

THE TYRANNY OF TRANSCENDENCE

Uses and abuses in the development of the will

Bhikkhu Sujato

Based on a talk given at Santi FM, Wednesday 24.9.2008

The five aggregates, to review them briefly, are:

rūpa - the physical form, the body and anything physical perceived by the mind.

vedanā - feeling: pleasant, painful, and neutral.

saññā - perception, how things seem, how the mind puts together the input of sensory data and constructs a world that we can live in.

saṅkhārā - volition, will.

viññāṇa - consciousness, awareness.

In conventional Buddhism, these are usually taught as being, if you like, constituents of our life, of our being, our experience, what we are. They arise and pass away moment to moment, a conditioned process of suffering, within which we are trapped as long as we remain in samsara. This perspective is true and useful, but I don't think that that exhausts the potential of meaning for the *khandhas*. Of course, the *khandhas* do occur together moment to moment and we can never examine them in isolation. But it is very interesting that the overall structure of the *khandhas* reflects a large number of different conceptual schemes or maps of reality in various ways. One such large-scale correlation is with the hierarchy of being.

If we think in terms of *rūpa* being the physical realm, the material world, or inanimate matter and plants, then *vedanā* is distinctive of animals - they feel pleasure and pain and respond to it. And in the development of culture, identity, and language, which are particularly characteristic of humanity, *saññā* comes to the fore. Magic, myth, and sacrificial religion are perhaps the most characteristic products of *saññā*. These are the outstanding features of all human societies up until the first millennium BCE. *Saṅkhārā* is much more characteristic of the axial age philosophies, which crystallised around 500 BCE in Greece, the Middle East, India, and China. While earlier ages seem distant, alien, axial age people are people we can instinctively relate to for their reason, their intellect, their ability to step outside their immediate concerns and think objectively, planning and imagining, worrying and wondering. Finally, *viññāṇa*, awareness itself, was an ancient speciality of the Indian cultural sphere and only there do we find it so emphasised and developed.

So the *khandhas* can be envisaged in terms of macroscopic development; but they may also be seen as unfolding in individual human development. Each of us start out as an embryo, when we are basically growing our bodies, which is *rūpa*. And then, with the maturation of the nervous system, we learn how to feel. When we are born our minds are dominated by desire and aversion; the pleasure and pain responses of *vedanā* are to the fore. As we grow up we learn to identify things, to use language, to identify, conceptualise, put our world together so that it makes sense; here *saññā* predominates. Still later, maybe from seven or so until we become adults, we develop *saṅkhārā*. We learn how to think, how to make decisions, how to accept moral responsibility for our acts. For most of us if we get that far we're doing pretty well; and the higher development of awareness, *viññāṇa*, is restricted to the unfortunately small, but growing number of people who are interested in

meditation.

If we look at the traditional expositions of *saṅkhārā*, we find that, starting from the Abhidhamma period, *saṅkhārakkhandha* has been more or less used as a grab bag of anything that has been left over from other *khandhas*. It becomes this bloated category, where fifty or more different kinds of mental phenomena (*dhammas*) are put in there for want of anywhere else to put them. Faith, rapture, jealousy, delusion, desire, and so on: all of these things are thrown into *saṅkhārakkhandha* without regard for the structural aspect of the *khandhas* as a developmental paradigm. And so that whole aspect of the five *khandhas* is marginalised or lost in the later traditions. The problem is that the *khandhas* were never meant to be used as a scheme for organising the *dhammas*. In early Buddhism they were used for quite different kinds of purposes. And so we must re-discover what the Buddha was talking about in a way that is relevant for us.

The word *saṅkhārā* means ‘activity’: doing, activating, constructing. It is invariably plural in this sense, conveying something of the diversity of our doings. So it’s definitely got an active sense to it. Occasionally it may also have a passive sense: what has been constructed or conditioned, although this usage is marginal in the early texts. It’s defined explicitly in the suttas as *cetanā*: will, intention: *saṅkhārās* are the forces in the mind that do stuff. So it’s associated with the active part of the mind, the mind that thinks. In Buddhist cultures people think of *saṅkhārā* as the stuff that happens in the mind, the thinking, the activity, the movement of the mind. There’s certainly something to that, it’s not wrong by any means, but we need to bear in mind that the suttas treat *saṅkhārā* much more specifically as volition.

But the interesting thing, and I think the very telling thing about *saṅkhārā*, is that it’s defined not merely as *cetanā*, intention; in addition *cetanā* and *saṅkhārā* are both defined in ethical terms: *puññabhisāṅkhārā*, *apuññabhisāṅkhārā*, *āneñjābhisāṅkhārā*, or meritorious, demeritorious, and imperturbable activities. This is completely unlike the other *khandhas*, which aren’t defined ethically at all.

