

What You Take Home With You

By Ajahn Sucitto

From the book *Seeing the Way*, Vol. 2: Discerning Timeless Truth in Traditional Buddhist Teachings: An Anthology of Transcribed Talks and Essays by Monks and Nuns of the Forest Sangha Tradition

From a talk given at Insight Meditation Society, Barre, Massachusetts in 1999

Ajahn Sucitto was born in London in 1949. He received bhikkhu ordination in 1976 in Thailand, came to Britain in 1978 and was part of the original group that established Cittaviveka under Ajahn Sumedho in 1979. Ajahn Sucitto helped establish Harnham Vihara in 1981 then Amaravati in 1984, and in 1992 became the third abbot of Cittaviveka, where he remains today.

“When you handle the present with mindfulness, the future will be conditioned by awareness and joy.”

When it's time to leave the retreat or the monastery, you have to leave the situation and the structure. You're going to have to put aside the silence, support and companionship. You can only take with you what is yours – the awareness, the skills and the understanding. That's why we use routines and stillness without attaching to them – because you can't take them with you. It's nice to cultivate them during retreat, but the silence itself is not the main benefit. Rather, the main benefits are mindfulness and wisdom. We are involved with meditation in order to realize that our psychological space can change radically for the better. And we also practise just for the beauty of practice, for the skills and the happiness that arise. These can stay with you if you carry them with the wisdom of right understanding.

You Can Take Mindfulness with You

Mindfulness, the ability to bear witness, is a tremendously powerful and skilful factor of mind. The Buddha called mindfulness the flood-stopper. It stops the floods of greed, hatred, and delusion. With mindfulness, we give ourselves a choice with regard to following what arises in the mind; and keeping that choice available is something you want to go on doing because the mind almost longs to get trapped – and there are plenty of sights, sounds, flavours and ideas that can sweep you away out of aware responsibility. So as we carry a body with us all the time, we can use that as a base for mindfulness; a place where we can stop the floods. We can turn our attention to the body and just refer to the body in the body, as it is – that is, as sensations, energies and form rather than the impressions of beauty or ugliness that identification imposes upon it. With those impressions, the body is always a source of anxiety and agitation. But we can know that that's just how the body is. It's a thirty-year-old body, a sixty-year-old body, or whatever. It behaves this way. It gets ill; it loses vitality. That's what it does. We don't have to make that a source of pain or horror. The body is the home base, the place where we learn to refer to the body in the body, not as a source of vanity or desire, but just as it is. And we can refer to other people's bodies in the same way.

It's much the same with mind-states; they don't have to be burdened with agitation, shame, defence or conceit. With mindfulness we bear mind-states in mind, but not in a hypnotized way. Instead mindfulness is to be conjoined with full awareness. Full awareness tunes into the ethical nature of our current mind-state; also, it is alert to the changing nature of whatever we experience. So when mindfulness and full awareness come into play, they guide us towards letting go of the bad and affirming the good, without making a drama out of them. Without this skilful way of relating, we just identify with the mind states and relate to them with shame, conceit and build up programs of needing to control everything, impulsiveness, fault-finding or self-pity. These relational programs become our thumbprints – so close that we don't even see them – yet we can stamp them on everything and everyone we come into contact with. The check-point is whether we can relate to mind states with responsibility but without making a big thing out of them. Can we relate without attachment, without sticking our thumbprints onto what arises, and allow a state to be as it is? Mindfulness and full awareness make it possible to do so. And amazingly enough this gives us clarity to let the state pass, learn from it, or engage – whatever is appropriate.

So as you leave here take a mindful way of relating with you. Notice when meditating on breathing, how we put demands onto a simple thing like the breathing. 'I need to get concentrated!' We can get into aversion as well. 'I'm useless because I can't be with the breathing.' But there is a release from relating in these ways. We can learn to trust, to allow, to be content with the way it is. Then the mind can rest in that contentment, and let that natural calm support mindfulness of your body's breathing. Then *samadhi* arises – not out of forcing the mind onto the breath but out of a relationship of ease, contentment, trust, and steadiness.

