

*“As the Buddha often pointed out, it’s  
worth getting to know this feeling of insecurity  
in the face of the unknown.”*



# Opening the Heart

From a talk given by Ajahn Jitindriya.

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For me, when it comes to offering some reflections on Dhamma, it always feels like the first time! I was inspired to read an article recently about a young Russian pianist, apparently the most accomplished pianist in the world today, who was a child prodigy. I can't tell you his name but he's got a big mop of black hair like Sai Baba!

I was reading through this interview with him — a very confident, powerful young man — and the interviewer asked if he ever got nervous before a performance. He said, “Always, I always get nervous, to the point where I can't even drink anything.” Then he added, “But that nervousness is really important, because as soon as I start playing the piano it transforms into inspiration.” And there was this photograph of him there just touching the keys. You could see he was already lifted into the heavens, he was away. It was quite inspiring.

It gave me a new view on what nervousness is about. It's not an inadequate response to a situation where you might feel inadequate, where you think you should feel confident, or whatever. It's actually very close to what Dhamma is all about — one is approaching the threshold of the unknown and, for most of us, given a chance,

we'll back right away. That's why it's so good to be confronted with situations such as this in the monastic life. There are many situations where you can't back away, so you look at that, you be with that and you look into that gaping black void... 'What's that about?'

I'm not just talking about my own experience in terms of giving a talk, or the nervousness of someone giving a performance, but it's something we can face, we can come up against, quite regularly in our daily lives, in our so-called normal and ordinary experience — but we have so many ways of avoiding it and backing away that we don't often recognize it. We don't take the opportunity to actually go towards what we might call 'emptiness' because it's uncomfortable, it's insecure. In that sense of insecurity there's fear — fear of losing the sense of identity, of not knowing what to do when there's no identity, when there's no strategy, when there are no reference points. What happens is we feel very threatened.

As the Buddha often pointed out, it's worth getting to know this feeling of insecurity in the face of the unknown. Get familiar with that feeling and turn towards it, feel it out in any given situation. It can happen in relationship quite a lot. One sign to recognize that we're backing away or that we're about to back away is that sense of *dukkha*, maybe manifesting in anger, or fear, or desire, or impatience; even boredom, restlessness; it manifests in many ways.

Recognize it manifesting, as you feel a kind of knot starting to form in your stomach, or a feeling of the

heart shutting down or the mind shutting down; a wanting to get out, get away or change the subject; or in not being able to look at the other person, to look into their eyes.

What is that? When I investigate such things in myself I usually find it's a 'fear thing,' a defense mechanism — not wanting to be hurt or not wanting to let in something I perceive as unpleasant, not wanting to experience it; fear of the pain involved, the possible pain. It's based on memory isn't it? Fear of possible pain, it's not actual fact yet.

We often project onto others or create an idea of a future that is going to be painful, and we back off, avoid, or somehow find a way to reinforce our sense of security and identity with something familiar, something pleasant, something that's OK and allowable in my world.

'VIBHAVA-TANHA'

When we are attracted to a spiritual teaching, to committing ourselves to a path of practice in order to find this promised freedom from suffering — enlightenment, wisdom, compassion; being able to exist in the world without fear or hatred — this is a very promising thing, something we all aspire to. But in many cases we undertake a spiritual practice with what is called *vibhava-tanha*, a sense of wanting to get away from our life as it is, from things as they are. This isn't to be seen as wrong, it's just a natural thing that happens. We've decided something is not right, it's not good enough, it's unpleasant, it's intolerable, unbearable and... "I want out.

There has to be a way out,” or at least, there has to be another way!

People enter upon a spiritual path for different reasons. Perhaps one has had insight into what we might call the ‘Unborn’, or what might be called pure consciousness, the Unconditioned, or a state of being that is totally free from the usual constrictions or constraints we feel as a limited beings. It’s hard to describe this but people experience it in different ways. There’s a recognition that there is something more profound to be discovered, a deeper understanding that can clear away this confusion that’s present most of the time.

Or one might be following an intuition one has of an ultimate happiness to be found, which might be based upon insight or might be based merely upon a kind of escapist hopefulness — a kind of wanting to experience the ultimate happiness and make it permanent, find a feeling that remains peaceful, that remains happy, that doesn’t change. Most of us want to find that kind of feeling and keep it all the time. It’s only when we get a little bit more familiar with ourselves, say through meditation, introspection and reflection, get more familiar with the nature of the mind, that we begin to recognize our own avoidance tactics, and that those avoidance tactics in themselves are what create the prison that we are trying to escape from.

