

# *Dhamma Questions & Responses - Part I*

by Ajahn Buddhādāsa

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

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*In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhādāsa gave regular talks during the monthly international retreats held at Suan Mokkh and then Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage. Usually, Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. Audio recordings are now available from [www.suanmokkh.org](http://www.suanmokkh.org) and [www.bia.or.th](http://www.bia.or.th). The following is a transcription generously made by a Dhamma volunteer. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the Buddhādāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok ([suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com](mailto:suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com)).*

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*How does one lead a life full of Dhamma amongst those who do not?*

If we have sufficiently complete Dhamma, then we will be able to live and practice Dhamma in the midst of people who do not. We must know what to avoid – to avoid what should be avoided – and only to get involved in things or ways that are useful. And we should know... and then we should have the purpose of getting involved in a way that helps those people who do not have Dhamma to understand Dhamma. If we have this approach, there won't be any difficulties and we won't get frustrated.

The Dhamma itself will transform our minds, our hearts, so that we will be able to live in such a way.

*Do you think that working for inner peace and enlightenment needs to be supplemented by engaged Buddhism or working for world peace, by challenging the structures that oppress – e.g. armies, governments, religions, bigotry – through non-violent actions?*

The Dhamma itself will bring about a revolution in our hearts, and then through that inner spiritual revolution, one will practice, one will live and work, not only for one's own benefit, but for the benefits of society. These various structures that have been mentioned, such as the military, the governments, religions and so on, originally these, in their spirit, have the intention of

supporting society. So, in our fulfilling our responsibilities as a human being towards society, it's not necessary to be in conflict with these different systems. Except when... however, there are the times when these systems or structures are incorrect, when they are based in misunderstanding and have deviated from their original spirit or intention. Nonetheless, there is no need to be in conflict with these systems or structures.

The Dhamma exists in order to resolve conflict. Because human beings were already in conflict, already fighting and so on, it became necessary to discover Dhamma. If one has sufficient Dhamma, there would be no conflict, but because of the conflicts that existed, human beings were unable to tolerate that, and so they searched for Dhamma, they searched for answers to the conflict until they discovered Dhamma in certain forms or on certain levels, and these have later been developed until complete.

On the beginning level, Dhamma is a matter of ethics or morality, in order to solve social problems or the problems between human beings – interpersonal problems and so on. And then Dhamma developed further until it reached the level of religion or spirituality. Morality, or the moral level of Dhamma, is primarily concerned with social problems, whereas religion, or the spiritual level of Dhamma, is concerned with an inner revolution. We make outer revolutions in order to change society, Dhamma however, the spiritual level of Dhamma, is for a revolution of our own hearts which will solve the problems, not only which are inside, but also those which are outside. So this spiritual level of Dhamma can bring about a revolution both within and without.

To work for world peace, merely on the social, politic or economic level will never be successful. The only way to achieve world peace is through a spiritual revolution in the hearts of human beings. And this is exactly the duty of Dhamma; the duty of Dhamma is to bring about this revolution in the hearts of human beings, and then that will spread to a revolution in the social realm.

*How should Buddhists respond when in a certain country, the military is dominating society through the use of force and is oppressing the people? How should we challenge them or how should we resist, or shouldn't we?*

In a Buddhist country, there would not be such kinds of soldiers. A military that uses force to oppress the people would not exist in a truly Buddhist country. When there is such a military, it means that the military does not have Dhamma. In a Buddhist country, in a genuinely Buddhist country, the military will have Dhamma, there will perform the correct duties of the military in order to maintain the peace and security of the country. In that case, there's no problem,

there will be no conflict between the military and the people. If however the military is using force, is killing its own people and exploiting in other ways, this is a sign that that country does not have Dhamma, that that country lacks true or correct religion.

To resist immorality with more immorality, or with immoral means, leads only to war. To resist or work against immorality, one needs morality or higher levels of Dhamma. Therefore one should prepare oneself to resist immorality in this higher way, by training and having Dhamma.

To exchange one's understanding of Dhamma, to have a Dhamma exchange between different segments of society, can prevent such problems. Please don't overlook this possibility of exchanging Dhamma, of discussing Dhamma, so as to make understanding.

