# Refinement, Sublimation and the Eightfold Path

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 49:31

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhudassa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhudassa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhudassa* — homage to the Buddha, the blessed noble and fully self-awakened one.

So, we've come to the end of our three-week retreat. Some of you have been here for three weeks. Some joined a couple of weeks back and one or two of you came this week. So as usual at the end of a retreat, there's this translation of what we've come to understand in our practice into our daily life.

One of the things the Buddha did was he left — I want to start with the monastic order so you have some idea — he said that he had left the Dharma and the Vinaya. He didn't just leave the Dharma, which would be the teaching, the practice of meditation and all that. He also left the Vinaya. The Vinaya is the rule of the monks. And he considered that of equal importance, the Dharma and the Vinaya. And he obviously saw that the institution that had developed around him was of importance, maybe not so much to maintain the teaching — I'm sure that was on his mind — but as exemplars.

So as the order grew, especially after the first 20 years, when it seems people joined who were not of the same caliber as the first intake, these rules began to appear, all sorts of rules. So there were serious ones for which you lose the robe, such as stealing, any — if you'll excuse me — any sexual penetration to the depth of a mustard seed. Very precise, very precise. In any aperture, by the way. So you can see he's got it really taped — there's no way out of it.

And then there's all sorts of rules about behaviour between monks and especially women and for nuns with men. And there's what you might call institutional rules, which define the institution and those rules which are really to do with morality. And they're all mixed together, which is rather interesting. It's actually a very illogical code. It's really to do with the punishments — that's not quite the right word in Buddhism — the consequences of what happens if you break these rules. So the rules come in the measure of their consequence.

So the ones I've just mentioned, you lose your robe. There's no ceremony for leaving. You don't have to go and make this great confession in front of thousands of people. You just disrobe, you just disappear. That's if you can handle the shame and the horror of being a monk having broken these rules. Of course, you carry on being a monk. But that would be very hard, I think.

But there's others which demand a meeting that you have to tell what you've done. Like, for instance, an obvious one: touching a woman in a lustful way. You have to confess to five and you have to be separated for at least six nights. And then you have to get 20 monks to get you back into the order to reestablish you, unless you're out in the cold.

There's others where you have something which you shouldn't have and you have to give it up. So, I don't know, for instance, sometimes monks will buy something — but it'll be, say, the scriptures. But because they bought it with money, it's not to be had. So often you have to give that up. But often that's given back to the person. It's just like a reminder, really, that they shouldn't be doing that.

Then there's all sorts of little rules. And then we get down to — and I'll just show you how nitty gritty it is. And the Buddha said to Ananda, "Look, these lesser rules, you can get rid of them." Well, of course, Ananda didn't ask what he actually meant by these little rules. So he was heavily blamed at the council. So nobody's ever had the gumption to say, "Well, look, we can get rid of this rule."

But he gets down to this. And just note the difference, even though they're all just put in any old order, not making a distinction between what is moral and what is institutional. So you get one which is, for instance, "I shall not look enviously at another's bowl." So when you're sitting there at table, have you peeked over and thought, "Look at that, how could he take so much?" So it's looking, the envy of looking at somebody's food.

But then you've got things like what you might call just etiquette. "I shall not eat stuffing out the cheeks like a monkey." "I shall not make a *chapu chapu* sound." And "I shall not eat making a *suru suru* sound."

So there's all these bands of rules about behaviour, which all really have to do with a certain etiquette. And I suppose you've got to ask yourself, why? Why such a finickity-ness about things?

So the only way you can explain that is the way the Buddha talked about himself. He said, "Who sees the Buddha sees the Dharma, and who sees the Dharma sees the Buddha." So in other words, your behaviour is a manifestation of your wisdom. And there's something about somebody who is awakened or liberated, however you wish to name it, that there's a certain dignity about the person, a certain way of behaving which suggests a refinement.

So this whole business of ethics, and we'll talk about why it's so important, is moving from the gross — finally we've come to the end of killing people, thieving from the next door neighbour, and swearing at them. And we've come away from all that. But there's a whole section of behaviour which is a refinement to do with the beautiful mind. So we're moving towards beautifying the mind and this naturally expresses itself in the way we behave.