So at some point it’s recognized that this happiness we are looking for — this freedom, this wisdom and compassion — is not going to come easily, that in

fact what we have to do is turn right around and face all of those very things we have been running from. And this is where the path begins. This is where we need to develop many qualities of heart that help us to do that — courage in the first place, tremendous patience, faith, willingness, and some faculties and powers of mind such as concentration, mindfulness, and wise reflection.

It often takes a long time to see where we're avoiding what really needs to be looked at. It's not easy to see it because we've got so many judgments in the mind, primarily about 'good' and 'bad' based on experience of pain and pleasure. Somewhere deep in our psyche we judge anything painful as bad and, depending on our varying kinds of conditioning processes, we blame ourselves for it, or blame the archetypal Father or Mother, or something 'out there.'

'THE HABIT OF SELF-BLAME'

In some ways, especially in Western culture, we have a very deep sense of self-blame and this needs to be uncovered because until we can get to this point of seeing our own judgment of pain as bad, and at some level 'my fault'... 'I've done something wrong,' or 'someone's done something wrong here'... then there's no real way to be free of the pain involved. We need to get to that level to begin to open the heart to that depth of pain.

You might be able to recognize the judgment that comes in — it's not necessarily a discursive judgment, you don't hear yourself saying, "That's bad" when you

experience some kind of pain, whether it be subtle or more obvious. It's more an attitude that you uncover, a way of responding at a very primary level, where we discover a resistance that manifests physically and mentally. When you feel that resistance happening — a kind of shut-down happening in the mind or a knot occurring physically — it's a sign, one that the Buddha points to as dukkha.

Turn towards that, recognise that, recognise what's happening, and in that recognition, for that moment, there can be a letting go of the resistance. And then you have to keep moving into it because the defense mechanisms are so strong they'll just keep re-activating. Keep recognizing the resistance as it's occurring, or the shut-down, and keep opening up, moving into it.

How do we move into it when there's so much pain and resistance? First of all we let go of the stories that are happening around it, the thoughts creating the "She did this ... he shouldn't have done that ... it was her fault...etc. etc." That's the first level, we let go of all that kind of discursive justification for 'what I'm feeling' and go further into the physical feeling or the mental feeling as we experience it. Experience the struggle and keep relaxing.

How do we relax with struggle? By cultivating mindfulness and concentration, just enough to stay present and notice that our experience in this present moment is always fluctuating and shifting, it's never fully static. It becomes static as soon as we solidify it by concept

and identification, making it into ‘me’ and ‘mine,’ then we’re trapped.

If you keep the mindfulness witnessing the process of change, slight fluctuations physically or mentally — noticing feeling, noticing perception — then this is a way to stay present with what’s actually occurring, whether it’s in your sitting meditation or whether it’s in your personal relationships. Usually it’s a little easier to do when sitting quietly, because concentration and mindfulness can be much more refined and you can drop those layers of social conditioning that seem to just keep rolling through when we’re engaging with others. But even when we are, say, in a discussion and some buttons are being pushed, one can still be deeply aware of where the reactions are coming from and what they are conditioning in terms of feeling, physical and mental. The mind, in itself, is not time-bound — what’s time-bound are thoughts and feelings and perceptions, but there’s an ability to witness to those things as they’re occurring and that is a timeless ability, it is not based in time.

It’s amazing, with a little power of concentration and mindfulness, what you can begin to observe in your conscious experience — and this is how wisdom can arise, through this clear observation of what’s actually occurring. It’s not a conceptual creation, it’s not intellectual understanding, it’s a clear, direct witnessing of your experience. But it is also helpful to know what



to focus on in order for a clear understanding to come about.

‘INVESTIGATING PERSONALITY-VIEW’

We’re encouraged to investigate the ‘personality factors’ as the Buddha has described, (body, feeling, perception, mental formations and sense-consciousness), what is sometimes referred to as the ‘ego structure’, but it’s not necessarily the same thing as referred to in psychology.

