

The Method is Self-Reliance

by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

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In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhādāsa gave regular lectures during the monthly international retreats held at Suan Mokkh and then Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage. Usually, Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. Audio recordings are now available from www.suanmokkh.org and www.bia.or.th. The following is a transcription generously made by a Dhamma volunteer. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the Buddhādāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok (suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com).

First of all we would like to express our joy at the fact that you have come to this place in this way; meaning that you have come here in order to study the principles of Buddhism and to train yourselves in meditation. We are pleased by two kinds of benefits which should come from this. First of all you will all personally benefit from this study and training. And then second this will be of use in developing the human world towards peace and happiness. So we all ought to be pleased by these two kinds of benefits which ought to develop out of this training.

At this beginning stage we ought to be careful to understand the following truths: that life has been given to us by nature and that this life can be developed by itself in a satisfying way. If we understand this truth then it will not be very difficult to make the most of our lives, to develop them correctly, and to be satisfied from doing so correctly.

Most people however are not aware of this truth. The majority of people are not interested, and so they don't know what life is and they don't know themselves. Instead of taking interest in developing themselves they just let things happen according to circumstances and situations and what they call luck or fate or fortune.

The kind of benefits that we can reasonably hope for are of two kinds: First, it's reasonable to wish for a life that is peaceful and happy. And second, for the

kind of life that can be used for the highest benefit. These are the two kinds of benefits that it is reasonable hope for.

You should understand that both of these benefits can happen together. There's no contradiction between the two. But unfortunately, a large number of people think that they are two completely separate matters. There are people that think that it is impossible to work and be happy at the same time. This is a very sad misunderstanding. If we understand the truth however, it is easy to find that in doing our work, in doing our duty, in doing things that are of benefit, we can also be very happy at exactly the same time. And so these two benefits from life can work together in helping support each other.

This matter we are talking about doesn't really have to be associated with religion or with any specific religion. We can just say that it's something that happens naturally according to natural principles and the law of nature. If however any religion is going to be involved in this matter that's okay if that religion is able to aid us in being successful in realizing these natural benefits of life. However, it's just as easy to say that it all depends on natural laws and that we don't have to make a big issue about this religion or that religion.

There are two words that we ought to consider. In the Thai language they are very, very close. Just one letter is different. The first one is 'method,' or *witee*. And the second one is 'ceremony,' or *pitee*. *Witee* and *pitee*, method and ceremony, are very different, but people tend to mix them up and confuse them. So we should be careful about this because method is scientific and ceremony is superstitious.

The way it usually is nowadays is that what we are doing is just pretty much ceremonies. We're turning a lot of things into ceremonies because we tend to attach, we tend to cling to one religion or another. We make too much of a big thing. We take our religions too personally. But if we try to base our action on natural law, on natural principles, then it not need be a ceremony and it can be based on scientific principle. When we are not clinging to this or to that we can live according to scientific methods.

If we look around, especially at the modern religions at the current state of religious affairs, we see that mostly what's happening is ceremonial, and it is very hard to find any methods of natural scientific methods being studied and practiced. So please be careful to see the difference and be able to separate the ceremony from the method. And then let's spend our time here looking into scientific methods based on the law of nature. First we'll study these so that we'll have a natural understanding. And then of course we must practice that

understanding, we must put our understanding into our actions in our daily lives.

In Thai Buddhism there's a whole lot more ceremony than there are methods. What most of us are doing is just putting on ceremonies and carrying out rituals. It is very difficult to find any genuine use of methods. But the intention of Buddhism has never had anything to do with ceremonies. The goal of Buddhism has always been to practice methods that actually work. So let's be careful to stick to this original intention. There is no need for these ceremonies. Let's instead really practice the methods that are available to us.

It's either strange, or sad, or pitiful that we intend to practice scientific methods but keep ending up doing ceremonies. We start off with an intention to use methods but end up in our rituals. Actually though, in all religions, not just in Buddhism, it is possible to do things in a methodical way or in a ceremonial way. And so in most religions it's pretty much just a bunch of ceremonies. Even in some religions it is nothing but ceremonies; although there is always the possibility to do things in a methodical way. So let's try to learn how to do things according to natural laws, and do it using scientific methodical methods.

