SATIPANYA BUDDHIST RETREAT

A Foundation Course in Buddhism

A systematic introduction to Theravāda Buddhist thought and practice

Bhante Bodhidhamma

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Contents

PART 1 — THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The First Noble Truth — Dukkha	21 min	3
The First Noble Truth — Conditioned States	19 min	11
The First Noble Truth — The Three Characteristics	16 min	18
The Second Noble Truth — The Cause of Suffering: Desire	20 min	25
The Second Noble Truth — The Wheel of Dependent Origination	19 min	33
The Second Noble Truth — Kamma	21 min	41
The Fourth Noble Truth - Morality - Sīla	20 min	49
The Fourth Noble Truth - Positive Morality - Pāramī	22 min	56
The Fourth Noble Truth — Right Understanding	20 min	64
The Fourth Noble Truth - Mental Development - Samādhi	20 min	72

PART 2 — DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING

Moods, Emotions and Feelings	27 min	80
Guilt — Real and Unreal	24 min	90
The End of Guilt	25 min	99
Right Intention	24 min	109
The Divine Abodes	28 min	118
Faith or Belief	25 min	129
Paṭicca Samuppāda: The Wheel of Dependent Origination	26 min	139
Kamma	27 min	149
The Saṅgha	26 min	160
The Four Paths and the Four Fruits	23 min	170
The Noble Silence	34 min	179

CHAPTER 1

The First Noble Truth — Dukkha

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 21 min

> *In this opening talk of the Foundation Course in Buddhism, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the First Noble Truth from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) — the reality of dukkha, often translated as suffering or unsatisfactoriness. Drawing from the Buddha's own account of his Great Renunciation, the talk explores how Prince Siddhattha's confrontation with aging, sickness, and death led to his spiritual quest.*
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> *Bhante explains the three categories of dukkha, focusing here on ordinary suffering: birth, decay, death, and the pain of being separated from what we love or forced into what we dislike. Rather than promoting pessimism, this teaching calls for a realistic middle path approach — neither false optimism that denies life's difficulties nor despair that sees only suffering.*
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> *The talk emphasizes how vipassanā meditation practice allows us to observe our reactions to pleasant and unpleasant experiences without being overwhelmed by either attraction or aversion. By developing this balanced awareness, we can respond to life's challenges with equanimity rather than being driven by fear or false hope. This realistic understanding becomes the foundation for genuine spiritual progress and inner peace.*

Foundation course in Buddhism, talk one. The first noble truth of suffering, *dukkha*.

Dukkha literally means hard to bear or difficult to endure. So *dukkha* is variously translated as pain, suffering, misery, discontent, discomfort, unhappiness, frustration, unsatisfactoriness and such like. It is a very difficult word to translate into English, since it has so many shades of meaning, much as our word love has. But we need to know these meanings because *dukkha* is a central concept of the Buddha's teachings. In fact, it's the starting point of his whole doctrine.

The first noble truth states that life itself is suffering, is unsatisfactory. Because of this bold statement, Buddhism is accused of being life-negating, of being negative and pessimistic. And it would be so, were it not for the third noble truth, which states in equally bold fashion that there is an end to suffering. The Buddha summed up his whole teaching saying that he only taught two things – the truth of suffering and the end of suffering.

It was his experience of life as unsatisfactory that led the Buddha to leave home and follow the hard ascetic life. The Buddha was born into the Kshatriya caste, who were the rulers, governors, landed gentry, you might say, of those times. The other castes were, and still are in Hinduism, the Brahmins, the highest caste, who were the priests of the society. Beneath them the Kshatriya, then the Vaishya, who were the merchants and tradesmen, and finally the Sudra, who were the artisans and workers. All other peoples, such as the slaves, were outside the caste system. They were the pariahs.

The Buddha's father was a leader of a small group of Kshatriya families known as the Sakyas, their clan name, who ruled in an area of North India on the border of present-day Nepal. Life for the young Siddhartha Gautama was, we can believe, easy and pleasant, and may even have been luxurious. It seems, however, that his courtly life upbringing did not hide from him the suffering inherent in life, and a legend tells how he came to face this. While out riding and hunting on various days, he first saw a sick man, then a dying man, and finally a corpse.

Here is a passage from one of the discourses where the Buddha explains his experience. First he tells us how luxurious his life was. "I was delicate, most delicate, extremely delicate. Lily pools were made at my father's house solely for my benefit. Blue lilies flowered one, white lilies another, red lilies a third. I used no sandalwood that was not of Benares. My turban, tunic, lower garments and cloak were all made of Benares cloth. A white sunshade was held over me day and night, so no cold, or heat, or dust, or grit, or dew might inconvenience me."

So now we have an idea of his courtly lifestyle. "Whilst I had such power and good fortune, yet I thought: When an ordinary untaught man who is subject to ageing, not safe from ageing, sees another who has aged, he is shocked, humiliated and disgusted, for he had forgotten that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to ageing, not safe from ageing, and so it cannot be right for me to be shocked, humiliated and disgusted when I see another who has aged. When I considered this, the vanity of my youth completely left me."

"I thought, when an ordinary untaught man, who is subject to sickness, not safe from sickness, sees another who is sick, he is shocked, humiliated and disgusted, for he had forgotten that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to sickness, not safe from sickness, and so it cannot be right for me to be shocked, humiliated and disgusted when I see another who is sick. When I considered this, the vanity of health completely left me."

"I thought, when an ordinary untaught man, who is subject to death, not safe from death, sees another who is dead, he is shocked, humiliated and disgusted, for he had forgotten that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to death, not safe from death, so it cannot be right for me to be shocked, humiliated and disgusted when I see another who is dead. When I considered this, the vanity of life itself completely left me."

Given the additions of an ordered tradition, for the scriptures were not actually written down for 500 years after the Buddha's death, what we can accept as fact is that the whole problem of suffering had become a major concern for the young nobleman. The last straw, it seems, was when he woke up in the early morning after a night of revelry, and saw about him bodies lying about in ungainly and disgusting positions, the air foul with the smell of alcohol and vomit. His sense of disgust, coupled with the growing weariness of trying to find any substantial or meaningful happiness in a life geared to sensual pleasure, finally caused him to leave.

That early morning, he left on his favourite horse, Kanthaka, and with his faithful servant, Channa, rode beyond three kingdoms and crossed the river Anoma. He cut off his hair as a sign of renouncing the life devoted to sensual pleasure. He then gave his ornaments and jewellery to Channa and went in search of a teacher. It is said that such was the distress of his horse Kanthaka that he died of a heart attack.

In another discourse, reasons of a more philosophical nature are given by the Buddha to explain how he came to this momentous decision, known as the Great Renunciation. "At this time, before I was enlightened, because I was subject to birth, I wanted to find out the nature of birth. So I thought to myself, since I am subject to birth, what if I were to find out what birth really is and discover the unsatisfactoriness of the nature of birth? So I set out to discover the unborn, the supreme of *Nibbāna*." And he says the same of sickness, old age and death.

In other words, he left the court confident there was an end to suffering, which, by the way, was not annihilation. So what constitutes this *dukkha*, suffering or unsatisfactoriness, is divided into three categories. The first is called ordinary suffering. The second is called the suffering caused by the changing nature of life. And the third is that caused by our conditioning or conditioned states.

Here we shall concern ourselves with the first category, ordinary suffering. This is how the Buddha expresses it in his first ever discourse after his enlightenment in which he expounds the basic teachings of the four noble truths and the eightfold noble path. It is called the discourse on the turning of the wheel of the law. "This is the first noble

truth of suffering. Birth is suffering. Decay is suffering. Death is suffering. Sorrow, grief, lamentation, physical and mental pain, despair are all suffering. To be with what we dislike is suffering. To be separated from what we like is suffering."

Here it is important to grasp that the Buddha is talking about those things people normally associate with suffering and pain, the whole birth process, teething, acne, hormonal changes, middle age crises, the aches and pains of growing old and the final agony of death. He also means the emotional pains of frustration, anxiety, depression, despair and so on. He is also saying that this is part and parcel of life itself. We are subject to this suffering. It's the package we receive when we're born.

When we really contemplate this, really think about it, it's depressing. Yes, it's true. The only thing I can say with absolute certainty about my life is that it will end. I will die, whether I like it or not. But it is only when we find the courage to face this hard fact, rather than avoid it, that there can be any possibility of discovering if there is anything beyond this cycle of birth and death. That is what the Buddha did as a young man. He decided to face the facts, and it led him to discover that which is beyond birth and death, *Nibbāna*.

Generally speaking, much of our suffering lies in the fact that we find it hard to face this sort of reality. It is a good exercise to look over the past and see how we have approached and tackled problems, upsets, catastrophes and traumas. One way we approach the painful is to avoid it, to shun it, to try and escape from it. We prefer to do anything but feel the pain, physical or mental. On a physical level, as soon as even a small ache is felt in the head, we reach for the bottle of pills. Sometimes, if we get a slight pain in the body, we'll ignore it. We'll pretend it's nothing, but underneath the apparent easy-going attitude is the fear we don't face that it may be a cancer or a dangerous illness.

On the emotional level, if we feel depressed, we'll try and drown it out with a drink. If we feel bored, we'll try and escape by turning on the TV. If we feel lonely or anxious, we'll phone a friend. Anything not to feel the boredom, the depression, the anxiety, the loneliness and so on. We don't want to feel them. Why should we?

If these escape routes are blocked, if we can't use our usual means of pushing these negative feelings away, we'll talk about them. We'll spend hours groaning, complaining, whinging and whining to family, friends, colleagues, doctors, anyone who'll listen. Even the cat gets an earful.

For instance, very few people will face up to the fact of death. You can joke about it, but you can't talk about it seriously. That can get too close to the feelings of terror and horror it arouses. Some will have long conversations about death. What is death? What is it to die? To be or not to be? Wonderful questions, but all intellectualisations, all rationalisations. It makes you feel good to talk about and around death, but it's still escapism. It's just a mental exercise. It separates us from the real feelings we have about death.

If we really want to know what it is to die, we should visit mortuaries and look upon actual corpses. Not for ghoulish fancies, but to arouse our subconscious fears. This is what the monks in the Buddha's time used to do. They would visit the charnel grounds and gaze upon dead bodies in different states of decay. Some do it even to this day, I believe. By such an exercise, we come to know not what death is, but rather how we relate to it. We can never know death as it really is till we actually die. So what's the point of talking about it? It's just another way of escaping our painful feelings, our suffering.

The peculiar thing is that this sort of attitude, constantly turning away from what is painful, blocking it, rationalising it, always escaping, causes the mind to dwell on the good side of life, the pleasures, the excitement, the bright future. It produces an unreal optimism. Things always turn out all right. Life's great. I'm happy. Eat, drink and be merry, for we die tomorrow. Not now. Anyway, it won't happen to me. Not in the foreseeable future. So what's all this talk about life is suffering? I'm happy. Life's great.

This sort of optimism is obviously false, leading to false beliefs and false hopes. And beneath it all sits a lot of repressed fears and anxieties. Such a person is not prepared for the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. When the Buddha states that life is unsatisfactory, he is asking us to see life as it really is, and not to shy away from its inbuilt suffering.

The opposite of this approach to life is when we submit passively to suffering and misfortune. Life's hard, and then you die. A helplessness, a loss of reason for living. What's the point? It's all work, work, work. Why bother? We're all going to die. At first sight, compared to the optimist, this might seem a little more realistic. At least, the pessimist is accepting totally the one fact of life of which we can be certain. Indeed, in the face of overwhelming evidence that life does end, what is the point of effort, of success? Death mocks all our ambitions and achievements.

The logical conclusion of such an understanding is despair and suicide, or a brave stoicism, where life just has to be suffered and you may as well make the best of a bad job. For such people, living can take on a certain desperation and sometimes, quite paradoxically, a compulsiveness to achieve, to win, to somehow fly in the face of despair.

No doubt we've all faced certain events in our lives in these two ways to some degree or another, but is there another way of seeing life which neither leads us down the garden path of foolish hopes, nor drags us into tunnels of despair, despondency and gloom? The Buddha would have us investigate life impartially, to see it as it really is, accepting the situation totally. Within that clarity of view, it is easier for us to act. That is what he called the middle path. And it is often the name given to his teachings.

His teachings were very clear on this point. Suffering is caused by seeking happiness in the pleasures of the senses because such things don't last. The person who concentrates his life on the next exciting thing to do is doing exactly this, forever seeking enjoyment, distraction and pleasure. Such persons are blind to the suffering that surrounds them. On the other hand, people who try to deny all pleasure and happiness and are overcome by the sufferings of life have become blinded to the possibility of the real peace and joy to be found in living. What is worse is that both are blinded to the higher reality that transcends both the pleasures and the tribulations of life.

The Buddha asked us to take a realistic approach, not to pin our hopes on the transient pleasures of life, nor to be overcome by suffering and death, but to accept this dual situation totally, work within it, and try to discover what lies beyond it.

This realistic approach can be experienced at first hand in our meditation. What is it we are doing but facing and accepting all the negativity that arises, observing all the pleasurable and joyful feelings and thoughts, and seeing all of this for what it really is, just passing phenomena, momentary mental objects. Realising the passing nature of things undercuts false hopes. Seeing the arising of things, the birth of every moment, undercuts despair.

Let us take the threat of nuclear war. Some people feel this threat of a nuclear holocaust as an ever-present reality. They are fearful and anxious, angry and frustrated, depressed and despairing. Others don't seem to see the danger at all. They feel secure under the nuclear umbrella, the deterrent. Anyway, they say, a nuclear war is unthinkable. What's the point of fighting it? No one would win. Humans wouldn't be so mad.

Here, we have two opposite reactions to a given situation, the pessimistic and the falsely optimistic. Contemplating the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, even if it were to happen by mistake, might awaken those never-will-happen believers to the potential harm and motivate them to support disarmament. Accepting the possibility of nuclear holocaust with all that that means, especially to ourselves personally, for a lot of our fear of nuclear war is a fear of our own death, both fear and anxiety may be lessened. Once they are, we are much more capable of positive action.

Anxiety and fear drain our energy, bring about panic and confusion. With a clearer mind, a more firm direction can be found. But we can only do what we can do. For some it may mean joining a march, for others influencing heads of state. We have to accept our limitations. If we don't, we will suffer from anger, frustration, depression and despair.

This polarity of pessimism and false optimism needs to be steadied towards a calm grasp of reality, seeing the situation just as it is. We need to be very much aware of how our emotions colour a situation. Here lies the importance of meditation practice, insight *vipassanā* meditation.

This was the Buddha's great discovery in his enlightenment. He discovered that by just developing awareness we are able to heal all our negativities and slowly purify the heart. When we sit, this is an opportunity to observe, really experience our moods and emotions, our states of mind. But investigate here does not mean to analyse, to ask questions, to wonder about the causes. It means simply to experience, to feel the emotions and mood as they really are.

Equally important is to observe also our feelings about them, our reactions to them. When I feel depressed, how do I feel about it? Do I get angry? Do I get fearful and anxious? Do I get depressed about being depressed? The first step in the meditation is to begin to lose our fears and aversions towards states of mind. This is the first step in purifying the mind, having established some concentration on the breath. We observe any state of mind that arises, any mood or emotion that comes to our attention. Observe them as bodily feelings. There may be feelings of heaviness from depression, heat from anger, wobbliness from fear and tightness from anxiety.

These feelings manifest in different parts of the body, sometimes in the chest or stomach or abdomen, for instance. We just watch it all calmly, noticing, observing. We see that everything is changing, everything is arising and passing away.

What is it we are achieving here? By this simple observation, we are losing our fears of and aversions to negative states of mind as they arise. By not repressing these negative states of mind, they display themselves and to our amazement pass away. We are healing our hearts, we are purifying our minds.

We must also be equally aware of pleasant feelings, observing them just as keenly, but this time observing how the mind grasps for them, longs to indulge in them. Of course, they pass away too. Observing the passing of pleasant states of mind stops us becoming falsely optimistic. Observing the passing of painful states of mind stops us becoming pessimistic. Seeing both as passing phenomena leads to a realistic view of life.

When the mind is realistic, knowing things as they really are, it is equanimous and peaceful. To win a million or to lose a million does not ruffle this inner calm. This is the joy of the middle path. This is what the Buddha wanted us to do. To know ourselves as we really are.

Meditation helps us to realize this, but it shouldn't stop there. We should keep this frame of mind, this understanding, throughout the day, every day.

I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

CHAPTER 2

The First Noble Truth — Conditioned States

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 19 min

> *In this teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines how the Buddha analysed human experience through the five khandhas (aggregates): rūpa (matter), vedanā (sensations), saññā (perceptions), saṅkhāra (volitional formations), and viññāṇa (consciousness). Using accessible analogies like a car's components, he demonstrates how what we perceive as a unified 'self' is actually a collection of interconnected processes.*
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> *The talk focuses particularly on the crucial fourth aggregate — saṅkhāra — showing how our emotional reactions are conditioned responses rather than inevitable consequences of external events. Through practical examples, including the monk's encounter with a disgusted onlooker, Bhante reveals how recognizing our role in creating our own suffering through habitual reactions is key to liberation.*
>
> *This systematic understanding of the khandhas provides meditators with a precise framework for investigating where dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) actually arises, supporting both formal meditation practice and mindful awareness in daily life. The teaching emphasizes the liberating insight that our emotional states are products of our own will and conditioning, not external circumstances.*

When we look at any object in the world, be it natural or man-made, we tend to see it as a whole, a total or integral thing. Take for instance the car. We see it parked or moving, we see it as an object in itself, we see it as one substantial thing. But this is just a concept. We lose sight of the fact that it's made up of parts. It's only when the car breaks down that we remember, or perhaps realise for the first time if we're not mechanically minded, that it is an object made up of many other objects, all in relationship to each other. Only when all these pieces are assembled do we call it a car.

The petrol pump is hidden away, hardly known by most drivers. Suddenly the car stops. We call the services. The mechanic says, "It's the petrol pump." We realise this little object is crucial to the well-being of the car. We realise that this car we once took as a whole and entire is simply an intricate relationship of parts to parts.

This might be a layman's view of a car, but specialists may see it in a different light. The mechanic sees it as transmission and bodywork. The metallurgist as a collection of different materials: metals, plastics, natural substances such as wood and rubber. Sci-

entists see it as molecular structures or subatomic particles, whatever. The point is that the car can be pulled apart and heaped into different piles depending on how you look at it, how you perceive it.

When it comes to the human being, it is astounding how many ways this poor being has been divided and subdivided. Every religious, philosophical and psychological school East and West has its own definition or division of the human being. In the West, materialist biologists and behavioural psychologists see the human as simply a collection of physical parts. Mind or personality is simply brain, grey matter indeed. Freudians categorise humans as a process moving from one stage of development to another. Social psychologists and sociologists see the person in terms of relationship to others. Christianity and Islam say that it's more than just a body and mind. They posit an everlasting soul.

Ever since the philosopher Descartes in the 17th century, we in the West have looked upon the human being essentially as a machine. Only recently have scientists begun to look at the human as an integrated circuit in holistic terms, rather than just a set of parts that happen to be together but work independently. The list of categorizations is endless.

Now, as for the Buddha's point of view, everything arises from his own self-designated area of teaching. Whatever he knew about the human being, he confined what he said to the noble truths and to his aim to teach only the fact of suffering and the end of suffering. For the Buddha, it was of paramount importance to be able to pinpoint for people where their suffering arose and what in fact constituted suffering, so that the way or path leading to the end of suffering would be made clear to the listener. He simply wasn't interested in anything else. So, when we read the teachings of the Buddha, it's important to keep in mind what angle he's coming from.

The Buddha divided the human being into what is known as the five *khandha*, translated as aggregates and sometimes a little unkindly as heaps. So, just as the metallurgist might divide the car into metals, plastic, rubber, glass and oils, the Buddha divided the human being into matter, sensations, perceptions, volitional formations and consciousness. And each category is to be seen as a heap of similar things, like five distinct scrap yards.

Now, at base, the human is made of two separate phenomena: matter and mind. Matter is the body itself, the bones, muscles, blood and so on, including brain. But mind is different from matter, a more subtle phenomenon that infuses the body like dye in water.

Matter is *rupa* in Pali, which is the language that all the scriptures of the Theravāda tradition of Buddhism are written in. It is a dialect of one of the ancient languages in India. However, here rupa, matter, not only refers to the actual physical matter but to how the mind experiences this matter. And for the meditator this is very important.

The mind infuses the body and comes in contact with matter. This contact, this interface we can say, is the base of mind. It is the sense base. It is at five points that mind comes to know matter, the five sense bases. For example, light, as a physical phenomena, the photons, strikes the retina in the eye. This is all that is known by the eye. Without the retina, without the eyes, a person simply does not know or experience light. When the photons are felt by the mind at the point of contact on the retina, mind experiences matter. So it is with all the other senses of touch, smelling, hearing and tasting.

This initial contact with matter is experienced as a combination in varying degrees of what Buddhism calls four elements. They are descriptively known as earth, fire, water and air. The earth element refers to the quality of weight and is sensed as pressure, light or heavy. Fire is temperature from extreme heat to extreme cold. Water is cohesion or elasticity. It's what keeps things together. Air is movement, pure movement. The last two are difficult to experience purely by themselves, but can be done in meditation. The first two, pressure and temperature, are gross enough for us to be aware of even in daily life.

When someone stands on our toes in the bus queue, that's the earth element we are experiencing at base sense level. When we touch a hot pan handle by mistake, what makes us howl is the fire element at the sense base, the nerve endings in the hand. It is only after this is sensed that the mind recognises it as pressure or heat, and then, if mind perceives signals as too much, we react to avoid more of the pain.

If we just ponder for a moment, we come to realise that we don't actually know our bodies. For instance, we carefully comb our hair, we spend a lot of money at the barbers and hairdressers, but when one falls out, we never shed a tear, unless it becomes an epidemic, as it did with me. In fact, we don't have any feeling in the hair, in the hair itself. It's not just my hair. What of nails? Of blood? Do we feel our blood? Even when we cut ourselves and some flows out, do I feel the blood in itself flow out of me? Do I experience me flowing out with my blood? When the blood falls and hits the floor, do I shout, "Ouch"?

In Buddhist understanding, the mind by which I know things is only in contact with the material body through the senses. So although the cut signals pain, I do not experience each skin cell nor the blood that flows. The point of contact is the nerve ending. If

the nerve goes numb or is destroyed, I don't feel the cut. What I know of my body is what I can sense, that's all. I can see its shape, hear the heartbeat, feel pleasurable and painful sensations and so on. I experience this through the different interactions and combinations of the four elements. When we meditate, especially if we do a long course of, say, a week, these elements can become quite obvious to us. We begin to see that they form a category of mental experience.

The next category is the aggregate of sensations, called in Pali, *vedanā*. This is where we experience pleasurable, painful or neutral sensations. Whatever combinations of elements go to make up the original contact, this contact is experienced as pleasing, painful or neutral. When we chew an apple, a good juicy one, contacts are made all over the tongue. Each individual contact at the end of each taste bud on the tongue is experienced as sweet and tasty. All these sensations, and there's never a moment when the body is not sending sense data to the mind, can all be collected into one heap: the aggregate of sensation.

The third aggregate, *saññā*, is to do with that part of the mind that labels these sense objects. It includes all our perceptions. When air vibrations of a sound puts pressure on the eardrum, that pressure is mostly the earth element. This contact causes sensations to arise that are pleasant and that are then perceived as music. If the sensations are unpleasant, the sound is perceived as noise. If neither pleasant nor unpleasant, sound is perceived simply as sound. Included then in the aggregate is not just the labelling of things, but also our value judgements, including all our biases and prejudices.

The important thing for the meditator is to be able to listen to these perceptions objectively. And not only in the sitting posture, but throughout the day. If we heighten our general awareness, we come to know that many of our perceptions are subliminal. We are barely conscious of them. And we are often not conscious of how our perceptions are prejudiced. We take the way we think for granted. At base, then, this aggregate of perception, saññā, is just a recognition of the object, but this recognition has built-in values. It is these value judgments that can be wrong, and so bring about suffering for others and ourselves. We need to investigate all our value judgments. We need to become more and more aware of the aggregate of perception.

The next aggregate is called volitional formations or conditioning, *saṅkhāra*, and refers to all those states of mind, negative and positive. It is all our emotions and moods. It is in this aggregate that we can say we experience the sufferings and the joys of life. It is one of the aims of meditation to cleanse this aggregate of all the negative states and move towards those states of mind the Buddha called the divine abodes. That is, abiding in loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

These volitional conditionings are that part of the mind that reacts to incoming data, sensations and perceptions. It is very important here for the meditator to grasp what is happening if such negativity is to be undermined. By negativity here, it simply meant all those states of mind that we experience as unpleasant, disagreeable and painful, like depression, anxiety, fear, frustration, guilt, sorrow, and so on.

Jack sits in the armchair with a cup of tea after a hard day's work, finally enjoying a bit of peace and quiet. Suddenly, through the dividing wall, heavy rock comes bursting through from next door. The insistent thud beats its rhythm on Jack's eardrum. Feelings arise perceived as unpleasant. This perception of noise sharpens the focus and the reaction arises. This reaction is how Jack has taught himself to respond to such a perception. He's fuming with anger, more so because he's asked his neighbours not to play their music aloud.

Now at first glance it seems that Jack is justified in his anger. That his anger is caused by next door who are not being neighbourly. But is his anger really caused by their lack of neighbourliness or by the heavy rock? Or is his anger the way he's taught himself to react when he hears such a noise? This is a crucial point, and once we've grasped the mechanics here and actually see what is happening within ourselves, we will be able to make great headway in reducing the amount of emotional suffering we bear. This is one of the reasons for meditation, to become more and more aware of our passing moods, how they arise and how they pass away.

This aggregate, translated as volitional formations or volitional conditionings, is precisely so called because these mental states are the product of our own will. Nobody has made Jack angry. Nothing at all, in fact, makes Jack angry. Jack's anger is his own learnt response, willed by him and him alone. When Jill, his teenage daughter, comes in looking for something, she quite unconsciously starts humming the tune, subliminally delighted by that very same noise that Jack, her dad, says ruins his tea.

Indeed, if anger were caused by an outside object, then we could argue that there must be an object in the world that makes everyone angry as soon as they see or hear it. But this is not so. We all have our own conditioning, and individual conditionings have their own individual reactions.

Now you might ask, well, how is it I get angry even when I don't mean to? If it is really all to do with me conditioning myself, if it is really all to do with my will, why don't I have immediate control? The fact is that will has conditioned this category of mind. Habits have been formed. That part of the mind which contains our emotional reactions and moods has been habituated, trained, conditioned to respond in certain ways. The first step to undermining this conditioning is to realize for ourselves the role

of the will. Then we can see clearly that our emotions and moods are truly the result of past acts of will. We then realize that by refusing to will, to entertain these states of mind, they will pass away.

Jack believes he is right to get angry with his neighbours. He believes it is justified. In fact, he's tricked himself into believing that the music and the neighbours themselves are directly causing his anger. So long as he believes this, every time anger arises because of the music and the neighbours, he will indulge that anger. When he indulges that anger, he is actually saying, "Yes, I will get angry." If only Jack would meditate. If he did, he would soon come to realize that it is he himself who wills his own anger. By refusing to will it, to indulge it, he will undermine his own learnt response. Eventually, he will come to perceive the noise as simply sound. He may even be influenced by his teenage daughter and come to recognize some musicality.

When a meditator who has always believed that others were the cause of her or his anger, depression, stress and so on, realize that they are in fact self-taught responses, a great insight has been made. For from now on, the state of mind will come more and more under personal control. She realizes that she can control it, given time and ardent practice. This practice is twofold. Firstly, not to indulge in any negative states of mind, thereby allowing old conditioning to die out. Secondly, not to will any new negative states of mind, thereby keeping the mind pure. This is a very liberating insight.

Finally, there is the aggregate of consciousness. This is the faculty in the mind that just cognizes, it knows, it is the mirror in which all the rest of the mind displays itself. This consciousness in meditation takes on the quality of awareness and objective viewing and knowing. From this standpoint of watching all the sensations, emotions, thoughts and imaginings, insight into the true nature of mind arises. This is the first step for the meditator, to become the impartial objective observer. Just knowing what's going on is enough for wisdom and insight to arise.

So, to recap. The Buddha divided the human being into five aggregates or heaps. They are, firstly, matter and mind's initial contact with matter through the six senses. The sixth sense here being mind itself. Secondly, all the sensations experienced as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Thirdly, all the perceptions, recognitions, images and thoughts. Fourthly, all the mental states, our moods and emotions. And lastly, all our consciousnesses that know all this. The importance of these categorizations is that they help us to pinpoint where suffering arises.

When I first walked around the streets in my robes, I was very much aware of people's reactions to this alien. One of the most difficult reactions for me to handle with equanimity was the look of disgust. Now, what actually happened to me on such an oc-

casion? The retinas of my eyes simply respond to incoming light, that is, the simple contact. This light is conveyed to the mind where perception recognizes it. It is pigeonholed as woman with disgusted look at me, and with it, bad, meaning, no one should look at the noble likes of me with disgust.

With the perception of a disgusted face, there arises in me the feelings of what these perceptions mean. I feel her disgust for me. I empathize. Unpleasant feelings fill my body, so this is what she feels for me. I now get angry because I believe that if someone is disgusted with me for no logical reason, from my point of view that is, I am justified in getting angry with that person. Who is she to feel disgust at me? Doesn't she know I'm a monk? How ignorant! It's disgusting. This disgust and the ensuing anger is simply how I've trained myself to respond to such looks. My consciousness totally identifies with this. This is the me, the ego. Anything can happen. Next morning, the headlines read, "Buddhist monk breaks begging bowl on old woman's head. It's disgusting."

Of course, it is hoped that the monk has learned his lesson, and that now realizing that the woman did not actually make him disgusted and angry, he understands that the woman's perception and feelings are her own too.

That in truth, the more skillful response may have been a smile.

Well, I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

CHAPTER 3

The First Noble Truth — The Three Characteristics

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 16 min

> *In this teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the First Noble Truth through the lens of the three universal characteristics (tilakkhana): dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), anicca (impermanence), and anattā (not-self). Drawing from the Buddha's second discourse to his first disciples, he explains how our human condition involves a fundamental case of mistaken identity.*
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> *The talk explores how we wrongly identify with the five khandhas (aggregates) — form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness — despite their constantly changing nature. Using vivid examples like the weekly renewal of the eye's cornea and the philosophical insight that we never step in the same river with the same foot, Bhante reveals the radical impermanence underlying all existence.*
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> *This investigation shows how our attachment to what we cannot actually possess creates the very suffering described in the First Noble Truth. The teaching demonstrates how Right Awareness in meditation allows us to observe this process of arising and passing away directly, leading to non-attachment and the liberation of the heart. Essential listening for understanding the Buddhist analysis of why we suffer and how wisdom leads to true peace.*

The Buddha taught there were three basic characteristics of our human condition. *Dukkha*, often translated as unsatisfactoriness or suffering. *Anicca*, impermanence, transiency, change. And *anattā*, no soul, egolessness or insubstantiality.

When he said that our condition was fundamentally unsatisfactory, he meant not only ordinary aches and pains, emotional and personal problems and the sufferings of old age and death, he also meant it in two other respects which are, in fact, the other two characteristics of our existence: transiency and insubstantiality.

The third characteristic of our human condition, *anattā*, often translated as no soul, but better understood as egolessness or insubstantiality, has to do with how we identify with the wrong things. We take on a mistaken identity. We believe ourselves to be the body and mind, the body and the ego or personality.

He divided the human phenomenon into five categories known as *khandha* or aggregates or less lovingly heaps. The first heap consists of the material body and how mind experiences this. The second, all our sensations. The third, all our perceptions and thinking. The fourth, all our states of mind, which have been produced by our will and are called volitional conditionings or formations. They are all our moods and emotions. The fifth, the knowing of all this, our consciousness.

To understand how this is a mistaken identity it is necessary to investigate the second characteristic of the human condition which is not only applicable to all humans but to the whole of nature. This is the characteristic of change, *anicca*.

Built into the idea of change is the concept of time. It is interesting to see how we use this word. We say we live in time or we've been through bad times. The underlying concept is that time is a tunnel or a container within which we live, in which we act out our lives. Time is somehow separate from us, existing apart from us. Secondly, we seem to think we have some control over this energy or thing called time. We often say, I haven't the time, or I lost time, give me time, even I'll make time. These underlying concepts that time somehow has an independent existence, and that somehow we have some control over it, are what we must investigate to determine the essential quality of change of which time is simply the measure.

One of the rituals in any family gathering is to bring out the photo albums with all the usual comments, delights and laughter, but one of the interesting things is to observe the tense that people talk in. This is me as a baby. There I am when I was a teenager. This is me at your wedding last year. You can see there's quite a confusion here between the present I am and the past I was. The identity of this I, with the I of the past and with the I in the present, is confused. This I, this ego, this personality conceives itself as being the same, whether in the past, present or indeed in the future. However, the fact is that this is simply not true.

Let us examine the human at the biological level. The body I had as a baby is simply not the body I have now. In fact, it is said the body completely changes every seven years. All that food and drink I have day in and day out go to fuel this process. Cells duplicate and die, all to an internal pattern, no doubt, a preset blueprint, the DNA. But nonetheless, the cells are not so much changing as themselves, but dying while other cells take their place. Even brain cells, which don't actually die, change completely within themselves, so they cannot be called the same cells as the ones we were born with.

This is an important point to grasp. By change, we don't mean that the same thing is simply changing shape. A piece of clay can be moulded into a cup and then into a saucer, so that we can say it is the same piece of clay. But when it comes to the body cells, they reproduce and die. They are not the same cells changing shape.

This came home very strongly to me when I once went to the optician. My left eye, it seems, had got a little better. I was surprised by it. But the optician told me it was surprising that eyesight remained so static, since the actual cornea, the large lens we look through, changes not once in seven years, nor in a year, nor in a month, but once a week. Yes, indeed, every week I'm looking at the world through a new cornea, and I didn't know it. In my blithe ignorance, I thought the body changed all right, but not radically. Now I come to realise that the change is radical. The body I have now is simply not the one I had seven years ago. At all.

In other words, it's the difference between an organisation saying it's going to change the staff, meaning training and redeployment, and another organisation which says it's going to change the staff, meaning it sacks everyone it now employs and takes on a totally new workforce. Our bodies change radically. They're changing radically even now.

When we perceive this, when we realize this, this transiency, this changing nature, then we begin to understand why the body cannot be a substantial me, a permanent ego. The ancient Greeks understood this idea and the philosopher Heraclitus used the image of a river for life. He said no one steps in the same river twice for it is forever changing. The Buddha, I'm sure, would have pointed out that no one steps in the same river with the same foot, for that too is ever-changing.

We can't say this is my body, because as soon as I say this is my body and thereby identify with it, define myself by it, it's gone, it's changed. It's like trying to grasp water, it just flows out of the hand. Not realising this fact of change causes us to identify with the wrong things, and this in turn is the cause of our suffering.

It never occurs to a young person in any real sense that they're growing old. The first signs of wrinkles on the face, the first grey hairs are traumas. I knew I was growing old, but I didn't think it would happen now. Growing old, losing one's powers, watching the changes on the skin all causes tremendous suffering. We identify so much with our bodies, desiring them to be as we want them to be, that we are forever compensating for the process of change, of growing old, of decay, even to the point of cosmetic operations. And death, of course, every time we have a little brush with it, be it a near accident or close shave or death of another, fills us with terror. Who are we when we have no body? If I am my body, who am I when it dies?

The same critique can be applied to all the other four khandha, the four categories the Buddha divided the human being into. If we observe our sensations, we see they're all changing all the time. They are caused by outside stimuli or stimuli from within the mind itself but everyone is unique, rising and passing away. Others arise that can be similar but not the same ones since the sensations I felt a moment ago have actually passed away.

To see this more clearly we need to return to the concept of time. Time itself doesn't exist. It is just a concept in the mind whereby we order the events that have happened to us. Ten years ago I went to my sister's wedding. Last year I visited them as usual. This year I will see them in December. Although I speak as though all this is real now, in fact nothing's happening at all by way of my sister. Let's say it's now eight o'clock in the evening. 7.45 has come and gone. It no longer exists. In fact, 7.49 has gone, no longer exists. It has collapsed, disappeared, vanished. It is no longer. Now 8.01 has not yet arrived. It too doesn't exist in any way. The only existence, the only real point that I experience in which I am actually alive is this now, this very moment, 8 o'clock.

We live on this knife edge of time. Awareness, what we are developing in meditation, is a faculty that can only exist in the now. We can't be aware of yesterday. Awareness doesn't live there. We can't be aware of tomorrow. Awareness is not born there. Awareness arises only here and now in this minute moment. Awareness and consciousness are simply here and now and at no other time.

The speed of this process, the arising and falling of each and every moment of consciousness is tremendously fast. Nuclear physicists have timed the existence of matter, subatomic particles of which all our bodies are constituted, as a million, million, million, ten thousandths of a second, or one to the power of twenty-three. That's a very small moment of existence indeed. And the Buddha teaches that within that moment of matter existing, seventeen consciousnesses, thought moments, arise.

Let us recap then on time. First, it doesn't exist by way of extension. There is no past whatsoever. It has collapsed into nothingness. There is no future. It's not here. There is only this infinitesimal moment. This is the only existence we have. It arises out of nothing, sustains itself for that infinitesimal length of time and then ceases.

When we watch the breath in meditation, we are observing time in a gross way. The in-breath begins, it is sustained and then ends. That's it, one in-breath gone. The out-breath begins, sustains and ends. That's it, one out-breath gone. By observing the breath process we are observing, getting to know intimately this passage of moments of time. Each breath outwardly similar, yet a totally different creation from the last. We don't

live in or through a time object. Real time is just our actual existence. This existence is here and now. We can't lose it or hold on to it. It can't be repeated. Each moment of existence is unique and total. It arises and passes away.

This transiency, this anicca, is a fundamental characteristic of the physical and mental world. It is a fundamental characteristic of the me, the human being.

Just as this is true of our physical bodies and sensations, so it is also true of the third aggregate, our perceptions. We can only perceive what there is now. I can only see a cup when a cup is there, and perceptions of the cup arise and pass away. When these perceptions are purely mental, images, words, ideas, value judgments of good and bad, they also arise and pass away. And they never arise again, but new ones affected by new information arise. So our perceptions, our ideas, our thoughts, are always arising and passing away, always changing.

Again, these same arguments pertain to our states of mind, the volitional conditionings, be they moods and emotions of depression, anxiety, anger, or joy, happiness and peace. Whatever the state of mind, it never repeats itself. So which state of mind shall I identify with? Which one shall I call me or mine? If I define myself in my depression, I'm a depressive, what am I when happiness arises? If I say I'm all my moods and emotions, then I fall into the error of believing I is existing yesterday when I was depressed, now when I'm angry, and tomorrow when I will be happy. But this I is only now, and this now passes away. It is a delusion to identify with the past and the future.

The same with the final aggregate, consciousness. Often people will argue, oh yes, I agree I'm not my body and other mental factors, since it's all arising and passing away, I see that now. But my consciousness is steady, I am my consciousness, my knowing of these things. However, in meditation, this last hold onto our false identity begins to evaporate, for we begin to realize there can only be consciousness when there is an object to be conscious of. If I were to enter a space with no objects at all, and the mind itself produced no thinking, no images, what would I be conscious of? Consciousness begs an object. Without an object there is no consciousness, no knowing. Indeed there are times when we are unconscious, not conscious. If I say, I am my consciousness, who am I in deep sleep, or anaesthetised on the operating table, or knocked unconscious?

So here we have investigated the first noble truth and the point of view of the three characteristics of existence. Transiency, anicca, unsatisfactoriness, dukkha, and egolessness or insubstantiality of the personality, anattā.

The Buddha, when he was enlightened, at first thought his discoveries too subtle for people to understand. But persuaded otherwise, he sought out his five former disciples. They had left him a while earlier because he ate some milk rice, and they thought he was giving up the training of an ascetic and gone soft. But in fact, this meal gave him the energy to reach full enlightenment. When he approached them, they were reluctant at first to receive him. But as he came closer, his presence was all too powerful, and they prepared a seat for him, and he taught the Dharma by way of the Four Noble Truths.

At the end of this first discourse, known as the turning of the wheel of the law, one of the four, Kondanya, was enlightened, or as the scripture says, the spotless immaculate vision of the Dharma arose in him. Later that same day, after they had all shared the food brought in from alms round, he gave the second discourse, in which the three characteristics of existence are taught for the first time.

This is how it ends. When a wise disciple understands that the five aggregates are transitory, unsatisfying and do not constitute a permanent self, non-attachment to the body, sensations, perceptions, emotions and consciousnesses arises. As non-attachment arises, sense desires and attachments fade away. With the fading away of sense desires and attachments, the heart is liberated. With liberation, the knowledge arises: I am liberated.

This is the fundamental teaching of the Buddha. Through meditation and throughout our daily life, these characteristics should become more and more plain to us. Life is changing. This body, this mind, is not me, not mine. Identifying with it causes me to have wrong expectations, false hopes. This wrong identification is the cause of all my suffering. Not to identify with them is to lose my attachment to them, to be non-attached. These insights lead us to a proper relationship with ourselves and others, and ultimately leads to the experience which is beyond body and mind, Nibbāna.

We can say that the experience of Nibbāna is the discovery of our true identity, and it establishes a new way of relating to ourselves and the world. What is this new relationship? It is simply that since everything arises and passes away, I do not regard it as a me or a mine, a soul or self. I come to realize that when I wrongly identify with all this, it is a cause of suffering. I become non-attached. But let me hasten to add that this is not a cold detachment. Far from it. Because of this perspective, the heart is liberated. We begin to find real wisdom and true compassion.

In conclusion then, the more we become aware of the transient changing, radically changing nature of our lives, the more we realize there is no stopping place, no rest, no stability, no security. The more we accept these facts, the more we live within the flow

of living and work within it. Through meditation, coming to terms with the ever-changing nature of our lives, we free ourselves of false fears and frustrations, fearing the loss of what we cannot actually keep, frustrated by not being able to achieve what is actually unachievable. It leads to a greater realism, and in that greater realism we will find the peace and joy we all so dearly seek.

Well, I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

CHAPTER 4

The Second Noble Truth — The Cause of Suffering: Desire

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 20 min

> *In this teaching from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the Second Noble Truth: that craving (taṇhā) is the cause of suffering. He explores the three types of craving mentioned by the Buddha — for sensual pleasure, existence, and annihilation — and traces their origin to fundamental ignorance (avijjā) and delusion (moha).*
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> *The talk illuminates how our attachment to sensual pleasures and self-identification with possessions, roles, and experiences creates an endless cycle of dissatisfaction. Through practical examples from daily life, Bhante explains how desire and aversion work together, keeping us trapped in patterns of grasping and rejection. He distinguishes between genuine needs and manufactured wants, encouraging practitioners to question their attachments and observe the suffering inherent in constant craving.*
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> *The discussion extends to how this understanding applies in vipassanā meditation practice, where we learn to observe mental states with detached awareness rather than being swept away by desires and aversions. This insight forms the foundation for discovering the path out of suffering, preparing practitioners for understanding the Third and Fourth Noble Truths.*

Foundation Course 1, Talk 4: The Second Noble Truth—The Cause of Suffering, Desire

The Second Noble Truth was formulated by the Buddha in his first ever discourse after his enlightenment at Isipatana Park near Benares on the Ganges River. It's called The Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of the Law.

"This, O disciples, is the Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering. That craving which leads to rebirth, combined with pleasure and passion, finding satisfaction now here, now there, namely, the craving for sense pleasure, the craving for new existence, and the craving for annihilation."

So the cause of our suffering, or unsatisfactoriness in our lives, is desire or craving for sensual pleasure. To understand why this is, we need to go down one step further and ask why it is that we desire in the first place.

According to the Buddha, our fundamental, call it existential position, is that we are ignorant. This ignorance is not stupidity or blameworthy lack of education. This ignorance means the same as the root meaning in English: not knowing. We simply don't know. And what is it we don't know? It is the cause of our suffering and how to put an end to it.

Because we're ignorant of this, this ignorant mind which doesn't know seems to find an answer, and since the answer is based on wrong understanding—sometimes even guesswork or fantasy, for the real truth of the matter is hidden—delusion is produced in the mind. This delusion is the active side of the passive ignorance.

We often see this in our daily life. The TV suddenly goes funny. We haven't a clue how a TV works or why it's gone funny. But since we can't get someone to service it, we'll mess about with the knobs, and even lead ourselves to believing that a thump to the casing might work. No wonder the first words of the exasperated service person is, "Who's been messing about with this?" We, of course, adopt a posture of innocent ignorance.

More seriously, in earlier times when people were really exasperated with disasters such as floods, famines, droughts, suddenly gods needed to be appeased. Animal and human sacrifice is called for.

The great problem with delusion and its manifestations is that we don't know we're deluded. This is by definition the meaning of delusion. In mental illness, the problem with the paranoid person is that he has no insight. He doesn't realize in any way that his thinking does not match reality. And no matter how much you say it to him, or show him, or try to make it obvious to him, yet his disturbed thinking persists. Delusions are rock hard.

