Dullness and Lethargy (Thīna-Middha)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 15:13

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

This moon, I thought I'd have a go at dullness and lethargy. It used to be called sloth and torpor, which are, of course, moral views of them. It's also listed in the seven deadly sins of the Christian tradition. You'll know them all: pride, avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth.

These days, we tend to use gentler phenomenological titles and call them how we feel them. So we feel them as dullness in the head and lethargy in the body. And of course, cognitive science always comes up with its own little definitions—arousal dysregulation. So when you feel very dull and lazy and all that, you can say, "Oh, this is just arousal dysregulation."

Thīna-middha, that's the Pali word. Thīna refers to this dullness in the head, and middha refers to this heaviness or physical torpor.

Now, I don't think we put enough accent on this. The other hindrances, everybody knows about—sensual desire and ill will, anger and all that. And we know about restlessness and we know about remorse and guilt and shame. And doubt often comes up for us. But I don't think we realize how pernicious dullness and lethargy is.

So how does it come about, this dullness and lethargy? Consider certain situations. Sunday morning, and you wake up nice and warm in bed and it's absolutely wonderful. And you think, "I'll just roll over and roast the other side for a moment." You don't need it, but it's just a lovely thing to disappear into this sweet oblivion. Especially when it's subliminal—you're not quite asleep, but you're not quite awake. It just feels very lovely.

Well, of course, that's really bad energy. Everything we do creates physical or mental energy. This energy now is one that pulls us down.

And then there are occasions when we feel a bit bored, or we're a bit upset, or feel a bit depressed—we'll come to depression in a minute. We feel a bit down, and we think, "Oh, you know," and we sort of get on the sofa and disappear, or throw ourselves under the duvet. One way or another we just get rid of ourselves. It's a sort of soft suicide. But it takes an effort. You have to do it. There has to be this intention to disappear, and there's an energy that makes you do that. And of course, when it comes up in meditation or in ordinary daily life, you just get this dullness in your head and this heaviness in the body. So it's just a bad habit, that's all.

There was an Arahant in Burma called Sunlun, and he attained full liberation at record Olympic speed. It seems he was a clerk in an office, and he met someone who taught him how to do breathing meditation. But what they taught him was this very heavy, fast breathing. You can get it on YouTube—S-U-N-L-U-N. And it was something like six months. He just did this practice, and within six months, he'd made it. And then he began to teach the system.

He was asked, "Why is it that people—I mean, you did it in this express speed—how is it people don't?" And he said, "It's because they're lazy."

So there we are. That's coming from an Arahant.

The problem with dullness and lethargy is that it then expresses itself as a sort of apathy, an unwillingness to do something. "I can't be bothered." Boredom sinks in. So it really has a long effect on us in terms of our attitude in daily life.

You have to be careful not to confuse it with depression. I've got some material here which points out the difference.

So in meditation—the dullness—or in ordinary daily life when you feel dull or you feel this heaviness in the body, it's normally just a state. But if it's depression, it becomes a trait. It's with you. It's with you a lot of the time.

And in the posture, it improves with lifting the energy. So if you feel drowsy in the posture, there are a few things you can do. You can open your eyes, let the light in, you can lift your body up, put more energy into it, and it normally will dissipate. The other thing, of course, is to sink into the feeling and just be with it and investigate its qualities—the softness of it, the tingliness of it. You'd be surprised how it feels when you drop into the body. And sometimes if you're dull in the head and you just wake up, as it were, and investigate this sort of porridge in the head, you'd be surprised. You wake up like a light bulb. It's quite remarkable.

But if it's depression, it's a mood. It just doesn't move. So you have to be careful not to confuse those two. And if you do think that you are depressed, then obviously you might need some help.

Just zooming forward to the Buddha. So he had his early two disciples, Moggallana and Sariputta. They were Brahmins. And they became, of course, his two chief disciples. Moggallana went to him for some advice about dullness and lethargy, and he gave these sorts of advice. He says change the focus, put your attention on something which is going to raise your energy. In his terms, it could be reflecting on the Dharma. You can even do some chanting, just something to lift the energy.

He also suggests that you pull your earlobes. So you can always try that. If you really press your fingers in, it really hurts. In the old days, that's what your parents used to get hold of, just to wake you up.

And then there's light, of course. I've mentioned opening the eyes and letting the light in. And then he says

walking meditation, of course. You can always do that.

Also, just in ordinary daily life, remember, after you've eaten, even if it's the right amount, if it's carbohydrates, the body does produce a chemical that makes you feel drowsy, wanting you to spend some time resting in order to digest and go through that whole process. But you have to be careful that you don't give in to the sleepiness of it. That's all. And if in fact you are overcome by sleepiness after you've eaten, then you might be eating too much.

And then he says, when all that fails, he talks about mindful rest. So to actually rest and try something like yoga nidra, just to relax and not actually lose consciousness.

So let's go back a little bit to the causes. Just to run over those causes again: there's overeating, sometimes oversleeping—that's when you're indulging in blissful oblivion. Be careful of boredom; that also makes you want to go to sleep, so you have to lift up a bit of interest.

And physical exercise—don't forget physical exercise. It doesn't have to be much, but you've got to take care of the body in terms of its energy systems. Doing things like Tai Chi, yoga, but also some aerobic stuff like walking or cycling or something. All these add to a general feeling of energy.

Now, one thing you can do if you do feel sleepy is to again remind ourselves of the urgency of the situation. Every morning we wake up and I'm sure that we are absolutely certain we will live the whole day. But there's nothing certain about that at all. We can drop dead any time, or we could be caught up in an accident, or fall off a cliff. Who knows? It's getting that feel that we're living on this knife edge, and that brings a sense of urgency of wanting to really bring the practice into daily life. Sometimes you can bring inspiring teachers and teachings to mind.

So basically, it's a hindrance, right? It's one of the hindrances. It's a mental state that I think we have to take quite seriously. In my own practice, I've spent hours dealing with dullness and lethargy. And at one point, it used to last for ten days. I used to just walk around in this fog. And there was a lovely occasion in a meditation room that I was staying in Malaysia at the time. I was working with Upandita.

And everybody, of course, was getting up at half past three. The diligent ones, if they were falling asleep in meditation, were doing walking meditation at the back of the hall. The lights were quite low, and we're all sitting there. Then there's this hell-raising crash—glass breaking. It sounded terrible. This poor meditator, he might have been a monk or a nun, walks straight into a glass picture. That's how dull you can get. He wasn't hurt, but it was a funny occasion.

I think we've covered basically all of it now.

I'd like to leave you with something I haven't said for a very long time, which is to recognize that we were most probably conceived on a bed and we probably were born on a bed. We spend a third of our lives in bed. When we're sick, we go to bed, and we'll probably die in a bed. So it's good to remember that the bed

is probably the most dangerous place on earth. Just stay with that. Every time you look at the bed, think of it as the pit—so that you actually regulate how much you're falling asleep. Because any oversleep creates this bad energy, this downer.

On a final note, there is a connection between restlessness and dullness and lethargy. Often in your meditation, you'll be quite restless and then suddenly find yourself dozing. Sometimes you're feeling very dull and unenergetic and suddenly you become restless. As I experience it, it's the same energy—one is coming up and the other is going down. So one trick when you're feeling dull is to start from the feet and just bring your attention up the body, feeling things. It's an exploration. But don't go down—start again at the feet and just keep coming up. That, for me anyway, has the effect of lifting that energy.

Very good. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, and that by your diligent practice—never falling into the error of dullness and lethargy—you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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