

A Dhamma Talk by

**Ajahn Chah**

## **The Dangers of Attachment**

*as edited by*

David Dale Holmes

Using the tools of practice entails hardship and arduous challenges. We rely on patience, endurance and going without. We have to do it ourselves, experience it for ourselves, realize it ourselves.

Scholars, however, tend to get confused a lot. For example, when they sit in meditation, as soon as their minds experience a teeny bit of tranquillity they start to think, “Hey, this must be first *jhána*.”

This is how their minds work. And once those thoughts arise, the tranquillity they’d experienced is shattered. Soon they start to think that it must have been the second *jhána* they had attained.

Don’t think and speculate about it. There aren’t any billboards that announce which level of *samádhi* we’re experiencing. The reality is completely different. There aren’t any signs like the road signs that tell you, “This way to Wat Nong Pah Pong.” That’s not how I read the mind. The mind doesn’t announce.

Although a number of highly esteemed scholars have written descriptions of the first, second, third, and fourth *jhána*, what’s written is merely external information. If the mind actually enters these states of profound peace, it doesn’t know anything about those

written descriptions. It knows, but what it knows isn't the same as the theory we study.

If the scholars try to clutch their theory and drag it into their meditation, sitting and pondering, "Hmmm...what could this be? Is this first *jhána* yet?" There! The peace is shattered, and they don't experience anything of real value. And why is that? Because there is *desire*, and once there's *craving* what happens? The mind simultaneously withdraws out of the meditation.

So it's necessary for all of us to relinquish thinking and speculation. Abandon them completely. Just take up the body, speech and mind and delve entirely into the practice. Observe the workings of the mind, but don't lug the Dhamma books in there with you. Otherwise everything becomes a big mess, because nothing in those books corresponds precisely to the reality of the way things truly are.

People who study a lot, who are full of theoretical knowledge, usually don't succeed in Dhamma practice. They get bogged down at the information level. The truth is that the heart and mind can't be measured by external standards.

If the mind is getting peaceful, just allow it to be peaceful. The most profound levels of deep peace do exist. Personally, I didn't know much about the theory of practice. I'd been a monk for three years and still had a lot of questions about what *samádhi* actually was. I kept trying to think about it and figure it out as I meditated, but my mind became even more restless and distracted than it had been before! The amount of thinking actually increased. When I wasn't meditating it was more peaceful. Boy, was it difficult, so exasperating!

But even though I encountered so many obstacles, I never threw in the towel. I just kept on doing it. When I wasn't trying to do anything in particular, my mind was relatively at ease. But whenever I determined to make the mind unify in samádhi, it went out of control. "What's going on here," I wondered. "Why is this happening?"

Later on I began to realize that meditation was comparable to the process of breathing. If we're determined to force the breath to be shallow, deep or just right, it's very difficult to do. However, if we go for a stroll and we're not even aware of when we're breathing in or out, it's extremely relaxing.

So I reflected, "Aha! Maybe that's the way it works." When a person is normally walking around in the course of the day, not focusing attention on their breath, does their breathing cause them suffering?

No, they just feel relaxed. But when I'd sit down and vow with determination that I was going to make my mind peaceful, clinging and attachment set in. When I tried to control the breath to be shallow or deep, it just brought on more stress than I had before.

Why? Because the willpower I was using was tainted with clinging and attachment. I didn't know what was going on. All that frustration and hardship was coming up because I was bringing craving into the meditation.

### *Unshakeable Peace*

I once stayed in a forest monastery that was half a mile from a village. One night the villagers were celebrating with a loud party as I was doing walking meditation. It must have been after 11:00 and I was feeling a bit peculiar. I'd been feeling strange like this since midday. My mind was quiet. There were hardly any thoughts. I felt

very relaxed and at ease. I did walking meditation until I was tired and then went to sit in my grass-roofed hut.

As I sat down I barely had time to cross my legs before, amazingly, my mind just wanted to delve into a profound state of peace. It happened all by itself. As soon as I sat down, the mind became truly peaceful. It was rock solid. It wasn't as if I couldn't hear the noise of the villagers singing and dancing—I still could—but I could also shut the sound out entirely.

