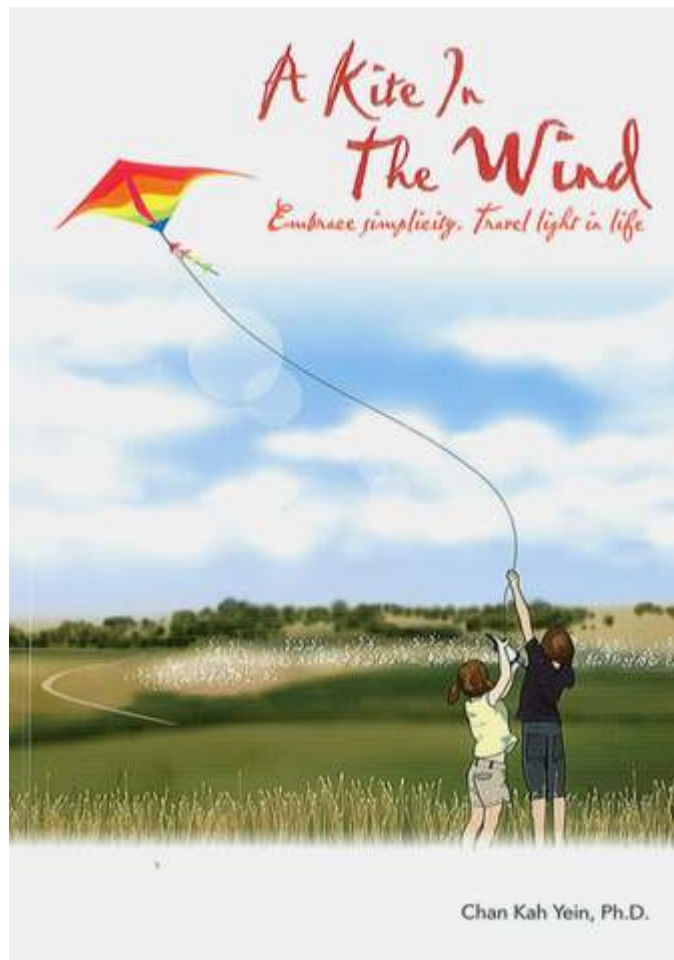


A KITE IN THE WIND



**EMBRACE SIMPLICITY,
TRAVEL LIGHT IN LIFE**

Chan Kah Yein, Ph.D.

By the Author

Books

Pawprints on My Heart, 2008
Seven Little Stories about Kindness to Animals

Little Steps, Joyful Steps, 2008
The Humble Beginnings of a Dhamma Speaker

A Kite in the Wind, 2008
Embrace Simplicity, Travel Light in Life

Audio Talks in CDs

How to Practise Right Livelihood and Still be Rich, 2006

Kindness to Animals, a Buddhist Perspective, 2007

Awakening Kindness, 2007

Creating Heaven in an Imperfect World, 2008

Dewdrops from My Heart, 2009
A Treasury of 28 Dhamma Talks

If you have found these books and CDs beneficial, kindly pass them on.
The Gift of Dhamma excels all Gifts.

**For my children,
Ming-Yi and Jia-Wen**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chan Kah Yein teaches tertiary-level mathematics in a private college in Subang Jaya. She holds a first class honours degree, a Masters and a Ph.D. in Mathematics Education.

Having been a practising Buddhist since the age of twelve, Kah Yein is now a regular *Dhamma* speaker in the Klang Valley. She was the best student in the United Malaysian Dhammafarrers' 1st *Dhamma* Speakers Course, and a moderator for the 2007 Global Conference on Buddhism. She is also an associate editor of *Community*, a journal for Malaysian Buddhist educationists.

Kah Yein is very passionate about promoting kindness to animals as part of her practice of *metta*, and she rescues stray animals and fosters them at home. She has written two other *Dhamma* books entitled *Pawprints on My Heart* and *Little Steps, Joyful Steps*.

With a love for all things small and simple, her motto is to embrace simplicity and travel light in life.

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Provided it is done without any changes to the text, this book may be printed in whole or in part for free distribution only (strictly not for sale). However, the author would appreciate being informed by email: chankahyein@gmail.com

Foreword

I am thrilled and honoured to be asked to write the foreword to this delightful little book by Dr Chan Kah Yein, who, in the very short space of two years has distinguished herself as a *Dhamma* speaker who is well known for her ability to bring the sublime message of the Buddha in an uncomplicated, joyful manner to audiences with various levels of understanding and knowledge.

The Buddha has said that there are three kinds of people just like there are three kinds of lotuses: those who will never rise above the water, those who lie just below the surface and those who bloom gloriously above it. Some years ago Kah Yein was just below the surface, quietly listening to *Dhamma* talks at every opportunity, absorbing it all, but after attending a short *Dhamma* Speakers course organized by a few older members of the community in the Klang Valley, she simply blossomed and charmed all her listeners not only with her wit, but also with her attention to minute details as well as her insistence on scriptural accuracy.

Once she established herself as a *Dhamma* speaker, she decided to apply her skills and knowledge in the art of writing books. In a very short time she has written some very popular books and *A Kite in the Wind* is her third publication.

This book is remarkable in that it truly ‘embraces simplicity’ by bringing home the Buddha’s message that one way to experience happiness is to reduce our wants. She has an impeccable style of writing, quoting from a wide variety of sources ranging from pop songs to western poets to the scriptures, and incorporating them with ease to support her main theme.

In recent times we have seen the publication of an impressive number of books on Buddhism by local writers, but Kah Yein’s books stand out because of their simplicity and acceptability to a wide range of interests. She demonstrates that Buddhism is easy to practice, and that it can bring happiness immediately to anyone who chooses to see the wisdom behind her words.

Vijaya Samarawickrama

Acknowledgements

When I was encouraged by my spiritual friend, Bro Ong Khing Wee, to write a *Dhamma* book, I had intended that my first title would be *Embrace Simplicity, Travel Light in Life* because this had become my motto ever since I became a *Dhamma* speaker.

“You make things simple and so easy to understand,” is what most people usually tell me after my talks. But somehow, *Pawprints on My Heart* and *Little Steps, Joyful Steps* took precedence, and I just went with the flow of my creative juices.

Now, finally, the book on how I travel light and embrace simplicity in my daily life has become a reality. And this book would not have been possible without the support of many people.

I wish to thank Bro Khing Wee and Bro Lim Chin Kah for giving me the confidence to write, not just any book, but a *Dhamma* book. I know this task comes with great responsibility because I would be propagating the Buddha’s words. Thank you, brothers, for believing in me.

I wish to thank Uncle Vijaya Samarawickrama for his very meticulous proof-reading and in providing valuable feedback. I am honoured and humbled to have been able to learn from the very best in the field, in literary prowess as well as *Dhamma* knowledge.

My heartfelt thanks go to Bro Chin Kah and Mrs Wong Yew Choong, my Fifth Form English teacher, who have both so graciously offered to be my proof-readers for all my books thus far. Thank you once again, for helping me with this book with your very careful and keen “second pair of eyes” and seeing what I cannot see.

My gratitude also goes to everyone who had so willingly supported all my books, by giving me encouragement, sponsoring the publication costs for free distribution, helping me distribute the books *and* reading what I write. I am deeply honoured by your generosity and loving-kindness.

And, to my family – without your patience and understanding, support and encouragement, this book would never have got off the ground. Thank you for being there for me.

With lots of love,

kahyein

12th June 2008

Prologue

Less is more.

- Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

I thrive on simplicity in my life.

Having always found sophistication and elegance in all things simple, whether in thought, word or deed, I am a minimalist and a reductionist in life.

The Buddhist economist, E. F. Schumacher was attributed to have said: *Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius – and a lot of courage – to move in the opposite direction.*

So you see, not that I am a genius, rather, I am learning *not* to be a fool...

Having said that, I must now very quickly end this prologue with a K.I.S.S. (Keep It Short and Simple), and get on with the book...

1. When I was Small

...and Christmas trees were tall, we used to love while others used to play. Those of you who lived during the era of the Bee Gees would have recognised these lyrics from their song *First of May*, in the movie *Melody*.

I grew up in a middle-class family. My father was a technical assistant with the Public Works Department while my mother was a school teacher. My elder brother and I had a happy childhood. I remember my mother often telling us that she did not have many material luxuries during her childhood as it was marred by the Second World War. Being the eldest in the family, she was tasked with the responsibility of looking after her siblings while my grandparents travelled far to earn a living. So after having become a mother, she ensured that we (her children) would never ever be deprived of material needs and wants.



Mummy, brother and me, on my first birthday.



My brother and me, playing *masak-masak*.
We had three woks!

My father too felt the same way though he had never quite expressed it to us in words, but he certainly showed it in all his actions – how he showered us with toys, games, books, activities, and whatever children needed and wanted as we were growing up. Although my parents were not financially “rich” those days, my brother and I had everything, and I do not ever remember having to ask for anything all my life. In fact, I felt we had too much!!

When I look back now, I am quite convinced that both my parents must have done lots of *dana* (giving) in their previous lives. They were not in the high income group, yet they had everything in abundance. I remember we would have three refrigerators, several television sets, many hi-fi sets, toys in duplicate (because there were two of us, and although we never fought at all, my father still made sure we would never *have* to fight, hence, everything was bought in duplicate!). Our cousins and friends who visited would marvel at just how much we had those days.

So, having grown up with abundance all my life, did I also want to have abundance in my life when I started my own home? Abundance of love and caring – Yes! But, in material things, I wanted to keep things really, really simple.

Just the bare necessities would do.

2. First Things First

In my *Dhamma* talks, I am sometimes asked, “Where, in the Buddha’s teachings does it say that we must practise simplicity?” Well, in quite a few places, actually.

If we were to look at the Buddha’s life history itself, we would see that He chose simplicity against abundance (in the material sense). His life of princely riches and pleasure did not bring him happiness. At the age of twenty-nine, he chose to leave these luxuries behind and lead the life of an ascetic in order to seek the truth. And, to find happiness. This itself tells us that in order to seek the truth and be truly happy, we need to let go of the unnecessary things in life.

The *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* (Turning the Wheel of the *Dhamma*) was the first sermon of the Buddha, and this was delivered at the Deer Park in Sarnath to the five ascetics, two months after His Enlightenment. In this sermon, the Buddha expounded the Four Noble Truths as the realities of life. The First Truth tells us that there is unsatisfactoriness in life while the Second Truth explains that this unsatisfactoriness is caused by *tanha*.

Tanha is usually translated as craving or thirst, the unwholesome desire of wanting more and more and never being satisfied. *Tanha* also connotes grasping and clinging, and not being able to let go. It is this *tanha* that causes us to be dissatisfied with life. The Third Truth tells us that the way to be truly happy is to free ourselves from *tanha*. Freeing ourselves from *tanha* is letting go of our wants, and we should also think about how we can simplify our needs too, and make do with less. And the Fourth Truth shows us the way to do this – to live our lives according to the Noble Eightfold Path.

Therefore, the way to attain enlightenment is enshrined in the Noble Eightfold Path which covers eight aspects of our lives. One of these is *Samma Sankappa* (Right Intentions). The Buddha said that in everything that we do, intention matters the most. It is our intention that produces *kamma*.

Under Right Intentions, the Buddha taught that we should do all things with these intentions:

Nekkhamma (Renunciation or Letting Go)
Avyapada (Friendliness and Goodwill)
Avihimsa (Non-Violence or Harmlessness)

It is *Nekkhamma* that teaches us to practise simplicity in our lives. Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his book, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, translates it as Renunciation. He writes that the Buddha’s teachings run contrary to the way of the modern world in that while consumerism is on the rise, the Buddha tells us that turning away from craving and its drive for gratification is the key to happiness. Most importantly, Bhikkhu Bodhi reminds us that real renunciation is not about compelling ourselves to give up things which we

still inwardly cherish, but of changing our perspective on them so that we no longer crave for them. If we realise that our dissatisfaction in life is due to our desires and cravings, then we would not want to remain in bondage to them anymore.

Ven S. Dhammika, in his book *All About Buddhism*, explains that *Nekkhamma* means giving up in order to go forward spiritually. Indeed, when we do things with the Right Intention of letting go, we are rising spiritually and getting closer to enlightenment.

3. Delusion.com

In the *Anguttara Nikaya 10.67*, the Buddha taught us that all our defilements stem from three evil roots, namely, Delusion, Greed and Hatred. We are deluded because we do not have the wisdom to really see things as they are. For example, some of us might still hope that good things would remain permanent, yet one of the last things the Buddha reminded us was that all conditioned things are transient.

In the practice of simplicity and letting go, it is helpful that we learn to see all things as impermanent, be it good or bad. When goodness comes, we are grateful, and we embrace and enjoy it. When troubles come, we must be graceful and accept them as well, knowing and realising that good times and bad times are merely passing phases in our lives. It is when we attach ourselves to them that we will be miserable. We feel miserable when bad times come, but we also feel miserable when good times fade away. If only we could embrace them momentarily while they are here, and let them go, we would lighten our hearts and go about life more happily.

William Blake expresses this very eloquently in this beautiful poem:

*He who binds himself to joy,
Doth the winged life destroy.
But he who kisses the joy as it flies,
Lives in eternity's sunrise.*

Do you see the Four Noble Truths expressed in this poem? The first two lines tell us that attachment to good times (and bad times too!) is the origin (*Samudaya* – Second Noble Truth) of our unsatisfactoriness in life (*Dukkha* – First Noble Truth). The next two lines say that if we could just “kiss the joy as it flies”, and this means that when joy comes, we are allowed to embrace it, enjoy it momentarily and let it fly, then we would always be happy (*Nirodha* – Third Noble Truth). Similarly, when sadness comes, embrace it too. Then, let it fly. It will eventually fly away.

