Sutta Study Class: The Honeyball Sutta (part 2)

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:12:35

In examining paragraph 13, we find the bhikkhus expressing their trust in Mahākaccāna's wisdom. They acknowledge that while the Blessed One "knowing knows, seeing sees," and is indeed the Tathāgata himself, they had missed their opportunity to request clarification when the Buddha first spoke. Since the Venerable Mahākaccāna is praised by the teacher and esteemed by his wise companions in the holy life, and since he possesses the capability to expound the detailed meaning of what the Blessed One summarized without elaboration, they request that he explain it without finding it troublesome.

Mahākaccāna accepts their request, saying, "Then listen, friends, and attend closely to what I shall say." The bhikkhus reply, "Yes, friend," and the venerable Mahākaccāna begins his exposition.

In paragraph 15, Mahākaccāna restates the Buddha's summary teaching: "Friends, the Blessed One rose from his seat and went into his dwelling after giving a summary in brief, without expounding the detailed meaning—that is, as to the source through which perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation beset a person. If nothing is found there to delight in, welcome, and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendency to lust... Here these evil, unwholesome states cease without remainder. I understand the detailed meaning of this summary to be as follows."

Now we arrive at paragraph 16, which contains the most crucial teaching of the entire sutta. Mahākaccāna begins his detailed analysis: "Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation beset a person with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye."

This sequence bears striking resemblance to the beginning of dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda). Mahākaccāna describes the sense base of seeing, where the eye serves as the internal sense base and visual forms constitute the external sense base. When eye consciousness is also present, seeing occurs. This convergence of the three—sense organ, sense object, and sense consciousness—creates what is called contact (phassa).

Contact represents the meeting point where these three elements come together at the sense door. This process occurs continuously through all six sense doors: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. We are constantly receiving streams of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and feelings—a continuous bombardment of sensory experience that forms the foundation of our perceptual world.

No, it's what I would call a sense datum. It's the raw data before perception in Buddhist terms. When the bell is struck, that sound is the sense datum—it has both consciousness and the sound wrapped together. That's contact.

All of human experience consists of these sense contacts coming at us through the six sense doors. The consciousness is the knowing of it. You can feel that as a mental event—it's the knowing of that bare phenomenon. The object—the sound—is what's being known.

It's just one experience. You don't think, "Let me gather the consciousness from back here and send it out to meet that object." It doesn't happen like that. It's the object and the knowing together.

So it's one experience, but you can look at the knowing side or you can look at the sense object side. If this sound were in a room with a corpse, the corpse wouldn't have consciousness, so the sense object would be there, but the sense consciousness wouldn't, and there wouldn't be an experience of hearing. But because we're alive, we have the consciousness and we have the object, so we can hear.

There's one experience—hearing—but there are two aspects we can examine. We can look at our knowing of it, because we're sentient beings knowing all the time in this bare sense data way. Or we can look at the quality of the sound—we could say that's E flat or whatever note it is. That sound has a certain quality and timbre. But it's one experience, two aspects.

How can one experience have two aspects? Is this bowl round or is it gold? There's only one bowl, but I can either look at the roundness or I can look at the color. Same with sense experience—just one experience, but I can look at the knowing side, which is happening only because I'm a sentient being. That sentience is consciousness that can receive and know it. And then there's the sound. Many different sounds exist in the world. They have their own qualities and properties. They arise together.

So the meeting of the three is contact. It's happening to us all the time. And when there's contact, there's feeling. This is straight out of dependent origination—the six sense bases, contact, and then the next step is feeling.

Feeling is very specific here. The word is vedanā in Pali. It's not emotion. It's a quality in every sense contact of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Actually, "neither" is the way it's described, but as shorthand we say neutral.

Every sense contact either has a quality of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant—which we sometimes shorten as neutral. Those are the three choices. It's happening at six sense doors, so you could say there are eighteen possible feelings. But for now, we'll just say three feelings.

Why is feeling so important in the chain of dependent origination? Why is it such a central link, Flavia?

"Because it can lead to craving."

Yes, it leads to craving. How so? Describe how that happens with the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

Yeah, so craving in its aspects of greed, aversion, and delusion is activated through these reactions to the three kinds of feeling. Pleasant feeling tends to stimulate wanting. Unpleasant feeling tends to stimulate aversion. Neutral feeling tends to provoke ignorance. Why? Because we're not interested in it. It doesn't feed the underlying craving, so we tune out.

