Revising the Principles of Meditation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 32:00

So really just to revise the principles of meditation and some of the pitfalls.

It's always good to go back to the Buddha himself, his own personal experience, and to remember that right until the very end of his search for an answer that was deep within his own heart, this business around suffering, he couldn't find the answer to it and he was pretty stuck. By the time he came to leave his companions, it must have looked to him that there really wasn't an answer, because everything that the society at that time had to offer had been offered and he'd done it to the best of his abilities and he got nowhere.

It was only when he sat there and was refreshed with a bowl of rice pudding—everybody knows the power of rice pudding—that he just remembered this occasion in childhood when he was watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony, and there was something about that watching which awoke in him another possibility.

His earlier practice had been to do with what we call the *jhānas*, these absorptions, which is something you can manipulate, something you can do with your mind. You can make it feel, you can make your heart feel blissful. So it's an actual doing, it's an actual something you can achieve, just like we can achieve through the repetition of phrases, just repetition of phrases and scenes and just talking to ourselves, and we can get into a nice deep depression. In the same way you can talk to yourself and lift yourself up.

Then there was that business of self-mortification where the error was seen to be in the body itself. So it's the body that has pleasure, and therefore one tries to subdue that, and in doing so one attains a certain type of peace. But the problem was that just led him towards starvation and death, which didn't present itself as the most brilliant answer to his problem.

So it was only when he went back to this childhood experience. And what is it about the child, especially before the age of seven, that is different from an adult's way of seeing the world? It's that it isn't yet confused by concepts and experiences. So that intelligence is still, shall we say, in a very pure state of just receiving, just receiving, and the ability to receive without criticism, receive without judgment, receive without past experience. And then of course it has to make sense of it, and adults tell it how to make sense of it, and that's the end of that.

So it's a case of really rediscovering that original mind that we had then, the original intelligence we had then. That's all it is. And to do that, we keep pulling ourselves out of the mind. We keep getting out of our own mind, exiting from our own emotions. We find that position within ourselves where we're actually

watching, feeling, experiencing an emotion, which is very different from being it, isn't it? Very different from being angry to feeling the anger as something within you.

And when the body comes with its tickles and its pains, to actually see it as objective and to investigate it just as a sensation. What is a sensation? What is an itch before you call it an itch? As soon as you say it's an itch, you've got to scratch it. But if you go before you call it an itch, there isn't the impulse to scratch really. All it is is little fiery little sensations.

The same with eating. As soon as you say I'm hungry, or I am hungry, or there is hunger, there's the impulsion to eat. If you go below that, just the sensations, they're just tickly sensations in the stomach.

So there's something happening in our mentation which is losing, shall we say, that initial direct contact. It immediately flips into conceptual thinking, historical thinking, conditioned thinking. That's what we mean by this conditioning. It's something we build up within ourselves.

So what we're trying to do in the meditation is to allow the mind to express all this, allow the heart to express all its emotional states. Let the body be uncomfortable, comfortable, doesn't matter, and to discover that access point where we're no longer involved in it, we're no longer caught up in it, and from that point we can observe, we can feel, we can experience, and in so doing we can see how we create the world that we live in.

So the whole of our practice is keep on accessing that position. And that position has to become clear to us. It has to become clear to us by direct personal experience. Nobody can describe it to you, can tell you what it is, to a point. All these words that I'm saying now would be meaningless unless you've done some meditation and actually tried to experience this business of distancing from what was inside you.

Just as we don't have any problem with knowing that this room is outside my body—we've made that objective, we've made that an object—we can create a relationship to it and say it's my room, in which case I get worried and anxious about it, but I'm much easier with just saying it is a room, it belongs to somebody else, and I can do what I want inside it and not get too worried.

So that business of being able to see things as not connected to me in that way of being mine. So when I go inward, I have this anger, this depression, this stress. And on the other side I have joy, affection, love. As soon as I say it's mine, I'm forming a relationship with that which is going to cramp the mind and heart. Now in what way does it cramp it? It cramps it because it has the service. It comes into the service of me.

So when you drive yourself down to this me, what does this me want? What do I want from the world I live in? As we said last night, I want to be happy. It's fair enough, isn't it? I just want to be happy. And unfortunately this I presumes that its happiness can be found by manipulating the world. I'd be happy if people served me food and drove me around a bit. So then I have to manipulate people to make sure that I get what I want. And of course if they don't service me, then I want to get rid of them. What's the point of having people around who aren't going to service my wants?

The same with objects. If I don't like an object, I chuck it away. And if I do like it, hold on to it. Put it under lock and key. So the world becomes a place of—it becomes a dangerous place. It becomes a place where I have to hold on to what I have in case I become unhappy. I have to keep away all those things that make me unhappy. The Scrooge. Keep what makes me happy.

