

BUDDHISM AND THE FEAR OF COVID-19
A chat with Achan¹ Sujin Borihanwanaket

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And DJ Banchorn Wichiansri
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¹ **Achan**: teacher; professor; instructor. Pali form: ācariya.

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DJ Banchorn Wichiansri: Achan Sujin, today in Thailand and around the world there is huge anxiety and dread about COVID-19. We don't know what is happening or where it will lead. It could be a mild illness or very serious and result in death. There have been a number of cases of COVID-19 in southern Thailand. Thai people worry about encountering the illness when they come here from other areas of the country. Crime, accidents and illness are dangers that surround us all the time. Now, in the midst of current fears about COVID-19, how are we to consider what is happening from the Buddhist perspective?

Achan Sujin Borihanwanaket: Let me ask you, in the truest sense, is anyone able to prevent COVID from occurring? We have to consider carefully to understand the root cause of things, and realize that we have no understanding whatsoever that there is *no one* to do anything. Whatever arises does so by conditions. It seems simple. However, this truth is very subtle and profound.

Whether there is danger or not, there must be seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking arising and falling away all the time, right? These cannot be stopped. If we cannot control even these realities, then how can we control the experiencing of harm? We can see that when there are conditions for realities to arise, they will arise. There is *no one* to do or control anything. The only thing is to understand³ that things do not happen the way we think they will or want them to –if there's a cause for something to happen a certain way, it has to happen that way.

COVID is a clear example of the timeless truth of realities unfolding by conditions. We need to understand that there is *no one* who can control; there is no *controlling agent*. Things can only be the way they are; they cannot be otherwise. When we no longer think of COVID we will think about other things and the story about COVID will be just like any other train of thought, gone and forgotten.

DJ: Fearing the dangers around us and then avoiding facing them, is that the correct way to proceed?

AS: There's certainly no way to avoid dangers. If there are precautions to be taken, then by all means take them. However, we need to understand that they may not prevent contracting the virus. The Buddha has shown us the real causes, both *near* and *far*, for the arising of phenomena.

³ There's *no one* to develop understanding either, but when the right conditions are present, what is actually true can become an object of understanding. [Translator's Note]

Without a deep understanding of causation we will always be fearful. Now we fear COVID, but in the future there will be other diseases. We can be frightened of everything because we don't know the cause for good and bad (kusala and akusala)⁴ things to occur. Why does something good happen to one person and something bad to another? Why do only some get COVID and others do not?

Fear is certain as long as there is attachment to oneself, right? Having been born in this world, one is fearful of everything. How much fear? Well, that will depend...

DJ: When I talk about not being careless, I think in general this means avoiding the dangers we fear – such as accidents, crimes, diseases, illnesses, natural disasters and so on...

AS: Did those who contracted COVID do anything to try to avoid it? Many did, but they still got it. Others took no steps to avoid it; some of them got the virus while others didn't. Near causes are those within view. If we are not careful and do nothing to avoid COVID, we give rise to contracting it. However, there are also far causes. Some people are very careful and still get the virus, while others are not at all careful and don't get it. Why is this?

DJ: I've heard that even those who are very cautious get it.

AS: In spite of being careful we can still become ill if there are conditions for it. If there are no conditions, no matter what, we won't become ill. Our volitional actions (kamma)⁵ always bring results, so there is always "becoming" something, from moment to moment, from life to life. Whatever happens, be it happiness or suffering, it's not going to be good all the time or distress all the time. Some people may have physical pain and no mental suffering. Others may experience great emotional pain and have no physical pain. If we don't know about causation, we cannot know which causes bring about good or bad results.

DJ: It seems like we don't have to do anything at all — because if something happens, it has to happen. It seems that there's no need to try to avoid anything or be cautious, but isn't this being careless?

⁴ **Kusala:** good, ethically skillful, wholesome, meritorious; kammically profitable, conducing to well-being. **Akusala:** bad, ethically unskillful, unwholesome.

⁵ **Kamma:** Action, deed; doing. Sanskrit form: *karma*. Means volitional action by body, speech or mind, having an inherent tendency to bear fruit in accordance with the kind of action done. Note that kamma means action, not the result of action (*vipāka*) as when people say, "It's my karma". This reduces the teaching of kamma to mere fatalism. Kamma (will, volition, intention) is a mental phenomenon and thus it can be accumulated. People accumulate different defilements (*kilesas*) and different kmmas. Different accumulations of kamma are the condition for the different results in life. This is the law of kamma and *vipāka*, of cause and result/effect: ethical causality.

AS: See? You're already thinking incorrectly. In ignorance we think "if that is the case, then I don't have to do anything." We don't think about being a good person and doing good. These are things that bring good results.

DJ: Right.

AS: When looking at common causes for getting the virus, we think only about things we can do to prevent it. We overlook the real causes. If the cause is kusala, the result will definitely be good, and if the cause is akusala, no matter what we do, the result will be bad. Why are some born with no disease or handicap but others are born with one or both? We may think we will die from one thing but in the end, we die from another. Everyone wishes for good things only, without knowing what brings them about. It's a timeless truth that kusala always produces good results and akusala always produces bad results.

We forget this and think, "in that case, I don't have to do anything". That moment of thinking is definitely not kusala because we don't understand what ought to be cultivated.

DJ: So is it akusala if we think, "we don't have to do anything, just let it go..."?

AS: Yes, this is wrong thinking. "Not doing anything", see? The akusala just goes on and on because there is no correct understanding that abandoning things to chance or doing nothing is not kusala.

Like right now with COVID, people are helping each other, taking care of each other, not harming each other. During times like this, kindness and other kusala deeds make things easier little by little. On the other hand, the more akusala, the worse things get. People tend to forget, or fail to see, that kusala and akusala speech and actions are the true causes of good and bad results. Instead, we think merely about protecting ourselves, but does this lead to protection against akusala?

DJ: How can we evaluate what is kusala? I've heard people disagree about what is kusala and what is not.

AS: Kusala for those who have not listened to the Buddha's teachings, and kusala for those who have listened must be different, right?

DJ: Yes.

AS: We need to listen to the teachings in order to know in depth the meaning of causation. Even at this very moment there is the hearing of a sound. Can we stop ourselves from hearing that sound?

DJ: Impossible.

AS: Everything seems to occur by itself or on its own, but in truth it's not like that at all. There are sounds in the forest, sounds faraway, sounds in the different rooms... but the sound that we hear can only be the particular sound that impinges on the ear-sense. Only the hearing of that sound will arise –not any other sound. This is very subtle and, therefore, it's extremely difficult to know whether the sound heard is the result of kusala or akusala action.⁶ If we could split time into tiny momentary fragments we would find alternating moments of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking arising and falling away very quickly throughout the day, nothing static or permanent. This happens so rapidly that it appears as if they are all joined together, making it impossible to see what is arising or what is passing away.

Just now we are talking about this story and next we'll talk about another story, you see? The story we have just talked about is completely gone. The story of COVID is just one story. If we are in deep sleep, we don't know or see anything, but as soon as we wake up, we start worrying because of self-love. We worry about ourselves, others or anything else. However, I think that if everyone understood kusala and performed kusala deeds we would not be afraid of anything.

DJ: This means that the real danger to be known is not what people are fearing now –we are only afraid of external factors, afraid of change– am I right?

