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by

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Walking Dhutanga in Britain

The first three years of my life as a bhikkhu were spent largely in one monastery, or more accurately, in a hut (*kuti*) in one section of a monastery on the outskirts of a town in central Thailand. I had travelled widely, almost frantically, as a layman, and this had resulted in the kind of disenchantment with experiences that was a perfect incentive to get to the root of discontent: to meditate. I had no inclination to go anywhere even though I could come up with all kinds of grievances about the weather, the food, the noise, the insects, the teacher, and my mind. It was clear that there was no point in going anywhere carrying that discontent. Without its customary means of distraction, the mind dissolved into a flux of moods, memories and anguish at its own vacuousness, and the dumb-founding effect of confronting that left me with little interest in doing anything other than establishing some firm base and equilibrium. It was time to sit still.

One thing did come through the haze—occasionally on *pindapata* I would see bhikkhus wearing robes of a dull brown, robes that looked patched and heavy, strikingly different from the immaculate bright yellow

of the town bhikkhus. While the yellow-robed bhikkhus darted through the streets looking for almsfood, these strange bhikkhus walked slowly, with patient, downcast eyes, apparently indifferent to the fact that the alms offerings were running out. They seemed to have nowhere special to go and yet nowhere worth lingering either. They evoked in me a feeling of nobility, and a mixture of sadness that there was no refuge in the world, and joy that men could walk with such gentle composure, clearly conscious of that raw truth. When I asked my teacher about them, he said they were *tudong* monks.

Tudong is the Thai form of *dhutanga*, meaning literally "means of shaking off," i.e. the practises that emphasise renunciation, and it can refer to the thirteen *dhutanga* austerities, or to the forest bhikkhus who live observing all or some of these and other renunciate practises, or more narrowly, to the custom of walking for weeks, months, or even years on end with just a bowl containing spare robes and essentials such as a razor, sewing equipment, matches, a water kettle, and a glot—a large umbrella with mosquito-net which acts as a tent. Mostly *dhutanga* walks are undertaken by bhikkhus of the forest monasteries when they are considered stable enough and well grounded in the Vinaya discipline. You have to learn to live simply to go *tudong*, and to handle yourself with skill in the face

of such difficulties as not finding almsfood, disease, and bad weather. Moreover, for a foreigner there are the problems of language and custom, and as a meditator outside the shelter of the teacher, doubts about one's practise and one's purity. I could see quite clearly that it would be enormously strengthening to walk through that lot and keep on going, and its flavour and appearance very much fitted those ideals of homelessness and simplicity that had led me to take ordination. However, my basic practise was attendance on the teacher, and giving up to the situation of the monastery seemed to give me enough to work on, so I stayed put and let things take their natural course.

A few years later at Chithurst in England the subject of *tudong* would occasionally crop up again. Sometimes, when we were sitting around Ajahn Sumedho in his room in a convivial mood, someone's conviviality would overflow into fantasies of *tudong* in Britain, walking along the Downs … and when could we go? … all of which was given short shrift by the Ajahn. This was not the time for restless bhikkhus to go off fulfilling personal ambitions; needless to say, we all gladly surrendered to that wisdom.

But times change. When it is no longer an overflow of fantasy and restlessness; when it is appropriate to the Sangha and the Buddhist community; when, like

many things in the training, what needs to be done and what you want to do merge, best, perhaps, when it doesn't matter any more—then you can go.

In spring of '82 we received a terse postcard from Ven. Viradhammo, then resident at Harnham Vihara. It was posted from Lindisfarne, where he was on part of a brief *dhutanga* tour. Accompanied by a lay supporter, he had walked for eight days over fell and moor, sleeping in lambing sheds and receiving food in the homes of various of the layman's friends en route. It was a small but significant beginning—you can keep warm enough, you can sleep rough, you can get fed. When Ajahn Sumedho subsequently invited me to spend the Vassa at Golden Square (near Honiton) in Devon, and consented to my returning on foot for the Kathina in October, I got more advice from Ven. Viradhammo on footwear, rainwear, and eating: "Try to get some breakfast before you begin to walk, otherwise you turn to jelly after a couple of hours." … To which he added, "But don't just do it the way I did; I'd like to see how you do it."