Now this ignorance-delusion is the fount of two other manifestations: desire and hatred. Desire here always refers to sensual desire. It is first of all believing that life is about sensual indulgence, and secondly that happiness is to be found in sense pleasure. This is what constitutes the delusion. Herein is our great confusion.

We, as human beings, have five senses which respond to the world, and through which we enjoy a lot of pleasure, be it food, lovely sights, the feeling of a sea breeze, or sexual pleasures. Even within the mind itself—the sixth sense in Buddhism—there is great pleasure to be had in fantasies and mental states of excitement, infatuation and so on. In fact, for most of us, a lot of the time, life can be very pleasurable.

Our technological society goes out of its way to try and turn this life into a sensual delight. From compact discs, TVs, jacuzzis, you name it, there is some machine somewhere to heighten our sensual experience. Unfortunately, pleasure has an inbuilt obsolescence. No matter how wonderful, how exciting our pleasurable experience is, there comes a time when we tire of it, we get bored.

So now this desire, which has caused us to find pleasure with its attendant emotional highs, drives us on to seek more and more pleasure. If we watch ourselves closely throughout the day, we will see how tireless we are in trying to make ourselves comfortable and to enjoy some sort of new pleasure all the time. As soon as I write, I think, cup of tea. At breakfast, it's, what new cereal have I? Work is boring, I need to look for something interesting. TV is boring, I need to call a friend. What am I going to do this evening? Oh, disaster, I've got nothing on. Can you imagine a weekend with nothing to do?

For others who lead stressful, busy lives, they may look forward to a weekend of nothing to do. If something turns up they have to do, they're very unhappy.

When we see this merry-go-round desire forces us to ride, we realize there is no end to the demand. We desire this, this gets boring, so we want that, and so on. The search for pleasure can never end, for desire itself, as a disposition of mind, can never be fully satisfied.

This, however, is only the surface of things, for underneath the merry-go-round sits fear and anxiety. The more we attach to our pleasure, the more we define ourselves by it. This self-definition with pleasure and pleasurable emotions and feelings is the ultimate delusion.

I have a job. It gives me wealth and status. When I walk the streets, I can hold myself high. I'm a prime minister, a nurse, a bus driver, a teacher. It doesn't matter what it is, so long as I identify with it, so long as I say, "that's me." Suddenly I lose my job. Now what am I? No wonder people go into severe depression when they're made redundant. To be made redundant is to rip one's badge off. It's to denude them. It's to say, that person thought she was a prime minister, nurse, bus driver or teacher, but in fact she's not. These job definitions aren't in any essential way or real way at all. But we think they are. That's the delusion. That's why it causes us so much suffering to lose our jobs.

As if the drop in standard of living were not suffering enough, we compound it with loss of self-esteem and confidence. Even when we know our redundancy is not caused by our bad work or unpunctuality or anything like that, we react with depression, anxiety and so on.

When we realise the connection between pleasure and identity, between pleasure and the fear of loss of pleasure, then at least we can begin to look for another way of looking at life which won't cause us to suffer. In order to find out how we can undermine our personal suffering, we need to observe ourselves in daily life. We need to question our attitudes, all our greeds, as opposed to needs. See what stands up to reason.

If my father comes home from the pub with a black eye, I'm furious. I go to the pub, I want to know how it happened. I want the attacker punished, I'm very angry, I'm very upset. If Jimmy, the neighbour I argued with last week, gets beaten up, I think he deserves it. It serves him right, he was asking for it.

If my car is stolen, it's a shock. My car. How can I live without my car? I'm full of hatred toward the thieves. I find no peace of mind until my car is restored to me and the insurance paid or the thieves brought to justice. When my next-door neighbor's car is stolen, I'm full of commiseration about the rottenness of the world today. No shock. No anger. I don't feel depressed. Why should I? It's not my car.

This is what the Buddha meant when he talked of desire and all its ramifications. Desire arises out of a particular delusion that somehow our happiness rests on the quantity and quality of sensual pleasure and the emotional delights it creates. This delusion sits on, arises out of, that fundamental ignorance of not knowing where we are to find our ultimate happiness.

This ignorance, this delusion, this desire, create craving for things, and so life is a continual finding satisfaction, now here, now there, and with no rest, no permanent satisfaction at all.

It's good practice to listen to ourselves and write down the words of desire we use: I want, I wish, I would like, and so on. Next to see how we use these words of obsession: I have to, I must, I need, I should, I ought, and so on. Then to make two lists of those things we desire and those things we think we need and see how many are realistic.

Of course I need to eat, but do I need to go to a restaurant? When we become more aware of how we use these words we become more aware of our attachments and obsessions. The way we use our language reveals our delusions. It's a good practice to make this list and really question what is need as opposed to greed. It surprises us to find how little we do actually need.

The Buddha wanted to reduce the monk's needs to the absolute basics. He called these the four requisites: food, clothing, shelter and medicine. And in each case the rules go to show that it is only the basic rudimentary kind of these four requisites that is sufficient. Sufficient meaning what is actually needed.

This came home to me once when I attended a meditation course in India. The food for the three weeks I was there was simply *chapati*, a flat, unleavened whole wheat bread, and *dal*, or lentil soup. Now and again I got other vegetables and fruit, but in no way consistently. It was only three weeks, but I remember how worried I became. I thought my body would fall apart for lack of proteins and vitamins. In fact, I never felt healthier, and people remarked on how healthy I looked. It made me realize all the fears and obsessions I had about food. Such fears and obsessions caused me suffering.

So here we have the deluded human being, thinking that sense pleasures are the be-all and end-all of life. This is hedonism. Such a person who really thinks that pleasure is the greatest good is a hedonist. But in reality, this pleasure, this greatest good, is a wild goose chase, running after this only to find boredom, running after that only to find dissatisfaction, disillusionment, and so on and so on.

But worse, when we move from one pleasure to another, we want it to be better. We don't want films to continue, the same old cowboy film with the same old plot. We want it to be different, more spills and more thrills. So the old cowboy movie becomes a sexy musical, or a realistic Sam Peckinpah film showing bullets exploding out of cowboy chests. The horror movie of yesterday makes us laugh. We want real horror, real terror. Love stories have to have desperate twists and turns.

And if this is true of the movies, how much truer it is of our own lives. We so much want to be in the movies. We so much want to emulate the film stars, be heroine, hero, whatever. We have to succeed. But this success, especially in our greatly materialistic Western civilization, is measured simply by how much pleasure we can buy, be it consumer goods or services. Last week I went to Spain. This year I'm going to China, don't you know? Next year I've booked on a spaceship to Mars.

Now this delusive desire has established an identity, and this identity is what I call me. As far as I am concerned, I am what I want. I am what I have. I am the satisfaction of my desires. And through this me, I define and identify what is mine. If I lose what is mine, I also lose a bit of me. And that is when this I reacts with anger or depression or fear or what have you. In extreme cases, this I thinks it will go mad or even lose the desire to live.

When we are at the point of to be or not to be, we are at the second and third type of desire the Buddha talked of. The desire to be, in this sense, is really the desire to become, to keep on renewing life, to keep on living. Whenever death comes near, either by way of the loss of a dear one, or a life-threatening illness to our own person, great horror arises.

Essentially, the terror we feel now at the possible loss of life is no different from the fear or anxiety we feel if our jobs are threatened or loved ones leave us. The quantity of terror, fear, anxiety we feel is the measure of our identity with the loved one, the job, this myself.

And yet we know we will die. We know very well we will grow old and die. We know it very well. There is undeniable evidence that everyone else, even my loved ones, will die, will grow old and die. But even though we know it, we don't seem to really accept it. There's something in us that keeps blinding us to the fact, and we carry on behaving as if it happens to everyone else, but not to us. This shows how deep our delusion is.

So much so, that because we can't face the death of myself, we create all sorts of heavens where we shall be able to enjoy the pleasures of life—transitory fleeting pleasures, mind—for eternity. Here, then, is the fallacy of eternalism. Whatever is eternal cannot in itself be fleeting, it cannot in itself change. And yet such is our inability to conceive of a life that is not transitory, and therefore nothing to do with fleeting pleasures, that we create happy hunting grounds, eternal realms, everlasting heavens, where we can eat forever, or drink forever, or have any pleasure you care to name, forever. This is eternalism, the belief that the same person carries on in the same way, but perfectly happily, after death. It is but an extended hedonism.

But what we really see here is the problem of ignorance and delusion. Delusion cannot see beyond itself. It has no other option but to recreate itself, even though all the time the feedback is saying, "No, this doesn't last, this isn't permanent." Even though experience tells us pleasure, the search for pleasure, the dependency on pleasure, only accumulates worry, obsession, anxiety, frustration, depression, and worse.

Now when I fail to achieve the great pleasured Rome, then awful feelings of inadequacy arise, a loss of self-esteem. In my depression I face this horror. Realizing that in fact pleasure does not deliver the permanent good, I see only death, only annihilation. In my despair I believe death will bring some total ending, a permanent relief.

Even in ordinary life, if things get too much, I run away. If a relationship gets too hard, I divorce. If the job gets too much, I change. If I'm unhappy, I go to bed. I annihilate myself in sweet sleep. When pain and suffering arises, the desire to get rid of it arises. This is the twin to desire: aversion, the desire to do away with what is painful.

If I want pleasure, I don't want pain. Aversion is just the negative side of desire, and this in its extreme delusive form produces the escape mentality, the running away, at worst, from oneself by killing oneself. From life by suicide, death ends all. This is the annihilationist. Believing in annihilation at death is the logical outcome of believing that human life is only about sensual pleasure, and that it will end.

So where have we got to? We've said that because of our fundamental ignorance—the not knowing what suffering is, nor the cause of it, nor how to put an end to it—we've produced solutions. Since these solutions are based on wrong understanding, our delusions are born.

Because we want to be happy, desire arises and we attach to what gives us immediate gratification, our sense pleasures. The mistake is then made of believing that that is what we really are. When pleasures fail us, we are thrown into an identity crisis. Faced with disease, old age and death, we either believe we will be able to take it up again in some heavenly plane forever, or we will all annihilate into nothingness.

In meditation, this merry-go-round should become more and more obvious to us. All sorts of emotional states and fantasies assail us, some highly pleasurable, some painful, some full of hate and fear and sorrow, and others full of excitement, sentimentality and delight. All sorts of mental states with their accompaniment of daydream and internal dialogue, films indeed.

But in meditation, our work is to become the detached observer. We must begin to take a side seat from which we can be attentive to every passing conscious moment. Whatever the object of our meditation, be it good, bad, painful, pleasurable, no matter, whatever the object, we watch it with keen attentiveness.

All that happens in our mind is to be considered so much phenomena, mental things. As we come to know, perhaps for the first time in our lives, how much our mind is filled with desires and aversions, insight begins to arise. Just look at all this stuff. It really is suffering. It is just coming up and I've no control over it. All these desires, these wants, these obsessions, all these petty dislikes, hatreds, grudges, all these self-definitions, self-identifications, opinions, beliefs, criticisms—they're all a source of suffering for me.

Then the question arises, can I live without desire and attachment? Can I live without aversion and hatred? Can I live without continually reconditioning myself to look at life as if it was one huge birthday cake for me, for me and no one else?

With these thoughts we move into daily life. We begin to question all these little people in our head shouting at us, I want this, I need that, I can't live without this, I may as well kill myself if I don't get that. By questioning our desires and aversions, by seeing them for what they really are, we begin to discover the path that leads out of all this mess.

And this is exactly what the Buddha did himself. Realising that no amount of pleasure was ever going to satisfy him, he set out to discover the path that leads out of suffering. But before he could discover the path, he had to discover the cause.

Remember, the Dharma, the teaching of the Buddha, is not a pill to be taken every morning. It's a handbook, a guide, which we ourselves have to put into practice. Discovering that desire for sensual pleasure is not something we should indulge is at first painful, but I like my beer, I like my food. But as we come to let go of our obsessive, grasping natures, we will discover a kinder nature, one of peace, a nature that does not feed off grasping and expectation, but allows generosity and sits squarely balanced in reality.

A nature no longer pushed about by internal compulsions, but free to respond to others with love and care. It all leads to a greater satisfaction with our lives. All we need to do is get to know these desires and aversions and to see them for what they really are. They pretend to lead us to happiness, but in fact they are wolves in sheep's clothing. They will lead nowhere but to unhappiness.

Here is the power of meditation, *vipassanā* insight meditation. It helps us see these mental states for what they really are. In daily life we need to activate these insights. We mustn't allow ourselves to get caught up in greed, hatred and delusion. We must undermine every greed, every hatred. We must question every opinion and belief in case they are deluded, not simply act upon their command. We must discover for ourselves what is good, what is right, what leads to happiness and peace. To happiness and peace of ourselves and all beings.

I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful.

CHAPTER 5

The Second Noble Truth — The Wheel of Dependent Origination

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 19 min

> *In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma presents paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination) as the Buddha's central teaching that encompasses the Four Noble Truths and Buddhist psychology. He explains how this twelve-link wheel describes our moment-to-moment experience, beginning with ignorance (avijjā) as the underlying condition that creates delusive mental formations (saṅkhāra), leading through consciousness, mind-body, sense contact, feeling, craving (taṇhā), clinging, becoming, birth, and death.*
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> *Using accessible examples like eating an apple or religious prejudice, Bhante shows how our conditioned responses create suffering through unconscious reactions to pleasant and unpleasant feelings. He emphasizes that while initial thoughts and feelings arise from past conditioning and cannot be controlled, we retain the freedom to choose our response at the crucial point of desire and craving.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for meditation and daily life, explaining how recognizing unwholesome mental states without acting upon them gradually undermines negative conditioning while cultivating wholesome responses. This process of mental purification leads toward the insight that reveals our true nature beyond greed, hatred, and delusion, ultimately pointing toward the Nibbānic peace that transcends the wheel of becoming.*

Foundation Course One, Talk Five: The Second Noble Truth - The Wheel of Dependent Origination

There came a time in the Buddha's life in late middle age when he decided to appoint one of his monks as a permanent attendant, and he asked Ānanda, a cousin, to be that person. Ānanda agreed to do so, but only on condition that he could hear every word the Buddha spoke, and if he were to miss any talks, the Buddha would relate to him what he had said. The Buddha agreed.

When the Buddha died, a great council was held to bring together all the discourses and make a compilation. It was this very same Ānanda who came to be relied upon to supply the discourses. He seems to have had quite a phenomenal audio memory, lucky in an oral tradition which was to hand down these discourses by rote learning for 500

years before they were finally committed to paper. So it is that all the discourses are prefaced, "Thus have I heard," and then there follows the place and occasion for the discourse.

On this particular occasion, it is this same Ānanda who tells the Buddha that although the teaching on the wheel of dependent origination is deep and profound, yet he, Ānanda, found it to be self-evident and fathomable. The Buddha rebukes him: "Don't say that, Ānanda, don't say it. This teaching of mine, the wheel of dependent origination, is not only profound and deep, it also bears the signs of being so." Then the Buddha goes on to say that it is because people have not grasped this that their lives continue to be miserable.

In a way, the teaching on the Wheel of Dependent Origination is the centrepiece of the Buddha's doctrine. It encapsulates not only the Four Noble Truths, but the whole of Buddhist psychology. It is an explanation of how we come to suffer and why we do so. It describes this in detail.

Of late, there was a renowned teacher in Burma, the Mogok Sayadaw, believed to be an Arahant, a Buddhist saint, who taught everything through this doctrine. Although the formulation of the Four Noble Truths came first during the reflections after the Enlightenment, it is said that after a period of seven days following the Enlightenment, the whole formula of the wheel came to the Buddha as he emerged from concentration in the early night, and that later he understood it in reverse order.

Here we can only hope to get a general idea of this teaching. We shall look at it as a day-to-day psychology and how it helps us to understand the meditation we do and how it can help us in daily life. For the Buddha's teaching is not some empty descriptive philosophy. It's a theory we must prove to be true for ourselves by putting it into practice, by trying it out.

The first link, which is not to be considered a first cause but an underlying precondition out of which all our suffering, and indeed our existence, arises, is ignorance. Ignorance here means not knowing, just as I might not know your name simply because I've not heard it. This not knowing produces wrong understanding about life, delusions in fact. These delusions are inbuilt in our psychology. These delusions cause us to make decisions and act in certain ways which are unskillful and bring about unwholesome results.

It is in this way that mind is conditioned. Our mental life, our psychology, is full of habits which have been produced by our own decision-making, our wills. However, because our wills have acted upon wrong information, those delusions of ours, so the mind ends up with unskillful or unwholesome conditions, which in turn causes further suffering.

When I am a child, because I don't know any better, because I am ignorant, I accept what is given to me. If, for instance, I am told that people of other religions are evil and to be avoided, at first I believe it. This wrong understanding now produces an attitude, which in turn produces words and actions of particular behaviour whenever I should meet such people. I have internalised my parents' prejudice. An interesting word: prejudge. To form an opinion about something before the facts are known.

Deluded by this prejudice, I'm on my guard. I feel fear. These people are evil. I must get away before they do me harm. Or worse: if only we could be rid of them. Upon these thoughts, I avoid them. The important point to understand here is that although I have received a prejudice from my parents, and although I have been taught an attitude, in the final analysis, I make the decision to act upon it. In this way, I reinforce it so that it now becomes my prejudice.

All these decisions, acts of will, build up in the child's mind until the way I behave with people of other religions will be simply a blind conditional response. I may even have forgotten the reasons why I behave like that. In fact, to the child become an adult, such behaviour comes to be accepted as perfectly proper and self-evidently righteous.

So if we take any point of our lives, say when we wake up, we bring with us from the past all our ignorance and our delusive conditionings, the mental habits we've developed. Upon this twin base of ignorance and conditioned mental states, we perform all our activities.

As soon as we wake, the next five links on the wheel come into being. The first is consciousness itself, just that faculty in the mind that knows. With this arises all the rest of the mind: the mental aggregates of sensations, perceptions, and volitional conditionings, and at the same time, the body itself. Because of this mind and body, the six senses are activated, the sixth sense being the mind itself as a sense base receiving information from the other five senses. Because of these senses, contact is made with the world out there. When this contact is made, feelings arise we experience as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Here then is the human being as a receiver of information: the consciousness, the mental faculties and the body, the sense bases, contact with the world through these senses, and feelings caused by these contacts. Again, it is important to remember that everything has arisen because of something else. The human being comes into life at every moment of life in this way. Even in deep sleep there is some form of consciousness and sense contact, or how else could we pull a blanket over us when cold?

This moment is a product of all the past and contains in it the effects of all our yesterday's decisions, skillful and unskillful. Some are realised, others lie potential in that moment, to be realised at some future time.

To look at it another way, as soon as I see an apple, the first light that strikes the retina, the sense base, is the contact. Upon the contact feeling arises. I know this feeling, I am conscious of it. All this has happened by way of the physical and mental properties. In other words, the whole process is dependent, one thing on another, hence the wheel of dependent origination. Perhaps it would be better called interdependent origination since all these functions, properties, interrelate and work one upon the other.

However, this is not the end of the story. There are yet more links. In the previous five links, ignorance has been the latent factor affecting all our perception of things, the way we understand. It is the next link where the ignorance factor comes again more obviously into play.

As soon as pleasurable feelings are experienced, because of our past deluded conditioning, desire for them arises. As soon as desire has arisen, there is a strengthening of it, if the wheel is to progress onto craving, grasping, even obsession. Once this has happened, the will comes into play, and the desire is realised, activated, satisfied.

If we return to my apple, as soon as I saw the apple, there arose in me pleasurable feelings conditioned by past apple-eating. As soon as this happened, desire for more of those pleasurable feelings – not the apple itself, notice – arose in me. This desire takes hold of my mind in the form of grasping and craving. Before I know it, I've made the decision to eat it. When I actually eat the apple, I become the eater of the apple. I become absorbed in it, lost in it, totally self-identified with it. This is becoming. This is what Buddhism means by *kamma*. Kamma is simply becoming, being my actions, whether verbal or physical, and it is all brought about through my own will.

What about aversion and hatred? Here, it is simply seen as a type of desire. If, for instance, I don't like apples, my conditioned response may be to ignore it – that is, not wanting, not wishing to see it. If I had a disgust for it, I might throw it away in the bin. My desire is to remove it. Aversion and hatred are simply the obverse of desire: I want

it, I don't want it. It's all want. It's all a matter of desire. Fear is also desire, in this case, the desire to remove myself. If I had a phobia of apples, I might shrink away when I see one or run off.

If they are neutral feelings, we usually remain ignorant of them, such as the sensations of our breathing process. Here, I'm using the word sensations and feelings to mean the same thing. What separates them into pleasant, unpleasant and neutral is our perception of them, how we name or label these sensations through our past experience.

The wheel has not yet finished turning. Having made visual contact with the apple, felt all the attendant sensations of delight, and knowing this, having reacted with desire and craving, I eat it. Now, of course, I've finished. I've eaten the apple. It took a little time, but I saw the apple coming to an end, my sensual pleasure coming to an end. Suddenly I'm left with just a core and a few pips. The apple is no more, and my delight is gone. These are the last two links. Having decided to do something, I am born into that action. This birth is the becoming, is the *kamma*. It is in this way that we are reborn from moment to moment. But as soon as I am born, born again, reborn into something, that thing must come by way of a decaying or a declining process to an end, at some time or other. Everything decays and dies.

However, in the process, I have also reinforced my conditioning, those volitional conditionings that sit as potential in my mind. I shall react very much the same when I next see an apple, and the wheel of dependent origination will turn yet again.

This is an explanation of the whole of moral human behaviour. Although this is a harmless example of apple eating, it's the same psychology that produces negative habits of smoking, alcoholism, sexual deviancy, crimes of violence, murder, and the same that causes selfishness and egotism to enter into the acts of love and compassion.

If a young teenage boy continually bombarded with sexual images uses the medium of sex to develop feelings of hate and the pleasures of cruelty, is it any wonder that sooner or later there's a rape?

Indeed, this wheel can be formulated in a slightly different way that brings this personality development more into relief. It is taught in Buddhism that upon the arising of a thought, there is an action. A thought here includes all the underlying ignorant delusion, the basic human faculties of body and mind needed to bring this about, and the deluded desires. Action is that point of decision which is an act of will. Upon a set of actions, a habit is established.

So we see that if we turn the wheel in a certain direction often enough, it will keep turning that way. It gathers momentum. Habits are hard to break. Long-established habits, harder still. Now a collection of habits is a personality. That's worth pondering on. A personality in Buddhism is just a whole collection of conditioned responses. This is not to say that humans are automatons. For remember, we condition ourselves. It's when we don't know this or forget this that we lose the ability to direct our lives. And so it is that this personality determines our destiny.

How important it is to become aware of our thoughts. If you were to say to an ordinary person in the street, what's worse: the thought of murder, the threatening of murder, or the action of murder? The answer would be the action itself, since up to that time no actual harm had been done. And indeed, from the victim's and society's point of view, this is quite right. But from a mental process point of view and the murderer's point of view, the most important was the thought. For without the thought, the action would never have arisen, nor indeed the threatening.

From our point of view as meditators, this is something we have to grasp very deeply indeed, if we're eventually to escape this wheel of dependent origination, this wheel of suffering. In longer periods of meditation practice, such as a weekend or a week-long course, this process becomes more obvious to us. And with the practice of moment-to-moment awareness in our daily life, we can begin to catch this process and see how it's doing us harm, and more important, see how we can stop it.

So how do we undermine this wheel? First of all, we have to accept that all the links up to feeling – that is, all the ignorance, volitional conditionings, consciousness, mind and body, the six senses, contact, and the feelings that arise – are a given. They are conditioned. We can do nothing about those thoughts arising in the mind. They will come of their own.

Let me return to the problem of religious prejudice, which, sad to say, is very much a world phenomenon. Now because of this conditioning, when I come to know a person who is of a different religion to me, unpleasant, perhaps hateful thoughts and feelings arise. This is my conditioning, prejudicial, caused by a combination of my upbringing and my own past acts of will. It's a combination of my believing misinformation and acting upon it. But at this moment, when I see this other person, there is no act of will. I am not actively prejudicial. Upon the seeing there arises a conditioned response. There is nothing in the world I can do to stop that arising.

It is in the next links that this conditioned prejudice, already arisen in my mind, is acted upon. It is at the actual point of reaction – the desire, the craving and the action or becoming – where the choice arises to develop, reinforce these prejudicial condition-

ings or to let them go, to just observe them. If I decide to act upon them, to obey their suggestions, then I will strengthen my religious prejudice. I will feed it, develop it. But if I refuse to do so, if I just observe them, let them go, fail to obey them, I undermine that conditioning. For that conditioning needs my continued, active, willful support to grow, to develop, to sustain.

More, in deciding and willing not to act upon their suggestions, I set up a more wholesome conditioning of positive values. I am creating a new response, a new conditioning, which not only counteracts and undermines the old negative one, but is also producing something new. In short, initial thoughts and feelings are products of past action and conditioning. It is what I do with them that matters.

Now you will have noticed that I've used the concepts of wholesome and unwholesome. Indeed, this is Buddhist training. It is to begin to recognise what is unwholesome, harmful for ourselves and other beings, and to refuse to develop any further those very conditionings. Secondly, it is to foster within ourselves and to develop thoughts and feelings that are beneficial, wholesome. In this way we purify the mind. In this way we are slowing down, wearing out the wheels. So long as we react to and indulge in unwholesome states of mind, so long are we deepening our ignorance and so worsening our suffering.

When we begin to let go of unwholesome states of mind and develop wholesome states of mind, we rid ourselves of ignorance. As we begin to rid ourselves of ignorance, the mind, clear of its obscuring wrong attitudes, opinions and prejudices, becomes more and more insightful until it can begin to plumb the depths of our being and see what it is we really are. This seeing ourselves as we really are, beyond greed, hatred and delusion, is the nirvanic experience.

Every time we undermine an unwholesome conditioning, we come to understand more deeply the insights the Buddha had on the night when he discovered the wheel of dependent origination in its reverse order. Indeed, as ignorance is destroyed, so are all the links on the chain, one upon the other, and with it goes our suffering. This doesn't mean annihilation. The Buddha continued to live another 45 years after his enlightenment, but in perfect peace and joy. When he was asked what happened to a Buddha, or a totally purified one upon death, his answer was that it was simply ineffable, not describable. *Parinibbāna* is beyond the wheel of becoming, the wheel of dependent origination.

So this is our task: to recognise unwholesome conditioning, thoughts and feelings for what they are. Let them go. We have to train ourselves in more wholesome ways of thinking and feeling.

We can do this. This is our freedom. We have the power, through our own wills, to change our states of mind. In meditation we see these conditionings, these states of mind, these emotions and moods, just as passing things, transient phenomena. We mustn't attach to them. We mustn't identify with them. And so too in daily life, while going about our day-to-day activities.

In this way our lives will become happier, more peaceful. When all conditions ripen, wholesome conditions, insight will arise naturally into that state beyond change. Nibbāna is assured.

Well, I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the Nibbānic peace within.

CHAPTER 6

The Second Noble Truth — Kamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 21 min

> *In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma clarifies the authentic Buddhist understanding of kamma, distinguishing it from popular misconceptions influenced by Hindu and Western ideas. He explains how kamma (action) and vipāka (result) operate according to the law of cause and effect within the moral sphere of human existence.*
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> *Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that "in this fathom-long body is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world," Bhante explores how our inner dispositions create our relationships with the world. Through practical examples, he demonstrates how volition (cetanā) is the root cause of kamma, and how we condition ourselves through our mental reactions to circumstances.*
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> *The talk addresses common questions about karmic justice and suffering, explaining the reciprocal law that wholesome actions produce wholesome results, while emphasizing personal responsibility for our mental states. Bhante concludes with verses from the Dhammapada and explains how vipassanā meditation and mettā practice can help us observe and transform our conditioning, moving from unwholesome to wholesome states of mind.*

Kamma, more commonly known in its Sanskrit form as karma, another language the Buddhist scriptures are written in, has become part of our language ever since the hippie sixties. But unfortunately the meaning of the word has been overloaded with Hindu and Western ideas. In Buddhism, the law of *kamma* is understood within the framework of the Four Noble Truths, and without this law, the truths would not make sense.

The Buddha taught there were fundamental laws that governed our lives, and if we were able to perceive them, we would be able to understand why we suffer and how we could rid ourselves of suffering. Nowadays the word karma tends to be used when something bad happens to us, but actually it refers to everything that happens to us, good, bad and indifferent.

Strictly speaking, *kamma* means what we actually do. The results of our actions is properly termed *vipāka*. These two words then mean cause and effect, action and result: *kamma*, *vipāka*.

The law of cause and effect is accepted without question in western science. Nothing happens without something having caused it. There is nothing that just appears out of nowhere, so to speak. Everything is caused by something else. At its most obvious, the seed is the cause of the plant and the plant of the fruit, which in turn produces the seed. Buddhism takes this law of causality, of causation, and places it firmly within the moral sphere of human existence.

Here we need to stand back a minute and consider what human beings are in relationship to each other and the world. I am autonomous in the sense that I have my own apparatus, body, senses, mental abilities and so on, which perceive the world and make sense of it. In this sense, I'm an individual unit. However, this unit is in a state of total relationship with the world, not just other human beings, but animals, plants and minerals. I have a relationship with the stones in the street. I kick them. In other words, although I in myself have my own understandings, thoughts and so on, as soon as I speak or act, I form a relationship with something or somebody, and this relationship in turn affects the way I think and understand. In a way, I can say I am my relationships.

For instance, when Jim goes to work, he always sits at the same table, in the same chair. He has a relationship with these two objects, little do they know, whereby they are singled out from all the other tables and chairs in the room, singled out by him as his, belonging to him. He knows this is true for him. The chair and table don't, but it does affect them because no one else uses them. Their use, their relationship, is limited to Jim, and everyone else who works in that room agrees with that relationship. It's all very reciprocal and harmonious, since everyone else in the room has their own table and chair.

One day Jim walks in, and lo and behold, someone is sitting at his table. This person is new to the place. She doesn't realise. In fact, she's only there temporarily to do a quick jotting, but her posture suggests that she owns the table and chair. She's pulled the chair right up, and is sitting comfortably and squarely at the table. She's taken his space. What is Jim's reaction? Anger. He might clothe it with sarcasm. "Being promoted then?" "Sorry," she says, collects her things and shoots off with an angry glance.

You can see that in this little scene, Jim's relationship to that chair and table has been an underlying factor in making an enemy of someone who in all innocence was just using them temporarily. These attitudes we have within ourselves, our inner dispositions, affect our relationship to the world, both good and bad.

Here is the Buddha firmly placing the centre of all our relationships: "In this fathom-long body, I declare, is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world." This is another formulation of the Four Noble Truths, but from the point of view of *kamma*.

As far as I am concerned, this me in myself, my existence, my sufferings, my joys, my birth, my death, is the world, the world as I know and perceive it, the world as I experience it. That world is me. I make divisions between me and myself and me with others, and also between me and the world. But actually this me in the world is just the me in myself portrayed upon the world affecting it, and the me within myself is the world portrayed in me affecting me. The division of subject and object is very much needed in ordinary daily life, but we think of them as two totally separated things instead of realising their intimate interrelationship.

The table, chair and woman in the office have their own existence in the world, their relationship to the world. But when Jim enters the scene, their existence in the world, their relationship to the world, includes him in it. When he entered the office, he fell into an immediate relationship with these three. What matters to Jim is exactly this interrelationship. The way he understands, perceives others, also includes the way others perceive and understand him. The way Jim understands and perceives things is very much affected by the way things affect him.

When Jim doesn't see this, he lives in a dual world of me and them. Me, the isolated being in a world of things and others. But in actual fact, everything is interdependent, interrelated. It's like a huge folk dance. Each one of us are only individuals in that we have a specific role to play within the whole dance. How we play that role is up to us, though our decisions will be affected by the other dancers.

We say it takes two to start a quarrel, but you can bet your last penny the protagonists will blame each other. They won't see it as an interrelationship. If the woman was sitting at another desk, Jim might have barely noticed her. If the woman had been a friend, he would have greeted her. So you can see, within this fathom-long body is the whole world, with all its suffering, and of course the path leading out of suffering too. This whole world is the whole of the interdependent interrelationships we are.

Now, within this world of interdependent interrelationships, when we think or do something which is *kamma*, we create a result, *vipāka*. In our minds, we either create a different way of thinking or we reinforce an old way of thinking. In other words, we are conditioning ourselves.

Every day, when Jim gets to work, he has a cup of coffee. As soon as he walks into the office, his first thought is coffee. Why? Because for the past few years, that's what he's always done. He sometimes looks forward to the coffee, even on the way to work. His thoughts keep reminding him of delicious coffee awaiting him. His mind and his body are conditioned to wallow in the taste of hot coffee before he settles down to work.

One day, Jim gets to work. No coffee! He's so angry. Whose turn was it to buy the coffee? He's so embarrassed about his anger when other staff tell him it was his turn.

Now where does this desire, anger and embarrassment come from? The desire, virtually obsession, has been cultivated by Jim in himself over the years. Every time he gets to work, he's satisfied his desire, his wish for coffee. The coffee didn't make Jim do it. The coffee did not create his obsession. He could have decided to have coffee only if he felt tired to pep him up. The coffee is a passive object. Jim's used it as he's wanted to, and it is Jim himself who is totally responsible for his obsession.

Did the coffee cause Jim's anger? Did the lack of coffee cause Jim's anger? Of course not. Anger was Jim's internal learnt response when he doesn't get what he wants. When Jim has to suffer the pain of not satisfying a craving, he gets angry. Worse, the angry mind looks for a scapegoat. Jim wants to blame someone. As it turned out, it was his own fault. And he feels embarrassed about his display of anger and petulance.

Did his colleagues make Jim embarrassed? Or the coffee? Or the lack of coffee? Of course not. Embarrassment is what Jim feels, what he's taught himself to feel when he makes a fool of himself. It is the mind which suffers from its own internal conditioning.

Next day, Jim reads in the papers an article about the harmfulness of caffeine. He decides he won't have any more coffee. But the smell of coffee keeps distracting him. He feels angry, depressed. His body, for lack of coffee, feels uncomfortable. But Jim holds out. Within a week or two, he's dropped the habit. He's off the drug.

Reading the article influenced his opinion, his understanding of coffee. He ponders, he decides, it's better not to drink it. This decision leads to action, to avoiding coffee. Although Jim has to suffer the consequences of past conditioning, his past obsession with coffee, he reconditions himself. Jim purifies his mind of that obsession. In the end, he's lost it. He doesn't care whether he has coffee or not. Jim has reached a state of perfect equanimity about it.

The importance here is to realise that he's conditioned himself, that he's responsible for his own mind, and that he can no longer blame his parents, colleagues, friends, politicians, the system, or whatever, for his state of mind. In other words, Jane can

blame bad management for the collapse of the firm and her eventual redundancy, but not the ensuing depression and so on. The mental reaction is her own self-imposed conditioning.

This is extremely hard for most people to understand and accept. Our whole vocabulary and use of language is based on the understanding that others make us angry or happy. Others make the anger in me, not me. One of the insights of meditation is to see that states of mind from the darkest to the lightest are our own personal conditioning. That's why what angers one person may bring joy to another. One person's delight is another person's poison.

In the Buddha's teaching, this understanding is crucial if we are to cleanse the mind of all its negativity, to purify it. If Jim thinks his wife Jane is the cause of his depression, he'll have to change her or leave her. If Jane says John is always making her angry, she'll have to change him before she gets any relief. This point of view, which presumes that somehow I will be perfectly happy and life perfectly wonderful for me if only the world, especially the people in it, would change, is one of the causes of our great unhappiness and frustration.

When we realise we are the makers of our own mental states, suddenly we have real power, real opportunity to change. If I make me angry and depressed, I can make me unangry and undepressed. When we accept this, we can now look for the kernel agent that produces this conditioning. The Buddha isolated that agent: "Volition, O disciples, is what I call *kamma*. It is through will that a person does something in the form of thought, word or action."

So, an idea comes to mind. At that point, I decide to stop it or develop it. If I decide to develop it, I will produce a train of thoughts which may translate into words and actions. From a mental development point of view, it is so necessary to decide whether the initial thought or idea is good in terms of being right. However I react, whatever I do will reinforce the conditioning in my mind or undermine it.

This leads us to the next law of *kamma*, that of reciprocity. Like produces like. The Buddha taught very clearly that wholesomeness produces wholesomeness and unwholesomeness produces unwholesomeness. I use wholesomeness, another possible word is skilful, rather than good and bad, to get away from any idea of supernatural forces of good and evil or a rewarding and punishing deity.

The Buddha taught that everything that happens to us is the product of past and present conditions. There is no concept of punishment in Buddhism. Everything that happens to us are consequences. Punishment, as such, is something human beings have

produced for themselves. It's something human beings do to each other out of revenge or a sense of so-called righteousness. Yet another result, another consequence of unwholesome conditioning in the mind.

An objection is usually raised here. How is it people get away with murder, literally? How is it that people who are good end up suffering? The point is that a person's action has a two-fold effect. When a person does something two stones drop into two pools.

The first pool is the outside world setting up a chain of reactions that affects the me in the world. Since I am in relationship with the world as soon as I do something it affects it. These effects go on and on until they come back to the original doer. In other words the initial action changes the world. As the world changes so it affects the doer of that action. When Jim got angry about his coffee, others formed new opinions of him. These opinions of theirs now affect his relationship with them. If his boss was involved, they may even affect his career prospects.

The second stone drops inward into the pool of the mind, setting up a chain reaction which affects the me in myself. Jim's anger over the coffee goes to reinforce this disposition of anger. When he goes home and finds there's no coffee there too, his angry response, now just that little more developed, makes for a great explosion and Jim finds himself flinging the empty coffee jar out of the window.

In other words, the unskilful person and the skilful person are simply developing different minds within themselves and they are also developing different worlds around themselves. At some point, the consequences of their actions will be experienced. Even if a murderer gets away with it in the world, his mind won't. The Buddha said, "According to the seed, so the fruit is reaped."

There is no escaping these karmic results in Buddhism. Penance, prayer, offerings to a god of *kamma* won't help in the least. However, there are ways to assuage, to soften the effects of unwholesome results, the *vipāka*. Jim's display of petulant anger upset his colleagues. They were surprised and disappointed. The next morning, Jim brings two jars of coffee and leaves a note of apology. Old relationships are re-established, but of course, it will take greater proof to convince them that Jim is not the angry type.

The next question normally asked is, how does Buddhism account for mass suffering, especially seemingly innocent suffering in earthquakes or civilian war casualties? The first point is that the law of *kamma* is only one of the laws that govern the universe. When we are born, we have to accept the whole package. Not everything that happens to us is the result of our personal past or present actions. When Jim threw that jar out of the window, it landed on the head of a poor old man. He died there and then. And

Jim went to jail for manslaughter. Now, he didn't make the man walk under the window just as the jar came down. So you see, we have to be careful with what we do or say. There are other factors abroad that can maximise or minimise the effects of what we do. Wholesome actions, for instance, may not mature since the conditions are not there to support.

The second point is that suffering is a state of mind. In meditation, when pains come from the sitting posture, we try to see these so-called pains for what they really are. Calling them pains puts a value judgment on them. They are bad, terrible. We react with fear and aversion. But in meditation, if we concentrate just on the sensations, the pains as sensations, the mind will empty of its normal reaction and we will suddenly experience what we thought of as pain as just sensation. When we experience just sensations, what is the state of mind? Peaceful and calm. Not suffering.

So in a disaster such as the Mexico earthquake of 1987, thousands of people suffered pain. Some died instantly, with very little pain indeed. Others died slowly in great pain and in great anguish. Others died in great pain, but equanimously. How each individual reacted to their tragedy was determined to a large extent by their conditioned state of mind. From the outside, from the TV pictures, we're filled with horror at so much suffering. From the inside, there are only individuals, each suffering their own lot according to their self-developed conditioning. That is why some trapped but not physically suffering may have been screaming with fright. Others, in terrible physical agony, may have been calm and died peacefully.

So, to recap. Firstly, the law of *kamma* states that everything we suffer or enjoy belongs to the moral sphere which is governed by the law of cause and effect, as is the world of atoms and molecules. Secondly, that there is a direct reciprocity in that wholesome, skilful thoughts, words and actions produce wholesome, skilful thoughts, words and actions, and that unwholesomeness and unskilfulness produce unwholesome and unskilful results.

Thirdly, that the root cause of *kamma* is to be discovered in our own volition, our wills. This means that through the power of our own decision-making, we can change our personality, the way we are and act, and so we can change the world about us.

Fourthly, that the results of any intentioned thoughts, words and actions are inescapable, but we can affect the outcome of unskillfulness in the present with present skillfulness.

Vipassanā insight meditation allows us to see our present conditioning of mind. In the clearing of awareness, the mind displays itself. By not joining in, not indulging, not developing, we can allow unwholesome states of mind to burn themselves out. With the practice of loving kindness, *mettā* meditation, we suggest to ourselves more skillful ways of thinking and behaving. In our daily life, we constantly try to behave in skillful ways. In this way, the meditative life changes us, moves us away from unwholesome states of mind towards the wholesome, from darkness to light.

The Dhammapada is often referred to as the Buddhist Bible. It is a collection of many of the Buddhist sayings under different headings. Here are three verses on *kamma*.

"Even a wrongdoer may still find happiness, so long as his unskillful behaviour does not bear fruit. But when his unskillful behaviour does bear fruit, he will meet with their unwholesome consequences. Even a good person may meet with suffering, so long as his skillful behaviour does not bear fruit. But when that skillful behaviour does bear fruit, he will enjoy the benefits of that skillful behaviour. If there is no cut on the hand, a person can handle poison. The poison won't affect someone who does not have a cut. There are no unwholesome consequences for one who did not intend to act unskillfully."

Well, I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the *nibbānic* peace within.

CHAPTER 7

The Fourth Noble Truth - Morality - Sīla

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 20 min

In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the Fourth Noble Truth - the Noble Eightfold Path - as presented in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11). He explains how the Buddha's Middle Way transcends both self-indulgence and self-mortification, establishing a practical framework for spiritual development. The talk focuses extensively on sīla (morality) as the essential foundation, exploring the ten wrong actions across thought, speech, and action that create unwholesome states of mind.

Bhante discusses the three divisions of the Noble Eightfold Path - wisdom, morality, and mental development - while emphasizing the Buddha's practical formula: 'Such is morality, such is mental development, such is wisdom.' He addresses Buddhist morality not as divine commandment but as natural law governed by kamma, where wholesome actions produce wholesome results. The Five Precepts for lay practitioners are explained as training rules rather than rigid commandments.

Drawing from traditional stories and practical examples, including the account of Tambadāṭika from the Dhammapada, Bhante offers guidance on navigating moral challenges in modern life, from livelihood choices to dealing with guilt and shame. This talk provides essential groundwork for understanding how ethical conduct purifies the mind and creates the foundation for deeper spiritual development leading toward nibbāna.

The manner in which the Four Noble Truths were formulated was that of the physicians of the time concerning any illness. Firstly the illness was described and named, the cause was then stated, then the prognosis or likely outcome of the disease, and finally the treatment.

So if we were following the normal course, we should go on to the third noble truth, the truth of the end of suffering. But for clarity's sake, we shall instead go on to the treatment of our dis-ease, the fourth noble truth, in which the Buddha lays down the path that leads to the perfect cure for life's sufferings.

This is how it is put in the first ever talk the Buddha gave after his enlightenment, the Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of the Law. These two extremes, O disciples, should not be practiced by one who has gone forth from the world. What are these two? That which is to do with passions and pleasure, low, vulgar, coarse, ignoble and useless. And that which is to do with mortification, painful, ignoble and useless. Avoiding these

two extremes, the Tathagata has attained the knowledge of the middle path, which gives perception and knowledge, and leads to peace, to insight, enlightenment and *nibbāna*. What then is this middle path? It is the noble eightfold path, namely, right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

Buddhism is often called the middle path or the middle way, that between self-indulgence governed by desire for pleasure and by the passions and self-mortification involving penances and self-torture. The path of self-indulgence is the way of those who believe happiness is to be found in pleasure. The path of mortification is the way of those who believe that the destruction of the physical appetites and desires leads to liberation.

The middle path lies between these two in this sense, that bodily appetites are natural to human life, we need to eat, and our appetite depends on tasty food. However, once we begin to indulge these appetites, indulge the delights of taste caring little for the body's needs, our appetites grow coarse and vulgar. We become gluttons. This tightrope distinguishing between what the body needs as opposed to what the mind greeds is the middle path. It helps us to purify the mind of gross appetites and emotions and to establish a peaceful disposition, contented.

But this middle path also suggests a hierarchy, an apex of a triangle which transcends the two points on either side of the base. When insight is gained into nibbāna, then we can say that by destroying the very roots of our discontent, the path now completely transcends the other two. And indeed, that is one way of describing the Buddhist saint or *arahant*, one who is beyond self-indulgence and self-mortification.

The Noble Eightfold Path, the Middle Path, is laid out in this order. The first two, Right Understanding and Right Intention, come under the division of Wisdom. Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood come under the division of Morality. Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration come under the division of Mental Development.

However, in later talks, the Buddha turns his presentation around to show how the theory is put into practice. There is a passage cropping up time and time again at the end of the discourses. We have to remember those were the days before cassette recorders, videos and even books, news travelled by word of mouth and slowly. As the Buddha wandered around the area of North India, around the Ganges, he had to constantly repeat the message. All discourses have some nuance to add to the teaching, but many of them end with what must have been one of his most well-known formulae.

