

REFUGE IN THE TRIPLE GEM Ajahn Chah Remembrance Day 2010

Meditation Retreat at Janda Baik, Malaysia | January 2010

[Day 1 – Guided Meditation]

by Ajahn Sumedho

Group requests for the taking of the Three Refuges and the Eight Precepts addressed to Ajahn Sumedho in Pali, followed by Ajahn Sumedho leading the taking of the 3 Refuges and the 8 Precepts in Pali.

This is the beginning of the retreat, with the taking of the Three Refuges and the Eight Precepts.

The Refuges are really about being mindful, and ‘Buddham Saranam Gacchami’ is actually the point of mindfulness in each of us. So we take refuge in mindfulness.

‘Dhammam Saranam Gacchami’ is the truth, ‘the way it is’. As we go through this retreat we begin to look at our experience in terms of Dhamma rather than in terms of worldly values, so Dhamma is the second refuge.

Sangha is those who practise the Dhamma, and that is all of us, at this time, with all our intention to practise according to the Dhamma, to see and know for ourselves the truth of ‘the way it is’.

Over the years, I’ve internalised these Refuges. Rather than just being ceremonies and Theravada Pali recitations, they are actually reminders and skilful means. Every time I chant, like this time, giving you the Three Refuges, I always feel a sense of commitment to this meditation practice where Buddha is my refuge. Refuges are safe places, and we all want to feel safe. As we live in a realm where there are a lot of danger and a lot of fear, all creatures are looking for a refuge or some kind of safety. The Buddha then pointed to this mindfulness, this awakened consciousness, that is available to us. These are manifested in these terms of Buddham Saranam Gacchami, Dhammam Saranam Gacchami, Sangham Saranam Gacchami.

At first it began as a Theravadin ceremony, but later on, as we develop our practice, this becomes a beautiful reminder of our true nature and our liberation which we realise or recognise for ourselves the safety, that safe place, through refuge in the mind.

The Eight Precepts are about meditation form and agreed behaviour, or we put boundaries in terms of action and speech especially since we will be together for the next few days.

The First Precept is that we refrain from any kind of violent action towards each other. We also respect the lives of other creatures, such as wildlife that are coexisting with us, at this time, in this place. So it is the refrain from intentionally killing any living creatures. The Second is to refrain from taking that which is not given. Here we are in this beautiful place, we should be respecting the property of the owner and

respecting each other's properties. Our intention is to respect the nature of the properties, the material conditions, we find ourselves using and involved with at this time.

The Third, *abramahcariya*, is to refrain from any kind of sexual activities. This is the time not to seek excitement or romance but to refrain from sexual activities.

The Fourth is *musavada*, the refrain from inappropriate speech. Here I encourage what we call "noble silence". This is to make us, during this retreat, focus on looking at ourselves rather than seeking each other out to talk and distract each other. It's a way to support each other in our endeavour to awaken and enlighten. Speech is one thing that we normally use to talk and chat and seek to demand things from each other. But during this time, this is our opportunity to refrain from using our speech unless it is necessary. This is important. Noble silence is not tyrannical oppression. It is not like you are going to be punished if you talk to anyone. This word "noble" in English means that you take responsibility for your speech; use it only when it is appropriate and refrain from the habitual pattern of talking and chatting and seeking others to converse with. We call this "noble silence".

The Fifth is the refrain from any kind of intoxicating drinks or drugs. We want to investigate our conscious experience not as it is influenced by chemicals or drugs or alcohol. We create as little chemical condition as possible so that we can be just aware of natural consciousness that we are experiencing.

The Sixth is that we follow the schedule as listed here and the meals that are provided for us. Many people spend their day munching. Every time they get upset, distressed or worried, they go and eat something, or have a drink, call friends on the cell phone. We refrain from seeking distraction through eating. We just follow the scheduled meal time and eat at the appropriate time. During this time you don't have to be involved with cooking or shopping for food or dealing with such matter. It is a wonderful opportunity where we are no longer involved with that or to spend the time eating snacks and distracting ourselves with various things. So just determine to take the meals at the proper times. In the evenings, some people find not having dinner very distressing. Actually you can get used to it. I have not had dinner for 44 years. I don't miss it at all.

The Seventh is to refrain from seeking entertainments - singing, dancing, playing games and all the other ways of distracting ourselves. This is not about morality but about refraining from activities that intentionally distract us from our own determination in this retreat to concentrate the mind in the present moment.

