

# *Developing Life through Duty*

by Buddhadāsa 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 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](http://www.suanmokkh.org) and [www.bia.or.th](http://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](mailto:suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com)).*

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Today is the last day of this course and this is our second talk. We hope that during this course you have achieved two things. That you have understood the Dhamma more deeply. And that you have met some success in practicing mental development.

We need to have both of these things together. First of all we need to have knowledge about the Dhamma – knowledge about how to make the mind peaceful. But still we won't be able to actually do it – actually make the mind peaceful. So we also need to have some understanding about how to practice in order to actually make the mind peaceful. You can't just have one without the other. In order to be successful in our endeavor we must have both of these aspects together.

Please be able to distinguish between these two topics or subjects. We need to have each of them and understand them clearly. The first one is to understand the basic facts of nature, to understand the Four Noble Truths, to understand the law of nature – *idappaccayatā* (conditionality), to understand dependent origination, to understand impermanence, oppressiveness, non-selfhood, voidness, thusness and so on. We need to have this understanding about the way things actually are. But then to go with that, we must also have some practical knowledge about how to use mindfulness with breathing in order to actually bring about the direct realization, and living in accordance with those fundamental truths. If we don't have both of these aspects or topics working

together, then it probably won't be possible for us to meet with any genuine success.

We'd like you to look at the current situation and see that the Dhamma is something necessary when the industrial age has achieved its highest level of development. When all this material, industrial, technological progress has occurred we need the Dhamma in order to control that, in order to keep it within healthy limits, and not let it get out of bounds. But without the Dhamma, then things run wild and create all sorts of problems as we're seeing today. You'll examine this just a little bit, you can easily see that Dhamma is absolutely necessary when we have achieved such a high level of industrial and technological development.

Let's look at the phrase 'the highest development of the industrial age.' This word 'industrial' or 'industry' refers to various tools, mechanisms and so on that supply us with what we want and then make life easier, make life more comfortable. So this industry has supplied us with more and more tools to provide us with the objects of our desire in increasing numbers, and to give us more and more comfortable lives where we can do things in incredibly easy ways, especially when compared with the past. For example, now every house has to have a washing machine, which can do the work of dozens of people in one day – one washing machine can wash the same amount of clothes as many people. Or we have vacuum cleaners, which can do the work of a whole lot of people. In this way, we've made our lives easier and more comfortable. Not only just supplying our wants but just ... enable ... things that support our daily existence. These have become more and more easy. Now with all this advance and progress, and everything becoming so easy and comfortable, where we have all kinds of money and we can buy all kinds of things, and travel all around the world on our whim – what is the result of this? Does it result in peace – peace of mind and heart? Or does it result in hate?

Take a look at this fact. In the old days before the industrial age, people were killing each other in great numbers. Now at this highest development of the industrial age, people are killing themselves in great numbers. Take a look at this fact – this is of great importance.

If we look now that we have more and more things which fulfil our desires, please take careful note of this word – 'things that fulfil our desires.' The more we have such things which respond to and satisfy our desires – then see what happens – our desires increase, our craving, our thirst, our hunger increases, the amount of our thinking, our worrying, our planning – all these things increase.

And with all these thinking and worrying and wondering and planning, then it's like we're carrying a whole lot more things around in our mind. It's like we start picking up and carrying around very heavy burden. This means we have more and more attachments which are weighing down our lives. And the more of these attachments we have, the more troubles and problems and pain and misery we have in our lives. Can you see the direct correlation between the increase in things fulfilling our desires, and the increase in our difficulties, our problems, our conflicts, our traumas? The more there are these things which satisfy our wants, the more we can't find peace, we can't sleep at night, we can't relax, we can't even smile a real smile anymore.

