Starting a Personal Retreat

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 43:11

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Sammāsambuddhassa

Homage to the Blessed, Noble, and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

Traditionally, that's a chant to the historical Buddha, or to all the Buddhas. But spiritually, we are recognising the Buddha within ourselves.

Today marks the beginning of the winter retreat and it's an opportunity for those of you who've been here to re-establish your commitment and energy and to put more effort into the practice. Not that you haven't been putting maximum effort into the practice. And for those of you who have just joined, obviously it is a special period.

Now it seems to me that we can waste a lot of time if we are confused or not clear about the aim of meditation practice. As far as I'm concerned, the only thing that we can expect of a meditation period is to feel that we've honed the skills of meditation a bit more. If we join a practice with the idea that we're going to achieve something, no matter what it is, even at a mundane level of a calm and peaceful mind, to rid ourselves of some peculiar neuroses. Even at that level, we immediately put pressure on ourselves, immediately put an ego idea of what the meditation is concerned with.

So the first thing to do is to banish completely all aims and objectives. In so doing, we're then left in an open space. And in that open space, we can perceive, perhaps, what the true intention of our meditation should be.

And this is expressed by the Buddha in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse, the discourse on how to establish mindfulness. All he asks us to do is to be aware. And he uses three words to give us the idea of what this awareness might be. *Ātāpī*, *sampajāno*, *satimā*.

Now *ātāpī* comes from the root word *tapos*, which means fire. Fire. And it refers to the energy that we have to put into the practice. If at any time we're not putting energy into the practice, then we're not going to establish this right awareness. However, that energy can become easily corrupted. So we have to also be very clear as to what the energy is. In Zen, they put it in this wonderful paradoxical way. It's the effortless effort. So we have to discover what the effortless effort is.

That effortless effort has to sustain *sampajañño*. *Sampajañño*'s root word is this *ñ* which comes right through our civilisation in words like 'to know'. The 'kn' goes right back to that *ñ*. It comes through the

Latin to us. And the root word is to know. And the prefix *pa* is a reinforcement. And it's referring to a particular type of knowing. And that knowing is *paññā*. That knowing is intuitive insight. So we have to understand what is meant by an intuitive intelligence as opposed to every other intelligence we have.

And the third one is *satimā*, which has in it there the word *sati*, which is a state of awareness. Effort, intelligence, awareness. That's the composition of the meditative mind.

So now, what is the quality of awareness? In its simplest form, it's just to know, just to be here, a sense of presence. However, even frogs have that. All beings have a sense of presence. It might not be a self-conscious presence, but they definitely have a sense of presence. It's part of consciousness. It's a quality of consciousness to be conscious. Even in sleep, there's a sense of presence. Somebody pulls the blanket over you when you're cold. Somebody wakes up when the bell goes off. So even in deepest sleep, there's some slight awareness going on.

So if it were just awareness, it wouldn't do. That awareness has to be flavoured with this intelligence. And the flavour of that intelligence is simply a question mark. It's a curiosity. If that curiosity has a word attached to it, if that curiosity has a goal attached to it, a sentence, *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*, transiency, suffering, *Nibbāna*, if that question mark is corrupted by a question, then we immediately drop into a thinking mind, a mind which is distorted by conceptual thinking. So somehow we have to raise that intelligence, we have to abstract it, we have to disembed it out of thought.

Equally, if that state is coloured by an emotion and we presume that this intuition has something to do with a feeling, then that is also a similar mistake. Both of these things—what we normally mean by intelligence and what we normally mean by emotional intelligence—both of these types of intelligences are simply expressions of the original intelligence as it expresses itself through thought and emotion, and ultimately through the body. The body itself has an intelligence. We see it in athletes.

So the business of meditation, the business of *vipassanā*, is to first of all get to a point where we can actually practise *vipassanā*. And that *vipassanā* itself means to really see. The root word *passati* just means to see, to really see. So it's again referring to this insightfulness, this intelligence. And the effort we need is simply the effort to get to that level of consciousness, to get to that point where this purity of awareness with this lovely open question mark is allowed to exist, just to be.

