

IT'S
LIKE
THIS

VENERABLE
AJAHN CHAH

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108 DHAMMA SIMILES

Venerable Ajahn Chah

*Translated from the Thai by
Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

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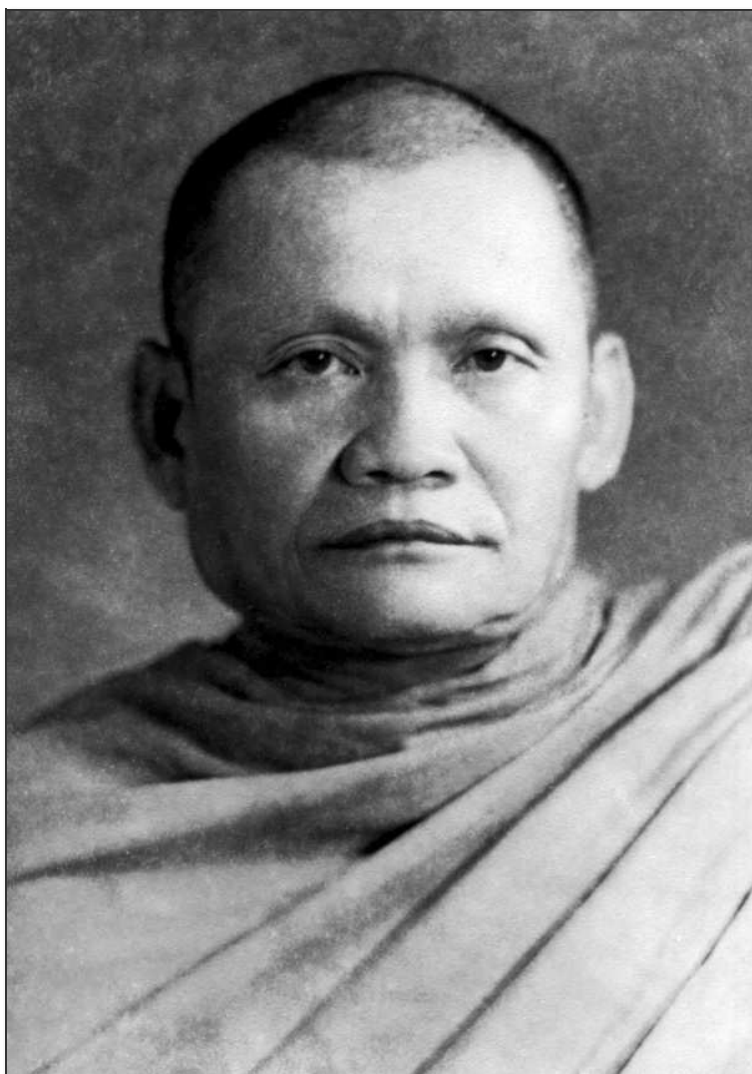
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VENERABLE AJAHN CHAH

Introduction

Venerable Ajahn Chah was a master at using the apt and unusual simile to explain points of Dhamma in a memorable way, sometimes to answer questions, sometimes to provoke them. He was especially talented at exploiting the open-ended nature of the simile—in which some similarities are relevant and others are not—using a particular image to make one point in one context, and a very different point in another.

This book is a companion to *In Simple Terms*, an earlier collection of similes drawn from Ajahn Chah's transcribed talks. Here, the majority of the passages come from a compilation made by Ajahn Jandee Kantasaro, one of Ajahn Chah's students, entitled *Khwaam Phid Nai Khwaam Thuuk (What's Wrong in What's Right)*. The title of this compilation is taken from a phrase that Ajahn Chah often used to describe the misuse of correct knowledge. Ajahn Jandee, in his introduction, illustrates the principle by telling of a man he once encountered who used the teaching on inconstancy to justify the fact that he never cleaned his truck.

Khwaam Phid Nai Khwaam Thuuk contains 186 short passages transcribed directly from recordings of Ajahn Chah's talks and conversations. From these passages, I first selected those containing similes and then eliminated any that were totally redundant with the same or better expressions of the same simile either in this collection or in *In Simple Terms*. This left 94 passages. To provide a full complement of 108— $1^1 \times 2^2 \times 3^3$, a number that, in the Buddhist tradition, signifies completeness—I chose an extra 14 similes from a range of Ajahn Chah's other recorded talks and conversations, and then arranged the resulting collection so that the passages would comment and build on one another.

Several people have looked over the original manuscript and have provided helpful suggestions for improving it. In addition to monks here at the monastery, this includes Ajahn Pasanno, Ginger Vathanasombat, Isabella Trauttmansdorff, Nathaniel Osgood, Addie Onsanit, and Michael Barber. I would like to express my appreciation for their help.

May all those who read this translation realize Ajahn Chah's original aim in explaining the Dhamma like this.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

May, 2013

A Bird in a Cage

Use the mind to contemplate the body so that you're familiar with it. When you're familiar with it, you'll see that it's not for sure—every part of it is inconstant. When you see in this way, your mind will give rise to a sense of disenchantment—disenchanted with the body and mind because they're not for sure, they're unreliable. So you want to find a way out, a way to gain release from suffering and stress.

It's like a bird in a cage: It sees the drawbacks of not being able to fly anywhere, so its mind is obsessed with finding a way out of the cage. It's fed up with the cage where it lives. Even if you give it food to eat, it's still not happy, because it's fed up with the cage where it's imprisoned.

The same with our heart: When it sees the drawbacks of the inconstancy, stressfulness, and not-selfness of physical and mental phenomena, it will try to contemplate how to escape from that cycle of wandering-on.

The Power of the Dhamma

The teachings of the Buddha get rid of people and give rise to venerables. In other words, they get rid of what's wrong in the mind. Only then can what's right arise. They get rid of what's evil so that goodness can arise. As when your house is dirty: If you sweep it out and wipe away the dirt, it'll be clean—because the dirt is gone. As long as what's wrong in the mind isn't gone, what's right can't arise. If you don't meditate, you won't know the truth. The Buddha's Dhamma is very powerful. If it couldn't change your heart, it wouldn't be a Dhamma with any power. But the Dhamma can turn ordinary people into noble ones, because it enables people with wrong views to give rise to right views.

Your Own Witness

With the Dhamma, it's like going to the home of friends or relatives and they give you some fruit. When you take the fruit in your hand, you don't know whether it's sour, sweet, or unripe. In other words, if you simply hold the fruit in your hand, you can't know its taste. To know the taste, you have to bite into it and chew it. That's when you'll know that it's sour or sweet or what its various flavors are, in line with your own perceptions.

It's the same with the Dhamma. In everything, the Buddha has you take yourself as your own witness. You don't have to take anyone else. The affairs of other people are hard to judge because they're the affairs of other people. If something is your own affair, it's easy—because the truth lies within you. It has you as its witness. When you hear the Dhamma, you have to meditate on it to be complete in study, practice, and attainment. *Pariyatti* is study so as to know. When you know, then *patipatti*: You put it into practice. With *pativedha*, attainment, knowledge in line with the truth arises within you. If you simply listen, your knowledge is just perceptions and concepts. If you talk about it, you speak in line with your concepts. You aren't bringing the truth out to talk about. This means you haven't reached the Dhamma, haven't contemplated the Dhamma. Your heart isn't Dhamma, but you can speak the Dhamma and act as if you were Dhamma. This is called being incomplete according to the standards of the Buddha's teachings.

The Language of the Dhamma

All languages come together in the language of the Dhamma. I'll give you a simple example. When we boil water for tea so that it's hot, the word "hot" in Thai is *rawn*. In Isaan it's *hawn*. In English, they say, *hot*. That's the way it is.

Languages are like that. Each person speaks in his or her own language, even though it's all the same heat. If you want to find where all these languages come together, the language of heat all comes together where we stick our finger into the tea. If you get a Chinese person to stick his finger into the tea, the heat is no different from when you get a Westerner or an English person to stick his finger into the tea. The only difference is in the language of the words. Heat is the same for everybody. When you know heat, it means that you know how it is for everyone.

Open Your Eyes

People, if they don't feel pain, don't open their eyes. If they're happy, everything shuts down and they get lazy. When suffering stabs you: That's what gets you thinking, and you can really expand your awareness. The greater the pain, the more you have to investigate it to see what causes it. You can't just sit there and let the pain go away on its own. Right now my arm feels heavy—why? Because I've picked up this glass. If I let it go, the glass won't be heavy, or at least won't be heavy on me, because I'm not connected with it.

The same with stress and pain: Why is it heavy? Why is it painful? Because you're holding onto it. But you don't understand that it's stressful. You think that it's something special, something good. When you're told to let it go, you can't let it go. When you're told to put it down, you can't put it down. So you keep on being heavy, keep on suffering.

Dyeing the Cloth

Our Lord Buddha wanted us to get our foundation in good shape first, get everything clear and clean first. It's like building a house or a building. We have to inspect the ground, the area where we're going to put up the building, so that it's in proper shape. Or like dyeing cloth: If you want to dye a piece of cloth, you have to look it over to see if it's dirty. If it's dirty, you have to wash it in detergent until it's clean. Only then will it take the color when you dye it. In other words, wash it until it's clean, and then it will take the dye. It's the same with making merit. You first have to make your mind clean.

Making your mind clean means letting go of evil thoughts, letting go of everything that's wrong and evil. That's when you can do good, do what's correct. With everything, the foundation has to be clean first, and then whatever you do will give rise to merit. *Sabba-papassa akaranam*: First you have to abandon evil, abandon what's wrong, in the same way that you get rid of the dirt so that you can dye your cloth. This is one of the lessons in the heart of the Buddha's teachings.

Remove the Weeds

For your vegetable to grow big and beautiful, you have to remove the weeds. That's when your vegetables will have a chance to grow large and beautiful—because you've removed the weeds. You've removed the bad things around the vegetables, so the vegetables can grow. It's the same with our body, speech, and mind. If we remove our bad actions, then our goodness—our virtue—will grow. So take the precepts and follow them with restraint, with care.

Why Wait?

As soon as there's anything unskillful in your thoughts, words, and deeds, remove it. Don't let it hang around for a long time. It's like a wound appearing in your body, or a thorn sticking into your foot. You want to remove it, but would it be better to remove it today or tomorrow? Or how about taking it out next week?

Or suppose you get a stomachache today. A stomachache is painful, and you want the pain to go away. But do you want it to go away today, or would tomorrow be better? Or would you rather wait for a week for it to go away?

Awakening to the Dhamma

Reaching the Dhamma, awakening to the Dhamma: These things sound awfully exalted, too exalted to talk about. But actually, people like us are on a level where we can reach the Dhamma. Reaching the Dhamma is understanding, "This is evil. It's wrong and doesn't benefit me or anyone else at all." When you understand in this way, that's called reaching the Dhamma of what should be abandoned. This is what's called awakening to the Dhamma. It's like going to a boat landing. When you've arrived at the landing, you've reached the landing. When you come up here to the meeting hall, you've reached the meeting hall. When you're correctly acquainted with the truth, that's what's meant by reaching the truth, reaching the Dhamma. When you've reached the Dhamma, your defilements gradually fade away and decrease. When your views are right, it's normal that you'll abandon your wrong views.