The last or Eight is about high and comfortable bed. I notice that beds here are high and comfortable. Don't make a problem of this. It just means not to spend your time sleeping through this retreat.

All these Eight Precepts are here to kind of reach into our lives. The moral precepts are the first five - that is about respecting lives, non violent behaviour, respecting the property of others, about refraining from engaging in sexual activities, about right speech, not telling lies, using speech to deceive or harm or insult anyone but here we expand that to noble silence, and then the fifth is of course to refrain from alcoholic drinks and drugs. So these are about sexuality, about action, about speech; the moral agreement on limitation on how we act toward each other and speak to each other.

Then the others, the sixth, seventh and eighth precepts are renunciate precepts for this retreat: not eating in the evening and only taking the meals that are provided; refraining from entertaining

distractions and from sleeping too much.

Notice that these are guidelines for behaviour and agreements about how we are going to live during this period of time. This is like a conventional form in the Theravada Buddhist style and it is a way that we can learn and live with each other during this time as simply and as easily as possible.

The aim of a meditation retreat is to give us the occasion, like this retreat, for all of us to gather together and to contemplate and meditate on our lives, on our own mind. We are looking inward now; we are not seeking distraction outwardly. We are not here to go sightseeing or to engage in entertainment but to look inward. And so like meditation, this is to look inwards at ourselves, not in a critical judgmental way but changing the direction of ordinary daily worldly activities which pull us outward all the time into seeking things outside ourselves. This is a special opportunity to just have the support of the monastic Sangha here and the lay people. We are all helping each other to support this activity of looking inward to look at our mind, our heart and in this way it is a very different direction say from worldly activities and worldly goals.

So these 3 refuges and 8 precepts are the kind of traditional form or style of meditation.

I don't know what kind of experience or lack of experience you have. Maybe some of you have not been on a meditation retreat before. Maybe some of you are old hands or are experienced practitioners. And some of you may have had various retreats of different kinds, different techniques and different styles. In the meditation scene in Europe and America, there are so many different techniques, different teachers, different styles, different emphases and there so many different possibilities that we can label meditation.

My aim in this retreat is to encourage an attitude. I am not so much interested in meditation technique as such but in developing an attitude that will be helpful for whatever meditation technique you find helpful. So what I am trying to get across during this time is to develop an attitude that I found very helpful in my own cultivation and practice over the many years that I have been a monk. The attitude is one of looking, observing and noticing with awakened attention. We are not doing this in order to analyse or to think. We are to develop this sense of the "here and now", enlightenment and awakening in the here and now; because this is all we have - this "here and now".

Tomorrow is a potential, a possibility. But right now, we are sitting here, in this room, and when we think about tomorrow, it is not a memory. We can't remember tomorrow but we can expect or hope or dare or fear whatever about things that may happen in the future. All that arises are always in the present. You may be recollecting the past, yesterday or last week or whatever. That is a memory that arises in the present. So this is the Buddha's emphasis: it is about paying attention, here and now, and mindfulness, and awakened consciousness, here and now.

Over the years that I have been practising meditation, I find this a constant reminder. The worldly values always pull us out, planning the future: the future of the Sangha, the future of Buddhism, the future of this monk, this nun, this person, on and on like that. Then remembering the past, the good days and the bad days and so forth and that's how the worldly values are. It's all about time and about the future, about getting something, getting rid of something, and controlling something. So, in this realm that we are living in, we get caught up into just kind of obsessive compulsive habits. We have lots of anxiety or worry about the future because in the future anything can happen, anything you can think of, success or failure, whatever is a possibility in the future. And inevitably we get old and die. So death is definitely

about the future, and the past is what we remember from previous experiences. Usually the memories we have are the more extreme events that we experienced in the past - the great humiliations, disappointments, or the great successes, the good times. We don't usually remember the ordinariness of a day, say, on January 7 of last year. I am sure most of you don't quite remember what happened on that day, unless it was some extreme event. We all remember 9/11. That was an extreme event that changed the whole attitude of the whole world we know. That's a memory now, isn't it? 9/11 is a memory that arises in the present. So this present moment is where liberation is, where freedom is. Once we begin to appreciate this, we can deal with the conditions, the problems of the world that are inevitably a part of everyone's life as we have to live it in this form. So this emphasis on "here and now", the reality of now and this reminder to ourselves of the posture we are sitting in now. There are four basic postures that we use throughout the day and night, sitting, standing, walking and lying down. And these are not exotic postures, not like standing on our heads, doing some pirouettes across the floor - just the ordinary postures that any normal human being uses throughout one's life.