So whatever technique we employ in our meditation, doesn't matter what it is, whether it's the strict Mahāsi thing about noting and walking slowly or following the breath flowing up and down the body or whatever skill, whatever technique you employ, it's always to do with getting ourselves into this completely open, spacious awareness which has this question mark, this curiosity about it.

So the first thing is, when we sit, is to use some object, mainly the breath. And the reason we use the breath is because it's neutral. So it immediately drains away from the system any emotion which might be attached to a particular object. Watching a film is exciting, but watching the breath can be positively

boring. There's nothing there, it's just the breath, just the sensations.

By putting our mind just on the sensations, with no other intention than to feel sensations, experience sensations as sensations, then there arises a certain brightness in the mind. When that brightness awakens within us, find that position within yourself of an intelligent observation. And the closest image I have of that is of a child. When a child sees a bug they've never seen before, they fix on it, don't they? Their eyes just fixate on that bug. They stop still. There's an absolute silence comes upon them. And the mouth drops.

The mouth dropping and the tongue stopping is a sign that the intellectual, the thinking faculty has stopped. If you watch yourself very closely, whenever you're thinking, there's always some little vibrations on the tongue. So when the tongue is still and the jaw drops, and the eyes become still, then this intelligence begins to appear. In your meditation, the teeth should be separate because the jaw should be relaxed. The lips are closed, but the jaw is relaxed.

Getting into that position, we need an effort to get ourselves there. And that effort is simply the effort to keep bringing that mind back into this position. Now, in this particular technique of the Mahāsi, for instance, this noting word is used. It's a very skillful way. Remember, the Mahāsi was a scholar. In fact, he was what was called the questioner at the great meeting of 1956 to celebrate 2,500 years, where many of the scholars and monks came to Rangoon, where they built a special building that looked like the original cave where the first council was convened after the Buddha's death, and there they agreed upon the different scriptures. Most of it was just an agreement of what was already agreed upon. But it was an occasion where certain things were discussed. And he was the so-called questioner.

So his standing in the Buddhist community, the Theravāda Buddhist community, was second to none. He was considered to be a scholar. Now the problem with any people who live in their head is that they live in their head. So this technique that he devised was especially apt for people who get caught up in thought. Our particular culture definitely gets us caught up in thought.

So, by reducing the whole of thought to a single word—rising, falling, looking, stretching, tasting—by reducing thought to a single word, it immediately cuts out this whole proliferation of thought around an object. So using a word like that can be very skillful. So you bring yourself back, rising, falling, rising, falling.

Now, if at the first time, as we begin to meditate, there is this effort to just bring the mind back, something takes us away, if we are aggressive towards that something, if we push it away, if we see it as a nuisance to our meditation, then we're simply putting more aggression into the system. So we have to note what that is, the wandering mind, whatever the content is—worrying, thinking, dreaming, whatever it is—we just note it. It's a careful observation of that. Remember, that's a memory of a thought. A memory of a thought. And then we just guide our attention back to the breath.

This action of bringing the attention back to the breath is an act of will. Will is what conditions us. Every time we make the effort to just gently bring that attention back to the breath, it's conditioning the mind to be still. So the first part of any meditation is just bringing the mind to rest upon an object. We use mainly the breath. That's your first state.

Once you're there, once you've done that, you then have just the word and just the object. Now, as you begin to keep saying the word and keep going into the object, there comes a feeling of being fixed on the object, that you can't move off the object. Nothing can take you from it. Even when a thought comes, even when a sound comes, there'll be a recognition of hearing and then immediate return to the breath.

Now at that point, the concentration has risen to the level of what we call first *jhāna*. What we mean by an absorption state is that the mind is still on the object. The difference between this sort of concentration and a concentration that we might get in *jhāna*, the absorptions, is that what we want from *jhāna* is a beautiful state of mind. What we want from *jhāna* is to increase that beautiful state of mind and turn ourselves into glorious charismatics. However, the purpose of insight meditation is not that. It's to actually begin to see where we're causing ourselves problems.

Remember the Buddha reduced the whole of his teachings to three words in the Pali, *dukkha*, *dukkha nirodha*—suffering and the end of suffering. It's as simple as that. So what we're concerned with ultimately in our meditation is to find out where does suffering arise, who's causing suffering, is there a who that causes suffering, etc.