There's a very simple way to distinguish whether we are just doing ceremonies or methods. If we are doing something as a method, a scientific method, then we only hope to depend on ourselves. We look to ourselves as the one responsible, as the one who is to help us. We help ourselves. However, if we are turning into ceremonies and rituals, then there is always a wish to depend on someone else or on external things. So it's very simple, who are we depending on? On ourselves or on something else? And in this way we can distinguish ceremonies from methods, or separate methods from the ceremonies.

A difficulty in this matter is that we instinctually tend to depend on others, on external things. This is a basic instinct we have – to be dependent. And so it is much easier for us to accept ceremonial ways of doing things. We have an affinity for this already. So we need to be very careful to avoid falling into the instincts, our habits and just going along with these instincts. If we are careful we can begin to do things methodically rather than ceremonially, and learn to depend on ourselves. Otherwise we just blow hot and cold, go up and down, or all over the place just following our instinctual urges and tendencies. We need to regulate or to have some self-control over our awareness and our feelings in order that we do things as methods instead of ceremonies.

Another thing is that words can often be vague, ambiguous, and uncertain. And so then in religion if we talk about depending on the highest thing, the supreme thing – no matter what we call it – when we talk about this supreme thing we can understand it both external in something and internal. So we need to be careful to depend on a supreme thing that is within us. For example, in Buddhism we say that Dhamma is the highest thing. And Dhamma is something within ourselves, and so we must use this internal Dhamma that we find within ourselves if our practice is going to be a method.

If we want to look at this a bit scientifically, if we talk about Dhamma, especially the Dhamma inside ourselves, then the most scientific way to look at it is that Dhamma is the duty, or the function that allows us to survive. The duty, the function that by which we survive, by which we are saved – this is Dhamma. This is the highest thing – duty. And it is something we find inside. You can't find it outside. This is the highest thing, this Dhamma. If we don't do it, there is no way we can survive, and there is no way we can be saved. And if we don't do it there is nothing outside of us, even the highest thing outside of us, any high, supreme, external thing, won't be able to save us if we don't do our duty. But if as soon as we do the duty, the necessary function, then that becomes the highest thing. That is the Dhamma, and we can survive, and we are saved.

In Buddhism we hold to a very fundamental principle, that if we do not do our duty, all the angels, celestial beings, and gods, and so on, will be powerless to help us. If we don't do our duty, none of these celestial gods and powers can do anything for us. This is the fundamental meaning of Dhamma that we must go into very carefully in order to see clearly. And then through our personal understanding of it practice it. Practice it scientifically.

Now we are not talking about these things as Buddhist principles. We are not trying to suggest them or claim them as Buddhist. Rather we are talking about them as natural principles. This duty is a duty according to the law of nature. This is all a matter of nature and the law of nature, and our duty according to that law of nature. We don't have to specify any certain religion. If we want to call it a religion we could just call it the religion of nature or a natural religion; a religion of nature, the law of nature, and the duty that needs to be done in line with the law of nature. So it's all very natural. So we don't have to talk about this religion or that religion. We just have to understand these natural principles and live accordingly.

This whole matter is a matter of nature, and this Dhamma we are talking about is all a natural matter. Therefore, these are the basic meanings, or aspects of the word Dhamma that we'd like to advise you about. The first meaning of Dhamma is nature. The second is the law of nature, the natural law. Then third is the duty of law to be done in line with nature. And fourth is the benefit that comes from doing that duty correctly according to natural law. These are four meanings, the four meanings of Dhamma, the four natural meanings of Dhamma that we would like to go into more detail.

It's just a coincidence that the central teachings of Buddhism are also based on natural principles. That the main teachings are about nature, the law of nature – the duty to be done in line with natural law and the benefits or the results of doing that duty. It's just a coincidence that Buddhism coincides with these natural principles, whether we talk about the Four Noble Truths or Dependent Origination, or any of the other central-core teachings. It's a natural matter. So we would like to go into this further and discuss these various meanings of the word Dhamma, these various aspects of nature.

Once we've talked about the general meaning of the word Dhamma to establish a basic understanding, then we need to talk about the basic Dhamma that we need to have, that we must have in order to realize the basic purpose of our lives. So when we talk in this aspect of Dhamma we need to talk about three *dhammas* we must have. They are *sati* – mindfulness, *paññā* – wisdom, intuitive wisdom, and understanding; and *samādhi* – a collected, concentrated, stable mind. These are three dhammas we need to have. We need to have them not in a ceremonial way, but we need to have them in a methodical way.

