# Talk at the Re-opening of the Golden Buddha Centre in Totnes

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 55:22

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble, and fully self-enlightened.

I would like to thank Vikram Daya for this opportunity to come and give a talk, and of course to thank them for the dedication they have put in to establish a little meditation center right here in the middle of Totnes. Sadhu! Sadhu! Sadhu!

I thought this might be an opportunity to go over some basic teachings as a reminder, looking at the Buddha's life itself and recognizing that he is an exemplar. The life that he lived is really what we ourselves have to go through. He is a teacher, of course, and in the sense that it is a path that everybody has to take, one way or the other—and I mean everybody—he is an archetype.

It is a path of renunciation, not to be confused with mortification. Renunciation, remember, is simply the letting go of a wrong relationship we have with the world.

In those times, very similar to ours, there were two basic philosophies. One was what we would call materialism, scientific materialism: one life and that's it, so you may as well enjoy yourself. The Buddha probably tried that as a youth, got fed up with it, became empty, and that was one of the reasons he began to leave. One of our deepest fears is that we want to enjoy life.

The other philosophy was that there was some sort of soul or spirit within us which was held down by karma. In the Jain tradition, this is quite material—it is your actual physical body, you might say. The whole idea was to practice mortification exercises which would then allow the soul to leave the body. So the Jain saint, the one who is a hero, is one who starves himself to death.

The Buddha himself tried these approaches, of course. He tried to attain these beautiful mental states, which were part of the idea of some sort of eternality, and found them wanting. He kept waking up and finding himself to be still the anxious and depressed Gautama. We could say that he was going through what we would call an existential crisis, coming to terms with sickness, aging, and death. Then he tried the self-mortification business and found that it was just more suffering. So he abandoned that.

We can imagine him on the road, having left his companions, feeling quite despairing. Along comes a woman—for some reason we know her name, Sujata, meaning "fortunate birth"—who sees him. Although she is carrying special sweetmeats, little rice cakes (though I prefer to always think of it as rice pudding),

she sees this poor wretch and offers her offerings to him. In the scriptures, of course, it says he was glowing like a god. This is ridiculous. He was there looking quite wretched, and he took this rice pudding. As you know, the effect of rice pudding is incalculable.

At that point he has a memory from childhood, and this is really why we call him self-enlightened. In this memory from childhood, he remembers watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony, and he recognizes that he is in the same state of absorption that he would have been in during those practices of absorption, the jhānic state. But there is something extra to it: a sense of curiosity. He is driven by interest to know what his father is doing.

At that point, his whole search, his whole labor turns upon itself. Instead of trying to seek happiness, he now tries to understand how he is creating suffering. With that new inspiration, he sits under the Bodhi tree with great determination: either he is going to crack this problem or die.

Well, lucky for him, and very fortunate for us, he cracks it. Six hours—that is what he said it took. What he realized, what he experienced, is something which he cannot explain. He calls it ineffable, beyond rationality. He has all these lovely epithets, and he points to it often, mostly in the negative: it is not born, does not die, not conditioned. He then gives it a name: Nibbāna. But in the Theravāda tradition, it is the negative side which is mostly accentuated.

That Nirvana is nothing that can be described, that it's an emptiness and all that sort of thing. In the Mahayana tradition, they're much more positive about it.

There are two occasions in the scriptures which, in a sense, give us the more Mahayana point of view. We have a collection of scriptures called the Udana Suttas, which are the inspirational phrases that the Buddha came out with. Somebody collected them all into this special collection, and it doesn't include these two instances—which gives you the slant of a particular school.

These two instances say quite clearly that there is a consciousness which is not touched by any of the senses, which includes the mind. No emotions, no thoughts. Without boundary—only phenomena can create boundary. And in all directions, full of light. Just this is the end of suffering.

So we have to find within us this Buddha. This Buddha that's within us, this satipañña, this intuitive awareness, is completely confused with the body and mind, with the psychophysical organism. And because of that confusion, it seeks happiness in this form. Seeking happiness in this form leads ultimately to frustration.

What it does is make us collect things, to be acquisitive, thinking that the more we have, the happier and more secure we'll be. So more money, more friends, more power. And we find that this isn't ever completely satisfactory, because I'm never completely safe, so I always have to have a little more money. I'm never entirely loved, so I need a couple more friends. I'm never quite in control, so I need a little more power. And so it grows, and in those actions we form unskillful deeds, which create within us our

suffering, our conditioning, our unskillful conditioning.