By the end of the Vassa, making my intentions known, I had accumulated three tents, three backpacks, a series of Ordinance Survey maps of the 140 mile route, a camping stove and cooking pot, canteens, foot lotions, and invitations to stop in several houses on the way. I had about two weeks to get back

to the *Kathina,* a beautiful stretch of country ahead, the experience of a few long-distance walks to measure things by, and the company of an anagarika who made excellent tea. It couldn't go wrong; there was nothing perilous or even arduous about it, and witnessing the way that it had all come together—with invitations and loans of equipment that involved many people—it seemed that the practise that the walk was about was not a personal trial but the opportunity to share merit. It was a way to bring an example of the spiritual life to those who don't live near a monastery. I dedicated the walk to all practitioners of the Dhamma, especially to Ajahn Chah, who had given so much of himself and now lay seriously ill in a Bangkok hospital. The dedication fitted very well. I noticed on long walks how one would feel compelled to get to where one was going, walk too fast, be insensitive to and overtax the body. This is typical of all self-conscious endeavour. Putting the walk into the perspective of fulfilling a religious function for other people's well-being, "for the benefit of the many-folk" as it says in the Canon, gave me the space to not have to prove myself, to resist the temptation to turn it into a personal epic, and to be content to take one step at a time.

Rather than having the convenience of a backpack, I decided to carry my equipment in two bowl bags, one

over each shoulder, which was more awkward but did allow me to wear the bhikkhu's outer robe, an important sign. I also decided to go on a route that allowed contact with people, and to keep equipment and supplies minimal so that people could offer help and take part in that way. After some ascetic longings, I finally succumbed to carrying a one man tent, a sleeping bag, a pair of treck shoes and my bowl, a change of undergarments, a toothbrush and some first aid; also a rain poncho and groundsheet (which doubled as a waterproof lower robe). I eventually walked most of the way in a pair of light-weight wellies I'd brought with me, preferring to use everyday equipment to specialised gear.

Anagarika Tony carried his clothing, sleeping bag and blanket, the small stove and pot, things for hot drinks and an old ice-cream container filled with about 4lbs of muesli. The final touch was a small *rupa*(statuette) from the shrine at Golden Square that Douglas, our host, had given us with some incense.

We set out at 10 a.m. on October 2nd as we did on every subsequent morning after chanting the names and virtues of the Twenty-Eight Buddhas as a protection and blessing for our hosts. We walked in silent single file about ten metres apart, along the river valley through Axminster and on the back lanes around the lower rim of Marshwood Vale to

Charmouth, where Richard and Anne Bancroft had invited us for the night. It took about seven hours, but we rested in a couple of breaks for two and a half hours. We were wet, my feet were blistered and the heel was coming off my boot, but there was ease in the heart from a day of being attuned to silent mindful walking. Whatever the changes in the next two weeks, that pattern remained the same.

And of course, the royal welcome. The lovely thing about the mendicant life is that your presence is a mirror that allows people to recognise their own goodness with a charity that is joyous and caring rather than burdensome. Throughout the journey, people we stayed with ushered us into hot baths, offered to wash clothes, gave us a meal and often gave Tony some food to take with us. Sometimes we would meditate together or talk Dhamma, but it was always clear that it was all right to sit quietly or rest.

The second day we turned back inland from the cliffs of the Dorset coast through twisting lanes and deep mud slopes on a hot morning. With the changeable English weather, choice of clothing had a skill to it. My basic clothing was light summer wear—a t-shirt, lower robe, and *angsa* (a light shirt), with a blanket thick *sanghati*, or upper robe, to be used when the weather was chilly, as a blanket or pillow and for proper appearance in towns. The initial feeling one

has on wearing a robe is that it is a hindrance to free movement, but in this situation it came into its own as I watched Tony continually changing sweaters, jackets, thin and thick trousers and having to carry all his spare clothing. We passed through Bridport with scarcely a catcall, before we went up onto the downs to the north and east, and stopped to ask for water in the one-street stone village of Loders. This met with an invitation to drink tea, pull our boots off and sit for a while. Meeting people, the relationship is so clean. They know what your life means and that you're not hiding or expecting something from them. That gives people the chance to be honest without fear of reproach or the need to impress. You share in someone else's life for an hour, say goodbye and nothing is left but a genuine smile and that openness —"Oh, yes, go up on to Eggardon Hill, the view is really beautiful"—and it certainly was, looking back west over Marshwood Vale and the hills lounging into Devon.

