

Who Ordered This Truckload of Dung?

"Ajahn Brahm is
the Seinfeld of Dharma."
—Sumi Loundon,
editor of *Blue Jean Buddha*

INSPIRING STORIES FOR
WELCOMING LIFE'S
DIFFICULTIES



AJAHN BRAHM

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“From the first word to the last, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond* is riveting, rollicking, and uncompromisingly real. Ajahn Brahm's voice is utterly fresh, compelling and commanding. Readers seeking a sure guide to ‘the bliss better than sex’ will find it in this wonderful book.”

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“Ajahn Brahm's first American book, *Who Ordered this Truckload of Dung?* introduced us to a British-born Theravada monk who teaches by telling entertaining life stories with a moral punchline. If that was the appetizer, this is the main course. *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond* demonstrates that Ajahn Brahm is that rare meditator who has actually had—and can describe—the profound meditation experiences outlined in the early Buddhist teachings.”

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“Most Buddhist writers are not often lighthearted or zesty, but the British-born Ajahn Brahm is a delightful exception. [...] He is able to write about a variety of mental states and visualizations with precision and discrimination, drawing on his own experience. He is step-by-step systematic, which helps demystify what happens in meditation. Also useful is the specificity with which he describes the kinds of problems meditators encounter and what to do to resolve them. Meditation is difficult to teach on the page, but Brahm, who began his life as an academic at Cambridge, here fulfills his calling as a teacher.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

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To my teacher, Ajahn Chah, who lived at peace,
To my fellow monks who remind me of the beauty of silence,
And to my father who taught me kindness.

Grant yourself a moment of peace,
and you will understand
how foolishly you have scurried about.
Learn to be silent,
and you will notice that
you have talked too much.
Be kind,
and you will realize that
your judgment of others was too severe.

—*Ancient Chinese Proverb*

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preface

LIFE IS A SERIES of interwoven stories, not a set of concepts. Ideas are generalizations, always some distance from the truth. A story, with its array of meanings and richness of detail, is recognizably much closer to real life. That is why we relate more easily to stories than to abstract theories. We love a good yarn.

The stories in this book have been collected over the thirty years that I have lived as a monk in the forest tradition of Theravada Buddhism. For many centuries, Theravada has been the main vehicle of spirituality for the peoples of Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Laos. Now this form of Buddhism is growing in the West—and in the *South* (I live in Australia!).

I am often asked what the difference is between the major strands of Buddhism—Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, and Zen. The answer is that they are like identical cakes with four different icings: on the outside the traditions may look and taste different, but when you go deeply into them, you find the same taste—the taste of freedom. There was only one Buddhism in the beginning. The Buddha taught in northeast India around 2,600 years ago—that's a century before Socrates. He taught not only monks and nuns, but also many thousands of ordinary people: from rice farmers to street sweepers and even prostitutes. The wisdom of the Buddha did not come as a revelation from a supernatural being. It arose from the deepest of insights into the true nature of life.

The Buddha's teachings came from his heart, opened by deep meditation. As the Buddha famously said, "It is in this fathom long body endowed with mind that the beginning and the end of this world are made known."¹

The Buddha's central teaching was the four noble truths. Rearranged from their usual order, these are

- 1 Happiness
- 2 The cause of happiness
- 3 The absence of happiness
- 4 The cause for such an absence

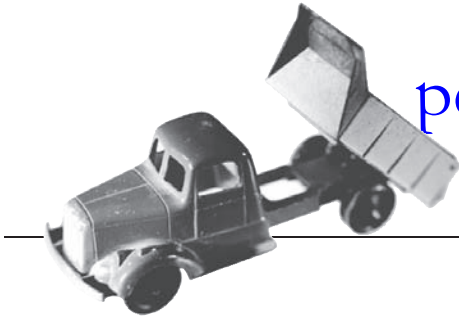
The stories in this book revolve around the second of these noble truths, the cause of happiness.