AS: Yes, everyone is afraid of COVID, but not everyone will get it. It will come only to those with the conditions to get it. Otherwise, everyone would have it by now. Regardless of what happens to each person, there must be causes specific to that person. It is very complex, but gradually we can consider and understand what we really fear.

As long as there is birth, there will be fear; we have been afraid since birth; no one is unafraid. The fears need not be great; they can be of simple things, like geckos and ants. There is fear because we don't understand what we are afraid of. Is there any good in being afraid? Isn't it better not to be afraid because we understand what it is that we fear?

⁶ **Vipāka:** The consequence and result of a past volitional action (kamma), either the result of a wholesome deed (kusala kamma), kusala vipāka, or of an unwholesome deed (akusala kamma), akusala vipāka.

DJ: So what are we really afraid of or why are we afraid?

AS: In fact, I think it should be ignorance about reality. At this moment there's only ignorance, thus we are afraid, even though the object of fear has gone.

When we stop talking about COVID-19, will there still be fear even though such thought has gone? Some will still fear, but others, with different things to think about, won't think about COVID anymore.

We fear because we don't understand the reality appearing at each moment, how it appears and what causes it to appear. Why is this country, this person or this thought the way it is? Everything! We don't know the causes for the arising of phenomena.

You may be wondering what we are talking about here.⁷ If we try to consider the truth carefully, we can go beyond fear by understanding that if something is going to happen, it must happen. If it is not going to happen, it will not happen. There's *no one* to make it happen. There must be causes for things to happen to one person and other causes for things to happen to another, all according to the many and diverse conditioning factors that arise for each person.

DJ: If fear arises again it is not the same fear that arose and disappeared before. Fear can arise and disappear again and again. Am I right?

AS: Yes, there's absolutely nothing at all that does not cease. We understand that "cease" means "come to an end". Here we use "cease" to mean "come to an end, never to return". "Fallen away" means the same thing. What has ceased or fallen away cannot be found anywhere. Like the sound heard just a moment ago, as soon as it falls away it's impossible to find it again. Then we forget about it when a new sound arises and falls away. This is how the truth is concealed, moment-by-moment.

DJ: If that is the case, what's the real danger?

AS: Defilements,⁸ ignorance. Would the arahant⁹ be afraid of COVID?

⁷ Before the Buddha's time, there was no hearing of an explanation of Dhamma (of reality right now). So the listeners heard what was never heard before. [TN]

⁸ **Kilesa:** defilements, mind-defiling, unwholesome qualities. That which afflicts, that which stains, thus makes the mind unable to see things clearly (as they truly are). The three main defilements are greed, hate and delusion (or ignorance); the third being the one that supports the other two.

⁹ **Arahant:** a liberated one; one who has eradicated all of the defilements and therefore attained nibbāna. Defilements are eradicated and/or reduced stage by stage at each of the four levels of enlightenment: sotāpanna (footnote 31), sakadāgāmī, anāgāmī (footnote 32) and arahant.

DJ: From what I have read and listened to, he would not be afraid.

AS: The arahant has no defilements. He's not shaken by anything because he knows that there are specific causes for every result. If the cause exists and the conditions are complete for the result to arise, there's *no one* who can prevent it from arising. Whether it's gain or loss of wealth, death, or any kind of calamity, no one can stop it. When it's time for it to happen, it must happen.

DJ: In which way are these fears harmful?

AS: They are dangerous because we do not know that the truth, even now as we speak, is very deep. We can only know the depth of the truth to the extent of our understanding. As understanding at the level of listening and considering develops to the level of direct understanding of realities, the truth becomes more profound than we could have imagined previously.¹⁰ The depth and subtlety of the Dhamma (the teachings of the Buddha) cannot be overestimated.

Wrongly viewing realities as self –viewing absolutely everything that arises as a self– is dangerous. However, this truth –that there is in reality no self– can be understood.

All things, without exception, are anattā,¹¹ not attā.¹² Fire or wind (temperature or motion)¹³ depend on conditions for their arising. Whether we experience heat or cold, sweetness, saltiness, excitement or happiness, if there are conditions for their arising, they will arise. If the conditions are absent, they will not arise. We have no idea that everything that has arisen and ceased is not-a-self. As soon as it arises, it disappears, never to return. From now until we pass away from this life, there is nothing but the incessant arising and falling away of dhammas.¹⁴ Nothing remains. Every instant is completely gone. The fact is that from the time we were born there

¹⁰ The more one understands, the more one is aware of how little understanding there is, i.e., how much ignorance one has. [TN]

¹¹ **Anattā:** not-a-self, no fundamental entity; impersonality; uncontrollability. The anattā doctrine teaches that neither within the physical or mental phenomena of existence (nāma-rūpa), nor outside of them, can be found anything that in the ultimate sense could be regarded as a self-existing real ego-entity, soul, or any other abiding substance.

¹² **Attā:** self, ego, personality, is in Buddhism a mere conventional expression and no designation for anything really existing. This applies also to material phenomena, like when regarding a “table” as having an abiding essence of “tableness”. Soul; substance; essence.

¹³ **The Four Great Elements** (mahā-bhūta-rūpa) have to arise together with each and every group of rupas, no matter whether these are of the body or materiality outside. The types of rupa other than the four Great Elements depend on these four rupas and cannot arise without them. They are the following rupas: the Element of Earth or solidity, the Element of Water or cohesion, the Element of Fire or heat and the Element of Wind or motion.

¹⁴ **Dhammas** (realities) bear characteristics which can be directly known, unlike concepts which can only be thought about. They are divided into those realities which can experience an object (**nāma:** mentality) and those realities which cannot experience anything (**rūpa:** materiality).

has been no “person” and when we die nothing is left, just as at each moment the reality that arises falls away immediately, never to return.

Yesterday does not last until today.
Just now does not last until now.

We cannot know the Buddha without understanding the correct meaning of not-a-self. Listening to a single word or phrase is not enough. For example, the words “all dhammas are anattā,” (sabbe dhammā anattā) are well known and often repeated. However, we don’t recognize that understanding these words can lead to freedom from all harm

Everything that exists is not-a-self. If kusala and akusala deeds arise by causes and conditions and their results also arise by causes and conditions, where is the self? If there was a self that could control, we wouldn’t have to die; but absolutely everyone has to die. So where does that self go when we die?

DJ: Can we regard as real what is existing now?

AS: If there is no arising, can anything exist?

DJ: No.

AS: Therefore, something only exists when it arises, is that right?

DJ: Yes, indeed.

AS: As soon as we are born there is immediate clinging to that which is born, by taking it as a self. The first moment of life¹⁵ arises and then has to cease. Once that moment has ceased, unknown, where is it?

DJ: That moment of consciousness (citta)¹⁶ is not the same as the present one?

¹⁵ **Paṭisandhi-citta:** “first moment of life” or first moment of consciousness; birth or rebirth linking consciousness.

