

# *The Way of Reaching Buddhism*

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 in our first meeting together, we'll speak about the method of getting into Buddhism. For the sake of simplicity, speed, and efficiency in coming to terms with Buddhism, we'd like you to begin by knowing three [Thai] words. The first word is *rop roo*. We could say 'comprehensive knowledge' or complete knowing. The second is [*tuen non*] 'to be awake,' to be wide awake, fully awake. The third is *boek ban* which is like 'to blossom,' like a flower blossoming in freshness, purity, clarity. So please know these three words, 'comprehensive knowing,' 'to be fully awake' and 'to blossom.'

'Comprehensive knowing' here does not mean knowing everything. It means merely to know the things we need to know. So it's to know comprehensively everything that is necessary for us to know.

It really isn't necessary for us to know about all the matters of outer space or the inner workings of the atom, of nucleus. There're many things that aren't really necessary for us to know but there are things that, if we know them, they will lead to the direct and complete end of suffering, of pain. These are the things that it is necessary for us to know.

As for the word 'to be fully awake,' 'to wake up,' this doesn't mean so much to physically be awake but it's when the mind wakes up from the sleep of the human defilements, of greed, anger, and delusion. To wake up from these is what we mean here by waking up. To be asleep, to be lost in greed, anger, and

delusion is to be lost in darkness and to wake up from that is the second thing we're talking about.

So if there is knowing and there is waking up, then there will be a blossoming like a flower blossoms but this will be a blossoming that will not wilt. Ordinary flowers blossom and then wilt and rot but this blossoming, because it comes from knowing and from waking up from the defilements, this blossoming into freshness and clarity doesn't wilt.

So now we come to what we call '*Buddhasāsana*' or 'Buddhism.' First of all, we'd like to say that Buddhism will not harm or interfere with your intellectual or cultural freedom. You all are free to think and believe and hold opinions as you see fit depending on your cultural, educational, or religious background. This intellectual freedom is not hampered with by Buddhism so there is no need to stop being a Christian, a Muslim or whatever. Buddhism can still provide something of value because the method of Buddhism has nothing to do with interfering with our freedom of thought, belief, and expression. Instead, Buddhism has something to add, some methods or points of view or ways of observation which will help us to find the way, to free our lives from suffering, to eliminate, to quench suffering in our lives or we can say will help us to eliminate problems from our lives.

So you can see that in Buddhism, there is no dogmatic system. Buddhism doesn't force you to believe anything. To study or practice Buddhism does not require any belief and any system of dogma, rather Buddhism encourages you to think for yourself, study for yourself, investigate things on your own and when you come across things that you think will be able to quench suffering, to get rid of pain and sorrow then go ahead and experiment, try those things out. And only when you know directly through your own experience, through your own living that something will eliminate suffering only then need you believe it. You need not rely on any system of dogma.

Sometimes we have difficulties with the word we use and so there are often people asking, 'Is this Buddhism a religion or not?' So it comes down to how we look at and how we use these words and if we understand the word 'religion' in a profound way then we will see also that Buddhism is a religion.

So we ask you to consider, the following meaning or definition of religion. This is the one that seems most appropriate to us. Religion is the practices or the system of practices that enable mankind to realize the highest thing, the practices which lead humanity to the highest thing. To us this is the correct and clearest definition of religion.

But then there's a lot of wondering about this thing called 'the highest thing.' In religions that believe in God or some form or kind of God, they will hold that God is the highest thing. In Buddhism, however, we do not say that 'God' is the highest thing rather we say that 'Nibbāna' is the highest, the supreme thing. Nibbāna is the state where all suffering is completely quenched, completely ended, the state in which all problems are dropped, are eliminated. This complete ending of suffering, of misery is what we call 'Nibbāna.' Now if you would like to talk about God in relation to Buddhism then you would have to do it in terms of Nibbāna which would mean it's a non-personal God. Nibbāna has nothing to do with a person with some individual-like thing but if we wish to call it a non-personal God, we could do so. This in Buddhism is the highest thing or supreme thing. Buddhism is a way of practice that enables us to reach, to realize this highest thing.

Now if you prefer, even you prefer to continue using, to use the word 'God,' God in the name 'Yahweh,' God in the name of 'Allah' or whichever name God has, we suggest that you give, understand these names with the meaning of that which helps us to salvation, that which helps us to be saved, the thing that will really help us to be saved from all pain or misery or suffering (*dukkha*). This is the meaning we suggest for you and if we can use this meaning then there will be no disagreement and no conflict between us.

