LEAVING IT ALL BEHIND

Bhikkhunī Ānandabodhī & Bhikkhunī Santacittā

Published for free distribution by:
ĀLOKA VIHĀRA PUBLICATIONS

Available for download at www.alokavihara.org

2019

Leaving It All Behind

Dhamma Talks from the Nuns
at Āloka Vihāra Forest Monastery

Bhikkhunī Ānandabodhī and Bhikkhunī Santacittā

"Whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon,
that becomes the inclination of the mind."

Dvedhāvitakka Sutta

Dedicated to

all Saranaloka Board members—
past, present, and future,
with so much gratitude for your vision,
courage, and hard work throughout
this unfolding adventure.

Acknowledgments

❧ Thank you to Jill Boone for having the idea for this book and getting it started, to Emily Carpenter for bringing all of the threads together, to Meredith James for designing the cover and interior, to Matty Weingast for editing and for use of the poems, to Leslie Reed for writing the Foreword, to Shannon Anderson, Ashley Farnan, and Linda Furrow for proofreading, to Linda Jansen, Jane McEwan-Hewer, Quilley Powers, Christine Story, and Maria Torres for transcribing, and to Saranaloka Foundation for all their support.

Thank you to all the donors for making
this book freely available.

Table of Contents

Foreword

Leslie Reed

I AM HONORED to introduce the writings of Ayya Ānandabodhī and Ayya Santacittā, contemporary female voices of ancient Buddhist wisdom. Their journey is an inspiration, embodying courage and deep commitment amidst great uncertainty.

From 1992 to 2009, Ayya Ānandabodhī and Ayya Santacittā trained at Amaravatī and Chithurst Buddhist Monasteries in England. These communities were founded by Venerable Ajahn Sumedho, a disciple of Venerable Ajahn Chah, a master in the Thai Forest Tradition. In England, Ayya Ānandabodhī and Ayya Santacittā undertook Sīladhāra Training—this system was developed for nuns as an alternative to full Bhikkhunī ordination, which had not been available in the Theravāda tradition for nearly one thousand years.

In 2005, a group of lay practitioners in the United States began a non-profit stewardship organization, the Saranaloka Foundation. The aim of this foundation was to invite nuns to visit, teach and establish a training monastery for women. In 2009, Ayya Santacittā and Ayya Ānandabodhī responded to Saranaloka's invitation to come to the U.S., with this vision in mind. Over time, Ayya Santacittā and Ayya Ānandabodhī realized that, to fulfill their intention of developing a training monastery for women on the American West Coast, they would need to be fully ordained. In April 2011, both women took leave of the Ajahn Chah lineage and the Sīladhāra Order in order to pursue full Bhikkhunī ordination. This bold step meant poten-

tially losing everything—leaving it all behind. Their willingness to honor their lineage, while clearly seeing its limitations for women, contributed to the long overdue re-emergence of female voices in the Buddha's teaching.

This book is a testament to this re-emergence. In these writings, both women articulate the power of letting go. Ayya Ānandabodhī writes, "We all have to give everything up. So why not start now?" And, in Ayya Santacittā's words, "We need to bow down and give ourselves to the Path if we really want to be free."

This book celebrates the tenth anniversary of Ayya Ānandabodhī's and Ayya Santacittā's bow to the Path of Awakening. After taking leave of their monastic community of nearly two decades, they moved to the U.S. with open hearts and minds, facing the uncertain task of forging a path for monastic women. They lived and taught in San Francisco for four and a half years, and then the collective vision of creating forest space for women to train in a rural setting was realized. In 2014, using generous contributions, Saranaloka purchased property for Āloka Vihāra Forest Monastery in the Sierra Foothills of California. As a board member and neighbor, I have the deep satisfaction of witnessing the monastery's warm welcome to monastic women and to people of all genders to serve, visit and participate in daily monastic life, supporting awakening together. Āloka Vihāra's mission is: "A training monastery of forest nuns living the teachings of the Buddha and of the Earth, for the benefit of all beings."

Monastic community and lay community are interdependent, supporting one another. Monastics practice simplicity, renunciation, close connection to nature, and service. They generously offer Dhamma teachings and retreats to the public, while donations to Saranaloka sustain and grow the monastery. In this spirit of mutual support, may these writings serve as inspiration and encouragement to follow your path of awakening.

Echoing the words of the Ayye,

May your heart be radiant and warm.
May you and your body be kind friends.
May you live like a prayer flag -
grounded yet flexible, light yet resilient.

~ Leslie Reed

The Teachers

❧ **BHIKKUNĪ ĀNANDABODHĪ** was born and raised in Wales, where she first encountered the Buddha's teachings at the age of fourteen. This ignited a deep faith in the Buddha's Path of Awakening and a wish to understand more. In 1992, she began her monastic training at Amaravatī and Chithurst Monasteries in England, where she lived for 17 years. She moved to the United States in 2009 to help establish Āloka Vihāra, a training monastery for women.

Her practice continues to be guided by the early Buddhist scriptures and nature's pure and immediate Dhamma. In 2011, she took full Bhikkhunī Ordination, joining the growing number of women who are reclaiming this path given by the Buddha.

❧ **BHIKKUNĪ SANTACITTĀ** was born in Austria and did her graduate studies in Cultural Anthropology, focusing on dance, theatre and ritual. She also worked in avant-garde dance theatre as a performer and costume designer. In 1988 she met Ajahn Buddhadasa in southern Thailand, who sparked her interest in Buddhist monastic life. She has trained as a nun in both the East and West since 1993, primarily in the lineage of Ajahn Chah, and has practiced meditation for over 30 years. Since 2002, she has also received teachings in the lineage of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche.

Bhikkhunī Santacittā co-founded Āloka Vihāra Forest Monastery in 2009 and received Bhikkhunī Ordination in 2011. She is particularly interested in creating sanctuary close to nature and bringing wisdom traditions to the environmental movement.

Like a Prayer Flag: Working with the Eight Worldly Winds

Bhikkhunī Santacittā

THE BUDDHA TALKED about the Eight Worldly Winds: gain and loss, fame and disgrace, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. Everyone understands how they work. This isn't just a Buddhist thing. Even dogs understand this to a certain degree. In fact, if dogs didn't experience the Eight Worldly Winds, especially praise and blame, we wouldn't be able to train them. In a way, we are all trained and conditioned by these winds. When we work skillfully with them, they can teach us how to navigate our daily lives, which are all too often dominated by trying to get what we want and avoiding what we don't want.

These winds are grouped into four pairs because one never comes on its own. They always arise together. We desire praise—we fear blame. We desire gain—we fear loss. We desire to be well-liked—we fear being criticized or ignored. We desire pleasant things—we fear unpleasant things. But sadly, as soon as we do get that praise or that gain, the desire turns into fear of losing it. There is no true resting place within all of these ups and downs. These four pairs of winds are a way of speaking about how life feels when we relate to everything in terms of 'me' and 'mine.' Even when we get the things we desire, we're still stuck within the cycle of wanting, as any satisfaction can only be temporary. Getting fed up with this restless search was most likely what brought us all onto the Path in the first place.

If one wind is blowing very strongly, at some later time it will blow softly—or not at all. If one is blowing now, a different one will blow later. When we see for ourselves that it's all just weather, we can decide not to make such a big fuss. If it's rain-

ing or snowing or hot or cold, we can choose how to dress and whether or not to go outside, but we can't change the weather. If we are practicing in order to make these winds go away, we are going to be disappointed. But as our practice deepens, we'll potentially experience more and more moments that are not dominated by those winds, and there will be an increased understanding of how they actually work. When a particular wind is blowing, we'll know, "This is one of the winds. It blows this way, it blows that way." However, this understanding isn't going to stop the wind from blowing. We can get to know those winds intimately, but they are always going to be part of our lives.

This is all very individual. Something that strongly affects me might not even be noticed by someone else. In one culture, we are praised for doing a particular thing. In another culture, we get blamed for doing that very same thing. The power of conditioning is incredibly strong. Even if certain aspects of cultural values might appear arbitrary, the ways in which cultural conditioning affects perception must be taken seriously. We are taught to perceive certain events as either a gain or a loss, either pleasant or painful, either something we will be valued for or something for which we will be despised. This has huge repercussions on how we live our lives; and whatever we do, we cannot escape the impact of these winds.

