowing when to let it go in the light of clear, calm, restful awareness. Mental tension and struggle often result.

Normally, we see the world with our restless, conditioned minds. Our view of the world is coloured by our judgments and discriminations, our likes and dislikes, our desires and aversions, our hopes and fears, our worries and anxieties. So, our perception of reality is limited by our mental states, by how we see and react to the world. Rarely do we see the world and people with a calm, clear mind; rarely do we see things as they are with clear awareness. A calm and attentive mind will help us to live more sanely and balanced in the present moment. Our thoughts and images are always taking us into the past or into the future. This disturbs the mind and a great deal of mental energy is wasted. With more mindfulness, calm attention, we can check the agitated and worrisome mind. We can be more aware of what arises in the mind--reactions, impulses, discursive thoughts, emotions and moods--and let them go instead of chasing them or clinging to them. We can free the mind and stay calm and balanced.

I quote Achaan Chah of Thailand: "People are always looking outwards, at others and things. They look at this hall, for example, and say, "Oh, this place is so big!" Actually, it's not big at all. Whether or not it seems big depends on your perception of it. In fact, this hall is just the size it is, neither big nor small. But people run after their perceptions and feelings all the time. They are so busy looking around and having opinions about what they see, hear, taste, smell, and touch, that they have no time to look at themselves. We get carried away with our restless minds and chase our thoughts, ideas and impressions, our feelings, emotions and moods--we get caught by them, and so we create a lot of problems for ourselves. Some people get totally carried away and do crazy things, even commit crimes and murder. We are often victims of our own mental states because we don't know how to watch our minds with awareness and wisdom and let these mental states go."

The restless, confused, untrained mind is vulnerable to circumstances. It is easily affected by changing circumstances, by happiness and unhappiness, by praise and blame, by gain and loss, by fame and infamy. Sometimes good or pleasant things happen and the mind is happy. Sometimes bad or unpleasant things happen and the mind gets upset, there is suffering, dis-ease. Our state of mind depends on how we react to things or situations. It can remain cool and calm or become heated and upset depending on how personally we take things. One who makes the effort to follow the Eight-fold Path has less fear and anxiety, one is calm and patient despite the changes and accidents around one because one sees things as they are--impermanent, unsatisfactory and empty of a permanent, concrete and separate self. Although there are problems in life and misunderstandings in human relationship one can be calm and patient without anger, aversion or resentment. Being impatient and angry or irritable does not remove the problem; it only causes more suffering and makes things worse. With patient endurance, wisdom and determination [re: mind training and cultivation] suffering and dis-ease are overcome and the mind becomes peaceful. One is light-hearted, optimistic and free, not gloomy and depressed.

The Buddha taught that when we grasp and cling to anything [physical, mental or emotional] as a self or belonging to a self [as "I", "me", or "mine"] then there will be conflict, suffering, and a heavy burden. He reminded us that all conditioned, compounded things are impermanent, perpetually changing and breaking up. By calming and training

the mind, our grasping, clinging and reactions are diminished. We learn to let go of emotions and not hold on to them. We begin to see that happiness and sadness really have the same value: they're only temporary states, they come and go and they don't belong to us. We should not despair and get carried away when suffering arises--sadness, depression, loneliness, etc.--we have to understand that there is no one really there to receive it. If we think that suffering is ours, happiness is ours, we will not be able to find peace and joy. Nirvana is a state of mind that is free from self-centered grasping and clinging, desire, aversion, hatred and ill will. It is the experience of mental purity, equanimity and inner peace.

As Achaan Chah would say: " When we no longer identify with and cling to happiness and unhappiness, we are simply left with the natural way of things, the arising and passing away of mental states or phenomena. When your knowing or mindfulness is constant you'll see that this is really all there is. Everything is just birth and death. It's not as if there is anything which carries on. There's just this arising and passing away as it is--that's all. This kind of seeing will give rise to a tranquil feeling of dispassion, detachment to the world--less grasping and clinging. Mental activity is like a deadly poisonous cobra. If we don't interfere with the cobra, it simply goes its own way. Even though it may be extremely poisonous, we are not affected by it. We don't go near it or take hold of it, and it doesn't bite us. The cobra does what is natural for the cobra to do. If you are wise and attentive, you'll leave it alone."

The practice of Dharma is for our minds to be in the present moment, to be aware, mindful, attentive of the mind and body, to go beyond our mental-emotional states, our problems and conflicts, our greed and attachments, our anger and aversion, our fears and worries, our sadness and sorrow, our feelings of insecurity, isolation and loneliness, depression, and so on. One has to train the wild animal of the mind so that it doesn't control us and give us problems. Our thoughts and images are always creating scenarios and mini-dramas, we get lost in them; we mistake them for reality. Meditation practice helps us to wake up, to emerge from our mind-created worlds so we are not deluded and influenced by them. This is freedom from delusion and mental dis-ease.

No, meditation practice is not for the purpose of acquiring psychic powers. The Buddha had advised the monks and nuns that if they should acquire psychic powers from their practice they should not speak or boast of them, as they were just a by-product and not the real goal of mind training and cultivation. The real goal is peace, wisdom and compassion, freedom from suffering. In mindfulness one is not only restful, calm and happy, but also alert and awake. Meditation is not an evasion or escape; it is a clear and serene encounter with reality.

Q: Please explain Right Effort as opposed to Wrong Effort?

A: When the Buddha used the word right as opposed to wrong, he wasn't being judgmental or self-righteous in any way for he was very rational, wise and compassionate. He meant "right" to indicate that which produces a beneficial, peaceful and harmonious result. Right Effort implies proper motivation and understanding of the

practice. One must be sincere and patient, not too eager and overly ambitious [as in self-centered grasping and craving] to overcome the five hindrances to mind training and cultivation--attachment to sensual pleasures, aversion and ill will, restlessness and agitation, laziness, confusion and doubt.

As Achaan Sumedho would say: "These hindrances are just temporary conditions of the mind, they arise and then they pass away; they're unsatisfactory and not self, they don't belong to a permanent, unchanging ego-personality. They can be quite trivial or seemingly important, or petty, foolish, irrational, annoying and obsessive. They keep pushing, jabbing, knocking us down all the time until we give them proper attention and understanding, until they are no longer a problem. That's why one has to be patient and compassionate, and to be humble to learn from these hindrances. They are relevant indicators in life which we can recognise as changing conditions of the mind, only temporary mental states: and if we patiently endure through them, then things change automatically, on their own, you don't have to get rid of them because everything that arises, passes away. There is nothing to get rid of or dislike or be anxious about, you just have to be patient with them and allow things to take their natural course into cessation without interfering.

When you are patient, allowing things to cease, then you begin to know cessation and freedom--silence, emptiness, clarity--the mind clears, there is stillness. The mind is still vibrant and awake, it is not oblivious, repressed or dull, and you can find peace in the emptiness of the mind, in its clarity, in its silence and open space. Silence, space, and freedom go together."

Q: What is Right Concentration and Right Mindfulness?

A: Right Concentration is using patience and intelligent motivation in order to deal with the five hindrances without struggle, inner tension or conflict. Therefore, physical and mental repose are of the utmost importance. Then one will experience calmness and clarity so one can observe things clearly and reflect wisely. The untrained "monkey mind" is reactive, obsessive, worrisome, impatient, confused and deluded. It is easily seduced by the sense pleasures of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking/imagining. And it is easily caught by aversion and dislike when sensations and conditions are unpleasant and uncomfortable. Grasping and clinging with the self is an automatic response for the "monkey mind"--I like, I don't like, I want, I don't want, I can't stand that person, I hate him/her, etc. It is self-centered and judgmental; it takes the self/ego too seriously; it suffers from ignorance and delusion. Essentially, it is our habitual, reactive, self-centered thinking which causes us suffering, conflict and dis-ease.

Right Concentration is practicing non-grasping and non-clinging. Not to be caught by the six senses. When seeing, just see! When hearing, just hear! When tasting, just taste! When smelling, just smell!

When feeling bodily sensations, just feel! When mental objects [thoughts, ideas, images, moods] arise in the mind, just be aware of them! Don't allow liking and disliking to arise

in the mind, as desire and aversion will result. Don't give birth to a "liker" or "disliker/hater" which is the arising of selfhood or ego entity. Such a mind is agitated, turbulent, shallow, finicky, neurotic and confused; it is not calm and free. To go the way of the self or ego is suffering and deception.

Right Mindfulness: Awareness of the in-breath and out-breath. Awareness of the body in daily activity. Awareness of the nature of the body with respect to the 4 elements, the 32 parts, the unpleasantness and unattractiveness, the decay of the body in sickness, old age and death. Awareness of feelings, the arising and passing away of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral sensations. Awareness of the state of mind--calm, restless, scattered, concentrated, sleepy, bright, dull, lustful, angry, obsessive and irritated. Awareness of mental formations and perceptions--thoughts, ideas and opinions, desire and aversion, judgments, criticisms and conclusions, moods and emotions. All changing and impermanent, unsatisfactory, and empty of a permanent, solid, separate and independent self or ego personality.

Generally, our problems are the result of our inner reaction to a situation or to what someone has said; when we do not know ourselves clearly, we are like foreigners to our senses, thoughts and feelings, and it is difficult to control our reactions. It is our reactions that make us burn out, which throw us off balance and cause us suffering or discontent, dis-ease. Our very lack of awareness has contributed to our mental suffering. We are deluded by our thoughts, feelings and emotions and we become victims of them and are thrown off balance. We can learn to rely on ourselves by paying attention to our patterns of response and becoming aware of the motivations that lead us into difficulty. We can learn to watch and let go. Just see things as they are--impermanent and changing conditions of mind, and empty of self. Things get better in our lives when we react less and less and stop taking everything so personally. We will remain calm and peaceful, wise and patient, strong and secure.

Samadhi is a state of mindfulness, calm attention and joy. A state of repose and restful awareness, of quiet confidence and goodwill, wherein clear one-pointedness of mind may operate undisturbed by physical tensions or emotional worries. Through mindfulness one can observe the interactions of emotions on the body and of physical tensions on the mind and by knowing these things we gain confidence, insight and repose. To see things as they really are, there must be firm foundation of physical relaxation and emotional repose in daily life as we relate and react to the world so we can see clearly the habitual patterns which exert their powerful forces from the dark depths of the caverns of memory, past experience and accumulated knowledge. The Buddha taught the way of Satipatthana [the four foundations of mindfulness] through which the Dharma may be clearly realized. Through mindfulness we are able to observe our mental-emotional states with awareness and let them go before we become victims of these temporary conditions of mind.

Q: What are the benefits of reflecting on the four elements and the different parts of the body?

A: Normally we see the body in terms of "me" and "mine" and we see it as something attractive and desirable; we become infatuated with our bodies and with other people's. In today's society many people become obsessed with themselves and with physical beauty, and a great deal of mental conflict and anxiety is experienced. Some people become obsessed with their bodies to an unhealthy degree as in the condition called Anorexia Nervosa. The body attracts us and we get attracted to the body because our physical eye sees the physical form and not our wisdom eye. The Buddha reminds us that the real nature of our body is unclean and unpleasant, not pretty, but impermanent and decaying and prone to suffering, accidents, illness, ageing and death. It is really an animal's body, a biological manifestation of nature. Physical beauty is only skin-deep, below the skin is unattractive and unpleasant--blood, flesh, sinew, organs, etc.

In the body meditations we look deeply at the body and see its parts, its real constituents--hair on the head, the hairs on the body, the nails, teeth and gums, skin, flesh, sinews, muscle, bones, bone marrow, brain, heart, liver, lungs, diaphragm, spleen, stomach, intestines, bowels, excrement, bile, mucus, pus, blood, sweat, tears, saliva, urine, and so forth. We separate them from the other body parts and we reflect on them with respect to the four elements of earth, water, fire and air. Thus we can realize that we are indeed an aspect of nature as opposed to being a separate and independent ego personality existing on a strange and foreign planet, that we "came out" of the elements and conditions of the evolving world as leaves emerging from the branches of a tree or waves from the surface of the ocean as opposed to an alien life form "coming into" this world from some place else and feeling lonely, isolated, and disconnected.

As Achaan Chah would say: "All bodies are composed of the four elements, of earth, water, fire and wind. When they come together and form a body we say it's a male or a female, giving it names and so on, so that we can identify each other more easily. But actually, there isn't anyone there, no permanent, fixed and independent entity--only mind-body process, only earth, water, fire and wind. Don't get excited over it or infatuated by it because if you do you'll only suffer. You'll only fall down when you want to make it permanent and beautiful. If you really look into it, you will not find anyone there." [If you could open up your head and look inside you'll not see a person there. No one home! Only brain tissue and electrical impulses that create thoughts and images, ideas and opinions, and so on. We're deluded by these electrical impulses, imagine!]

In the body meditation we mentally peel off the skin and look inside and then ask ourselves: Do we really want it? Is it attractive and desirable? Unfortunately, not many people today get to see the true nature of the human body apart from morticians, surgical teams, medical examiners and students, police and ambulance personnel, and fire fighters. Monks in Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka are allowed to view autopsies along with medical students in order to reflect on the true nature of the body. But in order for the body meditation to be beneficial one must first overcome the aversion and fear so that one can look and reflect with calmness, wisdom and compassion; this usually takes more than one viewing of a body.

Seeing the true nature of the body can cut off the first three fetters of ignorance:

1. Our own body view and sense of self or ego; contemplating the body and mind we see their impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality. We can realize that they are neither us nor ours, not me, not mine, that nothing in the world really belongs to us. They have only a provisional reality. It's like your house; it's only nominally yours. You can't take it with you anywhere. The same applies to your wealth, your possessions, your family and friends, your knowledge and experiences--they're yours in name only. They don't really belong to you; they all belong to the changing conditions of nature.

2. Skeptical doubt. Knowing things as they truly are puts an end to doubt and confusion.

3. Attachment to a path based on blind faith, rites and rituals. If we understand the fact of our own impermanence and death, we can become more sensitive, thoughtful and compassionate to all life on earth. We can learn to forgive and let go, and find peace and harmony in everyday life.

Q: What is Right Understanding or View? Right Thought or Attitude?

A: Right Understanding or View means the clear realisation that all things--physical, mental and emotional--are changing and impermanent, unsatisfactory and empty of a permanent, unchanging, separate and independent self or ego-entity. That all things are interdependent and interconnected, and subject to causes and conditions. This is the removal of ignorance and delusion and the awakening of wisdom and intelligence. One may have a great deal of book knowledge and several academic degrees but still remain ignorant to the true nature of reality. Maturity comes with right view, when we no longer think and believe that we're so important and special and are at the center of the world; when we no longer take ourselves seriously and can laugh at ourselves. With right view, we can transcend the eight worldly conditions: happiness and unhappiness, gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and infamy/disrepute. One can remain serene and patient despite the ups and downs of life; one realises that there's really nothing to lose or gain, nothing to achieve or to become, and nothing to prove. A wise person can bear misfortune with equanimity. One knows that the Universe is indeed unfolding as it should.

Right Thought or Attitude is the freedom from selfish desires and self-centered interests. One is free from attachment to the ego or "me" center and therefore free from pride, arrogance and conceit. One is patient, accepting and forgiving, considerate and understanding. One is blessed with the four Sublime States--loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. With awareness, we begin to notice how a judgmental, critical attitude results in anger, resentment, aversion and guilt. A responsive action that is based on loving kindness and compassion does not result in conflict.

Q: What is the difference between our normal everyday thinking and reflective thinking?

A: Our normal everyday thinking is usually automatic, mechanical, repetitive, agitated, reactive, judgmental, discriminative, self-centered, superficial, scattered, and so on.

Whereas, reflective/contemplative thinking is calm, creative, objective and inquiring which leads to intuitive understanding and insight, wisdom, peace and compassion.

Q: It is said that when Prince Siddhartha renounced the worldly life and became a wandering ascetic in search of enlightenment and liberation, he wanted to find a cure for sickness, old age and death. How was he able to do this?

A: When Siddhartha Gautama, the forest ascetic, became the Buddha, the Awakened One, he realized the truth of change and impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and suffering, and the non-existence of a permanent, fixed and separate self or ego-entity. He realised that the mind-body phenomenon was a constantly changing process, an interplay of the five aggregates of form, sensation, perception, mental formation and consciousness, and that a permanent, concrete and separate self was nowhere to be found. The Buddha understood that the self was only a creation of the mind, a concept based on memory, past experience and knowledge. Also, that the body was composed of the four elements of earth, water, fire and air--coming together to form a body due to certain causes and conditions, and disintegrating due to certain causes and conditions.

So, with this understanding, the Buddha saw that birth, sickness, growing old and death were just bodily changes, only manifestations of the physical organism, and that these conditions of nature were not happening to a self or ego-personality. We take these things personally because of our conditioned habit of identifying with changing phenomena--physical, mental and emotional. We suffer from ignorance and delusion. When we begin to reflect on life, we realise that suffering/conflict arises from grasping and clinging. Birth, sickness, ageing and death are not suffering where there is no attachment to "my birth", "my sickness", "my ageing", "my death". At the moment we are grasping at birth, sickness, ageing and death as "ours". This is wrong view cause by habitual conditioning and response. If we don't grasp and take things personally, they are not suffering or disease. Birth, sickness, ageing and death are only bodily changes. With right view, right understanding, birth, sickness, ageing and death disappear--only changing conditions of nature--and the "my" disappear at the same time as well. There is no longer any "I" or "me" or "my" and this condition is not suffering. It is peace, acceptance, freedom and detachment. This is the way to overcome birth, sickness, ageing and death. No one and nothing can free you but your own understanding, your own mental training/cultivation and wisdom. So, the Buddha's cure was a mental/psychological one based on insightful understanding as opposed to a physical or medical cure, OK? Are there any more questions?

Q: Can you speak on the deeper significance of birth and death?

A: Normally, when we think of birth and death in daily existence we usually think of the physical phenomenon of birth and the physical phenomenon of death. That is, a baby being born and someone dying of an illness or an accident or old age. We see birth as the beginning of life and death as the end of existence; we see birth and death as separate happenings with a time period of living in between. We see living as something separate from death. We cling to life and we fear death, we deny death. In modern society we

don't view death as something natural anymore, we see death as the cruel end of a life of the ego-personality, the "unfair" ending of all our attachments and connections--our family and friends, our material possessions, our habits and enjoyments, our knowledge and experiences, our profession and social status, our plans, hopes and dreams of the future, and so on. Or we think that death ought to occur only when someone is very old and senile otherwise it's regarded as "untimely". This shows our lack of understanding of the true nature of things and how much we take for granted. Modern medicine and doctors can only prolong life; they cannot cure death. Doctors and medical specialists--they, too, will get sick and die.

So, let's explore together the deeper meaning of birth and death. Unless we calm our minds and look deeper into the nature of life and human experience we will be at the mercy of ignorance and delusion from which comes self-centered craving and attachment, fear, sorrow and uncertainty. Because we tend to think too much and are caught up in the swift-flowing "mindstream", our perception of life is very superficial, self-centered, confused. By training/cultivating the mind we are able to focus our awareness on what is happening in the present moment. From becoming aware of our inhalation and exhalation, the physical sensation of in-breath and out-breath [the expansion and contraction of the chest-stomach area] the thinking process will slow down, the mind will become calmer and clearer, and we'll be able to see thoughts, ideas and images more objectively instead of being caught up in them and being led astray. This is the first taste of freedom, freedom from the mental world. Instead of being carried away by the fast-flowing current of thoughts and images, we can use awareness, mindfulness to get out of the stream and watch these mental objects come and go without getting involved in their story. We awaken from their powerful spell. This awakening is the Buddha-nature that exists in all beings.

In this way, we begin to notice the space between thoughts and images, and are able to see them arising and passing away in the spaciousness of awareness, calm attention. This is witnessing the birth and death of mental objects. Soon, useless and scattered thoughts and images will cease and one's mindfulness deepens. We are then able to observe the arising of bodily sensations and the fading away of bodily sensations [including the sensation of in-breath and out-breath]--the birth and death of bodily sensations. When our mindfulness is constant in daily life, we become more aware of the arising and fading away of consciousness regarding the six senses--seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking and imagining--and how fleeting and impermanent are the sense objects which appear. Our world is really the six senses, the process of mind and body, and the interplay of the five aggregates. Their changing, interdependent nature constitutes the birth and death of phenomena, the arising and passing away of consciousness, perception, sensations, etc. We begin to realise that existence itself consists of birth and death, the arising and falling away of mental, emotional and physical states.

