

Excerpts From

**Seeking Nibbana
in
Sri Lanka**



A Novel by
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The meditation master lives in a remote jungle on the island of Sri Lanka. He was an accomplished Buddhist scholar as a young man, but now he is widely recognized as a meditation master of the highest order. Everyone who has heard of him likes to think of him as an arhat, one who has uprooted all sense of selfhood and eliminated all forms of craving, and has arrived at the pinnacle of inner peace: nibbana.

Despite his reputation, he has never been invited to the towns or the big cities where he could teach hundreds of people. A common monk can teach beginners. A master, it is widely believed, should only give his time to the most advanced students, the ones who are perched on the edge of entering the stream to full awakening. Thus, it is that his next student, an American, who has lived five years in Sri Lanka, decides it is time for him to seek out the meditation master, under whose superior guidance he believes he will eventually put an end to greed, hatred, and delusion, and arrive at that very same nibbana.

This student, an ordained Buddhist monk, a bhikkhu to be precise, goes by the name of Sumana. He has a pleasant disposition, as his name suggests. After having spent much of his time in Sri Lanka at the meditation center monastery where he first decided to become a bhikkhu, he sets out on foot to travel the fifty odd miles to the master's hermitage. It will take him at least three days to reach the jungle hermitage, but that does not deter him. Neither is he deterred by the remoteness of it, the poverty of it, nor the dangers of living there. For there will be no electricity, no running water, thus no bathroom with a flush toilet, and no hot showers.

He has heard from a fellow foreign monk that the meditation master's hermitage is so deep in the jungle that few villagers are willing to bring food for the monks and that any monks living there have to walk miles to one of the neighboring villages for alms. Because of this seclusion from the rest of the world, Sumana surmises that the meditation master and he will be lucky to eat every day. Sumana

embraces the idea of fasting for days as necessary for the attainment of nibbana, though the thought of going more than two days without a meal worries him.

The meditation master's reputed arhatship, combined with the notion that he lives an austere life aloof from worldly concerns, greatly inspires Sumana as he makes his long journey to the jungle hermitage. Each imagined inconvenience and every conceivable danger serve to bolster his determination to stay there for as long as it takes, for he believes with all his heart that such conditions are essential in his search for nibbana. His fear is not of poisonous snakes, which there is said to be many in that part of the jungle, but of poisonous thoughts keeping him stuck on the wheel of existence. Lack of food and drinking water frighten him less than the thoughts of sensual pleasures that sometimes catch hold of his mind and pull him astray. He is certain that he wants to make an end to the round of rebirths right now, before he turns thirty, and then he can face anything in life with calm equanimity, knowing exactly what to do, his peace of mind utterly unshakable.

Sumana walks barefoot, as that is what he has heard an ardent bhikkhu does on such journeys. He carries a brown cloth bowl-bag with his bhikkhu's double robe in it, a barber's razor, a toothbrush, a watch, his passport and visa papers, and at the very bottom, his black lacquered iron alms bowl, the most prized of his meager possessions. The sun beats down on his shaved head fiercely and he resists the temptation to put a cloth over it to protect his skin. Each day his head gets more and more sun burnt as he walks the highways through towns, and then the footpaths through miles of rice paddy broken up by old rubber plantations and patches of uncultivated jungle, until he reaches the border of the great jungle where the meditation master lives. There he stops at a small village to get directions.

The villagers decide for him that it is too dangerous for the young white-skinned bhikkhu to go alone into the jungle, so they choose a guide for him and insist that he spend the night in the village. He is told he would lose his way and perish before ever reaching his goal if he does not follow their advice. Sumana accepts their hospitality and retires for the night in a tiny thatched hut specially prepared for him.



CHAPTER 2

The villagers are early risers, and once Sumana hears voices shouting and exclaiming in the high-pitched tone of Sinhalese women, he comes out of a deep sleep. He does not pause a second upon waking up. He hastily wraps himself in his outer robe, grabs his bowl-bag, and runs outside to search for the guide.

From the night before, Sumana recalls what the guide looks like. He looks young, at least to Sumana's eyes, but in truth, he is really quite a few years older than Sumana. He is thin and tall, almost Sumana's height, which is a gangling 6'2", with dark smooth skin and straight black hair, cropped short, dappled with bright silver hairs. He speaks good English, which he learned as a young man at a Jesuit boarding school in Colombo.

