

**Ajahn Brahm Live in Bangkok:
Public Talk - "Ups and Downs in Life"
October 10, 2006
Transcript**

Tonight's talk will be about dealing with the ups and downs in life. We learn that much of our life, we can't control or do much to change it. Our health, the way people speak to us...

The only thing that is in our control are our reactions to the ups and downs in life. We can't control the world, but we can control our mind. We can train our mind. To perceive something useful in whatever we do.

Taking Buddhism to a Western country like Australia, one has to make the timeless teachings relevant so they can be helpful to all walks of life.

The role of being a monk in a Western country is very different from in a Buddhist country like Thailand. There, you have to earn respect, you can't take it for granted. You also get in situations you won't be put in Thailand. There is a different lifestyle in being a monk in the West. So you have to cope with some difficulties.

For example, I was once invited to go on an Australian phone-in radio show. Turns out the radio program was a sex hotline. Imagine a Buddhist celibate monk having to answer questions on sex and relationships! Even though I was put in a difficult situation in life, my meditation training helped me out. The few questions I answered in the beginning so impressed the audience, I ended up fielding most of the questions being asked.

The insight you gain from meditation is so powerful, you can answer questions in all subjects. Even if you are put in an uncomfortable situation, **you can use your experience and insights into the ways of the mind to cope with whatever happens.**

No matter what you experience, you can always do something about it. The monastery in which I live we had to build ourselves. I recall an occasion where we monks were mixing concrete. When you do that, you get cement dust all over you. My robes and under-robes got all dirty with concrete and water. When I was on my way back to my hut, I met a visitor, a Sri-Lankan lady who was well-dressed and seemed to be upper-class. "I'm looking for the Abbot," she said. "Do you know where he is?" Well, I was the Abbot.

So I said, "If you go up to the hall, he'll be there in fifteen minutes. I quickly went to shower and changed my robes, and became what a good monk should look like.

When I met her in the hall, she was very polite and inspired. As she was leaving, she said, "I saw a monk in your temple who was very poorly dressed. Please tell him to dress properly."

No matter what you do, you can always make fun of it and enjoy it.

A lot of my life as monk is spent in the ditches shoveling sand or mixing concrete. But here's an experience on the other end of spectrum. Last March, the Commonwealth Games were held in Melbourne. For the occasion, Queen Elizabeth visited. I was invited – not to participate in the Games – but to a couple of ceremonies with Queen Elizabeth. I was asked to represent the Buddhist community of Australia, which makes up 2 percent of the Australian population, at a state dinner held at Parliament House. The invitation card included a “dress code” – black tie, military uniform, or long dress. I figured my robes qualified for “long dress.”

So I went, and saw Queen Elizabeth, as well as Prince Andrew. I noticed he's getting bald, so I said to him, “If you lose any more hair, you can become a monk! (*Laughs*)” Prince Andrew laughed. Because no matter who they are, people always appreciate humor.

Dinner brought another problem. Buddhist monk can't eat after noon, so that means no dinner. But this was a three-course dinner. The first course was soup. Now, monks are allowed to eat a few things in the afternoon, like cheese. So for my first course, I was served Camembert. It was very delicious. The second course was fish. My second course? Cheddar. The third course was dessert, pie with nuts and other Australian goodies. For me: Dark chocolate. (note: monks are allowed to eat chocolate that does not contain milk after noon).

So you can adapt in all situations, which is how you deal with the ups and downs in life. As a monk you have all sorts of different experiences. But you can deal with it so you can make use of whatever happens in your life.

When you're walking home from the office, sometimes unfortunately you trip in dog poo. **Whenever you tread in dog poo, never scrape it off your shoes. Always take it home with you.** Because once you get home, you may have an apple tree in your garden, and you can dig that dog poo into that tree. One year later, the apples from your tree will be sweeter. When you taste the sweet apples -- that's dog poo transformed. So, even when you face difficult experiences in life, which you must from time to time, like treading in dog poo, you can always dig it in. If you know how to use the dog poo of life, it always grows sweeter apples in your life.

If you have a down in life, a difficult period, never think it is something you have to get rid of straight away. Never allow the mind to get into depression. Surely you can't change the situation you're in. But you can change your attitude towards it. You can't control the world, but you can control your attitude - how you regard the dog poo and what you do with it.

Sometimes you have good times in life. **The biggest problem in human beings is that they are very concerned with the downs, the difficulties. But they neglect paying attention to the up side of life.** What I mean by this is well-illustrated in a story from Ajahn Chah.