Our entire lives are about the possibility of right relationship. As we learn this, everything opens up. There will always be something to relate to – from the most intimate to the global, from one other person to a community, group or nation, from the living to the dead. True relationship is a dynamic experience, isn't it? It's not a fixed or static thing. It's a way of being that involves the openness and the skill to be present with the way it is. If we don't do that, the relationship becomes distorted with projections. Consider, for example, how many human relationships get distorted because they follow the wrong impulses. 'I want you to be this way. You've got to be like this for me.' As long as we're coming from self-interest we'll always see things in terms of how we want them to be, and this can only be a very limited perspective. Follow it, and there's disappointment, bitterness, and betrayal.

But there's a way out of that, through Dhamma practice. This brings us more clearly into life. It's not about latching onto a particular feeling, mood, perception, or situation. Dhamma practices like mindfulness, patience and clarity help us to relate to what's going on with more spaciousness and less demands and pressure; one can even learn about one's stickiness in a light way. 'Oh, I see what's happening. The mind is doing this.' We can let go of it. Then life is based on clarity. It's interesting. It's something you can empathize with. When we get stuck in our self-perspectives, we get cranky and stubborn and defensive, rigid or inflamed. So we need

to keep using mindfulness and full awareness to learn not to take our own perspectives as ultimate. Then we can grow in terms of empathy, clarity and ease.

If we can cultivate in this way, we arrive at what is called *atammayatā*, which means ‘not making out of it.’ Things are happening as they are right now. *Atammayatā* is the wisdom that relinquishes making things out of arisen phenomena. But it’s not an unwillingness to respond. It means that we don’t keep running our habits and compulsive programs through life. We leave our life-story, with its tragedies, heroes and villains behind. This wise relinquishment comes through mindfulness and awareness. That is, the mind tunes in to the way things are right now, and finds that it feels steady and complete. And it feels more in touch this way, than when it goes into judgments and opinions and tries to make things happen in accordance with them. A wiser response can then arise, as and when and how it ts.

So mindfulness supports wisdom, the wisdom to recognize the difference between how things are going and the habitual impressions and reactions that we construct around that. And as we begin to see things as changing events rather than fixed realities, the mind comes out of its own frozen or compulsive states. In that awakening, the mind’s centre shifts. It feels steady yet light. Once there is access to this lightness, this non-attachment, it can progressively deepen. We stop getting so intense about our habits, and accordingly approach them more skillfully. We approach them from the non-attachment that defuses and discharges them.

Living the Dhamma requires a skilful handling, a gentle unravelling of our tightly-held complexities. When we can handle our mind’s views and energies, then we can share its rich potential with one another. Rather than constantly intensifying me and mine, we can live lightly, share, and enjoy. We can act without making a big deal out of it. And a basis for action with non-attachment to praise, blame and self-imagery is a great thing to take with you.

You Can Take Understanding with You

You can take understanding wherever you go, by looking out for three signs. These signs may not sound very attractive, because they are the qualities of unsatisfactoriness, impermanence, and not-self that can be discerned in our experience. In terms of conditioned reality, these three signs are true markers that run through what we see, think, taste, feel and do.

Think about these. There is ‘unsatisfactoriness’ (*dukkha*). This doesn’t mean that everything is miserable and wretched; it means that there is a sense of incompleteness. We’d like things to be consistent and ordered, but they rarely are. Unsatisfactoriness occurs in different ways. First of all there is the natural law of things breaking down, or being inconsistent. This is called ‘*sabhāva dukkha*’: the way that nature is. There is pain. The world is always unresolved. Life isn’t fair and doesn’t have straight edges. Relationships keep going in and out of kilter. We can conceive of life as if it should run in straight lines, but you won’t find a straight line in the universe. Even light bends.

