AJAHN VIRADHAMMO

THE MOTHER AND THE MONK

AJAHN VIRADHAMMO

TISARANA BUDDHIST MONASTERY

This is a small offering to celebrate the commencement of Luang Por Viradhammo's 80th year of birth. On this special occasion, his peers, friends and students wish to offer much love and gratitude by expressing happiness for the good fortune of Luang Por Viradhammo's presence. May his light shine long and bright, continuing to lead beings to the end of suffering.

DEDICATION

Mātā pitu upatthānaṃ	The support of mother and father,
Puttadārassa sangaho	the cherishing of wife and children
Anākulā ca kammantā	and peaceful occupations;
Etam maṇgalam-uttamaṃ	these are Blessings Supreme.

MAṆGALA SUTTA

Luang Por Chah with his mother Mae Chee Pim Chuangchot, moments before her death. ►

Buddhānam Jananīshāni	You are the mother of the Buddhas,
Bodhisattva Pitāmahi	The grandmother of the Bodhisattvas;
Prapitāmahi Sattvānam	The great-grandmother of all that is sentient,
Pragñé Devi Namostuté.	Oh, Mother Awareness, I bow to thee.

PRAJÑĀ PĀRAMITĀ STUTHIH

◄ Mrs Astrid Akers with her sons Peter and Vitauts in Esslingen, Germany.

Brahmāti mātāpitaro,	Mother and father are our creators,
pubbācariyāti vuccare;	venerated as our earliest teachers;
Āhuneyyā ca puttānaṁ,	Worthy of their progenies' offerings,
pajāya anukampakā.	In return for their never-ceasing care.

ITIVUTTAKA 106

GRATITUDE TO PARENTS

TRANSCRIBED FROM A DHAMMA TALK OFFERED BY LUANG POR SUMEDHO
AMARAVATI MONASTERY, OCTOBER 1994

On this day we are considering *kataññu-katavedi*, which is the Pali for gratitude. Gratitude is a positive response to life; in developing *kataññu* we deliberately bring into our consciousness the good things done to us in our lives. So on this day, especially, we remember the goodness of our parents, and we contemplate it. We are not dwelling on what they did wrong; instead, we deliberately choose to remember the goodness. And the kindness that our parents had for us – even though in some cases, generosity might not have been there at all times. This is one day in the year for remembering our parents with gratitude and recalling all the good things they have done for us. Having a day like this, when we deliberately think of parents with gratitude, is a way of bringing joy and positive feelings into our lives.

Of course, my mother was not perfect, she was not a perfectly enlightened being when she had me, so naturally there were things

she could have improved on. But generally speaking, the dedication, commitment, love, and care were all there – and directed mainly to making the lives of my father, my sister and myself as good and as happy as could be. It was a dedication; she asked very little for herself. So when I think back like this, *kataññu*, gratitude, arises in my mind for my mother and father. Now I can hardly think of any of the faults which used to dominate my mind when I was young; they seem so trivial now, I hardly recall any.

If we just go on with the force of habit and conditioning, we remain more or less stuck with all kinds of things instilled into us – with habits that we acquired when we were young – and these can dominate our conscious life as we get older. But as we mature and grow up, we realize that we can develop skilfulness in the way we think about ourselves, and in the way we think about others. The Buddha encouraged us to think of the good things done for us by our parents, by our teachers, friends, whoever; and to do this intentionally – to cultivate it, to bring it into consciousness quite deliberately – rather than just let it happen accidentally.

LUANG POR SUMEDHO

> Our mother is the teacher who first teaches us love, the most important lesson in our life. Without her, we cannot have known how to love.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *A Rose for Your Pocket*

> May anyone who sees, reads, touches or recollects these words awaken to be ever-loving, caring, grateful, patient, thankful, forgiving and kinder to their mothers and fathers.

Sister Esther Thien's preface, *A Rose for your Pocket*

FOREWORD

Buddhism and the Buddha have had a difficult reputation regarding family relationships ever since Aśvaghoṣa composed the *Buddhacarita* in the second century CE. In that epic poem, the Buddha-to-be is depicted as abandoning his wife and infant child in the middle of the night, fleeing the city by chariot. Unsurprisingly, this portrayal sits uneasily with modern sensibilities around marriage and parental responsibility. It is, however, a later poetic construction rather than a historical account.

The earliest sources, preserved in the Pali Canon, describe something quite different. They depict a young man who entered an arranged marriage in accordance with his parents' wishes, and who lived within that relationship for thirteen years. As heir to a kingdom, he nevertheless recognized that he could not protect his family from ageing, sickness, and death. So, after fathering a son and ensuring the succession, and following protracted negotiations with his family, he resolved to go forth in search of an answer to these universal human dilemmas.

Having found that answer, he returned to his family to share it. According to the tradition, his wife and son eventually went forth and attained full awakening. His foster mother became the first bhikkhuni and an arahant, and his father attained profound spiritual insight. How better to support one's family?

