

HOW SHOULD WE UNDERSTAND THE DHAMMA

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

M.R. Kukrit Pramoj

I

 **B**uddhadāsa: The assembly of those interested in the *dhamma* presided by the minister! I am invited here to deliver a lecture on *dhamma* in a dialogical style. That is, questions will be raised from as many angles as possible in order to promote understanding, which is different from debate as commonly understood. Therefore, please pay close attention. The appointed topic is 'How do you understand the *dhamma*?' However, it is unclear to whom 'you' refers. If it is the audiences, Ajarn Kukrit and I have nothing to say, because it concerns each of the audiences himself. If it refers to us, Ajarn Kukrit and I will express our views. I will relate my views and Ajarn Kukrit will raise questions to make interesting points clearer. However, I would like to modify the topic to be 'How should we understand the *dhamma*?'

Firstly, I would like to tell that wherever I am to deliver a sermon, I am accused of attempting to launch religious propaganda in the manner of over-advertising a product. Therefore, I would like to make known to you all that the *dhamma* is in itself so wonderful that neither propaganda nor advertisement is needed. Promotion becomes necessary because of people's spiritual falling. An example is the activities of boy scouts or the Red Cross which are always accompanied with elaborated form of 'propaganda'. This shows that our mental state is not suitable for learning the *dhamma*. Meanwhile, the elements that divert people from the *dhamma*—even obscenity or *apāyamukha* (ways of squandering wealth)—are given intense 'propaganda.' Thus, it is the right time that we counter this with 'religious propaganda.' I am willing to face the accusation in the course of saving the worsening world. The 'worldly propaganda' shows the situation of selfishness. This world is full of lies told on the basis of self-interest. In a word, it is the atmosphere of infliction through words and intentions, which is mysterious and invisible. Infliction is not a human duty. The *dhamma* is the pure duty we ought to do. Infliction is certainly not the duty because it is against the duty, the *dhamma*. In other words, it

conforms to the opposite *dhamma*, that of villains and rogues. Infliction is not the desirable *dhamma*. Therefore, we describe those without the *dhamma* as having less of human virtue. I would like to sum up that we have lower mental quality to understand the *dhamma*. Even though there is material progress and more research works, the virtue that supports the conformity to the duty becomes lower so that it is more and more unsuitable to understand the *dhamma*. The problem is thus how to promote the understanding of the *dhamma* among the new generation. Will they have a better understanding? Is the education suitable for this task? This is the point I propose you to remind our children.

In this world, ten thousand tons of paper are used in publication. Therefore, books are influential. However, of all the publications, how many per cent is about the *dhamma*? Most of them promote sensuality, which diverts people from the *dhamma*. The distracting elements are so many that they now form the world atmosphere, and take hold of the human mind. It is then hard to understand the *dhamma*. Moreover, I would like to point out that the so-called study of the *dhamma*, or the Pāli study, in the temples can be done without any true understanding of the *dhamma*. I would like Ajarn Kukrit to elaborate on this point. The *saṅgha* is in a sad condition. That is, despite the advance of the monastic affair, it aims to do things other than the promotion of the understanding such as the provision of vocational knowledge, which can be gained without any interest or accurate understanding in the *dhamma*. To sum up, the question is whether people's understanding of the *dhamma* is now desirable, or deserves our concern. May Ajarn Kukrit lead the discussion to provide us with a good understanding?

M.R. Kukrit: I agree with your viewpoint. I feel that people these days do not understand the *dhamma*, or take something to be the *dhamma* when it is not. Regarding the advertisements, it is normal for worldly people who still have to earn their living. It is not my concern at all. Venerable mentioned about temples' advertisements. The study of Pāli and *dhamma* in the temples can be done with no connection to the *dhamma*. This point, I strongly agree. I would not like Venerable yourself to discuss about it, because they are still your fellows. Otherwise, it would not be good for you. You said you were accused of launching the 'religious propaganda' or over-advertising the *dhamma*. I believe it was from a few for it is not true. Were it true, people would know it and believe the 'propaganda.' The truth is that most still do not understand the *dhamma*. Therefore, if the 'propaganda' is really made, it is not good enough because it cannot match

others. Most still lack the understanding. The way the advertisements for the *dhamma* are conducted, I think, is not different from those with commercial purpose. That is, the advertisers of the *dhamma* survey the market, and then propose to sell things that match the desires. When those in the temples know that people's desires are full of greed and delusion, they propose greed and delusion in the name of the *dhamma*. For example, they give sermons on supernatural power. From the radio and other media, the topics of paradise and flirtations among angles are related to enjoy the audiences around the country. Even the incredible matters that children can falsify are included in the sermons. I feel that the advertisements of the *dhamma* as done today are not well thought. It may eventually drive people away, and undermine the faith in the *dhamma*. If people find the *dhamma* to be false—, that is, when what they perceive from the radio or the newspapers is uninteresting, incredible, dubious, or wrong—, those who never know about the true *dhamma* will lose interest, and think that the *dhamma* is useless, and nonsensical, and that it is better off leading the worldly life earning their living. If a temple advertises amulets or important monk images by describing that anyone who owns them will become wealthy, this is likely to make people believe. But it is the belief not based on rationality. There are many who see that, if one wants to be rich or have successful business, there are many other ways to these ends like honesty and hard working. On the other hand, some think that dishonest acts, not the worship of amulets or monk images, are the effective means of money making. However, the temples these days give much emphasis on this kind of advertisements, which results in undesirable drawbacks. I think that the temples heavily rely on the worldly methods. They speak what people want to listen. Therefore, if people are greedy, they preach in the way that the greed is promoted; if people are deluded, they promote the delusion rather than give them light. Sometimes, they even provide mediums. All of these have to do with cravings and false views, but succeed in creating the attraction. I do not understand the purpose of these activities. My inquiry tells that money is the goal. They claim that these give the temples a financial support. The arising question is what the temples are for. If they are the place where the right *dhamma* is to be propagated, the reliance on the means that are against the *dhamma* is a contradiction. Instead of the place of spiritual liberation, the temples are the sites of delusion, not enlightenment. I may be considered aggressive, but my observation shows me thus. The advertisements of the Buddha images, amulets, and monk images are

widespread. The competitive atmosphere is not different from that found in the commercial market. The campaigns for the *vipassanā* practice are also easily found. People go to *vipassanā* schools, and gossiped about the superiority of this over that school. The gossip topics even include the *vipassanā* masters' private matters. Because I belong to no school, I heard the gossip about every school. People dropped in and told me the gossip. I would not like to go into details. If the main activity that people do when they go sitting meditation is gossip, I never see that *vipassanā* can provide the way of promoting the understanding in the *dhamma*. I would like to leave this to Venerable. Otherwise, I would do all the talking.

Buddhadāsa: Next I would like to focus on the obstacles to the *dhamma* understanding. When people say they are interested in or want to study the *dhamma*, they refer to theoretical understanding, which they pursue to the point of uselessness. The theoretical study is enjoyable because there are many points for discussion. And those who are successful in the study, not in the serious contemplation, easily gain the prestige. People are thus drawn to the theoretical matter with no involvement with the way of practice. An example is the study of *abhidhamma*, which mainly concern theoretical explanations, rather than practical matter. To appreciate the point, compare the study of formula to create a human being to the study of practice for the existing human beings to be free from suffering, and think which is more interesting. The former is usually found to be challenging while the latter seems to be common. Yet, consider which should be done; which tends to our benefits. As a matter of fact, we focus on the conformity to the *vinaya*, the memorization of the *sutta*, and the discussion of the *abhidhamma* while the essence of the *dhamma* is overlooked. People forget the need to transform themselves to be one with the *dhamma*. These are the obstacles to the right understanding. As a result, what we are doing is plainly the senseless imitation of what our ancestors did. By analogy, we are not different from crab infants that zigzag like their mother. We lack the true interest in the right understanding of the *dhamma*. Like Ajarn Kukrit said, religion is commercialized, which obstructs the learning of *dhamma*. However, the traditional way of religious practice opens the way for that—zigzagging crab infants and commercialization. To sum up, we pay attention only to the theoretical study of *dhamma*, and go deeper to the point of unnecessary. Ironically, the *vinaya*, the *sutta* and, the *abhidhamma* turn out to delay the learning. How do you think of these facts? I again beg you to discuss.