Such is morality, such is mental development, such is wisdom. Mental development, when based on morality, is rich in result and of great effect. Wisdom, based on mental development, is rich in result and great in effect. In the Buddha's understanding, morality is the key to further development. So we shall concentrate on the meaning of morality and its importance. Here we will deal with the negative aspect. Positive morality, virtue, will be dealt with next time.

Morality these days is still something of a dirty word with heavy Victorian overtones. Behind this sits the notion of an angry deity who judges and punishes every transgression. To understand Buddhist morality, we have to keep in mind that first, there is no such concept of a punishing or rewarding God, and secondly, that morality is bound up with the law of cause and effect, *kamma*, which states that what is wholesome produces wholesomeness, and what is unwholesome produces unwholesomeness.

So, on one level, morality is about our actions in the world, realizing that our actions are producing effects all the time. If this is so, we need to know what sort of action brings about a good result and happy peaceful situations, and what sort of action brings about painful situations. On another level, morality is about our state of mind within. According to the law of kamma, it is our wills that produce our states of mind. It is by willing to think about and so produce acts of generosity and compassion that loving states of mind arise. It is by willing to think about my personal benefit at the expense of others that brings about the selfish, jealous, anxious states of mind.

On one level then, the moral laws in Buddhism are about creating a peaceful and caring society. They are the basis for real social harmony. On the other hand, they are laws of mental health, which when followed, create a mind full of compassion, joy and peace. The simplest formulation made by the Buddha is recorded in the discourses in verse. Cease from harm, do good, purify the mind. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas. We can call these three the primary precepts.

The first is the negative morality, what we ought not to do by way of harm to ourselves and others. The second is the positive morality, what we ought to do for our benefit and the benefit of all beings. The third is to do with clearing out all negative tendencies in the mind and replacing them with positive attitudes.

So what is the Buddha's formulation of cease from evil in detail? What are those thoughts, words and actions which produce unwholesome states? They are known as the ten wrong actions and they are split into three divisions, wrong thought, wrong speech and wrong action.

Wrong thought takes up the first three of the ten, avarice, ill will and wrong views. Avarice is to do with all those fantasies and mental projects we indulge that have their motivation in greed. Self-indulgent, lustful, selfish thoughts, fantasies of wealth, fame and power. It's the mentality of accumulation, of acquisition. Ill will includes all those thoughts based on hatred, from jealousy to anger, from grudge to revenge. Wrong views here means our tendency to indulge in what is harmful, kidding ourselves that it isn't so. It means especially not understanding or knowing the law of kamma. In this negative morality, this means that unskillful behaviour necessarily brings unhappy results. It includes the conceit that our opinions are always right, even when they are obviously getting us into trouble. It demands we check all our opinions in the light of our own experience and the experience of others. The kernel of wrong view, in terms of the ten wrong actions, is to believe that since we've got away with some unskillful behaviour, that that's the end of the story.

Wrong speech takes up the next four of the wrong actions. The first is lying, saying anything untrue. For those of finer conscience, it includes what is often euphemistically called exaggeration. The second is malicious talk, which only furthers backbiting and disharmony. Slander often joins together lying and malicious talk. The third is coarse speech, the use of four-letter words and so on. We need to ask what sort of mental state lies behind the use of such words. Finally, useless talk, idle gossip. Again, we are looking at the state of mind indulged in, the whinging, complaining, bored, empty, rattling mind.

There is a quaint story attached to one of the verses spoken by the Buddha in the Dhammapada, which is the collection of the Buddha's sayings. A certain Tambadatika had been the king's executioner for 45 years. He had retired and had asked one of the Buddha's chief disciples, Sariputta, to receive alms food at his home. Sariputta was one of the two chief disciples of the Buddha. He was known as the general of the Dhamma. After he had eaten, the elder gave a talk about the Dharma, but he could see that Tambadataka was very agitated and unable to concentrate.

Tambadataka explained that memories of all the deaths he had caused as executioner was the reason for his agitation. Sariputta asked him if he was the one who had decided they had to be executed. He said that that had been the king's work, and that he himself had never really wanted to kill anyone. He had done so because he was ordered to. He had had no option. Sariputta told him that if that were so, he was not guilty of murder as such, since it had never been his intention to execute the condemned. Tambadataka was greatly relieved in his heart.

That same afternoon, it seems, he was accidentally killed by a cow. When the Buddha heard of this, he said that although Tambadatika had followed an unwholesome profession, because of the Dhamma he had heard, he had been reborn in a place where he would be able to handle the results of his actions much better. Then he uttered this verse concerning the teaching of the Dharma. Better than a thousand words that are senseless and unconnected with the realization of Nibbāna is a single word of sense if upon hearing it one is calmed.

These days this concept of useless talk is very much overlooked. If we examine our media, the TV programs, the serials, soap operas and the newspapers, so much of it is filling our minds with hogwash. Don't you think?

Finally, there's wrong action. The final three. The first is not to kill any living being, and it also includes not doing them harm. The second is not to steal, which is phrased as not taking what is not freely given. The third is sensual misconduct, such as gluttony, drunkenness and self-indulgent sexuality.

These days the whole area of sexuality is very confused. There are fundamental Christian sects, for whom sex is a bad thing in itself. And there is the libertine view that their personal freedom to satisfy any desire means virtually a right to sex on demand. Interestingly, the occasion of AIDS has brought about a rethink of sorts. One can only hope it is not going to result in a vindictive witch hunt and a return to the bad old days of repression.

In traditional Buddhist countries, sexual activity is seen as something limited within the bonds of marriage. In the West, since there is no general consensus, it is best left to the individual to decide what is unskillful and what is skillful in such behaviour. These are some of the questions that a Buddhist perspective would want to ask. What is the reason for the sexual pleasure? Is it just self-indulgence? Is there any real affection involved in the relationship? Is it just habitual? Are the factors of reproduction being taken into account? The fundamental guiding principle is that of not doing harm.

No matter how important sexual pleasure may have become to us in our culture, we need to investigate and see what is the outcome of all this sexual activity. What is the effect both within the mind and between people? We need to be quite truthful about it to ourselves. We need to be prepared to change if our experience and understanding asks for a change in behaviour. It is surprising, for instance, how many smokers will still say that the link between tobacco and cancer is not yet proved conclusively. Surely a warning signal should be enough. But such is the dependency, the craving, that people will kid themselves along, even to death.

These ten wrong actions give us, in some detail, what the Buddha meant by right speech and right action in the Noble Eightfold Path. There is also included here part of right intention, and all of it naturally is included in right livelihood. It is interesting that the Buddha was all too aware of how much our jobs and work dominate our lives, how they affect our minds and social relationships.

Wrong livelihood is really an extension of wrong speech and wrong action, but it did give the Buddha the opportunity to pinpoint some traits which he said ought not to be practiced. They will not come as any surprise to you: dealing in arms and lethal weapons, dealing in animal slaughter, dealing in human beings—these days we might consider slave wages—making and selling intoxicating beverages—we can also include here the whole drug trade—and finally dealing in poisons, including chemical and germ warfare of today.

If we find ourselves doing such work, it is good to refer to the story of Tambadatika, so that we are not worried by false guilts and anxieties. If we find ourselves doing any job of work, which we come to realise is harmful and we wish to leave, it is good to take into account all the consequences of such a move, such as effect upon income and family. It may mean we have to stay in such work until other opportunities arise. Our search for other occupation must be vigorous, mind. And in the meantime, we can take solace in the fact that our intentions are no longer to do harm. This takes patience. It means accepting one's kamma, one's actual situation. It's of little help to take a lofty moralistic position, which of course is what people outside the situation often do. The relief comes in the fact that once we have left such unwholesome work, upon the leaving, no more unwholesome kamma is being created.

Finally, a word about lay practice in Theravāda tradition. All lay Buddhists take what's called the Five Precepts as training rules. It is important to remember that the Buddha was not prescriptive. These aren't commandments with attached penalties. These are rules of conduct, which are the first step on the path leading to the purification of the mind. They are training rules lay Buddhists take upon themselves. They try to keep them as best they can, though of course there will be times lack of attentiveness or lack of willpower will cause them to break the training rules. They are phrased as follows. I undertake the training rule to refrain from harming any living being, taking what is not freely given, misusing the senses, wrong speech, taking drugs or drinks that tend to cloud the mind.

Finally, it is necessary to discuss the role of guilt, sorrow and penance in Buddhism. Guilt is simply the knowledge that we have done something wrong and usually accompanying this insight are the feelings of shame and fear of the consequences. This in Buddhism is quite proper. Feeling sorry, however, is only wholesome if it leads to the resolution to put right what is wrong and to resolve not to do such a thing again.

If, for instance, I've given somebody a bad name, I'm guilty of doing harm. I'm afraid the person will find out. I'm ashamed of what I've done. Acknowledging this, I tell others I was wrong to say what I said. I might even feel it necessary to tell the wronged person. Having done this, I resolve not to slander again. If shame and fear keep on arising, I should just observe this, especially in meditation, and remind myself that these feelings are the unwholesome results of unskillful action. In that way they become great teachers for us. I should remind myself that I have done what I can to put things right, that I will without doubt have to accept the consequences of what I've done. Indulging these feelings of shame or fear produces neurosis. It is best not to give them any importance.

Now as for penance, if it means piling more suffering on top of myself as punishment, then according to the Buddha, this is not only unnecessary, it could be harmful, in that it might develop cruel and self-destructive tendencies. Whether I like it or not, because of the law of kamma, I will reap the sour fruits of my action. Isn't that enough? What I must do to sweeten these fruits a little is to put an end as best I can to the effects of my wrong speech, determine never to slander again, and resolve to cultivate an attitude of seeing the best in people.

In this way the Buddha has given directions as to how to start on the Noble Eightfold Path, leading to the end of suffering. We need to purify our habits. This moral code is a set of guidelines that help us to rid ourselves of such unwholesome habits of thought, speech and action. We need to couple this with the practice of positive morality virtue, and this is formulated in Buddhism as the Ten Perfections. In this way, the foundation is laid for mental development and insight wisdom, the experience of the end of suffering, nibbāna.

Well, I hope you found this talk useful, interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nibbānic peace within.

CHAPTER 8

The Fourth Noble Truth - Positive Morality - Pāramī

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 22 min

> *In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the positive aspect of morality within the Fourth Noble Truth - the development of virtue through the ten perfections or pāramī. Rather than mere 'perfections,' these are qualities that carry us to 'the other shore' of Nibbāna when cultivated throughout our lives.*
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> *Bhante explores each of the ten pāramī in detail: dāna (generosity), sīla (morality), nekkhamma (renunciation), paññā (wisdom), vīriya (effort), khanti (patience), sacca (truthfulness), adhiṭṭhāna (resolution), mettā (loving-kindness), and upekkhā (equanimity). Drawing from the Jātaka tales and practical examples, he shows how these virtues interconnect - practicing one naturally develops the others.*
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> *This talk emphasizes that Buddhist morality isn't about rigid commandments but about cultivating a harmonious society and peaceful mind. Bhante demonstrates how the pāramī serve as practical training for meditation and daily life, ultimately preparing us for the 'historic decision' to pursue complete liberation. The teachings are presented with warmth and accessibility, making ancient wisdom relevant for contemporary practitioners.*

The Buddha taught that morality was the basis of spiritual attainment. By morality, he didn't mean a set of commandments imposed by a wrathful deity. He meant simply those rules whereby a harmonious society would be established and a peaceful and loving mind could be developed. Since all human beings are interdependent, an individual's progress through life is greatly affected by those around and about. Buddhism often talks about the *kalyanamita*, the good friend, and the Buddha himself is often seen as such – a friend, a companion, a true guide who has our best interests at heart.

The primary precepts are the basic guidelines. They begin with a negative morality, to cease from harm, then comes to do good, a positive morality, the development of virtue. This was codified in the Theravada tradition as the ten perfections. Actually, the translation gives the wrong idea as to their aim. The word for them in Pali is *parami*, which means the other shore, an image often used for Nibbāna. So really, these ten virtues, when practiced, help us to find our way to liberation. There's no idea of perfection in terms of coming to some sort of end in their development. They can be practiced and developed as long as we are alive, to any degree.

The ten perfections are generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, effort, patience, truthfulness, resolution, unconditioned love, and equanimity. Here we can only give pointers, and I'm sure none of the virtues comes to you as any surprise.

First, then, is *dana*, generosity. Dana is a word you will often hear in Buddhist circles. If the lay people offer food to monks and nuns, for instance, it's called dana. Dana means, really, to share one's wealth and one's time with others with no thought of return. Our word donation comes from the same root. This is very important because it teaches us to let go of our attachment to wealth and frees us from thinking that our lives are to be simply lived for our own personal benefit. It stops us becoming greedy and miserly.

Walking around the city centre on a flag day for a charity, do we ignore the change-jangling boxes? Do we instinctively reach into our purse? If we do, and find only a pound coin, do we still put it in? Or do we listen to the barrage of voices in our minds crying, too much, too much? Generosity with time softens our unwillingness to spend time for the benefit of others. Those precious moments of our lives we would normally devote entirely to our own pleasures and interests. How do we feel when children ask for help with homework? Or a parent asks for help? Or a friend makes a social call? Do we say, we're too busy, too tired?

Generosity with our wealth and time helps us to put our life, our life's work, our relationships into a greater perspective. The question arises, why should I give my money to another? Why should I spend any time of my life helping another? It is only in so doing and reaping the benefits that we can discover the answer.

The second is morality, which means to guard against any unskillful actions and to produce eventually a mind free of greed, hatred and delusion. This is one description of a Buddhist saint, the Arahant. Arahant literally means to kill one's enemies. What enemies? The enemies within. Greed, hatred and delusions.

The third is renunciation. Although this can often have a feel of sacrifice about it, that is not the kernel of it. It's being able to give something up once you know it's no good for you. We like to drink, but when we come to know what alcohol does to the body and mind, we may decide to cut back or stop altogether. Either way, renouncing drink means we have to go through the barrier of obsessive desires, the very habits of drinking. Often renunciation comes about because of weariness with some old habit. Perhaps a person stops drinking because she suddenly realizes it's just an empty social habit devoid of any intrinsic meaning. Renunciation includes having the strength of character to give up what is harmful to us.

Wisdom, the fourth perfection, means to undermine our delusions and illusions about ourselves. By the practice of awareness, both in meditation and during our daily lives, we can begin to see ourselves more objectively. As we do this, ignorance about ourselves is dispelled and wisdom, real self-knowledge, grows.

The fifth *parami*, effort, is raising the will to do, to act. It's raising the energy needed to accomplish the task. In the spiritual field, that means the primary precepts. We must make effort to cease from doing harm. We must put forth effort to do good, good for ourselves and others. We have to raise the effort to purify the mind. This constant effort to raise energy undermines our unwholesome tendency towards sleepiness, laziness, not bothering, leaving it to others, apathy. It won't allow boredom and depression to trick us into escape routes and hopelessness.

The sixth, patience, the Buddha said was the highest ascetism. The word *khanti* in Pali is variously translated as patience, forbearance or forgiveness. Our own word patience is interesting also. Its Latin root means suffering. Patience is the willingness to accept suffering. In our meditation, this is a virtue of great importance. When we sit, all our negative states of mind begin to surface, our great angers, grudges, depressions, anxieties, fears, doubts, and so on. All nasty feelings in the body, some very uncomfortable indeed. What is more, the pain of the sitting posture, especially at the knees, can become quite sharp.

Being able to sit still in the midst of this suffering is a prerequisite for insight wisdom. That attitude which says, yes, there's a lot of pain in me, I feel it, but I'm just going to sit here patiently, equanimously, and put all my effort into watching it keenly. This sort of attitude is absolutely paramount to the whole process of mental purification. Up until now, we've run away from pain, from pain to pain, either dousing it out with pills or finding some other way of distracting the mind. Anything but face up to it. But as the Buddha has pointed out so clearly in the First Noble Truth, this is but a foolish escapism. By facing pain and suffering, we lose our fear of it. When we see pain and suffering for what it really is, then we can say we have achieved an important insight into the human state, and it is this understanding that leads us towards our final emancipation from all suffering.

The Jataka tales comprise many volumes. They are stories made up after the death of the Buddha, purportedly telling of his past lives. Before his enlightenment, the Buddha is called the *Bodhisatta*, one who is seeking enlightenment. In this interesting little story, he is said to have been born an ascetic called Kundaka. It shows us how far patience can be taken. It would seem that the king Kalaka had gone with his dancing girls for a lavish picnic in a pleasure grove. He fell asleep and the girls wandered off to de-

light in the grove. They came across the ascetic Kundaka. They fell in conversation with him about the Dharma. When the king woke up and found out what had happened, he was furious with jealousy. But for the intervention of one of his favorite ladies, he would have cut the Bodhisattva down there and then.

Instead, maliciously, he asked the ascetic what he taught. The ascetic answered, "It is to have no anger when another abuses, strikes, or humiliates you." The cruel king Kalaka decided to put him to the test and had his executioner lash him two thousand times. When asked for his response, the ascetic Kundaka, the Bodhisatta, replies, "I teach patience, sire, but you think my patience is only skin deep. It is not. My patience is rooted deeply in my heart." The king then had his hands chopped off, then his feet. Again the ascetic declared, "You think, sire, my patience is in my hands and my feet, but it is deep within my being." Off came his ears and nose, but the ascetic Bodhisattva declared his patience was deep in the heart. Annoyed by his defeat, the king kicks him and departs, only to be swallowed up into the deepest of hells, the Ricci.

That same day, the Bodhisattva also dies, but not without this verse of forgiveness: "The king, who had my hands, feet, ears, and nose cut off, let him live long. Those who are as I am cannot be angry." So you see there's no limit to how much we can develop the perfections.

Truthfulness is the seventh. To strive for that absolute honesty, not only with others, but with ourselves too. It may take courage sometimes to face others and ourselves, but truthfulness means the inability to deceive. It means to search for the authentic, to do what is right and proper in our relationships, in our society and towards ourselves. It asks us to see things as they really are, warts and all. In its perfection, it's to seek the ultimate truth, Nibbāna.

The eighth is resolution. The path to hell is paved with good intentions. How true. If only we'd done this, done that, we'd be so happy now. Resolution is stickability – the stamina to keep going, going on regardless how hard it is, regardless of the temptations to leave off. It's to go on going on. The Buddha himself exercised this perfection when he made his historic decision not to rise from the sitting posture until he had attained enlightenment. What a resolution! It took six hours before his breakthrough came.

We can do it. We can take up the posture and refuse with all our will to rise not until we're enlightened. It would be a real test of our resolution, wouldn't it? This is one of the reasons it's so difficult to become enlightened. Our perfection of resolution is not developed enough.

Perhaps a little more realistically, it means to see our decisions through. If I decide to do something, I should do it. I should complete the task and complete it to the best of my ability. If I say I'll help someone with their garden, I should do it, and I should get there early, even if everything in me wants to go shopping instead. If I say I'm going to sit for half an hour, I should do so to the last minute and add a couple for good measure. This sort of self-training helps to develop a strong, unwavering mind.

This is not to be confused with a headstrong will-do-or-die business. It's a matter of honouring our commitments to others and to ourselves. It leads to self-reliance and to the trust of others. People know you do as you say, and you know you can do as you say you will do. Ultimately, it's all training us for that time when we will make our own personal historic decision not to rise, not to be dissuaded from the path, until our total liberation is won.

The ninth is *metta*. A difficult word this to translate. Loving-kindness is the usual, but some say it's too sloppy. It's an open-heartedness, friendliness. It's a universal, unprejudiced, unbiased, impartial love. Love as care, benevolence, empathy. There are no favourites. Even if someone dislikes us, we still develop this attitude towards them. If I dislike someone, and I want to practice metta, I first of all don't indulge that dislike. I develop first an attitude of no harm, and as the nasty feelings pass, I can begin to develop more kindly attitudes, looking at that person's better side.

Of course, this is all very difficult. We are bound to have a greater affinity, greater feelings for those who are close to us, those whom we meet every day rather than people we hardly know, let alone those we never see. But it's an ideal we aim to move towards, an unbounded love where all beings are seen through the eye of love and compassion. It's a generalized attitude, a disposition of care and well-wishing.

Someone I know held a correspondence with a prisoner, who later in a letter confided he had committed rape. My friend was filled with anger and disgust. In a letter later, the prisoner explained how through this terrible mistake he had lost all his family, no one wanted to know him, how he had lost his career, and all that on top of being locked away in prison. When my friend now saw it from the prisoner's angle, he was able to re-establish a sense of sympathy for the man. This is metta.

There is another side of metta which people find difficult to accept. And this is to realize that we cannot achieve the goal of universal love if we can't also include ourselves in there. That is why when we practice Metta Bhavana, loving-kindness meditation, we develop these attitudes towards ourselves. May I be free of suffering. May I

be peaceful. May I be liberated. Some think this is selfishness, but there's a vast difference between eating to live and living to eat. The one is caring for oneself, looking after oneself. The other is self-indulgence.

We tend to have a lot of dislike for ourselves. We are often full of self-recrimination, self-accusations, all those little voices: I'm no good, I'm useless, I'm ugly, I'm disgusting, I don't know how anybody could possibly like me. I'm not good enough, no one loves me. And so on. We need to undermine these negative feelings towards ourselves by, first of all, not indulging them. Just listen to them and smile. No one's perfect. Then we should develop self-acceptance, self-care.

What would you think of someone who never washed their own clothes and went around like a ragamuffin? We'd say, that woman doesn't care for herself. That man has no self-respect. What would you think of someone who never washed their own clothes, went around like a ragamuffin, but wanted to wash everybody else's clothes? That's what we're like, isn't it? We like to take care of everyone else's problems while we haven't a clue what to do with our own. Sometimes we're so self-deluded we don't think we have any problems. Being able to take care of ourselves is a qualification for being able to take care of others.

Finally, equanimity, the tenth perfection. Equanimity is considered to be the highest state of mind in Buddhism. It is not to be confused with cold detachment or intellectual indifference. It is a mental state undisturbed by any negative emotions or feelings. There is no sentimentality here. It is a state of mind, clear, calm and cool like a still pool in which all the sky is clearly mirrored. It is within this equanimous mind that the intuition, the faculty of insight, can exercise its power to see, to understand and eventually to liberate the mind of all its illusions and delusions. It is when our hearts are calm and peaceful that wisdom shines.

The practice of meditation is especially important in developing this sort of mind. No matter what comes into our attention, we constantly take the position of the objective observer, just watching, just noting what is arising and passing away. Eventually all this commotion in the mind begins to die down. You can sometimes feel this relaxation, even after a few minutes sitting. As the mind's agitation calms, you may experience little gaps of empty mind, where there seems to be no emotion or mood or thought or image, just pure awareness, being aware of this stillness, this silence.

This is the mind as a calm pool, and awareness is the sky. When sensations, feelings or mental states arise out of the depth of this pool, the awareness can perceive quite clearly the arising and passing away of all this mental phenomena. It is with this sort of concentration that there is a possibility of glimpsing what is beyond this phenomena, the nirvanic peace beyond.

Now, in daily life, it's not necessary for us to get all neurotic and keep a tally on what perfection we're practicing and how well we're doing. The easiest and simplest approach to the development of virtue is to take one of the list which we feel we would like most to develop. We will find that in its practice all the others are included.

If I decide to practice dana generosity, for instance, well, of course, that means I'm undermining greed, and I shall hardly be developing the habit of taking what is not freely given to me. That's morality. As soon as I give, I also have to renounce a little of my wealth and time. Renunciation. As I practice generosity, I come to know its importance. I come to see how interdependent people are. Such insights are all developing my wisdom. To practice any virtue takes effort. And I need to suffer willingly my discomfort at the loss of wealth and time. That's patience. I've learnt how to give gladly.

In all this, I need to be honest with myself. I must be aware of my reasons, both overt and covert. Sometimes I think I'm giving with a pure heart, but in fact I'm very upset if the person doesn't thank me. Honesty might mean becoming aware of our impure motives. I develop resolution too, in that I carry out my decisions. In giving, my heart is opened. I'm giving because I see the other needs my assistance. I'm giving because I see no reason why I should have more than the other. This is metta, loving kindness.

All this naturally leads to undermining the negative attitudes I have in my mind, the negative feelings I have in my heart, especially if I give to someone I dislike. The clearer the heart and mind is of negativity, the greater is the equanimity. Through the practice of *dāna*, generosity, I am developing all the perfections.

It's important not to make heavy weather of all this, but rather to see it in the light of experimentation. When I decided to become a monk, I decided to give a ring away. It was a silver ring with a Buddhist design on it. I liked it very much. This was going to be a great act of renunciation. I decided I would give it away to the first person who showed any interest in it. As it happened, a young woman expressed a liking for it not a few days after my momentous decision, but I didn't think her worthy of it. Eventually, I did give it away, under those conditions, after a little self-examination and re-decision. I think my self-knowledge and wisdom grew a little there.

Our growth towards the light, away from the darkness, should be a joyful exploit. Our targets should be manageable. We should not make mission impossibles. If we aim too high and fail, it will only disappoint us. Growth in mental development needs to be slow and sure. We need to build up our perfections in depth. And that takes time. We need to revolutionize our thinking, but without violence. That revolution is the movement from doing harm to doing good.

We have to sit down every day and really examine our behaviour. We have to begin to do what's right. It's a bit like learning how to play a guitar. You struggle so long to twist your fingers round and get that chord. Then one day, there it is, a tune played with ease and delight. We need to see our bodies and minds as instruments we are trying to master through experimentation and practice. We need to develop into highly tuned, harmonious human instruments. This is our task, the purification and the development of mind. We can do it.

Well, I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

CHAPTER 9

The Fourth Noble Truth — Right Understanding

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 20 min

> *In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the Fourth Noble Truth — the Noble Eightfold Path — with particular focus on Right Understanding (sammā diṭṭhi) as the essential first step toward Awakening. Drawing from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) and the Buddha's second discourse on the characteristics of existence, he explores how wisdom develops through three stages: received knowledge, personal reflection, and direct experiential realization.*
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> *The talk illuminates the middle path between sensual indulgence and self-mortification, showing how Right Understanding naturally leads to Right Intention. Bhante explains the analytical knowledge of causation (paṭicca samuppāda), addressing common misconceptions about karma and emphasizing our capacity to influence our present and future through wholesome action. He outlines the four noble persons (sotāpanna, sakadāgāmī, anāgāmī, arahant) and discusses how understanding impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self leads to liberation.*
>
> *Practical examples, from DIY furniture assembly to dealing with grief, illustrate how Right Understanding transforms our relationship with life's inevitable changes. This accessible yet profound exploration provides essential groundwork for anyone beginning or deepening their Buddhist practice, emphasizing that true wisdom comes only through direct meditation experience.*

Foundation Course 1, Talk 9, The Fourth Noble Truth, Right Understanding

So we come full circle, back to the problem of wisdom, which in Buddhist terms means the solution to the problem of suffering. If the Buddha had left just a philosophy or psychology, he would no doubt be considered these days to be one of the greatest thinkers of mankind. But what sets the Buddha apart from philosophers was that he also left a methodology, a systematic practice whereby each and every individual could make their own discovery of what he himself had discovered.

The fourth noble truth is the Noble Eightfold Path. It is divided into three sections: morality, mental development and wisdom, and it contains this practice, this methodology. Wisdom is what is gained in terms of our personal experience. These guidelines, called by the Buddha from his own experiential wisdom, act as guidelines directing the whole process of self-enlightenment.

There is the wisdom we gain through insight and the wisdom we gain through compassionate action or ordinary daily experience. Both of these are supported by what we learn from other sources, such as books, magazines, TV, and of course people, and by how we ourselves think.

I'm sure everyone has had the experience of buying a do-it-yourself furniture kit, an adult Lego. If you're like me, you take everything out, quickly work out in your head how it's supposed to go together and start fixing it up, only to come to the end of the labour to find one metal bracket or something left over. Because of this missing piece, the whole construction keeps falling over. So it all has to be dismantled and started again, only this time with a humbling and grudging read of the instructions. Others who do not suffer from such overweening self-confidence will carefully read the instructions or get a friend to instruct. Some, of course, will get a friend to do it, so that although they say they know how to do it, they haven't actually done it themselves.

In all these cases, one or more of the above types of understanding has been employed. But the Buddha would have us tackle even such mundane things as building a DIY stool by first of all reading the instructions, then thinking about it, so we've actually understood it for ourselves, and then construct it. In this way, we can say we truly know what it means to construct a DIY stool. Now we're in a position to help others. I'm sure everyone has a friend who can fix things, and it ends up costing twice the professional fees.

We can say that knowledge and wisdom is the more profound and authentic to the individual, the more it is discovered and experienced by that individual. So it's the same attitude the Buddha wants us to apply to his teaching. When he explains to me that there is no lasting entity or soul to be found in the body and mind, I understand it, but I'm not convinced. Then I go away and ponder over it and check it out with my own logic, arguing with other beliefs I have within myself. If after all my thinking I understand it to be right, then it becomes almost my own argument, as it were. But as yet, it's all head stuff. I have not actually experienced the insubstantiality of my body and mind.

Scientists, for instance, tell us there is no difference between my body and the plaster on the walls in terms of subatomic particles. But I don't experience myself as subatomic activity. Through the meditation practice, I can experience the teaching of insubstantiality. I do begin to experience for myself the insubstantial nature of my body and mind. And when this happens, my knowledge is the wisdom of seeing things as they really are. Experiential knowledge. This is realisation, to realise the truth. According to the Buddha, this is the only true wisdom.

Herein lies the importance of different types of wisdom in Buddhist practice. The progression from received knowledge to one's own personal conclusions to realisation through actual experience is expressed by the Buddha like this: There are two conditions to the arising of right understanding, namely instruction by another and one's own wise consideration.

The importance of right understanding is that it is the first step. If our first step is wrong, we may very well get lost. The Buddha says it in a more poetic way: Just as the red morning sky is the forerunner and first indication of the rising of the sun, just so is right understanding the forerunner and first indication of karmically wholesome things.

So here expressed very clearly is the link between right understanding, *kamma*, and our destiny. Before we make any decision, we do it by way of understanding. If I'm going to buy one of these DIY kits, I'd be very foolish if I didn't understand what it entails. Once I understand, my decisions put ideas into force, into action.

Right intention, the second part of the wisdom division of this Noble Eightfold Path, is just that. It is the will putting force into ideas, plans, projects, which run along the lines laid down by right understanding. Having understood the meditation, what the actual practice and theory is, I then decide to sit. This decision is right intention.

Right understanding undercuts delusion, whereas right intention undercuts greed and hatred. In this way, right understanding and right intention destroy the roots of all unwholesome *kamma*, of all suffering. We will never intend to keep the three primary precepts or the five training rules. We will never intend to practice the perfections. We will never intend to meditate if we have no knowledge or understanding of them. Right understanding is the foundation of the middle path, the path of purification.

So what is right understanding? It is of course enshrined in the Four Noble Truths which were succinctly expressed in the Buddha's first talk, the Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of the Law. Here the first distinction that he made is what should be avoided by one who has gone forth from the worldly life. This doesn't just refer to monks and nuns, but to anyone who is turning towards a spiritual dimension.

There are three paths: the path of sensual pleasure, the path of self-mortification, and the middle path. The whole of the Buddha's teachings can be seen as a destruction of sensual desire. Remember, this doesn't mean there's no tastiness to our food anymore. It means the end of greed. To end greed, we also need to end its twin, hatred.

Self-mortification, thinking that the body and mind are bad and evil and must somehow be destroyed, is wrong understanding. There is nothing evil in nature. Nature is perfect just as it is. It is our view of things that causes suffering, and there is no escape in self-hatred or repression or by means of self-mortification, such as long fasts and so on. The middle path is simply to understand the crucial point that our greed and hatred are the roots of our misery. Once we've understood that, we have gone a long way to destroying our delusions. Our wisdom is growing.

Over Christmas and New Year, for instance, everyone drinks and eats so much, we get fat. That's the path of sensual pleasure. Afterwards, we worry about cholesterol and heart attacks. We starve ourselves to eat less and cut out what we like. That's the path of mortification. The middle path is to eat when we are hungry and until the body has had enough.

The middle path is hedged, both by the thorny bush of moral laws which safeguard us from doing anything unwholesome, unskillful or harmful, and the flowering bushes of the perfections that perfume and beautify our journey. The path itself is our steps, our actions, what we do and how we do. It is the meditative life in which sitting meditation trains us to live in action in a mindful and careful way.

In the second of the Buddha's talks, given to the same five monks, he is concerned to extend their understanding of the underlying characteristics of human nature. Delusion causes us to identify with our pleasures. We think that's what we are. We think that's what life is about. This delusion is the theory upon which our greeds and hatreds are founded. To understand the nature of our delusion is paramount if we are going to achieve the right understanding without which all our intentions and all our actions will be leading us towards suffering, not away from it.

The Buddha converses with his disciples. What do you think? Is the body permanent or impermanent? Impermanent, Lord. And is this impermanence something that brings happiness or unhappiness? Unhappiness, Lord. And is it right to understand what is impermanent and what destroys happiness as mine, me or myself? No, Lord.

So he questions them concerning the whole mind, its feelings, thoughts, emotions and even consciousness. All are not permanent. Do not bring happiness and do not constitute a me or soul or a self. If we really understand this, that there is nothing in our body and minds that we can hold on to, since it is all arising and passing away, if we really understand that we can't call any of it a permanent me or ego or soul or self, then, says the Buddha, understanding this, a wise noble disciple loses his passion for things of the body, his passion for feelings, for thoughts, for emotions, for consciousness. When he loses the passion for these things, his greeds and obsessions fade away.

When greeds and obsessions fade away, the heart is liberated. When the heart is liberated, then he comes to know this is liberation. He understands this is the end of birth. The holy life has been completed. What needed to be done has been done. There is no more rebirth for me.

Please notice, the heart is not lost with the destruction of desire. It is liberated. This talk was so clear to the five disciples that they were all totally liberated as their new understanding coupled with their meditation practice came to fruition. There and then they were released from their delusions.

Becoming more and more aware of the changing nature of our lives will always undermine our attachment to it. When someone dear to us dies, it is extremely painful. Yet if the mourning process is successful, most of our sorrow will have passed within a year. Within five or ten years, there may not even be a sad memory. Instead, we will remember the person with warmth, joy and gratitude. Virtually all suffering caused by that separation will disappear.

This is what the Buddha taught. If we can accept that life is impermanent and uncertain, our attachment to it will be questioned. As we come to see that life is forever on the move, we won't hold on to anything. We expect things to change, be it for the better or the worse. It doesn't matter anymore. What matters is how we react to it, how we are affected by it. It is of no use to our dead loved ones if we spend the rest of our lives in misery at their passing away. It's hardly what they'd want. They'd want us to get on with living. That's what the Buddha taught. Don't hold on to life. Just get on with living here and now. But with right understanding and right intention, of course.

The path that Buddhists follow, the middle path, also contains different levels of commitment and insight. A person who experiences *Nibbāna* is known as a *sotāpanna* or stream entrant. It is said of a *sotāpanna* that her or his faith in the Buddha *Dhamma Saṅgha* is unshakeable. For now they know by their own experience the third noble truth, the end of suffering.

Unfortunately, however, this is not the end of training. Even though total liberation to such a person is assured, there are three further noble paths to be obtained. The second is called *sakadāgāmi*, and at this stage the bonds of attachment and hatred are only loosened. It is only on achieving the third path, *anāgāmi*, that these bonds that tie us to sensual pleasures are finally cut. Even so, the training must still go on. Final liberation is achieved when the attainment of the *arahat*, which literally means to have killed all enemies. The enemies, of course, are greed, hatred and delusion.

These four types of persons are known as the noble community, *Ariya Saṅgha*. They are the Buddhist saints. When a Buddhist bows three times towards a shrine, he's taking refuge in the Buddha, the historical personage, and the enlightenment, the *Dhamma*, the doctrine, and the *Saṅgha*, this community of saints. Taking refuge means to put one's trust in the triple gem, or the three jewels, as they are often called. This act of refuge, plus the taking of the five training rules, is how a person becomes a Buddhist. But the formula is repeated by devout Buddhists every day, and it is common to make a special effort every quarter moon, approximately once a week. These four days, per lunar month, are known as *uposatha* days. Lay people often go to the monastery on these days to meditate, or just to spend a quiet, reflective day within monastic grounds.

For those who have not attained one of the paths, there is an understanding that if certain teachings are truly understood, development towards the first *ariya* path, *sotāpanna*, the stream entrant to intuit *Nibbāna*, is assured. That teaching is called the light of the analytical knowledge of causation.

There are three types of wrong understanding concerning the law of causation, the law of cause and effect, the law of *kamma*. The first is to say that existence, life, what we do, what happens to us, arises without a cause. Right understanding states that everything happens because of something else. Everything is caused. Everything is the effect of a cause.

The second is to say that existence, life, what we do, what happens to us, arises spontaneously or because of some deity. This is also wrong understanding. Every birth and action is conditioned by past actions.

Thirdly, to say that only past actions condition the present and future is not right understanding either. To believe this would be to believe in predestination, in sealed fate. In reality, the present moment and the future are also affected by our present decisions now. If this were not possible, we would not be able to affect any change within ourselves. We would simply be doomed by fate. It is knowing that we can take certain control, especially of our decision-making, that makes the whole process of purification and eventual liberation possible.

In other words, to have truly understood the law of *kamma* is to have the light which will lead meditators out of the dark. The Buddha talked of four kinds of persons: those going from dark to dark, from light to dark, the unfortunates, and those going from dark to light, and from light to light, the fortunates. Understanding that we can be in control of this process through our will means we have the ability to start moving in the right way.

Understanding that unwholesome thoughts, words and actions produce the same, and that wholesome thoughts, words and actions produce the same, means we can now see the light. At least, at this level, we're beginning to see the connection between what we think, say and do, and what happens to us. Even if the outer consequences of our actions are not immediately obvious, by our meditative practice we come to know their immediate effect on the mind and heart. If I'm angry with someone, maybe he'll try and get his own back. Of that I'm not sure. I don't know what the outer effect will be. But when I meditate and see how this anger affects me and myself, then at least I'm aware of its negative and unhealthy effects on me. I notice the effects are quite the opposite if I'm kind and gentle and helpful. Slowly, this analytical knowledge of causation begins to be our guiding light.

Then we can say such a person is a *chūla sotāpanna*, a lesser stream entrant. We can be sure that such a person will try to develop the perfections and practice meditation. The later commentaries on the scriptures assure us that such a person will not end up in situations where his training will not be able to continue. In other words, his mentality and actions will lead to situations conducive to training.

To guide such a person, the Buddha clearly laid out the Noble Eightfold Path. By following this, especially the *sīla* – right action, right speech and right livelihood – the fourth type of wisdom arises, wisdom in action, compassion. For this is also the aim of any meditation, to help other fellow beings towards the enlightenment. This doesn't mean to preach Buddhism, it means to help others in whatever capacity a person feels able. To guide a child in moral understanding, to feed a sick person and comfort them with encouraging words, to listen to the problems of some friend or colleague, to give to good causes. Whatever is compassionate is to practice the perfections.

It's a two-way stream. Learning to be patient with the angry child is to learn to be patient with our own internal worrying childish thoughts. Learning how to care for and comfort ourselves is to learn how to care for and comfort others. So this is it.

This is all the Buddha would have us do: to study ourselves, our lives, to make the connections, to decide to follow what is wise, to cease from harm, to do good, to purify the mind. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas.

Like most things, easy to say, hard to do. But it's worth the effort, for the fruits of our labour are sweet. The middle path really does bring peace, joy, love and harmony, and in the end, liberation—an end to all suffering.

When the Buddha was asked, "What is the taste of the Dharma?" he said, "The taste of the Dharma was freedom."

Well, I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

CHAPTER 10

The Fourth Noble Truth - Mental Development - Samādhi

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 20 min

> *In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the Mental Development (samādhi) division of the Noble Eightfold Path, comprising Right Effort, Right Concentration, and Right Awareness. He provides detailed guidance on establishing proper meditation posture and using the breath as an object of concentration to develop mental stillness and alertness.*
>
> *The talk explores how vipassanā meditation differs from conventional thinking, requiring us to become objective observers of our own minds without interference. Bhante explains how repressed negative emotions naturally surface during meditation and, through mindful observation rather than suppression or indulgence, gradually lose their power and fade away.*
>
> *A key focus is on developing insight into the three characteristics of existence: impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and not-self (anattā). Through sustained attention to the arising and passing away of mental and physical phenomena, practitioners can experience the separation between consciousness and its objects, leading toward the ultimate realization of nibbāna. The talk emphasizes that this process requires faith (saddhā) - not blind belief, but trust in the Buddha's guidance - along with the cultivation of the spiritual faculties that make insight knowledge possible.*

The Fourth Noble Truth, which is the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the liberation from all suffering, is divided into Morality, Mental Development and Wisdom. However, this isn't meant to be a progressive list, but a threefold development. So while we are protecting ourselves from doing harm and keeping as best we can the moral precepts as codified in the five training rules, and while we are also developing the perfections, we need to develop our mental faculties and wisdom. And the one powerful practice to achieve this is the practice of meditation.

Meditation in the Buddha's practice holds the central place of the middle way. Its importance lies in two fields. The first is the purification of the mind, the last of the three primary precepts, the first two, to cease from harm and to do good, being covered by the morality division. The second is the realisation of the supramundane truth,

Nibbāna. Both of purification of the mind and the enlightenment also include the third division of the Eightfold Path, Wisdom. But here we are concerned with how to develop the mind so that it can make the necessary insight into itself and into Nirvana.

There are three factors of the Noble Eightfold Path that go to make up this division: Right effort, right concentration and right awareness. And there are two areas of life where they are applicable, in meditation practice and in daily life. The practice and art of meditation in daily life is dealt with elsewhere. Here we shall investigate the meditative process to see how and why it works.

The first thing we do when we begin to meditate is to take up a sitting posture and sit still. For most of us this will be the first time we ever sat still in one position without moving for any length of time. Even when we are engrossed in a film or a TV program, quite unconsciously we are moving and shifting about all the time. In the practice of meditation all that has to stop and we have to make a resolution not to move for a given period of time. We start with twenty minutes but we ought to build up to close on an hour as possible.

The actual posture itself is not all that important. You can meditate sitting on a chair, but the cross-leg posture is worth developing for its future benefit. Believe it or not, when the legs have settled on the floor, it is a most comfortable position, and more important, gives us a sense of balance, steadiness and groundedness. It's always a bit of a shock if you've fallen asleep for a moment while sitting on a chair, to suddenly find yourself sprawled on the floor.

However, although comfort and good posture are important, it is the state of mind that carries more weight. The mind must be alert and this is expressed in the body through the spine. If the spine is not held with energy, the body sags and pain can result in the back. If there's too much energy, pain also arises, usually in the neck. The spine must be held erect and alert with the head balanced gently on the top. Finally the hands are placed on the lap, one on the other or apart, it doesn't matter. This is right effort then when it comes to the sitting posture: comfortable, still and energised.

The second thing we notice when we first meditate is the silence we sit in. Some experience it as peace. All interpersonal interaction is stopped. We don't communicate with anyone. No one tries to communicate with us. The outer person, the one whom everyone knows, is shut down. This allows us to build up the concentration and sets up the conditions whereby we can observe and get to know the inner person.

In order to build up the concentration we use an object which is obvious to us and so can draw the attention. Most people find it's not all that difficult to keep the body still for some time but when it comes to the mind it's a very different kettle of fish. In fact, most meditators comment on how surprised they are to find that the mind is so unruly. The Buddha described it like a monkey jumping from branch to branch.

Now the object we choose is the breath, just that simple action of breathing in and breathing out. We don't interfere with it, we just allow the body to breathe. Some watch the breath coming in and out of the nostrils, others the rising and falling of the stomach. We should choose the one that seems most obvious to us and stick to it. There's no special merit attached to either, for the purpose of watching the process of breath is to train the mind to be still, concentrated and alert. So now we have right effort and right concentration.

Right effort here is to put in the energy needed to keep the mind steady on the breath. If this energy is used for any other purpose then it will begin to undermine the third factor, right awareness. If we concentrate on the breath to achieve something or to discover something then we are beginning to direct the mind, putting ideas and concepts in the way of pure awareness.

We need to develop a very different mind to the one our education system tries to develop. If we consider our educational system for a moment, we see it is firstly about the mind storing information and learning skills. Secondly, when once this has been achieved, it is about teaching that trained mind to express ideas and feelings through writing, art, music, science and so on. But the meditation the Buddha would have us practice is about training the mind to observe itself, to see itself as it really is. That's what we mean by the word *vipassanā*. It means literally really or truly seeing. We become the objective observer of our own minds.

To achieve this we need to consider how a scientist comes to know the world in an objective way. Suppose she's an ornithologist studying the habits of the common dreadful warbler. Does she ride on the back of the warbler? Of course not. Does she in any way interfere with the warbler? No. To do so would be to distort the behaviour of the bird, interfere with its natural habits. To do so would not be to observe the dreadful warbler as it really is, but as it is interfered with.

