

The Burden of Life

by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

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

Today, at this first talk, I feel that we should talk about one specific topic. That topic is our problem – everyone’s problem. The reason that I want to talk about this topic is because if we don’t understand what our problem is and what our problems are, then we don’t know why we are here and we don’t know what we’re doing when we come to study the Dhamma – when we come to practice *vipassanā*.

Without an understanding of what our problems are, we won’t know what we’re doing and we’ll be wasting our time. So therefore I’d like to begin by talking about our problem – everyone’s problem.

We like to use a short phrase when we talk about our problem. This phrase is ‘the burden of life.’ If one of each of us as an individual feels – or anyone of us feels – that our life is completely free of problems, that we have no burdens and that everything is fine . . . Anyone who feels this way will not benefit at all from studying Dhamma and practicing insight meditation. Therefore anyone who feels this way doesn’t need to waste their time here at Suan Mokkh. However if we do feel that there are problems – problems of the sort that we would call ‘the burdens of life’ – if we feel that we do have these sort of problems, then we can benefit very much from studying the Dhamma and practicing *vipassanā* meditation. And so we need to consider this point from the very beginning.

There is something complicated and a bit amusing about the phrase, ‘the burden of life.’ When we use this phrase, it is something that can be correctly understood and the meaning is basically correct. However it’s not completely correct. It’s a bit off the mark. The reason that ‘the burden of life’ might not completely convey the truth is because life itself is the burden. Life itself is this burden. When we say ‘the burden of life,’ it sounds as if we’re separating the two – the burden and life – from each other making them two different things. But in reality life itself is this burden. Our problem is life. And so this is the point that we have to consider. We have to study life if we’re going to get anywhere.

So life has this symptom of heaviness or burdensome, of being burdensome. This symptom of life is something that needs to be studied and understood. We can say that life is the burden of life. There’s this symptom of weight and burdensomeness which is interfering and disturbing life. So this symptom of life is the burden of life.

Now if we see this symptom as it arises and interferes, then we will have some understanding of the problem. We need to be able to look until we clearly see that life is this burden of life which disturbs life – it batters life, it attacks life, and in the end it torments life. If we see this symptom which is attacking, battering, and tormenting life, then we’ll understand what the problem is. And only then do we begin to understand what the Dhamma is about.

If we’re someone who thinks that everything is already wonderful and perfect and that everything is fine, then all this Dhamma is of absolutely no use whatsoever. The purpose of the Dhamma is only one thing. The purpose of the Dhamma is to solve our problems – to help us deal with and be free from the condition of unsatisfactoriness which we call *dukkha*. Dhamma is only to help us to be free of *dukkha* – to understand and free ourselves from this condition of painfulness, unsatisfactoriness, and all the other unpleasanties and disturbing aspects of life.

This is what the Dhamma is about. And so we need to have insights into this problem – into the burden of life, the *dukkha* of life – and then we’ll know why we’re here to learn about the Dhamma and why we’re here to practice the Dhamma.

Imagine there’s a person who feels completely healthy, completely free of all illness, sickness and physical disability. Wouldn’t it be ridiculous for these people to go to a drugstore or clinic or some place that passes out medicine? What would

be the point – in this person who considers himself or herself completely healthy – to go get some medicine? Why would this person feel inclined to go and get some medicine? What's the meaning in that? What's the rationale and intelligence in getting medicine when one feels completely healthy?

It can be the same with the Dhamma. People who don't see any problems – who aren't aware of any dukkha, any unsatisfactoriness in their lives – but yet they come and make some sort of attempt to study the Dhamma and to practice meditation. What's the point of that? If people don't have any awareness of a problem or of dukkha, then their activity in going through a meditation retreat or something like that can be nothing but just doing what is popular or what is a current fashion or just because their friends do it or because it sounds mysterious or it's another stop on the tour of Thailand or whatever. We can get wrapped up into meditation and turn it into a meaningless tradition or a silly rite and ritual if we don't practice it for the right reasons. And therefore if we're here to study the Dhamma and practice meditation, we need to understand the reason for doing so. Otherwise we are like a person who is completely healthy but goes off in search of medicine for no intelligent reason.

Now if you're new to this thing we call Dhamma and if you're new to meditation, we're not expecting you to immediately agree that you've got all sorts of problems and are suffering from all kinds of dukkha and burdens of life. We're not expecting you to agree with all this.

