FOR THE LOVE OF THE WORLD

AJAHN AMARO

FOR THE LOVE OF THE WORLD

AJAHN AMARO

For the Love of the World

Ajahn Amaro

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the well-being of Planet Earth
and to all who dwell in, on and around her

Preface

The setting for the talks from which this book arose is the Ukiah Valley in Mendocino County, an exquisitely beautiful rural area of Northern California – home to orchards and wineries; logging, fishing and tourist industries; Buddhist and Christian communities; back-to-the-land collectives and hardcore red-neck establishments. As some would say, it lies on the cusp between capuccino- and cowboy-lands. This area is home to Abhayagiri Monastery, where Ajahn Amaro lived for over a decade, and to Yoga Mendocino, a non-profit yoga center that seeks to help our varied populus embody a heart-felt wisdom and bring mindfulness directly into all aspects of our twenty-first-century lives. Throughout his years at Abhayagiri, Ajahn Amaro taught classes at Yoga Mendocino and willingly considered an extraordinary variety of topics at our request.

The series of talks that form the basis for this book came out of a growing concern that I and others were feeling about our perilous ecological future and how to bring our Buddhist practice directly into our activism and community – as Ajahn Amaro would say, to cultivate an 'unentangled engagement'. Mendocino County is an area of tremendous environmental and political enquiry; many members of our group are actively involved in environmental education and eco-projects, such as the local ballot initiative that made Mendocino County the first GMO-free county in the world! But there are times when people become overwhelmed by the task in hand and wonder whether their spiritual practices actually become an escape from the global realities that are facing us. Likewise, Ajahn Amaro once recalled several Buddhists who said they just 'didn't want to even go there' when asked about how the ecological situation affected or was embraced in their teachings.

At the time Ajahn Amaro spoke at Yoga Mendocino, the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was a great tragedy that many were holding in their hearts. It was into this atmosphere of grief and doubt that I proposed he speak about our relationship to this extraordinary blue-green, spinning planet. A small group of us first met with Ajahn Amaro to plan for such a class series

– ironically enough in the local Starbucks! Later on, in discussions with my partner, Berni, a very pragmatic and land-based apple farmer, we came up with the idea to center each talk around one of the 'Four Elements' and in this way celebrate the Earth. It seemed the perfect fit, since Yoga

Mendocino's co-founder, Maggie Norton, and I both explore the elements in our teaching and see this as one place where the practices of yoga and Buddhism intertwine magically.

When he arrived to begin the classes, Ajahn Amaro surprised and delighted us all by explaining his added intention to bring the 'Four Foundations of Mindfulness' into his talks. For four weeks over ninety people crammed into a space designed to hold a maximum of fifty. Discussions buzzed on the Internet mid-week, and questions were fired back to Ajahn Amaro in and out of session. Our center became a veritable eco-hub, learning how the truths the Buddha taught over 2,500 years ago remain so relevant to a world spinning out of control and lacking in elemental kindness.

The buzz continues to this day. His talks have been part of our programs, teacher trainings, and distance learning courses. They have been shared on the web from the Yukon to Costa Rica to Cuba, and beyond. Each time I listen to them again, I smile with gratitude for Ajahn Amaro and his gentle good humour and wisdom, his generosity to our little bit of the earth – our Yoga Mendocino community – and to the bigger globe. I also bow to our yoga center and the people who keep this little oasis, like so many others, alive in these critical times to share such important reflections.

May our blue-green spinning planet be loved more dearly and touched by our kindness and engagement, as we are inspired by these words of our dear teacher.

Mary Paffard
Yoga Mendocino, Ukiah, California
November 2012

Introduction

Almost daily the media tell us that this is a time of environmental crisis. In 2012 the northern polar ice cap melted more than ever before in human memory. Species are said to be disappearing faster than at any time since the last mass extinction, 70 million years ago. Extreme storms and floods are becoming more common events, and 2012 was one of the ten warmest globally since record-keeping began 160 years ago. It does indeed seem to be a time of crisis.

When we consider the fragile and fleeting biosphere that we live in, these changes we are seeing and experiencing all around us can easily lead us to fear: What is going to happen? Will my home be destroyed by flood or fire? Will the droughts lead to food shortages? Will all the birds and fishes die? Will our children and grandchildren – and we humans – survive? And is there anything I can do in response to this crisis that will truly make a difference?

One phenomenon that does not get a lot of attention is that things have a tendency to create their opposites: times of war can give rise to occasions of unparalleled kindness, painful losses can lead to liberating wisdom, and oppression can be a cause for ocean-like compassion. In a similar way the current stressful times are giving rise to resources to help us deal with that very stress. As modern societies speed up and break down, they also hatch the means to understand and counteract that drift. The steadily increasing popularity of the Buddha's teachings in the modern world can be said to be one such instance of this phenomenon – because the malaise is so rife, the eagerness for a cure becomes all the more acute.

This small book you are reading attempts to address some of the issues arising from the ecological tensions in the world today – the imbalances in this precious, delicate, and intricately structured ecosystem, this slender membrane of life that wraps the blue-green ball of the Earth.

The way chosen to approach the topic is, essentially, by first asking the question, 'What is the world?' Then, secondly, 'How can we best handle the

world's unstable and uncertain nature?' This particular approach is not intended as definitive; rather it should be regarded as simply one way of considering the issues and finding out whether such contemplations lead us to a greater sense of understanding and well-being, or not.

The Four Elements

When picking up the first of these two questions – 'What is the world?' – it seems natural first to look at the material realm which is both around us and which makes up our own bodies. What is this world made of? How is it formed?

From a Buddhist perspective, the most obvious way of relating to this material form is to explore what are known as the 'Four Elements' or 'Great Elements', or in the Pali language of the Southern Buddhist scriptures, the *Mahā-dhātu* or *Mahā-bhūta*. Just as it did in mediaeval Europe, the word 'elements' in Buddhist philosophy evokes images of earth, water, fire and air. Scientists of today would most likely scoff at the quaint and antiquated notion that there are only four elements. When we read or hear the word 'elements', we tend to think of carbon, oxygen, iron, and mercury etc. or perhaps an image of the Periodic Table comes to mind.

In Western science the word refers to the unique forms that matter takes according to the number of protons in the nucleus of its atoms. In Buddhist philosophy, however, the word is being used differently. The 'Four Elements' refers rather to the essential properties of all matter, which can be summarized as:

Earth element (*pathavī-dhātu*): Solidity, hardness, the crystal structure and formed quality of any matter.

Water element (*āpo-dhātu*): Cohesion and fluidity, that which both holds things together and shapes the flow of their movement.

Fire element *(tejo-dhātu)*: Temperature, the degree of heat possessed by all matter, even at absolute zero; also, in living things, ripening, the life force or *jīvita*.

Air or wind element (*vāyo-dhātu*): Vibration, the oscillatory quality of all matter, especially at its most fundamental level.

When we redefine the terms in this way, no modern student of chemistry or physics would deny that all matter is imbued with these four qualities, in various ways, shapes and forms.

The Four Elements thus describe our world – the mountains, clouds, sands and streets that we stand on and which surround us, and also these very bodies that we call our own. They are a particular set of lenses through which we can contemplate and come to understand the material world.

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

When considering the second of our essential questions – 'How can we best handle the world's unstable and uncertain nature?' – we turn to the Buddha's contemplative training known as the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. This practice shows us how the mind and the world meet, and how great the benefits are if that meeting is brought about in an ongoing, mindful way, fully attuned to the natural order and all its vagaries.

This teaching, described in two almost identical discourses (Majjhima Nikaya 10 & Digha Nikaya 22), is commonly recognized as the most significant meditation instruction in the scriptures of the Theravada, or the Southern School of Buddhism. Like the Great Elements, this formulation is divided into four sections, which can be summarized as:

Contemplation of the body (*kāya-nupassanā*)

Contemplation of sensation or feeling (*vedanā-nupassanā*)

Contemplation of the mind, including moods, thoughts, memories, mental imagery and intentions (*cittā-nupassanā*)

Contemplation of experience in terms of the natural order (*dhammā-nupassanā*)

According to Buddhist teachings, the world would not be known to us were it not for the agency of our own minds as we contact these four aspects, or 'foundations', through which the world is perceived, interpreted and understood. When the mind is fully awakened and attuned to the present moment – when it is completely free from greed, hatred and delusion – then it is possible to know the world clearly and to respond to it in a harmonious way. This mindful attunement results in a life of peace and freedom and a way of being that is a source of blessings for oneself and many others. Just as when a virtuoso musician plays a piece with all their heart and skill and attunes their playing perfectly to the rest of the group, the musicians delight in the rapture of the music and all those listening are transported too.

Unfortunately, those who have arrived at this kind of pitch-perfect attunement to life are very few. Most of us are continually distracted by loves and hates, habits and opinions, regrets about missed opportunities and fears of future calamaties. Or we simple wander through life whilst effectively half asleep. To continue the musical metaphor: We do not know our instruments so well, we are not following the beat, and our minds keep wandering when we should be following the score. Practising the Four Foundations of Mindfulness offers a way for us to improve our skills, help ourselves to wake up and be more attentive, and develop that precious quality of true attunement.

Weaving Together Two Teachings

These two somewhat separate formulae – the Four Elements and the Four Foundations of Mindfulness – came together in my mind as I reflected on the upcoming series of classes at Yoga Mendocino, on this theme of caring for the world in a time of traumatic environmental changes. It struck me that the two might align well with each other. I started by making the obvious connection between 'earth' and 'contemplation of the body' (*kāya-nupassanā*). Then I considered – 'What about 'water'?,' and saw an intuitive connection between the realm of feeling (*vedanā*) and fluidity. Next I found as in the famous Fire Sermon, that 'fire' is directly related to the six senses, the realm of perception, and the contemplation of thoughts and moods (*citta*). Lastly, I realized that 'wind', which is about vibration,

and *dhammā-nupassanā*, which is about contemplating the characteristic of the rise and fall, the changing nature of all conditions, went together perfectly as well.

Of course, it could reasonably be argued, if one put on a purist theoretician's hat, that all Four Elements are really just part of *kāya* or *rūpa*, the world of form, and have nothing to do with the mental realm at all. But why should one not consider the elements in terms of mind as well? Is not the teaching of the Buddha, and indeed all of life itself, an open field for our contemplation? Furthermore, despite the fact that the Four Elements describe the fundamental properties of matter, do we not with everyday ease talk about 'heated emotions', that so-and-so is a 'solid character', that 'compassion is what holds things together', or that Elvis truly was feeling 'all shook up' when he sang that song?

Eco-Anxiety

The last factor which contributed to this little volume is a presentation made in 2009 by Ven. Tenzin Chogkyi at the 15th Western Buddhist Monastic Gathering at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Talmage, California. The theme of the event was 'Monasticism and the Environment', and amongst the rich mix of material offered by the various presenters (it also included such themes as 'Monastic responses to global warming and climate change', 'Alternative technologies in use and prospective' and 'Genetic engineering, cloning and robotics') her exposition on the theme of 'eco-anxiety' particularly impressed me.

When preparing for the classes at Yoga Mendocino, I found myself referring to her notes again and again and quoting from them frequently when illustrating particular points. She has thus kindly agreed to let her notes be appended here. Some of the material may now be out of date, since it was presented in 2009, but much of it is still highly pertinent and gives a helpful overview regarding our concern for the welfare of the planet and its attendant themes. Should any reader wish to explore more of these areas in greater depth, numerous helpful books and other resources are listed in the bibliography.

Each of the Four Elements, which gave the titles to the main chapters of this book, has been considered principally in the light of its inherent instability. This is no accident, for it is primarily through the apprehension of the truth of change and uncertainty that liberating wisdom arises, which is also why the dénoument of the Four Foundations, *dhammā-nupassanā*, pertains to this transformative insight. Ajahn Chah once described the contemplation that 'all things are not sure' as 'the standard of the Noble Ones'. This means that such a realization is what aids the heart to open to its own true nobility and security.

It is hoped, through the words you are reading here, that any anxieties arising from these uncertain times of environmental crisis will indeed prove to be just such a source of wisdom, bringing peace, happiness and a stability that is unshakeable.

Ajahn Amaro
Amaravati Monastery, Hemel Hempstead, U.K.
December 2012

1 Feeling the Earth Move

The Earth element represents solidity, or the quality of structure, of things having a form.
Visuddhimagga XI, 2

Thus, free of covetousness and grief, the body is contemplated simply as a body.
Satipatthāna Sutta

Let the Earth draw the body to it; relaxed, free from tension, perfectly settled.
Ajahn Amaro

Earth—Matter made from rock and soil. It, too, is pulled by the moon as the magma circulates through the planet heart and roots such molecules into biology. Earth pours through us, replacing each cell in the body every seven years. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, we ingest, incorporate, and excrete the earth, are made from the earth. I am that. You are that.
Gaia Meditation by John Seed and Joanna Macy

Earth represents solidity. It represents form and structure, that which resists pressure. It's what forms the physical structure of our own bodies and the world that we're a part of. We assume the earth is solid and predictable. We can stomp on it and say, 'Yes. There it is. This is the Earth.'

But when we start to look more closely and consider the quality of solidity, we realize it's only relative or tentative. It's not an absolute. Abhayagiri Monastery is in Mendocino County, California, an earthquake zone. It gets about a dozen small earthquakes every year. Not gigantic ones, just little *whoomphs!* Enough to wake you up at 1:30 in the morning or in the middle of typing an email. 'Oh, right . . . the earth moved'. When we meet with that change, that quaking, that movement of the earth, we may feel stress and tension in ourselves – a quality of anxiety – because something in us assumes that, *'knock, knock',* this is solid, right?

I remember years ago walking through Montgomery Woods just to the west of Abhayagiri Monastery. Some of the trees there are over a thousand years old – they appear to be massive, solid, dependable forms. But someone pointed out to me, 'It's amazing to think that the carbon in these huge redwood trees comes from carbon dioxide in our atmosphere. These trees are just crystallised gas!' Whether that's folk biology or real biology, I like to think it's true. These great, amazing trees – a thousand or two thousand years old, so tall you get a crick in your neck looking up at them – are just air, carbon dioxide incarnated, crystallized into the form of a tree. If a fire goes through, *whoomph,* then the tree will disappear. In the same way, the buildings we live and work in will eventually collapse. In 100 years, 200 years, 500 hundred years, sooner or later it will all be gone.

I'm also reminded of a story about Ajahn Tiradhammo, a senior monk in our community. Growing up, he was prone to anxiety. He was a very insecure person and quite a worrywart. When he went to university, he thought, 'What can I study in order to feel more solid in my life, to relieve my insecurity and uncertainty? I'll put my mind onto something really firm: geology!' In his naiveté, he thought, 'Rocks, they are the most solid things of all. I'll study rocks'. But after a few geology lectures, he realized that rocks are actually quite far from being dependable and solid. In reality, we're sitting on this big ball of jelly floating around in space! So he quit university and rode a bicycle across India instead. He must have thought, 'Oh well. If I'm going to be insecure, I might as well be *really* insecure'.

Often, we unconsciously assume that things are solid. Then, when they reveal their transiency or insubstantiality, we are surprised and can experience a sense of fear or anxiety. 'This shouldn't be happening!' Or, 'That's not right!' In these times of environmental catastrophes, climate change, the melting of the glaciers and icecaps, the changing atmosphere, many of us experience great anxiety. That which we thought was solid and predictable – the weather, the climate, our Earth – is revealing the quality of changeability.

I recently discovered there's actually a field called 'ecopsychology' that focuses on 'eco-anxiety'. My friend Ven. Tenzin Chokyi, a very wonderful Western nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, writes about this:

‘For people who feel an acute unease about the future of the planet, a small but growing number of psychotherapists now offer a treatment designed to reduce worries as well as carbon footprints: ecopsychology. The idea behind it is that people’s relationship with the Earth is crucial to their physical and emotional well-being. Any disruption in this relationship can lead to stress and anxiety ...’

[Ecopsychology] practice now takes a variety of forms. Some therapists offer strategies for eco-anxiety in private sessions or lead discussion groups for the conservation-minded. More than 150 therapists, from Alaska to Uruguay, are listed as practitioners at the International Community for Ecopsychology website (www.ecopsychology.org), and colleges and universities have started offering ecopsychology as a major.

It’s impressive to me that so many people have stepped up to say, ‘Let’s look at this experience of anxiety about the state of the planet, the changing climate, and ecological stress. Let’s explore this and find ways to work with it’. This is an issue that involves us all in many, many ways.

In terms of Buddhist psychology, the first place to explore our relationship to the *earth element* is on the individual level. This body – with its bones and blood, its hair, teeth, and organs – is the bit of the Earth that we can know most directly, most acutely, and most intimately. This body of ours is the one piece of the Earth that we can really have a direct effect on. So in working with the changeability or the unpredictability of the Earth – in learning to feel its nature – we bring our attention to this body and this mind to see how they work.

There are various specific ways of undertaking this exploration. One of these is the classical practice of mindfulness of the body, which is the first of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. In the Satipatthāna Sutta, the Buddha teaches several ways to develop mindfulness of the body. He talks about mindfulness of breathing, learning to focus the mind on the body by watching the cycles of the breath. He talks about keeping one’s attention on changes of posture – from sitting to standing to walking to lying down – watching how the body moves during the course of a day in simple, natural changes. He talks about contemplating the body as its constituent parts –

skin, bones, blood, and organs – reflecting on the different materials the body is made up of.

