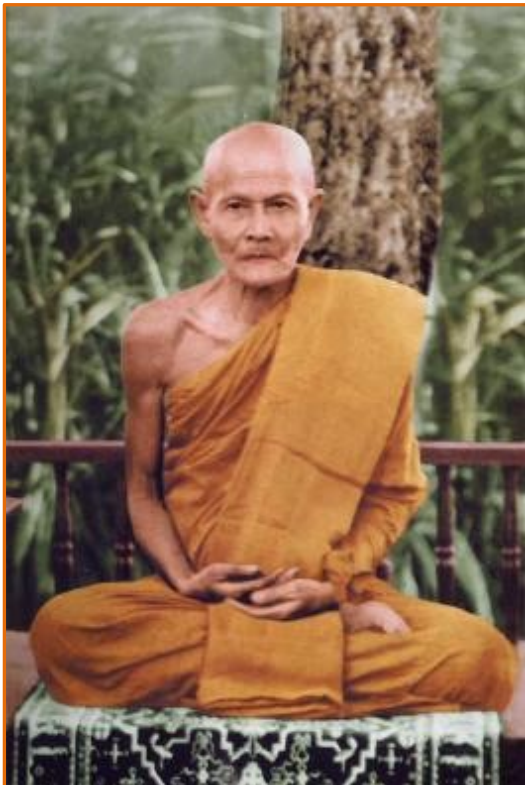




# The Ever-present Truth

## Teachings of Phra Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta Mahathera

Translated from the Thai by  
Thanissaro Bhikkhu



The following selections are drawn from a collection of sermon fragments appended to the book *A Heart Released* as part of a commemorative volume distributed at Phra Ajahn Mun's cremation in 1950. The collection was drawn from notes of Ajahn Mun's sermons taken by two of his students during the last two years of his life, covering a wide range of topics, including some standard accounts of the Buddha's life. The selections included here comprise all of the passages dealing directly with the practice of virtue and meditation.

Some of Ajahn Mun's direct students have commented that the fragments would have been more subtle and insightful if the students who recorded them had been more advanced in their own meditation practice. As a result, we can only guess as to what the original sermons were like. Still, what has been

recorded is worth reading and putting into practice, and so it has been translated and offered here as a gift of Dhamma for all who are interested.

## § 1. The root meditation themes

Has anyone ever been ordained in the Buddha's religion without having studied meditation? We can say categorically no -- there hasn't. There isn't a single preceptor who doesn't teach meditation to the ordinand before presenting him with his robes. If a preceptor doesn't teach meditation beforehand, he can no longer continue being a preceptor. So every person who has been ordained can be said to have studied meditation. There is no reason to doubt this.

The preceptor teaches the five meditation themes: kesa, hair of the head; loma, hair of the body; nakha, nails; danta, teeth; and taco, skin. These five meditation themes end with the skin. Why are we taught only as far as the skin? Because the skin is an especially important part of the body. Each and every one of us has to have skin as our wrapping. If we didn't have skin, our head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, and teeth wouldn't hold together. They'd have to scatter. Our flesh, bones, tendons, and all the other parts of the body wouldn't be able to stay together at all. They'd have to separate, to fall apart.

When we get infatuated with the human body, the skin is what we are infatuated with. When we conceive of the body as being beautiful and attractive, and develop love, desire, and longing for it, it's because of what we conceive of the skin. When we see a body, we suppose it to have a complexion -- fair, ruddy, dark, etc. -- because of what we conceive the color of the skin to be. If the body didn't have skin, who would conceive it to be beautiful or attractive? Who would love it, like it, or desire it? We'd regard it with nothing but hatred, loathing, and disgust. If it weren't wrapped in skin, the flesh, tendons, and other parts of the body wouldn't hold together and couldn't be used to accomplish anything at all -- which is why we say the skin is especially important. The fact that we can keep on living is because of the skin. The fact that we get deluded into seeing the body as beautiful and attractive is because it has skin. This is why preceptors teach only as far as the skin.

If we set our minds on considering the skin until we see it as disgusting and gain a vision of its unloveliness appearing unmistakably to the heart, we are bound to see the inherent truths of inconstancy, stress, and not-selfness. This will cure our delusions of beauty and attractiveness that are fixated on the skin. We will no longer focus any conceivings on it or find it appealing or desirable, for we have seen it for what it is. Only when we heed our preceptors' instructions and not take them lightly will we see these inherent truths. If we don't heed our preceptors' instructions, we won't be able to cure our delusions, and instead will fall into the snares of enticing preoccupations -- into the wheels of the cycle of rebirth.