The Buddha would often teach using stories. My own teacher, the late Ajahn Chah of northeast Thailand, also taught using stories. After hearing one of Ajahn Chah's discourses, it was the stories I would remember most, especially the funny ones. Moreover, it was these stories that conveyed the deepest instructions about the path to inner happiness. The stories were the messengers carrying his teachings.

I have also used stories when teaching Buddhism and meditation in Australia, Singapore, and Malaysia for more than twenty years, and in this book I present some of what I feel are the best of these stories. Each story is intended to speak for itself, so I have added minimal commentary. Each one carries many levels of meaning, so the more you read them, the more truths are revealed.

May you enjoy reading these stories of true happiness as much as those who have heard them told. And may they help change your life for the better, just as they have for so many others.

Ajahn Brahm
Perth, May 2004



perfection
and guilt

two bad bricks

AFTER WE PURCHASED THE LAND for our monastery in 1983 we were broke. We were in debt. There were no buildings on the land, not even a shed. Those first few weeks we slept not on beds but on old doors we had bought cheaply from the salvage yard; we raised them on bricks at each corner to lift them off the ground. (There were no mattresses, of course—we were forest monks.)

The abbot had the best door, the flat one. My door was ribbed with a sizeable hole in the center where the doorknob would have been. I joked that now I wouldn't need to get out of bed to go to the toilet! The cold truth was, however, that the wind would come up through that hole. I didn't sleep much those nights.

We were poor monks who needed buildings. We couldn't afford to employ a builder—the materials were expensive enough. So I had to learn how to build: how to prepare the foundations, lay concrete and bricks, erect the roof, put in the plumbing—the whole lot. I had been a theoretical physicist and high-school teacher in lay life, not used to working with my hands. After a few years, I became quite skilled at building, even calling my crew the BBC (“Buddhist Building Company”). But when I started it was very difficult.

It may look easy to lay a brick: a dollop of mortar underneath, a little tap here, a little tap there. But when I began laying bricks,

I'd tap one corner down to make it level and another corner would go up. So I'd tap that corner down then the brick would move out of line. After I'd nudged it back into line, the first corner would be too high again. Hey, you try it!

Being a monk, I had patience and as much time as I needed. I made sure every single brick was perfect, no matter how long it took. Eventually, I completed my first brick wall and stood back to admire it. It was only then that I noticed—*oh no!*—I'd missed two bricks. All the other bricks were nicely in line, but these two were inclined at an angle. They looked terrible. They spoiled the whole wall. They ruined it.

By then, the cement mortar was too hard for the bricks to be taken out, so I asked the abbot if I could knock the wall down and start over again—or, even better, perhaps blow it up. I'd made a mess of it and I was very embarrassed. The abbot said no, the wall had to stay.

When I showed our first visitors around our fledgling monastery, I always tried to avoid taking them past my brick wall. I hated anyone seeing it. Then one day, some three or four months after I finished it, I was walking with a visitor and he saw the wall.

“That's a nice wall,” he casually remarked.

“Sir,” I replied in surprise, “have you left your glasses in your car? Are you visually impaired? Can't you see those *two bad bricks* which spoil the whole wall?”

What he said next changed my whole view of that wall, of myself, and of many other aspects of life. He said, “Yes. I can see those two bad bricks. But I can see the 998 good bricks as well.”

I was stunned. For the first time in over three months, I could see other bricks in that wall apart from the two mistakes. Above, below, to the left and to the right of the bad bricks were good bricks, perfect bricks. Moreover, the perfect bricks were many,

many more than the two bad bricks. Before, my eyes would focus exclusively on my two mistakes; I was blind to everything else. That was why I couldn't bear looking at that wall, or having others see it. That was why I wanted to destroy it. Now that I could see the good bricks, the wall didn't look so bad after all. It was, as the visitor had said, "a nice brick wall." It's still there now, twenty years later, but I've forgotten exactly where those bad bricks are. I literally cannot see those mistakes any more.

