
SATIPANYA BUDDHIST RETREAT

Selected Talks

A selection of interesting talks if you don't know where to start

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SHROPSHIRE, WALES · UNITED KINGDOM

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Aṅgulimāla: A Monologue

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 54 min

This powerful dramatic monologue presents the complete story of Aṅgulimāla from his own perspective - from his privileged Brahmin childhood as Ahimsaka ('the Harmless One') through his transformation into a notorious serial killer collecting human fingers, to his ultimate awakening as a Buddhist monk. The narrative follows his encounter with the Buddha on the Kosala roads, his ordination, and his gradual purification of mind through meditation practice. Drawing from the Aṅgulimāla Sutta (MN 86), this dramatisation explores profound themes of karma and its consequences, the possibility of redemption even for the most heinous crimes, and the Buddhist understanding that suffering arises from ignorance rather than inherent evil. The story culminates in Aṅgulimāla's realisation of his fundamental innocence despite his terrible actions, illustrating the Buddhist teaching that liberation is possible for all beings regardless of their past. This compelling retelling offers insights into the transformative power of Right Awareness practice and the Buddha's boundless compassion.

I am amused when I look back on my life. To say I lived it wouldn't be the truth. To say I did not live it would be a lie. In the clarity and distance of old age, it seems a tale of another age, another person. Yet I remember it all as clear as day.

I was born at the beginning of the cold season, the Himalayan wind chilling the dying embers of a warm sun. My mother rejoiced, of course, as did the household of relatives and friends, but my father was more concerned with my horoscope, and he slipped away with colleagues to study the charts.

That next morning, it was an anxious father who hurried to the palace to fulfil the morning rituals of a royal chaplain. There he found the king troubled and agitated.

"Ah, Gagaji, I was dozing after my evening meal when I woke into a living nightmare. All my armour was shaking, clattering, flashing."

"Oh, that would have been the time Mantāni gave birth to our son, Your Majesty, and... I'm afraid, into an inauspicious constellation."

"Inauspicious?" A worried king has no time for sympathetic joy. "There are signs that show great promise indeed, and yet others that indicate something quite terrible."

"Something terrible, such as?" The king wanted precision.

"I can't say, Your Majesty." And at the king's growing frustration, he quickly added, "Perhaps it may be prudent to be rid of him."

My life hung on a thread. Thankfully, this king was not so easily frightened. Indeed, he was surprised my father should put such little value on my life. "But he's born a Brahmin. Surely, properly educated and carefully nurtured, he'll overcome any evil tendencies, and that promise will shine through."

This was not the first time I was to owe my life to the compassion of this young, arrogant king, Pasenadi of Kosala. My parents expressed their uneasy hope in naming me Ahimsaka, the Harmless One.

My childhood was happy and untroubled. I was my mother's favourite. I do remember being offered all manner of bribes to be good. Not that it had much effect. It seems I had an insatiable desire to chase mosquitoes, cockroaches, frogs, anything that moved, and squash them.

However, there was one extraordinary incident that shook my usual happy composure. Suddenly, a gang of boys, all friends, playmates, stood around me. One of them, a big boy, Vajiro, began jeering at me. "Creep, think you're better than all of us." They all joined in. At first, I thought they were joking. Then they began to push me around.

All of a sudden, everything went blank. When I came to my senses, the children were staring at me. Before me lay Vajiro. One by one, they sidled away. When the big boy got up, his blood-stained lips flamed with implacable revenge. "I'll get you for this!" I laughed at his threat. I felt only the power and grandeur of a conqueror. But, more ominous, I was savouring the exquisite pleasure of drawing blood.

By young manhood, I was well practised in the arts of war, and I showed such potential in my studies that my father sent me to Takkasilā, the foremost seat of learning. Such was my reputation that the most learned teacher wanted to see me. Āgamaha Paṇḍita Abhiññāna, a small, rotund, elderly man, was revered for his incisive intellect. That, coupled with a stentorian voice, made him a formidable debater. He fired all manner of questions at me, jabbing them at me with his little finger that seemed to turn them into sharp needles. It was a trait that was to take on a sinister meaning for me.

"You'll outshine them all, even me," he announced with great delight. I felt a great devotion to my guru. I began to treat him with a special veneration due to a natural father. I felt sure he saw me equally as a natural son. It was my devotion to learning and a desire to please my guru that caused me to excel.

Then, one day, I remember it too well, he glanced at me in a way that greatly disturbed me. There was suspicion in his eyes, a tightness to his face suggesting fear, or was it hatred? As the days passed, he grew more and more distant. During the final days, there were awkward silences and false smiles. I felt hurt by our loss of intimacy. Too confused to ask what the matter was. Anyway, I decided to put it all to one side, especially so since my final exams were starting. The recitations, the public debates, the competitive games. I performed very well. In fact, I was acclaimed foremost student of my year.

On the very day the results were given, my deepest anxieties were confirmed. My guru called me to see him. I expected praise. I wanted to express my unrepairable gratitude, and indeed that's what I did. But then he said, "You know, it is the duty of every student to offer a gift of homage to their guru."

"Oh, indeed," I exclaimed. "Name it, Guruji."

What he asked for came as an utter shock. "From this *ācārya*, he said with absolute authority, bring me a little finger of one thousand people."

His eyes demanded obedience.

"I can't do that," I remember stuttering.

He was silent, his glare insisting submission.

"My family are all Brahmins. We live as harmlessly as possible, to the highest standards of one who is born of the mouth of Brahmā."

"Those who refuse to pay the ceremonial gift of homage, a sacred duty to their guru, are to be detested. Such a person tramples on our time-honoured tradition. All their learning will produce but sterile fruit. Is this the behaviour of a son born of the mouth of Brahmā?"

There was an inexplicable hardness to his tone, a sneer in his question. I simply had no response. I bowed, mumbling that I would follow his wishes. When I looked up, he'd turned away and was calling for his servant. I backed away, cowed and confused.

The guru had a right to name his gift of homage, but why was mine so terrible? Why had he not asked similar of others? All he asked of them was fruit, clothing, medicine.

That night I fell into a heavy, disturbed sleep. I woke into a terrible night terror. Pointed fingers like darts burst upon me from every angle. I fought furiously with sword and shield, writhing in agony. When I came to my senses, I was lying on the floor, soaked in cold sweat and shaking, awake to the full horror of my duty.

In a daze, I got my belongings together and began to make my way homeward, a journey of two weeks or more, time to clear my head and cool my heart. I stayed in the villages en route, hardly talking to anyone, and all the time I was convincing myself of my duty. I must get one thousand fingers. How else could I possibly do so without killing? People aren't just going to let me walk off with their little finger. I have to kill. There's no other way. Such killing isn't murder. I have to fulfil my sacred duty. Who am I to renounce a time-honoured tradition? I have to do it. I have to.

In this way, by the time I arrived at the dark and dense Jālini forest on the border of my country, Kosala, I was steeled for my first killing. I found a cave on a hill that looked down on a stretch of road travelled by hunters, gatherers and merchants. Water and forest food - banana, mango, rich papaya, various nuts - were all in abundance. And I spent my first day.

That evening, in the pearl-white silence of a full moon, soft with the scuffing of cicadas, I dug a fire pit to Kālī Durgā, Divine Mother, womb of all creation. It was into this cremation ground that I would offer the flesh of my victims to gain them her protection and so sanctify my deeds. I cut my little finger and into the sacrificial fire I offered my blood as libation. Staring at the flames, I then began to develop a fierce concentration. It was going to take all the courage and strength I could muster. For all my battle skills, I'd never yet killed an animal, never mind a human being.

In the dark dawn of early morning, I rubbed the sacred ash into my body. Filled with religious confidence, I made my way down to the path. There I hid, waiting. And sure enough, in that early hour, the shuffle of a wood-gatherer with his hacks and bundles of rope.

I'd imagined a swift dagger attack from behind, but instead pulled an arrow into the bow. A more easy prey there couldn't be. But I couldn't let that arrow fly. I continued to stalk him, all the time urging myself to fulfil my duty. And anyway, what had life left for this old, feeble man but a miserable diseased end? It was a mercy to kill him.

I took a deep breath. As quick as lightning, I thrust my sword. It seemed to penetrate like a knife through butter. His body startled, tensed, and suddenly slumped, dragging me downwards, so I tumbled onto him. There I looked into his face. His eyes glazed, empty and deaf. His mouth wide open, locked in shock. Horrified, I leapt up, hardly able to catch my breath.

Suddenly, there were great cries. When a small crowd of men were racing towards me, their axes shaking in the air. All went blank. I remember nothing but standing there with these same men strewn around me, twisted and bleeding. As I realised what had happened, there came upon me that strange feeling of omnipotence. I stood towering above the slain bodies, the skill, the power, the glory of it. Like the all-conquering hero, I sliced off each little finger with a flourish. And I rejoiced. "I've done it. I've done it. And it's easy, so easy." I danced for joy and relief.

I then hid the bodies. The more I could keep the killings secret, the easier would I capture my victims. I returned to my cave. There I cut what flesh I could from the fingers into the sacrificial pyre. I then threaded the bones with vine and tied them onto a branch. Once they were picked clean by birds or ants, I'd hang it around my neck as a divine amulet.

Late that same afternoon, I heard in the distance a calling. Names being called by many over and over again. Intrigued, I went down. Of course, family and friends had come to look for the wood gatherers. Again I stalked and pounced like a tiger. My attacks were swift and smooth, the blows of death precise, clean.

Having taken the fingers of two men, moving around a bamboo coppice, there in front of me three women. Yes, I stopped. For a moment there was doubt. I felt something tight against my heart. But by now I was too committed. Two were dead before the other could turn. She stared at me, paralysed in fear, and that was the face that fell into the embrace of soft grasses and wild flowers.

Did I feel pity? None. I was drunk with conquest. I could have easily killed the rest, but for a scream of horror some distance from me. I was moving so fast I hadn't bothered to hide the bodies. The game was up. It was now a matter of stopping the news travelling beyond the village. I ran at maddening speed until I arrived at a large clearing. Many buildings nestled there among the palm trees, the place littered with busy chickens and scrawny dogs.

I was sure that once the villagers returned, they'd send a party off to the king at Sāvatti. It was on that road I lay waiting. And sure enough, a handful of men came bearing the usual crude weapons. I followed them till they had gone quite some way

from the village and well out of earshot. It was then, full of the courage of invincibility, I pounced on them. None of this low caste would have had my training. It was all becoming too easy.

I decided to take full advantage of the situation. I made my way back to the village, and in the early hours of the following morning, just when colour begins to seep into the shades, I crept into the first one-room hut, the air hot and stale with the exhausted slumber of grief. Husband and wife lay together, the children - seven, or maybe eight of them - snuggled in the opposite corner. Their pitiful defencelessness couldn't soften my cruel resolve. I bathed myself in the blood of carnage. First the man, then the woman, then the children. Quietly and speedily, I slit their throats and stabbed their hearts. And so I savaged hut after hut. I could see streamlets of blood pick their way down the slope towards the well.

Suddenly, as I left a large wooden house, a scream. I lurched back inside and grabbed that child by the throat. A rage took me. I lifted the little body until it dangled in the air, its little arms flailing, mouth agape, eyes bulging in terror, its tiny fingers wrenched into my hand, its little feet kicking the air. My grip tightened till the tiny body seized and fell limp. I stared at that beautiful little face as in a trance. I couldn't bear to acknowledge what I'd done. As I dropped the body to continue the slaughter, it was the one finger I left behind.

But that little child's cry had stirred the village. It was only because of the poor light that I was able to disappear unseen into the forest. I arrived back at my hideout, exhausted. As I lay down, the child's face returned. I turned on my side and slept through the heat of midday.

Late that afternoon, I woke refreshed and of a sudden decided to hunt animals. Each kill reaffirmed my command over life and death. In the cool of that evening, for the first time in my life, I sank my teeth into roasted boar. It was delicious. Again, I rejoiced. "Soon I'll have my hundred fingers. The debt will be paid. I'll return home in secret triumph and through my father's good offices enter into the service of the king. I'll marry a beautiful girl, inherit the farm, have many children, and my life will be a rolling countryside of nothing but contentment and joy." I danced in joy. I danced in gratitude. I danced for Kālī, my divine protectress.

The following morning I woke in more sombre mood. I realised that even now a platoon of soldiers would be searching for me. There was only one thing for it, to keep on the move without coherent plan and to range as far as possible. In this way I could at-

tack unwary travellers along any road, enter any unsuspecting village in the dark. The kill was easy so long as it remained unexpected. Even the soldiers were useless defence. Such was their clatter, I could always hear them coming.

On one such outing, I overheard a conversation that first made me laugh, and then showed me to what depravity I had descended. I heard a small crowd talking about this madman who murdered for little fingers. "A demon, Aṅgulimāla."

Me? I was Aṅgulimāla, Garland of Fingers. Returning that evening, I caught my face in a pool of water, and what I saw truly shocked me. My black hair was tortured, spikes around my head, my face hidden beneath a matted, grubby beard. My eyes seemed to bulge. My lips and tongue, blood red from betel leaf, which I chewed to calm my nerves. My clothes, torn, filthy and bespattered with human blood. And there, around my neck, the garland of fingers. Yes, a demon. A *yakkha*.

Over this period of but a few weeks, as I gathered my tally of fingers, my bloodlust consumed me. My dreams were full of it. Daydreams addicted to it. To see the horror in their eyes, to hear their screams, was my joy.

Yes, I remember. I remember it all, as clear as day.

I had now but one finger to go, and I thought to come full circle and return to the very spot on that road where I'd stabbed that poor old wood-gatherer. Then at last I would present this blood homage to my guru, against whom I'd built up a healthy hatred and often plotted how to avenge my humiliation.

As I hid in waiting, I began to hear a calling. Oh, my heart jumped into my throat. "Ahiṃsaka! Ahiṃsaka!" My mother! My mother calling me as she'd always done. How could she have known it was me? Her mother's intuition.

Mother or no, there raged inside me a desire to kill. A loud, clear no arose, yet against my will my legs began to move nearer and nearer until I saw her. I couldn't stop. I just kept advancing, my hand now taking the sword from the scabbard. I was all but ready to pounce when a tall, bald-headed monk suddenly appeared. My mother bowed to him. He must have said something to her, for my mother turned and walked back the way she came. He then continued along the road.

I was intrigued. I began to stalk this monk, moving faster and faster, yet the faster I moved, he seemed to be the same distance away. Finally, frustrated, I burst out of my hiding into the road and ran towards him. Faster and faster I ran, yet never getting any closer.

He kept on walking at the very same easy pace. Finally exhausted, I shouted out, "Stop!" And he did. While I panted, he turned round, quite unhurriedly, and replied, "I have stopped, Angulimala. It's you who haven't stopped."

I was full of rage and yet taken aback. He was smiling at me. We stood facing each other for what seemed a long time. Finally, my curiosity—at his supernatural ability to walk faster than I could run, his obvious fearlessness, and this strange reply—brought the student out of me.

"You've stopped, but I haven't!" I shouted angrily.

"This vicious craving and enjoyment in making others suffer, do you think it will end with your hundred fingers? With the murder of your own mother?"

I was dumb.

"And the consequences, the *kamma*. Don't you believe the torturer reaps in kind?"

Of course I did. Do harm, and surely harm will follow as a cart follows the ox.

"I'm fulfilling an ancient obligation to my guru," I offered in defence.

"Ha! Put yourself in the place of your victims. How would you like to be murdered, just so that some bright young Brahmin can offer your little finger as a present to his guru?"

The absurdity of my position hit me like a bolt of lightning. Why had it never occurred to me to take the victim's point of view?

"So come then," he said. "You may as well finish the job." He offered his hand. "You needn't kill me for it."

I stared at him in disbelief. He was a big man beyond his prime, but still strong enough to defend himself, offering me his little finger. His fearless act of generosity made my own courage seem puny.

"You've been amazingly stupid," he continued. "What happened to your common sense? It just goes to show how brilliance can service the most ludicrous delusions. That very dedication to your studies, and indeed to your murderings, is a virtue that will help perfect contentment even in this very life."

His compassion had utterly exposed my callous logic. The full horror of what I had done was upon me. I could hardly bear to look into his kindly yet penetrating eyes. He indeed was a guru of another kind.

He asked me to take him to my hideout. We talked of how we'd both been brought up in the lap of luxury—he, the son of Suddhodana, king of the Sakyans, north of my own country. How even as a young man he'd become weary of courtly life, how he had an insatiable hunger to know the true destiny of a human being. Were we to wander around aimlessly from life to life, suffering this, enjoying that, or was it simply death, annihilation? Or was there something else?

On the way I came across some jungle fowl. I grabbed an arrow, only to feel acute embarrassment. Such was his immediate effect upon me. I returned to gathering fruits and nuts. That midday, we ate together in silence.

It was late afternoon when I woke from a heavy sleep. Suddenly, seeing the monk again, I jumped and grabbed my dagger. He chuckled at my ferocious posturing. "Angulimala, when will you again be Ahimsaka, the harmless one?"

He asked me to sit in meditation with him. "Just observe and feel anything that comes into your attention."

I couldn't sit for long—I was so restless.

"Walk up and down, slowly," he said, "but again, just to be aware of any thoughts and feelings."

I would sit and walk in fits and starts. I just couldn't stand still.

"Patience," he said. "This is going to take some time. Don't worry, I'll stay with you till your future is clear."

I immediately relaxed with this assurance.

It took a few days to calm down enough to sit still and watch. Again and again, I re-enacted my killings. Endlessly working over the same old themes: the chase, the battle, the kill, and always the excitement, the enjoyment. I couldn't stop them dominating me.

"Don't indulge these fantasies," he warned. "Take away their nourishment and they'll simply die away. Or else they'll drive you to further atrocity. And where will it all end? The king's prison? To be publicly tortured?"

That sent a cold shiver up my spine.

"And," he added, "undermine these overpowering cravings by considering how much your victims suffered."

That was hard. I still wanted to justify myself, make light of their suffering.

Disheartened and weary, I stretched and looked into the dark emptiness of a starlit night, and there caught the first delicate arc of the new moon. I decided to meditate just once more. As if by magic, the focus of my fantasies began to change. Instead of relishing the chase and the kill, I began to see the pain and panic of my victims. It was with these images that I fell asleep.

It was still dark when I felt a hand rock my shoulder. I woke with a start.

"Continue," he said. He must have felt the change in my heart. "Get up. Shake off the sloth of sleep."

The voice was sharp, but his smile completely disarmed my angry indignation. I had by now unwittingly become a disciple. Like any good student, I obeyed. I splashed water on my face and began to sit in meditation.

And there they came—the faces tortured in pain, weeping and pleading, vivid and alive as if from the dead. I began to feel their agonies, and there arose a remorse that began to shake my body. Till it started to release, first in little spurts, then in cries, and then in loud moaning and weeping. I cried and cried and cried. I felt my very insides were gouged out. Who knows how long I filled that jungle with my wailing.

"Excellent," said the monk, smiling. "Only when true remorse arises can the heart begin to heal."

I did find his joy in my discomfort a little disconcerting.

The images of my cruelty continued to haunt my every meditation, my every action, my every dream. Every moment was shame, guilt and remorse. And I was so angry with myself. Why had I not seen the sheer idiocy of my guru's request? The gall I felt when I realised I could have said no. What had stopped me but vile servitude to custom, enslavement to tradition? And how was I ever going to compensate for such monstrous crimes?

My remorse turned to despair when I saw they were too terrible to be forgiven.

"How can we compensate for murder of all things?" this gentle monk asked. "What could replace the loss of grandparents, husband, wife, children? In such a case, we must simply bear the consequences. Isn't that enough? Do we have to punish ourselves as well?"

I began to realise that in the end, I would have to give myself up to the authorities. They would mete out a terrible, tortuous death. My identity would be revealed, my family shamed and ruined, my mother... Oh, better for me to live wild, or go to another

country far away, take my chances with uncivilised tribes, or better still, to commit suicide, secretly, somewhere the body would be eaten by wild animals, so that I remained anonymous.

He listened to my ranting and raving. Then again, in a moment of calmness: "Do you want to be a fugitive or live like an animal all your life? And having murdered so many people, you now want to murder yourself? Is there no end to your stupidity? Past deeds cannot be altered, and they will produce present and future consequences. The true question is, do you have the courage to face it, to suffer it? For this is the only way you can drain the past of its effect."

His eyes looked steadily into mine. I jumped up. I had to walk. The arguments went round and round, but the truth stood out. It was better to face the consequences. Surely the king would have sympathy for me. He'd known me since I was a baby. We'd even wrestled each other. He would understand my dilemma. What else could a disciple do but obey his guru? There was my father's influence, the standing of my family. Indeed, I could defend myself before the king as I defended my actions to my own self. And if I was shown no mercy, well, then I would have to suffer the consequences. At least, as this teacher says, I'd wipe the slate clean.

I returned and told him of my decision to give myself up to the authorities. He nodded, as if in approval. There was a long silence in which we gazed into each other's eyes. Then he said, "Would you not rather put an end to this whole weary round of births and deaths?"

"Is there an escape?" I asked.

His face shone with a smile, and he spoke with that absolute assurance of one who knows. "There is, Ahimsaka—that which is not born does not die. It is not created, nor can it be destroyed. Where there's earth, fire, water or air, it cannot be seen or heard or in any way perceived. It is the deathless, the unconditioned. If this were not so, there would be no escape from birth, sickness, ageing and death and the endless, endless rounds of rebirth."

Suddenly I heard myself asking, "You would accept me, Angulimala, a criminal, a murderer, as your disciple?"

"You can stop, Ahimsaka, as I have stopped," he replied.

A huge burden seemed to lift, and an enormous joy, born of hope, settled upon me.

First, he said, you must bury the tools of your abhorrent profession. You must no longer harm any living being, not even a cockroach.

For the last time, I caressed the beautifully wrought weapons, especially the slender blade with its snake-embraced handle. I stabbed out a trench. There I placed these precious jewels, gleaming and glistening in the noonday sun. How difficult it is to give up an addiction, an obsession. I forced my hands to cover them with soil and placed heavy boulders on them until I felt sure that I'd truly buried them for good.

Then he asked me to go in search of suitable robe cloth in cemeteries—oh, disturbing places, charnel grounds, corpses steaming the air with their sickly, sweet, pungent stench, dismembered limbs, half eaten by tigers, rodents, vultures, and strewn around the white shrouds that mourners had wrapped their dead in.

I was about to wash the cloth when my teacher told me I hadn't yet fully buried the past. I looked at him, puzzled. He pointed to a tree. There, hanging forgotten around my makeshift shrine to Kali, was the garland of finger bones, gently swaying in the sighing breeze, their chimes hollow and choked.

I laid them down in a circle, each finger pointing inward to the now empty pit. And on the burial mound over these sacred bones, I planted a frangipani tree, whose white, sweet, perfumed flowers would ever shower their sad grave. I watched over this cemetery, recalling their murders, begging forgiveness, till sleep overpowered me.

The next day I washed the white cloth, and with my teacher's needle and thread made robes. He then shaved my head and beard, and finally all was ready for me to make my request.

"*Bhagavā*, may you be my guide. I shall live dependent on the *Bhagavā*."

"Come," he replied, "and conduct yourself diligently according to the customs of ascetics."

That evening, for the first time, bliss was the object of my meditation.

The following day, he wanted to return to his monastery in Sāvatti. He sensed my fear. "I will not recognise you," he assured me, knowing how different I looked.

When we arrived at the first village, there were shouts of recognition. "*Bhagavad Gautama!*" A great thrill passed through my body. I'd only heard of this great teacher. I couldn't believe my good fortune.

The villagers told their tales of Angulimala and how they thirsted for revenge. "Ah," said the *Bhagavā*, "your revenge makes you no better than he. Let the king deal with him. Oh, the law of *kamma*. Better to live good lives and offer your merit to your departed loved ones. That is what they need."

None recognised me. As a young, clean-shaven disciple, it was proper for me to keep my eyes lowered and remain silent. He asked them to help me dye my robes.

That evening I approached the *Bhagavā* in ochre robes. I knelt before him and asked him for a name.

"You shall be known by the name of your innocent childhood," he said. I was to be known as Bhikkhu Ahimsaka, the Harmless One.

That day all the villagers took a day away from their labours. He talked both to the group and to individuals, calming and consoling them. And so we continued, staying at village after village, until we saw ahead of us the walls of the capital city, Sāvatti.

The monastery, on the outskirts of the city... It was a set of buildings with a large meditation hall, neat footpaths, bushes, flowers and trees bordering well-kept lawns. Everyone stood waiting, hands joined before them in *añjali*. They greeted him with silence and smiles.

I was shown to a hut hidden in the tamed forest grove close by, a sturdy little bamboo affair covered in layers of banana leaves. No more than two good strides in length and one in breadth. I had that strange feeling of coming home.

I lay there that night on the soft-platted palm-leaf mat, listening to the crickets and the conversation of owls, musing how my life had so quickly turned around. Truly miraculous.

During the first few days I would constantly visit the *Bhagavā*, but his attendant, the elder Ānanda, would always tell me to go back to my hut and practise. I felt annoyed and frustrated. Then one day the *Bhagavā* asked to see me.

"Dear friend," he said, "it's not proper to develop an affection for the teacher. I can't bring about your deliverance from suffering. You must take refuge in the teachings and the practice, but above all in yourself. I can only point the way. So please don't come unless called."

That day I felt utterly dejected, abandoned. So much so, I even began to dream of being Angulimala, and all the pleasures of hunting assailed me. I was guided skillfully, and I came to realise that it was this craving to be teacher's best boy that had so angered my fellow students. I was a creep.

Then, early one morning, there were drums, and the occasional salute of trumpets. The king and his army are en route somewhere. To my horror, I suddenly realised they were coming to the monastery. You can imagine my alarm. I'd all but decided to run away when a young monk came and told me to come at once.

As I entered the *Bhagavā's* room, he saw the look of anxiety on my face and smiled. With an insistent gesture, he motioned me to sit by him. We sat and waited as the marching footsteps approached us. And suddenly at the door stood the king—a short, stocky, heavily bearded man, the warrior in his eyes.

The king and his officers paid homage to the *Bhagavā*. I knew all of them, though none recognised me. I did keep my head low.

After the usual pleasantries were exchanged, the king explained they'd come for the *Bhagavān's* blessing. "It's this Angulimala. I've sent out dozens of platoons, but to no avail. He's murdered hundreds, wiped out whole villages. Extraordinary. But how to deal with a deranged madman? Why is he collecting fingers?"

There came a burst of suggestions. "He's possessed." "A demon." "A lunatic."

When the excitement had calmed, the *Bhagavān* said, "What would you say, your majesty, if such a dark-hearted murderer were to become a monk?"

I could feel the panic rising in me.

"What?" shouted the king, his mouth agape with incredulity. A chorus of scoffing supported his scorn.

"Don't be so dismissive," urged the *Bhagavān*. "Even this Angulimala can transform himself."

"Transform himself?" The king continued to shout. "When I catch him, I'll transform him. I'll have him roasted alive."

There were great guffaws and equally delicious torments suggested. But one especially made my hair stand on end: "I'd have him slowly cut to pieces so that he could watch his body being eaten by dogs."

It wasn't the horror of it, but the voice. It was that childhood enemy, Vajiro, now an officer in the king's guard.

"Do you really think that revenge can ever be satisfied? Whatever you do, the bereaved will complain it wasn't harsh enough. Violence breeds violence. It can only be attained by compassion. This is an ancient law."

There was an uneasy silence.

"You did come for my advice." Again that smile. The king looked around at his company. Everyone was baffled.

"So you want us to catch him and bring him to you, *Bhagavā*?" suggested the king.

"No need for that." And turning to me, the *Bhagavā* cheerfully announced, "Here he is. Angulimala, now Bhikkhu Ahimsaka."

The whole company, to a man including the king, instinctively grabbed their swords. There was a stunned silence.

"Perhaps you know him?" asked the *Bhagavā*. I looked up in surprise. The king glared at me.

"Ahimsaka," he said at first in shock, and then in growing surprise.

Ahimsaka, son of Gaga and Montani. He related the circumstances of my birth. But why, he asked, why the fingers? I then told him about the gift demanded by my guru. Realizing my predicament, a sympathy grew towards me among the king and his company. Indeed, I could see sadness shadow the king's face.

After a long pause in which the king kept looking at me and then to the *Bhagavā*, he said, "You're a lucky man, Bhikkhu Ahimsaka, a very lucky man." With that they began to leave. But the king, as he reached the door, turned and warned me not to leave the *Bhagavā*'s order. We listened to the marching steps. The *Bhagavā* turned to me and smiled. I took a very deep breath.

The very next morning, as I was preparing to go on alms round, there was a knock at my door. I opened it to find what I most dreaded standing before me. My mother. Was a basket of food enough for an elephant? Here and then I began to sob, to sob uncontrollably. No doubt she thought it was remorse for the shame that I'd brought upon the family. Not so many days ago, I was stalking this very woman, intent on stabbing her

through the heart, slicing off her finger. This woman, my mother, who bore me, suckled me, tended to my every care. My heart cramped into a solid spasm of agony. If ever I were to describe hell, it would be the heart-wrenching compunction I felt that day.

Happily, even hell passes. But this was the bloodiest of daggers I'd pierced into my own heart. I told her my tale, and of the king's stipulation not to leave the Order, and that I needed time to cure the festering in my heart. I sensed her disappointment. She'd wanted grandchildren and all that. And as for my father, he wasn't surprised, of course. Hadn't he foretold it? It was that I had become a disciple of someone who wasn't a Brahmin that he found offensive. Eventually, he offered me his blessing.

Not everyone came to accept me, of course. On alms round, children poked fun at me, making up silly songs about Aṅgulimāla. But more serious, people threw stones at me, some bouncing off my head. I'd just walk on. They would eventually tire. But I was attacked viciously once. A few of the aggrieved families whipped up a crowd to such a righteous frenzy that they beat me with sticks and were taking me out of the city to kill me, when the guards at the gates stopped them. Ironically, it was Vajiro in command of the post. With a great look of disdain, he ordered a platoon of soldiers to escort me back to the monastery. It took days for the bruises to heal, but luckily there were no broken bones, saying to myself, "If this is all the *kamma* I have to suffer, how fortunate indeed."

It was on one of these alms rounds that something quite remarkable happened. I'd stopped in front of a house in case someone should want to offer food, when I heard great cries. A man came out, looking desperate, saw me, and shouted, "This is no time to come begging. Can't you hear my wife?" Her cries resurrected the screams of my victims. I was so depressed by this that I went to see the Bhagavā.

"Go back and offer this blessing," he said. "Say, 'By the power of a harmless life, let that mother's pain cease and the child be born safe.'"

"Harmless life?" I said incredulously.

"Since your spiritual life began, from the day of your ordination," the Bhagavā replied.

Yes, I thought, at least I could make an offering of my harmless life, albeit a little short. How wonderful if I could actually assist a birth, I who had assisted so many deaths.

She was still crying out and praying to the gods. Quite a crowd had gathered outside the house. I stood at the gates and offered my blessing: "Sister, since I was born into the noble life, I do not recall having ever intentionally killed a living being. By this truth may you be well and may your child be safe."

Everyone began to scoff and jeer. I could feel the anger rising. I left at once. That evening the clamour of a crowd approached my hut and called for me. I began to panic again. I took a deep breath and opened the door. And there before me stood a man holding a baby. There were shouts of "Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu, well done." Presents were laid before me and a garland of the most beautiful white frangipani was placed around my neck. They told me that almost immediately after my blessing, the baby was born and both mother and child were well. I was to be honoured guest at the feast. It was all I could do to blubber my thanks.

Oh, to my surprise, my chant has become a magical mantra for mothers to be. And from that day on, the children stopped poking fun. Coarse words became kindly greetings, and the stones turned into flowers, incense, and sweets. My heart ached with relief and joy at their forgiveness.

After many years, once I felt sure enough in my practice, I decided to go to the neighbouring kingdom of Magadha, where no one would recognise me, in order to live a more solitary life. I found a secluded forest, not far from the prosperous capital of Rajagaha. It was the dry, hot season, so I made my home beneath a great shady fig tree. In time, the villagers generously built me a hut.

There I continued to work, work hard, through all the mental anguish. There were the burning hurts and scorching revenge towards my enemies, especially my guru. It stung to know, to find out, that he had believed the malicious slander that I had been scheming to have him removed so that I could take his prestigious post, and that he had given me such a heinous obligation out of hateful spite. Then there was the nauseous guilt and agonising remorse towards my victims, as well as all the usual unquenchable lusts, paralysing fears and so on. Oh, I thought they'd never end.

And yet, over the years, everything began to subside. And in the clearings it became so obvious. No one had actually ever made me suffer. No one. Not the plots of my enemies, not the punches of Vajiro, not even the vicious malevolence of my guru. All the ensuing hurt and hate was of my own making. Was it not my own befuddled thinking that led me to murder? The demonic delight I took in killing, was that not mine to develop? And all the self-pity, self-hatred, guilt, remorse, and so on, and so on, and so on. Was that not all direct consequence? All the time I was blaming others, unwittingly, I was creating my own hell.

And so it was that since none had actually caused me to suffer, I lost all reason, all need to forgive anyone. And it was then I saw as clear as day. But for mistaken understanding, deluded reasoning, I had never actually meant any harm, never meant to cause anyone any suffering whatsoever. And so it was that I lost all reason, all need to be forgiven.

I was like a man who, wandering through a forest, kicks a crooked stick only to disturb a viper. Just because he's mistaken doesn't mean he and others won't be bitten. Is this not a great paradox of human life that we are at once responsible for our moral behaviour, yet because we are fundamentally not immoral, not bad, not evil, but ignorant, mistaken, deluded, we are therefore intrinsically innocent? Indeed, if this were not so, how could we ever attain purity? And without purity, there can be no liberation from suffering.

These insights came early one morning. From my hut, perched on the side of a wooded valley, I watched the sun rising through the golden air, full of sweet early monsoon blossom and the trill of songbirds. And there arose in me such relief and release. And I remembered how the Bhagavā had answered me on the killing road: "I have stopped, Aṅgulimāla."

Now, I've stopped too. I've done what had to be done. My heart is purified of all defilements and I live in utter contentment and peace.

Greed, Hatred and Delusion as Foundations for Mindfulness

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

In this retreat talk, Noirin Sheahan returns to the jewel of the Buddha's teachings, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), focusing particularly on the third foundation - contemplation of mind (cittānupassanā). She explores how the three mental poisons of greed (rāga), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha) can become objects of mindful investigation rather than obstacles to overcome.

The talk distinguishes between skillful desire (chanda) and reactive craving (taṇhā), showing how even beneficial activities like gardening or parenting can involve both wholesome motivation and subtle greed. Through practical examples, Noirin demonstrates how to work with anger using the Buddha's teaching of the two arrows - the initial hurt and our reactive response that creates additional suffering.

Drawing on the Dhammapada's instruction to guard the mind, she guides practitioners in recognizing these mental states both internally and externally, seeing their arising and passing away. This contemplation develops the capacity to rest awareness within difficult mind states without identification, gradually weakening their hold and opening pathways to greater freedom and compassion.

Tonight I'd like to revisit what's held as the jewel of the Buddha's teachings, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, focusing especially on the third part, contemplation of mind. *Satipaṭṭhāna*, remember, is often translated as a foundation or support, or more evocatively, as a posture for mindfulness, a resting place for awareness.

There are four *satipaṭṭhānas*: body, feelings, mind and *dharmas*, the last one including the main teachings of the Buddha. When we're in the third *satipaṭṭhāna*, we're directing attention inwards into our mind.

Sometimes the Buddha distinguishes between consciousness, *viññāṇa* in Pali, and the mind, the *nāma* component of *nāmarūpa*. Consciousness is the knowing of experience, while *nāma* comprises mental factors like will and perception, which can in themselves be known. The analogy often used is a movie theatre with consciousness as the screen and *nāma* as the picture we see on the screen. For *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation we include both screen and the movie, the knowing and the mental factors that can be known.

In this *satipaṭṭhāna*, we're looking backwards, you could say, looking into what's looking. We're letting attention rest within the mind that's asking attention to rest. This is possible because the mind has a receptive aspect, the mind door, as well as its active components like perception, attention and intention, the components that enable it to direct experience, to focus attention, to cognize.

The mind door is similar to the physical senses and is considered as the sixth sense in Buddhism. The receptive aspect of mind can detect mental activity and thereby act as a doorway, allowing that mental activity become conscious.

The guidance for this *satipaṭṭhāna* starts with: "And how does one abide contemplating mind as mind? Here one knows mind affected by greed as mind affected by greed and mind unaffected by greed as mind unaffected by greed." The Pali word *rāga* is used here which can be translated as greed, lust, passion, attachment or craving.

In Western culture, passion can be seen in a positive light, as when somebody says, "I'm passionate about gardening." Likewise, we often think of attachment in positive terms. Mother and baby, for example, are encouraged to make a strong bond of attachment. And if this doesn't happen, they both suffer emotionally. But in Buddhism, we speak of passion and attachment in the same sense as greed, lust and craving. Along with hatred and delusion, *rāga* is described as one of the three poisons of the mind.

How can we think the attachment between mother and baby in terms of mental poison? And what about passion? Are we never to get enthusiastic about anything?

The Buddhist term *chanda* can be used to describe skillful desire. Ajahn Sucitto describes *chanda* as "desire as an eagerness to offer, to commit, to apply oneself to meditation. It's a psychological yes, a choice, not a pathology." *Chanda*, skillful desire, is in contrast to *taṇhā*, which is the desire that comes in reaction to our feelings. *Taṇhā* leads to suffering, as we vainly try to grasp pleasures that are always slipping through our fingers, whereas *chanda* is grounded in wisdom rather than reactive delusion.

If we're passionate about gardening, we can bring this into our Dhamma path by reflecting on the benefits, for example, care for the earth, respect for nature, beautifying the world, giving pleasure to others, promoting bodily and mental health. We can see gardening as *muditā*, appreciating the good things in life. But greed can easily slip in, as when we want to have the best garden in the neighbourhood. Although the activity is skilful, we can start grasping after its fleeting pleasures and turn it into something stressful.

It's similar for the attachment between parent and child. Parenthood can be brought into our Dhamma path by reflecting on the goodness involved. When the child brings joy, we can be grateful, remembering that joy itself is part of the spiritual path. But again, we have to guard against role identification, otherwise we will be devastated when the child disappoints us or flees the nest. Once we get emotionally involved in how we want our children to turn out, we're on the slippery slope.

Because we're not yet enlightened, all our attachments are going to have some level of greed as well as compassion, goodwill and *muditā*. Even during meditation practice, we'll all spend some time craving a better meditation. In this Sutta, the Buddha clarifies that this is not a problem. All we have to do is recognize the mind state of greed when it is present. We don't have to judge it as wrong or combat it in any way. We only have to know the experience of greed while it is present.

By simply noting "greed, greed" whenever this arises, we learn not to identify with the mind state. It is just another phenomenon arising due to conditions. It doesn't represent me. The more we clarify this, the less we will be troubled or controlled by the state. Greed will be welcome when it comes, because we're interested to get to know its raw energies.

Whenever we notice ourselves wanting a better meditation, we have a golden opportunity to get to know greed. There may be some pleasant feelings associated with thoughts of insight, peace and tranquility. Probably also unpleasant feelings associated with the fact that these aren't happening right now. Acknowledging both the pleasant and the unpleasant moves us towards equanimity, the objective observer, the bird-watcher in the hide.

This, of course, is a very wise and worthy state of being, the state we normally cultivate in *vipassanā*. But to get to know the mind state of greed a bit better, we can creep out of the hide, get a bit closer to those birds which fascinate us. Of course, we have to be very patient, knowing we'll scare away the birds at the slightest noise. And we must be prepared for a long wait back in the hide whenever this happens, letting body awareness cool whatever passions have been generated.

When we're studying the mind state of greed, the bird we want to see more clearly is the knowing of pleasant feeling. We relax as best we can to allow pleasant feelings become more prominent. Then we focus attention on the mind that watches these, the knowing of pleasure. This is a tricky business. Our attachments to pleasure run deep and of course we can only enjoy pleasure if we know it, are conscious of it.

We're so deeply attached to the pleasure of knowing, of being conscious, that we simply take it for granted. The sense of self grows strong as we resist the notion that consciousness might not actually be me, mine. Could it really just be something that's happening? A chance combination of some sense object out in the world being detected by a sensor based in my body, animated by a moment of attention. It's hard to think about life in these terms. It gets too complicated for our brain to cope with.

In my case, reflections like these stir the desire to build a better picture of what's going on. This is another example of greed mixed in with *chanda*. In this case, dhamma *chanda*, the desire to understand the true nature of the world.

Armed with the instructions to know the mind affected by greed as the mind affected by greed, I don't have to curb greed, but simply let mindfulness rest in this instance of third *satipaṭṭhāna*. Attention retreats from its usual external orientation to explore the experience of knowing. There's a sense of moving inwards to what feels like my core. But what can be said about the experience?

There's certainly a pleasure in knowing experience. Pleasure is most clearly epitomized as pleasant sensations in the body. Greed tends to embroider these with thoughts of me and mine, but mindfulness detects the effort needed to blow up these bubbles of thought and the stress involved in that. Seeing the futility of grasping, greed fades and equanimity allows awareness to rest more easily in those pleasant sensations which now acquire perceptions of ease and goodwill.

At the same time, I start to lose touch with what I had termed the core of myself, the sense of being the one who knows experience. I realize that I cannot actually experience pleasure and maintain the sense of myself as the knower of pleasure.

As usual with any *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, mindfulness brings us to the edge of our comfort zone where we are resisting the limitations of our human condition. Resting awareness within the discomfort allows us bit by bit to make peace with our limitations. This exercise helps us come to terms in particular with the limitations of consciousness, learning that we cannot have that broad overview of all experience which brings the sense of being the observer, the one who knows, while also knowing any one experience in any detail, such as pleasant feeling in the body. We have to compromise, let attention move in and out as conditions dictate.

At times like these, it could be useful to practice with the second part of the instruction on greed, to notice when the mind is not being affected by greed. While we are willing to compromise to allow attention move around as circumstances dictate, the mind is not being dominated by greed. However, reflecting the mind is not affected by

greed brings us to another edge to the comfort zone. It's pleasant to experience a quiet mind without the strong pushes and pulls associated with greed. But because it's so pleasant, greed also wants to know the mind that is not affected by greed. It's a conundrum.

We slowly learn to accommodate this limit to what we can know by allowing greed to come and go as we explore non-greed, the absence of greed. In my experience, energies of greed burn in the face and head but are continually being cooled, washed away by the more calming energies of the breath. The exercise helps us get to know greed in a non-judgmental way. Moments of greed meet moments of non-greed. It's not a battle, just a dance.

But a dance doesn't last forever. Greed can turn to anger at its inability to possess the pleasant, calming feelings associated with non-greed. To help us work with this, we have the next line of the Sutta which goes: "One knows mind affected by anger as mind affected by anger, and mind unaffected by anger as mind unaffected by anger."

Anger is a manifestation of ill will. It's a reaction against what we perceive as unpleasant. Within the context of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, anger isn't a problem but an opportunity to get to know ill will. In milder forms, ill will might take the hue of disinterest or dullness. We simply turn away from the world of experience, shield ourselves with mental fog. If the perceived threat penetrates that fog, ill will might take more active forms like irritation, impatience or suspicion. If the sense of threat grows really strong, we forget any agenda except defending ourselves and ill will could manifest as fear, hatred or rage.

The Buddha's metaphor of the two arrows illustrates the sad stupidity of ill will. We have the initial unpleasantness. For example, someone insults us. The hurt we feel at the insult is like being pierced by the first arrow. Rather than tend to this wound, we react with anger. This is like stabbing ourselves with the second arrow. Every time we speak or act on this anger, we remind ourselves of the insult, unwittingly stabbing ourselves again and again.

The metaphor graphically illustrates the pain we inflict on ourselves through anger. The pain of the second arrow isn't immediately obvious. In fact, we generally feel better when we react with anger. The insult hurts, makes us feel small and insignificant. But the reaction of anger builds us up again, makes us feel righteous and strong. In our psyche, it is the other person who is diminished as we hurl insults back at them.

It's similar for all the other shades of ill will. At a surface level, they make us feel better. Impatience and irritation insist that the problem is out there. We would be fine if it wasn't for the idiot in the car in front who insists on stopping at all the traffic lights. It's only when we look at the experience in more detail that we can feel the second arrow.

Suppose the memory of a hurtful remark comes up in meditation. The body grows tense and in our mind we might fire daggers at the person who hurt us. While the image and thoughts put the enemy outside ourselves, we feel the push of aversion within our own body. At times it becomes apparent that anger splits us in two. The angry, assertive part holds all the power and feels like me. It flails about, tightening this muscle and then that, but it can never really pin down the you it seeks to crush.

Eventually we give up the useless battle and let the images fade. Tensions start to relax. As they do we have to admit that the anger was only a distraction covering up our original hurt at the harsh words. There's nothing for it but to feel those hurting sensations. This is to tend to the wound of the first arrow.

It's not easy to bear with the hurts and fears that underlie anger. Much easier to contort our body and mind in ill will. But with each reaction the habit grows. Eventually we see no good in the world. Everything is useless. Nobody is trustworthy. We're on the slippery slope towards a life of bitter isolation.

If we can learn to bear with unpleasant feelings, this has a transformative effect. The enemy is no longer out there. What we were crushing, we realize, was our feeling of hurt. Those feelings are embedded within our flesh, which might be trembling in fear. But there's also an impulse towards self-compassion. Within the fire of purification we learn to forgive ourselves for the hurts we've unwittingly caused and this makes it easier to forgive others.

We won't be able to tend to these inner wounds unless we allow the mind state of anger to reveal itself in mindfulness. Easier said than done. Most of us have been strongly conditioned to repress anger. This may be true for women even more so than men. The cultural message in my youth was, "Nice girls don't get angry." This forms a powerful part of our self-story and causes us to suppress anger.

It's not that suppression is always wrong. In daily life, it's often wise to suppress anger. To be able to suppress in a skillful way, we need to get to know the forces of suppression within us. In my experience, suppression is felt as a fierce weight on my head

which bears down through my forehead. Just sitting with this allows healing. And then, in a social situation where I need to contain anger, that suppressive force can come to my aid. I can welcome it joyfully as a friend.

Occasionally, expressing anger might be wiser than suppression, especially if our habit is to hide anger in passive aggression. Learning to assert ourselves is part of our spiritual path. Of course, we need to be ready to apologize when we get it wrong. A good rule of thumb is to do the opposite of what you really want. If you want to let rip at somebody, that's the time to take a few deep breaths before opening your mouth. If you're scared to say anything, want to clam up and nurse a new grievance, that's the time to summon courage and let it rip. Surprisingly, the release can sometimes propel us to a position of deeper friendship.

Anger plays a huge part in human life, for the most part destructive, but can be used skillfully when we've learned to befriend the state through mindfulness. Thus, we want to welcome the mind state of anger whenever this occurs in meditation. Allow awareness to examine all its various facets in body and mind. See where we're clinging. Let go if possible. Bear with the pain if not.

Within the honest gaze of mindfulness, we sense that anger keeps missing the target. It aims at the imaginary enemy but hurts only our own flesh. Seeing this futility the habit of anger fades and alternative pathways for coping with life's difficulties start opening up.

The skillful response to life's vicissitudes starts with accepting situations as they are. This doesn't mean becoming a passive doormat. We can recognise a situation as undesirable without letting that disturb our mental balance. "It's undesirable, but it's happening and I have to deal with this reality, not waste time thinking about how it ought to be." Acceptance fosters calm, which in turn allows for clear thought about how we might respond. If necessary, we can act vigorously to combat a threat and our actions will be more effective without anger clouding the mind.

A big part of exploring these alternative pathways is to notice when the mind state of anger is not present. This can prove a great boost to our spiritual self-confidence. Especially as awareness deepens, it might seem as though we must be the most hateful, angry person in the world. It's important to be able to counter that with direct proof that we can also be free from anger. When you're practicing *mettā*, for example, you could stop for a moment to acknowledge that the mind is not angry at this moment.

At times, however, even the absence of anger can prove challenging. When the heart is filled with *mettā*, the last thing it wants is to feel anger. And yet to notice the absence of anger, we have to remember what it is that's absent. So this practice deliberately recalls anger.

We must allow anger to arise, remind us of what is absent, and then fade, letting us see the absence of anger. This is certainly a challenge, but it develops the ability to work through anger towards whatever traits we detect in the absence of anger. These will probably include compassion for our human condition — at the mercy of strong desires and yet incapable of satisfying these.

The third exercise in the Sutta is to know mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion. Greed hooks us to pleasant feelings while anger binds us to unpleasant feelings. When delusion predominates, we're ignoring sense data, dismissing it as unimportant. This happens when the experience is not very stimulating, neither threatening nor enticing. Ordinary activities like walking, standing in a queue, brushing our teeth, relaxing after a meal — all these are easy prey for delusion. Similarly, when things go quiet or the mind goes dull in formal meditation.

We withdraw to shield ourselves from the experience of sensations and feelings arising and passing at their own pace and without any respect for what I would prefer. Wrapped tight in a blanket of ignoring, we make up a little story. We tell ourselves we are an individual who lives within our body-mind system, that we are in charge of this subjective inner world, deciding what to say and where to go, what thoughts to think, and — if only other people didn't keep messing things up — what feelings to have.

While we're young and healthy, it's very pleasing to think that this lithe body and these feelings of vibrancy and strength are mine. If we're clever, then we feel proud of this, assuming cleverness is our personal achievement. Whatever advantage we have, we assume this is ours. The illusion gives us energy and confidence, helps us pursue our dreams. But it also makes us vulnerable.

The older we get, the more trouble we find. We were proud of our beauty, so now we're aghast at being wrinkled and ugly. We delighted in striding up mountains. Who is this old geezer who pants when climbing a few steps? We could motivate people, galvanise a crowd into action. How come I'm now alone and ignored? Sometimes we feel bewildered, sometimes ashamed, as if we have caused this decline, sometimes angry, believing the world has failed us. The illusion has now become a source of misery. We nurture delusion at our peril.

So we need to be vigilant. Watch out for those moments when we quietly withdraw and ignore what's going on around us. How easily this happens. How often have you resolved to follow the breath, only to discover five, ten, twenty minutes have elapsed without ever noticing the abdomen rising or falling? We've been completely lost in thoughts, worries, daydreams, plans.

If we catch ourselves early in this delusive drift, chances are the thought stream will be somewhat daft or inconsequential — wondering about tomorrow's weather, whatever happened to our old school books. These fairly neutral thoughts are typical of the deluded mind. It's not that greed is getting us all excited about a plan or daydream, or that anger is compelling us to rehash old grievances. Instead, it seems we're thinking just for the sake of it.

Why do we do this? Thinking divides the mind in two. There's the thought and the thinker. An external world and me. While the thoughts and images vary from weather to school books, the thinker feels constant. This allows us to perpetuate the idea of a permanent, real entity inside — a me which is at the centre of experience, knowing it, feeling it, commenting on it.

We also delude ourselves that we are in control. We can easily pretend that we've made the decision to open a door, until we try to do this mindfully and see how difficult it is to stop barging through rather than feel the hand moving towards the doorknob and the thousand other sensations that arise and pass before we step through the door.

Even when the mind has steadied in *vipassanā* and we're no longer lost in thought, the illusion is propelled by subtle, barely verbalised perceptions that associate I, me, mine with pleasant feelings. It seems that I'm the observer of all my experience. If we direct attention towards that sense of self, a subtle image may emerge, perhaps a glow of light or a pleasant feeling. We perceive this glow, this feeling, as me. But as soon as we rest attention there for a moment, we notice the glow shifts position, and now it seems like I am looking at things from a slightly different perspective. What in fact has happened is that the initial image faded, like all phenomena do, and we've created a new idea of self around another pleasant experience. When we see this sense of self shifting around like this, we begin to get a feel for the delusion that ensnares us.

We don't want to let the focus on delusion make us believe that the sense of self is innately wrong. It's quite the opposite, in fact. We need a healthy sense of self to accomplish anything, including getting ourselves to be mindful. We just want to see through the belief that this self is a substantial, permanent entity located somewhere within the body-mind system.

In fact, the instinctive tendency towards delusion can even be used beneficially. Delusion is fuelled by a need to feel whole within ourselves, self-sufficient, autonomous. When practising *mettā* for ourselves, we allow this powerful selfing instinct to find expression as conscious good wishes for ourselves. We are evoking a sense of self in order to care for ourselves. In this instance, the instinct to identify as a separate self is being used wisely. The idea, "this is me," energises the body and mind, lets us get ourselves together to accomplish things.

But at times we sense that idea fading. Attention rests on sensations without any central headquarters and no one commenting. We witness the body and mind operating according to their own laws. We see that the perception not-self fits this experience and sense the liberation on offer when we stop clinging to the idea of a self. Despite this, selfing starts up again.

On our way to liberation, we have to make peace with the mind affected by delusion. We need to cultivate a friendly attitude towards the deluded mind. The *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta gives us great support for this, letting us welcome delusion as an opportunity to explore delusions. Delusion will be present in all states of anger and greed, as well as more neutral states, like dullness. Whenever you feel a strong sense of self, use the reflection, "This is the mind affected by delusion," to establish yourself in the third *satipaṭṭhāna*. Allow the experience to unfold in whatever way it will.

Perhaps you'll start questioning that sense of self, wondering if it's really true. Perhaps anger will be stirred at the very thought of having your identity questioned. Perhaps greed will be stirred at the delightful self-image presented by delusion. We're also asked to notice the mind without delusion. At times when the central headquarters disappears, try reflecting, "This mind is not affected by delusion." As for anger and greed, noticing the absence of delusion may well prove a challenge. It may bring up grief as we acknowledge that the only way we can know this peaceful state is by continually saying goodbye to any budding sense of self.

Curiously, the exercise can also strengthen self-acceptance. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, we say. As clinging fades, appreciation for this suffering being, this body-mind system that seeks liberation, flows more strongly.

I'd like to end with some of the instructions given in what's termed the refrain of the Sutta, a section that's repeated again and again throughout all four *Satipaṭṭhāna*. Firstly, we're asked to practise the exercises internally, which is what I've been discussing — noticing our own greed, hatred and delusion. We're also asked to practise these externally, meaning we notice these in other people.

When we're in a crowd of frantic shoppers, we could pause for a while, acknowledging the greed driving our thoughts and feelings, and then reflect, "This is most likely what's driving all the other shoppers as well." When we're walking outdoors or in a similarly tranquil situation, we could take a moment to reflect on the absence of greed in our own mind and very probably in the minds of others around us. We do the same for anger and delusion.

If we see someone in a rage, we can reflect on the ill will driving their thoughts and feelings. Curiously, this can stir compassion rather than deepen our hostility. When we're in a social gathering, we can take a moment to reflect on the absence of ill will amongst the people present. This might deepen our sense of connection and trust. If someone is tipsy or talking in a highly charged melodramatic manner, we could reflect that delusion is dominating their mind at the moment. When we're meditating with others or we see someone absorbed in gardening or other grounded occupation, we could reflect that delusion is not a dominant force in their minds at this moment.

Recognising the presence or absence of greed, anger and delusion in others is a form of *mettā* practice. It brings other people into consciousness at quite an intimate level. This may stir a degree of comradeship and we start to see the others in a friendlier light. At other times the opposite may happen and the exercise brings up some emotional reaction. This is part of the purification process, helping us acknowledge others as human with similar challenges and limitations as ourselves and also with a similar potential for liberation. If we can bear with the negative emotions mindfully, the payoff is purification and increasing ability to relate skilfully to others.

The next instruction in the refrain is to see the arising and passing away of these mind states. Say someone treads on our toe and we feel a surge of anger arising. Very quickly that anger is going to persuade us of whatever story aversion normally brings up, and we'll be stuck in a very solid sense of self and think that life has always been this miserable way and always will be. If we can catch that moment of anger arising, we see that this story is being constructed, willed into existence. We're choosing the story out of habit. Although this is very unedifying to see, it's ultimately liberating. We learn to respond differently, tell ourselves more helpful stories that are closer to the truth. Same for greed and delusion. If we see them arising, we realise we are cooperating, willingly buying into these states. Of course, we have to be patient with these deeply conditioned habits, but slowly intuition starts to find more helpful ways of reacting.

To see the passing away of greed, hatred or delusion is also very instructive. For example, when we come home from a shopping trip, we could sit down, relax and feel the frenzy of shopaholism die away. This gives us a taste for the absence of greed. Let's see the value of the state. If we've had a blow-out with a colleague, we could go somewhere quiet, wait for the anger to die down, detect when the mind becomes rational again, appreciate the absence of anger. Similarly, we can detect the final moments of delusion. If we've been the one telling the melodramatic story, we can track the buzzing giddiness till it touches down to reality. Who knows what we will find? Perhaps relief? Humour? Shame? Whatever arises is part of our path to non-delusion.

Let's finish with a verse from the Dhammapada: "Let the discerning one guard the mind, so difficult to detect and extremely subtle, seizing whatever it desires. A guarded mind brings happiness."

Developing the Spiritual Faculties

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 45 min

Building on yesterday's teaching on the hindrances, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the positive counterparts: the five spiritual faculties (pañca indriya) and seven factors of awakening (satta bojjhaṅga). He begins with saddhā (faith) - not mere belief, but confidence rooted in understanding and trust that deepens through practice until it becomes unshakeable upon glimpsing Nibbāna.

The talk explores how paññā (wisdom) manifests as dhammavicaya (investigation of Dharma), supported by upekkhā (equanimity) - perfect receptivity without reaction. Bhante emphasizes the delicate balance between vīriya (effort) and samādhi (concentration), using the Buddha's analogy of tuning a lute string - neither too tight nor too loose. He discusses how pīti (interest/joy) naturally awakens concentration when we're genuinely curious, while passaddhi (calmness) provides stability.

The profound simplicity emerges: establishing sammā sati (Right Awareness) through continuous attention naturally brings all spiritual faculties into balance. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna teachings, Bhante shows how sustained looking at the breath's transient nature leads to moments where the observer-observed duality dissolves, allowing direct insight to arise. These brief glimpses of satipaññā (awareness-wisdom) gradually transform understanding and our relationship to experience, supporting the gradual path toward liberation.

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato
Sammāsambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa*

Homage to the blessed noble and fully self-enlightened one.

Yesterday we did the hindrances, how to deal with those states of mind which take us away from the object. Even though they're called hindrances, they are our teachers, aren't they, because they're there to tell us what's wrong with us, and through our instructions we can deal with them in a skillful way. So we have to look upon them as welcome enemies. We have to open our hearts to our hindrances.

Now, there's the other side of the equation, which is the seven factors of enlightenment and the five spiritual faculties. And I'm going to try and dovetail them. By the end of the talk, you'll be utterly confused. But I'll try and reduce it to a very simple statement at the end. And the best thing, especially for those who don't know what I'm talk-

ing about, is to let it go in one ear and out the other. Because it's more in the sense of giving a certain confidence and a certain background knowledge which gives you faith, confidence in the process.

The ground of spiritual practice in terms of advancement is faith. I was going to say *sīla*, right conduct. Of course we always talk about *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. So *paññā* is the wisdom factor and *sīla* refers to the conduct, and the one must be mirrored in the other. But here we're talking more specifically about developing this quality of intuitive insight.

So faith is crucial, and the first thing is not to confuse that with belief. If we define belief as faith in a statement such as "I believe in a god" or "I don't believe in a god," then that's not what the Buddha is talking about when he talks about *saddhā*, faith. What he's talking about is a sense of confidence, a sense of trust.

If you think about it, anytime you act, especially those times during our lives when it's a big decision such as moving house or getting a job elsewhere or forming a relationship or going to live with somebody, marry them, all those sorts of occasions demand faith. You trust. You trust in your own decision. You trust in the way that you see things, that you understand things, and that there's something in the heart which is telling you that this is what you have to do. Otherwise you just wouldn't do it. So you can see that the relationship between trust and commitment is crucial.

If you don't trust, you just don't do it. If you go to a surgeon to have the pimple removed at the end of your nose and you don't feel right about him or her, then you don't do it. You go and find somebody else.

So that faith has two qualities. It has the quality of understanding and the quality of trust which comes more from the heart. This understanding is got merely by listening to Dharma talks, reading. That's the first sort of understanding we have. It's a given and it makes sense. The deeper understanding comes when that becomes our own way, that we've worked it out for ourselves.

You might hear somebody, for instance, explain the wheel of dependent origination, this psychology the Buddha taught, and it might initially make sense. But then when you reflect on it, it may begin to make more sense, and you can see that with that more sense there grows that sense of trust, that coming from the heart, that willingness to investigate further. And of course through the practice of *vipassanā*, what was an intellectual understanding then becomes a direct understanding, and that of course begins to cement the faith.

It is said that faith doesn't become unshakeable until we've intuited *Nibbāna*. Once a person has experienced *Nibbāna*, then there's no way that that faith can be shaken because now they know for themselves absolutely that the teaching of the Buddha is true. So it's not a matter then of losing faith anymore, and in fact the Buddha gives it a different word.

For one word it's called an *indriya*, which is a faculty, and when somebody has an insight into *Nibbāna* it becomes a *bala*, it becomes a strength, unshakable. The quality of that understanding, the process, is really just that deepening of understanding, and it has this effect of trust.

Now that trust is coming from the heart, isn't it? It's something more, slightly more intuitive. So there are those people who need to understand to the nth degree of the teaching before they dare to trust it. And there are those people who don't need much understanding. They just trust the feeling they have towards a particular teaching or towards a particular teacher, and that's enough for them. That feeling, that intuitive feeling that this is right for them. Most of us of course have to balance the two of them in some sort of proportion.

But you can understand that there are some people who just have faith. They just have faith. And you can diminish it by calling it blind faith because they can't draw up the arguments. But it can be just as deeply felt, just as deeply committed as the faith of somebody who can argue their point. And it was often a criticism that somebody had blind faith. But if your blind faith is actually in the truth, that's good, isn't it? I mean, if it actually turns out that what you've got blind faith in is the absolute truth, it saves you a lot of reading for a start. You just get on with the practice.

So this movement of the heart towards faith is there at the beginning of our practice, and it supports everything that we're doing. And there's a lovely image given—I can't remember whether it came from the scriptures, but definitely it's in the *Milindapanha*. The *Milindapanha* were questions and answers given by Nāgasena, who was understood to be fully awakened, some centuries after the Buddha when all the north part of that world was all Greek because Alexander had conquered it. So Milinda is actually the Greek king Menander who would have been around Afghanistan, and there he talks about the water-purifying gem of the world-conquering monarch.

In the scriptures you get this myth of the world-conquering monarch. Those of you who know the story of the Buddha, when he was seen by the wise man, he prophesied that this little baby would become either a world-conquering monarch or a fully self-enlightened being. And that's what made his father all upset and made sure that he brought him up to be a world-conquering monarch. That's the story. So this alter ego

runs right through the scriptures that the Buddha could have become this, and if he had, he would have been this superb leader of the world bringing tremendous good conduct and all that.

One of the gems that the person has, one of the things that they have to support that world-conquering manifestation is this water-purifying gem. So that when all the horses and the camels and the bullock carts have passed over the river with all the men carrying their shields and swords, of course the water is all disturbed, but by dropping this lovely gem into the water, the whole thing just becomes utterly purified.

And that's a lovely image for faith. Because remember, if you think about it, before you make a decision, there's confusion, isn't there? A sense of confusion. Shall I? Shall I not? There's lots of doubt about. You don't know whether you will or whether you won't. You make your lists for and against. And then suddenly you commit and the whole thing just disappears. Just like that. And the heart with all its troubles and its anxieties just gets completely purified. It just all vanishes and suddenly there's this lovely blossoming of joy in one's commitment. So it's a lovely image to have for faith.

Now, that faith underpins this *paññā*, and *paññā* is this intuitive intelligence. So it's because we have confidence in this teaching, we have confidence in the practice, that we actually can even start looking. And that looking, that observing, brings about its own insights, which then strengthens the faith. And so they tumble over each other into pure awakening.

Now that intuitive intelligence is expressed in the other form, the seven factors of enlightenment, as investigation of *dhamma*, *dhammavicaya*. And when the Buddha is talking about that, remember, if you read the discourse on it, it's basically beginning to look at things the way he saw things. So we have those three characteristics: transience, not self, and how we create unsatisfactions for ourselves. But also this business of de-constructing things, all this business around the hindrances and also all this business around the factors of enlightenment. So that's all to do with investigating the Dharma as he calls it.

That Dharma investigation is supported by equanimity. Equanimity is one of these words really. It's not the same as calmness. Equanimity I think is best described as a perfect receptivity. Now, there's nothing stopping you from receiving. There's no reaction to what's actually coming at you.

If you liken it to a judge, we expect the judge not to get caught up in the arguments of these lawyers at the head level. And we don't expect them to get caught up in the anger and emotion of the crowd, baying for blood. So it's that business of being able to be dis-

passionate, not caught up in. And of course as soon as we lift ourselves into the position of the observer, it arises naturally because to observe you have to allow whatever is to be observed to manifest. And we lose that sense of equanimity as soon as we drop into any reaction, wanting, not wanting.

So that equanimity has to be there for the investigation to be clear. And for the investigation to be clear, the intelligence must be awakened. And we won't do that unless we have faith in the process.

Now supporting that, you've got concentration which is balanced with effort, with proper energy. Concentration again is one of those things because normally when you say to somebody "get concentrated" or "be focused," you expect this real narrowing down, collapse into some sort of tightness. But concentration in this sense just means being able to keep the attention on the object. Full stop.

And the effort which is to be developed is just the effort needed to keep the attention on the object. So if that concentration becomes tight, then you start moving into restlessness. It begins to shake, and you can't keep your mind on it. And when that happens, the meditator has to recognize that. So the restlessness—and this is where the meditation gets, shall we say, a little tricky—because you may be thinking that the restlessness is coming from something arising out of the heart or something, but actually it might be because you're trying too hard, trying to become too concentrated.

So that business of effort and concentration, if you think of a camera when you focus it, the old ones before they made these little machines where you had to actually use your fingers, and if you think of that, that's the effort and then there's the focus.

Now the other side of concentration, when you have too much concentration but not enough energy, is that of course the mind now is like a laser beam, it's facing one way. And if the energy is not there to support it, then you drop into a state of unconsciousness. That's not the same as sleep, and the meditator knows when that's happened rather than sleep because the body remains upright because the energy is there alright, the concentration is there, but because the energy is not supporting it, then it's as though the mind just stops. It's a blank count, and you wake up.

Depending on the power of that concentration, it can last for various lengths of time. There's a lovely story about a Hindu guru who was an adept at these very high jhānic absorption states, and he gave an instruction to his attendant to get him some water and went to meditate and went into one of these states. Ten years later, he comes out of this state and his first words are, "Where's my water?"

What the tale is meant to symbolize is that nothing happens. It's a complete waste of time getting into these constricted blank states. And it's funny how many people actually believe that meditation is about blanking the mind, about turning it off and ending up in this dead place.

So when that happens we can congratulate ourselves because the concentration is good, but then we have to also recognize that the effort—there's something wrong with the effort. And normally when you look at it, there's been a moment there where you've lost interest, where something has lost its empowering of that looking, and the whole thing drops.

When the concentration has become too tight, then you have to look at your effort. So the effort to gain, the effort always to achieve. And when that happens, you have to really remind yourself that to be aware is the achievement. That's it. There's nothing else to achieve. And once you drum that into yourself, it does stop you wanting to go beyond the present moment, because whenever you want to achieve something it's always in the future, isn't it? When you've achieved it, you've achieved it. But while you're wanting to achieve, it's not here, it's over there. So the mind is always moving ahead of itself.

If you find yourself feeling restless, and you've got an inkling that it's not really to do—because the body feels good, and it feels light, and it's okay—but there's this restlessness, then, especially not so much at the beginning of a week retreat, but maybe within two or three days, when you really settle, then just see if some idea of getting something has not crept in.

Again the story from the scriptures is of Nanda. Nanda was the cousin of the Buddha, and he was really practicing hard and getting nowhere and getting all this restlessness and stuff, and so he began to give up. And he decided that what he would do in this lifetime was create good *kamma* and then have another go in the next one. So the Buddha, having heard this or intuiting it, appeared by his side and said, "Nanda, what are you doing, mate?"

And he gave him the simile. He said, "No, no. What you've got to do is you've got to have this effort," and he gave the image of tuning a lute—can't remember the proper word for that instrument, but it's a lute, it's a stringed instrument—and he said to get the right pitch, it mustn't be too tight and it mustn't be too loose. Just getting the right pitch.

And of course, Nanda in no length of time, having got the right pitch, became fully awakened. Usually these little stories are glossed in the commentary to say things like Nanda went off to the forest for 25 years and became fully enlightened. But actually in the scriptures it said he struggled with it and became fully awakened.

So effort is a cheeky one for us because Western culture is about achieving. It's about achieving, about getting. And one of the problems of the Vipassana school is that it does put to us certain achievements. I mean, they're there. They're called the *vipassanānāṇas*, the insights that come with Vipassana. And then there are four stages of sanctity: stream entrant, once returner, non-returner, and then finally this *arahant*.

What that does for us, or the way we can look at it so that it doesn't become some sort of achievement, is again this feeling that the path is actually well delineated. It's not a sort of—we're not on a path which is higgledy-piggledy and it may or may not. It's actually the path leading to breakthrough is very clearly marked. Very clearly marked.

Having said that, the path of the Vipassana knowledge is not the only way. And people have achieved amazing insight very quickly, usually because of some great shock. Somebody close has died or they've fallen off a bridge or something. Something happens which gives them a shock and it can really pull them out of a particular mind state and turn their lives. One of the more interesting ones is this near death experience that people have.

So, it's not the—I wouldn't say it was the only delineated path, you do get slightly different ones in the Mahāyāna—but it's definitely well delineated in this particular context.

So this business of effort and concentration—and effort, by the way, comes up in the faculties too for those of you who know these things—the other combination is calmness and what's badly translated as joy, much better translated as interest.

Now interest is a funny emotion. Philosophers wonder about it. It's a sort of wanting to know, but you can feel it coming from the heart. And just as an aside, remember—just ask yourself: did you ever have any problem with concentration when you were interested in something? So that's why, because the force of our practice is to awaken the intelligence, it seems to me much more beneficial to raise interest rather than to worry about concentration.

I'm always amazed how that manifests even in animals, this sort of wonder. I was once in a lovely place up in Penang, Malaya. There was a plantation up there and I was offered to stay up there at this house which was lived in occasionally. It was a lovely evening so I took this table out onto the forecourt, wanting to lift myself off the ground

because of bugs and stuff, snakes. I tied this mosquito net to the tree above me and brought my cushions out and everything and a cup of coffee, and I sat on this table looking out through the mosquito net to the setting sun. As it grew darker and darker I suddenly realised I was facing east. I was a little disappointed.

There were these two dogs that every evening would scamper, would chase each other. Two very good friends would chase each other madly around. On this particular evening, the one that I was sat out there waiting for the sunset, one of these dogs was late. The other one began to pine and cry a little. When the dog finally turned up, to my amazement, he ran up. When he saw this table with this figure and this... He stood there and he went... You know, while the other dog was biting him and doing all sorts of deaf things. I thought, my goodness. What an amazing sort of intelligence. Yeah, I must have looked really silly. To a dog, anyway.

Well I can't remember why I went into that—oh yes, interest. So this quality of wanting to know, you see, even here walking down the street with all these cows and bullocks, it's just amazing. They just come towards you wanting to know, you see.

So it's something that we find in all creatures. It's a case of awakening that within us, that wanting to know, that wonder. Sometimes you have to work at it a bit, just to raise your energy towards interest. Like all these things, these are all conditioned, all conditionings. So the more you condition yourself to become interested, the more interested you become. The more interested you become, the more you practice with verve and with right commitment. The more you practice with verve and right commitment, the more you see. The more you're delighted, so the more interested you become.

These things have an internal motor and I would say that interest is a real motivation. But sometimes you have to feed it, especially when those little nasty things come up like boredom, which is the direct enemy of interest. So when that comes up, remember that boredom is what is to be observed and not to be conned by, that you need distraction.

There was a monk I knew who would go to his teacher and say, "I've been watching this breath and I'm really bored." The teacher said, "Well, why don't you try watching it down here in the stomach?" So he went away and he came back and he said, "I'm watching it and I'm really bored." So he said, "Well, why don't you try a concentration exercise and look at discs?" There's an exercise of looking at these colored discs, which you use to gain concentration. So he asked him what was his favourite colour, and he said, well, it might have been blue. So he said, "Well, get yourself a disc of blue and just say blue, blue," and that was it. He came back and he says, "Really boring." So he said, "Well, try another colour," you see. This poor monk ended up being depressed. He

ended up in hospital. Yeah, he ended up in hospital. When he finally came out of it, I think he understood the mistake of getting into boredom, trying to escape boredom through distraction, you see.

You have to be very careful, and of course if you look at our society, that's the problem with all this addiction stuff. It's all an escape from the boredom that arises by seeking pleasure in something which always has an inbuilt obsolescence. You can't keep chewing the same gobstopper even if it is blackcurrant. You want a lime gobstopper. So eventually you can't stop eating gobstoppers, spend all your money on gobstoppers. Remember that to raise interest is a very empowering way to put energy into our practice.

What supports it is calmness, calmness in the heart, you see. As I say, not to confuse that with equanimity. Calmness, and anything which you find is shaking is shaking, you see. Of course one of the things that happens when you draw up interest and you do begin to see something, of course the excitement comes. That shakes the meditation for us. So as soon as that comes, that's your object. Remember that the mind and heart are very slippery. They're always shifting off focus. So you have to keep that aliveness.

Now, I opened the talk by saying that by the end of it, once I've been through five of these and seven of those, especially those who haven't come across this teaching before, they'd probably be utterly confused. But luckily, there's a very simple way of getting all these faculties to be balanced. That, you won't be surprised to hear, is the establishment of awareness.

So what the Buddha says is that when you establish right awareness on the object, all these faculties will come up to support it, just quite naturally, quite naturally, quite naturally. The quality of awareness is just looking, just looking, just observing, just being with the experience. It's its simplicity which foxes us. We always think we have to do something. We always think we have to see something. You don't. All you have to do is look. It's extraordinarily simple.

In the opening of the discourse on how to establish right mindfulness, this awareness, *satipaṭṭhāna*, the establishment of this level of consciousness, he starts off by saying—he uses the word *sikkhati*. *Sikkhati* means to train. So he says, "Observe the breath," to train, in other words to get still, to be fairly, to be somewhat concentrated. That's in my morning Vipassanā guidelines. That's what one of my main teachers used to always—that was his little phrase, "somewhat concentrated." Nobody ever knew exactly what he meant, but we got the idea that you needn't be waiting until you're utterly, completely focused before you could, as it were, begin to investigate it.

Then the Buddha says—and he's talking now about the breath, and of course the breath is something neutral, so the other two things are not so obvious, this business of not me, not mine, and the business of how we create problems from it. The most obvious thing to look at is the quality of transience. So he says keep looking at it. Now he's suggesting that you actually do that as a purposive... Like the thought comes in the mind, you know, "Let me watch the transient nature of this."

At the moment when I see the breath, it feels to me like one thing, like a string, like it's one string, you see. I mean, how long is time? See, because the length of time as we experience it is as long as we can hold a frame, a frame of time. So how long is it? Have you ever measured it? I don't know. Less than a second probably, or something like that, I don't know. How long is a piece of time, you see? Now, that gives us the impression that the whole breath is one joined up experience.

What he's saying is if you keep looking, if you keep just putting your eye on it, and the more these faculties come up to actually join you and you're actually tuned into the transient nature of the breath—that's what you're looking at, is it just one string or is it all little pieces all quite separate—as you're looking at that and all these faculties of concentration, of right effort, of that investigation of the Dharma, here it's the *anicca* quality, of the balance of effort with concentration, of that equanimity balancing the investigation, and of the calmness balancing the interest. When all these things rise up, you see, he says you come to a point where there is just enough concentration and just enough intuitive intelligence or insight to arise.

Those two words, the awareness and intelligence, are never separate in that discourse. The two words that I use for this trust of ours, *satipanya*, I've actually taken that from a very famous Thai teacher called Buddhādāsa. It's two nouns, but the way it's put in the scriptures is *ātāpī sampajāno satimā*. *Ātāpī* is the effort and it's sometimes translated as fierce effort, but we're much closer to the meaning if we understand relentless effort. You don't stop. That's why I quote the Mahāsi: the continuity of awareness is the secret of success. It's the continuity, because the more you maintain it, the more these spiritual faculties come up.

You begin by placing the *sati* on the object—that's the looking—and as you look, then you see. So the looking and seeing are both the same faculty. It's just that one is passive looking, receiving, and then there's the seeing. If you think of any occasion... I had one where a friend who came to see me and we were going for a walk, his car broke down. We went off to have a look at it. The police had got there because he'd left it on the main road here in Newton Abbot and wheeled it back down. He opened the bonnet, you see. What had happened was that suddenly the engine cut, you see. Because of my long ex-

perience with mechanics, I immediately said, "Well, that's got to do with the electrics." So he opened the bonnet and I immediately pointed to this object within the engine. Having looked, you see, I saw it must be the dynamo and I pointed to this. I said, "The dynamo's gone." The AA man turned up and having a slightly longer experience in mechanics, noticed that the fan belt had gone and pointed to the dynamo which happened to be in a different place. So in this case of looking and seeing, you see... It's the case of getting that clarity so that your car doesn't end up in the scrapyard because you tried to mend it.

So these two qualities, the *sati*, the awareness, and that spark, that intuitive grasp of what's happening, arises naturally when the conditions ripen. In our meditation, when we're sat here, you see, we're just making that continuous, relentless effort of just relaxing, of coming back onto the object. That's another way, perhaps, of translating that word for calmness. *Passaddhi*. You can translate it as relaxing.

Then as it slowly gathers around, there comes the moment where we can hold the position of the observer. Now that's the point where we are seeing the transience but there's still the sense of the observer.

Now the observer means that there's a shaking in the mind. One minute we see the sensation of the breath and next minute we're aware of something watching the sensation of the breath. That awareness is a feeling of me being here. What's really happening—or what you can take as a metaphor, an image—is sometimes when you're watching TV and you can see yourself on the screen. Are you going to watch yourself watching TV or are you going to watch the TV? Now because the light is such, you can't get rid of that image of yourself watching TV. But because your interest grows so much in the program, you don't see it anymore. You just get lost in the program itself.

When we are in a state of the observer, there's always that dual state going on: seeing, seeing the seer, seeing, seeing the seer. Of course, because of the speed of the mind and its ability to hold things for us long enough and substantiate them, give them some sort of solidity, we feel it's one process, that there is an observer constantly observing this breath which is constantly arising and passing away.

But by continuously placing that attention—and that's another word for *sati*, an act of attention—on the object, all these faculties come up and, as it were, the focus narrows and narrows, and with it, time narrows. So time now begins to narrow so much until you're just there. When you're just there, there's no time for this switch and the sense of the self disappears. That's when it's possible for this intuitive intelligence to see something very clearly because now it's not shaking and there can't be—in the now there can't be any conceptual thinking.

It just can't be. Conceptual thinking takes time. You can't have a word in a speck of a second. So when those moments come up there's always some little insight. They come up in very short blips. You might not even know. It can be so short that you don't even know. But as your meditation grows, these little moments of being absolutely absorbed into the object grow slightly longer, and then when one comes out of that back to being the observer, there is that knowing that during that moment there, there was pure *satipanya*.

Now do remember that none of this—you can't make it happen, you see. That's the point and that's where the sense of achieving comes. So forget that. The Buddha is saying very clearly: just train, just keep bringing that attention back, keep waking it out of the dullness, just keep working with it gently, and there'll come that point when you'll begin to see these characteristics, one or the other.

As you begin to see that and your interest is drawn, you'll just be drawn naturally into the present moment. That's when we have just enough awareness and just enough intuitive intelligence to make these little insights. These insights are not huge wallops around the back of the head which send you spinning out of the room, you know. They're just little... they're just little, ah, oh, ah, right, see. All the time this consciousness is turning, the way it's looking is changing, just in little degrees all the time.

That then has a systemic change because as we change our understanding it changes our relationship. So that's the heart coming in. When a relationship changes it expresses itself through what we say and what we do and how we think in a more wise way. So that's the process we're going through.

So if I were to bring it all together, there are these five faculties, five spiritual faculties, and there are these seven factors of enlightenment. The ones to be concerned with are how to develop this awareness, just the looking, just the looking. How to support just the looking by raising interest. How to be very quick to know that some future aim has slipped into the practice and that's the achieving. How to be aware of that sort of restlessness that comes around because we're trying too hard. How sometimes you're right there but somehow we've slipped with the interest and we're sinking away from it.

So it's a case really of not worrying too much about all these different faculties etc. etc.

but just keep reminding oneself that one has to remain bright, vigilant.

Now this word vigilance is one of the Buddha's favourites. *Appamādo*, vigilant, diligent, being awake. And in the Vipassanā guidelines I've translated the phrase — my translation there is "those who are mindful are in the vicinity of, are in the presence of Nibbāna" — and the actual word he uses is *appamādhū*: those who are vigilant, those who are diligent in their practice are in the vicinity and the presence of Nibbāna.

So it only remains for me to wish you fruitful practice and a continuing effort. May you all be liberated even in this very lifetime.

Thank you.

70th Birthday Reflection — A Spiritual Journey from Rosary to Dhamma

Noirin Sheahan · 30 min

In this 70th birthday reflection, Noirin Sheahan traces her remarkable spiritual journey from childhood rosary prayers in 1950s Ireland to finding her true calling in the Buddha's Dhamma. Beginning with formative experiences of Catholic devotion and a profound childhood insight that brought both spiritual opening and paralyzing guilt, she shares how early meditation practice through the rosary planted seeds that would later flourish in Buddhist practice.

Noirin candidly recounts the challenges that shaped her path: her mother's bipolar depression, the devastating loss of her brother Conor, career disappointments, failed relationships, and a midlife mental health crisis. She describes how discovering 'The Tao of Physics' opened her to Eastern meditation, leading to her first encounters with Bhante Bodhidhamma and the Dublin meditation sangha in the 1980s.

The heart of her reflection centers on a profound insight experience during retreat that revealed the truth of anattā (not-self), triggering intense fear but ultimately deepening her faith in the Dhamma. She describes how this awakening, though frightening, transformed her relationships and brought genuine happiness rooted in understanding dukkha and the possibility of liberation. Her journey includes facing throat cancer, caring for her aging mother with newfound ease, and eventually finding her spiritual home at Satipanya during the COVID lockdown.

This intimate autobiography offers inspiration for anyone navigating spiritual seeking, mental health challenges, and the quest for authentic meaning in life.

Three score years and ten. How did it come about that I should spend twelve hours of my seventieth birthday sitting in silence or taking baby footsteps around a house in Portugal and then come back here to Satipanya to celebrate my official birthday with all of you?

I think it traces back to summer holidays in my granny's house in Cork and the habit of the family rosary. Everyone gathered in the evening, knelt down and said the prayer together. Ireland in the 1950s was very much a Catholic country and Sunday mass and

confession and so on were a big part of life. I don't think many families still kept up the practice of the daily rosary, but I'm very grateful that it was still alive in my granny's house while I was a child.

The rosary is a prayer that takes about fifteen minutes. There are five mysteries to contemplate, each one a different scene from the life of Christ or from his death and resurrection and beyond. Somehow it clicked with me to hold an image in the imagination of saying a very simple, repetitive prayer. It gave me a way of taking to heart what was taught as truly important and fundamental in life. It was a form of meditation bringing my mind to a quiet place where I could sense some connection with deeper truth.

After the holidays, my mum, dad and brother Conor and I went back to Dublin. We didn't say the family rosary at home. It obviously didn't mean much to my mum or dad, and definitely not to my brother Conor. He was a carefree and wild child, always getting into some sort of trouble, whereas I was dreamy. At least, that's how my granny described me, and I think she was right.

So maybe because I liked dreamy images from the life of Christ, I continued the rosary on my own, though snuggled up in bed rather than on my knees on the cold floor. Climbing into bed, I'd be grumbling that I'd much prefer to daydream than say the rosary. But I'd make a bargain with myself to say just one mystery and then daydream. But when I got to the end of that first mystery, I decided to do a second and then daydream, and so on, till I got through all five. By that time, sleep beckoned, and I no longer had the energy to bother daydreaming.

In retrospect, I'm very grateful for the family rosary practice, both because it put some limit on my habit of daydreaming, and because it was my first taste of meditation, a quieting of the mind as it opens in awe. I lost the habit as I grew older. Though I have no memory of deciding to stop, it may have been after what you might call my first spiritual insight, which came when I was eight.

I was praying one evening when I suddenly knew that there was a presence beside and around me that was separate to me. It seemed to drop like a thud into my mind. One moment I was the only one in the room, then suddenly there was also this mysterious presence, which I took to be God. While I didn't feel God's presence was threatening, I didn't feel it as loving either. It was just there, other.

The main way it affected me was to show me that I'd been making this big mistake, that all my thoughts of God and my prayers had all been make-believe, that I'd never known God till now. Maybe I got myself mixed up with the idea of false gods from the first of the Ten Commandments. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God and thou shalt not put false gods before me."

To my mind, I had committed a dreadful sin, made up a false image of God. The guilt multiplied with the judgement that I'd never said any proper prayers in my life. Hundreds and hundreds of sins. And because I'd never confessed these, I'd made bad confessions, each one a mortal sin. And then I'd compounded that problem by going to communion with the mortal sin of a bad confession on my soul. And so I'd made bad communions, more mortal sins. Within a few minutes, I'd clocked up several hundred mortal sins, because in those days you went to confession and communion every week.

The reason I know I was eight when this happened is because I had to multiply my two mortal sins per week for my bad confession and bad communion, by fifty-two for every year since my first communion, which was when I was five. Then I had to add in extra bad confessions and bad communions for all the feast days and Christmas days. And I found even more as I scoured through my little green catechism to be sure I'd got them all multiplied up correctly before my next confession.

I imagine I stopped saying the rosary after that. There couldn't have been any joy or peace in it. Although the guilt probably undermined me subconsciously, the episode didn't mark my life at the surface level, which was a good thing. Beyond making sure I got to confession as soon as possible to get all my sins forgiven, I don't remember thinking about it much and I doubt anyone in the family or among my friends knew anything had happened. So that was the first phase of my religious life: meditation, devotion, mystery, a thought of insight and then a plunge into guilt.

In many ways, I had a happy childhood. My brother Conor was just a year older and we were very close. There were dozens of children our age living nearby, so always someone to play with. My dad worked as a weather forecaster at the airport and we didn't have financial problems. However, there was always a background anxiety hanging over us because my mother had bipolar depression. It was first diagnosed as postnatal depression after Conor was born and then again after my birth. In those days, there was no psychotherapy available, or even much kindness in psychiatric practice. Just electric shock treatment and heavy sedation. And so she never really recovered.

For much of our childhood, she was in bed and very depressed. And every six months or so, she would have an acute flare-up and get into rows with family or neighbours until eventually she had to be admitted to hospital again for more ECT and seda-

tion. While she was in hospital, myself and my brother would stay with cousins, sometimes both at the one house, sometimes split up. At the time, I didn't see this as a problem. I liked my cousins and enjoyed staying with them. But I know now that my mother's illness took a toll at a deeper level and underlay my later midlife crisis and the fear that suddenly emerged during a retreat in 1999.

Another major sorrow was that Conor's wildness caught up with him just after he turned eighteen. He went out to a dance one Saturday night and never came home. He was killed in a road accident. That was a devastating blow for all the family, as you can imagine. But life went on.

Although I had lost the habit of the rosary, I never lost the sense of mystery that it kindled. There was a strong wish to understand the deeper truths of life, which was why I opted to study physics after school, on the assumption that understanding the basic laws of physics meant I would understand life itself and be happy. But even before I finished college, I realised I was onto the wrong track. Nothing I was learning was helping me understand life better or be any happier.

Though that was disappointing, there were lots of compensations. The physics class was small, only twelve of us, and we made good friends, hiking over mountains at the weekends, renting cottages in the country during holidays, playing tennis into the long summer evenings, frantic study before the exams, and of course, many pints of creamy Guinness to help us to put the world to rights. When I started college, a pint cost eighteen pence. By the time I finished, it had gone up to a staggering twenty-three pence. So college was a wonderful experience and our physics class still gets together frequently. In fact, we're having a collective seventieth birthday party next month as we've all reached this milestone during the year.

After college, I did a teacher training course only to discover that teaching was not for me either. At a bit of a loose end for a while, I was delighted to discover that there was a career called medical physics and jobs in this area in most big hospitals. The delight was from the thought that even though I might not understand life deeply, I could contribute meaningfully to it.

My first job was in London in the Royal Free Hospital with a team who were researching lung function and especially the role of aerosols in diagnosis and in treatment. It was a dream start, a small friendly team, enthusiastic about work, curious to try new techniques, a very happy work environment. Plus a deepening relationship with Adrian, who I had met during the teacher training course. We were well suited and happy until my mother suddenly took a dislike to him. Once there was talk of the relationship becoming serious and him buying a house, he suddenly became, in her

eyes, not good enough for me. And the sad thing was that I hadn't anchored myself enough to withstand her disapproval. Once she lost confidence in him, I lost confidence in him. The joy in the relationship went out and eventually we broke up.

In retrospect, I can see that this failure to define myself as separate to my mother left me with a lot of bitterness and self-doubt. But, as always, life went on. And after three years at the Royal Free, I came back to Dublin in my mid-twenties, working in a number of different hospitals, until I took early retirement in 2007, aged fifty-three.

The first decade or so was a happy time. Friendly colleagues, stimulating work with lots of fascinating research, enough challenges to make things interesting, enough routine to keep me grounded. I made good friends. We played tennis, squash, went hill walking, hired cottages together for holidays.

In retrospect, the most important incident was when colleagues gave me the book, *The Tao of Physics*, by Fritjof Capra. This linked modern physics with Eastern mysticism and opened up a whole new world for me. I was overjoyed to realise there was another way of understanding life that didn't involve maths and physics, but meditation. I found D.T. Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, and started practising meditation. A while later, I found a meditation group and another chapter in life opened up.

Weekly meetings, Dhamma study, retreats, and perhaps most important of all, close friendship with others in the group. We're still good friends to this day. One claim to fame for our little group was that we can say we discovered Bhante Bodhi Dhamma, invited him to teach his first ever retreat in Dublin back in the mid-1980s, and he came back for several years afterwards to teach weekend retreats. Our group was also party to his first ten-day retreat, which was held in Kerry in the late 1980s.

For a decade or more, I couldn't make up my mind between Buddhism and Christianity. I think some of it stemmed from fear of damnation, because I was now definitely putting a false god before the true god of the catechism. And some was the sense of identity with the Christian story. I really wanted to believe it all, whereas the Buddha and the vague notion of enlightenment didn't appeal to me at that personal story level. I did quite a number of silent meditation retreats with the Carmelite Order, as well as the weekends with Bhante or other Buddhist teachers, and found both forms to be very helpful and inspiring.

The main attraction of Buddhism for me was the friendship group. They were my own age, good fun, open to questions. We used to go out hill walking together, went away on skiing holidays, celebrated Christmas and birthday parties. On the other hand,

the people I met at the Catholic retreats were usually much older than me, more settled in life and more pious than questioning. So there wasn't much discussion and I never developed any friendships.

I am so grateful that the spiritual aspect of my life opened up because as middle age approached, the lights went out in other areas. After the disappointment over Adrian, I never again managed to form a committed relationship and the fun went out of medical physics once I became senior, had to take responsibility for services.

It came to a head in my mid-forties while I was also doing a course in the spiritual exercises of Ignatius Loyola, a form of spiritual training in daily life developed by the Jesuits. The course is well known for making people more vulnerable than usual. And in my case, this, along with a combination of work stress and unexpected relationship issues, brought on a mental health crisis. I couldn't sleep, couldn't stop crying, couldn't find anything to believe in.

I offered to hand in my resignation at work, but the hospital was very decent. They could see I was unwell and persuaded me to take six months off to think about things and then make a decision. During those months, as I looked back on life, it seemed to me that the only thing that hadn't let me down was meditation practice. Career and relationships just seemed burdensome now. Family held no joy at all.

Although I had loved my father very much and we played bridge together for many years, he had died when I was thirty and my relationship with my mother, never strong to start with, went further downhill after that. I did have good friends from college days and from work and from my meditation group and they were a support but not a reason to live. The only thing that offered hope was the spiritual realm. I'd lost confidence in the world. And so I made the decision that from now on, spiritual development would be my principal aim in life. Everything else would come secondary to it.

Being realistic, I knew I didn't have what it would take to head off into the hills as a hermit. I was too old, forty-five at that stage, to be taken in as a novice nun. Also, the recent breakdown showed me I needed to be gentle with myself, not expect too much, take baby steps rather than giant leaps.

So I changed my work arrangement at the hospital, took a part-time appointment at basic grade level so that I wouldn't have so much responsibility and could organise my work time so as to take months off as needed for retreat and then work full-time between retreats. This gave me the means to support myself financially as well as the time needed for spiritual development.

Although I was still undecided between Christianity and Buddhism, this decision was made for me because the teacher who was guiding me through the spiritual exercises cut me off completely once I had the breakdown. It wasn't done unkindly, it was just their policy. You go to a doctor for mental health issues and come back to spiritual practice when you're balanced again. Whereas when I told Bhante about the breakdown, he hardly blinked an eye, just told me to get back on the cushion and watch the emotional storm.

From then on, I never wavered. I realised Buddhism, at least in the form Bhante taught, was what I needed to hold me together in life. In retrospect, I can see that my life became happier from this point onwards. I had been happy as a child and a young adult because things were mostly easy, going my way. But the happiness that started growing now was coming from a deeper place, from the wisdom of the first noble truth, realising that nothing in life was going to satisfy, along with the inspiration of the third noble truth, trusting in the possibility of being free from suffering, content and happy.