They are like the seasons. Even if we're enlightened, autumn will still turn into winter, winter will still turn into spring. Some days it will rain, and some days it won't. We wouldn't want only one season. When our environment changes, we are forced to

adapt. The Buddha's teaching is a manual on how to meet this constant flow, this river of life, with an open mind and open heart. That is what practice is all about.

Whichever wind we find most difficult, that particular wind is pointing us towards something unresolved within ourselves. These painful moments can serve as a wake-up call. If we are not repeatedly challenged by these winds, we have no reason to look more closely and ask, "What's going on here? Where am I stuck? Why is this so difficult and confusing?" In this way, the Eight Worldly Winds are our precious teachers.

After cycling through the same scenario enough times, we might look back on a difficult experience, such as grief, and feel a sense of gratitude for that grief, because it forced us to grow. It's the same when we go through a period of intense fear. Working through that fear will give us faith in the process and in our own capacity for transformation. We trust more and more that everything can help the mind and heart to broaden and expand. Even the most painful experiences can be used in the service of waking up.

When the Eight Worldly Winds are blowing strongly, it's important to try to make peace with them—like calling a truce after having attempted everything else. There are four points necessary for arriving at a lasting truce: to show up, to listen, to be truthful, and to not fixate on our ideas about what success looks like. If we can respond in all these four ways, the process will take care of itself and there will be resolution.

In my own life, I can definitely say that even the biggest challenges have been very beneficial for my growth. I first came

to the practice not long after my mother's death. That great pain brought me to my knees and led me onto the Path. Aside from giving birth to me, my mother's death was the greatest gift she ever gave me. Powerful experiences like this can, of course, potentially be very overwhelming. Strong winds can cause a lot of destruction, and sometimes we need to take shelter and wait until the storm dies down a little.

Imagine going outside on a stormy day and fighting the wind. How can that possibly work? On the other hand, that same wind can turn a rotor blade for generating electricity. If it's a strong wind, the rotor blades will turn very quickly. If there's not much wind, the blades will turn slowly. Either way, energy is created and can be used for many good purposes. Or say you have a sailboat—without wind, you won't go anywhere. But no matter what direction the wind is blowing, if you adjust the sails in the right way, you can get where you want to go. There is a huge amount of energy in these winds, and that's why we don't want to block them or pretend they're not happening. We want to learn how to harness that precious energy to propel us along the path of awakening. There is no experience whatsoever that can't be used for waking up to the way things really are—impermanent, unsatisfactory and empty of a separate enduring self. That is why the Buddha said that all experiences have liberation as their essence. They all can show us the way out of suffering.

Prayer flags are another beautiful example of how we can benefit from wind power. They are said to have originated with the shamanistic Bon Tradition of ancient Tibet and promote

peace, compassion, strength, and wisdom. When the wind blows, whatever is written on the prayer flag will be sent throughout the whole universe. No matter which way the wind is blowing, as long as it moves the flag, a prayer will be sent out. Mingyur Rinpoche said in his book, *The Aim of Attention*, "Awareness is the basis, or what you might call the 'support', of the mind. It is steady and unchanging, like the pole to which the flag of ordinary consciousness is attached."

A flag doesn't resist the wind, but it is fixed to a pole so that it won't be carried off. When the wind blows, the flag flutters up and down, back and forth. Flags aren't made of wood or metal; that wouldn't work. They're made of cloth so that they can move with the wind. If we want our practice to succeed, we need to cultivate the qualities of a prayer flag—grounded yet flexible, light yet resilient. Gradually, we learn to free ourselves from the rigidity of always needing things to be a particular way. Gradually, we learn to see that the peace we are looking for comes through letting go, rather than an anxious attempt to control.

Whenever our internal winds are blowing, we can bring the image of a prayer flag to mind and let go into the wind. When the energy gets too high, we feel for the pole of awareness and ground ourselves. We can become one with the rhythm of the wind and move with it. In this way, we are allowing all experiences to teach us, so that wisdom and compassion can flourish for the benefit of all, including ourselves.

We all have pretty clear ideas of what we do and do not want to happen in our lives. The roots of those preferences go very, very deep. But over time, I've learned that the intention to

develop wisdom and compassion is much more satisfying than any of those preferences. Whatever our central motivation is—whatever this path means to us—that's what we need to write on our prayer flag. Then, regardless of our circumstances, we can continue to wake up every day, ground ourselves in our deepest aspiration, and keep sending that aspiration out into the universe for the benefit of all beings.

There is the wind. There is the pole. And there is the flag we call body and mind, with our foremost intention written across the fabric of our lives—all the ways we think, speak, and act. That is the Path, and we just need to keep going.

Person as Process

Bhikkhunī Ānandabodhī

BACK IN CHITHURST, years ago, I was living with a small group of nuns at Āloka Cottage down by the river near the beautiful forest of Hammer Wood. We were just five or six nuns living and practicing together, working hard and giving ourselves to the Path. A short walk up the hill was the monks' monastery. They were a larger community, and we would join them for meals and evening meditation. One day, a monk named Bhante Dhammavaro came to stay. He was a Cambodian monk who was at the time 106 years old. He had come to visit the monastery and share his wisdom, and also to enjoy the sense of community there.

Being so old, he did everything very, very slowly. He insisted on staying upstairs in the big house with the other monks, even though they would have made a room for him downstairs. The daily meal was at 11am, and at 9:30am the monks would let him know, "Bhante, it's time to get ready for the meal." Then would begin a very slow process of him walking down the stairs with a monk on either side. He refused to be carried, although the monks would have been delighted to carry him down.

One teaching that he gave again and again in his very slow speech was,

You…are…what…you…think.
You…are…what…you…eat…and…drink.

He was pointing to how whatever we take into our minds and whatever we do with our thoughts influences who we are. And how the food and drink that we take into our bodies literally

becomes our body. It was a very simple teaching, but profound.

Another great Cambodian monk, Venerable Mahā Ghosananda, heard that Bhante Dhammavaro was staying at Chithurst and came to pay his respects. Ven. Mahā Ghosananda was known as the Gandhi of Cambodia. He was highly respected for his peace work, as well as for his deep insight. He constantly radiated a bright and joyful presence. Ven. Mahā Ghosananda listened to Bhante Dhammavaro's teaching and then expounded on it for the community.

As well as the more obvious aspect of food and drink becoming part of our bodies, Ven. Mahā Ghosananda spoke about how all of our senses, including mind, are 'eating' sense experience all the time. What we consume is who we become.

He would say,

You are the world,
and you eat the world.

When you know this,
you know all the dhammas
of the Buddha.

I still contemplate this teaching.

If I feed thoughts of anger and ill-will, I become an angry person. If I feed the impulse of greed, that energy starts to take over and I become a greedy person. When I feed my intellect, I become knowledgeable. When I feed my heart with generosity, I become a conduit for generosity, and that becomes a source

of joy. As we train and cultivate the mind in what is wholesome, it changes who we are and how we experience the world.

We can imagine that we are limited by where we are born, what family we are born into, our social status, how we look—that these things determine who we are. Of course, they will have a big influence on our lives. But it's what we do with our minds, our bodies, our speech—how we live in the world—that both influences the world around us and shapes who we are. Our six senses are eating the world all the time. So, what are we consuming? What are we becoming?

In the early years of practice, we might want to get rid of our sense of self. We might have a difficult history that we want to get away from, and so the teaching on not-self can feel like an escape from that. But the Buddha's teaching on *anattā* is pointing to understanding person as process. It's not that we will ever get away from our history—that is part of us. We can't change our past, but we can change the direction our life takes. Even though we may feel stuck at times, really we are never stuck. It's only our thinking that keeps us stuck.

I like to remember the Buddha's teaching, where he likens our situation to standing on a dangerous shore with a great body of water between us and a distant island—a place of safety and refuge. He urges us to look around and find scraps of wood and bits of vine, tie them together to make a raft, and then paddle with hands and feet to the further shore.

We sometimes imagine that conditions need to be perfect in order to get across or that it should be a relatively easy ride. But the Buddha is pointing to just gathering up what we can

find, tying it all together, and setting off in the right direction. With that greater intention in mind, and by putting in persistent effort, we can navigate the inevitable currents of desire and aversion that will try to pull us off course. They may come as waves or great storms, or they may be quiet undercurrents that we barely even notice until we find ourselves in treacherous or shallow waters.