Strange! When I didn't pay attention to the sound, it was perfectly quiet—didn't hear a thing. But if I wanted to hear, I could, without it being a disturbance. It was like there were two objects in my mind that were placed side by side but not touching. I could see that the mind and its object of awareness were separate and distinct, just like this spittoon and water kettle here.

Then I understood: when the mind unifies in samádhi, if you direct your attention outward you can hear, but if you let it dwell in its emptiness then it's perfectly silent. When sound was perceived, I could see that the knowing and the sound were distinctly different.

I contemplated: “If this isn't the way it is, how else could it be?” That's the way it was. These two things were totally separate. I continued on investigating like this until my understanding deepened even further: “Ah, this is important. When the perceived continuity of phenomena is cut, the result is peace.”

The previous illusion of continuity (*santati*) transformed into peace of mind (*santi*). So I continued to sit, putting effort into the meditation. The mind at that time was focused solely on the meditation, indifferent to everything else. Had I stopped meditating at this point, it would have been merely because it was complete. I

could have taken it easy, but it wouldn't have been because of laziness, tiredness, or feeling annoyed; these were absent from the heart. There was only perfect inner balance and equipoise—just right.

Eventually I did take a break, but it was only the posture of sitting that changed. My heart remained constant, unwavering and unflagging. I pulled a pillow over, intending to take a rest. As I reclined, the mind remained just as peaceful as it had been before.

Then, just before my head hit the pillow, the mind's awareness began flowing inwards, I didn't know where it was headed, but it kept flowing deeper and deeper within. It was like a current of electricity flowing down a cable to a switch. When it hit the switch, my body exploded with a deafening bang.

The knowing during that time was extremely lucid and subtle. Once past that point, the mind was released to penetrate deeply inside. It went inside to the point where there wasn't anything at all. Absolutely nothing from the outside world could come into that place. Nothing at all could reach it.

Having dwelt internally for some time, the mind then retreated to flow back out. However, when I say it retreated, I don't mean to imply that I made it flow back out. I was simply an observer, only knowing and witnessing. The mind came out more and more until it finally returned to normal.

Once my normal state of consciousness returned, the question arose, "What was that?" The answer came immediately, "These things happen of their own accord. You don't have to search for an explanation." This answer was enough to satisfy my mind.

After a short time my mind again began flowing inwards. I wasn't making any conscious effort to direct the mind. It took off by itself. As it moved deeper and deeper inside, it again hit that same switch. This time my body shattered into the most minute particles and fragments. Again the mind was released to penetrate deeply inside itself. Utter silence.

It was even more profound than the first time. Absolutely nothing external could reach it. The mind abided here for some time, for as long as it wished, and then retreated to flow outwards. At that time, it was following its own momentum and happening all by itself. I wasn't influencing or directing my mind to be in any particular way, to flow inwards or retreat outwards. I was merely the one knowing and watching.

My mind again returned to its normal state of consciousness, and I didn't wonder or speculate about what was happening. As I meditated, the mind once again inclined inwards. This third time the entire cosmos shattered and disintegrated into minute particles. The earth, ground, mountains, fields and forests—the whole world—disintegrated into the space element (*ákása-dhātu*). People had vanished. Everything had disappeared. Absolutely nothing remained.

The mind, having inclined inwards, settled down there for as long as it wished. I can't say I understand exactly how it remained there. It's difficult to describe what happened. There's nothing I can compare it to. No simile is apt. This time the mind remained inside far longer than it had previously, and only after some time did it come out of that state. When I say it came out, I don't mean to imply that I made it come out or that I was controlling what was happening. The mind did it all by itself. I was merely an observer. Eventually it again

returned to its normal state of consciousness. How could you put a name on what happened during these three times? Who knows? What term are you going to use to label it?

### *The Power of Samádhi*

Everything I've been relating to you concerns the mind following the way of nature. This was no theoretical description of the mind or of psychological states. There's no need for that. When there's faith or confidence, you get in there and really do it. Not just playing around, you put your life on the line. And when your practice reaches the stage that I've been describing, afterwards the whole world is turned upside down.