The word '*nibbāna*' as a verb means the action, the activity that completely extinguishes and eliminates suffering and misery and then the result of that is the state, the fruit of coolness in which there is no pain and misery. This is just as much of God as in the other Gods because this is the highest thing, this action which helps us to be free of all misery. This is the non-personal God. But if you'd like, we can use all the Gods, all the different names of Gods to help us in order to be saved from the great torment of suffering, of misery. There's no need for us to argue about God. There's no reason to turn God into an argument or something to fight about. Why not just use all the Gods in order to help us to realize the highest thing, complete freedom from suffering.

We can compare religions if we wish but we should never do so in a way that leads to conflict and argument. If we study comparative religions, we should do so not to emphasize the differences but to find the similarity, find the places where we can cooperate and work together. If we compare religions in this way, it can be a fruitful and useful activity so we should look and see that all religions aim to eliminate selfishness from human life, that all religions, all true religions are trying to bring peace into the world, to allow peace to flourish and spread. These are the aims of all religions. Now, different religions may use

different methods, have different terminologies, different symbols in order to bring about these aims but this is merely to... as ways to try to help different kinds of people coming from many different cultures and backgrounds. The great variety of religions is just to answer and respond to the great variety in humans and in the needs of human but always religions are trying to bring peace, to allow peace to flourish. If we can see this then there's no need for argument and we can use this basic essence of religion to our advantage as we see that all religions work to eliminate suffering, to completely destroy suffering in human life.

The words 'being united with God,' 'being one with God' mean the state or the condition of being completely free of suffering, of having quenched misery. This is what it means to be united with God. Whether you say 'God' or 'Nibbāna' or whatever, whether you say this is the personal God or the non-personal God or whatever we call it, the true meaning that we're talking about is being completely free, of having eliminated pain, misery or as we say in Pāli, eliminating dukkha, having quenched dukkha. This is what it really means to be united with God, to have realized this state. When we see that all the religions are pointing to this same thing then there's no need for conflict. When we see that all religions are pointing to this state that is free of pain, misery, and conflict then we see that there's simply one method involved in religion and then that one method or way is the way that gets rid of suffering.

The fact that some religions in some places prefer to talk about a God that is personal, a God that has individual, sometimes even human characteristic, this is so because in some places and times, it is that religion saw that it was not possible to talk to people about a God that was non-personal and when people wouldn't understand such a thing, it is necessary to speak about the highest thing in terms of a personal, individual God. But in some times and places, people can understand, they're ready to listen to and practice towards a non-personal God, a God completely free of any personality traits or human characteristics. Buddhism is of the latter sort, when people are able to comprehend this teaching then Buddhism will discuss the non-personal God, will point out that there is such a thing that this is the highest, the supreme thing and will encourage people to practice in order to reach this highest non-personal God.

So let's just say that whatever will make us be above our problems, whatever enables us to be above all problems that is God – whether it's a non-personal or personal God we will not worry about. But let's just pay attention to

this thing that allows us to be above our problems, to be above all pain and misery.

Now let's talk about Buddhism specifically. Buddhism is able to show us or teach us a new way or a new system of life. Buddhism will give us the means to follow a new system of life. When we say this, we mean that Buddhism will allow us to live life in a way that is completely free of all positivism & negativism. It will allow us to get out of the traps that positive thinking & negative thinking build for us. This is to be completely free, to be free of any influence, of any of the power of the positive & the negative. Now, many people will not be interested by this because nowadays, people are in love with the positive. They're infatuated by positivism, by positive things and so many people will not be willing or will be uninterested in what Buddhism has to offer. But if we really are interested in freedom, in peace, and in truth then Buddhism will help us to be free of the influences of positivism & negativism, of our minds being dominated by the positive & the negative.

There's an absolute fact that anyone who is enslaved to positivism, anyone who is trapped by the positive, that person will not like Buddhism. They won't be interested in Buddhism and will be unable to understand it because if we're completely trapped by the positive, if our mind is thoroughly dominated by thinking about what is positive, by what we like and want, then we won't be able to appreciate or understand Buddhism which enables us to be free of positivism & negativism.

