

Life is Something That Can & Must be Developed

by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

A Dhamma lecture given at Suan Mokkh on 2 August 1988

In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhadāsa 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 Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok (suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com).

At this beginning level allow us to start with the broad principle that life is something which can be developed and which we must develop.

Some people don't think that they are able to develop themselves and so they think they can depend on some God to do the developing for them. This is very mistaken according to Buddhist principles, for in Buddhism we understand that we can develop and that we must develop by ourselves.

Actually, God can be understood in two ways. There is the God that is a person – a personal God, and there is a God which is not a person. The first kind of God – the personal God – is one that has experiences like a person does, whereas the second kind of God doesn't have experiences in a personal way. Now at some times in human history, people are of ... in the second kind of God we would call the law of nature. But in some times of human history people are unable to understand what we mean by the law of nature, so that in such times, it is necessary to talk in terms of a God which is personal, which experiences like a person or an individual would.

Whether we speak of the personal God or whether we speak of the non-personal law of nature, whichever kinds of God we're talking about, that God cannot develop us. Instead we have to develop ourselves, by ourselves.

Whatever way we look at it, this life is something that has been given to us by nature or by God. We can see this life as being similar to some basic capital

which is given to us in order to invest. We invest this life in some kind of business and then we carry out that business in order to turn a profit. If we understand life as this basic stake or capital for us to invest in the business of life, then we can understand the importance of developing this life.

Why do we talk about life as a kind of business? We use this terminology because we have the possibility of making the highest profit, receiving the most value and benefit from this life. Life all by itself – just mere life – may not have any value at all or have only very little value. However, if we do our investment properly and then learn how to make the most profit, and receive the highest value from life, then we can truly call it a kind of business. Meaning that we try to get the most from our basic initial investment.

From ancient times, people in India have used this word business in reference to life. They have the word *saṃvohāra* which means a kind of buying and selling, a kind of trading, or to operate a business in order to make a profit. The idea is that one lives one's life and looks at it as a kind of business where one tries to get the most out of it, until one is old and then we turn over the business to our children in order to then experience a peaceful and wise old age. This meaning is an ancient one in India and is something which ought to be of interest to us today.

We can either talk in terms of business – the business of life – or we can talk about developing life. But either way, the meaning is basically the same. We have to do something so that there is increasing value in life, so that we get the highest return from life. So it's necessary for us to develop this life.

What is the benefit or result of this business of life, this development of life? The first result is a life that is cool and peaceful. And then second, a life that is beneficial and useful for everyone. If we realize these two results, then we can say that we have received the highest possible profit from our lives – the highest kind of profit which we ought to achieve. This is what ought to be the result of the business of our lives.

To have a life that is happy and peaceful, and then beneficial for everyone concerned – that ought to be enough shouldn't it? This ought to be sufficient for us. But nowadays, people don't seem to be satisfied with just a simple, peaceful, cool life that is of benefit to everyone. Instead of just settling for a peaceful bliss, people are interested in all kinds of luxuries, and excess materialism and consumerism, and all kinds of things like that.

This is because people aren't interested in a truly cool, calm and peaceful happiness. And so they go and develop all kinds of materialistic pursuits and activities. All the development is merely material, and then this kind of development completely misses the point of what we need in life. For example, all the things going on, all the activities, they're just chasing after material, sensual kinds of pleasure – just trying to accumulate possessions in everything. This completely misses the point of what our lives are really about. And so we can never really find true peace and happiness.

This genuine peaceful bliss that we're talking about is neither positive nor negative. But nobody is interested in such a thing. All that people want is what is positive, positive, positive, positive. So they can't understand what real happiness, real peace is about. But here, this is what we're most interested in – the kind of real happiness that is free of both positive & negative. And this is the kind of happiness, the kind of peace that we can understand, that we can discover through the practice of mindfulness with breathing, which you are beginning to practice here.

Please be particularly interested about the meaning of these words – 'positive' & 'negative' – especially being free of both positive & negative. The positive excites, it stimulates, it bubbles, it stimulates the mind. And then the negative deflates, depresses the mind. One, the positive leads to getting happy and feeling happy, whereas the negative leads to sadness and sorrow. Neither of these are peaceful and neither of these are true happiness. So please be very careful to understand what is meant by the positive & the negative. Because if you can't understand this, you won't be able to understand what it is we're talking about here.

