

REFUGE IN THE TRIPLE GEM Ajahn Chah Remembrance Day 2010

Meditation Retreat at Janda Baik, Malaysia | January 2010
[Day 1 – Evening Dhamma Talk]

by Ajahn Sumedho

So this is the evening of the first night, some of you are probably tired after travelling and moving from the home and all that settling in. I will take time to give a few reflections on this event.

The guided meditation was an attempt to give basic guidance for those who are already developed in their practice and also for those who have never practised.

There are so many stories about meditation around of wonderful experiences but also of horrible ones. Some people think that meditation is very difficult and that they are not ready for it. They doubt their ability to do it.

But Ajahn Chah always referred to it (meditation) as ‘a holiday of the heart’.

I remember when I first heard him say that, I thought, ‘Holiday? I am not having a holiday!’ It was hard work. My attitude then was very much that it involved very wilful and intense practices. My whole psychological mechanism was always goal oriented – achieving; proving myself; getting something; getting somewhere. With meditation, all these attitudes of ‘go for it’, ‘get it’, ‘conquer the defilements (kilesa)’, ‘work hard and get good results with all this willfulness’ do not help. I had plenty of will power in those days and I could make myself do all kinds of things but the result was never very peaceful and certainly not liberating in any way.

Ajahn Chah’s reflection ‘holiday of the heart’ implied that being a holiday, you can rest your heart. You don’t have to try and prove yourself when having a holiday of the heart or the mind (citta). Just contemplate that and notice your own attitudes about Buddhist meditation, whatever they might be – whether you think you can do it and are expectant, or you think it’s hard work and you can’t do it and are therefore filled with dread. Whatever you think, my advice is just be the Buddha, the observer. Buddha is being at ease and accepting everything. Buddha is not about picking and choosing; liking or disliking; trying to get something or to get rid of something. This sense of awareness, Buddha, is totalling accepting of everything the pleasure or the pain in the body, the good thoughts, bad thoughts, happiness, sadness, despair, whatever emotional quality you are experiencing.

Buddha is not judgmental, not condemning, not criticising but just noting, discerning. I find this attitude very helpful in dealing with my own very American character or conditioned personality. Being an American, I was brought up to be a winner, to get somewhere, prove myself. It’s all about competition. So even though American values are all very high minded about equality and egalitarianism, the result of being brought up like this is that it is endlessly competitive. We are brought up to compete who runs faster, or is taller, whatever. We are always comparing with those who we think are better off or can do

things better than we can. We also tend to look down on those who aren't as good as we think we are. Meditation encourages us to observe our relationships with our egos and not to reinforce or to judge them; just to note them; to be the Buddho, the Knower of the way it is.

The vipassana reflection is always that all conditions are impermanent. This means everything the body, the posture, the sensations of the body, the senses, what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think, all our emotions, our memories. The whole psycho physiological conditions we are experiencing now are impermanent, (anicca). They range from the very subtle to the very coarse. These conditioned phenomena have infinite varieties, qualities, quantities and so forth. They are forever changing and they are always moving like our breath... inhaling and exhaling.

In Europe and America, the idea of progress is that everything is going to get better and better. In other words, progress means things will just be moving from good to better to best. Of course, the Buddhist who knows the Dhamma knows that things can only progress to a point and then they go the other way, just like the breath where one can only inhale so far before one has to exhale; and one depends on the other. This applies to all conditioned phenomena, whether they are economics, political or social, whether they are through sight, sound, smell, taste or touch, whether they are emotional or physical, like the sun, the moon, the stars, the universe.

The Buddha pointed not to the things that are so remote that it is out of our direct ability to observe their changes but to the most obvious realities of here and now, the physical body and its mental activities. Once we understand these obvious realities, we can apply them to the whole universe. They can be extrapolated to the macrocosmic scale.

We learn from the microcosm of our own conscious moments, at this time, within the limitation of our physical forms through which we experience the here and now, the way it is with our mental states whatever they may be good, bad, inspired, depressed, right, wrong, emotions, memories, sensory contacts in their various forms.

