

Nibbāna for Everyone

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu



Nalanda

A message from Suan Mokkh

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by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Cover Page

Traditional Siamese artistic representation of Nibbāna.

From a painting at the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok, Thailand.

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by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

Translated from Thai by Santikaro

กรรมในพระพุทธศาสนา

This article was prepared in 1988 by Ajahn Buddhādāsa as part of a series of pamphlets to be distributed at a major exhibition on his life and work organized by Ajahn Runjuan Indarakamhaeng and other students at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

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This new electronic edition has been revised by Santikaro in collaboration with a network of volunteers.

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Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives

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Liberation Park is a Dhamma refuge in the USA's Midwest inspired by Suan Mokkh. Here, Santikaro and friends work to nurture a garden of liberation along the lines taught by Ajahn Buddhadāsa, where followers of the Buddha-Dhamma Way can explore Dhamma as Nature and in the Pāli suttas.

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Established in 2003, Nalanda focuses on providing holistic education, facilitating spiritual development, and the joyful propagation of Buddha-Dhamma. Nalanda is one of several acknowledged centres of Buddhist education in Malaysia through its successful Dhamma courses, camps, meditation retreats, conferences, and seminars.

Nibbāna for Everyone

An article written on 3 April 2531 (1988)
at Suan Mokkhabalārāma, Chaiya.

When you hear the words “*Nibbāna* for everyone”, many of you will shake your heads. You’ll think that I’m trying to dye cats for sale¹ and you probably won’t have any interest in the subject. This can only happen because you understand the meaning of this phrase too narrowly and out of line with the truth.

In Thai schools, children are taught that *Nibbāna* is the death of an *arahant*.² The ordinary man in the street has been taught that it’s a special city, empty of pain and chock full of the happiness of fulfilled wishes, supposedly reached after death by those who store up perfections (*pāramīs*) over tens of thousands of lifetimes. Modern social developers see it as an obstruction to progress that we shouldn’t get involved with or even discuss. Most students consider it a matter only for devout old folks at the temple, with no relevance for the young. Young men and women think it’s bland and unexciting, awful and frightening. All the candidates for the monkhood merely mouth without understanding the vow “May I go forth in order to awaken to

¹ ‘Dyeing cats for sale’ is a Thai expression similar to ‘window dressing’. It means dressing up something shabby and inferior in order to trick the customer into buying it. [*All notes are added by the translator.*]

² *Arahants* (worthy ones) have seen through ignorance, transcended self-centeredness, and are released from all suffering. ‘*Nirvāna*’ is the Sanskrit equivalent of ‘*Nibbāna*’.

Nibbāna”. The old monks say *Nibbāna* can’t happen anymore in this day and age, and that an *arahant* cannot exist anymore either. *Nibbāna* has become a secret that no one cares about. We’ve turned it into something barren and silent, buried away in the scriptures, to be paid occasional lip service in sermons while no one really knows what it is.

In fact, without this theme of *Nibbāna*, Buddhism would be as good as dead. When nobody is interested in *Nibbāna*, then nobody is genuinely interested in Buddhism. When nothing about *Nibbāna* interests us, then we can’t get any benefits at all from Buddhism. I feel that it’s about time for us to get interested and bring about this highest benefit, as befits the phrase “*Nibbāna* is the Supreme Thing” – namely, the highest goal of living beings, a purpose always inseparable from our daily lives.

Nibbāna has nothing in the least to do with death. ‘*Nibbāna*’ means coolness. It meant coolness back when it was just an ordinary word that people used in their homes, and when used as Dhamma language, in a religious context, it still means coolness. In Dhamma language it refers to the cooling or going out of the fires of defilement (‘*kilesas*’, reactive emotions), while in ordinary people’s usage it means the cooling of physical fires.

Throughout the Pāli scriptures, the word ‘*Nibbāna*’ is never used in the sense of death. When death is discussed, ‘*marana*’ is used. Or ‘*Parinibbāna*’ (thorough coolness) is used, such as when the Buddha said, “The *Parinibbāna* (of the Blessed One) will occur three months from now”.³

³ Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, Digha Nikāya 16.

