

# The Miracle in the Heart

*by Ajahn Vayama*

**Namô Tassa Bhagavatô Arahâtô Sammâ-Sambuddhassa  
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Buddham Dhammam Sangham Namasami**

One of the nicest parts about sharing the Dhamma with people is when someone comes to share their experiences of practice, and particularly when someone has been practising for a number of years, and they can see the growth in their own understanding of the Dhamma and in the effect that it's having on their life. When people come and share that kind of experience it's very uplifting, and it has the aspect of someone, because they've practised well and they know for themselves, they have the extra confidence that the teaching is the truth, and that it works, and also that they can do the practice, and they themselves can get the fruits of the practice.

And very often when we start to practice we imagine that meditation is the most important part of the practice, and that's how we gauge whether or not we're doing well, whether we've understood the teaching, and we can be disappointed when the meditation doesn't come together in the way we expect it to, or when we experience periods of peace and bliss maybe and then they disappear. When we've been practising for a number of years we understand that there's a lot more to it than just the meditation practice, that the whole of our life has to be involved. Our daily life, our relationships, the whole of the Noble Eightfold Path. We also recognise that peaceful states come and go, and that even if our meditation isn't blissful it doesn't mean that we're not progressing. The way that we really know whether we're making progress is how much more ease there is in our daily life. That doesn't mean how much am I getting what I want, it means how am I dealing with, how am I coping when I get what I want *and* when I don't get what I want – how much more understanding is there about life, and how much more am I able to bring that understanding to the things that I like and the things that I don't like. This is how we really gauge our practice.

Someone came the other day and they were discussing their practice with me, and I told them that they had given me a wonderful title for my next talk in the way that

they described what they were doing. They talked about the miracle in the heart. They said they discovered after years of practice that the miracle wasn't in transforming the world and making things the way we want them to be, the miracle is in transforming our own heart to be able to understand life and to be able to live life with more peace and more harmony. This is the real miracle in the heart. I thought it was such a beautiful way of expressing what the path is about, particularly because when we think about the heart in Buddhism it was two aspects. The heart is used to describe the mind, the mind that knows, the mind that understands, that wisdom aspect that develops. And it also, when we think about the heart, it describes the emotional aspect of our life, the feeling part.

Progress on the path has these two aspects to it. The knowing part, the wisdom part, the understanding of what life is really like, understanding of where we fit into life. That understanding would be very dry, very un-inspiring if it didn't touch our emotional life and make us feel happier, make us feel more peaceful, make us feel grateful for what we've got. And this is the outcome of being able to live life within the terms of what life is. When we don't understand, the Buddha said, we are the source of suffering in our own life, we create stress in our own life because we don't understand the way things truly are, we don't understand where we fit in to the scheme of things and the underlying ignorance that we all suffer under is the wrong view of self.

With the wrong view of self we have this sense that somehow we are the centre of the whole thing, that life happens with us at its central focal point and things that suit us are good, and things that don't suit us are bad, and things we like we should be able to get, we should be able to control, we should be able to organise life to be the way we want it to be. And the disappointments that come in life are because we can't do that, we can't get it right, and we think there's something wrong, either with our skill, our wealth, our power, our position, that doesn't yet give us that power to control. And the practice in terms of wisdom is helping us to change our perspective by seeing that we are not the centre of the universe, that we're part of the picture, that we're in fact part of a process flowing on around us, through us, we are part of the process. And when we can change our orientation, change our perspective through really understanding this, that already we relieve ourselves of so much suffering.

I'll give you an example of this change of perspective in my own situation just recently. Up at the nun's monastery, for those of you who haven't visited us, we live

