Why We Need a Technique

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 29:58

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa (three times) - Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So this evening, just to go over this business of technique. A technique is there to perfect something, isn't it? If you think about musicians or sports people, they have their techniques. The Fosbury flop just came to mind there. The guy who started jumping over the bar with his back. So there you see, that's a good example actually when I think about it, because people are jumping over this bar and using the usual technique of just jumping over it, as you would as a kid. And this Fosbury finds a way of doing it by throwing his shoulders over first. The weight of his body and then he's almost doing a somersault really. And of course the records go absolutely berserk. So the aim is to jump over this bar, but the techniques are different. And if you get your technique right, then you get over the bar. So that in a sense tells us the relationship between a technique and your objective.

I'm also thinking of people like the violin player, Menuhin. Years ago, he re-taught himself the violin under what was known as the Suzuki method. And this gave him just that extra bit of expression in his playing or whatever. I don't quite know what it did for him, but he found that by doing this other technique, his violin playing improved. So there is something about the connection between the technique and what it is you're trying to achieve.

And we can also say on the negative side that if the technique isn't right for what you're doing or isn't as perfected or is leaving something out of the skills, then you tend to end up not as skillful as somebody else. Another good example of that in sports is our great achievement in the last Olympics with 19 medals or something, wasn't it? And I think it was a terrible thing for the Australians. It was the first time we beat them, I think. The thing is that what I discovered was that we'd filched a lot of their trainers. Now there's something else. The person who is actually guiding the sportsman is also important in terms of getting the technique across.

So if you look back at just the recent history of Theravāda, there are at least two major techniques that come to mind, which would be the Mahāsi Sayadaw's technique, which he got from his earlier teacher, and the one taught by Goenkaji and Mother Sayama, the U Ba Khin technique. These are probably the two most used in the West. And then on top of that, you might say there's the less directed technique of the Thai forest tradition of just observing the breath and whatever comes up. It's very Zen in a sense. You just watch and you use the breath to get a certain level of concentration, and whatever comes up, that's your object. You just watch it. In a sense, that's the basis of all technique. But the little techniques that were

developed by these other teachers just made the pointing just a bit more sharp, guided the meditation more to look more closely. So that's the importance of a technique as such. It's just a way of practicing, a way of developing your skills of meditation.

And no matter how good the technique is, no matter how clever it is, it's of no use to the meditator if their actual aim isn't right. That's another thing too. It's no good learning the Suzuki technique on violin playing if you want to be a footballer. It doesn't work. Or even a thief, fiddling.

So we have to be very clear as to what state, what state of consciousness or what state in general we're trying to develop through *vipassanā*. That's very important. And the first thing is to be clear as to what is not. So if we know what is not, then at least we can be more clear as to what it is.

So it's not about directly healing the body. There are many techniques these days to do with healing the body, going from something very physical like osteopathy to something on the edge like homeopathy, and then you get into all sorts of stuff. And when you get into that, the person has a clear aim in mind. They've got a physical problem and they're looking for help.

Now we hear about physical problems being cured by *vipassanā*. They are definitely - headaches go, backaches go. There's that amazing example from the book from the Mahāsi centre when he was alive, which is a compendium of all these cures that took place. It's on the web. And perhaps the most astounding one is this man who comes in with stomach cancer and he's dying of it, and he decides to take no medicine but just to sit in *vipassanā*. And as he explains it, there's an explosion in his stomach and it's gone.

Now of course, that suggests that whatever the cancer was, it was caused by the mental state. It obviously wasn't something like asbestosis or something that you can actually point to a chemical or a substance which is messing the body about. And one of the things that we come to realise in our meditation is that a mental state has a direct impact on the body. We can feel it. If anger comes up, you can feel the heat in the body. It's messing your cellular life about. Fear comes up, it's all constricting and tight, and you get these funny nausea feelings and stuff like that.