So, living simply and being able to let things go after embracing and enjoying them momentarily, is one of the keys to a happy life. When we are able to let go, we also reduce the other two evil roots of Greed and Hatred, which are bolstered by Delusion. Greed is wanting more and more, Hatred is holding on to angry thoughts. If only we could let go of these two defilements, we would definitely be more at peace with ourselves.

4. Don't Be a Burden!

The *Karaniya Metta Sutta*, (Discourse on Loving-Kindness) from the *Samyutta Nikaya* 1.8, is one of the most-loved protective verses recited by Buddhists today. More so, in a world that is torn by war and strife, *metta* (loving-kindness) is what we need to cultivate and practise in our lives to bring back some sanity and hope to this world.

In the first part of the *sutta*, the Buddha describes the day-to-day conduct of a loving and caring person. In the second part, He expounds the concept of universal, non-discriminatory and boundless love for all beings, and urges all of us to radiate this love to all beings.

The second stanza of the *sutta* goes like this (part of the description of a loving and caring person):

*Contented, he ought to be easy to support,
Not over-busy, and simple in living,
Tranquil in his senses, let him be prudent,
And not brazen, nor fawning on families.*

Every line in this stanza praises the virtues of embracing simplicity in our lives. When we are easily contented, we do not become a burden to others. Keeping our duties and livelihood simple, we reduce the stress in our lives. Similarly, being tranquil in our senses, wise and not greedily attached to families and supporters, we free ourselves from unnecessary emotional upheavals.

5. Our Five Guardians

The Buddha gave us the *Panca Sila* (Five Precepts) to guide and protect us in our daily lives. Coupled with the *Panca Dhamma* (Five Ennoblers), the “Five Guardians” of our spiritual path are:

- (1) Refrain from killing. Save and protect lives.
- (2) Refrain from stealing. Give generously.
- (3) Refrain from sexual misconduct. Embrace simplicity and contentment.
- (4) Refrain from false speech. Speak words of truth and kindness.
- (5) Refrain from intoxicants. Practise mindfulness.

These precepts act as *training rules* to help us become better people, and to protect us from engaging in harmful deeds and actions. And in many ways, the precepts also help us simplify our lives. Killing is vicious and involves hatred and scheming. Likewise, stealing also involves unwholesome and complicated thoughts. Sexual (and sensual) misconduct is the over-indulgence in satisfying our senses (too much pleasure until it leaves a bad taste in the mouth!). Lying is a form of wrong speech, and it was Mark Twain who said: *It is simpler and easier to tell the truth. You don't have to remember anything!* And lastly, an intoxicated mind is a complicated and suffering mind.

The celebrated Thai *Dhamma* master, Ajahn Chah, tells us to use the precepts to make our lives simple and pure:

Keep the precepts. Use virtue to make your life simple and pure. With virtue as a basis for everything that you do, your mind becomes kind, clear and quiet. Meditation will grow easily in this environment.

And if anyone finds the five precepts too many to remember, then remember the “golden precepts”, as taught by the Buddha to his little son, Rahula: *Do not hurt others, and do not hurt yourself.* You'll find that when you keep these two “golden precepts”, you are already keeping the five precepts!

Confucius taught the Golden Rule: *Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.* This Golden Rule is found in twenty-one different religions.

The truth is always universal. And the truth is the *Dhamma*.

6. Let's Start From the Mind

In Verses 1 and 2 of the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha tells us:

The mind is the forerunner of all things. If one acts with an impure mind, suffering follows, and if one acts with a pure mind, happiness follows.

In the practice of simplicity, one must also begin from the mind. Perhaps the first question that we ought to ask ourselves is “Do I think too much?”

According to many psychologists, most of us think too much. In fact, some studies found that as much as 80% of our thinking is unnecessary and quite useless! That being the case, it pays to heed the Buddha's teachings where we are advised to return to solitude and silence. The *Itivuttaka* 3.67 says:

*Silent in body, silent in speech,
Silent in mind, without defilement,
Blessed with silence is the sage.
He is truly washed of evil.*

One of my favourite verses is the *Pabhassara Sutta* from the *Anguttara Nikaya* 1.10, which proclaims: *Luminous is the mind. It is only clouded by visiting defilements.* This *sutta* brings hope to many of us because it reminds us that the original nature of our mind is luminous, pure, bright and radiant. The only problem is that due to our own delusion, we have allowed our minds to be clouded by visiting defilements such as greed, hatred, jealousy, anger, worry and stress. What we need to do then is not to battle with these defilements when they come a-visiting, but to calmly return to our breath and take our minds off them.

Some people find it easier to contemplate on the disadvantages and harmfulness of harbouring such negative emotions. What works for me is to think of these defilements as pieces of burning charcoal. The longer I hold on to them, the more I burn myself. So, why be so foolish? When we are angry, aren't we the ones who are suffering? Drop the burning charcoal. Return to the purity of the silent mind.

*A fast mind is sick,
A slow mind is sound,
A still mind...is divine.
- Meher Baba*

7. De-clutter!

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana writes in his book, *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*, that the first thing we must do to begin our practice of the Noble Eightfold Path is to simplify our lives.

Let us begin by looking at our material needs. I love spring cleaning. The first thing I do every semester break where I get some time off teaching is to look around my house and see what I can give away. I always tell my friends, “I need to de-clutter, I need space to breathe!!” My dream house is a Zen house – one that has almost nothing except space to breathe!

Last semester break, I actually sent all my Ph.D. books and materials (except for my thesis, of course – attachment?) for recycling. I looked at my whole collection of materials, and yes, they had seen me through the academic pinnacle of my life, and yes, they did hold very fond memories, but I figured they had served their purpose, and for the past four years, they had just been gathering dust in the cupboard.

When I decided to devote my life to *Dhamma*-speaking and rescuing stray animals, I had to give up something because I cannot possibly cope with so many ambitions in my life (remember the *Metta Sutta*? Have few duties!). And I decided that my academic ambitions had been fulfilled and that phase of my life was now over (let go, do not attach!). It was time to move on to the spiritual dimension and serve the Buddha *Sasana*.



At the Subang Jaya Buddhist Association.



At the 5th Global Conference on Buddhism.



My first three rescued kittens.



With my family of rescued cats

So, I packed all my Ph.D. materials, said a final goodbye to them, stopped the first *paper lama* (old newspaper) van that passed my house, and quite joyfully, gave all the materials to the delighted driver. I said to him, “No, you don’t have to pay me, I’m giving them to you.” I cannot sell my Ph.D. materials for few ringgit. They are priceless, but because research is such that one must keep oneself updated, these books were of no use to anyone now. Might as well do the practical thing and get the paper recycled, *and* save some trees!

By having cleared out some of my books and other unused things, I emptied a whole cupboard, and later had the privilege of giving it away to a construction worker who came to do some renovation work in my house. Now, that was total bliss - to be able to save some trees and give a useful item to someone who welcomed it. And to top it all, I made more breathing space in my room!

Let’s look around our house, is there anything usable that we do not need anymore? If there is, why not consider giving it away to someone who needs it more than us? After all, I heard that de-cluttering creates good *feng shui*, because the bad *qi* lodges itself into cluttered and untidy spaces!

My friend, Jas, told me recently, that after the tsunami in 2004, many of the victims came to a realisation, and were reported to have said, “We realise now that we only need so little, but we have accumulated so, so much...”

Edwin Way Teale writes: *Reduce the complexity of life by eliminating the needless wants of life, and the labours of life reduce themselves.*

Simplicity is making the journey of this life with just enough baggage.

8. A Roof Over My Head

I am (still) living in the same house (our first house) we bought twenty years ago. It is a small house, which was what we could afford at that time, and we have raised two children, and now, two dogs and nine rescued cats live with us.



At home, with my canine and feline family.

I see that it is the trend amongst many middle-class families to “upgrade” to a bigger house after a few years. I have never seen the need or had the desire to “upgrade”. After all, there are only the four of us humans, and the pets don’t take up too much space. I sleep with my dog and two cats – it’s cozier in a small house, isn’t it? And everywhere in the house, I am never alone because my dog follows me like a bodyguard and there would always be one or two cats on top of a

cupboard and snuggled up in a basket for a snooze. Talking about *feng shui* again, I read that it is good *qi* that there is the “breath of life” in every part of the room. It makes your house “alive”.

My husband had often wanted to buy a bigger house, but I have been stopping him for as long as I can. I tell him that we do not need one. I feel safer in an intermediate-linked house because I can see the whole house when I drive in and am sure that there are no unwelcome visitors lurking at the sides.

I am sure you have read the email about how the American billionaire Warren Buffet practises simplicity in his life. He has been staying in the same three-bedroom house he bought fifty years ago!

9. Wheel Deals

I only drive small cars. I love small cars because they are so nippy and it is easy to squeeze through traffic and into parking bays. Having grown up with my mother's Mini Cooper, I too have opted for small cars all my life, and they usually last me at least seven to ten years before wear and tear compels me to trade them in for...*another* small car! "Why don't you upgrade to a bigger car?", the salesperson asks. I don't need a bigger car, I only have two children and a dog who loves joy rides. Give me the same car, same model, just a newer one (in the days when I was driving the *Daihatsu Charade*). Then the *Charade* got phased out, so I opted for an even smaller car – the *Kelisa*!

My husband has been coaxing me to trade in my *Kelisa* for a bigger car, citing safety as the reason. But I tell him the advantages of driving a small car. People always give way to smaller cars. I don't get bullied on the road when I drive my car. In fact, I get bullied when I drive *his* (bigger) car!! Ahh...the benefits of being small...

With the recent hike (and impending subsequent hikes) in the price of petrol, it really makes sense to drive a smaller car, especially when I do not travel far. I only need the car to take me to work and back, buy groceries and to the *Dhamma* centres to give talks. At the rate I go, I spend, on average, RM100 on petrol per month, and my road tax is only RM20 per year.



My trusty wheels.

And I also only drive manual cars. This is because automatic cars make me lazy. And when I am lazy, I have a tendency to fall asleep (yes, *even* when driving!). So for my own safety, I go for simple cars – the simpler, the better. I do not even use the remote control to lock my car doors. I prefer the keys. It is so much simpler when it's back to basics, isn't it?

And when the weather is fine and the destination not too far away, use the trusty old two-wheeler!

10. Shop...But Not Till You Drop!

One of the favourite pastimes of Malaysians is...shopping! And it is not just window shopping but *really* buying a whole lot of stuff, especially at the ubiquitous “Grand Sales” which, like genetically-modified crops, seem to be in season all year round nowadays.

Thank goodness that despite having lived in urban Klang Valley for so long, I have not developed the love for shopping. I shun “Grand Sales” simply because I dread crowds and I am never good at picking up good discounts, anyway. So I usually only shop for groceries, and even then, I go with a shopping list. Once all the items are ticked off, I head for the check-out counter and...run for my life! If I stay and browse, I might be a little tempted to buy things which I have not needed in the first place (because they are not on my list), so I always go with a list, and then, run for my life...back home. It works. This way, I do not clutter my house with unnecessary things.



Hmm... is this on my list?

11. Food, Glorious Food!

If you are as crazy as I am over musicals, you would be familiar with the words *Food, Glorious Food!* taken from the lyrics of the song from *Oliver!* when the boys at the workhouse queued up for their daily gruel.

Fortunately, I am *not* crazy about food. I have always thought of food as being a necessity simply to sustain our lives, and was pleased when I found out that the Buddha taught the same to His monks and nuns. In the *Ganaka Moggallana Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, 107, the Buddha tells them that the purpose of eating is not for amusement, intoxication or physical beauty but for the sustenance of the body so that they may maintain the holy life.

I live by the principle of eating as close to Nature as possible, so my diet comprises mostly fruit and vegetables. Because I do not eat meat, I save a whole lot of money and can indulge in local “organic” vegetables (actually, it is only pesticide-free, strictly speaking). By patronising pesticide-free produce, we are indirectly saving lives – not only the insects’, but ours too!

The China Study is a book by T. Colin Campbell of Cornell University. It examines the relationship between meat-eating and twelve different types of cancers and other related diseases. In this extensive scientific research, the conclusion is for people to adopt a plant-based diet with adequate amounts of sunshine! That doesn’t sound too difficult, does it?



Dinner time for humans... and cats, too!

I eat a hearty breakfast (that’s my fuel for the day because I do walk quite a lot at work), a moderate lunch, a very light dinner (or I sometimes skip it entirely) and no supper. This resonates with what the Buddha recommended for His monks and nuns – no food after mid-day. But as laypeople, we still need to eat dinner because we lead a lay-life, but I make sure my dinner is very light. And even modern nutritionists tell us not to stuff ourselves up at night so that the stomach has a chance to rest when we sleep.

When I cook my meals at home, I do so very simply. Preferring to taste the natural sweetness of the food itself, I either boil, steam or stir-fry, and I do not use flavourings. But in all fairness, let me also admit that I am a hopeless cook. Having what I would call “kindergarten” culinary skills, my repertoire of recipes is absolutely nothing to shout about, but I am very contented (and actually prefer it too) eating my vegetables boiled, steamed or raw. And I love fruit! I am very easy to please when it comes to food.

Sometimes my time-table at work is such that I teach back-to-back from 10am to 2pm, and only manage to squeeze in ten minutes for a quick lunch. On such days, I go bananas! Yes, this wonderful yellow-coloured fruit, as you probably know, besides being a source of instant energy, is packed with nutrients like vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, phytochemicals and the entire spectrum of healthy nutrients. I was told that Tiger Woods sustains himself with bananas on the golf course in his world-class tournaments. Well, what is good enough for Tiger Woods is certainly good enough for me!

