The Importance of Tranquillity — Passaddhi

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 16:52

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.

So I thought this evening we'd tackle this factor of enlightenment. The word is *passaddhi* and it translates as calmness, tranquillity, serenity. And you can see that this is really important because the Buddha has included it in one of the seven factors of enlightenment.

Just to remind you, the seven factors are awareness, effort and concentration, this calmness and curiosity, and then you have equanimity and the investigation of the Dharma. So the first six are just general virtues that everybody can develop. What turns them into factors of enlightenment is the investigation of the characteristics of existence: impermanence, how we create suffering for ourselves through wrong attachments, wrong desires, wanting, not wanting, and of course, identity, not self.

I think people who've done yoga nidra will know that's a really deep way of relaxing. And we have to, yeah, in war zones, you have to keep calm and carry on. So I don't know whether I want to post that up in present war zones. Terrible what's happening.

The Buddha always splits everything into body and mind. So if we look at what happens in the body... I did a bit of research. Most of you know this better than I do, actually, for sure. Remember, we have autonomic systems. So one is the sympathetic, one is the parasympathetic. So the sympathetic one is the fight and flight. You're walking across the road and a car suddenly makes for you. Before you know it, you've got to the other side. So that's the sympathetic nervous system. The parasympathetic is the opposite, right? So it's about calmness, rest and digest. I've picked that up somewhere. It affects your heart rate, et cetera.

The big thing about being calm, about relaxing into the present moment is physically it releases all these wonderful neurotransmitters: serotonin, which makes you feel happy and well-being, and feel-good factors, the endorphins. Now, remember that in Buddhist understanding, these hormones within the body affect the mind, right? So there are two different systems within us. There's this more gross energy that we call subatomic particles, or subatomic energy, and there's a mental energy which is separate from that. This you can actually experience in your meditation.

So it's not as though these hormones directly make you happy, they just have the effect on the heart of making it happy, your emotional life. And of course, it works the other way. When you're angry, the body gets hot. Similarly, it reduces cortisol. So that's what we have when we've got all this stress-related stuff,

which isn't very good for us.

Because you're relaxed, because the body is feeling okay, obviously it's much better for our immune system. So we're able to fight diseases. As you know, there's a syndrome where people who are stressed at work, they go on holiday and then fall ill. So it's as though they have to have a real rest.

So it lowers muscle tension. I mean, that's the whole point of relaxing, isn't it? To relax the muscles. And this, of course, can alleviate even chronic pain. Just going back to my first episode with my back, the first time the disc prolapsed, I went along to an acupuncturist and I was surprised that as the needles went in, this anxiety came up. And as the anxiety dissipated, the pain wasn't anywhere near as bad as when I had this anxiety holding the body, as it were. It was trying to protect me. I mean, these systems are trying to protect us.

And similarly, of course, it helps digestion. It actually says that stress can lead to digestive issues such as indigestion, irritable bowel syndrome. So especially to feel relaxed around eating. I mean, if you're at work and you're being pressured and you're just chucking the sandwich down your throat, can't be doing you good, can it? And in Eastern understanding, I was thinking of the Chinese: 11 o'clock to 1 o'clock is eating time. So your body is primed to eat at that time. And from 1 o'clock to 3 o'clock is liver time, right? So if you're rushing around while your liver's trying to handle all these nutrients, you can see it's not going to do you very good. So between 11 and 3 o'clock, make an effort to be a bit more relaxed. That's if you're stressed, yeah.

As a change in brain activity, you get these lovely alpha brain waves. So these are the ones that you have when you're feeling relaxed. It's also a very creative place to be. And we're there when we meditate. So when you're actually in that state of just *vipassanā*, normally the mind will go down to these alpha waves.

And obviously it improves your sleep because if you're not calm when you're trying to sleep, it's difficult. I mean, that's why really to close everything down about half an hour before we intend to sleep. Get off the social media, turn off Netflix, the BBC. And do something which is going to calm us. Like, I personally sometimes listen to the chanting from Throstle Hole Abbey, which was my first Buddhist encounter. And I just love their chanting. But there's other types of music, read poetry. There's many things you can do that are just relaxing in order to be prepared to go into sleep.

What we want to do is get that substrate under sleep to be calm and peaceful. And of course, when we're in bed, to put the breath, to put the attention on the breath and just feel it, just feel the body breathing. It wafts you into sleep, very calm. I can do *mettā*, of course. But the big thing is this sense of being relaxed, of being at ease.

I'm actually reading a book on this. It was a bestseller, Sunday Times bestseller called *Breath* by James Nestor. It's entertaining. It's very good. So when we relax, when we feel calm, even in situations that are stressful, we can get into a calmer place. It's obviously having these effects on the body and that's got to be

good for us.