How many people end a relationship or get divorced because all they can see in their partner are "two bad bricks"? How many of us become depressed or even contemplate suicide, because all we can see in ourselves are "two bad bricks." In truth, there are many, many more good bricks, perfect bricks—above, below, to the left and to the right of the faults—but at times we just can't see them. Instead, every time we look, our eyes focus exclusively on the mistakes. The mistakes are all we see, they're all we think are there—and so we want to destroy them. And sometimes, sadly, we do destroy a "very nice wall."

We've all got our two bad bricks, but the perfect bricks in each one of us are much, much more than the mistakes. Once we see this, things aren't so bad. Not only can we live at peace with ourselves, inclusive of our faults, but we can also enjoy living with a partner. This is bad news for divorce lawyers, but good news for you.

I have told this anecdote many times. After one occasion, a builder came up to me and told me a professional secret. "We builders always make mistakes," he said, "But we tell our clients that it is 'an original feature' with no other house in the neighborhood like it. And then we charge them a couple of thousand dollars extra!"

So the “unique features” in your house probably started out as mistakes. In the same way, what you might take to be mistakes in yourself, in your partner, or in life in general, can become “unique features,” enriching your time here—once you stop focusing on them exclusively.

the temple garden

BUDDHIST TEMPLES IN JAPAN are renowned for their gardens. Many years ago, there was one temple that was said to have the most beautiful garden of all. Travelers would come from all over the country just to admire its exquisite arrangement, so rich in simplicity.

An old monk once came to visit. He arrived very early, just after dawn. He wanted to discover why this garden was considered the most inspiring, so he concealed himself behind a large bush with a good view of the rest of the garden.

He saw a young gardening monk emerge from the temple carrying two wicker baskets. For the next three hours, he watched the young monk carefully pick up every leaf and twig that had fallen from the spreading plum tree in the center of the garden. As he picked up each leaf and twig, the young monk would turn it over in his soft hand, examine it, ponder over it; and if it was to his liking he would delicately place it in one of the baskets. If it wasn't to be of use to him, he would drop it in the second basket, the rubbish basket. Having collected and thought over every leaf and twig, having emptied the rubbish basket on the pile at the rear of the temple, he paused to take tea and compose his mind for the next crucial stage.

The young monk spent another three hours, mindfully, carefully, skillfully, placing each leaf and twig just in the right place in

the garden. If he wasn't satisfied with the position of a twig, he would turn it slightly or move it forwards a little until, with a light smile of satisfaction, he would move on to the next leaf, choosing just the right shape and color for its place in the garden. His attention to detail was unparalleled. His mastery over the arrangement of color and shape was superb. His understanding of natural beauty was sublime. When he was finished, the garden looked immaculate.

Then the old monk stepped out from behind his bush. Wearing a broken-toothed smile, he congratulated the young gardening monk, "Well done! Well done indeed, Venerable! I've been observing you all morning. Your diligence is worthy of the highest of praise. And your garden... Well! Your garden is almost perfect."

The young monk's face went white. His body stiffened as if he had been stung by a scorpion. His smile of self-satisfaction slipped from his face and tumbled into the great chasm of the void. In Japan, you can never be sure of old grinning monks!

"What d...do...you mean?" he stuttered through his fear. "What do y...you mean, *almost* perfect?" and he prostrated himself at the old monk's feet. "Oh master! Oh teacher! Please release your compassion on me. You have surely been sent by the Buddha to show me how to make my garden really perfect. Teach me, Oh Wise One! Show me the way!"

"Do you really want me to show you?" asked the old monk, his ancient face creasing with mischief.

"Oh yes. Please do. Oh please master!"

So the old monk strode into the center of the garden. He put his old but still strong arms around the leafy plum tree. Then with the laugh of a saint, he shook the hell out of that poor tree! Leaves, twigs, and bark fell everywhere, and still the old monk shook that tree. When no more leaves would fall, he stopped.

The young monk was horrified. The garden was ruined. The whole morning's work was wasted. He wanted to kill the old monk. But the old monk merely looked around him admiring his work. Then with a smile that melts anger, he said gently to the young monk, "Now your garden is really perfect."

what's done is finished

THE MONSOON IN THAILAND is from July to October. During this period, the monks stop traveling, put aside all work projects, and devote themselves to study and meditation. The period is called *Vassa*, the Rains Retreat.

