





# DISORDER, FEAR, DEATH AND THEIR TRANSCENDENCE

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## Abstract

Disorder in individual and collective terms is a problem which affects more than a few people in Thailand, as elsewhere. While the phenomena experienced might cause fear of a decline in the quality of life in society and the wider global ecological environment, it is argued that this very fear can act as a stimulus to change. Drawing on various perceptions and thoughts of several proponents of spiritual practices, as well as literary sources, matters such as fear of social and environmental decay and individual death are considered for their didactic value—namely, to encourage an awakening to life's realities and to work to resolve the egocentric root cause of all fears.

## Introduction

In Buddhist and Hindu worldview perspectives the term “Kali Yuga” is used to describe an age of darkness, disorder and upheaval, occurring as the downside of a cyclical swing in (collective) human consciousness. In Thai it is known as *kalīyuk*, and although people generally may be unfamiliar with its deeper theoretical intricacies, they often feel it reflects current trends with an apparent deterioration in the human state, the world, or larger cosmic order. Undeniably modern developments have brought progress, with technological advances in agriculture, manufacturing, transportation, communication, medicine, etc.; nevertheless this seems unable to prevent greater egocentrism and attachment to sensory pleasures, reduced regard for ethical issues and increased environmental destruction.

To begin with, the cyclical nature of existence and non-existence (and all other dualities) informing Buddhist understandings of karma (volitional action) and the law of cause and effect (*Dhammaniyāma*) are discussed. For unenlightened humans, like other sentient beings, life is considered part of a process of continual change in Samsara's sea of suffering. On the other hand, the Buddha, on enlightenment, saw the cycles of birth, life, death and rebirth and freed himself from attachment to conditionality, thus experiencing Nirvana, a nondual “state” achieved by other sages who transcend identification with a self (*attā*). It is the ultimate fruit of spiritual practice; however, it evades being experienced by so many and thus

they think and talk about the Kali Yuga, as if facing and fearing death and needing some explanation for this existential crisis.

Luang-phor Khun Tikukhawiro—one of Ajarn Chah’s (Pra Bodhinyana Thera, 1918–1992) best-known living disciples—discussing the Kali Yuga’s relevance as an instrument of teaching Dharma (what the Buddha taught), feels that essentially it is just a concept in the mind of any individual contemplating turmoil in the world of phenomena. He mentions that individuals experience their own Kali Yuga, because of “clinging” to what they consider “bad” in the world and this gives rise to suffering (*dukkha*)<sup>1</sup>. Clinging to the bad may sound absurd, yet Buddhism’s view of desire (*taṇhā*) incorporates desire for sense-pleasures (*kāma-taṇhā*), desire for existence and becoming (*bhava-taṇhā*), and desire for non-existence, death or (self-) annihilation (*vibhava-taṇhā*), where one loses motivation for existence, thinking that all things are essentially nothing or non-existent<sup>2</sup> (Buddhadasa, cf. Swearer 1989:94 and Rahula 1998:29). Regarding materialistic, consumerist development, *kāma-taṇhā* and how to transcend it are the most obvious areas of study; regarding more existential matters, though, *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā* are relevant. Clinging to the bad could be more appropriately referred to as mental clinging to concepts of bad “involuntarily”, or “voluntarily” clinging to “an obsessive aversion to the object of that feeling and an obsessive desire to seek escape from it” (Payutto 1995a:52). Whichever way, there is clinging, and its “negative” side is what Luang-phor Khun feels makes people fear the Kali Yuga.

He does not imply that we are not living in an era with tendencies towards more selfishness, violence and wars; however, he says that worrying will not change anything for the better. In practical terms, he says that without problems in life, solutions are not needed. Moreover, in the past humans would not have had to overcome hardship by seeking to improve things through studying, experimenting and inventing, whether motivated by *taṇhā* or *chanda* (wisdom or *paññā*-based desire for well-being applicable to problem-solving). The problem, he feels, is that “material” progress has gone so far that in the West (and parts of Thailand) many people are born in comfort with little need to adopt problem-solving mentalities, and instead their minds become easily troubled by mundane matters. To effectively break free of Samsaric cycles, he teaches people to work on themselves and change their perception.

<sup>1</sup> *Dukkha* is commonly translated as “suffering”, but, without conveying such pessimism, it literally means “unsustainable” and “incapable of providing perfect happiness” (Chah 1992:35), implying that everything in life and the world is characterised by impermanence, emptiness or insubstantiality (Rahula 1998:17).

<sup>2</sup> Misinterpreted, *vibhava-taṇhā* can produce incorrect, nihilistic understandings of non-self or emptiness.