If we want to observe the mind as it really is, we must take up a position within ourselves that won't interfere with the workings of the mind. The mind will offer us no end of entertainment. It is full of imaginative plots, daydreams, dialogues and emotions. Before we meditated, we used to indulge in such things. We'd sit on the bus or

drive the car and allow the mind to wander off to sunny beaches. We'd lie in bed and conjure up plans on how to get more money or win promotion. We wouldn't be able to sleep for the agitation in the mind, chewing over the day's traumas and tribulations.

But since we've begun meditating, we've pulled away from these habits because we've discovered them to be unwholesome and actually harmful. This is not to say that there's not a place for constructive fantasy and directed thinking. What is unwholesome is when our minds indulge in escapist fantasy and thought that develop unskillful negative states of mind such as lust and grudge.

There's a world of difference between using our imagination to think about how we will gather the money together and organise our trip to the Costa del Sol, and fantasising for three or four hours, wandering up and down beaches, attracting the opposite sex. Allowing the depressed mind to construct a fantasy-fabricated world as a totally depressing and despairing place is a very different thing from trying to solve real problems in our relationships and at work which may be depressing us.

But in meditation practice we do not indulge in either, neither the constructive skillful use of the mind nor the destructive unskillful use of the mind. In meditation we are trying to observe the mind as it is. When we are indulging in any fantasy or thinking we are riding on the back of the common dreadful warbler. If we keep doing this, we'll never come to know what the mind really is.

There are many things in our minds that cause us suffering. Old memories, present problems, negative emotions and moods that we prefer not to look at, not to acknowledge. Usually, when something negative comes up, we tend to want to escape. If we feel bored, for instance, we'll turn the TV on. If we feel lonely, we'll call a friend or get drunk. If we get angry with someone we're not supposed to, we'll swallow it, anything but to feel the painful states of mind in us.

All these strategies and tactics we employ to escape this suffering in the mind are all repressive measures. They work in a very subtle way. They push these unwanted feelings and thoughts back into the subconscious. This is like putting the rare dreadful warbler into a cage. We might like to see it there, it's pretty, but it's not natural. It's not how the warbler really is. Its natural habits are not allowed free expression. It will find other ways of behaving which are unnatural to it.

In time, the warbler may sicken and die, so unused is it to confinement, or its behaviour will become strange for its species, neurotic. Just as our ornithologist will get a distorted view of the bird by studying it in a false situation, so we will get a very distorted view of ourselves if a great part of us is unseen, unknown, buried deep in the subconscious.

Right awareness is to be able to see the mind as it really is, as it displays itself to us. When meditators first practice Vipassanā meditation, they're often surprised to find how much suffering there is in the mind. "I knew I had anger in me, but this anger that's coming up is frightening. I knew I was depressed, but I didn't think I was this depressed. I know I'm an anxious type, but this is terrifying."

Sometimes it unfortunately happens that the meditator blames the meditation, but in reality all that's happening is that the lid is being taken off the dustbin. All our lives we've trained ourselves to bottle up, to can our feelings. As soon as we meditate, all the repressive ploys and tricks are suddenly taken away and out of the subconscious there arises a welter of unresolved guilts, angers, frustrations, sorrows, depressions, anxieties, fears, you name it, you'll find it.

A great deal of our meditation practice is to allow these painful feelings to surface into awareness and to observe them, to feel them, to really feel them as they really are. Now we can see why we must sit still. When these feelings, emotions, moods come up, our reactions have always been to escape, to run away. But now our bodies are still, there's nowhere to go. There is no way in which these negative states can now be avoided. Indeed, as meditators we don't want to avoid them anymore. We've come to a point in our lives when we've decided to sort things out, to get the mind straight, to purify the mind.

In order to realise how it works, we need to remind ourselves how these mental states were created in the first place. The Buddha taught, it is our desire and our will that play a crucial role. Desire, with its corollary, aversion, creates the motivation. The will activates it, orders the mind to develop it, and hence a state of mind is produced. All our lives we've indulged our likes and dislikes and felt frustrated or depressed when we've not got what we wanted. When we have what we want, we're afraid to lose it. It's not so bad if it's a watch or a book, but if it's my job or a relationship, my moods, emotions, states of mind can be very painful indeed.

When we meditate, in the light of awareness, all these negative states arise, but we don't indulge them and we don't push them away. So what happens to these mental states? They die away, they lose energy, they fade out. The Buddha's description of the process was of a fire. Throwing logs on a fire will not put it out. They create a bonfire.

This is repression. We can't draw the energy out of the fire by throwing sawdust on it. This only makes the fire flare up. If we want the fire to die out, we simply leave it alone and let it burn itself out.

It's the same with our negativities. Just watching, just observing everything that comes into the mind, allows it to spend its energy and exhaust itself. It simply fades out, dies away. But more, this watching is not just a passive activity, allowing this to burn out before our very eyes, as it were. It is also active in that the attention is directed to a particular quality of all that arises into the awareness. That quality is the characteristic of transiency, of change.

It is at this point that Vipassanā meditation moves from being a psychotherapy, a way of healing and purifying the mind and heart, to a spiritual practice. Hereby spiritual practice is meant the discovery of what lies beyond this apparent realism of our body and mind. For as we observe the arising and passing nature of our breath, our thoughts, our emotions and our sensations, we slowly begin to experience ourselves more and more the objective observer.

A distance is created between the objects of our awareness and the awareness itself, which grows wider and wider and more and more distinct in its separateness. As this distance grows, so does our identity, our self-definition, our egos grow dimmer and dimmer. For we realise that everything we are experiencing, which we once took to be some permanent and substantial personality, is but a mass of passing phenomena. There comes a time when even the observer vanishes.

For instance, pain might arise in the knees. In fact, it will. We put all our effort into keeping the attention centered on the sensations, so that our concentration grows narrower and narrower, until we are aware of only a very small area. There comes a time when we are aware of just sensations arising and passing away at very fast speeds, and although we once perceived them as unpleasant, we do not do so now. We experience them as just pure sensation, just arising and passing away.

After such an experience we might also reflect, we might also realise by our own personal experience, that the consciousness of these sensations was separate from the actual sensations themselves. In fact, the consciousness was not the sensations. Consciousness is one thing, sensations another. The human mind, just like the human body, is made up of parts. This is beginning to experience what is known in Buddhism as *anattā*, that teaching particular to the Buddha that no permanent soul or self or substantial entity is to be found in the body and mind.

This insubstantiality is another of the basic characteristics of our existence. And because everything is transient and insubstantial, no everlasting happiness can be found there either. In this way, we come to realise for ourselves the essential unsatisfactoriness of the human condition, the third characteristic, *dukkha*.

So it is that by observing the phenomena of the mind from the point of view of the characteristic of transiency of change that the nirvanic experience can be had. For upon the observation of this characteristic of transiency, the other two characteristics become more obvious, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality. As these characteristics become more and more obvious, and as the concentration and awareness become more and more fine, more penetrating, the intuitive faculty that realises all these things intuits *Nibbāna*, that which is beyond all these changing, unsatisfactory and insubstantial phenomena.

This the Buddha put clearly in three famous verses. "All that is conditioned is transient. When one sees this with wisdom, one tires of suffering. This is the path of purification. All that is conditioned is unsatisfying. When one sees this with wisdom, then one tires of suffering. This is the path of purification. Everything is insubstantial. When one sees this with wisdom, then one tires of suffering. This is the path of purification."

Now the whole of this meditation process rests upon faith. Faith here does not mean belief. The Buddha was quite clear in all his teachings that he didn't want blind belief. Belief can be understood here as uncritically accepting statements about something that have not or cannot be proven. The Buddha states there is *Nibbāna*, an end to suffering, which is not annihilation, that transcends the experience of body and mind. But he never describes it, save in the negative. It is the unborn, the unbecoming, the uncreated, and the uncompounded.

He doesn't ask us to believe this, but he does ask us to put trust, to have faith in him, to give him the benefit of the doubt. Unless we can do this, all our efforts at concentration will be undermined. All the time we'll be wondering and questioning and doubting, all precious energy wasted, unreclaimable, lost forever. And what's the point?

The Buddha is only asking us to try and see if it works for us, just as a doctor offers us medicine on the understanding we trust the medication. So with trust, effort and interest are aroused. With these, our concentration is that much easier to achieve, and with it, awareness comes easily. Within this watchful and alert awareness, the faculty of intuition, that which makes insight, lies potential. When these spiritual faculties are balanced and highly enough developed, *vipassanā* insight actualizes.

Whenever we sit in this way, we can presume that two things are happening. Firstly, that there is a healing process of the mind and heart, allowing all the negativities to arise and pass away. This fulfills the third primary precept to purify the mind. And secondly, that the spiritual faculties of faith, effort, concentration, awareness and intuitive wisdom are being developed.

Given constant practice, the meditator is bound to succeed in achieving a happier and more peaceful life, and is all the time laying the foundations for the eventual experience of insight knowledge into the ultimate, that liberation from suffering, *Nibbāna*. There's no doubt about this.

Well, I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

CHAPTER 11

Moods, Emotions and Feelings

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 27 min

In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the intricate relationship between moods, emotions, and bodily feelings, showing how they arise from our fundamental desires and attachments. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) that craving is the root of all suffering, he traces how our pursuit of sensual pleasure creates predictable cycles of desire, satisfaction, boredom, and eventual disgust.

Using the vivid example of a child wanting ice cream, Bhante illustrates how we move through patterns of craving, indulgence, denial, bargaining, anger, and depression - cycles that continue into adulthood with more sophisticated objects of desire. He explains how these states belong to the saṅkhāra khandha (aggregate of volitional formations) and represent karmic results of past actions that must be allowed to burn out rather than suppressed or indulged.

The talk offers practical guidance for meditators on experiencing these mental states through bodily feelings rather than getting caught in reactive thinking. By developing objective awareness of our emotional patterns, we can begin to free ourselves from the obsessive quality of desire that ultimately leads to the fear of death and loss. This liberation, Bhante emphasizes, is not about losing life's richness but discovering authentic experience beyond the distortions of craving.

If there is one thing we are generally aware of, it is our prevailing state of mind. The mood and emotional states with the feelings they cause us to experience in the body. Moods, emotions and feelings tend to dominate our lives and we often gauge our quality of life by how much we are enjoying or not enjoying the way we are living.

If a person has a continual problem with depression, lack of energy, listlessness, life seems useless, pointless, and hard to bear. If a person is fiery, ebullient, energetic, goal-orientated, life is a constant challenge, a fight, and it is somehow worthwhile, even when it's bruising. If a person is well-adjusted, not experiencing deep lows or great highs, problems don't seem to affect their emotional life so much. They can take things in their stride.

We can go on delineating different personality types till the cows come home. It is a good exercise, by the way, to try and see what our own individual make-up is. But here we're interested to see if there's any inner pattern of mental states common to all hu-

mans. Is there a rationality, a viable syndrome of emotions and moods? If there is, perhaps it will be easy for us to see where we are in the scope of things. Perhaps it will make the job of purifying our minds a little easier if we can see our particular behaviour within the whole realm of human emotional experience.

After all, this is the purpose of the middle path. This was the Buddha's avowed aim, to see what suffering is, what the cause, the way out of it, and the final experience of a state beyond suffering. We shall concentrate on a particular area of those moods and emotions and feelings, those that are associated with sensual pleasure and pain.

Before we go on, we need to be clear in our minds what we're talking about. For the sake of clarity, let us call mood generalized states of mind that do not seem to be under our control. I may wake up depressed for no apparent reason, although all the outward signs of life are very comfortable, supportive and happy. A happy family, close relationships, good job and such like. Even so, my general mood is depression. Or it might be irritability. Or again, anxiety. No matter how much we try to calm ourselves, everything makes us feel more depressed, more irritated, more anxious. These moods just hang about sometimes all day, perhaps months.

These are all part of the *saṅkhāra* group, the volitional conditionings that belong to the five skandhas, the aggregates. They are states of mind that are consequences of past actions. They are the karmic results of past behavior. That's why we can't do anything about them. That's why we have to sit patiently in the midst of these conditionings and just allow them to burn out. That's why we must be wary of our reactions to them. Depressed about being angry, angry about being anxious, anxious about being depressed, and so on. These reactions are only fueling the process, either by indulging, entertaining these states, or by repressing them. And of course, it is of little help to take drugs. They just repress those states of mind, though there are times they can be used wisely to take the heat off.

Now, emotions, also belonging to the saṅkhāra khandha, the aggregator of volitional conditionings, I'd like to define as less stable states of mind that surface and disappear fairly quickly. For instance, I might be fearful crossing the road, but the fear disappears once I'm on the other side. Someone may say something that triggers off an angry response, but I can just shrug it off. I put music on that creates an emotional state, but it passes quickly once the music stops. I'd like to include here those emotional responses we have to moods. So emotions may be less stable and we may be able to exercise some control over them.

As for feelings, I'd like to define them as the effects of these moods and emotions on the body. It's the biofeedback. Heavy feelings associated with depression, hot feelings with anger, wobbly weak feelings of fear, tight feelings of anxiety and stress and so on. It's these feelings that drugs change. Drugs are only chemicals affecting the chemical composition of the body. They stop the expression of mental states in the body and so its feedback to the mind. In so doing, they repress it. That's why they don't help cure the state of mind, the actual moods and emotions themselves. But they do help in crises and in psychotic states of mind where they give back sufferers some control over their lives.

For the meditator, these feelings are important, for they are the easiest things to center our attention on. By experiencing our states of mind, moods and emotions at the bodily feeling level, there is no indulgence, no repression going on. We are experiencing these states of mind at their raw issue. We are really experiencing these states of mind as they really are. If moods and emotions begin to affect our thinking, then our thinking becomes an expression of those moods and emotions. Unwittingly, the thinking develops those states of mind. We have to be careful not to let moods swamp our lives. To do that, we have to keep them at arm's length, so to speak. The easiest way to do this is to experience those moods and emotions as they manifest in the body as feelings. Concentrating on the feelings stops the mind thinking. This is what we are trying to do in meditation, in the meditative life, to develop a way of experiencing our moods and emotions in an objective way.

So, if we accept these definitions of moods, emotions, with their attendant feelings for the purpose of this talk, we can now ask, where do these negative states of mind arise from in the first place? In the discourse on the turning of the wheel of the law, the Buddha makes it quite clear that the cause of all suffering is desire. This is the noble truth of the cause of suffering. The craving, which causes rebirth, accompanied by the pleasure of emotions, finds delight in this and that object. Want, desire, craving, obsession, all these attitudes, these internal dispositions, cause us suffering. Here we shall investigate how desire for sensual pleasure causes so many of our different moods and emotional states.

Let's take a simple example. The little girl who wants ice cream. There she is in the front room playing quietly with one of those mind-boggling educational games. Suddenly the strains of the Italian gondolier music shatter the peace. She sits bolt upright. She's caught and snared. Once the vision of the ice cream cornet has arisen in the imagination, little Lily is in a paroxysm of desire. This new pleasure, fuelled by experience of past similar pleasures of choc-ice and lollipops, obsesses her. "I want an ice-cream." It is said with such force that Daddy is shocked and falls over. This "I" wanting the ice-cream is the ice-cream. The child, the "I" and the vision of the ice-cream are all one. The

child at the younger age grasps this fact. "Me ice-cream." In that phrase is the kernel of all our problems. It encapsulates all our wrong identification and our obsession. Our identity. Me. Ice cream.

Let us take this path of indulgence. Daddy knows by past experience it's best to let her have her own way once in a while, or it's misery all morning. He gives in. It's Sunday. He's too tired to fight. Lily's off and back in delight. Desire has arisen with all its attendant emotions of expectation and excitement. With the first lick there comes ecstatic delight, and with the final lick, total satisfaction. That is, until the desire for ice cream arises again. So here we have the first particular little merry-go-round. Desire and surfeit. A rest period, and desire arises again.

If we investigate our lives, we shall see we spend a lot of time on this round. The regular cup of tea, desire and surfeit. The party once every so often. The TV programs, especially the soaps, live off this emotional round. A half hour is quite enough. Can you imagine attending a soap festival, Coronation Street, Dallas, for ten hours a day for seven days?

The second merry-go-round is when one such pleasure begins to predominate. Sharpened by past satisfaction, this desire wants a keener pleasure or boredom will set in. We slowly become slaves to that desire, we become obsessed by it, we demand it. That is what the Buddha meant by attachment. We can actually feel the compulsiveness of craving of this attachment even if we miss a morning cup of tea. But when we look at how people become dedicated to beauty, wealth, fame or power, we can begin to see the whole such desires as craving can have.

The reason is that desire has an inbuilt growth mechanism. Even Lily, the second time round, might want a different ice cream, or a bigger ice cream, and eat too much. We say in our consumerist society that we are spoiled for choice. The fact is, desire demands choice, for once a pleasure is had, its repeat is boring. The cycle, the round of pleasure surfeit, includes boredom, a demand for difference, and a difference that's better and more exciting. This comes home quite starkly when we look at popular films. The horror films of yesterday make us laugh now. Now we want real horror, real terror. But the next generation will be baffled at how such things were ever found to create fear. They'll laugh and demand even greater horror, a terror beyond terror.

This second round can lead to overdosing, to overindulgence, and then to disgust. That one curry dish too many that turns a good meal into vomit. That one glass of whiskey that makes Sunday morning lying a bed of nails. It is interesting to note that in children desires are not so highly developed. They seem to be still in contact with their bod-

ies. They seem to have a built-in body wisdom knowing when to stop. As we grow older we lose this distinction between bodily needs and mental greeds by way of continual overindulgence.

Now this third round of desire to overindulgence, to disgust, is of particular interest in the role it can play in spiritual growth. It was exactly this disgust and weariness with courtly life that is said to have been the final goad that drove the Buddha to seek the end of suffering. He realized the insatiability of desire and the emptiness and despair of boredom. In our adult life, we often have such feelings about our jobs, our relationships and our very life. But it doesn't mean we have to leave our job, our spouse, or commit suicide. It means we have to look at our situation, our whole life situation. We have to discover why we suffer such feelings of boredom, of emptiness, of uselessness.

Realising that it arises from this basic disposition to life, that of pleasure-seeking, is to liberate us from wrong view. It's a beginning. The struggle to free ourselves from its snares has only just begun, but this is the path of liberation. Liberation from what? From the belief that our desires can be satisfied. From desire, want, obsessions themselves. That lead eventually to dissatisfaction, suffering, *dukkha*.

Now the next round is caused by denial. There's our little Lily, jumping up and down all happy and excited, shouting, "I want an ice cream." Daddy's in a bad mood. "No." What happens in Little Lily? At first there's a sense of shock. All those visions of streaming cool cornet, it's burnt, melt down. All the excitement. The jumping is all suddenly squashed. The mind races. Options arise. She could try pleading bargaining ploy. "Oh, please, Daddy, please." As if the world were heaving with terminal sorrow. "No." "I won't have a big one, just a small one." "No."

Next ploy, anger. "Why not? I want one." Dad hasn't the stomach for a fight and tells her to go and ask Mum. On the way, Lily sweetens up. "Mummy, can I have an ice cream, please?" She knows Mummy's objections straight into bargaining. "I'll eat all my dinner." Mummy knows she won't. "No." Lily tries the angry stomp. "I want an ice cream." Then the tantrum, screaming blue murder. Mummy knows this gambit and decides on the counter of ignoring it. Past experience has proven that giving in at this stage can lead to regular tantrum use, and to smack her leads to a mortal fight to the death. Lily's very strong. Mummy ignores her.

Lily finally exhausts herself and ends up weeping. The weeping begins to sound genuine, real sorrow. Mummy tries to console, but Lily won't hear of it. Slowly, the sorrow remoulds itself into a quiet glowering, very glum, very quiet, very withdrawn. Full

of resentment and self-pity, Lily sits incommunicado. The Great Depression is descending. She won't talk, and she certainly won't eat. She would have eaten if she'd had her ice cream, but now she hasn't, she can't eat. Can't, of course, means won't.

At this point, Mummy relents a little, not wanting to crush Lily's spirit. A little explanation why such tactics won't get her the ice cream. And if she hadn't have lost her temper, she could have had one after dinner. And a little bargaining. She can still have one if she eats her food. Lots of pleas and cuddling. Little Lily relents. She accepts the situation. No ice cream now. With this acceptance, you can sometimes catch the relief as the desire, the obsession leaves. This is letting go. But of course, the desire, the demand for ice cream lies dormant like a wild tiger, ready to spring upon the next time the ice cream van chimes.

Now, as far as Lily is concerned, her desire for ice cream is proper and legitimate simply because the desire is there. Those who frustrate her desires are seen as enemies. They are seen as the direct cause for her suffering. The humiliation of begging and bargaining. The frustration and anger, the depression and sadness. All these are directly caused by mummy and daddy. This is the great lie we can't let go of. Even as adults, we still bear grudges against our parents. Even as adults, we believe the other is the cause of our unhappiness. But they are only the proximate causes, catalysts perhaps. The direct cause is ourselves, and the root cause is desire with its twin, aversion.

Although we followed a typical little child, that little child is in all of us. This is the problem. We're still playing these gambits. We're still getting caught up in the meshes of desires, greeds and obsessions. We play these rounds out time after time. Some people never get tired of them, even consciously build their lives around them. Like the person who loves to fall in love, but as soon as it's serious, they're off. Even though leaving in the midst of infatuation is painful, the beginning of a new infatuation is too attractive. The crunch for such people comes with the loss of beauty, the inability to attract.

We need to look at these little lilies inside us, see the child for what it is, remnants of past behaviour constantly cramping our lives with obsession for pleasure, for me, for mine. Somehow we have to change the child's behaviour, but not to crush its spirit. This re-education of the child in us is no easy matter.

As children, we also learnt how to repress and bury our painful moods and feelings deep in our psyche. We learnt how to swallow our bad feelings, our hates, frustrations, fears, anxieties and so on. And they sit there, burning all the time. The Buddha taught that the human was made up of two parts, the physical body and the mind. He said the mix was like milk in water. They were inseparable, the mind infusing the body. When the mind moves, so does the body. When the body moves, so does the mind.

If an angry thought arises in the mind, electrochemical changes are felt in the body. If pain arises in the body, the mind knows it and reacts. Everything in the body and mind interpenetrate when we see this, and it can be easily observed in meditation. Psychosomatic diseases are not hard to understand. When repressed, the distorted energy of negative moods and emotions have no expression, so they leak out of the mind, causing neurotic behavior, at worst, a psychotic breakdown, or they leak into the body, causing illness.

Whenever suffering arises, be it physical or mental pain, our reactions of shock, of bargaining, of anger, of depression, will also arise. Maybe in different order, in different strengths, maybe with one or two missed out. In extreme cases, our reactions may lead to despair and suicide. But in happier cases, like Little Lily, we will come to accept things as they really are and be peaceful with our situation.

This is all part of what Buddhism calls samsara, the faring on, the going on and on, a continual moving from here to there, this restlessness that finds no peace. We need to see this vicious circle of pain-pleasure syndrome. This is samsara, the opposite of our goal, *nibbāna*. One of the meanings of nibbāna is nirvana, no desire. This particular round of shock-fear, bargaining-pleading, frustration-anger, depression, has been especially studied in people who are suffering from terminal illness.

Every individual will have a particular reaction syndrome to loss, be it to dropping their ice cream, to the discovery that they have a terminal cancer. Although here we have concentrated on the sensual pleasure part of desire, don't forget that there is also the desire for life itself, the desire to become, and the desire to annihilate oneself, the death wish.

The question now arises as to why some people suffer so much at death and dying. Others seek it and commit suicide, and yet others die peacefully. To understand this, we need to dig a little deeper and see exactly what happens when we desire something greatly.

When Lily is caught up in the idea of wanting an ice cream, that's just the first expression of desire. But once she actually has the ice cream in hand, there arises an attachment to it: my ice cream. Asking Lily to share some of her ice cream with her brothers and sisters is to ask her to let go of a bit of that "my," that "me." By being generous, Lily is coming to understand that the ice cream doesn't actually belong to anyone, or rather that the concept of belonging, of possession, is fluid, not rigid.

If when Lily's asked she won't share, and her brother and sister take by force, then we see how much Lily has invested herself in that ice cream. In other words, to take the ice cream off Lily is also to rob her of some of herself. It's to take a part of her away, hence the screaming, the fighting to the death.

Do we change as we grow older? Unfortunately, not much. In fact, most of us, as we grow older, tend to become more childish. Listen to someone who's had their car scratched by hooligans or stolen. Underlying these reactions is this self-identity, and whenever that self-identity is threatened, fear arises. That's what fear is. It's this self-identity, this ego, the "I," saying something is threatening it.

If that threat is real and actually attacks, then there is trauma and shock. The difference is seen with the reaction to nearly being run over to actually being knocked down, to knowing the next door neighbours have been burgled, to being burgled oneself. This is what this self-identity, this ego, produces. Ego says, "I am my house, my car, my jewellery. This is my wife, my husband, my child." The trauma, the shock is felt when such self-definitions are proved to be palpably untrue. When the car is stolen, when the spouse walks out, when the child grows up and leaves.

Closer to home, this ego identifies with the body and mind. In fact, in the ultimate analysis, that's what ego is, what self, person, personality is. That's why dying is such a suffering for us. For this ego, this "I," sees itself in mortal danger.

This is what Queen Malika meant when she answered her husband, the king of Kosala. He had asked her whom did she love the most. She said herself. The king, far from being outraged, agreed that he too loved himself the most. Both approached the Buddha for advice. He said, unenlightened beings did indeed in the last analysis love themselves the most.

Ego protects itself. Any movement of harm towards ego is signalled by fear and anxiety. Any actual wound causes trauma and shock. So we see that underlying all this sense pleasure, all this desire to become somebody, to be a personality, all rests on an elephant trap: death. That's why fear is the champion and guardian of ego. It will cause ego to fly for its life or fight to the death.

However, quite paradoxically, when the body and mind become full of suffering, when ego, as it were, finds it too painful to live with itself, it wants to rid itself of this painful burden. What a wonderful trick we play on ourselves. First ego says, "I am my body and mind." But now it's painful. Ego says, "I'm not really this body and mind. I can escape it."

But this "I" is the body and mind. This ego is that self-identity. But by a trick of thought, it believes that this self-awareness, which is in fact just another mental concept, exists as a separate substantial entity. In other words, that the consciousness can somehow leave the body and mind with all its emotions and thinking and go elsewhere. It says, "I think, therefore I am." The mistake of the philosopher Descartes, if he actually thought that the "I" was separate from the thinking.

So when this "I," this ego, decides to kill off the pain, to commit suicide, it thinks it will escape. But the Buddha taught that this consciousness is but another of the aggregate, and is part and parcel of mind, not separate from it, equally transient, not permanent, not a substantial entity. A closer look at the reality of our mental life reveals that consciousness is arising and passing away every minute moment.

Upon death, only the body slumps. The mind arises again. The body can be killed, but not the mind. The mind simply seeks elsewhere, just as it does in everyday life, to satisfy its passions or to rid itself of its suffering. Suicide turns out to be not an escape, but a further investment in desire, this time in its negative aspects of not wanting aversion. Annihilation in Buddhism is out of the question.

At base we are propelled through life and from life to life by these two desires: the desire to get, to have, to become, and the desire to be rid of, to annihilate. Our reactions to such extreme cases will also be dictated by our level of understanding. If we are but grown-up boys and girls, we will react very much the same way as Lily did when she didn't get her ice cream. "Why me? Why do I, not the other, have to die? I'm too young."

Buddhism should prepare us for these realities. Our meditation, our purification of the mind, the constant attempt to see things as they really are, should undermine these childish attitudes and reactions. Insofar as we have matured towards our death, so we shall die in peace.

People are always mystified when they hear of someone reacted calmly to the knowledge of their death, as if they wanted people to go screaming. The 18th century diarist and writer Dr. Johnson, when he went to see the famous philosopher John Locke, was shocked by the man's cheerfulness even though he was dying. But I ask you, what did the Buddha mean when he said the middle path led to the end of suffering? Was he not also including the ability to die in peace? His own death is surely the great model. Even though he was about to die, he was still giving advice to his followers. He achieved his *parinibbāna*, total *nibbāna*, in absolute peace and equanimity.

How we react to loss, to being separated from what we love, will be individual and unique. But we can all reach a point of understanding and a purity of heart where loss is accepted with perfect equanimity. We can die at peace with the world and in perfect peace within ourselves.

So the question arises, how do we do it? Now that we've all been meditating full steam for three months or more, you'll know the answer. The answer is to catch it all in the bud. To watch it all pass. To become the objective observer of the mental and emotional life.

When that favourite TV programme comes, watch the desire, the gleeful expectation for it. Watch it rise, let it pass. When it's passed, ask yourself, do you really want to watch it? If you really ought to watch it. All the time we allow desires to pass and not get caught up in them. This is purifying the mind of its obsessiveness. By letting desire go we free the heart and with it the intellect, so that we can truly see what is wholesome for us and what isn't.

Some people think by losing desire they lose the spice of life. How mistaken. Desire is the unhealthy additive, like sugar on top of sweet strawberries. Like all those e-food additives. We don't know what food really tastes like. It's the so-called food enhancers we actually taste. They are what we come to like.

Desire and obsessional emotions are what we come to like. But just as sugar and ease distort the taste of real food, so desire and obsession distort our sensual experience. What is more, by letting go of desire, we are preparing for death. What is it that makes death so painful but our clinging, our obsession, our attachment?

Here's the Buddha in the Dhammapada: "From craving, grief arises. From craving arises fear. For one who is free of craving, there is no grief. From where will fear arise?"

When the Buddha talks of liberation, liberation from suffering, he does not mean a sudden windfall, a million pounds, so that we can go off and do anything we want. Mind you, how hard we would work if a million pounds were promised. No, this liberation is subtler. It is a freedom from. It is a release us from prison. It is an unburdening, as if throwing off a great backpack of bricks we've carried around all our lives. Freeing ourselves of desire and obsession with all the moods, emotions and feelings they manufacture is to rid ourselves of a huge, constricting, heart-crippling, painful burden.

CHAPTER 12

Guilt — Real and Unreal

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 24 min

> *In this talk from the Foundation Course, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines guilt as both a natural guardian of morality and a potential source of psychological suffering. Drawing from the Dhammapada, he distinguishes between proper guilt — the awareness of having acted against one's conscience — and neurotic guilt arising from harmful self-definitions formed in childhood.*
>
> *The talk explores how wholesome guilt, accompanied by shame (hiri) and moral dread (ottappa), serves as protection against unskillful actions. However, when we identify the actor with the action ("you are bad" rather than "that action was unskillful"), we create damaging self-concepts that fuel anxiety and restlessness in meditation. Bhante explains the three components of karmic action: intention, effort, and completion, showing that mere arising of unwholesome thoughts is not itself karma.*
>
> *Using practical examples and Buddhist psychology, this teaching offers a path to freedom through accepting guilt feelings in meditation without identifying with them, understanding that we are fundamentally wise beings obscured by ignorance, not essentially evil. The talk concludes with guidance on counteracting unwholesome karma through present wholesome actions, emphasizing that "nothing is preconditioned" — we can always change our karmic trajectory through skillful choices.*

Foundation Course 2. Talk 2.

Guilt, real and unreal.

Guilt and feelings associated with guilt are sometimes a great problem for meditators. They can be very insistent. Some say it's to do with their Christian upbringing, or guilt only arises because of the concept of a vengeful deity. But guilt is a human phenomenon, and each individual suffers their own particular amount of it, depending on their understanding and the offense committed.

If the search for pleasure and the self-identification with pleasurable things brings about a syndrome of emotional responses, guilt also creates such a one, but a wholly different set of reactions.

Guilt itself is just the knowledge of having done something against one's conscience. Conscience here means simply knowing, but a knowing of a particular kind. It is the knowing of what is right and what is wrong. In Buddhism, it is better to talk of what is right and wrong in terms of skillfulness or wholesomeness. Everyone has a conscience, and every conscience is different. Even though there is a broad agreement about such things as murder and theft, when it comes to the outer reaches of our definitions, the edges get frayed. Is it right to execute someone who has killed another? At what point is abortion the killing of a human being?

Our conscience tells us what is wholesome for us, or what is unwholesome for us. This conscience, then, is our moral wisdom, and therefore contains within it right or wrong understanding. This understanding determines our intentions and acts of will, which in turn determine our karma, so it is obviously very important to investigate conscience closely. We need to question all our understandings and opinions about morality, good and bad.

The Buddha makes it quite clear that ignorance is no excuse. Being ignorant will not save us from the consequences of an unwholesome act. This is a verse from the *Dhammapada*: "A fool, while he performs unskillful deeds, does not know them to be unskillful. But that fool still suffers for his unskillfulness, just as one burnt by fire." In other words, a child, just because she doesn't know what matches do and still plays with them even after parental warnings, will still be burnt. She may even burn the house down.

We are not isolated individuals, we are an integral part of an interrelated world. If we do harm, harm comes back to us. So knowing what is unwholesome and unskillful is of great importance to us if we want to put an end to the suffering we cause ourselves and unjustly to other human beings.

So having a conscience means that whenever we do something we know it to be wholesome, unwholesome or neutral. When we know that what we have done is wholesome, pleasant feelings arise. Our self-esteem grows. The proverbial helping of the old person across the road makes one feel good. To do good is to feel good about oneself. It dispels feelings of self-hate, self-belittlement.

On the other hand, if while driving my car, an old person steps onto the zebra crossing and screeching to a halt, I wind down my window and shout abuse to the effect that all old people ought to be done away with as kindly as possible, afterwards, if I am truthful with myself, I shall know myself to have been cruel. I have gone against my knowledge of what is wholesome and skillful. I have crossed my conscience. This knowing that I have transgressed a moral law is guilt.

The dictionary definition talks of failure to do one's duty, the fact of having committed an offense, the state of having willfully committed a crime. Now we can see what guilt is. It is simply knowing one has done what one ought not to do. It is perfectly right and proper in such a case to feel and know oneself to be guilty. Knowing oneself to be guilty is just awareness of having done something harmful.

Now this knowledge is accompanied by two feelings in Buddhist psychology: shame and dread. Shame is just those varying degrees of embarrassment, plus the knowledge that one has lost the respect of others and self-respect. If I'm caught shoplifting a battery for my Walkman, I feel so small. I feel humiliated. I know people now see me not as a worthy citizen, but as a petty thief. Shame can be a very painful experience. Knowing this sets a barrier, a protection against me doing such things.

You used to hear parents say to young people, "Have you no shame? Don't you feel ashamed?" It's gone out of fashion now because of our general rejection of guilt as a good thing, and the fear of creating a guilt complex. But in Buddhist understanding, guilt has a proper role to play, and it is entwined with self-esteem and self-respect, and the esteem and respect others have of us. Perhaps we ought to say to our children, "Have you no self-respect? Don't you want to be respected?" It may be a more positive way of saying the same thing.

Now, at the same time as feeling ashamed, I also feel afraid. For when I'm caught red-handed, dread also arises. I fear the consequences of my act. I know I can be prosecuted or fined. I may even lose my job. Knowing there are inescapable consequences for what I do also creates a barrier, a protection against my doing unskillful, unwholesome acts.

The Buddha, again in the *Dhammapada*, warns us: "Not in the sky, nor in the middle of the ocean, nor in a cave of a mountain, nor anywhere else is there a place where we can escape from the consequences of an unwholesome deed."

There's a story concerning this verse. It was the answer the Buddha gave to some monks who told him about this strange event. They had been traveling on a boat which suddenly stopped mid-water and apparently refused to move. The people on the boat drew lots, and three times it fell to the wife of the skipper. He decided he didn't want so many people to suffer on account of his wife, so he had a sandbag tied round her neck and had her thrown overboard. Now, to our modern ears, this might seem highly suspicious, and a clever way of ridding himself of a troublesome wife. But the commentary goes on to say that this was the consequence of having drowned a pet dog, because she had been made to feel ashamed of it. A heavy consequence indeed, though it's nice to see animals being given the high regard they deserve as fellow beings.

In Buddhist understanding, these two reactions to doing harm—shame and dread—are not only the guardians that prevent someone from committing an unskillful act, but also the guardians of order in a society. If people felt neither shame nor dread of consequences, what would stop them from doing harm? In fact, such people are often described as psychopathic, mentally ill.

The fact about hardened criminals is that personal gain seems to get the better of discretion, of shame and dread, even though their actions may make others suffer a great deal and bring great suffering to themselves. In the case of violent political actions, all such considerations are discarded in favor of the ideology. The ends justify the means. It's right and proper to kill opponents.

Now, if there is such a thing as a balanced conscience whose guardians are shame and dread, and if there is such a thing as a moral code of behavior that is the foundation of social and interpersonal harmony, why has guilt become such a great problem for us?

Let's take a typical case. Billy, a lively lad, found an easy supply of comics and sweets. He just makes sure no one's looking while he helps himself. When Billy's finally caught, his parents are very upset and the first thing they tell him is that he's a thief. Being a thief is bad, very bad. Therefore, Billy comes to understand that he's a thief and he's bad.

Billy has been told he's bad, off and on, every time he upsets his parents. He's alternatively selfish, cruel, lazy, good for nothing, a nuisance, a "why we put up with you I'll never know." A part of Billy knows himself to be Bad Billy, Big Bad Billy. It becomes a self-definition, and with it, low self-esteem, low self-respect—that is, self-hate.

Identifying the action with the actor creates a wrong identity. No doubt, the act of stealing is not something to encourage in children, but one theft doesn't make a thief. In fact, a million thefts don't make a thief, if by thief we mean someone who is a thief by nature. Once we're taught as children to get into these traps of self-definitions, it's very difficult to find an escape.

This sort of guilt is not the proper guilt about an action committed, but a neurotic guilt about the person who committed the action. So my fear of consequences is compounded by the fear that that's the sort of person I am and I can't do anything about it.

The understanding that humans are somehow essentially evil, some more than others, bad at the core, so to speak, is a chief cause of mistaken self-definition and later leads to all our problems with guilt. The Buddha taught that we were born in ignorance,

that because of our ignorance we acted with wrong intention, but always with the idea of fulfilling our desires. Not knowing what desires led to suffering for ourselves and others, and what desires lead to happiness, is the essential problem.

At fundament, the human is wise, is enlightened, is a Buddha, meaning someone who has the potential to be enlightened. If we truly grasp this point—that it is our ignorance that must be dispelled, that we are not essentially evil—then in our meditation we must allow these damning self-definitions to emerge. These voices must be listened to: "You're useless, you're inadequate, you're wicked and evil, you're terrible, no one can love you, you can't love anyone," and so on.

Through the power of our intuitive wisdom, we see these as disembodied voices, voices we have taken into ourselves. The personality is but a collection of such habits, and just as habits are formed, so they can be unformed. Meditation should help us to confront these often painful self-definitions, see them as mere opinions, as changeable, and by not indulging them, through this understanding allow their power over our thinking to die out.

Meanwhile, poor Billy, although he was caught, didn't take the opportunity to clear his heart of all the offenses. He swore in tears that he had only ever taken one comic and one bag of sweets. That's why he was let off lightly with warnings of lashings and thrashings, if ever he should even think of doing such a thing again.

Unfortunately for Billy, guilt feelings, especially of the fear of being found out, sit uncomfortably in his mind. Since no one does find out, Billy represses those feelings and begins to see this as a clever ploy. He's now compounded his stealing with lying, and both have been fairly successful in satisfying his desires. But the result of this is to laden his mind with all sorts of unresolved guilts.

Since boyhood, Billy hasn't stolen a thing, but feelings of guilt still dog him. Whenever a policeman should appear, panic arises. Worse, whenever he does do anything wrong, the proper guilt he ought to feel is fueled by all the unresolved guilt, so that he feels overly guilty and anxious, and has to apologize profusely even when he inadvertently steps on someone's toe.

It is also possible that such is the store of unresolved guilt, coupled with self-definition of being a bad person, that his worldview is so distorted he sees all sorts of people out to get him, conspiracy everywhere, paranoia at worst.

Again, it is in meditation that these phantom guilts can be dealt with. Let them come to the attention. Feel them fully. Accept them fully. Don't criticize or look for excuses and scapegoats. Don't get into conversation with them. Let them be. Just let them disclose themselves and sit equanimously within all the discomfort. Slowly, their strength declines. Their power dissolves.

Unfortunately, yet again, Billy is to be pitied, the more for his parents have told him that even bad thoughts are something he should be ashamed of and feel guilty about. The Buddha's teaching is very clear on this. Thoughts and images that arise in the mind are the consequences, the results of past actions. When Billy walks into a newsagent, the idea arises of stealing a book, to slip one inside his coat. That idea has been conditioned by Billy's past actions. It has become a conditioned response whenever he sees books. Up to this point, what Billy is suffering from is the karmic results of past actions, the *vipāka*. He has not yet committed any new karma.

What happens next is crucial. If Billy is taken to the idea, it will obsess, possess his mind. He will make a decision to take the book. Billy, by this decision, has only reinforced the thought, the intention of stealing. On the other hand, he may exert himself. He may even put the book in his coat and then decide against it. If he takes his action up to this point, he has reinforced his inclination to steal, but we cannot yet say he has stolen, or that he has created any new karma in the sense of a completed unwholesome action.

It is only when these three components all come together can we talk of a karmic action: the intention, the effort or exertion, and the actual completion of the act. In this case, when Billy walks out of the shop with the book. Up until this actual moment of taking, Billy is only reinforcing his state of mind, the mental habit, which will have the unwholesome result of making further temptations harder to overcome. These are the consequences of intention and exertion.

But upon the actual completion of the act, the stealing itself, not only is there the inner consequence, but the outer consequence too. At some point in time, because we are all interrelated, interfused, a result will arise from that harmful, unskillful action.

In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha warns us: "Even an unskillful person may still find happiness, so long as his unskillfulness does not bear fruit. But when his unskillfulness does bear fruit, he will meet with unwholesome consequences."

Let us recap a moment. Firstly, we can say that unwholesome actions have the same root cause as sensual pleasure. We do them because we think they will bring us pleasure and happiness. A biting remark fulfills our desire for revenge, and our self-esteem

is restored. Robbing a bank will bring us all that lovely lolly, and we'll be happy for the rest of our lives. Sometimes we do things harmful for the sheer sake of excitement, such as driving in a dangerous way. Whatever the pleasurable satisfaction we gain, it is gained at the expense of ourselves and quite unjustly at the expense of others.

Secondly, we can see that there are two rounds involved. The first is unskillful actions with guilt feelings that bring success and lead to repetition. The second is unskillful action that arouses no guilt feelings but lead to painful consequences later.

Thirdly, we cannot say that an unwholesome karmic action is fully completed till the three ingredients are there: intention, exertion and completion of the act.

Fourthly, these guilt rounds with their attendant feelings of shame and dread subsist the pleasure syndrome and go to make life harder for us. Making money to get rich is one thing. Making money out of the sale of arms to get rich is another. Worse still, when all this is fueled by unresolved guilt, it all adds up to create greater anxiety, worry, fear, and restlessness.

In meditation, this now becomes a great hindrance. When restlessness and anxiety arise in the mind, we need to see if they are coming from guilt. To our surprise, we may find memories there of unwholesome actions we've done, even as children.

In my own case, when I was about twelve years old, I caught a mole and took it to my teacher. It was a great catch. It caused a sensation, and I was for a while a celebrity. But after everyone had seen it, the teacher told me to take it back, for it was impossible to keep. Moles eat a lot of worms, it seems.

Now, I don't know whether it was because it had bit me when I caught it, or whether I was angry at the teacher, or whether it was the result of past conditioning in cruelty. But, without really thinking about it, I took a large piece of wood and battered it to death. When that memory came back to me, I was filled with horror. I felt a certain panic. Even though I've meditated on it for years now, it still makes me feel uncomfortable. Such wanton cruelty. It's no good me arguing that perhaps the mole was getting its comeuppance. I did it. I performed the foul deed.

What the outer consequences are, I don't know. Perhaps I've already suffered them. I hope so. But I'm painfully aware of the inner consequences. But having observed all this in meditation and reflecting upon it, in time, the emotional power of the memory has decreased. This has been my karma.

The first steps, then, in overcoming guilt feelings is to face up to them, and there's no better place than in the meditation. The second is to reflect on the act.

There is a mistaken understanding that you can put things right, but the spilt milk is spilt, it is gone. That little mole cannot be resurrected, nor can its suffering be wiped out of history. All we can do is accept the consequences. Now in truth there's great relief in that, because now we can stop worrying. What will be, will be, though I can undermine unwholesome *kamma* coming my way by doing wholesome things.

One of the incidents in Mahatma Gandhi's life illustrates this well. A distraught Hindu came to him saying that he had killed a Muslim child during one of the riots. What bad kamma! Gandhi told him to adopt a Muslim orphan and bring him up as a Muslim. This good deed would go a long way to counteract the earlier unskillful one.

This is a very important point to grasp in the Buddha's teaching on kamma. Nothing is preconditioned. We can assuage unwholesome consequences in the future by doing what is good now. There are further steps to purifying the mind of guilt, but this is dealt with in a later talk. Enough it is to say here that the first step is acceptance.

If upon reflection we understand guilt to be unreal, an overreaction, we will still have to suffer from it. We will still have to patiently allow it to rise up into our consciousness. However, in the process of letting go of such guilt, we can say that some part of the store of unresolved guilt is being expended.

This needs a little further explanation. Although I've used terms like "store of guilt," in Buddhist understanding this isn't quite right. What is more correct is to talk of a disposition, a tendency, which has been conditioned by past actions. If I tend to feel overguilty, then by allowing it to pass, that tendency will be weakened.

