



# FOREST SANGHA

## newsletter

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## Emptiness and Pure Awareness

Ajahn Amaro

All of us, the Buddha included, are faced with the inevitable presence of dissatisfaction and physical discomfort. Ever present is the danger of pain and disease - because we are born. Because there is a physical birth there must be physical decay: the two have to go together. Thus our only true refuge is the Deathless - that which is not subject to disease, not subject to defilement, not subject to time or to limitation - that which is unsupported. So returning to our source, the Deathless, is our only way to cure disease, the only way to pass beyond it.

This returning to the Source, or realising the Deathless, is the sense of coming to know the source and origin of our life. Because it is the very basis of our existence it has been exerting a power of attraction on us all throughout our life - this is the attraction of Truth, of the Real, the completely satisfying, the completely safe.

When we are children we function on the instinctual level, so that spiritual attraction becomes focussed on, or sublimated by food and warmth, comfort and toys. Although that whole pull has fundamentally been a spiritual motivation, it subsequently gets sidetracked by the search for material security, or for permanent happy relationships.

However, these things don't complete the picture; they are not really sustainable as our support, since they are impermanent. Also, the heart knows it has not gone the whole way; it is as if you are trying to make a journey to a distant place, but you take a detour and get caught up in interesting things along the way. It is only when you finally get to your destination that there is feeling of, "Ah, now we are home, now we are safe, now everything is okay." When you are side-tracked, there is a feeling lingering in your heart, "Well, there is a bit further to go." Or, "This is all very interesting, but, hmm, there is something missing here. There is something not quite right, not quite true, not quite final here."

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## the Goal, the mind goes blank trying to get hold of it.

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The attraction towards Truth is fundamental. It is the living law that rules the universe: the attraction towards reality, the basic fabric of all being. Once we are attuned to this pull and have realised its spiritual nature, once we have picked up the idea that life is fundamentally and completely a spiritual activity, the task is much easier and the realisation of the Goal becomes inevitable. The tendency to get side-tracked is diminished and the knowing of the true nature of the Goal calls us on - encouraging and inspiring us to keep going.

When we talk about the Deathless, or the Absolute, or the Goal, or the Other Shore, the mind goes blank trying to get hold of it. Even in the way we speak about Nibbana: "cooling down" - "coolness" - we don't use any dramatic or emotive term. We talk about "emptiness" - the realisation of Absolute Truth - we describe the realisation of the non-conceptual pure mind as "the ultimate emptiness".

The reason for that kind of terminology is not because there is nothing there, but because when the conceptual mind tries to grasp ultimate reality - which can't be formed into a pattern - it finds that there is no thing there. It is like picking up a book in Chinese if you can't read Chinese. Here is a book, perhaps full of profound and wonderful teachings and pure truths, but you can't read the script so it's meaningless. This is like the conceptual mind trying to grasp Ultimate Truth, the nature of the Godhead. The thinking mind says, "Well what is it?", "How do you describe it?", "Where is it?", "Am I it?", "Am I not it?" - it gropes for some kind of handle. The thinking mind falls flat, just like trying to read a book in Chinese when one only knows English.

The experience of Ultimate Truth can be described as "emptiness" because, to the conceptual mind, it has no form; but, to the non-conceptual wisdom mind, the realisation of Truth is like the Truth seeing itself. When there is no identification, no sense of self whatsoever, the mind rests pure and still, simply aware of its own nature - the Dhamma aware of its own nature. There is a realisation that everything is Dhamma; but that realisation is non-verbal, non-conceptual, so the conceptual mind calls it empty. But to itself, its real nature is apparent, it is understood. This is the source of our life, the basis of our reality.

Our world of people and things, of doing this and of doing that, is called the world of manifestation, the conditioned or sensory world. The Buddha taught in terms of the relationship between these two: the unconditioned and the conditioned; the ultimate and the relative; samutti sacca and paramatha sacca; conventional truth and ultimate truth. A lot of Buddhist practice is about learning to understand the relationship between these two aspects of what is.

When we see clearly, when we have a realisation of the Unconditioned, what flows forth in terms of conditions is harmonious and beautiful. What is beautiful and harmonious helps to lead the mind back to the Uncreated. Religious acts, teachings, works of art, are designed to be pure and harmonious forms which draw the mind back to the silence, the stillness - that purity which lies behind all things. As in the chanting that we do: even though the sound itself is quite beautiful, its real importance is that it leads the mind to an apprehension of the



silence of Ultimate Truth which lies behind and permeates the sound. This is why certain pieces of music or works of art stop the mind, or fill the heart with warmth and light, a feeling of blessedness and beauty. It's a religious experience. The experience of all true art is essentially religious . That is what it is for.

One witnesses the same thing with relationships. If we try to find a completely satisfying relationship just on the external level of personality, then all we get is an outpouring of selfhood. We get our projections of how the other person should behave, or what they should be like to make 'me' happy.

One sees this not just in a romantic relationship, but also in monastic life - particularly within the relationship between a disciple and their teacher. You find that if you have got very fixed ideas about the teacher - what they should be like, what they should say, what they should do and shouldn't do - it is very much divided up into "me and them". Then you end up feeling terribly pleased and enthusiastic about being connected with this person, when they say all the things that you like and they compliment you. You also get filled with terrible irritation and disappointment, hurt feelings and anger, when they don't do the things that you like or they upset your image of them. Intense devotion and affection very easily goes into intense violence and destruction.

In the Greek myths, Aphrodite and Aries were lovers, even though they were the goddess of love and the god of war. This is very indicative of the human condition in that passion easily goes into either attraction or aversion; when one doesn't see clearly, it can easily go either way. They say that 90% of all murders have some kind of sexual aspect, which is a pretty astonishing statistic. But you can see why - when we have very definite expectations or feelings about each other and it remains stuck on a personal level, then we have to end up in dissatisfaction of some sort. This is because true satisfaction can only come by seeing that which is beyond personality, beyond the sense of 'me' and 'you'.

In a sense, devotion to a teacher or a guru, or being in love, are all religious experiences. The devotional practices we follow generate a sense of love, and in that sense of love we lose identity, we lose the sense of 'me'. In romantic love, too, we forget ourselves because we are completely absorbed in the 'Other'. The 'Other' becomes supremely important and the sense of

'I' vanishes. The blissful feeling of being in love is almost religious, there is no sense of self, there is apparently perfect happiness.

That happiness is conditioned, it depends on the presence of the other, or their abiding interest, or whatever. But at the moment of pure romantic contact, then the sense of self vanishes, and there is bliss. In 'Gone With the Wind', the moment that Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler kiss is very interesting; it is described something like this: "All she knew was that everything vanished. The world vanished, he and she vanished, all there was was total bliss and a great sound roaring in her ears" - which is a very common description of mystical experiences! So one sees, on the level of personal relationship, that when there is a complete abandonment of the sense of 'I', it takes us - at least momentarily - to that place of unification and contentment, to perfection.