Regarding whether individuals can help others, Luang-phor Khun (echoing sentiments of many nuns and monks promoting self-reliance) cites the example of Ajarn Chah, his master from many years ago, as an effective teacher. He says that before Ajarn Chah “revitalised” Dharma in Northeast Thailand, Buddhism was generally in a poor state, predominantly concerned with rituals and lacking in pragmatic efforts to extinguish *dukkha*. Nevertheless, without needing to announce himself as a Dharma teacher, Ajarn Chah affected numerous people by acting as an example of someone imbued with Dharma. This inspired others to do likewise and a demonstration effect was established. Therefore Luang-phor Khun feels that the best way to affect others and do one’s best to resolve problems of a world apparently amidst a Kali Yuga is to change oneself to exemplify Dharma. This will help resolve one’s own (fear-of-death) Kali Yuga and lead others to do likewise. He says not doing so will prevent one being self-reliant spiritually, and if one tries to help others it is like attempting to save a drowning person without being able to swim, resulting in both people drowning.

Another senior monk and disciple of Ajarn Chah, Phra-ajarn Pairot Wirojano, cites instances of increased serious social problems as evidence of a global Kali Yuga. He says that with greater violence, murder, rape and other activities characteristic of *sat-dērachan* (beasts), people seem to be behaving less like *sat-prasēūt* (humans). Nevertheless, he adds that this is just part of a natural cycle. If individuals picture themselves old and close to death, he says, with their own body and world experiencing decay, there is no need to consider more than oneself to see that what is born must die. He notes that all people will die, Westerners, Thais, Chinese, it is all the same; but he stresses the need to work on one’s individual attainment to transcend egotistical fears of death, while helping others to do likewise. This attitude prevails among others who are concerned more with practice than cogitating over the state of the world, and a common warning is that people should not worry about such matters, since it will only depress them. Nevertheless, as few people are aware of looking within to solve individual and communal problems, discussion should also be directed at trends more concerned with “outside” happenings, especially how the “Kali Yuga” or other discourses on deteriorating collective human circumstances are used didactically.

### **Imminent doom or evolutionary pressure?**

Thais, though using the Buddhist Era calendar (2000 AD = 2543 BE), were certainly not oblivious to global celebrations of the new millennium. In fact, media coverage and festivities across Thailand then and more recent events show that, in an era of globalisation, Thais are aware of many world-wide happenings and trends. In the years leading to the turn of the millennium, signs of what Thompson (1999) refers to as “Pre-Millennial Tension” were indeed apparent. There appeared stories in Thai newspapers, books and both academic and informal discourses related to

various potential impending Armageddon-like phenomena. Thailand, like many other nations, is arguably affected by “a world-wide growth in apocalypticism” whose roots lie in “secularization, globalization and what Anthony Giddens calls ‘the reflexive project of the self’” (ibid:13). Through the Internet, media and mass entertainment “doctrines, philosophies and conspiracy theories which promise an end to the current order are flourishing as never before” and can potentially affect people everywhere, for the “...market in spirituality is now as globalized as any other” (ibid). The year 2000 AD has passed, and although much of the fuss may be over, incidents like the 11 September disasters, the war in Iraq and the effects of environmental degradation keep arising. Moreover, concerns about the Kali Yuga and how religion and spirituality can save or be exploited by fanatics remain.

In his article “Millennialism, Theravada Buddhism, and Thai Society”, Keyes (1977:283) considers millennialism to be associated with beliefs that an old (corrupt) “world order” will be destroyed, with the “damned” perishing in the holocaust, and the “elect” surviving to enjoy benefits of a “new order”. He argues that millennialism is not particular to the Christian religion and there is indeed a Buddhist basis for millennial belief. Furthermore, the fact that, *numerically*-speaking, in the Buddhist calendar there appears no millennial significance at this point in history, does not mean that Thais are unaffected by the aforementioned global phenomena (cf. Ratana 1997:21). Nor does it mean that millennialism, in wider contexts of belief in a future period of ideal peace and happiness, cannot operate independently of calendar dates. However, unlike Keyes’ work, which considers *phū-wisēt* (people with extraordinary powers) who can “effect immediate improvements in the conditions of existence of those who become [their] followers” (Keyes 1977:289), what is dealt with here is how—amidst the pressures of modern society—Dharma is taught and how it can be an impetus to spiritual development.

Regarding Buddhist views of the evolution of the universe, Thittila (1986:24) states that rather than evolving out of nothingness, the universe “evolved out of the dispersed matter of a previous universe; and when this universe is dissolved, its dispersed matter, or its residual energy which is continuously renewing itself, will in turn give rise to another universe in the same way. The process is therefore cyclic and continuous.” On Earth (with the same cyclical and evolutionary forces), Buddhism’s historical texts generally agree that after Gautama Buddha, social order and ethics will continuously decline, but there is limited consensus on how long before the nadir is reached. Lamotte (1988:192–198) mentions that in canonical writings the years for the “disappearance of the Good Law”, discovered and expounded by the Buddha, vary from 500 to 12,000. Nevertheless, in the fifth century AD the reformer Buddhaghosa fixed the date at 5,000 years after Gautama Buddha, a figure adopted by the Pali (Theravada) chronicles and commentaries (ibid:196).

