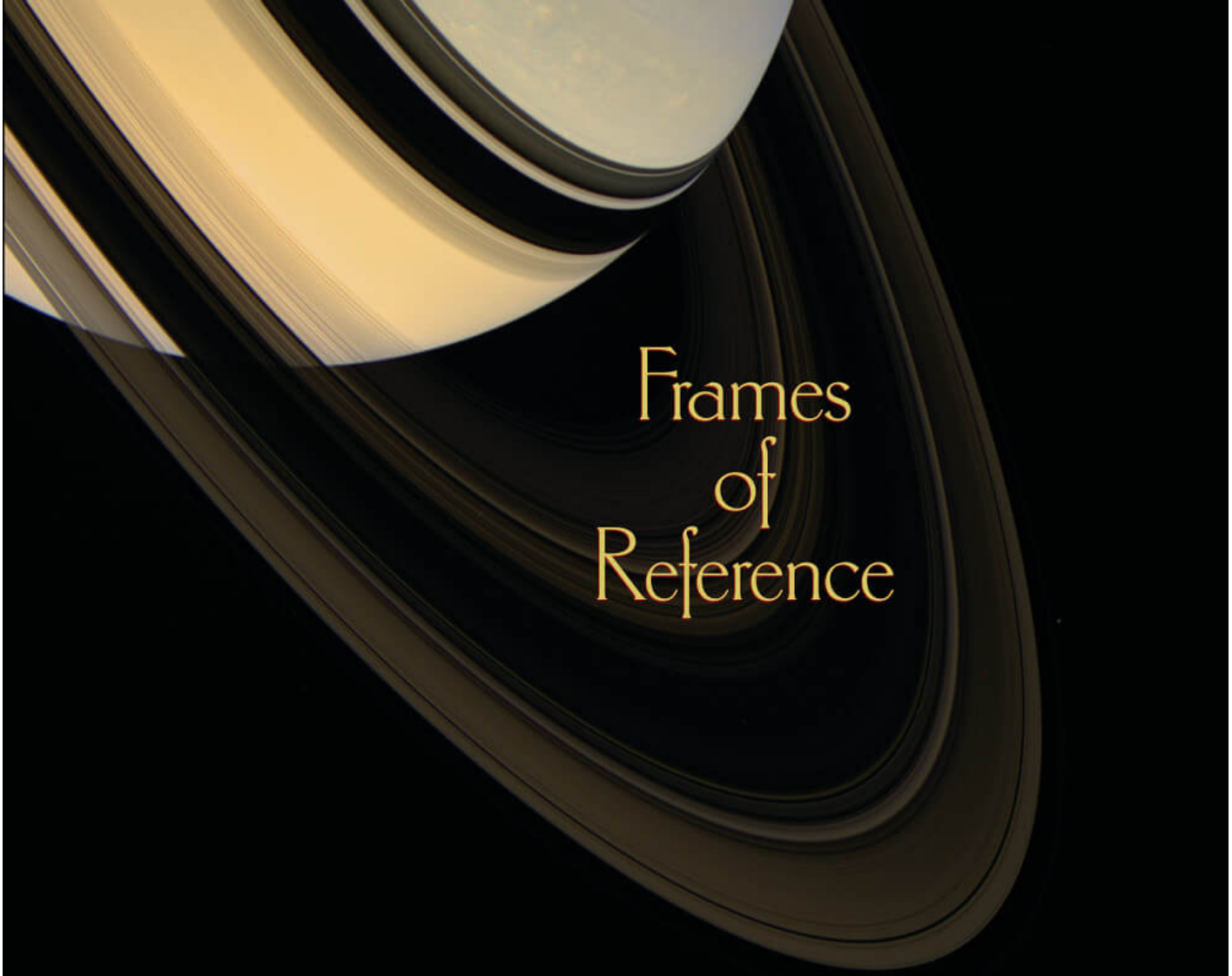

Frames of Reference

Frames of Reference

by

Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo
(Phra Suddhidhammaraṅsī Gambhīramedhācariya)

translated from the Thai by

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Foreword: About the Author

Phra Ajaan Lee was born in 1906 in a rural village in Ubon Ratchathani province, northeastern Thailand. At the age of 20 he was ordained as a monk at the temple in his home village, and there began his study of Buddhist doctrine and monastic discipline. He discovered, much to his distress, that life in his temple—as in most temples in Thailand at the time—had little to do with the practice of the Buddha's teachings. As he wrote later in his autobiography, 'Instead of observing the duties of the contemplative life, we were out to have a good time: playing chess, wrestling, playing match games with girls whenever there was a wake... Whenever I looked into the books on monastic discipline, I'd start feeling really uneasy. I told myself, "If you don't want to leave the monkhood, you're going to have to leave this temple."'

Soon after making this resolution, he happened to meet a monk of the wandering ascetic tradition founded by Phra Ajaan Sao Kantasīlo (1861 - 1941) and Phra Ajaan Mun Bhūridatto (1870 - 1949). Impressed both with the man's teachings and with his way of life, Ajaan Lee set out on foot to find Ajaan Mun and to become his student. He spent two very intensive periods studying with Ajaan Mun: once, that first year, in the forests of Ubon; and then again, four years later, at Wat Chedi Luang in Chieng Mai. Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao were unique in their time in teaching that the way to nibbāna was still open, and the training they gave their students in the direction of that goal was also unique, involving not only intensive meditation practice but also the total re-education of the student's character: his habits, values, and powers of observation.

As Ajaan Lee wrote in his autobiography, 'Staying with Ajaan Mun was very good for me, but also very hard. I had to be willing to learn everything anew... Some days he'd be cross with me, saying that I was messy, that I never put anything in the right place—but he'd never tell me what the right places were... To be able to stay with him any length

of time, you had to be very observant and very circumspect. You couldn't leave footprints on the floor, you couldn't make noise when you swallowed water or opened the windows or doors. There had to be a science to everything you did—hanging out robes… arranging bedding, everything. Otherwise, he'd drive you out, even in the middle of the Rains Retreat. Even then, you'd just have to take it and try to use your powers of observation.

'In other matters, such as sitting and walking meditation, he trained me in every way, to my complete satisfaction. But I was able to keep up with him at best only about 60 percent of the time.'

After Ajaan Lee's second period of training, Ajaan Mun sent him out into the forests of northern Thailand to wander and meditate on his own. Ajaan Lee's wanderings eventually took him through every part of Thailand, as well as into Burma, Cambodia, and India. Of all of Ajaan Mun's students, Ajaan Lee was the first to bring the teachings of the forest tradition into the mainstream of Thai society in central Thailand. In 1935 he founded a temple, Wat Paa Khlawng Kung, in a cemetery near Chanthaburi, on the southeast coast; and in 1955 he founded Wat Asokaram in a marshy area at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River on the outskirts of Bangkok. He drew students—monks and lay people, men and women—from all levels of society and all walks of life. In 1957 he was given the ecclesiastical rank of Chao Khun, with the title Phra Suddhidhammarańsī Gambhīramedhācariya. He passed away in 1961.

Even in his last years, though, he continued to retreat regularly into the forest. To quote again from his autobiography: 'Living in the forest, as I like to do, has given me a lot to think about… It's a quiet place, where you can observe the influences of the environment. Take the wild rooster: If it went around acting like a domestic rooster, the cobras and mongooses would make a meal of it in no time… So it is with us: If we spend all out time wallowing in companionship, we're like a knife or a hoe stuck down into the dirt—it'll rust easily. But if it's constantly sharpened on a stone or a file, rust won't have a chance to take hold. So we should learn always to be on the alert…

‘Living in the forest, the mind becomes confident. The Dhamma you’ve studied—or even that you haven’t studied—will make itself clear, because nature is the teacher. It’s like the sciences of the world, which every country has used to develop amazing powers: None of their inventions or discoveries came out of textbooks. They came because scientists studied the principles of nature, all of which appear right here in the world. As for the Dhamma, it’s just like science: It exists in nature. When I realized this, I no longer worried about studying the scriptures and I was reminded of the Lord Buddha and his disciples: They studied and learned from the principles of nature. None of them followed a textbook.’

‘For these reasons, I’m willing to be ignorant when it comes to texts and scriptures. Some kinds of trees sleep at night and are awake during the day. Others sleep by day and are awake by night.’

Introduction

This book on the frames of reference is based to some extent on my own thoughts and opinions. In some spots it may not be directly in line with the original texts, because my primary aim has been to get to the heart of the matter so that it can be conveniently put into practice. Those who hold zealously to the texts may feel that what I have written is wrong; but as for me, I feel that whoever is able to practice in line with what is written here will find that it can be taken as a guide to the true principles of concentration, discernment, and release. To hold to the texts isn't wrong, but they should be held to discerningly, just as in medicine: A doctor who thinks that the only way to cure a fever is to drink a concoction of boiled neem and quinine leaves is wrong. Some doctors may add the leaves of other trees and make it into a powder; some may make a concentrated extract; others may vary the dosage. In the same way, when practicing the Dhamma, to go no further than the texts may in some cases be wrong. Actually, any path that abandons defilement and brings relief from suffering is right. The value of medicine lies in its ability to cure disease; the value of a method of practice lies in its ability to abandon defilement. As far as I can see, there is nothing wrong with any method that has been found to work. In the end, all such methods must follow the basic principles of virtue, concentration, and discernment, and differ only as to whether they are crude or sophisticated, direct or indirect, fast or slow.

Now, I don't want to set myself up as an absolute authority of any kind. Thus, I want you, the reader, to use your own discernment. Take whatever passage seems right for you as a basis for your practice. There is no need to follow the entire book. Simply focus on a single point, and that will be enough. Once you have mastered an important point, all the other sections will come together and connect right there.

