Developing the Spiritual Faculties

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 45:46

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

Homage to the blessed noble and fully self-enlightened one.

Yesterday we did the hindrances, how to deal with those states of mind which take us away from the object. Even though they're called hindrances, they are our teachers, aren't they, because they're there to tell us what's wrong with us, and through our instructions we can deal with them in a skillful way. So we have to look upon them as welcome enemies. We have to open our hearts to our hindrances.

Now, there's the other side of the equation, which is the seven factors of enlightenment and the five spiritual faculties. And I'm going to try and dovetail them. By the end of the talk, you'll be utterly confused. But I'll try and reduce it to a very simple statement at the end. And the best thing, especially for those who don't know what I'm talking about, is to let it go in one ear and out the other. Because it's more in the sense of giving a certain confidence and a certain background knowledge which gives you faith, confidence in the process.

The ground of spiritual practice in terms of advancement is faith. I was going to say *sīla*, right conduct. Of course we always talk about *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. So *paññā* is the wisdom factor and *sīla* refers to the conduct, and the one must be mirrored in the other. But here we're talking more specifically about developing this quality of intuitive insight.

So faith is crucial, and the first thing is not to confuse that with belief. If we define belief as faith in a statement such as "I believe in a god" or "I don't believe in a god," then that's not what the Buddha is talking about when he talks about *saddhā*, faith. What he's talking about is a sense of confidence, a sense of trust.

If you think about it, anytime you act, especially those times during our lives when it's a big decision such as moving house or getting a job elsewhere or forming a relationship or going to live with somebody, marry them, all those sorts of occasions demand faith. You trust. You trust in your own decision. You trust in the way that you see things, that you understand things, and that there's something in the heart which is telling you that this is what you have to do. Otherwise you just wouldn't do it. So you can see that the relationship between trust and commitment is crucial.

If you don't trust, you just don't do it. If you go to a surgeon to have the pimple removed at the end of your nose and you don't feel right about him or her, then you don't do it. You go and find somebody else.

So that faith has two qualities. It has the quality of understanding and the quality of trust which comes more from the heart. This understanding is got merely by listening to Dharma talks, reading. That's the first sort of understanding we have. It's a given and it makes sense. The deeper understanding comes when that becomes our own way, that we've worked it out for ourselves.

You might hear somebody, for instance, explain the wheel of dependent origination, this psychology the Buddha taught, and it might initially make sense. But then when you reflect on it, it may begin to make more sense, and you can see that with that more sense there grows that sense of trust, that coming from the heart, that willingness to investigate further. And of course through the practice of *vipassanā*, what was an intellectual understanding then becomes a direct understanding, and that of course begins to cement the faith.

It is said that faith doesn't become unshakeable until we've intuited *Nibbāna*. Once a person has experienced *Nibbāna*, then there's no way that that faith can be shaken because now they know for themselves absolutely that the teaching of the Buddha is true. So it's not a matter then of losing faith anymore, and in fact the Buddha gives it a different word.

For one word it's called an *indriya*, which is a faculty, and when somebody has an insight into *Nibbāna* it becomes a *bala*, it becomes a strength, unshakable. The quality of that understanding, the process, is really just that deepening of understanding, and it has this effect of trust.

Now that trust is coming from the heart, isn't it? It's something more, slightly more intuitive. So there are those people who need to understand to the nth degree of the teaching before they dare to trust it. And there are those people who don't need much understanding. They just trust the feeling they have towards a particular teaching or towards a particular teacher, and that's enough for them. That feeling, that intuitive feeling that this is right for them. Most of us of course have to balance the two of them in some sort of proportion.

But you can understand that there are some people who just have faith. They just have faith. And you can diminish it by calling it blind faith because they can't draw up the arguments. But it can be just as deeply felt, just as deeply committed as the faith of somebody who can argue their point. And it was often a criticism that somebody had blind faith. But if your blind faith is actually in the truth, that's good, isn't it? I mean, if it actually turns out that what you've got blind faith in is the absolute truth, it saves you a lot of reading for a start. You just get on with the practice.