There are dogs and chickens moving about, scouring the ground for food, and he imagines that all these creatures are starving and desperate for even the smallest grain just as he is desperate to find his guide into the depths of the jungle. He yearns to be with the meditation master right now. He needs a master to help him find inner calmness and clarity, believing that he can't do that for himself, for he is in a state of panic. He blames the villagers for causing this panic within him. The morning hours would be different if he were back in the monastery. There would be no commotion, no chaos and unfamiliar sights to greet his waking eyes and ears; instead, he would be sitting in meditation, his mind moving freely in and out of sleep, lulled by the morning songs of the birds in the trees outside his hut.

The guide finds Sumana looking anxiously at a crowded row of four thatched huts, each one housing a whole family. A tap on the shoulder startles Sumana, though he tries to disguise it by making his body stiff and his face appear blank and serene. This is an old monk's habit, which he has seen hundreds of times in Sinhalese monks and has successfully learned to imitate. Only it does not become genuine just because it has become habitual. He can't hold the blank stiffness for long. Within a minute, his anxiousness reasserts itself with concern about having enough time to reach the meditation master's hermitage before twelve noon, for he can't eat after noon. Sumana begins to speak, controlling his intonation, slowing

his speech down into some kind of hypnotic rhythm. He tells the guide that they can't waste any time. As he speaks however, he has to fight back his anxiety and keep his face as stiff as he possibly can.

All this effort at self-control is unnecessary. The guide only sees a white-skinned man, who is tall and thin, with light-colored features, and an oval face. Because Sumana is from a more developed country and has so intelligently adopted Sinhalese Buddhism over any of the other world religions, the guide is proud to be in his company. When someone from a Western country comes to realize the greatness of the Buddha's teaching, and along with it, the Sinhalese mind, there is a sense of rightness, of victory over the forces of ignorance. And the greatest triumph is the Western bhikkhu who commits himself to the selfless pursuit of nibbana by going to the forest to learn from an authentic Sinhalese meditation master.

The grand stature of Sumana's quest is thus well understood and respected by the Sinhalese villagers. Thus when they are ready to leave, people bring them bags and baskets of fruit, vegetables, prepared foods, oils and tonics, stationery and other necessities to take with them to the meditation master's hermitage.

There are far too many gifts for the guide to carry alone, since a monk like Sumana can't help him carry anything, so he must get help from some of the young men of the village. Two brothers in their mid-teens volunteer as porters for this journey. With strong young bodies and youthful energy, they are perfect for the task.

Sumana speaks a little Sinhala, having picked up some common phrases and words from the Sinhalese monks at his home monastery. But he has difficulty forming sentences in Sinhala, so they speak mostly in English during the journey. The two young men from the village occasionally try to ask Sumana questions in Sinhala, and the guide often has to translate.

For the first half hour of their journey, the guide entertains Sumana with a story about the founder of the meditation master's hermitage, who was also a renowned meditation master. The guide begins by telling Sumana that there is a cave on the hermitage's grounds, where the hermitage's founding monk lived over fifty years ago.

The Buddha's monastic order arrived on this island, from India, over two thousand years ago, and has gone through several periods of decline and revival. Fifty to a hundred years ago, during one such revival, it was common for a solitary

bhikkhu to go into the jungle and find a cave to live in for the rest of his life. These monks often did not live into old age, but that was not important to them or the Sinhalese lay Buddhist community. What made them special was the sincerity of their quest for nibbana, combined with the austerity of their lives. They were revered as true bhikkhus, and offering them food, shelter, and clothing was the greatest privilege a layperson could have.

The monk who founded the meditation master's hermitage was of that stature. His name was Atakkachari, which means, "he who lives in the realm of no thought." He was thirty when he first arrived and lived there for ten years. For many years, the story goes, he was quite healthy, and every other day he would walk to a nearby village, receive his morning alms, which was usually very little because he used a hollowed out coconut shell as an alms bowl. Then he would walk back to his cave, where he would eat his meal slowly and mindfully, throwing away all of the leftovers when he was done. Occasionally, when he remained in his cave, a group of local villagers would come and bring him prepared food. No other bhikkhu lived there with him, nor did any laymen. He was completely alone, and died completely alone. No one knew he was dead until several days after the fact, when a large group of laypeople came to his cave on the full-moon day. They found him seated in meditation, his eyes wide open, not focusing on anything. One of the men put his ear to Atakkachari's heart and could hear no heartbeat. A discussion ensued whether or not he was meditating in the state of "the cessation of perception and feeling," where it is believed the heart stops for as long as one is in it. But in that state one does not smell, and may even have a flowery scent, while Venerable Atakkachari's body was already starting to putrefy. Still, everyone believed that he was a fully liberated arhat and that he had entered nibbana upon "the breaking up of his body."