So we've already been well-taught by our preceptors since the day of our ordination. There is no reason to look for anything further. If we're still unsure, if we're still looking for something more, that shows that we are still confused and lost. If we weren't confused, what would we be looking for? An unconfused person doesn't have to look for anything. Only a confused person has to go looking. The more he goes looking, the further he gets lost. If a person doesn't go looking, but simply considers what is already present, he will see clearly the reality that is inherently primal and unmoving, free from the yokes and fermentations of defilement.

This subject is not something thought up by the preceptors to be taught to the ordinand in line with anyone's opinion. It comes from the word of the Lord Buddha, who decreed that the preceptor should teach the ordinand these essential meditation themes for his constant consideration. Otherwise, our ordination wouldn't be in keeping with the fact that we have relinquished the life of home and family and have come out to practice renunciation for the sake of freedom. Our ordination would be nothing more than a sham. But since the Buddha has decreed this matter, every preceptor has continued this tradition down to the present. What our preceptors have taught us isn't wrong. It's absolutely true. But we simply haven't taken their teachings to heart. We've stayed complacent and deluded of our own accord -- for people of discretion have affirmed that these teachings are the genuine path to purity.

## § 2. Virtue.

silam sila viya:

Virtue is like rock.

Virtue -- normalcy -- is like rock, which is solid and forms the basis of the ground. No matter how much the wind may buffet and blow, rock doesn't waver or flinch.

If we simply hold to the word "virtue," though, we can still go astray. We need to know where virtue lies, what it is, and who maintains it. If we know the factor maintaining it, we will see how that factor forms the essence of virtue. If we don't understand virtue, we'll end up going astray and holding just to the externals of virtue, believing that we have to look for virtue here or ask for the precepts there before we can have virtue. If we have to look for it and ask for it, doesn't that show that we're confused about it? Isn't that a sign of attachment to the externals of precepts and practices?

People who aren't confused about virtue don't have to go looking or asking for it, because they know that virtue exists within themselves. They themselves are the ones who maintain their virtue by avoiding faults of various kinds.

Intention is what forms the essence of virtue. What is intention (cetana)? We have to play with this word cetana in order to understand it. Change the "e" to an "i," and add another "t." That gives us citta, the mind. A person without a mind can't be called a person. If we had only a body, what could we accomplish? The body and mind have to rely on each other. If the mind isn't virtuous, the body will misbehave in all sorts of ways. This is why we say that there is only one virtue: that of the mind. The precepts deal simply with the flaws we should avoid. Whether you avoid the five flaws, the eight, the ten, or the 227, you succeed in maintaining the one and the same virtue. If you can

maintain this one virtue, your words and deeds will be flawless. The mind will be at normalcy -- simple, solid, and unwavering.

This sort of virtue isn't something you go looking or asking for. When people go looking and asking, it's a sign they're poor and destitute. They don't have anything, so they have to go begging. They keep requesting the precepts, over and over again. The more they request them, the more they lack them. The poorer they become.

We are already endowed with body and mind. Our body we have received from our parents; our mind is already with us, so we have everything we need in full measure. If we want to make the body and mind virtuous, we should go right ahead and do it. We don't have to think that virtue lies here or there, at this or that time. Virtue already lies right here with us. Akaliko: If we maintain it at all times, we will reap its rewards at all times.

This point can be confirmed with reference to the time of the Buddha. When the five brethren; Ven. Yasa, his parents, and his former wife; the Kassapa brothers and their disciples; King Bimbisara and his following, etc., listened to the Buddha's teachings, they didn't ask for the precepts beforehand. The Buddha started right in teaching them. So why were they able to attain the noble paths and fruitions? Where did their virtue, concentration, and discernment come from? The Buddha never told them to ask him for virtue, concentration, and discernment. Once they had savored the taste of his teachings, then virtue, concentration, and discernment developed within them of their own accord, without any asking or giving taking place. No one had to take the various factors of the path and put them together into a whole, for in each case, virtue, concentration, and discernment were qualities of one and the same heart.

