Q&A Session: Family Distractions, Selfish to Meditate, Negative Emotions, Suffering on Identification

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 38:11

Q&A Session: Family Distractions, Selfish to Meditate, Negative Emotions, Suffering on Identification

I have a family of children. How am I supposed to practice with so many distractions?

It's best to give them up.

This is a very regular sort of problem we come across, isn't it? It's really about understanding that meditation isn't sitting on the cushion. Meditation is about developing a type of awareness, a type of being in the present moment, you might say.

In the Satipatthana discourse, this discourse on how to establish awareness, there's a section on daily life: when you're stretching your arm, you're stretching your arm. When you're doing this, you're doing that. Meditation in action is doing something deliberately—doing something that you actually meant to do.

There are various ways we can approach this, but it's basically always to do with attitude. It's always about getting the right attitude, and this sets the heart in the right direction. That's where you put your attention. So whatever you're doing in daily life—whether you're looking after children, cooking, or working—it's important just to stop every so often and put the right intention in your heart. And that's the good heart.

Generally speaking, the attitude in daily life, in terms of work and family, is service. You're serving people. Service. So there's the good heart, and that's where you put your attention.

Just like in meditation, you're washing the pots and you find yourself worrying. You have to stop and decide: now, am I going to wash the pots or am I going to worry? You make a decision: I'm going to wash the pots. You re-establish your connection with the pots. When you're with children and they're getting up your nose, you stop and say, "Children are getting up my nose," and you re-establish your sense of service to your children.

In a busy life, if you can actually find some time to sit in the morning, that's important because it sets your mode for the day. It's sort of like saying, "This is the way I want to be. I want to be bright, I want to be awake all day, and aware." Then you always end your practice with metta, and that reconnects you with the world. Even though we do it in a more generalized way, that doesn't mean that in that practice, at the

end of it, you can't bring to mind people whom you're going to meet during the day. Some of them might be difficult. So you meet them with no ill will.

When you meet them, of course, a lot of ill will comes up. But you know, "Oh, ill will's come up." Then you re-establish a certain open-heartedness. At least you can establish an attitude of no harm. There might be a lot of ill will, but at least no harm.

Sometimes when things seem to get on top of us—so many things to do all at once—just try to maintain a line of calmness through it. Know that when you're trying to do two things at once, there's going to be some inefficiency. You can't do it perfectly. But sometimes you have to do that. You're trying to cook and the baby's crying and somebody's shouting for you. You're going berserk. You just do the best you can.

The driving line is just this sense of awareness. And to be aware, you've got to be generally relaxed. Once you get tense, it's very difficult. A lot of energy gets dissipated with tension and fretting and all that sort of stuff. Just keep stopping. Start again. Even if you have to do that every ten seconds. Start again. It doesn't matter. You just keep stopping and starting again.

When we talk about meditation in action, we're not talking about being self-aware. That's often a mistake we make, because in the practice of vipassana, you become very much self-aware. You become this observer up here somewhere, observing. So you think, "Well, when I go around in life, I've got to watch myself doing things." But that's a real split in daily life, because one minute we're aware of what we're doing, and the next minute we're aware of "myself" doing. Even though self-awareness arises, you don't develop it. You know it's there, but you keep putting your attention on what you're doing.

When you enter into an action—no matter what it is, whether looking after children, doing the garden, doing a piece of work—when you enter into that and you lose that sense of self, you also lose the sense of time. Then you suddenly wake up and you've been at the computer for ten hours, and you wonder where it's all gone. But if you've entered into that absorption with goodwill, with a sense of service and a sense of awakeness, that's what you're developing.

with anxiety or with some sort of greed or with some sort of craving—that's what you're developing. So once you understand that we develop our personalities and characters by thinking and doing, then you become much more wary about entering into what you're doing with a good intention. And every time you lose it, which we will, you just start again.

