



# Questions & Answers

ALBA Day of Practice 20 March 2021

'The Simplicity of Acceptance'



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## Relationships and attachment

*Could you talk a little about attachment as I am confused about its relevance to us as humans in a psychological sense. My understanding from Bowlby's theory of attachment is that from birth in order to develop secure attachment we require love and nurturing from our significant care givers. Has this attachment been a cause and condition of our difficulty letting go and if so why is secure attachment so important for us as children ?*



As human beings we are part of an evolutionary and developmental process.

Being cared for when young is essential for us in order to survive, physically and emotionally. The degree of safety and attachment that we experience in relation to our carers influences the degree of emotional resilience that we develop, resilience that is necessary for our later personal and social development. But however secure the attachment we may have had and developed, it will not prevent us from suffering.

The process of development, or *bhavana* as it is called in Buddhist terminology, involves an investigation into the cause of our suffering which turns out to be craving, or wanting things to be different than they are. We begin to recognise that we are burdened by our individual and collective habits and patterns of thinking and feeling, and by our attachments to those we care for because of what they give us, be it love or a sense of security. If we look at most of the relationships that we form as adults, we see that we are in them because of our personal needs and not because of unconditional love. But as we mature in our emotional and 'spiritual' practice we become less needy and more generous emotionally towards those close to us and to others, and in that sense we become less attached and emotionally dependent on them.

So the paradox is that in developing insight into *Anicca* (impermanence) and *Anatta* (no-self) we become increasingly selfless and naturally experience loving kindness towards others, compassion for their suffering, empathy with their happiness, all held in a field of equanimity which is based on our acceptance of the changing nature of reality.

## When it is difficult to accept

*You speak about accepting the difficulty of sitting with acceptance. Are there any methods and ways of supporting and encouraging the attitude of acceptance apart from meditation and aiming to let go? Could you perhaps speak a little more about this difficulty please?*

*Thank you.*

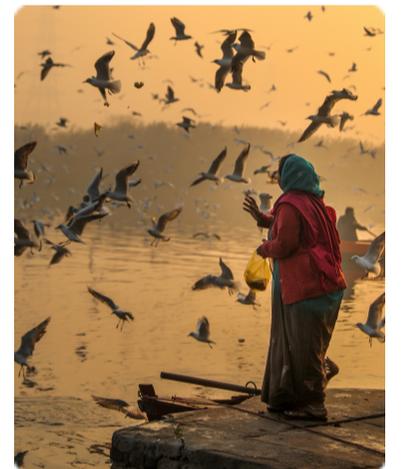
I would suggest patience and perseverance as being key elements in helping us develop acceptance, for we all have a natural resistance to experiencing what is unpleasant. We are happy to accept what we like, but not what we dislike, even if it is 'good' for us. If we are inspired by trust that it is possible to change, have the wisdom that recognises what is good for us and the energy and interest to put into our intention into practice, we will become more accepting, and as a result more skilful in our interactions with the world.



## Letting be or letting go?

*Is acceptance more of a letting be than a letting go? For me it has more of an emotional tone associated with loss and forgiveness which results in a stepping back and allowing.*

It's fine to call it a 'letting be'. It is a stepping back and allowing things to be, but not being passive in the sense of giving up and not bothering. In our 'letting be' we can know that the constant is our 'knowing' of what we are experiencing, and that what we are 'letting be' is the relentless arising and ceasing of phenomena, mental, emotional or physical. Accepting this allows the wisdom to manifest with which to respond.