Then one day we wake up and discover vipassana—or any meditation—and the process now is in reverse. The process is to observe within us how we've created this world.

When we say we've created this world, the room we're sitting in now has, we can presume, some sort of objective existence. In other words, it can be here when we all leave. But the room that we're actually experiencing is entirely created by us. It depends upon our sight, our hearing, our body. We live within this cocoon, this bubble of consciousness. And this bubble of consciousness gives us the impression that we are objective about the world, especially in the West, where we confuse ourselves into thinking that we can see the world objectively. It's come about through our science and our technology, but it's left us with a delusion.

What the meditation tells us is that the world we're actually living in is being created entirely by us from very minimal stimuli from the outside. At the eardrum, all there is is pressure. At the skin level, there are only little chemical, electrical changes. The eyes collect a very small amount of photons, and the rest of it is completely manufactured within us.

And so, when we consider that the world I am actually living in is the one that I am creating, then the question must arise: why have I made such a pig's ear of it? That's basically our investigation.

In taking a stance within us, which we call the observer, the feeler, we have disengaged with the psychophysical organism. What do we mean by self? We mean identity. And what does identity mean? It means basically that for that moment, that's what you are.

There are single moments where this comes across to us. For instance, when you trap your finger in the door, for that one lovely, delightful moment, you and the pain are one and the same. That's identity. When you get lost in a daydream, lost in the emotional inner DVD, that's what you are. That's what we mean by identity. As soon as you jump out of it, you've lost that identity and formed another identity of the one who knows.

The whole process of our liberation from that delusion is the process of pulling ourselves out of what we thought was me, what we thought was us.

Consider the child who's born. A lot of research was done, even going back to Freud. There was a psychologist called Margaret Mahler, I think that was her name, who did extensive study on how a child finally individuated, and it takes, it seems, three years. The first four months, it seems to be just a blanket of sensations which has no depth. We see little babies reaching out and actually creating their three-dimensional world, and very slowly, over a period of time, this mass of sensations becomes the world out there and me. That's why by about the age of three, children can say, "I am a boy, I am a girl."

They're very clear about their little existences.

All we are doing is externalizing the inner world. All we are doing is, as it were, pushing away the inner world so that it becomes an inner world that seems outer. I'm sure I'm making myself perfectly clear.

When you find this position within yourself, it has been named the observation post by Nyanaponika Thera in what is still the classic book on meditation, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. We access within us an observation post, and we feel ourselves to be the observer of thoughts and feelings. We experience ourselves to be the feeler. We can feel pain in the knee and so on. We feel the breath. We can experience it directly. And yet, our identity is of the observer.

In moments of real clarity within your meditation, when the body is perfectly still, and the heart is perfectly calm, and the mind has stopped even for a second, and you really feel yourself, you really experience yourself to be the observer within this psychophysical organism—when you've done that, ask yourself afterwards: What were the inner contents of the observer? What's it made of? Did you find any sensations in there? Did you find any bodily parts in there? Were there any feelings, emotions, moods? Were there any thoughts or images? And yet there was this bright, intuitive awareness.

What we've done there, unwittingly, is we've found where Nibbana is. It's staring us in the face, but we don't see it.

Now, the sense of self that we get, the sense of the observer, is the image of that very sati-pañña in the screen of consciousness. When we talk about consciousness, when we talk about viññāṇa—the fifth of the five aggregates—we're speaking of something beyond body and its feelings, beyond all our perceptions which congregate to become our memories and help our thought patterns, beyond all our conditionings, our saṅkhārā, which are all our habits. And finally, this word viññāṇa. It's translated as consciousness, but we don't really have a word for it in English. I tried to use the word cognition, but when I looked it up on the all-knowing Wikipedia, it didn't seem to fit either.

It's a screen. Can you imagine all the information coming in onto your monitor or your TV screen? Somehow it's got to be held. It's got to be manifest. That manifestation is the manifestation of consciousness. And peculiarly enough, it has its own intelligence—just as the body has its own intelligence. When you cut yourself, do you get in there? Do you shift the cells around? What do you do? You do nothing. You keep it antiseptic, and the body does the rest. The body itself, the cellular life, has its own intelligence.

So it is with our minds and hearts. We've developed a particular "person," inverted commas, which works by itself. That's why you can be driving to work, thinking about all the problems of your life, and arrive completely unharmed, having driven all that way, wondering where the two hours went. There's something about the mind which has its own intelligence, but it needs to be put on the screen.

