The Hindrances

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 31:04

Just to remind ourselves, and for those of you who are fairly new to this insight meditation *vipassanā*, I want to go over some of the principles and some of the pitfalls—the hindrances that we come across. One of the insights that the Buddha had when he became fully liberated was that all the floods—I don't know how to translate that, the *āsavā*—these unwholesome dispositions within us had been completely transformed.

So there's a process that's going on within our meditation which is beyond our control, beyond our direct control, which is this process of transformation. When we are experiencing directly what's happening within the heart, all these negative states—there are five of them, we split them up into five so that we can see them more clearly—they're not simply dying out, they're also then becoming or turning gently into their opposites.

So when we sit and anything around greed comes up—greed, lust, desire for fame, desire for pleasures of any kind—whenever we feel that searching within us to be happy in some sort of sensual or emotional way, then that searching is coming from the self. And the self is just really trying to be happy. It's sad, really. It just wants to be happy. But it just keeps investing in the wrong stock. That's all. So it invests in food, sex, drugs, rock and roll. And it's alright for a while, as you know. And then it dissipates, it cracks up. And that's the basic problem with the happinesses and joys of life. They're not evil, they're wonderful. It's just we have a wrong relationship with them, that's all. If we can enjoy these things and just let them go, then they don't cause us any problems. But that attachment, unfortunately, is a natural consequence of the self. It's its delusion about the way life is.

And that's why we try to observe these three characteristics, because that undermines that delusion and begins to create a different relationship to the world. So when we talk about suffering, the word *dukkha*—t hat's what it's translating—the word suffering is sometimes too strong for it. A discontent, a feeling of alienation, a feeling of not fitting, loneliness, all that. It's all included in this word dukkha. And included there also is the inability for the pleasures and joys of life to deliver.

So when we're seeking in the wrong place, then at some point there's going to come some feeling of unsatisfactoriness, dissatisfaction. And when we sit, we can see this vicious circle. So something comes into the mind, some pleasant thing, and there's a movement towards it, to grab it, to hold it, to develop it, to maintain it. And then something unpleasant comes into the mind, and there's a movement to ignore it, to push it away. If it's too strong, of course, one wants to run away. So there you've got your fight-flight syndrome. So these three emotional positions of attachment, grasping, wanting, and pushing and running

come out of this wrong view.

And if you watch yourself during the day, you're constantly running around this little vicious circle. You might have got up this morning and saw the rain and immediately there's, "Oh, that's soggy old England." And then you might have come down later or after meditation and then there's breakfast and, "Oh, great." There's a grasping for breakfast. And then there's a work period, "Oh, no." We're constantly emotionally going up and down on this wave, this rather unfortunate wave of wanting, not wanting.

And this wanting-not wanting does have a basis. It has a basis in the way we experience life. So we experience life as pleasant or unpleasant. I mean, that's natural. There are things which the body feels is pleasant, and there are things it feels unpleasant. So a pleasant taste on the tongue, and when you get a headache, that's not so pleasant. That doesn't create any problems. It's the reaction that we have, the inability to stay calm, equanimous, accepting, with it within our own hearts. That's where the problem lies.

So, what we're trying to become aware of, very keenly, is that movement in the mind of wanting, not wanting, and the vicious circle that it creates. Now, to be aware of that, you have to access a different way of being inside yourself. You can't join in that circle—you get lost. So that whenever desire arises you run for it, go for it, so your whole life becomes impelled by that desire. The better job, the better car, the whole of our economic system is driven on the understanding that you can create people's desires. I think originally when Smith wrote his book about capitalism, I think he thought it would be driven by the consumer but he didn't realize the power of the advertiser and the power of human desire. So as soon as you put a pretty picture up everybody wants it, so the advertisers know what drives us. Just fundamental psychology really about greed.

So that understanding about pleasure, and then the other side about running away, you see, what we're trying to do is to see that process. You can't see it when you're lost in it. You can't see it when you're totally indulgent. You can't see it when you're totally in a rage. So somehow you have to access a position where you can observe that, come to know it, come to see it as unskillful, unwholesome, leading only to more unsatisfactoriness, and then of course you tend to wean yourself off it.

So now that position of looking—if you can think of a cone and at the base of it there's this vicious circle going on and you're sitting on top and you're looking down as it were on this psychology that's wanting not wanting wanting not wanting wanting not wanting—and that position there, that's the *vipassanā* position.

