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A Leap of Faith

Ajahn Sucitto provides some background and perspective on another Theravadin monastic residence (vihara), which is taking shape in Italy. Ajahn Thanavaro will return to his native country to take up residence there, and around this he gives some impressions about his life as a bhikkhu.

When Ajahn Sumedho returned from a visit to Switzerland and Italy last December, he brought back some news that created a blend of interest and enthusiasm mingled with appreciation - the possible establishment of a vihara in Italy, about 120 km south of Rome.

Ajahn Thanavaro, then in Italy visiting his parents, would be residing there, at least for awhile, as the senior incumbent. Not much else was certain, except the beauty of the situation on the Mediterranean coast, and the commitment of the lay supporters.

Such impressions, and the signs they leave in the mind, herald the opening of all viharas - and are characteristic of much of Sangha life. The mind perceives a pleasant inspiring image, then looks around for something solid to base it on, and finds ... space. So it was with the establishment of Chithurst Monastery in a derelict miles away from lay supporters, by a handful of inexperienced bhikkhus and a penniless charity. So it was with Harnham - another primitive dwelling and impecunious Trust. And likewise with Amarawati - a Buddhist Centre for which we had no previous models, and whose purchase required an enormous bank loan.

And now, with the sangha feeling rather stretched in covering the duties which have already presented themselves - it looks like there is to be another vihara, dependent largely on one bhikkhu. To redress the situation in spiritual terms, it is time for another leap of faith.

The chronology of this venture gives it a sense of inevitability. The supporters can be classified broadly as two groups: a large Sri Lankan community, and a group of experienced Italian Buddhists. The latter include Corrado Pensa and Vincenzo Piga, who have been foremost, respectively, in teaching Vipassana meditation and Buddhist studies in Italy over the past decade. Yet, although Zen, Tibetan and Nichiren monasticism are well established, there is no Theravadin monastic presence in Italy. The late Ven. Dr. Saddhatissa visited Italy

quite often, and on learning of this situation, passed on the name of Ven. Thanavaro Bhikkhu, born in Italy, ordained by Dr. Saddhatissa, and living in New Zealand with Ajahn Viradhommo at that time. That was a couple of years ago. Ven. Thanavaro was then fully occupied with the Stokes Vally Vihara, but he nevertheless kept an open mind.

Brought up as a Catholic, he had abandoned that faith partly out of disagreement with the outer form that the Church expected of the laity, and partly due to an inner conflict.

Naturally, the situation developed. Ajahn Sumedho, visiting New Zealand in 1989, felt that it was time for Ven. Thanavaro to return to Europe after nearly five years in the Antipodes. It would be a chance to pay a long overdue visit to his parents, and reconnect to a larger Sangha. But by the time that Ven. Thanavaro actually arrived in Italy, Ajahn Sumedho was also there - having been invited to Rome by the Theravadin community - and a small monastic residence had been prepared in the hope that a Sangha might be able to stay. The two bhikkhus were introduced to the community, the residence and the spiritual need, and it was decided that in principle the necessary factors were there for an Italian vihara.

Much of the rest of the story is Ajahn Thanavaro's. In some ways, this move represents an other stage in his practice as a bhikkhu, as he has only recently completed ten 'rains' as a monk, and now being considered worthy to teach and train others. He spent the winter monastic retreat at Amarawati before going to the new vihara, and at that time, he reflected on his spiritual path as it has unfolded:

'My spiritual search was a result of inner values that I upheld as true to myself. And it became very apparent that in the world these are very difficult to realise: like harmlessness, non-violence. All the violence in the world really hurt me. I remember reading a newspaper article about Buddhist monks starving in Laos due to a change in their political scene. That was at a time when I didn't know anything about Buddhism. Just reading about Buddhist monks not being almsfood, because people were discouraged from doing so, really brought tears to my eyes.

Born near Trieste in 1955, and brought up as a Catholic, he had abandoned that faith partly out of disagreement with the outer form that the Church expected of the laity, and partly due to an inner conflict:

'My understanding of the Catholic teachings was that there is a good, and that is what you should cultivate; and there is evil, and that is what should destroy and get rid of. But it seems to me that as you cultivate good, inevitably you are faced with evil, and you have to learn what that is, rather than run away from it.

'I kept praying until the age of 19 and using the prayer of "our Father", but eventually I had to stop, because every time I started the prayer of "our Father", this blasphemy would come into my mind and would represent the whole conflict between good and evil.....I had to give up praying because it was too painful.'

Nevertheless, a strong sense of spiritual urgency stayed with him, accompanied by the ability to go forth in faith. He arrived at Oaken Holt Buddhist Centre, Oxfordshire, in 1977, as a layman, having heard about Buddhism while undergoing military service in Italy, then finding out



*Leap, friend,
leap.*

that Buddhism was strong in England, and finally deciding to go there - although he spoke almost no English. At Oaken Holt he met Ajahn Sumedha and Ven. Viradhammo, who were teaching a retreat there. Through a translator he got 'a vague idea of what was talked about', and asked to stay at the Sangha's Hampstead Vihara. On Ajahn Sumedha's return to the Vihara, he asked for Eight Precepts, and became an anagarika. Seven months later, on Vesakha Puja of 1978, he took the Samanera Precepta from Ven. Dr. Saddhatissa, who gave him upasampada as a bhikkhu on 27 October 1979. This was at the time that the Sangha were hard at work establishing Chithurst Monastery. The nature of the task in hand could be turned to advantage in one who had faith:

'For me, meeting the bhikkhus was a very inspiring experience. The element of devotion was sustained through the devotion to my teacher and to the Sangha... and through my willingness to serve the Sangha. And that was at a time when people needed to sacrifice themselves for a common purpose. So although I wasn't able to actually have much time with, or speak to, my teacher ...nevertheless that relationship of service and devotion sustained me through my practice.

'My intention for being there was very well-defined in my mind. I wanted to be a Buddhist monk, and that was the way of doing it: just be around and wait.'

Faith in the reality of the spiritual life, as experienced and enacted, made his transition from Christianity and prayer to Buddhism and meditation remarkably smooth. Actually, Ajahn Thanavaro now sees his realignment of faith as a development in his practice rather than a rejection of values.

