

NO RELIGION

By

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

Translated from the Thai by Bhikkhu Punno

For more information:
Dhammadana Foundation
c/o Suan Mokh
Chaiya
Surat Thani 84110
Thailand

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Transcribed directly from disks provided by Santikaro Bhikkhu
Formatting & Proofreading: Scott Oser <oser@hep.uchicago.edu>

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GENERAL INFORMATION

Other books by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu:

Handbook For Mankind
Mindfulness With Breathing: Unveiling the Secrets of Life
Buddha-Dhamma For Students
Keys to Natural Truth
Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree: The Buddha's Teaching on Voidness
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Surat Thani 84110
Thailand

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

On the occasion of this year's centennial of Chicago's 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions, the Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center of Hinsdale, Illinois (a suburb of Chicago) has chosen to reprint "No Religion" for free distribution during and after this year's Parliament. It is offered as a small contribution to the discussions in Chicago, particularly because the author cannot be present, and in hope that friends from other religions will appreciate Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's emphasis on attachment and voidness.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu sincerely believes that world peace is possible, if humanity would only conquer the selfishness which is the cause of all our conflicts and troubles. Moreover, he insists that the world's religions are the most important vehicles for propagating unselfishness. In this book, he digs into the heart of selfishness, namely, attachment to "I" and "mine," and points to the unselfish remedy. We hope that readers will find it useful in their own spiritual lives and in our common search for lasting peace.

"No Religion" was originally a talk given to a Bangkok Buddhist group in 1967. It was translated by Bhikkhu Punno in the mid-70's and published in Bangkok, but has been long out-of-print. The manuscript has been newly revised for the current edition.

The original talk was delivered spontaneously and informally. While on some occasions Buddhadasa Bhikkhu prefers a more formal style, when speaking with Dhamma friends and students he prefers to be informal. We have tried to maintain some of the flavor of the talk's style, for example, by using contractions and retaining some Thai expressions.

The Venerable Ajarn was speaking to a group which is already familiar with the Lord Buddha's teaching and the Venerable Ajarn's way of explaining it. Thus, he took for granted a certain familiarity with key Buddhist terms and principles. Therefore, the translator and editor have interpolated explanations into the text where we felt it was necessary for the understanding of readers unfamiliar with the Venerable Ajarn's style of teaching, which was particularly terse in this talk. We have done our best to be sparing with these additions, merely trying to bridge the gap between the original audience of the talk and subsequent readers of this book, including non-Buddhists. The Venerable Ajarn's talks usually contain a healthy dose of terms from Pali, the scriptural language of Theravada Buddhism. We have used easily understandable translations to the best of our ability.

Many of the terms are explained in the text and become clear as they are used repeatedly, for example, suffering (dukkha), attachment (upadana), and not-self (anatta). A small glossary is provided to explain those terms which may need further explanation.

The Venerable Ajarn assumed that his audience was familiar with the principle of not-self; however, this may be unfamiliar to non-Buddhist readers. From the highest to the lowest forms and phenomena of nature, nothing can be found which is truly a self, that is, a lasting, separate, individual being. All things--except for Nibbana--are transient, conditioned, inherently unstable, and liable to decay. Thus, everything is not-self (anatta) and void of inherent selfhood. Although this fact isn't explained directly in the talk, there are numerous examples which should help readers to deepen their understanding of this key aspect of reality.

As the venerable Ajarn was speaking to a Thai Buddhist audience, he refers to Thailand's most prominent religions: Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. (Since the reading audience is much broader, we have added references to other world religions.) The central religious term in Thailand, as in much of South and Southeast Asia, is "Dhamma" or "Dharma." We have retained it in this edition, rather than using English translations, for two reasons. First, no English translation captures the full richness and depth of "Dhamma." Second, English terms tend to be colored and confounded by the cultures and religions which have produced them and which, in turn, distort the religious sensibilities of other cultures and languages.

In the original talk, all citations from scripture, both Buddhist and Christian, were from memory and in loose paraphrase. For this book, however, all quotes from the Bible have been copied from Revised Standard Edition of the American Bible Society. All footnotes are by the translator and editor.

Finally, special thanks to the Center for the Long Life of Buddhism of Wat Chalapraton Rangsarit (Nontaburi) for the use of their Macintosh, to Phra Jaran Aranyadhammo for teaching me how to use it, and to Phra Surasak Surayano for organizing layout and printing. Thanks and blessings also to the many people, both in Chicago and Bangkok, whose gifts of knowledge, time, energy, and funds made this reprint possible.

Inevitably, some mistakes will be found in the present edition. All comments, corrections, and criticisms will be cheerfully welcomed. May all beings realize the best thing that life has to offer--the lasting peace of voidness.

Santikaro Bhikkhu
Suan Mokkh
25 July 1993

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

A key expression used in all of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's talks to grab the attention of Thai audiences is "tua-goo." Tua-goo" must be translated as "I", but the full connotations of the Thai word does not come through. Thai has literally dozens of forms for the first person pronoun. Of these, "tua-goo" is one of the most colloquial and in many cases is considered vulgar. Its use often implies anger on the part of the speaker. Its frequent use by the Venerable Ajarn strikes the audience with great impact. This impact is felt on many levels. When he says "Suffering is caused by attachment to tua-goo" or requests us to eliminate tua-goo, it leads the listener to see how the ego is an emotional reaction to stimuli and how selfishness always results from it. Finally, the listener may realize that ego is basically a misconception and illusion. Hence, the Venerable Ajarn's use of the word "tua-goo" can often startle the listener into a new perspective, something that could never happen if he were to use any of the more neutral first person pronouns. As English has only one form of the first person singular pronoun, all of these many shades of meaning are lost in translation. The translator has resorted to using as many different words as possible ("I", "self", "ego", etc.) in the hope that perhaps one of them will stimulate the reader to a fresh view of himself or herself.

Bhikkhu Punno

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ON VOIDNESS

Do work of all kinds with a mind that is void
And to the voidness surrender all of the fruits;
Eat the food of voidness as the holy ones do,
You'll have died to yourself from the very start.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

* * * * *

NO RELIGION
27 January 1967

Suan Usom Foundation, Bangkok

I didn't come here today to give any formal sermon or lecture, but to have an informal chat among friends. I hope that you all agree to this, so that we can speak and listen to each other without formality and rituals, even if our talk here becomes somewhat different or unusual. Further, I intend to speak only about the most essential matters, important topics which people consider to be profound. Therefore, if you don't listen carefully you may find it difficult to follow and might misunderstand, especially those of you who haven't heard the previous talks in this series. (As a matter of fact, it's also difficult for me, for with each new talk I must maintain a connection with the previous ones.)

The last talk was called "What To Do To Be Void." This time I intend to talk about "No Religion." If you find the subject strange or incomprehensible, or if don't agree, please take the time to think it over. But remember, it isn't necessary to believe or subscribe to what I say right away.

When we meet together like this, I feel there is something which prevents us from understanding each other and this thing is simply the problem of language itself. You see, there are two kinds of language. One is the conventional language that ordinary people speak, what I call "people language."

People language is used by the ordinary people who don't understand Dhamma very well and by those worldly people who are so dense that they are blind to everything but material things. Then, there is the language which is spoken by those who understand reality (Dhamma), especially those who know and understand reality in the ultimate sense. This is another kind of language. Sometimes, when only a few words or even just a few syllables are uttered, the ordinary listener finds Dhamma language paradoxical, completely opposite to the language he speaks. We can call it "Dhamma language." You always must take care to recognize which language is being spoken.

