



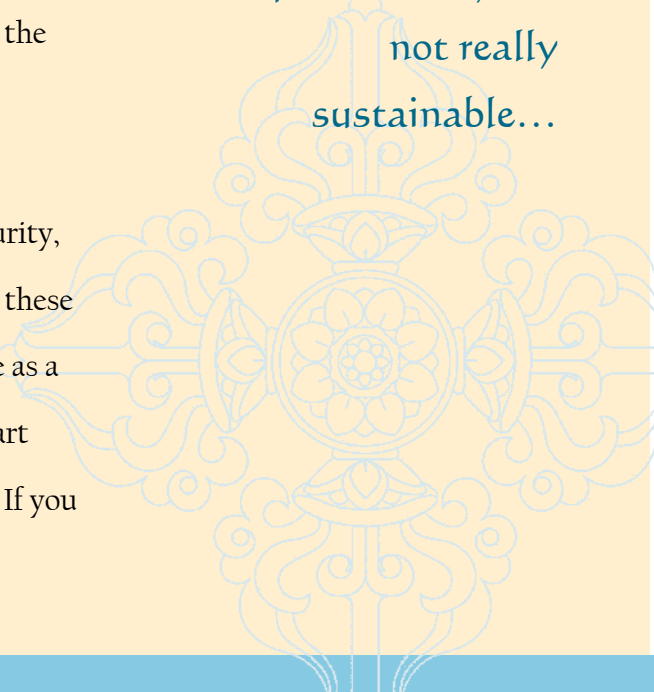
EMPTINESS &
PURE AWARENESS

ajahn thanisaro

When we are children we function on the instinctual level, so that spiritual attraction becomes focused on/sublimated by food and warmth, comfort and toys. Then, later on, that satisfaction is found with people, with activities, relationships, machines, ambitions, the doings of worldly existence. All along, however, that pull has fundamentally been a spiritual motivation.

It gets sidetracked by the search for wealth, for material security, for permanent happy relationships. But one sees the reason why these things don't complete the picture: they are not really sustainable as a support because they are impermanent, and also because the heart knows it has not gone the whole way, one has taken a side road. If you

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are trying to make a journey to a distant place and you take a detour, you get caught up in interesting things along the way. But it is only when you get to your destination that there is feeling of, “Ahh, now we are home, now we are safe, now everything is okay.”

Even when you are sidetracked, there is a feeling lingering in your heart, “Well, there is a bit further to go.” Or, “This is all very interesting, but, mmm, there is something missing here, there is something not quite right, not quite true, not quite final here.” The attraction towards Truth is fundamental. It is attraction towards reality, the basic fabric of all being. This is the primary natural law; it's the living law that rules the universe. The gravitation which draws all things to Truth, drawing everything to the center, this is the



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basic law of life. So once we are attuned to this pull and have realized its spiritual nature, and have picked up the idea that life is fundamentally and completely a spiritual activity, once we have got that clear in our mind, the task is much easier, and the realization of the Goal becomes inevitable. The tendency to get side-tracked becomes diminished, the knowing of the true nature of the Goal calls us on, encourages and inspires us to keep going.

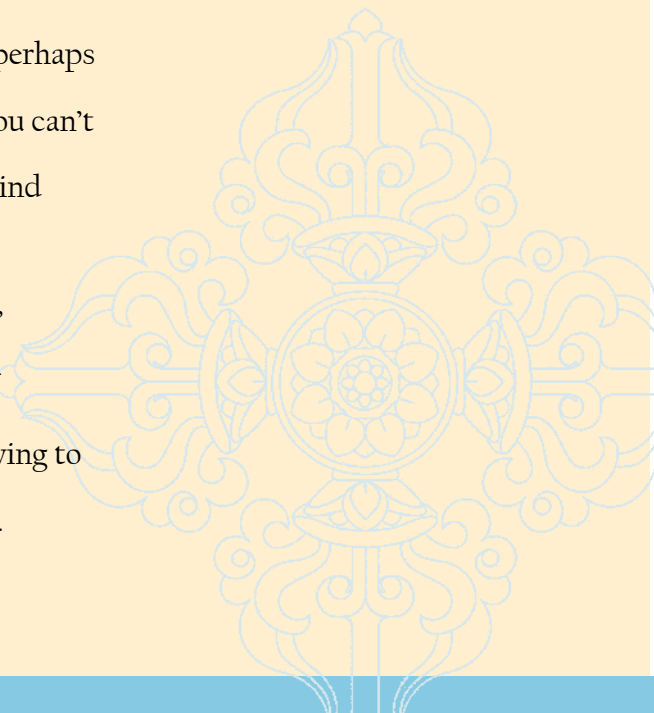
When we talk about the the Goal, the mind goes a little bit blank trying to get a hold of it. We talk about ‘emptiness’: the realization of Absolute Truth, or of our true nature, the realization of the non-conceptual pure mind, we describe as ‘the ultimate emptiness’.

