

*“When there is a sense of ease, we’re in tune
and we can respond in a way that is suitable,
rather than a way that’s wilful and
that will perpetuate agitation.”*



Beyond Worldly Aims and Values

Ajahn Candasiri

NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAM-
BUDDHASSA — Homage to the blessed, noble and
perfectly enlightened One.

I always find these words paying homage to the Buddha helpful as a way of recollecting that which is a place of refuge. From such a place we can notice the Siren songs, the voices of the world that lure us into things that are not safe, while having a sense of refuge. Often these may be things we have to deal with that are not really obvious, and we can very easily be pulled into all kinds of compulsions — those very powerful thoughts about what we should or we shouldn't do, things we should or shouldn't be concerned about.

There is a *sutta* which we recite sometimes that I find most helpful as an anchor; it lists the ten things that *samanas*, those who have gone forth, should recollect frequently. The first is 'I am no longer living according to worldly aims and values.' It is pointing to the fact that when one becomes a monk or a nun one gives up worldly titles. You can't actually tell which of us are princesses or princes, titled people, we all become just *samanas*.

There is a lovely story from the time of the Buddha. After the Buddha was enlightened, his cousins, who were all princes with noble positions, decided to go forth, leaving their family situations, their situations of power, and to go and be his disciples. So they set off with Upali who was their barber. Their intention had been to send Upali back to the palace, but he wanted to go on with them, to also be a disciple of the Buddha. When the time came for their ordination, the Sakyan princes made sure that Upali was the first, and hence their senior. In this way they gave up their princely status. In the same way, we bow to one another simply in order of seniority, depending on how long we've been ordained.

Another way I like to think of this reflection is that we're operating more in terms of Dhamma rather than looking to be very powerful or successful in a worldly sense. In Sangha life we can be very good at doing certain things. We have very skilled crafts people in the community, we have people who are good at giving talks, we have people who are very good at sewing or very good administrators or very good artists; but in terms of practice these things aren't really that important. It doesn't really matter how successful we are in worldly terms. Certainly it's nice when a community runs smoothly, when things are well taken care of and when people can construct buildings that don't fall down and sew their robes straight. These kinds of things are good things to do, but really our gift, our offering, is in

terms of our Dhamma practice.

This is a useful thing for everybody to consider — whether living as a monk or nun, or living a household life, having to go out and earn a living, look after a family, or whatever. Because these Sirens, these voices of the world are very powerful, very convincing, and can lead us into a lot of trouble. No matter how successful we are, how wonderfully we *do*, the moments of great triumph where we really hit the heights in terms of fame or prestige or do the very, very best — these are only moments, they don't last. They bring a kind of pleasure and satisfaction, but if they're the things that we make the most important in our life, our life is going to be a series of ups and downs. We'll have moments of great success, but they'll pass, and then what will we do? Either we can look for another moment of success, or remember that great moment, that peak, and take it out from time-to-time and fondle the memory of it.

Having this practice gives us a chance to find something that is beyond the world, and that will endure in a way worldly success and failure don't endure; something that will be a real refuge to us when everything else is falling apart. So when we are old or sick, when we are no longer able to succeed, there is something that we can turn to as a safe abiding place.

I find this reflection very helpful because, while there are days in our community when everything seems to go very well (and we can certainly enjoy these) there

are also days when things don't work out so well.

Sometimes everybody else is feeling fine but maybe I'm having a bad day. I'm upset, things aren't working out, the computer doesn't do what I want it to, the fax machine breaks down. If I don't keep remembering that I'm not living according to worldly aims and values — that it actually doesn't really matter if things go wrong, but that what is important is how I respond to these things — then I can suffer. I can either suffer, or I can understand that this is just how it is right now. Maybe it's not my fault, or anybody else's fault, maybe it's just how things have come together. I don't have to blame anybody, I don't have to blame myself, I don't have to fight, or struggle, or try to manipulate things so that they're different — all I have to do is make peace with things as they are.

Sometimes people say, "Gosh, Buddhists are awfully passive just making peace with things as they are. What good are they doing for the world?" But the alternative, when we're not mindful and things are going wrong, is that we tend to tense up. A reactivity happens in the mind, and there's a closing down; it's like having blinkers on so we can only see in one direction. We hold everything very, very tight to try and keep things the way we think they 'should be.' There's a wilfulness there. So we can create a mood of tension that everybody picks up on. This certainly brings suffering.