The ‘ego’ in the Western psychological model seems to be more about having a healthy sense of individuality, and that’s definitely needed, there’s no need to break that down. Having a healthy understanding of individuation and of the conditioned situation, the conditioned world we find ourselves in, is helpful, necessary. There needs to be a healthy sense of ‘self’ in that respect to know how to interact and to take care of oneself and others.

The ego structure within the Buddhist teaching is much more about that which keeps us trapped — our belief, our utter belief in those personality factors as self, not as mere functions but as ‘who and what I am’; our tendency to believe, to fix on to physical experience as self, to believe and fix on to feeling as self. We often think of feeling, *vedana*, as ‘emotion,’ but emotion is more a conglomeration of feeling, perception, thought and sense-consciousness in the Buddha’s teaching. *Vedana* is that initial felt response of pleasure or pain arising with

one's present experience. We are usually attracted towards the pleasant feeling and want to move away from the unpleasant.

Perception is described as that which is related to memory — how we perceive and label an experience based on past experience. *Sanna* is this conditioned kind of perception, it's not a pure seeing, a direct seeing, but an apprehension of something in a way that we fix it due to our past experience so we then experience that in a pre-conditioned way.

Often you can notice images arising in the mind upon sense contact — you can see this in meditation sometimes, or even in our everyday experience. We tend to fix to our perceptions as being true and real and part of me, myself, and we totally believe in and fix on to our sensory experience in terms of 'what I see, what I hear, what I smell, taste, touch and what I think.'

These are the sense realms, where 'ego' is created, if we fix those experiences as being true and real and what I am. It's as if we collect those experiences and create this sense of self from them and then become fixed in that world. It's not to say that those experiences, these sense realms, are unreal but they are conditioned experiences, they're dependent on many factors. But there is that which can begin to know the experiences of the sense world, and that which can know sight as sight is actually free of the conditionality based on that sight. It's not to say that you don't see what you see, it's just a different level of understanding.

If there's a clear knowing of a present experience then that clear knowing is not caught up in the identity structure, it knows the creation of identity, it knows the creation of ego.

Therefore what you see and hear, smell, taste, touch, think, becomes just that: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations and thoughts, arising and passing — certainly supplying much information about our world, our relationships, what needs to be done, what doesn't need to be done — but there can be that dimension of mind that knows all this as part of a world in flux, in flow: all experience conditioning further experience.

#### 'THE UNBORN'

We can begin to have a sense of dispassion, a letting go of being totally fixed in the world of sensory experience, and that other dimension of clear knowing is what might be referred to as the Unborn or the Uncreated. It can't be conceived of — one can recognize a concept of it, 'the Unborn,' but that's not it. It cannot be grasped with the conceiving mind, but one can learn to abide in that place of knowing awareness.

Now the Buddha created his whole structure of teaching in order to help us find the way to free ourselves from suffering. It's not to create further ideas about an alternative Unconditioned realm, some kind of heaven where we can find that hoped for happiness, it's rather to find a present refuge in the midst of what we perceive

and experience as turmoil or suffering or confusion. A present refuge from where we can begin to understand this experience of being human.

So we have this faculty of awareness or what we might call ‘the knowing,’ ‘that which knows’ — that which can be awake to what’s happening, to what’s actually occurring — and this ability to be awake is compared to the very same awakened mind of the Buddha. It is a faculty of mind, of nature, it’s not a personal thing — the Buddha pointed this out as a place from where we can cultivate the path.

It’s so easy to construct an elaborate cosmology in our mind when we hear any religious teachings and then continue to seek security within that mental construction — trying to separate the good from the bad, trying to do ‘this’ in order to avoid ‘that.’ This is still the very strategy we have to keep seeing. It’s not about creating a wonderful future or the perfect heaven to be reborn in. It’s not about creating new concepts at all. Conceiving of the teaching, the path, is a natural thing, we have to use our conceptual faculties and our intellectual faculties, but see it as that, and never believe in that creation of mind as being the true thing. The true thing, the Dhamma, is always apparent here and now and is timeless, it’s never away from where we are now.

Various religious teachings infer that the Truth, or God, is unutterable — that you can’t describe it — it’s ineffable. And still that gets confused in many ways,

doesn't it? We create a 'holy' structure where we're never allowed to utter a word for 'God', out of respect for purity, yet we can still live out our lives in a very unrealised way.