Right now, just reflect on our sitting - in a chair, on a mat, whatever. What they are is not important. What I encourage you to do at this time is just to sit and observe; be the observer of the reality of sitting is like this, whatever way you are sitting; just paying attention and noticing the weight of your body, the pressure, whatever you are feeling through your body at this moment. So now take this time, a few minutes, to observe. Don't look at anyone else, just look yourself, look inwards and observe just the simple act, the reality of your body sitting like this at this time. And notice just the pressure of sitting on the mat or the chair is like this, not that it has to be any way but be the observer of the sitting. Notice any tensions you may feel in your body at this time, any kind of stress, tension, tenseness without trying to do anything with it, just accept it whatever your body is producing at this time. Not changing anything but just observing that it's like this. Notice just the touch of your hands, where are your hands right now. You don't look at them but just observe the thoughts of your hands, your right hand, left hand. The - the sense of touch. One touching the other is like this.. or your feet. What are the feet at this time. Where are they? You don't have to open your eyes and look at them but just observe the sense of the right foot is like this, the left foot is like this. Notice the feeling of the fanned air touching your body. Whether you feel hot or cold, or just right...it's like this.

So this way of reflecting like this is not judging. It's not saying whether it's right or wrong, pleasant or painful, but it's a reminder that we are noticing something that we generally pay no attention to, or never notice. It's easy when we sit and think about other things, read the books, eat the food, talk to each other. Unless we do meditation retreat, we don't sit and notice the act itself. Unless the body is really uncomfortable, we don't notice the body till it starts producing some kind of discomfort. We also notice that this is the "here and now" Dhamma, isn't it? This is your body. Your body is sitting here and it is like this. See this as a way of grounding ourselves. The body is an easy object to observe. It is nothing subtle or exoteric. It is just like this. It is a coarse condition. It is always here and now as long as you are alive, the body is here and now whatever posture you are in. Whatever state of mind or emotion you are experiencing, your body is here and it is now that you are recognising and observing. It will bring your attention to the reality of your own physical body as it is in the present where emotional problems and plans of the future, and regrets from the past will always pursue us, make us worry, complicate our lives endlessly. So this is a way of reflecting, bringing attention to what is obvious in the present, of what is happening right now. It isn't caught up with vanity, or worldly values such as success or failure or anything else. It is just like this. There is nothing much to it. It's not interesting even. But it is a way of training yourself to pay attention and to recognise and appreciate the ability that each of us has to pay attention to life, to be aware of that which is very obvious in the present, such as this physical body that each of us lives with till it dies.

Now the next one is the breath. All of us are breathing at this time. Be aware of our breath, pay attention to our nostril and just use the breath as an object of mindfulness. This is the traditional meditation called anapanasatthi in which we just observe the inhaling and exhaling, the gentle sensation that we feel as the air enters the nostrils, reaches its peak and then exhalation. Just observe that the breathing of our own bodies in this present moment is like this; bringing attention to nostril, or be aware any part of your body that you tend to feel the breath, where it is most obvious. The point is to pay attention that this is what it is you are using, this here and now reality of breathing, using it as a focus to begin to appreciate the present moment. We no longer create problems about the future or carry anything from the past, just be with that which is here and now – the posture and the breath.

Notice that mindfulness is observing, being aware, of that which is now – the breathing is now, you are not thinking of about the breath tomorrow, being just an observer of the way the body is breathing at this moment is like this - the posture, the sitting posture, that in addition to standing, walking and lying down. So the result of this practice is actually paying attention, observing that which is happening now. It isn't triggering off egotistical problems, vanity or worldly conditions. I am not asking the posture to be sitting in full lotus posture and have a competition of whose posture is the best. That would be bringing up the sense of vanity in self. The posture you are using at this moment is like this - this sense of awakened attention to that which is happening in the present moment.