Your understanding of reality is completely different. Your view is utterly transformed. If someone saw you at that moment, they might think you were insane. If this experience happened to someone who didn't have a thorough grip on themselves, they might actually go crazy, because nothing is the same as it was before.

The people of the world appear differently than they used to. But you're the only one who sees this. Absolutely everything changes. Your thoughts are transmuted. Other people now think in one way, while you think in another. They speak about things in one way, while you speak in another. They're descending one path, while you're climbing another. You're no longer the same as other human beings.

This way of experiencing things doesn't deteriorate. It persists and carries on. Give it a try. If it really is as I describe, you won't have to go searching very far. Just look into your own heart. This heart is staunchly courageous, unshakably bold. This is the heart's power, its

source of strength and energy. The heart has this potential strength. This is the power and force of samádhi.

At this point it is still just the power and purity that the mind derives from samádhi. This level of samádhi is samádhi at its ultimate. The mind has attained the summit of samádhi; it's not mere momentary concentration.

If you were to switch to vipassaná meditation at this point, the contemplation would be uninterrupted and insightful. Or you could take that focused energy and use it in other ways. From this point on you could develop psychic powers, perform miraculous feats or use it anyway you wanted. Ascetics and hermits have used samádhi energy for making holy water, talismans or casting spells. These things are all possible at this stage, and may be of some benefit in their own way; but it's like the benefit of alcohol. You drink it and then you get drunk.

This level of samádhi is a rest stop. The Buddha stopped and rested here. It forms the foundation for contemplation and vipassaná. However, it's not necessary to have such profound samádhi as this in order to observe the conditions around us, so keep on steadily contemplating the process of cause and effect.

To do this we focus the peace and clarity of our minds to analyze the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, physical sensations, thoughts, and mental states we experience. Examine moods and emotions, whether positive or negative, happy or unhappy. Examine everything. It's just like someone else has climbed up a mango tree and is shaking down the fruit while we wait underneath to gather them up. The ones which are rotten, we don't pick up. Just gather the good mangoes. It's not exhausting, because we don't have to climb up the tree. We



simply wait underneath to reap the fruit.

Do you get the meaning of this simile? Everything experienced with a peaceful mind confers greater understanding. No longer do we create proliferating interpretations around what is experienced. Wealth, fame, blame, praise, happiness, and unhappiness come of their own accord. And we're at peace. We're wise. It's actually fun. It becomes fun to sift through and sort out these things.

What other people call good, bad, evil, here, there, happiness, unhappiness, or whatever—it all gets taken in for our own profit. Someone else has climbed up the mango tree and is shaking the branches to make the mangoes fall down to us. We simply enjoy ourselves gathering the fruit without fear. What's there to be afraid of anyway?

It's someone else who's shaking the mangoes down to us. Wealth, fame, praise, criticism, happiness, unhappiness, and all the rest are no more than mangoes falling down, and we examine them with a serene heart. Then we'll know which ones are good and which are rotten.

### *Working in Accord with Nature*

When we begin to wield the peace and serenity we've been developing in meditation to contemplate these things, wisdom arises. This is what I call wisdom. This is vipassaná. It's not something fabricated and construed.

If we're wise, vipassaná will develop naturally. We don't have to label what's happening. If there's only a little clarity of insight, we call this "little vipassaná." When clear seeing increases a bit, we call that "moderate vipassaná." If knowing is fully in accordance with the Truth, we call that "ultimate vipassaná."

Personally I prefer to use the word *wisdom* (*paññá*) rather than *vipassaná*. If we think we are going to sit down from time to time and practise “vipassaná meditation,” we’re going to have a very difficult time of it. Insight has to proceed from peace and tranquillity. The entire process will happen naturally of its own accord. We can’t force it.

The Buddha taught that this process matures at its own rate. Having reached this level of practice, we allow it to develop according to our innate capabilities, spiritual aptitude and the merit we’ve accumulated in the past. But we never stop putting effort into the practice. Whether the progress is swift or slow is out of our control.