When you are ready to meditate, you should try to find a quiet, solitary place to assist in your practice of the frames of reference. Otherwise, your practice won't go smoothly, because solitude is desirable for all spiritual seekers in general. Just as a person who wants to look at his reflection in the water will be able to see himself clearly only when the water is still, with no wind rippling across the surface, in the same way, a person who wants peace that is subtle and profound has to conduct himself in this manner.

Or to put it another way, there has to be external peace and quiet before internal peace will arise. When both forms of peace are present, you will know and see the Dhamma as it actually is. So when you put this form of meditation into practice, you should first say your chants and pay respect to the Buddha in whatever way you are accustomed to, and then begin sitting in meditation. You are sure to obtain genuine results in line with what I have written here.

If there is anything defective or wrong in this book, I trust that the reader will show me forgiveness, for I'm not much of an expert when it comes to the texts. I've simply learned a few parts, and put them into practice.

One more point: This practice of training the heart is very important in that it forms the source of all goodness and merit; and whatever is the source of goodness and merit deserves special care and attention. The heart is a vessel for all that is good. When the heart is pure, any meritorious actions you may perform externally will truly foster happiness. External merit is like a tasty curry. If it's served in a filthy dish, then even though the curry may be delicious, the person eating it won't want to eat his fill because of the filth. But if the dish is clean and the curry delicious, the person eating is likely to eat with confidence to his heart's content. In the same way, if the heart is clean, it will find itself attracted to performing externally meritorious actions. It will always be ready to make sacrifices, because in every case it will taste the nourishment of its goodness.

Not only that, a clean heart also forms the path for release from stress and suffering, leading ultimately to nibbāna. Those who are to reach the paths *(magga)* and fruitions *(phala)* leading to nibbāna will

do so by way of the heart. If the heart isn't trained, then no matter how much external goodness you may have, you won't be able to reach nibbāna. Nibbāna can be attained only by training the heart in the practice of virtue, concentration, and discernment. Virtue forms the basis for concentration; concentration, the basis for discernment; and discernment, the basis for release. Concentration is especially important because it forms the basis for discernment and intuitive understanding *(ñāṇa),* which are the crucial factors of the path. You can't do without concentration. If concentration is lacking, you can gain nothing but jumbled thoughts and obsessions, without any sound support.

Concentration is like a nail: and discernment, a hammer. If the nail isn't held firm and straight, the hammer will strike it only hit-or-miss, and the nail will never get through the board. For the heart to penetrate the world and get through to the highest Dhamma, it must take a firm stance in concentration so as to give rise to intuitive understanding. Intuitive understanding can occur only to those who have centered the mind in concentration. As for discernment, it's something we all have, but if it lacks intuitive understanding, it can never get beyond the world.

For this reason, we should all take an interest in the factors that form the path leading beyond suffering and stress to abundant wellbeing.

If you have questions about any part of this book, please feel free to ask at any time.

The merit coming from the writing of this book, I ask to dedicate to all those who have felt inspired to help pay for its printing costs so that it can be distributed freely as a gift of Dhamma. May the power arising from this gift bear them fruit, so that whatever they aspire to that is upright and just may succeed in bringing them happiness in every way.

Phra Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo

Wat Paa Khlawng Kung
(The Shrimp Canal Forest Temple)

Chanthaburi, 1948

Frames of Reference

An explanation of the four frames of reference, which are—for those who put them into practice—a means for freedom from defilement:

I. Kāyānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna: being mindful of the body as a frame of reference.
II. Vedanānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna: being mindful of feelings as a frame of reference.
III. Cittānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna: being mindful of the mind as a frame of reference.
IV. Dhammānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna: being mindful of mental qualities as a frame of reference.

In order to use these four frames of reference as a means for centering the mind, you must first familiarize yourself with the following three qualities. Otherwise, you can't say that you're standing firm on your frame of reference. The truth of the matter is that the translations given above are too narrow—for in dealing with the frames of reference, mere mindfulness isn't enough. When it's not enough, and yet you keep being mindful of the body, you will give rise only to feelings of pleasure and displeasure, because the duty of mindfulness is simply to keep remembering or referring to an object. So in developing the frames of reference, you have to know your tools for remembering—

1. *Sati:* mindfulness; powers of reference.
2. *Sampajañña:* alertness. This has to be firmly in place at the mind before sending mindfulness out to refer to its object—such as the body—and then bringing it back inwards to refer to the heart.
3. *Ātappa:* ardency; focused investigation, analyzing the object into its various aspects.

This can be illustrated as follows: The body is like a sawmill. The mind is like a drive shaft. Alertness is the pulley that spins around the drive shaft in one spot. Mindfulness is the belt that ties the mind to its object, not letting it slip away to other objects. Ardency—focused investigation—is the saw blade that keeps cutting the logs into pieces so that they can be of use. These three qualities must always be present for your practice of centering the mind to succeed.

Now we will discuss the work to be done, the objects for which focused investigation, alertness, and mindfulness are responsible, each its separate way. The objects are four—

1. The body *(kāya),* which is a conglomeration of the four properties of earth, water, fire, and wind.
2. Feelings *(vedanā):* the experiencing of such sensations as pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain.
3. The mind *(citta),* which is what stores up the various forms of good and evil.
4. Mental qualities *(dhamma):* conditions maintained within you, such as the skillful and unskillful qualities that occur mixed together in the mind.

These are the four things for which you must be responsible.

I. THE BODY

The term 'body' here refers to conglomerations of the four properties, both those that have consciousness directing them and those that no longer do, but that still appear to the eye. Both sorts are termed physical bodies *(rūpa-kāya).* Bodies can be considered under three aspects—

A. The inner body: your own body.
B. Outer bodies: the bodies of other people.
C. The body in and of itself: the act of focusing on an aspect or part of the body, such as the breath, which is an aspect of one of the four properties. This is what is meant by the body in and of itself.

The body, whether inner or outer, is simply a matter of the four properties. Now that you know your duties, you have to perform them properly. *Sampajañña:* Keep your alertness in place, right at the mind within. You don't have to direct it anywhere else. *Sati:* Your mindfulness has to be all-round. In other words, refer inwardly to the mind and then out to the object—in this case, the physical body—and then watch after the mind and its object to make sure that they don't slip away from each other. *Ātappa:* Focus ardently on investigating the physical body, analyzing it into its various aspects. This can be done in any of five ways:

1. Investigate the 32 parts of the body, beginning with the hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, etc. Make a thorough survey and evaluation. If this method doesn't calm the mind, go on to—

2. Investigate the various repugnant aspects of the body, beginning with the fact that the body is a conglomeration of all sorts of things. In other words, it's a burial ground, a national cemetery, filled with the corpses of cattle, pigs, ducks, chickens, sour, sweet, greasy, salty, gathered and aged in the stomach, filtered and distilled into blood, pus, decomposing and putrid, oozing throughout the body and coming out its various openings: this body, which all of us in the human race care for without ceasing—bathing it, scrubbing it, masking its smell—and even then its filth keeps displaying itself as ear wax, eye secretions, nasal drip, tooth tartar, skin-scruff, and sweat, always oozing out, filthy in every way. What it comes from is filthy, where it stays is filthy (i.e., in a cemetery of fresh corpses, or even worse—we've probably buried hundreds of different kinds of corpses within ourselves). If you look at the human body, you'll see that its characteristics are ill-matched and incongruous. Its smell is something really offensive. If looking at the body in this way doesn't give rise to a sense of dismay and detachment, go on to—

3. Investigate the in-and-out breath. When the breath comes in long, be aware of the fact. When it goes out long, be aware of it. When you first begin dealing with the breath, start out by sending your attention out with the out-breath and in with the in-breath. Do this two

or three times, and then let your attention settle in the middle—without letting it follow the breath in or out—until the mind becomes still, paying attention only to the in-and-out breath. Make the mind open, relaxed and at ease. You can settle your awareness at the tip of the nose, at the palate—if you can keep it centered in the middle of the chest, so much the better. Keep the mind still, and it will feel at ease. Discernment will arise; an inner light will appear, reducing distractive thought. Now observe the behavior of the breath as it swells and contracts—in long and out long, in short and out short, in short and out long, in long and out short, in heavy and out light, in light and out heavy, in light and out light. Focus on making a thorough investigation into these different modes of breathing, without letting the mind move along with the breath. Do this until it gives rise to a sense of mental calm. If, however, this method doesn't make you calm, go on to—

4. Investigate the four properties: earth, water, wind and fire. The parts of the body that feel hard are the earth property. The parts that feel liquid are the water property. The energy that flows through the body is the wind property; and the warmth in the body, the fire property. Imagine that you can take the earth property out and pile it in a heap in front of you, that you can take the water property out and pile it behind you, that you can pile the wind property in a heap to your left, and the fire property in a heap to your right. Place yourself in the middle and take a good look at the body, until you see that, when taken apart in this way, it vanishes into nothing, into ashes—what they call 'death'—and you will come to feel a sense of dismay and detachment. If, however, you don't see any results appearing, go on to—

5. Consider the fact that the body, once it's born, leaves you exposed on all sides to the steady onslaughts of old age, illness, and death. Ultimately, you are sure to be torn away from everything in the world. The body is always displaying its nature—

Anicca: It's inconstant, unstable, always shifting precariously about.

Dukkha: It's hard to endure.

Anattā: It's not you, yours, or anyone else's. You didn't bring it with you when you came, and can't take it with you when you go. When you die, you'll have to throw it away like an old log or a piece of kindling. There's nothing of any substance or worth to it at all.