To this day, those who choose to go forth must seek their family's permission. Renouncing worldly responsibilities does not mean renouncing relationship. In Thailand, it is not uncommon for forest Ajahns to invite their mothers to live within the monastery community, ensuring they are cared for until the end of their lives. In the West – where such arrangements may not be culturally feasible – monks and nuns commonly maintain close contact with their parents, particularly in times of illness or vulnerability, and help to facilitate appropriate care.

This small book recounts one senior monk's response to the needs of an ageing mother who required sustained physical and medical support. It is both a tender and a courageous account: courageous in that it involved a leap into the unknown, moving from New Zealand to Canada with little sense of how such care could be managed. The decision also pressed against conventional monastic boundaries and

demanded ongoing reflection on the purpose and expression of his spiritual training. It became a deeply transformative practice. As Luang Por Viradhammo once remarked to me, 'It was a nine-year deep intensive in *mettā-bhāvanā*.' The understanding and perspective forged during this period have continued to inform his practice and teaching ever since.

As with all truly blessed commitments, the response was collective. Buddhist communities in Ottawa and Toronto rallied to offer support, and, through their efforts, Tisarana Buddhist Monastery was established. A longstanding disciple, Ajahn Kusalo, stepped forward to build and steward the monastery, allowing Luang Por the respite he needed. Personal steps in the dark led to a fortunate and shared dawn.

From a refugee mother granted residence in Canada, to the son who offered her unwavering care; from the community that gathered around them, to the monastery that emerged – this story, of which the pages that follow are a fragment, speaks of courage, resolve, and compassion. In doing so, it leads the reader quietly into the living heart of the Buddha's Dhamma.

AJAHN SUCITTO

THE MOTHER AND THE MONK

TRANSCRIBED FROM A DHAMMA TALK OFFERED BY LUANG POR VIRADHAMMO

AMARAVATI MONASTERY, 2012

Today is the Uposatha, or the Observance Day. It is a lovely ritual that we participate in every fortnight. On this day, we come together and remember our protocols and agreements that we live by. Every fortnight we get a chance to remember why we started this work, and why we picked up this particular way of life and practice. Why did we as bhikkhus take *upasampadā* and why did the siladharā go forth? What was it that brought us here?

I always find it very helpful to keep in mind my aspirations and intentions. This fortnightly gathering is a beautiful way of remembering that we are doing this together as a community, not just as individuals.

Though this is an individual aspiration, it is lived in the context of a whole community of people with similar aspirations, guided by our love and respect for each other, and for the Buddha. These are, to me, very much part of the Patimokkha or the taking up of precepts. It seems to me that this is what it is indicating: there is the personal aspiration, and there is an agreement to do this as a community. This is very rare in the world.

I've just been travelling quite a bit, and these places are rather marvellous. Though I haven't been here since 1999, I was here for the opening, and this cathedral-like building is quite stunning. Coming into this hall, just the silence.

Yet we are all pretty ordinary people, aren't we? This is what I find extraordinary. We are all ordinary folk trying to get enlightened or be better people, and yet what manifests around us is this beauty, this generosity. We have this chance to practise here at Amaravati, in Cittaviveka and in my own monastery, Tisarana.

I feel really fortunate to have this kind of opportunity. I doubt if any of us find it easy in the monastic life, or in lay life. Life itself is challenging. Trying to practise in a way which has integrity and consistency and love in it, is a hard path to maintain. Our

communal gatherings are ways of helping each other and in reinforcing that aspiration we have.

THE POINT OF THIS LIFE

As most of you know, I've been out of the loop, out of the monastic circuit for ten years. I left Amaravati in 1999 because I was quite exhausted being here. I was really in over my head, completely out of my depth and needed a good long rest. I had various self-retreats for a couple of years. This is the wonderful thing of our communities; we have these opportunities to support each other and do retreats like that.

During this time, my mother fell and she broke her pelvis. She lived in Ottawa and I was in New Zealand, so I went out to care for her. She was already 87, so no spring chicken, and I could see that there was just no way she could be alone. I didn't want her to go into an old folks' home, so I decided that I would try to stay with her and learn how to practise as a bhikkhu in my mother's condominium.

She didn't believe me in the beginning, and for the first year she would often say, 'When are you going?', and I would reply, 'I'm staying.' ... 'When are you going?' 'I'm staying.'

For those of us in monastic life, it's often a challenge to be outside of our monastic protection, our monastic privilege. We're so well cared for in these monastic settings, but when we are outside of Thailand, and in non-Buddhist countries, in situations where it's really not understood why we live in the way we do – it is interesting to see how we adapt to a different kind of environment.

When I returned home to visit my family in 1977 – after having been in robes for about four and a half years – I really blew it. The visit was awkward and clumsy, as so often happens when entering an unfamiliar situation.

