

The Art of Disappearing: *The Buddha's Path to Lasting Joy* by Ajahn Brahm

Wisdom Publications, 2011
Paperback, 192 pages
Reviewed by Caroline Starkey

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*As you learn how to calm the mind down,
you also learn little by little how to disappear,
how to fade away.*

There is nothing quite like comparing your mind and meditation practice to shooting a hail of excited gunfire at a concrete cinema screen, yet in his new book, *The Art of Disappearing*, Ajahn Brahm does just that. Offering a number of traditional (and some rather nontraditional) stories, *The Art of Disappearing's* central concern is to help the meditator let go and embrace becoming nobody. The disappearing happens, as Ajahn Brahm explains, “in spite of you” when you practice *nibbida* (disengaging or standing back). In fact, the real purpose of meditation, he extols, is to become a loser! To gradually lose ego, to lose your attachment to attainment, and to begin the process of disengaging because at the heart of it, “When even a little bit of you disappears, you have more peace, freedom, and joy.”

This is a book that returns again and again to its central theme of letting go—yet it does not seem like a book for the

beginner meditator. As Ajahn Brahm states in his preface, this is not a “how to meditate” guide. It does not tell you how to sit or exactly what to do in your meditation from one moment to the next. As he says, “Sure, I could give you a few instructions, but you’re already off having a wonderful time. And that’s exactly what I want for you.” Instead, I believe the principle conceit of this book is to provide inspiration—and what better inspiration than giving a glimpse of the fun and bliss of what deep meditation might offer?

If you are struggling with your meditation practice, Ajahn Brahm’s advice might give you pause for thought. If each time you sit, you are faced with firing guns at a concrete cinema screen, mind-numbing boredom, or tiredness, or you tend to just employ brute willpower to keep watching your breath, Ajahn Brahm’s book could help. His style is gentle but at the same time disciplined. He’s gentle in that he

continuously shows awareness of the problems that might be faced during meditation and provides pragmatic reassurance. His advice on dealing with tiredness exemplifies this: “Be careful not to own your sleepiness—it has nothing to do with you; it’s just an effect stemming from a cause, that’s all.” The discipline he espouses features his characteristically direct statements relating to the importance of the attitude of the meditator: “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and success in meditation is in the attitude of the meditator.” This is Ajahn Brahm giving attitude adjustment in kind but no uncertain terms. “You’ve got a choice,” he offers. “You can keep on suffering, or you can attain parinibbāna.”

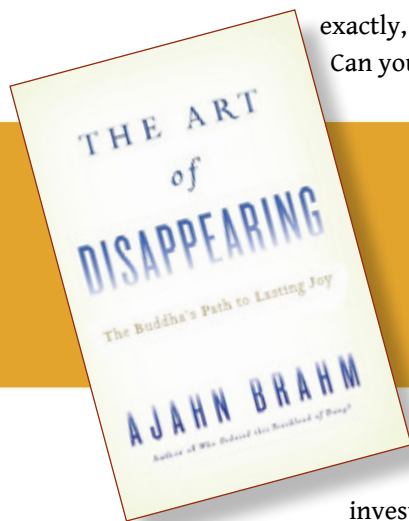
Yet, is it really as easy and as straightforward as that? Doesn’t a dedication to outcomes (e.g., parinibbāna) actually hinder the success of meditation (an aspect which Ajahn

Brahm does suggest later)? Who is it, exactly, who is making this choice? Can you really give meditation the

you are bored, see how long you can be bored. Keep a diary of your boring moments . . . and see if you can beat your own record.” Among other things, it is the gentle humor of this book that sets it apart.

Quite possibly the most useful tool he gives the reader in this book is his advice about dispassionate detachment, something you can do at any time, not just on the meditation cushion: “When you disengage and go inside to the place where Māra can’t reach, there’s a beautiful freedom from suffering.” It’s a movie, just a movie, he says. Let go, disengage, and disappear. He knows his Western audience well, but in our culture of attaining and striving, it is sometimes challenging to hear that: “I now know I was wasting my time trying to be somebody by studying to pass all those exams. You’ve probably been through all that . . . that’s the kamma you have to face.”

The difficulty with that is, what is the alternative? Can you really put effort into studying and education without ambition? I was left, very occasionally, wondering whether



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full dedication that this book advises without having some investment in the possible outcomes

that might occur as a result of the practice?

It does seem as if there are two seemingly contradictory sides to the advice. On the one side, be dedicated, make a choice; and on the other, “You don’t become a meditator; meditating just happens.” While I don’t feel that this tension is ever satisfactorily resolved (perhaps it can’t be), I do think I understand what Ajahn Brahm is saying. He is advising that there needs to be a balance between being disciplined in your practice and committed to making the effort, and forcing the meditation. “Meditation really is an easy thing to do, but most people just don’t get it. What they do is try harder to make it easy—but that’s a self-contradiction.”

Instead, he suggests, stay with it, despite the experience of difficulty. Even though this is a challenging balance to strike, he assures the meditator that “When the energy stops going into the doing, it starts to flow into the knowing.” Interestingly, Ajahn Brahm highlights that the difficulties that sometimes accompany meditation (including boredom, frustration, and irritability) actually provide a means to become aware of and really know the First Noble Truth of *dukkha*. And again he advises you to stay with it: “Next time

what he was suggesting was really possible for the majority of lay men and women navigating their lives. Although perhaps that is my kamma as a Ph.D. student! Indeed, although some of the advice in *The Art of Disappearing* does make you think deeply with a questioning mind, perhaps that is the point even though you may not always find the suggestions easy to put into practice.

Still, I put the book down after each chapter with the desire to meditate, not to read—and you get the impression that this is what Ajahn Brahm wants you to do, as he sees his role as a teacher helping “to [pull] people out of their own piles of dung.” But he is clear that the Buddhist path is about “virtue, stillness, and wisdom” and, ultimately, making the effort to find out for yourself. “Let go of the past, don’t try to get anything, and have no expectations. Just allow things to disappear.”

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