



AJAHN SUNDARA was born in France in 1946. She studied contemporary dance and ballet in England and in France. After an active life as a dancer and contemporary dance teacher, a period of deep questioning ensued. In 1978, she attended a talk given by Ajahn Sumedho where he spoke about his life as a Buddhist monk. It resonated deeply. Before long, she asked to join the monastic community at Chithurst Monastery (Cittaviveka) as one of the first four women novices. Since then, she has participated in the establishment of the nuns' community and training. Since the late 1980s, she has taught and led meditation retreats in Europe and North America.

Even the Buddha was challenged

Extract from a talk by Ajahn Sundara

You would have thought that after his enlightenment the Buddha would have had an easy life, wouldn't you? Isn't that what we're all hoping for, just a little bit of enlightenment, and then life might get a little bit easier?

I thought I'd tell you the real truth so that your expectations won't be disappointed! In the 45 years that the Buddha was teaching and leading monastic communities, he met an incredible amount of difficulties. Even though he was enlightened, he still had karma.

He had ascetics coming to challenge and criticise him, accusing him of distorted views and incorrect teachings, and throughout his entire life his disciples caused him lots of problems. Some wanted to encourage eating and sleeping and sexual practices as a way to enlightenment, while others wanted to tighten up the discipline, to enforce vegetarianism, for instance. His cousin Devadatta tried to kill him several times, sent a mad elephant to trample him and tried to create a schism in the Sangha. Finally some ascetics jealous of the Buddha got a woman to blame him for fathering her child. So we haven't got such a bad deal after all!

After spending a few days meditating, we realise that the point of the practice is not about getting out of our human predicament or avoiding life's problems; it's about understanding and liberating the mind from delusion. It is a great power within us which, if it's not understood, will easily send us to hell. The power of our wilfulness, our anger, our stubbornness, and our opinionated mind — have we ever noticed how strong it is? We can't stop getting depressed so we fill up our mind with things to distract us, but this feeling is still there, isn't it? We can't control our mind that way forever.

One of the Buddha's most important contributions to our understanding the mind is to teach us the cause of suffering. Most of us are still at the stage of looking outside ourselves for the causes of suffering, and indeed there are many external things that trigger our agitation, lack of contentment, and so on. But the Buddha's teaching is that the real cause is *tanha*: desire, grasping.

Without awareness, our mind is almost always found in a state of grasping, even at the pettiest things, like our cushion, or our place in the food queue. Little things like that are the causes of bigger miseries; it just takes someone to trigger an irritation in the early morning to set the tone for the whole day. Quite often we are totally oblivious of our feelings. Have we noticed how, often, the most angry people haven't a clue that they are angry? It took me a long time to truly acknowledge that in certain situations, or with certain people, I was

always infuriated. When I began to notice this process clearly and at a deeper level, it was a great relief.

Most of us are seeking happiness but don't even notice that we are unhappy. And yet before we can be happy the first step is to notice that there is *dukkha*, that there is suffering. It's quite frightening for many people to come to terms with that. They think: "If I find out I'm unhappy, I'll want to escape, I'll have to leave my partner, my home, my job." They believe that by removing themselves from a painful situation, they can escape their miseries. But that's not the way out of suffering. The Buddha said that even if you hid away alone in a remote place, you would still take your mind with you!

Monastic life is a wonderful playground for quickly learning about *dukkha* because every day you experience this truth with almost no distraction. In a monastic community you find yourself in situations you have little control over, with people you have not chosen. This kind of environment pushes all your buttons. The only thing that saves us is our refuge in mindfulness. When we are mindful, we contain the energies of our mind, we are cultivating restraint. In other words, we are not splashing our mental soup over other people.

I remember the time when I was cooking for a Senior Monk at Chithurst who for a few years was very sick. I offered to look after his diet as I knew about macrobiotic food before I became a nun.

One day everything irritated me. I was cooking his meal and I thought: "Angry vibrations in food aren't

going to help anyone, are they?” So I went to my teacher and said, “I think I’m going to have to give up this cooking. I’m so angry sometimes, I think I’m poisoning him.” His reply was, “Well, if you’re mindful of your anger then you are not poisoning him. Your anger’s not coming out into the food, you’re containing it within you.”

On another occasion when I was due to give a teaching to 45 people, my heart started racing and all I wanted to do was to run out of the room to release the adrenaline. But as I waited in silence, knowing that things would change, I began talking. It’s quite amazing. Even though I had experienced a feeling of total panic, the nun who was sitting next to me told me how calm and peaceful I seemed while teaching!

So when you go to the office tomorrow, and you have a boss you can’t stand or you have come to your wit’s end at work, just be mindful of that feeling, and your boss might not even notice.

Mindfulness truly protects us and you will know through cultivating it how you don’t need to repress or wait to blow up to express yourself. See how it works, whether it is with your partner, your friend, or your dog. Just remind yourself every morning what is truly important in your life. In the West, so many opportunities are available to us, we are really spoiled. Even at the best retreat centres, people complain about the food, about this and that. Don’t we recognise heaven when it is in front of us? It is so easy for us to fall into negativity; often we even seem to get a lot of energy out of it.

Instead, can we learn to tap into something more nurturing than frustration and discontent? Scientists tell us we're not using even a tenth of our mind's potential, and even that small amount is misused and channelled into things like doubt, worry, fear, greed, envy, etc.

The West has few examples that inspire qualities of wisdom and compassion in us. Our modern heroes are not particularly peaceful or wise heroes. In this materialistic society we often feel like spiritual orphans, bereft of guidance from wise and compassionate beings. Fortunately, the Buddhist teaching is always pointing to the teacher within. Here and now, we can tune in to the wisdom within us and nurture it, rather than tormenting ourselves for being a failure. It's important to see that the problems that arise in life can be a time of awakening, of transformation.

Even if we attach to goodness, as an end in itself, it will create suffering. Wanting not to be angry, or wanting to become good, is dukkha. The Buddha said that there is only one wholesome attachment, the desire for liberation. So with mindfulness as your refuge, cultivate in yourself that intention to release your heart from dukkha, to abandon all those things which are in the way of liberating your heart from delusion.

Once we've tasted what it is to be unburdened by craving, clinging, grasping, then life is so much simpler — we are abiding with the power in our own heart, with the power of patience, of mindfulness, of loving-kindness, of peace.