The thing that we're most interested in, which satisfies us, which makes us happy is merely this thing we call the positive. This is what we're familiar with, this is what we want. And then because of that, the negative goes against our feelings, it grates on us. We don't want it, we want to avoid it. Neither of these are genuine peace and happiness. In fact both of them are the opposite of being at peace. And so to understand genuine happiness, real happiness, we need to understand what it is to be free of positive & negative.

We can take the mind itself as the basic standard or principle – the mind that is neither positive nor negative. This would mean the mind that neither likes the positive nor hates the negative – the mind that is not caught up in either one. This mind that is free or empty of the positive & the negative is the mind that is truly at peace, and is genuinely happy. So take this mind, this genuinely happy

mind that is neither positive nor negative, as a basic standard for our further understanding.

Anāpānasati bhāvanā (the cultivation of mindfulness with breathing) which you are practicing now will help you to know the mind that is neither positive nor negative. So please be very interested in this practice in order to discover this mind which is genuinely happy.

Anāpānasati (mindfulness with breathing) can help us to have a mind that is pure. *Anāpānasati* can help us to have a mind that is free of the positive and the negative, a mind that is free of any egoistic feeling, free of any sense of ‘I’ and ‘mine.’ *Anāpānasati*, mindfulness with breathing, will help us to realize the fact of ‘not-self,’ that everything in our lives is not really a ‘self,’ so it helps us to give up the feeling, the delusion, or the belief in ‘I’ and ‘mine.’ This is how *ānāpānasati* will enable us to be free, to have a mind that is void of ego and selfishness.

But now we don’t take the mind to be the basic factor, to be the primary issue. Instead we take I, me, myself, the ego, to be the primary issue, and then we act in all ways from an ego-centric position. When this happens then, the mind has already been deceived, the mind has been tricked, and now misunderstands. Such a mind is caught up in an illusion, in the deception of the belief, in ego, in an independently existing ‘I,’ the belief that there are things which are ‘mine.’ This mind that is trapped within ego views is a mind that cannot be developed. So instead of getting trapped in this illusion, go straight for the mind itself. Don’t get sidetracked by ego, and take the mind as the basic primary issue, because this will enable us to develop life.

We need to be free of all egoistic concepts whatsoever. We need to abandon every kind of egoistic concepts. That means that this ‘we’ we talked about has to be a ‘we’ or an ‘I’ that isn’t trapped in any egoistic perspective, and so this gives rise to the rather strange sentence that we need to have a “we that is not we.” A “we that is not we” is ‘we’ that has nothing to do with these egoistic concepts and illusions. This is what is necessary in life.

There is the ‘we’ that is associated with egoistic concepts. And then there is the ‘we’ that is not associated with any egoistic concepts. These two kinds of ‘we’ are so different that they’re even more different than if they were opposites – the difference is even more than being just opposites. The ‘we’ that is free of egoistic concepts is just a mind that is pure, a mind by itself, a mind that is intelligent, open, a mind that is free. The ‘we’ that is caught up in egoistic concepts is a mind that is foolish, a mind that is deceived, a mind that is filled

with selfishness, and brings about all kinds of foolish and selfish acts. The difference between these two ‘we’s’ is immense, and you need to understand that difference.

This ‘we’ that is full of egoistic concepts is the ‘we’ that we’ve got right here and now – this ‘we’ that is sitting right here. Whereas the ‘we’ that is free of any egoistic concepts is the ‘we’ that will happen some time later. This ‘we’ that has no egoistic concept is the ‘we’ that will happen when life has been developed to the fullest extent – when we’ve reached the end of the development of life, and then there will be this ‘we’ that has no egoistic concerns. So there’s this ‘we’ that we’ve got now – the one caught up in ego, and then the ‘we’ that we will come to if we practice Dhamma to its fullest – the ‘we’ that has no ego or egoistic perspectives attached to it.

The *we which is not we* – when we listen to this it may sound like nonsense. But in fact in this statement there is tremendous sense – it makes perfect sense. It points to a reality that is correct and appropriate. This is something that is very important for us to understand and requires our attention – to understand this *we which is not we*. If we understand this, we will understand what the goal of our life is.