The word of Venerable Atakkachari's passing spread to the towns and villages all over that part of the island. A big funeral was planned and hundreds of people attended it. They cleared a large area of land and built a funeral pyre with the wood. A group of monks carried the body on a plank. As they walked carrying the body, hundreds of young women bowed to the revered Atakkachari, their long black hair covering the ground, making a carpet for the bhikkhus to walk on. There were many other signs of devotion from those assembled. Many presented flowers to the corpse as it passed by, while others chanted, reciting the appropriate suttas (discourses or poems of the Buddha's). When the body was placed on the pyre, a crowd rushed up to it to touch the robes and exposed feet of an arhat

before his body was incinerated. After the stack of wood beneath the body was lit, the flames climbed high into the sky and the corpse was said to emanate a brilliant white light. Some who saw it were changed for life, and from that time on became devout supporters of bhikkhus. A few even joined the monastic order. After that a group of villagers decided to build two huts on the cleared land and construct a cistern over a nearby spring. In another part of the hermitage, a memorial would be built to house the charred remains of Atakkachari's bones and teeth. They would make this place into a hermitage for those rare monks who are determined to arrive at nibbana in this very life. Everyone agreed to name it Atakkachari Araña, the forest hermitage of Atakkachari.

That is, in summary, the story the guide told him. Sumana was captivated by the vision of a bhikkhu living alone in a cave and attaining nibbana. The part about his death made him sad at first, but then the whole thing about hundreds of women forming a carpet of hair for the monks to walk on struck him as an exaggeration, as did the part about the corpse emanating a bright white light. He is familiar with the Sinhalese tendency to over-embellish a story to make it seem grander and more significant than it really was.

Sumana has been conscious all along that they have not been following a real trail, but was so engrossed in the story and his thoughts about it, that he failed to register much concern. Now that the story is over, he begins to feel some anxiety about this. They have been creating their own trails through the jungle, and he recalls having hiked up and down a couple of hills. Whenever they reached the top of a hill, the guide would pause in his story telling to climb up a tree to get an unobstructed look at the land below. Then they would often make a slight adjustment in their course, creating another thin trail supposedly leading in the right direction.

Sumana thoughts about getting lost in the jungle become more frequent and fearful. He now seriously doubts if the guide knows the way to the master's hermitage. But he is unsure how to state his concern. Finally, after nearly half an hour of haphazard meandering through an obviously unvisited swath of jungle, he succumbs to his exasperation at what seems to him useless, counterproductive wandering in the bush, and asks the guide the question that has been on his mind.

“Are you sure you can locate his hermitage in this vast jungle?”

“It is here. I know it is near,” the guide replies.

“Have you ever met the meditation master?”

The guide stops and turns around to face Sumana. He does not believe he is being asked such a question. "Of course the meditation master knows me. I have brought him offerings every year for the past twenty years."

"Then why do you seem not to know if we are going in the right direction?"

"In the jungle, paths get overgrown in a matter of days. You must then rely on landmarks and what you remember from previous journeys."

That answer makes perfect sense to Sumana. Perhaps this guide has studied under the meditation master. Sumana pictures pathways in his mind, ones leading to pleasurable and peaceful states of consciousness, having become overgrown with fearful and obsessive thoughts. At that time, he reasons, he could look for the landmarks and signs that have led him to a kind of the inner peace he has known before.

They continue walking in silence. The jungle all around them is mostly silent, too. Sumana, now much less concerned about getting lost in the jungle, moves his attention to the life within the jungle. He has heard that there are poisonous snakes everywhere, on the ground and in trees. All of a sudden, he finds himself very alert and tense, imagining a possible snake hiding in the grass, or above him in a tree. His walking becomes clumsy, his face turns pale, and it is hard for him to breathe. Then the guide turns around and motions him to stop. A burst of fear shoots up through his whole body. Has the guide seen a snake?

"Do you hear that?" the guide says to Sumana, who is out of breath and therefore unable to speak. When he does not get a response from the white-skinned monk, he asks the two young men from his village the same question, this time in Sinhala. All of them stand motionless, listening for something. Sumana listens for a sound a snake might make, the two young Sri Lankan villagers listen for some sound they have never heard before, while the guide listens to the periodic sound of water splashing on rocks.

"Hear that?" he says. "The meditation master is not far."

