Q&A: Emotions, Awareness/Delusion, Insight, Masculine/Feminine, Sense-of-Self, Porridge-Itself-Has-No-Taste

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

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa
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Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

The first question is about emotions. Since they're conditioned, how can they arise when we meditate in the present moment? Is it because we're not fully in the present moment?

In vipassanā, remember, we are standing off from the whole organism. We've found a place, this observation post, this place within ourselves where we're looking into ourselves. And emotions, when we actually experience them in the body, are just some form of feeling. We give them a name—might say anxiety, for instance. But as soon as we give it a name, we slot it into a particular category, so it becomes unpleasant, and so on. You can't stop that happening. That's just part and parcel of recognizing the emotion that's arisen.

Because we are standing off from the whole process—the whole process going on psychologically and physically—the heart expresses whatever turbulence is at the surface. These turbulences that we call emotions or moods, and the thought patterns that go with them, are part of that category of the aggregates, the khandhas, which is the sankhāras. The sankhāras are something that we manufacture. All the rest of it is a given.

The sense base sees something and it moves back into the memory, which is part of our perceptual process. And then that memory, the image, with the concept or the perception that we have with it, brings up the feeling tone of what we're experiencing. Altogether, we just call that a mental state. An emotion is pointing to that feeling value, the affective value of our experience.

There's no telling what the heart's going to offer. This is one of the understandings we have—that we don't actually know ourselves in that way. You're sitting there and just out of the blue some memory comes from childhood when somebody hit you on the head with a bat. That's what happened to me, you see. I've never been the same. And suddenly you remember it. I even remember his name, Ken. And suddenly I think, "I'll kill him." Where's that come from? It's all mixed up inside yourself. And then suddenly, for

apparently no reason—like just now, I haven't thought of this for years—it just came up out of the blue. And it latches on to an emotion.

That's the important thing to realize about an emotion: the emotional state is not attached to the object. Your emotions—all these things to do with desire, hatred, aversion, fear—are like balloons. You've got a balloon of anger and a balloon of excitement and joy. What happens is something comes up which puts a little pinprick, and all that emotion wants to get out through there. That's where we get this sort of inappropriate reaction to things, road rage and such. The emotion itself is a conditioning that we have developed towards an object. It's not caused by the object.

Very simply, if somebody hits me on the nose, the pain stops there. It doesn't travel anywhere else—it's on the nose. The feeling of anger that I get from them, it hits me and I can feel it, and it stops there. But what I do is react to it with anger or fear. That's what I'm generating—the anger and fear that I have towards what's coming at me. And that anger and fear is not specific to the object. It's just something I've developed whenever I see something that's dangerous to me.

So you're sitting there in meditation and there's Ken again with his bat—and he bonked me because I beat him, you see. He was a bad loser.

And I think what's happened in my own mind is that the turbulence of anger has sort of begun to rise to the surface of consciousness, of the mind, where it touches consciousness. And it's seeking an object. It's seeking something to grab hold of. So it grabs hold of this memory, and off you go. You start then thinking about this memory and you're developing this anger through developing a storyline around this Ken, whom I'm still hunting for. I sent out a search warrant.

So it's nothing to do with the observer, the feeler, the one who knows. Now, normally speaking, you're engaged in the organism and therefore you seem to be, as it were, in charge of your emotions. So you might say to yourself, "Well, you know, I'll go to the cinema and I'll watch this film. It's a horror film and I know it's going to frighten me. That's great because I like being frightened." So you sit there and watch the horror film. That's your decision. You've made that. You seem to be in control of it.

But at other times, for instance, you wake up—you never say, "Tomorrow I'm going to wake up depressed." But you wake up and you're depressed, and it's just come up. It's just come up of its own accord. And that's what we're discovering: that when you take this position of the observer within yourself, the feeler—remember, the awareness is multiple in its sensitivities; it can feel, it can see, it can understand—what you're saying to the heart is: manifest. Manifest yourself. What have you got hidden from me?

And that, remember, is the process of therapy. We're not doing the practice in order to have psychotherapy or for the mind to heal itself. It's just a natural process that the heart does when you come off it. The turbulence itself begins to manifest, and so long as we don't get lost in that thinking and all that,

that energy begins to evaporate. But it doesn't disappear, remember. It always moves towards its opposite. So whatever was a hateful, angry mood will move towards love, you see.

In Zen they say, with wisdom, compassion arises naturally. And we practice mettā just to give it a little bit of a push. But in the process of purifying the heart, in the process whereby the heart purifies itself, it's always moving towards purity naturally, and towards the virtues. I always say it's very cheap.