So vipassanā just means to see things clearly. The "vi" is the strengthening and "passanā"—passity—just means to see. So it's exactly the same as English, to see clearly, to see discriminately. Now this seeing, this knowing, you see, is what's actually deluded. It's because we don't see clearly that we get lost in these little traps. And it's only when you turn on what's happening in the mind—you catch it when you see it—that suddenly this intelligence we have pulls itself out of that indulgence. Pulls itself out of its normal reaction

to things. Accesses this point and sees, oh, this is what's happening. Wanting, not wanting.

And it's not as though a primary insight, it's not as though just seeing it once is enough, because the habit is so deeply ingrained in us it goes back a long way. We have to believe—Buddhist understanding—goes back lifetimes. So that's a really ingrained habit to indulge and reject, indulge and be averse. So we've got to keep seeing it, keep seeing it. And we won't pull ourselves off that reaction unless we see the consequence, and the consequence is unsatisfactoriness. So when we indulge in something you can see that the indulgence is growing towards addiction and then you become obsessed with it, so the suffering grows. Now when you come off it you have to go through the pain of renunciation, the pain of letting it go.

Now that's something else that we are beginning to understand, that when you sit in meditation a lot of it is purgatory. That's the way it is. And purgatory is different from hell. Hell is when you know there is no end to suffering. Purgatory, at least, you know there comes an end to it, even if it's the end of the meditation period. So it's a case of recognizing that to purge the heart, to actually cleanse the heart of these very clinging states, uncomfortable states, you have to suffer them. There's no way out of that.

If you don't suffer them, and they're in the mind—it's not as though there's anywhere outside your mind—they remain in the mind as a turbulence. And that's when you get these psychosomatic illnesses, tics. They've nowhere to go. If there's anger in the system, where can it go? It's stuck there within the system. It's only when you let the anger out and feel it, and let it blow itself out, that there's a release of that energy.

But remember, it's not just a simple release and gone. There's still the energy there, and that energy transforms into its opposite. So where there was hatred and anger, there's love. Where there was cruelty, compassion. You don't lose anything by the process of meditations. It's the same as what they say about energy in the universe. There's no energy lost. It always seems to be the same quantity of energy. It's just transforming, it's changing.

One of the pleasant insights of meditation is that you don't have to do anything for your psychology. The psychology will heal itself because all it is is a turbulence, an energy. When we call it something, you see, whenever you give a name to something, it immediately substantiates it. It makes it into some sort of something solid. So you say to yourself, "Oh, I'm depressed." Well, there you are. You are depressed. You just said it. "So I suffer from depression." Well, that's an object, isn't it? Depression. It's hard. How do you get over depressions?

And it's only when you sit quietly with it and begin to investigate these feelings that you realize there's nothing at all. There's no such thing as depression. All there is is just this flow of sensations. That's all. And if you just stay long enough, four or five years, it begins to dissipate. So that's one of the problems of the mind. We need it, of course. We need to have concepts in ordinary daily life. That's not a problem. But it's to believe that they're real. So if I say to myself, "You know, I suffer from depression," it's very difficult for me to see that that's just a mental concept. When I go into it, what I am actually suffering from are just

heavy feelings, heavy sensations. And the mind is in a state of being blocked or unable to move.

And that's fine, you see, if you stay with that. Then there's no pressure on yourself to become not depressed. There's no pressure to try and change anything. And so this turbulence that we have, what can it do? It just expresses itself. And in the expression, it blows itself out. And it's just that being able to be patient with mental states and to see them as just energy forms, forms of energy, you see, that allows them to dissipate.

Now, we're not going to do that unless we are very clear that that's actually what's happening when we're in meditation. Because when you're in meditation, you might be sitting there and feeling these things like great restlessness, or tiredness and dullness in the head, the shaking of doubt—what the hell am I doing here?—and all that. These hatreds, angers, greed, lusts, they all come up, you see.

Now when you sit in meditation and you access this point at the top of the cone, you're not suppressing anything. So it often feels that things are getting worse, much worse. And it's because sometimes for the first time in our lives, we're actually allowing this stuff to express itself fully within our consciousness. And if it does that, then often we get that reaction of fear. "The meditation's making me more depressed." But it's not, honestly. What's happening is that the heart finally has that space and opportunity to express itself to you. So you thought you were sad, but you never thought you were this sad. You knew what grief was, but you didn't know it was painful as this. But if we can just have that courage, just that constancy, and to stay with it—and we won't get that unless we actually see this process as a healing process. That's important.