The wind was cold up on that ridge: a lone Roman road and open land. We found a spinney and spent our first night in the tent. Two men in a one-man tent makes for mindfulness of small movements. You have to operate the body like a complex machine, one joint of a limb at a time—roll on left side, draw up right arm, uncurl fingers, reach gently for matches. You

don't sleep very much, and in the darkness of early morning, getting up and getting dressed is an exercise in concentration. We would begin about 3 a.m. and be drinking black tea by 4 a.m. A small night-light, the *rupa* set on top of my alms bowl and a stick of incense made the shrine for the morning's sitting practise, or if it was too wet outside, reclining in the lion posture. There would be a couple of hours before dawn, and as the mind composed, I would reflect *metta* to everyone who had helped me on the spiritual path—it was a colossal list. When the night receded, we would chant the "Twenty Eight Buddhas", eat breakfast, pack up and move on.

Jane Browne was driving Sisters Sundara and Candasiri back from Cornwall on the next day: they had said that they'd look out for us on the road into Dorchester. Sure enough, late in the morning, an aged Volvo steamed past with a flash of smiles and flapping white robes, and ploughed to a halt on the verge. There were a few moments in which everyone adjusted their joy to the appropriate greetings and set to the practicalities of finding the right place to eat Sundara's birthday picnic. Tony and I bundled into the back and the car settled down on its springs and obediently rolled off to the north—Cerne Abbas, Minterne Magna, and a manor house where Candasiri's uncle and aunt lived. It was strange for

them, but they were good-hearted and took our oddness well; in fact Candasiri's cousin invited the two of us to stay at his farm for the night while he went out. "Make yourselves at home," he said and left us his house. In the morning he waved Tony into the kitchen "Help yourself to food"—and went off to chase a runaway cow. He said he knew all about monks, as the friars of Hillfield lived only a mile away.

It was a long walk from there across Dorset, south-east to Bere Regis and Waltham Forest, with just one short break in a country churchyard. It was sunny and the leaves were turning red and rattled in the breeze. The Hardy monument stood over to the west, dwindling as the day went by, and a rainstorm swept over just catching us in a peripheral shower. In the evening we nestled in some pine woods, built a fire, sat and stretched out, feet throbbing, and allowed the rhythm of walking to fade out into meditation and sleep. We spent the next day walking across the forest and camped early to rest and restore physical energy.

Despite the physical effort and fatigue, the walking was very energising for the mind. Most nights, I would sleep lightly for about four hours, whereas Tony dozed rather than slept because of feeling cold. The rhythm of the day had no stress, no tension that needed to be resolved, and although we hardly spoke,

it was a very easy and natural silence, as we applied ourselves to walking, sitting, eating, and putting up and packing the tent. Watching the mind in the day within the framework of the walking, ancient memories would unravel and dissolve—a sure sign that there was nothing much getting stuck in the mind by the day's activities.

About halfway home, on the sixth and seventh days, we stayed with Mary, a friend of the Sangha living in Poole. Walking through the town, our "mirror" picked up the usual reflections—shouts of "Hare Krishna", "Skinhead!", and genuine inquiries and offers of help from complete strangers. In the centre of town a policeman pulled up in his van, looked me in the eye and asked—"Had we come far? Where had we been at ten o'clock that morning?" He explained in a level manner that someone had been shoplifting in the Arndale Centre and the description exactly fitted me! Tony and I looked at each other and laughed—alms bowl, tent, robes and shaven bead—what are shoplifters getting up to these days? He didn't pursue the investigation, asked a few polite questions about the monastery and let us go on our way.

Spending that evening and all the next day in Poole allowed time for some interesting Dhamma discussion with a few Buddhists and like-minded people whom Mary had invited around. Spiritual company is a