However if you are coming here, you can look at it as similar to going to the doctor or the hospital for a physical check-up. If we're not completely sure that our health is perfect, we'll go to the doctor and he'll look us over and see if there is anything wrong.

We can look at this meditation course or the study of Dhamma in the same way. If we're not sure yet whether or not we have any dukkha and any problems, then we can look at this as a check-up. It's a chance to examine yourself, get to know yourself, find out what you really are, find out what shape you're in and find out what should be done once you know what shape you're in.

If we look at this as a check-up – as self examination, to see how we are doing, whether there are any problems or not – this approach is not lacking in intelligence. It has some reason and sense in it. So if you're not sure yet whether or not there are any problems, then approach the Dhamma as a means to check things out and examine yourself.

An absolutely essential condition for the proper study of Dhamma is the desire, the need, to be free of dukkha. Or we can say to be free of disease and illness. Without this desire and intention to be free of all unsatisfactory mind states and all dissatisfying conditions – without this need, without this intention, then it's like we're just daydreaming. We really don't know what we are doing and we're just muddling about.

So this is an absolutely essential condition to correct practice and study of Dhamma. Without this we may just be following a current fashion or a crowd of people who wandered over from some beach or we're just following what other people are doing – we're turning it into a little tradition amongst ourselves. Who knows what we are doing if we don't have this desire to end dukkha? This is absolutely essential but it's quite amusing and quite sad that nobody has this desire. We wander through life in a little cloud as if nothing were wrong. And if something goes wrong, we pretend it's not there. But we never really develop a keen and powerful urge to get free of all the dukkha, of all the problems and burdens that torment life.

We never have this desire and without it we cannot practice Dhamma. So be aware of this desire. Do you want to be healthy or not? This isn't an intellectual decision – oh sure, I want to be healthy – which most people will admit to quite readily. But it's a deep-seated urge that begins to work and take over one's life – where one's life is oriented to being healthy, spiritually healthy, which means free of dukkha.

This desire, this need, to be free of dukkha can be compared to . . . If someone took you and threw you in the ocean or a river and held your head under the water for 2, 3, 4, 5 minutes . . . Imagine that if somebody was holding you under the water and you had no oxygen to breathe, what kind of desire and need would be in you to get your head above the water so you could breathe? Can you imagine this? How would you feel if somebody was keeping your head under the water so you couldn't breathe?

That kind of desire that one would have – when being drowned – is the kind of desire that we need to be free of dukkha – to be free of the problems of life, of all the mental states, of all the defilements, all the unnecessary things which cloud and disturb the mind and destroy the mind's natural brightness and clarity.

To get beyond all this dukkha we need this desire. And this desire must be of the strength of someone who has had their head held under the water. Or in the Pāli

scriptures, the Buddha compared it to someone whose head is on fire – one’s hair and whatever is burning and there are flames shooting up and burning one’s head. If you had a fire on your head . . . If your head was on fire, would you sort of sit around twiddling your thumbs without making any effort to put it out? Or would there be a strong desire to do something to put out this fire?

These two examples illustrate the strength that is necessary within this desire and need to extinguish dukkha. This is what is necessary for successful practice. And you can use it as a measure on yourself. Do you have the desire to extinguish dukkha that is as strong as someone whose head is on fire would have for putting out that fire? Is your desire this strong or not?

For the majority of people, they have no awareness of dukkha within the mind. There may be some intellectual opinions about this matter from reading books or talking with someone, but there is no clear realization within the mind that there is dukkha.

But in spite of this we come here to extinguish dukkha – to get rid of this dukkha – which is quite funny. We’re not even aware of dukkha and we want to get rid of it. Well, what’s the sense in that? This condition, though, should be looked into a little bit more closely.

For you, when you come to Suan Mokkh, it’s quite natural that there will not be any dukkha because you come here as a visitor. You don’t stay here very long. You have no responsibilities. And nothing here belongs to you. There is nothing here that is yours and so there is nothing that you must be responsible for, that you must worry about and that you must take care of. And so it’s very easy for you to come to a place like Suan Mokkh and be quite comfortable and free of dukkha. This can be quite automatic.

And so you come here and there’s no dukkha. But you’re here to extinguish dukkha. So what’s going on? Here there is no dukkha. But think about it. What will happen when you go home, go back to some place where you do have responsibilities, possessions, belongings, things you have to do? Will there be things that you will worry about? Will there be problems then? Will there be dukkha? There might not be dukkha here, but there may be when you go back home or to wherever you have responsibilities and belongings.