Our delusion is to fall into the screen, onto the monitor, onto the TV, and become whatever is happening at that time. When we come into meditation, we're pulling ourselves out of that mass, and we're making it

an object. We're making it something to observe. And in so doing, as soon as we observe it, it obviously can't be me.

However, when we get there—and sometimes when you're watching television, you will see your image in the screen—you have a choice. Are you going to watch TV, or are you going to watch yourself watching TV? The sense of the observer is the image of this sati-pañña, this intuitive awareness, in the screen of cognition, in the screen of consciousness, for want of a better word.

Unfortunately, you can't get rid of it by an act of will. You can only get rid of it by paying attention to the object that's before you. When you pay attention to the object that's before you, you're going to absorb into it.

the intention with which you enter that absorption, you come out the other end having developed that intention. If you saw something which you particularly liked—ice cream on a hot day—and you just went for it, thoroughly indulged in it with two scoops, you would come out of that experience with even more desire for ice cream.

However, if you went into that experience without the greed, but just to enjoy—very difficult to separate—then you come out of it with a greater sense of enjoyment without the attachment.

We find we wouldn't get attached so much to things if we began to recognize the aftermath. The aftermath of attachment, the aftermath of indulgence, is the frustration of not being able to get what you want. It's the grief of losing what you have. It's the constant fear of loss anyway, so you take out an insurance policy. There's a sense of compulsive behavior behind it, and worst of all, boredom. Because of the inbuilt obsolescence of pleasure, we can't keep chewing the same sweet. We've got to have a different flavor. And so we get caught up in this search for happiness in the sensual world, the search for happiness in relationship, the search for happiness in art, in nature, wherever we think we can find happiness—the search goes on.

However, if we begin to enter into these experiences with the right intention, then we don't get that stickiness, and we find that we can enjoy life without these unfortunate consequences. Conversely, if we enter into a situation of aversion, then of course we end up with conflict. And that has its own problems. Pretty straightforward.

So our aim in daily life is to take the aversion, to take the suffering out of pain—all sorts of pain: physical, emotional, relational, whatever—take the suffering out of it, and to take the indulgence out of pleasure. That's our practice, in one way of looking at it, in ordinary daily life.

In the inner life, in our meditation and in our contemplations, our process is always to make things something to observe, something to investigate. And that process makes more and more obvious to us this quality within us which is happily called the knowing.

Ajahn Tate, who was a very famous monk in Thailand, lived up on the Mekong River, was considered to be an arahant, and when he died, two million people turned up to his funeral—so presumably he earned his reputation. And he had this lovely little phrase: "Make it simple, take it easy, stay with the one who knows." That was probably his guiding line, which brought him his own insights.

This process of re-identifying ourselves backward into the observer is the process of relief. It's the process of unshackling ourselves. So nibbana turns out to be the unshackling of this intuitive awareness. That's the process that we're going through. And we can only hope that when we get there, that's it, and there isn't anything else.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by your fierce practice, enter into that wonderful state of the end of suffering sooner rather than later.

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A question arose about what happened to the Buddha when he ate a rice cake. What I'm suggesting is that sometime around that point, he remembers this occasion in childhood. So there must have been some connection—like Proust and the madeleine. It all comes back to him. He remembers his father, and he just recalls that state.

Now, if you think about children, you'll notice how they suddenly lock onto something—a bug they haven't seen, or something. And when they do that, their eyes just lock and the world disappears. Their jaw drops. And to us, more developed beings, we think they look gormless. We give them a crack on the back of the head and they wake up, thereby destroying their ability to become fully liberated. This is what happens.

When the child is locked in like that, there's no thought. Their attention is completely absorbed in receiving the information. When the jaw drops, it tells us that there's no thought, because the jaw, the tongue are intimately connected to thinking.

So at that point they are in a state of pure observation. That's what we need to get back to. That's original mind.

So Buddha had that memory of his father. And having that memory led him to turn around upon his meditation. He turned around on his meditation. I'm putting it that way deliberately. Before, he'd been practicing in order to be happy.

The first practices were these absorption states, which exist in all religions—something that you create within yourself through mantra, through the fact of metta that we do. The beauty of those is that you don't need anything outside you. All you need is a couple of robes, a tree, a bowl to go around and get a bit of food, and you can sit there all day completely blissed out. But unfortunately you kept waking up out of that state and finding that actually you're still depressed, anxious. So it was a false state. And he left those

teachers because of that.