¹⁶ **Citta:** consciousness, the reality that knows or is conscious of an object. Citta is defined in three ways: as agent, as instrument, and as an activity. As the agent, citta is that which cognizes an object. As the instrument it is that by means of which the accompanying mental factors (cetasikas) cognize the object. As an activity it is the process of cognizing the object. The third definition, in terms of sheer activity, is regarded as the most adequate: that is, citta is fundamentally an activity or process of cognizing or knowing an object. It is not an agent or instrument possessing actual being in itself apart from the activity of cognizing. The definitions in terms of agent and instrument are proposed to refute the wrong view of those who hold that a permanent self is the agent or instrument of cognition. It is not a self that performs the act of cognition, but citta. This citta is nothing other than the act of cognizing, and that act is necessarily impermanent, marked by rise and fall. Each citta must have its object of knowing. The citta which sees (seeing-consciousness) has what is visible as its object, etc.

AS: Not at all. Citta is extremely short. Also referred to as “moment of consciousness”, citta is a reality that arises and cognizes the object that appears; it then falls away immediately to be followed by the arising of the next citta. For example, seeing consciousness (seeing), the citta that knows visible object, arises and then falls away immediately. The Buddha had to develop the perfections¹⁷ for a very long time before realizing the Noble Truths.¹⁸ He explained saṅkhāra-dhamma as realities that are conditioned and therefore must arise and then fall away:

“All conditioned realities (saṅkhāra-dhammas) are impermanent,
all conditioned realities are dukkha¹⁹
and all realities (dhammas) are anattā”.

There are no exceptions regarding anattā (not-a-self). Everything that exists (both conditioned and unconditioned) is not-a-self.

Everything that arises definitely has to cease. Is there anything left at all? No. For example, if hardness appears and is followed by seeing, where is the hardness? It has fallen away, never to return. If hardness appears again, it is not the same hardness that has just fallen away.

DJ: I’ve never seen it that way before.

AS: Yes, that’s right, we don’t see it. We have to listen to the teachings until we understand that everything that exists, each one, is a reality (dhamma). I didn’t say that each thing that exists is a self, I said that it was a reality, right? We cling to both mentality (knowing, seeing, remembering, etc.) and materiality (visible object, solidity, etc.) as “me” or “mine”; but how can they be “self” when we have no control over them?

I don’t want to feel pain, so why are *my* knees hurting now, right? Where is “mine”? A moment ago that which was taken as belonging to a self didn’t hurt, and now, where does the pain come from? It has again become “a self is in pain” or “I am in

There is not any citta without an object. *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma: The Abhidhammattha Sangaha*, by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

¹⁷ **Pāramī:** perfection. Ten qualities leading to Buddhahood: (1) perfection in giving, (2) morality, (3) renunciation, (4) wisdom, (5) energy, (6) patience or forbearance, (7) truthfulness, (8) resolution, (9) loving-kindness, (10) equanimity. These qualities were developed and brought to maturity by the Bodhisatta (the Buddha-to-be) in his past existences.

¹⁸ **The Four Noble Truths** (ariya-sacca): suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the way leading to the end of suffering.

¹⁹ **Dukkha:** suffering or unsatisfactoriness. On the ordinary level this means obvious suffering such as physical pain. On the deepest level, “dukkha” refers to the unstable, changing nature of all mental and physical phenomena, even the most pleasurable.

pain". Once gone, to where did the pain that I called "mine" disappear? All that we claim as "mine" is completely gone. We say that the moment of seeing now is self, "I see". As soon as there's no more seeing, where is the self that was seeing a moment ago? This is very subtle. When listening to the teachings, we should know that they are very detailed and profound. When we understand them there is gradually less anxiety. This is because understanding is a condition for performing kusala deeds that will bring about kusala, not akusala, results.

DJ: At the moment we are in pain –or happy, afraid or angry–, regardless of what emotion appears, we feel that the pain or emotion is real. So, how can we deal with this?

AS: Even before dealing with the pain, it's already "I am in pain", right?

DJ: Yes.

AS: If pain does not arise, can there be "me" in pain?

DJ: No.

AS: Right. So you're probably not in pain all the time, correct?

DJ: But for instance, when I have a toothache, well, it hurts all over and also for a long time...

AS: We think that, but actually the pain has already arisen and fallen away repeatedly, many times, arising-and-ceasing on and on, making it appear to last and not change. Is it possible for the tooth to still be hurting? Of course it is, if there are appropriate conditions. After the dentist extracts the tooth though, does it still hurt? When pain arises we don't know that in fact no one made it arise; it arose by conditions. Yet, as soon as the pain arises there's the (idea of a) self in pain, "I am in pain".

We remember this and that story, unaware that remembering is not-a-self. Without remembering, there would be no "I remember"; as soon as there is remembering, we take it as "I remember". On account of avijjā (ignorance) we cling to everything as "I". If we really understand reality, we know that each moment an object appears shows us that the object is real, it has to arise, there is no one to make it arise and, once arisen, it has to fall away. It's impossible to estimate how extremely quickly this happens because it's like a flash of light that appears to be shining continuously, all the time. After each moment of consciousness (citta) ceases, another arises immediately, in continuous succession. As the ceasing of the previous citta does not

appear, ignorance deceives us into seeing shape and form –thus taking it for “something” or “someone”.²⁰

Please close your eyes. Is anything there?

DJ: I don't see anything.

AS: Open your eyes...

DJ: Now I see.

AS: What do you see? What can be seen is only that which appears through the eye, i.e., visible object. We think we see a person, a flower, or a tree, but we are

²⁰ **Guhatthaka-suttaniddeso: Upon the Tip of a Needle**

Life, personhood, pleasure and pain
— This is all that's bound together
In a single mental event
— A moment that quickly takes place.

Even the spirits who endure
For eighty-four thousand aeons
— Even these do not live the same
For any two moments of mind.

What ceases for one who is dead,
Or for one who's still standing here,
Are all just the same aggregates
— Gone, never to connect again.

The states which are vanishing now,
And those which will vanish some day,
Have characteristics no different
Than those which have vanished before.

With no production there's no birth;
With becoming present, one lives.
When grasped with the highest meaning,
The world is dead when the mind stops.

There's no hoarding what has vanished,
No piling up for the future;
Those who have been born are standing
Like a seed upon a needle.

The vanishing of all these states
That have become is not welcome,
Though dissolving phenomena stand
Uncombined from primordial time.

From the unseen, [states] come and go,
Glimpsed only as they're passing by;
Like lightning flashing in the sky
— They arise and then pass away.

Translated from the Pali by Andrew Olendzki (2005), Access to Insight.

actually thinking of a concept formed up from the visible object, memory and other factors. Whatever the object, whatever the concept, we remember it. As soon as we close our eyes, none of these things are there anymore –*no one* can make them appear. We do not know that what was seen just before closing our eyes has already fallen away, never to return. When opening our eyes again something completely new is seen, not the same as before. It is a new moment, not the one before. *Life exists in only one moment*; it continues to arise and cease, moment after moment.

Three types of death were shown by the Buddha:

1. *Khaṇika-maraṇa* is momentary death. *Khaṇika* is derived from the word *khaṇa* (moment, instant); *khaṇika-maraṇa*, means dying every moment. What appeared just now has already ceased, never to return again no matter what. The arising and ceasing happens so quickly that no one can see it, so it seems as if what appeared was there all the time.