in the middle of the forest, and at this time of the year there are lots of leaves falling from the trees. And one of the things we do at the monastery every day is to sweep away the leaves, not only to make it look nice, not only to give ourselves something to do, because we've got plenty of things to do, but also because we reflect that sweeping away the leaves every day is like sweeping away the defilements in the mind – even if we sweep them away today, there they are back again tomorrow – so we can't give up on this sweeping business, whether it's external or internal. The other morning I was sweeping the leaves and getting them into nice piles, and the wind was blowing. As soon as I got them into a nice pile, before I could sweep them away, the wind would blow them around again, and I started to get frustrated, and I started to think, what's going on here? What's wrong? Whose fault is this? This wind, if it wasn't blowing all the time I'd be able to get rid of the leaves. And while I was sweeping the wind said "Hey, don't blame me. If I was blowing and there were no leaves you wouldn't mind. Blame the leaves, they're the ones getting in the way, they're the ones that are moving around." So I thought yeah that's right, if it wasn't for these leaves I wouldn't be worried about the wind, it's the leaves' fault. And the leaves said "Hey, don't blame me. I was hanging on the tree just a while ago, and then I just, whoops, fell off. What can I do, here I am down on the ground and I just go wherever I'm pushed, whether it's by you or by the wind. Don't blame me, blame the tree! The tree let me go." That it, it's the tree. Why didn't you hang on to your leaves? "Hey don't blame me. I'm standing here in the sun. How can I hang onto my leaves when there's no moisture? It's so hot, anyone would drop their leaves, what can I do?" "Hey, don't blame me," said the Sun, "I shine all year round and nobody cares if I'm shining when there's plenty of rain coming, I can shine all day if it's wet, nobody falls off the tree. It's because there's no moisture." And then the rain said, "Hey don't blame me. I'd be here except there's no clouds. Blame the clouds." And so it went on and I could hear this conversation going on, and then all of a sudden they all ganged up on me and they said, "Listen, the real problem is you humans, building a house in the middle of the forest. We have been growing here, dropping our leaves for as long as I can remember, and nobody cared until you came along and put a house here with verandahs and paths. And now you want them to be free of leaves. So the problem is one you've created." And I heard all that and I thought, that's very true. Look at us, I'm getting upset because I want to get rid of the leaves. And looking at it in a different way, from a different perspective, there was no problem at all, it was just quite natural and I wasn't the centre-point of all that, there were all sorts of other things happening around me. I was just part of the big picture. And when I saw it in

that way all the stress of trying to get rid of these leaves just evaporated. Nothing had changed, only my perspective on the situation had changed.

And this is what our practice is encouraging us to understand, to open up to, not just the light-hearted aspects of our life but in the most serious ones. But if you just think about the way some people live their lives, even the apparently light-hearted ones can become the cause for people having terrible arguments, beating each other up, shooting each other, because someone did something that seemed not too bad and yet it really enraged another person. I've been telling a story at the monastery recently about someone from the time of the Buddha whose name was Samavati. And Samavati is a very good example of someone living in a situation where she couldn't change the outer conditions and yet she managed to practice nonetheless and come to a high level of development on the path. Just to briefly let you know her situation – she was born into a wealthy family but her parents died at an early age because of a plague. Her family had to leave the town where they were prosperous, leave everything behind to try to escape the plague. They moved to another city, her parents died, she was left an orphan, another family took her in, she grew up with a very loving foster family, she grew into a beautiful young woman and the king of the town, when he saw her, forced her to become his wife, even though he had two other queens, and even though she didn't want to marry into the royal household, he threatened her foster family that they would lose all of their wealth and be turned out from the city if she refused to become his consort. And so she was forced to go into the life of the palace. And in the palace she was subject to the jealousy of the queens who were her rivals, and she was treated very badly, and she was accused of trying to kill the king by one of the queens who was jealous of her, who plotted against her, and she had to endure all sorts of abuse. But she heard the Buddha's teaching and she became a devoted disciple of the Buddha. And even though she couldn't change her circumstances, she couldn't escape from the palace, and she continued to be harassed by particularly one of the other queens in the palace, she cultivated the teaching that she heard, and the Buddha said that she was his foremost lay disciple in cultivating loving-kindness. Loving-kindness which was not directed just at the people who were nice to her, just because she was in a very pleasant situation, but loving kindness which she was able to develop even in the most difficult and trying circumstances. And in the end she was murdered by the queen who considered her to be her chief rival. And if we consider what kind of life she must have endured in the royal household, it ended up with her being killed, we can understand that to be able to

cultivate loving-kindness even in those very difficult circumstances was certainly not an easy thing to do.