This phrase – the *we which is not we* is something which is difficult to listen to, and there is nothing about it that really encourages us, or invites us to pay attention. But still, we need to give it total attention, to understand what we mean by the *we which is not we*. We’re talking about just this mind, if we see this *we which is not we* we’ll just see pure mind – mind that has none of those egoistic concepts or beliefs. This is something of great importance.

The *we which is we* is the ‘we’ of ignorance. The *we which is not we* is the genuine ‘we’ – the ‘we’ of wisdom.

This ‘we’ that we talk about doesn’t really exist. There’s nothing really that is ‘us’ or ‘ours,’ but this is the nature of language in our world. In our languages we have these words and we need to use them. And because of our ignorance, we don’t understand the inherent falsehood and limitations of these words – ‘we’ and ‘our’ and ‘us.’ So we’re deceived by them – we really believe in them. We think that there really is a *we which is we*. We don’t understand that ‘we’ is not really ‘we’ because we’re deceived by this – we believe in these words too much. We must understand how language works so as not be tricked by it – not to believe everything that we hear.

The Buddha and all enlightened beings use the word ‘we.’ They use these everyday words like ‘we’ and ‘I’ and ‘ours’ and so on. But when the Buddha or an enlightened being use the word ‘we,’ they meant the *we which is not we*. But when ordinary thick ones like ourselves use the word ‘we’ we mean the *we that is we*, and we’re tricked and deceived by this. So please hurry up and understand this matter – understand the *we which is not we*. Understand what we’re talking about here in order to be free and to have your own experience of the *we which is not we*.

We ought to understand where this ‘we’ comes from. This ‘we’ comes from a misunderstanding, a lack of knowledge, a wrong view, and being deceived. This ‘we’ comes from what we call *upādāna*, which is grasping and clinging at things in a foolish way. When we have experience in life, say when we have sensual experience, which is just a basic part of life, we see something and we hear something. This is a rather crude and coarse stimulation of the mind, and when the mind doesn’t understand this activity of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or whatever, then it misunderstands it and is deceived. When the mind misunderstands our experiences and senses, and what we see and hear, then it takes these things to be ‘we’ or ‘ours’ or ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘ego.’ So there arises this foolish clinging to things, this stupid attachment, because we don’t see things the way they really are, and so we take them to be really ‘we.’ Really there is just a kind of an experience, a certain sensitivity of the mind. But then we misunderstand this and are deceived into our foolish belief in ‘we’ and ‘ours.’

We are able to examine this matter from the very start. We can go back to the beginning when we are infants. We can go back to the newborn infant, who born into the world begins to have the sense organs developed, and then when these are sufficiently developed they receive stimuli – they make contact with various things in the world. And then through the process of experiencing sights, sounds, smells, odors, touches, thoughts, memories and so on, these various experiences have a kind of feeling/color to them – some are pleasant, some are unpleasant, some are indiscernible (whether it’s pleasant or unpleasant). From this feeling then there arises a desire – a want. Depending on the kind of feeling, the mind wants something in terms of that object that it experiences. And then once there is this wanting – this desire in the mind, then there develops a sense of the ‘we’ who desires, the desirer, the wanter. Notice that first there is just the want, the desire, but then there develops the wanter, the desirer. This is very important because this idea of the ‘we’ who wants, or the ‘I’ that desires, is just an illusion. It wasn’t there in the first place – this ‘I,’ this

‘we,’ didn’t exist from the beginning. But because of these various developments, there eventually – or at one point – arises this illusion, this image, this picture, this belief, identity of ‘we,’ of ‘I.’ But notice that it didn’t exist from the start – it just developed because of there being desire. First there is desire, and then there is the illusion of the desirer. This is how the ‘we’ arises. It is important to see how it didn’t exist from the start. It only is concocted later. It’s just an illusion, a hallucination we create.

Let’s examine this further. When the infant has grown and is now a child that can walk. The child walks and then clumsily bumps into a chair. And then the child gets angry at the chair. The child regards the pain that is experienced in bumping into the chair – this is taken personally as ‘my pain’ or ‘I hurt.’ And so as we’ve just explained, the child creates the illusion of ‘we.’ It views itself as a ‘self,’ and then it gets angry at that chair. It not only has foolishly created a self concept regarding itself, but the child has also developed a self concept regarding the chair. It sees the chair as a ‘self.’ It gets angry at the chair, and the kid even kicks the chair. This is how this foolishness grows and expands – beginning with seeing ourselves as ‘we,’ and then we go and see everything around us as ‘self,’ so we get lost in this illusion which we create.

