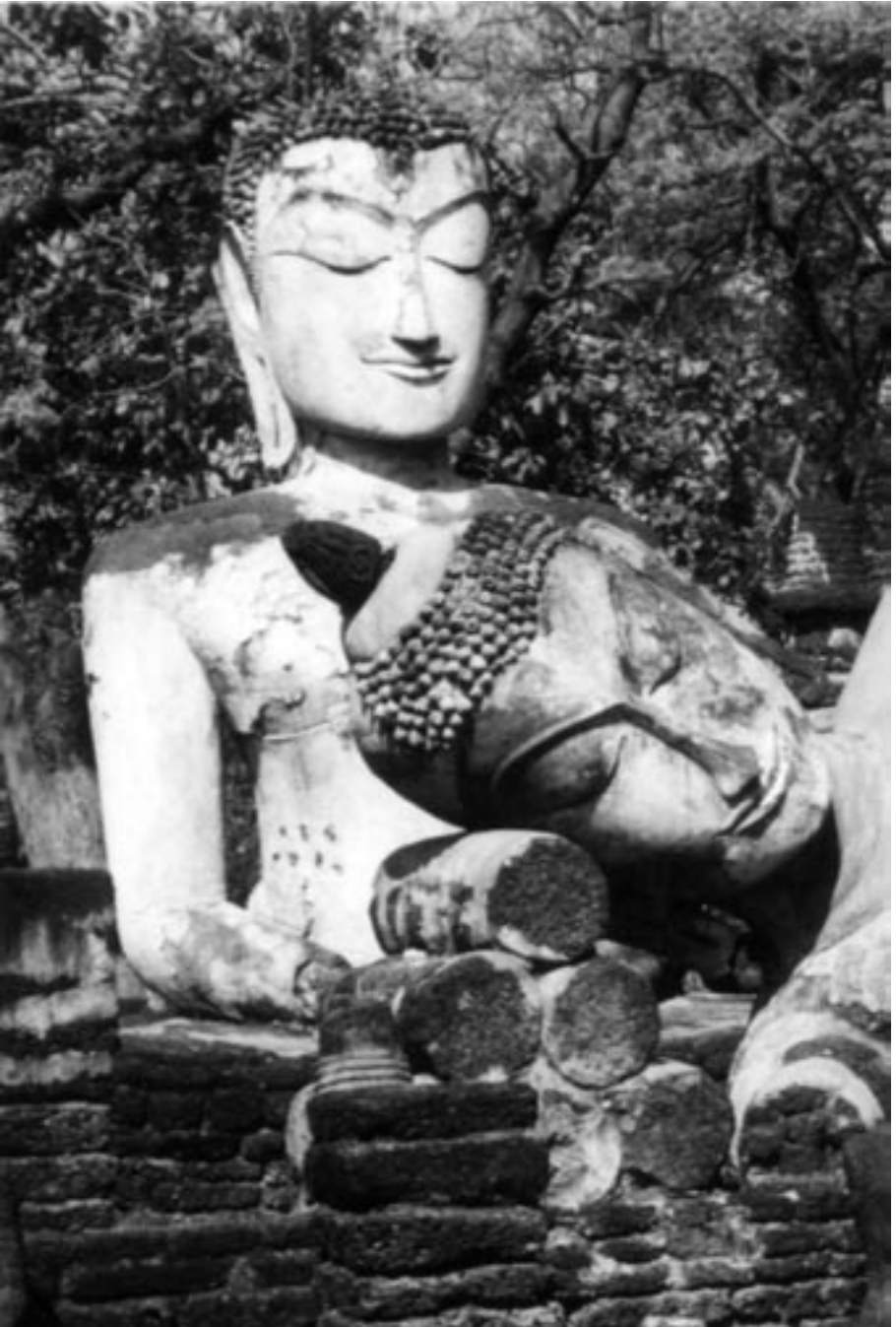


*Wat Phra Non, Sukhothai, Thailand (15-16C). Photo Hazel Maghorn*



# Liberating Emotions

Ajahn Sumedho

We can reflect on the way it is—on this tropical kind of weather, for example. In the attitude of acceptance we can allow ourselves to be receptive to life rather than try to control it, run away from, or resist it. This receptivity contrasts resistance. Culturally, we tend to be conditioned into resisting things. There is a fear of being open and receptive, as if by doing so we shall allow something to take us over. We feel we have to develop some kind of protection in order to keep ourselves from being annihilated or taken advantage of; it is a kind of paranoia of the mind. We may also have the attitude of needing to resist evil, of having to kill the devil and destroy the evil forces.