So all the way during today, you see, for those of you who are new to this, to be aware that emotions are just arising and passing away, and if you don't indulge them, they pass away, and if you don't reject them, they come up a bit stronger, but they pass away. If we can see just in small little emotions that are rising constantly throughout the day, when something big comes up, something that we've suppressed—who knows from what time—then we'll have that knowledge which will give us the courage to just sit with it, to just stay with it, and just let it burn.

Deep loneliness. People are lonely. You might feel yourself isolated. Our families dissipate, don't they? They go all over the place. Friendships, you move in and out of friendships. The society isn't static. So some people can feel terribly lonely. And when they sit with themselves, that loneliness can get really heavy. Because it's an existential loneliness. It's a feeling of, "Why am I here in the first place? What's the point of being a human being?" So it can dig deep. It can be a despair. It can lead you to a despair. So the meditation would open you up to that, you see.

Now if you think that, well, loneliness leads to despair, leads to the bridge, then obviously there's no point in handling that. You may as well turn the TV on. But if you see that loneliness is just another mental state, and that if you just stay with it, it begins to dissipate, begins to just crack away and finally disappear. And if you can stay to the end point, you'll see that the other side of loneliness isn't despair at all. The other

side is solitude, which is to be happy within oneself, just to be with oneself.

So all these negative states, if we stay—even the little ones—if you stay with them long enough, and you see actually that they transform into their opposites, all the unwholesome stuff transforms into a wholesome state, then there grows that growing confidence in the process that's happening within us when we practice vipassanā.

Now, if we were just to do it for the sake of psychological benefit, we'd miss out, you see, on the spiritual side, which is the undoing of that essential delusion in that which knows, in that which is looking. And to do that, just being aware of that process of reaction, wanting, not wanting, you see, is to release the delusion, to release us from the delusion that we can have permanent happiness in indulging in the world.

And coupled with that is seeing that transience. So when we really catch—when we really catch the fact that everything is radically arising and passing away and we can't argue with the Buddha when he says that there's nothing in this world worth holding on to—then you stop holding. Something comes, you win the lottery, great. You lose all your money, great. Be able just to, whatever arises, that's it. It arises, passes away, it's gone.

And as we look at that, you see, then we're undermining this idea of a self, which goes at a much more subtle level. And without worrying about a concept of what does the self mean, rather to be concerned to understand how it manifests—it manifests in control. The self wants to be in control. If it's in control, it's very happy. So if you've got a load of dosh in the bank, you're in control of all your financial needs and you can extend them all the way up to skiing in the Alps and you feel you're in control of your life. If you've got power at work, and you're in charge of people and they're doing what you want and you're in control and you feel you're in control of your life. So it's that sense of control where you can catch the self. That obsessive control. Wanting to be in charge.

So, coming down to our basic practice, we always begin by establishing that sense of calmness. Those seven factors that we went through quickly. And I'll do them again this evening in more detail. I'll explain them in more detail. And it's just getting that position and accessing that level, that point, the top of the cone, you see. And making that as a self-reflection, making that as a recognition. "Oh, now I'm in this position of the observer. I'm in this position of the witness. I'm in the position of the experiencer." To be very clear in our minds that this is the position I want to be in. And every time you lose it, you've wandered off somewhere or you're getting caught up in something, to immediately recognize that, and re-access this position.

This we can do. We can make all sensations in the body quite objective, whether they're pleasant or unpleasant. We can actually feel as though they are there. Now, in the system of meditation that I teach, this Mahāsi, we actually use a little noting word, and that noting word is a great help just to distance from the object. So when there's discomfort, say, in the knee or from the posture, rather than moving away from it quickly, which is the usual thing that we do—you're always shifting about, you can't stay in a

position of discomfort, you just catch yourself watching TV, you're always moving a bit—

But here in the meditation, if you remain in that position of discomfort and you observe that discomfort, you stay with the discomfort, not to react to it, then you're maintaining and using that noting word - pain, pain, pain, pain. And that helps you to keep yourself at the position on top of the cone.

If you get an emotional state, it could be a happy one, for heaven's sake. Something comes up, something joyful. So you notice it, joy. You don't get caught up in it - joyful, that must be good, let's get into it. See, and that means that you're now invested in a transient emotion. Because next minute you're depressed. One minute you're drunk. So you notice joy, and it's there, oh joy, that's joy. Feel it. What's the texture of joy? What does the mind want to do when it's joyful? You don't get caught up in it.