Puñña is often translated as merit, although perhaps simply ‘goodness’ might be better. On the other hand, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ have many non-ethical uses, while ‘good’ and ‘evil’ is too strong. Perhaps, then, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ would be useful renderings. In any case, these are further defined in terms of their results: right acts (*puññabhisāṅkhārā*) lead to happiness, wrong acts (*apuññabhisāṅkhārā*) lead to unhappiness. *Āneñja* is the indeterminate ‘third’. It would seem that it should be associated with neutral feeling, neither pleasure nor pain, and that’s exactly what we find in the suttas: *āneñja* describes states of meditation from the fourth jhana onwards. This is why it is cannot be *puñña*, for it doesn’t result in happiness but rather in equanimous abiding.

This ethical aspect of *saṅkhārā* dovetails quite neatly with the developmental arc that we looked at earlier. In terms of either human cultural development on the large scale or individual personal development, *saṅkhārakkhandha* is emphasised at that point when we learn how to be moral, learn how to make ethical decisions and accept responsibility for those.

I keep coming back to the two fundamental perspectives from which we can contemplate these *khandhas*. Normally they are treated under the first noble truth of suffering, which is where they appear in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. From that perspective the *khandhas* are deprecated: they’re suffering, they’re impermanent, not self; they’re a boil, a calamity, a disease, a disaster, alien, an affliction - get rid of them! That’s one way of looking at them. But this negative perspective is only relatively valid: it is essential for developing deep insight that leads to liberation. But it is also relatively valid to see the *khandhas* in a positive light: things to be developed as part of being a whole person. They’re something that needs to be looked after as part of a normal process of human development. This is not the perspective of final liberation, but the perspective of becoming a mature, balanced person. And that is something which, to say the least, is a prerequisite before we can start to meaningfully approach liberation.

We need to learn how to think, to reason, to take responsibility. And we need to learn these things both within ourselves and also in dialogue; so the activities of speech are also called *saṅkhārā* - *vācisaṅkhārā*. The stuff that comes out of our mouth is closely connected with *saṅkhārā*, which also reflects the structure of the eightfold path: *sammā saṅkappa*, right intention, which is just how the Buddha described the right kind of *saṅkhārā*, and then immediately after that is right speech. This is common sense: whatever we think about very largely determines our speech. But speech is not an internal matter, for it influences the quality of our

community, of our social life, our social fabric. Thus neither the internal dimension of volition, nor the external world of dialogue is in any sense ultimate: each is valid in its own domain.

Please don't mistake the Buddhist point of view on this. Buddhism takes language, which is primarily a social dialogue, and then points to the inside and says, 'Let's look at the inside as well. That's real, too.' But that's not to say that the external dialogue is not important. It's merely to say that there should be a shift of emphasis and a balancing. And that is very different for different people: many people need to learn to shut up, they need to not talk so much, they need to turn inside and listen to their minds more. But others need to talk more, they need to engage in dialogue. This is something that you need to know for yourself.

As adults we must be able to articulate our needs in dialogue with others. We all have to learn how to do this, it is not something that you can escape from. But it's something that's often misapprehended and misused in Buddhist monasteries that I've seen. Too often, practitioners imagine that it's a virtue to not say anything, to not develop the ability to express their own needs and to communicate effectively what needs to be communicated. This is taken to be 'harmony', but it is the kind of harmony that the Buddha said was 'living together like dumb pigs'.

There are really two aspects of that responsibility. Within the community there needs to be an availability and an openness for honest communication. It's our collective responsibility as a team to create and maintain that. But also each one of us needs to have the individual responsibility to use that openness well. That means when something needs to be said, we say it. We learn how to articulate that in a way that's clear, to clarify our language and our concepts so that others can understand us. We show respect for others through making the effort to speak with each other well. That's right speech as a part of the eightfold path. If we are too lazy or timid to take the time to use language to communicate effectively, we do not respect the other members of the community.

Coming back to the question of *saṅkhāra* and ethics, notice how that particular ethical language is framed: if you do xyz then that leads to xyz results. If you do a good act, a good *saṅkhāra*, then that leads to happiness, to pleasant feeling. If you do a bad act it leads to painful feeling. This kind of moral language is typically Buddhist. In philosophy this way of talking about moral questions is called 'utilitarianism', a moral philosophy most closely associated with John Stuart Mill, a British philosopher of the 19th century. Very generally, utilitarianism says something like: when we say that something is good, we mean that it leads to the greatest happiness for the greatest number. This is one of the major schools of moral theory in Western philosophy, and I would say that Buddhism is a kind of utilitarianism. Of course the big problem with utilitarianism is that good acts don't always lead to happiness and bad acts don't always lead to sadness. The solution to that from a Buddhist point of view is to invoke the notion of *kamma*: pleasure and pain are meted out with relentless justice, but this happens in ways that are ordinarily hidden, although they may be known to the philosopher through reason or the meditator through insight. The good thing about utilitarianism is that it is based on empirical psychological realities: when we do a good act we can recognize that as such with our inner moral sense; and the experience of pleasure and pain is also based on the inner reality of our experience. So utilitarianism is based straightforwardly on experience.