Knowledge & Goodness

Knowledge is like a knife. You hone it until it's sharp—really sharp. Then you put it away. The knife can cause both benefits and harm. When a person of discernment uses it, it's sharp. A person of discernment can get lots of benefits from it because it's sharp. But a person without discernment can use it to destroy the nation, destroy happiness, destroy harmony—all kinds of things. And he can do it easily because the knife is sharp.

When knowledge comes to a fool, it's like putting a weapon in the hands of a bandit or an evil person. He'll shoot people all over the place, kill all over the place. When knowledge comes to a wise person, the nation and its people get along easily.

These days we pin our hopes on knowledge. We worship knowledge. We rarely worship goodness or correctness. When you have knowledge, you need to have goodness and correctness as well. When you encourage these things, the world will go well. But here it's, "I've got knowledge, so I'm in charge." In this way, everything goes to hell. That's what it's like when you have knowledge without goodness.

Goodness Without Discernment

Skillfulness doesn't focus only on pleasure or happiness. It has to see where that happiness comes from and what it's like. You have to use your discernment to see what it comes from.

Some people think that gaining a lot of wealth is goodness. Not gaining a lot is bad. It doesn't matter to them how you gain it, just as long as there's a lot. Suppose that after a while they decide that human skin fetches a high price. One kilogram fetches tens of thousands of baht. So another group goes out looking for human skins. Where could we live? We'd be killing one another all over the place simply to get skins to put up for sale—because human skin fetches a high price.

These days we look for our livelihood, thinking that the more we gain, the better. But if we gain it in a way that's not moral, would it be right?

Every form of goodness has to be done with discernment. Any form of goodness done without discernment is harmful. Any form of goodness done with discernment is free of harm. Any form of goodness done without discernment is goodness outside the Buddha's teachings.

It's like a person advertising poison for sale. He says, "My poison is good. If you feed it to a dog, the dog will die. If you feed it to a person, the person will die. If you feed it to a chicken, the chicken will die. Whoever you feed it to will all die. So buy my poison. It's good poison." If it's really good, you should try feeding it to the person selling it. But its goodness is that it kills. Whatever eats it dies. So he says it's good. If it's good, you should try feeding it to the person selling it—but would he eat it? He wouldn't eat it. He'd be afraid that it would kill him.

That kind of goodness is goodness outside the Buddha's teachings. It's harmful goodness, filthy goodness, unclean goodness, goodness that's not peaceful. Goodness in line with the Buddha's teachings is goodness without harm. This is why, when you look for happiness in line with the Buddha's teachings, you have to do it with discernment.

Genuine Wealth

Silena bhoga-sampada: A person with virtue has wealth. In terms of external wealth, all the things that we search out for our livelihood will be Right Livelihood. The things we gain from Right Livelihood, even if they're not much, are large. They're large because they have value. That's why they count as *bhoga-sampada*: consummation in terms of wealth. Like diamonds and jewels: Even tiny pieces have a high price because they're free of things that are worthless. All the things that we use to maintain our livelihood: If they're free of harm, they have value. They're wealth.

Seeing the Fullness

When you make merit, what is merit? It's correctness. In other words, it's bringing the mind to peace, away from all kinds of evil. All of you lay people have gathered to make merit, but when you look for the merit, each of you has to look for yourself. These things you've brought here are objects—lots of different objects. It's like eating. You gain delicious tastes because of objects. But when you're full, where is the fullness? You don't know.

The fullness doesn't have any substance, but everyone knows that you feel full. Some people don't see merit. Not seeing merit is like not seeing the fullness from eating. Suppose that we all eat a meal. We use up the curry; we use up the rice; we use up the sweets. And what do we gain? Fullness. Fullness isn't a thing, but it appears in the mind. That's what we gain. What does it come from? It comes from objects, from the activity of eating the objects.

It's the same with merit. I've heard people say, "I've made merit but I don't see that I've gained any merit." Apparently these people eat but without seeing any fullness. Don't you know what fullness is? Fullness is the result that comes from eating.

The activity we're doing now is called making merit. It's a convention. The merit is in the mind's being serene and at ease.

The Teacup

I'll tell you a story about the Supreme Patriarch, something I've heard from other people. He went to China and, when he arrived, the Chinese gave him a teacup. It was really beautiful. There was nothing like it in Thailand. And as soon as he received the teacup, he suffered: Where was he going to put it? Where was he going to keep it? He put it in his shoulder bag. If anyone touched his shoulder bag, he'd say, "Watch out. Don't break the teacup. Watch out for the thing that can break in there." So he was always worried about it, suffering from it: suffering from having and then clinging. That's what made him suffer.

One day a novice let the teacup slip from his hand and it broke. The Supreme Patriarch said, "At last. That's the end of my suffering." This is called events happening to free him from his suffering. If the teacup hadn't broken, he would've probably been reborn as a hungry ghost right there.

It's like the things in your house. If there's nothing there, you suffer because you want to have things. You think that once you have things, you'll be comfortable. But once you have them, you still suffer because you're afraid they'll get lost. You don't understand the suffering that's already arisen.

Pouncing on Fire

We should all train our heart, look after our mind. Our mind, when it's not trained, is like a small, innocent child that doesn't know anything. Whatever it comes across, it pounces. If it comes across water, it pounces on the water. If it comes across fire, it pounces on the fire. It keeps causing harm to itself.

Learning about Fire

When you see the harm of what you're doing, you can stop. You watch it until you can stop, until you can give it up. It's like lighting a lantern and letting your child loose. The child doesn't know anything. It crawls over and tries to catch hold of the flame. Then it'll start crying. The next day, if you try to take the child to the flame, it won't touch it, for it's seen the harm from the day before. It'll stop trying to catch it.

Right here is where insight helps us. We really see. Whatever we really see, we can really let go.

Teaching from the Top

The way we teach when we follow the Buddha's teachings is that virtue comes first, concentration comes in the middle, and discernment comes at the end. That's how we memorize these things. But with some people, you don't teach virtue first. You get them to sit until their minds are quiet. You don't yet talk about, one, virtue; two, concentration; three, discernment. Have them sit until their minds are quiet. When they're quiet, they'll sense things on their own. It's as if there were a poisonous snake under a piece of cloth right here. We can stand on the cloth and feel relaxed because we don't know it's there. But when the mind is quiet, we'll sense that something is wrong.

It's like this tree here. We're told to teach it beginning from the base. But we can also teach people to grab hold of the top first. As they follow along the tree, they'll get to the base. If you start with the base and follow along, you'll get to the top—because the base and top are part of the same thing.

It's the same when you try to figure out how to teach some people. With concentration, when the mind is quiet, it'll sense that something is wrong. Discernment will gradually seep in, seep in, and the mind will gradually gain a sense of right and wrong.

Drop after Drop

When contemplating a meditation object, check to see which object is right for you. It's like food on a tray. You have to contemplate for yourself to choose which foods are right for the conditions of your body. In the same way, you choose a meditation object right for you. The in-and-out breath. Or you can contemplate the body.

In practicing, you have to keep at it gradually but steadily—like water that falls in drops, steadily into a big water jar. The jar doesn't dry out; the animals living in the jar don't die. If you contemplate the Dhamma themes of inconstancy, stress, and not-self until you understand, it's like loosening a bolt in a counter-clockwise direction. It's no longer so tight—so that you don't grasp at what's inconstant, stressful, and not-self.

Just Right

Ever notice how the Buddha image is sitting? Is his head bent back? Is it hanging down in front? He's sitting there just right. So right now, let's make our bodies just right, our minds just right. If the mind and body aren't just right, there won't be any stillness. Have you ever noticed that things whose goodness isn't just right aren't really good? When things are good, it's because their goodness is just right in every way. You don't have to look far away. It's like the curry we eat. If it's too salty, is it good? If it's too bland, is it good? When a cook fixes curry, she puts everything together just right. She aims at "just right." So today let's make our bodies just right, our minds just right.

Everything Gathers in the Ocean

The water in the ocean comes from little rivers. They flow into the ocean from different directions, but they all come together there.

It's the same when we meditate. We all bring the mind to stillness, and then we practice not clinging. Big rivers, small rivers, all gather in the same ocean. It doesn't matter where they come from, they all gather in the ocean. We practice meditation to make the mind quiet and to stop clinging to the five aggregates. It's all the same, so you don't have to worry about it. If you see that this method is easier than that one, you can take this one. If you see that another method is easier, you can take that one. It's just a matter of what's right for your propensities.

Coconut Water

The crude, beginning level of the practice is a little hard to maintain, but the refined levels of virtue, concentration, and discernment all come out of this. It's as if they're distilled from this same thing. To put it in simple terms, it's like a coconut tree. A coconut tree absorbs ordinary water up through its trunk, but when the water reaches the coconuts, it's sweet and clean. It comes from ordinary water, the trunk, the crude dirt. But as the water gets absorbed up the tree, it gets distilled. It's the same water but when it reaches the coconuts it's cleaner than before. And sweet. In the same way, the virtue, concentration, and discernment of your path are crude, but if the mind contemplates these things until they're more and more refined, their crudeness will disappear. They get more and more refined, so that the area you have to maintain grows smaller and smaller, into the mind. Then it's easy.

Patience

Desire is something known right at the mind. We're like fishermen who go out to cast their nets. As soon as they catch a fish, they rush to pounce on it, which scares the fish away. The fishermen are afraid that the fish will escape from the net. When that's the case, the fish are confused and hard to control, and so they quickly escape from the net.

This is why people in the past taught us to gradually feel our way along, to keep at it gradually and steadily. When you feel lazy, you do it. When you feel diligent, you do it. If you keep doing it a lot, then as soon as you find the quiet path, the mind will calm down. When you practice, you're taught to keep at it. Don't give up. When you feel diligent, you do it. When you feel lazy, you do it—but you have to practice like a person spinning a fire stick. If you start and stop, start and stop and start again because you're impatient, you won't get anywhere—because of your impatience.

When you practice, you don't need to think about a lot of things. Just survey right at yourself. You don't have to survey anywhere else. If you see yourself, you see other people. It's like aspirin and Tylenol: If you know one, you know the other, because they're both meant to cure the same illness. They're both painkillers.

People who practice and those who study like to criticize each other, but it's like putting your hand palm-up and palm-down. When it's palm-down, the palm hasn't gone away anywhere. It's right there, just that we don't see it. If you study without practicing, you don't see things for what they are—and that can make you deluded.

The Dhamma in a Pot

When cooked rice is just sitting in the pot, what purpose does it serve? If we don't practice with it—if we don't spoon it onto a plate, add a little curry and pepper sauce, and then eat it—what purpose will it serve? Even though the rice is good. The Buddha's teachings are the cooked rice in a pot. If we just keep the teachings there in the pot, what purpose will they serve? They just stay there in the pot. If you cook good jasmine rice and then just set it high on the table, will it give you any flavor? Will it make you full?

We take the Buddha's teachings and simply set them high in the world without practicing them. We keep on bowing down to them. If we really bow down, it means we believe them. We trust them. If we believe and trust them, we have to practice in line with them. That's when the Buddha's teachings will serve a purpose. They depend on each and every one of us to practice them.

Chickens Coming to the Monastery

Some people come to the monastery but never come to the meditation hall to hear the Dhamma. They sit way out there, chatting with their children and grandchildren, and don't understand anything. This isn't coming into the monastery like people. This is coming into the monastery like chickens. Chickens bring their baby chicks into the monastery, scratching around for dog shit and pig shit. They're not looking for anything else. This is not the right way to come to a monastery. It's coming into the monastery without seeing the monastery, coming into the monastery without seeing monks. It's like a fish living in water without seeing water, or an earthworm living in the dirt, eating the dirt, but not seeing the dirt.