So the more we have these things that fulfil our desires, then the more troubles we have, the more problems we have. This is because we have more and more of these things. It ought to be obvious that instead of having more things to fulfil our desires, what we need is just to have what is sufficient or adequate. But then we have the difficulty that we don't know how much is enough. We don't know what to want – what wants are sufficient, and what wants and desires are excessive or luxurious or ridiculous. We don't understand this and so when we don't know where to draw the line between enough and too much, then our desires always are too much, excessive and luxurious. These desires have no limits, they increase on and on and on, as long as we don't understand – don't have the right kind of knowledge to know what is enough. This again shows the importance of Dhamma. If we have an understanding of Dhamma, this will help us to know what is enough and what is too much. And then we can control our wants so that we only want what is proper and enough. And then we can get free of all these excessive, crazy, ridiculous wants that are causing us so many problems. This is how Dhamma can help us.

Now if we look at our friends, we'll easily see that they've got way too many things. If we look at the people around us, it's quite obvious that they have more than they need – that their wants and the things satisfying those wants are excessive and too much. But then if we look at ourselves, we'll never see it this way – when we look at ourselves, we never see that our own wants and our own possessions are excessive and too much. So don't bother looking at your friends. Instead learn to look at yourself, and learn to do so honestly and see whether your wants are sufficient or excessive.

It's because of what we call *avijjā* (ignorance, not knowing) that we are unable to see what's enough. As long as we look at ourselves with ignorance, then we won't be able to tell the difference between sufficiency, and luxury and excess. So we need to sweep away – get rid of – that ignorance, in order to be

able to look at ourselves clearly, and then see what wants are wise, and which wants are foolish and ignorant. So it's necessary to get rid of that ignorance.

Ignorance leads to foolish desires. Note the adjective 'foolish.' Ignorance leads to this blind, foolish, stupid want and desire. But when we want in a correct way, when there is the desire of wisdom, then there is not this problem of excess and luxury. Don't get hung up on the word 'desire' or 'want.' The important thing is, is it a foolish 'want' coming from ignorance, or is it a wise 'want' which is correct. If this 'want' is coming from ignorance, then it will always lead to excess, to luxury, and there will be no end to it – it will go on forever, and will be perpetually hungry.

An important phrase is 'knowing things as they really are' – 'knowing things as they truly are in nature.' This is a very important phrase because most of what we know doesn't really have much to do with the way things really are, such as all the things we go and learn in university. In university we learn to be very clever and intelligent. We can think all kinds of incredible things, cite all kinds of marvelous statistics. But very little, if any of that, has anything to do with the way things really are. We go and amass a lot of cleverness and knowledge so that we can get jobs, so that we can argue, and do things like that, but in university we're never learning the way things really are. So in this way, we don't have the kind of understanding which prevents ignorant desire. In fact, all that university learning just leads to more and more foolish desires, as we can see all around us. So please give special importance to understanding the way things are, the way things are naturally, the natural truth of things. And the more you understand this, the more you will see that this is never taught in university.

Dhamma is to know correctly according to the way things really are in nature. In this Dhamma is to understand everything as they actually are in nature. In this word 'Dhamma' there are included ... there are gathered many, many meanings. For example, 'God' is included within the word 'Dhamma.' We don't need to have some kind of God who we bow to, and pray to, and plead to give us this and give us that – we don't need that kind of God. In the word 'Dhamma' there is the kind of God that is part of knowing how things really are in nature. And by understanding this Dhamma we don't have to plead and beg and ask for help. This is the kind of Dhamma, the kind of knowledge we need – knowing things as they actually are in nature.

To know Dhamma is to know how these things really are in nature. To know how they really are is to have the highest kind of understanding. And in

this highest understanding of the reality of things, we also must know ... this also includes how to act regarding things. Just an abstract knowledge about things would be worthless. For it really to be Dhamma – to really know how things are, we have to know how to act regarding them, we have to know how to speak, how to act, how to think, so that things are correctly. If we have this kind of highest Dhamma knowledge then there won't be any problems when we know how to act and speak and think – there won't be any difficulties anymore.