The Buddhist attitude is one of loving-kindness (*metta*), of open acceptance of everything as it is. If we take loving-kindness to its ultimate, all conditioned phenomena are accepted for what they are. That doesn't mean all things are approved of; they are simply accepted. Everything *has* to be the way it is in the moment. You can't say, 'I don't want the weather to be like this,' or, 'I don't want things to be this way.' If you do, you are not accepting the way it is and are creating suffering around something that you don't like or don't want.

You can also have loving-kindness for your dislike of the way it is, so you are not even criticising yourself for being critical. Feeling despair and self-aversion for being critical or selfish is another trap of the mind. Even if you are sitting here hating yourself, thinking of yourself as selfish and critical and not a very nice person, you can have *metta* for that; you can have loving-kindness for the critical mind. Patient acceptance is nonaversion to everything that is happening now. Everything is accepted, nothing left out. There are no loose ends or exceptions.

I was giving a talk the other day about how to change one's attitude from negative to positive, and somebody took umbrage at that. This person gets very annoyed if I imply that one should be thinking positively, like in the power of positive thought. But how does he know that I mean it in the way that he takes it? And what about resistance and acceptance? This is resistance. To have *metta* for resistance is an attitude of mind, not a position to take. It is not

that we should grasp the idea of having loving-kindness for everything, because then we will feel we are never loving enough. There may always be something or someone in our lives for whom you can't generate any positive feeling. Their name comes up and you just go into a rage. You think, 'I should be able to have *metta* for this person,' and, 'I should be able to forgive,' but when that person's name comes into consciousness you just can't do it; it doesn't work. You simply can't say, 'May you be well,' without feeling bitter and hypocritical. Grudgingly saying, 'May you be well,' is the best you can do.

Sometimes *metta* is presented as a kind of 'think pink' idea, where we are just saying very nice things and wishing everybody well and it is all very sweet and nice, but underneath there might be a kind of volcano of rage and resentment.



Buddhism protected by Naga, Wat Arun Prang, Photo Hazel Waghorne

Idealism is a mental function. You can think of the highest ideals about eternal love, loving all sentient beings. Unconditioned love is an ideal. Intellectually we can create ideals about how things should be if they were at their best, and that is a function of the mind. We might then get inspired by these ideals. And if we talk about love and forgiveness and loving-kindness, tears can come into our eyes—the joy of being so high-minded. And then, after spreading loving-kindness throughout the universe, maybe something happens—somebody slams the door, for example—and suddenly we are angry. Now we can become confused because anger is not part of the ideal. Nevertheless, anger and rage are emotions that we all experience, so then we can have a war going on between our ideals and our emotions.

A woman came to me once—a well-educated woman—and she was in a very emotional state. She started crying and said, ‘I’m so sorry, I know I’m being foolish. I’m just being so foolish and stupid.’ Then she cried again and said, ‘I know this is ridiculous, but I can’t help it.’ Her intellect didn’t approve of this at all; the intellect was being hard line: *You shouldn’t be crying. You shouldn’t be doing that, just weeping and soft. You’re losing control. You’re disgracing yourself.* One can be very hard and tyrannical on the intellectual plane: *If I were a really together woman and got my act together, I wouldn’t be weeping and crying like this; I’d have control of myself. But look at me! I’m a mass of jelly in front of this monk. He must think I’m just another one of those emotional women.* We can be very cruel to ourselves, very judgmental: *I shouldn’t be like this. I shouldn’t feel these kinds of feelings. If I were a decent person I would never have done the things I’ve done.* Inner tyrants are relentlessly hard, cruel and judgmental. That is the intellectual mind thinking in terms of how things *should* be. But ideals don’t feel anything. When you attach to an ideal, you don’t feel life at that moment. You can be very insensitive to somebody who is having problems because you are attached to ideals. Even the ideal of sensitivity is not sensitive. We may say we must be sensitive to each other, grasp that as an ideal and not be sensitive at all; we can simply shut ourselves off by attaching to the ideal of sensitivity.