The other kind of moral language that has become prominent in the global moral dialogue in recent centuries is the language of rights. This has come to dominate our ethical language so much that we've become accustomed to framing moral values in terms of the notion of rights. But the concept of 'rights' is philosophically problematic, and I must admit that I'm not particularly enamoured of using the language of rights as an effective way of talking about moral issues. The basic problem is that the word 'right' doesn't seem to refer to anything. We've got this vague notion of what a right is, but it's almost impossible to pin it down - it lives in this ambiguous realm between something which exists objectively as a law of the universe and something that exists as a social contract; and it just doesn't want to settle down on either side of those things. The most fundamental 'right' is the 'right to life', but when you get right down to it what does that really mean? You're born, that's all, and then you have to deal with it.

It's not quite as black & white as this, admittedly. For the ultimate Indo-European root of 'right' is *ar-*, which is a very ancient expression of the idea of things 'fitting together properly'. As such, it is one of our oldest words

that expresses the notion of a cosmic order. The Vedic form is closer to the English 'right': *ṛta*, natural principles such as weather (Pali *utu*). *Ar* is one of the most fertile Indo-European roots, and among its many other descendants we find 'ratio', 'reason', 'harmony', 'rhyme', 'art', 'rite', 'arithmetic'. In this sense we can understand the moral language of rights as implying that if we act in accordance with what is 'right', with what our 'rights' are, we act in 'harmony', we act 'reasonably'; we 'rhyme' with the 'way it is'. This makes sense, but it becomes problematic when we speak of 'rights' as something we can 'have'. It is not at all clear how the idea of 'rhyming with the natural order' comes to mean an 'inalienable moral possession'.

The more pragmatic problem with the language of rights is that it emphasises what you get as opposed to what you give. This is only a very partial approach to an ethical life. As such, talk of rights sets a minimum standard, it doesn't give you anything to aspire to. Of course if rights are being violated, then we can say that we aspire to keep those rights. For example, we might say that people have a right to have clean water, so if they lack water we should provide it for them. That's great, but what do we do then? Once they've drunk the clean water, how are they going to live their lives? The language of rights is not good at describing higher human development, it just sets a minimum standard that we can get by with.

So these are some problems with the language of rights. But, while not ignoring these problems, remember that the *Dīghanakha Sutta* says that we use the language of the world without misapprehending it. Since the language of rights is in fact present in the moral discourse of our culture, we should learn to use it in contexts where it will contribute to effective understanding and promoting a positive outcome. Any mode of discourse has its problems, we simply need to be aware of these and careful to avoid misunderstandings. If we are in an environment where we can frame things in our own way, then we might frame things in a more characteristically Buddhist way. But the point I'm trying to make here is that these are just different ways of using language to talk about moral issues. We can always find different languagings for these things, but changing the languaging doesn't make the issue go away. So for example we can talk about 'equality for women', that 'men and women should be equal', 'men and women should have equal rights'. What does that mean? It means something specific in a specific context: that women should have equal pay, or the right to vote, or whatever the issue of the day may be.

But the underlying issue is always suffering. So the utilitarian or Buddhist way of putting it is to say that if we treat people equally and fairly then that leads to happiness, if we act in a way that's discriminating then that leads to unhappiness. And of course that's what we can experience when we feel the pain of injustice. It became terribly vivid in the famous 'Blue-eyes, brown-eyes' experiment, where young schoolchildren were introduced to discrimination on the basis of eye-color; those of the 'wrong' eye colour were made to wear distinguishing scarves. The kids rapidly descended into a mess of squabbling, nasty brutes; only to scream with joy and relief when the experiment was over and the stigmatising scarves were taken off. Watching the experiment on video, you can't see rights, what you see is acts and the results of those acts: happiness and sadness.

These are certain theoretical problems with the notion of rights as a form of ethical dialogue. But the crucial point is that you have to find another kind of language to talk about ethical problems. It's just not good enough to disparage the notion of rights and say, 'If the women are demanding equal rights, they should just be content and let go.' The pain is real, and dismissing it is frankly immoral; it ignores the problem of suffering that lies at the heart of Buddhist ethics. If you don't like the notion of rights, then you need to try to find a more constructive mode of dialogue.