Reading the suttas or books by great beings, we may imagine an ideal that feels so far from our internal experience that we start to think the Path is for others, not for us. We might feel that the raw materials we have aren't good enough. But, of course, the Path must be for everyone. It's the attitude and intention that we bring to our experience that changes our life and opens up the Path. As we keep going, the journey itself changes us.

When I first started to meditate, I didn't feel like I had what it takes. I was overwhelmed by old habits of negativity. So, I began keeping a journal. On one side of the page, I would write all the things I had done or said wrong that day, and the things about me that I felt were wrong. On the other side, I would write down the things that I had done well and the things that I saw that were good about me. On the 'wrong' side, I could get a good, long list going every day. On the 'good' side, I might squeeze out one or two things—three on a good day. I began making a special effort to try to notice what was good, what I did well. I also started doing things to make my 'good' list a little longer.

As I kept going, the 'wrong' list started to get shorter, and the 'good' list kept getting longer — because I was spending more time doing good things and less time ruminating on what was wrong. I was also training my mind to see what was good, which before, I had completely missed. Gradually, I was changing the way I lived, and my life was becoming more joyful.

Another Uttamā

The entire Path
and all you will ever need
to walk it
you will find inside.

So the Buddha taught me.

Once I took a closer look,
all the running around
started to seem a little silly.

Things changed so quickly—
by the time I got anywhere,
I'd be someone else.

You are your mother.
You are your daughter.

One
moment
gives birth
to the
next.

What we do is who we become.

(from *The First Free Women*, Matty Weingast)

In changing what we do, we change who we are. The Buddha strongly emphasized the importance of recollecting our generosity and our virtue. It may not be something we are accustomed to, but if we don't notice the good that we're doing and appreciate it, our old, limiting patterns will take over.

We might be afraid that we'll get conceited if we allow ourselves to really feel the joy of the good that we do. But that joy is wholesome, and a support for the Path. It's a joy that arises from recollecting and appreciating what is harmless, what is generous, what is kind. It's so much easier to get self-absorbed around our negative qualities, so we need to counter that with appreciating the good.

So how do we navigate these waters? First, we can shift from chasing short-term pleasures and comforts to aligning ourselves with a greater joy. We can ask: "Is this wholesome? Is this beneficial? Will this lead to my welfare, to the welfare of others, or to both?" If we find that those questions bring us a "No," then we need to change what we are doing and find a way that will better serve our Path.

It's not that we're trying to make ourselves into a perfect person—there is no such thing—but we are changing the way we meet our experience and that changes everything. When we expand beyond our little stories of good and bad, right and wrong, the Path is right there.

As the Buddha said in the *Dvedhāvitakka Sutta*, "Whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of the mind."

It's not that things will always feel good—that's impossible—but as we practice, little by little, our old tendencies start to shift, and new ways of responding get stronger. Guided by our own wisdom and a wish for freedom, things start to open up. We feel the joy of being aligned with the Path, and we can direct our internal compass to this joy as we navigate our way through the journey of life.

Inevitably we'll find ourselves off course from time to time. Recognizing that we've lost our way gives us an opportunity to realign with our greater intention. And this can be a source of joy. So, we have to get clear about our greater intention and where we want to go.

Keeping our greater intention in mind, we gather around us whatever supports we can find, and 'make effort with hands and feet'. As we keep going, we'll find that we're getting stronger and may even discover a faith and resilience we didn't know we had. We can never know how our journey is going to unfold, whether it will be arduous or easy, or how long it's going to last. All that matters is to make a start on the journey, and to keep going.

Working with a Shrine: Using Symbols as a Support for Practice

Bhikkhunī Santacittā

AS OUR PRACTICE UNFOLDS, there are definitely going to be challenging times. Unconscious material is becoming conscious, and we are gradually opening up to a larger mind and a larger world. Old strategies break apart and fall away, and new qualities emerge and go through various stages of growing pains. If we are truly committed to transforming old, challenging patterns, we will need support. When the going gets tough, we tend to forget where we are and what we are trying to do. Especially then, the Three Refuges are a powerful foundation for staying on track. At the same time, we can also use our immediate surroundings as a support. We can create a sacred space to empower our life and practice—to give us a sense of orientation and grounding when we are lost and confused.

All the qualities that we are trying to cultivate already exist in seed form in our hearts and minds. We can connect with these qualities and begin to nurture and train them through the skillful use of symbols—a visual display of particular images that mirror our inner processes. Jung said, "The psychological mechanism for the transformation of energy is the symbol." This is exactly what we are aiming for in order to better serve our journey on the path to freedom.

A symbol can be used as both an anchor and a means to go deeper. A teddy bear is only some cloth and stuffing, but it represents much more than that to a child. It offers a sense of safety and support, and it helps the child to feel less alone and afraid. Even after children grow up, they might remain attached to teddy bears or blankets or such things. Just because we grow up doesn't mean we no longer need this kind of comfort-

ing when we feel afraid or lonely or sad. We all need symbols in one way or another. It's not something we grow out of, but we can become more proficient in using them consciously. If we think that symbols are only crutches for the weak, we are not being really honest with ourselves, or perhaps we are living a rather safe life that doesn't push us to our limits. When we're at the edge of change, that's when we need the support of symbols the most.

At Āloka Vihāra, I have turned my entire room into a shrine. All the objects and images there hold and express specific qualities that are in the process of being born or cultivated. I use my altar in a tangible way to help me integrate new insights more deeply and securely. This is an ancient method of symbolically 'fixing the energy' in order to make sure that it won't revert back to old patterns. From time to time, internal changes will call out to be portrayed in new and more relevant ways.

I usually work with my shrine during retreat or on our monastery's weekly quiet day, so I'll have all the time that is necessary. I never know what I'm going to do before I start. After sitting there for a while, I'll eventually find myself getting up and moving an object from one side of the altar to the other or taking an object off or putting a new object on. I'll continue to move things around for as long as it takes and won't stop until it feels right. Every now and then, I take some photos of my altar after rearranging it. When I look through these photos, I can make out different phases of my practice, and recognize the overarching themes that have been closest to my heart over the years.

I have been living as a Theravāda nun for quite a long time, but I also work with some Vajrayana practices. I don't tend to show this side of myself to the world very much, but visual expressions of these practices do have their place on my shrine. All kinds of objects have gone onto my shrine, moved around my shrine, and come off my shrine. It's a fluid space, constantly changing. There are objects I find in nature, beautiful things given by friends, or ritual implements from other cultures. They each have their own story to tell and hold a certain energy that resonates with whatever is happening in my practice.

When the presence of a particular item ceases to feel relevant, I'll take it down and put it aside. After a while, I might feel that it wants to go back on the altar, but instead of returning it to the center, it might go off to one side. Somehow the object needed to come off before it could go back and find its appropriate new place. This is a very intuitive process, similar to writing a poem or painting a picture—an inner expression that flows out into a particular manifestation—until it changes again.

Sometimes I combine the rearranging of my shrine with simple rituals such as burning herbs and incense or taking some of the items down to the creek for a cleansing bath in the water. Working with an altar is like any other creative undertaking. You have to keep going until it's done. Even if the outcome doesn't look like much, I know for myself when it's complete—a little world of its own, even if no one else ever sees it. There are times when nothing at all happens on my shrine for many weeks. Dust begins to settle, and I might start feeling a little

anxious for a shift. That's just a dry phase, and sooner or later a new wave of creative energy always arises, bringing along its new expressions of whatever is coming next.

We all keep parts of ourselves hidden from the world. If we make space for those hidden parts, they won't have to be ignored or cast aside just because they don't seem to fit in with our external lives. If these parts have a landing place somewhere, we can preserve their energy without having to bring them into the outer world before we're ready. An altar can be a sort of staging area, a space for rehearsal. Certain qualities can be held there until it's the right time to incorporate them into the person we show to the world—or they can remain private. There's no right or wrong to any of this. It's just movement and change.

