THE BODY

DHAMMA REFLECTIONS ON AGEING, SICKNESS AND DEATH
BY THE NUNS OF THE THERAVADA COMMUNITY

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Dedication

We would like to dedicate this collection of teachings to our parents and all others who have shared gracefulness and wisdom in response to their meeting the messengers of old age, sickness and death.

Old Age, Sickness and Death

Ajahn Sundara

I have been reflecting on how much cooling down we need to do.

As you probably already know, the mind has a lot of heat in it. So we all love cooling down, finding some peace, but we don't always know how to do that. The heat element is not just the fire of our passions; it also expresses the amount of complexity that we build up in ourselves. A very simple fact or reality can become a mountain of issues, difficulties, and problems. The Dhamma perspective asks you to turn away from complexities and look at the simple facts of life. Rather than analyzing a whole train of thought, the Dhamma asks you just to look at thought and see how it behaves. What is it and how long does it last? How does it affect you? We ask these questions not from an intellectual point of view but from intuitive knowledge – the knowing mind, which Ajahn Sumedho sometimes refers to as 'intuitive knowing'. It is a knowing which comes not from thinking but from just seeing, from presence.

Sometimes this is a little startling, because as soon as you bring things into 'presence' they become simple. Then you can get lost – you may think something is wrong, you are just suppressing something or maybe doing something incorrectly, because life becomes so simple when you are just present. I'm sure you've witnessed how many times the mind goes astray during the day, how many times it moves out of this sense of presence, of knowing. If you look deeply at the causes of this movement, it has to do with heat which agitates the mind, creating a kind of turmoil.

In Dhamma practice there are many means of addressing this particular turmoil. One way is sitting on your cushion, but there are also reflections, like the reflection on ageing, sickness and death:

> *I am of the nature to age; I have not gone beyond ageing.*
> *I am of the nature to sicken; I have not gone beyond sickness.*
> *I am of the nature to die; I have not gone beyond dying.*

This reflection helps us cool down the mind and bring it to a level where we face facts rather than a world of fantasy. This is what brought me to the Dhamma: wanting to face those three facts of existence, and death in

particular, the awareness that death can happen at any time. There is a whole aspect of the practice which has to do with simple reflections like that – reflecting on the transience of life, on the uncertainty of our existence. Reflecting that we are fit now but one day we may be sick; one day we might no longer have all the privileges we have at present, the privileges of good health, strength in the body and strength and clarity of mind.

When we do not reflect in this way we are likely to be caught up in the illusion of the future and in planning for that future, organizing our life, worrying or getting excited about what could happen, or becoming depressed. The mind creates a whole range of feelings and moods when it forgets that our life could terminate at any time. So paradoxically, this reflection, this recollection of ageing, sickness and death can help us to appreciate our life more positively.

How do we deal with the ageing process? Do we fear being sick ? Do we fear death and all that goes with that aspect of our life ? We make plans so as to put off dying, doing everything we can not to fall sick or grow old. A lot of energy is spent on that. You can see in our society how many gadgets just to keep us looking young are dangled in front of us – hair dyes, Botox, facelifts, eternal youth pills... ! We try to go against nature, but that means paying a price and in the end it never works.

Ageing, sickness and death are the three signs that propelled the Buddha onto the path of liberation. When the Buddha was a prince he was completely protected from seeing anything that could give him an idea of ageing, sickness and death. It was only at the age of twenty-nine, when he left his father's palace for the first time and was going through the town, that he saw an old person, a sick person and a dead person, and each time he asked his friend the charioteer Channa, 'What is this? Is that going to happen to me too?' Channa said, 'Yes, all of us are going to age, get sick and die.' Having witnessed and realized this, the Prince decided to find out the meaning of this life. What was the point of being alive if the only things that awaited us were ageing, getting sick and dying? Why were we here in the first place? That is why this reflection is such an important teaching – those three signs were the gateway to the arising of the Buddha's interest in Dhamma.