We might be developing certain powers of faith and conviction in a particular path but is it really the path to freedom? Freedom, even though it sounds good, is something that we often find we don't really want, if we are honest — it's too scary. To paraphrase an Indian shaman, "Most people don't want to grow up, don't want to be adults, because you discover you have the freedom to invent your own life." It's that kind of freedom!

So we find we have to develop skills and ways of being, ways to help us be fully present in order to confront those fears, those avoidance tactics that are so deeply embedded in our minds. When we meet someone we don't like, when someone says something to us that's really hurtful, what do we do? Can our hearts stay open to that?

It doesn't mean that we have to condone something that is not necessarily wholesome, but the path is about looking at what this heart's doing, the path is about freeing this heart from the conditioned reactivity of just shutting down. So it means that in those moments which we find difficult, whether we're alone or with others, to develop the strength to stay open, to stay present, to stay feeling: to feel what we feel, to know what we think, to recognize how our thoughts condition our feelings and how judgement arises. What happens

when we judge the other or judge the world or judge ourselves, what kind of feeling or state does that condition?

‘COMPASSION’

Now this practice takes a lot of time because we find we can't face a lot all at once, and this is where we have to develop another powerful quality called compassion. We often think that compassion is something that we have for other people but the biggest lesson we learn is that compassion is something we must develop for ourselves.

When we feel the pain that we can't bear to feel, or we can't hold or we can't face, instead of just moving away from it or blaming the other, doing something against the other, can we just sit there and allow our heart to open wider and really feel the pain of whatever it is and say, "It's OK"? This is where we might notice that attitude coming in judging; "This is wrong, it must be wrong, it's too painful." I have to firmly tell myself sometimes "It's absolutely OK"... to feel miserable, to feel despair, to feel fear; it's absolutely OK to feel what we're feeling.

Somehow in that space of absolute acceptance there's a release and in that moment we can recognize what it was that was keeping us trapped — just this attitude of judgement based in 'I want, I don't want.' What's that 'I want, I don't want' based in? It's based in a false understanding that pleasant feelings bring ultimate

happiness. It's based in a false understanding that feelings can be permanent, feelings can stay the same forever — but they can't. And in that moment when we totally allow ourselves to feel exactly what we are feeling and there's a moment of release, we recognize that those feelings pass because they're being let go of, because we are no longer fixing them through resisting or struggling or judging. And they pass, gone forever, they only ever were a moment.

But how much of our lives are created, how many stories are created around a moment of feeling this way or a moment of feeling that way, and then struggling to get it right, to feel more of this type of thing and feel less of that type of thing. A lot of pain, a lot of pressure and you never find happiness that way because feelings never stay the same.

So, in opening the heart and allowing oneself to feel the painful, which is what we have been trying to avoid, strangely enough we find we actually develop a capacity to enjoy the pleasant aspects of life more fully, because we begin to develop a knack for not clinging, for not trying to manipulate and create a reality that we *think* we want or we *think* will be right or the best. We find a sense of freedom or release coming through not clinging, allowing things, allowing life to flow as it will. We find a greater freedom to choose how to respond rather than react in situations, a greater clarity of mind to reflect upon situations, upon our own involvement.

This is where developing the path becomes more

effective. We can choose to act or not act according to how we understand the situation and as tolerance and a certain kind of courage and compassion grow, we find that our disposition is much more one of not wanting to harm or to hurt anything, so the choices we make tend towards harmlessness, the consideration of others. One becomes more sensitive to what's wholesome, what's worth developing — not only for ourselves but for all those we're involved with in our lives.

It doesn't stop there either, because there comes an increasing understanding of our interconnectedness, of the commonality of human experience. But it all starts with a willingness to begin to look under the surface of our initial reactivity, in every way possible.

‘THE COMMON EXPERIENCE’

The Buddha described *dukkha* in many ways, and they're common daily experiences — getting what I don't want, not getting what I want — how does that make us feel? Taking the time and having the willingness to look at that, investigate that. These are often the things where the strongest reactivity comes up.

We can often be much more noble and giving in very dramatic situations and not think of ourselves first. But in little ways, in insignificant, petty ways, when we don't get *our* way or *my* way, it can be absolutely infuriating! Remember to reflect on it in terms of Dhamma, it doesn't need to be judged at any other level, it doesn't have to be right or wrong but just: “Is this



suffering?... Is there pain here?” Recognize it, accommodate it and reflect, “How do I relate to this... how is this pain sustained... why does it feel so bad?” And where do we feel it hurting?