The Buddha was known to have advised the good King Pasenadi of Kosala not to eat too much, and that was where the much-acclaimed catch-phrase: *Health is the Greatest Gain, Contentment, the Greatest Wealth* in the *Dhammapada, 204*, came from. Again, modern nutritionists now tell us to stop eating when we feel we are three-quarters full. The reason is that it takes time for the stomach to inform the brain how full we feel. So, when our brain tells us that we are three-quarters full, we are actually already completely *full*. If we continue eating when we feel three-quarters full, we will eventually end up over-stuffing ourselves. Unlike the petrol tank, our stomach will continue accepting whatever food we put in (because it has no choice!). That is why many people suffer from the discomforts (and diseases!) related to over-eating.

World statistics show that Okinawa has the world's largest number of healthy centenarians. One of the contributing factors to the Okinawans' longevity is their diet that is high in fruit and vegetables, and low in calories. Another is their principle of *hara hachi bu* which means "eat until you are 80% full".

I read with interest what Bhante Kumara wrote in his article entitled, *Eating Right*. He says he came across an interesting quote supposedly found in an ancient Egyptian tomb that says: *One-quarter of what you eat keeps you alive. The other three-quarters keeps your doctor alive.*

All things in moderation.

Less is more.

Hara Hachi Bu!

12. Let Food Be Thy Medicine...

...and medicine shall be thy food, so says Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine. I live by this principle as well, so in my quest to reduce the chances of getting sick, I do my best to eat as healthily as I can, relying more on natural foods than supplements.

I am not a pharmacist or nutritionist and may not have any authority to say this, but I figured, in my simplistic reasoning that if quality supplements claim to use “all natural products”, wouldn’t it make more sense to just eat the “natural products” in its natural state rather than wait for it to be extracted and put into pills?

Furthermore, again, from my simplistic reasoning and what little bit of uninformed knowledge that I have, I learnt that most nutrients have to be consumed in their natural state together with other supporting nutrients as no particular nutrient can work alone. Every nutrient works synergistically with its many counterparts.

So I choose to eat simply, and eat closer to Nature.



Back to Nature for good health – my little plot of herbs.

13. Work Those Muscles!

Physical fitness is catching on fast these days, and rightly so too, because a healthy mind is closely dependent on a healthy body and vice versa. For exercise, I choose not to join a gym or play sports, but that's only because of a personal preference for the outdoors to an air-conditioned gymnasium.



The Cat Pose? No, this is called the Cow Pose!



Ahh...the hills are alive!

I cannot play sports because I get breathless due to a heart condition called mitral valve regurgitation where my mitral valve (the one between the left auricle and ventricle) is floppy, a condition which I have lived with since my teens. So, you'd seldom see me running. I have often joked (but actually, I am quite serious) that even if a tiger chases me, all I can do is to radiate *metta* and hope that the tiger would have enough compassion not to eat this wretched, imperfect body of mine.

Since I have this “handicap”, so to speak, I choose yoga. I used to do yoga daily without fail, starting with the *Sun Salutation* and followed by a host of other poses which I had put together for my bodily needs, and ending with *The Plough*, *The Shoulder Stand* and *Breathing Meditation*. I was surprised but very pleased that after decades of having an extremely low blood pressure (a pathetic reading of 90/50), after a year of yoga, for the first time in my entire life, my blood pressure normalised at 120/80. Ever since then, I have sworn by yoga, but now that *Dhamma*-speaking has taken over my life, I sometimes shelve my daily yoga when I am too caught up doing research for my talks. I must make the effort to return to my daily yoga practice again before my health takes a tumble.

I also walk as much as I can. My office is situated on the eighth floor of our new campus, and I make it a point to walk *up* (yes, eight floors!) at least once a day from Mondays to Fridays. The first time I did so, in spite of years of hiking up Gasing Hill, I panted upon reaching the sixth and almost gave up, but I persevered and made it to the top. It is becoming easier these days. Walking *down* eight floors is a piece of cake, but I was told not to indulge in that because it causes much damage to the knees. So, up, it is then! While I was proudly telling all my friends that I walk up eight floors every day, I was told that a certain eighty-seven-year-old man walks up twenty-eight floors every day to his office. Gee...I am humbled. But I am even more motivated now to keep up with my eight floors per day!

Previously my office was situated three shophot blocks away from the main campus where classes were held, so I used to have to walk to and fro a few times a day, each trip about 500 metres in distance. I walk extremely fast, and this served as wonderful exercise for me. We have since moved to our new 10-storey campus and all classes are held within the same premises, but I still choose to park my car 500 metres away so that I get to walk.

I walk up escalators too, and I avoid the lifts as far as I need to. Instead of taking the car, I either walk or cycle to the nearby shops when it does not rain. These are little opportunities for us to exercise and work those muscles, and since it is free, why not?

14. Mirror, Mirror, On the Wall...

Indeed, *who* is the fairest of ‘em all? Coming from a female perspective, don’t we all want to look nice and pretty? But, beauty is only skin-deep. Real beauty shines from within. I have often believed that if one’s heart is kind and filled with goodness, one *will* look beautiful, even if one is not bountifully endowed with exquisite physical features. Look into the eyes, as they say, the eyes are the windows to the soul. The eyes speak volumes of what is in the heart.

All said, as far back as the times of the Egyptians, women have wanted to look beautiful. And for this purpose, they used natural concoctions to decorate their faces, and these have now evolved into cosmetics that come in sophisticated jars and bottles with exotic-sounding names. In the past, the Native American braves used them too, but that was for a different purpose, of course. But for some reason, my husband sees no difference between what the ancient Egyptians, the Native Americans or the modern women use, so he calls them all “war paint”.

When I was in my teens, I read all about animal testing in the manufacture of cosmetics and skin-care products. I saw pictures of little rabbits being trapped in stereotaxic devices to have chemicals pumped into their eyes, and to suffer intense pain, then left to die slowly and painfully. From that time onwards, I vowed never to use cosmetics all my life. I still don’t.

The only things I use are shampoo, soap and toothpaste (all herbal and not tested on animals), so that makes traveling *really* light and easy. Granted, if you’d still like to use cosmetics (and again, there is nothing wrong with wanting to look beautiful), go for the products that are not tested on animals. At least you can use them with a clear conscience knowing that those poor little animals have not suffered needlessly to produce that lipstick, eye-shadow or moisturizer.

Recently I read from a health website that many chemicals used in cosmetics are toxic, and ingesting them through the skin is more dangerous than ingesting them by eating because when these chemicals go through our digestive system, the harmful chemicals are partially filtered by our liver whereas the skin has no ability to do this, so chemicals that we apply onto our skin goes directly into our body.

And do you know that the Buddha had actually given us many beauty tips in the *suttas* too? In the *Samyutta Nikaya 1.10*, the story goes that the *devas* (heavenly beings) were enthralled by the radiant complexions of the monks, so they came to ask the Buddha:

*Your monks wear coarse robes, no shoes, and eat only one meal a day.
Yet, their complexions are so radiant.
Why is that so?*

The Buddha answered:

*They sorrow not for what is past,
They have no longing for the future,
They maintain themselves in the present,
Hence, their complexion is so radiant.*

So there you have it, *Dhamma*-cosmetics! All it takes to have a radiant complexion is to practise present-moment awareness and live in the *now*. If I may quote the translation of an ancient Sanskrit poem:

*Yesterday is but a dream,
Tomorrow is but a vision.
But today well-lived
Makes every yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.*

The Buddha also taught that there are eleven benefits of practising *metta*. One of them is “a radiant complexion”. And this is not difficult to understand because *metta* is the wish for all beings to be well and happy. If we always cultivate and maintain kind and loving thoughts in our minds, surely our hearts will always be filled with goodness, and this beauty and serenity that shine from within will be manifested on our face.

15. Silver Streaks & Highlights

These days you might have noticed that sporting fashionable hairstyles is the “in thing”. In the past, men did not bother much about their hair, but nowadays, they too do not want to lose out to the ladies in this area of grooming their crowning glory with sprays, gels, colour and highlights.

I sport an extremely low-maintenance hair-cut and have had this style for as long as I remember. From the time I was born until my late teens, my mother had always cut my hair. When I was in university, I cut my own hair (yes, with the help of a mirror for the back). After I was married, I made my husband cut my hair! But now he is a little tired of doing it, so lately, for the first time in my life, I started going to the salon to get it done. Even then, it is just for cutting. I would go home and wash it myself.

The advantage of having such a simple short hairstyle is that it is cheap to maintain, you do not need any chemicals for it *and* you can wash it every day. I remember many years ago, a biology teacher asked me if I ever wondered why even young people have white hair nowadays. Could it, he hypothesised, be due to all the chemicals that they use on their hair? I don't know...maybe, coupled with a stressful lifestyle as well. My hair is still black...for now, and I do not intend to dye it even if it turns white. Let the white strands be the “highlights” then.

Grow old gracefully, the best is yet to be!

16. White Dresses & Blue Satin Sashes

Those of you who grew up with *The Sound of Music* would have recognised the title of this chapter from the lyrics of *My Favourite Things*. One of the favourite things of many women is none other than clothes and accessories. We are female, we love beautiful things. Even the Buddha said in the *Sigalovada Sutta* that one of the duties of the husband is to provide his wife with adornments...but only at appropriate times, Uncle Vijaya would remind us!

An honest look into my cupboard reveals that I have enough clothes and accessories for three lifetimes! After all, do I need so much? Not being one who patronises departmental stores at year-round grand sales nor one who falls prey to discounted things, I *still* think I have accumulated enough beautiful “loot” for three lifetimes.

So, some years back, I decided that I should use a guideline to prevent overcrowding in my wardrobe: If I did not wear that piece of clothing for six consecutive months, it meant that I did not like it, so I would give it away. Nowadays, with so many on-going charity drives, there is always a need for usable clothing. My other guideline is that when I buy something new, I must give away something old. It has to be on a one-to-one replacement basis. That way, overpopulation in the wardrobe will not arise. I have since then given away many nice (and even new) clothes to people who welcome them.

While we are allowed to indulge in something new (and nice!) once in a while, it is wiser to choose simple, classic styles that are timeless and will not go out of fashion too quickly. That way, you do not need new clothes when the fashion scene changes. After all, it was the great artist who painted *Mona Lisa*, Leonardo da Vinci, who said: *Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication*. Rather than buying exotic styles that thrill the senses for a short time (but later becomes a little boring), I prefer simple, timeless pieces. Ahh...this is my way of not indulging in the senses. Quite Buddhistic, if I may say so!

For work, I wear blouses that never go out of fashion. I am proud to say that some of my clothes are at least twenty-years old! My students have often remarked, “Ma’am, why do you wear the same clothes all the time?” Why, I love these clothes, that’s why. And these are all I have too!



My students felt I did not have enough dresses, so they bought me this dress for Teachers' Day!

As one who places comfort before beauty, I love t-shirts. I often quip that just as monks only have three robes, I too only have three favourite combed cotton t-shirts from Sukhi Hotu which I rotate throughout the week. Why do I need more when three are enough?



My favourite t-shirt from Sukhi Hotu.
Wash, wear, wash, wear...

Simplicity, carried to an extreme, becomes elegance – Jon Franklin

17. All that Glitters

Being one who has fewer clothes (and shoes!) than the average female, I allow myself the occasional luxury of acquiring ear-studs and ear-rings. But I would always remember what my Fifth Form English teacher, Mrs Wong, taught us. Now, Mrs Wong was the epitome of sophistication when it came to grooming. She had an impeccable taste for all things beautiful. She used to remind us, “Girls, dress appropriately and in good taste. Never put on too many accessories until you look like a Christmas tree!” I remember your advice well, Mrs Wong. I am far from being a Christmas tree. I’m more like a palm tree, perhaps. Save for the ear-studs or ear-rings, I’m as simple and as natural as they come.

Believe it or not, a few years ago, I wore ear-studs and ear-rings for a practical purpose – so that no one would mistake me for a man! This is because I do not use cosmetics and dress very simply, hence I tend to stick out like a sore thumb, especially at official functions. So, rather than have people stare at me and wonder, “Why is she so under-dressed? Is she male or female...or both?”, I figured I shall decorate myself with ear-studs to make myself look more female. But these days, that doesn’t work anymore because boys and men wear ear-studs too! And some of theirs are prettier than ours.

Oh well, for what it is worth, all that glitters is not gold. W. Somerset Maugham, the great English author writes: *Simplicity and naturalness are the truest marks of distinction.*

18. For the Love of Teaching

I had wanted to become a teacher ever since I was in Sixth Form. Inspired by Mrs Wong, who had been a top scorer herself but chose to become a teacher for the sheer love of it, and impressed by my Sixth Form Pure Mathematics teacher, Miss Kwok, who taught mathematics with fervour, and showed me that mathematics is so aesthetically beautiful, I made up my mind I wanted to follow in their footsteps.

My friends and relatives were aghast. “What??? You want to be *only* a teacher? But you are a top student, why must you waste all your talents by becoming a teacher??” Those days, these comments were expected, because the teaching profession was already losing its glory, and many people were known to choose teaching only as a last resort when they failed to qualify for other “better professions”. So here I was, a straight-A student putting down my first and second choices as “teaching” in my application form for university.



I started off as a secondary school teacher, way back in the eighties.

I have been teaching for twenty-one years now. Every semester, I meet new students, and with it comes a fresh new challenge to deliver the same mathematical concepts using more effective and creative means. “Won’t you get bored teaching the same subjects over and over again?”, I am asked. How could I be bored? The subject matter may be the same, but the people are all new. That makes the entire process and experience new for me too.

I have found that in teaching, I learn a lot about myself, especially my weaknesses. Hence, I use this opportunity to cultivate virtues such as patience, tolerance and empathy, and my job is part of my practice in cultivating Buddhist values. This is especially true when it comes to Right Speech. Much as it is easier to keep noble silence, teaching is a job where noble silence just doesn’t work. So as I speak and address the many students I face every day, I am mindful of filtering my thoughts before they manifest into words. I am mindful of my actions too. Am I responding to and addressing my students with patience, empathy and loving-kindness? Am I doing my duty as a teacher to bring out the potential in them, and build confidence in them?

