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Buddha-Bush

Seeing Dhamma in Nature

Bhikkhu Khantipalo

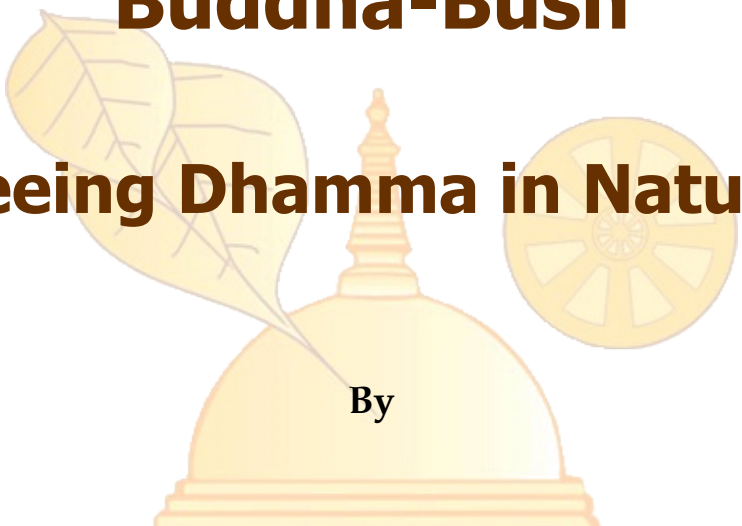


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By

Bhikkhu Khantipalo

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A Few Words Explained

Dhamma: Law, Path or Way, righteousness, virtue, moral precepts, states of mind, conditioned events, and the Unconditioned Element (Nibbāna).

Deva: god, deity, a divine being so born according to the kamma made, but impermanent as all other beings.

Dukkha: pain, anguish, what is unsatisfactory, whether gross suffering or subtle.

Kamma: intentional action originating in mind and manifesting through speech and body actions, either wholesome or unwholesome, and having the potential results respectively of happiness and suffering.

Wat: a Buddhist monastery.

Buddha–Bush: Seeing Dhamma in Nature

On Living on the Edge

H

ow easy it is to be complacent, how hard to feel all the time that this world is the edge! Complacency is helped by the way things are arranged: in cities, neat orderly houses in rows with neat gardens in front and neat curtains in the windows. But why is it arranged like this? This is what satisfies most peoples' craving for security. It looks secure, so it must be secure. Behind that facade of orderliness though, there is always the jungle. A garden illustrates this very well: take a neatly trimmed lawn with orderly rose beds and let it do its own thing for a month, a year, twenty years. You know what happens—it starts by looking overgrown, then weedy, and then the forest reasserts itself and within fifty years there will be tall trees which bear no signs of human order. Houses are like that too: without attention they decay and fall down. Bodies are like that too, they do the same. And the mind, if not looked after, soon becomes a jungle of greed, hatred and delusion.

As this is so, should we not remind ourselves of the nature of this world? If we live in a relatively well-ordered city (though they're going out of gear more and more), shouldn't we remind ourselves: "It doesn't last! Not permanent? Unsure! Insecure!" If we don't

do this then we just settle down and become more complacent. And though decay, disease and death are threatening all the time we pretend that they don't concern us. We can take it easy and enjoy the security of our well-ordered lives. Don't be fooled by it!

Living in the country can open one's eyes to the disorder and to the chanciness of this life. Though there is a kind of order in plants and animals, it is based on "strongest grows, weakest dies" and the web of supporting conditions, any part of which can disappear leading to starvation and death. Human life, too, depends on such a web and only one link has to go for life to be disrupted. Look into that and get rid of complacency!

Here in Australia the bush emphasises how precarious existence is. The countless eucalyptus trees all around, the many kinds of "gum" trees that so typify this country, have leaves full of volatile oils. So do a lot of the bushes that grow under them. Then if one chooses to live in the seclusion of the bush, one chooses too a very high fire risk. Actually such fire is necessary for the regeneration of Australian forests but it often leads to the death of humans. The gums all sprout again and the rest of the bush shoots up from underground tubers or regenerates from seed, but human beings and their buildings can't do that.

Maybe you say: “It’s crazy to live in such a place. It’s not safe!” But then the question is: “Where is a safe place?” Knowing insecurity and practising Dhamma every day, one is reminded of disease, decay and death, which leads to true security: that of the mind which can’t be shaken by the worldly conditions. And how is it possible to make the unstable eight conditions of the world [1] sure and unchanging? Look at the uncertainty, live on the edge and don’t be afraid of it.