When you consider things in this way, you'll come to feel a sense of dismay and detachment that will make the mind steady, still, and firmly centered in concentration.

These five activities are the duties of your focused investigation, fighting to see the true nature of the physical body. As for mindfulness, it has to follow its own duties, referring to the object under investigation, at the same time referring to the mind within. Don't make reference to anything else. Keep check on whether or not you have your mind on what you're doing: This is alertness. Keep track of your mind, observing it at all times to see in what ways it might be acting or reacting on you. Keep your alertness always in place, right at the heart.

All the activities mentioned here are aspects of taking the body as a frame of reference. Whether you are dealing with the inner body, with outer bodies, or with the body in and of itself, you have to use the three qualities mentioned above. Only when you have them fully developed can you say that you are developing the great frame of reference *(mahā-satipaṭṭhāna).*

Normally, mindfulness is a quality we all have, but when it lacks alertness, it falls into wrong ways, becoming Wrong Mindfulness. But when you can follow the methods outlined above, you are sure to develop a disinterested steadiness of mind. You will come to feel a sense of dismay and detachment that will make the mind quiet, calm, and unperturbed. This is the ladder of liberating insight *(vipassanā-ñāṇa),* leading to nibbāna, which people of wisdom and experience have guaranteed:

nibbānaṁ paramaṁ sukhaṁ

Nibbāna is the ultimate ease.

This ends the discussion of keeping the body in mind as a frame of reference.

II. FEELINGS

The word ‘feeling’ refers to the experiencing of sensations that arise from one’s own actions, or kamma. There are three sorts of feelings: inner feelings or moods, outer feelings, and feelings in and of themselves.

A. Inner feelings, in terms of how they feel, are of three kinds —

1. *Sukha-vedanā:* good moods; a carefree sense of ease or well-being in the mind.
2. *Dukkha-vedanā:* bad moods; a feeling of sadness, irritation, or depression.
3. *Upekkhā-vedanā:* neutral moods, during intervals when happiness and sadness are not appearing.

B. Outer feelings are also of three kinds —

1. *Somanassa-vedanā:* pleasure or delight in objects of the six senses—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas; becoming attracted to and pleased with these things as they come into contact with the heart.
2. *Domanassa-vedanā:* displeasure or discontent that arises from contact with objects of the senses such as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, etc., as they appear to the eye, ear, nose, tongue, etc., and strike one as unsatisfactory or undesirable.
3. *Upekkhā-vedanā:* a feeling of indifference or neutrality as one comes into contact with sights, sounds, etc.

These feelings are called outer feelings because they are connected with the external sense media.

C. Feelings in and of themselves: This refers to the act of focusing on any single aspect of the above-mentioned feelings. In other words, you don't have to be particular. Whenever pleasure arises, for example, set your mind on investigating it. Keep it firmly in mind. Watch after it to see that it stays within you, and that you stay within it. Don't let your frame of reference slip away and change—and don't let any hopes or wants arise in that mental moment at all. Then use your powers of focused investigation to look into the truth of the feeling; and alertness to watch after the mind, to make sure that your awareness stays in place. Don't allow the mental current that causes stress to arise.

The cause of stress first arises when alertness is weak and the mind vacillates. The vacillation is called craving for not-becoming *(vibhava-taṇhā)*. As the movement becomes stronger, a mental current arises and goes straying out. The current that strays out is craving for becoming *(bhava-taṇhā)*. When it comes across a thought or sensory object and grabs hold, that's called craving for sensuality *(kāma-taṇhā)*. For this reason, you should watch after the mind to make sure that it stays with its one object, its feeling of pleasure. Don't let any other preoccupations get involved. Keep your mindfulness and alertness firmly in place, and then make a focused investigation of the truth of that feeling. Only when you do this can you say that you are making use of feelings in and of themselves as a frame of reference.

By and large, whenever a mood or feeling arises, we tend to give rise to various hopes or desires. For instance, when a good mood arises, we want that sense of wellbeing to stay as it is or to increase. This desire gives rise to stress, and so we receive results contrary to what we had hoped for. Sometimes a bad mood arises and we don't want it, so we struggle to find happiness, and this simply piles on more suffering. Sometimes the heart is neutral—neither happy nor sad, neither pleased nor displeased—and we want to stay that way constantly, or else we start to think that staying neutral is stupid or inane. This gives rise to more desires, and we start to struggle for something better than what we already are.

When this happens, we can't say that we're firmly based on our frame of reference—for even though we may be mindful of the fact that a good or a bad or a neutral feeling has arisen, we're not beyond it. This shows that we lack the three qualities that can nurture and support mindfulness in becoming a factor of the Path. In other words, start out with alertness firmly established, and then use mindfulness to connect the mind with its object. Don't let the mind slip away from the object, and don't let the object slip away from the mind. Keep mindfulness firmly in reference to the object, and watch the mind to make sure that it stays fixed on its one object. As for the object, it's the responsibility of your focused investigation to keep track of whatever aspect of feeling may appear: inner or outer; happy, sad, or neutral.

1. For instance, when pain arises, what does it come from? Investigate it until you know its truth. What does pleasure come from? It's the duty of your focused investigation to find out. In what mental moment does neutrality occur? It's the duty of your focused investigation to keep watch until you really know. Whatever feelings may arise, inner or outer, are the responsibility of your focused investigation. You have to use your powers of analysis to burn into whatever spot a feeling may arise. This is the first round in your investigation.

2. The second round: Watch the arising of feelings in the present. You don't have to follow them anywhere else. Tell yourself that whatever may be causing these feelings, you're going to focus exclusively on what is present.

3. Focus on the fading of feelings in the present.

4. Focus on the passing away of feelings in the present.

5. Stay with the realization that feelings do nothing but arise and fall away—simply flowing away and vanishing in various ways—with nothing of any substance or worth. When you can do this, you can say that your frame of reference is firmly established in feelings in and of themselves—and at that point, the Path comes together.

If we were to express this in terms of the factors of the Path, we'd have to do so as follows: The alertness that constantly watches after the mind, keeping it at normalcy, making sure that it doesn't fall into

unskillful ways, is virtue. The mindfulness that keeps the mind connected with its object so that it doesn't slip away to other objects, is concentration. The focused investigation that penetrates into each object as it arises so as to know its true nature clearly—knowing both arising and disbanding, as well as non-arising and non-disbanding—is discernment. These three qualities have to arise together in a single mental moment for the Path to come together *(magga-samaṅgī)*, and then the Path will function on its own, in line with its duties, enabling you to see clearly and know truly without having to let go of this or work at that, work at this or let go of that, let go of the outside or work at the inside, work at the outside or let go of the inside or whatever.

When all three of these qualities are gathered together, you can deal with any feeling at all—past, present, or future; pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—because when these three qualities are fully developed, they all connect. This is why I made the comparison at the beginning: The mind is like a drive shaft. Alertness is like a pulley spinning in place around the drive shaft. Mindfulness is like the belt that keeps the mind and its objects from slipping away from each other. Focused investigation is like the saw blade that works back and forth, cutting each object to pieces—which is what is meant by *'bhagavant.'*

Only a person who has the discernment to see in line with the truth in this way can be said to have fully mastered the use of feelings as a frame of reference.

III. THE MIND

In using the mind as a frame of reference, there are three aspects to deal with:

A. The mind inside.
B. The mind outside.
C. The mind in and of itself.

'The mind inside' refers to a state exclusively in the heart unrelated to any outer preoccupations. 'The mind outside' refers to its

interaction with such outer preoccupations as sights, sounds, etc. 'The mind in and of itself' refers to the act of singling out any aspect of the mind as it appears, whether inside or out.

As for the modes of the mind inside, there are three—

1. *Rāga-citta:* a mental state infused with desire or passion.
2. *Dosa-citta:* a sense of inner irritation and displeasure.
3. *Moha-citta:* a cloudy, murky, or confused state of mind, in which it is unable to consider anything; in short, delusion.

The mind outside is divided into the same three aspects—states of passion, irritation and delusion—but these are said to be 'outside' because once any of these aspects arises, it tends to go out and latch onto an outer preoccupation that simply serves to further aggravate the original state of passion, irritation, or delusion. The mind then doesn't clearly or truly understand its objects. Its knowledge goes off in various directions, away from the truth: seeing beauty, for instance, in things that aren't beautiful, constancy in things that are inconstant, pleasure in things that are painful, and self in things that are not-self.

All of these things are aspects of the mind outside.

'The mind in and of itself' refers to the act of singling out any one of these aspects of the mind. For example, sometimes passion arises, sometimes irritation, sometimes delusion: Whichever aspect may be arising in the present, single it out. With your alertness firmly in place, be steadily mindful of that aspect of the mind, without making reference to any other objects—and without letting any hopes or wants arise in that particular mental moment at all. Then focus unwaveringly on investigating that state of mind until you know its truth. The truth of these states is that sometimes, once they've arisen, they flare up and spread; sometimes they die away. Their nature is to arise for a moment and then dissolve away with nothing of any substance or worth. When you are intent on examining things in this way—with your mindfulness, alertness, and powers of focused investigation firmly in place—then none of these defilements, even though they may be appearing, will have the chance to grow or spread. This is like the baskets or jars used to cover new lettuce plants: If no one removes the

baskets, the plants will never have a chance to grow, and will simply wither away and die. Thus you have to keep your alertness right with each mental state as it arises. Keep mindfulness constantly referring to its object, and use your powers of focused investigation to burn into those defilements so as to keep them away from the heart at all times.