People who are blind to the true reality (Dhamma) can speak only people language, the conventional language of ordinary people. On the other hand, people who have genuinely realized the ultimate truth (Dhamma) can speak either language. They can handle people language quite well and are also comfortable using Dhamma language, especially when speaking among those who know reality, who have already realized the truth (Dhamma). Amongst those with profound understanding, Dhamma language is used almost exclusively, unfortunately, ordinary people can't understand a word. Dhamma language is understood only by those who are in the know. What is more, in Dhamma language it isn't even necessary to make a sound. For example, a finger is pointed or an eyebrow raised and the ultimate meaning of reality is understood. So, please take interest in these two kinds of language--people

language and Dhamma language.

To illustrate the importance of language, let us consider the following example. Ordinary, ignorant worldly people are under the impression that there is this religion and that religion, and that these religions are different, so different that they're opposed to each other. Such people speak of "Christianity," "Islam," "Buddhism," "Hinduism," "Sikhism," and so on, and consider these religions to be different, separate, and incompatible. These people think and speak according to their personal feelings and thus turn the religions into enemies. Because of this mentality, there come to exist different religions which are hostilely opposed to each other.

Those who have penetrated to the essential nature of religion will regard all religions as being the same. Although they may say there is Buddhism, Judaism, Taoism, Islam, or whatever, they will also say that all religions are inwardly the same. However, those who have penetrated to the highest understanding of Dhamma will feel that the thing called "religion" doesn't exist after all. There is no Buddhism; there is no Christianity; there is no Islam. How can they be the same or in conflict when they don't even exist? It just isn't possible. Thus, the phrase "No religion!" is actually Dhamma language of the highest level. Whether it will be understood or not is something else, depending upon the listener, and has nothing to do with the truth or with religion.

I'd like to give a simple example of people language, the language of materialism. "Water" will suffice. A person who don't know much about even the simplest things thinks that there are many different kinds of water. They view these various kinds of water as if they have nothing in common. They distinguish rain-water, well-water, underground-water, canal-water, swamp-water, ditch-water, gutter-water, sewer-water, toilet-water, urine, diarrhea, and many other kinds of water from each other. Average people will insist that these waters are completely different, because such people take external appearances as their criteria.

A person with some knowledge, however, knows that pure water can be found in every kind of water. If you take rain-water and distill it, you will get pure water. If you take river-water and distill it, you will get pure water. If you take canal-water, sewer-water, or toilet-water, and distill it, you will still get pure water. A person with this understanding knows that all those different kinds of water are the same as far as the water component is concerned. As for those elements which make it impure and look different, they aren't the water itself. They may combine with water, and alter water, but they are never water itself. If we look through the polluting elements, we can see the water that is always the same, for in every case the essential nature of water is the same. However many kinds of water there may seem to be, they are all the same as far as the essential nature of water is concerned. When we look at things from this viewpoint, we can see that all religions are the same. If

they appear different it's because we are making judgments on the basis of external forms.

On an even more intelligent level, we can take that pure water and examine it further. Then, we must conclude that there is no water, only two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. There's no water left. That substance which we have been calling "water" has disappeared, it's void. The same is true everywhere, no matter where we find the two parts of hydrogen and one part of oxygen. In the sky, in the ground, or wherever these parts happen to be found, the state of water has disappeared and the term "water" is no longer used. For one who has penetrated to this level of truth, there is no such thing as water.

In the same way, one who has attained to the ultimate truth sees that there is no such thing as religion. There is only a certain nature which can be called whatever we like. We can call it "Dhamma," we can call it "Truth," we can call it "God," "Tao," or whatever we like, but we shouldn't particularize that "Dhamma" or that "Truth" as Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, Judaism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, or Islam, for we can neither capture nor confine it with labels or concepts. Still, such divisions occur because people haven't yet realized this nameless truth for themselves. They have only reached the external levels, just as with canal-water, muddy water, and the rest.

The Buddha intended for us to understand and be able to see that there is no person, that there is no separate individual, that there are only dhammas or natural phenomena. Therefore, we shouldn't cling to the belief that there is this religion and that religion. We added the labels "Buddhism," "Islam," and "Christianity" ourselves, long after the founders lived. None of the great religious teachers ever gave a personal name to their teachings, like we do today. They just went about teaching us how we should live.

Please try to understand this correctly. When the final level is reached, when the ultimate is known, not even man exists. There is only nature, only Dhamma. This reality can't be considered to be any particular thing; it can't be anything other than Dhamma. It can't be Thai, Chinese, Indian, Arab, or European. It can't be black, brown, yellow, red, or white. It can't be eastern or western, southern or northern. Nor can it be Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, or anything else. So please try to reach this Dhamma, for then you will have reached the heart of all religions and of all things, and finally come to the complete cessation of suffering.

Although we call ourselves "Buddhists" and profess Buddhism, we haven't yet realized the truth of Buddhism, for we are acquainted with only a tiny aspect of our own Buddhism. Although we be monks, nuns, novices, lay devotees, or whatever, we are aware of only the bark, the outer covering which makes us think our religion is different from the other religions. Because we have failed to

understand and haven't yet realized our own truth, we look down upon other religions and praise only our own. We think of ourselves as a special group and of others as outsiders or foreigners. We believe that they are wrong and only we are right, that we are special and have a special calling, and that only we have the truth and the way to salvation. We have many of these blind beliefs. Such ideas and beliefs show that we are still ignorant, very foolish indeed, just like little babies who know only their own bellies. Tell a small child to take a bath and to wash with soap to get all the dirt off; the little child will scrub only her belly. She doesn't know to wash all over. She will never think of washing behind her ears or between her toes or anywhere like that. She merely scrubs and polishes her tummy vigorously.

In this same way as the child, most of the adherents of Buddhism know only a few things, such as how to take and how to get. Even while doing good, supporting the temples and monks, and observing the precepts, their only objective is to get something, they even want to get more in return than they gave. When they make offerings, some people expect back ten times what they gave, some a hundred times, some a thousand, and some even more. In this case, it would be more accurate to say that these people know nothing at all, for they are acquainted only with how to get and how to take. That isn't Buddhism at all. It's the religion of getting and taking. If ever they can't get or can't take something, they are frustrated and they suffer. Real Buddhism is to know how to get without getting and take without taking so that there is no frustration and no suffering at all.

This must be spoken about very often in order to acquaint everyone with the heart of Buddhism: Non-Attachment. Buddhism is about not trying to seize or grasp anything, to not cling or attach to anything, not even to the religion itself, until finally realizing that there is no Buddhism after all. That means, if we speak directly, that there is no Buddha, no Dhamma, and no Sangha! (*) However, if we speak in this way, nobody will understand; they will be shocked and frightened.

[* The Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha (Community) are the beloved Triple Gem which most Buddhists cherish as the basis of their faith.]

Those who understand, see that the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are the same thing, that is, just Dhamma or just Nature itself. The compulsion to seize and hang onto things as persons and individuals, as this and that, doesn't exist in them. Everything is non-personal, that is, is Dhamma or Nature in its pure state or whatever you wish to call it. But we dare not think like this. We are afraid to think that there is no religion, that there is no Buddha, Dhamma, or Sangha. Even if people were taught or forced to think in this way, they still wouldn't be able to understand. In fact, they would have a totally distorted understanding of what they thought and would react in the opposite way to what was intended.

