

# *The Meaning of Retreat*

by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro 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](http://www.suanmokkh.org) and [www.bia.or.th](http://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](mailto:suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com)).*

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First of all, I'd like to express my delight that all of you have come to this place in this way.

First of all, [I am delighted] that you have come here in order to find knowledge and understanding, to come for the sake of the Dhamma. And then second, that you have come here for a retreat. And then we ask you to make this a retreat that is fitting and appropriate to the meaning of the word 'retreat' – to make it a *real* retreat.

Those of you who are English speakers already know what the meaning of 'retreat' is. It's to lower our battle flag, to stop fighting, to stop arguing and struggling, and to back up into a quiet peaceful place. In English this is what we mean by 'retreat.' To get out of the battle, to leave the fighting behind, and find a quiet peaceful place. So we would like to summarize it more briefly in saying that 'retreat' is to stop being crazy – 'retreat' is to end insanity.

Commonly, everybody in this world is insane. Just about everyone is insane or crazy in different ways. Sometimes they're crazy about food, sometimes people go crazy about flesh or sensual things, and sometimes they go crazy about fame. Being crazy about food, flesh, and fame leads to lots of insanity. How much this is rampant in our world you can easily see for yourself. Coming to a retreat means to lessen, to weaken this insanity in a meaningful way.

To study Dhamma and then practice accordingly is to end all insanity about these three things.

*[A den of strife is the household life  
Filled with toil and need.  
Free and high as the open sky  
Is the life that the homeless lead.]*

The life of the ordinary layperson, the householder, is full of toil or work, and need – it's full of toil and need. A den of strife is the household life, filled with toil and need. But then coming to a retreat is to find freedom and openness – to end the craziness of all that toil and need, and to find openness as in: “Free and high is the open sky, [this] is the life that the homeless lead.”

Those who have freed themselves from the bonds of home and become homeless find freedom and openness. This is what we mean by ‘retreat.’

A retreat is to lower our battle flags, which in Buddhism has quite profound meaning because all of us are raising our battle flags through our defilements, our desires, our pride, and our views and opinions. And so to lower this battle flag – that is of views, opinions, defilements, pride and desire – has very deep meaning in Buddhism. If we can lower this flag, then we can make a real retreat, but if we insist on keeping our flag waving in the air, there's no way we will have a retreat.

To say ‘stop fighting’ or ‘to end the fighting’ has very deep Dhamma meaning because we're fighting with and through the defilements all the time. We use our defilements to fight against the world and against others. To stop this fighting, even if only temporarily, that has a very deep meaning. It may not last forever, but still, this retreat, to put our flag down and take a break from the defilements, to learn to control them, to find a method to stop the defilements, even if only for a short period, this has a lot of value and meaning for us.

Another meaning of ‘retreat’ is to end the busyness and chaos. Our lives are full of being busy. Most of us are busy all the time, if not physically, we're busy mentally and this makes things very chaotic. This is expressed in a Thai saying which I'm not sure how to translate but something like, ‘to pack in’ or ‘to stuff in the smoke’ which means to state that throughout the night we're packing in smoke, we're thinking and worrying and planning all night long what we're going to do tomorrow. We stay up late, we can't go to sleep because we're so

busy thinking and planning and worrying about the next day. And then once the sun comes up we blaze into fire. And this means once the sun comes up we get out and get into action, running all over the place, trying to accomplish this and that according to our desires and plans and everything. So this Thai saying comes from the original Pāli scriptures: ‘All night long to pack in the smoke, and then during the day to blaze into fire.’ This is how most of us lead our lives. Even at night, even if we sleep we’re still so tense that we dream. We can’t even really find peace while sleeping so we end up dreaming. So one meaning of ‘retreat’ is to get free of all this busyness and tension.