In reflective awareness, however, we are saying sensitivity is like *this*; it feels like *this*. This is a sense realm; it isn’t an ideal realm, a utopia. This realm has everything—the best, the worst, and all gradations between, from refined subtleties of beauty, aesthetics and loveliness to the most hideous, gross, totally disgusting conditions. In terms of reflective awareness, then, we are not

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judging, we are just noticing that life is like *this*. It is not what it should be according to an ideal, but this is the way it is.

The habits that we have acquired, the emotional habits, the way we react to praise and blame, success and failure, sickness and health, prosperity, depression and elation and all these things, are not rational; they are not ideal. The intellect is rational, but emotions are like *this*. You can be blubbering on the floor, a mass of jelly. That is not being reasonable or rational, is it? So then your rational mind can be critical and say, *You shouldn't be like this*. It can judge according to ideals.

My own experience of life is that when I reached the age of thirty I was horrified to discover that, emotionally, I was still very immature. I thought thirty was old, my youth had gone, but emotionally I felt very childish. This was a horrible realisation. Physically I had matured, intellectually I had developed and could put on an act of maturity. A friend asked me once, ‘Why did you become a monk?’ I told him it was because I had been suffering so much. He said, ‘You suffered?’ I said, ‘Yeah, I was suffering all the time.’ He said, ‘You never looked like you were suffering. You always looked so happy.’ ‘Did I? I didn’t know I looked happy because I wasn’t.’ This appearance of being happy was probably my persona, how I presented myself. He was surprised that I had suffered, but I thought everybody could see it; I thought it was as plain as the nose on my face.

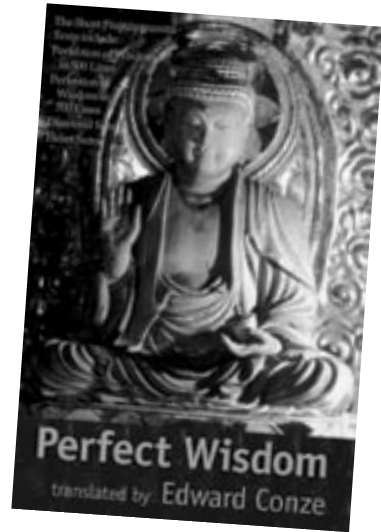
I could act out a role at the appropriate time. In the quiet of my room, however, it wasn't like that. I wasn't mature and cool, a man who had his life together; I was frightened and feeling insecure, disappointed with life, and had childish reactions to things. So what do you do with yourself in such a situation? How can you change? The inner tyrant said, 'Well, just grow up.' And I tried that; I tried to act as though I was grown up. It wasn't that I went around throwing temper tantrums in front of people, but sometimes the tantrums were going on inside. I could be smiling, smoking a cigarette and drinking a cocktail, but inside I was anything but cool and calm.

Meditation was the light at the end of the tunnel, the only hope I had of growing up, of really maturing and taking that to the ultimate of enlightenment, to complete liberation. Why settle for maturity in a childish society? Society is pretty childish anyway, at least the one in which I had lived. People were vain, and in those days nobody seemed very interested in spiritual development. If you talked about such things they looked at you as though you had said something inappropriate, or were an idiot. The people I knew were only interested in appearances, fashion, political movements, in trying to make the world better and so forth, but on the level

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Wat Phra Non, Sukhothai, Thailand (15-16). Photo Hazel Waghorn

of spiritual development, nobody seemed to have even a slight inclination.

While training and living these past thirty-three years as a monk, I have had the opportunity of getting to the root of this issue. This way of intuitive awareness, emptiness, can resolve our emotional habits. There is a way of freeing ourselves from those habitual reactions, and it is the only way I have found that works. Endlessly discussing them and thinking about them just seems to lead one in circles. What we need is an escape from the conditioned realm. Awareness opens the gate to the deathless, opens the mind and heart to the deathless reality, to the Dhamma, to where emotional habits can be liberated from the mind. Otherwise, as Ajahn Sucitto likes to say, 'It is just like rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.' Trying to change conditions is like rearranging your furniture. You are tired of the sofa on that side of the room so you put it on this side. That is the best you can do. If you begin to see the way out of the whole thing, however, you see that mindfulness is the path to the deathless.