2. *Sammatti-maraṇa* is what is conventionally assumed to be death at the end of a lifetime, usually followed by cremation or burial. *Sammatti* means the termination of life –but not the final end– because when death occurs, there is rebirth immediately into the next life. Who could know this other than the Buddha? He explained in the finest detail the nature of citta (consciousness) which arises and ceases in continuous succession: how each moment is different, how it arises; what it is composed of. There are many diverse conditions. At this moment now a citta arises and ceases, similar to dying, but it is just this moment. The next moment another citta arises. Cittas arise and fall away in succession, one after another. This is momentary death (*khaṇika-maraṇa*), whereas *sammatti-maraṇa* is death at the end of a lifetime.

And 3. *Samuccheda-maraṇa* is parinibbāna, the death of arahants, those no longer subject to further birth. If arahants continued in the round of death and rebirth, the Buddha would continue to be reborn but he no longer exists in any way. All sāvakas (listeners, therefore disciples) who were arahants *parinibbāned* after the falling away of the last moment of consciousness of their current life and were not reborn again. For all other beings who still have defilements there are conditions for immediate rebirth after the last moment of life.

The Buddha has explained all of this but we don't understand because we hold to the idea that *a self is born, persists and then dies*.

We're unaware that *this life is the previous life of the next life*. As soon as we reach the next life there's no recollection of who we were and what we used to do because

now we are a new “individuality”. We don’t know who our parents, siblings and friends were in our previous existence, what we used to do, how we had fun, etc. We remain this “person” for only as long as this life lasts. As soon as we die, this individuality ceases to exist. It is impossible to find it again in saṃsāra.²¹

DJ: Can the arahant know that what we take as *continuity* is just one moment at a time?

AS: Defilements can only be eradicated if sacca-dhamma, the Four Noble Truths, has been realized. No matter how much we listen or understand, if the intrinsic nature of dhammas (*sabhāva*) hasn’t been fully realized, the defilements cannot be eradicated. There are many levels of defilements, from coarse, which are very evident, to medium and, finally, the fine type which are dormant in the citta and do not appear. No one knows the difference between a sleeping arahant and a sleeping thief. In each case there’s no activity at all, but the quality of the consciousness (citta) of the arahant is different from that of the thief.

The truth proclaimed by the Buddha can be verified now. Why would one person get COVID-19 and another not? Can one choose?

DJ: No, no one can choose.

AS: Right. This clearly shows anattā: there is nothing under the power of anyone’s control. That’s why anattā means not-a-self, empty of self. There are only dhammas arising and ceasing, changing all the time throughout each lifespan. It is like the Jātaka tales²² which tell of several births of the Blessed One before his Enlightenment.

DJ: Achan Sujin, what truth were you talking about when you said that we don’t know the truth?

AS: What is real at this moment? Is seeing real?

DJ: Seeing?

AS: Is it real? Is there seeing right now or not?

DJ: I’m seeing now...

²¹ **Saṃsāra:** the round of death and [re]birth, perpetual wandering; coming and going again and again, faring on, circulation; lit., “wandering-on”. The continuous process of ever again and again being born, growing old, getting sick and dying.

²² Tales of the Buddha’s former births.

AS: Yes. Therefore, seeing must have arisen. If you had no eyes, could you see?

DJ: With no eyes there'd be no seeing.

AS: If there were eyes but no object impinging on them, would you be able to see that object?

DJ: I wouldn't.

AS: Therefore, you only see the objects which impinge on your eyes, correct?

DJ: Right, when the conditions are not complete, there's no seeing.

AS: There are no eyes in the arm, so the seeing cannot happen there. Visible object impinges only on the eye-sense. For seeing to occur there must be eye-sense and that which can and actually does impinge on it.

DJ: Can we touch what we see?

AS: When you touch it, what do you touch?

DJ: I touch the object that I see.

AS: It's hard, right?

DJ: There's solidity or hardness there.

AS: Right. Can you touch what is appearing through the eye right now?

DJ: Touch what is appearing through the eye...? No, I can't.

AS: You see, now we've separated these two realities. What can be seen is not the same as what can be touched. What appears through the eye-door arises along with solidity, but it's not solidity. If the elements of solidity (hardness/softness), temperature (heat/cold), cohesion²³ and motion (movement/pressure),²⁴ are absent,

²³ The element of water or cohesion cannot be experienced through the bodysense, only through the mind-door. When we touch what we call water, it is only solidity, temperature or motion which can be experienced through the body-sense, not cohesion. Cohesion has to arise together with whatever kind of materiality arises. It makes the other rupas it accompanies cohere so that they do not become scattered. [Nina van Gorkom]

²⁴ We may believe that we can see motion of objects but the rupa which is motion cannot be seen. What we mean by motion as we express it in conventional language is not the same as the element of

an object could not impinge on the eye.²⁵ These four elements arise in a group of eight inseparable material realities (rūpas) that also includes colour (visible object),²⁶ odour, flavour and nutriment. Colour, not the element of solidity, impinges on the eye-sense and causes seeing (seeing-consciousness) to arise. The intrinsic nature of seeing is the experiencing of visible object. Seeing sees and then falls away immediately; its only function is to see; it cannot think or do anything else; it has been conditioned by kamma to arise and see. Kamma, along with other conditions, causes sense-consciousness to arise; hence it is because of past kamma that there must be seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or touching. We have eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body-sense only for the purpose of receiving the results of past kamma.

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DJ: If so, does the hardness that I touched exist?

AS: If it was touched, without a doubt it has to be hardness or, if not, it has to be softness, heat, cold, pressure or motion, right? Touching a balloon and touching water are different. When touching water, is there cold or heat? Softness or hardness? Pressure or motion? These are realities that can be directly experienced. From the different experiences and memory we assume that it is what we call water.

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wind or motion. We can conclude that something has moved because there are different moments of seeing and thinking, and there is association of these different experiences, but that is not the experience of the rupa which is motion. This rupa can be directly experienced through the body-sense. When we touch a body or an object which has a certain resilience, the characteristic of motion or pressure may present itself. It is, for example, a condition for the movement of the limbs of the body. It plays its specific role in the strengthening of the body so that it does not collapse, and assumes different postures; it is a condition for the stretching and bending of the limbs. [Nina van Gorkom]

²⁵ **The Eight Inseparable Rūpas:** Rūpas (materiality or physical phenomena) always arise in groups, kalāpa, and the four Great Elements of solidity, cohesion, temperature and motion are always present wherever there is materiality. Apart from these four elements there are other rūpas, namely twentyfour “derived rūpas” (upādā rūpas). The derived rūpas cannot arise without the four Great Elements, they are dependent on them. Four among the derived rūpas always arise together with the four Great Elements in every group of rūpas and are thus present wherever materiality occurs, no matter whether rūpas of the body or materiality outside the body. These four rūpas are visible-object (or colour), odour, flavour, nutrition. The four Great elements and these four derived rūpas, which always arise together, are called the “inseparable rūpas” (avinibbhoga rūpas). Wherever solidity arises, there also has to be cohesion, temperature, motion, colour, odour, flavour and nutritive essence. Visible object has as its proximate cause the four Great Elements because it cannot arise without them.

²⁶ Colour is light or visible object.