M.R. Kukrit: I agree with Venerable. Whenever you say like that, I always find it agreeable. I think that the cause of all these problems stems from the ignorance of the objective of *dhamma* learning. People in general do not pay attention to this. They opt for something simpler like the idea that all religions teach people to be moral. Therefore, they think that any religions will do, or even that all can be integrated as one. This is the trend. And they held the meetings (about the idea) as if there were nothing significant (about the objective). Religions are taken to be the means to teach people to do good. There is no point considering how different they are. They can attend the assembly of any religions. They do not understand the *dhamma*. They do not know what the learning of *dhamma* is for, and take the means as the end. Or they misunderstand that the *sutta* is the *dhamma*, and devote themselves memorizing its content. When they vow to observe the precepts, they assume a competitive attitude. They want to prove who can do it better. Otherwise, they go to the other extreme. That is, they think that, if they can not strictly observe them, the precepts should not be observed at all. Moreover, they claim that it is better studying the *abhidhamma* because it is more profound, can exempt one from observing the precepts, and enables a vigorous *vipassanā* practice. These can be found. They go to the opposite extremes. Some study the *abhidhamma* to learn technical terms, and to count the sets of mental states, about which they enjoy a chat. I think that the study of *abhidhamma*, the study of *sutta*, and the observance of precepts for their own sake are not for the *dhamma*'s sake, not for the liberation from sufferings—the true objective. These all stem from the ignorance of the objective. Not only the studies are affected, but also the daily practice. If the objective is not rightly understood, we tie the *dhamma* to a certain place. We do not absorb the *dhamma*. No practice begins. They consider the *dhamma* to depend on the conditions of place and time. For example, if one goes to a temple, the *dhamma* should be the topic of conversation, or one should listen to the sermons and observe the precepts therein. They believe that, when one leaves the temple, the precepts are no longer necessary to observe. The instruction of *dhamma* is completely given in daily life. If we observe life from the *dhamma* viewpoint, we see that the *dhamma* is the vehicle of liberation. No matter what we see in life or work, more sense of liberation can be felt if we see them with the *dhamma*, or consider them with the *dhamma*; if we let the *dhamma* to be within us, or look for the *dhamma* from ourselves. That is, we can make ourselves free little by little from sufferings. We do not know the true objective of the *dhamma*. We

misunderstand that we go to the temples to make merits, and study the religion to be a good person. What good is it if we do good in order to gain? For example, some civil servants do good because they want promotion. They think that it is the fruit of merits. If they are disappointed, they are unhappy so deeply that nothing can soothe. Sometimes, they even quit doing good. These stem firstly from the ignorance of the meaning of the *dhamma*, secondly from the ignorance of its objective, and thirdly from the lacking understanding of 'good' according to the *dhamma*. If we still want to teach people the *dhamma*, I think we should do it correctly. That is, we should begin with what is 'good' according to Buddhism. What is the ultimate good? Otherwise, we do not have a norm. These days, we keep teaching people to do good without telling them what is good, how it is good, why it is good. When it is not taught, people do not understand and misunderstand that good are things gained in return like going to heaven, becoming prestigious, owning a big car, having a lot of money, winning royal decorations. Even though events in life show these to not be good, but vehicle to sufferings, none believes it. All stem from the ignorance about the *dhamma* that Venerable talked about. These are my opinions.

Buddhadāsa: I still have the doubt whether we have any hope to draw them back so that they have the right understanding—a good beginning.

M.R. Kukrit: Oops! You ask me? Actually, it is your concern because you are the monk. I am the layperson. It is enough that I understand it. I do not have the duty to guide anyone. Let each do his own. I do not have the duty of propagation. I was in the monkhood for a short while. It is my duty to make myself enlightened as far as I see possible. If I succeed, I am satisfied. If people are going to hell, it is not my business at all. I would like to ask Venerable what you will do given that it is your duty to guide people to the enlightenment.

Buddhadāsa: Let me repeat my question. As a man with knowledge of the world, people, and society so wide that their being lost is detected, do you think it is still possible that we instruct them?

M.R. Kukrit: It is always possible, or at least hopeful, because today's education is inculcating rationality in people. The faith in things beyond rational proof is perhaps getting to subside. I think that there should be an organization, or people in the religious circle, setting the irrefutable principles that explain for what we have faith in Buddhism. In what do we really have faith? We can not be sure what kind of faith people are having. The so-called Buddhists do not only worship the Buddha, the *Dhamma*,

and the *Sangha*, but also Kuan-ou (the virtuous Chinese warrior) and the like. Or even M. R. Kukrit. They can worship everything. Worship for what? The Thai sect does not tell. Monks are all apathetic. Each gives a different answer when asked. Our religion recognizes such remarkable freedom of speech. No conclusive answer can be reached. It all depends on each temple, each school, or each monk. Each teaches his own way. It is not conclusive. Formerly, I thought I could depend on monks when I had any doubts. Yet, the more I talked to them, the more clearly the disparity was seen. I then did not know what to do. I did not want to choose among them. Nowadays, I still treat monks with respect, but I do not ask them any question. I pay them respect at sight and make offering. I never ask a question because that will bring me headache. They all give different answers. Therefore, we should begin with what the faith in Buddhism aims at, and what exactly goodness is. What is the ultimate good? What is it when Buddhism calls 'know'? When is it that we know? No one ever tells about them. People devote themselves practicing *vipassanā* simply to find out that they still do not know whether it is rightly practiced. They are totally ignorant. These should be the starting point. I think they are possible to teach. But they must be taught by the authority. And they should be uniformly held. I do not mind misinterpretations of the precepts, or misunderstandings. It is a matter of individuals' freedom. However, Buddhism should provide the principles that no one in the religious circle can deny, the principle on which laypeople can depend. That is, when they ask a question, it can be expected that they will be given a uniform answer no matter from which temples. These days, temples give different answers. I do not know what to do. If I went to *Suan Mok* and asked Venerable for what we made merit, you might tell me that it was for elimination of defilements, for liberation. If I went to Chiangmai and ask the other monk, he might tell it was for going to heaven many miles up high. One spoon of rice offered to the monk enabled me to become an angel after death surrounded by other eighty four thousand servant angles. It is a form of profiteering, I think. Eventually, I myself can also propose my own religious principles, which amounts to my having a new religion. It is my own Buddhism originated from my own understanding, and held by me alone without any propagation.

Buddhadāsa: Therefore, it means that, first of all, we should have a uniform understanding of the *dhamma*. Otherwise, we will run into the trouble Ajarn Kukrit described. That is, each school focuses certain point as they see fit, which creates the difficulty for the society. Today's topic is

‘How should we, or you, understand the *dhamma*?’. It is a good topic indeed. I would like to draw your attention to this word, ‘*dhamma*.’ We should understand its meanings thoroughly. However, first of all, I would like to say that the *dhamma* that can be explained or discussed is not the true and ultimate *dhamma*. The true and ultimate *dhamma* is beyond discussion because it confines to each individual’s experience. It is like sweet or salty tastes, which can not be explained to people. They themselves have to taste it. Therefore, the *dhamma* that is explained is not ultimate. I would like to ask Ajarn Kukrit to discuss about it. Is it so?