Book-heads

Sometimes they come here—book-heads—they know it all, every Buddhist book.

They say that they want to practise meditation but all they do is display their theories. What trouble! Here it is quiet, with wind in the gums and cicadas at their never-ending song, teaching Dhamma all the time. Rocks worn away and split apart and the bush that grows between, teach even more silently, but book-heads can’t see that. They’re full of yānas and vādas (yes, and *ekayāna* [2] too!) *so that there is no room for Dhamma. How heavy their heads must be with all that load of books and words but they don’t put it down. Not even for a moment.*

Bright and Beautiful Plus Dark and Ugly

People who visit often say: “Oh, what a wonderfully beautiful place you have here.” And that is true because this valley with its surrounding rocky hills all covered with trees is very beautiful. There are our groves of smooth-barked apple with incredibly twisted limbs and trunks which vary from smooth silver-grey to pure apricot and all shades between. Very beautiful, yes. But then we ask, “Why see only one side? Why see only the beautiful?” All so beautiful, but all so terrible too. The beauty of the trees is subject to the hunger of termites and borers, fungus and old age. The insects, birds, wallabies, and wombats all live on other living beings or plants. Living means eating; eating means killing. If these beings are not looking for their next meal—and they usually are—they are about to become the next meal of another. You say it is nature? Then one must recognize that nature is not only bright and beautiful but also dark and ugly. And of course this body, too, is subject to both sides, youth and old age, health and disease, life and death. Admiring the beauty of the Wat—and elsewhere—has a disadvantage, that is of attachment, clinging and craving. Looking also at the other side where there is decay, disease and death has a great advantage—dispassion grows and one can let

go easily.

Tenacity

All these plants around here, such as the felted flannel-flower, cling tenaciously to cracks in the rocks. People say: “How tenacious they are!” thereby praising them. But think a minute about tenacity in everyday life, how it depends on desires and how its outcome is possessiveness leading to avarice, the need to guard, and so to weapons and fighting, and you will see tenacity in a different light. Just as generations of flannel-flowers have clung tenaciously—but with a hard battle for existence—to the rocks and sandy cracks, so people cling and will not let go. But what should one let go of? Some people want to let go of even good things before they have ever practised them. “Oh, I have renounced my attachment to meditation so I don’t have to practise it now.” Such lofty virtue! Giving up what one has not got—who cannot do that! But the letting go of evil, unwholesome mental states and the speech and body actions that they give rise to, that is difficult. Be tenacious in Dhamma but let go of what is not Dhamma.

Spinners

In the early morning when mist fills the valley and the dew has been heavy, the ground, grass, bushes and trees are covered in pearl-sprinkled nets of silk of innumerable kinds. What precision and what marvellous energy to produce it all in a single night. Nets of death, nets of destruction! One must look, too, at the other side. They are only for catching breakfast. And the beautiful beasts who have created them—spiders are two million or so to the acre—have poison to paralyze their victims and then dissolve out their innards and suck them dry. Well now, that's a different picture! And it gets worse if you look into it. Female spiders are usually larger than the males and some even eat their mates in the sexual embrace. Gruesome indeed, but that's how the spider-world keeps going. So what should one do? Just look at the beauty of the spider webs (and perhaps marvel at the supposed creator's plan) or see the grim struggle for life which lies behind the veneer of the mind's imposed concepts of beauty? If one knows thoroughly the terror and fear which pervades animal life, and intrudes into human exigency quite frequently, one will give up such notions as "creator" and "divine plan" and awake in oneself great compassion for all living beings so afflicted by diverse sufferings.

Impermanence

Crack ... crump! On a perfectly still day, a huge tree or a large limb has come down. Wood weakened by fire, eaten by white ants, and down it comes, unexpectedly. So too, in this life the major events of impermanence cannot be predicted and the unexpected can always happen. If one goes around with one's life nicely planned out, or just complacent with the flow of pleasures, how shocking these things can be. You have to be aware of impermanence all the time, otherwise there is bound to be *dukkha*.

Ants

Imagine yourself ant-size, though even they come very big and very small. You are busily looking for something dead or dying to clear up and take back to the nest. Suddenly the earth beneath you shakes, sudden shade falls and an enormous object lands just near you. It seems to tower to the sky. You stagger back in fear, blind fear of being crushed but it is already gone and the earth-tremors subside. How can ants, even granting them enough intelligence, conceive of human beings—they are too big. They can be known only as fearful intrusions into the ceaseless business of the ant world. This might lead humans to think that perhaps there could be beings so vast in proportions and different in form that they cannot

conceive of them. And there are of course. And how small then are humans and their works!

