



Relief

Santussikā Bhikkhunī

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Karuna Buddhist Vihāra

Relief by Santussikā Bhikkhunī

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DEDICATION

To my mother and father
for all their love and support
and for their good examples.



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May all your offerings bring you much
happiness and peace.



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RELIEF

When I was asked to write a book to offer as a gift at the 2019 Karuna Buddhist Vihara kathina, I thought about some of the themes that have come up frequently in both our teachings at KBV and in the questions people have brought to us from their practice and life experience. The common thread is relief from dukkha, relief from suffering and stress. This is not a surprise since this is the primary purpose of the Buddha's teachings.

When we practice what the Buddha taught and we experience relief, in whatever measure it is available to us, appreciative joy and gratitude naturally arise. Our confidence in the Buddha and his teaching of the Dhamma develops and

becomes solid in our hearts. Within these pages, I hope you find some useful guidelines and inspiration for developing this confidence and putting in the causes and conditions for your own increased relief from suffering.

BECOMING HARMLESS AND TRUSTWORTHY

The heart is so joyful and clear when we live in a way that no other living being needs to be afraid of us. The five precepts that the Buddha encouraged everyone to live by provide a profound training for the mind and bring peace and harmony to our lives and our society. At the vihara, we often see how people become happier as they develop in keeping the five precepts, and this has certainly been true for me in my own life.

In general, my parents and grandparents were moral and upright, but there were some areas of confusion, particularly with killing animals. They were all farmers and there is a lot of killing in farm life. It was also common for the men to hunt

and fish. My brother would trap animals along the ditches for their fur. It was completely ordinary to swat flies and mosquitos or even drown kittens, if there were too many barn cats. In general, these actions were not done out of cruelty. They were practical matters. Animals were either pests, food, helpers with the work or producers of products, such as milk or offspring. The closest thing my family had to a pet was our German Shepard, but he “made his living” by being an excellent guard dog. The horses and mules we had were definitely for fun, our fun -- for riding and pulling buggies and carts. My elders taught me that God gave us animals for our purposes and that they do not have souls. Therefore, it is all right to use them as we wish and to kill them as it suits us.

At this point, you may be cringing. I am. It is so harsh. However, it is good to understand that this fiercely independent, self-reliant culture provides much of the foundation for the attitudes people in America still have towards guns and gun control laws. But that is another story.

The first time I lived around people who refrained from killing any living creature was in 1999 at Wat Pah Nanachat, the international monastery founded by Ajahn Chah. I stayed there for one month. I had gone there because I wanted to visit my son, who had recently ordained as a sāmanera, a novice monk. I was very interested in learning about the life of the monks; and they taught me a lot during that first month, including techniques for avoiding killing the myriad of critters living in the forest. It didn't take long before I was

breaking more habits than I was precepts, experiencing for myself what the precepts do for the mind, not to mention what they do for everyone around us. I remember reflecting that I didn't know how this mosquito, that I just gently shooed away, would live the remainder of its life. Would it be a very short life, lived in misery? Or would it go on to joyfully fulfill the true purpose of mosquito-hood? Regardless, I experienced how gentle my own heart was becoming as a result of caring for and being kind and gentle with all living beings.

So what really changed in me? First, the idea that animals exist for the use of humankind, an idea that the Buddha would identify as wrong view, dissolved. My heart opened and a new dimension of compassion took root. It became clear that behind that wrong idea, there was the belief that

we matter more and some sense that how we treat others doesn't really affect us. This, too, is wrong view according to the Buddha.

Most of this change did not come in the form of ideas. It was through the *experience of the practice* of avoiding killing, through the practice of unremitting kindness or at least an attempt at it. What came to be understood in the heart was how our experience of life, of pleasure and pain, and of awakening (or the lack of it) are intrinsically connected to our actions, which are primarily about how we treat other living beings. This is the law of karma. What we do and say and think profoundly affects us, not just in the moment when we think or speak or act, but also as those energies spread into the world and flood back to us. So when we are harsh, we

add to the harshness in the world and the harshness that we experience in our own lives, in our own hearts.

As we live from this understanding, arrogance fades and humility increases. We develop a kind of quiet confidence and have less fear. We become kinder to ourselves as well as others, and we care for and respect ourselves and others in a more balanced way. As the underlying attitude of “oh, it’s just an ant” shifts to seeing that “this is a being with consciousness, with a fear of pain and a wish to live, just like me,” we become more sensitive to the feelings of other living beings. Our empathy develops. We can take this a step or two further and become better listeners, being more interested in how others are feeling and thinking. While we don’t do any of this with the idea that people will love us

more, they do, and they can trust us. Eventually, we come to love ourselves more, which oddly enough is integral to awakening, to complete freedom from suffering. And we are miles and miles away from promoting or supporting or participating in acts of war or violence.

Of course, there is more involved here than the precept of not killing. All the precepts come into play. Over these past twenty years of practicing the Dhamma, I've been able to experience the beauty of this harmless way of life that the Buddha laid out for us. It is beautiful in all its forms: the 5 precepts of lay life, the 8 precepts of lay practitioners taking practice to a deeper level, the 10 precepts of the entrance to monastic life or the full-on taking up of the Pātimokkha rules laid down by the Buddha for his bhikkhus (227 rules) and

bhikkhunis (311 rules). All levels lead to the purification of conduct and the purification of the mind, transforming us into the gentlest and kindest people on the planet -- human beings that no living being needs to fear. What a beautiful accomplishment in a human life! One that is available to all of us, leading us to freedom and relief.