M.R. Kukrit: I am completely certain. The true *dhamma* can not be taught. Those with direct experience of it can not give the explanation, because it transcends human language. It is incomparable. It is too profound for verbal expression. The enlightened can not show it. However, before the enlightenment is reached, there need be some guidance like that given by the Buddha. If we still have loving kindness toward others to lead them to the attainment, we need to provide them with guidelines of practice, or instruct them the *dhamma*. Despite its not being the true *dhamma*, it can lead people to the true *dhamma*. Do not teach the *dhamma* that drive them away. Do not teach the *dhamma* that poses the obstacle. As I said earlier, if the *dhamma* is to be taught, it should be considered whether the instructions are the obstacle, the promoter of defilements, cravings, and delusions. This kind of instructions is the obstacle. We should avoid it.

II

Buddhadāsa: It can be said that Ajarn Kukrit and I agree that the *dhamma* to discuss is that about which verbal expression is possible to a certain extent. Let’s conclusively define the *dhamma* that deserves attention so that interest is aroused and practice is begun. Firstly, the *dhamma* is everything with nothing excluded no matter whether they are abstract or concrete; deeds or their fruits; conditioned or unconditioned; permanent or impermanent. All are the *dhamma*. Secondly, all of these follow certain laws. The laws of all these are the *dhamma*. The first definition of *dhamma* may refer to ‘nature’. Everything, even the *nibbāna*, is natural. The second definition, the laws of all that we call ‘*dhammatā*’, is also the nature. Thirdly, the *dhamma* is the reciprocal duty among all, the duty to act in accordance with the laws in order to attain peace. I insist that my thorough study leads me to only three definitions of the *dhamma*. We can conclude that the *dhamma* must be known, practiced,

or had to prevent all from sufferings. This is to say in accordance with the aim of the religion as far as it concerns human beings, and in accordance with the Buddha's purpose, the Master's. Ultimately, we will find that the practice ends with the *dhamma* in the sense of the void of attachment even to the *dhamma*. The true and ultimate *dhamma* equals the complete detachment, even to the *dhamma*—even the notion that this *dhamma* is me or mine. The notion of 'me' or 'mine' is extinguished no matter whether it is in the laws, the duty toward all, or the fruit of the practice. Our mind is void of the feeling that what is me and what is mine exist, the feeling sustained by the attachment. This is the ultimate attainment of the *dhamma*. We should reach this point of understanding if we want to save ourselves. Otherwise, we can not save ourselves and are below the point where we can rightly claim we know the Buddha's religion. We have to understand it to the point where there is no attachment to 'me' or 'mine', even the *dhamma* itself, or the *nibbāna*. Whether the explanation is difficult or easy; short or long; deep or shallow, please consider with close attention. If you ask me what the *dhamma* is, this is the answer. I believe that you all should understand thus. And this will save your time. You can have the timely understanding for your life. You will be on the right path. Otherwise, you may have to go around for a long while. Sometimes, death arrives before any understanding is gained. How do you think of the proposed principles, Ajarn Kukrit?

M.R. Kukrit: I have nothing to add. I understand so. What I was trying to say was meant so. Like what you just said, the *dhamma* is nature—everything that we experience both inside and outside the temples. Even the *nibbāna* is part of nature. And everything goes by the laws. That is, they are impermanent and have to perish one day. And everything is interrelated. Therefore, everything has reciprocal duties. If we are to live among men, we need to know the duties toward them so that we can live together with peace. But this is only the minimum. If we want something better, we have to do the duty toward ourselves, which lead to the true peace, the void of attachment even in the *dhamma*. However, the problem is how to make people believe this.

Buddhadāsa: Let me conclude that Ajarn Kukrit and I agree on the definitions of the *dhamma* as I have already shown. 'Empty mind' is therefore the important issue to discuss today. I understand that Ajarn Kukrit admits that 'empty mind' is not nonsensical. It is the highest goal of Buddhism, the very end of Buddhism that everyone should practice to attain. Next, let me make an important remark. Because we are interested

in the cautious or immediate understanding of Buddhism, I would like to suggest you to adhere to the easy principle that, the more you study about Buddhism, the more you are ignorant about it. This is applicable especially to the occidental scholars who take 'religion' to mean doctrines or theories, and rites. We have to study the world or sufferings if we want to understand Buddhism. The Buddha used them interchangeably. The world is sufferings; sufferings are the world; or life is the world. All the *Tipitaka* can not help us understand Buddhism. The occidental scholars think that we should thoroughly study both Mahāyāna's and Theravāda's *Tipitakas*, and all the knowledge about India like arts, culture, and other religions. This way does not lead to the understanding, but misleads us around until we quit. Unless we learn from the world or life or sufferings, that is, from ourselves in the limit of this approximately one-metre long body, we do not understand Buddhism or the *dhamma*. Today, we misunderstand that the study of all the *Tipitaka*, and information about India will help us rightly understand the *dhamma* or Buddhism. I insist that this is misleading. We should attend to those things that are going on inside ourselves. Look inside ourselves and see that the attachment is the cause of the sufferings we are experiencing. The second that we have no attachment is when we no longer suffer. The more you do it this way, the more directly and the earlier you gain the understanding of the *dhamma* or Buddhism. Regarding this remark, what do you think, Ajarn Kukrit?

M.R. Kukrit: If you teach it this way, you should teach it to me on our own. That is, the detached should teach the detached. If you teach people with strong attachment, they misunderstand. That is because, while by 'empty mind' you mean the mind empty of attachment, 'empty' can be differently understood. Empty of what? It is easier to understand if 'detached mind' is used instead. 'Empty' can lead people to think of not-thinking. The phrase, 'work with empty mind,' raises a doubt in laypeople whether it is possible to do any work when the mind is empty. The background should be provided. If you talk to me about it, I can understand. There is no problem at all because I know it when you talk about it. However, as for those with some attachment, it is very difficult. Besides, the saying, 'the more you study about Buddhism, the more you are ignorant about it,' can frighten those with no background. They might accuse Buddhadāsa of talking nonsense. That would be unwholesome for them. Thais are not familiar with it. Instead, it should be taught to Japanese people because it sounds closer to Zen Buddhism. Another difficulty can still be found. I beg your forgiveness. Please allow me to frankly inform

you of my disagreement about your saying that, the more we learn from the world or sufferings, the more we understand Buddhism. I am suspicious. I many times saw that people who tried to learn from the world and the sufferings without Buddhism on their mind were usually let astray. I should like to propose instead that, if anyone is going to learn from the world and the sufferings with the aim to rightly understand the world and the sufferings, and Buddhism, he should have some Buddhist principle on his mind. That is, he must know that he learns from them in order to get rid of all the attachment. If a man is attached to, for example, the belief in the existence of God, no matter how hard he tries to learn from the world and sufferings, he will never be liberated. No *dhamma* can be so understood. On the other hand, if he studies the world and sufferings through the Buddhist lens, he will know more about the world. When he knows more about the world and sufferings, he knows more about Buddhism. However, I agree with your first point that, if they study Buddhism in the way people are doing today, they will never know Buddhism. The gained knowledge simply enables them to be promoted to higher ecclesiastical ranks or wins them degree, but they can not be said to truly know Buddhism. Regarding the second point about learning from the world and sufferings, it is reminded that the Buddhist attitude must be assumed. If the other religions' attitude is assumed, you certainly run into trouble. That is, if you study the world with the hope that it is the place of happiness, you will not be able to identify sufferings when you see them. Then, more unhappiness, more rage, more dissatisfaction developed. And it becomes impossible to be free from sufferings. You suffer more. If we know the Buddhist principle, and accordingly learn from the world, it is better, I think. I would like to skip the issue that, the more one studies the *Tipitaka*, the more one is ignorant about Buddhism, because I once was severely reprimanded when I discussed about it.