In the Thai Forest tradition, they have this mantra that they use which I find very helpful and it is just a two syllable mantra – Buddhho – which is the Buddha's name, a grammatical mantric form for Buddha. Most Thai Forest teachers, especially those in Wat Pah Pong, use this mantra. I found this valuable because in Thai they translate this as "the Knowing in the present". It can be used as a kind of word, a mantric form that we repeat or use to stop the tendency to proliferate in thought. It reminds us the relationship of this moment, of being this Knowing, this Buddhho, of the way it is, such as the breath, is like this; the posture is like this...

The biggest obstruction to meditation and insight and enlightenment is the ego, the sense of self, as we are conditioned to see ourselves as the body, as this personality. Our refuge now is in Buddhho, or awareness, this mindfulness. As we develop the use of this word Buddhho it reminds us to pay attention to the most obvious condition to us at this time, using the body, the posture or the breath. When I talk about attitude, it is changing from being a person trying to meditate and get somewhere, solve one's emotional problems and get rid of one's defilements and become enlightened in the future. That is the ego, the conventional attitude generally we come to meditation with.

We all start with "I'm a person with a lot of suffering and problems and I want to meditate in order to solve my problems and to become a better person and to become enlightened in the future". At least I started out with that. I didn't see myself through wisdom but through the worldly conditioning. What I am pointing to now is that I am not trying to reinforce this illusion of the self for any of you. I am trying to give you the necessary skilful means that we use in meditation to be able to see through the assumptions you have about who you are or what you need to do to become something else. The ego is built on memories and the thinking process – "I am this person". "I did this". "I did that". We see ourselves according to values of this society - good or bad, successful or failed, lovable or not, acceptable or not acceptable, right or wrong.

Buddha knows the way it is. Buddha knows the breath is like this. It is not me, Ajahn Sumedho, contemplating my breath anymore. When there is this mindfulness, this Buddhho, awareness and breath as the object of awareness, then we are seeing it in terms of Dhamma or the way it is rather than in terms of how we are breathing, our breath and all the conditions that arise from that assumption – our

breathing, our breath, our body – into being the Buddho, the refuge, *Buddham Saranam Gacchami*, awakened consciousness of an individual at this moment. This is the seeming conventional reality of this moment. I am here and you are over there. We are not emphasising that myself is sitting here and you there but that we are all engaging in this mindfulness practice, to be aware of the way it is wherever our body is sitting; whatever condition we are experiencing. In meditation, we start with the most obvious conditions in the present, the posture and the breath.

This Buddho is a reminder of our refuge rather than interpreting our meditation practice in personal terms on whether one is a good meditator or not a very good meditator. We begin to no longer take this position or judge ourselves according to the ego but we develop this sense of refuge and awakened consciousness with mindfulness, knowing the Dhamma the way it is, the breath, just using the breath and the posture of the body.

When I first started meditating, I was an obsessed thinker. I was absolutely lost in my own thoughts. Even the mindfulness of the breath was beyond my ability. I started meditating trying to be mindful of the breath, but my wandering mind, the thinking mind, would carry me away every time. I began to use this Buddho mantra – If I am going to think, I am going to think just this one word. Then its intentional, I am not trying to figure out the nature of Buddha or anything like that, but just merely a skilful means and expedient means, taking one word, two syllables, Budd and Dho and just thinking that. Because of the obsessive thinking problem I had with my wandering mind, I had to keep this Buddho going at a rather rapid pace.

At first I just repeat Buddho in a rapid pace, making it as fast as possible so that no other thoughts can sneak in whatsoever, just trying to be ahead of the tendency to proliferate in thinking. I was determined to just listen to myself thinking Buddho knowing that it can become mechanical and perfunctory. So the determination is to keep it quite clear and bright in the mind. After experimenting with this, I found it did calm me. After awhile I didn't need to repeat Buddho rapidly. Quite unexpectedly, I began to sense this calming of the mind. I could align Buddho with the breath.. inhaling on Budd.. exhaling on Dho so that the thinking of the mantra aligns with the breath. This helped me to concentrate my mind and keep it from wandering with proliferating thought.

So now just try this mindfulness of the breath with this word, inhaling on Bud, exhaling on Dho, so that you are thinking the word while you are observing the inhalation. It will keep you from wandering in your thought and then exhaling with the syllable Dho. Just try it for a few minutes to get some momentary experience at this time with it.....

Now, I suggest that you have short break, change your posture. Take a 5 minute break and then we can continue.