The other side was self-mortification, which is the idea that the problem was the body. So you got rid of all sex, drugs, rock and roll. You began not to eat, to draw the body down to its essentials. And as I've said, the Jain saint actually takes it to the point of death after release. For them, for the Jain religion, they are heroes. He tried that, but he just found it to be more suffering.

So he then has this experience. As far as I'm concerned, he's in a state of despair, because he's received all the teachings that were there, and he's still in a state of complete confusion and quandary, and presumably thinking that this is it—it's just going to be birth after birth, one lifetime a cow and a pig, which sounds pretty miserable. So he's sitting there and then somebody comes along and gives him this bit of rice, this sweetmeat. He has this memory, and somehow it changes his view of what he's trying to seek, of what he's searching for. Instead of trying to seek happiness, he says, "Well, why am I suffering? What's the cause of this suffering?"

And it's that which makes him sit under the tree with this new inspiration of turning inward and observing how he's creating suffering. This later comes out in the teaching of dependent origination, which is a psychology. And the teaching of dependent origination clearly delineates where the problem lies. It does not lie in the body. It does not lie in our sense bases. It does not lie in the feelings and emotions that come up. It lies in our relationship to what we're experiencing. That's the core of it. And that relationship is desire—wrong desire.

But even at the point of desire, in the meditation, you'll know that there's no suffering. Because desire, as it comes up as an intention, is still not manifest. It just remains as a force within the mind. It's only when you fall into the identity of it that the suffering begins.

So the process is the seeing, the initial experience, the way that we divide the world into what's pleasant and unpleasant, and then the desire for the pleasant, and then "I want" the desire for the pleasant. So although in English we say "I want, I see, I want, I scream," it's the other way around. Scream, see, want, I. If it weren't that way around, there'd be no escape. If the whole process began with "I," you wouldn't be able to get out of it, because it's always you. It's the fact that the process before the "I" arises is not you, is not identifiable, and you can step out of that process and observe it in its passing. And in so doing, you're actually seeing the escape route from suffering.

If you haven't understood this in the words, then you must come up to Satipaññā and do a retreat.

"So really then what you're saying is our real 'I' is our spiritual nature?"

Yeah. Why not?

"You're also saying not to take it personally, in a sense, aren't you? Because it's not about the 'I.'"

Well, you have to be careful with this one, because the Buddha never said there was no self. He just said it

was false. And it's recognizing the false nature of the self which is the process of disidentifying. So whenever I say, "I am depressed," where's the escape? As soon as I say, "Oh, there's depression," I've escaped.

I've come out of that process of identity. You see?

Except the depression remains.

I know, it's a drag. But everything changes. Remember that the heart will heal itself. You don't have to do anything. This is the magic of the whole system. All there is, is energy. It's the mind which describes it as depression and puts a history to it and a future to it. When you stay with the depression, there's no depression—there's just weight.

In the East, they somatize their problems. Here, we always psychologize it. You get a pain in the knee and it's deep anxiety. Whereas in the East, they just say it's a pain in the knee. So if they're depressed, they're not depressed—they just feel heavy. And there's a little escape from that. At least you don't identify so much with it.

What we discover in our meditation is that simply allowing it to express itself is the process of healing. It's as simple as that. And much cheaper.

And remember that we're not moving towards some sort of dead heart state—the Buddha sitting under the tree, blank, with a sign: "Fully liberated, do not be stirred." He ends up with the Buddha heart. So all these emotional states that we have—depression, loneliness, anxiety—when they come up, that energy is not dissipated. It transforms. It sublimates.

As I understand sublimation in science, it is a solid which moves directly into a gas without an in-between. Although we have ice, water, and vapour, if you have something which goes from solid to vapour immediately, they call that sublimation. That's exactly what's happening all the time.

As soon as you sit with your depression or your anxiety, feeling it, staying with it, holding it and embracing it in loving kindness, affectionate awareness—it feels as though it's evaporating. After a time, of course. And that is changing into its opposite immediately. And you know that because the next time you behave, there's a change of behavior, even if only small. So where there was hatred, you find love. Where there's cruelty, compassion. Selfishness, generosity. Loneliness, solitude.

Happy days are ahead of us.

So a lot of this is about using language to make the state objective, out there, and constantly returning to that practice, would you say?

