The Crucial Role of Desire and Intention

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 20:25

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa

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

So I thought this evening we'd tackle this crucial role of desire and intention. There are three words that we have to be clear about: *taṇhā*, *chanda* and *cetanā*.

This word *taṇhā* originally means a drought. So from that, you get the idea of thirst, and it's used only for unwholesome desires. And it always is included in dependent origination, in the five middle factors, which are the ones that are a process. So first of all, you have a contact with one of your sense bases. Remember the mind, heart is a sense base. Something has to come up into that base of consciousness: moods, emotions, thoughts, images.

And then there's a relationship to what we are experiencing. So we give it first of all a name, a concept. And then we have a feeling arises with it. And dependent on those, we have that reaction that we call a desire. That desire, remember, is coming from a conditioning of wanting and not wanting. And in this case, it's always unwholesome, in dependent origination, because it describes how we create suffering for ourselves.

And then after that, you have an identity: I want. And then there's the empowerment. And that's where we make a distinction between the desire and an intention.

If I take an example, you see an apple. So the first is just a seeing an object—it's round, et cetera. And then it's given a name, apple. And with the word apple, there comes a nice feeling, usually. And then you might feel hungry. So there's a desire for the apple, which may come from just ordinary appetite. But in this case, with *taṇhā*, it becomes because we're greedy.

And then you identify with that. I want that apple. And you can see there how the language confuses us. It creates a delusion, gives you the idea that the I comes first. "I want the apple," but actually it comes towards the end of that process. Once you have that identity, then you empower that desire. And that's when you become an apple eater. So that's the first word, *taṇhā*.

The second word is *chanda*. Now, actually, in the discourses, *chanda* can either be wholesome or unwholesome. But in later Buddhism, the more Abhidhamma commentarial side, the *chanda* tended to be used only for what was a wholesome desire. So we do need desire, but we need those desires that lead to

liberation, that lead to happiness in this very life.

So that's *chanda*. And we can translate it as a sort of desire—I mean, you've got to be careful. These words are so confusing. A resolution. It's the energy of wanting something.

The third word is *cetanā*. Now, *cetanā* is connected to the word *citta*, which means mind. So here we're talking about intention or purpose. So there are these two things. There's a desire, which can be wholesome and unwholesome, and there's the purpose.

Now, the importance of that is that the desire itself, the actual energy, the wanting, is neutral. What makes it wholesome and unwholesome is the *cetanā*, your purpose for doing something. Now, to get a feel for what that desire is, as opposed to purpose, you might say, one thing you can do is if you're very hungry, just sit with the food in front of you and just feel the desire. So the purpose is obvious. You want to eat the food. But by sitting there, just looking at the food and smelling the aromas and all that, and you can get that feel for what desire is as an energy.

If you want to really experience it, this is what I used to say, but it's been ruined now. I used to say, turn on the TV when it's your favorite program. Sorry, sit in front of the TV when it's your favorite program and don't turn it on. But unfortunately, iPlayer has ruined all that. You can always catch up with a bit of a pain.

If we take an example from physics of throwing a stone, the energy within the arm is translated into the stone or transferred into the stone, rather. And you cannot separate the force from the stone. You can't stop it in midair and say, well, look, this is the force and this is the stone. They're all one. But the purpose of throwing the stone can be various.

So when I'm walking around the property here, some of the stones from the car park have come onto the path where they shouldn't be. So I might just pick one up and flick it back onto the car park. I might find a flat stone, we have a little pond, and I might throw it on the pond to see it skim just for the joy of it.

But then we also have rabbits. Now, most of you or some of you will remember my experience with moles and how we had to get rid of the lawns and create a garden. So now we have rabbits who come in and dig little holes. So I might be tempted to pick up a stone, not to harm the rabbit, you understand, but to give it the impression that it shouldn't actually be digging a hole in the garden and they've got a whole meadow to go and do it in.

So these are my intentions, but the actual energy or the desire to throw the stone is neutral. There's a distinction there. And the Buddha makes it quite clear. He says, I say to you that it is the *cetanā* that creates a *kamma*.

Now, *kamma* here is not the same as karma, which has come into our language as comeuppance and what you deserve. *Kamma* here just means an action. Now remember that when you repeat an action, you

create a habit. And as we know, a collection of habits is your personality, your character. And once you've got that, then your destiny is assured. So something is driving us to our destiny and it's these habits that we've collected throughout life. And our purpose, of course, is to discern those habits that lead us to perdition and those habits that lead to liberation.

I'll give you another example, actually, which comes from the Vinaya, the rule of the monks. If, for instance, I see somebody's mobile and I'm very attracted to it, and I think to myself, I'd like that mobile, because they've left it unguarded on a piece of furniture or something. Now, if I just allow the thoughts to process, in a sense, I'm building up a wrong intention. Now, it might be that this intention becomes so strong that I actually move towards the mobile with the intention at the back of my mind to slip it in my pocket. Now, and then I stop myself. I stop myself in that process. What the heck's going on? So this is called a *dukkaṭa*. This is already a small offense. It's not serious.

However, the desire for this mobile overtakes me and I again approach the mobile and I just put my hand on it. And then in a sort of horror, I take it back. Now, this is what's called a *thullaccaya*. It's a serious offence. I've actually gone and touched the object that I'm wanting. But again, the desire for this mobile completely overtakes me. I go to it. I touch it and I move it a nano centimeter. That's all just a nano centimeter. I suddenly realize what I've done. I drop it and I walk away too late. As far as the Vinaya is concerned, I've committed an act of stealing, even if I don't get it. It's an act of stealing. And in the Vinaya, this is a very serious offense. It's called a *pārājika*.