There are several different ways of learning and integrating new information. Intellect alone doesn't cover the whole territory. With the help of a shrine, we can also utilize the visual and kinesthetic senses. Jung said, "Often the hands will solve a mystery that the intellect has struggled with in vain." That's also very much my own experience. When we are able to touch and see a new concept or idea right there in front of us, we can access a more intimate connection with what is happening inside and integrate it with more ease. This leads to a deeper sense of confidence in our own innate capacity to respond authentically from where we are on the Path. Why would anyone not want to tap into such a vast reservoir of creativity and support?

We all know that what we present to the world is a very small part of who we really are. Still, most of the time we go around thinking that we see others as they actually are. We know that they don't see us, but we assume that, for the most part, we see them. When I see my shrine, I'm reminded of all the parts of myself that others don't see. This naturally expands to an understanding that there must be many parts of others that I don't see. When I remember that what I perceive is never the whole picture, it becomes easier to keep an open heart and mind.

Many of the objects that make their way onto my altar represent unconscious material that I can't even put into words and that I don't fully understand. Once these new ideas are on display, the internal processes have more support in unfolding. Maintaining a shrine can serve a similar function as a to-do list. It frees me from having to hold everything in my mind, because when I see it on the altar, I'll remember.

The word 'symbol' comes from ancient Greek and means something like 'putting things together.' It's the connecting of an internal idea, quality, or feeling with a physical representation or sound. When we see cave paintings or other powerful pieces of art, we often experience a sense of awe. We feel a connection with the people who painted and sculpted them, and we resonate with their work on a level far deeper than the thinking mind. Those paintings and sculptures speak to us, even after thousands of years have gone by. Seeing how the same basic themes recur at different times in different cultures

gives me a feeling of belonging and support. I'm never alone when something new inside is struggling for expression. I'm part of a stream of spiritual seekers dating back to the distant past.

In a certain sense, I am also wearing my shrine. The robes and shaved head are symbols that I take wherever I go. When I'm at the airport or someplace like that, it's truly amazing to see how people are affected by the robes. Before I became a nun, I worked with an avant-garde dance theatre, so I know very well how a particular style of dress can change anyone into an archetype—a representation that can affect people on a profound level.

Becoming a monastic means—among many other things—choosing to transform oneself into a symbol. We give up our old names and how we used to dress in order to embody and integrate an ancient form of practice. By doing so, we become living reminders that this world, which we all too often experience as mundane and ordinary, is actually sacred. To a large extent, we have lost this sense of the sacred, but in fact, it is only a thin veil that divides us from what we so deeply long for—a reassurance that we have never been and can never be separated from this great mystery we call life.

That is the purpose and true potential of symbols—to show us our own true potential—to keep pointing us in the right direction and to provide the inspiration and energy needed to fully give ourselves to the Path.

This Body, Our Teacher

Bhikkhunī Ānandabodhī

THE BUDDHA SAID that everything we need to awaken is right here in this fathom-long body, but most people I know have a lot of difficulty being in their body. That presents a bit of a problem. If the main teaching is here in the body, and we can't be with our body, how do we access that teaching? How can we start developing a relationship with our body that is kind, friendly, and curious, so that we can learn from it?

I've learned a lot from my body—how it changes, gradually ages—how it goes through its natural cycles—how it gets sick and heals again. This body knows that it comes from the earth and will return to the earth, and there's a peacefulness in that.

I remember when I was a little girl, standing with my grandmother as we both looked into the dressing table mirror. I remember her saying how the whites of my eyes had a bluish color that people have when they're young, and how the whites of her eyes had turned yellowish. I could feel her disappointment at the loss of the bloom of her youth. To me, it didn't matter whether the whites of my eyes were blue or yellow, but I could hear that, for her, something precious had been lost. I was maybe six or seven, and it was the first time I can remember clearly recognizing that the body gets old, whether we like it or not. My grandmother didn't want to get old, but it happened anyway. The body follows the laws of nature.

When we think that our body should follow our wishes, we're setting ourselves up for *dukkha*. We don't choose the kind of body we get, and while we can make a few changes through what we eat, how we exercise, and how we take care of our body, basically, it is what it is. If we expect our body always

to be healthy and strong, to stay vibrant and to live forever, we create suffering right there. When we're aligned with the natural process of things, there's peace.

In our youth, as our body is growing and changing, the sense of identity grows particularly strong. As time goes by, we get to watch the aging process. The tone of the skin changes. At some point, our hair starts to go gray, things start to wrinkle and sag. Things that we once relied on—a good digestive system, clear eyesight, a sharp mind—no longer work in the same way.

The body is always giving a teaching of impermanence and not-self. If we can accept the changing nature of this body, we no longer have to fight with that truth. Then we can appreciate it as a teacher.

For a long time, it wasn't possible for me to have that kind of relationship with my body. When I started going on retreats in my early twenties, I'd find myself getting really angry with whoever was teaching yoga. I didn't consider myself a particularly angry person, but the yoga teacher always made me very angry. Through the stretching exercises, the anger that was locked away in my body started to wake up. At some point, I finally put it together—it wasn't the fault of the yoga teacher.

I remember a woman telling me that it was hard for her to come into her body. As we spoke, I noticed that she was sitting in a way that was collapsed just below the ribs and that her shoulders were hunched forward. All her energy was in her head, thinking about how she couldn't be in her body. I invited her to lie down on the floor and breathe deeply into her belly. I encouraged her to let her chest and shoulders open, so that her

body could receive the whole of the breath. "Okay," I said. "Can you breathe down into your chest? Can you breathe down into your solar plexus? Can you breathe down into your belly?"

Her breath was starting to go into places that normally were closed down. Whereas before, her breath had been shallow and mainly confined to her throat and upper chest, now it was filling out her whole body down into her belly. It was quite a revelation for her. Previously, her mind had been trying to figure out how to be embodied. But, actually, she needed the breath to bring that sense of embodiment, not the thinking mind.

We can retrain our body to relax and come into its fullness, then bring that fullness into our formal sitting practice. If you can breathe down into your chest and belly just a few times and let the breath stretch you, there's already more awareness in the body. The farther down the breath goes, the less of a boundary there will be between the head and the body. There will gradually be a shift from the head getting all the attention to your attention being more evenly shared throughout the body.

I like to begin my formal meditation practice by bringing attention to the weight of my body on the cushion. That grounds me in the present. Then I bring my attention from the base of the spine up through the body, feeling each part and recognizing if there's any tightness or holding, with an invitation for any tightness to release. Next, I shift my attention to notice the space above and around my body. If there's both groundedness and openness, the body can relax and fully occupy its own space.

The other day, I was speaking to a woman relatively new to practice. She was telling me that, during vacation time, she could be quite present, but while at work, she would get caught up in her thoughts and feel very stuck. So I began by saying, "Okay. Let's find little ways to bring attention into your body while you're at work."

First, we just stood there together for a while, and I asked her, "What is it like to stand? Can you feel your feet? Because the feet are as far away as you can get from your head. So, if you can bring awareness into your feet, your body gets a chance to have some attention, too."

Quite quickly she said, "Yes, I can feel my feet."

Then I asked, "Can you feel your legs and your body rising up from the ground? Can you imagine roots reaching down from the soles of your feet, so that you're truly connected with the earth while you're standing here?"

She totally got it. "Now that you've got the sense of embodiment," I said, "let's walk a little."

We were here at the monastery, and we just walked in circles around the library for a while. It's not a very big space, but there was enough room for that. As we walked, I asked her, "Can you feel your feet? Can you feel how it feels to walk?"

And she said, "I can feel my big toe. I can feel my little toe!"

There was so much joy for her just in having that simple presence and connection with her body.

Being in the body doesn't have to be a struggle. It can be easeful and pleasant. But somehow, the mind wants to keep pushing and pulling and keeping all the attention for itself. Then

it starts to drive itself crazy and look for ways to manage all the thinking. It often does this by thinking even more. What we really need to do is to come down into our body. Can you feel your feet on the ground? Can you feel the touch of your clothes on your skin? It's the simple things that bring us back into connection.

The mind can have a strong tendency to want to leave the body behind and not have to deal with it. The body is earthy and heavy. It needs to be fed and washed and maintained. The mind can think it's more refined and beautiful, and that it would be much better off without the cumbersome body. But this body is our teacher. It teaches us the Dhamma. The mind will go on thinking about the past and thinking about the future, but the body is always here in the present.

Sometimes I guide people through gratitude body scans. It's usually best to do this while standing or lying down. We'll go up and down throughout the body, feeling gratitude for the work that each part does.