So this points out the necessity that we must understand what dukkha is and how it affects life. What is the influence and bearing of dukkha upon life? This we

need to be very clear about – not some intellectual, theoretical, abstract opinion on the matter. But some direct understanding of one's own life and the dukkha – the problems, the unsatisfactoriness, the pain – within one's own life. This is what we must be aware of and understand, and then begin to have some ways, some techniques of dealing with that dukkha that does arise in our life. So this needs to be done.

So in order to understand this dukkha – these problems that exist within our own lives – we need to discuss the problems of life. And so we're going to take some time to talk about this thing we call dukkha. We'll discuss it in order to develop some awareness and understanding of the part it plays in our lives.

Dukkha is something that is involved with many, many different facts and there are many secrets associated with it that we can discuss. For example if it wasn't for this thing dukkha – if there was no such thing as dukkha – then there would be no religion in the world. Without dukkha, there would not be any prophets, any saints, any founders of religion, any sages, any wise men. It's only because of dukkha that all these things have arisen in the world. It's through dukkha that certain minds have set out to understand this thing and find a way out of it. And so it's because of dukkha there arise the Jesus Christs, the Buddhas, the Mohammads, the Lao Tzus of the world – these minds who have understood dukkha – and found and worked for ways to be free of it. And then have taught the way to be free of dukkha to others. And in this way, dukkha has been the cause for the various prophets and religions which we have. This is one of the secrets of dukkha.

The cleverness of humanity and our intelligence is another thing that exists because of dukkha. All the things which humanity has accomplished – all the inventions, all the ideas, all the things that we have done, all the material developments – exist only because of dukkha. It's in our desire – and through our desire and need to be free of dukkha – that mankind has been spurred on to create all the clothing, housing, medicine, and all the other things we have in this world. The high level of material development of what we call modern civilization is completely conditioned and caused by dukkha. Only because of this thing would be put all this time and effort into all these things we do.

But we very seldom take the time to look at this matter deeply. We never really examine it closely to realize the place – this important position – dukkha has in

human life. We don't look and so we don't see. And so some of us may even think that dukkha doesn't even exist.

So this is another way we can begin to look at dukkha, to see what it is and what role it plays in our lives.

Or in your own case, have you come to Suan Mokkh because dukkha has driven you here? Has the whip of dukkha been driving you and whipping you and spurring you here like a herd of frightened cattle? Is this why you're here, because dukkha has driven you here?

Or have you just come out of curiosity, just because you're traveling around Thailand and this is another place in the guidebook or somebody at some bungalow or guest house told you it was a nice place to stay for a few days? Why are you here? Do you see the dukkha that is driving you here? Or are you just here to have a look around, enjoy yourself, and have a few pleasant days in the forest? Take a look at yourself and see what place, what role, what influence dukkha has within your own life.

This point is very important. Until you begin to see what dukkha is doing – and how central it is in what you do, what you say, what you think – then you'll never have the desire, the strong and powerful need to get rid of this dukkha, to understand what dukkha is, to know it and then take it apart so that you know the escape from it. Until you see this dukkha, you'll never have the desire to be free of it. And so this point is very very important. It's very serious and essential. And so we'll keep repeating ourselves on it and keep harping upon this point in order that you may begin to understand what we're talking about.

If we look at this matter in the most favorable light, we can see that dukkha is both a friend and an enemy. This is very useful to look at dukkha on this deeper level where we see that it is both friend and enemy.

For those of you who are beginning to understand what dukkha is, you may wonder what we're talking about when we say that dukkha is a friend. But if you've really examined dukkha, you'll see that in some respects it is a friend because – as we mentioned already – it's dukkha that makes us clever and intelligent.

It's only through dukkha that we ever learn anything. We don't learn anything from being happy. We learn from mistakes, from problems, from dukkha. Dukkha is what makes us intelligent. It's what causes us to grow in wisdom. Dukkha is

what has spurred on all of human evolution. And so, whatever degree human consciousness has developed to, it has only done so because of the friendship of dukkha. Dukkha is responsible for all this intelligence and wisdom.

But on the other hand, dukkha bites us. It slaps us. It's painful. It torments us. And so in this way, dukkha is also an enemy. It's dukkha that is slapping us around, whipping us, biting us, and driving us. We're always trying to get free of dukkha, whether we realize it or not. We're always trying to flee it, run away, escape from this enemy of ours.