In Thai it’s very common to talk about ‘being crazy’ about one’s wife, children, home, to be crazy about one’s car or buffalos or motorcycle, to be crazy about fame and honor and status and money, to be crazy about all kinds of things. This is a very common expression in Thai, to be crazy about all these things, to be drunk or intoxicated with these things. Which is far more intoxicating than alcohol, and more crazy than to be in the mental hospital. This craziness of wives and husbands and children and money and possessions and cars and walkmans and all these things.

There are even people who are Dhamma crazy. I don’t know, have any of you come here with this kind of craziness? Or some people are *vipassanā* crazy, they’ve really gotten carried away and gone insane about what they call ‘vipassanā.’ They practice meditation for the sake of developing special abilities or magic powers, so that they can use them to get advantage over others, to get ahead in business or something. And once they start thinking in this way then they get crazy about meditation. So one can get crazy about just about anything, even about Dhamma and insight meditation. So be very careful about this because as soon as this craziness sets in, all peacefulness is destroyed.

And the whole world is full of this lunacy. Everyone is crazy. They’re in love with positive things and they hate negative things. This loving the positive and hating the negative is just insanity. The only way to give up insanity is to learn to stop loving the positive and hating the negative.

It’s much better not to be crazy about these things. The positive will bite us in one way, and the negative will bite us in another. Since both the positive & the negative are biting us, why bother being crazy about them?

The positive makes us love things until we become crazy in that way. And the negative makes us hate things until we become crazy in that direction. This

craziness wears us out, it wastes energy, it makes us busy and confused for no purpose at all. There's no way that this craziness can compare with being sane – to give up the craziness and just being at peace. There's really no comparison.

When we love something we very quickly become its slave. You should observe that whenever we love something, whatever we love, we become its slave. This kind of slavery is worse than the physical slavery where people are bought and sold to different masters. That's one kind of slavery, but the slavery that really does damage in this world is this slavery to the things we love. When we love something, first we'll be happy and then we'll be sad. We become glad and then sad, back and forth, depending on our relationship to these things we love. As circumstances change we become sad, we become glad – sad/glad. This going back and forth like this is just more craziness. To become free of this – to get out of this slavery, would be a very nice thing.

Please take a good look at these facts and then you'll be able to make a real Dhamma retreat. You'll see that when you love money, then you just can't get free of the money, you're enslaved to the money and your mind dwells on it all the time. Or if you love your car, then you become a slave to the car, always at the mercy of its needs. Or even if you love your dog, then you become a slave to the dog and can never get free of the dog. If you see this and understand it, then you'll be ready to make a retreat – to make a retreat where we end all this craziness, or we get free of this lunacy.

In order to help you to have an appetite for this retreat which we're talking about, we'd like to look at some of the disadvantages or even the harm of not making a retreat – or the harm of not being able to retreat. We'd like to look at this in a little bit of detail.

What we'd like to do is to mention some of the ways that this craziness, this being caught up in the positive & negative, messes up our ordinary lives. We'd like to mention some basic examples of this and discuss them in a little bit of detail. So first, I will list them and then Tan Santikaro will try and explain them. The list begins with love, and then anger, hatred, fear, excitement, worry about the future, longing after the past, envy, jealousy and then sexual jealousy around one's husband or wife or partner.

All of these things are biting us throughout the day. Most of us haven't paid attention but throughout our ordinary experience in life, these different things are biting us, are harming us, and preventing us from having any real peace and

joy in life. So to look at the harm and the punishment of these things will give us a genuine appetite to make a real retreat. So we need to look at them – we need to explain them a little bit. The first is love. Whenever we love something there's this positiveness about it. And we get trapped by that positiveness, by the attraction of it. And then whenever we're trapped by something, enslaved by something, then it bites us. It's able to bite us because we're totally at its mercy. And in this way love brings us pain and harm.

Whatever we love bites us, and it bites our hearts, it bites them quite viciously. Yet still, we worship love, we put love on a pedestal and bow down to it. Can you see how crazy and insane this is?