I once saw a chart of the body. Next to each anatomical part it said, "Smile into the liver. Smile into the heart. Smile into the kidneys." Just bringing a gentle inner smile to those places can help to cultivate a sense of well-being and appreciation for the work each does. Whenever you feel a certain part of the body — your feet, your hands, your stomach — you can gently smile into it.

When we befriend our body, we stop trying to control it all the time. The body is a support for the Path, but it's not who and what we are. All the fears and desires that we have around

our looks and health and age is just getting involved in business that isn't really ours. At the end of life, we have to let our body return to the earth. But we don't have to wait until then to see things as they truly are. The fact is that we are always letting go—each breath, each visit to the bathroom, each time we cut our nails or our hair.

When we really know this body as it is, it doesn't feel frightening anymore to let go into the natural cycle of things. In truth, this is happening anyway. But the mind gets identified and entangled and tries to hold on to what is changing. When we understand that this body we take so personally is just a natural process, it brings a sense of lightness and ease. Then things become more simple. As Ajahn Chah said, "Our lives are like the breath, like the growing and falling leaves. When we really understand this, we can sweep the leaves every day and have great happiness in our lives in this ever-changing world."

Eco vs. Ego:
The Planet and Us

Bhikkhunī Santacittā

AS MONASTICS, we are taught to contemplate old age, sickness, and death every day. Reflecting on these truths gives our practice a sense of urgency, as we come to understand that we are all together in this—that nobody is exempt from that fate. We need to remind ourselves regularly that, while we don't know when we are going to die, it is certain that we will die—that death is inevitable. For many people, death ideally would never happen. But dying isn't a defeat or the result of a mistake. If we can learn to hold our whole life within the big picture of old age, sickness, and death, everything cools down, and we develop a sense of perspective from which to make better choices.

When we look more closely, it becomes apparent that it can't be any other way. Death is the opposite of birth, not the opposite of life. There is no birth without death, and there is no death without birth. Our bodies arise out of the planet. We grow, we age, we die, and we return back to the planet again—one chapter closes, another opens. Through our meditation practice, we come to see ourselves as waves rising and falling on the surface of a great ocean. We see that death isn't really the end, and birth wasn't really the beginning, either.

If a wave rises out of the water, it must eventually fall back into the water, and then other waves will follow. Through the practice of *maraṇasati* (contemplation of death), we come to realize that we are just one tiny process within a vast universe of processes, all intermingling and unfolding, expanding and contracting—a great sea. This practice not only prepares us for our own inevitable death, it also helps us to truly live.

The practice of *maraṇasati* consists of three primary reflections:

Death is inevitable.
We cannot know when, where, and how we will die.
When death comes, we will have to let go of everything.

These contemplations can be done while sitting in meditation, while walking, while lying down, or whenever we think of it. We can begin by taking a few breaths and grounding in the body. We might say to ourselves, "Every being that has ever lived has died—humans and non-humans, rich and poor, influential and powerless. I cannot be an exception. I cannot possibly escape this fate." We often think that death lies somewhere far off in the distant future, but really our death arises with our birth. Just as a thrown ball will reach a certain height and then begin to fall back to the ground, when causes and conditions are right, this body will also return to the Earth. Every moment the ball rises, it is getting closer and closer to the time when it will begin coming back down. Just so, with every year—every hour—every minute—I am moving closer and closer to my death. This reflection works best if we come up with our own images and wording. We must make this practice our own in order to take full advantage of its potential.

Next, we bring to mind that we cannot know when, where, and how death will come. We might picture it happening when we are old and gray, but people of all ages die. We might picture death coming when we are lying in a hospital bed or at home surrounded by our loved ones, but actually beings can die anywhere. We may imagine dying someday from cancer

or another illness, but every day beings die from any number of different causes.

The final step is reflecting, "When I die, I will have to let go of everything—my family, my possessions, my accomplishments, my body, even my name. I will be separated from everyone I love and care about. I can only take with me the karmic tendencies that I have been cultivating." When we die, everything must be left behind.

Once we are familiar with all of these steps, we can use just one short phrase that represents the essence of this entire practice, something as simple as "Death is inevitable." This is the core—the central notion that needs to be understood, accepted, and fully integrated.

Many believe that thinking or speaking about death will make us depressed or afraid, keeping us from really living. But often it is the fear of death itself that is making us depressed and afraid, keeping us from really living. Once the truth of death is embraced and digested, those difficult emotions will dissolve by themselves.

Just as we don't like to think about our own death, it's also distressing to think about the death of the planet as we know it. We might avoid images or thoughts or discussions about climate change, or we might go to the other extreme and fixate upon those images and reports, and talk about them constantly. We either shut down or we panic. We are likely to relate to the death of our planet in much the same way as we relate to the death of our own body. Just as our body was born and must therefore inevitably die, so must our planet. Whether this

happens in a hundred years because of climate change or nuclear destruction, or in a billion years when our sun burns out—the death of our planet is also inevitable.

Stars are born, they live, and they die. Our sun is no different, and when it goes, the Earth will go with it. In the distant future, when the sun expands into a red giant during the throes of death, it will vaporize the Earth. But just as with our own bodies, the debris will reconstellate into new celestial bodies. Our planet is not exempt from that fate. The Earth was born from stardust more than four billion years ago, and therefore she must also die someday.

Our personal journeys are often messy and chaotic, and our collective evolutionary journey is also messy and chaotic. I hear people say, "I can't just sit here on the cushion. I need to do something. I need to stop this from happening." Yes, there is a lot to be done, but whatever we do must be based on right understanding. On the ultimate level, nothing can be gained or lost, but in our conventional lives, there is a lot to lose.

Another form of *maraṇasati* is to follow a newly-dead body through all its stages of decay. First the skin and flesh gradually fall away, leaving only a skeleton, and finally the bones slowly crumble into dust and blow away. Nothing is left after that. We can also engage in a similar reflection for the planet by visualizing a landscape ravaged by refineries, fracking wells, and open mines. We could imagine how the Earth might be 20 years from now, 50 years from now, or 100, 200, or 500 years from now. Then we can fast-forward to a billion years from now, when the sun might have turned into a red giant and our oceans

are boiling. If we keep fast-forwarding, we'll come to a time when there is nothing left of the Earth but dust.

It's important to remember that we are not engaging in this contemplation in order to arouse a sense of fear or guilt or hopelessness. Death contemplation is a tough maturing practice that we undertake in the service of waking up. Reflecting on what we humans have inflicted on the planet is also a tough maturing practice. Really taking in and integrating these truths is difficult, and it requires a lot of courage and determination to meet what is actually happening with our bodies and with the planet.

Anyone who chooses to work with these practices is likely to go through various emotional stages. It begins with denial and then usually moves through shock, terror, guilt, and hopelessness. These are just the early stages. If we get stuck in any one of these emotions, we will never experience the fruits of this practice. In order to support the journey from the early to the later stages of *maraṇasati*—both for the Earth and for the body—we need to move slowly and employ some grounding practices. Whenever we feel that this contemplation is becoming too intense, it's important to take a step back and remind ourselves that this is a very long journey. To make this path sustainable, we must be gentle with ourselves.

We can imagine roots coming out of our feet or root chakra. When we breathe in, we breathe in through those roots and draw nourishment up from the Earth. When we breathe out, we send our gratitude deep down into the planet. We feel the Earth welcoming, sustaining, and nurturing us. We can't fall off

her—she will always catch us. Finally, we experience ourselves and the Earth as inseparable. We are part of her, and she is part of us. Once we see this clearly, we won't be able to engage in certain behaviors any longer. Before I started to meditate, I would slap mosquitoes, but after years of meditation, I can no longer do this. After all, don't the mosquitoes and I come from the same place? Don't we both have the same mother?

If we fully give ourselves to this practice, there will be a transformation that affects everything we think and say and do. But we need to put ourselves on the line for this to happen, because there will definitely be discomfort. Little by little, we'll come to know for ourselves the origin of our actions. Is a particular action coming from an understanding of the inevitability of death? Or from a place of fear or guilt or confusion? Really taking in the inevitability of death doesn't lead to doing nothing. If that happens, we need to keep going, because we are still in the early stages of the contemplation.