It's the same with us. We come into the monastery but we're not acquainted with the monastery. We come into the monastery without reaching the monastery. This gives rise to problems not only for us but also for our children and grandchildren. We say that coming to the monastery gives rise to merit, and it's something that human beings have to do. We see our parents coming to the monastery and we simply follow along. As a result, when we're in our forties or fifties and someone teaches the Dhamma, speaks about the practice, about the Buddha, Dhamma, or Sangha, we don't understand anything. We don't know anything at all.

Thieves

Hiri, a sense of shame; and *ottappa*, a sense of compunction: These are qualities that protect the world. But they can protect the world only because we practice them. If we don't practice them, they don't protect anything. Some Westerners have called me on this. They say, "You live in Thailand. Thailand is a Buddhist country, so why does it have so many thieves?" I admit that it's true. Thailand has lots of thieves, but it's people who are thieves. The Dhamma isn't a thief. It's probably the same in the West. Not only in Thailand do we have dishonest people. They're thieves. There are good laws, and morality is still good. So I admit that there are thieves in Thailand, but the Dhamma isn't a thief.

The Blind Person

Venerable father, what is white like? It's like white lime. What is white lime like? It's like a pale sky. What's a pale sky like? This never comes to an end because you don't know the truth. Fish live in the water but don't see the water. Earthworms live in the dirt but don't see the dirt. Not seeing yourself, not knowing the truth, is like a person living with his skeleton and getting frightened by skeletons—because he doesn't see the truth.

Listening to the Dhamma gives lots of merit in that it helps you to see that there's a thorn in your foot. As soon as you see it, you take it out. The people who don't benefit from listening to the Dhamma are those who don't know the cause of stress, don't know the cessation of stress, and don't know the practices leading to the cessation of stress. In other words, they don't really know suffering because they don't contemplate it.

don't run along

Meditation means contemplating in a way that solves problems at the same time. Look at yourself a lot. Keep track of the mind, your sensitivity, your thought-fabrications. Actually, all your thoughts are an affair of fabrication. To put it in simple terms, don't run along with them. Don't follow in line with them. They're just an affair of mental fabrication. Fabrications fabricate things, now wanting this, now wanting that. Try to fix your attention on keeping track of their stages as they're happening. Whatever they're about, they're all not for sure, each and every one. When you see this clearly, that will end your doubts.

Whatever thoughts arise, know that they're not for sure. Don't go attaching meaning to them, and they'll end on their own. When they don't end, *make* them end, and that's the end of the matter. They're just an affair of fabrication. If we don't understand, we'll think that they're an affair of discernment. Actually, our thoughts and ideas are all an affair of fabrication. They're not genuine knowing. But we think that they're knowledge. They're knowledge that doesn't let go. If knowledge is genuine, it lets go.

The Salt of Meditation

Generosity and virtue are like meat. Meditation is like salt. For the meat to keep without spoiling, you have to salt it. Meditation is what makes your generosity correct, makes your virtue correct. That's why meditation is something of very high value. It's the ultimate perfection.

Complete Food for the Mind

Virtue, concentration, and discernment are like our food. If virtue were food, we'd say that it's sweet but without any richness. If you add concentration, that adds some richness. Now it's both sweet and rich. It's good that way. But if all you have is sweet and rich, it's still not complete. It has to be good-smelling, too. If you have all three, then the food is complete. Whether it's inner food or outer food, it's complete: sweet, rich, and good-smelling. It makes you want to eat your fill. That's what it's like.

Moving the Glass

Samadhi means firm concentration. *Bhavana*, meditation, means making the mind have a single preoccupation. You don't have to do a lot of things. It's kind of like taking this glass and setting it here for a minute, then lifting it and setting it there for a minute. Lifting and setting it, back and forth like this, without doing anything else.

When you meditate, contemplate the breath. When the breath comes in and out, know whether it's short or long. Whatever it feels like, be mindful. You don't have to force it. Whether the mind gets quiet or not, don't worry about it. Just keep at it as much as you can.

Better Than No Rice

When you come to sit in concentration, then even if your mind isn't yet quiet, simply sitting in the meditation posture is something good. It's better than people who don't even do that much. It's like being hungry, but today there's only rice, with nothing to go with it. We feel disgruntled, but I'd say that it's better than having no rice at all. Eating plain rice is better than not eating anything, right? If all you have is plain rice, eat that for the time being. It's better than not eating anything at all. The same with this: Even if we know only a little about how to practice, it's still good.

The Chicken in the Cage

It's like having a chicken and putting it into a cage. Let it stay in just one cage. When the chicken's in the cage, it won't get out of the cage, but it will walk back and forth inside the cage. Its walking back and forth is no problem, because it's walking back and forth in the cage.

It's like the things we sense in the mind when we're mindful and still. When we sense things in the stillness, it doesn't disturb us. When we think and sense things in the stillness, it's no problem.

Some people, when they sense things, don't want there to be anything there. That's wrong. There are things you'll sense in the stillness—you'll sense them, but they won't annoy you. The mind is still. There's no problem.

The problem is when the chicken leaves the cage. For example, you're focused on the breath but then you forget. You go traveling to your home or into the market—way out there. Sometimes it takes half an hour to come back. That's dying without knowing what's happening. This is important, so be careful. This is important. The mind has left the cage. It's left its stillness. You have to be careful. You have to be mindful. As soon as you're aware that it's left, you have to pull it back in—although to say that you pull it back in, you're not really pulling it back in. Wherever your thoughts go, it's just a matter of changing what you sense. When you get the mind to stay here, it stays here. As long as you're mindful, it stays here. It doesn't go anywhere. The change is right here in the mind. Notice that when it seems to go over there, it doesn't really go. The change happens right here. As soon as your mindfulness remembers again, it's immediately here. It doesn't leave from here. Everything is sensed right here.

Only One Hole Open

Focus your heart in your heart. Make mindfulness continuous. Get the mind to calm down its preoccupations, leaving just awareness. Like Tuccho Potthila: He went to learn the Dhamma from a novice. The novice taught him that there's a termite nest with six openings. You want to catch the lizard hiding in the hollow inside the termite nest, so what do you do? You close off five of the holes and leave open only one hole, so that you can catch the lizard when it comes out. In other words, leave your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body alone, and be aware right at the heart. That's what it means to focus your heart in your heart.

The same today: To catch all your awareness and gather it in together, you have to practice restraint of the senses. You restrain your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. Let go of the entire body, and simply be aware at the heart. This is called focusing your heart in your heart.

The Water Cooler

If you know something simply by memorizing it, there can still be doubts. If you know the truth, that's the end of your doubts. It's like this water cooler that has only a single opening for the water to go out. It won't go out any other way. If you tilt it in any other direction, the water won't go out, for there's no opening. And the advice you hear from this person here is for you to go right to that opening. Try to make your mind go right to that opening. If you try to pour the water out in another direction, it won't come out, for there's no opening. You have to pour it in this direction, and it will flow right out. "Oh. This is how it comes out." That's when you understand it.

Recognizing Fire

When we see the truth, we'll admit the truth. When we see the cause that gives rise to stress, then wherever stress would arise, we don't do that. We don't say that. We practice so that our practice becomes correct, and stress won't arise.

It's the same as when a person makes a mistake often because he doesn't recognize mistakes. He doesn't recognize fire. If people recognize fire, will they grab hold of it? No matter who grabs hold of it, they get burned. Once they know this, none of them will grab hold of fire.

The mind is hotter than fire, but nobody senses that it's hot, and so they say that it's nothing to worry about. They don't know that whatever's not correct is hot and burning. This is why human beings keep grabbing hold of it—sometimes even when they know better. They're servants of craving. They're slaves. All of us: If we don't know the Dhamma, we're all slaves to craving.

Looking for a Teacher

When you go looking for teachings on how to meditate, you have to look for people who are pure, monks who are pure, who really act in line with what they say: people who are content with little, who practice to gain release from suffering, to gain release from the cycle of wandering-on. This energizes your practice because it gives rise to a sense of conviction and inspiration.

If the teachers are lay people like you, they... I've never felt inspired by them. They have spouses, children, belongings—they're embroiled. In the evening they teach meditation and then in the morning they drink beer, drink alcohol. They're just ordinary people.

When you study in school, what do you do? You look for teachers who know more than you do, right? Only then will you study with them.

When you practice the Buddha's teachings, when you practice meditation, you have to look for people with few defilements, light defilements—people who've been able to get out of their defilements to a good extent.

The Stick in the Stream

All of us who have come here to practice: Walk in a way that correctly follows the Dhamma of the Buddha. Follow in line with his footsteps, in line with virtue, concentration, and discernment so that your practice is right, and I firmly believe that the results are sure to arise within you.

It's like cutting a stick and throwing it into the current of a stream. If the stick doesn't go rotten and it doesn't get snagged on the far bank or the near bank of the stream, it'll keep on floating along with the current. And you can be sure that it'll eventually reach the ocean.

One of the stream banks is pleasure. The other bank is pain. The stick is your mind. As it floats along with the current of the stream, pleasure will bump into it, pain will bump into it often. As long as your mind doesn't grasp onto the pleasure or the pain, it'll reach the current flowing to *nibbana*: respite and peace.

Addicted to Curry

It's like a dog. If you feed it plain rice every day, it'll get fat like a pig. But if one day you start mixing some curry in with the rice, just one or two meals, then after that if you give it plain rice again, it won't eat it. It gets addicted to the curry really fast. Sights, sounds, smells, and tastes are things that can destroy our practice. If we don't contemplate our four requisites—clothing, food, shelter, and medicine—Buddhism won't be able to survive.

Eating the Hook

When people are deluded, they deludedly see that hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, and skin are wonderful things. Beautiful. It's like a fish biting a hook. Whether it's biting the hook or biting the bait, it doesn't know. It wants to bite the bait, but what comes into its mouth is the hook, snagging its mouth so that the fish can't get away. No matter how much it wants to get away, it can't. It's stuck.

It's the same with us: When we see hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, and skin, we like them. We fall for them—and we're already stuck on their hook. By the time we realize what's happened, it's already hooked into our mouth. It's hard to get away. If we think about getting away to ordain, we're worried about our children, our belongings—worried about all kinds of things. And so we don't get away. We stay right there until we die. This means that the hook has snagged us by the mouth. We don't know and so we're deluded—like the fish that's deluded and doesn't know which is the bait and which is the hook. If it really knew the hook, it wouldn't eat the hook. It would eat only the bait.

The reason we're stuck in the world is because of these five things. They're "beautiful." They're "wonderful." We like these things; we submit to these things until we die. Actually, there's nothing much to them. It's just a matter of the hook snagging the mouth of the fish, that's all. Take this and think about it carefully.