One way I first noticed this growing happiness was the transformation I found in my work colleagues. Many whom I had dismissed as foolish or unreliable before I had taken my six months leave, turned out to be wise and trustworthy once I returned. I could genuinely enjoy their company again.

I also began to see an improvement in my relationship with my mother. Having taken a decisive step in my own life, a new level of respect started to grow between us. By the time of her latter years, hatred had transformed to love and we were quite at ease with one another. I moved back to the family home to support her after she turned ninety. Although I'd earlier dreaded the prospect of her becoming dependent on me, caring for her turned out to be as easy as tying my shoelaces. Not blissful, but just ordinary, not a problem.

Considering my earlier dread of her depending on me and the contrasting simplicity of caring for her in her final years gave me vivid proof of the fruits of spiritual practice and brought a lot of happiness. But I've skipped forward twenty years there, so back to my midlife crisis now.

It was around this time that Bhante started teaching ten-day or longer retreats in various locations in Ireland and the UK before moving to Gaia House as spiritual director. I became one of the regular attendees, and it was towards the end of my first two-week retreat that I had an insight which was possibly a revisiting of my childhood insight of God as a real presence separate to me.

While I was walking along the garden path, I became aware of an expansive presence, a still peaceful knowing which filled the sky and pervaded everything around me. In that moment, I knew that all my sensory experience was in total harmony with this presence. Seeing, hearing, moving — these were not disturbing or disturbed by the presence. The only thing that was at odds was my belief in being a separate person, independent. I saw the experience as a demonstration of the truth of *anattā*, and in a flash knew that I would have to lose the identity I called Noirin if I was going to attain Nibbāna.

Although I'd always wanted insight, as soon as it came, I wished it hadn't. It brought up a huge surge of fear — felt like particles of fear were surging up my throat and out of my mouth. While I hadn't felt the presence as threatening in any way, just peaceful, knowing, non-interfering, what frightened me was the knowledge that I'd been making this huge mistake, identifying with the story of my life. Who could I rely on if not myself? And I obviously couldn't rely on myself, because I was the one making the mistake of identifying as me.

This marked another turning point in life, a plunge into fear, but also a waking up. Bhante's support was wonderful. He radiated confidence that I could work with the fear, and I had begun to believe him, even before the retreat was over.

It wasn't easy, though. Since midlife, I'd always had problems sleeping, and now sleep seemed out of the question. Also, the fearful turbulence led to auditory hallucinations, among other things. Every now and then, it seemed as though a hurricane was blowing up, the wind was howling, trees smashing, or else someone would be rubbing a packet of crisps right in my ear, or walking with very heavy footsteps round and round my seat. Fortunately, the visual field wasn't affected, so all I had to do was open my eyes to check that none of this was real, and then go back to working with the anxieties and fear underlying all this strangeness.

What seemed even more fearful was that my face would twitch spontaneously, my tongue waggle around my mouth. The notion that I was not in control of my own body movements seemed to me horrific. The twitching and hallucinations eased off after the retreat was over, though fear and anxiety accompanied me for a long time, along with sleeplessness.

The payoff was increased mindfulness because the fearful thoughts were even more upsetting than the present moment feeling of fear. So for my own peace of mind, I had no choice but to be mindful. "Condemned to the present moment" was how I thought of

myself. In time, I started to see how I was benefiting. Boredom, for example, was a thing of the past, and I had no time for hopelessness or negative thinking. The call to presence was too strong.

In turn, all my relationships grew more trusting and appreciative. This was particularly true within the family. As the bond between myself and my mother strengthened, so also that bond extended to my many cousins, aunts and uncles. Although circumstances prevent me seeing them often, I sense them as a source of friendship, joy and care.

The deepest gift was the steadily growing faith in the Dhamma, especially the truth of *dukkha* and how simply being mindful of *dukkha* led to positive change.

I was very chuffed when in 2003 Bhante asked me to assist him in teaching. I felt this as a great honour and a confirmation that I had turned a corner in life. Trust in the Dhamma was my saviour when in 2005 I was diagnosed with throat cancer, which was treated with radiotherapy, giving me a good seven years until it returned with a vengeance, needing not just major but heroic surgery in 2013, with only a fifty-fifty chance of survival. It also meant losing my voice box. I've written about that in some essays on the website, so I won't say much more here, except that this unwanted turn of events brought deeper faith and insight, along with its natural share of sorrow.

And so let's skip forward to 2020, when after a fall in which she broke her hip, my mother died. A peaceful death, I'm happy to say, and I was with her at the time, which was a gift I will always treasure. By this stage, I was long retired and had always thought of coming to live near Satipanya after my mother's death. She died in January 2020, and in March, I came to Satipanya to join the final month of the winter retreat. But then the COVID lockdown happened and I never went home.

Initially, it was because it was considered unsafe to travel. But as the weeks and months went by, it became clear that there really was no good reason to go back to Dublin and that I would be far happier staying at Satipanya. Luckily, Bhante was also pleased to be able to offload some of the management responsibilities and I was happy to take on more of the teaching. So the COVID lockdown was for me a great blessing, opening up a new phase in life for me, which I trust is very beneficial.

To mark this new phase, I took lay ordination in 2021 to help me take heart in the Dhamma as the inspiration for my life and dedicate the remainder of my time on earth to practice in accordance with the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha. Part of this is an annual retreat, which I take during the winter months. As a treat for my seventieth birthday, I booked a house in Portugal from January last year to the middle of February and spent

my seventieth birthday exploring the joys and woes of the inner life, opening some doors in my mind, making peace with those that remain stubbornly closed. I honestly cannot think of a more satisfying way to mark my seventieth birthday.

A final word about friendship. One wonderful aspect of Dhamma practice is that you meet the best of people — considerate, honest, good-natured, kind, making the best of life's vicissitudes, interested in spiritual matters. It's a heaven realm from that point of view. And I want to thank all of you reading or listening to this for the deep contribution you have made to my life.

I want to finish by thanking Bhante Bodhidhamma for forgiving my many mistakes and encouraging me at every opportunity. Although his equanimity can sometimes be infuriating — "Why can't he just get upset like any normal human being?" I'd be thinking to myself — there is always some small corner of my mind that's willing to trust his good humour as a guide through whatever difficulty is presented. Just as the Rosary guided me in childhood, Bhante's teaching, friendship and unstinting support have guided my latter years, gentling the decline into old age, inspiring faith in what lies beyond.

Extinguishing the Housebuilder

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 16 min

In this profound teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma continues his exploration of the Buddha's victory verse and the nature of the deluded self—the 'housebuilder' identified as Māra. Drawing upon his previous talks about consciousness 'in which nothing is manifest' as a description of Nibbāna, he presents powerful metaphors to understand the liberation process.

Using the analogy of infant development and the myth of Narcissus, Bhante illustrates how we create distance between awareness and its objects, just as a baby learns to distinguish self from world. He explains how sati (intuitive awareness) catches its own reflection in the 'pool of consciousness' and how Vipassanā practice rescues us by drawing awareness out of identification with body and mind.

The talk includes specific meditation techniques for investigating the nature of self-awareness itself, recognizing it too as an object that arises and passes away. Bhante concludes with the inspiring testimony of Mechi Kyo, an ordinary village woman who achieved complete liberation, describing her direct experience of knowing all phenomena while remaining utterly unaffected by them. This teaching offers both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for serious practitioners seeking to uproot the very foundation of suffering through insight into anattā (not-self).

Namo tassa bhagavato hara-hatto samma-sambhodassa — Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

This evening, the presentation is a little difficult because I've actually written something. So it's not going to be particularly verbatim, which is my normal way of presenting.

In the last two talks, we looked at, first of all, the Buddha's victory verse and his naming of the house builder, which is to say that deluded self, which is *Mara*. When we talk about Mara, the evil tempter, that's the self, the deluded self. And then we went on — the next presentation was about a monk who wanted to know where all the world ended. And he tells him that this is badly phrased, that it should be where the world does not find a footing. And then he gives a very clear description, for want of a better word, of a place, of that place where the world does not find a footing. And this is it: There is a consciousness in which nothing is manifest. It has no boundary and is full of light in all directions. So we can understand this to be a description of *Nibbāna*.

Now our task is to find a way to practice in such a way that this might become manifest to us. But before we do that, I'd like to offer these metaphors, these ways of thinking about what we're doing, so we can understand the process of liberating ourselves from self-deception, which is generated by this deluded self, this house builder. Now, some of you who've been to Satipanya to work with me have heard all this before, but I'm hoping that you've forgotten it. And if you haven't forgotten it, you'll excuse my presentation because I just wanted it to be in this medium.

The first metaphor is to recognise what happens to us when we're babies. It has a similarity to the process of insight meditation. For the first four months of our lives, it seems, we're bombarded by sensual information, can make no head or tail of it. But we do know when we're experiencing what is pleasant or unpleasant — that is the dual world that we enter into. Then around four months we start to delineate our first object out of this bewildering mass and in so doing we create the third dimension of depth. And it's usually out of this that we find our first object, our mother, our carer.

So the process continues, it seems, until around the age of three, we're pretty clear that I'm not anything outside my body. My body and my sense of me are separate from everyone and everything. And I know my toys belong to me. They're mine. A very strong sense of possession. There's still a great connection to Mother, but what we've done is we've distanced the outer world from the inner world.

Our practice is to distance this inner world from the intuitive awareness. Every time we experience a feeling or sensation, an emotion or mood, a thought or an image as an object, we're telling ourselves that this cannot be the awareness that knows it. The knower, the feeler, the experiencer experiences itself as quite other to everything it knows, feels and experiences. Now that's what happens when we turn everything into an object, just as the baby creates a third dimension by reaching out and so creating distance. So we're pushing away what we are overwhelmed with, our sensations, feelings, and thoughts. And that distance between the object and the awareness is the inner third dimension.

The second metaphor that I like to use is one of Narcissus. As you remember, Narcissus was a handsome, beautiful young man. And he looked into the pool, caught the image of his own face, fell in love with it, and then went to embrace it and fell in and drowned. This is understood as a myth about self-absorption, pride, vanity, conceit. And water in mythology often represents a lot of things, but life and creation, as well as chaos and purification.

However, we can read this myth spiritually. It is that *sati*, the intuitive awareness — I mean notice, not AI — that catches its image on the screen of consciousness. Consciousness itself is that screen upon which the six senses manifest. That is why consciousness is defined by the sense base: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, mind consciousness, and so on.

So every morning we wake up, the first thing we are aware of is ourselves, our self-awareness. I'm sure you'll have had the experience of waking up in an unfamiliar room at a hotel or friends. And for those first few seconds you can't recognize where you are and so who you are. There's a momentary panic till we situate ourselves. So it is that *sati* sees itself, senses itself in the pool of the mind, the pool of the world that the mind is creating, and then we drown in it.

However, the Buddha has come to the rescue and offered us a methodology to resuscitate us, ourselves. We must drag Narcissus out of the water, sitting back on the bank of the pool. And so it is that in *Vipassanā*, we draw our awareness out of the body and mind with its feelings, perceptions and habits, and we experience ourselves as the one who knows.

In this, our basic identity begins to change, where we base our identity. As children, our identity is very body-centered, and we have that experience when we bite our tongues when we're eating. Just for that singular moment of the stabbing pain, we're absorbed into it and become a physical self. We then very quickly bounce out of it and are annoyed with ourselves and so become an emotional self. We then might reflect upon it and counsel ourselves to eat more slowly and mindfully. And so we become a thinking self. But this position of the observer, the feeler, transcends them all. It can be aware of all the experiences the body and heart-mind have.

Then we might acknowledge more and more clearly the distinction between the object and the subject. So this takes us back to the distancing, the disidentifying process of the baby and young child. And this takes us a step further to investigate the nature of this identity of the self as the observer and the feeler. For having accessed within ourselves this inner position, called by Nyanaponika Thera in his classic work, still worthy of a read, "The Heart of Buddhist Meditation," an observation post. And from this observation post, we can see clearly that the body and heart, heart-mind, the emotions and thought life, continue of themselves without the engagement of this self-awareness that we now experience ourselves to be.

Now we have a situation where the self-awareness sees the body as other and that the body keeps on being the body with its sensations and feelings. The emotions and moods still continue to arise and the thoughts and images continue to flit across the mind. None of it needing the direct control of *sati*, this intuitive awareness. So we're left with the question as to the nature of this self-awareness.

Our investigation now turns towards the self-awareness, that sense of presence. Since we're aware of it, that makes it an object. So we can't be it. Worse, we realize that this identity is the very portal into the world manufactured by the six senses — the five physical senses and the heart mind. This is the face in the pool.

Indeed, this primary self is Mara, the evil tempter, inviting us into the pleasures and joys of the world, only to find ourselves entangled, ensnared and imprisoned. This is the house builder the Buddha discovered to be the agent of rebirth, the root of all our discontent and suffering.

So now there's a practice which is pretty specific to this investigation. And I'm indebted, well, we are indebted to the Mahayana school for this. When the body is very still and the heart calm and the mind is silent — now admittedly that's pretty rare in our daily lives, though it does arise on retreat — we can raise our attention into that feeling of presence located in the forehead. We can stay there to the exclusion of everything else and again just gaze. We now know because we are aware of that sense of self, it is an object and therefore belongs to the mind. So it must be arising and passing away, even though it seems to be coexistent with the awareness that knows it. Remember, consciousnesses are flashing at enormous speeds so that they give us a sense of continuity. We need to hold that position as best we can without straining, just gazing with wonder. Is that sense of self arising and passing away? That is all. Just to gaze with wonder. Presume that the awareness knows what it's looking for. So that's one particular technique.

The other one is the one that we usually use when we're practicing *Vipassanā*. And that involves directly investigating the process of impermanence. So whenever we see an object, whether it's a sensation or a feeling, mood or emotion, thought or image appearing and disappearing, the same applies. The *sati*, this observer, this feeler, that experiences the object arising and passing away, cannot itself be arising and passing away. That gap, minute as it is, between the passing of an object and the arising of another, would also constitute a glimpse into our true nature, which is unborn, undying, uncreated and unconditioned.

So we can sum up the techniques by first of all pulling away from the objects we're aware of so it becomes something to observe and feel, remembering that the perceiver cannot be the perceived. This is the first step of not me, not mine, not self. Then the direct experience of the appearance and disappearance of the object allows *sati* to experience itself as other, whole, entire and permanent. Slowly but surely, this intuitive awareness, *satipaṇṇā*, becomes an island unto itself, impervious to the physical and mental worlds. This is where the very world cannot find a footing.

Now fortunately we have an example of someone who describes what it's like to be fully liberated from the delusion of self and this actually warrants a talk but for our present purpose it's enough to quote her. I'm presuming for the time being that you know the categories that the Buddha teaches, the four great elements, the six sense bases and the five aggregates. Meichi Kyo was an ordinary, barely educated village girl who died in 1991 at the age of 90. And this is her statement:

"Body, mind and essence are all distinct and separate realities. Absolutely everything is known. Earth, water, fire and wind. Body, feeling, memory, thought and consciousness. Sounds, sights, smells, tastes and touches and emotions. Anger, greed and delusion, all are known, I know them all as they exist in their own natural states. But no matter how much I'm exposed to them, I am unable to detect even an instant when they have any power over my heart. They arise and cease, they're forever changing, but the presence that knows them never changes for an instant. It is forever unborn and undying. This is the end of all suffering."

I can only hope my little homily has been of interest, and that by your dedication to the practice you will be liberated from all suffering, like Mei-Chi Kiao, sooner rather than later.

Attachment: The Five Khandhas

Noirin Sheahan · 47 min

In this teaching, Noirin Sheahan examines the five khandhas—the aggregates of clinging that form our entire conditioned experience. Using the striking metaphor of free-fall from an airplane, she illustrates how we desperately grasp at material form, vedanā (feeling-tone), perception, saṅkhāra (mental formations), and consciousness in our futile attempt to find security in an inherently unstable world.

The talk explores each khandha in detail: how we cling to our bodies and possessions (form), chase pleasant feelings while avoiding unpleasant ones (vedanā), create fixed perceptions including the sense of self (saññā), identify with emotions and mind-states (saṅkhāra), and finally attach to the very awareness that experiences it all (viññāṇa). Noirin shows how all clinging ultimately reduces to wanting pleasant vedanā, and how understanding the three characteristics of anicca, dukkha, and anattā in relation to each khandha can lead to the joy of non-clinging.

Drawing from personal retreat experiences and practical examples, this teaching offers both theoretical understanding and experiential guidance for recognizing our patterns of attachment and discovering the peace that comes from letting go—the taste of nibbāna itself.

Tonight I want to talk about the five *khandha*, which is a teaching often translated as the five aggregates of clinging. By now I am sure you are aware that clinging to our experience as "me" and "mine" causes suffering.

This is expressed in the second noble truth, that desire is the cause of suffering. Unless we can see desire as it arises, it generates a sense of self, and this newly created "me" devotes all my energy to trying to get more of the pleasure and get rid of the pain or distress. But this is stressful.

In moments of equanimity, when we can let things arise and pass away, we get a taste of freedom, a glimpse of the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering. All of the Buddha's teachings concern suffering and the end of suffering, but each time he gives us a slightly different perspective on this central theme. The better we get to know them all, the more choice we have in finding one to suit our circumstances.

For example, the wheel of dependent origination focuses on the step-by-step process which ends up in *dukkha*. We notice these links when our attention is drawn into a momentary experience of one thing leading to another. By contrast, the teaching on the khandha focuses on what it is we are clinging to. It's like taking a cross-section through our experience at any one time. The wheel looks at detail to find out how we create suffering. The khandha looks more broadly to discover what we are clinging to.

The word khandha is usually translated as an aggregate, which means an amalgamation of many separate elements. Aggregate is not such a common word, but sounds good by comparison to another translation of khandha as a heap. It's not very flattering to think of ourselves scrabbling round in five heaps of stuff as we make our way through life, but maybe this is a poignant image for our predicament.

The first of these heaps consists of material form. The second of *vedanā* or feeling. The third is composed of our perceptions. The fourth is our habitual tendencies or *saṅkhāra*. And finally we have consciousness. These five heaps cover all of our experience in life apart from the experience of *Nibbāna*.

We cling to the khandha because we don't see their basic characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. One metaphor which is often used to convey the true nature of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* is that of free fall. Everything is slipping away at a great rate and you're completely out of control. There's nothing you can cling to. It's all disappearing too quickly. At first you're scared stiff because of the crash to earth you are anticipating, but in our fall into the reality of the three characteristics the crash never comes. Bit by bit we learn to relax and enjoy the experience.

So now I'm asking you to stretch your imagination a bit and think of your whole life as a long fall out of an aeroplane. Everything is slipping by at an alarming rate. Nothing gives any stability. You're spinning and tumbling out of control. You reach out in a vain effort to find anything that could slow things down. And suppose there are various objects that offer hope. Falling through a flock of geese, you could clutch at a few legs. The birds get dragged downwards, but they slow your fall and even hold you steady for a while. Relief. But then the rest of the flock descends to rescue the tethered geese by pecking at you so that you have to let go. You land on the wing of a glider plane. This offers a few moments bumpy ride, but your weight tips the plane over so you get ejected. Again and again you reach out for whatever will give you stability. These images represent our attempt to cling to the first khandha, material form.

If you were a very astute free faller you would have noticed that you feel good when you're managing to cling on and you would realize it's the feel-good you really want and start wondering whether there are easier ways of getting that pleasure. Now you

are intent on clinging to the second khandha, vedanā, or feeling, as a means of coping with the reality of ultimate doom. You have found one way of getting a pleasant feeling from the temporary security offered by material form. But all that pecking from wild geese is no fun and the bumpy rides are very bumpy, so you start looking around for other ways to help you feel good.

You notice the turning on your back helps. The sky looks much more stable than the fast approaching ground. Also, you come across a nice little heap of glasses and lenses that are falling to earth around you. Putting on rose tinted spectacles certainly helps. And also looking through lenses that make the ground seem far away. All these allow you change your perception of the situation. So now you're clinging to the third khandha, perception. You're choosing the perceptions of life that help you feel safe and secure.

But sometimes you can't find the right glasses and you notice that certain thoughts and patterns of behaviour also help you cope. For example, roaring and shouting about how awful and unfair it is that you fell from the plane gives you a bit of a buzz. And luckily, for the first few years of your free fall, there's a kind mother figure falling to earth alongside you who never fails to respond with milk and bickies. So now you're clinging to the fourth khandha, habitual behaviour, saṅkhāra. You're developing habits that give you a fleeting quick fix of pleasure.

But roaring and shouting gives you a headache, so as a last resort you turn to mindfulness. You learn to watch your experience without interfering. Things get peaceful. There's a soothing sense of simply being an observer, slightly aloof from the drama of your life. Now you are clinging to the last khandha, consciousness. Again, this gives that all-important hit of pleasant feeling. But sooner or later you lose the balance of mind that allows the impartial observer stance and get all embroiled in the drama again. In dismay you look around for some passing geese to grab hold of or a pair of spectacles.

That gives a crude image of our life as a vain effort to give ourselves a temporary illusion that things are going our way, that we are in control and that we will somehow survive this doomed fall to earth. We grab hold of whatever will help us feel good. Practising with the khandha is like learning to enjoy the free fall. To our enormous relief, we discover that the ground is also an illusion. So we're free-falling, without danger of a sudden crash.

To make this discovery, we need to get to know the khandha. What are these features of experience which delude us into thinking they could provide a secure abode within the reality of anicca, dukkha, anattā? Can we feel the stress involved in clinging? Can we learn not to panic when they eventually let us down and we sense the free fall?

With continued attention to experience, these in-between moments of non-clinging become clearer and less terrifying. This is how we learn to enjoy the free fall. As we sensitize ourselves to the contrasting experiences of clinging and non-clinging, the Buddha assures us our nature automatically shifts towards non-clinging. We become happier and more content. Ultimately, we become enlightened, meaning we have been liberated from the futility of clinging.

So let's have a look at the first khandha, material form. This includes the body and all its sense bases, eyes, ears, etc., as well as the external material world, earth, plants, animals, mountains, houses, cars, computers, mobile phones, food, etc. Anything we can touch or see or hear or smell or taste is part of this first khandha.

We cling very tenaciously to the material form in our own body. Notice all the thoughts and emotions resulting from a headache or other pain. Any illness is a great teacher about how we cling to our bodies. We usually build our future around being able to walk, run, lift, carry etc. Not to mention hear, see, eat and talk. We get quite a shock if any of these fail. There's no way around the dukkha, but we can experience it moment by moment and let it teach us about the mistake we're making in assuming we can rely on our bodies to support our agenda in life.

And we accumulate so much material form around us in life. House, car, mobile phones, clothes, garden, books, furniture, etc. Often we don't notice our attachment to these until we lose them or they let us down in some way. If the car breaks down, or someone breaks into your house and steals the TV, there will probably be a lot of dukkha to endure.

One mistake that's easy to make when we hear this teaching is to start to disdain the material world, including our own body, as the source of dukkha. This is a mistake. Neither the world nor our body cause dukkha. Only our mistaken belief that they can offer us permanent support and be the basis for a happy life. The Buddha asks us to treat these with care and respect. It's only in an intimate caring relationship for our bodies and the material world that we experience how we stress ourselves out in the effort to grasp these as "me" or "mine". We can't learn that from a distance.

To encourage this positive relationship think of your daily activities as an aspect of *mettā* for the material world. When you are eating, doing yoga, washing your hands, do all these in a spirit of self-care. In your daily chore, can you do this as an act of gratitude for the safety and ease the physical structure of Satipanya offers us? We wouldn't be here in retreat if the walls and roof weren't holding together or if we had no plates to hold our dinner. If you're doing some gardening, can you see this as adding beauty to

the world? When you take a walk around the meadows during the break times, can you see this as an act of appreciation for the material world around you? Trees, sky, ground, wildlife.

Let's look now at the second khandha, *vedanā* or feeling. We've already come across *vedanā* as one of the steps in the wheel of dependent origination. *Vedanā* describes the way we categorize sensations as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. If we don't tune into *vedanā*, our system then moves on to the next link in the wheel, generating desire for pleasant *vedanā*, aversion to unpleasant and to ignore the neutral. Once this wheel has moved past *vedanā*, it gets progressively more difficult to stop before it ends up at *dukkha*. By contrast, if we learn to tune into the basic pleasure-displeasure neutrality of sense contacts and know from experience the pain of *dukkha*, we can persuade ourselves to enjoy the pleasant without clinging, to bear with the unpleasant without pushing away, and to pay close attention to the neutral because the lack of stimulation is very relieving to our frazzled nerves.

In fact, clinging to all the other khandha boils down to clinging to *vedanā* as explained in the teaching on the Wheel of Dependent Origination. So why do we study all the other khandha? It's because we're so deeply enmeshed with these that we rarely notice the feeling-reaction coupling at the core. But reflecting on the khandha helps us see through the illusion we are creating.

For example, take material form. Imagine primitive man making his way northwards across Europe. It gets wetter and colder, unpleasant *vedanā*, so he builds himself a hut to shelter in. The hut is associated with pleasant *vedanā*. He likes it. He starts to think of it as home. Fast forward to our modern homes that we work 40 years to pay for, with all their decor and furniture and gardens. This attachment covers a huge section of our life. We think it's the house, garden etc. that we want and need. But actually it's the pleasant *vedanā* it gives us from physical sensations like warmth and comfort and concepts like security, safety, status that generate more pleasant *vedanā*.

If we are lucky enough to have somewhere we can call home, reflecting on our relationship with our home will bring up pleasant thoughts of being cosy and secure and the very unpleasant thoughts of losing our home. To reflect mindfully, we have to keep letting go of whatever desires might come up, for instance, to paint the house. If we hadn't made the effort to be mindful, the thought of our home could have turned the wheel all the way to birth and we would be out painting the house before we knew where we were. And, of course, the rain and wind would eventually destroy our careful painting so the wheel would turn on to *dukkha*.

By reflecting on the khandha of material form we are learning to let the wheel come to rest at the point of vedanā while we think of our home and other possessions. This purifies our relationship with the first khandha. We become more appreciative of our possessions. We enjoy them more fully and are not quite so dismayed and appalled when they go the way of all things into the abyss of loss and decay. We paint the house mindfully, knowing all our efforts will come to naught, apart, that is, from the effort to be mindful. That's the one that will pay dividends.

It's the same with the other khandha. We bind ourselves to these for the sake of the pleasant vedanā they offer. Vedanā is really the key to unlock the chain binding us to suffering. So during retreat here this week, really try to sensitise yourself to the pleasantness, unpleasantness or neutrality resulting from physical sensations and the mental world of thoughts, ideas, memories. The better you can do this on retreat, the easier it will be to reflect on the khandha mindfully afterwards, feeling the associated pleasant and unpleasant feelings as we think about these and the role they play in our life. Reflecting like this teaches us the futility of clinging. The wheel comes to halt more and more often at the point of vedanā as we contemplate the khandha.

Let's go on to look at the third khandha, perception. A perception is the mind's attempt to categorize whatever stimulus it receives. For example, a certain pattern of pressures fall on the eardrum and the mind recognizes a ringing tone. One teacher uses the image of a filing cabinet to illustrate this khandha. Whatever comes in has to be sorted into its correct file. The more attached we are to this khandha, the more time we turn our back on the incoming sense data, ignoring most of them in favour of a preoccupation with files and sub-files and finding the exact category for each sensation.

The stimulus can be mental as well as physical. Suppose some loud, high-pitched vibrations impact on the ear and we perceive these as a ringing tone. The perception, ringing tone, in turn, stimulates the mind to do some further classification, perhaps comparing this vibration with the memory of our house alarm and alarm clock before ending up with the concept doorbell. A concept is a mental amalgamation of the memory of many perceptions which is cemented by beliefs and culture. Primitive man, for example, would not have had the concept doorbell, and if he heard one, might have been sorting through his memory of birdsongs to try to recognise this peculiarly shrill one.

Concepts get strung together to form thoughts and mental images. A pattern of light, shade and colour falls on the eye and the mind recognises our neighbour's face and we think, "here's John from down the road." It's truly amazing how the mind can recognise and classify the complex patterns of sight and smell and sound that it is bombarded

with each moment. But each perception is just a guess at the reality that stimulated it, like my seeing the red cloth brushing the floor and my mind constructing a life-size image of Bhante Bodhidharma, as I explained in another talk.

So perceptions with their resulting concepts, mental images and thoughts are very, very clever guesswork based on what we remember and what we believe to be likely and some incoming data from the senses. They impose a structure in the world that we would swear to be true. And this can certainly be helpful. For example, we need to recognise a certain pattern of light as a cup in order to drink tea. Could we accept our perceptions as helpful, clever ways to represent reality, but nothing more than that? A temporary classification which needs to be continually reconfirmed by checking against our sensory input. Then we wouldn't get so startled when the cup shatters into little pieces spilling all the tea.

Take for example our deeply held belief that there's someone called "me" whose location is probably within or nearby my body. This "me" is, or should be, in control of my body and my life. The Buddha taught that this perception of self is created as part of the reaction to *vedanā*. In order to get what it wants, or get rid of what it doesn't want, the mind-body complex lets desire generate a perception of a self that can take decisions and get the body into action. It's a wonderfully clever way that our biology has found to satisfy its needs.

Despite our deep belief in the reality of me, the Buddha teaches that the real truth is *anattā*, not self. This is a very difficult teaching to get our heads around. But some people have sudden insights into *anattā*.

While walking in the Himalayas, D.E. Harding experienced a moment in which all his mental chatter died down. As if I had been born that instant, innocent of all memories. He looked down to find a pair of trouser legs terminating in a pair of brown shoes, sleeves terminating sideways in a pair of pink hands, and a shirt front terminating in nothing whatsoever. But this nothing, this hole where his head should have been, was no ordinary vacancy. The emptiness was filled with mountains, trees and sky, everything in his visual field. He had lost a head and gained a world. There arose no questions, he said, but only peace and a quiet joy, and the sensation of having dropped an intolerable burden.

So the perception of *anattā* is a very beautiful one which can arise quite naturally when the mental chatter dies down. But the thought of *anattā* is often unsettling or even frightening. The Buddha never answered questions of the form, do I exist or is

there a self, but asked people to experience for themselves that the perception of self is conditional. It arises when there is a desire for whatever *vedanā* is felt. The sense of self, like all perceptions, is the mind's guess at how to interpret present reality.

When a pattern of black and yellow light strikes the eye and gives rise to the very unpleasant thought of a tiger about to pounce, it makes a lot of sense to get our biological act together using the concept of me being in control and putting all my energy into escaping. And if the tiger catches us and we see we're doomed, it makes sense to change our minds and see that this painful, frightened entity is not our true self. In that sublime state, we could even wish the tiger Bon Appétit!

Can we see the self as a temporary, provisional, best guess at interpreting present reality? Very helpful at times, but not the ultimate truth. Can we see it wax and wane as circumstances dictate? For example, the way a sense of me suddenly blossoms when something nice happens. It's very interesting to note that you didn't remark on its absence before the sudden blossoming. The experience of not-self is very subtle and unobtrusive. That's why we don't notice it. It's quite an unremarkable experience, until we think about it. The experience of self, on the other hand, always calls attention, even if it's an unpleasant experience. For example, the way that sense of me crumples or rears up in anger when something unpleasant happens.

Let's look now at the fourth *khandha*, *saṅkhārā*. There are many translations for *saṅkhārā*. Mental formations, mental factors, mental habits, habitual tendencies, even concoctions. In everyday language we refer to some of these as moods and emotions such as depression, anger, love, joy. Others, such as laziness, we might think of as a state of mind, while others, such as wisdom, we might think of as a mental attribute. Each moment the *saṅkhārā* changes with the circumstances we find ourselves in, but each of us favour different sets. For example, some of us have a tendency towards anger, others for delusion, others for joy.

Our characters and personalities are determined by our *saṅkhārā*. Some *saṅkhārā* are unwholesome in the sense that they lead to suffering. Others lead towards *Nibbāna*, termed Beautiful *saṅkhārā*. Others are ethically neutral. They can be present in either wholesome or unwholesome states. One of the neutral *saṅkhārā* is volition, which is particularly important because it links with *kamma*, the ethical force at work in life.

Volition, also translated as intention or will, factors into every conscious moment. Even seeing and hearing are intentional. So every moment we are sowing *kamma* for ourselves. *Kamma* is like a seed. It ripens as fruit. Actions or speech motivated by kindness or other beautiful qualities ripen as various forms of happiness. Actions motivated by hatred or other unwholesome qualities ripen as unhappiness.

Kamma ripens in many ways, but perhaps the most important is the type of *saṅkhārā* they develop. If we're motivated by greed to steal someone's wallet, we develop habits of greed, deceitfulness, shamelessness, among others. If we're motivated by kindness to care for a sick child, we develop habits such as patience, compassion, love. It is the motivation that matters, not the act itself. If we care for the child because we feel trapped into this role and we let resentment be shown and make cruel remarks now and then, then we develop cruelty and resentment rather than beautiful *saṅkhārā*.

Non-attachment and non-hatred are amongst the beautiful *saṅkhārā*. These are very unexciting terms, but I had a striking demonstration of the beauty of non-attachment during one retreat. There was a bed of wild flowers in the garden, and I was enthralled by the gorgeous colours. But my mind would get lost in thoughts of sowing a flower bed like this at home, and my friends would surely want one too, and on and on it went until I was tense with anxiety about these future gardens. Although the scene in front of me was beautiful, I felt contorted by tension. I sadly decided I would have to forgo the gorgeous flower bed if I was to get any peace of mind.

Then one day as I was drying dishes, there was a moment where I simply felt the weight of the cup and the softness of the cloth, and my mind expanded into a beautiful freedom. It was a moment without attachment, but one of the most beautiful experiences of my life. I had never realised how much I was clinging until I experienced that one moment of non-attachment. Comparing this with my experience at the flowerbed, I could see that attachment leads to misery, while non-attachment allows perfect contentment.

Non-hatred also sounds mundane but can be put in more positive language as friendliness, kindness, love and patience. As you would expect, compassion, equanimity and sympathetic joy are also among the beautiful states of mind.

We cling to this *khandha* by identifying ourselves with our emotions and mind states thinking I am angry, I am happy, I am sleepy. The truth of the matter is that these are temporary states of mind which arise because of certain conditions and cease when these conditions pass away. When we get closely identified with any mind state we become blind to any alternative way of viewing the situation. So the mind loses its flexibility.

During a long car journey I was feeling a bit sick and very grumpy. A friend smiled and made some pleasantries. For a moment I forgot to be grumpy and my heart lifted but then I remembered I am grumpy and started sinking back into the state. But the momentary lift showed me the state wasn't the absolute truth and I could make the effort

to be sociable. I found myself resisting, feeling who would be disloyal to my grumpy self, who deserved my loyalty. On digesting this, my sociability-related *saṅkhārā* won out over my self-loyalty ones, and I decided to perk up a bit.

As always, mindfulness is the key to seeing through delusion. In this case, the belief that I am grumpy, rather than a more accurate belief such as grumpiness is here now, but conditions could change. It's also easy to cling to *saṅkhārā* like love, joy, compassion, understanding, not seeing how these come and go depending on circumstances. When we've had a good meal or heard some good news, we can feel kind, happy and understanding. It's so tempting to believe this is the real me. But then there is shock and grief when this wonderful state gets broken down again. Can we notice the beautiful *saṅkhārā* objectively, enjoying them while they last, letting them go when the conditions change? It's a tough practice. We have to let everything go for the sake of complete freedom.

This brings us to the last of the *khandha*, consciousness. To be conscious is to experience the other four *khandha*, the sensory world around us and the mental world within. If we are unconscious, this experience vanishes. This is the sense in which the term consciousness is used when it refers to the fifth *khandha*. Consciousness can also be used to refer to the experience of *nibbāna* but that's not included in the *khandha*. The *khandha* only describe what we cling to, and *nibbāna* is what we're left with when we stop clinging to the *khandha*.

Consciousness is often likened to a screen on which a film projects. The light from the projector has to fall on the screen if we are to see the scenery and characters. If there was no screen, the light would just pass through and if there were no dust in the air to scatter it, the light beam would be invisible. It would make no impact on us. In the same way the various dramas of our lives as well as their component parts of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, body sensations and mental activity all have to project onto the screen of consciousness to have any impact on us.

Is there a difference between consciousness, awareness and mindfulness? Sometimes the words are used interchangeably, so it can be confusing. For this talk, I use awareness and mindfulness interchangeably. We all know that we can be conscious though not mindful. We are on autopilot, letting the mind run away on thoughts but not noticing that these thoughts are just part of our present experience. Going back to the movie analogy, it's as if we're in the movie, playing our role, feeling our feelings, totally immersed in the plot.

Mindfulness turns attention to our conscious experience and the mind starts taking an interest in what's being projected on the screen. It's often described as a different level of consciousness. We can have stretches where we see the film quite objectively, like watching ourselves acting in the movie of our lives. Then we lose mindfulness and get sucked into some aspect of the plot that was on the screen, acting it all out with gusto.

The Buddha taught that there are six separate doorways to consciousness, involving the five senses and also the mind, for example, when a thought or memory falls on the screen of consciousness. Certain conditions have to be fulfilled for each door to open. In order to hear a bird song, for example, we need the bird to sing, good hearing, as well as attention. If any of these is missing, then hearing consciousness does not happen. Although we say, isn't the silence beautiful, we can't actually hear silence. Perhaps what we're enjoying is the absence of hearing consciousness. It's the same for all the other senses. We need the sense object, sensory physiology and attention. Sight, sound, body sensations, smell, taste and mental activities. All of these are separate doorways to conscious experience. But they are completely separate independent experiences.

I first noticed this separation of the different fields of consciousness one time while walking during a retreat. I was noting the feeling of the feet swinging forward and stepping down onto the ground. So my attention was on body consciousness. But then I suddenly saw the tip of my foot appearing and disappearing as I felt it come to the end of the forward swing. I found myself being amazed that these experiences coincided so perfectly. Before that, I would never have questioned that the sight and feel of the foot would coincide. But now I could sense that logical expectations, sight and bodily sensations were occupying three separate worlds. It seemed a pure wonder and an incredible gift that they all fitted into each other so neatly. I was tasting the separation of consciousness into its six fields.

Can you tune into the different fields of consciousness, for example vision, hearing and bodily experience? Joseph Goldstein recommends using noting phrases of the form sounds being known, walking being known, to turn attention towards that entity which registers experience. Can you get a sense of how separate are the worlds of hearing, seeing and physical sensing?

The Buddha also taught that we only experience one doorway for consciousness at a time sight or sound or smell or mental activity. But this is all happening at such a fast rate that we don't notice the separate registrations. Once I was walking towards a door to open it feeling the feet lifting, moving. Then my hand went out to grasp the handle of the door touching turning pushing pushing then my foot lifted to take another

step at the moment I felt the foot lift I realised my hand had disappeared totally from consciousness. I got such a fright I looked down to see if my hand had dropped off. But it was still there and I realised it was simply that perception had sharpened so that I was experiencing just one sensation at a time.

These kinds of experience undermine our usual fascination with the plot that's playing on the screen of consciousness and make us wonder about the nature of consciousness itself. To study this fifth *khandha*, we need to calm ourselves in meditation sufficiently to extract ourselves from the fascination of the plot and simply watch the film. Then at times we might relax enough to get a sense of what often feels like a more stable sense of self, the one who watches the film, the one who knows experience, the observer, the witness. At those moments we're noticing our identification with the fifth *khandha*. We sense this is happening within me or I am observing all this.

Bhante uses the analogy of looking through a shop window. You see the goods inside but might also notice your own reflection as you watch. If the stuff for sale doesn't appeal, you might get more interested in your own face. In the same way, when our consciousness film is not too exciting, we can bring attention to the sense of me, the one who experiences, observes and knows all this. Although at first it feels like a deep and reliable sense of self, it also begins to shift and slide when the spotlight turns upon it. So we begin to lose faith in this final *khandha* as a stable source of happiness.

At other times we lose that sense of watching the screen but remain mindful. We feel more intimate with sensations and feelings. They're no longer out there on the screen for me to watch. This is the loss of identity with the fifth *khandha*. Sensations and feelings arise and pass just as before, but no one is watching anymore. It's an experience of *anattā*. Our whole system functions just fine without the usual sense of me being in charge or watching the film. In our earlier analogy, we're now tasting freefall, no longer clinging even to this fifth *khandha* for security.

Each sensation of life is intimately known, but there's no central control system, no observer, no unknowing. We glimpse the state of non-clinging, the end of suffering, *nibbāna*. However, until our trust in this state deepens to total enlightenment, the sense of self sooner or later rears its head again as we start clinging to familiar experiences to help us feel secure.

Studying the *khandha* helps us to discover what it is we cling to unwittingly creating *dukkha* in the process. Ultimately, all our clinging boils down to wanting to feel good, clinging to pleasant *vedanā*. In an effort to do this, we scrabble around in the heap of material form, buying goods, nice clothes, makeup, in an effort to feel secure about our bodies and our material well-being. Or else we polish our spectacles, choose a new pair

of lenses as we immerse ourselves in the heap of perceptions. At other times we get lost in the heap of *saṅkhārā*, repeating old habits in an effort to get things stable. When we're relaxed and mindful, we fall into the heap of consciousness, concocting stability from the illusion that there's someone called me who experiences my life.

The good news is that deeper awareness of our habit of clinging and how much it hurts makes us more willing to let go and free fall with the truths of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. We get more curious about the state of non-clinging. Instead of the temporary highs offered by the *khandha*, we become enthralled by the possibility of letting these slip through our fingers. We discover the stability offered by knowing the instability of life.

May these reflections on the five *khandha* help us experience the joy of non-clinging.

Faith

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 48 min

In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines faith (saddhā) as one of the five spiritual faculties in Buddhism, drawing on the Abhidhamma's analysis of consciousness to explore faith's three essential components: understanding, emotional involvement, and will. He carefully distinguishes between faith as trust and confidence versus belief in mere statements, using practical examples from climbing mountains to medical treatment to illustrate how genuine faith operates in daily life.

The talk explores how spiritual faith develops through hearing the Dhamma, personal reflection, and direct experience through meditation practice. Bhante discusses the famous Kālāma Sutta's teaching against blind belief, emphasizing the Buddha's instruction to test teachings through personal experience. He addresses common obstacles to faith including intellectual pride, spiritual despair, and unrealistic expectations, while explaining how faith becomes unshakeable wisdom (bala) upon reaching stream-entry (sotāpanna).

Drawing from classical commentaries, Bhante illustrates faith's purifying effect on consciousness and its essential balance with wisdom (paññā) in meditation practice. The talk concludes with practical guidance on nurturing faith through spiritual friendship (kalyāṇamittā), ethical conduct (sīla), and understanding impermanence (anicca), making this teaching valuable for both newcomers and experienced practitioners seeking to deepen their commitment to the path.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa

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

So I thought I'd give a little talk around faith, which in the Buddha's understanding is fundamental. Nothing happens without faith. And I read a rather nice little essay on it by Nyanaponika, whom some of you might know — a very famous German monk who started the Buddhist Publication Society up in Kandy. Didn't write all that much himself, but what he wrote was influential. And his main book, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, still remains a classic on meditation.

The way I would like to tackle it is from these three constituents of an act of consciousness. I'm getting this from the Abhidhamma, but actually it should be pretty obvious to us. Not being too specific about one act of consciousness, but in a series of con-

sciousnesses. You always have the intellectual part, the cognitive part, the understanding. There's always some affective part, your emotional involvement. And for an action, there has to be an act of will.

And you will notice that in my explanation there, I use my hand to point to three centres. So they're your basic chakras, the one in the middle of your head signifying your understanding, the heart in the middle of your chest, and the one in your belly. And it's interesting that, just a little aside, if you look at the way Buddhism grew, it was very much a cognitive effort. The Buddha's teaching is very much about, first of all, understanding and everything flows from that. But that became too rigid, too dry perhaps, so that the next wave through Mahāyāna was raising up *karuṇā*, raising up the heart to the level of *paññā*, wisdom. So *karuṇā* and *paññā* became equal. And if you go over to the Far East, to Japan, their centre is very much in the hara, the will — a samurai. Just a little aside, you understand. Nothing to do with faith.

So these three things I want to just look at from the point of view of faith. And before we do that, I have to make one big distinction between faith and belief. So a belief is faith in a statement. If you say, there is no God, or there is a God, then that's a statement which, in effect, you can't prove either one way or the other. But if you believe it, then it would come under a belief rather than faith. So when we're talking about faith this evening, it's concerned with an attitude, trust, confidence. That's what we're talking about.

To give us some idea as to what we mean by that, we can take a few ordinary things that we do which demand faith. If you take, for instance, supposing now you decided to climb Everest. So there would have to be these three things, wouldn't there? You'd have to have understood what the actual path of Everest means and what it might take. It has to be that understanding. There has to be the desire to get up there, doesn't there? You might read about it and think that's very interesting but there's no desire to go up Everest. And you might have a good understanding as to what it's going to take, you might have an incredible desire, but somehow you just can't get your boots on and that's the lack of will. That's the lack of will. Lots of times like that in our lives, isn't there?

So somebody came and she was in quite an upset state because she was convinced that she had throat cancer, this particular person. And she had no trust in her doctors. So she wouldn't even go for a biopsy — not an autopsy, she wasn't dead yet — a little biopsy on the grounds that she didn't trust the doctors. And as we were discussing it and seeing what other options were open, it finally began to show that what was really

undermining her faith wasn't at all to do with the doctors or the profession, it was the fear that in fact she may have throat cancer. So that underlying fear was translated into a lack of faith. I think in this case she actually did eventually go.

But if you think of anything you have to do with doctors, you have to have a primary faith that their diagnosis is correct and that the medicine they prescribe is correct. Now in the old days you would have just had blind faith in the doctor. My parents wouldn't have ever argued with a doctor. If the doctor said this pimple on your nose is a dreadful cancer they would have believed it. It wouldn't have occurred to them to question the diagnosis. These days we're a bit more argumentative. And you want to know why and what happens. Recently I went in to the doctor with tinnitus which had just arrived out of nowhere. And she said, I'll send you for a blood test. I said, a blood test? I had to squeeze out of her why she was sending me for a blood test. I won't tell you. So this whole business of even taking medicine, even going for an operation, you've got to have that trust in the surgeon.

You take another thing that we do in our lives, a job. So if you're taking on a job, especially a job which you know will stretch you, then there has to be these three elements. There has to be, first of all, that you've understood what the job is asking you to do. There has to be that attraction to the job, there has to be a desire to do it. And then finally you've got to sign on the dotted line, or else it just doesn't happen. And that's the act, that's the commitment, the act of will. And there, sometimes what stops us is that doubt — can I do it, can I do it. So you can see that the opposite of faith is doubt. There's something that stops you from that commitment.

And if we take another one, it's forming a relationship or getting married. This takes us into the realm of a more intimate human relationship where actually your trust is in this other person. They're not going to abuse you or take advantage of you. Take all your money. There's got to be that trust. And again, there is that knowledge that comes of knowing the other person long enough, the confidence that arises with that. Then, of course, that special love that one has with that sort of relationship. And then, eventually, there's got to be that movement towards yes, yes.

So these things are just little examples which we now translate into the spiritual life. So when it comes to the spiritual life, and specifically around Buddhism, faith, the Buddha calls the spiritual faculty. Interestingly enough, he doesn't put it in with the factors of enlightenment. And the presumption is, at least I presume, is that by the time you're actually meditating, the faith must be there, at least some level of faith. Because the factors of enlightenment are put into the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse, the discourse on how to establish mindfulness or this awareness which leads us to the awakening. But

the five faculties are not there. They're talked about in other places. What's in that particular scripture are the seven factors of enlightenment. So when it comes to the faculty, it seems to me, faith seems to me presumed.

So all of you here now, whatever commitment you have towards the Buddha's teaching, the fact is you wouldn't be here were it not that there was some faith. And if we now go back to what faith entails, the cognitive part, the actual part of understanding, so that's pointed out as three different stages. The first one is you hear the doctrine, you hear the teaching, and that immediately arouses interest. There's also something that's stirring in the heart, that this is the truth, an attraction. There must be some sort of an attraction.

And then after you've heard it and you read about it, there are reflections about it. So that the knowledge which was given, hearsay, read, now becomes your own personal understanding by way of your own reflections. And the more that happens, the more confidence arises, the more faith arises in us about the doctrine, because now in a sense it's becoming our way of thinking, our way of understanding. So it's my way, not the Buddha's way. I'm slowly turning towards that.

But there's still that missing link between an understanding which is intellectual and the actual experience. So it's all right saying that everything arises and passes away, and I mean, there are very few people in the world who wouldn't grasp that. And when we turn inward and we just look around a little bit, we can see that thoughts arise and pass away, emotions arise and pass away, feelings arise. I mean, it's not a brain twister to actually go into that, but it's actually coming to the point where this I, this me, which feels so solid, is also arising and passing away. So turning inward and really coming to terms with what transience actually means at a deeper level through our meditation, that now becomes a knowledge which is also carrying into experience. But we would never have got there, really, without that initial confidence. See, that initial confidence.

When it comes to the heart itself, there's that feeling of trust which comes in, to trust somebody, to have confidence in, faith in somebody. And then there's a desire to devote oneself — a loyal service to the Dharma, for as much as it feeds you personally. So if you're devoted to somebody, then you're there to actually help, please, make them happy. A mother and father devoted to their children. So that act of devotion is not just a lovey-dovey thing. It's part of that movement of the heart to give of oneself. A votary offering. It's an offering. And running along with that, there's love, which translates as a lightness, a joy in faith.

And then once those two are there, there comes this point of a commitment. And the commitment is at all different levels. So it might be just the commitment to practice a bit of meditation. And eventually it's a commitment to actually follow the Buddha's path as your centre line. And a total life's devotion to it.

So, for instance, when people take refuges, refuges and precepts — that's the normal way in all forms of Buddhism. So the refuges are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. And then you take the five precepts, which is just your basic morality, not to kill anybody, steal, etc. But the first part, the taking of refuge in the Buddha Dharma Sangha, is an act of commitment dependent on the person. So it might be that they are committed to it just on a level of, a rather superficial level of, the Buddha's teaching is good, and it's part of my spiritual smorgasbord. I've got all this other stuff, and here's the Buddha's teaching over here, and I do a bit of that. That's fine.

As the teaching takes a more central position in your life, then the commitment comes more, to give oneself more to that teaching. But there still might be a holding back. So it takes a long time to actually commit yourself to something, especially if you are converted to it. If you're born into a religion, if you're born into a spiritual way of life, then it's just natural to you because ever since you woke up, you've been cajoled to make that sort of devotion, to make that act of devotion. But for those who have come from other forms and come into Buddhism, then it takes quite a long time before you ever get to that point of actually, if ever, that you actually commit yourself in terms of this life.

Now, you only get back what you give. So if you give a bit of commitment, then you get a little bit back. If you give a bit more, you get a bit more back. And if you give the whole thing, then eventually you get the whole thing. It's like in a relationship, if you say, well, I love you a bit, and the other person says, well, I love you a bit. And it slowly builds up until finally there's some sort of connection, which one can call a marriage in one form or another. So that's the same with our relationship to the spiritual path.

And that commitment can't be forced, you can't say, oh well, I'm fed up with messing around now, I'm going to devote myself to the Buddha Dharma Sangha. Not at all, because it's a movement within the heart. And there just comes a time in a person's life when they make these little commitments, so it grows, it grows, it grows.

Now when that happens, or as that happens, then one gets the satisfaction of acts of commitment based on faith. So here's one way of putting it. This is taken from the commentary, but it also turns up in what's known as the Questions of King Milinda, which was written quite a while after the Buddha.

And it says, "As a water purifying gem of the universal monarch" — he has seven of these by the way — "thrown into water causes solids, alluvia, water weeds and mud to subside and makes the water clear, transparent and undisturbed. So faith arising discards the hindrances, causes the corruptions to subside, purifies the mind and makes it undisturbed, the mind being purified, and the aspirant of the noble family gives gifts, observes the precepts, performs the duties of the uposatha and commences *bhāvanā*. Thus, faith should be known to have purifying as its characteristic."

So these performs the duties of the uposatha — in Buddhist countries, these full moon and the new moon and the quarters are times when lay people go to the monastery and make a special day of it, especially the full moon. And commencing *bhāvanā*, *bhāvanā* is meditation.

So here we have the purifying of water, transparency. Now all you've got to think about is those times when your life has been full of doubt — either should you move house, should you go for this job or that job, should you go into this relationship or that relationship. In those times of doubt, as soon as there's a commitment, as soon as there's a decision and a commitment, all the stuff around that disappears, doesn't it? All that disturbance, all the doubt, all the fear, it just clarifies, it just disappears. So that's what this is pointing to, that an act of faith is, or an act of taking refuge in Buddhist language, to take the refuge, is that point where all doubts, finally, about how one should lead one's spiritual life begin to fade away. And one is clear, one is clear. So that's its effect on us.

Talking again just a little bit about the intellect and the affective, the emotional thing — if something is only intellective, if it's only an understanding coming from the mind and it doesn't have the force of the heart behind it, then it remains brittle, it remains quite brittle and it can easily be cracked by another argument. Somebody coming along like for instance later on there's a question on rebirth — so if a person thinks well you have to believe in rebirth to be a Buddhist and I can't really believe that, then the whole thing shatters. So if faith is only at that intellectual understanding that this is ok, I understand it and all that, but without the heart behind it, it's not going to really penetrate, it's not really going to have the effect of true devotion.

If on the other hand it's only the heart, so sometimes one is drawn — a type of person might be drawn simply by seeing, seeing a statue of the Buddha. I know people, as soon as they've seen a statue of Buddha they fall in love with it. Something in their memory has clicked and there's this heart connection. And there's that leap of faith. But if that's not balanced with some sort of intellectual understanding about what they're doing, then we would call that blind faith.

And what happens then is an easy falling into belief systems. So I believe the Buddha is right, whatever the Buddha says it's got to be right. And what that does to the practitioner is it undermines their commitment to practice. I mean, if you have a belief that oh yeah the Buddha is right, then why prove it? See, the whole point of the practice that we do, the *bhāvanā*, the *vipassanā*, is that question: Is the Buddha correct? Has he got it right?

I mean, you're not saying that to yourself when you sit, I hope. But that's the underlying basis of the great doubt. This is not doubt as a skeptical thing. This is not coming from fear. It's coming from a desire to really know personally, as a personal experience, whether the Buddha's liberation is true. And whether once one gets to this point of *nibbāna*, whether there isn't in fact more. We might get there and we think, no, this isn't it. I've got to keep going. You don't know, do you?

And it's that sort of doubt which is better translated as a wonder, a philosopher's wonder, which drives our meditation. So in your meditation, if you're just sitting there watching, looking, that won't do. That's called being lazy. There has to also be that sense of curiosity. If the curiosity is not there, just that simple question mark in the mind, a way of looking, then insight can't arise.

So the Buddha is quite clear. Awareness. Without awareness, without placing that attention on something, insight can't arise. So you can't have insight without the awareness. But on the other hand, that insight won't arise unless there is that curiosity in the mind, that wanting to know.

So those two are, you have to have them in balance. And of course when you say balance, there's not some objective balance. You can't go on a weighing scale and say well I've got a bit of this and I've got a bit of that. It's to do with the individual, so that every individual has to have that balance within themselves of an intellectual understanding and a commitment in terms of their devotion, in terms of what their heart wants to do.

And that will, you know, it's just like we were saying about not getting your boots on. So there can always be this lovely intellectual understanding. Some people read so much and they can splurge it all out, and quote ad infinitum. And sometimes they've got a good feeling behind it, but they don't practice. No practice at all. Don't do any meditation.

See, now what stops them doing that? What stops them making that little effort to actually climb the mountain? And that's the lack of will, the lack of commitment. So unless there's that too, there can't be progress on the path.

And it's interesting that the Buddha puts faith opposite, or he balances faith in the five faculties, he balances it with insight. So if there's no faith, if there's not that act of devotion to the practice, then insight can't come up. So these two things are intimately linked.

And eventually when we have an insight which is an insight into the final goal, which is known as entering the stream, the *Sotāpanna*, at that point this faith becomes unshakeable. It's then known not so much as an *indriya*, which we translate as faculty, it becomes a *bala*, which means a strength. So now that faith now is unshakeable because that person has actually seen the top of the mountain. They know where it is. It's no longer clouded. It's not that they can't see it because they've actually touched it. And now that faith, which is a strength, of course, must necessarily draw them to the end of the path through the next few stages.

So until, it's understood that until we have intuited this nirvanic moment, faith will always have a little shake in it. There'll always be a little shake in it.

And that really brings us to what undermines our faith, what undermines your commitment to the practice. The first one we've already talked about, this confusion between faith and belief. So you can very easily slip into that lazy place where you say, well, I believe the Buddha, what's the point? And it undermines that practice. So you've got to keep up that sense of curiosity, that sense of wanting to know.

And the Buddha laid that out very clearly when he visited the Kalamas. It's a very famous discourse. Everybody quotes it, so I may as well quote it myself. So he ended up at the village of the Kalamas, and the Kalamas said to him, we're in a state of calamity. And he said, everybody who comes here tells us that this is what it's all about, this is the truth, and everybody else is wrong. So who are we to believe? Where are we to go?

And he says, do not believe anything simply because you've 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, and simply on the authority of your teachers and elders. In other words, don't believe anything. And then he says, only when it works for you, only when you've tried it out, only when it's something which is of benefit to you, would you then commit yourself to it.

So belief is something which would be contrary to the Buddha's path as such.

The other thing is that we talked about was this balance between devotion or the heart and the understanding. And this is from the commentaries. And it says, for one strong in faith and weak in understanding has confidence uncritically and groundlessly. So that's your blind faith. That's your gullibility. That's believing something, right?

For one strong in understanding and weak in faith errs on the side of cunning and is as hard to cure as one sick of a disease caused by medicine. Interesting, isn't it? We know about the side effects of drugs. One strong in understanding and weak in faith.

So what they're saying here, what he's saying here is that you can have such a good intellectual grasp of Buddhism that you actually believe you've experienced it. And there's a total confusion between something that has been so clearly understood and something which has been directly experienced.

And I knew of a monk who actually believed that himself. He did, he had an enormous, wonderful, deep grasp of the Dharma. And he was convinced that he must be a reborn stream entrant. In other words, he'd already somewhere in his past life, he had intuited *Nibbāna*. Or else how could he have this amazing, wonderful understanding of the Buddha's teaching?

And that is such an easy confusion, related to those who have a very strong intellect. And so it then goes on to say, with the balancing of the two, a person has confidence where there are grounds for it. In other words, it's the balance that we're looking for.

The other one is more to do with self-expectation. The big one about self-doubt. Everybody can do it but not me. That sort of thing. And that can be a real barrier to progress. There's a particular monk in the scriptures who becomes despairing of his practice and commits suicide. Fortunately, when the Buddha comes along and is asked, well, what happened to this monk? Where's he gone? He says, oh, he became enlightened in the process of committing suicide.

Now, I'm not suggesting, of course, that. In this case, it was a happy outcome. But I don't think there's a deeper despair than spiritual despair. To despair of somebody, to despair of your ability to have a relationship, to despair of your ability to earn money and live a good life. All these things that throw people into suicide and jump off bridges. I'm thinking particularly of a young man in Australia who made, and remember this is a piece of news, who made an enormous amount of wealth on property. And when that thing crashed in the mid-90s, he committed suicide.

But when we're talking about spiritual despair, that digs at the deepest level of our being, doesn't it? Because that's what the spiritual life is about. It's about being. It's about who are we at fundament. And to have entered the spiritual path and to have seen the possibility of spiritual advancement and spiritual attainment and that end of suffering and then to despair that one could ever achieve that. I don't think you can get worse than that when it comes to despair anyway.

So don't despair. So that when self-doubt comes up like that, it can often be caused by an over-expectation. You know, you thought you'd be further along the path than this, than you are now. And there's pride involved in that and a loss of self-esteem.

I met a man and he said to me, when he first came to meditation, he went to a course, this was back in the 70s, he went to a course of meditation and he went to it as you would go to any old course of calligraphy or basket making or, French or something. And he went along and the idea was you got an Ibana, you got a certificate and then you left. It was a week on how to attain *Nibbāna*. He entered the course thinking he'd have a go and at the end he'd know *Nibbāna* and that was it. That's what he'd come for.

Well, of course, as the course began to end, the despair entered into the heart and it took him a while to realize that it wasn't that sort of course. And that's why you don't get certificates after meditation courses. Nobody hands you a certificate. So this expectation.

So here's the Buddha. He says, I do not say that the attainment of profound knowledge comes straight away. Nevertheless, the attainment of profound knowledge comes by a gradual training, a gradual doing, a gradual course. How does the attainment of profound knowledge come? By means of gradual training, gradual doing and gradual course. As it is, one who has faith draws near. Drawing close, they sit down nearby. Sitting nearby, they lend an ear. Lending an ear, they hear the Dharma. Having heard the Dharma, they remember it. They test the meaning of things they have borne in mind. Whilst testing the meaning, things are approved of. They're being approved of things. Desire is born. When desire is born, they make an effort. Having made the effort, they weigh it up. Having weighed it up, they strive. Being self-resolute, they realize for themselves the highest truth itself. Penetrating by means of wisdom.

See? Stages. And you also have to be careful that, so the whole point is that when we practice to abandon all expectation. This is the point. So abandon all expectation. And this will, if you don't, then you'll get into that failure success. And that's where the trouble starts.

And when you get a lack of success, it can be a sort of misunderstanding really. Remember that all spiritual traditions warn us that the spiritual path is full of deserts. Dry places, empty places. And it's surprising how many people when they enter into that place just begin to slag off and disappear and then they reappear about 20 years later.

But those periods when you think you are not advancing are more important than those periods when you think you are. That's the slog, that's the dryness, that's the desert. You've just got to keep one foot in front of the other. And I use the image before the mountain. So mountains are used often in the spiritual literature because they're so close to the experience of the spiritual life.

The idea of having this constant. The actual practice is extremely simple. To climb a mountain, all you've got to remember is you put one foot in front of the other and, generally speaking, go up. That's it, isn't it? I mean, you don't need any more instructions than that. Then, of course, there comes all sorts of techniques and ways of handling certain situations. Stamina, commitment, yeah?

And the worst thing you can do on a mountain, especially the high you get, is to sit down and have a break which is just a wee bit too long and you start getting cold. And you drink your last cup of tea. And that's it. You're on the way down then. So it's a case of that commitment, especially during those periods where you feel that nothing is happening. It doesn't matter how long nothing is happening. You just keep going. Just keep going.

And it's a testing time. You're just looking at the fact of the loss of self-esteem, the feeling that you're not going anywhere, as if there was anywhere to go, a lack of success. All comes up, and it's the ego. So the dryness, the aridity of practice, is one of the most potential parts to get rid of the ego. And usually it's a time when we give up, which is a sorrow, because it takes a bit to get up there. So don't worry about lack of success, just keep doing the job.

Then of course there are the more obvious things, doubt in the Buddha. The doubt, a doubt in the Buddha always has felt to me, in a sense, slightly unnecessary. Because as you go along, there are side posts there. You don't have to believe in *Nibbāna*. You don't have to believe at all in any of that stuff. The whole point about the Dharma is that it's immediate. You either benefit from it now or you don't. That's the point.

But when we're practicing we might not see, shall we say, an immediate benefit from it right here and now in this present moment, but when we look back on our practice over a period of years we can see that it's helped us to progress and it's part of our progression and it might even be the fundamental reason for our progression. So it's that

ability to see that the doubt that we have in the practice is undermined by not looking too far ahead. It's right here and now. So if we can look back and think a little bit, oh, this is a benefit, then we don't lose that sense of faith in what we're doing.

When it comes to the Sangha, that's really an extension of faith in the Buddha because the Sangha is simply other people who've said that they've actually attained the same thing. And the more people who say that, the more of course it gives other people confidence. Now these three things have to be, or at least two of them, have to be internal.

Even at the end, when the Buddha actually becomes enlightened, as that doubt appears, is this it or is there more, and that's when Mara attacks him with all the armies, that's how it's put in the mythology, and the Buddha touches the earth. You've seen the posture, the *Bhumisparsa* posture where he's touching the earth, and that was the point where he touched the earth as a witness as it were that he had attained the end of suffering. And the earth quaked and the earth goddess rose, wringing from her hair the water poured as libation to her by the Buddha in previous lives. That's nice, isn't it?

But when we actually take the refuge, it's not simply in that historical Buddha, it's the presumption that there's a Buddha within us, that there's something within us which is to be liberated. And that's what you're taking your faith in.

So when the Buddha is dying, Ananda wants to know who's going to take his place. Because Ananda has this overflowing faith in the Buddha. And the Buddha's answer is that he mustn't take faith in him as a person, but take faith in the Dharma, the teaching itself, the practice itself.

And in himself: be a light unto yourself, take the Dharma as your light, take the Dharma as your guide, take the Dharma as your teacher, take yourself as your guide, yourself as your teacher. So eventually this is our journey, that's all the Buddha is saying. And the usual quote is: the Buddha's only point the way.

So eventually when we take these refuges, when we make that commitment, it's always a commitment to ourselves. And there was only one period in Buddhist history that I know of where there was a collapse of faith, where there was a doubt that there were some human beings who couldn't make it. And it's a heresy, of course.

And these people who couldn't make it were labelled the *icchantikas*. And *icchantika* means forever going on in the world of *saṃsāra*. There was no ending to their rebirth because they were so stupid. But luckily that didn't take on. It remains there as one of these little side schools that believe that some beings were really thick. They couldn't make it, even if they tried.

I must tell you, in Sri Lanka it's very strange to us, but they can tell by the shape of somebody's head – or some monks can tell, and nuns I presume, can tell by the shape of somebody's head – whether they're going to make it or not. And the teacher at my own monastery, who was an excellent teacher, a direct disciple of the Mahāsi, very strict, very demanding, and often wouldn't take on students, but he wouldn't take on certain students whose head wasn't quite right. I say no more. Maybe there are ways of telling things that we're not privy to – that's all there is to it.

So I think I've just about covered all the bits that I wanted to cover. I suppose one thing I might just say is how to make faith grow. We haven't done that, really.

So first of all, there's the spiritual friendship. That's very important: to be with the right people. To be with people of like mind who are supporting you is obvious, I mean. The Buddha – Ānanda says to the Buddha, "I believe that right relationship, good relationship, is only half of the spiritual livelihood." And the Buddha says, "Oh no, it's the whole of spiritual livelihood."

When a meditator has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that they will develop and cultivate the Eightfold Noble Path.

Also to be clear about one's training. See, if you're sloppy with your virtue, then it also slips. It undermines your commitment to the path because you cannot separate insight from virtue. You can't have a Buddha who goes around robbing. Wisdom is also an act – when it expresses itself, it is virtuous.

You have to be careful of your speech especially, it says. You must be energetic in abandoning what is unprofitable. Remember that every time you attend to something, there's an act of intention. Therefore, it's conditioning. You have to be careful what programmes you watch on the telly.

And finally, the understanding of impermanence. The more we understand impermanence, the more we get what's known as *saṃvega*, that enthusiasm. I mean, we haven't got that long, have we?

And visits to the teacher or to a centre where you get teaching. And also, just as an aside, the group – the evening group, your local group. That's always a nice fillip. I always remember making that effort every week to go across town in order to join a group had an effect of raising the effort for the whole practice for the week. And if I missed it, I could feel the lack of energy during the week. So remember that the effort you put into a practice is an attitude, and the attitude stays with you.

So I think that brings me to an end of my little homily. I'll just leave you with a little final refrain taken from the *Sutta Nipāta*:

Faith, in the way that we've been describing it, is the best wealth to a person of this world. Well-practised Dharma brings the most happiness. Truth is the sweetest of all tastes, and living with wisdom is said to be of the noblest kind.

Beset by Perceptions (Madhupiṇḍika Sutta)

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

In this retreat talk, Noirin Sheahan unpacks one of the more challenging suttas in the Pali Canon - the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (MN 18), known as the 'Honeyball Sutta.' This discourse reveals how our attachment to perceptions creates the mental proliferation (papañca) that underlies all conflict and suffering.

The talk traces the Buddha's encounter with Daṇḍapāṇi and his cryptic teaching that 'perceptions no more underlie that brahmin who abides detached from sensual pleasures.' When the disciples seek clarification, Mahākaccāna provides a detailed explanation of how sense contact leads to feeling, perception, thinking, and ultimately mental proliferation - the endless chatter that besieges the mind.

Noirin skillfully relates this ancient teaching to modern vipassanā practice, showing how we can observe the arising of perceptions, notice our attachment to them, and discover the peace that comes when we stop delighting in mental elaboration. The talk emphasizes how 'perceptions fade as clinging is released' and explores what it means to experience reality without the constant need to categorize and solidify our experience through the lens of self-hood.

Tonight I'd like to discuss the sutta titled The Honey Ball. In parts of India, cakes baked from flour and honey and oil are still called honey balls. When Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and attendant, heard the discourse, he said it satisfied a spiritual seeker in the way a honey ball satisfies a famished man. So what we're getting tonight is some high calorie spiritual nourishment.

Now high calorie foods can also be heavy going on the system and I'd certainly rank this sutta as a difficult one to digest. Even in the original story, as you will see, the Buddha's disciples need three separate attempts to explain the matter before the penny drops.

Let's go through all three levels of explanation before looking at any one of them in detail. It all starts with the Buddha going into a wood for his day's abiding. A man named Dandapani is walking in the woods and seeing the Buddha approaches him and asks about his spiritual beliefs and practice. The Buddha replies:

"Friend, I assert and proclaim a teaching such that one does not quarrel with anyone in the world with its gods, its Maras and its Brahmas, in this generation with its recluses and Brahmins, its princes and its people, a teaching such that perceptions no more underlie that brahmin who abides detached from sensual pleasures, without perplexity, shorn of worry, free from craving for any kind of being."

In many of the suttas, the Buddha finds the exact teaching needed for whoever he is talking to, and that person becomes completely enlightened, though we 21st century seekers might be baffled by the Buddha's words. But Dandapani seems as perplexed as us modern-day dullards, and is described as shaking his head, wagging his tongue, and raising his eyebrows till his forehead was puckered into three lines, after which he departed, leaning on his stick. As an aside, Dandapani wasn't a recluse, and was wandering round the wood for exercise. Perhaps the Buddha's response irritated Dandapani enough to spur a spiritual quest at some later stage.

One way or another, Dandapani departs in a huff and the Buddha settles back to his meditation for the afternoon before later rejoining his disciples and telling them about his exchange with Dandapani. It seems the disciples were also puzzled by this summary of the *Dhamma* and one of them basically asked the Buddha what he is talking about.

So the Buddha offers this explanation: "Bhikkhu, as to the source by which perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man. If nothing is found there to delight in, welcome and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendency to lust, of the underlying tendency to aversion, of the underlying tendency to views, of the underlying tendency to doubt, of the underlying tendency to conceit, of the underlying tendency to desire for being, of the underlying tendency to ignorance. This is the end of resorting to rods and weapons, of quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice and false speech. Here these evil, unwholesome states cease without remainder."

Having said this much, the Buddha then leaves his disciples and retires into his dwelling. I imagine you will be relieved to hear that this explanation hasn't done much to satisfy the disciples, who then go to seek out a senior teacher to pick out the meaning of the Buddha's words. They chose Mahakaccana, who at first demurs, saying that they should have asked the Buddha, whom he likens to heartwood in the tree of Dhamma, while he, Mahakaccana, represents only the branches and leaves of that tree. But after a bit of persuasion, he agrees to give them his interpretation, which goes like this:

"Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is called contact. With contact as condition there is feeling. What one feels that one perceives. What one perceives that one thinks about. What one thinks about that one men-

tally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man with respect to past, future and present forms cognizable through the eye."

He goes on to say the same about all the other sense doors: hearing, tasting, smelling, body sensations and mind objects such as thoughts and perceptions. He then continues: "When there is the eye, form and eye-consciousness, it is possible to point out the manifestation of contact. When there is the manifestation of contact, it is possible to point out the manifestation of feeling," and so on until "When there is the manifestation of thinking, it is possible to point out the manifestation of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation."

Likewise he says the same about all the other sense doors and then concludes with: "When there is no eye, no form, and no eye-consciousness, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of contact," and so on until, "when there is no manifestation of thinking, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation." And as usual, he says the same about all the other sense doors.

This, I'm sorry to have to tell you, is the end of the line as regards explanations. The bhikkhus, we are told, were delighted with Mahakaccana's words. But they went and checked them with the Buddha as Mahakaccana himself advised them to do. The Buddha praises Mahakaccana and says he would have said exactly the same thing if he had been pressed for a further explanation.

It's at this point that Ananda describes the sutta in terms of a honey ball, saying: "Just as if a man exhausted by hunger and weakness comes upon a honey ball, in the course of eating it would find a sweet, delectable flavour. So too, Venerable Sir, any able-minded bhikkhu, in the course of scrutinising with wisdom the meaning of this discourse on the Dhamma, would find satisfaction and confidence of mind." The Buddha seems pleased with Ananda's analogy and tells the assembly they should remember this discourse as the honey ball.

So let's nibble our way through the honey ball and see can we detect any of the sweet delectable flavour that Ananda found here. First, we have the Buddha's synopsis of the Dhamma for Dandapani which starts with the description of a world without conflict and follows with the description of being free from attachments with their burden of worry and strife. He describes freedom as a state where perceptions no longer underlie that brahmin who abides detached from sensual pleasures. He is linking internal and

external conflict with being attached to and somehow founded upon our perceptions. His Dhamma, he declares, cuts through all that so that we find ourselves at peace with the world.

He describes this peace as applying to the worldly level of princes and men. All our worldly concerns fade away. We are also at peace with the heavenly realm of gods and the hell realm of Mara. In an age so dominated by science and technology, it's not easy for us to think of heaven and hell realms. Instead, we can think of these as temporary mind states, heavenly bliss and hellish rage. We no longer quarrel with whatever we come up against in the external world or in any of the internal worlds we experience within our minds.

I don't think any of us would quarrel with the notion of inner peace and making peace with the world. It's the phrase, "Perceptions no longer underlie that brahmin who abides non-attached to sensual pleasures," which stumps us, and like Dandapani, be causing our brows to furrow into the three lines and tempting us to stomp off.

And sure enough, when his disciples ask the Buddha to explain himself, he expands on the issue of perception and how they can lead to grief. Perceptions, if you remember, are the labels we place on whatever sense data comes to us. If our eye falls on some green grass, our mind sorts through its memories of stuff that is shaped and coloured like this and comes up with perceptions "green" and "grass." We might then quietly add a perception like "unimportant," as we move on to label the next bit of incoming sense data.

In this explanation of his message to Dandapani, the Buddha basically says that if only we can stop delighting in the source of perceptions that beset us, then we'd be freed from underlying tendencies to lust and other afflictions. There's a lot to think about here. He is saying that we delight in exactly that which is causing us to suffer. Although our perceptions beset us, cause us grief, the only reason they are doing that is because we delight in the source of these perceptions. We're in a mess, it seems.

Let's look at a possible example. Suppose I'm fretting about my neighbour's dogs who I hear growling in her back garden. There may be many levels to the mental disturbance. Concern that the dogs might start fighting, grief at the thought that they are possibly being neglected, instinctive fear at the sound of growling. All of these can set off chains of thought. Is there going to be a fight? What should I do? Will I get hurt? Each of these thoughts involves a long string of perceptions. Even the basic sound had to be perceived as growling and with that perceptions like "danger" would have emerged.

Although I'm getting stressed out by all my thoughts about the dogs and what might happen, the Buddha is saying that the only cause for my distress is that I'm delighting in, welcoming and holding on to the source of these perceptions. What is the source of these perceptions? This is the question that Mahakaccana addresses when pressed for his understanding of the Buddha's words.

He traces the source back to the moment of sense contact which involves in my case the sound of growling, the sense of hearing and the faculty of consciousness. If I'd been deaf or unconscious the dogs could growl all they liked but I wouldn't be upset. But given those three conditions the growling sound made contact within my psyche.

Mahakaccana then says: "With contact as condition, there is feeling." We might think of feelings as purely physical. In my case, the growling might have impacted as a rough, low-pitched vibration on the eardrum. Although the sensations are physical, our mental system gets involved immediately, categorising the sensation so as to work out whether it is a threat or an opportunity. This gives us a feeling for the sensation as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. In the case of the growling dogs, my system feels the sound as unpleasant.

Mahakaccana then says: "What one feels, that one perceives." Many of those who have commented on this sutta note the grammatical change here. When describing the link between contact and feeling he used impersonal language: "With contact as condition there is feeling." But this changes once perception comes into the picture: "What one feels that one perceives." The language is now personal. This implies that the mind which categorises the sensation as growling also identifies itself as the one who feels this unpleasant sound and perceives it as growling. We have solidified both the external world and the internal world. We believe ourselves to be separate, a person who existed in the past and will exist in the future.

Although Mahakaccana doesn't spell out all the links of dependent origination for us, we can take it that we have at least gone through the links of desire and clinging when we form these perceptions based on feeling, to which he is referring here. Mahakaccana's linking of perception and clinging is very interesting to reflect upon. The vibrations resonating on the eardrum are my only real point of contact with the external world. Once the mind puts the label "growling" on these vibrations, it can split itself off from the raw experience. Unless I can hold the label very lightly as a tentative possibility, needing constant reaffirmation from each new sound, my subjective experience freezes around the label.

Fluidity is lost. A sense of self emerges in that abstract frozen world of this and that, me and you, growling and danger. If any of you have read Rob Burbea's book, *Seeing That Frees*, you'll probably remember the strong emphasis Rob also gives to the link between perception and clinging. Say we're lost in a temper tantrum. Our sense of self is strong and our perception of our adversary hardens into enmity. Later, when we calm down, we no longer feel so identified with our view and might also start to see the other person in a kinder light. The perception of enmity fades as clinging is released.

In general, Rob says, perceptions fade as clinging is released. This is a very useful phrase to contemplate and fits very neatly with Mahakaccana's teaching. Perceptions fade as clinging is released. In the case of the growling dogs, we're seeing the opposite side of the coin, how perceptions and clinging get intertwined and lead to *dukkha*.

Some innocuous vibrations on my eardrum have conjured up a sense of self around the perception "growling." The tendency then is to stop attending to the basic vibrations and instead to withdraw into an abstract internal world where my mind can build around that label. Many commentators say that there can be feedback loops within the 12-step process described by dependent origination, and we can see a perception-based feedback loop here. The perception "growling" can now become a new input at the doorway of the mind. And if we attend to it, we have another sense contact which deepens the unpleasant feeling, tightens the clinging and goes on to generate another perception like "danger."

As Mahakaccana says, "What one perceives, that one thinks about." Thus my mind spins through a few feedback loops and finds the perception "dog" fits neatly alongside the perception "growling" and the perception "neighbour's dogs" fit with both until the jigsaw completes and the thought and image of the neighbour's dogs growling at one another establishes itself in my mind.

Now there's nothing wrong with this. It's an aspect of human intelligence to be able to build a picture of what might be happening based on snippets of sensory information. The Buddha might have interpreted vibrations on his eardrum in a similar way. We need these interpretations in order to engage with the world. The only difference between the Buddha's approach and mine is that his piecing together of perceptions would have been done out of goodwill, as a deliberate, conscious decision to engage with the world. My picture, on the other hand, was built as an automatic reaction to unacknowledged aversion for the growling sound.

Putting the pieces of the jigsaw together gives me the illusion of control. And my problem is that I get hooked on the jigsaw. I want to find new pieces to fit, see what new picture will emerge. It's this delight in jigsaw making which, according to the Buddha, keeps rekindling lust and aversion, which then underlie our quarrels with the world.

In Mahakaccana's words, "What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates." The jigsaw grows from the thought of the neighbour's dogs growling into thoughts like, are they going to start fighting? Why do they keep two dogs? What should I do? The string of thoughts based on that initial perception "growling" are now besetting me. I fitted so many jigsaw pieces together that I'm encaged by my own creation.

This process of mental proliferation is termed *papañca* in Pali. That's what this sutta is addressing. The endless chatter of the mind. The way it complicates any simple idea, elaborates on it, examines it for defects and builds a world around it. The way it fixates on an idea and projects a happy future around that. The enmity it projects onto whatever gets in the way of that idea. This is the source of all our quarrels with the world.

But all is not lost. Even though we're trapped within our monstrous jigsaw, we can train ourselves to see that we're making and remaking the jigsaw moment after moment. Mahakaccana assures us of this when he states: "When there is the eye, a form, and eye-consciousness, it is possible to point out the manifestation of contact," and so on until "When there is the manifestation of thinking, it is possible to point out the manifestation of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation."

It's the last statement which we spend most of our time working through. Being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation. For those of you who, like me, are impatient to get to those intriguing links between consciousness and contact, contact and feeling, I offer this analogy. Imagine the honey ball has a very sweet centre but is encased in a thick hard crust. We have to patiently nibble away at the crust before we can taste the sweet fruit at the centre.

Can we find in the thinking process the sense of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation? To go back to my experience of fretting about the neighbourhood dogs, if I had stopped to ask myself, are these thoughts making me happy? I would have had to admit that they were not. Why then do I keep thinking these anxious thoughts? The answer is that I feel compelled to think them. They seem important, as if the act of thinking will protect me from harm. So the description of

being beset by my own thoughts is apt. When we notice thoughts in *vipassanā* and acknowledge that compulsion to keep thinking, we are nibbling at the hard crust of Mahakaccana's honey ball.

If I become aware of the thought stream about the neighbours' dogs and bring attention to the moment-to-moment experience, I will sense myself insisting on my point of view, that the dogs are growling, that this is a problem, that something awful might happen, and so on. These are the perceptions and notions that are besetting me.

The practice, as we know, is to bring attention to the body, letting the thoughts come and go without latching onto them. The growling sounds, my basic point of contact in the world, might seem distant, behind an impenetrable barrier, inaccessible. It's as if there's an explosion of energy keeping me away from that basic sense contact. I feel frightened, fragmented, in my head, separate from my bodily experience, from hearing and all sense contact. This is hardly surprising, as the self I believe myself to be is just one piece of the jigsaw being created from these perceptual feedback loops.

For example, the thought "this is a problem I need to fix" could be very true and pressing. How is the thought experienced? Sometimes thoughts seem very light and fleeting and an analogy often used is that of clouds passing through the sky. But as I attempt to look at a very pressing thought like this, the cloud refuses to pass by. Instead, it envelops me. My mind fixates around it. It becomes gospel. It's as if myself and the thought are enclosed within a bright bubble, defending ourselves against a hostile world. It's a very uncomfortable experience, both physically and mentally, being stuck in this bubble.

As I let attention dwell on the experience, the bubble starts to dissolve and emotions like anger or sadness may emerge. Various components of the thought come more to the fore. At one stage, it may be the concept "problem". I might feel myself insisting that there really is a problem. At another stage the notion "I need" might become predominant as I feel the anxiety behind neediness. Or it could be the notion "fix" that looms large in imagination as I feel myself grasping after a perfect world.

At this stage I can acknowledge the truth of what Mahākākaṇa says about being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation. Notions like "fix" and "need" have my life history of self-chatter embedded within them. Every time I repeat a thought like "I need to do this or get that", I'm adding to the pressure inside all future thought bubbles with the phrase "I need". Whenever I paint a picture of how rosy the world will be once I get this or that right, I'm also adding to this pressure. The notions

"need" and "fix" and all other components of the thought are like landmines I create by mental proliferation. They lie waiting in consciousness till tread upon by some innocent bit of sense contact.

This is what the Buddha was pointing to when he explained, "Bhikkhu, as to the source by which perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man, if nothing is found there to delight in, welcome and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendency to lust, aversion and so on."

It is the fact that we delight in mental chatter that causes all our problems. Each chat solidifies our hold on whatever notions and perceptions underlie it. Notions like "this is a problem" and its partner "I must fix this" would be favourites for most of us. You could probably name your own top ten notions which underlie most of your internal chatter.

We do, however, get moments when the emotional turmoil burns out and we feel less beset by thoughts. Instead of just saying "phew, I'm glad that's over" and drifting into a dreamy state of relief, we can maintain our investigative stance and see can we tease out any deeper nourishment from our honey ball. Can we look at the process of thinking from this calmer perspective to see how it comes about? Can we detect the desire to link perceptions together to form thoughts?

In my experience, perceptions are accompanied by a bright bubble of light in my mind and I get a little pop of satisfaction when a small mental bubble merges with another one. What was a vague notion now becomes more defined and the sense of self more solid. This is to study Mahākāka's statement: "With the manifestation of perception, it is possible to point out the manifestation of thought."

If I watch carefully, I'll notice that the pop of satisfaction is short-lived. The bubbles keep deflating. The sense of certainty dissolves with them. Seeing this over and over persuades me to resist the urge towards certainty and definition, to try to make peace with a world that is constantly changing, undefinable. Many emotions may surface as I come to terms with truth in this exercise. Grief, anger, fear, shame. But the draw towards truth holds the inquiring mind in situ, and faith helps me relax deeper into the experience, trusting that the path to peace is being formed as I bear with these emotions.

Say, for example, I identify my emotional state as fear. Bringing attention to the body, I register unpleasant physical sensations and tensions. Alongside these, I might detect pulses of intense fear which push a description of what's happening into my head, insisting that the situation is horrid. What I'm experiencing according to Mahākāka is

the manifestation of perception. "When there is the manifestation of feeling, it is possible to point out the manifestation of perception." Unpleasant feelings are there as a background and those little pushing sensations, the fleeting insistence that the situation is horrid, are momentary manifestations of perception. My mind splits itself off from what is thought of as horrid.

In time, though, my psyche relaxes from this insistence and attention dwells more continuously in the body. Although the sensations haven't changed, if I had to describe them, I might call them rough, pinching, jagged, stinging. But these labels no longer seem relevant. The mind stops bothering to categorise experience, to take meaning from it, to complicate it. It lets the roughness be rough. It lets the stinging sensations sting. Although these are still recognised as unpleasant, feeling them fully like this is less stressful than the continual popping of mental bubbles and the effort to separate off from experience to find myself as somehow outside of it all.

Sometimes this less stressful experience is so puzzling that it brings up the deeper fear of living in a world I cannot comprehend. But if conditions are right, I'll be able to trust to this unusual view of experience and start to make sense of it. I'll notice that the decreased stress is due to the fact that my interpretation of reality isn't centred around the notion of being a separate person. Sensations and feelings are known, felt, but there's no interpretation of these as happening to some entity called me. They're just coming and going of their own accord. The knowing of them is not centred around any point where I usually locate me, the knower. Its origin and extent are outside of experience, beyond the range of perception. Acknowledging the vast unknown within which my small world spins brings a deep sense of peace.

Linked to this, we have the final part of Mahākāka's teaching: "When there is no eye, no form and no eye consciousness, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of contact. And so on until, when there is no manifestation of thinking, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of being beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation."

This parallels the Buddha's advice from the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta when he asks us to notice the mind without lust, the mind without hate and so on. We are to notice what is not happening. This is not usually our habit but a very rich practice indeed. Again, we have to start by nibbling at the outer crust of this honey ball, acknowledging times when our minds are not beset by perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation. Whenever you feel yourself somewhat calm, interested in the sensations of breathing or walking for example, acknowledge how the absence of thought is contributing to that sense of calm.

A word of warning. Absences can be hard to acknowledge. It is said that nature abhors a vacuum and as soon as the mind notices an absence it tends to fill it with lots of thoughts. No need to worry. This is part of the purification process. It's a manifestation of our fear of living in a world we cannot fully comprehend. Rather than work through that fear, we attach ourselves to thought. We even love thinking about our woes. What would become of us if we couldn't remember our failings and regrets, our disappointments and our worries? When that gets too much, we change tack and start thinking out new plans, new strategies for making ourselves happy. These and other mental habits often surge in to fill the gap we notice at that blessed moment of not being beset by our thoughts. Bearing with this and reflecting on the possibility, and occasional reality, of not thinking, loosens our attachment to these stories, encourages us to live a more embodied life.

In deeper meditations we may get the chance to study the other absences Mahākākaṇa mentions and see that thoughts cannot form without perception, that perceptions only form when there is feeling and in the absence of sense contact that feelings cannot form. At the most profound level we might even get a glimpse of sense contact emerging as we bring attention into one or other of the sense doors to detect a signal from the outside world.

At one level the exercise seems academic. Who cares whether feelings can only register based on sense contact? How does that help me cope with the challenges in life? One answer to this is that the exercise itself is purifying. Contemplating the possibility of living for even a moment without perception shows us how deeply attached we are to our way of seeing the world. We purify ourselves as we bear with the pain of attachment, the anger and grief that shows up as our minds probe this border to our understanding.

But do remember that there's nothing wrong with perception. It's a vital part of our intelligence. It's only attachment to perception that does the damage. When we dare to let go of needing to always see things my way we slide into a mysterious harmony. Our being is content and at ease as within an indescribable universe. We lose our desire to describe ourselves in any way that can be contained within the phenomenal world.

These moments also help us understand the Buddha's somewhat puzzling phrase in his address to Daṇḍapāṇi: "Perceptions do not underlie the Brahmin who abides detached from sensual pleasures." In these moments of peace we are experiencing a fluid world where categories like "this" and "that" are not absolute but changing, dissolving, reforming in line with the constantly changing sensory stream. The sense of me is not

defined by our present mood or our roles or by any measure we can make of our skills or behaviour. We don't bother defining what is indefinable. To use the Buddha's phrase, perceptions do not underlie our being.

We become more willing to experience life at the level of sensation and feeling and may even see how these come into being moment after moment. The beauty of this simple, fluid level of reality shows us that our dreams and worries are irrelevant, burdensome, unskillful. Although these moments of deep insight are only temporary, they give us hope. Our faith in the Dhamma is strengthened and when the self comes back to impose its will on the world, it is not quite so dictatorial, more ready to listen, to negotiate, to appreciate the kindness and wisdom on offer from the world. With a lighter heart we can pass over many grievances and see the wisdom of accepting the imperfections of the world, working with people, not against them. Eventually the Buddha assures us we will come to the end of quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice and false speech. "Here these evil, unwholesome states cease without remainder."

In summary then, the Honeyball Sutta describes the Dhamma in terms of its ultimate goal of perfect peace. This is a broad-sweep overview of the Buddha's vision for his followers. The Sutta also pinpoints why we don't experience this peace, describing how we delight in and attach to our perceptions and especially the perception of ourselves as a separate substantial entity at the centre of our world. Attachment to perception leads on to thoughts which eventually weave a net to ensnare us within a painful, confining world of self-definition.

The ultimate peace comes when we no longer attach to perceptions, no longer get fooled into finding our essence within anything that can be pinpointed, named, defined or in any way bound within the confines of the mind and body.

So let's use our meditation time wisely. Now and again we might be troubled by the barking of the dogs nearby or other sounds. Can we feel any underlying emotions? Can we feel the urge to *papañca*? To embroider and complicate every idea, go over and back on it, defend its flaws, embellish our point of view. Can we sense how we create a world out of all this *papañca*? Similarly, if you're captivated by the dragonflies hovering over the pond, can you detect the urge to amplify the experience, to tell someone about it, to dig a pond in your own garden? Does all this thinking add to the beauty of the experience or detract from it?

In moments of ease, can we acknowledge the absence of thinking? Can we see how perceptions fade as clinging is released? Can we detect the peace on offer when we are not blowing up so many mental bubbles? Is that peace founded upon perception? Is it mine? Is there even a me?

May our meditation help us to break through the tough crust of *papañca* and be nourished by the honey ball of the Dhamma.

Identity and Not-Self

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 21 min

In this exploration of one of Buddhism's most challenging teachings, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines anattā (not-self) through the lens of everyday experience. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he explains how our identification with roles—whether as cook, teacher, or meditator—becomes a source of dukkha (suffering and unsatisfactoriness) when things don't go as planned.

Using vivid personal anecdotes about failed attempts with gas cylinders and printer cartridges, Bhante illustrates how emotional storms can become "rocket fuel for awakening" when met with mindful awareness. He demonstrates the practical application of internal and external mindfulness practice from the Mahāsi tradition, showing how we can observe the process of "selfing" (upādāna) as temporary identities arise and dissolve based on conditions.

The talk offers valuable insights into working with identification patterns in daily life, explaining how unpleasant sensations can serve as messengers reminding us "this is not who you really are." This teaching provides both theoretical understanding and practical tools for recognizing the conditional, impermanent nature of all constructed identities, pointing toward the peace that comes from seeing through these limited self-concepts.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa.

Homage to the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

The Buddha's teaching on *anattā*, not-self, is a hard aspect of the Dhamma to understand. We will all be grappling with it till the moment of enlightenment. To motivate ourselves for the challenge, it's worth reflecting on the suffering we experience because of identifying with our body, our mind, our life stories.

Take the example of role identification. Whatever role we're playing in life—father, daughter, gardener—we want to do it well, which is a good motive, no problem there. It's when we over-identify, can't see beyond our role, that *dukkha*, suffering, emerges.

On a good day, we get a buzz out of doing things well: cooking a meal, mending a puncture, teaching a class. But we all have days when these go wrong. The sponge cake turns out as a stodgy lump. The tyre deflates the minute we put the wheel back on. We go blank when trying to teach. This is when the dukkha of identification is felt.

The more we identify as a good cook, a good DIYer, a good teacher, the harder it is to bear the letdown. We can't stop thinking about it. What went wrong? How could I have made such a mess of things? What did they think of me? We look for someone to blame. If he hadn't interrupted, it would have been perfect.

While none of us enjoy those times when we've made a hash of something, it is worth dwelling on them long enough to acknowledge that the source of the misery is not actually the gooey mess or the deflating tyre. It's the sense of me and how badly I've let myself down. That's the real nub—a loss of confidence, perhaps an almost desperate need to reassert ourselves, prove our ability.