So, birth and death are not separate, unconnected happenings, they go together; they're not at the opposite ends of existence. Living is a continuous process of birth and death; the physical organism is alive due to this process of birth and death, constant change and impermanence. Strictly speaking, we die and are reborn [physically and mentally] from

one moment to the next. Birth conditions death, arising conditions fading away, in-breath conditions out-breath and out-breath conditions in-breath. With mindfulness training and reflection we begin to see this fact more and more clearly, beyond doubt, speculation and confusion. As I'm typing this on the computer I'm aware of the birth and death of countless sensations as my fingers touch the keyboard and mouse, and that of the sensation of my bottom on the chair as I keep shifting position when that sensation becomes uncomfortable. The body is constantly experiencing touch sensations throughout the day [and night] but normally we're not aware of them unless they're very pleasurable or painful or uncomfortable or hot or cold, and so on. As I sit here I'm also aware of my heartbeat and the flow of blood through the system. Most people are not aware of their breathing [and heart beat] unless they're engaged in sport activity [jogging, swimming, soccer, etc.] or having some breathing difficulty.

So, the whole nature of change and impermanence is the process of birth and death, the continuous arising and falling away of phenomena, just like the waves on the surface of the ocean, arising and falling away ceaselessly but the ocean remains the same. The birth and death of waves is just part of a process in the much vaster and timeless dimension of the ocean. Likewise, the physical birth, existence and death of all life forms are just parts of a process in a much vaster and timeless reality of the planet and solar system, the Milky Way Galaxy and the immense Cosmos.

Q: How did the Buddha transcend the notion of physical birth and death?

A: The Buddha saw that the births and deaths of all living things on earth were but outward appearances and not true reality, just as millions of waves arise and fall incessantly on the surface of the ocean, while the ocean itself is beyond birth and death; it is not affected by the waves. If the waves understood that they themselves were water, were of the ocean, they would transcend the notion of birth and death, and come to inner peace and wisdom overcoming all fear and anxiety. Likewise, if we could understand that we are composed of the elements of the planet and solar system, that we came out of the world like leaves from a tree or waves from the ocean as opposed to a concrete, separate and isolated ego-entity living in an alien landscape, we would arrive at a profound understanding of oneness and interconnectedness which would dissolve our sorrow, worry and confusion, and would give rise to acceptance, equanimity, loving kindness and compassion. Because of the thinking process, we're like waves who think we're separate from the ocean and also separate from other waves. This is the illusion of separation, division and duality. You can say that we are the planet, in this human form, being aware of itself.

This realisation enabled the Buddha to transcend the notion of birth and death. He cultivated his mind to look deeply at the true nature of phenomena and contemplated the changing and empty nature of all things, thus he was liberated from the outer appearances of human birth and death, liberated from sorrow, fear and suffering. Thus he could remain calm and serene even when his son, stepmother, his former wife and two closest disciples passed away. He had learned to look at birth and death as mere illusions, like

bubbles forming and bursting on the surface of a flowing river. Or like waves rising and falling on the surface of the ocean.

Q: I was reading a book by a famous teacher and in it he said, "Love, birth and death are inseparable; they always go together." Can you please explain this statement?

A: First, we have to understand what love means. For most of us, love is connected to self-centred desire, pleasure and attachment, yes? Due to family and social conditioning, which includes Hollywood's movie version of romantic love, we tend to equate love with infatuation and desire, emotional need, dependency, expectation, possessiveness, jealousy, remembrances of pleasure, and so on. This kind of love is a part of human behavior and experience, we cannot deny that. But if we know only this immature form of love, only suffering will ensue--anxiety, fear, obsession, frustration, disappointment, resentment, clinging, etc.--which implies that we depend inwardly on another, we want to be loved. We don't just love and leave it there, but we ask for something in return, and in that very asking, that craving, we become dependent. Desire, dependency and fear go together. Also possessiveness, jealousy and resistance. I wonder if you see this? Self-centered clinging to a person or thing leads to resistance and tension, right? Yes, fear and conflict, suffering.

The Buddha advised us to cultivate loving kindness and compassion otherwise we'll not know freedom, peace and joy. Loving-kindness is not self-centered desire or dependency. It is wishing others to be well, peaceful and happy, to be free from suffering, conflict and harm. Loving-kindness is not a reaction. If I love you because you love me, that is mere exchange, mere trade, a thing to be bought in the market place. With loving kindness or unconditional love, there is no asking or expecting anything in return. True generosity is giving without expectation, one is not thinking about oneself--this is the freedom and virtue of loving-kindness.

With loving kindness and compassion, there is inner beauty and simplicity because the mind is not judging, discriminating, condemning, comparing, wanting, acquiring--the self is not in operation. One is accepting, patient, considerate and forgiving. One can let go of past conflicts and hurts, sorrow and despair. One cannot love--have loving kindness and compassion--without dying to the known, to memories of personal suffering and loss. One can end the burden of the past in the light of awareness in the present moment. One cannot accept and embrace without this quality of love and forgiveness. So, love, awareness and letting go [psychological death] go together. Loving kindness and compassion has its own energy and intelligence, its own wisdom, harmony, beauty and freedom, its own action. If one is caught in sorrow and despair, one cannot have compassion for others; sorrow is self-enclosing, self-isolating, compassion is to be open, to empathize with the suffering of others--there is freedom from the self with its problems, conflicts and burden. With love there is the ending of time and sorrow.

So, with loving kindness, compassion and awareness there is death, mental ending of the past. With this ending there is birth and creation, something new comes into being--the

mind/heart is fresh, open and innocent. Thus, we can see how love [loving kindness and compassion], death and creation are inseparable, how they go together.

Q: As a Dharma student and teacher, what is the main problem you encounter with Dharma practitioners?

A: Good question. Simply put, their craving, clinging and attachment! This defilement is very difficult to overcome: conditioned habit, reaction and impulse that come from self-centered behavior due to ignorance and delusion. When people get involved with Dharma teachings and practice, they naturally bring their conditioned minds with them. So, without proper guidance from a wise teacher, they easily become attached to a particular tradition, a particular lineage, a particular teacher, a particular meditation method, and so on. Some ambitious teachers encourage this attachment in order to gain more devotees and students, more support for their temples or Dharma centers; they say that their teaching is the "purest" form of Buddhism and that their meditation method is the surest and quickest way to Enlightenment and Nirvana--this sounds like business marketing to me, however "attractive"! Respecting the Buddha's way, I don't wish for anyone to become attached to me; dependency and fear deny the freedom of understanding and intelligence. I try to encourage people to look at their minds to see the truth of suffering and to make the effort to follow the path of wholesome living, mind cultivation and wisdom. When Dharma practitioners get attached to a particular teacher, they're not open and receptive to other teachers even if they may have beneficial insights and advice to share and offer. This attachment brings limitation so many do not realise that the Dharma is universal, that life itself is our greatest teacher. An individual can only guide you to discover the truth for yourself; if he/she becomes an authority, a dependency, then that prevents the awakening of your own wisdom nature, intelligence and compassion.

This tendency to cling comes from attachment to the self/ego-center with its strong desire to achieve or become something which goes with the fear of not becoming, not achieving--the resulting feeling of insecurity. Clinging and insecurity often breed pride, arrogance and conceit. The ego's demand for security in the religious/spiritual world sometimes results in fanatical behaviour or sectarianism. Despite the Buddha's advice, many Dharma practitioners are caught in sectarian thinking--such is the power of ignorance and delusion, and the thinking process. As Achaan Chah would say: "Craving/clinging, hatred/aversion, delusion/ignorance are the cause of suffering. We must learn to overcome them and free ourselves from their control. This is very hard to do. It's like leaving a close friend we've known and loved since childhood. It's not easy to make the separation." How true!

But then, I realise that most people have limited life experience, they haven't travelled much except on short vacations. Because we tend to be creatures of habit, we get caught in our limited and stale conditioning, in our patterns of habitual behavior, reactions and impulses; we easily get attached to our comforts, pleasures and personal boundaries, anything which give us a sense of security however false it may be. Of course, when these things change we experience conflict and suffering--hence the fear of change! Travelling not only opens up our minds but it helps us to become more spontaneous and

flexible. It helps us to let go of our habitual behaviour of grasping and clinging so we can adapt more easily to change, to the unexpected. Travelling challenges us; many Dharma practitioners do not challenge themselves to let go of their attachments, their likes and dislikes, fears and insecurities. Those practitioners who get to travel extensively are naturally more open-minded, receptive and flexible. Even monks and nuns, unless they're very wise and compassionate, are easily caught in their cultural conditioning and tend to be rigid and narrow-minded due to lack of exposure and life experience. Unless they begin to travel outside of their respected countries and traditions, they think and believe that their tradition of Buddhism is the best, that their meditation method is the best, and so on. This is why I like to encourage my Thai monk friends to travel to India and other countries, if possible, in order to open up their minds. In India, for instance, Theravada monks are not treated in any special, formal way, with a special status as they would in their S.E. Asian cultures. In India, a Buddhist monk is just one of many renunciates, respected but no one special.

A good example is of a well-known Malaysian monk who was invited to teach in a town on the east coast of Canada. He was ordained in the Thai tradition and taught the popular Mahasi method of insight meditation which originated in Burma/Myanmar. He had his own retreat center in Malaysia and devotees who treated him with great reverence, respect and generosity, not uncommon in the Theravada tradition. So he had come to expect this "royal" treatment and formality when he showed up at this Chinese temple in Halifax where the devotees, mostly ethnic Chinese, were used to Mahayana monks who were much less formal and rigid. To make a long story short, he expected them to behave like devotees in Malaysia and Thailand and soon he became very unpopular and unwelcome: they found him too serious and rigid, arrogant, rude and demanding. Needless to say, despite his knowledge and wisdom, he still has a lot to learn! I can only hope that he has learnt something from this experience especially if he intends to do more teaching overseas.

Some Dharma devotees like to associate themselves with famous names and teachers, which is only ego-enhancement; the ego wants to feel special. Some read books and soon they think they know everything; they think they're "experts" on Buddhism. Some learn a meditation technique and quickly they're eager to become meditation teachers. There's a saying: "Those who cannot learn are eager to teach". To learn there must be humility and patience. To realise the Dharma as a personal experience, we must first "empty our cup", we must let go of our intellectual pride, conceit and arrogance otherwise we remain ignorant and deluded. When someone says, "I know", you can be sure that his or her understanding is limited and superficial. The "don't know" mind is awake, open and receptive, it is therefore capable of learning. A mind that is always learning and reflecting is an intelligent mind; it is not busy trying to accumulate knowledge in order to enhance the self or ego, to impress others. Wisdom is based on intuitive knowing, awareness and understanding, not intellectual knowledge. Without wisdom and compassion, our actions end up with suffering and conflict even if we mean well. There's a saying: "The road to hell is often paved with good intentions". Please reflect on this!

Due to habitual clinging, people have too many ideas, views and opinions about everything: about themselves, about Dharma practice, about the teachings of the Buddha, about the way monks and nuns should behave, and so on. There's also the clinging to certain beliefs even though the Dharma is not about believing--when you intuitively know and understand something, there's no need to believe! In short, people think too much--not enough mindfulness, calm attention, silence and reflection, not enough humour and light heartedness. People take themselves far too seriously; they're caught in their limited and stale conditioning. They keep looking outside of themselves--comparing, discriminating, judging, condemning, liking and disliking. They cling to rules, to outer form, and they wonder why they experience suffering and conflict. Wise practice is to keep looking at ourselves most of the time otherwise we won't find peace and joy. Nor will we find peace looking for the perfect teacher, lineage, tradition, monk or nun. The Buddha advised us to look at the Dharma, the way things are, the cause of suffering, not to look at other people, not to be caught by the illusion of forms and appearances. Sometimes we may see a monk or lay teacher behaving badly or not according to our idea or image of how he/she ought to behave, we may get shocked and upset. This is unnecessary suffering. We may think: "That monk/teacher has gotten angry [or irritable]. He/she can't be enlightened with such defilements, A monk/teacher should be calm and serene all the time; he/she shouldn't be displaying emotion. This is bad!" Sounds familiar? This is a great defilement on our part: discriminating, making comparisons and judgments. We must watch our reactions and emotions, our egos, and let go of our opinions. This is the way of Dharma, the truth of suffering and dis-ease. We cannot possibly make everyone behave as we would wish or to be like us. This wish will only make us suffer. This is a common mistake for Dharma practitioners/ meditators to make but watching others will not make us develop wisdom and compassion, patience and tolerance. We will understand when we pay attention to our thoughts, feelings and emotions. If we think we're better than others, we'll only suffer. We must get rid of our cleverness, arrogance and conceit.

On occasion, I've been told, rather haughtily, that I wasn't "enlightened", that I still had defilements because I happened to display moments of irritation. My response would be, "Of course I have defilements! I'm only human, no? I never claimed to be a saint or Arahant, did I? That's just your projection! I still get upset or irritable [usually if I'm sick or very tired] but the big difference now is that I don't cling to these mental states because I know that they're temporary, unsatisfactory and suffering; I can easily let go of them, I no longer identify with them as "me" or "mine". Understand? Actually, I'm glad that you don't think I'm "enlightened" because then you'd expect me to behave in a certain way according to your idea or concept, right? And then, if and when I behave otherwise you would only get upset and annoyed, wouldn't you? You would only suffer!"

"The Dharma is for those with little dust in their eyes", said the Buddha. "Dust" here means, of course, the defilements/pollutions of the mind--ignorance and delusion, craving and clinging, hatred and ill will. Many Dharma practitioners I've encountered have a fair amount of dust in their eyes and so it's not easy for them to realise the Dharma at a deeper level apart from intellectual understanding. They might have some Dharma knowledge but yet their minds continue to react in deluded ways. They're still caught in the trap of

self-centered craving, attachment and aversion. As Dharma students we have to keep recognizing the dust of conditioning and defilements and have the courage to remove the layers of ignorance and delusion that blind us from the way things are.

To practice the Dhamma, we must be constantly mindful, to be choicelessly, effortlessly aware of ourselves moment to moment and let things go in the flame of attention. We must keep emptying our minds to see the truth of what is happening moment to moment; the way things are outside of our thoughts, ideas, opinions and personal preferences. We must challenge ourselves, challenge our habitual tendency to over-react, to grasp and to cling, to crave and to reject, to judge and to criticize, compare and condemn. Otherwise, we cover up the truth of non-self. All we see is self/ego--I, me, mine. But Dharma is letting go of self-centeredness, of limited and stale conditioning, and move towards peace, silence and emptiness, towards Nibbana, loving kindness and compassion.

Chapter 3: Self-knowledge and Freedom

From: *An Inquiring Mind's Journey:*
a book about a life with Buddhism
by Bhante Kovida



Image courtesy of [Buddhism Depot](#)

A talk given at the University of Toronto, October, 1997

This evening we are going to explore together the significance of self-knowledge and the meaning of freedom. I say "together" because the speaker is not an authority, he is not trying to convince or convert you with a particular belief or philosophy. We are inquiring and exploring together as spiritual friends into some of the issues of existence. So what is important is the quality of your listening in which there is your own understanding and realisation. It is essential to listen with an open and relaxed mind in order to find out that which is true and obvious. Our conditioned mind with its ideas, beliefs, opinions, discriminations, likes and dislikes, is often an obstruction to seeing things clearly and directly without the imposing habit of labels, words and measurement.

Now, as you know, we have a great deal of knowledge today. You just have to visit the university or public library or check the Internet for a wide array of information or watch documentaries on TV or read encyclopedias. It is endless. Many people here are studying for degrees, Bachelors, Masters and Ph.Ds. Some people have more than one degree. We seem to judge intelligence by the amount of knowledge we accumulate but the most essential knowledge of all is self-knowledge and self-understanding that leads to wisdom, compassion and freedom. We may be very sophisticated intellectually, very clever and learned, very professional, but unless we understand ourselves, we are, really, unintelligent as our minds are in conflict and contradiction. We'll never be peaceful and mature human beings. In North America we may have a much higher standard of living than in most countries but there's a great deal of mental suffering in our modern society.

When Mother Theresa came here some years ago she pointed out that although there was a lot of poverty and many people living on the streets of towns and cities in India, there was a great deal of loneliness and isolation here, a great amount of fear, insecurity, depression, superficiality and pettiness. In this materialistic, consumer society, money

and material things are often more important than our relationship with other human beings, and we tend to make a fuss over trivial things. So, we have to investigate what freedom really implies. Because freedom and self-knowledge go together. It is in understanding of ourselves, our human condition and experience, that we develop wisdom, compassion and freedom.

This topic of freedom is very relevant to me at this time because I'm visiting a group of inmates at a correctional center and this is an important issue I discuss with them in order for them to understand the deeper aspect of freedom regarding the nature of our mental defilements which cause us suffering and get us into trouble. Now, what is freedom? Normally we think that freedom means the freedom to do what we like; we like to pride ourselves that in N. America we are a free, democratic society, we can vote, we can think and say what we like, we can go anywhere we choose, make as much money as possible, buy anything we want and satisfy our desires, we can enjoy ourselves in so many ways. Yet if you inquire deeply, logically you'll see that we're really not free in our so-called free society. We may have the freedom to do what we like, go where we like, and so on, but we still have a great deal of fear and anxiety, stress, greed and frustration. In our society there is a strong urge to acquire material things; yet when we do get them there is the burden of attachment and worry. Very often our possessions possess us more than we possess them. I hope you see this fact. If we become too attached to our families and friends, they too become a burden, a source of worry, expectation and disappointment. So, freedom really means freedom from all this mental suffering and delusion. Because if the mind is clear, peaceful and compassionate, then whether one is in prison or one has only a few months to live, one can still be peaceful and free from fear, anxiety, craving and regret. Freedom comes when the mind is purified of its defilements--ignorance and delusion, craving and attachment, hatred and ill will.

As you all know, fear is a dominant aspect of the human psyche, a universal delusion of the mind. Our minds are constantly being deluded by thoughts, ideas, beliefs and images, opinions and views, conclusions and suspicions. We are deluded by self-centeredness, by pride, arrogance and conceit, by the belief that the self or ego or soul is a permanent and fixed entity, that we're at the center of the universe, separate and independent from the rest of existence. But, all this is an illusion. Nothing exists in isolation or in a vacuum. What the mystics and intelligent, aboriginal peoples realised a long time ago the modern environmentalists are now realising: that everything is interdependent and interconnected in a complex web of interrelationships. One of the reasons we think we're so separate and independent is because our lives are so busy and we've become so mobile and materialistic. Our consciousness is dominated by stress and anxiety, greed and attachments, goals, results and time schedules, pleasure and enjoyment. And we now have the ability to travel long distances by plane, car, bus and train. It's easy to forget that we're intricately a part of the whole. And despite our busy, mobile lives our bodies still require the elements of this planet--air, food, water, heat, and rest, exercise and medicines for sustenance and good health.

Most of us have an emptiness, a void within us. And because we don't like this void we try to fill it. Through romantic relationships and pleasures of the senses, through the

acquisition of money and material things, through many kinds of entertainment including alcohol and drugs. Or we try to fill the void with some religious idea or belief: a creator God or Savior, belief in a guru, in eternal life or reincarnation, in miracles and psychic phenomena. Endless amount of things that we don't really need. But until we understand the nature of the void, this inner emptiness, it will always be there. And so will that sense of dissatisfaction, disillusionment, fear and anxiety, loneliness and despair. One of the things I noticed last year when I came back from Asia was that at least 60% of the people I knew were caught in some form of depression or emotional turmoil. It seems that being depressed has become like a plague. Medical science is producing more and more drugs for this condition; even children now take medicine for depression.

Why are we such complex and confused individuals? Our minds are so filled with ideas and ideals, concepts and opinions, cravings and attachments, fears and anxieties. The conditioned mind is always judging, comparing, analyzing, discriminating; we're caught up in a lot of likes and dislikes, personal preferences, our minds are so agitated and opinionated. Another thing I also noticed upon returning to Canada and being with friends was that most of the things they talked about concerned what they liked and what they didn't like; they would make such a big deal out of their personal preferences as if they were so important. We think our likes and dislikes are important because we think this "I" or "me" is so special; we take ourselves far too seriously, we're too attached to this sense of self or ego.

So, what exactly is this "self" or ego? Is it something to be taken seriously? To understand the "self" or ego, one has to understand the nature of the thinking process. These factors are connected. As you know, most of us are caught up in this restless thinking process and we think incessantly because it's such an automatic, mechanical phenomenon, and most of the time we're not even aware that we're thinking. We just get caught up in it and this creates our mental-emotional reality. We often get carried away with our restless minds and chase our thoughts and ideas, our feelings, moods and emotions, we get deluded and caught by them, and so we create a lot of problems for ourselves. Some people get totally carried away and do crazy, irrational things, even commit crimes and murder. We are the victims of mental-emotional states because we simply don't know how to watch our minds with awareness and let these mental states go. As we said, because we think so much, an essential aspect of self-knowledge is to put thinking in its right place. Thoughts and images dominate our consciousness. They suppress our natural intuitive awareness and intelligence; it's only in times of emergency and life-threatening situations that this awareness comes into the foreground.