Now, to go back a step and wonder why ethics is so important, remember the sequence of events in daily life. There is always this underground ignorance, right? Now, remember, that's the wrong word, really. We should say not knowing. In fact, I did find the right word, nescience, but nobody knows it. So I thought,

there's no point in using it. Every time I say translate *avidya*, I've always got to do this double take on it and say, well, it's not culpable ignorance. It's just, you don't know.

And then there's the mistake we make. What is the mistake we make? The mistake is to think we're human beings. Once you realize that, that is a conventional reality, right? I mean, we're not apes, right? But in an ultimate reality, we're not human beings. We're not this body, heart, mind. That's what I mean when I say human being.

So having made the mistake of wanting to be this, believing ourselves to be this human being, what is it that we really, really deep down in the most deepest recesses of our — what do we want? To be happy, isn't it? You just want to be happy. And you can define that in any way you want. For some people, it's money. For some people, it's love. But basically, we're all searching for this happiness.

Now, our mistake, of course, is to seek happiness in the sensual world. And that leads us into three relationships which are undermining our sensuality, even though sometimes it doesn't seem like that or feel like that.

So the first one is, of course, that you generally feel more happy the more you have. And more is a noun, just more. So more friends, more money, better job. And it just goes more, more, more. And what we don't realize is that the more you have, the more vulnerable you are. Because the more you have, the more you have to lose. And the more you have to lose puts you into a state of fear, a state of anxiety. And this anxiety, of course, is underlying all our pleasures in life, because we know that it could all disappear in a trice. In fact, the news is now that the world is going to dip again into a huge recession, it seems. So a lot of people are going to lose work. There's going to be misery out there. Hopefully it doesn't affect you, of course.

And on top of that, of course, there's this aversion, there's this defense mechanism where anybody that is undermining your possessions is to be seen as an enemy and must be annihilated at all costs.

So you can see that these three dispositions relate to show us our relationship to the world. We're either acquiring something or we are defending something or we're running away from something, hiding from something. So from these three dispositions all our unwholesome actions arise — you know, the greed, all the hatred and the spite and the revenge and all the other side too, the anxiety and the depression.

It's difficult to define depression these days. People seem to have various definitions. But when I personally talk about depression, I just mean those feelings that you have when you get in contact with something in your makeup which is trying to come up but you don't let it out. So you're having a clue what it is. It could be suppressed grief. It could be suppressed fear. Whatever it is but as it comes up as it tries to surface there's an unwillingness to go there and there's a fear of it because you just don't know what turbulence that is in the heart. I mean that's one of our big problems in meditation is to be able to go into the bonfires and to feel comfortable there, not to feel burnt up with them.

These three dispositions lead us then into these negative actions. And because of that, we have the consequences that come of it. Technically, it's called *vipaka*, *karma*. *Karma* is the act, *vipaka* is the product. But these days, of course, it's become in our language to talk about your karma. Anything that happens to you is your karma.

Just on an aside there, we need to be clear about what personal karma is. Your personal, by which I mean that karma which is preventing us from achieving liberation, are these dispositions within us, which every time we act upon them get worse. That's our personal karma. What happens to us from the outside could be caused by a myriad reasons. The Buddha is quite clear about that. Just because you catch a cold doesn't mean that's because you pushed somebody out in the snow many years ago. It just means somebody sneezed at you and you got mad. I mean, it's not — that's not your personal karma. How you deal with it and how you feel about the person who sneezed in your face is your personal karma. That's what your personal karma is.

So, okay, so here we have this idea that we started off with this wrong understanding. We've created this mayhem and now we have to go back on it. And our first attempt through the meditation is to let the heart manifest all its turbulences. And we find that just by allowing it to do that, these turbulences just die away. They begin to evaporate, you might say. And that, of course, is not a short process. That's going to be — I mean, restlessness doesn't go to the very end. Not until that moment when we are fully liberated does restlessness leave us. And it depends how you want to define restlessness. The way I see it is that it's all these defilements, but now at such a low level that it's experienced by the person as a discomfort.

And of course, conceit, which is at the base of this relationship, the I am, I am me, doesn't go either. So it's not as though we're ever going to be able to say, "Well, that's done. I'm finished with worrying about my dark side," because it's always going to be there in some little way to the very end.