Let us end with two salutary tales from the *Dhammapada*. First is the story of the careless monk. One of the rules of a monk's life is to put back whatever has been used. Now it was the habit of this monk that no matter what he used—table, stool or mat—he would leave it out in the open, exposed to the sun or the rain. When monks pointed this out to him, he just shrugged his shoulders, saying little damage was done, and anyway, he meant no harm. But he was warned that small faults are in the habit of growing large. He was a wise fellow after all, for he took their good counsel.

When the Buddha heard this, he said: "One should not think lightly of an unskillful deed, imagining, 'A little will not affect me.' Just as a jug of water is filled by falling drops of rain, so also the fool is filled up with unwholesome conditioning by accumulating little by little."

The second is the story of Billa Lepadika, a rich man who was ready to kill the organizer of a community offering of food to the Buddha and his monks. Billa Lepadika had been annoyed by this organizer for asking him and others to give. He noticed his small

offering was kept apart and thought the organizer was doing this to show him up. That's why he was going to kill him. But in fact, the organizer put a little of what he had given in every bowl, thereby hoping to increase Billa Lepadika's merit. Billa Lepadika was repentant and apologized to the organizer for not supporting him properly.

The Buddha overheard this and said: "One should not think lightly of doing good, imagining 'A little will not affect me.' Just as a water jar is filled up with falling drops of rain, so also the wise one is filled up with merit, accumulated little by little."

So there we have the Buddha's teaching. Be scrupulous about unskillful deeds. Do good no matter how small. It all counts. So when it comes to guilt and guilt feelings of low self-esteem, low self-respect, self-hatred, by doing what is wholesome, these are counteracted by feelings of high self-esteem, high self-respect, self-acceptance, self-care and self-understanding.

By observing and sitting patiently with guilt feelings in meditation, we will purify the mind of anguish, remorse, anxiety and sorrow. And by doing what is wholesome and skillful in our daily lives, we will re-establish that sense of wholesomeness and innocence, which is the joy of being at peace with ourselves and at peace with the world.

I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the *nirvanic* peace within.

CHAPTER 13

The End of Guilt

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 25 min

> *In this exploration of guilt and moral responsibility, Bhante Bodhidhamma distinguishes between healthy remorse that arises from wrongdoing and destructive self-condemnation that hinders spiritual progress. Drawing from the Dhammapada and the law of karma, he explains how unresolved guilt creates restlessness and anxiety that obstruct meditation practice, making the mind "like a turbulent pool" where insight cannot develop.*
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> *Using the gentle story of little Lily and her ice cream transgression, Bhante demonstrates a compassionate Buddhist approach to handling moral lapses: acceptance of wrongdoing, understanding consequences, genuine remorse, making amends, receiving or extending forgiveness, and firm resolution for future conduct. He emphasizes that karma operates through natural consequences rather than divine punishment, and that even our mistakes serve the ultimate purpose of leading us toward wisdom and the end of suffering.*
>
> *This talk offers practical guidance for overcoming the crushing effects of self-hate and shame that accumulate on the spiritual path. Bhante explains the monastic pātimokkha confession system as a model for healthy accountability, and stresses that until we reach arahantship and eradicate greed, hatred, and delusion entirely, we will continue making mistakes—making self-forgiveness and wise resolution essential skills for maintaining the mental tranquility necessary for vipassanā practice.*

Foundation course two, talk three. The end of guilt.

Guilt can be a real problem for us and it can become a major cause of our disease. Whenever we satisfy our desires, be they desires to have something or desires to do away with something, if these desires are satisfied at the expense of another, guilt arises. The knowledge of having done harm arises, and with it, in differing degrees, shame and dread.

Although these days we've come to see this in a very negative light, actually this is a healthy reaction, for the fact that guilt, shame and dread have arisen means that the doer is still in contact with the heart, that inner compassionate part of us that knows such things cause suffering and cannot bear it. If these reactions do not arise, what is there stopping us behaving in harmful ways?

If society did not have moral code or moral law, a basic agreement among its citizens on how to live together without doing each other harm, it would certainly be a case of dog-eat-dog. The whole system of law is about being able to judge impartially any case of harm that arises so that the aggrieved can be compensated and the doer checked. The idea of a society protecting its citizens from the harm of others is accepted unequivocally. This is a pure reason, shall we say, for a police force to stop society eating itself.

The inability to accept guilt causes individuals a lot of problems. The idea that we shouldn't feel guilty causes us a lot of problems. They both repress what is a perfectly natural response of the heart. Just as a good heart responds to acts of cruelty with horror, so it responds to a person's own acts of cruelty with horror. When we read in the newspapers that a woman or a boy had been murdered or sexually abused, feelings of shock and intense dislike arise. When we ourselves do something against our own moral code, the same sort of horror emotions arise directed towards ourselves. This sort of guilt reaction and the ensuing shame and dread of consequences are our internal guardians, stopping us doing what we know to be harmful.

But things do go wrong. Ever since we were children, we have been told in varying degrees how bad we are. We are variously cheeky, naughty, selfish, cruel, called nuisances, good-for-nothings, liars, thieves, and so on. This sort of labelling really gets into the child.

The famous French writer and playwright Jean Genet writes how when he was a boy, he was told he was a thief, so he said to himself, yes, that's what I am. He ended up in jail.

I remember myself going into a newsagent as a young boy, ten years old or so, and asking for my father's newspaper. I must have pushed in the queue or asked with some imperious tone in my voice, because the assistant said, "You're presumptuous." I felt really embarrassed about it, I felt so humiliated. Worse, because I couldn't give a cheeky answer, since I didn't know what it meant. Though I did realise it was belittling. I harboured a great grudge against that assistant, and often fantasised situations where I turned the tables and gleefully exclaimed, "Aha, you see, you're the one who's presumptuous!"

Both these two factors of accusations and labeling, judgments by others of our personalities, become internalised. We believe them. So that later on in life, these self-accusations, derogatory self-definitions, denigrating self-judgments, all go to create a very uncomfortable feeling within ourselves, feelings of inadequacy, of being naturally no good, evil, rotten to the core.

It doesn't help much either if you've been brought up in a religion where a wrathful God, devilish demons and hellfire have dominated. Luckily, I was brought up in a Christian religion that stressed the love, compassion and forgiving nature of Jesus and his Father. So personally, I didn't have any problems that way.

This is not to say that guilt is not known in Buddhist countries. Far from it. Often the doctrine of *kamma* is taught only in its negative aspects. The evil consequences are inescapable. This also can lead to an inordinate fear of consequences. Although the scriptures are full of tales of the most horrific consequences, the Buddha says in the Dhammapada, if a person does what is good, he should do it again and again. If a person does what is good, she should delight in it. The accumulation of merit leads to happiness. We need to bring such thoughts to mind whenever we are thinking of unwholesome results of our actions. We can affect the future by the good we do now.

So we can say that there are two types of guilt. The one, a natural response to wrongdoing. The other, an unrealistic response caused by underlying accusatory self-definitions and unresolved guilt.

How do we overcome this? What can we do about such states of mind? The importance of this lies in the fact that restlessness and anxiety caused by guilt are both great hindrances in the meditation practice. When we are restless and anxious, the mind is said to be like a turbulent pool. We are unable to see beyond the surface of waves and splashes. If our insight is to grow, we need very much to bring peace to this pool, to clear the mind of all guilt. Remember, the moral laws of Buddhism are also rules of mental health.

Let us return to little Lily, whom we left glum, unable to have ice cream she wanted. Lily wanted to have ice cream, but it was too near lunchtime. She got angry and very depressed about it. Even though her parents did get her some ice cream in the afternoon, she still felt aggrieved. Children have their own thoughts, they're little persons. No matter what parents do, they can never be totally responsible for the child's behaviour. Such total responsibility presumes total control of the child's development and environment. But not only are there other factors at play, such as friends, other adults, the media, and so on, there is the indomitable little mind of the child herself.

Lily is not a scheming child. She's just decided that if she wants ice cream, she should have some. Why not? That afternoon, Mum also bought a whole box of vanilla ice cream and put it in the freezer. Next day, during a quiet afternoon, the image of that box rose in the mind of little Lily. She quietly slipped out of the sitting room, looking very busy, went to the freezer, doled herself out a goodly portion, and crept upstairs to her bedroom, where she feasted in paradise with her dolls.

It never occurred to her that the hole in the ice cream would be noticed. Well, of course, that evening, when Mum went to get the dessert, half was gone, and the alarm went out. Lily was commanded to report immediately. Lily arrives looking innocent enough, though inwardly trembling. When that sort of alarm goes up, it means she's done something really wrong. She knows it's got to be the ice cream.

It is at this point that Lily is beginning to suffer the karmic results of her actions. Up till now, she's been enjoying the karmic results of satisfying her desire for ice cream. But she got it by unlawful means. The product of those unlawful means is now her trembling as she meets the female deity in her wrathful aspect, the angry mum.

What happens from now on is going to be crucial to Lily's future behaviour and her attitude concerning the moral law. Will mum reinforce her feelings of fear by giving her a slapping? Will she turn the accent onto naughtiness and evil, calling Lily a do-no-good-little-thief? Will she give Lily room to explain herself? Will she appeal to Lily's better nature, to her sense of remorse? Will she demand Lily pay a price, that she be punished in some way? Will she forgive Lily totally, and ask her never to do such a thing again? Will she ask Lily to make such a resolution? Will she forgive Lily, but with dire warnings of what will happen the next time such things happen?

Mum's options are varied. She could have even decided to ignore it. She could even have slapped Lily hard for what she did, but told her, if she wants to steal, she should do it from the shops and not from home. There's honour amongst thieves.

However Mum has reacted, my bet is that she has done so exactly as her mother and father did to her. She has internalised, made her own, her parents' way of handling immoral conduct. In fact, she treats herself like that.

Before we can investigate further, we need to be clear what the place of punishment is in the law of kamma. The Buddha stated that the consequences of our actions, good and bad, were inescapable. But they are consequences, not rewards or punishments. No divine law, no god, punishes or rewards us. It is simply a matter of results. If I turn up late for work, fail to do a good job, I get sacked. I can't say the boss or the system punished me. The sacking is a result of my working practices. If I mindlessly handle a boiling kettle and scorch myself, I can't say the kettle has punished me. Punishment is something invented by human beings to inflict upon each other.

Punishment is either getting even, an eye for an eye, or it's to slake our thirst for revenge, or it is out of a mistaken understanding that punishment is a deterrent which will stop the wrongdoer without unwholesome side effects. Whatever reasons are given for punishment, as far as the Buddha's understanding goes, it's something human be-

ings lay on the wrongdoer as an extra. For whether the punisher or the wrongdoer likes it or not, the unwholesome consequences of the wrong action will manifest themselves in the goodness of time.

The Buddha appeals to our better nature. All are afraid of the stick. All fear death. Putting oneself in another's place, one should not beat or kill another.

The concept of punishment is alien to Buddhism, and unlike other religious systems or secular codes of law, you will not find in the scriptures any lists of appropriate punishment for crime. For it is understood that when we do harm to another, even if it is legal or socially acceptable, it can only be done with aversion in the mind. There is no such thing as righteous retribution.

Whatever person A does that is unskilful, he will reap the painful consequences. The consequences themselves will be the just desert. Person B, who wants to exact punishment, a further suffering, who calls for the cat, the gallows, solitary confinement, does it for unwholesome reasons. The righteous punisher will also receive their just deserts for their cruelty.

But there is a deeper reason, still, why punishment is inimical to the Buddha's path. And that is because what is at root fault is not an evil nature, but sheer ignorance. A wrongdoer, perhaps better termed a mistaken doer, must be approached with compassion, with firmness, no doubt, but with the intention of showing that person the unwholesome consequences of their action.

Now, mum has done a lot of meditation and given a lot of thought to this whole problem. Although she is a fire with divine wrathfulness, within this great display lies a heart of compassion, the heart of wisdom.

First, there is the great owning up, "I did it," the acceptance. Then, Lily has to be shown the consequences of her deed. Not enough ice cream to go around, hardly a spoonful each. How does Lily feel about that, depriving everyone else of their ice cream? Slowly, Lily is coaxed to a position of seeing the harm she's done. She's allowed to offer mitigating circumstances. She didn't know she was taking everybody else's ice cream. Remorse abounds, perhaps a few tears, but Mum can't stop there. These tears could be tainted with relief, for Lily knows from her Mum's tone she won't be slapped. Or tainted with sympathy-seeking. Who cannot be softened by the tears of a child? Children are clever.

No, the consequences must be faced. She is asked to agree not to have ice cream so that others can have a proper share. Lily agrees. But still there's an important ingredient missing, which will allow Lily to move towards wholesomeness. All right, she's

made good the obvious consequences of her deed, but how does her heart know that she has done enough? She knows everything is back to normal when her mother forgives her. Lily's heart is greatly relieved, for now she sees the wrathful deity in her benign aspect of forgiveness and radiant love. A hug and a cuddle heals the internal wound, but still the process is not complete.

Lily has confessed. She's been remorseful. She's accepted the consequences. She will make good reparation. She has received forgiveness, but what will stop her doing it again? Right understanding is not enough. Right intention must also be made. In the midst of that forgiving embrace, Lily finds it easy to make a firm and unshakable resolution never to do such a thing again. How important it is for the goddess to say she believes Lily will never do it again. Later on at the dinner table, when the sad tale is retold to explain why Lily is not having ice cream, everyone is moved to share their ice cream, and Lily learns that her good deed of making good has other wonderful consequences.

Now, I apologise if I've been pulling the heartstrings a bit here. I know it's never quite so easy. I know wonderful endings are miracles. But at least here we have a model we can work on to develop our own strategies. All the steps are important. And it is all important we not only treat children like this, but adults and ourselves.

To overcome the horror of guilt, the shame and the dread in whatever degree, there has first of all got to be an open acceptance of the fact and the realisation of the ensuing consequences. Then remorse arises and sorrow and with it the apology. Next we need to do something about the consequences and if nothing can be done, then we must learn to console ourselves with the fact that it is not within our powers to do anything and that we must readily accept the results of what we have done with patience, a willingness to suffer them gladly.

Then comes forgiveness. It's a great help in healing our hearts if the victim forgives us. But if that is not forthcoming, we have to be able to forgive ourselves. If we are dogged by thoughts of, "I can't forgive myself, not for that," then we must turn the stream of compassion inwards. We need to ask ourselves why we can't forgive ourselves. After all, what does forgiveness mean but, "All right, I've done wrong, I've done what I can to put things right, I've learnt my lesson, so I'm going to be kind and pardon myself."

If when we talk to ourselves like this, feelings of self-hate arise, these must be observed and not entertained. We also need to be aware of our inverted pride which is subtly saying, "I won't forgive myself till they forgive me."

This inability to pardon ourselves, to be unforgiving towards our own faults, needs to be constantly tackled with the practice of loving kindness directed inwards. Slowly, these self-accusatory, unforgiving voices will trouble us less and less until they disappear altogether. If we fail to do this, we have simply internalised the wrathful deity. We become our own punishers and executioners. The consequences of our wrongdoings are painful enough. There's no need to load it with self-inflicted wounds.

Finally, what seals the wound? The firm resolution to abstain from such actions in the future, to determine to be forever on our guard. This resolution gives us confidence, and success builds on success. "Yes, I used to do things like that, but I don't now." This returns our self-respect and self-esteem.

At last, our hearts, split into all sorts of conflicting emotions, return to their pure base of balance and tranquillity.

The ability to move through these stages becomes increasingly more important the more we travel along the spiritual path. The Buddha was forever talking of the importance of moral behaviour that a whole third part of the Tipiṭaka is devoted to the higher morality of the monastic life. The Tipiṭaka is what the Buddhist scriptures are called and means literally the three baskets. The first being the discourses, the second being the monastic discipline, and the third the Abhidhamma.

The higher morality of the monastic life is meant to speed the ardent towards liberation. There are 227 rules at base, but these are compounded with refinements and later commentarial additions, on top of which each culture and each monastery adds its own rules. The whole idea is to keep the monastic on the straight and narrow.

This is very important for lay Buddhists to know, because often they support monks unwisely, tempting them with things they ought not to have. For instance, a monk is not supposed to wear any sort of jewellery. Now, it's a moot point as to whether a watch can be considered so. A lot of monks overcome the problem by having pocket calculator watches. But there is a great difference between buying a monk a simple timepiece and giving him a gold watch.

Now, it may not come as a great surprise to you, but the community hold what is called a *pātimokkha* ceremony every 8th and 13th, 14th day of the lunar month. The whole set of rules are recited, and monks confess to each other any transgressions they have committed. Some are serious enough to cause expulsion from the order. The consequences of breaking a more serious rule is to suffer isolation from the community for six nights, during which time the monk is meant to reflect on his actions and the com-

munity to reflect on how to respond. Confiscation is also carried out if a monk owns up to having something he ought not to have. But the vast majority of transgressions are forgiven on the telling.

Do you think such a thing is possible in families, where members own up to bad temper and so on, and are forgiven and exhorted to change?

There is also a formula monks use when they hurt another monk in any way. Its formula may interest you. "Forgive me, venerable sir, for my wrongdoing, done carelessly to the venerable one, by way of the three doors, of mind, speech, and body." "I forgive you." "You should forgive me." "I forgive you, venerable sir." The interesting thing in this formula is the magnanimity asked of the victim. He also forgives. It takes two to quarrel, and it takes two to forgive.

Perhaps mum and dad were wrong to buy the ice cream and store it so obviously, knowing little Lily's predilection, her little problem. Perhaps they should have warned her not to take any, or told her when she would get some. We often unwittingly lay traps for others and then expect them to take all the blame. How much of our present-day violence, for instance, can we apportion to social policies and how much to personal responsibility?

The reason why we must be able to handle our unskillful behaviour is because we shall keep on tripping over the moral law, keep on creating unwholesome *kamma*, no matter how insignificant, till the very day of our total liberation. Not until we become *Arahats*, when the root causes of our unwholesome actions – greed, hatred and delusion – are eradicated, will we eventually stop doing unskillful things. Many times we're going to give in to desire, to aversion, to harmfulness, and if we can't forgive ourselves, we're simply going to go on accumulating self-hate with its crushing effects on our hearts.

We must know how to take refuge in the Dharma, the Truth, and especially the Lord of Karma. And we must learn how to take refuge in ourselves. We must learn how to forgive ourselves. We must realize there are going to be countless times we're going to give in, but our deepest resolution is never to give up. Battles will be lost, but the war must be won. This must be our life strategy.

One very important tactic within this strategy is the routing of guilt, of shame, of dread, of worry, of restlessness, by the means of accepting responsibility, making amends, self-forgiving, and resolving to guard against recurrence, and so maintain a general balance and tranquillity of mind.

There is one other problem we need to deal with, that was hinted at in the first talk on guilt. What happens when we do something unwholesome but don't know it to be unwholesome? Take, for instance, daydream and indulgent fantasy. We once thought them to be all right, but now, through the meditational experience, we've come to see them as quite corruptive. Eventually, we will come to suffer, for these fantasies lead to insatiability. Fantasies grow and grow until they've developed our desires to a point where they cannot be satisfied, such as dreaming about what we would do if we had a million pounds. That causes us to be dissatisfied and brings suffering.

So here again we are back to the law of *kamma*. When we do something harmful, harmfulness will arise. This suffering makes us reconsider what we are doing. More often than not we stop, though sometimes we need to suffer a little more until the suffering becomes greater than the pleasure. Not until there have been endless mornings of hangovers, sometimes not until the liver tweaks, does the dedicated drinker think of stopping. But this is how wisdom dawns on us and the balance of tranquillity of mind is regained.

Lily might not have thought she was doing anything particularly wrong, but when Mum came down on her like a ton of bricks, her ideas about what she could do with things that belong to her and things that belong to the family and others were sharpened. This was Lily's growth in wisdom. It also shows us how the Lord of Karma is always working for our benefit.

This is the essential hope in the Dhamma. Everything in the universe, in one way or another, is conspiring to lead us to the end of suffering and the perfect peace of *Nibbāna*.

A final word. It's no good worrying about actions. What is done is done. All we can do is deal with the ongoing effects till they pass away. We need to cultivate patience. The Buddha gave us a wonderful image: What would you think of a man shot by an arrow, who, when his friends came to help, would not allow them to pull it out until he had found out who shot it, who made it, and so on? He'd be dead before he knew. The arrow is the problem. Deal with the arrow. This is our freedom. We can deal with the present problems.

Let's finish on a high note, the Buddha again in the *Dhammapada*: "Rare in the world is the kind of person who, out of a sense of shame, refrains from wrongdoing and keeps himself awake, like a good horse that gives no cause to be whipped. Like a good horse stirred at the touch of a whip, be diligent, be alarmed at the endless rounds of rebirth.

By faith, skilful conduct, effort, concentration and right understanding, endowed in this way with wisdom, good practice and mindfulness, leave this immeasurable suffering behind."

I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

CHAPTER 14

Right Intention

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 24 min

> *In this exploration of sammā saṅkappa (Right Intention), Bhante Bodhidhamma presents it as the vital link between Right Understanding and the ethical conduct of Right Action, Speech, and Livelihood. Drawing from the Buddha's discourse on the two types of thinking, he examines how Right Intention serves to dispel greed and hatred, the manifestations of ignorance in action.*
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> *The talk delves into the Buddha's teaching on wrong intention—comprising thoughts of sense pleasure, ill-will, and harmfulness—and their transformation into renunciation, non-aversion, and harmlessness. Through practical examples and the story of 'Billy,' Bhante illustrates how renunciation doesn't mean living a grey existence but rather freedom from compulsive attachment. He explains how this practice naturally leads to generosity, loving-kindness (mettā), and compassion (karuṇā).*
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> *The discourse emphasizes the arduous nature of this training, likening it to a rocket escaping gravitational pull, requiring diligent, ardent, and resolute effort. Bhante concludes with the Buddha's simile of leading a herd of deer from marshy ground to liberation, showing how Right Intention enables the spiral away from the syndromes of pleasure, pain, and guilt toward the open space of nibbāna.*

Right Intention is the second step on the Noble Eightfold Path and it is the crucial link between Right Understanding and the translation of that Right Understanding into the virtuous conduct of Right Action, Speech and Livelihood and the development of the meditative life through Right Effort, Awareness and Concentration.

What the Buddha has shown is that by developing right intention we can spiral away from the crippling and anguishing syndromes of pleasure, pain and guilt. Right understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the Law of *Kamma* clears the mind of ignorance. Ignorance is the base root cause of all our unskillful actions. But if we stop there, we shall all too easily forget what we have come to know, for understanding as a mental activity must be reinforced by actual experience. That actual experience will never come if we don't do something, and we never do anything unless we intend to do it, unless we make an act of will.

Making an act of will on the Noble Eightfold Path means to go against any manifestation of ignorance, of delusion. Ignorance manifests itself in action as greed and hatred, the other two unwholesome roots. If right understanding dispels ignorance, then right intention dispels greed and hatred. Once these roots are undermined, we begin to move out of those syndromes of pleasure-pain and guilt.

This is no easy task, as anyone who has tried to get rid of an unwanted habit will testify. For all the understanding that tobacco and alcohol do to the body, does it stop people smoking and drinking? Does the knowledge of the ill health caused by the two drugs cause a sudden change in behaviour? Not at all. No matter how deep their understanding is, the smoker and the drinker will keep on smoking and drinking until they make the intention to stop. Is just making the one intention enough? Not at all. The intention must be repeated again and again until the old habit has been loosened. Anyone who's tried to give up a strong habit, no matter what it is, knows full well what the training is and how arduous it is. But the prize, the liberation from such habits, is sweet victory indeed.

The Buddha gave a very clear discourse as to what right intention was. At the time he was at one of his main monasteries. It had been built by one of the foremost lay people, a millionaire called Anathapindika. It was situated in a reportedly beautiful place called the Jeta Grove near the capital city of Kosala, Sarvati. The Buddha starts by telling his listeners, "Before my enlightenment, while I was still a bodhisattva, one intent on becoming truly enlightened, these thoughts occurred to me. Whatever are thoughts of sense pleasure, whatever our thoughts of ill-will and aversion, whatever our thoughts of harming, these thoughts I consider one type. And whatever our thoughts of renunciation, whatever our thoughts of non-ill-will and non-aversion, and whatever our thoughts of non-harming, harmlessness, these I consider another type."

Here, the Buddha is defining wrong intention as comprising three types of thoughts: those to do with sense pleasure, those to do with ill will, and those to do with harming. Out of these three types of wrong intentional thinking, the states of mind associated with pleasure, pain, and guilt, comes all our suffering.

The Buddha then goes on to make explicit what the unwholesome results of such thinking are. "I understood it in this way. Thoughts of sense pleasure arise in me but they lead to hurting myself, they lead to hurting others, they lead to hurting myself and others, they obstruct intuitive wisdom, they are associated with distress and they do not lead to *nibbana*." He says exactly the same thing about ill will and harming. So here we have clear reasons why we need to abandon and certainly not indulge in these three types of thinking.

Firstly, they are unwholesome and bring present and future unwholesome results both to ourselves and others. Secondly, they are hindrances to the faculty of wisdom that intuits *nibbana*, which means that our meditation practice will be undermined by such states of mind that arise from such intentions. And thirdly, they lead to distress, to the rounds of rebirth, *samsara*, and away from liberation, *nibbana*.

What is also important to note here is that these understandings came to the Buddha before he was enlightened. I think there is a mistaken understanding that the Buddha practised only meditational techniques before his enlightenment, but he obviously spent a considerable time in reflection, in thinking about what he was doing and what was happening to him. In our daily lives as meditators, we also need to regularly think about what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. Right understanding tops the list of the Eightfold Noble Path.

Now, the next step the Bodhisatta made was to counteract such thought. He made a statement as to the importance of a type of thinking we would call these days self-suggestion and positive thinking. And throughout the discourse, he reminds us of the labour involved in this, referring to himself as faring on diligently, ardently and resolutely.

The Buddha goes on to say, "According to whatever a meditator continually ponders and reflects on, so his mind, as a result, develops a leaning in that direction." In other words, the more I think about sense pleasure, the more I'll crave for it. Thoughts build up their own energy, their own momentum, and finally demand expression in some form of speech or action. If someone keeps passing a bank and entertains thoughts of robbing it, it won't be long before he puts pen to paper.

The next step, the Buddha says, is this: "If a meditator ponders and reflects a lot on thoughts of sense pleasure, they bring up thoughts of renunciation." The Buddha here is not saying that we should conjure up thoughts of delightful sense pleasure and then renounce them. No, he goes on: "If meditators make much of the thought of sense pleasure, the mind inclines to thoughts of sense pleasure." What the Buddha wants us to do is to bring to mind those thoughts about how sense pleasure leads to suffering and away from liberation. When we counter our desire for sense pleasure with contemplation of their dangers, then it is that the feeling to rid ourselves of them, to renounce them, arises.

This renunciation arises out of wisdom. It isn't a practice of sacrifice if by sacrifice we mean to give something up in order to get something else, such as, I give up my desire for a holiday to get a new car. A meditator renounces indulging in sense pleasures not because he wants to gain favours or advantages, but because of the realisation that

such self-indulgence brings harmful results. The results of such an action are the opposite of indulgence. It does not lead to hurting others and oneself. It allows intuitive wisdom to flourish. It leads away from suffering and towards liberation, *nirvana*.

But the Buddha adds, "If during the night and the day I should ponder and reflect on this, then from that source I do not behold fear." Fear underlies all our sense desire. It is to do with that essential self-definition, self-attachment. Who am I if I can't indulge in pleasures of sex, wine and song? Our attachment to pleasure, when undermined, causes us to feel anxious and fearful. What the Buddha is telling us is that renouncing our attachment to sense desire, the compulsions, the obsessions, the way we define ourselves by what we enjoy, we shall also free ourselves from anxiety and fear.

We left poor Billy stealing comics and sweets. His desire for these things had become so great that he couldn't resist the temptation of an easy self-satisfaction. His obsession possessed his mind. It stopped him thinking clearly about what he was doing. He may have acted on sheer impulse and just took the comics and bag of sweets. Or he may have reflected upon it and simply pushed away any notion of being caught.

Billy has now totally reformed, I'm happy to report. But that doesn't mean he no longer reads comics or eats sweets. Not at all. What he's got rid of is the compulsion. If the money's there, or somebody buys him a comic, he reads it. He enjoys it. If someone offers him a sweet, he eats it. He enjoys the taste. There's no more sorrow and frustration if he doesn't get sweets and comics. He hasn't built up a collection of comics that he puts under lock and key for fear, for anxiety, that they will be stolen. Billy's learnt to renounce sweets and comics. Mind you, Billy's 40 years old now. Well, as I said, it takes time to overcome these things.

This is a very important point to grasp. People often interpret this teaching of the Buddha to renounce pleasure as meaning to live grey lives, a lacklustre bread-and-water existence. But many is the time in the scripture when the Buddha delights in the world, and he seems to have particular delight in shrines. During the last year of his life, after collecting alms food, he asks Ananda to accompany him to the Capala shrine. "How delightful a spot Ananda is Vesali, and how charming the Udana shrine, and the Gautamaka shrine, and the shrine of the seven mangoes, and the shrine of the many suns, and the Sarandada shrine, and the Capala shrine."

It is not that the Buddha is asking us to be blind to the beauty of the world, but to see it from a particular angle. It's all passing, all transient. And when it comes to our pleasure, it's not me, not mine, not a permanent self. Renouncing all this, our attachment to

the world as a place of pleasure-seeking, leads to liberation from that snare. It leads to peace of mind, fearlessness, and total release, *nibbana*. The Zen master says it in a characteristically direct way: "When I'm hungry, I eat. When I'm tired, I sleep."

This sublime equanimity and joy is something we must work towards, and not simply by renouncing sense desire, pleasure-seeking, but also by undermining our ill-will and harmfulness. It is pondering the effects of aversion that brings about a disengagement, a non-aversion, a non-ill-will. It is by pondering the effects of harmfulness that brings about a refusal to act in a way that causes suffering to others or ourselves, a harmlessness.

Perhaps we should spend some time every day sitting alone, going over what it means to hate, to actually cause harm. When we experience both of these in our daily lives, not simply as doers but as victims, when we meditate and experience what such thoughts are doing to us internally, when we see how they cloud the little wisdom we have, when we see how easily we seem to be absorbed into negativity and lose all balance and tranquillity, when we see how it causes all this suffering and how it leads to more and more suffering, thoughts of escape naturally arise. Attitudes of non-aversion, non-harmfulness naturally develop.

In the meditation especially, we come to know the power of our minds to reinforce their own conditioning. This very inbuilt mechanism of the mind to recondition existing states of mind is going to be the hardest task for us to use in our favour. Whenever we allow the mind to fantasise, be it on the bus, while driving, while having a cup of tea, whatever, every time it happens, it is reinforcing that respective habit, developing that negative conditioning, increasing our *sankhara*. In this discourse, the Buddha makes this plain: "Whatever a meditator ponders and reflects upon, his mind, as a result, develops a bias in that way."

Our efforts, therefore, in daily life and in meditation, must be to raise the energy to remain vigilant and alert. And as soon as such thoughts and fantasies come, we have to zap them. Aha, greed! Aha, the old grudge! Aha, my good friend's sweet revenge! Then to reflect, to ponder, how if we had developed such thinking, what suffering it would have led to. The Buddha is so clear on this teaching, and these thoughts came to him before his enlightenment.

At this point, something very wonderful happens, and I've tried to put it in diagrammatic form. We have now reached a stage of renouncing pleasure-seeking. The more we renounce, the more possessions cease to possess us. They simply become objects in our care for our use. We see them no longer as mine, but simply as objects that help us

do things. We stop defining them as belonging to me. When I see another needs the use of that object, I let her or him use it. I don't need it. I might even let her have it. Renunciation naturally leads to generosity.

Just think of your most precious object. Maybe it's a ring, a jewel, a video, a record, a car, whatever. You can test your renunciation, your non-attachment to it. You can test your generosity by allowing another to use it, even own it. Then observe closely the agitation of the mind. Someone happens to say, "My video's broken." Do we immediately say, "Use mine"? Or do we go very quiet and look aimlessly out of the window? Someone happens to say they'd love to make a trip, perhaps to see someone, but it's very difficult without a car. Do we say, "Use mine. I insist." Or do we shrivel up in a paroxysm of fear in case they ask us?

Do we check our monthly bank account and delight at the extra ten pounds? Does the thought arise, "What cause can I support? Who might need this money more than me?" Or do we fantasise on updating yet another possession? When we observe our minds like this, it comes as no surprise to see how closed in, how isolated, how small-minded some people can be. Selfishness diminishes us. Generosity is infinite expansion.

Is it that impossible to have societies in which personally owned property, apart from personal effects, exist? The Buddha wanted his monks and nuns to come as close as possible to that ideal. A monk owns eight objects which he can justly call mine, and even here there are warnings not to take pride in such things. They have three robes, the begging bowl, thread to mend, a water strainer, a razor and a sitting mat. Apart from a few other things that can be owned on occasion, all the property in the monastery is owned by the establishment, the *Sangha*.

It would be possible for lay communities to have a high degree of shared property, but it will never come by enforcement. Enforced collectives or cooperatives are undermined by the greed and jealousy of the members. Where there is greed and selfishness, how can there be non-attachment, sharing and generosity? The Buddha's understandings do not arise from a materialistic ideology. The Buddha's path has as its ideal, its goal, something beyond sense pleasure. It is only when the search for happiness in sense pleasure ceases, the great renunciation, that a sharing society will arise. It is possible.

Now, a similar experience is found with ill-will. Reflecting on all our dislikes and feelings of aversion, we move to the middle ground of not entertaining such thoughts, not giving them any importance. This is a very important position to be able to take if we really want to undermine our hatreds, angers and frustrations. If, for instance, we

dislike someone, we need to ponder the consequences of such an action. We need to realise it is only an attitude, and we don't have to obey it, say it's right, it's me, identify with it.

Within ourselves, we need to take up a position of, "All right, I don't like that person, but I'm not going to do anything about it. No one's perfect, and what's the point of being angry over another's faults? How does it help? In fact, I'm going to try and see her or him in a more positive light." One begins to see the positive attributes of the person, and this is where non-ill will becomes good will, loving kindness.

So with harmfulness, actually translating thoughts of ill will into action is harmfulness. There's a lot of pleasure in it. Sweet revenge. Watching one's enemy, one's rival squirm. The feelings of victory with the cutting word. Why else do it but for the pleasure? It's hard for ordinary people to understand, but torturers get job satisfaction.

Pondering on the karmic consequences of harming others is often enough to reach a position of no harm, harmlessness. When we actually do harm in our thoughts to ourselves, in speech or actions to ourselves and others, it is transgressing the moral law and starting up the reactions associated with guilt. When we undermine this tendency within us, there arises in us an abhorrence of cruelty and a desire to help others. In this way, harmlessness transforms into compassion.

So now we have completed our spiral out of suffering. The more we are ensnared in the syndromes of pleasure, pain and guilt, the more we are being overcome with delusion. The more our ignorance is growing. The greatest delusion lies in the fact that as the selfishness increases, so does our idea of self-importance increase. Our ego gets bigger all the time. As we spend more and more time feeding this pride, this ego-centredness, the more we are cutting off the world as people are turned away by our lack of generosity, sympathy, care for others and so on. How can the enlarged ego give to others when it is so involved in giving to itself?

As selfish persons think they are growing more important, the less important do other people think they are. Life moves towards isolation, loneliness, mental sickness, to hell. What is hell but a state of mind? As my favourite poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins says, "I see the lost are like this, and their scourge to be as I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse."

To escape this downward spiral, this disappearance into the world of the little mind, demands hard training. It's arduous work and full of pain. There are many setbacks and times when advance seems to elude the meditator. Sometimes we even think we're getting worse for all the meditation and attempts at awareness. Letting go of our de-

sires and obsessions fills us with acute discomfort. We so much want, desire, crave. Letting go of aversions makes us feel them even more keenly within ourselves, since now we are no longer displacing these feelings onto others by angry attacks and so on. We feel them burning inside us. Our actions of harmfulness in thought, speech and action scorch us with shame or freeze us with fear as we face up to the consequences we now no longer shrug off.

But just as a rocket escapes the gravitational pull of the earth through the tremendous power of its own boosters, so we can pull ourselves free of the gravitational pull of our negative conditionings by our own power of resolute determination. No easy task. And the Buddha is the first to tell us it was no easy task for him either. Diligent, ardent and self-resolute—that's how he describes himself.

Now as we do begin to pull further and further away, the more we begin to experience moments of light-heartedness, of mental poise, tranquillity. How easy it is to be generous, loving and compassionate when we're like that. Slowly the training becomes more and more joyous. When we are truly generous and we give, joy arises. When we truly love, we love with joy. When compassion arises and we help, joy is the fruit of our labour.

Throughout our whole training lives we shall move in and out of these states—one time generous, sometimes stingy, sometimes loving, other times not caring, and so on. But if our training is ardent and resolute and diligent, the movement will be upward and outward, spiralling even to the point where generosity, love and compassion are habitual, to the point of wholesome, spontaneous action.

This is one of the attributes of the Buddha: *vijjācaraṇasampanno*, endowed with knowledge and virtue. There was no separation between what he knew to be right and how he behaved. What he said, he did.

The role of meditation here is twofold. It puts us directly in touch with our states of mind and it allows the negative states to die out. Throughout our daily life we maintain a bright alertness with intentions switched to generosity, loving-kindness and compassion so that all day our actions are motivated from that base.

When the mind is in any of these three modes, the root of wrong action is destroyed. Where there was ignorance, there is now its opposite: wisdom. When wisdom is put into action, the other two roots of greed and hatred are destroyed. Where there was greed and hatred, there is now generosity, love and compassion. That's wisdom in action.

When we are moving from the base of wisdom, the intuitive faculty is empowered, it is free. That's why it is in ordinary daily life that so many of the enlightening and spiritual experiences are had. You can experience *nibbāna* while peeling a banana.

Most of the discourses end with a simile. In this discourse of the two types of thinking, the Buddha likens himself to a man who leads a herd of deer out of the marshy ground of sense pleasure, along a secure road of the Eightfold Noble Path, past the male decoy of passion and the female lure of delusion, finally leading to the open space of liberation.

At the end of the discourse on the twofold types of thinking, the Buddha encourages us: "Meditate. Do not be lazy and feel sorry later on. This is my instruction to you." Thus spoke the Lord. Delighted, the monks and lay people rejoiced in what had been said.

Well, I hope this talk has been interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain *nibbānic* peace within.

CHAPTER 15

The Divine Abodes

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 28 min

> *In this teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma addresses a common misconception about Buddhism as a cold, detached path by exploring the brahmavihāra or divine abodes—the four sublime mental states of mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (sympathetic joy), and upekkhā (equanimity). Drawing from the Visuddhimagga and referencing the Metta Sutta, he explains how these states represent the natural dwelling places of the awakened mind, countering the notion that Buddhist practice leads to emotional emptiness.*
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> *The talk provides detailed analysis of each divine abode, explaining their characteristics, functions, and near causes according to traditional commentary. Bhante emphasizes how equanimity serves as our 'home base'—a balanced mind unmoved by the eight worldly conditions of gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. He distinguishes true equanimity born of wisdom from mere indifference, showing how it supports both meditation practice and daily life responses.*
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> *Using accessible examples including stories from Winnie-the-Pooh and the Buddha's teaching to Kisāgotamī, Bhante demonstrates how genuine compassion focuses on alleviating suffering rather than indulging in grief or self-pity. He addresses the relationship between non-attachment and love, showing how mettā differs from possessive affection or lust. The teaching concludes with practical guidance on cultivating these states through directed meditation, transforming our mental conditioning toward these sublime qualities that characterize the fully awakened mind.*

Foundation Course 2, Talk 5, The Divine Abodes

The First Noble Truth states that life itself is suffering. A great deal of conversation and talks from monks, nuns and lay people in Buddhism tend to concentrate on the problem of suffering, physical pain, mental anguish or social injustice and so on, and how we are to overcome it. But too little is said of life after you do overcome these tribulations, or what life is like when all suffering is dispelled. Is life without pleasure-seeking and without mental anguish just a bland existence, a sort of grey emotional life where nothing happens?

The Buddha grew up in a society where the dominant beliefs were known as Brahmanism. The chief priests of this society were known as Brahmins, meaning followers of Brahma. In fact, the early followers of the Buddha did not call themselves Buddhists,

but Sadamins, followers of the real truth. Brahma was the highest god and the purpose of life for Brahmanism was the summation of all their endeavour was to be one with Brahma.

Since the Buddha declared there was no personality god or creator or divine being, Brahma was demoted to being the chief inhabitant of the highest heavenly plane, or Brahma was seen as the highest mind achievable by human beings before *Nibbāna*. So when the Buddha was asked what was it like to be a Brahma realm dweller, a being whose mind was so highly developed, he replied that such a being was always within one of four mental states: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, or equanimity. In other words, the greatest God, or the highest mind in all the universe, dwelt in those sorts of mental states all the time.

The enlightened mind, the Buddha, the saint, or *Arahant*, while alive, dwells always within these states. So this is the end product mentally of all our training. All this work we are doing on ourselves in meditation sitting and mindfulness in meditative life. This is what we as meditators are aiming to achieve. A mind continually in states of friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy or equanimity.

Unlike *Nibbāna*, unlike transcendental insight, which is beyond our power to control, these four dwelling places of Brahma, the *Brahmavihāra*, or the divine abodes, as they are called, can actually be developed by us in a positive and active way. As these states of mind become more and more developed in us, we will scotch the myth that Buddhism is a selfish path, teaching a way of detachment and cold indifference.

The highest of the four states is equanimity. Equanimity means a balanced mind, a mind that is impartial, does not get caught up in opinions and views. It is the mind within which the intuition has full freedom, unencumbered by prejudice, bias or any delusion, a mind that is at peace with itself and with the world. Equanimity is the peaceful heart, calm, untroubled, like a placid lake, in whose waters the sky is mirrored perfectly without distortion.

We can test our own equanimity in the way we react to what the Buddha calls the eight worldly conditions. These are gain and loss, fame and loss of fame, praise and blame, happiness and pain. True equanimity does not arise out of indifference, a what does it matter anyway, a carelessness, an apathy. This attitude is actually callousness, a hardening of the heart. True equanimity arises out of wisdom insight, the personal experiential knowledge that everything is passing, the personal experiential knowledge that there is no permanent self in the body and mind. There is nothing that constitutes a permanent ego, a substantial self. Nothing in reality belongs to a me, is mine.

Whether we win a million on the pools or lose it all on the dogs, we remain equanimous, even-minded, calm. Sometimes we have many friends, many parties to go to. Other times we seem to be alone, unwanted, devoid of friendship. Yet we remain even-minded, calm-hearted. Sometimes at work, in the family, everyone is praising us, saying how wonderful we are, what successes. Other times we can't seem to do anything right, the boss breathing down our necks, the husband, the wife, the kids all complaining. Praise or blame, we remain even, unruffled, our hearts calm and peaceful.

Many is the time we wake up happy, life's wonderful, we're going on holiday. Many is the time we wake up dreadful, life's terrible, we're going to work. What does it matter to the even-minded, the calm-hearted? Whatever happens, in the person whose equanimity is highly developed, she remains balanced in mind, clear-sighted. He remains calm in heart, peaceful within himself.

This mental quality of equanimity is extremely important in our meditation practice. Awareness is the brightness of the mind, that knowing what is happening. Equanimity is the ability of the mind to stay with the object of meditation without getting caught up in it, without reacting to it. When we are meditating we can occasionally make a mental check. Am I really aware? Am I really awake? Am I really equanimous? Am I really still, deep inside? Is my awareness sitting in the stillness of equanimity, or is it desperately trying to hold its own, fighting against the onslaughts of emotion and thoughts?

If we see in our meditation that we are losing this balance, this calmness, we should go back to the breath until we re-establish the equanimous calm base. When we realise the role of equanimity in meditation, how important it is to establish a calm, balanced mind, we also come to know how important it is in our daily lives. No matter what negativity we feel in ourselves, we just observe it and keep that still centre within us. No matter what negativity we are facing from another, we don't lose our balance. We are aware of our reactions but we don't entertain them and act from that point. We don't react to outside stimuli, outside causes. We act from, we move outward from the centre of balance, the equipoise, the calm heart and mind.

But how do we move out? How do we respond from this centre of inward balance? The way we will respond will be in the three other modes, the three other divine abodes. If our response to ourselves and to others is coming from that inner stillness where intuitive wisdom resides, we will always respond with loving kindness, or compassion, or sympathetic joy, as the situation warrants. And where these reactions are inappropriate, we will simply remain calm, balanced, equanimous. Equanimity is our home base.

Before we go further, I'd like to introduce you to a very important work. Once the Buddha died, there grew up an industry of commentary and commentary upon the commentaries. The original commentaries are also considered very much part of the Theravada teaching, and other schools of Buddhism also have their own commentaries. One of the principal figures, the most famous, was a monk, Buddhaghosa, who came from Buddhagaya, the place of Buddha's enlightenment. To prove his competence, he set about writing a summary of all the Buddha's teachings. The work is known as the *Visuddhimagga*, the Path of Freedom, and it is recognised as one of the greatest books on spiritual development ever produced. A lot of what I say here is taken from that book.