Further, the child is even taught to think more deeply into this illusion. When the child bumps into the chair and gets hurt and angry, and then sits and cries and sulks. Then the nurse comes by and goes and gets angry at the chair too, and hits the chair, kicks the chair for the child. So this way, the child’s nurse goes and teaches and fortifies this sense of ego. Teaches the child to become even more stupid, to believe even more fully in this hallucination, this deception. So this is how we learn – we teach each other to get more and more trapped in our illusions. In the West, are there such practices, such customs, where the nurse will go and hit the chair or whatever for the child which is crying? If you’ve got such practices back in Europe or America or wherever, then you’re just teaching your children to be more and more stupid.

And so the deception grows and grows – the illusion gets worse and worse. But never did this self really exist. At no point is this belief in self [a] belief in something that truly exists. This self is just created out of ignorance – it’s just a product of our ignorance and our lack of understanding. And so this illusion begins with the child – the young child – and then it grows, and then it’s supported, and fortified, and solidified by customs, and culture, and education, so we become more and more foolish, and more and more trapped in this deception – so that we are living in it all the time. We spend all our lives caught in this ignorance and this deception.

And then there's a second matter as well. The first matter is this 'we,' this 'self,' this 'ego' we invest so heavily in. And once this self has been produced fully by ignorance then anything that comes into contact with this self, anything that gets into some relationship or association with this self becomes mine, that which belongs to the self – the possessions, the belongings of self. So that these two things, first the fundamental problem of 'I,' and then from that there arises 'mine.' Now the principle problem is – the first one – this 'I' which is created by ignorance, and then the problems grows, expands, and starts pulling in all these things to be mine, and so this problem spreads like a cancer all over the place. Both of these – self and that which belongs to self (I & mine) – need to be gotten rid of. The way to do so is to get rid of the basic one – to get rid of self. If we get rid of this illusion of self, then the illusion of mine, of possessions, of belongings would disappear as well. In mindfulness with breathing, the final stage of this practice is exclusively concerned with eliminating the illusion of self, getting rid of this self, and with it, the burden of 'mine.' This is why we practice *ānāpānasati* in order to be free of this burden of self, and that which belongs to self, in order to know the *we which is not we*.

This foolishness of 'mine' – of that which belongs to self – this gets even worse as well. At first there is just the mine that is pleasant, that we like. At first we take as our belongings, the things we like, the things we want. But then this feeling of 'mine' goes further and we start to feel this way towards things we don't like, things that we disagree with, things that we hate even. So that we end up with 'my enemy,' 'ego's enemy.' This problem of I and mine turns into positive and negative. The positive is sometimes the feeling of 'mine' towards the positive – sometimes we identify with the positive. And then this foolishness go so far as – for us to identify with the negative as well – to identify with that which I hate, I don't want, I don't like, and so on, and on and on. Our mind is dimmed and obscured and messed up. It floats around in this confusion of positive and negative. This positive and negative go on and on and on. The mind is lost, flowing along, drifting in this cloud of confusion.

In the Pāli language, the language which the Buddha spoke, there is the word *attā*, and the word *attaniya*. *Attā* means self, and *attaniya* means concerned with self, or associated with self, related to self. So there is *attā* and *attaniya*. We can translate these as 'I' & 'mine,' but that's not really strong enough because *attā* & *attaniya* are a little bit more ugly than that. We're talking about ego and that which ego grabs on to as its own. We're talking about 'we' & 'ours,' 'I' & 'mine,' 'ego' & 'my-go.' You can't have just 'me' – you can't have just 'we,' 'ego,' 'self.' Once there is *attā*, then there arises *attaniya*. As

soon as we have a sense of self, then there are all the things concerned with, connected to, associated with self. So there is 'I' & 'mine,' 'I-go' & 'my-go,' on and on and on. And we can't just take the positive. This foolishness gets so carried away – we're so stupid that we take the negative also. This attā & attaniya – it's not just the good thing. We also get stuck with the negative – the so-called bad thing. This is how this ignorance grows and grows, until it becomes an incredible stupidity, and how we get trapped in all this 'I' & 'mine,' 'we' & 'ours.'