But when we cultivate an attitude of letting go, of being present with things as they are and making

peace, then the mind is more sensitive, more responsive, more intuitive. It is much more aware. Then our response can be in accordance with Dhamma; there is a sense of harmony rather than of tightness from holding with fear or desire.

The Dhamma is one of our refuges, a place of security. We can find peace in what is unpeaceful, find security in what is insecure; just by coming for Refuge in the present moment, through asking, “How is it right now?...” and resting in the present like that. When there is a sense of ease, we’re in tune and we can respond in a way that is suitable, rather than a way that’s wilful and that will perpetuate agitation. What happens otherwise is that when something goes wrong there’s a rebound: we react, we say something unskilful and then people get upset with us, and then there’s a general feeling of disharmony.

There was a wonderful scene at tea-time today down at the ‘peaceful little cottage where the nuns live.’ I had had an idea about how the evening was going to go; I was expecting a cousin and another very good friend to visit, and I was going to prepare tea and then go off and talk quietly with them. However, as I was preparing the tea another friend showed up — that was very nice, I welcomed her and she helped. Then a Tibetan nun dropped by with a friend — that was a bit of a surprise and they joined us. Then someone else came.

Then a young friend staying with us who is going through a fairly major breakdown right now, came

wandering through doing strange things. Then a couple of sisters who are on retreat in the forest came in, expecting to find the place empty and quiet and there was our small kitchen full of people drinking tea! I was very grateful for this practice. It meant just keeping my feet on the ground and realising that, 'this is how it is right now, it's not that there's anything wrong.'

It was not exactly what I had in mind for the evening but it was perfectly all right. I felt we had a very nice time with just a whole series of different things happening, and I was grateful that I was not living according to worldly aims and values. A worldly value would be, 'Well it's supposed to be like this and we're supposed to do this. Things have gone wrong, they haven't worked out and now it's up to me to make things all right.' But when we let go, then whatever happens is fine, things don't have to go according to plan. This is a great security.

Before I started this way of practice I was always concerned about things working out. I always had to have an idea about how things were going to go. I had to make proper preparation and if things didn't go right then there was tension.

When I first came into the community I went on a retreat led by Ajahn Viradhammo. I remember him talking about taking refuge in Dhamma and I began to have a sense of what it really meant 'to take refuge in Dhamma.' It felt awesome, I was so used to taking refuge in my mind, my clever mind that would work things

out and would be able to judge and assess things, according to what I thought was right and proper. I realised just how much I used my intellect to hold my world together, and I began to see that actually taking refuge in Dhamma meant letting go of this intellect, letting go of these structures that I'd used to determine how I lived my life. It felt like a leap of faith — being willing to let go of what I'd grown up to depend upon, to allow myself not to have a clue what to do or what was going to happen next, and to take refuge in the moment. To know the moment, rather than hold on to a fixed view or a fixed plan.

When we talk about this turning aside from worldly aims and value, or taking refuge in Dhamma, this doesn't actually mean to give up our intellect, it means to stop allowing it to be the master. We can still plan things, we can still make intelligent use of the brain that we have, but we do it from a place of Dhamma, rather than a place of fear or desire. We let them go. It does take time; we can't just do it straight away.

Living in community, living in society, of course we have to make plans. Those of you who have jobs have to turn up for work; you have to earn your livelihood. Living in the monastery we have different duties that we do our best to perform, we try to live as well as we can in accordance with our training, which is set up to help us to understand our inner drives, to see clearly the Sirens, that are pulling us away from our real potential, our real possibility of being free.

I remember a number of years ago when the nuns' community was still in quite a tender, fragile state, we had a visit from Maechee Patomwan, who at that stage had been a nun in Thailand for thirty-six years. She was aware that I was concerned because some people were anxious about the nuns' community — whether we had enough respect and whether things were all right for us. But she said to me, “Don't worry about it. Don't worry about looking good or any of that, just concentrate on your own practice. Just look after your own heart, keep your own heart peaceful. If you do that everything will be all right, the respect will come, things will work out.”

Just hearing that was such a relief because it confirmed what I had felt intuitively all along. I realised that trying to look good, trying to get respect were worldly aims, worldly values; it was getting it the wrong way round. So we can notice, ‘Is there suffering? Is there not suffering?’ and if there is suffering then, ‘Why is there suffering? There's suffering because I want to be respected, or because I want to look good.’ OK, that can be looked at: ‘Is that really important? Does that really matter?’

