Questions and Answers — Anger, Death Contemplation, and Buddhist Psychology

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 26:01

Good evening. I trust you've had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, though I hope it has been happy.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samasambuddhasa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samasambuddhasa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samasambuddhasa

Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble, and fully self-awakened one.

This evening, we were going to leave not-self for a while and tackle some of the questions that have come in.

The first one is about anger. Is all anger to be avoided and purified? The questioner is thinking of abuses of power and injustice. They were feeling angry at the government for suggesting the public fundraise for the NHS when they already pay it through taxation, yet find money for other things when pressed.

Really all you have to ask yourself is, when you're angry, what's your state of mind? Are you open to the other person's viewpoints? Are you really concerned with winning the argument and not really seeking the truth? What's actually guiding the anger?

Often the case of anger sits on fear. Your identity, your views, your opinions have been upset, they've been attacked, and the response is to get rid of the enemy. The Buddha is quite clear that any form of anger is going to distort our thinking and will eventually end up creating even more anger, one way or the other, even if we overwhelm the person. And they run away with their tail between their legs, they will be thinking about ways in which to get back to us. So anger is, in Buddhist understanding, basically a no-no.

One example that is given here is: How is Jesus viewed in Buddhism turning the moneylenders out of the temple? In Christian thinking, they do often translate that as righteous anger. But in Buddhism, they don't say righteous anger. But what there is is assertiveness. So that distinction between aggression and assertiveness.

If one is coming from a state of inner equanimity and yet knows what ought to be said, then that anger becomes translated into a force, into a form which supports you. And of course, because you're based on equanimity and wisdom, you have the power for that. And the other people feel that. As soon as you're angry, they also feel your fear because if they come back at you and they see that there's a slight bit of fear

in you, then they know they're winning the argument.

But when you're being assertive, when you're being correct, when you're standing your ground, you are open to the other person's argument and you may be nuanced. You may be affected by it. It's not a problem. But you are assertive about your particular position. This goes back to this business of free speech, where there was a time a couple of years back where they had the right to insult. Well, nobody has a right to insult anybody. It was a very harsh way of expressing the fact that you can be assertive about your opinion, about your perspective, and I know that the other person's not going to be happy with it but that's their problem not yours. I think that distinction is very valid and it stops you getting into fights, awful situations that can come back at you.

Again, does the Buddhist path separate from all these things? Is it all seen as *samsāra*, not to be engaged with? And that's the other thing that you might do, because you don't want to get angry, you don't get engaged. Well, that's the other negative side of not being engaged. But if you are coming from a point of wisdom, a point of compassion, then, of course, your behavior will engage you. And the Buddha had no problem engaging in serious situations. His people and the Kaliyas, who owned the other side of the river, were going to fight about water rights. And he went up and he said to them, what's more precious, the blood in your veins or the water in the river? And that cooled them down a bit. And kings would come to him for advice. His advice was always to seek the way to peace not seek the way to war.

The questioner goes on to say, also, I've been feeling sad about all the deaths and the families that have been left bereaved. Am I right in thinking that Sharon Salzberg, in *Loving Kindness,* is saying that that is no longer compassion, but sadness. And is compassion that we need to develop?

Yes. I think we've also touched upon this, the distinction between grief and sorrow. Sorrow is the ability to feel another person's pain and empathy, and it requires us, it impedes us to find a way of helping. Even if we can't help, at least we can send our good wishes or influence somebody else to help them. But that's not to be confused with grief, which is the pain we feel when we lose somebody whom we're dependent on for our personal happiness. It's a different thing. The sensations, the feelings can be very similar, but they have different roots.

The Buddha himself is also known as the Mahākaruṇiko, he's the great compassionate one. Because after all, he spent his life trying to save us from suffering, trying to save all people from suffering, which was a big task, let's face it. So yes, anger, generally speaking, is a no-no. You want to try and redirect the energy towards assertiveness. We do need compassion. We need to be in touch with people, feel what they feel as a resonance. Now, obviously, you can't feel what another person feels, but you can resonate with it and do what we can to help. Trembling in the heart, that's what the Buddha says, a trembling in the heart when you see somebody suffering.

The next one is: are my thoughts and feelings dependent on my physical body? If I had a different body would I have different thoughts etc? Well, of course, many of them are dependent on the body. That's why

in the evening we go on about sickness, aging and death. We're very concerned with the body. It definitely brings up a lot of anxiety and all the other stuff. It's through the body of course we're in contact with the material world outside, with the phenomena, with the material world outside through our senses. And it's that which creates this inner phenomenal experience. So obviously if you're deaf then that dimension of experiencing things as something that you can hear is not there for you. So the body has a direct effect on the mind.