blessing, and with all our best wishes we left the little *rupa*— a plump and smiling Chinese figure-squatting on the mantelpiece among spiritual paintings and statuettes bowed in prayer, as a reminder of the companionship of the Refuge. The next morning we left for the New Forest, and as a concession to preference, took a ride in Mary's car through Bournemouth and its urban districts for about eight miles to allow more time for walking in the open country. This made possible an unhurried tour from southwest to northeast, and we spent the night in the Forest with plenty of time and energy to sit in meditation. The weather was clear, my body had got used to carrying extra weight, my feet had hardened, and walking seemed as natural an effort as breathing — things felt very balanced. Forests are places where the harmony of nature can leave its impression on an open mind, and the Buddha, recognising how we are conditioned by our environment, recommended his disciples to seek out "roots of trees and lonely places." Ironically enough, on entering the forest we had passed a fox hunt, where the humans were charging around chaotically, tooting horns, and the nonchalant fox ambling close by where we stood was the only being in clear control of his faculties. Our route went via Minstead Lodge—the other side of the human coin, where a community founded on Christian

principles directs itself towards exemplifying working in harmony with each other and with Nature. The choice is up to us—we may have to live within restrictions and conventional roles; but we do have the freedom to choose those that lead out of pain and delusion.

Rain began in earnest as we left Minstead Lodge, and persisted for the next three days on our walk through the urban back garden of Southampton—Totton, Chilworth. Chandlers Ford—past Eastleigh and up onto the South Downs at Droxford. By the time we got to Eastleigh my boots were worn out. The heels had come off, the soles split, and my feet were always wet. Tony had some money given by a thoughtful lay supporter against just such a contingency, and bought me a new pair. They didn't leak, but … the effect of wearing a rain poncho and a waterproof lower robe was to channel rainwater into my boots as efficiently as having drainpipes installed. When it came down to it, I finally recognised that wet feet weren't so bad after all.

We crossed the river Meon at Droxford in a thunderstorm, hid in a disused railway station until it spent itself, and as the sun beamed down from a clean sky, walked up onto the open Downs that presided over the Meon Valley. The fields and copper woodlands glowed: it was marvellous to walk under

such a sky with the land stretched out on either side. A line of oak and beech trees conveniently appeared as a pleasant spot to eat our meal of leftover fruit and some pies that Tony had bought on the way. As we chanted the Anumodana, fluffy clouds came bobbing towards us, magnificent at first but then revealing dark grey bellies that signified only one thing. "Don't worry," I said to Tony, "think positive." The sun disappeared and a sense of urgency entered our eating as I glanced around—not a shelter in sight. Silently praying, "Please don't rain, or at least not on us, or at least not now," I suddenly recalled the power of asseveration of truth, and began: "If I have been mindful …" thought I'd better make it easy, and rephrased it as: "If, at least during this Vassa, I have done the best I can, please don't rain!" The response was as swift and adroit as that of a Zen Master. Lightning flashed and it poured down. You don't stop rainstorms with anything less than a "Lion's Roar!" Tony instinctively threw a sheet over his pack and headed for the trees, but actually there was nowhere to go. I slipped my poncho over my head, and, with the rain pinging into the lid of my bowl and turning my pies soggy, munched on peacefully. I might as well be wet and full as wet and hungry. As the rainwater began to flow under my poncho, Tony, catching the mood, reappeared with hands in *añjali*

and a courteous smile: “May I offer you some coffee, bhante?” I declined, finished the meal and stood bowed under a tree while the rain did the washing up.

Storms don’t last long but we did need to dry out. About four miles down the road we stopped in some woods by the trunk of a felled beech and a huge pile of branches. Tony had discovered that, no matter if it rains, if the wood is dead and not in contact with the ground, it doesn’t become waterlogged. We were always able to start fires with twigs and use the heat to dry out larger branches and build up that way. As this fire matured, the rain poured down again, but I lashed the tent to the tree trunk, made an awning over us and the fire, and crawled under the giant leg. In a dry period we erected the tent and finally stood around the fire getting alternately roasted and rained on, which seemed better than lying down cramped and damp.

The next morning, we went over Butser Hill and surveyed Petersfield and the valley of the Rother where Chithurst Monastery lies. Colin and Jane, who live about six miles from the monastery, had said that they would like to drive out to meet us and offer us alms-food at Buriton. After the meal, it was only another four muddy miles along the South Downs Way to their house where we could get cleaned up and rest before returning to the busy monastery.

