Overcoming the Taints by Restraint

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 22:55

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

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

It's a bit cold these days. The temperature's dropped a wee bit.

Just to say something about this observer position within ourselves, a couple of questions come up. Remember that so long as there's a sense of the observer, there are two consciousnesses, following the other very rapidly, so rapidly that we get the impression that the observer is constant even though what it's looking at is steady. But that sense of the self, the observer, is a consciousness. It's the feel of awareness on that screen of consciousness.

Now as your concentration goes, driven by interest to see things as they really are, of course that stops and there's that absorption where the sense of self disappears. There's just the awareness and the object that you're observing. You can call that pure *vipassanā*. It's the same absorption you might say when you watch a DVD, but because it's a completely different purpose, it doesn't lead to awakening. So this practice is about leading to awakening. So you have to enter into absorption with that interest.

Unfortunately, you can't make it happen. It just arises when the conditions are there—the seven factors of enlightenment. And it's just practice. Sometimes it comes, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it stays a little bit, sometimes stays a little bit longer. On retreat, of course, it's a bit easier. In daily life, depending how busy you are and so on—I mean, now that everybody's in isolation, you're of course very contented and peaceful and at ease, and therefore it should arise fairly easily, maybe.

So we want to carry on now to the taints. We want to move on. What we've done is we've seen the first way of overcoming taint, which is through insight, and that actually leads to awakening. But the next one is abandoning by restraint. Just let me remind you of the various ways: the first one we've seen—that's we've done that—abandoned by restraining, abandoned by using, abandoned by enduring, abandoned by avoiding, abandoned by removing, and abandoned by developing. So each of these, the Buddha's offering those different ways to overcome unwholesome states. So we're on the second section: taints to be abandoned by restraining.

So we'll read it through and see what happens. What taints, bhikkhu, should be abandoned by restraining? Here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, abides with the eye faculty unrestrained, while taints,

vexation and fever might arise in one who abides with the eye faculty unrestrained. Now, just this little phrase, "reflecting wisely"—*yoniso manasikāra*, that's a bit of Pali—that's a very regular phrase by the Buddha. He constantly wants us to reflect upon what we're doing.

I'm reminded of a talk, I remember, given by a monk where he was talking about reflection and reflecting on reflection. And the word "reflect" came up every second word. By the end of the talk, I hated the word "reflection."

So we have to reflect wisely, not unwisely. And then he goes on to say there are no taints, vexation or fever in one who abides with the eye faculty restrained. There's no discontent and no fever over wanting something in somebody who abides like that. And then, of course, he goes through the other ones, the ear faculty restraint, the nose faculty restraint, et cetera, et cetera.

Now, if we just go back to the eye restraint, we're a very visual society. If we think of our grandparents, they would have had the radio. There wouldn't have been much to excite the eye, no screens. And their sense of hearing, I think, would have been better than ours, because just from the sound of a voice on a radio, you'd be able to tell what sort of person that was. The voice is telling you a lot about the person. And I got a feeling that we've lost all that because we've become so visual. And the sounds, when we go out in nature, we're often into views and scenes and panoramas, but not so much the sounds of nature.

And that's something that the Buddha's talking about: restraint, of course. It's basically looking at what we're looking at. So remember, every time you look at something, that's an act of intention. An act of attention is an act of intention, whether we're aware of that or not. There's a moment when we intend. Normally we don't notice these things because they're habitual. It's only when you're forced to look at something that you don't want to look at that you might recognize that a decision has to be made. So within any act of seeing, smelling, touching, anything like that, there's always a moment of impulsion. There's always a moment of a decision and an actualization—the will. And that's conditioning. That's conditioning.

One example I have mentioned, which is my favourite example, was that sometime in the 80s, there was a loss of confidence in the billboards. And the people who owned them wanted to prove, in fact, that they did have a big effect on people. So they put up a big poster advertising this new perfume. I can't remember what it was called, but it had a sort of an Italian hat on it, you know, with the corks hanging down, stop the flies in the outback attacking you, and it was given a funny name. And what happened was, of course, there was a huge demand for this new perfume, and they proved that they had an effect.

