

THE PRISON OF LIFE

by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

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A Dhamma lecture given at Suan Mokkh on 10 February 1988

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. All Ajahn's teachings are now available on:

www.suanmokkh.org,

<https://soundcloud.com/buddhadasa> and

<https://www.youtube.com/@buddhadasabhikkhu7829>.

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Today we'll talk about the thing called 'prison.' This should help us to understand the thing called 'life' better. Then we'll know Dhamma better, which will help us to live life without *dukkha* (dissatisfaction, distress, suffering). So today we'll talk about the thing called 'prison.' Please prepare your minds to listen carefully.

Wherever the conditions and signs of prison exist, right there is *dukkha*. You should observe that all the forms and types of *dukkha* have a quality of prison about them. Being captured, incarcerated, enchained, and put through difficulties and hassles are characteristics of *dukkha*. If you understand this, then you will understand more clearly the meaning of what we call '*upādāna*' (clinging, attachment).¹ Wherever there is *upādāna*, right there is a prison. This thing, *upādāna*, itself brings about the conditions of imprisonment.

Wherever there is *upādāna*, right there is bondage. The bondage may be positive or negative, both are equally binding. By regarding things and clinging to them as 'I' or 'mine,' bondage occurs. When bound to something, we are stuck in it, just like being stuck in prison.

All of the Dhamma principles of Buddhism can be summarized thus: *upādāna* is the cause of *dukkha*, *dukkha* is born out of *upādāna*. We all must understand this matter of *upādāna* well. To make it easy to understand, we must see it clearly as being just like a prison — a mental prison, a spiritual prison. We come to study Dhamma and develop *samādhi* (mental stability and calm) and *vipassanā* (insight) in order to destroy *upādāna*. Or if we speak metaphorically, we study Dhamma and develop the mind in order to destroy the prison that now traps us.

We're speaking about a mental or spiritual prison, but it has the same meaning as a concrete prison. *Upādāna* is just like the physical prisons that incarcerate people everywhere, but now we're speaking of a purely spiritual prison. This prison is a bit odd, or extraordinary, in that we can't see its substance with our eyes. What's even more extraordinary is that people volunteer to get locked up in this prison. People are actually delighted to go and get locked up in spiritual prison. This is a very queer aspect of the spiritual prison.

Freedom Is Salvation From Prison

You must recall the words ‘salvation’ and ‘liberation’ that are used in all religions. The final goal of all religions is salvation, or emancipation, or whatever word is most suitable in each language. All these words have the same meaning — being saved. All religions teach salvation. Yet from what are we saved? We are saved from spiritual prison. The thing that all of you want and need, even right at this moment, is the thing called ‘freedom’ or ‘liberty,’ which is simply escape from prison. The meaning is the same whether we think of a physical, material prison or a mental, spiritual prison. In all cases, we want freedom.

Those who lack *paññā* (wisdom) can see and fear only the physical, material prisons. Those who have the wisdom to look more deeply will see how much more terrifying and dangerous the spiritual prison is. Really, we can see that hardly anybody is locked up in the ordinary jails, while everyone in the world is caught in the spiritual prison. For instance, every one of you sitting here is free of the ordinary prison, but you all are incarcerated in the spiritual prison. That which drives us to be interested in Dhamma, to come to study Dhamma, to practice mental cultivation, is the oppression and force of being caught in this spiritual prison. Whether you feel it or not isn’t important. It forces us, no matter what, to struggle and search for a way out of spiritual imprisonment. It’s forcing all of you, whether you realize it or not, to find spiritual freedom. So you come looking for it here and other such places.

Although that which imprisons us is only one thing, namely, *upādāna* all by itself, this prison takes on many different forms. There are dozens of styles and kinds of prison. If we take the time to study every type of prison, it will help us to understand this phenomenon much better. Then we will understand *upādāna* better, and we also will better understand *taṇhā* (craving) and *kilesa* (defilements of mind), which according to Buddhist teaching cause *dukkha*. Further, craving conditions *upādāna* and *upādāna* creates defilements. We will understand the issue of *dukkha* if we understand the issue of prison clearly and thoroughly.