So it's not as though the mind isn't affecting the body - we know that, psychosomatic diseases. And when you hear about *vipassanā*, insight meditation curing diseases, when people say, "I used to have these terrible migraines and they've all gone now through *vipassanā*," then the meditator thinks, "Well, I've got this problem, so I'm going to sit." And it skews the meditation because that's what you're looking for. That's what you're trying to do. You're trying to get rid of this headache, this backache, neckache, noseache, whatever has gone wrong, trying to get rid of it.

So all these techniques - noting, going slow, up and down the body, there's hundreds of them - are then all skewed over to this aim to try and cure the body. Now it may or may not - hopefully it does - but you miss out on the whole point of *vipassanā*, which is a spiritual insight which is to do with realising ultimate

truth, for want of a better phrase.

And in the same way, we make the mistake about therapy, psychotherapy. All of us have some imbalance or other in our psyche. I mean, it's just the way we are because of our conditioning. And we know now through mindfulness training and CBT and mindfulness-based stress reduction that in fact there's some connection between the development of *vipassanā* and mental purity, heart purity. So therefore the meditator then begins to meditate in order to get rid of their psychological dis-eases, their psychological stress.

And hopefully it does. Hopefully it does alleviate the problem, as we see with something like mindfulness stress-based stuff. But again, it misses the point. It's skewed off. And by doing that, we miss out on a deeper healing, which is the spiritual disease that we suffer from.

And that spiritual disease could be perhaps contained in the phrase, "Who am I?" Or "What am I?" Digging deep at a deep existential level, like "What am I doing here? Who am I? Where am I going? Why am I here?" That's even worse.

I think a person might have that approach, especially Westerners with our psychotherapeutic history, on the understanding, and to an extent it is true, that it is our psychological problems which are distorting the way we see. But the Buddha's technique, the Buddha's way of teaching is actually to leave all that to the side and to move to an angle, to move to a position where that still is within the purview of our investigation, but it doesn't become the purpose.

And we wouldn't do that unless we become more and more confident, have faith in the system that these mental turbulences, the turbulences that we call emotional stuff, actually we don't have to do anything for them to heal themselves. And that's a big leap for us, because all our therapies offer us techniques about doing something about them. And a lot of them are successful. I mean, there's nothing particularly harmful about them, far from it. So they're very clever techniques, they're very good ways in which therapists can help people overcome certain mental problems they've got.

But the understanding is that when you depersonalise - this is the point - when you depersonalise these mental diseases, they cure themselves. What do we mean by depersonalising it? It means taking the "I" out. And that's one of your main techniques. You're actually objectifying something, you're looking at it.

Whereas before, we might go to a therapist and say, "I'm always depressed and I'm getting manic and I'm up and down." And we say, "I, I'm doing this, I'm doing that, I'm doing that." And so the therapist gives techniques which may alleviate the problem, but it doesn't get rid of the "I," because it's the "I" that's creating the problem in the first place.

When we take the "I" out, the "me" out, and we begin to see these mental diseases objectively, then we find certain characteristics about them. That in fact, by depersonalising them, they lose their power over us.

Now you experience that in meditation when something, a memory comes up or something, and you feel there's a bit of anger or a bit of depression or even a bit of excitement and joy occasionally. One, as it were, looks at it as an object, and there's that disconnection with it. Not a disconnection in the sense of not feeling it, not knowing it, but a disconnection whereby you're observing something very objectively, as you would watching that chicken that comes around here. He's not been around actually these past years. I frightened him. I frightened her. I barked and she ran off squawking. I'm very good with animals. There are two ducks as well. They haven't come back either.

So it's like we're taking a position in ourselves where we can observe ourselves. And that position of observation is not an abstract thing, it's not an intellectual thing. It's a direct experience of what it is that we're actually feeling.

So when pain comes up, it's not as though by pulling out the "I," by no longer saying "my knee is hurting, I am suffering pain in my knee," by pulling that "I" and "me" and "mine" out and noting "there's pain, there is pain," there is an object. Paradoxically, we can actually feel it the keener, because when the "I" steps in, you get that resistance, not wanting to be there, fear of it.