The Dhamma that is mindfulness, the Dhamma that is intuitive wisdom, the Dhamma that is concentration, all of these can be talked about on different levels and in great detail. But we'd like to express to you in advance that these three dhammas, these three things, must be used whenever we meet any external or surrounding things. Whenever we come up against something in the world, in our environment, any of the many, many things, we must have mindfulness, *sati* – intuitive wisdom, *paññā*, and a collected, concentrated, stable mind – *samādhi*. Whatever we do, whether we are meeting up with various things in the world, or whether we are enjoying or experiencing the results of the work we do in life, or even while studying and investigating this life that we are leading. All of these three activities: meeting up with, confronting the things that surround us in the world; experiencing, tasting, and consuming the fruits, the benefits that come from our work and our labor; and then our studies and our investigations of life, all of these must be done with mindfulness, wisdom, and concentration.

If we lack these three dhammas, if these three things are missing, then whenever we meet up with anything from the world around us then there will be problems, there will be confusion, there will be difficulties, there will be pain, and there will be suffering. If we lack mindfulness, wisdom, and a collected mind, then whatever we meet up with will lead to problems. And those problems, those difficulties, will cause us a great deal of harm. We won't know how to respond to them and we will behave incorrectly if we lack these three dhammas.

If in our studies, in our work, in our searching for money, in our getting money, in our having money, in our consumption of things that we receive or that we have around, or in keeping various things that we get, all of these and everything else in our life can only be done successfully only if we have these three *dhammas* of mindfulness, wisdom, and a collected mind. If we lack these three then whatever it is will turn into a problem, will bring us pain and misery.

Today we will examine these three things carefully and go into a much detail as time will allow us.

The first is called *sati* [Pāli], or in Thai *sati*, which is translated usually as 'mindfulness' or 'awareness.' This is something we all have naturally. But often there is not enough of it or it's too slow. In life the mind is constantly experiencing various stimuli coming in through the various senses, and usually mindfulness is too slow to be there at the time the mind makes contact – the time the mind experiences something. *Sati* is for the mind to recollect, for the mind to reflect, to be right there at the point of experience – to be aware, to be fully aware there at the moment of experience for the mind to come back to that to be right there. But so often our mindfulness is not well enough developed. It's too slow, it's too clumsy, it's too weak, and so we need to develop it. We need to train it. Our natural level of mindfulness is okay for getting through life. But it's not enough for us to really live life as we should, and so we must train it. We must develop it in a proper way.

Sati always operates with *paññā* (intuitive wisdom). It's pointless to talk about one without the other, they always work together. *Sati* (mindfulness) is like the transport mechanism or the vehicle for wisdom. Whenever anything confronts the mind, *sati* (mindfulness) recollects wisdom. *Sati* is recollection. *Sati* recollects wisdom. It goes and gets wisdom and brings it right here, right at the moment of experiencing whatever it is. *Sati* brings wisdom, brings correct knowledge right there to deal with the specific thing occurring right at this

moment. If sati is too slow then wisdom doesn't come. So we must have sati and wisdom. Without sati there is no wisdom to solve the problem. *Sati* (mindfulness) alone, cannot solve the problem, cannot deal with the situation properly. It must bring wisdom, correct knowledge and understanding, right there on time to deal with the situation. This is how these two work together: sati and paññā.

It is just as if we had a very powerful weapon. But without sati we can't bring the weapon into play and so it's useless. But if we have sufficient, strong enough, quick enough mindfulness, then it can recollect the weapon and bring the weapon into action in order to deal with the situation.

Sati – mindfulness is an immediate awareness, an instantaneous awareness of the situation, of whatever is happening with the mind, for the mind, in the mind. Then when this is sati quick enough – right on time, then it can recollect, it can retrieve wisdom. Now sati must be able to recollect the correct wisdom, the appropriate wisdom for the specific situation. Wisdom is very broad. It can include many things from various angles. Sati must choose just the right wisdom to bring to the situation in order to deal specifically with what is taking place. So mindfulness must be instantaneous, immediate, it must be very quick. It must be able to recollect wisdom and choose the proper wisdom, then that sati is correct. It must be fast, it must be correct, able to bring, retrieve the correct wisdom needed for the situation. Then mindfulness and wisdom can work properly in order to work successfully with whatever is happening.