I’d like to advise that you use this word ‘*upādāna*’ instead of ‘attachment,’ ‘clinging,’ or any other English translation. Those English words are constantly being misunderstood. You may not understand it fully at this time, but try to use this word ‘*upādāna*’ to accustom your mouth, your mind, and your feelings to it. We must realize that the heart of Buddhism is to wipe out *upādāna*. The heart of Buddhism is that which gets rid of *upādāna*, or cuts it out. Then there is no prison, and then there is no *dukkha*.

Take the meanings of the English words ‘attachment,’ ‘grasping,’ and ‘clinging,’ and combine them to get the meaning of ‘*upādāna*.’ It’s better for us to use the word ‘*upādāna*.’ Its meaning is broader and it will enable us to look into this matter more deeply and extensively.

The Single Essence of Buddhism

It may be just one simple word, but *upādāna* is the most important thing. The heart of Buddhism is simply to uproot or cut out this *upādāna*. Then *dukkha* will be finished. Please understand that this is the heart of all Buddhism; it is found in every sect and school. Theravāda Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, or whatever kind of Buddhism you like — they’re different only in name or in the external ceremonies and practices. Inside it’s all the same thing: the cutting off of *upādāna*.

Please don't be sad, don't be disappointed or anxious, and don't make trouble for yourself thinking that you haven't been able to study all the schools of Buddhism. Don't worry if you haven't been able to study Buddhism in Tibet, in Sri Lanka, in Burma, in China, or wherever. That's a waste of time. There's just a single essence or heart of it all, namely, to eliminate upādāna. The labels Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Zen, Tibetan, and Chinese reflect only the outer covers of what seem to be different kinds of Buddhism. If there are any differences they are merely surface or superficial ones, just a bunch of accumulated rites and rituals. The true heart of the matter, the heart of all Buddhism, is the same everywhere: the uprooting and cutting out of upādāna. So study just this one thing. Don't waste time being sad or thinking that you haven't studied all the different kinds of Buddhism. Study this single matter of the cutting off of upādāna, which is all you need.

If you really want to know Mahāyāna Buddhism like an expert, you'll have to go and learn Sanskrit and other languages. You can spend almost your entire life trying to learn those languages and still not really know anything. If you want to know Zen well, you will have to learn Chinese and Japanese. You might spend your whole life learning Chinese and Japanese yet in the end not really know Zen. To know Vajrayāna, the Buddhism of Tibet, you'll have to learn Tibetan. Just learning the languages will cost almost your whole life, yet you won't really have learned anything essential, just superficialities conjured up as new developments. You still won't have gotten into the heart of Buddhism. Understand the heart of it all and learn just this one thing — the cutting off of upādāna. Then you'll know the essence of Buddhism, whether it is labeled Mahāyāna, Theravāda, Zen, or Vajrayāna. Whether it's from China, Japan, Korea, or wherever, it's all found in just one place — cutting out upādāna.

Even in the single school of Theravāda Buddhism there are many different forms. There are many different ways of mental cultivation, too. There's the kind of meditation from Burma, where they watch the rising and falling of the abdomen. There are the kinds based on the mantras 'sammā araham' and 'Buddho, Buddho,' and other kinds based on all sorts of different objects and approaches. If they are correct, however, the heart of each is always in exactly the same place — the need to eradicate upādāna. If it hasn't gotten to the elimination of upādāna, it isn't the real thing yet. And it won't be of any use or benefit, either. Why not be interested in the matter of cutting off upādāna or if we speak metaphorically, destroying the prison? So it's best if we now speak about this prison.

Discover It Inside

To speak most correctly, we really can't learn from scriptures, from techniques, or from those various teachings if we are to be truly successful. To successfully reap any real benefits, we must learn in the thing itself, namely, the actual prison. Study the actual dukkha in itself, that prison itself. Thus, we'd better look for and find this prison.