So, drawing our mind to this point where the word is still keeping us on the breath, we can say to ourselves, this concentration is good. So we can, at that point, congratulate ourselves and feel good about it. At that point, we then keep centring in on the breath, still able to observe anything which arises, be it a feeling in the body, an emotion, a thought, whatever it is, we still keep going and we still keep coming back to the breath.

And there comes a point where the concentration is so locked into the present moment that there's no time for words. Thought is always an afterthought. In that locking into the present moment, the thinking mind simply stops. That's *vipassanā*. That's the point where true insight will arise for us. Our whole practice is to bring ourselves to that point. The whole of our effort is just to bring ourselves to that point. That's all.

That's why the Buddha insists on this idea of awareness in the present moment. In the present moment, there's no time for the mind to think about the present moment. It's in the present moment. Being in the present moment, that intelligence now sheds off any conceptual thinking and is able to directly experience what's actually going on. And it's in those moments that some small insight can arise concerning these three characteristics of existence. The fact of transiency. The fact that everything is not self. The fact that if I form a relationship with anything of me and mine, possession, identity, wanting, not wanting, some form of dissatisfaction will arise.

These things, according to the Buddha, arise quite naturally to that intelligence once it gets into that position. These little insights are not mind-blowing experiences, where you suddenly fling yourself up in the air and say, got it, eureka, like poor old Archimedes. These moments are just very simple, very obvious to the intelligence. You wouldn't think anything of them. But the effect slowly, over a period of time, is to shave away all that delusion and we find ourselves unbinding ourselves. All these opinions, definitions, all these needs and wants are bindings around us.

So this cutting off, this loosening of the binding is the process of the enlightenment. That's why *Nibbāna* is translated in one sense as unbinding, unshackling. That's why the Buddha says he's achieved the *asaṅkhat aṃ cittaṃ*, which is the unconditioned mind, the unconditioned consciousness. It's a consciousness which is living in the world, fully in the world, but not caught up in the world.

When you're in that state of pure *vipassanā*, when you're there just watching, just able to be with it, when you come out of that state, ask yourself, what were the qualities of that state? Even though there was pain, were you suffering? Even though there was an emotional state which was painful, were you suffering? Even though there was great joy, were you excited? What was your relationship to what you were watching?

So now, once we understand where we have to get to, then we have to hone those skills to protect it. So if the first part of our period is just trying gently to bring ourselves back to this, we always have to be on guard for the armies of Māra.

Now the first attack is anything which is pleasurable. Now, when we say pleasure, is it pleasure that we want to get rid of? Definitely not. There's nothing wrong with pleasure. We all know it's very beautiful. Nobody would want to follow the spiritual practice of Buddhism if we had to ban cream cakes. It's not necessary. Our problem is not pleasure, but our relationship to pleasure. What is it we want from pleasure? Whether it be something quite basic, like porridge, or something wonderful, like love. Or something sublime, like some great spiritual joy.

What is it we want from it? We want happiness, don't we? We want happiness. We want to be happy. If we were always happy, we wouldn't meditate, would we? We'd just be perfectly happy. So our problem is that this search for happiness isn't working. We keep investing in all this stuff, and it just keeps letting us down. In terms of an investor on the stock market, he would think we're real fools. To put any investment at all in the joys of life, knowing full well that you can't trust them at all. You can't even trust human beings.

The last thing we would want to put our trust in for our personal happiness is another human being. They're terrible. They leave you. They do awful things to you. Then they get sick and they die. They can just leave you utterly bereft. So the last thing we need to find this absolute comfort in is anything to do with a phenomenal world.

So therefore we have to come off the drug. Come off the drug of pleasure. But first of all we have to be convinced that in fact pleasure is a drug. We have to see that our addiction is taking us to more and more suffering.

Now, the one time of the day when you can make this very plain to yourself is when you're eating. Take it slowly. Sit there before the food. Contact the body. Contact the feeling of hunger. Know that somewhere mixed in that is the desire to find happiness. That's the greed. I'm going to really enjoy this. Sausage, mash and beans. Can't think of anything more delightful. There's this little voice saying, this is going to be really good.