The intellect can easily judge emotions. We can condemn ourselves for having them, feeling despair and hopelessness with ourselves because we seem to regurgitate the same stuff over and over again. The *metta* then is towards the intellect, the inner tyrant, the self-criticism. *Metta* is the willingness to accept the way it is without any condition. It is not like a deal you make: 'I'll accept you if you change. I will marry you if you promise to change your ways and do what I want.' That is some people's way of relating to each other. 'I can only love you when you act in the right way. If you conduct yourself appropriately, I will love you. But if you act in a bad way and don't respect me, then

I won't love you any more.' That is conditioned love, isn't it? Unconditioned love, which is *metta*, does not make any conditions. No matter how nasty it is, I still love you. No matter how horrible you become, I still love you. There is nothing that can destroy my love for you. You can be the most maniacal, horrible, nasty human being in the whole world, you can become a demon, but nothing can diminish or taint that unconditioned love—now you are probably thinking of ways to test me.

This unconditioned love doesn't necessarily mean liking or approving. The word 'love' is often used to mean 'I like you and I approve of you', but unconditioned love and *metta* isn't a matter of liking. You have *metta* for what you don't like as well as for what you like. You can have *metta* for devils. You can love your enemies in the Christian sense of loving your enemy. That doesn't mean you like your enemy. If somebody wants to kill you, you are not going to like them. Liking is a different thing, isn't it? Liking is when people do things of which you approve; it is good and you like good. Unconditioned love isn't a matter of liking but of not hating, of not condemning, of accepting, of being patient, of being noncritical towards the way it is, whether it is anger or the inner tyrant, the immature emotions, or the foolish, silly thoughts you have. Unconditioned love or *metta* makes no conditions; it is the way it is, and all conditions are impermanent.

Apply that to your practice. When negative, dark things come into consciousness, practise saying to yourself, 'I accept this.' Really embrace it and see what happens. With the sound of silence you can cut off your thinking, so you are not thinking about it but are feeling it. Get to the raw feeling. Just hold that in a totally accepting, uncritical, patient way, and see what happens. Prove this practice to yourself. Now you are liberating these unresolved and immature emotions. You are resolving these emotions rather than manipulating them, rearranging or suppressing them. So there is a way out; there is a way of freedom and liberation, even within the limitations of human *kamma*.

Sometimes we find that life is a real challenge. We have our Achilles heel, our weak point, and when we get hit there, we fall apart; we collapse into a heap. It is important, therefore, to know where our weak points are, not in order to criticise them, but to be more prepared. I find that I now have the ability to walk into the lions' den, as it were, like Daniel. I used to be a coward and wouldn't go near the lions' den. If the lions' den were over there I would walk over here. Now I am willing to enter because I have learnt how to deal



with acrimonious, threatening or frightening situations. But I encourage you to work on the little things in daily life, the petty stuff. There is no need to wait for the big moments, you know, when there are real lions around. Probably none of us will have to go into a real lions' den, of course, or be crucified on a cross, or anything dramatic. We shall probably just get older, smaller, lose control of our faculties—sight goes, hearing goes and so forth. Some people die in a grand or inspiring way, but most of us just kind of pack up. But that is all right, isn't it? If that is the way it is, then that is Dhamma.

Sometimes we are criticised for bypassing our emotions, for being spiritual bypassers. This is a term I have heard applied to me. They say, 'You're bypassing your emotional life.' Alternatively, there are people who like to talk about their feelings a lot. Admittedly, this has a certain value, especially if they have always kept their feelings to themselves, but endlessly talking about their feelings is still being caught in a trap of the 'self' view. Also, those who always want to talk about their feelings can be very annoying to others.

The way to deal with feelings and emotions, then, is not through bypassing them, or judging or trying to change them, but through directly accepting them, knowing them for what they are. At first it is very difficult to do this because there is a lot of habitual resistance to emotions. Begin to notice what resistance is like, this tendency to dismiss or dislike emotional experience,



Wat Phnom, Siem Reap, Thailand (15-16). Photo Hazel Vaughan

feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed or ill at ease, and wanting to get away when people become emotional. In this practice of intuitive awareness, however, we can have *metta* for our embarrassment and for everything without exception. Otherwise we say, 'I should get in contact more with my emotions.' We have these ideas, 'I'm not in touch with my emotions so I should get in touch with them.' You may hold onto this idea of being someone who is not in touch with your emotions and should become somebody who *is*. Then you go out of your way to try and feel everything and be emotional, and this can be very contrived. You attach to the idea, try to force things, make them happen according to what you want or how you conceive it should be rather than having *metta* and letting it unfold, letting it flow.