Now, what exactly is thinking and why do we think? An easy way to understand this is to see the mind as a computer; actually the mind, the brain is a computer, but it is a biological computer which is a result of millions and millions of years of biological evolution; you know, the electro-chemical process. And somewhere inside the brain, I'm told it's in the mid-brain, are these memory circuits that contain all our past information since early childhood up until now, today. And that information is based on all our past experiences, all our accumulated knowledge which includes language, mathematics, geography, etc., and of course, memory. Now, every time we think, we're actually using

information from these memory circuits; so thinking is a response to memory, past experience and knowledge, and with this past information and mental conditioning, thinking projects itself into the future. If you observe your mind you'll see this fact for yourself: that most of the time we're either thinking about the past, remembering some event which occurred either this morning, last week, last year. Or we're thinking about the future--later on this evening, two days from now, next week, next year, right? Some of us are already thinking about Christmas, I'm sure. [laughter]

So you see that thinking is a movement in time, from past to future, isn't it? This is just the nature of the thinking process; it is time-based. Thinking or thought is time, past and future; this movement is going on all the time. Our consciousness is time-based because of the thinking process; thinking conditions the mind with the idea of past and future. You can see how obsessed we've become with physical age, birthdays, wedding and other anniversaries. We take these things so seriously and we make a big fuss over them with desire and expectation; if people forget our anniversaries, there's conflict and suffering in the mind, right? Time-based events become a part of who we are because the self, the "me" is also a result of past conditioning, as we shall see. If we understand the whole structure of the thinking process, the nature of time and the self or ego, you'll see that these time-based events are not really important, we're only conditioned with these things from childhood and they create anxiety, desire and conflict in the mind. Time is really a delusion created by thinking. And it is because of thinking that there's so much anxiety, worry, insecurity and psychological fear in human consciousness. Later we'll be exploring into the nature of fear and you'll see how thinking itself and the concept of time are two of the main factors of fear.

Now, what is this self or ego or soul which we believe is permanent, unchanging and is at the center of experience and the vast Universe? First, we must understand that it is natural to have a sense of self but this self, the "I" or "me" with the idea of "mine", is only a result of conditioning. Who we are or who we think we are when we say "I" or "me" is just a collection of memories and past experiences. In other words, the self or ego is just a construction put together by the thinking process as memory, past experience and knowledge. I wonder if you see this fact. You can see that the thinking process and the self, the "me" are intricately connected, right? You can say that the thinking process is the vehicle of the self, carrying it along, sustaining it with past memories and hopes and dreams of the future, right? For example, if I'm meeting you for the first time today and naturally we begin to speak about ourselves, what do we speak about? Past experiences, memories, right? That's all. And as thinking projects itself into the future, thinking projects the self into the future as personal hopes and dreams, personal goals, plans and ambitions, personal fears and anxieties, right? This is most interesting; this is the real insight into human consciousness as realised by the Buddha and other enlightened beings throughout the centuries.

This sense of self, because it is a result of the past, has many regrets, guilt feelings and disappointments, sorrow, hurts, memories of happiness, fears and anxieties. Now this "me" center is not a fixed, concrete, unchanging entity: it is always growing, changing with new experiences and accumulation of knowledge. For example, your coming here

this evening to listen to the speaker becomes a part of your self. I wonder if you see this? By listening and participating and exploring together with the speaker, this becomes a part of your direct experience, which later becomes a part of your memory, which becomes a part of you self, right? You, the experiencer, are not separate from your experiences, memory, knowledge, and understanding [and misunderstandings]. So later on, if and when you speak or refer to this evening, you'll realise that you, your "self" is intricately related to your memory and past experiences, right? So as you can see, our "self" is not something that is fixed and concrete, it's a result of past conditioning and it keeps changing and expanding with the addition of new experiences and knowledge.

Normally, we believe that this self is permanent and unchanging because of the delusion of thoughts and language, because of the constant use of "I", "me" and "my" in everyday conversation. Due to social convention, we need to use the labels "I", "you", "he", "she", "we", "us", "they", "them", but they're only labels for communication. Likewise, our names are just convenient labels for others to refer to us; our parents gave us names, labels, for social convention, initially used on our birth certificate, then on our student I. D., then on social insurance certificate, medical insurance, drivers permit, passport, and so on. But names are really just labels, likewise the "I" or "me", but we usually don't realise this fact; we're caught in the ignorance and delusion of social conditioning, and so we take our names and the "I", the self, very, very seriously. We cling to names and labels as a self or personality and so there's suffering. Someone forgets your name or you forget his or her name, and it becomes a big deal. But it's not really important; names are just labels, if you forget a label you forget it; it's no big deal! Actually, it's wiser to ask someone, "What is your label, please?" or "Excuse me but I forgot your label" than to say, "What is your name?" or "I'm sorry but I forgot your name", right? So we have to see this fact and go beyond the limited convention of names and labels; a name or label is not the actual person or thing!

As we said, we have to use the label "I" in order to communicate effectively and in daily life we use this "I" many times, don't we? Sometimes over a hundred times a day. And because we use the same label "I" as a center of reference, it gives the impression that this so-called self is permanent and unchanging, always the same. I wonder if you see this fact clearly? And it's only through observation and insight, through looking at the mind with awareness, calm attention, that we begin to see and cut through the deep-rooted illusion of a concrete center of experience. You begin to see that each moment the mind is different and the body is different. So, mentally, emotionally and physically, we're never the same from one moment to the next; the mind is a constantly changing process and similarly the physical body--there's nothing fixed and solid in us. It is only thinking itself and the constant, habitual use of the label "I", which creates this strong illusion of a permanent and unchanging self--center. Actually, we're alive at this moment because of constant change, a complex and interrelated series of biological processes. Yet, due to our ignorance and delusion, we become too attached to people, material things and ideas [mental formations] and we do not want them to change; we want the objects of our attachments to last forever. Please reflect on this fact of human experience! So life, existence, is based on constant change and impermanence. Everything is in constant flux;

nothing remains still. An essential aspect of self-knowledge, insight and wisdom, is to see clearly this constant change, this impermanence.

With insightful understanding, you still continue to use the personal pronoun, "I", in daily conversation, but you are no longer fooled by it anymore; you realise the purpose and limitation of words, labels and thoughts; you're no longer attached to the idea of a permanent and unchanging self or ego, so you stop taking yourself seriously because you see that the conditioned habit of identifying with changing, impermanent phenomena only results in suffering and conflict; you stop taking things personally and the burden of life is slowly lifted and you experience more freedom, spontaneous joy, and compassion in daily life.

The mind is complex, confused and contradictory simply because it gets caught up with restless, neurotic thinking, with words and symbols, labels, ideas and ideals which we mistake for reality, for the way things are. Also, the mind has been conditioned to label, judge, criticize, compare, condemn, discriminate, to like and to dislike, to want and not to want, plus the desire to get rid of or to change that which you dislike. All this grasping and clinging, discrimination and constant measuring only help to strengthen the illusion of a permanent and unchanging self or ego-center. It is only with awareness, calm attention that we begin to see the reality of things as they are, to observe "what is" from moment to moment without the interference of words and labels and the discriminating mind. Such a mind is no longer confused and deluded, agitated and complex; it is calm and clear, simple and patient, watchful and compassionate. You can say that this clear, restful awareness or bare attention is our true self, the unconditioned state of being.

Not only do we see the self, ego or soul as a permanent, concrete, separate and independent entity, but we also see the body in terms of "me" and "mine"; we view the physical organism as a self or belonging to a self. We say things like, "My head is hurting me" or "I've got a stomach problem" or "I'm getting fat" or "I'm too skinny" or "I'm getting wrinkles, I'm definitely aging!" or "My hair is falling out, I'm getting bald. Oh no!" or "My face is so ugly, I hate the way I look", and so on. But, in truth, the body is neither "me" nor "mine"; it doesn't belong to a self or personality; it belongs to the changing conditions of Nature, a biological manifestation of the four elements--Cosmic Energy. We identify with the body out of conditioned habit and mental suffering arises as a result. Now let's investigate: Can you tell the body not to get hungry? Can you command the body not to get sick? Can you tell the body not to get tired, not to sleep, not to eat, not to go to the toilet, not to feel pain, heat or cold? Does it obey your wishes? No, not really. Because if the body was really "me" or "mine", it would never get sick, feel pain, get tired, dirty and smelly; it would never have to eat and go to the toilet, it would never get injured, grow old, and it would never die. But you see, whether we like it or not, the body does its own thing, it follows its own natural laws according to causes and conditions; but because of ignorance and delusion we cling to the body as "me" and "mine". Let us say that the body belongs to us in name only, conventionally speaking; likewise our children: they do not really belong to us, we're responsible for raising them healthily and safely, but they too belong to the changing conditions of Nature; they do not remain cute, cuddly babies forever, right? They too have to grow old and die someday.

The body is just a temporary shelter, we have to leave it one of these days; let's say that it's on temporary loan from Nature and the four elements. But like a rented house, we have to look after it, keep it clean and healthy, and give it proper rest, nourishment, and so on. Our house is like a hotel and so is our body. We'll have to move out of them both one day and leave them behind, only temporary shelters. There is no permanent, abiding entity or tenant--only mind-body process, only earth, water, fire and air. We should not get excited over it or infatuated by it. When we don't understand this there is suffering, anxiety and conflict. In modern society we've become very obsessed with the way we look; we're afraid of the ageing process and of getting sick, and we're terribly afraid of death. Death is no longer seen as part of the natural process of existence but rather as the cruel ending to a life of pleasurable enjoyment and endless attachment to people, money, material possessions and personal achievements. And physical death is the ending of all attachments and desires.

According to the Buddha, we have the wrong view, the wrong understanding of the body-mind process, clinging to it as "me" and "mine". We now have this disease called Anorexia Nervosa, where individuals become so obsessed with being slim that they ruin their health by not eating properly, some people even die from this condition. This is an example, although somewhat extreme, of this wrong view of the body-mind process, over-identification of the physical form. We spend a great deal of time and money trying to look attractive, youthful and glamorous; cosmetic surgery has become very popular. Our physical image has become all-important and our lives have become increasingly shallow, petty and superficial. So there's suffering and conflict resulting from ignorance and delusion. There's this thing now called Cryogenics where, if you have money, you can pay this company to freeze your body after death in the hope that medical science in the future will be able to bring you back to life again. This idea is, of course, due to the strong attachment to the body as a self with its craving for eternal life in the future. The belief in reincarnation also has its roots in the idea of a permanent, concrete self wanting to come back again and again into worldly existence but in a different body each time. If you care to go into this matter deeply you'll see that this belief is the outcome of thought projecting itself into the future with fear and uncertainty of the unknown. Thought/thinking, being a response to memory and knowledge is always in the field of the known and previous experience, so it cannot possibly comprehend the profound mystery of death, the great Unknown. It's like a fish trying to relate to the experience of riding a bicycle or driving a car or of a bird gliding in the wind--it's impossible. We cannot really relate to and comprehend that which is outside of our day-to-day experience; we can only speculate and create theories. So, out of this profound uncertainty and fear of the unknown mystery of death, thought has created the belief in reincarnation, likewise the idea of Heaven and Hell and Eternal Life, the Pure Land in the Western Paradise, the Great Hunting Ground in the Sky, and so on. In short, thinking/thought is afraid to come to an end. It wants to continue forever! Only in the silence of meditation does the fear of the unknown come to an end.

Upon wise and calm reflection, we begin to see more and more that the self or ego-center is just a conditioning, a programming in the brain, a construction of the thinking process as memory, past experience and knowledge. So, thinking and the self, the "me", are time-

based; they're related to the past and therefore to the future, a movement in time. And so this self with its past conditioning and history feels that it has to become, has to achieve, has to acquire, and so on, in the future; we're educated in this manner, thus our parents often put unnecessary pressure and expectations on us. As a result there is tremendous fear of not becoming, not achieving, not having, and so on. Psychological fear is caused by thinking, and thinking is becoming, wanting, grasping, craving, needing, etc. Becoming with its fear of not becoming and not achieving is the root of all fear. If there were no thinking, there would be no fear. Becoming is fear. Not becoming, not achieving, not having, creates tremendous insecurity and therefore fear, anxiety, worry, frustration, despair, depression, suffering, dis-ease.

I remember when I was in university some years ago, my mind became very restless, disturbed, and confused, and I became increasingly dissatisfied, disappointed and depressed with academic studies. I didn't know what else to do with my life, my future seemed very bleak and uncertain. I kept thinking, "What's going to happen to me next year?" "What's going to happen to me two, three years from now? What will I be able to achieve? Will I become a famous scientist? Will I be able to win the Nobel Prize for Chemistry, develop medicines and save the world?" My thoughts an endless becoming in the future, right? Naturally, I began to experience a great deal of fear and anxiety; there was this nervous tension in the chest and stomach area, which felt most uneasy and unhealthy--alcohol and cigarettes were the order of the day. I didn't realise, of course, at the time that it was this all-consuming neurotic thinking and worrying about the self which was creating this inner turmoil, suffering and dis-ease. Unfortunately, self-knowledge, mind training and cultivation [the art of skillful living] are not included in our education curriculum; the mental-emotional world is so powerful and strong, our minds easily get so confused and deluded, that we get carried away by emotions and moods or by the appearance of things; we tend to overreact thus becoming unbalanced, disturbed and irrational. In those days I was just another confused, frustrated, ignorant but hopeful college student facing an uncertain future in a much too fast-moving, materialistic world.

As we've said, thinking is a response to our past information stored up in the brain as memory and knowledge and it projects itself into the future. This is a natural, universal, phenomenon in human consciousness regardless of which language one is programmed with or using--English, French, Spanish, or Chinese. Now, let us proceed and investigate further: by merely thinking about the past and recalling various events, many kinds of feelings and emotions can arise to cause disturbance in the mind. For example, you can recall a happy occasion and a happy, jovial feeling will arise; likewise, recalling an unhappy experience will result in a sad, unpleasant feeling, right? You might remember some unskillful, irrational thing that you did or said in the past and it's likely you'll feel regret or remorse or guilt--we can all identify with this, can't we? We also have regrets about things we didn't do or say, don't we? You can recall some conflict you had with someone and it's likely that anger, hatred, ill-will, and resentment will arise, even after a year or two, even after five, ten or twenty years, interesting, no? And perhaps that individual with whom you had this problem is no longer alive, long dead and gone, with only bones or ashes remaining, and yet the very memory of that person is able to bring back intense emotions--amazing how the mind strongly clings to past events and negative

emotions which only result in suffering, bitterness, sadness and dis-ease! This is the delusive power of thoughts and images! Then there are the memories of emotional or physical pain which tend to produce fear and foreboding, fear that this painful experience might reoccur in the future--once bitten, twice shy, yes? And it's interesting, on the other hand, how memories of pleasure and enjoyment produces the desire for more of the same; you want those pleasures to be repeated, there's craving for more sense pleasures, right? Without mind training, reflection and wisdom, we easily become slaves to the pleasures of the senses which are always impermanent and therefore unsatisfactory; we don't realise how powerful their seduction is on our psyche; attachment to fleeting sense pleasures usually result in frustration, disappointment and despair--pleasure and pain usually go together. So, you can see how thinking, responding to the past, can result in a variety of disturbing mental-emotional states.

Similarly, thinking about the future can result in anxiety, worry, fear, insecurity, anticipation, nervousness, and so on. This is obvious, isn't it? Also, you see that the more restless and agitated the mind is, the more desires and cravings there are, which result in more feelings of frustration and disappointment. If you ask teenagers whether or not they were confused about life, most of them would answer in the affirmative; this is, of course, partially due to their lack of self-knowledge and proper guidance within the home and school environment, and partially due to the fact that teenagers usually have a lot of restless energy and being very impressionable they're easily caught by constant desires and cravings, which increase with the strong influence of peer pressure. Hence, they're victims to a great deal of frustration, disappointment, envy, jealousy, inferiority complex, emotional turmoil and conflicts, which spell confusion in the mind. The root cause of this youthful confusion is, naturally, the restless, agitated, easily excitable mind, which is easily caught in self-centered grasping, craving and clinging.

Discursive, neurotic thinking also creates feelings of isolation and loneliness, sadness, despair, depression, and, of course, fear and insecurity. Thinking--with its associated emotions--is limited, self-isolating, divisive and fragmentary by nature. Thinking creates the illusory division, the duality between "me" and the world and society, between "me" and Nature, between "us" and "them", between the "thinker" and thoughts, between the "experiencer" and experience, and so on. This division or duality in the mind is the cause of conflict and neurosis. Thinking is so mechanical, automatic, repetitive and all-consuming, it fuels our emotions out of proportion and often out of control; thoughts have the ability to create big dramas out of small problems and conflicts, don't they? It's like starting out with a small fire and you keep adding more wood, paper and fuel to it, and before you know it, you end up with a huge, roaring fire which you're unable to control, right? This is another unhealthy, delusive aspect of the thought process; thinking is a necessary part of existence, it has its place and purpose, but it's limited and is the actual cause of our mental problems: obsessions, cravings, greed, attachments, fixations, fears, hatred, ill will, and other delusions. Also, thought is a linear reality, the immensity of life is multi-dimensional; thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions cannot possibly grasp this vast reality, this immensity.

To recapitulate, thinking is a response to memory, past experience and knowledge, and it projects itself into the future; it is therefore a movement in time. The self or ego-center is a construction of the thought process and is therefore a result of past conditioning. Thinking has its place and purpose but it's limited. Now, The Buddha, Shakyamuni, with his profound insight and wisdom, understood the nature of the human condition and the phenomenon of human experience including, of course, the nature and structure of the thinking process. He saw how consciousness was related to the six senses [seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking/imagining], and how our conditioned thinking was the main factor behind mental suffering and its source: mental defilements--ignorance and delusion, craving and clinging, hatred and ill will. And this is why the Buddha stressed the importance of mind training and cultivation in order to purify the mind of its defilements to end suffering and dis-ease. He constantly stressed the importance of awareness, mindfulness, calm attention [he used the Pali word: sati] because this aspect of the brain is unconditioned; it is not related to the past or to the future, it is always in the present moment. It is always fresh, innocent, clear--not neurotic or confused, it is unlimited and intelligent. It is the Buddha Mind, the one who intuitively knows, that aspect of our nature which is awake, calm and alert. It is awareness, attention which frees us from the delusions and tyranny of the all-consuming thinking process. It helps to keep the mind open, receptive, spacious and responsive, free from tension, grasping and clinging which cause the mind to contract around its obsessions and fixations, worries, anxieties, and other self-centered pre-occupations. We are often lost in the stories or mini-dramas of our minds. It is sati, mindfulness, which frees us from our mind-created worlds. Thoughts, images and moods are not necessarily connected with reality, with what is actually happening in the present moment. The Buddha taught us to pay attention, to be aware of them before we are influenced, deluded or caught by them.

With awareness, we feel more peaceful, balanced and secure, and less self-centered. Our attachments and desires become less and less, and our minds become more light, innocent, joyful and free. The path of wholesome living and simplicity, mind training/cultivation, self-knowledge and wisdom frees us from suffering and the burden of life. I remember one day in Sri Lanka at my mentor's temple: I was taking a short walk and enjoying the natural scenery but I also had several things on my mind--pre-occupations with different aspects of a monk's life: my increasing attachment to solitude and silence, my growing desire for bland, uncooked food, some health problems, learning to deal with desire, longing, clinging, expectation, frustration, boredom and doubt. Suddenly, I caught a movement at the corner of my eye; instinctively I froze in my tracks and slowly looked down to my right. Sure enough there was this cobra snake about two feet away, upper body raised with spread hood, ready to strike in self-defense. Normally, cobras do not strike unless provoked or stepped on, they're very shy creatures otherwise. At that moment I became extremely alert and awake, natural instinct clicked in. And I don't think I'd ever been so awake in my entire life! [laughter] One's whole being was completely at attention in the present moment; all mental activity concerning the past and future had quickly vanished; in that state of alertness the mind could effortlessly let go of all its problems and pre-occupations due to the immediate physical danger of the poisonous snake. All past conditioning/programming, including the self or ego, had ceased to operate. Interestingly enough, there was no state of panic or horror--I did not

freak out--there was only an awakened state of clarity, attention and elation. The cobra and I looked intensely at one another: we were at the same energy level, at the same intensity; and we were meeting each other at the same place and at the same time--totally in the present moment! There was an intuitive understanding and respect for each other; words and thoughts, ideas, concepts and symbols were completely superfluous! Intuitive awareness and wakefulness were indeed essential for survival and well-being. Then suddenly, as quickly as the cobra had appeared, it turned its hooded head and quickly disappeared into the bush. I was amazed at its speed, agility and intelligence. On seeing the patterned marks on the back of its hood as it retreated, I could appreciate its beauty despite its potential danger. I felt no aversion to it nor was I paralyzed with fear; there was only a sense of exhilaration and awe, loving kindness and empathy for one of Mother Nature's creatures. It was a profound experience of wakefulness, emptiness and non-self. Standing there on the path and appreciating the peace and beauty of aloneness, the clouds in the vast blue sky never looked more lovely or enchanting as at that moment, eternal and beyond measure. When the mind is no longer judging, criticizing, comparing, condemning, without wanting to change anything, and is therefore capable of seeing "what is" from moment to moment, in that very perception is the eternal, full of magic and beauty.