Buddhadāsa: I am happy to discover the truths Ajarn Kukrit pointed out. Audience! Please consider the facts about the Thai Buddhists' study and knowledge of Buddhism. When I said that, the more you study about Buddhism, the more you are ignorant about it, I meant to point out that this way of study made people obsessed with, and addicted to, the theoretical knowledge, and the taste of theoretical thinking, philosophical speculation and logical inference. By Buddhism here, we do not mean the theoretical knowledge, but the true *dhamma* that destroys the attachment. The more we study the *Tipitaka*, the more we enjoy it. That is why people in the past called the *Tipitaka* 'angel' (*vāṇī*). She is so beautiful and charming that the

students are under her spell. Enslaving them, she takes a firm hold of their minds. I had the experience. Regarding the knowledge about India that those occidental scholars insist that we have before the proper understanding of Buddhism can be obtained, I think that they get lost away from the core of Buddhism. They think that Buddhism is one of Indian religions. I insist on the contrary that it is the hopeless method, especially for those totally ignorant about Buddhism. If one wants to gain an immediate understanding of Buddhism, one needs to practice the method taught by the Buddha, *vipassanā*. But it must be the right *vipassanā*, not the false one which, as you know well, brings the consequence mushrooming to cloud Buddhism. One should practice as the Buddha taught by sticking his mind to the moment of seeing an image, hearing a sound, smelling a smell, tasting a taste, for example, and keep it on the track of wisdom, not cravings and delusions. After a few hours, a few days, or a few months, the *dhamma* will be attained, the *dhamma* that the Buddha showed us, not the one that, pardon me, was added later by the commentators as appeared in the *Tipitaka* or other scriptures.

Therefore, we should not misunderstand that, because they thoroughly study the Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism, and other various subjects on India, the occidental scholars very well understand Buddhism and suit to teach us. It is for sure that, as long as you are still at lost in this large flower garden, you will never discover the heart of the *dhamma* or Buddhism. Thus is how the saying should be understood that, the more you study about Buddhism, the more you are ignorant about it. Moreover, when the sufferings or the world are mentioned, they have the specific meanings. The Buddha used them interchangeably. Although sufferings arise, the world in itself is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. On the condition that we are attached to the world in such a way that it is us or ours, the world becomes the suffering. The world can mean anything ranging from honor, fame, wealth, or family, for example. Even such simple things are the world. When we are attached to them, we suffer. When we detach from them, the sufferings cease. However, the lesson can not be learnt other time than the moment of suffering. That moment is the golden, the diamond moment. It is the most wonderful moment to study Buddhism. Ponder how the suffering is, why it arises, what is its opposite, and how to realize its opposite. This is the principle (the Four Noble Truths) in Buddhism. When suffering, you must look inside yourself and observe the mind filled with cravings and delusion. This deserves a close observation and a serious attempt to understand. It is called 'the more you

observe the sufferings, the more you know them, and the *dhamma* of Buddhism.' Thus is the meaning of sufferings. The meaning is specifically defined so that suffering is correlated with attachment. Detachment gets rid of the sufferings. Birth, old age, sickness, and death are alike. If we are not attached to them, they can not make us suffer. Therefore, when we hear the chanting that birth is a suffering, old age is a suffering, etc., do not take it to mean that they themselves are the sufferings. The Buddha's instruction comes at the end of the chanting that the attached five aggregates are the very sufferings. Either sufferings or the world, without being attached to, do not give rise to sufferings. Attachment to them always give rise to sufferings. Focus on this principle. The time when the attachment can arise is every time of the eyes' contacting the images, the ears' contacting the sounds and so on. This is the method to study Buddhism. This method brings an immediate understanding of the *dhamma*. Thus should we study from the sufferings. In this sense and with this method. It enables the soonest understanding. I beg you to suggest people to study Buddhism in this way, and to tell your friends or foreigners who are ignorant about Buddhism that, if they want to learn about Buddhism directly and immediately, they should do it in this way. The *Tipitaka* or Indian studies are not the way. To sum up, the more you study about Buddhism, the more you are ignorant about it; the more you study the sufferings in this way, the more you understand Buddhism, and are likely to conquer the sufferings. Therefore, we are closer to the topic of how we should understand the *dhamma*. 'Religion' is used with confused meaning. In the time of the Buddha, the term '*dhamma*' was used. But now we use the term 'religion.' They are meant to share the same reference. However, the meaning of 'religion' now deviates much from this, which causes difficulties.

Now we come to the so-called heart of the *dhamma* or, if you prefer, the heart of Buddhism. It is a newly coined phrase in the Thai society, because, in the time of the Buddha, Buddhism was nothing but its heart. However, later it is wrapped with decorations so that its heart is hard to identify. We are required to re-consider what the heart is. Generally in the Buddhist circle, when asked what the heart of Buddhism is, most of them reply that it is the Principal Teaching (*Ovādapūṭimokkha*), which consists of not to do any evil, to do good, and to purify the mind. Some prefer the Assaji's words popularly recorded on bricks, which can be found both in India and Thailand, especially in Nakorn Pathom province. The words are derived from the story that, short period after the Buddha's first propaga-

tion, the monk, Assaji, was asked what the Buddha's *dhamma* was like. He replied that everything came to be for a cause, and the Buddha pointed out what the cause was, and showed the complete ceasing to be by the eradication of the cause. Some prefer the *Four Noble Truths*—sufferings, the cause of sufferings, the ceasing of suffering, and the path to the ceasing.

As for me, I prefer one of the Buddha's words. Once a man asked whether the Buddha could summarize into one statement all the *dhamma* he taught. The Buddha affirmatively replied that the statement was that nothing at all deserved any attachment. This is all of Buddhism. If one practices this, one practices all; if one succeeds in this, one succeeds in all. Let consider which of the proposals should be so nominated. It is right that we should not do any evil, do good, and purify the mind, but it is not clear how to purify the mind. Assaji's words are that everything came to be for a cause, and the Buddha pointed out what the cause was, and how it can be eradicated. By this, sufferings are meant. Sufferings come to be for the causes, and the Buddha showed their complete ceasing to be. Yet, it is not clear how it was showed. Therefore, from a viewpoint, the words imply that we should be rational. That is, we need to know that, for an effect to cease to be, its cause must be ended. Regarding to the principle of Four Noble Truths, it covers the four topics whose content is very general. I thus would rather not adopt it as the heart of Buddhism. The principle needs a lot of details to explain. Therefore, I prefer the statement that nothing at all deserves any attachment. I see that it is the heart of Buddhism because it is sufficient that we see that nothing at all deserves any attachment. Not to attach is not to mistakenly consider that it is me or mine. When we no longer think that anything is us or ours, we will have all the qualifications. Like the Buddha said, *sīla* (morality), *saṃādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom) arose out of detachment. People become immoral, unable to concentrate, and unwise or most stupid because of the attachment. Therefore, there is only one thing to do, only one thing to learn, and only one thing to practice. Success comes from this one thing. That is, we have to be careful not to let the mind form the attachment that it is me or mine when we hear, smell, taste in daily life. The detached mind is full of wisdom and mindfulness. With this empty mind, we are wise and mindful; with troubling mind, we are craving and attached. They are always opposite. 'Empty mind' means the mind without attachment and selfishness, the mind with brightness and peace from wisdom and mindfulness. This is the empty mind according to Buddhism.