Or, as described in this book you are now reading, the Buddha talks about thinking of the body in terms of the four elements. We can reflect on this body as being made up of a solid element: the structure of the bones, muscles, and organs; of a liquid element: blood, lymphatic fluid, tears, and so forth; of a heat element: the body's temperature; and a wind element: breath, the air in the lungs, and other gaseous elements that move and shift around in the body. In the sutta, the Buddha says:

'In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element. In this way one abides contemplating the body as a body, internally and externally; in its arising and vanishing, it comes into being, it integrates and it disintegrates; developing the mindfulness, 'There is a body here,' established to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And so one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world'.

That is, 'Here is this body'. It is made up of solid, liquid, heat, and gas. It's just this. This body is not separate from what's outside.

This way of looking at things is not just symbolic. This *actual* physical body is formed by vegetables that grew in the ground and fruits that hung off the trees. The material that was called the 'earth' yesterday is now called 'me'. The earth inside the body and outside the body is the same element, it has the same quality of solidity. Likewise, the water in the body, the liquid element, is the same inside as it is outside. With the air we breathe, we are constantly exchanging carbon dioxide and oxygen between inside and outside, inhaling and exhaling bits of each other. We are not independent in any way, shape, or form. Even the vegetarians amongst us have been unwittingly inhaling human skin in the form of dust! That's the nature of it. We are breathing in and breathing out all the time. When we breathe out the gas that was in our body a moment ago, it generates heat in the room. The room is warm because we breathed out warm air. Then we're happy to breathe in the cool evening air and make it 'us'. This isn't just something we read in an eco-friendly book. We are real earth, real water, real air, real fire. And our bodies are in a state of change.

This reflection on the elements might not seem very revolutionary. But internalizing this deep recognition that both this body and this world are simply manifestations of the *earth element* – this truly helps to depersonalize the way we relate to this body and this life.

You may wonder why depersonalizing our relationship with the world might be a good thing. On the surface, sounds like cold detachment. But the Buddha encourages us to relate to the world 'as it is', not as we wish it to be (or not to be). And the Buddha points out that our relationship to the world is distorted by what he calls the eight *loka dhammas*, or the worldly conditions. These are four pairs of very ordinary, everyday experiences: gain and loss, fame and disrepute, happiness and unhappiness, praise and criticism. Also called the 'worldly winds', these experiences cause agitation within us and tend to colour our internal world in terms of our moods.

During the course of the day, often what moves our heart is when we succeed or when we're praised. We get excited, enthusiastic. We feel great when we gain something, when we win a prize. 'Oh, how fantastic! I won!' But when we lose, we think, 'Lost again. It's always me who gets the short straw.' When we get criticized or launch some project or put some effort into something that fails, then we experience a quality of heartbreak. 'I've been rejected, pushed away, disliked, failed the exam'. Just reading these words is depressing, isn't it? We feel something sinking within us.

Why is it that when we get what we like, we feel happy? And that when we lose something we thought was ours – when something precious breaks, when someone dear to us dies, when our stock prices drop through the floor – we feel so desolate? By looking at this body of ours, this piece of the world – this very life, this very set of attitudes and feelings – and getting to know it directly and intimately, we have a better chance of working effectively and realistically within the greater world, the greater field of activity.

So often we take things personally. We use expressions like 'Financially, I am in great shape! I am a person of substance'. There's a certain relish in that. But when the bank goes belly up or the inflation rate increases or the stock prices collapse, then suddenly, *gasp!,* we're bereft and lost. 'I am a person of no substance'. The degree to which we believe in the 'I am' is the

degree to which we create stress and tension. The anxiety around our own personal ecology is entirely proportional to the amount that we see things as 'me' and 'mine'. If 'I' am the owner when there is gain, then 'I' am the owner when there is loss.

It's the same with praise and blame. Praise is a sweet taste – *'Oh, what a beautiful morning, oh, what a beautiful day…'*. Then suddenly, when we're criticized or blamed, when we get a bad review, when people represent us in ways we don't like or they misunderstand us or push us away, it's a bitter taste – *'All the leaves are brown and the sky is grey…'*. But we don't have to take it personally. A sweet taste is empty and formless. It's just a shape of the world. That's all. And a bitter taste is empty and formless. It too is just a shape of the world. That's all.

The more we see our experiences simply as being the way the world moves – not as personal successes or failures, not as being 'me' or 'mine' in an absolute way – then we can really enjoy the brightness and the grey. It's all 'as it is', just attributes of the world. We can be at ease with it. We can be at home with it. We can feel centred, which means we can then respond appropriately.

This might seem a bit tangential to responding to eco-anxiety or helping the planet. What do our personal feelings around gain and loss, praise and blame have to do with feeling upset about oil spills or receding glaciers or the unpredictability of the climate these days? Well, when we see how we respond to the worldly winds – what stirs up and shakes our individual world – then we can find an internal place or develop an attitude that helps us work more effectively with the gains and losses, the health and sickness of the world around us. Once we get to know those movements in our own life, we'll be able to translate that understanding to working with those cycles in the Earth.

When we're drunk on gain and loss, happiness and unhappiness – when we get caught up and take them personally – then it's very hard to respond in a clear and balanced way. We tend to react out of an unmindful and blind place. But when there's a quality of centredness, when we don't take what's happening in the world personally, we find we're able to respond. There's an acute attunement. In Buddhist jargon we call this equanimity, or *upekkhā*

in the Pali language. This is really what we're aiming towards in terms of dealing with the quaking of the world, of feeling the Earth move – recognizing its fragility and changeability. The more that we establish a heart that's centred and balanced – that's truly equanimous – then it's like coming to 'the still point of the turning world', as T. S. Eliot called it. In the midst of the changingness of life and all of its attributes, we're attuned, with a complete openness to it. While everything else is agitated, we find that in us which is *not* agitated.

Some people may tend to think of this as 'switching off', not really feeling things, simply shutting down. The English word *equanimity* might suggest a quality of numbness or not caring, but the true quality of *upekkhā* is the greatest, the most intense and all-encompassing brightness of the heart. In English we think of equanimity as an even-mindedness, which doesn't really come across as being particularly radiant. This highlights a very wonderful and mysterious aspect of what the Buddha is pointing to. When we find that place of utter balance, when we are able to *not* take change personally – whether the changes of our own body or the changes of the Earth – but attune to change from that place of centredness, then what we experience is a great brightness. Even in the face of great difficulty and struggle, great agitation, we find a place of stillness that's connected to everything but not agitated along with it. This state is not easy to find, but it's something that intuitively we all know.

Another way the Buddha talks about finding this place of equanimity, this place of inner balance, is by looking at things in terms of cause and effect. He suggests we reflect: 'I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related to my actions, abide supported by my actions. Whatever actions I will do, for good or for ill, of those I will be the heir'. This is an impersonal equation, a law of nature: If we do *this,* we get *that.* That's just the way things work – it is not something to be taken personally. If you drill a hole 5,000 feet under the ocean to release a large pocket of rotted trees (that is, fossil fuel) and mess up because of some cost-cutting initiative, then things will eventually go wrong and create a terrible oil spill. Cause and effect.

This terrible and destructive effect can draw people's attention to the cause and create the sense of, 'we mustn't let this happen again'. Caution, restraint, and care can become another result of that painful experience. We can also identify companies or people who were responsible, since there were individual choices as causes. These people should be encouraged to take responsibility. But this is not the same as getting caught up in casting blame or taking the destruction personally. If we experience such a catastrophe in a non-personal way and see it as cause and effect, then we can take action and relate to the situation in an effective way.

Of course, responding to something like a massive oil spill is a big issue. Fortunately, the Buddha offers us important tools to relate to this sort of turbulence and difficulty facing the Earth, whether we're feeling eco-anxiety or personal anxiety. We can use these tools to see the fundamental relationship between how much we cling to things – this is 'me' or 'mine', this is 'my problem' or 'my issue', 'I'm alone in this' – and the amount of suffering in the heart. The more we cling to and identify with the changes facing the Earth, the more we create stress and tension. This then disables effective action from occurring. Alternatively, the more we are able to relate to change from a non-personal perspective, seeing things in terms of the laws of nature, the more we will be able to remain at ease within ourselves. By remaining more at ease within ourselves, more perfect and fluidly effective action can be taken.

Guided Meditation: Earth

Let yourself get settled down. First of all, before you adjust the body or the mind in any way, take a moment to notice how you feel: the mood of the mind and the tenor of the body. How is it? What are you feeling in the present moment, right now?

Bring the attention into the body, feeling the weight, the body's pull toward the Earth, the pull of the Earth on this body. Centring the attention around your spine, feel the pressure between the Earth and this body as they pull towards each other by the force of gravity. Sensing the pull of the body being drawn downwards, let the spine stretch and gently move against that

stream. Let the spine stretch and grow to its full, natural extent, not tense or rigid. As the body rises up, feel a quality of alertness, energy, and brightness in the mind. And then, with the spine as the central column, allow the rest of the body to relax around that. Let the Earth draw the rest of the body to it: relaxed, free from tension, perfectly settled.

Next, bringing the attention into the body, consider its solid elements: the bones of the skull, the vertebrae stacked up, the cartilages between them; the bones of the skull, the shoulders, arms, all the digits; the bones of the pelvis, thighs, shins, ankles, and feet. This is the *'earth element'*, solidity, *pathavī-dhātu*.

Feel the other solid forms of the body: the muscles across the chest and back, the arms and legs, the orbs of the eyes, the curve of the ears, the beating of the heart, the lobes of the kidneys, the long tubes of the guts, the bag of the stomach, the infinite strings and threads of the arteries and veins, the lymph ducts threading their way in incredible complexity through limbs and torso, the face, the head. These are the solid structures of the body. The *earth element*.

Consider the *earth element* of the body: how different is it really from the shape and structure of the mat or chair you're sitting on, the skeleton of the building, the timber, the concrete of the foundation? These are all *earth element*.

The rocks of the valley outside, the riverbed, the mountains, the trees with their endless thousands of trunks and branches, needles of fir and redwood, leaves of oak, blades of grass. All uncountable. The tarmac of the roads. The metal of the cars. These are all *earth element*. *Earth element* inside, *earth element* outside. It's all just *earth element*.

Take a moment to explore these themes, not to fill the mind with thinking, but to see what arises from reflection. How does the heart change? How does the attitude shift? How does it help to see things in an un-self-centred way? Does it lead to a place of centredness? To a place of balance? Of being at the heart of things?

Next, explore the ways you react to the patterns and polarities of worldly thinking: gain and loss, praise and blame, happiness and unhappiness. How do you get blown around by them? You might bring to mind a significant event from the past, some particularly painful global crisis or some tremendously joyful occasion. From this place of quietness and stillness, consciously invite that memory firmly and solidly into your awareness. No matter how painful or unpleasant it might be, really let it in. Or no matter how exciting or stimulating it might be, really let it in. Bring it in.

As you trigger that memory or thought, notice the emotion that is born with it. Try to find it your body. If it's something upsetting, where do you feel it? When things really fall apart or there's terrible injustice, how do you feel it? Keep the attention as unbiased and uncomplicated as possible. Don't get swept away by a big story; just bring the attention to the sensation in the body. How does it feel? Where is it? Let it be known as fully, as completely, as directly as possible.

Do you feel grief as a sensation of pain in the heart or a knot of tension in the solar plexus? Whatever it might be, wherever it might be, let that feeling be known and held, received. Simply stay with the sensation, knowing and accepting the feeling of it directly. Don't judge whether it should or shouldn't be there, or whether it should or shouldn't have happened. Just know the feeling of grief, of sadness, of anxiety.

If your memory is very pleasant or positive, how does that feel? The excitement, the thrill: Where is it? What's it like? Let it be known directly, simply as a feeling, a pattern of nature. Then, receiving and knowing that feeling, let the in-breath carry it into the heart. And as the breath turns, let the out-breath release it.

As other waves of thought or images come to mind, breathe them in and know them, breathe them out and release them. Let the whole body system remain centred and settled.

Now, no longer trying to sustain the memory or the idea, just release it, let it fade, let the out-breath carry it away. Let everything be still – taking in the moment, knowing it, letting it go – until all that remains is openness.

Questions & Answers

Q: What's wrong with feeling good when we're praised or gain something or are thought well of? Or feeling bad when we're criticized or lose something or are thought poorly of? Isn't that natural and even an important part of living a happy life and improving ourselves?

A: The Buddha's teaching on the 'worldly winds' is primarily about helping us notice those ways that our sense of self gets knocked around most easily. He's pointing to those things in our life that we identify with and then create the thrill of *'Great!'* or the despair of *'Aaaargh!'*

In our very life-affirming culture, we might think, 'Well, what's wrong with the thrill of having and being? Aren't we supposed to embrace life?' We love to talk in those terms. What these teachings are pointing to is not negating that way of speaking in and of itself. The Buddha's suggesting we look at what happens when there's a relishing – '*I*'ve got, *I* have, *I* am!' Even though there might be something deeply satisfying in that feeling, it's that relishing that causes suffering.

So, you might be thinking, 'Well, I'm not very worldly. I've got few possessions.' But even if there's a relishing of the 'Look at me, I'm not attached' view of oneself, then there's still an ego-attachment issue; the mind is attached to the idea of not being attached. Whether it's to a possession or an opinion or even a problem – 'I am the sick one, I am the flawed one' – we suffer when that gets negated or taken away or threatened.

It's not that holding on to things is intrinsically bad. But look what happens when those things get denied or threatened. Then we see, 'Ah, right, I got myself addicted to this.' When the drug of choice – the feeling of 'I' and 'me' and 'mine' – is no longer available and the supply gets cut off, then our reaction is *'Aaaargh!*'

How beautiful it is to be free of that addiction. How free we are when the heart is really independent and can know the quality of stillness, utterly attuned to the moving and vibrating world but never thrown off balance by that.

Q: You say that equanimity comes from contemplating karma. But doesn't karma mean accepting that things cannot be other than they are?

A: Our choices are also part of the way things are, but we often forget that. It's really important to recognize that the teaching on equanimity is not about being passive, or not being involved, or not making choices. Our choice, which is part of the way things are, can be to do things that are helpful and to avoid doing things that are unhelpful. The more the heart is attuned to cultivating the good and letting go of the harmful, the more we will be in accord with what's needed in the time, place, and situation. Then, our actions will be much more effective.

The English word *equanimity* is not a great translation for *upekkhā* because it implies a little too much in the way of 'don't get involved' or 'just leave it alone'. The idea 'I shouldn't do anything' can be an obstructive force, but the quality of true equanimity can actually lead us to letting go of the habit of being passive, not engaging, or being afraid of change. We can be okay with the sense that 'I don't know what's going to come of this'. Equanimity is a source of courage and openness to unfamiliar ground. It's a quality of unentangled participation rather than avoidance of involvement or disengagement.

Really, we can't *not* participate. Even if we freeze – 'I'm not part of this! I'm out of here! I'm not involved!' – our frozenness still contributes to the mix. Our involvement is as unavoidable as a large lump in the middle of the dance floor. In a way, equanimity is a recognition that our nature is intrinsically to participate in the whole world, in all things. And then, by remaining unbiased and attuned, regardless of how agitated things can be, we will find ourselves able to respond from a place of sensitivity and readiness.

Q: I don't think I really understand the notion of karma.

A: The Buddha said that if you try and figure out all of the workings of karma you'll either go crazy or your head will explode but, thankfully, it's not a matter of working out all the details and figuring out how it all fits. *Karma* is popularly understood in the West to mean *fate* or *destiny* but this view is based on Hindu philosophy and mythology. In the Buddhist usage

of the word it does not mean this at all; rather it refers to the simple principle of action and its result. In Pali this is expressed by the term *kamma-vipāka,* (literally, *action-result*). It is the law of causality: because of *this,* there is *that.* It's an understanding that our lives are woven together by an incalculably complex cascade of causes and effects. At the very root of it, that's all there is. '*This* conditions *that*'.

By seeing how life works in this way, there's a sense of relaxation, of things being in order. This fundamental orderliness of nature may not be what we like. It might even be very painful. 'I've got a body, I've got a mind, so I'm going to get sick at certain times. I'm going to feel uncomfortable at certain times. How could it be otherwise?'

So what I've been talking about is the practice of recognizing that even events or feelings that might seem very personal – 'This is happening to me' – are actually just the way nature moves. With this cause, there's that effect; with this choice, there's that result. This doesn't mean we check out of responsibilty in a deluded way and say, 'It's not me. It's not mine. There's no person here. I'm not involved'. That's a false kind of nonattachment. Instead, we say, 'This is just the law of nature. This is how nature works'. We're learning to loosen the grip around the truth of the way things are. Then that part of the natural order that is our capacity to think and to relate and to act can come forth. We do what we are able to, to be helpful or to restrain what is harmful. We do the best we can in the present moment as we find it.

2 Still and Flowing, Wild Water

Water represents cohesion and fluidity.
Visuddhimagga XI, 2

The contemplation or mindfulness of feeling is the most reliable raft to get across the turbulent waters.
Ajahn Amaro

The mind is like still flowing water. There are perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and moods that come and go, that flow and change constantly. But that which knows the mind is not caught up in the world of time and motion. It's perfectly still.
Ajahn Chah

Water – Blood, lymph, mucus, sweat, tears, inner oceans tugged by the moon, tides within and tides without. Streaming fluids floating our cells, washing and nourishing through endless riverways of gut and vein and capillary. Moisture pouring in and through and out of you, of me, in the vast poem of the hydrological cycle. You are that. I am that.
Gaia Meditation by John Seed and Joanna Macy

Water represents cohesion. That is its primary quality. Water is what makes things stick together. Thus, in the Buddhist tradition, water often symbolizes the qualities of compassion as well as composure. And, in pairing each of the four elements with the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, 'water' and *vedanā* (sensation or feeling) seem to have an association with each other; feelings are an experience of flow. These different aspects of the *water element* are worth exploring, particularly when the flow of our feelings gets intense and we find ourselves losing our composure.