In the Buddha's understanding, you can become fully liberated looking after children. Why not? So it's not to do with sitting on a cushion. I mean, it helps to sit on a cushion, especially at the end of the day—sometime after work, sometime when everything's quiet, even if it's only for ten minutes—and just let the accumulations of the day come up: little anxieties, little irritations. That's a time when you might actually go through the day, and as you remember things, you can feel the emotional value you've put on them. Just stay with that for a little while, not letting the mind think about it, so you're not trying to work

something out, but just staying with the emotional value around it, and wait for it to soften. Just to know how attachment manifests.

Parents love their children, but there's also always some attachment there because there's a self. So how do you know when you're acting lovingly and when you're acting from attachment? It's very difficult. But there are certain signs. Whenever you're getting angry with somebody—with your spouse or someone—that's because you want them to do what you want them to do.

There's a lovely little section in the discourses where three fully liberated monks are living together. The Anuruddhas, they're called. The Buddha approached them and asked, "How is it you live so peacefully?" He would turn up at monasteries where monks were arguing and jumping about and making all sorts of mess. And one of them said, "Well, in the morning when I get up, I say to myself: What if I put aside what I want to do and do what the others want to do?" That puts you immediately into a very different relationship with all the people you meet.

Now, you've got to be careful there, because the reason they were living so peacefully is that the other two were saying the same thing. If you say, "Why don't I put aside what I want to do and do what the others want to do," then there's a danger, of course—you're going to be manipulated, you're going to be abused. So you've got to be awake. It's not stupid. But what you're trying to do is establish a relationship. So you're awake when you see you're being used or abused. Then, of course, you stop it. You're waking up to it.

The two main things to remember are: develop the good heart through constant intention, and keep putting your attention exactly where you want it. Some days we find it very difficult, with the mind so scattered. You keep getting caught up in things. You get fed up with yourself, fed up with everybody else. And then some days it goes really smooth, and you think you've made it. Foolish.

So that's it, really. It's very simple. This is what foxes us, I think. We expect it to be clever or difficult. We expect some trick or other to become fully liberated. But it's just getting the right intention in daily life and staying awake. And that little bit about not confusing self-awareness—what you want to do is give yourself to what you're doing, so much so that you lose that sense of self, that sense of time. That's your meditation in action.

A question came: "How do you tell the difference? You're saying stay awake so you don't get abused, but how do you tell? It's a very hard call to make in practice sometimes."

Well, as I say, it's up to the person to decide whether they're being abused or not. It's up to the person to develop that sensitivity, and to be able to reflect back to the other person how you feel about it—without getting angry. These things aren't hard rules. It's just a case of getting the feel that somebody's messing you about. You might not know it while it's happening; it might be a reflection afterwards, and you think, "I've been making tea all day for him."

This problem in a lot of workplaces to do with bullying can be very subtle. Bullying can be very subtle. If

you're in a position of power over somebody, just ignoring them can be quite destructive. And some people are highly trained to bully. They know exactly how to abuse people in this very subtle, easy way.

And you wake up and think, "Hey, hold on, what's happening here?" So that's the waking up, you see—suddenly realising that your service has been abused.

Well, that's very true. Partly it's a habit. It's just getting into the habit of stopping. The way you can try is to make a determination, a decision to do something. It could be just a phone call. And then you remind yourself: when I put that phone down, I'm just going to stop for a moment. I'm going to go inward and see if there's been any accumulation of something during that phone call. Then before the next thing to be done, before you make a phone call, you can stop.

So it's making an intention which is clear and obvious—what you're actually going to do—and making it very clear to yourself that when that intention is finished, you stop for a moment. It doesn't have to be long, you see. You don't have to sit there for an hour. You can make the next phone call. It's just—Thich Nhat Hanh, you know, he's very good at this. He has this bell going off at any old time during his monastery. And even when the phone goes, you have to stop.

So it's only training. There's something you can download—I've got it on my computer—this mindfulness bell. Have you come across that? You can put it on for any length of time, twenty minutes, half an hour, you see. And then you have to train yourself to stop, because sometimes you think, "Oh, there's a bell," and you get on with what you were doing. So you've got to train yourself to stop and breathe out. Just get that feeling of stopping.

