Q&A: Kamma/Free Will, Mettā/Attachment, Momentary Concentration (Khaṇika Samādhi)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 39:48

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa
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Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble, and Fully Self-Awakened One.

What I've done here is put a few questions together since they revolve around the same theme. The first question is: what does "causes and conditions" mean? The next one: what about free will? Then there is: why is it that we clean our kamma when we practice vipassanā? And as a side issue to that, the term "spiritual bypassing"—does that mean one unskillfully uses the practice to avoid unpleasant feelings and emotions, and if so, what might some of the more subtle indicators of this be when it occurs?

This all revolves around the Buddha's teaching about kamma, and the main teaching is really around dependent origination, because that's how we create kamma—kamma here meaning our conditioning, our own personal conditioning. This conditioning is always within conditions; we're never completely separate from the world around us or the relationships around us. It's always a sort of negotiated process where we're working in a situation from a particular intention, and you haven't a clue what's going to happen once you activate it. The general rule, of course, is that if you do something wholesome, something wholesome arises out of it, and if you do something unwholesome, unwholesomeness arises.

Causes and conditions—that was, of course, what drew Sāriputta to the Buddha when he met Assaji, one of the five companions who had been with the Buddha before his liberation. When Sāriputta asked what his teacher taught, Assaji said, "Where there's a cause, there's a reason for it"—I'm paraphrasing. That somehow clicked with Sāriputta, who then went off to search for the Buddha.

Everything is conditioned. So how is it, in all these conditions which have their own causes? Remember, there are two types of causes, put as the idappaccayatā—the law of this and that. When that happened in the past, this happens now, and when that didn't happen, this doesn't happen now. Then there's the immediate present contingency: because this happens now, this happens; because this doesn't happen, this doesn't happen.

My usual example is the group. You've all come from different pasts, different places, different reasons. And once we are here, we create something just out of that. When you're here, there's this relationship

going on all the time—both with you and the meditation, and with others. Causes and conditions are all mixed up in a process happening in the present, affected by the past.

You can't separate these, because if you think everything is from the past, then you're into fate. And logically, as one writer said, if everything was just cause and effect from the past, where would creativity come from? It would be a sort of repetitive universe or cosmos. On the other hand, if there's no past, if everything happens just spontaneously, you have some sort of chaos. So there's the creativity: things come together from the past to create a present moment, and that present moment is the creative moment.

You can see it in our round of politics—how the world slowly moves towards psychosis and war, then there's a healing period and you're all right for about twenty or thirty years, and then it all starts moving up again into catastrophe. This happens both on the wider scale and in ourselves.

If you take the view that causes and conditions determine everything, then you're on the far side of free will, which is fate—everything's conditioned. There were people in the Buddha's time who taught that everything is determined, so why bother? It'll just happen. I don't have any modern philosopher who has that extreme view, though I'm sure there are some hidden somewhere on YouTube.

The other side, of course, is complete free will. The teacher of that was Jean-Paul Sartre, who said every conscious moment you have the freedom of choice—you're completely free. But what stops you, of course, is your neuroses, your hang-ups, and so forth. In a very narrow sense, if each and every moment presents us with an opportunity for choice, then we could say there is some sort of free will.

But Buddhism is normally put in this middle place, which they call compatibilism. Obviously, some of our lives is fated—the fact that you're born into a society, you've got a language which gives you certain structures. You can't get out of that easily; you have to learn another language, you have to enculturate, you have to go native into another language to realize how caught up we are in our own concepts and ideas.

One obvious example is the way the West is so individual—"I did it my way"—whereas in the East, they see themselves very much as part of a group. That's why we find the Japanese and Chinese quite difficult to understand. We think they're just being manipulated or following the group, but they're very much family-centred, group-centred, nation-centred. For me, that's a very obvious difference.

So there's a part of us which is already set—just part of our conditioning in the world, the society. And there's a part of us which has a choice. Now, here we've got to be careful. When you see somebody going down the biscuit aisle thinking they have a choice as to what they're going to select—I've done this myself, where you go in thinking, "Right, I'm going to have something new, I'm fed up with chocolate biscuits." You go all the way along, a hundred biscuits at Tesco's, and you keep coming back, centering on chocolate biscuits, and in the end you think, "To hell with it, I'll have my usual." The conditioning is so great.