The religious path is a way of taking the possibility of realising perfect happiness or fullness of being, and making it an ever-present and independent actuality - which isn't dependent on the presence of the teacher or the presence of the beloved, or a kind word or good health or anything. It is founded completely on mindfulness, wisdom and purity of heart. It is not just an ecstatic experience, dependent on drugs or romance or even an experience of a wonderful piece of music or work of art. When that experience is founded on spiritual qualities and is independent of the sensory world, then we experience unshakeability. Otherwise, even though that experience is there and for a moment there is complete transportation, there is also the inevitable shadow of, "This isn't going to last. This is wonderful now, but I have to go home after the concert, ... I have to leave, ... have to go to work, ... have to eat, ... have to do something".

That is why this is a difficult path. To establish the unshakeable happiness means we have to be ready to leave all of the 'secondary' happiness on one side. We have to grow out of our old skins, like a reptile or an insect grows out of its old skins and leaves them behind. In our life, we have to keep sustaining this sense of being ready to leave behind the old - not hanging on to our old skins, our old identities, our old achievements and attachments.

When an insect or a reptile leaves its skin behind, for that moment it is very fragile, vulnerable; its new skin is soft, very delicate. It takes time for it to harden and become strong. It's the same for us in our spiritual development; when we leave something behind, when we let something go, there is a feeling of relief: "Oh, glad I'm out of that one." But then, with laying down the protection of our 'self', there is a sense of vulnerability, of being open to the way life actually is.

We are making ourselves open and sensitive to the entire vast nature of life, the universe, to whatever can be experienced by us. So we can feel fear or hesitation: "Oh, I think I'll just climb back into my old skin. It doesn't fit and it's falling to bits but at least I can climb back in there, so I'll be covered up and protected." But we realise in our heart that we can't do this. We can't get back into the clothes that we wore when we were five years old - no way. There might be one or two things, like a scarf or a little bracelet or something that we had, but we realise that it's impossible to keep dragging along all our old identities, our loves and our attachments, our problems, our trials and our pains.

We find that it can be hard for us to leave behind the things that we like, but sometimes being parted from the things that make us suffer is even more difficult. A wise teacher once said, "You can take away anything from people, except for their suffering - they will cling onto that until death".

But we realise that in actuality we have to let everything go. No matter how reasonable it is to long for something, to bemoan something or to feel pain over something - we have to leave it

all behind, we can't go back to it. As we grow up we learn that the best thing - the only real way to go - is to face that sense of vulnerability, of being open to the unknown. The unknown is frightening. When we don't know, when the thinking mind can't get itself around an experience, when it can't describe, or name, or pigeonhole what's happening, then we experience fear - because of the sense of self.

The unknown is frightening as long as there is the sense of self. When we face the unknown and abandon selfhood, then it changes from being frightening to being mysterious and full of wonder. The mind is left in a state of wonder rather than terror. This is the transmutation that liberates and it is our path.

## The Man Who Moved Animals

by: *Carol Sherman*

*This poem is offered in memory of  
Houn Cuthbert Juettner F.O.B.C,  
who was a Buddhist monk in the  
Soto Zen tradition at Shasta  
Abbey, California, for ten years.  
On November 8th, 1991, he was  
killed by a truck in a hit and run  
accident.*

Small heaps of fur  
on the side of the road:  
Cats, dogs, coons, possums.  
They ate, drank, scurried about  
Till the cataclysm -  
The thud of steel on flesh.  
At the moment life left their bodies  
They were alone.

One man, bald and robed,  
Tended to their remains,  
Stopping at the side of the road  
To move the bodies  
And say a blessing,  
To send them off with ceremony.  
In Montana, they called him  
The Man Who Moved Animals.

If I tell you

That he died suddenly  
The thud of steel on flesh  
His bicycle bent and twisted  
His glasses flying off his face  
Whirling in the gusts  
of karmic coincidence  
The sweetness of his smile  
Hovering at the side of the road  
Blessing the distraught driver,  
you would say  
it couldn't be.



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## Ajahn Gunhah: A Profile

Venerable Chandako

A noted disciple of Luang Por Chah who is gaining respect in his own right as a teacher is his nephew, Venerable Ajahn Gunhah. At age 44, with 27 years as a monk, he is part of a new generation of up-and-coming meditation masters in the Thai forest tradition.

A noted disciple of Luang Por Chah who is gaining respect in his own right as a teacher is his nephew, Venerable Ajahn Gunhah. At age 44, with 27 years as a monk, he is part of a new generation of up-and-coming meditation masters in the Thai forest tradition. Ajahn Gunhah has something to offer nearly everyone. Half of the year he spends the greater part of each day sitting in a bamboo chair receiving guests, answering questions and chatting with his monks and nuns. If no one else is around he simply sits. His round and pudgy body shakes as he giggles, smiles and jokes with those around him. Radiating peace and loving-kindness his compassionate eyes penetrate to the heart. He is soft, gentle and motherly.

The other half of the year Ajahn Gunhah is on tudong - walking barefoot around the country. Displaying physical stamina and an ability to persevere through hardship, he has been going tudong every year since he was ordained. When he leaves on these spiritual wanderings he takes most of the monastery with him, and each year the number of his disciples increases. After Luang Por Chah's funeral he left on foot followed by 62 others. Unperturbed by heat, rain, pain or sometimes scarcity of food (boiled banana stems for a month), Ajahn Gunhah is tough and disciplined.

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As if knowing the hearts of his disciples, he directs each person according to their individual tendencies.

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Ajahn Gunhah is a traditionalist in that he strictly observes the dhutanga practices - ascetic practices recommended by the Buddha - and closely follows the simple and reclusive lifestyle of a forest monk. Yet he is quite innovative in his methods of training. He and his disciples are all vegetarians and caffeine-free. It is Ajahn Gunhah's combination of equanimity and serene composure in the face of hardship and his nurturing compassion that attracts others, arouses respect and brings out the best in his disciples.

Whether sitting in his bamboo chair receiving guests hour after hour or enduring through some extremely trying situations on tudong, what most arouses admiration in his disciples is the extent of his even-temperedness. His joyful expression seems constant. They say he never shows any signs of fatigue, impatience or drowsiness. One rains retreat he resolved not to sleep or lie down, only resting by entering deep states of samadhi (concentration). For three

months without sleep he was not once seen to nod or yawn.

Ajahn Gunhah rarely gives a Dhamma talk, yet he is known as a great teacher. Setting an impeccable example, he teaches informally with an economy of well-timed words in a simple and direct way. On tudong, he will push people to their limits, or creatively frustrate their desire for comfort. As if knowing the hearts of his disciples, he directs each person according to their individual tendencies.

"We were born for enlightenment, so don't let anything make you hot and bothered. We can't blame anyone else - we wanted to be born. Stay with the Knowing and let the mind be calm, happy and peaceful. Whatever it is, watch it pass away. However, trying to develop insight without samadhi is like trying to cut down a tree with a razor blade. It's sharp but only when combined with the weight of an axe can the tree be cut down. Make your mind serene and don't look too far ahead or you will step on a thorn. Let your mind be cool Sabaay Sabaay.\*"

The external conditions of Ajahn Gunhah's monastery are cramped, crowded and next to a busy railroad line; yet due to the atmosphere he creates, many people still find it a tranquil place to practise. This is achieved by encouraging a minimum of talking and socialising. During chores, often the monks simply gesture to each other when communication is necessary. Eating, bowing and bowl washing are done slowly and quietly. Daily events are carefully orchestrated and well organised with an attention to detail. Demonstrating respect to monastic seniority is used as a tool for cultivating humility, and the interwoven roles of the community flow harmoniously with a refined politeness. There is an air of cool serenity pervading the monastery. In such an atmosphere of trust and compassion it feels safe to let go of the defences, barriers and constructs of the self.