The Tree in the Seed

Samadhi is firm concentration. If you're firm in your practice, it's a kind of concentration, but it doesn't yet give you the fruit. It's still just the flower—but out of the flower comes the fruit, big or small. The potentials of people are not the same. Things that are buried inside, we don't yet see. Like the seed of a jackfruit: Suppose that you eat some jackfruit and lift out a seed. When you do that, you're lifting a whole jackfruit tree, but at the moment, you don't see it. You don't yet know it. Even if you were to split open the seed, you still wouldn't see the tree because it's subtle. When you don't see it, you feel that there's no tree in there. Why? Because it hasn't been mixed with the right things. If you plant a jackfruit seed in the dirt, then it will start growing. Leaves will appear. Branches will appear. They'll get bigger and bigger. Flowers will appear. Small fruits will appear. Big fruits will appear. Ripe fruits will appear. But as long as the seed is still just a seed, you can't point to these things in there. This is why people don't take any interest.

When you're meditating, you're picking up a mango—and you're picking up the whole mango tree. It's the same as picking up a jackfruit seed but without seeing the tree in the seed. What gets in the way? The sweet flavor of the flesh gets in the way. The sour flavor gets in the way. We haven't yet made our way into the jackfruit tree inside the jackfruit seed. All we can see is that the flesh is sweet; it's delicious. All these things get in the way of our seeing the jackfruit tree inside the jackfruit seed.

It's the same with us as we practice. We sit on top of the Dhamma. We lie down on top of the Dhamma. We plant our foot on the Dhamma with every step—but we don't know that we're stepping on Dhamma.

Running in Circles

When you live alone, you can still be stupid. You can still suffer. When you live with a lot of people, you can be stupid and suffer. It's like chicken shit. If you hold it by yourself, it stinks. If you hold it with a lot of people, it stinks.

There's a way in which it's right to think that living with a lot of people isn't quiet, but living with a lot of people can also give rise to lots of discernment. I myself have gained a lot of discernment from having lots of students. When lots of people with lots of ideas and lots of experiences come together, it has to give rise to stronger and greater powers of endurance. I can endure. I can keep on contemplating things. It's all beneficial.

The cycles of wandering-on keep spinning around—so how can you keep running after them? If they speed up, can you catch up with them? Just stand in one place, and the cycles will keep running around you on their own. It's like a wind-up doll running around and around in circles. You stay right in the middle and you'll see it each time it runs past. You don't have to go running after it.

Lifting the Bowl

What do stress and suffering come from? It's like lifting this bowl and feeling that it's heavy. If you put it down, it's not heavy any more. As soon as you lift it up again, it's heavy again. So what does the heaviness come from? We feel heavy because we've lifted this thing. So we put it down. We put down the cause of its heaviness and we're light. Right? Know stress. Know the cause of stress. Know the cessation of stress. Know the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress. That's all you do. Just put down the cause, and the stress and suffering ceases. That's the practice.

When we start out, we don't understand anything. We lift this up, and it really feels heavy. Why is it heavy? We don't understand. Why is it heavy? Because that person looks down on us; because this person criticizes us. All kinds of things. We don't know what we're holding in our own hand. But if we put it down and stay still, we're not heavy. See? We're not suffering because we're not lifting anything. That's all there is to our practice.

See for Yourself

Now that you've come here to the monastery, you no longer have any questions about what Paa Pong Monastery is like or where it is. That's because you've already seen for yourself. As long as you haven't seen for yourself, you have to keep asking other people. Keep that up until you die, and you still won't know Paa Pong Monastery. Why? Because all you know is what other people say. Do you know anything about it? You know, but it's not clear. Your knowledge doesn't reach the monastery. That's why there are still questions.

This is why the Buddha taught us to meditate so that we can see things clearly for ourselves. As long as you simply believe what other people say, the Buddha says that you're still stupid.

Talk about Blindness

This issue of nibbana: The Buddha describes it in a way that's unclear because there's no way you can describe it clearly. It's like talking to a person who's totally blind. Try describing a color in a way that's clear. Something really yellow: Go and ask a blind person if he knows it. The more you try to describe it, the less he knows. So how do you solve the problem? You have to focus back on the cause: "Why are you blind?" You'd do better to talk about how to cure the disease in his eyes. Once his eyes are good, then you don't have to teach him about red or green. He'll know for himself.

Your Duty

Your duty is to plant a tree, water it, and fertilize it, that's all. Whether it's going to grow fast or grow slowly, that's not your duty. It's the duty of the tree. You can stand there complaining about it until the day you die, but it won't get you what you want. Where do your thoughts go? "Maybe the soil here isn't good." So you pull up the tree. Its roots are just beginning to grow, but now they're torn off. You keep pulling it up, again and again, until it finally dies. Why do you want it to grow fast? Your desire for it to grow fast is craving. Your desire for it to grow slowly is craving.

Are you going to follow your craving, or are you going to follow the Buddha? Think about this every day. What you're doing: Why are you doing it? If you're not at your ease, you're doing it with craving. If you let go, then you'll do the practice when you feel lazy; you'll do it when you feel industrious. But here you don't do it when you feel lazy. You do it only when you feel industrious. That's just a practice that follows your craving. *When* are you going to practice following the Buddha?

Sitting with a Cobra

Make the mind mindful and keep it aware all the time. The problem is how to keep it aware. Suppose you have an area about three meters wide and you're sitting inside it. And there's a big cobra staying in there, too. What would your mind be like then? Because you don't trust the cobra, because it's poisonous, you won't dare lie down. You won't dare get drowsy. Why? Because you're afraid of the cobra. When you understand in this way, your awareness will get a lot clearer.

The Spider

When we're mindful, we're like a spider making its web. It stretches its web across the air and then it puts itself in the center. Quiet. Still. Unmoving. Mindful. If a fly or a bee comes flying along and touches the web, the spider knows. It gets up and runs out to catch that insect and turn it into food. Once the spider has caught its food, it hurries back to its original spot. It makes itself quiet and alert. Mindful. It knows when something is about to touch the web. As soon as something touches it, it's already awake—because it lives with mindfulness.

The spider is like our mind. The mind lies in the middle of the sense spheres: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. That's the way it is with a person who practices. If we're careful, alert, and restrained, we'll get to know ourselves. We'll get to know the mind: what it's doing and in what way.

A Road Through the Wilderness

Training the mind is something we have to do. As you train the mind over time, it's like making a road into the wilderness. At first, you're walking in the wilderness, but if you keep walking along the same path every day, every day, the path gradually changes. The dirt gets harder. Stumps get worn down, and the road becomes an easy place to walk.

Roads to Pass By

When you come here to Nong Paa Pong Monastery, there are roads crossing your way. But they don't matter. You simply go past them, because you don't want them. The same with all the preoccupations in the world: We want the mind to quiet down but then we bring in disturbing preoccupations to stir it up again. If we understand that they're simply roads to pass by, we pass them by without paying them any attention. That's what it means to cut preoccupations away. For example, "When the mind is quiet, what will it know? What will it see?" Cut those thoughts away. They simply clutter up your path.

Know One, Know Them All

Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, everything: When you know one, you know them all. They all have the same characteristics. It's kind of like recognizing what characteristics this chicken has. All you have to do is learn to recognize one chicken. Then when you go to different provinces and find other animals like this one, you'll know that they're like this chicken. You don't have to go remembering that those other ones aren't ducks. They're chickens. You're sure of the matter.

When you're sitting in meditation and a sound comes in, it's not the case that the sound is disturbing you. When that awareness arises, you're disturbing the sound. That's where you have to solve the problem. Discernment will gradually arise. You gradually contemplate and judge things for yourself. Wherever you get snagged, you undo the problem right there. Your duties while you practice concentration don't require you to do a lot. Keep the mind one. Know the breath coming in, the breath going out. When you get worried about something else, focus on the breath again. When you get confused about the breath, not knowing whether it's coming in or going out, establish your mindfulness all over again.

Two Different Things

If you sit in one place and sounds get you all upset, you go away from that place and find another place that's quiet. But if there are sounds there, you get upset again. That's because your knowledge comes from perceptions. You don't know in line with the truth. The truth is that you live with sounds, and sounds live with you, and there are no issues, because you're two different things. I'll give you an example. If you lift up this object, it's heavy. If you put it down, it's not heavy.

Why is it heavy? Because you lift it up. Why is it light when you put it down? Because you're not lifting it. "Lifting it" is simply a matter of clinging to the idea that the sound is disturbing you. If you think in that way, you get upset. Suppose that this object weighs one kilogram. If you leave it there, it weighs just a kilogram. It's the same with sounds. If you leave the sounds alone, they won't disturb you—because you don't grab onto them.

Killed by the Mind

The mind is something really important. It can kill you or it can get you out of danger. We can see this from wild animals that we tame. Wild chickens, for instance, are really afraid of people. If you pounce on one and hold it to have a good look at it, it'll die. What killed it? The fierceness of its mind killed it. If it's afraid, it can be so afraid that it dies. Just like people: When we get sad, the tears will flow. When we get too happy, the tears will flow—because the mind doesn't stay in a condition that's just right.

Hiding in the Mind

When a child is born, we don't see any good or bad kamma. There's just a body. It comes naked. This shows that the things in one life can't be held in our hands to see in the next life. This is why, when a child is born, it doesn't bring anything along in its hands. But there *are* things that come along, simply that they come along somewhere else. They come along in the mind.

I'll give you an example, like a mango seed or lamyai seed. As long as it's still a seed, you can examine it carefully and not find a tree in there, any flowers in there, because they're very subtle. But there's something in there. Even though a person coming into this life doesn't hold anything in his hands or carry anything over his shoulder, these things appear when nature begins to mature—for they're already there. Like a mango seed: the trunk, the leaves, the branches are all there in the mango seed. If we plant the seed in the ground, it'll turn into a trunk, leaves, and flowers on its own.

This is why the Buddha said that kamma is what sorts people out so that they're different.

Strength & Harmony

Virtue is a strength. Concentration is a strength. Discernment is a strength. When they pool their strengths and work together so that they're one and the same, that's called *magga-samangi*: the path in harmony. As soon as this harmony arises, that's when you awaken to the Dhamma. It's like all of us here. When we're in harmony, we can be at our ease. Like students or teachers: If the teachers are in harmony, if the students are in harmony, the whole school is at ease. When the students are not in harmony and the teachers are not in harmony, running off in different directions, then there's no peace. The teachers and students have to cooperate: teachers following their duties as teachers, students following their duties as students. Each person performs his or her duties to the full. No problems will arise.

The same with practicing concentration: When there's virtue, concentration, and discernment, all kinds of good things will stand out right there, right where they're helping one another in harmony.

To bring the matter in even closer, into the body: When the properties of earth, water, fire, and wind are in harmony, the body is beaming with health—because of the harmony within it. But if the body isn't in harmony—if there's too much fire, too much earth, and not enough wind—the body will grow sick and uncomfortable.

You Know You're Full

The Buddha emphasized that we should think about what we're doing as days and nights fly past, fly past. If we know what we're doing, we have a refuge we can depend on. For example, if you do something right today, but a friend says, "What you did is wrong," then you get angry with your friend. That shows that you do good things but think things that aren't good. Other people say you're not good, and you become not good in line with their words. Actually, if you do good, then even if other people say, "not good," you're still good. You can stand your ground. After all, what you did was good. It's like eating rice today until you're full. If other people come and say you're not full, will you believe them? You believe in yourself that you're already full. When you can believe in yourself, that's when you can depend on yourself.

From there you go to *attana codayattanam*: You yourself should admonish yourself. If you do wrong, admonish yourself. Whatever you do, keep admonishing yourself.