For this reason, after the passing away of the Buddha, there appeared many new systems of religious practice. The teachings were reorganized into descending levels, with lower, more accessible aspects, so that even if someone wished to make offerings in order to gain heavy benefits in return, equal to dozens, hundreds, or thousands of times their "merits," it could be done. This was a preliminary arrangement so that the rewards for good deeds would be a bait to attract people and keep them from going astray. As a starting point, people were encouraged to hang on to the good and its rewards as much as possible. If they continued to do so, they would eventually discover that it was unnecessary to cling or be attached to goodness. They would come to see that any such attachment is unsatisfying and painful. Thus, they would gradually disentangle themselves from the habit of attachment. This is how Dhamma leads through successively higher levels and is why the practice of Dhamma in its earliest stage is based on "gaining merits" to let people get something they really like at the start.

The next step on the path of Dhamma is to voluntarily choose to live a plain and simple life, a pure life, in which one isn't led astray or intoxicated by anything. On this level, there is still a sense of the "I" who is enjoying this mode of happiness, but it's a better, more developed "I."

The next highest level of Dhamma is to not let any traces of the "I" to remain at all. It's finished. The mind no longer has the feeling of being "I," of being a self, and there is no way that suffering or dissatisfaction can happen, since there is no "I" to suffer. Suffering can't occur because this egolessness is the highest happiness, if we speak in people language. If we speak in Dhamma language, however, there is nothing to say. There is nothing to get, nothing to have, nothing to be--no happiness, no suffering, nothing at all. We call this "voidness." Everything still exists, but it's free and void of any feeling of being "I" or "mine." For this reason we say "voidness."

To see that everything is void is to see things as being neither an aspect of oneself nor in anyway possessed by oneself. The words "void" and "voidness" in the common language of ignorant people mean that nothing exists, but in the language of the Buddha, the Awakened One, the words "void" and "voidness" mean everything exists, but without attachment to any of it in terms of "I" or "mine." That there isn't clinging or attachment to things as being "I" and "mine" is voidness of I and voidness of mine. When the words "void" and "voidness" are used in this way, it's the voidness of Dhamma language. To use "void" in the sense that nothing actually exists is the language of worldly people who are trapped in their senses, is the language of materialism, is the language of householders who know nothing but their homes. Here, "voidness" has given us another example of the difference between people language and Dhamma language.

We should always keep in mind this truth about language and

discriminate whether the words we hear, read, and use are people language or Dhamma language. For example, the Buddha said, "Kill your father and kill your mother, then you shall attain Nibbana." "Kill your father and mother, be an ungrateful child, then you shall attain Nibbana." The Buddha didn't mean that we should take this literally and kill our flesh and blood parents. Instead, he meant that ignorance is a kind of father and craving is a kind of mother. The two give birth to ego-consciousness and subsequently all forms of selfishness and sin. There's no reason to feel any gratitude toward them; destroy them immediately and Nibbana is realized.

To speak in this fashion is to use the Dhamma language which the ordinary person is unable to understand. He must study and inquire, think and reflect, until finally he understands. But the Noble ones, those who have realized Dhamma already, will understand immediately, though only a few words are spoken and without any explanation or advice. Just one word is enough for them to understand, without further explanation, because they know Dhamma language thoroughly.

The words "birth" and "death" require the same discrimination regarding language. In people language, the word "birth" means to be born from a mother's womb. In Dhamma language, however, the word "birth" means some form of attachment is born. This kind of birth happens every time we allow the arising of a thought or feeling which involves grasping and clinging to something as "I" or "mine," such as, "I am," "I have," "I think," and "I do." This is the birth of the "I" or the ego.

For example, think like a criminal and one is instantly born as a criminal. A few moments later those thoughts disappear, one thinks like a normal human being again and is born as a human being once more. If a few moments later one has foolish thoughts, right then one is born as a fool. If one then thinks in an increasingly foolish and dull manner, one will be born as an animal immediately. Whenever an attachment is felt intensely--when it burns inside one with the heat of fire--one is born as a demon in hell. Whenever one is so hungry and thirsty that one could never be satiated, one is born as an insatiably hungry ghost. When one is overly cautious and timid without reason, one is born a cowardly titan. (*) Thus, in a single day one can be born any number of times in many different forms, since a birth takes place each and every time there arises any form of attachment to the idea of being something. Each conception of "I am," "I was," or "I will" is simultaneously a birth. This is the meaning of "birth" in Dhamma language. Therefore, whenever one encounters the word "birth," one must be very careful to understand its meaning in each particular context.

[* Animals, demons, hungry ghosts (peta), and cowardly titans (asura) are the inhabitants of the "lower realms" in traditional Buddhist cosmology.]

"Birth is suffering." These words mean that the egoistic kind of birth described above is always painful and ugly. That is to say, if we allow "I" to be born in any manner, suffering occurs immediately. If we live simply and directly in the awareness of "not-being-I," it's like remaining unborn and never experiencing suffering. Although physical birth has happened long ago, there is no further spiritual birth of the egoistic "I."

On the other hand, whenever an egoistic thought or feeling arises, there is suffering at once and the suffering always fits the particular kind of "I" that is being born. If "I" is human, it suffers like a human. If "I" is an angel, it suffers angelically. If "I" is demonic, it suffers hellishly. The manner of the grasping and clinging can change repeatedly, even being born as beasts, hungry ghosts, and cowardly titans. In one day, there may be many births, many dozens of births, and every one of them is unsatisfactory, frustrating, and painful. To destroy this kind of birth is Nibbana.

Concerning death, there's no need to speak about what happens after the people language version. Why talk about what happens once we're in the coffin? Instead, please deal with this most urgent issue of ego-birth, that is, don't get born and there will be no suffering. Without the feeling of being born, there is no person anymore and all the problems disappear with it. That is all. When there isn't this continual being born, there is no longer a "somebody" to have problems. It's as simple as that. The time remaining in life is no longer an issue once we know how to experience the fact that this "I" will never be born again. This can be called "non-birth." You may call it "death" if you prefer.

So you see, between people language and Dhamma language the words "birth" and "death" have opposite meanings. The same situation exists in the scriptures of other religions, especially those of Christianity. As a result, the Christians don't understand their own Bible, just as we Buddhists don't understand the Tipitaka (Buddhist scriptures). Thus, whenever members of the two meet, they end up arguing until they are blue in the face. The quarrels are simply unbelievable; they fight to the end. Therefore, let us develop some understanding concerning this matter of people language and Dhamma language.

We have discussed the word "birth" in a Buddhist context, now let us consider a word from the Christian scriptures, such as "life." Matthew says that Jesus Christ "surrendered his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). Elsewhere, Jesus said, "If you would enter life, keep the commandments" (Matt. 19:17). These two statements show that the word "life" has more than one meaning. In the first statement, "life" is used in its people language sense. Jesus allowed them to kill the life of his body, which is the ordinary meaning of "life." "Life" in the second passage is the same word "life," but it now

refers to a life that can never be killed. It's a life which will never know death. By this we see that even the simple word "life" can have two very different meanings.

The word "die" provides another example. In people language, "to die" means that the bodily functions have stopped, which is the kind of death we can see with our eyes. However, "die" in the language used by God has quite a different meaning, such as when he spoke to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden telling them not to eat the fruit of a certain tree, "for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen. 2:17). Eventually, Adam and Eve ate that fruit, but we know that they didn't die in the ordinary sense, the kind that puts people into coffins. That is, their bodies didn't die. Instead, they died in another way, in the Dhamma language sense, which is a spiritual death much more cruel than being buried in a coffin. This fate worse than death was the appearance of enormous sin in their minds, that is, they began to think in dualistic terms--good and evil, male and female, naked and clothed, husband and wife, and so on. The pairs of opposites proliferated making the pain very heavy, so much so that their minds were flooded by a suffering so severe that it's impossible to describe. All this has been passed down through the years and inherited by everyone living in the present era.