What did this rotund and robust Ajahn do before he became a monk? He was a jockey! Ajahn Gunhah said he was successful because he had no fear of dying. Riding bareback he wouldn't hold on but would slap the sides of the horse with both hands. He also worked as a village medic giving medical care to prostitutes. Because of this experience, dispassion arose towards the world. He had always wanted to ordain from an early age but



his father had continually forbidden it. Ajahn Gunhah said this was his greatest suffering.

Once, while alone on tudong in 1981, Ajahn Gunhah had arranged to meet up with disciples of his at Langklaburi near the Burmese border. It was two weeks before the beginning of the Rains Retreat and the monsoon rains had already begun. He needed to traverse well over a hundred kilometers through the extensive jungles and mountains of Tung Yai Wildlife Reserve. He knew he would have to travel many days without encountering any village where he could go on alms round to obtain food. There are no paths or roads through this region. He had no map, but by using a compass and following elephant trails he aimed for a range of high mountains in the distance. He frequently came across wild animals and, while walking through a tract of high grass, a tiger suddenly crossed his path close enough to touch. "Stop! Stop!" he called out. The tiger stopped, then startled, bounded away.

For seven days Ajahn Gunhah fasted and continued walking. "Surviving only on samadhi", he carried on until he came upon the tracks of a domesticated water buffalo. Following the tracks he saw a Karen hill-tribesman gutting a barking deer he had shot. Ajahn Gunhah asked him where he lived but he didn't speak Thai. Using sign language the Karen motioned for Ajahn Gunhah to follow him. He led him to a grass shack and disappeared.

Half an hour later he returned with a group of armed communist guerrillas - Thai students who were battling the government forces. They immediately assumed Ajahn Gunhah was a spy in monk's garb and began interrogating him. Repeatedly cross-examining him in an attempt to expose his supposed undercover mission, they asked how long he'd been walking. "Seven days."

"Where are your supplies?"

"I have none."

"What trail did you come on?"

"I followed no trail but simply cut through the wilderness."

"How can that be? This entire area is a minefield!"

By this time the communists were not so sure Ajahn Gunhah actually was a spy. Since it was still before noon they ordered the Karen to boil the innards of the barking deer - a delicacy - and offer it with some plain rice to the monk. Ajahn Gunhah responded that it was his personal practice to eat only vegetarian food and that plain rice would be enough. Surprised and impressed, they gathered some forest vegetables to offer him.

After the meal the communists escorted him under guard to their main camp. The series of sentries and lookouts used birdcalls to communicate with each other. They passed through hundreds of acres of rice paddies - enough to feed a large army - until arriving at the main camp where he was again interrogated by rebel leaders. Ajahn Gunhah told them he was a disciple of Ajahn Chah.

"Ajahn Chah is O.K." they replied. "He teaches people to have wisdom and doesn't try to delude the people by handing out magic amulets like some monks."

Ajahn Gunhah simply spread metta the entire time he was captive. When they finally believed he was indeed an authentic monk they agreed to release him on the condition he wouldn't disclose their whereabouts. He again was escorted through minefields with a guard in front and behind. Upon reaching the edge of the minefield the soldiers told him he could go free. As Ajahn Gunhah walked off they called out for him to stop. They ran up, put down their guns, took off their boots and bowed three times. They asked him if he wouldn't please consent to spend the Rains Retreat with them. Ajahn Gunhah replied he was sorry but his disciples would be very worried if he didn't show up.

He turned and continued walking.

*\* Sabaay (Thai) meaning to be at ease.*

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## A Little Awakening in Italy

Bhikkhu Chandapalo sends news from Santacittarama in Italy.

Although the recent film Little Buddha was a flop in England, in director Bernardo Bertolucci's native land of Italy it was received with great interest and anticipation and played to full houses. In their search for material on Buddhism at the time of the film's release the media soon discovered Santacittarama and, shortly after Ajahn Thanavaro had left for a three-month trip to Australia, New Zealand and Thailand, we found ourselves giving interviews for major newspapers and radio, and appearing briefly on prime-time television. Fortunately, Venerable Dhammiko came to help out during the Ajahn's absence, and having a native Italian speaker present was greatly appreciated. Although many of the articles were rather shallow and superficial, with whimsical titles such as "The Buddha has arrived among the artichokes of Latina" and "Tibet in Sezze", the interest that was generated was very genuine and sincere. The current dissatisfaction with the 'Establish-ment' in Italy does not seem to have affected their respect for the spiritual life and religious teachings. The locals were very impressed with the amount of attention given to their Buddhist monks and the only Theravada monastery in Italy, and rumours were soon rife that the world famous football player, Roberto Baggio, widely known to be a Buddhist, was doing a retreat there!

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During one period of several weeks last year I realized that, as far as I knew, I was the only bhikkhu in the whole of Italy! Therefore we do appreciate the occasional visits from other bhikkhus.

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The building development at Santacittarama has now reached a point where such increased interest can be accommodated; what was previously car parking space below the single story building is now 2 dormitories with room for at least 8 men, 2 bathrooms, and a 50 square metre meditation hall, which is now home to a large brass Buddha image donated from Thailand. Our evening meditation is regularly attended by local people, and people come from all over Italy, from as far as Sicily in the south to Milan and elsewhere in the north, to stay a few days or longer. A nearby apartment has also been made available to allow women guests the opportunity to participate in the daily life of the monastery. Recently we had our first meditation weekend for lay people and these are likely to become a regular feature in the monastic calendar.

After four years residence and a steadily expanding teaching itinerary that takes him to many parts of Italy, Ajahn Thanavaro has become very widely known and much in demand. A recent sign of this recognition was his election to the presidency of the

'Italian Buddhist Union', an umbrella organization that represents Buddhists of all the major traditions present in Italy. The time has come, however, when he sees the need to reduce this level of external commitments in order to spend more time consolidating the monastic life. With a stable Sangha presence the new facilities at Santacittarama should help to create a suitable environment for those wishing to deepen their study and practice of Dhamma. A resident community of three should allow each bhikkhu a regular opportunity for solitude and quiet retreat, either in the kuti at the bottom of the garden (which was recently built by Italian friends and funded by Thai supporters) or in a prehistoric cave in the ruins of a monastery some twelve miles away. Santacittarama may be the smallest branch monastery but it could well be the busiest and these periodic retreats will be very welcome.