At this point, we are confronted by two choices: are we going to learn from the outside or are we going to learn from the inside? The distinction is crucial. The Buddha said that we must study from inside. The external learning is from books, ceremonies, practices, and things like that. Everything that we must learn, the Tathāgata has explained in terms of the body which is still alive. That means a living body, with a living mind, not a dead one. That's where real learning takes place, so learn right here. Learn from that inside, which means learn within yourself while still alive, before you die. External study — learning from books and all those different

ceremonies and rituals — hasn't really accomplished anything of value. So let's study inside. Please remember these words: "learn inside."

Training in *samādhi* and *vipassanā* (concentration and insight), that is, developing mindfulness with breathing (*ānāpānasati-bhāvanā*) as we have been doing here, is this inside learning. To do this inner study takes a fairly good amount of patience and endurance, but not too much. Actually, in comparison with some of the other things people practice, such as high level sports, gymnastics, and acrobatics, training in *samādhi* and *vipassanā* is less difficult. Yet people have enough endurance and perseverance to be able to do such things. Just have moderate endurance and you will be able to train with *samādhi* and *vipassanā* through mindfulness with breathing. Some people can't take it and have run away already. You have had enough endurance to get this far, and if you continue a bit more, you'll be able to do it and will receive the proper benefits. So please, apply yourself to this inner study and do so with sufficient patience and endurance.

Life Itself Is Prison

Using metaphors makes it easier for us to understand the matter we are discussing. So we will make use of them here today. The first prison which you must look for and see is life itself. If you look on life as a prison and see the prison that it is, then we must say that you know the truth of nature quite well. Most people, however, look on life as something enjoyable, as an opportunity to have fun. They are willing to live for the enjoyment of life. They then become infatuated with and engrossed in life, which is what turns it into prison.

If we see life as a prison, we must have seen the *upādāna* in this life. If we haven't seen the *upādāna* in life, we won't see that life is a prison and we'll be content to think that this life is heaven instead. This is because there are so many things in life that satisfy us, that trick us and engross us; however, in anything that we find satisfying, agreeable, attractive, and infatuating there will be *upādāna* as well. That thing becomes a prison. However much we love something, it becomes at least that much a prison because of *upādāna*. This is a positive kind of *upādāna*. As soon as we hate something or dislike something, that becomes a negative kind of *upādāna*, which is a prison just the same. To be beguiled and misled, either by the positive or by the negative, is a prison both ways. And that prison turns life into *dukkha*.

In addition, one will be able to see that when there is *upādāna* in life, then life becomes a prison. And so when there is no *upādāna*, then life is not a prison at all. You can see this right now, here — whether or not there is *upādāna* in your life. "Is my life a prison or not? Am I living in a prison of *upādāna* or not?" Each of you must look very carefully into your own hearts and see absolutely clearly whether life is a prison for you or not. Have you got a prison or not? Are you living in a prison or not? Otherwise, why are we coming here to meditate, to cultivate the mind? In essence, the true goal and purpose of mental development is the destruction of our prisons. Whether your studies and practice are successful, whether you can destroy the prison or not, is another question. Nonetheless, our real aim and purpose is to destroy the prison of life.

Consider this carefully. If we don't recognize *upādāna*, we are caught in prison without even recognizing the prison. We are trapped in prison without knowing the prison at all. What's more, we are satisfied and infatuated with that prison, just as we are infatuated and satisfied with life. Because we are infatuated and satisfied in life, we get caught in the prison of life. What are we going to do so that it won't be a prison? This is the question that we must answer most carefully and correctly.

How are we to live so that life is not a prison? This means that ordinarily, or naturally, life is not a prison, that we only make it into a prison through upādāna. Because of our own ignorance, our own stupidity, our own lack of correct understanding, we have upādāna in life. Life then becomes a prison for us. In Thai we have a phrase which is both crude and critical, ‘*som nam naa man*,’ which means something like ‘it serves you right.’ Life isn’t a prison or any such thing, but through our own stupidity we create upādāna out of ignorance, and then there’s the prison. What can we say but ‘*som nam naa man*, it serves you right.’