So when we're thinking about how difficult it might be to cultivate the path, it's very useful for us, I think, to reflect on the practice of those who've gone before us, not that we might be able to come up to that kind of standard of loving-kindness and forgiveness, but we recognise what we're heading towards, and also that if we're able to cultivate the path to that extent then we're able to be at peace in our own heart, even if the people around us, even if the conditions in our life are drastic to say the least. This is what we recognise the longer we practice this path, that we're never going to get perfect conditions, we're never going to get just nice people, we're never going to get our body perfectly healthy for very long. There are always going to be things coming into our life that we don't like. There are always going to be things leaving our life that we want to keep. And so the essence of the practice, the miracle that we're trying to grow in our heart is the ability to bear with the things that we can't change and to make the most of the conditions that present themselves to us.

Now one of the reasons why we find it very difficult to do the practice that we need to do is because very often we'd rather stay with what we know than strike out in unknown territory. And there are a couple of examples of this that came to my attention recently. One of them was a Calvin & Hobbes cartoon, and Calvin & Hobbes is one of my favourite cartoons, and you might have seen this one this year. Calvin, for those of you who don't know, is a little boy about 6 years old and Hobbes is his companion, who's a stuffed toy, a tiger, but who comes to life to be Calvin's best friend. And at the beginning of the year Hobbes asks Calvin if he's making any New Year Resolutions, and Calvin says, "No, I don't want anything to change, I want everything to stay the way it is. Last year was lousy, but at least it was familiar, and I'd rather have what's familiar, even if it's lousy because when things change you have to think about them, you have to deal with them, you have to come up with something new and that's too hard. I'll stick with the familiar even if it's lousy."

And this is how we very often approach things even when things are going wrong, even when our life is messy. Even when we're not happy we hang on very tenaciously to this wrong view of self that somehow I'm going to be able one day to pull it all together, by being able to control the conditions out there, the people out there. We resist looking into our own mind. We resist doing the work on our own thought, our own speech, and our own behaviour. We resist it even when everything we've tried in

trying to control out there, make other people the fault for our unhappiness, even when it hasn't worked.

Someone was telling me a story recently about someone they knew who they'd watched for 50 years doing this kind of act. Not just Calvin and Hobbes do this kind of thing but people do this. For 50 years this person had tried to control the people in their family, trying to control the people around them, and they ended up alienating even their closest relatives. And they reached the point where even though they were living in the same apartment block as their son, their son hadn't visited them for the last 8 years. And another son who lived nearby hadn't come to visit either. And this person was living a very unhappy life because attempts to control others hadn't worked and alienation had followed, but there was still this resistance to giving up what they were familiar with. And even on their deathbed they were still trying to control the family, still trying to organise the people around them. It's a very poignant story that at one point, as this person was coming close to their death, that the people in the hospice said the family had better come because your relative is sure to die tonight. So all of the family came around to be at the bedside except the two sons. And something strange happened. The person didn't die. All the family was there, all the signs were that they were going to pass away. And they hung on and hung on. And the staff in the hospice said – someone isn't here that that person want to be here, wants to see before they go. And of course it was the two sons that they were hanging on, hoping to be able to meet before they die. And in the end the two sons came to visit, by that time their mother was unable to control in an active way, but was able to know that they had come, and was able to let go. It's a very powerful lesson to just contemplate at what point are we able to let go. Do we have to get to our last breath before we're able to do that shift around, able to change our perspective, able to stop trying to reorder the world to be the way that we think it should be, the way that it suits us.

The wisdom aspect of this path, the wisdom aspect that keeps trying to wake us up to where we actually fit in to the scheme of things, as I said, would be very dry if it didn't also touch our emotional life, if it didn't also add to the richness of our feelings, open us up to more love, open us up to more acceptance, open us up to more kindness. Until we're able to see things clearly and let go, until we've cultivated wisdom to its deepest point, one of the most powerful supports to help us experience how good it will be when we can fully let go is to actively cultivate loving-kindness. Sometimes we'll say, "Oh, I've heard that so many times, loving-kindness..." Someone actually

said to me recently, again someone who has been practising for many years, they said, “When I heard this about loving-kindness I didn’t know what they were talking about! It was just so foreign to me. What’s this ‘kindness’, ‘opening up your heart’ to others? What’s this feeling? I’ve never known it.” And they said they practised for years and years and years and they would keep hearing about it, and then they’d be given guided meditations on it, and still there was nothing. It seemed a very barren practice to them. Literally outside of their experience. But they kept on trying because they had confidence in the teaching, they had understood certain aspects from the wisdom perspective. They could see how things hung together, how the whole of the path had to be cultivated. They started to experience improvement in their relationships. They weren’t so anxious and tense. Until suddenly the penny dropped that the feeling of ease that they were now experiencing in their closest relationships, maybe that was loving kindness. Maybe that was that softening in the heart that they’d been hearing about all this time. After years of what seemed like a desert their heart started to open.