Control

Human cities give the impression that we can control everything: switches turn on electricity, gas-taps release gas. The grass in the gardens has tidy edges and the municipal trees are regularly pruned. And then the starter (usually) starts the car's motor (and how irritated we get if it doesn't), while trains and buses run to schedule (unless affected by increasingly frequent strikes). So by and large we are in control—aren't we? But come to a place like this where there are hundreds of acres of bush in every direction. It is not under any human control at all. It does its own thing with no reference to human beings. No doubt this is why some people cannot bear to live in such a place. Obviously, a human being is not on top of it all here. A person can fit in by adaptation, otherwise there are two possible courses: go back to the well-controlled city which is not fearful, or chop down all the trees and make some fields—human order in all this natural disorder. Then he's in control again, isn't he? But look again. Even in the safest cities how can the floods of decay, disease and death be completely controlled? Who can even pretend to control death?

And everywhere the four great elements, earth, water, fire and air, how much can they be controlled? The exterior ones every now and again let humanity know that they are not controlled at all, as in earthquakes, floods, bushfires and high winds. These four are what this body is made of too ...

Birds

We have them in all sizes and varieties with an amazing range of calls. Even on the stillest cold winter night there is an occasional harsh owl-screech or the repetitious "mopoke" echoing. At other times there are always plenty of bird noises. Watch one for a while. The little head darts this way and that, even when there is no food involved. Well certainly it is looking for food, endlessly, until death. But what else? It looks for enemies. It is frightened, full of fear. Even when humans do nothing to cause fear, as here in the Wat, the birds' heads turn ceaselessly and though there is no danger, off they fly. Fear rules the animal world even more nakedly than it does the human.

Enlightened Kookaburras [3]

He laughs long and loud, again and again,
What does he laugh at on this grey day?

An abundance of lizards gone down his throat?
It cannot be so with this cold and rain.
Perhaps he laughs making light of troubles,
Sure he has plenty though quite simple ones,
Not the complications of human beings though.
Their greeds and their hatreds, elaborate evasions,
Curious and contorted self-justifications.
Is he laughing since rid of this heavy burden.
Or just out of habit hoping the rain's stopped?
In the last analysis his laughing is man-made,
A mind-made overlay, just interpretations,
Surely a thing he might well laugh at!
Trees aren't troublesome,
Grevilleas just grow themselves;
She-oaks sigh and sough
But humanity means hassles.
Whoever heard of a lazy lambertia?
When did a wattle ever tell a lie?
And gums though twisted never distort things
But humans though straight are twisted inside.
Ferns don't intrude, they grace small spaces.
They aren't conceited or opinionated;
Humans how different with cravings
and hates. But trees just aren't troublesome.

Undertakers

They are the world-wide firm dressed in sober hues and fully experienced in the clean and proper disposal of bodies for several tens of millions of years—but humans aren't allowed to use these very natural undertakers. So, not at all deterred by this loss of business, they go about the animal world where they undertake to dispose of all bodies, big and small, very efficiently. They can do so because they are so much more ubiquitous than the human variety—and, by contrast, they do it for free! Do you know who they are?

Night Silence

The moon, nearly full, shines from a hazy sky through the twisted maze of branches. Though a summer night, yet it is so quiet, perhaps an odd "gloop" by a frog, a little cicada sound sometimes, occasionally the screech of an owl, or more rarely the weird scream of a possum. So quiet that if you just stand still and look at it all, or close your eyes and listen, there is the intense ringing soundlessness all around, and it goes on and on. Then comes the reflection: "What marvellous good *kamma* has been made to be able to live like this, in such a place conducive to Dhamma-practice?" How one then appreciates the worth of the Dhamma which has led to this solitude in the bush. This solitude

which can be enjoyed and used, while so many come here to savour the taste of the Dhamma in these peaceful surroundings.

Nature, Mother or Murderer?