This period is commonly referred to in Thailand<sup>3</sup> as the time between Gautama Buddha and Maitreya, the future Buddha who will re-discover Dharma once it has been lost. Ajarn Pichet Boonthumme, a lay Buddhist teacher and healer, proposes that things indeed appear to be getting worse in the world, with the possibility of mass destruction; however, this is not necessarily a problem. He stresses that one need not wait over 2,000 years for *phra sī-āriaya-mētraī* (Maitreya), because he can come any time if one develops one's mind in a self-reliant manner and attains awareness of *lokuttara* (the transcendent world). He discourages dependence on others because they cannot think or practice on one's behalf, and only by one's own efforts can one realise the emptiness or non-self of *lokuttara* common to all religions. For this, he says, it is not significant if one has (much) money or not, since these are things of the mundane world and can at most help make the body comfortable. Nevertheless, to make the mind/heart happy and at peace, one must do away with all defilements or *kilesa* (fundamentally, greed, hatred and delusion). Thus, for Ajarn Pichet the Kali Yuga is a personal thing which everyone must overcome. With this in mind, and with his ability to teach healing and aspects of Buddhist practice in one-to-one terms, he is more interested in helping people individually than in dealing with many people in a socially active manner.

The monk Phra Pongthep Dhammagaruko adopts an approach involving a wider audience. He says that we are indeed in a Kali Yuga, and with current trends, or without a *glap-jai* ("change of heart"), things will certainly get worse. However, he suggests that this should not induce pessimism or negative thinking, and this is why *all* of the four *Brahmavihāra* (principles of virtuous existence) are relevant.<sup>4</sup> He mentions that existing problems are due to past karma, and, seen collectively, we are all responsible. *Mettā*, *karuṇā* and *muditā* alone, he adds, may not be enough to prevent *dukkha* associated with a Kali Yuga, since *upekkhā* is essential for that. Consequently, he considers non-violence in thoughts, speech and actions as crucial, and feels that talking optimistically *will* help people. This does not necessarily contradict the view that in the phenomenal world there is and may continue to be disaster and upheaval, because it operates on a different level, that of *sammāditthi* (right view/understanding).<sup>5</sup> Even if humanity is still short of the extreme of a Kali Yuga, in Phra Pongthep's opinion we can attain *upekkhā* by not clinging to

<sup>3</sup> As well as in other Theravada Buddhist countries (Keyes 1977:288 and Mendelson 1961:574–576).

<sup>4</sup> These principles—*mettā* (loving kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic-altruistic joy) and *upekkhā* (equanimity, neutrality, poise)—drive socially-engaged Buddhism, which works for the benefit of the whole.

<sup>5</sup> The first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-aṭṭhangika-magga*), which leads to *dukkha*'s cessation.

concepts of disorder and deterioration. He says that this is possible, but only for a small number of people who can develop their minds to that state. In addition, he feels that optimism in speech is justified, if one realises that one can change oneself and help others to whatever degree.

Phra Pongthep brings attention to some of his own writings, funded by UNICEF (Pongthep 2000). Basically, he says that, in simplified terms, a look at the four factors—natural resources, rich people, poor people and the magnitude of social crises—shows that recently natural resources have been depleted and the magnitude of social crises has increased. He adds that rich and poor people are both responsible, since they both contribute to the extraction of natural resources and are driven by *taṇhā* to consume increasingly more. Furthermore, they all experience *dukkha* associated with seeking “worldly” pleasures, and are never truly satisfied or in the position to experience *upekkhā*. He is of the opinion that the future holds two possibilities. First, natural resources (the world’s “invaluable initial investment”) become progressively fewer and the magnitude of crises increases. In this case the suffering of the poor increases (particularly from scarcity and disease) as does that of the rich, as their selfishness and “karmic load” accrues them greater *dukkha*, physical and psychological. Second, people use natural resources to the extent that satisfies their needs sustainably, by both rich and poor adopting *sammādiṭṭhi* and working together. Phra Pongthep feels that highlighting dilemmas of negative possibilities, working on people’s fear to change attitudes, and optimistically pointing to positive possibilities of less individual and collective *dukkha*, will make people think and act in manners conducive to changes for the better. Therefore, he sees the whole issue of the Kali Yuga as a useful, living teaching with universal validity.