Looking at Tony's mud caked white clothing, I recognised another blessing of the ochre robe, yes it would he best to get cleaned up. We came into Buriton like those *dhutanga* bhikkhus I had been inspired by years before. Living with attention focused on the body, you didn't waste its energy. Walking, and other movements were steady and composed, and although you spoke little, the mind remained turned towards other people's well-being, a lot of the self-concern had died. It was all right to have sore feet, getting wet didn't send you into a panic, there wasn't the need to impress yourself or others, and when there wasn't anywhere to go, it was all right to sit by the church in Buriton watching the ducks on the pond and not thinking of anything much. We waited a while, received alms food, and after the meal walked on to Colin and Jane's house. When we arrived everything felt so balanced and peaceful amongst us that there wasn't a lot to say.

When you keep your personal achievements at the level of putting one foot in front of the other and being mindful, you listen to what the world has to say. In that listening, the mind is fresh and alert to the mystery of life, and being unable to express that mystery only purifies the aspiration to live in harmony with it. When the walk came to an end, thirteen mornings after leaving Golden Square, the practise-

path that it symbolises continued; the monastic life is about non-abiding, it is a giving up of personal possessions, desires, concerns and opinions. You listen and live close to the heart of life, and the only refuge from the rawness of our nature is to do good and be mindful. Sometimes that seems to leave you completely alone with nothing to hold on to, but the path evokes a compassion in us that fills the heart, and a respect for our way of life that gives us many friends. Before we reached the monastery, we stopped to say hello to Sam, the woodsman who works in the barn at the top of Chithurst Lane. "You've just got back, have you?" he said. "Please, just wait a moment." He walked to the back of his workshop and returned with half of his packed lunch. "Can I put this into your bowl?"

Bowing to Conventions

In the monastic life, if it is well-lived, you have to give up a lot, you have to surrender a lot. More than just the renunciation implied by the precepts, there comes

about a giving up of oneself through living the life of an alms-mendicant. This rather bleak prospect is in reality joyous—the mind becomes open and peaceful with the realisation that there wasn't a self to give up anyway. Rather than being a substantive entity, self is only a notion, a view and a conventional way of coming to terms with sensory experience. Although selfhood is a useful convention for most purposes, clinging to it gives rise to the feeling of being the owner of the senses who is then beset by the birth and death process that the senses experience. We become helpless if we can't get beyond the sensory movement of attraction towards objects that we can't keep, or repulsion from things that cause us pain. And this volitional tide creates the notion of a being who is moved by it, trapped in it, the creator of it. With the practise of Dhamma, a clear understanding replaces the compulsion of that volition and we can use the conventional notion of self wisely. For this purpose, not for the extinction of any real self the Buddha gave instruction on selflessness and established a monastic order that would enable ordinary people to let go of personal volition and learn to respond to life at it happened:

> They do not lament over the past,
> They do not hanker for things in the future,
> They maintain themselves on whatever comes:

Therefore they are serene.

(Samyutta Nikaya 1, 3)

The practise of bowing is a meaningful sign for the practise of giving oneself up. When I first entered a monastery in Thailand, eager to meditate, I was introduced to the Abbot, who indicated that I should bow to him. This seemed to be a polite social gesture that I had no objection to carrying out, so I went down onto my knees and bowed forehead, hands and elbow s to the floor at his feet, three times. It seemed to be just a custom, but when carried out in a life of mindful reflection, it takes on a more profound spiritual significance: the self has to be made to serve rather than govern the spiritual life.

I had quite a clear picture of what I was doing when I turned up at the monastery after an introductory lecture in Chiang Mai: a few days of meditation to learn how to get clarity and calm, and then off to Malaysia and Indonesia. After a few days, it became clear that things weren't going according to plan. I certainly witnessed a lot more of the movements of my mind, but the more I looked, the more intrinsic the mental flux appeared, and the more elusive the clear being that I had expected to become. After leaving the country to get a new visa, I returned determined to live for three months as a samanera and sort things

out.

Apart from the giving up denoted by the ten samanera precepts—entailing chastity, poverty, sobriety and a daily fast of 20 hours—life as a samanera also meant giving up one's personal habits, dress, and hair. Strangely enough, this seemed peripheral to the major surrender that I was adjusting to in the practise of meditation: the surrender to the Dhamma, the way things are. For one who has lived his life on a series of false premises and become accustomed to following his desires, the way things are seems rather tough. Restlessness, boredom, agitated memories, longing, and the struggle to get rid of these are common experiences. I could see plenty of reasons not to continue: but what was mystifying was the deepening resolve to persevere. After three months, I half-realised that my life was motivated by deeper instincts than the plans of my conscious mind, and I began to give up the desire to become something, and instead, to observe the way things are. That was a bow to the Buddha, that in us which observes and reflects, and it was a bow to the Dhamma, the way that one's life actually is, beyond conceptions and self consciousness.