It is quite common among the western Ajahns to hear them saying that we had no rights, especially as monastics. We have given up the world, should let go, and not have a sense of ownership or entitlement. This kind of statement pivots on the ambiguity in the notion of rights in quite a disturbing way. Such language can easily justify totalitarianism. You can disrespect and disable people's ability to make a mature decision. This is something that really struck me when I was in Poo Jom Gom (a remote hermitage in Thailand) in my ninth rains retreat. It was the first time I'd been the senior monk in a community. After a few days Venerable Satimanto came up to me and said, 'Can I make myself a cup of tea?' and I'm thinking, 'Crikey, this is a 50 year old ex-lawyer who's done more things in his life than I've ever dreamed of, and he's asking me whether he can make a cup of tea?'

This is the extent to which in the monastic life we can disrupt the ability to make a mature decision. In doing that we're neglecting a crucial part of who we are. We're not honouring that part of our humanity. And I think that's very sad; not merely sad, but also destructive. When we come to Buddhism we have this very strong emphasis on meditation. We're told that meditation is the 'one and only way', and when we come to meditate we're told that thinking is wrong, that wanting things is wrong, if the mind does anything, if it moves at all it's wrong. The mind has to be completely still, empty of all content and focused on the one object, if we're doing samatha meditation. If we're doing vipassana meditation, samatha is wrong and we have to focus on whatever feelings and so on that arise in the mind.

This is the ideology. And of course there's some truth to it. If we want to develop *viññāṇa*, then we need to go beyond *sañkhāra*, thought and so on. But this doesn't mean that it's wrong, it just means that it's not the end of the road, that it's something to be transcended. But if we forget this, and deprecate the balanced development of all the *khandhas*, we get this 'narcissism of consciousness' that is so terribly Buddhist. Awareness itself is all that matters; just know and that will dissolve every problem.

This is wrong. It's not the eightfold path and it's not what the Buddha taught. We have to develop, as part of our spiritual practice, our own ability to act and to accept responsibility for those acts, and that is also part of our spiritual path. If we can't do that, then any serious development of deep states of awareness is going to go wrong, because it's based on a denial, built on shaky foundations.

There are many, many people in Buddhism who meditate, meditate, meditate, and that meditation is just denial: they don't want to think because it's too much effort, they don't want to study because it's too much effort. And so they find a teacher who says: 'Don't think, don't study!' And they say: 'Right! That's the teacher for me, I can throw all that stuff out and just focus on one thing.' And it's coming from laziness and it's coming from immaturity and it's coming from an inability to recognise and to deal with the way that you're using your mind in a responsible manner, and so it all goes wrong. It leads towards a community where there's a denial of individual responsibility, a denial of maturity, and a cult of subservience. This is very plain to see in places where the teacher says: 'Don't think, don't make decisions, whatever you think is desire and desire is wrong. Don't talk about your rights, emptiness is beyond all those things, *nibbāna* is beyond all those things, if you were enlightened then you wouldn't have all those desires, so just get rid of all your desires and all the problems go away.'

Meanwhile, someone has to make the decisions, and if it's not you then who is it? Well, presumably it's the one who is telling you to get rid of your desires. It's their desires that fill that vacuum. This is an ideological tyranny: the only thing that matters is *nibbāna*. We're not at *nibbāna* now, therefore we don't matter, we are nothing, our pain is meaningless. Our task is to realise that, and not to address the actual humanity that we feel. Our task is to let go of our humanity, and if we cannot, we can at least act as if we have.

But there is one problem: we live in the conditioned world. We can dismiss conditions all we like, but we still end up living with them. Pain is real; and the denial of pain is, unfortunately, just as real.

This is the tyranny of transcendence. It happens whenever we fail to comply with the minimal basic standards of right and wrong as accepted in the world, and justify that by an appeal to a higher value that transcends mere worldly concerns. The Buddha never did this, because he understood that different levels of ethics or spirituality require different responses. Worldly right and wrong is the foundation for the higher spiritual development, not a distraction from it. We should be skilful and accomplished in worldly ethics, take a keen interest in them, so that we can set an example. We should be in the forefront, leading the way, in questions such as gender equality. We should not have to be dragged kicking and screaming like a child throwing a tantrum when we are asked to comply with, for example, the UN principles of equal rights for women.

When you see this kind of absolutist philosophy, you should ask one very simple question: 'What kind of tyranny could this not justify?' And if we look at all the cults in the world, all the people who end up doing bizarre and terrible things in the name of the spirit, then we see that in every case they follow that same road. The devotees give up their own power, their own ability to make choices, their own rights, they invest those rights in a guru who is infallible, who makes all the decisions.