'I came to the conclusion that Jesus lived very similarly to a Buddhist monk, and strangely enough, this conviction seems to be quite reasonable! So although I had a lot of feelings towards Christianity, particularly to the Gospels and to Jesus, I felt I was doing the right thing.

'However, it was quite difficult to give up the idea of God and the tool of prayer. So the practice of meditation, and particularly the letting go of the dialogue in my own mind, was quite a step - because I had to let go of that relationship with God. I just had to leave things alone rather than sustain them according to past models - to deal with the mind, rather than keep a bewilderment going. So meditation seemed to be the best way of doing that : enter the mind and really see what's going on there.

'I felt the Buddhist teachings are particularly effective for dealing with defilements. Catholicism has given me an aspiration, an element of faith that has supported me. It's not that I have lost what I gained through Christianity.'

Perhaps it is with this synthesis in mind that the Italian vihara has been named 'Santacittarama' - 'The Monastery of the Peaceful Heart' if you understand Pali, but very close to 'The Holy City of Rome' to a Italian ear! In practice, the peaceful heart and the Holy City require a lot of work, not always characteristically spiritual. Sangha life in the West has meant applying the spirit of devotion to the physical task in hand. It is always a fine balance, dogged by workaholicism and anxiety on one hand, and craving for solitude and tranquillity on the other.

'In a sense, I feel a bit of a pioneer. Like most of us, I have been mixing cement, carrying gravel, building places. For me that kind of giving of oneself to the situation has been a very strong element in the practice.

'When I was sent [to Harnham] with Ajahn Anando, we were really involved with a lot of renovation work. I remember that I had to take up my sleeping time for practice. So that was

the time when I started doing "the sitter's practice" (*) just to catch up with my lost meditation hours. So one has to find the time, in a sense.

'My priority was more in terms of focussing the mind and experiencing some tranquillity, and I was pretty good at it, I felt quite happy with it. But it's obvious that the practice is more than just getting into a tranquil state. The working situation was a confirmation of that - it doesn't allow you to be still for too long! So it was obvious that one had to deal with circumstances as they presented themselves.'

During the first five years of monastic training, a monk is expected to stay with his teacher, but after this time he has some choice in the matter of where he lives. After Ven. Thanavaro's initial training under Ajahn Sumedho, he offered to go to New Zealand to help Ajahn Vira dhammo start a monastery there.

The building of that monastery is another story. However, in spiritual terms, Ven. Thanavaro here became acquainted with a familiar problem of the middle years of monastic training -- a kind of dreariness of the heart, and estrangement from the vitality of the tradition. New Zealand was a perfect setting for such a sense of aloneness:

'My experience in New Zealand was very much an experience, in some respects, of "survival", because we felt so isolated. This is a common feeling for New Zealanders - being apart from everything.'

However, compassionate forces in the universe presented him with the opportunity to go on a pilgrimage to India, and then to Thailand, in 1988.

'I discovered for myself this connection with a tradition, after the pilgrimage to India, because before that I couldn't really relate to the Buddha as my teacher... Going to India was establishing that connection not only for myself, but also for New Zealand Buddhists.

'There is a very strong pull towards a Buddhist country. One feels a great deal of gratitude for the Buddhist countries that have kept the teachings going, and I even started learning Thai when I was in New Zealand, just to feel a sense of connection again.'

Having opened to the experience of visiting India and Thailand, Ajahn Thanavaro seems to have added that confidence to his powerful sense of faith, and returned to the West with a doubt.

'It becomes apparent that as a Western Buddhist, my place is in the West; and that is where the work needs to be and the practice has to go on.

'It came as a surprise for all of us, the establishing of this vihara [in Italy]. But I certainly can say that it has been a happy surprise. I feel very honoured to be in this position of taking back to my own country what I have been able to learn over the last twelve years.'

As with any of the monasteries, all seekers will be welcome as visitors, whatever their religion, even if they don't speak the language. The vihara is in an embryonic stage right now, with just two residents, and the course of future developments cannot be predicted. However, one feels that if the vihara is founded on Ajahn Thanavaro's practice, all will be well. We would like to wish him many blessings and timely support.

*The contact address (this is not the address of the vihara) is:
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Practice after the Retreat

Extracts from a talk given by Sister Sundara during a ten-day retreat at Amaravati last year.

There is line in the Dhammapada which says that the mind is the forerunner of all things: if one acts with evil thoughts the result is evil, if one acts with kind thoughts then the result is kind. Now to see this you have to investigate life, you have to investigate your mind. We call that process 'wisely reflecting'. When we talk about looking at thoughts, you may understand, and feel perhaps that you've got to stop thinking in order to be wise, instead of actually reflecting on your life, on your actions, your family, your job, your needs ... reflecting with mindfulness and attention, rather than just thinking about things, and being confused by your fear of not being able to solve problems.

So we can reflect on our feelings right now. We can know that they're changing and unsatisfactory, and we can also see that there is no need to identify with them.

All this nonsense about being a lay person or monk or nun ...these are the kinds of excuses we make for not taking that Refuge in mindfulness.

On a retreat like this we can see clearly the source of our agitation; we begin to notice the more subtle irritations, like the way people close doors or the way they pick up a pot of honey - we can be mindful of them. But when you go home ... it's easy to think you will lose all mindfulness - that the Refuges will completely go out of the window, and no way will you be able to be wise, no way will you be able to see things in perspective. This worry is what we call Mara - on a direct line! - telling you you'll be confused, that you can't do it tomorrow. So already you start thinking about the next retreat, about how you can go back to your nice, kid zafu, and breathe ... in and out ... sorting out your life on your meditation mat.!

All this nonsense about being a lay person or monk or nun ...these are the kinds of excuses we make for not taking that Refuge in mindfulness. But if you really want to be free, then that's what you have to do, rather than take refuge in your excuses for not being mindful. Before the retreat I was reflecting on my position thinking, thinking, 'Well, you'll be talking to a group of lay people ... Now, what's good for lay people? What's good for monks and nuns?' But what's the difference? When I look at you, I feel that there isn't much difference. I don't think it's really a kindness to you to think, 'this is for lay people, this is for the Sangha - they do the advanced practice and you do the lay people's practice.' I don't think it's kindness, because one doesn't want to appeal to the idea that one can make excuses - to feel that one can't do it because one is a lay person. If your aim is to be free, then keep that in mind, don't lose that intention in your heart. Then you can observe the amount of excuses one can come up with

just to forget about it.