Is that a strict causal condition? Does every pleasant feeling trigger greed? What makes the difference? When mindfulness is there, we don't react. If it's there and strong, we can be with pleasant feeling but not react with greed. Similarly for aversion, similarly for ignorance.

"Is the mental proliferation of thoughts, images and all that also considered what comes in through the mind-sense door?"

It is. Mental thoughts and emotions, all the meditative states of mind are considered objects of the mind-sense door, even if originally triggered by something like a bell. So it doesn't have to be just originating in the mind to be considered the mind's sense door.

You know, walk down the street, see a beautiful new car. Desire arises based on pleasant contact. The desire is a thing of the mind. Think about, "Oh, I really like that color of Prius. I wonder where the Toyota dealer is located in San Rafael." That's mind-door stuff, even though it's related to an external object.

Even the feeling—let's call it feeling tone so that we're really clear it's vedana, pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—the feeling tone is a mind-door object. It's not intrinsic in the object itself. So this sound could be experienced as pleasant, but some people might experience it as unpleasant because of past associations, conditioning or whatever. So the sound is one thing. The feeling tone is almost a verb—how are you feeling that tone, that sound arriving? And it's based on our individual natures and conditioning and habits and likes and dislikes. So even the feeling is a mental event.

"I'm just thinking so many times you wake up and you're way down the path of the mental event and you can't even remember what the sense trigger was that originated that thought."

Yes. And the good thing is from a point of view of meditation you don't need to. I mean, sometimes it's fun when your mind's a little still and you find yourself two minutes into a big fantasy to trace each step back and realize where it got started and how we leapfrogged from one to another, but you don't need to do that.

From the point of view of meditation, we don't have to unravel that tangle. That's a temptation, especially from a Western psychological point of view—you want to unravel the tangle and get back to the source, but we don't need to. In meditation, we can just drop the tangle. Just come back to the present moment. What's happening now? Just disengage from the tangle altogether.

So here we're in dependent origination. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that

one perceives. Now, this is interesting because in dependent origination, there is no element of perception. But people often ask as they start to investigate their experience and they see the importance of perception, where does it fit into dependent origination? And what's being hinted at or alluded to here is it follows feeling.

Now, I don't remember the Buddha saying that except in this sutta where he confirms later. The perception seems to follow feeling in this outline. So we feel something—there's an impingement, we feel it, and then we notice it.

And then we perceive it by memory. So you know, this seems reasonable. What one feels, that one perceives. Remember, perceiving is not intrinsically problematic. It's this classification thing that goes on, and it's okay.

What one perceives, that one thinks about. Now something is starting to happen here that's a little more active. Notice the very first part of this sequence is totally involuntary. There's contact, which is consciousness. Consciousness is not volitional, and the eye is not volitional, and the object is not volitional. Contact is happening. That's not because we're willing it. And when there's contact, there's feeling. It's based on our past conditioning, but you don't have to think about how to feel something. You just know you like it, or you don't like it, or it's neutral. Not volitional either, really.

Then what one feels that one perceives—this also happens pretty automatically. "Oh, I know, that's a friend. That's someone I don't know. That's a car. That's a salesperson in a store." That happens automatically. Not much will has come in yet.

Now, what one perceives, that one thinks about. So we're starting to get volitional. We're starting to get active. And once we start thinking, we're engaging more of our emotional energy in it. For instance, why do we choose to think about some things and not think about others? Ah, because some things strike us with more charge. Those are the things we tend to fix on and then think about. We don't think about everything we perceive. How much time have you spent thinking about this water pitcher this afternoon, even though you've been perceiving it for quite a while?

So once we start thinking about something, there's starting to be a little investment of emotional energy there. But then it goes on. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. So this is the word papañca. There's actually a verb, papañceti. He proliferates, she proliferates is papañceti. So that's what's being used here. We're mentally proliferating.

Now, is thinking about something inherently problematic? You can think about something and it can be safe, right? So thinking is not inherently a problem. If I look at this, I think, "Oh, I'm really appreciative Sean left me a pitcher of water, and when I need it, I can pour it and drink it in this class." Useful. A thought can be useful.

What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. Are we getting into danger? Yeah. So the leap from

thinking, which can be controlled—we can approach thinking in a controlled way if mindfulness is strong. We can think clearly. We can think calmly. We can drop it when the need for it is over. But now we're into proliferating. And this is where the process starts to get out of our control.

Proliferating kind of means we've lost charge of the thought stream and it's running away with itself based on emotions, past associations, conditioning, underlying tendencies, and all of that stuff. With what one has mentally proliferated...