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Goal

We use that kind of terminology not because there is nothing there, but because when the conceptual mind tries to grasp ultimate reality, since it can't be formed into a pattern, it finds that there is no-thing there. It is like picking up a book in Chinese; if you can't read Chinese you are picking up a book in a foreign language. Here is a book, perhaps full of profound and wonderful teachings and pure truths, but you can't read the script, so it's meaningless. This is like the conceptual mind trying to grasp Ultimate Truth, the nature of the Godhead. The thinking mind says, "Well what is it?" "How do you describe it?" "Where is it?" "Am I it?" "Am I not it?" It gropes for some kind of handle. In the same way, the thinking mind falls flat, as when trying to read a book in Chinese or whatever when it only knows English.

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So, because to the conceptual mind the experience of Ultimate Truth has no form, it can be described as 'emptiness'. But to the non-conceptual wisdom-mind, the realization of Truth is like the Truth seeing itself. Pure Mind, aware of its own nature. When the mind is completely unattached, when there is no identification, no sense of self whatsoever, the mind rests pure and still, simply aware of its own nature.


This is the source of our life, the basis of our reality. Our world of people and things, of doing this and of doing that, this is what we call the world of manifestation, the conditioned or sensory world. The Enlightened Being taught in terms of the relationship between these two, the Unconditioned and the conditioned, the ultimate and the relative, conventional truth and ultimate truth.

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When we see clearly, when we have a realization of the Unconditioned, what flows forth is harmonious, beautiful, and that which is beautiful and harmonious helps to lead the mind back to the Uncreated. All religious acts, teachings, works of art, are designed to be harmonious and pure forms which draw the mind back to recognize the silence, stillness, that purity which lies behind all things. As in the chanting that we do: even though the sound itself is quite beautiful, its real importance is that it leads the mind to an apprehension of the silence of Ultimate Truth which lies behind the sound, permeates the sound. This is why certain pieces of music or works of art stop the mind, or fill the heart with warmth and light and a feeling of blessedness and beauty, It's a religious experience. All

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true art is a religious experience. That is what it is for. One witnesses the same thing with relationships: if we try to find happiness simply on the level of personality, try to find a completely satisfying and perfect relationship just on the external level, then all we get is an outpouring of selfhood. We get our projections of how the other person should behave, of what they should be like to make me happy.

This is something that one sees not just in romantic relationships, but also in monastic life as well, particularly within the relationship between someone and their teacher. You find that if you have got very fixed ideas about the teacher—what they should be like, what they should say, what they shouldn't say, what they should do and what they shouldn't do—it is very much divided up into 'me and them.'



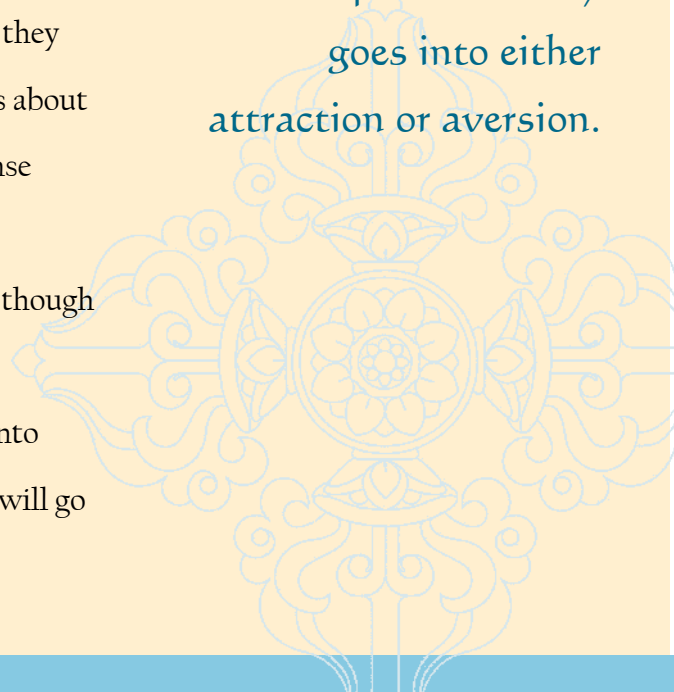
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Then you end up feeling terribly pleased and enthusiastic about being connected with this person when they say all the things that you like and when they pat you on the head and compliment you. And you also get filled with terrible irritation and disappointment, hurt feelings and anger when they don't do the things that you like, they upset your image of them or they don't fit into your projections about them. Intense devotion and affection very easily goes into intense violence and destruction.