²⁷ Said in a different way, when there’s still kamma, the senses are indispensable for such kamma to come into fruition, i.e., without them vipāka (the result of kamma or volitional action) would not be able to arise. I added this footnote because I think this point is important especially for those -like me- looking for a purpose/meaning in life. [TN]

²⁸ When touching a balloon, the tangible-object experienced is not the same as when touching water. This is why even a blind person knows the difference and thinks about different objects afterwards. Each softness is different, each experience of heat or cold is different. Or like now, the hardness of my computer is different from the hardness of my leg or the table. Each one is hardness, but we

We need to be firm and honest with ourselves about what is appearing. Only then can we gradually understand that the object appearing through the eye is not solidity, but that it arises with solidity in a group of eight inseparable material realities. The colour (visible object) that impinges on the eye cannot be separated from solidity. The flower is solid, the chair is solid, the newspaper is solid. Yet, solidity does not impinge on the eye. Colour arises with solidity but only colour impinges on the eye. Colour is not solidity but it arises with solidity (paṭhavi dhatu or element of earth) in every group (kalāpa) because colour and solidity are inseparable material phenomena.

The Buddha explained momentary life, life moment-by-moment, in great detail. He broke it down until we can see that what we call life is just the arising and falling away of momentary realities. Realities or dhammas are “that which is real”. The Blessed One awakened to this truth, hence the phrase “Awakened to Dhamma”. We too can awaken to Dhamma.

DJ: I understand only part of what you have explained. I have the feeling, though, that it is very complex and subtle. What can we do in order to really understand this?

AS: Now you’re getting to know the Buddha, right? His true words describe what is real. Who can talk about reality in such great detail? We have discussed only a few words, yet the Buddha preached for 45 years. Each word is very profound. Let’s consider the word “dhamma.” It means that which is real. Absolutely everything real is dhamma.²⁹ There are many different realities, each with different characteristics.

The Accomplished Fully-Enlightened One awakened to the truth of all realities and their characteristics. Take the reality of seeing as an example. No one can touch seeing. It arises to know visible object, but it cannot know anything else. It knows the object appearing right now –only that object– and then it passes away never to return again. Seeing only sees, it cannot do anything else. Then as soon as hearing arises there is no more seeing. Hearing hears only the sound that is impinging on the ear at that very moment, not any other sound, and then it falls away.

Here the Buddha is showing us how dhammas are not-a-self, not a being or a person. All dhammas are anattā, not under anyone's control. We think we have some control over COVID-19 and that we can prevent it. However, we do not understand the realities that actually exist. For example, pain is the result of

assume each one is "a computer" or "a leg" or "a table" because of different experiences and memory which lead to different kinds of thinking about various objects. [Sarah Abbott's note].

²⁹ The emphasis on “real” is to show that “person”, “tree”, “house”, etc. are concepts, not realities. [TN]

previous akusala deeds. Some who get the virus suffer great pain while others barely suffer at all. It depends on conditions whether one gets the disease and how severely. That is the *anattaness* of dhammas - we have no control over the results of kamma (volitional action).

If one is deaf, or blind (from birth), one cannot understand anything of what is being talked about. One-by-one, world-by-world, all five sense worlds (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching) and the sixth world, the world of thinking, become blended into a fused world of images, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. This causes us to think that “people” and “things” really exist. The Buddha explained the intrinsic nature of consciousness (that which knows) and its great variety of functions. Memory, for example, is a reality. It exists and arises with every moment of consciousness, but it is not-a-self (a “me” or a “mine”). Without experiencing what appears through the five senses would there be anything to remember? If there were no seeing, for example, or hearing, could there be memory of what was seen or heard? If there were no sense experiences there would be nothing to remember.

When we understand, we know that this is the story of every life. It is true for all births in the never-ending round of birth-and-death (*saṃsāra-vaṭṭa*)³⁰ where dhammas are mistakenly taken for a self –when in reality there is *no one*.

DJ: I would like to give an example of a recent experience. It's about a friend who had a disappointing love relationship. The person he loved deeply no longer loves him and doesn't want to be with him any more. My friend is suffering a lot. He is deeply saddened, so upset that he feels that other things no longer have meaning. How can we help people in this situation understand or move beyond their suffering?

AS: If your friend had never seen this person could he have fallen in love?

DJ: No. If he had never seen this person, that attachment would never have arisen.

AS: But attachment has arisen because of seeing, right?

DJ: Yes, right.

AS: He doesn't know that seeing has passed away. He loves an object that is completely gone but due to ignorance, he believes that the object still exists. Ignorance is the cause for his attachment. Attachment is one reality; it is real and it

³⁰ **Vatṭa:** “rolling on”, the “round” of existences, cycle of transmigrations.

exists. Who has none? The stream-enterer³¹ and the non-returner³² still have attachment. Only the arahant, one who has attained the highest level of understanding, has completely eradicated attachment.

Defilements can only be extinguished by understanding what causes them. It is not a matter of what we can or should do. It is ignorance that does not know the cause of defilements –be they conceit, self-love or the desire to end all suffering. If the causes are not eradicated there will be results. If we understand that dhammas are not-a-self, then we know that there will be attachment as long as the arising and falling away of phenomena do not appear.

The understanding of the stream-enterer has penetrated the arising and falling away of phenomena, but wisdom at that level does not let go of attachment. So even then, it is impossible for the stream-enterer to abandon all the love, attachments, wanting and clinging that have been accumulated through an incalculably long period of time.

We've learned that before his enlightenment the Buddha was a Bodhisatta (Buddha-to-be) for a very long time. The ascetic Sumedha (a previous life of Gotama Buddha) received a prophecy from Dīpaṃkara Buddha³³ that in four innumerable³⁴ and 100,000 aeons³⁵ he would be awakened to the truth that we are discussing now and become a Buddha.

The Four Noble Truths need to be realized by direct experience. As long as there is no realization of the Noble Truth of Suffering, namely, that all things are nothing but the arising-and-ceasing of realities, there will be bondage. No matter how much we listen, without this realization, we will continue to see things as permanent. How can we tell people not to be attached when they don't know the truth about reality?

DJ: Impossible to do anything.

AS: If we don't start to understand today, when will we start? No one who has understood the Buddha's teachings has ever said that they are neither difficult nor

³¹ **Sotāpanna:** Stream-enterer. One who has entered the stream of the Path. A person who has abandoned the first three of the fetters (personality belief, skeptical doubt and attachment to rule and ritual) that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth and has thus entered the "stream" flowing inexorably to nibbana, ensuring that one will be reborn at most only seven more times, and only into human or higher realms.

³² **Anāgāmi:** Non-returner. A person who has abandoned the five lower fetters that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth, and who after death will appear in one of the Brahma worlds called the Pure Abodes, there to attain nibbāna, never again to return to this world.

³³ **Dīpaṃkara** was a Buddha who reached enlightenment eons prior to Gautama Buddha, the historical Buddha. Dīpaṃkara is one of numerous previous Buddhas, while Gautama was the most recent, and Maitreya will be the next Buddha in the future.

³⁴ **Asaṅkheyya:** incalculable or immense periods of time.

³⁵ **Kappa:** a world cycle, an aeon, an inconceivably long space of time.

profound. This is the reason the Buddha-to-be developed the perfections up until the time he reached Buddhahood. The kindness of each word of the teachings lets us understand what otherwise would be in total darkness.