The consequences have been so disastrous that the Christians give the name "original sin" to the first appearance of dualistic thinking. Original Sin first happened with that primordial couple and then was passed on to all their descendants down to this very day. This is what God meant by the word "death"; whenever we partake of this fruit of dualism (from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil") we must die right then and there. This is the meaning of "death" in Christian language.

"Death" has the same meaning in the language of the Buddha. Why is this so? Because both religions are pointing to the same truth concerning attachment and dualism. Whenever dualistic thoughts arise there is bound to be suffering, which is death. Death means the end of everything good, the end of happiness, the end of peace, the end of everything worthwhile. This is the meaning of "death" in Dhamma language. Most of us die this way many times each day.

It's called "death" because it makes the heart heavy. It always creates a feeling of frustration and depression to some degree, not to mention worry, restlessness, and anxiety. The more intelligent and clever a person is, the more often one dies and the more profound the deaths. The clever person's deaths are much more special and creative than those of an ignorant person.

We must know how to avoid death in order to be in accord with the teachings of the Buddha and Jesus (along with the other prophets) The objective of Buddhism is the same as of Christianity: Don't let this original sin overpower you; don't let dualistic attachment

dominate your heart or your mind. Refuse to let it dominate the mind ever again.

We must always be aware of the true nature of Dhamma, that in reality there is no duality of any sort--no gain, no loss, no happiness, no suffering, no good, no evil, no merit, no sin, no male, no female. There is absolutely nothing at all that can be separated and polarized into opposites. Rather than buy into them, we ought to transcend.

The dualistic pairs are the basis of all attachment, so don't fall for their tricks. Don't attach to any of them. Try to understand that these things can never be seized and held onto because they are impermanent, lack any real substance, and are not-self. Try to go about your business with a mind that is unattached. Work with a mind that clings to nothing and is free from all forms of attachment. This is called "working with a void mind."

We should perform every kind of task with a void mind, no matter whether it's at the office or at home. Even rest and recreation should be done with a void mind, a mind that always remains unattached and free because it's above all dualities. If we work with a busy mind, a mind that is restless and always grasping and clinging to one thing or idea after another, a mind that is over-burdened with attachments, then there is suffering and we must inevitably be born in a lowly state. The lower realms spoken of by traditional Buddhists happen right then and there; birth as a demon in hell, as a beast, as a hungry ghost, or as a cowardly titan takes place at that very moment. This is the most serious problem facing humanity, it's the most original sin, and it's death in Dhamma language. Therefore, we should live, work, and play without attachments.

There is a short verse of mine which I'd like to discuss.

Do work of all kinds with a mind that is void
And to the voidness surrender all of the fruits;
Eat the food of voidness as the holy ones do,
You'll have died to yourself from the very start.

Some people are unable to understand this verse and they keep saying that the author is crazy. Nonetheless, it isn't so difficult to explain.

That we should do every kind of work with a void mind is a warning that the busy and agitated mind which jumps into things with attachment always becomes dark and clouded with delusion, is full of worries and fears, and becomes gloomy and insecure. If people insist on keeping this up, before long they are sure to suffer a nervous breakdown or some other kind of illness. If they let these mental diseases and related physical ailments accumulate, they end up confined to a sick bed. Even though they may be intelligent, talented, and sophisticated people who do important work and earn a

great deal of money, they will still end up being confined to bed with nervous breakdowns, ulcers, and other disorders caused by insecurity and anxiety. All of these illnesses begin with attaching and clinging to such things as fame and money, profit and loss, happiness and unhappiness, and praise and blame.

So, don't get involved with these things. Get free of all such attachments and the mind will be void. The mind will be brilliantly intelligent, as clear and sharp as possible. Then, do your work with just such a void mind as this. All your needs will be satisfied without the least bit of frustration or suffering. Sometimes, it will even seem to be a Dhammic sort of fun. Best of all, working like this is the kind of Dhamma practice which frees us from the false distinction between practicing Dhamma at the temple and working at home. Such a dichotomy is rather foolish; it's what happens when people think only in people language.

According to Dhamma language, we must practice Dhamma in this body and mind at the same time we do our work with this same body and mind. Both work and Dhamma practice are done in the same place or the same thing. The practice of Dhamma is there in the work; the work in itself is Dhamma practice. In other words, to do work of any kind without grasping or clinging is a way to practice Dhamma. Wherever and whenever we practice non-attachment, there and then is Dhamma practice.

Accordingly, whether we are engaged in training the mind to be unattached and calm, or whether we are working to earn a living in some occupation or another, if we do so with a void mind that forms no attachments, right there is the practice of Dhamma. It doesn't matter if we are in an office, a factory, a cave, or whatever. To work like this without getting involved in attachments, obsessions, and ego is what is meant by "Do work of all kinds with a mind that is void."

The result of working this way is that we enjoy ourselves while working, and that the work is done well because our minds are very clear and sharp then, and there are no worries about things like money. The things we need are acquired in the usual ways and all this without the attachment forged by grasping and straining.

This brings us to the second line of the verse which is "And to the voidness surrender all of the fruits." When our work bears fruit in the form of money, fame, influence, status, and so forth, we must give it all to voidness. Don't be so stupid as to cling to these things as "belonging to me"--"my money," "my success," "my talent," or "my" anything. This is what is meant by not attaching to the results of our work.

Most of us blindly cling to our successes and so our experiences of success increase our selfish desires and defilements (kilesa). Let ourselves be careless for only a moment and we will fall into pain immediately due to the weight of attachments and

anxieties. In truth, this kind of mental or spiritual pain is always happening. Before long, if we aren't careful, the pain manifests itself physically in the body as well. Some people have nervous breakdowns or go insane, while others develop one of the numerous varieties of neuroses so prevalent in the world today, even though they may be famous, knowledgeable, and wealthy. All this pain results from the fact that people the world over have misunderstood, abused, and ignored their own religions.

We shouldn't think that the teaching of non-attachment is found only in Buddhism. In fact, it can be found in every religion, although many people don't notice because it's expressed in Dhamma language. Its meaning is profound, difficult to see, and usually misunderstood.

Please forgive me, I don't mean to be insulting, but I feel that many religious people don't yet understand their own religion. For instance, in the Christian Bible, St. Paul advises us to "Let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those that buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it" (Cor. 7:29-31). This passage is found in the New Testament of the Christian Bible; anyone can look it up. It should be understood in the same way as our basic Buddhist theme of non-attachment. That is, if you have a wife, don't attach to having her; if you have a husband, don't cling to having him. If you have painful or sorrowful experiences, don't cling to them as "I" or "mine" and it will be as if they never happened. That is, don't be sad about them. Don't attach to joy, goods, and worldly dealings, either.

Unfortunately, the fact is that most people--whatever their religion--are dominated by these things. They let themselves suffer intolerably over such matters until finally they go insane or commit suicide. But those of us who follow St. Paul's advice can go on as if nothing had happened. That kind of suffering doesn't happen to us, we remain fine. We buy things without taking anything home, which means we never get attached to what we buy and take home. We bought it, we brought it home, but it's like we didn't buy anything, because we don't give birth to the thought that we possess something.