Weekends at Santacittarama have always seen large numbers of Sri Lankan devotees coming to offer dana, and our new meditation hall serves well in accommodating them all. The presence of a Thai monk, Ven. Preechar Jutindharo, has enabled the Thai community to feel much more connected, and they contribute substantially towards the development of the monastery. Also the Burmese and Bangladeshi Buddhist communities, though quite small, look to Santacittarama as the focal point for their religious activities. In many ways the Italian character is similar to the Asian, with its natural faith and generosity, and our regular alms round functions not only as an opportunity for exercise and "flying the flag" but many local people respond very generously, usually offering something that they have grown in their own gardens. In fact it has been very inspiring to witness the concern and generosity that, having been without an anagarika since last November, the bhikkhus' situation of dependency has facilitated.



With the aid of a recently offered computer we have begun to issue a modest newsletter, produced in three languages: Italian, English and Thai, and this is available on request. It will be issued two or three times a year and will serve mainly to keep people informed of latest developments and forthcoming events, and should help the monastery to become more of a focal point for Dhamma activities. This year will see Santacittarama's first 'end-of-rainy-season-retreat alms-giving' ceremony, initiated by a group of Thai people from Naples, who have only recently come to know of the vihara's existence. On the same day, November 13th, we will have an official opening ceremony and inauguration of the new Dhamma hall, and we are looking forward to Ajahn Sumedho's presence on this special occasion.

In October our increasingly popular annual series of weekly classes on Buddhism and meditation will begin again in Rome and continue until next July. The reason that Sezze Romano was chosen as a location for the monastery (a question often asked) was that it lies somewhere between Rome and Naples, and would be accessible to the peoples of both cities. Despite being much further away than Rome, a lot of interest has been developing in Naples of late, and usually there is a monthly meeting which takes place at a vegetarian restaurant. To encourage the Neapolitans and to help reintroduce the 'tudong' tradition to this native land of the original mendicant friars, I am planning to walk to Naples with Venerable Jutindharo on a twelve day pilgrimage at the end of the rainy season retreat.

Although one is unlikely to become lonely at Santacittarama, we do sometimes feel our distance from the "Greater Sangha" (we are about 2000 km from Amaravati). During one period of several weeks last year I realized that, as far as I knew, I was the only bhikkhu in the whole of Italy! Therefore we do appreciate the occasional visits from other bhikkhus; this year Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Sucitto spent several days with us and led some well attended retreats for lay people. We also benefit greatly from our contact with the other monasteries, particularly those in England and Switzerland.

As always we rejoice in the goodness and generosity of the very many people who support the Sangha in diverse ways, making available the opportunity for anyone sufficiently motivated to practise the Dhamma and realize the end of suffering. Warm greetings from the deep South and ...

*arrivederci!*  
*Bhikkhu Chandapalo*



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## Lay Practice: Buddhism in Essex

*Pamutto - the senior teacher of the Harlow Buddhist Society, describes the evolution of the Society over twenty years, toward the growth of a lay sangha as its nucleus.*

It was the late summer of 1969. I had reached the age of 21, was married with two children, emotionally crippled, angry (very angry), frightened and riddled with many fears, doubts and anxieties. In fact, just prior to my first encounter with Buddhism I would say that my marriage was "on the rocks". Like most of us, it is always somebody or something other than ourselves that's at fault, but one thing I couldn't deny was the fact that my life was pretty desperate. One of my brothers (who like myself had rejected the family religion of Catholicism) suggested I might try meditation as a way of learning to relax. He explained that he had been attending beginners' meditation classes and, although the course had finished, a number of interested people continued to meet regularly at an individual's home. I had nothing to lose so I went along - and still have a very vivid recollection of this first meeting. I remember firing many questions at the teacher, Harry Knight, whom Ajahn Sumedho later named Dhammapalo. He had been involved in Buddhist practice for many years, and it was the first time that anybody had made sense of many issues that had bothered me for so long. I joined the group on a regular basis to see if I could in some way learn how to hurt less. A few months later my wife began attending the group with me - an ideal situation which has continued through our 27 years together.

As is so often the case, Nature provides us with the tools to evolve. In my case these were: a life with often quite intense suffering, the guidance of skilful teachers, a strong sense of determination and an enquiring mind, so I guess in many respects I had ideal raw material for Dhamma practice.

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How can we understand anything unless we firstly  
understand ourselves?

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Throughout the years I spent with Dhammapalo (I stayed with him until his death at Amaravati in 1987) I learned many lessons. Often this was an extremely painful process, but he was a strong, sensitive person with a seemingly uncanny sense of time and place. If an opportunity arose to point something out to me, he never let it drift by, and gradually things began to change. As this happened I became less angry, frightened and defensive; consequently my relationships with people - particularly my wife and children - started to improve. My involvement with the group increased and I realised that I had an ability to organise, something which had gone largely unrecognised until then. Many of the activities of the Harlow group - for example entering in the Local Annual Town Show, fund raising activities like jumble sales and fetes - obviously relied on good organisation to be successful, and I found myself involved in a whole range of different things. This was ideal practice for a

person bereft of tact and patience. Yes, there were casualties along the way, but the most regular casualty was of course myself, not to mention my wife and anybody else that happened to be around at the time.

Many people who came along during these early years wanted to know if the Harlow group was a Zen, Theravadan or Tibetan group. Dhammapalo would say, "we are a Noble Truths and Eightfold Path group". He never formally embraced any particular school, and consistently pointed us towards the five precepts and the first aspect of the Eightfold Path, namely right understanding, more specifically of oneself. "How can we understand anything unless we firstly understand ourselves?" he would say time and time again. He would then go on and explain that people were made up of mind and body, and point out that we must understand the relationship between these two. Understand the influence of emotions, instincts, likes and dislikes.... always the same teaching, year in and year out. Being able to offer a religious message in such a practical and dynamic way helped to establish the foundations of practice which still support my endeavours to this day.

Dhammapalo never saw human development as being something which should be kept to oneself (I hasten to add that he did not advocate the evangelistic approach either). Consequently, as the Harlow group started to become a little more mature, we began a self-help therapy group, relaxation and non-religious beginner's meditation classes. All of these were seen as ways to offer Dhamma to a wider section of people whilst providing the members of the group with an opportunity to work more closely in these various projects.

In 1977 it was decided that we try to find premises in which our activities could be brought together. We eventually secured a small detached three-bedroom house from the local authority. By this time I had been around for about 10 years and Dhammapalo's health had begun to decline; in 1978 he formally passed the day-to-day responsibility of the group to myself and my wife. He gradually became less able to participate, but still continued to provide sound guidance on many of the important issues and attend whenever his health permitted.

The move into premises took place early in 1979 and triggered a whole range of difficulties - not least the differing views people had about many things. We were constantly having to adjust and adapt the way in which things were approached, trying to strike a balance between spiritual practice and the need for a stable financial situation. We decided that no charges would be made for Dhamma activities and that the members would generate the necessary funds for the group's continuance. Obviously people were made aware that we accepted donations, but no pressure was brought to bear. So anyone could and still can attend, use the shrine room, borrow books and cassettes from our library, free of charge regardless of their financial situation. All this was offered as dana by the group. Hence our house came to be



called 'Dana House' - the House of Selfless Giving. This calls for an unswerving commitment to the group and its activities by the members. It is to my mind no accident that dana appears at the top of the list of paramita.