And of course what you find is that you've actually been far more efficient. This is the point. You've been far more efficient, and you've reserved a lot of energy, because so much energy goes on emotional stuff which you just don't need. A lot of energy goes in the head. What is it, twenty-five, thirty percent of our glucose is used by the brain? Something crazy like that, you see. So just to relax the brain for a minute. And you do that by just repeating a little mantra to yourself: relax, relax, relax. You have to talk yourself into it.

I always quote Ajahn Tate, who was a very lovely teacher in Thailand: "Keep it simple. Take it easy. Stay with the one who knows." That's it. Keep it simple, take it easy, stay with the one who knows. That's the one you've got to find out. Once you've cracked that, you've made it.

So yes, I'm just trying to think—instead of calling them distractions, they're not distractions. They're only distractions to somebody who's intent on doing this even though everything else around them is calling them to do that. But they're not distractions; they're just the next thing to be done. Abandon the word distractions. Is that alright?

Someone asks: "Isn't it selfish to meditate so much? Shouldn't we be trying to improve the lives of others in tangible ways?"

Yes. The problem is improving others in tangible ways—this is the big problem. Because of the self, we tend to improve other people's lives in tangible ways by the way *we* want to improve them. So we end up with this do-gooder syndrome. A do-gooder is somebody who wants to do you the good *they* want to do you. It's irrelevant whether you want it or not. And it makes them feel good—that's the point. They're going to feel goodness.

Sometimes it's not that there's meditation and then there's this other thing. They're not opposites. Whatever life we choose to lead, that lifestyle will determine how much time we're putting to meditation, how much time we're not. So if your work is one of these terrible things that you have to keep going on for ten, twelve hours a day, then that's what you have to deal with. And in between, you try to stop and keep this awakenedness going, try to do the morning and evening meditation.

When it says "to meditate so much"—I mean, what's so much about forty minutes in the morning and twenty minutes in the evening? That's not so much, is it? That's your basic template.

Forty minutes to an hour in the morning. And then, every so often during the day, try to stop. See if you can stop for ten minutes occasionally. At lunchtime, instead of all that chatter, if you find a quiet place, just sit quietly. You don't have to sit in posture. You just find a quiet place to sit and quieten the mind, quieten the heart—ten minutes, fifteen minutes. And then in the evening when you come back.

Now, you wouldn't do that if you didn't see the effect of it on your life. That's the point. I mean, for me it was immediate. As soon as I started meditating, my life became so much easier. I was a teacher in a further education college, so you have to go from one class to another, sometimes right across the college. Normally speaking, you'd be shouting at somebody, then you'd bang the door, then you'd be rushing to the next class with all your stuff under your arm. But then I began to realize through the meditation that the movement from one place to another was a time just to collect yourself. So the whole day became so much calmer. Just simple things like that.

You wouldn't do that if you didn't realize what sort of mind or awareness you're trying to develop. And that's what the vipassanā is doing. It's trying to help us realize that there's a way of being aware which is awake and alive, and it's engaged in the sitting. It's engaged in the sense of really feeling and seeing things. And in the world of doing things, being in your doing, being your doing. Ram Dass—very good book, *Be Here Now*. It's an old one but it's still worth reading.

And then you realize that. And then what you discover—I think most people begin to experience this—is that when the meditation drops off, their life starts going back to the old habits. And then you realize, ah, hold on, that was the purpose of my meditation. And then you need little fillips during the year. You need to do a day retreat occasionally. If you can get away for a week, wonderful. And these lift your practice. Lift your practice.

So there's nothing wrong with trying to help people. It's just that you're not out there for yourself. This is

very difficult. You're not out there trying to make yourself happy through helping others. You may be happy helping others, but that's not the reason you're doing it. Now, you may say to yourself consciously, "Oh, I'm doing it for their benefit." And then when somebody—I mean, my usual example, for those who know me—you make this soup for somebody because they're ill, and they say, "Well, I don't want the soup."