We love seeing water get wild. I think of the Russian River near Abhayagiri Monastery. After four or five days of downpour, the river is churning over the rocks, hurtling around the bends, foaming and charging. When I'd come out of my cabin and walk through the forest, I'd hear the streams roaring,

and the feeling would arise: ‘Oh, yes! The forest is alive! Everything’s happening!’ There’s an invigorating, rejuvenating quality in that feeling.

But wildness in the water is not always beautiful and invigorating. Hurricanes, flooding, tsunamis – when the *water element* gets seriously wild and we find ourselves in the midst of it – that’s a different story. It’s no longer, ‘Oh, how refreshing! How invigorating!’ I have a friend who was doing tai chi on the beach in Southern India when the tsunami hit there in 2004. He saw the wave coming up the beach, ran into the house and grabbed his partner; they wrapped themselves around a palm tree and held on as the wall of water hit them. They managed to survive. When I saw him two or three weeks later, I could still see in his expression the raw terror of being in that sort of *water element*.

Most of us don’t meet physical tsunamis with any kind of regularity in our lives; it’s a rare occurrence. But the psychological tsunamis – turbulence in our family lives, our working lives, our social lives – are much more common. We may encounter a divorce, or a family member ‘going crazy’, or feel intense agitation when some politician gets elected whom we can’t stand. All sorts of arguments and comments and criticisms fly back and forth. ‘Who’s right, who’s wrong? What are the pros and cons? Which side should I take?’ Does that sound like a familiar situation?

Whether it’s a personal issue or a social issue, when we meet with an intensity of feeling, when the waters get wild, what do we do? How do we handle that? Sometimes we hold our feelings in balance, and they can be very invigorating and helpful. Other times we get carried away and lost in the turbulence. We get caught up in the flood, gasping for breath or experiencing the destruction that can come with strong feelings. The stronger, the more intense the turbulence, the more we are prone towards reacting in unconscious or semi-conscious ways. What we like, we grab hold of; what we dislike, we take a position against. ‘I’m right. You’re wrong.’ ‘This is good. That’s bad.’ And when we intensely grasp an opinion, a point of view, the content of our position can seem to become more important than the suffering that comes from grasping it.

That quality of grasping, buying into things, getting caught up, this is what the Buddha called ‘getting hit by the second arrow’. (The Buddha had a

military background; he was brought up as a warrior noble prince and trained in the arts of war, so a lot of his imagery and analogies are military. As Robert Thurman once put it, he was a 'West Pointer'.) Since we have a body and mind, we are always going to experience some kind of pain, whether physical or mental. That's unavoidable and what the Buddha meant by 'getting hit by the first arrow'. The second arrow is the anguish, resentment, or anxiety that clusters around that feeling of pain. Since we've got a body and a mind, we can't avoid that first arrow. But if we are attentive and realize that truth, then we'll be able to avoid getting hit by the second arrow. We'll be able to avoid getting caught in the turbulence.

Seeing that suffering comes from grasping is the beginning of regaining our composure. When we're looking at how to handle these wild waters of our lives – these intense ups and downs – what we need is a good raft. This is another symbol that the Buddha used. What causes us to get caught up or get lost in the waters, is *not* having a good raft, or not understanding how the mind works.

To gain this understanding, we can contemplate feeling as the second of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. *Feeling* refers to pleasurable, painful, or neutral sensations as well as to the feeling of *like* and *dislike*. It's not just a physical sensation, but also being attracted or repelled by something. In Buddhist psychology we call this *vedanā*. It refers to the world of the senses, to the initial sensory impact that something has on us – 'I like that' or 'That's ugly' or 'That's beautiful'.

When we are able to know feeling as it is – 'That's an appealing sound, that's not an appealing sound, that's a delicious taste, that's a ghastly taste' – then life can stay very simple and we can keep things in balance. In a way, the quality of mindfulness is what enables us to keep our attention on feeling and just let it be feeling. That's the raft. *Vedanā-nupassanā*, the contemplation or mindfulness of feeling, is the most reliable raft to get across the turbulent waters. We're able to keep things in perspective: 'That feels pleasant, that feels painful. I like, I dislike.' When we have no raft, or the raft falls apart under us, then feeling leads to craving, or what is sometimes translated as *desire.* 'I like' turns into 'I want', or 'I don't like' turns into 'I can't stand'.

In Buddhist practice we're not trying to rid ourselves of feeling or shut ourselves down. We're trying to understand the realm of feeling and its textures, how it can be held in perspective and used as a vehicle to help us cultivate our potential. If we let 'I like' turn into 'I want', then craving leads to clinging very quickly. Clinging then leads to what we call 'becoming'. We become completely absorbed: 'I've gotta have this!' or 'I can't stand that!' We buy into the promise of something, whether it's something appealing in terms of a sense pleasure or even something painful that we are struggling against and being burdened by. We get swept up by the current and carried along by the feeling. We're being carried by the wave.

It's like surfing. When catching a wave, the thrill of being perfectly balanced on it – 'Yes! This is it! This is great! I love it!' – is the 'becoming' feeling. In terms of desirable objects, the moment of maximum thrill, the key point of becoming is when we're just about to get the thing we desire. Scientists have wired people up to measure galvanic skin responses and then have sent them shopping. The maximum pitch of excitement is just when someone hands over the plastic. They're guaranteed to get the product, but it hasn't quite landed in their hands yet. They start getting disappointed as soon as it's in their hands; acquisition is actually a disappointment. Our 'consumer culture' is not really about consuming at all. It's really a 'desire culture.'

The flip side of this is the thrill of getting angry. How many people do we know who really feel most alive when they're upset or angry? 'I'm right and you're wrong!' We can feel most alive, most fired up, when we find a 'them' who is wrong. This is the wave of becoming. Inevitably, though, that wave breaks or crashes over the rocks, and there we are, tumbling over with a mouth full of salt water, getting bashed by the board, and fighting to come up for air. The way we are as human beings, we might just think, 'How do I get to the next wave?!' When we crash, it's like getting what we wanted, which is followed by disappointment since it doesn't make us *totally* satisfied.

Eventually, when we realize we've been swept away by the waves of the mind, we may ask, 'Why do I keep doing this to myself?' Or 'Oh no. Did I

really send that email? Can I get it back?' There's a feeling of, 'It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now – oh, dear'.

In Buddhist psychology, this movement from *feeling* to *craving* to *clinging* to *becoming* are links in what's called the chain of 'Dependent Origination'. When it's not held in an embrace of mindfulness and wisdom, the ordinary experience of the senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or touching, carries the heart away to states of disappointment, alienation, and incompleteness. When we are not seeing and understanding our feelings, then we're constantly looking for the next thrill: 'This product will be better. Or this marriage. Or this Dhamma book.' We just catch another wave, and then another, and then another. This is called the cycle of compulsion, the cycle of dependent origination, the cycle of birth and death.

The weak point in this chain is the link between feeling and craving. The more we can develop mindfulness of feeling – learning to sense the waters, whether they're calm and fluid or strong and wild – then we'll be better able to respond rather than to react. 'Oh, this is the feeling of liking, it has a sweet taste; or disliking, it has a bitter taste.'

Being mindful in this way does not mean numbing ourselves out. I remember travelling once with the Zen teacher Zoketsu Norman Fischer. As we were passing through San Francisco, he said, 'Can we stop off at the shopping mall?' I asked skeptically, 'You want a Theravadan monk to go shopping with a Zen master?' And he said, 'I could do with a break, and this might be a good place to stop. I like to treat this mall as my own personal palace. It's got marble floors and fountains. I can look at all the beautiful objects in the shops and delight at other people's joy in shopping. I just like to enjoy the space, and,' he laughed, 'I don't have to look after it.' I thought to myself, 'This is a really good example of liking but not wanting.' We can say, 'Yes, that's beautiful, but I have no interest in owning it.' Learning how *not* to cross the bridge between feeling and craving is therefore a key element of our practice.

This is also where the quality of compassion comes in – having compassion for ourselves and for our own disposition, being able to appreciate and allow space for our likes and dislikes, our fears and our desires, what we feel comfortable with and what we feel uncomfortable with. We regard

ourselves as: ‘Well, that’s how I am. When I see this, I feel excited. When I see that, I feel threatened.’ The embodiment of compassion is this quality of being able to listen to our own nature, our own feelings, and to really know that. The name *Gwan Yin,* the bodhisattva of compassion, literally means ‘the one who listens to the sounds of the world’.

In listening with compassion, we also find – again, turning to the symbol of water – that we are able to receive all sorts of different streams flowing into us. At Abhayagiri Monastery, about nine different creeks flow down through the forest and join together to form Goat Creek, which then flows into the Russian River. There’s a confluence. Similarly, when we learn to listen, we hear our mixed feelings of like and dislike, bewilderment and confidence or confusion, and they can all meet together in that listening space.

We also learn to listen to our thoughts and to understand how the thinking process works, since this is where we often drift from liking to wanting to compulsion, or from disliking to rejecting to aversion. One of the main difficulties in our lives is the belief that: if we think it, it must be true. This is actually a very peculiar idea, because we often think opposing or contradictory things even in the space of a few minutes, let alone in a day.

The Buddha suggested different ways we can handle the patterns of thinking. First of all, if we notice the mind is getting distracted or moving towards a compulsive wanting or rejecting, we see that as unwholesome and take the mind off that thought. Instead, we consciously cultivate, say, a feeling of loving-kindness or compassion. This is like using a small peg to knock a big peg out of a hole. We use a wholesome thought to knock out an unwholesome thought. That’s one method.

Another method is to consider the disadvantages of following thoughts that are drifting towards aversion or compulsion. We reflect, ‘If I follow this thought, where is it going to take me?’ It might lead to a bigger debt, or a conflict with someone, or more unhappiness and disturbance. The Buddha said that carrying around such a thought is like taking the body of a dead and rotting animal and tying it around our neck. When we’re really swept up with desire or fear – and even though we know it’s leading down the wrong road – we peel that dead skunk up off the road and tie it around our

neck, and we even wonder why the world has suddenly become so stinky. The Buddha is really good at using graphic images that stick in our minds!

The third method is a bit milder and has to do with seeing the agitating quality of thought and deciding to turn away from it. We have a choice: 'I can pay attention to this pattern of thinking or I can turn my attention away'. Sometimes asking ourselves 'Why do I want to put my mind onto that?' is just enough. The Buddha said it's like looking at an object that's disturbing or painful or ugly, and simply turning away. We've probably all been at the movies and had to cover our eyes because we don't want to see something. Similarly, we can do that with our thoughts, not from aversion or fear, but just because we don't want to put the mind onto that image. So we avert our attention.

Fourth is calming the body, or what the Buddha calls 'stilling the thought formation'. Sometimes the runaway, distracted, turbulent nature of the mind is heavily conditioned by tension or agitation in the body. Bringing the body to stillness and calmness is a way of stilling and calming the thought process. When we find ourselves worried about something, we bring attention to the body, let it settle, soften the muscles of the face, relax the abdomen, et cetera. Then, when we try to remember what it was that we were worrying about, we often find it has disappeared: 'A moment ago there was such a big issue. Now… what was it I was worried about…? It's gone.'

The last method is learning how to say no. The image that the Buddha uses for this is wrestling. It's like a cattle rancher wrestling a cow to the ground to treat it or to brand it. Or two people wrestling together, one using sheer force to say 'I'm in charge here!' or 'Time for you to take your medicine!' This can seem a bit brutal or forceful, but sometimes 'just saying no' is the most helpful method when the mind is going on and on and on. It's like when a little child is about to stick her hand in the fire, we shout out 'No!' Because we love the child, we don't want her to be hurt.

These are all methods to help us sustain a quality of mindful awareness in relationship to feeling. Developing this awareness in the face of our constantly changing feelings is something my teacher Ajahn Chah referred to as 'still flowing water'. He would often ask, 'Have you ever seen still

water?' Then, 'Have you ever seen flowing water?' And finally, 'Have you ever seen *still flowing* water?' Most people would wonder, 'What? Did I get that right? How can water be still and flowing at the same time?' He would go on to explain that the mind is like still flowing water. There are perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and moods that come and go, that flow and change constantly. But that which *knows* the mind is not caught up in the world of time and motion. It's perfectly still. These qualities of flowing and stillness cohabit in the mind. Perceptions, moods, and feelings come and go, yet the awareness of them is perfectly still and serene, outside the realm of time and space and individuality.

When we recognize that the mind is both still and flowing – and that those two properties abide together without conflict – then we are able to live with the flow of the mind, however intense it might be. Strong or gentle, pleasant or painful, we are always able to hold our feelings because we recognize the quality of stillness and the undercurrent of composure and spaciousness that's ever-present, regardless of what it is we're perceiving.

Guided Meditation: Water

Begin by taking note of how you feel right this minute – hot or cool, cheerful or anxious, tired or excited – whatever it might be. Notice the feeling of this moment.

Then invite the body to settle, to soften and to be at ease. Feeling the Earth pulling you to her. Feel the elements of the body: its heat, its weight, its fluidity, its form, its vibration, its oscillations. Feel the whole body and invite it to settle, relax, and be still.

In order to support the quality of composure, a steadiness of attention, take a simple object to be a reference point, to help train the attention on this current reality, this present moment. There are many different objects you can use to orient your attention. The most simple and tangible is the natural flow of your own breath. As you feel the presence of the body sitting on a chair or cushion or stool, of all the different sensations of the body, let the feelings of the breath, the movement of the lungs, be at the centre of attention. Don't try to change the breath or do anything with it. Just feel the

body breathing according to its own pace and let that cluster of feelings be at the very centre of attention.

The mind's natural habit is to wander, to be carried away by the river of ideas about the future or past, creating imaginary worlds here in the present. Distraction is normal. But just because something is normal doesn't mean that it's particularly useful. So when you find the mind has drifted away, then remember, 'I am devoting this time to watching my breath.' Employ one of the Buddha's methods of dispelling the habit of distraction. Turn the attention away from that thought to something wholesome, coming back to the feeling of the breath.

Another helpful method to work with the habit of a drifting mind is to follow the flow of thoughts back to where they began. 'That was the roar of a passing car. It sounded just like my grandpa's old car. He used to live in Columbus, Ohio. God, I'm glad I don't live in Ohio anymore. California is really great, but it does have its drawbacks – like bad roads. I've got to write to the mayor about all the potholes...' When you realize your mind has drifted, notice what you feel in that moment – in this case the quality of aversion and irritation about the bad roads. Consider, 'How did I get here?' and follow the flow back upstream. 'Oh, it all began with the sound of a car. It was just an engine noise. An ordinary sound being heard. That's all'.

As you trace the flow of thoughts back to their source, realize how extremely simply they began. With just a sound, no more, no less. Very pure. Very natural. Perfect in its own right. From the realm of compulsion back to craving, back to the realm of feeling. See where that state came from. See how it was triggered and let the mind rest with that source. Notice the contrast between the mind in a tense, compulsive, aversive state and the mind wholly in the feeling, perceiving, knowing realm.

Then go back to the breath and try to stay with it.

The more you develop the skill of resting calmly with a feeling, the sooner you will be able to catch the mind when it is being pulled by the turbulence of compulsion, attraction and aversion. When you're able to sustain a quality of attention here in the present and the mind isn't swept away by

thoughts or sensations, then the mind will rest, still, simply aware of the flow of feelings, here in the present moment.

Questions & Answers

Q: Speaking environmentally, I envision the world as just an extension of our bodies. The health of the world is very much about the health of our own bodies, and the health of our bodies is about the health of the world. I call that 'making things personal'. What's the difference between making things personal and taking things personally?

A: That's a great way of expressing things, a neat coinage. 'Making things personal' is to do with recognizing our involvement. One of the expressions that's often used to describe Buddhist meditation is 'being the observer' or 'being the watcher'. I've moved away from using that expression because it can create a false kind of alienation or dissociation. I prefer to talk in terms of 'unentangled participating', because that expression reflects a sense of responsibility. We are involved. We are *it*. We can't be outsiders; we're all insiders. This body is made of the same water as the water in the oceans. It's all the same.

Making things personal versus taking things personally comes down to the difference between what we call cultivating right effort versus succumbing to the habit of becoming. 'Becoming' is that self-centred urge to experience the thrill of getting and having and being. There's an ego-investment in that. Sure, there's also gratification, but it brings with it a shadow of disappointment. When we take things personally, that's what I would call 'becoming'. In Pali, the scriptural language, it's called *bhava tanhā*, or the quality of relishing: *I am, I have, I'm getting, I'm doing*. To the degree to which this feeling has become an ego-centred, self-centred habit, it is going to lead to a painful and destructive result.

The counterpart to *bhava* (ie taking things personally), is *bhāvanā*, which means 'cultivation' or 'development'. These two are rather like the left and the right hands; in some respects they are identical and in some respects opposite. For instance, the desire to become and the desire to get rid of *(bhava)* are seen as causes of discontentment and dissatisfaction. *I* want to

get concentrated. *I* want to be enlightened. *I* want to get rid of my anger and my bad habits. Even when practising meditation, as long as there's a feeling of 'I', then even spiritual efforts lead to more suffering.

With 'right effort' *(bhāvanā),* we are also restraining the unwholesome from arising and cultivating the wholesome. It might seem very much the same as wanting to get rid of bad habits or wanting to get enlightened. But the trick is that with right effort, there's no sense of 'I' and 'me' and 'my' involved. Effort is being applied, but it is towards cultivating the good and retraining the unwholesome. 'Making it personal' is taking responsibility for applying right effort in a balanced, wise, attuned way, and then learning to see the degree to which it's 'me' doing or getting, or getting rid of.