According to the Buddha it is the most difficult paramita for human beings to develop. We can all give, you know, on flag days or when something pricks us into doing so - but is this generosity? We only really practise generosity when we feel it. If I have a hundred pounds and give five pounds away, it is giving - but I still have ninety five pounds for myself. If I give fifty or sixty pounds from my hundred then that is generosity, because I really feel it. Maybe I feel joy or regret afterwards, but whatever, I do know something has happened. This is what is taking place at Dana House and has been for nearly sixteen years, not only in relation to money, but also time, material and personal support.

With a centre to focus our practice on, it became inevitable that the group members spent more time in each other's company. In order for things to run evenly, responsibilities and decision-making needed to be more clearly defined. Could we learn to disagree with each other and resolve differences more skilfully?

It was now around 1980, and, having heard about the Chithurst project, I decided to spend a weekend there. I had never been involved with monks and nuns at such close quarters, and it became obvious to me that a real parallel to our endeavours in Harlow existed. I had a number of chats with Ajahn Sumedho and before leaving invited him to visit us in Harlow. I think it was in 1981 when he was able to spend a weekend with us. I picked him up from Chithurst and arrived at Dana House in the afternoon; I remember the two of us sitting alone in the shrine room at Dana House for about 2 hours. Ajahn wanted the complete picture - who taught us, where did we get our funds from, how had we secured these premises - everything seemed to interest him. I explained how the group had started in 1969, who our teacher was, how we approached our practice; to be honest I felt a little bemused by his total interest. We had a marvellous weekend with the Ajahn, one of several over the years. When we arrived back at Chithurst, I recall him telling Ajahn Sucitto all about Dana House and how he felt it could be something other lay groups might consider.

Over the next few years, and in particular when Amaravati opened, I became much more involved in various ways with the Sangha. As I got closer to the actual mechanics of the Sangha, I was intrigued by many things which were not immediately apparent on first contact. I saw how, through wisdom and compassion, it is possible to resolve many day-to-day issues; how the question of seniority works; the use of patience and seeking to be open with each other. I wondered if some of the approaches used by the monks and nuns could be tailored to fit a lay group - not for the sake of emulation, but because of the need to regulate and steer our activities at Dana House.

In July 1987 Dhammapalo died from cancer, having gone to Amaravati a few weeks prior to his death. After this our group went through a period during which people felt quite low, but we recovered and carried on.

As the dust settled after Dhammapalo's death, I began to reflect on a number of quite important issues, discussing with those members who had been around the longest what their thoughts were. The result of much discussion and consideration was that a number of approaches, similar to those of the monastic Sangha, but adjusted for a lay group, would be

embraced for a period of six months to see what effect might occur. In the first instance these were not referred to as precepts. After the six months had passed, it was plain to see how helpful it was to regulate our practice together with the use of training and observance rules. Further discussion resulted in a certain route being agreed as and when new rules are to be considered:

1. New rules are embraced as and when it is considered appropriate.
2. All of the members need to agree that whatever is being considered is necessary.
3. All of the members are invited to offer their thoughts and discuss any proposal.

We have now embraced many rules (training precepts) which help us in our endeavours; obviously these emanate from the five precepts. To some it may seem strange, but when we explain the relevance of these things, even if they do not fully appreciate what we are doing, they get a flavour of what is going on. When we are working together, or on retreat with each other, these precepts help to bring us back to the moment and pay a little more attention to practical, everyday situations. For example, we observe seniority in relation to the amount of time spent in the Harlow Sangha by the various members. We are also quite disciplined in relation to the preparation and eating of food, how we dress, the order that we leave the shrine room, and other areas of behaviour. Certain Sangha members have particular responsibilities, which are reviewed each year, or as appropriate. These precepts and responsibilities now function in a way that enriches our practice together as a lay Sangha. We are not seeking to be a 'special group' in any way, but responding to a need which, as the Harlow Sangha has developed, has become apparent. To use the system of the monastic Sangha as a model, with over 2,500 years of refinement, seemed a reasonable approach to adopt.

To my mind what has taken place over the years is that quite organically the Harlow group has evolved from a group meeting together once a week into a lay Sangha. This is a very difficult transition to make and requires much understanding and patience from the people involved. The Sangha members tend to see each other on different occasions outside of the activities of Dana House, and consequently meaningful friendships have grown. We try to bear in mind the needs of people that come along, whatever their background or creed, adjusting our pattern of events and meetings wherever possible. After all, what is needed is pretty much the same for everybody. We all need affection - to be accepted - to be appreciated. These are basic to all human beings, and it is the acknowledgment of this which is the bed-rock for Sangha. Sangha is a state of mind which arises as our understanding of ourselves deepens. When we truly understand our own needs then we can truly respond to the needs of others, learning how to express true friendship with each other. Sangha then begins to be expressed in ways which are appropriate to a given set of circumstances or situation.

Over the years different people (some of them quite strong-minded individuals) have wanted the group to go along a particular route. During our decision making process we ask, "Is this an appropriate direction to be taking at this time?", "Does it fit with our original purpose for being together?" We try, wherever we can, not to lose sight of the basics, and seek always to focus our endeavours around the needs of the many and not the wants of the few.

We try to bear in mind that the members of the Harlow Sangha are like gatekeepers. We keep open the gates for people to come in and try whatever is being offered, and then to stay or leave as they wish; making everybody welcome, without any pressure to take part in anything, and getting them to feel comfortable. If people want to join us for a cup of tea and a chat at the end of the evening, that's fine by us. In other words: "We are here if people need us - and if people don't need us, we are still here."

P.S. I speak of "my teacher", but I have had many teachers in my life and still do: my wife and children, the Sangha, work, home life - in fact, on reflection I cannot bring to mind anything

which is not in some way linked to practice. Sometimes I look back at that sensitive young man mentioned above that felt so unloved and afraid, and feel so much gratitude for the fact that I have been able to understand something of the great and profoundly simple Dhamma.



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## Love Unbounded

*In April this year, Sister Candasiri and Sister Medhanandi spent three days with the Sisters of the Love of God - one of the few Anglican contemplative Orders - at Fairacres, The Convent of the Incarnation, on the outskirts of Oxford. Sister Candasiri presents some impressions of their experience.*

Some years ago, Sr. Rosemary SLG (Sister of the Love of God) came to spend two months at Amaravati to pursue an interest in meditation, stimulated through reading the teachings of Ajahn Sumedho. After discovering - in addition to a deep sense of kalyanamitta - that we had been at school together almost thirty years before, we kept in contact. I was delighted when an opportunity came to pay her a visit.

From the moment we stepped off the coach in Oxford to be met by Sr. Rosemary - plus bicycle - we were made to feel at ease. As three brown-robed figures conversing animatedly as we walked through the streets, we attracted a certain interest; her elaborate head dress and gold crucifix, our shaven heads - all of us wearing sandals. We made our way to the convent, which is situated in a quiet suburban road. It comprises several buildings built over a time span of about 100 years, and is set in 5 acres of enclosed gardens where fruit and vegetables are grown and formal gardens merge with less cultivated areas.

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There seemed to emanate a radiance - the beauty of one who is whole, at one with existence. For each, I felt deep respect and gratitude.