So this movement of the heart towards faith is there at the beginning of our practice, and it supports everything that we're doing. And there's a lovely image given—I can't remember whether it came from the scriptures, but definitely it's in the Milindapanha. The Milindapanha were questions and answers given by Nāgasena, who was understood to be fully awakened, some centuries after the Buddha when all the north part of that world was all Greek because Alexander had conquered it. So Milinda is actually the Greek king Menander who would have been around Afghanistan, and there he talks about the water-purifying gem of

the world-conquering monarch.

In the scriptures you get this myth of the world-conquering monarch. Those of you who know the story of the Buddha, when he was seen by the wise man, he prophesied that this little baby would become either a world-conquering monarch or a fully self-enlightened being. And that's what made his father all upset and made sure that he brought him up to be a world-conquering monarch. That's the story. So this alter ego runs right through the scriptures that the Buddha could have become this, and if he had, he would have been this superb leader of the world bringing tremendous good conduct and all that.

One of the gems that the person has, one of the things that they have to support that world-conquering manifestation is this water-purifying gem. So that when all the horses and the camels and the bullock carts have passed over the river with all the men carrying their shields and swords, of course the water is all disturbed, but by dropping this lovely gem into the water, the whole thing just becomes utterly purified.

And that's a lovely image for faith. Because remember, if you think about it, before you make a decision, there's confusion, isn't there? A sense of confusion. Shall I? Shall I not? There's lots of doubt about. You don't know whether you will or whether you won't. You make your lists for and against. And then suddenly you commit and the whole thing just disappears. Just like that. And the heart with all its troubles and its anxieties just gets completely purified. It just all vanishes and suddenly there's this lovely blossoming of joy in one's commitment. So it's a lovely image to have for faith.

Now, that faith underpins this *paññā*, and *paññā* is this intuitive intelligence. So it's because we have confidence in this teaching, we have confidence in the practice, that we actually can even start looking. And that looking, that observing, brings about its own insights, which then strengthens the faith. And so they tumble over each other into pure awakening.

Now that intuitive intelligence is expressed in the other form, the seven factors of enlightenment, as investigation of *dhamma*, *dhammavicaya*. And when the Buddha is talking about that, remember, if you read the discourse on it, it's basically beginning to look at things the way he saw things. So we have those three characteristics: transience, not self, and how we create unsatisfactions for ourselves. But also this business of deconstructing things, all this business around the hindrances and also all this business around the factors of enlightenment. So that's all to do with investigating the Dharma as he calls it.

That Dharma investigation is supported by equanimity. Equanimity is one of these words really. It's not the same as calmness. Equanimity I think is best described as a perfect receptivity. Now, there's nothing stopping you from receiving. There's no reaction to what's actually coming at you.

If you liken it to a judge, we expect the judge not to get caught up in the arguments of these lawyers at the head level. And we don't expect them to get caught up in the anger and emotion of the crowd, baying for blood. So it's that business of being able to be dispassionate, not caught up in. And of course as soon as we

lift ourselves into the position of the observer, it arises naturally because to observe you have to allow whatever is to be observed to manifest. And we lose that sense of equanimity as soon as we drop into any reaction, wanting, not wanting.

So that equanimity has to be there for the investigation to be clear. And for the investigation to be clear, the intelligence must be awakened. And we won't do that unless we have faith in the process.

Now supporting that, you've got concentration which is balanced with effort, with proper energy. Concentration again is one of those things because normally when you say to somebody "get concentrated" or "be focused," you expect this real narrowing down, collapse into some sort of tightness. But concentration in this sense just means being able to keep the attention on the object. Full stop.

And the effort which is to be developed is just the effort needed to keep the attention on the object. So if that concentration becomes tight, then you start moving into restlessness. It begins to shake, and you can't keep your mind on it. And when that happens, the meditator has to recognize that. So the restlessness—and this is where the meditation gets, shall we say, a little tricky—because you may be thinking that the restlessness is coming from something arising out of the heart or something, but actually it might be because you're trying too hard, trying to become too concentrated.