However, this time I did much better. This time I had much more confidence. I was trying to figure out what this bhikkhu life is all about. What is my culture as a bhikkhu? What is my mother's life about? What is her culture? Personally, I find it arrogant to assume that my Buddhist culture must be the dominant one in every social situation, or that everyone should serve me as if they were disciples of Ajahn Chah.

Why can't I adapt to other people's culture? It's the kind of contemplation I've often had. Why should my cultural situation be more important than another cultural situation? So, with my mother,

I could see that it wasn't just her cultural situation, it was her physical condition that was more important than all my rule-keeping. I tried to work out a way where I would keep to my moral and monastic discipline, and still care for her.

There were the usual issues around food, and some of our rules say that we can't be alone with a woman. My mother is 87 – I can't be alone with her? With our rules, we can see that there is an allowance to acknowledge any transgressions with another bhikkhu. We can say that, during this fortnight I stepped outside these boundaries, but I stepped outside these boundaries for these particular reasons.

I want to share with you how I worked all this out. I went to Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Pasanno and I told them: 'This is what I'm doing, this is how I'm living.' They approved, saying, 'If you can't take care of your mother, what's the point of this life?'

Thus, I found a way to keep my formal and contemplative practices going, but the most important thing was just to take care of my mother. To wash and feed her when necessary, or to just be with her, make her a garden. This was quite wonderful. As I say to people, the two best things I've done in my life is to become a monk, and to take care of my mum. Really, honestly.

Still, my mum and I were really good mates. She passed away a year and a half ago, and in all the nine years we spent together, we had only one disagreement, which lasted fifteen minutes. It was a special relationship. I recognize that not everyone shares such a clear and open connection with their parents; for some, it can be a source of stress.

PRACTISING THE BRAHMAVIHĀRĀ IN EVERYDAY LIFE

One of the things that is perhaps uncommon in a forest monk's life, or in a traditional monastic setting, is loving self-sacrifice. I think in lay life that might actually be an easier piece to develop, because of a parent's relationship with their children, or good marriage relationship. There is a kind of loving bond that exists, so self-sacrifice comes from a deep sense of love and care.

If I think of the way my mum cared for me during our refugee years... when we came to Canada, my parents had no money. My mother gave her food to us kids. She hardly ate, hardly anything at all. That's amazing! But it was so natural for her.

When you think about it, in our monastic life, that loving bond we have with someone is harder to find, it's different. Sometimes we feel very devoted to our teachers. So, I know with Ajahn Chah, one had a tremendous sense of *bhakti*[*] to him, he was such an exceptional being, and that *bhakti* allows a lot of self-sacrifice, a deep sense of service, a really wonderful opening of the heart. Being with my mum, it was this kind of marvellous opportunity of practising the *brahmavihārā*, day in and day out – just in a very simple, very natural way.

Obviously, the sense of wishing her well, or *mettā*, was very obvious. *Karunā* was very obvious too. She had a lot of pain. She had osteoporosis and arthritis, she was legally blind, but she was quite fine with it, able to get around on a walker most of the time. Just to serve someone like that and to look out for them, I found that our training in *ācariyavatta*, our training as *upaṭṭhaka*, is brilliant.[**]

The way we are trained to look out for our teachers, how we are trained to anticipate their needs, how we are trained to look out and see what they like. Do they like black tea or green tea? Do they

* devotion

** *ācariyavatta* is 'duty to the teacher', and *upaṭṭḥaka* is the term for this personal service.

like sugar? Do they like honey? That kind of sensitivity and service, which I learned from Luang Por Chah and Luang Por Sumedho. This really comes into play with someone who is very old, because their needs are considerable – you can do so much for an old person. You can do so much.

You can do so many little things. Like when I noticed that my mother was fumbling around with the lamps – I put light switches in all the corners, just at the height her hand could reach, either in the chair or in the bed. It was a little thing, but it made a huge difference to her life. That kind of care-giving, I think is natural. The way we are trained as monastics is to really look out for our teachers.

How can I help you? How can I make your life easier? How can I make your life more graceful? That training comes into play. That kind of sensitivity and sense of observation. This way, I was able to facilitate mum's difficult physical life. At that age, for most people – it's a bummer. My mum kept saying that she just wanted out. Not in any morose way, but just in a natural way. Enough with the pain, enough with the tiredness, and so on.

It was interesting trying to keep her mind from not getting depressed. Just to keep her somehow interested in things. So that her mind

wouldn't sink. To do that, I'd find things like fashion catalogues and go through them with my mother. It was not my forte. Yet, it was interesting when you really love someone you can look for ways to make them happy, rather than what's going to make me happy.

We would go through an L.L. Bean catalogue, then she'd look at something that caught her eye. She could hardly read, I would say, 'What are you going to look like in that?' It was really quite fun going through a shopping catalogue with a 90-year-old lady, having no money and not knowing anything. But these are the kind of small joys of caring for someone, joys that then lift the other person's heart. Because they see that we care for them, it gives them a different perspective.