Buddho knows the way it is that all conditions are impermanent. These words like Buddho and Dhammo go together, the Buddha and the Dhamma. The buddha rupa is a human form. It is an iconic human form that represents the human's individual state of awareness, awakened attention. You will notice that all buddha rupas have this sense of attentiveness, awakened consciousness. They are invariably peaceful forms. In other religions, they don't seem to have such a form. I remember being in Paris one time walking through the public park near Eiffel Tower where there were huge bronze sculptures of warriors, male figures, in a state of passion, fighting, angry and fearsome. The female figures were usually unpleasantly haughty women, like the Queens and upper class ladies who think they were better than the rest. You look at these public sculptures in parks in Paris, the male figure as the warrior fighting, angry, conquering and the female figures very authoritative, haughty and presumptuous, and they have certain effects on the mind. Then we went to the nearby Guimet Museum in Paris which had a very good collection of Khmer buddha images from Cambodia. The French was very good at setting off these most serene looking forms of Khmer sculptures of Buddha in stone with lighting. They represented the human form in a state of attention. They were not warriors, not acting like they are superior or somebody important. They were not trying to promote themselves through passion and emotion but through calm and peace. This is Buddho.

To develop and cultivate this sense of Buddho in our lives means that we are not trying to become a Buddha as some kind of personal endeavour. That is missing the point. It's taking refuge always in the

here and now, learning to trust our ability to pay attention in the present. In a retreat like this, we start out with the obvious, the sitting posture and the breath... because that is here and now. Then I suggest the use of this mantra 'Buddho' because I am trying to challenge the attitude of 'I am somebody who need to get something or do something. I want to get my concentration in meditation, get something I don't have, get rid of my wandering mind, my defilements'. This is the sense of the self that causes us to try to meditate to get something in the future, or to get rid of something that we have that we don't want. The Buddhist teaching is to take the refuges and be in a refuge of enlightened awareness. From the ego level, this does not make sense. The ego is not enlightened. It can never be aware of itself. But we can be aware through Buddho because Buddho is aware of the ego. So this is a reflection for observing. Learning to no longer operate from the basic delusion of 'I have to meditate in order to get something or get rid of something'. The attitude should be more of reminding ourselves of awareness.

In his first sermon after his enlightenment, the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths. This is a very interesting approach because the Buddha was pointing to something that we all recognise – 'suffering'. There is nothing subtle about suffering. We all can relate to that. Whether we are rich or poor, male or female, young or old, suffering is a common bond we all have as human beings. The Buddha took this very banal and ordinary human experience and put it into the category of Noble Truth. Buddhism is the only religion that really does this. Other religions don't quite get Buddhism, especially the theistic ones like Christianity, Judaism and Islam, because they always start from the top – I believe in God, a statement about the ultimate. The Buddha's statement that 'There is suffering (dukkha)' is the Noble Truth, not the Ultimate Truth. After his enlightenment, he had taken this most common human experience and made it the First Noble Truth. What is noble about this truth is that we are changing our attitude from 'suffer' to 'There is suffering'. Notice the difference: 'I suffer' is usually followed by 'because of this or that, or you, or the weather, or my health etc'. We think of suffering as something we don't want that is caused by external sources. But there is nothing noble in that. It is just how it seems to us in our ordinary, conventional way of thinking or attitude. The challenge now is to awaken to 'There is suffering' which is not about blaming anybody or anything external but recognising that there is this sense of anxiety or worry about the future, or regret or guilt about the past. It can also be a strong sense of being persecuted and then feeling angry and indignant by the way other people treat or abuse us. We think that people who are physically abusing us are the cause of my suffering. As a noble truth, our suffering is our aversion, anger and resentment toward those people. If we are just caught in anger, hatred and resentment, then we are suffering from the abuse that somebody else is projecting toward us. If we use panna or wisdom, we will know that even though we are physically abused, we are not creating suffering in our minds. Sometimes life does present us with unfair blame and abuse from others and what not; and we think it's unfair. On the ego level, it's very painful and hurtful and our tendency is to think that it's somebody else's fault. But when we start to observe our own 'not wanting', to observe that we are personally programmed or conditioned to hate or resent people who abuse us, we begin to know Buddho, which knows these mental states, to know the Dhamma, the Dhammo, or the way it is: that all conditions that we are experiencing now, whether physical, emotional or mental, whether pleasure or painful, are impermanent, anicca. This is the key word for investigating the way it is. This is what we call vipassana meditation, which is insight - looking into the way things are.