To put this another way, all of the mental states mentioned above are like lettuce or green-gram seeds. Mindfulness is like a basket. Alertness is the person who scatters the seeds, while the power of focused investigation is the heat of the sun that burns them up.

So far, we have mentioned only bad mental states. Their opposites are good mental states: *virāga-citta*—the mind free from the grip of passion; *adosa-citta*—the mind free from the irritation or anger that can lead to loss and ruin; *amoha-citta*—the mind free from delusion, intoxication, and misunderstandings. These are skillful states of mind *(kusala-citta),* which form the root of all that is good. When they arise, maintain them and observe them so that you can come to know the level of your mind.

There are four levels of good mental states—

1. *Kāmāvacara-bhūmi:* the level of sensuality.
2. *Rūpāvacara-bhūmi:* the level of form.
3. *Arūpavacara-bhūmi:* the level of formlessness.
4. *Lokuttara-bhūmi:* the transcendent level.

1. *The level of sensuality:* A mental state arises and connects with a skillful object—any sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensation, or idea that can form the basis for skillful mental states. When it meets with its object, it becomes happy, joyful, and glad. (Here we are referring only to those sensory objects that are good for the mind.) If you were to refer to the Heavens of Sensual Bliss as they appear within each of us, the list would run as follows: Sights that can form the basis for skillful mental states are one level, sounds are another, and same with smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. Together they form the six levels of heaven on the sensual level.

2. The level of form: A mental state arises from thinking about *(vitakka)* a physical object that serves as the theme of one's meditation; and then analyzing *(vicāra)* the object into its various aspects, at the same time making sure that the mind doesn't slip away from the object *(ekaggatārammaṇa)*. When the mind and its object are one in this way, the object becomes light. The mind is unburdened and can let go of its worries. Rapture *(pīti)* and pleasure *(sukha)* arise as a result. When these five factors appear in the mind, it has entered the first jhāna—the beginning stage in the level of form.

3. The level of formlessness: The mind lets go of its physical object on the level of form, but is still attached to a very subtle mental notion —the jhāna of infinite space, for instance, in which you are focused on a sense of emptiness and awareness with no physical object or image passing into your field of attention, so that you are unable to know its full range. What has actually happened is that you have curled up and are hiding inside. This isn't the kind of 'going in to know' that comes from finishing your work. It's the 'going in to know' that comes from wanting to run away. You've seen the faults of what arises outside you, but haven't seen that they really lie buried within you—so you've hidden inside by limiting the field of your attention.

Some people, when they reach this point, believe that they have done away with defilement, because they mistake the emptiness for nibbāna. Actually, it's only the first stage in the level of formlessness, and so is still on the mundane level.

If you seriously want to know whether your mind is on the mundane or the transcendent level, then observe it when you turn your awareness inward and make it still—when you feel a sense of peace and ease that seems to have no defilements adulterating it at all. Let go of that mental state, to see how it behaves on its own. If defilements can reappear, you're still on the mundane level. Sometimes that mental state remains unchanged through the power of your own efforts, but after a while you become unsure of your knowledge. Your mind has to keep fondling, i.e., making a running commentary on it. When this is the case, don't go believing that your knowledge is in any way true.

There are many, many kinds of knowledge: The intellect knows, the heart knows, the mind knows, consciousness knows, discernment knows, alertness knows, awareness knows, unawareness knows. All these modes are based on knowledge; they differ simply in how they know. If you aren't able to distinguish clearly among the different modes of knowing, knowing can become confused—and so you might take wrong knowing to be right knowing, or unawareness to be awareness, or knowledge attached to suppositions *(sammuti)* to be freedom from suppositions *(vimutti)*. Thus you should experiment and examine things carefully from all angles so that you can come to see for yourself which kind of knowledge is genuine, and which is counterfeit. Counterfeit knowledge merely knows but can't let go. Genuine knowledge, when it goes about knowing anything, is bound to let go.

All three levels of the mind discussed so far are on the mundane level.

4. *The transcendent level:* This begins with the path and fruition of entry into the stream to nibbāna. Those who reach this level have begun by following the threefold training of virtue, concentration, and discernment on the mundane level, but then have gone on to gain their first true insight into the four Noble Truths, enabling them to free themselves from the first three Fetters *(saṁyojana)*. Their minds are thus released into the stream to nibbāna. The three Fetters are —

a. Self-identification *(sakkāya-diṭṭhi):* the view that leads us to believe that the conscious body is our own.

b. Doubt *(vicikicchā):* the uncertainty that leads us to be unsure of the good we believe in—i.e., of how much truth there is to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha.

c. Attachment to precepts and practices *(sīlabbata-parāmāsa):* fondling the good that we practice; being attached to those forms of goodness that are merely external activities—for instance, observing precepts or practices by clinging simply to the level of bodily action or speech. Examples of this attitude include such things as developing virtue by adhering simply to the precepts; practicing concentration by simply sitting like a post; not being able to free yourself from these

activities, always holding onto the goodness that comes from them, happy when you have the chance to perform them in a particular way, upset when you don't; thinking, for instance, that virtue is something you get from monks when they give you the precepts; that the eight precepts are to be observed only on certain days and nights, months and years; that you gain or lose merit simply as a result of external activities associated with your accustomed beliefs. None of these attitudes reaches the essence of virtue. They go no further than simply clinging to beliefs, customs, and conventions; clutching onto these forms of goodness, always fondling them, unable to let them go. Thus this is called 'attachment to precepts and practices.'

Such attitudes are an obstacle to what is truly good. Take, for example, the long-held belief that goodness means to practice generosity, virtue, and meditation on the uposatha days: Stream-winners have completely let go of such beliefs. Their hearts are no longer caught up in beliefs and customs. Their virtues no longer have precepts. In other words, they have reached the essence of virtue. Their virtue is free from the limits of time.

In this they differ from ordinary, run-of-the-mill people. Ordinary people have to hand goodness over to external criteria—believing, for instance, that virtue lies on this day or that, during the Rains Retreat, during this or that month or year—and then holding fast to that belief, maintaining that anyone who doesn't follow the custom can't be virtuous. In the end, such people have a hard time finding the opportunity really to do good. Thus we can say that they don't know the true criteria for goodness. As for Stream-winners, all the qualities of virtue have come in and filled their hearts. They are able to unshackle themselves from the conventional values of the world that say that this or that is good. What is truly good they have seen appear in their hearts. Good lies right here. Evil lies right here. Neither depends on external activities. This is in line with the Buddha's saying,

mano-pubbaṅgamā dhammā
mano-seṭṭhā mano-mayā

All phenomena are preceded by the heart,

excelled by the heart,
achieved through the heart.
This is what is meant by 'Stream-winner.'

Stream-winners are like people who have rowed their boats into the main current of the Chao Phraya River, and so are destined to float down to the river's mouth and into the sea of *amata*—deathless—nibbāna. There are three ways they can reach the sea:

(1) The lowest level of Stream-winner is like a boatsman who leans back with his hand simply placed on the rudder. This level of Stream-winner reaches the goal slowly.

(2) The second level is like a boatsman who has his foot on the rudder, his hands on the oars, and rows along.

(3) The third level: The boat is equipped with a motor and the boatsman is at the steering wheel, and so he reaches the goal in practically no time at all.

This—reaching the stream to nibbāna—is the beginning stage of the transcendent level. If you were to simplify the three Fetters, you could do so as follows: To be attached to the conscious body as being one's own is self-identification. To be attached to the activities of the body is attachment to precepts and practices. Not knowing how to separate the mind from the body or from one's activities makes one unable to see clearly and know truly: This leads to uncertainty and doubt.

These are simply my opinions on the matter, so you who read this should consider things carefully on your own.

This ends the discussion of the transcendent and mundane skillful states of mind.

When you know the characteristics of the various mental states, you should use the three qualities mentioned above as your tools: Keep your mindfulness, alertness, and powers of focused investigation firmly in place at the mind. To be able to gain knowledge, you have to

use the power of focused investigation, which is an aspect of discernment, to know how mental states arise and fall: pulling out, taking a stance, and then returning into stillness. You must keep your attention fixed on investigating these things constantly in order to be able to know the arising and falling away of mental states—and you will come to know the nature of the mind that doesn't arise and doesn't fall away.

To know the arising and falling away of mental states of the past is one level of cognitive skill *(vijjā),* and deserves to be called 'knowledge of previous births.' To know the states of the mind as they change in the present deserves to be called 'knowledge of death and rebirth.' To know how to separate mental states from their objects, knowing the primal nature of the mind, knowing the current or force of the mind that flows to its objects; separating the objects, the current of mind that flows, and the primal nature of the mind: To be able to know in this way deserves to be called 'knowledge of the ending of mental effluents.' The objects or preoccupations of the mind are the effluent of sensuality. The current that flows is the effluent of a state of becoming. Not knowing the nature of the mind is the effluent of unawareness.

If we were to express this in terms of the four Noble Truths, we would have to do so as follows: The objects or preoccupations of the mind are the truth of stress *(dukkha-sacca).* The current of the mind that flows into and falls for its objects is the truth of the cause of stress *(samudaya-sacca).* The mental state that penetrates in to see clearly the truth of all objects, the current of the mind, and the primal nature of the mind, is called the mental moment that forms the Path *(magga-citta).* To let go of the objects, the mental current, and the nature of the mind, without any sense of attachment, is the truth of the disbanding of stress *(nirodha-sacca).*

When the three qualities that assist the mind—alertness, mindfulness, and focused investigation—are vigorous and strong, strong alertness becomes the awareness of release *(vijjā-vimutti),* strong mindfulness becomes intuitive understanding *(ñāṇa),* and strong focused investigation becomes liberating insight *(vipassanā-*

ñāṇa), the discernment that can stay fixed on knowing the truth of stress without permitting any sense of pleasure or displeasure for its object to arise. Intuitive understanding fathoms the cause of stress, and the awareness of release knows the heart clearly all the way through. When you can know in this way, you can say that you know rightly.