Now, our passage now is, first of all, to undermine that. But then, of course, it's to develop the good heart. It's to develop ourselves as beautiful people. And the reason for that is because this is a manifestation of the Buddha within. This is what we mean by the Dharma, by wisdom, by wisdom in action. We mean, how does it manifest in the person? And it manifests, of course, in all the virtues, and we can go through the perfections, as they're known. But it also manifests in this refinement of behaviour.

And that's why there are all these little finickety rules in the monastic orders.

Now, on another tack... We have to question what this more is. And here's the Buddha telling us what we actually need in order to live the spiritual life. So don't confuse this with what we need in order to live the social life. You need money for a bus, et cetera. But right at the base of our needs in order to live the spiritual life, we have these four requisites.

So I'll read them out as they come. So wisely reflecting, I use the robe, so clothes, to ward off the cold, ward off the heat, ward off the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, burning and creeping things, and only for

the sake of modesty. So there's no mention here of fashion shows. I mean, what is the monk about town wearing at this moment? It doesn't come into the definition. It's just straightforward. You're wearing clothes to protect yourself.

Unfortunately, we've lost that connection with nature, which allows us to go around naked. Every other animal that we see here, they found ways of bearing with nature. They can live in nature. When we had that minus 21 up here during that very cold winter — we never had minus 21 — there were horses out in the field just standing like statues close to each other, not against each other. They bear — I mean at night all day long and there was hardly any fodder though the farmer was bringing bales of fodder during the day — but day after day. I can't remember how long it lasted but it was a long time, wasn't it? At least a month, wasn't it? I remember that terrible winter and they didn't die. They just stood in the cold and of course we have to — well, we need hot water bottles.

So you can see there's a certain disconnect being a human being with nature. But you can see here, that's all you actually need. You only need the clothes to protect yourself from nature, however that might manifest. In the East, it's mosquitoes and stuff.

When it comes to alms food, you see, I use the alms food not for fun. That kills it immediately, doesn't it? Not for pleasure, not for indulgence — I mean it's in a sense that's a wrong translation — not for fattening and not for beautification, but only for the maintenance and nourishment of the body, for keeping it healthy, for helping with the holy life. Thinking thus — and this is what we say in a slightly different way at our meal times — I will allay hunger without overeating so that I may continue to live blamelessly and at ease.

So when you're taking food, get down to that. Remind yourself of what you actually need. So it doesn't need to be really, really tasty. It doesn't need to be particularly varied. I mean, here, I think we go through every vegetable that is on earth by the end of the week. And so many types of beans and so many types of pulses. And I often think, well, I'm not so sure that's particularly good for us because the body has to work at thinking, "Hold on, this is cauliflower. This is broad beans, what am I going to do?" So the body has to keep manufacturing different enzymes to compete with the amount of food, all these different foods. Whereas in the old days, it was just a chop and two veg. And that was it. And you had that every week. You had fish with boiled potatoes, and that was it. I remember that. And all these drinks, millions of drinks. Well, in the old days, it was just tea, wasn't it? "You want some tea?" "You're not bothering." That was the welcome, wasn't it? "Do you want a cup of tea?" "You're not bothering." I'd say, "Yeah, all right."

So it's good to remind ourselves about this refinement, about getting back to the basics of what we actually need. And then we come to reflecting our lodgings where we live. So again, the Buddha is only concerned with warding off the cold.

And to purposefully develop those in your spare time.

So the question you ask is: what is my work doing to me? What kind of person is it making me? And then, what kind of person do I want to become? And then you arrange your leisure time and your spiritual practices to develop those qualities that your work isn't developing.

So if your work is making you very competitive and aggressive, then in your spiritual life you cultivate cooperation and gentleness. If your work is making you very analytical and mental, then you cultivate the heart qualities. If your work is very solitary, then you cultivate community. You see what I mean? So you're using your spiritual life to balance what your work is doing to you.

And this brings us to right effort. Right effort is about energy management. It's about recognizing that we have limited energy, and how are we going to use it? So the Buddha talks about four kinds of right effort. The first is to prevent unwholesome states from arising. The second is to abandon unwholesome states that have already arisen. The third is to cultivate wholesome states that haven't yet arisen. And the fourth is to maintain wholesome states that have already arisen.

Now, this might sound a bit mechanical, but actually it's very practical psychology. Because if you think about it, most of our energy goes into either fighting with things that have already gone wrong, or worrying about things that might go wrong. And very little energy goes into actually cultivating what we want to cultivate.