Therefore, the short statement of the heart of Buddhism is that we should free ourselves from the attachment that this and that are us or ours. This is the statement, in which the Buddha summarized all of the teachings. It exhausts all the *Tipiṭaka*. All I am trying to do all along is to point out the heart of the *dhamma* and express it in a short statement yielding to immediate understanding of people in general who do not want a deep study. They can attain to the *nibbāna* because of the detachment. Is such a short statement that provides the principle for practice sufficient and suitable for the present society? I beg Ajarn Kukrit to comment.

III

 **R. Kukrit:** Having listened to your discussion, I understand. But it is not as easy as Venerable said. That is, it is hard to explain to children or laypeople. Simply to explain the Assaji's words, it takes several days. I once made the attempt. It was not easy at all. If they were the detached, it would be a lot easier for them. However, it is very difficult for the detached to explain it to the attached. I can not see the way. In fact, I understand that, if people can only realize that only principle, they are free of all the attachment. However, the truth is that every teaching of the Buddha, if we have enough wisdom to contemplate on them, can free us from the attachment. But, if we want a convenience, we can make do with that one principle in the contemplation on the world and sufferings. Nevertheless, if we do not know the other teachings of the Buddha, we can not go very far. I came across with many who had been born in the places of different faiths and never known about the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha*. When they began to study Buddhism, the traces from the former faiths still exerted influence on them. For example, they still thought that the Buddha was God; the *Sangha* was the mediator between God and men, not the group of those determined to free themselves from the world. It is very difficult. I admit that, if I had no background, I would not see it. These days, I see the world, understand it and know the sufferings because of the original faith in the Buddha as the Perfectly Enlightened One, the attempt to study about what the Buddha was enlightened, and the avoidance of the suspicion in his being truly enlightened. We should start with the belief or faith. It is like the instruction that we begin with faith, and then try to understand Buddhism. Do not lead your thinking out of the religion. This can be said to be a form of attachment. That is, we are attached to the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha*, which, I think, is not unwholesome. The *Tipiṭaka* can be so

understood too. There are many approaches to it. It depends on the approaches we use to study the *Tipitaka*. If we use literary approach, we can get addicted because its prose is very beautiful, and its meanings are deep. If we approach it from a logical standpoint, there are many points for analysis. If we approach it with etymology, the old language therein is very interesting. The *Tipitaka* is indispensable. It can not be totally ignored. The Buddha's teachings we now know come from the *Tipitaka*. It is right that it may contain some errors, but what we consider to be the truths can be found in it too. Who is eligible to judge which pages contain errors and which pages truths? If we are to accept it, we have to accept it all. If we are to throw it away, we will lose all the valuable things. That is what I think. What Venerable told us is totally correct. I had no dispute. But, first of all, we have to begin with faith. We have to take refuge in the *Ratanattaya*, believe in the Buddha as the Perfectly Enlightened One, and believe that the Four Noble Truths, what the Buddha was enlightened about, are completely true and credible. Otherwise, I think it is impossible to understand the *dhamma*. All we attain to will be infinite sufferings, attachment, and cravings. There is only one who can be enlightened without Buddhism on his mind, only one who can know the world and sufferings by himself without any experience with Buddhism, and he is the Buddha himself. No one else can do that. All the rest must follow his path! Thus do I believe. May I beg Venerable to tell whether it is right?

Buddhadāsa: It is now clear to me what the confusion is. When I said that the statement was the heart of Buddhism, I meant to choose the most practical or comprehensive principle that could provide us with the guidance. It can guide our faith too. It is true that we need faith as the basis. However, I told that the aim was to help learners and practitioners save time. If the faith is thoroughly directed to the heart of Buddhism, it will be the right and complete faith, because the statement encompasses all the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha*; and *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*; or anything else. That is, the essence of the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha* is the state, or being an individual with the state, void of attachment. Because the Buddha was enlightened, and had all his attachment destroyed, what made him the Buddha is his state void of attachment while his body was not different from normal people. The heart of the *Dhamma* is the state void of attachment. The *Dhamma* as practice aims to destroy the attachment. The *Dhamma* as fruit of the practice, the *nibbāna*, consists of the complete destruction of all the attachment. Therefore, we should focus on the destruction of all the attachment. Only

then do we properly absorb into our heart the essence of all the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha*. This is the way we have the true Buddha, the true *Dhamma*, and the true *Sangha* in our faith, or in our practice. We no longer have to worship the objects, voices, and things symbolizing the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha*. We are not delayed as before. We do not waste our time. If we have to use the symbols, we should transcend them as soon as possible to discover the essence of the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha*, the state void of attachment. Then, we have in ourselves the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha*, which is totally credible, self-evident and in need of no authority. If one sees that the attachment is the cause of sufferings and its destruction is the end of sufferings, one is completed with *sīla* (morality), *saṃādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom). People become immoral because of the attachment to the things they love and hate. They act under the influence of love and hatred. They lack concentration and suffer from the five hindrances (*nivaraṇa*) because of the attachment. If we see that there is nothing to which we should be attached, our mind becomes calm. The contemplation on there being nothing that deserves our attachment comprises the ultimate wisdom that the Buddha wished we had. Therefore, through the detachment, we have all the *sīla*, *saṃādhi*, and *paññā* in the spirit of Buddhism.

Considering about the *Tipiṭaka*, we can see clearly that every words therein points to the destruction of the attachment. Even in the Four Noble Truths, we can clearly see that the first two truths, sufferings and their causes, have to do with attachment. We can see further that, when there is no attachment, that is, no craving, then there arises the extinction of sufferings. And all the acts on the basis of detachment are the path leading to the extinction. Even though the path consists of eight elements, all contribute to the destruction of attachment, the misunderstanding that this or that is me or mine. Take the first of the eight elements, the right view, as the main principle. We must begin with the view that there is nothing to which we should be attached. This is the perfectly right view, which enables all the other elements to be performed on the right track. The Buddha told that the right view should come first, the view that corresponds to the reality in which there is nothing that can be attached to as 'me' or 'mine.' Then, we have the other two of the four noble truths, the truths that are concentrated in the only statement that nothing at all deserves any attachment. Therefore, the faith in the Buddha, the *Dhamma*,

and the *Saṅgha*; and the practice of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*; or all the other kinds of practice are simply an elaboration on the basis of this statement. The doctrinal study, or the study of the *Tipiṭaka*, is within its bound. Only elaborated and beautiful explanations are added. Therefore, for those wishing to gain an immediate understanding of the *dhamma*, this should be focused as the heart of the *dhamma*. I am agreeable with Ajarn Kukrit that it is very difficult and profound for laypeople. Yet, if we have the determination, and try our best to find out the proper methods, there should be a way that is appropriate and suitable for them to rightly practice themselves so that they unknowingly have all the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha, and simultaneously accomplish according to the Four Noble Truths. Therefore, I beg your special attention to the statement that nothing at all deserves any attachment. If you find it still too long, a short phrase, 'empty mind' (*sunñatā*), will do. This is the very heart of the *dhamma* or Buddhism, because being void of all the attachment is the ultimate goal of Buddhism.

I have a system of practice especially provided to ease laypeople's understanding and practice. I have been confronted with the difficulty in explaining the phrase, 'empty mind,' for years. And I always learn more about the explaining method. I am thus encouraged to strive for the clearer explanation so as to save the fellow human beings' time and lead them to the concise, right, and complete understanding of Buddhism. I have often been accused of speaking with unintelligible terms. Therefore, I beg your close attention. This system consists of working with empty mind, eating with empty mind, living with empty mind, which puts death out of the question in the first place.