So only if we aren't deluded into searching outside for virtue can we be ranked as truly discerning.

### § 3. Potential

The traits that people have carried over from the past differ in being good, bad, and neutral. Their potential follows along with their traits -- i.e., higher than what they currently are, lower, or on a par. Some people have developed a high potential to be good, but if they associate with fools, their potential will develop into that of a fool. Some people are weak in terms of their potential, but if they associate with sages, their potential improves and they become sages, too. Some people associate with friends who are neither good nor bad, who lead them neither up nor down, and so their potential stays on a mediocre level.

For this reason, we should try to associate with sages and wise people so as to raise the level of our potential progressively higher and higher, step by step.

### § 4. Contemplating the body

We have all come here to study of our own accord. Not one of us was invited to come. So, as we have come to study and practice, we should really give ourselves to the practice, in line with the example set by the Buddha and his Arahant disciples.

At the very beginning, you should contemplate all four truths -- birth, aging, illness, and death -- that all the Noble Ones have contemplated before us. Birth: We have already been born. What is your body if not a heap of birth? Illness, aging, and death are all an affair of this heap. When we contemplate these things in all four positions -- by practicing sitting meditation, walking meditation, meditation while standing or lying down -- the mind will gather into concentration. If it gathers briefly, that's called momentary concentration. In other words, the mind gathers and reverts to its underlying level for a short while and then withdraws. If you contemplate without retreating, until an uggaha nimitta (arising image) of a part of the body appears within or without, contemplate that image until the mind lets go of it and reverts to its underlying level and stays there for a fair while before withdrawing again. Concentration on this level is called threshold concentration.

Keep on contemplating that image until the mind reverts to a firm stance on its underlying level, reaching the singleness of the first level of jhana. When the mind withdraws, keep contemplating that image over and over again until you can take it apart as a patibhaga nimitta (counterpart image). In other words, contemplate what the body will be like after it dies. It'll have to disintegrate until only the bones are left. Focus on this truth within you -- as it applies to your own body -- as well as without -- as it applies to the bodies of others. See what the various parts of the body are: "This is hair"... "These are nails"... "These are teeth"... "This is skin." How many tendons are there? How many bones? Get so that you can see these things clearly. Visualize the body coming together again -- sitting, standing, walking, and lying down -- and then dying and reverting to its original state: its original properties of earth, water, fire, and wind.

When you contemplate this way repeatedly both within and without, visualizing the body newly dead and long dead, with dogs and vultures fighting over it, your mind will eventually come to gain intuitive insight in line with your potential.

## § 5. Purifying the mind

sacitta-pariyodapanam etam buddhana-sasanam:

To purify one's own mind is to follow the Buddhas' teachings.

The Buddha, our foremost teacher, taught about body, speech, and mind. He didn't teach anything else. He taught us to practice, to train our minds, to use our minds to investigate the body: This is called the contemplation of the body as a frame of reference. We are taught to train our mindfulness thoroughly in the practice of investigating -- this is called the analysis of phenomena (dhamma-vicaya, one of the factors of Awakening) -- until it reaches a point of sufficiency. When we have investigated enough to make mindfulness itself a factor of Awakening, the mind settles down into concentration of its own accord.

There are three levels of concentration. In momentary concentration, the mind gathers and settles down to a firm stance and rests there for a moment before withdrawing. In threshold concentration, the mind gathers and settles down to its underlying level and stays there a fair while before withdrawing to be aware of a nimitta of one sort or another. In fixed penetration, the mind settles down to a firm stance on its underlying level and stops there in singleness, perfectly still -- aware that it is staying there -- endowed with the five factors of jhana, which then become gradually more and more refined.

When we train the mind in this way, we are said to be heightening the mind, as in the Pali phrase,

adhicitte ca ayogo etam buddhana-sasanam:

To heighten the mind is to follow the Buddhas' teachings.

The contemplation of the body is a practice that sages -- including the Lord Buddha -- have described in many ways. For example, in the Maha-Satipatthana Sutta (Great Frames of Reference Discourse), he calls it the contemplation of the body as a frame of reference. In the root themes of meditation, which a preceptor must teach at the beginning of the ordination ceremony, he describes the contemplation of hairs of the head, hairs of the body, nails, teeth, and skin. In the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma), he teaches that birth, aging, and death are stressful.