Sumana and the two young men look at each other, wondering how the guide knows that the meditation master is nearby. As they get closer however, the sound of water hitting the ground becomes more audible, and all of them recognize it. The meditation master is taking his morning bath. Soon they are in a clearing where they can see a stone cistern and a monk, dressed only in his under-robe, which is worn like a sarong, being a single piece of brown cloth that is folded several times in front and held in place by more folds from the top. It is wet and sticks to his thin waist and legs.

The monk appears to be middle-aged, a good deal younger than Sumana expected. He is also much shorter than Sumana imagined he would be. His shaven head — glistening brown, beaded with sunlit droplets of water — is pleasantly shaped, more oval than round, creating an aura of serene wisdom. His facial features are in proportion to the overall shape and size of his head: his eyes, ears, mouth, and nose are all perfectly laid out. Soon Sumana is not seeing the master's head in the distance, but some recollection of a Buddha statue.

The meditation master pulls up a metal bucket with a rope attached to its handle, sets it on the ground and then lifts the bucket over his head and empties the water on his shaven head. It cascades down his body, creating the impression of a transparent egg encompassing his body for an instant before vanishing with a loud splash.

Sumana is transfixed by the spectacle of the meditation master bathing out in the open. He has also bathed in the open, but he has never watched another monk do it from a distance before. It strikes him as being a most ancient way of bathing, as how it was done during the time of the Buddha. Sumana's mind habitually looks for ways to identify with the Buddha's time, believing that such fantasies are part of the bhikkhu's life. Whether or not the monks of the Buddha's time actually bathed this way does not matter to him. He is not an historian, but a monk seeking liberation. If an illusion aids in his pursuit of liberation, he sees no reason to dispel it.

The guide and the two young villagers pull their attention away from the meditation master and talk very softly amongst themselves. Sumana is at first distracted by their voices. But when they are done talking, the guide explains to him that now is not an auspicious time to approach the meditation master. They should stay where they are until he has finished bathing and has put on his outer robe. Then when he is fully dressed, they should approach him with their baskets of food and other offerings. That will be the perfect time to gain the most merit.

This way of looking at things has become very familiar to Sumana. It boils down to how to get the most spiritual profit for your material investment. It is widely believed among Sinhalese Buddhists that the same good actions can produce varying degrees of merit depending on whom they are done for and at what time they are done. Thus, giving alms food to an arhat will produce greater merit, greater spiritual profit, than giving the same food to an unenlightened monk, though that will produce more merit than giving the same food to a poor person truly in need of sustenance. Giving food to someone who has just emerged from a

state of higher consciousness is supposed to produce more merit than giving the same food to the same person at some other time. This is how lay Buddhists all over Sri Lanka think, and Sumana sees clearly how this way of thinking makes his life more secure.

The meditation master soon finishes bathing, leaving the cistern with his bucket. Sumana, the guide, and the two young men wait about five minutes before going to the master's hut. As they approach the hut, they see the meditation master fully dressed in a thick dark brown robe, sitting on a stool in front of his hut. His eyes are closed and his head is tilted upwards at the sun. To Sumana's mind, he is drying off in the sun. To the three Sinhalese men, he is in a profound meditative state that can bring them great merit if they do not disturb it. They decide to wait and give him their gifts immediately after he emerges from it. Several minutes pass and the four of them stand silently observing the meditation master. They see mosquitoes buzzing around his face, but none landing on his skin. Sumana marvels at this miracle. They feel a breeze occasionally blow through the clearing where they're standing, and the guide remarks how the master's robes are not touched by the wind, as if this were not his physical body, but a mind-made one before them.

Then the master's eyes open and he looks across at the four visitors. He smiles. He has all of his teeth, a rarity amongst Sinhalese monks at the master's age, which Sumana now places at near fifty. His face beams with light and friendship. He does not rise from his stool, waiting for them to approach and bow before him, which they all do. Sumana the monk goes first, asking for compassion, followed by the other three who ask for nothing, though they anticipate how much merit today's offerings will bring. The guide gestures to the bags and baskets and then asks the meditation master if he would kindly accept alms from them today. The master says he would, but first he would like to learn more about the white-skinned monk.

Sumana approaches the meditation master again, sitting down cross-legged on the ground in front of him. He looks up into the master's dark brown eyes and imagines that he is seated in front of the Buddha and it is now his time to receive that teaching that will result in the end of suffering, the final severing of all rebirth, nibbana. The meditation master speaks first.

His voice is deep and calm, and his English is crisp and clear. He says, "Venerable monk, I am Aggachitta Thera, a monk of twenty-five rains. Have you come for meditation instruction?"