Or we make excuses because we think practice should be good; that if we practise rightly we should be OK. We should feel happy and contented, calm, peaceful, loving and compassionate. We think that this is the practice - we mix our ideas about practice with our desires. But when we practice correctly, we reflect on desires, rather than mixing 'practice' with what we want and what we think it should be, what we think it should feel like.

So if you're a lay person and the conditions you're living in are different from the conditions here, there is no reason to think that you can't be wise, that you can't be mindful. There's no reason to think like that, that's just the voice of Mara - which we tend to follow quite easily, because that feels more 'home' than 'Yes, I can do it.'

Sometimes we tend to be quiet disparaging about ourselves, not trusting our abilities, and it is this lack of trust that always makes us run away from that Refuge because we don't trust it. Maybe it's easier to put trust in someone else, or what somebody has written, than to reflect on things, cultivate wisdom, realising that it is possible to see things really clearly and to know what needs to be done. That we can live a life that we respect, that we like and feel good about.

You can develop confidence in your practice by giving up certain things. It doesn't have to be anything much - just experiment with little things ... Can I give up talking for an hour? Can I give up smoking for a day? Can I give up grasping for an hour? Can I give up being grumbly for two days? Simple things like that. Just making the determination is very strengthening, using the power of the mind. We can feel really depressed if we lose confidence; the mind starts feeling all floppy, like withering flowers - a bit miserable-looking. That's how our mind feels if we don't really nurture it and give it a little bit of sunshine, a little bit of water and a little bit of loving care, and help fill it with confidence.

If we don't cultivate the heart, it just flops and withers like a plant. We're living with something alive that needs care and attention and loving and strength. It needs to be given confidence, rather than saying, 'Oh I can't do it, I'm no good,' and looking for reinforcements from outside: 'It's so difficult when you've got so many responsibilities.' 'I quite agree with you - it's quite impossible.' That way of thinking can be very damaging ... 'I'll be wise tomorrow, but today - just leave me alone! Let me enjoy myself today, then when I get the right food or the right job - then I'll be wise!'

When I speak about nurturing or cultivating the heart, we can see it as a relationship we establish with ourselves where we begin to see ourselves as a human being - not as somebody who's always doing wrong. We establish a proper relationship with ourselves, instead of being critical, nasty, demanding and complaining, anxious, angry and upset: inspired then upset because we don't feel inspired any more ... then we get depressed and we get annoyed because we get depressed! This is not a very nice relationship, is it?

We have different needs, because we are different people, but what's good for all of us is to develop a very kind relationship towards ourselves. In meditation retreats you can observe meticulously how your mind works. You begin to see yourself as if you're someone else; you



can see how your senses, your eyes, ears, nose, tongue and thoughts create constantly all sorts of interesting things - and sometimes not-so-interesting things!

So Mara is very, very clever, he knows how to trick you. The favourite trick is to create the kind of images you might have about tomorrow - he just says boldly, 'Here I am, and I'm telling you tomorrow will be wonderful!' or 'Tomorrow will be awful!' But being reflective, you know that this is happening right here and now ... and tomorrow hasn't arrived yet. Rather than trying to find ways of sorting out your life, trying to change the conditions to make your life OK, we take the time to sit quietly and reflect. Suddenly the mind becomes open, rather than filled with all our fears and desires and anxieties; there is a spaciousness, we can allow things to be seen in a new way - we can see life in a non-distorted way, see it with a bit more truth.

But we tend to be impatient - it doesn't seem to be so important for most people to go to that Refuge of mindfulness. What seems more important is to eat and to sleep and to talk and to have fun - looking for ways to satisfy 'me', rather than applying that Refuge we've been cultivating for the past week - that very knowing and clarity of the reflective mind which allows us to see what is necessary. If you reflect on your thoughts, you can see very clearly ... the changing ... they come and they go, and you see them beginning and ending, you see through the whole of your melodrama. It's as clear as a crystal. But then as you go back into your ordinary life, it gets a little bit more fixed, a bit more solid, and ... more solid! And finally you begin to believe it all again. It's such a lovely feeling - isn't it? - when you can see your difficulties and the things we get caught into as changing, as beginning and ending. There's a wonderful feeling about it, you can experience the joy of seeing their true nature...that they're not what we are.

But the world of ignorance is pretty powerful and we are in the midst of it all the time - bombarded with wrong views, wrong intentions, wrong thoughts, wrong understanding, wrong livelihood. Everything seems to be wrong, out of ignorance. But when we start to awaken and can reflect, then there's this possibility of finding the way out.



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Observance Day at Wat Pah Nanachat

Ajahn Sucitto shares some of his experiences from his stay at Wat Pah Nanachat in 1987.

The sound of the bell resonates through the dark forest at 3 a.m., as usual. They may have been up already, walking in meditation in the cool of the night, or awash in the land of dreams; but for the twenty or so residents of the monastery the bell is a reminder that it is time to begin another day in the conventional world of Wat Pah Nanachat, Ubon Rajathani, North-East Thailand. Soon it will be time for morning pooja and meditation for a couple of hours in the sala before dawn. The date hardly matters: dawn occurs with only a few minutes' variance throughout the year and the day follows a regular routine. As day breaks, we sweep the sala in silence; the junior bhikkhus and the novices come with their own and the senior bhikkhus' alms bowls; in threes and fours we go out for alms. It's another normal day for the Sangha. And for their supporters, the village folk of the Isan, it's another day with the land, the family, and the presence of Buddhist tradition.

So it is on January 13th, 1987. It's the cold season and the rice has been harvested. The flat paddy fields are going brown, and sunrise has a welcome warmth; people asleep in the wooden plank-walled houses huddle in blankets; men squat by the side of the road, heads swathed in cloth, warming themselves by fires of dead leaves and twigs; the breath of the buffaloes beneath the houses is smoky. To a European it seems cool and pleasant to file along the grit and dust roads (when your bare feet have toughened a little) and to move silently through the waking village receiving morsels of sticky rice. Some of the people that you see kneeling before you with little rattan baskets of rice, you see every day, year in, year out; a little more wizened with time and the sun, faces either calm or cracked open in a toothy grin for a few words of greeting.

A few eyebrows have been raised when the 'novice' sits with womenfolk; however, Luang Por's disciples are held in great respect; and these are the Westerners.