When we're deluded, the idea of choice is obviously something that consumerism works on—the delusion

that you have a choice, that you're the one who chooses this particular piece of clothing, that it hasn't been chosen for you. From a Buddhist point of view, that's a very delusive area, because it's being manipulated by your desires, your attachments, your following of the crowd, being one of the many.

But once we start meditating, then this faculty of discrimination comes in. What discrimination does is look at choices that come up within us from the position of the path—where are we heading? This is the business of the aim and the objective. The aim is to get fully liberated from all suffering. The object arises every present moment, which is either off the path or on it. Because of our strong conditioning for certain habits, certain indulgences, we're always slipping off on these little side roads. But eventually we drag ourselves back and get on the path.

And what facilitates that return to the path, of course, is this discrimination. So you might say that even for somebody who's completely caught up in their desires and whatnot, there remains some sort of choice—or at least the potential of choice. They can say "no chocolate biscuits today," you know, but it's difficult. And then there are those of us who are on the path who are dragged by old habits, but this new understanding keeps bringing us back.

So in what way do we have free will, in any extent? But it doesn't quite work, does it? Because once you know where you're going, then the path is set for you. It's just like when you go for a walk. Tomorrow's my day off, by the way, so I'll probably climb a hill with Mark, depending on the weather. And of course, once we've decided on a hill, that's it. It's not as though you go halfway up and say, "Hold on, let's do the other hill." You set your pace and you stay on that path. If you come off piste, there's a chance of getting lost in all the other side routes, but you keep coming back to the path because you want to get to the top.

So in a sense, I would argue that the idea of choice is—well, it's there. You can choose not to be on the path. But in terms of where your heart is, where your direction is, where your objective or aim is, you don't have much of a choice. This is the path; I've got to stay on it.

So for me, it's a funny one. I try to come off the whole idea of free will and just talk about discrimination and what that actually leads us to do. And then to have the commitment—the understanding comes with the discrimination—to know, "Well, this is what you're going to do."

Part of that clarity, part of that discrimination, comes with the purity of the heart. Because it's the turbulences in the heart, it's the little delusive habits that we have in the heart, that keep taking us away. And so whenever we're meditating and we can see this stuff coming up—irritations, anxieties, overexcitements, planning, planning, all that sort of stuff—for us, that's recognizing that these are little devils that sit behind us and keep prodding us, unwittingly guiding our lives without us being fully aware of it. As these come into awareness and we recognize them as unwholesome, we allow them to burn out.

And that's really getting rid of old vipāka. If we want to be strictly correct, kamma is your action; the consequence is vipāka. But I know these days we just use the word kamma to mean consequences. So

these are the consequences that are in us, in our own hearts, because of past action. And you can't get rid of them just like that. You have to allow them to express themselves. That's one reason why the meditation is so difficult—because it's ninety-nine percent purification and one percent chocolate biscuits. There isn't much sweetness at first. But as you progress, of course, you get more chocolate biscuits. Or at least the misery tones down a bit. That's what we can say: the misery tones down. Remember, right to the very end, there's some form of restlessness in the person.

So a lot of our practice is, first of all, releasing this turbulence in the heart, allowing it to manifest. And the other side is, of course, this discrimination—that's the wisdom factor. That's this satipaññha, this intuitive awareness, coming to realize that it's not looking at things properly, it's not engaging properly, and that's what's creating the problem.

So there is a process of purification and a process of insight. And this insight slowly but surely guides us out of those habits that create problems for us. That's how it happens.

And remember that these internal turbulences need not come out as memories. They need not come out as emotions. They can just come out as pain. Unfortunately.

And when the pain comes out, you know something's gone because you simply feel it, but you haven't a clue what it was. And the wonderful thing is you don't have to know. You don't have to do psychotherapy on yourself. It's always a waste of time anyway.

I remember way back when I read all those books—Freud, Jung, Laing—just reading and reading. And I came to this amazing conclusion. I always remember this. I was about twenty-five and I thought, "Finally, I know myself." Yes. Delusion.

So one of the dangers of this process is what's been known by—I should have looked it up, I'm sorry—his name's Wellwood, I think. He's a very good writer, both a psychotherapist and a very good meditator, belonging to the Tibetan tradition, I believe. And it was he who coined this phrase: *bypassing*, spiritual bypassing.