Cults are built on a distorted paternalistic relationship. It is obviously the case that parents have to make certain decisions for the children. The children aren't ready to make decisions, and it would be irresponsible to expect them to. And likewise in the student/teacher relationship it's also the case that the teacher is a teacher for a reason, because they have knowledge and experience that's used to guide the students. So there is a degree of relative authority and hierarchy implicit in that relationship. This is natural, indeed inevitable. But once we absolutise this and say that you have no rights and even to talk about them is wrong, then you create a very dangerous situation.

In the development of the eightfold path, this particular stage is most closely associated with *sammāsaṅkappa*. This is a dynamic aspect of the path, which we usually translate as right thought or right intention. But it's important to notice that right thought is not mere intellectualism, for it is closely associated with emotional development. When *sammā saṅkappa* is defined as the intention of renunciation, of non ill-will, and non harming, it's the aspect of love and compassion that stands forth. This is a crucial feature of the proper development of *saṅkhāra*. Yes, it is reason and thought and rationality and so on, but that's happening within an emotional context. The *saṅkhārakkhandha* as analysed by the *abhidhamma* also includes both rational elements and emotional elements. This is in line with the findings of modern psychology, which contradict the traditional Western tendency to contrast reason and emotions. In fact, emotional development is a stimulus and support for constructive thought.

It's possible to use our thought in quite a destructive manner, we can glory in it, we can delight in the power of our thought to decimate ideas. I used to like doing this with the Mormons who came to visit me when I was at University. It was great fun to sit down and demolish all of their arguments. Certainly they're worthy of demolition, and there's nothing wrong with refuting false and dangerous ideas. But that needs to also be combined with compassion. That was something I learnt from the book *The Good Heart*, which was the Dalai Lama's commentary on certain Bible passages. One of the Christian respondents remarked on how compassionately the Dalai Lama was in his comments, he wasn't being aggressive or disrespectful in how he dealt with the Gospels, even though he could easily have done so, since some of the Bible passages were quite controversial. For example, Jesus was sitting with his disciples and his family approached, and he said, 'I'm not interested in my family, these are my family now.' That's a disturbing scene, and could have easily been used in a very critical way. But the Dalai Lama used it to speak of the virtue of equanimity. So although he is very intellectually powerful, he has that balance of compassion that tempers the intellect.

I've mentioned the idea that these *khandhas* are not only things to be understood and to be abandoned ultimately in the level of *nibbāna*, but they're also things that here and now are to be developed in the proper way. Within the four noble truths, the first noble truth, suffering, is *pariññeyya* 'to be fully understood' while the fourth noble truth, the path, is *bhāvetabba* 'to be developed'. So what I'm suggesting is that the *khandhas*, even though they come under the first noble truth are also related to what's going on in the fourth noble truth. And of course it is evident that these things cannot be entirely separated.

In various kinds of psychological models, these are acknowledged as being part of a normal development of an individual. To use one of the best-known models, in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, for example, you start out with the basic physical needs - the need for food, shelter - these are the four requisites. Then you have the need for safety and security of health and property, etc. Next comes emotional needs, for love and friendship. Then esteem, the need to belong and be respected by one's peers. The highest level of the standard model is 'self-actualisation', the development of morality, creativity, intellectual stimulus, solving problems, and so on. Later in life, Maslow expanded the model to include the highest need: transcendence.

That's a useful schema, which corresponds quite nicely to the five *khandhas*. The physical needs correspond with *rūpa*, the safety/health needs relate to *vedanā*, the need for love and belonging are connected with *saññā*, while self-actualisation is the level of *saṅkhārā*. In this model, as is usual in psychological models, transcendence is associated with *viññāṇa*, which is of course only a limited sense of transcendence from a Buddhist point of view, the freedom of *samadhi*. This is not to say that the *khandhas* and the hierarchy of needs are the same thing, but just that we can recognise common patterns. Of course there are differences, but the commonalities are real. And this is just one model: we can find similar correspondence with any number of psychological theories.

The 'hierarchy of needs' is often diagrammed in terms of a pyramid. But this exposes the fallacy within the tyranny of transcendence. If transcendence dismisses the other levels then it just falls down in a heap. You just can't do it. This kind of 'transcendence' is appealing but ultimately empty rhetoric.

These 'needs', interestingly enough, correspond not only with the abstract pattern of the *khandhas*, but with the more down to earth mutual duties for the mentor and the student in the Vinaya. In the ordination itself the four requisites are taught, which are the most basic level of material survival. Now, from the mentor's point of view, it's their duty to make sure that these things are provided for the student. If we want to express that in terms of a 'right', we can say that the student has a right to expect these things from their mentor. Or we could express it in terms of 'duties', saying that the mentor has a duty to provide the requisites for their student. Or we could phrase it in a utilitarian form: the proper provision of requisites by the mentor for the student leads to happiness. These are all just different languagings of the same situation.