Husk & Not-husk

When they say, “Admonish yourself,” “self” is *atta*. As for yourself, it’s not like that. Suppose that some water is murky. You filter it and see the clear water that comes from the murky water: “That’s clear water.” If you filter yourself, it’ll be *anatta*, not-self, coming out of self. You’ll see that it’s not-self. That’s when it’s *anatta* in line with the understanding of your discernment. But some people think that if everything is *anatta*, not-self, then what’s there to gain?

We have to understand self and not-self. They lie on top of each other. Have you ever been to a market to buy a coconut? To buy a banana? When you buy a coconut, it has its husk and its shell. They come along with it. If someone comes up and says, “Hey. That husk. That shell. Are you going to put them in your curry, too? If not, then why are you carrying them?” The person buying the coconut knows that you can’t eat the husk or the shell, but you have to bring them along. The time hasn’t come to throw them away, so you have to bring them along. This is convention. When you buy a coconut, don’t get deluded about the husk or the shell.

Conventions and release come along with each other in the same way.

What's Wrong in What's Right

We've seen that this bowl, no matter where you put it, will someday have to break. This plate, no matter where you put it, will someday have to break. But we have to teach our children to wash these things so that they're clean and put them away safely. We have to teach children in line with these conventions so that we can use the bowl for a long time. This is a sign that we understand the Dhamma and are practicing the Dhamma.

If you see that the bowl is going to break and tell your children, "Don't worry about it. When you've finished eating out of it, you don't have to wash it. If you drop it, it doesn't matter. It's not really ours. Toss it anywhere you want, for it's ready to break." If you speak in this way, you're simply too stupid.

If we understand conventions, then when we fall sick we look for medicine to take. When we feel hot, we take a bath. When we feel cold, we find something to keep the body warm. When we're hungry, we find rice to eat. We know that even though we eat rice, the body's still going to die. But at the moment, it hasn't reached its time to die. Like this bowl: It hasn't yet broken, so we take care of it so that we can benefit from it while we can.

Feeding Through the Mouth

People who are intelligent: You don't have to teach a lot. People who are not intelligent: No matter how much you teach them, they don't understand. But this depends on the teacher, too. By and large, we teach when we're in a bad mood. As when we teach our children: It's only when we're angry with them that we "teach" them, and then it's just a matter of yelling at them. We're not willing to teach them nicely. When people are in a bad mood, why should you teach one another? I'd say not to teach at that time. Wait until everyone's in a better mood. No matter how wrong the other person is, put it aside for the time being. Wait until you're both in a good mood.

Remember this, okay? From what I've observed, lay people teach their children only when they're angry with them. And so it hurts the children's feelings. You're giving them something that's not good, so why should they accept it? You suffer; your children suffer. That's the way things are. We all like what's good, but our goodness isn't enough. If you try to give someone something good but you don't have a sense of time and place, a sense of your role, nothing good comes from it. It's like delicious food. You have to eat it with your mouth if you're going to benefit from it. But try stuffing it in your ear: Will it give any benefit? Will that delicious food give any benefit? All of us have our openings. You have to look for the other person's openings. That's the way it is with everybody.

Potters Beating Pots

When raising your children, you need to have discernment. Have you ever watched potters? Potters beat their pots all day. They beat them to make them into pots. They don't beat them to break them. It's the same with your children. You have to keep teaching them. When the time comes to be fierce with them, be fierce only with your mouth, but not with your heart. Don't make yourself suffer. Even though you may be in a bad mood, you keep on teaching them, in the same way that a potter beats his pots all day. His intention is to make the pots beautiful. He doesn't beat them to break them. You should teach your children in the same way.

Forcing the Fruit

Don't get angry with people who can't yet do the practice. Just keep on teaching them. When their faculties mature, they'll be ready to accept what you say. If you keep on acting in this way, problems fall away.

It's like a fruit that's still unripe. You can't force it to become sweet, because it's still unripe, still sour. It's still small and unripe. You can't force it to become large and sweet. Just let it be. When it matures, it'll grow large on its own, sweet on its own, ripe on its own. If you can think in this way, you can be at your ease. That's the way it is with people in the world.

The Turtle & the Snake

A forest fire was coming, and a turtle struggled to get away from the flames. It walked past a snake coiled up and it forgot all about death. It felt sorry for the snake. The fire kept spreading closer and closer, and the turtle felt sorry for the snake. Why? Because it didn't have any legs, so how was it going to get away? The turtle was so afraid that the fire would burn the snake that it turned around to help the snake. The snake didn't do anything. As the fire got closer and closer, the snake uncoiled itself and slithered away. The turtle was stuck right there. It couldn't walk fast enough to get away from the fire, so it was burned to death.

This is a comparison. It was all because of the stupidity of the turtle, because it thought that only if you had legs could you move. Anyone without legs couldn't move. When it came across the snake, it saw that the snake didn't have any legs. It misunderstood and thought that the fire would burn it to death. It was afraid the snake would die, but instead *it* died. Even though it had legs, it couldn't run. The snake, though, kept its cool. When the fire got close, it slithered away and escaped the danger.

The Cow Knows the Field

A person with conviction is like a cow eating grass. If we let it loose in a field of grass, it eats grass. If it won't eat grass, it's a pig. The same with people of conviction: You don't have to teach them a lot. Just let them loose in the field of merit—the monastic Sangha—and they'll follow your example, practice in line with your example of their own accord.

Barking at Leaves

When you go for alms in the village, put on your robes neatly before you go. Exercise restraint as you go for alms. I've seen new monks and novices who don't know anything. When they eat in someone's house, they have to look around, all over the place. Why do they have to look around? Some of them even stare—it's even worse than lay people. It's because they've been living in the wilderness and haven't seen anything like this for a long while. When they go into someone's home, they see this, see that, and it pulls at their eyes. They look all around because they're hungry. It's kind of like a dog: When it stays in the village market, it doesn't bark very much. But if you take it out into the wilderness and the wind blows the leaves around, it barks all night.

So this is important. You have to be very careful when you go for alms.

Dye in the Mind

It's like rain water, which is water that's clear and clean. Its clarity is normally clean. But if we put green or yellow dye into it, the water will turn green or yellow. It's the same with the mind. When it meets up with a preoccupation it likes, it's at ease. When it meets up with a preoccupation it doesn't like, it's ill at ease. It's like a leaf blown by the wind. It flutters. You can't depend on it.

Flowers and fruits also get blown by the breeze. If they get blown by the breeze and fall from the tree, they never ripen. It's the same with the minds of human beings. Preoccupations blow them around, drag them around, pull them around, so that they fall—just like the fruit.

Not Awfully Anything

Suppose there's a rock placed right here in front of us. It weighs about twelve kilograms, placed right here in front of us. Its weight is normal for it. It just stays right there. It's normal for it. But if we go to lift it, it doesn't feel normal at all. We find fault with it, "This rock is awfully heavy!" That's how we find fault with it. Actually, it's not awfully anything. When it sits there, it's perfectly normal for itself. Even though it's heavy, it doesn't cause anyone to suffer—as long as no one tries to pick it up and carry it.

It's the same with our preoccupations. When preoccupations come passing in, passing in, then as long as we don't pick them up to carry them—as long as we let them go and put them down—there's no heaviness. If you had no attachment to things, it would be like not carrying this rock around. Even though the rock would have its weight, you wouldn't be weighed down—because you're not carrying it. Your preoccupations, whether they're good or bad: There's not much to them. If you know them for what they are, you let them go. You don't carry them around; you don't latch onto them. They dissolve into the air, that's all. They don't come after you.

Playthings for the Mind

It's like a child in your home. Suppose your child is always getting into mischief. No matter what you do, it won't stop. It won't stay still. So what do you do? You give it a balloon to play with. It's content to stay engrossed in its balloon. It doesn't cry; it doesn't bother you. Why? Because you give it something to play with, and so it's engrossed in its balloon.

It's the same with the mind. When it's in a turmoil, jumping all around, give it a meditation topic to play with. What kind of topic? Recollection of the Buddha, recollection of the Dhamma, recollection of the Sangha, recollection of virtue, recollection of generosity, recollection of death: Let it contemplate death.

The Balloon of Tranquility

It's as if your child gets a balloon. Whatever else it's been playing with, it puts aside. Its interest in other preoccupations grows quiet. It plays as it likes with the balloon. It's right there. Its mind is quiet. This level of quiet is just the level of quiet of a child with a balloon. Its mind is all tied up in the balloon. But this level of quiet isn't enough. The child sees the balloon floating in the air and it's engrossed, that's all. It doesn't think about whether or not the balloon is going to burst. It doesn't think. It sees the balloon floating in the air and it's engrossed. This is what's called *samatha*, tranquility.

Vipassana or insight is a matter of making your discernment greater than that. You know what's going to happen to the balloon. Will it eventually burst?—that sort of thing. Eventually you see in the mind that the balloon is inconstant. It's sure to burst. Your discernment shoots out to that point.

Tranquility doesn't have any discernment. It sees the balloon floating in the air and just keeps playing with it. When the balloon bursts—pop!—it cries. Why doesn't it think? It doesn't have the discernment to see that the balloon will burst. It doesn't look into inconstancy, stress, and not-self. It just sees the balloon floating and it feels satisfied. Engrossed. This is tranquility, the stillness of tranquility.

With concentration, the mind is quiet, but defilements are still there, simply that for the moment no defilements appear in the mind. That's why it's not disturbed. It's quiet like a balloon for the time being. There's still air in the balloon and it's still floating. It's just there to make the child happy over made-up things, that's all. Tranquility is just like that.

The Balloon is Already Burst

It's like a child or an adult playing with a balloon. You see the balloon floating and you ask, "What's eventually going to happen to the balloon?" "Oh. It's not for sure. It's inconstant, stressful, and not-self. There's nothing dependable about it. Eventually it's sure to burst." This is the view of the adult, the view of a person of discernment. It doesn't trust the balloon. It always sees that the balloon will burst for sure. It sees clearly. Eventually the balloon bursts—boom!—and the mind is still at ease.

Why is it at ease? Because insight has arisen, because it sees that the balloon is burst before it bursts, right? It's already burst. It bursts after it's burst in our view. That's why no problem arises.

It's the same with our body, or any object we get and we love a lot: We have to understand that eventually it'll have to break down.

I'll give you an example: a lovely cup or plate. Once we get it, some people get really happy and glad. That's the way children are. People without discernment think that it's good, that it won't break. But people with discernment see this glass or this plate, when they get it and happiness arises, and think, "Hmm. This is just... that's all. It's a vessel that one day is going to have to leave us. It'll have to get broken. If it doesn't break and leave us, we have to break and leave it." When you can think in this way, the mind has gone to a high level. It's trying to gain release from suffering and stress.

After a while, as we use the plate and it eventually breaks, no problem can arise. Why? Because we know that it's already broken. This is insight. When this glass breaks, it's no big deal. It's perfectly normal.

When You Know How

Don't get stuck on the texts. Don't focus on what all the different teachers say. Talk about things that are Dhamma.

It's like being a student in school. We study books in school. As long as we don't know, we study books in school. We read in school, write in school, and get taught in school until we can pass the exams. We now can read and write. When a friend sends a letter to us at home, we can read it at home. We don't have to carry it to school to read. Once we've learned the alphabet, we can read the letter anywhere and understand what it's saying. If we want to write a letter, we can write it at home or at the side of the road and send it off—because we now know how to write.