It's all rather strange to me, a visitor of a few weeks only; yet as I am wearing the dark ochre robe of the forest bhikkhu, and carrying the large alms bowl that can hold my belongings when travelling, the key factors of my identity are well-known and trusted by the villagers. They've got used to Westerners now: it's been over twenty years since Phra Sumedho became the first Western disciple of Luang Por Chah, and nearly thirteen since he became the first abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat - the forest monastery for Western monks. Nowadays Ajahn Pasanno is the abbot and he generally leads pindabaht line through Bung Wai village with two or three other monks, and - uniquely in North-East Thailand - one ten-precept nun (*). Eight-precept nuns wear white, and the ten-precept form is a rarity in Thailand, particularly in the

conservative North-East; so Sister Sanghamitta in her ochre robe has been mistaken for a boy novice at times. A few eyebrows have been raised when the 'novice' sits with womenfolk; however, Luang Por's disciples are held in great respect; and these are the Westerners. Such factors smooth over any misunderstandings when tradition is enriched by practice.

Today is a little special, although conforming to ancient tradition. It is the Observance Day, Wan Phra in Thai, Poya Day in Sri Lanka, or - if you use the Pali terms - the Uposatha Day. Such days, occurring on each lunar quarter day, were established as days for religious observance in Northern India before the time of the Buddha. They were days when people would observe the rituals and make sacrifices to the gods; and for such occasions a standard of moral conduct was adhered to by keeping the Eight Precepts, and symbolised by the wearing of white clothes.

On such days religious wayfarers, ascetics, and yogis (known collectively as samanas) would also meet to debate on spiritual themes, often with householders. The Buddha felt that at least two of these days - the full and new moons - would be suitable for his samana disciples to gather together. But the 'sons of the Sakyans' were great lovers of silence and meditation; householders received little instruction, and King Bimbisara questioned as to why they sat 'dumb, like hogs' while the wanderers of other sects expounded their doctrines the whole night long. "Monks, I allow you to talk on Dhamma, proclaimed the Buddha, and he later made such occasions the time for the Sangha to recite the Patimokkha - the principles of their training. It is from regular observances of this kind that the Buddha's samana disciples evolved from a wandering sect into a monastic order.

Nowadays in Thailand it is customary for devout Buddhist to take the Eight Precepts, wear white and spend the lunar quarter in their local monastery. The Sangha presents a focus for such observances by receiving alms, giving the Precepts and teaching Dhamma, while in many monasteries bhikkhus, nuns and laity will spend the night of the Wan Phra meditating together.

To idealise the lay people - or the monks - would be a falsehood, and it would take away some of the meaning of their practice. Encouraged by human beings' recognition of human fallibility, something gracious appears in the world: a shared occasion for reflecting on and fully comprehending selflessness. Even the less devout may come out and to give alms; or at least recognise the pre-eminence of the Holy Life. (I remember reading that on one Wesak Day, the most important Wan Phra of the year, the bars and parlours of Bangkok's notorious red-light district closed down for the day -well, 'Little by little is the water jar filled.') So Observance Days are the focal point of a relationship that uplifts the ideals of a society and keeps the religion in touch with the earth.

Having been travelling around the North-East for a month or so, I made a special determination to to get back to Nanachat for the Uposatha Day. A mixture of bus rides and short walks (walking is difficult for bhikkhus in the devout Isan; it's seldom that you can get more than a



kilometre before someone offers a ride) took me from Sakhon Nakorn to Ubon on the 12th in time to shave my head and exchange news with Ajahn Pasanno.

It was good to be back. Going to new places can give interesting reflections and present challenges, but for me the most useful practice occurs in the everyday and the normal. Nothing establishes my mind so much in the sense of the timeless norms of the Dhamma-Vinaya and the monastic life so well as the Patimokkha recitation and the all-night vigil. Observance Days make a lot of sense for people living in the 'go-out-and-grab-it-now world', but even in the contemplative life one needs that remainder to step back from particular events and problems and see them as just part of the flow of life.

The first signs of the Uposatha Day (apart from the freshly-shaven heads) is the presence of a lot more lay people in the monastery when we return from pindabaht around 7 a.m. There are always a few village women in the monastery at this time, preparing food to augment the pindabaht offerings, but on Wan Phra there must be more than thirty villagers in the big open-air kitchen near the sala. Some are clad completely in white, but most have at least a white shirt over their workaday clothes, or a simple white wrap or sash worn over the left shoulder. As usual, the women outnumber men fivefold.

As the food becomes ready, it is brought into the sala in one great enamel dish after another, for an hour or more, until everything and everyone is gathered together in the sala for the offering. The dishes are then handed one at a time up to the senior monk on the raised platform; he takes a spoonful of the food and passes it down the line of monks. This procedure goes on for up to thirty dishes, so it trains you to know the measure of how much you need. Thinking about it takes too long, and is always biased by under- or over-estimation. Left in silence, the eye is more astute judge.

This morning, Ajahn Pasanno has been called over to Wat Pah Pong on Sangha business, so I am the senior monk. This is fine as far as chanting a blessing goes, but obviously it will be Venerable Nyanadhammo on my left who will be giving the Dhamma talk. So when all the food has been passed out amongst the monastic community, Venerable Nyanadhammo leaves the platform, gets up into the Dhamma seat, gives the Eight Precepts and talks on Dhamma fluently for another half an hour. It's good to see an Australian bhikkhu and a group of Isan villagers - such cultural stragglers - gathered together around the Buddha's teaching. It's also nice to know that after years of meditation, sitting with your daily meal beside you for an hour observing the proceedings without understanding a word doesn't hurt a bit. Such are the small joys of practice - there will be many more, I'm sure.

The congregation of fifty villagers chant the morning puja in Thai and Pali while we eat, then go to the kitchen for their meal. When we have finished our meal, the junior monks and novices clean their own and the senior monks' alms bowls, and we all take part in a general sweep-up. After cleaning up the kitchen, some of the villagers go home; most rest, meditate or do minor chores; and towards noon the monastery becomes still. Except for Ajahn Pasanno - who has arrived back in the sala after the meal - the residents go back to their kutis and get an hour or two's rest. The Ajahn spends noon break talking with local villagers or visitors (today it's Sister Sanghamitta's parents); and he is still receiving guests in the sala when the afternoon work begins at 2.30. Then it's time to clean up the sala and haul water from the well to supply the numerous water jars that are set around the forest for washing purposes. And so the day proceeds.