This indulgence or infatuation with positivism can be traced to our attachment to the positive. There are things that we consider to be positive or sometimes we say 'good' and we like these things, we want them, we desire them and because of this liking and desiring of positive things, we get attached to the positive. We take up a personal attitude, we get involved in them personally, we take up an egoistic stance and this we call 'attachment.' And through this attachment, to the positive, we become trapped by it and through this trap, we are plunged into all kinds of frustration, sorrow, and misery. Anyone who is completely satisfied or at least thinks that they are happy with indulgence and attachment to positivism, such a person will have no chance of understanding Buddhism. Buddhism is a method that is free of the influence of positivism & negativism. It's outside of the sphere of influence, of these attachments and, through correctly following, studying, and practicing the principles of Buddhism, we can transcend the problem of negativism & positivism and the attaching to them. But if we still like, if we're still happy about indulgence in positivism then we will not be able to understand Buddhism

as it really is. What we'll do is we'll just distort Buddhism to fit our own opinions and perspectives but in fact we will never even know what genuine Buddhism is and it will be impossible that we will ever have actual true Buddhism unless we are truly interested in freedom from the positive & the negative. If we are not interested in this freedom then we have no chance of understanding Buddhism.

As for the negative, this really isn't so much of a problem because none of us are very interested in the negative as it is. We're all willing to do without it. So the negative or negativism isn't such a problem but still, indirectly, it confronts us so we will have to deal with it as well because negative things, negative thoughts will come in even though we don't really want them and so we'll have to know how to deal with them, how to be free of the negative as well. So Buddhism will enable us to be free both of the positive and also the negative and it will help us to arrange, to manage our lives so that we can live our lives in a truly free and peaceful way, unharmed and uninfluenced by positivism & negativism.

Or to make it a little easier to understand, we can talk about another pair of words, the words 'good & evil' or 'good & bad.' The meaning of good & evil is basically the same as positivism & negativism. This good or pursuit of the good dominates our lives, we're always wanting something good, liking something good, chasing after something good. We hunger for the good and then suffer frustration or disappointment when we don't get it as soon and as quick enough or in large enough quantities or in exactly the form we want. Our pursuit of the good, our fixation and obsession with the good dominates us and of course there's always the bad. There are the bad, the evil things that come in to our lives even though we don't want them and so we're confronted with the bad. Ordinary people are going back and forth between the good & the evil all the time. Buddhism allows us to be beyond the influence of these as well, to not have to live a life that is dominated and trapped within the good & the bad but instead to be free of this, to transcend them. Those of you who have ever studied the Bible, the Cristian Bible might be familiar with the phrase in the first chapter of Genesis where God tells Adam and Eve not to attach to good & evil. Don't get involve in good & evil, it will just bring you lots of problems. This is the message of the story about the Fruit of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. There's that tree with the apples and if you eat one of the apples then you know about good & evil and it brings about all kinds of problems. This is the Bible's way of warning us to not attach to good & evil. This is the basic essence

of spiritual life to be out from under this attachment so that our lives can be free.

As human beings, we create our problems for ourselves and the vast majority of these problems are created out of the good because of our obsessions with the good, our desires and hungers. For the good, we make ourselves all kinds of problems. We want the good, we're searching for it and chasing after the good but when we get it, we're not even satisfied, we want a 'better good' but that isn't enough and so we hope for, we work for, we search for the 'best good.' But even the best good isn't enough for us, we always want more. Our desire for the good, this attachment to the good is endless. There's no stopping it and it just goes on and on, going around in circles, chasing after the good, the better good, and the best good. This pursuit of the good causes us so many problems. The bad, of course, has some of its problems but we volunteer, we're hungry for, we're in favor of the good so it causes the most problems. The same is true of [negativism but] negativism doesn't cause so many problems. To free of this is what Buddhism is about.

Because of this obsession with the good, we're unable to sleep at night. We even develop nervous disorders, psychosis, can go crazy to the point that some people kill themselves because of this obsession with the good. If we put it in the most simple terms, when we're very happy, when we're really happy, we're unable to sleep at night and the food we eat doesn't taste good. Have you looked and seen this for yourself? Or when we're sad and unhappy, the food we eat doesn't taste good and we can't sleep properly at night. This shows very clearly the influence, the result of the good & the bad, of positivism & negativism and shows that the only place to be free and at peace is when we're no longer under the influence of good & bad, of positive & negative then we'll be able to sleep at night and food will taste delicious.

And for example, people who kill themselves. Generally we love ourselves more than anything else but some of us will go and kill this life that we love the most because we've got into, attached to some form of goodness and then the result is suicide.