There is a lovely little Buddhist story called *The Emperor's Three Questions*. The story goes that an emperor asked a monk these questions:

Emperor: *What is the most important time?*

Monk: ***Now.***

Emperor: *Who is the most important person?*

Monk: ***The one you are with.***

Emperor: *What is the most important thing to do?*

Monk: ***To care for the one you are with.***

In my daily associations with my students, I am fortunate because I get the opportunity to practise present-moment awareness with them. Giving them undivided attention is a form of caring. It is also “simpler” to do so because my mind only needs to focus on one thing at a time. That is a form of tranquility meditation, isn't it?

As a teacher, I am guided by the advice of Professor Nel Noddings, feminist educationist and advocate of the caring ethics in education. She says:

I do not need to establish a deep, lasting, time-consuming personal relationship with every student. What I must do is to be totally and nonselectively present to the student – to each student – as he addresses me. The time interval may be brief but the encounter is total.



With my college students now... Spot the teacher!

19. Mathematics & the *Ten Paramis*

I chose to teach mathematics because in mathematics, what is required is essentially to *simplify* all problems. I find that the skills required in doing mathematics can be transferred to real-life. If one can see beyond the numbers and procedures involved, then one sees the intrinsic value of learning mathematics. Furthermore, while teaching mathematics, I also impart and train the students in the *Ten Paramis* (perfections). Here's how I do it:

- (1) *Dana* (Generosity) – teach a friend, share what you know.
- (2) *Sila* (Morality) – one can never cheat his or her way in mathematics, all working must be shown.
- (3) *Nekkhamma* (Renunciation) – mathematics is all about simplifying problems and expressions.
- (4) *Panna* (Wisdom) – one needs to “see things as they really are” before a mathematical problem can be correctly solved.
- (5) *Viriya* (Energy) – mathematics definitely requires mental energy.
- (6) *Khanti* (Patience) – work at it, don't give up!
- (7) *Sacca* (Truthfulness) – total honesty in doing mathematics.
- (8) *Adhitthana* (Determination) – if at first you don't succeed, try and try again.
- (9) *Metta* (Loving-Kindness) – please be kind to your teacher, do your homework.
- (10) *Upekkha* (Equanimity) – sometimes mathematics is easy, sometimes it's difficult. But hey, that's life, isn't it?

I am awed and humbled by the words of Conrad Hilton, founder of the Hilton Hotel chain, who attributes his phenomenal success to his mathematics lessons in school:

*I am not out to convince anyone that calculus, or even algebra or geometry, are necessities in the hotel business. But I will argue long and loud that they are not useless ornaments pinned onto an average man's education. For me, at any rate, the ability to formulate quickly, to resolve any problem into its **simplest**, clearest form has been exceedingly useful. It is true that you don't use algebra formulae but...I found higher mathematics the best possible exercise for developing the mental muscles necessary to this process... (Conrad Hilton (1957), *Be My Guest*)*

After having taught for twenty-one years now, I am lucky that I am still very happy doing what I do. Sometimes my students ask me, “Will I ever be using all these formulae in my job next time?” I tell them, “Probably not, but you will definitely be using the mathematical skill of simplifying your problems in life. Mathematics is your training ground to cope with life later on. Remember what Conrad Hilton says...”

And what my students sometimes may not realise is that I am teaching them values in life (as in the *Ten Paramis*) through mathematics. This is Mathematics-*Dhamma*. Isn't this wonderful?

20. When School's Out

In my college, one semester lasts for fifteen weeks, and after that, we get a (very welcome) two-week break. Many of my colleagues would be heading off somewhere exotic for a holiday. For me, I prefer to spend my holidays at home. I have always been a home-loving person, and I am happiest at home.

When my husband was working in the airlines, we used to get free tickets for the family every year – first class, to any destination that we wanted. My husband had always felt that while he got to travel in his work, we never got to see places, so he coaxed us to travel once a year. However, wherever we went, exotic or temperate, I would find myself yearning to come home. I would miss my dog (who would be sent down to Ipoh for baby-sitting at my parents'). I would miss my house and all my things. Talk about having attachment (!), this is probably it!

But all said, I'm happiest at home, and my idea of a good holiday is resting at home, maybe spring cleaning the house, and just enjoying life at a more relaxed pace.



The simple joys of staying home...

21. Small is Beautiful

In this day and age, many people work for the money, and as expected, with more money, their needs somehow increase. So for many, no matter how much they earn, it just never seems to be enough.

The great Indian sage, Mahatma Gandhi says: *The Earth provides enough for every man's needs, but not even one man's greed.*

It pays for us to sit back and examine the things that we acquire – do we really need them, or are we just satisfying our greed? Remember that the Buddha said in the Second Noble Truth that the origin of our unsatisfactoriness is craving.

Greek philosophers also remind us about the futility of harbouring desires. Epicurus says: *If you want to make a man happy, add not to his riches but take away his desires.* And Socrates says: *By desiring little, a poor man makes himself rich. A state of being where one wishes for nothing is the greatest of all bliss. To be able to approach this greatest happiness, one must get used to being satisfied with little.*

So, how does one gets satisfied with little? One must learn to simplify one's needs.

E. F. Schumacher, a Buddhist economist, writes in his series of books: *Man is small, and therefore, small is beautiful.* He points out that materialism cannot sustain our present-day economy, and blasts out at the notions of “growth is good” or “bigger is better”.

An attitude to life which seeks fulfillment in the single-minded pursuit of wealth – in short, materialism – does not fit into this world, because it contains within itself no limiting principle, while the environment in which it is placed is strictly limited. It is clear, that Buddhist economics must be very different from the economics of modern materialism, since the Buddhist sees the essence of civilisation not in a multiplication of wants but in the purification of human character. Character, at the same time, is formed primarily by a man's work. And work, properly conducted in conditions of human dignity and freedom, blesses those who do it and equally their products.

(E. F. Schumacher (1973), *Buddhist Economics*)

22. Can Money Buy Happiness?

In a recent article from Newsweek (October 2007), Sharon Begley writes that contrary to common belief, money does *not* buy happiness. She quotes Harvard University psychologist Daniel Gilbert in his best-seller, *Stumbling on Happiness*, where psychologists generally agree that wealth increases human happiness when it lifts people out of abject poverty and into the middle class, but it does little to increase happiness thereafter.

Wealth may increase one's *pleasure* (as in acquiring more material wants that satisfy the senses), but would this actually make us *happier*? Happiness is permanent, pleasure is fleeting, and therefore the latter is a source of unsatisfactoriness.

Consider these statistics, as revealed in Sharon Begley's article:

In a typical survey people are asked to rank their sense of well-being or happiness on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 means "not at all satisfied with my life" and 7 means "completely satisfied". Of the American multimillionaires who responded, the average happiness score was 5.8. Homeless people in Calcutta came in at 2.9. But before you assume that money does buy happiness after all, consider who else rated themselves around 5.8: the Inuit of northern Greenland, who do not exactly lead a life of luxury, and the cattle-herding Masai of Kenya, whose dung huts have no electricity or running water. And proving Gilbert's point about money buying happiness only when it lifts you out of abject poverty, slum dwellers in Calcutta—one economic rung above the homeless—rate themselves at 4.6.

So while money does not buy happiness, the converse is true. Happiness buys money! Yes, when one is happy, one is more productive in one's job. One will take the initiative to do more and in the process, becomes a valuable asset to one's employer or company. When your boss likes you, good things follow. So, happiness buys money...

I am sometimes asked why I chose not to seek higher positions after I obtained my Ph.D. "Why do you continue working in this place? Don't you want a better job elsewhere?", I am asked. Better? Better in what sense? I am very happy in my present job – isn't that good enough? Although my job is far from being the perfect job that anybody can ask for, but I am happy because I make myself happy. As unglamorous as it may seem, I am very contented being "just a teacher". I derive joy and satisfaction from what I do. I am rewarded knowing that I have made a difference to the hearts and minds of the young people whose lives I am privileged to have touched.

Lao Tzu, the great Chinese philosopher, was reputed to have said: *He who knows that enough is enough will always have enough.*

I have enough.

I am happy.

23. Look for the Bare Necessities

Compared to “those good old days”, one of the things that modernisation and technology have done for us these days is to give us many options in life. And I’m not sure if that’s a good thing, actually.

For example, when we buy things, whether it’s food, household products, cars, computers or handphones, we are confronted by an expanding array of brands, flavours and options. Take milk, for example. If we only had just plain *milk* in the past, now we have low-fat, calcium-enriched, vitamin-enhanced, high-protein, et cetera. We even have sugar-free sweets and cholesterol-free butter! What would come next? Fat-free oil?

Similarly, we have more options in our choice of careers and lifestyles, and this can make our lives more complicated than before. I don’t deny that choice can be a good thing. However, more often than not, it doesn’t seem to make life any simpler, does it? Sometimes, too many options become a source of distraction *and* frustration, and we lose our priorities and maybe even forget what our original objectives are.

Take for example, the person who intended to just buy some new coat-hangers but ended up with a new ironing board (on special discount), a steam iron (which he doesn’t actually need, but it was 50% off!) and a set of ironing paraphernalia thrown in as freebies. “Why don’t you take the package, sir, you get *more* for less money,” the salesperson chirped happily. Yes, indeed, *more* clutter for less money!

So how do I combat this malady of modernity? I don’t get caught by discounts so that I will not end up with things that I do not need. Also, I limit my choices. For example, when I need a new pair of shoes, I go to a shop that has enough choices, and I make sure I get what I want there. At the most, I allow myself to visit maybe just one more other shop if this one absolutely does not have the thing I want. This resonates well with my preference not to browse and window-shop. Get to the shop, choose from what they have, buy it and go home.

Consider the wise words of Baloo the Bear in *The Jungle Book*, when he taught Mowgli how to survive in the jungle:

*Look for the bare necessities,
The simple bare necessities,
Forget about your worries and your strife;
I mean the bare necessities,
That’s why a bear can rest at ease,
With just the bare necessities of life.*

*Don’t spend your time looking around,
For something you want that can’t be found,
When you find out you can live without it,
And go along not thinking about it,*

*I'll tell you something true,
The bare necessities of life will come to you,
They'll come to you.*

On this score, I am very certain that Baloo the Bear would heartily shake paws and hands with Lao Tzu if he hears the great sage saying this:

*Be content with what you have,
Rejoice in the way things are;
When you realise there is nothing lacking,
The whole world belongs to you.*

24. Technology for Dummies

Talking about modernisation and this highly technology-dependent world today, modern equipments now come with a host of gadgets that are supposedly designed to make life “easier” for us. Take the television set as an example. In “my days”, it was so easy to go to the television set, press a button, and turn it on. Then, for variety, we turned a dial which would switch it to the next (and only other) channel. Now? Now I do not even know *how* to turn on the television set in my house! I know there are three remote controls lying on the table, but I can never remember which one does what. So what do I do?

I don't watch television anymore.

By now, you would probably be thinking that I must be some anti-technology diehard out to discredit all things modern! Well, not quite. I don't watch television because more often than not, it dulls my mind, and that is why I have never bothered to learn how those three remote controls work. But I do watch certain good programmes, and I also de-stress by laughing over sitcoms, together with my children.

While I may be a television-dummy, I definitely know how to use the computer, and the Internet is one technological amenity that I definitely appreciate! Emailing has given me the freedom to interact socially without having to leave the house. To me, emailing is the best form of social interaction because it is the least intrusive. The recipient can choose *when* to read my mail, or even *not* to read my mail (if he finds me a pain!). This is unlike the telephone which may ring at the wrong time, or worse, the unannounced house visit when the inside of my house looks like it has just been ravaged by a tornado.

The point I am trying to make here is that it would do well to use what we need and not get sucked into the entire complexity of life which has resulted from technological (over)advancement. For example, I do not need the latest alarm system in my car and I do not even need automatic gears, so I opt for a small manual car which comes with old-fashioned keys. This is enough for me. And I am happy.

This way, we will not become slaves to technology. We remain in control. And we still get to simplify our lives, by choosing what works for us.

As Baloo the Bear says it so eloquently: *When you find out you can live without it, then go along not thinking about it.*

Less is more, and small is still beautiful. And this techie dummy is happy the way she is!

25. Speak Softly Love

One of the eight aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path is *Samma Vaca* (Right Speech). The Buddha taught us that right speech has to be truthful, beneficial, spoken at the right time, gentle and compassionate (*Samyutta Nikaya*, 15.5). In my *Dhamma* talks, I use the simile of a coffee strainer. Let us strain our words through the filters of these four characteristics before they escape our lips. Or if you prefer an easier way, then just talk less!

Right Speech also includes abstaining from lying, divisive speech, harsh speech and idle chatter. Interestingly, the *Pali* word for idle chatter is *samphappalapa*. Now, doesn't this remind you of *sampah* (the Malay word for "rubbish") and blah, blah, blah?!!

Our late Chief Reverend, Ven Dr K. Sri Dhammananda Nayake Maha Thera, always reminded us to be careful and mindful of our speech. Humans are bestowed with the gift of speech, but often, it is this very "gift" that causes a lot of trouble and suffering for others. I often share with the audience in my talks that though the pen is mightier than the sword, the tongue is mightier than the pen! Words, once spoken, can hurt and cause much pain, and retracting them is sometimes too late. The same goes for the written word too. Uncle Vijaya shared with me this poem by Omar Khayyam, the 11th century poet, mathematician and astronomer from Persia:

*The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.*

But words come from the mind, so we must be able to catch the thought and hold the tongue (or finger!). In fact, when the Buddha used the metaphors of "poison, weapons and fire" as things that harm us, he was also indirectly referring to harmful words. A harmful and vicious tongue is like an axe. It is a weapon of mass destruction!