So just like *bhava* and *bhāvanā,* 'taking things personally' and 'making things personal' look very much like each other, but they're also opposites, like the left and right hands. One is the ailment and the other is the cure. Or like homeopathic remedies, one is the poison, the other is the counteracting agent.

Q: To what extent is it enough for us to recognize internally the emotional tsunamis of, say, desire or jealousy, and to what extent is it important for us to communicate those feelings to others?

A: This is where mindfulness comes in, because there is no fixed formula about when to speak and how to speak. However, the Buddha did set up a few criteria. One teaching on this came when wanderers of a different religious group were trying to find fault with him. One of their group, Prince Abhaya, said something like: 'You, Gotama, are reputed to be kind and nice, but you make critical comments to people and hurt their feelings. So how can you have loving-kindness if you say things that are hurtful to others?' The Prince happened to have his little daughter nearby as they were speaking, so the Buddha replied, 'Well, Prince, you look as though you love your daughter very much. If she were to get a stick or stone stuck in her throat, would you make efforts to remove it?' 'Of course, I love my child so naturally I'd make the effort to get the stone or stick out of her mouth,' said the prince. The Buddha continued, 'And would you cause the child pain or even draw blood if it were necessary to get the stick or stone out?' The prince responded, 'Well, of course!' So the Buddha said,

‘Similarly, as you might hurt your daughter in order to care for her, sometimes I say things that are hurtful to people out of my care and compassion for them.’

Then the Buddha set out this list of criteria of how he chose to speak. He said:

If something is true and beneficial and it’s pleasant to hear, then the Buddha knows the right time to say such a thing.

If it’s not true but it’s beneficial and pleasant to hear, the Buddha won’t say it.

If it’s not true and not beneficial but it’s pleasant, the Buddha won’t say it.

If it’s true and not beneficial but it’s pleasant to hear, he won’t say it.

If it’s true and beneficial but it’s unpleasant to hear then, again, the Buddha knows the right time to say such a thing.

There’s no handbook to let us know the right time; it really depends on mindfulness and attunement to time and place. All of us have probably had the experience of wanting to bring something up with a friend, partner, or coworker and suddenly knowing, ‘Ah, this is the moment’. Or realizing five seconds later: ‘Oh, no. The mood changed. The situation shifted. It’s not the right moment anymore.’

Mindfulness of feelings has to do with attuning oneself to that flow of conversation and to one’s motivation. If someone is a fully enlightened being, then we we can be pretty sure they have the right motivation. But for those of us who are not fully enlightened beings, it’s good to check our intentions. If I’m trying to set you straight so that my world will be tidier, rather than out of a wish to benefit you, I had better not say anything. I have a rule for myself: keep quiet and wait. If there’s something to be said, I wait until it’s for you, rather than for me. My genuine intent has to be compassion for you – to help you stop causing trouble and pain for yourself and others. In that case, I’ll speak freely, even if it’s something you may not

want to hear. But this takes circumspection. Like it says in King Lear, ‘Ripeness is all’.

3 All is Burning

Fire represents heat and temperature (as well as the life force).
Visuddhimagga XI, 2

Fire, when burning, is in a state of agitation, dependence, attachment, and entrapment – both clinging and being stuck to its sustenance. Extinguished, it becomes calm, independent, indeterminate, and unattached.
Ajahn Thanissaro

We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.
Little Gidding by T.S.Eliot

Fire – Fire, from our sun that fuels all life, drawing up plants and raising the waters to the sky to fall again replenishing. The inner furnace of your metabolism burns with the fire of the Big Bang that first sent matter-energy spinning through space and time. And the same fire as the lightning that flashed in the primordial soup, catalyzing the birth of organic life. You were there, I was there, for each cell of our bodies is descended in an unbroken chain from that event.
Gaia Meditation by John Seed and Joanna Macy

Fire represents heat and temperature as well as the life force. In terms of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, I'd like to bring together fire with the contemplations on mental activity, or moods. *Cittānupassanā* literally means 'the contemplation of mind' or 'investigation of mind'.

The Buddha speaks of fire in one of his most famous teachings, *The Fire Sermon*, where he begins by saying, 'All is burning'. The Buddha tended to use images and symbols that were significant to the people he was talking to. This is a teaching he gave to a group of a thousand former fire worshipers who had become his students. It's said that as they were walking along through the countryside, they saw a large forest fire burning in a valley down below them and the Buddha said, 'All is burning. Everything is burning.' In their former spiritual training they looked towards fire and heat

as being synonymous with spiritual goodness and strength, but the Buddha turned it around and said that things burn with greed or passion *(rāga)*, aversion or hatred *(dosa),* and delusion or ignorance *(moha)*. He pointed to these three qualities as the way we tend to experience the world through our six senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind). Things are aflame, in a state of incineration. It's easy for us to get ignited by the conflagration we experience around what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think.

We might think, 'I *love* passion! Passion is good! I like to be ignited!' But in this context, we see passion in terms of being obstructive to genuine freedom and happiness. The Buddha is telling us that when we grasp what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think in an unskilful way, then the heart burns with greed, with aversion, with delusion. He says this not with a nihilistic attitude towards the sense world, but to point to the direction things can go when we habitually get caught up in what attracts us, annoys or frightens us. It's just the same as when liking or being pleased with something turns into craving and clinging. The Buddha is pointing out how the quality of burning in the heart occurs when we get entangled in our moods.

Beyond our own personal concerns, it's also easy for us to get caught up and to feel a sense of pressure, anxiety or despair at the state of the environment. We can become enraged by how the planet is being destroyed by the policies of various governments, or particular multinational corporations, or certain groups of people. Interestingly, the first word that the Buddha uses to describe burning is *rāga,* which is closely connected with the English word *rage*. *Rage* is usually translated as 'passion', but it also means 'inflamed'. In her essay on eco-anxiety, Tenzin Chogkyi describes 'eco-angst' thus:

'Some people feel grief, while others experience helplessness or depression. Among the strangest of the reported symptoms is a 'buzzing' feeling, as if people's cells are alive and twitching. In its most extreme form, eco-anxiety might even spawn rage, psychologists say. Groups of so-called eco-terrorists have used destruction to bring about their aim of environmental change. They have, among other acts, set fire to a $50 million San Diego

housing complex and taken baseball bats to Hummers to vent their eco-rage.'

Jean Twenge, a professor from San Diego State University, conducted a large study on American anxiety between 1952 and 1993. She found that a major factor predisposing individuals in society towards anxiety is something psychologists call 'locus of control'. Having an internal locus of control means believing our actions matter and what we do makes a difference; this lowers our anxiety levels. Having an external locus of control means believing things like luck and 'powerful others' determine what happens in the world; this increases our anxiety levels.'

This is a very significant insight. Even if we can't control what happens outside us, we can control our attitude towards it. I can't control how *you* are, but I can control the attitude I have towards you and towards the way I'm feeling in this present moment. The feeling of being powerless, or that things are out of control or that other powerful people are having a negative effect, can fuel a sense of despair and rage, can stoke the fire that causes everything to burn. Instead, when we recognize that there is a genuine locus of control within us – that we are not powerless and that we do have an effect at least on our own life – then we will see the possibility of making a change. Small or large, it is within our scope.

When the Buddha gave the Fire Sermon, all 1,000 people listening to his teaching became totally enlightened. It was a *really* good talk! And it takes only about fifteen minutes to recite.… In the first part of the discourse, he goes through each of the six senses in a systematic way, beginning with the eye: the eye is burning, visual objects are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, the feelings of pleasure and pain and neutral feelings that arise based on the eye are all burning. He's laying out the damage that's caused within and around ourselves when our choices are guided by greed, hatred, and delusion.

After he finishes going through all the senses, he uses a disarmingly simple phrase: 'Seeing thus,' this indicates how the clear seeing of all this blazing fire and its causes is enough to turn the whole process around. Then he continues, '…the wise, noble disciple becomes dispassionate towards the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind,' and, in turn, dispassionate towards

sights, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily sensations, and thoughts and moods. Then, being dispassionate, the fires of rage die down and the heart becomes cool. The Pali word for to 'cool down' or 'become dispassionate' is *nibbindati*, which is related to the word *Nibbāna (Skt. Nirvāna)*. Cooling is the transformative element.

This teaching can also be thought of in terms of transforming the energy of fire – which in this case symbolizes things being out of control – into the energy of light, that which we can see by, as in the Buddha saying, 'Seeing thus'. There's still a vibrant energy, but it's been transformed from fire to light. When there is light, when there is true vision, when we really see what's going on, what we're doing, what others are doing, then we gain the capacity to bring the heart into alignment with what will be of benefit.

This change in the heart is the crucial thing, and cultivating mindfulness of our mental states or moods is one of the ways to bring that about, to 'see thus'. In the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, it is again extraordinarily simple how the Buddha spells it out: when we want to develop mindfulness towards a mind-state, then it's just a matter of bringing attention to that mind-state and knowing what it is. He says, 'To develop mindfulness of moods, one knows: This is the angry mind, it feels like this; this is the mind free from anger, it feels like this. This is the mind filled with passion, it feels like this; this is the mind free from passion, it feels like this. This is the mind filled with delusion, it feels like this; this is the mind free from delusion, it feels like this. Here's the expanded mind, it feels like this; here's the contracted mind, it feels like this. Here's the distracted mind, it feels like this; here's the focused mind, it feels like this.' It's also interesting that he doesn't say anger is bad and being free from anger is good. He doesn't say being passionate is bad and being free from passion is good. He doesn't say being concentrated is good and being unconcentrated is bad. He's completely neutral in that respect.

My teacher Ajahn Sumedho says something similar: 'It's like this' or 'This is the way it is'. When we bring attention to just knowing, I find for myself it can be one of the most helpful kinds of practice. 'Oh, this is the mind feeling angry. This is the mind feeling lustful. This is the mind feeling peaceful. Here's the mind being distracted'. But that which knows the

distraction is not in itself distracted. That which knows the mind is going crazy is not in itself crazy. Right?

The German monk Venerable Analayo came up with a phrase I really like: 'non-reactive awareness'. It's a non-ethical approach to the different aspects of mind. No commentary. No judgment of good or bad. 'Here it is. This is what's happening. It's like this'. There's a beautiful, clear distancing – a disentanglement from the mind-state. It's bringing the energy of mindfulness, of clear wisdom and attention to what is happening. We are taking the position of wisdom or knowing, which is an energetic quality in itself, and using that to help the heart really know what is going on.

In *Little Gidding*, which is part of his *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot writes:

> *The only hope, or else despair*
> *Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre –*
> *To be redeemed from fire by fire.*

And then, in the next verse:

> *We only live, only suspire*
> *Consumed by either fire or fire.*

He is using Christian imagery of the flame of the Pentecost ('The dove descending breaks the air with flame of incandescent terror'), which I would refer to as the fire or light of wisdom. I see the choice of 'pyre or pyre' as the funeral pyre that burns us up in our own loves and hates versus the fire of wisdom. 'To be redeemed from fire by fire' is to be redeemed from the fires of *rāga, dosa, moha,* (greed, hatred, delusion) by the light of wisdom.

So how do we actually practice and work with the mind in an inflamed and agitated state once we see what's going on? In the sutta, the Buddha says, 'Seeing thus, the wise noble disciple (or the alert student) *becomes dispassionate* towards the eye, towards visual objects, towards pleasurable and painful and neutral feelings associated with what is seen', and so forth with all the senses. First we become able to track our moods and know 'this is the feeling of anger', 'this is the feeling of the mind free from anger', and

so on. Then we recognize the *habit* of clinging, that feeling of tension when the mind grabs a thought, grabs a mood, grabs an opinion, grabs a physical sensation, grabs a piece of news, grabs an idea. It's the quality of taking hold, grasping and clinging, that fans the flames. 'Becoming dispassionate' means releasing our grasp.

I've been using the imagery of the energy of fire being transformed into light, but it's also interesting to look at how fire was viewed in the Buddha's time. *Nibbāna* literally means 'the going out of a flame' or 'the extinguishing of a fire', but why would the Buddha use that image as a fundamental spiritual symbol? When a fire's gone out, we say it's dead. Why would that be seen as transformative? The American monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu offers an explanation:

'Nibbāna, which literally means 'the extinguishing of a fire', derives from the way the physics of fire was viewed at the Buddha's time. As fire burned it was seen as clinging to its fuel in a state of entrapment and agitation. When it went out, it let go of its fuel, growing calm and free. Thus, when the Indians of his time saw a fire going out, they did not feel they were watching extinction. Rather, they were seeing a metaphorical lesson in how freedom could be attained by letting go.'

'The image of an extinguished fire carried no connotations of annihilation for the early Buddhists. Rather, the aspects of fire that to them had significance for the mind/fire analogy are these: fire, when burning, is in a state of agitation, dependence, attachment, and entrapment – both clinging and being stuck to its sustenance. Extinguished, it becomes calm, independent, indeterminate, and unattached. It lets go of its sustenance and is released. This same nexus of events, applied to the workings of the mind, is found repeatedly in canonical passages describing the attainment of the goal.'

In the I Ching, the thirtieth hexagram is called '*Li*: The Clinging/Fire', which also brings those two qualities together. And in the Pali language, the word for 'fuel' such as firewood is *upādāna,* and the word for 'clinging' is also *upādāna*. The quality of clinging is that which fuels the burning, that which keeps the mind habituated towards greed, hatred, and delusion. Clinging is what sustains the entrapment, and the fire going out – or the

transformation of fire to light, if you like – represents a letting go of clinging. Letting go of the painfulness of clinging is synonymous with freeing the *fire element* from entrapment in and attachment to its fuel.

There's a wonderful passage in Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta 37 where somebody asks the Buddha to summarize his teachings as briefly as possible. The Buddha responds, 'This is a summary of the whole teaching: *Nothing whatsoever should be clung to*. Having heard this, one directly knows everything; having directly known everything, one fully understands everything; having fully understood everything, whatever feeling is felt, whether pleasant or painful or neutral, one contemplates the changing nature of those feelings and their fading away, and one contemplates letting go'. Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of the most prominent teachers of the last century in Thailand, used to quote this passage quite often. He would say that you can summarize the entire teaching of the Buddha in four words; in Pali it's '*sabbe dhammā nālam abhinivesāyā'*, or in English, 'Don't cling to anything'.

When there is the understanding that 'nothing whatsoever should be clung to', the heart watches the experience of what we feel – our loves and hates, our moods and opinions – and recognizes its changing quality. Experience is in a continual state of arising and passing away. Seeing this clearly, we can then cultivate a quality of coolness. The heart lets the fires of greed, hatred and delusion go out, leading to the qualities of openness, stillness, spaciousness, unentanglement, abandonment and non-confusion in relationship to our experiences.

In that same sutta the Buddha then said that one who has developed a heart that's completely free from clinging, thereby removes the causes of anxiety, agitation, distress and alienation. The heart that's free from clinging is unagitated, and one whose heart is unagitated knows directly the perfect peace of Nibbāna here and now. He finishes by saying, 'Such a one has reached the ultimate end, the ultimate freedom, the ultimate goal and is unsurpassed in all the realms of gods and humans'.

It's extraordinarily simple: Don't cling to anything.

When we let go, when we relax, the qualities of peacefulness and clarity can be found. This letting go is not passive, it's not a matter of apathy or disengaging. It's learning how to engage in a way that is in accord with things. Another way to put it is learning how to *respond* rather than to *react*.

When we approach our experience from an entrapped, entangled, agitated state – from the place of clinging – then we react. If we see something we like, we chase after it. If we see something we dislike, we run away from it or attack it or oppose it or create an opinion about it. This is what I mean by *react.*

When we are mindful of our moods – 'Oh, this is really upsetting. I feel enraged about this. Oh, that's a hot one! Look at that' – then by that very recognition there's a space. There's an openness. There's a sense of circumspection. Then, out of that spaciousness, we are able to draw upon our intuitive wisdom to consider, 'What's the best way to respond? If there's something to say, then let it be said. If there's nothing to say, then leave it alone.' This is what I mean by *respond.*

This method, of bringing a non-reactive awareness to our moods, is precisely what allows us to respond rather than to react. And the difference between reacting and responding makes all the difference in the world.

Guided Meditation: Fire

Take a moment to notice: What's the body like? What's the mind like? What is your mood? Are you feeling heavy or light? Comfortable or uncomfortable? Hot or cool? Energetic or tired? How is it? There's no right or wrong place to start. Begin with what is here. This is the material we work with – this body, this mind. Just this. No more, no less.

Bring your attention into the body, feeling its presence, its weight, its strength, its energy, its heat. Draw the attention to the spine, inviting the body to sit in an upright way, the spine lengthening to its full, comfortable extent, and letting the rest of the body relax around it, soft and free from tension.

Relax the face and the shoulders, the chest and the stomach, letting the whole body settle, be at ease. Relax the legs, all the way down to the ankles and feet. Relax the arms to the tips of the fingers. Feeling the presence of the body. Alert. Energetic. Alive.

Now draw the attention to the feeling of the breath. Draw in the oxygen that combusts and brings energy into the body. Oxygen that enters the bloodstream, soaks into each cell, is transformed into an energizing, enlivening presence. Each in-breath vitalizes the body moment-by-moment, minute-by-minute. Without it, this life-force would fade. It is the fuel we need to keep this body alive.

We can use the energy that comes from our breath to burn chaotically, to create confusion and pollution and distress, to stoke greed and aversion and delusion. Or we can use the same fuel, the same vitality that comes from our breathing, from the energy of this life, to fuel kindness, compassion and wisdom.

Let the attention settle around the simple, natural rhythm of breathing. Feel the body inhaling and exhaling. For a few minutes, let that rhythm be the very centre of attention, helping to settle and calm the mind in this moment.