We can however be upright! In terms of morality, and of how we relate to what we're with, we can be that balanced uprightness that witnesses the wobbly nature of experience and makes peace with that. And we can contemplate any unsatisfied feeling that comes into our minds. This form of *dukkha* (*sankhata dukkha*) is something that our minds compound; and it's an experience that we can do something about. In this sense *dukkha* is a feeling that occurs as a consequence of wanting things to be full, complete, reasonable, steady.... Most poignantly it occurs around physical pain, or the sense of separation from the loved. This is where we're really tested, as to whether we go into frustration, depression, or denial; whether we react and compound an unsatisfactory mind-set around the *dukkha* of being alive – or whether we use Dhamma to meet and come out of all that.

To come out of those reactions is the crux of Dhamma practice: through this practice we develop the capacity to meet the *sabhāva dukkha* with patience, compassion, and equanimity. And to generate these qualities in ourselves at this very important meeting-place is what mindfulness and full awareness are about.

The sign of *dukkha* is not a cause for despair, but rather a pointer to where we need to let go of naivety and grow mature in life. Through meeting *dukkha* we come fully to life. Life is flowing, rhythmic and comes with forces that we can't control. To pass then through *dukkha* to a serene centre in ourselves there has to be the development of great strengths, great faith and great heart. Therefore we should take the exhortation with us to practise with whatever *dukkha* arises; it's this that makes us grow.

The second sign is that of impermanence, inconstancy or uncertainty – *anicca*. Consider the way that expectation establishes things in the future, how it sets up the wish for things to be this way or that way. The sign of impermanence challenges that: *anicca* also carries the implication of complete uncertainty. From moment to moment, things are shifting and changing. You can't anticipate what's going to come up. You don't know. What does that do to your plans and sense of security? It can feel scary, but this sign, like that of *dukkha*, catalyzes the development of great heart and great freedom.

Anicca is very good for helping us break out of our sense of time. Time is an abstraction. We create it as a linear thing, something that moves forward. But contemplate that. How long has this week been? Ten days? Someone said that yesterday felt like forty-eight hours. And yet, what's ten seconds of pain? How long is a shower? How long is a cold shower?

Time then is a measure of desire – desire for continuity, desire for a certain outcome. It paralyzes us into expectation and anticipation or dread and worry. We skip over the present moment and get lost in something we imagine is out there in the virtual reality we call the future. One can spend one's life thinking about the future – for example, 'When I get home, I'll...' But in the purest sense, there isn't any future. We are only ever here.

How good is having a future anyway? It's a burden when it makes you think, 'Oh, I've got to do this. I've got to do that' or, 'It's going to be like this and like that,' or, 'maybe there's something I should be or could be...Well maybe I could, or perhaps I'll never be able to....' What do these things feel like? We can spend quite a lot of time in meditation trying to put aside the past and the future because we've become so attuned to that way of experiencing things – the past and the future. That's our conditioning. Meditating, trying to get into the present moment, can take quite a bit of skill. But the more that one can abide in the present, the easier the meditation will be.

In this respect, the capacity to live in uncertainty can help. We can develop the capacity to live free from the pressure of time. But it's not about imagining that there will be no future ... that's another expectation about the future. No, the skills that you develop in being fully tuned in to the present and meeting and managing what arises will support a future based on clarity and balance. The future arises out of the conditions in the present, so when you handle the present with mindfulness, the future will be conditioned by awareness and joy rather than by anxiety and bias. Joy comes from the initiative and the courage to meet the inconstant and the uncertain. Take those with you too!