Recently, a young man we had not met before came to our vihara for our sutta study program. I asked him if he had much experience with Buddhism. He said, “No, not much, but Buddhists are kind. I like being kind, so that’s why I’m here. Buddhists are kind for no reason.” I must say, his words were a delight to my heart. I smile every time I think of him.



MY MOTHER ENCOUNTERING THE DHAMMA

Today, as I write this, it is my mother's birthday. She died a little over two years ago at the age of 90. This is a good time to reflect on her life and especially on her experience of Dhamma.

She came from a poor family of farmers, the salt of the earth. Her parents worked very hard and so did their five children. They raised vegetables for market and spent every summer day, except Sundays, working in the field. On Sundays, the children went to church and the parents stayed at home. Her father had become fed-up with what he saw as hypocrisy in the church leaders. He used to say, "If the pillars of the church

are rotten, the church is rotten.” Still, he and his wife valued religion and wanted their children to absorb its principles. This laid the groundwork for my mother’s ability to take the good and leave the rest.

She never fully accepted Christian beliefs but was intensely interested in religion and truth. Her first exposure to Dhamma came when she flew to Thailand to attend my son’s bhikkhu ordination. She stayed at Wat Pah Nanachat and completely soaked up the experience. She returned radiant and talked of little else for many months. After that, she came with me on yearly trips to Thailand, staying at whatever monastery my son was living in at the time. We also visited other monasteries and a number of great Thai Forest masters. My mother was tough. She made no complaints about sleeping on a wooden

platform in the forest under a mosquito net at Ajahn Mahaboowa's monastery, or about hiking up the rough terrain to the tea kuti at Wat Poo Jom Gom, a small branch monastery above the Mekong River. At the tea cave, she said it was the most peaceful she had ever felt.

The Dhamma sank into her deeply. She told me that this is what she had been looking for all her life. She was picking up on the meditation practice, sometimes without any direct instruction. Staying at Ajahn Dtun's monastery, she asked one day, "Is it OK to meditate just focusing on different parts of the body?" Body contemplation happened to be the primary practice there. A few days later, she told me that she had a vision. She said, "The body is nothing. I saw my body thrown into a corner, as if it were a monk's robe. There's



My mother, Agnes DeYoung, with Ajahn Gunavuddho (now David DeYoung), Ajahn Dtun, Ajahn Tejapañño and me as a lay woman at Ajahn Dtun's monastery in Thailand

nothing to it.” Over the years, she would recall this image, along with the feeling and the wisdom that came with it, and she would say, “I’ll never forget that.” True to her word, she talked about it again two and a half years ago when she got the diagnosis that told her she was dying. She seemed content and fearless.

On one occasion while staying at Wat Pah Nanachat, after meditating on her cot in the kuti, she said, “It felt like my whole body was going to rise up off the bed.” When we stayed at Ajahn Brahm’s monastery in Western Australia, the monk who built Ajahn Brahm’s cave for him invited us to see it. Ajahn Brahm was away, so we took up the invitation. The monk ushered us inside the small cave and then left, closing the door so we could experience the silence and the feeling

of the cave. When he opened the door again, my mother turned to me and asked, “Did you see anything?” “No,” I said. She told us that she saw a vision of the Buddha. He was standing in front of her. The monks asked if she saw it with her eyes open or closed. She said, “Both.” They asked, “Did he say anything to you?” She replied, “He said he would show me the way.”

Probably the most profound “miracle” in my mother’s Dhamma practice was a transformation of the heart. From the time she married my father, my mother was plagued by her sister-in-law’s mean actions and remarks. There were many, many episodes which evoked anger and frustration. My mother was generally reserved in her own responses but would think and talk about these scenes incessantly. After

my father died, my mother had less contact with her sister-in-law, but the feelings towards her were still very strong. As my mother practiced meditation, she developed her own version of metta practice. She would meditate on the people in her life with a mind of metta. She would start with her children, my brother and me, then her grandchildren and great grandchildren, her sisters, nieces, nephews, all the shirttail relations, friends, neighbors and so on. It was a very, very long list. One day she called me to talk about a dilemma she was having. One of my father's aunties had died and my mother was torn between wanting to go to the funeral to honor the lovely woman who had passed and to see so many family members, and desperately not wanting to run into her sister-in-law. She struggled with the decision and at the last

minute decided to go. The next day she told me what happened. She said she saw her sister-in-law in the distance, walked right over to her and greeted her with friendliness. To my mother's great surprise, she felt only kindness and warmth. The hateful feelings were completely gone and never again returned.

My mother was an ordinary woman with the extraordinary good fortune to meet up with the Dhamma, and she had the wisdom and fortitude to grab hold of it. I'm happy for her in a way that words cannot express. Wherever "she" is, may she continue walking this amazing path.



LIFE-CHANGING CHOICES

You may remember a small, dynamic bhikkhuni in her mid-eighties, an elder in our tradition, who spoke at the Karuna Buddhist Vihara kathina in 2018. Her name is Venerable Satima. She began her talk by saying, “B is for birth and D is for death. So what is between B and D? “C” – (this was not the tough question). Then she asked, “What does C stand for?” (This question is harder. Fortunately, you already know because of the title of this section.) “C” is for “Choices.” *Choices* are what happens between birth and death.