So *pārājika* translates as end of life, which means that you have to leave the order and you can't join it again in this lifetime. So this shows you there's an example to sort of show the process of how we can unwittingly be developing a desire, which then suddenly grabs us and we do something that we ought not to have done. So the moral there is don't become a monastic.

So one or two things here now, just as a sort of reflection. When we have a negative desire, so this is to do with a sense of self, when we have a negative desire, when we're doing something or saying something, there's always a separation. You create a duality between the person who doesn't want to do something and what you're actually doing.

So a simple example might be washing pots. You're fed up with washing pots, especially if you've got a family and all these pots and pans everywhere and you're fed up with it and you're washing the pots. Now yourself, the sense of self is I don't, I shouldn't be doing this. Somebody else should be doing this and I'm fed up with doing this, and you're washing the pots at the same time. So there's a split there between the sense of self and what you're actually doing. And that's why sometimes you lose your attention and you drop a pot and break it, and then you're really mad.

Now, if you have a positive craving, if you have something that you really want, an indulging thing, then here you can immerse completely into that experience. So it might be that you're very fond of horror movies or something like that. And you're knowing yourself that perhaps you shouldn't be watching these.

I'm not saying you shouldn't, you're saying it to yourself. And then you absorb into the film, you lose yourself into the film.

Now, the problem with going into something from a position of indulgence is that you go in with prejudice. And it's selective. So for instance, supposing now you go to a restaurant and there's a pizza. So you've had all these pizzas. So you've got this idea of what a proper pizza ought to be. And you walk into the restaurant, you ask for a pizza and it just doesn't live up to what you expect a pizza to be. So you're very disappointed and you eat it, of course, grumbling. And you won't go back, of course. But if this was the first pizza you'd ever eaten, you'd be delighted by it.

Another thing is when you are eating something like sticky toffee pudding. So if you eat sticky toffee pudding and what you really want is the sweetness of it, so you're prejudiced towards, you're biased towards tasting the sweetness of the sticky toffee pudding. Now, it might have all sorts of different subtle flavors, but you're unaware of those. You've brushed them out, as it were, because all you're interested in is sweetness. And that's what indulgence does. It just looks for what will gratify it.

So, for instance, another distinction would be, say, wine tasters or tea tasters, better. They have to put the tea or the wine on the tongue and roll it round and really be aware of all the tastes that come out from that. Whereas when we drink tea normally, we just have this one taste in mind. And if there isn't enough milk, we don't like it. If there's not enough sugar, if it's not strong enough and so on and so forth.

So it's a case of recognizing that whenever we're doing something from a position of indulgence, it's always going to crimp our experience. It's going to limit it. Apart from, of course, creating a further, greater dependency on it, like they become addictions at various levels or other, because you're always trying to satisfy this indulgence. And the fact of the matter is it can't be satisfied. Because that's not where the suffering is coming from. The suffering is coming from some sense of lack within us, some sense of neediness within us.

And the object that we're using to fulfill it can never cure that sense of neediness. It just gratifies it for a little while. The only way we can cure the neediness is by staying with it until it evaporates. And the energy of that habit is slowly undermined and disappears. So looking to indulge ourselves, hoping to get rid of the sense, hoping to get rid of that craving is a non-starter. It just gets worse.

Now, going back to *cetanā*, remember that that's your conditioning factor. The purpose for which we're doing something is actually reinforcing a habit that we already have. So it's really important to catch that purpose. Now, sometimes in the discourses, remember that the word *chanda*, desire, will be used in a sense of wholesome and unwholesome. But don't be confused by that if you come across it, because it's always the purpose for which we're doing something which is conditioning us.

Just one little example, which comes from the Visuddhimagga, the path of purification, which was written by a monk called Buddhaghosa in the 5th century. And it's got to be one of the great spiritual manuals of

the world. I mean, in that book, which is a big tome, and it's as dry as you could imagine. It has a whole section on the Dharma, a whole section on how to develop beautiful mental states, such as the use of love and *mettā* and things like that, and a whole section on how to develop insight. So it's a really beautiful book.

And in it, he gives this example of a teacher who's with his students. And while he's talking, his hand lifts up and he stops and very slowly puts his hand down. And all the students want to know what happened there. He said, well, what happened? And he said, I didn't know my intention. In other words, his mindfulness is so acute, is so in the present moment that even the smallest intention would normally be acknowledged. And in this case, he hadn't. But he recognized that his hand shouldn't be there. And he very slowly put it back. He intended to put his hand back where it ought to be. So that's how awake we can become in daily life. And it's especially important to be awake whenever we're making decisions that are of an ethical nature.

Finally, this *chanda* is a desire which grows with the habit of doing something until it becomes a sort of zeal. And it becomes part of the four bases of power or success. And I've covered that in an earlier Moon presentation. And that's your zeal. And with it, there comes the energy to support that aspiration. And then there's the commitment, the devotion of the heart to what you're doing. And finally, in terms of anything that needs an investigation, the path of insight, there comes that discrimination, that investigation of what we're experiencing.

So this *chanda* moves from being the slightest little desire, good desire in this case, to a real zeal, a real desire to achieve something. And that's your *chanda*.

So just to sum up very quickly, we've got these three words, this *taṇhā*, which is any desire which we can perceive or realize is unwholesome, *chanda*, which is a desire which is wholesome. And what we have to be careful of is this *cetanā*, the purpose for which we're doing something. And that sometimes takes a little reflection, because it can get a bit dodgy.

On the surface of things, we might be doing something for good purpose. So I'm helping somebody just out of the goodness of my heart. But when they don't thank me, I'm very upset. So that shows that underneath there, I'm expecting some sort of praise. So trying to get all that stuff into consciousness really demands an ability to just stop every so often and recognize what's going on inside us.

I hope my words have not caused any confusion and that by your careful observation of desire, you will drive yourself relentlessly to your liberation from all suffering.

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