But there's also a lesson implied - the student shouldn't expect too much. Yes, you should have the necessities, the things that you need, but you can't expect and demand to have luxuries and extras. So the Vinaya allows various 'optional extras' on top of the basic requisites; but then there's other things that are not ok, things that are too much. And so if somebody says: 'Excuse me, fermented cow's urine is just not doing it for me any more, I'd like a bit of chocolate in the evening to fill my stomach up and give me a bit of energy,' then that's okay. But if they say: 'I need a bottle of Scotch in the evening to keep me warm at night,' then that's an excessive use of medicinal requisites.

This is a very ordinary part of growing up, it's nothing unique for monastics. We all know that we can't expect everything. Our parents taught us that when we were kids; even Mick Jagger taught us this. Your parents teach you: 'Enough is enough! You can cry and scream and whinge all you like, but you're not getting any more.' We're adults and we realise that there are limits. Sometimes what we want is reasonable and we have a reasonable expectation that we should be able to get it. If someone is living in a hut and the roof is leaking, then they have a reasonable expectation that that should be fixed, and it's our duty as a community to provide the materials, the skills, or the labour as best we can. But if someone's living in the hut and they want a sauna attached, then it's not a reasonable expectation.

So there are physical needs to be provided, but also other needs in Maslow's hierarchy are acknowledged in the Vinaya, such as the need for security and safety. For example, if you're living in an area where there are bandits and so forth then there are special provisions made for that. And the particular need for physical security for women was mentioned by the Buddha on several occasions.

The need for emotional nurturance is mentioned quite a lot in the Vinaya. For the monks, the mentor should look on the student with the mind of a father, and the student should look on the mentor with the mind of a son. Unfortunately this is one of those passages where we don't find the feminine version. But obviously the senior nun should look on the junior nuns with the eyes of a mother and the junior nuns should look on the senior ones with the eyes of a daughter. Elsewhere the Suttas pose the question, 'How do these young monks restrain their desires?' The first answer to that, the basic one, the most important one, is that if the woman is older than him he looks on her as a mother, if she's younger then he looks on her as a daughter and if she's the same age he looks on her as a sister. So the first response is to cultivate that loving and caring response to each other in presence and relationship, which is why the Buddha said the good friendship is the whole of the Holy Life. Only then, if that is not enough, do we need to develop the other practices of body contemplation and sense restraint. The first thing we do, the most basic thing, repeated in the Suttas again and again, is to look upon each other with eyes of loving-kindness. That's our basic relationship with each other, to be actively and positively pursued.

And the need for intellectual stimulus is also recognized both within Maslow's hierarchy and within the Vinaya. We don't ever find the Buddha saying: 'Don't think!' On the contrary, he's constantly asking the monks: 'What do you think about that?' This is a model for education in the deep sense: 'drawing out' a person's potential wisdom. Sometimes the Buddha would give a long discourse, but many times he taught by question and answer, eliciting responses, provoking reflection, stimulating thought. And sometimes he'd say: 'That's a good answer' and sometimes he'd say: 'No, that's wrong' and sometimes he'd say: 'Well that's kind of okay, in a

way, it's not quite what I was getting at, but it's not a bad answer.' That intellectual nourishment and education is also part of our duty as the Sangha. As senior members of the Sangha we have to teach students the Suttas, the Vinaya, the Dhamma, meditation. That's our duty, and you have a right to expect that. And if you don't get that, you have every right to say: 'We need an education.' Or, to rephrase the same point in utilitarian language: provision of a good education for monastics is one of the conditions leading to a happy and fulfilled monastic life.

In the Suttas and the Vinaya there are hundreds of cases when these kinds of things come up. 'Bhante, I'm staying in a place where the roads are harsh and rocky and my feet get cracked.' And the Buddha says: 'Well, then, wear some sandals.' Where does he ever say: 'You have no right to wear shoes'? But this is what the situation I was in, in Thailand when I was an *anāgāraka* and we went on a few days of wandering one time. We had walked for a few days into the deep jungle in Kanchanaburi, wearing just cheap rubber flip-flops. After one or two days, being unused to such walking, my feet were broken and cracked and extremely painful to walk on. We stayed the night in a little Burmese village, and the next morning went for alms-round. (In those days, the *anāgārakas* at Wat Nanachat went for alms, even though this is not the normal Thai custom) It was muddy, dirty ground, and my feet were broken and bleeding. I said to my teacher: 'Can I wear my flip-flops on alms-round?' And he said: 'No you can't'. So I had to go barefoot in the mud and the slime with my bleeding cracked feet - and it really hurt. This is not a sob story; it was only a little incident, many years ago. But the point is that the Buddha never did that, it's too extreme. The Buddha always responded in a moderate and reasonable manner to these kinds of requests. But it was my fault: I should not have acquiesced. The teacher had no right to ask that of me, he was overstepping his bounds, and he needed a student who could recognise and stand firm on that boundary. I failed that test, and failed to help my teacher, in my excessive eagerness to be the model student.