If we can see both of these aspects of dukkha, we'll begin to understand dukkha on a profound level. We'll be seeing dukkha on the level of *sati-paññā* (mindful wisdom). This is knowledge that is based in awareness – self awareness – and an understanding of life. It's the opposite of stupidity. If our understanding of dukkha is foolish, childish, and stupid, it will be of no use to us. But when our understanding of dukkha is deep, profound, and based in mindful wisdom, then it will be of tremendous use.

Now what we're interested in doing is developing this mindful, wise approach to dukkha. If we do so, then we can emphasize dukkha in its aspect as friend. Or we can use the word 'comrade.' We can emphasize dukkha as our comrade and de-emphasize the aspect of it being an enemy. What we mean by this is make use of what dukkha offers us. Use dukkha to develop the mind, to train the mind, to grow in wisdom and understanding. In this way dukkha is a friend, it's a comrade.

But learn also . . . and in doing so . . . in using dukkha as a friend, then there is less and less opportunity for dukkha to be an enemy. Dukkha will not bite and claw and scratch and torment us so much. And so we can emphasize the aspect as a friend and diminish the torment and painful, the enemy aspect of dukkha. This is a mindful and wise way to approach dukkha – by taking it as a friend. Don't let it go by itself. Don't leave it on its own where it will remain an enemy.

Now we can look at dukkha a little bit deeper. We can see that dukkha – the condition of dukkha – is common to all of us. Each of us has this one thing in common. We have dukkha in common – it is something that we all experience. And on this level we are all the same. We are in no way different.

We are also the same in that the absence of dukkha is identical for all of us. When there is no dukkha, then it's the same for each of us. So in this condition when there is no dukkha, this is also identical for each of us. So in these two ways

– or maybe in this one way – we are all the same. We are the same when there is dukkha – it’s the same experience for us all – and the absence from dukkha – the freedom from dukkha – is identical for everyone. We have these things in common.

If we look at the characteristics of dukkha and see what kind of things we can observe about it – what are the symptoms, what are the marks and signs of dukkha? – we can look at it in a variety of ways. One way is to see that dukkha is the lack of relaxation for the spirit. Ajahn Buddhadasa phrased it: ‘There is no resting place for the suffering soul.’ The suffering soul has no place to rest and relax its weary bones.

This is an aspect of dukkha, the lack of spiritual relaxation. What we mean by this is that there is a constant process of conditioning. Various causes and conditions are spinning round and round, compounding each other. And this constant conditioning doesn’t give the spirit or soul or whatever any chance to rest and relax. All this conditioning catches up the spirit. And when it’s caught up in all this mess of causes and effects and interrelationships and everything, then the spirit cannot rest. The suffering soul has no resting place. This is an essential characteristic of dukkha.

So the first aspect we have on dukkha is the absence of spiritual rest which is caused by all the conditioning. And this conditioning is in turn caused by ignorance or not knowing – not understanding the way things are – or by craving. This ignorance and craving keeps all this conditioning spinning and this never gives the spirit a chance to rest and relax.

Another angle on dukkha is the fact that there is nothing in this world that goes the way we want it to go. We can’t have things the way we want them. Things just don’t happen according to our wishes and desires. Every now and then something accidentally turns out in a way that pleases us. But if we look at human society for instance, all of us are aware of countless things that aren’t fitting in with our wishes. The world, all the wars, the starvation, all the problems, all the political messes, the economic exploitation, all this stuff, one way or another, isn’t according with our wishes. So this is dukkha. Things don’t go the way we want them to go.

Or to come closer to home, even our own bodies . . . Do our bodies really do what we want them to do? They’re getting old, getting sick, falling apart slowly

but steadily. Our bodies don't go the way we want them to go. They aren't the way we want them to be.

This is dukkha. So this is the second aspect of dukkha which we want to point out to you. That all these things are never the way we want them to be.

Which brings up the problem for us of how do we live with all these things that don't go the way we want them to go? What are we going to do about all these things? What can we do? How can we adjust ourselves? How can we cope with all this? What do we need to do with the mind so we can live in a way that is appropriate to a world where everything goes its own way? Where nothing satisfies our wishes, what do we need to do? This is the second aspect of dukkha.

A third angle on dukkha is the fact of our lives that we can't stop wanting things. We just can't avoid wanting and wishing and hoping and desiring. We can't avoid this. There's always something stirring up all of our wishes and desires, our craving and wanting.