As a samanera, one is on the fringes of the Bhikkhu Sangha, and, at least as a privileged Westerner, not really involved with the running of the monastery or

the duties to the lay community. However, I was a mendicant, living dependent on a supportive lay community who had unquestioningly provided a hut (*kuti*) and robes, and continued to offer alms-food daily. Every day, just after dawn, I would walk into town for alms, and people who didn't know me would be waiting by the side of the road to put food into my alms-bowl. The whole procedure was carried out in silence, without even an exchange of glances. Generosity uncluttered by the desire to evoke a response is a very touching thing. Far from making me feel complacent, it brought up a silent exhortation from my own mind to practise the life of purity and to make myself worthy of offerings. After years of trying to fit into small and large communities, or find one that matched my ideals, I found myself taking part in a community action that centred around the attitude of kindness to others. People weren't making judgments, they weren't making demands: they were giving. No matter what the purity of the rest of their day, or my own, might have been, there was that gesture of selflessness. It was practical and something that we could all take part in without having to be more than human. Moreover, people weren't giving to me because I was a particularly praiseworthy or fascinating person, but because of what I represented in human terms—the potential for enlightenment.

Finding one's life gradually taking the form of a symbol can have its disquieting moments. It threatens one's personal identity. I started to think of places to go and other things to do, without really knowing why. After all, I had food, shelter and a tremendous amount of support from the teacher and the people around me … but there was still the residual desire to go somewhere else where I could live life on my own terms, get up when I wanted, eat when I wanted: in short, reinforce my personal identity. Yet having followed that impulse for several years and recognised its fruitlessness, I realised that the only place to go was away from personal volition. Letting go of choices opened up a path of learning to respond skilfully to whatever came up. Uncertain at first, it proved more fruitful than my attempts to attain profound mental states. There was something gladdening about being part of the world rather than trying to find something in it.

Taking higher ordination as a bhikkhu was more of a surrender than a promotion: commitment was something that I had always shied away from. The occasion was brought about by some 700 ladies visiting the monastery and taking on temporary ordination there as eight-precept nuns. I had been a samanera for about six months by then, and had always side-stepped the issue of higher ordination: my

mind still wanted to play with the idea of an imaginary future when I wouldn't have to do all this monastic stuff. But when I was told how much they would like to provide a bowl and robes for my bhikkhu ordination, something in me gave up. Despite the seeming impossibility of sorting myself out, I could see that my life could provide some uplift for others, and really there was nothing else to do.

Perhaps I might have had second thoughts had I known what the ceremony entailed. Disrobed from being a samanera, I was dolled up in a lacy white gown and placed at the head of a procession, clutching flowers and incense in my "praying" hands (*añjali*). Followed by the more able-bodied of the 700, I proceeded at a snail's pace for the mile or so to the ordination mo nastery clicked at by cameras along the way. After a triple circumambulation of the ordination hall, the ladies seemed keen to have a last "lucky" touch of the monk-to-be, who would in future be untouchable. It was getting a little scary when a large fat man picked me up and carried me over the threshold of the ordination hall to prevent an "unlucky" trip. The impression in my mind, however, was of suddenly being tendered completely helpless and dependent on others, with vestiges of personal identity falling away. I was even given a new name without having any say in the matter. (My name,

Sucitto, meaning "good mind" or "good heart" seemed tame compared with other possibilities such as Noble Wisdom or Enlightenment Bliss, It has, however, been enough to try to live up to.)

Obviously, in becoming a bhikkhu, one did more than join the Bhikkhu Sangha as a recluse. One joined the larger Buddhist community in a unique and dynamic way, as a symbol and reminder of the path, irrespective of one's personal attainments. Although I had little confidence in my own "attainments," having a conventional identity did take some of the pressure off. I didn't have to have an opinion about myself, and because I didn't have to think about myself in order to justify myself, I didn't keep creating myself. I realised that my life was not my own, but it was better that way: I could have a little more dispassion, a little more tolerance of myself and a little more patience.