Many of the choices we make in a day are fairly inconsequential, like what to wear or which tea to drink, but others can radically change our lives, our character and our karma. Even

when choices seem insignificant in the moment, they add up, like a leak dripping into a bucket. Before we know it, the bucket is full.

One area that has far-reaching consequences is our choice of companions in life, particularly our partners, friends, and when possible, our bosses and coworkers. The Buddha put a lot of emphasis on friendship and said that we should associate with wise people and avoid fools. This means choosing friends who will help us keep the five precepts and support us in doing good things with our time and energy. These are people who are good role models, people we are proud to associate with, people we can trust. It means that we stop worrying about what foolish people think of us and only concern ourselves with what the wise people think. It

means choosing a partner who has integrity, someone we truly admire for their goodness. It means choosing roommates who have good values, and working for and with people of integrity.

I've seen that following the Buddha's advice of placing a high value on having wholesome companions can save us from a lifetime of misery. If we are closely associated with someone who chronically behaves foolishly, we are likely to improve our life dramatically by pulling away from them. What kinds of behaviors are meant here? In particular, this would include dishonest, reckless or harmful behaviors by body or speech, the kinds of actions that someone who understands karma would never want to do. A reliable guide is that a wise person would live by values that accord with Dhamma, regardless of

whether they are Buddhist. After all, the Dhamma is everywhere and many people who have never heard of the Buddha follow the same moral principles he taught.

When we are in a situation at home, at work or with friends, that does not meet these standards, how do we know if leaving is the right choice? The rule of thumb the Buddha gave is to check to see if our own unwholesome states are increasing and our wholesome states are decreasing. If so, then we carefully examine our own behavior and correct anything we can in ourselves to improve the situation. We can also try to work with the other person to turn things around. In order for you to stay in the relationship, the other person must actually change their unwholesome behaviors, not just say they want to change or for a short time simply *act*

as if they are changing. In my experience, people will only actually change such fundamental things if they really want to, for themselves, and earnestly pick up a practice that brings about the change. If, in spite of these efforts, the other person is unwilling or unable to change, it is time to leave, or at least make a plan to leave and start following it. This is important. Life is short and the progress we can make is invaluable. Falling backwards is tragic. Don't let any ideas of how you should stay and help the other person, or be more compassionate for their suffering, stop you from making a better life for yourself. You will be happier living in a way that is more wholesome and spiritually productive.

Everything ends, including relationships, jobs and living situations. Put your values and purification of mind first. The

karma we make will go beyond this lifetime. We can only affect its trajectory in the present.

Following this advice may require taking risks. Many years ago when I was working in high-tech and raising my two children as a single mom, I worked at a company that sometimes used unethical tactics. During the early months of working there, I heard several co-workers complain that upper management was making them lie to customers and do other unethical things. One day, the Vice President of Marketing told me that I was to fly to the East Coast to visit a customer and say things to the management that were untrue and divisive, in order to get someone in their organization fired. I felt miserable about it. I feared losing my job if I didn't comply, but knew that what I was being asked

to do was wrong. I struggled with the question of what to do for the days and nights leading up to the trip. The morning before I was to leave, what I should do became clear and I finally felt peaceful. I was determined to walk into the VP's office and explain that I would not go on this trip and why. I wasn't afraid. I had already accepted that I would probably lose my job.

When I told him, we had a lengthy and illuminating discussion about business ethics. To my great surprise, he seemed to be enjoying the challenge I was offering. I didn't get fired and I was never again asked to do anything unethical. Of course, things could have easily gone the other way. If he had fired me, given what I know now about karma, it would have certainly been worth it to stand by my values.

From that day on, the VP and I were friends. To my knowledge, the management made no further requests of anyone for unethical behavior.

Choices about who we spend our time with are closely related to how we spend our time. The Buddha encouraged frequent reflection on this. We can ask ourselves if what we are doing, whether at work or at home, for entertainment or relaxation, helps to develop good qualities and mental states. If we continue to use our time this way over the next few years, how will we be different than we are now? Do our activities encourage development of beautiful qualities like patience, contentment, humility, happiness, generosity and kindness? How do our activities help us to develop wisdom, the discernment of what is wholesome and unwholesome? Do

we act based on worldly values like accumulating more stuff, competing with others and winning, or gratifying the senses in a way that stokes up greed or hatred? How much of what we do is an effort to please others rather than follow our own values? Where is our time wasted on things that do not lead to any benefits for ourselves or others?

While reflecting on these questions, it is useful to guard against criticizing ourselves. Instead, we can take this on as an exploration leading to greater happiness and fulfillment. We also want to look beneath the surface of these activities and qualities. For example, we might spend a lot of time earning money. On the surface, someone could criticize this as an unwholesome focus on accumulation. However, that may not be the case. It depends on what we are doing to earn

the money and how we relate to it and use it once we have it. The Buddha never condemned being materially wealthy. He did criticize obtaining wealth at the expense of the well-being of others. He also criticized being miserly and failing to use one's wealth to be generous and bring happiness to oneself and others.