As monastics who have gone forth out of faith, with teachers and a Sangha who have pledged to support that highest of aspirations, you have a right to expect these things. You have the right to expect a degree of solitude and isolation for meditation, this is one of the duties of the Sangha. Of course it's too much to say: 'I should just meditate all day in my hut and I shouldn't have to do any work or duties. I didn't come here to work, I didn't come here to learn Pali, I came here to meditate!' That's too much, that's an extreme, that's absolutist. It's a viewpoint which found its way into one of the latest Suttas of the Pali canon, the Bakkula Sutta, but which contradicts all of the mainstream tenets of monastic training.

But you should have free time to stay in a quiet place, be at peace, and develop the mind. If the environment is not suitable and you can't develop your meditation, then you should leave. That's the Dhamma, that's the Vinaya. If you can't get the context and environment that you need with that teacher or in that monastery then you should leave. You have the right to make that decision, even as a junior monastic under dependence, how much more so for senior monastics? And remember, when saying 'You have the right to do that' we can always translate the statement into utilitarian terms: 'That is a skilful act that leads to happiness.'

If you want to do something and your teacher says no, it is the teacher's responsibility to explain their reasons. They have the responsibility to articulate in a reasonable manner, relying on Dhamma and Vinaya, why they've made that decision. And if they don't or can't do that you should ask them to: 'Venerable, I don't understand why you're making this decision, could you please explain it to me?' That is your duty; in such a case, saying nothing is immaturity, not letting go. But if the teacher can't explain their decision, then they should be criticised, for it is the responsibility of a teacher to learn that skill. If they do not articulate themselves, the process becomes obscure and harmful, even if pursued with the best of intent. One in a despotic role is culpable, even if they do not act like a despot. For the existence of benevolent dictators creates the false belief that dictatorship can be benevolent, and obstructs any possibility of equality. All those in a position of power have the responsibility to devolve that power. Like Solon, the greatest of Greek leaders. After successfully promulgating his reforms, he extracted a guarantee that they would not be changed for ten years; then he left Athens for ten years! He forced the citizens to accept the weighty burden of responsible exercise of power.

But if the teacher does explain their decision to you, then it's your responsibility to reflect: 'Is that a reasonable explanation? Is that in accord with the Dhamma and the Vinaya? Is that wholesome?'

These are things that the Buddha explicitly told us to do: enquire, reflect on matters of importance, don't just

be content to accept them. This is how you are developing your *saṅkhārakkhandha* to use it as a mature, responsible adult. And you reflect on that and think: 'Yes what the teacher says is right', then you accept that, even if it's not what you want. it. But if after careful reflection you conclude: 'No, this is not right', then you should reject it. Ultimately the Vinaya says you should leave, you should leave dependence, even if the teacher asks you to stay. But if what they're saying is not Dhamma and Vinaya, then you should go away from that place. That's your duty.

In the Vinaya, individuals have no power of command. I want you all to be very clear about this. We're here working together as mature adults to create a monastic community under the guidelines of the Dhamma and the Vinaya. And under that Dhamma and Vinaya no monk or nun has the power to order any other monk or nun to do anything. Such a power does not exist. Between teacher and student there is a relationship of respect, not of command. If you are lucky enough to have an experienced teacher, then you should listen to what they say, reflect on it, and consider it seriously. But at the end of the day, there is no power of command.

The power of command can be manifested only as a result of a communal decision by the Sangha (*saṅghakamma*), properly following the procedures of the Vinaya. So if the Sangha makes a decision: 'This person's conduct is unacceptable, we have to ask them to leave the monastery', then the Sangha can do that by means of *saṅghakamma*, but it's not up to an individual to make that decision. And such decisions, generally speaking, are discussed and decided upon individually by the bhikkhu Sangha and the bhikkhuni Sangha. So even by means of *saṅghakamma*, the bhikkhus have no coercive power over the bhikkhunis.