Anger is like a fire. When we're angry with someone where does the fire burn? The fire doesn't burn them, it burns us. The other person is probably just laughing at us. But when we get angry we just burn ourselves. It's really quite stupid. So why is it that we still like to get angry?

And then when there's hatred, we stay up all night with this hatred, thinking of what we're going to do to this other person. But all the time that we're lying there in hatred, we don't really do anything to the other person, we just destroy ourselves. With this hatred we really can't do anything to the other person, but it ruins us. This hatred bites our hearts and ruins our minds. We ought to see how ridiculous and stupid this is.

As for fear, you all probably know this much better than I do. I don't have much fear, but it seems that you all have fear of all kinds of things: nuclear war, nuclear waste, AIDS, thieves, and all kinds of other things. So you ought to know fear much better than us to start with.

The words 'kingdom of fear' appear because of this fear that dominates so many people's minds. When fear takes over our mind then we are in a kingdom of fear. We don't sleep at night because of this fear, we're nervous and tense all day long because of this fear. This fear makes us crazy. We have no chance of retreat when we're in this kingdom of fear. How ridiculous and pathetic this is, is something we need to take note of.

And then for excitement – to get excited. Why is it that we like this so much – that we like to go places that inspire us and stimulate us, to get our heart beating and get all excited? We like to watch sports or even brutal things like American football or boxing. Or we go to the movies where there's lots of

violence, or to the horror movies. Or even all kinds of cultural shows and travels where we go just to get stimulated and inspired and excited. Why is it that we like this so much? It doesn't make our minds peaceful. It doesn't lead to any real understanding or wisdom. So why is it that we want so much to get inspired and excited?

Even humor and comedy – this is another pretty silly thing. People really love jokes and riddles and humor and all kinds of things. Why is it that we love this so much? It doesn't make us peaceful. It's no kind of a retreat. But yet why is the whole world so crazy about humor?

Next is worrying about, thinking about the future. Which comes down to hope – to having hopes and dreams. Originally in Thailand it wasn't like that. But then when the first western teachers, especially from England came, they taught that we should live for our hopes and dreams – we should live according to hopes. Originally in Thailand we didn't have that kind of silly idea. One understood that we lived with *sati* (awareness) and *paññā* (understanding), that one's life was lived according to mindfulness and wisdom. But then we brought in western teachers and then they taught that we should live according to hopes, we should have dreams, we should build castles in the sky, and chase after all kinds of impossible things. And so we're always worrying now about the future. We're always thinking about things that haven't come because our minds are full of these hopes and dreams and plans.

All we need to do is to think, to spend some time thinking and examining what we need to do. And then just do it without bringing in all kinds of hopes about the future. If we would, with mindfulness and wisdom, think carefully about what we need to do, and then do it, also with mindfulness and wisdom, then we wouldn't have to have all these dreams and hopes getting in the way and there wouldn't be any problem. So be careful about having all these hopes and expectations for the future. They just cause us a lot of turmoil and distress.

Hope is not peaceful – hoping and dreaming is not peaceful. And in a retreat, there's no hope. These things just don't go together. So in coming to a retreat learn to find peacefulness and let go of the hopes and the expectations.

Next, is longing after the past. Certain things, although they're gone – they've faded away, they're completely finished – some things are still hard to forget and so we keep remembering them and longing after them. This keeps our mind caught up and tied up with these things which no longer exist. And

this entrapment then interferes with our lives, it confuses us, it dazes us. So this is another thing that interferes with retreat. In retreat we're just with the present, with reality. So to let go of this longing after the past – which is just the opposite of worrying about the future. One drags us off into the non-existent future, the other drags us back into the non-existent past. Both ways are of no real value to us, and just bite our minds.

The next is *itcha-ritsayaa* [Thai, from Pāli: *issā* and Sanskrit: *īrṣyā*] (which Ajahn Buddhādāsa wonders if the English translation of 'envy' really captures the meaning here. Because in Pāli '*ritsayaa*' is that which will destroy the world, '*ritsayaa*' will ruin the world. Is our English word 'envy' strong enough to include this, this quality that is going to ruin the world?)