We call this thing that stirs up all the desires, all the craving, we call it *avijjā*. *Vijjā* means knowing. *Avijjā* is not-knowing. Or we can say ignorance, the lack of correct understanding, the lack of correct knowledge. It's always giving rise to this craving. We can say that it's also giving rise to the *kilesa* (defilements) – these phenomena and states of mind that arise and disturb the mind, disrupt the mind, interfere with the natural peace and brightness of the mind. So this ignorance and defilement is always conditioning, craving ignorance and desire. And all of this . . . This goes round and round and we're unable to stop it. And by being caught up in this perpetual craving, this is another aspect of dukkha.

Now this third aspect of dukkha has a very important point which we should consider. This is that there is a certain master which has control over us. This is a very fierce master. This tyrant is dominating our lives and turns us into slaves. The name of this tyrant is 'defilement.' It's the defilements which are our masters. The funny thing about this is that we volunteer. We're completely willing to be slaves to this evil and fierce tyrant – the defilements (*kilesas*), the mental impurities. We volunteer to be slaves to this tyrant, these tyrants, and so we spend our lives running here and there, doing this and doing that, under the orders and commands of the defilements.

This is the state we're in. And we don't even notice it. We're so busy running around – carrying out the orders and commands of these tyrants – that we never

even realize what state we're in. We don't even understand the situation and see how much dukkha it is.

This aspect of dukkha is really horrible and it is something that needs to be understood. This kind of slavery – the slavery to the defilements – is the worst kind of slavery that there is. If we compare this slavery to the defilements with all the other kinds of slavery that have existed in the world, all the other kinds pale before it.

The kind of slavery that has existed say in the United States over a hundred years ago – or in India or even in Thailand – where one human being is a slave to another . . . This kind of slavery is nothing compared to the slavery to the defilements which we all so willingly enter into. But this kind of slavery is a very fierce kind of dukkha.

Another aspect of dukkha to look at which is a bit more limited or more concentrated than the previous can be described in a way that Buddhists like to talk. It's not discussed so much in other traditions. We Buddhists like to say that this fourth aspect of dukkha is being slaves to the *āyatana*. The *āyatana* are the sense-spheres we can say which includes the internal sense-spheres or the sense-organs – the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. There are six sense-organs. And then the corresponding external sense-objects – sights, shapes go with the eyes, and then sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and mental phenomena.

So these are the *āyatana* – the sense-spheres, inner and external – and we are slaves to them. We very willingly serve these sense-spheres, these sense-organs and sense-objects, throughout our lives. We do whatever they tell us to do. We're always following them blindly, being conditioned by them.

If you understand this, then you'll truly understand how reprehensible and foul dukkha is. If you understand this situation of being slaves to the sense-spheres. Actually the sense-spheres are just the fuel, the bait of the defilements. They're what catches us into defilement. And so this fourth aspect really isn't any different than the third aspect. It's just a little more specific in the way we phrase it. So being a slave to the *āyatana* is a fourth aspect of dukkha by which . . . as we begin to see this, we begin to understand how wrong and unnecessary dukkha is.

Something to consider about this fourth aspect is that all the work we have done in our lives, all the things we have done in order to earn money or whatever way they repay us for our sweat and labor . . . All this work we have done is just to

get money in order to respond to our defilements. All the work we do . . . All we're trying to do is get the means by which we can try and satisfy our defilements. Do what our defilements what us to do, tell us to do. And so we are very loyal slaves to the defilements.

If you kept a record throughout your life of how you spent your money, you would see that this is true. The way we do this is we get some money and we go out and try to satisfy some defilement through one of the sense-spheres. We try and satisfy these defiled states of mind, these defilements, by . . . through the eyes with some visual experience or oral experience or some whatever you say for the nose, gustatory, some tastes, trying to get some pleasing, satisfying, delicious, luxurious experience through one of the senses.

In this way, all the work, all our labor, all our sweat is being spent on the defilements. And the defilements are trying to work themselves out through the senses. This is an absolutely essential point. It's the same essential point we've been pointing at throughout this talk. If you don't see this point of how we've been spending all our labor and effort in trying to respond to the defilements through the senses – one sense or another, one way or another . . . If you don't see this, then it's basically hopeless for you to study the Dhamma.

If you don't begin to understand this point, then there's no way that you're going to be able to understand the Dhamma, be able to practice the Dhamma, or do anything useful with meditation. Actually if you don't understand this point, you'll never meditate. You'll just be imitating a meditator but there won't be any genuine meditation. So take a look at this point really carefully. Look at it, observe it, stare at it, gaze at it, scrutinize it until you see it and realize the truth of this point.