Now use the presence of the breath to cultivate a spacious, attentive quality. Into this spaciousness, invite a thought of some aspect of your own life or the world around you that you find particularly disturbing, in which you feel great despair – something that you feel great rage about or that triggers your feelings of anger and opposition. For a few minutes, give free rein to that particular mood, that particular passion. Let the mind get stuck in, consciously clinging to that memory, that feeling. Lean into it. Buy into the stories the mind tells, deliberately grasping the rights and wrongs, the pain and grief of what's been lost or destroyed or harmed. Bring those thoughts into the mind, and let it burn.

Next, with whatever passion the mind has taken hold of, let yourself fully know how it feels. The discomfort of clinging, what is it like? Without any commentary or qualification or blaming, just notice, how does that feel in the body? Where is it located in the body? Reflect: this is the feeling of anger. This is the feeling of grief or despair or rage. It's like this.

Let yourself consciously cling and know what the clinging feels like. Clinging feels like this. Sustain it. Know it.

Now allow yourself to let go, to relax the grip – not because you should or because someone says so, but just because it's hurting. Allow the letting go to come from a completely natural, common sense place. 'Why would I want to do that to myself? Why would I want to sustain that any longer?'

Let go, relax, release. Know the feeling of the fire's cessation, its calming, its ending. Let the out-breath carry it away – cooling, releasing, fading. Let that cessation carry the mood to its own natural ending point.

As the mood fades and the memories dissolve, the heart becomes free of clinging. Again, consciously, without commentary or judgement, notice how it feels. Experience the heart free from clinging. What is it like?

Peace is harder to focus on than hard-edged passion. Peace is less interesting than rage or grief, desire or aversion. See if you can sustain a quality of attention, noticing when the heart is open, spacious, free of clinging. How does this feel?

In the quality of ease, there's energy, alertness, total relaxation. There's brightness of vision but not the inflamed quality of greed or aversion. There's a coolness. In the moment that the heart is free of grasping, there is peacefulness, clarity, no sense of self.

The fire has let go of its fuel and is released – released and transformed into the light of wisdom.

Questions & Answers

Q: When faced with greed, hatred, and delusion, I often experience a sort of tunnel vision. How can I not get drawn down that tunnel but instead become aware.

A: More practice! One of the reasons why we practise meditation is to get used to the way the mind works, whilst we are in a benign situation. When

you're practising meditation by yourself in a quiet room in your home or at a yoga centre or on a retreat, then you're not out working in the field, so to speak. You're not directly face-to-face with those things you desire or are annoyed by. It's a benign situation. In the guided meditation I described – where certain thoughts or moods either come up on their own or you deliberately arouse them – you can get to know the habits of like and dislike, greed and aversion in a controlled situation. The oil spill is not in this room. The people you feel resentment towards are not in this room. The people you are in debt to are not in this room. The experience of those things is kept solely within the mental realm; you're dealing with memory, dealing with imagination. It's like a military exercise in which you're using blanks. The gun goes off – Bang! – but the bullets aren't real.

In meditation, you get familiar with how resentment works, how grief works, how anger works. It's like this. You get to know, 'Oh! It's just a fantasy.' You get familiar with the moods and the patterns of your experience without the karmic load of actually arguing with someone or getting into a conflict situation. You're genuinely working with those patterns; it's the same energy but on a much more manageable scale.

Then, when you're actually out in a 'real' situation – dealing with people who are criticizing you, or being drawn to something you desire – by having worked out those pathways and developed that familiarity, something in you will be much more able to see what's happening. This is the 'I-gotta-have-it' feeling. This is the 'I-can't-stand-it' feeling. This is the 'if-you-ask-me-my-opinion' feeling. You can take the position of wisdom: 'I know what this is.' You can be mindful of the mental state: 'This is a mood; this isn't anything that has to be bought into.' You're not suppressing it, and you're not buying into it. You're rather knowing it fully and completely as it is, as it comes into being, does its thing, says its piece and then fades away. The quality of responsiveness then guides your action. 'Is there something to be said about this? Is there something to be done here, or not? Do I actually need one of those?'

So, just do more practice.

Q: You mentioned ways of empowering oneself in response to the feeling of eco-anxiety – suggestions like cutting back on email, not shopping so much,

that kind of thing. But I'm still struggling with collective responsibility rather than piecemeal 'making myself feel better'. When I was recently talking to some young activists, they seemed to get very cynical when I talked about putting up my own solar panels or using my own bags at the grocery store. They said that's just what businesses want us to do – to feel individually responsible for this incredible environmental disaster. But by taking these individual actions, we're not really feeling outraged at the huge problems out there or taking a collective approach. It's like putting a small bandage on a huge wound.

A: That's a good point. There can be the thought, 'I'm doing my bit because I don't use plastic bags or I never drink bottled water. I've paid my dues. I'm clear.' As you say, maybe that's what big business is angling for. After all, I notice that the biggest environmental ads in magazines like *National Geographic* or *The Atlantic Monthly* or *Harper's* are always from big corporations like BP and Chevron, showing gloriously bucolic scenes, or happy turtles swimming through clear waters.

Certainly the bigger wound can be addressed at a broader political level but if our basic attitude is one of contention, of despair, of cynicism – if that's where we take refuge – then regardless of the changes we might be able to bring about on a broader social level, we will be bringing a negativity into the mix as well. To me, the way we work is the work we do. The medium is the message.

If we pick up even the most radically effective and most directly helpful activity with an attitude of aversion, fear, despair or resentment, that is necessarily going to disable the very efforts we are making, to some extent. This is how meditation and the spiritual dimension can help – by bringing the radical quality of alignment into the mix, seeing it's not just what we do but how we do it. Whether it's just saying 'No thanks, I don't need a plastic bag' or bringing about some big policy change in the government, those things can be both brought about through careful and attentive engagement.

I heartily encourage you to work on as broad a level as possible, but keep the attention focused on how you are picking it up. In every conversation, every footstep down the pavement, every engagement, every effort, every email you write, ask yourself, 'What do I want to say? How do I want to

say it? And where am I coming from?' Care and attention to those little details makes a difference. It's also what enables you to carry on for years and years doing effective work, rather than getting compassion fatigue and burn-out – or being totally impossible to live with! I know a number of situations in which someone was so busy saving the world that his family just walked out on him. Or a person is very sincerely trying to do everything she can to work on large-scale ecological issues while her marriage is breaking up and her teenager is melting down because her mum is too busy with other big projects to notice her.

The way we pick things up, what we set in place, and how we do things all have a huge effect, but this can be invisible to us. As our mind goes to the content of what we are discussing, the way we are discussing it becomes invisible. And, ironically, the more important the content, the more invisible the way we pick it up can be. That's what I see happening in myself. The more intense and emotionally loaded an issue is, the more the mind goes to the content rather than to the process. So we need to practise ways to bring our attention to the manner in which we work as individuals, in dialogues, or in groups. The more we do that – and invest it with a quality of genuine realism and wholesome ethical values – the more we will be of benefit in everything we do, whether it's using our own bags or changing the ways that BP and Monsanto and the government do their business.

4 Winds of Change

Air represents vibration.
It is the essential oscillatory quality of matter.
Visuddhimagga XI, 2

I shall breathe in contemplating impermanence ... I shall breathe out contemplating impermanence ... on that occasion one abides contemplating dhammas as dhammas – ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.
The Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing

The closer scientists look at matter, the more they see that it's entirely made of vibration.
Ajahn Amaro

Air – The gaseous realm, the atmosphere, the planet's membrane. The inhale and the exhale. Breathing out carbon dioxide to the trees and breathing in their fresh exudations. Oxygen kissing each cell awake, atoms dancing in orderly metabolism, interpenetrating. That dance of the air cycle, breathing the universe in and out again, is what you are, is what I am.
Gaia Meditation by John Seed and Joanna Macy

Air represents vibration. It is the essential oscillatory quality of matter. Just as all matter has some kind of crystalline form (earth), cohesive property (water), and temperature (fire), it also has a quality of vibration. The closer scientists look at matter, the more they see that it's entirely made of vibration. Looking down inside atoms, then subatomic particles, then quarks, we find 'strings'. Strings of *what* is not exactly clear, but according to string theory, the fundamental nature of all matter is just a vibrating string. Vibrating energy is the very foundation of the physical world – our bodies, the planet, the universe, the whole material realm. In Pali, this is called *vāyo-dhātu.* The *air element* represents that vibration.

But the *air element* is not represented only on a fundamental level by a theory about vibrating strings or energy. We also experience the *air element* directly; and how we experience the *air element* in the body is much the same as how we experience the other three elements. The earth element is found in the bones, muscles, and organs; the water element in the blood, the oil of the joints, and other bodily fluids; the fire element in the heat of the body and the energy of oxygen being burned and turned into the energy of our body. Similarly, the *air element* is found in the breath entering and leaving our lungs, as well as in the other gaseous elements moving through the body. More than that, the word for *breath* also means 'body energy'. It's *prāna* in Sanskrit, *chi* in Chinese, and *pāna* in Pali.

Along with representing the breath and vibration, the *air element* represents the cyclical quality of life and the world of forms – the movement of the planets, the turning of the seasons, the changing of night into day. That cyclical quality is also the quality of change, *anicca* in Pali. When the Buddha described the three primary characteristics of experience – whether mental or physical – the first was the property of change. Everything changes. This isn't news to anybody. We probably all figured that out when we were three years old. Everything changes, whether it's a thought or a feeling or even the universe. If it's a 'thing', it's in a constant state of change.

So the *air element* can also be seen as representing the first, and primary, characteristic of the way things are: change. This understanding is how air can be linked to the last of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, called *dhammānupassanā*, which literally means 'mindfulness of things in terms of reality', or seeing things in their essential nature. This is described in the Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing (MN 118). In it, the Buddha says:

'Monks, on whatever occasion one trains thus: 'I shall breathe in contemplating impermanence', or trains thus, 'I shall breathe out contemplating impermanence', or trains thus, 'I shall breathe in contemplating fading away', or trains thus, 'I shall breathe out contemplating fading away' . . . on that occasion one abides contemplating dhammas as dhammas – ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. Monks, that is how mindfulness of

breathing, developed and cultivated, fulfills the Four Foundations of Mindfulness'.

Being with the breath and watching the qualities of change draws the attention to change as an essential aspect of our experience.

When we contemplate change, however, it's not only by watching the breath come and go. We can also contemplate the qualities of change in terms of the natural world, for instance, with global climate change. We see signs of the melting ice caps or increasing year-round temperatures. My sister is a gardener in England; she said to me lately that she's now mowing people's grass right up to Christmas and starting again in February. That wasn't how it used to be. People are starting to plant olive trees in southwest England. The climate is warming up so much, and people who have a hands-on feel for the weather are really noticing the change. And when we experience this sort of change on the level of the global climate or of the ecosystem, then we can feel a sense of threat. There can be a feeling that things are falling apart or degenerating.

More often than not, my teacher Ajahn Chah used to translate *anicca* as 'uncertainty'. The word *change,* in a way, is describing the external, objective nature of a quality, whether it's a thought or a feeling or the planet or the day, but the subjective feeling of change is uncertainty. The feeling when the heart meets with change is the experience of not knowing what's going to happen next. We feel uncertainty. And when we're uncertain about what's going to happen next, we can experience that as threatening. Our uncertainty may then lead to anxiety and a sense of fear and internal tension. That's what Tenzin Chogkyi means when she talks about 'eco-anxiety'. What then becomes important is how we relate to the experience of change or uncertainty.

Essentially, *dhammānupassanā*, the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, means looking directly at change. If we relate to change and uncertainty from a self-centred perspective, then we will feel threatened. We'll become afraid of what's going to happen next. I speak as a former worrywart. I realized after a number of years of meditation that my basic relationship to life was 'if it exists, worry about it'. I noticed that when I'd sit down after finishing up some job, I'd feel only three or four seconds of relaxation then

the feeling would arise, ‘I’m sure I should be worrying about something.’ We start to hunt for something. We suddenly remember, ‘Oh, my goodness! I’ve got that shopping to do. I was going to write that email.’ We recognize the thing we think we should be worrying about, and then we feel almost relieved.

Or with eco-anxiety, worrying about all the possible devastating changes that will come with global warming becomes a source of chronic stress. It creates a sense of tension and fear that we then experience whenever we turn our attention to the planet. That stress also conduces to the desire to switch off and think, ‘I don’t want to feel that, I don’t want to hear that. I was depressed already.’ Notice that feeling; it’s a pulling away. That pulling away from what is threatening or even just uncertain is a very natural instinct for us.

The problem is that we don’t often notice we are relating to change from a self-centred perspective or understand why uncertainty feels threatening, painful or brings tension. Ajahn Chah would often ask us why the Buddha encouraged us to bring our attention to the quality of change. He exorted us to: ‘Develop mindfulness, pay attention and look at the quality of change, bring your mind onto that.’ Change and uncertainty have a different feeling when we experience them from a non-egoic perspective, from the perspective of clear seeing.

In one of his talks, Ajahn Chah explained:

> ‘If you know the truth of sensations, that is knowing the Dhamma. You let go of sensations, seeing that invariably, they are all uncertain.
>
> What we call uncertainty, here, is the Buddha. The Buddha is the Dhamma. The Dhamma is the characteristic of uncertainty. Whoever sees the uncertainty of things sees the unchanging reality of things. That’s what the Dhamma is like. And that is the Buddha. If you see the Dhamma you see the Buddha; seeing the Buddha, you see the Dhamma. If you know aniccam, (uncertainty), you will let go of things and not grasp onto them.’

The wise mind that sees uncertainty is the Buddha mind. So when we recognize, 'Oh! Everything changes, everything is uncertain – how could it not be that way?,' and relate to that from a place of wisdom, from a place of clarity, then we're bringing the heart into alignment with reality. We find that uncertainty is not a threat, it's a possibility. In a way, we are broadening our view. There's an opening of the heart to recognize: 'I haven't got the whole picture. My mood, my impression, my judgment is one perspective. There is more at play here than I can conceive'. This realization is conducive to an openness and a realism, and with that comes the possibility of genuine attunement.

Ajahn Chah described it like building a dam with a spillway. Recognizing the feeling of uncertainty – of our moods and opinions – is like having a spillway. It serves as a release when we're filled up with our hopes, our fears, our loves, our hates. Recognizing uncertainty is the spillway that lets off the overflow. It releases the extra energy so that the dam doesn't burst. The quality of recognizing changeability is what keeps things in perspective, it's what allows the dam to contain the water it's designed to contain. Ajahn Chah also said that the quality of recognizing uncertainty is what makes the heart truly noble and brings us into alignment with truth and wisdom.

Another aspect of wisdom is learning how to be content with our limitations. We can often have a strong sense of 'I can't do everything to save the world, therefore I'm guilty of causing the world to fall apart'. That's a bit of a psychological leap, but we do that, don't we? We often believe that if someone continues to suffer even after we try to help, then their suffering is our fault. Because we can't fix the *whole* thing, we look on ourselves as being guilty for being too weak. So one of the things that's most helpful is learning to recognize, 'This is as much as I can do. If I could do more, I would do more, but I can't. And I'm not going to create suffering in myself over what I can't do.'

This is a radical concept. It's a letting go of the guilt trip about the limit of our own capacity. Instead, we learn to do what we can and then not to make a problem out of what we can't do. That might sound like laziness: 'But I *should* try harder! Do more!' Really, though, it's not about trying hard as

much as it's about learning the limit of our strength. When we recognize our limits and work within them, then we are able to work far more effectively.

In the book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, there's an incident in which the father and his kid set out to climb a mountain. At some point, the father realizes, 'We're not going to get to the top and make it back to the bike by nightfall', and so he says, 'We've got to turn around'. But the kid says, 'No, Dad! You're such a wimp! We can do it! We can!' The father replies, 'No. We have to turn around'. He recognizes, yes, on an ideal level it would be great if we could make it to the top, but we can't; so what we do is we go back to the bike. That's not weakness. That's wisdom. Otherwise, they could have ended up stuck on the mountain and there would have been no kid and no dad to write the book!

So, when one is working to 'save the world', it's important to know your limitations and maintain a perspective that allows you to work effectively. Some people feel that in the face of so much pollution and other damage caused by our economic system, putting in energy-saving light bulbs is not really going to make that much difference. There's some truth to that perspective, but I also believe sewing some patches on my shoulder-bag and keeping it going for a little bit longer is doing a bit to help. In fact, I've had this same bag since 1986. Repairing and caring for things is of great benefit because there's a real sense of attention and concern that goes into it. It can be therapeutic. Tenzin Chogkyi writes about eco-therapist Linda Buzzell-Saltzman, who advises:

'Get involved in resisting that which isn't good. Work on the solution. Growing an organic garden, installing solar panels, or becoming a political activist – those things lower anxiety as well as bring about social change. ... Meditation or some other spiritual path helps to provide a calming perspective.'

A couple of examples come to mind from the monastic community on how to engage wisely to bring about change. Years ago, Ajahn Pasanno set up a couple of charities to address the huge amount of deforestation that was going on in Thailand. He saw that the local people were destroying their own forest and threatening their own long-term resources by cutting down

trees to sell the timber because it was an immediate cash crop. Rather than just wading in and proclaiming, 'I'm a spiritual teacher, and I don't think you should cut down the forest', he chatted with the local people and got a sense of why they needed the money and what was driving the logging. He also discussed what other resources they had and then brought in people who could help train the local community in using those resources in a different way. He got biologists and friends from the universities to teach them how to cultivate orchids as a local cottage industry and to weave local cotton into textiles that could be marketed in other parts of Thailand. The village women were able to develop the weaving skills they already had, and the men were able to use the farming skills they had. Ajahn Pasanno also helped set up organisations to oversee those projects and to train people and make connections in other parts of the country. In a village nearest to another one of our monasteries, the people took up broom making, and their brooms are now found all over Thailand. This is the result of Ajahn Pasanno's effort to help people see what skills and resources they could use to benefit themselves without depleting their local environment and their long-term security.