Imagine a dear friend is dying. We know that the friend is dying, but we do our best to help, to heal, and to comfort. We don't abandon our friend, nor do we stop caring. Out of love, we do what we can, knowing that no matter what we do, our friend eventually must die. We continue to care, even though no amount of caring can save her in the end.

Like children, for a long time we have just been taking and taking. Everything seemed to revolve around us, and we thought of ourselves as the center of the universe. The only times we thought about our mother was when we were hungry, when we were tired, or whenever we wanted something. Our mother has

been very patient with us, and we have become rather spoiled. Now, Mother Earth has become sick. It's up to us either to grow up and stop thinking only of ourselves, or to die with our mother. We are all her children, and we are all in this together.

If you murder someone, you can't tell the judge, "I should not be punished—eventually that person was going to die anyway, so it doesn't matter that I killed them." Even if we are all only waves on the ocean, we still have to look out for one another and do our best not to cause harm. We all know this. As we work with *maraṇasati* and our grounding practices, we discover the Middle Path between shutting down and becoming obsessed, between freezing and panicking. Once we see for ourselves that we cannot draw a line between this thing called 'me' and the planet, a deep sense of belonging and relief will arise. With this comes an understanding of what we actually can do for our planet, for one another, and for ourselves. Then we will move into action, one step at a time, with equanimity and dedication—trying with all of our might to do what needs to be done, while at the same time knowing that *saṃsāra* ultimately cannot be fixed.

At different times in my life, I've had different teachers. Right now, the Earth is my most powerful teacher. If we are looking for a teacher, we don't have to look very far. We are standing, sitting, and lying down on our teacher. We come from our teacher, and we return to our teacher. All it takes is one moment of feeling our feet on the ground. Even right now, in whatever way comes most naturally, we can connect with the Earth. She is always right here with us.

The Dhamma is for One Who Feels

Bhikkhunī Ānandabodhī

This is an edited version of a talk given at the end of 2014 at Insight Retreat Center, Santa Cruz during our annual New Year's Retreat. Though the actual stories may be dated, sadly, the situation continues.

WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN to come to the end of a year and start a new one? Marking the end and beginning of a year is only a convention. Tomorrow will most likely be a day much like today, and life will go on. To mark the new year, we could go through the motions, do some little rituals, and carry on with our lives just as they have been. But, like any convention, if you breathe life into it, it can have meaning. This annual event is an opportunity to look back over the year and reflect on what has happened, what has changed, what matters, and what doesn't.

Being nuns, we are not always up on current affairs, but certain things have stood out for me over this year. I've lived in the United States for five years now. I no longer feel like just a person visiting from the UK. I'm part of this country, and this country is part of me. There is an integration.

Earlier this year, Ayya Santacittā went to the People's Climate March in New York City. It was the largest climate march in history. Four hundred thousand people turned out to say, "Wake up! This is something we must pay attention to! We are destroying the Earth on which we live, and we cannot carry on like this!" In many countries around the world, people took to the streets and demonstrated to let it be known, "Enough is enough! It is time to wake up now!" Even though change is slow and old habits die hard, I feel there is a gradual shift happening. If it doesn't happen, we are in serious trouble.

Another very big shift has been the pronounced 'waking up' of more white people to the depth of racism in America today. While people of color have lived with racism day-in and day-

out for generations, many white Americans have remained largely unconscious of the reality. There is racism in Britain, too, but when I first moved to San Francisco, there was a particular quality that surprised me. Just on our street, I would encounter situations that pointed to the deep, institutional nature of racism in America.

Earlier this year, the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, served as a catalyst for this to come more fully into consciousness for many people. I was following his story, and during that same time, I was shocked to learn that many African-American men have been and continue to be shot in the streets for no good reason.

There was one particular video I watched that had been recorded on someone's phone just a few days after Michael Brown's shooting. An African-American man who wanted to make a statement walked into a store, picked up two cans of Red Bull, walked out without paying for them, set the cans down on the sidewalk, and stood there. Within minutes, the police drove up and got out of the car with guns in hand. The man wasn't armed, and his hands were hanging loosely at his sides. The police shot him dead. That was shocking and terrible to witness, but what shocked me even more was the response of people on that street. I realized that they were used to this. There was a level of normality about this incident for them. They responded with shock, but not the level of shock I would have expected.

This disregard for human life because of skin color has been embedded in the psyche of this country for a very long

time. With the advent of slavery in the United States, a strong and intentional division was created based on skin color. Laws were made to deny the humanity of African-American people. Eventually, through the Civil War and, later, the Civil Rights Movement, new laws were established. On a superficial level, things changed for the better. But something deep in the psyche didn't change, and it is still playing itself out today. There's an unconscious devaluing of lives based only on the color of one's skin. This is perpetuated by our not noticing, not looking, not paying attention—and it is deeply harmful.

We may not feel that we personally are racist, but all of us are part of this because we are part of this country. One can think, "Well, I'm not racist, so this doesn't really apply to me." But it does. As long as we are not really conscious, and as long as we can't take in the painful reality of this situation, then we are part of keeping it in place.

If we know that people are being killed because of the color of their skin, what more motivation do we need? If we know that our brothers and sisters are getting shot in the street for no good reason, isn't that motivation enough? If they were our brother or sister, if they were our son or daughter, we wouldn't have to ask why we should care. And the fact is that they are our brothers, they are our sons, they are our daughters, they are our sisters. So why are we staying silent about it? Why are we not getting engaged in this?

After Michael Brown's shooting, people came out onto the streets in 170 cities across the country and stopped traffic to say, "This is going on. This is happening. And it needs to change."

When I heard about these demonstrations, I was so relieved because, within this country with its beautiful ideals, that deep harm of racism continues to play itself out. For things to really change, we need to have the courage to feel this and to see it for what it is.

As nuns living in a patriarchal monastic system in the UK, we got a small taste of what it's like to be a minority and to live consciously with that day-in and day-out. Whereas the comfortable majority didn't have to feel the dissonance because it didn't feel relevant to them, this was a major part of our daily experience as nuns. Whenever the gender imbalance was brought up, it was seen as an inconvenience, or even a threat: "You're rocking the boat." "Why do you have to make trouble when everything's fine?"

In some ways, it's not even personal. A structure falls into place. Some people land in a position of privilege, and others get stuck in a subordinate position. Those in the subordinate position feel the rub and have to work extra hard to hold the dissonance, while those in the position of privilege generally have no incentive even to notice. Things are set up for their advantage. "It feels good — why change?"

When the imbalance is pointed out to the people who are keeping it in place, we usually don't want to hear it. We can be blind to our own position of privilege, or we can find it too painful to address. "It makes me feel guilty. It makes me feel bad. I don't know how to change it, so I'm just going to give that right back to you."

On the path of awakening, we do not leave the bits we'd rather not deal with for someone else. It doesn't work that way. We are choosing to take it all in. We are finding the courage to acknowledge that sometimes our actions—even unintentionally, through ignoring—are causing harm to others. If we are really interested in awakening, we choose to turn towards the difficult and bring it all onto the Path. This is the first noble truth—turning towards *dukkha*—really feeling it. Only once we've done that can we start to understand where it comes from and let that be an incentive to let go of the cause.

In being willing to open to this truth, we share some of the burden that those in a subordinate position have to carry. If we connect with that, it can motivate us to step out of our comfort zone and learn from people whose life experiences are different from ours. That's when we really start to change. It is easy to think that the Path is just about working on particular aspects of our personality through our formal practice. I can understand the wish to sit quietly on the cushion and let the world go by, but we are part of the world. We all have to give something up. Ultimately, we all have to give everything up. So why not start now?

The Buddha said, "The Dhamma is for one who feels, not for one who does not feel." I love that because I am a very sensitive person, so there is a lot of feeling going on. It can be pretty intense at times. It can be quite unpleasant. Certainly, much of my early years of practice were motivated by the wish to get away from the intensity of feeling, to rise above and not have to

feel, not have to be a sensitive being. But, actually, the Dhamma is for one who feels, not for one who does not feel.

We can draw on the support of the *brahma vihāras,* the four heart qualities, to strengthen our sense of well-being so that we can begin to transform our own hearts and embrace those difficult feelings. These qualities can be a support as we open to the challenge of being born into this world—of being part of this human race at this time in history, here. We can draw on these reservoirs of *mettā, karuṇā, muditā,* and *upekkhā* to open and meet the reality of this troubled world so that we can be a source of safety and kindness, as much as we are able. We may not manage it every time, but we can work on it.