On the subject of speaking, let us be mindful of our words, but let us also embrace simplicity and brevity so as not to subject our listeners to the mental and physical anguish of having to listen to us blabber on and on. I remember the best advice ever given to me when I was undergoing the *Dhamma* Speakers Course. And this was from Uncle Vijaya: *The golden rule of public speaking is this – Stand up, Speak up, and Shut up!*

In the *Majjhima Nikaya*, 26, The Buddha reminded His monks:

Monks, when you have gathered together, there are two things to be done. Either talk about the Dhamma, or keep nobly silent.

Shh...

26. Seek More to Love Than to Be Loved

A few weeks back, I came across a beautiful saying by St Francis of Assisi. It said: *Lord, Grant that I may not so much seek to be loved than to love.*

This saying reminds me of the practice of *metta*. *Metta* is that boundless, unconditional love that we radiate to all beings. *Metta* is “simple love” because we love without attaching conditions, and without expecting anything in return. It is when we attach conditions and have expectations that love becomes complicated. And inevitably, we will suffer.

In our relationships with others, Ajahn Chah tells us that having expectations is the cause of many of our miseries and suffering. To me, nothing is truer than this. Love for the sake of simply loving. It does not matter if that love is not reciprocated. Let our satisfaction come from knowing that we can rise above the ordinary I-love-you-so-you-must-love-me-back expectation and reach out to the loftier ideals of altruistic love.



Parents, the Brahmas of our hearts.
Supreme blessings... *Etam Mangala Muttamam!*

One of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, Wystan Hugh Auden writes: *We are here on earth to do good for others. What the others are here for, I don't know.* When people hurt me, St Francis and W.H. Auden's words shall be my *mantras* and they remind me that *metta* is indeed a far greater love than any kinds of mundane love that I know of.

Whenever I think of *metta*, I think of my parents. Despite the many times I may have hurt them all my life, I know that they still love me unconditionally. I know

that they will always forgive me. The Buddha was absolutely correct when He described *metta* as a mother's (or a parent's) love. Unconditional. Non-discriminatory. Boundless. Unblemished.

Monks, whatever grounds there are for making merit, all these do not equal a sixteenth part of developing a mind of loving-kindness...Just as the radiance of the stars do not equal a sixteenth part of the moon's radiance, but the moon's radiance surpasses them and shines forth, bright and brilliant, even so, all other grounds of making merit do not equal the merits of cultivating a mind of loving-kindness. (Itivutakka 1.27)

So let us keep love simple. Love others simply for the sake of loving them. There is no other reason for it. Unconditional and boundless love is the basis of all human goodness.



My children and our dog, Bobby.



Now we have cats too.

Love generously, and let it spread across boundaries.

Metta surpasses the radiance of the moon.

27. A Reason, a Season and a Lifetime

Those of you who read the emails in circulation would have probably read this beautiful article many times before. And those of you, who, like me, have people come and go from your life, would probably have found some comfort from this article. I cannot possibly say it any better, so I'm going to reproduce the whole article here:

*People come into your life for **a reason, a season or a lifetime.***

When you know which one it is, you will know what to do for that person.

*When someone is in your life for a **reason**, it is usually to meet a need you have expressed.*

They have come to assist you through a difficulty, to provide you with guidance and support, to aid you physically, emotionally or spiritually. They may seem like a godsend and they are.

They are there for the reason you need them to be.

Then, without any wrongdoing on your part or at an inconvenient time, this person will say or do something to bring the relationship to an end.

Sometimes they die. Sometimes they walk away.

Sometimes they act up and force you to take a stand.

What we must realize is that our need has been met, our desire fulfilled, their work is done.

The prayer you sent up has been answered and now it is time to move on.

*Some people come into your life for a **season**, because your turn has come to share, grow or learn.*

They bring you an experience of peace or make you laugh.

They may teach you something you have never done.

They usually give you an unbelievable amount of joy.

Believe it, it is real. But only for a season.

*Lifetime relationships teach you **lifetime** lessons, things you must build upon in order to have a solid emotional foundation.*

Your job is to accept the lesson, love the person and put what you have learned to use in all other relationships and areas of your life. It is said that love is blind but friendship is clairvoyant.

Granted, people come to us for a reason, a season or a lifetime, but we will never know which it is until...they leave, especially the "seasonal" friend. We can identify the "reasonable" friend – that's the one who comes to help us out when we needed it most, or to give us a lesson in life. And we can only hope that our good friends are lifetime friends, but will we ever know for sure? If we cling to them, and they turn out to be just "reasonable" or "seasonal", we suffer, don't we?

The "simple" thing to do with friendships (and even family), then, would be to take each moment as being precious and valuable. Do not look back at the past (especially the quarrels!). Do not have expectations of everlasting friendship for the future. Just cherish the present moment, just as we cherish our breath, and make the encounter a pleasant and memorable one.



Friends are gifts you give yourself.

Take comfort to know that when people come into our lives, we are *kammically*-linked to them in some ways, and *kamma* is the reason for them to be there at that time. Create good *kamma* by sharing wholesome values with them and giving them love and care. I find it useful to treat each encounter with my friends as my last meeting with them. Bearing this possibility in mind, I make the best of the encounter and leave pleasant feelings behind. If indeed it *is* the last meeting, the pleasant experience will foster a good relationship with them again in our next life.



Home sweet home ... for a lifetime.
My parents, my brother and his family, and mine.

It would also do well for loved ones to “kiss and make up” before they go to bed, especially if there had been a misunderstanding or a quarrel. Never bring a quarrel to bed – we won’t be able to sleep peacefully. And what if we died in our sleep? We would never get a chance to make things right and if we meet up again in our next life, the unpleasant feelings might continue.

So, each time you meet your friend or loved one, think of it as the last meeting in this lifetime. Make it a memorable and happy one. We will continue meeting in many lifetimes if we are *kammically* destined to do so.

28. Where do I begin?

Do you know the greatest love story of all time? It's not Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Nor is it Erich Segal's best-seller, *Love Story*, that became a box office hit in 1970. It's even greater than that.

It is the Buddha's love story...

Many aeons ago, the Buddha-to-be was born as the ascetic, Sumedha, who, in that lifetime was spiritually ready to attain enlightenment. Sumedha lived during the time of Buddha Dipankara, and one day, he received news that Buddha Dipankara and His entourage would be visiting his village. The roads were under construction at that time and there was a portion of the road which was not in good order.

When Buddha Dipankara and His entourage arrived, Sumedha lay his body across the portion of the road so that the entire entourage could cross the road safely by stepping on his body. Nearby, a village girl by the name of Sumitta, had come to worship Buddha Dipankara and had brought with her 8 stalks of lotuses. Sumitta witnessed the whole episode and was extremely touched by the devotion of Sumedha. She came to him and offered him five of her lotus stalks, keeping three for herself, so that he too, may pay respects to Buddha Dipankara.

When Buddha Dipankara saw them both, He made a prophecy. He said to the ascetic, Sumedha, "This girl shall be your loyal and faithful partner in all your future lifetimes. She will remain with you, life after life, to support you, until you become a Buddha." Note that at that time, Sumedha could have already attained enlightenment (and become an *arahant*), but he chose not to, because he was inspired by Buddha Dipankara and Sumedha wanted to become a *Samma-Sambuddha* – an enlightened being who could teach others as well. To do this, he had to perfect himself for many more lifetimes.

Hence, as prophesied, the Sumedha-Sumitta partnership continued for many, many lifetimes, and finally both of them came to their final births as Prince Siddhattha Gotama and Princess Yasodhara, namely, our Buddha and His ever-faithful wife. When Prince Siddhattha left home to search for the truth, Princess Yasodhara awaited news of her beloved husband eagerly. When she heard that he had donned a yellow robe and only ate one meal a day, she too, removed all her finery, donned a yellow robe and ate only one meal a day.

Later, when their only son, Rahula, entered monkhood, Princess Yasodhara also renounced and became a nun. She passed away at the age of 78, and her dying words to the Buddha was: *I have followed you lifetimes after lifetimes, supporting you all the way, but I will follow you no more now for I too have attained enlightenment in this last birth of mine.*

The Buddha attained *Mahaparinibbana* (passing away as an enlightened being) two years later.

But their beautiful love story continues till this day.

So, are the people in your life here for a reason, a season or a lifetime? Or perhaps, *lifetimes*? We will never know. Be the best that you can to everyone. Shower love and kindness to all whom you meet.

Keep our relationships simple. Give lots of love.

29. Zen & the Teacup

Long ago, a professor visited the monk Nanyin to ask him about Zen.

“Teach me all about Zen. I want to learn everything.” said the professor.

Nanyin offered some tea to his guest, but he continued pouring even after the cup was full. After a short while, the professor could not stand it any longer, so he said,

“The cup is already full! Stop pouring”!

“Like this cup,” Nanyin said, *“you are so full of your views and opinions. If you do not empty your cup first, how can I tell you about Zen?”*

I love Zen. I have loved Zen since I was very young.

My father was a collector of books. When we were first introduced to Buddhism (I was twelve years old then), my father stocked up our library with as many Buddhist books as he could. So I had access to books from the various schools, and I would spend hours, browsing and reading. Soaked in the multitude of ideas and interpretations of the Buddha-*Dhamma*, I found myself attracted to and preferring the “originality” and down-to-earth approach of *Theravada* and the simplicity of Zen.

And while *Theravada* teachings provided me with a clear and straight-forward method of practice, Zen gave me that extra “oomph” because I saw elegance in its simplicity. Zen was so beautiful to me.

The simile of the teacup conveys a very important guideline for our practice. It tells us that in order to learn and progress higher on the spiritual path (or any path, for that matter), we must be humble enough to “empty our cup” regularly.

To “empty our cup” means we should not cling to our ideas and think that what we know is *the* truth. There are many layers and levels of truths. What I understood as a twelve-year-old child has changed and matured tremendously over the years. But this happened only because I keep telling myself to seek further, and deeper. And I keep reminding myself that I still have a lot to learn. One of my favourite quotes comes from Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese poet and philosopher. He says: *Say not I have found **the** truth, but rather, I have found **a** truth.*

Furthermore, “emptying our cup” also means we cannot cling to even what is good. The Buddha used the Simile of the Raft (*Alagaddupama Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya, 22*) to illustrate this point. A raft is a very useful device for crossing the river, but after doing so, we should not carry the raft with us, but leave it behind for others to use. If we carry the raft, we would only be creating a burden for ourselves.

Hence, Zen masters, especially, always advise us to keep ourselves open to new understanding and never hold on to anything. Whatever beliefs we have, keep them in an open hand and not a tight fist.

Here are some insightful quotes from the great meditation teacher, Ajahn Chah, from the book, *No Ajahn Chah*:

Of course there are many meditation techniques, but it all comes down to this – just letting it all be.

We practise to learn letting go, not to increase our holding on. Enlightenment appears when you stop wanting anything.

As the Second Noble Truth tells us, craving, grasping, clinging and attachment are the origins of *dukkha*.

So, just practise, and let go. Travel light, and travel bright.

The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon.

30. Burning Charcoals & the Violet's Fragrance

Being *puthujjanas* (unenlightened worldlings), many of us still suffer from the occasional angry outbursts, or perhaps in the milder form of getting hurt and offended, but these are all still different forms of anger. Remember the Simile of the Burning Charcoal? When we are angry, we are holding on to pieces of burning charcoal, waiting to hurl them at others, but in the process of doing so, we burn ourselves first.

So we know that we must let anger go, but isn't that easier said than done? Oh yes...but try, we must, if we wish to maintain calm and peace in our minds for our own happiness. My spiritual friend, Bro Khing Wee, shared with me these extremely profound words of Master Cheng Yen, founder of Tzu Chi. Master Cheng Yen says: *Anger is a punishment we inflict upon ourselves due to the mistakes of others.* Indeed, how true and how wise... When I first heard these words, I felt so foolish for the times that I had been angry. Why am I punishing myself due to the mistakes of others?

Charles Moore, a scholar and historian, writes: *When we forgive, the offender ceases to have power over us; we are no longer condemned to a life-sentence of pain.* When we forgive, perhaps we gain more than the one who has hurt us. It is quite interesting that a survey conducted by *USA Today* on what makes people happy reveals that the top three things that make people happy are:

- (1) Having good friends,
- (2) Not competing,
- (3) Being able to forgive others.

Forgiveness is a virtue. Mark Twain puts it beautifully when he says: *Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.* This is altruism at its finest – the ability to love even when one has been...crushed, so to speak. Remember also that it takes a bigger and nobler person to say he or she is sorry. It takes a bigger person to initiate peace and reconciliation. On the lighter side, Oscar Wilde quips: *Forgive your enemies. Nothing annoys them so much.*

Furthermore, when we are angry, more often than not, the issue gets blown out of proportion. Richard Carlson writes in his book, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, that if we can be mindful of our anger, it helps to ask ourselves: *Would this matter one year from now?* Reflect upon the past, how many times have we got angry before, and indeed, did the issue matter after one year or even one month? This too, shall pass. Let patience prevail. Let it pass. Let it go.

The Buddhist antidote to anger is *metta*. If our cultivation of *metta* is strong enough, it will help us cope better with anger as it arises. In the *Aghatavinaya Sutta, Part One (Anguttara Nikaya 5.161)*, the Buddha says that as anger arises, one must practise *metta*. Indeed, in the *Dhammapada* also, Verse 5 reminds us: *Hatred never ceases by hatred, only by love is it conquered. This is an Eternal Law.*

Getting angry is certainly far more complicated than letting go. When we get angry, we have to think of many reasons to do so, to maintain those feelings of hatred, and we would constantly be replaying that unpleasant incident in our minds. Then, as we think more and more, the hatred grows deeper and this generates more unwholesome thoughts, and with it, more unwholesome *kamma*. The charcoal continues to burn in our hands. What we need to do then is to simply let go. Knowing how harmful it is to harbour anger, a wise person reflects using wise consideration, and lets it go as it arises.