When you look at it closely you wonder. Romantics call nature a mother but then they do not care to look closely. Hindus with their imagery of black-tongued, blood-drinking, skull-bedecked Mother Kali (the Black One) really have an image closer to reality but then that raises all sorts of quite unsolvable problems. If she is a mother, why create such a bloody mess as nature; surely her creation should evince a mother's compassion? But she is bloody and ravening ... It will be better not to label nature with any sex-tag, for a stem father-God is hardly a more reassuring figure! It all just happens according to *kamma* which produces the innumerable variety of births. And since most of them that we can know about are without any great distinction regarding intelligence, they are the result of unwholesome *kamma* —they live in a world of endless conflicts. Listen to these impressive words of the Buddha:

“What is dark kamma with dark ripening? Here someone produces (kammic) bodily, verbal and mental processes (bound up) with affliction. [4]

By doing so, that person reappears in a world of affliction. When that happens, afflicting contacts [5] touch that person. Being touched by these, one feels afflicting feelings entirely painful as in the case of beings in hell. Thus a being's reappearance is due to a being (in the past); one reappears (is reborn) owing to the karmas one has performed. When one reappears, contacts touch one. Thus I say are beings heirs of their karmas. This is called dark ripening." [6]

As the Buddha said, more beings are reborn this way than in the good destinies, such as human birth. It's no good saying: "I've a human soul now and can't descend to animal birth"—how comforting if it were so! If a human being is no longer up to human level regarding conduct—and some humans do worse things than animals, then why should there be no possibility for animal birth? And the animals, footless, two-footed, four-footed or many-footed—they don't appreciate this forest as beautiful; for them it's a full-on struggle to keep alive. They would certainly not agree with the romantics' Mother Nature and be more inclined to agree with the Hindus' Mother Kālī—that is, if they could think such ideas. But they have no time for that. Food, mating and avoiding enemies

takes up all their time. Oh, the dukkha! Open your eyes to this and awake the great compassion for all these creatures trapped in the terrible round of existence.

So Easily Upset

Meaning this body. Of course most people's minds are that way too but that can be trained away with Dhamma. The body's fragility however was emphasized by a recent incident of snakebite. Though we have been here nearly three years there have been no cases of this until now. People are always told, "If you have mindfulness with your feet and loving-kindness in your heart you are unlikely to disturb snakes." And it worked well. Just for safety—as there are children running round—there are "snake-stations" with bandages in jars and splints to immobilize the affected limb, all marked by a smiling white serpent on a red ground who says "METTA." But a resident was bitten in long grass and did not even see the creature concerned. Anyway, as recommended, she put on a pressure bandage and lay down until discovered shortly afterwards. The hospital said it was a small bite perhaps by a small snake but it caused quite a bit of bodily pain. Only such a very little poison! And others were affected too

—the driver who rushed the sick lady to hospital, the ferryman who sped us across the river and the police car which preceded us and cleared the road. Just a little bit of poison to upset the body. How frail it is and how easily upset. Something to think about ...

In the Middle

“In the Middle” is the description of the Buddha’s Dhamma. It does not mean halfway compromises but refers to the fact that one practising Dhamma never goes to extremes—not emotionally, intellectually or in views, speech or actions. From this one can easily know that there are plenty of humans who have no idea of the Middle Way. And there must be a lot of devas who have never heard of it too, that is, if Buddhist tradition regarding their influence on weather is more accurate than the mere scientific patterns of physical change accepted by most people now. Capricious devas who go on holiday! So that Australia is gripped by a few years’ continuous drought, and who then return, carelessly directing colossal storms into the arid interior so that enormous floods ensue, lakes suddenly appear, rivers usually of sand fill with the roar of water and whatever crops and animals did not die of drought are swept away ... Even in the more temperate parts, the pattern can still

be one of droughts and floods, though more moderately. The creeks dry up and water is reduced to a trickle, as month follows month and the heavens hold only the bright sun and moon, no clouds. At last, when the garden is no longer cultivated for lack of water and there are talks of trucking in water for drinking (washing has long been done by "bucket bath"—one-bucket equals one bath—or even "cat-lick" passing a damp towel over the body), rain falls enough to stave off extremities but not to fill the creeks. And so it goes on until finally, in a gigantic storm lasting some days, so much water falls that the road is washed out, the ferryboats are carried downstream, trees and rocks block highways, people are cut off for days, and of course the creeks flow and there is enough water. Drought, according to the Buddha, has as one cause that human beings don't keep the Five Precepts ... well there are some of those! If this is combined with the capriciousness of weather deities, it might account for the lack of keeping in the middle as far as our climate is concerned. What to do about it? Convert the devas to Dhamma-practice? A big job with a rather unseen audience. Turn the humans in the direction of Dhamma? An even bigger job ...