The first reflection is on ageing: 'I am of the nature to age; I have not gone beyond ageing'. This reflection is a very potent one, because we are

all ageing from the moment we are born. None of us are going to escape. When I was thirty-one, in my mind I felt as if I was ninety. Now, except for the body, I feel much younger. The Dhamma does keep the mind young. If you want to make an investment in your life towards staying young, make sure you practise Dhamma. The wakefulness it teaches is the only thing you can really bank on. Everything will fall apart except that brightness, that radiance of mindfulness. Everything else will just go back to its elements. All of us who are over fifty know that this is true. We are definitely leaning downwards, back to the earth. We're getting podgier, spreading, becoming bent over. If we are really vain and our personal appearance is all there is to our life, ageing is pretty miserable, isn't it? If you are attached to the body, what a terrible thing when the body is changing, getting sick, growing old, decaying and eventually facing death.

The second reflection is on getting sick: 'I am of the nature to sicken; I have not gone beyond sickness'. This reflection reminds us that we never go beyond the risk of sickness, we can never be liberated from fear of sickness or our attachment to health. If we haven't reflected on the body's limitations, the fact that even with the healthiest diet and lifestyle it is prone to sickness, we may dread being sick. When I was a young dancer, before I encountered the Dhamma, I thought I could do *anything* with my body. I never looked at it as a limited thing. I wasn't conscious of my fears regarding the body until I started meditating. Then I realized there was a lot of fear in it, fear of death, of disappearing, of changing, of losing control.

We invest so much in trying to keep the body healthy, which on one level is a good thing; this is our instrument, after all. For example, we have to keep it strong enough to practise. If we didn't have a good back, good knees and a certain degree of general good health, we wouldn't be able to sit and go through what we have to go through when we do intensive practice. But a lot of our mind is kept extremely busy with the body, and this is what you need to see in meditation; that busy-ness and worrying around the desire to keep the body healthy.

We have a very strange, conflictual relationship with the body, because even though we want to stay healthy and strong and youthful, the body also receives all our negativity and stress. We punish it with certain habits – smoking, drinking, constant worrying. When you are not aware of the body, do not acknowledge it, you can pile up a lot of stress. We can

spend a lot of time indulging in mental activities, without paying much attention to how they affect our whole physical experience. So this reflection, 'I am of the nature to sicken, I have not gone beyond sickness', reminds us to take care of our body and to realize that the body is dependent on the mind and the mind is dependent on the body. They are inter-related. They affect each other: sometimes the body affects the mind, sometimes the mind affects the body. If we do not understand that, we can easily damage the body by overriding the signals that it sends. The body is a very good gauge. If you know how to read them, it gives you every signal you need to know about your mind and how to take care of it.

It is also important not to indulge in endlessly pampering the body. You should understand how it works, but if you are obsessed with the body you will actually make it sick, because the obsession will become worry and that won't help much. So we need to remember that falling sick is not unnatural. The body does get sick. Some people believe that if you think the right thoughts all the time you will never fall ill, but you're still at the mercy of bugs and weaknesses in the body and of organs failing, not necessarily because you have been thinking a certain way. Of course, if you think in a negative way for too long this will affect the body. But sometimes the body just fails, because it is part of nature, like a tree. A tree's leaves fall every year and eventually an old tree falls down, but not because it was depressed or worried! It hasn't suffered from stress or mismanagement. Falling down is just its nature; at some point it gives up. This is something for us to reflect upon. Sometimes we do create the conditions for ageing more rapidly or falling ill, but in any event we age naturally, because we are part of nature.

Sickness is not a personal problem. You don't need to feel bad about being ill. The Buddha says we are of the nature to fall sick and we haven't gone beyond sickness. If we haven't been ill yet, this is a cause for appreciating our good health and the good health of others – feeling a sense of *muditā* (appreciation), instead of complaining that we don't have the right food, the right conditions or the right job to be healthy. A mind that is always complaining will certainly *make* you sick. But if you appreciate what you have and receive at each moment, that can sustain you – even if it doesn't sustain the health of the body, at least it can sustain the health of the mind.

The third reflection is: 'I am of the nature to die; I will not go beyond

dying'. Even before I knew anything about Buddhism, at one point in my life I became interested in reflecting on death. Maybe it was because I was in a vulnerable state, or maybe it was because I was open and searching for the meaning of life. I wished deeply that at the end of my life I might have no regrets. This reflection on death brought me an immediate sense of presence, it immediately brought me down to reality. If I had any doubts about things, which option to take, what to do and how, or similar mental proliferations about this and that, I'd ask myself, 'If I died tomorrow, what would I like to do now?' The very powerful effect that had on me was just amazing. My whole body would relax and become very at peace with things. That thought was a great cooling factor.