"Stick with this soup now. Took me two hours."

And they say, "Do me a favour."

"What's that?"

"Clean the toilet. I'd rather have a clean toilet."

"I've made this soup!"

Ha! Of course you do—you clean the toilet, but you're grumbling.

And then that awful business of saying yes too quickly. "Will you help me move house?" "Oh yeah!" Where's he going? And you have to start lying. "I feel really ill, I can't go." All sorts of dead ends.

So I would abandon trying to help others. I'd wait for somebody to ask me to help them. That's a safer patch.

Would anybody like to add to that?

A practitioner asks: "You said that when we feel strong negative emotions we should allow ourselves to feel them fully and they will burn themselves out. What can we do when the pain of these emotions feels so overwhelming, when we simply feel we do not have the strength to endure until the emotion passes?"

Now, when it feels overwhelming like that, you have to park them. I try to make a distinction between suppressing something and parking it. When you suppress something, you're doing it out of anger, you're doing it out of aversion, you're doing it out of fear. When you do that, you're just adding more bad energy into the system. But if you say, "Well, this is too much, it's too much"—you stay there for a minute, you say, you talk to it, "Stay there for a minute and I'll have a cup of tea." Or call up a friend, or do something, or go for a walk. You don't have to be overwhelmed in that sense.

And of course sometimes it feels like that because when you open up to yourself, you're taking away these suppressive measures. So you're sitting there, for instance, and the fear comes up and you don't want to feel this, and you're a bit afraid of it—some anxiety, a sense of panic. So you stay with the panic. But when that panic and that sense of fear of what you're going to experience and the aversion to it disappears, this stuff is then allowed to manifest. So don't be surprised if it comes up with a whoosh.

So then you—whoa, whoa, stop. You take a walk. And you just wait. And then very slowly your courage

comes. You get more courage and you're able to sit with it. And then you're able to sink into it.

And one question that you might ask yourself is: what is an emotion before I give it a name? Once you give something a name, you're into a reaction.

If you don't know what it is and you've lost some fear of it, then you can sink into it more easily. As you know, if you have a pain, many people might feel very sick and not know what it is, but it turns out to be a serious disease like cancer. There's a certain relief in knowing what it is. It's better to be in a place of knowing than not knowing, even though it's a horrible diagnosis. It's the same with these emotions. We don't know the extent of them, the depth of them. And you have to go sometimes a little gingerly, that's all. Gingerly.

Does that make sense? Anybody got any other tricks?

One student shared that just persevering had been essential. She actually went on a retreat to help deal with the negative emotion she was having toward somebody she had to work with every single day. It took her three years of visiting, visiting, visiting that emotion. She still has a bit of a low threshold when encountering that person, but at least she doesn't feel that overwhelming ill will anymore.

And of course we know from Freud that if you do push it away, it comes out in sneaky ways. It comes out in little slips of the tongue, just the way you look at them, which makes everything worse.

Well, congratulations for not slipping into murder.

Another question arose about identification. I had mentioned earlier when talking about identification that there can be moments where all our suffering begins, but identification can often be seen in interpersonal relationships as a kind of empathy with another's pain. Is there wholesome and unwholesome identification, or do we just get it all confused?

When I talk about identification, I'm talking about identifying with what is unwholesome. If you watch how the mind works, say you see somebody whom you don't like—first of all, as soon as you see them, which is the immediate contact, there's a reaction: you don't like, you don't like. And then there's an identification with that reaction: *I* don't like. This immediately turns into a train of thoughts or an action of speech or body. And that's creating your conditioning, that's your becoming. That's what the Buddha means by becoming, by karma.

Now, so long as we are aware of that dislike, we're not developing it. It remains there as a difficult feeling, it remains there as unpleasant, but the one that knows isn't actually suffering—until they become "I am angry" or "I am depressed." To make that distinction really clear, you have to work in your meditation when, say, a negative state comes up. Some sort of anxiety. And you're feeling it. It's become quite objective to you. You feel it.