At four o'clock we gather in the downstairs of the Ajahn's kuti for a hot drink before going over to Wat Pah Pong in an ex-Army truck. Luang Por Chah is critically ill, so it has become a regular practice for the Sangha to chant parittas outside his kuti. These visits offer us a clear reflection. To be reminded of frailty of existence - especially in the case of a beloved teacher - would be depressing if there were nothing beyond appearance; but the practice Ajahn Chah has exemplified looks directly through life's fragile surface to timeless peace. If you follow the teaching, there is serenity in the heart; if you don't, your eyes mist with tears.

We return to Nanachat, as quietly as the darkening evening. There is time to bathe and then the bhikkhus pair off to acknowledge and clear any transgressions of the discipline before the Patimokkha recitation. The Uposatha Hall is still in the process of being built, so the bhikkhus assemble upstairs in Ajahn Pasanno's kuti. The recitation takes between 45 minutes and an hour in conventional time; but for me each recitation is a summary of my life as a bhikkhu. In its chattering incomprehensible syllables, all personalities dissolve, and the group of monks becomes the Sangha; issues cool into material for contemplation; and after the recitation there's talk on the practice of the religious life. The Patimokkha is something you love as would a father, even when you feel exasperated by the rules, irritated by the personalities, and disheartened by your shortcomings. I think it takes a lot of people that way - certainly there is no shortage of bhikkhus who learn to recite it. That even Ajahn Pasanno talked on contentment with little; on the avoidance and abandoning of sorrow; and on the beauty of the Holy Life. I for one rejoiced at his words. They came from the heart and that's where they went.

Meanwhile, the lay congregation are waiting for the Ajahn to give them the evening Dhamma talk. While we were absent, they have chanted the evening chanting (in Pali and Thai) and are now sitting in meditation: our return cues one of the village men to request a desana. This time it's Ajahn Pasanno who responds by getting up into the Dhamma seat, and talk seems quite informal. He speaks rather slowly (understandable, considering he's been talking the better part of the day), but the people are pleased. There are pauses and gently laughter and remarks or questions coming back until nobody has anything more to say. Then the silence which has been drifting into the desana is finally acknowledged: the lamps dim; the cool and darkness of the night enters through the huge glassless windows; and the monks, wrapping their robes around them, turn into silhouettes.

At midnight things take shape around a hot drink. People come in from walking meditations; heads that were drooping pick up; the mind moves into functional mode. Just hold your mug out and the monk carrying the kettle fills it with something hot, sweet and brown. An enamelled plate with small slabs of cheese makes it way down the line. The monks lean back a little and rest their backs against the wall or gently stretch. Slowly and softly Ajahn Pasanno mentions playing a tape of a talk of Ajahn Sumedho's; a monk pads out and returns with a deck and some cassettes. How bright Ajahn Sumedho's voice is! For an hour in our dark night, the sala glows with warmth and light.

Then we are left alone in our minds, trying to leave our minds alone. When energy softens and subsides, the mind's focus blurs and contemplation gets tricky. Instinct looks for something to hold on to. There is the welcome firmness of the ground beneath my feet when I practise walking meditation; but sitting in the sala, the breath is too subtle; what to follow when it seems to fade out altogether?

When thoughts get fuzzy, who can know what they are doing? An inquiry weaves through the pattern of mind: snagged on patches of unkempt memory, challenged by renegade passions, turned aside by shambling dullness, it yet half remembers itself. The observing takes over. We persist, we practise patience; and even when the certainties mutiny, the ship remains on course. I kept opening my eyes to re-focus attention, and in those glimpses the inner

perspective is confirmed: though most are bobbing in their moorings, people are still afloat. A lone mosquito comes to keep me company and provides something to focus on - arm ...neck...wrist...cheek...But that goes too, and by 3 a.m. there's just patience and surrender; and something that would not exchange that peace for all the happiness in the world.

The bell sounds and nothing happens. At 4 a.m. we begin the morning chanting (in Pali and Thai), this time borne along by the congregation, as the voices climb and plunge - and occasionally blend. It's perhaps not the most melodious chanting (and my toes sing their own laments after forty minutes of kneeling on them): however, the spirit is harmonious, to put it kindly - and what more can ask for in the religious life? And how impeccably the lay people complete their observance! Led by one of the older men, they ask forgiveness from the Sangha for any wrong-doings or offences they may have caused, and then ask permission to leave the monastery. Another normal day is about to begin, and there is work to do ...Ajahn Pasanno says a few words, and the villagers pay their respects and leave. The Sangha sits on until dawn in a benevolent afterglow: thus, our observance is completed in harmony. On the human plane, at this time, everything is All Right.

As the light returns, we sweep up: everybody knows what to do. The junior bhikkhus and the novices come with their own and the senior bhikkhus' alms bowls. In threes and fours we go out for the alms. It's normal day. However, this evening there will be a fire lit in the monastery's sauna.

Being human has its special joys.



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The Great Vehicle and the Elders' Way

Towards the end of 1989 several bhikshus from the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, a large Mahayana monastery in the USA, came to visit Wat Pah Pong during a teaching tour of Asia. They were introduced to Ajahn Liam, the acting abbot since the onset of Tan Ajahn Chah's sickness, and the following is a brief account of the exchange between them. The monastery from which they come is noted for its strict standard of discipline and for the use of the dhutangas (bitter or austere practices), as skilful means for the cultivation of the Path.

'Austerities are valuable, they help us to strengthen our resolution to refrain from worldly ways and they encourage us to develop energy. With those practices which give rise to a lot of endurance, however - like the "sitter's practice", where one refrains from ever lying down - one has to be very careful not to allow different sorts of craving to affect them and thus cause them to deteriorate. Endurance is a very important virtue but it is a "hard" virtue, and a "hard" virtue like this has to be balanced by a "soft" virtue. The softness, gentleness and refinement of the wisdom faculty is that which has to govern austere practices at every stage. This enables us to always remember what the purpose of austerity is: the overall aim is freedom from suffering.

Sila is the basis and virtues, such as filial piety, act as a foundation for samatha and vipassana meditation.