I was very privileged to spend nine years with Ajahn Chah. He became very famous because his teachings were down-to-earth – you can understand it if you're a westerner, if you're a farmer in the provinces, if you're a politician or from the elite class in Bangkok. Whatever he taught, there was always something you could laugh

at, understand, and take home with you. What's the point of coming to a talk if it doesn't change your life? It must be useful. A Chah's stories would always be useful.

One story was about two chicken farmers. The first chicken farmer went to the shed early in the morning. That chicken farmer only collected chicken dung and left the eggs to rot. That was a dumb chicken farmer. Chicken farmer number two would leave the chicken dung to rot and collect the eggs, use some to make a nice omelet for his family and sell the rest for cash. That was a very smart chicken farmer.

The meaning of that simile is: when you look into your past, from today, or last week, or the rest of your life. What do you collect? Do you collect all the negative experiences and remember those and worry about those? Then you only collect the chicken dung of your life. Or when you look at the past, do you collect the eggs? Remember the beautiful past, the successful past, the happy times? Most of us are the first type. **When we look back, we look at what went wrong. We remember only what went wrong.**

We collect the chicken dung of the past because we think we can learn from them. **We think we can learn from the mistakes of the past. Maybe that's what we're taught. But what happens when people focus on mistakes of the past, very often they get depressed and dispirited and just give up.** Because you're focusing on the negativity and mistakes, it's not inspiring or energizing. It doesn't help you go forward in life with zest and vigor.

You can learn from mistakes in a way that makes you grow. Another way to grow is to learn from successes. **You can learn more from successes than you can ever learn from mistakes. For example, when you look back at your company, rather than look at the mistakes, look at what works. We take success for granted and focus on the mistakes and try to fix them up.**

Sometimes when you focus on the faults, people spiral down into depression. The hole gets so deep you can't get out of it. Some even commit suicide.

We have an epidemic in the Western world. People are getting depressed. There's an industry now, with medical companies producing medicines, chemicals to cure depression. And those of you old enough to have lived on this planet for a while can recognize that this is a modern epidemic. Sure, before, some people also got depressed, but not on the same scale as we have in modern life. It's not so much the stress or how much we have to work. But it's the negativity we've developed in the modern world. We're taught to be managers, of our life, education, relationships. What a manager does is look at mistakes and fix them.

Another way to live our life, that older people may remember, is to **forgive the mistakes. Ok, sometimes you fix them, but you also forgive them.** We also have gratitude, looking not just at what went wrong, but what went right. The successes, the happiness, the beauty.

But even when you fall into a hole, there's always other ways of looking at it. This attitude change is the essence of Buddhism. You can develop it through listening to teachings, through meditation, through insight.

As monk, a taxi driver, an office worker – you always have people criticizing you. Sometimes, scolding you. Very often when you get scolded, it's very unfair. What should you do, when life pours a whole lot of dirt on top of you? There's lovely story of the donkey in the well.

Once upon a time, a donkey was just moseying around, minding his own business, not bothering anyone. He wasn't careful and fell down a well. He hadn't broken his legs or injured himself, but by the time he stood up, he realized he was at the bottom of a disused well. Donkeys can't climb. He was in a bit of trouble. How could he get out of the hole in the ground in which he'd fallen? He decided to cry for help.

He made donkey sounds to try to get someone's attention. "Ueah, ueah, ueah!" But there was no one there in the forest. Two hours later, someone finally heard him, an old farmer who went into the forest to gather twigs. When he searched for the source of the sound, he saw this stupid old donkey. The farmer had never liked that donkey. It was always chewing his vegetable crops and being a nuisance. He'd also been thinking of filling in the well because it was dangerous. So he thought, "Now, I can fill in the well and get rid of that donkey at the same time." He was a very mean famer. He started to shovel earth into the well. All the dirt fell on the donkey.

The donkey didn't know why the farmer was shoveling dirt into the well until he realized – the farmer was trying to bury him alive! So he cried "Ueah, ueah, ueah!" even louder. He was screaming for his life. He screamed and screamed until suddenly he went quiet. The farmer thought, "I must have buried that donkey already. I can take my time now, and don't have to worry about those annoying donkey sounds.

But what he didn't know was what was going on at the bottom of the well. That donkey must have read my book, because he got an insight into what to do. When the farmer shoveled dirt on him, instead of complaining he just shrugged it off his shoulders, and stamped it into the ground. Then, he noticed he was rising millimeters higher. Shovelful after shovelful he was getting higher and higher. The farmer never noticed a pair of donkey ears appear, then a whole head, and when the donkey was high enough, he just jumped out of the well and bit the farmer on the backside. The moral of that story is - you should always watch your ass! As for biting the farmer – that's the law of kamma, of course.

