Revising the Principles of Vipassanā

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 43:18

Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So it's just an opportunity to revise the principles of meditation and go over the problems that we come across in terms of dealing with certain mental states.

One of the core words of the Buddhist teachings is this word *dukkha*, which translates as a hard place. So we're in a hard place. And the idea is that if we get it right, it'll become sukha, it'll be a happy place, an easy place. And the process whereby we bring that about is a dual process, both of allowing old conditionings based on wrong understandings to exhaust themselves and developing new conditionings.

So from an ordinary relative phenomenal point of view, the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, when he was fully self-enlightened he was still the personality, the character was still conditioned by the situation he found himself in. But according to him he was always happy or calm, equanimous. The world argues with me, I don't argue with the world.

Now if we investigate how we create these conditionings, then hopefully we can go back on that process. One of the things we do is to use our intellect and our imagination to create within ourselves and to develop within ourselves a particular conditioning. So if for instance we have already a disposition within us which is anxious, then through our thoughts and through our imaginings we'll create an anxious world around us. We'll worry about this, worry about that. And with all these things there's a presumption that the more you worry the less you'll have to worry about, but the opposite tends to be true. The more you worry the more you worry, and then you suddenly begin to wake up to that reality and you begin to perhaps ask the question: am I the one who's creating the worry?

If you have a disposition which is depressive, always looking at the negative side of things, we tend to find more and more things to be depressed about, and there's a sort of relief in that because you're always proving yourself right. I am depressed. The world is depressing me. Everywhere I look, it is depressing. And what we get ourselves into is a lock situation where you don't see the end of that spiral. You try to break out of it. You try to buy some ice cream or something. But then you worry whether the ice cream is doing you any good. And you get depressed about it.

So when we realise that it's thought which is actually creating the world for us—thought and imaginings—information comes in and we play with it inside the mind, as it were. And we play with it

from a particular disposition, a particular position that we've taken in life, and then we project it, we deposit it on the world, and the world funnily enough mirrors it back to us. So if you go around feeling depressed, looking depressed, everybody else around you gets depressed, and if they don't want to get depressed they don't want to see you, so you end up getting more depressed because now the world is truly depressing.

Now, all the Buddha is saying is, if you stop for a minute and try to take a position within ourselves to observe the mind, to observe what it's actually doing, then we'll come very quickly to understand that all we have to do is stop this form of indulgence. And that's really the training of vipassanā.

So we're discovering a place in ourselves, rediscovering a place in ourselves, and constantly trying to re-establish it, a place where we can observe what's going on. And we start with placing the attention on the body itself, because that's the most obvious. You can sense the body, you can feel the body, it's not that difficult to get in contact with it. And one of the main reasons for doing that is to try and release this intelligence, try to draw it out of its confusion with thought. That's the first thing, you see. This intelligence we have, this intuitive intelligence, generally speaking defines itself as thought, as imagining. I think therefore I am, that sort of statement.

But when we take this position in ourselves of the observer, of this observation post, we can actually see the images in the mind; they can become very clear to us. Thoughts are often too quick for us and we wake up after a sequence of thoughts and then reflect on it as some form of thinking or worrying or whatever. But in some good states of concentration when the mind is really steady, when this attention is really clarified, you might even see a thought passing in front of you like a neon sign. And these sorts of experiences are telling us that there is something as it were prior to or beyond the thinking process.

When we go into emotions, normally or often we find ourselves hijacked by a particular mental state. Suddenly you're angry, suddenly you're anxious, whatever. But when you actually sit like this and find that observation post, when a mental state arises you can, as it were, feel it as an object. You can investigate it as if it were something you had in your hands, a piece of putty, a dough. You can actually begin to investigate the feelings, the sensations that we would normally call anger or depression or anxiety. So you're becoming intimate with your psychic life in a way that you wouldn't normally be.

Normally, the ordinary person wouldn't make a distinction between that knowing and what they're experiencing. They are what they feel, they are what they're experiencing, they are their thoughts, they are the body. If the body hurts, it's me, it's me that's hurting. But here, by taking that observation post, when we find pain in the body, discomfort in the knee, whatever, it becomes an object. We've distanced ourselves from it. That's our first position, as it were.