It's the same with our practice. When we practice the precepts, we don't have to take the precepts from monks, because we already know how to practice. If a monk teaches us, we listen; we take them. They still count as the five precepts either way.

The One Mango

So we should always keep on practicing in this way. Tranquility is right in here; insight is right in here. You can't separate them out. We can separate them in our speech, but we can't separate them in reality. It's like a mango: You can't separate it out. You can't separate ripe from unripe in the mango. We see that at one point in time it's sour, and then after that it's ripe and sweet. Where did the sour go? It's turned into sweet. At first its peel is green, but when it's ripe, it's yellow. Where did the green go? It's turned into the yellow. You can't separate these things out.

The One Mango Explained

This mango is first small, then it's half-ripe, then it's ripe. When it's ripe, is it the same mango as the small one? When it comes out as a flower, it's this mango. When it's small, it's this mango. When it's big, it's the same mango. When it's half-ripe, it's the same mango. When it's ripe, it's the same mango.

The same with virtue, concentration, and discernment: Virtue, in simple terms, is abandoning evil. A person without virtue is hot. If he abandons evil, he cools down, for he has no guilt. That lack of guilt is the reward of virtue. It makes the mind peaceful. The mind gets concentrated.

When the mind is concentrated, it's clear and clean. You can see lots of things in it. It's like water with no ripples: If you look into it, you see not only the reflection of your face. You can see all the way to the roof above you. When birds fly past, you can see them, too.

So these things are all the same thing, like the one mango.

The Mango in Harmony

You have to look for concentration, discernment, and virtue all together at the same time. When they develop, they develop together. When your perfections reach fullness, they're full together. Your right views: When your discernment sees rightly, every factor in the eightfold path will be right. If it's right only ten percent, then each of the ten perfections will be only ten percent.

It's like a mango. When the fruit is ripe, the entire fruit is ripe. There's no part that isn't ripe. It's ripe all together. When it's half-ripe, the entire fruit is half-ripe. It doesn't separate into different parts. If we separate things into different parts, we don't understand anything and we create difficulties for ourselves.

So we're taught to train ourselves in virtue, concentration, and discernment all at the same time. That way our virtue, our concentration, and our discernment will be in harmony with one another. Just like this mango: When it's unripe, it's all unripe in harmony. When it's half-ripe, it's all half-ripe in harmony. When it's ripe, it's all ripe in harmony in just the same way—because it's a single fruit.

The Fluttering Mind

Stillness of mind without discernment is like a leaf that flutters when stirred by a breeze. In other words, stillness of mind without discernment is dark and then bright, back and forth. It's like a person who eats meat and gets a piece stuck in his teeth. When he pries it out, he feels better. When he's hungry he eats some more and gets another piece stuck in his teeth. It hurts again. When he pries it out, he feels better again.

The Snake under the Cloth

Mental stillness, on its own, has other things mixed in with it. It's still because there are things mixed in with it, but it's not aware of them. That's why it's still. Suppose that this foot-wiping cloth that my feet are on has a poisonous snake living under it. I can put my feet here without any fear because I don't see the snake. But actually, there's a poisonous snake right here. I have no idea, so I can relax, with no fear of anything. The fact that I don't feel any fear is because I don't know that there's a poisonous snake right here. This is *samatha*: tranquility. "Who cares if there are defilements there? I feel peaceful right now." This is called stillness of mind without the defilements being still. It's called *samatha*. We train the mind to be still so that, in the next step, the defilements will be still. That's an affair of discernment.

Healing the Wound

Tranquility is stillness that lasts only for a little while. The stillness is the foundation for insight. Insight is seeing clearly, understanding more clearly than you did before. Insight is not simply still. The stillness of tranquility is like running away from noises to a wilderness where there's no noise. If you have lots of children, you run away to a wilderness where there are no children. When you don't see your children or don't hear any noise, you find stillness.

But that kind of stillness is like having a wound, stitching it up, and covering it up with a bandage until it looks like it's healed. But actually there's still an infection inside. When the infection flares up, you cut it open, stitch it up again, put medicine in it, and the wound heals over. But there's still infection inside. It's not really healed. That's tranquility.

With insight, you have to remove all the infected tissue so that it can heal from the inside. Don't stitch it up. Wait until it's free from infection, and then close it off. Shoot it full of medicine so that it heals from the inside to the out. When the outside is healed, that's it. The inside is already good, so it won't get infected again. That's insight meditation.

The Stillness of Insight

When the mind reaches that level of stillness, it's not enough—the stillness of tranquility. You have to make it still through insight. You have to give rise to discernment. With the stillness of tranquility, it's like not being able to be still in a hot place. You have to go to the seaside to be still. When you go back to where it's hot, you're not still anymore. The preoccupations of tranquility are only on this level of stillness. But with the preoccupations of insight, then when it's hot in the mountains, you can stay there comfortably. When you go down to the seaside, you can stay there comfortably. You can focus on knowing these things, and the mind doesn't run. It knows pleasure; it knows pain. That's how we know when we practice.

Rocks in the Way

We're walking along a road that goes straight ahead. It doesn't matter how many kilometers it goes, we just keep walking straight ahead. When we find a log or a rock obstructing our way, we pick it up and throw it off to the side of the road.

We're trying to make the mind quiet and still. The preoccupations that arise by way of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body all come together here at the mind. When the mind gets involved with these things, it's like a rock obstructing our way. It interferes with our walking, so we pick it up and throw it off to the side.

The preoccupation arising at that moment we see as inconstant, stressful, and not-self. We throw it off to the side. Don't hold onto anything at all. Let it go, and keep on walking. If love comes, we let it go. If hatred comes, we let it go, that's all.

Killing Your Meditation

When standing, walking, sitting, and lying down, keep your mindfulness continuous at all times. This is called practicing meditation (*kammattana*) correctly. The reason why our mindfulness isn't continuous is because we don't do it. "Doing it" isn't something the body does. The mind is what does it. If we do our mindfulness so that it's continuous, so that we're constantly aware, it's like drops of water that flow continuously so that they become a continuous stream of water. If you can train the mind in this way, your meditation will progress quickly and well.

But these days, people go practice vipassana for three days, seven days, ten days, fifteen days, and then they come out of retreat. They say that they've already done vipassana and they're already good at it. So they go to sing and dance and play around. When that happens, their vipassana is gone and they don't have any left. When they do all kinds of unskillful things that stir up the heart and damage it like this, you can't call it "practice." It's a mode of practice like planting a tree where you plant it today and then, in three days' time, you pull it up and plant it over there. Then, after another three days, you pull it up again. The tree is going to die and you won't get to eat the fruit. Meditation can die in just the same way.

Staying at Home

If you have mindfulness and alertness at all times, you'll come to your senses. If you waste your time playing with other things, suffering will arise and you'll suffer—because you don't have any mindfulness. Your alertness isn't here. It's like your home. If you leave and don't close the door, dogs will come in and eat your stored-up rice. Thieves will come in and steal all your things. It's the same when you don't have mindfulness.

Actually, you have mindfulness, but it's mindful of other things. It's like leaving your house. You're still there, but you're not there in the house. You're there somewhere else. It's the same with mindfulness. You have mindfulness, but your mindfulness isn't here. Thieves come and steal the things you have here, but you're not here. Your "here" is somewhere else. Your mindfulness is working somewhere over there. It's not working here. If your mindfulness is working here, then you'll sense when a preoccupation strikes the mind. If the mind likes it, you'll know—and you'll see that it's inconstant. Don't latch onto it or else you'll fall into suffering and stress. You'll see: "This is inconstant, stressful, and not-self," right there. That means that you're practicing the Dhamma.

This is why people who practice have mindfulness—the ability to recollect—at all times while they're standing, walking, sitting, and lying down. Alertness always knows what we're doing right now. This is how you have the opportunity to awaken to the Dhamma. You'll have the opportunity to chase these dogs out of your home, to chase away the thieves that have come to steal your things—because you're right here. You'll have the opportunity not to lose your belongings.

Fix It Right Here

This practice is called the practice of the Dhamma. If you can see every day, if you can try to see continually into your mind, then even if you're doing work, you'll see. Try to see with every moment. You might say, "Oho, Venerable Father, I don't have any time to meditate. I can't meditate. I'm always busy." That's how we tend to see things. Actually, where you're busy is the place where you practice. Wherever there's heat, there's coolness right there. You don't understand. All you see is that when heat arises, there's nothing but heat there. No coolness at all. Actually, wherever there's busyness, there's stillness right there. Wherever there's wrongness, there's rightness right there. Wherever there's turmoil, there's stillness right there. Look. If you do something wrong right here, where are you going to correct it? It's as if something goes wrong in your motorcycle right here, right in this spot. Where are you going to fix it? You fix it right where something has gone wrong, and then it'll go right, right there, that's all. Wherever you encounter a preoccupation you like, you practice right there: "Oh. This isn't for sure. We've already experienced pleasure. We've already experienced pain many, many times. This won't turn into anything else. It'll turn into nothing but suffering." If you can think correctly like this, the mind will keep staying in that state.

A Fish on Land

Our different postures hide pain. When you've been sitting a long time and then switch positions because of the pain, the pain disappears. That's why we don't see the pain. It's like youth hiding old age inside. The mind is taken with the looks, the sounds, the smells, the tastes of youth, but if you stay with it for a while, old age starts to show its face.

The mind is like a fish in water. When you catch it and bring it on land, it'll squirm and struggle to get back into the water. If you simply let it go, it'll be at its ease. But if you catch the mind and make it sit in meditation, it'll see pain. If you simply let it go as it likes, it won't see pain—like the fish in water. But when you try sitting in meditation, it's like a fish caught and placed on land. It'll see pain immediately.

Overcoming Pain

Suppose you're sitting in concentration and it really hurts. When it hurts, you come out of meditation. Then you meditate some more until you reach the point where it hurts, and then you come out again. This is why you don't understand suffering even though you suffer. Wherever you sit and meditate, you suffer pain. So you ask yourself, "What can I do to overcome this?" You have to make a decision: "Sit, but don't move. Let the body die."

You depend on what the Buddha said: Whatever arises passes away. If pain arises, why won't it pass away? As soon as you sit, there's nothing but pain. It hurts. It aches. Sweat starts flowing in drops as big as corn kernels. You're about to move but you say, "Hmm. No. Let it die." You have to take it that far—until the mind goes beyond death. The pain disappears. Once you've gone beyond death, discernment arises. Confidence gets strong. You thought that you wouldn't be able to stand it; you thought that you were about to die. This is called training yourself with a heavy hand. It's not for general use. After that, whenever you meditate, you understand—because you've seen how far the pain can go. This is called overcoming pain.

If you can't overcome pain, then when you reach that point, you fall out of concentration. You die every time. You don't have any strength. You have to overcome it someday in your practice. Once you've overcome it, you won't be afraid of it—because you've seen what it's like. It's like being a boxer. If you haven't boxed in the ring, you're afraid. Once you've boxed in the ring, you're not afraid anymore, for you know what it's like. You have to experiment with this. This is called overcoming pain.

Why Study?

If you close your eyes, you won't see any light. Things won't be bright. When things aren't bright, you don't see light and colors. You don't see your way.

The Dhamma of study is like your eyes. Your eyes help you see where you're going. Wherever you walk, you have to depend on your eyes to look ahead. While your eyes are looking, your feet keep walking at the same time. Whatever your activities, you have to depend on your eyes to open the way, to forge a trail through the darkness. That's their nature.