Upon reflection, one realised that the state of pure awareness or bare attention was empty of a self or the "me" center; there is no self or entity being aware or paying attention--there's just that energy, that state of mindfulness, alertness, sati. I wonder if you see this important fact? Awareness, attention is a state of non-duality. It is thoughts and words [using conventional language] which create the self-center or ego-entity, thus creating the duality, division, between the observer and the observed [visible objects], the listener and sounds, the feeler and feelings, the thinker and thoughts, and so on. There is really no concrete thinker that is separate from thoughts; the thinker is thought; the "me" is put together by thought from memory, past experience and knowledge. Thought separates itself as the thinker, a thinking entity, in order to give itself continuance and permanency, security. Thought also creates the observer, the controller, the listener, the feeler, the smeller, the taster, the experiencer, and the separate center of experience.

Thought says, "I am thinking good thoughts" or "I shouldn't be thinking bad thoughts", or "I am seeing that tree, I am hearing that sound", thereby creating an "I" as a thinker separate from thoughts, an "I" as a seer or observer separate from visible objects, and an "I" as a hearer or listener who is separate from audible sounds. Do you see this illusion of separation created by thought and conventional language? This is real insight and investigation. This duality or division is the root of psychological conflict. Where there is an observer separating himself from the thing he observes, there must be conflict. As long as I say, "Anger [or envy] is different from me, I must control anger [or envy], I must change, I must control my thoughts and emotions", etc., in that there is duality, division, hence there's conflict. Conflict implies suppression, control, conformity, imitation, struggle, and tension. Only in the non-dual light of awareness that one can observe clearly, objectively, calmly, sanely, the totality of consciousness without analysis, and thus going beyond thoughts and emotions, these changing, impermanent, and impersonal conditions of the mind.

Thinking also creates the image one has of oneself, an extension of the "me" center. Sometimes we create a negative image of ourselves, which naturally result in conflict and dis-ease. We do this out of the conditioned habit of being too judgmental and idealistic of ourselves and others, don't we? We usually create images of people depending on pleasure or displeasure and conflict, right? And we cling to those images whenever we think of those people and when we meet them again, isn't that so? That's just the nature of thoughts, memory and attachment, isn't it? In other words, we see people with the eyes/images of the past so we are not really relating to them in the present moment; we don't "allow" them to change. So for harmonious relationship to take place, it is essential that we let go of the images of past memory, conflicts and hurts, right? And this is only possible when there's attention in the present moment, loving kindness and compassion. It's only this quality of energy that can free the mind of past hurts and conflict. This is goodness, virtue, and freedom.

Another realisation I had from that memorable encounter with the cobra snake was the limitation and pettiness of the ego or conditioned self. The cobra didn't care who I was; it wasn't interested in my personal history or my hopes and dreams, or whether I was rich or poor, famous or infamous, happy or sad. It didn't care if I was a monk or lay person. In short, the cobra wasn't interested in who "I" was or who I thought I was, including whatever images I had about myself. To the cobra, I was just one giant and potentially dangerous animal! A creature to be avoided at all cost! That's all. So much for self-centered pride, vanity, arrogance and conceit! It was indeed a most humbling and insightful experience. That cobra snake was one of my greatest teachers. That unexpected encounter gave me a much deeper understanding of the profound truth of non-self and emptiness, and of the benefits of being alert and attentive plus the freedom of letting go which goes with this awakened state of mind. Normally, the mind is very sticky like glue: it has the propensity not only to grasp, crave and want endlessly but also to cling to ideas, opinions and concepts, bad memories, pleasurable experiences, negative emotions, and so on. Cobras are indeed wise and noble beings!

A mind that is seeing clearly, penetrating deeply into the nature of things, experiences the arising and passing away [birth and death] of phenomena very distinctly, moment to moment. Purity of view means freedom from the view or concept of self or ego-center. All that we are is a process of mind and body unfolding, continually becoming. This is all; there is nothing apart from this--the eye and visible objects; the ear and sounds; the nose and smells; the tongue and tastes; the body and touch sensations; the mind and mental objects [thoughts, ideas, images]. Our whole universe consists of a very rapid sequence of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and thinking/imagining. What we are is this continuity of process; this process of change is not happening to a permanent and fixed self. There is no one behind it to whom it is happening; the whole show is happening by itself. [It is thought which creates the experiencer and the duality of experience]. There is no abiding entity of which can be said, "This is I or me", because each consciousness and its object arise and vanish moment to moment.

Our whole existence is a continuity of the six processes. The names we give to them are many. Innumerable concepts describe our experiences. But the eye sees only form and

colours; it doesn't see names and labels. What the ear hears is sound. We give many names to the different sounds but what is actually happening is that vibrations come into contact with the ear, which causes hearing consciousness to arise. A very simple cause and effect relationship. There is no one home; no fixed, unchanging, independent and separate entity in the mind. The rapidity of the sequence gives the illusion that it is all happening to someone, a center of consciousness. When the mind is quiet and clear, we begin to experience the purification of view in which our whole being is seen as just that continuity of process of knowing and object, a constant flow of sensations, perceptions, thought processes and emotional states, and consciousness, free from the concept of self. And as the purity of view deepens, we become one with the flow instead of trying to hold on to it. Purity of view is the clarity of understanding that sees things as they are, the beginning of a transforming vision, a different dimension of consciousness leading to wisdom and freedom. There is a happiness and peace, a restful awareness, a coolness beyond the mind-body process, beyond the limited dimension of thoughts and feelings.

The ego-center, self, I, me, mine are all ideas in the mind, arising out of our identification with various aspects of the mind-body process. From the beginning, this self does not exist, yet because we're so firmly attached to this deeply ingrained concept, we spend much of our lives defending or enlarging or satisfying this imaginary center, the essence of our being. Meditation helps us to see its conceptual nature, to see that in reality it doesn't really exist, that it's just an idea, an extraneous projection onto what's happening in the moment. This center is put together by thought, thought being a response to memory, past experience and knowledge. By detaching the mind from all of the sensory impingements and undermining with insight perception the delusive notion of a separate "I" who is experiencing, the mind gradually quits reacting or even pay attention to sense stimuli. The "I" feeling fades away and a state of undifferentiating, all-embracing, restful, selfless awareness is experienced--the unconditioned state of being. With self-knowledge and wisdom, life becomes calmer, more harmonious, a smoother flow, less fear, worry, anxiety, regret and resentment.

Summing up, thinking and the conditioning of self-view are factors that have to be clearly understood in order to be free, mature and wise. They have their place and purpose in daily living. For practical reasons including conventional communication, but they're limited and cause division and conflict--attachment to ego, taking oneself too seriously, causes suffering, conflict and disharmony in relationship. It's obvious that we need logical, rational thinking in daily activities but you see that even when we don't need to think, the mind keeps thinking unnecessarily--worrying, planning, anticipating, regretting, desiring, obsessing, hating, resenting. Have you noticed this? Thinking becomes completely irrational, illogical, when it creates and sustains desire and fear, doesn't it? This mental process is so automatic, mechanical and repetitive--there is only disorder and confusion. This unnecessary thinking dissipates a great deal of mental energy; mental fatigue and stress are common symptoms of modern society. A mind with order and cultivation thinks logically, rationally when necessary, and when there's no real need for thinking, the mind becomes quiet, calm but alert, attentive--it dwells in restful awareness. Thoughts are just tools to be used when needed: it's like drinking tea or coffee, we need to use a cup for this purpose, and when we finish drinking we simply put

the cup down, without effort or struggle; there's no need to carry around the empty cup, right? This is common sense, intelligence, and order. So, what gives order to the mind is the energy of awareness, mindfulness, and calm attention. This order is intelligence and freedom, out of which comes kindness, compassion, patience, humility, innocence and joy.

I'll end here with a Tibetan meditation on the sky-like quality of the mind:

The mind is like the sky. The drifting clouds are like our changing thoughts and ideas. The gray, dark clouds and wind are like our emotions and moods. The thunder and lightening are like our anger and temper. The falling rain like our sadness, sorrow and tears. But above the ever-changing clouds and weather is the clear, blue sky. Similarly, above our constantly changing mental states is awareness, mindfulness--clear, vast and peaceful. The sky is clear and unaffected by what is happening. The clouds and wind come and go. So does the rain and sunlight. But the sky remains clear, vast and peaceful. See the mind as the clear blue sky or the night sky filled with stars. And let everything arise and pass away, come and go on its own. Then the mind will stay balanced, peaceful and free, observing the flow of events and our temporary mental states. Such is the nature of awareness, mindfulness--calm, bare attention.

May you be well and happy and free from ignorance and delusion. I wish you all a pleasant evening. Thank you.

Chapter 4: The Nature and Ending of Fear

From: *An Inquiring Mind's Journey:*
a book about a life with Buddhism
by Bhante Kovida

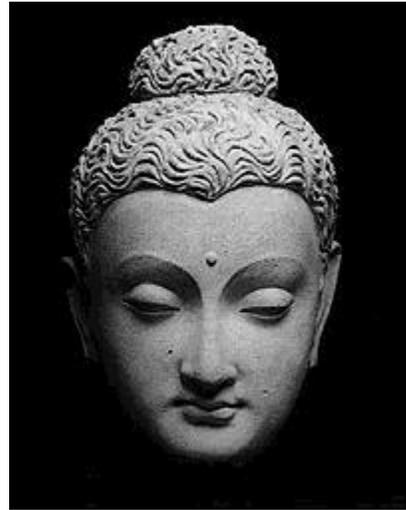


Image courtesy of [Buddhism Depot](#)

Talk given at the University of Toronto, November, 1997

This evening we're going to explore and investigate together into the nature of fear, one of the most prominent aspects of the human psyche and without doubt, one of the strongest delusions of the human mind. We're also going to see if it's at all possible to end fear through skillful means, through the application of mindfulness, attention, and wisdom. It's very important to understand this aspect of the human condition because fear tends to dominate and distort our consciousness, thus preventing us from being spontaneous, open and loving human beings.

There's a great deal of fear, worry, insecurity, anxiety, etc. in modern society, a great deal of mental suffering, dis-ease, dissatisfaction, delusion. It is ironical that the more secure we become physically as a species, the more insecure we are mentally, psychologically.

Basically, there are two kinds of fear: physical and psychological. Physical fear is much easier to understand; it arises naturally when there's physical danger--as in meeting a cobra snake or an aggressive dog, or someone threatens you with a knife, or something in the house catches on fire, and so on. It's just an instinct for self-preservation; this fact is obvious and we needn't spend much time on it. But psychological fear is much more complex and difficult to comprehend, and this is what we're going to explore this evening.

Now, a useful model for understanding mental fear is that of a tree; you may call this, "The Tree of Fear"--the branches are the various kinds of psychological fears we all experience, the connecting trunk of the tree signifies the connecting factors of fear, and at the bottom of the tree is, of course, the root of fear. First, we'll discuss the various types of fear and then we'll see what the connecting factors are, and then we'll get to the very root of all our fears.

Again, please bear in mind that the speaker is not an authority; he's not trying to convince you of anything or trying to convert you to a particular philosophy or belief. He's not speaking to you as a Buddhist monk, but rather as just a human being exploring with you one of the most destructive conditions in human consciousness. So it's essential that we listen with an open, alert and inquiring mind. This is not an evening's entertainment; we're investigating together, exploring together as spiritual friends a very serious factor of our conditioning. We're all conditioned by fear as well as pleasure, pain, guilt, remorse, desire and aversion. We're also conditioned by language, knowledge, climate, food, formal education, the family environment, and the morality and values of society. An essential aspect of self-knowledge and freedom is to understand the nature of our conditioning, its usefulness, its limitations and what lies beyond them. This is the awakening of intelligence and wisdom, freedom and compassion.

Now, one of the most common fears human beings go through is fear of the future and the unknown: the fear of not achieving, not becoming, not acquiring in the future; the fear of not being successful, of being a failure; the fear of being poor, of not having; the fear of being nobody special, of not having position, prestige, fame, some kind of status, the fear of not being married; the fear of not getting a promotion; the fear of not being accepted, acknowledged, respected, the fear of not being loved, the fear of rejection. If you're studying in university, there's the fear of not passing one's examinations, of not getting a degree, the fear of not having a successful academic career, the fear of not getting a suitable job after university, and so on. In the working world it's the same kind of fear, anxiety, preoccupation. This kind of fear is very prominent especially in our modern, industrial societies, isn't it?

There's also the fear of getting sick, the fear of getting fat, bald, etc.--the fear of becoming unattractive, the fear of ageing and of old age, and the dreaded fear of death, the great Unknown. There's the fear of loneliness and isolation, the fear of not having a partner or companion, the fear of not having a family and future generations. There's also the fear of losing people we love, material possessions, power, status, wealth, reputation, and so on. There's the fear of losing one's job, one's sense of security. There's the fear, of course, of public opinion, of what people say and think about us. There's the fear of ghosts and spirits, the fear of God or the Devil. There's the fear of authority in the home, school, and work environment. And there's the fear of physical and emotional pain. There're so many kinds of psychological fears including claustrophobia, agoraphobia [the fear of open space], the fear of flying, the fear of animal fur, and so on.

The fear of not becoming, not achieving, not acquiring, in the future has its origin in two things: parental/family pressure and expectations, and peer pressure in the school environment; this fear and anxiety will continue later on in the work environment. It begins with the unhealthy but accepted behavior of comparison: parents start to compare you to the other siblings or to other people's children, teachers begin to compare you to other students and you begin to compare yourself to other kids. This helps to strengthen the ego-center or self-image, and in most cases a feeling of inferiority will result; a few students will develop superiority complexes but fear and insecurity always lurk behind that mask of pride, arrogance and conceit, don't they? Conflict is bound to arise when you

compare yourself with other students as you'll always find some who're smarter than you are, some who're better looking, more outgoing and popular, some who're better at sports, and some whose parents have more money than yours. Comparison is a no-win situation. People with an inferiority complex are emotionally immature and unbalanced, they having a great deal of anxiety to please others, to prove themselves, in order to be loved and to be accepted. They often experience sadness, frustration, disappointment, despair and depression. People with a superiority complex also have similar problems.

Children whose parents have high expectations of them tend to suffer a lot from performance-anxiety and thus, fear of the future. I met a student once in Malaysia and he told me he always had a lot of fear, anxiety whenever he was studying for an examination. I was surprised at this as he was an A-student; then he told me his story. He was always at the top of his class except for the previous two years in which he came second and third; his parents, both school teachers, were not pleased; they wanted their son to be number one all the time--hence his problem. I reassured him that he was not the problem but rather it was his parents' attitude and behavior. He agreed, smart kid. I offered to speak to his parents but he said he would do it himself; despite being schoolteachers they were indeed suffering from ignorance and delusion, craving and attachment. They were totally unaware of the unhealthy effect their expectations were having on their son. Parents, due to ignorance and delusion with the resulting self-centered interests, often destroy their children in the name of love and caring; their love is always conditional--very detrimental indeed!

The fear of public opinion comes from having an image of oneself, from being too attached to the ego-center or self-image. The mind creates an image around the "me" as an extension of the self-center; the center hides behind this image, it uses this image as a mask or camouflage out of fear and insecurity in order to protect and justify itself. The "me" center is afraid of being nothing special, a nobody. And this image one uses to feel secure and important is bound to get hurt or deflated. Because of the urge to become, to achieve, we spend a great deal of energy trying to promote, aggrandize, justify, protect and defend this self with its image, don't we? Hence the fear of public opinion. So, is it possible not to have an image of oneself or of another? Whether it's a positive or negative image--it only creates suffering and conflict, right? A mind that is alert, sensitive, caring and attentive will not create an image because it sees the danger of thoughts and the imprisoning nature of the self; it is free from past images based on memory and previous experiences and conflict. There is great freedom and wisdom in not having an image of oneself, obviously. If you don't take yourself seriously then you'll not care what people think or say about you, right? If one is innocent and awake, free from the past and the "me" center, then one will not get hurt, there will be no conflict. Abandoning images of yourself and of others is the awakening of loving kindness and compassion, acceptance, goodness and virtue. So, no clinging to ego, no image. No image, no problem.

The fear of losing people, material things, wealth, status, prestige and reputation comes with attachment. To be attached means to be dependent; you are depending on someone or something for your personal happiness, pleasure, comfort and security; you're depending on position, status and power to feel that you're someone special, important,

secure and comfortable, to strengthen the ego, the "me". Some people use knowledge in this way, they depend on knowledge in order to feel special and important but knowledge which is mere information is only for the purpose of vanity. If you examine, go behind their words, there's fear, insecurity, uncertainty lurking behind the screen of words and information. It's only empty knowledge. So where there's dependence there must be fear. Do you understand this?

Physical dependence is something different: we have to depend on the doctor when we're sick, we have to depend on the postman to deliver our letters, and sometimes we have to depend on our friends and family members for food, clothing, shelter, and emotional support and inspiration. But to become too attached and dependent on people and material things for our happiness and security only result in fear, disappointment, frustration, resentment and despair, doesn't it? Normally we think that love is desire, pleasure and attachment but this quality of love, which is based on self-centered wanting, craving, only results in suffering and disillusionment, right? Loving kindness and compassion are not based on self-centered desires and interests, it is the profound wish for others to be well and happy and free from harm and suffering. It is only this quality of love [and empathy], which knows freedom, harmony, virtue and peace. With loving kindness and compassion there is the ending of fear, sorrow, and the memories of past conflicts and hurts.

The fear of getting sick, becoming unattractive, ageing, old age and death comes from our wrong view or understanding of the body. Because of our conditioned habit we identify and cling to the body as "me" and "mine", we see the physical organism as a self or belonging to a self or ego-entity. But this is ignorance and delusion. The body belongs to us in name only; it really belongs to the changing and impermanent conditions of nature; it doesn't belong to an ego-personality. If our body really belonged to us, it would obey our commands. Yet if we say, "Don't get old!" or "Don't get hungry or tired!" or "I forbid you to get sick!" does it obey us? No! It takes no notice. If the body was really "me" and "mine", it would never get sick or injured, it would never feel pain, heat or cold, it would never have to eat or go to the toilet, it would never get dirty and smelly, it would never get tired and demand sleep, and it would never grow old and die--it would be young and attractive, clean, healthy and energetic forever! But as you can see, the body follows its own natural laws whether "we" like it or not. There's really nothing wrong with the way the body grows old and gets sick. It's just nature, just the way things are.

So it's not the body that causes us suffering but our wrong thinking or view against the natural flow of things; anorexia nervosa, for example, is a symptom of this wrong view, isn't it? Wanting a river to flow back uphill will only cause us conflict. If we have the right view, we can see that the water must flow downhill, then our minds will be peaceful. Going against the stream is ignorance and delusion, craving and clinging. The real nature of our body is that it is not clean, not attractive, but impermanent and decaying. Physical beauty is only skin-deep, below the skin is unpleasant, unattractive--blood, flesh, sinew, muscles and organs. We experience anxiety only when we want to make it permanent and beautiful. All bodies are composed of the four elements, of earth,

water, fire and air. When they come together and form a body we say it's male or female, we give it names and so on, so that we can easily identify it. But, actually, there isn't anyone there, no permanent, concrete, independent entity--only body-mind process, only earth, water, fire and air. If we get excited or infatuated over it, there's only suffering and conflict. There's really no one home.

If you're afraid of illness, ageing and death, then you should reflect on where they come from. Where do they come from? Have you ever asked yourself this important question? Scientific explanations can only give you partial answers. Incidentally, here's a relevant question: why do we get headaches? Can anyone give a satisfactory answer? ...From tension, yes ... from influenza, yes ... pollution ...hunger ... from tiredness, yes. Many factors can help to cause headaches but there's a fundamental reason for headaches, which is so obvious that we usually don't see it. We get headaches simply because we have a head! [laughter]. Right? No head, no headaches! Obvious, isn't it? Likewise, we experience illness, ageing and death simply because we have a physical body, simply because we were born. Illness, ageing and death arise from birth, no place else. As soon as we're born we're subject to hunger, tiredness, sleepiness, illness, ageing and death, isn't it? They all go together, don't they? It's like a tree. The root and the branches and leaves all go together. You can't have one without the other. If we look closely we'll realise that if there were no birth, there would be no illness, ageing, or death. We were born due to certain causes and conditions, and we're alive today due to certain causes and conditions, and when these causes and conditions come to an end the physical organism simply shuts down; in conventional language we say that people die or pass away.