### Science, spirituality and consciousness transformed

A slightly different approach to the Kali Yuga is employed by Dr Art-ong Jumsai Na Ayudhaya, a prominent Thai scientist and educator. He combines Hindu, Christian and Buddhist terms and cites from each tradition’s sacred texts to elucidate the significance of dispelling Maya (illusion of attachment to the relative/dualistic world) and transcending the conceptual mind to become one with God (the Absolute). He says that while humans are universally driven to attain happiness or end *dukkha*, most people are deluded into thinking that happiness can actually be found *in* Maya. Those, he mentions, who realize that *dukkha* itself teaches, can gradually learn from their mistakes. Through introspection that confronts mental confusion and other means, they seek more refined (non-egocentric) happiness until their happiness comes from universal love for all beings (*lokuttara-sukha*).

Dr Art-ong does not talk of impending disaster, though he says that the world's troubles are, like "growing pains", signs of a transformation in consciousness. He mentions that what is happening now results from an accumulation of all collective past karma from human history, and affects *all* people. Although negative karma seems preponderant, he says that there are actually subtle changes among people around the world, with the effect that positive karma associated with universal love is gradually "cancelling out" negative karma. He likens the situation to an atomic bomb, where beyond a "critical mass" of uranium or plutonium, very powerful things happen. With karma the critical mass is reached when universal love "transmutes" the accumulated negative karma and brings about radical changes in the human world. Meditation, which "is not a means of evasion... [but] a serene encounter with reality" (Sulak 1992:86), is an effective way of bringing about such changes, for "When one person in a family practices meditation, the entire family will benefit. Because of the presence of one member who lives in mindfulness, filled with compassion, the entire family will be reminded to live in that spirit" (ibid:86).

The subtle power created by *phalang-jit* (or psychic energy) is often alluded to during meditation retreats when meditators project *mettā-karuṇā* to all beings. This is the essence of meditation practices used by, among others, Luangphor Jayasaro, abbot of Wat Pa Nanachat, in Ubon Rajathani province, which follows Ajarn Chah's teachings. In such meditation sessions *mettā-karuṇā* is sent out to all beings based on the realisation that for nuns, monks and other meditators this can be an effective way of changing the world for the better. In fact, healing energy of this nature was called upon on a national level in Thailand, when in early 1995, with large media coverage, everyone was asked to project *mettā-karuṇā* to the king, who was seriously unwell. Monks across the country were involved in synchronized chanting/praying to send the king healing energy, while in many areas, such as Sanam Luang (the large field next to the royal palace in Bangkok), laity dressed in white participated in similar activities.

Wilber (1991:247-248) discusses Tonglen, a meditation practice "so powerful and... transformative it was kept largely secret until just recently in Tibet", which involves taking in the "suffering of beings everywhere" on the in-breath and "sending them back health and happiness and virtue" on the out-breath. This implies practising true compassion and in a sense is "the Buddhist equivalent of what Christ did: be willing to take on the sins of the world, and thus transform them (and you)" (ibid:248). Chödrön (1999:35), considering Tonglen, refers to the powerful energies of "anger, lust, envy, jealousy" as "wisdoms in disguise". She says "Tonglen practice reverses the usual logic of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure... [thus] we become liberated from very ancient patterns of selfishness... [employ] what seems like poison as medicine... [and] use our personal sufferings as the path to compassion for all beings." (ibid:35)



Returning to Dr Art-ong, frequently, both in public speeches and in more private dialogues, he refers to Jesus Christ as someone who devoted himself to changing the balance of karma in the world through sacrifices and his teachings. In the current era, he feels that Sai Baba is performing an analogous role, influencing people in Thailand and across the globe, especially in education. With similar feelings, Dr Teerakiet Jaroensettasin, an influential psychiatrist, often employs Sri Aurobindo's teachings. Aurobindo (1993) suggests that the human species is experiencing a "supramental" evolution. This links people to "the highest divine consciousness and force operative in the universe... superior to mentality, it exists, acts and proceeds in the fundamental truth and unity of things and not like the mind in their appearances and phenomenal divisions" (ibid:396–397). The evolution involves "the progressive unfolding of Spirit out of the destiny of material consciousness", raising consciousness to that which "is still unmanifest, from matter into life, from life into mind, from mind into the spirit" (ibid:382).

Aurobindo (ibid:72–73) cautions that speculation on the manifestation of a new supramental principle and race of supramental beings on earth is rather perilous as it must be done with the mind; yet "...the mind has not the capacity to forecast the action of what is above itself—just as a merely animal or vital perception of things could not have forecast what would be the workings of Mind and a mentalized race of beings here."