Unfortunately, I don't recommend it to the beginner because it is a scholarly work, full of technical language and very dry, very dry indeed. Words are defined in this book in a way which seems strange to us, but actually illuminates a lot for us. That may be obscure. It's done like this. Take a flame, a flame of a match. The characteristic mark of a flame is heat. The function is to consume the wood. Its manifestation is light, and its near cause is the material to be burnt. It also has an inner enemy, damp in the material, and an outer enemy, an unexpected gust of wind. So a word is defined by its characteristic mark, its function, its manifestation, its near cause, its inner enemy and its outer enemy.

Sympathetic joy, *muditā*, has as its characteristic mark the gladdening of others. When one is joyful, that joy is infective. How different it is when you work with someone who's happy, happy at their work and even happy by nature. Even when such a person is with someone who is depressed or angry, that inner joy undermines the despair, the hatred of the other. Its function is to do away with envy and jealousy so that it manifests itself as joy and happiness in others' success. Its near cause is the ability to rejoice in the success of others.

How do we react when an acquaintance buys a better car than we have, when others get the promotion we wanted? You can see that this joy, like equanimity, rests on non-attachment, that understanding of self, me, mine, as only conventional truths. If we can only be joyful for ourselves and expect others to be happy at our success, our capacity for joy is greatly diminished, for we shall be overcome by envy and jealousy of others. This is the inner enemy, only being able to rejoice in oneself. That's why *muditā* is termed sympathetic joy, because our sense of joy should be universal. When it is universal, it will lack its outer edges of aversion, envy, jealousy and boredom, and naturally rejoice in others.

Cultivating this sympathetic joy is also important for meditators. No matter how we feel inside, depressed, anxious, frustrated and so on, our hearts are turned outwards to be with others in a joyful way. Some people think this is false, that it's two-faced, but it's only two-faced if we pretend to be joyful. What we need to do is determine to put our attention into being with the other, to be with the other in a sympathetic, supportive and friendly way as the occasion demands. As to our internal moods, we can put them to the side for the time being and look at them later in meditation.

It comes as a great surprise to those who practise this that the energy being absorbed by our negativity is displaced, drawn out of there into our positive disposition by the very will, the very intention to be positive, in this case joyful. This is the power of positive thinking. What's more, this joy turns up as one of the factors of enlightenment, here called *pīti*. This is the joy of interest. As you determine to meditate, to cut through the moods and really concentrate, as you become absorbed, then that watchful interest will arise. That interest comes with joy and both are factors that need to be there for the intuitive faculty to activate and intuit *Nibbāna*. So here, we also have a solution for our boredom and depression. We find something to do, wholesome of course, we put our minds to it, and lo and behold, just by making the effort, interest and joy arise.

Friendliness, open-heartedness, goodwill, loving-kindness, love in this sense is *mettā*. All these qualities are its characteristic mark, and its function is to promote and develop these very qualities. The near cause that makes such a mind arise is the ability to see the lovableness in all beings. Here we come up against the problem of non-attachment. If I'm not supposed to be attached to anything, how can I love it? But attachment is when the object of love is defined as mine, belonging to me, or therefore my satisfaction. This is why affection and lust are the inner enemies.

Your child comes home with a black eye. All hell's let loose. You want to know who did it. Why wasn't it stopped? You feel it terribly. When Jack the lad, the neighbour's son, comes home with a black eye, it's what he deserves. That'll teach him. That love of someone or something that we define as belonging to me is what attached love is, attached to a definition of me. Because of this, we love only what pleases us.

If Victoria sees herself as a yuppie and has to walk down the street with a man dressed like a tramp, she'll keep a distance to make sure that everyone knows that he's not really with her. Such a man can never be her man, her boyfriend, her husband. This is why snobbery and classism are so destructive to relationships. Other people are turned into objects that signify a person's status. Just like cars, owning a Jaguar or a Mini says something about the owner.

If a man has a Clint Eastwood complex, he doesn't want to be seen with a woman who doesn't look like Miss World. If he is with a woman who looks like Miss World, he feels wonderful. But if he's with a Miss Universe, he feels threatened and humiliated. He loves women only in that they enhance his image of himself. This is why sexism is so destructive to relationship. It turns the other into an object, an object which is there to please. If all these objects fail to please, then we hate them.

When two people fall in love in sweet infatuation, what's happening? It's ego meet ego. On the physical, emotional and mental level, for those few precious days, weeks or months, it seems that two are one. The other looks supremely beautiful, is totally loving and kind and so intelligent. Then the charm begins to wear off. Suddenly, ego doesn't mirror ego. Before they know it, these two lovebirds are bickering and biting each other. If they break up, they say in a bewildered way, I don't know what attracted me. Of course, in a long-lasting relationship, these times are overcome, but through a higher love not based on sensual attraction.

This higher love, *mettā*, will manifest as acceptance, goodwill, commitment, friendliness, care, and so on. If a partnership ever gets into a position of ill will and hatred, then it is consorting with the outer enemy. Lust and affection, or ill will, destroy true friendship. Lust centres on the personal physical satisfaction, the body beautiful, to the detriment of communication through touch and tenderness. Affection centres on the ego desires, what pleases me, without taking the other into consideration, and so feels to the other like an imprisonment. Ill will blocks any attempt of the other to approach or to make reconciliation.

If we look at it another way, usually our attachments are first and foremost to our closest family, then relatives and friends, then place of birth, our country, then to the ethnic group or so-called race, and finally to all human beings. So long as our attachments always take this order, everything up the scale undermines, contradicts what's below. If my friend asks me for something, I don't see his request as independent, but in relation to these attachments. I only do that thing for close family. If someone of another ethnic group has success, I moan. I say our group should have it.

These attitudes reverse themselves and our hearts open up when we define ourselves first and foremost as human beings, then belonging to the different subgroups. This is one way to approach unbranded, impartial, universal, boundless love. This is what the Buddha meant by *mettā*.

Finally, there is compassion. According to the *Visuddhimagga*, the path of freedom, compassion has the characteristic of wanting to alleviate suffering. Its function is to make us unable to bear another person's suffering so that we are motivated to do some-

thing about it. Its near cause is the seeing of the helplessness in the sufferer. And when we act compassionately, it manifests as the opposite of cruelty, a caring concern. Cruelty itself is seen as the outer enemy. If we are cruel of heart, we enjoy inflicting pain on another. The exact opposite. The inner enemy, and this is difficult for us in the West to accept at first, is grief.

To illustrate all this, I'd like to take a story from the magnificent Winnie the Pooh, Pooh Bear herself. No doubt, in my mind, a very enlightened being, even if only a bear of little brain. The story I'd like to centre on is Eeyore's birthday. When Pooh happens upon Eeyore, he's a very sad donkey indeed. Everyone's forgotten his birthday. Pooh, once he's realised what is wrong, it takes him a little while, decides to tackle the problem at heart. Even though he too had forgotten Eeyore's birthday, at least he could still get him a present and put things aright.

He rushes off home, only to find Piglet knocking on his door. When Piglet finds out it's Eeyore's birthday, he wants to share Pooh's present. Pooh tells him that that's not a good idea, so Piglet rushes off to get a present of his own. Pooh decides to give Eeyore a jar of honey. Unfortunately on the way, none too mindful, he gets a little peckish and eats the honey. When he realises what he's done, he saves the day by realising he can give the empty jar to Eeyore as a useful pot.

Little Piglet, meanwhile, went to get a balloon left over from a party and is racing towards Eeyore, hoping to get there before Pooh to give Eeyore the impression that he'd remembered his birthday without anyone telling him. Unfortunately, he slips and bursts the balloon. In the end, Piglet arrives with the burst balloon and Pooh with his useful pot. After a heart-rending scene, they leave Eeyore as happy as a donkey could be, for Eeyore, though disappointed with the balloon being burst, has now found a wonderful pastime, putting it in and pulling it out of his useful pot. To get the full delight of the story, please read the originals.

The conversation is very funny. Anyway, the point of my retelling the story here is to point out what compassion is, and how Pooh Bear here is without doubt a very compassionate little being.

When Pooh sees Eeyore and hears his tale, he doesn't do what we would likely do. He doesn't collude and build up a world of woe. "Yes, you're right, Eeyore, the world's terrible. Nobody remembers birthdays. People aren't kind anymore. It's rotten. The world, the people in it," and so on and so on. We think that this indulgence of self-pity and righteous indignation is a way of consoling someone. But in fact, this sort of self-indul-

gent whinging simply adds to the overall feelings of depression and sorrow. It's bad enough for Eeyore to realise that everyone's forgotten his birthday without being told that that's how the world really is.

The other course we would take is the "oh come on, pull your socks up, Eeyore," and the kick-in-the-pants routine. No pity here, but anger and aversion at others' depression and self-pity. Of course, such an action would be to oppress poor Eeyore the more, seeing that no one understands his sorrow and actually blames him for it.

No, Pooh Bear does neither. They had all forgotten Eeyore's birthday. That's the problem. What to do? Off he goes to get a present, thereby turning the situation into one of joy. That's compassion: treating the problem, allaying the suffering.

Piglet, of course, wants to do that also, but he also wants to give Eeyore the wrong impression that he's remembered his birthday. He wants to be Eeyore's best friend. It's still compassion, all right, but compassion with ego added.

We can test our compassion in ordinary daily life. What is our reaction to other people's suffering? Do we ignore it? Do we get irritated by it? Do we want to do something about it purely, or for recognition? Unfortunately, until our hearts are totally purified, all our compassionate actions will have some small ingredient of ego in there somewhere. Whenever we help someone, we need to be aware — just aware — of such reactions: the wholesome one of compassion, and the unwholesome ones of indifference, aversion, selfishness, pride, and so on.

Just notice the unwholesome ones. Don't entertain them, don't pay any attention to them, don't give them any importance, don't entertain any feelings of guilt. Realise that all such thoughts and feelings are just products of past unwholesome conditioning. Put all the energy we have into solving the problem. Solving the problem is what compassion is.

While solving the problem, we may need to console, to empathise, to say encouraging things, but the real motivation is to solve the problem. If after our action we feel good, we notice how much we esteem ourselves, how good we think we are — that's just the product of the ego-added ingredient to our good actions. Let it be. For if we entertain such thoughts, we shall find ourselves doing good in order to feel good ourselves. That's the do-gooder complex. If you've ever been the object of the attentions of a do-gooder, you'll understand what I mean when I say that the sufferer becomes a patient, an object to be taken care of. It can be quite stifling.

It is impossible to be totally compassionate so long as there is ego, selfishness within us. But we still have to strive. In the striving, we will discover selfish attitudes underlying our compassion — the inner enemies. Slowly, this wisdom will lead to separating out those selfish elements until they become isolated. In their isolation, they will lose their influence over us and seem like cheeky flies to be gently wafted away.

Doing what we can to alleviate another's suffering is enough. We can only do what we can do. What's the point of grief? Pooh does not grieve over Eeyore's plight. Pooh doesn't start to cry over it.

If I go to the doctor to find out the results of an X-ray, and he pulls it out, holds it to the light, points tremblingly at the dark spot, and collapses into a heap of sobs while telling me I only have three weeks to live, how does that make me feel? Here am I, trying to come to terms with this traumatic news, while a part of me wants to comfort the doctor, is embarrassed by the doctor, is angry that the doctor isn't consoling me, giving me some hope.

Now, I'm not saying here that we have to repress our grief — not at all. If we feel grief and sorrow, we have to let it out. It's most necessary to do so. But we also have to recognise that it is not a wholesome state of mind. If we think we have to grieve, then we may very well be reinforcing the grief and find ourselves grieving all our lives over a mistake or a loss of someone dear. It can become an illness.

The fact is that the amount of grief we feel is proportionate to our attachment to that thing or person. If my mother is suffering, I feel terrible. If it's your mother, I feel sad for you. If it's Mrs. Bloggs, I don't feel anything — I don't know Mrs. Bloggs. If a doctor weeps over the suffering of her husband, we think that's right and proper. But if she does it over a patient, we think that's unprofessional.

Furthermore, if I myself am grieving, if I'm upset, that hinders my ability to be compassionate. I was once in an accident. I ran over a dog. When I went into the pub opposite to ask whose it was, the landlady rushed out, shrieked, picked up the dog, and stood there wailing and shouting. The dog was in its death throes, with blood pouring out of its mouth. She was absolutely grief-stricken — so stricken she could do nothing at all for the dog, and probably added to the dog's suffering by handling it.

It's difficult for us to grasp this point about grief. We need to ponder over it. Once we realise that grief doesn't help, once we realise that a lot of our grief can be caused by the fact that we think we ought to grieve and feel guilty if we don't, we can let go of a lot of our grief, not give it importance, just let it die out.

There's a famous story from the scriptures illustrating this point. *Kisagotami* brought her dead child to the Buddha. She was absolutely distraught with grief. She had heard of his powers and wanted him to perform some ceremony or other to bring the child back to life. The Buddha realised that talking would not help. He asked her instead to leave the child with him and go in search of a mustard seed. Now mustard seeds are a thousand a penny in India. Kisagotami ran off full of joy thinking that the Buddha would now bring her child back to life. But the Buddha had put a condition on it. He had said the seed must come from a house where there had been no death.

Every house she visited, they were only too glad to give her handfuls of mustard seeds. But to the last they all had a death to report: a grandfather, a grandmother, a parent, a child. Slowly, slowly, it dawned on Kisagotami that death was inevitable and inescapable. As her insight came, the madness of her grief passed. She returned, praising the Buddha, and later joined the Order. Eventually, she achieved full enlightenment.

Anyone who has done bereavement counselling knows that the hardest thing for the grieved to accept is that the beloved one has died. It's so difficult to say, "John's dead," "Mary's dead." The Great Compassionate One, the Buddha, the helper of humankind, is asking us to see things as they really are. It's painful to let go of our cherished notions, but when we do, we experience liberation.

Like Kisagotami, we need to liberate ourselves from wrong views, wrong understandings. I'm sure she went on to help many another in grief.

I hope that all this has gone a long way to scotch the idea that Buddhism is a cold religion, that Buddha was teaching some cold indifference, that non-attachment means not to care. In the *Metta Sutta*, the Discourse on Loving Kindness, the Buddha urges people to live always in the mind of universal love. He asks us to cultivate a love like a mother who is not possessive. Children are in the care of parents. They don't belong to them. People are in our care. They don't belong to us.

If we can cultivate this attitude, then we will be like the mother who is equanimous with the leaving of the eldest. She has gone on and is doing well. There's no sorrow in the parting. The job's done. The child, now adult, must go her own way. The second child has just passed his exams and she feels sympathetic joy at his success. She encourages him to succeed the more. The third is at school and young. She takes care to support the child, guiding her as a true friend. The youngest is in bed with a bad sore throat and cold. To that child she feels nothing but compassion, devoting herself to alleviating his suffering. This mother lives in the divine abodes. Her heart is forever in loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, or equanimity.

The Buddha tells us to develop these states of mind. It is the measure of our personal growth in the meditative life, the more we live in these states. He asks us to practise sending out our loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and peace in all directions: east, south, west, north, below and above, to cover the whole universe with these thoughts. These were his instructions:

"Here a disciple dwells, pervading in one direction with heart filled with love, likewise in the second, the third, the fourth direction, so above, below, and around. He dwells pervading the entire world everywhere, and equally with heart filled with love, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from hatred, and free from distress." And this is done again with compassion, and then with sympathetic joy, and lastly with equanimity.

This is how we should end any *vipassana* insight meditation we do. What mental energy we have purified is thereby transformed, re-educated, re-conditioned into one of those sublime states. Our training continues. These states deepen and broaden until, like all the Buddhas and *Arahats*, we shall live continually in these four divine abodes.

Worth striving for, don't you think? So I hope this talk has been interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the *nirvanic* peace within.

CHAPTER 16

Faith or Belief

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 25 min

In this exploration, Bhante Bodhidhamma distinguishes between blind belief and authentic faith (saddhā) in Buddhist practice. Drawing from the Kālāma Sutta and other discourses, he demonstrates how the Buddha explicitly discouraged blind acceptance of teachings, instead encouraging personal investigation and verification through reason and experience.

The talk examines four key aspects of the Buddha's approach: his Socratic teaching method that encouraged listeners to discover truth for themselves, his declaration of individual freedom of thought in the Kālāma Sutta, his refusal to make unverifiable metaphysical statements, and most importantly, his provision of the Noble Eightfold Path as a practical method for direct realization.

Bhante explains how true faith (saddhā) differs fundamentally from belief - it is a disposition of the heart that arouses confidence, energy, and willingness to investigate. This faith becomes one of the five spiritual faculties essential for meditation practice, eventually transforming into unshakeable power upon experiencing Nibbāna. The talk concludes with the Buddha's final instruction to Ānanda about taking refuge in oneself and the Dhamma, emphasizing that each person must realize the truth individually while having confidence in the path shown by those who have succeeded before us.

Foundation Course 2, Talk 6, Buddhism, Belief or Faith

I wonder what you think would happen in the world if all the religious systems, ideologies, philosophies, psychologies, all the ismologies, were to disappear. Do you think we'd be any the poorer for it? Or do you think we would somehow start afresh? Or would we return to a barbarism? I suppose the underlying question is, how did we get where we are in the first place?

According to some religious systems, truths are revealed to us by supernatural means, but the Buddha said that all his discoveries were realized through his own endeavour and his alone. That's why we call him the *Sammasambuddho*, the fully self-enlightened one. Furthermore, he was quite clear that whatever he discovered concerning the fact and the end of suffering could also be discovered by each individual. The truth, the *Dhamma*, is said to be realized by the wise for themselves.

This is a very important point in Buddhist understanding. No matter what the Buddha taught, he was not a saviour. He could not end our personal suffering for us. Each person has to find that end for themselves by their own endeavour. The Buddhas only point the way.

The way, the truth, the Dhamma can be a very subjective thing. If we begin to study the ismologies, all these isms and ologies that have been developed, to the impartial mind it's no easy task to discover the truth as an objective thing. Unfortunately, human beings can't point to something and say, that's it, that's the truth, the ultimate transcendent truth. If it were so, we'd have no disagreement such as whether there is a personal God or not.

To make it easier for us within the scope of this talk, in which we're trying to decide whether Buddhism is a belief system or a theory meditators are trying to prove true for themselves, I'd like to use the Buddha's own description taken from a discourse I shall be quoting more fully later on. Truth is that which, after observation and analysis, agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of all. This is the Dharma, the truth, the law, and its noble characteristics are that it makes sense, it's reasonable, and that it is to the benefit of all. I'm sure that most philosophers and religious leaders would agree to this baseline definition, but the Buddha, of course, means that it should be the aim of all individuals to come to such realization for themselves.

What has been essential then in the past to the development of all the systems, and essential to any future development, even if there is almost complete wipe-out of knowledge, not so unthinkable in our nuclear age, is the human desire to realize the truth. If a person living now does not have that desire in them, then all the religions, philosophies and so on are indeed of no avail anyway, since without that desire a person simply won't seek.

Marx said that religion was an opium of the people. It put them into a pleasant dream state, a delusion in which they could be easily manipulated. A lot of people would argue that that's what seems to have happened to Marxism and other communist ideologies themselves. The underlying question here seems to be, why do people become followers and never leaders, disciples and never masters? I'm not here suggesting some anarchic system wherein everyone wants to be a chief leader, but more, why do people never become truly individuals? Or as modern psychology would have it, individuated or truly self-actuated.

There are many psychological reasons, I'm sure, as to why this is. But here, I'd like to centre on what happens when we believe something. It seems that when we believe something, we give up the struggle to find out whether what we have come to believe is

really true or not. By belief here is meant to accept without criticism or personal investigation any statement made by another. Once we've taken this belief position, we blindly accept whatever is said to be true.

If you tell young children that Father Christmas is coming down the chimney, they believe it. I did. I wrote letters and sent them up the chimney. If I was still doing that now, people might think me a little eccentric, to say the least. But I've heard other children questioning it. And I wrote secret letters asking for this and that. Since they never came, I realized it was all just a joke. So I stopped believing there was a Father Christmas. But while I believed in Father Christmas, I felt great. I felt really secure that I'd get everything I wanted. I was really happy. But of course, I was living under a delusion.

I personally believe this to be a very healthy thing to do to children. When they find out adults have tricked them, it should create a healthy scepticism. They lose their gullibility. There's no way you can fool a five-year-old who's discovered adults don't always tell the truth.

This happiness in my delusion about Father Christmas, ignorance is bliss, has an unfortunate side effect. For while I believed, that very belief blocked my investigative faculties. It stifled my intellect. Worse, that belief destroyed the fine line between knowing a statement because I believe it to be true and knowing a statement because I discovered it to be true by my own experience. In other words, belief becomes knowledge. By force of my willingness to believe what my parents told me, by force of my own imagination, I believed Father Christmas to be as real as the presents I got from him.

Although this seems rather trivial when talking about a child's belief in Father Christmas, when we look into history, we see so many examples of belief systems and what happens when someone undermines them. We need to remind ourselves that a belief system in Buddhism is seen as a self-definition, the self of opinions, views and judgments. I am what I believe. I am my opinions. If someone argues against what I believe and I win, I feel good. If in the argument I lose, I also lose my temper and call the other a fool. To actually change some of our cherished opinions can be very hard indeed.

In the Middle Ages, for instance, people believed that man was the centre of God's creation, and therefore that the whole universe revolved about the earth, man's dwelling place. If you look up at the sky, that seems to be reinforced by observation. Indeed, the sun, moon and stars do appear to revolve around us. When Galileo discovered through his new telescope that in fact this was not so, he was told by the church authorities to be silent, or else he may find himself burnt as a heretic.

In the Cultural Revolution in China, anyone even suspected of being a capitalist roader, or of believing that communism may not have it all right, meant imprisonment or execution. In our present-day secularist state, any idea of bringing some moral judgment to bear in laws concerning abortion, surrogate motherhood, and so on, are considered contrary to the idea of personal freedom. This idea of personal freedom can be taken to extremes. In America, study after study has shown that pornography is a chief factor in developing sexist attitudes and in influencing men towards sexual violence. A law enabling women victims of pornography to bring civil actions against pornographers was repealed in the federal courts. The pornographers claimed it was against their constitutional right of free speech. They won, even though the courts accepted that pornography was a violation of women's civil rights to equality and safety from violence. The right to free speech, it seems, takes precedence overall, even when it's harming individuals and society. Here in this country, racists consider it part of free speech to go around insulting people. It's now against the law, but not after a lot of damage had been done to community relations.

One of the outcomes of any belief system, religious, ideological, or whatever, is that the believers form a closed system, which not only has an answer to everything, but which has penalties for those believers who begin to doubt. If I didn't believe in Father Christmas, maybe I wouldn't get any presents. What happens to me if I don't believe in God anymore? If I don't believe Buddha was a fully enlightened being? Suddenly, I'm full of fear, and each system has horror tales of what happens to those who dare to leave. This is also true of Buddhism, when it had become an established religion. It's the way we human beings always like to build secure fortresses. But is it what the Buddha wanted? I think we can safely say that this was exactly the opposite of what the Buddha wanted.

First of all, there are a lot of discourses written in the Socratic fashion, that is, the Buddha uses a question and answer format to get the listeners to discover for themselves the truth of the matter. Indeed, he uses this way of teaching in the very second discourse he gives on the characteristics of human existence, the transiency, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality of our lives. He asks, is the body permanent or not permanent? If it is impermanent and subject to change, can we say it belongs to a me? Or say it is what I am? Or say it constitutes a substantial soul or self? To all these questions, the listeners answer, no, venerable sir. And so he goes through all the rest of the aggregates, the sensations, perceptions, volitional conditionings and consciousness.

One often gets from the scriptures whole passages where the Buddha is in conversation with one or another individual, usually beginning with a question and answer session. Only when he sees they've got the point does he then give a talk as such to clarify

his own teachings. There is always the presumption that all that needs to be done is to dispel ignorance and wisdom will arise automatically. We are all capable of enlightenment, but we must all make the effort to achieve it. The Buddha's method is to excite a person's intellectual factors, get them thinking for themselves, and then make a clear statement of his own position, allowing the individual room to criticise and question.

The second factor is his direct teaching on belief itself. There seems to have been an oversupply of religious teachers in his time with all sorts of teachings being expounded. A little bit like today, I imagine. The Buddha, while visiting the village of the Kalamas, was approached by them. They complained that one guru came and taught such and such and then another would come, call the other a fool and teach another set of doctrines. The point was that they were all very confused and didn't know what to believe.

The Buddha then gives a talk which can rightly be called a declaration of an individual's right to freedom of thought. Do not believe anything simply because you have heard it, simply because it is tradition handed down for many generations, simply because it is spoken and rumoured by the many, simply because it is found written in your religious books, simply on the authority of your teachers and elders. Not only do we see in this discourse that the Buddha had no desire for people to sell their souls to his teachings in blind belief, but he exhorted them to think for themselves.

There is an incident in the scriptures which reinforces this picture of the Buddha as one who did not want people to be blind adherents. There was a certain Upali who when he had questioned the Buddha and heard him explain the doctrine was immediately converted. He was a major supporter of another important sect at the time and which still survives in India today, the Jains. The Buddha would not accept him as a follower immediately, but asked him to go back to the Jains and stay with them until he was absolutely sure of what he wanted to do. The Buddha knew that often people are caught up in their enthusiasm, only to feel embarrassed once the excitement has worn off. He really did want people to think about things.

The third factor that points to the Buddha not wanting people to have blind belief in what he said is that he would not make any definite statements about matters that could not be verified, could not be proven. He calls such questions undetermined. In a particular discourse named after the wealthy Brahmin he was talking to, Pottapada, he makes it clear the sort of philosophical, metaphysical questions he will not determine or give an answer to. Is the world eternal or not eternal, finite or infinite? Is the soul the same as the body, or is the soul one thing and the body another? Does an enlightened being live on after death or not? Or does he neither live nor not live again after death?

You can see from these questions they are the sort of questions philosophers, both the professional armchair varieties, love to spend a lifetime talking about. To the exasperated Pottapada, the Buddha explains why he expresses no opinion. Such questions, he says, bring no profit and are not concerned with the Dharma. They don't help to refine our moral behavior and develop non-attachment. Nor do they purify the mind and lead to the cessation of desire. Nor to equanimity, nor to supramundane knowledge, nor to the highest wisdom, *Nibbāna*.

In other words, the Buddha would not be drawn into statements that were of no moral worth and did not lead to the end of suffering. In the context of the times these were the sorts of questions any self-respecting religious teacher was happy to give an answer to, although there was a sect who, like the Buddha, would not enter into such discussions. The point is that the Buddha would not enter into useless arguments about things that could not be verified, could not be proved. To have done so would have put his followers in a position of having to believe something they themselves could not verify and this would have led to an element of blind belief.

So if the Buddha did not leave a set of unverifiable beliefs, he did not leave an empty philosophy or psychology either. And this is the fourth point that shows the Buddha did not want blind believers and indeed simply had no need of such support. The fact is that because he had discovered the truth by his own endeavour, he had also discovered the path to the truth. The Eightfold Noble Path is the great discovery of the Middle Way. He doesn't have to say to people, believe me, for I know this is true. He is free to say, this is the truth, now you can discover it for yourselves, whether it is true or not. Firstly, by the use of your own intellectual powers, and secondly, by direct experience, through practicing the Eightfold Noble Path. What is more, through the practice of *Vipassanā* Insight Meditation, you will discover the Absolute Truth for yourself.

In other words, the Buddha is not simply saying that he's enlightened, but that everyone can become so, and he leaves us the actual method by which we can achieve it. He doesn't want meditators to remain disciples. He wants them to become masters.

These four points then, his method of teaching allowing the listener to think for themselves, his declaration of an individual's right to freedom of thought, no doctrine that was not verifiable, able to be proved to be true by each individual, and lastly, the actual method and practice he left whereby individuals can prove all this to be true for themselves. All of this points to the Buddha not wanting to have people have blind belief. But he did want them to have faith.

The difference between belief and faith is crucial in Buddhist understanding. By belief here is meant an acceptance of a statement about something that cannot be proved. Here there are two types of statements worth pondering over. If I discuss a Walkman with a friend, I would be trying to define what a perfect Walkman is. A cassette radio, stereo, light earphones and rechargeable battery and so on. We would hopefully eventually arrive at the perfect Walkman. But this perfection only exists in my mind. It's a concept. The perfect Walkman. And this concept has all the attributes named above.

Now suppose I say to my friend, where have you put my Walkman? We are no longer worried about what a Walkman is anymore. We're worried about where the object is. The object, the Walkman in this case, really exists.

Now if we keep these two types of statements in mind, the question of what is something as opposed to where is something, we can see we come across great difficulties with questions concerning the supramundane, the supernatural. If we say a God is the perfect good, for example, a group of people should be able to come to a good definition. But because they have come even to a perfect definition about a God, it doesn't mean, therefore, that he or she exists. Just because I can build up a picture of the perfect human being doesn't mean that person will actually ever really exist. When we come to the question of where is God, now that's where we have problems, because no one has yet found God anywhere, or at least anywhere where another person can also find that God. If God could be pointed to in the way that I point to a person, no difficulty would exist.

These are the sorts of arguments the Buddha would not enter into. That's why he wouldn't say what happened to a Buddha after death. Such things are indescribable, unprovable, in the way that you can prove that the body rots after death.

So here is the first error that can be made by the meditator if he believes in what the Buddha says. There is a possibility of turning a concept into a fact, of believing that a concept actually exists apart from the mind that has it.

Nibbāna, for instance, is never described. It's a bold statement. The end of suffering exists, and it isn't annihilation nor a heaven. But what a person experiences when all suffering has gone is never described. If Nibbāna could be described, then it would still belong to this type of existence. All words and concepts can only describe what is possible in our experience as human beings, no matter how imaginative. That which is beyond sense experience, beyond the experience of this world, is by definition inexplicable, undescribable.

So to have an idea of what Nibbāna is would actually be a hindrance. For I would be trying to experience my idea of Nibbāna. If or when I do experience my idea of Nibbāna, I will only have experienced my idea of it, what I think it is. To come to a point where I believe that my experience of an idea of Nibbāna, say a brilliant or bright light, is in fact Nibbāna, is to be deluded. Therefore, when it comes to such things, the Buddha was silent.

So, if belief simply means saying something really exists which can't be proved, what is faith? Faith has little to do with thinking. Faith is a disposition of the heart. It is a trusting. It is to set one's heart to something. It arouses confidence in us. This confidence leads to an open-mindedness, to a willingness to investigate for ourselves. It arouses energy, courage and determination.

When the Buddha teaches the fact of the end of suffering Nibbāna, he does so by way of argument. These arguments we might find persuasive. Because we are attracted by the arguments, we ask, well, how do we know it's true? The Buddha then gives us a method, a technique, which will lead us to such a personal experience, the Noble Eightfold Path.

Again, persuaded by this argument, we begin to tread that path. At first, because we're not sure, we do it carefully, hesitatingly. But as we tread the path, we find that what the Buddha said is true. As we discover for ourselves that little bits of what the Buddha said are actually true for us personally, so we listen more attentively to what he has to say, and our trust in his guidance grows. As our trust grows, so does our dedication to the path.

This trust, this faith, known as *saddha*, becomes one of the spiritual faculties. Without this faith, the second faculty, energy, could not arise. If I don't have confidence in something, I'm hardly going to give it a go. If I don't have confidence to dive off the high plank, I'm hardly going to climb up to it. Without confidence, faith, no energy. No energy, no concentration. No concentration, no awareness. Without these, no meditation at all. And with no meditation, no wisdom can arise.

The five spiritual faculties of faith, energy, concentration, awareness and wisdom all depend on this ability to set one's heart to something. Interestingly, once a person has experienced Nibbāna, this faculty is now called a power. For one who has experienced Nibbāna, their faith in the Buddha's path is unshakable, for now they know for themselves the third noble truth of the end of suffering.

So what exactly did the Buddha want us to have faith in? During the last journey of the Buddha, while he was making his way to Kusinara, where he passed into *Parinibbana*, total Nibbāna, Ananda, his faithful attendant for the last 20 years, begins to get frightened when he realizes his master is going to die. With great anxiety, he asks the Buddha what will happen once he's gone. What will happen to the order, to the teaching, to him, Ananda? Who will guide them? Who will guide him once he, the teacher, has gone?

Here is the Buddha's reply. Ananda, be an island unto yourself. Be a refuge unto yourself. Seek no external refuge. Live with the *Dhamma*, the truth, the law as your island, the Dhamma as your refuge. Take no other external refuge.

What is the Buddha saying here? He's saying that in the ultimate analysis there is only the individual seeker and the truth. The truth, the law, the Dhamma that he taught has six qualities. It is to be self-realized. No one can realize the truth for us. When we experience the ultimate truth of Nibbāna, the fruits are immediate. We experience the results of that experience at once. The Dhamma invites us to investigate it. It will lead to Nibbāna, the liberation of all suffering. And finally, it has to be understood, to be comprehended by each person individually.

This is where our confidence is to be put. But the Buddha also said, who sees the Dharma, sees me. In other words, there is no separation between the truth and the expression of that truth within the person of the Buddha. To put trust in the Dharma is therefore also to put trust in the teacher of that Dharma, the Buddha himself. But once he had gone into Parinibbana, the only tangible thing left for his followers is the actual teachings. That's why he asked Ananda to make it his island, his island of refuge.

This Dharma, this truth, however, is not something external to a person. It isn't a treasure chest to be found on an island. It is a treasure to be found within a person's heart and being. Therefore, the Buddha asks Ananda to take refuge in himself, to trust himself, to have confidence in himself. All beings are capable of enlightenment. The Buddha is asking us to have faith in ourselves because in the last analysis we can only free ourselves. The Buddhas only point the way. They can't save us from suffering. We have to pull ourselves out of it.

By cultivating this confidence in ourselves, we are also cultivating confidence in all those who've trod the path and succeeded, the noble ones, the *Aryas*, the saints. So it is that by taking refuge in ourselves, we are also putting trust, taking refuge in all those who have achieved the enlightenment, the Aryan Sangha, the community of noble ones.

In this way, Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. In this way, they take refuge in themselves. This is all the Buddha wanted his followers to do, not to believe blindly what he said, not to accept the words of the Master without due investigation. He called himself the *Tathagata*, one who has completed the path, the journey. He wants all to follow that path, but with the spirit of investigation, of personal endeavour. He wants us to experiment and discover it for ourselves.

If it stands to reason, if it is conducive to the benefit of all, then put confidence in it, trust it, and most of all, live up to it. The Buddha didn't ask the Kalamas to become his disciples to become Buddhists. If the Buddha's path works for us, then we should work at it.

I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

CHAPTER 17

Paṭicca Samuppāda: The Wheel of Dependent Origination

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 26 min

> *In this exploration of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the Buddha's profound teaching on causation and liberation. He explains the twelve interconnected links that perpetuate the cycle of becoming: from ignorance (avijjā) and volitional formations (saṅkhāra) through consciousness (viññāṇa), name-and-form (nāmarūpa), the six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving (taṇhā), clinging (upādāna), becoming (bhava), and finally birth and death.*
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> *The talk illuminates how this wheel operates both as a historical process spanning lifetimes and as an immediate reality occurring moment to moment. Bhante explores the Buddhist understanding of rebirth (not reincarnation), emphasizing the arising and passing of the five aggregates (khandha) in each moment. Drawing from the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (DN 22), he demonstrates how vipassanā meditation reveals the constant birth and death occurring within our experience.*
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> *Using compelling examples including personal reflections on racism and conditioning, Bhante shows how ignorance creates self-perpetuating cycles of suffering. He describes the liberated state of an Arahant—one who has broken free from the wheel through the elimination of craving and wrong view of self. The talk concludes with practical guidance on finding the exit from suffering 'between feelings and the desire for them,' emphasizing the crucial importance of present-moment awareness in breaking these ancient patterns.*

In the last attempt at describing the central teaching of the Buddha, I concentrated on how it works in daily life. After a reminder of what the links are in the wheel, I'd like to develop the historical process of the wheel, the process of habit-forming, the importance of the present moment, rebirth and its meaning, and finally to give some idea of what it is to be totally liberated, an Arahant or a Buddha, in terms of the wheel of dependent origination.

The links of the wheel of dependent origination are made in a circular form to show the inevitable rounds of rebirth. So long as there is ignorance, the first link, the wheel will always turn. Ignorance is the root cause—our not knowing why we are born, why we live and why we die. Because of this ignorance we attach to the sense world, the world of transient things, things that are not substantial or real in any permanent way.

Because of this wrong attachment we have built up a whole battery of dependencies, of conditionings that cry out for satisfaction and lead us by the nose to seek that satisfaction. Even though we don't know why we are born, or why we live or why we die—indeed why we suffer—we still crave for life and birth with all that that means. These conditionings are the product of past decisions and actions. These volitional conditionings or formations are the second link.

Once these two preconditions are there, the next five links come into being: the human being itself, with all its consciousnesses, its body and mind, the six senses, the ability through these senses to make contact with the world, and the feelings that these contacts produce in the body, perceived as either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Once a human is endowed with these basic faculties, there is a reaction, a response to all the information coming in. This response is desire, whether it is a want or a don't want. And this desire becomes strong and produces an attachment, a grasping, an obsession, sometimes an uncontrollable craving. This leads to a decision, to an action, in order to fulfill that craving. We want to live. When death approaches, we clutch at life. A drowning man clutches at a straw.

But once these three links are activated—the desire, the attachment and action arising out of these motivations—we can be assured of becoming. This becoming means that the cycle will all be repeated again in the future. This future is just this cycle of birth, growth, a momentary peak, then decay and death. These are the twelve links, the twelve consecutive causes and effects that produce the whole phenomena of birth and death.

If we now look at it from the point of view of *kamma*, we shall see this historical process more clearly. The law of *kamma* states that nothing happens without a cause. So it is the Buddha says: "Inconceivable is the beginning, O disciples, of this going on and on. The earliest point is not revealed." And just as the earliest point is not revealed, so an ending is incomprehensible. In fact, there is no ending. There is only escape, only liberation.

To be clear how this liberation is to be achieved, we need to have understood how it is we keep on becoming. In any given moment in our lives, ignorance and past volitional intentioned conditionings are always with us. The ignorance is a passive thing. The problem is we don't know what it is we are ignorant of. That's a tautology I know, but it needs to be said. If we did know what we were ignorant of, we'd soon find a way to dispel it. We'd become wise. But we can take a middle position and acknowledge that we don't know everything. This attitude at least keeps us open-minded, keeps us searching, and open to information that might disagree with what we believe.

In the Dhammapada, the Buddha is very clear on this: "The fool, who knows he is a fool, can for that reason be a wise man. But a fool who thinks himself wise, that fool is a fool indeed." For fool, read ignorance.

Much of what we believe is simply blind acceptance of what we have been told, such as the belief that the human being is a complete whole and not a collection of integrated parts, or the belief that in the body and personality there is some substantial real everlasting soul or self or ego. This sort of belief based on ignorance, this delusion, causes us to behave in certain ways that reinforce that belief. Beliefs are self-fulfilling, since they perceive the world in a certain way, and that certain way blocks out any information that does not fit. This is what conditioning does.

If we take one of the great evils in the world today, racism, this mechanism becomes obvious. Racism is a worldwide phenomena. Anyone who travels will come up against it in all forms. Each ethnic grouping presumes the other to be inferior by its own standards. Very early on in life as children, the things our parents, friends and media say, the way they say whatever they say about the other so-called race, all conditions our childish, ignorant, not-knowing mind. The child simply does not know better. Later, that child acts upon that racist information and reinforces its own conditionings.

I remember as a child being taunted by other children. I was born in Italy. And when I went to school, my English was very poor, so the other children would make fun of me. One of the things they'd do is turn me round to look at the yellow stripe down my back, since all Italians, because of Mussolini's invasion of a defenceless Ethiopia and the later miserable war record, were supposed to be cowards. They were yellow.

Unfortunately, it didn't stop there. I was enculturated. By eight or nine, no one would have known me to be Italian. My English was English and my name was English. I looked and behaved English. Social pressure pushed me to assimilate. I wanted to be accepted by my peer group. I internalized their hatred of Italy. I was ashamed of my Italian origin. I was ashamed of being out with my Italian mother. By the age of 11, I remember taking distinct delight in making fun of the first West Indian who came to the school. There I was, turning the wheel of racial hatred, even though I myself had suffered from it. My subconscious unresolved anger at those who made fun of me found its sweet revenge in perpetrating the same violence on another entirely innocent. The effects of our conditioning can be extremely subtle. We simply don't know.

There was a teacher I knew who blamed the inability of some Asians to draw in three dimensions on genetics. What this teacher was saying was that the skills that are obviously taught and learnt are already somehow pre-programmed by our genes, and that it was these genes that set one above the other, one race above another.

Whether this thinking manifests itself between different ethnic groups as racism, or between different classes of people in a society as classism, the Buddha made his position quite clear. The Brahmanical society of the Buddha's day had produced such a rigid caste system that it was impossible to move from one to the other. There was no social mobility. Each caste had a particular task apportioned to it. The Kshatriya caste, to which the Buddha himself belonged, were the warriors, rulers or governing class. Whether you had such capabilities or not, that's where you stayed if that's where you were born. You certainly couldn't do things ascribed to other castes, such as becoming a merchant or a priest. Any intermarriage did not produce a new caste or allow one caste member to move into another caste. The couple who married became outcasts.

Of course, that society came to its own class system and racist attitudes by way of its own understandings or rather misunderstandings. But the Buddha asserted that all humans are equal in their ability to escape from ignorance and suffering. He undermined the whole system by demanding that any person joining his order had to drop all notions of caste. Even the highest Brahmin, as soon as he joined, joined at the end of the armed round even after an untouchable who may have joined but minutes before.

Whatever our ignorance and conditioning were in the past, they are causes now in the present, causes which affect our thinking now. We can't do anything about them arising. But by exercising our awareness in daily life, we can begin to see and realize they are there. Once we begin to do that, we can at least stop them from affecting our actions.

This present ignorance and the present conditioned thoughts and states of mind have been caused by past craving, attachment and action. At the deepest level, it is these three—desire, attachment and action, working away and manifesting themselves as our conditionings—that cause us to come into life, that cause us to have and desperately want to keep the body and mind.

Just as ignorant delusion is always present in the mind, just as the volitional conditionings, all our habitual ways of thinking and behaving, are always ready to activate upon a given stimulus, so the two motivations of craving and attachment, and specifically the will to act upon these motivations, are what create further becoming.

We can begin to see why the Buddha told Ananda off for thinking he had understood this teaching. We can see here there are wheels within wheels. The more we study the teaching, the more complicated it becomes.

So now we've got as far as saying that in any given moment of our lives there is an underlying ignorance. Because of this ignorance, we react to things with craving and attachment. These cause us to make decisions that produce actions. These actions, these becomings, build up our conditionings. All this, all our past, lies pregnant within us at any given moment. On a life level, it keeps us clinging to life, clinging to our bodies and minds.

In this way, the next five links—consciousness, body and mind, the six senses, sense contact and feeling—all arise. And they arise every moment of our lives. Unfortunately, as soon as they arise, they must go through the process of decay and death. In this way, the last two links are not only future results of being alive, but are ever present with us now. Every day begins and ends. Every moment begins and ends.

We can now begin to understand a little better what the Buddha meant by the doctrine of rebirth. Firstly, this must not be confused with reincarnation. Reincarnation presumes that in the body and mind there is a lasting being or substance that carries on unchanged. What the Buddha discovered was that such an entity did not actually exist. Everything that goes to make up the body and mind are so many pieces, so many parts. He divided all these pieces into five categorizations, the five aggregates.

These five aggregates of body, sensations, perceptions, all the volitional conditionings, and consciousness are all arising and passing away at any given moment of the day. In other words, this person or being is arising and passing away, being born and dying, every moment of its so-called existence. The human is this process of change. This change means that something has to end before something new can begin. We cannot carry within us the body of the baby we were in the body of the adult we are. That baby body disintegrated soon after birth to give way to the toddler body, and the toddler body gave way to the child body and so on.

Rebirth, in Buddha's understanding, is happening right here and now. Birth and death are always with us. It is part of our delusion to see ourselves as always coming into being and never dying out of it. For this reason, in our meditation, we are encouraged to see not just the beginning but also the ending of things.

In the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the discourses on the establishment of awareness, where the techniques of insight vipassanā meditation are described, the Buddha explains how to observe the breath. The meditator trains himself to be clearly aware of the whole passage of the in-breath, its beginning, its middle and its end. He trains himself to be clearly aware of the whole passage of the out-breath, its beginning, its middle, and its end.

When we become more and more aware that all things, meaning ourselves, are constantly dying in the moment, great fear arises. This is the fear of ego at its own death. That's why we go into shock if our life is threatened. This ego, this essential delusion in us, only sees the arising, the birth, the coming into being, the growth, the continuation of things. It never really looks at the passing of things.

Our culture reinforces this conditioning, this delusion. We always know the new pop group, the new fashion, the new computer. We never know what happens to them in the end. They just disappear. Their decline and death is blotted out by other new pop groups, fashions, computers. The inability of our culture to face death, the fact that we hurry the burial, hide the dying, the sick, the deformed, the crippled, are all symptomatic of this ego-blindness, of this fear of decay and death, of our deeply delusive thinking.