In the south of Thailand some years ago, a famous abbot was building a new hall in his forest monastery. When the Rains Retreat came, he stopped all work and sent the builders home. This was the time for quiet in his monastery.

A few days later a visitor came, saw the half-constructed building and asked the abbot when his hall would be finished. Without hesitation, the old monk said, "The hall is finished."

"What do you mean, 'The hall is finished?'" the visitor replied, taken aback. "It hasn't got a roof. There are no doors or windows. There are pieces of wood and cement bags all over the place. Are you going to leave it like that? Are you mad? What do you mean, 'The hall is finished?'"

The old abbot smiled and gently replied, "What's done is finished," and then he went away to meditate.

That is the only way to have a retreat or to take a break. Otherwise our work is never finished.

the idiot's guide to peace of mind

I TOLD THE PREVIOUS STORY to a large audience one Friday evening in Perth. On the following Sunday, an angry parent came to tell me off. He had attended that talk together with his teenage son. On Saturday evening, his son wanted to go out with his friends. The father asked him, "Have you finished your homework yet, son?" His son replied, "As Ajahn Brahm taught us at the temple last night, Dad, what's done is finished! See ya."

The following week I told another story.

Most people in Australia have a garden with their house, but only a few know how to find peace in their garden. For the rest, the garden is just another place for work. So I encourage those with a garden to nurture its beauty by working a while and nurture their hearts by just sitting peacefully in the garden, enjoying nature's gifts.

The first gardener thinks this a jolly good idea. So they decide to get all the little jobs out of the way first, and then they will allow themselves a few moments of peace in their garden. After all, the lawn does need mowing, the flowers could do with a good watering, the leaves need raking, the bushes need pruning, the path needs sweeping... Of course, it takes up all of their free time just to get a fraction of those "little jobs" out of the way. Their work is never finished, so they never get to have a few minutes of peace.

(Have you ever noticed that in our culture, the only people who “rest in peace” are found in the cemetery?)

The second gardener thinks they are much smarter than the first. They put away the rakes and the watering cans and sit out in the garden reading a magazine—probably with big, glossy pictures of nature. But that’s enjoying your magazine, not finding peace in your garden.

The third gardener puts away all the gardening tools, all the magazines, newspapers, and radios, and just sits in the peace of their garden—for about two seconds! Then they start thinking: “That lawn really needs mowing. And those bushes should be pruned soon. If I don’t water those flowers within a few days they may die. And maybe a nice gardenia would go well in that corner. Yes! With one of those ornamental birdbaths in front. I could pick one up at the nursery...” That is enjoying thinking and planning. Again, there is no peace of mind there.

Now the *fourth* gardener, the wise one, considers, “I’ve worked long enough, now is the time to enjoy the fruit of my work, to listen for the peace. So even though the lawn needs mowing and the leaves need raking and blah! blah! blah!—not now.” This way, we find the wisdom to enjoy the garden even though it’s not perfect.

Perhaps there’s an old Japanese monk hiding behind one of the bushes ready to jump out and tell us that our messy old garden really is perfect. Indeed, if we look at the work we have already done instead of focusing on the work that remains, we might understand that what’s done has been finished. But if we focus exclusively on the faults, on the things that need to be fixed, as in the case of my brick wall in my monastery, we will never know peace.

The wise gardener enjoys their fifteen minutes of peace in the

perfect imperfection of nature, not thinking, not planning, and not feeling guilty. We all deserve to get away and have some peace; and others deserve the peace of us getting out of their way! Then, after getting our crucial, life-saving fifteen minutes of peace “out of its way,” we carry on with our gardening duties.