As the source, perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation beset a person with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye.

Now we're in trouble. Because at first, it was a pretty organic process—consciousness and objects, things being known, contact occurring, contact bringing feeling and perception. That's all normal. The Buddha experiences this very same process.

Then what one perceives, one thinks about. If there's abundant mindfulness, we can keep that steady. Such thinking can be appropriate, measured, calm, reasonable.

Then we get into proliferating. The focus is still on our activity—we're proliferating. But what we know is also happening is we're losing control. Proliferation usually comes from a loss of control, or let's say a loss of choice about the thought process.

The next step is crucial: we're no longer in control; we're actually at effect. So the focus shifts—not from our own activity or our own volition, but to what besets a person. Now all the proliferation we've engaged in comes back on us like a burden. We've stirred up all these old associations and hopes and fears and regrets and worries and future anxiety. Now it's as though they achieve a life of their own and they're attacking us. They're besetting us.

It's as though the artist painted the tiger and the tiger came to life and ate them. This is what we do with our imagination.

Take anything you've been worried about lately. Can you see—and I have my own things too, I'm not exempting myself from this—can we see that the thought about that situation doesn't have to be frightening? Because it's just a thought. We may be sitting quite safely in our own home, warm, comfortable with friends or family, quite safe. Yet the thought makes us afraid.

So you get a stream of these thoughts coming, each one making us afraid, worried, regretful, ashamed, embarrassed. And then we become the victim of that proliferation.

What Mahākaccāna is pointing to, which the Buddha will confirm, is that proliferation sets off a kind of chain reaction where these thoughts and feelings have a life of their own. And then we become the victim of them.

"In the sequence, does the troublesome thinking begin or arise once following the sensation?"

It's quite possible to have a clear, rational, non-problematic thought about a sensation, even a painful one. I could have a painful sensation in my knee, and I just go, "That's a painful sensation. I'm not going to keep sitting here if it gets a little bit stronger. I'm going to change my posture," and then I drop it.

But if I start to proliferate: "Oh man, I had a friend who sat through a knee pain and it actually injured his ACL where he had had surgery, and I saw him walking around on crutches for the last three days of the retreat, and then I think they had to take him to the hospital. I can't go to the hospital now because I have a big piece of work coming up. If I let this go another minute, I'm probably going to be bound to..." That's where it spins out of reality into imagination. And that's where it becomes problematic.

So you notice that thinking can be related just to the present moment, the way things are—seeing things the way they are. That's a pain. It's happening in the right knee. I may have an old skiing injury there. I should be a little careful of it.

But then these proliferations beset a person with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye. All of a sudden it's exploding into past and future. And when we get entangled in past and future, then we're really at risk. Because past and future aren't real. Past and future are only thoughts in the moment. But if we don't see them clearly as thoughts, we take them as real, and they become burdensome.

So it's the proliferation that sets that up. We get lost in past and future. Most people live their lives lost in past and future. As meditators, we step out of that whirlwind from time to time. But to be honest, we live much of our lives in past and future as well.

Sanity is being in the present, seeing a thought arise, seeing it persist, seeing it pass away. That's what the Buddha said was so wonderful and marvelous about his experience.

So, as meditators, we really have our work cut out for us. It is to establish a sane relationship to thinking. And the first step in that is to start to understand this phenomenon of papañca. To be able to recognize it when it happens, know how it's different from useful thought, and to see how it stirs things up that then land on us as problems.

"Sometimes what you just described actually occurs in my thinking process," one student shared. "But sometimes it doesn't, and I have to step back and then I just say 'stop' because I can't reach a place of calmness to be able to let go. So I say into my mind, stop. Just stop. And that sometimes works, sometimes doesn't. But it allows me to then take a breath because it gets, like you said, entangled."

That's very skillful. And it takes quite a bit of meditative background to be able to do that. This is what we sometimes call the sword of discriminating wisdom. When you see that a thought is going and it's starting to go out of control in a way that's not helpful, you recognize this is not going to be helpful. This pattern of

thinking is leading me down a road that I'm pretty familiar with, and I know where it goes. It goes into fear or regret or hope or desire, something that isn't going to be helpful. And you say, "Stop it." Sometimes we can do that and it will work, just as you're describing.