If you are successful in practicing *ānāpānasati-bhāvanā* (cultivation through mindfulness with breathing),² you will understand life well. You will know upādāna well and you won’t have any upādāna regarding this thing called ‘life.’ Then any prison that is happening dissolves and disappears, and new prisons don’t occur. This kind of life has the most value, but who realizes this or does not realize it is another matter. Please try to understand these facts as you ought to. This will motivate you to apply yourselves with energy and patience to be able to destroy the prison.

One way to look at these facts is to observe that life must carry on according to the law of nature, that we ourselves must carry on in line with natural law. We must search for food, must exercise, must rest and relax, must work to maintain and support our lives. We must do these and all the other things that you know so well. Not to do them is impossible. We’re forced to do them. This is a prison, too. The fact that we must always follow the law of nature is a kind of prison. How are we going to break out of this particular prison?

Why have we gotten caught in the prison of having to live subject to the law of nature? This prison comes from our upādāna regarding ourselves or regarding our lives. When there is upādāna toward ourselves, then ‘I,’ the self, is born. This ‘I’ is anxious about, worries over, and is frightened and afraid of these natural duties making itself miserable over them. These difficulties come from upādāna. If we had no upādāna regarding ‘I,’ these necessary duties would not be like a prison. We would be able to hunt for our needs, earn a living, and exercise and care for the body without being miserable if we didn’t have any upādāna toward life. This is very subtle; it’s a mystery for most people. This is the subtlety of natural truth. How are we going to live so that there’s no dukkha connected with the fact that everything in this life must be performed in line with the law of nature?

The Instincts Are Prison

The next prison to consider is that we live under the influence of the instincts. We are under the instincts’ power. All living things, whether people, animals, or plants, have instincts. These instincts constantly force us to follow our concerns and needs. This is especially true for the sexual or reproductive instinct. How much does it control, hassle, activate, and complicate us? Sexual feelings and reproductive urges squeeze us, oppress us, and disturb us so profoundly; they force us through all kinds of difficulties. But we can’t stop. Sometimes we prefer it this way. Our children grow and mature to the stage where the sexual instinct ripens completely, and then these children get caught in the prison of the sexual instinct.

Even the instinct of showing off can run our lives. Many people wouldn’t think of this as an instinct, but all animals have it. The need to show off, to brag, and to display oneself is an instinct. Even animals have the condition of wanting to show off that they are beautiful, strong, agile, or whatever. Even this craziest, most ridiculous instinct is a prison. We want to show off

and boast. If it wasn't a prison, it wouldn't force and oppress us in the least. Now, however, it forces us to buy beautiful clothing, beautiful jewelry, beautiful shoes even, and lots of them, too! Why must we have many beautiful shirts and many pairs of beautiful shoes? Why do we need them all? And forgive me, we must mention the women in particular here. There is this instinct to show off and it is one kind of prison. Because people can't endure it, they are forced to follow this instinct, spending all kinds of money on all kinds of things. The instinct to show off is the funniest, most ridiculous of them all. Still, it truly is a prison. People never have enough money because of this prison. Please consider and reflect carefully on these examples of instincts that we have mentioned. They are prisons too.

If we think about this, if we make an account of all our expenses, we'll discover that some people spend more money on clothing, jewelry, and keeping themselves always beautiful than they spend on food. Further, they insist on decorating and prettying up their houses, which piles up their expenses. Taken together, the two are more than they spend on food, which is necessary for life. We put more money into things which are unnecessary in life than we put into the necessities of life, like food. This is one more way of getting caught in the instinctual prison.

The Senses Are Prison

Next, we come to the most amusing prison, the prison that's closest to us. There are the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind: the six *āyatanas*, the six sense media that connect the inner and outer aspects of life. They are prisons, too. Take a slow, careful look at them. Listen carefully in order to understand how our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind — all six of them — become prisons.

In Pāli we call them the 'āyatanas.' The root of this word literally means 'mechanisms for communicating with the external world' — places, mechanisms, and means for connecting and communicating with the external world. We call them 'āyatanas.' If you're willing, use this Pāli word, 'āyatanas.' We aren't sure what to call them in English, maybe 'sense media' or 'connectors.' All six āyatanas are prisons.