We have all taken birth now, haven't we? When we practice so as to opanayiko -- take these teachings inward and contemplate them by applying them to ourselves -- we are not going wrong in the practice, because the Dhamma is akaliko, ever-present; and aloko, blatantly clear both by day and by night, with nothing to obscure it.

## § 6. The method of practice for those who have studied a great deal

People who have studied a lot of the Dhamma and Vinaya -- who have learned a large number of approaches together with their many ramifications -- when they then come to train their minds, find that their minds don't settle down easily into concentration. They need to realize that they must first take their learning and put it back on the shelf for the time being. They need to train "what knows" -- this very mind -- developing their mindfulness until it is super-mindfulness, their discernment until it is super-discernment, so that they can see through the super-deceits of conventional truth and common assumptions that set things up, naming them, "This is this," and "That is that" -- days, nights, months, years, earth, sky, sun, moon, constellations, everything -- all the things that thought-formations, the conditions or effects of the mind, set up as being this or that.

Once the mind can see through these effects of the mind, this is called knowing stress and its cause. Once you practice this theme and develop it repeatedly until you are quick at seeing through these things, the mind will be able to gather and settle down. To focus in this way is called developing the path. And when the path reaches a point of sufficiency, there is no need to speak of the cessation of stress: It will appear of its own accord to the person who practices -- because virtue, concentration, and discernment all exist in our very own body, speech, and mind. These things are said to be *akaliko*: ever-present. *Opanayiko*: When meditators contemplate what already exists within them, then -- *paccattam* -- they will know for themselves. In other words, we contemplate the body so as to see it as unattractive and visualize it as disintegrating back into its primary properties in terms of the primal Dhamma that is blatantly clear both by day and by night.

When contemplating, you should keep this analogy in mind: When people grow rice, they have to grow it in the earth. They have to go wading through the mud, exposed to the sun and rain, before they can get the rice grains, the husked rice, the cooked rice, and can finally eat their fill. When they do this, they are getting their rice entirely from things that already exist. In the same

way, meditators must develop virtue, concentration, and discernment, which already exist in the body, speech, and mind of every person.

#### § 7. The principles of the practice are ever-present

Concerning the principles of our practice, there is no real problem. Opanayiko: Bring the mind inward to investigate body, speech, and mind -- things that are *akaliko*, ever-present; *aloko*, blatantly clear both by day and by night; *paccattam veditabbo viññuhi*, to be known by the wise for themselves -- just as the sages of the past, such as the Buddha and the Noble Disciples, knew clearly for themselves after bringing their minds inward to contemplate what was already there.

It's not the case that these things exist at some times and not at others. They exist at all times, in every era. This is something we as meditators can know for ourselves. In others words, when we make a mistake, we know it. When we do things correctly, we know it within ourselves. How good or bad we are, we are bound to know better than anyone else -- as long as we are persistent in our contemplation and don't let ourselves grow complacent or heedless.

An example from the past is that of the sixteen young students of the Brahmin teacher, Bavari. They had practiced jhana to the point where they were stuck on rupa jhana and arupa jhana. The Buddha thus taught them to contemplate what was already inside them so as to see it clearly with discernment -- to see the level of sensuality as lying below, the level of formlessness as lying above, and the level of form as in the middle; to see the past as below, the future as above, and the present as in the middle. Then he taught them to look inside themselves -- from the feet below, to the tips of the hair above, and all around in between.

Once they had contemplated in this way, they came to know clearly for themselves. This ended their doubts about how to practice, and they no longer had to go to the trouble of looking anywhere else.

## § 8. Listening to the Dhamma at all times

As a meditator, you should use the strategy of listening to the Dhamma at all times, even when you are living alone. In other words, contemplate the Dhamma both by day and by night. The eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body are physical phenomena (rupa-dhamma) that are always present. Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations are also present for you to see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. The mind? It too is present. Your thoughts and feelings about various topics -- good and bad -- are present as well. Development and decay, both within you and without, are also present. These things that occur naturally display the truth -- inconstancy, stress, and not-selfness -- for you to see at all times. When a leaf grows yellow and falls from the tree, for instance, it is showing you the truth of inconstancy.

So when you continually use this approach to contemplate things with your mindfulness and discernment, you are said to be listening to the Dhamma at all times, both by day and by night.

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