That's a very skillful thing to do—just cut it. The sword of wisdom in the Tibetan, actually the Mahayana tradition, is represented by the bodhisattva Manjushri. You'll see him holding that flaming sword. That's one of the functions—that sword is to cut delusion. And one of the forms of delusion is papañca. So when we can see that and we can just stop it, that's very skillful.

Now, can that be misapplied? Yes, because sometimes our thoughts are going and we just think, "I'd rather be calm. I wish I was concentrated in this sitting. Let me see if I can just suppress that thought energy." That doesn't help. That just bottles it up. So when we can see with wisdom that it's not going in a useful direction and we can just cut it, that can be good. But beware of suppressing feelings with it. You want to cut the chain of thought, but you don't want to suppress feelings or emotions that are there.

This is an area that we really want to become very familiar with in our practice. When is the spinning out starting to happen?

I want to read you some of the other words that have been used to translate this word, papañca. Papañca was not well understood when these teachings started coming to the West into English. Early translators looked at it and they didn't know what the heck the Buddha meant by it because it doesn't appear in that many suttas. I mentioned some suttas on the handout—you'll see a short list at the bottom of other suttas where this is described. Actually, you could add to that; there's one more I just found out in the Sutta Nipata, section 5.30, I think it is.

He doesn't give a clear definition of the word anywhere. So translators had to look at all the places it was used and use their intuition about what is being pointed to here. And I feel pretty comfortable now with the rendering as conceptual proliferation or mental proliferation. But I'll give you some of the other translations that were used and some are still being used today: expansion, diffuseness, spreading out, complication, objectification, diversification, fixation, and obsession.

I think conceptual proliferation touches on all of these translations quite well—it captures what's being pointed to. But I want to pull out one other translation to examine more closely: objectification. This is actually the word that Thanissaro Bhikkhu now uses for papañca.

What he's pointing to, I think, is this function that language has of making solid objects out of transitory phenomena. You know how when you examine your direct experience through meditation, you see that everything is just a momentary arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing. There's nothing—when you're seeing from that space—that could even be called a solid thing. That's one of the key meditative insights into impermanence: everything's dissolving moment by moment.

What concepts do is fix that momentary flow and reify it, making it look like there's something solid there.

Think about the name of your best friend. I bet you have a very good image of what your friend is supposed to be like. Even though you might have seen them in a bunch of different situations and different emotions, I bet you have some kind of solid image of what that person is like. So we take this changing flow and we concretize it, we try to fix it. If we don't understand what we're doing, the blind use of language obscures the transitory nature of things.

So that's another way that papañca gets us into trouble. It creates substance where there isn't any in our experience. This is a universal problem with language—not just a Buddhist problem. But papañca contributes to it, and that's why I think Thanissaro likes this word objectification.

Let me read you Bhikkhu Bodhi's description of this. He says, "The Pali word papañca suggests mental fabrication, obsessive mental constructions, and deluded conceptualization."

Did that give a sense of the weight? I'll read that again: "Papañca suggests mental fabrication, obsessive mental construction, and deluded conceptualization."

The mental fabrication we've been talking about, the obsessive nature of it we've focused on, the fact that it's all constructed—thoughts of past and future are all constructed, they're not here now, they're not real, but we construct them through imagination—and deluded conceptualization. We'll get to this a little further along, but as we expand our time into past and future, generally what comes along is the thought, "I have been existing from the past through the present and will exist into the future."

So we give the self a continuity that it doesn't have. The self isn't continuous. We're all just bundles of changing mental and physical phenomena. But we construct the view that self is continuing from past through the present into the future.

Let's read the second part of verse 16, and then I want to go back and talk in a little more detail about papañca.

"Dependent on the ear and sound... dependent on the nose and odors, dependent on the tongue and flavors, dependent on the body and tangible, dependent on the mind and mind-objects, mind-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation beset a person with respect to past, future, and present mind objects cognizable to the mind."

This is basically just taking the same formula that we went through for eye and forms and eye consciousness and applying it equally to the other five senses. So we're covering all six sense bases and showing that they operate in the same way—that we can proliferate about all of them, and then those proliferations come back to beset us, leading to suffering.

So let's talk in a little more detail about papañca. It's said that there are three varieties of papañca. This comes from the commentaries—it's not explicit in the suttas, but it seems like a good list. The three kinds of papañca are papañca based on craving, on conceit, and on views. The Pali is taṇhā-papañca, māna-papañca, and diṭṭhi-papañca.

When you think about this, I think you can see all three of these in your experience.