So that business of effort and concentration, if you think of a camera when you focus it, the old ones before they made these little machines where you had to actually use your fingers, and if you think of that, that's the effort and then there's the focus.

Now the other side of concentration, when you have too much concentration but not enough energy, is that of course the mind now is like a laser beam, it's facing one way. And if the energy is not there to support it, then you drop into a state of unconsciousness. That's not the same as sleep, and the meditator knows when that's happened rather than sleep because the body remains upright because the energy is there alright, the concentration is there, but because the energy is not supporting it, then it's as though the mind just stops. It's a blank count, and you wake up.

Depending on the power of that concentration, it can last for various lengths of time. There's a lovely story about a Hindu guru who was an adept at these very high jhānic absorption states, and he gave an instruction to his attendant to get him some water and went to meditate and went into one of these states. Ten years later, he comes out of this state and his first words are, "Where's my water?"

What the tale is meant to symbolize is that nothing happens. It's a complete waste of time getting into these constricted blank states. And it's funny how many people actually believe that meditation is about blanking the mind, about turning it off and ending up in this dead place.

So when that happens we can congratulate ourselves because the concentration is good, but then we have to also recognize that the effort—there's something wrong with the effort. And normally when you look at it, there's been a moment there where you've lost interest, where something has lost its empowering of

that looking, and the whole thing drops.

When the concentration has become too tight, then you have to look at your effort. So the effort to gain, the effort always to achieve. And when that happens, you have to really remind yourself that to be aware is the achievement. That's it. There's nothing else to achieve. And once you drum that into yourself, it does stop you wanting to go beyond the present moment, because whenever you want to achieve something it's always in the future, isn't it? When you've achieved it, you've achieved it. But while you're wanting to achieve, it's not here, it's over there. So the mind is always moving ahead of itself.

If you find yourself feeling restless, and you've got an inkling that it's not really to do—because the body feels good, and it feels light, and it's okay—but there's this restlessness, then, especially not so much at the beginning of a week retreat, but maybe within two or three days, when you really settle, then just see if some idea of getting something has not crept in.

Again the story from the scriptures is of Nanda. Nanda was the cousin of the Buddha, and he was really practicing hard and getting nowhere and getting all this restlessness and stuff, and so he began to give up. And he decided that what he would do in this lifetime was create good *kamma* and then have another go in the next one. So the Buddha, having heard this or intuiting it, appeared by his side and said, "Nanda, what are you doing, mate?"

And he gave him the simile. He said, "No, no. What you've got to do is you've got to have this effort," and he gave the image of tuning a lute—can't remember the proper word for that instrument, but it's a lute, it's a stringed instrument—and he said to get the right pitch, it mustn't be too tight and it mustn't be too loose. Just getting the right pitch.

And of course, Nanda in no length of time, having got the right pitch, became fully awakened. Usually these little stories are glossed in the commentary to say things like Nanda went off to the forest for 25 years and became fully enlightened. But actually in the scriptures it said he struggled with it and became fully awakened.

So effort is a cheeky one for us because Western culture is about achieving. It's about achieving, about getting. And one of the problems of the Vipassana school is that it does put to us certain achievements. I mean, they're there. They're called the *vipassanāñāṇas*, the insights that come with Vipassana. And then there are four stages of sanctity: stream entrant, once returner, non-returner, and then finally this *arahan t*.

What that does for us, or the way we can look at it so that it doesn't become some sort of achievement, is again this feeling that the path is actually well delineated. It's not a sort of—we're not on a path which is higgledy-piggledy and it may or may not. It's actually the path leading to breakthrough is very clearly marked. Very clearly marked.

Having said that, the path of the Vipassana knowledge is not the only way. And people have achieved

amazing insight very quickly, usually because of some great shock. Somebody close has died or they've fallen off a bridge or something. Something happens which gives them a shock and it can really pull them out of a particular mind state and turn their lives. One of the more interesting ones is this near death experience that people have.

So, it's not the—I wouldn't say it was the only delineated path, you do get slightly different ones in the Mahāyāna—but it's definitely well delineated in this particular context.