Nibbāna is one of the *dhātus* (natural elements). It is the coolness that remains when the defilements – greed, anger, fear, delusion – have ended. Two types of this element can be distinguished. In the first, the defilements are exhausted and cooled, but the organs that receive sensory stimuli aren't yet cool. In the second, this sensory system is also cooled. A white-hot charcoal illustrates the difference. After first going out, it is still too hot to be handled. We must wait a while longer until it is cool enough to be touched.

Through the changes and lapses that are commonplace in this world, later generations of Buddhists, changed the meaning of '*Nibbāna*' to death. Nowadays we Thais use this later, distorted meaning. I myself was taught this way as a child. When I first became a bhikkhu, I still understood it erroneously and passed that understanding on to my friends and students. Only when I could study the original Pāli texts for myself did I discover that *Nibbāna* was a whole other affair than death. Instead, it's a kind of life that knows no death. *Nibbāna* is the thing that sustains life, thus preventing death. It itself can never die, although the body must die eventually.

Other Indian religions contemporary with Buddhism also used the word '*Nibbāna*'. In the Pāli texts there's a passage about a Brahmin teacher named Bāvari from the area of the Godhāvari River in Southern India. He sent his sixteen students, also well-known teachers, to ask the Buddha about his experience

⁴ [From Page 4] The *Solasapañhā* make up the final chapter, "*Pārāyana-vagga*", of the Sutta-Nipāta, Khuddaka Nikāya. In many of the verses, the Buddha emphasizes conquering and going beyond death. He never speaks of seeking it out as a form of salvation or end of suffering.

of *Nibbāna*. Some of them may have understood *Nibbāna* to mean death. In Theravāda countries, this story is well known as “The Sixteen Questions”.⁴ [See foot-note on Page 3] The point here is that the theme of *Nibbāna* was the highest concern of the Indian religions contemporary with Buddhism. Further, at least one group that understood it to mean death must have spread its teaching in the vicinity of *Suvaṇṇabhūmī* (‘Golden Land’, the ancient name of Siam) before Buddhism arrived here. This persisted as the general understanding among the common folk, similar to what happened with ‘*attā*’ (self) and ‘*ātman*’ (soul).

Now let’s return to our examination of *Nibbāna* as taught in Buddhism. When Prince Siddhattha (*i.e.* the future Buddha) first took up the homeless spiritual life, he wandered in search of the *Nibbāna* that is the total quenching of all *Dukkha*. He wasn’t looking for death! From the famous teachers of India at that time, he learned nothing higher than the experience of ‘neither perception nor non-perception’ (*Neva saññānāsaññāyatana*), a degree of mental tranquility so deep that we can describe it neither as death nor as non-death. He couldn’t accept this as the supreme *Nibbāna*, so he went off to search on his own until he discovered the *Nibbāna* that is the coolness remaining when the defilements have finally ended. He called this “the end of *Dukkha*”, meaning the exhaustion of all the heat produced by defilements.

However much the defilements are exhausted, there’s that much coolness, until eventually there is perfect coolness due to the defilements being finished completely. In short, to the degree that the defilements are ended, there will be that much coolness, or *Nibbāna*. *Nibbāna* is the coolness resulting from the quenching of defilements through Dhamma practice.



“ What is the world full of?
It is full of things that arise, persist, and cease.
Grasp and cling to them, and they produce suffering.
Don't grasp and cling to them,
and they do not produce suffering. ”

~ Ajahn Buddhādāsa

Whenever the defilements are quenched, then there is the thing called ‘*Nibbāna*,’ always with the same meaning – coolness.

Next, notice that the defilements are concocted things (*saṅkhāra-dhammas*) that arise and pass away. As it says in the Pāli,

***Yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ
sabbaṃ taṃ nirodha-dhammaṃ’ti.***

Whatever things originate, all those things will cease.

Any reactive emotion that arises, ceases when its causes and conditions are finished. Although it may be a temporary quenching, merely a temporary coolness, it is still ‘*nibbāna*,’ even if only momentarily. Thus, there’s a temporary ‘*nibbāna*’ for those who can’t yet avoid some defilements. It is this temporary ‘*nibbāna*’ that sustains the lives of beings who continue hanging onto defilement. Anyone can see that if the egoistic emotions existed night and day without any pause or rest, no life could endure it. If such life didn’t die, it would go crazy and then die in the end. You ought to consider carefully the fact that life can survive only because there are periods when the defilements don’t roast it. These periods out-number the times when the defilements blaze.