## Accepting in the face of unfairness

*When accepting everything in life as it is, do we have to accept unfairness and suppression of a certain section in the society by powerful forces?*

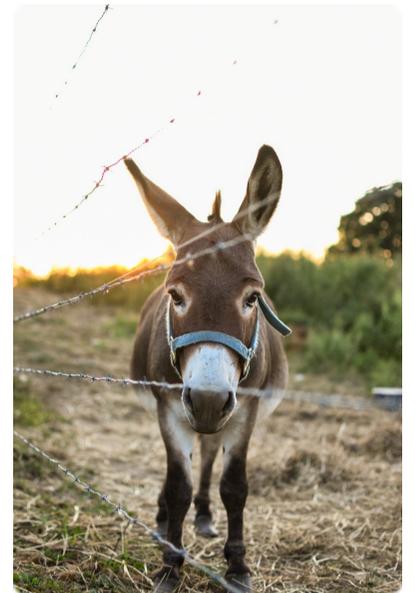
*e.g. The famous Buddhist Anagarika Dharmapala fought selflessly to protect Buddhism and sacred Buddhist places such as Bodh Gaya from outside forces. Was Anagarika Dharmapala's actions of not accepting the situation as it was at the time correct or not according to Buddhism?*

Anagarika Dharmapala accepted the fact that there was unfairness and suppression of a certain section in the society. He didn't encourage violence or aggression, he encouraged the teachings of the Buddha dhamma which encourages tolerance and acceptance of differences, whilst being quite clear about the uniqueness of Buddhist teachings and the benefits they offer.

Acceptance is often understood as meaning being passive or colluding and perhaps even agreeing with what is happening. But being passive, as in not doing anything or being silent, is only one of several possible responses. Full acknowledgement and acceptance of specific circumstances will decide the best response. We can accept what is happening and on that basis decide how best to act with right intention.

*There were plenty of other examples of Buddhist Monks fighting against forces to protect Buddhism. Were they correct according to Buddhism?*

It comes down to right intention. Anger begets anger, love begets love. Who is protecting what? What are the intentions behind our words and actions and what states of mind and actions is one generating in oneself. Each situation is unique, but the principle of right intention and harmlessness remains the same. As individuals we have to make a decision as to how we act, and we have to accept the consequences.



## How to accept when it's only going to get worse?

*How to accept something that is only going to get worse? That things will change but not in a good way? Is it to: Accept this and to continually accept at each step - be aware that life is a succession of acceptances? And how to accept that you can't change the way things are but only accept that this is the way it is ....without feeling like you are giving up?*

You have summed it up well. Accepting the way things are often simply highlights how much we are resisting what we are experiencing, which is itself suffering. As you say, life is a succession of acceptances in which there is often much suffering. It could be called the Path of Acceptance. 'Giving up' can be either a passive resignation to a situation, or an 'active' acceptance in recognising how things actually are. The suffering we accept on this path is transformative as we become more accepting of what we are so resistant to. As we become more at ease and more accepting of what we are experiencing, we become better able to manage and respond to what we experience in the conditioned world.

## Paramitha

*I have a question about how to cultivate acceptance. I've been strongly resisting a change in my life for the last few years. I recognise the resistance now (which is progress!) and want to accept the change, but the resistance remains....could you suggest any other practices I can use in addition to sitting with and accepting the non-acceptance, as we did this morning?*

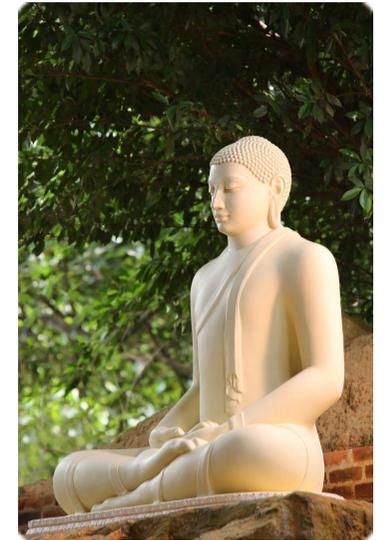
I would suggest living a balanced life and practicing the following: generosity, moral uprightness, renunciation of what you don't need and what doesn't help, reflection, effort in practice, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving kindness towards yourself and others and equanimity. This a summing up of the ten 'perfections' or paramitas. So, as you can see from that number of them on the list we all have plenty to get on with!