Nevertheless, even without specific speculation, pressures exist, be they evolutionary or otherwise, and it is arguably the nature of the human mind to search for meanings, to speculate and to explain what happens in life. Satprem (1989:107), using teachings of his two masters, Aurobindo and Mother, comments that in "the world body... [t]here's a feeling that everything is going awry, falling apart... It's as if our entire mental system were completely rotten... and there's no solution to anything." This, he argues, is because, as with fish when they had to move from gill respiration to another mode of breathing, "[i]t's suffocating to evolve to 'another'... Everything is shattered... The entire Earth body is being torn apart" (ibid:108). Hence, he adds, "...if we believe we are moving toward new unities, new world wide fraternities, that shall save the poor and make a better society, we are sorely mistaken... We are not going to make better fish—we are in the process of making a new species" (ibid:108).

Dr Teerakiet takes an optimistic view of changes humanity is going through and suggests that while Aurobindo's "superman" does not imply a person with the finest and most flawless qualities with which we are familiar, the gap between "superman" and humans could be like that between humans and monkeys. Dr Teerakiet has faith that something significant is dawning and we can be instrumental in helping the labour of the new age. He adds that, while six million years ago a chimpanzee's brain represented the apex of the evolutionary progression,

three million years ago it was Lucy's and today it is the human mind, what it will be six million years hence or what will have materialized elsewhere is anybody's guess.

A scientific approach to inquiry into causes-and-effects, seen integrally and without attachment to materialistic reductionism,<sup>6</sup> may reveal world-wide developments in new light. For instance, Satprem (1989:111–112) argues that if one “could step back and have a bird's-eye view of history” one would see that science's “real purpose” is not production of “gadgets” nor “superjets”; rather its real contribution “is to have woven such a dense and tight network among all parts of the globe, all the groups of humanity, to have created such a unity... that you can't do the slightest thing in a remote corner of France without its having repercussions in Washington or Beijing.”

Consequently, considering current chaotic world circumstances, within the unity, “[t]he solution is found or uncovered *in* the obstacle” (Satprem 1992:109). Furthermore, contrary to what “most scholars” think (not understanding “mystical religion”), science is not killing spirituality, but “stripping us of our infantile and adolescent [prerational] views of spirit... to make way for... the transpersonal stages of genuine mystical or contemplative development” (Wilber 1991:201). This is because “mysticism is transrational and thus lies in our collective future, not our collective past. Mysticism is evolutionary and progressive, not devolutionary and regressive, as Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin realized” (ibid:201). Bearing the aforementioned comments in mind, self-reliance may imply that individuals are to realize spiritual “truths” in their minds and overcome their own Kali Yuga, while recognizing their relation to larger collective orders.

### **All phenomena contain their opposites**

Capra (1983) feels the current epoch is revealing a “turning point”, in which, by people adopting a “holistic”, “systems-based approach”, what appears to be mass destruction can be transformed into new opportunities for sustainable development with ecological awareness. Considering such a transformative process, dynamic equilibrium and relations between duality and nonduality are now discussed.

A basic tenet of understanding the relative world of duality is that nothing is absolute (including that very statement), though everything comes from the nondual unity “behind” that which is manifested. Consequently, nothing exists without being seen and comprehended in relation to its opposite. Additionally, themes

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<sup>6</sup> Taking valid data accumulation, following Kuhn's (1970) criteria, and subsequent verification or falsification of results by communal and consensual proof (Popper 1959), to constitute “scientific”, and employing the “inner eye” of intuition rather than outer eyes, that verify through “material” experimentation and proof (cf Wilber, 1996).

of karma and rebirth (whether viewed *vis-à-vis* lifetimes or purely thoughts corresponding to arising psychological states) prevalent in Eastern philosophy consider phenomena existing cyclically. Thus, birth leads to death, which in turn leads to rebirth. Traditional Chinese philosophical yin-yang thinking considers cycles fundamental to every phenomenon in the universe, which “alternates through a cyclical movement of peaks and bases”, with the yin-yang alternation as “the motive force of its change and development” (Maciocia 1989:3). The continual flux between yin and yang means that—as the yin-yang diagram, by now recognized almost everywhere in the world, shows—in all phenomena the “seed” of its opposite exists.

In many Asian systems of medicine this promotes understanding of causes of and cures for sickness, and, though it is usually applied to physical sickness, the same principles apply to any form of sickness where balance is disturbed, be it individual, collective, or related to the environment. Nevertheless, to overcome *all* sickness, one must know duality and transcend it. This implies realizing that “light can only be seen through the darkness” and problems are “lessons” in understanding life. In turn it can lead to solutions and “true health”, which “...can only be established by individual triumph over the constant temptations and dangers of daily life... [not] through a proxy war on cancer, war on poverty [etc.]... True health can be won by recognition of the principle of the Oneness of the universe, and man’s relation to it” (Oshawa 1965:203–204).