The more clearly we can acknowledge the suffering that comes from identification, the more we will be willing to explore the difficult Buddhist teaching of anattā, not-self. And there is no doubt anattā is a difficult nut to crack. We all have a strong sense that we are the ones baking the cake, mending the tyre, teaching the class, living our life. It's hard to even toy with the idea that this might not be so.

The Buddha's advice is to keep breaking down experience into smaller and smaller chunks. It's easier to get glimpses of the truth in these. Then gradually, over time, the notion of not-self becomes easier to contemplate. We start to see its benefits, how much easier life is when we're not identified by our roles or opinions or abilities or achievements. It's wonderful to have nothing to defend.

One instruction from the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, that I found very helpful for exploring anattā is the advice to practice internally and externally. Internal can be interpreted to mean our subjective felt experience, while external means our mental understanding of it. We feel the sensations of breathing for internal practice. For external practice, we reflect that we are breathing.

The Mahāsi noting technique provides a way of practicing both internally and externally. We feel the breath and at the same time make a mental note of it. Same for walking, eating, talking. All of life can be known both internally as moment-to-moment sensations and feelings, and externally as our objective mental perception of what's happening.

Say we are practising mindfulness of breathing. Feeling the sensations of breathing is to practise mindfulness internally. Although we don't usually make the thought conscious, we assume we are the one who's sitting here breathing. If we're also practising externally, then we're noting "rising, falling" as we track the breath.

As concentration deepens, it can seem like our identity shifts. Instead of being the one who is sitting here breathing, we sense ourselves as the observer, some sort of spaced-out entity hovering around our head, the one who is watching the body breathing. On a good day, we'll also be able to watch our thoughts coming and going, watch emotions rise and fade, realise we don't have to get caught up in them.

All of this is helping us disentangle our confusion about identity. Internally, we feel ourselves breathing, thinking, growing happy one moment, sad the next. But because of our external perspective, we realise we don't need to identify with our thoughts, emotions, breathing. We see this as happening of their own accord, driven by various stimuli, but not driven by what I now think of as me.

This can be a lovely experience, a sense of coming home, having found our true self—a sort of disembodied entity that hovers in and around the body, equanimous, interested, watching the show without getting caught up in it. But after a while, we might grow uncomfortable. Things start to feel sticky, as if there's a sheet of velcro passing over each sensation, pulling us along with it. We start getting caught up with experience again, identified with thoughts and feelings and emotions. We are again the one who is sitting here breathing and now anxiously trying to find our way back to the lofty crow's nest from which we've been able to observe the show.

Although there's a temptation to see this as bad meditation, we should really see it as a precious opportunity to learn the Dhamma more deeply. Pema Chödrön likens these episodes as rocket fuel for enlightenment.

To take a practical example: we got a new connector for our gas canister the other day, and so I overcame all my fears about gas and explosions and went to hook it up. After about a dozen failed attempts, all the bits eventually came together. It looked perfect. But gas started leaking the moment I opened the cylinder. I took it apart, reread the instructions, reconnected it. Still no go. Disappointing.

I was then asked to look at the printer because it wasn't working. It needed a new toner cartridge. And again, I overcame my deep suspicion of all things electrical and mechanical and managed to replace the cartridge. But no go. Every page came out

white as snow with nothing at all being printed. Again, I took it all apart, reread the instructions, watched a few videos on replacing the cartridge, tried again. Still no go. Another disappointment.

And this time I felt the edge of bad humour. My mind was starting to close up, feel oppressed by others and by the world in general. A bit later, Bhante came over, took the cartridge out and, in his own words, gave it a few thumps and put it back in place. Lo and behold, it worked perfectly. Of course, I was impressed and amused and grateful, but alongside these happy responses, my incipient bad humour gave a painful kick within. Why couldn't it have worked for me?

I decided to go to my room to explore this more deeply. Rationally, it was just silliness, the mind building a mountain out of a molehill. And yet there was—not quite a mountain, but certainly more than a molehill of frustration at my failure to connect up a gas cylinder and change a toner cartridge. But what was more distressing was the admission of being so emotionally impacted by such trivial matters. What was the point of decades of Dhamma practice only to be getting distraught over nothing?

This is the dukkha, the suffering, of identification: identifying with self as manager, the one who is supposed to sort out problems; identification with self as meditator, who should by now have developed outstanding equanimity; not to speak of self as meditation teacher who should know the Dhamma upside down and be able to instantly see through this latest delusion.

As always, mindfulness allowed the storm to blow itself out. Looking back now, I sense the truth of Pema Chödrön's advice to see these times when our buttons are pressed and we feel like a two-year-old again as rocket fuel for enlightenment. Emotional storms have so much energy that negative thoughts and feelings we normally suppress come skyrocketing into consciousness. In the light of awareness, their pain becomes so acute that our system is forced to learn a new way of coping with the dukkha.

This new coping mechanism, learned from within, from moment-to-moment awareness, opens up new pathways for energy flow in the body and new doorways in the mind. We discover new thoughts and perspectives which are gentler, kinder, more patient and forgiving.

In my own example, a new doorway opened because of feeling so acutely the pain of identification, how it traps the mind in a prison of delusion. The pain of this prison sharpened when the storyline of "me who should be better at everything" had fallen away, and I could more clearly feel the emotional patterns underlying the thoughts.

Practising mindfulness internally, I could feel how eagerly the body and mind pounced on a pleasant feeling, sending tentacles of energy around it to clutch and hold as mine, while a bright light switched on in my head, which I perceived as me—confident, on top of things, in control. A whirlpool of energy rose around my chest and head to sustain this delight. The feeling of confidence was gorgeous, but watching it, the external perspective showed up the craziness and pain underneath.

Seeing this, I desperately wanted to escape the prison of identification. The external perspective let me recognise the crazy whirlpool of energy and the bright light as what the Buddha terms *upādāna*, usually translated as grasping or clinging. It's also sometimes referred to as selfing. What is happening is that unskilful desire, *taṇhā*, has driven us to create a new identity so as to fulfil this desire.

The better we get to know this experience of selfing, the more we are persuaded of the Buddhist teaching on *anattā*, not-self. Knowing from our direct experience that a me has suddenly arisen makes it hard to take me too seriously. We start to see how various mes arise and fade depending on external stimuli. When things go well, a happy, pleased, self-confident me emerges. But that fades quickly when things go wrong and the deflated, miserable me takes its place instead.

Back to my own example of watching the fallout from my emotional storm. Internally, I was experiencing the selfing process, which was generating a confident, delighted sense of me—one who could fix all the printers and gas cylinders in the world. However, the external perspective knew this as delusion. Undermined by that news, the confident self suddenly collapsed into a timid, scared, stiff entity which felt it had no right to exist. A moment later, the confident self reappeared, wildly insisting it was totally in control of the situation.

This yo-yo between elated confidence and abject fear continued for some time. Both identities felt excruciatingly painful and vulnerable. There was a strong desire to abandon the meditation, but I persisted, allowing my emotional roller coaster to take its course, trusting that a lesson would eventually be learned.

In *vipassanā*, we can't interfere; we can't tell ourselves to stop being deluded. We have to bear patiently with our greeds, hatreds and delusions, trust them to burn out in the light of awareness, teach us the Dhamma as we suffer their flames.

And sure enough, the energy of the roller coaster gradually diminished. As it did, so my attention extended gingerly beyond the whirlpool of elated and fearful energies in my chest and head to sense my arms, legs, my body sitting. I couldn't really feel these in any detail. I only knew them as faint suggestions. They seemed like strangers from another world—alien, scary.

Luckily, curiosity was stronger than fear, and each out-breath let awareness rest more attentively in the seemingly alien body. At last, some feelings rippled through. They were unpleasant and carried the message that the heady whirlpool of confidence was not me, not mine. The emotionally energetic, deluded part of myself felt this as a threat. But some wisdom emerged from the depths to welcome the unpleasantness. Here was something I would not want to cling to, therefore very welcome.

Letting attention rest on the unpleasantness became a non-interfering way of containing and restraining the deluded self. Gradually, the energetic, bright-light me felt glad of being contained and limited—embodied rather than a totally deluded mental entity. It became like looking in a mirror.

Perhaps we've all had similar experiences where we sense ourselves as both watching and being watched. Sometimes I was the watcher, the observer, the disembodied entity that hovers near my head. This was the external mindful perspective. Sometimes I was the mirror image. This was the internal mindfulness perspective, bringing the embodied experience of me—the experience of sitting and breathing and knowing that I was being watched.

The desire to know who I really am has always been very strong for me. And part of me that was observing, watching, felt this now as an almost overwhelming attraction towards the mirror image. I wanted to grasp hold of the image, devour it even. But whenever I gave in to that desire, it was as if I'd gobbled up my own reflection. All that was left were little shivers of fear and grief as I realised how I destroyed what I desired.

I had to suffer the fear and grief, wait patiently till peace prevailed, before I could again glimpse the mirror image. I became grateful for any unpleasant sensations in the mirror image. These acted like repulsive forces, countering the attempt to grasp and own the image. They carried the message: this isn't who you really are. That understanding also helped me not to grasp and thereby destroy the image of me that I desired so deeply.

I became grateful for the fact that the body can repel the mind as well as attract it. By this stage, I'd forgotten altogether about my sense of having let myself down. It just wasn't an issue. And I was very glad I'd persisted with the meditation, hadn't given up at the height of the emotional storm.

The great gift of sitting with the misery was that the message "this is not who you really are" became for the first time totally welcome. As the meditation went on, the message brought joy, relief, gratitude. I understood it as necessary to counter the strong desire to identify with my body and mind—the only reflection I can find for whatever it is I sense myself to be.

In subsequent meditations and in daily life, I was better able to recognise all mes as temporary and conditional. I could smile at them, appreciate them, but not be surprised when they dissolved. This is such a gift. The deluded me expects too much of me, expects me always to be on top of everything. Being able to see myself as limited brings forth compassion, as well as appreciation for whatever efforts I make to follow the path, fulfil my various roles.

And if I'm getting a bit heated in conversation, clinging to my opinion, then I can focus on some unpleasant sensation and welcome them as messengers that this strongly opinionated one is not your true self either. Again, this brings a smile and allows me to be more flexible, ready to change my mind and see the other's point of view.

I hope this illustration of working with the dukkha of identification encourages you to explore the teaching around anattā, not-self, and perhaps also see how those external and internal mindfulness perspectives can help with this challenging teaching. In this way, may we all see through our identification as daughter, manager, cook or whatever—see these as temporary, conditional, not ever designed to be satisfactory.

As the Buddha said, whatever is inconstant, conditioned, unsatisfactory, is not worthy of being thought of as me. We sell ourselves short by investing in these limited identities. Our continued practice leads us to a truth, a resting place beyond all such limitations. May we all experience the peace and bliss of *Nibbāna*.

Building a Raft to Cross the Floods of Becoming and Ignorance

Noirin Sheahan · 42 min

In this retreat teaching, Noirin Sheahan continues her exploration of the Buddha's raft simile, examining how we cross the floods of becoming (bhava) and ignorance (avijjā). The flood of becoming relates to our attachment to roles and identities - as parent, teacher, or social activist - and our projection of these into the future. Through vivid examples like a challenging classroom scenario, Noirin demonstrates how mindfulness, mettā, and moral resolve can form a raft to navigate threatening situations without losing our spiritual integrity.

The flood of ignorance represents our fundamental confusion about how to be truly happy. Even in peaceful moments, we experience underlying unease and restlessness. Noirin addresses the crucial challenge of letting go of our spiritual achievements - the very rafts that carry us to safety. Drawing on the Buddha's instruction that we must abandon even skillful states and Dhamma understanding, she explores the painful but necessary process of non-attachment to our insights and elevated states.

Using post-retreat experiences as a teaching tool, Noirin shows how attachment to spiritual highs leads to inevitable falls from grace. The teaching emphasizes seeing ourselves as perpetual students rather than experts, celebrating our understanding while remaining willing to let it go. This talk offers practical wisdom for both meditation practice and daily life challenges, showing how spiritual maturity involves embracing uncertainty and moving unburdened toward deeper freedom.

Tonight's talk continues with the teaching known as the raft which describes someone following a path that leads to a shore that is perilous owing to a great expanse of water. Across the water he sees another shore where the ground is secure. He gathers grass, twigs, branches and leaves, binds them together to make a raft and paddling energetically crosses the flood. The near shore, if you remember, stands for self-identity, while the far shore represents freedom. Ultimately, this means the complete freedom of *Nibbāna*, but for the purpose of this sutta, we're best to think of the far shore as those temporary periods of freedom that emerge when we've worked our way mindfully through some struggle. The water refers to the four floods which represent those as-

pects of life we identify with: sensuality, becoming, views and ignorance. On the near shore we are unwittingly taking on a false identity and will suffer on account of that because sooner or later this identity will be threatened.

Last night we looked at the floods of sensuality and views. Tonight we look at the other floods, starting with the flood of becoming. This flood relates to our identity as a person with a future and a past. It's especially connected with our roles as parent, daughter, technician, cook and so on. More subtly, we also assume social roles such as respectable person, good friend, social activist, etc. We're not fully aware of some of our roles or consciously choosing to play them. For example, we can play victim roles in certain circumstances when we don't know how to cope with misfortune. At other times, we play the role of bully in an attempt to control ourselves or others. In other circumstances, we'll end up playing roles of mother hen, wise owl, grumpy grouse. We have a whole menagerie inside us, waiting for their moment on stage.

Just as sensuality and views can play meaningful, beneficial parts in our lives, our roles can also serve us well. They give us predictable ways of interacting with others which simplifies social situations and lets us all work together well. The problem only comes when we forget that these roles are temporary and contingent. There will come a time when they are not appropriate and unless we can let go we will suffer and so also will our relationships. Retirement for example is a challenge for most people. Our role as electrician or teacher or secretary which we knew so well is suddenly gone. We don't know who we are anymore or what to do with ourselves. As children turn into adults, we find it difficult to let go of parent-child roles.

Why is this flood termed becoming? Why not call it the flood of roles? If we're looking back on our role as teacher or parent, that isn't a problem. It's a way of understanding and appreciating our lives, learning from past mistakes and forgiving these. It's only the projection of that role into the future that gets us swept off our feet. The energetic pull of the flood is towards the future. So becoming describes the feeling tone of this flood very well.

Retirement and other major role changes in life are strong currents in the flood of becoming. But we get swept away in small ways every day. We can use each of these smaller floods as opportunities to practice making a raft and getting safely to the far shore. In meditation, how often do we get carried away into a fantasy about how wonderful we are? It might be that we're going to write the most spectacular novel worthy of a hundred Man Booker prizes. In another meditation, we'd be climbing Mount Everest without oxygen, winning Wimbledon, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. These are mini tsunamis in the flood of becoming.

Instead of condemning yourself for these, see how well you can stay afloat in their midst. Body awareness makes a great raft. The mind can be sparking with ideas on how we will impress the world, but the body is sitting there in meditation, grounding us. In my experience, this flood seems to be pulling me towards a very pleasant, enticing future. This imagined future would be reflected in my body as pleasant sensations. If I can locate and hold attention on those sensations, the sparky thoughts and ideas fade and I get a better sense of the energies surging around my body, generating all those pleasant sensations which my mind is interpreting as a wonderful future. At times, then, I might be persuaded to relax a bit, enjoy the pleasure in the here and now.

As I relax, I might detect a couple of separate strands to the energies flowing around my body. At one level, there is self-care, *mettā*. A kindly streak within me is quietly generating pleasant sensations as an expression of care. Then there are the energies driven by desire, clutching onto the pleasure, embroidering a magnificent future out of it. Although I'm strongly attached to this aspect of the experience, I have to admit that the light of awareness shows it up as painful, stressful. Essentially, I'm rejecting the pleasure being offered by my *mettā*-streak, saying, this isn't worth anything, what I need is a great future.

If I can sit with the emotions and feelings generated within this flood of becoming, I'm undermining the delusion at its core. This person I'm so identified with, the soon-to-be Nobel Prize Peace Winner, can I find that person here and now? Are they in my chest, my stomach, my throat, my face? From afar it seems the answer is yes. I might find a hot spot in my throat, for example, where that wonderful person resides. But when I look closely, all I find are physical sensations, pleasant feelings and the deep displeasure of confusion. Where did that wonderful person escape to? Why can't I pin them down?

By now, awareness has penetrated the flood of becoming deep enough to be exploring the underlying flood of ignorance. Caught up in the delusion of self, I'm looking for my essence as something objective that I can know, discern, pinpoint. But I have to admit, sadly, that everything I know keeps dissolving, changing, become other than whatever it seemed to be a moment ago. All very unsatisfactory. Sooner or later, I give up on the futile search. With luck, I'll surrender, for even a few blessed moments, to the truth of *anattā*. No longer interested in defining myself as an essential separation from the rest of experience. What a relief. A toehold on the far shore.

I'll say a bit more about the flood of delusion later on but for now I want to come back to the flood of becoming and your daydreams about the wonderful person you truly are if only the rest of the world would wake up and take notice. I'm not encouraging you to daydream but to let the raft of *vipassanā* bob up and down on the waves of this flood as you paddle your way to the far shore.

Let's look at a potential tsunami from daily life. Suppose you're a geography teacher standing in front of a class of teenagers. Some of them are listening, some look bored and abstracted, while a group in the back are laughing and chatting. You call for silence, but they ignore you. Jack, stop talking and pay attention, you call to the ringleader. Give me one good reason, sneers Jack, getting a laugh from his buddies. Okay, leave the class now and go to the headmaster's office, you order sternly. Come and make me, he retorts, leaning back in his chair defiantly. Your blood is boiling and you want to murder him. You're also aware that the class has gone still, with all eyes on you to see your next move.

It's the flood of becoming, resting as always on the flood of ignorance, which is making your blood boil. You're identified with your role as teacher and it's under severe threat. If you can't control the situation, the class will lose respect for you and you might also lose confidence in yourself as a teacher. All this is very real. But for spiritual practice, we have to be prepared to look underneath the surface reality. From the spiritual perspective, the danger is that you're being severely tempted to act on anger. Although it can seem counterintuitive, working at the spiritual level can have unexpected benefits at the surface level. If we can muster goodwill in a challenging situation, others often pick up on this and follow suit. For the start, though, we have to put aside any desire for specific outcomes. We have to let all worldly considerations go and give all our heart into gathering bits and pieces for our raft.

Mindfulness would be a great starting ingredient. If you can register your anger and that you're feeling threatened, you will then have some objectivity on the situation. Some degree of calm would greatly help, so you can feel your feet on the ground for a few seconds or take a mindful breath. If you can, add in a *mettā*-wish such as, may I handle this situation wisely? With mindfulness, calm and a degree of *mettā* on board, you may be able to give *mettā* the flavour of equanimity with the wish like, may your behaviour not provoke me to react. This acknowledges the danger of reactivity within a sentiment of goodwill. It forms a wide net for *mettā*. Hopefully your anger will be caught within this.

While none of this changes anything externally, it will have changed things radically within yourself. The situation has now been encompassed within your Dhamma practice, and no matter what happens next, you will be on board a raft rather than drowning in the sea of becoming. You've also saved yourself from the worst outcome – giving Jack a clatter and possibly getting the sack or maybe even being charged with assault. Even if you make an utter fool of yourself and get the sack anyway, it means teaching teenagers was never going to be your career. What matters from the spiritual perspective is not whether you get the sack but how you handle that setback if it comes.

Supposing mindfulness, calm and mettā got you into some sort of a raft and you feel enough confidence to launch into the flood. My imagination can't stretch to anything more original than, I can't force you out of the class Jack, but I want you to know that I'm appalled by your behaviour and unless it improves radically, I'll be going to the head myself after class with the full story. You're afloat for the moment, but need to be paddling constantly in case any retort from Jack causes a wave to topple you back into fury.

So is there anything else that could add buoyancy? One would be to extend your mettā-wishes to Jack and the rest of the class with something like, May we make it through this crisis? If you have a strong faith you could ask the Buddha or Quan Yin for help or any devas who happen to be nearby. This would be adding faith and devotion to your raft. One very powerful mettā practice is to see all beings as enlightened except for ourselves. Everyone else is playing their roles here on earth with only one purpose in mind, to liberate us from suffering. Our supposed enemies are only pretending to threaten us in order to sharpen our practice. If you could manage even a momentary glimpse of that possibility, it could turn the raft into a cruise ship. No longer are you the teacher, they are the teachers and you are the pupil. This radical shift in perspective may let you see some humour in the situation and find a creative way to handle it.

But suppose you didn't manage to build any raft and are striding towards the back of the class, intending to catch Jack by the scruff of the neck and give him a good clatter. If you've been saying the precepts regularly, then the phrase, not to harm living beings, may pop into your head to bring you to a halt. This would be to start your raft with morality. Acknowledging the harm intended, you might resolve to find some other way of dealing with the situation. To borrow Bhante's phrase, a resolute resolution is what's needed here. I can do no harm. I ought to do no harm. I want to do no harm. I will do no harm. Resolutions are strengthened by a physical gesture and in this case to turn around and walk slowly back to your desk could fit the bill.

The trouble is that you've already let your emotions escalate as well as heightening the tension in the room. So there will probably be a strong temptation towards harsh speech as a means of saving face and regaining some control. Hopefully, you will also remember the precept against wrong speech and start casting around for some wisdom. Equanimity is a major support at times like these. If you practice saying something like, may I not make things worse for myself, during minor difficulties, the phrase may come back to save you in a situation like this. Patience is also a saviour in threatening situations. Patience allows you to acknowledge aversion for the situation and the wish that it would change. But both the aversion and the desire for change are encompassed in equanimity. Phrases like everything in its own time or things are unfolding just as they should strengthen patience. Steadied by morality, resolve, equanimity and patience. You might then be ready to launch into the flood and find some words to resolve the situation.

Let's finish the story on an optimistic note and presume we make a good enough raft and paddle it energetically enough to get to the far shore. Whatever way the situation played itself out, we've kept our integrity and somehow got ourselves out of danger. It might be hard to think of the incident as a spiritual practice, but keep in mind the image of a rickety raft made out of grass and twigs and leaves. Our practice doesn't have to look pretty. It just has to get us across the floods. Although we'd probably be rattled by the whole experience, we've actually done ourselves a lot of good in spiritual terms, avoiding a severe temptation to indulge anger. Our teacher role has submitted to the demands of the Dhamma, and as a result we would be in a much better position to handle the flood of becoming in future.

Finally, let's look at the flood of ignorance which underlies all the other floods. Ignorance is a harsh sounding word for something as innocent as not knowing how to be happy. Perhaps we could call it the flood of confusion. No matter what we call it, the fact that we don't know how to be happy underlies all our suffering in life. To traverse this flood we need a raft made out of the Four Noble Truths. We need to fully understand *dukkha*, let go of the desires that cause *dukkha* and realize for ourselves there is a state of perfect contentment when we let go of unskillful desire. To accomplish all of these we need to follow the Eightfold Path. We paddle our way through this flood in quiet moments when the other floods have subsided.

We may be sitting quietly at home, physically comfortable, fed and watered, not troubled by anything in particular, just relaxing. But still there's an underlying unease. After a few moments we get restless. We want something to fill our minds, get us going again. This is the flood of ignorance. Even when all the external conditions for peace

and contentment are there, we don't know how to be happy. We see this very clearly in meditation practice, how the mind keeps creating stories and dramas to fill up the quietness. Even unhappy stories and bad dramas are preferable to nothing at all.

We also experience the flood of ignorance as we draw near the far shore and have to decide what to do with our raft and it's that aspect of the flood I'd like to focus on tonight. Suppose we had managed to get our cruise ship together and see Jack and all the other pupils as enlightened beings. A great wave of love pulls them into our heart and produces some wise words which resolve the crisis. That wave of love seeps into our geography teaching and the remainder of the class passes like a dream, with everyone, including Jack and his buddies, paying rapt attention.

By the time the class is over, we're walking on air. We've got through the flood of becoming in great style, but we're still in danger from the flood of ignorance. When we're walking on air, it's very easy to believe this is the real me. We think our troubles are over, that Jack will never misbehave again, and even if he does, we know how to handle the situation. Just picture him as the Buddha. What could be simpler?

This, of course, is to be swept away on the flood of ignorance. We've identified with the happiness that has come our way, and think we're in control of it, but we'll always be able to summon it at will. But until we're fully enlightened, our happiness will always depend on conditions. After a while, we'll come down to earth. And at the next class, we might be so shocked to find Jack back to his old tricks that we can't muster any metaphor for him at all, never mind picture him as the Buddha.

Let's recap on the Buddha's words on getting to the far shore.

And what should the man do with the raft? There is the case where the man, having crossed over, would think, "How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands and feet, I have crossed over to safety on the far shore." So we're tempted to hoist the raft on our shoulder and take it with us on our journey. But according to the Buddha, this isn't wise. We're to leave our beloved raft behind. "Why don't I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?" In doing this, he would be doing what should be done with the raft.

So we should first reflect on our raft and appreciate how well it has served us. In this case we would reflect on our ability to picture the pupils as enlightened beings. Doubtless there'll be a temptation to think, "I know how to do this now, I'll always be able to do it." But that would be to carry the raft on our head as we go on our onward journey. It's delusional. We have to rejoice in our raft while letting it go.

Letting go of skillful qualities is one of the major challenges on our spiritual path. It's quite natural to get attached to *metta* and states of deep concentration or joy or tranquillity. Our job, though, is to note these, just as we note physical sensations or any of the hindrances. It is within that objective knowing of these as transient experiences that we can free ourselves from the *dukkha* of false identification.

If we don't manage this, the fall from grace can be very sore indeed. One moment we're light as a feather, loving everyone deeply. Somehow our hold on this gets broken and we're distraught to find ourselves back as the old me, with all of our petty grievances perfectly intact. In fact, we're in a worse mood than usual because of having somehow lost our footing on that wonderful far shore. This can be a very deep shock and sorrow.

One problem is that we often don't know we're attached to something until we lose it. The post-retreat period is a good teacher in this regard. For a while we may be walking on air, at peace with the world and even our old enemies. But somehow we fall back into our old ways. It can be quite shocking to see how easily we get sucked into these sense pleasures, even though we know they're transient and unsatisfactory. Worse still, we can be tempted to blame ourselves and everyone around us for our fall from grace. Even the dog and the goldfish are despicable.

Eventually, of course, things even out and when they do, we will be able to appreciate again the benefits of the retreat, but this time in a more balanced way, knowing that whatever new levels of *metta* or clarity we might experience, they will come and go.

The first time I really became aware of this was after a three-week retreat in Nepal, which had followed on a pilgrimage around India. I was walking on air, inspired and confident that I had undergone an enormous transformation for the better. The exalted state survived the journey back to Delhi, but when the taxi to the airport was over an hour late and no other taxis to be found, it started to quake a bit. Luckily the plane was even later than my taxi, so I got home all right. But my first night in my own bed was one of deep distress. It really felt like bereavement. I was heartbroken for the loss of that beautiful state of confidence, clarity and inspiration.

Nowadays I try to prepare myself for the fall from grace and to see the post-retreat period as part of the retreat itself. While on retreat I'm often looking forward to the ending and to relaxing the intensity of practice. And at first the wide world seems very lovely but sometime later despondency of one form or another descends. As Sarah, who often does long retreats here at Satipanya, put it, "I can feel worse on retreat, but I know it's all worthwhile. Whereas at home I can feel much better, but there's a background sense that I'm wasting my life." That expresses my own sentiments very well.

I nowadays spend time during the end of the retreat acknowledging the deeper levels of peace, kindness or understanding that I've been noticing from time to time. This is to appreciate the raft. I then remind myself that these aren't mine, that they depend on conditions like the rule of silence, the schedule, the company of other meditators and so on. Although this brings grief, it also allows gratitude to flow for these supports and for Bhante's work in establishing Satipanya and guiding us all along, and for all my efforts to practice during the retreat. During the post-retreat blues, I can then be more compassionate and take care of myself wisely.

Another danger is to neglect practice in the immediate aftermath of a long retreat, to think, "I've done enough of that for the moment, I need a break." To counter this reaction, I arrange to meet up with meditation friends, make a special effort to go to meditation group meetings and to get back into my own daily practice. The more Dhamma supports I can find in the outside world, the easier it is to get through the blues. In summary, the post-retreat period gives us practice at letting go of whatever rafts get us through the floods.

Note that the Buddha gives us two options here. Either we are to sink the raft in water or to drag it onto the beach and leave it there. My understanding is that we sink our raft in the water when we use it to navigate through the flood of ignorance.

Let's take an example. Suppose we have used a raft of *metta* to get us through a flood of views. We're now at ease. We can see the other person's point of view. We see them as a friend and we look back at our little hissy fit. We can giggle at our pettiness. The raft has done its job. So we spend a moment to value our *metta* practice, being grateful for it, resolving to continue to develop this. With that, we simply let the whole matter go. If we were meditating, we would return to the breath. If we were taking a break in daily life, we would move on to the next task. That would be to leave the raft on the beach. A very simple letting go.

Now suppose that as we are reflecting on our *metta* practice, valuing it, being grateful for it, we find it hard to say goodbye, to let it go. We then have to work with our attachment to the beautiful state of *metta*. We acknowledge whatever emotions show up and let them burn out. This is to sink our raft in the water. We are working with the flood of ignorance, seeing more deeply into the second noble truth that desire for the state of *metta* is causing us to suffer. We're learning the humbling lesson that goodwill is not ours to own. It comes and goes depending on conditions. Ironically, it can make us quite angry to realise that. It's only with lots of patient effort that we can be persuaded to let the raft sink away.

Related to this, we have the Buddha's last words from the sutta: "In the same way, monks, I have taught the Dhamma compared to a raft for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding on to. Understanding the Dhamma as taught compared to a raft, you should let go even of Dhammas, to say nothing of non-Dhammas."

Just as we let go of *metta* or whatever got us across the flood, we also have to let go of whatever Dhamma wisdom we have mustered. This again is a deep challenge. We treasure our understanding of the Dhamma. It represents our only hope of happiness. So naturally we get attached. But all attachments bring pain. It's very painful to have to admit that our understanding is insufficient.

In words, it all sounds so simple. Desire causes suffering. Let go of desire and suffering ceases. We agonise within ourselves: "I know that already. Why can't I just do it?" It seems such a mystery. The drill, as we know, is to keep relaxing around the tensions, noting all the protests, the emotions, the confusion, the frustration, until the moment comes when something inside shifts and we're at ease. We might not be able to put into words what we've learned, but we're no longer quarrelling with ourselves. We've experienced again that letting go of desire allows suffering to cease.

But oh, the temptation to attach to our new level of clarity, to think, "OK, now I know and I won't ever get mixed up again." And then unwittingly cause ourselves repeated agony. In this teaching the Buddha emphasises that we must look on our understanding as part of the raft, to be really grateful that it got us across the flood, but then to let it go.

The attempt to do this will show us our attachment. As I reflect on any new level of insight, delight will generally emerge. But in that delight, there's often a streak of pride and my head literally starts swelling. The discomfort of a swollen head shows me very graphically that, despite my new insight, I've still a long way to go. There is then the effort to accept this unpalatable fact and make peace with the unenlightened being that I now am.

To help with the process we can bring to mind the pain of attaching to Dhamma understanding. We experience this in various ways. One is when we try out a different meditation technique. At first it's a welcome change. Then after some time we find it hard to concentrate. It doesn't seem to let us relax as much as our usual method. But our warrior spirit compels us to give it another go. After another aeon of fruitless effort we're confused, angry and frustrated. We can't catch any thoughts. They're exploding all over the place and we believe them all. This turmoil is coming from being attached to views on how to meditate and to our role as competent meditator. So we have the flood of views criss-crossing with the flood of becoming.

When this happened to me, Bhante's advice was excellent: "Stick with the new technique until the aversion passes. Then make a rational decision as to which is better for you." This helped me work through my attachment to the deeply focused form of Mahasi meditation that Bhante encourages.

Another way we can work with this attachment is during Dhamma discussions. We can get hurt when our opinions are challenged or become afraid to express any views. Then again we can be delighted when our opinions prevail, but perhaps there's a tinge of pride in that delight. If we can bear the fear or hurt or pride mindfully, the discussion is actually a very beneficial one. No matter whether we're learning any new information, we're loosening attachment to our Dhamma views.

Reflecting on the pain of attachment makes us more willing to admit that our understanding isn't perfect, that we need to let go. We need to see ourselves as perpetual students rather than give in to temptation and view ourselves as experts. Some statements from arahats reflect a state of continual investigation even after enlightenment. For example, Mechi Kyo says, "I cannot detect a single moment when greed, hatred or delusion have any power over my heart." This indicates that she is still confirming the Dhamma for herself, still investigating.

To see ourselves as perpetual students rather than experts, we are, in the Buddha's words, letting go of the raft of Dhamma. But we can love the raft even while we let it go. We can celebrate and cherish every scrap of understanding that helped us through the flood. Essentially, this is a *mudita* practice, celebrating what is ephemeral, transitory, disappearing in front of our eyes.

Before closing, I'd like to go back to the beginning. The sutta starts out with someone following a path that leads to a perilous shore. So too our spiritual journey is always leading us to new challenges. It's interesting that the Buddha doesn't ever suggest turning back and retreating along the path. This signifies that we can't escape spiritual challenges by keeping to sections of the path we already know.

Supposing you've excellent concentration and can easily access tranquillity when you follow your breath. As the geography teacher under attack from Jack, you could simply let all your attention dwell on your breath. And so your anger would pass and you could go on with the class, ignoring the tensions caused by the incident. If you do the same thing whenever the memory of the incident comes up in meditation, then you won't be developing spiritually. It would be like turning back on the path whenever you come to a perilous shore, and the Buddha isn't recommending that.

Instead, we must take our practice to the edge of our comfort zone, to where we don't know what to do and are flying on a wing and a prayer. That's where we build our raft. And that's how we learn the Dhamma.

May our Dhamma understanding serve us as a raft until, safe at the far shore, we lay down our raggle-taggle of knowledge and skill and move unburdened onwards.

Building a Raft to Cross the Floods of Sensuality and Views

Noirin Sheahan · 39 min

In this retreat talk, Noirin Sheahan presents the Buddha's teaching of the raft as a vivid metaphor for spiritual practice in challenging circumstances. Drawing from the Alagaddūpama Sutta (MN 22), she explains how the four floods—sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance—sweep us away from spiritual stability, and how we can construct makeshift rafts from the Noble Eightfold Path to reach safety.

The teaching offers practical guidance for working with difficult emotions and situations both in meditation and daily life. Noirin provides detailed examples of how to apply mindfulness, right speech, and the brahmavihāra when caught in heated debates or struggling with low moods during retreat. She emphasizes that we don't need to be spiritual experts to begin practice—we simply gather whatever 'grass, twigs, and branches' of Dhamma understanding we possess.

The talk beautifully illustrates how temporary periods of ease in practice represent reaching the 'far shore,' while our identification with body, personality, and life story keeps us trapped on the 'perilous near shore.' Noirin's teaching is both deeply practical and inspiring, showing how even our most undignified spiritual struggles can become opportunities for liberation when approached with wisdom and compassion.

Last night, we spoke of the spiritual faculties, which are the strengths that develop from our spiritual practice and which help us combat difficulties in formal meditation and daily life. The teaching known as The Raft is related to this theme, and that's what I'd like to talk about tonight.

While the spiritual faculties help us reflect on and value the strengths we're building up, the teaching on the raft suggests how to put these to work in tricky situations. So it's a different perspective. In fact, all the Buddha's teachings are saying the same thing from slightly different perspectives. This one tackles the dynamic and powerful challenges we come across in life and gives us a vivid and quite undignified image for how we might somehow scabble our way through.

The Sutta describes someone following a path that leads to a shore that is perilous and risky, owing to a great flood of water. Across the water he sees another shore where the ground is safe and secure. The Buddha then says, "The thought would occur to him:

What if I were to gather grass, twigs, branches and leaves, and having bound them together to make a raft, were to cross over to safety on the other shore, independence on the raft, making an effort with my hands and feet?" So he builds the raft and makes it to the other shore.

Then there is the question of what to do with the raft. He's tempted to take it with him, but according to the Buddha, that's a mistake. After pondering the question for a while, he has the thought, "Why don't I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?" That, according to the Buddha, is the right decision.

In another Sutta, the various symbols are explained. The great expanse of water stands for the fourfold flood. The raft stands for the noble eightfold path. The near shore stands for self-identity while the far shore stands for unbinding.

Identifying with our normal limited sense of self is our problem on the near shore. When we believe we're confined within our body and mind, and expressed by a personality and described in our life story, then we're on perilous ground. At any moment our body can fall ill or die. Our personality can let us down when we get a shock or get depressed, and can wither away altogether through Alzheimer's or other diseases. We might suffer some calamity which makes a mockery of all we achieved and so our personal story becomes one of failure.

On the far shore we know we are not confined within our body, mind, personality or life history. So we can look on our physical, mental or social troubles with tender compassion but without distress. The ultimate unbinding happens when we're fully enlightened. But for the moment, we can think of the far shore as those temporary periods of ease in our practice, when we've worked our way through some hindrance and are now at ease.

To get to the far shore, we have to cross the expanse of water, the fourfold flood. In essence, these are the hindrances again, but from a different perspective. The hindrances describe the energetic manifestation of our troubles, without reference to any background story that may be prompting desire, aversion, restlessness, etc. This is an especially useful way to view these in meditation, where we're looking at moment-to-moment experience.

The floods describe these same troubles but in broader terms rather than momentary energies. They describe what we identify with in life. Thus, the floods are related to the *khandas*, and the first flood, termed the flood of sensuality, overlaps with the first *khandha*, termed the body.

The *khandhas* describe our identities in terms that encourage us to tease things out at the deep level we can sometimes achieve within the steady focus of *vipassanā*. It's often termed a deconstruction of our sense of self. This microscopic focus is powerful, but can seem puzzling or academic from our normal perspective. In order to facilitate our practice at times when we don't have so much calm objectivity, we have the image of a fourfold flood as a way to tease out the problems that come from identifying with aspects of our life.

The first three are the floods of sensuality, becoming and views. Underlying these three, we have the fourth one, the flood of ignorance.

We get swept away by the flood of sensuality whenever we indulge sense pleasure mindlessly, whether it be for food, sex, music, material goods, intoxicants, whatever the material world can offer by way of pleasure and escapism. This flood also drowns us when we are upset by the unattractive nature of the material world. Hunger, thirst and physical pain are our primary fears here, but we also deplore noise, ugliness, stinks and so on.

We might not think of ourselves as sensual. Perhaps we're more cerebral, easily absorbed by computers or books or abstract ideas, but not very interested in food or music or sex or whether the house is painted red or green or what the wallpaper looks like. Thus, we might think that sensuality is one flood we don't have to worry about. But our cerebral function depends on being warm and healthy and having food to eat. If we're cold or hungry, we won't be able to think straight or with any pleasure. It's only when we get a meal inside us and are tucked up in front of a warm fire that we'll feel like ourselves again, able to engage happily with our book or computer.

So even if we don't take much notice of sense pleasures, we're depending on them to let our minds pursue their cerebral pleasures and there inform that all-important sense of me. As such, we're at risk from the floods of sensuality whenever our basic needs for food and warmth are not met, when any of our senses fail or when our body is wracked with pain.

The next flood, termed becoming, sweeps us away when we identify with our personal history and its projection into the future. It seems so obvious that we were the child we remember from our school days and that we will be the older person who will bear our name and passport tomorrow. In the steady gaze of *vipassanā*, this illusion can sometimes be seen through. We sense a mass of changing sensations, thoughts, moods, but no central control headquarters to call me.

But the belief in ourselves as a personal identity has been taken for granted throughout our lives and forms the basis for almost all our thoughts. And so the illusion of self returns again and again, both on and off the cushion. We are then prey to floods of regret for the past as well as worry about the future. How will I get everything done? Will I succeed in my career? Will people respect me? Does anyone love me?

That's not to say we can ignore our personal history and its likely course in the future. Life is a precious opportunity for liberation and unless we look after the unenlightened person we appear to be just now, we won't be able to liberate that person from suffering. That can mean looking after our career, our good name, our family and so on. The raft formed from the *anattā* perspective lets us do all this without worrying and obsessing over our future or regretting our past.

Another flood comes when we attach to views and opinions. How many of us can have a completely calm, rational discussion about politics or religion, abortion or euthanasia? If we've no opinion, that makes it easy. But perhaps we've chosen non-committal as a way of avoiding hurt if our views were rejected. And even if we can ignore these somewhat abstract questions, we'll probably have a cherished opinion on how to hang wallpaper or how to cook the best Christmas pudding. So the flood can sweep us away when someone dismisses our opinions on these matters and we feel small, hurt and disrespected.

Finally, and underlying all of these, we have the flood of ignorance. That term is often used insultingly, but here it means that we don't know how to make ourselves happy. Happiness comes when we live from the perspective of the Four Noble Truths. While ignorance means that we don't fully understand these, so we're looking for happiness in all the wrong places. We're assuming the next romance will make us happy or becoming a millionaire. That should do the trick. Basically, we get swept away by the first three floods because we're already drifting in the flood of ignorance.

It's worth reminding ourselves that we don't have to know everything in order to be free from suffering. We only have to understand the four noble truths. We can be quite ignorant about biology, music and gardening and still be perfectly happy. We might not know the best way to organise people or the best decisions to make in our life.

The Buddha's first sermon was a complete failure. The person walked away after the Buddha's attempt to describe his enlightened state. So the Buddha wasn't omniscient. He could make mistakes. He had to experiment and see what worked. The only mistake he could never make after enlightenment was to let desire cause suffering.

Unlike the Buddha, here we are on our perilous shoreline. One moment it feels secure, the next it's collapsing like quicksand. The water in front of us is treacherous. But in the distance we see another shore that's stable and secure. This gives us the spark of faith we need to get started. It gets us looking around for materials that could make a raft.

And to be honest, they don't look promising. Grass and twigs and branches and leaves. The grass I can only imagine is long reed-like stems that could be used to bind twigs and branches together. Flimsy, makeshift, rickety fragile. That is the image the Buddha is giving us for our raft. It takes courage to set out at all. This means that we don't have to be experts before we start practising. We just use whatever bits of information or skill we have and get stuck in.

And don't expect the ride to be easy. It's not a cruise ship we're on. It's a very flimsy raft. We're spread-eagled on it, just barely clear of the floodwaters, paddling through these using our hands and feet. I think this is a great image to console us for the very unedifying picture we get of ourselves as we scramble our Dharma practice together in the midst of a crisis.

At times we'll probably lose sight of the far shore. To tell us whether we're still going the right direction, we have another water metaphor the Buddha gives for spiritual practice: swimming upstream. We're always going against the current of the floods, against the habitual desires of our conditioning. Whatever we don't want to do, that's what we need to do. If we want to gobble our dinner, we need to slow down. If we want to sink into despair, that's when we need to find some reason to be hopeful. Even when we can't see where we're heading, we can detect the direction that desire is sweeping us and work against that strong current.

Somehow we make it across. We're on that wonderful beach, safe and sound. Our little raft has done its job. We're naturally delighted with it. We might also be attached to it, thinking we might need it again, for who knows what the next shoreline will look like. And we might be justifiably proud of it and want it as a trophy, to show people how clever we were in getting across the stormy sea. So we're tempted to hoist it on our shoulder and take it with us on our journey. But according to the Buddha, this isn't wise. We're to leave our beloved raft behind.

This tells us that we can't cling to any aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path. Just because we practiced right speech in a tricky situation, we shouldn't think of ourselves as experts. It is so tempting to think, okay, I've learned that lesson, I'll never make that

mistake again. But then to our utter dismay, we fall back into the same trap. The conditioning that pulls us into the floods goes deep and we have to relearn the Dharma, make a new raft in each new situation.

But it's also fair to say that we get better at finding materials for our raft and more skilled in binding these together, more sensitive to the flow of the current. Also our muscles develop so we can paddle more vigorously. And we gain more and more confidence that we will, at some stage, make it to the other shore. So we're willing to venture out in ever more skimpy rafts.

Let's look at a practical example. Suppose you had a really rough morning's meditation here at Satipanya. You've lost any confidence you ever had regarding meditation. All morning your mind kept wandering. By the 11 a.m. meditation you were totally fed up. Again and again you woke up to find yourself in the middle of a long moan about how hopeless things are. When the bell goes for lunch, you just want to gobble it all up and dive into bed for an hour.

What floods are at work here? We're unhappy and don't know how to make ourselves happy. That summarises our basic problem in life. Unhappiness at base stems from not understanding the Four Noble Truths. So we're adrift in the flood of ignorance. Lunch and bed represent sense pleasures. So the flood of sensuality is flowing over the flood of ignorance. And with a bit of luck, the pleasures of food and being stretched out on a warm bed will let us forget our troubles for a while.

But at what cost do we enter this flood? One episode of laziness might not do too much harm. But the trouble is that the next time you're feeling low, you'll want to gobble your lunch twice as fast and sleep for twice as long. If this goes on, then pretty soon you won't return for the afternoon shift at all. And then you'll feel even more rotten and depressed. Basically, the current starts off gently, but pulls us into ever faster currents that sweep us further and further from the shore.

So where can we find materials for our raft? First and foremost, we have mindfulness. We can acknowledge that we're fed up and miserable. Sounds easy, but the temptation to ignore our moods can be strong. We need a steady practice to work mindfully with bad moods such as this.

To start making a raft, you could resolve to spend a few minutes in mindful acknowledgement of the bad mood. In theory, this is what you've been doing all morning, but sometimes we lose sight of the broader picture in our effort to still the mind in medita-

tion. As we relax when the bell goes, and as we're walking toward the lunchroom, that broader awareness might actually be the first real acknowledgement of how low your mood has descended.

Acknowledging the bad humour changes the situation radically and with this broader awareness it is worth re-entering the gaze of *vipassanā* for another few minutes. You could do this while sitting at table after serving yourself your lunch, noting the mood and feeling the bodily sensations associated with it. Even one minute will make a huge difference. Although you might still feel low, you will feel much better for having taken the time and trouble to acknowledge the mood mindfully. You might even make it all the way to the far shore and feel hopeful about your meditation practice again.

Vipassanā practice will always make a really good raft. But suppose you can't muster the energy for this. Just like it was doing all morning, your mind gets sucked into negative thoughts the moment you decide to do a minute's practice at the dining room table. Instead of *vipassanā*, you could choose mindful eating as the framework for your raft, noting all the physical sensations.

For extra buoyancy, you could pick up some *mettā*. You could wish yourself well as you cut up a potato. As you're chewing this, you can wish that the meal will cheer you up. If your mood lightens, you could add in *muditā*, appreciating the meal and congratulating yourself for having looked after yourself well in a tricky situation.

Now suppose wishing ourselves well seems forced and contrived and puts us in even worse humour. In that case, compassion could be more appropriate, starting off by acknowledging that we're having a really bad time. It often helps to express sympathy with a gesture, perhaps a hand on the heart. The phrase, "may I be free from suffering," or "may I be free from anger and ill will," could feel more congruent than *mettā* good wishes. This is to work very tenderly with ourselves. If we can also be patient, not expecting ourselves to cheer up anytime soon, we can be assured that this is a very genuine part of our spiritual practice.

But if it's one of those times when we're too low or fed up for self-compassion, we could try to pick up some equanimity for our raft with a phrase like, "may I not make things worse for myself?"

If that stems the flow of negativity for a moment, we could add some other bits of wisdom. A phrase like "this too will pass" reminds us of *anicca*. No matter how we decide to work with bad humour, we've avoided the temptation to gobble and dive into bed. So we're buoying up our raft with renunciation.

When the Buddha first thought of a life of renunciation, he noticed, "my heart did not leap up with joy." We find it much easier to be enthusiastic about *mettā*, compassion, mindfulness and so on than renunciation. Deferring pleasure isn't easy, especially as we've no control over when and if any rewards will come through. But I'm sure you'll agree that you would feel immeasurably better for having worked mindfully with a bad humour than if you'd given in to all its demands.

Although the thought of renunciation doesn't make our hearts leap with joy, the practice of it brings a freedom. We realise we don't have to be controlled by our moods or obsessions. Such a relief. A soupsong of *Nibbāna*.

But if the flood of sensuality sweeps us off our feet and we're already gobbling our dinner, we could try making a supreme effort and note "indulging, indulging." Can we feel any of the pleasure this is giving? If so, can we focus on this as we eat? You could call it mindful gobbling. A rickety raft for sure, but if it keeps us present, it's doing its job.

It's also possible that when we note "indulging, indulging," we are immediately recaptured by our negativity. We remember our bad humour and now there might be a good dollop of shame added to this as well. Shame can be used skilfully because it tells us we're going astray. We've been reacting, indulging in food as a means of escape. Although we might feel even worse after noting indulgence, that very discomfort can prompt us to look around for a few materials to start making a raft. It's never too late to start. Even if we're on the last bite, any of the options suggested above are still available, though we might now have to start with self-forgiveness and the resolve that we can mend our ways.

These are the times that it really helps to remember the image of being spread-eagled on a rickety raft. We don't have to look good to practice the *Dhamma*. In fact, the shame of knowing we've been acting unskilfully is always a good place to start building a raft.

I know one man who had earlier in life suffered from alcoholism. After one bad bout he was nursing a hangover and sitting in the kitchen feeling really miserable. He was watching his wife doing some housework, too sick and depressed to offer any help. As she passed him by, she gave him a look of total disgust. He had the thought, "you're right, I am a louse, but I can do better." He gave up drinking completely from that moment, went on to form and run a very successful business, and when I met him years later, he was regularly going to ten-day Vipassanā retreats. When we register guilt or

shame mindfully, they can stir us to find a way to mend our ways. No matter how many break periods we've wasted gobbling and snoring, we can choose the thought, "I can do better than this," and make faith the first component of our raft.

Let's now look at a practical example of the flood of views. Suppose we've got ourselves into a heated debate about the refugee crisis. Our adversary is fiercely arguing for border closures while we are stoutly defending the refugees' rights to asylum. We're feeling threatened by the situation and getting agitated. It's a complex situation. On the one hand, we're expressing compassion for refugees, so we're developing one of the *Brahmavihāra*. On the other hand, we're in danger of ill will.

Mindfulness would be the main material to frame our raft. Unless we're aware of the anger rising within us, we could easily snap at our opponent, insult them, scorn their lack of compassion or taunt them with sarcastic comments. If we're a clever debater, we could find ways to ridicule their arguments and belittle them, unconscious of the irony that we're using cruel words to argue for compassion. If we're not good at debate, we could find ourselves on the receiving end of cruelty. If we take their scorn to heart and let it wreck our confidence, we might end up sowing seeds of enmity, unable to think well of that person again. We'll have been carried far away by the floods without any awareness of this, insisting that we're doing the right thing, standing up for the rights of refugees.

With mindfulness, we'll feel and acknowledge anger and be aware of the floods threatening us. Once we have the frame of mindfulness in place, the most useful material for this particular raft would be right speech. Here's the definition the Buddha gives: "And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter. This is called right speech."

In another teaching he puts it in positive terms: "It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of goodwill."

We're not likely to be able to sift every word through the Buddha's filters while we're in the middle of a heated argument. But the more often we reflect on these lists and let them influence our speech in less conflicting situations, the more easily we'll be able to attach right speech to our raft when we really need it.

So let's see how our communication is measuring up to the Buddha's standards in this particular situation. We're certainly not engaged in idle chatter. Our intention is beneficial and we're not using divisive speech. So far so good. Hopefully also we're being truthful, though this will be compromised if we're exaggerating facts and figures to score our point.

Another consideration, according to the Buddha, is whether our speech is timely. If we can see that our adversary is completely closed to our point of view, then our words are a waste of time. All we're doing is letting that person sow their own seeds of hatred, as well as putting ourselves in danger of the flood of views. Out of compassion for self and other, we should put an end to the argument.

We also need to ask ourselves whether we're speaking with a mind of goodwill, and whether our words are gentle or harsh. These are obviously related. If we're speaking with goodwill, we won't be shouting or letting sarcastic or insulting remarks slip out. At times we might believe we're speaking with goodwill, unaware of how anger has escalated in the heat of the moment. If we hear ourselves using harsh words or a scornful tone, we have the feedback we need to acknowledge that anger is getting the better of us. In that case, we have to scrabble around to find a way of binding the raft together again.

One of the *Brahmavihāra* might do the trick. *Upekkhā* is often the most practical place to start, with a wish such as "may I not do harm on account of my anger." If that steadies the raft, you could add a dash of *mettā*, for example, "may this conversation be beneficial to us both."

It's tough work though, trying to bind a rickety raft together on stormy waters. So should we withdraw from the conversation as soon as we feel anger rising? That depends on how well we can trust ourselves to work with anger in a conflict such as this. If we're mindful of anger, we're not being controlled by it. We can feel angry but maintain an attitude of no harm or even of goodwill. This is the great benefit of working with the difficult person in our *mettā* practice. So long as we can maintain the no harm attitude, we can safely continue to argue our case no matter what fury might be firing through our veins.

In fact, engaging with the argument will be an excellent spiritual practice. We're mindfully watching anger and letting it transform into compassion, which is hard enough to do on the cushion, never mind in a social situation. If we can somehow make it to the other shore, we should give ourselves a major *sādhū* for steering our raft through such a flood.

Mindfulness and right speech are the primary materials we need when the flood of views threatens. It can also help to remember the Buddha's usual method of engaging people in debate. He would listen to their views carefully and then question them, drawing them out so that they eventually saw the weakness in their argument. Only then would he give his own view. If we could use this model, we would be doing a lot more listening than we usually do during a heated argument. This will also help keep us calm and give us a much better chance of controlling any anger. In order to ask useful questions, we will have to consider their point of view seriously, which in itself is an act of *mettā*.

You might rarely get into controversial discussions like this. Perhaps you don't have strong views on many matters. Those of us in this category might therefore think that at least we're free from the flood of views. But if someone bullies us, it's hard to resist the view that they are horrid and cruel. Or if our partner repeatedly omits to do their share of housework, we'd probably be rehashing thoughts like "he's so mean and lazy," or "she's so thoughtless." These views can bind us, and so we might never appreciate how much attention our partner pays to the children, for example.

If we're sharing responsibility for a project, it's easy to get into arguments about how things ought to be done, convinced that our view is right. Even if we don't have strong political or religious views, we have opinions on almost everything we do. And if someone disagrees with these, we'll feel angry, hurt or threatened. Thus all of us, even the meek and mild, are at risk from the flood of views.

You can explore this flood here on retreat. Even though we're not talking out loud, how many arguments do we have in our heads, insisting over and over again how right we are and how wrong our imaginary adversary is? To make a raft, we use body awareness. Feeling the sensations generated by all those strident thoughts, we paddle our way through the flood. The far shore might come into view as a thought like "what does it really matter who's right or wrong" slips through the turmoil.

The more often we negotiate our way through this flood in Vipassanā, the more easily we make a raft when the tsunami comes our way in a heated conversation during daily life.

Another very good practice to prepare us for this flood is to reflect on the Buddha's list for right speech and ask ourselves whether we often transgress these unwittingly. Idle or untimely speech would be a danger for many of us. This doesn't mean we should only speak when we have something really important to say. The Buddha was always happy to exchange pleasantries. These are just a socially acceptable way of saying "may you be well and happy." So they are a *mettā* practice and to be cherished.

But conversations easily fall into moaning about our woes or giving out about third parties. In that case, we're being swept away by the flood of views. Our moans reflect the view that the world should not have done this to me or that the third party should have behaved differently. For example, "the car broke down and I had to get it towed away, cost me £300 and then my boss decides to dock me an hour's pay for being late."

If that's said mindfully, as a factual statement, or with clarity in our distress and need for sympathy, then no problem. We need to be able to tell others our bad news. It's part of the way we help each other to deal with the truth of *dukkha*. But if we're spitting the words out in anger and injecting swear words about our boss and the car, then we're caught in the flood, proclaiming our view of how rotten the world is and especially our rotten car and boss. We're not so much looking for sympathy, more interested in having our view of the rotten world confirmed.

Suppose we've spat out that much and then suddenly remember our *Dhamma* practice. We need to start building a raft pronto. Mindfulness would be the best start, acknowledging anger. We then need to acknowledge this to whoever we've been talking to and apologise for having dumped our bad temper on them. This would be an example of right speech. The apology relieves some of the burden we've placed on them. So it is beneficial speech. All of this might have calmed us enough for some self-compassion, acknowledging in a sympathetic way how rotten we feel. *Upekkhā*-style good wishes such as "may I take care of myself wisely" would help us bear the burden until our anger dissipates.

In general, right speech is an important aspect of any raft to take us across the flood of views, as this flood will be at its swiftest when we're expressing our views to another person. The more often we take care to practice right speech in simple situations when we're not threatened by the flood, the easier it will be for us to build our raft when we need it.

We'll continue with this teaching on the raft tomorrow night and give some examples of working with the other floods. For the moment, let's remind ourselves that we don't have to despair when we find ourselves in a tantrum and acting as if we'd never done a moment's mindfulness practice in our lives. The moment we see our tantrum is the moment to start looking around for any branches or twigs that could make a raft. It's never too late to start.

The present moment never condemns us or shuts us out from its infinite store of wisdom and compassion. May this reflection help us build and trust our rickety rafts and paddle them swiftly to the far shores.

Destruction of Craving: Tracing Back to the Origin of Dukkha

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

In this retreat talk, Noirin Sheahan explores the Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta (MN 38), the 'Destruction of Craving' discourse. The teaching begins with the Buddha correcting the monk Sāti's mistaken view of consciousness as a permanent entity that travels from life to life. Through careful analysis of dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda), we examine how consciousness arises conditionally through the six sense doors, not as one continuous stream.

The talk traces the chain of conditions underlying dukkha: craving (taṇhā) supported by feeling (vedanā), which arises from sense contact, dependent on the six sense bases, rooted in mind-and-matter (nāma-rūpa), consciousness (viññāṇa), and habitual formations (saṅkhāra), all stemming from ignorance (avijjā). Through practical meditation instructions, we learn to observe experience as 'this has come to be' - seeing the arising and passing of phenomena rather than assuming permanent selfhood.

This teaching offers both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for undermining the conditions that support craving, showing how mindfulness can reveal the dependent nature of all experience and gradually liberate us from the delusion of a permanent, unchanging self.

Tonight I want to look at the teaching known as the Destruction of Craving, the Mahātanha Sankhaya Sutta.

The teaching is given because one of the Buddha's monks, Sati, believes that there is just this one consciousness that runs throughout all our life and was with us in our previous lives and will accompany us throughout our future lives. Just this one and no other, he claims, thinking he's teaching the Dhamma correctly and according to the Buddha.

The other disciples try to dissuade him, but Sati insists on his view and is summoned by the Buddha to discuss the matter. The Buddha starts by asking Sati about his one consciousness understanding. And when Sati repeats this, the Buddha then asks him to define consciousness.

Sati says, "It is that which speaks and feels and experiences here and there the results of good and bad actions."

To Sati's dismay, the Buddha dismisses this vehemently, saying, "Misguided man, to whom have you ever heard me explain the Dhamma thus? Misguided man, in many discourses have I not stated consciousness to be dependently arisen, since, without a condition, there is no origination of consciousness. But you, misguided man, have misrepresented us and by your wrong grasp and injured yourself and stored up much demerit."

We are told that on hearing this, poor old Sati sat silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum and without response.

Now, I'd say we could all have sympathy with Sati. It certainly seems that our essence, call it consciousness, is that which speaks and feels and experiences, and that this essence has been with us all our life. And, if we believe in rebirth, it's hard to see what else within us might survive other than that which speaks and feels and experiences the results of good and bad *kamma*. Obviously, we're badly mistaken here. We're suffering from the same delusion that got Sati into trouble.

It is interesting that the Buddha gets Sati to explain his understanding before he so emphatically refutes this. This reflects the fact that we need to be clear about our delusions before we can see through them. We put them forward into the gaze of mindfulness, trusting that this will filter out the falsehood from the truth.

The Buddha then reiterates his own teaching. Firstly, consciousness is of six kinds. For instance, if our eyes are open and there's a visible object in front of them, then eye consciousness can arise. If our hearing works okay and sound waves fall on the ears, then ear consciousness can arise. He gives the analogy of fire: a log fire, a grass fire. We name the fire depending on what fuel it is based upon.

He then goes on to question the audience on three points. To start with, he asks whether they are clear that "this has come to be." They all chorus in unison, "Yes, venerable sir." It is very irritating when we're scratching our heads wondering what on earth he means. But these short, often perplexing statements from the Buddha give us something to investigate in vipassanā.

It would be worthwhile, when you next sit in meditation, to ask yourself whether your experience could be described by the phrase, "This has come to be." Once our mind settles in meditation, we find ourselves in a sea of sensations and feelings, reac-

tions of desire or aversion, emotions, thoughts and images. This can be incredibly confusing until we notice that only one of these is happening at any one time. It simplifies things to track each passing experience rather than try to make sense of the totality.

Each experience could be labelled as "this." We might be watching the breath. We feel glad to be watching the breath. What the Buddha is asking of us is to notice that gladness has come to be. After a while, we don't feel so glad anymore. We feel a bit glum, thinking something better should be happening. Again, what's asked of us is to notice that glumness has come to be, that discontent has come to be. In general, whatever takes our attention, we're being asked to notice that this is our present moment experience.

To follow this to a deeper level, if our gaze lands on a green field, eye consciousness gives us an image of greenness. Concentration is rarely sharp enough to see individual moments of consciousness in this way, and so we see the world as a multitude of separate objects which all exist simultaneously: green fields and trees and sky and so on. But when we calm the mind enough to allow moments of deeper clarity, we see that only one sense contact can be registered at a time—for instance, greenness, blueness, greyness—and that we're building an overall picture by joining the dots.

While it's an amazing feat of intelligence to be able to join the dots and negotiate the world based on the overall picture we get from this, we also need to see the underlying process. I had a glimpse of this one time as I was eating lunch on retreat. I saw the knife and fork moving slowly toward the potato. My attention was taken by something else for a moment. Then visual consciousness came to the fore again, only this time the knife and fork had moved closer to the potato. I realized I had just seen two visual stills within what I normally interpret as a continuous video of visual consciousness.

Because of mindfulness, I wasn't joining the dots in the usual way. Instead, I knew that in between the two stills, I had no idea where the knife and fork were, or even whether they existed. There was a complete blank and absence of information. For those moments, visual consciousness had ceased.

The Buddha never suggests that the world stops existing when we're not watching it. He doesn't attempt to describe reality in terms of objective science. What he describes is the cognitive process upon which we build our picture of reality. He wants us to see that our access to the world, our ability to know it consciously, is unstable, conditional. A portal opens, gives us a little snippet of information, then closes. As the Buddha teaches, consciousness arises and then ceases.

Getting a direct experience of this undermines the delusion Sati describes so succinctly—that there's just one consciousness that sees and feels and experiences the results of good and bad kamma and that this same consciousness has been with us all our lives and will be with us the next life too. Sati's description mirrors our delusion but it doesn't bear scrutiny under the watchful eye of mindfulness.

Seeing this stop-start nature of cognition is not simply academic. It might rock a person to the core of their being to realize how limited is our knowledge of reality. As we learn to live with this uncomfortable news, the insight gradually opens the heart. It helps us loosen our grip on certainties we cling to, entrenched opinions about who and what we are, how we should behave, how others should behave, etc.

Knowing how little we actually know makes it easier to forgive mistakes, to be grateful that anything at all can actually work out right in the midst of such a paucity of real information dependent on so many unproven assumptions. We realize how much we're taking for granted and what a miracle it is even to be able to take a footstep or make a cup of tea.

Having ascertained that his disciples understand experience from the viewpoint of present moment awareness, which can be summarized as, "this has come to be," the Buddha then goes on to ask whether they're clear that its origination occurs with that as nutriment. Conscious experience depends on certain conditions. It doesn't arise from nowhere. It needs support, nutriment.

All of these nutriments, he declares, have craving as their origin. Craving is another word for sensual desire or *tanhā* in Pali. This, the Buddha had discovered, was the basic drive underlying all worldly experience. It's because we want something from the world that we become conscious of it. That's quite a thought to reflect on.

Now of course the Buddha was conscious and could see and hear and think. He was living within the world of sense contact. So there's obviously a way to experience the world that doesn't depend on craving.

The word for craving is *tanhā* in Pali. It comes in three flavours. The desire for sense pleasure is one. Another is the desire to become, to be someone special. And finally the desire not to become. This is when we want to annihilate ourselves. In the extreme it means suicide, but in minor ways this desire arises out of embarrassment, for example, when we want to become invisible. *Tanhā* or craving refers to all of these three flavours of desire.

There is a related word, *chanda*, which describes skilful desire. *Chanda* also supports consciousness. We see this when we use *chanda* to develop traits like mettā, for example. We start spotting opportunities where goodwill is needed. We become more conscious of goodwill in others. It's like we've opened a door into a whole new aspect of life, an area we were previously not conscious of.

The Buddha doesn't describe the workings of an enlightened being as we don't need to know this before we get there. But my guess is that *chanda* plays a part in maintaining their consciousness within the phenomenal world. But that's an aside. What the Buddha is keen for us to understand is that within our unenlightened state all nutriment for conscious experience has craving as its base. Whatever is our present moment experience, this has come to be because we crave sense pleasure, we crave existence to become someone special, we crave non-existence to be invisible.

The third question the Buddha puts to his disciples is whether they are clear that with the cessation of that nutriment, what has come to be is subject to cessation. Let's say what has come to be is a feeling of happiness. This will have been born from certain conditions. It could have been the thought of a job well done. If we can steady attention on the feeling, the thought will fade and sometime afterwards the feeling also fades. This shows us that the feeling of happiness needs certain supportive factors.

In fact, everything we experience fades away after a few moments, once the supporting conditions give way. We see this in gross terms. An animal dies without food. A plant dies without water. Snow melts when it gets too warm. Machines break down when they're not maintained. Everything depends on its supporting conditions and fades away, ceases to exist once those conditions fail to appear.

Mostly we hear this as bad news. We dread change and loss. But of course it can be used to suit our purposes. If we want to stop something undesirable, it's usually easier to undermine its supporting conditions than to tackle the problem head on. If a child is crying, we find out what is the problem. They might be hungry, so we give them something to eat. What we're doing is taking away the cause of their distress, rather than preventing them from crying.

It's the same within us. We might sense anger as a big problem in our lives. Instead of trying to suppress every emotional flare-up, we can look for the causes of anger, work to undermine these. Same for any of the hindrances, any unskilful tendencies we find within ourselves. The more we undermine the conditions, the more the unskilfulness loses its grip on us.

This is essentially why the Buddha lists all the factors that support craving. The better we understand these, the more options we find for dismantling the whole structure.

Having set the big picture, the Buddha then goes on to list the chain of factors that support craving. These are the first seven links in the chain known as dependent arising or dependent origination, a twelve-link process that leads from ignorance to dukkha.

The immediate support for craving, its proximate cause, is feeling, *vedanā* in Pali. We crave to get more pleasant feelings, to get rid of unpleasant ones, to ignore neutral ones.

What underlies feeling, he asks. The answer is sense contact. Feelings are generated only as a result of some snippet of information that has come through the senses. The feeling tells us whether this is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Feeling is a biological adaptation which aids survival. Any organism needs to be able to detect threats, to seek out food or other nourishment, to filter out sensory information that's not relevant to survival. So our biology is set up to filter sense contacts into these categories, giving us a feeling tone for each bit of sense data.

The process happens so quickly, so automatically, we're rarely aware of our feelings. We simply react automatically. However, as the Buddha points out, feeling is the proximate cause for craving. And so we need to learn to tune into the feeling tone of experience.

To recap on these three links, craving is based on feeling. When we experience a pleasant feeling, we crave for more of the same. When we experience an unpleasant feeling, we crave to get rid of it. We crave to ignore neutral feeling. In turn, feeling is only generated when a new bit of sensory information is registered by sense contact.

What underlies sense contact? The six sense doors. One of these is forming the portal, allowing that snippet of information to come in. The sensation of warmth requires the body's tactile system as a door to consciousness. A bird song needs the hearing system. The thought of buttered toast needs the mind as a sense door.

When we acknowledge the crucial role of the sense doors, we also see that one way to reduce craving is to withdraw from as much sensory stimulation as possible. We go somewhere quiet, shut the eyes, make the body comfortable. With a bit of luck, the only challenging feelings we have to deal with are those that enter via the doorway of the mind.

What underlies the six sense doors? Mind and matter. *Nāmarūpa*. The sense doors are built from the cells, blood, neurons in our bodies, animated by mental phenomena such as attention and intention. *Nāmarūpa* translates literally as name and form. Form refers to the body, the world of matter; blood, bones, neurons. What gives this a name, a meaning, is *nāma*, the mind.

As an aside, it's generally understood the dependent arising describes how we experience the world. It's not a description of scientific reality, but of our inner cognitive reality. It's also generally understood that the first six of the links, up as far as sense contact, all occur simultaneously. It's not that we become aware of mind and matter, *nāmarūpa*, and then become aware of one of the sense bases and then the snippet of data from the outside world. Instead, we become conscious of all of these in the one moment. The usual way to say this is that they all arise simultaneously. We can't separate them in time, but we can examine our experience at any one time and tease out these various strands within the experience.

Curiously, sense contact and feeling are also part of *nāma*. A simple mechanical understanding of dependent origination would suggest that since *nāma* supports contact and feeling, it can't also contain them. But the reality in which we live isn't so simple.

Think of an ecosystem. The top predators, let's say owls, depend on there being mice to prey upon. The mice depend on there being seeds to eat. The seeds depend on there being plants to develop them. The plants depend on the soil. The soil needs the nutrient from owl and mouse droppings to be fertile. The dependence is intertwined rather than linear. Everything depends on everything else. If the owls disappear, the mouse population would explode, eating all the seeds, resulting in famine and devastation. So the owls, in one sense, support themselves, support the system by feeding off it.

In the same way, contact and feeling support themselves because they are part of *nāma*, the mental component underlying the sense bases. The sound that I'm hearing forms part of the mind that listens. Although the sound vibrations come from, for example, a bird singing, the sound I hear is internal and subjective. It's a purely mental phenomenon, an aspect of the mind that listens. Looked at from the point of view of experience, sound isn't external. It occurs within the mind, within consciousness.

Similarly, the evaluation of the sound as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral is a mental process. It forms part of the mind that listens to the sound, feels it as pleasant.

While this complexity might seem daunting we can use it to our advantage. For example, it helps to lessen our sense of separation from the world. If sounds are within me, forming part of my basic mentality, why not try to live more peacefully with them?

If they sound pleasant to my ears, it evokes gratitude to reflect that the pleasant feeling is forming part of my mental make-up at this moment, helping me to see the world in a more positive way. If it's the grating noise from a jackhammer that I'm hearing, I'll have more compassion for myself when I reflect that the unpleasant feeling is coursing within me, affecting me at my core. If it's the background hum of the fridge I'm hearing, its evaluation in neutral tones forms part of the quietness in my own mental background. Noticing this invites me to time off from busyness and spend a few moments in refrigerator-humming meditation.

What I'm saying, basically, is that knowing sense contact and feeling are in here, part of our subjective mental world, as opposed to out there, helps to draw attention inwards, steady the mind on these very sensations and the feelings they evoke. The more we can steady the mind, the more we foster positive qualities like mindfulness, compassion, gratitude, tranquillity. At the same time, we're letting go of our usual urges towards reactivity, restlessness, doubt and other hindrances.

The Buddha then asks what *nāma rūpa* depends on and answers that consciousness is their proximate cause. Consciousness, *viññāṇa* in Pali, describes awareness at any one point of the six sense doors. A useful analogy is a mental screen. Consciousness is the screen itself, while sense contact, *vedanā* and the other components of mind, such as attention and intention, are the images that appear on the screen.

Imagine you're in a cinema. If the screen suddenly disappeared you wouldn't see the film. The light from the projector would pass on through, disappear into blackness. Similarly the ears could be ringing with the vibrations from a rock concert but because we're fast asleep the sounds disappear into the vast silence of unconsciousness.

Although in this sutta the Buddha describes consciousness as the condition upon which *nāma rūpa* rests, in another sutta the two are described as interdependent. Consciousness depends on *nāma rūpa* as much as *nāma rūpa* on consciousness. Sāriputta, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, gives the analogy of two sheaves of wheat resting against one another. If you take out one, the other collapses. Likewise for consciousness and *nāma rūpa*. The screen of consciousness is needed to play the film of *nāma rūpa*. The film contains mental factors like intention and attention which are needed to beget the screen. You could call it an eco-friendly screen. It only comes into being when there's a film to play. It decomposes instantly when it's not needed.

The Buddha then asks, what is it that underlies consciousness? The answer is habitual formations. As the term suggests, these are the habits we develop as we repeat patterns of thought, speech and behaviour. A river cuts a channel through rock as it rushes from its source to the open sea. Similarly, as ignorance rushes toward *dukkha*, our

thoughts, speech and actions cut out a *saṅkhāra*, a channel through which our mental and physical energies can flow. The more often we repeat a pattern of thought, speech or action, the deeper that channel cuts, making it ever more likely that ignorance will choose that channel in order to flow to *dukkha*.

Saṅkhāra comes in three categories. One relates to the mental formations of perception and feeling. We tend to see and feel the world in habitual ways. For example, we speak of people with a negative disposition, choosing fearful perceptions, detecting hostility in the most innocent remark. This is all stemming from a *saṅkhāra* of unpleasant feeling, perceptions of danger. Others have an optimistic disposition, seeing the best in people and situations. Insofar as this is based on ignorance, what we're looking out for is worldly happiness. We see the best, not because of admiration or appreciation, but because we're used to feeding off the best that the world has to offer. When we walk into a party, we see the drinks counter, the food buffet, the most attractive people. A person with a negative disposition would have seen the messy, half-finished plates of food, heard insincerity in every peal of laughter. The deluded optimist usually manages to get the best out of situations, never notice the mess they're leaving for others to clear up.

Then, there are those who habitually choose neutral feelings and the perceptions of indifference which support neutrality. When they walk into the room, they see neither the drinks cabinet nor the dirty plates. None of that matters very much. They might sidle into the first group that they see, accept whatever food and drink they're offered, play safe in conversation, quickly forgetting the names of whoever they're introduced to. The whole evening leaves only a vague impression on consciousness, makes little or no impact on their lives. Thus, the channel leading from ignorance to *dukkha* cuts a bit deeper, into the groove of neutrality and indifference.

You might recognise these crude portraits of optimism, pessimism and indifference as the Buddhist description of the three personality types based on greed, hatred or delusion. It's interesting to reflect that underlying the will which drives us along roots of greed, hatred or delusion are habits of feelings and perception.

It gets a bit mysterious here because *saṅkhāras* underlie consciousness and *nāma rūpa*, implying that they exist outside the world of mind and matter. *Saṅkhāras* are bound up with another somewhat mysterious phenomenon in Buddhism, *kamma*. *Kamma* and *saṅkhāra* are usually illustrated by analogy to seeds and fruit. Whatever desire we choose to act upon sows a seed of *kamma*, which will later ripen as a fruit, a *saṅkhāra*, which prompts us to fulfil that desire again. While a seed and its fruit are

directly linked in a material way, the link between our deeds and the *saṅkhāra* that result from them is immaterial. The Buddha warns us that the workings of *kamma* are beyond human understanding.

Ultimately, *kamma* and *saṅkhāra* lie in the realm of mystery, but one way to picture the link is to say that the doing of any deed results in a potential for its own repetition, a potential which underlies consciousness. We could use the analogy of a ghost. We are haunted by our past actions, speech and thoughts. But this isn't just a horror story. Many of these ghosts serve us well on the spiritual path. Thoughts, words and deeds stemming from wisdom and *mettā* also want to impress themselves into consciousness and strengthen with each moment of mindfulness.

So far we've been looking at the *saṅkhāra* of mental habits, the ghostly image of feelings and perceptions we've developed through favouring certain feelings and perceptions, the optimist favouring pleasant feelings, happy perceptions, the pessimist favouring unpleasant feeling, fearful or hostile perceptions and so on. Another variety of *saṅkhāra* concerns verbal formations, our habits not only of speech but of directed thought and evaluation. Thoughts reflect how we conceive of the world. They rely on concepts, ideas.

A baby doesn't think about what they're going to have for dinner. They just know when they're hungry and whether or not they like what's coming into their mouth. They live in immediate reality. Sensations, feelings, impulses of wanting and not wanting, simple perceptions like blueness, warmth, ease, unease. Gradually perceptions bundle together to reveal patterns. A lot of whiteness with some yellowness at one end turns into warm sweetness on the tongue and a filling of the belly. The concept of a feeding bottle starts to form as a very desirable pattern that is much more likely to happen if I cry loudly. And so we slowly learn how to manipulate the masses of sensory information that impinges on us each moment so as to get more of what makes us feel good and avoid what makes us feel bad.

To manipulate the world like this, we need concepts. We need to stand back from immediate experience and make sense of it. We take a multitude of passing sensations and weave them into a concept. Feeding bottle, mummy, blanket. As we grow older, the level of abstraction increases so that we can think about governments, human rights, Buddhism. All of this mental activity happens when verbal *saṅkhāra* underlie consciousness.

The ability to abstract, to conceptualise, allows us make sense of our lives, choose a career, affect the world for good or evil, follow a spiritual path. We obviously don't want to destroy that ability. But we don't want to be enslaved by it either, unable to follow a

single breath without spinning off into a stream of thought. We don't want to be forever haunted by the ghosts of our past thoughts, forever rehearsing what we'll say, repeating our opinions about this and that. We do this by sitting in meditation, again and again dropping the latest line of thought, choosing instead to let awareness dwell in that more immediate, non-conceptual reality of sensation and feeling.

This is to strengthen the habitual formation in the third variety of *saṅkhāra*, bodily formations. These are our physical habits, the way we walk, our facial expression, our nervous twitches. As we sit in meditation, the most predominant habit is the breath. Breathing forms the basis for biological life. When we stop breathing, we die. Of course, other functions like heartbeat are also essential, but the breath is the one under voluntary control. It's a habit we initiate at birth and continually repeat until death.

The Buddha places great emphasis on mindfulness of breathing. It's the first exercise in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. After a rains retreat, when a disciple asks him about his meditation, the Buddha responds that he spent most of the time being mindful of breathing. With three flavours of *saṅkhāra* to choose between, verbal formations, mental formations and bodily formations, the Buddha chose the latter as the basis for consciousness during retreat. The *saṅkhāra* of directed thought would have been unnecessary. He'd long since figured out the Dhamma. He didn't need to reflect on anything. The mental formation of pleasant feeling and perception would have allowed consciousness to establish itself in jhāna, a very restful state of deep concentration. We might think he would choose to spend his retreat in the freedom of Nibbāna or one of those sublime states of jhāna.

But no, he deliberately chose to spend the months of the rains retreat being conscious of the in and out breath. Who knows why? My guess is that it strengthened his will to live to the ripe old age of 80. I like to think of him allowing the ghosts of his previous breaths draw the infinite wisdom of Nirvāṇa into his human form. I'm speculating here. All we know is that the Buddha places great emphasis on the use of this *saṅkhāra* to build mindfulness of breathing and that he chose to spend the months of the rains retreat doing this himself. So it's certainly a *saṅkhāra* that can be used wisely and perhaps, who knows, is a way to strengthen our life energy, our will to live.

The Buddha then asks what underlies *saṅkhāra* and answers that they are born and produced from ignorance. It's only because we don't fully understand how suffering is caused that we let *saṅkhāras* come out of potential and into consciousness. Ignorance is our basic problem. The Buddha never lists anything else, original sin or whatever underlying ignorance. We eradicate ignorance by gaining wisdom. We gain wisdom by experiencing reality directly, not through the filters of conceptual thought. Mindfulness

educates us as to the true nature of the world. Each up-close, touchy-feely encounter with experience shows that craving is feeding dissatisfaction, *dukkha*. The deeper we let this truth sink in, the less we allow our *saṅkhāra* ghosts to haunt us. We learn to hold off till an inkling of wisdom becomes conscious, cutting out new pathways for our speech, actions and thoughts. Pathways that reflect the Dhamma, that take account of the fact that everything is in a constant process of creation and decay.

Having followed the Buddha's analysis of our problem down to its base, ignorance, let's recap. To undermine delusion that Sati described so well, but I think we all have to admit to, the Buddha first asks us to drop below the level of conceptual thought and see experience as a series of happenings, a dynamic sequence of events. Secondly, he wants us to see that events are being continually nourished by craving. Ultimately, everything we experience on this side of enlightenment, anyhow, has craving as its source. The third thing he wants us to clarify is that things die away naturally once the supportive conditions are removed. This is good news. It means that we can put an end to our foolish craving. We don't have to tackle craving head on, stop ourselves desiring this or resisting that. Instead we can find out what conditions allow craving to come about in the first place. As we undermine these, craving dies out quite naturally.

That's the point of teaching us about the chain of conditions underlying craving. The better we get to know these, the more skilled we get at removing the supportive structure within us that binds us to suffering. If you're looking for a very practical place to start, why not investigate the first point that the Buddha puts to his disciples? When the mind quietens in meditation, ask yourself whether your experience could be described by the phrase, this has come to be.

May our practice liberate us from craving and bring us to the end of suffering.

Divine Abiding, d. Appreciative Joy, Muditā - read by Therese Caherty

Noirin Sheahan · 40 min

In this fourth talk on the brahmavihāras (divine abidings), Noirin Sheahan explores muditā - appreciative joy or sympathetic joy. Drawing from the Mahāmaṅgala Sutta's list of blessings, she shows how muditā allows us to celebrate the happiness of others and appreciate the good conditions supporting our Dhamma practice.

Noirin addresses the misconception that Buddhism dismisses worldly joy, explaining how the Buddha himself remembered the 'blameless joy' of his childhood meditation under the rose apple tree. She distinguishes between pīti (joy as a factor of awakening that arises from pursuing truth) and muditā (joy that responds to life's beauty and goodness).

The talk covers muditā's enemies: jealousy and denigration (far enemies) that shut out joy, and excitement and excess (near enemies) that cling too tightly to it. Noirin offers practical guidance for cultivating muditā toward ourselves and others, emphasizing how appreciating our own good deeds builds the self-confidence needed for liberation while avoiding the trap of vanity or self-attachment.

For the past few evenings, I've been talking about the Brahma Vihara, the beautiful states of mind and heart expressed when we're in harmony with the world. The basis is *metta* or goodwill. We wish all beings to be happy, but *metta* doesn't make us smile with delight in all circumstances. The intelligence we cultivate in Vipassanā is also very much to the fore and we are acutely aware of the ever-present potential for suffering and the need to take care that we don't unwittingly get the wheel turning.

As we learn to acknowledge and bear with our emotions in Vipassanā, we are better able to tune into the emotional tone of various situations that we find in our daily lives. Then we can tailor our goodwill towards compassion, *mudita* or equanimity so as to fit in with different circumstances.

Suppose you're meeting a friend for coffee. You're feeling bright and breezy and giving silent good wishes to everyone in the restaurant. Then you see your friend coming and, to your surprise, you see them looking weary and glum. The simple *metta* wish, may you be happy, just doesn't fit. It doesn't show any sensitivity to the situation. You might prefer if they'd feel bright and breezy to match your own mood, but that wish is out of kilter with their present reality.

So you have to be prepared to let go of your bright and breezy mood and instead take into consideration that something may be amiss. As you let your mood change from brightness to concern, your goodwill can take on the hue of compassion. This more sombre form of goodwill fits when you're aware of witnessing some degree of suffering. The phrase, may you be free from suffering, acknowledges both the suffering and your friend's potential to find freedom. Forming this good wish while you watch them approach means your tone of voice and body language will express empathy and care for whatever's troubling them.

To take another example, suppose you're walking down a street wishing strangers well as they pass by, but something catches your eye and in a dark alley you see someone squatting on the pavement injecting drugs into a vein. Again, the straightforward metta wish, may you be happy, just doesn't work here. It would be glossing over the reality, refusing to engage with the human tragedy you're witnessing. The wish may you be free from suffering fits better as this is certainly a situation of suffering and it's possible that the person is suffering very deeply. But it doesn't acknowledge the kernel of the problem that as far as we can judge the person is making things worse for themselves by drug addiction.

Equanimity is the Brahma Vihara which allows us to cope with what we don't want and judge as wrong. It accommodates both good and evil. The understanding of *kamma* provides a channel for equanimous good wishes, such as, may you be able to bear with the kamma you are creating. Or it could help to phrase the wish in more mundane terms, such as, may you stop harming yourself. Or may you learn to cope with your challenges more skillfully.

Now let's say you've made your good wishes for the person shooting drugs and have recovered your good humour and are back to wishing well to strangers as you pass them by. Then you spy a couple with their arms around one another, obviously deeply in love. Once again, the metta wish, may you be happy, doesn't fit as they're already so obviously happy. So they don't need your good wishes on that account. In this case, you need to form your good wishes in a way that acknowledges and honours their existing happiness. This brings us to *mudita* or appreciative joy which is the Brahma Vihara I want to talk about tonight.

Mudita tunes into our natural human capacity for joy and gives us a skillful way to build on that. The classic phrase to cultivate *mudita* is may your happiness continue, may your happiness increase. If your *mudita* channels are open you'll be delighted for them and get a little shot of joy yourself into the bargain. And as you pass them by and

continue wishing well to those all around your good wishes will have an extra animation. With *mudita* happiness is multiplied. The happiness of the couple became your happiness. *Mudita* is all about appreciating the good things in life.

Buddhism tends to have a bad reputation in this department because of the emphasis on the first noble truth of *dukkha*. But joy is also very much part of the Dhamma. It will certainly be there when we're fully developed, as described in this verse from the Dhammapada: "Happy indeed we live, we who possess nothing. Feeders on joy we shall be, like the radiant gods."

But joy isn't only when we've reached such an exalted state. After spending years doing mortification practices and deciding they led nowhere, the Buddha then remembered his joyful experience as a child under the rose apple tree watching his father ploughing. The mortification practices had dismissed joy as worthless but now the Buddha questioned himself on this. He realised the joy he had experienced wasn't to do with attachment to the world but was what he described as a blameless joy. He decided he'd no longer dismiss that and instead would actively cultivate it as an aid to meditation.

Thus we have joy as a factor of enlightenment. The Pali term for this is *pīti*. In this case, joy emerges from fascination with the pursuit of truth. We're glad to be seeking out and sensing the path to freedom. It's not linked to anything specific in life, like seeing a couple in love. *Mudita*, on the other hand, arises when we are touched by the beauty of life. Young love, the birth of a baby, the smile of a friend. It's the response of gladness to the good things in life.

It can be a bit confusing. In meditation we rejoice in freedom, letting go of our attachments in life. In *mudita* we rejoice in life itself. Is there not a contradiction? To embrace both sources of joy is part of our path to freedom. For example we need families to help us through infancy and childhood. We need some level of education to be able to hear and understand the Dhamma. We need a stable society to give us the possibility of retreat centers where we can practice meditation. And of course we need food, clean air, water, medicine to keep us alive until our moment of enlightenment when we fully understand that which goes beyond life and death.

Although freedom, *Nibbāna*, is not dependent on education or families or a stable society, we can only find our path to freedom in the midst of all these. At one level, *mudita* can be seen as a thank you to all the conditions that allow for ourselves and others to tread the path to freedom.

Mudita builds on our natural *joie de vivre*. As babies, we took delight in seeing faces we recognised, playing with whoever and whatever came our way, in food and comfort and being able to explore and learn and so on. This delight only led to *dukkha* because of attachment, the mistake of believing we could control and own all the lovely stuff. But the delight itself animated us, let us develop confidence and trust, help to smile and make connections and learn to communicate.

Mudita cultivates delight with all its benefits for our psyche and perhaps also for our bodies without the delusion of attachment. Our baby's capacity for delight is still there, even though it might by now seem buried under tons of depression and anxiety. To recapture our *joie de vivre*, we need to reflect on what really nurtures us and make a deliberate attempt to appreciate all these.

The Mahamangala Sutta, which we chant last thing at night, gives the Buddha's list of things we can rejoice in. He places associating with wise companions first among the list of great blessings. If you have a meditation group, you're really lucky. Not only does it get you onto the cushion regularly, it also gives you the chance to discuss the Dhamma and how it applies to the many challenges in life. Trying to put our understanding into words really helps it sharpen. It can be uncomfortable as we only notice all our confusions when we try to put our vague notions into a string of words. But every attempt is worthwhile for both you and your friends. Together you can help each other sort through some of the confusions and let each person's unique perspective become part of the group wisdom. Try making the wish, may our happiness continue, may our happiness increase, whenever you meet up with your group.

The next on the list is residing in a suitable place, meaning somewhere that encourages and supports us in our practice. So certainly Satipanya fits the bill. But your own home can be conducive to meditation practice too. For some people, making a small shrine helps or setting aside a room for meditation. For me, the main thing has been to establish the habit of a daily practice. Over the years, this became more and more central to my life, a deep source of refuge. After a challenging day at work it was such a relief to know that in the evening I could close the door behind me and let meditation clean out the layer of fractious energy that had built up over the day.

So if we're lucky enough to have a home we have a deep reason to rejoice. Caring for our home, keeping it clean and tidy, and adding touches of beauty are also part of mudita practice, a way of saying thank you for this precious gift. Beauty might seem unnecessary. After all, we're cultivating equanimity, so why should we care whether things are drab or pretty? But that line of thinking is drawing us towards indifference

rather than equanimity. It encourages a don't care, doesn't matter attitude to the world, whereas true equanimity only exists within a deep care for the world. Beautifying our surroundings is a way to express that care.

It also shows sensitivity to the way the human body and psyche thrive on pleasure. The feelings we recognise as pleasant *vedanā* have a soothing effect on our bodies and mind. I imagine various hormones are released to calm our nervous systems. Why not give ourselves every opportunity for such benefits?

The Buddha appreciated beauty. In the Parinibbāna Sutta, which tracks the last stages of his life, we find him wandering from one shrine to another. Along the way, he says to Ānanda, "Come, Ānanda, let us go to Vesāli. Pleasant, Ānanda, is Vesāli. Pleasant are the shrines of Udena, Gotamaka, Sattambaka, Bahuputta, Sārandada and Cāpāla." In fact, he repeats this a number of times as he moves from shrine to shrine, as if the memory of their beauty meant a lot to him.

You can imagine the effort it would have taken for a dying man of 80 years to walk from place to place, and yet this is how he spent his last days. The way he kept repeating the list of beautiful shrines suggests their memory gave him energy for the journey. We can take this as encouragement to adorn our homes and whatever we value as supporting us in life.

And of course our home wouldn't exist if it weren't for all the supporting social structures around. Roads, shops, sewage pipes and electricity, as well as courts of law that uphold our right to lock the door behind us and meditate. Every aspect of the society we live in contributes something to the fact that we have time and space to practice, Dhamma books to read, Dhamma talks to listen to. Think of the enormous web of conditions that allowed Buddhist teachings reach our Western ears. Seeing things this way, any contribution we make towards society can be done in the spirit of *mudita*.

Say the water pressure drops and we have to get onto the local council to get it sorted. Generally, we think of this as a real pain in the neck. But just think of what a gift it is to have fresh water on tap. It was my mother's 90th birthday recently, and as part of this, she decided to write up the story of her life. When she was young, the family water had to be drawn from a spring in a boggy field a good distance from the house. And if you wanted it heated, it was a question of lighting the fire and pouring the buckets of water into a cauldron for a few hours.

Reflecting on how much extra time we get because of not having to walk miles to collect water from a well each day, this might bring a sense of gratitude into our dealings with the council. We might even take little shots of hope and joy away with us every time we get a helpful response.

Now of course you could argue that rejoicing in your local council and your home and meditation group is only going to lead to dukkha when these go the way of all earthly phenomena and eventually fall apart. That line of thinking represents fear of attachment, not wisdom. Our problem is that we're already deeply attached to our possessions, friends, activities, as well as to our social status as householders and therefore deserving of running water in our taps. Deciding not to rejoice in these won't help matters at all.

We only learn the art of non-attachment by experiencing the pain that comes when these things fall apart. So we might as well go through that pain for the sake of worthy attachments, like all those the Buddha suggests. And, as we get more and more involved in the meditation group, we'll find our buttons being pushed left, right and centre. All this shows us our attachment to personality styles, ideas of how the group should be run, interpretations of the Dhamma, preferences for meditation techniques and so on.

If we didn't put any effort into bonding with the group, we could just float in and out of the meetings, congratulating ourselves on our equanimity and raising our eyes to heaven when we hear squabbles among the more established members. But this is to mistake indifference for equanimity. We only learn true equanimity by putting our heart into our activities, making deep connections and bearing with any reactionary pain as part of our learning curve. Mudita helps us open our hearts to form those essential connections.

Next on the Buddha's list is the joy at having done meritorious actions. We easily miss this source of mudita. Say, for example, we help an elderly person cross the road. It would be very easy to dismiss this with words like, that was nothing, anyone would have done the same thing. But according to the Buddha, we are to rejoice at every good deed. We need to say well done to ourselves for any small act of kindness or generosity.

I found this really helped with my recovery from laryngectomy. I couldn't find any joy in my new state until it occurred to me to think of my role in life as someone who cared for a laryngectomy. I started to see every little thing I had to do, cleaning the various tubes, taking medicine, doing exercises, as acts of kindness for someone who had suffered laryngectomy. This gave me a new source of joy, and with that my self-confidence started to recover.

And when I recovered enough to be able to do a few things for others, these really meant a lot. It might just have been that I cut the veg for dinner or sorted through the recycling bins. Before the illness I wouldn't have paid much heed to these but after a long spell of being totally dependent I saw how much joy was on offer from being able to play a role in society.