As soon as you do that, as soon as we make any of this stuff an object, whether it's the thoughts or imaginings, emotions, feelings, sensations, we've created a very different relationship to it. Before I would have said my knee hurts, but when I'm sitting in meditation here like this and the pain comes and I say

pain is there, it's not mine, there's a sort of break in my relationship with it and I can begin to see it as just sensation.

When I can begin to distance myself from these things like this, I become aware of this other relationship that I've had, which at the moment I'm not indulging. And here we're coming to this second noble truth. So the first one is that there is this unsatisfactoriness, the suffering that we've created, and the second one is the role of desire. Now I have to be careful with this English word desire because it doesn't quite hit the nail on the head. It's really a relationship we have with the world where we're constantly trying to be happy with it. We're constantly trying to find a way of being in the world which makes us happy so that this happiness is dependent on the world. When I say the world here I mean on what we experience, what we experience.

So how does that manifest within us? Well, whenever I get something pleasant, a pleasant feeling in the body, say a nice joy comes up or a calmness, I immediately want to disappear into it, absorb into it. I may want to indulge it, I want to maintain it there.

Sometimes we're sitting here and finally we can say we've got some sort of steady attention and we feel that we're calm and peaceful and we're really watching. And then somebody comes in and bangs the door, sneezes into the back of our necks, you see. And all hell's let loose inside. You want to kill somebody. And what that shows us is that we've entered into this beautiful space and unwittingly we've tried to hold it, we've tried to contain it, we've tried to not let it move. And in that way, whether we like it or not, we find ourselves in conflict with the world. So when somebody sneezes, you know, we feel irritated by it.

But if we were in that easy state of open awareness, you see, there would just be the sneeze and the sneeze would disappear. It would just be like a bird flying across your sight. Just one thing happening after another.

Now when we are maintaining that, we'll also see that whenever something unpleasant arises, there's always this resistance to it. You just don't want that. And that resistance is a relationship of wanting to get rid of, destroy, annihilate anything which I am experiencing as undermining my comfort, undermining my particular state. So again I find myself in conflict. I'm always in conflict with what's happening. Either I'm trying to hold on to something and stop something entering into that experience because this is the way I want to be, or I'm trying to get rid of something which I find upsetting, exhausting in it. And if of course this pain or whatever that comes up begins to get a bit too much for me then the anxiety comes, the fear comes. So those are our three basic positions in the world: we're either holding on to something, we're either being greedy, we're either trying to maintain a particular situation, or we're trying to get rid of it. We're trying to get rid of a situation. And if that situation is too much for us, we run for it. That's it.

If we observe ourselves, even if you're just sitting watching a TV, if you watch yourself, you're constantly shifting your position, moving around the armchair. You just can't maintain any place which is slightly uncomfortable.

Now that wouldn't be so bad in itself, I suppose, were it not that it was based on a wrong understanding as to where we're going to find happiness. I mean, if happiness could be found by playing this wanting-not-wanting game, then we ought to keep playing it. Because, well, we want to be happy. Very simple. But it's when we realise it's not going to deliver that, and we look at our fundamental position—you see, there's an unspoken presumption that happiness is based upon the sensual world. In other words, I've got to find happiness within this mortal frame, within this body, within this mind. And all the time, the messages I'm getting from the world is, it's not possible.

And it's not possible because things are changing anyway. I can't maintain anything. As soon as I try to hold on to something, I just find that it slips out of my grasp. It's like holding water. And then I find I've not got that much control.

So to define myself, to define a self, surely it's about, if this is me, I should be able to control it. If this is my body, if this is me, if my body is me, then I should be able to do what I want with it. I should be able to make it grow a bit more, hopefully. I should be able to eat as much as I want and not grow fat. I should be able to do whatever I want with it, but I can't. I find myself in a peculiar situation of being in a body over which I've got minimal control. I mean, I can wave my arms about and all that. I can't stop it ageing. I can't stop it dropping dead. That's the important thing, isn't it? I don't mind the ageing bit, I just don't want to drop dead. I don't mind the body as it is, it's great, I just don't want it to fall ill.

So here we have, you know, we're in this peculiar state where there's a drive within us to be happy in the world and the world just isn't playing ball. It's just not coming, it's not responding in a way that it ought to really. So maybe I've got it wrong, you see, and this is the Buddha—remember, the Buddha's own life story mirrors this same path. The Buddha isn't just simply the exemplar, you know, the one who actually sets an example. He's the archetype. All of us have to follow this particular path if we want to find this liberation.