So when we are practising meditation, we're going in, into the mind, into the body itself, into the heart itself, to actually feel what's going on there and to recognise that relationship we have: like it, don't like it, want it, don't want it. So it starts here. Everything out there is just a projection of what I've decided I need.

So if I go in here and I feel loneliness, I project it outwards. I've got to heal it out there. So I phone up a friend and say, "Look, I'm very lonely." "Oh, don't worry. I'll come and have a pint with you." And you think, "Oh, that's healed." You have a pint, you feel good, and you think, "Oh, that's how to cure loneliness"—until your friend drops dead. And then the loneliness comes up and says, "The friend's not there," and you're stuck with this loneliness.

So now all these problems we have within us can't be solved by anything outside us. It's actually only through coming into contact with these problems inside us and to actually feel them and allow them to express themselves and to express themselves without any interference that we realise actually that that's the curing process. All they want to do is tell us how sad they are, how lonely they are, how upset they are, how angry they are. Once you've listened to it and felt it, they just go away. They just fade out. They exhaust themselves. And it's just having that patience, that willingness to receive, no matter how hard it is. I mean, some of the stuff's pretty awful. And it's just being able to be open to that.

Now we'll be much easier with the stuff if we don't identify with it. So that's why in our meditation we try to take this position of the onlooker, the observer, the one who knows. And that distance, that distance from what we experience within ourselves, that's the process of detaching.

Now so that that distance, detachment doesn't become brittle, doesn't become hard, doesn't become in a sense another subtle way of not feeling things, you have to open your heart out as it were to what's arising, and that's the importance of *metta*. So this looking, this onward looking has to be—it's best if it's flavoured with that attitude of wanting to heal what's there. And you've got to be careful here because that presumes some sort of achievement. But it's looking down or looking at what is happening within us in a kindly way, in a gentle way. And that's the process of metta. That's why this vipassanā and metta are two things that need to balance each other.

So it's a warm, it's a warm onlooking, it's a warm investigation. And when you do that, it undermines all those judgmental phrases that come up: "This is terrible. I'm useless." All that sort of stuff. So developing that looking down upon with compassion. So in the Mahāyāna you see the Avalokiteśvara, the compassionate Buddha, the one that looks down upon with compassion. So that's what we're trying to do within ourselves is to create, is to discover the Buddha within us and to give it that flavour of compassion towards ourselves.

So now, once we're pretty clear about that we want to always access this position of the onlooker, the witness, the observer, that's not, remember, the most perfect state. It's only when the idea of me looking down, me observing, disappears too, that it's any true vipassanā. That can't happen by an act of will. We can get ourselves to an onlooker by an act of will. You can say, "Right, now let's look at this," and immediately you pull yourself out. This consciousness pulls itself out. But it can't do that with the self. And that's our unfortunate situation. You cannot by an act of will get rid of the self. All you do is create another self, getting rid of the self you don't want.

So the only way that sense of self disappears is by bringing that attention—and that's where this sense of concentration comes in—bringing that attention into the immediate moment. And when, as you draw through interest and through investigation, through concentration and effort, into the immediate moment, there's no time for that reflection, for the afterthought, "I'm looking." And those are moments of pure vipassanā. They're happening anyway in your practice, believe it or not, but they're just so small that you probably haven't noticed. And it's extending those moments and waking up out of them that you realise for that point of time, for that little measure of time, there was just awareness. There was just the knowing.

Now that is what we're trying to develop towards, and our skills of meditation are about how to work with the hindrances when they come up. So that's a skill and that takes effort.

So what do you do when you get these feelings of tiredness and sloth in the body and dullness in the mind? So the first thing, of course, is so long as you're clear that it is lethargy and dullness, that it isn't that you need sleep. This might not be clear on such a small retreat like this. So give yourself the benefit of the doubt. But not too much.

And so when you get these feelings of lethargy, know that they're there, and just make that mental determination: "I'm not going to give in to this." Just refuse to be annihilated. And then work with them. Open your eyes to make sure that you're awake. Stand up. Don't feel that's a failure. Standing meditation is perfectly equal to sitting meditation. Don't stand up thinking, "Oh, all these people are there, what a terrible meditator." Stand up. If it's really, really bad, before you fall over, you can leave the room and walk up and down a bit. And just keep yourself, keep yourself awake.

And what is your object? What is it that you're investigating? Well, these very feelings. The dullness in the mind—it's like porridge in the mind, in the head. And the feeling of the body just wanting to collapse. And you just keep, you just walk with it, that's all. Like you're walking with a great big fat dog that doesn't want to come with you. Just keep moving up and down. Very slowly, just very slowly.