So even if we’re actively trying to cultivate loving kindness we may not experience very strong powerful positive feelings but that doesn’t mean that we should give up, it means we need to keep going. Loving-kindness has two aspects to it which I’d like to draw your attention to in relation to how it supports us in cultivating wisdom, cultivating this understanding of where we fit into the scheme of things. One aspect is the active good vibrations that we cultivate. When someone, when any of us, are able to not just think loving-kindness but feel loving-kindness, that is feeling a feeling which we actually experience as a very pleasant, warm, uplifting, energising emotion. And when we’re around someone who is feeling that, or even when we’re practising ourselves, sometimes we can feel like we’ve been lifted up, we’re being filled up with these positive feelings, and those positive feelings actually go out from us. Someone who’s full of love, we can feel that. And if we can’t feel that, or we haven’t felt that, then just compare it to how it feels when we’re around someone who’s really angry, who’s really in a rage, you can pick up the vibrations from that person. Or someone who’s really sad and depressed and really heavy, if you’re around someone like that you pick up those vibrations. So these positive vibrations of loving-kindness are something which we actively cultivate in meditation, in daily life, and we generate them so that they go out, become an energy field around us which other people can tune into.

That’s the active aspect. But there is a receptive aspect to loving-kindness which is something that we also need to be aware of so we can start to familiarise ourselves

with it. This is the aspect of loving-kindness which is able to receive things, situations, people, animals, as they are without projecting onto them who we think they should be, or what we think they should be, how we think they should change and be different to suit us. A way of understanding this is if you again think of loving-kindness as an energy, it's sort of like when you put air in a tyre or when you're baking something and you whip up the cream, or whip up the batter and put air in it, it gets lighter, it expands, and it opens up. There are spaces in it that weren't there before. There's a lightness there that wasn't there before. When someone is able to generate powerful feelings of loving-kindness in meditation and also in daily life, and very often those feelings from meditation will carry over to daily life, they not only generate that feeling outwards but they open up the space in their heart for others.

Someone was telling me an experience they had recently, someone who practises loving kindness very powerfully, who uses it as their main meditation object. They use loving-kindness meditation to begin their practice and it takes them into a very happy peaceful state, and then they use that kind of mind to take up the breath, and when they take up the breath then they're already operating with a very relaxed, very open, very receptive mind. They just stay with the breath without effort because the breath becomes something wonderful, beautiful, something which they receive with so much joy and gratitude. This is the way they practice and cultivating this loving-kindness again and again and again, even when they're not sitting in meditation, even when they're just bouncing around they are in that state, and they project that state, not deliberately but just as a matter of course. And that openness to beings is there. And they were telling me that recently they went to visit some friends that they hadn't seen for years and when they knocked on the door this German Shepherd came bounding up to the door, and the person had a very good meditation that morning and was full of loving-kindness and they said "hello doggy, nice to see you, give me a kiss," and they bent down and the dog gave them a lick on the face, and by this time the owners came up and they were astounded because this dog was a German Shepherd that was trained to guard and it *always* barked, even at people it knew because it had been trained to do that and yet here it was, bounding up joyfully to welcome in this person who it didn't know. And they received this dog into their heart, without fear, without worry, because that was the way they were feeling, that was their state. And we can understand, if we just reflect, because the Buddha's teaching is not nonsense, it's not magic, how did it happen that this dog was able to pick up that feeling, and why was it that dog didn't bark – because the dog was

received, there was no impediment there, there was no barrier there, that person's sense of self had been so expanded, the boundaries had been let down, there was nothing for that dog to charge into. Usually we say, "whoa!", and whoever we meet whether it's a dog or another person knows how far they can come; when they stop and gather themselves they also put up their barriers. And at this moment because of this person's practice, that didn't happen with the dog.