So now you understand how the positive and the negative depend on 'mine,' which in turns depend on 'I.' Now you can remember from the beginning that genuine happiness cannot occur when there is positive & negative. So if we want to be free of the positive & the negative, we must get rid of its sources. The positive & the negative arise from attaniya, from mine, this sense of possession, of claiming things as mine, as ours. And then this arises from attā, the sense of self, the illusion of self. So if we want to get rid of this positive & negative entrapment, then we have to get rid of that 'mine.' This means we have to destroy this self-illusion. To get free, we have to deal with this basic illusion of self. This is why we take up *vipassanā*. Vipassanā is seeing clearly into the nature of things. We practice vipassanā in order to see clearly that this self doesn't really exist. If we understand this fully, if we experience this deeply, then the illusion disappears, and then we're free of the whole mess.

When the mind is totally liberated from positive & negative through the destruction of this ignorant illusion of self – when we have accomplished that – when the mind is totally free of self, free of selfishness, free of positive & negative, then that mind is very cool. It's totally peaceful, it's empty of all defiling things, it's totally free and liberated, nothing disturbs it. This is a mind that contains within it all which is truly desirable, and such a mind is realized, achieved, attained by the elimination of this self-illusion, and this sense of possessiveness of 'mine' that it engenders, and then the positive & negative that arises from that. That's all there is to it. This freeing the mind by getting free of this delusion that there is this self. So really the only problem – since it's all quite simple and straightforward – is whether or not you are interested. Do you care about this – that's all that matters. So please think about it carefully – do you care, are you interested in this or not.

We're sincerely asking you – do you like a life that is without the positive & the negative.

At this point, we've all invested a lot in the positive. We've really got sucked in, and deceived, and tricked by the positive. And this makes it very difficult for us to study and investigate that which is neither positive nor negative. Therefore, to enable us to investigate this matter without undue difficulty, we need to really become interested in that which is neither positive nor negative. If we're sincerely interested in this, our spiritual practice will not be difficult. So look at this matter very carefully, give it your fullest attention.

If we genuinely like this, if we're interested, then we will be able to discover a life that is no longer trapped by the positive & negative. This will be a life that is freed of that self-illusion. And so that life, that mind, will be peaceful, will be calm, will be cool, which is the highest benefit for that mind itself. And such a mind which is no longer deluded and trapped by positive & negative, by 'I' & 'mine,' that mind will be completely unselfish. A mind that is unselfish is able to genuinely do things for others. Whenever we're selfish, our acts are of no value to others, and often cause outright harm. But when we are unselfish, we can do things which are of genuine benefit to others. So in this way, the unselfish mind, the mind that is free of self, of positive & negative, is of benefit and value for everyone – for both oneself and for others. This mind that is unselfish, is a mind that is of benefit for all. If you can understand this, then we think you'll genuinely like it.

When we look around at our fellow human beings, we take a look at this world, we see that all people are trapped within this thing called 'self.' People are full of selfishness, completely deceived by the positive & the negative, and we see this causing all kinds of problems, and conflicts, and wars – all this selfishness and self. So the question for us is do we dare – do each of us have the courage to step away from all that ego, and all that selfishness, and all that violence, in order to find genuine happiness and peace. Do we have the courage to back away from all that selfishness, in order to free ourselves of 'I' & 'mine,' of ego and selfishness. If we do, then we will ourselves experience true happiness, and we will also be able to bring peace to the world. All that selfishness can never bring any peace. Only if we have the courage to free ourselves of selfishness, only in this way, can we hope to bring peace to the world. So do we have the courage to do this – to do something that is of the highest benefit for ourselves and for others? Do we have this courage to get free of positive & negative, of 'I' & of 'mine'? If we have the courage, *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness with breathing, provides the means for us to do so. If we practice diligently, sincerely, correctly, then this will give us a way to get free of this selfhood and all the tremendous problems it's causing for the world and for

each of us, even as we sit here today. So this is the question facing each of us – do we have the courage to practice to be free of self? Are we really willing to do something for the benefit of not only ourselves but of the world? This is all there is to it – this is the big question of our lives. So we leave it to you to think about it. Today’s talk is over.

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Transcribed by Christine Apikul in 2015

Audio files: 5125310802010.mp3 & 1988-08 (1) Life is something which can and must be developed.mp3.

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