Various approaches are adopted by monks and other spiritually aware people with regard to teaching about mindfulness of individual behaviour, especially in preventing health problems by not acting on *taṇhā* yet learning how to live harmoniously with others. Nevertheless, they are generally informed by similar realizations of the transient nature of the physical body and the significance of transcending egocentric drives. Death and sickness are sometimes stressed to make people change themselves sooner rather than later. The well-known monk Luang-poo Putta-isara frequently uses language that encourages reflection on one’s shortcomings and altering them. For instance, in his “Treatise on Death” (Putta-isara 2000) he emphasizes that it is uncertain *when* we will die, but what is certain is that we all *will* die. A sentimental reaction may be that this morbid topic is best avoided. However, for Luang-poo Putta-isara, it is an objective truth, and simply that. Anything more is a “subjective”, ego-driven response. Given the problem, a solution is also proffered, which is developing awareness of death with every breath until the mind no longer clings to anything, including life or death (ibid:13). Moreover, one is encouraged to realize that death (as a cause of *dukkha*) is just a concept, which, with limited awareness, can lead to “moods” that distract from seeing things as they are. Thus, people are cautioned not to get drunk (i.e. lost) in sensations (especially defilements) nor fear death, since this leads to trouble in life rather than seeing death as something natural (ibid:14). One can indeed learn from fear of

death, “a constant reminder” of a central tenet of Buddhism “and mysticism in general” that all is transient and “...nothing remains... Only the whole endures eternally; all parts are doomed to death and decay. In meditative or mystical awareness, beyond the prison of individuality, one can taste the whole and escape the fate of a part; one is released from suffering and from the terror of mortality” (Wilber 1991:66).

Working on people’s dark side for didactic purposes, the Thai Ministry of Public Health often uses shock images (e.g. bleeding gums and blackened lungs), considered effective in anti-smoking campaigns. Some years ago it stopped using posters implying that gifts of cigarettes to monks (and thus smoking) is a sin, in favour of posters which adopt scare tactics, graphically depicting the bodily harm cigarettes can cause. Similar approaches are used with malaria and AIDS. Psychological research shows that fear-based appeals are effective in changing attitudes, though after a certain point, what becomes high fear has limited effects (Robberson and Rogers 1988). Nevertheless, fear alone cannot help one progress far in developing consciousness and transcending *dukkha*, since, for this, fear must be conquered.

The monk and meditation teacher Sumano Bhikkhu feels that fear and negative emotions can help one learn to overcome problems. His own fear has been one of his greatest teachers and has made him risk everything to develop spiritually. His experiences and those of several monks he knows show how spiritual progress is frequently (if not primarily) triggered and expedited by reaching a point of existential desperation, where one faces fear and willingly puts everything on the line. This implies risking the *attā* that identifies with its perceived “possessions”: corporeality, sensations and other aggregates of existence (*khandha*).<sup>7</sup> It also implies acknowledging what Loy (1992:159) feels is a key point in Buddhism and also a theme familiar to existential philosophy, namely “anxiety is essential to the ego because it is the ego’s response to its own groundlessness, something more immediately threatening than fear of death in the future.” This groundlessness is a feature of Buddhism, which sees all phenomena as essentially empty or void.

Sumano Bhikkhu describes his own disenchantment with life at a lower level of consciousness development and *dukkha* associated with it. He reached the point that he no longer saw meaning in living as a slave of *taṇhā*. Yet in that desperation he found a seed of faith (or spark of *bodhi*)<sup>8</sup> in a life devotedly

<sup>7</sup> Buddhism sees all people consisting of the five *khandha*, namely *rūpa* (material form/corporeality), *vedanā* (feelings/sensations), *saññā* (perceptions), *saṅkhāra* (mental formations/volitional activities) and *viññāna* (consciousness).

<sup>8</sup> The Buddha Nature inherent in all sentient beings.

working for the welfare of all beings, without concern for one's individuality other than staying healthy enough to carry out one's duty. Turning things around to their opposite reflects Sun Tzu's advice in the classic on strategy, "The Art of War": "When people fall into danger, they are then able to strive for victory" (cf. Cleary 1988:161). Sumano Bhikkhu says that in desperation a seed of hope may be found by those receptive enough to not be engulfed by negativity. Then slowly, by developing wisdom (*paññā*) and working on faith that glimpses the "deathless" condition in meditative practice that can be attained by commitment to non-attachment and transcendence of the *attā*, progress is made. However, one must "do the difficult" and "stop the world". This, Sumano Bhikkhu feels, implies sticking with practice and not giving up to slackness or distractions of the sensory world, while letting go of attachment to transient phenomena and effectively "stilling the mind" in the "eternal now". It means not getting carried away by *taṇhā* and witnessing the present moment that transcends space and time. For when the mind goes beyond relative bondage of time and space it breaks free from the chains of karma and Kali Yuga fears. According to another disciple of Ajarn Chah and Sumano Bhikkhu's preceptor, Ajarn Sumedho (n.d.:3), it is a matter of being continuously aware and realizing that "Yesterday is a memory. Tomorrow is the unknown. Now is the knowing."