Since becoming a nun I've seen many people dying, and I've been blessed with seeing some of them dying in wonderful ways. This is something that I will always cherish, because when it's my turn I'll be able to call to mind the amazing experience of being with those people right to the end. Over the years several people have come to die at the monastery. There was a Thai lady who temporarily ordained and spent six months with us at Chithurst. Three years later she was diagnosed with liver cancer. She decided to prepare herself to die, so she came back to the monastery. It was extraordinary to be with her during the last six weeks of her life and to see her last minutes – she was so bright and alive. She didn't have much pain. We spent a lot of time around her. The monks and nuns sat in her room and we did some chanting. She had a bag of sweets, and about ten minutes before she died she said, 'Oh, let's share all these sweets, this is my last sensual enjoyment on this earth'. She shared out all the sweets, then five minutes later she lay down and died. Until the end she was very bright, even chirpy, with a kind of energy – a radiance and brightness.

There was also a man who came to die at the monastery. He was himself a Dhamma teacher. He had taught Dhamma for many years and he was interested in talking about *mettā* , so he led a kind of *mettā* seminar. We studied various texts and reflected on *mettā* . The next morning he died.

So I've been blessed with witnessing these quite inspiring endings. Our own life is also a preparation for death, isn't it? We live well so we can die well. The two go together. If we wholeheartedly put all our good energy into living this life, without holding back, being selfish or caught in fear, we will probably find that we will die much more peacefully.

That's what I've noticed; when people have lived a good life they tend to die much more at peace with themselves.

Reflection on dying is a way of appreciating our life right now. When we think of death, we can appreciate each present moment as a very precious moment. This life is a precious life. This opportunity to learn is a precious opportunity. We may be feeling so many things – a sense of failure, regret for the mistakes we have made in life and a reaction of righteousness connected with those mistakes: 'You should have done it this way! Never forgive! Feel bad!', followed by a very quick spiral down into a hell realm. But at that moment you reflect, 'I may die tomorrow, what is important right now? What is meaningful?'

One aspect of ageing, sickness and death is forgiveness: being able to forgive ourselves for being stupid, forgetting to be aware, being misunderstood. Tomorrow we may end, so we do not hold on to old grudges, fears, projections, perceptions or views, the strong ideas we have about ourselves and others. It is so important to develop that lightness which is part of letting go. But letting go calls for skills. It's not just sitting on the cushion. There is reading the Suttas, reflecting on the teachings, encouraging oneself. Sometimes we need to talk to ourselves too. Ajahn Chah used to encourage his students to talk to themselves as if they were talking to a friend.

The programme of ignorance loves to undermine all the good work that you do. In the poems of enlightened monks and nuns from the time of the Buddha, even though they are enlightened, *Māra* still has the guts to come and say to a nun, 'What are you doing here, Sister? You could be having such fun in life. You could have a husband and make lots of merit and enjoy all the sensual pleasures of the world, instead of looking gaunt and miserable.' And the nun says, 'I know you, Mara. I've seen the limitation of sense pleasures, thank you very much.' We need to remember the goal of our path. If we lose sight of the purpose of practice we can easily get lost. Ageing, sickness and death remind us to reflect on the purpose of this journey of life. Sometimes we can cling to practice so desperately that we may actually lose the moment of insight, of awakening. We forget that in many stories enlightenment happens at the most unexpected moment. For example, one bhikkhuni disciple of the Buddha, Patācārā, became enlightened as she put out the wick of her lamp. It wasn't as she was straining and feeling, 'It's coming! It's coming!', she just extinguished her lamp and there was enlightenment!

Venerable Ānanda, the Buddha's cousin and devoted attendant, spent a whole night contemplating the body. The story tells us that as he went to lie down, 'before his head touched the pillow and after his feet left the ground, in that interval his heart was liberated from taints' and he became an Arahant.

We are programmed and conditioned into always wanting, wanting, wanting something. Wanting some proof of the value of our practice and preferably now, not tomorrow: 'I will do it only if it works, and if it doesn't work I'll give up!' But we can learn not to expect anything and just remember these reflections: 'I am of the nature to age, I have not gone beyond ageing. I am of the nature to sicken, I have not gone beyond sickness. I am of the nature to die, I have not gone beyond dying'. The recollection which follows them: 'All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me', can come as a hard truth to consider. Everything will be separated from us. That teaches us to remember to enjoy fully what is here with us now, as one day it will be gone. Worrying about *when* it will go or being miserable while it is present and thinking too much about the future will spoil the joy of life.