“Yes, Bhante,” Sumana says in a soft, breathy voice.

“Then what is your name and who is your preceptor?”

“I am Sumana Bhikkhu. My preceptor is Dhammaphala, a Nayaka Thera of the Shwe Jin Nikaya,” he says with a tone of pride at his distinguished pedigree.

“I too am of the Shwe Jin Nikaya. It is a noble Burmese ordination. I studied in Burma. Did you know that?”

Sumana didn't know that. Actually, he doesn't know anything about the meditation master, Venerable Aggachitta, except that he's a reputed arhat and the greatest living teacher in Sri Lanka.

“Before I became a monk,” Aggachitta continues, “I was a student at Peradineya, the University in Kandy. After I had completed my doctoral thesis on conditionality, I was offered the opportunity to go to Burma and study the commentaries on the abhidharma. It was there in Burma that I first meditated at a large meditation center, and soon after ordained as a bhikkhu. I returned to Sri Lanka. Instead of taking up a teaching post at the university, I left for the forest. I have lived alone, except for the occasional student, for the past twenty-five years.”

Sumana doesn't quite know what to make of the meditation master's description of his background. It doesn't seem extraordinary to him: college, writing a dissertation on something obscure, a Burmese meditation center, and then going to the forest. It sounds as though the meditation master has barely lived, though that should be a good thing for someone who has attained nibbana. Sumana did have a life of sensual pleasure and intimate relationships between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, before he decided to become a monk. He believes this will make it harder for him to progress on the path to nibbana. He too has gone to college, but only enough to satisfy his parents so that he could leave his country and search for liberation in the East. He read a few popular books on Buddhism before setting out on his quest, never attempting anything scholarly. The idea of learning Pali and studying the early discourses of the Buddha has not appealed to him. It is too much of a burden to take on. Besides, he has heard that study is not necessary for full awakening, and that it can even become an impediment.

For a brief moment, as he sits in front of the meditation master, he feels stupid and inadequate. Then it occurs to him that he may not get the kind of teaching he has dreamed about from the meditation master. Instead of fasting, long hours of sitting meditation, depriving his body of sleep and exercise, he may now be in store for long hours devoted to the study and contemplation of Buddhist philosophy. Nibbana now seems to him to be utterly unattainable.



CHAPTER

6

Sumana sleeps deeply, softly, peacefully throughout the night. When he awakes at dawn, he feels refreshed. The jungle is quiet at first. He is just getting seated on his double robe, adjusting his posture and placing one hand on top of the other in his lap, when the cries of birds — hundreds of birds, singing at the first light of day — break through the quiet of his mind. He is irritated by how loud the birds are, how shrill some of them sound, and wishes that the volume could be turned down. When he closes his eyes and tries to put his attention on just sitting, the discordant bird sounds seem amplified, and he feels goaded to jump up and stamp out the door to yell at those inconsiderate birds to shut the hell up!

He suppresses that impulse, not by soothing himself with words, but by tensing his body and forcing himself to stay rooted in his meditation posture. He then tries to locate where the different bird sounds are coming from. Some of the birds are near his hut, chirping furiously above his right ear. Then there are whistling bird sounds that seem to fill the whole sky above the roof of his hut. Soon he has pinpointed the direction and approximate distances of many of the birds. In the course of making this mental map of the various sounds, he feels the tension in his body begin to lessen. His anger at the birds also dies down. His body relaxes even more. His trunk caves in a bit and his arms make a wider circle in front of him. His breathing slows down. Sleepiness returns. The volume of the birds is reduced further and further into dead silence as his mind turns inward.

At first he is caught off-guard by the onset of sleepiness, as he was feeling well rested when he began the sitting. Maybe it is not sleepiness. But it certainly feels like it. His head droops and his body leans forward even more. It feels as if his body will tip over any minute. Then he has a giddy sensation of falling forward, but his body does not move. It is as though he falls forward through his body for a second and then is snapped back into it. This startles him fully awake. He is determined to sit up straight so as not to have it happen again. A minute or

so later, the drowsiness returns, his body is hunched over again and he can feel himself once again falling forward. But this time he does not fall through his body. He just vanishes for a second and then abruptly returns to awareness. He opens his eyes. The light is bluish and it is hard to make out the forms of things around him. He does not feel tired anymore. He straightens up and, shutting his eyes, makes an even stronger determination not to let his mind drop off in this strange way again. He places his attention on the sound of the birds outside, even though the external noise has quieted down considerably. He soon finds his mind getting drowsy again. Within a few seconds, his chin is resting on his chest. A gurgling sound, coming from his own throat, enters into his awareness, and he wonders how long he has been asleep. He scolds himself for not being able to stay awake. Then, without a clear intention to do so, he gets up and makes his way outdoors. Only then does it occur to him that a cup of tea might help him stay awake.