So it's nothing to do about being—it is to do specifically about being present in the moment in that particular way. And the heart then manifests its turbulences. And it can throw up even traumas from early life, real traumas, that can be liberated through this process.

Are there any questions arising out of that?

So in answer to the question: emotions are conditioned, yes, so how can they arise when we meditate? They arise of themselves—this is what you realize. The knee hurts of itself. It doesn't ask you for permission, does it? "Do you mind if I scream?" No. It just starts screaming.

And is it because we're not fully in the present? No, we are fully in the present, but in a particular way. We've taken this objective position within ourselves. That's not the same as being fully present when you're doing something, because then you're engaging the organism and it will come up with a certain mental state to support your engagement.

So if you say to yourself, "Right, I'm going to wash the pots," or do this piece of work on the computer, then you are ordering the organism to do this particular task. It might be that during that, some little bit of irritation comes up because of your reaction to what you're doing, or boredom suddenly arises—all that sort of stuff. But the point is that we can use this organism to do stuff. And that's different from being in this position within ourselves of the objective observer, where we're just leaving the organism alone. We're just watching the process.

And remember, that's the Buddha's approach to things. He's not interested in why something's happened, but how something's happened. Because in seeing how we create suffering for ourselves, we should be able to undo the knot. We should be able to undo the process.

This is a tricky question: how can awareness be deluded if it's unconditioned? I'm no great scholar, and I can't say I've read all the scriptures—I've read the main ones—but I don't think this question ever actually comes up in the texts. I must ask a scholar sometime.

The question of being unconditioned is not relevant to whether awareness is wise or deluded. It's simply unconditioned. The unconditioned refers mainly to the fact that it is not dependent on anything. It has its own existence, its own being. I'm using words very loosely here, because the Buddha doesn't like to talk about the qualities of the unconditioned. He just points to them. He points to them with metaphor—the island, the refuge, and so forth.

As to how awareness appears in a deluded state and then moves towards a wise state, as to why that happens, I don't think that's ever discussed. The only thing that's ever discussed is how to do that, but not why. There's never any ontological question in Buddhism—no question about why something has come to be in that ultimate sense. No questions about why it was created in the first place. The Buddha shies away from all those sorts of questions. Anything to do with metaphysics, he doesn't answer. He says it's a waste of time.

This is expressed in the famous quadrilemma—not dilemma, quadrilemma. The four main questions: On his death, does the Buddha exist? Does he not exist? Does he both exist and not exist? Does he neither exist nor not exist? It goes on and on, these negatives. And the Buddha, of course, is silent. He says it's not a question that leads anywhere. It's just the intellect thinking, thinking.

But what we do know is that we are deluded, in his terms. And the delusion lies at its base in identity. We identify with this form, and it leads us into all sorts of mess. Every time we move back into the position of the observer—unwittingly, even if we're not fully aware of it—we're disidentifying. As soon as something's an object, you can't be it. And that's one of the things we can say to ourselves. We can reflect upon it in the meditation. We can look at something—an image in the mind, an emotion—and say, "Well, I'm looking at it. It can't be me." And then, of course, you abandon thinking and just watch. Because even that thought is stopping us from having a direct experience of not me, not mine.

So there's no answer to that question.

Someone asks what it means for awareness to be deluded. What would be an example where one says, "My awareness is deluded"?

Awareness here is short for intuitive awareness. And the delusion, in Buddhist terms, is that it doesn't see the three characteristics clearly. It doesn't see. Because it's so committed to this life form, it doesn't really catch impermanence. Although we in our practice get down to this business of arising and passing away of a breath and all that, remember the real point of impermanence is death. That really manifests our impermanence. And it's one place we don't like to go. Death is something that's going to happen to everybody else, and maybe to me at some point in the future.

So that's impermanence. And we do what we can to ignore it, to entertain ourselves away from it. There's a fantastic book called *The Denial of Death* — the author's name has just flitted through my mind — and it's a classic, written I think in the seventies or eighties. The effect of the denial of death is unbelievable. It makes us run, you see. It makes us accumulate.

So this intuitive awareness, because of its identity with this form, doesn't see impermanence directly. It sees it superficially — day and night and all that — but it doesn't really see the cause of suffering. It doesn't really see it. And if it does see it, that is a breakthrough, but it finds it very difficult to let go. One example which I often use is smoking. In the fifties, it was still understood that smoking was okay, didn't

do much harm. Then as the science came through and people realised they were killing themselves, they didn't stop smoking. They just couldn't stop the process. It's like with us — we can see the process of craving, and we can see it's doing us harm, but it's very difficult to stop going for that tenth biscuit. You know what I mean? And that's the power of our cravings, which is the psychological cause of our suffering.