Reflection is a way of training the mind. Although that word may conjure up ideas of military training, and becoming a good Dhamma soldier, we have to be quite realistic. The path is about training the mind/heart. But the training does not have to be militaristic; it is a compassionate training that helps the mind to be free from delusion and pain. The mind as we experience it is not what we are, but we still have to live with it, so we have to guide it in a kindly way and give it some pointers, some guidelines to help its energy flow in the the right direction. During difficult times we can recall that many things, many good forces are helping and supporting our endeavour to walk this path. These reflections on ageing, sickness and death are among them.

Growing Old Gracefully

Ajahn Candasiri

I recently visited some relatives in Canada, where I also had a chance to share *Dhamma* with various Buddhist groups there. I realized that when people don't have a local monastery or regular contact with *Dhamma* teachings, they really seem to value having contact with a monk or nun. These people were very interested, very eager. They had lots of questions and seemed very enthusiastic about practice.

Growing Old

One of the things that struck me most forcefully during my visit was a question that someone asked in one of the meditation workshops. She said she was noticing that as she grew older she tended to forget things, her mind is no longer so bright and clear. She asked, 'How do you practise with this? I know that it's not going to get any better; I can feel that my mind is going.'

After she had asked this question there was an awesome hush in the room. I think quite a few of the people there were aware that they were no longer remembering things so well. Though they were from a wide range of ages, the fact of ageing was very real for all of them. It's clear that we can't stop the ageing process, but how can we practise with it? Is there anything we can do to make it all less difficult for ourselves and others? What was really striking was that shared realization of the inevitability of old age, sickness and death; this is something that all of us are facing right now in varying degrees – and we can't do anything about it. Some people will completely lose their minds fairly early on. Others of us may grow into our seventies, eighties or nineties with a mind that is still quite bright, but certainly the body will change. How can Buddhist practice support a sense of well-being during this process?

Well-Being

It was a particularly interesting question because the theme I had chosen for the workshop was 'Well-Being': maintaining well-being. I have come to see that well-being is a necessary foundation for practice. It is said that you can't teach people when they're hungry; you have to feed them first.

There has to be a reasonable degree of well-being to really contemplate *dhamma*, otherwise the bodily and mental stress become too much of a distraction.

Mindfulness

Whenever I am asked a question, rather than thinking and struggling to find a suitable response, I tend to go quiet and see what arises. So when the person asked the question about ageing, I turned my attention inwards, listened and felt what was behind her question. I realized that the only response I could give was to say, 'Mindfulness'; that the way to prepare for and manage the process of growing old is to cultivate mindfulness – a quality of presence and a sense of ease and well-being.

I've noticed that when my mind is a bit forgetful, or if I have some physical discomfort or pain, my habitual reaction is a tensing up, a feeling of anxiety or panic: 'Oh dear, what's happening here?' There is a kind of mental freezing, but that actually makes things worse. It doesn't help me, and it doesn't help the people I'm in contact with because they become tense, anxious and worried as well. However, if I can just relax and acknowledge what's happening, I don't add to the difficulty I might be experiencing. I'm not adding to the concern that other people may feel. It's as though I'm taking responsibility for what is happening to myself moment by moment, acknowledging, 'OK, this is how it is right now.' Because of the ageing process we may make a mistake, forget to do something or get something wrong. But if we can be mindful, present and aware of what's happened, and just acknowledge what's happened, there is a chance to correct the mistake, to make amends.