One should rely upon mutual understanding and reconciliation as the primary means to deal with such conflicts or problems. These are the means which can actually solve the problems, that is, understanding and reconciliation through Dhamma. Please don't forget these tools.

*Well, what should one do in a country that is not Buddhist anymore, where the power structures – whether the military or whoever – will not talk with us or is unwilling to discuss or negotiate?*

This is nothing new. The law of *idappaccayatā*, the law of causes and conditions as it applies to the evil side of things, has concocted up or brewed up new troubles, and this has happened many times in human history. Don't respond to evil with evil, don't respond to baseness with more baseness or lowness, but respond with goodness, with correctness. So those who are interested in Dhamma, those who are practicing Dhamma, should gather together, should work together, in order to prevent and protect against these problems. In human history there have been many occasions where there has been destruction and crises in society, but there have also been times when there has been success in preventing, in solving, those crises.

Don't just look at things in an external, outward way, because even in one single person, there is an ongoing struggle between wrong and right, between evil and goodness, between what is low and what is high. The struggle goes on within each of us. It's not just going on outside of us, in society. If one can correct wrongness with rightness or correctness, that is what Dhamma is about, that's what Dhamma is for. If within oneself one corrects the wrongness, the lowness, with Dhamma, then there is no need to worry or doubt, one will be able to take care of the external battles and struggles as well.

The study of history is mainly concerned with finding out how to beat the other side in war, how to be better at fighting, how to gain political, economic and military advantages. This is what the historians are most concerned with. You can't find many who are studying how to make peace. There are very few historians who are trying to learn from history how to create peace. And so there will continue to be wars in human society, that's just the way things go.

*Upon reaching the state of Nibbāna, what is the stimulus for working towards the betterment of the world? Wouldn't it be just as easy to be lazy? What drives you personally?*

The study and practice for the sake of Nibbāna is one of overcoming and removing selfishness, in order to act merely for the sake of Dhamma, to act unselfishly. Thus, when one realizes Nibbāna, there remains the momentum of all those unselfish acts that have been practiced previously. And this momentum is what induces or brings the Buddha and the *arahants* (the perfected human beings) to do things that are of benefit for others. It's this momentum of unselfishness that carries on. And so you needn't wonder or worry that you will be lazy once you realize Nibbāna.

There are a pair of opposing things here: there is selfishness and unselfishness. Selfishness is under the power of the defilements, whereas unselfishness is under the power of *sati-paññā* (mindfulness and wisdom), which means Dhamma. When there is selfishness, there is no Dhamma at all; when there is no selfishness, then there is Dhamma. And when there is Dhamma, then one just acts for the benefit of others. It's not possible for life to remain still, life is movement, and when there is Dhamma, the movement is solely for the benefit of others – that is for the sake of Dhamma. And so don't worry, this momentum of Dhamma, of unselfishness, will carry on, and so one can live solely for the benefit, for the happiness of others.

When one is successful in one's own practice and has solved all of one's problems, then one asks, 'Well, what does one do next?' It's not possible to do nothing, to just vegetate or something. It's natural that one then looks around to see what needs to be done; when we have fulfilled our personal duty, towards ourselves, then one looks around to see what needs to be done beyond that. And because of the whole flow of one's practice before, the answer is apparent and obvious. Well, if I have practiced like this and done this, with the result that now I have found perfect peace for myself, then, I can invite you all, or encourage you, and help you in any way possible so that you will have the same

peace, and to request that you all help, that you all work together to spread this peace amongst all human beings. This is how it has worked in the past with the Buddha and with all the arahants – that finding their own peace, they then worked to help others to find theirs as well.

Please don't be surprised or startled when you hear that even the arahant needs entertainment, even the perfected human being seeks entertainment. But the arahant doesn't look for sexual entertainment or worldly entertainment. The entertainment of the awakened being is dhammic, it's the kind of entertainment that has to do with Dhamma. So the arahant finds his joy, relaxation and fun – similar to playing sports or games – in helping others. Whatever way the arahant has practiced and lived in order to find perfect peace, then the arahant helps others to do the same. So you need not worry that the arahant will be lazy or useless.