Now, our way to be free is to study and investigate things, to study and investigate specifically goodness & evil and see that these are products of our own minds and that the thing that causes goodness & evil, the source of goodness & evil is our own foolishness, our own ignorance. Because of this ignorance, we go and discriminate things as good & evil. We evaluate things as positive & negative. In fact, things are just what they are. They're just natural

phenomena, they're just the way they are but then we go and evaluate them, judge them from our own personal position and prejudices as good & evil, positive & negative. So this is our own ignorance turns things into problems when in fact there're just the way they are. This idea that are good or bad is our own creation. It's something we put, we add to experience. It's not there in the first place.

There's a very special word in Buddhism that captures the most profound essence of this teaching so we'd like you to learn this word and to consider it, work with it and explore it in order to get the most out of it. This word in very simple terms is 'just like that.' Things are 'just like this' or in the Pāli language of the Buddha, we can say '*tathatā*' or we can translate into English as 'thusness' or 'suchness.' Only thus, just merely thus, things aren't good, they're not bad, positive or negative or any of those other dualistic categories. They're merely thus and this quality, this characteristic of thusness in all things, this is the essence of Buddhism. When we see things in this way, when we see the thusness, the suchness of things, of our own bodies and minds then there is no more entrapment and slavery to goodness & badness and then we're free. So please give a lot of consideration to this word *tathatā* see if you can understand it and experience it and then see the result of that experience.

We can use our knowledge of our science to help us to understand these things. We all have some background in the basics of science. So for example, we have on one side a picture which is not beautiful or ugly and over here we have a picture which is beautiful. That's what we think. This picture is beautiful and this one isn't. But if we understand science then we can see things in a different way. Normally, there'll be this picture which is not beautiful, we don't like it, we don't want to look at it, we don't want to have anything to do with it; then there is beautiful picture which we are attracted to, we might fall in love with it, get infatuated with it, try to buy it or steal it. But if we look at things scientifically, we'll see that both pictures are merely waves of light, just little waves with bundles of photon energy, of light energy coming and striking the retina of our eye. That's all it is. In this way both pictures are the same, merely rays of light, waves of light. There're also somewhat different, the exact makeup in frequency of the light waves, the amplitude and so forth maybe different but fundamentally, it's merely the same waves of light. But some people go and discriminate this pattern, this pattern of light waves is beautiful and this pattern is not beautiful whereas other people will discriminate it in a different way. So fundamentally it's just merely this basic thusness of the things in these light waves. We can see this even more clearly if we compare it with a



dog. You take a picture that human beings consider to be beautiful and show it to a dog and the dog doesn't even care. There is no absolute beauty or non-beauty in the thing. It's something that we create ourselves. These are conceptual thoughts that we attach or apply to the reality. Both pictures have the same fundamental thusness. They're just the way they are. They're just thus. But then we go and conceptualize, we discriminate this goodness & badness or beauty & non-beauty upon these pictures when fundamentally there's no such thing. It's our own ignorance evaluating, judging, and confusing the situation.

Or we can take an example having to do with sound. There are sounds that we considered pleasant and other sounds which are unpleasant. There are beautiful, harmonious sounds and there are obnoxious, ugly sounds. But if we examine them scientifically, we'll see that really, all there is are soundwaves or just waves of sound. There're differences in these different waves but basically it's just soundwaves and these different soundwaves don't really have any meaning or any special quality. But when they strike the eardrums and then are interpreted by the brain and then the mind, the mind once it receives these sounds then it gives the meaning, it gives them qualities. The mind conjures up the beauty or the unpleasantness, the harshness or the softness or the harmoniousness or discordancy. The mind, attaches to the experience and then these different kinds of sounds become problems for the mind, things to get and things to get rid of and so the mind turns these ordinary soundwaves into problems. If we just see the thusness, if we see that it's merely just different kinds of soundwaves and see the thusness of the situation then it won't lead to any problems. To see the *tathatā*, the thusness of these soundwaves enable us to be free of the influence of the sounds and then no sounds will ever cause problems for us as long as we continue judging and evaluating them, sound will be a problem for us. But if we see the thusness of the soundwaves then we are above the influence of beautiful sounds, of unpleasant sounds, of all sounds, so no sound will ever create a problem for us again.