Mindfulness can also protect against and prevent problems. We just talked about how mindfulness retrieves wisdom in order to solve or correct problems. But mindfulness can also prevent them. And of course it's better to prevent any sort of difficulties than to have to solve them once they have occurred. If we know how to use mindfulness properly, if we have trained it enough, then it is able to come in and prevent the arising of any misunderstanding, any foolish responses, any blind reactions. It won't allow anything evil or harmful or dangerous to arrive if we know how to use it correctly.

By practicing *ānāpānasati* – the mental development through using mindfulness with breathing in and out – will train mindfulness so that it is very fast and correct, so that we can use it to prevent or correct all problems. Or if we slip, then we will be able to use mindfulness to help solve any problems that might have occurred.

Now we come to the second of these *dhammas*: *paññā* – wisdom, or intuitive wisdom that can correct, or understanding. There are many things that we know, or could know, that it is possible to know, but the *paññā* is specifically the things we need to know. All the things we could know are far too much for us to fully understand. But what we need to know is limited enough that all of us are capable of understanding it thoroughly. In short, what we need to know is how suffering arises, how mental anguish arises, and how suffering ceases. To understand these two aspects of nature is wisdom. You can compare it to a fist with a handful of leaves. You don't have to pick up all the leaves in the forest, that would be impossible. But if you can pick up just this one handful of leaves then it will be enough to solve all your problems, and then even better, to prevent any new problems.

This knowledge we've just mentioned is truth. We call it the truth. Now this kind of knowledge, this truth that we are talking about must be correct, it must be right. There is a lot of knowledge around that is incorrect, or useless, it doesn't serve any benefit. For knowledge to be wisdom it must be correct. And by correct that means it has to be able to solve the problem of suffering. There is a very deep and profound experience troubling us, and we call it suffering. If knowledge is correct, it must be able to understand and solve this problem. Then it can be called wisdom, or correct knowledge, correct understanding. In the Buddha's language he used the word *sammā*, which means 'correct,' 'right.' If it is not right then it doesn't do us any good and it's not really true. It may seem true, but to be true it must help us to deal with the fundamental problem of our lives. Then it's right knowledge. Then it's wisdom. Whether we are talking about the Four Noble Truths, or dependent origination, this is the heart of wisdom because this deals with the reality of suffering how it arises and how it ceases, and that is all we need to know.

Having this correct wisdom, having understanding this truth correctly, has the highest benefit. It is tremendously beneficial for our lives because when we have this wisdom then we will never again become slaves to the things we call good and bad. Without this wisdom we're always getting stuck to and getting tapped by, cornered by, and led around by what we call 'good' and what we call 'bad.' Good and bad is the original duality. It's the basic duality from which all the other dualisms spring. If we have this wisdom we're talking about then none of these good and evil and all of the other dualisms, other pairs of opposites will have any power over our minds, and then we will be free and the mind will be liberated. It will be free from everything that is disturbing it. This is the tremendous benefit that comes from developing this correct wisdom.

For those of you who are Christian, please think back to a place in the first chapter of Genesis way back at the beginning of the Bible. There is one single sentence where God gives a very direct teaching or commandment to Adam and Eve. In one sentence God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God said don't eat that fruit that will lead to the knowledge about good and evil. This first commandment, the first time that God spoke directly to man is exactly the same as the fundamental understanding of Buddhism. Do not fall under the influence or power of good and evil. As soon as we become influenced by good and evil we get trapped and it brings suffering. Unfortunately, Christians aren't interested in this first commandment of God. They show much more interest in the words of Jesus Christ, which are of a lesser or lower importance. We ask that you give space, give attention though to this first commandment of God because this is the pinnacle of wisdom. This one sentence expresses the supreme wisdom. As soon as we get trapped by good and evil, as soon as we cling to it, as soon as we believe that this is good and that is evil, then we're trapped. We get locked up in a prison of suffering. If we understand what God commanded and practice accordingly, then we will be freed. And so please give this careful attention, especially those of you who consider yourselves Christians.