If you'd like to translate the word 'Dhamma' into an ordinary word that is familiar to us all, we can translate Dhamma as 'duty.' Some of you may think this is too ordinary a word, and you may not be interested – there is nothing special or fancy or exciting about the word 'duty.' So many fools aren't at all interested in this. But this word 'duty' is the best translation of the word Dhamma. This is the highest kind of knowledge we need to know – our duty. If we understand what duty is, what Dhamma is, then we always know how to act – what to do, what to say and what to think. And when we're always acting correctly, in accordance with nature, then there are no difficulties, no friction, no stress, no misery. If we don't do our duty, if we have no interest in this word duty – consider it unimportant, or boring, or something like that – if we overlook it, then we get into all kinds of problems. In fact, if we don't do our duty, we will die – physically we will die and spiritually we will suffer. We'll be plunged in misery every time we fail to do our duty. So this word duty has the highest meaning. This is what Dhamma is about – just this word 'duty.'

We'll go far as to say that in the word 'duty,' we have all the meanings of God. God the Creator is merely duty, God the Preserver is also duty, and God the Destroyer is duty. Everything that is created is created through duty, and maintained, preserved through duty, and in the end destroyed through duty. Just this one word 'duty' encompasses all the meanings of God. We don't have to look for God anywhere else but in the word 'duty.' This is the pinnacle of God – just this word 'duty.'

This word 'duty' is life – if you look carefully, you'll see that life is just duty. As soon as we stop doing our duty, there is death. You can look all around and at all levels of life, and see that life is just duty. In this body there are all these [cells]. If a cell stops doing its duty, it dies. If all our cells stop doing their duties then we die. There're these various organs and systems within the body. If these stop doing their duties then there is death. There is the respiratory system, the circulatory system, the nervous system, the lymphatic system, the digestive system – if any of these stop functioning, if any of these duties are ceased ... ceased to be done – then we die. It's like this for people, it's like this

for animals, it's like this even for trees. In all living things there is duty, and as soon as the duty is not done, there is death.

The plants are doing duty every second of the day, all through the day and all through the night – the plants are doing their duty. If you go and study botany, you'll understand this easily. Although the duties may differ from day to night, these duties are being constantly done without any let up, without any pause – all the duties are being done. If the plants stop doing their duties, then the plants will die. It's the same with animals. The survival of animals depend on their duties being done. If any of their duties stop, then there is death. Without duty there's no survival. And it's the same with human beings. All life is dependent on duty. If these duties aren't performed, we die. We survive only through duty. Duty is survival itself – we can't live without it.

In English, you call this 'duty.' In ancient days in India, they called it 'Dhamma.' And here in Thailand it's called *nathi*. But whatever it's called in whatever time or place or language, it's exactly the same thing – this thing that is absolutely necessary for life, this thing that we must understand and then practice as fully as we can.

Way back in ancient times in the early days of our race, may be some time just past the Stone Age, our primitive ancestors discovered this thing we now call 'duty' or 'Dhamma.' They found out that if this isn't done, that there would be death. So they discovered this thing called 'duty.' Then after it was discovered, this information, this knowledge was passed on from those who discovered it to their friends and relatives – and the words spread – and it was passed on from generation to generation. So the word 'duty' was discovered and then began to circulate among mankind so that we would know the secret of survival. This occurred long before the Buddha's time, but then when the Buddha appeared in the world, the Buddha discovered the highest duty, which is the utter quenching of *dukkha*. And then through discovering ... and then teaching this highest duty, we are all given the potential to realize this duty, which is the ultimate of ... or the highest level, the most complete, the perfection of survival.

You can see for yourself without having to believe anyone that this word 'duty' means, 'that which must be done.' Duty means 'that which must be done.' If it's not done, we die. It's absolutely necessary to do this – this is the meaning of duty – 'that which must be done.' This is the Dhamma, the duty that we need to understand. To think 'that which must be done' – this means actually knowing it, correctly understanding 'that which must be done,' and

then actually doing it – correctly doing ‘that which must be done.’ This is the meaning of duty – ‘that which must be done’ – this is the highest meaning of duty which you can know for yourself – ‘that which must be done.’