On a smaller scale, one of the things we have found most helpful to reduce the 'eco-anxiety' in our ecosystem at Abhayagiri Monastery is to hold a community meeting every two weeks. We're a very hierarchical outfit, with strict adherence to lining up by seniority, but once every two weeks we all sit in a circle – everyone from the newest bhikkhus all the way up to the senior ajahns – in a non-hierarchical gathering, never chaired by the abbot. We go around the circle and share three sets of things: our appreciations, our regrets, and our hurts. There's no cross-talk, so everyone can say what they want, sticking to their own experience.

Somebody might say, 'I've been having a difficult week because Ajahn Amaro said something to me back on Thursday, and he had that nasty look on his face. He really gave me a bad time'. The facilitator might ask a clarifying question, like, 'Well, are you sure that Ajahn Amaro was giving you a bad time, or was that just the impression you had?' and the monk might respond, 'Maybe that was just my *impression,* but he was certainly very curt, and I've been carrying around a nasty feeling'. Then that person would share an appreciation – 'I'm so glad to hear the wonderful Dhamma

talks so-and-so has given' – and finally his own regrets about his own shortcomings that month. Hurts, gratitudes, regrets.

In the second round, everyone has the option to speak; it's more 'free conversation'. I might respond to the monk I'd upset by saying, 'I'm really sorry to hear that you were upset by my comment. Actually, I was just in a rush to get to the bathroom, and I must confess I wanted to keep the conversation short, because there was an urgency! I was not trying to give you a bad time'. What we've found, even within a conservative and classic Theravadan outfit, is that this kind of communal meeting can end the tensions and difficulties within our own little ecosystem. A face-to-face and open heart-level meeting is incredibly helpful and beneficial in alleviating uncertainties. It's an opportunity to really 'air' things out.

So whether we take large-scale action or small-scale action, both are the very things that help to reduce our level of alienation and anxiety and strengthen the qualities of community and connection. Wisdom in both large and small scale actions – wisdom in *all* actions – is the way of the Buddha. The way of liberation.

Ven. Tenzin Chogkyi wrote about a 2009 survey in which the Sustainable Energy Institute asked people what they are looking forward to as they as they face environmental collapse. One person responded, 'An authentic life that is centred around *people* and not *things*. Revival of things spiritual and not material.' Another person wrote, 'Learning how to live with each other and within the larger community of our bio-regions and ecosystems in a way that is intimate, honest, humble and humanly and ecologically sustainable. That includes restoring viable community life, economic and ecological relationships and systems – living systems.' To this, Tenzin Chogkyi commented, 'What I hear in these responses is not negativity but a deep longing for the possibility of living lives in harmony with all of the Earth community and thereby experiencing the fullness of our humanity.'

When talking about change, it's important to remember that change can be for the *better*. It's important to recognize the possibility of things shifting into a more beneficial, equitable way. 'Oh, look at that.' Change needn't be seen as something threatening, change can bring with it possibility and the opportunity for goodness.

As was mentioned before, the *air element*, not only represents the gaseous realm and vibration but also the aspect of energy or *prāna.* This last example, of community meetings at Abhayagiri, shows what a difference it makes when our human energies are guided skilfully rather than destructively or chaotically.

Thus, when we contemplate the *air element* and *dhammānupassanā*, we are contemplating vibration, and prāna, energy – and it is crucial that we contemplate it is also crucial to include the capacity we have to steer our energies. Each of us as human beings has a wealth of energy at our disposal and when this is directed in harmony with the way things are, great good can emerge from each of our little lives.

Guided Meditation: Air

Take a moment to notice how you feel. What is your mood, the tone of your sensations, right now? Feel the body and the mood of the mind. How is it? What's present?

Invite the body to settle, to relax. Relax the legs, the shoulders, the face. Allow the spine to stretch, to grow to its full, comfortable extension so that the body can be alert and help the mind to be attentive.

Bring the attention to the *air element*, the breath entering and leaving this body of ours. It's an unrelenting cycle, the engine of the life-force itself. Take in the oxygen. Breathe in this precious element. Breathe out the carbon dioxide, the nitrogen, and the other gases in the air.

Sharing the air with each other, with the planet. This same oxygen has been breathed out by the trees and grasses that wrap the hills where we live. This carbon dioxide that we breath out is taken in by those same plants, forming their bodies.

Feel the body breathing. Let the cyclical quality, the rhythmic quality of the breath be at the very centre of your attention – the rhythm, the pace, the beat of your own life; the inhalation, the exhalation.

Then listen closely – behind the breath, prior to the breath, in the background of your hearing – there is a high-pitched ringing tone, an inner vibration. It's called the *nada* sound. *Nada* is the Sanskrit word for sound itself as well as the Spanish word for 'nothing.' See if you can hear this gentle, steady vibratory tone in the background. It's a continuous, shimmering presence, almost like white noise.

The nada sound, too, is a vibration, constantly modulating, its frequency way higher than the slow cycles of the breath. See if you can hear it. Allow yourself to rest in the hearing. Receive that inner sound, the nada. Attend to this vibration.

There's no need to try to figure it out or to write a story or a poem about it. Just let yourself rest in the quality of hearing, of attending. Let the sound, the vibration, this fine oscillation fill your attention, fill the space of awareness. Just listen. Know it.

Along with the rhythm of the breath and the vibration of the inner sound, hear the traffic off in the distance, the chirping of a bird, the sound of my voice. Notice feelings come and go in the body. Stray thoughts and ideas. Memories of the past, plans for the future – see them pop up and then disappear in awareness.

Now, see if you can bring your attention to 'changingness' itself. A feeling in the body arises and passes. The breath arises and passes. The sound of a car arises and passes. Bring the attention to the transiency of your object of meditation. Attend to the process of its arising and passing.

This is the essence of *dhammānupassanā,* contemplation of dhammas, looking at the self-less, changing quality of experience.

Feel and know the patterns of nature arising and passing; welling into being, doing their thing, dissolving.

Rather than focusing on the detail of that which is changing, rest in the appreciation, the participation in change. Just be that which is aware of change, of the uncertain. Rest in the knowing of change itself.

A sound arises and passes. A mood arises and passes. These words arise and pass. It takes a lot of effort to let go of the content, to relax the grip on the content, to notice the quality of change. It's a refined way, a reflective way of holding this moment.

Don't focus on happy or unhappy, but look at the change. Don't focus on pleasant or unpleasant, but notice the change. Don't focus on inside or outside, but notice the change.

When you make that shift in the heart, when there is that relaxation, notice what it brings with it. There's an easing. A gentling. It's changing. That's what it is. That's its nature. It's uncertain. Of course. How could it be otherwise? Ahh.

Questions & Answers

Q: Sometimes when I'm focusing on the nada sound, a kind of fear comes up following a sort of sensation that the molecules might not hold together if I keep my attention on the sound.

A: Well, they might not! But seriously… feelings of fear and anxiety can arise if we have a sense of personal control, like, 'I'm in charge here. I know what's going on.' When we open the mind up to something that is not so personal or under our individual control, then any fear is usually coming from the ego being threatened, like, 'I'm *not* in charge here. I *don't* know what's going on.' So the fearfulness you describe may be coming from the sense of 'I' or 'mine' being challenged. At least, when I have that kind of feeling, that's usually its source. This is why I said that when the ego meets the unknown what arises is fear. Instead, when the unknown is recognized or experienced from more of a heart level, what we experience is wonderment and a quality of mystery that is delightful rather than threatening.

One of the Upanishads begins with something like, 'Originally, all that existed was the mind of the absolute filling the great void. Then, in the mind of the absolute there arose the thought "I am". With the thought "I am" there arose fear. And with fear there arose desire.' With the 'I am' over

here, there must be a ‘that’ or ‘another’ over there, which leads to a feeling of threat. That leads to the arising of the desire to get rid of, or get away from that feeling of threat.

In cultivating a moment-to-moment awareness in meditation, look at the feeling of fear. That fear is also something that has arisen. It’s not necessarily something we have to believe in. We can simply recognize, ‘This is a fear feeling.’ We can take a little step back from it and recognize it as just another temporary event coming into being, doing its thing. We can ask, ‘What happens if I don’t buy into this fear but just know it as a feeling?’ Are we able to treat it more in an experimental way and from a basis of interest rather than believing in it or asking, ‘What am I going to lose? What’s going to be threatened or damaged here?’

Q: When we are observing everything that is arising and passing away, that’s another aspect of the mind. So it’s mind observing mind?

A: Exactly. The quality of awareness is being drawn upon to observe and to know all the aspects of the mind, the body, and the world. In a way, that’s what spiritual training is: learning to use the quality of awareness to know how the whole system of the mind works. It’s like using language to talk about the nature of language. We’re using the mental faculty to understand the mind, letting the mind be aware of its own nature.

People sometimes use the expression ‘I really like to be out in nature’. Well, how can you get away from nature? Our breathing, bone-framed body is part of nature. We *are* nature. That’s why I don’t really like the terminology ‘the witness’ or ‘the observer’ when speaking about cultivating awareness. ‘Unentangled participating’ is my favourite term lately. We can’t *not* be a participator. We *are* that mind. We *are* that awareness. So trying to extract an ‘observer’ and put it somewhere off in the corner looking down on the mind always feels slightly unreal. One of the reasons for the stress of the planet, the eco-destruction, is because of this abstraction of ‘man separated from nature’. We’ve lost our intrinsic connection, our inescapable participation. That’s what’s really happening to the planet and the environment.

I like Ajahn Chah's phrase 'Uncertainty is the Buddha'. He's riffing on a very famous teaching of the Buddha that says, 'One who sees me sees the Dhamma. One who sees the Dhamma sees me'. What he means is that if you see the Dhamma, it is as if you are in the presence of the Buddha. And if you truly see and apprehend the nature of the Buddha, then you are seeing reality, and that reality is crystallized in the truth of change and uncertainty. So that's why he says, 'Uncertainty is the Buddha'. He's bringing attention to when the heart truly sees reality, when we see with wisdom. When there's a pure, clear, unbiased, unconfused seeing, when we are 'being Buddha', then what is seen is the fundamental, mysterious nature of reality – the fluid uncertainty of nature. We can't conceive the way things are but we can realize it and attune to it.

What this means is that, even though we can't conceive it, we can be in harmony with it. It's rather like playing in an orchestra. We can be utterly in tune with the rest of the instruments even if we can't write the equations for the vibrations of the skins on the drums or the air in the trombones or the strings on the violins. When we recognize, 'Yes, it's all extremely mysterious', and remain open but not threatened, then our actions can flow forth from the quality of attunement and vulnerability. And in that openness and vulnerability, there is a possibility of empathizing with the world and others, with our capacities and limitations.

Q: I've certainly had the experience of things changing, but also I've had the experience of things not changing, like getting stuck in a rut. I wish sometimes things *would* change. How does this fit in with 'everything is change'?

A: That's a good point. But even that feeling of being in a rut has textures. Like with the inner sound, something that may seem to be continuous actually modulates constantly.

With certain things, there is a quality of continuity, or a karmic habit. There's a way we do things, a style, a familiar pattern. On one level, we may say something is not changing, but that's more of a broad-brush perspective. For example, maybe we have a habit of being irritable, and so we think, 'I'm such a crabby person. I'm critical and negative, and I really wish I wasn't like that.' Because that's a very frequent, habitual thought, we

think that's it's there all the time. Given any opportunity – Boom! – that's the rut the mind goes down, so we might think, 'I've got an irritability problem'. It can seem like that doesn't change if we've been like that for years.

But in a sense, we are just telling ourselves a story: 'This is always here, and this is who I am'. Instead, we can use the reflection on uncertainty to help ourselves loosen our habitual way of labelling things. We can say, 'I tell myself that story, but is that so?' Ajahn Chah teaches, as a meditation practice, to say to ourselves, no matter what arises, 'Not so!' or 'Is that so?'

I've certainly done this myself with my own mental habits. I used to think, 'I've got a fear problem. I'm anxious all the time.' When I was recently rereading a book I wrote twenty-five years ago about a walk I did through England, I couldn't believe the number of times I said I was afraid: afraid of the weather, afraid of walking through this village, afraid of what my walking partner was thinking. It was so normal to me when I wrote the book that I didn't even see it. Twenty-five years later it jumped off the page at me. I was a really frightened guy! When I saw that that fear was actually just a very heavily entrenched habit, I began to use the reflection 'Is that so? Is that a sure thing?' Then something in the heart would recognize, 'Oh, yeah. Right. That's just my favoured story.' I also used body-awareness practice with fear. I would bring the attention into the body, let the body relax and then ask, 'Okay, now what was it you were afraid of? What were you worried about?' In the moment when the body is relaxed and not feeding the fear with tension in the gut, or whatever it might be, then we realize, 'It was here, now it's gone. It's a cyclical, changing thing.'

One of the things that obstructs us more than anything is our habitual self-creation. I had my first hint of this years ago, when I was a psychology student, and the book *Scripts People Live* by Claude Steiner had a really big influence on me. Some of the scripts he had written out were exactly what my own mind said – it was eerie! The stories we tell ourselves, the way we judge ourselves and position ourselves, constitute our scripts. Then there are the different things we can do with our scripts. When I got to the last two he described in the book – we can 'flip out' of our script or 'tear up' our script – I thought, 'Yes! Why do I have to be an educated, middle-class

English person who gets a job, gets married, etc.?' That book is one of the reasons I went to Asia and became a Buddhist monk. What the author pointed out is that we are mostly completely unaware that we are following a script, let alone interested in finding out who wrote it or imagining we can change it.

When we recognize we have the capacity to rewrite our script, or start with a blank page, or make at least a few changes, we find ourselves far freer and able to function in the face of uncertainty. That's why I like to reflect on change not just as a quality of threat but as a quality of possibility. When we look at things in terms of Dhamma, the fundamental nature of things, there are a lot of possibilities that open up – riches we already possess that we don't realize we have. Sometimes things that we look upon as crises, problems or hindrances, can turn into being sources of blessings and great benefit.

Satipatthāna

The Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness

abbreviated and adapted

Thus have I heard: on one occasion the Buddha was staying in the Kuru country, near the town of Kammasadhamma. There he addressed the Sangha, saying this:

There is a direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and grief, for the disappearance of pain and distress, for the attainment of the Noble Path, for the realization of Nibbāna – that path is the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

What are the four? (i) You abide contemplating the body as merely 'body' – ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world. (ii) You abide contemplating feelings as merely 'feelings'... (iii) ...mind as merely 'mind'... (iv) ...mental qualities as merely 'mental qualities,' and in terms of Reality – ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world.

1. Contemplation of the Body

How do you abide contemplating the body as merely 'body'?

A • Mindfulness of Breathing

Sitting down in a suitably quiet place, you cross your legs, holding the body upright, and establish mindfulness before you.

Bringing attention to the breath, you are aware of whether the breath is short or long. You train yourself to breathe in and out conscious of the

whole body, and you train yourself to breathe in and out calming the whole bodily process.

In this way you abide contemplating the body as merely ‘body’ both internally and externally, both in yourself and in others. Or you abide contemplating the nature of arising and passing away in the body. Or mindfulness that ‘there is a body’ is maintained in you to the extent necessary for knowledge and awareness. Thus you abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

B • Mindfulness of the Four Postures

When walking, you know, ‘I am walking.’ When standing, you know, ‘I am standing.’ When sitting, you know, ‘I am sitting.’ When lying down, you know, ‘I am lying down.’ In whatever way your body is disposed, you know that that is how it is.

C • Mindfulness and Clear Awareness

When moving forwards or backwards you are clearly aware of what you are doing; when looking toward or looking away...; when bending and stretching...; in wearing your clothes...; in eating, drinking, chewing and tasting...; when urinating and defecating...; in walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep and waking up, in speaking or in staying silent, you are clearly aware of what you are doing.

D • Reviewing the Unattractive Qualities of the Body

Just as if there were a bag, with openings at both ends, full of various kinds of grain – such as wheat, rice, mung beans, kidney beans, sesame seeds and husked rice – and you were to open the bag, identify the different grains and reflect on them, so too you reflect on your own body. Consider that from

the soles of the feet up and down from the crown of the head, it is a sealed bag of skin, filled with unattractive things. Reflecting, 'In this body there are: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, muscles, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, membranes, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, stomach, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, mucus, oil of the joints, and urine.'

E • Contemplation of the Four Elements

You review your body, however it may be placed or disposed, in terms of it merely being comprised of the Four Elements, reflecting: 'This body consists only of the earth element, the water element, the fire element and the air element.'

F • The Nine Contemplations of Death

i) If you should see a corpse left in a charnel ground – one, two or three days dead – bloated, livid and festering, you compare your own body to that, reflecting: 'My body is of the same nature, it will become like that, such is its inevitable fate'...; ii) If you should see a corpse being eaten by crows, hawks or vultures, or by dogs, jackals or various other creatures...; iii) … a skeleton with flesh and blood, still connected by sinews...; iv) … a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, still connected by sinews...; v)… a fleshless skeleton, still connected by sinews...; vi) … bones scattered in all directions – a hand-bone here, a foot-bone there, a shin-bone here, a thigh-bone there, a spine here, a skull there...; vii) … bones whitened, the colour of shells...; viii) … bones piled up, more than a year old...; ix) … bones rotted away to a powder… In all of these cases you reflect: 'My body is of the same nature, it will become like that, such is its inevitable fate'

Similarly, in all of the ways mentioned here, you abide contemplating the body as merely 'body', and both internally and externally, and both in

yourself and in others. Or you abide contemplating the nature of arising and passing away in reference to the body. Or mindfulness that ‘there is a body’ is maintained in you to the extent necessary for simple knowledge and awareness. Thus you abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

This is how you abide contemplating the body as merely ‘body.’