In the technique that I personally teach, which is taught by the Mahasi side of Burma, we do use a noting technique to make that distance obvious. But that is only a technique. It's not so much to do with language

as an inner position that you take.

I mentioned catching your finger in the door. For one moment, you and the finger are one. You become a physical self. And then you jump out of that and become the angry self and start kicking the door. So this sense of self is always moving. It's always changing. It's always catching hold of something.

What is it that is falling into this identity? Buddha. It's the satipaññā, the awareness. It's the Buddha within that is suffering.

The body doesn't suffer. It just has pain. The heart doesn't suffer. It just has emotions. The mind doesn't suffer. It just works. What's suffering is the Buddha within.

When something happens to us—say, just a very simple thing, somebody says something that irritates us—all that's happening is that we can see their face and

That's why we're trying to get out of suffering. You're all looking at me very seriously. You're beginning to feel I'm saying heretical things.

"Can I ask, what do you mean by 'the Buddha within'? Is that an awareness of the fact that we can get out of it? Is that the Buddha within?"

The Buddha within refers to the quality of intuitive awareness. These are not two different faculties—they're two sides of the same coin. First you look, and then you see. But for it to be active, there has to be a desire to know.

"Could you take us through a little process? For example, based on what you've been saying, I've been working with a certain issue to try and release the Buddha within. So there is grief—I'm grieving, so there is grief. And then I feel disloyal in a way because I'm not grieving anymore. So then I say, 'There is disloyalty,' and I'm sort of free of that, and then somehow I'm..."

Stuck.

"Yes, I'm not sure where I am."

Right. Well, first of all, in this particular case, our confusion is between sorrow and grief. Sorrow is the resonance within our own hearts of somebody else's suffering. Grief is the measure of our attachment. So when somebody dies or somebody leaves us, it's like something is ripped out of our hearts and we're just left with this wound. And then if we think that grief is a measure of our love, how can we stop grieving? Every time we stop grieving, we think we've stopped loving. We get into a double bind.

Once we realize that the grief I'm feeling is something personal to me because of the relationship I had—and it has nothing to do with love—everything shifts. Love is very easy. Love lets people die. It's not a problem. Love lets people leave us. But grief doesn't. Grief hangs on.

So we sit with the grief, not confusing it with love denied, but seeing it as the product of attachment. Attachment means we are psychologically dependent on something outside our control for our happiness. Once you begin to realize that, it's a no-goer. You just don't invest in bonds that aren't going to work.

You observe the grief, and the heart will heal itself. It may take a week, a month, nine months—it doesn't matter. The heart will just slowly heal itself.

I had a particularly interesting case of that. An elderly woman came to see me, saying she'd been grieving for her son for five years. And this was exactly what she was doing. She was grieving, and every time the grief went, she felt guilty that she no longer loved her son. As soon as this was pointed out to her, she was back the next week saying all the grief had gone. There is an end to grief.

"You do get like an emotional scar as well, don't you? You can see a photo, the grief can come back, or you can just remember something and the grief returns."

Yes, but hopefully, eventually, there's just the memory of joys. You counterbalance that with gratefulness, gratitude—that you had a lovely relationship. Even if it was a terrible relationship, you're grateful for the teachings.

"Yes, that's it."

It's called Tough Love.

"I was quite interested in what you were saying about the difference in the way that we look at emotional and psychological problems in the West—depression, anxiety, trauma, whatever—and that it's experienced more as a somatic sensation. Do you think working with feelings in the body rather than the cognitions is actually quite helpful when you're meditating?"

We hear their harsh words, the words they intend to be painful. That's all. We might feel, at the heart level, at this surface level of the heart, the vibration of their anger. That's all. The rest is completely manufactured by me. If I now allow anger to arise in response, that has been manufactured by me.

All these emotions we feel—the depression, the anxiety, and so forth—have not been directly caused by someone else or by an event. There is nothing in the world, and nobody in the world, who can actually cause me psychological suffering. If it were true that other people could cause me psychological suffering, how could I ever have been liberated? By getting rid of you? It's the very fact that all the suffering I have is caused by me that liberation is possible here and now.

So now, if all this anger in me is not caused by external circumstances, I'm still left with the conditioning of anger. It remains in me like a red-hot balloon, and it seeks objects. I can get angry with anything. It just depends on whether this conditioning is coming to the surface or not. That's why a lot of our anger is inappropriate. When you go home and your partner hasn't done something, you can burst out in a huge amount of anger. But if it's your boss, you've got to swallow it. You've got to keep it down.