These periodic ‘*nibbānas*’ sustain life for all of us, without excepting even animals, which have their levels of ‘*nibbāna*,’ too. We are able to survive because this kind of ‘*nibbāna*’ nurtures us, until it becomes the most ordinary habit of life and of mind. Whenever there is freedom from defilement, then there is the value and meaning of ‘*nibbāna*.’ This must occur fairly often for living things to survive. That we have some time to relax both

bodily and mentally provides us with the freshness and vitality needed to live.

Why don't we understand and feel thankful for this kind of 'nibbāna' at least a little bit? Fortunately, the instincts can manage to find tastes of it by themselves. Conscious beings naturally search for periods that are free from craving, thirst, and egoism. We might call this natural urge "the nibbāna instinct". If there is unrelenting thirst, life must die. Thus, infants know how to suck the breast, and the mosquitoes that buzz around know how to suck blood to sustain their lives. Our instincts have this virtue built in; they search for periods of time sufficiently free from defilement or free from thirst to maintain life.

Whenever there is freedom and voidness, there is this little 'nibbāna', until we know how to make it into the lasting or perfect *Nibbāna* of *arahants*. It isn't death, but rather is deathlessness, in particular, spiritual deathlessness. Anyone who sees this fact will personally experience that we can survive only through this kind of 'nibbānic' moments. We don't survive just because of rice and food that so infatuate people. We realize that everybody must have this thing called 'nibbāna', and must depend on it as their life's sustenance. So who can object to our talking about "nibbāna for everyone"?

In order to better understand the meaning of the word 'nibbāna', we ought to look at it from the perspective of linguistics. A material sense of the word is found in the phrase "*pajjotasseva nibbānaṃ*". This 'nibbāna' refers to the ordinary quenching of a lamp and, more broadly, to the quenching of any source of heat or fire. When the rice porridge is still hot, the cook yells out



“ To believe straight away is foolishness;
to believe after having seen clearly is good sense.

This is the Buddhist policy in belief –
not to believe stupidly, or to rely only on people,
textbooks, conjecture, reasoning,
or whatever the majority believes, but rather to believe
what we see clearly for ourselves to be the case.

This is how it is in Buddhism. ”

~ Ajahn Buddhadasa

from the kitchen, “Wait a moment, let it ‘nibbāna’ first”. When the goldsmith melts down gold and pours it into a mould, he sprinkles water on it to cool it. The word used in Pāli here is ‘*nibbāpeyya*’, to first make it ‘nibbāna’, or cool, before working it into some shape or form.

Even the wild animals that are captured from the jungle and tamed like pussy cats are said to have been ‘nibbāna-ed’. Similarly, sensual pleasures cool down the desires of foolish people in ways appropriate for them. Unwavering concentration on material forms (*rūpa-jhānas*) brings a coolness untroubled by the fires of sensuality. Although temporary, these absorptions (*jhānas*) are also certain levels of ‘nibbāna’. The experience of ‘nothingness’ (*Ākiñcaññāyatana*) and the other formless absorptions (*arūpa-jhānas*) bring levels of coolness free from the fires that arise out of attractive material things. *Nibbāna* due to the ending of all defilements brings the final coolness that is the ultimate in all respects.

Certain groups of teachers have made up the term ‘*sivamokkhamahānibbāna*’, which they explain as some kind of town or city. Although no one can make any sense of it, or knows where it is, they keep it around for people to bow to when this strange term is declaimed from the pulpits of their conventional temples.

We also find the word ‘*nibbuti*’, meaning an ethical level of *Nibbāna*. It refers to a cool heart and cool life such as that which impressed a young woman on seeing Prince Siddhattha. She exclaimed, “Whoever’s son this gentleman is, his mother and father are *nibbuta* [cool]; whoever’s husband he is, that woman is *nibbuta*”. Such examples also have the meaning of ‘nibbāna’. Nowadays, when chanting the benefits of ethical behavior, Thai

monks intone, “*Sīlena nibbutiṇi yanti*”, which means *nibbuti* is achieved through healthy morality (*sīla*). This comes after the lesser benefits of ethical living, such as acquisition of wealth and attaining happy births (*sugati*). The purpose here is to give Nibbāna a place in ordinary daily life.