This is how to buy and live as though having no goods, but if you discuss this passage with some Christians, you will find that they don't understand it at all. Even some of the clergy, the teachers of their religion, couldn't explain to me correctly how to practice in accordance with St. Paul's instructions. Their explanations were vague and obscure. They beat around the bush and don't give any practical interpretation of the passage. In fact, this passage has the same meaning as "Do work of all kinds with a mind that is void and to the voidness surrender all of the fruits," which, of course, many Buddhists don't understand either.

The third line of the verse is "Eat the food of voidness as the holy ones do." Here, some people might ask, "Then, what do we eat?" If everything is void or given away to the voidness, what will there be to eat? The answer is to eat food that belongs to voidness, the same way that the Noble Ones do. We work with a void mind and turn all the rewards over to voidness. Voidness then stockpiles it all and preserves it safely. When it's time to eat, we can eat from the stock of voidness, too.

If you earn a million dollars from your work and store it in a safe or the bank, offer it to voidness and don't think "it's mine, it belongs to me!" When you spend the money, do so with the same void mind. Simply use the money to buy some food to eat, or whatever we need to consume. This is what is meant by "Eat the food of voidness as the holy ones do."

In this line, "holy ones" means those who understand deeply and have no attachments. We ourselves ought to eat in the same way that these liberated ones eat. The Buddha ate food and all the enlightened disciples ate food. So, we aren't saying that a Buddha doesn't have to eat food anymore, but from whomever he gets his food, it's always the food of voidness, for it's received and eaten without any feelings of possession or attachment. And yet, a Buddha always has more than enough to eat. This is the meaning of "Eat the food of voidness as the holy ones do."

We can do the same. When we give all the rewards of our work to voidness, they don't disappear. Nothing is lost. Physically, in worldly terms, everything is still there. It's stored and protected in the usual ways and the law still recognizes that it belongs to us. If someone tries to snatch it away, we can battle to protect our rights in court, but always with the same void mind. That is, we needn't get angry or upset, we needn't suffer, we needn't feel personally involved, we needn't attach. In fact, with complete non-attachment we will be able to argue our case even better. We needn't create any problems for ourselves, things won't become complicated and difficult, and we will be able to protect our rights most effectively.

To pursue this point a little further: even when caught in an argument or involved in a lawsuit we should be restrained and mindful at all times so that the mind is free of attachment. Take care not to be attached or emotionally involved. In other words, first make sure the mind is void, then argue and fight out the case to the finish. In this way, we will have the advantage. Our side will debate more cleverly, will argue more skilfully, and will experience a higher level of victory.

Even in cases when we are forced to be insulting, use the usual words but do so with a void mind. This may sound funny and hopelessly impractical, but it really is possible. The word "void"

includes such strange aspects; they are all implications of working with a void mind, willingly giving all that we get to voidness, and always eating food from the pantry of voidness.

The fourth, final, and most important line of the verse is "You'll have died to yourself from the very start." We already have died to ourselves--that precious inner "me" is gone--from the very first moment. This means that when we re-examine the past and reflect upon it with clarity, mindfulness, and wisdom, we will know for a fact that there never was a "person" or "individual." We will see that there are only the basic processes of life (khandha), the sensory media (ayatana), the elements (dhatu), and natural phenomena (dhammas). Even the things we had previously clung to as existing no longer exist. They died in that moment.

Everything has died at the moment of their birth. There never was an "I" and there never was a "mine." In the past, we were stupid enough to lug "I" and "mine" around all the time. Now, however, we know the truth that even in retrospect they never were what we took them to be. They're not-me, they're not-mine, the me-ing and my-ing died from the very start right up to this moment. They're finished, even in the future. Don't ever again fall for any "I" and "mine" in your experiences. Simply stop thinking in terms of "I" and mine. So you see, we needn't interpret this verse to mean that we must physically kill ourselves. One has to be trapped in one's ego to understand it in such a way. Such an interpretation is too physical, too superficial, and too childish.

This "I," this ego, is just a mental concept, a product of thought. There is nothing substantial or permanent upon which it's based. There is only an ever-changing process flowing according to causes and conditions, but ignorance misconstrues this process to be a permanent entity, a "self," and an "ego." So don't let attached thoughts and feelings based on "I" and "mine" arise. All pains and problems will end right there and then, so that the body becomes insignificant, no longer a cause of worry. It's merely a collection of the five aggregates (khandha), functioning according to causes and conditions, pure in its own nature. These five aggregates or component processes of life are naturally free of attachment and selfishness. As for the inner aspect, those habits of desire and selfishness, try to do without them. Keep striving to prevent them from being born until the defilements and selfishness have no more opportunities to pollute the heart. In this way, we force ourselves to die, that is, we die through the elimination of polluting selfishness and defilements (kilesa).

Just don't allow any egoistic consciousness, that's the meaning of "death" in Dhamma language. Without anything masquerading as "I" and "mine," where can suffering take place? Suffering can only happen to an "I" and its "mine." So you see, possessing "I" and "mine" is the heart of suffering. Should there be

some happiness, as soon as clinging comes in the happiness becomes painful, yet one more way to suffer.

Ignorant people are always attaching to something; they don't know how to live without clinging to "I" and "mine." As a result, even beneficial things are converted into causes of suffering. Happiness is turned into pain; goodness is turned into pain; praise, fame, honour and the like are all turned into forms of suffering. As soon as we try to seize and hang on to them, they all become unsatisfactory, painful, and ugly. Among good and evil, virtue and sin, happiness and unhappiness, gain and loss, and all other dualistic pairs, suffering inevitably happens whenever we attach to either pole of one pair or another. Clinging to one pole also traps us in its opposite partner.

When we are intelligent enough not to cling or be attached to any form of dualism, then we will no longer suffer because of these things. Good and evil, happiness and suffering, virtue and sin, and the rest, will never be painful again. We realize that they are merely natural phenomena, the ordinary stuff of nature. They all are naturally void and so there is no suffering inherent in any of them.

These are the consequences of not having an ego, of not having any "I" and "mine" in the mind. Outwardly, we may say "I" and "my" according to social conventions, but don't let them exist in the mind or heart. As St. Paul said, "Let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those that mourn as though they weren't mourning . . . and those who buy as though they had no goods."

Externally, we should behave the same as others do: eat like they eat, work like they work, and speak like they speak. Speak in their people language: "this is my house, this is mine." There's nothing wrong in using these words when necessary, but don't let the mind fall for them. Leave such words outside, don't let them into the mind, don't believe them. We ought always to train ourselves this way, that is, "mouth is one and mind another." The mouth says one thing, but the heart knows otherwise.

Actually, this phrase is usually an insult used to condemn liars and conmen, not something to be encouraged. In the end, however, it can be turned around and applied to a person who really practices Dhamma, that is, whose external behavior conforms with worldly conventions but whose internal reality is another story. While the external expressions actually take place, they don't manifest in the mind. We call this, "mouth is one and mind another" or "external and internal do not correspond." A behavior that we used to condemn and try to abandon because of its dishonesty and crookedness becomes the most noble and excellent form of speech. Sometimes Dhamma language seems rather strange!

To be honest in both mouth and mind, that is, speech and thought, is people language, not Dhamma language. Ordinary people

demand that our words honestly reflect our thoughts, but when it comes to the Dhamma language of the Buddha, we practice in the manner called "mouth is one and mind another." In other words, the outside appears one way, while the inside is the opposite. Outwardly, in our speech and actions, we may possess all the things that others possess, but in the mind we possess nothing. Inwardly, we are broke and bankrupt, without a penny to our names. So please remember this saying - "mouth is one and mind another" -- in its Dhamma language meaning of course, not in the people language understanding. Please give it some thought.