But then, of course, there are many things that affect the mind-heart which are not directly coming from the body. We've just talked of one really, our bodies anyway, is that when we see somebody who's in a bad state, we want to help them. It might not be a physical bad state. It might be a mental one, but you want to help. So not everything comes from the body.

If you had a different body, would you have different thoughts? It very much depends, really. When I shaved my head to become a monk, my sister was there. My family were there. And she said to me afterwards, I didn't realize you had such big ears. Well, I was shocked. I fancy somebody saying that on your ordination day. So ever since then, I've been slightly aware of these jugs on the side of my face, these jug handles. And you can imagine, if you had the ears the size of an elephant, then you'd be aware of it. It would affect your self-esteem, probably. I've forgotten that particular remark until just today, actually.

So yes, different bodies. Obviously, if your body's disabled, that's a different situation too. Having the body we have brings its own mental situations. If you've got a healthy athletic body that never falls ill, that's very different from a person who's continuously weak, falls ill, et cetera, breaks their bones and so on. So yes. Don't wish for another body. That's what I say. Just be happy with the one we've got. You never know what you're going to get.

The next one is: I've tried the death contemplation, breathing in as the body's last breath, only for around five minutes of time, tagged on to the normal meditation. First, I was shocked just how attached I was to everything, absolutely everything. Then I realized it was to this body and sense experiences resulting from it. Then when I applied it to wandering thoughts and worries, it put these worries and thoughts into perspective and the realization how unimportant they are. Should I use this when I'm really upset or worried?

I think that's what the contemplation of death does. It puts things in a wider perspective and you get different priorities. Even now through this covid thing where we're having to isolate, it's making I think a lot of people experience life in a different way. And they might be thinking, why am I rushing around all the time? What's the point of earning all that money if I'm going to be stressed out all the time? I'm hoping that's what's happening anyway.

So the contemplation of death puts life into a different perspective. And one of the things is to see what a treasure it is. And one wants to live fully within the present moment. So when one turns to one's worries, you think, well, what's that in terms of death? So little worries or these superficial things might just fade

away.

But you have to be careful about using these techniques not to feel what the heart wants to express, especially if the feeling is a strong one, if you've got sadness or anxiety. Doing that, you can fall into the error of what's been called spiritual bypassing, which is just another way of saying suppressing.

So often, for instance, in the tradition, a great emphasis is put on impermanence, *anicca*, *anicca*, everything's changing, everything's changing. And what happens is you're looking or you're feeling, say, some anxiety, and you're stepping back, but stepping back in the wrong way and looking at it and saying, oh, yeah, it's all arising and passing away. It's all arising and passing away. But you're not feeling the intensity of that anxiety, and therefore the heart can't cure itself. It just goes back into the system. You just get as neurotic as you were before.

So don't forget that it's *anicca*, *anattā*, but it's also *dukkha*, right? And that's in the discourse on establishing right awareness. The Buddha's constantly putting us in, to feel feelings in feelings, to feel mental states in mental states. It's the same as a room. It's the difference between being outside, looking in through the window, or at the doorway, or on top of the room, or under the room. It's completely different when you actually go into the room. And that's when you actually experience the room as an internal experience. And that's what you're doing with these emotions, with these mental states. You want to get into them and feel them as they are.

Then when you're inside feeling them as they really are, that's when you can also begin to recognize that it's actually changing. And that's when you're getting down to that level of the different things that make up a feeling, the heaviness, the burning, and all that sort of stuff. So be careful about that. That's when you get teachers saying that you need psychotherapy before you go to *vipassanā*. Or you need psychotherapy after you've done *vipassanā*. And it's usually because of this problem. I can't remember, unfortunately, the name of the psychiatrist who actually wrote this. He was a good meditation teacher too, died recently. But if it suddenly springs to mind, I shall mention him.

So yes, death meditation is very powerful. And as this person experienced, you don't have to do it for hours, just a little bit at the end of each sitting, just a little reminder occasionally during the day. It brings you back to this lovely present moment we've got. Even though it's horrible.

So we'll move on to the next. I have a bit of confusion here. I get the three unwholesome roots. So that's greed, aversion, and delusion. And that they're fundamentally the base of all unwholesome states. But the taints, which we're coming to later, of course, tomorrow, the cankers, also called, the hindrances and the fetters, all seem to have similarities, with some being blockages to insight and some being yokes to the worldly states. The same factors may be in the different groups. Are the taints generally the same thing as the fetters, or is the different way of looking at these items or considering their arising and passing? The taints may be cleared to allow stream entry. That's the first level of insight. But somehow, I'm sure that I've seen clearing the fetters described as being overcome by the same results. Are fetters and taints

interchangeable?

This is where we get into these lists. The three or four taints are also called *ogha*. They're called floods. They saturate everything, right? As an unwholesome saturation. It's like you're painting in watercolours and you have your first wash and that wash gives the whole painting a feel. So these taints, these oozings are like these floods, these color washes that are behind everything that we speak, think, say, and do. They're also called *yoga*, yokes, because they tie us to the worldly thing. And as taints, they are referred to their malignancy, their horrible oozings.