Sometimes I talk about it as desire, because I always think craving is far too strong a word. It covers the whole range from simple wrong desires to great big wrong desires. But remember that desire in English also covers all those beautiful things that we ought to desire, arising out of our social virtues — love, compassion, joy and so on.

And when it comes to not-self, that's what awareness doesn't know. Because of that wrong identity, it's lost its own identity. It's lost its own sense of what it is. Now, whether it ever had that is difficult to say. I can't see it ever having had that in some other rebirth, in some other place, and have lost it. I can't see that happening. So it's going back to that question of time, of the origin of awareness, of how it arose in the first place. It's simply unanswerable.

All we know is that we aren't happy in that absolute, fundamental way. There is an alienation with life. We don't feel we fit completely in with life. And what tells us that is, of course, the body falls ill and you die — because you don't want to do that, really. Usually, you know. Jesus says it in that lovely poetic way, doesn't he? The birds have their nests, the fox has its holes, but man has nowhere to rest his head. So we're always out of sync with nature.

We're not like animals that are very in the moment in that totally immersive, deluded way. But they are at home. This is where it makes sense to them, for want of a better word. They don't think about death. You never see sheep or cows having philosophical arguments as to whether they could do something about this problem.

So there's no answer to the origins of awareness. All we know is that it's within us. We experience it. And through our practice, we're slowly isolating its qualities. It's individuating out of the mass of those five aggregates, the psychophysical organism. People who have had an out-of-body experience know this. It's a very clear experience.

"Do you not see animals grieving death?"

They do, don't they? The higher animals. Elephants and the higher apes.

Would that not suggest that they have an understanding of death? I don't know whether they have an understanding of death. It's probably the sense of... well, understanding in the sense that they know that's a corpse now. It's becoming more and more obvious as they study the higher animals that they're far more intelligent than we would presume. Elephants grieve, don't they? It's a spectrum, isn't it? And then something happened to a particular ape and we went into a different category.

Is the insight into the true nature of ourselves something that can change? Or is it an insight into the world and others? Well, these insights are accumulative. As soon as you hear the Buddha's message about anicca, dukkha, and anatta, there's a click—our awareness or our relationship to the world just clicks. It clicks every time you have a new understanding of things. Even at an intellectual level, you can have a different view of something, and this feeds into your attitude and how you speak. That's the Eightfold Path, you see.

So all our insights are slowly changing our relationship to the world. And it's moving us towards this position: the world is not me, it's not mine, but I have to be engaged in it. And the reason you want to be engaged in it is because you've made a connection with other beings. You're drawn by compassion.

Compassion is understood to be—the Buddha talks about it as—a trembling in the heart when you see other people suffering. And it draws you. That would be a certain sorrow. And if you don't react to it, it remains unrequited. It remains within you, and you might feel guilty or sad that you didn't respond at the right time. That's just a natural thing that happens. I don't think you have to work at it. It just comes with an insight into ourselves. It's a universal insight. These are universal insights that all human beings are capable of.

The insight itself doesn't change. You just get further insights. It accumulates. So in these four stages of liberation—the stream entrance—the Buddha says it's just like a flash of lightning. The person sees everything, but it's like that was it. It's not really a full grasp of the situation. The second one, I think he says, is like a full starry night. Again, there's a deeper seeing, but it's not complete. And the third one is like a full moon night. In the East, you can see color; it's very bright. And then you don't get to see the world like the sun until you've finally cracked it.

So it's slow, but the insights are always the same. They're always around impermanence, the creation of suffering through wrong relationship—desire or craving—and not-self. It's always the same thing. Once you've understood that, there's nothing more to be known. There's only the practice.

That's why people can be fully liberated who in society are considered to be dull-minded. Because you don't need the intellect. What you need is the liberation of the intuitive awareness, the intuitive intelligence, from its confusion with the intellect. And in fact, people who are intellectual, or even those lost in art, are less well disposed.

There's a story that runs with the Dhammapada of a monk who had disciples, something like ten of them, and all his disciples became liberated while he wasn't. He was a teacher and he knew everything. So he thought, well, he'd better bite the bullet. He went to see one of them and said, "Could you teach me how to become fully liberated?" And the fellow knew this guy was too intellectually conceited.

He couldn't help him. So he told him, "Well, actually, the person you want to see is this other past student of yours." And so he's passed on down the line. And he got to this point where a monk said to him, "Well,

you need to work with this boy. He'll show you."