It is important to look into these questions with the intention to increase the goodness in ourselves, in our lives, and in the world. This is not for taking a position of superiority or inferiority. This is an example of reflecting on how we think in ways that lead to happiness or lead to suffering. If we find ourselves thinking critical thoughts that lead us to be less kind and compassionate, then we have the choice to look at what lies behind this thinking and what helps us change our

attitude. We do have choices about what we think. In fact, the Buddha said that we can train the mind to be able to think what we want to think when we want to think it. This is a worthwhile endeavor.

We have choices about what we think, say, and do. Everything else is outside our control. So we should put our attention and effort on purifying our conduct of body, speech and mind. Reflection on our values and repeatedly putting them into action, leads to development and refinement of our character. Then when things happen that we don't have a choice in, like aging, sickness, death, natural disasters and how other people act, we are able to make wise choices about how to meet these experiences and have the skills

needed to follow through. All along the way, we are tidying up our karmic field, planting seeds for future blessings.

As a wife, mother, schoolteacher, ardent Dhamma practitioner, and now for many years, a bhikkhuni, Venerable Satima has made many choices to create wholesome conditions, cultivate good qualities and bring about good results in her life. She has trained her mind to reflect on the truth of the way things are, the Dhamma, and she practices for the realization of Nibbāna. At this stage in her life, she is still a dazzling light in the world.

At the end of her visit with us in California, before going back to her monastery in Colorado, she said, “I had a wonderful visit. I’m so glad I came. Thank you for inviting me, but I don’t

think I'll be coming again. I'm too old to do this. I don't think I have much longer." The brightness in her eyes and vibrancy of her energy made us wonder if she really has longer than she thinks.

We don't have a choice about how long the energy in this body will naturally last, but we do have the choice to make the most of the time we have and to prepare ourselves to meet whatever comes.



ERASING OUR DEFILEMENTS

One of my favorite discourses of the Buddha is the “Sallekha Sutta” from the *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*¹. In English, it means effacement, which is rubbing away or erasing. In this practical teaching, the Buddha explains how we can erase our unskillful behaviors and rid ourselves of defilements.

He begins this teaching with a focus on intention. He said that even *thinking* about good qualities is very helpful, let alone following through with what we say and do. He lists 44 unskillful things, such as cruelty, jealousy, anger, restlessness, lying and resentment, and then he tells us to avoid them by using the opposite skillful qualities instead. He compares this

to having two possible paths to take, a rough one (the unskillful way) and a smooth one (the skillful way). He said the smooth path keeps leading upwards until we reach the point where the unskillful quality is completely gone, rubbed out, erased, and we are free from that brand of suffering.

With some of the items in the list, it is easy to know what to do, even though it may not be easy to do it, as with abstaining from gossip or lying. In other cases, it can be hard to know how to get to the smooth path. For example, how do we replace anger with non-anger?

As I've practiced with this teaching, I've had the ... well, let's call it an *opportunity* to work with a number of these qualities in myself and this has given me a chance to develop some techniques for avoiding the continued use of the rough path.

TRUTHFUL SPEECH

Let's first take the example of working with lying, one of those behaviors for which it is fairly easy to know what to do. In my case, out-and-out lying, I would say, was pretty rare. My tendency was more towards *stretching* the truth. The practice I used to clean that up and "abstain from false speech," was to stop whenever I would say something that I realized was not quite truthful or accurate, and say it again, correctly, on the spot. This applied to everything whether I was expressing my evaluations, feelings, views, or anything else. If what I was saying didn't fully match what I was thinking or what I believed to be true, I'd stop and set it right. I call this the "steeplechase technique."

A steeplechase is a horse race with obstacles, such as hedges, walls and ditches that the horse must jump. As horse and rider run a cross-country course, if at any point the horse balks at a jump, even though they've lost the race, the rider swings the horse around and they approach the jump again. This is the training. One doesn't just mess up, walk off the field and go home. It's important to go back immediately and do it right. I would reassure myself by acknowledging that this is a lot easier with speech than it is with horses. Before long, it became a habit that helped greatly in keeping me on the smooth path where false speech was concerned.

There were rare cases when the temptation arose to tell a "white lie". There really isn't any such thing as a "white lie", by the way. No lie is innocent or inconsequential because of

what it does to the mind and to the integrity of our speech. These cases required deep investigation into what I was afraid of, which then provided the opportunity to work with the fear and find a skillful way to tell the truth. Sometimes, the best course of action is silence.

There is the very, very rare occasion when telling a lie might actually be the best thing to do. Ajahn Brahm shares a poignant story that makes this point. A woman whom Ajahn Brahm knew very well and who had been following the path of Dhamma for a long time, found herself in a tough situation. Her husband desperately needed heart surgery. He was in the hospital, sharing a room with another heart patient. Both men were scheduled for the same kind of surgery the next day, the roommate in the morning, the woman's husband in

the afternoon. During his surgery, the roommate died. Just before going in for surgery, the woman's husband asked how his roommate was doing. What could she say? In his weakened condition, if she told him the truth, it might well kill him! She lied. She told him that his roommate had come through the surgery just fine and was doing well in the recovery room. She felt awful about the lie.

When her husband was out of danger, she told him what she had done. Of course, he forgave her, but she still felt bad about breaking the precept. The next time they saw Ajahn Brahm, she confessed her transgression to him. He asked, "How long have you been married?" She replied, "Forty-two years." He said, "OK, you're allowed one lie every 42 years."