I certainly can. Craving papancha manifests when I think about what I want in the future. Where am I going to get that new Prius? When am I going to have the money to buy it? This desire force is one example. Fear and anger can also operate in the same way as forms of craving. These strong emotional components lead us into past and future with tremendous intensity and burden, carrying great weight. That's the force of craving.

Mana is where self-judgment enters and the comparing mind takes hold. I'm not good enough. I'm not lovable enough. I'm not going to be good at this job. I'm not going to find a partner. I'm not worthy of a promotion or a raise. I won't find work because I don't know enough. I don't have skills. All these judging thoughts represent one side, while the opposite manifests as pride. I'm much better than they are. I should be getting the raise. Why are they getting promoted when I'm not? That's the pride side. Even claiming that we're equal, in Buddhist understanding, is also conceit. We're still comparing ourselves, trying to find solid ground.

If we look at the motivation underlying mana comparison, it's an attempt to find some ground where we can establish ourselves. Perhaps I'm not as good as that person, but at least I'm this far below them. They look solid and I'm here, so I must be solid too. Or that person's there and I know I'm better than them. We're trying to find some solid ground for self to rest on in the middle of all this insecure impermanence.

Ditthi manifests when we disagree with people. During the campaign—I bet everybody's so glad we're out of the 2012 election season, I certainly am—all the different views you'd hear from right and left, the far right and far left, across that whole spectrum. Everyone was so sure their view was right, with so much heat and passion about it. I spent some hours on the meditation cushion entertaining some of my political views at that time, so I know it's happening in the world. We feel really strongly about those views. We genuinely feel my view is right and their view is wrong, and we can get very heated about this.

I have friends who used to like finding people from the opposition party to try convincing them why their view was wrong. Two different people during the last season who were on the opposite end of the spectrum from me wanted to take me aside and convince me why their view was right. I wouldn't engage because I think that's fruitless, but it was very interesting.

This attachment to views manifests in the political world, in the dharma world—I believe this, you believe that, or if you're a Christian or a Muslim, you're not even on my map. We see it in relationships. We have a view of what our partner should be doing to live up to our ideal of what our partner should be doing. They

have a view about us as well, the same thing, or in relation to our parents or friends. They shouldn't have done that to me. They should have done this instead. We can get quite heated in our relationship to them based on those views, and they're only views. The other person in the exchange will have a different view.

These are the things we spin out about: things we want or don't want, ways we judge or compare ourselves, and views and opinions. When you examine what proliferation consists of, I think this is a pretty comprehensive list.

Again, as a matter of self-knowledge, it's really helpful for us to start taking a closer look at our papancha—first knowing when we're proliferating, then seeing what's the content, what's the fuel, and seeing if it falls into one of these three categories, because very often it does. I haven't identified my own papancha as being anything other than these three. Maybe there is some I haven't yet identified, but it's a pretty good list.

This is interesting because although it's not explicit in the suttas, there are references to it. There's this very good sutta in the Majjhima on the five aggregates, which is Majjhima 109. In this sutta, the Buddha is explaining to the bhikkhus...

This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

So seeing with wisdom undercuts the papañca tendencies of craving, conceit, and views. Seeing with proper wisdom, not claiming as I or mine is freeing.

A student raised an important question about this teaching: "This concept of non-self has challenged me for a long time. When I look at adolescent and childhood development in my work, it's so important for children, particularly those from challenging environments, to develop a healthy sense of self. You wouldn't want to undermine that. This idea of moving towards what we're discussing here comes from wisdom - wisdom that arrives because I've developed a sense of self. Hopefully it's a positive sense of self. By arriving at that positive sense of self, it gives me the opportunity to work on letting go of that self. But I don't think you can do this until you've done that. Am I completely off base here?"

This is an excellent observation, and I agree completely. Growing up, there's no way to escape developing a sense of self - there's simply no way around it. And there are healthy senses of who we are and damaging senses of who we are. Our whole educational system - from family through schools through universities - should be constructed around giving people a very healthy sense of self.

How is this communicated? Through the fundamental message: I value you because I love you. Not because you're smart, not because you're pretty, not because you're good at sports, not because you got good grades - but because you exist, because you're here. This unconditional love and acceptance forms the foundation of healthy self-development.

This fundamental truth is elegantly illustrated when the conditions cease to exist. When there is no eye,

no form and no eye-consciousness, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of contact. When there is no manifestation of contact, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of feeling. When there is no manifestation of feeling, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of perception. When there is no manifestation of perception, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of thinking. When there is no manifestation of thinking, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of besettement by perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation.