All of these reactions to death are based on ignorance, for no one actually knows for sure what happens when we die. Because we don't know, we imagine. That's the delusion. Or we ignore. That's the ignorance.

But the Buddha, through the teaching of the wheel of dependent origination, is pointing to the now, this ever-present moment. For it is here and now that we shall capture this stark mixture of birth and death and unravel its secrets. By unraveling its secrets in the living moment and the dying moment, we will discover what happens upon physical death.

As far as Buddhism is concerned, all that happens upon physical death is that the mind, a different phenomena from body, leaves the body and seeks another. In this present moment, as you watch your in-breath and out-breath, you will experience sensations caused by the passage of air at the nostrils or the arising and falling of the stomach. You will see that as the breath comes and goes, consciousness arises with it. The more your meditation deepens, the more you will experience this consciousness as separate from the sensations of breathing. The meditator comes to know that mind is not body.

But even though this mind leaves the body, it is made up of parts itself, the five aggregates. There is no entity or soul to be found in these five constituents. A modern image has been used to explain this phenomena of the mind arising and falling, being born and dying. When one billiard ball is shot at another and they hit, the first ball stops and the other moves. What is it that is passed on?

Death is just a mental moment. It's not the end of anything. It's the beginning of birth. When we experience ourselves dying, dying now in meditation, we shall realize death for what it really is: just another moment in the cycle of becoming, just a point on the ever-turning wheel of dependent origination.

Having said this, let me hasten to add that belief in all this is not necessary for the meditator. In fact, belief as such is a hindrance. Whatever you may personally believe or feel about the teaching of rebirth, do remember that all doctrine in Buddhism is put to you as a theory, which is of little value till you yourself prove it for yourself to be true or false.

But at least here you can see that rebirth, not reincarnation, is part and parcel of the Buddha's understanding of how this world of unsatisfactoriness works. How this ever going on and on, this *saṃsāra*, turns and turns upon itself.

So where are we on the wheel of dependent origination? We've seen how our underlying ignorance has been the cause of our craving, attachment and intended actions in the past, which have in turn produced the conditionings that underlie the present moment. We have seen how the great attachment, our desire for sense pleasure, keeps us clinging to the body and mind, its consciousness, the senses, the sensual contact and the feelings we experience through this.

Now, of course, there's the reaction. In the present, suddenly presented with incoming data and new sensations, the old conditionings arise. Suddenly we are craving. We are becoming attached. We are making new decisions, creating new *kamma*, reinforcing the volitional conditionings. This is the dynamic of the wheel. This dynamic will always produce the future syndrome of birth, growth, decay and death. So long as we're on this wheel, this is inevitable.

We can see here that this wheel is a historical process. Things done in the past affect the present, and things done in the present affect the future. The future becomes the present. The present becomes the past. Tomorrow arrives, and today becomes yesterday. The wheel is also an ever-present process, wherein all factors affect this moment. By twisting the wheel upon itself, I've tried to give this by way of an image. It shows that every moment, the now, is a becoming, a coming into being, and with it arises consciousness and the rest.

Twisting it like this also happily gives us the mathematical sign for infinity.

Now that we have come to understand that this wheel is indeed self-propelling, that no beginning was ever designated by the Buddha, nor is an end to this process conceivable, we need to be clear how to escape from it and glimpse, if we can, the life of an arahat, the totally liberated individual.

First of all, we must be absolutely clear on what constitutes a fully enlightened person in terms of the wheel. It means that there are no more volitional conditionings that are born of desire and attachment. And it means that there are no more volitional conditionings left in stock that might fuel further actions founded on ignorance. Remember, this desire is the desire for sense pleasure, and it includes in it the wrong view of self, that this body and mind constitute a permanent substantial being.

Of course, we can't say what an enlightened being thinks about in detail, but we can say that no thoughts, words or actions arise out of this sort of desire or wrong view of self. Therefore, there is no accumulation of habits that will keep the wheel turning.

Does this mean that the Arahant thinks nothing, says nothing, does nothing? The more you become enlightened, the more you turn to stone? Far from it. If you ever meet someone who is highly spiritually developed, the first thing that strikes you is the presence of that person. But there's no stereotype. Depending on past conditioning and experience, that person may be quiet or jovial, or as the famous Bodhidharma, who took Buddhism to the East and is renowned as the founder of Zen, ferocious.

But however that person is, all thoughts and words and actions will arise out of wisdom and not ignorance. The underlying motivation will therefore not be to satisfy personal desire, but love, compassion, sympathetic joy and peace. The general state of mind, those *saṅkhāra*, which once gave us so much trouble, are now peaceful and the arahat lives in equanimity.

So long as an enlightened person lives, so long will she or he function as an ordinary human being, with consciousness, body and mind, the six senses, contact and feeling. They will keep going till all remnants of *kamma* have been consumed. The Buddha himself lived for 45 years after his enlightenment. Never does he act out of sense desire. There is no becoming, there is no *kamma*, good or bad, being accrued, since now there is no ego which can accumulate it.

So how does an enlightened person behave? When we read the scriptures, we read how forthright and direct the Buddha was with monks who did wrong. When Suddhinna, a monk who was enticed by his family to make love with his former wife so that there be an heir, the Buddha rebukes him. "It is not fit, foolish man. It is not becom-

ing. It is not proper. It is unworthy of a recluse. It is unlawful. It ought not to be done." The Buddha goes on to explain why this is so, calling him a foolish man no less than 15 times. It's a real tirade.

On the other hand, when he deals with Patacara, who has lost a family, he's full of compassion. When he talks to Potapada about philosophical questions, you can sense his gentle mirth. When he wants to search out somewhere pleasant to eat his meal, a pleasant grove, you can see he appreciates beauty. The fact that the kings of the time came to him for advice shows the sort of figure he cut in public.

All we can say of a fully enlightened being, a Buddha or an Arahant, is that all their actions arise out of wisdom and not out of ignorant self-gratification of desires. That their mental states are in one of the four modes, either of equanimity, sympathetic joy, universal love or compassion.

How does this square up with the law of *kamma*? Again, it is recognizing the two pools into which the stones of thought, speech and action drop. The Buddha was constantly affecting people around him. Indeed, he still is. But within his own mind, there are no ripples. There is no reaction, no conditioned response, no response at all that arises out of a wrong view of a self. Therefore, this self or ego or idea of a substantial personality is simply not there. Because the enlightened behave with wisdom, so they affect the world around them. And these effects move the world towards peace and harmony.

What happens then to a Buddha or an Arahant after death? The Buddha said it was indescribable. But an Arahant may be reborn in a higher realm till all his residual *kamma* is worn out. Then he passes into *parinibbāna*, total *nibbāna*.

So we have seen how the wheel of dependent origination fits together as a historical process and as an immediate happening. We see how it includes the teaching of rebirth.

So where does all this leave us? Needless to say, it leaves us right here and now, spinning round and round. Whatever personal opinions we come to concerning rebirth or enlightenment, one thing we can test for ourselves right here and now is whether desire and attachment are truly the causes of our unhappiness. That we can test by the practice of *vipassanā* insight meditation and the daily effort to be mindful.

We can discover where the exit lies, where the escape is to be found — right there between feelings and the desire for them. How important it is to grasp this fact, to really realize for ourselves the difference between pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings and our desire or aversion for them. How important it is to realize that we lose

nothing but suffering in giving up these desires and attachments. Indeed, that we can gain peace of mind, joy, and a boundless ability to be loving and compassionate once we do drop this self-centeredness, this continual desire to satisfy our desires.

How important it is to realize that this moment is all we have. We can only do something about ourselves, about our situation, in the present moment, the now. This moment now is the fruit of all our past, the seed of all our future. We only have this moment to change past direction, to create new direction. Let that direction be from darkness to light, and from light to light.

We must resolve to purify our hearts and minds. Here is a lovely verse from the verses of the sisters, the nuns, the *bhikkhunī*, who achieved arahatship. I recommend their reading. They are inspiring. Sundarī Nandā was a beautiful woman, it seems, greatly caught up in her physical beauty and sensual desire. She used the meditations on aging and death to overcome her great attachment, and eventually she won the goal:

"I, even I, have seen from the inside and outside this body as it indeed really is. I strive to know the what and why of it with unfaltering zeal and fiery ardour. Now I care no more for this body and all my consciousness is free of passion. Keen with unfettered zeal. No attachments. Calm and serene. I taste the peace of *Nibbāna*."

I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful.

CHAPTER 18

Kamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 27 min

> *In this exploration of kamma, Bhante Bodhidhamma places the moral law of action and consequence within the Buddha's teaching of five universal laws governing existence. Drawing from the Mahākammavibhaṅga Sutta (MN 136) and the Acinteyya Sutta, he clarifies that not everything we experience results from personal past actions—physical, biological, psychological, and natural laws also operate alongside our moral choices.*
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> *The talk examines kamma's classifications by function (reproductive, supportive, counteractive, and destructive) and by effects (death-proximate, weighty, habitual, and stored-up kamma). Bhante explains how our final conscious moment determines rebirth circumstances and the crucial role of habitual kamma in meditation practice. The six realms of existence are presented both as literal destinations and present mental states we can experience.*
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> *Connecting kamma to vipassanā practice, Bhante demonstrates how insight into the three characteristics during meditation reveals that kamma is simply energy manifesting as the five khandhas, with no substantial self behind the process. This understanding leads to the liberating realization that phenomena simply flow on without a permanent doer or experiencer.*

It is very important to remember when we are talking about *kamma* and talking about how we suffer or enjoy things, not to make the mistake of believing that everything that happens to us, good or bad, is because of past actions we have done. The Buddha taught there were five general laws that govern the universe.

Briefly, the arising and falling of all material things, nature itself, is governed by the caloric order, caloric here meaning energy. This law approximates to what we would call physics, chemistry and biology. Secondly, there is the law of germinal order, which is really part of the caloric order, but refers to the vegetable kingdom. Thirdly, there is the moral order, and this is the kamma we're going to look at more deeply. Fourthly, there is the psychical order, which equates today with the whole area of psychology. And finally, the order of natural phenomena, both physical and mental, which points to a deeper level, the absolute truths of the universe, such as the inherent transitoriness of all things.

In other words, human beings are born into a set of circumstances of which only one is the result of personal past and present moral actions. But the important thing is that our states of mind and wrong understandings are very much dependent on this law of kamma. In other words, if we seek happiness and liberation from all suffering, it is the understanding of this law of kamma that will give us the key.

It would be more accurate to say that all these laws are working all the time and that within them is the effect of our own decision making. Remember, the Buddha said, "Volition, O disciples, is what I call kamma." Furthermore, it is because of these other laws plus the effects of all other people's actions that it is impossible to say what the effect of any one action will be. Often a person will mean well, but it all turns out wrongly. A surgeon means to cure the patient, but the patient dies. Sometimes we wish to do harm and something good turns up. We speak badly about someone and get the promotion.

Here we shall be looking at the different classifications of kamma and what they mean in our practice. We shall go further into understanding the mechanisms and see how and why people seem to get away with things or strike lucky. This will take us into the Buddhist cosmology, the six realms where rebirth can take place. But we shall see they are also just states of mind. And finally, we shall dig a little deeper and see how all this fits in with the idea of there being no self.

Even though we do not have much control over the effects of our actions in the outside world, we can come to have total control of the world of the inner mind. This is a very important point to grasp. The Buddha taught that our personal suffering, the suffering within the mind, all its negative states, was caused by desire and attachment and the ensuing decisions that lead from these wrong views. In other words, if we want to end our suffering, the problem lies within us, not outside us. The task is to change our decisions towards the wholesome, and allow the mind to purify itself through the practice of *vipassanā* insight meditation.

So although we intend to do good, but unfortunate results arise, although we intend to do harm, but fortunate results arise, the fact is that these intentions go to condition the mind, and this mind keeps on acting in that conditioned habitual way. Eventually, circumstances around a person will begin to mirror the internal state of the mind. However, because of the complexities of any given situation, we can never tell what the result of any particular action will be.

The Buddha says this very clearly in the Achintaya Sutta, Discourse on the Unthinkable. "The results of an action are unthinkable, nor are they to be thought about." Trying to work out the results would lead one to madness or frustration. Having said this, because of this internal mechanism in the mind, this self-conditioning through acts of

will that keep on creating the same sort of actions, so it is that eventually situations build up around us. It is also taught that the effect of any action will eventually reach us.

At this point, the teaching of kamma does not make sense unless the concept of rebirth is introduced. Without this concept it would seem that people really do get away with murder and people really do suffer unjustly. Rebirth simply states that the mind which is constantly seeking satisfaction for its desires goes on doing so even after the physical death of the body. In Buddhism the body is one thing and the mind is another. The body is sustained by the mind and other physical factors such as food. When the body dies, the mind itself leaves and seeks elsewhere to be born.

This discarnate entity, a rather ugly expression used these days by scientists to describe what happens in near-death experiences, is not a permanent soul or self or integral entity at all. It is all the five aggregates the Buddha talks of. It is an energy which needs the physical world to satisfy its desires. As we shall see later, there are realms of existence in Buddhism where there is just pure mind, but such minds are purified if only for a time of sensual pleasure.

In the Mahā-kamma-vibhaṅga-sutta, the discourse on the great exposition of kamma, the Buddha answers questions that arise out of four types of situations. There is the wrong-doer who ends up badly, and the wrong-doer who ends up happily. There is the good-doer who ends up happily, and the good-doer who ends up badly.

In his day there were those who took up certain positions. Some said all wrongdoers ended up badly and eventually in hell. The same with the good doers, saving that they went to heaven. Now this actual discourse came about because a young monk, Samiddhi, got it all wrong and so misguided another ascetic of a different beliefs, a certain Potaliputta. The questions had centered on what happens after death. Here is the Buddha making his teaching clear to Ānanda, who brought the tale to the Buddha.

"Now Ānanda, there is such a person who has killed living beings, taken what is not freely given, misconducted himself in sexual desires, spoken falsely, spoken maliciously, spoken coarsely, gossiped, was covetous, was ill-willed and had wrong view." These, of course, are the ten wrong actions. "On the dissolution of the body after death, he reappears in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell. But the unwholesome kamma producing this suffering may have been done by him earlier, or the unwholesome kamma producing this suffering may have been done by him later, or wrong view was undertaken and completed by him at the time of death. And this is why, on the dissolution of the body after death, he appeared in the states of deprivation,

in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell. Since he has committed one of the ten wrong actions, he will feel the results of that here and now, or in the next rebirth, or in subsequent existence."

So what the Buddha is saying here is that the effects of unwholesome deeds can be felt in subsequent lives after this, that indeed we may now be suffering consequences of deeds done in previous lives. One of the important points here is wrong view taken at the time of death.

This brings us to the classification of kamma according to function. The last conscious moment of this life will be the first consciousness of the next, and will, according to Buddhist psychology, be the main mental disposition throughout the next life. If someone dies with hate on the mind, that hateful state of mind will constitute the subconscious flow of the next life. Conversely, if one dies in peace or in joy, that will be the next life's subconscious stream. More important, it is that last thought that sets the place of rebirth.

That last thought is not a haphazard thing, but will be the thought that carries the most karmic energy in the mind. If, for instance, you look back over today, you will see you will remember one or two distinct events. If you look back over the past week or month, you'll see there'll be just one or two memories that stand out. At death, it is believed that one memory will arise that will be the one action or event that is most important to the person. This last thought then sets a particular disposition in the mind which underpins a person's personality and character.

Running along with this karmic vein are two other types of kamma known as supportive and counteractive. So it is not as though the mind is totally dominated by this last thought. What is more, there may be what's known as destructive kamma, which is a very strong force, previously lying latent, but which may arise once the conditions are conducive. This destroys the reproductive kamma itself.

A person, for instance, may in this life be generally happy, have a good job, a happy family. Her happy state of mind, her positive virtues outnumbering her vices, may all be a result of the underlying reproductive kamma that may be one of peace. She has died in her last life in a peaceful way. In this life, this reproductive kamma is supported by happy circumstances, such as born into a well-to-do family in a rich western country. The counteracted kamma is that the prevailing sexism in society stops her from realizing her potential, stops her from building a successful career. Suddenly, in the midst of life, she is struck by a debilitating disease or fatal illness. Such an unfortunate

happening may very well be the product of an earlier life's unwholesome deed now maturing in this fashion. Obviously such destructive kamma does not arise for everyone, in fact for the majority.

So from this classification of kamma by function into reproductive, supportive, counteractive and destructive, we can see that it makes unravelling one's kamma very complicated indeed. We simply don't know whether what we suffer or enjoy now is the kamma coming to fruition which was done in the past life or lives, or whether it is the fruit of this life's endeavour.

So it is that the Buddha in the discourse of the great exposition of kamma goes on to say that an evil doer on the dissolution of the body may reappear in a happy destination. So with the good doer such a person may end up upon death either in a happy or unhappy situation depending on the death moment consciousness.

For meditators this is a point to ponder. We may now be in a happy situation but things might change. How are we going to react? Perhaps we ought to remind ourselves every day that there may be karmic debts to pay, and that if it is so, we should remind ourselves of the law of kamma and accept things just as they are, knowing that the debt will be repaid the quicker, the more we accept it. Knowing that the debt will be repaid, and we shall be freed of that karmic debt, and we will no longer suffer from the effects of that past unwholesome action. Indeed, there will come a time when all the sour fruits of past unwholesome actions have been suffered, and we are left simply with the results of our continuing wholesome deeds.

Another way that kamma is classified is by the different effects, and this leads us to understand the more psychological aspects of kamma. Here, the reproductive kamma is called death-proximate kamma, and as already mentioned, determines the subconscious stream.

Secondly, the Buddha taught that there were actions which produced certain results, and these he called weighty kamma. On the negative side, which will surely lead a person to states of perdition or hell realms, are four actions: to kill one's mother or father, to kill an arahat, a saint, to wound a Buddha, or to create a schism in the Saṅgha. As far as lay people go, since Buddhas and Arahats are in short supply, and it's very difficult for lay people to create a schism in the Saṅgha, the message is, don't kill your mum and dad. On the wholesome side, any of the higher states of concentration, known as *jhāna*, or any of the paths of insight, will effect a happy rebirth.

The third type of kamma is very important for meditators to grasp. It is known as habitual kamma, all our habits of thought, speech and action, those things that are second nature to us. It's mostly these we struggle with in ordinary daily life and in our meditations. Habits have a lot of force within them. They are very difficult to break and root out, as anyone who has tried to break one knows, whether it's smoking or giving up the morning cup of tea. Our work is to make sure that we are undermining unwholesome habits and reinforcing wholesome ones. This is, in fact, the right effort on the Noble Eightfold Path.

In the context of long-term kamma, meaning future rebirth, this now becomes even more important, for after weighty kamma, it is usually this sort of habitual thought that we grasp for when life begins to pass from us. You can see there is a vast difference of mind between one that is in confusion demanding alcohol after a lifetime devoted to the bottle, and one demanding peace or friendships of good companion, or dare I say the quiet of a meditation room. Of course, ideally, now we are meditators, we should maintain our mindfulness, alert and awake, even unto that dying moment. That's what all this practice is about, to be able to die in meditation.

The final classification is really potluck. It's known as stored-up kamma. It includes light or rarely performed actions. However, depending on what one does, the force of such kamma could be very great. That one explosion of anger that leads to a murderous blow. That one insight into the suffering of another that led to giving away a fortune.

In daily life we must be wary of any new unwholesome thoughts, speech and action, for such things can grow into habits. Therefore we need to be ever vigilant, not to reinforce anything unskilful. We go out for a drink, we're invited again, and again, suddenly we're in the company of drinkers. Before we know it, we've got a problem.

So now we've looked at kamma in terms of a wider field. We see that the Buddha teaches not simply in the perspective of one life in which we either sink or swim, but a sequence of lives in which we hopefully become more and more aware of our ultimate purpose, more and more aware of the trap we are in and of the way to escape it. We see there are forces at play outside our personal kamma. We see our own kamma to be a very complicated thing. Different forces of kamma may be playing different functions, sometimes supporting, sometimes counteracting the basic kamma we were born with. We can see that what we have done and what we do has had and will have certain results.

In this very complicated picture can we reduce everything to an easier view that will eventually bring us the desired results of happiness and liberation, such results that will lead to situations conducive for training and insight and the realization of the ultimate truth?

The first is to ponder the fact that we own our own kamma, we reap its results. There is a verse of the Buddha from the *Dhammapada* which brings this home to us: "I am the owner of my kamma, heir of my kamma, born of my kamma, related to my kamma. I abide supported by my kamma. Whatever I do, be it wholesome or unwholesome, I shall be heir to the results of that action."

Kamma is usually read as bad. We must correct this lopsided view. Kamma is good so long as we behave skilfully. No matter how I read that verse, however, because of the preconceived idea that kamma is some predetermined hard-to-bear fate, it's hard to see that in fact it is a message of hope. What it's saying is that we are in control. All right, the Buddha is no saviour that's going to let us off the hook. All right, the Buddha declared there is no merciful God we can appeal to with mitigating circumstances to alleviate our problems. But there is an obvious ending to all our suffering once we cotton on to the fact that all we have to do is do good.

If we were to do good and only good, from now on, to live in a completely harmless way from this instant onwards, we can say that what we suffer now and in the future is just the results of past unskilful action, and that they are in fact burning out. They are all coming to an end, and we can look to a future where the fruits of our good actions will ripen.

So it is that the Buddha enjoins us to gladden our hearts in the midst of our sufferings. He says, in fact, we are extremely fortunate to be born as human beings, for it is in this very human realm that we are most able to see the way out of our mess.

This brings us to the teaching of the different realms of existence in Buddhism. The realms are divided into four divisions: the happy states, the unhappy states, the realms of form, and the formless realms. The last two we can deal with quickly. They are realms into which beings are reborn who have achieved the higher states of mind brought about by concentration meditation. They are highly blissful realms and life seems to be astronomically long. But like all realms in Buddhism they are impermanent and at some time or other beings fall from that existence into lower or maybe higher ones. Because life is so pleasurable in these realms beings are said to find it hard to train spiritually so content and happy are they.

These realms need not concern us here, since to practice the *jhāna* meditations is often beyond the ability of meditators who are too busy trying to earn a living. But if you really want to develop these states, you'll have to give yourself totally to the job, or join a monastery.

It is the other two states, happy and unhappy, that concern us most. There are four unhappy realms. They are the different hell states, the animal realm, the hungry ghost states known as the *petas*, and the *asura* realm, which simply means that beings don't shine, a glum existence. Because of our unwholesome deeds, then, a being can be reborn in states of fierce suffering, or as an animal, or as a discarnate entity, wandering about looking for satisfaction. The *petas* are said to live on this earth and approximate to our idea of ghosts.

The happy realms include six different heavenly states, all of which are said to be most delightful, and life there seems to be very long. But most interestingly, the human realm is classified as happy. To understand this, we have to remind ourselves that all these realms refer also to states of mind.

Whether or not to believe that other realms exist is left up to the individual in Buddhism. I met a Sri Lankan scholar who said he had proved beyond doubt that they were all metaphor symbolic for states of mind, that they didn't really exist. But my own reading of the scriptures leads me to believe that the Buddha did teach such realms as real. Of course, belief in such things is not necessary for insight, and anyway, all these realms suffer from the same problem of transiency. Even so, if doubt comes to the mind, it's simply best to give it the benefit of the doubt until proved otherwise. There's no harm either way, believing or not believing, and it may just turn out to be true.

Since these states are all states of mind, they can be experienced here in the human realm. When a person suffers from a deep depression or indeed a mental illness, this is akin to a hell state. When a person is drunk and his intelligence and will are very much reduced, it is akin to an animal state. When a person is controlled by an obsession, this is a *peta*, a hungry ghost, often portrayed with a big belly and a tiny mouth to suggest their inability to achieve satisfaction. When we are generally unhappy, we are *asuras*, lacking gladness. When we are happy, joyful, excited and so on, we are in the heavenly realms. Inhabitants there are known as *devas*, usually translated as gods. We can also experience all the realms of form and the formless realms through concentration meditation.

In other words, as humans, we have the capacity to experience all states of mind. That's why this earth is a very special place to be, and Tibetan Buddhism calls it a precious birth. Here we are not crushed by unhappiness, nor is our intelligence dulled, nor

are we lost in pleasure and happy states of mind. In fact, we experience them all. We experience the despair of hell and the joys of heaven. This mental wandering about can bring us great wisdom once we begin to see things with right understanding. In the human realm we can experience that characteristic of all existence more keenly: the transiency and the endless unsatisfying search for happiness and contentment.

Of course there are human beings who are living in desperate circumstances, some who are born with very low intellectual capacity, others who live like gods, but the vast majority have the ability to see the ultimate truths within all this becoming. Knowing this, we must take advantage of this life to develop in virtue and wisdom.

I've covered a great deal here, so I'd better recap. I started by recalling the law of *kamma*, the importance of the will, and the reciprocal nature whereby good returns good and harm returns harm. However, we can't put everything that happens to us in the world down to our own personal past and present actions. There are other laws and other people. But essentially, when it comes to the third noble truth, the end of suffering, we're talking about the world within us. However, even if this is true, our actions do have effect. We will reap sweet or sour fruits in future rebirths, if not in this present life.

Talking of rebirth, we saw the mechanisms of reproductive *kamma* and death proximate *kamma* to show how actions in the past life condition the last death consciousness, which in turn is a subconscious stream of the next life. This karmic strain is either helped by supportive *kamma* or undermined by counteractive *kamma*. This doesn't mean that counteractive *kamma* is always unwholesome. It depends on the death proximate *kamma*. For instance, there was a great Buddhist leader in India, Dr. Ambedkar, who was born in very undesirable circumstances as an untouchable. But the Maharaja took interest in him — counteractive *kamma*. He ended up with high degrees from Oxford and being called the father of the Indian constitution. Finally, there is the destructive *kamma*, which explains why catastrophes can happen to us. This is how *kamma* functions.

The classification by effect pointed out that there are certain actions which bring sure results either to be born in the realms of dire suffering or in the realms of form or formless realms. There is stored up *kamma* which indeed may contain the destructive *kamma* mentioned above. Most important for us meditators is habitual *kamma* for these tend to be most troublesome to us if unwholesome and most beneficial if wholesome. This led to the different realms in Buddhism with the accent firmly on the importance of the human realm as being the place most conducive for our liberation.

Finally, I would like to go a little deeper and point to the importance of *vipassanā* insight meditation and the meditative lifestyle in general. When we are meditating on the breath and noticing its passing nature, we are also beginning to grasp that other characteristic of the human being, namely that this body and mind, this *kamma*, do not constitute a complete entity, a substantial ego, a soul, a person or a self. The human is a collection of parts.

When pain comes to us in the meditation, this should be greeted with open arms, for what pain does most wonderfully is concentrate the mind. When pain arises in the knees from the posture, for example, how easy it is for us to keep our attention on it, but we must observe it with wisdom. We have to catch all the passing reactions to it, the fear, the aversion, and we must keep bringing the awareness back to observing the sensations. At some point, the pain will be experienced as just sensation, pure sensation. All the labelling will have gone. The meditator knows only the arising and falling of minute moments of sensation.

With this sort of concentrative awareness, the meditator comes to realize that the sensations, the so-called pain, are one thing, and the consciousness that knows it another. In other words, the sensations are not the consciousness. This consciousness itself does not suffer. At such deep points of concentration, there is not even the awareness of someone, or a person, or a soul, or a self that is knowing. Whenever that knowing faculty identifies with the labeling, "it is pain," then it becomes the aggregate of perception, an ego is born. When that knowing faculty identifies with all the reactions, "I'm afraid, I'm anxious," it becomes the aggregate of volitional formations, and an ego, a self, a person, is born. So long as there is an iota of a self, or a feeling of somebody observing, so long is there an ego, a person, a soul, or a self.

This, of course, has to be experienced. No words can catch this experiential knowledge. It's like trying to describe the taste of a mango to someone who's never even seen one. But such experiences undermine a lot of wrong understanding, and the more we come to experience such things, the more the Buddha's teaching of *anattā*, non-self, becomes clear. As it becomes more and more clear, there is a growing realization that *kamma* is just a force that manifests as the five aggregates, the *khandhas*, the human being — that in fact humans are nothing but this karmic force, that is, form and energy, that the whole world is in fact just this form, this energy, this *kamma*, that none of it constitutes anything substantial.

In *The Path of Purification*, the spiritual classic written by Buddhaghosa, he says in a verse:

There is no doer of a deed, nor is there anyone who reaps the deed's effects. Phenomena alone flow on and on. No other view than this is right.

We can slowly come to realize all this in our meditation and daily life. When we know this totally, when we have this insight into all things, then, of course, we shall be enlightened. For what is it the Buddhas know we don't, if it isn't exactly this? That anything that arises and passes away does not constitute a person, a soul, a self, or any substantial being.

Then wherein lies our liberation, the taste of freedom? It is in the discovery, the realization for oneself, of that unborn, that unbecoming, that uncreated, that uncompounded, that makes this realization.

I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the *Nibbānic* peace within.

CHAPTER 19

The Saṅgha

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 26 min

> *In this exploration of the Saṅgha, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the Buddha's revolutionary approach to spiritual community organization. Drawing from historical context, he explains how the Buddha, born into a society transitioning from pastoral to monarchical rule, deliberately chose a democratic structure over autocracy for his followers.*
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> *The talk covers the establishment of the four Saṅghas: bhikkhus (monks), bhikkhunīs (nuns), upāsakas (laymen), and upāsikās (laywomen). Bhante details the ordination process, from the simple "Ehi bhikkhu" ("Come, monk") formula to the formal Upasampadā ceremony, and explains the organic development of the Vinaya discipline through the 227 rules of the Pātimokkha.*
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> *Particularly illuminating is the discussion of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's persistent efforts to establish the bhikkhunī order, contextualized within the social constraints of ancient India. The talk concludes by distinguishing between the conventional Saṅgha of practitioners and the Ariya Saṅgha—the noble community of awakened beings who serve as refuge for all Buddhists. This foundational understanding reveals how the Buddha's vision of spiritual community continues to provide a model for democratic, egalitarian practice while maintaining the essential interdependence between monastic and lay practitioners.*

Foundation Course 2, Talk 9: The Sangha

Sangha literally means comprising, so it comes to mean assembly and community. The Buddha was born into the Kshatriya, the warrior and ruling caste, and it seems his father, Suddhodana, was the chief of a council of rulers. This council was also called a Sangha.

Before and during the Buddha's lifetime, the society was going through quite a fundamental change. It had been a pastoral society of wandering herdsmen centred on small market villages. But with the growth of agriculture and a more settled population, cities grew, and in them there came about a greater division of labour. So whereas in a pastoral society most could do most of the jobs, in a city-based agricultural society craftsmen developed who had specialised skills, such as wheelwrights and cobblers. Also with the cities, there grew a larger concentration of population and a more centralized system of government. Kings and courts began to develop, and this indeed was a profound political change.

By the time the Buddha died, there were still some states who were ruled by a group of people, a sort of republic, but the area in which he lived, the great fertile plain north of the Ganges, had mostly come under the rule of autocratic kings.

The importance of this little piece of history is to highlight the Buddha's own political leanings, which are not only developed in the discourses dealing with such matters, but are manifest most in how he organized the community of monastics, which he called the Sangha. In fact, before he passed away, the Buddha declared that his work was done since the Dhamma had been taught and the four Sanghas established. These four sanghas, orders or communities, are the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni, that is, the monks and nuns, and the upasaka and the upasika, the lay men and the lay women.

He saw them as quite distinct orders, and more significantly, left no one in charge. In fact, when Ananda asks him who will rule them once he has passed away, the Buddha told him that the Dhamma must be the guide. The Dhamma here also included the rules of conduct he left, the *Vinaya* or discipline he left for the monastics, and the *sila*, the morality rules he left for laypeople. So the Buddha himself did not follow the trend of his society in setting up an autocratic structure in the order, with a head, a lieutenant, sergeants and so on. He left it quite open, expecting the monastics and lay people to discuss openly any problem, for he was sure there was enough scriptural procedure for people to come to a correct decision.

So far as the Buddha was concerned, he saw his followers as four distinct Sangha, each with their own way of life, non-governed by any person as such, but guided by the Dhamma, the teachings he had left.

Legend has it that the first ever two disciples of the Buddha were in fact two laymen, the merchants Tapusa and Balika. But it was more probably the five disciples he delivered his first discourse to after his enlightenment. The same five in fact who had deserted him a little earlier, for they thought he had given up the quest upon eating a bowl of rice milk.

From the first discourse, the turning of the wheel of the law, news seemed to have spread quickly about him, and ascetics approached him wanting to be his disciples. His reply was, "Ehi bhikkhu, come bhikkhu, well explained is the Dhamma, live the brahmacharya, the holy life, for the complete ending of suffering." This was the formula of the first ordinations, the first makings of an order. It was as simple as that.

However, when an originator cannot be present, followers often want to formalize things. And as the number of applicants grew and the order spread so that the distance became quite a problem, the Buddha allowed senior monks to ordain. In the end, a final ordination procedure was established and became known as the going for refuge in the triple gem. It is called the *Upasampadā* ordination.

The system established was that anyone who had been in the order for ten years or more could present someone to the order for admission. He is known as the postulant *upajjhāya*. To ordain a monk it takes ten other monks, save in non-Buddhist countries where monks are rare. In such a case, five monks will do.

At first the novice becomes a *sāmaṇera*, taking ten precepts. These are the usual five of the lay person: not to kill, not to take anything not freely given. The third, normally not to misuse the senses, here becomes a vow of chastity, of celibacy, a complete abstinence from all sexual conduct. Then there is not to lie and not to take any intoxicating drugs or drinks. The further five are not to eat after midday, not to wear perfumes or self-adornments like jewellery, not to go to entertainment such as dancing and films, not to sleep on high or luxurious beds, and finally, not to touch or handle money.

Such precepts can also be taken by boys from the age of 8, and in fact sāmaṇera means little ascetic. This is quite a common practice in Buddhist countries, and many stay to the age of 20 when they can ordain.

Once these lower orders are taken, the novice can put on the monk's robes, and then, if he is of age and willing, he can take the higher ordination. This consists of answering a certain amount of questions to make sure there are no barriers to the monkhood, such as, does he have the permission of dependence? Does he have a serious illness? Is he in debt? And so on. Once the ordaining monks are satisfied, the postulant is then brought into the circle and told the rules of the Vinaya, the discipline, upon which, so long as he accepts them, he is received into the order.

For the first five years he comes under a teacher, usually the person who introduced him to the order, the upajjhāya, but not necessarily so. After five years he is known as a senior, and can teach if asked to do so. After ten he is known as a thera, or elder, and has the privilege of ordaining other monks. After twenty years he gains the title of mahāthera, or great elder.

However, every country has its own way of addressing monks. Most people use the word bhante, equivalent to venerable, when addressing a monk. But depending on the tradition, some call elders ajahn, as in Thailand, which is a corruption of the word

ācārya, meaning teacher, or if they are from Burma, they are addressed as sayadaw, royal or noble teacher. Junior monks call senior monks bhante, but senior monks call junior monks by their name.

When it came to how to spend the day, the Buddha left no regimen, although all monks have to eat before noon, and there are plenty of discourses advising monks how to spend their time wisely, in meditation and in learning the Dhamma. The day is very much left up to the monk or monastery to organize. Monasteries have their own timetables, and some are quite highly organized. The Buddha himself advised the ardent monk to meditate in the first part of the night, sleep the second, and meditate again in the third part, in other words, to do with four hours sleep. But he doesn't make it a rule. Even in his own time, it seems, many could not summon up the energy needed for such strenuous practice.

In fact, when it comes to the actual Vinaya, the discipline, the rules of the monastic life, they all grew up in a very organic way. The Buddha was asked early on to formulate rules and regulations, but he refused to do so, since the early monks had done no wrong. However, as they did do things that brought criticism either from other monks or from the lay people, The Buddha would consider the situation, and if he thought it appropriate, would declare a rule.

For instance, the rule that says monks must eat before noon came about because lay people complained that monks were forever coming on alms round. The rules concerning the monk's behaviour with women, which strictly speaking is that he should not speak to a woman out of earshot, came about because of slander and indeed the odd dalliance of monks with women. In fact, when you look at the rules, you discover that a lot of them are about protecting the good name of the order.

These days, some of the rules seem a little excessive, especially this relationship between monks and women. But you'll be surprised how the image of a sex-starved monk nipping over the monastery wall still persists in people's minds. A monk can't be too careful in this field, so don't be surprised if monks, especially from the Theravāda tradition, don't even shake hands with women. Anyway, such a custom is not particularly an Eastern habit, where the greeting is to join hands and bow.

Luckily, the Buddha's ministry lasted 45 years, during which all sorts of things happened, so that the final compilation of the Vinaya, the 227 rules, covers virtually all aspects of monastic life, and makes it very clear how the Buddha wanted his monks and nuns to behave.

The rules are laid out in order of severity, and here we shall briefly mention a few. The most serious to break are known as the *pārājika*, the defeats. For if a monastic transgresses any of these four, they must leave the order and cannot rejoin again in this lifetime. They are to have any form of sexual intercourse whatsoever, to steal anything, to kill a human being, and to create a schism or split in the sangha.

Then there follow thirteen rules for which the monk needs twenty other monks to reinstate him in the order, if they are broken. They include virtually any sexual behavior, groundlessly accusing another of having broken the pārājikas, the defeats, and supporting a schism. There are then 30 rules entailing forfeiture. If a monk owns something he ought not to have, then it is simply taken away. There are 92 rules which are forgiven on the telling. They entail such things as abusive speech, lying, and even damage to plants.

The rules also cover all the conduct appropriate between monastics and laypeople, among monastics themselves, and even how objects should be treated. There's a whole section of training rules that say how a monk should eat and robe. The final section lists the seven rules on how to settle disputes that arise within the order.

I recommend a reading of the *Pātimokkha*, as it is called. It will give you an insight into what a monk's life is all about. In short, it's about conduct, study and meditation. It's simply a refinement of the Noble Eightfold Path: *sīla*, right conduct, *samādhi*, right meditation and *paññā* wisdom. It's about the development of awareness. It's about behaving in a harmless, restrained, gentle way. It's about devoting one's life to self-introspection and learning. It's learning how to live at peace with oneself and with others.

On a more mundane level, it's about achieving an absolute simplicity of lifestyle when it comes to material possessions. The Buddha wanted monks to have only those things that sustain life. Food, clothing, shelter and medicine. Just the bare necessities, nothing lavish. They're called the four requisites. The majority of monks still live at this level, and in a world increasingly swamped by consumerism and lost in the drive to achieve more and more personal possessions, such examples of simplicity of living will become more and more important in reminding people that there are other values, other ways of living, which may be more successful in terms of achieving peace and happiness.

Not that everyone has to live on the breadline. It's more to do with attitudes to material wealth. It's that perspective which undermines attachment to sensual pleasure, whether expressed in goods or services. The perspective of what does it matter in the end.

Propertylessness, on the personal level, is the hallmark of a monk. The monastery and all its contents belong to the sangha, the community. In the West, monasteries are usually trusts supported by laypeople, who are themselves the trustees. Although the rules specify only eight basic possessions a monk can have, such as his three robes and begging bowl, he is allowed other things, and these days you might find them owning the odd piece of modern gadgetry, such as an electric shaver and an alarm clock. This way of living is to bring our modern ideas of conservation down to a personal level, a simplicity of lifestyle.

When it came to the community itself, the Buddha obviously wanted it to behave as a community of equals. His was indeed a revolutionary demand to ask anyone who joined the order to drop all pretense of caste, higher or lower, and simply join the end of the queue. No matter if an untouchable joined only the day before, the Brahmin followed him on alms round.

What is more, in any decision-making within a given group of monks, all have the right to a say and to vote. Usually decisions made by the group are unanimous. What the Buddha obviously wanted was a real democracy in the sense that each individual was to be considered equal to anyone else and had a right to influence decisions. This in a society of a rigid caste system and a society turning more and more towards autocratic rule shows how clear the Buddha was in his ideas of what sort of basic rules lead to a peaceful and harmonious community.

Even if a dispute grows within a certain group of monks that seems unresolvable, they are allowed to part company and begin another sangha. A sangha here is any grouping of monks so long as there are four or over. In this way, monks can agree to differ. At base, he destroyed the idea of personal wealth at the expense of others, and he demanded that everyone share responsibility by giving each equal power to vote. The fact that the Sangha has lasted over 2,500 years is testimony to his wisdom.

Although the Bhikkhu Sangha, the order of monks, was quickly established, the Bhikkhuni Sangha, the nuns, took a little longer to form, and came about through the unswerving efforts of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. She had been the Buddha's stepmother, his mother's sister, in fact, who died on giving birth to the Buddha. Once the Buddha's father Suddhodana died, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī found herself free of family, so she decided to see if she could join the order as a monk. She went to ask the Buddha for ordination. He refused her three times.

This seems to have been a ritual in those times to test the sincerity of the candidate. To refuse twice, but to accept the third time. Even now, Buddhists take the refuges three times, preserving this tradition of expressing one's determination. It was unusual to be

refused a third time. However, Mahāpajāpatī was not going to be disheartened. She and a small group of women with her donned the yellow robe and went again to seek the Buddha, who was over 150 miles away at Vesāli. They arrived, exhausted and bedraggled, and again asked the Buddha three times, and again he refused to contemplate a bhikkhuni order.

A lot of Westerners are now inclined to accuse the Buddha of sexism, but I think that's to look at it through 20th century eyes. To understand the Buddha's response, and to be fair, we need firstly to recognize just what a revolutionary he was for his times in many other ways, and secondly, what the status of women was in that society which made such an idea seem out of the question.

He was a revolutionary, for instance, in his attitude to animal slaughter, especially the use of animals for sacrifice. It is said it was the Buddhists and their allies who eventually put an end to this useless ritual. He also condemned the caste system, which he destroyed in his own order.

When it came to women, the prejudice against them went deeper still. One need only read the book of Manu to see that women were reduced to chattels. For instance, a man was able and indeed had to read the scriptures, the Vedas, and had to have sacrifices made in order to achieve spiritual advancement. A woman was unable and indeed forbidden to do this. She was told it was enough to be a good wife.

Now there was not only this prejudice against women which firmly tied them to the household and which labelled them unable to have certain spiritual training or that it was needed or warranted, there was also the conditions of the ascetic life itself as it was led in those days. In the Buddha's time monasteries as a place where monastics dwelt all the time were very rare indeed. Most ascetics anyway preferred to live the wanderer's life going into seclusion into the forest and searching out alms food in the villages and towns. Often they lived under trees and in caves, taking shelter in a monastery only during the four months of the monsoon. It was indeed a hard life, even by the standards of those times.

What is more, the forests were the hideouts for bandits and criminals, not to talk of wild tigers. The idea of women wandering about even in groups would have seemed a wanton carelessness, asking for trouble.

So the lack of precedence, the hardship of the life — remember also that Mahāpajāpatī was a court lady — plus the dangers of the lifestyle, would have seemed great obstacles.

However, the Buddha did finally agree, and it came about through the intervention of Ānanda, his attendant and personal assistant during the last twenty years of his life. He asked the Buddha if it were possible for women to achieve the highest goal and become arahats. The Buddha said yes. If so, replied Ānanda, shouldn't they be given the same opportunity as men to live the *brahmacarya*, the holy life? The Buddha agreed, and so the bhikkhunī order was established.

However, he added eight extra rules to the Vinaya, the discipline, for the nuns, which established the relationship of the bhikkhunī order to the bhikkhu order. The bhikkhunī are the junior order. Again, this need not be interpreted as sexist. In our society, when the three armed forces are together at a ceremony, the navy, being the most senior service, stands first, then the army, and then the air force in order of seniority.

Unfortunately, the bhikkhunī order died out about a thousand years ago in the Theravāda tradition, though it is still very much alive in the Chinese Mahāyāna schools. These days there are many women and men who wish to reinstate the order, but to do so there needs to be a bhikkhunī. Catch-22.

What we do have today is women who have taken the eight precepts, which include the vow of celibacy. In Thailand they dress in white, in Burma pink. Here in Britain there are also nuns who have taken ten precepts of the lower order of sāmaṇerī. They are wearing brown robes. There is also a society, the Saṅghamittā, called after the daughter of the Emperor Asoka, the arahant Saṅghamittā, who went with her brother to Sri Lanka and converted the country to Buddhism. This organisation is working for the re-establishment of a bhikkhunī saṅgha. Tibetan Buddhism also lacks the full order of bhikkhunī, and the Dalai Lama has taken a great interest in this movement.

It's difficult to know what will happen, but I myself am optimistic. Once there is a large enough caucus of women wanting the higher ordination, and the Buddhist community feels it just won't peter out, the question of Ānanda will once more be invoked, and a formula will be established to reinstitute the bhikkhunī order.

So what are the duties and responsibilities of the monastics? Taking for granted that they must try to live the brahmacarya, the holy life, their two specific duties are to study the teachings, the Dhamma, and to practise the meditation, vipassanā. To teach is only a duty in itself if asked to do so. Within a year of his first discourse, the Buddha sent monks off in all directions: "Go forth, monks, for the benefit of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world."

Because monks cannot teach unless they are asked, Buddhism has not developed into a proselytising religion. People will come forward because of their interest and maturity. There's no need to convert.