When other people in the office or life shovel dirt all over you, when they abuse you in a way which is undeserved, you don't need to go "Ueah, ueah, ueah!" and try to scold them back. There's no need to get upset and angry. What you need to do is to shrug it off and stamp it in. You're a little bit higher than you were before. Say, "Thank you so much for criticizing me." Then shrug it off, and stamp it in.

Here's another story about dealing with abuse from others. 32 years ago, when I went to Ubon (in Northeastern Thailand) it was near the end of the Vietnam war. There

was an Army base in Ubon. Ajahn Chah told a story about an American soldier who was working at the air force base. He wanted to go into town and took a rickshaw cycle, driven by a poor man. On the way, halfway between the base and the town center, they passed a shop selling liquor. Many of the driver's friends were drinking whiskey and getting drunk. Because they were drinking, they had that drunken bravado and pointed to the American soldier, and said to the driver in Lao (the local dialect), "Where are you taking that filthy dog to?" The driver of the rickshaw looked back and saw the GI was just smiling. Obviously, he didn't understand Lao. So the driver said, "I'm taking this dirty mongrel to the river for a wash." When they got to town, the soldier got off the rickshaw and started to walk away without paying. The driver said, "Sir, pay my fare in dollars." Then the soldier replied, in fluent Lao, "Dogs don't have money."

It doesn't matter what people say to you or do to you. Why do people throw scorn on you anyway? They do it to try to make you upset. They're trying to control your emotions. Why do you allow people to control you so much? Why do people allow their happiness to get destroyed in this way? If you're wise, you say your peace and ease is under you power. You don't have to let people control you or your happiness. They can say what they like, do what they like. You can choose to just let it go and make peace with it.

A Chah said, if someone calls you a dog, you should look at your bottom to see if you have a tail. If you don't find a tail, you can't be a dog. End of problem.

Sometimes there are problems, especially between relationships between the Muslim world and the Western world, because of terrorism and other issues. We try our very best to create harmony between different religions, and do pretty well in Australia, but but there are always problems. Someone once put me on the spot because of lots of articles in the newspaper about an incident where some Americans were accused of flushing the Koran down the toilet. I was giving a talk two nights later in Perth, and someone asked the question, "If someone flushed a Buddhist holy book down the toilet, as a Buddhist monk what would you do?"

What would I do? Call a plumber.

I'm very practical. **I've made a distinction between the container and the contents. You can destroy the container, but you don't need to destroy the contents. Please maintain the contents.** By which I mean: books are containers. It's what the book says – **peace, harmony, forgiveness, moving forward rather than remembering the bad of the past.** The dhamma – the true teachings that make people peaceful and harmonious, that's what is important. It's the contents of the books.

In the same way, when the Taliban destroyed the Bamyán statues, they never destroyed Buddhism. Just its container, the statues. Buddhists didn't allow themselves to get angry or seek revenge. If Buddhists sought revenge, then the Taliban would not only have destroyed the statues but also destroyed Buddhism, the contents. It's the contents that are more important than any container. You can blow up statues and burn monasteries and kill monks, but don't allow anyone to destroy what those monks are all about.

If we can do that, we don't mind when people try to upset us by destroying our symbols. Symbols are secondary, it's what they represent – peace, harmony, love between people, and freedom of the heart. That's what's important.

We have the opportunity to make a different response to the ups and downs in life. We can make this difference. *We can.*

In my experiences as a monk, you can see how people are able to make these changes in their lives. An extreme case came up when I went to Malaysia to teach. There was a girl who had had a big trauma in her life, and I was asked to give her some counseling. Buddhist monks are often sought after for counseling. Because we're free! But also because we give good advice. She had a big problem. She had been to many counselors and nothing had worked. She'd been raped violently. For her, it was affecting her whole life. She was in a mess.

As a monk, what I did was not to use psychic powers or anything like that. I simply sat opposite her. **You make your mind very peaceful, and feel the person in front of you. You develop a sensitivity to understand where they are, how they feel. Through silence, you understand her. It's not something you need a whole lot of meditation training to do.**

I found that the woman had an amazing inner strength. This is the only time I've said to someone in her situation, "What happened to you is wonderful. You are very fortunate." It shocked her. I took a great risk to say that. As a monk, as a man who's never been in her situation. I risked trivializing or misunderstanding what she was going thru. But I needed to say something out of the ordinary to shock her and open her mind to a different way out. When she was silent, I could really talk to her.