In the Greek myths, Aphrodite and Aries were lovers, even though they were the goddess of love and the god of war. This is very indicative of the human condition, in that passion easily goes into either attraction or aversion. When there is blindness there, it will go

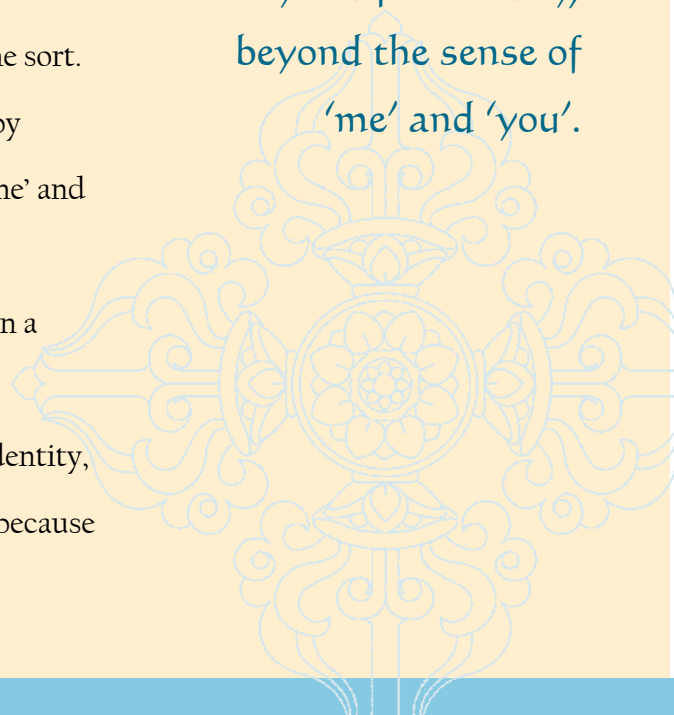
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easily either way. They say that 90% of all murders have some kind of sexual aspect to them, which is a pretty astonishing statistic. But you can see why. You can see why, when we have very definite expectations or feelings about each other, and it remains stuck on a personal level, then we have to end up in dissatisfaction of some sort. It has to be that way, because true satisfaction can only come by seeing that which is beyond personality, beyond the sense of 'me' and 'you'.

Devotion to a teacher, to a guru, or being in love, these are in a sense all religious experiences. The devotional practices we do generate a sense of love, because in that sense of love we lose identity, we lose the sense of 'me'. In romantic love we forget ourselves because

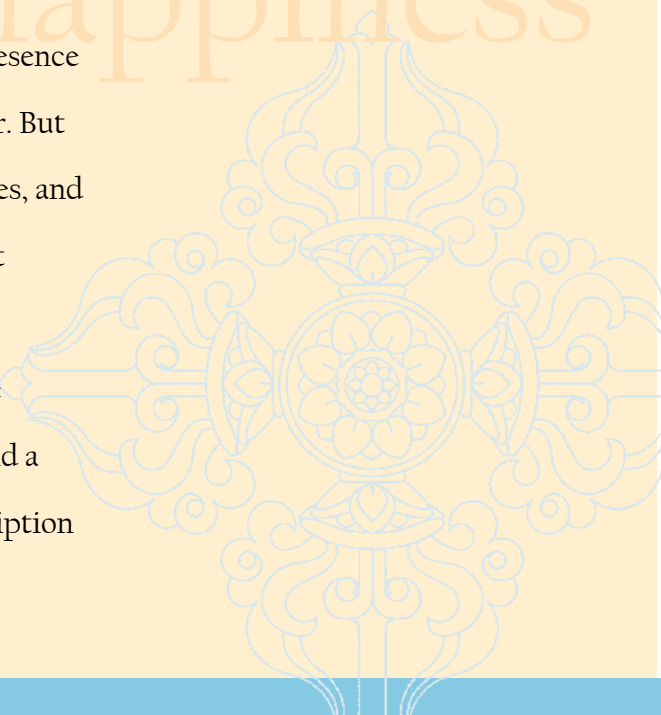
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we are completely absorbed into the Other. The Other becomes supremely important and the sense of 'I' vanishes. The blissful feeling of being in love is almost religious, there is no sense of self, there is perfect happiness.