* * *

Here I would like to back up and discuss the question of the mind in a little more detail. The word 'mind' covers three aspects:

(1) The primal nature of the mind.
(2) Mental states.
(3) Mental states in interaction with their objects.

All of these aspects, taken together, make up the mind. If you don't know the mind in this way, you can't say that you really know it. All you can do is say that the mind arises and falls away, the mind doesn't rise or fall away; the mind is good, the mind is evil; the mind becomes annihilated, the mind doesn't become annihilated; the mind is a dhamma, the mind isn't a dhamma; the mind gains release, the mind doesn't gain release; the mind is nibbāna, the mind isn't nibbāna; the mind is sensory consciousness, the mind isn't sensory consciousness; the mind is the heart, the mind isn't the heart...

As the Buddha taught, there are only two paths to practice—the body, speech, and heart; and the body, speech, and mind—and in the end both paths reach the same point: Their true goal is release. So if you want to know the truth concerning any of the above issues, you have to follow the path and reach the truth on your own. Otherwise, you'll have to argue endlessly. These issues—for people who haven't practiced all the way to clear insight—have been termed by people of wisdom as *sedamocana-kathā:* issues that can only make you break out in a sweat.

So I would like to make a short explanation: The primal nature of the mind is a nature that simply knows. The current that thinks and streams out from knowing to various objects is a mental state. When

this current connects with its objects and falls for them, it becomes a defilement, darkening the mind: This is a mental state in interaction. Mental states, by themselves and in interaction, whether good or evil, have to arise, have to disband, have to dissolve away by their very nature. The source of both these sorts of mental states is the primal nature of the mind, which neither arises nor disbands. It is a fixed phenomenon *(ṭhiti-dhamma),* always in place. By the primal nature of the mind—which is termed *'pabhassara,'* or radiant—I mean the ordinary, elementary state of knowing in the present. But whoever isn't able to penetrate in to know it can't gain any good from it, like the proverbial monkey with the diamond.

Thus the name given by the Buddha for this state of affairs is really fitting: *avijjā*—dark knowledge, counterfeit knowledge. This is in line with the terms *'pubbante aññāṇam'*—not knowing the beginning, i.e., the primal nature of the mind; *'parante aññāṇam'*—not knowing the end, i.e., mental states in interaction with their objects; *'majjhantika aññāṇam'*—not knowing the middle, i.e., the current that streams from the primal nature of knowing. When this is the case, the mind becomes a *saṅkhāra:* a fabricator, a magician, concocting prolifically in its myriad ways.

This ends the discussion of the mind as a frame of reference.

IV. MENTAL QUALITIES

Mental qualities as a frame of reference can be divided into three sorts: inner mental qualities, outer mental qualities, and mental qualities in and of themselves.

A. Inner mental qualities can be either good or bad, but here we will deal only with the five Hindrances *(nīvaraṇa),* which are bad—

1. *Kāma-chanda:* sensual desire.
2. *Byāpāda:* ill will, malevolence.
3. *Thīna-middha:* sloth and drowsiness.
4. *Uddhacca-kukkucca:* restlessness and anxiety.
5. *Vicikicchā:* uncertainty.

These five Hindrances can be either inner or outer phenomena. For example:

1. The mind gives rise to sensual desire but hasn't yet streamed out to fix its desires on any particular object.
2. The mind gives rise to a sense of irritation and displeasure, but without yet fixing on any particular object.
3. A state of drowsiness arises in the mind, without yet fixing on any particular object.
4. The mind is restless, anxious, and disturbed on its own, without yet fixing on any particular object.
5. The mind is doubtful and uncertain—unable to think anything through—but without yet fixing on any particular object. It's simply that way on its own.

If these five Hindrances are still weak and haven't yet streamed out to become involved with any external objects, they are called 'inner mental qualities.'

B. Outer mental qualities simply come from the inside:

1. Once the mind has given rise to a sense of desire, it streams out and fixes on such external objects as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, etc.
2. Once the mind has given rise to a sense of irritation, it streams out and fixes on a sight, sound, smell, taste, etc., and then dislikes its object, wanting it to be destroyed.
3. The mind, already in a state of torpor, streams out and fixes on an outer object. Once it has fixed on the object, it then becomes even more torpid.
4. The mind, already restless, streams out to fix on such outer objects as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, etc.
5. A mental state of uncertainty arises in the mind, and the mind lets it stream out to fix on such external objects as sights, etc.

These are thus called outer mental qualities. When any mental quality first arises in the mind, it's called an inner quality. When it

flares up, grows stronger and streams out to an outer object, it's called an outer quality.

C. Mental qualities in and of themselves: This means to focus on any one of these Hindrances—because not all five Hindrances can appear in the same mental moment. You can thus pick out any Hindrance at all to focus on and examine. For example, suppose that sensual desire has appeared: Keep your alertness firmly in place at the heart, and use your mindfulness to keep the mind on the phenomenon. Don't waver, and don't let any hopes or wishes arise. Keep your mind firmly in one place. Don't go dragging any other objects in to interfere. Focus your powers of ardent investigation down on nothing but the quality appearing in the present. As long as you haven't gained clear, true insight into it, don't let up on your efforts. When you can do this, you are developing mental qualities in and of themselves as a frame of reference.

The qualities mentioned above are all unskillful qualities *(akusala dhamma)*. They act as obstacles to such things as jhāna, liberating insight, and the transcendent. Thus, if you want to gain release from them, you must first center the mind firmly in concentration. To be able to center the mind firmly, you have to develop the following three qualities within yourself —

(1) Sampajañña: alertness. Always have this firmly in place.

(2) Sati: mindfulness. Keep the mind in firm reference to whatever quality has arisen within it. Watch after the quality to keep it with the mind; watch after the mind to make sure that it doesn't lose aim and go slipping off to other objects. Once you see that the mind and its object have become compatible with each other, use—

(3) Ātappa—the power of focused investigation—to get to the facts of the quality. If you haven't yet gained clear and true insight, don't relax your efforts. Keep focusing and investigating until the power of your discernment is concentrated and strong, and you will come to know that mental qualities—whether inner, outer, or in and of themselves—simply arise, fade and disband. There's nothing of any lasting worth to them, because they are all *saṅkhata dhamma*—

fabricated phenomena; and whatever is fabricated falls under the truths of *aniccatā*—inconstancy; *dukkhatā*—stress, i.e., it's hard to bear; and *anattatā:* It's not you, yours, or anyone else's. It simply changes in line with natural conditions. No one with any real discernment holds onto these qualities as self or as anything of lasting worth, because such people have seen that these things are like wheels or gears: Whoever holds onto them will have to be trampled or mashed.

Thus if you hope for the genuine happiness offered by the Buddha's teachings, you should take the three qualities mentioned above and make them permanent features of your heart—and you will come to see clearly the quality free from fabrication, called the unfabricated *(asaṅkhata dhamma),* the genuine Dhamma. Uncreated, uncaused, it simply is, by its very nature. It doesn't circle about, arising and passing away. The unfabricated is a perfectly ordinary part of nature, yet no one in the world can know it aside from those who have developed virtue, concentration, and discernment. So if you sincerely want to go beyond suffering and stress, you should work to give rise to clear and true insight through your own efforts. When you can keep your alertness constantly in place, you will be able to know the nature of the mind. Your powers of reference and focused investigation will have to be constantly in place within for you not to be misled by the objects and preoccupations of the mind.

Most of us, ordinarily, have no clear sense of our own nature, and so we can't clearly see the thoughts and urges that arise within us. As a result, we go out to fasten onto their objects, giving rise to the wheel of wandering-on *(vaṭṭa-saṁsāra),* circling around and around without end.

Here I will refer to the wheel within: Not knowing the primal nature of the mind is the cycle of defilement *(kilesa vaṭṭa),* or unawareness, which is the beginning of the cycle. This gives rise to fabrication, which is the cycle of intention and action *(kamma vaṭṭa).* This in turn leads us to experience mental objects and preoccupations, which is the cycle of retribution *(vipāka vaṭṭa).* Thus there are three parts to the cycle.

The three parts of the cycle can be illustrated as follows: Unawareness is the hub of the wheel. Fabrications are the spokes; and mental preoccupations, the rim. The sensory organs form the yoke and harness, sensory objects are the oxen, and the driver is birth, aging, illness, and death. Now pile on your belongings—your defilements—and with a lash of the whip, you're off: The oxen drag you away, leading you up the mountains and down, until in the end you crash and are smashed to smithereens, i.e., death.

For this reason, we must make our awareness penetrate into the nature of the mind at the center of the axle, which doesn't turn with the wheel and which is said to be 'uncycling' *(vivaṭṭa)*. Whoever can do this will find that the path is sudden and short, not slow. For example, in ancient times, monks and lay disciples were able to reach Awakening even while sitting and listening to a sermon, while going for alms, or while gazing at a corpse. From this we can gather that, after imbuing themselves with the qualities mentioned above, they focused their investigation on that particular point and gained clear and true insight right then and there, without having to pull in or out, back or forth. They were able to let go naturally, with no 'in' or 'out,' no 'coming' or 'going.'