One of the main reasons we fear death so much is our reluctance to let go of our attachments, our craving, greed and clinging are so strong and relentless. As we go through life we accumulate more and more attachments, attachment to people, money and material things, attachment to knowledge, experience, to certain activities and habits, attachment to reputation, prestige, fame, position, power, etc., attachment to ideas, ideals, beliefs, concepts, and so on--all of which help to strengthen, to aggrandize, to expand the self/ego-center, right? And death means the ending of the "I", the "me", with all its attachments. The more attachments mean the stronger the clinging to the "me" and the stronger the craving for the continuity of the self, the stronger the craving for eternal life. Hence the strong fear of death, of letting go of all that we know--so there's fear of the unknown! Out of which comes the hope and belief in an afterlife, in Heaven or Hell, in Salvation or Eternal Life, in reincarnation. Thought is afraid to come to an end so it creates these beliefs in the hope of continuing the self after death. The self, the "me", is put together by thought as memory, past experience and knowledge. Meditation is the ending of thought; it is a movement in silence and the unknown. It is effortless awareness, calm attention, moment to moment.

Death is a fear only if we see it as an event in time. We visualize death waiting for us far ahead, and in the course of the years we build up a dread of this enemy--the cruel end--that is hiding behind a bush to pounce on us. Instead of seeing death as something frightening awaiting us, is it possible to bring death from the future closer to us in daily life so that it becomes more familiar and less scary? Is it possible to die while we're

alive? Obviously this implies psychological dying, letting go, ending an attachment, a dependency, and living moment to moment. See the extraordinary implications of this! Physical death is 100% certain, we all have to die one day, but mental dying is vital, essential to understanding freedom, awareness and compassion. To die mentally means to end something, to let go of past conflicts and hurts, bad memories, regrets and sorrow, freeing the mind from the past. It means to be alert, sensitive and attentive in the present moment so that the mind is not caught in clinging and grasping, craving and attachment--a feature of the mechanical thinking process. It is only awareness that can free us from our thoughts, memories, and obsessions about the future. In the moment we become aware that our thoughts are just thoughts rather than reality itself, we wake up from their spell and can dwell in the present. When we can mentally end something then the mind is fresh and innocent and open to the new, the unknown; with death there is birth, creation, so that one reincarnates in the moment which is much more important than believing in reincarnation. In the light of awareness one sees the arising and falling away--birth and death--of mental and physical phenomena moment to moment; birth and death are just parts of a process in a much vaster and timeless dimension. So, when we can live moment to moment with alertness and sensitivity, thereby freeing the mind constantly of clinging and grasping, craving and attachment, we can face physical death with peace and wisdom, without fear and anxiety. One can say: "Hello death and goodbye life."

Now let us turn to the fear of ghosts and spirits. This fear naturally come from childhood conditioning, from ghost stories and various superstitions handed down from generation to generation. With vivid imaginations it's very easy for children to see and believe in these ancient stories. In Chinese culture, for example, the belief in ghosts and spirits is very prevalent. There's a special month where they believe the gates of hell open and hungry ghosts roam the earth in search of food, drink, money, entertainment, and other necessities. Offerings of food and drink are placed on household shrines amidst smoking incense sticks to appease the ancestral spirits who are supposed to guide and protect the family. Food offerings are placed outside to appease strange and unfriendly spirits. Chinese operas, plays and puppet shows with accompanying live music are performed to entertain the hungry ghosts; special paper money, paper cars, rickshaws, planes and mansions are made and burnt so that the spirits can use them in the other world; to keep up with the times offerings now include paper credit cards, computers and cell phones. Growing up in Jamaica, I was conditioned to believe in ghosts and spirits from West Africa which were brought over by the slaves. In North America, we might think we are modern and sophisticated people but we also have our superstitions--the number 13 is considered unlucky, for example, and Friday 13th is considered an inauspicious day, right?

The fear of authority in the home, school, and work environment also has its origin in childhood conditioning, obviously. If one has a very strict, serious parent or schoolteacher or school principle then one will naturally develop this fear of authority, right? And this fear will naturally continue in the work place even if your boss or supervisor is not so strict and serious; it becomes a part of our conditioned behavior, doesn't it? There are now certain schools in which the teachers and principles not only act as role models but they participate in friendly discussion groups, with everyone sitting

together in a circle either on the floor or on chairs, and discuss human values and potentials and the difficulties young people face. Meditation, Hatha yoga, recreational music and art, and non-competitive sport activities are offered. In this way the students can learn and inquire in an atmosphere of mutual respect, relaxation, encouragement and empathy, free from this fear of authority and the fear of becoming and achieving in the future.

The fear of loneliness, of not finding a partner or companion, is due to ignorance and delusion, in not understanding one's basic state of aloneness. As the saying goes: "We're born alone and we'll die alone". It's our natural condition, it's just the way things are. If you're hungry, can anyone eat for you? If you have to go to the toilet, can your best friend or spouse go for you? Of course not! If you're tired, nobody can take rest or sleep for you, right? No one can breathe for you; this is our natural condition of aloneness. Yet social conditioning does not encouraged us to face and accept our aloneness. We are not encouraged to enjoy our own company; to be alone with the natural environment; our conditioning demands company, constant chatter, and entertainment. They breed dependency and therefore fear, frustration and disappointment. We try to escape from our natural state of aloneness and so there's fear of loneliness, isolation, the fear of not enjoying pleasure with others or with someone special. We could be in the most beautiful place in the world but if our minds were restless or preoccupied we couldn't be able to appreciate the beauty and silence. So, restlessness and mental agitation, loneliness and fear go together. When we're relaxed and peaceful we can appreciate our natural state of aloneness, there's no need to escape, no desire for company or to be entertained. I'm not saying that we shouldn't socialize but that we also need to spend time alone by ourselves, to be silent. An occupied mind is never free and never innocent.

The fear of physical or emotional pain comes from remembering past experiences of being hurt. Say you've had an accident and had to be admitted into hospital or you've been hurt emotionally from a relationship, by recalling that painful experience fear or dread will naturally arise that this experience might happen again, right? Naturally, you do not wish for that painful experience to be repeated. As the saying goes: "Once bitten, twice shy". The mind tends to do this as it's always recalling memory and projecting it into the future. Likewise, say you've had a very pleasurable experience and by recalling it you wish to repeat that enjoyment again--this is the root cause of craving and greed. The mind holds on to pleasure as memory and wants to let go of unpleasant things. We crave for pleasure and we try to avoid pain. The craving for sense pleasures often results in disappointment, frustration, and despair simply because sense pleasures do not last; it is their nature to change and are therefore impermanent and unsatisfactory. Permanent enjoyment is not possible. Nothing can give us permanent satisfaction. Happiness and unhappiness are only temporary mental states, only changing conditions of the mind. With pleasure there's pain.

So you can see that thinking about the past and the future brings about fear, anxiety, and insecurity. The factors of fear, the connecting trunk of the Tree of Fear, are therefore thinking, time as past and future, and desire--craving, greed, becoming, achieving, wanting, not wanting. Not wanting something can also create anxiety and worry, right?

We can see that desire, pleasure and fear are interrelated. It is the struggle to repeat and perpetuate pleasure that turns it into pain, anxiety, and frustration. You can watch this in yourself. The very demand for the repetition of pleasure brings about suffering and disease, because the pleasure is not the same as it was yesterday or before. You struggle to achieve the same delight or sensation, and you are hurt or disappointed because it is denied to you. Have you observed what happens to you when you are denied a little pleasure or enjoyment--in drinking, smoking, companionship or sex? When you don't get what you want, you become anxious, envious, hateful, resentful, right? What battles, what struggles we go through! All this is a form of fear, isn't it? You are afraid of not getting what you want or of losing what you have, right? When some particular faith or belief or ideology that you have held for years is shaken or torn away from you by logic or by life experience, aren't you afraid of standing alone? That belief has for years given you satisfaction, comfort, security, pleasure, and when it is taken away or threatened you are left stranded, naked and alone, empty, and the fear remains until you find another form of pleasure, another belief, another security blanket. Fear, pleasure, sorrow, thinking, aggression and violence are all interrelated, aren't they?

Now we get to the very root of fear. What is the root of psychological fear?

Audience: I think it has something to do with the notion of an "I" which is threatened, which we worry about

That's right, it's the self, the ego, the "me" center. This is the root of psychological fear; it's obvious, isn't it? We spend a great deal of energy worrying about this self, don't we? We believe that this "me" center is a permanent and concrete entity which is separate and independent from the rest of the world. Due to our ignorance and delusion, we spend a lot of time trying to promote, aggrandize, justify, protect and defend this deep-rooted idea of a permanent self. The Chinese attitude of "saving face", for example, is only a cultural, conditioned behavior and desire to protect and defend this self/ego-center out of fear, insecurity and pride. So we have to understand what this self is and how does this idea gets programmed into the brain. It's very interesting.

The Buddha was the first person to realise that the self or soul isn't a permanent and fixed entity in Nature. This realisation was contrary to the popular belief in a permanent self and reincarnation in ancient [and present day] India. The Buddha taught that there was no reincarnation. He realised that the self was only a concept in the mind based on past conditioning; the "me" center is put together by the thinking process as memory, past experience and knowledge. Who we are or who we think we are when we say, "I" or "me", is just a collection of all our memories. If you meet someone for the first time and you start talking about yourself, what do you talk about? Past experiences, memory, right? Which include personal preferences, desires and aversions, ideas and opinions. And we project this self into the future as personal hopes, dreams and plans, because the thinking process is a movement in time, from past to future. If you observe your mind you'll see this: you're either thinking about the past, recalling various memories, or you're thinking about the future--projecting, planning, hoping, becoming, and so on, right? This mental phenomenon occurs regardless of which language one is using. We all share the

same thinking process, the same fears and anxieties, desires and attachments. And we all want to be safe, happy and secure, right?

The Buddha also spoke about the unconditioned "self", that aspect of human consciousness which is not based on past conditioning, not related to memory, past experience and knowledge. This is awareness, attention, and the state of mindfulness that is always in the present moment. With awareness we are able to see the truth of things, the way things are outside of our thoughts, ideas, opinions, images, likes and dislikes. Only awareness can free us from our thoughts. With mindfulness, we can awaken from our mental delusions. This is the Buddha Mind, the Wisdom Mind.

Now, how does this deep-rooted idea of a permanent self get programmed into the human brain? It begins in early childhood when a child begins to speak, imitating sounds from its mother and others in the home environment. This stimulates the thinking process and soon the child begins to use the pronoun "I" as a means of communication, in order to express itself: "I want, I don't want, I like, I don't like". The world is fascinating, magical and mysterious, and the pleasures of the senses are enticing indeed--the desire for sense pleasures begin at an early age. The child also learns to use the words "my" and "mine" as in, "You are my mommy, you are my daddy", "This is my toy, my cup, my bed, my shirt, etc", "This is my hand, my foot, my tummy, I have ten fingers and ten toes, etc.", "This is mine!", and so on. This idea is the beginning of attachment in the mind. The idea that someone or something actually belongs to "me". The "my" and "mine" give vitality to the "I", the "me", thus strengthening the sense that there is a self. So with the constant use of "I", "me", "my" and "mine", the sense of self becomes stronger, firmer, more solid and concrete, and important as the child gets older. The degree of attachment to this sense of self depends on one's innate nature and one's conditioning in the home environment.

Now, what makes the idea of self even more deep-rooted in the mind is the verbal expression of experience through the six senses in daily life--"I am seeing/looking/observing, I am hearing/listening, I am tasting, I am smelling, I am feeling, and I am thinking/imagining." It seems perfectly normal and harmless, doesn't it? But what this does is create the illusion that there's an observer separate from visible objects, that there's a listener separate from sounds, a taster separate from flavors, a smeller separate from odours, a feeler separate from feelings/sensations, and a thinker separate from thoughts/images. In short, a permanent and concrete experiencer, separate from experience. But, in fact, there's no such center of experience; the whole process of existence via the six sense doors [seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking] is simply happening automatically by itself. The whole show is going on by itself; there's no one behind this process, to whom it is happening. We are a process of change, mentally and physically, this process is not happening to a being or self; there is just seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling and thinking, automatic phenomena, when the eyes encounter visible objects, when the ears encounter sound vibrations, when the nose encounter odours, and so on. It is thought and spoken language that create the "I" or "me" as the experiencer, as the observer, the listener, the smeller, the taster, the feeler, and the thinker. I hope you see this fact because this is the real insight of the Buddha. There is no thinker separate from thoughts; the thinker is thought, the thinker, the "I", is a part of the

flow of thoughts, right? But see how tricky thought is--thought separates itself as the thinker, the observer, the controller, in order to give itself continuance and permanency, which creates duality in the mind and hence conflict. It's only in the light of awareness and penetrating insight that we are able to cut through the illusion of a permanent and fixed experiencer or self separate from seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling and thinking.

Now, how do we deal with fear when it arises in the mind? Obviously we need to be aware and mindful otherwise we get caught by it. Without awareness we easily get carried away with the restless mind and chase thoughts and ideas, feelings and emotions, we get caught by them and so we become victims of our mental-emotional states--fear, worry, obsessions, greed, anger, lust. We deal with fear, we establish awareness by paying attention to the in-breath and out-breath, by doing this we can observe fear, desire, aversion, etc. more objectively. Instead of identifying with mental-emotional states ["I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm afraid, I'm scared, I'm worried, I'm having fear, etc."], we can note objectively--"There's fear in the mind" or "There's a state of fear"- and then we can remind ourselves that it is only a temporary mental state, a changing and impermanent condition of the mind, and it's not self. There's a big difference between saying, "I'm afraid, I'm having fear", and saying, "There's a state of fear". Do you see the difference? The former is a personal grasping and clinging to fear, and the latter is an objective perspective of fear, right?

It is essential that we don't identify with fear. Due to our conditioning, we identify with everything including the physical body, we take everything personally; we believe that we are a permanent self or individual having a permanent problem or experiencing a permanent feeling or emotion. But this is an illusion. Nothing is permanent and unchanging. Identifying with mental and physical states as "me" or "mine" are just habitual reactions out of ignorance and delusion. All mental, emotional and physical states are temporary, impermanent, unsatisfactory and empty of a permanent self. A happy feeling comes and goes, a sad feeling comes and goes; they do not last and they are not really happening to a self or ego-personality. We only believe this because we are always saying, "I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm upset, I'm scared, I'm angry, etc." By habit, we impose the "I" onto what is happening in the moment, thus creating a duality, a division in the mind, which results in conflict, confusion and struggle. We say, "I'm fearful but I must be brave. I must overcome fear. I must get rid of fear so I can be peaceful and happy."

When we grasp and cling to these impermanent states as "me" and "mine", it is more difficult to let them go. Actually, these mental states [fear, desire, aversion, anger, confusion, doubt, frustration] are not who we really are but rather they're just changing conditions of the mind which arise and pass away. We only react and grasp at them out of ignorance. But we are not hopeless victims of fear, desire, anger and aversion. Fear has power over us only as long as we grasp and identify with it as "me" and "mine", as long as we believe in it and react to it. We keep awareness of the in-breath and out-breath and patiently wait for the feeling of fear to pass away. We allow fear to take its natural course--having risen, it will pass away. With mindfulness, fear goes away on its own, you

don't have to struggle to get rid of it. The practice of loving kindness meditation [metta bhavana] is also helpful in overcoming fear, anxiety and worry; it not only helps to let go of negative mental states but it's beneficial in overcoming self-centeredness and therefore fear, anxiety and worry. We'll do this practice at the end of the talk so you can experience its peace and freedom.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk, writer and poet, has a delightful way of dealing with fear and other mental-emotional states. He instructs: "Breathing in, I'm aware that fear is in me. Breathing out, I smile at that fear. That smile is the Buddha's smile, the smile of mindfulness and freedom." It's interesting that when we can breathe and smile with awareness we can change our mental-emotional states, we can change our perspective on things especially when we're caught up in negative and trivial thoughts and moods. It's difficult to remain upset or worried with a smile on your face, right?

Once in southern Thailand, a local monk took me to a small island after a retreat with high school students. We spent a few days relaxing on a small beach not far from the main village. At night we'd sleep out on the sand under the stars and the waning moon, it was quite pleasant and warm, we just used our robes as cover, and there was no need for a blanket or sleeping bag. Then my friend had to return to Bangkok; we said goodbye and I spent the rest of the day swimming and relaxing. I enjoyed the sunset, but as it was getting dark I suddenly realized that I was all alone on the beach and that my friend was far away. Then I noticed the fear creeping into my mind as I began wondering about the possibility of being mugged by local thieves or by western hippies and drug addicts. Suddenly I missed my friend. I hadn't missed him all day, but now, all alone in the dark, out in the open and vulnerable to thieves--I wasn't too worried about ghosts and spirits. I thought of going to the village and renting a room for the night just to be on the safe side; I even thought of the weapons the thieves might be carrying when they came to mug me at 3 a.m., in the dead of night; perhaps they'd tie me up and even slit my throat. The more I thought about this the more scared I became. Then I realised, "Wait a minute! I'm just scaring myself! This is it! This is my big opportunity to deal with fear! I shouldn't run away from fear, I should stay here on the beach all night, watch my mind with awareness so that I'm not deluded by thoughts and the power of the imagination." So, I sat on the cool sand and established mindfulness on the in-breath and out-breath, and observed the mind, letting thoughts, images, fear, desire, etc. come and go, come and go, until there was only silence, bliss and peace. It was indeed a beautiful night under the moon and stars.

A greater challenge came two days later when there was a turn in the weather and it began to rain. There was an abandoned house at the back of this beach and one morning I had a look at this place just out of curiosity. It was filthy with garbage and old clothes, and I remember thinking that I would never stay in this house at night. Also, someone in the village had told my friend earlier that this house was haunted, imagine! Well, the rain wouldn't stop and so I had no choice but to take shelter in this place. The wet afternoon got darker and darker and I had no torch, no candle or matches, no source of light. Again, I realised, "This is it! I must be very mindful and alert tonight otherwise I'll be overcome by fear for sure! I have no choice!" Somehow the open space of the beach area seemed

much safer than the dark, enclosed space of this supposedly haunted house. I spread one of my robes on the filthy mattress lying on the floor and sat in meditation as if my life and sanity depended on it. Would hungry rats come tonight to chew on my toes and fingers, I wondered. Having established mindfulness on my breathing, I began to observe the mind's reaction to every sound and to every image that arose in consciousness so that one was not caught by the power of delusion. My eyes got used to the dark, the mind became more clear, alert and calm the longer I sat, and the sound of the rain became more soothing. The fear of spending the night in the house began to go away. I reflected on the life of the Buddha and those early forest monks and yogis, how they'd spend some nights in graveyards, cremation grounds, and charnel grounds with dead bodies exposed to the elements and wild animals in order to overcome fear of death, the unknown, and the attachment to the physical body. I was greatly inspired by their example and felt profound gratitude to all the wise and noble beings of the past. I sent loving kindness to all beings past and present and smiled at fear with mindfulness. I felt great joy, peace, innocence and freedom. That night I had one of the best meditations I've ever experienced thanks to the rain and that "haunted" house. And I was able to sleep quite well and comfortable. Such are the benefits of mindfulness, wisdom and loving kindness. Now, are there any questions or comments?

Audience: How is fear related to neurotic behavior?

That's a good question. Neurotic behavior naturally comes from a neurotic condition in the mind which is when we're totally caught up in our mental world, when we get carried away by our thoughts, images, moods, obsessions and worries, when we are constantly swept away by the rapid moving "mind stream" and therefore get very deluded by it. Thoughts and images are delusions of the mind. Normally, we get carried away with our restless, agitated minds and chase our thoughts, ideas, impressions and conclusions, our feelings and emotions, we get caught by them, and so we create a lot of problems for ourselves and others around us. Some people get totally carried away and do crazy, irrational things, even commit crimes and murder. We are often victims of our own mental states because we don't know how to watch our minds with awareness, with calm attention, and let these mental states go. It is only awareness that can free us from our thoughts.

Neurotic people are constantly chasing their thoughts, moods and emotions and so are enslaved and deluded by them. Their mental world is much more real and concrete than their awareness of themselves and the outer environment. They're very self-centered and insecure, tense and uptight; they're susceptible to fear, worry, anxiety, fixations and obsessions. Psychotic people are totally deluded and imprisoned by their mental states and so their perception of the outer world is very distorted.

Discursive thinking breeds fear and insecurity as this mental process sustains the notion of a permanent, concrete and separate self or ego-personality and from this comes self-centered grasping and clinging, craving and attachment. A neurotic person, if in a relationship, is naturally very possessive and suffers easily from jealousy with the fear of losing the partner. Their attachment to loved ones and to material things tend to be very

unhealthy and irrational, they tend to become "control freaks" within the home environment and they create a great deal of conflict and disharmony for their spouses and children. If they get into positions of power and influence, they usually become very dangerous, overly ambitious and deluded and they end up causing a lot of suffering for many people in the work place and in political office. Dictators are usually very neurotic, insecure and deluded people.