When we have developed, collected, gathered enough understanding, enough wisdom, it's like we store up wisdom. When we've stored up sufficient wisdom of genuine correct understanding, then *sati* (mindfulness), can retrieve that wisdom to be used in specific circumstances as is needed. *Sati* comes and gets the right amount or the right kind of wisdom to deal with whatever situation is happening. So *sati* and *paññā* (wisdom), work together like this. Now, wisdom means the entire collection of our understanding, which is much more than ever needs to be used in one specific situation. The specific aspect or the specific knowledge that is retrieved by mindfulness and then applied to a specific situation, a specific event, or experience within the mind – that specific wisdom we call *sampajañña*. We can call it that, or sometimes it is called clear apprehension. Meaning to fully understand the exact situation here. Or we can call it wisdom in action, or applied wisdom. So there is mindfulness, there's our collected wisdom, and then there's the application to a specific situation with that wisdom which we call *sampajañña*. *Sampajañña* is a word derived from the word *paññā* – wisdom, and it means 'applied wisdom' – wisdom in action. We should understand how this works in order that we can derive the fullest benefits from this natural principle about the mind.

Now we come to the third *dhamma*, which is *samādhi*. This is often translated concentration; but be very, very careful to listen to the explanation. It can also be translated as collectedness. This is something – collectedness – this is something that exists naturally. It's instinctive in all sentient beings. You can see this, that as soon as we intend to do anything the mind will have a degree of concentration on doing that thing: say, to shoot a gun, or to pick up a stone and throw it, or to even brush our teeth. There will be a degree of naturally arising concentration involved. But this instinctual *samādhi* is not enough. It's not strong enough. So we need to train and develop it further. *Samadhi* is a gathering, a collecting together of the mind's power, of the mind's energy. As it's collected it can then be focused into doing any activity. The more the mind is gathered together, is collected together, the more prepared it is, the more ready it is to do any kind of work. So the concentration we are talking about here is not a dull, sleepy state, but it's a very active, a very ready mind. It's also very solid and stable, and powerful because of all that mental energy gathered together. When there is *samādhi* then this great power can be used to support wisdom. When there is adequate *samādhi* then wisdom can operate very efficiently and very quickly, very effectively deal with any situation. So we have *samādhi* in order so that wisdom can do its work. We train and develop the mind's ability to gather itself together to collect up its power so that it is very active and completely ready to do anything. So whether we use this for training the mind properly, the mind will always have *samādhi*. Whether to support wisdom as wisdom performs its duty, or just for the mind all by itself to have a level of alertness, activeness, and strength. This is the role of *samādhi*.

Another advantage of *samādhi* is that it can bring instant happiness. It can bring immediate happiness. Whenever you are feeling unhappy, whenever you need some joy, then just make the mind into a state of *samādhi* and then there will be joy. Just by using *samādhi* to clear the mind of any harmful or foul moods or emotions or feelings, just chase them away. Chase any bad or evil thoughts away. Any thoughts, or moods, or emotions that are causing us pain or suffering can be chased away by using *samādhi*, and then there will be instant joy. This joy is another advantage of *samādhi*, and we can learn to do this whenever we need to. This joy, this happiness is very useful. It can be an aid to the development of wisdom. Once there is a calm joy in the mind it will support our development of wisdom. And then as wisdom grows we are more and more able to solve all the problems of life. So please understand how these three *dhammas* work. If we learn to develop them, to train them correctly, then they will be able to solve any difficulties that occur in our lives. So *sati* – mindfulness, *paññā* – wisdom, *samādhi* – collectedness of mind: all three of

these together can work together. They form a team. And if we allow them to work together as a team, then our life will be free of all problems.

So these three things are *sati*, *paññā*, and *samādhi* – mindfulness, intuitive wisdom, and concentration. If you can develop all three of these until they are full, complete, and perfect then your life will experience no pain and no problems. You can develop all three of these fully through practicing mindfulness with breathing in and breathing out. If you practice *ānāpānasati* – mindfulness with breathing – successfully and completely, then mindfulness, wisdom, and *samādhi* will be full, complete, and perfect. Through practicing mindfulness and breathing let us insist or declare or assure you that through correctly and completely practicing mindfulness with breathing you will then have all three of these dhammas to aid you in life, and they will be able to solve all problems. So we hope that you all can come to understand how all this works and then apply yourselves to it diligently. And we hope very much that you will be completely successful in this endeavor. That you will have all the mindfulness, wisdom, and concentration that you need to live a completely peaceful and useful life. We wish you the greatest success and request now that today's talk be finished.

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