'There is a need for us to establish the criteria for what is, and what is not Dhamma-Vinaya. One of criteria is that any dhamma which leads to craving, or even a "colouring" of the mind, is not Dhamma, is not Vinaya. It is easy, when one is doing very strict practices, for our efforts to become affected, "coloured" by vibhavatanha - to try to be rid of, or to annihilate defilements.

'It is thus important for us to notice any desire to become, or any desire to get rid of, as these can easily distort our practice; for of course there are defilements of strict practice - looking down on people who are not as strict as oneself, for example.

'The conditioning process which disables us from penetrating the nature of Dhamma can take many forms. The Venerable Ananda's practice, for example, was always influenced by the Buddha's forecast that he would definitely attain arhantship in this present life. Therefore, when he was putting forth effort meditating that memory would be there, so of course he was never actually able to let go. It was only when he was able to completely put that down and be in the present moment, that he could be free himself.'

Ajahn Liam then asked them, 'What are the principles of your practice?' Heng Chi replied, 'Sila

is the basis and virtues, such as filial piety, act as a foundation for samatha and vipassana meditation.' Heng Shun (who, incidentally, had been a novice at Wat Bovornives and had spent time with Ajahn Pasanno at Wat Pleng many years before) then went on to talk about the four Bodhisattva Vows, which are:

*'Living beings are numberless - I vow to save them all.

*'Defilements are limitless - I vow to cut them all off.

*'The Dharma doors are endless - I vow to enter them all.

*'Enlightenment is supreme - I vow to attain it.'

When this was translated for him, Ajahn Liam then said, 'This is good, but someone with a lot of meeta like that tends to suffer heavily - if one is not very careful meeta can cause one a great deal of pain, again necessarily so if the wisdom faculty is lacking.'

He then went on to say, 'There are different emphases or motivations in Buddhist practice but, effectively, the Theravada and Mahayana approaches don't really differ - they are both concerned with the mind in the present moment. It's very important to remember that everything arises from Mind, and that a practice based on compassion which neglects that fact will just cause one a lot of suffering. With the fact that everything arises from Mind, whether one's motivation is saving all sentient beings or creating ultimate benefit for oneself and for others (as is more the Theravada formulation), in actuality one is doing more or less the same thing: putting forth effort to identify and remove unwholesome mental states, bringing into being and perfecting wholesome mental states, purifying the mind.'

The bhikshus were very impressed by this, and said that it corresponded with the teachings in the Surangama and Avatamsaka Suttas.

Originally translated and recounted by Venerable Jayasaro.



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Almsround in Britain

In Britain, the almsround is hardly a means of gathering food; nor, a few loyal supporters excepted, is it a response to householders' desire to make offerings to the Sangha. Still, as Sister Viveka points out, it is a purposeful feature of the monastic day.

Although it is frequently only symbolic here in the West, we still walk on almsround. It can be quite lovely walking through the Hertfordshire countryside. This area has a certain gentle beauty with its small hills and ancient woodland, and has a myriad of footpaths which seem to be well-marked. I like to go out as often as possible and walk for a couple of hours.

It is a satisfying thing to have done with your morning: having finished cleaning up, we collect everything we will need for the meal - sitting cloth, spoon, knife, lap-cloth - and leave them by the places where we will eat the meal. Then, bowing to the shrine, we arrange our outer robes over both shoulders and leave the monastery in single file. We try to walk unhurriedly (save those occasions when the time is miscalculated and we are late back!), often keeping to the footpaths rather than the busy roads.

as sight meets unfamiliar objects and views, the mind
seems to become naturally expansive and accepting.

Personally, I find that walking has a good effect on the mind, as well as the body. As we live a fairly sedentary life, this form of exercise can be very helpful: the natural rhythm of the body walking has a calming effect on any lurking mental preoccupations. After a while things slow right down, and it is easier to be attentive to the sky meeting the horizon, fields of corn, the forest greens, the sound of the wind, the pressure of your feet walking....

One favourite walk is to Little Gaddesden Church, a few miles away. This place is a sanctuary, a place of stillness. Greeted by this note on the porch:

Visitors:

You are welcome in God's House

Please feel free to put on the lights...

If you are thirsty you will find squash in the vestry

Please help yourself (no charge) and rest there

May God bless your visit

...we always feel welcomed by such an open-hearted invitation. To be able to sit in the church for a few moments seems a gift of communion with spiritual

seekers from a different religion. It's a reminder that the movement towards goodness is an integral part of human societies, although the forms taken by that movement vary dramatically.

Theravadin Buddhism is essentially nomadic, and the Thai forest tradition from which our Sangha has grown adheres to this quite closely - keeping up the practices of tudong wandering and almsround. Long walks give one a slight taste of this aspect of our inheritance. It is delightful to explore, and as sight meets unfamiliar objects and views, the mind seems to become naturally expansive and accepting. Walking with one or two other nuns several miles away from Amaravati, where people don't necessarily know who or what we are, and we have nothing but our alms bowls and robes with us, the vulnerability of being an alms mendicant in a non-Buddhist country also becomes more apparent. We've had a few adventures: I got bitten by a mischievous foal one morning; another nun was bitten by a dog, and cows - especially young bullocks - love to chase walkers, it seems. So far, thankfully, the bulls have regarded us with disinterest.



I've felt a growing appreciation of our immediate environment - a greater sense of belonging to this area - arise from getting to know it better. From comments made by local people, our walking through the countryside seems to provide an interweaving between a monastic tradition, which can appear puzzling to onlookers, and the peacefulness which is characteristic of the Buddhist discipline. Rather than being 'those strange people up there' we are suddenly accessible - just walking along.

Of course, pindapada in this country is not limited to this type of wandering. Many supporters of Amravati invite monks or nuns to walk to their homes, to talk about Dhamma over a cup of tea. Such invitations take us into the towns of Hemel Hempstead and Berkhamsted, both within walking distance. Pindapada to Hemel Hempstead is a good walk; depending on who you're going to visit, it can take two hours or so. Walking through the Marlowes, Hemel's High Street, on Sunday morning provides a very different view of Hertfordshire. On the morning after Saturday night, Marlowes is a desolate realm holding echoes of fruitless searches for fulfillment. The streets, void of people but littered with empty beer cans and wrappers from Wimpy Bars, present what is most hollow in our society. It leaves a lingering sadness. It is quite a contrast when we arrive at John and Angela's house to join their Sunday morning family. After such a waste-land, it is gladdening to know that there are people who find joy in being able to support others, and in investigating the nature of our human existence.