Now if we take everything that's been discussed so far and we want to summarize it, that can be done quite easily. When we talk about being a slave to the defilements or talk about being a slave to the sense-spheres, we can summarize both of these by saying that the essential core problem – the heart of the problem – is our slavery to the *vedanā*. *Vedanā* is a very very important Pāli word. Pāli is the language of the Buddhist scriptures that we use. We have this word *vedanā*. I'll try and explain it to you for those of you who are new. It's often translated 'feelings,' but be careful because the word 'feelings' includes many things that are not the same as the *vedanā*. *Vedanā* is a specific aspect of what we call in English 'the feelings.'

What the *vedanā* are is that when there is say seeing – when the eyes make contact with some sight – and then there is both the physical seeing and a mental component. And when all this happens there is the experience of seeing – the visual experience which we call ‘seeing.’ When there is this experience the mind reacts to it or the mind-heart, we can say, reacts to it. Either it moves toward that experience or it backs away or it vacillates in uncertainty. And these three kinds of reactions to experience – whether visual or by oral or through one of the other senses . . . This reaction to experience – this immediate habitual reaction – is called *vedanā* or feelings. It’s either pleasant when the mind goes toward the experience or unpleasant when it tries to move away or it’s uncertain when it doesn’t know whether to be pleased or displeased.

These are the *vedanā* and they are central to all of our problems. So we can summarize all of these problems of *dukkha* by saying that *dukkha* arises because of slavery to the *vedanā*. The Buddha said that the *vedanā* are the root of all *dhammas*, of all things. All things can be traced to the *vedanā*. For example ignorance or wrong understanding, wrong view, some/all of the prejudices and biases we have can be traced to the *vedanā*, these feelings of liking, disliking, and uncertainty. Craving, attachment – all these can be traced to the *vedanā*. And therefore *dukkha* can always be traced to the *vedanā*. This shows how central the *vedanā* are and as long as we are a slave – as long as we or our minds, as long as the human mind is a slave to the *vedanā* – then there will be *dukkha* arising because of that slavery.

We need to understand this point, begin to see it, because if it’s possible to take care of the *vedanā* properly, then there will be no *dukkha* arising from them. We are spurred into all kinds of activities and kinds of craving because of the *vedanā*. For example all of our sexual impulses arise because of the *vedanā*. And also all of the egoism and pride and selfishness by which we mess up our own lives and the lives of others, all this can be traced to the *vedanā*.

The *vedanā* are the meeting point, the gathering point, the thing that links together all our problems. And so this is why we say that slavery to the *vedanā* is the heart of all our problems. It’s the summary of everything we’ve been saying today. When there is slavery to the defilements, in that is slavery to the *vedanā*. When there is slavery to the sense-organs – the sense-spheres – in that there is also slavery to the feelings.

We can go so far as to say that the whole world . . . all of the world is enslaved, is enthralled with the *vedanā*. All sentient beings are under the power and control of the *vedanā*. And so our hope . . . the way to be free of *dukkha* is to get the mind above the *vedanā*, get the mind out from under this control and power of these feelings. In this way we summarize everything that has been discussed so far.

So we'd like to request, we implore you in fact, to remember this word *vedanā*. Or in Thai *wetthana*. It's spelled in Roman letters V-E-D-A-N-A. *Vedanā* or *wetthana*. Please remember this word. Use the Pāli word even if it is unfamiliar to you because the meaning is much more important than the meaning of the word 'feelings.' If you insist on clinging to the English words, you will often be left with only half of the meaning that is intended.

So please please remember this word *vedanā*. Get interested in it. Begin to understand it, what is meant here. All human activity is caused by the *vedanā*. You can see everything you do, everything you say, everything you think, all movements that you make – whether they are physical movements of the body or mental movements of the mind or the heart, emotional movements, whatever . . . Whatever kind of movements – physical or mental – these movements are caused by the *vedanā*.

You can see that everything you do and have been doing throughout your life – with no exception whatsoever – has been caused by the *vedanā*. The pleasant feelings – the pleasant likeable *vedanā* – you've been running after, you've been chasing after them your whole life. You've been doing all sorts of things to get a hold of these pleasant *vedanā*.