I said, "I mean, I think you have it in you, some spiritual qualities, some inner strength to find a way out of this pain and humiliation and guilt." You know, people who have been raped feel they are somehow culpable and feel guilty for getting into that situation. It seems irrational, but they do. I said, "You have the strength to do something. **The reason I said you are fortunate is because I think this is your journey, to learn how to move away and climb out from this big hole.** I can't really help you because I haven't experienced it, so I don't know what it's like. **But I think when you're through this, your great gift will be that you'll be able to hold the hand of another woman who's been through it** and do what I can never do.

"You can say, 'I know how you feel.' More than that, not only can you hold her hand and empathize, you can tell her you know the path out. Your own experience can lead her step by step out of despair, out of pain and fear. You can give her life back. Show her her freedom. **That is why it's very fortunate for you. Not now, but when you're through his. You'll be an amazing woman. You can really help others in way few people are privileged to do."**

What I gave her there was hope. What I gave her there was a vision of life after the pain. What I gave her there was encouragement. It worked. This is actually an extreme case. When a person has been through such a down, such a trauma, it can

scar them, emotionally cripple them for the rest of their life. I said “There is another way. This is your way. When you’ve found it, share it with others.”

That was an understanding of how during the downs in life, you do not need to allow the pain and despair to overwhelm you. There is something useful to gain no matter what has happened to you. **The downs in life are the dog poo of your life. That’s where you learn. That’s the fertilizer. That’s the stuff of growth.** That’s the Growing Pains.

As for the beautiful ups in life - that’s your reward. But the ups also help you to grow happiness. We should *always* remember to.

One of the great downs in life are relationships. Marriage. Partnership. Very often, I see the difficulties my disciples have figuring out how men and women can live together in peace and harmony. How to have a relationship with someone that won’t descend into bitterness and divorce. Some people’s marriages are very dysfunctional. Sure, they live together, but they aren’t happy together. What a strange thing that is. If you have children, you love the children no matter what they do, who they are, or what their character is like. Now, when you choose husband or wife, you spend more time than you do selecting car. You take them out, check them out, have your friends and parents check them out. Sometimes these days you even test-drive them before you commit. Why is it that after you go through all these tests, you can’t love your partner the way you love your child? Why can’t you love them unconditionally?

If men and women can live in harmony, if we learn how to stop conflict, learn to give and take, in our own house, then people in the country, in the region, in the world may be able to.

How can we learn to do that? **So much of conflict starts with a fault-finding mind.** When you look at a partner during your first date, you think he’s the most wonderful person in world. But at the time you divorce, you think he’s the most horrible person. Actually, he’s pretty much the same person. What has changed is your attitude towards him.

Love is blind at first. And if love is blind, then marriage is an institution for the blind. But after a while, you become blind not to the faults, but the good. You need to open your eyes to see the good. Don’t just look at the faults. Actually, they had them from the beginning. Look at their beauty as well.

Too often in life, **when we don’t look at another’s beauty, we get angry. If you have an enemy, say a person in the office or next door or a family member, a great way of overcoming the problem is to look for beauty in the enemy. Something you can respect, something you can find endearing.**

I was once at a funeral ceremony of an old man who had died. In Australia, at funerals there is the tradition of giving a eulogy. Close relations stand up and say something about the person’s life, encapsulate who they were, and recall the good things. “Eulogy” literally means “good words.” This time, the deceased’s wife came up to say something about her husband. She told a story which her husband had told her about an experience that had affected his whole life.

One time when he was in grade school, children in the class were having an argument. There was about to be a fight when the schoolteacher told them to all sit down immediately. He said, "Get out a plain piece of paper and draw a vertical line down the middle. At the top write down the name of another boy in the class whom you hate the most. On the left-hand side, write down why you hate him. All the rotten things he does. Unkind words he says. Write it all down." All the kids in class started busily scribbling about their enemy, the one they hate the most. It took only a minute to fill the whole of the left side.

Then the teacher said, "Now, on the right-hand side, write down something you respect about that person. Some kindness you've seen them do." This time, it took them a while to get the first thing down. But soon they thought up the right-hand side. "Now," said the teacher, "carefully fold the piece of paper in the middle and tear it in half. Put the left-hand side in the waste bin. Keep the right-hand side. Then get up and go give it to the person." So every child received a list of what their enemy liked about them. That changed the whole dynamic of that class.

