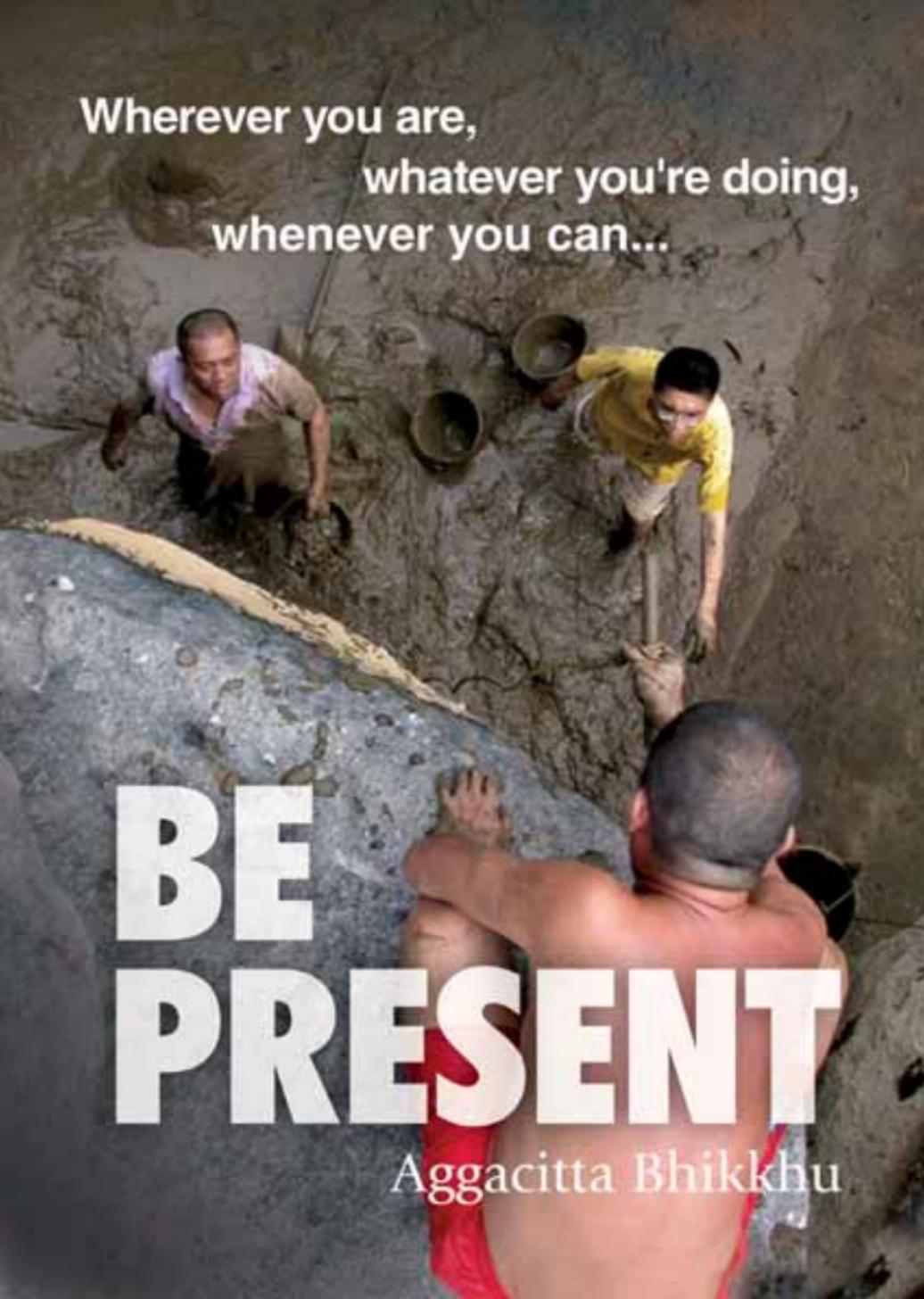


Wherever you are,  
whatever you're doing,  
whenever you can...