Now, the fetters, there's only four of those, by the way, the fetters are a specific group of 10, which tell you which ones go as you go up the four stages of awakening. And the first three to go are doubt in the Buddhist teaching, belief that any form of ritual or practices will actually bring about liberation, although they have their place. Like, I do the taking refuges and precepts. They have their place. But you could do that for an eternity and it wouldn't actually liberate you from suffering. And the final one is the one we've been addressing, is that insight which undermines, you just get that insight into not-self, into the fact that there's something there which is not changing. And that's, of course, the Buddha calls it like a flash of lightning. You've seen it, but it's not been long enough to really be sustained. It has its effect. So those are the fetters.

Then you've got defilements and latent tendencies. So I used to know some of these lists, but happily I've forgotten most of them. It just weighs on the mind, I think.

Kilesa, the defilement. You've got, none of these will come as a surprise. Greed, aversion, delusion. So there's your three basics. Then you've got conceit, which is to do with me. Speculative views, wrong views. And then you've got skeptical doubt. So that's the doubt that stops you doing something, yeah? If you're on the high board wanting to dive into the pond, if you doubt that you can do it or you're too afraid to do it, then you just don't jump, you come down. Mental torpor, so that's a bit of a hindrance or a defilement. Restlessness, shamelessness, and lack of moral dread. When we lose shame and fear of consequences, then really there's nothing much to stop us doing unwholesome things. So those are known as your defilements. So they're just a group. I don't think they are exhaustive, but at least they give you some idea of what a defilement is. I think that's more the case.

When it comes to *anusaya* or latent tendencies, as far as I know these are not defined as such in the discourses. It's just a way of talking about things that are there which we might not be aware of. So sometimes they're called, they're translated as proclivities or inclinations, tendencies.

And again, you won't be too surprised by what they are. So it's greed, of course, and then grudge, which is rather interesting. Resentment, the inability to forgive. Speculative view again, skeptical doubt, conceit, see, craving for continued existence. So that's the other one of the taints. If you remember, sensual desire, desire for existence, and ignorance.

So all these lists, I think you just take them as indications, that's all, indications.

So the best thing to get is the Buddhist dictionary. Here we are, Buddhist Dictionary. Oh, you can't see it. Buddhist Dictionary: A Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines by Nyanatiloka, and he's got it all there for you. You get it from BPS, which is the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy. I think you can download it as a PDF too. So that'll give you all your lists.

How are we doing for time? Oh dear. OK, it's getting on, isn't it? Getting on. Oh yes, just the last one here.

I also have some thoughts on assuming the position of the observer. I'm not good at staying with sensations for a long time. Rather, I'm at that stage of my development where it tends to last for a split second or so, maybe minutes in some circumstances. I gather from the Mahāsi treatises that this state tends to extend itself with practice until liberation when it becomes permanent. The only exception seems to be, for me, meditating on pain. I work a lot with pain, provides a powerful focus. Eventually, and in the right circumstance, this focus leads to the objectivization of pain itself once the position of the observer is established. This is also one of the most effective ways of managing pain, I find. Pity, it tends to be more impermanent than the pain itself.

Yes, that's what we discover, isn't it? That with things that are unpleasant, when we have dealt with the reaction—see, that's the important thing—not wanting it, to go there, feel the reaction. When the reaction goes and we then turn towards the difficulty, the pain, physical or mental, then we can stay with it. And of course, we realise that the reaction is causing the suffering. Pain is just pain, as it were, and we can be quite equanimous with it.

Now, one thing I did that's brought to mind, which I didn't stress actually in the discussion yesterday evening about not-self, when I talked about the object, the distinction between the subject, the observer, the feeler, the knower, and what is felt, seen, observed, etc. You can make that clear to yourself by making the distance between the two obvious to yourself.

So for instance, if there's pain in the knee, you're up here somewhere looking down and you can say there's pain. So that's there. And then to be aware of the distance that there is between the two, the observer and the observed. So it's like here, now you're looking at the screen and at me no doubt, and I'm filling most of your awareness, most of your attention.

Now, if you become aware of the distance between your eyes and the screen. Now, that's what I mean by recognising the distinction between the subject and object. And you find you can do that with emotions because they're in the body and you're still up here. Images, sometimes you can see them ahead of you and you can at least intuit the space. There must be a space there between them, as it were. It's a mental space. Thoughts, of course, very difficult.

And that again accentuates the whole business of what I'm experiencing doesn't constitute me. Because this me now is felt to be the observer, okay?

So I think that's enough of that for one evening, don't you think? And we can begin our meditation. I just hope, as usual, that I've not caused even more confusion. Very good.

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