Working with empty mind amounts to our working according to our duties with the mind free of 'selfishness,' free of the idea that there exists the self or things belonging to that self, free of the attachment that this or that is me or mine. This is to work with empty mind. Empty of what? Empty of the feeling that our self or its belongings exist. Empty of 'selfishness'. That is because our self is not true. It is an illusion. Nevertheless, we can not underestimate the illusion. The illusion is the feeling that the self exists as something dense, something real, while the self actually is only the illusion, the attachment. It results from misunderstanding or ignorance. It is a form of false view due to the clinging. We have to work with mind empty of the view that the self exists. Then, we work with empty mind. At the same time, this empty mind is full with mindfulness and wisdom. Make a clear distinction

between mindfulness and wisdom. They are allies. Mindfulness makes one cautious in his acting; wisdom makes him act wisely. They are the important elements for practicing. The Buddha said that only mindfulness could save us. Mindfulness and wisdom can not co-exist with attachment. They can be found together at the same moment. Although our mind changes from one moment to another, there is no moment when they co-exist. If there is attachment, there is then no mindfulness and wisdom, and vice versa. When the mind is free from attachment, it is full of mindfulness and wisdom. If we do whatever duties with empty mind free from 'selfishness', it is the state of 'empty mind.' However, most people do not understand so. They think that empty mind is the blank mind which amounts to our being like a log, or a sleepwalker. It is not so. The word 'empty' can mean many things. There is 'empty' in the sense held by the wrong views, and in the sense held by the right view. According to Buddhism, it must mean the emptiness of the feeling that there is 'me' or 'mine,' the feeling that is caused by the misunderstanding due to attachment. If there is no 'selfishness', what else can it be called except the emptiness of self. Such emptiness implies wisdom. It is the *dhamma* in the Zen Buddhism's concise descriptions that the Buddha is emptiness, and the *Dhamma* is emptiness. By 'emptiness' it is meant as what I said. Whenever we are empty of our self, we become a Buddha, the *dhamma* as it should. This is the effective Buddhist principle. It is not different either in Zen or Theravāda. This emptiness refers to the void of all kinds of 'selfish' feeling. When we work, we will work effectively. Let me raise an example of a rice grower's working with empty mind. Exposed to the strong sunlight and soaked with sweat, he with empty mind that clings to nothing as its belonging tills the soil while singing. This is to grow rice with empty mind, which makes the work enjoyable in itself. If he also sees that it amounts to the practice of the *dhamma*, his enjoyment grows and the mind becomes emptier. Thus, he ploughs with peace of mind. No thought ever arises that it is easier earning a living by stealing. Another example is a ferryman who oars against the wind and the current in the condition of strong sunlight, or heavy rain. His work brings him no pain if his mind is empty of the thoughts concerning his self or its belongings. For example, he simply thinks that it is his work. He does not feel inferior by it. He does not think that he is poor, or he is reaping the result of his bad *kamma*. His work does not make him suffer—it does not put his mind into hell. He enjoys it singing and oaring. This is also the case for other kinds of laborers. If they do so, they work with empty mind. To shoot or throw

sharply, a man needs to get himself prepared with empty mind. If his mind is filled with 'selfishness' like the expectation for reward or the fear of laughter, he will never be able to make it. He needs to concentrate and remove these 'selfish' thoughts from his mind. The mind is left with mindfulness and wisdom. He then will be able to shoot or throw sharply. It is spontaneous as if by magic. That is because it is done on the basis of the mind empty of the feeling that it is his self, or its belongings. If he is 'selfish', his mind swings, his body shakes, and so does his hand. When a student goes to a test, he should prepare his mind so that it becomes empty, forgets all about the self, and is left with mindfulness and wisdom. He then can do the test extraordinarily well. It is to go to test with empty mind. It is true that kids always expect good result when they have a test. They are 'selfish.' However, while they are sitting in the examination, they should be mindful and wise in the manner of empty mind. They then can do it better. They can have better study, memory, and decision. Even when a man goes to court, he should maintain the empty mind. Otherwise, his mind is vague, which puts him in a disadvantageous position. If his mind is empty, he can see the way, and become more cautious, which brings him advantages.

Even music can be played with empty, not troubling, mind. The pure music, the one without lyrics, like whistling can be played with empty mind. Even when we sing, if we do not cling to our self or its belongings, we sing with empty mind. Moreover, the pure music can also help clear the mind of all the obsession, anxiety, and restlessness until it becomes empty. Therefore, whistling or singing can not be always deemed to be driven by sensual cravings. Sometimes, they are means to empty mind. They can give a starting point. If we sing with sensual cravings, the mind is certainly troubling. Especially when the singing is sexually driven, the trouble grows. But do not consider all singings or music to trouble the mind. Impure arts certainly promote sensual cravings. Therefore, the arts are neither to be all blamed nor all praised. We have to distinguish between those that tend to empty mind and those that promotes sensuality. Therefore, we should not judge everyone we see singing to be sensually driven. The state of mind should be taken into account. An angry man who whistles to ease the rage is doing it right according to this principle.

'To work for emptiness' must confuse the audiences. It is to work neither for the worker himself, his family, the nation, nor the religion. It is to work for emptiness. However, this saying skips over to the final goal. It is possible to offer a simpler interpretation like 'to work with empty mind.'

I have said that the *dhamma* is emptiness. Emptiness is ultimate. It is now generally recognized that there is nothing at all that deserves attachment, because everything is selfless. Everything is empty. The whole world, ourselves, our family, our nation are simply mental formations. They are natural, either corporeal or mental. Actually, they are not-self. In this sense, no matter whom you work for, you work for emptiness. Therefore, to work for emptiness is to turn the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha into what human beings ultimately deserve. If we work for this or that, it is base. Especially, when money is the goal, it is worse. If we work for its own sake, this is better, but the duty itself should not be clung on. To work for its own sake is considered to be for emptiness. The term 'emptiness' has the special meaning. When we work with empty mind, it amounts to working for emptiness. Its benefit falls on no one else but the worker himself. Therefore, we do not have to be afraid of shortage of food, for example. Although the benefit is great, we do not attach to it. It thus is to work for emptiness. If it is asked on what one will be fed, the answer is that he is fed on 'the food of emptiness.' It is to be fed on the food of the *dhamma*, the food of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. But we call what we are fed on 'the food of emptiness,' which has the special meaning. Therefore, we have food while we are working with empty mind, for emptiness. It is the pure food with no mixture of disadvantage. It truly is wholesome.

Next is 'living with emptiness,' which is to live with no idea of self and its belongings on every breath. Regarding the point that 'death is put out of the question in the first place,' it means that when we work with and for emptiness, and are fed on the food of emptiness, there is no self, which makes death impossible. There is thus no problem about death. The only death that exists is the eternal emptiness, which is better than the death that is accompanied by rottenness, dirty, ordorous, disgusting, and pitiful. I can not judge for myself if what I have been sayings is intelligible, and acceptable to people in general. However, I still persist in the attempt to find out the way to help them understand.

The monastic life enables easier understanding and practice. I taught my fellow monks that we should be fed on the Buddha's food, not our or laypeople's food; that the true Buddha was the Dhamma and the true Dhamma is the emptiness. The fellow monks can make sense of it. But I am not sure if it is also the case for laypeople. Therefore, I would like to beg Ajarn Kukrit to discuss on it.