We have upādāna towards life, that is, towards ourselves, which have these six media for sensing, experiencing, receiving, communicating with, and tasting sense objects. When there's upādāna regarding these six āyatanas, we serve them and become their slaves. We serve the eyes to gratify the eyes. We serve the ears to gratify the ears. We serve the nose to satisfy the nose. We serve the tongue to satiate the tongue. We serve the skin and general body sense to make it comfortable. We serve the mind, the mental sense, in order to soothe and comfort it. This means that all our behavior is just for entertaining these āyatanas. Everything we do is for the sake of these six āyatanas. We surrender to them and become their slaves. Then, as they squeeze and control us, there's no avoiding them. We call this 'getting caught in the prison of the āyatanas.'

Consider whether there is anyone, whether there are any of you, who is not slavishly serving these six āyatanas. And you serve them most willingly, don't you? You endure hardships and bend over backwards in order to serve them, always looking for ways to make the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind comfortable and happy, in the most trussed up way. So we must admit that we are slaves. Those people who lack wisdom will certainly be slaves of the āyatanas, will keep getting caught in the prison of the āyatanas. Through the correct and successful practice of mindfulness with breathing, we can escape from the prison. If we practice *ānāpānasati* incorrectly and incompletely, we will remain caught in the āyatana prison for longer than we can imagine.

Superstition Is Prison

For the next prison, we want to mention being deceived by the thing known as ‘*saiyasatr*.’³ All superstitious formalities and beliefs are *saiyasatr*, or ‘sleepology.’ The more ignorance there is, the more one lacks correct knowledge, the more one is trapped in superstitious prisons. Now education and science (*vidayasatr*)⁴ have improved, which has led to a better understanding of natural truths and of all things observable by science. Still, there remains too much entrapment in superstitious prisons. It’s a personal thing. Some people are caught very much and others not so much. People are caught in different degrees and ways, but we can say that there are still people caught in the prison of *saiyasatr*, trapped by superstition.

Although in general superstition has diminished greatly due to the progress of science, there is still quite a bit of *saiyasatr* left in the temples and churches. Please forgive us for saying so, but the place we can find superstition the most is in churches, in the temples, and in places of that sort. Although superstition has lessened in general, there’s a lot remaining in such places. Wherever there are altars, wherever people bow down and worship so-called sacred and holy things, there is the place where the ‘sleeping science’ persists. Superstition is for people who are asleep. It’s for those who don’t understand correctly, who are ignorant. We are taught these things as children, before we have the intelligence and ability to reason about them. Children believe whatever they’re told, and so ‘adults’ teach them many superstitious things. If you still feel that thirteen is an unlucky number, that’s *saiyasatr*. You’re still sleeping. There are many other examples of superstition, but we’d better not name them. Some people might get offended. These kinds of things are prisons. Why not look carefully enough to see them as such. Even the number thirteen becomes a prison when we’re foolish.

Sacred Institutions Are Prisons

We should continue with those institutions or establishments which are holy and sacred, or are famous and celebrated, or are rumored to be so elite and prestigious that anyone who becomes a member of one is prestigious, too. There are a number of such places and institutions around. As soon as someone registers as a member of that association or this organization, that institute or this establishment, they start to get ideas and feelings about it. They feel that “we’re better than them” or “we’re the ones who are right and the rest are stupid.” They grasp and cling without the least bit of consideration or critical thinking. In this way, that institution, even that church — we can’t avoid saying so — becomes a prison. So we beg of you, don’t think that Suan Mokkh is some holy or miraculous institution, otherwise Suan Mokkh will become a prison. Please don’t turn Suan Mokkh into your prison. You ought to think freely, examine carefully, and evaluate critically. Understand and believe only what is genuinely beneficial. Don’t get imprisoned in any of those prestigious or famous institutions.

