

Att'attha-cariyā



An excerpt from the
Autobiography of Tan Chao Khun Upāli Guṇūpamājān
written in 1926 when he was 70 years old

[*Translator's note*: this illuminating passage from Tan Chao Khun Upālī's autobiography (the title here being my own invention) draws together many of the most profound teachings in the book 'The Natural Character of Awakening', giving interesting background to these insights and showing how they formed the heart of his own progress on the path.]

At this point, I will relate *att'attha-cariyā* – conduct for my own benefit – in the way of Dhamma practise for you to hear as well.

From the time I turned 20 years old onwards, the Buddha's teaching where he says "*attā hi attano nātho*" – oneself is one's own mainstay – has grabbed hold of my heart.

When I was still untaught and unskilled, I believed that just this body and mind were myself. I was therefore determined to study, learn and put forth effort to look after myself, being established in good qualities at all times – having a sense of shame and moral conscience, always.

Afterwards, as I studied more difficult Dhamma, I would rely on the book '*Saṅkhattovād'* by Chao Khun Somdet Phra Wanrut (Tup Buddhasiri) of Wat Somanut, which says: "No. There is no one who is born. There is no one who gets old. There is no one who dies. Sentient-form, properties, aggregates and sense-faculties arise, and then cease in their own way."

I was determined to practise in accordance with this, but hesitation and uncertainty arose in me because it was totally contrary to my original understanding. I originally understood that the body and mind

were myself – that is, just this very sentient-form, these properties, aggregates and sense-faculties.

Afterwards, contemplating in accordance with his book saying that they are not-self, more doubt arose and continued to grow. Although I was bound to trust that sentient-form, the properties, aggregates and sense-faculties were uncertain, oppressive, and not-self, along with the Somdet, I was nevertheless stuck on (the problem of) ‘non-identity’ for about 10 years.

When I reflected on the results (of the practise), that is, the stilling of lust, anger and delusion, I definitely believed: “If you’re going to follow the three-fold training but not fight (the defilements), what kind of power are you going to have? Many practitioners have weaned their hearts from the textbooks, taken up the three-fold training and have successfully achieved path and fruit – hundreds of thousands, millions of them. If I cling firmly to *aniccam*, *dukkham* and *anattā*, only just that much, and take it to be ‘discernment’, where is it going to get me? I’m wasting too much time.”

From then on, I was determined to cultivate *sati* – recollection – in order to turn it into the factor of ‘right concentration’, but the methods for taming the mind were extremely difficult because I had a lot of communal responsibilities in the Saṅgha, laden with material gains and prestige. But even then, I still had times when I was able to slip away for some bodily seclusion.

The teaching in the ‘Discourse on the Necessity of Dhamma’ helped me give rise to a lot of skill. The reason why the Buddha left it in the state that he did gave rise to a lot of doubtful speculation – where he taught “all fabrications are uncertain; all fabrications are oppressive; all Dhammas are not-self”. Why then didn’t he teach ‘all *fabrications* are not-self? Doubt arose in me: “Fabrications and Dhammas here – how

are they different? Fabrications are called ‘Dhammas’. As for that Dhamma, how is it different from a fabrication?”

I was bound to get the answer from a suggestion in the ‘Discourse on the Supreme Kinds of Inspiration’, where it says “*saṅkhatā vā asaṅkhatā vā virāgo tesam aggam-akkhāyati*” – among fabricated Dhammas or unfabricated Dhammas, someone who truly knows will naturally explain that of all Dhammas, the Dhamma of dispassion is supreme.

In this way I understood to my satisfaction. “*Saṅkhatā vā*” I understood to be the ‘things of the world’, namely, mind, mental characteristics and form. These three things are secondary, derived phenomena. “*Asaṅkhatā vā*” are the ‘things of Dhamma’, namely, *nibbāna*, and all the Dhammas (that the Buddha) promulgated which are not secondary, derived phenomena.

In those words “*sabbe dhammā anattā*”, the Buddha means that all fabricated Dhammas *and* all unfabricated Dhammas are not one’s identity, but they can still be distinguished from each other.