It changed the life of her husband. Because for his whole life, he kept that piece of paper in his wallet. His wife took out that piece of paper, and showed it to the people at the funeral service. She continued, "Whenever he was upset, he would look at this piece of paper – this is what his enemy thought of him. Imagine what his friends would say. So he's not such a bad person. It took him through some hard times in life. **Because his enemy could see beauty in him, he learned to see beauty in himself.**"

At the end of her speech, three or four people stood up – his former classmates – and took out a similar piece of paper. They had also kept them. It meant so much to know your enemy can look at you and see something beautiful.

So the next time you have an argument with your partner, get out a piece of paper. Write down all the mean, spiteful, lazy things they do. Then write down why you fell in love with them in the first place – all the beautiful things. Then go give it to your partner.

Do you understand what we're doing here? Through this exercise we're forcing people to see something beautiful in the enemy. Because I'm a monk, I've been trained in this for long time. It's really incredible. **When you see someone in a bad mood, don't look at the scolding. If you look at their beauty, it's amazing. They change.**

One disciple in Sydney, Judy, was a businesswoman. She ran a very good import-export business. There was a very lucrative contract with a big firm in London that she really wanted to get. So she flew all the way across the world to London from Sydney. If you're a businessperson, you don't have time to get over jet lag. As soon as she got off the plane, she went to meet the board and CEO of that firm. The board directors met her, and said, "You've wasted your time. The CEO is a very hard man even in best of times. Today he's come in in a terrible mood. He's been shouting at us all morning. There's no way in the world he's going to sign your contract. Go back home and come back next month."

But fortunately she knew a bit of Buddhism . So she decided to do a bit of metta (loving-kindness) meditation. She only had five minutes, but did it quietly in the corner of a room. When she heard the CEO was about to come in, she went out and met him. He was indeed in a foul mood. Murderous! Psychopathic! But here is what this disciple did – I'm so proud of her. She said she hadn't planned it, it just came out of her mouth, but she told the CEO, "You've got such beautiful blue eyes, just like my daughter Holly." The CEO melted. All the anger drained out of him and he said, "Oh, really?" The contract was signed in half an hour. All the directors said, "Teach us how you did this. What's the secret?"

It was amazing what she did. The CEO was so stressed out, but she saw something beautiful in him. Something so simple. Just blue eyes. **Because she was looking for beauty, she saw it. And when she saw beauty in him, he saw it in himself.**

So whatever you look for, the other person shows you that. If you look for faults. They'll show you faults. And more faults. If you look for their beauty and kindness, they will show you that back. And more.

As part of my life as a monk in Australia, I teach in prisons. They're great places to teach dhamma because lots of violent and evil men are in jail. Sometimes you see murderers and rapists. There is one very famous criminal – he's such a nice guy, because I've trained myself to see something beautiful in him. Instead of saying, "Wow! He's raped people! Maybe he could rape me!"

I went to one jail which had installed a security system. Because people like me actually have been raped. Some people in jail have such long sentences that they know they're going to die in there anyway, so there is no field for punishment. One day, the prison doctor gave me a ballpoint pen. Or something that looked like a pen, but was actually a security alarm. He told me that on the ceilings in the jail rooms, there were things that look like smoke detectors, but were actually alarms. "If you get attacked, press the top of the pen and an alarm will go off, and we'll know where you are. Be very careful. Don't let the prisoners know what the pen is."

I then went to teach a meditation class to 30 or 40 people. One of the leaders of the group said, "Ah, you've got one of those pens yourself. Do you think that you can press that button at the top before I got to you and raped you?" I looked at him, and said no. "You're right, I could get to you. But you don't need to worry, because we like you. If someone tried to jump you, I'd jump him first." Because I'd been kind to them, they were good to me. That prisoner was my security system.

So that's the ups and downs in life. Some stories of how we can change our attitude to life. **Life is not what happens to us, but the way we look at it, ourselves, our partner, our messes in life.** Remember that dog poo is fertilizer. Say, "I'm so lucky!" when you step in some. Scrape it off, dig it in, and grow from it. But remember you learn more from your successes. Whatever worked, repeat it. Never underestimate what you can learn from your successes.

Questions and Answers

Q: My friend has cancer. What should she do?

A: Cancer is on the rise in the modern world because of stress. **A busy person is not someone who has too many things to do, but too many things to do at one time. We need to learn efficiency.**

Cancer is a word, not a sentence. It's a learning experience. I've talked to lots of cancer patients. So many people who've had cancer come to me after. They say what a wonderful experience it was. That they wouldn't have missed it for the world.