So this business of effort and concentration—and effort, by the way, comes up in the faculties too for those of you who know these things—the other combination is calmness and what's badly translated as joy, much better translated as interest.

Now interest is a funny emotion. Philosophers wonder about it. It's a sort of wanting to know, but you can feel it coming from the heart. And just as an aside, remember—just ask yourself: did you ever have any problem with concentration when you were interested in something? So that's why, because the force of our practice is to awaken the intelligence, it seems to me much more beneficial to raise interest rather than to worry about concentration.

I'm always amazed how that manifests even in animals, this sort of wonder. I was once in a lovely place up in Penang, Malaya. There was a plantation up there and I was offered to stay up there at this house which was lived in occasionally. It was a lovely evening so I took this table out onto the forecourt, wanting to lift myself off the ground because of bugs and stuff, snakes. I tied this mosquito net to the tree above me and brought my cushions out and everything and a cup of coffee, and I sat on this table looking out through the mosquito net to the setting sun. As it grew darker and darker I suddenly realised I was facing east. I was a little disappointed.

There were these two dogs that every evening would scamper, would chase each other. Two very good friends would chase each other madly around. On this particular evening, the one that I was sat out there waiting for the sunset, one of these dogs was late. The other one began to pine and cry a little. When the dog finally turned up, to my amazement, he ran up. When he saw this table with this figure and this... He stood there and he went... You know, while the other dog was biting him and doing all sorts of deaf things. I thought, my goodness. What an amazing sort of intelligence. Yeah, I must have looked really silly. To a dog, anyway.

Well I can't remember why I went into that—oh yes, interest. So this quality of wanting to know, you see, even here walking down the street with all these cows and bullocks, it's just amazing. They just come towards you wanting to know, you see.

So it's something that we find in all creatures. It's a case of awakening that within us, that wanting to know, that wonder. Sometimes you have to work at it a bit, just to raise your energy towards interest. Like all these things, these are all conditioned, all conditionings. So the more you condition yourself to become

interested, the more interested you become. The more interested you become, the more you practice with verve and with right commitment. The more you practice with verve and right commitment, the more you see. The more you're delighted, so the more interested you become.

These things have an internal motor and I would say that interest is a real motivation. But sometimes you have to feed it, especially when those little nasty things come up like boredom, which is the direct enemy of interest. So when that comes up, remember that boredom is what is to be observed and not to be conned by, that you need distraction.

There was a monk I knew who would go to his teacher and say, "I've been watching this breath and I'm really bored." The teacher said, "Well, why don't you try watching it down here in the stomach?" So he went away and he came back and he said, "I'm watching it and I'm really bored." So he said, "Well, why don't you try a concentration exercise and look at discs?" There's an exercise of looking at these colored discs, which you use to gain concentration. So he asked him what was his favourite colour, and he said, well, it might have been blue. So he said, "Well, get yourself a disc of blue and just say blue, blue," and that was it. He came back and he says, "Really boring." So he said, "Well, try another colour," you see. This poor monk ended up being depressed. He ended up in hospital. Yeah, he ended up in hospital. When he finally came out of it, I think he understood the mistake of getting into boredom, trying to escape boredom through distraction, you see.

You have to be very careful, and of course if you look at our society, that's the problem with all this addiction stuff. It's all an escape from the boredom that arises by seeking pleasure in something which always has an inbuilt obsolescence. You can't keep chewing the same gobstopper even if it is blackcurrant. You want a lime gobstopper. So eventually you can't stop eating gobstoppers, spend all your money on gobstoppers. Remember that to raise interest is a very empowering way to put energy into our practice.

What supports it is calmness, calmness in the heart, you see. As I say, not to confuse that with equanimity. Calmness, and anything which you find is shaking is shaking, you see. Of course one of the things that happens when you draw up interest and you do begin to see something, of course the excitement comes. That shakes the meditation for us. So as soon as that comes, that's your object. Remember that the mind and heart are very slippery. They're always shifting off focus. So you have to keep that aliveness.