For example, those of you who work in the monastery kitchen meet many people who visit at weekends. They tell you their names and a little about themselves, but then when you meet them three weeks or a month later, you may not remember their name or what it was they told you about themselves. This is because you have met so many people. It is not easy to remember so many names or to put names to faces. I find that in those situations I have a number of choices. I can try bluffing, pretending that I can remember the person, but usually what works best is just to admit: 'I really can't remember having met you before.' Then they may tell me a little bit about themselves, and that jogs my memory . Sometimes I can remember them, but I have no idea what their name is or what they do, so then I have to say: 'Well, I can remember you, but I'm

afraid I can't remember what your name is.' I find that actually people are very forgiving if I am straight with them and acknowledge: 'I can't remember who you are.' Most people can accept that. More than our remembering everything about them, what they seem to respond to is the quality of our presence. I remember realizing many years ago, when I was in conversation with somebody, that what was most important for me in relation to that person was not to spend a lot of time in conversation with them, or that I wanted them to do anything in particular for me; what I was looking for was simply a quality of presence. When one is able to fully acknowledge someone's presence, whatever may be needed can happen in just a few seconds. There is the sense that somebody is right there, present and attending to you; there is a sense of connection.

This was some of what I said to the lady in Canada who asked about growing old and forgetfulness. I encouraged her just to try to make a habit of mindfulness, a habit of presence, so that even when she forgot something or made a mistake, she could simply acknowledge that. Forgetfulness and mistakes needn't be a big deal; and if people are very upset, just staying present can be the most helpful response to their concern or irritation. One of the beauties of living in an international community is that we are in contact with people from many backgrounds, with different expectations, skills and gifts so there are often misunderstandings. This gives us the chance to develop great patience, kindness and acceptance of one another.

Cultivating Patience

This leads to the second thing that came to mind when I was speaking to that lady. It was the importance of cultivating not only the habit of presence, but also kindness, patience, appreciation, contentment and forgiveness. These are qualities that I have found helpful throughout my monastic life and training. I suspect that if I can keep perfecting them, then when I am a really old lady, not just elderly (as I am now!), they will be a most valuable resource. It is good to begin to cultivate these qualities while we are still young, because as we get older we tend to become more fixed in our ways. Our ingrained habits become more intractable, less easy to work with; so it's important, first of all, to recognize those habitual tendencies.

Some of us who had the opportunity to look after Sister Uppala found

that experience very helpful. She lived in our community for about seven or eight years, until she died at the age of ninety. Whenever I was around her I got an idea of just how patient one must be as one gets older, because everything becomes more difficult and time-consuming. She couldn't see or hear so well, couldn't move around so easily. Life became more and more difficult for her, so she was dependent on many people helping her. She certainly tested our patience, but you could also see the extent to which her situation required great patience from her side too, because we couldn't always understand what was needed, didn't always arrive on time, didn't always get things right. It's hard to have to rely on other people who may not always get things right. So I am suggesting that we make cultivating patience a priority.

Winter is a good time for cultivating patience. It takes effort just to get dressed warmly enough to move about from building to building in our monasteries. One time at Chithurst I counted. I needed something like twenty garments to go out and do walking meditation: two pairs of socks, long johns, two hats, two pairs of gloves, a pullover, scarves, a number of other bits and pieces, just to keep warm. After you've put them all on you might realize you've forgotten something, so you have to unlace your boots to go back into your *kuti*! All that gives a chance to cultivate patience—a willingness to be present with the different things we need to attend to. It's a very useful reflection as a counter-balance to restlessness and agitation.

One Thing at a Time

In the monastery some people have many duties, many things to attend to. Something else people asked about when I was in Canada was: 'How can we bring mindfulness into everyday life, when we have so many things to attend to, so many demands on our time and energy?' Then I thought of Ajahn Sucitto's advice once when we were preparing for some important event here at Amaravati. He said, 'Well, there's a tremendous amount to do – so we must go very slowly, very carefully.' I've always remembered that, because it reminds me of the need to attend to just one thing at a time.

When we have many things to do, we have a tendency to carry them all in our mind. It's like having twenty people to see. Rather than just being with each person and attending only to them, we allow the pressure of all twenty to queue up, to crowd into our mind and make us feel

agitated. Whereas I've found that if I can attend to things carefully, one at a time, I find that I have plenty of energy for everything, and I don't feel frazzled and agitated by the end of the day. This is another useful reflection for us here in the monastery. Can we cultivate patience in our daily life, doing just one thing, then the next, then the next, rather than allowing them all to queue up in our minds, putting a sense of pressure into our activity?