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Question Time

Ajahn Jagaro is the abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery, Serpentine, Western Australia.

Question: In terms of my lifetime, it's relative permanence that will count, not absolute. For example, a brick is unlikely to break down in my lifetime, so one can assume it's permanent.

Ajahn Jagaro: You are assuming that the brick will last for the rest of your life. This is where the problem arises, because things are not reliable, there is no 'permanent'. In our quest for happiness, we are continually frustrated, because it is not for the rest of our lives. It's not for one life; it's quite often not for one moment.

Look at anything ...like relationships, your body, your health. I could say, 'Well, OK, my body's impermanent, but if it lasts for this lifetime it'll be good enough!' sure, it's good enough, but it doesn't just do that; it's breaking down, it gets sick, it gets old. And with relationships: we can think, 'It's all right. Everything is impermanent, but we'll be in love for the rest of our life. We'll die at exactly the same moment and blissfully for the rest of our time.' But you know it doesn't work out like that. One party gets bored, the other doesn't - relationships often don't last.

If there was something truly permanent, you could at
least hold onto that!

Material things, certainly, they don't last. There is no guarantee that they will last for even one moment. You may think this building's going to last - it's impermanent, but it's going to last for another twenty years - but you don't know. We're building a monastery in Serpentine, and we're building it as well as we can with the idea of making it last. But at the back of my mind I always have what they call the perception of impermanence. During summer, it would only take on really hot day, one careless match somewhere in that vicinity, and whooom - there goes the monastery! And we'd all start again from the scratch. It's not necessarily going to last my lifetime, that monastery. Things are flux, change - there is no guarantee for any length of time. Life is but one moment.

If there was something truly permanent, you could at least hold onto that!. But you too are permanent. Your body's impermanence, your perceptions are impermanent, your thoughts are impermanent. Everything is inter-related. However, our desire is to seek for security, and that is where the crux of the matter lies, that's where the frustration arises. Psychologically, emotionally, we are unable to accept the truth of impermanence. We are operating from this firm conviction that there must be permanence. That is our frustration, that is our suffering. Knowing it intellectually doesn't help. It does not bring about a radical change in being.

Q:If everything is 'not self', what is reborn? Just the conditions?

A: It is a flow, a process of causes and results. It is operating now. You ask what is there to be reborn; I ask you what here now? Who is here now? If you can tell me what is here now, that is what is going to happen at rebirth. The way we describe rebirth is very similar to what is happening now: a condition of causal arising, in other words, a present condition. At this moment, this physical/mental state is the result of the past. The past has still got potential to express. Our volition in the present acts with the potential from the past to create the next moment, the future. So there is a dynamic process operating. At the moment of the death of the body it cannot be a vehicle any more, it is breaking down. The mind and mental faculties also break down, but in the mind there is this basic drive, a desire to experience gratification. There is the conviction that there can be gratification. So in the last conscious moment, this desire driven by ignorance is still there. The body can't operate, but this desire conditions the next conscious moment in a new body.



Q: If there was no desire there would be no rebirth?

A: If there was no desire there would be no rebirth.

Q: What happens if someone commits suicide?



A: That person wants to escape from the preset conditions, which are so awful that they feel that they can't cope. They want to end it all but, unfortunately, it doesn't end, it just starts again. Nothing is lost because the new conscious moment is conditioned by the past, and within it are the imprints of all the previous tendencies, kammic tendencies. The moment of the present is conditioned by the past.

Q: Before you started the session, you bowed down. What are the reasons for doing this?

A: The teaching of the Buddha is not really to do with superstition, ceremonial ritual sacrifices of any sort. It is based on reason, logic and understanding. However, form, like anything we do, is a convention. Take the example of shaking hands. You could say: 'Look at that superstitious practice these Western people have. They have to shake hands all the time.' It is a custom. Now, in the time of the Buddha they did not have Buddha statues. These came into existence about three or four hundred years after the Buddha, I think. The purpose of a statue is to act as a reminder. It is not a Buddha. No statue, no body, no matter, could ever become Buddha. No conditioned thing can be Buddha.

So this statue is just brass, not sacred. It is a symbol, though - just like a picture of your wife when you see it brings up certain feelings, depending upon what sort of relationship you have! And so what I see this statue, I reflect on the Buddha: the person who lived 2500 years ago, what he did, how he lived, the impeccable person, the peaceful person, the compassionate person. I have a sense of gratitude, respect, for that being.

Also, I can consider the Buddha as the quality Buddha - wisdom, that quality which is within myself to be realised, to be cultivated. And again I have inspiration to work towards. Then I bow three times as a way of paying respect. It is not worshipping anything. It is paying respect to the historical Buddha and to the Buddha within.

The second value of it, which is even more important in many ways, is an act of humility. Being able to humble yourself: to get this thing that we hold up so much, that is so much associated with me, that is what we relate ourselves to - and put it on the ground. There is

humility in being able to bow to another - be it the memory of the Buddha, or to another monk - and humility is very good.

The third and very important reason for the exercise is one of mindfulness, or collecting oneself. I've just been talking to people, doing things. When I come into this room, I stop - physically stop, verbally stop, mentally stop. I bring my mind into my body, collect myself, and then I bow mindfully - mind and body together, a silent bow. Just three bows has a wonderful effect for calming the mind, stilling the mind. So that it is an exercise in mindfulness and centring oneself. So I centre myself before I begin to talk again, or before I meditate, before I undertake other activities.

So bowing serves three purposes: as a way of paying respect, for humility, and for centring oneself in the practice of mindfulness.



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EDITORIAL

Advance is Based on Retreat

We begin this newsletter with the account of a new vihara opening in Italy. This comes as a surprise, it is a happy one and a fitting way of supporting the aspirations of Buddhists in Italy. There are those who will assume that Ajahn Sumedho is trying to accumulate a monastic empire, but actually this is far from the case: our efforts to slow things down and keep our ventures within limits are so constant that we even win the reputation of being rather stingy and unco-operative! One has to keep reminding people that we need a good presence in the monasteries to keep them functioning, and that monks and nuns generally don't teach for their first five years in the Sangha, to ensure that their wisdom is matured and held with the humility of anatta.