This passage reveals the profound simplicity of dependent origination working in reverse. When any link in the chain is absent, the entire proliferation of mental activity simply cannot arise. It's like removing the foundation stone from an arch—without it, the whole structure cannot stand.

The same principle applies to all the sense doors. When there is no ear and no sound and no ear-consciousness, when there is no nose and no odor and no nose-consciousness, when there is no tongue and no flavor and no tongue-consciousness, when there is no body and no tangible and no body-consciousness, when there is no mind and no mind-object and no mind-consciousness—in each case, it becomes impossible for that familiar cascade of mental elaboration to manifest.

This isn't merely a philosophical point. It points to something we can actually experience in meditation. There are moments when the sense of contact becomes so subtle that the usual chain reaction simply doesn't fire. The mind settles into a profound quiet where perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation have no ground to arise upon.

What we discover is that our suffering isn't inevitable. It depends on conditions, and when those conditions are absent, suffering simply cannot manifest. This recognition can bring tremendous relief and hope to our practice. We begin to see that the very mechanism that creates our entanglement also contains the seeds of our liberation.

And let's finish up 18.

When there is no ear, no sound, and no ear consciousness... This continues for all six sense doors.

Sound a little nihilistic?

Let me say a little bit first. So this is one of those passages that one comes to in the suttas and one reads it and goes, "What on earth is being pointed to here?" It's really quite cryptic, isn't it, at best?

So I want to suggest it's not clear exactly what's being meant by this passage, but if I look at it in the context of the other things that I've read, what I suspect is being pointed to is the condition of the fully enlightened one not taking birth again.

When one is fully liberated according to the Theravadan view, the five aggregates don't reappear, as it's often said. Or more commonly, there is no further birth, there is no next life. Generally, as long as the mind is not fully liberated, when we die, there is some forward momentum from the kilesas, from the

asavas, whatever you want to call it—some form of greed, aversion, delusion, some form of craving that's going forward that causes a birth to take place and a new being to arise that carries some of the karma of that past life. That's a traditional Theravadan understanding of rebirth.

I think what's being pointed to here is the ending of that samsaric journey. When one is fully enlightened, as it's said, birth is destroyed. Or as the Buddha uttered after his enlightenment, "House builder you are seen, you will build no house again."

So I think that's what's being pointed to—the no manifestation of contact.

"Do you think it's pointing to emptiness too, like the Heart Sutra? It seems very similar."

It's funny, it sounds a lot like the Heart Sutra, doesn't it? Almost lifted from it.

Another way that it might be understood, and I think this could be similar to the Heart Sutra, is if there is absolutely no clinging or dependency, then one is in a state of... When there's no clinging, there is emptiness. So it could be pointing to that.

My sense, in the context of all the other suttas in the Pali Canon, is it's more likely pointing to what's called nibbana without residue. That means one has attained final nibbana and then passed away. There's no residue in the sense there are no five aggregates continuing. That's my guess, but I don't know.

"Yes, Susan?"

"I think what I wanted to ask is, would the Buddha advise us to stop window shopping? What it sort of spoke to me was that if I couldn't control the papañca, I could go back and control the contact. Or, like, I had more options. Is that okay? I mean, obviously that's not ideal, but if I keep getting on the same train, maybe I need to not walk in the station."

Very good. I think that's the heart of the sutta. If we don't want to go down that ride that the proliferation takes us on, don't step on board a thought. I think that is the practice instruction from this sutta.

So final nibbana might solve the problem completely. Short of that, we get to figure out when papañca is starting and whether we want to go down that road or not. That's the practical lesson for our meditation. Don't hop on that papañca train. Absolutely.

So I want to skip—I want to finish the narrative and then come back and have a few more dharma points, but I want to skip a couple of paragraphs. What are we up to? We're up to 19. I'm going to let you read 19 and 20 on your own. They're kind of interesting, but basically they went and got the Buddha. And they said, "This is what Mahakaccana said when we asked him to explain it in detail. Is that correct?"

And so let's read number 21.

"Mahakaccana is wise because Mahakaccana has great wisdom. If you had asked me the meaning of this, I

would have explained it to you in the same way that Mahakaccana has explained it. Such is the meaning of this, and so you should remember it."

So this is the Buddha putting his seal of approval on this discourse, and therefore the tradition holds this text with equal weight as though the Buddha had said it. Whether this is an actual event—that the Buddha actually did come out and say those words—or whether it's a rhetorical device that the editors put in to say "this is authentic Dhamma," I really don't know. But within the tradition, this validates this teaching as the equivalent of having been delivered by the Buddha. We're meant to have as much faith in this text as if the Buddha had said it through his own mouth.