So, once it's there, using that noting word, if it works for you, very slowly lift up the food. Now when it hits the tongue, what do we have? We have pleasure. At the physical base, we have the tongue telling us what a wonderful thing this is. Now when I say we have pleasure, this pleasure is just sensations which are being interpreted by the mind as something pleasurable. If you were one of those very unfortunate persons who didn't like sausage, mash and beans, it would not be perceived as something pleasurable. This idea of pleasurable is not within the sausage, mash and beans.

The idea of what is pleasurable and worthy of enjoyment is in the head. It's in the way we have associated with this object. Taking our consciousness deep into the tongue, what do we find? Just taste. Around it we've built this aura of enjoyment. We have to separate out the taste on the tongue from the aura of enjoyment. And in so doing, we're actually beginning to deconstruct the event. In deconstructing the event, we're also going to find that there's nobody enjoying it.

One of the constant little techniques that the Buddha uses throughout the scripture is the technique of deconstructing. He turns everything into lists. You've come across them. The five aggregates and the six sense bases. Everything has to be pulled apart. And he does that in order to take away the concept of wholeness. The concept of an entity.

So you're here. Tasting. As you perceive the taste, you see that there's an emotion around it. Now what we have to see is what is our relationship to that state. What is the relationship we have to that state? And that relationship is one of desire. That relationship is one of wanting to be happy right there. If we can catch that movement, then we're catching what the Buddha calls *taṇhā*. It's rather heavily translated as craving. But it's that desire of consciousness, desire to find happiness in sensual pleasure.

If we can stay above all that, see, that's the *vipassanā* mind. If we can stay above all that and we can slowly as we eat allow this greed to just pass away because we're not feeding the greed and we reduce ourselves simply to the food and the pleasure it brings in the heart, then we're discovering a way of being with pleasure in that non-indulgent way.

If we indulge in pleasure, any time, there will always be a hangover. We think we only get hangovers when we get drunk. But hangovers come any time you have pleasure. We've got to catch that. We've got to

see that. We've got to see that pleasure, that indulgence in pleasure, doesn't deliver. We've actually got to see it. When we've indulged in pleasure, become attached to pleasure, the problem is afterwards, the frustration of not getting it when you want. The underlying fear that exists, that subexists all pleasure, that you might never get it again. These two things, the grief at the loss of pleasure.

If you take any of your sense bases, your eyes for instance, the amount of pleasure and joy we get from our eyes, you've only got to imagine one moment slowly going blind. Where does the suffering come from? Are the eyes suffering? Where's the pain? Where's the despair coming from? It's coming from that identity. It's coming from that indulgence, association. It's coming from that addiction to pleasure as a place where we're going to be happy.

So part of our process of enlightenment is to unshackle ourselves of the idea that we can find happiness in the sensual, pleasurable, even in the spiritual world of high absorptions. And yet we also mustn't make the mistake that we have to kill the pleasure. It's nothing to do with pleasure. We often hear that quote from the Bible, money is the root of evil. But the real quote from the Bible is quite correctly, it's the love of money which is the root of all evil. So it's the love of things which is causing our problems.

So putting pleasure aside, we now have to deal with all those things which are horrible. When something like aversion comes up, and in a meditation, probably boredom, something like that, you have to be very careful not to listen to these things. Boredom will always tell you to seek distraction. Try another technique. Go do some walking meditation. I need to stretch myself. I'll walk around the property and look at the flowers. It'll always tell you to go and do something which makes you happy. But that's not the cure to boredom.

Boredom is cured through repetition. I'm sure you've all experienced during your learning days where you've got bored with something, but because you've kept at it, then the interest again arises naturally. Correct? Definitely. So it's a case of observing the boredom, feeling the boredom, experiencing the boredom as boredom, seeing how we relate to boredom, how we want to escape it, thinking that distraction will bring the end of boredom. All that has to be seen and we have to wait patiently for the boredom to dissipate.

All negative states come to rest. Interestingly enough, in the scriptures the Buddha never talks about going from hatred to love. He always talks about going from hatred to non-hatred. First of all, that turbulence has to be allowed to come to rest. Only then is it transformed into its opposite. So just as much as we were bored, don't be surprised if the same amount of energy arises as interest. It's just turning over itself.