When we understand how to find such peace in our garden, we will know how to find peace anytime, anywhere. Especially, we will know how to find peace in the garden of our heart, even though at times we might think that it’s such a mess, with so much to be done.

guilt and absolution

A FEW YEARS AGO, a young Australian woman came to see me at my temple in Perth. Monks are often sought out for advice on personal problems, perhaps because we're cheap—we never charge a fee. She was tormented with guilt. Some six months previously, she had been working in a remote mining community in the north of Western Australia. The work was hard and the money good, but there was not much to do in the hours off work. So one Sunday afternoon she suggested to her best friend, and her best friend's boyfriend, that they all go out for a drive in the bush. Her friend didn't want to go, and neither did her friend's boyfriend, but it was no fun going alone. So she cajoled, argued, and badgered until they gave in and agreed to go on the drive in the bush.

There was an accident: the car rolled on the loose gravel road. The young woman's girlfriend was killed; the boy was paralyzed. The drive was her idea, yet she wasn't hurt.

She told me with sorrow in her eyes: "If only I hadn't forced them to go. She would still be here. He would still have his legs. I shouldn't have made them go. I feel so terrible. I feel so guilty."

The first thought that came into my mind was to reassure her that it wasn't her fault. She didn't plan to have the accident. She had no intention of hurting her friends. These things happen. Let it go. Don't feel guilty. But the second thought that came up was, "I bet she's heard that line before, hundreds of times, and it obviously

hasn't worked." So I paused, looked deeper into her situation, then told her it was good that she felt so guilty.

Her face changed from sorrow to surprise, and from surprise to relief. She hadn't heard this before: that she should feel guilty. I'd guessed right. She was feeling guilty about feeling guilty. She felt guilty and everyone was telling her not to. She felt "double guilt," guilt over the accident and guilt over feeling guilty. Our complicated minds work like that.

Only when we had dealt with the first layer of guilt and established that it was all right for her to feel guilty could we proceed to the next stage of the solution: What's to be done about it?

There's a helpful Buddhist proverb: "Better to light a candle than complain about the darkness."

There's always something we can do instead of feeling upset, even if that something is just sitting peacefully for a while, not complaining.

Guilt is substantially different from remorse. In our culture "guilty" is a verdict hammered out on hard wood by a judge in a court. And if no one else punishes us, we will look to punish ourselves, some way or another. Guilt means punishment deep in our psyche.

So the young woman needed a penance to absolve her from guilt. Telling her to forget it and get on with life wouldn't have worked. I suggested that she volunteer for work at her local hospital's rehab unit, treating the casualties of road accidents. In that context, I thought, she would wear away her guilt with all the hard work, and also, as usually happens in volunteer work, be helped so much by the very people she was there to help.

criminal guilt

BEFORE I HAD THE HONORABLE but burdensome office of abbot dumped upon me, I used to visit the prisons around Perth. I kept a careful record of the hours of service I had spent in jail to be used as credit in case I ever got sentenced!

On my first visit to a big prison in Perth, I was surprised and impressed at the number of prisoners who came to hear me speak about meditation. The room was packed. Around ninety-five percent of the prisoner population had come to learn meditation. Yet the longer I spoke, the more restless my captive audience grew. After only ten minutes, one of the prisoners, one of the leading crims in the jail, put up his hand to interrupt my talk and ask a question. I invited him to go ahead and ask.

“Is it really true,” he said, “that through meditation you can learn how to levitate?”

Now I knew why so many prisoners had come for my talk. They were all planning to learn meditation so they could levitate over the prison walls! I told them that it is possible, but only for exceptional meditators, and then only after many years of training. The next time I went to teach at that prison, only four prisoners turned up for the session.