2. Contemplation of Feelings

How do you abide contemplating feelings as merely ‘feelings’?

When you feel a pleasant feeling, you know, ‘I am feeling a pleasant feeling.’ Similarly, when you feel a painful or a neutral feeling, you know that’s what you are feeling too.

When you feel any pleasant, painful or neutral feeling, whether it is sensual and worldly, or non-sensual and refined, you know that’s what you are feeling.

In this way you abide contemplating feelings as merely ‘feelings,’ and both internally and externally, and both in yourself and in others. Or you abide contemplating the nature of arising and passing away in reference to feelings. Or mindfulness that ‘there is a feeling’ (or ‘there is this sensation’) is maintained in you to the extent necessary for simple knowledge and awareness. Thus you abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how you abide contemplating feelings as merely ‘feelings.’

3. Contemplation of Mind

How do you abide contemplating mind as merely ‘mind’?

You know a lustful mind as being lustful, a mind free from lust as being free from lust; a hating mind as hating, a mind mind free from hate as being free from hate; a deluded mind as being deluded, an undeluded mind as being undeluded; a contracted mind as being contracted, a distracted mind

as being distracted; a developed mind as being developed, an undeveloped mind as being undeveloped; a concentrated mind as being concentrated, an unconcentrated as being unconcentrated; a liberated mind as being liberated, an unliberated mind as being unliberated.

In this way you abide contemplating mind as merely ‘mind’, and both internally and externally, and both in yourself and in others. Or you abide contemplating the nature of arising and passing away in reference to mind. Or mindfulness that ‘there is mind’ (or ‘there is this mood’) is maintained in you to the extent necessary for simple knowledge and awareness. Thus you abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how you abide contemplating mind as merely ‘mind.’

4. Contemplation of Mental Qualities, in terms of Reality

How do you abide contemplating mental qualities as merely ‘mental qualities,’ in terms of Reality?

A • The Five Hindrances

You contemplate mental qualities as merely ‘mental qualities,’ in terms of Reality, with reference to the Five Hindrances. Thus, if there is sensual desire present within you, you know that, ‘There is sensual desire present within me.’ Or, if there is no sensual desire present within you, you know that too. You know how unarisen sensual desire comes to arise, how arisen sensual desire is abandoned, and how the future arising of sensual desire can be prevented. And you contemplate in the same way in reference to the other four Hindrances: ill-will, sloth-and-torpor, restlessness and doubt.

In this way you abide contemplating mental qualities as merely ‘mental qualities,’ in terms of Reality, both internally and externally, both in yourself and in others. Or you abide contemplating the nature of arising and passing away in reference to mental qualities. Or mindfulness that ‘there are

mental qualities,' that function in accordance with Reality, is maintained in you to the extent necessary for simple knowledge and awareness. Thus you abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how you abide contemplating mental qualities as merely 'mental qualities' that function in accordance with Reality.

B • The Five Aggregates

You contemplate mental qualities as merely 'mental qualities,' in terms of Reality, with reference to the Five Aggregates. You reflect: 'Such is form (the body), such is its origination, such its disappearance. Such is feeling... Such is perception... Such are mental formations... Such is consciousness, such is its origination, such is its disappearance.'

C • The Six Senses

You contemplate mental qualities as merely 'mental qualities,' in terms of Reality, with reference to the Six Senses. You know the eye, you know visible forms, you know the attachment that arises dependent on the meeting of the two. You know how unarisen attachment comes to arise, how arisen attachment is abandoned, and how the future arising of attachment can be prevented. And you contemplate in the same way in reference to the other five Senses: the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body and the intellect.

D • The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

You contemplate mental qualities as merely 'mental qualities,' in terms of Reality, with reference to the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. If mindfulness is present within you, you know it is present. If there is no mindfulness present within you, you know that it is not present. You know how the unarisen Enlightenment Factor of mindfulness comes to arise, and

how the complete development of mindfulness comes about. And you contemplate in the same way in reference to the other six Factors of Enlightenment: investigation-of-qualities, energy, joy, tranquillity, concentration and equanimity.

E • The Four Noble Truths

You contemplate mental qualities as merely 'mental qualities,' in terms of Reality, with reference to the Four Noble Truths. You know, as it really is: 'This is suffering'; you know, as it really is: 'This is the origin of suffering'; you know, as it really is: 'This is the cessation of suffering'; and you know, as it really is: 'This is the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering.'

In all of the ways mentioned here, you abide contemplating mental qualities as merely 'mental qualities,' in terms of Reality, both internally and externally, and both in yourself and in others. Or you abide contemplating the nature of arising and passing away in reference to mental qualities. Or mindfulness that 'there are mental qualities,' that function in accordance with Reality, is maintained in you to the extent necessary for simple knowledge and awareness. Thus you abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how you abide contemplating mental qualities as merely 'mental qualities,' in terms of Reality.

Conclusion

If you practise and develop these Four Foundations of Mindfulness for just seven years, there are only two outcomes possible for you: either Full Enlightenment (Arahantship) in this very life or, if there is some remnant of clinging, the state of a Non-returner.

Let alone seven years – if you practise them for six years... five... four... three... two years... one year... seven months... six months... five... four... three... two months... one month... half a month, let alone half a month, if

you practise and develop these Four Foundations of Mindfulness for just one week, there are only two outcomes possible for you: either Full Enlightenment or the state of a Non-returner.

This is what the Buddha said. The Sangha rejoiced and were delighted by his words.

Ānāpānasati

The Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing

abbreviated and adapted

Thus have I heard: on one occasion the Buddha was staying at Savatthi in the Eastern Monastery together with many well-known elder disciples.

Now on that occasion, on the full moon of the fourth month of the rains, the Month of the White Lotus, the Buddha was seated in the open air surrounded by the community of monks. Looking out over the silent community, he addressed them thus:

Mindfulness of breathing is of great fruit and of great benefit when cultivated and made much of. For when mindfulness of breathing is thus developed it brings the Four Foundations of Mindfulness to fulfillment; when the Four Foundations of Mindfulness are thus developed, they bring the Seven Factors of Enlightenment to fulfillment; when the Seven Factors of Enlightenment are thus developed, they lead to the fulfilment of Awakened Awareness and Liberation.

1. Mindfulness of Breathing

How do you cultivate and make much of mindfulness of breathing, so that it will be of great fruit and great benefit?

Sitting down in a suitably quiet place, you cross your legs, holding the body upright, and establish mindfulness before you.

A • First Tetrad – 'Breathing with the Body'

Bringing attention to the breath, you are aware if the breath is short.
Bringing attention to the breath, you are aware if the breath is long.
You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out conscious of the whole body.
You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out calming the bodily processes.

B • Second Tetrad – 'Breathing with Feelings'

You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out experiencing joy.'
You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out experiencing pleasure.'
You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out experiencing mental activity.'
You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out calming mental activity.'

C • Third Tetrad – 'Breathing with the Mind'

You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out experiencing the mind.'
You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out gladdening the mind.'
You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out concentrating the mind.'
You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out liberating the mind.'

D • Fourth Tetrad – 'Breathing with Wisdom'

You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out contemplating impermanence.'
You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out contemplating dispassion.'
You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out contemplating cessation.'
You train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out contemplating relinquishment.'

This is how you cultivate and make much of mindfulness of breathing, so that it will be of great fruit and great benefit.

2. Fulfilment of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness

How do you develop mindfulness of breathing so that it brings the Four Foundations of Mindfulness to fulfillment?

I • First Tetrad – Body

On whatever occasion you bring attention to the breath and are aware of whether the breath is short or long; when you train yourself to breathe in and out conscious of the whole body; and when you train yourself to breathe in and out calming the whole bodily process – on those occasions you abide contemplating the body as merely 'body,' ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world. For I describe the in-and-out-breath as one kind of body amongst all bodies.

II • Second Tetrad – Feelings

On whatever occasion you train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out experiencing joy'; or 'I will breathe in and out experiencing pleasure'; or 'I will breathe in and out experiencing mental activity'; or 'I will breathe in and out calming mental activity' – on those occasions you abide contemplating feelings as merely 'feelings,' ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world. For I describe the in-and-out-breath as one kind of feeling amongst other feelings.

III • Third Tetrad – Mind

On whatever occasion you train yourself, 'I will breathe in and out experiencing the mind'; or 'I will breathe in and out gladdening the mind'; or 'I will breathe in and out concentrating the mind'; or 'I will breathe in and out liberating the mind' – on those occasions you abide contemplating

mind as merely ‘mind,’ ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world. For I say that mindfulness of breathing cannot be fully developed if you are forgetful and lacking clear awareness.

IV • Fourth Tetrad – Wisdom

On whatever occasion you train yourself, ‘I will breathe in and out contemplating impermanence’; or ‘I will breathe in and out contemplating dispassion’; or ‘I will breathe in and out contemplating cessation’; or ‘I will breathe in and out contemplating relinquishment’ – on those occasions you abide contemplating mental qualities as merely ‘mental qualities,’ in terms of Reality, ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world. And since you have seen with wisdom the abandoning of hankering and fretting, you are then one who regards all things with equanimity.

This is how, when you cultivate and make much of mindfulness of breathing, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness are brought to fulfillment.

3. Fulfilment of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment

How do you develop the Four Foundations of Mindfulness so that they bring the Seven Factors of Enlightenment to fulfillment?

I • Mindfulness

On whatever occasion you abide contemplating the body as merely ‘body’ – ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world – then, on that occasion, unremitting mindfulness is established in you. In this way you are cultivating the enlightenment factor of mindfulness; which, thus developed, reaches fulfillment.

II • Investigation-of-qualities

Abiding mindfully in this way, you investigate and examine that quality with wisdom and embark upon a full enquiry into it. In this way, on whatever occasion you investigate like this on account of abiding mindfully, you are cultivating the enlightenment factor of investigation-of-qualities; which, thus developed, reaches fulfillment.

III • Energy

If you investigate and examine that quality with wisdom and embark upon a full enquiry into it, tireless energy will be aroused. In this way, on whatever occasion you arouse energy on account of investigating qualities, you are cultivating the enlightenment factor of energy; which, thus developed, reaches fulfillment.

IV • Joy

If you have aroused such energy, a refined joy arises too. In this way, on whatever occasion refined joy arises in you on account of having aroused energy, you are cultivating the enlightenment factor of joy; which, thus developed, reaches fulfillment.

V • Tranquility

If you are joyful, the body and mind become tranquil. In this way, on whatever occasion your body and mind become tranquil on account of a refined joy, you are cultivating the enlightenment factor of tranquility; which, thus developed, reaches fulfillment.

VI • Concentration

If your body becomes tranquil and you feel pleasure, the mind becomes concentrated. In this way, on whatever occasion your mind becomes concentrated on account of the body being relaxed and you feeling pleasure, you are cultivating the enlightenment factor of concentration; which, thus

developed, reaches fulfillment.

VII • Equanimity

When your mind is thus concentrated you regard all things with equanimity.

In this way, on whatever occasion your mind is concentrated so that you regard all things with equanimity, you are cultivating the enlightenment factor of equanimity; which, thus developed, reaches fulfillment.

The same pattern of progressive development applies with reference to the other three Foundations of Mindfulness – feelings, mind, and mental qualities, known in terms of Reality.

This is how you develop the Four Foundations of Mindfulness so that they bring the Seven Factors of Enlightenment to fulfillment.

4. Fulfilment of Awakened Awareness and Liberation.

How do you develop the Seven Factors of Enlightenment so that they bring Awakened Awareness and Liberation to fulfillment?

You cultivate all Seven Factors – mindfulness, invest-igation-of-qualities, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration and equanimity – by supporting them with seclusion, dispassion and cessation, and they all ripen in relinquishment.

This is how you develop the Seven Factors of Enlightenment so that they bring Awakened Awareness and Liberation to fulfillment.

This is what the Buddha said. The Sangha rejoiced and were delighted by his words.

Appendix

Eco-anxiety and ecopsychology

Ven. Tenzin Chogkyi

Notes for a presentation given at the Monastic Gathering 2009, The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, Talmage, CA

For people who feel an acute unease about the future of the planet, a small but growing number of psychotherapists now offer a treatment designed to reduce worries as well as carbon footprints: ecopsychology.

The idea behind it is that people's relationship with the Earth is crucial to their physical and emotional well-being. Any disruption in this relationship can lead to stress and anxiety. Like traditional therapy, ecopsychology examines personal interactions and family systems, while also encouraging patients to develop a relationship to nature. 'Global warming has added an extra layer of anxiety to what people are already feeling,' said Sandy Shulmire of Portland, Ore., a psychologist and practitioner of ecopsychology. Therapists like Dr. Shulmire use several techniques, like encouraging patients besieged by multi-tasking to spend more time outdoors and exploring how their upbringing and family background influence their approach to the natural world.

The word 'ecopsychology' was popularized in the early 1990s by, among others, the social critic Theodore Roszak, who wrote two books that explored the link between mental health and ecological health. Its practice now takes a variety of forms. Some therapists offer strategies for eco-anxiety in private sessions, or lead discussion groups for the conservation-minded. More than 150 therapists from Alaska to Uruguay are listed as practitioners at the International Community for Ecopsychology Web site (www.ecopsychology.org), and colleges and universities, like Naropa University in Boulder, Colo., and Prescott College in Tucson, Ariz., have started offering ecopsychology as a major, so the number of trained eco-therapists is likely to grow.

The mental health disorder has grown enough to gain the ‘eco-anxiety’ name. “It’s causing them to feel anxiety, it’s causing them to feel depression, it’s causing them to have insomnia,” said general practitioner Cynthia Knudsen of patients. Eco-anxiety is real, according to some psychologists, and it can really stress you out. As one eco-anxious reporter described it, “The sight of an idling car, heat-trapping carbon dioxide spewing from the tailpipe, would send me into an hours-long panic, complete with shaking, the sweats, and staring off into space while others conversed around me.”

Last year, an anxious, depressed 17-year-old boy was admitted to the psychiatric unit at the Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne. He was refusing to drink water. Worried about drought related to climate change, the young man was convinced that if he drank, millions of people would die. The Australian doctors wrote the case up as the first known instance of ‘climate change delusion.’

Therapists who treat eco-anxiety say their patients report a number of general anxiety symptoms, including loss of appetite, irritability, panic attacks, insomnia, nightmares, unexplained weakness and actual physical pain. Some people say they cry uncontrollably at the thought of the polar ice caps melting or of yet another species facing extinction.

Some people feel grief, while others experience helplessness or depression. Among the strangest of the reported symptoms is a ‘buzzing’ feeling, as though people’s cells [not their cell-phones] were alive and twitching. In its most extreme form, eco-anxiety might even spawn rage, psychologists say. Groups of so-called eco-terrorists have used destruction to bring about their aim of environmental change. They have, among other acts, set fire to a $50 million San Diego housing complex and taken baseball bats to Hummers to vent their eco-rage.

Ecopsychologist Michael J. Cohen developed an idea called the ‘Natural Systems Thinking Process’ (NTSP), which furthers the idea that our anxiety is rooted in a disconnect between our health and the health of the planet. Cohen says we need to reconnect with nature to heal our emotional discord.

General concern about the environment

While not everyone has this level of anxiety about the plight of the environment, surveys show many people are deeply concerned. According to a Gallup poll, 36 percent of Americans say they worry “a great deal” about global warming, and 35 percent say they believe it will “pose a serious threat” to them or their way of life in their lifetime. Another 26 percent worry “a fair amount.” When asked what will be “the most important problem facing our nation 25 years from now,” Gallup respondents listed the environment third, just behind “a lack of energy sources” and Social Security, and way ahead of terrorism, education, unemployment, race relations, and the budget deficit.

Studies also show that women are more worried about the environment than men.

Global warming has become a central issue in Australia. In 2007, a poll found 75 per cent of Australians were “very” or “fairly” concerned about climate change.

Causes of eco-anxiety

Though much of the anxiety centers on the possibility of extreme weather events, global warming will also transform the natural environment in a more gradual way, they say. These changes could have their own effect on mental health.

“It’s not all trauma,” said Carol North, a psychiatrist who runs the trauma and disaster program at the Dallas VA Medical Center. “Some of it’s a quiet decline of quality of life.”

Indeed, climate change may eventually deplete natural resources, make it more difficult for people to live off the land, and disrupt the global food supply.

“That will mean declining socio-economic status and quality of life across the world,” North said, and “depression, demoralization, disillusionment.”

In India and Australia, where severe droughts have already taken a toll on agriculture, researchers have noted an uptick in suicides among farmers.

On the other side of the globe, the changing Arctic climate is expected to make hunting and fishing far more difficult for the people who live there. The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment says that such changes threaten Inuit culture, and that increases in domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide may result.

Glenn Albrecht, director of the Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy at Australia’s Murdoch University, has examined the psychological distress people experience in the face of this kind of slow, but chronic, change in their environments. His work with Australian communities living in areas changed by strip mining or drought revealed that people felt disconnected from nature, were no longer able to find solace in it, and they felt helpless.

“Climate change is a massive driver of change in people’s home environment,” Albrecht said. “These changes become sources of chronic stress.”

Albrecht and his colleagues developed and verified an Environmental Distress Scale, designed to identify stresses related to the degradation of external environments.