Cancer is a kick up the backside to teach the meaning of life. It's not to get on in society and get rich. If you have cancer, money doesn't matter. Every person with cancer wants family around. They look for the spiritual, deeper meaning in life. It's a shame you need cancer to teach you that. But for those who have cancer, during their dying process or recovery process, it changes the way they look at life. It's not the cancer that is the problem, it is the way we regard that condition, it is our attitude towards it.

In Penang, one of my disciples is a specialist in cancer about to retire. She told me. "I've been treating cancer patients in Malaysia for most of my life. I don't need to look at pathology reports anymore. They're not good indicators of survival rate. I can tell straight away if a patient is going to pull through simply by their attitude."

It's the attitude you have towards something, the way you relate to it. That's what you can do a lot about. So please make peace with it.

Q: How can one strike a balance between nonattachment and commitment in a relationship?

In relationships, there are two types of people. Some ppl think there are two types of Buddhism – Hinayana (Theravada) and Mahayana. In Hinayana – well, not really but this is the stereotype – you are just concerned with your own self, your own liberation. In Mahayana – you forget about yourself and care about other people. In a marriage, there's usually one Hinayana and one Mahayana. Usually it's the man that is Hinayana. The Hinayana is concerned with himself, the Mahayana is concerned with the other person. Which one is right or wrong?

Neither is right. From now on, **you shouldn't think of yourself, and you shouldn't think of the other person.** If you think only of the other person, you're forgotten and get burnt out. After a while, you don't count. When you give, give, give, you get nothing back. It's a terrible relationship. It won't last. If you take, take, take, it won't last either.

It lasts when you don't think of yourself or the other person, but think of what's between you. Think of us, not you or the other one. Problems in relationships are never what's in him or her, but in the way they relate together. It's what's in between that counts. That's the key to solving relationship problems.

Q: Can you tell us about your experiences with Ajahn Chah ?

A: He was a very down-to-earth monk. He used examples of modern life. He was also very funny and very gross. An example is one of the stories in the book – one of the funniest. I was in the back of a car going from the temple to the railway station with two other monks, one who was a new novice. Ajahn Chah turned around and looked at the new monk and said, “You’re thinking about your girlfriend in the US.” This poor novice’s jaw dropped. The teacher had read his mind accurately. But Ajahn Chah said, “That’s all right, we can help you. Instead of worrying about your girlfriend next time you write her, ask her to send something personal of hers. So that when you miss her you can take it out and look at it.” The monk was surprised, and asked if as a monk he could really do that. Now, Ajahn Chah was acting in this way where you could tell he was up to something. He replied, “Ask your girlfriend to send you a bottle of her shit. Whenever you miss her you can take out the bottle and say, ‘Ahhhhhh, that’s my loved one.’” It was very funny, but also contained some truth. When you say “Darling, I love everything about you,” of course you don’t.

Another story he told was about a man who was going to marry a beautiful girl, the best girl in the country. But, unfortunately she couldn’t cook. So he looked for another girl. He found one who was even more beautiful, and her cooking was delicious. But she was stupid, and couldn’t hold a conversation. She wasn’t perfect enough. Then he found another girl, who was beautiful, good at cooking, and so smart. But did he marry her? No. Because she was looking for the perfect man.

Q: Regarding your teaching about seeing beauty in the enemy, what if the enemy is always exploiting you?

A: You don’t need to be a door mat. There is a story in my book about how to be kind but still stand your ground. It’s the story of the bad snake.

A long time ago, there was this *bad* snake. He would bite people for fun. When people saw the snake, they would always jump out of the way.

Now, just as it’s only when people get old that they start to get interested in religion, when this snake got old, he started to wonder, “What happens when we die? Is there a hell for bad snakes?” He began to get worried.

He’d always heard that not far away, there was a holy snake, a great meditator, who gave great talks. But he’d always poured scorn on religion his whole life. So now he was a bit embarrassed to start getting interested in religion. So he put on a disguise and went to hear the holy snake talk. The more he listened, the more the holy snake made sense. He got interested and inspired. He was converted!

“Wow, how did I miss this all my life?” he thought. So he went up, took off his disguise, and in front of everyone, asked the holy snake for the five precepts (rules of moral behavior: not to kill, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, use wrong speech, or take intoxicants). Then he gave a donation -- in coins, so people could hear them rattle into the box. Now he was a *good* snake.