So duty ... Dhamma means ‘that which must be done.’ And you ought to understand that this means first of all ‘to know.’ ‘That which must be done’ must be known, must be understood. Once it is understood, it must be done – you have to do it. You can’t just sit on your butts, you’ve got to do it. And then when it’s done, we’ve got it, we have it. And once we have it, then we use it. It must be understood, and then done, and then we have it, and then we use it, and the more we use it, the more we’ve got it. This is all included in ‘that which must be done’ – to know it, do it, have it and use it.

This thing that must be known, done, had and used is called ‘duty.’ But we must be very careful to limit this to correct duty. It all must be correct – if this knowing, doing, having and using isn’t correct, then it’s worthless – it doesn’t do us any good, it’s meaningless. It must be correct, it must be proper. So what does it mean to be correct or proper? Please don’t go off on some philosophical tangent or off speculating, or in some logical argument. That won’t give us an answer we can use. We have to rely on Dhamma. And in terms of Dhamma, correct means ‘that which quenches dukkha.’ It’s correct if it quenches dukkha, if it extinguishes suffering – if it puts out misery then it’s correct. Any philosophical or theoretical argument are meaningless. All that matters is the practical result which you can experience right here for yourself – that it eliminates suffering, it quenches dukkha – then it’s correct. If the duty is correct then it will solve all our problems. If it’s incorrect, it’s not worth a prayer.

If you’ve heard about, studied about and begun to understand this thing we call the Noble Eightfold Path, then you’ll have a clear understanding of what this correct duty is. In the Noble Eightfold Path are all the necessary elements of correct duty. These eight factors help us point out what it takes to quench dukkha, to eliminate suffering. To learn about this Noble Eightfold Path is very valuable because it will show us what the correct duty is. Within this Noble Eightfold Path is all we need to know about duty. This Noble Eightfold Path includes mental development, or what some people call meditation. That’s included within there, and all the other aspects of life we need in order to fulfil our duty. So one should pay very careful attention to, and properly study the Noble Eightfold Path, and then if one has this correct understanding, one will be able to use it in order to do the duty correctly, and then our lives will be free of suffering.

The first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path is right understanding, right belief, right opinion, right viewpoint, right belief, right faith ... all of these things ... right trust, right confidence – all of these make up the first factor – *sammādiṭṭhi* (right view). This is the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. And there is the second factor which is right want ... we can even say right desire. Wanting things, intending things correctly – this is the second factor which we call *sammāsaṅkappa* (right aspiration). These are the first two factors of the Middle Way.

Then the second group of factors has the three elements of right speech, correct speech, correct action, correct activity and work. And the third is correct livelihood or maintaining one's life properly. These three factors make up the second group.

And then the last of the three groups are the three factors of right effort, right endeavor, right perseverance, right commitment, right determination – all these together make up right effort. And then there's right mindfulness, right *sati* – *sammāsaṅkappa*, as you're practicing now – (right mindfulness). And then there will be right *samādhi* (right concentration) – the mind that is firmly established, properly established – that is very stable and calm. All these together make up ... there are these eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. And individually they are not yet correct but when all eight of them come together then they are truly correct, and this is the fullest meaning of duty, of correct duty.

The Noble Eightfold Path are these eight conditions of correct duty. These eight aspects of correct duty together make up the path that we must travel along, that we must follow in order to fulfil our duty correctly. To understand these eight factors of correctness – these eight aspects of correct duty – will enable us to understand the word 'duty' in the highest sense.

In order to do this duty correctly we have to act correctly. Our actions of body, speech and mind must be correct. But if we're not careful, defilement, greed, anger, delusion and so on come in, and we're not able to act correctly. To prevent these things from taking over our bodies and minds, we have to control our bodies and mind. We have to restrain them and make them ... sometimes even force them to do what is right. Self-restraint and self-control is absolutely necessary if we are going to act correctly. And if we don't act correctly we can never do our duty.