It is a similar story with publications. It was interesting to note that the books of Venerable Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho have been, or are being, translated into Italia. There are also editions in German and French, and a constant stream of requests for articles, and books to be produced. I expect much the same story prevails in any Buddhist organisation. One comes to the simple conclusion that the world is indeed hungry for Dhamma, a Dhamma that has been experienced personally in this life and human form.

Devotion and service are a time-honoured training of the heart in the spiritual life, not purely reserved for samanās but available to all.

Seen in this light, the Winter Retreat is actually part of the Sangha's offering to the world. When the activities die down and conversation ceases, there is a chance for the mind to see very clearly into its own nature: compassionate service is based very accurately on the foundation of relinquishment of self. The two are necessary alternate faces of the same coin. This deepening insight into anatta is the proper way to establish the Dhamma and Sangha. Then the motivation is not based on missionary zeal but rather on a willingness to add whatever little one can to this Way out of Suffering.

Despite the suffering of the world in general, one certainly sees the best side of human nature in a monastery. Apart from the efforts of fellow samanās, one derives a lot of inspiration from the commitment of the lay people who come to look after the Sangha during such retreats. The lay people, for their part, are very grateful for the opportunity to help the Sangha, and they comment on its benefits. Devotion and service are a time-honoured training of the heart in the spiritual life, not purely reserved for samanās but available to all. It is so joyous and peaceful to be able to give oneself to the Triple Gem. That is where we find our true advancements: in turning back from conceit and views, and from the demands of the me and mine.

Ajahn Sucitto

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Buddha Word

*'The Great Lion's Roar to the Udumbarikans,' verse 23
 from Thus Have I heard, the Digha Nikaya as translated by Maurice Walshe (Wisdom
 Publication).*

Nigrodha, you may think: 'The ascetic Gotama says this in order to get disciples.' But you should not regard it like that. Let him who is your teacher remain your teacher. Or you may think: 'He wants us to abandon our rules.' But you should not regard it like that. Let your rules remain as they are. Or you may think: 'He wants us to abandon our way of life.' But you should not regard it like that.

Let your way of life remain as it was. Or you may think: 'He wants us to establish us in doing of things that according to our teaching are wrong, and are so considered among us.' But you should not regard it like that. Let those things you consider wrong continue to be so considered. Or you may think: 'He wants us to draw us away from things that according to our teaching are good, and are so considered among us.' But you should not regard it like that. Let whatever you consider right continue to be so considered. Nigrodha, I do not speak for any of these reasons ...



If you practice accordingly, these tainted things will
 be abandoned, and the things that make for
 purification will develop and grow.

There are, Nigrodha, unwholesome things that have not been abandoned, tainted, conducive to rebirth, fearful, productive of painful results in the future, associated with birth, decay and death. It is for abandonment of these things that I teach Dhamma. If you practice accordingly, these tainted things will be abandoned, and the things that make for purification will develop and grow, and you will attain to and dwell, in this very life, by your own insights and realisation, in the fullness of perfected wisdom.



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OBITUARY

Venerable Dr. H. Saddhatissa: a memorial

Venerable Dr. Hammalawa Saddhatissa Mahanayaka Thera passed away, aged 76, on February 13th this year, (1990) and was cremated at the orth London Crematorium on February 17th, 1990. Although personally he had not wanted any ceremony, such an event was inevitable at the funeral of Britain's most senior bhikkhu. Dr. Saddhatissa had received upasampada in Sri Lanka in 1926 and had been resident in the U.K., mostly at the London Buddhist Vihara, since 1957.



The Venerable Mahanayaka was a scholar of distinction, having served as either professor or lecturer at the universities of Benares, London, Toronto and Oxford, as well as being president of the British Mahabodhi Society and member of the executive council of the Pali Text Society. We remember his gentleness and humility, and his willingness to serve the sansana. Here is an extract from his translation of the Sutta Nipata, published by Curzon Press.

10: PURABHEDA SUTTA 'Qualities of a Muni (Sage)'

1 'Gotama, sir,' a questioner said to the Buddha, 'I want to ask you about the perfect man. There are those people whom we call "men who are calmed" - can you tell me how they see things and how they behave?'

2 'A man who is calmed, who has extinguished all his cravings before the time his body disintegrates into nothing, who has no concern with how things began or with how they will end and no fixation with what happens in between: such a man has no preferences.

Nothing disturbs his composure and nothing gives him
cause for regret. He is the wise man who is restrained in
speech.

3 'He has no anger, no fear and no pride. Nothing disturbs his composure and nothing gives him cause for regret. He is the wise man who is restrained in speech.

4 'He has no longing for the future and no grief for the past; there are no views or opinions that lead him. He can see detachment from the entangled world of sense impressions.

5 'He does not conceal anything and there is nothing that he holds on to. Without acquisitive or envy, he remains unobtrusive; he has no disdain or insult for anyone.

6 'He is not a man who is full of himself, or a man who is addicted to pleasure; he is a man who

is gentle and alert, with no blind faith; he shows no aversion [to anything].

7 'He is not a person who works because he wants something; if he gets nothing at all he remains unperturbed. There is no craving to build up the passion to taste new pleasures.

8 'His mindfulness holds him posed in a constant even-mindedness where arrogance is impossible; he makes no comparisons with the rest of the world as "superior", "inferior" or "equal".

9 'Because he understands the Way Things Are, he is free from dependency and there is nothing he relies on. For him there is no more craving to exist or not to exist.

10 'This is what I call a man who is calmed. It is a man who does not seek after pleasure, who has nothing to tie him down, who has gone beyond the pull of attachment.

11 'It is a man without sons, a man without wealth, without fields, without cows - a man with nothing in him that he grasps at as his, and nothing in him that he rejects as not his.

12 'He is a man who receives false criticisms from other people, from priests and hermits, but who remains undisturbed and unmoved by their words.

13 'It is a man without greed and without possessiveness; it is a man who, as a man of wisdom, does not consider himself "superior", "inferior" or "equal". It is a man who does not enter speculation, a man who is free from speculations.

14 'It is a man who has nothing in this world that he calls his own and who does not grieve for not having anything. He is calmed who does not take speculative views.'

Sister Thaniya