It’s better to go directly to the contemplation of Dhamma rather than to think about it at a kind of social level of what’s right and what’s wrong and what should be and what shouldn’t be and why I was justified in saying this, etc. There might be certain situations where that’s needed but when we want to work at the spiritual level, rather take this framework of the Four Noble Truths, beginning with recognizing dukkha. Recognize that it has a cause and that the cause can actually be seen here and now in our own experience, it doesn’t have to be traced back in memory, in time.

We think the cause may have been when someone said or did those things that were so hurtful, but what is the present cause in the present moment? And we always find that it is in our relationship to the presently arising feeling, in the way we struggle with that present experience.

This is the place where we have to look if we really want to be free from dukkha, because there will always be people, as long as we are alive, that are going to ‘miff’ us in one way or another. If we are on the Path it doesn’t necessarily get easier either, because we get more sensitive and little things can miff you really bad!

Also as our heart opens more, we are becoming more allowing for things to be present, allowing ourselves

to experience things, and in that space things can often come up in a more dramatic, even violent way sometimes, surprisingly so. This again is where we need to develop that capacity of mindfulness and concentration, to be a container for when it does come up, to hold it, to be with that and be interested in that, as phenomena, as something to be experienced and to learn from — because if we had nothing to learn from it would be very slow going!

Take it as an opportunity — it's the hardest thing to remember that unwanted experiences are opportunities for freedom. Usually we don't take the wanted experiences as opportunities, we just get lost in them, enjoy them, that's why happiness isn't so conducive to awakening. It can be very helpful and supportive but if you don't know how to wake up, then often it's the painful that helps us, goads us to wake up. But we do need the balance of the pleasant as well; we need to feel supported, we need to know how we can take time to rest, to nurture ourselves.

‘APPRECIATION AND KINDNESS’

In our lives, one of the difficult emotions that can arise, (I'm not sure how it is for men but for women it is especially significant), is the sense of not being appreciated ... “No one appreciates what I do.” This can come up in different ways, sometimes bringing with it painful feelings of alienation or incompleteness, and we have to find ways to accommodate that. We can't expect people to

appreciate us or to like us or love us or to tell us nice things, but we can begin to be kind to ourselves. Why is it that we need others to appreciate us, apart from the fact that it is pleasant? Again, it's usually based in some sense of insecurity or a sense of not being OK as I am, not being able to appreciate myself as I am — perhaps trying to fulfil others' expectations of us, (that often we create and project on to them!)

In fact, as with many things we feel we need from others, we can begin to look inside and ask, "Why do I need this from outside? Is it present in myself? Can I find it in myself?" If we begin to look we usually can. If we feel we need appreciation or we need love or some tender care, we find there's a space within where we can allow that feeling to arise for ourselves.

It sounds a little indulgent, and it's very difficult to do, to allow yourself to love yourself, to allow yourself to be kind and tender with yourself. We end up realizing that we have been our own biggest critics. There is a depth of relaxation that's brought about by this ability to be kind to oneself — to be completely tolerant and open and loving and appreciating of oneself, not as an ego but as a conscious being experiencing this, right now, whatever it may be, and totally allowing that.

It's this level of relaxation that's needed to begin to appreciate life itself — consciousness itself, being — and from where each moment can be experienced as something totally new, not as something interpreted through the filter of conditioned ego strategies. It's that

depth of relaxation that can allow whatever presents itself, whether it's painful or pleasant, to be wholly received — because you know you have the capacity, you know you have the power of love, the open-heartedness to receive that, to bear with the consequences.

When there is the capacity to love ourselves, there is the capacity to love others, no matter how they present themselves or how they are experienced in our heart. So it is actually possible to love someone you don't even like, or to love someone you disagree with, or to love someone that you have to tell that they're sacked or that you have to divorce them or whatever!

It is possible to have that kind of open-heartedness. It doesn't mean that everything is soppy and that you have to be sweet and think pink with everyone and everything. It's an ability to stay present, to stay real, to stay open and to respond rather than react-respond from a place of compassion and love and wisdom.

Wisdom is fully operable in a heart that is open. Wisdom is not a strategy or a tactic, it's something quite spontaneous, something quite intuitive, and it's not one's own.

*Evam.*