Trouble is, snakes can’t speak. So even though he’d changed, he couldn’t tell people he was changed. Even though he had an Amnesty International button on his chest. People still thought he was a bad snake, and still kept their distance from him. Then

one day, a young man was busy talking on his mobile phone and almost stepped on the snake. Only at the last minute did he realize he was in danger. But he saw the snake was smiling. He and others realized that the snake was now benign, and didn't worry about him anymore.

Once ordinary people found out, their children also found out he was all right. Then, naughty children decided to tease that snake. "You're not a real snake! Real snakes have fangs! Show us your fangs, you oversized worm!" they taunted. The snake thought indignantly, "I'm not a worm! I'm a real snake!" But he couldn't say it, and because he couldn't react, the boys started to throw stones at him and abuse him. It hurt.

The poor snake couldn't kill them, as he'd taken the precepts, so he could not defend himself. Which only made the boys bolder. "If only I could bite them! But the five precepts...Oh, religion impractical after all!" rued the snake. "It may be ok in a monastery, but in the real world, you've got to defend yourself." So he had to take the beating but lost faith in religion.

He went back to see that fake of a holy snake to get released from the five precepts. As he' crawled up the hill, the holy snake saw his bloody and bruised body. "It's your fault!" the holy snake said. "You idiot snake! It's true I told you not to bite, but did I ever tell you not to hiss?"

That's enough to scare them away. **So in the office, or wherever you face abuse, all you have to do is hiss.**

Q: I have a foreign friend who said, "Thai people donate too much to monks. All monks do is be fat and lazy. How would you respond?"

A: I'd listen to him. Yes, it's true some monks are fat and lazy. So don't support the fat and lazy monk. There are other monks who work their butt off. Working hard for others, doing good things. So support those who are worthy of support. Be discriminating. Be careful, because sometimes it's not just the monks who give talks that are good. There are great monks who work in other ways as well.

I used to not understand why people are more eager to give money to monasteries rather than hospitals. What changed my mind to recognise the worth of building temples and retreat centres was this experience.

It was the second time I was on a pilgrimage to India. Part of my group went on a boat down the Ganges. On the way back, we had to walk through a very poor part of Benares. Beggars came out. They were real lepers. They lived on the street with open wounds, bandages oozing pus. They were the poorest of the poor. They never knew what a monk was. One came to me, and said, "Rupee. Give me some rupee." rupee." Being a stupid monk, I said, "I don't have any money, I'm a monk," not realising he couldn't speak English. So all I could do was to give him a hug.

He then gave me a beautiful smile. I haven't seen a smile like that from anyone here tonight yet. It was a beautiful, warm smile. Made me think again about what real poverty is. What wealth is.

The suicide rate in a rich city like Perth is far higher than the suicide rate in Benares. Even though so many people are poor, they don't want to kill themselves. It's in the rich cities that suicide rates are horrendous.

The biggest pain is invisible pain. The pain in the heart. The depression or frustration, what other people can't see. You can see a leper, you can see a wound. You can see person with cancer. You can see their tumors. You can't see a person who's about to commit suicide. They look normal, there's nothing obvious in their features. But the pain is so great, they want to kill themselves. The biggest pain of all is the pain in the heart.

Good monks in good monasteries and retreat centres are doctors of the heart. People walk into a temple or monastery, and they look ordinary. They go out, and people don't necessarily see the change. But the change has been made.

I'm very fortunate. Lots of people have come and told me "You've saved my life."

While building the monastery in Perth, we wanted to use bamboo flooring. The person in the store I went to was a lady from Hong Kong. She had lost lots of money, and had gone to a mental institution for a few weeks because she was depressed. When she came to the temple, I gave her some teachings. She said, "You saved my life!" So we got very cheap bamboo flooring.

This is what good monks do.

You may know many people who have benefited in a way that they cannot from medicine. Monasteries can do more than hospitals. So it is good to support monks who really make a difference.

Q: Are men and women equal in every aspect, including being monks and getting to nibbana?.

A: Absolutely not. **They're different. But no one is better than the other. So you don't have to be equal or have one be better, simply different.**

A good example is meditation. Women get into deeper meditation more easily than men, because mediation requires facility with emotions. Because states of bliss are emotional. But it's balanced because men have an easier time figuring out what those states mean.

So they're different. No one is better than the other.

That's important to know. Sometimes you will see philosophers like Rousseau say that all people are born equal. This is patently wrong. **Everyone is different. It's what we make with what we've got, how we use our different tendencies, facilities, and skills, that makes us successful.**

Anyone, man or woman, can become enlightened.

Q: Could we be spoiled by the satisfaction of learning from what we've done right?