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As we entered the cool silence of the enclosure, our voices naturally dropped to a whisper and then to silence, in accordance with the rule followed by the community. This simple observance brings an aura of quiet collectedness as the sisters move about in the cloisters; most communication happens by notes (each sister has a note clip in the main hallway), or by gesture. When meeting the superior, Mother Anne, I noticed a slight awkwardness to find suitable gestures of respect and greeting - but we knew we were welcome.

It was our intention to merge as far as possible into the daily life of the community. However, Sr. Rosemary, although appreciative of our intention to be as discreet a presence as possible, had other ideas. I was surprised to see, on the daily schedule thoughtfully prepared for us in our cells, 'morning puja' and 'evening puja', 'group discussion', and 'meditation workshop' on Saturday afternoon. These were to take place in the Chapter House, which had been set aside for us to use during our stay. We also attended their Offices in the chapel (including the Night Office, from 2:00 to 3:00 am), helped with simple domestic duties - washing up, sewing curtains, taking care of the refectory - and, at suitable times in suitable places, we did a fair bit

of talking. So our days were well-filled, and yet somehow there was a sense of spaciousness. Each moment felt precious as we drank from the well of goodness that we found there.

As we entered the chapel, it was natural to bow - a deep bow from the waist - and we were seated among the professed sisters. For some of them it must have felt very strange to have us there, and included to such a degree. For our part, we felt deeply touched. I looked at the faces of the sisters opposite, many of them getting older now; some of them very old. From some, one could sense the struggle of the life, from others there seemed to emanate a radiance - the beauty of one who is whole, at one with existence. For each, I felt deep respect and gratitude.

We ate with the community and the other female and male guests at long wooden tables in the refectory. The mid-day meal, which was eaten from a single wooden bowl, was accompanied each day with a reading on aspects of spiritual life. During our stay, the theme was celibacy in religious community and the integration of the active and contemplative aspects of our life. It seemed strikingly pertinent.

The sisters, concerned that it might not interest us, were somewhat hesitant about inviting us to their "choir practice". Each week an elderly monk from another Order nearby visits, "to try to teach us to sing" as one of the sisters explained. But it was a delight to experience their interaction with him and to hear their Eastertide Alleluias soar to the highest heavens. One felt they were simply brother and sisters in the Holy Life. In contrast, we noticed, at the communion service we attended on the first morning of our visit, the immediate sense of polarity which arose with the entry of the priest. Until that time we had all simply been religious people; suddenly, in relation to him, we became 'women'.



We met at 7:30 each morning and evening in the Chapter House with those of the community who wished to attend our puja and meditation. Although the sisters do not receive training in formal meditation, as we sat together, the quality of silence and still attention was quite remarkable. One sensed that this presence of mind was the result of years of silent prayerfulness and recitation of the Office - an austere and impressive practice.

Our discussions were lively. Although they keep silence for much of the time, the recreation periods two or three times a week encourage discussion, and stimulate a keen interest and reflection on many aspects of life. One thing that interested them very much was the Buddhist approach to working with the mind. It was a revelation to them that significant changes in the mind and mental states could be effected simply through patiently bearing with them; that there was no need to struggle, or to feel guilty or burdened by the negativity, doubt or confusion that affect us all. Also interesting to them was the practice of walking meditation, and of just sitting consciously, as ways of attuning to the physical body.

We talked together of many things, aware that what we shared was vastly greater than our

differences. It was clear that we could learn from and support one another without in any way compromising our commitment to our respective traditions. What was also touching was to realise that we experienced the same personal doubts and sense of inadequacy, and that each felt the other to be stronger or more impressive. I sensed the fragility and subtlety of the renunciant life, demanding as it does a surrender of personal power and control; the need to give of oneself totally and, as one sister put it, simply to "trust the process".

Another meeting I had was with Sister Helen Mary. She is eighty four now and, having lived alone for twenty-five years on Bardsey Island, has the appearance of one well worn by the elements of nature. She spoke gently and quietly, but with great enthusiasm, about the wonder of living "immersed in the spirit". I knew what she meant, although I would have used different words. Again I felt a shyness, a hesitation: should we bow, shake hands, or what? - but that seemed to be a very minor matter!

On the last morning of our stay, we met with Mother Anne. I was curious to know how she regarded our visit and Sr. Rosemary's great interest in our Buddhist tradition. She told us that she had had no doubts about receiving us, and that she felt that nowadays it is essential to recognise God beyond the limitations of any particular religious convention. This was clearly conveyed when we finally took our leave, as she enveloped each of us in turn with the most whole-hearted embrace that I have ever experienced! There was no doubt about the love of God we shared at that moment.

At the last Office, with the afternoon sunlight filtering through the lofty windows of the chapel, I was struck by the awesome purity of the life: its simplicity and renunciation, its total dedication to what is wholly good. Beside it, the outside world we were about to enter seemed overwhelmingly confused and complicated - so little there to encourage people to live carefully, so much to stimulate greed and selfishness. Later on, I realised that perhaps visitors experience our monastic life in much the same way, even though, from the inside, it can often seem quite ordinary and full of flaws.

As we waited with Sister Rosemary for our bus back to London, continuing our talk about meditation and mindfulness, the bus we were due to catch sailed by. Oh well, we thought, so much for our practice of mindfulness! Not long after, another came and, more attentive this time, we managed to make it stop for us. We parted – our hearts full, and deeply grateful.



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## Suffer the Little Children

*Venerable Sobhano writes of his tudong through the Balkans which took him to an orphanage in the remote north-east of Romania.*

As we approached the orphanage I started to float. The crowd of orphans, volunteers and kids from the nearby villages had swollen to somewhere between 40 or 50. We walked underneath the entrance way with a great sign pasted up saying "Bine vinetu" which means "welcome" in Romanian. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. To my right I caught sight of the director looking down from the orphanage balcony with the local mayor and priest, observing our bedraggled procession as though they were members of the polit-bureau attending a Red Army parade. I rounded the corner of the old pink and green nobleman's building where a group of blind musicians began to play, the children gesticulating their distorted bodies to the music with glee. As everyone seemed to be looking at me for the next cue, I pulled out the icon from my rucksack that I had been carrying from Mt. Athos, a gift from an American novice for the orphans of Romania. On the back were messages in Greek, English and Romanian. I made my presentation to the priest who gave me a great hug and kissed me on both cheeks.

So my journey was over. Not so much an anti-climax, more a "what now" feeling. Sublime moments seem to be characterised by their brevity. But what stayed was an exquisite, and all too rare, sense of having reached my goal. Ionaseni had been the destination of my pilgrimage these past four months, a journey that had taken me from Mt. Athos to Macedonia, where we had began our walk, through Serbia and for the last six weeks from the south-west of the Carpathian Mountains to Moldavia in the north-east of Romania where the steppes begin their great roll toward Siberia.

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The main therapy was touch, some volunteers reported that after spending time holding the children, their growth rate accelerated, putting on inches in as many weeks.