So the first one, preventing unwholesome states from arising - that's about being wise about the conditions you put yourself in. If you know that certain situations trigger anger in you, then you either avoid those situations or you go into them prepared. If you know that certain people bring out the worst in you, then you either avoid them or you go to meet them having done some meditation first.

The second one, abandoning unwholesome states that have arisen - that's what we do in meditation. When we sit and we watch anger arising, and we just stay with it until it fades away. Or when we notice we're being selfish, and we just acknowledge it and let it go.

The third one, cultivating wholesome states - this is about deliberately developing generosity, loving-kindness, patience, all those beautiful qualities. Not just waiting for them to happen, but actually doing exercises to develop them.

And the fourth one, maintaining wholesome states - this is about recognizing when you're in a good state and not throwing it away carelessly. You know how sometimes you wake up feeling wonderful, and then by lunchtime you've managed to get yourself into a complete state? Well, this is about preserving those good states when they arise.

And this leads us naturally to right mindfulness. Now, mindfulness has become a bit of a buzzword these days, hasn't it? Everybody's talking about mindfulness. But what the Buddha meant by *sati* was quite specific. It means remembering to pay attention. It's not just paying attention - it's remembering to pay attention.

Because the problem isn't that we can't pay attention. The problem is that we forget to pay attention. We get caught up in our thoughts, in our reactions, in our habits, and we forget to be present. So mindfulness is that quality of mind that remembers to come back to the present moment.

And the Buddha gave us four foundations of mindfulness. Mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of mind, and mindfulness of *dhamma* - which means the way things actually are, the laws of nature.

Mindfulness of the body is about being present in your physical experience. Not living up in your head all the time, but actually feeling your body, feeling your breath, feeling your posture, feeling the sensations. This is tremendously grounding. Because the body is always in the present moment. The body never goes off into fantasies about the future or regrets about the past. So when you come into the body, you come into the present.

Mindfulness of feelings - this is about recognizing the feeling tone of your experience. Is it pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? This is crucial, because this is where all our reactions begin. We have a pleasant feeling, we want more of it. We have an unpleasant feeling, we want to get rid of it. We have a neutral feeling, we ignore it or we try to make it more interesting. So if you can catch the feeling tone before the reaction kicks in, you have much more choice about how you respond.

Mindfulness of mind is about watching the mind itself. Watching how thoughts arise and pass away. Watching how emotions come and go. Watching how the mind creates stories about everything. This gives you a very different relationship to your mental activity. Instead of being caught up in every thought and emotion, you begin to see them as just events that come and go.

And mindfulness of *dhamma* is about seeing the universal patterns - impermanence, suffering, and non-self. Seeing how everything is constantly changing. Seeing how our attachments create suffering. Seeing how this sense of self is just a construction.

And finally, we come to right concentration. This is about developing the ability to focus the mind, to calm the mind, to unify the mind. This is where the *jhānas* come in - those deep states of meditative absorption that the Buddha taught.

Now, some people think that concentration is just about sitting still and focusing on one thing. But actually, it's much more than that. Concentration is about developing a mind that is stable, unified, flexible, and workable. A mind that you can direct where you want it to go, and that stays where you put it.

This kind of concentration doesn't just happen on the meditation cushion. It affects everything you do. When you have good concentration, you can listen to people properly. You can work without getting distracted. You can be present in conversations. You can make decisions from a place of clarity rather than confusion.

And here's the beautiful thing about the Eightfold Path - it's a spiral. Each factor supports all the others. As your wisdom develops, your ethical conduct becomes more refined. As your ethical conduct becomes more refined, your concentration becomes stronger. As your concentration becomes stronger, your wisdom deepens. And round and round it goes, each revolution taking you deeper into freedom.

This is what the Buddha meant by the Middle Way. It's not just avoiding extremes of luxury and asceticism. It's finding the path that leads to the end of suffering through this careful balance of wisdom, ethics, and mental cultivation. Each supporting the others, each being refined by the others, until eventually the whole thing becomes effortless and natural.

And that's what we're working towards in our practice - not just temporary states of calm or insight, but a fundamental transformation of how we relate to life. A way of being that is wise, compassionate, and free.