BECOMING EASY TO ADMONISH

Let's look at an example of unskillful behavior which took a bit more effort for me to see both what I was doing wrong and how to correct it. I had never thought of myself as "difficult to admonish," but at some point I realized that when someone would tell me what I was doing wrong, I would immediately jump in to explain myself. From my point of view, I was trying so hard to do everything right, that this criticism was simply a misunderstanding. If I could quickly explain myself, then it would clear everything up. Clearly, I was not listening. I didn't want to hear it! This is a way of being difficult to admonish. It came across as arguing.

This reminds me of something a friend told me about her training as a Korean nun. She said that while training in a

Korean monastery, there are only two responses: “yes” and “my mistake.” Not so with Americans, but I can’t exactly blame this on my culture. I needed to see that I was desperately trying to avoid the painful feeling, which only leads to more of it. I needed to turn towards the feeling and experience it. This is the First Noble Truth. I had to learn how to stay present with the feeling and see what it was that I didn’t want to accept. I didn’t want to accept my imperfections. I didn’t want to accept that I might be causing someone else a problem. I didn’t want to accept that someone might not have the highest opinion of me.

For someone who really wants to be good, this is a serious impediment. I had to develop the ability to listen to criticism and observe my feelings at the same time, without reacting.

The practice is to really hear what the person is saying, try to understand what they're experiencing and see what they're trying to show me. Once I can completely take that in, then I can evaluate which bits seem to me to be valid and which might not be related to me or my behavior. At that point, I can figure out what to do about the situation.

It took a lot of practice and some coaching from someone with experience to learn how to stay present with emotional feeling without either suppressing it or becoming awash in it. This is really the function of mindfulness. One of the best methods is to notice where the feeling presents itself most strongly in the body. Is it causing a lump in the throat, a rock in the stomach, a tightness in the chest? At this point, one does not consider the content that brought up the feeling,

just the feeling itself. Developing the stamina to stay present with uncomfortable feeling is key to dissolving its power over us.

When we're able to handle painful feeling in this way, it is an amazing relief. We don't have to struggle to defend ourselves or wince from the pain of resisting the feedback. We can simply observe and really hear what the person is telling us, even if they are fairly worked up about it. We can take a sincere interest in what they are saying and even shift into their way of seeing things, putting ourselves in their position. We can actively participate in exploring what they are experiencing and maybe even help them see their own side more clearly. With this deep understanding of what is happening, we can then find ways to improve. As we take

action and really change, we truly become one who is easy to admonish.

FROM ANGER TO NON-ANGER

Dealing with anger can be more difficult because it can come on very strong, and also because there might be an underlying belief that it is useful, as a protection or a way to elicit a response. The Buddha was very clear that anger never has a good side to it. It is entirely toxic. Once we understand this and we set a clear intention that we want to calm our anger as soon as possible and work toward erasing it, then we can create an approach for moving from anger to non-anger.

When anger arises, first we need to deal with the intense feelings. There may be an abundance of chemicals rushing through the body, so some benign physical action like running

or chopping wood can be helpful. It is important to pull our attention away from whatever it was that provoked the anger. If we keep thinking about what was said or done that caused anger to arise, we will stoke up the fire, when what is needed is to let it die down. Once it does die down, we can use mindfulness to investigate the feelings in the body and explore what it is that we don't want to accept. If we continue time after time to contain the anger, feel it and investigate it, we will eventually be able to move through it more easily, coming to a state of mind without anger. Whatever the situation may be, we can then deal with it from a stable position, from our vantage point on the smooth path.

Recently we had a movie night here at the monastery. We watched a documentary on the life of Supreme Court Justice

Ruth Bader Ginsburg. One of the many things that impressed me about her character and her life was that in all the legal battles she waged, she was never angry. She said that anger is a useless emotion. This is something she learned from her mother. What a lovely teaching to have right from the beginning. I feel certain that this attribute of her character was a great help as she fought for and gained so much ground toward weeding out gender discrimination in America.

The Buddha assured us that if we keep replacing the unwholesome states and qualities with wholesome ones, we will make strides towards greater happiness, peace and relief from suffering. There will come a time when all our defilements are extinguished.



RELIEF FROM FIVE FEARS

Have you ever feared losing your livelihood, getting a bad reputation or feeling timid or insecure in a crowd of people? Are you afraid of death or what might happen after death? I think most people have experienced one or more of these five fears. The Buddha describes how we can leave these fears behind.

This teaching appears in the *Anguttara Nikāya* and is called “Powers.”² Here the Buddha says that if we possess four powers, we no longer experience these five fears. These are the power of wisdom, the power of energy, the power of blamelessness and the power of sustaining favorable relationships.

In order to understand these powers and how they can relieve us from these five fears, I reflected on the way my father lived, worked and engaged with people. As far as I know, my father didn't suffer from any of these fears. As I think about his approach to life and the Buddha's explanation of these powers, I can understand why.

In many respects, my father was an ordinary man. He worked hard, as is the nature of farm life, and he was honest and straightforward. Even though he knew nothing about Buddhism, he seemed to have a basic understanding of karma. He was quite confident that if one puts forth good effort, one will be supported in their life and work. I think this was more of a *feeling* for him than an idea.

In this teaching, the Buddha defines the power of wisdom as when “One has clearly seen and explored with wisdom those qualities that are unskillful ... and ... those that are skillful ... blamable/blameless ... dark/bright ... those that should not be cultivated/those that should be cultivated ... those that are unworthy of the noble ones/those that are worthy of the noble ones ...”³ I think my father’s understanding of wisdom was similar. He considered it common sense, a basic knowledge of right and wrong.