As for fabricated Dhammas, these may cease and disappear from oneself, according to the suggestion in the words “*tesam vūpasamo sukho*” – the entering into stillness of those fabrications is ease. That is, they are things that are not originally present, thus they can be stilled and cease.

As for those unfabricated Dhammas, as long as life persists they cannot cease. Because they are things that are originally present, they are merely not one’s identity – they are bound to be Dhammas following their natural functions.

I was bound to understand that oneself is Dhamma, Dhamma is oneself. Thus it was *atta-dīpā*, *dhamma-dīpā*, *atta-saraṇā*, *dhamma-saraṇā*. In this way, it accords with the (Buddha’s) words in the

‘Discourse to Vakkali’: “*yo dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati*” – whatever person sees Dhamma, that person sees *me*.

When I had practised until I saw that oneself was Dhamma, saw that Dhamma was oneself, I could see the usefulness in every aspect of the body and mind; the words “*attā hi attano nātho*” – oneself is one’s own mainstay – I understood much more clearly. What I saw before – that this body and mind were uncertain, oppressive, not an identity, impure and unattractive – all completely disappeared. Only Dhamma still remained. Thus it was something special that gave me a mainstay, enabling me to experience well-being, always.

The body and mind are almost like a wish-fulfilling gem for us in every way. I’ll break things down for you to see: the words ‘body and mind’ here are, namely, comprehensively every aspect of the body. That is, the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, bowels, urinary tract, hands, feet – every part of the body, big or small. They are all the supreme endowments we have, each in their own way. They have successfully come from volitional fabrications of goodness of every kind, thus they have come to be replete in this way.

Even though we may be skilled and clever, an artist or a writer, we are unable to embellish, add to, or improve (these endowments) – however they have come, we have to depend on them, using them and looking after them until the day we die. The only way we can embellish them is just by making them engage in good or bad conduct. To embellish them as high or low, black or white, to make them have a long life-span or not know death: this is not possible.

Those words “the body and mind are a wish-fulfilling gem” should be contemplated. We have eyes: if we wish to look at something, we can look at it. We have ears: if we wish to listen to something, we can listen to it. We have a nose: if we wish to know the smell of something, we can know it. We have a mouth, a tongue: if we wish to know the flavour

of something, we can know it; if we wish to say something, we can say it; if we wish to eat something, we can eat it. We have hands: if we wish to do something, we can do it. We have feet: if we wish to walk down some path, we can go. We have a heart, a mind: if we wish to take something in for reflection or investigation, we can do it however we want.

When someone knows themselves – that they are something special in this way – this will naturally become a cause for experiencing well-being. That is, they will use those things according to their functions, not making them into their own (worst) enemy.

The natural character of someone not skilled or clever naturally makes their eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind into their own internal property. This gives rise to resistance and displeasure – personal interest – because it's their property.

The natural character of someone skilled and clever naturally doesn't let these things become their own special property, or an enemy to themselves. In the moods and objects of knowing that come and go, they will choose only those things that are useful. As for those things that are harmful, they just let them pass right by – they don't accept them or take them in. That is, they train themselves to cleanse these internal things, at all times making them sparkling and clear in accordance with the words 'a wish-fulfilling gem'.

Relying on training oneself regularly, recollection will become more mature, helping these internal things rise clear from harm – that is, they won't be one's own (worst) enemy – and will give oneself well-being in every posture. Thus it accords with the Buddha's encouragement, where he taught: “*attā hi attano nātho*” – oneself is one's own mainstay.

If we speak in conventional terms, just this entire body is Dhamma. The words '*atta-saraṇa, dhamma-saraṇa*' – to have oneself as one's

place of recollection, to have Dhamma as one's place of recollection – mean we should see that oneself is Dhamma, Dhamma is oneself.