Another common teaching concerns humility. The Buddha taught us not to boast or show off and Jesus Christ emphasized this point even more. There are many pages in the Bible concerning this subject. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us to do our religious practices--such as praying, giving charity - and fasting, in secret so as to not let others see (Matt. 5-7, especially 6). If it's something we want others to see, that means we want to show off, which is attachment. If we apply his teaching to our Buddhist practices, such as when we keep the special precepts on the observance days (uposatha), we shouldn't dress up or powder and perfume ourselves. Don't let anyone know we are keeping the special precepts, just keep them strictly. Jesus stresses this point in many ways, both in this sermon and elsewhere. When offering prayers to God, fasting, or practicing austerities, don't let others see. If we wish to give alms or make a donation to charity, do so secretly; don't let others know who the giver is. Jesus teaches us to do everything without anyone knowing. In other words, his aim is to teach non-attachment. This kind of practice destroys selfishness and overcomes sin.

Buddhists should be able to understand this principle of giving without letting anyone know; giving in this way will destroy the giver's self-centeredness much more than public giving. As you know, we like to say, "sticking gold on the image's back." This saying can be interpreted in two ways. As understood by foolish people, this should never be done, because sticking gold leaf on the back of an image won't gain one any honour, reputation, or other benefits.(*). On the other hand, wise people take the words "sticking gold on the image's back" to mean something good, because one doesn't receive any recognition, praise, status, or honor from the act. One hasn't traded the goodness of the act for any worldly benefits. Thus, one makes more merit than if one were to stick the gold on the front of the image.

[* In Thailand, putting small squares of gold leaf onto Buddha images and other respected objects is a popular form of making merit. According to popular Thai belief, by affixing gold leaf to the eyes, mouth, forehead, cheeks, etc., of a Buddha image, the one who affixes it will be reborn in her next life with beautiful eyes, mouth, forehead, cheeks, etc., just like those of the image decorated with gold. At

the same time, her merit making is seen by all.]

Here we see that the teachings of Christianity and Buddhism are the same; they have the same meaning, namely, to destroy attachment. We should do all religious duties and practices without others knowing. In the end, it's like they don't exist any more and we don't exist either. There's no good, no evil, no virtue, no sin, no happiness, no suffering, and, finally, not even any religion. This is the highest level of religion.

Now, let us consider the fact that non-attachment, the highest Dhamma, is something wonderful, priceless, and extraordinary. It's the heart of every religion. It's the essence of Dhamma. If there is a God, it can only be found right here in non-attachment.

Non-attachment, the highest Dhamma, is wonderful precisely because anyone seeking it need not invest anything. No money, gold, or jewels are needed, not even a single penny. According to people language, nothing can be obtained without an investment. If they listen to people language, those who wish to gain merit, goodness, or whatever must pay in money, silver, and gold, or invest their labor. If they listen to Dhamma language, however, the reality is quite different. The Buddha said that Nibbana is given free of charge. Nibbana--the coolness and peace experienced when there's no attachment--doesn't cost a penny. This means that we can practice for the sake of Nibbana without spending any money along the way. Jesus said what amounts to the same thing. He invited us to drink the water of life for which there is no charge. He said this at least three times. Further, he called us to enter eternal life, which means to reach the state where we are one with God and therefore will never die again.

"Let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price" (Rev. 22:17). This call of Jesus is identical to what is taught in Buddhism. The Buddha said that the Noble Path of Liberation, the Liberating Results, and Nibbana are free of charge, no monetary investment is required. We live according to the Noble Eightfold Path, which means we give up this, give up that, and keep giving up things until everything is surrendered. Give up everything and take nothing back. Don't receive any payment and we won't have to pay anything: we will realize what is called "the Noble Path, the Liberating Results, and Nibbana." We can taste the flavor of Nibbana without paying a penny.

We spend a lot of money trying to buy Nibbana, but the money just gets in the way. It's like investing money in order to win a palace in heaven; the two have nothing to do with each other. In fact, they are incompatible. If we want to give charity, it should be solely for the sake of others. Nibbana is our first concern and requires no money.

Why do we make donations then? Not for ourselves, of course,

but to help our fellow human beings so that they may also reach that which requires no financial investment. So, we contribute money to build temples and schools, we develop methods of teaching, and we publish books in order to help our fellow human beings to travel on the right path, to travel toward that which is obtained without payment - Nibbana. Those of us who intend to earn merit with their gold and silver should please think in this way.

If those who intend to invest their money for so-called spiritual rewards don't reconsider, they will incur losses rather than make profits. Not only will they fail to make a profit, they won't even be able to recover their investment. And when there is no profit and no breaking even, there is only loss. To act that way goes contrary to the words of the Buddha who said, "It's free." Jesus also said that it's free.

Jesus added further that what "you received without pay, give without pay" (Matt. 10:8). It seems that the Buddha never said quite the same thing, but we can say, from the implications of his teaching, that he could easily have spoken these words. If something is obtained for free, we ought to pass it on for free, too. Don't be unwilling or reluctant. Don't go taking advantage of people by claiming favors or hinting that they'll benefit by helping one in such-and-such a way or implying that students owe a debt of gratitude to their teachers. All of that is inappropriate. When we get something for free, we must give it away for free. Therefore, as the loftiest of all things, the Dhamma of each religion is something to be obtained for free. Once we have got it, we are obligated to pass it on to our fellow human beings for free, also. Don't try to wheedle any benefits out of it in return.

When we make contributions to religious causes, they are for a particular purpose, which has no bearing on our realizing Nibbana. Such contributions are meant to be instrumental in helping people who don't yet see the way to be able to find it and eventually arrive at that which is given away for free to everyone. In the end, they also will obtain that precious thing which is obtained for free, without any obstacles.

If we look carefully, we will see that the pinnacle, the most excellent of things, which we get for free, is called "Nibbana" (as well as by many other names). Jesus called it "Life." This state in which we currently exist is death. Because everyone is dying, they don't reach God, they don't reach the Ultimate. Yet, if we follow the teachings of Jesus we are born again at once. After dying for so long, we need to be reborn. When we are born anew, we are born into eternal life, which is true life. The Buddha spoke in the same fashion. He said that we don't realize that this existence is like being dead, that is, that it's suffering. We must make the required knowledge, we must awaken into a new world, newly born. Then there will be no more suffering. To understand this is a fundamental principle.

Up until this realization, we were dead, that is, full of "I" and "mine." Always living under the burden of ego and egoism is death. Because of "I" and "mine," we died over and over again. Now we are reborn into eternal life, the life of Nibbana, the deathless life, the immortality in which all "I" and "mine" end. The word "reborn" here comes to mean a life without ego, free of "I" and "mine." This is the true life which can never die. The five aggregates (khandha), the basic processes of life, are now pure, the body and mind are free of attachment and selfishness. Prior to this, the five aggregates, the body-mind process, were continually being grasped at and clung to by means of "I" and "my" and were always stained by these corrupt attachments. That continuous "I" and "mine" was death.

When the polluting desires and attachments are completely gone there is a new birth in the world of the Noble Ones. "Rebirth in the world of the Noble Ones" is a people language expression. In Dhamma language, we speak of "quenching it." Quench the "I" and the "mine"; quench ego and its selfishness. Then there's nothing. There remains only supreme voidness, which is Nibbana. So says Dhamma language.