The third sign, 'not-self', *anattā*, is for the psychological context. If you look at any way in which you sense yourself, you see that it also depends on an inferred other-than-self. Because of this sense of 'me' there is also 'the other', the 'what I should be, what I might be seen as' and so on. The two facets go hand-in-hand. Things only exist, are notable or recognizable, because their opposites also exist. 'This is me, this is mine. I end at the edge of my skin. Other things exist, too, and they are out there, somewhere else.' Whenever there's an experience of 'mine', there's an experience of 'nothing to do with me'. There's a place called 'away' which is somewhere else. 'I don't want this so I throw it away.' 'Nothing to do with me.' On a global level, you can see the results of this kind of thinking. This is what all the pollution is about, isn't it? We're always trying to find a pit in which to bury things, dump them over the side, or look the other way. It's gone! It's gone away. But there isn't any 'away.' We have ways of switching off from what we can't bear. But really there aren't any final 'aways.' The dark side lives with us, doesn't it? And it only gets darker if we don't meet it with wisdom and compassion.

There isn't any getting away from your mind either. As long as it's experienced in a way that suggests that you are a self who can get away from your thoughts, emotions and memories, then you haven't developed the right relationship. When you learn to relate appropriately to the things that you don't like about yourself ...

when you stop trying to get away from yourself ... then you begin to experience yourself from a different basis. You relate to these experiences as they arise, rather than denying them as 'not me' or get stuck in them as: 'This is what I am.' And it's the same thing when relating to others: if other people are always 'getting in my way' and 'taking up my time' and 'bothering me', it's time to consider: 'What does this show me about my mind-set? What makes the otherness of "other people"?' Isn't it the view that imagines separate selves at the centre of it? And aren't all these

selves tinted by our biases and reactions? But with mindful awareness of the experience of self and other, we see that it is these tints and assumptions that really form self. It is this 'self-view' that clogs up our ability to relate.

We can colour life with the darkness of our own ignorance, bias or inability to be with what arises. But how lonely it is when we follow this self-view! There's a lack of trust, a lack of ease, a lack of sharing. People can feel dreadfully alone and that experience of aloneness is even more conscious in groups of people. You may not even experience it when you are on your own. Aloneness is a sense of alienation from the others who I sense around me. Some of the loneliest places are cities or railway stations or airports. There are thousands of people milling around all being 'other'. One can feel quite confused, threatened, even frightened. There's nothing more frightening than a crowd of people being 'others'.

With understanding, we can work with the mechanisms that make it that way. We can look into our psychology and relax the activities that reject, dismiss, screen out, or push away the 'other'. If you're a little speck in an indifferent or hostile universe then you've got to get something and have something and be something. You become the only place of safety and control in the cosmos. That's a tough job description to live up to, but that tightness, that sense of alienation is what 'self-view' does to you. So take the exhortation to look into 'self and other' with you; it can unfold into great compassion and freedom.

Let Great Heart Take You

Dhamma-practice can give you the boundaries of morality and the buoyancy to allow you to be with, but not overwhelmed by, the ups and downs and uncertainties of life. You feel yourself being lived, breathed in and out. And when you open into this sense of an uncontrolled ease, you can experience the great heart. This is the sense that can feel unconfined by separation. It can widen to embrace the hurt, and in that widening sense be a still, serene centre. From great heart come *mettā*, the inclination towards well-being for oneself and others, *karuṇa*, the capacity to receive and empathize with another person's suffering, *muditā*, a sense of enjoyment at another's success or happiness, and *uppekkhā*, the even-mindedness to serenely be with the ocean as the 'way it is'.

If you can maintain this Dhamma cultivation, you can pass more easily through the loss, the grief, the pain, and the illness that comes up in life. You get to trust the Dhamma of your heart rather than being clenched, holding on, fearing, or resisting. You may not know the future but you can know that mindfulness, awareness and calm are better than fear. You know that living in a self-absorbed way is hurtful and renders you confused, clumsy, and eventually impotent. We can know this and stay with that knowing. And for a moment, when you feel a quality of joy and opening that comes through that, then stay with it. This is the heart of the practice.

So Dhamma practice is about being fully alive and staying alive. It's about the brightness and the vitality that come from connecting to a living system. It doesn't mean it's always going to be

a comfortable ride. But once you begin to understand and lighten up about the comfortable and uncomfortable, then you experience the balance that enables you to ride, to float, to connect, to share in this great Way. This is what life is about. This is being alive rather than just existing.