Now of course we can get attached to our roles and get very uptight when we're not appreciated. But if we keep reminding ourselves that our motivation is kindness and congratulating ourselves for that kindness, this undercuts the attachment. Reflecting on the law of kamma helps with this. We shape our future happiness or unhappiness depending on the motivation for our actions. Acting out of kindness sows seeds for future happiness. Acting out of anger or meanness, sow seeds of unhappiness. Kamma is our only real possession in life. Everything else will fall apart in time. So we're looking after our future self really well when we do things out of kindness. And we can definitely congratulate ourselves for every good deed.

Further on in the Maṅgala Sutta, the Buddha includes supporting our families as a blessing in which to rejoice. There's so much involved in family life. All the daily chores of cooking and cleaning, educating children, caring for older parents. Can we make a practice of joy out of all this? For that, we have to spend quality time with our family, rather than let it all become a burden of hard work. Eating together is one way of expressing value for one another, and activities like sports, playing cards, scrabble, crosswords, going for walks, whatever pastimes your family enjoys.

If we're not careful, TV can be a mind-numbing escape from interaction. But we can also make it a focus for shared enjoyment, chatting about the programme like they do on Gogglebox. Remember, kamma is about motivation, not the activity itself. If our motivation for watching TV is to have some relaxing and enjoyable time with our family, we're on the right track.

To help with this, we can inject little *mudita* wishes every now and again. "May our happiness continue. May our happiness increase." Having said that, we have to take care that our activities don't violate the precepts. We can't justify watching pornography or sadism by saying, "May my happiness continue, may my happiness increase." So we have to choose forms of entertainment which stimulate wonder, for example, or humour, or understanding of human nature, or appreciation of skill, and so on.

So the Buddha isn't asking us to neglect our families, homes or society for the sake of enlightenment. Instead, we bring all these within the definition of what is our path, by appreciating them and adding to their beauty or joy wherever possible, while we remind ourselves that they cannot be relied upon for lasting happiness. So we can find

any number of occasions for *mudita*, but it can be quite a challenge because earthly joys don't last forever and because we can't own them or control them to any meaningful degree. It can be quite poignant. This is why *mudita* can be quite a challenging *brahma vihara*.

I sometimes find myself preferring funerals to weddings, for example. There is some comfort in knowing it's okay to feel and express sorrow, whereas there can be a confusing disconnect when sadness is felt but it's not the appropriate emotion to express. At a wedding, for example, if we're feeling depressed, the effort to keep smiling and making small talk can be quite wearying.

The ephemeral nature of joy means that like all phenomena, it fades away moment after moment. Unless we have a background level of peace within ourselves, the experience of joy fading away can be so hard to bear that we find ways of excluding it altogether. This process underlies the far enemies of *mudita*, which centre around jealousy for other people's happiness and disparaging our own sources of happiness.

Many myths and legends illustrate the destructive power of jealousy. In the Bible we have the first record of murder when Cain killed his brother Abel out of jealousy for the favour God showed to Abel. And a bit later, Joseph is set upon by all ten of his elder brothers who are jealous of the love their father showers on his younger son. And Snow White, remember, was cast out of the palace by the jealous queen who couldn't bear to be judged less beautiful than her daughter. All these stories go on to illustrate how jealousy destroys the one who harbours it. Cain becoming an outcast, Joseph's brothers suffering famine and imprisonment, and the wicked queen having to dance herself to death in red hot slippers at Snow White's wedding.

Shakespeare gives a graphic illustration of the self-destructive power of jealousy when Iago warns Othello: "O beware, my lord, of jealousy. It is the green-eyed monster which does mock the meat it feeds on."

These epic stories show jealousy in the form of murderous rage, but its power can also drive the drip-drip destructiveness of peevishness. In fear of their success, we denigrate our rival's achievement as worthless. Caught up in the throes of jealousy, their success implies our failure and the only way to relieve our pain is to belittle their achievement. To the extent that we're identified with our skills and talents, we're in danger of jealousy when another exhibits a similar talent.

If you read *Little Women*, you'll remember the night Amy burned her sister Jo's precious manuscript in a fit of jealousy. The 1950 Nobel Prize was said to have been offered to Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla for their work in electromagnetism, but they both

refused to accept it if the other person was to be included. Jealousy can destroy any partnership, be it artistic, scientific, business or even religious. Devadatta's attempt to kill the Buddha being a prime example. Jealousy also ruins personal relationships. We want our partner to be totally bound up in us. If they enjoy someone else's company, we take it as betrayal. And of course, if they leave us for another, we're in an agony of hatred for both parties.

Practicing *mudita* for ourselves is a powerful antidote to jealousy. We build self-confidence by appreciating ourselves and especially every effort we make to create good *kamma* for ourselves. As we build our own sense of self-worth, we're less threatened by the talents or good fortune of others. Congratulating ourselves is in itself an exercise in *mudita*. It stirs joy and creates a healthy sense of ourselves as worthwhile. We need this healthy sense of self to sustain us on the path.

Sometimes we mistake the teaching on *anattā*, not-self, to mean that we shouldn't have any sense of self. So whenever we feel a sense of self, we condemn ourselves saying, "I shouldn't feel like this" or "I shouldn't be here." But the Buddha often uses the word "self" in a very positive way. For example, he says that if we truly care for ourselves we will practice the Dhamma. Let's face it, the teaching on *anattā* can be very confusing.

I like Bhikkhu Thanissaro's interpretation that sometimes the sense of self is appropriate and helps us along the path, and other times it leads to suffering. Our job is to get better and better at recognising whether we should let our sense of self help us do what we need to do, or whether it's one of those times when the sense of self is curling itself around some habit based on greed, aversion or delusion. In which case, of course, we need to let it go.

When our judgment tells us that what we're doing is wise, we strengthen the sense of self needed to follow through on the activity. But when we've done the activity and the self wants to do it again, and again for no good reason, then it's time to accept the truth of *anattā* and let that sense of self dissolve.

So the self is something to care for, according to the Buddha. The only thing we have to worry about is making the mistake of expecting it to give us permanent happiness. Like everything else in this phenomenal universe, it is temporary and contingent. But of all the temporary contingent entities we find here, the self is the most important, the one we must cherish most deeply. To practice the Dhamma is to care deeply for oneself. We give ourselves the gift of mindfulness moment after moment, asking nothing in return.

As you all know, this is a tough challenge. We fortify ourselves for this challenge by appreciating every good deed we do, thanking ourselves for every effort we've made to practice, congratulating ourselves for everything we do well. This is strengthening the sense of self that does wise actions. Just as an ideal parent would praise and encourage their child, we must do the same for our poor, downtrodden selves.

Denigration is less dramatic than jealousy, but also powerfully destructive. In fact, it's such a quiet form of negativity, we hardly notice it. What's happening is that we see the joy as too little to bother appreciating. So we disparage our incredibly good fortune of living in a peaceful society, having shelter and enough to eat. We rarely remember to be grateful for the gift of the Dhamma or having friends to practice with. We only appreciate our health when it's gone.

Denigration also destroys relationships. Belittling a child or partner is a powerful form of bullying. It keeps the other from flourishing. The belittled party comes to believe in their worthlessness. Their personality and talents wither. Lucy illustrated this perfectly in a Peanuts comic strip, saying, "The trouble with you, Charlie Brown, is that you're you."

Apart from the interpersonal level, we regularly extend our disparaging remarks to collective aspects of human endeavour, remembering only the failures of institutions, politicians, technology and society. This bespeaks bitterness, resulting from our repeated attempts to shut joy out of our hearts.

For some strange reason, we're often encouraged culturally to denigrate ourselves. "I'm no good at this. I always make a mess of things. I can't ever get things right." In one sense, it's a form of appeasement, a way of saying, "I'm not a threat to you." It defines us as one of the gang. If we see it in that playful way, just a form of social pleasantries, then it's not harmful. But to the extent that we're really convinced of it, we're damaging ourselves.

None of us would like to be thought of as a bully, and yet the self-disparaging remarks we make to ourselves are actually those of a bully. We are shaming ourselves rather than seeing the liberating truth of anattā, that I cannot be expected to get everything right because conditions are always beyond my control. We can start to undo the habit of self-denigration by practising mudita for ourselves, saying, "Well done," even just for putting on our shoes mindfully, of course.

The near enemy of mudita is excitement and excess. It's natural to get excited when there's something to celebrate, but indulging this only brings the inevitable downer when the party's over. Think of the excess around Christmas and weddings. The same

for other supposedly religious celebrations. In Ireland many families go into huge debt over First Communion outfits, for example. Even when we invite a friend to tea, we can go over the top in preparations.

We mistake the daft excess for *mudita* because we're so happy about the celebration. But the joy goes to our head and escalates. In this heady exuberance we lose all sense of proportion. And in the frenetic excitement things can go badly wrong. Rivalries flare on matters of style and taste and who should sit where. For all these reasons, celebrations can be more stressful than happy.

Excessive exuberance turns sour very easily. Think of the riots that can follow football matches. I know one sister who hasn't spoken with her brother since an incident at her daughter's christening. In some forms of illness such as bipolar depression, the high stirred up by the celebration can lead to depression afterwards.

The far enemies of jealousy and denigration shut out joy, while the near enemies of excitement and excess cling to it. For *mudita*, we need to find the middle way, opening our hearts to the good things in life, while also relaxing, taking it easy, not building things out of proportion. It's a tightrope. One moment we're singing someone's praises, next we've exhausted all our goodwill and we're hoping they'll get their comeuppance. Just being aware which side of the tightrope we've fallen off tells us what needs to be cultivated just now.

In formal meditation, we start off by thinking of someone who has something to celebrate. For example, become a parent or grandparent, got a new job, won a prize. We then wish that their happiness will continue and increase. One variant on the classic phrase that I like is, "I'm happy that you're happy." This usually makes me feel happy. You could also try a simple, "Well done." Or in some cases, "Thank you" might fit the bill. Use whatever phrase best sustains your sense of appreciation when you think of that person.

It doesn't matter if you can't think of a reason for celebration. Imagine them smiling at a joke or enjoying a book or having coffee with a friend. The simplest daily joys can form the basis for *mudita*. As with all the *brahma vihara*, the self can be a particularly challenging category. Remember that any way that your life is going well—family, professional, social, hobbies, physical fitness, meditation practice—has taken hard work and commitment and deserves appreciation.

Sometimes a very simple image works best for me. I picture myself petting the dog or scattering breadcrumbs for the birds and I say, "Well done."

If, when you offer mudita to yourself, you feel vanity surface, just note this. We need to learn to take a healthy pride in our achievements. Once we're mindful of vanity, it won't spiral into self-delusion. Similarly, if you feel yourself contracting in jealousy or heady with excitement, just note these, set them aside and continue. Take a few breaths between good wishes to help you keep a balance and perspective.

If jealousy becomes overpowering, try turning attention to your own successes instead, murmuring, "Well done" to yourself for these. An alternative that I often find helpful is to encompass the jealousy within a good wish such as, "May our competition bring out the best in us both," or if the jealousy is about a personal relationship I've used the wish, "May your love for others help me to love them too."

And as usual, if the near or far enemies or any other hindrances get so overwhelming that none of the remedies works, take a *vipassanā* break and only return to mudita when you feel more balanced.

I want to finish off with a few words about working with the near and far enemies in daily life. For example, we easily get overexcited about celebrations, especially if we're involved in the planning stage. Noting this is the first and at times the hardest step. We can be so caught up in our plans that we forget to be any way mindful. They just take us over. Sooner or later, we'll notice that we're going over the top. Then we have to find strategies to calm ourselves. Mindful breaths, mindful footsteps, mindful actions, all these help.

Also, take a moment to think of the event you're celebrating. Ironically, we easily forget this in the midst of all the fussing. If it's a birthday party, take a moment to bring the person to mind and wish them a happy birthday. Very often, this brings us back down to earth for a while.

Often we fuss about the arrangements because we want to impress people. If you think that could be the case, take time for some self-directed goodwishes as a means of bolstering a healthy sense of your own value and protecting you from going into great excess.

While excitement shows particularly during the planning stage, the far enemies tend to show up during or in the aftermath of the celebration. As host, we might feel peeved that people aren't more appreciative. As guest, we might be fed up pretending we're happy. And as the door closes, both parties may be thinking, "Thank God that's over." Celebration isn't easy.

Often problems come about because we feel we ought to be happy. This puts us under pressure, which in itself quells a lot of happiness. So remember that we don't have to feel happy to practice mudita. The fact that we've taken the time to mark the occasion is enough. We can keep reminding ourselves of this whenever we feel jealousy, boredom or irritation setting in.

Say we're at a graduation party. After an hour or so we get fed up hearing about all the courses and exams they passed and wish they had just dropped out after the first day. Any effort to be happy on their account sets our teeth on edge. Our practice has to start with the small stuff.

Although our heart has closed down at the thought of our friend's great achievement, we might still be able to enjoy the food or see the beauty of a flower arrangement, or we might get a little lift by listening to the music that's playing in the background. Ironically, even our misery can be a basis for mudita, as we say, "Well done" to ourselves for every moment we endure in our efforts to celebrate our friend's achievement.

I hope this talk has helped clarify the importance of joy in the spiritual path. In meditation we have the joy of *pīti*, which results from interest in the process leading to liberation. It's what keeps us coming back to the cushion, back on retreat, despite all the *dukkha* we witness there. In daily life we're sustained by mudita, by the joy that arises naturally when things go well for us.

We cultivate mudita by paying deliberate attention to anything that makes life pleasant, inspiring or easy and getting into the habit of saying thank you and well done many times every day. An especially important aspect of mudita is to rejoice in our own good deeds and every attempt we make to practice meditation and incorporate the Dhamma into our lives. Congratulating ourselves for all these builds up the self-confidence we need to follow the path to liberation.

May our efforts to cultivate mudita bring joy to our lives and to the lives of those we love.

Exalted, Unexalted and Other Mind-states as Foundations for Right Awareness

Noirin Sheahan · 50 min

This dharma talk continues the exploration of the third foundation of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) - contemplation of mind (cittānupassanā). Noirin examines five crucial pairings of mind-states: contracted vs. distracted mind (relating to dullness/lethargy and restlessness); exalted vs. unexalted mind (connected to the four brahmavihāra); unsurpassed vs. surpassed mind (assessing developmental capacity); concentrated vs. unconcentrated mind (vicarā and vitakka levels); and liberated vs. unliberated mind (freedom from self-view). The talk illuminates how contracted mind gravitates toward pleasant feelings with subjective orientation ("this"), while distracted mind seeks escape from unpleasant feelings through objective searching ("that"). The exploration of exalted mind through metta practice reveals how awareness can expand to pervade space with loving-kindness, while unexalted states teach acceptance of limitations. The discussion of concentrated and unconcentrated mind uses the beautiful analogy of a bee tracking and alighting on flowers, showing how restlessness can paradoxically lead to deeper concentration. The final pairing addresses the liberated mind's freedom from self-identification - moments when experience continues without the constructed sense of "I" or "mine," revealing the characteristic of anattā (not-self).

Tonight I want to continue looking at the third section of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the contemplation of mind. Last night we looked at the first three exercises to know when the mind is or is not under the influence of greed, anger and delusion.

The next line of the Sutta reads: "One understands contracted mind as contracted mind and distracted mind as distracted mind." Contracted mind is understood as being under the influence of dullness and lethargy, while distracted mind is what we normally call restlessness.

We can distinguish this exercise from our work with the corresponding hindrances. When we keep falling asleep we're dealing with the hindrance of dullness and lethargy. The mind will be contracted but we won't be able to discern this because we're too dozy. After working mindfully with the hindrance for a period we may find that awareness steadies and we can observe the state quite closely. We still feel dozy, dull, but we're not asleep. We're aware of dullness. We might also be aware of the underlying feelings. They're usually pleasant feelings.

To rest attention in the third *satipaṭṭhāna*, we focus on the mind that knows these pleasant feelings. Contracted mind describes this very well. It only knows those pleasant feelings. It doesn't know anything else. It's as if we've retreated from the world, locked ourselves into a comforting stupor.

In contrast to this, we have distracted mind. When we're fidgeting or can't keep track of the multitude of thoughts that keep cropping up, then we're dealing with the hindrance of restlessness. Again, after working with this mindfully, awareness may come to rest in the third *satipaṭṭhāna*, and we can then experience the mind that's continually moving, searching for something. It's the same mind state in both cases, but because awareness is now focused on the mind state, those distractions can't get very far. They only disturb us to the extent necessary to register in awareness.

In contrast to the pleasant feelings associated with the contracted mind, the feelings associated with the distracted mind are usually unpleasant. The habit is to resist unpleasant feelings and so the mind moves around trying to get away from the disturbance, whereas in the case of dullness and lethargy the mind contracts around the underlying pleasant feelings.

The two states can also be contrasted in terms of subjectivity and objectivity. In the contracted mind, the mind is subjectively orientated. It's all me. There's no room for anything else, anything objective. If it could summon the energy to describe experience, it might say "this," because we use the word "this" to describe what's immediate, present, within my grasp, mine. This chair I'm sitting on, this idea I'm considering. We use the word "that" to describe something that's external, not part of me, that chair you're sitting on, that idea you're putting forward.

The distracted mind is looking outwards. Its orientation is objective. It's searching the external world to escape its own displeasure. Each moment it lands on something new to call "that." At times we might see the mind transiting between the two states. One moment it contracts around a pleasant feeling, perceives it as subjective, as this and mine. Next moment it detects an unpleasant feeling and bounces away, calling it that.

When awareness is steady enough to see these transitions, we get a chance to see how the mind constructs such radically different versions of reality based on feelings. Pleasant feelings are perceived as here, within our grasp, internal, mine. They are readily labelled as "this." These unpleasant feelings are perceived as external, objective, something that can be pushed away, not mine, labelled as "that."

This and that, subjectivity and objectivity, mine and not mine, they feed off one another. As the Buddha says in the discourse on the destruction of craving: "When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises." The better we can steady awareness around contracted and distracted states of mind, the better we can see how craving causes us to construct two separate worlds. One is internal, contracted around pleasant feeling. The other is external, extensive, allowing the mind bounce from one object to another.

When we fully understand these minute movements of mind, we'll see through the delusion caused by craving. When consciousness stops even for a moment clinging to the idea of this self as the ultimate reference point for the world, then the multitude of "that's" – that person, that challenge, that obligation – also disappear and we're liberated from the stress of false view. It might only be momentary, but it punches a little hole in delusions.

Thus we should welcome lethargy, dullness and restlessness whenever they come our way. Work mindfully with them until the mind can rest in the third *satipaṭṭhāna*. Teach us what is meant by contracted and distracted mind and how we create our world out of pleasant and unpleasant feelings.

The next instruction is: "One understands exalted mind as exalted mind and unexalted mind as unexalted mind." An exalted mind, sometimes termed great mind, is based in one of the four *Brahmavihāra*, the divine abodes, the ways that wisdom manifests in the world. The divine abodes all have goodwill as their basis, wishing ourselves and others well.

Mettā, friendliness, is the form goodwill takes by default, when there is no especially joyful, sad or challenging atmosphere associated with the encounter. If we meet someone who is going through a hard time, goodwill takes the hue of compassion. We wish that their troubles might cease. When there's something to celebrate, goodwill takes on the flavour of *muditā*, appreciative joy. And when we come across limitations or unskillfulness in ourselves or others, the response is equanimity, a tender understanding and acceptance of worldly imperfection.

On this side of liberation, we'll often miss the mark in relationship, believe we're acting with pure goodwill, but in reality hooked by what's termed the near enemy of the *Brahmavihāra*. Friendliness is often mixed in with attachment. We're anxious to sustain the relationship, needing the other person's company, good humour, esteem, and so on. Often we don't even notice the subtle expectations we have of our friends. It's only when we feel let down that we realise how many strings we were attaching to our acts of friendship.

Pity can masquerade as compassion. We overblow the problem, underestimate the person's resources, forgetting that their essence has not been diminished by whatever misfortune has come their way. We think they can't cope without our help, but then get overwhelmed and feel burdened by responsibility.

The near enemy of *muditā* is excitement. We build too much out of the occasion, go to excess in our efforts to celebrate. Finally, we can mistake indifference for equanimity. When some challenge comes up in our relationship we ignore this or shrug our shoulders rather than feel whatever disappointment, fear or anger may have been evoked. Work through those feelings to acceptance of the limitations of the relationship.

To get to know the exalted mind we can practice *mettā* but with a degree of curiosity about our experience. You might experiment with the Buddha's guidance for *mettā* practice: "One dwells suffusing one quarter with a mind filled with loving kindness, then a second, then a third, and a fourth quarter. Thus one abides, suffusing the whole world, up, down and across, everywhere, all around, with a mind filled with loving-kindness, expanded, immeasurable, free from hatred and ill-will."

This doesn't mention any categories of people. In fact, it doesn't mention people at all, not even other beings. It puts aside the usual ideas of self and other that we use in *mettā* practice. Instead, we use the concept of space and radiate loving-kindness up, down and across, everywhere, all around.

Whatever this might involve at an ultimate level, we can also see this as an exercise in imagination. We're training ourselves to imagine a world pervaded with kindness. If we imagine this often enough, it will become our inner reality.

If and when *mettā* seems stable, we can become curious about the mind that practices *mettā*. The Buddha describes this as expanded, immeasurable. Can you sense how imagining space around you requires a mind that itself is spacious? The mind expands to meet the space it imagines.

But of course there will be challenges. Our imagination will reach limits where we cannot conceive of kindness. This shows us the unexalted mind. At times the unexalted mind involves some form of ill will. We project demons into the space around us instead of good wishes. So we get frightened if these demons are angry that they're preventing us practicing *mettā*. Or we might just turn away from the difficulty as the mind shrinks into dullness.

At other times, the unexalted mind may involve greed. We project an exalted, saintly image of ourselves into the space around and then believe ourselves to be this great person with a big open heart. We might also get excited by all the good deeds we could do and all the people we could benefit, in which case restlessness forms the basis for the unexalted mind.

Alternatively, when our imagination reaches its limit, we start wondering what's going on. Is there really all this space around me? Can I really fill it with *mettā*? In this case, the unexalted mind is based in the hindrance of doubt.

Because the Sutta asks us to get to know both the exalted and unexalted mind, we don't have to think of the latter as a failure. In fact, the more curious we can get about it, the better. The positive attitude helps us work through whichever hindrance emerges.

The unexalted mind isn't necessarily based on any of the hindrances. We can also experience this as quite peaceful, the mind as simply knowing. There isn't active goodwill being generated, but there's no ill will either.

The Buddha's pairing of exalted and unexalted mind helps us foster a beneficial relationship between these. At one moment we pervade the space around us with warm good wishes. The next moment we get curious about the mind that practices *mettā*. We sense the expanded consciousness, the exalted mind. Quietly the image of space filled with *mettā* disappears. For a while there is just the knowing mind. Awareness gradually lands on other aspects of the being who meditates. Feelings, body, perception, unexalted mind.

The memory of the vast *mettā*-filled space fosters acceptance of our conditional nature. Gratitude for the Dhamma which allows our being learn its true nature. *Mettā* flows into the being with unexalted mind until it is ready once again to pervade the space around it with goodwill. Thus unexalted mind can provide a skilful break during *mettā* practice, allowing us to rest and recharge our *mettā* batteries.

The next instruction is to understand unsurpassed mind as unsurpassed mind and surpassed mind as surpassed mind. This is often taken as referring to *jhāna* practices where the highest *jhāna* represents the unsurpassed mind.

In his book *Satipaṭṭhāna, a Practical Guide*, Anālayo suggests that this can also be used in *vipassanā*, asking ourselves: has the mind been developed to its maximum capacity for this particular meditation, or can we continue to develop?

The standard *vipassanā* instructions don't explicitly include developing the mind. We are simply to register what we experience without judgment. Within non-judgmental awareness the mind develops of its own accord. The factors of enlightenment strengthen as the mind moves through hindrances towards greater clarity and ease.

When the factors of enlightenment are strong we have the unsurpassed mind. There is mindfulness. We can maintain focus in present experience. We're not repeatedly getting lost in thought or falling asleep. There is concentration. We can focus on some aspect of experience and track this. There is equanimity. We're able to maintain an objective, balanced stance rather than being sucked in by desires identified by views and thoughts. There is tranquillity. Preferring calm to excitement, we keep dropping desires and aversions. There is energy. We have the will and resources needed to maintain mindfulness, concentration and the other factors of enlightenment. There is investigation. The mind is intelligent, curious, discerning. There is joy. We are interested in experience, glad to be learning the Dhamma.

This exercise in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta asks us to look back into that well-balanced mind, to recognise it as unsurpassed. The word unsurpassed might make the exercise seem impossible, as if we should be looking into the mind of a saint. But we can interpret it to mean that awareness can't detect a flaw that can't be fixed.

If awareness detects grasping, the factors of enlightenment can step up to put this right. For example, we could shift focus, let attention rest in the breath or other neutral calming sensations. Energy could be stepped up a gear in order to resist the pull of desire, the push of aversion. Mindfulness could become more alert to the fading away of experience, moment after moment, which helps us acknowledge the futility of grasping. Equanimity might draw attention back from detail to see the larger picture.

These adjustments happen naturally, organically, without forcing. The factors work together as a team to restore their formation. Paṇḍit's wild geese analogy is very useful here. At times their V-shaped formation gets disturbed, some flying too fast, others going too slow. But then the instinct for coordination comes to the fore. Various birds come forward, others fall back, until order is restored. The flock needs to get to their destination, and each individual is willing to fall into line with that overriding objective.

In the same way, the factors of enlightenment get scattered. For example, when we get too curious and fall prey to the desire to know and understand experience more clearly. Unwittingly, we start forcing our agenda, put ourselves under pressure to hurry towards enlightenment. This is the surpassed mind.

But mindfulness detects the problem and then the adjustments start: changing focus, widening attention, noticing that everything is always slipping away, fading out. Our overriding objective is to maintain the objective observer stance and so traits like curiosity and tranquillity take a back seat as the mind steadies itself to resist the pull of grasping.

If order can be restored, if we again sense awareness brushing against experience rather than digging in, shaping it, then we can again reflect that the mind at the moment is unsurpassed. It knows how to maintain its own objectivity.

Anālayo describes the unsurpassed mind as one which can continue to develop. For example, we can use the unsurpassed mind to develop one of the factors of enlightenment or a virtue like patience. Often we're developing wisdom. We're seeing that sensations and feelings, moods and emotions, thoughts and images, all experience arises and passes away, that any attempt to cling brings *dukkha*. In other words, we're learning about the three characteristics of existence: *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. Transience, unsatisfactoriness and not-self.

But there comes a stage when we can no longer sustain equanimity. The hindrances are threatening to overpower us, and we sense it best to draw the meditation to a close. Here we have an example of the surpassed mind, one which, using Anālayo's description, cannot be further developed. We've run out of meditative steam, need to let daily life recharge our batteries.

What I often do here is to make the determination to wait until there is equanimity in the movement from sitting to standing. For as long as I feel impatience, the desire to plunge straight into daily life, I keep relaxing, allowing that desire to burn off, reminding myself that this is the surpassed mind, the mind that has reached its limit of development, a worthy *satipaṭṭhāna* for mindfulness.

Aversions and judgments may emerge, but again I note these, reminding myself that this surpassed mind is what I have to work with in daily life, so I might as well make friends with it. At some stage I notice the mind readying itself to stand and the body starting to sway or the eyes to open. Until it happens I never know how the body will actually do the business of standing up. These movements are sensed as an equanimous follow-on to the earlier decision to bring the meditation to a close.

These final minutes of the meditation are an exercise in making peace with limitations, accepting that the mind has done its job and cannot be further developed in this meditation setting. The transition back into daily life is wiser and more peaceful as a result.

Knowing our limitations is a great asset in life, knowing when we need to stop pushing ourselves to achieve some goal, when we need to step back, rest, recharge our batteries. The label surpassed mind can also help us make peace with the mental limitations we detect in daily life. For example, when we sense the mind as dull or stuck or lazy. We might not even have enough energy to work out which of the hindrances is overpowering us. We just know we're not in the most wholesome condition. The phrase surpassed mind lets us put all such states into a box, helps us see them objectively, draw out the awareness which can then start to tease some wisdom out of the situation.

The next pairing is between the concentrated and unconcentrated mind. These refer to the two levels of concentration we encounter in *vipassanā*, termed *vicāra* and *vitakka* in Pāli. *Vitakka* is described as applied thought. Here we're making an effort to focus the mind. We could be trying to follow the breath. Images and fantasies keep intruding, and we have to keep reminding ourselves of our goal. The notes, rising, falling, provide that reminder, like a lasso we throw around our scattered mind, drawing it back home. The image of a bee seeking nectar from a flower is also used.

The flower is bobbing around in the breeze while the bee hovers a few inches away, tracking the flower to and fro, waiting for the exact moment to alight. When that opportunity comes, we have *vitakka*, described as sustained thought. This is a deeper, more restful level of concentration. Just as the bee is now being carried about by the flower, no longer needs to hover and track. We are being carried along by sensations and feelings, no longer needing any effort to maintain mindfulness.

When we're following this particular exercise on the contemplation of mind, we're not so much trying to focus attention on the breath or other object as detecting whether or not we're focused. Are we putting some effort into containing images and thoughts, gathering them in? Or is the mind resting, being carried along by present experience? This is especially useful if we sense poor concentration as a problem in meditation and that we're failing because we don't have good concentration. It takes the pressure off as it no longer matters what the level of concentration is, only that we know whether we have to make an effort or whether we're relaxing.

There are a number of other benefits to this exercise. One is that when we get interested in the unconcentrated mind we find we can now focus on this. So the lack of concentration actually leads to concentration. What I find is that the unconcentrated mind is divided. One desire chases a certain stream of thought, while another desire wants to chase another. The bee is hovering around a big bunch of flowers, can't decide which to alight upon. The general feeling of division is unpleasant, aversive, and thus we easily link this state with a sense of failure. Instead, we should simply recognise it as

unconcentrated mind and see it as a worthy *satipaṭṭhāna* exercise. A level of equanimity and tranquillity develops. This allows us make peace with the tendency towards restlessness, getting scattered.

Focusing on the concentrated mind, we sense the pleasure of tranquillity. Of course, there is the danger of identification with this pleasant feeling, thinking, I am calm, and then grasping to the feeling. So here we are seeing the opposite to restlessness, the mind closing up within a pleasant haze, growing dull and lethargic. The bee has landed on the flower, but is sucking it dry. You do sometimes see a bee going to sleep on a flower, and in the same way we can actually lose consciousness when the mind is very concentrated. We're still sitting upright, but not registering anything consciously.

Curiosity about the concentrated and unconcentrated mind prevents this closure and paradoxically I find I can actually start looking forward to losing concentration. I'm curious to discover what will be lost when concentration moves back to *vicāra*. What I sometimes find is the mind moving from subjectivity to objectivity. If you remember back to the Sutta on the destruction of craving, the Buddha asks us to study the relationship between this and that.

The concentrated mind, I find, is focusing on what it terms this, thinking of sensations and feelings as subjective, which is to be expected, as the feeling of a concentrated mind is pleasant. So we tend to think of this experience as me and mine. As concentration weakens, we notice unpleasant feelings which we label as that, as external, objective. Now we sense a division between the observer and the object. If there is enough equanimity, we can then focus more closely on the unpleasant sensations and concentration returns. We're again in the realm of subjectivity, but making peace with unpleasant feelings that we would normally externalise as some storyline about how badly the world treats us. The bee has alighted again, but on a thorny flower and needing constant encouragement not to fly off, to keep detecting the nectar that is on offer within the pain.

Thus, the pairing of concentrated and unconcentrated mind can develop a very helpful relationship between these two where the unconcentrated mind is recognized as an opportunity to expand our mental horizons to make peace with a world that doesn't satisfy. Rob Burbea, for many years the resident teacher at Gaia House, has a series of Dhamma talks titled *In Praise of Restlessness*, which I find very inspiring. He identifies the danger of overvaluing tranquillity so that we ignore anything that disturbs concentration. He uses Greek mythology to inspire us to value instead the mind that lacks tranquillity, struggles with concentration, seeing this as a valiant, heroic attempt to embrace the tragic, crazy world with all its contradictions.

The final pairing in this section of the Sutta is between the liberated and unliberated mind. Full liberation will only come at the moment of enlightenment. But the Buddha obviously wants us to practice this exercise before then. Anālayo suggests we interpret the liberated mind as one which is liberated from the view of self.

Our usual effort in *Vipassanā* is to be the objective observer, not interfering in any way, just observing. Bhante uses the analogy of a sailor on lookout duty. The sailor climbs up the mast to the crow's nest, a lookout post giving a broad overview of the ship and its surrounds. Without this lookout, the ship could strike rocks or run unprepared into a storm. In the same way, our position as objective observer lets us spot the telltale signs of desire, aversion, grasping. Instead of getting caught up in these, mindfulness lets us steer safely through the storm.

Here we have the unsurpassed mind. The factors of enlightenment are strong. However, we are identifying as the observer and to that extent bound up in the *dukkha* which comes with identification. We usually aren't aware of this attachment till we lose the observer position. As far as we know, we're just watching equanimously, not interfering. But when thoughts begin to get sticky again, we realise we're slipping from our lofty perch on the crow's nest, falling into the bedlam we've been watching from above.

Mindfulness of the *dukkha* which accompanies the fall from grace helps us lose attachment to the state of objective observer. It becomes easier to see the tough times when we get caught up and identified with thoughts and emotions as opportunities to develop compassion for our unenlightened condition.

At times, when the factors are strong and we're in our crow's nest, observing objectively, the sense of ourselves as observer can simply disappear. There are sensations and feelings, perceptions and mental states, but these are just happening of their own accord. They no longer seem to be happening to me. There's no central reference point for it all.

When we say that the sense of self disappears, this sounds like a form of death. But the disappearance is quiet, undramatic. It's not that there's a long struggle and we eventually surrender. It happens at times when we're not struggling, just watching. The sense of self is simply a mental construction. It's a perspective we're putting on experience, using our cognitive abilities. Cognition puts a shape on the millions of sensations, feelings, what we could call atoms of experience, registering each moment. It helps slow things down mentally, makes it all more manageable.

One of the ways we frame experience is through the concept of self. We identify some of the atoms as me or mine and some as yours or his or some other way outside ourselves. But this distinction is learned. As a baby we weren't able to do this so it's not essential to life. It takes effort to frame experience like this, although the process is so habitual we don't notice that it's actually voluntary. We're willing ourselves to see the world as either self or other. At times in meditation the mind relaxes, stops making that effort, and the sense of self quietly disappears.

This is the liberated mind, the experience of not-self, *anattā*. Sensations, feelings etc. continue to appear but we stop dividing these into boxes of mine or not mine. It's a joyful experience. We've dropped the burden of thinking of ourselves as someone with a future and a past and so many roles and responsibilities to uphold. In fact, there's seldom any desire to think. We're so riveted by present experience. Bhante uses the analogy of a baby who's so fascinated by what they're seeing that the jaw drops. They stare open-mouthed at the world in a state of total wonder.

Although we probably won't want to think, the Buddha wants us to reflect that we are experiencing a mind that's been liberated from the view of self. This can actually be a challenge, as the absence of self may not be immediately apparent. We might not be able to work out what's happening. We just know we're seeing things differently. Experience is felt more intensely. There's no interest in anything but present experience. But other than that, everything continues normally.

In her book, *The Experience of No Self*, Bernadette Roberts describes how she knew something had changed during a particular meditation, but couldn't work out what it was. She went about her daily business, she was a mother with teenage children, for a few days, till she suddenly realized that her sense of self had dropped away.

Although the absence of self does not immediately trouble us, reflecting on this may trouble us. We fear what we do not understand and thus the very uptight self might emerge wanting to know what this implies. How can I be absent? How can the world be surviving without me? And so a multitude of contradictory thoughts may surface. Rather than follow these, we should simply reflect that this is the unliberated mind and feel the push and pull of desire and aversion underlying our fears and doubts. As we work mindfully through our fear of *anattā*, we start to appreciate the joy and freedom of the state, trusting that nothing essential is lost when we stop framing experience in terms of I, me, mine.

At times we may be able to study the transition from liberated to unliberated or vice versa. We see the effort of will that goes into framing experience in terms of self. Notice the relaxation as we stop. We might think that the liberated mind is always superior to

the unliberated mind. But on this side of enlightenment anyhow, it is essential to be able to construct a sense of self at times. For example, we can learn to bring forth a sense of self that attaches firmly to notions of restraint in order to resist desires based in greed, hatred and delusion. When that work is done, our knowledge of the liberated mind helps us let go of attachment to the self who has just rescued us from this latest peril.

In summary then, this section of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta gives us five ways of probing the mind: asking whether it's contracted, meaning dull and lethargic, or distracted, restless, whether or not it's in an exalted state of goodwill, whether it's unsurpassed, can be developed further, or surpassed, has reached its limit for this session, whether it's concentrated. Has the bee landed on the flower, or is it hovering about, trying to track a flower that's bobbing about in the breeze? The final exercise is to ask whether the mind has been liberated from the sense of self, or whether we're identified as the observer.

For each pairing we have the refrain, three variations on the basic exercise. First, we have the option to practice externally, to notice these mind states in others. When we've detected our mind is now exalted, we can reflect others experience the exalted mind. And when we move to the unexalted state we can reflect others experience an unexalted mind. We can do this for all of the five pairings. Realising that these states are part of the general human condition will loosen attachment, help us feel less ashamed of what we're deeming the less worthy states, less proud of those we judge as a terrific achievement. It also strengthens our goodwill and respect for others when we reflect that they can experience states like exalted mind, unsurpassed mind and liberated mind.

The second option is to notice that these states arise and pass away. Again, this helps us let go of attachment. We might feel mightily proud of an unsurpassed mind. But if we reflect that this wasn't here a few minutes ago, we might also realise that this is just a temporary visitor. We should enjoy it while it's here, but not be too surprised when it fades away.

The final option is simply to note there is mind. We're no longer trying to identify whether the mind is concentrated or surpassed or in any of the other states. This final option requires no effort whatsoever beyond focusing on the mind, the knowing aspect of experience. We could use the Mahāsi note, knowing, knowing, to help maintain focus. The mind may pass through many of the states described, exalted, non-exalted, contracted, distracted, etc. We're letting all this happen quite naturally, organically. However, we're not making the effort to note exactly which state the mind is in. We're

getting to know the mind intuitively, rather than by deliberate reflections. This is actually our normal *Vipassanā* practice except that we're focusing on the mind, the knowing of experience, rather than our more usual focus on sensations and feelings.

Let's finish with a verse from the Dhammapada. Mind is the forerunner of all evil. Speak or act with wicked mind, then suffering follows, even as the wheel follows the hoof of the ox. Mind is the forerunner of all good. Speak or act with pure mind, then happiness follows, even as the shadow that never leaves.

First Noble Truth: There is Dukkha

Noirin Sheahan · 45 min

In this teaching on the Four Noble Truths, Noirin Sheahan examines the Buddha's first insight: the existence of dukkha (suffering/unsatisfactoriness). Rather than pessimism, this teaching offers the essential starting point for liberation. She explores dukkha's three manifestations: dukkha-dukkha (obvious suffering like illness, death, loss), anicca-dukkha (dissatisfaction arising from life's transient nature), and anattā-dukkha (existential angst from our lack of meaningful control).

Using vivid examples from daily life - holidays ending, meals finishing, books concluding - Noirin shows how anicca-dukkha permeates our experience through beginnings and endings. She demonstrates how our cultural avoidance of unpleasant realities prevents the deep love and understanding that transcends our preferences. Through meditation on breathing and walking, practitioners can explore how attachment to pleasant experiences and aversion to endings creates suffering.

The teaching also addresses anattā-dukkha, examining how the sense of self arises with effort and dissolves in peaceful moments. Noirin explains how perception constructs our reality, including our sense of self, and how understanding not-self doesn't mean annihilation but recognizing when different perceptions serve us wisely. This comprehensive exploration prepares practitioners for deeper investigation of suffering's roots and ultimate liberation.

The talks for the rest of the week will centre on the Four Noble Truths, which was the first teaching the Buddha gave after his enlightenment. He described these as his own insights into the nature of suffering and the process by which it is eliminated. When he gave this teaching, he added an injunction with each truth. These bring the teaching alive for us. We can live the Four Noble Truths.

So what are these truths the Buddha wants us to live by? The first is that life involves *dukkha*. The injunction here is to fully understand dukkha. The second truth states that desire is the cause of dukkha. The Buddha asks us to let go of desire. The third truth is the good news, that there is an end to dukkha. The injunction is to realise the end of dukkha. Finally, we have more good news, that there is a way to the end of dukkha, namely the noble eightfold path. The injunction is to follow this path.

Let's start off tonight with the first noble truth, the truth of dukkha. For people with only a superficial interest in Buddhism, this can be off-putting. It's easy to deride Buddhists as pessimists because of the focus on suffering. Our culture more often encourages us to ignore the unsavoury aspects of life. We don't like to discuss death, for example.

Just this morning, I was listening to a radio interview with four people who had lost their spouses. One man who had obviously had a very close relationship with his wife said his only regret was that they never discussed her death. They both knew she was dying but couldn't acknowledge it openly. He sensed her growing distant from him in her last weeks because of this gap between them. When asked why he didn't broach the subject, he said it was because he didn't know how. They had both tried so hard to be optimistic and positive, and he didn't know how to break through that pattern.

I think this is a good illustration of our cultural difficulty around opening to death and other unwelcome aspects of life. We just don't know how to open. We build up habits of optimism and cheerfulness to try to buoy ourselves up, but then get stuck in these habits and lose touch with our deeper reality. His regrets around not having spoken to his wife about her impending death also shows the trap of our focus on the positive. It prevents the development and expression of a love which transcends our wishes for how life should be.

It is ironic that the path to happiness starts with an understanding of unhappiness, but this was the Buddha's great insight. Once he fully understood the nature of suffering, he became completely free from suffering. He was untroubled, quiet at ease and content throughout all the vicissitudes of life, and even as he died a painful death from food poisoning. He was open and unsentimental about the fact that he was dying, and not a bit impressed with his cousin Ananda for weeping at the news. With characteristic pragmatism, he reminded Ananda that old worldly pleasures fade away. He was willing and able to teach right up to the moment of death, leaving his followers with the words: "All conditioned things have the nature to decay. Strive diligently for your liberation."

He described dukkha as coming in three flavours. Firstly, there is dukkha-dukkha, which is what we normally recognise as suffering: illness, pain, death, redundancy, financial ruin, old age, bereavement and so on. Then there is *anicca* dukkha, resulting from the transient nature of life. And finally there is *anattā* dukkha, the existential angst we can feel because we don't have any meaningful degree of control over our lives.

Dukkha-dukkha is the most difficult for us to deal with. We go through shock, anger, grief and so on before coming to terms with major life challenges. Dukkha-dukkha is inescapable. Even if we live a charmed life, we will someday have to die. And if we're lucky enough to have a long life, we'll have to negotiate our way through the various humiliations of old age along the way. For many people, this dukkha-dukkha is their only encounter with the limitations of life, and they can be really thrown off course by the death of a loved one, for example. The incidence of depression increases with age, and the risk of suicide is highest in the elderly.

As a way of preparing ourselves for the inevitable, we can practise on the milder forms of dukkha relating to anicca and anattā. Let's look at anicca dukkha first – the dissatisfaction we feel because of the transitory nature of life. We have loads of examples of this in our daily life. Take a holiday for example. We can get quite excited at the prospect, looking through the brochures, checking out the hotels, booking time off work. Then we're on holiday. It can take a day or two to settle and relax. If we're lucky, we'll enjoy ourselves and appreciate our stay. But how quickly that final day comes round when we have to pack and go home again. And there's still the hotel bill to be paid. Sometimes we're energised and refreshed by the holiday, chatting to our colleagues and friends about what we've seen, but eventually the gloss wears off and we're back to our daily routine again.

That's the essence of anicca dukkha, the dissatisfaction we feel because the good times just don't last forever. It can be quite subtle and we might not feel it as a major problem, just part of life, we say philosophically. But the Buddha's advice is not to dismiss the problem so readily. Take an interest in the ending and aftermath of the holiday as much as the exciting and relaxing times before and during the holiday.

We often find ways to ignore the slight downer at the end, planning the next holiday for example. The problem with ignoring the endings of all our happy times is that we get addicted to activity or other forms of escapism as a means of keeping our spirits up. We look to the future, the next exciting thing in life, to keep our mind off the fact that something we cared for has just ended. If we persist in this, keeping ourselves buoyed up and cheerful at all costs, then we will have no resources to deal with the inevitable dukkha-dukkha when it comes.

I first noticed anicca dukkha as I was reading a book. I was always a great reader and would never go anywhere without a book for company. At the hairdressers, on the bus, during coffee. So long as I had a book, I was happy. I was pretty well addicted to reading, you could say. And then one day, I suddenly became aware that the number of pages on the right, the unread pages, was less than the number of pages on the left. I

felt quite depressed by this. From then on, I began to dread turning each page. When I finished the book, I felt a real downer and also a sense of shame. I was suddenly aware that the pleasure from reading was transitory, that it ended with the book, and therefore couldn't satisfy me at any depth. I was ashamed of having devoted so much of my life to this false god. This was quite a shock for me, and it was years before I would read a book again.

If we look closely, we see everything is in transit. It arises, shows itself for a moment before passing away again. Take any meal, lunch for example. It can be hard work getting this started. We may have to do some shopping and then the cooking. At least we're buoyed up through this by the prospect of lunch. Then comes the nice bit, eating. And if there are others with us, this can be a lovely part of the day, a time to relax and chat. But how quickly it ends! And there's still the washing up to be done.

Although we prefer to fudge around endings, distracting ourselves with whatever is next on the horizon, the wiser approach is to use this opportunity to get to know dukkha. So how do you experience the ending of lunch? See how you feel before lunch and how eager you are for the first bite. Does your mood lift as your stomach fills? And then the ending. Are you still so enthusiastic when the plate shows those last messy smears of food? Or do you just feel you have to get the job done? Can you rest with whatever emotions might surface as you swallow the last bite?

I remember on the final day of a retreat at Gaia House how much I was looking forward to the evening bowl of soup and it was delicious. But as the bowl emptied my world actually seemed to fall apart. I wanted that soup to last forever. It seemed to hold all the goodness of life for me. How could I let it go? What would there be left in the world? A big gap yawned open inside me. For a moment I was very frightened, and then grief surfaced. The grief was actually a relief, and I began to acknowledge other losses in life. This was a good illustration of anicca dukkha for me, and how opening to it mindfully helps us work with the inescapable dukkha of life and death.

Each breath and footstep teaches us about anicca. Which do you prefer, the in-breath or the out-breath? Do you like to hold your breath? When I am anxious, I tend to gasp at the start of the in-breath and my confidence grows as I inhale. But then comes the moment when I have to let it all go again. I do my best to ignore the out-breath as I look forward to that moment when I can snatch another ray of hope that comes with the in-breath. This is anicca dukkha. Anxiety is prompting me to hold on to what I enjoy, the sense of possibility and hope that comes with each in-breath. But anxiety will not let me relax with the out-breath. Let go of hope? No way! Nowadays when anxiety strikes I can usually let myself feel the fear of letting go and find a thin thread of trust that pulls me

through. This comes from moments during previous out-breaths when I saw that letting go of hope does not mean the end of all hope. It simply releases hope to do its proper job of reassuring us deep down that all is well. In the words of Julian of Norwich, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

What about the footstep? Do you prefer the lifting, the moving or the placing? At first I could only sense the lifting. It thrilled me. I had a sense of soaring with the angels. I didn't notice anything about the rest of the step, so intent was I in looking forward to the next time I could lift my foot. As time went on, I also became fascinated by the moving. This was more wonderment than the soaring of angels. Could I feel anything? What was I feeling? How did I know my foot was moving? But the ending of the footstep was another matter entirely. I felt uncertain, unsteady as the foot came downwards, searching for the floor. And when the toe touched down, the lightness of that touch seemed totally unsatisfactory. Even with my full weight on the floor, I felt unhappy under that lovely moment of the heel rising, the foot peeling off the floor, when all my woes would end for another few moments.

What all this shows me is how addicted I am to new beginnings and how I prefer to ignore the uncertainty that comes with endings. I can see this at other levels of life. I love springtime but find it hard to appreciate the lovely colours of the fall because they represent the end of the summer. I'm a morning person. I love the purity of dawn, whereas I easily get agitated in the evenings. I can be good at getting projects going, exploring new territory, but find it hard to see them through to the end. I used to do quite a lot of hill walking, and to my surprise one day, I found I preferred the uphill climb to the downhill stroll. Going upwards, I had a sense of hope, a promise of some reward to come. Coming down, on the other hand, was literally that, a come down. There was nothing to anticipate.

The years of meditation practice have smoothed me out a bit. Just last year I noticed to my surprise that I was enjoying the ending of the footstep. It felt satisfying to put my foot down on the floor and let it take all my weight. A little bit of progress at last.

The study of anicca has also shown me how much delusion I can have about new beginnings. The sense of anticipation, hope and expectancy can rocket me into the new venture, all excited and thrilled and knowing this is going to be wonderful and that I'll be well able for the challenge. But when I eventually hit the ground, I'm looking around wondering how I got here and what I'm supposed to be doing. Nowadays, I'm better at noticing all those exciting feelings of expectancy and anticipation and steady myself on the launch pad, wait a bit to try to get some bearings before take-off.

I've noticed that there can be a lot of fear around new beginnings. Each one is a venture into the unknown. And I sense how my eagerness to start is a reaction to that fear, wanting to get rid of that scary unknown by filling it with activity. Endings too can frighten us with a sense of the unknown. Take my life and death bowl of soup after my retreat, for example. That ending scared me so. Again, it was fear of the unknown. The soup was known. How could it just end? Can what we know actually disappear, become unknown?

Working with the unknown is such a big part of our meditation practice. As we are drawn into the present moment we lose touch with the certainties sewn into our stories and sense the shifting sands beneath. What do we really know? Just sensations and feelings really and these are shifting and changing so fast it's hard to claim any real knowledge of them. While my body contacts the sensations, my mind is drawn towards a mental image I am making in my efforts to make sense of the experience. I imagine a big space in which the sensations are manifesting. It puzzles me, this space. Sensations seem to twinkle like stars in its vast emptiness. Now, what can we say about that emptiness, that space where sensations appear and into which they disappear? Not a lot, nothing perhaps. It can still frighten me to sense myself so close to such a vast unknown. Fear projects all kinds of monsters into it. But despite my best efforts at suspicion, fear and even panic, all I can say really is it has never lived up to my expectations. It has never, ever threatened me in any way. I am more and more willing to trust that it is truly and deeply non-harming.

In ordinary life, the unknown appears in our minds when we think about the future, the next moment. It's behind the door before we open it. Thoughts also connect us with the unknown. I think of a friend and wish them well. But where are they right now? I might have a nice image of them sitting in a garden, but ultimately I have to admit I don't know. How are they feeling? I haven't a clue. The amount we don't know far outweighs what we do know, where and how our friends and family are, what's going to happen tomorrow, next year, in twenty years. So we have to get used to the unknown if we're going to have any peace. Anicca, with its beginnings and endings, provides the perfect opportunity.

I've been describing the difficulties we experience due to anicca, but the truth of anicca can also be experienced as joyous. The flow of sensations as the foot peels off the floor can be exhilarating. The slight sways of the body as we walk can be fascinating. The smooth ripple of breath can be relaxing. We can watch and wonder as sensations and feelings stream through consciousness like water through a sieve. We can feel truly alive in the shifting flux. And when I worked through my latest bout of fear and anxiety

to make peace with the unknown, then it is delightful to let myself relax and let the breath come and go of its own accord, let emotions emerge and develop and fade away. The transience is thrilling. It's perfectly okay not to know what will happen next.

Intertwined with *anicca* is the experience of *anattā*, usually translated as not-self. This is a difficult truth to come to terms with. Our minds are deeply conditioned to think in terms of me and you and him and her and so on, and we find this shift in perspective to not-me, not-I, not-self quite perplexing. The negativity that can come with being perplexed, frustration, confusion, anxiety, etc., is one manifestation of *anattā dukkha*.

To my mind, the kernel of fear that forms *anicca dukkha* is fear of the unknown. By comparison, I think much of the *dukkha* associated with *anattā* revolves around fear of not understanding.

That can make us feel like small children at school, feeling stupid and ashamed because we don't understand our lessons, frightened the teacher and the other kids will jeer at us. So look out for these kinds of emotions when you're exploring *anattā*, even now as you listen to the talk, for example. If they surface, see can you model the kind of teacher kids love: patient, encouraging, prepared to stop the lessons to have some fun, and especially to notice and resist any tendency to put yourself down, hate yourself because of how slowly this teaching is sinking in, or judge yourself as stupid and so on. If that happens, definitely time to stop the *anattā* lesson and focus instead on those jeering kids or teachers that have popped up in your imagination to taunt you.

Back to the *anattā* lesson now. What do we mean when we say, "I am"? It easily trots off our lips. I am happy. I am cold. I am an engineer. I am meditating. A step closer to the truth of *anattā* would be to say, "There is a being who is happy, cold, etc., and by some magic this being's experience and life story are known." It's so tempting to add "by me" — to say, "This being's experience and life story are known by me." Let's try to bring this closer to the truth of *anattā*. There is a concept of me, myself, I, who knows this being. Our concepts are a mental construction derived from our perceptions of the world. That's essentially what the self is, according to the Buddha: a mental construction.

Perceptions are the mind's attempts to make sense of all the data it receives. We see a certain pattern of yellow colours and perceive a buttercup. We hear a jangling sound and perceive a doorbell. One teacher likens perception to a mental filing cabinet. Each bit of sensory information is put into its correct file. The ability to perceive helps us

simplify the vast amount of data bombarding our senses each moment. If we didn't have our filing cabinet, the paper would be strewn all over the room. It would be total confusion. We couldn't function.

Babies haven't yet learned to categorise experience in this way, and so have endless fun exploring their little world. Everything is new. As adults, we learn to ignore much of our sense input, as it's so quickly stowed away into its correct file, and we gladly believe that much of it can be labelled as unimportant. The ability to perceive is wonderful. We couldn't negotiate our way through the world without this simplification. But it's important to remember that it's a mental classification, a form of data processing that we do. Our perceptions are not inherent to the world but a construction in our minds.

Our perceptions can be wrong. We've probably all had the experience of mistaking a stranger for a friend because of some trick of the light. For a brief moment we see our friend. We may even stop to say hello. Then the scene changes and a stranger's face comes into view. The incoming data went into the wrong file. We can get quite a shock. Sometimes the opposite happens. Recently I was waiting at a station when my eyes were for some reason attracted towards a strange woman's face and I found myself staring at her. She stared back. It took a second to recognise a friend. We both started giggling. We hadn't been expecting to see one another there and the raw data got misclassified as the perception "stranger."

I had a very striking example of this one time on retreat here at Satipanya when I came into the meditation room. It was the original room before the extension and some of you may remember that Bhante kept the prayer plant on its tall table just beside the side door. The pair are now in the dining room so look out for this misperception if you stray into the dining room at night. The table is draped with a red cloth. There was no one in the shrine room and I crossed over in the semi-darkness and switched on the light by the shrine. As I turned back, eyes downcast, I glimpsed the red cloth brushing the floor and in an instant my mind built up a life-size image of Bhante standing beside the door. In my mind, I saw Bhante, gave a startled jump as I hadn't heard him come in, felt embarrassed at my jumpiness and was about to apologise before I realised I was about to address a pot plant.

Our perceptions are our best attempt to make sense of the world. They're influenced by our memories and expectations. They can be wrong. So it is with the perception of self. It can be wrong. At times it's an appropriate perception. It helps make sense of the

world. This is true in much of our daily lives. This being, I call me, is staying in the library so needs to get herself there at times. If I didn't have an ability to perceive myself as different to others who knows where I would end up.

But this perception is not the ultimate truth, according to the Buddha. There are times where a perception of not-self is more helpful. Take those times when we are avidly watching the flow of sensations and feelings. Then things start to feel sticky. We tighten around pleasant feelings, trying to hold on to them. The flow gets choked up. If we can relax and let go, sensations and feelings flow more easily again. If you look carefully, you will also notice that a sense of self arises when things get sticky and is released when sensations are flowing. This is a teaching on the truth of anattā: that the self arises depending on conditions. The particular condition needed to generate a sense of self is a pleasant or unpleasant feeling we cling to. We try to hold, amplify and prolong the pleasant; we try to get rid of the unpleasant.

If you look closely, the perception of self is associated with the pleasant feeling of control. We love to feel in control. It means we can do what we want. We're the boss. We especially want to feel in control of ourselves, our bodies, emotions, thoughts. We want to be in good humour when we're on holiday. We want to think positive when we're going for interview. We want our bodies to be able to move and function normally. When we can't meet these expectations, we can feel quite threatened.

Our language actually contains a hint of anattā when we describe these times as, "I'm not myself today." "She wasn't like herself at all." "He was beside himself with rage." What's actually happening here? When we look closely we see that when things are going well for us there is a pleasant feeling which we perceive as me and believe to be the control centre for our body, mind and life. When things go badly unpleasant feelings are generated which we push away thinking "this isn't me." We're frightened by the fact that things are going against our wishes and especially when we notice the unpleasant sensations and associated feelings are also manifesting in our bodies. Where is our precious control centre now? If you look carefully you will find it's boxed into the opposition to the way things are. Even though the whole world can look black and scary, there is still a tiny, pleasant feeling of holding onto control. So long as I can say no to what I don't want, I can persuade myself I'm still in control.

In general, the feeling of self accompanies any sense of effort. Any time you feel relatively peaceful in meditation, see whether there is a strong sense of self. Compare that to the times you feel yourself struggling. The hindrances come with a strong sense of self. When I'm struggling with physical pain, I feel my body straining away from the painful area, as if it's trying to divide itself in two: the painful part, sensed as not me,

and the part which pulls away, sensed as me. As I make peace with the pain, that sense of division subsides. Thus, physical pain provides one way for us to explore the truth of anattā.

All this can be very bewildering. Am I here? Am I not here? Do I exist? It can be quite frightening. Our sense of self is very precious and we can feel threatened by thoughts of not-self. We imagine we will be annihilated. The Buddha refused to answer questions of the type, "Do I exist? Do I not exist? Will I exist after death?" Patiently he repeated his insight that the sense of self emerges to fulfil our desires. I think of the sense of self as a psychophysical mechanism that energises and sculpts my mind and body to help me get what I want, get rid of what I don't want.

But when we are resting, when there isn't any enticing food to be found or any threats to cope with, we don't need central coordination. All the cells and organs work away themselves, just as they do in sleep. Unless we experience desire or aversion, no sense of self is formed. At these times, we often have no interest in the question, "Do I exist?" It seems irrelevant. Then something disturbs our peaceful flow, and suddenly we're all hyped up, very sure of our existence.

One reason why we don't easily make peace with anattā is because we don't notice the absence of our sense of self during those peaceful times when there are no strong desires driving us. So we don't take those chances to explore and learn to appreciate the experience and perception not-self. Why don't we notice the experience of not-self? Although the thought of anattā is perplexing and we find it hard to imagine the possibility of existing without a sense of self, ironically the experience of anattā is quite mundane and doesn't attract our attention. The absence of self is not a particularly interesting experience. Our world doesn't fall apart. Our bodies and minds function just fine.

One teacher says that the mind state of not-self is far more prevalent than the mind state of self. It's just that it's so unobtrusive, so ordinary, that we don't notice it. I find it comforting to reflect on that. It helps to alleviate the fear we often feel during the investigation of anattā.

We can also investigate anattā as it shows up in our relationship with others. Normally we locate ourselves within our bodies and other people outside. But these perceptions can dissolve when we take another into our hearts in the practice of *mettā*. Again, we don't usually notice this as the experience does not trouble us. Only trouble calls attention. But it can be interesting to explore this when you feel a friendship. Is there a clear sense of separation between you and the other?

By contrast, the boundary between self and other gets amplified by enmity and hatred. When these surface, my face will often be tightening, my jaws locked. A strong sense of me fuels the tension, clenches my jaws. A mental image of the other person is projected around my head. As I let go of angry thoughts, their image blurs and I'm left with a vague but threatening sense of otherness beyond the borders of my body. The world seems to be divided into me, barricaded into my jaws and face, fiercely opposed to the other occupying the space around.

Nowadays, I use the note, "not me," to describe that sense of otherness. This stills my mind and increases curiosity. What is this entity I'm battling with? My mind pushes against the boundary, demanding to know what is out there. But nothing clarifies and my attention reverts to my body, the breath rising and falling. In time my face and jaws relax and the boundary between me and not me blurs. The space around me, once so threatening, seeps inwards, dissolving the sense of enmity. The image of the other person re-emerges and I begin to see the situation from their point of view. A sense of understanding grows.

Exploring our relationship with others in this way helps us to come to terms with the truth of anattā. Perceptions of self and not-self emerge and dissolve in line with feelings of enmity and friendship.

Whenever we start thinking about anattā, we will often be stimulating a sense of self, as the desire to know and understand the truth is operating. Ironically, this desire leads to a sense of self who needs to understand this truth. So it's quite a challenge to combine reflection on the teaching with experiential investigation. We need patience. We can also bring those emotional reactions into the field of investigation whenever they are stimulated. We might sense anattā in our lack of control over those emotions.

Beware also of judging the sense of self as somehow inferior to the sense of not-self. Time and again the Buddha asks us to look after ourselves wisely, to treasure our human life with its opportunity to free ourselves from suffering. There are many wise desires we should fulfil in order to look after ourselves and practice meditation. The desire to learn the Dharma would be one, and then the multitude of desires involved in putting this into practice. For example, the desire to come on retreat, the desire to get the bus in order to come on retreat, the desire to get out of bed in order to get the bus, etc., etc.

Many of these desires will need some effort to fulfil and a sense of self is conjured up to channel our energies into that effort. That's fine. That's the way the human organism accomplishes things. So a sense of self is nothing to be ashamed of. Ajahn Thanissaro, in his very helpful book on anattā entitled *Selves and Not-Self*, says that sometimes the

perception of self is the wiser one. Sometimes the perception of not-self is the wiser one. He adds that as our practice deepens, we get better at discerning which perception is more appropriate for each situation.

To marshal ourselves for actions we deem as worthy, the sense of self should be encouraged and nourished. We can search for any good feelings associated with thoughts like "I can," "I will," etc., and take delight in these as a little treasure trove to help us enjoy work and get us through any challenges. When we've accomplished our task or feel the need for a rest along the way, we can sit back and invite any dukkha stirred up by the activity to manifest. Sometimes as the struggle with dukkha wanes, we can let the perception of "not me," "not mine" sink in to remind us that we don't always have to be acting and accomplishing, that the world can survive quite well without us, that even we ourselves can survive quite well without anyone at the helm.

I want to finish off tonight by recapping on the first noble truth: that life involves dukkha. The Buddha asks us to fully understand dukkha. We can explore it in three forms. Dukkha-dukkha involves the major suffering of our lives and which we cannot escape. To prepare ourselves for this, we can study dukkha's milder forms. *Anicca-dukkha* manifests especially at beginnings and endings and is even contained within the minutiae. Every breath, footstep and meal present us with a lesson on transience. *Anattā-dukkha* shows up at the limits to our control, at the boundary of me and other, and even within ourselves, as we struggle with sensations and feelings we would prefer not to own.

The exploration of dukkha involves finding our way through the hindrances that block our view of truth. As we make our peace with each hindrance, we also come to terms with the limits to our knowledge and understanding. We feel more at ease in a world which is continually slipping through our fingers, beyond our tiny radius of control.

May we and all beings come to understand dukkha and thereby be liberated from all suffering.

Introduction to the Mahasi Meditation Practice

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

Noirin Sheahan offers a comprehensive introduction to the Mahasi vipassanā meditation technique, tracing its origins back to the Buddha's own path to awakening. She explains how the Buddha's realization of the middle way between extreme asceticism and transcendent absorption led to the development of insight meditation - the careful, moment-to-moment observation of present experience.

The talk covers the Four Noble Truths as the Buddha's framework for understanding dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), its cause in desire, the possibility of its cessation, and the Noble Eightfold Path as the way forward. Sheahan explains how the Mahasi Sayadaw adapted traditional vipassanā for lay practitioners, developing momentary concentration rather than deep jhāna states, making this practice accessible within shorter retreat periods.

Key practical elements covered include the noting technique for sharpening perception and directing attention away from thought, the importance of slowing down all activities, and noting intentions to develop conscious, deliberate action. Through vivid examples like the 'sniffing incident,' she demonstrates how mindful observation can transform misperception into compassion, illustrating the power of intuitive intelligence over conceptual thinking. This foundational teaching prepares retreatants for intensive vipassanā practice based on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.

Tonight I want to talk about the Mahāsi meditation technique: where it came from, what qualities it develops, special features of the technique, and some pitfalls we can fall into. This Mahāsi technique is a particular approach to *vipassanā* or insight meditation.

It's the form of meditation the Buddha adopted when he realised that none of the spiritual techniques he'd already learned were working for him. His spiritual journey had followed from what we would now call a midlife crisis, when he was suddenly exposed to the reality of sickness, ageing and death. This had started a period of intense suffering, enough to drive him away from his comfortable home and happy marriage, to take up the life of a wandering ascetic.

Over the following years, he tried two different approaches to spiritual training which were being practised in his day. One developed transcendent meditation states, while the other was based on very austere asceticism. When he saw that neither of these were answering his need to make sense of life, he realised he would have to find his own spiritual path.

The transcendent meditation had cultivated happy, peaceful mental states, while the ascetic training had invited hardship and suffering. He decided to steer a course between these two extremes—a middle way. He wouldn't see either happiness or suffering as the goal. The goal was to find a way to stop the suffering he felt from the knowledge that sickness, ageing and death were in store for himself and for everyone he loved.

A memory came back of an incident in his childhood, where he had been watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony. He had been alert and curious, happy to be watching all the details of the ceremony, and also peaceful, at ease, not hoping for anything special to happen. He now recognised the spiritual potential of that mental state. If there was a way to live peacefully with the knowledge of death, his intuition told him that this combination of alert curiosity and relaxed attention would lead him there. He sensed his own potential to learn how to stop suffering.

While as a child he had been absorbed by watching what was happening around him, he realised he could turn that focus inward, become absorbed by watching his own moment-to-moment experience—his physical experience of sitting, breathing, walking, as well as his mental experience of thoughts and emotions. This is what we now term *vipassanā* or insight meditation, also known as mindfulness meditation.

We can imagine the Buddha was going through various shades of grief and depression because of his acute apprehension of mortality and probably also a desperate anxiety to find a way forward, not unlike our predicament much of the time. The insight that followed his childhood memory gave him the clue that the way through all these conflicting emotions was to observe them in *vipassanā*.

The traditional story goes that once he made this determination to follow the middle way between joy and pain, it only took him six hours to reach the fully enlightened state. When he afterwards started teaching others how to follow in his footsteps, he described his understanding in terms of four truths he had learned along the way, which we now know as the Four Noble Truths.

First was the truth of *dukkha*, usually translated as suffering, but better as unsatisfactoriness. He had detected this *dukkha* in all experience, not only in grief, depression and so on, but also in states of happiness and joy. When we examine these mindfully, we notice a subtle anxiety associated with the knowledge that these beautiful states are fragile and easily fade away.

Usually we leap to conclusions here—blame ourselves, blame others, blame circumstances. But the Buddha's careful observation led him to conclude that blame only confused the issue, compounded the pain. The underlying reality was simply that the beautiful states of happiness and joy had faded. Probing deep into his experience of body and mind, the Buddha had come to understand that it was all by nature unstable, uncontrollable and therefore unsatisfactory.

Sounds like a discovery that would lead to even deeper depression, despair and maybe even suicide. But that original intuition that this method of meditation could lead him to the end of suffering proved stronger than any such temptations. We can imagine him relaxing, becoming so sensitive to his experience that he could say, "This here is the feeling of depression, and this slight pushing on the edge of it—this is the desire to get rid of depression." And to his amazement, no doubt, he found that what was really hurting was not the depression itself, but the desire to be rid of it. And then, seeing that he could, for a moment at least, relax, let go of that desire. And with that, the depression became bearable.

You can imagine that that discovery lifted his heart, gave him a shot of joy. So then he notices, "This here is the feeling of joy. And this slight pulling on the edge of it is the desire to possess the joy, prolong it, become forever joyful." And while the joy itself is lovely, the desire to own it, prolong it, become it, is stressful.

Thus, tracking his own experience, he was able to convince himself that desire was causing suffering, whether it was the desire to be rid of unpleasant stuff, like depression, or the desire to get more of the pleasant stuff, like joy. This he later described as the Second Noble Truth: desire is the cause of suffering.

And then came the real breakthrough. As he continued to watch desire with calm, curious attention, feeling the suffering it caused, he was drawn ever deeper into the roots of his experience. And there came a moment of profound stillness when all desire naturally faded away. And with that, all suffering stopped and there was deep peace.

It may have only been momentary because until we're fully enlightened, new desires keep arising. But luckily for us, he recognised that brief moment when desire faded as an experience of what he had been searching for—the cessation of suffering, a taste of *Nibbāna*. This he later taught as his Third Noble Truth: that there is an end to suffering.

Although the whole wearying process of wanting this, not wanting that, started up again, he now knew there was a way to work with this deeply ingrained conditioning. Studying his own emotions, attitudes, thoughts and behaviour in vipassanā, he was able to fine-tune his understanding of what caused suffering and what brought it to an end. This allowed him to work out a practical path that could be followed for spiritual awakening. He calls this the Noble Eightfold Path and we know this as the Fourth Noble Truth.

There are three sections to the Path: Wisdom, Morality and Meditation Training. Here we're mainly concerned with the third part, but we're based within the wisdom set by the Buddha in his Dhamma teachings, and having taken the precepts, we're working within a framework of morality.

Following his enlightenment, the Buddha spent the remainder of his life teaching others how to reach the same goal. But he stressed that words alone could only point in the direction of truth. Each person has to search for, detect and realise the truth within their own experience. Thus, we don't have to accept any of the teachings on blind faith. We don't have to think of ourselves as Buddhist or even believe in the historic figure of the Buddha. We can experiment with the Dhamma, see if these teachings prove a useful guide in our lives.

The motive inspiring our practice can thus be to ask whether the Dhamma is really true, manifesting right here and now in my life. We answer the question by practising vipassanā, examining our experience with a calm, curious, attentive observation.

But we don't want to get too far ahead of ourselves. Remember that we're on a training course here. We're not expecting full enlightenment. That's a very worthy long-term goal for meditation practice. But we need to put it aside for now, or else it will get in the way.

Joseph Goldstein gives the analogy of walking home through the woods at night. He could see the lights of his house ahead in the distance. That was his goal—to get to the house. But to make any progress, he had to look down at the ground in front of him, take it one step at a time. Looking ahead while stepping usually meant a tumble.

In the same way, thoughts about enlightenment or perfect happiness get in the way of the meditation skills we're trying to learn here and now. So we have to let go of our desires for psychological well-being and spiritual insight and instead focus on learning the technique, trusting that the process will, in its own good time, bring about insight and happiness. It's best to think of the retreat as essentially a training course. We're training ourselves in the art of meditation as taught by the Mahāsi Sayadaw of Burma. And like any training you've ever done, it's going to take time and effort and patience.

The Mahāsi Sayadaw was a Buddhist monk teaching in a monastery in the north of Burma until in 1948 he was asked to come to Yangon and teach meditation to lay people. This was an unusual request as it was widely held, in Burma at any rate, that any progress in meditation required a remove from all worldly affairs so as to dedicate one's time fully to spiritual training for many months and years. This allowed very deeply absorbed states of concentration to develop, known as *samatha jhānas*. It was only monastics who had the necessary time and seclusion to master these states.

The training technique that the Mahāsi Sayadaw had learned and practised did not require the deep absorptions, but instead developed what is known as momentary concentration. It's not that the concentration only lasts for a moment. It is the same strength as various levels of jhāna. The distinction between the two is that samatha focuses on one object, for example the breath, whereas vipassanā lets the focus switch between many objects. One moment we're aware of breathing, the next of hearing, the next of some emotion arising, and so on. Thus in vipassanā, the deep level of concentration is experienced over many moments of consciousness.

The Mahāsi recognised that people could develop this level of concentration within a relatively short time frame and thus that this meditation technique was ideally suited for lay people who could perhaps only make a retreat of a few weeks at the most. This is in keeping with the fact that one of the most prized of all of the Buddha's teachings—the discourse on establishing mindfulness—was given in the townland of Kuru to the lay people as well as to the monastics. The Mahāsi technique is based around many of the instructions given in this particular discourse, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.

While some vipassanā training techniques encourage a broad, open awareness, the Mahāsi technique focuses on detail. In the first place, on the sensations of the abdomen caused by breathing, or else the sensations in the feet caused by walking. We track these until the mind calms down, becomes interested in present experience. Then we let whatever calls attention become the new focus. It could be a sound, an itching sensation, some discomfort in the body perhaps. We allow our attention to go wherever it is

naturally called. And if nothing in particular calls, we go back to the breath at the abdomen, the feeling of the tummy rising and falling. This cultivates momentary concentration, where the mind can focus on each little detail of what attracts attention.

There are two other aspects to the Mahāsi approach that distinguish it from other forms of vipassanā training. One is noting and making a special effort to note intentions. Another is slowing down all physical activities to a snail's pace.

Noting involves making a short mental note of what you're experiencing. When feeling the rising and falling movements of the breath, we note "rising, rising, falling, falling." That helps draw attention more closely to those sensations. Whereas if we don't make that mental note, we might be only vaguely aware that we're breathing. When we make the mental notes "rising, falling," we are engaging the perceptual faculty of the mind, the ability to discern one thing from another, knowing red from green, hot from cold and so on.

Perception is a very powerful mental process and a very important aspect of the spiritual path. When Ānanda asked Sāriputta why it was that people did not attain liberation, Sāriputta told him that it was basically a problem of misperception. Because we perceive things wrongly, our minds end up in a confused turmoil that obscures the underlying peace of Nibbāna. Perception conditions all our thoughts, words and deeds.

I remember one walking meditation where the person in front of me kept sniffing, every footstep—sniff, sniff. It was driving me bananas. I was doing my best to watch the irritation, but the thoughts kept pouring out: "Why doesn't he just blow his nose? How could anybody be so rude, so inconsiderate?" After several minutes of torture, I saw his hand go into his pocket and pull out a tissue. I watched with bated breath, heard him blow his nose and gave a deep sigh of relief. But before he'd even put the tissue away, there was another sniff.

To my own amazement, my response wasn't anger, but compassion. It was only afterwards on reflection I'd realised that what I'd been reacting to was not the sound of sniffing, but my own presumption that this was a thoughtless, inconsiderate person who wasn't polite enough to blow his nose. The sniff following the nose blow showed me that whatever was causing him to sniff—perhaps he had asthma or an allergy or something—couldn't be fixed by simply blowing his nose. He wasn't a thoughtless, inconsiderate person after all.

It was such a joy to be relieved of all my fury. He sniffed away at every footstep till the end of the walking session but it no longer bothered me at all. Although the sounds were the same, they were heard differently. The pre-nose blow sniffs were heard within

a tumult of indignation and anger. The post-nose blow ones were heard with relief and compassion. In fact, I grew fonder of him with every sniff because he had taught me such a valuable Dhamma lesson.

There's another point to draw from this incident. It was the fact that compassion arose spontaneously once I saw that the sniffing was due to illness. I'm using the word "I" here, but in fact the thinking mind that I identify with was totally surprised by compassion. It had expected an even deeper burst of anger. The thinking mind only slowly unravelled the knot, realised that anger was due to a misperception.

This is an example of intuitive intelligence. It's in direct contact with reality, in this case the sound of sniffing. It experiences the sound without presumptions about rudeness and inconsideration, sees that the sniff doesn't connect directly to those angry thoughts. It doesn't need the convoluted logic of the thinking mind, but understands things in a flash. The insight that comes from intuitive intelligence is not just intellectual. When it sees clearly, the heart opens. Again, this is instantaneous. By comparison, my thinking mind took several seconds to work out why my attitude had changed from anger to compassion.

Intuitive intelligence is primary. The thinking mind catches up slowly. This illustrates why we are taking such pains to train ourselves to become aware of present experience rather than lost in thought. It's easy for us to dismiss detail like the sensations of the tummy rising as irrelevant, but they're providing the training ground for mindfulness. Just knowing those sensations is a peek beyond thought. And slowly we learn to trust in a wordless intelligence that is in direct contact with reality, not influenced by beliefs and presumptions. It's this level of intelligence that we need for insight into the true nature of reality.

We suffer because of our misperceptions. For example, we mistake what is transient as enduring, reliable—our house, our body, our mobile phone. We expect them to be there when we need them. We're distraught when they break down. That's because we rely on our thinking mind far too much. At the level of direct experience, a million flashes of colour might pass through the eyes and we think, "That's my phone." The thought gives us a feeling of certainty about those million flashes of colour, which we might not even see anymore. But we still believe that "my phone" is there where I saw it a moment ago.

By training ourselves to experience life directly, moment to moment, we start to break down our preconceived notions of reality. It might be during a very ordinary experience like tracking the feet as we walk. We might feel the foot touch the floor and realise, "Gosh, this is totally different to how it felt a moment ago as it moved forward."

At one level, nothing has changed. We know we're just walking. But the experience is now being seen through new eyes, with avid interest in each transient sensation. We feel totally alive, in touch with our bodies, with the environment.

This vibrant perspective may only last a few moments, but it's a genuine insight into the nature of reality. Each glimpse into a world without the filter of thoughts and conception deepens our faith in the practice.

Slowly, we learn to see, as the Buddha did, that all is transitory, a magic show, and that it's a mistake to believe this magic show can deliver anything but sorrow while we try to hang on to what we like, get rid of what we dislike.

To promote these glimpses of the world unfettered by thoughts and ideas, *vipassanā* practice trains our attention away from the thinking mind and towards sensory experience. It's ironic that the noting word itself is a thought. We're using thought to bring us beyond thought.

Say we were building an observation tower. We want to be high up in the air, above all houses and trees and whatever else will get in the way of our vision. We want to be well off the ground, but we build our tower from materials we take from the ground, like wood and steel. Each time we want to go a bit further up, we need more from the earth to build another step, another floor. Similarly, the word "rising" directs attention away from all the thoughts we'd otherwise be getting lost in. But we're not interested in the noting word. That would be like going up to the top of the observation tower only to stare at the floor beneath us. The noting word just serves to direct attention. What we're really interested in are those sensations in the tummy. They are our direct contact with sensory reality.

When we're directing the mind using the noting word, we're at the first level of concentration of *vipassanā*, called *vitaka* in Pali. We're gathering the mind. If we can keep doing that throughout the retreat, this is excellent practice.

You may notice that at some moments the mind gets fascinated with its present experience. We're absolutely riveted by an itching sensation, for example, really want to feel every little tingle. At that stage, we often forget to note. And that's fine, there's no need. The noting has already served its purpose. We're up in our observation tower, seeing clearly. We don't need to build any higher. This is the second level of concentration, *vicāra* in Pali.

An analogy used is a bee among flowers. The flowers are swaying around in a breeze, so the bee has to track the flower, move around with it. This is *vitaka*, where we're tracking the experience using noting words. There comes a moment when the

bee gets close enough to land on the flower. Even though the flower is still bobbing around, she no longer has to make any effort. She's being carried around with the flower. This is *vicāra*, the second level of concentration, where there is immediate, direct contact with itchiness. It's absorbing all your attention.

Don't worry if the noting stops when you get riveted by the direct experience of reality, but you have to start it again as soon as you lose that level of concentration. Don't think of the loss as a problem or a failure. It's the same for the bee. Once she's sipped the nectar from the flower, she must fly off in search of another. Similarly, we spend a few moments sipping the nectar of direct experience. Everything is vivid, fascinating. Then our desire to understand things conceptually gets the better of us and we withdraw into our world of thought again, and the itchy sensation may seem fuzzy, distant, confusing.

This is part of the natural process of learning about direct experience. So long as you don't give in to the desire to think your way to enlightenment, it's not a problem. It's just the way we learn. All you need to do is start making the effort to direct the mind again using the noting technique. Sometimes a note like "wondering, wondering" allows the mind the space it needs to take in the wonder of that little glimpse beyond thought. After a while, the itchiness or some other sensation in the body may call attention again.

A couple of common mistakes happen with the noting technique. Firstly, we can get into knots trying to find exactly the right word. Is this sensation itching or stinging? Is this a feeling of anger or frustration? As soon as you notice you're trying to find the exactly right word, then stop fussing and just use the simplest word that comes to mind. In fact, the words "thinking" and "feeling" cover everything. The noting word is only to direct the mind towards sensations and feelings, away from thoughts. If it happens that you can't stop trying to get the right word, try the noting word "thinking, thinking," because that's what's happening. You are thinking about what word is best.

Another common mistake is to put too much emphasis on the note as though we're shouting at ourselves. If this happens, if the note sounds loud, getting in the way of the sensations and feelings, then deliberately soften it. I've heard the note described as a feather brushing against whatever it's noting. A very light touch.

Sometimes the sound of the note just won't soften. We're pounding it out and can't stop. This is usually a sign of over-effort. We're so determined to do the practice well that we're getting all frenzied and uptight. If this happens, relax all effort for a while. Remind yourself that there's no exam coming up, that any new skill takes a lot of time

and patience to learn. And if the moment you go back to noting that same frenzied pounding starts up, that means that some underlying anxiety has surfaced. Perhaps you tend to be perfectionist and can't bear to think that you may be making any mistake.

This is actually to be welcomed. We want to allow our many underlying anxieties to surface in *vipassanā*. Learn to recognise them. Work with them mindfully. You can note "uptight" or "frustrated" or "trying to get it right" and allow yourself to feel that very experience. In time, this will show us how to live more patiently with perfectionism.

We can also listen out for any emotional tone in the note. Is it neutral? Perhaps it's tense with anger? If so, we can switch to noting anger instead, curious about the experience of anger. Thus, the tone of the note can be a very helpful indicator of some buried emotion that we might otherwise miss. But be careful. It's very easy to get curious about why we're angry rather than the experience of anger. To start thinking about the cause is to go down a rabbit hole. But the moment-to-moment experience can be a revelation.

Sometimes anger simply disappears in a flash when we become aware of it. Sometimes we have to work at it for a long time before there's any relief. Like in my sniffing experience, I had been noting anger for a few minutes before that magic moment where the intuitive intelligence darted forth to make sense of it all. This also illustrates how the intuitive intelligence is working away even in a bout of anger. It doesn't matter what we're aware of. Awareness itself is the key.

So there's no need to judge anger as wrong, judge greed as wrong, judge confusion or fear or anxiety as wrong. So long as we're maintaining awareness, our intuitive intelligence is at the ready, taking in what is happening, learning to see things as they really are.

The last thing I want to say about the noting technique is that it fosters ongoing mindfulness. This is because of its link with perception. If we perceive something, no matter how vaguely, we naturally want to perceive it more clearly. Say you're looking out your window. You're vaguely aware of trees and bushes, but not really interested, in a bit of a daydream. Then a squirrel jumps from a branch, but all you see is a flash of motion. Suddenly you're alert, looking intently at the garden, trying to figure out what it was that caught your eye. This shows the stimulating power of perception. It's woken you up from your vague daydream, brought you into present experience.

Now that doesn't necessarily mean you are now being mindful as you scan the garden wondering what caught your eye. Mostly we are so busy looking for something that we forget to register that the basic experience is one of looking, seeing. The same thing can happen in meditation. The noting gets us so interested in the detail of what

we're seeing or hearing or sensing that we forget that the basic experience is one of seeing, hearing, sensing. For that we need to take a step back. Stop trying to achieve anything at all, even to see or hear or sense things in detail. We need to balance the stimulation provided by noting by focusing on whatever will help calm us down, become aware that we're seeing, hearing, sensing.

For most people, the focus on the breath is naturally relaxing, but not for everyone. When I first started practising, a panicky feeling emerged as soon as I brought my attention to the abdomen. Bhante explained it as underlying fears that were manifesting on the breath. Once I heard that, I was delighted as it gave me a ready way to work with fear, which I already knew was undermining my life. But I also needed an alternative to the breath as a calming focus. In this case, the Mahāsi recommends touching points. For example, focus attention on the buttocks touching the cushion, the hands on the lap.

So, if the belly moving up and down as you breathe feels agitating rather than neutral or pleasant, then see what physical sensations would bring a degree of calm. The hands, the feet, the weight of the body pressing on the cushion. Use the noting word "touching, touching," to draw attention away from thought and ground it in the body.

Another aspect of calming the mind is to maintain mindfulness outside the meditation hall. Being fully present during our daily activities helps the mind to settle. The noting technique is a great support here as we so easily forget to be mindful outside of formal practice. If we get lazy and stop noting then the mind quickly runs away into daydreams and thoughts. Although this feels a lot easier than noting, it's only a short-term feel-good, as the mind is getting stirred up by its habitual desires and delusion. And that isn't calming at all, as we find when we next try to meditate.

The Buddha likened the practice as swimming upstream against the tide of habitual desires. So no wonder it feels like hard work to keep noting during ordinary activities like walking to the dining room, going to the bathroom. Remember, we're swimming upstream, training the mind to focus on present experience.

Another feature of the Mahāsi technique that helps bring us into the here and now is to slow down. We walk slowly, open doors slowly, eat slowly and so on. The slow pace quietens the mind and develops respect for our present experience. Instead of rushing to the meditation hall, all eager to start meditation, we take an interest in walking slowly toward the meditation hall, already meditating, already sensitive to present experience.

Slowing down also helps to sharpen our attention. We notice many little sensations in each footstep, for example. In turn, this extra sensitivity helps our minds to get more interested, more steady, more present.

Both of these techniques, slowing down and noting, help us to strengthen a very powerful aspect of the Eightfold Path: conscious, intentional activity. Noting intentions is important because the intention behind any action sows a seed of *kamma*. If we act out of greed, we reap the fruits of greed, growing ever more selfish and needy. If we act out of anger, we reap the fruits of anger, always ready to blame, losing friends, growing more bitter and isolated. Most of the time we don't notice the intention behind our actions. We go through our days on autopilot and so we reap the fruits of mindlessness, growing ever more entranced within our mental bubble, ever less sensitive to the reality around us.

Here on retreat it's a time to start sensitising yourself to these many intentions that govern our future. Make them deliberate, considered. If we rush towards the meditation hall we won't notice any intentionality at all in this. But if we slow down we notice when we have to turn or put on our shoes and open a door. Each of these can then be done deliberately by first noting the intention: "intending to turn," then turning; "intending to walk," then walking; "intending to bend down," then bending down, and so on. Here we're sowing the powerful *kamma* seed of mindfulness, which is the key to waking up and living well, conscious of our impact on the world, sensitive to others and to our environment.

The technique is a demanding one and there might be times when you feel totally fed up and discouraged. At those times, it's good to remember that every spiritual path is going to bring us to the edge of our comfort zone. That's actually the point of deepest learning. So, totally fed up and discouraged is the ideal setting for practice. If we can somehow persuade ourselves to keep at it, we will be doing ourselves a great favour in the long run. I do hope you succeed. And if you're really disheartened, come and find me. Talking the problem through will often help.

In summary, it's best to think of the retreat as a training course. You are learning *vipassanā*, a meditation technique that involves a curious, open-minded scrutiny of present experience. This is the form of meditation developed by the Buddha and which led him to full awakening and his comprehensive picture of moral psychology which has survived 2,500 years of scrutiny.

Vipassanā trains our intuitive intelligence, an understanding of ourselves and the world we live in that is not limited by prejudices and opinions but emerges from direct experience. Intuitive intelligence works from the bottom up, you could say, from em-

bodied awareness, making sense of life at the level of sensations and feelings and then feeding its understanding to the thinking mind. The intuitive intelligence can see through our stories and confusion, as in my sniffing example. Ultimately, it lets us follow the footsteps of the Buddha to full enlightenment.

The Mahāsi technique is a particular form of *vipassanā* training. It relies on attention to detail and momentary concentration. Whatever calls our attention becomes the focus for meditation. This form is particularly suited to lay people as it facilitates insight even within a relatively short timescale.

To practice according to the Mahāsi method, we use a noting word to direct attention toward present experience. This sharpens perception, stimulates alertness and supports mindful investigation. To balance these, we need to foster tranquillity, which is done by choosing a calming focus for attention, usually the breath at the abdomen or the feet while walking, by slowing down all activities to a snail's pace, and last but by no means least, maintaining mindfulness all day long. We also make an effort to note intentions, which fosters the choice to be mindful in daily activities rather than just lost in autopilot.

It's a challenging technique, so we need to be prepared to feel frustrated, confused, perhaps disheartened from time to time, but at other times, hopefully, inspired, maybe agog with wonder, and assured that this is a valuable practice, worth going through all the pain and torture that it takes to find the path to the end of suffering.

May your retreat be very beneficial, give you confidence that you too have the potential for full awakening, perfect peace and harmony.

Kamma, Rebirth and Transcendence: A Top-Down View of the Buddhadhamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 52 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma offers a 'top-down' perspective on the Buddha's teaching, examining transcendence, kamma, and rebirth from the viewpoint of the unconditioned rather than through scientific materialism. He explores the Buddha's descriptions of nibbāna as the 'unborn, unmade, unconditioned' realm where the four great elements find no footing, and examines what the Buddha deliberately left unanswered - the avyākata questions about the world's eternity and the Tathāgata's existence after death.

The talk delves into the Aggañña Sutta's creation narrative as satirical commentary on caste systems, while emphasizing that the Buddha's teaching centers fundamentally on ethics (sīla) - our relationships with ourselves, others, and the world. Bhante discusses the descent of Buddha-nature into psychophysical existence, the process of delusion and awakening, and addresses the challenging topic of rebirth within the six-realm cosmology.

Drawing on contemporary research including Ian Stevenson's reincarnation studies, he presents rebirth not as provable fact but as rational framework for understanding karmic equilibrium and the path to liberation. The discourse concludes with the Buddha's teaching that the world, its arising, ceasing, and the path to its cessation are all found within this 'fathom-long body' - emphasizing the immediacy and accessibility of liberation through ethical conduct and wisdom.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa.

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

In the last talk I was talking about the way our cultural way of looking at things through science or scientism and through our romantic understanding of life and through psychotherapy tends to distort the teaching of the Buddha. And I boiled it down, this teaching, I boiled it down to ethics and transcendence.

If you look at what's happening from a science point of view, it's easy to understand that you're looking upwards through matter. And matter begins to create chemicals, chemicals, some sort of bio-life. And so it all looks very clear, that consciousness and all

that appears as part of that process, that upward process of evolution. So it's quite understandable that that would make sense to somebody brought up in that sort of scientific tradition.

If you've been brought up in a religious tradition, one of the Christian traditions or Islam or Judaism or Hinduism, then, of course, you're looking at it from a slightly different way. You're looking at it down. You're looking down and seeing how everything slowly descends to the material base. So that's what I want to try and do this evening, to give you a different perspective.

And the first thing is to be clear about what the Buddha means by transcendence, what he's pointing to. So in the last talk I also mentioned some of these quotes. The one where people feel that he's been most clear is this one. It says there is a sphere or a dimension where there's no earth, no water, no fire, no air. Now those of course are your four great elements by which the mind contacts matter. So when you're looking at the pain in your knees, it'll either be fiery or it'll be heavy and thick.

So remember that when the Buddha talks about the world, the all, he's not talking about the objective world of science. He's talking about the way we experience it. The world that we're actually manufacturing. He's always talking from that angle. It's not that he denies that the world out there exists, but he's saying that from the point of view of liberation, it's the world that we're actually creating that we've got to be liberated from.

And he says there's no base consisting of space, consciousness, nothingness, perception, non-perception. This refers to these higher *jhānic* states, which is the most refined place that the mind can get to. It's when the mind actually stops producing, and there's just the awareness of that space.

And then he says it's neither this world or another world, nor both, neither sun nor moon. So he is saying that there isn't a physical world where this transcendent place is. He says there's no coming and going and no staying. So there's no sense of space and there's no sense of time. There's no ceasing, no uprising. So it's without change. This place is without change.

So remember those three characteristics, *dukkha*, *anicca* and *anattā*. So there's no suffering there, it's *adukkha*. There's no impermanence there, it's *nicca*. And of course there's no self there, there's no sense of a self. It's a non-dual state.

It's not fixed, it's not movable. So it's not fixed and movable. It's coming from our position that everything has a place and you can move most things. Everything changes. But there, there's nothing. So you can't talk about something being fixed or

movable. And it has no support. So this means everything in this world is dependent on something else. Nothing arises of itself. There's no existent. But this is a place where it doesn't need anything at all. So he's obviously pointing to something which is quite other than what we're experiencing. And that's what we mean by transcendence. And he says, just this is the end of suffering.

So then, of course, there's the other famous one that people quote. There exists—so the word *ati*—there is the not born, the not compounded, the not created, the not conditioned. But then he goes on to a second verse which he says, if there were not this not born, not compounded, not created, not conditioned, there'd be no escape. No escape could be discerned from the born, the compounded, the created and the conditioned. And then the final verse says, but because there is this not born, then there is obviously an escape. So again, he's talking about something which is of another nature, another dimension.

And the other final one which I brought up the last time was this question of where do earth, water, fire and air find no footing? Remember, somebody asks him where the world comes to an end. So this is the world we're creating. And he says, well, that's the wrong question. You should ask where does it find no footing? So there's nothing destroyed in the process. He himself says the only thing that's destroyed in the process of liberation is greed, hatred and delusion. Everything else remains.

Where are long and short, small, fair, foul? Where are the subject and object wholly destroyed? A sense of object. Remember this non-dual place. If you say there's one, there's a presumption that there may be a two. So that's why this word of non-dual is coined. But of course each system has a different understanding of non-dual. So for the Hindus, non-dual, the non-dual state is to be at one with Brahman. But in the Buddhist tradition, it's to be in this state of *Nibbāna*.