### Fear in Thai society and an individual example

Fear of one's shadow or dark side should be confronted for spiritual progress. Classic psychology studies show that through "systematic desensitization" fears/phobias can be removed. However, if objects of fears are avoided, fears are invariably perpetuated, or they are not given "a chance to undergo extinction" (Gross 1996:160). Concerning facing fear, Jung (1974:20) comments: "This confrontation is the first test of courage on the inner way, a test sufficient to frighten off most people, for the meeting with ourselves belongs to the more unpleasant things that can be avoided so long as we can project everything negative into the environment."

Kanchana (1982:34), analyzing fear in Thai society, concludes that children fear things (e.g. ghosts) that are *rai hētphon* ("without cause/reason") and such fear continues to affect them as adults. She (ibid:41) argues that historically children have been taught to fear and defer to parents, which has caused fear of anyone in power (thus easy exploitation) and ultimately created imaginations in which fear has no limit. This may sound extreme, but to varying degrees it occurs in, among other places, psychiatric wards in hospitals in Thailand, as elsewhere.

Whatever fear, arguably *taṇhā*, attachment and ignorant belief in an *attā* cause it. Regarding adverse feelings experienced by the *attā* (whether pain, fear or depression), the root cause is habitual clinging. This is relatively obvious with

death and the aforementioned groundlessness, but also exists with physical pain and fear of losing self-esteem. Fear, like other emotions, can be observed and subsequently overcome by “the transpersonal Witness” (Wilber 1998:286) in meditation practice.<sup>9</sup> However, when individuals are engulfed by fear or identify with it, there is no escape. Facing fear has traditionally been a practice of wandering forest monks who stay at charnel grounds contemplating fear of decay, the unknown and death, eventually to be freed from such fears. Thus the famous monk and meditation master Ajarn Man Bhuridatta (1871–1949) stated: “Dhamma [Dharma] is on the other side of death” (cf. Kamala 1997:96). This implies death of the *attā*, and only beyond the threshold of fear of death is the Truth (Dharma) realized. Fear of the unknown particularly affects people struck by sickness, and is fed by ignorance (*avijjā*), or not knowing what causes sickness and whether it will go away. Arguably, while *avijjā* frightens, knowledge (*vijjā*) soothes, so information is “the best kind of therapy”, since knowing more existentially, the more secure one feels, even if it is “bad news” (Wilber 1991:39). When development of insight generates necessary *paññā* to dispel ignorance about the cause of *dukkha*, and instill faith in methods of extinguishing *dukkha*, fear loses meaning.

Relatively recently at a mountain meditation retreat centre, I encountered a significant case of fear involving a 43-year-old hospital nurse with a Master’s degree from a British university. I observed and talked to her over a one-week period, and heard opinions of others staying at the centre, run by two monks who heal with herbs and contemplative practices that develop consciousness. The nurse came, having taken time off work, with a friend (a 63-year-old woman also interested in spiritual development) to overcome her fear by intensive meditation and talking to the monks. She had never married because of considerable determination to progress spiritually, and she even alluded to having become a *Sotāpanna*

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<sup>9</sup> An essential aspect of non-dual meditation techniques is training to avoid attachment to concepts and feelings of “I”, “me” and “mine”. Payutto (1995b:50) argues that “the concept of self” confuses people who, “still trapped in habitual thinking”, try to consider “reality as an actual condition”, since “the two perspectives clash. The perception is of a doer and a receiver of results. While in reality there is only a feeling, the perception of ‘one who feels’.” The Burmese insight meditation master Sunlun Sayadaw (1878–1952) spoke of “killing the causative force in the effect” and ultimately “killing the cause in the cause” (Kornfield 1993:105). Thus, initially meditators neither reach toward sensations—which are divided into pleasant, unpleasant and neutral (most subtle)—nor after them, but rather are mindful in the immediacy of their “arising or vanishing which is the present time, the now” (ibid:105). Meditators, conscious of the arising of sensations (e.g. lust and hate) learn to not cling to them, realizing that any attachment causes *dukkha*, until finally, through mindfulness, such sensations (like all conditioned phenomena) do not arise, even when meditators come into contact with objects that could cause their arising.

(Stream-Enterer).<sup>10</sup> The nurse openly admitted that she had feared ghosts since childhood and had seen ghosts and even felt one touch her. Her mother and four siblings also feared ghosts (though less so) and she explained that she had been “taught” about ghosts as a child by family, school friends and watching movies.