If we speak in people language, as Jesus Christ often did, we say that one is reborn in the world of the Noble Ones and that one lives eternally in the Kingdom of God. That's people language. When we translate it into Dhamma language, we use the opposite words and speak of "quenching." One language speaks of "rebirth," while the other talks about "utter quenching." Only the words are different. In people language we talk about being reborn; in Dhamma language we talk about quenching completely.

Therefore, let us live a life of total quenching, a life that douses the flames of desire, a life of coolness. When we are burning, we are dying. A person who is hot inside is like a demon in hell, an animal, a hungry ghost, or a cowardly titan. Such a person is always dying. His attachment to "I" is never quenched. His ego hasn't yet been doused; it boils and bubbles inside him with the heat of fire. It has to be cooled down.

To make things easier, we should remember that the word "nibbana" means "to cool down." In India at the time of the Buddha, "nibbana" was a common everyday word spoken in the houses, streets, and markets. When something hot had cooled down, they used the word "nibbana" to describe it. If the curry was too hot to eat, then cooled down enough to be eaten, they would say the curry is "nibbana, so let's eat."(*)

[* Actually, the words takes on different forms as a verb, noun, and adjective, and according to case and context. As Thai doesn't conjugate words like the Indian languages, only the form "Nibbana" is used.]

We can see that the word "nibbana" was not originally an exalted religious term, but had an ordinary everyday usage in people language--the cooling down of something hot. For example, if a red-hot charcoal cools down until it can be picked up, we can call that "nibbana." If we apply the term on a higher level, such as, to animals, then it refers to animals which are no longer hot. The heat of animals is the wildness and fierceness which is dangerous for humans. If a wild elephant or wild bull is tamed and well-trained so that finally its wildness, rebelliousness, and viciousness disappear and it's safe for humans, we can say that it's "nibbana," meaning it has cooled down.

When we speak of humans, "hot" means a person who is burning and boiling as if in hell or the other netherworlds. That isn't Nibbana. After we discover the way to apply Dhamma to cool ourselves off, we begin to nibbana, continue to nibbana, nibbana steadily, nibbana until everything is thoroughly cool, which is the highest level of Nibbana--absolute coolness.

Even now, we must nibbana to some extent in order to be able to sit here and discuss Dhamma like this. Otherwise, if the flames were flaring up within us now, we wouldn't be able to remain sitting here. Therefore, we should understand that Nibbana is related to us at all times, with every inhalation and exhalation. If this weren't so, if we had no connection to Nibbana whatsoever, we would all go out of our minds and die before we knew it. Fortunately, we have some relationship with Nibbana nearly all the time. It may disappear temporarily when lust, hatred, or delusion arise, when the mind is taken over by defilements and selfishness. But when lust, hatred, and delusion aren't present in our minds, we experience a small degree of Nibbana, a brief taste or free sample of Nibbana. Due to the benefits of these recurring glimpses of Nibbana, we don't go crazy and don't die from overheat. We survive by virtue of Nibbana's beneficial effects. Therefore, we should thank Nibbana and acknowledge our gratitude to it by acting so as to have more and more Nibbana for longer and longer periods of time. Keep calming and cooling things, that is, destroy "I" and "mine." Don't let ego prick up its ears and point its tail. With self-discipline and good manners, keep the ego small and out of trouble. Lessen it, reduce it, shrink it, until at last nothing remains, then you will get the best thing that a human being can possibly get.

Whenever we quarrel due to opinions, pride, vanity, or stubbornness, it shows that we have lost touch with Nibbana. At such moments, we are crazy. If we argue, quarrel, or interfere with others at any time--no matter whether over an ordinary affair or a religious one--we are insane. In such moments, we aren't really human anymore, because we've lowered ourselves to the level of arguing and fighting. And so, as was said before, if people remain foolish they will think that there are many different religions which are incompatible and opposed to each other, which are enemies that must compete, fight, and destroy each other. These are the most stupid and

ignorant of people. They cause and experience a great deal of trouble.

When religions are regarded as in opposition and conflict, people become enemies as a result. Everyone thinks "We are right, they are wrong; they are wrong, we are right," and so forth, and then there is quarrelling and fighting. Such people are incredibly foolish. What they are quarrelling about is only the outer shell. Everyone should recognize that these are only external forms, they aren't the inner essence.

When people of intelligence and wisdom get together concerning the essentials of religion, they recognize that religions are all the same. Though outwardly they may seem different, intelligent people know that the inner spirit must be the same in all cases. The inner essence is the same no matter how different the external forms are, just like we saw with the analogy of water. The essential pure nature of water is always the same, no matter how putrid or filthy it appears from the outside. It isn't the water that is dirty, but the other elements that are mixed in with the water that are dirty. We shouldn't take those other elements. When we take those elements, it means we drink dirty water; it means we swallow the filth, urine, excrement, or whatever, and don't drink pure water.

Whenever there is a quarrel, whether it's among lay people, novices, nuns, or monks, it means that the people involved are eating filth, namely, the defilements of "I" and "mine." This should never happen; it should be given up. Don't prick your ears and point your tails. Don't puff yourself with ego and create these conflicts of pride. That's letting things go too far. Rather, our duty is try to pacify these things and cool them down.

How silly it's that the older a person gets, the more full of ego he or she becomes. I beg your pardon for speaking so frankly, but some facts can't be ignored. Why do people become more egoistic with age? Because the older they get, the more accustomed they are to attachment; "I" and "mine" accumulate and pile up inside us as we age. Further, people have sons and daughters, so they puff themselves with ego and determine to lord it over their children. "My son! How could he do that without my permission!" When they have grandchildren, they become even more puffed up and superior. Thus, elderly people are more obsessed with "I" and "mine" than children are.

If we look back at childhood, we will find that children have very little ego. Immediately after birth, it's very hard to find much ego in them, while the child in the womb has hardly any traces of "I" or "mine" at all. However, as we grow into adulthood and become fathers and mothers, and later grandfathers and grandmothers, "I" and "mine" develops in a multitude of forms and personalities. These become deeply rooted in our minds and stick there with such tenacity

that they are very difficult to remove. Therefore, old folks should be very careful and alert. They should try to return to being like children again. To be like children is a kind of Dhamma practice which leads to non-attachment and voidness. Otherwise, the older they get, the further away from the Buddha and from Nibbana they will end up.

In truth, as we grow older we should grow closer to the Buddha. In other words, the more we age the younger we should be. The older we get, the more youthful we should become. As we get older we should become more light-hearted, cheerful, bright, and fresh. We shouldn't end up dry and lifeless, so that we gradually wither away. Everybody should become increasingly fresh, bright, and light-hearted as they grow older. As we age, we should get closer to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, which means we understand Dhamma more and more. The more successful we are in making the inner flames recede, the cooler we become. As we get cooler, we feel increasingly more refreshed and hearty, we look brighter and more lively. When we have cooled down absolutely, we will absolutely sparkle with brightness and cheer. Therefore, the more ancient we get, the more youthful we should become, and the more cheerful and fresh we should look and feel.

The lively physical activity and fresh complexions of young people is one kind of youth, while the youthfulness of Dhamma language - of the mind, heart, and spirit--refers to a spiritual brightness, vigor, and serenity that comes with having more Dhamma. This is the youthfulness of heat subsiding so that coolness can enter and envelop us. Consequently, we feel increasingly refreshed, vibrant, and cheerful. So let all elderly people become fresh and full of life. May we all become more youthful. Just let youthfulness grow inside us and that problem of bickering and quarrelling will no longer exist.