And as we remain at that position of the observer, the experiencer, we're beginning to develop a taste, a refined taste for equanimity, for peace. And eventually these things like joy and all that, they begin to feel a little gross. In Birmingham once, there was a young man came and it was the first time he'd ever meditated. And he came back the next week and he said, after that meditation period, and a few days meditation he couldn't listen to heavy rock anymore - couldn't handle it, it was too heavy. And that's it, you see, it's that process of refinement.

And when we're at that level, when we're at that level of the observer, all those seven factors that we were experiencing a little bit this morning, they're all there - the calmness, the steadiness of the watching, the essential peace, the silence. There's no words in the observer. And it's just getting, acknowledging that you've got to acknowledge it - oh this is where I am. So okay, that's a reflection, it's a thought, but it's a wise reflection. It's this knowing, coming to know how it got there and how it can maintain it. And that's important because unless we're there, we can't have these insights.

So now, finally, that position isn't the final position. Feeling ourselves to be the observer or the witness, knowing ourselves to be that, the feeler, the knower, isn't the final position because even there, there's somebody. I am feeling this. I know this. I can see this. There's still the I. There's still the knower.

Now, you can't go beyond that by an act of will, because that's the point where the self comes to an end of itself. To come to the end of that, we have to keep doing that *vipassanā*, doing that meditation, drawing ourselves through interest, through wanting to know, into a more refined, a more restricted moment, so that we're really beginning to centre on sensations just as they arise and pass away. And it's doing that that there's not the possibility of that reflection of I'm watching. The I begins to disappear. Well, it just disappears. It's not a process. It just disappears and suddenly there's just the watching, just the feeling, just the knowing.

And that's those little points that there's what we can call true vipassanā. And it's in those little moments that there are insights. The insight is not - it's very, very, very rare for there to be some sort of cataclysmic world changing insight. They're just little incremental insights which slowly build up over a period of time

to change our view of things so that you wake up maybe a few years later and realise that hmm, you've changed. Often, often it's so subtle that other people see the change that you don't see it. They say to you oh you've changed. It can be as subtle as that.

So, keeping that in mind today, to turn this day just into that very quiet, gentle process of observing ourselves, inwardly and outwardly. Just to take an interest in ourselves, just to take an interest in our psychology, in our bodies. What do we know of our bodies? Do you have any idea what's happening in your liver now? The clue? You just hope it's all right.

It's just that quiet, gentle, interested investigation of what's happening now, what is this, who am I, and all that sort of stuff. And just to slowly begin to recognise this position of the one who knows. And to do that, to quote Ajahn Tate, who is a very famous Thai teacher: Make it simple. Make it simple. Just watch. Take it easy. Relax.

If you find yourself rushing, if you find yourself taking two steps at a time, stop. Come down the stairs again. Start again. If you find yourself gobbling, put the fork down. If you find yourself rushing everywhere, just stop. And then start again. Just keep bringing the energy down to calm.

If during the day this calmness is slipping into exhaustion and tiredness, then you'll have to judge for yourself whether it's something you have to take a rest with or something you just gently work against. Whether it really is true tiredness or just the good old - our two very good friends, my old teacher used to call them - sloth and torpor. Remember, if you indulge in sloth and torpor you just get more slothful and more torporous, so be careful. But if during the day you just feel that the heaviness is too much then take a rest. But again you have to judge for yourself. You stay longer than 40 minutes you tend to disappear for a few hours. Make sure you put your alarm clock on.

So we can leave it at that and there's a bit of a walking period. So, unfortunately the weather isn't so clement. So, see if you can find a place to do some walking meditation. If you wish, you can also just read, or just reflect on your life, whatever takes your fancy. And we'll meet again for lunch. I think that's what happens, isn't it? Yeah? You're going for lunch?

And at lunch, just to remind you, it'll be a formal lunch. So I'll go for food first and everybody else serves themselves. And we sit at table. And during that period, it's called watching the food go cold. And then I do a little blessing. And then I remind people that we're eating in order to nourish the body and not in order to indulge. And then you have to forgive me for allowing the food to go cold. Okay?

Now, how many of you are new to meditation? Because we can stay here and I'll just take any questions. Especially if you haven't done any walking meditation. Is anybody going to stay behind or am I just going to be on my own? One? Two? Yeah? Good, okay. So feel free.

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