As Buddhists we take refuge in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and taking refuge in the Dhamma is taking refuge in intuitive awareness. We can let Dhamma direct us. We can trust and rest in the silence and attention, and if we see resistance, we can have *metta* for that. Thinking, 'I'm trying to accept this but I've got this terrible resisting habit,' brings us back into, 'I'm someone who's got this habit, and I shouldn't have. I should be able to accept my feelings and get in touch with my feelings, but sometimes I can't do it; it doesn't work for me.' Then we are back in the same trap because one condition cannot know another. Only the unconditioned knows the conditioned. The conditioned cannot know the unconditioned. When we are grasping conditions, we cannot realise the unconditioned, the ultimate reality. When we are in that realm of the conditioned, we just go from one condition to another, and there is no way that one condition can really know another; we just associate one condition with another. In intuitive awareness, however, we can actually know the

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conditioned as the conditioned; we can know the world as the world, know anger as anger, know greed as greed, know suffering as suffering—we can just simply and directly know the way it is without criticism, without condemnation of anything; things are allowed to flow and move according to Dhamma, according to the way things are. If we were to talk in terms of enlightened beings, we could say that an enlightened being is just a flow of light; they are not spiritual bypassers sitting under trees saying, ‘I don’t want to know.’ There is this immediacy, this intuitive awareness which is not intellectual. We can actually see and know things very directly, very clearly, not theoretically, not bound by definitions in Pali dictionaries or Buddhist treatises. We can actually know. It is not a matter of somebody else knowing; it is we who are trusting and knowing. This is a refuge; it is not theoretical or dependent on interpretations of scriptural teachings. The Buddha’s teachings can be used for mindfulness rather than just for collecting a lot of ideas *about* Buddhism.

When we liberate the mind from emotions, what is left? Will we just be lifeless zombies? Maybe our emotions give us a bit of glamour and colour, give us our unique characters and personalities. If we don’t have them, are we all going to be the same, like toy soldiers all in the same uniform with the same blank expressions? Or when we liberate ourselves from these bonds, these habits, shall we find out how to live in a way that is right speech, right action, right livelihood and so forth? The liberation of all our emotions will not lead to our just sitting under a tree in a kind of permanent *samadhi* where our eyes are shut and we don’t hear anything, a situation in which NATO could start bombing or twenty elephants

could dance on the roof of Amaravati temple and we would not hear a thing.

In the past, as a worldly person, I developed a way of existing in which I could protect myself. The world was and is very competitive, at least the society I am from. One learns how to play the game in order to survive, and there is a part of you which shuts off; you become quite insensitive. Monastics, on the other hand, become increasingly more sensitive. In a way, this can be rather frightening because where you used to be pretty tough, you know, 'Nothing bothers me!' suddenly you find you are not tough. So how do you interpret that sensitivity? If it is on a personal level, it can be very frightening because you are becoming too sensitive. It seems as though you are more fragile and delicate rather than stronger and unshakeable. Something that didn't bother you before suddenly shatters you. That is because the basic delusion is still there. You are living a life that is opening, but you are interpreting it in a personal way. You have no refuge. You are just getting used to the more refined manners which are encouraged in the monastic life.

The sense of refuge is very important; it is where one's faith is in the Dhamma rather than, say, in a refined situation with good, moral and pleasant people. This refuge is in intuitive awareness. Here is not dependent upon polite manners, morality, and everybody being good and nice and pleasant. This refuge means that I can go anywhere—I can go into the lions' den or the battlefield—because it is unshakeable, it is deathless, not refined or special.

As you begin to recognise intuitive awareness more and more, trust in that. Put it to the test and keep working with it in your daily life. You can develop awareness around a lot of the irritating, frustrating things in your family or profession, or whatever. You might have to live with people who are irritating, coarse or selfish, but you can use those situations for Dhamma. To apply this to the flow of your life is like a challenge, and as you have insight into it, you begin to trust it. You see it working and that increases your faith and confidence, so that after a while you feel a sense of unshakability, of mental clarity. The mind is clear and unshakable rather than rising and falling with emotions or the physical conditions in which you may find yourself.

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*[Ajahn Sumedho is the abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Hemel Hempstead, England. His books include *The Mind and the Way* and *Teachings of a Buddhist Monk*. The above is from a talk given during a retreat at Amaravati in May 1999. Courtesy of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery.]*