It's the same with the Dhamma of study. If you know how to put it to use, it serves a purpose. If you don't put it to use, it won't serve any purpose. It's like having a knife that you hone until it's sharp. If you put it away without using it, it won't serve any purpose. No matter how sharp it is, if you don't use it, if you put it away, it won't serve any purpose. So when you've studied, you should put it to use so as to benefit from it. If you study but don't put it to use, it's like a farmer growing rice in a field but not harvesting the rice, or growing a garden but not harvesting the vegetables.

You have to study first. Only then should you think about going out to practice in the forest. You have to study what the aim of practicing in the forest is. Only then should you go practice in the forest. It's like knowing the purpose of growing rice before you grow rice, or the purpose of growing vegetables before you grow vegetables. Know the aim, the purpose, of practicing in the forest.

The Name of the Fruit

The fruit that you offered to the monks: I don't know its name, but I know that its flavor is sweet and delicious. That much I know, but I don't know what it's called—and it's not really necessary. All that's necessary is knowing that its flavor is sweet and delicious. Right? That's really necessary. "What's the name of this fruit?" That's not really necessary. If someone tells you, you can remember it. But if you don't know the name, you can let the matter go. After all, knowing the name doesn't increase the sweetness or make the fruit more sour.

The knowledge that comes from the practice: We practice so that we'll know. It's knowledge that knows all the way in. Once you know all the way in, you let go. The knowledge that comes from the practice, once it knows all the way in, lets go. The knowledge that comes from studying doesn't let go, you know. It fills us up until we're stuffed tight. It ties us down even more.

Counting the Rootlets

Some people have to keep thinking: “What is the mind? What is the heart?”—all kinds of things, keeping at it, back and forth until they go crazy. They don’t understand anything. You don’t have to think that far. Just simply ask yourself, “What do you have in yourself?” There are physical phenomena and mental phenomena; or there’s a body and there’s a mind. That’s enough.

Some people ask, “I’ve heard that the Buddha knew everything. Well, if he knew everything...” They practice the Dhamma and start arguing: “How many roots does a tree have?” The Buddha answers that it has taproots and rootlets. “But how many rootlets does it have?” That shows they’re crazy, right? They want an answer about the rootlets: “How many rootlets are there? How many taproots are there?” Why do they ask? “Well, the Buddha knew everything, didn’t he? He’d have to know, all the way to the rootlets.” Who would be crazy enough to count them? Do you think the Buddha would be stupid like that? He’d say that there are rootlets and taproots, and that would be enough.

It’s like cutting our way through the forest. If we felt we had to cut down every tree, all the big trees and all the small trees, we’d be getting out of hand. Would we have to uproot them all in order to get through the forest? We’d cut back just the ones needed to open our way. That’s enough.

Mr. A & the Letter A

When we speak about the Dhamma, it's all a matter of strategy for understanding what's right there. It's matter of suppositions, a strategy. The genuine Dhamma exists, but it's something you can't see. We have to bring in other things so that we contemplate it.

It's like a teacher teaching her students, "Suppose Mr. A has this much money." Mr. A isn't there in the room, so what do you do? You write down the letter A with a piece of chalk, and you suppose that it's Mr. A. Is it Mr. A? It is as a supposition, but this Mr. A can't run. You can take the letter A and suppose that it's Mr. A and that he has this or that much money. It's Mr. A on the level of supposition, but you can't get this Mr. A to run anywhere, for it's just the letter A. It's a letter A that we can use. It's a strategy. You have to understand that the actual Mr. A isn't there, so you have to write the letter A to serve your purpose.

What's That?

With the Dhamma, it's not the case that you'll awaken because someone else tells you about it. You already know that you can't get serious about asking whether this is that or that is this. These things are really personal. We talk just enough for you to contemplate.

It's like a child who's never seen anything. He comes out to the countryside and sees a chicken. "Daddy, what's that over there?" He sees a duck. "Daddy, what's that?" He sees a pig. "Daddy, what's that over there?" The father gets tired of answering. The more he answers, the more the child keeps asking—because it's never seen these things. After a while, the father simply says, "Hmm." If you keep playing along with the child's every question, you die of fatigue. The child doesn't get fatigued. Whatever it sees, "What's that? What's this?" It never comes to an end. Finally the father says, "When you grow bigger, you'll know for yourself."

That's the way it is with meditation. I used to be like that. I really was. But when you understand, there are none of those questions. You've grown up. So be intent on contemplating until you understand, and things will gradually unravel themselves. That's the way it is. Keep watch over yourself as much as you can. Keep watch over yourself as much as you can, to see if you're lying to yourself. That's what's called keeping watch over yourself.

The Farmer & the Cobra

In short, the Dhamma teaches that whatever suffering arises will pass away. There's nothing more than this. There's just suffering arising and suffering passing away. That's all there is, which is why we suffer, why we're in a turmoil in this cycle of wandering-on. Why are we in a turmoil? Because we don't know this truth as it actually is. When you don't recognize suffering, you feed it, thinking that it'll be pleasure. But eventually it bites you, because it's suffering.

It's like the story of the farmer and the cobra. The cobra lies stiff in the cold, and the farmer feels pity for it. He thinks, "I have enough kindness to help this animal find some comfort." That's because he doesn't recognize what it is. He doesn't recognize that this is a snake that can bite people. Because he doesn't recognize it, he picks it up and holds it to his chest. As soon as the snake warms up, it bites us.

Awakening to the Cobra

Most of us, when we hear the words, “awakening to the Dhamma,” understand that it’s something so high and far away that we probably won’t awaken in this lifetime. That’s how we understand things. Actually, if something is evil and we don’t clearly see that it’s evil, then we can’t abandon it. That means we haven’t awakened much to the Dhamma. But if we listen, contemplate, and practice until we see it clearly, we’ll see the drawbacks for sure that that thing is evil and we won’t dare ever do it again. We won’t dare store it up as seeds to plant again. We’ll have to throw it away because we’ve seen the harm it does.

Before, we heard that it was evil, and we even said that it was evil, but we still did evil. We still did things that were wrong. That was when we hadn’t yet awakened to the Dhamma.

When someone awakens to the Dhamma, it’s like seeing a cobra, a poisonous snake slithering past. We know that this snake is poisonous, and its poison is dangerous. If it bites anyone, that person will die or suffer horribly. If we see a cobra or a banded krait, we know that its poison is fierce. Anyone it bites will have to die; if he doesn’t die, he’ll be close to death. This means that we know the snake for what it actually is. We don’t dare catch hold of it. No matter who tells us to catch it, we wouldn’t dare. This is called awakening to the Dhamma—awakening to the cobra, to the banded krait. We awaken to its poison.

It’s the same with all forms of evil. If we clearly see the harm they do, it’s not hard. We know for ourselves. All I ask is that you keep on practicing, contemplating, and you’ll know for yourselves. When you awaken to the Dhamma, the mind will be Dhamma. You’ll know the Dhamma.

Our Responsibilities

When we practice we're like a man planting a tree. He goes out and gets a tree, digs a hole, puts the tree in the hole, fills the hole with soil, waters it, gives it fertilizer, and keeps it safe from insects. These are our responsibilities. And that's the end of our responsibilities. The responsibility of the tree is to grow. Whether it grows fast or slow, don't force it. If you force it, you suffer. You plant it and then you think, "Hey. When is it ever going to grow so that I can get some fruit?" As soon as you start complaining, you suffer. Why? Because you don't understand your responsibilities. You take on the responsibilities of others. You take on the responsibilities of the tree.

The tree doesn't want anyone to take on its responsibilities. It'll do the work itself. The person has the responsibilities of the person. The owner has the responsibilities of the owner: to keep on watering and fertilizing the tree, to keep on protecting it from insects. That's our duty. If we do the duty of the tree—"Oho. It's really taking a long time to grow"—we pull on it to make it tall, to make it grow, and it'll simply die. That's not our duty.

It's the same when we practice our precepts well, when we practice concentration well: Discernment will arise. We keep at it gradually, continually, practicing like this, able to think like this, keeping this principle in mind, and we can be at our ease. We and the tree look after each other. The tree will grow healthy and beautiful because we look after it with our practice. As for whether it'll grow fast or slow, leave that to your merit and perfections. But don't abandon it. You have to keep on building your perfections all the time.

Cleaning the House

When you construct a house, then when it's finished, only the construction of it is finished, right? The next step is that you have to live in the house and always keep cleaning it. It's not the case that when you finish constructing the house you can rest at your ease. That's not the case at all. You have to keep cleaning the house continually.

It's the same when you practice concentration. When you do concentration, you can't think that you've finished doing it and now you can stop. You have to use your knowledge and mindfulness to be aware of the preoccupations that will disturb and destroy your concentration. You have to know these things. When standing, walking, sitting, and lying down, you have to keep mindfulness in charge at all times.

When you finish constructing a house, you can't say that you'll just lie down and rest, you know. When the house gets dirty, what will you do? You'll have to wipe it down and sweep it out, all kinds of things. It's the same when you practice concentration. Getting the mind into concentration isn't hard. But to keep maintaining concentration *is* hard. Constructing a house isn't hard. In just a few years you're finished. But you have to keep on cleaning the house for many, many years until it falls apart. As long as you live in it, you have to keep on cleaning it. That's the normal way it is.

Better & Better

When discernment arises, you can abandon your defilements. As your discernment grows, your behavior will change. You'll abandon your old ways. It's like going into the forest to look for fruit. At first you find some fruit that's not especially good, but even though it's sour, you take it. You carry it in your basket until you find fruits that are better than that. You throw the old fruits out of your basket. It's because you see that the new ones are better that you change what you're carrying.

The same with the mind: When you see the harm and drawbacks of your old ways, you keep on abandoning them. The more you look, the more you keep on abandoning. When you practice, you'll think, "This is it. This is good." But when you practice further—"Oh. What happened then wasn't really refined." So you abandon that, too.

The Compass

It's like having a compass that points north and south. You go into the forest carrying the compass with you, and it will still point north and south. But suppose that the day after you go into the forest you open your compass and decide that the south end of the needle is pointing west, and the north end of the needle is pointing east. That's when you have to realize that it's just a matter of your own thinking. You're thinking wrong. The needle's still pointing north and south all the time, but you understand that it's pointing east and west. You "know" and you follow this kind of knowledge. But it's an issue of your thoughts, which you can dissolve; an issue of your feelings, which you can dissolve. The compass is always pointing north and south, north and south, but you feel that it's pointing east and west. The mistake is with you.

The Saltiness of Salt

Buddhism is like salt. Salt is always salty. Whoever eats it will find that it's always salty. Whoever doesn't eat it won't taste the saltiness. In the same way, Buddhism can't degenerate. People degenerate. Buddhism doesn't degenerate.

Some people see monks behaving in a bad way and they blame Buddhism. It's like a person who doesn't eat salt and complains that salt isn't salty. Actually, the saltiness of salt is there all the time. If anyone eats the salt, the saltiness will appear. That's the way it is with Buddhism.

Lead vs. Gold

I'll ask you a question. Suppose there's a hunk of lead weighing one kilogram and a hunk of gold weighing one kilogram. If you were to ask people to take one of them, which one would they take?

It's the same with your son deciding to ordain for life. He sees that ordaining has more value. He sees the whole world as a hunk of lead with no value. That's why he doesn't want it. It's the same as your wanting the kilogram of gold and not the kilogram of lead. Why? Because the lead has less value—or no value at all. That's why you decide to take the gold.