Of course, one has to follow through and *do* what is right, and avoid doing what is wrong, as much as possible. This accords with the Buddha’s definition of the power of energy: “One generates enthusiasm, tries, makes an effort, exerts the mind, and strives to give up those qualities that are

unskillful and ... to gain those qualities that are skillful ...”

The power of blamelessness follows easily on the heels of the first two powers. “It’s when [one] has blameless conduct by way of body, speech, and mind.”

Living in a small, tight-knit community, everyone knew my father and everyone respected him. He was friendly, kind and fair. He enjoyed helping others and there were many opportunities to do so. No one is entirely blameless, but people know if your heart is in the right place, as they say. They see that most of the time, you make a sincere effort to do the right thing and generally things work out.

I don’t recall my father ever having trouble with anyone. There was one time when the neighbor downstream from us dammed up the ditch during a wet period, keeping our land

from draining properly. My father was worried about the crops and about having a conflict with the neighbor. He went over to talk it through with him. The neighbor apologized and removed the dam.

Almost without fail, the neighbors worked together for their general well-fare. When another neighboring farmer became sick in the spring just as planting started, my father planted all his crops for him. Once when my father had an accident a few days before finishing harvest and was completely laid up, a few farmers came in to finish for him. At times like these, no one wants or expects any pay for their work. The attitude is “we help each other and we all get through it.” They knew how good it feels to help one another and to receive help when you need it.

This brings us to the fourth power. It can be translated as “inclusiveness” or as “sustaining favorable relationships.” The Pali word that is used, *sangaha*, can also be translated as “kind disposition, kindness, sympathy, friendliness, help, assistance, protection, favor.”⁴ The first time I read this sutta, this fourth power took me by surprise. I had never seen it in any of the Buddha’s other lists. Upon further examination, I can really see how essential it is for dispelling some of these fears, especially the fear of losing one’s livelihood. My father related to the other farmers and to the businessmen in town with *sangaha*.

When I was a young child, there were two grocery stores in town. Both were small, and owned and operated by local families. My father generally went to one of them every

Saturday night for the week's groceries. When I was about 6 years old, a new supermarket came into town. Everyone was very excited about this. There would be much more variety of products, and it was likely that they would sell for less. My father stayed with the merchants he had patronized for years. He knew they would lose a lot of business. He valued the relationship with the merchants and their well-being above whatever savings he would gain by shopping at the bigger store.

Years later, my father started his own business, selling farm equipment. He began because he wanted to help his friends buy the equipment they needed for less than they would have to pay through large dealerships. I remember seeing him talking with other farmers sitting on the tailgate of his

pickup truck. He kept his catalogs in the truck bed. That was his first office.

His business did well. He made a profit, and he helped many farmers. I remember him saying to someone as they were making a deal, “Are you getting enough out of this?” To my father, good business meant being fair and making sure that everyone could earn a decent living.

The Buddha gave four instructions on how to sustain favorable relationships. One of the Buddha’s lay disciples listed these instructions, once when he came to visit the Buddha with a large following of his own in tow.⁵ The Buddha asked him how he was able to have such a large group of followers. He explained that he used the four means of

sustaining favorable relationships that the Buddha taught. If someone would benefit from a gift, he would give them a gift. If someone would benefit from kind words, he would speak to them with kind words. If someone would benefit from being cared for by some action, he would care for them in that way. If someone would benefit from being treated with impartiality, he would treat them with impartiality. This last one seems to have a couple of sides to it. One treats others equally by not playing favorites; and one treats others the same whether they are going through good times or bad. I remember my father doing these kinds of things, not to gain anything, just to be kind and helpful. It turned out that he also had a pretty large following. He used to say that when he dies, only a very few people, maybe a handful, will come to



the funeral. When he actually did die, many, many people came. My mother and I stood at the front of the large room, near the casket, and greeted people one-by-one in line. Someone came over to me and said, “Do you know that people are lined up out the door and around the block?” Some people had driven from as far as two states away. Every person took the time to tell us a story about something kind my father had done for them. My mother hadn’t even known about many of these acts of kindness. They said things like, “He plowed the snow out of my driveway with his tractor.” “He left a bag of sweet corn on my porch.” “He waved and smiled every time we drove past each other.”

So like the Buddha’s wise disciples, I think my father would have been able to say, “Why should I be afraid of losing my

livelihood, or of getting a bad reputation? Why should I be afraid to be in any group of people? Why fear death or anything that can happen afterwards? I have these four powers.”

I’m sure my father would have never thought about it in this way, but he was living it. It’s nice when we can see someone’s life stretched out behind us, along with some of the results of their actions. It is encouraging to know that we can put the causes and conditions into effect *now* that will lead to good results in the future.

I’m so grateful to my father for being the kind of *ordinary* man he was, one with such a good heart, setting such a good example.



GRIEF RELIEF

My father died suddenly when he was 69. At that time, I was 40 and completely unprepared for death, mine or anyone else's. I didn't know how to handle the loss or the grief. I didn't understand death or what comes afterwards. I felt like I was walking through jello; time slowed to a crawl. This altered sense of time and reality lasted for weeks. I took care of everything I needed to take care of. I helped with all the arrangements and supported my mother in her intense shock and grief. I went back to work, but I was still adrift, at sea.