And then of course, don't be surprised—I'm sure some of you have experienced it—that the energy just turns. Suddenly you've got all this energy. Sometimes it turns the other way and you find yourself being very restless. Then you realise they're just two sides of the same coin.

So when it comes to something like hatred, all these delicious things that we like to enjoy—cruel thoughts, getting your own back, poking people in the eye, things like that—don't be... Be aware of that, of the self-judgment that comes with it: "How could you possibly think things like that?" And then just note that: judging.

Remember, you can't kill the conditioning. You can't destroy the conditioning. All you can do is disempower it. And you disempower it by disidentifying and not joining in. Now even though you may find yourself joining in unwittingly, that's not being a real act of will, a conscious act of will. It doesn't have the force of a conscious act of will. It only has the force of a conditioned will. But even so it does push it a bit. If you sat here and said to yourself, "I am going to murder that person," you'd be off, wouldn't you? You'd be writing your notes, you'd be who you could phone up, and it would be a positive line of thought driving you to murder. Terrible.

But here it just arises. You're nervous, throwing them out of the window. So when that comes up—this is because you've been watching the wrong films. The films have taught you how to deal with these sorts of situations. So the mind is using all sorts of things to get rid of this problem of hating somebody.

So when that comes up, as soon as you become conscious of that dream, of that fantasy that's been created, you notice it. You don't note the fantasy. You're not worried about the actual content or anything like that. You're worried about what's there, what's empowering it. So it's hatred. Anger. So then you come into the body and go into the body to feel. To feel it as an emotional state. Because that's where the engine is. The engine's here in the heart.

And so long as you keep your attention here, it has a chance of just exhausting itself. Every time it slips up into these higher faculties, whether you've done it wittingly or unwittingly, it is turning itself, it's growing. I'm sure you've all had the experience of somebody saying something to you in the morning, in the early part of the day at work or somewhere, and you've been slightly irritated by it. But you've thought nothing of it. And then a couple of hours later when you're having a cup of tea... Then come lunch... and by night you've got this headache. And it's just because you haven't been mindful, you haven't noticed. As soon as the irritation arises, right, let it go, let it pass, let it just... don't join in the fantasies.

These emotional states generate themselves through the fantasies that they can create. As soon as you come off them, at least they're not generating. And now where can they go? They've got nowhere to go. They just have to come out through the body. Sometimes these things come out, sometimes they come out and they're so bedded in the body that actually they come out just as pain.

So when you feel pain in the body, fine, it could be that the body's in the wrong posture. It could be the start of a terrible and dangerous illness. You don't know. But it could also be just one of these little turbulences that are blocked in the body and again all you do is just stay with it. Let it blow itself out. Just be patient with it. Often when it happens like that you haven't a clue what it was, what caused it. It's been totally dissociated from its origin.

When it comes to the other side of all things that we like to indulge in — you know, the lusts and the greeds, making money, fame. When will my 15 minutes of fame come? As soon as the mind begins to agitate around that, well, these are quite delicious things to get into. So here you have to really be quite sharp and quite disciplined. And as you come away from it, as you come away from that thought pattern and you come into the body to feel whatever the emotion is, the excited emotion is that's empowering it, you have to make a determination not to go there.

Now, if you come into the body to feel this but there's still a part of you that wants to go to that fantasy, it only takes a moment of mindfulness and off you go. Half an hour later, you think, oh God, come back. So you have to stop, you have to stop and say, you have to acknowledge it. Ah, planning, planning, you know, planning the next great move. And then as you come off it, you can still feel that desire to go there. You have to stay with that desire, wait for it to begin to decrease. You have to be patient with that because sometimes they're very strong.

When it comes to restlessness, again, don't fight it. It's much more to do with relaxing around it. If it's a restlessness in the body, just relax what you can of the body around that feeling of wanting to get up, wanting to move. Whatever it appears in your hands, just relax around it. Just relax. And then put your attention right into those feelings of that restlessness. And just stay there. Investigate that. Feel that. See it more just as little transient moments of sensations.

Remember that the mind is always picking up a set of sensations and creating something out of it. It creates objects in the world for us which is necessary — you don't live in the world not being able to see objects — but we keep being fooled by it, that's the problem. So when you feel restless, this is one of those sensations that you can really get into and see that all it is is just little moments of these fiery movements, fiery windy movements.

The mind is more difficult when it's really restless. Some people think they're going mad. But we are mad. There shouldn't be any worries about going mad. It's pretty straightforward. Everybody's mad. Only somebody who's fully awakened is not mad. There's very few of us.