So this little child, you see, and the little child took him to an anthill. Do you know this story? He took him to an anthill and said, "Now in an anthill, when the ants leave, a snake often lives in it." And he said, "Supposing this anthill has six holes, how would you get the snake out?" And he said, "Well, you'd stop up five holes, you see." And the boy said, "Yeah, very good. So you stop the five senses and watch the mind." And of course, in no length of time, he became fully liberated.

His problem was conceit—thinking that because he'd understood something so well, he must be liberated from delusion. And that's what the intellect can do. It can fool you.

So the question is, can the insight into the nature of ourselves change? Yes, the insights grow. Look at it that way. They expand, they accumulate, they develop one on top of the other.

Insight into the world and others—remember, in the Buddha's teaching, whenever he talks about the world, he's talking about the world we're creating. He's not talking about the scientific world, the objective world. It's not that the world out there doesn't come up, but when he's talking spiritually, it's always the world that we're creating through this organism. In this fathom-length body is suffering and the end of suffering.

Is there a fundamental difference between men and women, in your experience? There's definitely—I think you've got to be careful because some women shade into—let's talk about masculine and feminine. Some feminine types move into the masculine and some masculine types move. So there's always that, you know. But if we talk about the two extremes...

When I used to teach in Dublin, there was a time when I used to stay with a very elderly lady called Beatrice. She was blind from diabetes. She'd lost her husband, her two sons. And she was an extraordinary person—a lovely feel about her. We got into a conversation, and she said to me, "You know why we're taking different positions?" And I said, "No." She says, "Well, men think deductively and women think inductively."

And I said, "No, that's interesting, Beatrice. What does that mean?" Because I couldn't remember what deductive and inductive thinking was. And she said, "Well, the feminine takes the particular and from the particular produces a concept. Whereas the masculine starts from the concept and draws it down to the particular."

Later on, we were talking about the war in Afghanistan—so that's when I was with her. And I suddenly went, "We're doing it, aren't we Beatrice?" She says, "Yes, you do it naturally. You don't know you're doing it. It's just the way you think."

So from a feminine point of view, when they look at a war, they see people being blown to bits, dead. So the obvious conclusion is we mustn't fight a war. From the deductive masculine point of view, there's the

bigger picture, right? We've got to get rid of these terrorists. So those people become collateral. They become part and parcel of this greater view.

And so in a patriarchal society, women are stupid because they can't see the bigger picture. But what happens is that then you have a patriarchal society that loses contact with the suffering, with what's actually going on. So that is quite a distinction on the ends of the spectrum.

The other distinction is will. The masculine will is the will of the storm, whereas the feminine will is the will of the mountain. My parents were like that. My father was a get-things-done type, but when my mother didn't want to do what he wanted to do, she simply said no. And that was it. He couldn't move her. The mountain does not move.

Emotionally, that's also quite a distinction at the far ends. The masculine experiences emotions in the head. I often see this with meditators—when they're angry, the anger is up here. The fear is up here. It's all up here. Whereas the feminine will feel it in the body as an emotion. In my own case, I had this insight that changed my life. I remember my next task came up: What is an emotion? I was twenty-five years old, asking myself this question. Because up until then, it was always in the head. There was no distinction between the thought and the emotion. I had no contact with the body as such.

So in meditation, in terms of the practice, the masculine has to come into the body to feel emotions—sometimes for the first time—as real feelings in the body. And for the feminine, because they're so locked into emotion, they have to lose their connection with emotion as emotion. The process then is to go down to the sensations, the four mahābhūta, to see that an emotion isn't real. It's just feeling, just sensation. These are all generalizations, you understand, but the masculine and feminine views of life represent genuinely different experiences.

After all the chatter of the mind has quietened down, a sense of self remains. Let me talk about this perception that I am in my head looking out at the world. Just to remind you of my imagery around this—the most obvious one is looking into a shop window. As you look into the window at the things you might want to buy, you suddenly become aware that there's a mirror image, and you catch yourself looking into the window. That window pane functions as a screen. All the light from the shop is moving out onto that screen, and that's what you're looking at, but the screen is also catching your image looking into it. That's consciousness.

When you're in that position of the observer, the knower, and you become aware of it, the object you're seeing—the sense of self, the observer—is also an object. Everything we experience from that position of the observer is an object. Pain in my knee, emotions, an image in my mind—they all become objects because I can actually point to them. I can give them names. And when I become aware of being the observer, of being the one who knows, then somehow that sense of self, that sense of the feeler, is also an object. So I can't be that either.