This experience threw me onto the spiritual path. I searched like my hair was on fire. Eventually, I found the Dhamma. By the time my mother died, 23 years later, I was much better

prepared. Of course, those losses had very different characteristics. My father wasn't young, but he wasn't quite old yet either -- my mother had lived a long life. My father's death was so sudden -- my mother's death was months in coming. I spent every day with her during the last three or four months, taking care of nearly every need. I was right there next to her when she died. I chanted and held a space of holiness for her passing. I washed her body and dressed it for the next phase of its journey. It was clear "she" was already gone. What I felt, I can't really call "grief." As weeks and months passed, sometimes sadness would arise and might linger for a day or two, but the feeling was something much lighter than grief. My mind was calm and clear.

So what changed in me during those 23 years?

Dhamma practice prepared me through utilizing all aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path, through frequent reflection on death, and through the practice of facing and embracing feeling as a way to understand reality.

I was taught that when feeling arises, we should turn towards it, hold it with compassion, accept it, and remember that it is just a feeling. It will change and it isn't me or mine. This isn't something we do because we should. We practice being intimately present and aware of feeling, so we can know feeling as it really is and relieve our suffering.

We never need to feel bad about feeling whatever it is that we feel. Feeling arises, we don't ask for it. The important

thing is to know what to do with it. When we feel grief or any other emotion, if we use mindfulness and clear understanding, we are not caught up in it, not awash in it, not clinging to it, not driven by it. Our mindfulness helps us to know when we start to veer off into any of those directions. There is no pressure to let go of grief, no pressure to get over it. By staying present with the feeling and reflecting on its true nature, we observe its disintegration and the peace that remains in its place.

When the Buddha talked about grief, he usually talked about it in the context of sorrow, lamentation, pain, and despair; as *dukkha*, as something to free ourselves from. When he taught about the foundations of mindfulness, he said, “This is the direct way for the purification of beings, for the overcoming

of sorrow and lamentation, for the destruction of suffering and grief, for reaching the right path, for the attainment of Nibbāna, namely, the four foundations of mindfulness.”⁶

The Buddha didn't say we shouldn't have grief or that we have somehow failed, if we do. He also didn't say that we *should* grieve or that grief is inextricable from loss. He didn't place any positive value on grief. He taught that the more we come to deeply understand Dhamma, the more likely we are to easily accept loss when it occurs, without clinging, grief or despair, without suffering.

In our culture, there is a pervasive idea that grief is a healthy process. The Buddha would not agree. As Bhikkhu Anālayo points out in his book “Mindfully Facing Disease and Death”,

“... the early Buddhist conception of mental health goes far beyond what modern psychology would consider a healthy condition of the mind.”⁷

Sometimes people talk about the gifts they find in grief. As far as I can tell, the sweetness in grief, the benefits, do not come from grief itself, but rather are all from experiencing the Dhamma. With death, we have a profound opportunity to realize that everything is impermanent and that we are not the only ones to go through this. In the light and peace of Dhamma, we can more fully appreciate the gifts and goodness of the person who has passed, and we can touch into what is beyond this world.

We also have this opportunity when someone is born. We are usually so excited about the birth that we don't think about where this living being has come from and what they have brought with them. If we tune into this much larger picture, we will probably understand this child better, have a deeper appreciation for what they bring to human life, see how they can blossom in it, and recognize that this lifetime is just one phase of a long process. When we die, what continues is not a personal identity, but the continuation of a process of consciousness and karma. Or, if there is complete understanding of Dhamma – the realization of Nibbāna – then the process goes completely silent, completely cool. There is complete peace and the greatest bliss, true safety, beyond all birth and death.

A number of women during the Buddha's time became bhikkunīs after the death of their child. One of them was Patacāra. She became a great teacher with many bhikkhunī students. She said to them, "You know not where this child has come from and you know not where they are going, and yet you weep for them. Why? When you know where they have come from and you know where they are going, then you do not weep for them. You know this is simply nature." Her students each reply:

“Pulling out
— completely out —
the arrow so hard to see,
embedded in my heart,
[you] expelled from me
— overcome with grief —
the grief over my [child].”⁸

For most of us, we cannot clearly see these comings and goings beyond this world, at least not yet, and hearing about it from someone else may not have the dramatic effect that these words of Patacāra had on her students. And yet, our continuing practice of Dhamma does help to loosen grief’s hold on us, to bring relief, much of which comes from letting go of what this loss means to *me*. The heavenly messenger of

death helps us see through our delusions of self. Our anxieties and fears about this self and what it has lost or may lose begin to fade.

With the dissolving of our own self-focus, we can more fully appreciate the good each person brings into the world, the good that they develop in themselves, and the incredible ability that humans have to realize this immense Truth, the Dhamma. We experience relief, and eventually, freedom from suffering in all its forms.



THE WAY TO ULTIMATE RELIEF

There is a young woman who comes to our vihara for sutta study and day-long meditation retreats. She asks question after question, trying to understand the Dhamma. She has been trying hard to find the truth and diligently practice.