Teachers Are Prison

Now we come to the prison called ‘*ajahn*’ (teacher, master), the famous teachers whose names reverberate afar. In Burma there’s ‘Sayadaw This,’ in Sri Lanka there’s ‘Bhante That,’ in Tibet there’s ‘Lama So-and-So,’ and in China there’s ‘Master Whoever.’ Every place has its famous teacher whose name is bouncing around. Whether national, regional, provincial, or local, every place has got its Big Guru. Then people cling and attach to their teachers as being the only teacher

who is correct; their teacher is right and all other teachers are completely wrong. They refuse to listen to other people's teachers. And they don't think about or examine the teachings of their own ajahns. They get caught in the 'teacher prison.' They turn the teacher into a prison and then get caught in it. It's an attachment which is truly ridiculous. Whether a big teacher or a small teacher, upādāna is at work just the same. People keep building prisons out of their teachers and gurus. Please don't get caught in even this prison.

Holy Things Are Prison

The next prison is that of holy scriptures, which we can find everywhere. Where there isn't much wisdom, these things are much clung to, the more so as being 'holy.' They even become stand-ins or replacements for God. It's as if merely bringing in the holy books is the same as actually getting help. It leads to there being many kinds of holy objects: sacred relics, holy water, and all kinds of sacred things. Be most careful of this word 'holy.' It will become a prison before you know it. The more holy something is, the more greatly it imprisons. Watch out for so-called 'sacredness' or 'holiness.'

You ought to know that there is nothing more sacred than the law of *idappaccayatā* (conditionality), the supreme holiness higher than all things. Everything else is holy by convention or by what people themselves concoct, which is merely holiness through upādāna. Wherever there is holiness through upādāna, that holiness is a prison. The law of *idappaccayatā* is sacred in itself, without needing any clinging. There's no need for upādāna. This fundamental natural law controls everything already and is truly holy all by itself. Please don't get caught in the prison of holy things. Don't make sacred things into a prison for yourself.

Goodness Is Prison

A further prison is one that is very important, one that causes all sorts of problems. This prison is what they call 'goodness.' Everyone likes the 'good' and people all teach each other to do good and be good. Then they worship what they call 'good.' However, as soon as there is upādāna mixed in with what they call good, that good becomes a prison. You ought to be good and have goodness without having upādāna. Then goodness won't be prison. If there's upādāna it becomes prison. As I am fond of saying, they go crazy about goodness, get drunk on goodness, and get lost in goodness until it turns into a problem. So be extremely careful not to make goodness into a prison. Regrettably, there's nothing we can do to help now, everyone is caught in the prison of goodness — blindly, obliviously, trapped in the prison of goodness.

If you are a Christian, we request that you think carefully and ponder deeply the teaching in the book of Genesis where God forbids Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.⁵ Don't go and eat it. Eating it will lead to knowing how to discriminate between good and evil. That discrimination then clings with upādāna toward that good and evil. Then good and evil become prisons. This teaching is very profound and good, most intelligent and wise, but nobody seems to understand it. People don't show much interest in it and thus can't be correct Christians. If they were proper Christians they would not cling with upādāna to good and evil. We must not make either good or evil into prisons. This means not getting caught in the prison of goodness.

We all have swallowed that fruit and come to know good and evil — then gotten caught and stuck in all the good and evil. We have had continual problems ever since; that's how it came

to be called ‘original sin,’ or sometimes ‘perpetual sin.’ It became the original prison, a perpetual prison. Please beware! Be careful not to get caught in this original prison, this perpetual prison. Don’t ever let yourself get caught in this prison.

With being imprisoned in goodness, or the good, as soon as one gets caught it carries on further all the way to the highest good, to supreme goodness. Then the supreme goodness will become the supreme prison. If it develops this way, God will become the supreme prison. May you understand and remember how upādāna builds such prisons.

Views Are Prison

The next prison is our own *ditṭhi*. The Pāli word ‘ditṭhi’ is difficult to translate. Knowledge, thoughts, ideas, theories, opinions, beliefs, positions, and understanding — all these are ditṭhis. Ditṭhi means all our personal thoughts, opinions, theories, and beliefs. It isn’t just certain opinions and little beliefs, it’s all of them, all views. Everything with which we view experience is called ‘ditṭhi.’ We are caught in a prison of our own views. We don’t obey anyone except our personal ditṭhi. This is a most terrifying prison, because we impetuously, rashly, hastily sail along according to our own personal views. We turn our backs on and lose out on the things that ought to benefit us, because our minds are closed to everything but our own ideas, beliefs, and views. Thus, these views become a horrible prison that holds us and locks us into just one way of understanding. Beware of the prison of one’s own ditṭhi.