So just consider: you're on a bus and you're just looking around, you're not really being fully aware, and your eye wanders outside the window, or you're constantly looking out of the window, and your eye hits this perfume, and you think, "Well, I've got to have that." And it's just part of that conditioning. So once we accept that wherever we put an attention, that's conditioning us, right? And that's what the Buddha means by restraint.

So when people go on retreat, especially a Mahāsi retreat, the idea is to restrain your senses. So we stop talking to each other so that we can hear the inner dialogue more clearly. We stop looking around so much so that we can see how impelled we are to see, to look.

Here, of course, we've got things like sheep and cows and a pheasant. We've had a pheasant recently. We actually got a duck on the pond, believe it or not. And she's hidden in the top there just underneath the parinibbāna Buddha, the Buddha in his death posture. And they say there's three ducks—she's attracted three ducks. I haven't seen them personally, but there she is. And so there's, you know, as soon as you hear a quack or a bleat or something, now we've got these little lambs jumping around the place, and you want to look, you see? You want to look.

Now on a retreat, that would be distracting. I mean, you know, living here as I am, I do actually watch the lambs gambolling and all that sort of stuff. But on retreat, you want to restrain the sight because you want to look inward. We're trying to see on retreat how the mind works. That's the same when you're sitting. That's why we close our eyes. Some people like to have them just ever so slightly open like in Zen. It doesn't matter. The point is you're not looking around so you can see inwardly. You've not got music going on. You're trying to be silent so you can hear the inner voice, the inner sounds that are in the body and so on.

So this restraint also, of course, is to do with greed and all that sort of stuff. You know, like you're walking through town and you're looking around and suddenly you see the signs.

So there's another discourse called the simile of the elephant's footprint. This is basically the opening metaphor where the elephant has the largest footprint of all animals, and so the Buddha is the greatest of all animals. He's often shown as, he's often represented as an elephant or a cock or something which is the head of that particular type of animal.

Anyway, this is what he says. This is a bit more detailed about seeing. "On seeing form with the eye, he does not grasp at its sign and features." So a sign would be the distinctive qualities and the features would be the other bits that come up when you look a bit more closely.

So an obvious case is walking through town seeing a coffee shop. Now, you see it. And of course, that's the sign. Whatever it is, there's a sign of the thing, whether it's Nero's or whatever. And that's your sign. And then you've got to, if you're there, if you're right aware and you know you shouldn't be nipping in there to get a coffee, then you avert your gaze, you see.

But more often than not, we hang around there, and visions of Danish pastries and other delights begin to invade the mind. And even though you've made a very fierce decision that you won't be dipping into the coffee shop, you find yourself sitting there wondering how you got to that place. And this is what happens when something grabs you.

So what he's saying is that if we maintain a sharp awareness—you know, just an awakenedness, an

awakenedness—we'd catch the sign, we'd catch the desire that comes up with it, and we'd be able to let it go. "So since he left the eye faculty unguarded, evil and unwholesome states of covetousness and grief might invade him. So covetousness and grief are just another way of saying desiring or wanting and not wanting, aversion. And he practices the way of restraint. He guards the eye faculty. He undertakes the restraint of the eye faculty."

And then he goes through all the other senses, of course. And finally, "cognizing a mind object with the mind, he does not grasp its signs and features."

So something might come up in the mind where—I mean, this happens in meditation, obviously, where you remember something. And before you know it, you're planning your holiday, you know, you're off to—well, not at the moment anyway, but normally speaking, you'd be off to Timbuktu or somewhere in your mind. And then you wake up and what's happened is the first sign has come up, some idea that you've seen in a magazine or something or on the old screen. And you've gone into it. Before you know it, you're planning your holiday.

So if we're aware and we catch that first image, we should be able to stop it there, you see, or at least make a decision that we won't indulge it. I mean, there's nothing wrong, obviously, with going on holiday. And there's nothing wrong with planning a holiday. It's just the fantasies that arise with it often create future disappointment. Where you expected sun and beaches is drenching with rain.