It’s just like planting a tree. The tree knows how fast it should grow. If we want it to grow more quickly than it is, this is pure delusion. If we want it to grow more slowly, recognize this as delusion as well. If we do the work, the results will be forthcoming—just like planting a tree.

For example, say we wanted to plant a chilli bush. Our responsibility is to dig a hole, plant the seedling, water it, fertilize it and protect it from insects. This is our job, our end of the bargain. This is where faith then comes in. Whether the chilli plant grows or not is up to it. It’s not our business. We can’t go tugging on the plant, trying to stretch it and make it grow faster. That’s not how nature works. Our responsibility is to water and fertilize it. Practising Dhamma in the same way puts our hearts at ease.

If we realize enlightenment in this lifetime, that’s fine. If we have to wait until our next life, no matter. We have faith and unfaltering conviction in the Dhamma. Whether we progress quickly or slowly

is up to our innate capabilities, spiritual aptitude, and the merit we've accumulated so far.

Practising like this puts the heart at ease. It's like we're riding in a horse cart. We don't put the cart before the horse. Or it's like trying to plough a rice paddy while walking in front of our water buffalo rather than behind. What I'm saying here is that the mind is getting ahead of itself. It's impatient to get quick results. That's not the way to do it. Don't walk in front of your water buffalo. You have to walk *behind* the water buffalo.

It's just like that chilli plant we are nurturing. Give it water and fertilizer, and it will do the job of absorbing the nutrients. When insects come to infest it, we chase them away. Doing just this much is enough for the chilli to grow beautifully on its own, and once it is growing beautifully, don't try to force it to flower when we think it should flower. It's none of our business. It will just create useless suffering.

Allow it to bloom on its own. And once the flowers do bloom don't demand that it immediately produce chilli peppers. Don't rely on coercion. That really causes suffering! Once we figure this out, we understand what our responsibilities are and are not. Each has their specific duty to fulfil. The mind knows its role in the work to be done. If the mind doesn't understand its role, it will try to force the chilli plant to produce peppers on the very day we plant it. The mind will insist that it grows, flowers, and produces peppers all in one day.

This is nothing but the second Noble Truth: craving causes suffering to arise. If we are aware of this Truth and ponder it, we'll understand that trying to force results in our Dhamma practice is pure delusion. It's wrong. Understanding how it works, we let go and allow things

to mature according to our innate capabilities, spiritual aptitude and the merit we've accumulated. We keep doing our part.

Don't worry that it might take a long time. Even if it takes a hundred or a thousand lifetimes to get enlightened, so what? However many lifetimes it takes, we just keep practicing with a heart at ease, comfortable with our pace. Once our mind has entered the stream, there's nothing to fear. It will have gone beyond even the smallest evil action.

The Buddha said that the mind of a sotápanna, someone who has attained the first stage of enlightenment, has entered the stream of Dhamma that flows to enlightenment. These people will never again have to experience the grim lower realms of existence, never again fall into hell. How could they possibly fall into hell when their minds have abandoned evil? They've seen the danger in making bad kamma. Even if you tried to force them to do or say something evil, they would be incapable of it, so there's no chance of ever again descending into hell or the lower realms of existence. Their minds are flowing with the current of Dhamma.

Once you're in the stream, you know what your responsibilities are. You comprehend the work ahead. You understand how to practise Dhamma. You know when to strive hard and when to relax. You comprehend your body and mind, this physical and mental process, and you renounce the things that should be renounced, continually abandoning them without a shred of doubt.

## Reference

Ajahn Chah. 2006. *Meditation*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society

Reprinted with the kind permission of the Abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat.

Copyright @ 2006 Sangha, Wat Pah Nanachat, Amphur Warin, Ubon Rajathani 34310, Thailand.  
The Buddhist Publication Society is grateful to Ajahn Nā́oadhammo, the abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat,  
and Ajahn Kalyá́o, the abbot of Bodhivana monastery, for giving their kind permission to reprint these  
talks and thus make them available to a wider public, especially in Sri Lanka. For free distribution only.