*He who checks **rising anger** as a charioteer checks a rolling chariot,
Him I call a true charioteer,
Others merely hold the reins. (Dhammapada, v. 222)*

So let anger go, lighten the load off your shoulders. Try smiling. Remember that our intrinsic nature is that of goodness, anger is just a visiting defilement.

This reminds me of a Zen story where a young monk consulted his master to help him cope with his anger.

Young monk: *Master, I get angry so often. Anger is a part of me. Help me get rid of it, please.*

Master: *If anger is a part of you, get angry for me now. Show me your anger, and I will help you get rid of it.*

Young monk: *How can I simply get angry for nothing? I'm not angry now.*

Master: *Well then, can you smile for me instead?*

Young monk: *Of course I can. (And he smiles.)*

Master: *You see, you cannot even get angry for me, so how can you say that anger is a part of you? But you can smile...*

Our intrinsic nature is one of goodness.

Smile...it only takes thirteen muscles to smile, but fifty to frown.

Smile...it's simpler than getting angry!

31. Look for the Silver Lining

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote the much-loved and oft-quoted *Serenity Prayer*:

God, grant us the grace to accept with serenity the things that we cannot change, the courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference.

When we look at the things and the people around us, we see numerous flaws, and don't we wish we had a magic wand that could just make things "right"? But, "right" in whose eyes? The Buddha says in the *Anguttara Nikaya 5.79* that before we criticise others, we should ask ourselves if we are flawless in our own speech and actions.

Some of us may insist that others change and not us, because we see ourselves as being right all the time. So we keep doing what we do, and expect to see different results or response from others. And on this, Albert Einstein says: *Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results.* It's not going to happen, folks. If we continue nagging our children in the same way, using the same words, they will continue ignoring us in the same manner. Similarly, if we continue to perceive that rude cashier as being rude, she will always be "rude", and even if she is not, we will find reasons to justify that she is.

So what should we do? Well, if we think it is absolutely necessary to change others, let us first be sure that it is for *their* benefit. Then, be creative, and more importantly, be fair. But here's an easier way – Instead of trying to change others, *change yourself*. Look at the situation differently...and positively.

Andrew Matthews writes in his book, *Follow your Heart: Our mission in life is not to change the world – Our mission is to change ourselves. There are no "outside" solutions. Only "inside" solutions.*

So, instead of insisting that others change, why don't we change our *perception* of the situation or the people who irritate and annoy us so that we can be more at peace? It is definitely easier to change ourselves than to change others. Ask any modern-day parent, and she will vouch for that!

Here's how we can change the way we look at things: An irritating person can be viewed as a "teacher" of patience and tolerance. A difficult situation can be viewed as an opportunity to practise acceptance and develop inner strength in overcoming adversities.

Eknath Easwaran, professor of English Literature and teacher of *Passage Meditation*, explains that we have a tendency to create "caricatures" of people in our minds. When we do not like someone, she will always be perceived as mean and unkind in our minds. As long as we do not attempt to change this perception, this caricature will continue to disturb, annoy and even torment us.

You'd find that those who choose to view others in a positive light seldom meet up with "difficult people". It is all a matter of perception. *Our* perception. See the good in others, and they *will* be good. Granted, some people are just plain nasty, but by placing them in the most positive light that you can, you have a far greater chance of influencing them to be good, *and* creating peace in your own mind. What is there to lose by seeing the good in others?

Charles Schwab, now philanthropist and one of the richest men in the United States, was employed to run Andrew Carnegie's Empire of Steel which became a phenomenal success way back in the fifties. Did Charles Schwab know anything at all about steel? No, he did not. But he knew *how* to bring out the best in people. When asked for the secret of his successful management of people, Charles Schwab only had this to say: *I am lavish in my praise and hearty in my approbation.* Instead of seeing the unfavourable in the workers, Charles Schwab chose to see the good in them, and told them so.

Now, in our modern-day human resource management, I hear that before an employee is reprimanded for a mistake, the employer should comment on some good that she has done first...to lessen the blow! But more importantly, it serves as a consolation and reminder that we all make mistakes once in a while, so let's not be too judgmental. No matter how grave our mistake, we still have the potential to be good.

The Buddha says in the *Aghatavinaya Sutta, Part Two (Anguttara Nikaya 5.162)*, that we should always find some good in others, just as we can find some usefulness in a piece of torn rag or a slimy pool of water. And if perchance, the person whom we encounter displays totally unwholesome characteristics, have compassion for her. Compassion will do her more good than harsh judgment.

Everything happens for a reason, and everyone crosses your path for a reason, as they say. In every situation, look for the learning opportunity, and learn the lesson as positively as we can.

*Look for the silver lining,
Whenever a cloud appears in the blue;
Remember somewhere the sun is shining,
And so the right thing to do,
Is make it shine for you.*

*A heart, full of joy and gladness,
Will always banish sadness and strife;
So always look for the silver lining,
And try to find the sunny side of life.*

32. Let's Go Fly a Kite!

*Let's go fly a kite,
Up to the highest height,
Let's go fly a kite,
And send it soaring....
Up to the atmosphere,
Up where the air is clear,
Oh, let's go...fly a kite!*

Remember this song from *Mary Poppins*? In our practice of the *Dhamma*, we should go “fly a kite” all the time! By this, I mean that we must let go of our anxieties, worries, anger, jealousy and the many other defilements that we have, and “soar up to the atmosphere where the air is clear”. The more we are able to let go, the higher we will rise on the spiritual ladder to enlightenment. Granted, sometimes we get hurt and angered, but the faster we let go, the less we will suffer.

We would do well also to remember that we must not cling to even the good feelings and so-called “correct” views. Do not hold on to opinions and concepts, or we get trapped in dualism.

Bhante Aggacitta, in his booklet, *Coping with a Handful of Leaves*, tells of a discussion he had with a brother forest monk who was one of the most exceptional yogis Bhante had ever encountered. This venerable monk was very well-versed in several meditation techniques, and was still very enthusiastic to learn new methods. “How do you cope with so many methods?”, Bhante Aggacitta asked him. The venerable monk answered, “Whenever I start to learn a new method I make sure I completely let go of any other techniques that I have learnt before.”

Seng T'san, the third patriarch of Zen, blends the teachings of Buddhism with Taoism very beautifully in one of the earliest and most influential Zen writings called *Hsin Hsin Ming* (Trust Mind Inscription). Here are two of the stanzas:

*Outside, don't get tangled in things.
Inside, don't get lost in emptiness.
Be still and become One
And all opposites disappear.*

*Emptiness changing into things
Is only our deluded view.
Do not seek the truth.
Only put down your opinions.*

The Second Noble Truth talks about craving as the origin of our unsatisfactoriness. Besides craving for material things, sometimes we also crave to be right. “I am right. You are wrong.” is a form of craving that afflicts many people these days. It does not do

us any good to adopt this superiority complex because it would only hinder our own growth and the opportunity to discover better interpretations of the *Dhamma*.

Hence, we should always keep letting go as we learn new things.

*Let go of our views,
Let go of our cravings,
Let's go fly a kite, folks,
And send it soaring...!*

33. Act Well Your Part

The emphasis on filial piety and respect is very deeply ingrained in the Chinese culture, and the credit for this is duly given to the teachings of Confucius. I was once asked for my opinion on respect in a *Dhamma* forum, and I said that while the elderly often expect respect to be bestowed upon them by virtue of their age or deeds, I felt very simply that respect ought to be earned.

Later, an elderly member of the audience who agreed with my views, shared with me this beautiful saying by Alexander Pope:

*Honour and Shame,
From no condition rise.
Act well your part
There all the honour lies.*

As we all age, let us remember that it is our duty and responsibility to continue leading and educating our young by example. It was the renowned physicist and Nobel Prize winner, Albert Einstein who said: *Example isn't another way to teach. It is the **only** way.* So if we want our young to behave and cultivate virtues, let us first embrace and practise these virtues ourselves. Our young watch us all the time, and they learn by emulating us.



Ming-Yi and Grandma – learning to chant, just like Grandma.



Jia-Wen helping me to pack gifts for friends.

When my children were young, I chose not to drum Buddhist virtues into them through the typical classroom way (“You should do this, you shouldn’t do that...because it says so in the *suttas!*”). Instead I opted for a more indirect approach. Let them see for themselves how I treat animals. Let them see for themselves how I give way to others on the road when I drive, or how I always thank waiters, waitresses and cashiers when I am served. Let them see how I would keep litter in my pocket until I find a litter bin. And can I stop doing these things now that my children have learnt from example? Absolutely not, and I cannot, even if I wanted to, because these ways of behaviour are what I am. These values have become me.

The results of this mode of indirect teaching by example may not be immediate, but they are definitely longer-lasting. And in many ways, it is really so much simpler too – you just have to practise what you profess.

Actions speak louder than words.

So, act your part well.

34. What is a Noble Person?

In the *Anuruddha Sutta*, the monk Ven Anuruddha tells the Buddha that he knows the characteristic of a “noble person”, one who would be able to learn the *Dhamma* well. This *Dhamma*, he says, is for one who has the following characteristics:

- (1) modest
- (2) easily contented
- (3) prefers to be alone, or reclusive
- (4) energetic
- (5) mindful
- (6) focused
- (7) wise

Having heard what Ven Anuruddha said, the Buddha concurs, and then asks him further, “Now then, Anuruddha, think of the eighth characteristic of a noble person. There is one more...what is it?”

Ven Anuruddha did not know, so the Buddha told him, “This *Dhamma* is for one who enjoys non-complication, one who delights in non-complication.”

This beautiful Buddha-*Dhamma* is for one who embraces simplicity.

35. Chopping Wood & Filling Marker Pens

It was Albert Einstein who said that people loved to chop wood because they can immediately see the results. We sometimes mistake the journey towards enlightenment as something that is difficult, complicated, and perhaps, even requiring deep analysis and reflection. However, you would have noticed that great meditation masters like Ajahn Chah had always stressed on simple mindfulness and just letting things be: *If you have time to be mindful, you have time to meditate.*

While *Samma Sati* (Right Mindfulness) is given so much importance in our quest to gain enlightenment, I had never quite really understood why this is so. Although I had no doubt whatsoever that the Buddha knew best, I did not know why or how being mindful could lead us to greater happiness, or enlightenment for that matter...until one day...

In my teaching, I use marker pens on the whiteboard and being an environmental-friendly person, I choose to refill the marker pens instead of discarding them for new ones. So unscrewing the tops of the pens, and filling them with ink has been a daily habit on Mondays through Fridays for me. I have been using the same two marker pens for eleven years now, and every working day, you would find me at the ink counter, dutifully filling my pens with ink before heading off to class.

When it came to filling up my marker pens, I must confess that I am a maximalist in that I would try to fill as much ink as I can so that the ink supply can last longer. More often than not, I would end up filling too much, up to the brim and when I screw back the top, the ink often spills out and causes a mess on my hands, the sides of the pen and sometimes, even splatters on my clothes!

And I never seemed to learn...sigh.

One day, a few months ago, I was at the counter as usual, filling my pens. But this time, something happened. As the ink level was reaching almost to the top, a voice inside me said, very decisively, "Stop. This is Greed."

STOP. THIS IS GREED.

I stopped.

At that very moment, I felt a huge burden lifted from my shoulders, an indescribable joy, happiness so deep that my heart and entire body experienced a "lightness" as though I had been transported elsewhere to a very blissful place. It was sheer *bliss*, and I had never ever experienced this feeling all my life.

I remember slowly putting down the bottle of ink and screwing the top back onto the pen. Then, I went back to my table and sat down. The blissful feeling lasted for quite some time after that. I felt like being in a world where everything felt light and wonderful.

A few weeks later, I had the opportunity to meet up with my spiritual adviser and friend, Bhante Kumara. I described the whole experience to him, and Bhante smiled. He then explained to me that what I had experienced was probably *bhavanamaya*, something beyond mere intellectual understanding. At that precise moment when that voice inside me said, “Stop. This is greed”, that moment, I *realised* what greed was, and I completely dropped that defilement. The dropping of the defilement brought the feeling of lightness and bliss within me.

This experience made me understand and realise why the Buddha said that being mindful is very important towards our quest for enlightenment. I had been mindfully filling my pens for more than a decade now, and this practice of mindfulness had finally paid off in this one beautiful moment where I realised that I must stop being greedy and I completely dropped the defilement from my mind. Now I know what it feels like when a defilement has been completely eradicated, at least for those few moments on that day.

Was that a glimpse of *jhanic* bliss? *Satori*? I don’t know. But it was bliss alright. And what wonderful bliss, too!

This reminds me of stories from the Buddha’s time where Ven Maha Kassapa was reputed to have gained enlightenment by just looking at a flower held up by the Buddha. Or, how another monk attained enlightenment by dutifully sweeping the floor day after day.

Now, I tell my friends never to underestimate the simple practice of mindfulness in daily life. You’ll never know...one day you may be *mindfully* washing the dishes, or repairing the car, and *voila!*...You are enlightened.

Before enlightenment, sweep the floor. After enlightenment, sweep the floor.
– Zen proverb

36. Indra's Net & the Butterflies in China

Shortly after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was co-awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, they issued a report which said that if we want to help brake global warming, there are three essential things which we must embrace in our daily lives:

- (1) Don't eat meat,
- (2) Ride a bike,
- (3) Be a frugal shopper.

Not that difficult to do, is it? We could gradually reduce our meat intake for a start (and gain better health), cycle to nearby places (and gain better health too), and buy only essential things (and save money!). Isn't that a win-win situation for us and the environment?

Dr Rajendra Pachauri, one of the two recipients of the coveted Nobel Peace Prize, in his acceptance speech in Oslo, Norway, attributes his life-long philosophy to the Hindu philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which means "the whole universe is one family", and hence, global efforts must be garnered to protect global commons.

Reducing our meat intake, the use of motorized vehicles and by buying only what we really need (and not what we want) *can* significantly reduce the emission of greenhouse gases that come from the animal-farming and meat industry, the use of vehicles and the manufacture of goods.