So he says that there is a consciousness which is non-manifestive. Now a consciousness that's manifestive is manifesting through the six senses. The five basic physical senses and the mind. Mind, heart, emotions and thoughts. So he said it's non-manifestive. So it's without boundary. So boundaries are created by phenomena, by objects, by things. So there's nothing there. That's what he's saying. And it's all directions full of light. So consciousness. You can take that as either a state of light or a brightness as if you were inside the bulb, or you can take it as a state of pure awareness.

And he says here's where this earth, water, fire and air, so the physical nature, our physical nature, finds no footing. He says it's where all these opposites, long and short, small and great and so on, subjects and objects are wholly destroyed. They don't exist there.

So now we have this, if we keep the idea of something that's transcendent. Now, what doesn't the Buddha talk about? What won't he actually talk about?

So there were these ten questions that were, I suppose, the obsessions of the age, really. So the first one is, is the world eternal? Is the world not eternal? Is the world infinite? Is the world finite? Is the soul the same as the body? So if it is, then you would be an annihilationist because when the body dies, you go as well. Soul here would be your mind rather. And is the soul different from the body? In which case, the soul would separate from the body and you'd be an eternalist.

So there were these two opposites at the time of the Buddha. You've got the Brahmins and the Jains who said the soul was released, the *jīva* was released into a heavenly state or at one with Brahman. And there were the materialists who said that was it. When you're dead, you're dead.

And then the last four were concerning somebody who was fully liberated. So does the *Tathāgata* exist after death or does he not exist? And then does he exist and not exist? And then finally, does he neither exist nor not exist? So he's cornered any sort of effort at rational—well, of course, he's silent. And he's silent because the questions are always coming from the point of view of a self. And this is what he says to Vaccha.

And then he says his usual thing. He says they regard feeling as self, perception as self, volitional formations as self, consciousness as self or self as possessing consciousness or consciousness is in self or self as in consciousness. Therefore when the wanderers of other sects ask such questions they give such answers. The world is eternal. They can be very certain about it. But the thing is that he never actually says anything about it. He doesn't make any indication as to whether it is or not. Even he might say, well, for those who don't have a self, there is an eternal. But he just goes mum.

So when it comes to those sorts of questions about the world and things like that, he's quite—he doesn't go there. But we'll come to something else in a minute. We'll come back to that.

The next thing that we might ask, but it never seems to occur in the scriptures is, why does this occur in the first place? Where does this *satipaṇṇā* or as the Abhidhamma would put it this *nibbānic* element in us or as the Mahāyāna would point to it as say Buddha nature, where does it come from? Why has it come here? Where did it all begin? So those sorts of questions—the relationship of this *Nibbānadhātu* and how it's come here—again it's never broached. I don't know of a question that comes up in the scriptures to do with that.

And it's the same with the relationship that our individual *Nibbānadhātus* have with each other. So presumably there's lots of Arahants whose *Nibbānadhātus*, this element, this Buddha nature, is somewhere and do they communicate? Do they communicate? Do they know whether the last perfectly enlightened person is next door or upstairs? So all that area, it just doesn't come up for discussion. It just doesn't arise.

But, of course, other, like the Hindus, tried to work something out for that. And so as you become liberated in the Hindu tradition, where you get *moksha*, freedom, of course, your *ātman*, your self, big self, goes back into Brahman. You become Brahman. So, in that sense, you've got this idea that Brahman, who's neuter, by the way, he's neither male nor female, bursts into all these different *ātman*s, and then they've got to find their way back to him. So in other words, they're trying to answer this question, but it never comes up in the scriptures. And the Buddha never approaches it. So that's the end of that. So it's just knowing that Buddhism doesn't have a monopoly on all truth, that's all.

Now, some would say that they're known as *avyākata* questions. *Avyākata* just means not determined. So he's just not spoken about it. But maybe there's something that is forever unknowable. Just to be able to accept that these sorts of questions are actually unknowable. And that may be one reason why the Buddha kept himself strictly to this particular teaching of liberation.

He does say in one place where he points to the person he's with and he says, or to the monks he's with, he says, you see all the leaves in this forest. He says, well, it's like I know all this, but I've only given you a clump of leaves which you need in order to be liberated. Because you don't know where that was put in later.

Because in the—thank heavens it doesn't say it in the scriptures, but in the *Visuddhimagga*, which is the medieval work of a Buddhādāsa, they describe the qualities of a Buddha, by which time, of course, he's grown to this sort of superhuman, just amazing, beyond human. And they say that he's omniscient. What they mean by that is if he bends his mind towards anything, he'll know the answer. And one thing he knows is that the world is flat. That's a killer, isn't it? So you say, okay. So you have to recognise that there's some messing about here.

So that's something he doesn't talk about. And just to go back a step in a way, just to the origins of the universe, again, there's no effort to do that. There is this peculiar discourse, the *Aggañña Sutta*, in which he lays out a certain creation myth but it's obviously a satire. I mean most people see it now as a satire.

It starts off with him having a talk with this man called Vaseṭṭha. Once the Lord was staying at Sāvathī at the mansion of Migāra's mother in the East Park. And at that time, Vaseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja were living among monks, hoping to become monks themselves. And in the evening, the Lord rose from his secluded meditation and came out of the mansion, started walking up and down in the shade. Vaseṭṭha noticed this and he said to Bhāradvāja, Friend, Bhāradvāja, the Lord has come out and is walking up and down. Let's go and approach him. We might be fortunate enough to hear a talk on Dhamma with the Lord himself. Yes, indeed, said Bhāradvāja. And they went up to the Lord, saluted him and fell into step with him.

And then the Lord said to Vaseṭṭha, Vaseṭṭha, you two are Brahmins born and bred and you have gone forth from the household life to the homeless life from Brahmin families. Do not the Brahmins revile and abuse you? Indeed, Lord, the Brahmins do revile and abuse us. They don't hold back with their usual flood of reproaches. What kind of reproaches do they fling at you? Lord, what the Brahmins say is that the Brahmin caste is the highest caste. Other castes are base. The Brahmin caste is fair. Other castes are dark. Brahmins are purified. Non-Brahmins are not. The Brahmins are the true children of Brahmā, born of the mouth of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā. And you, you've deserted the highest caste and gone over to the base caste, these shavelings, petty ascetics, servants, dark fellows, born of the Brahmā's foot. It's not right, it's not proper that you should mix with such people. So this is the way the Brahmins abuse us, Lord.

Then Vaseṭṭha, tell the Brahmins they have forgotten their ancient tradition when they say that, because we can see Brahmin women, the wives of Brahmins, who menstruate and become pregnant, have babies and give suck, and yet these womb-born Brahmins talk about being born of the Brahmā's mouth. These Brahmins misrepresent Brahmā. They tell lies. They earn much demerit.

And then he goes into exactly what happens at the end of the world. So at the end of the world, you can't have all beings destroyed because then that would be the end of *kamma*. And it would suggest that some beings are just not going to make it. So at the end of a world cycle, everybody gets shunted into this highest realm, the Ābhāssvara Brahma. And of course, there were questions asked about this by later commentators. How could this be? Because to get up there you've got to be in the highest of *jhānas* and be pretty pure. So the explanation was that everybody's been around this *saṃsāra* so many times that they must have hit one of these *jhānic* states, and the good *kamma* would come just at that moment and they'd be up in the Ābhāssvara realm.

And this, of course, saved this whole idea of realms from bringing an end to *kamma*. But it also suggests, of course, that everybody, all beings, will eventually be liberated, no matter how many world cycles they have to go through.

Anyway, they're all up there now. And they lived there for a very long time. And having passed away, they were mostly born into this world. And they dwell mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through the air, and glorious. Now at that time there was just one mass of water and all was darkness. So this is often a creation myth. Out of the chaos, the Greek chaos, which was this darkness. Out of nothingness, the Christian idea of everything comes out of nothingness. Even science, the big bang—where does it come from? So just out of this massive water of all darkness, blinding darkness, neither moon nor sun appeared, no constellations or stars, night and day, there was no male or female.

And sooner or later, after a very long period of time, savoury earth spread itself over the waters where those beings were, and it looked just like the skin that forms over hot milk as it cools. It was endowed with colour, smell and taste. It was the colour of fine ghee or butter and it was very sweet, like pure wild honey. And then some being with a greedy nature said, no, what can this be? And he tasted the savoury earth and of course he gets a craving for it. And everybody else says, well, what about that? And they get into it. And the result was, of course, their self-luminosity disappeared. The greed destroyed their self-luminosity.

And so then as they get more and more greedy, this beautiful skin of earth begins to disappear. And fungus grows up, which is just like that, but it's fungus. And then there's like a mushroom. Then creepers appear, shooting up like bamboo. And all the time, their luminosity and their heaviness, they're moving towards becoming more and more material.

And then finally rice appeared in open places, free from powder, free from husk, fragrant, and clean-grained. And as they collected this, their bodies became coarser still, and their looks became greater. The difference in their looks became greater. And then females developed female sex organs, and males developed male organs, and the women became excessively preoccupied with men, and the men became preoccupied with the women, and owing to their excessive preoccupation with each other, passion was aroused, and their bodies burnt with lust.

And later, because of this burning, they indulged in sexual activity, and those who saw them indulging threw dust, ashes, and cow dung at them, crying, "Die, you filthy beasts! How can you be doing such things to one another?" And just as today in some districts when a daughter-in-law is led out, some people throw dirt at her, some ashes

and some cow dung, without realising they're repeating an ancient observance. So I don't know where that comes from. Must have been one of those things you did at the marriage.

So it gets worse and worse. And then finally, because of all the immorality, they decide to get somebody who would show anger, would censure people, would banish those who deserve to be banished. And so that was the first king, the people's choice, Mahāsammata. So then you get the idea of kingship coming in. And then because of that, a whole level of society was created – the warrior caste, the Khattiya, and he was also called Rājā, which means he gladdens others with Dhamma. I don't think he does. These are just glosses.

Anyway, evil things appeared, such as taking what is not given, and all that, and then he did the banishments. And then there were people who said, enough of this, and they became very pure, and they lived out in the forest, and these were the Brahmins. Others, of course, who couldn't meditate, couldn't handle the meditation and the seclusion, began to adopt various trades. And then finally there were those who, the Sudda, they are base who live by the chase. So slowly but surely the four castes appeared.

But the whole discourse ends with... "The verse was rightly sung," he said, "and this too is true. The warrior caste, the Khattiyas, are best among those who value the clan." So it becomes an expression of how we've got to this place, the four castes, but by way of ethics. So we're always coming back to ethics.

So as to the question of creation, where we came from and all that, that also is not answered. So again, we have to accept that there are things that maybe are just simply unknowable. But one thing we do know is that we are here, right? We actually are existing or becoming in this very present moment.

If we consider this Nibbāna Dhātu descending, now this was later taken up by the Mahāyāna in the Yogācāra school of the Tathāgatagarbha, which meant the embryo of the Buddha. So the embryo of the Buddha, meaning that within us which is deluded comes down to find its own true nature, enters into this psychophysical organism, and then through the practice becomes the Tathāgata. So Tathāgata means "come there" or "gone there" – this "there" of course is that place of transcendence. So probably the best translation of that is "the one who has transcended" or "the transcendent one," and this is how the Buddha referred to himself, the Tathāgata.

Now, this Nibbāna Dhātu finds itself... I'll keep referring to it from now on as just Buddha nature. It's simpler. This Buddha nature finds itself in this psychophysical organism. And in the Buddha's teachings, there are these three bodies. So again, this was

developed out of the basic scriptures, the Pali scriptures, the early scriptures, and it was developed out of it. These different strands of understanding were developed from those bases.

So my teacher, Dr. Ewa Tadama in Birmingham, said to me that everything the Mahāyāna says about their teachings you'll find the kernel of it, you'll find something of that within the basic scriptures of Pali, the early scriptures.

So these three bodies are the Dharmakāya, so that's the Buddha, the Buddha nature. There's the Sambhogakāya, the body of bliss, and that's your mental body. And then there's the Nirmāṇakāya, the body of apparition, or the body that's made, this physical body that we find ourselves in. So, psychophysical.

So, in Buddhist understanding, these two things are quite separate. Although they're melded together at this level of being, they separate at death. And then you have this rebirth into different realms, which we'll come to towards the end of the talk.

So, just to remember that process where the Tathāgatagarbha, the embryo of the Buddha, the Buddha nature comes down in a state of not knowing. So remember, it's not a culpable state. It's not a culpable state, ignorance. It's just basically not knowing. And the mistake is made of believing itself to be this psychophysical organism it finds itself in. And then it seeks happiness. It's as simple as that.

And in seeking happiness, it begins to manipulate the world. So the more it has, the happier it feels, the more secure it feels – more money, friends, all that. And of course then you have to protect it, so that's where your aversion comes, your hatred to anybody who undermines what you have. And if the person's bigger, then of course you run for it.

So remember, those are your three basic attitudes that arise from delusion: acquisitiveness, aversion and fear. And from that, of course, because of those attitudes, we act in the world and create habits. And these habits are unwholesome and they have unwholesome results. Both inwardly, they create agitation and all the rest of it. And outwardly, of course, they create situations which aren't good for us – war for a start.

So coupled with that of course there is the wisdom factor which grows as you begin to see how we create suffering for ourselves, and then the other side of our nature begins to manifest which is the love, the compassion, the sympathetic joy, courage, gratitude and all the rest of it.

So you could say that the process that we're undergoing is moving away from the effects of that delusion towards the effects of wisdom. And so we're coming back, we're coming back to that original mistake. And that original mistake we call the self. It's an identity that we manufacture with the psychophysical organism we find ourselves with.

And that's our practice – our practice is to begin to discriminate, begin to discern those things that bring us suffering and those things that don't, that bring us happiness, a real happiness. And then as you come back into yourself, you come to this business of the observer, and of course that's where the initial problem lies, because it's through the observer that you enter into the world that we're creating.

I was going to also talk about... just to reinforce this idea that the Buddha only teaches ethics. Ethics, you can translate ethics as – ethics means relationship. So it's how you're relating. Morality tends for us to mean wrongdoing and stuff. So it has a more restricted meaning, I think, in our minds – Ten Commandments and all that. But ethics is just about relationship.

Now, we are in relationship all the time. We're in relationship with our food, we're in relationship to the door when we open it, relationship with people. Our whole lives are an act of relationship. And, of course, there's the relationship with ourselves, too. So ethics is really about how we relate – how, if we get it wrong, it can create suffering, and how, if we get it right, it creates happiness.

So once we've grasped that, that the whole of our lives is a relationship, then of course we want to do something about it. We want to make sure that we get it right.

If you remember when the Buddha was born, this holy man, this sage saw him and determined that either he was going to be a world conquering monarch or a fully self-enlightened being, and he began to cry. And when they asked him why he was crying, he said well, I won't be around to see which one he'll go for, but the accent was that he would actually become fully self-liberated.

Running in the scriptures, you get this alter ego of the world-conquering monarch. And in one of the scriptures, the old monarch is dying. The wheel treasure, so you have to imagine this wheel in the sky. And when that begins to disappear, it's time for the king to move on and to leave it to his son.

And so when the son takes – just before the son takes rule, he asks him, "Sire, what is the duty of the Ariyan wheel-turning monarch?" And he says, "It is this, my son. Yourself depending on the Dhamma, honouring it, revering it, cherishing it, doing homage to it and venerating it. Having the Dhamma as your badge and banner, acknowledging the Dhamma as your master, you should establish, guard, ward and protect, according to

the Dhamma, for your own household, your troops, your nobles and vassals, for Brahmins and householders, towns and country folk, ascetics and Brahmins, for beasts and birds. Let no crime prevail in your kingdom. And to those who are in need, give property. And whatever ascetics and Brahmins in your kingdom have renounced the life of sensual infatuation and are devoted to forbearance and gentleness, each one taming himself, each one calming himself, and each one striving for the end of craving, from time to time you should go to them and consult them as to what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, what is blameworthy and what is blameless, what is to be followed and what is not to be followed, what action will in the long run lead to harm and sorrow, and what to welfare and happiness. Having listened to them, you should avoid evil and do what is good. That is the duty of an Ariyan world-turning monarch."

So the son says, "Yes, sire. Thank you very much." And, of course, he becomes the king. Then, of course, he doesn't do that. Things went wrong, and the wheel slipped from its position. And so this man came to the king and said, "Sire, you should know that the sacred wheel treasure has disappeared." That's bad news.

"At this the king was grieved and felt sad, but he did not go to the royal sage, or ask about the duties of a wheel-turning monarch. Instead, he ruled the people according to his own ideas, and being so ruled, the people did not prosper so well as they had done under the previous kings who performed the duties of a wheel-turning monarch."

Then the ministers, counsellors, treasury officials, guards and doorkeepers, and the chanters came to the king and said, "Sire, as long as you rule the people according to your own ideas, and differently from the way they were ruled before under previous world-turning monarchs, the people do not prosper so well." So then they say to him, "Sire, there are ministers in the realm, including ourselves, who have preserved this knowledge of how a wheel-turning monarch should rule. Ask us, Your Majesty, and we will tell you."

So he asks them and he consults them and all that, and then having listened to them the king established a guard of protection but he did not give property to the needy, and as a result poverty became rife. And with the spread of poverty a man took what was not given – thus committed what was called theft. They arrested him and brought him to the king saying, "Your majesty, this man took what was not given, which we call theft."

And the king said to him, "Is it true you took what is not given, which is called theft?" "It is, it is, Majesty." "Why?" "Your Majesty, I have nothing to live on." Then the king gave him some property, saying, "Look, with this, my good man, you can keep yourself, support your mother and father, keep a wife and children, carry on a business and make

gifts to ascetics and Brahmins, which will promote your spiritual welfare and lead to a happy rebirth with pleasant results in the heavenly sphere." "Very good, Your Majesty," replied the man.

And the exact same thing happens to another man. And the people heard the king was giving away property to those who took what was not freely given. "Supposing we were to do likewise." And then another man took what was not given and they brought him to the king and the king asked him why he'd done it. He replied, "Sire, I've nothing to live on."

And the king thought, "If I give property to everybody who takes what is not given, this theft will increase more and more. I'd better make an end of him, finish him off once and for all and cut his head off." So he commanded his men, "Bind this man's arms tightly behind him with a strong rope, shave his head closely, lead him to the rough sound of a drum through the streets and squares and out through the southern gate, and there finish by inflicting the capital penalty and cut off his head." And they did so.

And hearing about this, the people thought, "Now let us get sharp swords made for us, and then we can take from anybody what is not given, we will make an end of them, finish them off, cut their heads off." And so having procured sharp swords they launched murderous assaults on villages, towns and cities, went in for highway robbery, killing their victims by cutting off their heads. So you can see once the rot sets in, you're just not going to get out of it.

And so it goes on and then finally the Dhamma monarch is re-established after many generations, five thousand years. And it gets worse because what happens is as people get more and more unethical, they lose their lifespan and they get down to... a time will come when children of these people have a lifespan of ten years. And the girls will be marriageable at five years old. And with them, these flavours will disappear: ghee, butter, sesame oil, molasses and salt. So it gets worse and worse and worse.

But again, it's just this idea that morality, ethics really, is what it's all about. And actually, that was the teaching of that Axial Age. If you look across to Lao Tzu and the Tao, and Moses, the Ten Commandments, and Socrates, all the same age. Socrates also said desire was the problem. You'll see there's an awakening of mankind to this idea that you do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That was the big message of what's known as the Axial Age. So anyway, that's the Buddha's teaching. It's about ethics.

So now we come to this knotty problem about rebirth. So that's another question that the Buddha doesn't answer. He doesn't tell us how the process takes place. Now, we hear of people with near-death experiences, especially on operating tables where they come out and they can actually tell what's actually happened during the operation. We also know that people have out-of-body experiences and see this whirling tunnel through which they go, sometimes into another realm. But none of that is in the Pali scriptures. The question of... nobody said to the Buddha, "Yeah, but how does it happen?"

So it's just that there's a teaching about there are different realms. And the basic one is, of course, the six realms. So the purgatorial realm, which is sometimes called hell realm. But hell, according to Dante, I mean, that's "abandon all hope, ye who enter here." There's nothing eternal in the world, according to Buddhism, so it's much better to think of it as purgatory, where you purge your sins and get rid of all your bad *kamma*. And there are various levels of that, the worst one being the Avīci hell, of course, where those who've been extremely cruel go, which is the opposite of the Buddhist teaching about compassion.

Then there's the animal realm – born an animal. There's the human realm, which is ours. The hungry ghosts, they're the ones who are driven by greed.

There's the angry devas—they're the clever people who are driven by anger, jealousy, all that sort of stuff. And then finally there's the deva realm, which is where beings are happy.

So you've got these six realms. And of course, what tends to happen is the relationship between what we experience as human beings extended into other realms of existence. So if you're in a deep depression and you don't see a way out of it, you're despairing, you're obviously in a hell realm. If you get drunk and do all sorts of daft things, then you're obviously in an animal realm. There's the human realm, of course. When we're craving for stuff and we can't just stop going for those biscuits, then you're a hungry ghost. And when we're getting angry and trying to get the best of somebody, we're in the angry deva realm. And then finally when we're happy and peaceful and wandering about the meadows here, then we're in the deva realm.

So there's always that connection between what we as human beings can experience and the cosmology that Buddhism talks about. So those are your basic things, but in the Abhidhamma it gets much more refined because then they talk about all these various realms to do with also with the jhānas. So the whole cosmology is built up into this huge idea of vast different realms, many realms all over the place—whether they exist or not is a moot point, of course.

So in order to get into these realms, of course, you've got to be reborn. You can't annihilate. If you annihilate, you don't get reborn. And therefore, you'll never experience these realms. So when it comes to rebirth, which is very difficult for us, because if you've been brought up a Christian or a Muslim or something like that, then it's easier. But for people who've been brought up in a more secular way, it's very difficult to actually just open up to the idea.

There's been lots of studies on it. I mean, what's his name? Ian Stevenson has written *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*. And there's also stuff on the website. I've actually put a clip on our website. So there's no way it's ever going to be proven scientifically. There's not going to be an fMRI scan of somebody being reborn. In the medieval ages, they would weigh a body before it died and then weigh it again after it died to see how much the soul weighed. And they were always upset because it didn't have any weight. There was no change. We're trying to prove that something which is transcendent actually exists. So we can forget about trying to prove whether there's rebirth or not.

But one thing is for sure, that when you start reading the discourses, it comes across all the time. You can't read the discourses without including rebirth. They don't make sense in terms of the whole law of kamma. So even in the Buddha's awakening we talk about the three knowledges that came to him where he remembered his past lives, which showed him how he came to be fully liberated and what was the driving force of that was his ethics.

And then he saw other beings moving from realm to realm, driven again by their ethics. So what had been just a personal law, he saw as a universal law. And then, of course, the third knowledge was that he himself was purified of all his defilements. So he goes right back to the—in the tradition, it's right back there to the awakening—of the whole thing about rebirth. And Bhikkhu Bodhi has written a monograph on it. And I've taken his ideas from there.

And the question he asks is, well, does it make sense? Is it intelligible? Does it make any sense in terms of the Dharma? Well, you can see that without the idea of rebirth, how do you ever resolve the actions that you've made? And this also moves into the idea that the universe has some sort of moral equilibrium, has some sort of moral resolution to it.

You might say that's more of an intuitive thing, that eventually whatever harm somebody has done has to be mended in some way, has to be ameliorated, has to be compensated for. So you have to forget the idea of punishment. It's to do with results. You do something wrong and there will be a result within your psychophysical organism.

And the result will reverberate back to this Buddha nature when it awakens up and realises, oh, I've done something wrong. I'm now in a world, my world, the world I'm creating, which is full of guilt, full of remorse, full of shame.

And of course the world then mirrors back to you. So if you're very sarcastic you find yourself being a bit lonely sometimes. So the way you behave also affects other people and they mirror your behavior back to you by the way they behave towards you.

There's a feeling that there must be some work out, because as we know, in the ordinary world as we see it, people get away with murder, and people who do wonderful things are never acknowledged. They might end up in a bad way too. Remember that poor man who went out to help the business in the Middle East, and they caught him and they shot him out in the desert somewhere—Jihadi John, one of the ISIS people. Do you remember that awful thing? He'd gone out to help a Muslim charity and he got out to the east. You might remember it and they showed him on YouTube and just before he was to be shot. So there's that and that makes you think, well, how does that work out?

Some people think that just because you're born or you go through something terrible in this life, that this is because you did something terrible in the past life. I think you've heard me talk about this tale which comes up in the Dhammapada, where there's a ship going across the ocean and it suddenly stops. It doesn't move. And the captain goes and consults these monks who are on board. And they sit down in deep contemplation. And they go to him and say, well, it's your wife. In the past life, she killed all these dogs. I can't remember what it was now. Dogs or something. So the only way it's going to move is to get rid of your wife, you see. So he throws her overboard. And of course, the ship moves on. There's one way to get rid of your wife.

So you've got these stories coming from the scriptures of moral retribution. So there's the feeling that maybe to make sense of the whole karmic law, there has to be some equilibrium, some way in which things are worked out. So that's an intuitive thing. Either you've got it or you've not.

And of course in terms of the whole process that we're in, which is about liberation, and about the—you might call it a categorical imperative in the Buddha's teaching—that all beings are heading towards liberation, and they will make it. So there is in us this Buddha nature which is indestructible. That's the point. It's immortal. It doesn't die. It's not born. And so it will keep being reborn until it finds that it doesn't have to be reborn anymore and finds itself in a blissful place which we call Nibbāna.

And of course there are two descriptions of what that is. In Theravāda the Self-Enlightened One just goes into Nibbāna, full stop. Nothing more is said. But in the Mahāyāna, you're drawn out to help other beings. And therefore you reappear in your bliss body in different realms. So the whole idea of kamma fits in with that basic idea that all beings are destined to be liberated one way or the other.

So it's with this rational argument—you see, it's not scientific, it's a rational argument—one might open up to the idea of rebirth. But having said all that, of course, it doesn't matter, does it? Because the Dharma works for us whether we believe it or not. So it's a case of really not coming to a conclusion.

I quote here Bhikkhu Bodhi: the karmic process functions autonomously, without a supervisor or directly, entirely through its own intrinsic power of volitional action. So it's just the law of kamma, there's no need for a god, there's no need for punishment, it just works itself out.

There's a quote here from the Buddha which I'll end with: "The end of the world is to be seen, known and reached by travelling—that I do not say. And yet I do not say that one makes an end of suffering without reaching the end of the world. Rather, in this fathom-long body, with its consciousness and mind, I declare the world, the arising of the world, the ceasing of the world, and the way leading to the ceasing of the world. Just this is the end of suffering."

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not confused, and that through your practice you may be liberated from all suffering, sooner rather than later.

Meditation and Daily Life

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 45 min

Bhante Bodhidhamma addresses the common difficulty practitioners face in connecting meditation practice with daily life. Drawing from his early experience with Zen Buddhism, he explains how Vipassanā meditation naturally flows into everyday activities through the structure of the Noble Eightfold Path. The talk explores the Buddha's concept of 'the all' (sabbam) - the six sense doors that constitute our entire experiential universe - and how establishing awareness at this interface allows us to step back from identification with the psychophysical process.

The discussion moves through the progression from Right Understanding (sammā diṭṭhi) to Right Livelihood (sammā ājīva), showing how wisdom naturally expresses itself through compassionate action and service to others. Bhante emphasizes practical techniques for maintaining mindfulness throughout the day, such as pausing when the phone rings and setting time boundaries for activities. He addresses common questions about ambition and career choices from a Buddhist perspective, advocating for an attitude of service that honors both self-care and care for others.

The talk concludes with practical guidance for establishing a daily meditation routine and maintaining the meditative perspective through regular 'stopping' practices, making the connection between formal sitting practice and the lived expression of the Dhamma increasingly seamless.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sambha sampuddhasa namo tassa bhagavato arahato sambha sampuddhasa namo tassa bhagavato arahato sambha sampuddhasa

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

There's always this blank when I begin a talk. Starts somewhere. I suppose what I'd like to do is make a link between what we're doing in meditation and what we do in the world out there. And people find that difficult. I was rather fortunate. When I say people find it difficult, I mean people in this particular tradition, especially Theravāda, also in other traditions, but I always feel fortunate because I began with Zen Buddhism up in North England, the Throble Hole Abbey Foundation, I don't know whether you know of it.

And Zen practice is very much based on work—you do a lot of physical work. I'm now talking about the monastic routine up there. Obviously when they do a special course of just meditation there tends to be more meditation—they call it a session—but just in their ordinary daily rota they do a lot of physical work. They keep gardens. And this came about because of the history of Buddhism in China which then spread to Japan where the idea of begging was just not on. And so the Chinese monks began to grow their own food, things like that.

The reason you worked hard, I mean you put a lot of energy into it, was because in the work you got your concentration and your mindfulness so that when you went to sit there was that attention, there was the ability to watch. So that mixture of working, even though it was physical work, and meditation, made it quite easy for me to see how the meditation worked in daily life, how it just moved into it. There was no real thought about it, it just went into daily life. Whatever you were doing, you attended to it.

And one thing that helps, of course, is the way that Zen or Chan or Dzogchen, some of you might know Dzogchen from the Tibetan tradition, begin their meditation. You might describe it as awareness at the six sense doors. In Buddhism you have the five senses, which we're all aware of, and the sixth sense, which is the mind itself. It's a sensing thing, it receives. It receives thoughts, it receives emotions. And being at the forefront, within the all, it's easy to maintain that general awareness when you go out into the world. So there didn't seem to be this huge distinction.

Now I just used the word there, the all. That's the Buddha, you see. He says the all. The six senses is the all. So to understand that, we have to get the idea that we are actually living in this bubble, this bubble of consciousness. It doesn't have an edge to it which is contained. It's just this space. So at this present time, in terms of my eye consciousness, I'm just caught within this room. It's difficult for me to see outside this room. So visually, I'm caught within the bubble, you might say, of this visual consciousness. And that's all I know, isn't it?

And it's a truism—all you know is what you know. You can't go beyond what you know. And what you know is that which the senses give you and your own mind and your own heart. There's nothing else. You can't go beyond that. So in a sense we're living in this enclosed little universe of my consciousness. And it's obviously similar, but different from yours. Otherwise we couldn't communicate.

But walking into this room, nobody will deny that the room has, as it were, its own existence, for want of a better word. So if we all leave, nobody believes the room disappears. It's not here because we see it. But on the other hand, thinking subjectively, this

room—there exist as many rooms as there are people in it, in terms of how the room is experienced. So we all walk in here and there's your room and my room, etc. And with it we have our relationship to it.

So that's the all, that's the all that the Buddha's talking about. Within that all, there is the whole of *saṃsāra*, the whole of onward going, the whole of unsatisfactoriness, and within that whole, eventually, is the Nibbanic experience. So the nirvanic experience isn't outside consciously—we're not going somewhere to experience *nirvana*. It's not like you take a train down from Manchester to London, and it's over there. *Nirvana* is simply another way of being in the world. So what we're investigating is the way we're being, or perhaps better, becoming, this constant sense of becoming somebody in the world.

So now, with the Zen Dzogchen approach, that distance between being up in the front of your mind, as it were, and then going out into the world didn't seem so separate. But in this other tradition, which is the Theravāda tradition, and also in the Tibetan tradition known as the Mahamudra tradition, they also have this form of meditation. We're actually trying to find within ourselves a sort of observation post, a position which is at the interface of consciousness and what the mind is offering, what the senses are offering. It's as though we've stepped out of ourselves, stood behind it and just watched. Or above it or below it, it doesn't matter what image you want to use. But it's as though we are exiting from the personality. Sort of finding a place where you're up front as to where thoughts arise. They arise there.

Now, you see, as I'm speaking to you now, I can't be looking at my thoughts that way, or else I'd lose it. If I become objective to my thoughts, I'll just know thinking, and the talk comes to an end and we'll have to do some walking meditation. I can't do—I've got to be up there in the thought. So it's the same with my emotional life. If I'm now, say, depressed, you see, and I start feeling my depression, well, it's going to be really depressing for you all, because I'm just going to express how depressed I am.

Somehow, I've got to maintain that distance, but in a sense, when I'm talking, I've got to manufacture. I've got to manufacture a particular mood to go with the talk. I manufacture a particular mood to go with when I meet somebody I know—a happiness arises. So but I've got to be up there, I've got to be in that emotion as it were. Whereas here you see I can somehow step behind it. I can see it. I can point to it. So I can say joy and it's there as it were in front of me.

When we have a pain—a headache or something—and we're trying to do some work, it's there, we're in it. It's very difficult for us to separate entirely from it and we immediately search for some pills to get rid of it. But here I can form a sort of space as it were between that which knows—the knowing—and the headache, the knee ache, the back ache. The sneeze. I can see the body going, "achoo," like that in front of me.

So there's some way in which I can objectify the whole psychophysical organism that usually I'm in. I'm in it and being it, walking around the world as this being. And to do that, we use this little technique, you see, of pointing with a word. You don't have to do that. There are perfectly viable *vipassanā* techniques that don't do the pointing with the word. But they still get that position. They still know it as an object.

The reason why the noting is there is, as we discussed last night, just to keep the intellect pointed, but there's a more subtle reason in that even when you are not using a word, you are still conceptualizing what you look at. You're still seeing it by way of a concept. So just to say the word, at least as it were, brings that concept to mind, and then we can move towards it.

So one thing might be, you see, is that you might have an itch. So you recognize it, "itching, itching," you see, and you can feel it. I've got one in here now. And you feel the itching, you see, and so long as I say "itching," there comes that whole response to it. Got to scratch it, get rid of the itch, you see. If I can just keep saying "itching," but I put my attention directly on to the sensation, it's as though I'm going beyond the idea of itching, and when that idea of itching goes, the idea of reacting to it goes, because I only react to something that I recognise.

When I get down to an itch as an itch, as it really manifests in the body, it's just a little sense disturbance, like a little scratching on the surface of the skin. And being with that, it means that this awareness I've got, this intelligence I've got, is pulling itself out of its embeddement, confusion with the intellect.

When I was at the college I used to work at, I once went to a colleague who was a fundamental materialist. There is the body, full stop—when you're dead that's the end of it. And I said to him—this is on the corridor—I said to him, "Is there an intelligence which doesn't think?" And he looked at me. We used to have these silly conversations. And he looked at me, and just for a moment, he looked. And he never said it. He just turned around and walked away.

And I was left thinking, what the hell have I said? And he took about ten, twenty paces, stopped, turned around, came straight back at me and said, "No," and then walked off. So presumably he's still stuck in the mire of delusion, you see.

So what we recognise by noting and by seeing thought—by recognising thought, there must be something that recognises the thought. There must be something outside thought which knows thought. And then we begin to see that thought is just there.

What do we mean by concept, you see? What do we mean by concept? They're symbols, aren't they? They're just symbols which carry history. If I say, for instance, "ice cream." Just say ice cream. What comes immediately, you see? It's not just the word, is it? I mean, a cornet came, with a swirl of ice cream. And then I'm on the beach and there's donkeys. You see, there's all sorts of things. Blackpool and stuff. All these things come up just with the word "ice cream." If you said it to me another time, I might get a whole load of different history. And there comes with it this deliciousness. See, got to have an ice cream.

So whenever we have a word, we always bring with it our understanding, which is historical, and our emotional involvement in whatever it is that we're conceiving. And that's okay. That's okay. You need it in ordinary life. But here, you see, in our meditation, we actually want to see that process and how it stops us from directly experiencing what we're actually experiencing.

So, for instance, today we had lasagna. Am I correct? I think it was lasagna. So there'll be, I'm sure there'll be amongst us, a specialised cook who knows what exactly a lasagna ought to be or whatever, what it should be cooked. So the pasta was not al dente, you see. It wasn't quite right. Teeth should go through it, but there should be a hardness to it. It shouldn't be too soft. If there's a little hardness in the middle, it's not properly cooked.

So anybody going there with a concept of what lasagna ought to be like because they are this expert lasagna user, they might not like that at all. They might have formed a real aversion to it, unable to eat it. You get that with gourmets, don't you? "It's terrible, take it away, I can't stand it." And it's perfectly good food.

So, as we're eating, we can see how the concept is affecting us. The chips, you see. So, while the chips came, I thought, oh, it's lovely, you see. The chips came, but I had no vinegar, so I could feel this disappointment. I had salt, but I had no vinegar. Where's the vinegar? And I thought, well, relax. It's not the end of the world. Chips without vinegar. No HP. Terrible. And this just arises naturally because of my conditioning with chips. What can you do?

If you battle that, if you think, well, you shouldn't be thinking that. That's terrible. That's just suppressive, isn't it? You're just layering another negativity. So here we are, we're taking this position always behind the mind, if you'll excuse that image, and you're just watching things arise and pass away.

I mean, what is there? There's sensations, sensations coming from the body, pleasant, unpleasant, feelings from the heart, pleasant, unpleasant, thoughts and images. That's it. And it all works in unison with different little habits and it produces this personality. And the personality changes, doesn't it? You're this way with this person and then you're slightly different with another person and you're slightly different when you're by yourself. It's not as though the personality is a static thing. It's got all sorts of shades and nuances depending on the situation you're in. Different types of habits arise.

Next time you happen to talk to a policeman, just watch your body. Or even seeing a policeman as well. "Not me. All the guilt comes up. Not me. I didn't do it." Or when you're standing next to somebody over whom you have some position. You just watch your body posture. You always lift it. Lift your chin. Even if the person is six foot six. Just engage. And if you walk into a room of somebody whom you have to have respect for, even a doctor—very few people have the old respect for doctors—but even so, walking into a doctor, just notice, you see, you just lower yourself a bit.

But this is just normal body language, you see. In the West, where we've come to this wonderful state of total equality, of course, we deny all this. We behave as though we're all perfectly equal. But in fact, if you watch yourself closely, you change. You change depending on who you meet, who you're with.

One of the more obvious ones is when you meet little children. You suddenly take on this baby voice and act in a stupid way. The kid thinks there's something wrong with this adult. As far as you're concerned, you have this special communication with a child. "Hello, how are you doing?"

So here we are, taking this position within ourselves, and the process is a detachment. We're not getting involved. It's one of allowing things to manifest and watching them die away. So it's very passive. It's not active. We're not actually manufacturing anything in the mind. What it's leading us to is a stillness of thought, a complete calmness of the heart, and a stillness of the body. Silence in the mind, calmness in the heart, stillness in the body. That's what *vipassanā* would lead you to, you see. It would lead you to that point of just bringing all that energy, finally just rolling down to this perfect stasis. Perfect stasis.

Now, if that was it, if that was the end of the plot, you see, then of course that would be the end of the practice. You would just meditate, come to this end point and that would be it.

Now if you go back to the Buddha's life, so he's struggling to find a way out of his question. Why do we suffer? Why are we unhappy? Why don't we find perfect fulfillment? Why am I here? All these existential questions. And just as an aside, remember that he remembers this point in childhood. This is really very crucial, very important. These stories that come through, they give you a pointer as to where the insight about how to go beyond suffering comes.

He's tried all these different methods, the absorptions and the mortifications. And he comes to this point, he remembers this point in childhood, where he's watching his father doing the plowing ceremony. So what is it about that attention that he had there, which is different from all the attention that he'd got through all this practice with these teachers, and through his mortification practices, and it goes back to that mind that the child has—best recognised before seven, that pre-conceptual, when the mind, before it begins to really proliferate, where you can see, especially young children, where they might see something which they'd never seen before, a bug or something.

I have a picture of two little girls watching this bug and it's perfect. And they just lock on to it. It's like the world shuts down and all they know is this little bug. And the jaw drops.

Now, that's why in your meditation the jaw has to be relaxed. Because the jaw and the tongue are intimately connected to thought. And sometimes you'll actually catch, if you watch, you'll actually catch your tongue moving with thought. It's already ready to speak. It's just tickling away on the top. So by relaxing that, you immediately relax the whole process of thinking.

And after it's actually observed this little bug, only then, when it's absorbed it, when it's really absorbed what it's looking at, will it ask for its name. And once it's told it's a beetle, it has a concept and a history. So the next time it sees a beetle, it's much more interested to tell the parent that it recognizes what it is, a beetle. But it's not seen the beetle. It's not seeing the beetle like it saw the beetle before. From now on, all beetles are seen with that history, with that word, with that concept. Even if the beetle is slightly different, it's still a beetle. That's a beetle. That's the end of it.

And that's what we're doing. We're not specifically seeing what's coming in without the clarity of that historical garbage that comes with everything that we experience. So here, we're trying to cleanse that. And that means that we have to go through the pro-

cess of very gently allowing the mind to calm down, to bring it to a stop. Calm down, bring it to a stop. To let these emotions become, to let them express themselves, because that's the emotional history we have. That's the baggage we're carrying from all the past. And to allow it to pass away, to burn itself out.

Now, if that were the end of the process, when the Buddha was enlightened, that would have been it, wouldn't it? He'd have just turned into a blob. He'd have just sat there and people would have come and said, what's wrong with you? And he wouldn't be able to speak, would he? He'd have just said, ugh, or something. Enlightened, shut up, go away. So he just sat there and did nothing because he's done it. He's perfectly happy.

But peculiarly enough, that doesn't happen at all. The first thought, or the first thoughts that arise in his mind is, who? Who can I teach this to? Who can I teach this to? So now we have a very different thing arising. There must be some connection. There must be some connection between this wisdom, this intelligence we have, and the world it finds itself in, the world it finds itself in, and the people that it finds itself connected to.

Now that's put into the Eightfold Path. So as soon as there is right understanding, there moves into a right attitude. And it happens naturally. I mean, we do have exercises. We do *mettā* practice. That's a practice on developing goodwill, developing our compassion. There are all sorts of practices in Buddhism to do that. But actually, it's not necessary because that wisdom will always want to express itself.

How do we know this wisdom always wants to express itself? Because this same intelligence, which has now become, shall we say, very wise, when it was deluded, wanted to express itself. So this intelligence we have, this intuitive intelligence, is always in a state of wanting to express what it knows. And the reason for that is that it doesn't know what it knows until it's expressed. If it did not express anything, it would stay in a complete state of original ignorance. And that's the beginning of the Eightfold Path, the one that we chant in the morning. *Avijjā*, not knowing.

This ignorance isn't a culpable thing. It's not as though we're evil because we don't know. We don't know because we don't know. So it's like little children. They don't know. They have to be taught. So it's a case of not knowing. It's the function, it's the inner quality of intelligence that it wants to know. That's how it's defined. It wants to know. Intelligence wants to know. And in wanting to know, it needs to be able to know it knows. And it can only know it knows when it expresses something, when it says something, paints something, creates music, talks to people, relates to people, does

something in the world, creates something in the world, a business, whatever it is. Those are all expressions of the either delusive nature in our intelligence or its wisdom nature.

So in other words, you can't exist and not express. Otherwise you just remain a vegetable. So there's the Buddha. He's become fully enlightened. And he says, I've attained the unconditioned consciousness. Unconditioned. Perhaps a better word is unbound, unbounded.

So this intelligence that we have, it's bounded, it's caught up in the sensual world. So it thinks itself to be what it sees, and the seeing process. It experiences itself as not only the hearing, but I hear, I am the one who hears. That binds us to hearing, and it binds us to seeking in hearing the happiness that it craves.

I mean, what is suffering? I don't mean, that's not a definition of suffering. I mean, what is it that is suffering? Does the body suffer? I mean, when you get pain in the knees, is the body suffering? It's just a sensation, isn't it? The knee isn't saying, ouch, I'm suffering. The knee is just giving off certain sensations. When you're depressed and the depression is there in front of you, is the depression depressed about being depressed. The depression is just a feeling. It doesn't have any intelligence. It doesn't know anything. It's just there as depression. Does a word, does the word, does the intellect understand what it's actually saying? Words are just little symbols, aren't they?

So that which understands, that which has a relationship to emotions, that which has a knowledge, understanding of sensations from the body, that is something else. So it must be that that suffers. So the answer lies not in the pain of the body, or in the emotional state of the heart, or in the way the mind thinks, but in the relationship that this intelligence has to the psychophysical organism it finds itself in.

So the relationship we have now is, this is me. And because of that, we're constantly expecting this to give us that sense of peace and joy, calm, that we want. And we get upset when it doesn't. Pain in the knee, and all that.

So, there's an intimate link between the wisdom that we gain from observing ourselves, the purity that we gain from allowing these emotions to expend their energy, and the new attitudes that arise in the heart which we recognise as sharing, love, giving, generosity, compassion, sympathetic joy, because of that communication we have with other people.

And when that drops further outward, as it were, as an expression, even if you're stuck there with this love, what use is that? If you went to a cave and just sat there and said, may all beings be happy. Well, you might. Of course, you might. I mean, I'm not

being cynical about this. You might be sending out waves, colossal waves of love with changing the world and all that. But in a sense, it might also be just you in this cave feeling very happy about how much you love people. And if somebody comes along and says, can you help me shift this bowl? You say, go away. Don't disturb me, I'm in a state of perfect love here.

So, you can get stuck at these stages. You might think, well, the whole purpose of life is just to sit and meditate and get into this perfect state of peace and happiness. But that's not what the Buddha did. Remember that he's the exemplar, he's the paradigm of our path. And you might think, well, in that case, I might stop that attitude and just develop this huge compassion, the Buddha heart. But that just turns you into just a self-regarding person. You just sit there beaming out this love.

So it has to move out, it has to express itself, and it expresses itself through right speech, right action, and right livelihood. So you can see how the Eightfold Path just follows, follows the one after the other. So the way we speak, the way we communicate is an expression of that heart, the kindness, compassionate way, sympathy, joyfulness, which is an expression of our understanding, of the way we relate to the world.

When we start doing something, it's done with that attention because that's what this intelligence is. It's a state of attention. And that's a nice word in English because there's also the word attend, to attend to. Nurses attend to their patients. There's a sense of, in that word, there's almost an inclusive, the idea of caring, attention and care, care and attention. So you could say that those are the hallmarks of your daily life. There are some things that you have to pay more attention to, like a phone call. And there are some things that you have to be more careful with, like when you're cooking. Be careful.

So the two are one and the same, but they're coming from, shall we say, a different type of relationship. One is more based on the intellect, the understanding, and one is more based in the heart, on a sense of care. They're always there. So now you can see how this intelligence which we've been training to sit back and watch, to sit back and watch and understand and see and understand what's going on, how it now begins to, as it were, come down into the attitude into the heart and how it begins to flow outward into the world in the way we speak and the way we act and finally the very livelihood that we have.

So here's the Buddha putting livelihood. Logically speaking, there's no need to put livelihood there because it's included in right action. But such is his understanding of the fact that most of our lives are doing something, unless we're unfortunate not to have a job. But even then, in the West anyway, they come and go. So now, your attitude. What is your attitude to the work you're doing?

Yesterday I was talking to somebody who was going through one of these awful periods where there's that vanity about what they're doing, about the uselessness, why am I doing this, it means nothing to me and all that. And what you often find when you get into that mood is that actually it's coming again from this idea of self that all we're concerned about is making the job interesting to me. It's interesting to me. What's it for me? How much am I earning? And there's always going to arise that dissatisfaction because the I always wants to aggrandize. That's the self. It always wants to accumulate. Because the more it accumulates, the safer it feels. I mean, you feel much safer if you had a million pounds in the bank than just a hundred. I would. I mean, you'd have this fallback.

So, I can't remember, there was, I think, one of these rich people said, I've done poverty, and I've done riches, and being rich is better. So, there's no particular virtue in being poor, it's just the way you end up. But you can see how the self is always trying to make the world safe and wonderful around itself.

So what's missing is missing that connection with the other person. So again, as soon as we do that, people become objects. You're just using them, using them to fulfill your desires. And that's bound to bring a dissatisfaction because people refuse to be objects to your desire. They always do something which you don't want them to do. And then you get angry and say, why did you do that?

If we now turn around in ourselves and we say, right, well... What would be a proper attitude to my work? Well, there has to be, obviously, some self-care. So we've tried to make that distinction with our eating, that we're not eating just to gain happiness, just to feel blissed out on chips. We're not doing that. We're actually trying to feed the body, we're trying to change our relationship to food, seeing it as medicine, seeing it as nourishment. That gives us a very different attitude.

So now, when I'm doing my work, when we're doing work in society, surely the attitude which I ought to give out is one of service, isn't it? Service. As soon as you serve other people, you're immediately in a state of communication to them as people, because you're trying to be of service to them. So to be of service to somebody means that

you have to open up to them as individuals. They have to speak to you. They have to tell you what they want. Even if it's just brushing the streets, for heaven's sake. You're doing it as a service.

So this puts a very different timbre on life, doesn't it? It puts a very different shading on life. I mean, we do it naturally with people whom we love, with family members. We'll do things for them and do it with a good heart and with an open heart. And when you do that, you get that good feeling, don't you? You get that glow. So that's the attitude of livelihood. It's one of being of service.

That doesn't take away the fact that there has to be that self-regard as well. You have to do something which is good for you, good for them. So in this way you can see how the meditation is preparing us to develop a completely different, not completely, I'm sure you all have this sense of service, is to develop the attitude of service and to distinguish between doing something just simply for ourselves out of selfish motivations and doing something which is caring for us, caring for the other.

And that brings us into that funny area where people get stuck, where they say, well, should I go for a position? Where does ambition come in? Should I then just say, well, I want to serve society, I want to serve people, and I'll just wait for the job to come. And you end up on the dole. Again, it's always, if you're serving, if you're serving, what you want to serve is your best, isn't it? If you invite a person round for a meal, you want to serve the best food that you can make, don't you? You want to serve them the best. You want to offer what you have as the best. If you invite a friend round for beans on toast, it can be depressing. Unless you told them, of course.

So when you offer your services to society, you're offering your best. So if there's an opening which you feel you can do, then you go and offer your service to that. If you don't get the job you want, if you don't get the position you wanted, because you did it out of an attitude of service, in other words, there's an acceptance that you don't fit into what they want, then there's no pain, there's no hurt. The potential to do that job still lies there. It's just they either found somebody else or whatever.

We had a case just recently at Gaia House where somebody came to apply for a job, one of the managers' jobs. And we knew her. She was a fairly regular visitor. And she'd set herself, set her heart on becoming a manager. But there was another person who applied for the same position. And eventually it was this other person who got the job. Well, it was like a disaster, really. Weeping, despair. And it was only a year's job. I mean, you'd be out after a year. There wasn't some huge life commitment to it. But the suffering that she went through because of that belies that

Even though there was that wanting to serve, there was something else there which attached her to that job. And not getting it brought about the pain. So it's a case of offering ourselves as a service and then recognizing that it might not be received, it might not be accepted. And that's okay. That's okay. So it doesn't stop you from following an ambitious route. There's nothing stopping any of you becoming Prime Minister if you feel that's where your talent lies.

So I hope that makes a connection between what we're doing here in the sitting and your daily life. I hope it makes you connect. There's a very intimate connection to it, very intimate.

So to reinforce that, you have to take some of the tricks that you gain from your meditation retreat into your daily life. And one of the most powerful ones is to stop. Keep stopping. Very simple occasions like if the phone rings. So when you get the first ring, you don't have to launch yourself at the phone, do you? You can note that the phone is ringing. And just relax. Like most people will hold on for three rings. I hold on for seven, ten rings for heaven's sake. I'm very patient. Well, three rings at least. So there's just that recognition, the phone is ringing, and then you just finish off what you're doing. You don't just forget, and then when you come back, you've lost your place. Then the next one goes, and you pick it up on the third ring. You're calm, you're collected, you're not in a rush, and therefore you're open to the telephone call.

After you've set yourself a task at work or just in your daily life, if you're aware of that intention, then put an end time to that intention. Like, for instance, I mess around a lot with this crazy computer stuff. And if I don't put a time on it, like two hours passes. I'm sure you've all experienced that. You wake up and two hours are gone. Two and a half hours. Whoa! And I've got in the habit, I have this little watch here which gives me a beep every 40 minutes. So just stop for a minute. It stops you getting caught up in something.

So when you set yourself a job, no matter what it is, it doesn't matter of length, you could be just mowing the lawn. So you say to yourself at the end of that, I'll just stop. You just relax. And then the accumulation of that job, maybe you got a bit of an irritation, who knows, maybe you picked up some irritation, maybe you developed unwittingly some irritation around it, some rush, some pressure. Just stop, let it, let it. And in this way, throughout the day, we're constantly bringing ourselves back to this very posture, this posture of just being here. Then you move again from that base.

And for those of you who haven't done this before it's important to do meditation in the morning and evening. Two hours is good. But 20 minutes is enough. You just need enough time to access this level of consciousness. It's a level of consciousness. A way of

being in the world. Just remind yourself, this is where I'm supposed to be at all day. And then throughout the day you do these little stoppings. Keep bringing yourself back. Remember how it was in that sitting.

And then in the evening when you come back, always better before you eat, before you have an evening ahead of you. Just to sit for 20 minutes and just see what you've accumulated during the day. The tensions, the irritations, the disappointment. Just let them calm down, calm down. And of course it makes your evening much more pleasant. If you do it too late, you just fall asleep. If you do it just before you go to bed, it's just preparation for falling asleep really. Nothing happens. So do it when you're still awake, especially before you eat. And then you'll see it has an effect on the evening.

So just very slowly, very slowly. And after each of these meditations, just a moment of developing *mettā*, goodwill, which we'll do tomorrow. And that prepares this intelligence to move into the world with a proper attitude. So that's the path in a nutshell.

Mindfulness of Breathing - read by Finola O'Siochrú

Noirin Sheahan · 37 min

This teaching explores the Buddha's instructions for mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati) as presented in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). Noirin examines how to work skillfully with the specific exercises: noting long and short breaths, experiencing the whole body while breathing, and tranquilizing the bodily formations (saṅkhāra). The talk addresses the practical challenge of integrating these traditional exercises with contemporary Mahasi Vipassanā practice.

Using the Buddha's analogy of the skilled woodturner, Noirin emphasizes breathing as a respected skill requiring patient cultivation. She provides detailed guidance on contemplating the breath internally and externally, observing arising and passing factors, and developing bare awareness. Special attention is given to working with the emotions and attachments that breath meditation can stir, particularly our deep attachment to life itself.

The teaching concludes with the Sutta's refrain, exploring how bare attention—simply knowing 'there is a body'—leads to independence and non-clinging. This talk offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners a thorough understanding of traditional breath meditation within the framework of insight practice, always emphasizing the ultimate goal of purification and the realization of Nibbāna.

Tonight I'd like to look at the exercises for mindfulness of breath given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. *Satipaṭṭhāna* usually translates as a foundation or support for mindfulness. Joseph Goldstein also suggests the word pasture, a fertile field where attention can safely graze. I like that pastoral image. It suggests a restful approach as an antidote to our habitual striving.

There are four *satipaṭṭhāna*: body, feeling, mind and *dhammas*. The last one covers the main teachings of the Buddha. The first *satipaṭṭhāna*, where mindfulness explores the posture of the body, starts with the breath.

Here's the passage: "Having gone to the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, one sits down. Having folded one's legs crosswise, set the body erect, and established mindfulness in front of one, ever mindful one breathes in, mindful one breathes out. Breathing in long, one understands 'I breathe in long.' Or breathing out long, one understands 'I breathe out long.' Breathing in short, one understands 'I breathe in

short.' Or breathing out short, one understands 'I breathe out short.' One trains thus, 'I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body.' One trains thus, 'I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.' One trains thus, 'I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation.' One trains thus, 'I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily formation.'

Just as a skilled turner or their apprentice, when making a long turn, understands, 'I make a long turn.' Or when making a short turn, one understands, 'I make a short turn.' So too, breathing in long, one understands, 'I breathe in long.' Or breathing out long, one understands, 'I breathe out long.' And so on for all the following exercises."

The first few sentences clarify that this is formal practice, not simply relaxation or a distraction for a few moments when we've nothing better to do. We're making time in life specifically for this practice, going somewhere secluded and taking care with our sitting posture. The phrase "established mindfulness in front of one" can be taken to mean that we've clarified for ourselves that our job is to be mindful, to attend to present moment experience.

Having done all that, we focus on the experience of breathing. Mindful, one breathes in. Mindful, one breathes out. This is our usual starting point for *Vipassanā*, bringing attention into the body, into the sensations that accompany breathing. When the mind has steadied, the next step in the Mahāsi approach is to broaden awareness, allowing attention rest wherever it is called. To follow the *Satipaṭṭhāna* approach, we instead take up one or other of the exercises suggested here.

This could get confusing. Should I be practising Mahāsi or *Satipaṭṭhāna*? The same question could be asked of the exercises in any other parts of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* Sutta: feeling, mind, *dharmā*. The *Satipaṭṭhāna* exercises are more challenging than normal Mahāsi practice. They often show up some unacknowledged attachment, tweak our understanding. However, we can't push ourselves too far. We have to let any new understanding integrate. We do that by reverting back to our normal Mahāsi practice as we work through whatever hindrances have been stirred by the exercise.

My advice, therefore, is to clarify that Mahāsi is our basic practice and that we only take up one of these exercises on occasion as a means of tweaking our practice. The moment we feel ourselves straining or getting dull or distracted or confused, we immediately go back to the Mahāsi approach, allowing attention go wherever it is called, letting go of any attempt to follow the *Satipaṭṭhāna* exercise.

This is especially important because most of us are influenced by modern culture of individual achievement. And so we turn these *Satipaṭṭhāna* exercises into another arena where we have to achieve, become expert. To counteract this, we must be willing

to revert to the more straightforward Mahāsi approach whenever we feel ourselves coming under pressure, trying to get the exercise right, trying to do things perfectly. We can see all this as purifying our addiction to achievement and therefore very beneficial.

So please keep that in mind throughout the rest of the talk. Our principal aim is to be mindful without any interference. The *Satipaṭṭhāna* exercises are only used when things go quiet and we're feeling the breath anyway as part of Mahāsi practice and we feel steady enough to give ourselves a challenge, tweak our practice in the right direction.

Having said all that, let's look at the first exercise. When we notice ourselves taking in a long breath, we understand, "I breathe in long." The Buddha doesn't ask us to deliberately take in a long breath. We're breathing naturally. It's only when we notice that the in or out breath is unusually long or short that we reflect in this way.

Attachment to breathing symbolises attachment to life itself. Without this vital movement we quickly die. When we're breathing with long deep breaths there's often a sense of ease and satisfaction. But attachment can add to this with delight, with pride, with the habit of fantasising and making great plans on the basis of feeling good. We can't get too carried away with those when we're noting that the breath is longer than usual. Thus the exercise keeps us grounded in the body, prevents us drifting into a cloud of hazy delight and delusion.

Sometimes a long breath is from a sigh or yawn that preludes sleepiness. In this case, noting, "I breathe in or out long," helps keep us awake, alert to these signs of drowsiness.

When the breath is shallow and rapid, there is often some negativity behind this. For example, fear can make for a jerky, uncomfortable breath. Anxiety can make the breath shallow and rapid. Anger might tense the body so that we take short, forced breaths. Often we're so fixated on the thoughts driving the emotion, we hardly notice the breath. Here, we're being asked to deliberately reflect that we're taking short breaths in and out. This takes some attention away from the thought fixation, might show us underlying aversion, desire or emotional turmoil.

Note there's no judgment involved in this exercise, no preference that the breath be long rather than short. Our only job is to know when it becomes unusually long or unusually short. The exercise makes us more aware of how emotions affect the breath, grounds attention in the body while the emotion is passing through.

Remember that at any point we can go back to our usual Mahāsi practice. We note whatever predominantly calls attention, let the breath go at its own pace. We stop asking ourselves whether it's going in or out, whether it's long or short. Tracking the emotion mindfully is to purify our attachment to breathing or to doing the exercise properly or whatever has stirred us up.

The next exercise is described as training, as opposed to our usual approach in *Vipassanā*, which is to be mindful without having any agenda. "One trains thus, 'I shall breathe in experiencing the full body. I shall breathe out experiencing the full body.'"

Sometimes the full body is interpreted as the full body of the breath. For instance, we track beginning, middle and end of the breath. Another interpretation is that we have a broad awareness of the full body, with the breath as one component within this. I find the second interpretation more helpful. Instead of focusing closely on the sensations of breathing, we have a more spacious awareness of the body.

It's interesting that this exercise is described as training. The natural tendency is for mindfulness to focus down on one sensation or another. We have to put some effort into maintaining the more spacious approach. The teacher Rob Burbea describes it as blowing up a bubble of mindfulness. Whenever we notice the bubble deflating and attention closing down onto some particular sensation then we very gently blow up that bubble again so that mindfulness encompasses the full body.

The point of this training is to help us develop a more spacious awareness. This can at times be very useful. We can get lost in detail, overly delighted by pleasant feelings for example, fearful around unpleasant ones. This is no problem when we have enough equanimity to remain mindful and objective despite these strong emotions. However, when we feel ourselves being overwhelmed by emotion, it can be helpful to broaden awareness. This promotes objectivity and equanimity, lets the emotion burn away without overwhelming us completely.

This exercise to breathe in experiencing the full body, breathe out experiencing the full body, develops our ability to stand back, see the bigger picture. If we deliberately practise this from time to time we'll find it creeping naturally into our *Vipassanā* practice when we're being threatened with overwhelm and need to strengthen equanimity.

The next instruction also involves training. "One trains thus 'I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation.' One trains thus 'I shall breathe out, tranquilizing the bodily formation.'" The Pali word for formation is *saṅkhāra*. We're more used to thinking of *saṅkhāra* in terms of the mind, the habits of mind we develop every time we think, speak or act. But there are also habits of body. Each of us walks in our own

way. Our posture and facial expression are likewise individuated. Every time we frown, our facial muscles get another chance to perfect their ability to frown. Thus our physical makeup is based on habit.

When we tranquilise the bodily formation, we are allowing the breath to calm the body. We might be amazed at how much tension we hold until we consciously try to relax. The face, the jaw, the shoulders, the stomach, all these can hold knots of tension. The habit of tension runs deep. As soon as we relax a muscle, we might notice it's tensing up again. That's why this instruction is also a form of training. We're cultivating a new habit, trying to teach an old dog tricks and we have to have a lot of patience.

Many people have practical challenges such as financial pressure, ill health, deadlines at work, relationship difficulties. All these can result in physical tension. Even if there are no obvious challenges, we carry stress because of our unenlightened nature. We keep expecting the world to make us happy. If only we could get away on holiday, get a pay rise, be more confident. Surely then we would be happy.

But the world cannot satisfy. Life is *dukkha*, the Buddha proclaims in the First Noble Truth. No job, relationship or achievement can provide a secure basis for happiness. All of these are unstable, changing, unreliable. To be deluded is to be constantly disappointed.

Retreating into cynicism or hopelessness is no help either. Life has its ups as well as downs. We cannot prevent pleasant feelings registering. To maintain cynicism, we have to tense up to suppress the smidgen of joy and hope that follows each one.

The exercise of relaxing the body can therefore be challenging. We are asking ourselves to trust that, at least for now, for this meditation session, there is no need to worry. We are in a safe place. We have nothing to achieve apart from remaining mindful. The instruction links relaxation with the breath. "I shall breathe in tranquilising the body formation. I shall breathe out tranquilising the body formation."

The *Vipassanā* teacher Bhante Sujeeva suggests imagining the breath flowing through whichever part of the body we are relaxing. We could even imagine a wave of breath flowing the whole full length of the body. But we can't force relaxation. If tension gets even tighter as we think about relaxing, then we need to let go of the exercise, go back to Mahāsi practice, feel the tension as sensations, without judging these as wrong. This is to give the underlying emotion the time and space it needs to be acknowledged.

The Buddha gives the simile of a woodturner for our work with the breath. "Just as a skilled turner or their apprentice, when making a long turn, understands, 'I make a long turn,' so too breathing in long, one understands, 'I breathe in long.'" He is saying that we are to regard breathing as a skill, one that needs devoted practice, an activity we can respect and esteem.

James, who is one of Bhante's students, who is a skilled woodworker, sent me a video of a man carving out an ornate chess set using a traditional instrument similar to those used in the Buddha's day. One hand turns a bow which determines how quickly the wood spins. The other hand, or sometimes a foot, holds a blade that cuts into the spinning wood, carving out a pattern. It really is an impressive skill. With a sharp knife in one hand and a delicate bow in another, the turner has to be very alert to what he is doing.

Would it be possible to see the breath in a similar fashion? Long slow breaths help us relax, gain stability, resource ourselves, while rapid breathing often accompanies emotional release. Rather than preferring one to the other, could we, like the woodturner, learn to see which was appropriate? At times we take long, slow breaths with flow throughout the body. These steady the mind, promote equanimity. At times the breath grows short and rapid, as strong tensions emerge along with a storm of emotion. If awareness can track the physical sensations, we feel the underlying emotion more objectively, allowing old fears and grudges heal.

Just as the woodturner carves out a beautiful shape from rough wood, so mindfulness of breath carves out wisdom from raw physical sensations.

We have to be careful that the emphasis on skill doesn't lead to the wrong attitude. We might start getting uptight, putting ourselves under pressure to have the perfect yogic breath or to release all our fears and phobias. But this is to cultivate *dukkha*. In truth, we are not in control of the breath. Any semblance of control is delusion. It's only when we can surrender, allow the breath to come and go, just as nature intends, that we find ourselves in tune, that the breath follows the pattern we also think is best.

Training ourselves to breathe mindfully is a humbling process. To help ourselves through these times, we can remember that the Buddha's analogy also includes the apprentice, "just as a skilled woodturner or his apprentice were to make a long turn." The Buddha gives us full permission to be the apprentice, having barely a clue how to get a breath into tight lungs.

Having described these exercises for mindfulness of breath, we then come to what is termed the refrain of the Sutta. The Buddha repeats this refrain after each set of exercises in all four *Satipaṭṭhāna*. Here is how it goes for the first *Satipaṭṭhāna*, mindfulness of body.

"In this way, he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, or he abides contemplating the body as a body externally, or else he abides contemplating the body in its arising factors. Or he abides contemplating the body in its vanishing factors. Or he abides contemplating the body in its arising and vanishing factors. Or else mindfulness that there is a body is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a *bhikkhu* abides contemplating the body as a body."

Contemplating the body as a body internally is what we've been describing so far. We're looking inside, feeling our own sensations. It's interesting that this is called contemplating. To contemplate is to think deeply. We're not actively generating thoughts as we practise. But the mind that can think is present, part of the watching process. It's taking in information, much as though we were at a lecture or watching a documentary. We might notice that the jaw tenses when we come to the end of the out-breath, for example. Even if this isn't processed into a grammatical sentence, the facts of the matter are now known and will make us more aware of our jaw tensing in daily life. Thus, mindfulness of breath is a form of deep thought, of contemplating the body, seeing how it works, what habits we're following.

To contemplate the body externally is normally interpreted as becoming mindful of other people's bodies. In the case of these breathing exercises, we are to be mindful of others' breathing. This is quite a challenge, but it may be possible to make a start here on retreat. If another person's breathing is quite loud, we can easily detect when they're breathing in and when they're breathing out. And this might also help diminish any irritation that could otherwise develop. After all, at least now they're helping us concentrate.

At times, of course, it could make the irritation even more acute. But again, that's helpful. We often have a false expectation that meditation should be pleasant, peaceful. Noisy breathing can therefore seem an outrage. But of course our expectation is the real problem, and so we have an opportunity to work with the anger or sadness that follows dashed expectations. Going back to the woodturner analogy, we could regard this work as carving our body and mind into a new shape, one that fits in more easily with all the unpleasant stuff life dumps on our plate.

Sometimes the noisy breath goes quiet, just as we're getting interested in it. An alternative would then be to reflect that others breathe in and out just as we ourselves do. Feeling the sensations of breath in our own body, we reflect that those around us are feeling similar sensations. We can take this through all the exercises, reflecting that others breathe in long, breathe out long, and so on. We can, in our imagination, calm their body as they breathe in and out. This is a form of *mettā*-practice.

We're taking others into our imagination at quite an intimate level. It can stir a feeling of friendliness and connection, perhaps even confidence, to know that we're not actually so very different to others. It can also show up attachment. We're all deeply attached to the breath. It means life after all. At some level we're holding to the pleasant feeling associated with being able to breathe, thinking of this as mine. This exercise asks us to imagine the feeling as also being in others. When attachment is showing up, we might feel deeply threatened, like we're being robbed of our own breath and of life itself. If we can bear with whatever emotions surface while we do the exercise, this is an opportunity for us to work with what is possibly the deepest attachment in life.

The refrain then presents the option of contemplating the body in its arising factors. We know the body through physical sensations. No sensation lasts forever. Each one arises at some moment and then passes away. To contemplate the arising factors, we attend to the first moment we become aware of sensations. Tuning into the start of the in-breath is a good way to do this. The body relaxes after the out-breath and then at some moment the tissues start moving and we feel the abdomen or chest starting to swell. Having detected the first moment of in-breath, it may become apparent that the rest of the breath is also composed of sensations that arise one after the other. We're getting used to the idea of the body as a series of sensations coming into consciousness.

Similarly, we contemplate the body in its vanishing factors when we notice that each of these sensations fades out a moment after it registers. One way to do this is to follow the out-breath till it stops. The chest or abdomen deflates. Sensations grow fainter till eventually no movement is detected, just stillness. Having detected that last sensation fading into stillness, we are more able to see the breath as sensations fading away, one after the other.

Next, the Buddha gives the option to contemplate the body in its arising and vanishing factors. As you can imagine, we are now tracking sensations as both arising and fading. Can we tune into both the start of the in-breath and its end? The start of the out-breath and its end? This can be quite a challenge as the feeling is so different for starting and ending. It takes quite a degree of equanimity to embrace both.

Like all *satipaṭṭhāna* exercises, strong emotions can be stirred. The point of all these exercises, remember, is to help us see through delusion. The exercise is only a means to that end. As soon as we start getting uptight, wanting to see the start or end of the breath more clearly, we need to relax, acknowledge whatever emotions might be building up, let them blow off steam. This is the purification process.

Any emotions stirred during mindfulness of breathing need to be treated with respect. We've been taking the breath for granted all our lives and it cuts deep to be shown how little control we actually have over this vital bodily function. We might feel small or stupid not to be able to do something so seemingly simple as feel the breath flowing in and out. But the mind holds tight to symbols and deep down the breath symbolises life. At some level we are all aware that there will sometime come a breath that flows out as normal but is not followed by an in-breath. It's not surprising therefore that tracking the breath from start to finish can stir all kinds of emotion. When this happens, remember, we abandon the exercise. Go back to standard Mahāsi practice.

The final option is akin to Mahāsi practice. The Buddha phrases it like this: "Or else, mindfulness that there is a body is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness, and he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world." We're no longer trying to detect the beginning or end of the breath, nor trying to follow another person's breathing. We're not asked to register whether we're breathing in and out, whether the breath is long or short. It's a more relaxed form of practice. As in Mahāsi, we've no agenda. We're not interfering in any way. However, we are to reflect: "There is a body." This grounds attention in the body, while making the body as a whole the object of meditation.

Just as we're attached to the breath without being aware of this, we can also be attached to the body without being aware of this. The reflection "there is a body" makes us see the body objectively, cuts across our usual habit of taking it for granted, assuming it's ours. At times the objectivity brings up gratitude toward this amazing, warm, sensitive entity that ferries us around, lets us see and hear and taste and speak. At other times we get uncomfortable, want to go back to our habitual assumptions that the body is mine to move around and command at will. Seeing it as something else, something out there in the world, can become confusing or irritating or sad or perhaps frightening. Whenever any strong emotions or feelings are evoked we recognise these as part of the purification process and return to our normal Mahāsi practice, allowing the emotion develop and express itself, teaching us the Dhamma as it burns itself out.

In summary then, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* gives us a number of specific exercises relating to the breath. The first is to steady ourselves with mindfulness of breathing: "Mindful, one breathes in. Mindful, one breathes out." We're also asked to reflect "I breathe in or out long" when we notice ourselves taking a long slow breath, and similarly for short breaths. Two training exercises are described: training ourselves to experience the full body as we breathe in or out, calming the body as we breathe in or out. The Buddha gives the analogy of the woodturner, indicating that we should respect breathing as a skill. He kindly includes the analogy of the apprentice, for those many times when the breath is demonstrating that it is in reality totally outside of our control.

We normally do these exercises internally, examining our own experience. The refrain of the Sutta clarifies that it's equally valid to contemplate the breath of others in the same way. Alternatively, we can examine the transient nature of the breath. Notice that what we actually experience is a series of sensations, each arising and fading away. Finally, we have the option of bare attention, a more relaxed form of practice when we're not doing any of these exercises, but reflecting "there is a body" as a means of working on our relationship with the body.

It is that final option of bare attention that is most akin to our usual *vipassanā* practice. In turn, *vipassanā* allows insight to develop. A tennis player will occasionally do special exercises, for example, to strengthen their backhand. But the only way they can benefit from the exercise is by playing tennis. So too, we follow the *Satipaṭṭhāna* exercises to develop specific skills, tranquillity for example, or the ability to see the broader picture. To reap the benefit, however, we need to relax all effort, return to our main practice of bare attention, being mindful without interfering in any way. Bare attention allows for insight that leads along the path to the end of suffering.

To finish, let's listen to some of the Sutta's opening lines: "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the realisation of *nibbāna*, namely, the four foundations for mindfulness. Having gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, one sits down. Having folded one's legs crosswise, set the body erect and established mindfulness in front of one. Ever mindful, one breathes in. Mindful, one breathes out."

May our practice enable us to surmount sorrow and lamentation, to realise *nibbāna*.

Sense Contact - The Six Sense Spheres

Noirin Sheahan · 41 min

This talk delves into the Buddha's teaching on the six sense spheres (saḷāyatana) as presented in the final section of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). Noirin explores how these spheres - the five physical senses plus mind consciousness - form the crucial interface between our inner subjective world and the external objective world.

Drawing on the wheel of dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda), she explains how our habitual reactions (saṅkhāra) rooted in ignorance (avijjā) color our perceptions at the moment of sense contact. The teaching reveals how desire, aversion, and delusion create 'fetters' that bind us to suffering (dukkha), while mindful awareness at this critical juncture offers the pathway to freedom.

Through vivid personal examples and analogies, including fascinating connections to quantum physics, this talk makes the profound Buddhist understanding of perception accessible and practical. Practitioners learn to recognize the subtle manifestations of reactivity before they lead to clinging and suffering, developing what Noirin calls 'the art of freedom' - the ability to immerse ourselves fully in the world without being bound by it.

Tonight's talk is on the six sense spheres. You may remember that in the final section of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the section on *dharmas*, Buddha asks us to contemplate various of his teachings. He starts with the hindrances, then the *khandhas* or aggregates which we looked at last night. Next, he lists the six sense spheres. All of these direct our attention to the origin and nature of suffering and offer us means of escape, but each in their own unique way.

The teaching on the hindrances asks us to get to know the moment-to-moment experience of the forces that disturb our peace of mind. We're becoming familiar with their physical and mental expression. The more deeply we know them, the less they dominate us. Our bodies may vibrate with their energy, we perceive how they are tempting us, but we can make an independent decision about how to act. At times, we may decide to use the energetic pathways they stimulate, for example, to use aversion to invigorate assertiveness when we're feeling threatened, use desire to enthuse us to accomplish something beneficial. At other times it's a question of letting go of their energy moment after moment until this episode of the hindrance burns itself out. This

first of the *dhammas* listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* shows us a very immediate and dynamic method of freeing ourselves from suffering. The teaching of the hindrances can be likened to skills training for a spiritual warrior.

By contrast, I think of the next teaching as a more composed enterprise, such as a scientific expedition. This is the teaching on the *khandhas*, the five aggregates of clinging. We're not being threatened by a hindrance here, but we're deliberately bringing ourselves into the zone of their influence, in order to get a feel for what binds us to suffering. We let attention dwell on our bodies, for example, to experience how we get drawn into anxieties as the tendency to think of this as "my body" comes to mind. One moment the breath is registered as simply a physical sensation. Next moment we've added a lorryload of meaning to this, all tethered to thoughts of "me" and "mine." Similarly for all the other *khandhas*, we experience their allure and then the pain of entrapment. And we say to ourselves, "I'm not going to get caught like that again." Thus, the study of the *khandhas* strengthens the wisdom we need to avoid new entanglements with *dukkha*.

The teaching on the six sense spheres also has the nature of scientific inquiry. This time the focus is not just on how we tend to get trapped, which is what we're studying in the *khandhas*, but equally on finding the moment-to-moment pathway to freedom. The sense spheres direct our attention to the boundary between our internal subjective world and the external objective world. Resting attention here, we can experience the draw towards clinging and *dukkha* and the possibility of freedom and release. This is the choice on offer to us at each moment of sense contact. The better we get at recognising these pathways, the more easily we choose the pathway to freedom.

As with the teaching on the hindrances, this teaching on the sense spheres offers us a very dynamic, immediate tool for moment-to-moment release from suffering. In the case of the hindrances, we've been caught in a thick bramble of *dukkha* and we're fighting our way clear. In the case of the sense spheres, we're brushing up against a thicket and finding out how to steer clear. We're releasing ourselves from the delusion that lets us get caught in the first place.

The spheres are made up of the five physical senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. These can all be described as doorways connecting us to the external world of visible objects, sounds, flavours, aromas and tactile sensations. Normally when we say "sixth sense" we mean an intuition or gut feeling, something outside of the normal sensory realm. But in Buddhism, the sixth sense is the doorway to the ordinary experiences of thought and memory and emotion. The sixth sense sphere comprises the conscious mind and the sense object that the mind perceives.

This is how the Buddha advises us to contemplate the sense spheres. "How does one contemplate *dharmas* in terms of the six sense spheres? One knows the eye and forms, and the fetter that arises dependent on both. One knows the ears and sounds, and the fetter that arises dependent on both." And so on for all the six senses. We'll come to the fetter in a moment, but first let's look at the guidance to know the eye and visible objects, the ear and sounds, etc.

This may sound pretty straightforward, but in fact it points us towards quite a mysterious aspect of life, one which has puzzled scientists and sages for centuries. Normally, we would only be aware of the forms, sounds, etc. We see a cat, we hear a bell. But when we're being mindful of the sense spheres, we also know we are seeing and hearing. This makes us more aware of sense contact as the interface between our inner and outer worlds. It helps break down the illusion of separation. The cat isn't just out there. I am seeing it. I've let it into my mind where it can generate all kinds of thoughts and feelings about cats. I might not want to think of any of these thoughts, but I can't help it now that the cat's got in.

I sensed this one time as I was meditating and became aware of a bird singing. It was a blackbird—you know the way they whistle a tune and after a pause a different one. I noticed how my mood lightened each time I heard the notes and how eagerly I was anticipating the next trill during the pauses. Suddenly the thought occurred to me: "Where is the bird? Is he in here or out there?" Intellectually, of course, I knew the bird was outside of me. But I'd suddenly realised the key role I was playing in our interaction. It was my ears and my brain that were doing all their magical processing work to detect the sound and register it in my mind. So it seemed we were both co-creators of the sound.

This gave me a graphic illustration of the Buddha's teaching on the sense spheres and how attending carefully to our sense data can break down the illusion of there being a "me" who is in here and in control of my world and totally separate from the world out there. On top of that, it seemed the bird was determining my moods and thoughts. When he chose to sing, I would feel glad. When he chose to pause, I would start getting a bit anxious. So from the emotional point of view, he was in charge, not me.

Both of these insights gave me tiny glimpses of the Buddha's teaching on *anattā*, that the sense of ourselves as permanent, substantial and in control of our lives is an illusion. Listening mindfully to that birdsong had taught me that there wasn't any clear dividing line between myself and the blackbird.

I had a similar experience one time, gazing at a Buddha rupa. I was alone in the meditation hall, and for a while I was seeing the rupa in quite an ordinary way. Then suddenly, though I was still gazing at the image, my attention was drawn to the "me" who was gazing. Again I sensed the very active part I was playing in the process of seeing. Though the rupa was out there, it needed my attention to create the image that my consciousness was registering. I sensed my attention as creative, a form of goodwill. By choosing to attend to the Buddha rupa, I was bringing this image into being for myself. At that moment I couldn't tell whether the image was really out there or whether my attention was actually creating the image and just imagining it to be out there. I realised that my subjective experience of the world could not be separated from what I normally thought of as the objective world out there.

Curiously, I had experienced this insight as a child, wondering if other people really existed when I wasn't looking at them. I spent a while peeping through keyholes, wondering could I catch them magically coming into existence so as to perform for me. But after a while I realised that I could never catch them out that way. The moment I had seen them, it was already too late for my experiment.

In Zen, the puzzle is captured in the story of two monks who are looking at a flag waving in the breeze and arguing about whether it is the flag or the wind that is moving. The teacher intervenes saying, "Neither the flag nor the wind are moving. It is only your minds that are moving." The conundrum has been debated in Western philosophy since it was posed by George Berkeley and is expressed in the question "If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?"

The question has puzzled physicists as well. A conversation between Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr is recorded where Einstein asked Bohr whether the moon exists when no one is looking at it. Bohr replied that no matter how hard he tried, he could not prove that it did exist. Einstein and Bohr's interest in the question would have been stirred by a recent peculiar finding in quantum physics, termed the observer effect. It applies to small subatomic particles that are the building blocks of our physical reality, electrons and protons for example. If you try to describe any of these according to its quantum equation, what you find is that it has the potential to be almost anywhere in the universe. The act of observation changes all that. It forces the particle to show up somewhere or other.

This was first detected for electrons, those tiny particles that flow in every electrical current. If you try to pin down an electron and detect whether it goes through one specific place or another, it will behave as you expect and go through one pathway or the other. But if you don't switch on your detectors so you don't know which pathway it

went through, it will behave as if it has simultaneously gone through both. Weird as this sounds, the phenomenon underlies your cell phone and remote control and almost every device you use nowadays.

Basically, quantum mechanics describes what Einstein described as a very spooky world. Matter can be anywhere and everywhere at once. It can penetrate through solid barriers, particles make instantaneous communication with one another even over vast distances, and the observer effect, taken literally, implies that subjective observation may actually be playing a huge role in determining the physical state of the world. Quantum physics describes a world which no one truly knows how to interpret. Most mainstream scientists ignore the deeper questions and follow Dirac's injunction to "shut up and calculate."

Perhaps I should also follow their lead and leave off trying to explain that spooky quantum world. But it is a big draw for me, and as the teaching on the six sense spheres directs our attention to that mysterious interface between subjectivity and objectivity, which has also been thrown up by quantum physics, I couldn't resist the temptation. And I hope that drawing your attention to the mystery might entice you to rest attention at sense contact and let curiosity and wonder maintain your meditation on this so common aspect of life that we so easily skip over.

However, let's go back to the teaching on the sense spheres. The Buddha taught that four things are needed in order to make sense contact. Two are part of the external world: the sense object itself—the sound, the aroma, the visible form, etc.—and the medium that enables this to be sensed. For example, we need light to see a visible object. We won't see in the dark. The other components needed for sense contact are internal. We need our sensory apparatus, our eyes, ears, etc. Finally, we need attention. This is what had struck me so forcibly when I had looked at the Buddha rupa. I realised my attention was a central and a necessary part of the image I was seeing.

Thus, the sense spheres form that link between our internal world and the external world. The Buddha doesn't comment on the question of whether consciousness affects the external world. His focus is not on philosophy, but on the possibility of freeing ourselves from *dukkha*. But he certainly wants us to link the external and the internal. He doesn't want us to think in terms of cats and blackbirds and Buddha rupas as objects out there. He wants us to experience how our attention and sense organs combine with these to bring about sense contact. He wants us to experience the meeting point of the internal and external world.

Sometimes the use of the passive voice in our noting words can help here. Instead of saying "hearing, hearing" as we listen to birdsong, we can say "sound being heard." This is a more awkward phrase, but it helps us to take in the subjectivity of our experience. It directs attention to the all-important but ever so quiet knowing aspect of our experience. Our fascination with the external world of sounds and sights might fade for a while as we get drawn toward the mystery of consciousness itself.

To deepen our understanding of the internal factors underlying sense contact, let's go back to the wheel of dependent origination. The sense spheres form the midsection of the wheel, and it's the first half of the wheel that describes our subjective role in sense contact. It all starts with *avijjā*, our misunderstanding about what leads to happiness and what to suffering. *Avijjā*, ignorance, forms the breeding ground for unwholesome *saṅkhāras*. *Saṅkhāras* are the habits of mind which push us into and through our lives. In order to exercise their driving power, they need to become conscious. The third link in the wheel lets us become conscious of the *saṅkhāra* rooted in ignorance.

For consciousness to manifest in the world we need both body and mind. Our bodies are part of the physical world of matter, our minds inhabit the world of thought and imagination. The pair are termed *nāma-rūpa* and form the fourth link in the wheel. Thus our *saṅkhāra* habit drives our body as well as our mind. If we are habitually angry, our jaws and teeth may be clenched most of the time. If we worry habitually, our forehead will probably develop creases from frowning.

The *saṅkhāra* now needs to decide which of our senses to work through. So now we're up to the six sense spheres again. The next link in the wheel is their internal subjective component, the six sense doors. The *saṅkhāra* can find its way through any of these. A *saṅkhāra* of ill-will can listen morosely to a conversation waiting for something to disagree with. A *saṅkhāra* of greed can look through our eyes searching for something to devour.

Then the sense doors link up with the external world and this meeting place of the *saṅkhāra* with the world forms the sixth link in the wheel: sense contact. A new bit of sense data impacts on our psycho-physical system. It could be a sound, it could be a sight, it could be a thought. We usually think of thoughts and emotions as part of our internal world, but they can also be objective. When greed finds its way into consciousness, the thought of ice cream can make us run to the fridge. When goodwill is established, that same thought can stir happy memories, joy and gratitude. When ill-will plants itself in consciousness and we sense the emotion of anger, it's easy to add the

second arrow and hate ourselves for being angry. When compassion implants itself, the emotion of anger becomes something to care for tenderly. So thoughts and emotions can act as objects for whatever is appearing through the sense door.

The teaching on the sense spheres directs our attention to this crucial mid-section of the wheel of dependent origination, where our *saṅkhāra* based in ignorance has found its way from our inner subjective world to the outer objective world. If we are not careful, a whole new pathway for *dukkha* opens up. But if we are mindful, then we have the opportunity to let that *saṅkhāra* fizzle its energy away, trying to get us to react while we steadfastly refuse.

It helps to become curious about how our moods and emotions seem to colour the world. If we're in a flaming temper, we won't hear the bees buzzing in the same way as we would if we were in good humour. In fact, we probably won't hear them at all or any nature sounds because of the storm of rage going on in our minds.

Last night I described my own striking example of this when I was doing some walking meditation on retreat, being quite happy until someone came in and started walking near me. I could have sworn the room went dark. Because I was being mindful, I could see that the darkening was internal and that my mood had suddenly gone from good humour to bad humour, but I still had to look out the window to be sure the weather hadn't changed. I hadn't ever noticed before that my mood could literally colour the visual scene in front of me. This gave me a striking example of how our *saṅkhāras* affect our perception of the world.

We can see this when we're feeling dull or lethargic. All our sense data is blurred. We'll only vaguely be aware of what's around us, hardly noticing any sounds or sights. But then if we hear our name called, we're suddenly alert and hear and see everything in detail. It was the same data falling on our ears and eyes, but experienced differently because of the *saṅkhāras* of dullness and alertness.

This also underlies the way people can describe the same situation differently. Say a husband and wife go to talk to a financial advisor about getting a loan for an extension. Let's say the husband really wants the loan but his wife is not so keen about getting into debt. When they talk about it afterwards, it's very likely that the wife will remember all the dangers mentioned, but will be vague about any encouraging remarks made, while the husband will have picked up all the encouragement and skimmed over the warnings. Again, it's the same input data, but being perceived differently because of their different *saṅkhāras*.

If we follow the Buddha's advice to see both the sense object and the sense door, we'd be much better at discerning how our subjective stance is colouring the situation. We get into the habit of asking ourselves, how am I looking? Am I looking at this with suspicion or with friendliness? How am I listening? Am I looking for errors in what's being said? Am I eager to agree with it all?

When our *saṅkhāra*, rooted in ignorance, makes contact with the world through any of the sense doors, the wheel has turned halfway around. And unless we are mindful, it will easily get through the full cycle to cause *dukkha*. To prevent this, let's go back to the advice of the Buddha regarding the sense spheres. One knows the eye and forms and the fetter that arises dependent on both. One knows the ears and sounds and the fetter that arises dependent on both. And so on for all the six senses.

Fetter means that which ties us to suffering, to the endless round of birth and death. So he is here encapsulating all of the links from sense contact onwards which spin us into *dukkha*.

To recap on the final links of the wheel. Our system responds to each sense contact by classifying it as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. This is the link of feelings. Unless we're being mindful, we react to our feelings with desire, aversion or ignoring. This is the start of the trouble. We desire more of the pleasant, we want to get rid of what is unpleasant, and we ignore whatever is neutral. To accomplish these three outcomes, our system then generates a sense of self. Thoughts of me and mine start to emerge to gather all our motivation towards our new goal. This is the link of clinging.

In our gardening analogy, the weed has blossomed, it is fully formed and has the stamp of identity. The next thing it needs to do is sow some seeds. This is the link of becoming where we decide to speak or act or scheme to fulfil our desires. We are now exercising our will to change something in the world. This is crucial to our future happiness because *saṅkhāra* seeds sown at this point are likely to emerge again at the second point of the wheel to get a new cycle going again in the future. That's why this step is termed becoming. Basically, we create the habits which tie us to suffering by acting on our desires and aversions and ignoring what doesn't seem relevant to our agenda.

As a result, we get the next step, the start of some new activity termed birth. This is the penultimate step in the wheel of dependent origination. Once we've decided to fulfil a desire for food, we get ourselves over to the cupboard to have a snack. Every step on the journey, every move of our arm to open the cupboard, and then the biscuit tin, requires an act of will. The wheel is spinning through hundreds, perhaps thousands of

cycles. Each of these sows another seed for the *saṅkhāra* of greed. So the new activity we've just started, which is the link of birth and the wheel, allows the *saṅkhāra* to reproduce itself a hundred or thousand fold.

In our gardening analogy, the weed has grown into a bramble thicket and is overrunning the garden. Each flower head is scattering seeds into the wind for future turns of the wheel. Then comes the final link, *dukkha*. We've eaten the packet of biscuits and now our teeth are all gummed up with crumbs. We feel a bit sick as well as guilty and out of sorts. The weighing scales is an enemy looming over us. The pleasure is all gone and only the hangover remains.

In the teaching on the sense spheres, the Buddha is asking us to avoid all the hassle of the second half of the wheel by anchoring our attention at the point of sense contact, knowing that our habitual reactions will fetter us to *dukkha*. Desire for pleasure will fetter us to the biscuit tin or the next rung on the ladder of success and fame. Or it might prompt us to flatter somebody so they will like us, so we get fettered into an unhealthy relationship.

Aversion also ends up attaching us to what we dislike. It can be hard to believe. But if there's somebody you really don't want to meet, you'll probably spend your whole day looking out in case they're coming. A friend once gave the example of going out into a garden and only seeing the clematis that needed pruning and tidying, unable to appreciate the beauty of the rest of the garden, so her attention was fettered to the overgrown clematis.

Once, I took an acute dislike to someone at a meeting. For an hour or more, my mind was tracking them, noticing when they came in and out of the room. I found myself eavesdropping on what they were saying when they were nearby, instead of listening to the conversation in my own group. Effectively, I was yoked to that person.

How do neutral sensations and thoughts fetter us? It's not that we get hooked on the sight of a grey pavement or the background whisper of wind, but we get hooked on the interpretation, this isn't relevant, and the habit of looking for something that will feed our sense of self. So the habit of ignoring the neutral fetters us to the spicy aspects of our sense contacts, running after pleasure and vainly trying to run away from displeasure.

The more often we experience and reflect upon experience to see how our habitual reactions fetter us to *dukkha*, the more willing we will be to follow the Buddha's advice to maintain mindfulness at sense contact and the resultant feeling of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral, watching out for the danger and pulling ourselves back from the brink again and again.

His advice to know both the internal and external aspects of sense contact is a great help. If we are conscious only of the object, the birdsong for example, we will easily be drawn outwards into thoughts about birds and miss our habitual reaction driving these thoughts. But if we bring attention to the subjective hearing of the birdsong, our attention is already internal and we may catch the pleasure and be much more sensitive to the first signs of desire, aversion or ignoring.

The Buddha stresses that the fetter is separate to our senses and what they perceive. He gives the analogy of two oxen tied together with a yoke. The bondage is not due to either of the oxen, but to the yoke. So when we see something, the fetter is not due to our eyes or to whatever we see, but to the binding power of desire.

This is also important. We can easily get into blaming this situation. If only there wasn't so much noise, I could be mindful or blaming ourselves. If only I could keep my eyes shut, I wouldn't be so distracted. But neither the noise nor our eyes cause *dukkha*. We can relax with all our senses open to the world, with its myriad of sights and sounds and smells and so on. It's only the third component, the stirrings of desire, aversion, or the way we shy away from reality in an effort to ignore it, that cause the trouble. The oxen are harmless. It's only the yoke that binds us to *dukkha*.

As we bring attention to the sense spheres, we learn to recognise the subtle manifestation of reactivity before this sets us off into actions and reactions. Eye movements can be helpful in this regard. I had an example of this when I was on pilgrimage in India with Bhante and others. For a few days I felt really nauseous following a dose of Delhi belly. Whenever I tried to focus on a menu, my eyes would wince and hop away from the page. Then came a long car journey where I got locked into a stupor. After checking into our new lodgings, the others set off for a meal. I tagged along, my mind still in its dull stupor. I only woke up, so to speak, when I found my eyes darting eagerly over the menu. To my amazement, I realised I had recovered. I recognised the force moving my eyes around the menu as greed. Comparing that to the ways my eyes had previously been hopping away from the menu, I saw in retrospect a subtle hostility, as if the menu was an enemy that was threatening me.