And on the other hand there are all the unpleasant, the dislikeable *vedanā* which you have been fleeing. You've been doing whatever you can to escape from these unpleasant *vedanā*, such as those of you who are rubbing your face or can't sit still because of various discomfort that's always causing you to scratch your head or shift your position or rock back and forth or who knows what.

You're spending all your time either running away from the unpleasant *vedanā* or chasing after the pleasant ones. This is what we mean by saying that 'the minds of sentient beings are enslaved to the *vedanā*.' This shows the central importance of these things. The Buddha said that all dhammas – all things, everything that you need to know – is associated with the *vedanā*. This is the gathering point of everything that needs to be understood.

If you understand the old saying that “all roads lead to Rome” – back in the Roman Empire all roads led to Rome – if you understand what that means, then you’ll understand what we mean when we say that ‘all things are associated with the vedanā.’ Everything has to do with the vedanā. So this is an absolutely central and crucial thing to understand. So please don’t be scared off by this foreign word. Remember the word and then begin to appreciate and understand what it means.

We really want to emphasize how central the vedanā are to everything. Everything that has to do with human life – human experience – is associated with, is tied to, the vedanā.

There’s a very good word in Pāli and we’re struggling to find the adequate words to express it in English. That task is left to me and I’m doing my best to think of the proper words. We want to stress that everything in life – all human experience and activity, whether physical or mental, via the body, the mouth or the mind – all this is tied to the vedanā. All these things are gathered together in the vedanā. We can say that the vedanā are the meeting place of everything.

Everything you are doing – even the small, minute, minor things that are going on as you sit and listen at this very moment – all these are caught up in the vedanā, are conditioned by the vedanā. For example, as you’re listening, if you like what’s being said, that’s vedanā. If you dislike what’s being said, that’s vedanā. If as you listen you think what’s being said has value for you and so you like it even more, well that’s even more vedanā. Or if you don’t like what’s being said and it starts to annoy you, that’s even more vedanā too.

And so if you really like what is being said, it satisfies you. You think it is useful. That’ll cause you to listen more carefully, more attentively. But if you don’t like what is being said, that kind of vedanā will cause you to start day-dreaming. Your mind will wander. Maybe you’ll fall asleep. Maybe you’ll even get up and leave. Or the little movements of your body and whatever your mind’s doing now – whether it’s paying attention or sleeping or who knows what – all of this is conditioned by the vedanā. The vedanā are the absolute center – the meeting point – of everything in human life.

We want to stress this so that you see how central this is and then maybe you’ll begin to take some interest in it. All the things that we call ‘the burden of life’ are centered in the vedanā. All the problems of life, all the dukkha, are centered in the vedanā. All the things that happen – satisfying things, unsatisfying things, pleasing

things, unpleasing things, happiness, unhappiness – all this is centered in the vedanā.

Either we're slaves to the vedanā or the mind is developed so that it is above the vedanā. Think about it. Look at it. And then develop the mind and practice the Dhamma till you actually experience what's being said here. It's crucial and essential.

All of you have come here from far away – from America, Canada, maybe Germany, Australia, Japan, from all over the world – and all of you without one exception has come here because of the vedanā. Some vedanā has caused you to come here. And some of you are saying to yourself 'they don't know what they are talking about. I came here because I wanted to. I'm traveling because I want to. Nothing sent me here. Nothing made me come.' But if you examine things carefully and honestly, you'll see that your very wants and desires have been conditioned by the vedanā.

You're wanting to leave say Germany because you don't like it there or something, or because the weather's cold and you want to come somewhere where it is warm, or you want some exotic experiences, or you like eating rice, or you're running away from this, or you want to get that . . . Whatever your reasons for traveling and whatever your reasons and motivations for coming to Suan Mokkh, behind all of these reasons, desires, wants and motivations are the vedanā – trying to get certain pleasant feelings and avoid certain unpleasant feelings, everything. These are what run your lives.

As human beings we tend to be very proud of our independence, our freedom. We think because we've got the money to go here and go there – to eat this and buy that – we think we are free and independent. We think we have will-power, free will, we make choices. This is what we think and it makes us proud and stupid. Because really we're just slaves to the vedanā. We don't make any choices. We just do what the vedanā tell us to do.

This is what we mean by 'the burden of life.' Can you appreciate what a burden this is – this perpetual slavery, the kind of slavery where some white man purchases a black man and uses him to pick cotton as was done in the United States over a hundred years ago? That kind of slave still had some time to do what he wanted – sing a song, eat some food. But the slavery we're talking about here – there's no respite. You're a slave all the time. Can you appreciate what a heavy, awesome, debilitating burden this is? You appreciate what we mean by 'the burden

of life’ that we’ve been talking about today. If you understand this complete dominance the vedanā have upon the mind, then you will understand what ‘the burden of life’ is.