In the *Avatamsaka Sutta* from the *Mahayana* scriptures, there is this beautiful concept of *Indra's Net*. In it, we are asked to imagine this earth as a cosmos that is covered by a net. On every knot in this net is a jewel, and every living being is a jewel on this net. This is a powerful simile, which in my personal opinion, reveals three important lessons.

First, all beings are equally precious. We are all jewels. Be it the lizard in your house, the rhinoceros in the jungle or the peddler on the street, we are all precious jewels. Second, when we look at one jewel, we see the reflections of all other jewels. Hence, we are all interconnected and interdependent. Third, when one jewel is touched, its reflection will bounce off the jewels around it, and this in turn creates a ripple effect without an end and it spreads throughout the entire net covering the cosmos.

When we realise how interconnected and interdependent we are, then we can understand that all our actions have consequences that can travel far and wide. In Mathematics, there is a similar metaphor called the *Butterfly Effect*. It is postulated that "if a butterfly flaps its wings in China, it can cause a tornado to break out in downtown New York". Based on the work of Edward Lorenz, the *Butterfly Effect* explains the sensitive dependence on initial conditions in meteorology, economics, and many other real-life situations.

Sometimes we do not realise the impact of our actions, even though they may appear to be trivial. Consider this possibility: The plastic bag that we carelessly throw into the river will eventually find its way to the ocean. It may choke a dolphin to death. And we would never know that perhaps it could have been this very dolphin that can save us one day when we are stranded in the middle of the ocean, surrounded by sharks.

The bottom line is this: If we understand that we all have a duty to this Earth, and that all our actions can help save *or* destroy the Earth, then we ought to do the best we can to ensure that our actions bring positive effects to preserve and safeguard Earth. After all, this is the only home we will ever have...at least for this lifetime.

Start with simple things like recycling and re-using whatever we can. During the Buddha's time, He advised the monks to re-use their robes too. Old robes would be converted to blankets, bedsheets, floormats, rags and finally, shredded into strips, mixed with clay and used to mend the cracks in the walls and floor of their huts. The Buddha was an advocate of recycling!

So, please support the *paper lama* man (collector of old newspapers), folks! Separate your garbage, *Reduce, Re-use, Recycle...*and most importantly, *Respect*.

Remember the words of wisdom from Chief Seattle: *Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.* .



Learning to love and respect Nature.

37. Dewdrops of Emptiness

Ven Thich Nhat Hanh writes in his book, *The Heart of Understanding*, that we are all very deeply interconnected with each other as well as with the environment. He coined the term “interbeing” to describe this relationship.

One of my favourite topics in the *Dhamma* talks that I give is “Dewdrops of Emptiness”. In this talk, I share with the audience the beautiful concept of *Sunyatta* (emptiness) where it is said that we are empty of a separate self, but full of everything else. I show the audience an orange, and invite them to look deeply into it. We see the connection of the orange with its tree, the nutrients in the soil, the sun, the rain, the air, the micro-organisms that fertilise the soil, the farmer who planted the tree, the workers who harvested the fruits, the lorry driver who brought the fruits to the shop and a host of other beings who are all intricately connected to this orange.

In this way, we are all very deeply connected to each other. Realising this, let us put less emphasis on “I” and more on “us”. Let us discard self-centred emotions such as selfishness, anger, jealousy, envy, hatred and greed (that breed from the “I”). In its place, we cultivate positive and wholesome feelings like love, generosity, altruistic joy and compassion. Life would indeed be much simpler if we lived by these wholesome feelings rather than get embroiled and entangled with destructive emotions which lead to complicated relationships, bitterness, heartache and stress.

Let us live simply so that others can simply live. After all, at the end of the day, the Buddha said: *Sabbe Dhamma Anatta* (all things are devoid of a self).

My little poem on Emptiness:

*The dewdrops,
The flowers, the leaves and the trees,
All synthesized as one.
Experience unity.
Let us inter-be.*

38. All Kinds of Everything

Ahh...this song brings back fond memories of my childhood. *All kinds of everything remind me of you*...so the love song goes.

You'd have noticed that besides citing quotes from the Buddhist scriptures in this book, I have also used many quotes from Western thinkers and philosophers, as well as lyrics of popular songs that I know. To me, the *Dhamma* contains universal and timeless truths, and being universal, many wise and inspired people would be able to see the same beauty through their own experiences in life. As the cliché goes: *Wise men think alike*.

There are many ways of learning the *Dhamma*. Learning need not be confined to purely Buddhist literature alone. If we can “see” the *Dhamma* in the inspirational writings of wise people, then we begin to appreciate how universal our Buddha-*Dhamma* is, and this is something we ought to be very proud of.

Even within the world Buddhist community, there are three major traditions, the *Theravada*, the *Mahayana* and the *Vajrayana*. Although some of the devotional practices may differ slightly, the basic doctrine of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path are the same in all the traditions. Ajahn Brahm, the ever-popular and well-loved *Dhamma* master from Australia, calls his tradition, “Hahayana”!

The three traditions arose because when the Buddha instructed His monks to go forth and teach the *Dhamma* for the good of the many, He told them specifically to allow His teachings to blend in with the local cultures of the people. Hence, we can see for ourselves that the sublime teachings of the Buddha have indeed blended in beautifully and harmoniously with the various cultures of the world today. For example, there is no need for a Buddhist to change his or her name, and Buddhists everywhere still observe and celebrate the many festivals in their respective cultures, as long as the practices do not bring harm to themselves and others.

When the Bengali Buddhist teacher, Atisha Dipankara Shrijnana, first went to Tibet in the 11th century, he was asked how one should practise since there were many schools of Buddhism. Atisha replied, “You should find the essential point common to all the teachings and practice that way”.

Great thinkers and spiritually-developed people will always choose to see the similarities rather than the differences in the various religious teachings. One goal, many paths. All religions teach us to do good and be good. The emphasis may be on different aspects – the devotional, the ritualistic or basic day-to-day practice, but the ultimate objective is to train and guide us to be as good as we possibly can.

More so, in a world that is torn by differences, political, cultural or religious, there is a greater need for us to see and appreciate our similarities. Why should we waste our time splitting hairs trying to prove who is “better” or more right? Ultimately, as the Buddha says, every sentient being has the Buddha Nature, that pure and brilliant mind that can be

developed to perfection. Buddhists call it *Nibbana*, Hindus call it *Moksha*, and the Christians call it *The Kingdom of Heaven*.

There is one Dhamma, not many; Distinctions arise from the needs of the ignorant.
– Seng T’san

All mystics speak the same language, for they come from the same country.
– Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin

Who is wise? One who learns from all.
– The Talmud

See the *Dhamma* in all things that are good, beautiful and true. And never underestimate the simplest ideas, because sometimes, the simplest can be the most profound and accurate. The 13th century Japanese Zen master, Dogen Zenji, was known to have said:

Buddha-Dhamma is no different from ordinary Dhamma. Those who fail to see the Dhamma in ordinary life, fail to see the true essence of the Dhamma.

So, whether it is from Socrates, William Blake, Mary Poppins or Baloo the Bear, I see the *Dhamma* in everything that is simple and beautiful.

All kinds of everything remind me of the *Buddha-Dhamma*.

Adikalyanam, majjhekalyanam, pariyosanakalyanam.
Beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle, and beautiful in the end.

39. Life is Short

We are often reminded, especially by our late Chief, Ven Dr K. Sri Dhammananda Nayake Maha Thera, that “life is uncertain and death is certain”, and we have to do as much good as we can before our lives are unexpectedly taken away by some freak accident or illness.

I embrace this saying and live by it because I have unexplained epileptic seizures that can come on any time, without warning. So far, I have had five episodes of such seizures and it must have been sheer luck (or divine intervention?) that they did not happen while I was driving. In one episode, I had a seizure, and fell onto the sharp corner of the concrete slab which jabbed right under my eye. I remember getting up, going to the mirror and seeing half my face covered in blood. When the doctor stitched up my wound, I told him there was no need to use any local anaesthesia. The pain had already numbed my nerves by then.

It was this particular seizure that resulted in my getting a brain scan done as the doctor suspected there may have been something growing in my brain. The CT-Scan showed the image of a “large tumour” at the pons. However, the doctor assured me that it could be just an “artifact”. This means that the image could have been caused by the reflection of some bones in the skull. This was especially since I could still function normally. If indeed I had such a “large tumour” in my brain, I would not have been able to even walk in a straight line. But, my epileptic seizures were a concern, so the radiologist insisted that an MRI be done to confirm the results.

During those days, MRIs were not freely available, so I had to take my turn on the waiting list at the General Hospital. It took four months for my turn to come, and during those four months, I lived with the possibility that I could die any time. While waiting for the MRI, a second opinion confirmed that IF indeed it were really such a large tumour, there would be no hope of recovery, and I remember what the doctor said to me. “Go home and pray”, she advised.

Not wanting to get people all worried for nothing, I chose not to tell anyone. Only my husband knew. My children were too young to understand what was going on. So every day, I went to sleep wondering if I would wake up the next day. And every morning when I woke up, I was thankful to see another new day.

Being the practical person that I was, the first thing I did was to write my will. I sought solace in Jack Kornfield’s *A Path with Heart*, especially from the chapter where he describes his sessions with terminally-ill patients, helping them cope better with their impending death, and helping them accept the inevitable with serenity.

Having loved music all my life, one song helped me cope as well, and this was Louis Armstrong’s *It’s a Wonderful World*. I even wanted this song (and only this one song) to be played at my funeral if I were to die. The lyrics helped me appreciate life more, that we have so much to be thankful for.

So as I thanked the *trees of green, red roses too, skies of blue and clouds of white* every day that I was still alive, the day finally came and I was called up for my MRI. The results came about a week later. My husband went to collect them after work and I was waiting at home. As he stepped out of his car with that big brown envelope, I looked at his face and searched for clues. There were none.

As he handed me the brown envelope, and I reached in nervously to take the report out, a look of relief appeared over his face, and he told me, “It’s normal”, and he smiled. I remember the look of relief on his face till this day, as though a huge burden had been lifted off his shoulders.

Throughout the four months of waiting, we chose not to talk about the eventuality, the “if’s and the “what if’s. I chose to keep silent because I did not want to worry him. I had to be brave for him. I remember we only said, “It’s probably nothing” and that was that. I had not known that he too had been so worried all these months (because my husband is an extremely calm and very strong person) until I saw that look of relief on his face that evening when he came home with the report.

So, dying is a reality for me. While each of us knows that we have to die one day, dying is a *very* real thing for me. Some of my friends do not understand why I do things so fast. “Why are you so eager? Why are you so anxious to get things done? Can’t you wait a bit?”, they ask in exasperation. They do not understand that I *live* with the possibility of dying at any time. I have been through a very real possibility of dying, and with my (still) unexplained epileptic seizures, I *can* throw a fit, collapse, and die at any time if my head hits a wrong place.

That is why when I have things to do, you can be sure I would do them as soon as I can. *Life is uncertain, death is certain.* I have lived through this, I embrace and wholeheartedly realise the truth of this statement. It has given me a new meaning of life. It gives me a sense of urgency to do all the good that I can do while I still can. It gives me a reason to fulfil my dreams, while I still can.

Some people think that only the sick and suffering deserve special care, but I beg to differ. To me, *everyone* deserves special care. *Everyone* is precious. Anyone *can* die at any time. So while we have the opportunity, let us love everyone with all our heart, and let us use whatever time we have to make them feel loved because we would never know when it is too late.

Talking about death, one inevitably comes to the subject of funerals. It is said that of all the species in the animal kingdom, only humans and whales organise funerals. Buddhists are “lucky” in the sense that *authentic* Buddhist funerals are simple, elegant and therefore, relatively *cheap*. But one can still choose to have it done elaborately if one chooses to, but whatever for, right? Remember the *Metta Sutta*? Let’s not be a burden to others, *dead or alive!*

How would I like my funeral to be like? Well, I am a registered organ donor, so when I am confirmed dead, I would like my organs to be donated, then my remains cremated in the cheapest possible manner, and my ashes can be brought home to be buried in a flower pot to fertilise the soil. I would rather not have a memorial tablet because that would only create a burden on my loved ones. Embrace simplicity, travel light in life....and in death too.

Uncle Vijaya shared with me this lovely and very profound saying by George Elliot in her novel, Middlemarch:

For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistorical acts: and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs.

Knowing that all things are transient, and that eventually our tombs would be unvisited and unremembered, why even have one in the first place? Why not do as much as we can while we are alive, and touch the hearts of people with kindness and share all the good that we can?

Many years ago, I had an Egyptian student who told me that he was taught since young to “live each day as his last.” He said every day he would think he might die the next day, and hence, he had to do as much good as he could. I thought that was a very meaningful life motto to embrace. This young man had been through hard times in his life, having had to work before coming back to study. Because of his life motto, when I was teaching him, I noticed a drive in him which I seldom saw in my other students – to do his utmost in his studies every single day by clarifying his doubts so that he understood the day’s lesson. I shared his life motto with my other students. They laughed out loud and said, “If it were my last day, I’d enjoy myself to the fullest, and I certainly won’t study at all!!” Oh well, it’s true what they say. Those who have been through adversities will look at life differently.



Me and my first book, Pawprints.

Some of you may know that I wrote my first three books (two *Dhamma* books and one secular book) in a period of barely two months in 2008. “Why are you in such a hurry?”, my friends ask me. Well, because I am writing about the passions of my life. I have stories and experiences to share from my life. Let me humbly share them with others with the hope that my writings may inspire others to live their passions too, and let my stories live on even after I am gone.

And what has this issue about the uncertainty of life got to do with simplicity and letting go? Well, I make my life simple in the sense that when I have things to do, I do them as soon as possible. I am one who would never procrastinate or put off till tomorrow what can be done today. Get it done, and let it go. And let another new day come...if it comes.