This happens when you're not really into dukkha. You don't want to sink into proper dukkha—real, burning, hot, fiery, squeegee suffering. And so what you do is distance yourself from it. That's one of our mistakes, especially with the noting. You say something like, "Anger, anger, anger," and actually you're pushing it away. You're keeping it well away over there. And of course, that doesn't give it the opportunity to burn out. So it rests there as a sort of dis-ease in the mind.

All the while, the meditator is saying to themselves, "I'm liberated from anger. I never react to anger. I see it coming and it's fine. I can see it purifying." But actually it's not happening. They're keeping it distant.

This happens when you're interested in impermanence. "Oh yes, very good." And "not me, not mine." But this "not me, not mine" is really being used to push things out of consciousness, to keep it in consciousness

in a way that feels comfortable. What you're not looking at is the reactivity—the not wanting to feel this stuff.

So what happens is that all the stuff accumulates. Because remember, every time you sit, you're beckoning the heart to manifest itself. You've pulled off the suppressive measures. You've found this observation post inside yourself—this place where you're above the mind, or should we say slightly beyond it. And so you're not reacting with fear or aversion, and therefore the heart feels free to begin to manifest. But in so doing, it can come up to such a point where the meditator keeps pushing back.

In the Mahasi tradition, and in fact in Theravada in general—just as we chant in the morning—it's impermanence, suffering, and not-self. That's the process. The reason why impermanence is put first is because it's a way into the other two. What arises and passes away radically can be seen as having no substance. It's not real. It's insubstantial. And what arises and passes away makes it useless to grasp onto something, to attach to anything, because it's gone anyway. It's only by dint of force that you hold onto things.

So anicca is a way into seeing these two, but not actually experiencing them. That's the problem. You see it from one angle, but in a sense you've got to also see it from the angle of anatta and the angle of dukkha.

The angle of anatta is, of course, to see that you're not in control—you don't have full control. That's the opening part of the discourse on the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the discourse on the characteristic of not-self. The first question is—I'm paraphrasing—"If this were my body, could I make it grow taller, have more hair?" Things like that. And the answer is, "Oh no, Bhante, no." So you can see there are limitations of power over the body, the heart, the mind.

That limitation of control is one of the sources of insight from the point of view of anatta—not from the point of view of anicca, though it might hint at it. And when it comes to dukkha, that's what dependent origination is pointing us to: this whole business of reactivity, of how we react to things and unwittingly cause ourselves more and more problems. There's that little escape route between vedana, feeling, and tanha—that movement towards wanting something or pushing it away.

In the discourse on the Satipaṭṭhāna, there's this recurrent phrase: *vedananupassana*, which means to see feelings in feelings, to feel feelings in feelings, to understand feelings in feelings. Similarly, to understand the mind in mind, to understand the body in the body. To me, this always suggests that the Buddha had this difficulty of getting people to actually open up to and receive fully what's actually happening.

One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, used to use the phrase "plunge into it." You have to go into it deeply, you have to absorb into it, you might say. And this allows us to recognise this reactivity. You can't do that while the reaction is there. If you can't investigate a physical pain or an emotional pain, something is getting in the way—you don't want to go there. And if something is stopping you from seeing things as they really are at the pleasurable level, at the emotional, joyful level, it's because you're colouring it with

wanting more, demanding more from it. There's your indulgence.

So although you can get a grasp of dukkha from impermanence—if everything's impermanent and you see that, what's the point of attachment?—you're not dealing with this reactivity. That's the problem. You're bypassing it. And of course, you can remain cool in life. Somebody gets angry with you, and you can immediately pull back and say, "Well, I'm a peaceful person. I don't get angry at all." You can kid yourself into thinking you don't have any anger.

So the three avenues of insight—dukkha, anicca, and anatta—they each have their own specific ways of looking at things, which connect with the other two. One connects with the other. But even so, you have to give all three of them your full attention.

There's a quick question here about khaṇika samādhi. In his book *In This Very Life*, Sayadaw U Pandita explains this completely, I think. He talks about vipassana jhana, vipassana absorptions, as opposed to samatha jhana. In the commentary, you get *ārammaṇa jhana* and *tilakkhaṇa jhana*. Ārammaṇa means object, and tilakkhaṇa means the three signs, the three characteristics.