Sarah Anne Edwards, PhD, LCSW, an ecopsychologist, has written:

“We are endowed with inborn energetic connections to this natural system and are thereby naturally attracted to those aspects of life that will simultaneously sustain and support both us and nature as a whole, but once this connection is severed, we lose our sense of what we want and need and our desires can be easily subverted.

“Disconnection from this web of natural attractions not only weakens us mentally and physically but also effects the system as a whole. In this sense

we can see how the vast majority of our personal, social, psychological and environmental problems are nature's way of calling our attention to this disconnection and attempting to bring us back into alignment. They are either a plea for help, a release from, or a sedative for, the lack of natural gratification that is our birthright as part of the natural world.

"In reviewing history, we can see that our disconnection from nature began long ago. As Jeremy Rikfin points out in *The End of Work,* the Industrial Revolution was especially alienating. Leading scientists, economists, educations, and philosophers of that era, like French mathematician Rene Descartes and later psychologist B.F Skinner, 'stripped nature of its aliveness, reducing both creation and all creatures, into mathematical and mechanical analogues.'

"Or as Thomas Carlyle declared in 1829, 'Were we required to characterize this age of ours by any single epithet we should be tempted to call it, the age of machinery in every outward and inward sense of the word. Men have grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand.'

"With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, nature was no longer our source of sustenance, but became a resource to be conquered and used for the progress of mankind. We no longer considered ourselves part of the nature world, but as adversaries to its forces that must be tamed, measured, dissected, and harnessed for our use."

The media are a big part of eco-anxiety, but psychologists say other elements are fueling our worry. Another large part of it is our growing sense of disconnectedness from family, friends and neighbors. When you're talking to no one but your computer, it's easy for your worries to spiral out of control. With so many environmental concerns occurring simultaneously around the world, it's also easy to get lost in the big picture and feel utterly helpless.

Today's problems seem beyond our individual or community control. Take global warming: sure, you can switch to a renewable energy supplier, buy a hybrid, or swap your old light bulbs and appliances for energy-efficient ones. And, though it's unlikely under the current administration, the federal government could raise car mileage standards, eliminate tax breaks for

SUVs, and fashion an energy policy that doesn't rely on fossil fuels. But then you have India and China on the horizon, two developing nations more concerned with economic development than greenhouse-gas emissions, and you wonder: What's the point in even trying? It's enough to keep you up at night.

Do the terrors of the modern world really account for soaring anxiety rates? Los Angeles-based 'eco-therapist' Linda Buzzell-Saltzman thinks so. "A lot of us have a form of secondhand trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder just from listening to the news," she says. "I've worked as a therapist for over 30 years and I've hardly seen anyone who doesn't have it."

A psychiatrist at UCLA believes that people are so anxious because the dangers that have arisen during recent decades are too new for us to have evolved neural processes and modes of behavior that might help us cope with constant warnings of disaster. "In our modern society, we've built a series of challenges that are not immediately life-threatening, but that create the same anxiety that a wild beast leaping at you would have done thousands of years ago," he says. And because of information overflow, "everybody's alarms are ringing all the time, but they're not turning off." All that ringing leaves us chronically anxious.

In examining data from more than 50,000 college students and children, Jean Twenge, of San Diego State University, found that increases in the anxiety rate were attributable to just two variables: The first is a decrease in what academics call social connectedness – the strength of our bonds with loved ones, friends, neighbors, fellow members of civic groups, religious congregations, and other organizations. The second factor, is "perceived threats to people's well-being… the crime rate, fear of nuclear war, AIDS."

There is one more factor predisposing individuals and societies towards anxiety, Twenge says. It's something psychologists call 'locus of control.' Having a so-called internal locus of control – "believing your actions matter and what you do makes a difference" – lowers anxiety levels. People with an external locus of control, who believe that "things like luck and powerful others determine what happens in the world," are more likely to become anxious.

If so, rising anxiety rates may result from globalization, that great autonomy-erasing, geopolitical trend of recent years. In an era when our lives are increasingly influenced by multinational corporate behemoths, powerful but remote politicians, and socio-economic trends we don't necessarily understand, Americans' locus of control has shifted from internal to external. Today, "kids as young as nine are saying, 'What I do doesn't matter,'" Twenge reports.

That's not necessarily a bad thing, if control lies in the hands of an eco-friendly steward. Numerous polls have found, for instance, that our environmental angst decreased during the Carter and Clinton administrations. "The more people have confidence that the government is handling the problem," says Riley Dunlap, an Oklahoma State University sociology professor who studies public attitudes about environmental issues, "the more public concern declines."

A treatment that research suggests may be the most effective against anxiety is cognitive-behavioral therapy, or CBT. Practitioners of CBT believe that psychological distress results from 'disordered thoughts' which are frequently characterized by illogic and hyperbole. ("My wallet is empty at the moment. I'm going to the poorhouse forever.") Correct the thoughts, and you eliminate the stress they produce. CBT produces outcomes at least as good as those experienced by individuals using anti-anxiety drugs. Perhaps the best-known CBT anxiety expert is Robert L. Leahy, Ph.D., author of *The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You* (Harmony Press, 2005). *The Worry Cure* deals mostly with the types of everyday anxieties experienced by Leahy's patients: the fear of financial ruin, of cancer and spousal abandonment even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Why, Leahy wondered, did his patients feel so much anxiety about things that might never come to pass?

The answer, he believes, is that worriers are likely to think that worry is efficacious. And sometimes they're right. Productive worry helps people accomplish tasks: If you're anxious about missing your train, you can check the schedule. By contrast, unproductive worry bogs down in vague, hard-to-answer questions.

According to Leahy, truly anxious people worry that they can't handle the emotions that might occur should the events they're afraid of actually happen. ("I'm anxious about global warming now because I think I might really lose it once the Atlantic floods Manhattan.") As a result, worriers try to prevent the realization of their fears through constant rumination. The problem is, that technique doesn't work.

Leahy says that anxious people often carry unconscious beliefs about who they are and what they must do for the world to run smoothly. ("If I think I'm unlovable, I'll try to be perfectly pleasing. If I think I'm a loser, I can try to defeat everybody.") And if I'm worried about the environment? "That person may have a core belief that it's all up to them." People suffering from eco-anxiety seem to have the impossible belief that it's all up to them to save the world.

"With global warming," Leahy continued, "there may be really negative consequences occurring now and in the future. The question is, would worry be the best strategy for coping with that information?" Worry isn't pathological as long as it's a first step in dealing with the problem, Leahy explained. "The next stage is, what can I do that's productive?"

Dr. Gavin Schmidt, who studies climate variability at NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies in Manhattan, attributes the rise in eco-anxiety to a naive public. He told reporters. 'The fact that people don't have a good grasp of how science thinking works, means they don't have a good grasp of what they should be skeptical about.'

"There's a scientific reason to be concerned and there's a scientific reason to push for action," Schmidt said, "but there's no scientific reason to despair."

Special high-risk group

Social psychologist Shalom Schwartz, professor emeritus at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, goes further. Over the course of several international studies, Schwartz has identified one group likely to grow anxious from their awareness of environmental problems: "People

concerned with the welfare of unknown others," he says. If you care about people you don't even know, you're more likely to find environmental crises upsetting. By contrast, Schwartz notes, people interested in power and fame are the least concerned about the environment.

Treatment

Eco-therapists help people resolve emotional issues not only through traditional psychotherapy, but by encouraging them to reconnect with the natural world through practices such as gardening, hiking, even walking in a city park. Buzzell-Saltzman calls it "understanding and healing the human-nature relationship."

Dr. Thomas Doherty, who teaches an introductory course to ecopsychology at the Graduate School of Education and Counseling at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, advises clients with global warming anxiety to recognize their concern about climate change and accept the limits of what they can control. He recommends 'fasts' from shopping, the news and sending e-mail, while cultivating calmer pursuits like meditation or gardening.

One eco-anxious reporter says that Leahy's theories resonated with him, and says, "Instead of keeping my anxiety caged inside my small household, in the past few months I've begun taking small but productive steps, like helping to start a group at my synagogue to address environmental concerns. Thanks to our efforts, the synagogue and 10 percent of its member households have switched to green power. As a result, almost 200 tons of carbon dioxide that would have been released into the atmosphere next year won't be. That won't save the world, but it's a start."

Buzzell-Saltzman, the eco-therapist, agrees that such individual action is therapeutic. "What you want is to not feel powerless," she explains. "Get involved in resisting that which isn't good. Work on the solution." Growing an organic garden, installing solar panels, or becoming a political activist – "those things lower anxiety" about the environment in general, she says. Meditation or some other spiritual path helps provide calming perspective. And finally, "get involved in a group of people for support. Because the

worst feeling is that you're all alone, having to deal with these dreadful things that are happening."

Leahy endorses social activism, but he also recommends being realistic about what you can do. "You have to accept that you don't know for sure what the outcome is going to be." Try hard, Leahy said, "to appreciate what's here."

The anxious reporter asked Leahy what to do when he was having panic attacks, and Leahy said,"Then watch what you're doing," he said calmly. "Say to yourself, 'I'm freaking out about this.'" Taking this step, he said, might lessen the emotional punch.

Eco-therapists will often recommend that their patients start an environmental group at their work, school or place of worship. Other ways to get involved are by installing low-energy lightbulbs throughout your home or by carrying reusable shopping bags with you to the grocery store. You can also make a donation to a fund that protects the environment, like the Sierra Club or the Audubon Society. Sometimes all it takes to relieve eco-anxiety is to escape from the purveyors of doom and gloom. Turn off the TV, shut down the Internet and accept that while you can't control everything, you can live responsibly.

Patients think they have to make big changes in their life, when the little things might be what matters most. Things like recycling, turning off lights, unplugging electrical items and carpooling can go a long way to ease the problem.

Is it any wonder that 49% of Americans have voluntarily made changes in their lifestyle over the past five years to earn less in exchange for a better way of life and that most of them are happy with this change? Now as we begin to wake up to the disconnect from our natural inclinations, more of us are in the process of making substantial changes. In addition the economy is forcing others of us to make similar changes, albeit sometimes unwillingly.

The same information that explains how our brains get hijacked into thinking we want the opposite of what we really want and need, also points the way for how we can take back our brains. If the neural networks that

define what we want are shaped by what we experience, we can re-shape them by reconnecting with nature and re-experiencing our natural desires and attractions. Organic psychologist Dr. Michael Cohen's Natural Systems Thinking Process (NSTP) is designed to enable us to do that. NSTP provides a specific way to go into nature where we can enjoy culturally unmediated experiences and thus rewire our brains to consciously reconnect our neural reward circuits to natural as opposed to artificially induced attractions.

One of the ways we can help is to reframe all the 'bad news' we're being bombarded with by the media as 'good news.' For example, we're hearing regular reports that shopping is down, people are using their credit cards less, borrowing less, learning ways to be more frugal, making things last, repairing our belongings, doing things for ourselves like making our own meals or entertaining family and friends at home. We're driving less, buying smaller cars, or riding a bike to work, traveling less or not as far. We're buying from local family farmers, volunteering to do more for others who need help, and using the library instead of the video store.

Such news is usually presented as a sign of how bad things are. We need to help our clients see that these changes are the very ones we all need to be making both for our own well-being and the well-being of the environment. They are signs that we are waking up, that we can adapt to the challenges ahead, and that we're beginning to move in the right direction. As we begin to think of such changes as an active choice instead of something being foisted on us, we immediately become more resilient and capable of moving on.

It is my wish that the New Year will bring a still greater awareness that 'eco-anxiety' is a normal and natural response to the unprecedented challenges we face across the globe but that we can reach out to others in our community, work together to respond responsibly, and when needed find help from nearby professionals who are aware of today's realities and work to marshall both the inner and outer resources we all need.

In the long term, we may also derive some psychological benefit from banding together with other citizens to mitigate the effects of global warming. Taking action might not only give us back a sense of our own

sense of efficacy against a powerful outside force, but also help us build community and social ties that offset stress, said Epstein and other specialists.

“Getting involved can be an antidote to the depression that can come from the overwhelming realizations that we have to face . . . ” Epstein said. “It can be empowering to realize that what you do is effective.”

LEAP, the Life Empowerment Action Program based in Sebastopol, California describes the two-pronged benefits of their Eco-Therapy program for the eco-patient:–

Eco-therapy works on two levels: The first is Earth-bound or Earth-centered, and is focused primarily on living sustainably for the benefit of the planet as a whole. On this level, being immersed in nature reminds us that we are simply a small part of a bigger picture, rather than a separate and dominant force. When we begin to see the earth and ourselves as one, it becomes natural for us to act sustainably. Only then do we realize that feelings of guilt, anxiety and despair result from our failure to act.

The second level is person-centered. The process of Eco-therapy focuses primarily on providing benefits to the individual. Contact with nature becomes restorative, a place for reflection and, for many, creates a place of spiritual connection grounded in a wider sense of belonging and presence. The beauty of Eco-therapy is that it usually leads to a feeling of interconnection and relationship and to a consciousness that recognizes that a healthy planet and a healthy individual are part of the same process – the process of sacred and authentic living.

Special problems in talking to spiritually-oriented people

Carolyn Baker, author of *Sacred Demise: Walking the Spiritual Path of Industrial Demise,* says, ‘I’ve noticed a common challenge in talking with my spiritually-oriented friends, colleagues, and clients about the needs for addressing the environmental, economic, and psychological aspects of

climate change and resource depletion. They consider such topics to be negative thoughts they don't want to contribute to.

Initially, admitting the reality of collapse is frightening and disheartening. People at first tend to become overwhelmed with fear or hopelessness or both. At that point, we can do one of two things: We can back off and process the facts in bits and pieces, interspersing doing so with living our everyday lives, doing things we enjoy with people we love, and savoring everything in life that nourishes us. Or, we can immediately engage one or more defense mechanisms in order to assuage our fear and cognitive dissonance.

The defense mechanism most frequently employed is denial, and unfortunately, some forms of spirituality are particularly useful in fostering denial because inherent in them is the assumption that accepting the demise of industrial civilization will drag one down into permanent depression, anger, hopelessness, or despair. While it is true that when first acknowledging collapse, one might experience such feelings, this does not guarantee that one must choose to take up residence in dark feelings, redecorate, change one's address, and permanently reside there.

Last month [April 2009], Oregon Peak Oil researcher and blogger, Jan Lundberg, put out a call to his readers to respond on three questions regarding collapse:

What we are acting toward?

What main outcome might we be looking forward to?

What do we relish leaving behind, as collapse begins or as it will be intensified?

What do we not want to leave behind unresolved; or, what needs to be done before it's too late to accomplish it?

This week, Culture Change published the results of the survey which I strongly encourage everyone to read. Here are a few responses:

- I look forward to the world breaking up “into small colonies of the saved” (Robert Bly). I look forward to a simpler, less neurotic life for me and my children. I would like to think that my children, while their chances of survival may be lower, their chances of happiness will be higher.

- The central change I would like to see is abandonment of the addictive, frenzied, exploitative American way of life in favor of a tribal, cooperative, relaxed way of life that puts responsibility toward other species and the Earth, as well as other human beings, first.

- An authentic life that is centered around people and not things. Revival of things spiritual and not material.

- Learning how to live with each other and within the larger community of our bioregions and ecosystems in a way that is intimate, honest, humble, and humanly and ecologically sustainable. That includes restoring viable community life, economic and ecological relationships and systems – living systems.

What I hear in these responses is not ‘negativity’ but a deep longing for the possibility of living lives in harmony with all of the earth community and thereby experiencing the fullness of our humanity.

Jung adamantly declared that “Mental illness is the avoidance of suffering.” He was not referring to meaningless anguish but suffering which we endeavor to make sense of so that our genuine human purpose may be revealed to us.

By studying the relationship between the natural environment and our mental, psychological and physical health, pioneering professionals in many fields from environmental psychologist Roger Barker to environmental educator Michael Cohen, entomologist Edward O. Wilson and Jungian analyst Marion Woodman are finding that this discrepancy arises because we are no longer attuned to the vast bioecological system of which we are apart.

Common threads of therapeutic approaches

Get in touch with nature.

Accept the limits of what you can control: while you can't control everything, you can live responsibly.

Be mindful of your feelings.

Take action, both large and small.

Get involved with a group of people for support.

Resources:

Eco-Anxiety: Breaking the Over-Consumption Habit. Sunday, January 25, 2009, Dr. Sarah Anne Edwards

Global Worrying The environment is in peril and anxiety disorders are on the rise. What's the connection? By Liz Galst, Plenty Magazine, Issue 11

When facing reality is not 'negative thinking.' May 31, 2009, By Carolyn Baker ©2009, Grassroots Press

Further resources

This book and many others from Venerable Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho, and their disciples are freely offered and available in various electronic formats as well as in print. You can find them via our monasteries and through the websites listed below, along with other resources such as audio talks, meditation instruction and retreats. Everything is free of charge, and everyone is welcome.

For books and audio:
www.forestsanghapublications.org
www.amaravati.org

For a list of Ajahn Chah community monasteries worldwide:
www.forestsangha.org

For further Theravada Buddhist literature including English translations of much of the Pali Canon:
www.accesstoinsight.org

Copyright

For the Love of the World

Amaravati Publications
Amaravati Buddhist Monastery
Great Gaddesden, Hertfordshire, HP1 3BZ
United Kingdom,

www.amaravati.org

Amaravati Publications is a part of The English Sangha Trust Ltd, UK
registered charity no. 231310

First published by Amaravati Publications 2013

This electronic edition published 2013

Digital Edition 1.0

ePub ISBN 978-1-870205-87-0

- Notice: For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the licence terms of this work.