## Acceptance and letting go

*I was wondering, could you please say a little about the relationship between acceptance and letting go?*

Acceptance and letting go are simply two sides of the same coin, which is impermanence of all phenomena. Acceptance in practice, as an experience, is the emotional recognition and acknowledgement of impermanence. Letting go is not holding on to what we are experiencing, which is what we do when we resist change. Impermanence is the nature of the way things are.



## Anxiety and phobia

*Please can you offer advice regarding approaching specific phobias: a specific activity or exposure that arouses anxiety or self critical thoughts, to the point that these negative mind states may influence our ability to perform the activity well which in turn can lead to more anxiety and self criticism. An unhelpful feedback loop! Looking at our hearts or facing our feelings at such a time can be opening to anxiety and discomfort. Greater exposure may not be helpful. Depending on the activity it may not be appropriate to completely divert ones attention away from it to say the breath. Very happy with an email response or other anonymised response.*

We can only change at a pace that is manageable to us - there is little to be gained by forcing change or pushing too hard, which can, as you suggest, make things worse. A phobia is a protective mechanism against what is instinctively experienced as a threat, however irrational that fear may be. The fear of the threat needs to be acknowledged and understood. Addressing the phobia with the help of a friend or a counsellor, can be one of a number of resources that can helpfully support change.

If paying attention to the breath evokes tension and triggers anxiety, then it is best to move attention to something less threatening, perhaps going for a walk or engaging in another physical activity, or perhaps listening to some soothing music. Our task is to learn what triggers the phobias and to develop strategies and resources that gradually weaken the fears we might have and thus make them more manageable.



## Focusing on sensation

*Could you comment on the value/practice of focusing on sensation (as in the Goenka approach). To clarify my question: where you are caught in a disturbing narrative/experience, to move from the narrative to the underlying sensation.*

The practice of body sweeping helps us train our minds from getting stuck in mental narratives and mental proliferation generally. Our emotions are experienced as sensations in the body. Developing an awareness of the sensations as they arise and change and training oneself to sit with them irrespective of whether they are pleasant or unpleasant, helps us become more accepting and less impulsively reactive to them. Observing this phenomena with an increasingly accepting frame of mind allows us to investigate and gain insight into the cycle of becoming and ceasing, of cause and effect, with the added bonus of possibly experiencing different states of samadhi. With time the practice helps reduce the amount of thought and mental activity we experience and allows what thoughts we do have to pass more freely through the mind, rather than getting stuck to whatever the thought or narrative might be.



## Mental proliferation

*When a thought arises, how do you stop the desire or attachment that comes with it from arising, and then developing a story associated with it, sometimes leading to lengthy rumination? Why do we enjoy the drama of this mental process? Do we just put it down to human nature as applying to all people in general, or would it be more useful to try and identify a more specific cause or reason to help address this more fully at an individual level?*

We may not be able to stop the desire or attachment that arises, but we can train the mind to stay with the sensations and resist the temptation to be drawn into rumination and speculation which can be so tempting to engage in. We often stay with the ruminations because we get attached to them. They can be very familiar and in a perverse way be quite comforting on some level. The problem is we don't get anywhere with them.

It is natural for the thinking mind to try and find a solution and this will inevitably happen; but having made the connections and understanding the cause and results, it is best to shift the focus of attention on the sensations in the body that accompany the thoughts and staying with them as best we can in the knowledge that getting caught up in rumination does not deliver any solution. We learn the truth of this by trying and finding out for ourselves.



## Leading a meaningful life

*You said that a life of sensual pleasure is a life without meaning. There is a lot of truth in that. I have found that as my practice develops, so much of what I did in the past, or still do, appears meaningless. I feel the need to replace those activities with things that are meaningful. Apart from practices like meditation and studying the dhamma, what are the characteristics of a meaningful life?*

A meaningful life is “doing good, avoiding evil and purifying the heart” which neatly summarise the essence of what leads to true insight and peace. Each one of us has our own specific issues to address and resolve. A life guided and lived with these three basic principles leads to a gradual resolution of our individual issues allowing us to taste the fruit of one’s practice and enlightenment.