This coolness of heart and peace of mind that everyone desires is the meaning of *Nibbāna*. However, many people misunderstand it and aim only for sex, which is hot stuff. Thus, they get a deceptive ‘nibbāna’. People have clung to such an interpretation since, or even before, the Buddha’s time, and it can be found among the sixty-two wrong views listed in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*.⁵ Please consider the history and basic meaning of the word ‘*Nibbāna*’. In all cases it points to coolness of heart and mind, according to the higher or lower awareness of each person. The essential meaning, however, is always in the nurturing and sustaining of life. It lessens the time when fires burn the mind just enough for us to survive and eventually develops to the highest level, which absolutely quenches all fires. The highest degree of realization in Buddhism, according to the Buddha, is the end of lust, the end of hatred, and the end of delusion, which is the final quenching of all fires and the coolest coolness that life can be.

Nibbāna is not the mind but is something that the mind can experience; or as the Buddha put it, it is a certain *āyatana* that

⁵ Digha Nikāya 1.

⁶ Here, Ajahn Buddhadasa does not imply that these refined meditative states are necessary attainments. Rather, he is using the traditional terminology to illustrate how the flavour of coolness pervades all the Dhamma teachings and is therefore immediately available to us all.

wisdom can experience. Forms, sounds, odours, flavours, and tactile sensations are material or physical *āyatana*s, things experienced through the body. Meditative attainments such as the formless absorptions – from the experience of ‘endless space’ (*Ākāśāñāncāyatana*) up to and including the experience of ‘neither perception nor non-perception’ (*Neva saññānāsaññāyatana*) – are mental *āyatana*s that the mind can experience.⁶ *Nibbāna* is a spiritual *āyatana* for mindfulness and wisdom to experience and realize. We should consider it something that Nature has provided for us to realize the highest level of humanity. We ought to know it so that *Nibbāna* and our lives are not in vain. Every one of us has mindfulness and wisdom in order to touch *Nibbāna*. Don’t let it go to waste!

The *Nibbāna*-element exists naturally so that *Nibbāna* will be realized, like a precious medicine that ends all *Dukkha*. There is the *dukkha* or disease that ordinary medicines cannot cure. This disease of defilement must be cured by the extinction of defilements. Through this the *Nibbāna-dhātu* is realized. This highest spiritual illness lies deeply hidden in us and torments us secretly. Anyone who can quench it has reached the pinnacle of being human.

To say “there is no *Nibbāna*” is more wrong than wrong can be because the *Nibbāna*-element exists naturally, everywhere, always; only nobody is interested enough to find it. The Buddha discovered and revealed it to us through his enormous compassion, but we cut the story short thinking that in this era there is no *Nibbāna* anymore, when we should instead say that nobody understands it or is interested in it. If we simply become proper followers of the Buddha, *Nibbāna* will appear. It is already waiting for people to find it.

Nobody can create *Nibbāna* as it is beyond all causes and conditions. Nevertheless, we can create the conditions for realizing *Nibbāna* through actions which lead to the abandonment of the defilements. We won't claim, as some do, that doing good is a condition for *Nibbāna*. Condition (*paccaya*) implies causal necessity, but there is nothing which has such power over *Nibbāna*. The right words are "Doing good is a condition for realizing *Nibbāna*", which can be done in any age or time. Old folks like the phrase "stairway to *Nibbāna*" because they think *Nibbāna* is a place or city, which is what they have been taught. Still, it is an acceptable enough phrase meaning simply "supporting conditions for the realization of *Nibbāna*".

There are dozens of synonyms for *Nibbāna*, for example, the 'Deathless', 'Permanence', 'Peace', 'Safety', 'Health', 'Diseaselessness', 'Freedom', 'Emancipation', 'Shelter', 'Refuge', 'Immunity', 'Island' (for those fallen into water), 'Highest Benefit', 'Supreme Joy', 'Other Shore', 'That which should be reached', and the 'End of Concocting'. All of these are thoroughly cool because there aren't any fires to make them hot. Peaceful coolness is their meaning or value; unfortunately, it is a value too subtle to interest people who are still overly enveloped by selfishness. When brushing aside the defilements for the first time, you will certainly be delighted by *Nibbāna* more than anything ever before. This is available to, and possible for everyone. May we take coolness as the supreme value.