Aggressive people are usually insecure and fearful. One aspect of neurotic, insecure behavior is the propensity to criticize and attack others, to put people down so that they can feel safe and secure; and at the same time ready to defend themselves at all cost. Defense, resistance and denial spring from fear. There is the constant urge to defend, protect, justify and aggrandize the self out of fear and insecurity, pride, arrogance and conceit. A neurotic person has the tendency to want to show off and impress others; they're usually concerned with social status, position, prestige, fame, reputation, recognition, wealth, and so on. It is a wish to dominate others, to feel superior and secure, which is a form of aggression and therefore fear and insecurity. Fear is one of the greatest problems in life. A mind that is caught in fear lives in confusion and conflict, and therefore must be violent, distorted and aggressive. It dares not move away from its own neurotic patterns of thinking and neuroses, and this breeds hypocrisy and delusion.

A neurotic mind is naturally very obsessed with the past and with the future; the fear of not becoming, not achieving, not having, not being someone special, not being recognized, etc., is very strong indeed. A neurotic person is easily jealous and envious as he/she is constantly comparing himself/herself with others, which results in fear and insecurity. Fear also arises when one is comparing oneself with what one has been and what one will be in the future, or with what one is and what one would like to be. A restless and agitated mind is never content and satisfied. When you don't compare you are not becoming. Our whole cultural education is based on becoming something, to be someone special and important, successful and wealthy, and so on. Religiously, spiritually, socially we're always wanting to become something.

Comparison is becoming and this breeds fear, anxiety, discontentment, dissatisfaction, dis-ease. To live without any comparison whatever is an extraordinary thing that takes place when the mind is not measuring, when it is still and silent and choicelessly aware of "what is" from moment to moment. With loving kindness and compassion, there is the ending of fear, duality and conflict.

Before we end this evening with metta bhavana [loving kindness meditation], I would like to read something from Achaan Chah of Thailand:

We believe that a self exists, that there's a permanent, concrete, separate and independent ego-entity that sees, hears, tastes, smells, feels and thinks. We believe that a self lives and dies, we believe that other selves exist. This is incorrect view of reality! What we take for self are only ever-changing phenomena. In reality there is no permanent "me", no "he", no "she", etc., these are just labels for social communication. We spend our lives dreaming about things that do not exist. Our wrong view causes us attachment and

suffering. We have expectations of ourselves and others and if these do not come through we suffer from frustration, disappointment, resentment, anguish, etc. We are afraid of death and we do not know what happens to the self after we have died. It would be most beneficial if we could see our life as it really is--only changing phenomena. Then we could face with right understanding old age, sickness and death. All phenomena in ourselves and around ourselves are only two kinds of realities--mental [nama] and physical [rupa]. Nama experiences or knows intuitively, rupa doesn't know anything. What we take for a self or a person is only changing phenomena, only nama and rupa. This includes animals and insects. Emotions are also transitory and empty of self. Our whole life is like a chain of moments of consciousness arising and falling away. When we realise that our life is actually only nama-rupa, mental and physical phenomena, which arises due to conditions, we become more patient even in difficult situations.

One should cultivate the reflection on the impurity and unpleasantness of the body for abandoning lust and infatuation. One should cultivate loving kindness and compassion for abandoning hate, resentment, ill will, aversion and fear. One should cultivate mindfulness of breathing for cutting off distracting, obsessive thoughts and images. One should cultivate the perception of change and impermanence and death for eliminating the conceit of "I am" and "This is mine". In one who perceives impermanence and non-self, emptiness and freedom are firmly established.

Chapter 5: Travels in South East Asia

From: An Inquiring Mind's Journey:
a book about a life with Buddhism
by Bhante Kovida



Image courtesy of [Buddhism Depot](#)

During 1994-1995, I spent sixteen months in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore visiting various Buddhist associations, a few temples, and at least two or three meditation centers. I began teaching the Dharma at this time, nineteen years after I'd first encountered Buddhism in India and Nepal. I learnt a lot while trying to share my understanding of the Buddha's sublime teachings and I met many kind and sincere people along the way; I was charmed by their friendliness and hospitality. Naturally, there were many who were confused about the Dharma as different monks would often say different things about certain topics and so doubting would result. Buddhism seemed like such a difficult "religion" or path to follow, as people didn't know exactly what to believe or accept. This is an age-old problem and I'm reminded of the story about when the Buddha visited a city called Kesaputta.

One day, some elders of the Kalama clan came to the Buddha and said: "Venerable Sir, various teachers come to our town from time to time and expound different teachings. One teacher says one thing and another gives a quite contradictory teaching. This happens over and over again. When we listen to them we get puzzled, and we cannot understand which is correct and which one is wrong."

Thereupon, the Buddha said, "It is no wonder that a man gets puzzled and confused when he hears teachings contradictory to each other, but I tell you this: don't accept something merely because it is handed down by tradition or because many people repeat it, don't accept something merely on the authority or fame of a teacher who teaches it, or because it is found in the so-called scriptures or because probability is in its favour, don't accept something merely because you have imagined it or that it is inspired by some supernormal agency. After examination, after testing it for yourself, if you find it reasonable and it is in conformity with your well being and the well being of others as well, then accept it and follow it."

Also, on another occasion, the Buddha said: "Brethren, when I speak to you, don't accept it blindly because you love and respect me. But examine it and put it to the test, as a goldsmith examines gold by cutting, heating and hammering it to know whether it is genuine gold or counterfeit. If you see that it is reasonable and practical, only then accept it and follow it."

This is the Buddha's way. This is how he encouraged everyone to think things through for oneself, he wanted people to use their intelligence and wisdom and not be misled by religious or spiritual authority. The Dharma is not about believing but rather intuitive understanding, reflection and insight.

Another source of confusion and doubt that S.E. Asian Buddhists had was their conditioned beliefs and superstitions that they'd inherited from the old Chinese culture, from their Chinese parents and grandparents [the majority of Buddhists in Malaysia are ethnic Chinese, the ethnic Malays have to be Muslim by law, they have no freedom of religion]. Many Chinese saw the Buddha as a god, a supernatural being to pray to in times of difficulty and distress, asking for good fortune in family and business affairs. So, it was difficult for them to relate to the Buddha as a simple forest ascetic or renunciate who had realised the fundamental truths of existence and who had taught the benefits of non-grasping and non-clinging, and the virtues of loving kindness and compassion. It was much more appropriate for the enterprising Chinese to relate to the Buddha as one of the gods of good luck relating to wealth, prosperity and happiness. Introspection and mind cultivation, they believed, were only for retired and elderly people. Bearing all this in mind, I was not surprised then that many modern-thinking Singaporeans and Malaysians viewed Buddhism as old-fashioned, irrational and too much tied up with superstitions. And for this reason, many embraced Christianity as a trendy, modern religion from the "sophisticated west". Obviously, they hadn't had the opportunity to learn about the Dharma as taught by Shakyamuni Buddha.

Many Buddhists were also confused and had misunderstandings about meditation practice. Again, different teachers, mostly from Burma and Thailand, had presented different techniques and methods, views and opinions, some claiming that their method was the best way to enlightenment--the real vipassana or insight meditation as taught by the Buddha himself. Often, people would make the mistake of thinking that vipassana or insight was the actual technique/method itself but this is a misunderstanding: a technique or method, if practiced correctly, can only give you mindfulness, calm attention which when applied in daily life with intelligent reflection can awaken insight or vipassana--the realisation of change and impermanence, suffering and unsatisfactoriness, and the emptiness of a permanent, fixed and separate self or ego entity. So, the technique/method is just a first step leading to insight, it is not the insightful realisation itself. Often, people would say to me, rather proudly, that they were practicing vipassana meditation, but meaning, in fact, that they were practicing the method as taught by Mahasi Sayadaw from Burma. Many people had become too attached to this method and were not open to others; they believed this was the only way to Enlightenment and Nibbana. From my Christian upbringing, this kind of mentality sounded all too familiar: the ignorance and delusion of the craving-clinging mind. Unhealthy attachment to a teacher or meditation

method is an indication of anxious craving [and insecurity] to achieve something or to become something. A sensible Dharma practitioner is one who is quietly and patiently seeking out that which is true, that which is outside of one's conditioning, outside of one's thoughts, ideas, views and opinions, likes and dislikes, and emotions. The unskillful practice of a method/technique only further conditions the mind, for then one is eagerly seeking a result. Thus the mind cannot be free from the conditioning of the self, from ignorance and delusion, from self-centered craving and clinging.

To most Dharma devotees I've met, Enlightenment and Nibbana were only ideas, concepts that they'd gotten from books and Dharma talks. Similarly, many devotees were taught about the levels of mental absorption [jhanas] during tranquil meditation and about the different levels of spiritual attainment as mentioned in the Pali text. This information was often misleading, as the grasping/clinging mind would easily get caught up in wanting to achieve these levels. Many practitioners seemed to be obsessed with jhanic states and wanting to become some highly "perfected being". They would end up torturing themselves, their minds and bodies full of tension and struggle, trying to achieve some goal instead of first learning to properly relax the body and mind. And so confusion, doubt and frustration would result. These levels and stages are only concepts and ideals of mental calm and spiritual perfection; "sainthood" is only a matter of perspective, it's relative and therefore arbitrary and questionable. Needless to say, some of the teachers are responsible for this unhealthy approach to mind training and cultivation. The insight of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self leads to wisdom and freedom, not the self or ego trying to achieve something, however noble. A relaxed body, mind and attitude are the key to right and harmonious mental cultivation, and liberation from suffering.

A preoccupied mind is not a free and peaceful mind. It is self-enclosing with its own conflicts, struggles, hopes and fears. It becomes narrow, trivial, shallow and petty. It is not open, spontaneous, inquiring and intelligent. Preoccupation with even spiritual ideas, concepts and ideals only entrenches the mind in its own pettiness. Thinking by its very nature is self-isolating; it cannot be made vulnerable and innocent. It cannot be spontaneous and free. Thinking is the continuation of the past as memory and that which continues cannot be free. What we think we are. It is the understanding of the thought process that is important, not what we think about.

It is ironic that the Buddha taught the benefits and freedom of non-grasping and non-clinging, and yet many Buddhists whom I met were busy grasping and clinging, easily caught in craving, greed, envy and attachment; they had somehow missed the essence of the Buddha's message. This condition of the mind is so automatic because it is connected to the thinking process, to our conditioned psychological habits, our reactions and impulses--the source of ignorance and delusion. Different systems of meditation taught by different teachers are like the different directions one can take going to a city. They differ outwardly only, only superficially. There's one essential point that all good practice must eventually come to: non-clinging!--that is, freedom from the craving and clinging mind. In the end, one has to let go of all systems and methods, one must go beyond techniques, even the teacher himself and his tradition or lineage! If the system leads to

relinquishment, to not clinging and grasping, to coolness, freedom and peace, then it is correct practice. Otherwise it is wrong effort, concentration and mindfulness.

During my stay in Sri Lanka and my travels in S.E. Asia, I came to realise two things:

1. There exist Buddhist cultures--traditions, ceremonies, rites and rituals, beliefs, superstitions, etc.--which are unique to the various Buddhist countries [Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Tibet, Taiwan, Korea, etc.].

2. The teachings of the Buddha can be found within these cultures but are understood only by a minority of the population. Many Buddhists [monks and nuns included] are attached only to the outer form of Buddhism, to the cultural traditions and so on; they do not seem to be interested in mind cultivation and contemplation. To understand and follow the Buddha's way requires a sensitive, inquiring and reflective nature. This quality of being gives one the motivation and energy to purify one's mind of the defilements of ignorance and delusion, craving and clinging, hatred and ill-will, which leads to peace and wisdom, freedom and compassion.

After Southeast Asia, I visited Taiwan and Korea where I taught Buddhism in English, meditation and mindfulness, and Hatha yoga. Then I returned to Canada after an absence of six and a half years.

RETURN to SOUTH EAST ASIA

For the winter of 1997-98, I decided to return to Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand to see friends and visit some of the Buddhist organisations in the area. I flew to Japan via Atlanta, stayed one night at the airport hotel, and then flew south to Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. The humid heat was overwhelming after 0° C in Toronto and 10° C in Japan. I'd forgotten how hot it was in Malaysia, how exhausted I'd become after sixteen months in Southeast Asia; it's interesting how most people choose to remember the more pleasant aspects of life.

Next thing I knew, I was in a vehicle with friends, familiar faces with familiar voices and accents, travelling on familiar roads and seeing familiar landmarks. I began to tell them briefly about my travel route from Canada to Malaysia and about my life and activities in Toronto, plus my travel itinerary for the next few months. My friends began telling me about the bad state of the economy in the area with the exception of Singapore, many people were getting laid off or wage cuts as development projects began slowing down or abandoned. Many ambitious and hopeful people had lost a lot of money in the stock market, and the Malaysian currency was sliding fast. It was not a good time to travel abroad except to Thailand and Indonesia where the economic downturn was worse. Some months later there would be riots and protest marches in Indonesia and President Suharto had to step down.

Next thing I knew, I was in a very familiar building and greeting old friends, it was a surprise reunion after two and a half years. The humid heat and the cooling fan overhead

were also quite familiar. I had spent many days in this house, which was a Dharma drop-in center; the people in charge called it W.A.V.E. [Wisdom Audio Visual Exchange]. There was a library of Dharma books and cassette tapes of Dharma talks by various teachers plus videotapes. One could borrow from the library and/or socialise with friends and others interested in Buddhism, some people donated books, tapes, etc. WAVE collected donations to reprint books, mostly Theravada teachings, for free distribution, locally and overseas, and to assist monks who were passing through Malaysia. Once a year, WAVE members would visit the various monasteries in Thailand to offer requisites [medicine, useful items, etc.] to the monks. This Buddhist drop-in center was a friendly and informative oasis in the midst of a large, noisy and polluted city.

One evening I was invited to give a talk at the WAVE center. As the economic situation was on most people's minds, we spoke about the need to be more mindful of our mental states in daily life, our fears and anxieties, our reactions when we see and hear the news on TV regarding the economic problems and the fluctuating currency, and also when we think and speak about this present recession. With mindfulness and reflection, we begin to realise that the world as we know it is the body-mind process with its six senses--i.e., what the eyes are seeing, the ears are hearing, the nose is smelling, the tongue is tasting, the body is feeling, and what the mind is thinking and imagining. This "world" is constantly changing, unsatisfactory and empty of a permanent and fixed self or ego entity. We also mentioned how during the first global economic recession in 1929 many people overreacted and became totally deluded and irrational by their mental states and jumped out of windows from tall buildings. So, learning how to observe our mental states and reactions with awareness and letting them go was of the utmost importance. We also spoke of the benefits of reflecting on the Dharma and the current situation with respect to change and impermanence, grasping and clinging, craving, greed and attachment--many people had lost a lot of money in the stock market. This was indeed the time to practice simple living and deep contemplation, less spending and buying, more mindfulness and patience. Next, we explored the nature of the self or ego and its connection to the thinking process as memory, past experience and knowledge; how the self is merely a result of conditioning and habitual responses and impulses, a collection of all our past experiences; and how this conditioned self constantly changes with the addition of new daily experiences which become additional memory. We concluded the talk and discussion by mentioning the benefits of metta bhavana [loving kindness meditation], not only as a practice for purifying the mind of negative states but also for bringing into consciousness and reminding oneself that everyone in the world also has problems, delusions and suffering, and not only ourselves, thus freeing the mind from the prison of self-centeredness, fear, attachment, worry and conflict.

Not far from the WAVE house is the well-known Brickfields Vihara, the largest English-speaking temple in Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia. The chief incumbent is Ven. Sri K. Dhammananda, who was originally from Sri Lanka. He has done a lot to promote Buddhism in S.E. Asia, his Dharma books have attracted many of the English-speaking Chinese to Buddhism and to the Brickfields temple. I stayed there during my first visit to Kuala Lumpur in 1994 and had a very interesting time meeting the devotees, having discussions and giving Dharma talks. It was a most beneficial learning experience and I

got a good insight into the Buddhist scene in Malaysia. Every year the temple conducts a two-week novitiate program for those who wish to take temporary ordination as novice monks and nuns. I did not stay at Brickfields Vihara this time around.

From Kuala Lumpur I went directly to Penang Island to visit a friend who had recently retired. He became interested in Buddhism during his last sabbatical in Bangkok, Thailand. We had met at the Brickfields Vihara and at the WAVE house. He was from a Hokkien family like the majority of the Penang Chinese whose ancestors came from Fujian province. Penang has many temples: Chinese, Thai, Burmese, Sri Lankan, and a large meditation center which practices the Mahasi Sayadaw method of vipassana meditation. During my first visit to Penang I had stayed at one of the Chinese temples and also at this meditation center, very interesting experiences. This time I visited Ven. Wei Wu's temple, which has a new seven-story building which houses a kindergarten on the ground floor and an old folks home with all the modern facilities on the first floor. Ven. Wei Wu, a soft-spoken and dedicated person, studied electrical engineering in New Zealand and worked for some years with an American computer company before becoming a monk in the Mahayana Chinese tradition. Apart from social services, he is also interested in Buddhist education for both Chinese and English-speaking devotees. The temple also arranges correspondence courses in Buddhist studies from the Buddhist University in Sri Lanka. I was invited to give two talks to the English-speaking group, one on the nature of the mind and the benefits of mindfulness and the other on the nature and ending of fear. The response was very good and we had very lively and inspiring discussions afterwards. I will definitely visit this temple again if and when I return to Malaysia and Penang island.

In the state of Perak, I visited the Buddhist associations in the towns of Ipoh and Teluk Intan. Previously, I'd visited Ipoh several times giving talks and meditation classes but this time I only stayed for two days on a short social visit. It was a happy reunion with some of the devotees and they were pleased to know I was spreading the Dharma in Canada and doing some social service. They took me out for lunch at a new vegetarian restaurant, the food was delicious. The president of the association, Dr. Lim Peng Swee, has been involved with Palliative Care Service, making home visits to terminally ill patients. He took me to see one of the members of the association who had had a recurrence of cancer after she'd had a mastectomy for breast cancer four years previously. She was a very devout Buddhist, kind, compassionate, humble and patient. The cancer had spread to her brain and she was no longer able to see. Dr. Lim had been treating her with a steroid that amazingly made her pain-free, clear-minded and comfortable. She had an attendant staying with her and was well looked after. She was single and shared a house with a sister. Most of the time she sat in a wheelchair and listened to the radio or to cassette tapes of Dharma talks. I held her hand and we had a pleasant conversation, two monks had visited her previously. She was peaceful and accepting of her terminal condition, I mentioned that life itself was a terminal condition, she laughed. Some months before, she'd decided to stop all medical treatment--chemotherapy, radiation, etc.--she only wished to die peacefully at home, no more false hopes, no more grasping and clinging to the physical body and to the world at large. She had no worries or regrets, no anger or resentment, she had understood the truth of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness

and non-self, hence her acceptance and peace. I reminded her to be mindful of her breathing whenever she experienced boredom and the inability to sleep during the night. I was most impressed and touched by her serenity, humility and gentleness. She offered me dana, a monetary donation [angpow], as I was leaving. Even in her physical condition, she was still able to practice generosity and loving-kindness. May she have a peaceful death.

The Buddhist Association in Teluk Intan is one of the most active and well-organised centers in Malaysia. They have programs for both Chinese and English-speaking adults plus programs for high school and elementary students plus a kindergarten school in the mornings. The association offers tuition classes in English, maths, science and the Malay language. During the school holidays, they have Dharma camps and everyone has a lot of fun. On this trip I was able to visit Teluk Intan twice; I gave the same talk as to the WAVE members in Kuala Lumpur, held group discussions and did some counseling with some adults and students. We also did practices in mindfulness and Hatha yoga sessions. I was taken to meet a young lady who had a muscle-wasting disease; she was looked after by some attendants in a temple with nuns. Her room was pleasant and comfortable with a fan, television, cassette player and Dharma books. We had a pleasant chat and I showed her some photos and postcards. The previous year she was angry, frustrated, depressed and bitter about her physical condition, as she was attractive, had a job and boyfriend and had been looking forward to getting married and having children. But after gaining some understanding of the Buddha's teachings, she had come to a stage of acceptance and peace. We spoke about how it was the nature of the body to get sick, grow old and die; how it was composed of the four elements and subject to the law of change and impermanence, and affected by causes and conditions. Also, how mental suffering arose from wrong view of the body and mental states: grasping and clinging to them as "me" and "mine". And how many people were not happy and content despite material wealth, having families and good physical health. She smiled sweetly and thanked us for visiting.

It is now easy to travel around Malaysia due to the new highway that runs the length of the peninsula, from the border with Thailand in the north down to Johor Bahru at the southern tip; then you take the Causeway bridge across to the island state of Singapore. There are oil palm plantations everywhere you go, rubber estates exist in certain areas including the south of Thailand. In the southern state of Johor, I visited the Buddhist groups in Muar, Johor Bahru, and at the University of Technology in Scudai. In the two former places, the groups follow the Theravada tradition and the students in Scudai are open to different schools of Buddhism and the teachings of J. Krishnamurti. These students were visited regularly by two local monks who had studied in Thailand and Taiwan. I had a reunion with one of these monks and also a meeting with the students who were about to graduate. We had lively discussions regarding the economic situation in S.E. Asia and Korea, and about how easy it was for people in power to get caught by greed and corruption and over-ambition. As with the WAVE group, we spoke of the need to be mindful of our fears and anxieties about the future and job opportunities and the need to be patient and to reflect on the Dharma and the Four Noble Truths. Some evenings, we would purchase many kinds of snacks at the night market and have dinner

parties back at the residence. The students were very funny, charming and hospitable, we had a most enjoyable time together.