I often notice greed at this very early stage when I'm eating mindfully. My eyes often rest on something neutral while I'm chewing a mouthful of food. But as I get ready to swallow, my eyes start darting all over my plate, eyeing up the next mouthful. If I notice this, I can uproot this new manifestation of greed before it makes trouble for me. Once I notice my eyes popping and darting I have a choice. I can relax and be mindful of the food in my mouth and the feeling of swallowing. Mindfulness has uprooted greed. The wheel has turned as far as eye contact and the resultant feeling of pleasure and whatever little manifestations of greed managed to get my eyes darting all over the plate. But at that point, mindfulness intervened and the wheel didn't get to turn its full cycle to *dukkha*. If I hadn't been mindful of those little eye movements, I would have gobbled my dinner, only vaguely aware of what I was tasting and feeling entirely unsatisfied, would have gone back for second helpings if I could get away with it.

We can also learn to discern unskillful *saṅkhāra* from the way we are listening. On one retreat there was a lot of noise from the kitchen. The teacher noticed that while everyone else complained of the noise, I said it didn't trouble me. I thought it was my superior mindfulness practice, but the teacher knew better. He suggested I really listen carefully to sounds during my next meditation. As it happened it was evening and the kitchen was quiet but a big storm blew up outside and the wind was beating furiously against the house.

As I listened, I became aware of tiny wincing reactions in my face at every loud gust. I focused attention in the reaction and felt a fleeting pain before each wince. Then, as I focused on the pain, I became aware that a thought darted through my mind as the pain ran through my face. To my amazement, the thought was, I didn't hear that, and a lovely feeling of delight followed. For a while it was incredibly confusing. My ears were hearing the blasts of wind, but my mind was happily denying this. After a while my mind started to believe my ears instead of its thoughts, and I had to trade the delightful state of denial for a mind that was made nervous and unhappy by the howling wind and rattling windows.

I was amazed at the power of denial to create a different reality to the one which is actually presenting. Needless to say, I was horribly upset by the noises in the kitchen next day. Although this was a painful wake-up call for me, I was also glad of being more in touch with reality. I felt stronger, more mature, better able to look after myself and had no wish to go back to my cosy state of denial.

Thus, keeping our attention at sense contact lets us see the danger and avoid getting fettered. It can be very enjoyable, like playing a game with reality. Our old habits are doing their best to get that yoke around our necks, but we keep dodging and ducking. Every now and then, of course, we will get caught.

Suppose we notice we've been lost in a haze of worries as we walk through a park. We need to make a very determined effort to rouse ourselves from this. We will easily be pulled back into autopilot as our mind will be alive with worrisome thoughts, a million little hooks all trying to drag us back into the haze. The wheel has the momentum of desire, attachment and becoming behind it now. It has managed to give birth to lots of worries and to the emotion of anxiety.

Remember our gardening analogy. The weed has grown into a thicket and sown lots of seeds. The gardener needs to chop away at the edges before he can get to the core and uproot it. We need to fortify ourselves with a chop, chop, chop at each new shoot by reminding ourselves of the Dhamma and how necessary it is for us to counter the habitual tendency to live life in the future or past. We draw ourselves into the present by paying attention to the sights and sounds around us and the feeling of anxiety within. So we're back at sense contact again and here we can chop away at the thicket, letting each wish to react fizzle itself out.

Eventually we will come to the root of the problem, some pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling that we were reacting to. It can be quite a challenge to hold attention steady here. Every fibre in our being wants to react. But if we hold our ground, we'll see through the compulsion and grow a little wiser as well. Thus, in our future work with the sense spheres, we'll be better equipped to resist the yoke that ties us to *dukkha*.

In summary then, the teaching on the six sense spheres draws our attention to the link between our inner subjective world and what we normally think of as the outer objective world. Instead of focusing only on the outer world, this teaching draws our attention inwards to detect also the way we are looking at things. We discover that our underlying moods and emotions colour our perceptions of the objective world. In a very real sense, we sense that there is no clear separation between the inner and outer worlds.

Holding attention on the sense spheres, we notice the first stirrings of desire for what attracts us, aversion to what repels us, and the delusion prompting us to ignore what registers as neutral. Thus we resist the reactivity which sets the latter part of the wheel in motion. We are resisting the temptation towards new illusions of me and mine. We are learning to immerse ourselves in the world without clinging. We are practicing the art of freedom.

The Buddha's Death (Mahāparinibbāna Sutta)

Noirin Sheahan · 41 min

In this retreat talk, Noirin Sheahan guides us through the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, the canonical account of the Buddha's final days and passing into parinibbāna. She reveals how the Buddha remained fully human even in enlightenment - experiencing physical pain, appreciating worldly beauty, and needing supportive friendships to maintain his energy and resolve.

The teaching explores key themes including the Buddha's refusal to establish hierarchical authority (advising disciples to "be islands unto yourselves with the Dhamma as refuge"), his practice of mudita (appreciative joy) even while dying, and his final temptation by Māra - not for worldly pleasures, but for premature escape into nibbāna's bliss. Noirin shows how we can apply these lessons to our own practice of closure, whether leaving retreat or facing life's endings.

The talk offers practical guidance on balancing spiritual aspiration with wise acceptance of limitations, using the Buddha's compassionate response to Ānanda's grief as a model for supporting others through loss. This deeply human portrait of the Buddha's parinibbāna provides both inspiration for dedicated practice and comfort in our shared experience of impermanence.

As we're coming toward the close of the retreat, I thought it would be fitting to look at the last of the Buddha's teachings, the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, known as the Buddha's Last Days.

Nibbāna, as you know, describes the state experienced by those who are enlightened. The fires of passion extinguish themselves in *Nibbāna*, and so extinguishing is one translation for *Nibbāna*. If this seems like a bleak goal for the spiritual life, we have Bhikkhu Thanissaro's assurance that in the Buddha's time it was believed that an extinguished fire went into a state of potential, liberated from its location to suffuse the whole universe with its energy. This ties in with alternative translations for *Nibbāna* such as unbinding, liberation, freedom, the deathless, the unborn. And of course we have positive descriptions of *Nibbāna* as perfect happiness and contentment.

The Buddha entered the state of *Nibbāna* when he fully understood the Four Noble Truths as he sat under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya. He then taught others how to come to the same understanding for over four decades until, aged 80, his body dies and he

enters the state known as *Parinibbāna*. This term refers to Nibbāna after the dissolution of the five aggregates. Unenlightened beings like us cling to these aggregates of body and mind in the mistaken belief that these constitute our essential being. The Buddha ceased clinging at Bodhgaya, but his transcendent knowledge and understanding could still manifest within the world through these aggregates. At the moment of death, his transcendence became completely non-manifest, untraceable.

The Buddha does not answer questions of the form, does the Buddha exist after death? The state of the Buddha is beyond measure, he says, so it is meaningless to speak of this in terms of existence or non-existence. The *Parinibbāna Sutta* does not try to unpick this conundrum, nor does it attempt any description of Nibbāna or *Parinibbāna*, but simply reports the facts of the Buddha's last days.

Most commentators agree that the *Sutta* has been embroidered by devotees who wished to remember the Buddha in exalted terms. For example, he is said to have transported himself over the river Ganges along with all his order of monks. He later caused an earthquake by revoking his will to live and another as he died. Muddy waters miraculously cleared to let him drink, his skin glowed brighter than gold, and flowers bloomed out of season to honour him on his deathbed. There are seemingly pointless stories, for example, of people locking their chariot wheels as they vie to have him attend their house for a meal, almost as the paparazzi pursue modern-day celebrities.

As against this, there are many credible and inspiring descriptions of his last days, which we can use as a teaching on closure, how we might hope to end our own lives. And of course, we can practice on a smaller scale, using this as a model of how to take our leave from any activity, even from this retreat, for example.

At the start of the *Sutta*, there is no talk of his impending death. It seems he is just doing what he had spent the past decades doing, going from place to place, teaching the Dhamma. Despite his frail old body, he is almost constantly on the road during these last days. He starts out in Vulture's Peak and we are told of 17 stopping points before he reaches his final resting place at a grove of sal trees at Kushinara. I was fortunate enough to have visited Vultures Peak and the Salgrove when on pilgrimage with Bhante and others in 2006. The distance between them is almost 200 miles. Even in the comfort of a saloon car it was a long journey. Imagine the energy and resolve involved in doing that on foot as an 80-year-old in chronic pain and with a body that was just about holding together.

To follow the Buddha's example is not just to sit on our cushions. We must also give ourselves wholeheartedly to whatever activities we choose to do in the service of others.

Much of the main drama of the Sutta happens in Vesali, the region where the Buddha had found his first meditation teacher. He also returned here after enlightenment to teach and establish monastic settlements. It is in Vesali that the business of the Buddha's death starts to loom large. He makes his final rains retreat here. During the retreat he becomes very ill and realizes he's in danger of death. He considers it would be unfitting to die in this way without having taken proper leave of his disciples. And so we are told he made a tremendous effort to summon the will to live and thereby overcame his sickness.

This is a good illustration of the Buddha's care for individuals and not just for humanity at large. It would have been easy to throw in the towel. He had accomplished his mission to achieve enlightenment and teach others how to follow in his footsteps. He had achieved all his broader goals. But he was also concerned for the particular, for Ananda and his companions. He didn't want to have them finding out news of his death while they were on retreat themselves and all the confusion that would cause. He wanted to die in a way that would minimize trouble for those he was leaving behind.

The great effort the Buddha made to overcome this illness is also a sober reminder to get our own affairs in order so that our death will cause minimal disturbance to others, making a will, tackling thorny issues like end-of-life care and deciding how much intervention we want. These aren't easy matters to address, but any headway we can make is our best attempt to follow the Buddha's example to care for others up to and beyond the point of our death.

Happily the Buddha was able to overcome his illness. Afterwards Ananda tells the Buddha how distressed he had been to see the Buddha so near death. The only thought that consoled him he said was that he was sure the Buddha would not die without making a statement about who should lead the monks after his death.

The Buddha seems surprised by this, asking, "What does the order expect of me?" For himself, he says, he doesn't think of the order in terms of needing a leader. Instead, he advises that you should live like islands unto yourselves, be in your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dharma as your refuge and no other refuge.

Thus, he doesn't try to extend his influence over the Order beyond his own lifetime. He fully accepted the limitations of his human form. The Order might be expecting him to look into the future and work out what would be best, but he has no such God-like view of himself. Having done his job of teaching and leading, he's now going to let go completely. He leaves no clear authority structure and instead asks that each person take responsibility for their own liberation, using the Dhamma as their guide. This em-

powers everyone to get on with the job themselves and guards against the corrupting effect of power. A very wise and trusting approach to the future of the Dhamma. He is leaving it up to all of us to carry on his life's work, which is an inspiring thought.

As if to stress the limitations of his earthly form and drive home that people need to take full responsibility for their own liberation and not look on him as some form of God, the Buddha describes his body as old and worn out. Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with straps, so the Tathagatha's body is kept going by being strapped up.

We might think that the enlightened state would somehow let the Buddha float above problems like the aches and pains of old age. Although he didn't identify himself with these limitations, he was intimately aware of them and tells Ananda that the only time his body feels comfortable is when he withdraws his attention from mundane matters to enter a state of deep concentration, devoid of perceptions.

There are a couple of points worth reflecting on here. Firstly, that the Buddha was normally attending to mundane matters and has to deliberately withdraw attention in order to give his body some comfort. Enlightenment obviously doesn't mean living in a cloud of bliss, disconnected from the world. The freedom of Nibbāna can be found within the mundane. Sometimes we confuse Nibbāna or the path of Nibbāna with very exalted states we might touch upon in meditation. While these give us wonderful glimpses of the potential for our human mind, we can overvalue them and then reject ordinary life as worthless by comparison. It helps us counter this natural preference for meditative bliss when we reflect that the enlightened mind of the Buddha was normally engaged with the mundane details of life, seeing whatever was in front of his eyes, tasting his food, noticing memories and perceptions registering in consciousness, feeling the pain of his 80-year-old body.

Enlightenment does not protect the Buddha from pain. The only difference between his experience of pain and ours is that he would not have added to the problem with any emotional turmoil. He wouldn't have got irritable or exasperated or felt hard done by or anything like that. He could continually find the escape from suffering within the experience of an aching body. Thus he could accept the pain, discomfort, indignity and other limitations of ageing with serene equanimity.

Pain and sickness can make us feel very vulnerable. We lose that all-important sense of being in control of our bodies, directing the show. The path to enlightenment involves the very humbling lesson that we cannot escape the horrors of illness except by getting close to that sense of horror, watching it dissolve moment after moment in the light of awareness in the midst of our illness. We can encourage ourselves with the

thought that the Buddha experienced exactly this kind of challenge and somehow found peace within it, as well as the determination to continue on his long and arduous last journey.

The next stop on that journey is at the Capala shrine where he and Ananda go after their alms round on the following day. The Buddha remarks on the beauty of the shrine and names the many other shrines he finds delightful in this region of Vesali. Although his body is old and worn out, and he's only just recovered from an illness that brought him close to death, he now declares that it would be within his power to live for a full century. We're told he makes this declaration several times at different shrines around Vesali. In one breath, he remarks on the beauty of the place, and in the next, declares that he could live out a full century. Each time, we are told, the Buddha was giving Ananda a hint to request that he live for another 20 years. Had Ananda taken the hint, the Buddha would then have assented to his friend's request.

There are a couple of points here worth reflecting on. One is to note the importance that *mudita* plays in the Buddha's life. *Mudita* is one of the four Brahmavihara, so it's hardly surprising to find him practicing this in his last days. And yet, it is worth reflecting on the implications of this more deeply. We can take it that the Buddha didn't need earthly beauty to be perfectly happy. He had transcended suffering and would have been quite equanimous in a slimy pit. Why then does he take the trouble to notice and admire what he considered beautiful, take delight in it and comment so frequently on it?

Mudita energizes us. Think of how your heart lifts when you see a beautiful vista, how vibrant you suddenly feel. It's the same for the Buddha. Although his default position is equanimity, he needs supportive conditions to feel joy and let that invigorate his body and mind. He is perhaps more human than we let ourselves believe. At 80 years of age and following on a serious illness, his life energy is running low. Moved by the beauty of the shrines at Vesali, *mudita* moves him to declare that he could, if necessary, maintain the will to live a further 20 years.

If *mudita* could spur the Buddha's will to live, it can surely generate very beneficial energies within us, helping us bear with difficulties, lifting our hearts for some arduous task, inspiring us to better things. Often we feel so overburdened by our troubles that we don't spend any time appreciating nature, architecture, music or any kind of art. The Parinibbāna Sutta encourages us to connect with the delightful aspects of the world. Let them lift our hearts. Tomorrow afternoon, after you've been liberated from

the rigours of the retreat, spend some time really looking at things, flowers, trees, the view, or any of the statuary here in Satipanya. You never know how this might repay you when you're trying to overcome a deathly illness.

When I was recovering from laryngectomy, anxiety was like a transistor radio blaring in my ear. But when I looked at a flower, the radio switched itself off momentarily. And as I gazed out my window at a tree, it was as if all those jarring notes were being absorbed within its branches and leaves. Although I didn't think of this in terms of survival and rekindling the will to live, in retrospect, I can see that these moments of relative ease possibly gave my body the rest it needed to recover.

Another point to acknowledge is the value of our human relationships. If a good friend asks us to do something, this can spur us well beyond what we would otherwise be prepared to do. The Buddha's need for Ananda to request that he live on to his potential lifespan of a hundred years gives us further evidence that transcendence did not make him all-powerful. Supportive conditions, such as the request of a friend, were also needed to maintain his life energy. If the Buddha could need a friend to spur his resolve, how much more do we need good friends to spur us on? Any time and effort we spend on developing friendships within our Sangha is time spent on our path to freedom. We want to be connected to people who will bring out the best in us.

It's also worth noting the wisdom in the Buddha's leaving it up to Ananda to make the request that he live a further 20 years. My grandfather used to say, if a thing is worth having, it's worth asking for. Doubtless, there would have been a value in the Buddha living for longer. He would have helped hundreds, possibly thousands of people. But he had to die sometime. There was always going to be some limit on the good he could do on earth. He wasn't one to take on hardship to no avail. When he first considered teaching, he decided against it, believing that people wouldn't understand him and so he would only be wearing himself out for no good reason, exasperating himself. Although an enlightened being does not suffer, neither do they choose hardship unless there is a good reason.

Likewise, we can be judicious in what we offer to others, taking our needs and limitations into account. It is generous to do many acts of kindness quietly without waiting to be asked. But when the task is arduous, it's best to follow the Buddha's lead and just hint that we could do this. Generosity needs to be balanced by wisdom. Otherwise, we could expend much of our life energy doing work that others aren't ready to support or value, and which might therefore be a waste of effort.

Back to the Sutta now, where Ananda fails to take the Buddha's hint and makes no request that the Buddha live to his full century. I can imagine the Buddha smiling quietly at that. The path is now cleared for his Parinibbāna. The next step is for the Buddha to relinquish the will to live.

At this point, Mara, the personification of evil in Buddhism, makes his final appearance in the Buddha's life, trying to get the Buddha to make a hasty exit into Parinibbāna. Though the scriptures always personify Mara as an evil being who tempts the Buddha, we can also see this in more mundane terms, as the last vestiges of desire within the Buddha himself. And this last temptation of the Buddha is for Nibbāna. Those of you who saw Martin Scorsese's film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, will know that Scorsese imagines Christ to be tempted by the desire for life. In the Buddha's case, his last temptation was not for life, but for the escape from the round of life and death. Having accomplished all that was expected of a Buddha, Mara tempts him to bask in the perfect contentment and peace of Nibbāna. But to succumb to this final desire would be to grasp at Nibbāna, to see it as mine, a state that could be contained within the Buddha's humanity. Needless to say, the Buddha doesn't fall for this.

Normally he vanquishes Mara vigorously, first and foremost by detecting the presence of Mara and then by expounding the Dhamma to show how Mara's temptations are no match for the Buddha's wisdom. The vanquished Mara slinks off in misery. For example, in one description, Mara is left silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum, with nothing to say, scraping the ground with a reed. Curiously, in this last bout between the pair, the Buddha is uncharacteristically accommodating. He simply says, "You need not worry, evil one."

Continue beautifying this talk (part 2/2). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

The Buddha's passing will not be long delayed. We can take this as a suggestion for how we might deal with our own desires for enlightenment. We don't have to quash these out of hand as we might a desire for sense pleasure. We can take a gentler approach, recognising the worthy aim of the desire, while refusing the temptation to grasp.

Let's take a practical example. Striving for insight is an experience we probably all go through. Let's see how a modified version of the Buddha's response might help, repeating to ourselves, "Do not worry, evil one, insight will come in its own time."

I tried this out one time when I felt myself straining to get on top of things, trying to see how I was causing so much *dukkha* for myself. Repeating the phrase helped me see my experience from a more objective point of view. Grasping at insight was experienced as physical tension manifesting at several points of my body: the diaphragm, the chest, throat and face. It was almost as if there was a gigantic hand stretching upwards inside my body clutching at a stream of very unpleasant sensations that were shooting upwards towards my head. It seemed so imperative that I catch these sensations, holding one of them long enough to get a good look at it.

After a few moments the phrase "evil one" gave me pause for thought. Why was this grasping really evil? Fear and aversion surfaced as I considered this. To my surprise the grasping diminished somewhat, as if cowed by the judgment "evil." By now I could see the link between this exercise and one of the steps in the sutta we considered a few nights ago on the removal of distracting thoughts. You may remember the step where we condemn ourselves harshly for the distraction, even imagining a carcass being slung around our necks. The phrase "evil one" was having a similar effect, quelling the unskillful desire, holding it in check so it could be examined objectively.

By comparison, the phrase "do not worry" had a soothing effect and helped me consider the concept "evil one" in a more balanced way. I could sense the judgment as valid, seeing the *dukkha* I was creating by grasping and how unskillful this was. However, it wasn't a total self-condemnation. The grasping was just one portion of my experience. The effort to say the phrase, "do not worry," was separate from the grasping and was sensed as caring and wise. Thus the phrase, "do not worry, evil one," had the effect of showing me the *dukkha* being caused by grasping. Although the concept "evil one" stirred fear and judgment, this was being used to avail, clarifying where my problem lay.

The second half of the reflection, "insight will come in its own time," helped me to step back and get a wider view of my experience. I noticed a mental image of light which appeared to be glowing gently above my head. This I sensed represented the insight I was grasping after. I felt the sadness of being unable to make direct contact with that gentle light. It seemed always out of reach. But some comfort trickled through as I repeated the phrase, "Insight will come in its own time." The comfort seemed to emanate from the light itself. Once I stopped grasping after it, the light became a compassionate warm glow, softening the stinging sensations of grief. As the meditation evolved, I found myself making peace with my current level of understanding. I felt deeply grateful for every scrap of it, every moment where I stopped grasping and let my imperfect wisdom soothe me, reassure me that I was on the right path.

It might also be useful to try out this exercise if you sense any grief at the closing of the retreat or any dread of going back into the big bad world. This grief or dread represents a tendency to grasp whatever peace, clarity, *metta* or other form of goodness you touched upon during the retreat. There is wisdom in the desire for these qualities, so you don't want to condemn the desire itself. Wise desire is termed *chanda* in Pali, to distinguish it from the unwise desire for sense pleasures, fame, success and so on. Those unskillful desires are termed *tanha*, and these are the ones that lead to suffering. *Chanda*, on the other hand, energises our path to freedom. And yet, grasping after beautiful states of mind brings suffering. Clarity and metta and all such states come and go depending on conditions. So you might like to experiment with the phrase, "Do not worry, evil one, there will be another retreat next year," and see whether that helps you face into the world outside of Satipaṭṭhāna.

But always remember that vipassanā is your primary tool in dealing with any emotional disturbance. This is just a suggestion that might help you tweak yourself in the right direction. It's a form of self-care, finding the appropriate reflection to help you through a challenging situation.

Back to the Buddha's last days now, where having soothed Mara in this final exchange between them, he is then able to renounce his will to live in a perfectly equanimous way. He then announces to Ānanda and the other disciples that he will pass away in three months' time.

All of this part of the story—the rains retreat, his sickness, his comments on beauty, his offer to live to a century, his last exchange with Mara and his renunciation of the will to live—happened in Vesāli. We are told that as he leaves the region, he gazed on it with an elephant's look, meaning that he turned his full body around to look behind him, just as an elephant has to do if he wants to look behind. After this long gaze, he tells Ānanda that this is the last time he will see Vesāli.

The Buddha wasn't one for idle chatter, so we can assume this comment and his elephant's look were poignant expressions of appreciation and farewell. So many of the Buddha's teachings hammer home the need not to attach ourselves to anything in the phenomenal world. But that's not to say we distance ourselves from the world, disdaining what it offers. Enlightenment hasn't removed the Buddha from the earth, neither in terms of the aches and pains of old age, nor the beauty he finds in Vesāli. His Buddha nature participates fully in his humanity.

This reflection provides another encouragement not to neglect mundane reality in our search for enlightenment. We engage fully in the world. It's where we find our path to freedom. We can afford to get fond of whatever places or people or aspects of the

world that enrich our lives. The only thing we have to keep reminding ourselves is that all delight depends on a multitude of conditions beyond our control. It will all fall apart someday. We have to find the courage to appreciate and enjoy and love all the wholesome but ephemeral pleasures of the world. Saying farewell is perhaps the most challenging aspect of appreciation. The Buddha's elephant look towards Vesāli gives us a clear indication not to fudge on this, so intent on our next move that we ignore what we're leaving behind. Saying goodbye is a poignant *muditā* practice.

Having said his farewell to Vesāli, the Buddha spends the next three months travelling from place to place in the manner he had done since he started teaching. In Pāva, he eats a meal which gives him food poisoning. Next day, obviously very ill, he succeeds in making his way to Kusinārā, where he will die. Next time you're suffering the indignity of vomiting and diarrhoea, you might comfort yourself with the thought that this was how the Buddha died, so you're in good company.

The sutta suggests that Kusinārā was a quiet rural region and Ānanda remonstrates with the Buddha for choosing such a miserable little backwater of a place in which to die. He urges him to go to one of the great cities instead, declaring that would be a more fitting place for the Buddha to die. Although Ānanda grieved sorely at the Buddha's passing, his understanding of the Dhamma told him that *Parinibbāna* was something to celebrate. This sentiment was captured in one of the verses written after the Buddha's death and which we chant every morning as part of the vipassanā verses:

"All conditioned things are impermanent. It is their nature to arise and pass away. Having arisen, they disappear. Their cessation is happiness."

Wouldn't it be wonderful to live from such wisdom? To know that death is the deepest happiness. We could give ourselves fully into every activity, every relationship, enjoy all wholesome aspects of life to the full knowing that the truest bliss will come when all this activity fades away. It really is to get the best of both worlds.

Ānanda, however, was not fully enlightened. The verse he uttered on the Buddha's passing confessed his suffering: "Terrible was the quaking, men's hair stood on end, when the all-accomplished Buddha passed away."

Before we come to that best of both worlds wisdom, we bear witness to the dukkha that results from attaching ourselves to anything in this world of phenomena. Perhaps to symbolise this, the Buddha rejects Ānanda's wish for him to celebrate Parinibbāna in the style of earthly splendour, in a big city surrounded by pomp and circumstance. Likewise, he turns his back on the more refined beauties of the world, symbolised by the shrines of Vesāli and other centres where he had lived, established monasteries and

taught. He chooses instead the relative obscurity of Kusinārā for his final release. Perhaps this was to symbolise that the path leads forever onwards, beyond what is already established, into the unknown, into silence, the quiet peace of Nibbāna.

At one point during this last day of the Buddha's life, Ānanda can no longer contain his grief and withdraws to a quiet spot to weep. When the Buddha hears of this he summons him, telling him not to grieve, reminding him that all earthly phenomena, no matter how dear, must pass away. This is tough love, but his next comments show a deep sensitivity toward the grieving process. He praises Ānanda for his services: "For a long time, Ānanda, you have been in the Buddha's presence, showing loving kindness in acts of body, speech and mind, beneficially, blessedly, wholeheartedly and unstintingly."

He commends the way Ānanda has administered his work: "Monks, Ānanda is wise. He knows when it is the right time for monks to come and see the Buddha, when it's the right time for nuns, for lay people, for kings, and so on." He then lauds Ānanda's many endearing qualities, telling how people are always pleased to see him, delighted when he speaks to them, disappointed if he is silent.

When we grieve someone's passing we unwittingly diminish our own value. Psychologically we let our strength and happiness die with them, projecting all our good qualities onto the dying person. Working our way through grief is to recover our confidence, our self-worth. The Buddha hastens Ānanda's recovery in this public expression of appreciation, praise and admiration for his friend. In this parting kindness to Ānanda, the Buddha leaves us with the conundrum of *anattā*. We need to cherish ourselves in order to see through the delusion of self.

Before we let the Buddha take his final breath, let's look back at some of the points we can take from this discourse. Firstly, it gives us a picture of the Buddha as a very real human being. His enlightened state is fully incarnate in the world. It does not shield him from aches and pains or from unexpected and untimely illness. Neither does it leave him immune to the beauty of the world or the joy of friendship. These are needed to fuel his energy and will to live. See if you can find occasions for *muditā* during these last days of the retreat. If there are any aspects of *Satipaṭṭhāna* which helped you along—the shrine or walking rooms, some restful spot in the meadows, your favourite walking path, the stupa or any of the statues that meant something to you—spend a few moments acknowledging these, expressing gratitude for whatever way they inspired you. When leaving, turn back, elephant style, to say farewell.

We can also remember the Buddha's last days as a contemplation on sickness, ageing and death. Within our imagination we might be all powerful, but these provide objective limitations on what we can achieve in the world. The really good news is that provided we give things our best shot, we can take these limitations as a gift. We can bow out delighted that the struggle is over and that we can now relax and let go.

The sutta shows the important role Ānanda played in the Buddha's life. Much of what we know about the Buddha comes from the long conversations he has with Ānanda. He tells him what is on his mind, uses him as a sounding board and comforts him in his grief. We can let ourselves be inspired by their relationship. Over these last days you might spend time thinking of your friends, especially those with whom you share the spiritual path. You could vow to develop these friendships and share the merits of your retreat with them.

Despite all the evidence of the Buddha's love for and appreciation of the people and places that played a role in his life, his last temptation was not for life, but for the peace and bliss of Nibbāna. Remembering this, we incline our minds to that ultimate bliss and encourage ourselves to find happiness in letting go. But the Buddha didn't give in to Mara's last temptation for him to bow out early. He maintained his mission to teach the Dhamma right up to the end, answering questions, advising people on specific points, giving Dhamma talks.

It is said at the very last moments of his life, his disciples all fell silent. Three times he asked if there were any more questions, but no one voiced any. With that, the Buddha uttered his last words: "All compound things have the nature to decay. Strive diligently for your liberation." With that, the Buddha took his last breath. His enlightened state was no longer incarnate within the five aggregates of body and mind through which he had lived his life and been known by others.

The sutta goes on to describe the ceremonies that followed and the division of the relics of his body. But I think the Buddha's last breath is the best point at which to take our leave.

As we contemplate his Parinibbāna, we may, in part, feel the anxiety and sorrow of Ānanda. Another part of us might rejoice in the wisdom of the vipassanā verse, which declares that true happiness comes when all things pass away. Torn between these extremes, we might feel stuck and confused. All of this, our wisdom and our many layers of delusion, is witnessed by the untraceable.

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.

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.

The Second Noble Truth — The Cause of Unsatisfactoriness

Noirin Sheahan · 24 min

In this dharma talk, Noirin Sheahan provides a comprehensive exploration of the Second Noble Truth from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta — that taṇhā (craving) is the origin of dukkha. She examines the three forms of craving: kāma-taṇhā (craving for sensual pleasures), bhava-taṇhā (craving for being or existence), and vibhava-taṇhā (craving for non-being or annihilation).

Drawing from personal anecdotes and teaching stories, Noirin explains how our survival instincts naturally generate desires for success, recognition, and pleasant experiences, while simultaneously creating aversion to failure and unpleasant states. She addresses the common mistake of judging ourselves for having desires, emphasizing instead the middle way between suppression and indulgence.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with desire in meditation practice, including techniques for acknowledging cravings without acting on them, feeling the bodily sensations of wanting, and staying present with vedanā (feeling-tone) rather than moving immediately to taṇhā. Noirin concludes with the paradoxical teaching that we must use skillful desire — such as the aspiration for awakening — to eventually transcend all craving, illustrating this with the dialogue between Ānanda and a brahmin about using desire to abandon desire.

So I'd like to say a few words about the second noble truth now, which is the truth of the cause of suffering. And in the Buddha's words, what is the noble truth of the origin of suffering? It is craving which renews being and is accompanied by relish and lust, relishing this and that. In other words, craving for sensual desires, craving for being, craving for non-being. But where does this craving arise and flourish? Wherever there is that which seems lovable and gratifying, thereon it arises and flourishes. There is this noble truth of the origin of suffering. Such was the vision inside wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before. And this noble truth must be penetrated by abandoning the origin of suffering.

So we have three sources of suffering that the Buddha describes there. One is sense pleasures. So all the lovely sights and sounds here in the countryside, good food. And then remembering that sense pleasures also includes all the pleasures of the mind,

good conversations, good discussions, a detective story if you like detective stories, any sort of happy thoughts. And of course, the opposite is implied there. If we like the pleasant stuff, we also then want to get rid of the unpleasant stuff. So pain, irritating noises, unpleasant tastes and smells and so on. And of course, all the unhappiness of the mind, depression and fear and unhappy thoughts of all descriptions.

Craving is the word used in that particular sutta. Often it's called desire. Desire for sense pleasures. Sometimes called lust, lust for sense pleasures. So craving, desire, lust, that wanting. You could describe it as wanting what's lovely, not wanting what's horrible. There's also this secondary one, that craving to be.

So that's a craving to be somebody. We want to be, for example, recognised. We want to be valued. We want to be respected. So all of those make us feel good. They really give us a boost in our life. And we can get these around family, for example, if we're identified with our family. For example, the role as a parent can give a lot of joy and pride and happiness. And it can make the hard work involved in being a parent worthwhile. It can make sense of life. There's a role in life. There's a meaning to my life. I am a father or a mother, for example. So that can provide great joy in life. And these are real joys. The Buddha doesn't in any way say don't enjoy life. There's a list of the various happinesses, and one of them would be looking after family, looking after family and friends, looking after children, cherishing children.

Another area where we identify would be our jobs. So there again, we can really crave that sense of recognition around being somebody with a skill, being somebody with a trade, somebody who belongs to some organisation, somebody with some expertise. So all of that, the craving to be an expert, to be a really good whatever it is, carpenter, plumber, whatever it is. Our hobbies as well. We want to be the best gardener, the best bridge player and so on. So this is all the area of craving to be, and it would include friendships, for example, to be a friend, to have friends.

So that gives us a lot of comfort. It helps our sense of self-worth. And again, this can be used very skillfully along the spiritual path. But it's just to see where we are also allowing it to draw us into suffering. That real neediness for maybe our friends to always be available, for example, or a terrible anxiety about our friends because we can't live without them. So all these desires can be used skillfully to support us along the path.

It's another huge desire, of course, the desire to be enlightened. That can really get in our way here. And Chögyam Trungpa, the Tibetan Buddhist master, he would call that spiritual materialism, that we're getting our status out of spiritual matters, maybe instead of houses and homes and stuff like that, but we're getting our sense of self-worth

from spiritual progress. That can be an area which can cause huge suffering as well. So it's just to be aware of it. So they're all the craving to be. And you can probably think of many, many more examples.

And then there's the craving not to be. So that'll be all the areas that we don't want to be identified with. For example, failure. Most of us would dread the thought of being seen as the failure. So we tend to hide our mistakes, gloss over our mistakes, even pretend to ourselves that we didn't make them somehow or other.

And Joseph Goldstein just has a nice story around that. In one of his interviews with his teacher, Upan Dita, he was, without really having made a decision to report his practice as a tiny little bit better than it was, he just realised afterwards he was doing that. He had a sense of what he should be seeing at this stage of his meditation practice after so many years and so on and how equanimous he should be and how many insights he should have. So that was colouring the way he was reporting everything. And just at the end of the interview, Upan Dita said, "That's not true."

At the end of a nice, long, embroidered, flowing interview of lots of spiritual success. That's not true. So Joseph Goldstein just said he wanted the floor to open up and take him in. He was so embarrassed. It was terrible. So he spent days just struggling with embarrassment and self-judgment of all descriptions. And realising, as soon as it was said, he realised he'd been exaggerating.

Anyway, at the end of about two days of pure agony, he was able to just see, okay, the mind does this as well. That's another aspect of the human mind. We want to be a success. And that's what it does. It pretends that it's a little bit better than it is. So he was able to see himself more humorously from then on. So it was, in that sense, a very good lesson for him. So he never took himself quite so seriously after that, because the human mind plays all kinds of tricks. It really is very devious.

So we don't want to be a failure. Also the whole area of employment. It's often our first question: what do you do? When we meet someone, what do you do? So to have to say well I'm unemployed, that's a bit of a come down. In certain social circles, then, to be a janitor is a come down. So you just don't want to have to say all of that. So the whole area of employment, we might really be embarrassed about our employment or our lack of employment. And that can become a big source of stress for us, not wanting to be seen in certain social lights.

So there is really so much stress built into the human condition, wanting to be a success, not wanting to be a failure, wanting to be accepted. And not to blame ourselves for all of this. We can again hear the second noble truth, desire is the cause of suffering,

and then start blaming ourselves for having all these desires. It's a very easy mistake for us to make and it's a mistake I find myself in again and again. So I find it helpful instead to reflect on the whole condition and to generate some compassion around it.

So all of these desires would be part of our survival strategy. And again, this probably comes from our evolution, just as we were mentioning before, that in order to survive, we need to thrive. We need the good stuff in life so we can thrive on things like good food, good education, a safe space as a home, maybe with a nice garden in the countryside or something like that. So all those pleasant sounds, pleasant sights, a sense of good social status, the good food, all of that, the safety, all of that would allow us to thrive. So naturally, our self wants to thrive. So those desires are built in to our system. It's not that they're our fault, or that we're wrong for having desires. They're essentially survival strategies. So in that sense, they are wise. So all of those that promote health and well-being, a sense of confidence, a sense of self-worth. So certainly not to be despised.

So to generate compassion around that whole area of desire, just to keep reflecting desires are natural. And a lot of them can be used for good, as we were mentioning before. It's a question of deciding which ones to follow and which ones not to follow.

So there is this teaching desire causes *dukkha*. There is maybe the tendency then to judge desire is wrong and to suppress it. But that is just another desire. That's the desire for enlightenment. The suppression of desire in order to get to the end of suffering. So that's a vicious circle. It can't work. It's an easy mistake, but we just have to see it again and again and keep dropping it.

But what can we do? So what the Buddha says is this noble truth must be penetrated by abandoning the origin of suffering. So we have to abandon our, often we use the word, let go of desire. So we can acknowledge the desire. And especially here in meditation, we don't have to fulfil our desires, but we can just really acknowledge them, feel them if possible. So that way we're not suppressing, we're allowing the desire just to express itself in our minds and our bodies, but we're not indulging it. So it's the middle way between suppression and indulgence.

And if we feel the desire to rush, the Mahāsi technique asks us to do everything slowly and we just feel really the desire to just rush through that door. And then can we feel that desire and feel the way it propels our body forward and instead just see, can we relax, take it easy, open the door slowly. So that's, again, allowing the desire, the impatience for getting here, there and everywhere, that desire to burn out.

We have the desire to gobble our dinner, just get through it quick. And again, if we can just feel that desire, acknowledge it, so not make ourselves wrong for it, but just acknowledge it and let it be felt in the body as maybe the shoulders wanting to move, the hands wanting to move in order to get the next spoonful in, the jaws wanting to chew quickly, everything like that. Just notice all of the tension associated with that desire and yet slowing down, relaxing as best we can and not following the desire. So again, that's just letting the desire burn itself out. So that's our middle path, our work here.

And we can also just listen to our thoughts. "I want another biscuit." It's so easy to come in and say, dismiss that, that's a stupid thought, and we can just put it away. But if we listen to it, okay, I do want another biscuit, and allow it to be felt, really listen to it. So it's a kinder way of being with desire to really listen to those thoughts and realise that's what's happening. There is a desire. You might even feel somewhere in the body that is grasping itself around that thought of another biscuit.

"I want to go to bed." So again, just listening to that, really listening into it, feeling the wish to go to bed with interest in the feeling. We're taking off the interest in going to bed, that dream of how lovely bed will be, but instead it's the interest in the here and now, the feeling of wanting to go to bed. So listening attentively to our own desires rather than quickly answering them with a put-down of some form, allowing ourselves to be human, to have all these desires.

Of course, then there is the whole area of suppression of desire. We can't just stop that either. We can't just turn off the suppressive forces within us. They're probably very deep habits. So again, it's a question of listening to those as best we can. And that can be hard. Well, I find it anyway, quite hard. So the suppressive forces would often involve a very stern crossness somewhere. So just tuning in to where in my body is stern or cross. And for me, I find it in the forehead. And sometimes, yes, sometimes around the back of the neck, the jaws, all of that. So all of that is trying to almost clamp down on these desires for more biscuits or wanting to go to bed.

So to tune in to the suppressive forces as well, and again, listen to them, the quick giving out, the quick answer back to any desire like "I want a biscuit." And it says, "No, you don't. You've had enough." Just to notice those little quick reactionary thoughts and maybe feel into them. So that's listening and acknowledging to the control freak in us, which is a strong force within us.

And linked to that there can be a lot of shame, shame at our own imperfections, hating imperfections. Again, it'll be linked to probably fear of failure, fear of judgment, all of that. So they're going deep within us and they need a lot of tender acknowledgement, a lot of compassion, a lot of sympathy. So it's a long and patient process, really, being with this human condition that has so many desires built into it.

It's very interesting that there are so many different desires and they're often in conflict with one another. The desire for the biscuit and then immediately, no, you don't want a biscuit. And other desires like we want to be liked by everybody, but we also want to have our own way.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, he has a whole series on selves and not self, he calls it. It's a wonderful little series. If you remember, each desire, as we were saying last night, each desire has the effect that our whole being goes into this idea of self. An idea of self is born in order to fulfil the desire. So every desire brings up some other aspect of ourselves, some other aspect of our personality. So it can be the little whingy child who wants another biscuit, or it can be the stern schoolteacher who's saying, "No, you've had enough."

So he likens our condition as we're like a committee. We're not a person. We're a committee. And we're a committee at loggerheads with one another, one member shouting at the other. And often a lot is going on under the scenes. We're not very honest because we actually don't know ourselves that well. There's an awful lot of subconscious poking of ourselves going on here. So it's not even a committee, it's more like a corrupt town council, he says, where people are taking bribes from each other and stabbing each other in the back and so on. So we really have a bit of a job with all these conflicting desires and somehow trying to survive in the midst of all of this is no joke.

Now, one other possibility we have here is to see the detail of the arising of desire. So desire is born from either pleasant or unpleasant feeling. And the feeling then, if you remember, is just the recognition of some sense impression as being pleasant or unpleasant. So we smell the food, for example, at dinner. And so that's a pleasant aroma. And that would lead to the desire, "Okay, I want to get stuck into this now." And then the self is created in order to just get stuck in, to pick up the spoon and shove it into our mouth and get going on eating it.

So if we can notice all of that, the aroma and then the sudden way the system is ready to eat, the tension in the muscles ready to pick up knives and forks and so on. So if we can see that and just stop, just let it go, just stop, don't act on the desire and let it

all die away. And instead what you'll have at some stage, a little bit later when the system has relaxed, will be again the pleasant aroma. And can you stay at that level of a pleasant aroma?

If we practice it, the desire then is just letting itself burn out. And if we can stay at that level of just pleasant *vedanā*, life is so peaceful. We don't have the urgency of desire. We don't have the stress of a self being created to fulfil them all.

The Buddha says this is really how we let suffering die away—we stay at the level of sense contact and *vedanā*, of knowing our sense impressions, knowing whether they're pleasant or unpleasant, but allowing desires to fade away. And they do burn away. So it's really for us to see that desires do burn. They do just fade away. If we don't indulge them, if we don't suppress them, they just burn away. It's very interesting.

Now, they come up again a second later, and you have to let that one burn away. So it's a patient process. But to see at least one, just that it dies away and I could be with this dinner even for a few moments with just the pleasure and no stress, no need to hurry, just appreciating. That's an example of the peaceful life we could live and we will all live when we come to the end of suffering, when we abandon all our desires.

So I just want to leave this with the reminder that we don't have to judge ourselves wrong for having desires. We can use desires skillfully to get to the end of suffering. It's a conversation between Ānanda and somebody else. A Brahmin, anyway, is asking Ānanda, "What is the way to the end of suffering? For what purpose, Master Ānanda, is the holy life lived under the Buddha, the ascetic Gautama?"

"It is for the sake of abandoning desire, Brahmin, that the holy life is lived under the Blessed One."

"But, Master Ānanda, is there a path? Is there a way for the abandoning of this desire?"

"There is a path, Brahmin. There is a way for abandoning of this desire."

"But, Master Ānanda, what is the path? What is the way for abandoning of this desire?"

"Here, Brahmin, a bhikkhu develops the basis for spiritual power that possesses concentration due to desire and volitional formations of striving. He develops the basis for spiritual power that possesses concentration due to energy," and so on. He goes through a whole lot more of them. "This, Brahmin, is the path. This is the way for the abandoning of this desire."

So just notice that what Ānanda is saying, that we develop the basis for spiritual power due to desire. You know, we desire our spiritual progress. We use that desire to develop our spiritual powers. So it's a bit of a conundrum, isn't it? We're using desire to get to the end of desire. You know, we're striving to get to the end of striving.

So anyway, the Brahmin picks him up on this. He says, "Such being the case, Master Ānanda, the situation is interminable. It is impossible that one can abandon desire by means of desire itself."

And so Ānanda answers, "Well then, Brahmin, I'll question you about this matter. Answer as you see fit. What do you think, Brahmin? Did you earlier have the desire, 'I will go to the park'? And after he went to the park, did this corresponding desire subside?" He went to the park to meet Ānanda.

So the Brahmin answers, "Yes, sir."

"Did you already arouse energy thinking, 'I will go to the park'? And after he went to the park, did the corresponding energy subside?"

"Yes, sir."

And he goes through them all like that. He aroused volitional formations as well to go to the park. So he strove to go to the park. He desired to go to the park. He strove to go to the park. He got to the park. But then they all subsided.

So desires just subside after they've been fulfilled, or if we just watch them and let them burn out anyway. So we can therefore just let the desires we want to fulfil be fulfilled. Our desire is to meditate. We can act on those, we can allow those be fulfilled. Our desire to come and retreat, we can strive like mad to go and retreat. And that desire, that striving will just pass away when we go on to retreat.

So we don't have to be afraid of our desirous nature, you know, our striving nature, but we can use it in the right direction. So anyway, the Brahmin is eventually completely convinced. Ānanda asks him, "Well, what do you think now, Brahmin? Is the situation terminable or interminable?"

"Surely, Master Ānanda, such being the case, the situation is terminable, not interminable. Magnificent, Master Ānanda. From today, let Master Ānanda remember me as a lay follower who has gone for refuge for life."

So although desire is the cause of suffering, this is a gradual path and we use our desire to come to the end of suffering to get us to the end of suffering.

Thank you.

The Awakening

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1h00

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines what the Buddha discovered during his awakening beneath the Bodhi tree and how this revelation formed the foundation of Buddhist practice. Drawing from the traditional account, he explores the Buddha's three insights: knowledge of past lives, understanding of kamma and rebirth, and the destruction of the āsavas (mental influxes). The talk delves deeply into the Four Noble Truths as the Buddha's fundamental diagnosis of human suffering, explaining how dukkha arises through our wrong relationship with the phenomenal world.

Bhante Bodhidhamma presents the three characteristics of existence - anicca (impermanence), dukkha (suffering/unsatisfactoriness), and anattā (not-self) - as practical tools for investigation rather than mere philosophical concepts. Using vivid analogies and practical examples, he explains how meditation practice involves taking the position of objective observer to see through the delusion of selfhood. The discussion includes detailed exploration of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination) as the psychology of suffering, showing how ignorance leads to the cycle of craving, grasping, and becoming.

The talk emphasizes that liberation comes not through force of will but through the gradual undermining of wrong view through Right Awareness (sammā sati) and wisdom (paññā). Bhante concludes by pointing to that transcendent sphere beyond the six sense doors - the goal toward which all Buddhist practice aims.

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato
Sammāsambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa*

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

For those of you who listened to my earlier talks, I'm following the life of the Buddha and we got as far as his enlightenment and then we went into details about Mara, the evil one. I had only meant to take one talk over the hindrances, but I ended up taking two, and I haven't finished them yet. I don't want to overplay that, so I'm going to leave the other ones—aversion, doubt and all that, which I'm sure you know anyway.

I wanted to move on to the question of: so what was his awakening? What was it that he discovered? And how did that translate into practice? I'm not going to say anything which is going to surprise you, but at least it's just an occasion to reflect on what his awakening was all about.

If we go back to that point where he's sitting by the roadside and the rice pudding turns up, and this enlivens him and fills him with great glee—as you know rice pudding does—he went off to make the great determination to sit beneath the tree, saying that he would not rise from this posture even if he were to die. So he sat there, and he went to sit, remember, with that memory of the child—the child who was watching his father doing the ploughing ceremony.

The ability of the child just to receive, especially around about the age of one onwards to about six, just that ability to let the jaw drop and the eyes wide open. And just that entire receptivity with no mentation at all. There's nothing guarding anything coming in because there's not enough history, there's not enough experience to block or to play around with.

So seeing his father doing the ploughing ceremony was a surprise, it was a joy for him. And with that, what we now understand to be *sati*, that awareness, *satipaṇṇā*, with intuitive intelligence, just that receptiveness—which is the definition of equanimity, remember: the ability to receive without reaction—he went and sat. And luckily for him, and for us of course, he finally cracked the puzzle, his koan: Is there an end to suffering?

The context of his awakening—it's the normal one that's, shall we say, accepted—was his insight into past lives, his own past lives. His insight, or his being able to see how people were reborn according to their moral or immoral actions. And that he knew that the *āsava* were completely destroyed. The floods—we'll come back to them.

So there are these three things that he understood. The first one: when he was able to review his past lives and understand how he got to where he was then, it became a personal understanding, you might say a personal law. But when that ability to go beyond himself, to see other beings arising and passing away according to what became the law of *kamma*—what had been a personal law then becomes a cosmic law. And that's what he taught. He taught the law of *kamma* and the law of rebirth.

And the *āsava*, these floods, as they're called—there are three of them. Normally there are three, then somebody added a fourth one in the later scriptures. The first one is, of course, the flood of desire for sensual pleasure. Here, "sensual" you have to stretch out a bit to include emotional—emotional pleasure. It's the pleasure of the senses which includes the mind and heart, so it's the whole pleasure syndrome: seeking pleasure in the phenomenal world or in the transient world. And the second one is, of course, the desire to become, to continue, to keep reappearing as myself.

And the third one is ignorance. And the ignorance was then reinforced by the idea of this flood of wrong view. So in a sense, the wrong view is an expression of ignorance as to why they added on—I don't know. But those three were the basic *āsava* that he had destroyed.

These *āsava*, these floods—it's like the image that I have is of a painting, of a water-colour, where the artist first puts a wash across the back. Sometimes you get watercolours on a black background, don't you? Or at least I've seen them like that. They might use oil, I can't remember. But anyway, they put a wash on the back, you see. And this wash gives the whole picture a certain tone.

So if we look at our mind-heart complex, the psyche, then it has these three basic tones. It has the tone of seeking happiness in sensual pleasure, the tone of wanting to become, to become, to become, and the tone of that ignorance, which is that wrong relationship that we have with the world we're in.

Now, when he talks about the world we're in, he then talks about the Four Noble Truths. And these Four Noble Truths: the truth that there is suffering—just a straightforward statement—the cause of suffering, which is that desire for sensual pleasure in the phenomenal world, and that there is an end—so there's your prognosis, not bad, is it? That there is an end to this constant misery—and that there's a path which leads to that place.

And in the Four Noble Truths, you'll get one way he says it where he says "*loke*"—in this world there is suffering. When he then defines *loke*, he says "in this fathom-length body." So this suffering, this *kamma*, this onward going, this *saṃsāra*, is happening actually within us, within the mind itself. And what he discovered was that there was a position which lay beyond that. A position which lay beyond that.

I've got a couple of quotes, if I can find them here. So, one of them is, for instance: "There is a sphere." Now, a sphere, an *āyatana*, is a level of experience which don't overlap. So, for instance, through our eyes we see form and colour. Through our nose we have smell or aroma. And you can't see through your nose and you can't smell through your eyes. I mean, you can try, but it doesn't happen. And that's what he means by a sphere.

So there are six spheres, the sixth one being the mind itself. And now he's saying that there is another sphere—there is a sphere which is to be experienced, direct experience, where the eye stops and perception, and the perception of form fades away, or disappears. And that perception is the mental noting.

So there's a sphere where form and perception disappears, to do with the eye. The same with ear and sound—they disappear. The perception of sound disappears, like "that's a bird" or "that's pleasant." The nose and smells, aroma. The tongue and its tastes. Body with its sensation. And the intellect with its mental objects, so the images and the thoughts. All that disappear. And he says this sphere should be realised.

So there he is pointing to something which goes beyond this body, this mind, this heart, the five *khandhas*, the five aggregates, and as he uses them here, the six spheres or the six avenues of consciousness. So we can only know the world through these six consciousnesses. We can only see it, smell it, hear it and so on, and we can only know it as an internal image. So what he's saying is that there's a place beyond that.

Having stated that, he points out that this can't be got by a simple act of will. You just can't get there by saying, "Well, okay, let's take a rocket or something and get up to that sphere." It just doesn't happen like that. It's beyond the will. It's beyond the self. And if you remember his next talk—having laid out, at least this is in the mythology, the way the scriptures were later collected—he then talked about the self.

Now this sphere that is to be known, which is beyond all else, is beyond the dualistic world—it's beyond objects—and therefore it can't be known as an object. So it's something which is totally subjective experience and it cannot be known as an object. And therefore, somehow, we have to, as it were, approach it by some little trick.

So, what all the Buddha is saying is: all you have to do is look at whatever is arising and passing away and simply know that that's not me, not mine. So here, the knowledge comes into a direct practice. And that's what he means by this *satipaṇṇā*, this awareness and intelligence. And he's saying that if we can take this position within ourselves of the observer, if we can find that observation post and begin to see things within ourselves as objects, then very slowly at least we'll be very clear as to what we are not.

And it's presumed that if we're very clear as to what we're not, then hopefully, eventually, we'll be very clear as to what we actually are. That's the idea, anyway, of the practice.

So how do we do that? What process do we use in order to access that vantage point? We can begin to investigate things so that it liberates. What's it liberating? It's liberating that which is this special sphere. And what is the content, or what is that made up of? It's the *sati*, it's the *pañṇā*, it's the awareness and the wisdom, it's the looking, it's the seeing, it's the looking and the seeing.

So he always says: first of all, you look and then you see. So if you take that into your life, in ordinary day life, you can see that first of all, you've got to look. If something goes wrong with the car, you've got to open the bonnet and have a look. And then when you look, you see. So it's the same with anything, that process of looking. But we're looking, remember, with that attitude of wanting to know. So that has to be there. There has to be that desire of wanting to know.

What is it that we want to know? We cannot know *Nibbāna*, we cannot know the end of suffering directly, we cannot turn round upon it and say, "Gotcha." It doesn't work like that. So, if you think of an archer—this is an image that works for me anyway—when they are firing the arrow at the distant target, they never point it at the target directly, they're always pointing it up in the air somewhere. And they know that if it travels at a certain speed and it passes through that point, it's going to hit the target.

So the Buddha shifts that sort of investigation away from *Nibbāna*. He says, "Don't worry about that." He says, "That will arise in its own good time." He says, "Just shift it towards the way you are looking." So this element that we have in us—in Theravāda, it's dryly referred to as the *Nibbāna dhātu*, the element of *Nibbāna*, which I think takes on a certain fleshy quality when you call it *bodhicitta*, the heart seeking enlightenment.

So when that arises, when we actually bring that forward by lifting this awareness to look at what is happening within the body and mind, he says, "Don't worry about *Nibbāna*." He says, "Just see how you're looking." And then he gives us these three vantage points: the *anicca*, the *dukkha*, the *anattā*—the sense of impermanence. Where is the suffering? Where is it? Where is it in this complex of the body, mind, heart? Where is the suffering? Where is it arising from? What's actually the cause of that suffering? And then the more subtle teaching of not-self.

So, he's taken our gaze away from worrying about *Nibbāna*, worrying about liberation, lots of stuff, and he says, "Why not investigate what you are experiencing from these three vantage points?"

So, when we're looking, and we take the vantage point of *anicca*, of transience and impermanence, we're becoming aware of that quality that everything is in a process of change. Now, if we centre simply on that, you see, then you'll find that the mind is very much aware of the beginning of things, but not the end of things. Because beginning—new for us—symbolises something exciting. Even if it's something horrible, there's still a sense of awareness that it is beginning.

Then as it begins to end, our attention really goes to what is the next beginning. So we always know who the new film star is or pop star, but we never actually know what happens to them. They've disappeared. They just fade away from consciousness, from cultural consciousness.

So by putting the attention on the ending of things, on the ending of things, we begin to see that actually this process, this process of change is not a continuum. There is an actual stopping. There is an actual stopping. The image there is of a row of billiard balls. So they're all joined up together but they're actually all separate. Usually that's explained as showing the difference between the Buddhist position on this and the Hindu position which says that there's something which continues through the arising and passing away of things. So it's like a row of beads with a string through it. But the Buddhist position is radical change. It's actually something completely finishes before something else can begin.

And that radical change, as we get into it, you see—so as we get into it, there's a seeing of it from the point of view of the intellect, the point of view of actually understanding things arise and pass away. But it's actually at the emotional level, it's at the heart level that it begins to strike home.

So even though in our school we go for the minuscule, we go for the actual seeing of things in the minute, watching the rising and falling of the breath and even eventually the rising and falling of a sequence of sensations, at the heart level, it doesn't have to be that particular find at all. Somebody close to us who dies can hit you just as hard as watching the arising and falling of the breath. And it's hitting at a point of attitude. And when that attitude is broken—this assumption of continuity—when that attitude is broken, it reverberates back onto our understanding.

So there's always different ways in which the quality of transience can strike us, and it's constantly putting that attention there that there is this slow beginning to understand what's happening. Now what is it that's arising and passing away?

So remember that the Buddha's teaching is that everything is mind. Our knowledge of the outside world is totally dependent upon the senses that we have. So even though we're in this room together and nobody would dispute that this meditation hall actually sort of exists when we go away—in other words our mind is not actually creating this hall—the fact of the matter is all of us have walked into it, we all have a different view of it, a slightly different feel of it and so on.

So in a sense our experience of this hall is all varied, individual, and that's true for everything we experience. It's only through language and general communication that we can get across to people that we generally see the world as they do—and of course some we don't—and therefore you get this image of parallel universes. We're all sort of running parallel to each other in some way, sometimes we sort of crash a bit. But the idea is that everything that I know is within my mind.

So all these stimuli—the light, the smells, the touch and all that—they're all being brought into this central box which we call the brain. But there's also, in Buddhist understanding, a mind-matter there, which is a more subtle form, which produces for us a picture. Now we know that from our own knowledge of how the brain works. This picture that we get is, shall we say, that act of cognition. And there's something that knows it. There's something that knows, that has a double take on it. It knows it knows.

And that picture, as it were, is arising and passing away, holding an image for us so that we can grasp it and then it disappears, and the next image comes up dependent on the stimuli coming in from the outside through the senses or from the inside through our memories.

And when we see that the world is arising and passing away, I think personally it would be truer to say that what we're watching is our minds arising and passing away—the actual act of cognition. Now to see that, of course, undermines the idea that I can be that.

So *anicca*, the quality of transience, does refer back to the self. And this is what the Buddha said if you remember in the discourse that I read: is something which arises and passes away to be understood as me, mine and so on? So that quality of radical impermanence does reflect back to the not-self. And in so doing, of course, it ruptures a type of relationship that we have, which is a holding on.

Remember that the self is constantly trying to build a world of comfort around itself, a sort of castle, so that it doesn't shake, it doesn't fear anything, it doesn't fear death. But to see that *anicca* quality, that real radical arising and passing away, reverberates back onto the self in its relationship to the world it's in.

Now, there I said the relationship of the self. That was wrong. It's a relationship of this *satipaṇṇā*, of this *bodhicitta* or this *nirvāṇa dhātu*. It depends what school you're in and what expression you feel happy with.

So now we're getting this idea that there is something within us, this awareness, this very basic intuitive intelligence which is at the root of our being, and it moves into every moment with some sort of wrong view, and that not knowing. It comes from the position of not knowing is the basis of, the beginning of, the wheel of dependent origination, which is how the Buddha explains how we come to suffer.

I think I said before in an earlier talk, when I was answering a question, if we go back to our little origins in this particular life, remember that we became alive as just a bundle of cells. So in that bundle, what did we know? And it's only through the growth of the senses that we come to collect, as it were, enough information. And then finally we find ourselves out in the open world and gasping for a bit of breath. And then we grow up. And all the time there's this presumption, which is gained right back there in the womb, that this must be me, because this is what I experience.

Now, that delusion stays with us all the time, and it's only through meditation, by taking this objective position in ourselves, that we begin to break through that delusion. And the process and nature of transience, of impermanence, is coming from a slightly different angle, which is saying that even if you hold on to it, it's going to disappear. Nothing stays the same. Everything is in a state of radical change. So that even the effort to try and hold on to something, to maintain a comfort, is a non-starter. It's not going to get you anywhere.

So watching *anicca*, even at the breath, is a constant undermining of that wrong view. A wrong view, remember, that has not come from a position of stupidity. That's the unfortunate thing about this English word ignorance. There is another word, nescience, but nobody knows it, so there's no point in it. Only the dictionary knows that word. And it means a simple don't know. Don't know, you see. And from that don't know is a frightening place to be. So one throws oneself into something, defines oneself as something.

Now this has happened to you all, I'm sure, at a time when you've been in a strange hotel or in somebody's house and you've just woken up and you don't know where you are. And there's that sudden sort of rush of panic as to who you are. And it's only when you remember that, oh, you're in this hotel, that you can breathe again. Now that panic, you see, is the self. At that moment, the self can't define itself. So it's rushing around like a mad fool, trying to work out what the hell it is. And so when it grasps it, fantastic, then it's happy. Oh, it's me again.

So that sense of transience, really seeing transience, is not only coming back to the idea that nothing in this world is worth holding on to – that's a direct quote from the Buddha – but the fact that if it's transient it can't be me, because it's arising and passing

away. So as we're watching it at all levels, remember at all levels, whether it's right there in the minuscule arising and passing away of a sensation, or whether we're just watching these leaves fall, and just watching the change of leaves, and just catching our feeling towards it.

Sometimes if you stand by a river, just watch the river coming at you and just catch your feelings that come up with that coming, the newness. And then turn around and watch it flowing away and just catch how your feelings are at letting something go. If there's a puddle around or a pond, look into that and see how you feel when there is no flow. So it's not as though we have to do this meditation in order to break through these things. All this meditation is doing for us is making more and more clear to us what this *satipaṇṇā* is.

So if we sit with the idea that right now I'm going to crack it, I'm going to really break through this sitting like the Buddha did, you can try it. It usually ends up with severe frustration. So if we see our sitting simply as training, all we're doing is we're just training ourselves to constantly lift ourselves into this position of at least the objective observer.

Now, from this position of not-self, we've created these delusions. The fundamental delusion is that I am this person. That's the fundamental delusion. I am this personality and I am this body. And those we call our *sankhāras*. And a *sankhāra* is all those things that we've been able to create through an act of will. So once you've got a body and you've got an eye, the eye will see, that's not a *sankhāra*. Whatever's coming into the eye is a given. What we do with that which comes into the eye, or with the image that comes, that's our *sankhāras*, because there comes that intention into what we're doing. And that's building up a mood, it's building up an attitude, and it's building up a whole series of thoughts, it's building up a history.

These intentions, remember, at all levels in all areas of our lives turn into an action. So you have an intention, it turns into an action. When you've got similar actions going on, you've produced a habit. And once you've got a compendium of these habits, a collection of habits, that's your personality. And once you've got a personality, it just drives you towards your destiny, until, of course, you come to meditate. And then you can reverse some of it, and hopefully end up with a decent destiny.

So, here we are, with this *satipaṇṇā*, this awareness, this *buddho* within ourselves, and then we're born. So that's the next stage, *nāmarūpa*, you're born. And with that being born, there arises these acts of cognition. So this body-mind complex and the act of

cognition rebound off each other. The one can't arise without the other. You can't cognize something if there's nothing there. So there can't be a cognition unless there's something coming in through the perceptual faculties, the eye and so on.

So once that's started, once you've got that, once you've got the consciousness and the basic body, which has these six senses, so that's your next step, the *salāyatana*, the six sense bases, then finally you can have some contact. And that's your next stage, your contact. At the point of contact, there has to be these three things. You have to have a sense base, you have to have something that stimulates that sense base, and you've got to have that consciousness.

Once that arises, then the mind, the perceptual faculty comes in, which knows what it is, but then that quality of judgment – now this isn't a judgment to do with good and bad and all that, it just experiences what comes in as pleasant or unpleasant. It's as simple as that. So sometimes we get a sensation which is pleasant, like when we're eating, and sometimes we get something which is unpleasant, like when it's getting cold. So whatever sensation comes in, after the contact, there is this relationship built up with it. So the relationship is, like it, don't like it.

Now, once the self grabs hold of that as a position, pleasant, unpleasant, you see, then it has to take a position. Now, its position comes from that fundamental misunderstanding that this is what it is. And it knows there is suffering. It's not happy. Now, what is it that's not happy? See, what is it that's not happy?

So we started off way back there in the womb, being this, shall we say, this *satipaṇṇā*, this Buddha nature. And it's formed a relationship. So when we talk about the self, we're not talking about something, we're not talking about an object, we're talking about a relationship. We're talking about a relationship.

So, when we're suffering, what is it that's suffering? If it's not this very nature, which is our essential nature of the Buddha. That's what's suffering. And it's suffering because it's formed this wrong relationship. So when we say the self, you see, there's a tendency to substantiate it. There's a tendency to think that it's an object. But we're much closer, I think, to understanding what the self is when we realize it's to do with our relationship.

So when this perception comes, that this is pleasant and unpleasant, the knowing, which is ignorant, which is creating the delusion, says to itself, I've got to make myself happy. This is where happiness is. I've got to make it now or else I've had it. So whatever it sees creates a certain state, a mental state, which is happy, it'll want to grab it, hold it and develop it. And once it's into that relationship, that's when we get that

greed in all its forms. It doesn't matter what it is, power, sex, drugs, rock and roll. It doesn't matter what it is. The fact is that the more I can have of it, the happier I will be. It's as simple as that.

Having built that little castle, that little place of joy, now, of course, it has to protect it. So anything which it sees is not pleasant, then it'll want to destroy, want to annihilate, get it out, push it away. And whenever that is too much, when it's overwhelming, then it runs. It runs for it. It picks up its bags and goes for it.

So there we have the fundamental psychology which arises out of that wrong perception of the self. This is me. This is mine. So you've got on one side the attachment, the holding, the developing, and on the other side, the protection and the pushing away. And the running away. That's all included in that word aversion.

So having got to that stage, we then very quickly can move into immoral action, which is basically doing harm. It's doing harm to others and doing harm to myself. And then once I've started doing harm, I'm into the second level of emotions to do with shame, guilt, horror, all that sort of stuff, remorse, regret. All those flow in once I start doing something which is unwholesome.

And of course, there are those, there's that side of the development which we take pleasure in, but which are horrible. So, you know, we like getting angry at people. It's a relief. We like banging the door. We like being cruel. We like stepping on people's toes and doing things like that. And saying that little sentence which really digs them. And like cruelty and then not being generous, being selfish, you see. All these things can be very pleasant. So there's a whole area of unpleasant behaviour which we enjoy, and that of course is creating further psychological problems for us.

Now all that, all that is included in those three little steps after *vedanā*. So the *tanhā*, the *upādāna* and the *bhava*. So the *tanhā* is that movement from the self moving towards it because it likes it, it wants it. So having perceived something as likeable, it now moves towards it as wantable. I want that. Just a minute. Want, want that.

Once that want has come, and this is the sequence of psychological events, according to the Buddha, the I comes in. See, the I doesn't come in first. In our language we say, I want that. But it's not, it's want I. First the desire arises, and then there's the association with the desire, there's the identification with desire, and that's the *upādāna*, that's the grasping.

Once that's happened it's very difficult to stop the action coming in which is the will. And the reason is this – because that delusion of I, I want is coming, remember, directly from the Buddha. The Buddha within which is deluded. And with it there comes the

power of the will. And that's also coming from that centre. It's also coming from that centre. So immediately we say I, it's very difficult to stop the grasping, the actual going for the object. And that's the *bhava*, that's the becoming. At that point we've created an act. And that act now, as I say, repeated, becomes a habit.

Now what we're trying to do in our meditation in terms of seeing the path through understanding *dukkha*, understanding how we create this unsatisfactory situation for ourselves, is to put our attention right in between that which we perceive as likeable and unlikeable – and of course neutral – and to catch that relationship of wanting, not wanting and ignoring. Not wanting, just simply ignoring it, simply not knowing it. And if we put our attention there it can't go, it can't move anywhere else, it can't go into I. Why is that, you see? It's because the awareness, this intelligence we have, this Buddha nature within us has taken a completely different position. It's now become transcendent to the whole psychological process. It's now above it or beyond it, and it's watching it from above.

So, if we stay in that position, it can't go into that identity. It just can't do it. So, in that position, we're actually snapping the idea of me or mine. As soon as you see a desire and let it go, you're destroying constantly the idea that desire is me. I am the desire. And it's through that process of seeing that that we can find this realization through just understanding how we create suffering for ourselves.

When I was in Thailand, I did a tour of all the different techniques. The Thais are very creative, you know. And I went down to a place called Boon Kanchan around, which is on the bay around Bangkok. And when I got there, the teaching, I'd heard about it. She had died. She's obviously a very good teacher. But the instructions are very simple. You don't stop doing what you're doing until it hurts. Really hurts. Really, really, really hurts.

So you sit and it starts to hurt. And you're not supposed to do anything until it really, really, really hurts. And then, when it really, really, really hurts, and you can't handle it anymore, you then change your posture. But you do it very, very slowly, and all you're looking at is, as the pain arises, as the discomfort arises, you're just watching your reactions to it. And as it gets to the point where you can't take it anymore, and you're shaking with it, you just watch your reactions to that, you see? And then when it comes to a point where you really can't take it anymore, you say intending to change. And as you change, you watch very carefully how the physical body, the physical sensations are changing and how the mind is changing. And then you come back to a state of comfort. So from walking you might go to sitting, to lying down, whatever you're doing, but you keep doing it until you get to that point where you're able to see that change.

And in seeing that change, you're seeing the distinction between pain, which is both physical and mental, and how you can take a position to it whereby you're not actually suffering. And by observing that process, you're actually undoing the idea of a self. Because the self is always identifying with that process. It says, oh, it's pain, I'd better go and get an aspirin. It's always moving off it. It's unable to stay with it. So even by going through this process of understanding *dukkha*, of understanding how we create suffering for ourselves, we again undermine that wrong relationship which lies at the base, which is the idea that this is me, this is mine.

Now, when that is finished, of course, you're also cutting the end of that process of the wheel of dependent origination, which is birth, aging, death, or arising, decay, death, arising and passing away.

Should we say, the traditional teaching is three lives, but the other teaching which is right there in the scriptures and is right there in the commentaries is of course moment to moment. So as we see something which we like and we indulge in it, then we become the indulger, and that arises and passes away.

So with every sequence of actions in which we've indulged or which we've pushed away or which we've run away, we've become somebody and there was a beginning, there was a middle, there was a decaying and there was an end. So not everything we do is part of the wheel of dependent origination. Not everything we do is continuing with the self, because for instance just some simple action like opening a door, there's not a moral problem there. It's only where a moral and ethical situation arises of greed, hatred or aversion that wheel can actually turn. So when we do something out of a correct intention, when we eat in order to nourish the body, we eat to live, not live to eat. When we eat to nourish the body, then we're not turning the wheel. In fact, we're going backwards on the wheel.

Now, why is it that the wheel doesn't come back on itself? So you start off with not becoming, and then you go down to not grasping, no I, then you come back to desire. No, the Buddha starts the negative side of the wheel, the wheel which is drawing us to enlightenment, back at ignorance again, back at the point of this wrong view. And the reason he does that is because when we're meditating, we're always correcting that view. And whenever you correct a view, whenever you correct the way you're looking at something, the whole castle of cards that we've built on that wrong view simply collapses. You don't have to take everything apart. As soon as you see transience, the whole thing that you've built on transience completely collapses. And that's why these insights are immediate.

Not all these insights, of course, have a colossal effect on us. We don't jump up and down and all that. But they're little. They're slowly just cutting away at the delusion. Slowly cutting away at the delusion. And that's why the whole of the Buddha's teaching is concerned with right view. As soon as you see something, everything corrects itself.

There was a friend of mine who was going to pick me up and we were going to go for a walk and his car broke down. And it was parked by the road there, so I, being an expert mechanic, said, "Well, open the bonnet." So he opened the bonnet, and he told me what had happened. The engine just cut. So my immediate diagnosis was, "Well, it's electrics." So we opened the bonnet and I tried it and I said, "No, it's either, it'll be the dynamo," I said. And I pointed at this part of the machine, I said, "It'll be the dynamo."

Anyway, the AA, I don't know what you call it in America, but the mechanic came. And he opened the bonnet and he immediately saw that the fan belt had broken. And what he pointed to as the dynamo seemed to be different from my own description of a dynamo. Now, if my friend had taken my advice, of course, the car would have ended up in a scrap heap. But luckily, somebody who knew came along and saved the day. So you can see how wrong view can end you up in a hole.

So there we see, this mechanic came along and that was it. As soon as that right view was there, the whole problem disappeared and I felt a real idiot. But there we are. So that's why the wheel starts again with ignorance, and that's why the whole force of the Buddha's teaching is right view. To see things as they really are, to understand, to know and see things as they have, if you want the direct translation, as they have come to be. To see the process. It's often translated as to see things as they really are, but it's not. It's to see things as they have come to be. So it's always catching that process in which we create the world we live in.

Gee, can't stop talking. Then there's the final characteristic of *anattā*, not-self. So we've talked about that from the point of view of *anicca*. If something arises and passes away, it can't be me, it can't be mine. And we talked about it through seeing this *dukkha*, through seeing that, in fact, if I can take this transcendent position, this transcendent position to this mental process of greed and stuff, then unwittingly I've snapped the self, I've broken the self, as soon as I'm in that position.

There's a lovely little quote here actually to do with *anicca* which I'd forgotten to read out and it's William Blake and I think he puts it in a beautiful little poetic way. I'm sure most of you know it. "He who binds to himself a joy does the winged life destroy, but he who kisses the joy as it flies lives in eternity's sunrise." So that's a lovely expression of how to, well, it's the Buddha mind. That's how we're supposed to be.

Now, *anattā*, the doctrine of not-self, is just getting that position where, instead of within yourself, when you're watching something, you see, and you turn it into an object that you're looking at, you see, it's catching that little distance. Although I talk in terms of space, I mean, it just feels that you're looking at something.

Remember that we're told that a child up to about the age of four months doesn't have that distance. Everything is me. It doesn't matter what it is. It's all me. And only slowly, after four months, does this object arise out of this bath, which is me, and his mother, isn't it? And that object now, as it were, becomes something in the mind of the child, something that's not me, just the beginnings of a perception. By the age of three, the child is very clear, this is my body and I'm not that. They're very clear about what their boundary is.

All we're doing is continuing that process inward. That's all we're doing. We are slowly deciding, or rather we're slowly realizing that within us all these things that I thought were part of me is actually an object. And one of the things that the Buddha talks about when he talks about not-self is this idea of control. If the self can't control it, how can it possibly be that? The whole idea of being a self is that you're in control. This is me. This is mine. I do what I want. I do my own thing in my own way, in my own time. And of course you can't.

So there's a constant destruction of this idea of a self every time in your ordinary daily life when you can't do what you want to do. If you can't do what you want to do, then you're not in control. Therefore you can't be the self. And that's the logic behind that.

So here you see, as we go into the body, I mean even the body itself, I mean, we cut ourselves. What do we do? You keep it antiseptic, but who mends it? You're not in there telling the cells to do this and do that. The body just gets on with it. When you breathe, what do you know of your body? Even when you go into yourself, what do I know? Do you know the marrow of your bones? I mean, we're told we've got them, but can you perceive it? Can you know it's there? The brain, we can't even feel the brain for heaven's sake. At least I can't. Perhaps I need a cat scan. And then the whole system, how it's working. We're breathing. I have no control over it at all. If I stop breathing, I panic.

The digestive system, I haven't a clue what goes on there. I mean, I'm told about enzymes and all that, but I don't feel anything at all. I just feel good. I haven't a clue what's happening. Even now, you see, if you look at me and your whole vision is filled with my face, right? This isn't an ego trip. If you fill your whole vision with my face, right, where's yours? Where's your face? It's just there in your imagination, isn't it? You haven't a clue, have you?

And when you look in the mirror and you look at your face, you think that's how people see you. At least I do. But it's only when you take another mirror and have a look at what's in the mirror that you realize that you didn't know your ears were that big. And you catch your face from the proper way that people see it. But normally that's not our vision of ourselves. So we walk around with this enormous delusion of either being ugly or beautiful, and it's completely our own idea of ourselves. So when you meditate or when you rather contemplate on these sorts of things, then again it's destroying this idea of who am I?

Emotions. We know what control do we have over our emotions. You don't go to bed thinking, "Well, tomorrow I'll wake up depressed." You just wake up depressed. Tomorrow you say, "I'll wake up happy," and you do, and you think, "Oh, I've got some control." But you haven't a clue how you're going to wake up. You might not wake up. Heavens. I mean, take that, you see. We go to sleep with a sheer presumption, a sheer presumption that tomorrow we're going to wake up. You go to bed, you feel absolutely comfortable, you're all curled up and it's all nice and warm, and there's just this underlying presumption that I'm going to wake up. Now, if the doctor said to you, "You fall asleep, it looks like curtains to me," you'd be there with pins in your eyes and pulling your nails out. Anything to keep awake. But we're quite happy to lose the self for 8, 10 hours. Some people 16. As long as we're absolutely certain within ourselves it will reappear.

And there's a lovely poem here which comes from my favourite author. Some of you might know Samuel Beckett. He's known for his getting to grips with death. I mean, he's got one of his plays was just a mouth speaking. And every so often it would wake up, "Still here." That was one of the refrains. It would just stop. "Still here." And he's at the edge of death as to what happens when you die. And he's got this very simple but lovely poem. He says, "Just think, if all this, one day, just one fine day, just think, if one fine day, all this stopped." I like that.

So, going back now to the Buddha's original understandings, so he's had this experience. He now comes back on himself and he spends his time reflecting on how he got there. And he comes up with this wheel of dependent origination, which is the psychology of suffering. That's all it's about. It's the psychology of delusion. And he sees these three vantage points and that's what he begins to teach. That's all he's teaching. To get into this position, the *vipassanā*, to see things as they really are and to observe these three points of view.

When we finally make it, when we have the glimpse at least of *Nibbāna*, he also talks about it in this way. "There is a sphere where there is neither earth nor water, nor fire nor wind." Now you've got to be careful here because this comes from a question as to where does the physical earth end? And he doesn't say the physical earth ends. He says there's a place where it finds no footing, which is very different. So the Buddha's enlightenment did not destroy his body. He just found a different relationship with it. And for the rest of his life, 40 odd years, he lived in what he called *Nibbāna*. And that's *Nibbāna* in this life.

"Where there's no infinite space, consciousness, nothingness, perception or non-perception," these refer to the four formless absorptions. He says, "No this world, no next world, no sun, no moon. There is, I say, no coming, no going, and no standing still." Now, we can understand in our meditation that the no coming and no going, because we can stand above in our meditation, things arising and passing away. But there's also no standing still. In other words, that's not a position in relation to what's happening. It's transcendent, completely transcendent. There's no passing away and there's no arising. It is without ground. It's without ground. There's nothing underneath it. There's nothing holding it. It's without foundation and it's without support. And he says, "Just this is the end of suffering. Just this is the end of it."

Now, I'm going to suggest to you that in your meditation, when you get at least the position of very clearly being the observer, an observer of pain, an observer of physical pleasure, an observer of emotions, an observer of thought, even though we can't say that's a pure *Nibbāna* because there's still the self there, at least we've got some idea there that there is no coming, no going, and there's no standing still within that process. And it's recognizing that that will draw your interest into really beginning to see that everything we experience is not me, not mine.

And then, in those quiet moments, when you're very still, when there's just the breath, and you get that very strong sense of being the observer. So now that's the subtlest of things that we produce. That's the subtlest of things that the delusion has produced, this idea of "I'm the observer. This is me." And that is a reflection in the mind.

So the image I use is when we watch TV. When you watch TV sometimes, you can see your image in the screen. Now you've got a choice. You're going to watch yourself watching TV or you're going to watch TV. If you watch TV, you then lose that sense of self which is in the screen. And that's what happens when in your meditation you feel yourself to be the observer and you're looking with interest at an object such as a feeling or a sensation and suddenly there's that collapse into it. That collapse into it is the loss of self.

And it's a direct perception by this *satipaṇṇā*, this Buddha within, this intelligent awareness of exactly what's going on. And when we come away from that experience, whether we like it or not, or whether we're even aware of it or not, there's been some undermining of delusion. Those are the little power points. Often, when we're in that, there doesn't seem to be a comeback. We don't seem to have some understanding. But in time, remember, there's this subtle change going on with the way we're looking at things. And it's changing the level of consciousness we're at. It's a very slow process, that's how it feels, of this slow changing.

And every so often, there may an insight come in terms of words, a sudden understanding. You suddenly find yourself behaving in a different manner. You're reacting to a situation in a different way than you did before. And all these are telltales.

So here, we enter into the Eightfold Path. So from right understanding, moving into right attitude, it expresses itself through right speech, right action, right livelihood. Now, this Noble Eightfold Path, remember, starts at any of those points. So when you make the effort to speak well, to speak truthfully and all that, when you make the effort to do something which is wholesome, when your livelihood has a wholesome effect on you, it reverberates back on your attitudes. It reverberates back on your understanding. So the whole thing turns upon itself. Turns upon itself. And in this way, over a period of time, we do feel a certain change within ourselves, hopefully for the better.

So I think that brings me to a sore throat. So I think I'd better stop before I die. So I hope my words have been of some assistance and I can only hope that in the very shortest length of time you will be fully liberated. Thank you.

70th Birthday: Bhante Bodhidhamma's Life Story

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1h23

In this deeply personal and candid talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma shares his complete life story on his 70th birthday, tracing the remarkable journey from his difficult birth in post-war Italy to becoming a Buddhist monk and meditation teacher. He recounts his early devotional experiences in Catholic church, his traumatic expulsion from seminary, existential despair in young adulthood, and travels across Africa and Asia in search of meaning.

Bhante describes pivotal moments including his discovery of meditation through Zen Buddhism, profound out-of-body experiences, and the gradual purification of childhood traumas through intensive Vipassanā practice in Sri Lanka. He reflects on the interplay between suffering and awakening, sharing insights about forgiveness, the categorical imperative of liberation for all beings, and how personal catastrophes became doorways to spiritual growth.

This autobiographical account offers a rare window into the human journey toward awakening, demonstrating how life's difficulties can become the very conditions that turn one toward the Dharma. Bhante's story illustrates the transformative power of meditation practice and the importance of perseverance on the spiritual path.

Namo tassa

I just want to begin by thanking all those people who have organized this lovely little celebration for me. The organizing committee: Aya and Richard and Deya and Mark and Sarah. And all those people who've made lovely donations to buy this statue that will go at the back of the pond there, and to fund my little trip to Japan. I was relieved to see that I could get a return ticket.

Also, I thank Charles and Heather and Mark and Peter, who've done this very professional recording for us. And of course, everybody who's chipped in for today.

So we have other birthdays here. Sarah, her birthday. And also Andy, who's got the 5-0. We're all suffering. And I think we can bring to mind Stephen Hawking. We can feel a certain sorrow for David Bowie, didn't quite make his three score and ten. And I think we can all join in with a special regard and good wishes to Kim Jong-un in Korea.

I am delighted that you've taken such joy in my own little birthday. But of course I myself am depressed. This is the beginning of the steep, the downward trend to decrepitude and senility. Now there was a card which some thought was telling me that 70 was a new 30. It's not. 70's serious.

Something peculiar's happened to me this year, in the sense that, suddenly—I suppose it's reaching the end of all this building stuff here, and feeling very settled outside Sari Panya—memories of my past life came up. I mean, this one. Of my past living. And I just wondered how it is that I got to this place. So I thought it was an opportunity to answer the questions that I'm often asked, but I usually palm off with a sentence or two. How I became a Buddhist, how I became a monk, and why do I continue?

So to start at the beginning: my father was in the RAF. They were following the armies up the boot of Italy when he was billeted on my mother's house. And they fell in love. And it seems as though he took AWOL in order to marry her. And when he got back to Cyprus, they put him in jail for a while. It's all very romantic. Anyway, he brought her to Britain and that's when her real depression began. If you can imagine moving from a hillside village overlooking the Adriatic with the smell of pine in your nostrils and ending up in Manchester. Black Manchester. We forget how black the cities were. Saturated with soot everywhere and pea soup fog.

Anyway, she happily became pregnant with me, but decided to go home to have me. And when the time came, they brought in the local midwife. She was 25, so presumably there was a little difficulty, but either they rushed it or it was her particular way of doing things, but they cut her. Such was the agony she bit into my uncle's thumb, and he showed me the scar. Even then I wouldn't come out. They had to prize me out with forceps. I mean, what a start. What a start.

She went on to give birth to two more sons and a daughter. So I've got two brothers and a lovely sister.

The effect of birth upon us. Consider the Buddha. So as soon as he was born, his mother died. So there must be a feeling there of loss, whether the baby's fully aware of it or not. There must be a feeling of loss. And according to certain disciplines like rebirthing, that breathing thing, and Stan Grof, holographic breathing. The birth trauma has a real effect upon us. It's there within our psyche. So I know this from the difference between my siblings because my mother said that my sister, who was last 11 years on, fell out. And she's utterly phlegmatic. Nothing like me. So that was my birth.

Now, I want you to imagine this little five-year-old boy being taken to church by his father. And he's walking into church. The church is quite big. It's St. Patrick's. It belongs to a third generation of Irish. And as you walk in, your nostrils are suffused with incense, frankincense. The atmosphere is very warm. And the people are very quiet. And then you're sitting there. And you're taken up into the gallery, into the choir loft. And your father is conducting. And at the point where the priest in these wonderful garments comes in with all the altar boys, because it was high mass, you're there as a little boy, a little child, and you're let loose. You can wander around and you're hanging on to the barrier of the choir overlooking down into the congregation and suddenly Bach or Handel or sweet music is coming in. So this was my introduction into devotion. I was in ecstasy.

And it's something that I think a lot of children these days don't get. Not that they don't get it with other things like pop stars and things like that. But it was my introduction into religion as a real heart-based experience. And this was to carry on. So that was, I call, if my first catastrophe was birth, this was my first blessing.

And my mother, being a southern Catholic—they were Roman Catholics, so I should mention that—my mother being a southern European Catholic, it was all about the love of Jesus. And my father was all hellfire and brimstone. I had a nice balance. I obviously warmed towards my mother. Northern Catholicism is very Protestant.

When you convert to a religion, when you actually move into a religion, you move in for various reasons. Most people who come to Buddhism come because they're suffering, because things have gone wrong and they've heard about meditation and stuff like that. But to actually begin to develop a heart attachment, a heart, a good attachment—not all attachments are evil—a relationship of the heart with your religion is very difficult, because this is done when you're a child. When you go to Thailand, you'll see little children are brought into the monastery, into the temples, and they bow, and they also have this sandalwood and incense, and they have the chanting. So that sense of devotion, which is a beautiful emotional state, it's a mental state of praise, of being in a lovely spaced out place, it's absolutely glorious. And of course you can develop these things into absorptions.

That's very difficult for us because it's a different culture. We haven't got that background. So I always think the way into that, the way into a devotional, a heart connection with the Buddhist teaching is through gratitude. And the more that you consider what the teaching has done for you and for others, then you get this gratitude come up. And it's very simple to go from gratitude towards love, towards a relationship.

Now, of course, the Buddha is gone. It's not as though we're relating to the Buddha. What we're relating to is an image within us of the Buddha. And in growing that, in a sense, we're actually forming a devotional relationship to the Buddha within us that we want to become. So it's the Buddha as he appears in daily life. It's not the transcendent Buddha. It's the Buddha of compassion, of love, of joy. And that's why I've got all these statues. That's the idea of devotion. I'm trying to squeeze a bit of Dharma out of my autobiography.

So anyway, we moved then to North Manchester, which was all fields at that time, out of Dean G. Mostyn into the lovely fields. The fields didn't stay fields long. They were soon built on. And right at the back of us, they established a cemetery. We're at school. There were over 50 kids in the class. So 47 was the peak of the baby boom. It begins in 45 and ends in 65. And if you look at the graph, it goes up on 47 and then begins to slowly come down. So Theresa May is a boomer.

So then, while I was at primary school, a priest turned up. And he gave us this wonderful talk with pictures about the missions. He showed us pictures of Flores, which is a beautiful island in Indonesia. He showed us pictures about New Guinea. And he showed us pictures about South America. And he talked about the wonderful things that priests did out there, missionaries. And if anybody felt like they might be drawn to that thing, then they should get in contact. So anyway, I got the 11 plus and I went to Xaverian College, which was a grammar school. But two of my friends from that school went to St. Richard's College. And during that year, for some reason, it came to me that that's what I wanted to do.

My mother was fiercely against it, but my father was like that, but it was my Aunt Rose who really wanted a priest in the family. Come the age of 12, I'm off on the train down to St. Richard's College.

And for me, it was entering into two years of undiluted heaven, because it was all about doing exactly what you want to do. And that's when you're most happiest, isn't it? When you're doing exactly what you want to do in an unpressured situation, you're in perfect joy. For instance, a hobby, right?

So the routine there was up about half past six, seven o'clock. We went down for mass. After mass, we went out in most weathers, only in the most severe, to do the old army exercise. Back in, into breakfast, clean up. School starts nine o'clock, all the way through to five o'clock. And all that time, apart from a little break at lunch, I remember it was in silence. Can you imagine that for a 12-year-old these days? At 6 o'clock, we went in to study, and at 8 o'clock, we were finally let free and we could play games down in the big game room. Imagine a 12-year-old day like today.

So, and I really got into it. I mean it was, all I remember is just being blissed out and hating going home, and having to come back because it was just there that I found my joy.

Then, something began to happen which promised a different sort of joy. It promised gold, but it turned into glitter. And the joy it promised finally ended up with frustration. Puberty. Even Mick Jagger could get no satisfaction. And he tried.

Anyway, we were let out every so often to go for a walk on a Sunday. And there were about six of us, five of us on the trip. And as we got down, we suddenly had this idea that we'd smoke. Now, teenagers are by nature rebellious. The order didn't smoke. And it was a German order begun by a German priest. And it was mainly German and American. And the joke was, we don't smoke, so we drink. S-V-D. And so it was a little rebellion to go and get some cigarettes. And we decided to steal them. There was an old lady who ran a shop at this bridge on the Worcester Canal. And as we entered in, we'd had it all figured out, somebody distracted her and somebody took the cigarettes. And I can't remember what my job was. I'll leave that.

Well, we smoked, of course. And when we got back in the evening after lunch, we were all called to the prefect's office, the headmaster prefect. And he told us that, he asked us, had we taken cigarettes from this lady? And we all said yes. She was no fool. We were probably the only customers the whole day. There was nobody, that in the middle of nowhere. So we were dismissed, and we thought, well, that's it.

There was no corporal punishment in the seminary at all. If I was at Xaverian, you'd have been beaten. Anyway, about a day or so later, we were all called for a talk in the main, in this big classroom. And the rector, who was in charge of the whole place, announced that certain boys had stolen. And he called our names and he said, you are expelled. Can you imagine that? I was three months off my GCEs and they kicked me out.

Anyway, I got back and because of that, my GCEs went all over the place. I had about four GCEs. I had to take my English again. And unfortunately, because the education was mainly by Americans, who I don't think really understood the English GCE system at the time. So what happened was, I ended up with subjects that I had virtually no interest in. Latin, French, and history. I had a bit of interest in history.

So life went on. And I didn't do well at the GCEs. And I remember talking to my father about this. Now, when they expelled, when I was thrown out, that was a cut off of a vocation. This vocation to be a priest remained in me as a really strong, tremendous urge for three years till I was over 19. Why couldn't I go back? Why couldn't I go back? It's because they never forgave me.

I can't tell you how important it is to forgive your enemies. What happened was, come the GCE, I turned up and they gave me a room in an outer building. I had to go into the exam room at a different entrance from everybody else. I wasn't allowed to talk to anybody and they weren't allowed to talk to me. In other words, I was excommunicated. And there was no way you can come back on that. If a priest or somebody come up and said, look, give it a couple of years and then, you know, you can join another order. I'd have had an in, but I had this block. I couldn't move.

So if you have any pity on your enemies, on all of them, do forgive them because it allows them to forgive themselves. And of course, in our offering forgiveness, we empty our own hearts of the revenge and the hurt and all that sort of stuff. Now, it doesn't mean to say that you've got to have somebody's forgiveness in order to forgive yourself, but it just makes it much easier.

So I went on then to about 19, and my father pointed out to me that since I was lost, I had no clue what to do with my life at this point. I'm completely lost. He said, why don't you teach? He said, you can travel with teaching. They must have known I was unsettled.

So I decided, I didn't go into university, so I went down to St. Mary's College, which was then a Catholic training college. It's now a university. And it was the year they were introducing the B.Ed. And instead of doing the B.Ed., I did the other offering, which was a degree course and a teacher training course.

And it was during this time that I completely forgot about being a priest. I finally began to enjoy a bit of life. But there's this underlying meaninglessness. There's this underlying boredom that comes because nothing you're doing is of any direct meaning to your own heart. And so what you overlay it with is distraction. You get drunk, you chase women, you do all sorts of daft things. And that went on for a little while until...

And it was during that time I fell in love. Oh my goodness. Well, you know what the first time is. So I'm completely sozzled, right? And on one steamy, love-drenched night, she fell pregnant. This was my third catastrophe.

So now in a Catholic community, for that to happen is a horror story. The abortion law had just been introduced, so it was legal. Let's not confuse legal with moral, just because in a liberal society, many of our personal decisions are left to us. But I just couldn't go there. It just wasn't on my to-do list, getting married and having children. So we struggled with it. We both struggled with it. She would have been, I think, happy going that way.

And eventually I had to be true to my own heart. And I went up to visit the parents and I said, look, I can't marry you. I'll support them. It was a way of getting myself into that position where eventually I'd marry. It was an in-between place, which I felt happy with, that I wasn't entrapped, and then finally I'd probably give in. But to the family, it just wasn't a no-go, and they just saw disaster for her daughter. They had connections with surgeons and stuff, and so she had an abortion.

I never felt really bad personally about that because I was never brought into that decision making. And of course I'm part of that whole process.

But if you go on the website and just type in something like reactions to abortion, you'll see pages after pages of men and women who really regret, no matter what good reason they had, actually regret that whole process. So it's there, shall we say, within my psyche, that at some part of my life there was an abuse of my sexual powers, even though it was a very wonderful moment.