Logorrhoea

They come with sad faces, strained, troubled, worried or anxious— all suffering from that common disease of the mind, logorrhoea. In case you don't recognize this word (though you know its body-relation, diarrhoea), it means a flow of words, the never-ending flow of words that goes on and on. Because of it there is madness, grief and remorse. Like other diseases, when it is not treated it becomes worse. So they come for the treatment, a meditation weekend or ten-day course so that the mad mind stops, or at least slows down. They get away from the causes of their sufferings—business worries, family strife, loss of what is dear, dissatisfaction with life generally or general ennui, and come to this very quiet and secluded place where they are up early in the morning to meditate, and continue to do so walking and sitting throughout the day. Twice a day they hear the Dhamma and afterwards there is ample time to ask questions and find out, "How does this apply to me?" Once a day they can go and ask the teachers questions in private. Between nine and ten each night, the days finish with loving-kindness meditation and then a lot of very tired meditators sleep very soundly. First and second days pass and usually a few are afflicted with 'second-day blues'— "I can't do it. It's too difficult!" But most of them stay. Then things start getting easier as the mind becomes gentler and more relaxed. The

logorrhoea is easing up. Even the country noises of birds and cicadas (and the occasional distant baby) no longer seem mountainous obstacles to concentration; in fact with growing loving-kindness towards all living beings the noises become a joyful part of meditation. And as that dread disease disappears, how happy faces become! Years and wrinkles disappear. Grimaces are replaced by smiles. So wonderful when logorrhoea stops! And if it stops for long periods of time so that there is just bright wordless awareness, then real rapture and bliss are experienced. People wonder then why they always thought that this disease was the normal state.

All for what?

This summer the raked area round the *sālā* (meditation hall) has seen an amazing invasion of thousands of low-flying flies. Their circling low over the ground has filled the *sālā* with a constant hum. They dig out holes in the sand and crawl in, perhaps to lay their eggs, and they roll about in tangled balls of bodies, indulging in some dipterous orgy. All this is the revered effort to keep the species going. And what does this mean? This means keeping the body going. While flies' minds have few concerns apart from this, human minds have more. But then, think about it. Isn't so

much of life just keeping this body going? There's "getting up, washing, dressing, eating, urinating and excreting, going to work ... for money for this body's clothes, shelter and medicines ... relaxation and enjoyment and finally lying down when this body is tired." It looks although most of this life can be spent, as flies spend their lives, concerned with the body. The Buddha calls it "to live following the body" (*kāyanvyatā*). No one thinks much about this because it is the common thing to do. And it is fairly satisfactory while the body works well ... but what happens when it doesn't? Suppose there is an accident, or the onset of old age, or of serious illness ... what then? One has lived "following the body" all the time and now it shows its impermanent nature. There are no resources in heart and mind to deal with this, for such materialists have never looked into themselves. The inside is dry and barren; there is no confidence in good Teachings, no loving-kindness, no insight into the transitoriness of everything. Faced with crises like these, such people grieve and lament; they become bitter and remorseful. Their lives may rise up before their eyes and with sorrow they think, "What was it all for? What purpose has it?" And if they are hardened cases, they may come up with the answer, "No purpose. It's just the blind drive of nature to keep going." So, hopelessly, they die. Just like the transient

flies, here today and gone a few days after. But why not look into this impermanence? For all life is about that, without any exception. Then one would not “live following the body” any more, nor lament when serious sufferings arose regarding the body. And of course, one would know what it was all about.

Conflict

Selfish desires produce it. More selfish desires, more conflict. You can see it everywhere, especially in the world of humans where desires are assiduously being cultivated by business interests so that one will buy more and increasingly complex things. Stir up the desires! And the ad-men know how to do it—quite easy because desire is an underlying tendency and just waits for arousing. But our desires conflict with those of others, so human society divides into more and more parties and factions, sects and groups, all at loggerheads with one another. Conflicts multiply from day to day and governments have a more and more difficult task to keep the peace between all these parties. Even in a peaceful place like Wat Buddha-Dhamma there are conflicts because this is the desire-world where all beings are beset by desires, not only humans. Our gardeners wanted to supply the kitchen with fresh vegetables and fruit grown without

poisonous sprays but the garden fence was low. Wallabies-hopped over, wombats dug under ... all to sample these various (to them) exotic tastes. They certainly desire to eat our vegetables. So, as the least harmful way of preventing this, the lay community built a high fence, wallaby-proof and buried rocks along it, only partly wombat-proof! The animals' desires conflicted with our desires—a simple case where our desires were not especially selfish and their desires could be limited without causing them harm.