The expression that best conveys the meaning of *Nibbāna* is "the end of *Dukkha*". Although the Buddha used this term, it's of no interest for those people who feel that they don't have any *dukkha* or suffering. They don't feel they have *dukkha*; they just

want the things they want, and think there isn't any *dukkha* to quench. Consequently, they don't care about quenching *dukkha* or about the end of *Dukkha*. Even many among the large number of foreigners who come to Suan Mokkh feel this way. However, once we tell them there is a new life, or quenching of thirst, or life which is beyond positive and negative, they start to get interested. This is the difficulty of language, which we nonetheless must use to get people interested in *Nibbāna*. For each person, there must be one translation of the word 'Nibbāna' particular to that person. This is no minor difficulty. Yet deep down, without being conscious of, or having any intention toward it, everyone wants *Nibbāna* if only through the power of instinct.

The study of *Nibbāna* in daily life is possible in order to have a better understanding of, and a greater interest in *Nibbāna*'s meaning. When seeing a fire go out or something hot cooling down, look for the meaning of *Nibbāna* in it. When bathing or drinking ice water, when a breeze blows or rain falls, take notice of the meaning of *Nibbāna*. When a fever subsides, a swelling goes down, or a headache goes away, recognize the meaning of *Nibbāna* as found in those things. When perspiring, sleeping comfortably, or eating one's healthy fill, see the meaning of *Nibbāna*. When seeing an animal with all its fierceness and danger tamed away, see the meaning of *Nibbāna*. All of these are lessons to help us understand the nature of *Nibbāna* in every moment. The mind will regularly incline towards contentment in *Nibbāna* and this helps the mind to flow more easily along the path of *Nibbāna*.

Whenever you find coolness in your experience, mark that coolness firmly in your heart, and breathe out and in.

Breathing in is cool, breathing out is cool. In cool, out cool – do this for a little while. This is an excellent lesson that will help you become a ‘lover of *Nibbāna*’ (*Nibbānakāmo*) more quickly. The instincts will develop in an enlightened (*bodhi*) way more than if you don’t practice like this. Natural ‘nibbāna’ – the unconscious quenching of defilement – will occur more often and easily.

In conclusion, *Nibbāna* is not death. Rather, it is the coolness and deathlessness that is full of life. In the Pāli scriptures, the word ‘*Nibbāna*’ is never used regarding death. *Nibbāna* is a natural element always ready to make contact with the mind in the sense that it is one kind of *āyatana* (sensible thing). If there were no *Nibbāna*, Buddhism would have no meaning.

The genuine kind of *Nibbāna*, different from the ‘nibbāna’ of other sects, was discovered by the Buddha. Natural *Nibbāna* can happen simply because the defilements arise and end naturally, because they are just other kinds of concocted nature. Every time the defilements don’t appear, ‘nibbāna’ becomes apparent to the mind. This temporary ‘nibbāna’ nourishes the lives of living things so they survive and don’t go crazy. At least, it lets us sleep at night.

Nibbāna isn’t any kind of special city anywhere. It is realized in the mind that is now void of besieging defilements. For the morality of ordinary people at home, its name is ‘*nibbuti*’. *Nibbāna* isn’t the mind, but it appears to the mind as a certain *āyatana*. We can experience *Nibbāna* here and now by breathing in cool, and breathing out cool.

It is the automatic quenching of heat, of thirst, of *Dukkha* in ordinary life, even without our being conscious of it. It is the eternal nourishment and sustenance of life.

I hope that you all will begin to know that talking about “*Nibbāna* for everyone” isn’t just dyeing cats for sale, but is the genuine cat for catching rats – that is, for ending *Dukkha*, distress, anxiety, and suffering, according to the mindfulness and wisdom of each person.