The jungle is truly beautiful and mysterious in the early morning twilight. He doesn't know the names of the tropical trees and plants, but they all seem thick and full, which arouses a sense of awe and appreciation of his surroundings. The world he walks through is a primeval garden, no different from the jungles of the Buddha's time. The same plants, the same birds, the same snakes, insects, and mammals seen by the bhikkhus of olden times are right here with him. It is barely light enough to see if a snake were in his path. This thought sends a burst of fear right through him. He stops in his tracks, anxiously scanning the ground in front of him. He sees no snakes, but he feels the fear of snakes hover between his chest and thighs. As he walks towards the dining hut, the sensation of fear stays around his belly, and so he puts his attention there as a way to keep it from spreading to other parts of his body.

As he approaches the dining hut, he notices a light coming from it. The hut seems flimsy and insubstantial next to the hardy jungle foliage. It has no walls, just pillars, one at each corner, made out of logs cemented in the ground, supporting a thatched roof.

The light is coming from a kerosene lantern. Near the lantern, Sumana can see the temple boy squatting in front of the kerosene stove. He is boiling water in the kettle. As Sumana enters the dining hut, the temple boy looks up at him with a smile, greeting him with hands clasped together in reverence, which lasts for a moment before he brings his attention back to the kettle.

Sumana watches him make tea as if in a daze. Next to the stove is a cup containing white powder and water, which the boy picks up and stirs with a

spoon. Squatting near the stove, he opens the tin of tea and reaches inside it with his free hand, pulling out a large clump of tealeaves. He puts the tea in the pot of water, which just now begins to boil. He opens an old cocoa tin and, using the same spoon, adds a spoonful of sugar to the kettle. He adds a few more teaspoons of sugar, turns the stove off, and only then pours the cup of milk into it. He lets it sit as he gets up and goes over to the table where some teacups and saucers are.

The temple boy brings Sumana a cup of tea, silently offering it to him, holding the cup in both hands with its handle facing Sumana. Still in a daze, he wraps his index finger around the porcelain handle as the boy lets go. The cup dangles in his hand, almost spilling over until Sumana tightens his grip. He is about to lift the teacup to his lips when he recalls the rule against monks eating or drinking while standing up. He catches himself in time and carries the tea over to the bench reserved for monks. He sits down, setting his tea on the bench next to him. The temple boy pulls up a mat and sits down on the ground in front of him, just as he did the day before with the meditation master.

He takes his first sip of tea and relishes the pleasant taste. He enjoys milk tea more than any other Sri Lankan beverage, especially in the morning, when the air is still cool enough to make drinking a hot beverage pleasurable. He so relishes the flavor and sensations created by sipping tea that he hopes to be left alone in silence. But that is not going to happen.

The temple boy introduces himself, speaking in good English without much of an accent.

“Yesterday we met only briefly. My name is Rahula.” He looks to Sumana for some sort of reciprocal reply, such as, “Hello, my name is Sumana. I am pleased to meet you.” But no such reply comes his way.

Rahula adds, “Venerable Aggachitta is my teacher too.”

This wakes Sumana up a bit. He looks more closely at the young man seated on the ground. He sees a healthy, handsome, though somewhat awkward eighteen-year old. Rahula’s eyes are bright, creating the impression of him being an aware and intelligent individual. When Sumana focuses on Rahula’s smile, he senses the young man’s friendliness and concern for others. Sumana then returns his attention to his cup of tea, taking the last few remaining gulps. He hopes that the temple boy will refill his cup without being coaxed, but instead he continues with his story.

“I was supposed to attend university this year, but the civil war has made the colleges dangerous. That’s why I’m here. Venerable Aggachitta is teaching

me about the monk's life while at the same time tutoring me in various subjects. Would you like to discuss the Buddha's teaching?"

Sumana knows all too well that a young man like this would have a considerable advantage over him when it comes to discussing the Buddha's teaching. Not only can a Sri Lankan with a complete high school education read the Pali Canon in Sinhalese and English, but he would also be familiar with many Pali words and phrases from having memorized suttas in his childhood. This young man has all the background to delve deeper into the Buddha's teaching. But for some reason that seldom happens among the Sinhalese. Sumana has heard from foreign monks who have lived here much longer than he has that few Sinhalese monks ever question the Buddha's teaching deeply or make their own inquiries into what the Buddha actually meant.