Then there was another example: rats got into the new house. At first it was just one or two and no-one took much notice. But they invited all their relatives and multiplied at such a prodigious rate that there was never a time without a scurrying of rats. Holes appeared, and rat droppings. That house contains a large library of Buddhist books assembled over many years and the rats started to pay them some attention, not alas to their wisdom content but as food! One of the lay people then made a number of cage-type rat traps. But we found that it was against the law to take live rats (they are black rats and therefore classed as vermin) from one place to let them go elsewhere. At this point, the conflict arising from desires became acute! Let them stay in the house? Then we have to move out with all our things! Or they have to go! Their desires and ours were quite different and not

reconcilable. Our notice-boards inform people: “Buddhist Monastery. All living beings protected. No shooting or fishing.” But due to the law we could not keep to this completely. In this world it is sometimes so; one party may desire peace, yet the other will not agree to it. One should not be too idealistic about this world, where due to conflicting desires, there will never be complete and lasting peace. One just has to minimize one’s selfishness, and so minimize the conflicts. Everyone can do that.

Noise-Silence (1)

Once there was a rather mad, meditating architect who was bent on building a completely silent meditation centre. His idea, inherited from others, was that there must be no noise to disturb meditation, so he designed a meditation hall which would be soundproof. As it was airtight, too, this meant air-conditioning machinery would be necessary ... and this makes a noise. Apart from this, it was pointed out to him that though the centre was to be rurally located, there were such noise risks as tractors, milk-trucks and, if you can escape from all of these, there are birds. No, there were to be no bird-noises in the meditation hall! Fortunately, the place never even got started. It would have been a disaster! So much costly

building to isolate meditators from the world they have to live in and come to terms with. Here in the Wat it's different. It is true that we have no agricultural noises to contend with because we are isolated completely by miles of national park and crown land—all of it wild bush. But all that bush is full of living beings both day and night, all making their special noises. For example, Ten-Mile Hollow has a large and flourishing tribe of kookaburras which sound off many times at dawn and dusk and are liable to break into long cacophonies of "laughter" at any time between. The meditation hall is certainly not kookaburra-proof; in fact as its walls are vertical half-logs, there are necessarily plenty of spaces between them, apart from windows and doorway. This provides cooling breezes in summer but means that a few blankets are needed for winter. Even meditators can't have it just as they want it all the time! So, bird songs and screeches and all sorts of other noises drift into the hall. A good meditator just takes it in stride, notices it and lets it go. Or if concentration is even better, those noises are not even noticed. When it comes to the time for loving-kindness meditation then the presence of all those living beings "footless and two-footed, four-footed and many-footed" gives something else, apart from humans, to direct it towards. Because of this, living-beings nearby have no

fear of the meditation hall and its inhabitants. Only the other night, a portly wombat scratching around near the hall continued to do his thing though I was only ten feet from him. This is how it should be in world at large.

Noise-Silence (2)

Noise should not be thought of as a break in silence. Neither is silence an absence of noise. For even in the most silent of silences, there is still sound. Go into a dry cave and sit down: you can hear silence. Maybe it is the sound of molecules of air on the eardrums or perhaps it is just the sound of one's own hearing system. Just by going places, it can never be escaped from. But on the interior journey this subtle sound can be used as something to be aware of when outside noises fade away, and even "head-noises" have been stilled. As concentration improves, though, it is necessary to recognize this sound as impermanent, subject to variation, arising and passing away. It should not be clung to as "holy vibrations." Even that sound must be let go of. Then what is there?

Mindfulness

When bhikkhus or Buddhist monks walk on

almsround, they do it barefoot. One goes much more silently, and of course it emphasizes non-possession and renunciation. The other day, coming back from my alms-gathering, I was climbing to the brow of a hill, taking the shortcut back to my hut. It had been raining and blowing for several days and the ground was littered with dead twigs and branches, so it was necessary to be careful where the bare feet were placed. Suddenly, one of the grey smooth eucalypt branchlets looked different. Only three feet away, I stopped and gazed at it. Half a minute went by. Then the branch shot off into the grass at the side of the track. A young brown snake dozing in the sun. Quite poisonous. Good for mindfulness though!