Live in the present. Do all you can, while you still can.

A beautiful reminder, attributed to both William Penn and Etienne de Grellet:

*I expect to pass through this world but once;
Any good thing therefore that I can do,
Or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature,
Let me do it now;
Let me not defer or neglect it,
For I shall not pass this way again.*

40. Little Things Matter

One of the most-quoted sayings of Mother Theresa is this: *We cannot do great things on this Earth, only little things with great love.*

As Buddhists, we know that when it is time for us to die, there is absolutely nothing we can bring along with us except for our *kamma*. And we hope that we bring along more bright than dark *kamma*, because it is this *kamma* that will determine our next rebirth and support us through it.

As Mother Theresa reminds us, we do not have to wait for opportunities to do big things. Another one of my favourite quotations comes from the highly-celebrated English poet, William Wordsworth:

*The best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love.*

There are beautiful random acts of kindness that we can do every day. All it takes is to have some consideration for others, and to look for opportunities to make the day a little happier and brighter for someone else.

Have you ever come to a toll station and paid for the toll of the car behind you? Try it, you'd be surprised how good the driver at the back *and* you feel after doing it. This is indeed a little, nameless act of kindness because the driver doesn't even know who you are. But I am sure the driver at the back will remember the act of kindness for a long time even though you may have forgotten about it yourself! Since she does not know who you are, that makes the deed even more special, because you are not out to gain recognition or even acknowledgement from her.

Have you given your left-over food to a stray dog or cat in your neighbourhood? Or have you tried to approach them only to have them move further away because they are afraid of you? But if you leave the food there, and stand at a distance, they will come back (because they are hungry *and* because they sense the genuine kindness in you), and they will eat the food, then look at you and wag their tails. Yes, even cats wag their tails!

Do you smile at the stranger who passes you by every day when you walk to work? Do you greet him "Good Morning!" even though you do not know him? I know you may be a little wary of doing so for fear of being labelled "what a crazy guy!" But try it, and sometimes, you'll find that the stranger will respond in kind, and *voila!* – you've made a new friend! I used to have a lecturer who did this, and he had a host of "strangers" who later became his friends.

Little things matter. Never underestimate even the simplest acts of kindness and love. The author of *Dilbert*, Scott Adams, says: *Remember there's no such thing as a small act of kindness. Every act creates a ripple with no logical end.*

I'm sure you'd recall this lovely little poem by Mrs J. A. Carney that you would have probably learnt as a child. Though these words have the innocence of childhood in them, they are, nevertheless, timeless and very profound.



Beautiful moments to cherish.

*Little drops of water,
Little grains of sand,
Make the mighty ocean,
And the beautiful land.*

*Little deeds of kindness,
Little words of love,
Make our earth an Eden,
Like the heaven above.*

*And the little moments,
Humble though they be,
Make the mighty ages,
Of eternity.*

41. Leaving a Bit of Ourselves Behind

A year ago, I read a newspaper article where four ladies were interviewed. It was about life past fifty, and these ladies were asked what they did to find meaning in their lives. I was greatly inspired by what one of these ladies said. She said, “Every day, I leave a little bit of myself behind.” What she meant was that every day, we touch people’s lives, and when doing so, let us touch people with kindness and love. Let us make the load a little lighter for others. By doing little acts of kindness, we are “leaving a bit of ourselves behind” because what we have done for others would remain in their hearts for a long time to come.

Talking about “leaving a bit of ourselves behind”, we Buddhists are taught to “let go completely” when it is time to die. Ven Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book *Old Path White Clouds*, describes how the Buddha guided His father, King Suddhodana to let go as the old king was on his deathbed:

Look at the green leaves on the branches outside your window. Life continues. As life continues, so do you. You will continue to live in me and in Nanda and Rahula, and in all beings.

By saying thus, the Buddha helped His father realise that even though he dies, he will continue to live on in the lives that he had touched, the Buddha’s, Nanda’s (the Buddha’s half-brother), or Rahula’s (the Buddha’s son). Through this realization, the old king was able to let go, and thus attained the first stage of sainthood upon his death, and subsequently, *Nibbana*.

So let us touch lives, and leave a bit of ourselves behind. And when it is time for us to go, we will go peacefully, knowing that we continue to live on in others. Let go, and die peacefully. Let there be no unfinished business because we have already left bits of ourselves behind.

And after we are gone, people might not remember our names or who we are. But they would remember that when they needed kindness, we were there, to lend a hand, to give a smile, a shoulder to lean on, a listening ear. And we made a difference to their lives, in their moment of need, because we cared. We made their lives more beautiful and meaningful and more humane. And that is a beautiful thing to do, an act of kindness and a beautiful legacy to leave behind. The great Greek philosopher Pericles says: *What we leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.*

All it takes are simple acts of kindness and of love, from a sincere and willing heart. In our quest to rise higher on the spiritual path to enlightenment, we should not carry so much baggage with us. Perform simple acts of kindness, and leave them behind.

42. My Simple Religion

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama has often said: *This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. My brain, my heart are my temples; my philosophy is kindness.*

In the book *A Still Forest Pool*, Jack Kornfield and Paul Breitner tell the story of Ajahn Chah and a lady who was a famous lecturer on Buddhist metaphysics. This lady taught the *Abhidhamma* and complex Buddhist psychology at the university.

In talking to Ajahn Chah one day, this lady detailed how important it was for people to understand Buddhist psychology and how much her students had benefitted from their study. She then asked Ajahn Chah if he agreed with the importance of such understanding.

“Yes, very important”, Ajahn Chah agreed.

Delighted, the lady further questioned whether Ajahn Chah made his own students learn the *Abhidhamma*.

“Oh yes, of course”, Ajahn Chah replied.

And where, she asked, did he recommend they start? “Which books and studies were best?” she asked excitedly.

“Only here,” Ajahn Chah said, pointing to his heart, “only here.”

Those who mistake the unessential to be essential, and the essential to be unessential, dwelling in wrong thoughts, never arrive at the essential. (Dhammapada, 11)

Learning from such great masters, what then is my religion and how do I practise?

My simple religion is kindness, and I practise from my heart.

Epilogue

Just as I've kept the prologue simple, I would do the same here.
So, I shall now end this book with another K.I.S.S....(Keep It Short and Simple!)

Embrace simplicity,
Sprinkle it with lots of love and kindness for all beings,
Travel bright in life.
Travel light in life.

May you be well and happy always.

Emptying my teacup,
with love and joy,

kahyein

True eloquence consists of saying all that should be said, and that only.
- Francois de La Rochefoucauld

Manifest plainness
Embrace simplicity
Reduce selfishness
Have few desires

- Lao Tzu

Fear less, hope more,
Eat less, chew more,
Whine less, breathe more,
Talk less, say more,
Hate less, love more,
And all good things will be yours.

- Swedish Proverb

Instants

If I could live again my life,
In the next - I'll try,
- to make more mistakes,
I won't try to be so perfect,
I'll be more relaxed,
I'll be more full - than I am now,
In fact, I'll take fewer things seriously,
I'll be less hygienic,
I'll take more risks,
I'll take more trips,
I'll watch more sunsets,
I'll climb more mountains,
I'll swim more rivers,
I'll go to more places - I've never been,
I'll eat more ice creams and less (lime) beans,
I'll have more real problems - and less imaginary ones,
I was one of those people who live
prudent and prolific lives -
each minute of his life,
Of course that I had moments of joy - but,
if I could go back I'll try to have only good moments,

If you don't know – that's what life is made of,
Don't lose the now!

I was one of those who never goes anywhere
without a thermometer,
without a hot-water bottle,
and without an umbrella and without a parachute,

If I could live again - I will travel light,
If I could live again - I'll try to work bare feet
at the beginning of spring till the end of autumn,
I'll ride more carts,
I'll watch more sunrises and play with more children,
If I have the life to live - but now I am 85,
- and I know that I am dying ...

- Jorge Luis Borges

The Four Noble Truths Unplugged

The Simile of the Pie

I have always thought of the Four Noble Truths as a “recipe”. To me, it is the perfect “Recipe for Happiness”. Thinking of recipes makes me think of food, and since everyone is familiar with food (we all have to eat to live), I thought I would try my hand at explaining what the Four Noble Truths means to me, using the simile of a pie.

The Four Noble Truths is contained in a “Happiness Pie”. And the art of practising the Four Noble Truths is similar to the art of making this “Happiness Pie”.

Here is the recipe for making the “Happiness Pie”. Note: This is an ancient Pali recipe, so the ingredients are given in their Pali names.

Ingredients:

1 cup of *Dukkha*

1 cup of *Samudaya*

1 cup of *Nirodha*

As much *Magga* as you want

Optional ingredients: 4-spice powder (available from the *Brahmavihara* shop)

Method:

1. In a large mixing bowl, put in 1 cup of *Dukkha*. Stir gently and mindfully.
2. Add in 1 cup of *Samudaya*, continue stirring mindfully.
3. Add in 1 cup of *Nirodha*, and continue stirring until well-mixed.
4. Remove the mixture, shape it into a ball, flatten it and this forms the crust of your pie. Put in on a baking tray, making sure it is firm.
5. Next, using a spoon, scoop heaps of *Magga* onto the crust. The more, the better. Note: *Magga* is a special premix containing eight specially selected herbs and spices, namely, *Ditthi*, *Sankappa*, *Vaca*, *Kammanta*, *Ajiva*, *Vayama*, *Sati*, *Samadhi*, all in perfect proportions (Hint: the Noble Eightfold Path)
6. OPTIONAL: For extra flavours, you could sprinkle generously the 4-spice powder onto the *Magga*. (The one available from the *Brahmavihara* shop is especially tasty and nutritious because it contains 4 very wholesome spices, ie. *Metta*, *Karuna*, *Mudita* and *Upekkha*.)
7. Now you are all ready to bake your pie. Put it into the oven, bake at 180° until golden brown and voila, there’s your Happiness Pie.

And it is said that if you eat a Happiness Pie each day, you will be blessed with long-lasting good health and happiness.

But a word of caution - there are two very important conditions to abide by when making this Happiness Pie:

- (A) You must be not put any preservatives into the recipe. Otherwise, its nutrients would be all destroyed.
- (B) You must bake it yourself.

Further notes:

The Four Noble Truths

1. *Dukkha* – there is unsatisfactoriness in life
2. *Samudaya* – there is an origin to this unsatisfactoriness (craving)
3. *Nirodha* – there is an end to this unsatisfactoriness (remove the craving)
4. *Magga* – the Noble Eightfold Path is the way to live for perfect happiness

The first three Noble Truths are to be understood one by one, but eventually they are to be understood and embraced as a whole. Hence, in the recipe, they are taken in one by one, but eventually well-mixed as a whole. They are also taken in in equal proportions (one cup each) because each one is equally as important as the other.

The first three Noble Truths form the doctrine of our understanding. Similarly, it forms the crust of the pie, a foundation for the filling of the pie. The filling is our practice (*Magga*, the Noble Eightfold Path). Without a firm foundation (the crust of the pie), our practice has nothing to stand on and it is meaningless. In the same way, with just an understanding (just the crust) but without practice, life is equally meaningless and we will not experience happiness. It would be like eating the crust of the pie without any filling. It is tasteless and has no nutrients. Hence, it takes understanding and practice, hand-in-hand.

Magga is to be practised as generously as possible, hence heap as much filling as you possibly can. And to me, my own practice is greatly enhanced by mindfully incorporating the four *Brahmaviharas* (*metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upekkha* – in the guise of a “4-spice powder”) as I strive to walk the Noble Eightfold Path.

Two conditions are imposed in this recipe: First, no preservatives are to be added. If you wish to eat a Happiness Pie each day, you shall have to bake a fresh one every day and eat it within the same day. This means that the Four Noble Truths are to be practised every day. We cannot hope to practise for a short period and expect lifelong happiness. The Four Noble Truths is a day-to-day, moment-to-moment, lifelong way of life.

Second, we must bake the pie ourselves. This means that we have to understand the doctrine and practice the teachings all by ourselves. No one can truly make us understand the doctrine and no one can practice the teachings for us – we have to walk the path ourselves.

So there you go, the art of practising the Four Noble Truths seen in the art of making a pie. Its recipe is available for one and all. It is up to us to take it up, and use it for our own happiness.

An apple a day keeps the doctor away?

A Happiness Pie a day keeps suffering away!

I wish all of you many happy hours of baking. May you always be motivated to bake your own Happiness Pie every day, and may you be nourished by its health-giving benefits for a long, healthy and happy life.

This simile was given as a 5-minute presentation at the Dhamma Speakers Course in 2006. It is also published in Eastern Horizon, January 2007, Issue No. 21.

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AN EXPRESSION OF HEARTFELT GRATITUDE

*If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is “thank you,” that would suffice.
- Meister Eckhart.*

To all my friends who have supported me in the writing and publishing of this book,

Thank you!

Travelling light,
But with lots of love,
kahyein

*Gratitude is the memory of the heart.
- Jean Baptiste Massieu, translated from French*

*Garavo ca nivato ca
Santutthi ca katannuta
Kalena dhamma savanam
Etam mangalam muttamam*

Reverence, Humility,
Contentment, Gratitude, and
Opportune Hearing of the *Dhamma*,
These are Supreme Blessings.

*Maha Mangala Sutta
Samyutta Nikaya 2.4*

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL



In *A Kite in the Wind*, Chan Kah Yein talks about how she practises simplicity in her life as a layperson who is caught up with the trivialities and complexities of life. She interprets the ancient and time-tested Buddha-*Dhamma* in her simple way, and finds that practising simplicity helps tremendously in her quest to live in accordance with the *Dhamma*. In this book, she shares tips on how we can incorporate simplicity into our busy lifestyle, and thereby gain more peace and happiness.

He who knows that enough is enough will always have enough
– Lao Tzu



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