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My welcome had been especially poignant because of the noticeable absence of my two younger brothers, without whom I would never have found myself in this remote part of the world. They had come to Romania in 1990, immediately after the revolution, with an Aid convoy from Scotland. The older of the two, Rupert, was covering the journey as a journalist, and Moona, a skate-board champ turned surfer, was taking a break from his quest for the perfect wave. The place was worse than anything they had seen so far. Over a hundred children tied to their beds, with a few older kids patrolling the dormitories with metal batons. Three nurses came and went, swilling out the toilets once in a while, preparing a meal when they felt like it. The director was reputedly a blatantly corrupt woman who had been cynically

accepting the foreign aid for resale on the black market.

My brothers stayed because there was no one else. They found volunteers through friends and other charity organisations who were already working in Romania, but generally there was no real co-ordination. The nightmare conditions, and the emotional damage of the children was balanced by the corps d'esprit of the volunteers who came by the truck-load. Tradesmen gave up their holidays and came to work on the plumbing and wiring. Youths from Belfast and Glasgow mixed with University graduates and nurses. The volunteers would have to barricade themselves in at night to get away from the clamouring of the orphans, desperate for affection.

An early video I saw showed the children sitting outside for the first time. Many had never walked before, so they simply sat there rocking, blinking in the new sun. Inside, the walls had been painted bright white with great splashes of colourful cartoon figures on every bare space. On the soundtrack you could hear rock 'n' roll music from the sixties, the first sensory stimulation many of the children would have ever received. The main therapy was touch, some volunteers reported that after spending time holding the children, their growth rate accelerated, putting on inches in as many weeks.

The work was also changing the volunteers. I saw how my brothers had matured in a very short space of time. In a strange way the values of our lives, mine as a monk and theirs, merged, something I could never have predicted when I first joined the Sangha. One of the joys of the early part of the walk was walking through Serbia with Rupert, who I hadn't really seen for nearly 15 years. We were still able to keep an argument running for the good part of a day, but it seemed that neither of us were that bothered about who won. We didn't need to prove ourselves. I could recognise the qualities of virtue and discipline that he had developed in his work, and I think he also found a different person behind the robe than he had known before.

The walk across Romania took six weeks. Having arrived from Serbia with Rupert, he returned to the head office of the charity Scottish European Aid, in Edinburgh. My other brother, after working in Romania for three years, had moved on to start an aid project in Bosnia. I set off from Timisoara then, the main city to the west of Transylvania, with Paul Shaw who had flown from London to help with food and travelling expenses.

After being in former Yugoslavia for two months I thought I would be used to the post- communist culture, but I quickly discovered that Romania was in a far worse state than anything I had seen so far. There was a lot less money around for one thing. The signs of consumerism were slow in coming, and an atmosphere of gloom still hung like a pall. The Romanians are naturally vivacious and open people, their Latin characteristics a light contrast to the Slavs. But the communism of Ceausescu had been of



*Ven. Sobhano's route through the Balkans*

altogether another order than Tito's of Yugoslavia. It had bowed the people.

Workers sat on buses exhausted with a life of repetition. Factories in the countryside seemed absurdly anachronistic in their remote settings. Collective farms had been either abandoned or limped along without any real motivation. The farm land of the Saxon villages we walked through, which had been famous for their terraced vineyards, were hopelessly neglected. Ten years of post-war occupation by the Russians had bled the country dry of its significant wealth and Ceausescu who had been initially welcomed as a hero for standing up to the Russians had been universally loathed. Five years after the so-called revolution the Romanians who hadn't been completely numbed into complacency by forty years of mental repression were waking up to the fact that they had been duped. The 'revolution' it turned out was a coup d'etat by the third-ranking communists. They had since cemented their power by dividing the opposition, (there are approximately 200 political parties in Romania, 26 of whom have seats in Parliament), and suppressing the second wave of student revolts in 1991 with the miners.

And yet as we proceeded through Romania, we found every truth contradicted by its opposite. Alongside the industrial wastelands there was the beauty of the land; wild flowers still growing in the pasture land, the wide expansive forests stretching for hundreds of miles in all directions, and the mountains that seemed to mock our attempts to negotiate them. Set against the state's denigration of the people was their spirituality and the strength of a monastic tradition which was unlike anything I had experienced in the West. On the last stretch of our journey we followed a chain of monastic settlements along the north-east ridge of the Carpathians. Sometimes we found ourselves surrounded by pilgrims who had come from all over the country to hear a great monk talk, or attend a church blessing. Services would be overcrowded with the faithful, and the monasteries themselves were unable to cope with the demand for places.

People complained, like everywhere else that they didn't have enough money and that things were better in the West. I used to protest that it wasn't as good as they imagined. We also had poverty, unemployment and crime. In many ways their lifestyle was a lot more conducive to mindfulness practice. The only way to live within a system where nothing worked properly was to develop patience. Situations which would have brought most of us to our knees with frustration had almost the opposite effect on Romanians. I also admired the sense of community I found in the towns. There was always a wonderful street life, children playing freely there, parents and grandparents sitting under the trees in the balmy summer evenings.

The first orphanage we came to in Romania was in the Hungarian region of Transylvania. 450 'normal' children in one huge building. It had been right on the aid trail so had received more than its fair share of support, with newly painted interiors and some modern facilities. We had come to visit the handful of volunteers there who were being sponsored by a large German charity, Romania Aid. The children over twelve seemed to have prematurely aged, as though a protective layer of anger had formed a shell around them. The younger children, still trusting and hoping, swarmed around us feeding off our attention like a drowning man gasping for air. My heart went out to the volunteers who though genuinely motivated to help the children, were struggling to get any perspective on their emotional involvement.

It was here that we first experienced the conundrum that is facing all the charities in Romania - of separating the human problem from the present political situation. The director of the orphanage was known to be an alcoholic, but nobody had the power to get rid of him. The teachers were regularly brutalising the children in class, but the charity volunteers had no authority to influence this. To effect any change meant taking on the whole political infrastructure that turned a blind eye to the problem.

When the media images of the Romanian orphans first hit the West, many were baffled that the people could permit such treatment. Perhaps Romanians had something against children. Walking through Romania dispelled all the prejudices I might have entertained as we saw how strong the family bonds were within their society. The wider family network survived in spite of the state rather than because of it. The other invention, or projection of the West, that better explains how the orphanage problem arose in the first place, was the idea that Romania was an underdeveloped country. In fact all the mechanisms of a modern state; roads, public transport, a civil service, a telephone system etc., are in place. But none of it worked, giving the appearance that the state was taking care of the abandoned children when in fact it couldn't.

Now the local politicians are waking up to the effect of the charities presence in their country. More bad news about neglected handicaps gives Romania a bad image abroad and exposes the corruption of those from the old regime trying to consolidate their positions in the new political arena. While the charities, both at home and in Romania, are being encouraged to "hand back" their projects, money, (that will still be needed to tackle the problem of actually retraining Romanians), is scarce. Some charities have simply given up trying to work within the present system and have announced their imminent withdrawal.