Empire-building

We stake our claims. We make our fences. “Inside that belongs to me—I can do, more or less, what I like with it.” Though the human world may agree to respect our ownership, there are many non-humans who will not; they may have their own boundaries, and they may not recognize ours. And the more boundaries we put up, the larger our frontiers and the more extensive our possessions, the more we are forced to “defend” our empire. The words of the Buddha come to mind:

“Thus it is that dependent on feeling there is

craving, on this is dependent seeking, on this, gaining; on this, discriminative thought; on this, desire and passion; on this, tenacity; on this, possessiveness; on this, avarice; on this, guarding; and many evil, unwholesome things come into being such as resorting to sticks and weapons, quarrels, brawls, disputes, recriminations, malice and false speech—all this is dependent on guarding— thus these many evil, unwholesome things come into being.”

A case in point is our meditation hall. Even that has to be defended against the onslaught of various small beings. On the hottest summer days the stink-ants go mad. You can see them climbing everywhere with a remarkable frenzy. Now ants and meditators don't agree well. The former like movement and like to move unmoving bodies, while the latter prefer stillness. Because of this the brick pillars under the hall must be wrapped with lamp-oil soaked rags to deter the ants and even then they find cunning ways to get in. They do not at all recognize the human boundaries there, and think that mining meditators' sweat and flesh is quite legitimate.

But when autumn comes, the ants quieten down while the local black rat population gets busy. They like to make themselves a snug den before winter comes. Then meditation cushions are in danger of their contents being taken (and even the canopy above

the main Buddha-image is chewed). Human beings, rather aggressive animals on the whole, do not like any other species challenging their primacy—so do away with the rats, or whatever. But the trouble is not the rats; it is the empire-making which the Buddha calls “mine-making.” Whenever this body is regarded as “mine” there is trouble, particularly when it shows how it is not-mine by disease, decay and death. How much more when other “possessions” are so regarded. More possessions means more trouble—unless one changes the mine-making mind.

Obsessions

After the forenoon meal, the last in a Buddhist monk’s day, the alms bowl of grey is washed and then dried in the sun’s heat for a few minutes. In that time, or even before that while the meal is still on, the March flies come buzzing and settle on the warm grey iron. They feed on blood, yet they walk slowly and perhaps in a rather puzzled way over the iron’s hot surface, feeling it with their forelegs and trying vainly to insert their proboscis. They have quite an obsession with dark coloured things it seems. Could it be that they associate this colour with the gray fur of the local rock wallabies? Though a human being with plenty of blood sits nearby, they are not interested in him but

return again and again to the hard grey, bloodless iron. If we pity them for their ignorance, what shall we say of more intelligent humans who though they get no happiness, only frustration, out of obsessions, yet return to them again and again. And the worst of that is that the obsessions become stronger each time they are returned to. To use another illustration for this: when someone goes for a walk in the miles of bush around here, he will leave almost no trace. Only a very good tracker could say, "A person has been this way." The bushes close behind, the wiry grasses and sedges spring into place again. But suppose a person begins to go the same way every day. At first, there will be just a little trampling and flattening; later a path is made. And a track may appear there still later as bushes are slashed for human convenience. It may even become a road or a superhighway, given time and development. It is the same in the mind. There too, pathways can be worn ... habit patterns set up. And these also become wider and easier to use as they get more traffic. The Buddha cautions one not to make the pathways of greed, hatred and delusion stronger than they are already, for such mental paths are easy to fall into and they lead downwards to deterioration. The pathways of unwholesomeness can become obsessions, and then where do they lead but to misery?

Notes

1. Gain and loss, fame and infamy, praise and blame, happiness and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*). [\[Back\]](#)
2. *Yāna* = vehicle, *vāda* = way, *ekayāna* = one vehicle. [\[Back\]](#)
3. Kookaburra, a large and gregarious species of the kingfisher family, peculiar to Australia. Its “laughing” cacophony morning and night usually raises a smile. [\[Back\]](#)
4. Defiled kinds of *kamma* (rooted in greed, aversion, delusion) and expressed through body speech and mind. [\[Back\]](#)
5. Painful ‘touches’ through eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind. [\[Back\]](#)
6. Condensed from Ven. Nyanamoli's translation of the Dog-Duty Ascetic Discourse of Majjhima-nikāya (see *Middle Length Sayings* , 57). [\[Back\]](#)

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