When it comes to sloth and torpor, it seems to me that a meditator needs no more than six hours per night. And in fact should do with more like five and a half. We sleep in one and three hour, one and three quarter hour cycles. What are we doing? Are we digging roads? Does the body need vast amounts of rest? Are we stressed? Are people rushing at us all over the place? Do this, do that? Are we into production targets? Are our minds being caught up in all sorts of figures and thoughts and plans? We're completely

relaxed. So therefore, a meditator should say to themselves, if I'm sleeping more than five and a half hours, this may very well be sloth. And if it reaches eight, then it's profoundly disgusting. Only dogs sleep eight hours a day.

So we have to awaken, we have to lift up that energy, that physical energy, to match the mental energy that we need in order to make these sorts of efforts. So once you've decided that enough's enough, any time tiredness comes, don't be fooled by it. You know these little voices that say just a ten minute kip will do you very good here. Lift yourself up. Refuse to be annihilated. Refuse to be dominated by a feeling of sloth and torpor. Don't call it tiredness. You've had it. Call it sloth and torpor. And lift yourself up and make yourself walk gently. Walk with it. Make it your object.

What are the feelings of sloth and torpor? Where do they arise? Do you feel sloth and torpor at the end of your fingers? Has your nose ever felt torporous? Where does it arise? Keep searching for it. Keep an objective view of it. See it as something interesting to explore. Don't be surprised if this sloth and torpor begin to evaporate and suddenly you find yourself with a very clear, pure energy. Because that's the opposite.

If you find yourself restless, jumping about, be careful not to obey these little commands that come from within us. Move, do this, do that. Where restlessness wants you to move, stay absolutely still. Refuse. Just refuse to move. If, for instance, you feel very restless before you go to sleep, one of the best tricks is to get yourself into a comfortable position and refuse to move. It may be agony for a little while, but then the energy just turns. So it's a case of accepting that these are just energy forms. We have to stop giving them names. We have to stop giving them some sort of credence. Stop giving them some sort of power over us. And we do that by just gently refusing to obey them. So when restlessness comes, be still with it. Relax around it. Refuse to move.

And finally, doubt. So doubt is insidious. And the one way to overcome doubt is just to create an area where there'll be just a putting of confidence into the practice, a putting of confidence into ourselves. And when doubt comes, when there's some sort of, I can't do it, that's one of the big ones, isn't it? I can't do it. Make that the object of your awareness. Don't let anything grab us. As soon as we find ourselves caught up in something, push it away, push it away. Observe it, experience it as an object. Don't get caught up in it.

This sceptical doubt is often based on a fear of commitment. It's often based on a feeling of low self-esteem. This is not the same as what we might call honest doubt, the doubt that the Buddha asks us to have towards his teaching. That's a sense of, is it true? And then a real desire to investigate. That's the wonder of a philosopher. And that's the mood that we have to engender within us, which is one of the factors of enlightenment.

Our meditation should be gently saturated with joy. And that gentle saturation is caused by *pīti*. Pīti translates as joy, bliss, all those sorts of words. But it's far too strong for *vipassanā*. That sort of thing is highly developed through these absorption states. But as far as vipassanā is concerned, it's interest.

Interest. I'm sure you remember times when you've been very interested in something. And it's been joyous. Correct. Interest.

So this interest has to be, as it were, lifted by us out of our system. We have to bring up the interest, bring up the desire to want to know. That's the Gnostic path. That's the path of the scientist. They want to know. So this interest as it arises within us is a support to that intelligence. So we need to be able to cajole ourselves, to argue ourselves into a point that this is very interesting. And then you'll find that, of course, because the heart is joyous, everything will come up to support your meditation.

That can even be found in the most miserable depressions. And it's found by turning upon the depression as an object to observe, as an object to investigate, to feel, to experience as it is, to see how there's a part of us that wants to get caught up in it, that wants to get depressed about being depressed, wants to get really angry about it. That will simply spiral us downwards into the warm hands of Prozac. That's not the way out, is it? So we have to be able to lift ourselves up above these moods and make them an object. Be interested in them. And the core interest is where and how does suffering arise? Where's the core of our suffering?