And when it comes to *cittānupassanā*, the calmness, tranquillity of the heart, so obviously the stress is happening the other way. It's coming as a reaction we have to a given situation or person. That stress coming in the heart is moving back into the body. So as soon as we can just relax around something which is upsetting us, making us anxious, all the better. And of course, if we have a habit of being calm in situation, it should extend itself into situations which are stressful, which means that we're slightly more emotionally resilient. We can move our emotions a bit. We're not stuck on one groove of being angry or being anxious or getting depressed about something.

And of course, when you are calm, it just improves your decision making. I make a rule for myself, which whenever I break it, it's always disastrous. I try never to make any decision when I'm miffed or angry, when I'm anxious or when I'm in doubt. If I make a decision in those states of mind, something bad turns up. So you have to wait sometimes. You have to wait until there's calmness and then there's greater clarity.

I mean, it's obviously better for our relationships too, isn't it? If you're with somebody who's neurotic, it affects you, doesn't it? And if you're neurotic, it affects them. So if we can get into the habit of just being calm, not rushing in conversation, not trying to get the answer ready before the person stopped talking, but to actually get into that mode of listening. And to listen you've got to be calm, right? You've got to be open.

It's obviously a good place for creativity. We're not talking about winners of the Booker Prize or ecstatic artists. It's just daily being creative about what we do. So even washing the pots can be actually a creative action, right? You can find different ways of doing it. This creativity... I mean, every moment, every day is different. So without us knowing it, we've got to be creative, right? Even if you're driving a car, you've got to be creative. You've got to see where you're going. You've got to drive in a safe and easy way and feel relaxed.

You know what happens when you drive and you're tense and you're anxious to get to a place or you're late to get to a place. That's how accidents happen. So obviously being calm just has an effect on our mental health. And developing that as a base within our lives from which we move, right, out of that base you move into an action. I mean, it's got to make us happy, hasn't it? Remember, these things are just habits. They're just habits that we can develop.

So it obviously has an effect on the body and it affects on the heart. And so it now becomes a *bojjhaṅga*, which is a factor of enlightenment. And it looms quite large in the Buddha's teachings. It's normally connected to concentration, calm concentration. *Samatha* is the word for calming exercises. So *mettā* practice would be a *samatha* practice. And it leads into an easy concentration. If you want to be concentrated, the worst thing you can do is to try to be concentrated. The whole thing about concentration comes when you're relaxed and at ease and just placing the attention on the object and allowing the

concentration to manifest. As soon as you try and push the process, you're getting in the way and what you get is restlessness.

So you find it in the Eightfold Path. The last three are to do with mindfulness. It's right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. And we can include in that concentration, that sense of calmness.

It's one of the four divine abidings. So we've got love, compassion. They come divine abidings, also illimitables. But there are social virtues, the love, compassion, joy. And there the word is *upekkhā*. And this is where you get that touching of calmness and equanimity. So equanimity has to rest upon calmness. You can't be equanimous if you're all agitated. Equanimous, in my understanding, refers to a certain attitude, a certain way of looking at things. Calmness is your mental state and it's supporting it.

It's in meditation. The concentration of the *samatha* practice, of course, leads to an even deeper sense of relaxation through the practice of *jhāna*, through the practice of absorptions. So it's right there within the practice. It's not something that we add on. It's a necessary part of our practice. And when we are calm and we're not restless, whenever something arises, which is obstructing our meditation, messing us about in ordinary daily life, even from minor silly things to heavy mental states, that calmness, if we've got that substrate of calmness, we can deal with it. That's the point.

And then finally, of course, there is the great calmness itself. In the Metta Sutta, remember, it talks about what must be done for those people who wish to reach the state of peace. Now, they use a different word there, *santa*. But of course, it is this calmness, this state of sublime serenity. That's one of the adjectives the Buddha uses for *Nibbāna*.

So there we are. So I'm hoping that you're all convinced and that to develop our calmness is absolutely necessary. And just remind yourself, it could become part of your New Year resolutions. A bit late, but why not? We can always add them on, can't we?

And to get in the habit, something I've been working on all my life since I became a Buddhist is to, when you finish something, when you've done a task, it can be just the washing of the pots, but it could be a piece of work. It could be a bit of gardening you've done, not this time, of course. And when it's finished, just to relax for a moment and just reflect on what you've done and see how you feel about it.

And then just to stop for a moment, just to relax into the present moment. And then quite naturally, the next thing to be done will arise. So you're moving into the next thing to be done from that base of calmness. And that allows us to be more wise, more loving.

So I'm hoping that I've convinced you to really practice this quality of calmness and that by your devotion to it, you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.