Then let's finish with verse 22. The Venerable Ananda said to the Blessed One, "Venerable Sir, just as if a man exhausted by hunger and weakness came upon a honey ball, wherever he would taste it, he would find a sweet, delectable flavor. So too, Venerable Sir, any able-minded bhikkhu, whenever he might scrutinize with wisdom the meaning of this discourse on the Dhamma, would find satisfaction and delight. Venerable Sir, what is the name of this discourse on the Dhamma?" "As to that Ananda, you may remember this discourse on the Dhamma as the Honeyball Discourse." That is what the Blessed One said. The Venerable Ananda was satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One's words.

So that is why this is called the Honey Ball Sutta—it was Ananda's invention. This term "honey ball," Bhikkhu Bodhi says, can be a mixture of honey and flour and ghee and molasses. So it's not just honey, but something you could really take and eat. Sounds like a gulab jamun or something, doesn't it? An Indian sweet. So this is a very sweet sutta that we've explored together today.

The gist of it is just what Susan said: for us to start becoming aware of proliferation and not get on the train. I want to pull out a couple of other sutta references that bring this point home clearly and strongly.

This is one of the suttas on the handout—Sutta Nipata 4.14. A questioner comes to the Buddha: "I asked the kinsman of the sun"—this is just one of the names he was called by—"the great seer, about seclusion and the state of peace. Seeing in what way is one unbound, clinging to nothing in the world?" This is a great question: How should we see that we're unbound, not caught in bondage, clinging to nothing in the world?

And this is the Buddha's reply: "They should put an entire stop to the root of objectification classifications: 'I am the thinker.'" This is Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation. But what is being translated by "objectification classifications" is papañca plus saṅkhā. So you could say "notions born of proliferation." They should put an entire stop to the root of notions of proliferation based on "I am the thinker."

"I am the thinker" is an interpretation of the phrase "I am." The fundamental conceit is "I am." Thanissaro Bhikkhu is interpreting its meaning as "I'm the thinker." To me that's a little limited—I think "I am" has a bigger sense than that. But his understanding is that "I am the thinker."

This is Thanissaro Bhikkhu's explanation: "The perception 'I am the thinker' lies at the root of these classifications in that it reads into the immediate present a set of distinctions—being and not being,

thinker and thought, identity, non-identity—that then can proliferate into mental and physical conflict. The conceit inherent in this perception thus forms a fetter on the mind. To become unbound, one must learn to examine these distinctions, which we all take for granted, to see that they are simply assumptions that are not inherent in experience and that we would be better off to be able to drop them."

We'd be better off. So it's dropping basically the distinction of duality. This reminds me very much of the Bahiya Sutta in the Udana.

Remember that story? There's this teacher living in the south of India who believes he's fully enlightened. He has many students, considerable support, and complete confidence in his realization. But then a deva—a heavenly being, rather like an angel—visits him.

When he asks the deva whether he's enlightened, that question itself should have been telling. The deva responds clearly: "You're not enlightened. You're not even on a path to enlightenment. You haven't even started on the path yet."

Deflated, the teacher asks if anyone truly is enlightened. The deva tells him about a recluse named Gautama, known as the Buddha, who wanders in northern India, and provides directions to find him.

Bahiya immediately abandons everything and sets out on foot to meet the Buddha. When he reaches the town where the Buddha is staying, the monks tell him the Buddha has gone on alms round. So Bahiya goes into town and finds a being with a magnificent face, great posture, and radiant presence. This must be him.

Approaching respectfully, Bahiya says, "Venerable sir, you must be the one known as the Buddha. Will you give me your teaching in brief? Please—I see you're on your alms round."

The Buddha replies, "I can't do it right now. I'm on my alms round."

But Bahiya persists: "Life is short. Who knows how long you will live or I will live? Please give me your teaching in brief."

Again the Buddha says, "I can't do it right now. I'm on my alms round."

So Bahiya asks a third time. And as you may know, the third time always works. The Buddha gives him his teaching in brief:

"This is how you should train, Bahiya. In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, let there be just the heard. In the sensed, let there be just the sensed. In the cognized, let there be just the cognized. Then there will be no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. Then you will be neither here nor there nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

He's saying: don't make a you on the basis of your sense experience. Don't build a you in relation to experience.