So when the mind goes berserk and it just won't stop thinking no matter what you do, it really is just so empowered and it's just going berserk inside there. So just be patient. Okay, so now that's all firing away on all pistons. So very gently you shoot off and you just come back. Just be patient with it, be patient with it. The important thing is not to make an act of will, a conscious act of will to indulge what the mind is telling you to do. That's the crucial thing.

And you can do a half-conscious will where there's a part of you saying, no, no, just watch, just watch. And the other part is saying, just have a peep, just have a peep. And before you know it, whoop! And then of course it goes really buggered.

So make a clear — these moments of reflection in your sitting, it's very skilful to stop every thought and

just ask yourself what you're doing. You know, like, what am I doing now? Why am I going berserk? These little moments of reflection and ask yourself, am I using, what techniques have I been taught? In what ways can I handle this particular problem? There's nothing wrong with thinking about your, reflecting and thinking about your meditation as you're sitting. That's what you're supposed to be doing. If you lose it, you're supposed to save yourself. What's going wrong here?

Doubt, self-doubt, you know, doubting whether you can do it or whether you should be doing it or is this the right time to do it and all that. So, doubt is just, where's it coming from, doubt? Where's the base of doubt? It comes from don't know, doesn't it? If you know, if you know, there's no doubt, is there? I mean, if you know that lunch is at 12.15 and you've seen it written here, then there's no doubt. It's only if you haven't seen it or somebody said maybe it's at 12.15 that you've got this doubt. So then you run around the place asking everybody, when's lunch? When's lunch? We're going to miss lunch. That sort of sense of doubt comes from this business of not knowing.

It's a place where we really don't like to be. You know, the self likes to know. It likes to be able to control. It likes to know what's going to happen tomorrow. It's got it all planned out. And when I retire, all that. So this business of staying in the don't know, of staying at a place where you are afraid. Where there's anxiety. And not to let it shake you into don't know. And then suddenly, I don't know whether I can, whether I should. Should I, shouldn't I?

Now, when the mind gets locked into those doubts about what you should be doing, whether you should be sitting or not sitting, whether you should be here or not here, in moments of life, whether you should be taking this job or not that job, whether you should be going into a relationship or not a relationship, you know, and all those points where doubt comes up, don't get lost so much in the mentation, but rest with that feeling of anxiety and fear that comes up when you don't know. And just let time, let more information come in before you rush into some decision.

So here, when you're meditating, and the mind goes berserk and all that, you can hear it sometimes, you know. Oh, you can't do this, you're wasting your time. There's the doubt. Normally we say, yeah, it's true, right, let's get up and go. You're fed up with this.

So be careful about doubt, it's very tricky. It's something that we very quickly get into because it's such a relief from having to feel the anxiety that's beneath it. It's much easier to run around like a chicken than it is to sit there with the feelings of fear and anxiety around the decision you know. Lists A and B for and against — should I, shouldn't I. And it's often a case of just staying there with those feelings of anxiety around doubt.

In the spiritual practice, of course, it's really pernicious. Well, it's pernicious in all forms of life to have sceptical doubt because it stops you doing, it stops you committing. So at some point you have to say yes and you have to, as it were, jump and hope for the best. And we can't do that if you see life in terms of success and failure. It's not nice to do something if you think you're going to fail. But if you see life more as

an investigation, more as a trial and error, then you lose that fear of failure. So that takes away a lot of that fear of making a decision and thinking you're going to make a prat of yourself. Other people can think you're a prat. That doesn't matter. It shouldn't matter. It should be up to us and ourselves as to why we've done something for a specific purpose.

So, when it comes to doubt, get on it quickly, especially in your meditation. It's a crippling thing.

I think I've covered most of them, I think. Doubt, guilt, restlessness, sleepiness, all those things we love, all those things we hate. And what we're trying to do is to become skilful. And if we can be skilful with it in the sitting, we should be able to take it out into daily life. So that this differentiation we make between sitting and daily life, they should fade into each other. There shouldn't be any distinction.

So, from now to lunchtime, it's up to you really what you want to do. A bit of walking, a bit of sitting. Keep your own time. Lunchtime is a bit more formal. I'll be offered food and then I'll wait for you all to eat. Sorry, to be served. Or to serve yourself. And then I'll do a little chant just to make it a bit more formal. And then we can eat.

And remember, the eating is part of our investigation. The whole process of pleasure. If we can understand how to enjoy food, which is so basic, we have to do it every day. It's so great to have to be with that in a non-indulgent way. And we should be able to translate that into all the pleasures of our life. When the Buddha described what it was like to be in a state of *Nibbāna*, he said he was contented and with it happy. How bad is it? Contented and with it happy.

So with those encouraging words, take advantage of your time, you know. And as I say, today is just being with yourself, letting things burn off.

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