So having dealt now with the more obvious hindrances, we have to deal with, as it were, the more subtle ones. And those are simply to get caught up in what is beautiful, what is coming up as beautiful in the mind. Be very careful that once you get into this lovely state of *passaddhi*, tranquility, where the mind is still, lovely and peaceful. If you don't watch it, just very slowly, you wander off into the land of lotus eaters. And what you've lost is your intelligence. And you can often tell a meditator that gets into that, their head goes like that. Very gentle. Now, if you were to ask them, are they awake? Of course they're awake. They're right there, not a problem. But the intelligence has switched off. They've just sunk into that lovely state of tranquility. What a waste of time.

Instead, this is the perfect opportunity to really go into the breath. To center in on the breath. To go for the very center of the breath. And as you beeline in, focus in, right into the center of the breath, all that energy will come up to support your investigations. And you're moving deeper and deeper into concentration. Deeper and deeper into a direct viewing of things. So don't waste those moments of tranquility. Acknowledge them. Very beautiful. But really work to put your mind right into the center of the breath. Awaken that question mark. And keep going into the center.

Why into the center? Because of the focus. And when something comes to take you out of the focus of the breath, that very same focus moves to that new object. Whether it be a pain in the leg or a sound of a bird, it doesn't matter. It'll just shift like that and then come back. It'll stay with you all the time. So don't waste those times in our meditation when the peace descends upon us.

One of the misunderstandings is this business of self-awareness. When we're self-aware, when we're aware of being an observer, there's still a shuddering in the mind. What's happening is that this consciousness, looking into the mind, feeling what's in the heart, sensing what's in the body, being aware

of it, being with it, is also catching its own image in the mind. You've watched TV, where you can see yourself watching TV. It's exactly that and your attention is moving from you watching TV in the TV to watching the TV. However, as the program gets more interesting the attention suddenly blocks onto the program and you don't see yourself in the screen watching yourself watching TV. So that's the trick. If that sense of observer is there you just note it, self-awareness, just keep coming back to the object and it will block it.

Alternatively, if there's a lot of peace around, if there's a lot of tranquility and the sense of self comes up like that, turn upon the self. Find out where does that image of a self arise. Where's it come from? Where's it being manufactured?

Now, the final thing is this whole business of prioritizing. In terms of meditation, we can't prioritize any part of the day, because all parts of the day are absolutely equally important in the process of growing awareness, of growing intelligence, and of growing effort. So don't say to ourselves, the sitting is more important than the walking. The walking is more important than the eating. Eating is more important than opening a door, walking up the stairs or having a pee. It's not. It all has to be equally seen as absolutely important. There mustn't be a break in that continuity. And what we're going for is a continuous state of awareness, a continuous state of presence all the way through the day. And so you have to see, first of all, those wrong opinions. And secondly, you have to see what parts of the day are weak. When do we give in? When do we stop? Those are the parts you have to empower. When you empower those parts, you empower the whole day.

So our commitment is moment to moment mindfulness, so long as there's wakefulness. So, what I suggest is that you draw a line, and just take a moment to recommit yourself to the practice. And every day you should draw that line and recommit yourself to the practice. That commitment is the *adhiṭṭhāna*. It's the determination to go on. And that determination has to be renewed every so often. And the best thing to do is to always choose a point of the day when you make this very firm commitment to the practice. And it's something that you can take with you in daily life. It's not just something that we do here. You can take it right into your daily life as one point in the day when you argue yourself, if you don't feel like it, to commit yourself to a moment-to-moment mindfulness.

So, I'd like to bring this little talk to an end by allowing you just for a moment there to draw up your will, the *dhamma chanda*, the will for the noble truth, translated later into the Mahāyāna system as the *bodhicit ta*, the mind bent on enlightenment. So commit yourself, and I will draw this little talk to an end with an offering of a blessing to you from the three Buddhas.

Sābba buddhā balāpattā pacheka buddhānaṃ tatheva ca, arahantānaṃ ca tejjena, rakkhaṇg bandhāmi sabbaso.

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