What about the other two orders, the lay women and the lay men, the upāsikā and the upāsaka? The Buddha also left many guidelines — the five precepts and all sorts of advice concerning family relationships and social responsibilities. It also became a tradition for lay people to spend every half moon in the monastery and to take eight precepts for that day. This is still followed in the East.

The relationship of the lay orders with the monastics is crucial to the well-being of Buddhism. The monastics depend upon the lay people for the four requisites: food, shelter, clothing and medicine. It is considered to be the lay person's responsibility to see that the physical needs of the monks and nuns are met. The lay people, in turn, look to the monastics for help concerning everyday problems of social or personal nature, but especially for spiritual guidance. They see the monks and nuns as the guardians of the Dhamma.

Although lay people hold monastics in veneration and show them high respect, they have also the duty to see to it that the Vinaya, the discipline, is preserved and well followed. There was a case, even in the Buddha's time, of a quarrel that arose between two monks and their followers at Kosambī. It was a dispute as to whether one of the monks had broken the Vinaya, the discipline, or not. The Buddha had come to sort out the quarrel, but they wouldn't listen to him, so he went off to live by himself in the forest. When the lay people heard about this, they refused to support the monks until they had gone to the Buddha, apologised and taken his advice. In this way they were forced to seek an end to their quarrelling.

It is not unknown even these days for lay people to stop supporting monks who are not following the Vinaya. So here we see quite a clever interdependent interrelationship the Buddha contrived to establish between the monastics and the lay saṅghas.

These days, however, the word saṅgha is used to refer only to the monastics. But this use of the word must not be confused with its other meaning: the Ariya Saṅgha, the community of saints Buddhists take refuge in.

Indeed, do not expect monks and nuns to be perfected enlightened ones. In the Buddha's time, there was a certain monk called Dabba the Mallian, who on becoming an arahant and wondering how best to serve the Dhamma, offered to take care of the monks' lodgings. The Buddha agreed it was a worthwhile thing to do. Dabba then set about dividing the monastic grounds into separate areas. In one part, he put all those

who were interested in the discourses, so they could rehearse and discuss them. In another part, he put all those interested in the Vinaya, the discipline, for the same reason. He chose a quiet area for those who wished simply to meditate. And there was a special area designated for those who indulged in low talk and were athletic.

So it would be a great mistake to see the saṅgha as a ready-made supermarket of arahats. On the other hand, it would be unjust to see them as a band of rogues. Monks and nuns are simply ordinary people who have decided to live in a particular way. Some do it with consummate dedication. Others, shall we say, bide their time.

The Ariya Saṅgha, the noble ones in whom Buddhists take refuge, are in fact those who have intuited Nibbāna and have entered the paths. But this saṅgha may belong to any of the orders. There is a very strong tradition of lay people achieving insight. Early this century there was an arahant in Burma called Sunlun Sayadaw, an illiterate farmer who achieved the third path before becoming a monk.

The reason such people are taken as refuge is because of their knowledge — their experiential knowledge — of the third noble truth, the end of suffering. They are the past and living examples of the truth of the Dhamma. Furthermore, because now they know for themselves, their faith in the Buddha Dhamma is unshakeable. By putting confidence in such people, Buddhists reinforce their own confidence. When you see a dentist's certificate, you have more confidence in the treatment and more confidence in yourself to undertake the treatment.

Furthermore, their importance lies in the fact that they are the very purpose for which the Buddha worked so tirelessly for forty-five years. For what is the point of the Dhamma if it is not to get people to that enlightenment? What is the point of the four saṅghas if not to support those individuals who have the necessary perfections to achieve the highest goal?

So, to take refuge in the noble saṅgha, the saints, is to aspire to be one of their number.

Well, I hope this talk has been interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the Nibbānic peace within.

CHAPTER 20

The Four Paths and the Four Fruits

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 23 min

> *In this exploration of spiritual development, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the traditional Theravāda framework of the four noble paths (magga) and their corresponding fruits (phala). The talk centers on how ten mental fetters bind beings to saṃsāra and are progressively uprooted through deepening insight.*
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> *The first path, sotāpanna (stream-entry), eliminates the three fundamental fetters: wrong view of self (sakkāya-diṭṭhi), skeptical doubt (vicikicchā), and adherence to wrong rites and rituals (sīlabbata-parāmāsa). Stream-enterers have unshakeable confidence in the Buddha's path and can achieve full liberation within seven lifetimes. The second path, sakadāgāmī (once-returner), weakens sensual desire and ill-will, while the third path, anāgāmī (non-returner), completely uproots these fetters.*
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> *The final stage, arahant, destroys all ten fetters including the subtlest forms of conceit, restlessness, and ignorance. Bhante explores how these attainments manifest as personality changes and discusses the special qualities of a sammāsambuddha. The talk concludes with reflections on Buddhist devotion to the Triple Gem - understanding it not as worship but as conscious cultivation of the Buddha's qualities within oneself. Through stories like Kisāgotamī's awakening verses and the Buddha's own victory proclamation from the Dhammapada, this teaching illuminates the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice.*

Foundation Course 2, Talk 10 The Four Paths and the Four Fruits

Another way of looking at the whole process of mental purification is to see it as a release from chains or fetters that tie us to this form of existence. The Buddha enumerated ten such fetters. The interesting thing is that in this categorization they are linked with the Progressive Insight. This progress itself is enumerated as the four paths, each having a particular insight or fruit.

When Buddhism talks of the middle path, this is what he meant at the highest level. Generally, the middle path is understood as the path of moderation in all things, but it can also mean the apex of a triangle which rises above and beyond the two lower paths of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. Here we shall see how this middle path develops into final liberation.

The first three of these fetters are dissolved, rooted out, with the first insight into *Nibbāna*. They are wrong view of self, skeptical doubt, and adherence to wrong rites and rituals. Wrong view of self is believing that the ego, the personality and the body constitute an integral person or substantial soul or self. It is when we believe the five *khandha* to be what we really are. That is why in the meditation practice we try to become more and more aware of the transient, changing, insubstantial nature of this being I call me, this being I call myself.

Therefore, it is not surprising that when a meditator intuits Nibbāna, the one thing she comes to know is that whatever the five khandha are—the body, the sensations, the perception, the volitional conditionings and consciousness itself—it isn't her. The Nibbānic experience can then be said to be a moment when we discover our true identities, what we really are.

Discovering and realizing that the third noble truth, the end of suffering, is true, obviously also brings to an end all the skeptical doubt. Until that moment, we have put confidence in the Buddha's teachings, and we've practiced the meditation and tried to shape our lives around the Noble Eightfold Path. But until this moment of insight, we cannot know for sure whether it's all true or not. This not knowing causes fear to arise, and it expresses itself within us as skeptical doubt. Is it just a trick? Perhaps the Buddha thought he was enlightened, but maybe he wasn't. Did the Buddha really know? This Eightfold Path makes sense, but I don't think it's the whole story. And so on. Some people are wracked by these sorts of doubts. Up until the moment of breakthrough, such people can overcome doubt by raising confidence, by putting trust in the path, at least until the real experiential proof to the opposite arises.

With insight, this sort of confidence, this faith becomes unshakable, for now the person knows. With this insight, not only is skeptical doubt in the Buddha's path rooted out, but the path leading to total liberation is opened up. Such a person who enters the Noble Path is called a *Sotāpanna*, which means one who has entered the stream, the stream that will carry them inevitably to total liberation.

Up until this moment also, a meditator may believe that there are other ways of overcoming suffering, such as appealing to a god or performing some magic ceremony or ritual. It's nice to think that the slate can be wiped clean by special pleading or an act of sacrifice. So it is, people will make offerings or undergo self-inflicted punishment, believing that this will wipe out the karmic debt. In Buddha's time, for instance, some ascetics believed that by standing in the river for hours on end, the passing water cleansed the body and the mind.

Insight dispels such wrong views. The stream-entrant, the Sotāpanna, knows it is only through personal self-endeavor that the mind will be purified and the noble paths won. Only by accepting the law of *kamma*, only by cleaning up one's own karmic stream, can further insights be made. It's a bit like a hiker who is lost in a forest, and suddenly in the clearing perceives the mountaintop he's aiming for. Now he knows the direction.

Because the stream entrant knows the direction, there is no chance such a person will find themselves in circumstances where training cannot continue. In terms of being born again after death—not something, by the way, that is necessary to believe to benefit from the meditation—such a person need only go through the process of birth and death at the most seven times, and the worst place he can be born into is here, as a human. Being a human, by the way, was recommended by the Buddha. He said it was the best place to train, for here a being can confront suffering more easily and discover the way out.

The importance of such people who attain this insight cannot be stressed too much. They form the backbone of the Buddhist community. Their firm, unwavering faith helps others to keep going when the going gets rough. Their own efforts are an inspiration. Without this continual renewal within the Buddhist community, there is a great danger of a loss of faith and the growth of superstitious beliefs, such as turning the Buddha into a god who can save us. In the East, it is generally believed that in these so-called corrupt times, people cannot achieve insight. But one of the greatest scholars in Burma, Ledi Sayadaw, said that such views were a danger to the Dharma and urged people to make great effort to attain at least the first path.

When the next noble path and fruit are attained, the next two fetters are only attenuated. Their grip is loosened, but the person is not free of them. These two are ill-will and sensual desire. Such a person is called a *sakadāgāmi*, or one who needs to be born only once again. So we see that attaining the paths not only brings us closer to liberation, but also manifests as a change in personality. At this level, the grip, the obsession with sensual pleasure is greatly diminished. However, it is not until the third path, the *anāgāmi*, the one who will not return, the non-returner, that the shackles, the fetters of sensual desire and ill-will are finally rooted out.

Finally, there is the last stage, the *arahat*, one who has killed all enemies, meaning, of course, the roots of unwholesomeness—greed, hatred and delusion. In that absolute liberation, all the fetters that chain us to the wheel of dependent origination, the wheel of becoming, are finally rooted out for good. The final five fetters are the craving for the realm of forms and the formless realms, conceit, restlessness and ignorance. The

realms refer to states of mind achievable through concentration meditation and also to realms of existence, where a being proficient in these skills can be born. But like all places in this phenomenal universe, they suffer from the wrath of transiency and don't last.

Losing desire for such blissful states of mind means that the arahat has no wish at all to stay in this world of change, *saṃsāra*, this ever going on and on. All desire for sense pleasure is gone. Although an arahat may be reborn in a high plane upon death until all kamma is finally run out, once this has passed, he passes into *parinibbāna*, total Nibbāna, as have all the Buddhas. This state is never described. The Buddha said it was indescribable.

It is interesting to note that conceit and restlessness stay up to the bitter end. Conceit, of course, arises out of wrong view of self. So all the other path-winners do not do away with ego. Even though they may know who they truly are, there is still delusion. There is still attachment to the five khandha, this body and mind. So long as there is even an iota of attachment, so long will there be wrong view of self. This, of course, is ignorance, the last fetter. Not until the heart is totally purified will we ever stop creating unwholesome kamma, no matter how insignificant it may be. This unwholesome kamma always causes mental disturbance. This is the restlessness that final liberation does away with.

So that's why those on the first three paths are called *sekha*, meaning trainees. Work still has to be done. But the arahat is called *asekha*—no more training is necessary. That final liberation also brings with it the consummate knowledge of the *sāvaka* Buddha, the enlightened being who was a follower of the Buddha. He becomes one who knows. All ignorance as to the true nature of saṃsāra, this phenomenal universe, this universe of becoming, is dispelled.

It's important here to note that the Buddha didn't call himself a master, but a guide, one who leads people to the higher understandings and attainments. He didn't want disciples to remain disciples. He wanted them to become masters, to master the path, and become equal to him in the knowledge of the Enlightenment. That is why followers who achieve the total Enlightenment, the highest path of the arahat, are known as sāvaka Buddhas, Buddhas who are disciples of a Buddha.

The joy of such attainment, of such liberation, is beautifully recorded in the words of Kisāgotamī. She was a woman who had turned up at the Buddha's monastery with her dead child and had asked him to bring the child back to life. She had gone from door to door looking for a mustard seed from a house where there had been no death, believing that if she found one, the Buddha would be able to perform a magic ritual and re-

surrect her child. Of course, she never found one and came back much enlightened by her experience, for it had taught her that death is inescapable and part and parcel of this universe. She joined the order and later achieved arahatship.

These are her victory verses: "Hear me. I have travelled upon the noble eightfold path that leads to that state of sheer happiness. It is Nibbāna itself I have realised, and I have gazed into the mirror of the holy norm. Yes, I, even I, am healed of my suffering. My burden is laid down. My task is done. My heart is set totally free. This is I, Sister Gotamī, who have said this."

The Buddha himself, of course, stands as the greatest of all in this dispensation. What gives him that special stature is that he is the *sammāsambuddho*, the fully self-enlightened one, and that he is the one who is the teacher of humankind. Whatever field we look at, be it religious or scientific, artistic, historical or social, the ones remembered are the ones who started things, accomplished something for the first time, discovered something.

The spiritual quest is often compared to mountain climbing, and here it works very well. So many attempts were made to climb Everest, but not until Sherpa Tenzing and Edmund Hillary actually made it did people know it was really possible. After their conquest, everything became that much easier because now climbers knew it could be done, and from that knowledge took confidence and courage. So with the Buddha. His life itself and the teachings are a monument and a description of that most difficult of peaks to be conquered. And just as Tenzing and Hillary are regarded with special honour and affection in mountaineering circles, so the Buddha is venerated by his followers.

The special qualities of a Buddha are chanted most times that Buddhists come together. It starts with a salutation: *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*—Hail to the Blessed One, the arahat, the fully self-enlightened one. Then, in the Theravāda tradition, the qualities are chanted.

They are, first of all, that he is an arahat, one who has destroyed all the enemies of the spiritual path and uprooted greed, hatred and delusion. Because of this, he has broken the spokes of the wheel of dependent origination, the wheel of becoming, and gone beyond. Therefore, he is worthy of homage.

The second is the fact that he is fully self-enlightened, fully in that he knows what suffering is, what the cause is, what the end of all suffering is, and the path leading to that end. This is what a Buddha knows. What is more, he achieved this by his own endeavour and without a guide.

Having achieved the enlightenment, the third characteristic is that he became endowed with clear knowledge, clear vision and virtuous conduct, perfect moral behaviour. There was no separation in him between what he said and how he behaved, what he said he did. His behaviour came out of wisdom and its special sign was a devotion to wakefulness, bright awareness. Indeed, there is a discourse when Ānanda, his attendant, enumerates the wonderful and marvellous qualities of the Buddha. But there is one thing he leaves out, and this, the Buddha says, is what is also remarkable about a Buddha: his continuous unbroken awareness. "All you have said is true, but remember this also, Ānanda, that this is also a wondrous and marvellous quality of the Perfected One. The Accomplished One is aware of feelings, be they pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. He is aware of them as they arise and as they pass away." And so he says that he is equally aware of all the other five khandhas—the perceptions, the volitional conditionings and consciousness.

Having achieved the Buddhahood, the journeying itself was accomplished. He had made a commitment to the Buddha of the last dispensation, Dīpaṅkara, at whose feet he determined to become a Buddha. Life after life he trained to achieve the necessary perfections, so that eventually he could discover the path without a guide. So he is called *sugato*, often translated unhappily as well-gone, but it means to have completed the journey to enlightenment with distinction.

The Buddha actually refers to himself in the scriptures as the *Tathāgata*, one who has gone or travelled thus, meaning this journey to enlightenment. This journey revealed to him the nature of the world we live in and of all the realms. So it is that his fourth quality is that of a knower of the worlds.

Having achieved his Buddhahood, he decided to teach, and so he is called incomparable trainer or leader of human beings who need to be tamed or trained. He is the teacher of gods and humankind, and this he did out of compassion to alleviate their suffering. In other scriptures he is called the *Mahākaruṇiko*, the great compassionate one. And so it is that he is enlightened, the awakener of humankind, and blessed, and deserving respect and veneration on account of these consummate qualities.

So in the Theravāda tradition, these are the nine qualities enumerated which belong to a Buddha. Thus is the Blessed One: he is an arahat, fully self-enlightened, endowed with clear knowledge and virtuous conduct, his journey well accomplished, knower of the world, incomparable charioteer of people to be trained, teacher of *devas*—those who dwell in the higher realms, here often translated as gods—and humankind, enlightened and blessed.

This brings us to devotion in Buddhism. Anyone entering a Buddhist shrine would immediately think that people are praying to a god and so on. The external trappings are the same as in many another religion: the statue of the founder, the special veneration he is held in, the candles, the incense, the flowers, the bells and smells, and so on. However, in Buddhism, devotion takes on a different meaning. Rather than an outpouring of emotions, it is a conscious, determined effort to bring to mind the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha—the three refuges, the triple gem—and to ponder their meanings, for it is to these qualities that one devotes oneself.

That's devotion—to take on, to train oneself, to devote oneself to achieving the qualities of an arahat, the sāvaka Buddha. No doubt, when a Buddhist or a meditator considers the life and work of the Buddha and what they have gained from the teaching and the practice, great feelings of thankfulness and praise arise. This is the heart's natural response to the generosity of the Buddhas and the saints. One can feel such gratitude for many another person—mother and father, friends who have helped us in need, public servants and so on. Although when these feelings arise there is great warmth and lightness in the heart, they would be of little use if they were not also seen as motivators to take up the path more seriously.

What's the point of going around telling everyone what a lovely and wonderful doctor you've got when you never take the prescribed medicine? Such emotions that arise of praise and gratitude can all be used by devotees to urge themselves along the path. If this is not so, if the Buddhist believes that performing a few ceremonies such as lighting candles and bowings and feeling good about it is all that is required for liberation, they are simply strengthening the fetter of adherence to wrong rites and rituals. It becomes right ritual and ceremony when it helps to further our training, to further a person along the path.

So when a Buddhist bows to a Buddha statue called the Buddha *rūpa*, he is saying something like, "Thank you for your teaching. I shall devote myself to the path. I submit myself to your wisdom. I have faith that it will lead me to my liberation." When a Buddhist lights the candles, she may call to mind the enlightenment and determine to achieve insight into one of the paths. When she lights incense, she may call to mind the law of kamma, that good deeds pervade the universe just as the scent of incense pervades the air.

When she sets out the flowers, she may remind herself of the essential characteristic of the universe: transience, change. Even the most beautiful bloom must fade. Whatever a devotee does in the shrine room has this symbolic quality about it. They are all aids to reflection. Even the chanting is simply recalling to mind the teachings of the Buddha, constantly developing right understanding of the Noble Eightfold Path.

This same devotion is also developed towards the Dhamma, the second refuge. The Dhamma is said to be thoroughly explained by the Buddha. When one realizes the Dhamma within oneself, this is the same as gaining the four paths of insight and their fruit. The results of such insights are immediate. This is why Buddhism talks of the eightfold kinds of noble persons. Each individual can achieve the four paths of insight and so gain the four fruits of these achievements.

The Dhamma is said to invite investigation. It's not just to be believed. It leads to *nibbāna*. Nibbāna is the end of training. It's the goal, the highest good. And finally, the Dhamma has to be understood by each person individually. No one else can understand or experience this for us. We have to do the work. Again, this is all part of Buddhist devotion: to devote oneself to realizing the Dhamma.

Devotion to the Sangha, which here means the eight kinds of persons—those who have entered the paths—is to recognize their unique position in the Buddhist community. Their conduct is said to be good, upright, wise and dutiful. For this reason, they are worthy of offerings, of hospitality, of gifts and reverential salutation, for they constitute an incomparable field of merit for the world. In other words, if you praise someone's way of life and livelihood, you want to support them.

Remember, such people can be both monastics and lay people. However, monks and nuns are more visibly trying to lead the holy life, and so are obviously treated with greater respect. And to some, many show great devotion.

The manner of showing devotion differs according to the culture. In Japan, monks and lay people will hold their hands together as if in a form of prayer and bow. They will bow this way to statues of the Buddha, the Buddha Rupa. In our tradition, there is a full body bow which is done towards the Buddha Rupa or to monks on occasion. Five parts of the body are to touch the ground: the two knees, the two hands and the forehead.

To us in the West, it seems a little over the top, but a great deal of study has been done in the West on the meaning of body postures. It is through our body and facial expressions that we also communicate what we mean. We stand in a different way when

we're with a friend from when we're with the boss. With the boss, we tend to stand a little more alertly—some say respectfully—and if we are taller, we tend to bend just a little to show deference.

Bowing can teach us a lot about ourselves. I recommend you try, and just notice how the mind reacts with all its opinions. I certainly butted against it when I first came to Buddhism, but now I find it a very meaningful practice.

So we've covered here the four different paths of sainthood, the meaning of the refuges, and of devotion. This is also the last talk, and therefore I think it right and proper to end with the victory verse of the Buddha himself, which he is said to have uttered upon enlightenment. They are recorded in the Dhammapada.

"I, who have been seeking the house-builder of this body, failing to achieve enlightenment by which I could discover him, have wandered through innumerable births in Samsara. To be born again and again is indeed suffering. But now, O house-builder, you have been caught. You shall build no more houses for me. All your rafters have been broken asunder, your gable-top destroyed. My mind has attained the unconditioned. The end of suffering has been achieved."

Well, I hope this talk has been interesting and helpful.

CHAPTER 21

The Noble Silence

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 34 min

> *In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma explores why intensive retreat conditions are essential for deep vipassanā insight meditation. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he explains how 'noble silence' involves systematically shutting down the outer personality to access deeper levels of mind. The talk examines the Buddha's teaching on the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa): sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and sceptical doubt. Using vivid analogies—including the story of catching a snake with six exits—Bhante demonstrates how these mental obstacles prevent clear seeing. He provides practical guidance for working with each hindrance through Right Awareness, explaining how fantasies and internal dialogues feed negative mental states. The teaching emphasizes the importance of sīla (moral conduct) in creating a safe container for inner work, and shows how external silence naturally calms the mind's agitation. Essential listening for understanding why retreat conditions support the purification and insight functions of vipassanā meditation.*

Buddhism without insight meditation would be like a whole system of medical theory without the medicine. The practice of insight *vipassanā* has two functions. It begins to reveal to us a way of being in the world and in daily life and it begins to reveal a way of discovering the deepest recesses within our mind. Here we are concerned with finding out why this is and how it is done. We are going to see why intensive retreats are important to the ardent meditator.

Within the process of vipassanā insight meditation there are two functions. Firstly to purify the mind and secondly to make insight. Both are achieved by the slow establishment of silence. Silence here means stillness, quietness, a situation such as a very bright, clear, windless day in which to observe the countryside.

To make this easier for us to understand, I've drawn a diagram to suggest the human is made up of three major casings, and each casing is made up of layer upon layer. The first casing, the outer shell, is the personality, the outer person everyone else knows us by. It is the way we relate to the world, communicate with it. It's how we interact with people.

In order to delve deeper into our mind, this outer circle, this casing, has to be shut down, quietened. This is why, when we look at the guidelines for an intensive retreat, we see people are asked to keep silent outwardly. There is no longer to be communica-

tion or interaction with others. As far as we are concerned, other people are here, on the course, as silent companions, who are dumb, deaf and blind. There's no need anymore even to greet people, to say hello in the morning, or to ask how they are. There's no need even to signal to people to let them pass on the staircase. One decides for oneself, either moving or waiting for the other to pass. At mealtimes, we eat as if no one else were in the room. We just let go of the usual graces of passing the salt and pouring out another's drink. We are learning to be alone. For on the journey inward, there will be no one to accompany us.

People who come on a course for the first time find this very strange, even a strain. They feel it selfish and unnatural. Well, of course it is strange, but such behaviour is there for a purpose. When we see others are behaving in the same way, the strain will go. It would be selfish if it was not an agreed contract between all members of the course, but we have agreed to behave like this for the duration. It is unnatural, if by unnatural we mean unusual. But again, there are many unnatural things that have to be done in different circumstances for different purposes. How unnatural it is to push buttons eight hours a day or walk a tightrope. The purpose of this silence between meditators to the point of non-communication is because we need to shut down the outer person in order to gaze into the inner person. As we shall see, this takes great effort, and our energy will be dissipated if it has to go outward to people.

This is also the reason we slow down our movements to about half pace. Our lives are generally full of rush and bother. We create great disturbances and noise by the way we go walking heavily on our feet, tramping upstairs, the way we bang doors, the way we open and close curtains. At mealtime we make a great crash with the knives and forks and spoons. Some people slurp their drink or chomp their food totally oblivious to the noise they're making. In other situations this might be acceptable behaviour, but on such a course as this, any noise means that the meditator is not being aware of creating silence. Such noise will also draw another meditator's attention, thereby distracting her from the business of looking inward.

Especially around and in the meditation room, great effort must be made by meditators not to create even a milli-decibel of noise. That is why meditators are asked to move extremely slowly and deliberately. And this is most important in the meditation room itself, where any action, such as preparing to sit or changing posture, should be done with the quietness of a door mouse. Being aware of the noise we make will heighten our sense of awareness. Being aware of the silence we are creating will deepen our concentration. In this way, meditators find their meditation greatly enhanced.

The outer person is not simply an expression of the inner person. It also has its own effect on the inner person. If we outwardly get caught up in someone's excitement, we find ourselves getting excited within us. If we're with someone who's depressed, often we ourselves begin to get depressed. Moods and emotions are infectious. The meditator experiences the calming of the inner person when the outer person is stilled.

This stillness is most important on the level of morality. If we do harm to any being, this causes great disturbance in the mind. If we get angry and have an argument with someone, this causes a great fire of agitation that can take hours to die down. Such happenings on a course such as this would destroy the whole environment immediately, not just for the two litigants either. For this reason, all participants take on certain training rules which cut out this possibility. Here, within this space, all meditators should feel very safe, very secure, protected. How impossible it would be for us to look inward if we knew someone here was waiting for an opportunity to kill us.

No, we have all agreed to do no harm whatsoever, not even to a bug. We have also agreed not to steal another's possessions, to have no sexual activity whatsoever, not to talk at all so no one can get into an argument in the first place, and finally, to take no alcohol or drugs. In this way, we have a basis for a very harmonious and peaceful society. We can rest in this environment. What's more, to stop causing harm to ourselves, we've taken on a rule not to eat after twelve, so there's no chance of overeating. We've also determined not to oversleep, thereby tempting others to become lazy and waste the weekend. And we've determined not to disturb anyone by arousing the passions with perfumes and aftershaves, music, dancing and hula hoops. So you can see this *sīla*, morality, is vital in this sort of situation. It is of paramount importance if we're going to close down that outer personality and turn the energy inward to discover the inner person.

It's very difficult at first. It is hard to slow down and be deliberate about everything we do. Even turning the handle of the door must be done with careful, slow deliberation. But with effort, our mindfulness will increase. Then, once this has been achieved, the problems of tackling the inner person can be faced.

By this inner person I mean all the moods, emotions and feelings, all the fantasies and all the interior dialogues. To achieve this silence of mind we have to understand how we achieved such a busy mind in the first place. It was through wrong view and wrong intention that we built up a mind full of negative states. These negative states, for the most part, lie dormant and arise only when certain stimuli come along. For instance, my anger presupposes a certain disposition to react with anger when something happens. We've taught ourselves to get angry whenever someone disagrees with us.

We've found this a very useful ploy, since for the most part it wins the argument for us, or at least most opponents retire frustrated if not defeated. Until similar occasions arise, our anger will lie dormant.

However, as soon as we sit in meditation, just then when all stimuli have been shut down around us, just then when in a perfect circumstance of silence and support, all the anger starts coming up for no apparent reason.

To illustrate why this is, an interesting tale is told in the scriptures of a teacher of the Dharma, who actually never meditated. He noticed that over a period of time, all his students became highly attained spiritually, and some even had a hat. He finally decided to go and seek their help. However, when he approached them, they'd simply say they were too busy and pass him on to another. The reason was that he had the sort of mind which questioned and argued. They presumed he'd never take their advice. Eventually, one of the monks asked him to approach a young boy. A little humbled, he nevertheless did so and asked the child how to meditate.

The *sāmaṇera*, or young novice monk, asked him how he would catch a snake he knew to be in a mound that had six exits. The Dharma teacher said he would do this by blocking up five exits and would simply wait patiently for the snake to come out. The young sāmaṇera said exactly so. He pointed out to the teacher that if he wanted to observe the mind, he had to close the five senses.

In other words, when we meditate, we are stopping the mind using its usual means of expression. Normally, if we are angry, we'd shout and throw something. It would be expressed in some way. But now, in the outer silence of the senses, in the stillness of the sitting posture, the mind becomes filled with its own anger and nowhere to express it. Suddenly, the meditator is faced with raw anger.

Unfortunately, it's not quite as simple as it seems, for now this anger does find an outlet, and that's of course the mind itself, the sixth hole in the mound. The mind itself creates a dream in which anger can satisfy itself. There we are, sitting very still. To anyone coming into the meditation room, we seem so quiet, so silent. But internally, our minds are in a vast commotion. Fantasies of shouting and hitting, of slaughter and mayhem, vast battles in huge war arenas are conjured up in our minds, fuelled by all the unleashed anger that can no longer find expression through the body into the world.

Even though these fantasies are not willed by the meditator, even though she finds herself caught up in them unwittingly, she is not only entertaining the anger but feeding it. How do we know this? We know this because the fantasies, if left unchecked, grow more and more violent, more and more angry, so that states of mind are being developed.

Fantasies and all internal dialogues have to be vigorously noted as soon as one becomes aware of them, and the attention brought back immediately to the underlying feelings or sensations of anger in the body. And if these sensations are not obvious, then we must return to the process of breath.

Now of course it's not just anger that causes this type of mental agitation. The Buddha in fact taught there were five causes that hindered the meditator's progress. They are called *nīvaraṇa* and are normally translated as hindrances. The five hindrances to concentration are sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry and sceptical doubt.

When these states of mind arise, we also recognise them in the meditation for what they are. In a volume of smaller sayings, this is how the Buddha tells meditators how to meditate on these states of mind: "Herein, O disciples, when some desire is present, the meditator knows there is some desire in me. And when desire is absent, he knows there is no sense desire in me. He knows how the latent sense desire comes to arise. He knows how to reject sense desire once it has arisen. And he knows how to prevent the arising of sense desire in the future."

For sense desire, read also ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and sceptical doubt. We shall take these five in turn and see how they cover all negative states of mind. It's a neat classification by which the meditator can quickly recognise what state of mind he is in and so quickly decide on a course of action. The instructions which follow are particularly to do with vipassanā insight meditation, though they can be useful in ordinary daily life.

It is a fact that our minds will always seek satisfaction now here and there. The mind always wants to be happy, excited, or at least contented. We have throughout our lives taught the mind to seek this happiness in pleasurable sensations that arise in the body. So whenever a stimulus from the outside world impinges upon the senses, be it pleasant music, a lovely scene, a cool ice cream, whatever it is, those resulting sensations is what the mind loves to indulge in, splash about in, wallow in.

When, in the situation of an intensive meditation course, all these stimuli are taken away, the mind becomes agitated and thrashes about, looking for those sensations it has come to expect. The body expresses that desire with empty feelings, craving feelings, wanting feelings, just like the pangs we feel when we get a little peckish and there are no biscuits about.

In the silence of a retreat there is no way to satisfy these demands, so the mind does a double take and tries to create them all within itself. Suddenly we are in cascades upon cascades of dreams, fantasies and dialogues. Vast epics are played out in the mind, all expressing our desire for satisfaction now here, now there.

Sexual pleasure and erotic delight are without doubt the most delicious of sensual experiences. You can see its search already dominating the lives of fourteen and fifteen year olds. Our society has encouraged its indulgence. A whole generation and the up and coming generation are left gasping like salivating dogs at the smell of meat. So we as a culture stand agape before tantalising flesh. Whenever you look at newspapers, billboards, virtually all films, the pleasures of sex are turned at us. The power of the image conditions our minds to seek these pleasures. And if it is reinforced with actual experience, sexual, erotic desire becomes for us a great craving and attachment. Should we then be so surprised that once all the avenues for its indulgence are shut, it becomes so insistent in the mind?

I talk of sex since that is a very usual hindrance of desire. But others include food and drink, power and status, fame and glory. Indeed, any pleasure you can name can develop this obsessive quality.

What can we do? In a meditation course, we are concerned to shut down the higher faculties of the mind. We are concerned to shut down imagination and thinking. When these are calmed, the intuitive mind is no longer clouded and can begin to see things as they really are. Therefore, our aim is to put an end to fantasy and imaginative thinking for the duration of the course.

The most important starting point is our determination not to get caught up in them. This has to be a most determined decision, a most resolute resolution. If there is one chink in that resolution, one little teeny-weeny bit of undetermined will, if there is but one small milli-ounce of will that still wants to indulge in sensual pleasure, we can be assured that before we know it, the whole mind will be indulging, and the resolution will have been destroyed. The meditator becomes discouraged. She says she can't control her mind. The meditator gives up and says meditation is not for him. Our wills must be steeled against sensual indulgence.

In this way, as soon as there is so much as a tickle, the attention will be immediately drawn to it. As soon as the meditator is aware of it and remains aware of it, noting it, it will begin to pass away. This is an important point to grasp. When a thought arises out of the subconscious, say a sudden picture of cheese, that image is immediately grasped by desire, our conditioned states of mind, the *saṅkhāra*. Energy is put into it, and the whole higher mind becomes engaged in developing that initial image. And so the powers of imaginative thinking will go into creating a huge banquet around the initial image of cheese.

The meditator, who has made that resolute resolution, who is ardent and energetic, will catch that fantasy at birth, that first image. In so doing, he preempts the conditioning to develop it. He gets between the desired image and the desiring attachment. This stops, this calms the higher mind, and the awareness can then gaze intelligently and energetically at the object. The higher mind can be engaged in naming it, in labelling it, but that distance of the objective observer must be kept inviolate.

The object, the image of cheese, has been produced by latent energy in the subconscious. It needs fuel. It needs the higher mind to develop it, or it will simply lose energy. To the meditator's delight, as she gazes, observes this image intently, it passes, it just fades away. Most times it just vanishes. She is left with feelings in the body which are then more easily observed just as the sensations caused by the breath process are observed.

Here then is how we tackle sensual desire in vipassanā insight meditation. We determine with an unshakable active resolution not to get caught up in sense pleasure. We determine with an unshakable resolute resolution to be awake, alert like a sentinel.

As soon as any pleasing image or feeling arises, the meditator zaps it with alert, keen, intelligent awareness and stays with it, regarding it as a scientist, with objectivity, until it passes away. Then, back to the breath process.

As with sensual desire, so also with other images, thoughts and feelings concerning the whole area of ill-will and aversion. Images of people and things we dislike, grudging dialogues where we never forgive the insult or the harm done, the great battles and wars fought to death inspired by revenge, scenes of cruelty and inflicted suffering on our enemies and rivals.

All these, like desire, give the mind great satisfaction, for the mind wants to indulge its ill will. There is relief to be had in letting off steam. There's pleasure to be had in revenge and cruelty. But with the same technique of alert, keen awareness, we catch these movements of aversion in the mind, snip them quickly in the bud, and know

them to be aversion and ill-will. Know them to be harmful and observe them intently and equanimously. We must become the objective observers of the mind's ill-will and aversion.

One of my meditation teachers, the Venerable Ujjanaka, used to call the third hindrance, sloth and torpor, the meditator's two very good friends. And that's just how they present themselves. They are very clever, full of subtle argument and pretense. But we must beware, for they are fifth columnists, traitors, and will sell us out to the enemy.

They tell us we're tired. We've worked hard enough. There's no more energy. It's too much, too much suffering. No one has suffered like me. It's time to rest now. Ah, sleep, sleep. You've earned it. Just a little rest, just five minutes, that's all. What's five minutes? And we'll wake up so refreshed. Go on, that's it. Just lie down. Rest just a moment. Ah, and we've gone. Five minutes, sixteen minutes, one hour, two hours, three hours, and we wake. And we know we've been duped. No, we've fooled ourselves.

As very small children, we're often taught to find the end of our problems in sleep. When their children are irritable or weepy, or making a lot of noise, parents will say they're tired, they need sleep. Now maybe they do, but often it's an excuse for putting the kids to bed and out of the way. Either way, the children learn to overcome difficulties by zonking out.

Of course, one does wake refreshed. Sometimes sleeping on a problem does help. The mind has subconscious ways of dealing with such things. But often, sleep is an indulgence, the Sunday lie-in. The whole day in bed with newspapers, plus trays of food and videos. But here, on our *vipassanā* insight meditation course, the indulgence in sleep is a destructor. For sleep saps our energy and leaves us groggy, our wills in tatters.

Our bodies work according to what is known as the circadian cycle. If this cycle is disturbed, we feel terrible. This is what happens in international flights and causes jet lag. Our sleep rhythms are disturbed. When we wake at the end of a sleep sequence and indulge in another hour or two, we unwittingly set up another cycle of sleep and we will feel groggy until it has been completed. The cycles vary in individuals from as little as five hours for adults to twelve or thirteen hours for young children. Here, of course, we have to beware not to start a cycle, or else this whole weekend meditation becomes an intensive sleeping meditation course.

Now all this has to be tempered by the fact that many of us live highly pressured lives, full of stress and worry. This takes its toll on our bodies and minds, and on a weekend course the whole Saturday can feel terrible, depending on what state of mind

we've come with. But we still have to make sure that if we are going to sleep during the rest periods, that it is a real tiredness and not laziness, not the listlessness of depression, not a conditioned reaction to suffering, to boredom.

The Buddha, again in the shorter sayings, gives advice to his great disciple Moggallāna, who became an adept in all the great powers. He suggests six ways of overcoming sleepiness before deciding to lie down. Firstly, he says, not to dwell on it, not to give it attention—that is, to keep the mind on the process of breath, raising energy into the observation. If this doesn't work, the meditator should think about how harmful sloth and torpor are and recall to mind the effects they know of and then go back to the breath. The next is to repeat whatever doctrine one knows off by heart till the sloth is dispelled.

If this doesn't work, the Buddha advises us to rub our ears and limbs with the palms of our hands. Then the Buddha advises that if this fails, we should splash water over our faces. If that fails, we should walk up and down. At the end of all this effort to stay awake, if tiredness still overcomes us, then we should lie down. But mindfully, and he goes on, "Having awakened, you should rise quickly, thinking, I won't indulge in the enjoyment of lying down and reclining, in the enjoyment of sleep."

So what the Buddha wants us to do is to be aware of not giving in to tiredness. We have to test it in the context of our particular insight meditation practice. We can firstly try to put energy into observing. If that fails, we can rise and stretch ourselves slowly and silently. If that fails, we can do walking meditation. But if tiredness still seems to overcome us, then we can lie down with a determination to wake mindfully.

In longer courses, meditators always experience a loss of demand for sleep. Often, the first day or two is nothing but sloth and torpor. But then, because of the power of awareness and its purifying effects, sleep time drops to six hours and sometimes to four. Even in a week-long course, some meditators do without a night's sleep.

The difference between sloth and torpor is that sloth is felt in the body and torpor is felt in the mind. Often meditators experience torpor like a heavy cloud on the mind. Again, it is a matter of observing it and returning to the process of breath. But if one feels overcome by it, then walking meditation is the best answer.

Restlessness and worry, agitation and anxiety are the fourth hindrance. When we sit for some time, even if we begin in a calm way, a feeling can arise to get up, to move. We get fidgety. We start thinking about the time. Is the half hour or hour up yet? Maybe I've missed the bell. This restlessness can be caused by any reason. It might be some worry,

real or imagined, that keeps coming up in the mind. It might be a lot of unresolved feelings which are all repressed and unknown to the meditator but cause such agitation in the mind and body.

In meditation the causes of such things are not important. We have to deal directly with the presenting problem. When restlessness comes we must raise our determination to sit still till it has passed or until the time allotted to the meditation is finished.

Here, unlike sloth and torpor, the energy is high, but it's fractured and bursting out all over the place. So our determination is placed into focusing the energy. When restlessness arises, we're much more concerned to sharpen the concentration and establish equanimity. To sharpen the concentration we can rest the attention on the breath, and whenever restlessness claims our attention we simply note it vigorously so as not to let it affect our thinking and our will to remain.

Remember, the work of a meditator is to see things objectively. When the restlessness is observed, it is done as by a stranger in an art gallery or museum. The restlessness manifests in the body, is seen and observed as something other. The awareness keeps its distance.

If there is ever a feeling that the restlessness is getting the better of us, if its suggestions to get up, to finish, cause us to make even the slightest movement of a finger or an eyelid, then we must take refuge in the breath process, bringing the concentration to bear until we have re-established our equanimity.

It is very important in this practice to overcome restlessness. If we give in, the next time is always that little bit harder to resist. If we are patient and wait until the restlessness begins to subside or even pass altogether, the next time will be that much easier.

Finally, there is sceptical doubt. Now this can be quite a disease with some people. The Buddha said the sceptic was the least able to make spiritual progress. The reason is that a person who doubts never moves. If I doubt whether I can dive off the top board at a swimming pool, I'll never do it. If I doubt my doctor's ability, I won't take the medicine.

As a hindrance to insight, there are three types of doubt. First, there is the doubt in the Buddha and what he taught, the Dhamma. Was he really enlightened? What does that mean anyway? How do I know he wasn't really as deluded as all of us? This Nibbāna is probably a hoax. It's just annihilation or something.

Then there's doubt in the meditation teacher. Well, how much does he know? How do I know he knows anything at all? He doesn't look saintly to me. She doesn't look enlightened at all. Maybe she's just on an ego trip.

Finally, there's doubting oneself. Yes, the Buddha was certainly enlightened. I've no doubt about that. The teacher's very good. She knows what she's doing. She's an excellent teacher. He's very fair. I understand him. It's me. I'm not up to it. I can't do it. I don't have the perfections, the necessary ability to achieve anything.

To undercut these sorts of doubts, that is why, of course, at the beginning of the weekend course we always take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, the Triple Gem. It's important to build up trust, to build confidence in the Triple Gem. This just means that a meditator will give it a go, that there will be a complete dedication to the task in hand, a steadiness of commitment.

Over such a short period as a weekend course, all that is asked is a total self-giving just for that period of time. In this way, after the weekend, a person can judge whether in fact there is anything to be gained from this meditation. We can think about it after the experience. If we don't lend ourselves totally to the experience, we'll never know whether it really works or not. It wouldn't be fair to oneself to give something a half-hearted go and then say, well, I didn't get much out of that.

By committing oneself totally to this meditation practice for a period of time, after that period, a meditator can look back and ask whether in fact there was any benefit. If a person suffers from overweight and goes to a health farm, he doesn't go there with his own set of conditions. He'll follow the regime. Going to a health farm demands a certain surrendering to the system, allowing the system to work itself on the person. It's not horrific. The person has read about such farms, has had friends who have gone there and praised the place and so on. He knows generally what to expect, and it doesn't last forever. He goes on trial for a serious, dedicated, energetic trial.

It is in this way we can overcome sceptical doubt in our meditation practice and on such a course as this. We dismiss all doubt, push it gently to the side and dedicate ourselves to the practising of the technique. After we've gone through the ordeal, then we can look back and judge. If we have gained nothing, then at least we've cleared out one venue of exploration. Now we know vipassanā insight meditation is not for us.

We have to be so careful not to waste precious time getting caught up in all that internal argumentation. Voice 1 saying, "Let's go, this is silly." Voice 2 saying, "No, let's stay, it's interesting." Voice 3 saying, "This is all very dangerous." Voice 4, "What is all this Buddhist stuff anyway?" Voice 5, "We should have gone to see that film."

Doubt creates great splits in the mind, and all the emotions of fear, frustration, depression, and so on are conjured up, all adding fuel with voice upon voice. We get caught up in views and opinions. We lose the balance of our minds and become more and more confused by the arguments, raging on and on until we give up in despair. "I'll never know the truth. The truth can't be known." Or we end up in cold dismissiveness. "It's all rubbish."

This hindrance of sceptical doubt is easily undermined by raising confidence in the triple gem, the teacher and oneself. Remember, faith is not belief. The Buddha didn't ask us to believe him. He just said, "Come and try, see if it works."

When sceptical doubt arises in the mind, just smile. Brush it gently to the side. Say to yourself that you will deal with all these worries after the course. Remind yourself that all doubt is dispelled through experience. For what is the root cause of all our doubting if it is not ignorance? We don't actually know. We're afraid of our unknowing. When we know, there is no doubt.

I can spend a whole lifetime worrying and doubting whether I can dive off the top board or not. But when I experience it, when I do it, what happens to the doubt? Doubt is a great conjurer. We must determine not to get caught up in its tricks. We must determine to put our effort into the practice.

So there we have the five hindrances, the *nīvaraṇa*, which create so much bother and commotion within the inner person. The Buddha likened this mind to a pot of water. When the water is mixed with different colours, it is like a mind possessed with sensual desire. A person looking into it cannot properly recognise their own face. When the pot is boiling and bubbling, it's like a mind filled with anger. When the water is covered with moss and water plants, it's like a mind overcome with sloth and torpor. When the water is stirred and agitated by the wind, it is like a mind overcome with restlessness and worry. When the water has become turbid and muddy, it is like a mind overcome with doubt.

In all cases, when a person looks into such a pot, he will not recognise or see the image of his own face. When we are overcome by these hindrances, we cannot see things as they really are. We are deluded by them. Although these hindrances do not entirely disappear till full enlightenment, when we learn to deal with them on a meditation course, we are achieving the first steps in overcoming them.

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