And so, why don't all of you try out this kind of entertainment? Why don't you seek this dhammic entertainment or spiritual entertainment of helping others? We can call this 'moving usefully' since life is movement. This is just a matter of making that movement useful and beneficial. So start on a small little level, and then develop it further and further until the highest level, until one's life is a kind of movement which is the greatest benefit for others.

In order to find spiritual or dhammic entertainment, the most wonderful tool is *ānāpānasati*. This is the kind of entertainment which leads to *bodhi* (enlightenment). Through *ānāpānasati*, one learns to enjoy doing what is truly useful on higher and higher levels. So this is the kind of entertainment which leads to enlightenment. And when one is finished helping oneself, then all that one has to do is help others to do what one has oneself accomplished.

*Buddhism relies on the law of nature. In nature, survival of the fittest is a very basic concept. Actually this is a concept in human thinking; it's not a concept in nature itself, it's just a human theory. 'Working for the sake of duty' seems to be close to the concepts of socialism or communism, and experience seems to show that, like nature, man performs best under some degree of competition. Why then this Buddhism promotes the concept of living and working only for the sake of duty?*

The survival of the fittest is an inherent principle or law of nature, it isn't something that human beings invented or thought up. It's just a fact of nature that there is survival of the fittest. And to do duty for duty's sake, this is the meaning of 'the fittest.' To be most fit for survival, one must do duty for duty's

sake – that is to do duty correctly, in line with the law of nature. When one acts and lives in line with the law of nature, then one is fit, one is supremely fit for survival. To do duty merely for one’s own sake, for some personal advantage or benefit, this is not in line with the law of nature, and so the selfish being is not fit for survival. But it’s only by doing duty just for the sake of Dhamma, for duty, according to the law of nature, that one is fit for survival. So it’s correct to say ‘survival of the fittest’ and fitness here, is solely a matter of doing duty for the sake of duty itself.

So there is no need to argue with nature, don’t bother arguing with nature otherwise you will just have a lot of headaches and *dukkha*. But if one can do duty for the sake of duty and in line with the law of nature, then we will have the full support of nature and things will go much more easily, and there will be survival.

‘To be fit’ or ‘fitness’ is the cause; ‘survival’ is the result. So be careful not to get the order backwards. It can be confusing to speak of ‘survival of the fittest,’ to put the result before the cause. It’s better to put it ‘the fittest survive,’ or ‘the most fit survive.’ There is first the cause of being fit, in to be in line with the law of nature, and then there will be the natural necessary result, which is survival. This is survival through Dhamma.

What’s funny here is that all this discussion about ‘us’ is about something that doesn’t really exist. That which we think is ‘we’ or ‘us,’ it’s just body and mind. But because this mind is able to think and proliferate, it goes and thinks foolishly, incorrectly, that there is some self, some lasting ‘me,’ some personal center. So it’s because of this ignorance that there is some self that can be attached to, that there is some ‘me’ that we can hang on to. We act selfishly and create all kinds of problems. So when there is nature under the power of ignorance, things go wrong, and when nature goes wrong, then there is selfishness and pain. Nature under the power of ignorance inevitably brings pain, stress or *dukkha*; but when life is Dhamma, when instead of ignorance there is mindfulness and wisdom, then life just leads to peacefulness, life is peaceful, free and of great benefit. When we can replace the foolish thinking about ‘me, me, me’ with wisdom, then it’s a different kind of life. So there is nature, but nature can go according to ignorance, or it can go according to wisdom. If instead of taking ego to be ‘me,’ if what we call ‘us’ or ‘we’ is just Dhamma, the Dhamma, the nature that has been borrowed in order to be ‘us,’ if we understand ‘us’ to just be Dhamma, then with this wisdom we won’t make a mess out of things, we won’t create selfishness and egoism. So the thing is, how to make life Dhamma? How for Dhamma to be life? How to make these one and

the same for us, so that it's no longer of nature that goes wrong, a nature that becomes stressful and peaceful?