**BE  
PRESENT**

Aggacitta Bhikkhu

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# **BE PRESENT**

*Aggacitta Bhikkhu*



Sasanarakkha Buddhist Sanctuary

Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia

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The Buddha taught *satipaṭṭhāna* to human beings for the ultimate aim of purification, as the way to overcome physical pain and mental defilements. ‘Satipatthana’ refers to the four establishments (*paṭṭhāna*) of mindfulness (*sati*): remembering to repeatedly observe the body, feelings, mind and *dhammas* (perceptible natural phenomena and how they work). This practice also brings along its attendant benefit of being focussed on activities of the present moment.

In several suttas the Buddha defined ‘*sati*’ as remembering. What is he telling us to remember? He is telling us to remember to observe the body as the body, feelings as feelings, the mind as the mind, dhammas as dhammas—in other words, watch the body,

etc. in order to realise that it is just body, etc.: not ‘I’, ‘mine’ or ‘my self’. The body is composed of sensations that we can directly feel. Be aware of the bodily sensations which are present all the time. Thus the Buddha repeatedly advised, “in bending or stretching the arm, etc. one does so with full awareness (*sampajānakārā*.” ‘Sati’ therefore is not awareness, but rather a reminder to be aware.

The five senses can take in only present objects. On the other hand the mind can take in past, present and future objects as well as time-freed objects such as ideas, abstractions and fantasies. Most times when we are engaged in our daily activities—moving around, writing at the desk, washing dishes, etc.—it is difficult to remember to be aware and to go back to the body. But it is a good tool to use mindfulness of the body as an

anchor, to ground one in the present moment. The moment you are aware that you are thinking, note the thought, let it go and bring the mind back to the body.

### ***Uncovering Layers of Past Conditioning***

It is good to ask yourself, every now and then, “Where is my mind?” If it is not with the five senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—then it is thinking. Check how it moves and behaves. As the Buddha said (in SN 47:35), “a bhikkhu exercises full awareness by being aware of feelings, thoughts and perceptions as they arise, persist and disappear.” If you are skilful in watching the mind, then you will not get caught up in thoughts and emotions. When you do this, you become more focussed on what you are presently



It is good practice to see how the mind works.



While walking to your workplace or the washroom ask yourself as you walk, "Where is my mind?"



doing, and you can be aware of the many layers of conditioning that cause thoughts and emotions to arise.

During a recent Introduction to MonkhooD Programme conducted in Sasanarakkha Buddhist Sanctuary (SBS), one of the participants put into practice what I had taught about mindfulness of ongoing activities. He petted one of the cats we have there, trying to be mindful, then went to wash his hands. At that moment, it struck him that the cause for his habitual act of washing his hands after touching a cat—although he was not deliberately thinking about it then—was because his mother had inculcated this in him when he was a child. He had an insight into the conditioning that brought about the automatic response of washing his hands after touching a cat.

Most, if not all, of our behaviour patterns are the products of past conditioning. Like robots we automatically react to situations according to such conditioned ways. Sometimes such conditioning can be the root of certain bad habits. If we can see such conditioning, then we have a chance to undo it. We can see the root causes of problems such as inexplicable inhibitions, phobias and grudges. We can be our own psychotherapist—watch our mind, see the conditioning that brings about such negativity and we can overcome them.

***Track the Mind and Experience Not-self (Anattà)***

The mind is a busybody. If you watch it, you can see how it moves from the eye, to the ear, etc. to thoughts commenting on almost every little thing that you can perceive through the senses. It seems to be engaged in multitasking,

but it is not. The mind is just moving very fast from object to object. See how it moves and behaves and how thoughts arise. This is how we can learn to be focussed on what we are doing in the present.

It is good practice to see how the mind works. While walking to your workplace or the washroom ask yourself as you walk, “Where is my mind?” If it is not with the five senses, particularly being aware of the movements of your limbs, it must be lost in thought. Then bring your mind back to the five senses—be aware of what you hear, see, smell as well as tactile sensations that can be felt while walking. If you want to be in the present moment, come back to the five senses.