At that point, you can stay there and just sense that sense of presence as an object, a sense of presence. But it's telling you something about this quality of intuitive awareness. What are you actually experiencing when you're in that very clear state of the observer? In Mahāyāna, they sometimes tell you to glance back, as it were, glance back into the observing state. And then when you've done that, you can reflect: Was there a body there? Were there any feelings, sensations, emotions? What was in it?

These little insights, little seeings, begin to change our relationship. Of course, you can pull yourself out of all these different selves—an emotional self, a thought self, a job self, a relationship self. You can pull yourself out to this business of the observer, but you can't get rid of that self. You can't get rid of that self. And consciousness is arising and passing away. It's not steady.

It's not something that is always there. It disappears in sleep, for instance. And in the Abhidhamma, they say these consciousnesses are flashing at an enormous rate, picking up information from various senses so fast that it gives us that sense of continuity. So you're hearing and seeing at the same time—but not in Buddhist psychology. There's one consciousness seeing and one consciousness hearing, and it's happening so fast that it creates this illusion.

Now, being aware of that self, the consciousness that that sense of self is arising in is also still arising and passing away. And if you keep your attention there long enough, you might catch that.

So in terms of the question about self-awareness—that perception of self-awareness is telling us something about the nature of awareness. It's emptiness. So you get this word *emptiness*. The awareness is empty of all phenomena. It's empty of whatever the psychophysical organism manifests. That's what it's empty of.

But of course, what you're beginning to experience when we're in the position of self-awareness—that *is* the real. Everything else is an object of awareness arising and passing away, but this awareness seems to be there all the time.

The last question commented that porridge itself has no taste, asking whether I was referring to the conditions of sense object, sense base, and sense consciousness needing to be present in order for sense contact and perception to arise.

Yes. The sense base has this sensitivity—in the case of the eyes, to amazingly subatomic particles, photons, for heaven's sake. The ear sense base is sensitive to pressure. So they're all sensitive. But then as that information is taken into the mind, the mind plays with it and creates something.

So if you make a determination before you fall asleep that you will see the process of hearing when you wake up, you'll see that the first sign of the bell is just pressure, as if your hands are touching like that. And then as it's taken in, you get the sound. And then the sound is given a name: bell. Then it's given a purpose: alarm bell. And then it's given the person: me. I've got to get up. It's right at the end of the process.

So it's the same with all the senses. It's always being taken into the mind, and then the mind makes sense of it. But at the sense base, it's just very simple information coming in.

You might have seen those photographs of how the eye moves around a picture when it's looking at a piece of art in a gallery. The eye is moving at a tremendous rate all over the place, often centering on something you're particularly interested in. But you don't see that. What you see is the picture.

So the porridge is only offering you chemicals. The tongue and the nose are sensing it, and then it's going in, and then there's all this mental activity going on around porridge. And there was a program I saw where the process of smelling is also at a subatomic level. I can't tell you quite how that works, but it's not a simple case of a cell touching a chemical. It's actually happening at an atomic level. Remarkable.

The next part of the question is this: "This reminds me of the question, if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? I guess the answer is no, in the absence of an ear and ear consciousness. But if you leave a tape recorder in the forest, it picks up the noise. Can you comment on this?"

Human beings are incredibly clever at extending tools. All animals use tools—I just read an article about a puffin that picks up a stick in order to scratch itself. So it seems even birds, which are dinosaurs, can actually use tools, but they can't develop them further. They can't then think, "Oh, well, I'll manufacture this as a steel object."

Human beings, however, have been able to extend through their imagination. We have these massive machines that do all our heavy work for us, and they're just an extension of an arm. Our groundsman Roy, if you ever see him moving his machine around—it really does look like his arm. He's got complete control over it as he's shifting soil here and there. It's quite remarkable. And all he's doing is this little business with a lever.

When it comes to hearing things, of course, we've manufactured gadgets that are sensitive to sound waves. That's all. There's nothing magical. It's not an ear. It's just sensitive to sound waves, and it repeats those sound waves. So the sound waves are what you're hearing. The recorder has caught the pressure waves coming from the falling of the tree, and then it's able to repeat them so that you then hear the tree falling. But the recorder hasn't heard the tree falling. The recording has simply recorded the pressure waves.

So it doesn't upset the Buddhist psychology. Porridge still has no taste, and the tree doesn't make a sound.

And then there's the old Zen kōan, isn't there? I can't remember the story exactly, but there's a flag, and the student says to the master, "The flag is flying," and the master says, "Is the flag flying, or your mind?" So what are you actually seeing? Are you seeing the flag, or are you seeing your mind? That's one of these kōans, you see.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and that I have not created even greater confusion—and that you will, through your arduous practice, soon be liberated from all suffering. Sooner rather than later.

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