During the Buddha's time people penetrated the Noble Truths and many became arahants. If they didn't reach that level they became non-returners, once-returners or stream-enterers. There were also virtuous common people (*kalyāna-puthujjana*), who, even though they still had defilements, had the accumulations³⁶ of kusala to understand the Dhamma that would eventually lead them to the end of all defilements.

The Buddha's teachings are still alive. However, to reach what you would like your friend to do, that is, to go beyond suffering and be free from love and attachment, requires the development of wisdom or understanding up to the level of the non-returner.

Visākhā Migāramāta, considered to have been the foremost lay disciple in generosity, became a stream-enterer at a very early age. She went on to marry and have a large family with many children and grandchildren. Defilements cannot be eradicated all at once. Wrong view of self, which arises together with ignorance, must be eradicated first. Then understanding has to develop on and on to gradually let go of the rest of defilements.

We can be pleased with things that we know are not real, for instance artificial diamonds or pearls. Sometimes they look so real that it is hard not to like them. Even though one knows that they're fake, one is still very fond of them. It is similar to penetrating the Noble Truths in that there are an incalculable number of defilements accumulated from the past that cannot be relinquished all at once. Putting an end to suffering due to love or attachment, or any other defilement, has to be in accordance with one's level of understanding. The best way to help others is by supporting them in gradually understanding the truth.

³⁶ **Accumulations**, referred to as natural decisive support condition (*pakatupanissaya paccaya*): Kusala and akusala cittas arise and fall away, but the wholesome or unwholesome inclinations are not lost, they are accumulated and passed on to the next and succeeding cittas. Kusala and akusala performed often can become habitual and condition the arising of kusala or akusala later on. For example, having listened to the Dhamma in the past can condition interest in the Dhamma in the future.

There are latent tendencies, *anusayas*, lying dormant in each citta, also in kusala citta, these are: clinging to sense objects, aversion, wrong view, doubt, conceit, clinging to existence, and ignorance. These do not arise but they can condition the arising of akusala citta at any moment. They are eradicated stage by stage at the different stages of enlightenment. Only the arahant has no more latent tendencies. [Nina van Gorkom]

If we want to be free of suffering or understand reality, but not yet be *extinguished*, that is, not yet end the perpetual cycle of death and rebirth, it is beneficial to know what is real and understand kusala and akusala. This helps all of us to live in a wholesome way without bringing harm to ourselves and others. Without akusala we live more comfortably in the world. If disease breaks out or other difficulties occur a stable mind is not moved and we can help each other and improve things for everyone regardless of the circumstances.

DJ: How can we help those who are suffering open their hearts and minds and listen to this?

AS: We must speak with them to find out whether they have accumulations to see the value of just one word of the Dhamma. Some people will not listen at all, as if it were worthless or a waste of time. First of all, people need to know what is kusala and what is akusala and have confidence that there is a way to reduce the continuous accumulation of akusala, a way to stop harming oneself and others. They need to listen to reason. Actually, if we start to teach children from a young age, they can begin to understand, little by little. This is very different from just learning about the Noble Truths through books, which results in knowing little more than words and names.

DJ: Is it possible that the teachers also don't understand?

AS: Of course, because if we understand correctly every word recorded in the Three Baskets,³⁷ the Buddha's words and the reality appearing right now will be the same.

DJ: The harm that we should really fear, or the fear that we can overcome, is ignorance, right?

AS: Definitely, because if there is ignorance or wrong view, such wrong understanding destroys the truth.

Excuse me, may I address the subject of meditation centers? I don't know whether Mr. Banchorn is comfortable with this?

DJ: Yes, please go ahead.

AS: In the teachings of the Buddha, nowhere do we find him admonishing anyone to go to a place to sit for hours, or lie down, or stand. To understand what? How long

³⁷ **The Three Baskets** or **Ti-piṭaka**, are the 3 divisions (or "Baskets") of the Buddhist Canon, namely, the Suttas or Basket of Discourses, the Vinaya or Basket of Discipline, and the Abhidhamma or Basket of Higher Teaching.

did the Buddha cultivate the perfections before his enlightenment? Four innumerable and 100,000 aeons before the birth of the recluse Gotama, the Buddha Dipamkara predicted that the ascetic Sumedha would penetrate the Noble Truths to become a Perfectly Enlightened One by the name Gotama Buddha. The townsfolk rejoiced when they heard this. They knew that even if they were not able to realize the truth in the time of Buddha Dīpaṃkara, there would be an opportunity in the time of Gotama Buddha. The ascetic Sumedha had yet to live through countless lifetimes over an incalculable period of time during which he would meet 24 different Buddhas. Nonetheless, the townsfolk could wait .

On the other hand, people today understand nothing; they go to a place where they do as they are told; they practice something they don't understand; they don't listen to or consider the teachings - all of this, while full of hope and expectation, but no understanding.

When we ask those who have practiced meditation what they have gotten from the practice, those who know nothing (about Buddhism), say they feel good. Those who have listened to or read the teachings are full of expectations, like being able to realize the rising-and-falling away of phenomena, eradicate defilements, understand realities and so on. Whatever their background, when they listen or read they don't understand correctly. Where do you have to go to understand the reality that is arising-and-falling away *right now*? One need not go anywhere because understanding has to be about this moment, now. Understanding is not about doing anything or going anywhere. "Doing" or "going" indicates wrong view, a lack of understanding of anattā (not-a-self).

This is different, isn't it?

In order to recognize who is a Buddhist, we should start by knowing that the word "buddha", meaning "paññā" (wisdom or understanding), implies that the Buddha is the "wise one." If there is no paññā to know what is real and understand what the Buddha taught, can one be a Buddhist?

This is where we have to be sincere in accepting corrections to our understanding of the truth. Otherwise, we do things in ignorance, which results in more ignorance and brings all kinds of harm.

DJ: In that case, going to practice, to sit in meditation cannot be considered as the beginning of learning about Buddhism, right?

AS: What are meditation centers? Once there, what do you do?

DJ: You go to sit.

AS: Why sit? We are sitting now.

DJ: To follow what's been taught.

AS: Taught by whom?

DJ: The meditation teacher.

AS: Who is the meditation teacher?

DJ: That's hard to answer.

AS: See? We go with ignorance and the result is more ignorance.

DJ: Due to our ignorance, we accept whoever teaches meditation as a knowledgeable person.

AS: Then what did the Accomplished Fully-Enlightened One teach?

DJ: Without studying his teachings we come to our own conclusions.

AS: So is it wrong to make up our own understanding without studying the profound words of the Buddha?

DJ: If we don't study the Buddha's words, our own understanding cannot be considered Buddhism.

AS: Of course. Those who go to meditation centres listen to whose words? The Buddha never told anyone to go sit, stand, abstain from sleeping or lying down or anything like that. There used to be a vipassanā teacher, Mr. Thawanrat, who stopped teaching because he gradually understood the truth and realized that what he had taught was entirely wrong. When he didn't know what to do he taught his students to pull weeds. How can that lead to any understanding?

DJ: What can be understood by pulling weeds?

AS: Well, that's it exactly. He taught that because of his ignorance –but he was a vipassanā teacher with many credentials.

DJ: If so, where can we get to know the Buddha's words?

AS: The teachings are set out thoroughly in the Three Baskets, that is, the Vinaya, the Suttanta and the Abhidhamma, each fully consistent with the other. They talk about things which are true for all times and ages – they’re true right now.