Buddhism is no different from other religions. As soon as there's conception, there's consciousness. So there's a living being. There's no way out of that. That's what's understood, anyway. And this further alienated me. It further alienated me from my own heart. It further put me into a position of what you might call an underlying despair, which I never really looked at. It was just there underneath — the boredom, the meaninglessness, and then this tragedy — and all that just lay down upon me as a despair, which every occasion would actually lend me in an angry depression. But it never lasted long because I'm very sanguine.

And then one day... I was 21, 1968, 1968, very important date, 1968. That was the student revolutions, if you remember, in Paris and all that. And I lay in bed on a Sunday and I said to myself, I wonder what will happen if I don't go to church. Now in those days, if you didn't go to church, it was a mortal sin. And if you didn't get to confess to a priest and you died, you went to hell forever. I mean, that was the teaching. So it was a big decision. They changed all that in the mid-60s with Pope John XXIII. And I said to myself, if I don't go to church today, let's see what happens.

Nothing happened. So I never went again. I know, it's the most ridiculous thing to do. And what it manifests really was that the religion had now lost that connection of devotion. It had just become an empty ritual. I was just turning up for the mass, receiving communion, et cetera, et cetera. And it had lost its potency. And I think also there might have been guilt about the abortion and all that. And so there was a cutoff there.

Now, what this did, of course, was it deepened my alienation. It deepened my alienation to the whole thing. In other words, I found myself where Nietzsche found himself. I only discovered Nietzsche fairly recently because God is dead. We've killed him. Nietzsche struggled with that. I mean, he came up with the answer of the courage to face the sufferings and the death of life and to somehow rise above it. And that's what he meant by the superman or supraman, the *übermensch*.

The Buddha himself, if you remember, had that existential crisis. I mean, he puts it in the myth. There's a myth surrounding seeing a sick person, an aging person, and a corpse, and this person sitting under a tree. And the whole thing is about him in his young 20s coming to realize that actually what he's heading towards is sickness, aging, and death. And that this image of the *samana*, of the recluse sitting under a tree, suggested some sort of an escape. So we have to, I think, imagine the Buddha that he himself is going through an existential crisis. And it's so strong within him to find the answer to this that he leaves his family. In his case, his just-born child. So I think from our point of view, this is where the Buddha's at. The meaningfulness of life is gone. It's an existential angst. And that's where I was, really, with this existential anxiety.

Now, I don't want to give you the impression that I was going around moping and all that. No, I was still getting drunk and having a good time. It's just that every so often in silent moments, just by yourself, you suddenly sink into this area of just sheer boredom, a despair about life. You're just living it.

And then came my third blessing. We went to see *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett. Now some of you probably don't know that play because it's years old now. But it's basically about two tramps who are having these gorgeous conversations waiting for Godot. Godot's going to come and sort it all out. And the same thing happens in the second act. And in the first act, two people come, walk across the stage. But in the second act, one's gone blind and the other one's gone dumb. And in the first act, there are leaves on the tree. In the second act, there's no leaves. So here are the two tramps waiting for Godot, and everything's just getting worse.

I came out of that play, even though it was just an amateur production by a college, absolutely enthused. I couldn't stop talking about it. They all thought I'd gone mad. But to me, it just caught this whole existential problem of what is the point if in the end you just die? And I thought at this point, just to get across this, I'd read out a poem by Beckett, which I came across much later. I spent a lot of time writing about nothingness, well, doggerel anyway, and what it meant to just come to the end, to just finish, to just, and that's it, you're gone, is it? So let me just read this little poem to you, see what you think.

Just think, if all this, one day,
all this one day, one fine day, just think,
if one day, one fine day, all this stopped.

Get it? So that was the underlying existential problem that I was battling with.

In terms of my emotional life, when I wasn't being extrovert and going out there, there was this, there's a lovely poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, that gets it across. And I carried this now for a long time. But it gives you an idea of, I think it's just a wonderful piece of poetry.

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, what black hours We have spent this night!
What sights, heart, you saw, Ways you went,
and more must In longer lights delay!

With witness I speak this,
But where I say hours, I mean years, I mean life.

My lament is cries countless, Cries like dead letters
Sent to dearest hymn,
that lives, alas, away.

I am gall, I am heartburn.
God's most deep decree.
Bitter would have me taste.
My taste was me.

Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.
Self-yeast of spirit, a dull dough sours.

I see the lost are like this, and they're scourged to be as I am mine.
They're sweating cells, but worse.

Ooh. Isn't that good, eh? They're sweating cells. I love it.

So then, actually, I've gone and forgotten my little centerpiece. I'm so sorry. I'll have to go back to my birth. Do you mind? I'm sorry, I don't know what's wrong with me. After that terrible birth, we seem to have both recovered.

I hadn't seen this picture for years. And when I saw it, I thought, well, blow me down. And two things came to mind when I saw it. I thought, first of all, we remember our mothers as old, in old age. We forget they were all lovely young women. And the

other thing was that little child, if it was just shown to me, there's no way I'd make a connection with that child at all. I mean, this is the 10th body. Well, no, he's got hair. There's no way I'd make a connection. This is my 10th body, if we're to believe biology. Every 10 years, you completely change all the atoms in your body. Anyway, sorry about that. I'm going to leave you here.

So I leave, the relationship breaks up. I can't handle it anymore. So anyway, I'm in Spain and I'm looking for my friends and I've lost them. I've arrived there sometime later. And I pick up a telegram from the local post office. Do you remember telegrams? Yeah, fantastic. And it said, congratulations, son, BA and teaching certificate. And I went up onto a high rock and overlooked the sea. And I said to myself, there's no way in this world I want to teach.

So I went down and camped in this camp. And that night, there was a torrential rain. I woke up with the tent around me, completely sodden with sand and everything, staggered to the drink area, the, what do you call it? It's where people drink. And looking pretty miserable for myself. And I met this bloke called Dave. And we began talking. And by the end of the evening, we decided to travel together across the world. Simple as that.

So I came back, and I got a job through somebody I knew as a rep for selling audiovisuals to schools. And there was lots of money in education, so I made lots of money. And I was traveling all over Cornwall and all over Wales selling this stuff to schools. And I gathered something like a thousand pounds, which must be a lot of money these days, isn't it? A thousand pounds. And come the year, off we went.

And during that time, remember, all this time I've got this thing going on, this nothingness and this stuff in the heart. But because of the joy of travel, just the constant new information coming in and the liberation of it, it was all underneath. It would only come up in the gloomier moments.

So anyway, we went off and we started off towards North Africa. We went down to, saw all the stuff in Egypt, the usual stuff, ride a camel and all that. Went over to Khartoum, lay on the luggage rack to sleep and woke up with sand everywhere because of a sandstorm. Got onto a boat down to Juba, which is now the capital of South Sudan. And for 10 days, we were looking at the amazing sight of reeds. The reeds were so tall, they went up above the boat. And the boat just plowed through this canal, which was the Nile. And all you saw for 10 days was reeds. And because we didn't have much money, we were just eating bread. So this was a really gloomy time. And that's when I wrote most of my doggerel about nothingness.

Got down to Juba. We flew across to Entebbe. We made this amazing bus ride across Africa. I slept on the back seat. And every so often, I was in midair as he ran over an elephant. It was just unbelievable. Got to Mombasa, stayed with his brother, but we didn't get on so well. So we went up the beach and camped up there. And there we got stolen. All our traveling checks were stolen, which was fantastic because when you got to India, you got on the black market and made a lot of money. Terrible, isn't it? And they stole my father's watch. He'd given me this gold watch that he had been given after he'd finished his time as a headmaster at St. Patrick's. And it had inscribed on it at the back, and it was a precious thing.

So I wrote him a letter expressing my sense of sorrow and my love of him and all that. Well, when his reply came back, about three or four months later.. He said, thank you, son. Bit sentimental.

So we get to India. So we get this cattle boat across the Indian Ocean from Mombasa to Bombay, playing chess all the time. Lots of travelers, by the way. There wasn't many going down Egypt. But by the time we got to Africa, the boat was full of Westerners. It was all hippies. I was dressed in purple. So we take this boat all the way across to Bombay, and we do the usual trip. And we finally end up in Nepal. And that's when we got really stoned. Up in Nepal, lots of these stones full of dope. And there were these lovely hippie gatherings where we'd all sit in a circle with a chillum. That's ridiculous, isn't it? And that lasted for a while.

And then we made our way down to Calcutta. And Calcutta was at war. That was the Indo-Pakistan war where Bangladesh split off. And so there was no planes going out. So we were stuck there for two weeks. And what I did every day, so this was one of my big awakenings. When you went to India, this time it wasn't so bad. But in those days, sickness, destitution was in your face. It was in your face. And in Calcutta, they have a huge park with this massive statue of Queen Victoria, which I presume they got rid of now. And there was a massive road, a circuit road going around. That road was packed tight with the sick. Elephantitis, everything, apart from lepers, all the way around. And they were lying on the pavement. And when you saw that, you understood Mother Teresa's compassion. Because many of them would have died just there.

So anyway, I saw that. That I'm not used to, I'm not ready to receive. I'm aware of the suffering, but I'm not ready to receive it. Every day I went to this Sikh restaurant to get curry, and I would always ask for a glass of water. And when they brought the glass of water, which was a pint glass, you'd always leave a nice oily thumbprint on the side. I don't know how it was that I was in India for so long and never caught anything. It's just weird.

Every day I passed this woman who had a huge goiter, and she sat there absolutely silent, holding a little thing for coins, and her eyes were always glazed with tears. She just sat there, never looked at me, just sat there. And as I passed on the other side of the road, I always saw her. Day after day I passed that poor woman, and I never gave her a penny.

So then I'm coming round the corner, I'm just wandering around Calcutta, and I come round the corner, and right before me, there's this little girl. She must be over seven, but she looks round about five. And she's sucking a dried black banana peel. And she sees me, and as she sees me, she has the dignity and that destitution to cover her sex. And that hit me so hard that I just bombed past her. I never went back to buy her a banana. It just hit me so hard. That was my little boy drowned on the beach moment, where you suddenly, the awareness of compassion is not enough. There has to be that contact. Anyway, that passed. And that stays with me. Every time I bring that image to mind, if I feel callous about anything, about refugees and all these people, I just bring that little child to mind. And that's my connection with all the suffering that's going on these days.

So we're in Calcutta, and we did a couple of naughty things. And we had opium. Opium's wonderful. And I was laid out there all night, and I remember waking up and just watching all these cockroaches going over Dave's body. I went into the toilet, and there was cockroaches everywhere. It sounded like cockroaches. I thought, fantastic. Anyway, I look, and all my troubles are gone. Like, what is all this business? Nothing. It's stupid. Get rid of it. I'm just absolutely blissed out. Then, of course, it wears off, and I'm depressed and anxious again.

So before long, we're off on a flight. We're going to Bangkok. And we do the usual tourist trip and wandering into all these beautiful Buddhist buildings. That's it. I have no connection at all with Buddhism. For me, they're just museums. And again, a bit of naughty stuff and cocaine and all that in Bangkok. And none of it really held. It was only years later when I read that book, Emotional Intelligence by Goldman, which brought this whole thing about emotional intelligence into consciousness, that he says in it, if you're a depressive, you tend to be drawn to those drugs that lift you out of your depression. These are not hallucinatory drugs. And if you are an anxious person, you're drawn to alcohol. Well, that's me, isn't it?

So we left Bangkok, we went down through Malaysia, and then we had to walk across the bridge to Singapore. As we got to the checkpoint, they sent us back to get a haircut. We had to cut my hair off, all of it, and then come back, and then we took this boat, which was a real proper lovely little boat, all the way to Port Moresby. It was on its

way to Cairns and down to Australia. That was New Guinea. We flew then from New Guinea to Medang, and I took up my post as a teacher in the Society of the Divine Word Missionary School.

I contacted them again and got this job, myself and Dave. He taught art and I was teaching English. That was a great year teaching those kids—they actually wanted to learn, you know what I mean? Great things like climbing Mount Harbour and going up this boat, which was run by a priest who was really a dislocated cowboy. He went up and down barking orders in that strident American way, giving sermons, selling things and shooting crocodiles. He had his huge rifle. He'd just go "Shoot!"

It was during that time that, because I was settled—and as soon as I was settled, you're kidding, blown me down after the rush—because I'm unsettled, I've got years to go yet. I'm only at the age of twenty-five, I'm not even twenty-five yet. But I get there. So anyway, I've got this dreadful thing going on, this nothingness. I go back from teaching, I don't know what it was, I lie on the bed and I'm suddenly suffused with this enormous fear. For some reason, I don't know, I must have got it from somewhere, I turn towards the fear, and I go into it, and next minute, I'm out of my body. I'm up there looking down, I turn round, I see that tunnel, swirling tunnel, and I'm back into the body. All fear of death disappeared. Not the fear of dying, all fear of death disappeared. And suddenly, out of the blue, I start writing plays. I start writing plays.

I go down to Australia because I'm interested in theatre and I go to a training school really to learn the art of theatre because I know virtually nothing about it. That's where I fall in love again. Hijacked. We have a lovely relationship. It's going fine. We're involved in theater. I get one or two plays going. Suddenly this idea of marriage comes up. My brother just got married. I was twenty-seven. That's what you do. But in my heart of hearts, I wasn't with it at all. But because of the relationship and because of the love, you get married. We went through a civil service. There was something in me that just couldn't handle this. I was getting overly happy. I remember my dear best man, as we got into the taxi, said to me, "You know, Pete"—that's what I was called—"Pete, you've got to take something seriously."

Well, it was a disaster because somebody who had been a friend, a companion, a lover, somebody whom I shared theatre with, suddenly became a burden. I'd fallen into the patriarchal trap. She became a burden. We went on a honeymoon and I drained it of joy. She said to me at one point, "You know, if you carry on like this, I'll leave you." That's not the sort of conversation you have on a honeymoon. It's absolutely awful.

We got to London, and my brother offered us lodgings. Hitting London in November from—it was the beginning of summer in Australia—the rain and the cold, and then we hit the theatre, and it was just overwhelming. Sydney was a small city with a major theatre and a couple of little outlets. You hit London, and it's just impossible. I sent my plays off, and I would follow them up, and I got one play back, and it had "600" written on it. It was just overwhelming. I was so depressed, and I was dragging her down too.

We were at SOAS, School of Oriental and Asian Studies. While we were there, this Nigerian approached us and said he was taking a troop out to Nigeria and would we be interested. Well, we were completely lost. We just said yes. He gave us lodgings. He said, "I'm going to get the group together in a house." I left my brother, went to this house, and it was just an empty room with a mattress in it. We had to put a line up for the clothes. I'm standing there for about two, three weeks, and nothing's happening. We're saying, "Larry, what's, can you show us the play? Can you show us the play?" Finally he shows us this play, and it could have been written by a ten-year-old. It was an inverted racist play. It was all about this great black chief who was going to teach these stupid white people something. Myself and Chris—by the way, her mother was Aboriginal and her father was English—we just looked at each other: got to get out of this, got to get out of this.

Very fortunately, I'd lost contact with Dave, my travelling companion. As we got onto a tube, he was right there. I said, "Dave!" Just a wonderful thing. He was moving out of a flat in Highgate. We were down in Kentish Town. It just worked for us.

The night before, we'd planned the escape because there must have been something in us that told us something like this would happen. We told him that we weren't going to come. That evening he came round and went ballistic. I mean, it was racist. It was awful. My wife stepped forward and slapped his face. He made for her. I grabbed hold of him. I'm on the floor with him. I'm holding him down. I'm shouting, "Relax, Harry, let go." Finally when he gives up the struggle, we both get up and he's standing there and he goes off again. I'm very penitent and I'm saying, "Get back." Finally he left. That night, we slept with chairs up against the doors and a carving knife. I slept with a carving knife. Seven o'clock in the morning, we were in that taxi and off we went.

Anyway, it just got worse and worse and worse. Eventually, my wife got a job in a theatre company up in Birmingham. Really, that was the first leaving. We both knew something was wrong. We knew it wasn't working. Her leaving really was the beginning of her leaving me.

I went back home really depressed. I was back in teaching FE. It was awful. I was getting nowhere with my plays. There was a fantastic opportunity when the director of Earl's Court Theatre actually asked me to come along. I had an interview with him. We were discussing this play I'd read—I mean, you don't do that with a top director. I didn't have the energy to go back with another play. I didn't keep the contact. That's what you do. Once you've got your foot in, you keep pushing. So I'm getting slowly, slowly depressed. That's when Chris tells me that she's fallen in love with somebody else.

Apart from the ego thump, the affection had almost disappeared, really. So there wasn't that sense of loss that you might get from somebody whom you truly love. But it put a cap on my situation. I mean, I was getting nowhere, plays were no good, I was teaching, which I hated doing, I was going nowhere. So I was in a state of absolute despair and shock.

I thought, well, everything I've built up these last years has just collapsed. Then it came to me that it was the most rational thing to do, the most obvious thing to do. In fact, it was common sense. I had to go to Japan to meditate. I don't know how that came. I'd read a book on Zen Buddhism in Sydney, and I'd walked from where I lived to the shops, looking at myself, observing myself. By the time I got to the shops, I thought, no, this is going to drive me crazy. So that was it. That was all I knew.

So I wrote to the Buddhist Society. How did we find places before Google? It's a mystery. Anyway, I wrote to them, and they wrote back and gave me twenty-one reasons as to why I shouldn't go to Japan. But they put me in touch with Throssel Hole Abbey that had only recently opened up in Hexham in Northumberland. From them, they put me in touch with Vajra Bailey, who was teaching in Birmingham, just a bus ride away from where I was living.

I remember going there on a cold February day, and she was very Zen, you know. The house was cold. We got up to the room, and there was a couple of Greek people there. Then she took us into the shrine room. We all bowed, and I thought, this is ridiculous. Then she sat me on a stool, and she pushed my back in and sat me upright. She said, "Just watch. Keep your eyes open like that." The instruction was: watch what comes up.

So I sat there for forty minutes in absolute agony, both emotionally and physically. But by the end of it, I was just convinced this was going to get me out of this hole. She had a room in the house which wasn't occupied, so I went to lodge with her. So that was February. By June, by July, I had a job, which was a really easy one, teaching English to

foreigners, foreign students. I bought a house. Everything began to move in that way. That was my last catastrophe, my last big catastrophe. I've had catastrophes since, but they're only small Cs.

I carry on doing that. Being part of a Zen monastery was like being back in St. Richard's. It just came to me with such ease. I loved going up there, even during the summer holidays. I'd spend six weeks up at Throssel Abbey.

Then one day I came back, and I lay on the bed, and this tremendous fear just filled the whole of my body, every cell—I felt it everywhere. There came this picture of this little boy, two years old, going into the front room, shaking my grandfather and saying, "He's dead, they've killed him, now they're going to kill me." Two years old.

I said to my father, "I found grandfather dead in the front room." He said, "No, he died in bed, I was with him." This tells a lot about trauma, children's trauma. Obviously my parents weren't getting on. I'm thinking I'm the problem, they go in and they presume they've killed my dear old grandfather, and I presume they're going to kill me now. What happened when that trauma came up—you have to be very careful with childhood memories, right? Because you don't know what you're laying on them actually. In the memory I speak to myself in English, but I don't think I had English—in fact, I could speak at the age of two. But that was the thought.

What happened then was I got a series of images coming through my life to tell me how this trauma had cancered every one of my relationships. There's your karmic line. It was just so plain to face, it was unbelievable. That was such a wonderful relief.

Then shortly after that, a little bit longer after that, I'm walking along the road, and on the other side there's a copse of wood. As I turn into the copse of wood, I get this thump on the head. This energy comes down into the heart, it shoots out towards this tree, and what I'm looking at is a kaleidoscopic vortex of energy reaching up into the sky. Can you imagine that? If you can imagine it, I've just turned towards a copse of wood, there's this gentle thump on my head, energy comes down in the centre of my body, it bursts out of my heart centre, and what I'm looking at is one tree amongst them all, which is this multicoloured, kaleidoscopic vortex of energy reaching up into the sky.

For a while I was blissed out and I remember particularly looking at this crimson geometry of a rose. That lasted for an hour or two and then I got depressed and anxious again. Now if you were to ask me if I had a choice between those two—this vision or this purification of the heart—no choice. You go for the purification of the heart. Because that's something you can do. You can't make these other things happen. They

seem to come to cap a certain level. They don't come to begin something. They seem to end a process. I don't think that would have been possible, that insight or vision or whatever it was, without the clearing of the heart.

If you look at the Dhammapada, the Buddha puts the practice as: "Stop doing evil, do good, purify the heart. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas." It's as simple as that. This purifying of the heart, what we go through when we're sitting there with all these things coming up, that is something that we can actually do something directly about.

Now when it comes to this other thing, this bump on the head, what do you think? God? Big being? Or just neurons firing through your head, just atomic, subatomic activity firing through the head. The thing is, I don't know. It didn't feel like a personal God. It just felt as though I was given this gift and I've remained at that level. If something happens like that to you, you don't have to expand it into some huge cosmology. It's just something that you receive. It's just an interesting thing. What I understood by that was that the whole of this phenomenal world is nothing but light. It's nothing but energy. Matter is just the coagulation of it. That's all it is. That's what it's made of. There's nothing real. There's nothing substantial in it.

Anyway, all that passed, and I carried on teaching. The story then is basically how I became a Buddhist. I went up to Throssel, I joined the Zen monastery. Through that, through Vajra Bailey, I met the *Theravāda* monk and I did a retreat with him. In that retreat I was drawn. Then the next year the Mahāsi teachers came and that gave me a real technique in which to really delve into myself in a way that Zen hadn't really done. It was from that that I decided to take a sabbatical from work and I went to Burma with my teacher for six months.

When I came back, during that time, this whole business of impermanence became even clearer because there I actually clearly saw that although this might be, what I'd seen about this tree might be true out there, what's actually true in here is the arising and passing away, minutely, of consciousnesses.

That's actually what we're experiencing all the time, just this screen which is flashing, flashing inside us. And what is it that's aware of it? What is it that is looking at it? And that, of course, is our *satipaṇṇā*, that's our intuitive awareness. And it's that separation which is the process of liberating ourselves from the delusion of thinking that we are this psychophysical organism.

So when I got back, I was really fired up. I was going to make a go of it. I got back to college, to the college I was teaching at, and they gave me a promotion. Can you believe that? So I thought, this is what I've got to do. I'll take it as a bad girl every so often. I'll come back and get a promotion. They gave me a promotion.

During that time, I was ready really to move into the whole thing of marriage. I bought a new house. It was a semi-detached house. And during that time, I began to fall in love again. Oh, my goodness. And so there was then this real potential. But something else started to creep in, which was, why don't I spend three years as a monk?

Now, the monastic order was established by the Buddha exactly for that reason. When you look at the rules of the monastic order, you end up simply learning the Dharma or meditating. There's nothing beyond that if you're keeping the rule as he would want it. And the whole infrastructure that comes with it in a society is that it holds you there, it holds you in that place.

So I struggled with that for about a year, making lists for and against, and for and against. And finally, when it really got on top of me, I went to see Revata Thera, my teacher, and I said, Bhante, I want to become a monk. And he said, you're too old. What a relief. Let's get back and live properly. So that was it. But it wouldn't leave me.

So come another six months, I'm back to him and I'm saying, listen, I've got to, I really have to ordain. Even if it's only for three years. That was my intention, a three-year ordination. So again, he said, well, no, he said, you're needed here. I'd become now so much part of that Vihara. And there were only a few of us. He wasn't the type of person who collected people. So there's only about three of us who held the whole Vihara up.

So again, I went away, but this time I wasn't so convinced. I spent two weeks in meditation with a good friend who read Lord of the Rings while I was suffering in the other room. If you're listening, Peter, you'll remember. And I came back absolutely determined. And when I went to see him again, he said, OK.

So I ordained for three years. And I remember telling my mother. And she burst into this enormous veil of tears. And I put my arm around her. I said, Mum, it's only for three years. And she stopped. In Catholicism, if you're a monk, you disappear. These days they're not so strict, but you disappear into the monastery, you don't see him again.

So there was a lovely feast for that ordination. And I went off to work with Goenkaji in his monastery, in his center in Igatpuri, India. And there, something came out of my neck, some snake or other, it was absolutely awful. And I came back feeling I'd got rid of

some big thing. And who should be there at the Vihara but Upandita, Sayadaw Upandita, some of you might know. He's one of the prime teachers of the Mahāsi tradition, who invited me to come and join him in Burma.

So before I did that, I thought, well, why don't I go and live at Amarawati, the big monastery there, and really get to know what it is to live in this community. So I turned up there, and it was during that year that there were those demonstrations in Burma and all the killing and everything that they did. It was the one before the one that finally made the military pull back. So I decided not to go.

And then at the turning of the year, I said to the sangha, I said to the monk, listen, I ought to go and tell Sayadaw Upandita why I've not turned up. So I went to his retreat in IMS. That's Barre, Massachusetts place. And as soon as I walked into the meditation hall, I just knew this was it. I didn't want to live in that forest community type of monasticism. I wanted this hard grind, full on, full metal jacket meditation.

So I decided to go to Burma. But I couldn't get in. I got to Bangkok. I couldn't get a visa. I ended up in a monastery in the north. I finally caught up with Upandita down in Penang. And I did a retreat with him in Penang there. And by this time, I'm despairing again. Because it's four years. I'm not getting anywhere. I'd determined three years. I thought, well, I'll give it another year. So I'm kneeling in front of the Buddha statue. And I'm saying, look, I've done what I can. I said, if nothing happens in another year, I'm going to go back and do something useful.

So there was a German monk there whom I was talking to and giving him all my sorrows and telling him where I was and all that. And he said to me, why don't you go to Sri Lanka? I said, Sri Lanka? I never even thought. The Mahāsis were out there. So I wrote to Venerable Pemasiri, who was the abbot. And he wrote back and said, come.

When I got there, I told him what I wanted to. I said, I just want to sit. I just want to find somewhere I can sit. So he gave me this bunch of keys and he directs me to this *kuti*, this hut at the back of the meditation room, of the monastery. And when I got there, there's this beautiful little ten foot by six foot hut with a little *cankamana*, a walking area with walls to keep the snakes out and all that. And a garden all to myself. And I walked in there and I thought, this is absolutely marvellous.

So I had a toilet built, that was important. And then there came that day, which was, it's very rare, even in a sense, even in the monastic life, where you didn't have to go into a retreat with the idea that you're going to finish in a month, three months, four

months. I went in with no ending date. And so I sat there going through all this purification of the heart, doing the meditation, two o'clock till ten o'clock at night, really going for it. I was absolutely empowered for doing it.

And it was during that time my second trauma appeared out of the blue. I had this dream of looking across a pond and there was a ghost waving at me. Now this ghost was exactly what you expect a ghost, a big sheet with two eyes. And it was on the other side of the pond. And I was absolutely terrified. And I asked a Jungian psychologist about this. He said it was a birth trauma. I don't know.

And then one night, the dream came once, it came twice, this nightmare. And then one night I woke up and there it was in the corner of the room. And I remember bouncing on the bed in absolute terror and my little voice saying, what do you want? What do you want? And the thing just disappeared. It just fizzled out. And that was it. Something just came out of the heart, this trauma. I still don't know what it means. And then after that, the clarity of impermanence became even more obvious to me.

And it was so fortunate. Death doesn't particularly regard you. Death happens when it wants to do it. It's usually most inconvenient. So at that point, just when everything was finished, my father died. So I remember receiving the news and I was walking back towards the kuti. I'm crying. But I didn't cry long because when I reflected on his life, you know, he had a good life. He was a happy man. He was very sanguine. And I loved him much.

And I went back for his funeral. And then I thought, well, somebody has to stay with my mother, comfort my mother. So I stayed with my mother for a year and I was a real Job's comforter. You know what I mean? I think I caused her more misery. Death stirs things up. I mean, if there's one woman I love to bits, it's my mother. And I could strangle her. So I stayed with her for one year and then I came back and I said to the family, I don't think she's going to live long because she doesn't have the moral support.

Anyway, what happened was I went back with the fierce intention again to start and off I went. And come about, it wasn't very long, something like that, she went seriously ill. And so I came back, and I felt really bad about that year of comforting. And so I really made an effort this time.

And you couldn't live with my mother. It was impossible. So we got her into a lovely nursing home. And at first, she hated it. She talked about le carrozze, these wheelchairs. She couldn't stand the wheelchairs. But when I went to see her after about a month, she

was perfectly at home. She was back in boarding school. She was with all these friends, all these women. She was chatting away. She was the life of the party. It was absolutely wonderful to see her.

Anyway, again, most inconveniently, she decided to have a stroke just before I was off to Sri Lanka. And she died within three days. So having buried her, I then went back to Sri Lanka and started the process again. So the death of my mother was really weird. I felt like an orphan. I mean, I was, what, forty-five years old? And I felt as though, yeah, I felt like an orphan. I wrote this big, long letter to one of my cousins in Italy explaining how awful I felt. I don't know what he's done with it.

And that passed. And then I went back and really went for it again. And there came this point where, oh, it was just impossible. The restlessness, the pain that was coming out of me, it was just constant. It was day in. I woke up into it. I carried it through the day. I slept into it. I woke up and it just went on day after day. And it got to a point when I thought, no, I just can't go on. I can't go on, I'm going to stop.

Well, I can't tell you what happened then. When I gave up at that moment, there came into me this enormous terror, which picked me up and threw me back onto the meditation cushion. Because that's the last thing you do. You can stop for a while, you can leave it, you can get drunk, you can do anything, but you never give up. Once you're on the path, you move on the path. If you give up, there's only one way to go. You're going to go down. And I was horrified. I can't tell you the horror that struck me when I realised that I'd actually given up on my spiritual journey. So I got over that pretty quickly. I just sat on the cushion and plowed my way through it.

So then I'm getting, my body is beginning to suffer, I think. I don't know, I'm beginning to feel weak. I'm not strong. I write to a monk I know in London, who's Dr. Vajiragana. And I write with the intention of staying there just to get my body right.

So I turn up at the London Buddhist Vihara, and I've got this back room, and I'm basically meditating. And the monk who was teaching there decided to leave the order and get married. So who did they ask to sit on the podium? It's me. So I'm sitting there, and I'm slowly beginning to understand that whatever took me to Sri Lanka, that energy, that inspiration was dying away. I didn't want to go back there. How would I live in Britain? So the only way you can live in Britain, if you want to find somewhere spiritually supportive, was to begin to teach. I needed support. So that's where the teaching began.

But, of course, I had this horror of teaching. I really didn't want to do it. So I'm teaching weekend retreats, and come the year 2000, I decide, look, I've got to sort this out, and I go on a retreat with Upandita, outside Upandita's place, Panditarama, in the middle of Rangoon.

And when you go on retreat with a problem, you don't think about the problem. You just go on retreat. And whatever is causing the problem will, in fact, just sort itself out. In other words, what's causing the problem is confusion. That's what's normally the problem. And if you just sit with it, if you just stay with it, as confusion, as fear of making a decision, eventually it just sorts itself out.

So that was another rotten retreat. Six weeks of misery. And then when it passed, it was lovely and peaceful for a week. So I'm down at the end of the retreat and I'm in the hall there and I'm looking at the bookcase and my eye falls on this book. And it's all the stuff on teaching that's taken out of A Course of Miracles. Some of you might know that book, A Course of Miracles. It's a big book and it's got a teacher's book with it. And I pick it out and I'm reading it and by the end of that book I'm absolutely certain that what I've got to do is teach. How weird. It happens, doesn't it? You've got this problem and you call for help and the answer comes. It comes in its own time.

So I get back to Britain. And I go back to the Vihara. And I set up a little trust. And before we know it, we've collected twenty-five thousand pounds to open a center. And that's where the big mistake comes. I open up in the north of London. All my support is in the south. I completely forget that London is not a city. It's a collection of villages. And you don't go from the south to the north for an evening meeting. That's a two-hour journey.

So on the opening day, thirty-odd people came. And what happened was they never came again. And I had this, they never came again, that's it. And come September, Matthias, a Dutch student, he was a student at one of the London universities doing a PhD. And he's very good. He supported me all the way. He's a lovely man. And I said to him, if we don't have somebody by the end of September, we're not going to have a group.

So we advertised all over the place, made these little stickers. And I had two young fellas, and they cycled everywhere. And they put these stickers everywhere, laundrettes, libraries, everywhere. And they had the wrong telephone number. Yeah, you learn, you learn. So the first night the neighbour came and he never came again. The second night nobody came. So by October I'm thinking this is a disaster.

By the end of that season the Sri Lankans had come to help us, especially Sita. She was always there helping me, Dr. Sita Siriwardhana. And then we had this six-week retreat over winter. We closed the place down. There were five of us. And I decided that it was not going to work. I've got to get out.

Luckily, there was a man who was on retreat with me, Peter, who knew the Batchelors. And he got in touch with the Batchelors. That's Stephen and Martine. Some of you might have read their books and might know them.

And he told them that the next cosmic Buddha was in the north of London. So there you go. So they came up to see me, and it was just one of these lovely moments.

Oh, my goodness. I'm really going over the top now. It's 3:15. I'm rushing now. I'm rushing through, right? Where do I need to get to? So anyway, this is it. This is the last bit. So it was just one of those times when Gaia House was stuck. The Bachelors had moved to France. They needed somebody there to look after the personals, about 12 personals. So I went to see Christina Feldman, and I thought it was a great place.

And when I was there, I became really my Dharma teacher's college. Because not only was I retreating with people who had come on personal retreat, some of them were ill with ME and things like that. Some were, you know, psychological problems, not mental illnesses, but, you know, passing depressions and lots of stuff. I had to deal with some of the managers who were running the place and I was given the chance to run these eight-week retreats in the Mahāsi system twice a year. And it was during that time that I realised that there was a little space to start something like this.

So after about a year or two, I decided to leave. I was never really fully into the teachers' organisation there because it's a very lay organisation. And so, again, I came to a choice as to whether to disrobe and become a lay teacher or to remain a monk. It was a bit like, for those of you who know the imagery, a bit like being a Catholic priest amongst Quakers.

So I gave up. I decided to leave. And then we just went through the whole business of a trust. I have a special thanks to Anne Ashton, who was the treasurer, who was the accounts person at Gaia House and she took us through this whole process of getting a lawyer. We've got a lawyer from down in London, you know, a simple letter to the charitable trust and we had it, and it only cost us two and a half thousand pounds. And then we set it up and, well, then it's just history, isn't it? You know, I found this place and from then on I think you know, it's all about that.

So let me see now. Let me see. I've got to finish now. This is the coda. This is finally the coda. Nobody's really rushed me. I could have been here three hours. So first, here we go. All right. Okay.

So you might ask now, after all this, where am I? Everybody wants to know where you are. So the Buddha gives this image of an ocean in which beings are swimming underneath, completely lost. Others bob their head up and down, and some are stable, and they can see there's an island. An island which is both in, but not of, this world.

Now for me, it wasn't an ocean, it's been a swamp, okay? So I'm stuck in this swamp with crocodiles, and every so often there's a bit of a clearing, and that's it. And all I can say is that I know where the island is. That's the important thing. I know where the island is. Does that mean I'm making a beeline for it? Not at all. I slip over here, slip over there, I sometimes turn my back on it. But generally speaking, I'm on the way, right? So that's where you've got to get to.

So you can see how I just stumbled and bumbled and just blundered my way through life, but not without lots of summery somersaults and sticky toffee pudding with custard. And I've landed here in an area of outstanding natural beauty. It's not bad, is it?

Anyway, so now, there are two things. I wanted to talk about some of my spiritual experience, because I want to really release people from keeping it to themselves. Often, you know, I get meditators come to me and tell me similar things that I've told you, and I've said, have you told anybody? They say, no, it's only just for me. Because there isn't that framework within which they feel free to express themselves. And often, of course, if they can't, they get into what's known as a spiritual emergency where it just sends them offline and they end up with a doctor. And if the doctor's not sympathetic, of course, you're back on drugs. It's a psychotic interlude or something.

So be much more open about out-of-body experiences. I go to Gaia and occasionally I'll ask a group of 25 how many people have had out-of-body experiences. Five hands go up. Now, I wouldn't say that's the same percentage for the general population, but it's not an unknown experience, you know?

And so finally, what is it that I would really like to pass on to you? What is it I've come to know? I've come to realise that the difference between me and the Buddha is one of degree and not of kind. And that the difference between me and you is the same. And that the difference between us and all sentient beings, all these animals, if you look into their eyes, the mirrors, the windows to the soul, you'll see they have this intelligence. And that, because of that, the force that lies in us all is to seek happiness. And

because we're deluded, we create all this suffering, but at some point there has to be a turning. You turn round upon it, and at some point in your life, you're pushed by your own suffering to move towards the end of it.

Now Kant has this little phrase called a categorical imperative. And he's talking about the moral law, whereby, if I can just quote him here, if I can just find it just a minute. I can find it somewhere. I thought I'd written it down. Oh, what a shame. It's the definition of it, you see. A categorical imperative by which he means that if you make a moral law, like for instance not to steal, that is unconditionally and completely applicable to all human beings. In the category of stealing, it is an imperative, a command that all human beings obey that. You can't say one human being can steal and others can't.

So I would like to say that it is a categorical imperative that all beings, all sentient beings, will become fully liberated from all suffering forever. Absolutely.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused confusion and befuddlement, and that you will, by your devotion to the practice, unrelenting, unremitting devotion to the practice, come to the end of suffering forever, sooner rather than later.

Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.

I could have gone on. Sorry about that.

Christmas Talk on the Path: Goodwill, Ethics, and Liberation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 47 min

In this Christmas dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma weaves together the seasonal message of goodwill with core Buddhist teachings on mettā (loving-kindness), karma, and ethical relationships. He explores how the Buddha's understanding of karma as action and will connects to our relationships with all beings - human, animal, and the natural world.

The talk examines how ethical conduct (sīla) forms an essential foundation for spiritual practice, drawing parallels between the Buddha's basic requirements for monastic life and our contemporary challenges around ecological responsibility and compassionate living. Bhante discusses the relationship between insight practice (vipassanā) and ethical purification, explaining how they work together on the path to liberation.

With practical wisdom for daily life, he addresses common struggles with anger, forgiveness, and self-worth, emphasizing that Buddhist practice involves creating a 'beautiful self' before transcending the notion of self altogether. The talk concludes with reflections on the power of mettā-bhāvanā (loving-kindness meditation) to transform both our inner conditioning and our relationships with the world around us.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa, namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa, namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa —
Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

I thought this evening just to let the mind wander a bit about this whole business of goodwill since it's Christmas. This was, if you remember, the message over the manger: "Goodwill to all men," meaning, of course, all humans. And I'm sure you noticed my little sign on the gate. I've extended it to all beings in the hope it might affect the local farmer. You can hear that little dog — he keeps it in a cage with a concrete base and it's obviously quite unhappy, but what can you do?

Goodwill for me really translates the word *mettā*, although I'm sure you've seen it translated as loving-kindness, which gives it its affective value, its emotional value. But we have to link that really with the Buddha's teaching about *kamma*. And *kamma* is an action — I'm using the word technically now, not your comeuppance, not "you get your karma," but more in the sense of just an action. And an action is driven by the will. The

action is a point where the will comes in. And then with the will you have the action, and the action of course produces the beginning of a conditioning or reinforces a present conditioning, and that's your *bhava*, that's your becoming.

Really it's just looking at the position that the Buddha puts this whole business of *kamma* into his teachings. When he went through that liberation process he came out with what's known as the three knowledges, the three great understandings he had. The first one was a realisation that he was completely purified of all these negative states. Later in his victory verse he says that he attained this unconditioned consciousness, *asaṅkhata-citta*. But the other two are related to how he got there. The first is he saw all his past lives and saw how he arrived at this particular place. And then he was able to perceive beings moving from one realm to another, driven by the same force, by the same karmic force, by their will. And what was then just a personal law became a universal law for him.

From that, over time, he develops dependent origination, which is the whole psychology of how we create our conditionings. But also he points to the whole business of ethics. So ethics in its broadest meaning is basically our relationship — our relationship to each other as human beings, of course, to the animal world, to the world of nature, to the mineral world, to use an old medieval way of looking at things. So even rocks and stuff like that we have a relationship with. It might not be a very deeply affectionate one, but we have a relationship with the physicality of nature.

In the Noble Eightfold Path, this comes into play because after we've had some insights, this has to translate itself into Right Attitude. And these attitudes — he names three of them within the Eightfold Path: selfishness to generosity, hatred towards love, and cruelty towards compassion. But you can take any negativity and you can state its opposite as where we're moving towards. And of course that's a change in relationship, and that's what we're talking about, a relationship. And this then expresses itself in right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

This ethics is most keenly expressed in its little detail in the Vinaya for the monks, for the monastic life, the monks and nuns. Because here he's trying to set up an institution, a specific institution, which is to preserve the Dharma and of course to help people become liberated. And he sees that as extremely important. And it's not as though he starts from a position of some ideal as to what the order will be. He follows the normal customs of the time, which was basically to use whatever cloth was about to create clothing, to live very simply in the forests, making your own little hut out of things, out of wood and leaves, banana leaves and stuff, and to eat what was given in a bowl. All these things were set.

And what it tells us is that here's the basis of a spiritual life. We need shelter. We need clothing against the elements. We need food to keep the body healthy. And the fourth one was medicine. And when you look across the world and you see these people who don't have these basic requirements, what we actually understand from the Buddha's teaching is that they haven't even got the basis for spiritual practice. In other words, Buddha's saying that in order to even begin the spiritual practice, you've got to feel safe. You've got to feel safe. If your mind is concerned about where you're going to get your next piece of bread, or how you're going to clothe yourself, or your children, and so on, then you can't begin this process of purifying the heart.

Saint Francis had a similar experience when he gave up everything in a very Buddhistic way and sewed together these bits of sackcloth to create his first robe. He thought to go and live with the beggars, actually live in Rome with the beggars. But he found that they were quite happy to thieve, and the language, of course, and the whole thing. And he had this ideal that, in fact, if you were poor, you were necessarily closer to Jesus, closer to God. But in fact, what he found was that they were robbers and thieves. Probably one or two of them were saintly, but generally speaking, they weren't a crowd he wanted to mix with. And so he left them. He went off on his own back to where he was brought up, started again.

So during this time, Christmas, we have this idea of goodwill to all beings. We then have this problem about will itself, meaning some sort of choice. In the West we have this idea coming really from Christianity of some sort of free will. The ancients didn't have that sort of concept. They were, I think, more deterministic, that things were already determined, a fate. And that choice was really some sort of trick that human beings played on themselves. Because they had choice, they therefore had free will. These days you get these different arguments between those who believe in a deterministic idea of the world and those who believe that we do have some measure of free will.

Now, in the Buddha's understanding, it's hard to talk about this complete free will. It really stems from the idea of the Christian relationship to God. So God has created us out of love. And a love which is determined by him is hardly satisfying. If you could create a dog and program it to love you, then you'd have a hard time thinking that this dog really loves you. I mean, he's already been broken. So the idea of free love was that a person could actually choose to love or deny God. And that was the essential dignity of the human being and the essential oneness of the human being as opposed to God. So he'd created something which was separate from him, and therefore the human being had to find this relationship.

In the Buddha's teachings it's difficult to see this free will because everything starts from this position of ignorance, the position of we're living under a delusion. And this delusion is driving us. So its main manifestation is acquisitiveness, which turns into greed and all that sort of stuff. And the reason is that in that essential delusion as to who we are, there's this presumed understanding that we are what we appear to be — human beings with the body, mind, heart, and so on and so forth. But there is always somewhere in the back of our understanding the problem of death.

All meaning to the self is in life, to the self that feels itself to be this psycho-physical organism. Death is meaningless because my whole effort is to try and enjoy life and make life meaningful for me. And I might extend that into some form of relationship that gives my life meaning. So you have a humanistic approach which is that my life has meaning when I'm helping others. So sometimes you'll get humanists who are just as self-negating, just as giving, just as generous, just as compassionate as anybody who would say they belong to a particular religion. And it gives their life meaning.

But even so, there is this underlying despair, because it's all going to come to an end. And it's very difficult for somebody who sees death as being the end of everything that they aspire to, everything that is meaningful in life, to turn upon death and really look it straight in the face. So there's always this gentle pushing away of it, the denial of death. And what the Buddha is saying is that this essential delusion as to who we are is creating this underlying feeling of disjointedness, of not being actually completely at one with nature that we're embedded in.

Because animals don't worry about that. Animals, as far as we know anyway, they're just happy to live the moment to moment because their minds don't really go beyond. They don't have that imaginative capacity to imagine their deaths. Not to say that they don't know when they're actually dying or being killed, but they don't have that existential fever that can descend upon us.

So when you consider that we've got this underlying delusion which is trying to make sense of this life, then everything is driven by that force. So although on the surface of things, when you walk into Tesco's and you think, well, am I going to have choco biscuits or fig biscuits? And I think, well, this is choice. This is a wonderful thing I have in this society of choice. The governments keep going on about this choice. But eventually, you tend to choose the one you like, the one you've established a decent relationship with.

So even though we have this idea of choice, actually, when we finally make the choice and we ask ourselves, well, why did I make that choice? We find it's actually all conditioned, that we've actually got good reasons for doing it, which is another way of

saying it's not been a free will choice. It's not as though free will stands somewhere outside my conditioning and is able to make this choice which has nothing to do with the conditioning that I have within my psychology.

So when it comes to the path, and we're talking about the way to go, it's like going for a walk, isn't it? You set off for a walk and you already have your map, you know where you're going to go. And wherever you come to a fork in the place or where you come to a place where you don't recognise something, you don't have free will. You look at your map and you decide you're going to go this way. Now, you might make a mistake and end up drowning in a lake, but we'll leave that one aside. Presumably you can read the maps, and even if you do start walking into marshy land, you know you've come the wrong way so you come back on yourself. So the path isn't so much one of choice but one of discernment. And if we discern wrongly, if we make the wrong choices, then there are certain things that happen because of that wrong choice, and the world mirrors back to us what it is.

Now, when we talk about *kamma*, remember, in the sense of that which is leading us to liberation, it's never something outside us. So, if, for instance, I find myself being fired from every job that I happen to get hold of, and I keep saying to myself, these people really don't understand me, they're absolute fools and all this other stuff, then slowly but surely it might occur to me that maybe I'm the fool and not these people I've been calling the fool all my life. But until I make that little bit of insight, the world keeps mirroring back to me exactly what I'm doing.

But if I were to say that losing my job is my *kamma*, then I'd be slightly off centre, because my real *kamma* is the conditioning I have inside me, the conditioning which is creating this personality, these relationships, which continually find me dumped. If on the other hand, take the opposite, if on the other hand I find myself constantly in situations which are creating happiness around me and joyfulness around me, then again that's mirroring back to me my relationship to the world.

So when anything happens to us, there is that business going on. That doesn't mean to say that other people's *kamma* isn't affecting us. I mean, the old adage that just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you. In other words, things happen to us, but it might not be specifically our fault. Somebody else is also dumping their stuff on us. And to sometimes distinguish that is very difficult. In fact, the closer the relationship is, the more difficult it is to discern that.

So, when it comes to this goodwill to all beings, we're really always looking at our relationships. That's what it actually means, just what is our relationship. And when it comes to ecology, and the world and all that, and we have all these deniers and all that

sort of stuff, we might say to ourselves, well, even if it isn't the overheating that's causing this, it would be better anyway to think it is just in case it is. If it isn't, fine, then the world is just changing in its usual patterns. But if it happens to be this business of overheating, then maybe I ought to do something about it.

So there was a meditator here who I asked about ecology and whatnot. Somehow it came up in the conversations that they took two baths a day. And I said, well, isn't that a bit ecologically vandalistic? And their reply was, well, nobody else is doing anything. So you can see how in this particular case this person was judging their particular ethical relationship to the world by other people and excusing what they obviously thought, because of their reply, was in fact ecological vandalism. Their excuse was because nobody else was doing it.

When it comes to ecology and things like that, our question is to ourselves, what am I doing about it? What is my responsibility within this particular situation I find myself in? So here, for instance, I've gone to all sorts of silly extents to try and cut down the amount of fuel we use to heat water. And some of them have been slightly ridiculous. That thing you're using now, which I bought, which was meant to be one of these super kettles that would keep water warm, turned out to be — I mean, that's why I've got that glove around it, that covering, because it was just letting off heat all over the place.

My latest escapade, as you've noticed over the sink, is a hand washing thing, but actually that water which comes straight from the well, straight from the cold water system, is perfectly drinkable. So if you ever want warm water, then you can take it straight from that. And this allowed me to cut down the heat in the tank itself, which I hope you've all forgiven me for. So that is basically just hand hot. It's not even that, is it? It's lukewarm. And then, which is all you need. You only need lukewarm water.

I mean, I go back to my experience in the East where only the rich can have a hot shower. You just don't have hot showers. Most people still shower at wells and it's always cold. Always. Mind you, of course, you're in the tropics, but even so.

So one thing that we can look at is just what is our relationship to the material world? How much heat do we need? What sort of clothes are we wearing so that we don't have to have the central heating on so high? The food we eat. So you go back to your basics — the food, the shelter, the clothing. I mean these days with clothes being so cheap people have quite large wardrobes. I'm now getting to that age group where I can be like the Monty Python sketch where he says, well in my day we had leather for breakfast, things like that.

But this whole explosion of material goods means that people don't have a sense of kindness towards things. They don't treasure anything because, well, if you break a cup, you're going to buy another one. But there was a time when you broke a cup, you'd get a crack around the back of your head because that would cost money.

So it's a case of re-establishing really the preciousness of things. In the Japanese tea ceremony, which I know very little about, part of the conversation is to appreciate the actual vessels that you're using, which may be cracked and very old. There was a lovely tale told by Suzuki, who wrote *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, where when the monks go off and take water with them, they always reserve a bit to bring back, to pour back into the river that flows past the monastery. And it's that sort of relationship that I think we have to re-establish.

I have a niece who works around ecology for schools. She sets up little projects for schools, a charity of such. When I was asking about that, her reply to me about people and ecology was, "People don't care. People don't care." And it's a sadness. We watched a film that was done by a French ecologist, and there was this very moving scene in Uganda where the hippos on this lake were being slaughtered by poachers. All the fish in the lake lived off the hippopotamus poo. That's what they did. That's how the fish lived in the lake. Of course, as they killed these hippos, the fish stocks went down. The man who was looking after it, when he saw that a little gang of hippos had disappeared, he starts weeping, he starts crying because he's so distraught at the uncaring nature of these poachers and the inability of the government or anybody to stop the slaughter. So it's a case really of thinking about our relationship to nature.

When it comes to animals, the animal world, it's a similar sort of thing. It's very difficult really to find products which don't use something from animals. Here I think you can get very tight around things. Although the Buddha pointed out these rules about not harming living beings, they were never set to us as commandments, as "thou shalt not." It wasn't to do with that. They're training rules. *Sekhapada*. You can't make an absolute law in a relative universe because, depending on time and place, human beings, if they want to stay alive, have to eat animals. I'm talking about people in deserts and people up in the icy parts of the world. So it's not as though we have to be particularly tight about that, but it's something that we could think about and ponder and just look at the food that we actually eat. The idea of having a vegetarian meal or two during the week seems to be catching on. But I think one of the problems is that when we move into that moral area, we become moralistic. So again, it's not being too tight around these things and just working with the situation.

Here myself and Martin had to make a big decision about Christmas. As you know, the Trust has made a commitment to using less animal products if we can, but careful not to name it as veganism, because then that locks you into a particular ism. That's not really where the Buddha was at. I remember talking to a German man who'd come to the monastery and he was very uptight about Buddhism. He just didn't like "Buddhism," he just didn't like this word. "We should call it *Buddhadhamma*," he said, because as soon as you enter into an ism, it's as though it becomes set in concrete. So when we talk about not being involved in taking life unnecessarily, I think we always have to be careful not to get into that ism business, but take each situation as it comes. Anyway, we decided that it was Christmas and we would have roast and use eggs to bind it. So it's just one of those things we gave in to that.

When it comes to human beings, it becomes very complicated because we have all sorts of ways of behaving towards each other which are unhealthy and equally as many ways as we can which are healthy. Tomorrow we might go through the perfections, as they call the *paramī*. But again, it's recognising that other people are our teachers. That's one really very positive way of looking at it. When somebody is creating some negativity within us, it's pointing out where we may be stuck, where we are actually holding on to views and opinions. It's a case of really doing that moment-to-moment *vipassanā*. We see *vipassanā* as being something that we sit and do as a practice, and that's true, that's not a problem. But to keep that awakenedness in us so that when we meet somebody and they're pressing buttons, we're right there with the inner turmoil, not to identify with it.

This is the whole point of practising *vipassanā*, is to disidentify with what we're experiencing. When anger comes within me, when I'm sitting and I've got a memory and some anger comes up, I'm gently pushing it away from me to observe it. In so doing, I realise it's not me, not mine. But in daily life, we tend to forget that. As soon as anger comes up, well, I'm going to be angry to hell with it. But the whole idea is to remain with this sharp awakenedness so that as soon as I feel the first stirrings of irritation, I'm right there with it. I can override that. This is the point. I can override that with goodwill. The measure of goodwill could be just a certain openness to the person, just to actually listen to what they're saying without this immediate reaction. If I'm going to identify with something, then let me identify with goodwill.

Here we come to another thing, this whole business about the self. The Buddha, in his teachings, it's not about getting rid of the self. It's about creating, first of all, a self which is beautiful, a self which feels dignified, self-worthy and has a lot of self-esteem. It's only when we feel that certainty within us that we can begin to go deeper and drop the idea of what a self might be. All his teachings, if you go through it, is all about, at

this ethical level, of moving away from negative states towards positive states, from darkness to light, as he would put it. There are some beings moving the other way, he says, but hopefully we're moving the right way, from darkness to light.

The whole training, part of the training is the Eightfold Path, is right speech, right action, right livelihood. What it's doing is creating this beautiful conditioning. When I associate with that, when I say, "Well, I am generous," then it's creating within me this sense of self-esteem. When I've forgiven somebody and I feel the relief that comes with that, I'm purifying my heart. When you're practising *mettā* and you're saying, "May I be safe, may I be well," it doesn't matter whether we believe there's an ultimate I there or not, but all we're doing is creating these conditionings which eventually build up to make us feel good about ourselves.

When we move into that meditation, the next stage is to investigate this sense of I. So it's a sort of parallel process. The process of insight and the process of ethical purity run together. If we're very disturbed over something, we're going through a patch in our lives which is full of anxiety and anger and all that sort of stuff, then it's very difficult to separate from it. Even if we keep falling into these habits of getting angry and all that sort of stuff, at least we know that we've fallen into a place where we don't want to stay. This is the point, we don't want to stay there. Often people will get themselves into this horrible place and they keep churning at it.

I remember Rob, who's our treasurer, he's a solicitor helping people through divorce and whatnot. I remember saying to this man something along the lines of, "You'll lose what you want. You're not going to win this case. And you're going to spend a lot of money, right?" So his whole argument was, let it be, come to an agreement and let it go. But he was too caught up in this bitterness and hatred and he was going to go for it, even though it was actually completely illogical. That's what we tend to do. We get ourselves into these whirlpools of thought. It's impossible to step out of it for a lot of people. They're just caught up in it.

There was another case just recently on the radio of a man who had been tortured by the Japanese on that River Kwai business really, really badly. His heart was just filled with hatred and anger. It was there, undealt with within his heart. His first marriage eventually broke up. Later on in his life, perhaps late middle age, he's just on a train and he meets somebody and begins to talk to her. This stuff begins to just flow outward. He gets in touch with all this goo, all this horrible stuff inside him. For some reason, I can't remember the details, he sees this article where this Japanese man, who was his torturer, has written an article in which he's asking for forgiveness and whatnot. So he determines to go and meet him in Japan and give him the old waffle. But as soon as the

man walks in, he meets this Japanese man. He just goes down on his knees and begs him to forgive him. It's like he can't do anything. The forgiveness just pours out of his heart and they become good friends.

In his case, he was very lucky that the fellow who now regrets bitterly the way he made these other human beings suffer actually had the opportunity to tell this victim how he felt about it now. If not, this man may very well have been still twisting in the little hell of his own making, just unable to forgive.

What our practice is teaching us is that all this negativity is not me in the sense that I don't have to do that, I don't have to indulge it, I don't have to associate with it even. I can see it as just another mental state. Even if I'm caught out by it every so often, and I find myself murdering people and stuff like that, even so, I can then remind myself after the act, "You lost yourself there. There was a loss of myself into that." If I can bring myself out of that and re-establish this good self, then at least I'm not justifying the act. A lot of people might justify anger, righteous anger and all that sort of stuff. But in Buddhist terms, it's very difficult to justify anger. You can sublimate it, you can turn your anger into doing something, but anger itself, the feeling of anger, the hatred that's involved in it, as soon as you put that out, it's a negativity, it's a negative force. It'll have its effect in one way or the other. Even if you get your own way, you'll have got your own way, which may be perfectly just, at the expense of friendship. The person might do it just out of because you've hammered them, because they're so afraid of you. But that's hardly a good reason for them to do it.

What we're trying to do at the level of self, at the level of me feeling I am, I am this, I am that, is moving myself towards this better place. When I get there, I find myself being more contented, less caught up in these mental states and so on and so forth. This allows my meditation to go deeper because these are, in our meditation, what we call the hindrances. They're actually stopping us from going deeper and seeing where the initial problem lies.

This goodwill that we are generally spreading around all over the place at Christmas is something that we also need. It's not only an outward flow, it's an inward flow towards ourselves. One of the purposes of practising *mettā-bhāvanā* is to get that feeling of self-worth about ourselves.

Even during this time, it depends how you wish to spend tomorrow, but you might spend some time just reflecting. Just try to guide your thoughts towards those areas where we find ourselves stuck or where we find certain irritations, certain fears, anxieties, and just see them that actually they're telling us something about ourselves, the

situation out there, the person out there. Then just to find a way of allowing yourself that original fear, anger, whatever it is, to arise. As it moves away, as it turns away, to establish the right relationship, the right relationship with a situation or with a person.

As we all know, this isn't easy work. You've got to keep at it. Even though sometimes you might feel things are going worse, sometimes it feels like that before it gets better. I'm sure you've heard that one before. So it's a case of really seeing our lives as an ethical process. It's not just this insightful process into impermanence and whatnot. It's actually an ethical process. It's a process of correcting our relationships. In a sense that's looking at the third middle characteristic of *dukkha*, of suffering. Remember, it always comes down to desire. This desire is a specific desire. It's not all desire, the desire to meditate, the desire to be liberated. It's not this *taṇhā*. This desire is always based on some wrong relationship we have, which is a fundamental delusion about who we are.

Even when we turn towards things like the ultimate things, like death, the Buddha's not shy about hitting nails on their head, like, "Life is uncertain, death is certain." I mean, he keeps poking you in the eye, sort of wake you up. It's being able to turn on that, turn on that certainty and looking at that fear because right there at the very fear of death we find this self. It's the self, it's this wrong relationship which is creating that initial, that deepest of all fears.

Just trying really to make that path quite clear to ourselves, that on the one side there's the process of insight, the process of seeing things as they really are, as the Buddha said. On the other side, it's how it manifests in our daily actions, speech, actions and livelihood. The one has to mirror the other. The way to liberation can come through any of those points on the Eightfold Path, especially those points about right speech, right action, but especially that right livelihood because in our actions we come across where the self is creating barriers, where the self is not able to extend itself in a fluid way into a situation, definitions, opinions, views, and all that sort of stuff.

Just as a final example of the distinction between what you might call a barrier and a boundary, boundaries are fluid, using that word as a fluid thing, is this whole business about opinions and views. If we see an opinion as just a perspective on a particular situation, political, social, etc., if it's just a perspective, we're much more open to accepting that other people have different perspectives. There's an ability there to work with it to find a compromise. So in terms of a self which is not so self-seeking, the word compromise is not a dirty word. But as soon as you identify with your opinion, "I am..." it's very difficult to find that bridge. We see it constantly in places like the Middle East.

There doesn't seem to be a way that these two sides can even come close to some sort of compromise, some sort of way of understanding each other and giving each other the sense of freedom they want.

However, it is Christmas, and we have to spread a bit of goodwill. And this evening in our *mettā*, perhaps we can bring these things to mind, like the Middle East, and send out our goodwill.

Just another final thing. Some people doubt the power of prayer, goodwill, blessings, and that sort of stuff. But there's a woman called Caroline Myss, some of you might have heard of her. And she tells a tale of a car crash in which the woman dies, comes out of her body. And as she looks down the line of cars, all these people are swearing and getting very angry with her and all that sort of stuff. But there's one woman who's praying for her. And what she sees is this energy going up and then coming down upon her. Anyway, as it is, she didn't die and she goes back into the body and all that. But she remembers the number plate of this person and seeks her out and takes her a bunch of flowers.

So even though we might do *mettā* only to help recondition our own hearts towards what is goodwill, I don't think we should doubt that it has some force. I'm always bemused, really, because, as you know, we read out these names in the morning, and occasionally somebody will say it really helped. And I can't really understand how it did it, but they actually feel it.

And there was one occasion—I mean, if you're a scientific materialist, obviously it's not going to make sense to you. But there was one case where somebody was dying and we were offering *mettā* and it so happened they died during that period when we were offering *mettā*, which I thought was extraordinary. Which means, I suppose you could translate that as being we killed them. But I think of it more positively as helping them move on.

So anyway, I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be fully liberated by observing these twin parts of the path of insight and ethical relationships. Sooner rather than later.

Destruction of Craving: Examining Each Link in the Chain

Noirin Sheahan · 47 min

In this exploration of the Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta (MN 38), Noirin Sheahan guides us through each of the twelve links of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), showing how understanding these stages can undermine craving and lead to liberation from dukkha.

The talk begins with the Buddha's teaching on the six types of consciousness (viññāṇa), then methodically examines each link from avijjā (ignorance) through saṅkhāra (formations), viññāṇa (consciousness), nāma-rūpa (mind-matter), salāyatana (six sense doors), phassa (contact), vedanā (feeling), taṇhā (craving), upādāna (clinging), bhava (becoming), jāti (birth), to jarāmaraṇa (death/suffering). Practical examples illustrate how each stage manifests in daily experience and meditation practice.

Noirin emphasizes that wisdom gained through direct knowledge of any link can halt the cycle at vedanā (feeling), preventing the arising of taṇhā (craving). She explains how mindfulness allows us to recognize these processes and how intuitive awareness can skillfully navigate even unskillful mental formations. The talk concludes with insights into how understanding dependent origination creates a 'tipping point' where the system binding us to suffering begins to collapse, leading toward ultimate liberation.

I want to continue with the discourse on the destruction of craving, the *Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta*. Here we find the Buddha countering a disciple's view that we have just the one consciousness that speaks, feels and experiences. The Buddha debunks this and reiterates his position that there are six distinct forms of consciousness. When we're seeing something, we have visual consciousness. When we're feeling hot, we have body consciousness and so on. Only one of these can operate at any moment, and it needs certain conditions to be present for that consciousness to arise.

As an aside, I'd like to clarify that the Buddha is talking of worldly consciousness here, termed *viññāṇa* in Pali. There is ongoing debate about how we can describe awareness which transcends the world, *Nibbāna*. Let's not get into that. But remember that when we're speaking of consciousness starting and ending with each sensory experience, we're only referring to ordinary human consciousness here.

The remainder of the sutta gives us a methodology that lets us experience the world in the same way as the Buddha. In the first place, we are to learn to see experience as a series of happenings. The phrase he uses to describe this perspective is "this has come to be." When we get angry we can reflect "anger has come to be." When we cool down and become peaceful we can reflect "peace has come to be." Our whole life can be seen as a series of experiences arising one after the other.

Normally, we use a broad-based understanding to negotiate the world, where we're aware of multiple things: the walls, the furniture, the conversation on the radio, the twinge of pain in the back. This broad understanding requires conceptualisation. It's a cognitive miracle, but it doesn't reflect ultimate reality.

To experience ultimate reality, things as they really are, we have to be prepared to delve beneath thought to let awareness rest on the raw data that is coming through our sense doors moment after moment. With this intuitive awareness, we realise that we can only focus on one thing at a time. Whatever has just come to be, that is all we know. It's the limit of cognition. When we're seeing, we're not hearing. When we're hearing, we're not aware of the twinge in our back.

At times we become painfully aware of how unsatisfactory this is to our normal sense of self, how little the self likes this stop-start world where certainties crumble. The pain of this insight, however, gives us an extra incentive to see how we can reduce the stress, learn to live peacefully with uncertainty, with the inability to control experience.

Having persuaded ourselves that experience can be described as "this has come to be," the Buddha next wants us to learn about the causes and conditions for experience. Essentially, he says, all conditions have craving at their source. It's a sobering thought. Craving is obviously a very powerful force in the universe. Luckily, wisdom is an even stronger force.

So we don't have to tackle craving head on, suppress every urge to want things to be different, accept every misery without reaction. This would be impossible. The Buddha discovered that craving can be undermined and eventually destroyed altogether by learning from direct experience about all the causes and conditions that underlie it. Just knowing these is to reduce and eventually eliminate craving. The power of knowing. It is amazing.

By knowing is meant direct present moment conscious experience. It's because we don't fully know this, we skim over it, ignore so much of it, that we unwittingly allow craving to hold such sway in our lives. To the degree that we're skimming over, ignoring, we are, using Buddha's terminology, ignorant.

In this sutta, the Buddha traces the causes and conditions for craving down to ignorance, this imperfect, imprecise knowing. He then recaps on the sequence, working back up from ignorance to *dukkha*. It's generally accepted that all the links up as far as sense contact occur simultaneously with the remaining ones following sequentially. At the deepest level of concentration we might see the final links from feeling onward to *dukkha* following one another in a flash. So the full sequence may be happening thousands, perhaps millions of times during every second of our lives.

Although our concentration isn't sharp enough to follow each individual link, we can get to know each step when we focus attention. For example, we could focus on craving, looking within experience for pushing or pulling sensations, for rushes of energy, for the mind's tendency to narrow down on what it craves. In time, we'll be able to recognise craving and make a rational decision about whether or not to follow its suggestion.

Similarly, we can learn by bringing attention to any stage in dependent origination. Eventually, intuition will use this knowledge wisely. We'll use that as a theme for the rest of the talk, asking how understanding each stage might release us from suffering.

We get to know the first stage, ignorance, *avijjā*, when we watch our relationship with not knowing, the little question mark in our minds that sometimes becomes evident as we sit in meditation. Not knowing isn't itself due to ignorance. There are real limits to cognition. For example, we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. When we're hearing, we're not seeing. Appreciating how little we know is wise. It's the degree to which we're disturbed that gives a measure of our ignorance.

There's a lot of purification to be had by learning to steady the mind around the sense of not knowing, if ever that comes up for you. Bearing with any agitation, restlessness, doubt or whatever hindrance comes up, the mind gradually makes peace with not knowing the future, not even knowing a sensation that passed a moment ago. The pause between breaths is sometimes when the sense of not knowing looms large.

As we learn to steady the mind around that, we also get a sense of there being a potential for something to be brought into consciousness, to become known. This allows us to learn about the next stage in dependent origination, *saṅkhāra*. Focusing on this sense of potential, we sense the somewhat ghostly nature of *saṅkhāra*. All our usual av-

enues for experience are there, but being held back. *Saṅkhāra*, remember, are the habits we've developed through our previous thoughts, speech and actions. They're the fruits of *kamma* and exist as a potential for their own repetition.

What we want to avoid doing is repeating unskillful habits based on greed, hatred or delusion. When ignorance is strong, it's easy to identify with that question mark and fall prey to the hindrance of doubt. Then there might be temptation to rush into something, to choose any old course of action, rather than live with doubt and uncertainty. Better to recognise doubt and learn to dwell more peacefully within that state of wonder and potential. Bringing wisdom to these crucial early steps in the chain allows intuitive awareness to bring forth the most appropriate *saṅkhāra*.

Saṅkhāras take three forms. Mental formations, which reflect our habitual feelings and perceptions. Verbal formations, which reflect our habits of thought and evaluation. And bodily formations, such as the in and out breath, which is the bodily habit we're most aware of in formal meditation.

Let's look at some examples of working skillfully with *saṅkhāra*. As we sit in meditation and things quieten down, during a pause between breaths, the little question mark of wonder might grow strong. We sense the tempting potential to think about what might be happening, what we should do. We also sense thinking being held back, recognised as a form of greed, the greed for understanding and control. In that case, body *saṅkhāra* might be the wise route for conscious experience. Consciousness of breath gets stronger and stronger, steadying the mind against the temptation to indulge thought. Here, intuition has chosen bodily *saṅkhāra* as the basis for conscious experience and our habitual urge to think is undermined.

At other times, feeling and perception may be the most skilful habit to come into consciousness. If the uncertainty has brought up strong aversion, the habit of *mettā* would help us bear with this. If we've been practising *mettā* in the past, then a perception of friendliness with associated pleasant feelings might emerge from nowhere, so to speak, to balance the aversion. In this case, intuition chose the mental habit of *mettā* as the basis for conscious experience. We begin to trust that this strange, uncertain world is, at base, a friendly place.

Verbal *saṅkhāra* can also be the skilful choice, especially when that sense of not knowing brings an almost chaotic bewilderment, as if we're an alien not understanding anything about the world. At such times, I found the phrase "this has come to be" surprisingly calming and consoling. It puts some sort of sensible framework around exper-

ience, reminding me that I'm just a human being in a state of bewilderment. In these cases, intuitive awareness has chosen to work through verbal *saṅkhāra*, allowing the thought "this has come to be" to become conscious.

Saṅkhāra, the habits that emerge because of ignorance, form the basis for the next link, *viññāṇa*, consciousness. To get to know this link, we could try to verify the Buddha's insight that there are six distinct types. For example, while listening to a piece of music, look at some visible object. Can you really hear and see at the same time? Or does one or other tend to predominate? In standing meditation, can you really feel both feet on the floor? Or does attention keep switching from one to the other?

Consciousness is coupled together with the following link, *nāma-rūpa*, mind and matter, like two sheaves of wheat balancing one another. *Rūpa* refers to the matter which, in subjective experience, corresponds to four elements: earth, air, water and fire. *Rūpa*, though physical in origin, is brought into mind through sense contact. Remember the first six links up as far as sense contact occur simultaneously. Here we can see how intertwined are the links of dependent origination. Sense contact forms a component of the mind that allows for sense contact to be made. It's not a neat linear process. It's more like an ecosystem with everything intertwined.

Other constituents of mind include intention and attention. Intention, otherwise called will or volition, is the basis for *kamma*, which we create at a much later stage in the cycle, the stage termed becoming. Intention arises at this early stage, *nāma-rūpa*, and then does its business, so to speak, at the much later stage of becoming. If a *saṅkhāra* of greed underlies consciousness, it is this mental factor of intention which allows greed to be acted out in the world and also be carried forward into the future. It's not the thought, act or speech themselves which create *kamma*. The key is the will with which this has been done. Exactly the same thought, speech or action could have been done out of goodwill, resulting in a *saṅkhāra* of *mettā*, starting a new round of conscious experience in the world.

To incline our lives in the direction of freedom, we need to get to know what our motivations are, pull ourselves away from situations if we find they are unskillful.

Attention is another mental factor which we can learn to use skillfully. We are constantly being bombarded with sensory information. Attention is the mental factor that selects out some portion of this to focus on. When we're not being mindful, we're letting *saṅkhāra*, our old ghosts, tell us what to notice. Greed gets us to look for pleasure. Aversion lures attention towards whatever frightens or irritates us. Delusion persuades us to ignore incoming sense data so that we can prioritise daydreams, worries and plans, all of which bolster the concept of me.

By contrast, mindfulness teaches us to bring attention to what will support our spiritual life. For example, the neutral sensations from the breath, which promote tranquility.

Mind and matter form the necessary basis for the next link, the six sense doors. We have the five physical senses plus the mind itself as another sense door. The eyes are sensitive to light and can act as a doorway for visual consciousness. Similarly for the ears and sound, nose and odours and so on.

Let's look in a bit more detail at the sixth sense, the mind as the doorway for mental consciousness. When we're looking at mind as part of *nāma-rūpa*, we were looking at what you might call central headquarters, the aspects of mind that display and process information via feeling and perception, and control experience through attention and intention. The mind door, on the other hand, represents the receptive aspect of mind. It's the mind as a sensor, sensitive to its own activity, much as the eyes are sensitive to light and the ears to vibration. A detector which detects itself.

When we listen to our own thoughts, we are using the mind as a sense door. It's mind-boggling to think about. No wonder we're in such a state of confusion. The mind can act like an echoing chamber or an infinity mirror, detecting its last thought, reacting in the same way, escalating worries till we're a nervous wreck.

Training ourselves to use the mind door wisely is our pathway to freedom. We can learn to stop echoing information unnecessarily. Stop trying to persuade ourselves that the past is still present. Persuade ourselves that thoughts represent reality. This shows us why so much emphasis is put on awareness at the physical sense doors in Vipassanā. The more often we rest attention on physical sensations, the less chance we're giving the mind to go round in circles, thinking a thought, detecting the feelings and perceptions generated by the thought, reacting to them by generating another thought.

We recognise the value of closing down the echo chamber effect of the mind when we stop rehearsing our woes, going over and over our plans, stop the daft daydreams. It's a relief. At times we detect a deeper silence. We might lose the sense of being an individual, a subjective entity to whom experience is happening. Sensations need no further embellishment, no interpretation beyond the experience of them arising and fading. Gradually we start to trust the Buddha's insight that *dukkha* results from ignorance, from constructing a false version of reality because we are not seeing it clearly.

The sense doors provide the opportunity for the sixth link to be made, sense contact. This happens when a sense door is open and has consciousness at one end and a sense object at the other. We've already mentioned sense contact, which can be confusing till you remember that all the first six links are experienced simultaneously.

At the moment the vibrations fall on the ear, a mental image of sound appears on the screen of consciousness. The vibration is only known as its mental component within *nāma*. The bird may be singing in the tree, but the sound I hear is within my own mind. The thought "there's a bird singing in the tree" is a thought. It's a construction we're putting on reality to explain that sound.

Sense contact forms the necessary basis for the next link, feeling, or *vedanā*. We're hardwired to interpret whatever comes in through the sense doors. Our biology is designed to detect whether the environment is safe or threatening, whether there are opportunities out there we should avail of, like food, shelter, company. Once sense contact is made, the mind processes this to produce a feeling. Comparing this sense input to previous ones, it works out whether to signal pleasure or danger. If a match can be made with a good memory, a pleasant feeling is generated. If it's a bad memory, an unpleasant feeling results. If it matches up with memories that were not in any way special, then a neutral feeling is generated.

Feelings, *vedanā* in Pali, are also part of the mind. They're not out there in the world. They're internal, peculiar to each individual. We easily overlook this. We believe "this person is terrific, beautiful, good fun." What we're doing is to project our internal feelings onto the person, embellishing them, concocting stories based on the good feeling we get when we meet them. But then we feel horribly let down if the person is in a bad humour. Our expectations aren't being met. Perplexed, we might add all manner of daft stories to the unpleasant feeling of disappointment. That they must be ill, that something terrible has happened, that they're rejecting us, that we've done something horrible to deserve a snub.

If we can sensitise ourselves to our feelings, we can stop creating unnecessary stories around these. It helps undermine the reactive stories to let attention rest on feelings, discerning whether they are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, whether they are associated with worldly concerns or with the spiritual life. This is a practice the Buddha specifically recommends.

As we all know, however, this is not so easy. Our habit is to indulge feelings by forming the next link called *taṇhā* in Pali, translated as craving or desire. This, according to the Buddha, is the cause of all our suffering. We crave more of whatever gives us a pleasant feeling. We crave to get rid of unpleasant feelings. We crave to ignore neutral feelings.

Unlike contact and feeling, craving isn't a basic constituent of mind. Contact, feeling and other elements of *nāma* can be likened to atoms of experience. They can't be broken up, explored in more depth. We can be aware of these as entities in themselves, just as sensation, just as feeling tone, just as a mind state. Craving and all the links beyond craving aren't so simple.

Remember, the cycle from ignorance to *dukkha* can happen thousands of times a second, so there is time for a thousand different *saṅkhāras* to underlie a thousand feelings, sensations and perceptions in even one second of craving or clinging. It's like putting atoms together to form molecules, putting molecules together to form a cell, and so on, till we have a new being.

When we're paying close attention, we can start to deconstruct the monster. We'll see that the experience of craving can be analysed down to several moments of sense contact, each with its own feeling tones. Physically craving is often felt as pulling or pushing, lack of force within the body, a strong flow of energy. Mentally, we might sense a willful focusing of mind. We get tunnel vision, all attention being drawn toward what we want or don't want, pushed away from what we want to ignore.

Even though craving is the cause of suffering, we shouldn't repress it in *vipassanā*. We need to get to know the experience. If we find ourselves rushing towards the dining room for dinner, that's a great time to slow down, bring attention inward, feel the mental and physical energies that are compelling you to rush. Often, there will be a mixture of craving and the next link, clinging, at this stage.

Clinging, *upādāna* in Pali, is sometimes called grasping. This generates a sense of self. It's as if many molecules of craving fuse together to create a central headquarters for this new activity, getting what I want, getting rid of what I don't want, ignoring what I deem irrelevant.

Let's look at how we might recognise grasping, *upādāna*, resulting from reacting with desire at the thought of buttered toast. Desire might have been felt as a rush of physical energy when the mind suddenly zoomed into that thought. A second later, those energies have coalesced into an empowered feeling of me. This is grasping. It

might be felt as a solidifying within body and mind. A moment ago, experience may have been nebulous. Now it seems I'm a whole entire person with a very definite agenda.

If we've previously trained ourselves to take an interest in the experience of craving, then *saṅkhāras* of mindfulness could also be underlying consciousness, making us aware of greed. *Saṅkhāras* of restraint could prompt us to think again, to hold back from indulgence. It often seems as though we have multiple selves, all pulling us in different directions. Again, it's important to allow the experience of clinging become fully known within *vipassanā*, rather than suppress this.

Some of these selves we construct are wise. For example, the mindful, restrained aspects of our character can hold us in check while the greedy aspect is yelling for buttered toast. So we can welcome each experience of grasping. These give mindfulness a chance to learn how to grasp onto whatever safety hook might be available in times of trouble.

Every greed will have its moment in the sun. For example, there may come a time when we're curled up in fear and dread of a scary world. At that moment, intuition might well choose a *saṅkhāra* of greed as the wisest basis for conscious experience. We grasp onto anything pleasant. Could be a thought like, there must be something better than this. It's wise to grasp this glimmer of hope with all our might until the spectre of fear has dissipated. With mindfulness, we learn how to grasp wisely till the need to grasp is over.

If we're not being mindful, however, greedy *saṅkhāras* will easily get the upper hand and we're on to the next link. This is termed becoming, *bhava* in Pali. This is the moment when will becomes action. We start moving towards the toaster. What was a possibility, a potential, now becomes reality. It's sensed as a release. All those tensions stirred up by desire and grasping now have somewhere to go. At this moment, we create *kamma*. Acting on *saṅkhāras* of greed strengthens this habit in our character, makes it more likely that greed will haunt us in the future.

It could happen, of course, that we were mindful at the point of grasping, and instead of rushing towards the toaster, we've decided to act on the *saṅkhāra* of restraint. We make a firm decision not to make toast. It's often a good idea to make some physical activity here as well, so that the energies stirred up by the earlier stages have somewhere to go. For example, walking to a window, looking out, whatever will help reinforce the decision. Thoughts also involve will. And so when we make the decision, we also create *kamma*, making it more likely that we'll be able to restrain ourselves in the future.

But if we've been snared by greed, we run to the penultimate link, termed birth. We're making the toast, buttering it, eating it. We now have ten minutes or more where greed can have a field day. We might be daydreaming, worrying, thinking of a thousand different things throughout the process, hardly even noticing the taste of toast when it hits the tongue. Each thought, each mindless body movement sows more *kamma*, getting us ever more hooked on greed, mindlessness, daydreams, worries and restlessness. If greed had prompted the birth of, say, a night in the pub getting drunk, the potential for harm would be even greater.

This penultimate link, birth, sets our life on a certain trajectory which reinforces whatever habit prompts the activity in the first place. But even here, mindfulness might prevail, giving us a chance to limit the damage. We could decide to slow down, to relax and enjoy the treat of buttered toast. You might even decide to forego the last morsel, give it to the birds, as a symbolic step towards restraint. And of course we can take wholesome births, for example, going on retreat. Each step in dependent arising can be used wisely once we know what we're doing.

And keep reminding yourself that the whole process is happening in any moment. So even if, at a gross level, we've taken birth as a toast eater, we can pause at any moment to feel the desires and clinging underlying this. As an aside, let's remember that dependent arising is occurring at many, many levels in life and we've all taken birth in various forms as a parent, a sister, an engineer. We took birth as a human being at our physical birth. All of these births are being acted out moment after moment.

Back to our mini birth as a devourer of buttered toast. Once the last crumb has disappeared, we have the final link in the chain, termed death. The Buddha describes this also as sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. The pleasure is over. All that's left are sticky teeth, a bloated tummy, dirty dishes and the need to buy more bread. The term death sounds melodramatic but as practice deepens we get more sensitive to the miseries we can experience when delusive pleasure comes to an end.

On retreat some years ago I had been looking forward eagerly to the evening meal on my last day. With great relish, I sat down to a bowl of steaming soup. But as the bowl emptied, it was as if my world came to an end. Deep grief, believe it or not. Worldly pleasures don't last. Delusion gets us to ignore that obvious reality. We can pin all our hopes on the next meal, the next party, the next activity. Once they're over, discontent rears its head again, intensified because our latest hopes for happiness have been dashed. We might feel painfully disappointed. Usually, we skip quickly over this final link, busy ourselves with some new activity. But we'll never escape *dukkha* that way.

Don't underestimate the value of mindfulness at this final stage of *dukkha*. If we're willing to feel our disappointment, this is a powerful teacher. In fact, many people start their spiritual journey because of some form of death. It might be a physical death, the loss of a loved one. It might be a relationship breakup, losing our job, failing an exam, seeing the first wrinkles appear. In some way or other, we are suddenly jolted into the more painful realities of life. Not knowing how to cope, we look for wisdom, for some alternative to a life based on temporary pleasures.

So even if we've missed every single cue and ended up with toothache, bellyache and never want to see another slice of toast, it's possible to learn from this *dukkha*. Each and every mini-death we go through mindfully eats away at ignorance, our basic problem. I never again pinned so much hope on an evening meal following that grief-filled bowl of soup.

We undermine ignorance with wisdom. The better we know any of the links in dependent arising, the more wisdom we are gaining. So pick whichever one is most obvious at any time, or whichever naturally attracts your curiosity. The Buddha clarifies that we can halt the process at *vedanā*. We can become completely convinced that reactions of craving only lead to suffering. In tandem, we develop the taste for equanimity and tranquillity, for not allowing ignorance drive us to *dukkha*.

With that, we can resist the allure of pleasant feeling and aversion towards the unpleasant. We don't have to suppress these reactions out of fear or judgment. Instead, we relax, trust wisdom to do the work. When we can dare to trust, intuitive intelligence can start to tease out ways to protect us from repeating the cycle. It can be fascinating to watch how the intuitive intelligence rescues us from our unskillful habits. What I sometimes find is that it uses some other habit to pull me back from the current of danger.

For example, I might be watching anger and on the verge of strong condemnation. Many of the final links can be felt within experience. *Tanhā*, craving, can be felt as a tense pushing within my body and my mind almost splitting in two. Grasping expresses itself as a solid sense of me, the righteous one. There's a feeling of power associated with this image of myself and it's almost as if my body is being shaped as a large fist which is clasp tightly around the mind state. All the earlier links are embedded within the experience too. The sensations of grasping include unpleasant feelings of tension, sweetly pleasant feelings of self-righteousness, the habitual formation of anger and so on.

I teeter on the cusp of the next link becoming. This is sensed as if a dam is about to burst. I know that all my powerful, self-righteous energies could burst through the dam and be released into a torrent of angry thoughts. At times the dam bursts. This feels like a relief and pleasant feelings become more apparent. But because of mindfulness, these pleasant feelings might also get associated with perceptions of friendliness. This can change everything. Self-righteousness cools a bit, remembering the value of friendship. The *saṅkhāra* of doubt might then become conscious, giving me pause for thought.

This, I find, is a really interesting aspect of the whole process. A *saṅkhāra* of doubt is normally unskillful, but can be used skillfully by intuitive awareness in many situations. In this case, it's not arising out of ignorance. Mindfulness is present, and intuition senses doubt as my best route out of the mess I've created. This shows why we need to allow all our various habits be expressed in *vipassanā*. The more we get to know their expression, the more readily they can be used to rescue us from situations. Anger could be a wise route to stabilize us against fear, for example. Greed could help us move on from despair. There is hope, even within all our unskillful habits.

At other times, the transition from craving to equanimity might be quite smooth. In fact, we might not even understand exactly why, but our attitude has changed. One moment we were fretting, doing our best to keep mindfulness afloat, but in constant danger of identifying with thoughts and feelings. The next moment we're okay with the experience. The sensations and feelings are the same, but we're no longer identifying with these, no longer troubled by them.

The teacher, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, puts this down to the complexity of dependent arising. As for an ecosystem or almost any aspect of modern society, the system has feedback loops which, in normal circumstances, positively reinforce the system, making it robust. But complex systems run into trouble when the environment changes. There are tipping points where the system becomes vulnerable. Once the tipping point has been reached, negative feedback starts to predominate and the system starts to fail and can even disintegrate, just as a bridge might suddenly collapse and as the financial system collapsed in 2008. Nowadays, we greatly fear ecosystem collapse. But within the sphere of dependent arising, collapse is welcome. We want to move towards that tipping point where our behaviour starts to change radically, where the whole complex tangle that ensnares us in suffering starts to unravel.

The environment for dependent arising is wisdom. While this is at a low level, while we're ignorant, the system flourishes and binds us tightly into unskillful habits. But mindfulness chips away at ignorance, drives the system towards its tipping point. Once we start to see how dependent arising works, intuition can use our understanding to

undermine the process and bring about the conditions which favour collapse. The system will collapse totally and forever at the moment of enlightenment. But we sense many disintegrations along the way.

I mention these because we should welcome them but the sudden change might leave us perplexed. One example would be the abrupt attitude change from fretful to equanimous. Resistance can suddenly evaporate. At other times we might suddenly see through the fallacy of our thoughts, as if a veil had been lifted from our eyes. We wonder why we hadn't been able to see what was so totally obvious. At other times, it's as if we can feel threads of delusion snapping as we relax. One moment we're blowing up a bubble of thought, the next moment the bubble has burst.

We can welcome all these abrupt changes as evidence that the system that binds us to *dukkha* is starting to crumble. Each moment of mindfulness undermines ignorance, drives the system that bit closer to its tipping point. I hope this talk encourages you to increase your understanding of dependent arising, getting to know whichever of the twelve links seems most apparent, trusting that this knowledge is bringing you closer to the end of suffering.

Divine Abiding: Equanimity

Noirin Sheahan · 45 min

In this retreat talk, Noirin Sheahan introduces the brahmavihāra (divine abodes) meditation practices, focusing particularly on equanimity (upekkhā). She explains how these sublime states complement vipassanā practice, with equanimity serving as the wisdom-based foundation that prevents attachment in our cultivation of mettā, compassion, and sympathetic joy. Drawing from traditional Buddhist teachings, Noirin distinguishes equanimity from its near enemy of indifference and its far enemy of reactivity. She offers practical phrases like "all beings are owners of their kamma" and "may we each find our own paths to peace" for formal practice and daily life application. The talk explores how equanimity allows us to maintain loving relationships while respecting others' autonomy and bearing life's inevitable changes with grace. Noirin emphasizes that equanimity, rooted in wisdom rather than feeling, enables us to acknowledge difficult emotions without being overwhelmed by them, creating the spaciousness needed for genuine compassion and appropriate responses to life's circumstances.

So far in this retreat we have been discussing Vipassanā meditation, especially as described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. For the next few days I want to talk about another approach to meditation described by the Buddha. This is termed *Brahmavihāra* practice. The term *Brahmavihāra* can be translated as a sublime state or more poetically as a heavenly abode.

Here is a passage from the Buddha's teaching on the *Brahmavihāra*: "Here monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with loving kindness. Likewise the second, the third and the fourth direction. So above, below and around. He dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with loving kindness. Abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress. Here monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with compassion, likewise the second and so on as before." The next verse repeats this for a heart filled with appreciative joy and the final verse repeats it for a heart filled with equanimity.

So in this form of meditation we are not simply observing our experience but deliberately filling our hearts with kindness or compassion or joy or equanimity and radiating these throughout the world.

Some teachers argue that there is no need to practice Brahmavihāra because Vipassanā naturally cultivates these sublime states. In support of this approach there is the fact that the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta does not include a contemplation of the Brahmavihāra. So this form of meditation is not a necessary component of the direct path to enlightenment.

Other teachers put great emphasis on cultivating goodwill and the other sublime states as the attitude needed in order to practice Vipassanā. In support of this there are many teachings the Buddha gives on the importance of goodwill and I'll mention some of these over the coming days.

So how can we bring these views together? Very often the attempt to fill the heart with loving kindness will show us how difficult this is. And so we have to cope with frustration, perhaps a sense of failure, confusion or anger and other ways the hindrances show up when we find our wishes are being thwarted.

When this happens, I found a great relief in the fact that Brahmavihāra meditation isn't included in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. So I feel perfectly justified in relaxing any effort to generate goodwill. Instead, I sit back and let Vipassanā acknowledge and explore these negative reactions.

But I've come to value reflections on goodwill and the other Brahmavihāra as a way of softening my Vipassanā practice. The two approaches complement each other well. The more often we make the effort to cultivate the Brahmavihāra, the more often this new habit will be expressed quite naturally in Vipassanā. Thus the observer is often watching goodwill, compassion, *mudita* or equanimity being cultivated quite naturally and without any deliberate effort in this direction. Vipassanā becomes a relaxed kind of Brahmavihāra practice.

In formal Brahmavihāra practice there is the extra effort to bring about wholesome states of mind but running parallel with this is the observation of whatever emotions are coming up. Then the effort can be softened or stepped up so as not to be overwhelmed by the negative states. Thus the two practices support and complement one another.

Coming back to whether or not we need to practice the Brahmavihāra in addition to Vipassanā, I follow the approach taken by Bhante and other teachers and think of Vipassanā as my main practice, but augment this with short stretches of Brahmavihāra practice, just as we do at night here on retreat. In daily life, the main emphasis is on putting the Brahmavihāra into action. This effort being supported by mindfulness and continually tailored to suit the particular situation.

The Brahmavihāra describe the enlightened heart's relationship to others. Goodwill, *mettā*. Compassion, the Pali term is *karuṇā*. Appreciative Joy, *muditā* in Pali and Equanimity, *upekkhā* in Pali. For this talk I'll use the Pali term *mettā* since that is so widely understood and also *muditā* instead of Appreciative Joy as that's a bit of a mouthful in English. But I'll just use the English words for Compassion and Equanimity.

The Brahmavihāra are the orientations of mind and heart needed to respond appropriately to the ups and downs of human relationships. If we can summon these states at will, we can always be in perfect harmony with others and with whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

As a basis, we have *mettā*, or good will. We want all beings to be happy and well. This is the default. Goodwill applies in all situations. If we find a friend in any sort of difficulty, goodwill takes on the shade of compassion. We empathise and wish their suffering will end. On the other hand, we can find them bouncing with good news. Goodwill takes on the hue of *muditā*. We are delighted for them. If they get involved in another relationship and don't have much time for us, goodwill takes on the form of equanimity. We respect their boundaries and their independence and wish them well in their new life.

The first three have the effect of opening our hearts to others, while the latter provides the balance required to prevent a slide into over-attachment, dependency and other dangers of close relationships. I'll be saying more about each of the Brahmavihāra later and over the next days but first I want to go over the formal meditation practice which is identical for all four.

Here again is the Buddha's description: "He dwells pervading the entire world, everywhere and equally, with his heart filled with loving kindness, abundant, grown great, measureless, free of enmity and free from distress." This is a very exalted state he is describing, which can inspire us deeply. But there is a danger. We will let our imagination be transported to a heavenly realm in a delusive way, clinging to a notion of heavenly bliss which has me as the source of all, as I liberally bestow my good wishes on all around.

To make the practice more real and grounded, we usually start with wishing well to real individuals. These are the various categories of people we think of in our regular *mettā* practice. Ourselves, a benefactor, close family and friends and so on. We start with whoever most easily stirs our friendly feelings.

For many people, this is someone who you think of as a benefactor. This could be a parent, brother, sister, uncle, aunt or grandparent. It could be a teacher or a friend. It could be a favourite pet. Or you could focus on a public figure you admire like Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi. It could be an author or poet whose work you love. Or you could use a spiritual figure, the Buddha, Kuan Yin, Jesus, Mary or any of the saints.

You can use different benefactors for different Brahmavihāra. For example, the person who best evokes *muditā* might not be the person who best evokes compassion. For *muditā*, you would want to be thinking of someone who has something to celebrate. while compassion is most easily stirred when we think of someone going through a tough time.

Then there is the often tricky business of offering ourselves good wishes. Sometimes we think of this as selfish, but this is a misunderstanding. Selfishness means clinging tightly to whatever we desire. In Brahmavihāra practice we are generous with our good wishes. We are giving without expectation of return. So too we wish ourselves well without building that into an expectation of what form the future will take for us. It's like the marriage vows, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer. We are developing an attitude of unconditional support for ourselves in all circumstances. This is not selfish, it is the essential psychological basis for living a good life.

Often we feel we don't deserve any good wishes, that we only deserve to be miserable. What's needed here is self-forgiveness. We can remind ourselves that whatever wrongs we've done they've happened in the past. They don't have to shape our future. We can't become the good person we feel we ought to be unless we are willing to believe in our potential for goodness and encourage ourselves in that direction. Paradoxically the times we feel most unworthy of good wishes are the times we most deeply need them.