When the capitalists envy the communists, and when the communists envy the capitalists, this will destroy the world, this will drag the world into ruin. This word *ritsayaa* is not just envy but includes the competitiveness that goes with envy.

A woman who is not so beautiful becomes very envious of a woman who is more beautiful. Or a poor person becomes envious of the man who is wealthier. Or the person who doesn't have much power and influence becomes envious of someone who has power and influence. And this bites the minds of these people who are envious. It doesn't have any effect on the object of the envy. It's the subject, the envious one, who bears the brunt, who suffers the burden of this envy.

Envy is not a retreat. Retreat is not envy. So we need to get this envy out of our hearts.

Next is *huang* [Thai], which is possessiveness, jealous possessiveness, where we feel possessive about things and are very jealous about them, we don't want to share them with anybody. We become afraid that others will do something to our possessions. And this keeps our minds very agitated and stimulated, and there's no retreat in this. And then *hueng* [Thai] is another word which is more narrow, it's specifically sexual possessiveness, to feel possessive towards one's husband or wife, or nowadays one's sexual partner. This sexual possessiveness and envy leads to all kinds of fights. People are always killing each other and this is often the cause. Angry lovers or cheating husbands and wives, are shooting or poisoning, or whatever, each other, all because of this

sexual possessive jealousy. Neither of these kinds of possessiveness are a kind of retreat. They are the antithesis of retreat.

This *hueng* (sexual possessiveness) is condensed from the ordinary possessive jealousy. You can see this even in children. When a child has a toy or anything that is better than his friends, the child becomes quite possessive and jealous about it and doesn't want anyone to play with 'my toy' or play with 'my doll' – it's 'mine,' it's 'mine.' We can see this even in children. Then that same possessive jealousy about dolls or toys or clothes, a new pair of shoes, a bicycle, even books and pencils and crayons and things, this can be condensed – becomes much stronger when it takes a sexual form, when it comes more and more to be centered on sex.

Give us a chance to go through these one more time, and please listen carefully. And we hope the translator gets it right this time. The first is love, anger, hatred, fear, excitement, hopes and worries, longing or worrying about the past, possessive jealousy, and sexual jealousy.

Please find the best translation in your own language for these things. These things are very important because they're our worst enemies in life. So we need to know them, and it helps to know their names. And then when we know them we can get free of them. None of these things are retreat. In none of them is there any peace, any lightness, any freedom. So we need to remove all of these things from our minds, from our hearts. This is the object of retreat – to get free of all these nasty enemies.

You've all come here to attend a ten-day meditation retreat. You've come here to participate in this. But to really do so you need an appetite, you need a real appetite for the retreat. And the only way to truly develop a good appetite for retreat is to understand the things which are the opposite, to understand the things that are not retreat. We need to look at and understand, not just by talking like this, but we need to really see in ourselves the craziness, the lunacy of these things we've been talking about – to see, really see them, how they trap us and bite us – how they mess up our lives. When we see these things that are not retreat, when we see the insanity of them, then we develop an appetite for real retreat. So to really participate, to really join this course, it's necessary to look at these things. The retreat is the solution to the problem. Or it's a way of learning how to solve the problem. But we need to see these problems first if

we're to know what to do. Then we can find the way to deal with these problems, with this insanity.

Another important warning is that this appetite we're talking about, don't let it be an appetite of desire. If this is an appetite of just desire, it will become crazy itself, and then it won't do us any good. We need the appetite of *sati-paññā*, of mindfulness and wisdom, the appetite that develops when we are aware of what's going on in our lives, and begin to understand what's taking place. This is the right kind of appetite. So if we have this kind of intention, this kind of inspiration, it's safe. But if our intention, our aspiration, our inspiration, comes just from desire to get, to have, to be, then it will just drive us crazy like all the other things we've been talking about.