IV

 R. Kukrit: If we live in a monk's cell in the back of the temple, we can certainly do as you guided. There is no problem. From the beginning until now, I see that Venerable has shown us the truth as deep as an ocean. You explain that the aim of liberation is the complete detachment, the destruction of all the attachment. This is the truth no one can deny. But, when it comes to 'to work with empty mind; to work for emptiness; to be fed on the food of emptiness; or to live with emptiness,' I feel that you are trying to pour the whole ocean into a small bowl. It is impossible. It overflows. The truth that you have shown us is too deep. It concerns the *arhats'* mental state. Ordinary people who have to earn their living can not contain that truth in such a small bowl—no matter how they do, they can not work with empty mind. That is my belief. Your concluding remark implies that you too see that it is easier for monks to put it to practice. Therefore, I believe the ancestors' saying that, if a layperson become an *arhat*, he will die within seven days. A monk who becomes an *arhat*, I truly believe, can live on without any problem because the monastic life allows the living in accordance with the *dhamma*. If a layperson makes an attempt, I think that he will get into trouble. It does not mean that the *dhamma* is wrong. On the contrary, I think that it is absolutely true. The problem is how much laypeople afford to practice it. What Venerable says mainly concerns the *arhats'*, and the Buddha's way of living. I think that it is impossible if laypeople are required to do the same. The first reason is that it is beyond my imagination how working with empty mind can be done. If we work without considering it as a work, without thinking that it is we who work, without seeing that others, society, nation are the recipients of the benefits, why should we work in the first place? Instead, we should put an end to working. Why should we work? If their mind is empty of selfishness, people no longer works. If I freed myself from all the clinging, I would go to your temple to ask for an ordination. I would not waste time working. But I can not free myself. That is why I am still layman. I can not let go all the attachment. Working is a form of attachment. Anyone who can not let go has to go on working. It is a part of suffering. I can not see a way to work with empty mind. Perhaps, I am of small mind, or do not really see the truth so that I completely have no idea. Regarding mindfulness and wisdom, I think that mindfulness is the state in which we are aware of everything's selflessness—being impermanent, subject to change, and not-self. Nothing is ours. If we are mindful in this sense, we no longer work. We lack any

enthusiasm to go vending, or anything. We would rather rest at home. With respect, I frankly inform you of my inability to understand. I want to make sense of it, but my pondering leads me this way. If Venerable told that the aim of your teaching was freedom from all sufferings—the mind is to be emptied in order to get ordained, I would believe you. But you teach it this way. You teach us to go back to work and keep our mind empty all the while. I can not do so. This clearly points out the disparity between laypeople's and monks' viewpoints. I would like Venerable to teach me what I should do then.

Buddhadāsa: I still have a doubt. Let me ask whether, after all the rest flows over its edge, the water left in the small bowl is the same as the overflow.

M.R. Kukrit: The water is just the same. Yet the amount is different. Anyone with careful consideration about your teaching realizes that your 'empty mind' is not truly empty. It is a form of attachment. The mind is slightly free from some defilements. The teaching does not survive a logical scrutiny. However, I admit it has a practical value. But the teaching then need not be on this. It may be on something simpler like the fruits of merit making to be reaped in heaven. That also leads to good deeds. It does not make sense why things should be made so complicated. I do not mean to accuse you of leading us out of the track. I simply would like to point out that people can be taught to do good with something simpler.

Buddhadāsa: Now I can catch your point. To work with empty mind, with freedom from the sense of our self or its belongings, means that, while we work, our mind should be free from 'selfishness'. Of course, there exists, even before the working is started, the cognizance that we have the duty toward our nation and religion. This can be considered a wholesome attachment. The possession of wholesome attachment does not attract a reproach. Everyone is allowed to store it. Yet they are further asked to make a superior attempt to strive until and beyond the top of wholesomeness. We then transcend to 'emptiness.' The immediate practical method is to avoid the troubling mind while working. We are mindful of what, how, how long, and how much it should be done. We can still think but do not think with the mind obsessed with the strong sense of 'selfishness,' or self. It is because it will be too much or too little deviating from the reality. Do it with pure wisdom, and with emptiness of the feeling that our self exists. We can think of how we should work with a certain status, under a certain condition, with a certain daily duty, with a certain job, or what benefits the society will have. These are alright. The mind still

can be said to be empty. The point is that, when we do it, all that should be left are mindfulness and wisdom. In Buddhism, 'mindfulness' refers to the principle of *Satipatthāna* (The Foundations of Mindfulness). Be mindful all the time. Do not be absent. Be mindful of there being neither self nor its belongings, and work with that mindfulness. In that state, the mind is absolutely bright, and quick. I propose you to ponder on and practice it. The attempt will show you whether it is possible. That is because sometimes we obtain the most precious from the smallest amount, as small as the water left in the bowl after the overflow. This is my intention. I would like you to carry on the consideration. You may not be able to understand it today, but you may one day ahead. In the teaching of this deep *dhamma*, we have to aspire that the learners of today will in the next five or ten years understand it. They will attain it for sure. However, if we keep waiting, they have to wait another ten years before the practice can be started. And another ten years before they can understand it. Be brave to contemplate on this unintelligible *dhamma* for the sake of benefit to be gained in the next five or ten years. 'Empty mind' or 'to work with empty mind' are part of the deep *dhamma*. I have been trying to communicate that you all should understand the *dhamma* in this manner to save your time, to attain an immediate result. We are discussing under the topic, 'How should we understand the *dhamma*?,' and I propose that this is the way we should understand it. Ajarn Kukrit's comments are reasonable. I will take into account to improve it so that it is beneficial even as much as the small amount of water from the whole ocean. Persist in the attempt to study to understand 'emptiness' or 'empty mind,' the most important principle in Buddhism. The Buddha held that *nibbāna* is the absolute emptiness. Absolute emptiness is *nibbāna*. The end of the feeling that it is self is *nibbāna*, the ultimate goal every human beings deserve. We should aspire to its coming one day in the future. I beg you to understand the *dhamma* in this manner. Do not think that the goal is to become an *arhat*, or to gain a status through the study or practice of the *dhamma*. It is because that tends to the increment of attachment. If we understand that the goal is the gradual reduction of 'selfishness,' the clinging to there being self or its belongings, that is right. Let the cultivation go that way. 'Emptiness' has the special meaning. Let me repeat again and again that the statement that '*Nibbāna* is the absolute emptiness' has the special meaning. Consider another important Buddha's words that 'Always see all the world that it is empty,' which means that the world is actually empty, but we do not see so. Therefore, we should try hard until we see so. This

will bring us to the most desirable state. The conventional words have their special meanings. When they are in a different context, it becomes difficult to understand. I thus try to use the contemporary Thai or easy language. Therefore, we should not cling to the words themselves. Ajarn Kukrit, do you think that there should be any exception, or what? What should be discussed? I beg you again so that the dialogue is completed.

M.R. Kukrit: I understand as you explained. Only those individuals can be called 'empty' who are as 'empty' as *arhats*, do not lead the same kind of life as I or the audiences here do, lead their lives as Venerable, use only three pieces of cloth, depart from society to live on their own, and observe the 227 precepts without any trouble, with voluntariness, and with spontaneity. But in case of the laypeople like me, I can not see how it is possible to work with 'empty mind' because the work itself prevents us from having the empty mind. The laypeople like me are in the condition that does not allow the emptiness. If we attain to the emptiness, we are no longer the laypeople. If you suggested that I should become a monk to attain to the emptiness, I would find it acceptable. I myself do not get attached to anything but, by 'working with empty mind,' I would like to ask you what you exactly mean. If you mean that it enables people to be successful with their worldly jobs, I do not believe it. If it is said that, for a man to become a very good soldier, he must be fighting with empty mind, shooting with empty mind, I do not believe it no matter what explanations are given. But, if Venerable said that we should be in the world to which our work belongs and work with empty mind so that no suffering arises either in the time of success or failure, I would believe. I do not believe your saying that, with empty mind, one is successful with his work, because the worldly work obstructs us from having the empty mind, or freeing ourselves from sufferings. Mundane happiness is unhappiness in terms of the *dhamma*. The success in work have worldly meaning. It is true if 'empty mind' leads to the attainment of the *dhamma*, but not both. If one wants to succeed in the *dhamma*, he should forsake the worldly achievements. Otherwise, there is no point in becoming a monk.