The meditation master doesn't seem to be that kind of Sinhalese monk. Perhaps his other student is also different. Sumana is becoming a little curious about the temple boy, whose name he can't seem to remember, though his main focus is on whether the young man will notice that his teacup is empty and in need of a refill.

"What do you think?" Rahula asks after the long period of silence.

"Is there any more tea?" Sumana asks, not fully conscious of what he is doing.

"Let me get you some," Rahula says, happy to be of service, uplifted by being given this new monk's undivided attention for a moment.

With his second cup of tea in his hands, Sumana feels at ease. Now he can concentrate on what the young man was saying. It had something to do with discussing the Buddha's teaching, but it is too early in the morning for Sumana to strain his mind on what little he actually knows of the Buddha's teaching. Perhaps asking the young man a few personal questions will do instead.

"When are you going to become a monk?"

Rahula replies, "I don't know yet. My family may someday need me to earn money for their survival."

"What does your father do?"

"He's a schoolteacher and may be a headmaster one day. My mother teaches at a finishing school for girls."

"Surely your parents will have a pension and be able to take care of themselves."

"I hadn't looked at it that way." Rahula replies.

“Then what’s stopping you?”

Rahula blushes. Sumana guesses that it has to do with a woman. That’s the main reason why men don’t become monks: they’re in love with a woman. At least that is what most of his fellow bhikkhus have led him to believe.

Rahula looks away, and then back up at Sumana. He feels uneasy about trusting this monk with his secret. He’s not even told the meditation master about his girlfriend in Colombo. There’s a good reason for that. He’s not sure if the meditation master will tell his parents if he confides in him. For the meditation master is his father’s older brother and would feel obligated to pass on such information.

Rahula takes Sumana’s teacup with some tea still left in it, and then goes outside the hut to wash it along with his cup. Sumana is finally left alone, but without the company of Rahula, or even his cherished cup of milk tea, it feels more like being deserted than just being alone.



Aggachitta walks to his hut, his mind preoccupied with thoughts of causality. Usually at this hour, he must put his attention on the morning routine of washing up, straightening up his room, and raking the leaves that have accumulated around his hut. These physical, worldly responsibilities make an intrusion, disrupting his thoughts for a moment before he exiles them with the words “not now.” For now, he is climbing the great ladder of *paticca-samuppada*, dependent arising, or dependent origination, depending on the translator.

His mind holds onto the central link in the great chain, as if it held the key that will unlock his understanding. The pivotal causal link is an idea that he believes deep down is simply a mistake of choosing the wrong word, leading to the wrong ideas, thus dooming any serious investigation into causality. It is a joke played by the Buddha, or perhaps — granting the Buddha more respect — it is a puzzle.

He enters his hut and sits down at his desk. He has an exercise book and a pen ready to write down his thoughts. He writes the word that troubles him: *tanha*. What is it doing in the great chain of dependent arising? One of its many synonyms would be clearer in its place, and that is how it has mostly been translated, leaving the riddle unanswered. For it is easier to call it desire, longing, craving, passion, greed, or any number of recognizable causes for suffering than it is to call it by name. *Tanha* is thirst.

In the front of his mind, he holds the idea of thirst, peeling it carefully, separating it from all the associations built up around it over the centuries, looking into it to see if he can see its core.

Thirst only goes away by drinking liquid. It then returns sometime later, compelling one to consume more liquid. All animals that walk the earth know thirst. Without water, there would be no life. The ending of thirst, in a physical sense, is death. Was the Buddha speaking in metaphor? Why would he choose a metaphor in such an important philosophic statement, where that word is the key element? He couldn't really have meant thirst, for there's no possible way that the Buddha and his disciples never felt the need to drink water after they attained *nibbana*.”

As much as his mind hates the idea, the only conclusion Aggachitta can reach right now is the same that countless Buddhist philosophers before him have reached, which is that thirst is indeed a metaphor. He cannot be satisfied with that explanation. Maybe the word has a particular connotation that has been lost over the ages. Then it would not be a metaphor, for he despises the use of metaphors in philosophical statements.

What modern connotations does the word thirst have? It conveys the search for something greater, or more stimulating, pleasure producing, than what one has already experienced, as in the sentence, "He thirsts for adventure."

Then he thinks about thirsting for fame, for wealth, for adoration, for power, and even for knowledge. It occurs to him that the central thread connecting all these objects is dissatisfaction with what one already has combined with an unstoppable momentum to get something greater than that.