The kind of loneliness of the elderly is profound. Because I don't think we are meant to be alone. We are social beings. It's not just physically taking care of an elderly person; it is taking care of their heart and taking care of their mind, tuning into what they need. This was just one of the interesting dances me and my mum did, figuratively – not that she could dance much, not that I do dance, but there was this kind of sensitivity we had to each other. She knew how to read me; I knew how to read her.

A times, I could see that she was very much consumed with her own pain and knew she was quiet because of that. She would never complain to me, instead she would simply tell me if something hurt. She loved me, and so was worried that I would worry – that was such a kind thing to do. However, I *would* sometimes hear her complaining to the very good physiotherapist that came.

Being with her, I felt pretty exhausted at times, and I'd tell myself, look, that's not her problem. I would always try to remain upbeat. So, what you have is, two people who raise their consciousness above the negativity of a difficult situation out of love; it's really quite marvellous. It is a kind of meditation on the *brahamvihārā* in a very, very open and natural way.

One of my fond memories comes from the time that I had been caring for her for about four years. I was beginning to tire, so I began exploring whether people in Ottawa might be interested in starting a forest monastery. That's how Tisarana began – and what a relief it was. It gave me weekends to rest.

Ajahn Kusalo kindly came to get the place up and running, and he would simply let me retreat to my kuṭi, which was deeply

restorative. That connection gave me a sense of *samana-saññā*[*] – a vital relationship with the sangha, which was so important for simply staying connected to a community.

Since then, every Saturday morning I'd go to Tisarana, have a meal, and teach a bit, or just go to my kuṭi and take a rest or meditate, whatever. Afterwards, I'd return to mum on Sunday evenings. I'd be away from home from Saturday mornings to Sunday evenings. When I went back, I always brought her some flowers – she loved flowers. Then I'd go up to the condominium and she'd be very happy to see me. I'd show her the flowers and her face would light up and she'd be radiant with joy. I would take mental snapshots of her being happy and then I bring those images into my meditation, just picturing her smile, her happiness. Of course I'd feel happy – that's very much the practice of *muditā*, the practice of feeling someone else's happiness and feeling happy for their happiness.

So, I found the deepening of the *brahamvihārā* in this very real way, where I began to see how we can use emotional memory, not as storyline, but as heart-feeling. A heart-feeling that gets stimulated, gets triggered, and becomes more vibrant through remembering.

[*] *samana-saññā* is the perception of being a samana, a gone-forth person.

This is the simple act of recollection, this idea of recollection. Just recollecting my mum's joy as a picture, and then as a heart-centred feeling which is very real, and then just abiding in that. This is *muditā*; this is joy.

Abiding in that and reinforcing that, such that the heart begins to remember and begins to feel viscerally what joy is about. Through repeating that kind of activity and pattern, I found that my attention tended to abide more with the centre of my heart rather than the thinking mind. I still enjoyed going there, because it likes to do that – but just to find an alternative place to allow consciousness to sit. To sit in the seat of the heart. I found it very lovely. And then compassion too, just feeling; feeling for my mum's situation, trying to act around that was always in the centre of the heart.

This kind of stimulation I think is very important in our lives. Because if our Dhamma remains merely intellectual, then it becomes very arid – to say the least – or very dry. Theravada Buddhism has tremendously beautiful intellectual structures. It is very difficult sometimes to get your head around it. It has a lot of lists. *Paṭiccasamuppada*, the Four Noble Truths, Factors of Awakening etc. The lists go on and on, but there's a huge difference between

having an intellectual set of principles or guidelines, or teachings that are merely left as that. Because that doctrine which is just left as intellectual knowledge either becomes dogma or just remains as a kind of artefact that you remember as a piece of knowledge. But liberation is not a doctrine to be just left as knowledge. It's to be used as something to actually awaken the heart.

The *brahamvihārā* encourage us to investigate what it really means to have empathy. What does empathy actually mean? How does it feel? So, we bring up the language of empathy. Well, what is empathy? Rather than having *brahamvihārā* as a list, something very good to do: how do we feel empathy?

One of the things I noticed with elderly people is that they often don't have opportunities to express generosity, because they're stuck in their physical form and its challenges. I found that with my mother, as with many others, much of her joy lay in giving, serving or gardening. And due to bodily constraints, those avenues of expression were no longer there. So, when we went through the shopping catalogue, she asked me what I wanted. I said 'socks' so that she'd have the joy of giving me something. So, I got more and more socks from her. Now I have a great collection of socks.

Serving others is a special opportunity. We all feel it, don't we? When you serve someone and they thank you, you often thank them in return. Why? Because in that moment, they are giving us the chance to form an empathetic connection – to touch the *brahamvihārā* not as an abstract ideal, but in a tangible way. When these moments arise, it's beautiful and timely to embrace them fully. We can then carry that heartfelt engagement into meditation, strengthening our connection so that the practice of the *brahamvihārā* lives not only in the mind, but in the heart.