In Muar I learned that one of the group members had taken ordination in the forest tradition of N.E. Thailand and was staying at Wat Pahnanachat, the international monastery that was founded by the western disciples of Achaan Chah. It was a simple, austere and challenging existence especially during the hot, dry months; the area was suffering from drought conditions due to rapid deforestation. Adherence to the vinaya rules of discipline was often quite strict and rigid, and some monks would eventually disrobe after a few months; temporary ordination is commonly accepted in the Thai and Burmese traditions. I also learned that a friend in Malacca, not far from Muar, had ordained in Burma; I was happy to hear this because he was easily affected by stress and worry so much so that he had to separate from his wife and children living in Singapore. We used to have conversations about his life and that of a monk in the Theravada tradition, and so, I was not surprised to hear of his ordination. I hope he finds peace and contentment as a monk in Myanmar. In Muar, I met a doctor who was interested in helping his patients with their mental-emotional problems. We discussed the benefits of meditation and mindfulness and the possibility of him starting a meditation class for his patients. I showed him some simple practices in mindfulness plus sitting and walking meditation and loving kindness practice. He was very enthusiastic and inspired after our meetings together.

I spent the Chinese New Year in Singapore; first, visiting a local monk I'd met in Thailand four years before, then staying at an English-speaking center where I'd previously given several talks. This center, Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society, was started by an Australian monk and some lay devotees some years ago. There were now two resident monks from Burma [Myanmar], who were teaching meditation and improving their English. During the first three days of the New Year, these monks conducted a meditation retreat for the Burmese nationals, mostly young engineers, working in Singapore. A few locals also attended. They taught the Mahasi Sayadaw method of mindfulness and insight which was practiced while walking and sitting. Four of the engineers took temporary ordination for the retreat period; it was interesting to see them back in lay clothes after the three days. Two of them had done this before in Burma, they believe this brings merit to themselves and their families. I was most impressed by these Burmese meditators, by their dedicated effort and quiet dignity, their charm, friendliness and hospitality. They prepared delicious food [vegetarian and non-vegetarian] and offered it first to the monks with graceful devotion and reverence before partaking of the meal themselves. Of all the Theravada Buddhist countries, Burma has the strongest tradition in meditation practice. In Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, only a minority of monks and lay people practise mind cultivation; traditional ceremonies and merit-making through the practice of generosity are more prevalent. In Burma, there are many meditation centers where lay people can go to whenever they have time off from work and household duties. Life is still slow and simple and not so affected by western materialistic influences.

In contrast, Singapore is a very modern, clean, high-tech, busy and stressful place. I was able to meet some old friends and we discussed the difficulties of living in such an environment and how to apply the Dharma with more mindfulness in daily life. I would often suggest the practice of Hatha yoga in dealing with stress and anxiety and for maintaining good health and flexibility; yoga is also complementary to mind training and cultivation.

Previously, I had stayed with a local monk in an apartment rented by his students, mostly young working people. He taught Early Buddhism and had previously stayed at his master's temple but he left without notice because his master, also a young monk but with an amazing vocal gift, was only interested in making money through chanting ceremonies and selling cassette tapes of his chanting. My friend was very energetic and sincere but tended to be too critical of others, which in the end caused his downfall; he became increasingly hostile to members of the Mahayana tradition, of which he was officially a part of, and he became more confused and deluded by his inner conflicts, pride and arrogance. He had simply taken himself too seriously as a monk and teacher, and suffering was the result; he may have had a lot of intellectual knowledge but he lacked the maturity, mental cultivation and life experiences to be a good Dharma teacher. In the end he decided to disrobe, give up teaching and return to lay life; this was the most intelligent thing he could have done. Also, he realised that it was a financial burden on his young devotees to keep supporting him as they were all starting out in the working world. I spoke with him on the phone but we never met, as he was shy and reluctant to see me. He was working full-time at a bookstore and part-time as a tour guide to India and Nepal for a Japanese travel company; he was about to go off travelling by himself for a few weeks. He was happy and somewhat relieved for not having the responsibility anymore of being the "teacher", the "shifu". I wished him good luck and happy travels.

I also visited some local monks who were staying in a private flat close to the Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society; I had stayed there previously for two days. These monks followed the Thai tradition and there were two Thai monks staying with them. The abbot, a young Mahayana monk, lived upstairs in the flat above. Some of the monks taught at various schools and Buddhist associations. Although they were well-supported by devotees, they found it difficult at times to stay in Singapore due to all the concrete high-rises and the traffic noise from the highway nearby. The environment was not really conducive to meditation and quiet contemplation unless one was very advanced in mind development and cultivation. Sometimes they would travel to Malaysia and Thailand for retreats but it was not easy to get long-term visas. They had visited India, Nepal and Java on pilgrimage.

I also met some new friends who were spiritual seekers but were confused about the Dharma; one of them was very superstitious and believed in ghosts and spirits, psychic powers and miracles, and that people could reincarnate as animals if they did bad deeds in this life. He was a teacher in a technical college. On Sundays he would visit a Quan Yin temple to pray for good fortune and to receive a blessing from a monk. He and a friend took me to this temple one Sunday afternoon. We sat on the cool marble floor, looked at the beautiful Quan Yin statue and spoke about the life of the Buddha, the Four

Noble Truths, self-knowledge and wisdom, the origin of Quan Yin Bodhisattva in India. We discussed about the fact that Bodhisattvas were only personifications--symbols of human virtues when human defilements were purified--and, Quan Yin being the personification of human compassion and loving-kindness. We spoke about the defilements of ignorance and delusion, grasping and clinging, hatred and ill will, and the importance of mind cultivation and mindfulness in daily life. Then we did some practices in mindfulness including sitting and walking meditation, and we ended with loving kindness meditation. This was all new to them and we agreed that learning the Dharma was the greatest blessing of all.

After Singapore and Johor state, I headed up the east coast to Kuantan, Kuala Terengganu and Kota Bharu. The east coast of Malaysia is less developed, therefore more quiet and laid-back, the ethnic Malays more innocent and friendly. I had visited Kuantan previously; it is a clean and lovely town. I spent only two days there meeting with the small English-speaking group, the majority of the Buddhists are Chinese-educated. The Pahang Buddhist Association was in the process of building a large temple not far from the old building, which is located next to a noisy highway. I spent eight days in Kuala Terengganu further up the coast and had a wonderful visit. The members of the Buddhist Association were very friendly and hospitable; their charming simplicity was quite a contrast to the sophisticated and often proud Singaporeans. I didn't have to rent a chalet by the seaside as planned as some devotees offered to drop me off at the beach every morning after breakfast and then pick me up at noon for lunch. So, I had a few hours everyday to walk along the long stretch of beach, swim and lay in the sun. The sea was calm for that time of year as the monsoon season was shortened by the El Nino Effect. During the monsoon season, the sea is very rough and dangerous with a strong, constantly blowing east wind. These hours by the seashore were very relaxing and therapeutic indeed. Meditation would come easily, effortlessly, during this time like a gentle, soothing breeze. All mental activity would come to an end without effort or desire and out of that silence and stillness came a benediction beyond words and images. The "me" center, the experiencer was totally absent; there was only the experience of vast space, beauty, freedom and bliss. Silence and space go together; in the light and space of silence, all problems and conflicts are dissolved. This quality of meditation is very different from formal practice, i.e., mind training and cultivation in effect. This kind of meditation comes when there is order in the mind, when there is the understanding of the thinking process and the self. It goes beyond their limitations, beyond grasping, clinging, and delusion.

The distant clouds above the horizon caught the light of the rising sun and gave shape to the morning sky, later the afternoon sky would be vast, empty and intensely blue with the glare and heat of the burning sun. As one observed the surface of the ocean, there was the insight that all our lives and events in the world were like the waves arising and falling, arising and falling, returning to the immense, deep and timeless dimension of the ocean and the universe, returning to peace and silence, order and harmony.

During the evenings at the Buddhist Association, we would have short Dharma talks and discussions before doing practices in mindfulness, sitting meditation, yoga postures and

loving kindness meditation. We had a translator for Mandarin Chinese as most of the members were Chinese-educated. This was the first time for most of them to receive some instruction on meditation; they were more used to the devotional chanting and bowing practice of the Mahayana tradition. These meditation sessions were appreciated so much that the group decided to continue holding them on a weekly basis in the future. The Buddhist Association also runs chi gong classes in the early morning as well as a morning kindergarten for pre-school children. Before leaving Kuala Terengganu, I was taken to a waterfall area some miles inland; two aunties took along some food for a picnic lunch. The place was very beautiful and the fresh water was most cooling and refreshing after the hot, dry weather.

I had some difficulty connecting with the English-speaking group in Kota Bharu so I decided to spend a night at a hotel close to the bus terminal and do some sightseeing. The Kelantan Buddhist Association has mostly Chinese-speaking members. The English-speaking group used to hold their functions at the same building but now they have their own place. Situated close to the Thailand border, this town did belong to Thailand not that long ago which explains the existence of a few Thai temples and a large reclining Buddha statue in the vicinity of the town. Near the bus terminal was a large parking lot, which turned into a night food-stall area with tables and chairs for customers. This place reminded me of Thailand which is famous for its all-night markets and open-air restaurants. Many western tourists were there, enjoying the wide variety of food; most of them were staying at the beach area some kilometers away. The following morning I took the bus to Butterworth and Penang Island along the east-west highway. It took eight hours and was quite scenic. Penang was very hot and dry. There, I completed a full circle around the Malaysian peninsula. During this trip I had come to appreciate air-conditioning.

Two friends in Penang took me up to southern Thailand to meet some friends who had established a retreat center at the edge of a rubber plantation located about halfway between the border and the town of Haadyai. Due to the economic recession, the immigration office at the border was now granting four-week permits instead of two in order to encourage more Malaysians and Singaporeans to visit. Haadyai is a popular place for shopping, eating and night entertainment. During 1994, I had stayed at a meditation center at the edge of Haadyai town with some Thai monks and we were invited to teach at a high school for ten days. At the new retreat center, there were lovely wooden buildings surrounded by trees--meditation huts, an open-air dining area, and a main building housing a library of books and video tapes of J. Krishnamurti and Luang Por Teean, whose teachings were quite similar to each other. Ven. Sudhammo, a Thai monk, was translating Krishnamurti's books into the Thai language. He said that the young people of Thailand needed a modern approach to Dharma as they were losing interest in the conservative traditional approach to Buddhism. There was a cooling stream at the bottom of the land for swimming; the kitchen served delicious Thai vegetarian food. The center is open for private retreats and group seminars, for students and spiritual seekers alike. We stayed for five days and had a very pleasant visit with our Thai friends.

Before leaving Malaysia, I spent three weeks in the Kuala Lumpur-Petaling Jaya area. It was hot and humid, and there was water rationing in some places. Trucks were delivering water to some communities and the weather scientists were seeding the clouds with silver nitrate crystals in the hope that sufficient rain would fall in the catchment areas. The lack of rain was blamed on the El Nino Effect; I received news that the winter back in Toronto was very mild due to the same global weather phenomenon. I was able to meet with friends to discuss the Dharma and how their practices were going. We spoke of the grasping/clinging mind and the problems that many meditators had in Malaysia. I was curious about how their lives were going and they were equally curious about my travels in Taiwan and Korea as well as life in Canada. Two friends were distributing free cassette tapes of Dharma talks as a service and they asked me to select some from a list of topics and speakers. They added some of my talks to their list. One friend was newly involved with E Kwan Tao, an eclectic religion using Jesus Christ, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, Confucius and others as guides leading to heaven; they considered Maitreya Buddha, the fat, jolly Buddha, as the Living Buddha. This religion evolved in China and went across to Taiwan during the communist revolution. E Kwan Tao is now popular in Malaysia and Singapore; a vegetarian diet is compulsory for devotees.

During this period I also had some time to reflect on the superstitious nature of the Chinese, how deeply ingrained the belief in ghosts and spirits was: naturally a result of childhood conditioning. Sometimes after a Dharma talk concerning the nature of fear and how to deal with fear, I would often suggest to the devotees that we spend an hour or two during the night doing meditation practice in a cemetery in order to overcome this fear of ghosts and spirits using the power of mindfulness, wisdom and loving kindness. The response to this suggestion was always one of excitement, laughter and dread. Only one or two individuals out of fifty or more people would be willing to face the challenge. Life was, without a doubt, much more exciting and intriguing having ghosts and spirits around to scare us.

Hong Kong is three hours from Kuala Lumpur by air. I was met at Kai Tak airport by a local monk whom I'd met in Taiwan three years previously. He was dressed in Theravada robes, which looked incongruous in the modern, international setting of Hong Kong; Mahayana dress with long sleeves appeared less out of place in the modern world. He took me for a vegetarian meal and the restaurant owner offered it as a donation. We took a taxi to a small village in the New Territories and a short walk took us to a small house surrounded by trees and a garden area. It was a lovely retreat place in a peaceful, rural setting. From the balcony upstairs there was a cool breeze and a wonderful view of the surrounding area with high hills in the background. The heavy heat and intense glare of the sun in Malaysia seemed like a distant dream. The other monk staying at the house was in Kowloon looking after his sick mother. After studying in Taiwan for a few years they decided to return to Hong Kong after the changeover to Chinese rule the previous summer. The fear and uncertainty which was felt before June, 1997, was all gone and the former British colony seemed normal and well except for the stress of living in a crowded and busy environment. My friends were getting Dharma books from Taiwan, Chinese translations of Theravada teachings, and giving them out to devotees. We spoke about mutual friends in Taiwan and Singapore, and about the Dharma scene in Hong Kong,

S.E. Asia, Toronto and Vancouver. They had visited Toronto before as one of them had some family members there. Occasionally, they would visit Thailand to see one of their teachers, a Thai monk staying in the Chiang Mai area and who's very active in social service.

While staying at this rural retreat center, it was a delight to get up at 4 a.m. and sit in the cool stillness and listen to the sounds of frogs, insects, birds and crowing roosters with the approaching dawn. Then we'd do some tai chi and chi gong exercises plus yoga stretches before having breakfast. I visited Po Lin Temple on Lantau Island and saw once again the giant Buddha statue sitting on top of the hill overlooking the monastery. It is an awesome and inspiring sight and the view from the statue of the surrounding area is breathtaking especially with the high mountains in the background, which are often bathed in mist and low-flying clouds. Sometimes the whole area and the giant statue would be enveloped in fog and the atmosphere would become strangely wonderful and dreamlike, a world far removed from the modern madness of Hong Kong. Po Lin Temple has many visitors, local and foreign tourists, and there's a restaurant that serves delicious vegetarian food. The main shrine hall is open to the public, the smaller halls are used for daily chanting ceremonies, and there are separate living and dining areas for the monks and nuns. In the basement of the monks' section is a meditation hall where I would join another monk for sitting and walking meditation. This monk was very devoted to the Dharma and was happy for the company. There is a hiking trail up Lantau Mountain and the view is fantastic. When the mist rolls in and you're totally enveloped in clouds, the atmosphere is simply out-of-this-world.

I had a reunion with two Malaysian monks who were studying at a Buddhist college in Hong Kong; one was from Johor Bharu and the other from Sabah, a state on the northern end of the large island of Borneo. The former was asked to teach at the same college and the latter was planning to return to his hometown in Sabah. The local monks staying in New Territories had some friends who operated a popular vegetarian restaurant in a busy area of Kowloon. They had an office and apartment upstairs the restaurant and they would often allow visiting monks to use the apartment. The owners were very kind and it was most convenient to stay there for one or two nights when I was passing through Kowloon.

I got a cheap return ticket to Taiwan so I was able to visit friends in Taipei for ten days. I got to stay in a new temple that had six floors and two sets of elevators. The rooms were comfortable with air-conditioning and private bathrooms; one could easily have been staying in a 4-star hotel. Only one of the monks could speak some English but they were all kind and hospitable. I attended the morning chanting which thankfully lasted just half an hour. This temple is also an educational center and weekly classes are offered to the public. Taipei, although a busy city with constant traffic, seemed quiet and relaxing in comparison to Hong Kong. People walked slower and the population density was far less. I visited the staff of Torch of Wisdom and gave them a big surprise. They publish a monthly Buddhist magazine, newsletter and many books. The head publisher, Prof. Cheng Chen-huang, who speaks excellent English, is a popular Dharma teacher and translator. I had spent four months at Torch of Wisdom during 1996 conducting classes in

Buddhism, meditation and Hatha yoga. They surprised me with the news that my teacher, Ven. Anandamaitreya, was also visiting Taipei with a group of monks from Sri Lanka. I hadn't seen him in five years and he was now 102 years old. Torch of Wisdom had invited him to give a talk at their premises so I was able to meet with him briefly afterwards. He was late for the morning talk so they asked me to speak about my experiences with Ven. Anandamaitreya in Sri Lanka. I also mentioned about his early travels in India as a young, adventurous monk meeting many teachers, mystics, saints and astrologers. He had studied many languages and religions and has always had a passion for books. His scholarship is truly vast and it is wisely balanced with meditation practice. He still reads and writes everyday, his mind is still sharp but he now needs the use of a wheelchair to get around.

I spent another ten days back in Hong Kong. This time my friends arranged for me to stay with a professor from Taiwan who teaches at the Baptist University. A young Tibetan monk was staying at the rural retreat center in New Territories; he apparently did long retreats in the mountain areas, walked great distances, and had attained a high level of realisation. He'd also taught himself Mandarin Chinese. The professor spoke good English as he'd studied in Hawaii for some years; his family lived in New York. He was quite interested in Buddhism and he did sitting meditation every morning. My friends, the local monks, arranged four Dharma programs for me in a rented hall in the Kowloon area and we had a good translator for Cantonese, a lawyer who'd studied in the U.K. and whose life was greatly improved by the wisdom of the Dharma. We started each session with twenty minutes of sitting meditation with relaxation music in the background; this gave people a chance to relax and calm down after a busy, hectic day. We spoke about the nature of the mind, the thinking process and awareness, the conditioned self and the unconditioned state of mind, the nature of fear and using skillful means to deal with fear. We did practices in mindfulness including walking and sitting meditation, and we emphasized the importance of observing thoughts as the main factor of the mind's tendency to grasp and cling, in maintaining negative states, and to be caught in ignorance and delusion--less thinking, less mental problems! The last session took place on Vesak Day. We spoke briefly on the life of the Buddha in ancient India and the radical way in which he taught, the importance of mindfulness in daily life and how to cultivate the spirit of renunciation in a modern, consumer society. We also spoke about the high degree of stress, craving, greed and delusion in Hong Kong society and how people liked to compete with one another inside and outside the work place, which was a symptom of this delusion. We did practices in mindfulness, followed by a discussion period and we ended with loving kindness meditation--a much needed practice in Hong Kong where people have a high degree of pride, arrogance and conceit, where people are very critical and judgmental and are therefore prone to guilt and inner conflict. Afterwards, there were some private questions and some people offered *angpow* or a monetary donation in appreciation for the Dharma sessions. They also appreciated the meditation music we used; it was the first time they'd heard music during a Dharma program, they said.

Before leaving Hong Kong, I was able to meet with some of the Dharma devotees and do some private counseling. One of them was a lady, middle-aged and single, and there was an eagerness about her that seemed most urgent yet sincere. She had attended some of the

talks and had asked a question regarding guilt and now she needed to investigate further into this most common affliction in human relationship. She had stopped working for some months and had been using the time to relax, travel and to try and find solutions to some of her problems: attending workshops in the USA and in Hong Kong, speaking with professional people, and reading self-help books. But she had not found a way to unburden her mind of this guilt concerning her mother who'd passed away sixteen years previously. So, for the past sixteen years she'd been carrying this guilt around like an open wound, a cancer eating away at her heart; there seemed no freedom from this persistent dis-ease.

"My mother had this chronic illness for about ten years which had to do with her immune system," she began, "and she worried a great deal about the family [of three children] because my father was a poor provider yet somehow he never seemed to worry. Actually, sometimes I blame my father for her illness because it was perhaps connected to her worrying and anxieties about the future. Anyhow, I was very self-centered, flighty and immature at the time, not a very responsible daughter. Instead of helping my mother at home, I just wanted to go out and have fun with my friends and boyfriends; I just hated having a sick mother at home all the time. My sister, on the other hand, was very different; she was a very filial daughter and she really took care of my mother, she was so patient. I'm a very impatient person! Anyhow, when our mother finally died, I suddenly realised what a terrible daughter I had been and since then I've been suffering from guilt and remorse about not caring for my mother. How can I free myself of this guilt? Sometimes I feel that my mother's ghost is haunting me, taking revenge for having neglected her. Please, I really need your help, what can I do?"