And then, of course, he carries on. "Since he left the mind faculty unguarded, evil and unwholesome states of covetousness and grief might invade him. So he practices this way of restraint. And he guards the mind faculty. He undertakes the restraint of the mind faculty, possessing this noble restraint of the faculties, he experiences within himself a bliss that is unsullied."

Now, when a desire arises, if we can stay with it to the very end—in fact, it's more obvious the greater the desire—if you can stay with it to the very end of that feeling, without, of course, indulging it, you're there with the wanting, and you wait for it to completely end. Then you get that sense of release. You get that sense of being released from this obsessive desire. And with it there arises this contentment, and that's blissful. And it's for us to really recognize when contentment is there and to recognize that that is the consequence of restraint. That's the consequence of letting go.

So when we're sure that that happens, that when we do let go and allow these desires and lusts and all the griefs and the avarice and all that, when we let all that fade away and drop away, the product is this blissful contentment. And if we do it often enough and convince ourselves that is what happens, then of course that makes us want to do it more and not want to get caught up in these desires.

So that's a really important line: "possessing this noble restraint of the faculties, he experiences within himself a bliss that is unsullied." Because every time, of course, you let a desire go, you undermine that conditioning, yeah?

And then he goes into examples of how we maintain that sense of awareness. And now all the examples are usually about monks, because it's the monks and nuns, the monastics rather, who have remembered all this. They've tended to remember it for themselves. So you have to translate this into the lay life.

So for instance, "he becomes one who acts in full awareness when going forward and returning." So any journey you're on, you're actually being aware—going to work, going to the shops, whatever it is. It's not as though that isn't part of our practice.

"Who acts in full awareness when looking ahead and looking away." In other words, we're aware of what we're looking at. We will do it when we're crossing the road. That's not a problem. But otherwise, we tend to let the mind just wander.

"He acts in full awareness when flexing and extending his limbs." Basically, when we're doing anything, we're aware of it, whether it's as simple as opening a door or doing some difficult work. It doesn't matter what it is. We're aware of it. It's within our range of awareness. And that's when we're doing jobs, of course. I mean, if you're on the computer and you're typing, well, obviously, often the typing is automatic and what your attention is on is what's actually appearing, what you're actually writing about.

"Acts in full awareness when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl." So it's a case of being aware of how we look going down the street, whatever, even privately, just being aware of what we're wearing. It's not something that you're doing all the time. It's just occasionally you're aware of your presence, of how you look. And what it's supposed to do is make you look dignified, you know. We're supposed to have this sense of dignity.

"Who acts in full awareness when eating and drinking, consuming food and tasting. Who acts in full awareness when defecating and urinating." That's a time we'd rather think of something else.

"Who acts in full awareness when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up." As soon as you wake up, bring that awareness to bear. "Talking and keeping silent."

So in other words, whenever—and basically it's at all time during the day—we try to maintain this awareness, this awakenedness.

"Possessing this aggregate of noble virtue"—so this collection of noble virtue, this noble restraint of faculties, and possessing this noble mindfulness and full awareness—"he resorts to a secluded resting place, the forest, the root of a tree, a mountain, a ravine, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle thicket, an open space, a heap of straw."

And this, of course, leads us to the benefits of what we're actually experiencing now, which is isolation. But, you know, in the spiritual life, we call it seclusion. So for us, this is a real opportunity to find times when we just sit in silence. You don't particularly have to practice *vipassanā*. You could be doing *mettā*. You could just be sitting aware of being aware in a chair and just resting, just resting in the present

moment. That's enough. That also has an effect on us. Instead of always trying to do something—more being than doing.

So this is what the Buddha is asking us to do: to restrain the senses so that we're not always chasing our desires; to stay with a desire if we can until it completely evaporates and to experience the bliss of contentment; and to do it all the time, to try and be awake all the time. I mean, that's a bit of a task, but that's where we're heading. We're heading for a complete moment-to-moment awareness.

And then, wherever we are, sitting on a bus, waiting for somebody in a waiting room at home, there are these lovely moments of stillness. Where we've gone to the forest, to the jungle thicket, an open space, a heap of straw.

So that gives us some idea of using restraint to guard our senses and to maintain mindfulness. So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and that I've not created too much confusion.

And I think it's time now for us to practice.

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