We may think: 'May I be well, may you be well', but it has to come down from the head into the heart. The heart centre has that kind of stimulation, which makes it very important for a balanced existence or *upekkhā*. With more heart-centred practice, awareness becomes a different kind of a game.

Awareness practice can, unfortunately, become continually critical or controlling. When held incorrectly, it can turn into a constant evaluation. In contrast, heart-centered practices are more receptive and avoid this trap. Consider how empathy works: it doesn't evaluate or reach outward; it allows what is present to come to you. It is closer to listening.

Listening is deeply empathetic. To listen is to allow something to enter consciousness. Even listening to silence – the quiet of a room – requires waiting. It asks us to be present, available and receptive, allowing the silence itself to meet us. Heart-centered practices cultivate this very quality. And when awareness is imbued with such empathy, meeting even the ordinary moments of life, we begin to truly understand the way things are.

Consider anyone who has done social work, counselling, or simply spent time talking deeply with others. To truly understand someone, you must first listen – truly listen. You have to allow them to enter your awareness and feel what they are conveying. If, instead, you approach with the intent to figure them out, solve their problems, or have a ready answer, you are no longer truly available to them. Without empathy, you cannot fully meet who they are.

In the same way, with our own experience, the difficulties we face as human beings, the problems and so on – I think true awareness has that empathetic quality in it. If I'm going to understand my own fears, my own biases, my own history, somehow I have to be present to that. I have to be available for that. I have to allow it to become conscious.

When I allow it to come to conscious, then I think there is understanding. But if I don't allow it to be conscious, and my mind is always evaluating, trying to become, or something, then I don't think there's true understanding there. When we meditate, we cultivate that sense of presence; I always find it very important, as I meditate, to really contemplate intention and effort.

RIGHT EFFORT

How do I make an effort? Why do I make an effort? And what is truly happening when I do? To me, that is the heart of the problem. So often, I find myself reaching forward, trying to act upon the present moment. But as long as I'm trying to 'do' something about it – guided by an agenda, a preconceived notion of attainment, or anticipation – I cannot truly understand the moment itself.

If I cannot understand the moment, I can't really respond to it correctly. But when I can sit back, I can allow the present moment to unfold and then insight can arise. Something fresh can arise. Why? Because I am available. If I don't have that sense of openness, I don't think I can really understand the present moment.

Now, this is often very difficult. When fear arises, or an old memory of betrayal surfaces, or physical pain flares up, it can feel nearly impossible to allow the present moment to become fully conscious. After all, who wants pain? None of us do. Yet, when we cultivate the capacity to be present even with pain, fear, resentment, or jealousy, we begin to touch something deeper in our consciousness – something unchanging.

In the deep difficulties of our practice, the deepest lessons I've had to learn are lessons around fear. All manners and flavours of fear. If you think about something like fear, empathy towards fear is not a natural way to respond to it.

For me, the natural way to respond to fear was to try to figure it out, to try to get rid of it, to somehow not have it. So, the natural or conditioned response is some desire to get rid of fear, desire to have some kind of other experience.

As long as I didn't see *that* as the problem – that is, in my case, the desire not to have the fear – as long as I didn't notice that, then nothing worked. There was certainly lots of vigour, diligence and determination. But as long as there was this misunderstanding, as long as there was some preconceived notion rooted in ignorance

with the way I approached fear, it always resulted poorly – in a sense of despair.

The teaching is to look at desire – to make it conscious rather than trying to get rid of it or follow it. This is an empathetic teaching: to simply let desire become conscious. Yet desire is such a powerful energy that we almost always react to it.

Take, for example, the desire to be free from fear, anger or jealousy. It can seem counterintuitive not to try to rid ourselves of these difficult emotions. But I've found that when we meet fear with open-hearted awareness, simply acknowledging its presence in consciousness, we begin to touch something beyond fear, something truly unchanging.

That is courageous work, and not at all easy. Whether facing intimidation, jealousy or old betrayals, to meet those feelings with compassion and empathy, be available to them – is not for the faint of heart. It's hard, isn't it?

Yet I don't see any other way to do it. As we sit in the fire of those kinds of feelings, then what happens is that insight begins to dawn on us that even this is okay. Even this fear is okay. Even this jealousy is okay. We begin to trust more in something that is unchanging, in that open-hearted clarity to the way things are.

AWAKEN AGAIN TO PRESENCE

After some time we forget, we lose the plot. We get lost, and then we awaken again. I have been reflecting, I've been in Harnham, I've been in Chithurst, and now I'm here in Amaravati. I was in New Zealand, I've been travelling all over, just reflecting on the places I've been as a monk, and the experiences I had.