So this opening up, this letting down barriers, this moving beyond the normal boundaries of self is one of the very powerful effects of loving-kindness. And it takes us to the same point where we can let go of our wrong view of self. When we can let the boundaries down and we understand that we are interconnected. Where do I stop and where do you start, all of that is gone even if only temporarily. It gives us a glimpse into our true relationship with others and with life. So practising loving-kindness, that opening up, that allowing beings to be as they are without trying to impose on them who we think they should be so that they suit us, without trying to control, this is what we should understand can be developed through loving-kindness practise, and this complements what we're trying to develop through the wisdom aspect of the path which investigates our mind, starts to understand what produces our thoughts, our emotions, our reactions, starts to see the process of contact with the world triggering off internal reactions, giving rise to thought, speech and action back into the world, this is complemented by loving-kindness practice. If we have both of these strands of practice going for us then little by little we'll see how in daily life we're able to live much more at ease, much more at peace from our own heart.

In the Maha Mangala Sutta which is one of the suttas we chant for Paritta as blessings, as protections, the Buddha goes through the highest blessings for human beings, and he starts off with the mundane blessings of living in a good locality, looking after family, having skills which one can use to earn a living, and he goes all the way to being fully enlightened. And the way he describes what it's like to be fully enlightened is the stanza – "though touched by worldly circumstance, the ups and downs of life, the mind of the enlightened one is never shaken – sorrowless, stainless and secure they abide." This is one of my favourite lines from this particular chanting and if we think about it, sorrowless means that even when we lose that which we love, we understand that this is the nature of life, there's nothing that can surprise us and so we become secure through the ups and downs of life. But both sorrowless and secure arise dependent on being stainless – stainless refers to the defilements, the impurities in the mind, the wrong understanding of where we fit in to the whole scheme of

things. That wrong understanding expresses itself in our wrong view of self, in our attachments, in our desires, in our attempts to control the world. When we're able to work to purify the mind of greed and hatred, the expressions of our wrong understanding, little by little we chip away at that wrong understanding until eventually we remove altogether the impurities from the mind, and only at that point do we become sorrowless and secure.

So the practice is to continually keep directing our attention to the places where we get stuck, the places where there is stress, the places where there is dissatisfaction, and see where it comes from. We may just have to change our perspective on where it's coming from, and we free ourselves from suffering, like understanding that the wind and the leaves and the whole bit are just part of the way things are. If we can start with seemingly innocuous things we might be able in this life itself to work all the way up to being able to let go of trying to control the people we care about the most. We can let go and also open up at the same time using loving-kindness which is willing to accept people, situations, on their own terms, without trying to control, without trying to change things to be the way we think they should be.

Loving-kindness coupled with wisdom – this is the miracle in the heart. May this teaching be of benefit to all of us, and may the merit of this teaching help us all to attain Nirvana.

If anyone has any questions or comments I will be pleased to try to answer them.

The question is a good one – when do you know it's okay to try to change things. We have to look into our own heart, that's why it's very important that we keep first of all turning inwards and see where we're coming from. The teaching isn't about not doing anything and not trying to act in the world, skilfully, or not trying to help the people around us when we can see that what they're doing is harmful to themselves, for example, or that we know a better way because we've learned it from our own experience. The key is always to come back to our own heart and to be honest with ourselves, be in touch with our own motivation, and if we can see we're coming from a space of loving-kindness or compassion, then to act but without expecting that we'll get the results that we want. Act with an open hand.

The definition of love. Acceptance is one of the very important ingredients of love, and particularly in long-kindness it's not expecting anything in return, not giving it because you expect that this person will appreciate it or that they will give back what

you've given them. It's not given because you necessarily like that person. It's not given because of who they are, it's given because of who you are. It's given because you have the love in your heart, so it comes free of any strings attached. A positive feeling that isn't dependent on the other person but is dependent on that feeling within you.

This is a very high standard of practice and this is what the Buddha's definition of loving-kindness is, and this is what we aspire to be able to do, doesn't mean we can, we can do it sometimes with some people in some situations, and other times it's very difficult but this is what we should be aspiring to and I think it's important for us to know what we are aspiring to develop so that we don't stop short with where it's comfortable and where it's easy. Well, I think that's the end of [the talk].