Now, I opened the talk by saying that by the end of it, once I've been through five of these and seven of those, especially those who haven't come across this teaching before, they'd probably be utterly confused. But luckily, there's a very simple way of getting all these faculties to be balanced. That, you won't be surprised to hear, is the establishment of awareness.

So what the Buddha says is that when you establish right awareness on the object, all these faculties will come up to support it, just quite naturally, quite naturally, quite naturally. The quality of awareness is just looking, just looking, just observing, just being with the experience. It's its simplicity which foxes us. We always think we have to do something. We always think we have to see something. You don't. All you have

to do is look. It's extraordinarily simple.

In the opening of the discourse on how to establish right mindfulness, this awareness, *satipaṭṭhāna*, the establishment of this level of consciousness, he starts off by saying—he uses the word *sikkhati*. *Sikkhati* means to train. So he says, "Observe the breath," to train, in other words to get still, to be fairly, to be somewhat concentrated. That's in my morning Vipassanā guidelines. That's what one of my main teachers used to always—that was his little phrase, "somewhat concentrated." Nobody ever knew exactly what he meant, but we got the idea that you needn't be waiting until you're utterly, completely focused before you could, as it were, begin to investigate it.

Then the Buddha says—and he's talking now about the breath, and of course the breath is something neutral, so the other two things are not so obvious, this business of not me, not mine, and the business of how we create problems from it. The most obvious thing to look at is the quality of transience. So he says keep looking at it. Now he's suggesting that you actually do that as a purposive... Like the thought comes in the mind, you know, "Let me watch the transient nature of this."

At the moment when I see the breath, it feels to me like one thing, like a string, like it's one string, you see. I mean, how long is time? See, because the length of time as we experience it is as long as we can hold a frame, a frame of time. So how long is it? Have you ever measured it? I don't know. Less than a second probably, or something like that, I don't know. How long is a piece of time, you see? Now, that gives us the impression that the whole breath is one joined up experience.

What he's saying is if you keep looking, if you keep just putting your eye on it, and the more these faculties come up to actually join you and you're actually tuned into the transient nature of the breath—that's what you're looking at, is it just one string or is it all little pieces all quite separate—as you're looking at that and all these faculties of concentration, of right effort, of that investigation of the Dharma, here it's the *anicca* quality, of the balance of effort with concentration, of that equanimity balancing the investigation, and of the calmness balancing the interest. When all these things rise up, you see, he says you come to a point where there is just enough concentration and just enough intuitive intelligence or insight to arise.

Those two words, the awareness and intelligence, are never separate in that discourse. The two words that I use for this trust of ours, *satipanya*, I've actually taken that from a very famous Thai teacher called Buddhadāsa. It's two nouns, but the way it's put in the scriptures is *ātāpī sampajāno satimā*. *Ātāpī* is the effort and it's sometimes translated as fierce effort, but we're much closer to the meaning if we understand relentless effort. You don't stop. That's why I quote the Mahāsi: the continuity of awareness is the secret of success. It's the continuity, because the more you maintain it, the more these spiritual faculties come up.

You begin by placing the *sati* on the object—that's the looking—and as you look, then you see. So the looking and seeing are both the same faculty. It's just that one is passive looking, receiving, and then there's the seeing. If you think of any occasion... I had one where a friend who came to see me and we

were going for a walk, his car broke down. We went off to have a look at it. The police had got there because he'd left it on the main road here in Newton Abbot and wheeled it back down. He opened the bonnet, you see. What had happened was that suddenly the engine cut, you see. Because of my long experience with mechanics, I immediately said, "Well, that's got to do with the electrics." So he opened the bonnet and I immediately pointed to this object within the engine. Having looked, you see, I saw it must be the dynamo and I pointed to this. I said, "The dynamo's gone." The AA man turned up and having a slightly longer experience in mechanics, noticed that the fan belt had gone and pointed to the dynamo which happened to be in a different place. So in this case of looking and seeing, you see... It's the case of getting that clarity so that your car doesn't end up in the scrapyard because you tried to mend it.