When I arrived at Ionaseni it was immediately apparent to me why my brothers had spent three years of their life with the children there. In fact it was difficult to tell who had benefitted more. The children seemed to awaken a sense of joyful compassion, that didn't really make any sense in terms of the insoluble problems before one, but was obvious when you were there. My own arrival had offered an excuse to simply celebrate Ionaseni, however I wasn't much good at handling the children themselves who took great delight in hiding under my robes, scratching my hair and generally clambering all over this strange creature in saffron. We were able to spend a few days with the volunteers over the time I was there - meditating together in the forests around Ionaseni. It was a small gesture, but I was surprised

how keen people were to hear the Dhamma. It seemed to bring some relief to the emotional demands of their work, and it was something I could give.

One memory stands out for me as an example of what a difference the simple presence of another human being can make. Sitting by the entrance way to the orphanage I was watching a friend, Nick Carrol, (a Buddhist layman who had come out from England for the last two weeks of my stay in Romania), playing with one of the older children, a blond haired boy with ice blue eyes and no obvious physical or mental handicap. He moved like a wild animal and would try to steal anything he could lay his hands on. Nick was playing a riding game with him, trotting him on his knees and varying the pace, now to a canter and now to a trot. Suddenly, quick as a flash, the boy darted aside to grab a badge from a little girl in a wheelchair innocently playing beside us. I immediately felt my bile rising at the injustice of this act, but neither the girl or Nick made any response. Nick just carried on bouncing him on his knees, and after a while began a new game, gently stroking the palms of his hands and his open fingers. The boy seemed transfixed. Very slowly the boy started to melt as Nick extended his caress to his arms, shoulders and head. It took a long time. Nobody said anything, but in the end the boy was just lying there in Nicks arms receiving perhaps for the first time the touch of loving hands.

Nowadays the orphanage is clean. A few Romanians have taken over the running of the physiotherapy unit and a small arts therapy space. But for the bulk of the children their life is still an interminable wait. Their prospects for the kind of education that would recognise them as being anything other than a medical problem, still rests in the hands of Western charities. Returning to the UK, and contemplating what my own contribution could be, I am immediately faced with a feeling of hopelessness. But perhaps by my effort to put into practice the teachings of the Buddha, I am making my own small contribution. The children of Ionaseni then become an inspiration - to bring to an end the suffering in this world, here and now.



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## Sutta Class: Authority of a Teacher

*Ajahn Sucitto*

'And how bhikkhus does the attainment of profound knowledge come by means of a gradual [*graduated in steps*] training...? As to this bhikkhus, one who has faith draws close; drawing close, he sits down nearby; sitting down nearby he lends ear; lending ear, he hears *dhamma*; having heard *dhamma* he remembers it; he tests the meaning of the things he has borne in mind; while testing the meaning, the things are approved of; there being approval of the things, *chanda* [interest, enthusiasm; c.f. *tanha*] is born; with desire born he makes an effort; having made the effort, he weighs it up; having weighed it up, he strives; being self-resolute, he realises with his person the highest truth itself and, penetrating it by means of wisdom, he sees. But, bhikkhus had there not been that faith, there would not have been that drawing near; there would not have been that sitting down...[*and so on*]. Bhikkhus you are on a wrong track, you are on a false track, bhikkhus. How very far, bhikkhus, have not these foolish persons strayed from this *dhamma* and discipline.

'...For a disciple who has faith in the Teacher's instruction and lives in unison with it, bhikkhus, it is a principle that: "The Teacher is the Lord, a disciple am I; the Lord knows, I do not know." [Kitagiri sutta; sutta 70 of the Middle Length Sayings]

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The Buddha encourages the Kalamas not to believe on account of a teacher's reputation, nor scripture, nor tradition, but to test things out in the light of their own experience.

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At one time, the Buddha instructed the bhikkhus to refrain from eating after noon, saying that he felt healthy and quite at ease with this observance. Subsequently, Assaji and Punabbasuka, two of the leaders of the notoriously deviant "bhikkhus of the group of six" told the other bhikkhus that they also felt healthy and at ease eating whenever and as often as they liked. While staying at Kitagiri, the Buddha summoned these two bhikkhus and questioned them, asking whether they felt that he did not understand through his own experience that there are things which are pleasant and conducive to Dhamma, and things that are pleasant that are not conducive to Dhamma; similarly for unpleasant things. "Of course not, revered sir," they hastily replied. "Those who have freed themselves from the asava" [outflows - the firmly embedded attachments], continued the Buddha, "can feel that their practice needs no further effort; the rest need to develop the path."

Many people are familiar with the gist of the Kalama sutta, wherein the Kalamas, who have received a number of contradictory teachings from various sources, ask the Buddha which teaching they should follow. In that sutta [Gradual Sayings: Threes, Great Chapter, 65] the

Buddha encourages the Kalamas not to believe on account of a teacher's reputation, nor scripture, nor tradition, but to test things out in the light of their own experience.

However, in reviewing the Kalama sutta, one should recall that the Kalamas were not disciples of the Buddha, they had not taken Refuge in him as the Teacher; furthermore, that there is a distinction between faith and belief that Western religious thought does not always make. Faith is the faculty that allows for the suspension of one's beliefs, customs and habits in order to listen to something openly. It allows one not to know, but to have the confidence to investigate. Belief deals with the unknown in a different way. One adopts a certainty about something one is uncertain of, and rejects investigation. Without faith one cannot proceed, but with belief, no furtherance seems necessary. Faith as the first of the five indriya (spiritual authorities) is the basis from which application to the Buddha's teachings becomes possible. Faith stimulates the right application of effort to support the practice with initiative, inquiry and personal realisation, against, rather than in accordance with, one's outflow-habits.

By engendering the supportive faculty of faith in this way, the Teacher does not crush a disciple's independence, but empowers it. As the sutta concludes: For a disciple who has faith in the teacher's instruction and lives in unison with it, bhikkhus, the Teacher's instruction is a furthering in growth, giving strength.

For a Buddha to feel personally offended that his disciples had contradicted him would be petty and impossible: 'This kind of higgling and haggling does not apply - that [...his followers] will or will not do this or that according as they like it or not.' It's not a power struggle. The point that the Buddha makes is that the recalcitrant bhikkhus - bhikkhus who had not checked the outflows of their habits and feelings - were attacking the foundation of their practice-path. The faculty of faith, of willingness to put into effect a simple instruction of the Teacher, was not active. Instead, they were believing in their own habits and feelings and going against the spirit of inquiry.

So, now that the Buddha has passed away, what guidance is there for learners in following a lesser contemporary teacher? Teachers may make mistakes. In leaving the Dhamma-Vinaya as our guide, the Buddha has laid down the standards for authoritative teaching. To paraphrase his instruction to Mahapajapati Gotami [*Culavagga X*], his teaching leads to dispassion, to the absence of bondage, to non-accumulation, to wanting little, to contentment, to solitude, to arousing energy, to ease in supporting oneself. And one can check out the teacher's advice according to the following from the *Mahaparinibbana sutta* [Dialogues of the Buddha, 122] 'now the words of that bhikkhu are neither to be welcomed nor scorned...but if, when laid down beside sutta and compared with Vinaya, they lie along with sutta and agree with Vinaya, to this conclusion you must come: surely this is the word of that Exalted One...it was rightly taken.'



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## Sutta Class: Authority of a Teacher

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