The Thinking of Earthworms

These days, Thai people are ordaining less and less. I don't know why. Whether it's because of their work or because the world is developing, I don't know. In the past, people would ordain for at least four years, five years. But now there are people ordaining for seven days, fifteen days. There are even people who ordain in the morning and disrobe in the evening. It's because of this sort of thing that Buddhism will disappear.

Some people say that if people ordained the way I say—three or five years—the country wouldn't develop. We'd run out of people staying at home; there wouldn't be anyone making a living; we wouldn't be able to keep up with the world. So I tell them that this kind of thinking is the thinking of earthworms.

Earthworms live in the dirt. They've been eating dirt from the very beginning. But even though they keep on eating, they're afraid that they'll run out of dirt. So when they excrete dirt, they put it up next to their heads to eat, for they're afraid they'll run out of dirt. This is the thinking of earthworms. People who think that the world won't develop, that it'll come to an end: That's the thinking of earthworms.

Neither Large nor Small

This bell here: Do you think it's large or small?

[A layman answers: "Small, sir."]

Small, eh? It's not large? Hmm. Is that how you see it? This bell is a physical phenomenon. Your feeling about it is a mental phenomenon. There's a physical phenomenon and a mental phenomenon: your mind, your intention. Craving can want to make this bell larger right now or smaller right now.

All of you sitting here: When you look at this bell, it's hard to answer. You don't know whether it's large or small because there's nothing else to measure it against. If you put an alms bowl right here, you'll see that the bell is small. It's not large any more. But if there's no alms bowl, the bell is large. Why is it like that? Everyone who says the bell is small wants it to be larger than this, and so the bell gets smaller. But actually, if the bell stands here by itself, it's not large and it's not small. It's just as much as it is. What makes it large or small, if not craving?—the desire for it to be smaller or larger. The bell itself is neither large nor small. It's just the way it is.

Why

When we understand that the movements of the mind have to be the way they are on their own, that's the way they are. They don't "why" anyone at all. The problem is that we latch onto things. It's like water flowing. It flows along in its water way. If you latch onto it, asking why it flows, you give rise to suffering. If you understand that it flows in line with its own affairs, there's no suffering.

Grabbing Hold of a Dog

Even when you see that something is true, you can't grab hold of it. It's like a dog: Try grabbing hold of a dog's leg without letting go, and it will turn around and bite you. Or a snake: Try grabbing hold of its tail, grabbing hold without letting go. It'll simply bite you. So don't hold on. Let it go. Put it down.

It's the same with conventions. We act in line with conventions, but we're taught not to grab hold of them. They're there to use, to provide us with conveniences so that we can live. They're not there to grab hold of them, to latch onto them to the point of giving rise to suffering and stress. The things that you understand to be right: If you latch onto them, you separate your mind into two parts—because your views have turned wrong.

When the Bees Leave the Hive

When we see emptiness, the King of Death can't catch up with us. Death can't reach us. Why? Because there's no "us." There are just piles of form, piles of feelings, piles of perceptions, piles of fabrications, piles of consciousness, that's all. So where's the person? Like that beehive over there: If all the bees leave and you try to take the hive, will you touch any bees? No, because it's empty. All you'll touch will be the beeswax. You don't know where the bees went, because they don't live there anymore.

That's how the Buddha taught. Take your views outside of "self" in that way, and you run out of questions. And not only do you run out of questions, there are also no answers. No questions. No one to answer the questions. That's where everything runs out. You know what it's like when things run out? "Running out" means there's nothing there.

Eating Out of the Shit-pot

To see things as empty means seeing that there's nothing there. You see that this spittoon is there, you see a cup and a plate, and the cup and the plate are there. It's not that they're *not* there, but they're there in emptiness. They're empty. If you ask this spittoon what it is, it won't answer you—because it's not anything. You can call it a spittoon if you want, but it's just your supposition. Or you could call it a pot—it's still just a supposition that you've made. Its actuality is there's nothing to it. But we grab onto it and hold onto it firmly.

I'll give you an example. Suppose there are two groups of people: one group intelligent, the other group stupid. They go to buy things in the market. The stupid group doesn't know anything, so they buy a shit-pot and use it to fix rice—because they don't know anything at all. The intelligent people see that and they get disgusted—“How can they use a shit-pot as a rice-pot? It's disgusting.”

Why do they find it disgusting? The shit-pot is still new; it's never been used, so it's like an ordinary pot. It's still clean. So why are they disgusted by it? Because they hold onto the idea that it's a shit-pot, that's all. Actually, it's just an ordinary pot. They suffer and get disgusted because they cling to their ideas about it.

So with these two groups of people, which one is really intelligent? Which one is really stupid? The pot is just an object, an ordinary pot that we suppose to be a shit-pot, so people get disgusted by it. If you put curry in it, they get disgusted. Put rice in it and they get disgusted—because of their wrong views, stuck on suppositions.

The Parts of a Knife

This knife placed here: It has the edge of its blade, it has the back of its blade, it has its handle—all of its parts. When you lift it up, can you lift just the edge of the blade? Can you pick up just the back of the blade? Just the handle? The handle is the handle of the knife. The back of the blade is the back of the knife's blade. The edge of the blade is the edge of the knife's blade. When you pick up the knife, you also pick up its handle, the back of its blade, and the edge of its blade. Could it split off just the edge of its blade for you?

This is an example. When you try to take just what's good, what's bad comes along with it. You want just what's good and to throw away what's bad. You don't learn about what's neither good nor bad. When that's the case, you won't come to the end of things. When you take what's good, what's bad comes along with it. They keep coming together. If you want pleasure, pain comes along with it. They're connected.

Knowing In-between

It's like going up on the roof or coming down to the floor. When someone climbs up there, he gets on the roof. When he comes down, he comes down to the floor. If he climbs up to the roof again and falls down, he falls down to the same floor. That's all that most people know. No one knows being in-between because there's nothing to measure it. When they say that in-between there's no state of becoming, we can't point it out. We can't point it out because there's nothing to mark it.

The questions we have to answer are the questions of the practice. Students for the most part want to know what merit looks like, what evil looks like, how many leaves there are on a tree, how many roots. If you want to know that sort of thing, the Buddha would probably say you're stupid, because all you really need to know is a single leaf. Every leaf on a rubber tree is just the same. The same with the roots: All you need to see is a single root.

It's the same with knowing people. If you really know yourself, that's enough. You know every person in the world.

When the Cabinet is Done

I want us all to have endurance—enduring until there's no more endurance. In other words, as soon as you see the truth, you let go. When you let go, you see peace arising. When peace arises, you don't have to practice—because you've finished practicing. It's like a cabinet. Before, it was a tree, but there was a problem that required making a cabinet. The tree was cut and shaped because there was still a reason to make the cabinet. Once the cabinet is finished and we've coated it with shellac and put it on display, that's the end of having to do anything. It ends right there in the cabinet.

Before, this cabinet was a tree; now, it's beautiful cabinet. We can say that what once wasn't beautiful has turned into something beautiful.

It's the same with all of us. All of us have been run-of-the-mill people. And not just us—even the Buddha was just the same. He started out ignorant. That's how he came to know. Wherever there's dirtiness, there's cleanliness right there. When you wash that spot, the cleanliness doesn't arise anywhere else. Wherever there's disturbance, there's peace right there. Wherever there's wrongness, there's rightness right there. They're together, both of them, right there. Wherever there's greed, aversion, and delusion, there's lack of greed, lack of aversion, lack of delusion right there.

Our Own Affair

Eventually, the teachings run out. When you know causes, you let go of causes. When you know results, you let go of results. So where will you stay? Above causes and beyond results. Above birth and beyond death. That's where you stay. You stay where everything is ended and runs out. The mind is at peace, away from causes and results; at peace away from birth and death; at peace away from pleasure and pain. It stays in peace like that. There are no causes and effects right there.

Once you're above causes and beyond results, that's the end point of what we're practicing. We aim right there. That's why the Buddha taught only that far. After that, what we practice is our own affair. Where we continue to go is our own affair. He taught only this far. He has a boat and an oar, and he gives it to us: both the boat and the oar. If we paddle with it, the boat will go forward. If we don't paddle with it, the boat stays where it is. It's our own affair.

In the Cage

Whether we're happy or sad, feel pleasure or pain, cry or sing, as long as we're in this world, these things happen in a cage. We don't escape from the cage. Even if we're wealthy, we're in a cage. If we're poor, we're in a cage. If we cry, we're in a cage. If we dance, we're dancing in a cage. Which cage? The cage of birth, aging, illness, and death.

It's like a mourning dove we keep in our home. We simply listen to its song and we praise it. "How pretty, the sound of my dove! My dove has a low voice. My dove has a high voice"—that sort of thing. We never ask the dove if it's enjoying itself or not. We give it rice to eat and water to drink, but everything is in the cage. And yet we think that the dove is satisfied.

Have we ever stopped to think: If someone gave us rice and water and put us in a cage, would we be happy? In the same way, we're caged in this world. "This is mine, I have this, I have that"—all kinds of things. But we don't understand our own condition. Actually, we're gathering stress and suffering into ourselves because we don't look deeply into ourselves, in the same way that we don't look deeply into the dove. It looks like it's living comfortably. It can drink water and eat food, and we think that it's happy. The same with us: Even though we live in extreme pleasure and comfort, once we're born we'll then have to grow old; when we're old, we'll then have to grow sick; when we're sick, we'll then have to die. This is suffering. This is the way we suffer.

Filling the Glass

The way that people think once they're born is that, having been born, they don't want to die. Is that the right way to think? Take this glass here. If we pour water into it and yet don't want it to be full—if we keep on pouring water into it and yet don't want to be full—can we get what we want? It's the same with people once they're born. Once they're born, they don't want to die. Is that kind of thinking right? If things could really be that way, with everybody born and not having to die, we'd suffer even more than we do now. If nobody born into this world ever died, we'd all be eating one another's shit. Where could we go to get away?

It's like the water in this glass: Can you keep on pouring it in without wanting the glass to be full? That's the way it is with the world. Get things into perspective. You can't want not to die. That's the way it has to be.

Mindfulness of Death

If you were to break the law, and in seven days they were going to execute you, how would you feel? If you were sentenced to death, and in seven days they were going to execute you, what would you do? I want you to reflect on this. As you are, you're already sentenced to be executed, simply that you don't know how many days you've got left. It might even be less than seven. Do you have a sense of this? You're already sentenced to death. They're going to have to execute you, but if you don't know, you don't feel anything. But if you were to break the law and the authorities were to catch you and execute you in seven days—oh, you'd really suffer.

This is mindfulness of death. Death is going to execute you in just a day or two. When you're not aware of this, you relax. You have to think in this way so that you give rise to the conviction needed to practice the Dhamma. That's why the Buddha has you practice mindfulness of death at all times. Normally, when you think of death, it scares you, so you don't want to think about it. And when that's the case, how can you *not* be stupid? You've already fallen into that condition, but you have no sense of yourself. So you relax. But if you come to your senses and contemplate mindfulness of death at all times, you'll hurry up and make the effort to escape from danger. How can you just sit there? If you were to break the law and in seven days they were planning to execute you, could you simply take it easy? You'd have to hurry up and find a way out.

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