At first, integration into the monastic community as a junior bhikkhu was slow. I helped my teacher to the best of my ability, and gave up more of my time to look after the newly-arrived meditators. But it wasn't until a death in my family took me back to England that I became an integral part of a monastic community. In England I didn't have the privilege of being a foreigner anymore, so I had to learn to use my "Englishness" to help the Dhamma and the Sangha in the very mundane matters of running a vihara and

relating to visitors. In our small London community, we were all very accessible; nobody could take refuge in being serene or anonymous. And it was another kind of surrender to relate to lay people who didn't understand the conventions of a bhikkhu and wanted to know what you would like for dinner and why you had to wear those "funny robes." After all, this is England. Nobody seemed to understand that it was not about becoming something, but about giving oneself up.

In a monastic community, a junior monk lives in dependence on a teacher (or "Ajahn" in the Thai tradition). This means that you follow his guidance, and offer service to him. It is another bow, and one that is reflected frequently by physically bowing to him on formal occasions such as after the twice-daily period of group meditation. A junior monk also defers to monks who have spent more years in the Order than himself: he walks behind them, sits lower than them, and eats after them. This can be frustrating if you take deference and respect as something that you have to give to others because they are better than you. In fact, paying respect enables you to establish a cool and kindly presence of mind with another person, rather than bring up feelings of comparison, or attach to any opinions that you may have about them. Bowing to others according to conventional hierarchy

eliminates the need to compete or form judgments; it is an act of giving, and as in all true giving, it opens the heart and composes the mind. Because of this training in showing respect, a Sangha can maintain its unity and harmony, without dividing into cliques of bosom friends who cut themselves off from others; and it can abide without its members holding onto grudges that may form around differences of opinion. One can use bowing as a means to bring some sensitivity into a situation; it is also away of letting go of the mind that makes permanent personalities out of transitory perceptions. Rather than idolising someone, respect gives them space. I found that if I idolised the teacher, I eventually became disappointed when he no longer fitted into my perception of what he should be; or one would want a more personal relationship or one would want to prove him better than any other teacher. But if I didn't carry around an idea of him, there was always something instructive and joyous in his company. With a teacher that one respects, there is the opportunity to develop this letting go of views until one knows that action in the mind, trusts it, and brings it to bear on a wider scale.

The detailed training in care and attention towards our simple requisites of bowl, robes and lodgings is also helpful for personal mindfulness and a peaceful atmosphere in a community. Rather than rushing

around, mind filled by a train of thought, one has to let go of personal obsessions in order to be mindful of whether one is carrying the bowl correctly, or whether the awkward robes are falling off, or whether one's deportment is correct. These are some of the minor rules that people challenge: "Why be hide-bound? Why be attached to traditions? Why not be more practical?" Actually I found these conventions, although occasionally irritating, enormously practical. Being aware of a robe and deportment continually brings the mind back to the body, one of the basic foundations of mindfulness. You have to be clear in the moment rather than concerned with getting anywhere fast; and you also have to be able to let go of the variety of opinions that it can bring up. Of course people do in time recognise the robe as belonging to someone they can trust, someone who is living in faith. This is very helpful in an age dominated by materialistic images that encourage people to be greedy and feel discontent with what is simple and unexciting.

With more minor matters of etiquette, one also had to learn when not to apply them. In a non-Buddhist country, the attitude of respect can easily be misunderstood as subservience: not everyone is able to appreciate its purpose at first. Unfamiliar customs can create comparisons in people's minds whereby

they feel compelled to justify themselves or criticise monasticism. For its part, the Sangha has to be aware of the desire to have everything established in its traditional way without any challenge. There is something in all of us which yearns for security in the world; so we have to be mindful of that instinct. And in order to be mindful, it is necessary to examine our instinctual relationship with the world through reflecting on the conventions that establish that relationship. For the most part, our social conventions are habitual and lead to inattention or false motivation, and we take our personal quirks and customs as being what we are. For me there was a tremendous amount of clinging to being a non-conformist, or to political views, or to personal "rights." And for all of us unawakened beings there is the clinging to self, which is just another convention and view. Dhamma training allows us, as mendicants or as householders, to take on a role and responsibility, not for becoming, not for comparison, not for reputation, but for wise reflection. This training can shift the mind beyond the perspective of self to that realm where there is freedom from convention, and the compassion to use conventions for the welfare of others.

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