Calm Collected Energy

This requires a willingness to be present, to be mindful, and an interest in being calm. I say this because it can be quite exciting to have many things to do. I can get quite a high out of it, and I imagine it's the same for some of you. A kind of energy and momentum can arise, and we end up doing a great number of things on this high kind of energy – which is different from the collected energy that comes when we're mindful. This restless energy arises when we're moving towards something in the future; it is like a succession of rebirths. The energy of rebirth is pulling us into the next thing. There is an aspect of humanity, of our human existence, that loves this, that wants to be reborn, to exist. We call this desire to exist, which leads to a continuous taking of rebirth, *bhavatanha* . However, those of you who have begun to be attentive to it as it happens in daily life may have seen that it is actually quite a dangerous energy. I've noticed myself that if I follow it, it can easily lead to exhaustion and burnout. It's not sustainable, and it can also lead to a feeling of irritability that can be extremely unfortunate . We can do or say things that really upset others, even without meaning to – we just blurt things out on the spur of the moment when we're caught up in this restless energy of becoming.

So having a lot to do can give us a sense of self-importance, but it's not a peaceful state, and it can have unfortunate consequences. It's really important to notice when that is happening for us. We don't need to stop doing the things we've undertaken, but we can change the way we do them. We recognize the excited energy that wants to be reborn, but we decide that actually peacefulness is more to be treasured. Being peaceful is even more precious than becoming or having a mission. So we take a moment just to breathe:

Breathing in for the Buddha...
breathing out for the Buddha...

Breathing in for the Dhamma...
breathing out for the Dhamma...
Breathing in for the Sangha...
breathing out for the Sangha...

establishing ourselves in the Refuge of the Triple Gem. We breathe awareness into the body and attend to whatever it is that we have to do, whether it's a conversation we're having or some duty like hanging up the tea towels. I hung up the tea towels today. Until then I hadn't been aware of this duty that someone has to do each day. There were a great many tea towels, I couldn't believe how many! I thought, 'I'll just hang up a few of them', but then I hung up a few more, and presently they were all done. I hope the person who usually does this job is able to enjoy hanging them up one at a time, rather than thinking: 'I've got to do this, and I've got to do that, and I'm never going to get it all done!'

Many years ago, before I was a nun, I was part of a Christian meditation group. We had invited a very impressive Orthodox priest to visit the group one evening to give a short reflection. As part of his talk, he said, 'If I have fifty letters to write (that blew me away, the thought of fifty letters to write!) I write the first one, then I write the second one, and, in time, by the grace of God, all fifty letters are written.' As Buddhists we'd say that if we just do one thing at a time, attending fully to what we're doing, then in due course the job can be completed.

Keeping the Heart Sweet

Of course, we may actually have taken on more than we c an complete. This too requires a mindful response, and a willingness to take responsibility. If we have a large number of things to do, instead of acknowledging what is happening, that we've taken on more than we can reasonably handle, we may find ourselves blaming somebody else or blaming 'the system.' So we blow up at someone: 'I can't do all this! Can't you see I've got far too much to do?' It may be that the person who asked you wasn't aware you had too much to do, that they weren't intending to torture you. They simply hadn't realized. This is something else that is useful: to be attentive so as to notice irritation, anger, and ill-will as they arise. To return to the theme of how we can prepare for old age, this too can be part of our ageing strategy: learning how to recognize irritability and ill-will before they come tumbling out and hurt somebody, trying to keep the heart sweet. Everybody wants to look after

a sweet old man or a sweet old lady, but looking after a sour old lady is a very different proposition!

So as a matter of enlightened self-interest, we should look at how we can cultivate sweetness of heart. Obviously, one way we can do this is to be attentive and notice when the heart is not sweet, when it is sour. This happens to everybody. I don't imagine there's anyone here who doesn't sometimes get sour and nasty inside. I know many of you have become very skilled at not allowing it to pour out, but I'm sure that even for those of you who have really cultivated an attitude of kindliness and beautiful speech, there are still moments of irritability and criticism of yourself or somebody else. We really need to take an interest in this. I talk about it a lot because it's so unpleasant to have a nasty thought, a mean thought, to feel critical and judgemental.