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About the Author

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu was born in 1906, the son of a southern Thai mother and an ethnic Chinese father. He followed Thai custom by entering a local monastery in 1926, studied for a couple years in Bangkok, and then founded his own refuge for study and practice in 1932. Since then, he has had a profound influence on not only Thai Buddhism but other religions in Siam, and Buddhism in the West. Among his more important accomplishments, he:

- Challenged the hegemony of later commentarial texts with the primacy of the Buddha's original discourses.
- Integrated serious Dhamma study, intellectual creativity, and rigorous practice.
- Explained Buddha-Dhamma with an emphasis on this life, including the possibility of experiencing *Nibbāna* ourselves.
- Softened the dichotomy between householder and monastic practice, stressing that the noble eightfold path is available to everyone.
- Offered doctrinal support for addressing social and environmental issues, helping to foster socially engaged Buddhism in Siam.
- Shaped his forest monastery as an innovative teaching environment and *Garden of Liberation*.

After a series of illnesses, including strokes, he died in 1993. He was cremated without the usual pomp and expense.



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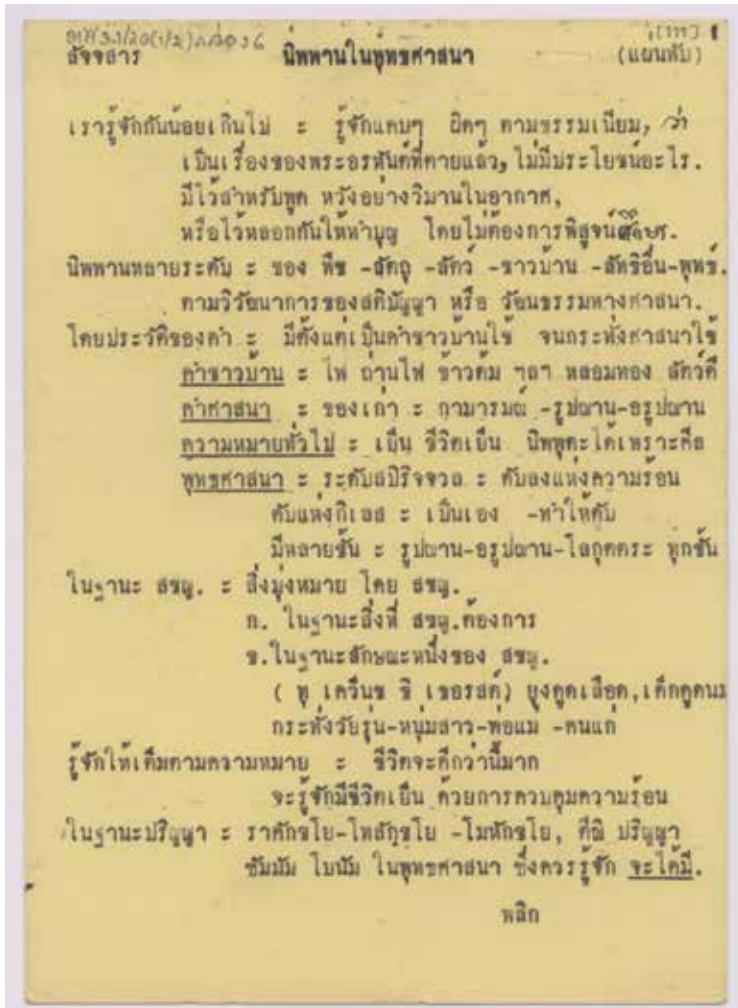
About the Translator

Santikaro went to Thailand with the *Peace Corps* in 1980, was ordained as a Theravāda monk in 1985, trained at Suan Mokkh under Ajahn Buddhādāsa, and became his primary English translator.

Santikaro led meditation retreats at Suan Mokkh for many years, and was the unofficial abbot of nearby Dawn Kiam. He is a founding member of *Think Sangha*, a community of socially engaged Buddhist thinker-activists that gives special attention to the ethical and spiritual impact of consumerism and other modern developments.

Santikaro returned to the USA's Midwest in 2001 and retired from formal monastic life in 2004. He continues to teach in the Buddhist tradition with an emphasis on the early Pāli sources and the insights of Ajahn Buddhādāsa.

Santikaro is the founder of *Liberation Park*, a modern American expression of Buddhist practice, study, and social responsibility in rural Wisconsin. There he continues to study, practice, translate the work of his teacher, teach, and imagine the future of *Buddha-Dhamma* in the West.



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Anumodana

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