And what we begin with through this meditation is this process of renunciation. Now renunciation is not self-mortification. We're not trying to make ourselves suffer; there's no point in that at all. And this is also something that the Buddha discovered, wasn't it? He went through a period of self-mortification. And he ended up by saying it was just suffering, more suffering, unprofitable, and well, ignoble really, beating yourself up.

So whatever renunciation is, it's not a case of putting ourselves into painful situations just for the sake of it. Renunciation is that process of beginning to let go of those things that we find ourselves attached to, those things that we are depending on for happiness, because we begin to realise that that isn't true happiness. Any happiness which is dependent on something is fragile. You know, if my happiness in the evening is dependent on watching Coronation Street, it can be very upsetting if the TV isn't working. I then get quite excited. I have to phone friends and ask to put it on a DVD and stuff like that.

So the idea of renunciation is to find out where the attachments are. You don't have to go the whole hog, drop everything and live under a tree. But you can do it in simple ways. You can find out where you're

getting stuck, where you're holding on to something, where you find yourself getting upset over what is logically a rather silly thing, and you can begin to, as it were, withdraw your indulgence in that, see, and just feel the pain, the pain of letting go, see. And that pain of letting go isn't something which is bad, it's something which is good because it's releasing us from that attachment. That process of experiencing the pain of release is kernel to spiritual growth, you see, because what is it that we're releasing? We're releasing not simply that attachment to an object. That would be just very restricted. We're actually releasing ourselves from a wrong view, a wrong understanding. That whatever happiness is to be found, it can't be found in an ephemeral, transient, unpredictable world.

So by letting go of things as best we can we're actually repositioning ourselves in the world, finding a different relationship with it, and beginning to discover that which has the effect on us of developing a sense of calmness with it, of developing a sense of patience, just bearing with things without irritation, not seeing that as a suffering.

Now that's really one of the main things that we're learning when we sit in this meditation posture. Finding that observation post within us, we've already discovered a transcendent position. What we mean here by transcendent is that it is no longer involved or drawn into any confusion with any identity, with any possession of whatever is being experienced. So at a very simple level, if I'm sitting here and pain comes to my knee, in normal daily life I'd say my knee is hurting and I would try and do something about it. But here, see, this is an opportunity to release myself from this relationship of my knee.

If you were walking along the road and your leg fell off, see, you'd look at that leg, wouldn't you, and you'd say, well, is that my leg? See, it was my leg, but now it's on the road. How can I say it's my leg? That's a fiction, isn't it? If somebody says, whose leg is that? That's my leg. That's my leg. It's just fallen off. Now because you've reached this perfect equanimity, you would simply note that your leg had fallen off. And then you would hop merrily into Costa's for a coffee. It would be of little concern.

But that's not what would happen really, would it? I mean, one would be in a state of shock. And that's really the problem with this identity. If it's me, if it's me we're talking about, then I lose a piece of me. That goes deep. That's why anything which happens to the body—we might be glib about it, we might say oh, you know, it's only the body and all that—but when something serious moves in the body then you come across this huge fear, this shock, and that's the measure of our delusion about who we are.

But it doesn't take that much reflection to realise that we can't be the body, even on a simple level. Well, have you any idea what's going on in your liver at the moment? Do you know where it is? Do you experience your toenails growing? Do you lose a part of yourself when you cut them off?

See, so just reflecting on the body as body, as an actual physical piece of mechanism, an organism, you begin to realize, actually, you don't know it.

We can't even see our own faces, for heaven's sake. When you look in the mirror, you think everybody

sees you that way. But actually, have you done the double mirror thing? It comes as a shock. You never thought your ear was that big. Have you done that? Get two mirrors and look into the one that's looking into the mirror, that's catching your face. And that's how people see you. It's always the other way around. Don't get too depressed when you see it. Even when you see yourself in the mirror, even in that way, it's only a representation. We can't see our own face as we can see other people's faces.

So this definition of who I am—you draw yourself into yourself with emotional states. And we find that there's not much control over that either. These emotions arise and pass away themselves. And they're often attached to certain things like meeting people and Coronation Street and things like that. To say to myself now, at this moment, I will be happy—to command happiness. Can't do it. You can pretend, you can jump up and down and be happy, but the heart won't respond on command. You don't go to bed thinking, well, tomorrow I'll wake up depressed. You go to bed with the expectation that you wake up refreshed, but you're not. Sometimes you're depressed.