Right Intention and Patience

Until we really understand what the Buddha is pointing to, we may think that Right Intention means we shouldn't have unpleasant thoughts, thoughts of ill-will and so on, but always have sweet thoughts. But the intention that the Buddha encouraged is the intention of mindfulness, of awareness, and the willingness to bear patiently with irritability, anger or ill-will as they arise. This is the intention to allow them to cease in consciousness, knowing that like everything else, they're impermanent, changing and definitely not what you are. You are not an angry person because you have an angry thought. You are not a grumpy person if you have a grumpy thought. If you have a mean, deluded, jealous, despairing thought, such thoughts are not what you are as a permanent, enduring entity. You don't have to worry about them, they are not part of what you are. They're simply passing visitors—unpleasant visitors, admittedly, but not anything that we need to grasp hold of. We don't even have to struggle to get rid of them. All we have to do is notice they're there, with an attitude of immense patience and kindliness. So rather than hating ourselves for hating somebody else, when we find hatred or aversion arising in relation to another person, we need only say: 'OK, this is what's happening right now. I can bear this, I don't have to fight it or struggle with it. It's not that I'm a horrible person; this is simply what has arisen. It's OK.' When we can be present with our malevolence, our negativity, when we can be patient with it, this leads us naturally to sweetness of heart. Through recognizing these things in our own hearts and learning how to not judge ourselves, we become much

less judgemental of others. This happens quite naturally. We don't have to force it. All we need to do is attend carefully to our own hearts. I call this 'staying in touch'.

Being Present in Meditation

In our approach to meditation we may sometimes want to jump ahead and get to the bliss. We want to get the *jhānas*, we want to get enlightened. This is understandable, because these things are said to be very pleasurable, very desirable. The Buddha talked about them as being allowable happiness, allowable pleasure – the kind of pleasure that does not have harmful consequences. However, in order to experience them, we need to cultivate a quality of presence. We need to find a place of well-being and ease in the present.

So in talking about meditation I find it helpful to think about cultivating a sense of presence, just being fully present with ourselves as we are right now. We can use the breath as a focus for the mind, but rather than struggling with the fact that we may not be perfectly present with each and every breath—and then giving up, because we think we can't do this practice—it can be more helpful to ask: 'How is it right now? What's happening right now? Can I enjoy breathing in? Can I enjoy breathing out? Can I just notice what's happening in my mind?' If you've had a very busy day, doing lots of different things, it may be that the mind is quite agitated. There is probably a lot of thinking, planning and remembering all the things you've been doing, or you want to get into some pleasant state. All sorts of things can be going on in your mind, whereas cultivating a quality of presence is just noticing: 'How is it? What's happening right here, right now?'

So we make this the priority of our life: cultivating a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of presence, a sense of acceptance, a sense of acknowledgement: 'This is how it is. This is how I'm feeling right now, this is what's happening for me right now.' Knowing that this present moment is our Refuge. Being the knowing, being Buddha. Attuning to the awareness of what's happening now, to *Dhamma*, the Truth of this moment. And aligning ourselves to the Sangha, that which aspires to live in accordance with Truth. We make the cultivation of this Triple Refuge the priority of our life, rather than relying on this body, relying on this mind.

Preparing for the Final Relinquishment

No matter how skilled we become at cooking or giving *Dhamma* talks, or even at meditation itself; no matter how brilliant we are at chanting, able to remember all the chants by heart; no matter how accomplished we become at anything, sooner or later we're going to lose it. I'm not saying we shouldn't do these things, but we need to keep in mind that no matter how good we are at any of them, in due course we're going to have to experience the lessening of these abilities. Little by little things are going to change – until the final relinquishment of this mortal existence. We don't have any choice about that, but we do have a choice as to how we approach it. If we cultivate mindfulness, patience, sweetness of heart, they will be most valuable resources when that time comes. And these are things we can be doing here in this monastery: we can make Amaravati a place of preparation. Ajahn Chah used to say that you come to the monastery to die. In a sense, that's what we have come here for – not that it's going to happen immediately, but we can practise dying to each moment, letting go of each moment. In this way we prepare for the final big one, the final letting go.

I offer this as a reflection, an encouragement. May we all always celebrate this opportunity that we have to practise in this place, and really treasure the situation that we have here. Those of you who don't live here, please come often and make use of this opportunity too. If you have to go far away from the monastery you can take it with you in your heart. This is what I did in Canada. When I felt lonely I remembered this place and the community here, my brothers and sisters in the holy life. This is how we see that we can have Amaravati with us wherever we go, wherever we are, whoever we're with: we have Amaravati with us, right here in our hearts.