A: Good question. **If you keep on thinking of things that have gone right, you get a big heart. Not a big head.** Try it and see.

You'll see what's successful and repeat it.

One year, I taught high school. I learned about educational psychology – about positive and negative reinforcement. Negative reinforcement is when you tell a kid what they did wrong and punish them. **The other way has been proven more effective time and time again. When they make a mistake, it's completely ignored. When they do it right, they are praised and encouraged.**

In the USA, there's a man who's making a fortune by training pets on where to go to toilet. When you have a new dog or cat, you have to potty train it. All this man did was to take the new puppy outside by the park or a tree and wait until the puppy did his business. As soon as he did it, this man would do cartwheels and sing a happy song. Even the little dog realised his actions were making this man happy. So, guaranteed, after 3 days, the dog was trained. Just positive reinforcement is all it took!

The only thing was, sometimes when the man jumped up and down for joy when watching a football match – the dog pooped.

Q: How can one balance one's mind and one's life?

A: (Holding up a glass of water.) How heavy is this glass of water? The longer I keep holding it, the heavier it feels. If I keep holding it for five minutes, I have pain. Ten minutes later, extreme pain. If I keep holding it after half an hour, I'm a very stupid monk. So put it down. You don't have to put it down for too long or throw it away. After a few minutes, pick it up again. You'll find it feels lighter. It's exactly the same weight, but because you've rested, it's easier to bear.

Balance in life is working hard, but when it gets too heavy, putting it down for a few minutes and resting. When you pick up your duties or business later, you'll find it's easier to handle. That's simple efficiency. If you keep holding the burden too long, worrying and thinking too long, life becomes so heavy. You get burnt out. You don't need to lessen your responsibilities, you just need to learn how to put things down from time to time. Take a few minutes of rest, then you can work more effectively afterwards.

When you get blurry eyes, turn off the computer. Take a break, go back, and all your problems are easy.

Q: Please explain title of your book, "Opening the Door of Your Heart."

A: Actually, there are different titles for the translated versions of the book.

The German edition is called "The Cow That Cried." That's the title of one of the stories in the book.

The American edition is called “Who Ordered This Truckload of Dung?”

And the Thai edition is called “Let’s Have Fun!” Which is a lovely title for a dhamma book.

“Opening the Door of Your Heart” comes from one of the key stories in the book. When I was young, we lived in a flat owned by the government. We were so poor we never worried about locking the door. In fact, we would hope that a burglar would come in and take pity on us and leave us something! When I was around thirteen, my father took me aside one day and said, “Son, whatever you do in your life, wherever you go, the door of my house will always be open to you.”

I still remember it to this day, 40 years later. It was my father’s way of expressing love for his son. When I was a monk, I kept thinking about it. I realised he did not mean the door of his flat, but the door of his heart. It opened up many avenues for experiencing the beauty of life for me. No matter what I ever do, or where I ever go, he was giving me unconditional love. I was his son and that was enough.

It’s such a beautiful thing to experience from a father, a mother, a friend. I would never do anything to harm him. When you are privileged to receive that from someone, you would never abuse it. He gave me full freedom to do whatever I liked, but he’d always love me. I have to work harder to live up to such trust.

I managed to get a few people in Australia to say that to their partner. It has changed their whole relationship. “Husband, no matter what you do, even if you go sleep with someone else, it doesn’t matter. The door of my heart will always be open to you. I will always love you.” There’s no way that husband will ever sleep with someone else. It has to come from the heart, be absolutely true.

One day, you have to say that to yourself. “Me. The one I’ve known for so long. The door of my heart is open to me. No matter what I’ve ever done, or what I failed at. No matter what mistakes I’ve made in my life. Come in.” You find that you’ve kept part of yourself outside - what you’re not proud of, what you don’t like, what mistakes you’ve made. That’s the cause of your suffering and pain. **That’s why you can’t enjoy life. You think you don’t deserve to.** But when you say it to yourself and mean it, then you’re free and become a better person. **You can enjoy yourself because you love yourself unconditionally.**

Q: Dear A Brahm, today is one of the best days of my life, being able to listen to your talk. And your book is the best book I’ve ever read. Your book has changed my views of life for the better. When are you going to write another book?

A: Whenever I was praised, sometimes I thought, I don’t deserve praise. I’d make a joke about it and not accept it.

Have you ever noticed that? Very rarely do we respond to praise, “Yes, you are quite right to say it!”

Actually, praise won't give you a big head. Sometimes all we open up ourselves to is criticism. But please open yourself up to praise as well.