Certainly, I've been overwhelmed many times. Sometimes I was unaware, or simply caught up, or burnt out. Yet somehow, we always return to the same point, don't we? We come back to this: the only thing that makes sense is presence. The only true place of abiding is knowing the way things are. It's the only thing that makes sense. Whenever we taste that, whenever we taste this pure presence, whenever we truly meet reality as it is, we can acknowledge, with optimism, 'Yes, I'm back again.'

No matter how lost we get, how foolish we might have been, how awful our behaviour becomes, or whatever we've said, at some moment we wake up. We wake up to this moment the way it is. To really treasure that, to acknowledge that, rather than just to dwell in the history of failure, the history of regret, but to actually value that

the only way out is this present moment awareness with empathy and love. The only way out is non-becoming.

FEAR

My own struggles with fear involved learning to witness it through my body – to actually let fear move through me. At first, I wasn't accustomed to this. I would typically localize my attention, focus on the breath, or try to control my mind – using practice as a way to distract from or eliminate fear.

It was, in essence, an agenda to avoid it. Previously, the very idea of witnessing difficult emotions like fear, panic, or anxiety by allowing the body to fully feel them – in the gut, the heart, the hands, the neck – was foreign to me. This open, empathetic way of being with fear met with a great deal of resistance.

In the beginning, I was more likely to think about fear – dwelling on fearful thoughts, planning talks around it, or arranging my life to avoid it altogether. It was all intellectual analysis and thought that never truly addressed the issue, because it never allowed me to fully witness the energy of fear itself.

However, our practices of body awareness are very receptive practices. They are practices which allow the energies of greed, hatred, and delusion to manifest. And because we open to them in this very body-witnessing way, their energies weaken and disappear, they process through the body. We feel them in the guts, we feel them in the heart, but because we no longer have an agenda of getting rid of them, or closing them down, as they process through us, our body begins to be liberated from them.

And as our body is liberated from them, our mind is liberated from them as well. This is the beauty of practising body awareness to release difficult emotions. The heart, stomach, or the body as a whole, dont't lie. Thoughts, if you notice, often lie. The thinking mind can just spin stories: around, rationalizations, blame, you know the whole business, but the body doesn't lie. The body feels, and we are mind-body experiences – aren't we? That is what our living existence presents to us.

So, there is a way of entering into our karma, entering into the difficulties of our practice, which is not simply intellectual. Intellect can help, but body-based practices, I think, are very important,

they are not trying to focus on anything. They are very open and welcoming; this is what the attitudes of the *brahamvihārā* are about.

You open to something that you don't want to open to. But in the opening to that, the kind of locked energy of fear and anger begins to be felt, begins to be released; your whole body begins to have a sense of openness, of open attention.

Then the mind is no longer localized into thoughts, into views and opinions, into all these awful self-disparagements that we have. It is no longer localized in that way; there is now a sense of expansion and largeness and liberation and letting go.

It comes from simple attitudes of receptivity, of listening, of allowing, of being curious, of taking the time to allow these energies to be just as they are. I don't know about you, but one of the problems I always had with these more difficult energies of my practice was just the continual analysis of them. Trying to figure out what I need to do about them. Trying to figure out a practice to get around them. Why they are here?

So, the mind always tends to be engaged in thought, but never really with the present moment. Never really with feeling. As human beings

◄ Ajahn Viradhammo scattering Mrs Akers' ashes off the Latvian coast.

we can pay attention in a way where we focus and try to figure things out, which we need to do – but we can also pay attention in a very receptive way.

We are usually not taught about the second way. We're taught to look at a computer screen and manipulate some keys, or a mouse, or a finger, and create some kind of a result. We're taught to manipulate vegetables to make food. We're taught to manipulate a sewing machine to sew robes – this is natural.

We all have that, but we're not taught, at least I was never taught, meditation as a way of learning this. We're not taught ways of actually witnessing life in a very receptive way. Where we just let life come to us without any kind of agenda or evaluation. This is a different way of approaching the present moment.

PAINTINGS AND OPEN AWARENESS

Six months ago, I did a retreat in a place called Peterborough in Ontario. It was snowing and whatever. In the room where I had the meal, there were two paintings. One was a very complicated Tibetan *thangka*, with all kinds of realms of beings and Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, one of those Tibetan iconographic wonders.

Looking at that, my mind was really engaged in trying to figure it out. 'What's that bodhisattva doing? Are the Four Noble Truths in there?' My mind was completely engaged in trying to figure something out. That's one way we use the mind.

On the other wall there was an abstract painting, and my first reaction was, 'Is that art?' But then I stopped, and then I just looked at it, and told myself: 'This is not something you're going to figure out intellectually – this is different.' Then I just let the colours come to me. I let the painting come to me. That was a different experience. It was quite peaceful actually.