Ever since she could remember, her fear prevented her from sleeping alone; thus her friend stayed with her at night. The nurse reported no traumatic childhood experiences, saying that her parents were always very loving to her and her siblings. She had visited a psychiatrist about her condition and been given medication; but, though her sleep improved, her condition essentially remained unchanged. She feared all sorts of things (e.g. future happenings, making mistakes in front of others, insects and the dark). Anxiety, high self-esteem and high expectations (e.g. attaining Nirvana) all fuelled her fear. She recognized that she had strong feelings of *attā* and said that, though eighty per cent of the time she succeeded in her aims, failure induced depression.

On her second night the monk mainly dealing with the nurse took her, her friend, the monk’s attendant (a male lay practitioner) and myself to meditate in a charnel ground with the remains of a corpse from a recent cremation, to make her confront her problem and contemplate it. The monk assured the nurse the whole time, even during meditation practice at the charnel ground, that she would be safe if she maintained mindfulness. Being in a group helped the nurse cope with circumstances—not so much the corpse, since at hospital she had seen mutilation, but the environment where ghosts were considered to reside. Nevertheless, on returning to the meditation retreat centre a middle-aged couple visiting the monk said things which caused complications. They both described having seen ghosts, and the monk now had three people to convince that no ghosts were around, or more relevantly, that they should not pay attention to them.

The next day the nurse said she had been so afraid at night that she could not sleep. The monk’s attendant (who had formerly been thirteen years in the monkhood) told me that her main problem was of conceptual conflicts, and her *taṇhā* to attain Nirvana while also living in the world with many duties led to mild neurosis (*rōk-prasāt*). The monk informed me that her attitude and determination made her face two possibilities: actually attaining Nirvana or becoming mad. The conditions for attaining Nirvana were lacking and she needed to progress step-by-step, so he advised her through “counselling” and “guided meditation”. Each morn-

<sup>10</sup> This refers to the first of four levels of mind in the supramundane plane; here the mundane world of existence has been transcended on the path to Nirvana. The Stream-Enterer is a person who, by no longer being bound by self-belief, doubt, and superstition, has attained for the first time the stream that flows to Nirvana (the stream being the “path” and Nirvana being the “fruit” of practice). Such an individual “at this stage is certain to attain Nirvana at some time in the future” (Buddhadasa 1989:114).

ing, over the day's only meal, the nurse, her friend, the monk's attendant and I talked at length about dualistic obstacles of dichotomizing Nirvana and Samsara, and benefits of using contemplative knowledge. By the end of her stay, following hours meditating and actively participating in desensitizing her fear, the nurse felt that, though her old fear was still strong, it had diminished and seeds of hope had been sown. She had been exposed to the "path" (*magga*), but not yet attained the "fruit" (*phala*), freedom from *dukkha*. Her progress would depend on practice and further development of *paññā*.

The above case involved relatively little intervention by the monk, with social and natural environments supportive of treatment. Moreover, the patient, though trained in biomedicine and often seeing things in dualistic and reductionist terms, is a practising Buddhist keen to develop spiritually. Therefore, the individual mind, influenced by a modern scientific worldview mixed with culturally-conditioned beliefs in spirits-ghosts, was receptive when exposed to Dharmic approaches to overcoming fear and *dukkha*.

This form of pragmatic and contemplative Buddhism lies at the core of a living teaching, which to varying degrees informs the way spiritual practices can help trounce fears and generate ever-present mindfulness. Experiencing this (by developing meditative awareness and, through practice, integrating it into all aspects of life), concerns about the Kali Yuga lose meaning and *dukkha* is seen as just another transient phenomenon. In meditation very intense pain (such as at the knees) might be felt. There are different ways of dealing with this or any other pain or fears. One induces *dukkha*, caused by identifying with it; another is letting go, not clinging to it and experiencing present-moment mindfulness and greater insight into the "three (universal) characteristics of existence" (*ti-lakkhaṇa*), namely, impermanence, *dukkha* and non-self.

### Concluding comments

To change society for the better, or transform individuals' relationships with external phenomena, many people argue that involvement is needed in specific participatory roles, as agents of change. This agency and participation, which are often highlighted nowadays (so that people's "voices" may be heard), can be viewed in many ways. A trend that appears to be growing with the agenda of greater human rights is that issues of individual empowerment need to be addressed while inequality needs to be eradicated. Though possibly based on good intentions, in karmic terms seeking to change things by force, whether by physical or psychological means, will have repercussions, and arguably limited long-term effects, due to backlash they trigger. In Thailand recent drugs-related killings show that problems do not disappear by trying to wipe them out; likewise problems in the Middle East are



not going away by force. Whether the Kali Yuga is here or not, the transcendence of all fears and anxieties can occur on the individual level by looking within to internal happenings of the mind. Hence when operating on the collective level a new perspective is acquired and living in the world is not so burdensome as what some critics make it out to be.

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