If you have this correct kind of appetite, the appetite of mindfulness and understanding, then you'll enjoy yourself for the entire ten days of the retreat. You'll have fun. You'll enjoy studying and learning from the different things that occur during the retreat. But if your appetite is mixed up with desire, with attachment, with defilement and selfishness – if there's any selfishness mixed up with this appetite, then you'll get depressed, you'll get angry, you'll get bored, and you'll have all these various forms of craziness coming in and causing you trouble. And you won't be able to stay for the ten days. Eventually because of your own selfishness, you'll have to get up and run away. It's very important to find this correct appetite, so that we can do the work of the ten days, and enjoy it – really enjoy the investigation and the learning of this retreat.

Once we start to become aware and understand these various forms of craziness which prevent retreat, then we need to understand where these things come from. What is the source of our inability to retreat? Where do these things that interfere with retreat come from? For this reason we need to study, to investigate what is called *paṭiccasamuppāda*, or 'dependent origination.' Dependent origination will explain from where these various forms of craziness arise. It will also explain how these different kinds of craziness will calm away and will end. So we need to spend some time to study this dependent origination. First, we study it in theory, that's all we can do in a talk like this – is to discuss it in theory. But once we have some understanding of it then we can put it into practice in the form of mindfulness with breathing meditation as you've been learning. So please take some time to learn about dependent origination.

So I ask you all to be patient in order to study dependent origination. But in fact if you're already interested in this, if you already have an appetite for this, you won't have to be patient. But if you're not yet interested, then you'll have to be patient and put up with this a little bit until you finally start to understand it. We need to look into the 'what,' the 'where,' the 'why,' and the 'how' of all these different kinds of craziness: love, anger, hatred, fear, excitement, and so on. What are they? Where do they come from? How do they arise? Why? All of these questions are answered by dependent origination. Once we understand the principle of dependent origination, once we see how it works, all these questions will be answered.

Also we'd like you to understand something which is a more private matter, a more special – which is somewhat beside this matter of dependent origination. Some of you won't be interested in this but we'd like to discuss it nonetheless. That the Buddha himself said that “The one who sees the Dhamma sees the Buddha; whoever sees the Buddha sees the Dhamma.” And that “The one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination; whoever sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma.” This may not be of interest to some of you, but nonetheless we ask that you allow us to speak about it.

The Buddha in his own time frequently pointed out to people that to see his body did not mean to see the Buddha. There were some people who were very attached to his physical form and they liked to hang around with him, they liked to follow him around. And he told them that, “Just to see my body, or to grab onto my robes, this doesn't mean to see me. To see the Buddha, one has to see the Dhamma, which means to see dependent origination.” He made this very clear, that seeing the Buddha wasn't a matter of seeing a physical body, or touching the physical body of that man. Nowadays, if we were to read the many books available about the life of the Buddha, there's no way that this will lead to us seeing the Buddha. The only way to see the Buddha then as well as now, is to see the Dhamma. And we see the Dhamma by seeing dependent origination. This, for each of us, is a very private matter, it's a very individual matter. It's not something that someone else can show you, or do for you, or give you. It's something you must find within yourself – to see the truth, to see the Dhamma of dependent origination within yourself. For those of us who would like to meet the Buddha, this is the only way to truly meet the Buddha. It's a private matter within our own hearts.

And when we see the Buddha, then we can see genuine Buddhism. If one hasn't yet seen the Buddha then one doesn't know what Buddhism is. And so Buddhism – although there are many books available now, there are many western scholars in particular writing many books about Buddhism, very few of these, if any, are actually about Buddhism because they're not written from a real understanding of the Buddha. To know Buddhism we need to see the Buddha. And the only way to see the Buddha is to see dependent origination. Buddhism isn't in the fancy temples, or the robes that the monks wear, or in the shaven head, or the ceremonies, or the mandalas, or any of these things. The only place to see Buddhism is in the Buddha, which we can only find in seeing dependent origination. Please take particular interest in this. It will save you a lot of time and energy.