Knowing Dhamma is 'Buddha'. The entire body replete with good qualities is 'Dhamma'. The practise that made the qualities of goodness grow in oneself is 'Saṅgha'. Someone who has Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha within themselves in this way, confident as someone who has arrived at the Triple Refuge in this life, will not have suffering throughout their life. If there is still further being and birth, one will continue to experience well-being (in future lives). If one has arrived at the Triple Refuge at a high level, they are finished with being and birth – the unequivocal attainment of *nibbāna*.

These days, as for myself, I have been successful in getting to just only the Triple Refuge – but the nature of that Triple Refuge has low levels and high levels. That is, the level of virtue, the level of concentration, the level of discernment, the level of knowledge and vision of liberation; it genuinely depends on someone's aptitude. Whatever level is reached, one will have to experience the results – just the well-being that accords with one's level and plane.

Describing (my) Dhamma-practise, letting my disciples hear, is for the purpose of helping lead you into having a refuge. Don't be someone vacillating and wavering: seize the opportunity at any cost!

Don't be gullible, believing meditation teachers who teach outside the box, outside the path – such as those who teach that giving, safeguarding virtue, developing calm and insight, venerating the Buddha and chanting, practising the holy life, abstaining from sex, abstaining from dinner – things like this – are just craving and defilement: non-doing itself is the end of craving and defilement. A teaching like this is characteristic of *akiriya-diṭṭhi* – holding that non-action is purity. It's wrong view. Don't be led into delusion, believing it. If anyone deludedly believes that, it will lead them throughout this life

and future lives to the *nibbāna* of ignorance. Don't be led into deludedly sliding after them.

As for the *nibbāna* of the Buddha, it is the holy *nibbāna* of affluence. What are called 'the endowments of *nibbāna*' are generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, heroic effort, enduring patience, integrity, determined resolve, loving kindness, equanimity and the 37 features of the 'wings to awakening' – starting with *sati'paṭṭhāna* and culminating with the eight-fold path. These are the endowments of *nibbāna*.

If you don't have these endowments, there is no way you will be able to reach the *nibbāna* of the Buddha. The *nibbāna* of the Buddha is the *nibbāna* of clear knowing. Investigate and look into the endowments of *nibbāna* in the way presented here: are they full and complete within you yet? If they are not full and complete, you are still a poor person. You can't go to *nibbāna*. This compares with a poor person who is not able to travel far by car or by boat because they're poor – they don't have the funds to cover the cost or pay the price of hiring someone's services.

If you investigate within yourself and see that the endowments of *nibbāna* are full and complete within you, you can count yourself as an affluent person – you may be able to arrive at *nibbāna*. This compares with a person who's got the funds – when they want to travel any path, they hire someone and go, succeeding in every way.

Nibbāna is not a state that individuals bereft of noble wealth are able to get to. Those with wrong view are poor people; they can only go to the *nibbāna* of poverty and destitution – that is, just the *nibbāna* of *anattā*, the *nibbāna* of ignorance.

We are disciples of the Buddha: we have to conduct ourselves in the way that makes us affluent like the Buddha. The Buddha was replete with gain, with honour, with praise and with well-being. The

dispensation of the Buddha has been able to be firmly established continuously now for more than two thousand years. It hasn't been firmly and continuously established through being poor! It has been able to be firmly and continuously established through genuine affluence. Even myself – the one advising you – I have trained myself to practise following the conduct of the Buddha and have thus become replete with gain, with honour, with praise and well-being. I have been someone who is affluent with external endowments and internal endowments throughout (my life), until I am now 70 years of age.

When you have read this biography, you should look and focus on the conduct that I have engaged myself in. As for that, I have determined in my heart to learn, study and practise straightly in line with Dhamma-Vinaya, and I have performed the tasks of administration according to my responsibilities, not letting them go to ruin, until I have advanced in royal titles and prestige. As for Dhamma-Vinaya, I have determined in my heart to follow the way of calm and insight until I have known the fabricated and the unfabricated – or, clung-to phenomena and unclung-to phenomena – clearly in the heart. I have reached the Triple Gem as my refuge. Count this as having a refuge through the ending of doubt.

This has been my *att'attha-cariyā* – conduct for my own benefit.

Comments or questions about this Autobiography can be addressed to the translator by email:

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