We have this opportunity to set our intentions for the coming year and have them witnessed by others. It is an opportunity to value the power of our intentions and actions in the world. What we do in our lives ripples out and affects others. From a cosmic perspective, we're just little specks in the universe, but at the same time, what we do matters. Both are true.

So, value the way that you use your life. Let your intentions gradually transform the parts that are closed down, the parts that are harmful to yourself or to others, the parts that are afraid or withdrawn. We don't have to wait until there is no fear or trepidation. We can feel the fear and act anyway. Once we recognize the true potential of the Path, we no longer judge the value of our actions by distant goals. We see the ways we can bring change to the world right here and now.

There in the Middleness: Cultivating Equanimity & Perseverance

Bhikkhunī Santacittā

TONIGHT, I would like to talk about staying in the middle of the Middle Way. Let us start with a poem from a contemporary rendering of the *Therīgāthā,* which feels very fitting for what I would like to explore. Here, Bhikkhunī Vijayā is speaking with an elder nun about difficulties in her practice.

Vijayā ~ Victor

When everyone else was meditating,
I'd be outside circling the hall.

Finally I went to confess.
I'm hopeless, I said.

The elder nun smiled.

Just keep going.
Nothing stays in orbit forever.
If this circling is all you have,
why not make this circling your home?

I did as she told me,
and went on circling the hall.

If you find yourself partly in
and partly out—
if you find yourself drawn to this Path
and also drawing away—
I can assure you,
you're in good company.

Just keep going.

Sometimes the most direct path isn't a straight line.

(from *The First Free Women*, Matty Weingast)

This is exactly my experience. "Sometimes the most direct path isn't a straight line." It's so true! That's what the elder nun is trying to show Vijayā—how to keep staying with the practice without running away or shutting down. Allowing those feelings of desperation and panic to come up and be there, without judging, is essential for transformation to occur.

We need to stay with the simplicity of our direct experience, just as Vijayā does when she accepts her situation for what it is and chooses to continue circling the hall. Nothing special, nothing heroic, just that circling of the hall. It might be hard to believe, but there is a lot of power in such simplicity. We need to bow down and give ourselves to the Path if we really want to be free.

What is the secret behind such dedication and fearlessness? What did the elder nun model to Vijayā with a smile and a few kind words? She offered her reassurance that it is okay to despair and that, ultimately, there is no real problem here. All these difficult emotions are part of the practice, and by staying with them, our minds become increasingly sensitized and pliable. Those difficult emotions are not in the way—they *are* the way! Those trials and tribulations are preparing our mind for insight and getting it ready to let go. True equanimity isn't a kind of stoic indifference, it's much more alive than that.

When I initially met my first teacher, Ajahn Buddhadasa, I was struck by the palpable equanimity he exuded by just sitting there. I was in my late twenties then and didn't have much equanimity, but felt immediately affected by his presence. This old monk was very special in his utter simplicity, and I viscerally

understood that I had, at last, found what I had been looking for in all the wrong places. He effortlessly communicated a deep sense of confidence—an unshakability of the heart in the midst of life's challenges. Even today, over thirty years later, I can still remember that first sight of Ajahn Buddhadasa. It remains a priceless reassurance for me—evidence that the work can be done, and has already been done, by those who are and have been walking the Path before us.

Spending time with people who embody the very qualities we would like to develop in ourselves has the potential to enliven our practice. That's one reason why Sangha is considered the Third Refuge. Realized beings have the power to mirror back to us our own innate potential for growth and freedom. They give us a taste of what practice might look like when it has been developed to maturity. This is communication from heart to heart—a deep resonance from within that speaks volumes without words. That's why we go to see these teachers and want to be in their presence. Directly participating in their realization, even for just a few moments, can feel like a breath of fresh air. This is a transmission of energy, most often through a gaze or a touch, which has the potential to ripen our own innate capacity for awakening.

For Vijayā, it was a smile and a few words from the elder nun. In my case, I would meet Ajahn Buddhadasa on his daily morning walks while I was helping an old nun to collect blossoms at the foot of a certain medicinal tree. He would stop and gaze at me for what felt like a very long time, even though it was probably less than half a minute. This was the beginning of my

conscious spiritual journey. Looking back, I feel very blessed to have had such an amazing teacher and role model supporting my entry onto the Path.

There are two different words for equanimity—*upekkhā* and (less well known) *tatramajjhattatā,* which means "there in the middleness." One classic illustration of this quality is "a charioteer who looks on with equanimity at the thoroughbreds progressing evenly along the roadway." Like Kwan Yin riding the dragon, we try to remain steady while riding the waves of *saṃsāra*. As our practice matures, we become better at using all the myriad challenges of life to fuel our practice. If we are standing solidly on a foundation of *sīla* (ethics), there is no reason to have remorse and we can just keep moving onwards, at whatever pace the Path unfolds.

Dhamma practice is a very creative endeavor, and everybody must find their own way. Sometimes we can see only the next few inches, and sometimes there is clear vision and a strong sense of purpose. The elder nun says to Vijayā, "If this circling is all you have, why not make this circling your home?" There is always something to work with, and if we can maintain humility and staying power, the next chapter of the Path will show itself. Sometimes, the best we can do is just to be where we are, not knowing what's going to come next. This is another instruction Vijayā receives in the poem: "Just keep going. Nothing stays in orbit forever." Here, the elder nun speaks to Vijayā about impermanence, that nothing stays suspended in mid-air forever—look closely, it is already changing.

The suttas are like rough sketches, and we must investigate

how those teachings apply to our own situation and personal karmic predicaments. We have to feel it out as we go along. I like the saying: "If you can't get out of it, you have to get into it." Can we let life speak for itself rather than holding onto ideas of what it should look like? It takes a lot of courage, but this is how wisdom and compassion are honed—by allowing unpleasant feelings to be what they are and not giving in to fear. More often than not, we yearn for closure because we want to be done with this and move on to the next thing. Equanimity is an essential quality for staying open to life rather than habitually pre-empting what is unfolding.

In some ways, we could say that the whole path rests on the maturing of this very quality. In the Abhidhamma, *upekkhā* is considered a universal, beautiful factor of mind that is part of every wholesome mind state. It's compared to making fire with fire sticks. If we start a little bit and put the sticks down, then start a little bit again and put the sticks down again, nothing is ever accomplished. But if we apply balanced and sustained effort, sooner or later smoke will come. If we're always stopping and starting, stopping and starting, eventually we'll collapse from exhaustion.

As we all know, there are different phases on the Path. Sometimes there is distress, and sometimes there is great happiness and inspiration. The Buddha talks about the Path as a long, gradual slope followed by a sudden drop-off, like walking into the ocean. People mostly want the sudden drop-off, but we are not so inspired by the gradual slope, which at times feels like it's going on forever. We want to get there as

quickly as possible and often forget that difficult times are a crucial prerequisite for generating insight.

All three schools of Buddhism agree that letting go of attachment and fixation is the heart of the practice. They also offer comparable teachings on how to train the mind in accomplishing this. Their presentations differ in flavour and exuberance, but essentially, they are all saying exactly the same thing. There is a very well-known quote by Ajahn Chah: "The cup is already broken." We can all enjoy that cup and use it to drink from, while at the same time understanding that it's going to break one day.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche gave the following teaching, which points to that very same truth: "Hold the sadness and pain of *saṃsāra* in your heart, and at the same time the power and vision of the great eastern sun. Then the warrior can make a proper cup of tea." I must admit that I definitely prefer the power and vision of the great eastern sun. My aspiration is to be awake and fully alive, but what about holding the sadness and pain of *saṃsāra* in my heart at the same time? If we can embrace the *dukkha* of human existence—what Rinpoche called 'the tender heart of sadness'—while at the same time not drowning in it, then we will live with balance and integrity, joining heaven and earth, vision and practicality.

This is essentially what Vijayā is saying at the end of her poem, after she has put the instructions of the elder nun into practice and knows for herself: "Just keep going. Sometimes the most direct path isn't a straight line." This is so crucial to remember when we are in the middle of it all. There is no

experience whatsoever that doesn't teach us about the way things are, about the three characteristics of life—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. At the same time, we need to understand that insight into these very same three characteristics has the power to open the door to full enlightenment.