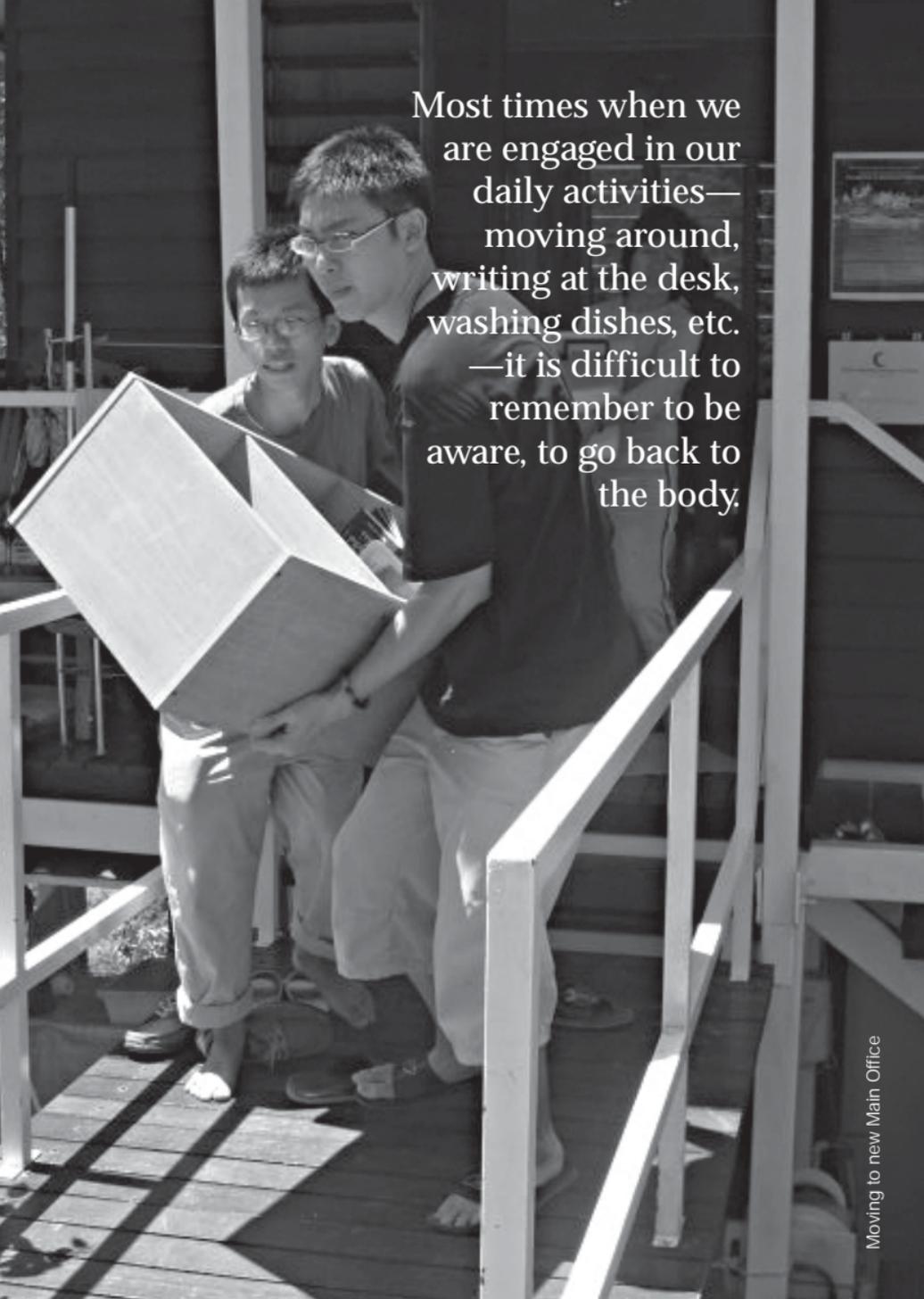
Being a busybody, the mind will be pulled to whichever sense object that is dominant. Each sense is constantly trying to overpower

the others to get the attention of the mind. If you just let it go, the mind will be taken over by the senses and it will respond with attachment, greed, lust, dislike, disappointment, etc. The moment you are aware of this, bring the mind back to the body.

However, there is a note of caution here. When we are aware of unwholesome thoughts we tend to either indulge in them or feel guilty about them. It is important to bear in mind that the practice of mindfulness involves disengaging oneself from those thoughts and observing them objectively. Any reactions to those thoughts are also mental states that should be noted. In order to prevent further reactions to all those thoughts, you must immediately bring the mind back to the body.