So when an emotion comes up in a similar way, depression comes up, our interior dialogue would normally be "I am depressed and I am fed up with this depression." There'd be some sort of identity with the depression, and then in a peculiar way that human beings do, they find another identity which hates the depression. "I'm fed up with the depression now." So "I am depressed and I'm fed up with being depressed." And this catastrophic way that we keep growing and growing around a central problem by resisting it and then resisting the resistance of it. You get depression and you get fed up with this, and then you get angry with it, and then you get so angry you're afraid of it, and then you get so afraid you really get depressed about how afraid you are. And the whole thing churns into this whirlpool of disaster.

And what we're trying to do is to take the "I" out of that, to take the "me" out of that, take the "mine," "me," "my." And in so doing, it loses that personhood, loses the personhood. Now when we do that, what do we find? We find that it begins to diminish. Begins to diminish. Sometimes it will diminish almost immediately. Sometimes as soon as you pull out, the thing begins to fade away. Sometimes it hangs on a bit longer. It might hang on a day, might hang on a month, who knows. But it always dies away.

And when it dies away, when we're in that position and it dies away, we realise actually I didn't do anything. It itself lost energy, it itself began to undo itself, exhaust itself. And then there comes this feeling that what I'm doing with the heart is allowing it to express itself. I'm liberating, for want of a better word, these pent-up states that are within the psyche, within the mind.

And our problem as meditators is how to keep maintaining that position of the objective observer, the objective feeler. Often in the literature around *vipassanā*, you get this accent on observing, seeing, and in a sense that only gives us half of the equation. The other half is feeling. The other half is bearing with in that very patient way, just allowing things to arise and feeling them.

And I suppose that's the big paradox, that these emotional states - this is not true of physical states, because the body has its own laws and its own separate existence from the mind - but it would seem that the mind cannot express, cannot liberate itself of these burdens save into some form of consciousness. Either you feel your emotional distress as an emotion, or you feel it in the body as a discomfort or, at worse, as an illness.

If you think of it as turbulence, that's the way I think about these things. It's just turbulence, like the weather. It's a turbulence. Somehow we've caged it in, we're holding it through resistance, through fear and through aversion. And we normally express that by simply not looking. And that's basically what Freud discovered through repression. I mean, it's a brilliant discovery. Remarkable discovery. It was completely unknown as far as I understand in the West. The whole mechanism of how human beings in ignoring something actually push something away.

So whatever techniques we employ, the whole purpose of them is to get us into that position of the objective feeler, the objective observer. That's all it is.

And one of the main techniques that the Mahāsi developed was this business of noting. Now the reason for the noting is not just simply to point us to the object, to keep the attention on the object. It does that very well, if you do it consciously. That's the first thing.

If you get into the habit of noting - the rising and falling, rising and falling - that also becomes conditioned in the mind. And our experience is that we're off in Acapulco somewhere, and when we come back the mind's happily going "rising, falling, rising, falling," like we've taught it to do that, in which case, of course, it's absolutely useless.

There is a connection between the intellect, the words, the concepts and the intelligence - this intuitive intelligence which is observing. We confuse this intuitive intelligence with the intellect. But the intuitive intelligence is using the intellect to talk to itself, to tell itself what it knows. Otherwise you wouldn't know. It's a paradox, one of these things. But our confusion is that this intelligence is the intellect, and therefore the cleverer a person is, the more intelligent, the more intuitive intelligence you think they have. But that's not necessarily so. And that's the separation between cleverness and wisdom. Not necessarily so.

So that's the first purpose, is to use the intellect as something which keeps pointing the attention at the object. Keeps pointing it there. And if you get into the habit of it, it's quite remarkable. It takes time, it takes effort, and it takes continual effort. The noting comes quite easy. And one of the reasons why the noting comes quite easy is because in a retreat of this nature, or a Mahāsi retreat, in fact all retreats, there's an awesome amount of repetition during the day.

So you get up and hearing, hearing, right? Because the bell—that's every morning you wake up, hearing, hearing. So after three or four or five days you wake up and hearing, hearing becomes quite natural.