Buddhadāsa: Do you mean that laypeople will never try to realize the empty mind?

M.R. Kukrit: They can. That is, empty of defilements. I believe so.

Buddhadāsa: Should laypeople try?

M.R. Kukrit: I believe they should not have attachment. That is, laypeople should study the Buddha's *dhamma* so that they know what it is, but at the same time they should also know that, while they do so, they

need to have some attachment because we are simply laypeople. If we can let everything go, we should not stay as laypeople.

Buddhadāsa: I want laypeople to work with less sufferings and full achievement. Is this possible with empty or troubling mind?

M.R. Kukrit: I think that worldly achievements must be bought with sufferings. We can not have the cake and eat it too. No one spreads butter on both sides of a piece of sliced bread. No one makes merit in that attitude. Allow me to teach monk that it is not possible. If complete freedom from all the sufferings is the aim, we should forsake the worldly achievements. We have to quit. If so, I believe. If we still are laypeople, we have to experience both happiness and unhappiness. There is no emptiness.

Buddhadāsa: How can we reduce the sufferings?

M.R. Kukrit: As I have said, everything is not self or its belongings, but we have to focus on our work when we work—it is not empty. It is unavoidable that we think we do it for ourselves. When there is any failure, then your teaching has a role. By thinking that it is not our self, we can at least comfort ourselves.

Buddhadāsa: Our dispute is over this point. I insist that even though you are a layperson, do a layperson's work, you have to more and more overcome the sufferings arising from your working. The main Buddhist method should be appropriately applied—empty your mind of all the attachment. Forget your status as a layperson or a monk, and focus on the immediate problem by observing your mind. If suffering is found, identify the cause and solve it there according to the principle that everything arises by a cause. Gradually, you become a monk living in the laypeople's home. Finally, you can no longer stand it and get yourself truly ordained.

M.R. Kukrit: If you say so, I believe it. At first, I felt that you suggested that we became a monk living in the laypeople's home without having to later get ordained. If you suggest the gradual cultivation of 'emptiness,' I find it acceptable.

Buddhadāsa: I say that we should use every means to get closer to emptiness. Even while we are working, eating, breathing, we should devise skilful means to get closer to emptiness despite a layperson. Our views are slightly different.

M.R. Kukrit: They are vastly different. The closer to emptiness we get, the less worldly success we have.

Buddhadāsa: That is not 'emptiness' in the sense the Buddha taught laypeople.

M.R. Kukrit: If one is a millionaire and a gentleman, it is not possible. To be a millionaire, one does have to suffer and can not be 'empty' at all.

Buddhadāsa: Can there be an *arhat* millionaire?

M.R. Kukrit: If he becomes the millionaire by heritage, it is possible. But it is not the case if he has to achieve it with his own hands, because an *arhat* never thinks of becoming a millionaire.

Buddhadāsa: Is it not possible that individuals with different levels of enlightenment are at the same time millionaires?

M.R. Kukrit: I myself do not believe so. Not to mention those enlightened individuals, even people with slight experience of emptiness like I myself do see that wealth is impermanent. So is money, or anything else. They are not self. I am not yet a millionaire. I simply have no difficulty earning my living. Actually, I have my principle that I will never earn money for future use. I earn money only when I want to buy something. When it is bought, I stop. That is why I have an 'empty' (free) time to discuss with Venerable. If I pay all the attention gaining money to be a millionaire, I would not be here today—I am not 'empty' (free).

Buddhadāsa: Is there any millionaire who feels that he has enough wealth so that he becomes interested in the *dhamma*.

M.R. Kukrit: Possible if it is said only that he gets interested. But anyone who touches money will find that it is no longer 'empty.' I do not think there is such a millionaire.

Buddhadāsa: I would like to leave the dispute over this issue to the audiences to independently consider for yourselves. I however insist that people of all ages and sexes apply the principle of always maintaining the sense of 'emptiness' as best as possible in all cases, especially when sufferings arises while you are working. The disputes over the views or appropriate time are besides the point. Even Ajarn Kukrit admits that the attachment is to be destroyed in the end because it is the principle of Buddhism. I repeat and insist that we should understand the *dhamma* in this way. That is, we should gradually get rid of the 'selfishness' until it is weak or completely destroyed. If you do it correctly, you will feel peaceful and find your work enjoyable, not tormenting, which is a spiritual progress at the same time. I insist and beg that you understand the *dhamma* in this way. I ask Ajarn Kukrit to express your opinion again.

M.R. Kukrit: I would like to make a short conclusion that I am totally agreeable with all that Venerable has said about the *dhamma*. You are absolutely right. That cravings and attachment are the cause of all sufferings is undeniable. It is verifiable. And the more we can reduce cravings and attachment, the more sufferings we can eliminate from ourselves. This is the pure *dhamma*, the unshakable. It should be promoted, understood, and propagated. My discussion simply aims at informing Venerable of the audiences' viewpoint that the practice of the *dhamma* is difficult because it requires the forsaking of 'the world' by which I mean all the troubles. 'The *dhamma*' is all the purity that is opposite to 'the world.' We are in the world. We can depend on the pure *dhamma*. The knowledge that cravings and attachment are the cause of all sufferings should always be on our mind. Meanwhile, if we keep practicing what the Buddha taught, the world will finally lose its significance for us. It is not a matter of desire. If we persist in the practice of the true *dhamma* the Buddha taught, we attain to *nibbāna* when the time is right. It is not because we desire or do not desire it. However, while we are still laypeople, it is difficult. I would like to make this clear. The choice has to be made between the worldly success and *nibbāna*. Status, fortune, conveniences are still understood to be the fruits of the practice of the *dhamma*. I insist that they are not. The effect of the practice, of making the mind empty, is liberation from sufferings. All the worldly gains bring us sufferings. They are not the true happiness. This is what we should know. If we think that empty mind helps us become a millionaire, I am not sure. But if, by 'millionaire', it means an individual rich with *dhamma*—the troubles he has never shake his mind, I find it acceptable. I believe it. That's it. I would like to tell you that you should be very careful when you teach people the *dhamma* because they easily misinterpret. For example, when you say that empty mind brings success, they misinterpret that empty mind brings financial success, because people these days think of money every breath they take. This is another obstacle to the propagation of the *dhamma* that I want to tell. Therefore, I generally do not have any disagreement, and very much appreciate with understanding the *dhamma* Venerable so deeply explained. The remarks I made have in the first place the objective of having you make elaboration, or showing the facts about laypeople, their cravings and defilements, their morality as it is today for Venerable and the audiences to learn, and to see if there is any solution in terms of the *dhamma* which tends to further benefits. This is my objective. I do not disagree with or mean to oppose monk, which will bring me

unwholesomeness. I never argue against Venerable. And, finally, I would like to honestly report that I never cling to *arhathood*. I never think of becoming an *arhat*, and never think that *arhathood* is the most precious and desirable. I never have such an attachment. These are my concluding remarks.

Buddhadāsa: I will ponder on the peculiar points you raised. If there is a chance, we will discuss again.

[Translated from the Thai version by *Pagorn Singsuriya*]