When you consider that there is this ball of anger, which has nothing to do with past, present, or future—it is a present conditioning within us, which has, of course, its own inner triggers, certain things that make us more angry than others—our task is to release the anger as feeling, because all it is, is energy. And it's in sitting within the bonfire, with affection and kindness, that the process of healing happens. You don't have to do anything in the outside world.

If in your meditation you're working with some sort of emotional pain, and you're sitting there, and suddenly a memory surfaces that seems to be the point where this whole mental conditioning arose, it can become a vehicle through which there's an escape for that particular suffering. It can be a healing moment. A traumatic moment. But you can't make that come. That has to arise out of the psyche, out of the mind.

Sometimes you get pain in the body, which you know is emotionally based rather than physical, and you sit with it, and sit with it, and sit with it, and it disappears, and you haven't a clue what it was. You might intuitively think it was anxiety, but you don't know. All you know is that there was discomfort and pain in the body. When it's gone, you know that something has left, and you feel lighter and better for it.

It's when you have these sorts of experiences that you realize the heart heals itself. All you have to do is get out of the way. But it can't heal without expressing its disturbances within your awareness. Until it does so, it remains stuck within the frame of this psychophysical organism—a phrase I particularly like.

Someone asked if I could share a little about myself, how I arrived at where I am.

Well, it's really boring. It's just me.

They asked me to start with my name. Ah, my name. Bodhidharma. That was given to me by my teacher when I ordained. He knew I had a Zen background, so I think it was a bit tongue-in-cheek.

In the ordination tradition, in the way of naming monastics, the name is determined by the day of your birth. The days of the week follow the alphabet—the Sanskrit or Pali alphabet. So the first day would be the vowels: A, E, O, U. Then it would start at the back with G, K, V. Well, Wednesday's child gets M and V, so he didn't have much of a choice. That's how he ended up with Bodhidharma. And as you know, Bodhidharma is the great Indian who went to China and started the whole Chan tradition—and was, for some reason, named after me.

So you just get your name like that. It's not that you can't change it. I have a rather interesting story of a Dutchman who was ordained and was given the name of one of the companions of the Buddha. This companion was called Whopper. And when he finally caught on to what it meant, he was overcome with sniggering. Fancy being called Whopper! He changed his name. So you're not stuck with it. Actually, the proper pronunciation should be "Whopper"—but it still doesn't fit the robe, you know.

So yes, I, like a lot of people, came into meditation because I wasn't happy. I began way back there in a

state of unhappiness, seeking happiness. I decided to go to Japan to do some meditation. So I wrote to the Buddhist Society in London and asked if they could give me some direction on how to get to Japan for this purpose. They sent me back a letter with twenty-one points—I wish I'd kept it—as to why I shouldn't go.

Then they said there was a monastery up in Northumberland, Throssel Hole Abbey. They also pointed me to a teacher in Birmingham named Vajra, and she lived but a little bus ride away. I remember my first meditation with her, which was so Zen, you know—the Zendo was very cool. And she had this sort of tough look about her. She sat me down, had me kneeling, facing the wall. Her instructions were simply: watch whatever comes up.

So I sat there and tried to watch whatever came up. And all I can say is, at the end of forty-five minutes, I just knew this was going to get me out of my problems. Within six months I had a job, I bought a house, and I was steering clear of relationships after the former disastrous one. I was giving myself a break.

By then I was living in Birmingham, and there was a Burmese monk there—some of you will know him—Revata Dhamma. Vajra said, why don't we go and visit him? So I went over, and he had a PhD in Abhidhamma. I thought I'd quiz him, so I said, "Bhante, what is your understanding of neurosis?" He looked at me and said, "What is that?" And I thought, well, can I believe it? Here I am lying about in my problems, and he's off in another world entirely.

Anyway, I was still drawn to practice, and I had my first Theravada retreat with Ajahn Sumedho. It was very different. Although it's the same observation process, Zen had kept me out of the five sense doors and was extremely good at daily life practice. It really did change my life. I even took refuge up there, became a Buddhist after two years.

But in that retreat I did with Ajahn Sumedho, the first one, closing my eyes and going inward was a massive revelation. I thought, this is it—I'm really actually investigating myself. Shortly after that, Mahasi Sayadaw came to England. I missed his first visit, but on the second visit I did a retreat with Sayadaw Janaka. And I just knew this teacher was the real thing.