We sat in silence for a few minutes listening to the sound of birds calling to one another. The view of the surrounding area from the hillside was lovely in the morning sunlight but her mind was too agitated and preoccupied to appreciate the beauty and silence of the moment. Her consciousness was so dominated by past memories that the significance of being in the present had little meaning. The sound of the birds could not penetrate her heart--too many obscurations. To be free of the burdens of the past, to that which we know, is to be innocent, open and joyous.

"When we don't know ourselves we usually end up as tormented, confused, unhappy human beings," I replied, "even though we may be very successful in the business world, and so on. Learned people who don't understand themselves are really unintelligent. Self-knowledge is the beginning of wisdom. In self-understanding there is the whole of existence. It embraces all the struggles and conflicts of humanity--all our suffering and dis-ease."

"What do you mean by self-knowledge?" she asked, rather puzzled.

"It means understanding the nature of the human condition, the nature of experience, the thinking process, why we have problems and how to solve these problems. I spoke about this during the talks, don't you recall?"

"This is still all new to me as they never taught any Dharma in school and as a child my parents never took me to any Buddhist temples," she replied.

"Actually, they should be teaching Dharma in schools besides the other academic subjects; it's no wonder children end up as confused, selfish, anxious adults. The Dharma is about life and relationship, it doesn't necessarily have to do with being a Buddhist; in fact, most temples do not teach Dharma as taught by the Buddha, they mostly do devotional ceremonies and collect donations. The Buddha taught about the nature of suffering and freedom from suffering, mainly regarding mental-emotional suffering, like what you're going through."

"What did the Buddha say about guilt?" she asked.

"First, you must realise that when your mother died sixteen years ago, all her suffering was over--physical, mental and emotional. But today she is still suffering in your mind, you are suffering with guilt because you're clinging to those memories of your sick mother and you don't know how to let them go, right? Your mind is very obsessive and you need to train it through meditation practice and come to some understanding of your thought process and who you really are otherwise you'll keep living in the past and keep feeling guilty, right?"

"Do you mean that I should completely forget about my mother?" she asked, somewhat bewildered.

"Of course not!" I replied. "That would be impossible anyhow unless you happen to have Alzheimer's disease. What I mean is that with mind training there is more awareness, more order in the mind so that you live more in the present moment and less in the past, you become less obsessed about your mother. You see, thinking is a response to memory, past experience and knowledge and it projects itself into the future. If you observe your mind you'll see this simple fact: that you're either thinking about past memories [often with regret] or you're thinking, planning, worrying, etc. about the future, right? And whether you're thinking in English or Cantonese it's the very same thought process, isn't it? Now, awareness or attention is a different aspect of the mind, it's always in the present moment. It's not related to the past or future, it's the unconditioned state of being, often referred to as "original mind". Also, you are not a permanent and concrete ego-personality, neither is guilt a permanent mental state."

"I find that hard to believe because my "I" is always there and this guilt feeling is always in my mind," she responded.

"This is actually an illusion created by thinking," I said. "Tell me something, when you're sleeping, is the "I" or that guilt feeling still there?"

"No, I don't think so but that's only because I'm unconsciousness during that time and I cannot remember anything," she replied.

"That's just my point. It's only when you wake up and start thinking again that the "I" or self arises, that the ego-personality comes into being. And when you begin thinking again about your mother only then does the old guilt feeling comes back, right?"

"Yes. I think I'm beginning to see what you're trying to say. Thinking is related to memory and also to the "I" personality, is that correct? But doesn't the "I" also exist when we're dreaming?" she asked.

"Yes, it does because our dreams are coming from memory, the stored information in the brain, but they tend to be all mixed up when we're dreaming, right? The "I" or "me" center is really just a collection of memories put together by the thinking process. For example, we're meeting now and we're talking about ourselves, what do we talk about? Past experience, memory, isn't that so? We cannot speak about ourselves without referring to the past. So, the "I" or self and the guilt feeling when you remember your mother only seem permanent because thinking, being such an automatic, mechanical, repetitive process, keeps bringing back the memories with their associated emotions. Thinking as memory gives continuity to past events, pleasurable or painful, even though those events have long gone. That's the amazing thing about thoughts, emotions and memory. We think we exist in the past simply because we have memories, ideas, perceptions and images about ourselves. But in truth, there's really no concrete, permanent ego-personality who existed in the past and who'll exist in the future. Physically, mentally and emotionally, we're not the same person from one moment to the next. We are, in fact, a constantly changing mental-physical process and we can only realise this when we learn to slow the mind down and observe ourselves with awareness, with calm attention. So, the person you were sixteen years ago, mentally and physically, is obviously not who you are today, at this moment, right? Likewise, who you were before and after your mother died were not the same person, do you see that now?"

"Yes, that is amazing. That is so true! Now I'm beginning to see how I've been totally caught up in all this delusion of thoughts; my mind has always been very restless and agitated and driven by desire, worry and fear. There are moments when I see things changing, even moods and emotions, but in my restlessness I don't have the time to sit down and reflect on these things. Besides, I've never met someone like you before who can explain the workings of the mind so clearly. Our mental world is so powerful and misleading. Yes, I really need to do meditation practice. Please, can you explain further about past and future?"

"We said that thinking is a response to memory, past experience and knowledge, right? And how it projects itself into the future as plans, ambitions, hopes and dreams [often causing worry, anxiety and feelings of insecurity] that's simple enough. So, thinking is a movement in consciousness as time, as past and future, right? So, when we're remembering someone or something from the past, those thoughts and images are actually happening in the present moment. Likewise, when we're thinking and obsessing about the future those very thoughts and images are happening now, in the present. For instance, the memory of your mother are just thoughts and images happening now, there are just thoughts. The thoughts or images are insubstantial; they're just electrical impulses

in the brain connected to memory. It is our emotional attachment to their content [your mother] that makes it seem so solid and permanent. Do you see this?"

"Yes, I do. I now realise how I've been living in the past and clinging to the memory of my mother and feeling guilty mainly due to my restless mind and my inability to free myself from the past due to a lack of awareness and calm attention. As you say, my emotional attachment to my mother and how I treated her has resulted in my obsessive behavior."

"We identify very strongly with memories: sixteen years ago...; twenty years ago...; five years ago...; one year ago...--our personal history. We have diaries, journals and pictures; photographs taken of when we were young children, when we were in public and high school, when we were in college, when we got engaged to be married, and so on. Now we have videos to record the past. We like to show people these pictures and say: "This was me twenty years ago, I was so skinny back then; now I'm so fat. This one was me five years ago, my hair was so short then," and so on. We like to feel safe, solid and secure when we think that we existed in the past. But with awareness we begin to see that thoughts, emotions and memories are not permanent and solid. They come and go like clouds in the sky, like the stars you see when you rub your eyes.

In fact, everything is happening, coming and going, in the present moment, we can't get out of this dimension even though it's constantly changing; the present is not a fixed and static state. The energy of awareness or attention keeps our mind in the present moment whereas the energy of thinking takes us away from the present; the two energies are very different, right? The former is restful, spacious and immediate while the latter is restless, scattered, linear and confining. In that state of calm attention or mindfulness, we are able to see more intimately the changing and impermanent nature of mind and body. Normally, we are caught up and swept away in the rapid "mind stream", in the fast-flowing movement of thoughts and images. So it's difficult to see things clearly; we are led astray by our mental activity. It's like when we are travelling in a fast-moving vehicle it's very difficult to see the passing landscape clearly especially those objects that are closest to the road. But if we drive slowly or if we're taking a walk, then it's easier to see things as they pass. Likewise, when we can calm our minds by focusing on our breathing, we are able to see our thoughts and images more clearly and objectively instead of being caught up in their story or content. Guilt, anxiety, hope, worry, insecurity and fear are all connected; they're created by self-centered thinking and the strong desire to have, to become, to achieve or to get rid of."

"Yes, I can see what you're saying. During the meditation session, I noticed how anxious I was to achieve something, how quickly I wanted to calm my mind and achieve a blissful, enlightened state even though you had told us at the beginning to be patient and not try to control the mind or achieve something. Yes, I see now that I'm such an impatient person because of this restless, craving mind. But I don't see how fear and guilt are related."

"In your case, guilt is the fear of being considered a 'bad daughter' by the rest of your family--shame and guilt usually go together--the fear of public opinion, of what others say or may say and think about you. Do you see that? Good. This fear is because you have an image of yourself [as being this 'bad daughter'] and you think and believe that this self-image is a permanent and solid entity, do you see this?"

"Yes, I do. I see clearly now how thinking has created this image from the past, from sixteen years ago, and how thinking sustains this image even up to today. The mind is so amazing! Only now I'm understanding this and finally I can see some light out of this darkness I've been having. But even without my family around, I would still have this image of myself, why do you think that is so?"

"Because you are too judgmental, too hard on yourself. You have to forgive yourself for being human. As human beings we all have weaknesses, shortcomings and limitations; we're not perfect. When you recall the past with your mother, you are thinking, 'I should have been a good daughter. I shouldn't have been so selfish and immature. I should have spent more time at home caring for her. Why was I so blind and stupid? I'm such an awful person, such a terrible human being!' Isn't that so? Perfection is only a concept, an ideal that we silly humans create and cling to out of ignorance and delusion. It's just a mind-created fantasy not unlike the belief that we, as a solid, permanent personality existed in the past, and that this same "me" will exist in the future, right?"

You know, I've noticed that people in Hong Kong, not everyone of course, tend to be very arrogant and judgmental. It must be a cultural conditioning of this greedy, competitive society. Being judgmental and critical initially makes us feel superior, that we are better than others; it feeds our pride, arrogance and conceit--that's the illusion of the ego! It's a great defilement in the mind, which can only result in suffering and conflict. You see, it backfires on us because we end up also being too judgmental and critical of ourselves; it's a learnt and automatic behavior, isn't it? And so, we suffer from guilt and remorse, insecurity and inferiority complex--fear!"

"Yes, I see how judgmental I am. I think I've been like this all my life, easy to criticize others and to judge and condemn myself. I also see that to compare myself with others and to an ideal that I should live up to is unhealthy. Yes, comparison breeds inferiority and insecurity, conflict in the mind. I also see that a part of the guilt was for feeling resentful of my mother for being sick and bed-ridden; I wasn't even aware that I was being judgmental. I was so stupid and ignorant but I was young and immature and didn't know any better. Of course, I'm now aware how I'm being judgmental of myself, this is really a revelation! Thinking about my poor, dear mother now makes me feel so sad but, as you so wisely pointed out, I have to forgive myself--correction, I have to forgive that young, immature person who existed more than sixteen years ago for not being patient and considerate of her sick, helpless mother. That's correct, isn't it?"

"You most certainly are!" I smiled.

"At the public talk you mentioned that the Buddha was a psychologist and psychotherapist; I didn't understand it at the time but now I see what you mean. This is really a journey into discovering who we really are, self-understanding which, of course, includes the thinking process and our condition behavior. This is all so amazing and interesting! Normally, we are thinking all the time and we certainly need it in our daily activities but we don't realise that most of our problems are caused by this very same thinking process. I see now that I have to be more accepting of myself and others. To be forgiving, compassionate and patient, and to make the effort to train and cultivate this restless, confused and deluded mind."

"I would also like to suggest that you do the loving kindness meditation at least twice a day: once in the morning after your sitting practice and just before you go to bed at night. Believe me, you'll begin to feel much better and you'll have less fear, anxiety and guilt. And remember to also send loving kindness to your mother and to those with whom you're having some problem or conflict."

"Do you think my mother is able to receive this loving kindness if I send it to her?" she asked.

"I'm not surprised that you asked that question as the Chinese believe in ghosts and spirits, don't they? You think your mother is a hungry ghost floating around somewhere, don't you? Yes, I thought as much. No, your mother, as you knew her, doesn't exist any longer except in your mind as memory. The loving kindness meditation is more for your benefit so that you can be more compassionate, accepting and peaceful which would naturally improve your relationship with your other family members and with the rest of society at large. Of course, if it will make you feel better believing that your mother is able to receive your kind thoughts then why not? Also, loving kindness meditation helps us to go beyond our self-centered world, which is really a small, confining space. Because in that small, narrow space breeds fear, worry, craving, attachment, guilt, hate, resentment, jealousy, and so on. Loving kindness and compassion is freedom from the self. It make you aware that you're not the only one in this wide world who's having problems; most people suffer from guilt, fear, worry, sadness and sorrow, right? Compassion is to empathize with the suffering of others. Loving-kindness is not self-centered desire, attachment and pleasure; it's the sincere wish for others to be happy, to be peaceful, to be free from problems and harm. This meditation will help to alleviate fear, guilt and anxiety because these mental states are due to self-centered thinking, right? So, when you think of your mother with kind, compassionate thoughts, you naturally won't react with regret and guilt. With loving kindness and compassion, there is the ending of time [freedom from past conflicts and hurts], guilt, fear and sorrow. May you be well and happy and free from guilt, fear and sorrow."

"Thank you so much. You have been most patient, kind and compassionate. I feel like a new person today!" she smiled. She could now look at the hills and clouds in the distance and delight in their beauty and grandeur. This is the benediction of a free and innocent mind.

A few days after this interview, she was feeling so relieved, positive and inspired that she wanted me to meet with her sister who was having problems sleeping at night and consequently she was suffering from guilt for not being a responsive wife, mother and work colleague. She had tried several sleeping medications but to no avail, the sleeping problem began around six months before. This second interview was much longer and more complicated as the sister's conflicts were more deep-rooted and complex. She seemed frail, nervous and anxious; she was well dressed and had a certain dignity about her, but a neurotic temperament lied just below that elegant appearance. Appearance, status, reputation, social class meant a great deal to her, which indicated deep insecurities and fear. She was very self-centered, needless to say, and the love for her son was made painful by too much expectation and attachment. Simply put, her mental condition was very unhealthy and deluded; her fear of ageing and death was profound. She made it a point to praise her husband for being kind, supportive, and strong but the root of her problem was her inability to forgive him for some indiscretion he had committed ten years ago. He had been very repentant for his mistake, their relationship was cordial and civil, no fights or arguments, but her pride had been deeply hurt and the wound in her ego refused to heal--hence her inability to get a good night's sleep. She had tortured him with her silent indignity and she became a tortured human being in return; the law of karma, action and reaction, cause and effect, was evident.

At the end of a long, intense but insightful interview she became a much wiser and more forgiving person. She had a better understanding of herself: the thinking process and the ego, the nature of craving and clinging, fear and guilt, the illusion of pride, social status and reputation, the certainty of sickness, ageing and death, and the truth of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self. Also, the freedom and intelligence of loving kindness and compassion. She was inspired to attend yoga classes and weekly meditation sessions. She thanked me for my patience and I was inspired to give her a farewell hug.

Her brother had become dependent on prescription drugs and despite the lady's concern and advice he was not receptive to her sisterly love. She tried many ways to get him to stop taking these pills but to no avail. What should she do?

"There's nothing that you can do!" I said.

"But he's my brother! I must do something!" she insisted.

"I can understand your concern and anxiety," I said, "but he won't listen to you, he doesn't need your help!"

"I know something about prescription drugs and it's going to ruin his liver!" she continued.

"All you can do is offer some advise but it's up to him to decide," I said, "after all, he's not a child; he should be responsible for his own health."

"But he doesn't know how to look after himself! My mother spoilt him as a child!" she retorted.

"You are the one who's suffering with anxiety and fear, not your brother!" I said.

"But if he doesn't stop taking those drugs he's going to die!" she said, rather anxiously.

"Look, we're all going to die one day, OK? We can die at anytime! You can die today! So what?" I exclaimed.

"But I care about him. Isn't this what compassion is all about?" she asked, pleadingly.

"No, that's foolish compassion," I replied, " I know you love and care about your brother but you're too attached; there's too much craving and clinging in your mind, that's why you're so anxious and worried, right? You think you can save him but you cannot, he won't listen to you! So you are hurt; your pride cannot accept that so there's suffering. You think you know what is best for him but that's a form of arrogance, believe it or not! Your ego is too involved; you have to let go of this craving even if you think it's caring. What makes you think you're so important? If you should die today, the world and your brother will go on without you, isn't that so? You know, many people try to do good work, social service, etc., but they end up with a lot of conflict because their egos get in the way: the ego is forever trying to achieve something, trying to seek self-fulfillment, recognition, some kind of success and glory. They want people to pat them on the back and sing praises to them, "You are so wonderful and special! We just couldn't manage without you!" Do you understand what I'm trying to say? Do you see how deceptive the mind is, how we fool ourselves? The ego is forever separating itself from the world in its vain pursuit of pleasure and success, and the resulting isolation breeds fear, loneliness, despair, and sorrow. It is this loneliness that needs praise and recognition. But compassion and love are totally different: the ego, the 'me' center is not in operation. So there's no expectation, no craving involved; no anxiety, no demand for a result, understand? There's a popular saying: 'The road to hell is often paved with good intention.' This is exactly what we mean. Wisdom and compassion go together otherwise it's 'foolish compassion'. Wisdom is awareness and understanding so that we can accept the things that we cannot change. It is to be humble and to know our limitations; the ego is never humble! To be humble is not a weakness. Humility helps us to keep the mind open and receptive so that we can learn. Proud and arrogant people cannot learn; they think they know everything and so they remain ignorant, deluded and conceited. They are only fooling themselves. I've met people who try to do environmental work around the world and they end up becoming very frustrated, angry and depressed simply because they lack wisdom and compassion. They may have noble intentions but their awareness is limited by their anxiety to achieve something. So when they cannot accomplish their goals, due to several factors, they experience a great deal of suffering. Self-centered craving and attachment is a powerful force in the mind, isn't it?"

"Yes, I see what you mean. The mind is most amazing and deceptive!" she answered. She had grown quieter and less anxious. "If you hadn't pointed all this out to me, I would have

continued to be overly concerned about my brother and become more anxious and resentful. Yes, you're right: my caring and 'foolish compassion' are ego-based and that's why it has caused me conflict. I now realise how genuine caring can become easily polluted by our deluded thoughts and the ego's demand for a result. Yes, I have to accept my brother's attitude and my inability to held him. I must be humble and accept things with grace instead of all this struggling and resistance. I need to stop worrying about him and work on myself instead, then all will be well."

I managed to get some shopping done before leaving Hong Kong. I flew to Narita, Japan, and stayed overnight at the airport hotel compliments of Japan Airlines. I had stayed in the same hotel on the way to Malaysia five months previously so I had one of those *deja vu* experiences. Time and memory are such strange and interesting phenomena of the human mind. The following morning I took the 12-hour flight to Atlanta, USA, then caught a connecting flight to Toronto after a 5-hour wait. I was very jet-lagged and sleepy but quite happy to be back in Canada.

P.S. Ven. Anandamaitreya passed away on July 18th, 1998, two and a half months after we had met in Taipei, Taiwan. His long life was a dedicated and unique service to the Dharma; he was indeed a true disciple of the Buddha. I will always remember his loving kindness and compassion, his humility, childlike innocence and charm. Knowing him was a great blessing indeed. He received a state funeral in Sri Lanka. Bhante Anandamaitreya will rest in peace and many people will have precious memories.

May all beings be well and happy and free from suffering, may all beings be peaceful and free from fear, conflict and delusion. May all beings experience the bliss and freedom of Nibbana.

The End

Biography



Image courtesy of [Buddhism Depot](#)

Bhante Kovida grew up on the tropical island of Jamaica, West Indies, of Chinese

descent. He immigrated to Canada, studied for a science degree, then traveled overland from Europe to India and Nepal (via Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan) during 1974-1975, where he began the study of Indian history and culture, Hatha Yoga and meditation, classical Indian music, and Buddhism. This journey was to be the most significant event in his life as it fulfilled a deep childhood yearning for travel and adventure, and spiritual understanding.

After two more extended visits to India plus doing some social development work in Sri Lanka, Bhante Kovida took ordination with Venerable Balangoda Anandamaitreya, a noted scholar, teacher and meditation practitioner, in January, 1991. This humble, learned and gracious Sri Lankan monk was very adventurous and open-minded in temperament and throughout his long life he was able to make many visits to India and several other countries. He passed away at the venerable age of 102 after a long and dedicated service to the Dharma and Sangha.

Bhante Kovida left Sri Lanka towards the end of 1993 and began traveling and sharing the Dharma in the Toronto area with occasional visits to Hamilton, Ottawa, Halifax and Vancouver. He has also visited inmates at Warkworth Correctional Center near Campbellford, Ontario, AIDS patients at the Casey House hospice in Toronto for a period.

Every two years or so, Bhante Kovida returns to Southeast Asia to visit friends and teach the Dharma, as well as Hatha Yoga and Chi Gong exercises) at several Buddhist Associations and Dharma centers in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

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