Now if we look deep, deep, deep, deep into this matter – the very core of it, on the most profound level – then we’ll appreciate what we mean by ‘the burden of life.’ By seeing how every movement – even the smallest tiniest movement of your bodies or minds – are caused by the vedanā . . . Because of some liking or disliking, then there is some kind of craving to get something or be something or not be something or get rid of something.

These feelings lead to craving. And because of this craving there is always dukkha. When craving arises, dukkha is a certainty. And so all dukkha is caused by vedanā. All the unpleasantness – all the difficulties, all the problems, all the things that make you sad, unhappy, frustrated, that make you worried, afraid, that make you stupid, that make you do silly, forgetful things – all this is centered in the vedanā.

This is why we harp on this point. We keep coming back to it and emphasizing it. This slavery to the vedanā is something that . . . You may not like to hear it but you better face up to the fact, because right now all of you are blindly and happily selling your souls to the vedanā. You serve these vedanā without batting an eye. With no second thoughts you just do whatever the vedanā tell you. You’re a menial, obedient, loyal slave to the vedanā.

But these vedanā causes so much dukkha. When we carry out the commands of the vedanā, it just brings us difficulties. It gets us into all kinds of hassles, uncomfortable situations, problems and pains.

All of this, everything that is not quite right with life – everything that is unsatisfying in life – is caught up in the vedanā or caused by the vedanā. So don’t be afraid to look at this. Take some time. Quit running around and sit and study this matter so you can understand it. Because if you want to be free, really free, you have to understand the vedanā – this problem of our slavery to the vedanā, this burden of life. Please take the time to study this. Be patient and do the work that needs to be done so that you will understand – not just intellectually, but realize within the depths of the heart and mind – what this is we’re talking about. Please take the time.

Just one last point we need to analyze and criticize. This is the subject of education and learning – not in general, but our own education and learning. All of us here have some kind of diploma, from secondary school or from university. A few of you probably have master’s degrees. There might even be a few doctors around. But if you look at all this learning – the eight, ten, twelve, sixteen, twenty, thirty years we spend in educational institutions . . . What are they teaching? Do any of these institutions, do the famous universities in America, England, Australia, France, Germany, wherever . . . Do these places teach about the vedanā? Do they teach us to look at and understand this slavery to the vedanā and then how to be free of it? Is this being taught anywhere? In all your years of education, has anybody taught you about this? Have you ever had a course in it? I doubt it because if you did you wouldn’t have to come here. You would have already solved the problems of life.

None of the universities – none of those pieces of paper they pass out – none of that has anything to do with solving this problem of slavery to the vedanā. It’s completely ignored. In fact, what they really teach . . . We can take everything that’s taught in the schools, colleges, universities, and the educational institutions of both the East and West . . . We can take all that and summarize it that what they’re teaching us – what we have been taught in all our years in school – is to be servants to the vedanā.

All the little intellectual and physical tricks that we learn – we learn mathematics, we learn geography, psychology, sociology, chemistry . . . All this stuff they teach us is just for us to follow the vedanā. To go get a job and earn money so we can buy things that satisfy the vedanā. Or we puff up our egos with our knowledge and degrees. Or we gain status or people like us or we’re impressive or whatever. All the things we accomplish – all the things they teach – are just to be servants, slaves to the vedanā.

All this modern education – all this which we’re very proud of – is just helping us or keeping us spinning around as slaves to craving and defilement. That’s all it is. It has nothing to do with freedom, of liberating the mind from this slavery.

So that’s why when we come here, we have to start talking about this. Because it’s not taught in all the places we’ve been educated. So when you come to Suan Mokkh, or places like Suan Mokkh, you have to talk about this topic – slavery to the vedanā. Talk about it so we’ll begin to do something about it and get free from the vedanā.

So we've been talking about our problems. And we summarized it as the problem of slavery to the *vedanā*. We haven't finished discussing this topic of our problems. But we're going to have to stop speaking for today and finish this tomorrow.

We have to stop speaking because the *vedanā* won't let us speak any more. The *vedanās* have control. Because of the *vedanā* we have to stop speaking now. And so we will close the talk at this point.

See you tomorrow.

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Transcribed by Arthur Brown in April-May 2015

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