## Buddha nature and Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta

*What does the Thai tradition say about Buddha Nature - is it unborn and how does it relate to anatta, anicca and dukkha? Happy to get a written answer later.*

The Thai tradition does not generally use the term Buddha Nature, which is a term more generally found in the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. The term Buddha Nature can be misleading as it implies that there is a ‘thing’ called Buddha Nature, or an enlightened nature that we can possess. Not being a ‘thing’, enlightenment is not an object or even an entity, it is neither born or indeed unborn, although it is referred to as the latter. At the same time the term ‘Buddha Nature’ itself can be experienced as inspiring, implying as it does that on the conventional level, we are all potentially capable of enlightenment.

The characteristics of existence are traditionally referred to as the *tilakkhana*, or the three marks of existence, and are directly related to enlightenment where enlightenment is understood as seeing into and unconditionally accepting the three marks of existence which are, *Anicca* or Impermanence, *Dukkha* or Suffering, and *Anatta* or No-self.



## Transitioning from 'meditation' to the external world

*I am quite a beginner and feel very much the benefits of cultivating awareness in encounters with other people - rather than just reacting to how they make me feel, and mistaking that for reality, or getting lost in the perception I have of their personality/my personality. It is the hardest part of practice in my experience so far - not in meditation but in everyday experience where awareness is skittish.*

*I have been experimenting with keeping eyes a bit open in meditation, to stay softly aware, and ease the transition to being present to everything in everyday sensory existence (maybe) rather than feeling relaxed and open in meditation and then flooded as soon as the eyes are open. I think walking meditation may also be key, as a practice that is brought into the everyday.*

*I just wanted to share this and ask for instructions that may help?*

It sounds as if you have found a good balance in your meditation practice of reducing external sensory input whilst you are sitting and thus reducing the 'shock' of exposure to all the sensory input that potentially surrounds us as you re-enter into the 'external' world.

You could experiment and allow yourself to go a little deeper into your 'inner' practice and then as your meditation period comes towards an end, ensure that you make the transition out of your meditation slow and manageable, by noticing the sensations of the outside of your body, the touch of clothes on your skin, the sounds around you, the taste in your mouth, the sensations of any changes in breathing or heart rate, and importantly awareness of the space around you.

We each tailor-make our practice to optimise its benefits, bearing in mind that the 'direction of travel' is not only to benefit from disentangling ourselves from the complexity of our lives, but ultimately to realise the freedom that comes with insight.



## Walking meditation

*I really enjoyed the walk and just before we went I think Nick mentioned some meditation techniques for walking, but he didn't explain them in full. Could you tell us what those were, something about 30 and 20 steps I think, but I could be completely wrong! As we haven't attended before we didn't know what he was referring to. Happy for the reply to be by email if everyone else already knows what this is about.*

Walking is a good way to counterbalance sitting practice. Walking allows the body to relax and stretch a little as inevitably some tension builds up as we sit still for longer periods of time. Our bodies are designed for movement and require blood circulation and use of muscles. Whilst walking we apply the same principle of paying attention to the experience just as we do to when we sit. This in order to stay in the present as best we can.

We establish a distance of two points some 20-30 paces apart. Starting at one end we walk to the end of the walking path at a normal, or perhaps slightly slower pace than normal, all the while paying attention to the sensations of the body and the mind as we walk. At the end of the path we stop, pause, turn and pause, and then retrace our steps on the path.

Walking for the purpose of being present is not something we normally do. Without a fixed point to stop at at either end of the path, we could walk for miles without being aware of where we are at all, in other words, we get 'lost in thought'! Since the thinking mind almost invariably goes on its own 'walk' into the past and future or abstract ruminations as we are walking, the 'stop, pause' and then 'turn and pause', allows us to come back to the physical present.

Walking meditation practice complements our sitting practice, giving us something very simple and unexciting to do, allowing us to observe and investigate the nature of experience without getting lost in the distracting contents of our minds.