So I determined to go out to Burma. I took a sabbatical from work and spent six months with him there. Then I came back, and this awful thing began to scratch at my mind. What I really needed, what I really wanted to do, was dedicate myself to the practice. The only way you could do that was to become a monastic, because the institution is there for you to do exactly that.

I resisted it. Then after about a year, I just went to Revata Dhamma and said, "Bhante, I want to become a monk." And he said, "You're too old." I thought, thank God for that.

So I went off, but he just wouldn't let me go. About six months later, I came back again and said, "No, Bhante, I think I really would like to ordain." And then he said, "Well, no, you're necessary here." By then I was doing a little teaching and was very much part of the fabric of the vihara. I mean, I cut the lawn for a start.

So again, I felt this sort of relief—"Oh yeah, right, okay." But unfortunately, he just wouldn't leave me alone. I went on a two-week personal retreat in Wales, and I became really quite sure that's what I wanted to do. When I came back to him again, he said, "Okay."

So I ordained in a very exotic place, which is Birmingham. And then from there, I went to Amaravati. I stayed there for about a year. I wanted to get myself to Burma, but all those terrible things happened in 1989, and so I was quite marooned really, in Thailand, not knowing what to do or where to go. I kept meeting monks who said, "You know, you want to go to this Mahasi center in Sri Lanka." I'd never even heard of it. And when I got there, there was this little hut and a nice little garden, and the abbot gave it to me. I sat there off and on for eight years.

Then I came back because I didn't feel well. I had a contract, we can say, with the then head of the London Buddhist Vihara, Dr. Vajiragnana. The idea was that I would stay there for the rainy season and just quietly meditate. Then I'd decide what to do. During that time, the monk who was teaching meditation left and got married. So I got plonked onto the podium, and the teaching began. I resisted it—I didn't even want to teach at all.

And so it grew. Then in the year 2000, I went on a retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita in his monastery. It's funny, isn't it, how things happen? But it was really quite a koan, to put it in a Zen way, this teaching business. There was something in me that really didn't want to do it. I was there for about two months, and at the end of the retreat, I just went into the library. You know the Course in Miracles? So here I am in Rangoon, in a Buddhist library, and there's a sliver of a book that catches my eye about teaching—all the quotes from the Course in Miracles as to why you should teach. I read that, and I knew I should teach. It's weird, isn't it?

So I came back and established a little place in North London, which was an utter and complete catastrophe. I had to get out quick. While I was up there, one of the people retreating with me was a man called Peter Menahem, who was very friendly with the Batchelors—he knew Stephen well, it seems. So he knew my predicament: like, what am I going to do? I'd even contemplated leaving the Order.

He wrote to Stephen and told him that the next Cosmic Buddha was in North London. It was just one of those lovely, fortunate situations where they'd left Gaia House, and Yanai and Christina were holding the place with all these personal retreats and they needed somebody to help. I stayed there, as some of you know, for four years.

During that time, it became obvious to me that there were enough people around who wanted to do the real McCoy—the full-on get up at half past three, go to bed at ten, wallop. I thought, well, there's a place there for a niche within a niche. So we began a little trust, and we've ended up on the borders of Wales. I only take eight people at a retreat, and only eight people come. And it's all right. It exists, and it continues. And you're all invited.

That's where I am at this present moment.

People come for various lengths of time. And there are little retreats throughout the year too, week-long retreats.

You really have to get up at half past three. Half past three is a wonderful time. Well, it's like anything else. After the first two days, when you get up a little later at five o'clock, you can feel the effects of the meditation. And so getting up at half past three is a bit of a struggle, but on day four, definitely by day five, one feels completely refreshed. Lots of energy. People cry by day seven. They just don't want to leave.

But then that's only five hours sleep. Five and a half hours. It's enough. Yes, five and a half hours. And then, of course, people who stay long term, even after about seven days, when they're used to that level of sleep, I push them back to four hours. And they're all there. Very few—only one or two have not been able to take that and come back to five and a half hours. You'd be surprised how much energy we have.

And when you're running a retreat at Diane's, do they get up at half three? Yes. Really? Yes, all week they've been up at half past three. The first two days it's five o'clock and then they're up. Yes! Twenty-five people up there, half past three till ten o'clock. Mind you, there were one or two laggards. One has to be compassionate.

Is that it? Thank you so much.

*[Bell rings]*

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