To see dependent origination is to see the real meat of Buddhism, to see the substance or the essence of Buddhism. To just read books about Buddhism or just have ideas about Buddhism – just pick up some new opinions about Buddhism, is just to have the superficial or the surface aspects of Buddhism – just the covering outside. To get to the real meat and essence of Buddhism we need to see dependent origination – not think about it, but actually see it directly for ourselves. So we hope that your coming here for this ten-day retreat is motivated by an intention for seeing dependent origination, to really find out what the real essence of Buddhism is. Once you can see dependent origination then your retreat will change, you'll have a real retreat. When you can totally see dependent origination, your life will become a retreat, totally peaceful, with no more craziness. But now, we need to start in this way, with this ordinary kind of retreat. But if we come to *this* retreat for the sake of seeing dependent origination, then we might see it and then have a perfect retreat.

If we ask, 'where does one see dependent origination?' The answer is very simple: 'we see it in the mind.' The place to see dependent origination is in the mind. And then if we ask, 'with what do we see dependent origination?' The answer is again: 'the mind.' We see dependent origination with the mind, in the mind. But this mind that can see dependent origination is a special mind, it's a mind that has been improved, a mind that has been trained so that it has certain qualities which most minds normally don't have. For this reason then, mindfulness with breathing is very necessary. We need some method or technique to improve the mind, to strengthen mental qualities so that the mind is able to see dependent origination. So to see dependent origination is our goal in

coming here. But to do so, we need to learn how to develop the mind using mindfulness with breathing.

So one needs to try and be patient and keep striving to practice mindfulness with breathing, to keep working on it, until we develop the mind to the point where we can see dependent origination. This ‘seeing’ of dependent origination becomes a realization of what this truth is about. And then this realization becomes a kind of understanding which is direct experience – it’s not an intellectual or theoretical knowledge, but it’s the knowledge that is direct experience. When there is this deep understanding and experience of dependent origination – first we see it, we catch glimpses and insights, and then this deepens into realization and becomes a total experience of dependent origination – when this occurs, then all the forms of craziness disappear. All those things that ruin our lives will be destroyed. And then one’s retreat becomes perfect – it becomes a perfect retreat, or what in Buddhism is called ‘Nibbāna.’

Seeing dependent origination will give us that which is most valuable in life, it will free us from all our problems and troubles. And practicing mindfulness with breathing will enable us to see dependent origination every time we breathe in and every time we breathe out. When we can see dependent origination, when we experience it directly while we’re breathing in and out, this will bring a purity to the mind, to life – everything becomes pure and clean. There’s a coolness to life. And then there’s a clarity. This cleanness, coolness, and clarity is what we can call ‘new life.’ In this way we come upon a life that is totally new, totally fresh, something we’ve never experienced before. This is the result of seeing dependent origination with every breath, every second, every moment. So we practice *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness with breathing) in order to be mindful of dependent origination every moment, and this gives us a new life which is pure, cool, and clear.

So please try to bring this about. Now, you may not be totally successful in ten days. You may not realize this completely, perfectly within a ten-day retreat. But you can in these ten days get the basic understanding you need to continue practicing. You can find out and discover the basic fundamental things you need to know in order to explore and develop the mind, until the point of seeing dependent origination. So please use this time to find out what dependent origination is, develop some theoretical understanding about it, enough so that you can continue investigating it once you leave. And use this time to find out

how to practice mindfulness with breathing, and to experiment with it until you understand it well enough to continue working on these things even after this ten-day retreat ends.

So we hope that you will all have an appetite for these things and will be able to put forth effort and energy into this study and practice. And we wish you all the best success that each of you can find in this work. Last of all, we'd like to thank you all for being good listeners, for paying attention and giving us this time. Tomorrow morning if we're able we'll speak again and we'll discuss the subject of dependent origination directly. Thank you for listening so well. That's all for this morning.

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