Those who investigate will see the truth. Some people believe that they will have to abandon all mental preoccupations before they can train the mind, but the truth of the matter is that the mind is usually deluded right there—at its preoccupations—and the spot where you are deluded is the spot you have to investigate. If you don't solve the problem right where you're deluded, don't believe that you can let go by hiding out or running away. Even if you do run away and hide, you'll end up coming back and falling for the same old preoccupations once more.

People of discernment, though, whether they deal with what is inside or out, can give rise to virtue, concentration, discernment, and release in every context. They have no sense that the inside is right and the outside wrong; that the inside is wrong and the outside right; or that the inside is refined and the outside base. Such opinions never occur to people of discernment. Discernment has to be all-around

knowing or knowing all around before it can be called full-fledged discernment. Knowing all around means to know the inside first and then the outside. All-around knowing means to know the outside first, and then to bring that awareness all the way in. This is why they are called people of discernment: They can bring the outside in; what is base they can make refined; past and future they can bring into the present, because they have brought the parts of the Path together in equal measure—mindfulness, alertness, and focused investigation—each performing its duties, forming the way that leads beyond all suffering and stress.

Those who can do this will be able to reach the truth in any posture. All that will appear to them will be the condition of stress *(sabhāva-dukkha)* and the condition of things in themselves *(sabhāva-dhamma)*. To see things this way is called *'yathābhūta-ñāṇa'*—seeing things for what they really are.

SUMMARY

The four frames of reference can be reduced to two: physical and mental phenomena, or—another way of putting it—body and mind. Even though they are divided into four, it is simply the current of the mind that is divided. When you come to the essence of the practice, it all boils down to the body and mind. If you want really to simplify the practice, you should focus on investigating the body and then focus on investigating the mind.

1. To focus on investigating the body: Be aware of any one aspect of the body, such as the breath, and then when you can keep focused on it accurately, spread your awareness to observe other aspects of the body, examining them from various angles. While making your investigation, though, don't let go of your original focus—the breath. Keep examining things until you've gained clear and true insight into the aspects of the body, and the mind becomes more quiet, still and subtle than before. If anything arises while you are investigating, don't fasten onto it in any way.

2. To focus on investigating the mind: Set your awareness at one spot or another, and keep that awareness perfectly still. After your mind has been still long enough, examine the ways it then changes and moves, until you can see that its movements, whether good or bad, are simply a form of fabrication *(saṅkhāra)*. Don't let yourself become preoccupied with anything you may come to know, think, or see while examining. Keep your awareness in the present. When you can do this, your mind is headed toward peace and clear insight.

This way of practice falls in line with all four of the frames of reference. When you can do this, you will give rise to the mental moment that forms the Path—and the moment the Path arises in full power is the moment you can let go.

Letting go has two forms: (1) Being able to let go of mental objects but not of one's own mind. (2) Being able to let go both of the objects of the mind and of one's self.

To be able to let go both of one's objects and of one's self is genuine knowing. To be able to let go of one's objects but not of one's self is counterfeit knowing. Genuine knowing lets go of both ends: It lets the object follow its own nature as an object, and lets the mind follow the nature of the mind. In other words, it lets nature look after itself. 'Object' here refers to the body; 'self' refers to the heart. You have to let go of both.

When your knowledge can reach this level, you don't have to worry much about virtue, concentration, or discernment. Virtue, concentration, and discernment aren't the nature of the mind; nor is the nature of the mind virtue, concentration, and discernment. Virtue, concentration, and discernment are simply fabricated phenomena, tools for extinguishing defilement. When defilement is extinguished, then virtue, concentration, and discernment disband as well. Virtue, concentration, and discernment are like water. Defilement is like a fire. The mind is like the person using the water to put out the fire. When the water has put out the flames, the water itself has vanished—but the person putting out the fire hasn't disappeared. The fire isn't the water, the water isn't the fire. The person isn't the water, the water isn't the person. The person isn't the fire, the fire isn't the person. The

genuine nature of the mind isn't defilement, nor is it virtue, concentration, and discernment. It simply is, in line with its own nature.

Those who don't know the nature of the truth maintain that death is annihilation or that nibbāna is annihilation of one sort or another. This is simply their own misunderstanding. Even those who have gone no higher than the level of Stream-entry are able to know that the true nature of the mind isn't in any way annihilated, which is why they are people of strong, unwavering conviction, believing in the paths and their fruitions. Even though their hearts aren't yet entirely free from the admixture of defilements, those defilements can't efface the true nature of their hearts—just as an ingot of gold, when it falls into the dirt, may be covered with soot, but the soot can't turn it into anything other than gold.

This is unlike ordinary, run-of-the-mill people. An ordinary person's mind may be pure from time to time, but it doesn't stay that way. It can't escape from being defiled again—just as a sharpened knife will stay in shape only if it is kept bathed in oil. If you put the knife to use or forget to keep it bathed, the steel of the blade might turn into something other than steel.

Thus each of us should enthusiastically make the effort to reach at least the Stream, for although all the qualities I have mentioned—whether fabricated *(saṅkhata dhamma)* or unfabricated *(asaṅkhata dhamma)*—lie mixed within every one of us, none of them are as exalted as *virāga dhamma:* the act of dispassion that extracts the unfabricated from the fabricated as gold is extracted from crude ore.

The Buddha's teachings are subtle and deep. Whoever isn't set on truly putting them into practice won't know their taste—like a cowherd hired to watch over cattle without ever knowing the taste of their milk.

Thus we are taught:

To study is to know the texts,
To practice is to know your defilements,
To attain the goal is to know & let go.

Appendix

Ajaan Lee's last recorded sermon dealt with the topic of making oneself one's own refuge by practicing the four frames of reference—much like one of the Buddha's sermons in the last year of his life. Because the sermon expands on the topic of the four frames of reference in a slightly different way from the above book, I thought it would make valuable addition to this volume, so here it is:

A REFUGE IN AWAKENING

ye keci buddhaṁ saraṇaṁ gatāse
na te gamissanti apāya-bhūmiṁ
pahāya mānusaṁ dehaṁ
deva-kāyaṁ paripūressantīti

"Those who have gone to the Buddha as refuge
will not go to the realms of deprivation.
On abandoning the human body,
they will fill the company of the gods."

I will now explain this verse so that you can practice in a way leading to the supreme attainment, capable of eliminating all your suffering and fears, reaching the refuge of peace.

We come into this world without a substantial refuge. Nothing—aside from the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha—will follow us into the next life. These three are the only things in which we can take refuge both in this life and in lives to come.

There are two levels on which people take refuge in the Triple Gem. Some take refuge only on the level of individuals, while others take refuge on the level of inner qualities, by developing the steps of the practice within themselves.

I. On the level of individuals

A. Buddha. Buddhas are people who have attained purity of heart. There are four types:

1. *Rightly self-awakened Buddhas:* those who have attained Awakening on their own, without anyone to teach them, and who have established a religion.
2. *Private Buddhas:* those who have gained Awakening without establishing a religion. On attaining the goal, they live by themselves.
3. *Disciple Buddhas:* a Buddha's immediate disciples who have practiced in line with his teachings until they too have gained Awakening.
4. *Learned Buddhas:* those who have studied the teachings in detail, have followed them, and attained the goal.

All four of these types are individual people, so to take refuge in them is to take refuge on the level of individuals. They can give us refuge only in a shallow and not very substantial way. Even though taking refuge on this level can be advantageous to us, it helps us only on the level of the world, and can give only temporary protection against falling into the realms of deprivation. If we lose faith in these individuals, our mind can change to a lower level—for all individuals fall under the laws of all fabricated things: They are inconstant and changing, subject to stress, and not-self—i.e., they can't prevent their own death.

So if you go to a Buddha as refuge on the level of individuals, there are only two sorts of results you'll get: at first gladness, and then sadness when the time comes to part—for it's the nature of all individuals in the world that they arise, age, grow ill, and die. The wisest sages and the most ordinary people are all equal on this point.

B. Dhamma. For many of us, the teachings in which we take our refuge are also on the level of individuals. Why is that? Because we see them as the words of individual people.

Sages of the past have divided the teachings in the Buddhist Canon into four types:

1. *Sayings of the Buddha*.
2. *Sayings of his disciples*.
3. *Sayings of heavenly beings*. There were occasions when heavenly beings, on coming to pay respect to the Buddha, said truths worth taking to heart.
4. *Sayings of seers*. Some hermits and yogis uttered truths from which Buddhists can benefit.

All of these sayings were organized into the three parts of the Buddhist Canon: the discourses, the discipline, and the Abhidhamma. If we take refuge in the Dhamma on this level, it is simply an object: something we can remember. But memory is inconstant and can't provide us with a safe, dependable refuge. At best it can help us only on the worldly level because we are depending on individuals, on objects, as our refuge.

C. Saṅgha. There are two sorts of Saṅgha.

1. The conventional Saṅgha: ordinary people who have ordained and taken up the homeless life. This sort of Saṅgha is composed of four sorts of people.

a. Upajīvikā: those who have taken up the ordained life simply as a comfortable way of making a living. They can depend on others to provide for their needs, and so get complacent, satisfied with their ordained status, without looking for any form of goodness better than that.

b. Upadusikā: those who, on being ordained in Buddhism, destroy the Buddha's teachings through their behavior—not abandoning the things they should abandon, not doing the things they should do, damaging their own capacity for good and that of others, being destructive, falling away from the Buddha's teachings.

c. Upamuyhikā: those who, on being ordained in Buddhism, make themselves blind and ignorant, who don't look for tactics for bringing their behavior into line with the Buddha's teachings. They don't pull themselves out of their unskillful ways, and stay continually deluded, oblivious, and defiled.

d. Upanisaraṇikā: those who, on being ordained in Buddhism, are intent on studying and practicing in line with what they have learned, who try to find themselves a secure refuge, and who don't let themselves become negligent or complacent. Whatever evil the Buddha said to abandon, they try to abandon. Whatever good he said to develop, they try to develop. Whether or not they attain that goodness, they keep on trying.