In the end, we find that questions are resolved not through getting the right answers, but by those very questions gradually falling away. All that's needed is to hang in there long enough to allow life to speak for itself. This is the necessary alchemy that changes us from the inside out. How else could we possibly arrive at a total abandoning of all false identifications and simply be with what is happening right now?

Mettā

Bhikkhunī Ānandabodhī

FOR MANY OF US, what gets us started on the Path is *dukkha*. It might come from a recognition of death or while going through a difficult time or experiencing intense craving that just isn't being fulfilled. Again and again, in one way or another, we encounter the limitations of life. The heart gets knocked around and sometimes trodden on and disappointed. It gets broken, too. It can lose trust and close down, either towards others, towards ourselves, or both.

Many people find it difficult to have *mettā* for themselves. They feel like they're unworthy or intrinsically bad or flawed. These thoughts are obstacles to awakening because the sense of self can grow very solid and strong around these negative perceptions.

The first time I really tasted *mettā*, it came as a sudden experience of unconditional love that appeared to be everywhere. I saw that I had been living from a very small sense of self, which had some good aspirations but was also shut down in many places. It became clear that my contracted sense of self was preventing the love from getting in. I was surrounded by this bountiful quality, but I didn't know how to receive it.

Then I recognized that my breath was the link between my body and the vast expanse all around me. My contracted experience was so obviously a result of wrong thinking — of not seeing things as they are. But it was difficult to shift out of it because I'd been operating from that place for such a long time. As I breathed in, the love was being breathed into my body. Very gradually, the sense of tightness and separateness began to dissolve.

That powerful experience of *mettā* happened before I started formally meditating. When I began to practice mindfulness of breathing, I saw just how strong and relentless my inner critic was. It was shocking to realize that this inner voice had been guiding my whole life, but I had never noticed it because I was always keeping myself distracted.

As I gradually got the basics of meditation down, I took a good look into my heart. I found that it was small, leathery, and contracted—that it had shut down in many ways. It was as though my heart was expecting something painful to happen at any moment. Clearly, it was in no position to generate *mettā*.

I remembered that practice of breathing in love that I'd experienced a few years before, and I began to let that same quality wash around my contracted heart. This was my main practice for a good year—breathing in *mettā* while walking down the street, on my way to work, during any little pockets of time throughout my day, as well as during formal practice, which wasn't very much back then.

Over that year, I could see that, little by little, my heart was growing softer, more open, more alive—until eventually it was full and healthy and well. It no longer seemed unreasonable for this heart to generate kindness for others. For some time after that, I used a simple phrase that I learned when I visited the monastery, "May I be well. May all beings be well." With some steady effort, I could keep that going and experience my heart continuing to transform and open.

During a long retreat, I used the system that is taught in the Visuddhimagga—sending *mettā* to benefactors, dear ones,

neutral people, and difficult people — which I found to be a really great workout. That practice strengthened and opened my heart. It also helped to transform some painful relationships that had been stuck for a long time.

I've heard people say that whenever they get to a particularly difficult person, their heart contracts. I had the same experience. Once on a retreat, I did a practice of calling to mind people in my life who brought me a sense of uplift and joy. Then I would bring in a particularly difficult person. I would always start by visualizing them quite far away. I would let them come closer—little by little, very slowly—until, at some point, my heart would suddenly contract. When it did, I would make that person stop. No closer. Then I would just spend time with my heart—giving it attention and letting it gradually open again whenever it was ready. When it became more stable and open, I would again let that person come a little closer.

It was a long retreat, and I did this practice with that particular person for a number of weeks. Eventually, I could let them come right up close. My heart would still occasionally contract, but I would just stay with it, and gradually it would open again. In the end, my heart could completely embrace them and remain open. Then there was no longer any problem.

Many of us approach *mettā* practice overestimating what our heart can do. All too often, we try to push our heart to do more than it's ready for. Whether it's having *mettā* for yourself or for someone who has harmed you, never demand that your heart open and produce *mettā*. Demanding is not an act of kindness. Better to learn to work with your heart until it gradu-

ally opens and becomes stronger and more stable. Then *mettā* will flow naturally.

Sometimes I hear people say, "How can you have *mettā* for yourself when there isn't a self?" It sounds like a conundrum, but the *mettā* isn't really for yourself. It's for your mistaken identity of self. The *mettā* softens that sense of self, opens it up, and breaks down the edges.

Quite often, people come to the Path with difficult histories. We may try to will ourselves into the practice, hoping to bypass the more painful work that needs to be done. It might work for a while, but sooner or later, we have to create the causes and conditions to meet those difficult places so that they can be released. *Mettā* practice is a powerful tool for this transformation.

These days, I like to visualize *mettā* as the gentle glow of a lamp at my heart's center that has a warmth and radiance. I use the breath to stay present with that quality of *mettā*. With each in-breath, bringing a little more brightness to the glow. With each out-breath, letting it radiate a little further. There are no demands or expectations—just a steady invitation for the quality of *mettā* to radiate.

In the suttas, the *brahma vihāras* are described as boundless and unlimited. You can let these qualities be boundless simply by not putting any boundary around them. You can let them be limitless simply by not limiting them. You don't have to try to send them out into the further reaches of the cosmos.

As for cultivating *mettā* for ourselves, since we're generating it from our own heart center, it has to radiate through us before

it reaches anything else. So, it's transforming our body and mind each moment that it's being cultivated. Sometimes it may be just a tiny glow in our heart, and that's just fine. Other times it may radiate throughout the whole of our body and far beyond, touching everyone and everything with which it comes into contact.

Some people tell me that their *mettā* practice isn't working for them, even after using the traditional phrases for years. I think the problem is that they haven't made that essential journey from the head to the heart. The intellect can't really understand *mettā*. All it can do is create concepts that are always going to be much smaller than what *mettā* actually is. *Mettā* is not a thing. It's not a thought. It's not a phrase. It's an energy field that one generates within one's being.

Sometimes I think about that old story when the powerful elephant, Nālāgiri, was riled by Devadatta and sent off towards the Buddha, who was walking through town on his daily alms round. As this maddened elephant was charging towards him, the Buddha generated a field of deep kindness and friendliness towards Nālāgiri. It is said that, as Nālāgiri entered that field of *mettā*, he began to remember the time before he was captured, when he roamed free in the forest with his mother. He remembered how hard and lonely the training had been to become a king's elephant. Nālāgiri's heart was touched, and he felt the sadness of that loss of freedom and all those years of hard work. Gradually, this great elephant slowed, came to a stop, and bowed down in front of the Buddha. The Buddha reached out, touched Nālāgiri's head, and called him, "Friend."

This is the powerful potential of *mettā* to transform the pain in our own heart and in the hearts of others.

Here is the poem of *Mittā*, an enlightened nun of the Buddha's time, that points to the liberating power of this friendship.

Mittā ~ Friend

Full of trust you left home
and soon learned to walk the Path—
making yourself a friend to everyone
and making everyone a friend.

When the whole world is your friend,
fear will find no place to call home.

And when you make the mind your friend,
you'll know what trust
really means.

Listen.

I have followed this Path of friendship to its end.
And I can say with absolute certainty—

it will lead you home.

(from *The First Free Women*, Matty Weingast)

If you don't know where to start or you can't feel anything, try putting your hand at your heart's center. Then just breathe in. Breathe into your heart. Stay with it for a while and let your heart soften and open.

You can call to mind a person or an animal that brings a smile to your heart. When you feel your heart smiling, then breathe into it and give it more and more space, more and more attention. Let it grow. Let it expand until you can really feel the quality of *mettā* in your heart. At a certain point, you can shift to just being with the quality of *mettā* itself and letting it radiate.

If your heart feels too guarded, let the breath wash around your heart. Let it be soothed by the gentle rhythm of the breath. Sometimes you just need to recognize that the mind isn't in control of all this. Find what works for you, give it some time, and keep going.

No one who has truly experienced the liberating power of *mettā* will ever think of it as a side project. It can change the course of our lives.

FOR FREE DISTRIBUTION ĀLOKA VIHĀRA PUBLICATIONS

AVAILABLE AS A FREE eBOOK AT WWW.ALOKAVIHARA.ORG