I never figured out what the painting was about, but I don't think that was the point of it. So, we can engage in life in both ways, and we have to. One emphasizes the object, like me looking at the *thangka*, I see all these figurines, and I try figuring it out from a historical background. And the other way doesn't emphasize the object. It emphasizes the looking. It's a different emphasis.

In awareness practice, we're emphasizing awareness rather than the object. The object is what tends to fool us. Through desire, through habitual reactions, we get caught in the objects of

consciousness. The objects of the body: pain, pleasure, thought, analysis, the emotions. Our attention is preoccupied or taken up by these objects.

Those objects which intensely preoccupy us and take up all our attention are the very addictive ones, the very obsessive ones. The ones with a strong sense of self, of me, you and others. When I'm really angry at someone, what happens is there's not only the energy of the anger, but my attention is now caught up with the object of anger and I become angry and I blame, of course I blame myself.

There's a tremendous preoccupation with this changing scenario of objects. To actually feel all that and come to a different way of relating, to say, 'ah, anger feels this way' is emphasizing the knowing rather than the object. Emphasizing the listening rather than the sound. Emphasizing the looking rather than the object you're looking at.

That shift of attention I think is very important in spiritual life. Because that's the shift, that opens the gateway to the unchanging.

As long as our preoccupation is with objects, I think our mind will always be busy with that. It cannot be in any other way. But we need to know how to shift our attention from objects to knowing.

RENUNCIATION

Along with the broad, open knowing, we also need to figure out how to do the heating in the room and how to install the lights, how to run the monastery etc. Otherwise, we couldn't be here to practise, right? It's not about dismissing the worldly side of life, but if that's the only thing we have, I don't think we have a spiritual life.

This is where renunciation comes in. Renunciation at the profound level is not about some rule-keeping or hardened asceticism, is it? It's that basic insight that in the five *khandhā,** you cannot find the unchanging. It's not possible.

Searching for the unchanging in the five *khandhā* is a red herring. You are not going to find that there. That is the basic shift of renunciation in one's mind. It's not about robes and so on. But then, the robe makes a lot of sense for enacting that kind of renunciation.

* *khandhā* is the five-part classification of conditioned experience: form, feeling, perception, activations and consciousness.

And so we have the *thangka*, the analysis and the abstract – which is the looking. Analysis or just looking – it's all in awareness.

LISTENING

Listening is an easy way to enter into that more receptive quality of consciousness. When you just stop and listen and let the sounds come to you; the mind just stops. There is only presence. There's no history. There's no future. There's no past. It's just the way things are.

When life is not threatening and simple, that's easy, but when life is threatening and complicated, it's difficult. But more I can be with the difficult objects of consciousness, the freer I am.

When there is a receptive listening to the habitual patterns of fear or whatever else, there's more and more freedom. That's the irony of dealing with our karma. Those very things which are the most obsessive can be the things which are the most liberating.

For example, if 60% of my time is spent worrying and if I can be receptive to worry and not get caught by it, and witness its cessation, then I've got 60% liberation! For me, the very thing that was most suffering for me, as I entered into it – is the greatest source of liberation!

It's obvious, isn't it? But it does take persistence, it takes courage, it takes stubbornness, it takes support, and it certainly takes empathy. It takes a kind of heartfelt quality to enter into these things. Not just a wilful act. It's like listening. When you listen to something, to me that's not a wilful act. It's an activity of awakening to the sound, isn't it? It's not moving ahead or away but allowing the abstract to come to you rather than trying to get in there and figure it all out.

I offer these thoughts for your consideration, *Evam*.

ABOUT LUANG POR VIRADHAMMO

Luang Por V, as we know him now, was born in 1947, in Esslingen, Germany, to refugee parents escaping the Soviet re-invasion of Latvia. The younger of two sons, he was named Vitauts. Four years later, the Akers family emigrated to Toronto, Canada.

After completing High School in Toronto, Vitauts enrolled to study engineering at the University of Toronto. Judging from his love of craft – from woodwork to weaving and building monasteries, we can surmise that this was a natural inclination. This was, however, a short-lived aspiration – as he answered a much more profound and meaningful call.

Even as a young boy of five or six, there arose experiences of deep silence that left an indelible but inexplicable mark on him. Later,

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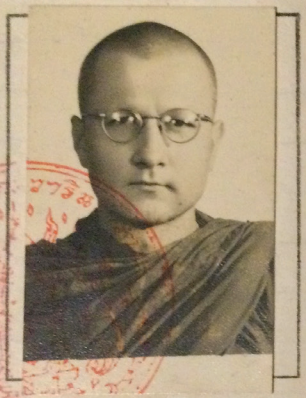

(ลงชื่อ) VITAUTS AKERS VIRADHAMMO

ตำแหน่งในคณะสงฆ์ มหานิกาย

สถานะเดิม

ชื่อ นายวิชเทาท์ นามสกุล เอเคอร์ส

วิทยฐานะ G.C.E อาชีพ ข้าราชการ

บิดา นายเอเคอร์ส มารดา นางเอเคอร์ส

สัญชาติ อังกฤษ สีผิว ขาว

ศาสนา เผดียน

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his quest for the Transcendent led him to India, where he first encountered the teachings of J. Krishnamurti. This brought him back to childhood memories of a deep peaceful inner silence.