And then you know, brushing your teeth: brushing, brushing. So eventually you find that your day doesn't

give you a choice. I mean, that's what a good meditation retreat ought to do. It shouldn't give you a choice. You shouldn't be saying, "Shall I sit or shall I not sit?" or "I think I'll do some walking now. I might go for a walk." All that is taken away from the meditator because it becomes a distraction.

You know, you're fed up and you think, "Well, I don't think I'll sit now. I'll have a cup of tea." Whereas actually you're supposed to be sitting watching this fed-upness.

So the noting, because of the repetitious nature of a retreat, becomes quite easy and normal, becomes quite straightforward. And the noting can be both as to what you are experiencing—so if it's pain, you're saying "pain, pain"—but it can also be the process that you're actually experiencing. So hearing might be just hearing, where you're observing just what's happening within the mind, within the heart, and at the eardrum. This sound—you're interested in the process of hearing.

And a word obviously cannot contain the whole of that experience, because there's a part of you which is hearing like this little black bird, and there's a part of you which is giving you pictures of the bird and where it might be, and there's a part of you which is responding—a sense of joy, you know, birdsong. So there's lots of things going on there.

And what we don't want to do is start thinking about it, because then we lose the direct experience. So the word—like "hearing"—as it were, contains the thinking mind, holds it there in a sort of limbo. It can't think, it's not producing a train of thought, but it's actually acting as a push behind the observing to make you actually look. And that's the purpose of the noting.

In terms of *vipassanā*, in terms of the intellect itself and why we need to shut it down, it's because everything that we experience is always being filtered through our past experience. It's always being distorted by what we've experienced of this thing in the past. When something comes along that we've never experienced before, then you get what these pictures in the room tell us—especially that little girl. Now there's no—you know, she's so enthralled in looking at that butterfly and reaching out to it that she's no words for it, she's no concept about it. This is something very new, and therefore the thinking mind has stopped. There's just that gaping mouth, you know. The jaw drops and you look a bit gormless.

But actually, that's when your intuitive intelligence is at its most lively. When I mentioned this, I was at a monastery up in the Algäu Alps, would you believe? It's the forest monastery set up by Ayya Khema. Lovely, beautiful place. Unfortunately—well, I say unfortunately—the teaching is all in German, so I should speak German. The monk there, he speaks very good English, the actual Ñāṇabodhi, he speaks English. And the other two monks with him, Kassapa—I've forgotten the other's name now—they're also excellent English speakers, so you could stay there.

Oh, what was I going to say that? What was I saying that for now? Where was I? Oh yeah, the jaw dropping. That's right. When I said that in this talk, a woman came up to me afterwards and said that her father would say to her to close her mouth or a bee would fly in. And that's what we do with children. We

don't see that in fact they're actually really alive and taking stuff in. But outwardly, of course, you look gormless. And if an adult does it, then you think they've got learning difficulties. But actually that's the sign of the complete newness of an experience, complete openness to it.

So when we have an experience and the intellect comes into it—by intellect I mean images, thoughts, concepts, ideas that we've gained from past experience—it always distorts the immediate experience because we're looking at it from that history.

So just take a very simple example: fruit. Remember, every time you taste, every time you eat an apple, you're not just eating that apple, you're eating all the apples you've ever eaten. Because all the apples you've ever eaten have congregated into this idea of an apple. And when you taste that apple, it's either good or bad, or it's not sweet enough, it's not firm enough. And all those are comparisons. The apple itself is just an apple, and it has its own characteristics. And it may be soft or hard, sweet or sour, but that apple is unique in itself.

But we don't see it like that. We see it as part of Apple—big Apple with a capital A, Apple. And we've got this line which says these are good apples and these are bad apples, and this fits somewhere here, and don't buy them again. So all the time we're doing that. All the time we're doing that, it's very, very difficult for us to establish this open-mindedness, this real unadulterated observation.

And that's one of the reasons to develop this abiding in the present moment, because it's exactly what it's developing—exactly the qualities of open-mindedness, open-heartedness, *upekkhā*. To me, that's the root virtue of *upekkhā*—that it...

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