DJ: This means we need to study the Three Baskets?

AS: Certainly. “The Dhamma is subtle, profound and hard to see.” These are the words spoken by the Buddha upon his enlightenment, his awakening to the truth. Do we ever consider these words? The story of the Buddha’s moment of reflection³⁸ tells of the Buddha’s disinclination to teach at first because the Dhamma is so profound and difficult to understand. However, he saw that there were people who could understand and decided to accept Brahma’s invitation to teach.

DJ: This is very subtle and hard to understand. How can we start and from where could this understanding come?

AS: Mr. Banchorn, have you ever heard the word “pāramī (perfections)”?

DJ: Yes, I have.

AS: Then what does it mean? We have not thought at all about the deep meaning of each word. See? *Pāra* means shore, *pāramī* means reaching the other shore. This shore is full of defilements that are accumulated as latent tendencies and carried in each moment of consciousness. They are a condition for further defilements to arise, thereby increasing their tendency. These latent tendencies are carried until they are relinquished upon enlightenment. It is only then that the other shore is reached, the shore where there are no defilements.

How long will this take? All of the perfections have to be developed. Without the perfections, that is, without listening to Dhamma, understanding, diligence, truthfulness, sincerity, resolution and firm confidence to know the truth, how can there be cessation of suffering?

Go to a meditation centre to do what? Where are the words of the Perfectly Enlightened One? Did he teach about the perfections? How long had he cultivated them before his enlightenment? Even his foremost disciples cultivated the perfections. So do people nowadays understand even one word? Regardless, they encourage each other to go to meditation centres.

³⁸ ["Ayacana Sutta: The Request" \(SN 6.1\)](#)

Is this harmful or not? It is not just this pandemic that is harmful; it can eventually be overcome. What is actually harmful is ignorance. How can that disappear? If there is no appreciation of the kindness of the Buddha, ignorance continues to accumulate. The Buddha cultivated the perfections necessary to become The Perfectly Enlightened One. He did it for those who are able to understand the Dhamma, but cannot do it by themselves.

DJ: Is there any danger or threat to the Buddha's teachings?

AS: Yes, there is.

DJ: What is it?

AS: Wrong View.

DJ: How so?

AS: Thinking that the Buddha's teachings are easy and thinking that there is no need to study. Have you ever heard this?

DJ: No need to study?

AS: The Buddha's teachings are extraordinarily deep. One must study. You see? This is already different. Why do people not study? Study means considering every word carefully, understanding that each word represents a reality that appears now. Instead of studying they try to figure out the teachings by themselves. Can their understanding possibly be equivalent to the Buddha's understanding? They cannot answer questions, even about the meaning of a single word. What is dhamma? What is ariya-sacca? Ariya-sacca is also dhamma. Everything without exception is dhamma. Dhammas consists of *kusala* dhamma (wholesome realities), *akusala* dhamma (unwholesome realities) and *avyākata* dhamma (indeterminate, neither wholesome nor unwholesome, realities). At a Thai funeral we normally hear, "*Kusalā dhammā, akusalā dhammā, avyākatā dhammā*". But... who listens? Who understands? Who knows? And then goes to a meditation center...?³⁹

³⁹ There's no awareness that going to a meditation centre reflects ignorance of the fact that there is no self. It also shows that the person going to a meditation centre has not correctly studied or considered the teachings of the Buddha. This results in holding the wrong view that there is "someone" who can practice and obtain craved-for results for that "someone". Understanding begins with questioning who it is that listens, understands and knows. Why go to a special place? Isn't there reality now? It appears that some think that reality is somewhere else therefore it's necessary to go look for it –maybe at a meditation centre. All activities and exercises called "practice" or "meditation" emanate from an unseen idea of self. The outcome will certainly be the development and accumulation of more greed and ignorance, because the idea of self is reinforced even more. This is

Do those who teach meditation really think they can rid people of defilements? The Buddha taught day and night for 45 years, longer than anyone else. Even far into the night devas⁴⁰ came to the Buddha and asked questions. Had the Buddha not become enlightened and taught like this we wouldn't have the opportunity to listen, not to a single word.

Regardless of what anyone thinks, all conditioned realities (saṅkhāra-dhammas) are impermanent, all conditioned realities are suffering and all realities (dhammas) are not-a-self. Can you see how the terms change? The first two aspects, impermanence and suffering, refer to conditioned phenomena, but the third aspect, "all dhammas are not-a-self" makes no exclusions. This is because "dhamma" means everything that is real, regardless of being conditioned (saṅkhāra or saṅkhata)⁴¹ or unconditioned (visaṅkhāra).⁴²

From his great compassion the Buddha taught the subtleties of the Dhamma in minute detail. He knew that people had accumulated ignorance throughout aeons of endless death and rebirth. Not knowing the difference between kusala and akusala is dangerous because it leads to committing all kinds of evil deeds. It is impossible to overcome this danger without understanding reality. Without understanding what is true, can one be a good or morally skillful person? Can one refrain from evil?

DJ: In the final analysis, what would be the ultimate consequence of the current crisis in Buddhism?

"Buddhism" or "Buddhist Dispensation" means the words of the Perfectly Enlightened One. The danger is the destruction of the teachings that occurs when people do not study them with respect. Only a person with high regard for the teachings and great attention to detail can study properly. We have to consider all of the teachings, word by word, to see that their meaning is consistent in all Three Baskets. An example is the phrase "all things that are real are dhamma". Some say that there are still things that are self (attā). How can this be so when the teachings are clear and consistent that all dhammas, without exception, are not-a-self? The truth has to be examined to know what is correct.

Can anyone command or be in control of their anger, attachment, wrong actions or seeing? We are hearing now, can we stop it? If we think that we can stop hearing at

why Achan Sujin states emphatically that "meditation centre" and "destruction of the Buddha's teachings" are synonymous. [TN]

⁴⁰ **Deva:** originally "belonging to the sky". A god, a divine being; usually in plural, *devā*, the gods.

⁴¹ **Sankhata:** put together, compound; conditioned, produced by a combination of causes, "created".

Asankhata not put together, not proceeding from a cause; epithet of **nibbāna**, the Unconditioned.

⁴² **Visankhāra:** [vi+sankhāra] divestment of all material things = nibbāna, i.e., unconditioned reality.

will, then we don't understand the nature of not-a-self, the *anattanness* of all things. Dhammas only arise when there are appropriate causes and conditions. If there are no suitable conditions, they cannot arise. If the conditions are suitable, they have to arise. If there is no eye, is there anything we can do in order to see?

DJ: No, there's nothing we can do.

AS: Without a cause for the eye-base to arise, no one, not even a miracle maker, can make it arise. The eye-base is matter. Matter (materiality) is a reality that does not know anything. It is called *rūpa-dhamma*. Like all dhammas, *rūpas* arise by conditions. They are conditioned by either kamma, citta, temperature or nutriment. Nutriment causes living creatures to be sustained by the ingestion of food. There are other kinds of nutriment as well.⁴³

DJ: Achan Sujin, your answer seems complete and comprehensible. Ignorance and wrong view cause harm to arise. Therefore we need to study the Dhamma in its entirety.