And we can look at the tongue and the flavors or tastes experienced by the tongue. Ordinary we would discriminate between delicious and bad tasting or foul tastes and flavors. But really it's just a matter of the amount of things stimulating the taste buds and the nerves within the tongue. There's a very limited number of taste buds in the tongues or in pipes and so the taste, the flavor of things is determined by the quantity of stimulation, of the taste buds and nerves within the tongue. And depending on if the taste buds are stimulated in one way it's sweet, in another way it's sour and another way it's bitter. If we see that the so-called flavors and the things we take to be delicious and foul

tasting are merely just the matter of the degree of stimulation, of the taste buds, we see this thusness of the flavors then we won't be trapped into these conceptualizing things as delicious or as foul. We do this on our own. We add these ideas to it. It's just basic sensitivity and then we judge it and attach to it and turn it into problem. But if we see the thusness of this activity in the tongue, we see that these so-called flavors are merely thus, they're just this thusness, this *tathatā* then the taste won't be a source of problem or torment for us anymore.

There's also the nose and the various odors that are experienced by the nose. Generally we say that some are fragrant and that other smell bad, have a rotten or foul odor to them. These various aromas whether fragrant or rotten are also supplied by us. If we look carefully, we'll see that really it's just a matter of the amount of volatile gases making contact with the nose. There're these kinds of gases which come in to the nose and then react with the nose. And if there's a lot of these, if these odors are intense, we tend to feel that they smell bad, that they're unpleasant, bad smelling, foul odor. But often if they're not so strong, we may judge them to be fragrant and pleasant. So it comes down to this pleasant & unpleasant odors, good & bad smelling odors are merely a subject of the intensity or the amount of the volatile gases entering the nose. This is the thusness about the nose but generally we don't see this and so we attach to and get involved and react to what is taken to be fragrant or a bad odor. You can test this for yourself. You can go and take a very strong foul smelling thing that you find really obnoxious and if you put it in a place where the odor can disperse, at first it's very intense and very annoying. It smells really bad but if we allow it to disperse and to spread out, to fade a bit that what was once a very foul odor can actually become a pleasant fragrant odor. They do this with women's perfume. They take really obnoxious things and then put them in a certain quantity so we actually think that they smell good. And we can test this for ourselves. If we understand that this, the nose and smells are basically just this interaction between volatile gases and the nose then we won't be trapped into judging these odors and reacting to them and being dominated by them. This is the value of seeing the thusness of the nose and the odors in order to be free of them.

You probably won't believe us but it's the fact that if you take a corpse, a rotting, stinking dead body which smells really horrible and foul. If you take the corpse and allow its odor to fade, to disperse and spread out either through being through distance or in time, if we allow that odor of the corpse to fade sufficiently, that smell will actually become pleasant. You may not believe this but this is how it works. This is a very good example of the way the senses trick

us. Because of the foolishness of all this, because the lack of knowledge and intelligence, because we don't understand how this works, we're only judging these things as good & bad, as pleasant & unpleasant and we're liking & disliking and reacting all the time because we don't see the thusness, the *tathatā* of these things. We don't see what actually taking place. We just follow the foolish activity of our senses and get tricked by them. And then, because of this trickery, we do all kinds of things; but if we see the *tathatā* of the odors, or actually the quantity of volatile gases or taste, the amount of the stimulation of the taste buds or the soundwaves or the light waves, if we see the *tathatā* of these things then there won't be any problems. None of these things will do us any damage. They won't trick us into doing anything foolish. There are many examples of the *tathatā*, of these basic aspects of our lives. If we study them, if we explore them, investigate them carefully then the knowledge from doing so will enable us to be free and we'll see that there is no really good or bad, there's no bad & good, there's no positive & negative. These are all creations of our mind when we are tricked by the senses. If we see the *tathatā* and see through all these labels and concepts that we're attaching into life then we can become more and more free and our lives more peaceful.

So we can wrap things up by saying, through the knowledge of *tathatā*, we'll see through all the apparent or delusive duality in life. All the different duality such as beautiful & ugly, as delightful & displeasing, of smelling good & smelling bad, in deliciousness & foul tasting, and all these other dualities that can be summarized as good & bad or positive & negative. *Tathatā* enables us to see through all these dualities so that life is above and beyond the power of these things where they have no more ability to condition, concoct and dominate our mind. In order to be free of these things, we'd like to encourage you to explore and practice *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness with breathing in and breathing out.) Through practicing *ānāpānasati* correctly, wisely then we will come to the understanding in realization of the *tathatā*, of all aspects of our lives and of this world in which we live. So we encourage you to apply yourselves to the practice of *ānāpānasati* so that it will lead to you seeing the *tathatā*, the thusness of your own bodies and minds of your own lives and, in this way, your life will be free of all problems, of all misery, of all *dukkha*. And so we'll end today's talk at this point and we hope you're successful in practicing *ānāpānasati*.

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