Over the many years that I taught inside prisons, I got to know some of the crims very well indeed. One thing I discovered was

that every crim feels guilty for what they have done. They feel it day and night, deep in their hearts. They only tell this to their close friends. They wear the standard defiant prisoner face for viewing in public. But when you earn their trust, when they take you as their spiritual guide for a while, then they open themselves and reveal their painful guilt. I would often help them with the next story: the story of the Class B kids.

the class b kids

MANY YEARS AGO, an experiment in education was carried out in secrecy at a school in England. The school had two classes for the same age of children. At the end of the school year an examination was held, in order to select the children for the classes of next year. However, the results of the exam were never revealed. In secrecy, with only the principal and the psychologists knowing the truth, the child who came first in the exam was placed in the same class with the children who came fourth and fifth, eighth and ninth, twelfth and thirteenth, and so on. While the children who came second and third in the exam were placed in the other class, with the children who came sixth and seventh, tenth and eleventh, and so on. In other words, based on their performance in the exam, the higher-performing and lower-performing children were split evenly between the two classes. Teachers for the next year were carefully selected for equal ability and experience. Even the classrooms were chosen with similar facilities. Everything was made as equal as possible, except for one thing: one was called “Class A,” the other, “Class B.”

Whereas in fact the classes had children of equal ability, in everyone’s minds the children in Class A were the clever ones, and the kids of Class B were not so clever. Some of the parents of the Class A children were pleasantly surprised that their child had done so well and rewarded them with presents and praise, whereas the

parents of some of the Class B kids berated their children for not working hard enough and took away some of their privileges. Even the teachers taught the Class B kids in a different manner, not expecting so much from them. For a whole year the illusion was maintained. Then there was another end-of-year exam.

The results were chilling, but not surprising. The children of Class A performed so much better than those of Class B. In fact, the results were just as if they had been the top half chosen from last year's exam. They had become "Class A" children. And those in the other group, though equal the year before, had now become "Class B" kids. That was what they were told for a whole year, that was how they were treated, and that was what they believed—so that was what they became.

the child in the supermarket

I TELL MY “JAILBIRD BUDDIES” never to think of themselves as criminals, but rather as someone who has done a criminal act. Because if they are told they *are* criminals, if they are treated as criminals and if they believe they are criminals, they *become* criminals. That’s how it works.

A young boy dropped a carton of milk at the supermarket checkout and it split open, spilling milk all over the floor. “You stupid child!” said the mother.

In the very next aisle, another boy dropped a carton of honey. It broke open too, spreading honey over the floor. “That was a stupid thing you did,” said his mother.

The first child has been classified stupid for life; the other has had only one fault pointed out. The first will probably become stupid; the other will learn to stop doing stupid things.

I ask my friends in prison what else they did the day of their crime. What else did they do the other days of that year? What else did they do the other years of their life? Then I repeat the story of my brick wall. There are other bricks in the wall that represent our life apart from our crimes. In fact, the good bricks are always many, many more than the bad. Now, are you a bad wall deserving destruction? Or are you a good wall with a couple of bad bricks, just like the rest of us?

A few months after I became abbot and stopped visiting jails, I

received a personal phone call from one of the prison officers. He asked me to come back. He gave me a compliment I will always treasure. He told me that my students at the prison, once they had finished their sentences, never returned to jail.

we are all crims

IN THE PREVIOUS STORY I talked about people I worked with in jail, but the message applies to anyone “doing time” in the prison of guilt. That “crime” for which we feel guilty—what else did we do that day, that year, this life? Can we see the other bricks in the wall? Can we see beyond the stupid act causing our guilt? If we focus on the “Class B” act too long, we might become a “Class B” person—that’s why we keep repeating our mistakes and amassing more guilt. But when we see the other parts of our lives, the other bricks in our wall, when we gain a realistic perspective, then a wonderful insight opens like a flower in the heart: we *deserve* to be forgiven.

letting go of guilt, forever

THE MOST DIFFICULT STAGE of the journey out of guilt is convincing ourselves that we deserve to be forgiven. The stories given so far are there to assist us, but the final step out of the prison is made alone.

When he was still a young boy, a friend of mine was playing with his best friend on a pier. For a joke, he pushed his friend into the water.

The friend drowned.

For many years that young man lived with crippling guilt. The drowned friend's parents lived next door. He grew up knowing that he had deprived them of their son. Then one morning, as he told it to me, he realized he didn't need to feel guilty any more. He walked out of his own prison into the warm air of freedom.