I've been contemplating the question ‘How are you?’ and have realised that it's a question we should ask ourselves often. ‘How are you today?’ I'm beginning to learn how to do this. For example, I had a quiet day this week; I was quite tired so I thought: ‘I'd better have a rest.’ So I lay down but my mind was going berserk. So then I thought: ‘Well, how are you?’ And I could see that I was thinking about all the things I had to do: ‘I've got to

do this and I've got to do that and I've got to think about this, and I've got to plan this, and I've got to write to so-and-so and I've got to talk to so-and-so, and...' I thought: 'Is resting really going to help?...' And I could see 'No.' It wasn't that I needed to rest, what I needed to do was to help the mind to settle: 'OK, so what's the remedy for this?...' I realised that what I had to do was to just sit quietly.

It was as though the mind was filled with Sirens all demanding attention. But I could also see, 'No! You don't have to listen to those voices of the world, it's time to pay attention to your heart. Just stay still, stay quiet, stay with nature.' So I spent the rest of the day just listening to those voices and, at the same time, staying with the body, staying with the breath, watching the light, watching the trees, touching the earth.

By the end of the day, when I asked myself, 'How are you?' The answer was 'All right.' There was a feeling of wholeness, rather than of agitation and of being pulled all over the place by the demands of the world.

So just consider: 'What are worldly aims and values?' And, 'What are the aims and values towards which we aspire?...' We can bring Dhamma into our lives, we can bring Dhamma into the world through our willingness to bear with the voices of the ego, to bear with the insistent demands of the world and not be bullied by them. Say, 'OK, I hear you...' Then from a place of calm we respond. We can do an enormous amount of good from this place of stillness, this place of quiet.

After his Enlightenment the Buddha didn't spend the next 45 years just sitting in a state of bliss. If you look into the Vinaya teachings — the teachings about how the monastic orders were set up and how the different rules came into being — or if you look into the Suttas, you can see that he was extremely active in a very compassionate, wise and skilful way. He dealt with people who were in the extremes of human anguish and despair, presenting teachings that responded to their particular need in the moment. He was also able to respond skilfully to the people who tried to catch him out in debates. He met all kinds of people.

To be like the Buddha is perhaps asking too much but perhaps we can try, moment-by-moment, to distinguish these voices of the world — to interrupt the compulsions of the mind that pull us around and just be with one breath. We can be with the feeling of the body sitting on the mat, or with the feeling of the feet touching the ground as we walk from place to place. We can relax the shoulders when we're finding ourselves getting tense in a difficult situation, or relax the face when we find that we are thinking an awful lot in our meditation — just letting the thoughts go their own way, using little things in our daily life as ways of helping to anchor us in what is a secure refuge. Then, in moments of extreme anguish, or complete confusion, when everything around us is falling apart, and when things just aren't the way they 'should be' — and even at the moment of death — we can turn to these signs, these anchors in the

present moment.

Being peaceful with one breath is obviously not a worldly value. It's obviously not something that is going to get us an enormous amount of praise. Fortunately here we have a situation where we're encouraged to do this, which takes us to a system of values that goes beyond the changing world. There isn't very much we can rely on in terms of our bodies, in terms of one another, in terms of worldly success, in terms of prestige and fame, in terms of our intellect. All of these things are changing. But we have this opportunity to develop the practice of being present.

Sometimes it's difficult, sometimes it doesn't really seem like it's anything very much but little-by-little it adds up. There's a verse in the Dhammapada that gives a valuable simile of this: if there's water just dripping into a bucket, just one drip and another drip and another drip, sooner or later the bucket fills up — it can be hard to notice it filling.

Similarly, you might think you are getting nowhere, the moments of mindfulness may not seem to be adding up to very much but give yourself a year or a couple of years or a decade or two, and you'll find that little by little things change. You'll notice that there is more of a sense of ease, there is more of an ability to respond rather than to get uptight and agitated. There is a little more compassion, a little bit more space in the heart. This is how it works. There might be a sudden insight, like my insight into what taking Refuge in

Dhamma really meant, but for each one of us it takes time and a humble step-by-step application, to bring about this gradual transformation.

I'd like to end this teaching, offering it as an encouragement for each of you to work at developing this very humble moment-by-moment mindfulness practice. And my wish for each one of you is that you will gradually find more peace, freedom and happiness in your lives.