Just reflect on that. Yes, there's an interior unpleasant feeling, an unpleasant environment, an interior

unpleasant environment. But that which knows isn't actually suffering. It's observing it. If you can make that clear to yourself, then you see that the problem starts when we slip into this "I am"—I am depressed, and so forth.

Now, when it's on the positive side—I want to do something for somebody, I love somebody, I'm rejoicing in that person's success—there's still that identification of "I am the one who is rejoicing, I am the one who loves," and all that. So there's still delusion there, but it's developing the good heart. In Buddhist therapy, we are letting go of unwholesome states which are causing us problems, and we're moving towards wholesome states so that we're developing the beautiful mind.

But the delusion is still there—that I am happy, I am the one who's happy, the "I" business. Now, when the heart is strong, when the more beautiful the heart is, the easier it is to see that delusion and to drop it. It's very difficult to drop the delusion of "I" when you're in a lot of pain, when you're in a lot of emotional pain.

If you think of other therapies, other ways of seeing this—in the Christian way, you've got sinfulness. That's their way of describing this unfortunate conditioning: sinfulness. And on the other side, you've got God and the commandments and the guidance, and you've got this free will. So this free will now has to decide whether it wants to go towards hell or towards heaven. And by realizing what the choice is, one hopes to make those choices that are moving us towards heaven.

Now if you look at the Freudian model, instead of sin you've got id—terrible id, which is animal and dreadful. And on the other side, you've got superego, the voices of your parents and the Bible and the Buddha. And in the middle you've got this poor ego trying to navigate some sort of decent life for itself.

So it's always the same thing, just looking at it from different angles. From the Buddha's point of view, the problem is ethical, and that would be the same as the Christian point of view. The problem is ethical, which really in its broadest sense means our relationships. How do you relate to other people? How do you relate to other animals and birds and all that? How do you relate to objects? How do you close your fridge door? Well, you should be ashamed—you should close it very gently.

It's by correcting the negative side of us, the unwholesome side, by simply not indulging those intentions. And by indulging those intentions that are beneficial to us. Now there's still a bit of a self there, but we're getting much more beautiful in ourselves. I'm using the word beautiful because that's the way the Buddha talks about the mind. Beautiful mind.

So that's what the identification is. So long as there's an identification with this psycho-physical organism as being me, even in the most subtle ways, I'll be seeking happiness through it, and it's not going to deliver. So I've got to search for happiness in a different place.

Where are we going to find the happiness the Buddha talks about?

So again, as I said this morning, as you relocate back into the knower, into the observer, the feeler, and that becomes a very strong experience for you—separate from the body with its sensations, the heart with its emotions, the mind with its thoughts and images—even there, afterwards you can reflect: what was it like being there?

Now, you may at first be very disappointed because it's completely unexciting. But actually, there's no suffering there. And the more you stay in that place, even during daily life, even during your actions—which is simply to be aware, just to be aware—the cooler our lives become. The cooler. And there's a deep happiness, because life isn't about chasing the next excitement. It's about meaningfulness. We'll suffer anything as long as it's meaningful. Take a look at political activists—torture, all that sort of stuff—but for them it makes their life utterly meaningful, and therefore they experience a profound happiness.

We suffer from a sense of impotence when we see the troubles of the world. And really, that's a case of being humble, which is recognizing exactly where we are in the scheme of things when it comes to power. The amount we can do is extraordinarily limited. The amount that we can influence other people to do what we want them to do is very limited. And it's a case of saying, "Well, that's it, that's all I can do," and being happy with that, being content with it, knowing that you're not asked to do any more. That's the limit. And just to accept that.

So, may you enjoy good fortune. May all the gods and beings that can protect us protect you. May the force be with you. And may you receive the blessings of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.

Bhavatu sabba maṅgalaṃ, rakkhantu sabba devatā.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.