Purity Is the Highest Prison

Next, we come to a prison which is really strange and marvelous; you could call it the ‘highest prison.’ The highest prison is what people call ‘innocence’ or ‘purity.’ It’s difficult to understand exactly what they mean by these words. We hear all kinds of talk about innocence and purity, but people never seem to know what they’re talking about. This purity is clung to and attached to, is regarded as this and that, is worshipped, is used for show and competition, is for boasting all over how pure ‘I’ am. But if there’s upādāna it’s all just purity through upādāna, not genuine purity. There are many forms of purity that are assumed out of clinging, such as needing to take baths; making incantations; being anointed, sprinkled, or dowsed with who knows what; or any of the myriad rituals and ceremonies done for ‘purity.’ This purity is pure upādāna, and purity through attachment is a prison. Please don’t get lost and end up in the prison named ‘purity.’

It’s something pitiful to see — clinging to self so much then attaching to purity just as much. Some religious creeds even go so far as to teach some sort of perpetual purity as an eternal soul dwelling in an imagined eternity or some such thing. The whole thing comes from grasping and clinging to purity through upādāna until one is caught in an eternal prison. It just ends up an eternal prison.

Voidness Is Not Prison

May we inform you that this is the last one, the final prison? Escape from the prison of highest purity, break out of the purest prison, into the voidness that is free of soul, ego, and self. Not having any self, living free from self, voidness of self — of any sense of self, void of all ideas and notions about self — is true purity. Any purity which is truly eternal cannot be a prison in any respect, unless people misunderstand and cling to it as a self or soul, in which case it becomes a

prison again. Let go unequivocally, be absolutely free of self — that is real purity. It's no prison. Voidness is the purity which isn't a prison.

So it is that the real prison, the collection of all these prisons that we have mentioned, is the thing people call 'attā' (self, soul, or ego). Oneself is the prison. This 'somebody' here is the prison. Every kind of prison is included in, comes down to 'oneself' and 'myself.' Clinging to self as self and then as belonging to self, attaching to 'I' and 'mine' — this is the true prison, the heart and soul of all prisons. All prisons are gathered in this thing called 'attā.' Tear out the foolishness that creates attā, along with attā itself, and all the prisons will be gone. If you practice mindfulness with breathing correctly until truly successful in it — real, not imagined success — you will destroy all the prisons completely. That is, destroy attā, then all the prisons are finished and we won't build any more of them ever again. May you all experience success in destroying the prisons, that is, attā or self.

The purpose of mindfulness with breathing is to remove all vestiges of upādāna regarding self. The complete removal of attachment toward self is the final and perfect quenching of dukkha, which is the meaning of liberation or salvation. The highest goal of every religion is salvation, the value and benefits of which are beyond words. So please try. Mindfulness with breathing, when practiced correctly, leads to this liberation from attā. I have been trying my best and I am willing to do whatever I can to help everyone understand ānāpānasati and practice it successfully, in order that all of us can escape from all aspects of humanity's prison.

With your permission, we will end today's lecture here.

Endnotes

¹ Pronounced oo-paa-daa-na. The oo is as in English 'shoe' and 'you'; the long vowels of paa and daa are stressed.

² See Ajahn Buddhadasa's *Mindfulness With Breathing: A Manual for Serious Beginners* (Wisdom Publications).

³ Saiyasatr, 'sleepology' or the 'sleepy science,' is a Thai word derived from Sanskrit words for 'sleep' (saiyā) and 'system of knowledge' (sāstra, science; literally, a sharp-edged weapon; used like the suffix 'ology').

⁴ From vidayā, 'knowledge, science,' and sāstra (as in previous note).

⁵ Gen. 2:16-3:24.

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This Dhamma teaching is also available as free ebook under the title
“The Prison of Life”: <https://www.suanmokkh.org/books/16>
(Translator/Editor: Santikaro)

Audio files: 5125310210010.mp3

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