AS: We need to study the Dhamma with respect and help each other to uphold the teachings. It is very rare in *saṃsara* to have the opportunity to listen to the teachings. Once the teachings are lost, they will be gone for a long, long time. Listening to them is the most precious thing in life. Meditation centres, or study with people who teach something other than what the Buddha taught, leads to the destruction of the teachings. Is this dangerous?

DJ: Yes, it is.

AS: There's nothing more dangerous than ignorance. Everyone wants something. We want happiness and ease but we do not know the right causes for these results. We want to know how to protect ourselves from illnesses occurring around the world. If the illness is something that has arisen from temperature (*utu*), it can be treated. There are many scientific and medical developments that can help. What cannot be treated are the results of kamma. If it is bad kamma, no matter how much you try, the results cannot be good.

DJ: If it is good kamma then the result will be good.

⁴³ "The laws of nutriment govern both biological and mental life, and this fact was expressed by the Buddha when speaking of four kinds of nutriment: edible food, sense-impressions, volitions, and consciousness. It is hunger that stands behind the entire process of nutrition, wielding its whip relentlessly. The body, from birth to death, craves ceaselessly for material food; and mind hungers as eagerly for its own kind of nourishment, for ever new sense-impressions and for an ever expanding universe of ideas." [The Four Nutriments of Life: An Anthology of Buddhist Texts](#)

AS: No one can stop good results. We can see that results can be varied and diverse, even in the same person. All aspects of being – facial features, looks, knowledge, rank, prestige– are unique to each person.

The teachings are intricate and subtle. One moment of citta arises and falls away completely, never to return. What was seen, what was known, what was thought about, and other conditioning factors come together to bring about the arising of the next citta immediately following the ceasing of the previous one. The falling away of the present citta always causes the immediate arising of the subsequent citta, on and on.⁴⁴

There are an endless number of worldly disciplines, but the depth and subtlety of the Dhamma is infinitely more profound. Still, we don't study it. Over time the Dhamma will cease to exist if we don't preserve it with respect. We must be honest with ourselves about whether our understanding of the truth of the words proclaimed by the Blessed One is correct. No one in the entire universe can know as much. There can only be one Perfectly Enlightened One at a time.

DJ: Well done! Sadhu! Once again, a discussion with Achan has given me more insights and ideas to consider through careful study – ideas like the need to study the Dhamma, all Three Baskets, with respect and consideration.⁴⁵

AS: In the end, everyone has to pass from this world, whether from the current virus that has become a pandemic or something else. The only beneficial things we take to the next life are the accumulation of goodness and right understanding. Even when we have the opportunity to listen to and study the Dhamma, we are often so absorbed in fears –serious or inconsequential– that we waste the opportunity. We do not fear ignorance, though. Compared to other fears, how much more frightening is ignorance?

⁴⁴ In these sentences several conditions or conditioning factors (*paccaya*) are summarized together. Each citta experiences an object, either a sense object (e.g. sound) or a mental object (e.g. thought); the object conditions citta by object-condition (*ārammaṇa-paccaya*). Cittas succeed one another without any interval; the citta that has just fallen away conditions the succeeding citta by way of proximity-condition (*anantara-paccaya*). There are also, among others, contiguity condition (*samanantara-paccaya*); volition condition (*kamma-paccaya*), where intentions in the past cause the vipāka citta to arise to cognize an object; natural decisive support condition (*upanissaya-paccaya*).

[TN]

⁴⁵ Achan Sujin has said that right understanding has to be in accordance with all Three Baskets. It appears that DJ Banchorn might have misunderstood it as meaning that one must study the Three Baskets completely. Study does not mean just book learning, because what the Buddha speaks about is understanding of what is *real*, which is what is happening *right now*. [TN]

Intellectual understanding is not the direct awareness of the reality which appears, but it is a condition for it. There's no one who can make awareness arise. If this is not understood then it will be *someone who does something* and this goes against the teachings. This is the subtlety of the teachings. [Alan Weller]

DJ: True indeed, ignorance is more frightening. I haven't heard anyone talk about the fear of ignorance like you have.

AS: We have no fear of ignorance because we are ignorant of its harm.

DJ: People have so many fears much of the time, like fear of darkness, ghosts, poverty, pain, death—but I've never heard anyone talk about fear of ignorance.

AS: Indeed. Can one be free from harm when one is ignorant?

DJ: Impossible.

AS: People do not see the value of right understanding and the harm of ignorance. Studying the Dhamma brings about understanding and knowledge that is beneficial for both oneself and others. How much benefit?

DJ: Every kind of benefit.

AS: Benefit both for oneself and for others.

DJ: Which means for everyone.

AS: If everyone could see the value of understanding and the harm of ignorance, the benefits would be immense.

DJ: Finally, Achan Sujin, what do you say to Buddhists?

AS: Be sincere. The word “buddha” means “wise person”. The Buddha taught so that we can understand what we could not on our own. A Buddhist is one who knows what the Buddha taught. Each word must be studied carefully and thoroughly. Each of the Three Baskets must be fully understood in accordance with the other two.

People today think that because the times have changed, it's alright for a bhikkhu⁴⁶ to accept money, even though this is contrary to the discipline set out for those who have given up the household life. How could it be right to go back to receiving and handling money after having discarded the pleasures and joys of the householder?

⁴⁶ **Bhikkhu:** Buddhist monk.

Ordination means giving up everything. If the Vinaya is correctly studied and understood, it will be clear that the purpose of ordination is the cleansing of defilements. Understanding the harm of ignorance that is the root of all defilements gradually leads to less akusala and the eradication of all defilements. Those who understood this were called *sāvakas* (listeners or disciples). The Buddha called them children born of his heart. With his wisdom and knowledge the Buddha showed others the benefits of renouncing the householder's life to study Dhamma and cultivate the understanding that cleanses defilements.

The life of the ordained is not suitable for everyone though, because householders do not have the accumulations for that life; they can, however, understand the Dhamma and become stream-enterers, like the physician *Jīvaka Komārabhacca*. During the Buddha's time numerous lay people became noble disciples while still living a householder's life. They were able to understand reality and attain up to the level of non-returners. If they realized arahantship they could no longer live a home life and abandoned that life to be ordained. The saffron robe indicates ordination and is symbolic of the ordained person who is an arahant. *Bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*⁴⁷ who were not arahants studied in order to cleanse the defilements. Lay people study⁴⁸ for the same reason, depending on their accumulated tendencies, disposition and conditions.

If we profess to be Buddhists, our understanding needs to be in accordance with the Buddha's awakening. Through his great compassion the Buddha taught the Dhamma so that we can begin to know the profound subtlety of reality. While there is still understanding, the teachings will be maintained and may continue not only for this era but for as long as they endure for the benefit of oneself, others and the world. Unfortunately, if no one studies them, the teachings will dwindle and eventually disappear.

DJ: Achan Sujin, our deepest thanks and appreciation for this opportunity.

AS: Yes, thank you.

DJ: Thank you!

⁴⁷ **Bhikkhuni:** Buddhist nun.

⁴⁸ This footnote is to remind us one more time that study is not just book knowledge, but it is investigation of the reality arising-and-falling away right now. Study is a means, not an end. The kind of study we are talking about, right study, is done with the understanding that there is actually *no self* who can study. Studying, investigating and understanding "for the self" is wrong study. [TN]