That happiness is conditioned because it depends on the presence of the other, their affection, or their abiding interest of whatever. But at the moment of pure romantic contact the sense of self vanishes, and there is bliss. In 'Gone with the Wind, the moment that Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler kiss is very interesting; it is described something like this: "All she knew was everything vanished: the world vanished, he and she vanished, all there was total bliss and a great sound roaring in her ears." Which is a very common description

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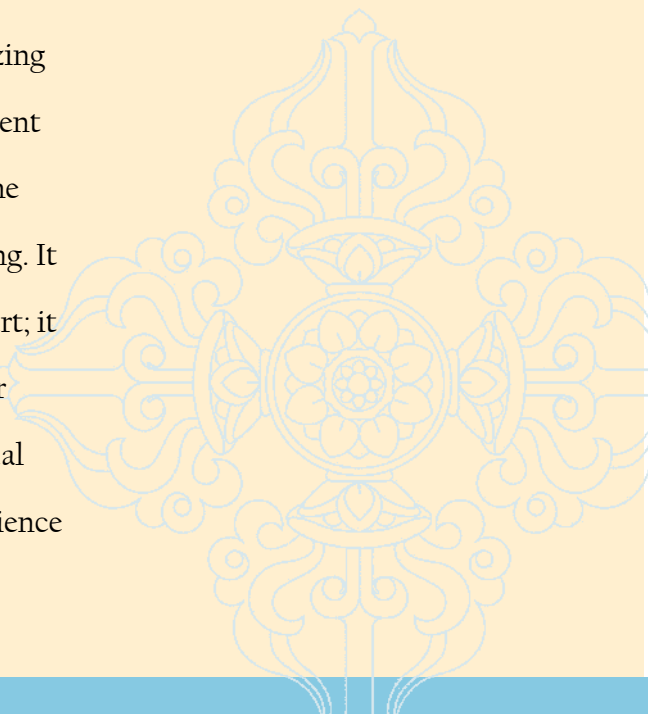
A close-up photograph of a cluster of white flowers with yellow centers, likely from a garden. The flowers are in various stages of bloom, with some fully open and others as buds. The background is filled with lush green leaves, creating a vibrant and natural setting.

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of mystical experiences! So one sees that, on the level of personal relationship, when there is a complete abandonment of the sense of 'I', it takes us, at least momentarily, to that place of unification, wholeness, contentment, of perfection.

The Religious Path is a way of taking this possibility of realizing perfect happiness, fullness of being, and making that an everpresent actuality that doesn't depend on the presence of the teacher or the presence of the beloved, or a kind work or good health or anything. It is founded completely on mindfulness, wisdom and purity of heart; it is not just an ecstatic experience of a wonderful piece of music or work of art. It is only when that experience is founded on spiritual qualities, and is independent of the sensory world that we experience

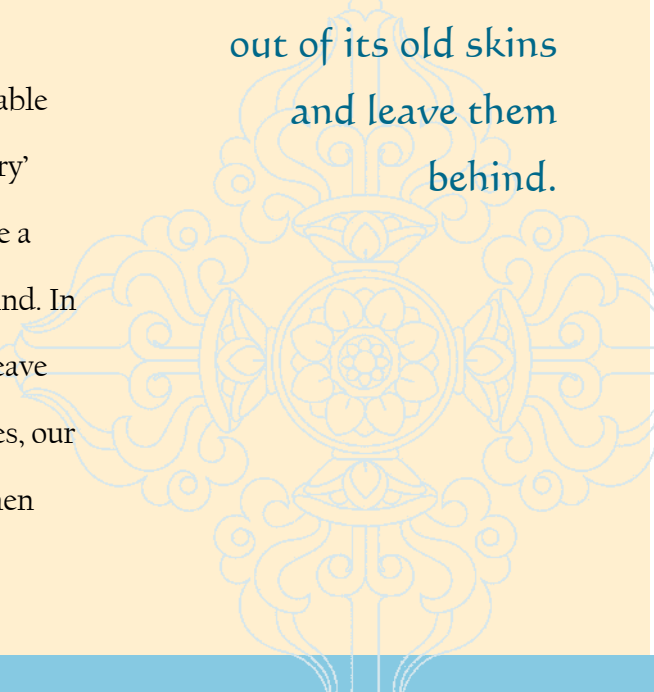
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unshakeability. Otherwise, even though that experience is there, and for a moment there is complete transportation, it inevitably has a pale shadow of, “This isn’t going to last. This is wonderful now but I have to go home after the concert, I have to leave, have to separate, have to go to work, have to pay.”