Such thirsts are never truly satisfied. The object of thirst is not material; it does not have a specific size, shape, or weight. It can always grow beyond one's grasp.

This line of thought leads right into grasping, or clinging, which is the next link. It is another puzzling term. However, is he finished with thirst yet? He doesn't want to go on before he is. Just at that moment, he catches thirst in action. It's the thirst in his investigation that makes it impossible to hold onto what thirst is for any length of time. Instead of looking at thirst, he is thirsty. Thirsty to know what thirst is. He can't just be satisfied knowing what little he has come to know thirst to be. His mind is thirst-driven.

Aggachitta knows that all minds are thirst-driven in this way. Coming and going, that is all about thirst, as is the past, present, and future. The mind can't think a thought without being dissatisfied with it in some way to seek another thought. The same holds true with sensations, feelings, and perceptions. When one feels pleasure, one doesn't immediately grasp it tightly as the traditionalists believe. Instead one thirsts after another pleasurable experience, for once the present one is felt, it is no longer an object of satisfaction. Then what is grasping?

Now the puzzle has shifted to the next element, for Aggachitta believes he now understands what *tanha* is. That understanding is soon buried by *tanha*, just as when one digs a hole in the sand, the sand slips back in to any space that is cleared.



CHAPTER

28

Gotami is too agitated to sleep. All she can think about is meeting the meditation master. She worries about whether he will like her or just ignore her. If he ignores her, that is not a bad sign, for that is how bhikkhus often relate to women. However, if he likes her, then maybe she can go to him for instruction every day. If he ignores her and yet likes her, which is the most likely scenario, maybe he will teach her once every two or three days. Then a more serious concern occurs to her. What will she do if he does not think much of her meditation practice?

This thought increases her anxiety. He might not find her worthy. Then she will have to be content with Ananda or any other less enlightened teacher who happens to be in the vicinity. She will never get anywhere on this noble path if that is her lot.

Now she knows what she must do. She has to meditate. She must put her best foot forward. She sits up in bed and assumes a cross-legged posture, straightening her back. She pictures her bodily form in her mind, and it looks good. The master will certainly approve. Then she considers which technique to use, trying to figure out which one the meditation master would approve of most. She weighs awareness of the breath at the nostrils against awareness at the abdomen. She goes with the abdomen. If she does that, then she should include noting rise/fall. She adds that to her list. Is there anything else? Oh yes! There is noting “thinking, thinking.”

Now she is ready to begin. She takes refuge three times, skips over the ten precepts, and jumps into a recitation of the qualities of the Buddha, dharma, and sangha. Now she’s sure her mind is properly directed. She places her attention on her abdomen. It is barely moving. She’s thinking about it not moving, and so notes “thinking, thinking.” This is going well so far, she thinks, and then notes “thinking, thinking” again. Her abdomen still isn’t moving much, though she does hear her stomach rumble, and so notes “hearing, hearing.” I’m being very mindful, she thinks, and then notes “thinking, thinking.” She wishes her abdomen was

moving more so she could be noting “rising, rising” and “falling, falling” instead of “thinking, thinking” all the time. That is what happens when you are aware, she tells herself, inserting a quick “thinking, thinking” after that thought.

She breathes faster so as to feel her abdomen. As she does so, she recalls what she read earlier about Sunlun Sayadaw. He didn’t do this noting technique and he became an arhat. All he did was breathe fast. Why not switch techniques? This thought is followed by a hurried “thinking, thinking.” Oh, shut up! The response is a loud, imperious “thinking, thinking!” Her breathing gets even faster, and she forcefully plants her attention on both nostrils. Thoughts come with the occasional “thinking, thinking” appended to them, but she now pushes them both away, drowning thinker and commentator in the roar of her breathing.

She breathes like a steam-driven locomotive for several minutes. Dots of light pop up and vanish within the black space of her mind. White, red, yellow, blue balls surge and burst here and there. It’s like a fireworks display. Her body sparkles with crisp sensations of joy. Her heart feels cool and delicious. Her breathing is unstoppable. It’s like riding a galloping horse and trying to keep hold of the reins. She’s tossed about, her body swirling in her seat, jerking in the shoulders and neck. Her breathing gets stronger and stronger, completely overtaking her. She feels an explosion rising up from within. Her body freezes, as though paralyzed. A strong, brilliant bright white light bursts up from her spine and into the very center of her brain.

“This is it,” a voice within her says, calm and unruffled, her body light and without tension, her mind completely still, floating on a translucent plane of infinite whiteness.

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