When you're practicing jhana, when you're practicing absorption, you really just want to have one object. You definitely don't want to discriminate or try to understand it, because then it shifts over to vipassana. You just want to absorb into it—that's all—and into the delight of it.

That sort of practice, when paired with vipassana, is of course a strengthening thing, because when you come out, you have a very sharp concentration. Much the same as when we practice walking meditation—although it remains a vipassana practice because of the impermanence, the rising and falling, it is also very much about a sense of ease, a sense of collectedness, a sense of concentration. When you come in from walking meditation, you can keep that with you.

With tilakkhaṇa jhana, the concentration is known as khaṇika—momentary—meaning it's one object, then another object, then another object. But that's not relating to the strength of your concentration.

That's something else. The strength of your concentration can be described at different levels. For instance, as you begin to quieten down on the objects that are arising, there may come a moment when you feel quite still. That's the moment of what would be termed *vitakka*.

There's this image they use in the commentaries—it's in the Visuddhimagga, for those of you who know it—of a bee flying around a flower. It's flying all over the place and then it finally finds this flower. It's going around, but it hasn't landed, and it can shoot off anywhere at any time. It's the same with the mind. You think you're there, and then you stop noting—which is a sin—and the mind wanders.

But then there comes a point where you sort of drop. Often people experience it as an actual drop. And then you're set. You're in there. That's known as *vicāra—vitakka-vicāra*. The bee has landed. It's sucking on the nectar.

When you've finally landed like that, slowly, driven by your interest—this is what it is, driven by your interest, looking at it, wanting to know—there's this tremendous support that comes, and your concentration, all the faculties, the seven factors of enlightenment become more and more strong. It becomes more laser-like. But still there might be a changing object. By then, usually you're down to one object like the breath, or a pain, or something that's very steady in its process. Usually the breath.

So the distinction is this: when you hear "momentary concentration," it doesn't mean you've got concentration this moment and then the next moment you've lost it. It sometimes feels like that, but that's not what this phrase is referring to. It's referring to a steady concentration with changing objects. And that should be vipassanā. Whereas samatha—the *ālambana*, the concentration based on an object—is usually the same object: some sort of repetition, some mantra, some image or whatever.

The term "momentary concentration" is a bit scholastic, really. You wouldn't find it in an ordinary dictionary. But I'm pretty sure that Sayadaw U Pandita talks about it in his book.

Now, there are two questions here that link together—actually, it's the same question—about the Noble Eightfold Path and where mental chatter comes in. Some thoughts come under right intention, which is *sammā-saṅkappa*. And Bhikkhu Ñāṇatiloka has "right thought" for step two. But I've seen it translated as right intention, right resolve, and so on.

If we go down the path, *sammā-diṭṭhi* is to see things clearly. Now, in a sense, that has to become systemic. You can't just see. If the whole process of liberation was just seeing that things were rising and passing away, not-self, then I think we'd have made it by yesterday, frankly. That's not a big deal. You can see those things at various levels. But somehow it has to become systemic, and the first thing it affects is the way you're seeing. It affects your attitude. It affects your relationship.

Sammā-saṅkappa is described as moving from selfishness to generosity, from hatred to love, and from cruelty to compassion. So you can see it's to do with some sort of change of behavior, right? As an attitude. It's not actually hit the behavior yet—that comes in the next three steps.

I know some people describe it as "right thought," but I don't think that hits the nail on the head. I think it's more to do with right attitude and how that brings about—sometimes you say right intention or right resolve. That's my own understanding. The attitude would, of course, produce resolves and intentions. It's dropping down from your attitude, isn't it? And then it has to be activated. So that's your right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

Although right speech is normally put out as what you actually say, if you look internally, you're always talking to somebody. There's an internal dialogue going on with everybody you hate and everybody you love. So I don't see a distinction between that. It's still talking. It's still speech. When I swear at somebody in my head—and hopefully it never comes out through the mouth—it's still unwholesome. It's not as though it's okay to have these murderous thoughts in my head, and only wrong if I actually do it.

In one of the discourses, the Buddha addresses this question directly: what is worse, what is more dangerous—something happening in your head, something you say, or something you do? He points out that it all begins in the head. It all begins in the way you think. If you're going to rob a bank, you've got to plan it first. You look at the maps, figure out how to do it.