Yesterday, she told me that just hours before, she had had an amazing experience. She was glowing as she spoke about it. She said that her relationship with her boyfriend was breaking up. She had been very sad and upset, but something changed in an instant as she talked with him on the phone. He was saying that the two of them want different things, and that they are going in different directions. When he said that something opened up in her heart, in her mind. She was

suddenly filled with love for him and for all beings. It was not the love of “I want you to be with me.” It was unconditional love, a genuine wish for his well-being. It was boundless metta.

As she told me, she was smiling and tears of amazement came to her eyes. She had never felt this kind of joy before. She said that always in the past in situations like this she would go into despair, self-criticism and doubt. Instead, now she had a deep sense that everything is alright, even though this significant part of her life was crumbling. She marveled at the absence of her normal self-criticism and low self-esteem. In this state, she reflected on the things that had always frightened her, like the thought of losing her father and other people and things that are dear to her. She was in awe that

now none of these thoughts brought up fear. There were no more skeptical questions. She only asked, “What should I do now?”

The approach I’ve found to be the most helpful when this kind of thing happens is to fix this memory in the mind – including how it *feels*, come back to it repeatedly for inspiration and clarity, and to reflect on this experience in meditation, contemplating the Dhamma behind it.

This first real glimpse of the Dhamma, experienced directly, is a moment when the veil of the world is drawn back. It leaves one seeing things differently. If we revisit such a memory again and again, it can support our steps towards enlightenment, towards complete freedom from suffering.

With this new awareness, like Pingiya in his song, we, too, can declare our inner confidence in the Buddha's true knowledge and insight, and in our unwavering determination to awaken.

PINGIYA'S SONG OF THE WAY TO THE BEYOND ⁹

[Pingiya]

Floundering in the mud, I lay,
Swimming from island to island,
Then I saw the Awakened Buddha,
Crossed over the flood, free of inflows.

[The Buddha]

Just as Vakkali was sure in faith,
Bhadrāvudha, and Ālavigotama, too,
In the same way, you too should be sure of your faith,
And, Pingiya, you will go to the far shore of death.

[Pingiya]

Thus my inspiration grows even more,
Hearing the voice of the Sage;
The Buddha, who drew back the veil of the world,
Without heartlessness, of inspired speech,

Knows what is beyond the gods,
Knows all, both high and low,
The Teacher who puts an end to questions
Of those who declare their doubts.

The immovable, unshakeable,
That to which there is no compare:
For sure, I will go there,
I have no doubt of that.
You may remember me
As one who's mind is made up.

I remember a time in my life, before hearing the Buddha's words, when I felt like Pingiya, floundering in the mud and swimming from island to island. I recall using that same metaphor to describe how I would grab on to something or someone to keep from sinking, and when I couldn't hold on anymore, I would quickly try to swim to the next island and grab onto something else. When I heard the Buddha's voice

coming through the monks and the texts, I found solid ground.

The Buddha's call to Pingiya to be sure of his faith, like so many who were sure in faith before him, lifted Pingiya up, not because of *blind* faith but because the Buddha's inspired words were coming from a heart of immeasurable compassion and his own direct experience of enlightenment. Pingiya was able to really take that in and to feel the truth of it. In this way, the Buddha put an end to all of Pingiya's questions; and Pingiya knew without doubt that he, too, would go to the far shore of death, to the immovable, the unshakeable, to that with which there is no comparison. His mind was made up.

So how can each of us make up our own minds to awaken and then put the causes and conditions in place to experience the Dhamma directly for ourselves? How can we make ourselves insight-prone?

We begin by listening to the Dhamma, if possible from someone who has experienced some level of awakening. Sometimes people ask if there are any enlightened beings living today. My answer is “Oh, yes!” Spending time with monks who trained with Ajahn Chah, and others who were Ajahn Chah’s contemporaries, convinced me of this beyond a doubt. Their influence made it clear that enlightenment is not only real; it is accessible. However, confidence in this truth develops over time, through experience.

We reveal our doubts and ask our questions, not from a mind of trying to disprove, but from a mind eager to understand. We utilize the Four Noble Truths whenever we encounter suffering, not wasting time and making more negative karma by getting embroiled in the feeling and the story. We make our virtue strong and clear, and reflect on our goodness and generosity with joy. We make a point to rejoice in the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the enlightened Sangha every day.

At some point, the Buddha's inspired words reach the heart, and we know, "Yes, enlightenment *is* possible." This relief from skeptical doubt opens the way to entering the stream, the first level of awakening.¹⁰ But we don't strive for it directly.

We just do the practice and make ourselves enlightenment-prone. Ajahn Paññavaddho told me that sometimes people might not even know that they have realized stream entry. It isn't something one *does*, it is something one *knows*; and rather than being an accomplishment, it is a deeply humbling realization. The result is having certainty that the body, feeling, perception, mental activity, and consciousness are not who we are, that going through the motions of rituals will not save us, and that we have unwavering confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma and enlightened Sangha.

Once one reaches this stage, one can never again fall backwards into the mud, into immoral behavior, or into paralyzing doubt. We never again have to swim frantically from island to island. Instead, we *become* the island, the solid ground. We know for ourselves this deep, exquisite relief.



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Santussikā Bhikkhunī grew up on a farm in the USA near Chicago, raised two children and was a software designer and engineer before ordaining as a bhikkhuni in the Theravadan tradition. She began meditation practice in the 1970's but didn't meet up with the Dhamma until 1998 when her son moved to Thailand to become a monk in the Ajahn Chah lineage of the Thai Forest Tradition. Through many visits

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