Literally the word 'Dhamma' means 'nature,' nature is Dhamma, but in essence they're not exactly the same. However, in practice, on the most profound level, there are again the same. When our way of living, when our behavior, all of our activities are in line with Dhamma, when everything we do is according to the law of nature, then Dhamma and nature are one and the same. To act, to behave in line with the law of nature, this is called 'Dhamma,' and when we act and live that way then our nature – the nature that we are – and Dhamma are the same thing. Every atom, every molecule of these bodies are nature and happen according to the law of nature, they are Dhamma. Every particle of these hearts or minds are nature. When all these natures are correct, then there will be the survival that we have been talking about.

When there is incorrectness in our physical nature, in the body, then the result is illness and disease. When there is incorrectness in our mental or spiritual nature, in the mind, then there is a spiritual illness – that is the defilements, such as greed, anger and delusion. But when there is correctness, when there is Dhamma both physically and mentally, then everything is fine, there are no physical diseases and no mental diseases. When the system, both the mental and physical systems, then can work together correctly, then there are no problems; then the two can function together, you can't separate them. If you try to separate the mind from the body, the result will be death, and then you won't be able to do anything anymore, they'll become useless. But when the body and the mind depend upon each other, when they're integrated through Dhamma, with correctness, then we can do everything that we need to do.

We live in the era of science, in which scientific understanding has become very precise, developed and refined. And so, when we speak about everything being nature, everything being natural, about Dhamma being nature, then people can understand. In the past, before there was adequate understanding of science, people couldn't understand, they couldn't understand if you said 'Everything is nature.' They would only understand if you spoke about spirits, if you spoke about angels and devils, and in the end, spoke about God. What nowadays we call 'the fittest survive,' in the old days that meant to be the fit in terms of God or to do the will of God. That's the old superstitious way of speaking. But nowadays, when there is an adequate understanding of nature due to science, we don't have to speak in such mythological or anthropomorphic ways, we can speak directly in Dhamma language, to speak merely of 'to be fit according to the law of nature,' and then one will survive. This is Dhamma language without

having to use any poetries or metaphors, it's not the people language where everything has to be explained in terms of egos and selves, in anthropomorphic language.

*What khandha is avijjā? Is it a tendency or a khandha?*

Normally we translate *avijjā* as 'not knowing,' but in fact there isn't anyone who doesn't know something, there isn't anyone who knows absolutely nothing. So in practice, *avijjā* means 'wrong knowing,' 'knowing things in an incorrect way.' So therefore we should translate the word *avijjā* in two ways: one is 'the absence of correct knowledge,' *avijjā* should mean 'the absence of correct knowledge,' this is how it's best to translate it. When there is correct understanding, then there is no *dukkha*, there are no problems. But when there is an absence or lack of this correct understanding, then *dukkha* is created. So when we talk about the five *khandhas*, we should say that when the five *khandhas* belong to *avijjā*, when they are ignorant *khandhas*, when these five *khandhas* lack correct understanding, then they will be attached to and there will be *dukkha*. But when the five *khandhas* are trained, when they are trained properly until they have correct knowledge, then there will be the five *khandhas* of *vijjā*, of correct knowledge and understanding. So this is what we should do, we should train the five *khandhas* until they have correct understanding.

If one wants to place *avijjā* in a particular *khandha*, then we can put it under *saṅkhāra-khandha*. Correct knowledge fits into *saṅkhāra-khandha* and so does incorrect knowledge or *avijjā*, would go under *saṅkhāra-khandha*. But the way I have spoken was to say that all the *khandhas* together are made up out of ignorance or, all of them are under *vijjā* (correct knowledge).

If *sati* (recollection, recall) is lacking, then *vijjā* will be wasted. So therefore we need to train and have *sati*, to be mindful, to recollect so that *vijjā* can be put into action. This *sati* or recollection can be placed within *saññā-khandha*.

Therefore we should train in *ānāpānasati* so that we have both *vijjā* and *sati*, so we have both mindfulness and wisdom through training in *ānāpānasati*. Then both of them, when they are fully trained, will be in time in order to deal with all these circumstances of life, so that nothing will create problems.