All four of these count as one type of Saṅgha on the level of individuals.

2. The Noble Saṅgha. This has four levels: those who have practiced the Buddha's teachings until they have reached the attainments of stream entry, once-returning, non-returning or arahantship. All four of these are still on the level of individuals because they are individual people who have reached the transcendent attainments in their hearts. Suppose, for example, we say that Aññakondañña is a streamwinner, Sāriputta a once-returner, Moggallāna a non-returner, and Ānanda an arahant. All four of them are still individuals in name and body. To take refuge in them is to take refuge on the level of individuals—and as individuals they are inconstant and unstable. Their bodies, sense faculties and mental phenomena by nature have to age, grow ill, and die. In other words, they are *anicca,* inconstant and changeable; *dukkha,* subject to stress and suffering; and *anattā:* They themselves can't prevent the nature of conditioned phenomena from taking its course with them.

This being the case, then when anyone tries to take refuge in them, that refuge is inconstant. We can depend on them only for a while, but they can't provide us any true refuge. They can't keep us from falling into the realms of deprivation. At best, taking refuge in them can give us results on the worldly level—and the worldly level is changing with every moment.

This ends the discussion of the Triple Refuge on the level of individuals.

II. On the Level of Inner Qualities

Taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha on the level of inner qualities means reaching the Triple Gem with the heart through the practice.

To reach the Buddha on the level of inner qualities, you first have to know the virtues of the Buddha, which are of two sorts: causes and results. The causes of his Awakening are mindfulness and alertness. The result of his Awakening is the transcendent: the stilling of all defilements and mental effluents.

So we have to develop these qualities within ourselves. *Buddha-sati* —mindfulness like the Buddha's—is what wakes us up. Full alertness is what makes us correctly aware of cause and effect. The way to develop these qualities is to practice in line with the four frames of reference. This will enable us to reach the Buddha on the level of inner qualities.

A. Contemplation of the body as a frame of reference. This means being firmly mindful of the body, using mindfulness to wake up the body and mind both by day and by night—sitting, standing, walking, lying down. We use mindfulness and alertness to be fully conscious throughout the body. *This* is the cause for reaching the Buddha on the level of inner qualities—i.e., reaching the Buddha by oneself and within oneself, without having to depend on anyone else. *When you depend on yourself, that's when you're on the right track.*

Before focusing mindfulness on the body so as to wake yourself up, you first have to know that there are two ways of looking at the body:

1. The body, i.e., all four physical properties gathered together as a physical object: the earth property, or the solid aspects; the water property, or the liquid aspects; the fire property, or the warm aspects; and the wind property, i.e., such things as the in-and-out breath. When all four of these properties are in harmony, they intermingle and form an aggregate or object we call the body.

2. The body in and of itself, i.e., any one aspect of any of these four properties. For example, we can take the wind property. Focus your mindfulness and alertness on nothing but the wind property and keep

them there. You don't have to get involved with any of the other properties. This is called the body in and of itself.

From there you can go to wind in and of itself. There are six aspects to the wind property: the breath energy flowing down from the head to the spaces between the fingers and toes; the breath energy flowing from the spaces between the fingers and toes up to the top of the head; the breath forces in the stomach; the breath forces in the intestines; and the in-and-out breath. These six aspects make up the wind property in the body.

When you focus on wind in and of itself, be mindful to keep track of only one of these aspects at a time—such as the in-and-out breath—without worrying about any other aspects of the breath energy. This can be called focusing on wind in itself. The same principle applies to earth in and of itself, water in and of itself and fire in and of itself.

When you have mindfulness and alertness constantly established in the body, the body in and of itself, wind, fire, earth or water in and of itself—whichever seems easiest and most comfortable—keep with it as much as possible. When you do this, the body will wake up, for you aren't letting it simply follow its natural course. To bring mindfulness into the body helps keep it awake. The body will feel lighter and lighter as we keep it in mind. Alertness is what enables us to be aware throughout the body. When these two mental qualities enter into the body, the body will feel agile, pliant, and light. In Pali, this is called *kāya-lahutā*. The mind will also be awake and will give rise to knowledge in and of itself through its own *'sandiṭṭhiko'* practice—i.e., the person who does the practice will see the results for him or herself in the here and now.

People who awaken from their slumbers are able to see and know things. The same holds true for people who practice mindfulness immersed in the body as a frame of reference. They are bound to see the true nature of their own bodies. To penetrate in, knowing and seeing in this way, is to reach the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha—which differ only in name, but are one and the same in their essence.

Whoever *doesn't* practice in this way is asleep, both in body and mind. A person asleep can't see or know anything at all, which is why

we can say that people of this sort have yet to reach the Buddha on the level of the inner qualities.

B. Contemplation of feelings as a frame of reference. Be mindful of feelings as they arise within you. Feelings are results that come from your own past and present actions. There are three sorts:

1. Feelings of pleasure
2. Feelings of pain
3. Feelings of equanimity.

To practice contemplation of feelings, be mindful of each of the various kinds of feeling that occur in the body and mind. For instance, sometimes there's physical pleasure but mental distress; sometimes physical pain but mental pleasure; sometimes pleasure both in body and mind; and sometimes pain both in body and mind. So focus in on being mindful of feelings as they arise. Examine them closely. This is called contemplation of feelings.

As for feelings in and of themselves, this means focusing on one type of feeling. For instance, wherever there's pleasure, focus right there, solely on the pleasure. You don't have to get involved with feelings of pain or equanimity. If you're going to focus on pleasure, keep focused right there. Or, if you want, you can focus on equanimity without getting involved with pleasure or pain. Don't let the mind jump around so that any other preoccupations come in and interfere. Keep monitoring the feeling you've chosen until you know its true nature through your own awareness.

Whichever type of feeling is easiest for you to focus on, keep your mindfulness and alertness right there as much as you can. This is what will enable you to awaken from the feelings within you. Whoever does this ranks as having developed the inner quality of *'buddha'* that is the cause for coming awake.

C. Contemplation of the mind as a frame of reference. Be mindful of the state of your own mind so that you can awaken it from the slumber of its delusions. When your mind awakens, it will be able to see and

know the various things occurring in the present. This will enable it to become firmly centered in the factors of concentration and *jhāna,* or mental absorption, which in turn lead to discernment, skilled awareness and release.

There are three basic states of mind you can focus on:

1. *Passion:* The mind hankers after sensual objects and sensual moods that color it, making it intoxicated and oblivious to other things. This prevents it from experiencing states that are brighter and clearer.

2. *Aversion:* The mind at times gets irritated and angry, causing whatever internal goodness it has to deteriorate. Aversion is thus a way in which the mind destroys itself.

3. *Delusion:* absent-mindedness, forgetfulness, mental darkness, misunderstanding.

These states of mind arise from preoccupations with what we like and dislike. If you have mindfulness watching over your mind with every moment, it will enable the mind to awaken and blossom, to know the truth about itself.

Whenever passion arises in the mind, focus on being mindful of the mind in and of itself. Don't focus on the object of the passion. Pay attention solely to the present, and the passion will fade. Or, if you want, you can use other methods to help, by contemplating the object of the passion in certain ways. For example, you can contemplate the unattractiveness of the body, focusing first on the insides of your own body, seeing them as filthy and disgusting. Your mind will then be able to free itself from the passion in which it is immersed, and to become more blooming and bright.

Whenever aversion arises in the mind, focus on being mindful exclusively of the present state of your mind. Don't focus attention on the external object or person that gave rise to the anger and aversion. Anger in the mind is like a burning fire. If you aren't mindful and aware of the state of your own mind, and instead think only of the object or person that incited the anger, it's like setting yourself on fire.

All you can do is end up getting burnt. So you shouldn't preoccupy yourself with the outside object. Instead, focus on being mindful and aware of the state of aversion in the mind. When mindfulness reaches full strength, the state of aversion will immediately disband.

Aversion and anger are like a cover over a fire that lets the fire provide heat but no light. If we remove the cover by doing away with the aversion, the light of the fire can brighten the mind. The 'light' here is discernment and skilled awareness.

Actually, there's nowhere else that we have to look for goodness other than our own minds. That's how we'll be able to gain the freedom from suffering and stress that is termed *citta-vimutti,* mental release, i.e., a mind beyond the reach of its preoccupations. This is one way in which we reach the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha on the level of inner qualities.

As for states of delusion, in which the mind tends to be absent-minded and forgetful: These come from there being many objects crowding in on the mind. When we find this happening, we should center the mind on a single preoccupation where we can gather strength for our mindfulness and alertness, in the same way that we can take diffused light rays and focus them on a single point. The power of the light is sure to get brighter. In the same way, when we are constantly mindful of the mind and don't let it get involved with various outside perceptions and preoccupations, mindfulness will give rise to a powerful light: skilled awareness. When skilled awareness arises within us, our minds will grow shining bright, and we'll awaken from our slumber of unawareness. We will have attained a quality of secure refuge in our own hearts. We will know for ourselves and see for ourselves, and this is what will enable us to attain the noble qualities of the transcendent.

D. Contemplation of mental qualities as a frame of reference. Be mindful to focus on the mental qualities that occur in the mind with every moment. Mental qualities are of two basic sorts, good and bad.