When Bahiya heard this teaching, he awakened. He was obviously someone with tremendous paramis—spiritual qualities and development—who simply needed this precise pointing for his mind to release and become liberated.

An hour later, walking through a field where a mother cow was protecting her calf, he ventured too close. The cow gored him and he died on the spot. His urgent message to the Buddha—"Please teach me in brief, for we don't know how long you or I will be here"—proved prophetic.

But he got the teaching, he was freed. He was liberated. But this is the same pointing that Thanissara Bhikkhu is offering. Don't imagine "I am the thinker" or "I am the hearer" or "I am the seer." In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, let there be just the heard. Take the "I" out of it.

I wanted to share one other sutta passage with you—another kind of beautiful story. Anuruddha was another great disciple of the Buddha who became enlightened over the course of practice. He had gone away to practice on his own in one part of the country, while the Buddha was staying elsewhere. As he was practicing, he had a reflection. He said that his reflection was "seven thoughts of a practitioner." They had to do with—he phrases them as "this Dhamma is for"—and I think he means this Dhamma is realizable for, or this Dhamma is realized by.

So I'll read you the seven:

"This Dhamma is for one with few desires, not for one with strong desires. This Dhamma is for one who is content, not for one who is discontent. This Dhamma is for one who resorts to solitude, not for one who delights in company. This Dhamma is for one who is energetic, not for one who is lazy. This Dhamma is for one with mindfulness established, not for one who is muddle-minded. This Dhamma is for one who is concentrated, not for one who is unconcentrated. This Dhamma is for one who is wise, not for one who is unwise."

The Buddha was living on the other side of the country, but he read Anuruddha's mind. He immediately projected what's called the mind-made body—you read about this in Don Juan also; it's one of the psychic powers in that shamanic tradition. He could generate a body that looked like his and immediately appeared next to Anuruddha to visit with him.

The Buddha said, "Anuruddha, those are seven good thoughts, but there's one more you should add to that list." That eighth one is: "This Dhamma is for one who delights in non-proliferation, who takes delight in non-proliferation, not for one who delights in proliferation, who takes delight in proliferation." The word is *papañca*. So this Dhamma is for one who takes delight in non-*papañca*—the Pali is *nipapañca*—not for one who delights in *papañca*.

He said, "Now you have these. These are called the eight thoughts of a great person about the Dhamma."

I think this is the invitation in our meditation: Do we delight in spinning out in thoughts, manufacturing

thoughts for which we have great creative ability? We could keep going forever. People come on a three-month course thinking, "I'm going to think all my thoughts in the first month, and then I'll be fed up with thinking." But it doesn't work like that. Deep into the three-month course, we're still thinking thoughts—plenty of them, no end of thoughts.

What do we delight in? Do we delight in the thinking of thoughts? There is an attraction to thinking, there's no doubt about it. Or do we delight in *nipapañca*, in non-proliferation?

Start to feel in your meditation what is the quality when you're not spinning out in a lot of conceptual thought. What does that feel like? At the very least, there is a great quality of peace, ease, spaciousness, relaxation, settledness, avenue to concentration, presence. All those things are there.

As we take delight in that, as we develop a taste for that, it comes really to be our heart's preference. When that's established as our heart's preference, it's much easier not to get on that train. Because we know where the train leads—to being beset with all the confusion and disturbance and worry and hope and fear that *papañca* stirs up. We develop a preference for staying settled in the peace, the quiet, the concentration of non-proliferation.

So I think that's the message of this sutta. I'll just leave you with one question: Is there a problem in life, in your life, if you don't think about it? Or are all problems constructed by thinking they're a problem?

That was the study for today.

Thank you for your attention and for staying with us throughout this exploration.

Any last questions before we finish?

Yes?

Student offers observation: It seems like the suttas and the Buddha's words are, in fact—a lot of them are very direct pointings to how to hold the mind in meditation. And I think this is one of those. Then there are a lot of teachings about conduct also that aren't so much of that nature, but tell us how to behave helpfully in the world. But a lot of them are really direct pointers to how to hold the mind—the quality of mind, the nature of mind.

Yes, exactly. Thank you for that observation.

Administrative note from Sean: If people don't wish to take their honey ball handouts with them, they can put them on the back table so we can redistribute them rather than recycling. If you don't want to take your paper... I'm sorry we don't have an actual honey ball to offer.

Thank you all for coming. It's been wonderful to explore this teaching together with everyone. Thanks for your participation and for your listening.

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