This buddhist teaching of the Four Noble Truths is a very skilful means that the Buddha gave us 2,552 years ago. In these modern times, the teaching still applies. It is not about some kind of exotic time in India in the past. It is not about Indian culture or anything like that. It is about our human state. It applies to us in England, everywhere. It's a timeless teaching because it applied to the conditions of the people Buddha encountered in India 2,552 years ago and still applies at this very moment here in this salubrious venue in this country.

Today, we still create endless suffering and then blame it on somebody or oneself. So during this time, when we are on retreat here, I encourage all of us to reflect along these lines. The main emphasis is always the 'here and now' Dhamma. We need to be reminded because our worldly minds, our conditioned egos, are all about doing something now to get something in the future.

I've been living in the UK since 1977. That's 33 years. The buddhists there were keen on meditation but they had so many doubts. Some of them were very diligent and serious practitioners of various techniques that were available then in England. I remember one man who was a retired solicitor, very gentlemanly, very polite, urbane English man who had practised a strict kind of meditation for twenty years. He came to me one day and said, "Ajahn Sumedho, I have been doing this for 20 years and I got nothing from it." He was in despair because with all his good intentions and determination, the basic problem was never recognised – that he was doing it in order to get some results in the future; that if he practised hard, over and over again, he should get rewarded for it. He had a kind of faith in a technique and the idea that if he kept doing it, he would be rewarded in some way for doing it. For 20 years he despaired that he got nowhere. I pointed out to him that he never reflected on what he was doing; that this was all his ego and cultural conditioning operating. We are so close to it, so used to doing it, so identified with it that we can't see its error. That's where the refuges, the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha come in. They are not meant to be identities or just exotic words or buddhist terminology. They are actually skilful means to really get to the causes of suffering. It is through surrendering to Buddho, to awareness, that Dhamma is recognised and understood.

People asked me, "Are you a Sotapana, Anagami or Arahant?" These people see these terminologies in terms of personal attainments, as ego operating in terms of these terminologies. When you really contemplate the structure that the Buddha gave in the Pali suttas, those teachings are not about attaining or achieving. It's all about relinquishing through awareness. As long as there is ignorance of Dhamma, no matter how good our intentions are on the personal level, they will only take us so far and we can't go any further. It might be skilful and good Dhamma. But for liberation we need to break out of the condition and assumptions we have into immediate awareness of the here and now and cultivate this. This retreat is an attempt to encourage you towards this, to keep reminding you - because you will get caught up in your own scenarios and habits. This is not trying to browbeat you into doing anything but to encourage you to awaken and to trust and recognise what awareness is, what a refuge is so you can really trust it and have confidence in it. So that after 20 years, you are not saying, 'Oh! I've been meditating diligently for 20 years and I am nowhere.' In terms of my own experience, my personality, my ego, has not gone anywhere. It hasn't changed that much. But this sense of understanding and this confidence in relinquishing has increased. When you prove through investigation and see for yourself the peace that comes through letting go and relinquishing, then it is not personal attainment at all. I can't claim it as the result of my efforts to meditate. It's like returning to that natural place we call the 'Deathless Reality' rather than being so always deluded and limited by the death-bound conditions that we identify with. Ajahn Chah would call this 'A Real Home'. When he referred to the 'Real Home', he would point here, the 'Heart'. He always said, 'Watch your mind! Observe! Be the conscious awakened being.' We investigate the conditions we are experiencing, not through identity or judgment but through discerning them. The Buddho is our ability to observe the changeability of the conditioned phenomena, whatever its quality might be, pleasant or painful; whatever the condition, whether it is the inhalation, the exhalation; whether it is inspiration or despair or other emotional conditions. That which is aware of conditions is not a condition. Just for convenience, we call that Buddho and that's the refuge and the position we are taking now, doing this retreat, being this awareness rather than trying to be somebody

who is getting somewhere in the meditation practice. So I just offer this as a reflection. There will time for discussions in the future.

I know sometimes this is very difficult to understand because it goes against the whole conditioning process of any culture. In terms of worldly conditions, UK is a very nice country to live in, well run, fairly good economy in the past, now may be some problems but who knows what is going to happen. But even at the best of times, the world is changing. Wherever we go, we can see the incredible migration of peoples, moving from one place to another. And we hear of the problems of world population explosion, pollution and all the doomsday predictions that are prevalent at this time. It is a time when there is a lot of change, uncontrollable things that worry us. What we can do is cultivate this awareness which will allow us to deal with the conditions of the places we live in and with the experiences that we have.