That is why this is a difficult path. To establish the unshakeable happiness means we have to be ready to leave all of the ‘secondary’ happiness on one side. We have to grow out of our old skins, like a reptile, of an insect grow out of its old skins and leave them behind. In our life we have to keep sustaining this sense of being ready to leave behind the old. Not hanging on to our old skins, our old identities, our old achievements and attachments. For an insect or a reptile, when

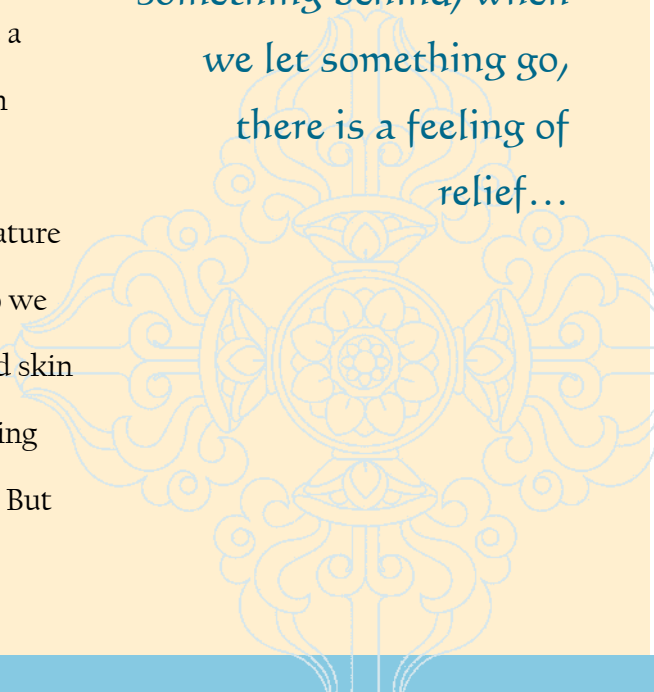
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they leave that skin behind, for that moment they are very fragile, vulnerable; their new skin is soft, very delicate. It takes time for it to harden and becomes strong. So in our own spiritual development, when we leave something behind, when we let something go, there is a feeling of relief: “Oh, glad I’m out of that one.” But then there is a sense of vulnerability, being open to the way life actually is, with laying down the protection of our ‘self’.

We are making ourselves open, sensitive to the entire vast nature of our life, the universe of whatever can be experienced by us. So we can feel fear or hesitation: “I think I’ll just climb back into my old skin — it doesn’t fit and it’s falling to bits but at least I can try and cling back in there, I’ll be covered up a little bit, protected a little bit.” But

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we realize in our hearts we can't do this, you can't get back into the clothes that you wore when you were five years old, no way. There might be one or two things, like a scarf or a little bracelet or something that we had, but we realize that it's impossible to keep dragging along all our old identities, our loves and our attachments and our problems, our trials and our pains, our mistreatments.

It is hard for us to leave behind the things that we like but sometimes being parted from the things that make us suffer is even more difficult. A wise teacher once said, "You can take away anything from people except for their suffering, they will cling onto that until death." We realize that in actuality we have to let everything go, no matter how reasonable it is to long for something, or to bemoan



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something, to feel pain over something. We have to leave it all behind. We can't go back to it. As we grow up we learn that the best thing, the only real way to go, is to face that sense of vulnerability, being open to the unknown. The unknown is frightening: when we don't know, when the thinking mind can't get itself around an experience, when it can't describe, or name, or pigeonhole what's happening, then we experience fear — because of the sense of self.

The unknown is frightening as long as there is the sense of self. When we face the unknown and abandon selfhood, then the unknown changes from being frightening to being mysterious, full of wonder. The mind is left in a state of wonderment, rather than terror. This is the transmutation that frees, it liberates, it is our path. **M**

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