This system of *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness with breathing) which we're talking about here, which you've been practicing for the last ten days – exactly



this system will enable you to understand what you need to know. And then it will enable you to train yourself to be able to actually do what you have to do. Just this one system of ānāpānasati – you’ll know what you need to know and you’ll be able to make yourself do it. You’ll be able to control this mind so that you can actually act correctly and do the duty. And when we know correctly and act correctly, then we’re safe – just through this ānāpānasati which you’ve been learning.

If we don’t do this duty correctly even a hundred gods won’t be able to help us. Excuse us for saying this – we’re not trying to put down anyone’s beliefs. But if we don’t do our duty correctly, not even a hundred gods can help us. We’ve already heard that God only helps those who help themselves. We all know that if we don’t go and do the duty correctly, the gods can’t even help us. So it comes down to we have to do this duty. Doing the duty is what helps us. Doing the duty is what saves us. So by doing the duty we help ourselves, we save ourselves. It doesn’t matter ... and the gods can’t help us, or God can’t help us, or whatever, unless we go and do this duty correctly.

Once duty is done correctly, then that correct duty becomes God. This duty, as soon as it’s correct, it helps us, and then there is the fullest meaning of God. Correct duty becomes God. For this reason in Buddhism, we hold that Dhamma or duty is God. By doing this duty correctly, then we will have the God that can truly help us.

This duty that is correct is our helper – this is what helps us. Because we do the duty ourselves, we are our own helper – we help ourselves. In all of the Buddhist scriptures you can’t find one instance where the Buddha said that we should rely on anyone else. There is not one place where the Buddha said we should even rely on the Buddha, or the Dhamma, or the Saṅgha. The Buddha never said anything like that. The Buddha only taught that we should rely on ourselves, depend on ourselves, help ourselves. All this stuff about people going to the Buddha for refuge, the Dhamma for refuge, the Saṅgha for refuge, all these ideas about depending on the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha, this is something we’ve made up for ourselves. The Buddha never said anything like that. The Buddha said help yourself, rely on yourself, by doing this duty, by doing Dhamma. The only thing we can rely on is this duty, by doing this duty ourselves. This is what the Buddha taught. He never said anything about going to anyone else for refuge or for help.

The Buddha spoke in Pāli but we’ll translate it in English. He said you ought to rely on yourself, don’t rely on anything else. You ought to rely on

Dhamma, don't rely on anything else. Relying on ourselves, relying on Dhamma, means relying on duty, on doing our duty – this is what we can depend on. Through practicing ānāpānasati, then we have the four foundations of mindfulness. And by relying on ourselves through the practice of mindfulness with breathing on these four foundations of mindfulness, then we have the duty that we can actually depend on.

So that's the highest thing that there is – the supreme thing is duty, is Dhamma. The Buddha himself proclaims that all Buddhas, all those who know, all the ones who know, honor duty. All Buddhas honor duty. The Buddha honors duty above all else. This duty is the highest thing, the supreme thing, is that through which we quench all *dukkha* and are saved. This is the thing most worthy of our attention – the thing we must know and do and have and use – duty, the supreme thing.

Through practicing ānāpānasati you can know what you need to know and you'll have the ability to do the duty that you need to do. So by learning to practice ānāpānasati you can fulfil your duty and thereby be saved from all suffering. So for this reason we welcome you all to come here and to study and learn how to practice ānāpānasati. We're trying to do our best to aid you in that – to give you what support and knowledge we can so that you can be successful in it. We don't know how many times it will take, how long you'll have to stay, or how many times you'll have to come back until you're able to get it right. But we're willing to help in any way we can. We'd like to express our appreciation and joy that you've come here in order to learn about *ānāpānasati*, this system of mental cultivation that will allow you to do this duty, to realize the supreme thing. We wish you the greatest success in this endeavor and we hope that it doesn't take you too long. This is the end of today's talk.

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Transcribed by Christine Apikul in 2015

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