As a little aside, I always remember there was a very famous bank robber up in Alcatraz or somewhere. When they asked him, "Why do you rob banks?" he said, "That's where the money is." That was very funny—what a stupid question! That's where the money is. He obviously had wrong intention, driven by money.

So that, I think, brings us to the end of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Now, someone mentions finding chanting helpful and asks where it comes from—whether it's part of tradition or something more general.

Chanting, of course, has its roots in the oral tradition. Everything was learnt off by heart, remember, for five hundred years. Five hundred years. And it came to a point, in Sri Lanka, at the great monastic universities, where they felt they were losing it—either because monks and nuns weren't making the effort to remember—so they decided to write it down. That brought to an end that particular way of remembering things.

When you read the scriptures, they're very repetitive, because that's how you remember things. You keep at it, and you get line after line after line, with just one word changing. That's the chanting—you keep at it.

But it's also, of course, a contemplative practice. If you're a monastic, you can't go shopping. You can't do any cooking. So what are you going to do? You can sit in meditation for some time, but not all day. You can do a bit of chatting, have a conversation with people. And then you think, well, why not do a bit of chanting? Some monks do a lot of it. It's a way of developing concentration, a way of lifting the heart.

There are phenomenal feats of memory in this tradition. In 1956, I think that was the date, they held the Sixth Great Council in Rangoon—there have been six great councils since the Buddha's time. This was a Theravada council, and there were, if I remember rightly, six monks who knew all the scriptures by heart. All of them—all the discourses, all the Vinaya (the rule of the monastics, which is another six books), and all the Abhidhamma as well. These were the ones who would sit there, and the Mahasi Sayadaw was the *p ucchaka*, the person who asked the questions. He himself was a renowned scholar in his own right. He asked the questions as they went through certain problems, and it would have been these six monks who decided whether everything was being properly remembered. I don't think there were any major changes—small ones, I believe, but nothing of importance.

So chanting really works on a heart level. It obviously has meaning when you chant, but if you put a

certain emotional quality into it—when you're chanting about the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha—the heart can be filled with gratitude, a sense of praise, a sense of awe. Then chanting has the ability to raise and develop the heart towards the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. And the *mettā* chanting is easy, of course, in the sense that you just want to send out this goodwill.

Now, remember that when you actually say to yourself, "I'm very grateful to the Buddha," don't always expect the heart to suddenly beam with this wonderful feeling of gratitude. The heart has its own ways of doing things. But with practice, it will come, quite naturally.

Music, you know, has a huge effect on us, on the heart. I was brought up Catholic, and the High Mass was a huge theatrical occasion—unbelievable, really, with the incense, the colours, the music. It's absolutely transporting. You get lost up in the clouds somewhere, in the heavenly realms.

So that's the chanting, and where it comes from.

This chanting that we do, I used to chant with my teacher. It was quite regular, I think for town monks—short, about half an hour. We used to chant the first discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, together every morning.

When you first start off, it's lovely—you're chanting with your teacher and all that. Then you think, "Couldn't we chant something else?" And then you go through this bored phase, and finally you just chant, and it is a relief simply to chant.

But the actual music of the chants here, I'm afraid most of it is my own concoction. The reason for this is that Ajahn Sumedho was utterly and totally tone deaf. He had this sort of monotone bagpipe drone that went on, and I wove around it these little tunes, which seemed to work well.

We went to a funeral once for a Tibetan lama, and he had this way about him—like a bishop, you know—he was going to walk in and walk straight to the top. So we sat there at the top, and then they said, "Would you chant the metta?" So we did—we chanted the metta together. You can imagine me chanting that metta with this drone at the back. And then, it was so funny, as we were coming down, this Tibetan nun came up and said, "That was the most beautiful chanting, Bhante." I thought, "What?" But it must have worked, you know, like bagpipes.

So yes, that chanting there—if you listen to Thai chanting or Sri Lankan chanting, you'll see it's slightly different. That's where ours comes from. But the actual content, what we're actually chanting, is something that we used to chant at the Vihara. And they still do. When I go there now, they chant for half an hour.

I think that brings us to the end of the questions. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused even greater confusion, and that by your devotion to practice, you will be liberated from all suffering—sooner rather than later.

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