So *sati* is aware of the situation and then it recalls or retrieves wisdom, so as to apply it correctly in order to deal with the situation. But if *sati* is too slow, or if it is shaky or careless, and if wisdom is incomplete or insufficient, then we won't be able to cope with the situation and it will concoct into *dukkha*. So we



must have sati which is quick enough, which is precise, and then wisdom which is sufficient and complete in order to deal with all the situations of life.

But we have a tendency to prefer things which retard or destroy mindfulness, namely things like marijuana, alcohol, beer and other forms of drugs which dull and retard sati. In this way then, whatever knowledge or understanding we have, is wasted, because we don't have the mindfulness, we don't have the clarity and precision of mind to retrieve that knowledge in order to actually use it in life, because of our addiction to things like alcohol and other drugs.

*Ānāpānasati is a complete path to liberation. What is the cause of it seeming to take many years in order to be liberated?*

If we give a quick answer that takes advantage of you, we would say that it's because of *avijjā*. The reason why it seems to take so many years is simply because of ignorance. But if we answer more precisely, if we go into it a little further, we could say because nobody cares about *sati*, nobody is interested in being mindful because they haven't noticed *dukkha*. Because nobody pays attention to *dukkha*, because all of us think that there really isn't any *dukkha*, there isn't much of a problem with *dukkha*, then we don't see the need for *sati*. If we were more aware of *dukkha*, if we took *dukkha* seriously, then we would very quickly become mindful, we would start paying attention to everything and our practice would not take so long. But when people don't take *dukkha* seriously, then they will continue living life in heedless, careless ways, and the practice will go on forever. It won't take many years to get liberated, one will never get liberated, until one takes *dukkha* seriously, and so is really willing to train and practice in mindfulness.

Nobody is afraid of *dukkha*... nobody is afraid of *dukkha*, nobody is embarrassed by *dukkha*. Nobody thinks it's something really shameful to suffer *dukkha*, and so we just go on living carelessly, heedlessly. But when one would be honest and take a good look at *dukkha*, then one sees how terrifying it is, how really shameful it is, and then one will have an appetite for practicing *ānāpānasati*. Now we don't have much of an appetite for it. Ten minutes, fifteen minutes and our minds start to wander all over the place. Because we have no appetite, we're not afraid of *dukkha*, we're not ashamed of our own stupidity; and so we don't have an appetite. But through correct fear and shame about *dukkha*, then one has an appetite for practice. And when one has this appetite, then it doesn't take so long. One will maybe make some errors but then

one can correct them and make rapid progress. So, in short, when there is a lot of ignorance and not enough *vijjā* (wisdom), then it goes very slowly or maybe it doesn't go anywhere at all and maybe even gets worse. But when there is more *vijjā*, more correct knowledge than there is ignorance, then there is rapid progress leading to success. So the thing is to have some mindfulness and some wisdom, to see what needs to be done in order to be afraid of dukkha and ashamed of dukkha, and then things will develop accordingly.

So if you see that this dukkha of your life is like a fire burning your head, you can see that dukkha is like your head being on fire, and you've got to do whatever possible to put it out immediately, then your progress, your practice will go well. If you can see that you came here in order to study Dhamma, for the sake of quenching dukkha, then things will go well. But if you think that you came here to learn Dhamma in order to hear something strange, to practice philosophy, to think of new ideas, or to write books about Buddhism, or to make yourself happy or comfortable or to feel better, or to become famous, if this is why you are studying Dhamma, then it will take a very long long time. So please come to study Dhamma simply for the sake of quenching dukkha. Be interested in Dhamma merely to make an end to dukkha. As for merely making yourself feel better, to forget a few of your problems or to be happy for a little while, if that's your attitude, then, it will take a long long time.

Some people have a lot of academic knowledge about Dhamma, they study Dhamma for many years in an academic way until they can graduate from university and even be a professor of Buddhist studies, but this alone will not quench dukkha, this won't solve any problems – although you might be able to get a job out of it – because one has to practice Dhamma. It's not just enough to [rack] up or store up a lot of knowledge, one must practice Dhamma.