But no job can develop all qualities. And to make sure that somehow you either balance it or find some ways of developing those qualities. Or indeed, there are certain qualities in a job which are overdeveloped. Like I mentioned, my brother-in-law is a policeman, so I know he's very suspicious. So it's a case of recognizing that and using it for our benefit.

So here we have this sense of refinement of our behaviour, undermining our unwholesome qualities and moving towards wholesome qualities, the beautiful mind, the beautiful heart, and using our daily situations in order to do it. And that's what the two things that we've been doing here relate directly to what we're doing in the world out there. For instance, when we're working, it's care and attention. It's making sure that we just stop for a moment to get the attitude right and we enter into the work with that attitude. But we've got to keep mindful because these defilements can slip in, you know.

So we start off being calm and with right attitude. Before we know it, we're getting irritated. In this case of stopping then and recognizing that and putting our attention on what we're doing. When it comes to all the things that we enjoy in life – relationships, art, food, it doesn't matter what it is – but at the end of it, to express our gratitude. And then, once we've said thank you, you know, goodbye. That's it. It's gone. Finished. It's never to be repeated. And that's the letting go of it.

When we are with people to remember that we're actually opening up to them. We talked before about this sense of 'I' being a barrier between me and you, and what we need to do is to turn it into a boundary, and a boundary which is malleable. It moves. It's not stiff, it's not rock. There's a lovely image I picked up from Ken Wilber, actually, if I remember rightly, where he talks about the beach. So the beach sometimes is the sea and sometimes it's the land.

And it's just being in that relationship where you're coming from your position, but you're also seeing where the others are coming from. And that gets rid of this idea of my view, my opinion. And it moves us towards an idea of perspective. And when you have your perspective, you can still maintain your perspective, but it includes them. And so you don't get these violent opposites and you get a sense of

ability to compromise because you're not creating these harsh definitions.

So there's lots of stuff around which you can read on daily life. There's books aplenty, you know. *Catastrop he Living* by Kabat-Zinn. There's a lovely one by Joko Beck, who's a Zen teacher. There's lots of them. And it's worth picking them up and reading the occasional chapters and whatnot. Because they do guide us in our practice.

But the important thing that we have to grasp is that the meditation is only really just part of the path. It really is an important part. It's the springboard. I would say it's necessary. But if I were talking a bit more subtly, I would say meditation isn't necessary. What's necessary is mindfulness. And that mindfulness, that being aware of what we're doing, is something we should try to maintain all the time. It's very difficult, very difficult.

But meditation is a wonderful practice to ground us and to get us to begin to work with all this subterranean stuff, and to get us to see these qualities of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. And all this feeds in. And not to be concerned about progress. A lot of people, well, I think we all get upset that, you know, "I've been doing this for years and nothing's happened." I think there's always a general feeling about that. And it's often always to do with some expectation about the rate of progress and expecting it to be much quicker than it is.

And why is it so slow? Well, it's because we're lazy. Sun Lun, the great Arahant in Burma, he had this very fierce meditation practice of breathing like an engine. And you would breathe and breathe and breathe like that until you were exploding with pain, and then the breath would stop, and it was as though the breath had pushed out all these defilements. And that's the way he – I don't think he explains it like that, but that's the way I can only understand it working.

Six weeks! Oh my goodness. So that was from his first breakthrough. He was just an ordinary farmer, uneducated really, and somebody told him how to do breathing meditation. They must have told him this fast breathing, which sounds more Hindu than Buddhist, but no, they tested him, the big monastic Sangha bosses tested him, and he himself declared himself didn't suffer. I mean, nobody ever says that an Arahant – you're in for people throwing stones and tomatoes at you if you say that. But he said he didn't suffer.

And he was asked, he said, "You know, you've made it so quickly, why is it that we can't?" He said, "You're lazy. You come here, you work hard for so much, then you give up, then you go back to the old life, get off, not the TV, get into it." So it's up and down, up and down. But hopefully we do see improvements, and I think rather than seeing our improvement in terms of insights and stages, it's much better to think about how we're relating to people and how we're relating to the world and just finding a greater sense of contentment about our lives.

Wanting what we get and always getting what we want. It's like turning things round and just getting that sense of feeling of contentment in your reality.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by your fierce determination and continual practice, achieve liberation from suffering sooner rather than later. It's always very weak, you know. I never get the real punchy stuff. I don't know whether you know this, but... Oh, what am I doing? Heavens. Hold on.

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