Thoughts. There we seem to have some ability to guide our thoughts, to put our thoughts in a particular way and guide them, as it were. But often it's the thoughts that overtake us. We find ourselves dominated, compulsive thinking. We can't escape the little boxes that we've created for ourselves.

So what the meditation is trying to make us do is to form a different relationship with it. And what we find to our joy is that actually we don't have to do anything. We don't have to change anything of the conditioning that we have, and this is quite a relief. You don't have to do anything about our depressions and our guilts and our feelings of embarrassments and all that. You don't have to do anything about it. All we have to do in that sense is this passive ability—this ability to stay with what's arising and give them the time, give them just that time and that inner space to express themselves.

And we find that when you just watch it like that, it evaporates. It begins to expend its energy and in so doing it'll eventually draw those things to an end, because it's only when they creep up into this thinking mind, into the imagining mind, that they develop themselves. It's only through thought that an emotion develops itself.

And that's a really important insight to make into our psyche. That if you stop thinking depressing thoughts, the depression cannot develop. On the other hand, if you don't feel the depression, then the depression stays in the body as a turbulence, as an energy which isn't doing us any good, creating discomfort, illness, headaches, and all that stuff.

So it's not as though we can get rid of these conditionings on a word, but we now know that we don't want to indulge them through thought. And so we're left with just this situation of sitting with them and allowing them to express themselves.

Now when you contact an emotional state—say anger, you feel irritated about something—and you've cut off this avenue of constantly going over what it was that upset you, and you come into the body and you

feel the anger within your body, and you're saying to yourself "this is anger, this is anger"—not "I am angry." See, you've separated "this is anger."

As you drop into that emotional state, so you're getting intimate with it, you want to find out what constitutes the emotion of anger. As you go into it, you may be surprised to find that all there is, is heat and movement. There's nothing there. The only thing that made it substantial was your positioning of saying "I am angry." As soon as you say I, me, it becomes solid, it becomes something. Whereas when you experience it as just an emotional state, as just a sensation state, you find there's absolutely nothing there. And eventually that little flowering of anger begins to just fade away, it fades out.

Now it's not as though that's the end of it, because there are these deeper dispositions which take their own time to purify. And that purification of the heart goes on automatically as soon as you're in this position of observing or feeling of experiencing. That's automatic. You don't have to work at it. You don't have to do anything.

And to maintain that objectivity, to maintain that position where you're not going to identify with this stuff, you're not concerned with the therapy of it. As soon as you do that, you become your own therapist. And that's always a danger, isn't it? Because it's the deluded trying to fix the deluded. So abandon that as absolutely hopeless. Instead, the Buddha says, don't worry about that. Just let that burn itself out. We don't have to worry about that. That'll happen naturally. What we need to do is to correct our relationship to it.

And he points to these three positions. So the first one is this impermanence. So we begin to see that this solid thing that we used to call depression, anxiety and all that is actually nothing but just an amorphous blob of sensations. There's actually nothing there, there's no substance to it.

And you begin to see that clearly when you experience it just as arising and passing away of sensations—heat, pressure and so on. And by doing that you come to the second understanding that if that's so then there's no substance to it. It is insubstantial. It has no entity of itself. It's not an integer. It doesn't have any being. It doesn't have any existence. It's just energy. And in fact, I tend to look upon my own emotional life as just weather patterns. I mean, what's a storm? It's just a couple of clouds coming over and a couple of bangs and flashes and then it moves on. It just blows itself out.

And the third thing is this position that we have caused by that wrong relationship of wanting and not wanting, wanting and not wanting. So we're trying to access this transcendent point. We're at the apex of a triangle and we're looking down upon what is happening as it were beneath us.

And on one side we're getting all those things that we've defined as pleasurable and on the other side as unpleasurable, just a continuum. And that's your baseline, that's the given of human life. You can't not be alive and not know that things are pleasant or unpleasant. That's never the problem. Things are always going to be pleasant or unpleasant.

Then you get this line that runs parallel to it, which is our reaction to it, which is wanting what is pleasant,

not wanting what is unpleasant. And that reaction to it is causing the conflict. And when that reaction passes, there is only the pleasant and the unpleasant.