Following his heart, he arrived in Almora, India in 1969, where he met the late Ven. Bodhesako, who introduced him to the teachings of the Buddha. The plan was to travel to Thailand, along with Ven. Bodhesako, but fate would have it otherwise and each went their own way.

Having worked in Switzerland and Germany for a few years, Vitauts was once more reminded of his spiritual calling, so he travelled solo to Thailand to fulfil the quest. In 1973 he went forth as a novice in Wat Mahathat, Bangkok, as Samanera Viradhammo.

Two months after taking samanera precepts, he was blessed to meet Ajahn Chah, and requested to be accepted as his student. In 1974 he went forth as a bhikkhu, under the benevolent guidance of Ajahn Chah.

Tan Viradhammo lived with and learnt from Ajahn Chah for a few more years, at which point he was asked to continue his life of service with Ajahn Sumedho in London at the Hampstead Vihara,

where the forest tradition was building a fledgling sangha. This was a gentle, fragile sapling at the time, one that would one day grow into a mighty tree of Dhamma and provide refuge for so many in Europe and around the world. This move to England started a lifetime relationship of service, devotion and noble friendship with Ajahn Sumedho – which continues till this day.

Over the next five decades, Luang Por V would dedicate his life and energies to growing, supporting and serving the *Buddha Sāsana* by building monasteries, training monks and teaching Dhamma, opening the hearts of many, both monastic and lay.

He has led various communities and built life-long friendships at various monasteries in Thailand; in Cittaviveka, Amaravati, Aruna Ratanagiri in the UK; Bodhinyānārāma in New Zealand and Tisarana in Canada – where he now resides as the Abbot and Senior Monk.

This offering would neither be meaningful nor complete without mentioning Luang Por V's mother, Mrs. Astrid Akers, whom he speaks of and recollects with so much love and filial piety. But for her, Tisarana Buddhist Monastery would not have come to be.

In 2001, Luang Por received news that his mum fallen and broken her pelvis at the age of 87. He immediately left New Zealand to support her, spending the next nine years caring for her. After his arrival in Canada, friends from the Ottawa Buddhist Society and associated Buddhist Groups invited Luang Por V to start a monastery and hence, the idea of Tisarana was conceived and born out of those pure intentions.

With Ajahn Kusalo as the first abbot of Tisarana, Luang Por V would spend the week in his mum's condo in Ottawa and teach a retreat at Tisarana over the weekends. He had a steady group of lay supporters who would offer him *dāna* every day and he maintained his adherence and commitment to the Vinaya even in these unique set of circumstances. A truly heartfelt and creative endeavour.

On his way back from Tisarana to Ottawa, his driver would always offer him flowers to take back to his mum. Luang Por Viradhammo also ensured that his mum's garden was maintained and built a ramp so that he could wheel his mum to the balcony so she could count the cherry tomatoes on the vine or sit with the flowers and the birds, briefly enjoying the fresh and open outdoors.

Many small gestures such as this would bring much joy and uplift to a situation that could've easily turned heavy and burdensome. His caring for his mum is testimonial to the way Luang Por lives his life of selfless service – with gentleness, love and a very special touch of levity and lightness that's so quintessentially Luang Por V.

He often says that a monk's livelihood is that of service, and asserts that the Buddha's teachings on filial piety are extremely reliable and tangible ways of touching and abiding in the *brahmavihārā*, leading to the opening of the heart.

Luang Por V's dedication and care, his service, to his mum at the twilight of her life, his conversations with her, recalling her love for gardening and flowers, admiration for the values she instilled in him – all describe a relationship abiding in that open-heartedness.

When Mrs Akers passed on, Luang Por had the opportunity to scatter part of her ashes off the East Coast of Canada as she wished, so that they could float to Latvia. Later on, he had the opportunity to take another part of her ashes and scatter them off the Latvian coast which, quite by coincidence, happened to be the exact area where his family fled to take refuge in Germany.

Luang Por V's life exemplifies and teaches us that the spiritual path is more than just observing the in- and out-breaths. It's a training in love, a training in devotion, a training that leads to the transcendent and to the promise of unshakeable deliverance of heart.

AMARASIRI BHIKKHU

A warm farewell from a loving son. Ajahn Viradhammo, feeling deep gratitude and love after scattering Mrs Akers' ashes off the coast of Latvia.

THE MOTHER AND THE MONK

AJAHN VIRADHAMMO

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The Oxeye daisy is the national flower of Latvia.

The Bodhi leaf is emblematic of the Buddha.

The text herein tells the story of their connection.