Worse than that quarrelling is the habit of "extolling oneself while putting down others." Vicious back-biting and name-calling has no place among Buddhists and anyone who does such things has ceased to be a Buddhist, except, perhaps, in name. Being a Buddhist in name alone doesn't mean anything and can't be depended upon. Just declaring oneself to be "Buddhist" because it's written on one's birth certificate or because one signed up at certain temples doesn't accomplish much good because they aren't sincere. We must be genuine Buddhists in the true sense of the word, which means to weaken and reduce "I" and "mine" in order to be cool and thereby be closer to Nibbana. So we needn't discuss atrocities like disparaging and oppressing others, or extolling oneself while putting down others. These things should never happen.

What to do about those who still engage in such behaviour? I don't know what class to put them in: First grade? Kindergarten? Nursery school? These are still too high; there should be some lower

class or grade for people who behave in such gross ways. In Buddhism, genuine lay followers never do such things. Even those who are at the kindergarten level and have not yet reached into the first grade of primary school know better than to do such things. They know that such behaviour is hot and has nothing to do with Dhamma or Buddhism.

Progressing through the upper grades, through the junior and senior classes, there is less egoism until, finally, there is no more "I" and "mine." On the highest level, there's no self, everything is void of self. There's no "I," no "you," no "we," no "they," which means there's no Buddhism, no Christianity, no Islam, and no religion.

How can different religions exist when there's no "we," no "they," no "anybody," when there is nothing but Dhamma? There is only pure nature itself (suddhidhamma pavattanti), nature is all that exists - with either active aspects or still aspects, depending on whether something is conditioned and transient or unconditioned and absolute. Those who are in the upper grades already understand this. Those who are in kindergarten and primary school should also know about this so that they can prepare themselves to reach its level.

So don't get caught up in envy and jealousy, in insults and praises, in harassing and interfering with others, in arguing and fighting, in extolling oneself while putting down others. Such behaviour is worthless. It's for those who don't know how to learn on even the lowest level. It's too low to have a place in the network of Buddhists.

All of us begin at a point where we're full of clinging, then steadily reduce the clinging until we don't cling to anything anymore, until we reach the point where everything is voidness: void of "I" and void of "mine." Understand that in essence everything has been void from the start. Whether physical or mental, look deeply into it's essential nature and it will turn out to be void. There is no clinging there anymore.

Whatever clinging there was has just now happened. Originally, there was no attachment, just as all water originally is pure and clean. It's pure as it forms in the clouds, but picks up fine particles of dust as it falls through the sky. Once it falls on roofs and collects in water jars, it becomes further contaminated. Even more contaminated is the water in wells, streams, ponds, and swamps. Worse is the putrid water found in ditches, sewers, and toilets. As we examine the external changes, we should recognize that the dirty elements aren't the water and aren't essential.

So look deeply into this very body and mind when they're in their natural state, when they aren't polluted by any defiled objects. The pure, natural, uncontaminated body-mind is the object of knowledge and study. The "I," the ego, knowing this, knowing that, this is

good, that is good: this is just dirty stuff. They mix with the mind, contaminate it, and muck it up. Naturally, in themselves, our bodies and minds aren't dirty, but owing to stupidity and carelessness the newly spawned defilements invade. It's these impure guests which enter the mind and contaminate it. Why then do we take these late-coming impurities to be "I," "me," or "my own true self"? They're just new arrivals, there's nothing genuine about them. They're just dirt, isn't it silly to take dirt as one's self? One ends up with a dirty self, a dirty ego--no doubt about it.

The mind which is knowledgable and wise, which is awakened (Buddha), doesn't take anything to be self. It doesn't take dirty things as its "self." It doesn't take defilements to be "self." If it must have a self, the voidness which is free of defilements must be the self. The voidness of defilements doesn't attach or cling to anything. Even though the mouth says "I am" or "I have," the mind inside doesn't feel any attachment. "Mouth is one and mind another" at all times. I hope that you will all practice in this way.

All I have said today is merely a chat among friends. If it were a public lecture or formal sermon, these things couldn't be said like this. It might create a big disturbance. However, this has been just an informal talk within our small circle of friends, among those who should be able to understand. I only mentioned these things because I thought the people here are capable of understanding. Indeed, I hope that everyone has listened carefully, has been able to follow, and will think over the issues seriously. Those who see the truth of and agree with these principles should try to live accordingly. Before long we will progress to a higher level on the path to voidness and freedom from suffering. Then we can do work of all kinds with a void mind and we can give all of the fruits to voidness. We will be able to eat the food of voidness. And so, we will be able to die completely from the very beginning. That's the end. That's the end of being a Buddhist; it's the end of all religions.

In people language they say, "Don't waste the opportunity of having been born human and of having encountered Buddha-Dhamma." If we speak in Dhamma language, however, we would have to say, "It's the end of everything. There is nothing left to be a problem ever again." Such a life can be called "eternal life," for there is no more birth, aging, illness, or death.

Are you ready to die before dying?

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GLOSSARY

anatta, not-self, selflessness: the fact that all things lack any lasting essence or substance which could properly be called a "self." (Cf. sunnata.)

dukkha, pain, hurt, suffering, dissatisfaction: literally, "hard to bear"; the stressful quality of all experiences which are accompanied by desire, attachment, and ego. Dukkha is also said to be a universal characteristic of all phenomena; because things are impermanent, they are undependable and can never satisfy us. The inherent decay and dissolution of things is dukkha.

Dhamma, Nature, Natural Law, Duty, Truth: the way things naturally are and the way we must live so that things (dhammas) don't become problems for us.

khandha, groups, heaps. aggregates: the five basic processes or sub-systems which make up human life, namely, body, feeling, perception, thought, and consciousness.

kilesa, defilement, pollution, impurity: the various manifestations of selfishness which defile the mind, especially greed, anger, and delusion.

Nibbana, coolness: the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice. The cool peacefulness of Nibbana manifests when the fires of defilement, selfishness, and suffering are thoroughly and finally quenched.

noble eightfold path: the way of life leading to Nibbana, namely, right understanding, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Noble Ones: human beings who have eradicated all or almost all of the attachments and defilements. They are the exemplars of Buddhist life due to their wisdom, coolness, calmness, and compassion.

sunnata, voidness: the reality of being void and free of selfhood, ego, or anything that could be taken to be "I" or "mine." (See anatta.)

upadana, attachment, clinging, grasping: to hold onto some thing foolishly, that is, to regard it as "I" or "mine"; to take things personally

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu has been the most important interpreter and reformer of Thai Buddhist thought in this century. Since he began Suan Mokkh, "The Garden of Liberation," in 1932, he has undertaken the most innovative, influential, and wide-ranging study of the Pali scriptures of Theravada Buddhism. These studies were the underpinning for his experiments and researches into life and nature, out of which developed a commanding body of work. His talks, lectures, and writings, along with the monastic community he founded, have inspired many to take a fresh look at Buddhism and religion.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu has always had a profound interest in other religions and has made many friends among them. In particular, he has been in dialogue with Christianity through foreign missionaries and local Christians who were delighted to find a Buddhist monk who sought only to understand their religion, without looking down on it. This book reveals some of his thoughts on religion.

The sixtieth anniversary of Suan Mokkh was observed on May 27, 1992. Despite the after effects of a heart attack and minor strokes, Ajarn Buddhadasa spent the last few years of his life as he had spent the previous sixty.

The Venerable Ajarn passed away at Suan Mokkh on July 8, 1993. Suan Mokkh, aided by the Dhammadana Foundation and other supporters, carries on his with his work.

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