Take as example how we look after different aspects of running the monastery. At a certain stage in the growth of Santi Monastery, I was appointed by the Sangha to be the one who would look after the building works, so this is my responsibility. I've been vested with that authority by the Sangha. So it's my duty to look after the building work, and to make decisions as regards to that. Not because I'm an infallible Elder whose word must be obeyed in every context, but because I've been asked to do this, and it's my responsibility to make sure it's done properly. Now if I don't do this properly, then it's the Sangha's duty to raise that among the Sangha for discussion. If my behaviour or conduct is not appropriate then I should be removed from that post. The Sangha says to me: 'You shouldn't be doing that job, you haven't done it properly.' They can then appoint another monastic to take care of that job. Or they can give me instructions and say do it in such and such a manner. Or the Sangha can say: 'We're not going to build that, we're going to build this'. And once a decision has been made then it's my responsibility to make sure that it's done properly.

This is how the Vinaya works. And if this system is to function properly, it's crucial that this relationship of respect does not get turned into a relationship of power. This is especially important and sensitive in terms of gender relationships. In traditional Theravāda, the monks hold all the cards. They hold the ownership of all the monasteries, they hold the spiritual authority, they are the guardians of the lineage, they have the enlightened masters on their side. All of these things, that whole weight of tradition, supports and empowers them. If they follow the way of power, it's up to them to decide what they want to give to the nuns. If they want to be nice to them, they're nice to them. And if they don't want to be nice to them, they're not nice to them. That's the reality of life in the Sangha as it is at the moment.

But that's not Vinaya. Vinaya says that the nuns make their own decisions. Even if we look at the most problematic and apparently sexist parts of the Vinaya, like the *garudhammas*, we do not find a principle of obedience. Be clear on this: there is no principle of obedience in the Vinaya. The bhikkhunis are not required in any sense to obey the commands of the monks, nor are they required to consult with them in any way in how they live. The *garudhammas* establish relations of respect between monks and nuns. The way this is done is genuinely problematic, for as a set of rules they plainly postdate the Buddha, but even the *garudhammas* merely speak of etiquette and formalising relationships in several *saṅghakammās*, and say nothing of command or obedience. With these exceptions, bhikkhunis are entirely autonomous in the Vinaya. They make their own minds as to how they live, how they run their monasteries, how they organise their communities, what teaching schedules they do, what kind of meditation practice do they do, what texts do they study. All of these things are decided amongst the bhikkhunis themselves, and the monks have no say in it whatsoever. That's Vinaya. So it's sad that in the modern Theravāda tradition our perception of Vinaya is very different from what we find in the

Vinaya texts themselves. This is one of the reasons why study of the texts is important. It is empowering. It enables you to make up your own mind. Any teacher who discourages you from studying the texts is setting up the condition for continued debilitating dependence.

I don't pretend to have solved all of these problems. The things I'm criticising are things that I feel because I know them in myself. I know that I've made those mistakes many times and so I'm trying to work towards a place where we can co-create a monastic community, a Sangha, in the fullest sense of the word.

And that's another literal reading of *saṅkhāra*: co-creating, building together. It has a positive nuance, a little reminiscent of Indo-European *ar-* in the sense of 'things fitting together aright'. If we want to build a monastic community together, each one of us needs to take that personal responsibility. You need to study the Vinaya, you need to study the Suttas, so that we can have a common language and a shared body of assumptions that we can bring to the community dialogue. You can't just claim the right to have your voice listened to and your opinions followed if you haven't done your homework. You must understand the models in Vinaya that are guiding the community so that there can be that equality. It's every person's responsibility to do that, and please, don't shirk that responsibility. Buddhism is a doctrine of action (*kiriya-vāda*), not a doctrine of fatalism (*niyati-vāda*). Sometimes I hear people say that change is inevitable, that the acceptance of bhikkhunis is inevitable. This is wrong: nothing is inevitable. Good things happen because people work together, hard, intelligently, with good will and principle. Our *saṅkhārās* are what will make the future of Buddhism possible.

Lack of responsibility is the downfall of consensual decision making. We aim for consensus, but if just one person is stubborn, stupid, or biased, and insists on their way, the whole system breaks down. Consensus is not about getting your own way, but about reaching the best possible solution under the Dhamma and Vinaya.

If there's only one thing that you learn from my teaching, then let this be it. In terms of meditation, I don't really mind whether you follow the method I teach. If you completely ignore it and follow the meditation according to another teacher that's perfectly fine. I don't feel at all that my meditation teaching has anything better or special to add. I teach what I find useful, that's all. But in terms of this particular point, I feel that it's something that's very problematic in the Buddhist tradition generally and in our monastic tradition in particular, and I would strongly encourage you to take the responsibility to ensure that your development is balanced. Remember the Maṅgala Sutta, which talks of the blessings of listening to Dhamma, conversation on Dhamma - asking questions, discussing things amongst ourselves, as well as meditation. Meditation has its own special sphere of relevance, and cannot substitute for these other things.