1. Bad mental qualities, which obstruct the mind from attaining higher levels of goodness, are called the Hindrances *(nīvaraṇa),* and

there are five sorts.

a. Sensual desire: hankering after sensual objects—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas that you like and find appealing; and a hankering after sensual moods, such as passion, anger, aversion, and delusion—assuming good to be bad and bad to be good, right to be wrong and wrong to be right. A hankering for any of these things is classed as sensual desire.

b. Malevolence: ill will for people or objects, hoping that they will be destroyed or come to a bad end.

c. Sloth & drowsiness: sleepiness, torpor, lassitude, laziness, and depression.

d. Restlessness & anxiety: being upset at failure in your aims, lacking the mindfulness to put a brake on your worries and concerns.

e. Uncertainty: indecision; doubt about the various things or qualities your are working to develop in your practice.

These five Hindrances are bad mental qualities. If you fall into any of them, you're in the dark—like a person at the bottom of a well who can't see anything on the surface of the earth, can't move around as he likes, can't hear what people at the top of the well are saying, and can't see the light of the sun and moon that illumine the earth. In the same way, the Hindrances obstruct us from developing goodness in many, many ways. They close off our ears and eyes, keep us in the dark, put us to sleep.

2. This is why we should work at developing the good mental qualities that will awaken us from the slumber of our unawareness. For instance, we should develop the four *jhānas* or mental absorptions, which are the tools for suppressing or eliminating all of the Hindrances.

a. The first *jhāna* has five factors. *Directed thought:* Think about any one of the objects of meditation that exist within you, such as the in-and-out breath. Make the mind one, keep it with the object you are

thinking of, and don't let it slip off to anything else: This is called *singleness of preoccupation. Evaluation:* Carefully observe the object of your meditation until you see its truth. When you are thoroughly aware of the object—this is called alertness—the results will arise within you: *pleasure* or ease; and *rapture*—fullness of body and mind.

When mindfulness fills the body like this, the body feels saturated, like soil saturated with moisture: Whatever you plant stays green and fresh. Plants flourish. Birds and other forest animals come to live in their shade. When rain falls, the soil can hold it instead of letting it wash away. *A person who has mastered the first jhāna is like a holding-place of goodness for other human and celestial beings* because *jhāna* and concentration can have a cooling influence not only on oneself, but also on others as well.

When mindfulness and alertness are fully aware in your mind, the mind feels saturated and full with an unadulterated sense of rapture and joy at all times. As for the pleasure and ease that come from the first *jhāna,* they give you a sense of freedom with no worries or concerns for anyone or anything—like a person who has attained enough wealth that he no longer has any worries or concerns about his livelihood, and can relax in peace.

When you attain the pleasure and ease that come from the first *jhāna,* you are freed from the Hindrances of indecision and restlessness & anxiety. So you should work at developing these factors in your mind until it can stay steadily in *jhāna*. Your heart will then be blooming and bright, giving rise to the light of discernment, or liberating insight. And if you have developed your capabilities enough, then on attaining the first *jhāna* you may gain entry to the transcendent. Some people, though, may go on to the second *jhāna*.

b. The second *jhāna* has three factors: rapture, pleasure, and singleness of preoccupation. The power of the mind gets stronger step by step, so try to keep your mind in that state simply by focusing down and keeping mindfulness firmly established right there. The mind will grow even stronger and this will lead you on to the third *jhāna*.

c. The third *jhāna* has two factors: pleasure and singleness of preoccupation. Keep focusing down through the power of mindfulness

and alertness, and you will be able to shed the factor of pleasure and enter the fourth *jhāna*.

d. The fourth *jhāna* has two factors: equanimity and singleness of preoccupation. On this level of *jhāna,* the mind has great strength, based on its strong focus accompanied by mindfulness and alertness. The mind is firm and unmoving—so completely unmoved by past and future that it lets them both go. It keeps track solely of the present, steady and unwavering like the light of a Coleman lantern when there is no wind. *When the mind attains the fourth jhāna, it gives rise to a brightness:* discernment and the skill of liberating insight. This is what enables it to gain understanding into the four Noble Truths, and so to proceed to the transcendent—the truly safe refuge.

People who have done this experience nothing but an inner brightness and happiness in their hearts, for they dwell with the quality they have given rise to within themselves. They reach the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha on the highest level, the level of release or ultimate attainment, a quality free from defilement and mental effluents.

People who train their hearts in this way have reached the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha on the level of inner quality. In other words, they have reached refuge in their own hearts. They have absolutely closed off the route to the realms of deprivation. At the very least, they are destined after death to go to the higher realms of happiness. At best, they will attain *nibbāna*. All of them are certain to attain *nibbāna* within at least seven lifetimes, for they have reached an inner quality that is steady and certain. They won't fall into anything low. Anyone who has yet to attain this quality, though, has an uncertain future.

So if we want the peace and security that Buddhism has to offer, we should all try to find ourselves a dependable refuge. If you take refuge on the level of individuals, find people of worth so that your conviction in them will take you to the happy realms. As for refuge on the level of inner qualities, which will really be of substantial value to you, practice so as to give rise to those qualities within yourself.

To summarize: On the level of inner qualities, the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha are all one and the same thing. They differ only in name.

So you should *'opanayiko'*—bring these qualities into your heart. *'Sandiṭṭhiko'*—When you practice, you'll see them for yourself. *'Paccattaṁ'*—You'll know them only for yourself. Things that other people know about aren't safe.

If you want peace and refuge that are substantial and sure, you should give rise to them in your own heart. The result will be *nibbāna*, liberation from defilement, from all birth, aging, illness, and death in this world and any world to come.

nibbānaṁ paramaṁ sukhaṁ

Nibbāna is the ultimate happiness.
There is no happiness higher.

This is *'buddha'* on the level of results: freedom from sleep, total Awakening.

And this ends our discussion of the verse on refuge.

Glossary

The definitions given here are based on the meanings these terms have in Ajaan Lee's writings and sermons.

avijjā: Unawareness; ignorance; counterfeit knowledge.

āyatana: Sense medium. The six inner sense media are the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and intellect. The six outer sense media are their respective objects.

bhagavant: An epithet for the Buddha, commonly translated as 'Blessed One' or 'Exalted One.' Some commentators, though, have traced the word etymologically to the Pali root meaning 'to divide' and, by extension, 'to analyze', and so translate it as 'Analyst.'

dhamma: Event; phenomenon; the way things are in and of themselves; their inherent qualities; the basic principles underlying their behavior. Also, principles of behavior that human beings should follow so as to fit in with the right natural order of things; qualities of mind they should develop so as to realize the inherent quality of the mind in and of itself. By extension, 'dhamma' is used also to refer to any doctrine that teaches such things. Thus the Dhamma of the Buddha refers both to his teachings and to the direct experience of the quality of nibbāna at which those teachings are aimed.

dhātu: Element; property; the elementary properties that make up the inner sense of the body and mind: earth (solidity), water (liquidity), fire (heat), wind (energy or motion), space, and consciousness.

jhāna: Meditative absorption in a single object, notion or sensation.

kamma: Intentional acts that result in states of being and birth. 'Kamma debts' are the moral debts one has to others either through

having been a burden to them (the primary example being one's debt to one's parents) or from having wronged them.

khandha: Component parts of sensory perception: *rūpa* (sense data, appearances); *vedanā* (feelings of pleasure, pain or indifference); *saññā* (labels, concepts, allusions); *saṅkhāra* (mental constructs or fabrications); and *viññāṇa* (consciousness, the act of attention that 'spotlights' objects so as to know them distinctly and pass judgment on them).

magga: The path to the cessation of suffering and stress. The four transcendent paths—or rather, one path with four levels of refinement—are the path to stream entry (entering the stream to nibbāna, which ensures that one will be reborn at most only seven more times), the path to once-returning, the path to non-returning, and the path to arahantship. Phala—fruition—refers to the mental state immediately following the attainment of any of these paths.

mala: Stains on the character, traditionally listed as nine: anger, hypocrisy, envy, stinginess, deceit, treachery, lying, evil desires, and wrong views.

nibbāna (nirvana): Liberation; the unbinding of the mind from greed, anger, and delusion, from physical sensations and mental acts. As this term is used to refer also to the extinguishing of fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. (According to the physics taught at the time of the Buddha, the property of fire exists in a latent state to a greater or lesser degree in all objects. When activated, it clings and is bound to its fuel. As long as it remains latent or is extinguished, it is 'unbound'.)

saṅkhāra: Fabrication—the forces that fabricate things, the process of fabricating, and the fabricated things—mental or physical—that result. In some contexts this term refers specifically to the fabrication of thoughts in the mind. In others, it refers to all five *khandhas* (see above).

uposatha: Special days in the Buddhist calendar—the days of the full moon, the new moon, and the half-moon—set aside for meritorious activities.

* * *

If anything in this translation is inaccurate or misleading, I ask forgiveness of the author and reader for having unwittingly stood in their way. As for whatever may be accurate, I hope the reader will make the best use of it, translating it a few steps further, into the heart, so as to attain the truth at which it points.

The translator

sabbe sattā sadā hontu
averā sukha-jīvino
kataṁ puñña-phalaṁ mayhaṁ
sabbe bhāgī bhavantu te

May all beings live happily,
always free from animosity.
May all share in the blessings
springing from the good I have done.

Table of Contents

Titlepage 1
Copyright 2
Foreword: About the Author 3
Introduction 6
Frames of Reference 10
I. The Body 11
II. Feelings 15
III. The Mind 18
IV. Mental Qualities 27
Summary 32
Appendix 35
A Refuge in Awakening 35
I. On the level of individuals 35
II. On the Level of Inner Qualities 38
Glossary 48
Dedication 51