And having abstracted ourselves, having uprooted ourselves from an identity with the pleasant and unpleasant, we find ourselves in this transcendent position where there is just experience. So the Buddha when he died of a stomach disease, even right towards the end, he's asking, "Are there any more questions?" I mean, the man's dying. He's got gastroenteritis. And he's lying there and he knows he's dying. He knows he's dying and he says, "Is there any more questions before I go?" And then just before he goes, he gives that salutary command. He says, "All compounded things are transient. Work diligently for your liberation." And then he dies. Peacefully.

What will be our last words? "Why me?" Why not you? Just the arising and passing away of the human body. And then when he died there were those younger monks around who weren't so trained and they began to cry. And the elderly monks and the monks who were more advanced said, "What are you crying for? Didn't you know that everything arises and passes away?" And their attachment to the Buddha was based upon that wrong view.

So that's all we're doing in a sense through our meditation—discovering a new relationship with the world. And the core practice of just being able to turn inward and to this introspection, just to be able to observe ourselves—so this intelligence that we have, this intuitive intelligence, it just begins to understand. And that understanding then begins to change our attitudes. And that attitude then begins to express itself in the way we speak, what we do, how we act, and through our livelihoods. And that's how this thing flows. It's a systemic effect on our lives.

So that's what you might say the more passive side of the practice. The active side is what we'll come to this afternoon, which is of course developing the beautiful mind. Developing love, compassion, joy, peacefulness, and then through that to move into the world.

So just to recap that: when we're sitting and the mind is wandering, the mind is thinking, unwittingly we're developing the old conditioning, we're making things worse. So we've got to be really right there with it as soon as we wake up and we have to acknowledge what the mind is doing. If the mind's worrying, we're not worried about content, right? Just don't give an ounce of interest to content. Just worry about the attitude. So if you see that you're worrying about something—so worry—when you come into the body, see if you can feel the worry as an emotional state within the body. And if you can't find it, you go back to the breath. And if you can find it, if it's there quite obvious to you, then stay with it. Wait for it to die out and you'll see the thoughts die out. And then that connection between thought and emotion becomes more apparent to us.

If you're sitting there and you feel a disturbance in the body, a tension in the stomach, something like that, don't guess. Don't say to yourself, "This is anxiety," or "This is worry," or "This is grief" or something. Just feel it as feeling. That feeling which may very well be an emotional state caught up in that part of the body

may rise to the point in the heart, into the heart center where you can recognize it as an emotion, or it may dissipate itself through the body so that when that tension goes that particular mental state has also been exhausted. This is also true of illnesses that are caused by the mind, psychosomatic illnesses—not all illnesses are caused by that of course.

And the only other thing that I'll mention just towards the end is the other side, which is this disappearing into sleep. So remember, the mind needs rest, sure, the body needs rest. But if you've had a good night's sleep and you feel generally rested, then in your meditation, if this dullness comes and this feeling of lethargy, don't fool yourself, don't say, "Well, I must be tired." Because this is sloth and torpor. And the instruction there is to remain awake at all costs. So whether you open your eyes or stand up or if it gets really bad, do some walking meditation. But be absolutely steadfast in your commitment and refuse to be annihilated.

And when you do the walking meditation or your standing, don't try and get rid of it. This is the thing that we tend to do. You feel a bit lazy and you're going jumping up and down. But actually all you're doing is suppressing that conditioning which is drawing us into oblivion. So when you feel the heaviness and the dullness, stay with it. Make that your object. Allow that energy to dissipate itself. We don't see it as energy because it's drawing us down into something. But it's like black holes. You get drawn into the inner black hole. So it's a real energy, it's a force that wants us to move towards oblivion. And we teach ourselves that every time the alarm goes and you turn over and wait for the snooze button. Every time you do that, there's another little weight just drawing us down into oblivion. And of course the attraction of oblivion is that there is no suffering. There's no suffering in oblivion. Wonderful. But unfortunately we keep waking up. So that's our problem.

So when we come across this other side, the bit that is lacking energy, when we feel that heaviness and the dullness of the mind, just open your eyes, stand up, stretch yourself. But you're not trying to get rid of it. Don't get into a battle with these conditionings. Just give them the space and time to just burn themselves out.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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