So if one is sick and tired of dukkha, one is afraid of dukkha and ashamed of dukkha, so that one seriously studies for the sake of quenching dukkha and practices in order to make an end to dukkha, then one will make steady and rapid progress. It's like all of you here travelling around the world. Are you travelling around just to see strange new things, to have new experiences, to take lots of photographs, to write home letters and so on? Or are you travelling in order to find a way to end dukkha? If your travels are for the sake of ending dukkha, then you will make progress even while travelling. But if you're just travelling for fun, for entertainment, to relax, to escape, then it will be a long long time so one can make an end to dukkha. So in short one needs an appetite for Dhamma – the Pāli word for this is *chanda*. When one has an appetite for

Dhamma and for practice, when one has a real appetite, then there will be success.

If we speak in the Buddhist language, then you will understand more easily. When the Buddha spoke of ‘the world,’ he meant the thing that is full of problems and dukkha. All the problems that are dukkha, this is what the Buddha meant by ‘the world.’ So if you travel around this world of the Buddha, if you travel around and around this world, it then won’t be long until you can make an end to dukkha. Even in the more ordinary ways of speaking, when people talk about the world, they’re always talking about problems, getting this and getting rid of that, they’re always talking about problems. So this is the world that one needs to travel around. Even if you don’t make it to travel around that world of the imagination, but if you travel around and around of this real world of the dukkha we create out of life, then one will find the way out of it.

There’s another natural fact that should be considered, which is that, if these bodies and minds which have been created by Dhamma, if in any case a body or mind is deficient or incomplete, specifically if there is a low IQ, if one is retarded or an idiot, if this is the case one won’t have any potential, one won’t be concerned with dukkha, one won’t be able to be interested in Dhamma, and so it will not be possible to make any progress in the study and practice of Dhamma. But all of us here, there is not one who is like that. Each of us has sufficient IQ, each of us is healthy enough, complete enough, in order to study and practice Dhamma. So one ought to be interested in this, one already has the ability. The only thing now is to have an appetite to put this ability into practice, to take seriously the quenching of dukkha.

They have a way of measuring our desire for something. Compare it to someone who is being drowned in the water. Imagine that somebody is pushing you under the water so you can’t breathe, so that you’re drowning and cannot breathe. When you are in that state, how strong will be your desire to get out of the water and on to land in order to breathe? How strong will be your desire to breathe? Stop and think about that for a bit. Consider what that kind of desire will be when you’re drowning, the desire to be able to breathe; and then compare that with one’s desire to end dukkha. None of us has such a desire to end dukkha. We’re just fooling around, just playing games, just entertaining ourselves for a little while and so we make very slow progress. But anyone who has the desire... whose desire to end dukkha is as strong as the person who is drowning wants to breathe, then that person will make very rapid progress.

But now all of you are drowning, you’re all drowning in positive and negative. And you like it, you enjoy it, you think it’s really great to be drowning

in the positive and negative. And so you have no desire to get out of that, to get free of the dukkha of a life that is dominated by positive and negative. But when one sees how all this positive and negative traps us, traps us into dukkha, then one will want to get free of it. But as long as we are content with the positive and negative then one will continue drowning, our life will go nowhere, it will be wasted. So consider this, and see if it isn't time to get interested in getting free of the positive and negative, to be a little bit embarrassed by all this dukkha.

So please try, please strive, please try to get out from the power of positive and negative. But let us say that if you aren't interested in this, if you don't have the desire to get free of the power of positive and negative, then we'll have to say that you're weak-minded, even that you're retarded and that you won't have the ability to study Buddhism. Buddhism is only about dukkha and the end of dukkha, and if you're not interested in this, well then, how will you ever be able to study Buddhism? So we hope that you will try to get free of the power, to rise up above the power of positive and negative in order to be free of dukkha. If this is what you are interested in, if you are genuinely interested in this, then it won't take so long.

Our allotted time has been used up – two hours already – so this will conclude our question and answer session for today. We hope that you will take your study and practice of dependent origination and mindfulness with breathing very seriously, and that you will continue to make progress in it, so that you will understand both what to practice and how to practice, so that, although in ten days you may not have finished, you may be able to continue after you leave and steadily make progress in order to have a life that is free of positive and negative, a life without any problems. We wish you success in your study and practice. May you have an appetite for this and may you enjoy it. That's all for today.

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