As you continually try to watch your thoughts and emotions, one of the first

insights that will dawn upon you is how fleeting and unruly the mind is. It really makes you wonder, “Who am I?” If you can clearly see how thoughts and emotions arise due to various specific conditions you will begin to have a greater understanding of what the Buddha meant by ‘not-self’ (*anattā*). You experience them as a flux of transient phenomena which are discrete yet causally related. Now the seeming solidity of your self-image (or ego) begins to melt. You can watch them as an external observer, without identifying with them. Then even the ‘observer’ can be seen as discrete moments of awareness that arise and disappear due to specific conditioning. This can be very liberating, as we normally identify our thoughts, emotions and awareness with our ‘self’.



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### ***Be Present***

In your daily life it is hardly possible to do ***vipassanà*** as practised during an intensive meditation retreat. You must learn to apply what you have learnt in an intensive meditation retreat to life in the outside world. A retreat is a simulated environment, where you are spoon-fed. Less than 1% of your lifetime is spent in retreats—the rest of the time you are in the ‘real’ world. In real life, do not expect spectacular insights like what you can experience in a retreat. Do not think that the practice of satipatthana is confined only to retreats and that when you are in the outside world, you cannot be mindful.

On the contrary, I’d like to stress that the four satipatthanas are very, very important at any time that you remember to practise them.

They help you to be in the present moment, to be fully aware of your daily activities, no matter how mundane they may be. It is especially useful to watch your mind states as they respond to stimuli at the sense doors. Then you can clearly see how your thoughts and emotions are conditioned into existence, thus loosening your 'sub-conscious' attachment to the illusory ego. And the less attached you are to the ego, the greater will be your clarity of mind in responding to whatever is required of you at that moment.

In 2004 we had a camp in SBS for some university students and a former biology lecturer said that more than 80% of the energy we use up is mental energy. Thinking causes tremendous mental energy to be burnt up. Manual workers, after a hard day's work under the scorching sun may not feel as burnt

out as a white collar worker who has spent his day working his brain power at his desk in an air-conditioned room. But a good practitioner of satipatthana, by significantly reducing discursive or verbal thinking, can actually conserve mental energy and therefore feel more energised.

So wherever you are, whatever you're doing, whenever you can: be present, be clear, be energised!



Venerable Aggacitta Bhikkhu is a Malaysian Theravada Buddhist monk who received *upasama-padà* (higher ordination) at Mahasi Meditation Centre, Rangoon, Burma, in 1979. He has trained under various teachers, notably Sayadaw U Pandita (Panditarama), Sayadaw U Tissara (Yan-kin Forest Monastery), and Sayadaw U Acinna (Pa Auk Forest Monastery).

Besides practicing meditation, he studied advanced Pali and translation in Thai and Burmese under Sayadaw U Dhammananda at Wat Tamaoh, Lampang, Thailand, from 1983 to 1984. He continued to study the Pali Tipitaka and researched on its interpretation and practice in Myanmar until his return to Malaysia at the end of 1994.

In 2000, he founded Sasanarakkha Buddhist Sanctuary (SBS), a Theravada monk training center nestled among secluded valleys and brooks near Taiping, Perak, Malaysia.

Languages that he is knowledgeable in are English, Bahasa Malaysia, Hokkien, Myanmar, Thai and Pali. Among his major literary contributions are:

- Coping with a Handful of Leaves (authored, 2004)
- Honouring the Departed (authored, 2004)
- Discourse on Atanatiya Protection (translated, 2003)
- Role of Sangha in the New Millenium: The Monastic Perspective (authored, 2002)
- Kathina Then and Now (authored, 2001)
- Dying to Live: The Role of Kamma in Dying and Rebirth (authored, 1999)
- In This Very Life (translated, 1993)
- Dhamma Therapy (translated, 1984)
- The Importance of Keeping the Five Precepts (authored, 1982)

VEN AGGACITTA explains how the practice of satipatthana in daily activities can lead one to understand the workings of one's mind and from there get insights into the root causes of one's mental and emotional problems.

On Saturday evenings in SBS, Ven Aggacitta gives practical guidance to the public on how to be present during the formal practice of mindfulness meditation as well as in daily life. If you are in Taiping on Saturday evenings, please feel free to join the session. Be at Hor Eeah Shrine at the foothill by 7.30pm for free 4WD transport up to SBS, and expect to be transported back there by 10.30pm. Please call the office (05-8084429) before 5.00pm on the same day of the particular session you wish to join, to confirm that the session is definitely on.