So these two qualities, the *sati*, the awareness, and that spark, that intuitive grasp of what's happening, arises naturally when the conditions ripen. In our meditation, when we're sat here, you see, we're just making that continuous, relentless effort of just relaxing, of coming back onto the object. That's another way, perhaps, of translating that word for calmness. *Passaddhi*. You can translate it as relaxing.

Then as it slowly gathers around, there comes the moment where we can hold the position of the observer. Now that's the point where we are seeing the transience but there's still the sense of the observer.

Now the observer means that there's a shaking in the mind. One minute we see the sensation of the breath and next minute we're aware of something watching the sensation of the breath. That awareness is a feeling of me being here. What's really happening—or what you can take as a metaphor, an image—is sometimes when you're watching TV and you can see yourself on the screen. Are you going to watch yourself watching TV or are you going to watch the TV? Now because the light is such, you can't get rid of that image of yourself watching TV. But because your interest grows so much in the program, you don't see it anymore. You just get lost in the program itself.

When we are in a state of the observer, there's always that dual state going on: seeing, seeing the seer, seeing, seeing the seer. Of course, because of the speed of the mind and its ability to hold things for us long enough and substantiate them, give them some sort of solidity, we feel it's one process, that there is an observer constantly observing this breath which is constantly arising and passing away.

But by continuously placing that attention—and that's another word for *sati*, an act of attention—on the object, all these faculties come up and, as it were, the focus narrows and narrows, and with it, time narrows. So time now begins to narrow so much until you're just there. When you're just there, there's no time for this switch and the sense of the self disappears. That's when it's possible for this intuitive intelligence to see something very clearly because now it's not shaking and there can't be—in the now there can't be any conceptual thinking.

It just can't be. Conceptual thinking takes time. You can't have a word in a speck of a second. So when those moments come up there's always some little insight. They come up in very short blips. You might not

even know. It can be so short that you don't even know. But as your meditation grows, these little moments of being absolutely absorbed into the object grow slightly longer, and then when one comes out of that back to being the observer, there is that knowing that during that moment there, there was pure *sa tipanya*.

Now do remember that none of this—you can't make it happen, you see. That's the point and that's where the sense of achieving comes. So forget that. The Buddha is saying very clearly: just train, just keep bringing that attention back, keep waking it out of the dullness, just keep working with it gently, and there'll come that point when you'll begin to see these characteristics, one or the other.

As you begin to see that and your interest is drawn, you'll just be drawn naturally into the present moment. That's when we have just enough awareness and just enough intuitive intelligence to make these little insights. These insights are not huge wallops around the back of the head which send you spinning out of the room, you know. They're just little... they're just little, ah, oh, ah, right, see. All the time this consciousness is turning, the way it's looking is changing, just in little degrees all the time.

That then has a systemic change because as we change our understanding it changes our relationship. So that's the heart coming in. When a relationship changes it expresses itself through what we say and what we do and how we think in a more wise way. So that's the process we're going through.

So if I were to bring it all together, there are these five faculties, five spiritual faculties, and there are these seven factors of enlightenment. The ones to be concerned with are how to develop this awareness, just the looking, just the looking. How to support just the looking by raising interest. How to be very quick to know that some future aim has slipped into the practice and that's the achieving. How to be aware of that sort of restlessness that comes around because we're trying too hard. How sometimes you're right there but somehow we've slipped with the interest and we're sinking away from it.

So it's a case really of not worrying too much about all these different faculties etc. etc.

but just keep reminding oneself that one has to remain bright, vigilant.

Now this word vigilance is one of the Buddha's favourites. *Appamādo*, vigilant, diligent, being awake. And in the Vipassanā guidelines I've translated the phrase — my translation there is "those who are mindful are in the vicinity of, are in the presence of Nibbāna" — and the actual word he uses is *appamādhū*: those who are vigilant, those who are diligent in their practice are in the vicinity and the presence of Nibbāna.

So it only remains for me to wish you fruitful practice and a continuing effort. May you all be liberated even in this very lifetime.

Thank you.

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