At other times we might feel all buoyed up and confident about wishing others well but that it's a waste of time wishing ourselves well. We're fine, we don't need any good wishes. What's actually going on is that we're denying our vulnerability. We're running on willpower, suppressing any suggestions of neediness or frailty. What's needed here is a combination of self-compassion for the underlying feelings, the *muditā* for the streak of self-confidence that is keeping us going.

All in all, the self can be the hardest of all categories for Brahmavihāra practice.

When we come to the category of close friends it's best to choose someone with whom we have a warm relationship but don't feel a romantic or sexual attraction. The problem with those attractions is that they easily stir strong emotions that swamp our simple goodwill. I'm saying simple because it needs to be a pure giving without expectation of return. It's a straightforward good wish like, I hope all goes well for you.

If we feel romantically, sexually attracted, we're very likely to want the person to think only about us. We're not that interested in the rest of their lives. So our good wishes are a kind of net we're trapping them inside. Though our minds might be saying, may you be happy, our heart is secretly whispering. May you love and adore me because I have your best interests at heart and no one will ever love you as I do. Though we may be able to sustain this focus for a long time, all we are doing really is to strengthen the bonds of attachment, not of goodwill.

This is one of the toughest aspects of Brahmavihāra practice. To keep our good will simple and pure with no strings attached. The particular divine state that helps us with this is equanimity. And I'll talk more about that later this evening.

For the moment, let's leave this category of close friend by saying that if you sense that a pure, more disinterested attitude of *mettā* has established itself in your mind, then at that point you could start to include those for whom you feel romantic or sexual love. You'll then be able to feel the shift towards possessiveness and know the danger.

The difficult person category presents a different challenge. This time the emotions being stirred up are of the aversive type. Anger, condemnation, irritation, fear, hatred. It's best not to start with our worst enemy, but practice on someone who we find irritating for some reason. It could be easier to start with equanimity style good wishes such as, may you not harm yourself or others, before switching to *mettā* style wishes like, may you be happy.

When we've gone through the various categories of people, we then start radiating spatially as the Buddha suggests. Again to keep this grounded in reality we usually start with our immediate surroundings like all of us under the same roof. Then we gradually widen the circle to our neighbourhood, country, continent and the whole world before encompassing all beings in all directions.

Each Brahmavihāra is associated with what are termed its near or subtle enemies and its far or direct enemies. The far enemy is the polar opposite of the divine abode, hatred, cruelty, etc. The near enemy can easily be mistaken for the truly divine abiding, attachment being mistaken for *mettā*, pity for compassion.

Much of the challenge in Brahmavihāra practice involves learning to recognize and work around these enemies as well as all the usual hindrances, wandering mind, aversion, sleepiness, etc. While Vipassanā asks us to turn attention directly on the hindrance, Brahmavihāra practice asks us to try to minimize their disturbance. For example, if we get uncomfortable, we don't try to sit it out as we might in Vipassanā. We just make ourselves more comfortable. Similarly, we switch back to the least challenging category whenever we get swamped by an enemy. In a sense, we dodge around the challenges and look for the line of least resistance, and we trust that perseverance will eventually establish the good habit as our new default.

Let's explore the difference between Brahmavihāra and Vipassanā meditation practices a little further. In Vipassanā, the ultimate aim is to cultivate wisdom. We're following the Buddha's quest to find a way to live happily in a world that includes the decay and death of all we love. We're looking for an escape from stress and suffering. So in Vipassanā we look directly at whatever takes our attention in order to see its transient unsatisfactory nature and that it's not within our power to control. It is not me or mine. This way of seeing gradually undercuts our habitual attachments. As wisdom deepens the heart is purified of greed and hatred. In a natural, unforced way, the Brahmavihāra are strengthened. It also gives us glimpses of what might not be transitory or unsatisfactory. We're learning to escape moment by moment from the limitations of being bound up in the world. To the extent that we have loosened the bonds of attachment and aversion, we are free. And freedom, we find, allows a natural friendliness to emerge whenever we think of ourselves or others.

In Brahmavihāra practice we are taking a different tack. We are letting our current level of wisdom be expressed in the form of good wishes for ourselves and others. Think of a lake from which a river flows to the sea. The lake represents wisdom and the river represents goodwill. In Vipassanā the lake is being filled with streams from the mountains. The lake is open, receptive. It doesn't matter whether the streams bring down muck and rocks from the mountains as well. The water lets them all pour in and that's all that matters. In the clear open space of the lake the rocks do their rocky thing and sink to the bottom. The muck floats around for a while, releases some of its water before the solid particles filtering down into the bed.

In Brahmavihāra meditation the lake is overflowing its boundaries and pouring itself into the river. At the boundary of the lake and the river there is a bank of rock and muck. At times the lake waters are high and overflow this bank effortlessly. This is when goodwill emerges naturally and easily without any opposing emotions. At other times the bank is showing through but the lake waters are powerful enough to be sweeping through the muck and rocks in its way. This is when we are putting an effort

into our Brahmavihāra practice, refusing to let ourselves be overcome by whatever emotions are emerging. We're breaking down the banks separating the Lake of Wisdom from the River of Goodwill.

After a while the water level drops to where the bank is more entrenched and firm. The lake waters have to be patient and find little chinks in the bank through which they seep through to keep a trickle of river flowing. This is where we're working very sensitively with our emotions in Brahmavihāra practice. We're dodging around the tight knots of aversion or desire, loosening them a chink here and there. Although it's hard work, we're eating away at the foundations of the solid bank, separating the lake from the river, separating our wisdom from its natural expression of goodwill.

When the lake can't get any flow at all through the bank, it has to wait till it fills up again from the mountain streams. This is when we decide to take a Vipassanā break in our *mettā* practice to get some clear space around whatever emotions have been thrown up.

In Vipassanā, we are receptive and open, exploring everything without judgment. Anything goes. In Brahmavihāra practice we're on a mission. We're putting all our energy into goodwill. We're not interested in the shape and texture of what gets in our way. We're only interested in finding a way around it.

Let's look for a moment at some of these rocks that can block up the channel between the lake and the river. Our minds keep wandering or we fall asleep or the enemies keep showing up. The temptation is to compound the problem by thinking, I'm such a rotten person, I can't even wish my best friend well. This is a dead end. We're unwittingly undermining our goodwill by self-criticism.

The teaching on *anattā* can help here, which says that there is nothing permanent or substantial in what we normally think of as our individual being. Our feelings, emotions, etc. shift and change with circumstances. So the wandering mind, the emotions of the various enemies that emerge, none of these are mine. None of them constitute me. They come and go depending on conditions.

So instead of blaming yourself, think about the conditions and whether anything could be changed. Would it help to look at a flower, a candle flame, an image? Does goodwill flow more easily when there is a chant playing in the background? Maybe it helps to lie down. Can a gesture help, like putting a hand on your heart? Don't be afraid to experiment. This is another form of *mettā* practice, learning to be kind to ourselves during the frustrations that show up in Brahmavihāra challenges.

One of the conditions that undermines goodwill is fear of failure. The term divine abode can set up high expectations that in themselves bring up the fear of failure.

We forget that what we are doing is a practice aimed in the direction of divinity. I suffered from that problem for many years until I accepted that working tenderly with fear of failure was in fact a fully acceptable *Brahma-vihāra* practice. *Mettā* took on the shade of compassion as I turned toward the fear and found some way of expressing support. The very simple gesture of stroking the back of my hand helped enormously. Although I was feeling small and incompetent, the *Brahma-vihāra* was being expressed as willingness to accept and work with that. An image of petting a scared puppy also helped.

Remember, we don't have to feel friendly, compassionate, joyful, equanimous to practice the *Brahma-vihāra*. As the saying goes, it's the thought that counts, or at times the gesture, like stroking the back of our hands. This simple gesture gradually reassured me that my own goodwill was genuine and reliable and that I didn't have to feel inadequate. *Brahma-vihāra* practice became much easier when I knew I could turn fear of failure into a practice of compassion.

So far we've been looking at the formal practice, but of course relating to others is a huge component of daily life. So we need to let our *Brahma-vihāra* practice on the cushion find its way into everyday situations. Again, the default is *mettā*. We can make friendly good wishes in all situations. Watching or listening to the news is usually an opportunity for *mettā* to shade towards compassion. If we're stuck in a crowd of cheering football supporters, we can wish that their happiness will continue, even through gritted teeth. This is *mettā* in the shade of *muditā*. If a friend refuses to listen to our advice, we can remember that they are free to choose their own path in life and wish them well with whatever they choose to do. This is *mettā* in the shade of equanimity.

We can also monitor our mood and respond appropriately. In all situations, we can wish ourselves well. When our mood turns sour, we can take a moment to acknowledge and comfort ourselves as best we can. This is a practice of self-compassion. When we do anything well or someone compliments us, we can take a moment for *muditā*. If we find ourselves worrying unduly about someone, we can remind ourselves that they have their own lives to live and that they have all the resources they need within themselves for perfect happiness. This is the practice of equanimity.

We can also bring our activities into our practice. As we're switching on the TV, we can wish that this will help us feel more connected with the world or help us relax and let go of the stresses of the day. If we're taking a snack, we can wish that this might uplift us and give us the energy and joy we need to carry on. As we're going to meet a

friend, we can wish that the encounter will help us both feel happy. Before we go into a meeting, we can wish that the business will benefit all concerned with our work. Whether we are cooking, teaching, repairing machines, emailing or visiting a friend, all of these can be dedicated to our own and others' welfare.

That has given a general introduction to *Brahma-vihāra* practice. For the rest of this talk and over the next evenings, we look more closely at each of the four divine abodes. I want to start with what's usually left to last, equanimity. The reason I'm starting here is because it's the *Brahma-vihāra* most closely associated with *vipassanā*. Also it helps with overcoming the enemies of the other *Brahma-vihāra*. We've already met with equanimity in the factors of enlightenment. In our wild geese analogy, equanimity was the bird with the wide open wingspan, steadying the rest of the flock through the ups and downs of the journey. When we're looking at *Brahma-vihāra*, we're seeing how that steadiness can come to our aid and be expressed in our relationships with others.

In everyday language, equanimity is described as mental and emotional stability and composure, even under duress. Equanimity is born of wisdom. It is the imperturbable balance of mind that follows from insight into the true nature of reality. When we understand that letting go of reactivity to pleasure and pain brings peace, we will no longer be so foolish as to react angrily to disappointments or excitedly to life's enticements. In the face of interpersonal relationships, equanimity sustains us through the loss of loved ones, rejections, insults, seduction and so on. With equanimity, we can acknowledge evil and danger and take appropriate care without blaming whoever is presenting the threat. Similarly, equanimity lets us enjoy all the benefits of knowing intelligent, delightful people without idolising them or clinging to them in a needy way, fearful of rejection.

Equanimity is often confused with tranquillity, which is a felt sense of calm and peace. But equanimity itself is rooted in wisdom, not in feeling. With equanimity we might feel angry, upset, confused, but we will not act from these feelings. We will bear with them, knowing that just bearing these feelings is the path to deeper wisdom and therefore deeper happiness and peace.

Equanimity develops as we learn to let go. Consider any of the major steps in life. A child's first day at school, graduation, 21st birthday, marriage. In all these, a new phase of life opens while the previous one is lost. Often the grief of loss goes unacknowledged in all the excitement and so the father still nags his 50-year-old son about spending too much money and the 60-year-old daughter worries whether her mum will like the dress she plans to wear for her retirement party. Equanimity allows the sorrow within each milestone to be acknowledged. Our grip on our old parent-child roles loosens. The

child finds parenting skills within themselves. The parent discovers their own childlike joys. Each sees the other in a new light with more gratitude and respect and less expectation.

Just as we need to let go of parent-child roles and demands, each relationship in life requires us to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. Our best friend moves abroad. Our sister dies. Our spouse asks for a divorce. These are harsh examples, but in minor ways the bonds of friendship are tested every day. Equanimity provides the spaciousness of heart and mind needed to accommodate all the hurts, misunderstandings and disappointments inherent in human relationships.

Equanimity also keeps us calm throughout the ups and downs of our internal life. It gives us a wider perspective on our needs, fears, ambitions and dislikes. We can feel our moods going down without shrinking into despair. And if we wake up soaring with confidence, we are delighted. But don't zoom into ambitious plans and firm commitments, assuming this is the real me and that we'll never have a moment's misery for the rest of our lives.

The analogy of space is a good way of picturing equanimity. The space doesn't react when daggers and bullets fly through it. Neither does it curl up around sweet cakes, hoarding them against the intruders. Space accommodates pleasant and unpleasant, good and evil. The far or direct enemy of equanimity is reactivity. If equanimity is like space, reactivity is a hard surface that things collide into, exploding on impact. We want things to fit in with the expectations and patterns we feel safe with. When this doesn't happen, the external world hits our wall of reactivity. This hurts. Shrapnel flies all around and others get hurt too, often setting off a chain reaction.

We build walls of reactivity in an attempt to shut out people who push our buttons. We dismiss, ignore or belittle their approaches. They resent this and poke at us again and again in retaliation. With every hurt we reinforce the walls. We're tense even when they are miles away because the thought of them isn't miles away. We carry our enemies around with us. Likewise, when we idolise someone, we unwittingly build walls of reactivity around them. Every word they say, every move they make impacts us deeply. This ends up stifling the relationship. Neither party can breathe freely.

The near or subtle enemy of equanimity is indifference. We mistake indifference for equanimity because we don't feel any way disturbed by others. They can be in a rotten temper but we are able to shrug it off. What they say doesn't matter to us. We barely notice them. Indifference is actually another wall we build in an effort to shield ourselves from the potential for hurt in human relationships. Although things pass us by without impact, others feel our indifference as coldness and rejection. We can't em-

pathise with people who are bereaved or having a relationship break-up. We wonder why they can't just forget it and get on with life. And when a major calamity strikes us, we can't relate to our own confusion and upset. We keep all the emotional turmoil hidden with denial. We can't reach out for help because we don't even know we need any help. Indifference in its quiet way can be just as destructive as anger both for ourselves and for our relationships.

The classic phrase used to develop equanimity is all beings are owners of their *kamma*. An understanding of the law of *kamma* forms the basis for wise relationship. Ultimately, happiness is a habit of mind, the fruit of good *kamma*, meaning speech, actions and thoughts motivated by kindness and wisdom. The *Brahma-vihāra* cultivate happiness, while speech, thought and deeds motivated by ill-will, greed, delusion cultivate unhappiness. An angry retort or spiteful remark can give us a temporary feeling of power but the long-term price is a damaged relationship and a guilty conscience. Happiness rests on a clear conscience and universal goodwill.

The aim of repeating the phrase all beings are owners of their *kamma* is to give us a wise perspective to see that happiness is each person's own responsibility. But *kamma-saka* is a very loaded phrase. It could help to break it down. May I accept the fruits of *kamma* to help us bear with the difficulties and we can wish the same for others. On the positive side we could wish may I sow only good *kamma* for the future to help us develop new habits leading to happiness and we can wish the same for others.

If the whole notion of *kamma* seems foreign or confusing, here are a few alternative suggestions. May we each find our own paths to peace. I find this helps, especially when I'm anxiously worrying about a friend. Perhaps they are, in my view, taking a wrong turn. They have ignored my perfectly reasonable and wise advice and are going to do things their own way. Damn them. To counter the mix of anger, indignation and anxiety, I repeat, may we each find our own paths to peace. Till I can smile at my deluded insistence that I know the way out of everyone's troubles.

Very much related to this is the phrase, May my wisdom guide me and your wisdom guide you. It's especially useful after a disagreement. When I find myself repeating my opinions to myself over and over again, I switch to that phrase. It helps me acknowledge the wisdom of my viewpoint in a healthy way that leaves room for the very tiny possibility that the other person might have some wisdom too. In time, I again begin to smile at my arrogance and might even begin to see the other person's point of view.

When someone pushes a button and I feel myself rising up in anger, the phrase, may I not react to your behaviour, saves me from making the situation worse. It pulls attention back to myself on what is in my long-term interest. Anger, on the other hand, pulls

my attention outwards towards the other person and all that I find horrid about them at that moment. By repeating, may I not react to your behaviour, I am reminded that my primary business in life is to follow the Eightfold Path, and saves me from making a whole lot of unnecessary bad *kamma*.

When there isn't any particular difficulty that I'm trying to combat, the phrase, may I trust my Buddha nature, helps me generate equanimity within myself. I then extend this to others with, may you trust in your Buddha nature. All of these phrases evoke the understanding that we are each responsible for our own happiness and we each have all the resources needed for perfect happiness.

At times, very simple reassurances like, it's all okay, take it easy, give us a measure of tranquillity to help us through a challenge without making things worse. Later we can try some of the wisdom phrases suggested above, so as to distil the wisdom from the difficulty.

In the case of formal equanimity meditation, it often works best to start with *mettā* for one of the easier categories and then switch to whatever phrase evokes equanimity. If you're feeling somewhat emotional or out of sorts, it may be easiest to generate equanimity in the categories we usually leave to last in the other *Brahma-vihāra*. For example, all beings, everyone in the world and gradually work towards home. It's a question of experimenting to see what works best.

If grief, anger or other forms of reactivity show up, don't be surprised. This is a natural part of the purification process. We're experiencing the *dukkha* of close attachment and the difficulty of letting go and acknowledging the other as an independent being. If possible, continue with the practice, simply noting the reaction without giving it any close attention. If it gets overwhelming, switch to an easier category for a while. If the reactivity persists, try self-equanimity. For example, may I find my own path to peace? Or, it's all okay. If your mind won't focus and keeps getting lost in thought without any strong underlying emotion, then it means the near enemy is surfacing. Switch to *mettā* until you again sense a connection with the other person. Then return to the phrases for equanimity. And if the disturbances continue to overwhelm, switch to *vipassanā* to acknowledge whatever emotion is emerging. When the storm abates somewhat, it might be possible to go back to wishing equanimity for yourself or others.

Finally, let's look at some opportunities to develop equanimity in daily life. If a friend lets us down, our partner takes us for granted, our child refuses to listen to advice, a phrase like, may I not be disturbed by your behaviour, prevents us digging a pit of anger or self-pity and reminds us that we need to protect ourselves from bad *kamma*, which would follow from reacting unskillfully.

Any parting requires equanimity, if it is to be properly acknowledged. Making our small goodbyes meaningful prepares us for the major leave-takings in life. Likewise, new beginnings need equanimity. When we start a new project or relationship, we can easily get lost in a sea of false expectation. The phrase, this too will come to an end, gives us some perspective.

We can also practise equanimity in regard to our moods. May I bear this *kamma* willingly? Could help us through the lows. While may I enjoy this without expecting it to last? Can help us through the highs. We could reflect to see what things we get very uptight around. Work, family, some project or hobby. To develop a sense of balance around these, we can tell ourselves, take it easy whenever we feel ourselves going into overdrive. We support equanimity when we let go of busyness in favour of relaxing activities. For example, going out for walks in the open air, cups of tea, stretches, bathing, looking out the window. Whatever gives distance and perspective supports equanimity. *Vipassanā* practice naturally cultivates equanimity. So we should definitely find time for a daily *vipassanā* meditation.

In summary, *Brahma-vihāra* meditation allows the wisdom we gain through *vipassanā* to be expressed as love and care for the world. Three of the *Brahma-vihāra*, *mettā*, compassion and *muditā*, work on our natural desire to connect with others. However, until we are fully enlightened, our love for others will be mixed up with our own needs for security. To help disentangle the knot we have the *Brahma-vihāra* of equanimity. This divine abode rests on the knowledge that each being is responsible for his or her own happiness. We cannot live other people's lives for them. We must keep remembering to let go of others and prioritise our own spiritual needs. This focus on our own path makes us more open and honest with others, which is in itself a very important aspect of kindness.

With equanimity, we allow more space in our close personal relationships and we can bear to take the sufferings of the world to heart without being overwhelmed. May our work with the *Brahma-vihāra* let our wisdom transform to loving relationships with all beings.

Divine Abiding: Goodwill, Mettā

Noirin Sheahan · 41 min

In this retreat talk, Noirin Sheahan explores mettā (loving-kindness or goodwill) as the foundational practice among the four brahmavihāras (divine abodes). She examines the Buddha's teaching that mettā should embody the unconditional care of an ideal mother for her only child—altruistic, universal, and free from expectation.

The talk addresses the far enemies of mettā (ill-will, anger, self-blame) and near enemies (attachment, neediness), offering practical guidance for working with these obstacles in formal meditation and daily life. Noirin discusses the integration of mettā with vipassanā practice, emphasizing that the sincere intention matters more than feeling states.

A significant portion explores the Buddha's teaching on kalyāṇamitra (spiritual friendship), where he tells Ānanda that admirable friendship constitutes 'the whole of the holy life.' Noirin examines how dharma community supports our practice and the challenge of recognizing and emulating virtues in our spiritual companions. She concludes with guidance on devotional practice—developing a personal relationship with the Buddha as the ultimate spiritual friend.

I want to continue the exploration of the four divine abodes, which in Pali are known as the *Brahma Vihara*. The focus tonight is on *metta*, which is the basis for all the *Brahma Vihara*. *Metta* is often translated as loving kindness, or more simply as goodwill. It can also be described as inoffensiveness and non-harming. In positive terms, it describes an open-hearted attitude, warmth, friendliness, benevolence, care.

The analogy the Buddha gives is the ideal mother's love for her only child. She's totally devoted, giving attention and affection without expecting anything in return. She forgives misbehaviour instantly and harbours no resentment. That is the ideal we have to aim at. Quite a challenge.

True *metta* is based on altruism rather than mundane self-interest. It is universal, applying to strangers, animals and other beings, as much as to ourselves and our closest family and friends. To those who have wronged us as much as to those who have cared for us. When the heart is filled with *metta*, it brings out the best in us and others. Life seems simple. We smile, we're interested in the other person, we're easily pleased, we speak and act benevolently in any company.

Fall from grace only comes when we perceive others or the world as threatening. All of our spiritual practice is aimed towards understanding that our essential nature cannot be threatened. When we are fully enlightened, *metta* will be our natural state. Till then, *metta* practice helps us coax and cajole ourselves in this direction.

So we don't have to feel happy and benevolent to practice *metta*. It's the kindly thought or act that counts, not the feeling. We can feel miserable, but still do our best to make things pleasant and easy for ourselves and others. It is said that the Buddha taught the *Metta Sutta* to monks whose forest dwelling was also the home of evil spirits who were trying to frighten them away with noises, visions and stinking orders. So when the monks started practicing *metta*, they were probably feeling scared stiff rather than any way kindly. Nevertheless, the spirits began to calm down and eventually to worship the monks as their benefactors. *Metta* softens not only our own hearts, but also the hearts of those around us.

The far enemy of *metta* is ill will, which can manifest in many different hues and intensities. Mild irritation, impatience, exasperation, despising, fear, blame, hatred and all the way up to murderous rage. Its expression depends on personality and circumstances. Sometimes there is an explosion of anger. Sometimes anger is more contained. Coldness, withdrawal, sulking, refusing to cooperate. It can be expressed openly or more subtly. Sighing heavily, grimacing, speaking ill of the person behind their back, undermining them.

All expressions of anger, open or subtle, endanger our relationships. Well-meaning friends become wary of us and may lose touch altogether. On the other hand, anger attracts people with a negative disposition, who then further exacerbate our own ill-will. Negativity escalates as tit for tat reactions spark between quarrelling parties. It can spread like wildfire and turn into chronic feuds and gangland violence. On a large scale we end up with the atrocities of war.

Ill will can also be directed inwards towards ourselves. We blame ourselves for our lack of success, our financial problems, our poor health and all the other *dukkha* in our lives. This might not get us into trouble that goes with outwardly directed anger, but it can be equally destructive for our well-being. As there is no effective opposition, we can hammer ourselves black and blue without any reprimand. Over time, habits of self-blame can lead to chronic anxiety and depression. We are afraid of our own judgement and feel completely hopeless about life.

The near enemy is attachment. In this case, we are clinging to the other in a needy way. It could be great passion, the beloved becomes the centre and meaning of a person's whole existence. It could be a mother over-protecting her child. At a simpler level, most human relationships involve some degree of anxiety about keeping the relationship on friendly terms.

Attachment can manifest in a variety of ways. We might worry about our beloved's relationships with other people, jealously guarding our own share of their time and affection. We buy them gifts, delightedly anticipating their gratitude. If they go on holidays, we secretly hope they'll miss us. We chatter inanely, anxious for their interest and approval. While attachment is a normal aspect of human relationships, we need to be careful not to foster it. If it gets out of control it damages the relationship. The needy person neglects their own development, projecting all their inner goodness and strength onto the other, who in turn feels burdened by those projections and needs.

Metta meditation is a powerful antidote to all the miseries described above. Here we wish ourselves and others well in four areas of life. Basic safety, physical health, mental well-being and social working family life. The phrases are some variant on may you be safe, well, happy, living in harmony with the world. We direct these toward all the categories described last night.

If the phrases don't work for you, then try to imagine the person in a happy situation. Alternatively, the breath may carry an embodied sense of goodwill. Almost as if you're blowing up a balloon of goodwill with each breath. Again, this is completely valid as a *metta* practice.

All the hindrances we experience in *vipassanā* can emerge in *metta*. Wandering mind, dullness, doubt. In the first instance, we just acknowledge these and bring our attention back to generating *metta*. Remember what we said yesterday about dodging round the hindrances. Some of these dodges we've already learnt in *vipassanā*. Opening our eyes, standing up for dullness and lethargy. Calming ourselves for a few breaths for the wandering mind, restlessness and worry. If the hindrance persists, we switch attention back to the easiest of the *metta* categories and re-establish goodwill before re-connecting with the more challenging category. Basically, do whatever you can to make things easy for yourself.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is when all our grudges reappear the moment we think of a person. Even our best friend, or else we start worrying what they think of us. This is quite natural. It's part of the purification process. Keep reminding yourself that there doesn't have to be a feeling of loving kindness. It's the willingness to keep trying

that counts. If you keep getting carried away into angry, anxious thoughts, direct *metta* towards yourself in the shade of compassion. Example, may I be free from ill will or may I be free from anxiety? Stay with this for the full session if needed.

What is more troublesome is when the near enemy goes unnoticed. We're wishing everyone well, heart soaring with goodwill, but subtly identifying with that sense of goodness and friendliness. We might only notice the problem afterwards. We're beaming radiantly at our family over breakfast. But when someone makes a snappy response, our bubble bursts. The fall from grace can be very sore and bring out the worst in us. Suddenly we hate everyone. If you notice this pattern, try taking it easier during *metta* practice. Allow a few breaths between each good wish and be sensitive to feelings of friendliness. Acknowledge and appreciate them. Then they can energize and strengthen your *metta* without leading you into delusion.

It helps to keep in mind that we're not practicing *metta* in order to feel good. Feelings come and go. What matters is that we're willing to gently nudge our attitude towards goodwill in all circumstances.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, we can judge our goodwill to be so paltry that we believe we're not really practicing at all. This is self-doubt, doubting our own powers of goodness. It underlies the fear of failure we spoke of last night. In the first instance, just carry on regardless of any belittling comments you hear. Perhaps you can smile at them or insist, this is enough, I will not despise my goodwill offering. Try putting a hand on your heart or any gesture you find supportive.

If that doesn't work, try self-compassion, reassuring yourself over and over of your essential goodness. Just as the ideal mother would reassure her only child. Alternatively, shade the goodwill towards equanimity, encouraging yourself to take it easy and don't believe self-doubts belittling judgments. Instead, see this meditation session as a deep purification.

If none of the suggested remedies for the near or far enemies is working, then switch to *vipassanā*, acknowledging whatever emotion is coming up. And don't think of any such session as a failure. It's a very central and necessary part of *metta* practice to know when to call a halt and switch to *vipassanā*. A successful explorer will often say that their most precious quality wasn't determination or strength, but the ability to turn back when things were too dangerous.

Metta practice is a deep exploration of the heart. It shows us how threatened we feel deep down, due to our confusion about ultimate reality. When our *metta* can no longer dodge and dive around the demons we've unleashed, we need to respect their power and listen to their story in *vipassanā*.

In daily life we cultivate *metta* in acts of friendship, making someone a cup of tea, taking time to visit, or we could join a local club, donate towards a community project. In all cases we need to keep reminding ourselves that our actions are for our own and others' welfare. Otherwise we can easily slip into attachment, being friendly so that we'll feel good or that people will like us and then getting a shock when our expectations aren't met. That shock can lead on to resentment and other manifestations of ill will. Altruism is quite a tough practice.

I remember my first clear seeing of this. I was on retreat and noticed a hammer had been left in the garden. Probably someone forgot it after doing some work. I picked it up and brought it back to the tool shed. I noticed how strongly I wanted to leave a note explaining where I'd found it and what I'd assumed. But I also felt the neediness underlying this. Basically, I wanted them to know how caring and kind I was. It seemed like such a waste just to leave the hammer back without getting any recognition for my good deed. But luckily, I had the sense not to encourage my neediness, and I sadly left it back with no note and no mark of recognition.

After that it was easier to spot the bonds of attachment in almost every so-called good deed. Just seeing was the really important thing. Then I had a choice. I could cut out whatever aspects of my good deed were really about getting praise and recognition. I could acknowledge the sense of loss in all this and I could make the good wish even though this was usually with a tight grimace. This is an example of how *metta* brings up the near and far enemies.

If we find ourselves anxiously anticipating our friend's next words, we need to acknowledge that this is attachment and step back to regain our equilibrium. Perhaps we just go quiet for a while directing *metta* towards ourselves. Or we might need to remove ourselves physically to avoid the temptation to seek reassurance or otherwise burden them with our needs. Caring for ourselves builds up the confidence needed to overcome emotional dependency. We do this in a very deep way when we devote time to meditation. But every activity, washing, dressing, eating, working is part of caring for our human life. But we need to remind ourselves that our motivation is kindness. Otherwise, these easily slip into autopilot and emotional self-neglect. May I take care of myself happily is a good phrase to remember as we go about our daily activities.

This can bring up another shade of the far enemy. For myself, the practice around eating has shown up a lot of guilt. If I find myself looking in the cupboard for a snack, I prefer to do this without any reflection rather than say, may I take care of myself happily. The reflection brings up all kinds of questions like, do I really need this? Should I be having this? Isn't this self-indulgence? At first, the only way I could deal with the situation was to close the cupboard door and go without that little perk. And I'd feel pretty bad for having even tried to take a snack. But then half an hour later, I'd be munching my way through the biscuits anyhow. The desire would have slipped through and got me to the cupboard.

After a bit of reflection, I started experimenting with mindful indulgence as a way of working more skilfully with the desire and guilt cycle. I needed to plan a few treats, which were obviously not just for the sake of nourishing the body, like cheesecake and ice cream. I would eat it slowly, pausing whenever the guilt surfaced, letting it ebb away into a good wish for my own happiness. And when the treat was over and the guilt would be persuading me to be very judgmental about my unnecessary indulgence, I would instead thank myself for having given myself this little perk to cheer myself up. Gradually, this has undermined the automatic guilt which surfaces around pleasure. I can more willingly resist unnecessary treats and feel grateful that my better judgment overcame the habit of desire. And I can more easily admit that if I'm feeling a bit low, a biscuit or maybe cheesecake and ice cream will cheer me up.

So in daily life we need to find skilful ways of working around the patterns of ill-will that so easily manifest. Rather than expect too much of ourselves in the *metta* department, in daily life the attempt to practice *metta* can also get twisted around to ill-will when we identify with the feeling of *metta*. We want so much to think of ourselves as kindly and benevolent. But when people who push our buttons show us that we're nothing of the sort, then we fly into a rage at the most petty remark. So now we have a new reason to hate them. It's the old problem of identity. If we start bringing me, a benevolent person, into the equation, we end up in trouble. We need to keep reminding ourselves that until we're fully enlightened, we will become all kinds of different characters depending on the situation.

The rotten-hearted, fizzling with rage me is our reminder to cultivate self-care. When our nearest and dearest have managed to push that button and we are on the verge of a blazing row, for example, it's usually best to beat a hasty retreat before we say anything to worsen the situation. If we say something nasty, which of course seems perfectly justified in the heat of the situation, it ends up making things an awful lot harder for ourselves. The Buddha put right speech amongst the three steps on morality in the Eightfold Path. This may be because most of us involved in spiritual development

would think carefully before thumping someone or doing any physical deed that would harm them. But harmful speech comes out so, so easily when we feel threatened. It can slip out before we've had time to think. The tongue like a sharp knife kills without drawing blood is an ancient Chinese proverb.

It helps to have a stock phrase in mind like, I can't think clearly about this right now, I'll get back to you later. Then we go off somewhere quiet to let ourselves fizzle out. When we've calmed a bit, we often feel the sorrow underlying our bout of rage. Often this is linked to the truth of *anattā*, showing us how little control we have over others and even over our own emotions. Although the facts are, as you have heard a thousand times before, the feeling of not being able to control that which we care about always challenges us to the core. Rather than give out to ourselves about our limitations, we need to learn to offer ourselves *metta* in compassionate terms. For example, some comforting gesture like stroking our hand and reassuring ourselves that it's all okay. Eventually we may be able to tune into the basic humanity of whoever it was that angered us and wish them to come to no harm.

Let's come now to look at the Buddha's teachings on the value of spiritual friendship, or *kalyāṇa mitra* in Pali. One teaching starts with Ananda remarking that this is half of the holy life Lord, admirable friendship, admirable companionship. Buddha replied, don't say that Ananda, don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions and colleagues, he can be expected to develop and pursue the noble eightfold path.

At first sight this seems a bit odd. The Buddha is more often heard advising people to withdraw to some secluded place to meditate. Now here he is telling Ananda that friendship, companionship is the whole of the holy life. Sounds great, doesn't it? Maybe we can just hang about chatting while the Dharma somehow filters in. But the Sutta doesn't end there and in the next paragraph the Buddha is back to his more usual form. And how does a monk who has admirable people as friends, companions and colleagues develop and pursue the Noble Eightfold Path? There is the case where a monk develops right view dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation resulting in relinquishment.

Right view is the first part of the Noble Eightfold Path and he says the same about all the other parts. So we still have to do all the usual hard work. But the point being made here is that the work is done in the context of friendship. This emphasises the humanity

in the Buddhist teaching. Too often we hear words like seclusion, dispassion and think of the path as a solitary, antisocial, lonely affair. But here he is placing human friendship as the essential frame for all our work.

He describes a friendship we need for spiritual life as admirable and gives this definition. And what is meant by admirable friendship? There is the case where a lay person in whatever town or village he may dwell spends time with householders or householder's sons, young or old, who are advanced in virtue. He talks with them, engages them in discussions. The language gets complex from here on, but the gist of it is that the person emulates the best in each of them, copying the generosity of the generous friend, the wisdom of the wise friend and so on. Basically, we are to seek out virtuous friends, find the best in them and copy that.

If we are lucky enough to have a Dharma group, we already have a source of admirable friendship. This is such a wonderful gift. I found a meditation group in the mid-1980s and over the past 30 years they have become my best friends. When we chat about our various challenges and inspirations in life, we end up framing this in the context of the Dharma. So quite naturally our attitudes, speech and lifestyle have become better aligned with the Dharma just by spending time in each other's company.

Now let's look at his specific advice to seek out the best in each of our friends and copy that. At one level that happens naturally. In any group you get norms for behaviour. So if getting drunk every night is a badge of honour in your friendship group, then you'll probably feel odd, even a bit ashamed if you're not a drinker. And the Buddha counsels against making unwise friendships like these, saying they are a drain on our resources. But amongst our wise friends, generosity, caring for others, going on retreat or daily meditation practice might be badges of honour. So our own behaviour naturally tends to move up towards the group norm. So our goodness rubs off on one another at a subconscious level.

Can we also bring that to the level of conscious choice? Can we actively seek out what's most admirable in our friends and copy that? Certainly we can. Though we might often run into obstacles on the way. Ireland, for example, has been described as a nation of begrudgers. We seek for the downside in every success story, the cloud behind the silver lining. To the extent that a begrudging cultural norm rubs its way down to each of us, we find it hard to trust and value goodness in our friends and even in ourselves. So the Buddha's advice is of valuable balance in any cultural tendency to suspect the worst in everyone.

To take an example, I have some wonderful friends who have a greater capacity than me to smile at human weakness, not get too hung up about it. My own tendency is to get depressed when I hear someone's making a mess of things. And when I see my friends smiling, I can find myself wondering, Do they have no sympathy? We've talked about this at various stages and I completely trust that their smile is based not on a lack of sympathy but having a wider perspective on the situation. To put it in Dharma terms, you could say that they see the first noble truth in action, that life involves suffering, but trust that the other three will eventually save the day.

The effort I've had to put into understanding and trusting their perspective illustrates how hard it is for us to value virtues that we haven't developed strongly in ourselves. Much easier to ignore these or even quietly dismiss them as a vice rather than a virtue. For example, my tendency to interpret their smiles as lack of sympathy. Recognising a virtue that we haven't developed strongly ourselves is hard enough, but copying it is even harder.

My laryngectomy operation was a case in point. My friends were better able than me to see in perspective. A huge loss, yes, but not a major disaster. This allowed them to care for me very effectively and incredibly generously throughout the whole episode. At times, though, my sense of the situation was that all the goodness had gone out of life. I just couldn't understand how they could be happy. It felt like treachery.

In meditation, as I tried to bring their smiles into consciousness, a knot of tension would gather and I would recoil in agony. All my aversion was projected outwards onto them, seeing them as uncaring and even cruel. But with the practice of dropping the thoughts and noting each emotion, I would eventually unwind into compassion for my sorry state. In the kindly gaze of compassion, I could admit that the basis of all this turmoil was nothing to do with my friends at all. Instead, it was aversion to having lost my voice.

With that admission, I could begin to see the value of moving on, accepting this new situation, working with it as best I could. At that stage, their smiles were seen as friendly and encouraging, and in my mind's eye, I could stretch out my hand gingerly towards them, let them lead me into my new life.

So the Buddha's advice, find the best in your friends and try to copy it, is extremely valuable but very challenging. It brings up vanity, the way we cling haughtily to, I'm better than you, as our inner begrudger dismisses their virtue. Or as we collapse into the despair of I'm worse than you and we curl up into a ball of jealousy. Or we cling tight to the pleasant notion of we're just the same as our imagination pulls them into our gang. People we can understand and feel easy with.

All of these, the Buddha says, are forms of vanity clinging to the notion I am. But this clinging doesn't do us any justice. We're trying to define who we are, fit ourselves into a box when in fact we're continually evolving and changing. We're on our journey to the end of suffering. It doesn't matter whether our friends are more or less developed, only that they're willing to help us along our path and we're willing to accept their help. And vice versa. That we're willing to help them. Any practical help must start with goodwill. Otherwise we'll end up trying to impose our supposed wisdom on them. So we bring them into our hearts in *metta* practice. The basis for spiritual friendship.

I want to close with the final part of the Buddha's conversation with Ananda. And through this line of reasoning, one may know how admirable friendship, admirable companionship is actually the whole of the holy life. It is in dependence on me as an admirable friend that beings subject to ageing have gained release from ageing. He goes on to say the same about death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress and despair. Before concluding, it is through this line of reasoning that one may know how having admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life.

Here the Buddha is inviting us to reflect on his life and the many people who have benefited from his teaching, and thus to develop gratitude and admiration for him. This is a bit hard to put with his teaching of not-self. If nothing in his phenomenal being had any permanent substantial essence, what is it we are admiring and being grateful for? Although we can't identify a permanent essence with anything tangible about the Buddha, we can acknowledge that his dedication to finding an escape from *dukkha* and teaching others what he discovered had an enormous impact on the world. As a result, here we are on our own path to enlightenment.

We can admire and be grateful for his dedication, energy, patience, compassion and all the other qualities that fuelled his spiritual life. Chief among these are his wisdom and awareness, *satipaṭṭhāna*. Using these faculties he discovered that which is unborn, undying, the end of all suffering. And while we can't paint a mental picture of whatever in him enjoys the perfect piece of *Nibbāna*, we can each in our own way attempt to take that mystery to heart.

For myself, this would mean allowing myself to wonder, what is it in him that is unborn, undying, the end of suffering? Of course, I have no answers. Sometimes my mind conjures up a bright light and I feel myself basking in its warmth. Often the initial pleasure turns to some form of *dukkha*, perhaps grief that I can't grasp onto that light,

hold it forever in my heart. But the grief is sensed as healing, teaching me to let go of attachment to any image or notion of what enlightenment might be. Recognising this, gratitude comes up and a deeper commitment to this contemplation.

Now of course our begrudging attitudes show up here too. Who does he think he is asking everyone to adore him? Does he think he's God Almighty? But we know the drill. Know thoughts as thoughts. Feel the feelings. Trust things to evolve in the light of awareness.

As I take on this practice what happens is that I feel myself developing a personal relationship with the Buddha. For example, my imagination can be drawn towards the details of his life, remembering his shock when he realised the futility of his princely life, for example, seeing him say his last goodbye to his wife and son, creeping out of the palace to take up the life of a wandering ascetic. Later on, after years of hardship, accepting the rice milk from Sujata. That's a very inspiring image for me. I would see it as the moment he recognised that his humanity and bodily needs form part of his spiritual path.

Another very touching moment for me is during his last temptation before enlightenment, when Mara, his inner begrudger, sneers. What makes you think you could be enlightened? What have you done to merit that? Who do you think you are? This is the hindrance of self-doubt, a challenge for every human being. In all the other temptations, he was able to sit still and not be swayed. But here his resolution is shaking. He feels the need of support. He stretches his hand down to touch the earth, calling it as witness to his right to come to the end of suffering.

As I contemplate these and other stories from the life of the Buddha he becomes a more tangible presence in my life. Imagining his serenity under the rose apple tree I feel serene. Imagining his courage in leaving home I feel myself grow in courage. Seeing him reach down to the earth in his moment of self-doubt I feel myself as part of the earth reassuring him, encouraging him to press on. This growing sense of friendship, companionship, camaraderie makes it a bit easier to contemplate his enlightened state. The touch of friendship extends beyond my understanding, encouraging me to make peace with the mystery of the unborn, undying, the end of suffering. There is a growing trust that whatever it is or isn't, there is nothing to fear.

This is the practice of devotion. Those of us brought up in Christianity will be familiar with the approach. Contemplating the life of Jesus, as we say the Rosary for example, devotion is a way of opening the heart. It's a form of *metta* practice, where we make the Buddha the object of our *metta*. One teacher calls it falling in love with the Buddha.

Now, of course, falling in love is not plain sailing. It can evoke inner, great inner turmoil. We can fall in and out of love at a great rate. Wandering mind, dullness, restlessness, aversion, all the hindrances come up as we bring the Buddha to mind. At times we'll be able to simply note these and then come back to the main focus, the Buddha. At times we have to give our full attention to whatever hindrance is uppermost, trusting that it will eventually burn itself out in the light of awareness. So we can switch between devotion and mindfulness as appropriate. It's like any relationship. At times we can be completely focused on the other. At times we need to withdraw and tend to ourselves, maybe to lick our wounds.

This retreat is an ideal opportunity to follow the Buddha's teaching on *kalyāṇa mita*, our spiritual friendship. If it weren't for the people around us, we wouldn't be spending so many hours a day in meditation. So everyone here is our spiritual friend. We could devote a portion of our meditation practice to bringing each other into our hearts. Being grateful for our connection within the group. Let's vow to look for the best in one another and copy that.

And for those of you who like falling in love, then give in to the temptation. Fall in love with the Buddha. Or you might prefer a somewhat more Buddhist phrase, become the Buddha within.

Dukkha: Unsatisfactoriness and the Path to Liberation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 50 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma unpacks the Buddha's central teaching: "In this world there is dukkha and there is the end of dukkha." He explains the three levels of dukkha - ordinary suffering (dukkha-dukkha), suffering from impermanence (viparinama-dukkha), and the subtle suffering arising from conditioned existence (sankhara-dukkha). Through examination of the five aggregates (pañca-khandha) - form, perception, feeling, mental formations, and consciousness - we discover how we actively create our experience of the world.

The talk reveals how the fourth aggregate, saṅkhāra (mental formations), contains our power of will (cetanā) that generates karma through our responses to pleasant and unpleasant feelings. Bhante emphasizes that while we cannot control the first three aggregates, we can transform our relationship to experience through Right Awareness practice. He distinguishes between intention and will, showing how vipassanā meditation creates liberating distance from our identifications.

Drawing from the Dhammapada's opening verse that "everything is mind-made," Bhante clarifies that while Buddhism isn't idealism, we can only know reality through our consciousness. This understanding empowers us to take responsibility for our psychological suffering while developing the wisdom that naturally flowers into compassion. The talk concludes with guidance on balancing insight practice with loving-kindness to avoid spiritual indifference.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

One of the phrases that the Buddha uses is "In this world there is *dukkha* and there is the end of *dukkha*." And this word *dukkha* is difficult to translate well—difficult in the sense that there's no single word that covers its meaning. *Dukkha* in itself just means a hard place, so we're in a hard place.

It also seems to have been used at the time for various ways of describing things. But one of them was an axle in a cart which didn't quite fit right, and so it scratched and made noises and went along. And that's an image of the way we are in the world. We haven't quite got it right.

This *dukkha* is not only described as just the ordinary pains and suffering of life—all the stuff that we experience here, for instance, the emotional stuff—but also remember the suffering that comes from attachment. And all that he calls *dukkha-dukkha*—that's the unsatisfactoriness of ordinary suffering, ordinary pain, ordinary unsatisfactoriness.

And then there's a suffering that comes from the idea of impermanence, the fact that we can't hold on to anything, that everything is disappearing, a lack of control. With certain things it doesn't really matter to us, but when it comes to our bodies, old age, sickness and death, then it gets a bit close to the bone, as you might say. So there's a whole suffering around impermanence simply because we prefer things not to change, especially when you've got it just right. You know, the perfect day, ice cream, it's all there and you just don't want it to move.

And then there's the more subtle suffering that arises because things are compounded. And what the Buddha means by that is that nothing has any self-reality, nothing exists of its own. Everything is dependent on something else. And that's this interdependency.

So even here now, we're breathing, we're dependent on the breath, we're dependent on the air in this room. And when you actually begin to just contemplate how dependent we are on the world around us, not just simply in terms of food and air and stuff like that, but companionship, relationship, transport—every part of our lives is always something dependent on something else. And that dependency shows that actually what we experience ourselves to be, how we define ourselves, is always in terms of a relationship, a relationship with something else. And that's the part of it that is compounded.

It goes deeper than that in the sense that everything within us is also compounded. There's parts of our body that give up before other parts. You'd think the whole thing would just go all together but it doesn't, so then you realize that actually parts of the body also have their own little life form and are doing their own little things. When you look into the body and you ask yourself what is it you know of the body, I think it can be quite surprising how little we actually know of the body.

Just, we've been talking about air and breathing. Have you ever experienced the exchange of oxygen for carbon dioxide? If nobody told you that, would you know? Skin—all the cells in the body have their own little life form and they're all dividing and dying and whatever. Do we ever experience that? Have any control over it? Your toenails, what about that? That's growing, it's growing right now. You have any idea it's growing? You have any idea what your liver's doing?

So there's a whole—once you begin to ask yourself, what do I actually know about the body as an organism? Quite surprising, we know very little. We can move it about. You've got to go up and down, smile, make it laugh, all that. But actually what we know, what we directly experience with the body is quite minimal. And it's minimal because the only thing we can know is through the mind.

Now, that goes back to this earlier statement: "In this world there is suffering and the end of suffering." So what the Buddha is saying is that this relationship that we have, it can be straightened out. We can actually get to a point where we don't suffer anymore. There's always going to be pain. The body's always going to deliver pain. But it's not going to make us suffer.

Now, this word that he uses, "in this world"—when he defines "in this world," he defines it as the five aggregates. And that's the way he split up the organism that we experience. So first of all there's the body, and we'll come back to that because it's not the body in the way that we just explained it. Then there are all perceptions, all the perceptions that we have. Then there are all the feelings that we have. Then there's what he calls these *saṅkhāra*. *Saṅkhāra* are the emotional and thought life that we experience. And then there's cognition, the act of holding something to know it, an act of cognition.

And the reason he splits it up like this is because he's always pointing to where the problem lies. The problem doesn't lie in the body. The body does its own thing. It's an organism, it feels, it sees, etc. It doesn't lie in perception. Perception meaning those first things that we cognize in the mind. So color, shape, sound, before it takes on a particular meaning. So when I look at the statue, what I see as the beginning percepts are just its shape and color. And it's an internal process that tells me it's a statue and it's a statue of the Buddha. What he's talking about when he talks about this perception process is just that beginning process where the mind is like a sense base.

And then there's feeling. Feeling, as we discover in our meditation, is just sensation. In his language, there's only one word for feeling. We've got sensations, feeling, emotions, moods. But as far as he's concerned, it's just all feeling. This word *vedanā*—and these feelings he splits into two kinds: they're either pleasant or they're unpleasant. There is a neutral—he also points to neutral feelings—but when you actually really go

into a neutral feeling you'll see it sides slightly with being unpleasant or slightly with being pleasant. And there's a further split in the sense that he says that some of these feelings are coming from the body, what we would call sensations, and some are coming from the mind, what we would call emotions, emotional feelings.

So this *vedanā* is simply telling us that those first three are telling us that there's a contact with the physical world, and this physical contact allows us to create percepts in the mind. These percepts are also memory—it's a memory bank as well—and it creates a certain feeling tone to the world, pleasant and unpleasant. All that is given. That's part and parcel of being a human being. But as you know, depending on our faculties—if we're blind, that's one avenue of experience that's not open to us. And we can develop certain senses. A painter, an artist would develop the sense of sight, a musician, a sense of sound, of hearing.

The fourth one—these *saṅkhāra*—he separates that out as the point where we create, because in the midst of that *saṅkhāra* we have this power called will. And the core thing about *saṅkhāra* is will, *cetanā*. Now will is not intention. So this is something that you can investigate yourself when you're doing standing meditation, for instance. Just to stand still and establish that stillness, and then allow the intention to arise.

Sometimes when I say intention, people think it has to be some big emotional thing, like intending to walk sort of overpowering me. But actually, it's just an intention. It's just like, I want to open the door. It doesn't have to be a big emotional explosion. And you know it by simply saying "intending to walk"—that's the intention. So when you say to yourself "intending to walk" you can feel a push in the body as it were, you feel a certain energy coming up: intending to walk. But nothing happens. Just try it yourself. You can stand there forever saying "intending to walk," nothing ever happens. And then something quite magical moves you—something happens, the foot moves.

So something has brought an idea, a wish, out of potential into the actual. It's actually produced an action. Now that power is what the Buddha calls the will. And it's through that power that we create these *saṅkhāras*, which is our emotional thought life. And he equates this will with *kamma*, with action.

Now, I'm not using the word here as it's normally used, in the sense of karma, like your comeuppance. This is what you deserve. *Kamma* here just means an act. And the technical word for the comeuppance, for what you get as a response to what you do, as a consequence to what you do, is *vipāka*. Those are the two words. So it's cause and then the effect or the result.

And then there's this act of cognition, which you can take to mean—the way I visualize it or the way I understand it is all the electrons hit the screen of a television. Before it hits the screen of a television it's completely nonsensical, but when it hits the screen of this television you've got a picture. So all this information is coming into the brain mind complex and it's somehow being held as a picture which we then know. So when you are—when in your mind you're seeing these images—though to see them, that primary knowing of those images, that's the act of cognition.

Now this is where we begin to understand the Buddha when he's in the opening verse of the *Dhammapada*. So the *Dhammapada* is a little collection of verses which is like a—in the Buddha's Bible you can say—that it's something that everybody reads. They're just little verses pointing to certain truth. And the first one is that everything is mind made and mind is the forerunner.

Now what this means is in the Buddha's understanding is that everything we're experiencing is created by the mind's contact with the outside world and of course with what it has engineered within itself. So you have to be careful here because Buddhism isn't an idealism. It moves towards that way in later Buddhism in the sense that nothing exists, it's all in the minds of people as it were. The Buddha doesn't deny the reality of the trees that you're looking at. What he's saying is you can only know the trees in your way. You can't get beyond your own consciousness. It's you who are actually creating the tree that you know.

Now when we take this into the problem of suffering, the problem of unsatisfactoriness, the problem of a certain lack, a certain existential angst, whatever we're suffering from. When you take that into—then you realize that actually it's not being created by the world. It's being created by the way we are relating to what's coming in and to our lives. So all our suffering is made by us. Nobody can make us suffer. So this is a real breakthrough when we actually realize that nobody can cause us psychological pain. They can give us a hell of a lot of physical pain, but they can't actually cause the psychological pain. That psychological pain is being produced by an internal mechanism which we have learned within ourselves. We've probably been taught how to do it by our parents etc., but it's something that we're creating in ourselves.

From a process of awakening point of view, if we weren't creating our suffering and it was somebody else who was doing it, then you'd have to get rid of that somebody else. And if there was anybody in the world whom you thought was creating suffering for you, before your suffering would end you'd have to get rid of them. So there'd be no way really to full liberation until you annihilated everybody. If somebody out there can cause you suffering, then there's always that potential of suffering.

What the Buddha is saying is that he attained a state where, as he puts it, the world argues with him, he doesn't argue with the world. He's not in contradiction with the world. It's not that people didn't hate him. Devadatta, the dastardly fellow who was a monk, he went to the Buddha and thought he was getting a bit old and he was getting all loose and losing his grip. So he said, what we need to do is get back to the originals, back to the original order—living in a forest, vegetarianism, just rag robes, sleep under a tree, back to the old hard stuff, because they've all gone soft. So the Buddha actually allowed it. He said, well, if you want to do those—they're called *dhutaṅgas*, those extra special exercises like never taking a lying position—he can do it. But I think Devadatta had in his mind that it was his time now to take over the order. He was a cousin actually. So he tried to kill him, didn't he? Three times, for heaven's sake. Rolled a boulder down a hill, caught his toe.

So it wasn't as though the Buddha didn't create enemies, but his relationship to Devadatta, we can presume, was not angry, hateful, vengeful, etc.

So, if we now take the position that the world I'm experiencing is the world that I'm creating—the world I'm experiencing is the world that I am actually creating—this allows us now, gives us a way of, if I'm creating this world and I'm not experiencing happiness, I'm not experiencing peace, then I must be doing something wrong. So we then have to look at the mechanisms within our own psychology to see how is it that we're creating this suffering. And that's what we're doing with *vipassanā*—that's the purpose of *vipassanā*—is to see how we create suffering and how we begin to undermine that suffering.

And there's two ways in which we better our situation. The first one is dealing with the suffering that we have, and the second one is increasing our bank of joy, love, compassion and peacefulness. And the two go hand in hand.

So what we're practising is allowing any feelings that we perceive as being unpleasant—downright painful and horrible—we're allowing them to just manifest. When they're mental feelings we can begin to realize that just in their manifestation, just in their expression, is their healing. And this is a real radical way of looking at therapy, because normally speaking we would be trying to do something about our psychology. Whereas what the Buddha says, all you got to do is endure it, all you got to do is sit in the midst of the flames and have the patience to allow them to burn out.

Now if it were just that, it would only be psychology, it would only be something that might help people to become a bit calmer, less stressful, all the usual stuff. But in seeing the mechanism, in actually perceiving how the flames were built in the first place, allows us to undermine that whole process of continuously making further flames, further bonfires for ourselves. And that process is this business of desire.

Now it's sometimes translated as craving, which is sometimes a bit over the top. Desire—in English, of course, has a good meaning. The desire to be compassionate, what's wrong with that? So this *taṇhā* is the desire which is coming from a wrong understanding of seeking happiness in the wrong place. It's a specific desire. It's a desire based on believing that we can create some sort of permanent happiness—permanent emotional thought happiness—by using the world around us: tea, biscuits, all that. And that desire is coming from this misunderstanding—a misunderstanding of where we can seek this happiness.

And what that does is, the misunderstanding creates the idea, creates the notion of a me. So this is where we get a bit—shall we say, it confuses people, this teaching about not-self. And often people turn it into a metaphysics like there is no self. But the Buddha never says that anywhere. He's simply using it as a tool, as a way of exploring what is real about what I'm experiencing.

So all he's saying is whatever arises and passes away necessarily can't be a self, because what we mean by a self is something substantial, something that continues, something that doesn't arise and pass away, isn't born, doesn't die. It's the same definition as somebody might call a spirit or a soul.

So in our meditation, when we are looking at what we're experiencing and we're creating that distance and we're seeing that it's arising and passing away, whether it's an intellectual reflection or not, we're actually experiencing the process of not me, not mine. As soon as you distance from something, as soon as you make it an object that you're looking at, then it can't be that which is looking.

And that distance, that separation is a liberation, no matter how small it might be. It's a liberation at some point from the notion of the self as feeling, the self as an emotion, the self as thought. I think therefore I am, I feel therefore I am. Every time we say something like "Oh, I'm really depressed," you're lost. You are depressed. What can you do about it? Now you're in there, you've defined yourself as being depressed. But as soon as you distance from it within yourself and you say "there is depression" through this technique of noting, just being able to distance yourself from it, you're liberated from it. That doesn't mean to say it's not painful — it's still depression — but there's something missing from "I am depressed."

The I that identifies with something falls into a hell state, and that's what, if you define a hell state, what is it apart from thinking that you are the suffering you're experiencing? When you come out of that and it becomes an object and there is depression, then we can say that's purgatory. I've always believed in Catholic doctrine. Hell is hell, whether it's a place or not, is immaterial. Hell is a place where you don't see an exit. That's it. If you get completely panicked, that's it, you're in hell. Whereas purgatory is where it's all very painful, but at least things are going to come to an end.

So our position in *vipassanā* is to allow things to arise, but also to create that distance so that we know that this is not me, it's not mine, and itself is not a self. An emotion is not a self. Does an emotion know itself? I mean, does an emotion go around saying, "I'm depressed"? Does a knee know it's hurting? Does a knee know anything? My knees don't know anything at all. So there's something in us that knows this stuff and then makes this wrong relationship.

So at fundament, you could say, the basic position is that our relationship to the world is wrong. It's all to do with relationship, and what I discovered is that everything that I'm creating now, no matter what it is, whether it's beautiful or sad or whatever, is actually being created by me. And if I can get that relationship right, then I should end up somewhere different. I should be experiencing the world in a different way.

So that's what this whole process is about — it's about changing our relationship to the world. And when the Buddha awakens from that delusion, his first thought is "Who can I help? Who can I tell this to?" — the good news. So it's not as though the meditation, this process of purification, the process of insight, is actually isolating us. It's not that it's drawing us into this little cave where we can be happy by ourselves. We're a horde of little peanuts and things like that. It's something which immediately reconnects us with the world. And this is really important for us to do because that's the practice of *mettā*.

And the *vipassanā* has a danger to it. The danger is that in finding this position of the objective observer, that objectivity which in its virtuous form is equanimity — it's the ability to receive, to bear without reaction — turns easily into a sort of disinterest. I'm looking for the other word, not callous. No, no, you're jumping ahead of me there. Indifference. Thank you very much. It's an indifference.

And I always like to tell the tale about these two little experiences I had. I was in one monastery with this monk, and there was a cat, and it was playing around with a mouse, which it had obviously killed. And I just said, "Didn't you stop that?" And he said, "No," he said, "cat karma and mouse karma. I mean, it's just the way it is, that's life, you can't stop it." So I said, "Fair enough."

And I was in another monastery where we were sitting on a bench, a couple of monks, a few monks. And suddenly this cat jumped out and jumped on this bird. And this monk, a flash of lightning, got up and gave this cat one hell of a kick. And got hold of the bird, but its lungs had been punctured. And very, very beautifully, he just held it up with its wings sort of splayed out, and chanted the verses that we do when somebody dies: "All compounded things arise and pass away."

So he didn't believe in cat karma and bird karma. And the distinction there was of course the relationship, that connection, that connection which comes through love, compassion and joy.

So you must make sure that whenever you do *vipassanā*, there's always some point at the end where you reconnect with the world. And that's in the Eightfold Path. So the right understanding begins with reflecting about our lives, and the *vipassanā* takes it into an experiential understanding of the way things are. But somehow that has to reconnect, and that's done through the second of the Noble Eightfold Path, which is this right attitude. And you build up your attitude through your intentions. So as soon as he'd understood what he'd experienced, the intention arose just naturally: "Who can I help? Who can I teach this to?"

So if we can do that at the end of a sitting and translate what we've understood into an attitude, then it's easy for it to be translated further into the next three steps of right speech, right action and right livelihood.

Now what we find is that these steps also, as it were, turn back on themselves. So what in *vipassanā* we come to understand — this relationship, this interrelatedness of things — so long as it stays as some sort of understanding, even at an experiential level, although you can argue that once it's become experiential it's got to move into an attitude. The Zen would say that: with wisdom, compassion arises naturally. You don't have to play at it. You don't have to work at it.

But even so, if it remains at the level of just an understanding of interrelatedness, it doesn't actually affect the world. But when it moves into the heart, the expression of interrelatedness is love. That's what love is. It's knowing that interrelatedness. And when that attitude is set, then it moves easily into right speech, right action and right livelihood.

Now having said that the world we experience is within this little bubble that I call my awareness, the fact of the matter is that this little bubble does have a relationship with all the other bubbles and with the big bubble that we call nature. There's some connection there which we have. So that when we look into ourselves and want to

know what our karma is — meaning what is our conditioning — that conditioning manifests in us as emotions and thoughts and feelings. But of course this resonates back out into the world, and that's why the world begins to mirror back to us our conditioning. So if a person is an argumentative type, then he shouldn't be too upset if people don't go near him. If a person is a loving type, then she shouldn't be surprised that people congregate around her. And that's pretty straightforward.

But you have to be careful here, because once we put an action into the world, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to have the effect that we wanted it to have, because it goes into a set of situations over which we have no power whatsoever. So even though you might do something out of the greatest charity of your heart, don't be surprised if somebody hates you for it, because in doing so unwittingly you've stood on their toes.

Because what we're doing is we're putting an action, we're putting an action of thought — even of thought actually — but especially of speech and action into a situation over which we do not know the consequences. So it wouldn't be right to think that things that happen to us are entirely to do with our karma, are entirely to do because of my past actions. But we can say that the way I am inside myself is the product of my own karma, is the product of my own manufacturing.

When the Buddha talks about "in this world there is suffering, in this world there is the end of suffering," he's actually talking about the karma which is to do with our state of happiness or lack of it.

So I turn the light on and begin to talk to ghosts. Now I think you have to press one of those, the middle one. The middle one. I sit and turn it. Hey. Enlightenment. Just like that.

So we started off by understanding that the Buddha has defined or deconstructed this human being into these five different areas, three of which we have no control over because it's a given. So the body is a given, and our contact with the body is a given. You can't do anything about that. It's the way that the mind contacts the physical world. So for instance, even when as you go around you might hug a tree — now the feeling that you get of a tree, the feeling you get of wood, is something that the mind is making up from its contact with wood. It's not necessarily true that the wood actually feels like that. Somebody else might come along and think it's soft or hard. It doesn't really matter. But even in basic percepts, we're always creating the world that we are living in. And somewhere along the line we're making this mistake.

And we create these conditionings within ourselves, this emotional thought life. And then we project this onto the world. And that's where our contact is. And because we're projecting it onto the world into an unknown, we don't know the consequences of what will happen if we do something. What comes back to us may seem to be unjust. Or it may seem to be just pure luck. Like when you buy a lottery ticket. I mean, why should you win? Why you? Why not me?

So you don't know what the effect of an action will be, but you can know about it within yourself. And that's the important thing, because it's within ourselves that we either create this happiness or unhappiness. If we move from an intention which is wholesome, it will have a wholesome effect upon our inner life. And that's the important thing. And if we move from intention which is unwholesome, it will have an unwholesome effect upon our inner life. And it's our inner life that we're actually experiencing. It's our inner life which is either causing us pain or causing us joy.

So the meditation is actually taking us inward to find these mechanisms, to find the way that we're creating this world. And hopefully we begin to undo them. And the positive side is the development of the seven factors of enlightenment: the calmness, the steadiness of attention, the curiosity to want to know how things happen.

But you'll notice that in the seven factors of enlightenment, love is not included. Love is not, because love is to do with the secondary part as to the relationship the enlightened mind has with the world. In order to get that, there must be this purity. So that purity is partly to do with the state of the heart in terms of getting rid of all these impure emotions, allowing them to burn out. But it's also to do with the way we see things, to see things as they really are. And so in a sense you might argue that love or compassion for oneself underpins the whole process, because in a sense we're having compassion for ourselves in wanting to get out of suffering.

But it's not as though in order to be enlightened we have to develop *mettā*. *Mettā* is the word for love. That's something we do afterwards in order to cement, you might say, the new understanding we have into a new relationship.

So that's the process, that's the spiritual process. We are inwardly looking to see where we're doing things wrong. Part of that process is to bear what is already wrong, to allow it to burn out. And then when we come out of that, to re-establish or to try to refine our relationship with the world on a more positive level. As simple as that. Just like that.

If Buddha said that mind creates the nature of the world outside, what does Buddha say? Well, no. Now, the thing about the Buddha is that he doesn't get into metaphysics. So if you were to ask the Buddha, "Is the world eternal?" or "Is it finite?" or "Who creates the world out there?" — he's just silent, because it's not something that you can directly know. He's only interested in what you can directly know. Everything else must necessarily be inference. And remember that the Buddha's — the arrow, the point of the arrow of his teaching — is simply this word *dukkha*, this word that we translate as unsatisfactoriness. That's all he's concerned with. He's quite clear about it. He says in the Pali, in the language, he reduces his teaching just to three words: *dukkha*, *dukkha nirodha* — suffering, unsatisfactoriness, and the end of it.

So trying to — I mean in later Buddhism it does become a bit more metaphysical and stuff. But in the Buddha's own specific teaching, as it comes through in our tradition anyway, it's always grounded in individual psychology. It doesn't really move off that.

So even when he's asked what happens to him when he dies — what was known as the quadrilemma. In the West we only have a dilemma, but in the East they have a quadrilemma. So does he exist? Does he not exist? Does he both somehow exist and not exist? And does he neither exist nor not exist? It's a killer, isn't it? And he's silent. And wouldn't you be?

No, there's no God. He won't go into that. He doesn't answer questions like, "Who created the world?" No, he doesn't. No, there is mind. What are you going to do with it?

So does he see mind as separate to what is not mind? Well, now that is the question about what is the definition of *nibbāna*. And our tradition tends to be very coy in describing it. And he tends to follow the Buddha's pattern of saying what it's not. I think in the religious tradition it's called the apophatic. Not this, not that. So he's not born, he doesn't die, he's not compounded, and he's not conditioned. But what it is, well, who knows?

But he definitely says that is not annihilation. Now the Buddhist at his time — or his teachings was often confused with annihilation because there were nihilists at that time, there were materialists, nihilists. I don't know whether they were socialists, but there was all sorts of beliefs. And when he's approached, he says, "Well, you're just teaching a form of nihilism." He says, "No," he says, "the only thing that's annihilated is greed, hatred and delusion." And it must have got very confusing for people who listen to these other teachers who would either say "Yes, there is" or "No, there isn't." And the Jains have a lovely comment on Buddhism. He says, "Well, these people say that there is no soul and there is no afterlife, and we say there is a soul and there is an afterlife, and the Buddhists can't make their mind up."

So was Buddha alive around the same time as the beginnings of, say, Judaism, as an example? Yeah, Moses. Around the same time? I think it was Moses. I'm not sure what the right word is.

Well, it was the Axial Age, wasn't it? Moses, Socrates, Lao Tzu. Out of interest, what's her name, the writer? *The History of God*. Karen Armstrong. She's written a wonderful book on the Axial Age. It's worth reading.

Well, that's this business of rebirth. And yes, there's rebirth. We understand rebirth when you understand what's happening now. What's happening now is that we're being reborn every moment into the next moment. And we're not different from the past moment, but we're not the same. And all Buddhism says is that upon death it's just the body that goes and the mind gets reborn, seeks another place to be reborn. And from the Buddha's point of view, it's this rebirth, this constant going on, this *saṃsāra*, which is the product of this misunderstanding.

Buddhism does split off into two different ideas when somebody is fully liberated. In our tradition nothing is really said. It's more like nothing can be said. The *Tathāgata* - that's how he referred to himself - translates as "the transcendent," the one who's transcended. And he himself doesn't say much. There is a passage where he hints at what happens to him after death. Unfortunately, it doesn't come to mind, so I'll look it up one day. But you don't know. I mean, it's very nice to think about those things because it comforts, but actually we don't know.

Well, the word soul has a lot of meanings. It's best just to think of it as mind. When we say mind here we mean the whole everything that we talked about - when I was talking about the five *khandhas*, how the mind contacts the physical world, perceptions, feelings, our volitional conditionings caused by acts of will and cognition. All that's reborn. And it's being reborn now.

So mind in the Buddha sense is actually different to how we would describe it in the literal sense in English, in the sense that mind in English means brain, intelligence, intellect. It's the heart, it's the heart-mind, it's the whole psychic - it's the psyche. You see, in the old definitions, in the Greek definition, there was *soma* the body, there was *psyche* which did not split mind off from heart - it was one thing - and there was *pneuma* which was the unknown, it was spirit, the unconditioned. This was translated into Christianity as *corpus* the body, *spiritus* and *mens*, mind.

And it's only, I think I'm right in saying, Descartes who split the mind off from the heart. "I think therefore I am." And we've been stuck with that split. So often in the East, when somebody says to you, "I think this is so," they don't point here, they point here.

They point to the heart. It's easy once you've separated the mind from the heart to realize or to begin to believe that animals who don't have a mind must be machines. You divest them of any soul, soulness or whatever. So that's how we got to this position with nature, you see, abusing it.

I was trying to say that it's a sort of tautology really, but you can only know what you can know. You can't go beyond your own awareness. So if you want to understand the result of hunger, you have to experience it. Really. Otherwise it remains a conceptual idea, doesn't it? Everything. And what we do is, we presume that because we have a concept of something that we actually know it. We often make that mistake. If you can describe it, if you can give it a sentence, you think that somehow you know it.

We do it on very basic things. Like you might pass, say, one of these flowers and you might name it Primrose. And you think that because you've named it, because you've recognised the Primrose, that you've actually experienced that Primrose. But you haven't looked at it, you haven't smelt it, you haven't felt it. So you haven't a clue what that Primrose actually is. You've simply deposited your concept on it and have been satisfied with that as an experience of that primrose. And that's why you'll find all Buddhist insight meditations are always trying to ground people back into the body. To re-contact our physicality.

Well, as I say, it remains in Theravāda Buddhism: *Nibbāna* is only described in its negative form. But interestingly enough you do find in our own scriptures a definition of something which is full of light, awareness, no boundary. And remember that although we talk about this experience as being full of unsatisfactoriness and that it's changing, and *Nibbāna* is described in the opposite - there is no unsatisfactoriness and there's no change - but it's still not a self.

That usually throws us, because we still think there's going to be some sort of being, some sort of something that you can describe in *Nibbāna*. So, for instance, when Sāriputta is asked, "How can you talk about the bliss of *Nibbāna*, the joy of *Nibbāna*, when there's no emotions there?" He says, "Well, it's the very absence of emotions, which is the bliss of *Nibbāna*."

Now how can we begin to understand that? When you're in a good meditative situation within yourself and you've become the observer and you're observing emotions and you're observing thoughts and you're observing feelings in the body, and when everything drops to a calmness and you can still feel these things as objects - ask yourself what's the mood of the observer? What's the mood of the observer?

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all your suffering sooner rather than later.

Dullness, Lethargy, Restlessness and Pain

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 58 min

In this practical dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma draws on the Buddha's encounter with Māra to explore how meditation hindrances serve as our spiritual trainers. He offers detailed guidance on working with sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), examining its roots in our conditioning toward seeking happiness in oblivion and avoidance of unpleasant experiences. Drawing from the story of Moggallāna's nine remedies, he provides practical techniques including posture adjustment, walking meditation, and investigative awareness.

The talk addresses restlessness (uddhacca) as refined energy that persists until the final stages of awakening, offering methods to work with both bodily agitation and obsessive thinking. Bhante emphasizes the importance of non-resistance while maintaining firm resolve not to indulge these states. He concludes with guidance on working with physical and emotional pain, distinguishing between necessary bodily signals and suppressed emotions held in the body. Throughout, he emphasizes seeing hindrances through the three characteristics (tilakkhana) and allowing their energy to transform rather than be suppressed, supporting the natural purification of the heart on the path to liberation.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sambha sambuddasa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sambha sambuddasa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sambha sambuddasa.

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

The last time I spoke it was about the bit where the Buddha becomes enlightened and is attacked by Mara and then eventually overcomes that attack and becomes liberated. What I mean to do is just go back a little bit and really discuss this fellow Mara.

So there were nine storms: the wind, the rain, the rocks, the missiles, the embers, the ashes, the sand, the mud and the darkness. And when they approached the Buddha or the Bodhisattva, he was either untouched or they turned into garlands, flowers, sandalwood powder, banners and light. These of course refer to hindrances or what's called hindrances.

The Buddha's own image for these hindrances are like a pool of water. So the mind is like a pool of water. And if it's discoloured with all various different colours, kaleidoscopic, then you can't see into it. You can't see into it because you're enchanted by these colours. If the water's boiling, then that's an image of hatred and anger. If it's covered

over with mosses, that's the effect of dullness and lethargy. And if the wind blows across the pool and makes the waves, then that's an image of restlessness. And if it's turbid and muddy, that's the insidious pervasiveness of doubt. That's the Buddha being a little poetic.

But for us, the defilements when they arise are to be acknowledged as our trainers. They must be embraced as friends. They've come to help us to develop our perfections. And we can say that the greater the defilement, the greater the potential for perfection. The more horrible you are, the more wonderful you'll become. So there's hope even for people like Hitler and Stalin. Heavens, they might become Buddhists.

One of the things when we hit these hindrances is that we don't know our virtues until they're tested. And I'm reminded of a book I read many years ago by a man called Brian Keenan who was an Irish fellow and he was one of the many who got kidnapped in Lebanon during that time and his book *An Evil Cradling* is well worth reading because he really went through some horrible stuff and I heard an interview with him and the usual question was you must be very strong to undergo these things you must have had a tremendous power inside you and he insisted that it wasn't so and that other people found similar strengths. I mean, there were one or two who broke down, who broke, but generally speaking, we have this inner virtue which we don't know until we're tested.

So when these defilements come up, we have to see them as testers, trainers, teachers, friends. What I want to do rather than go through them in the usual order is just take the ones that we normally suffer from. And I want to do it for a little while and then I want to answer these questions. The question sheet that I put up didn't get filled very quickly. So most of the questions come from people who've left. So I'm hoping that I can telepathically send it to them as I speak.

So the first big one that we hit usually when we come to retreat is the old dullness and lethargy. The old sloth and torpor. And we have to understand why it is that we have so much of it. So the first reason is, of course, that we like sleeping. We indulge in it, Sunday morning, rollover, cup of tea, newspaper, roll back over, the beach, say no more. So all these times that we have longed to sleep, to rest, for no reason at all apart from that it's a sweet thing to do, builds up that conditioning of seeking happiness in oblivion. That's what we're doing.

And the fact of the matter is that in oblivion there is no suffering. Correct? There's no suffering. In oblivion there's no suffering. It's only when you wake up that you realise that it hasn't worked.

But the other reason that we tend to fall asleep, is of course that we're turning away from something, we're pushing something away. So we feel depressed, we feel down, we feel a bit anxious. And you just lay out on the couch and off you go. And here are the two great *tanhas*, the two great cravings. The craving of *bhava*, the craving of becoming, so we want to become oblivious to the world. And *vibhava-tanha*, the craving to annihilate ourselves, which takes us towards suicide. So, when we understand that these are at the root of our problem, then at least we have some basis in which to really argue with ourselves, to really confront these feelings when they come up, no matter how heavy they are.

Now, there's a story of Moggallana. Moggallana had just met the Buddha and, not surprisingly, the big thing that he suffered from was sloth and torpor. So he went to the Buddha and the Buddha gave him nine things to do. He said, first of all, when the first sign comes, he said, take no notice, just lift the spine, put more energy into the practice. If you're still coming, then consider the Dharma. Recognise the danger of the hindrance. Build up some wholesome fear, you might say. A dread of consequences. And that should lift a bit of energy.

If that doesn't work, recite the Dharma. Now, if you don't know any Dharma, then you can recite anything, just to keep you awake. This is an effort just to keep awake, remember. Then he said, if that doesn't work, rub your ears. So he must have known about acupuncture points. And if that doesn't work, he said, rub your legs. And if that doesn't work, get up and wash your face in cold water. And if that fails, he said, open your eyes. You must have opened your eyes before, but somewhere along the line you can open your eyes. And then if that doesn't work, you can create a light source in your mind. Only people who have practised *jhana*, I should think, can do that. And then finally, walk up and down.

Now, the thing here is that what he's saying is don't give up easy. He's given nine different ways in which to overcome, try to work against that desire to fall asleep. Now in terms of our practice, we can simplify that. So yes, when those first feelings come, you have to recognise them fairly quickly and just lift up the body. Sometimes they go. It's just a bit of not enough energy around and it's just moving us towards sleep.

Then if that doesn't work, just open your eyes, let a bit of light in. The other one that I've tried is hands on your head. Not on top of your head, it hurts your neck. Something like that. You ever tried that? It works. Of course, if it fails, you tend to move forward pretty quickly. It would be dangerous. But generally speaking, you catch yourself.

Then, if that doesn't work, you stand up. And if you feel you're going to fall over, then you have to walk. Now, when you walk, don't do the slow walking meditation. What you want to do is just gently walk up and down. Because what we're trying to do is refuse to fall into that temptation. Whatever the rule is, whatever the hindrance is telling us to do, we must do exactly the opposite. So if these hindrances are saying, look, fall asleep, have a little kip, a power nap, that's what you need. And you say, no way, I know you, Mara. That's the mud that he threw at the Buddha. And you stand up against it, you won't do it. You have to resist, no matter what.

And you don't fight it. If you find yourself fighting it, of course, then you're pushing a lot of turbulence back into the system. Then it becomes a struggle and you just get a headache. So it's a case of just being with it, of allowing it to be there. When you walk, when you walk up and down with it, for instance, just imagine you're just taking a big fat dog for a walk. He's dragging it with you, that's all. Come on, come on.

Now, you can go to extreme levels to overcome sloth and torpor. There's a story, and I can't remember where I picked it up from, where a monk was rather desperate about it all, and he sat against a pole and tied his head to it. Unfortunately, he fell asleep. When they came in, they thought he'd hanged himself. He's actually fallen asleep.

The other thing you can try is to sit near a wall. And when you go forward, you definitely wake up with that last little crack on the head. Unfortunately, as I found anyway, it doesn't seem to help very much. You've got very strong torpor. You do wake up, as it were, but then eventually, if it's really bad, your body does tend to collapse and you really knock the wall. And after a week of this, I got this feeling there was a bit of brain damage going on. I gave up on it.

But when I got to my *kuti*, my hut, I found that I used to sit under a net, a mosquito net. I used to find that just that, just that little touch on the head from the mosquito net was enough to just keep me up. These are only suggestions, you understand.

I was at a retreat years ago and a big tall man was standing next to me and we were meditating and this almighty crash he had actually fallen over, he had keeled over so there's a you have to use a bit of common sense somewhere when we went over to help him he refused to be helped

And there was another occasion when this was when I was a lay person. There was another occasion when I was a monk. I was in Penang and they've got a beautiful centre there. And this young monk, he was a German fellow, very tall, big fellow. And he would get up with us at two o'clock, would you believe, to do the meditation. And

he'd do walking meditation at the back of the hall. And there was this, again, this enormous crash. And he'd walked into a painting. It was lucky it wasn't a window. Very embarrassed. None of us got up, by the way. We all just noted here and here.

So, obviously, you have to use a bit of common sense with these things. But what do you do? What do you actually do when these things come? I mean, what's the practice there? So it's to investigate it, isn't it? So first of all, there's usually that reaction to it, the aversion, the not wanting it, the want to shake yourself out of it, go for a brisk walk. See, now if you do that, you're suppressing it. If you think you can kick this out of the way by walking up and down fast, then there's a possibility that actually all you're doing is pushing it away. So that pushing it away re-enters the system and then you get more sloth, more torpor.

So, when we're sitting there and this stuff comes, there may be that desire to go there, so that's the pleasure, and there may be that resistance to it, not wanting to deal with it. But frankly, of all the painful mental states that we have, you know, depression, anxiety and all that, this isn't so bad, is it? I mean, I'm alright with it. Gentle, fuzzy feelings in the head. Sometimes it gets a bit like porridge, but you just...

And what the idea is that you wander about. If you keep your attention moving, it'll keep you awake. You just wander about, feeling this, feeling that, around the middle of your head. And then maybe you can come out of your head and see if there's any dullness, any lethargy anywhere else. If there's a bright, if the mind is bright, but the body feels very lethargic, you move around, just feeling here, feeling there. Just wondering if your big toe feels lethargic. Have you ever investigated that? See?

And it's just keeping that consciousness moving, just keeping the attention moving, just gives it that little bit of energy not to be drawn into it. And what we're investigating, as always, is the quality of those sensations, those feelings. Now we can see them from the three characteristics point of view, you know, the fact that they're constantly a course of change. When you're looking at it, the observer can't be the observed, there must be some distance, so it's not me, not I. And again that reaction of wanting, not wanting, which is the *dukkha*, the suffering.

But you can also look at it more in terms of the four great elements. Try and feel its, sometimes it's, we haven't got words for these things, it's all a featheriness, it's lightness, it's dustiness. And just get into it, you know. If words don't come, if you're using the noting technique and words don't come, don't bother with it, just feel what's actually happening there, actually get into it. And that's what we're doing, that's all we're doing.

And in so doing, remember, we're always allowing this turbulence, because it's a turbulence, it's an energy, to expend itself, to just blow itself out. Now every time we fall into it, remember, even when we don't want to, even if we don't want to, even if we do it totally unwittingly, there's always that little moment of impulsion. Remember that. Whenever we fall into some dream, fantasy or whatever, there's always that little moment of impulsion. And that's the *cetana*. That's the will. And it's recreating and continues to create and continues to reinforce that conditioning. Now, it's not a powerful thing, but it's there. It's there constantly pushing that wheel round.

So when we know that, then of course we get that feeling of putting a little bit of special effort into that practice. These things can last a long time, you know. They can last for days. So you just have to bear with it. I mean, it's not as though it's like that all the time, but it can be hanging around. And it feels as though you can't investigate anything because it feels so dull. But that's because you're not making the dullness something to investigate. And if boredom comes, you note that, because that's coming out of a desire for pleasure, a desire for some happiness or distraction. You just keep going back to it, keep going back to it.

And remind ourselves that when these things come up, in that way, as physical feelings, they're actually exhausting themselves. That's how the conditioning exhausts itself. Now often when we do this with these feelings it might be that as they begin to disappear whatever has been suppressed begins to arise. It might be fear, it might be anything down there.

So the resolution then is to refuse to be annihilated. And with all these hindrances, remember, that's the purification of the heart. So that's an energy. And when it's released, it's transformed. It doesn't stop. The energy isn't dissipated or lost. Remember that in right attitude of the Eightfold Path, hatred turns to love, cruelty to compassion. So there's a transformation going on. And this energy now, purified of that tightness, is there to be used. And it'll come back into the awareness, it'll come back into all the factors of enlightenment. So it's really worth struggling with it.

You know, it's up to you as to how much you want to find out where the point of tiredness is and the point of lethargy, this dullness and lethargy starts. So, if after, say, on a retreat, if after three days you've settled in and you feel settled and you're sleeping something like seven hours, you see, push it back a bit, go back to five and a half. Remember, we sleep in these one and three quarter hour patterns. And then when you do that of course you have to go through three days of misery to get that energy up but in so doing you see something may be being released because we don't know how much of our so called sleep is actually needed and then when that's settled and you're actually

flying along on five and a half hours and you feel generally ok with it not that these feelings won't come up push it back a bit more so you can get back to four hours three and a half you see and give it another three days.

If you can do that, lift it up three days, then, you know, really, it's very difficult to go back beyond that. Even the Buddha needed two hours. And on a hot day, on the hot season, you have to have a kip in the afternoon too. So it's not as though we want to do without sleep, but we just want to find out how much sleep do we actually need.

Now, if you knock it back to three and a half hours, four hours, and after four to five days you're still falling all over the place and crashing through doors and things like that, then you come back forward again and try five and a half hours. And then you know where the line is as far as this retreat is concerned. That's not an all-time rule, that's just this moment, this retreat, this is what I can handle. And in so doing, you're actually gently pushing the system, you see. You're gently, shall we say, squeezing the pimple. You've got to give it a little squeeze and it'll pop, see. So you've got to work with it a little bit.

So that sort of gives us some idea about sloth and torpor. I do prefer the words dullness and lethargy, but I'm used to saying sloth and torpor more. If while you're listening you come up with some question or you come up with a technique which has never been known before but which works for you, do leave me a little note please because I'm collecting techniques. It's my job.

So now opposite to that is all these feelings of restlessness. So again when we look at the root cause, the root cause of restlessness is all part of our indulgence, isn't it? Rushing here, rushing there, getting this done, getting that done, wanting this, wanting that. I mean the whole society is in a sort of constant rush. So we're in that flow of getting things done in order to achieve something. So there's that pleasure that comes with doing something fast and achieving something.

One very good exercise you might try is just—because this is also a lot to do with our relationship to time and time passing and everybody has slightly different relationships to time, psychological time—one little trick you can do which definitely helped me was to get a clock with fingers and just sit there watching it, two hours. Just watching the clock go round. And just listen to what comes up. And all this stuff about wasting time. What are you doing here? You should be out there doing something. And you just sit there just watching it go round. Minute after minute. And the passage of time. The fact that we can't control it. All sorts of stuff comes up. The office can buy you a clock.

Now the other reason of course that we rush is that we are pushing things away. We don't want to look at certain things so we're running in the opposite direction. Often for instance when we feel depressed we'll force ourselves, you know the old kick in the you-know-what and get going. And unfortunately we do that only by way of not looking at something which is unpleasant. We're running away from it so it's a form of aversion. And when we do that we are oppressing. So when we slow down—and that's one of the great things about slowing down—so that you can feel that impulse to rush, rush, rush, move, move, move. And if you just stop and just stay with that, then often when that begins to dissipate an underlying feeling, an underlying mental state which it's been actually suppressing begins to arise.

And interestingly enough, this particular hindrance, restlessness, is the last hindrance to go with conceit. Now, if we think of restlessness as simply just a form of energy being restless, then I don't think that's quite right. Restlessness is anything we feel, you see, which is actually shifting the mind. So it could be any of the hindrances which is making the mind shake. So if we look at the process of our practice as a refinement of the heart, a refinement of the mind, then all these hindrances just get more and more refined until they peter out, until they go out. They go out when the self disappears. So this restlessness is going to be with us right to the bitter end. So we've got to get used to it, so we've got to stop fighting it, we've got to know how to be with it.

Now when you're sitting there, you see, and the body feels tremendously restless, so again you have to make a resolution. You do exactly the opposite. Even though there are these little *nāgas* coming in saying, move, get up, get out, do something, shift, go take a walk, you'll feel better, see, all that sort of stuff—see, you don't move. It's absolute rock still, refuse to move. And as it were, relax around it. Relax the frame of the body around these feelings as best you can. And that sort of puts a damper on it, you might say. It just stops the energy beginning to shake everything.

And if again you can just keep the mind moving, keep the mind moving around until you feel that you can hold it, as it were, then it'll keep that attention right on those feelings. And if again you investigate the body, parts of it don't feel restless at all. At the end of your nose, for instance. It's very rare at the end of your nose to feel restless. And then just to keep going around and again to see it from one of the three characteristics, the quality of transience and all that, and again to go into it and see what are the building blocks.

Now remember that every time we go towards that point of contact where we're actually just experiencing the elements, the four great elements—heat, fire, water and earth, pressure and all that—remember at that point the intellect has to stop because

you've got to be right with it there. So we're seeing things very clearly. And at that point, because we've gone beyond the idea of restlessness—same with all the others, the idea of fear, the idea of sloth and torpor—then that energy, the suppression goes.

Suppression only goes when you recognise something as pleasant and unpleasant. The suppressive forces, *tanhā*, desire, wanting, not wanting, only comes into force after we've defined something as pleasant and unpleasant. If we go beyond that, into the actual feelings and lose that definition, then there's no suppression. That means that whatever that turbulence is, that restlessness, it's completely free to exhaust itself. And remember that when I'm using words like exhaust and expend and all that, the energy is not lost. It refines itself and is thereby to be used. Well, normally it comes back into the factors of enlightenment. The calm, the spaciousity, the calmness, the equanimity, the concentration, the effort, all that begins to get ironed out and reinforced, reinforced.

So when we are working with restlessness in the body, so the big resolution is not to move. Now if you do walking meditation, again if the restlessness is severe, there's no point in doing a slow walking meditation because it's like you're trying to force a concentration on the step when the rest of the body is shaking like mad. So just walk up and down. It's like taking a frisky dog out for a walk. Just walk up and down and just stay with those feelings. And keep the attention moving and feeling it and just being with it. Take it for a walk. But do it gently. Don't start walking up and down like a mad person. Because that's just empowering it. So it's a case of just moving the body gently up and down and just letting these feelings express themselves. Again, remember that they've got a grudge against us. They need to get the grudge off their chest. Mara. Embrace them. Friends. I don't want to sound too new-agey now. Huggy-wuggy normal.

If the restlessness is in the mind, obsessive thinking, so what's happening there? What's happening, you see? The old habit whereby an emotional state is seeking some sort of metaphor to work with. So the restlessness will grab anything it can be restless with. Doesn't matter what it is. And if you find that the mind is doing that, then that's an avenue which has been conditioned to slip out into these higher faculties of thought and imagination. So if you try and kill that, if you try and destroy it, then of course again you're feeding aggression back into the system. So we just have to be patient, don't we? Very patient with it. You just note it, acknowledge it.

I'm always for really acknowledging it. Sometimes we note something and it's more like a flip away, you know, restless, a little flick. And it's an aversion, you see, and we're not catching it. But if you actually note something, even if you don't use a word, just note it—restless, restless mind, obsessive thinking—and then the second one is like an acknowledgement, like driving it home to ourselves that this is the restless mind. And

that stops that reaction of pushing it away or something, and then just noting what it is. And just come back, come back into the body. And again just feel if you can the restlessness which is empowering these thoughts.

At first you might not be able to feel it because the energy of that restlessness has that way out of exhausting its energy. But if you keep doing it, then slowly I think you'll find that you get in touch with that restlessness. And that means that you're stopping that avenue of indulgence. And the more these feelings come out through the body, the more they're exhausting themselves.

So you can take that as an absolute rule until you prove me wrong that whenever these emotions slip into the higher faculties, whether we have meant them to do so or not, they are indulging themselves and they are growing. I mean one obvious example of that is during the day at work or at home somebody says something which is a little upsetting and you just put it aside, you don't worry about it. And then when it comes to sort of morning break it slips up in the mind and while you're drinking your tea you're, "How could they say anything like that to me?" And then by lunchtime you're eating and you're, "I'm pretty well told I'm not going to do that." And then by evening you're ripping them apart, throwing them out of windows. And you have to take Prozac.

And all that's been done, not because you meant it to, because every time that there's a slippage into the fantasy world, it's developing the emotion. That's what the emotion wants to do. That's how it finds relief. If you're angry and you bang the door, there's a relief there. But unfortunately, we've reinforced the habit of being angry with doors. So with that obsessive thinking, it's just real, just constant persistence, just working with it. And every time the anger comes up, the fed-upness comes up, all that, that's also to be noted. And just, as you know, after time, it fades out.

I like these two hindrances, they often move from one to the other, don't they? You can be restless one minute and then you just fall asleep the next. And then you fall asleep and suddenly you can't stop moving. So there we see that actually all we're working with are forms of energy. The image I have is of an internal weather system. So the storms come, the whirlwinds, all that. And it's all the same thing, it just takes on a different hue, a different form.

So those are some ideas about restlessness and again if you've got any little tricks up your sleeve and things like that or you think I've missed something out just leave me a note.

The next thing that comes up, isn't it, apart from those two, is just pain, you know, physical and mental pain. When it comes to physical pain, that's just the nature of the body, isn't it? We can't stop that. Even the Buddha had pain. So what we're concerned with is taking the suffering out of pain, and we find that the suffering is simply our relationship to it. So when pain comes, at least one good thing about it is that it does concentrate us. I'm sure there's often in our meditative lives when we are feeling very restless and all that that we are crying out for pain. Just stick us on a pin or something.

And of course you have to be careful that you don't get—when it comes to physical pain—that you're clear that it's coming from the body and that the body is actually saying something. So obviously when we begin a retreat you can start getting these sore knees, screaming knees. So therefore you have to give them a bit of a stretch, give them a bit of a rest, have a bit of kindness towards your knees, things like that. But even so, it's an interesting thing for us because we are investigating that relationship we have with pain, which is aversion and fear. And the idea is not, of course, to overcome pain. We're not supposed to get macho with it, try to kill it, destroy it. But as soon as we lose that sense of the ability to investigate and to see our relationship to it, it becomes too much. Then you change posture.

Now don't forget, when we change posture, there's a whole thing to be learned there. So here we are moving from a situation where the body is in pain and the mind is in pain, the emotions are in pain, aversion and all that. As we move slowly, the more slowly you go, the more you can see the connection between the body and mind. As you move slowly, you can see the sensations of pain fading out to neutral and you can see the heart moving from being very agitated to being calm, comfortable. So it's just watching that, watching that the mind-body, like the Buddha said, milk and water, they're constantly reacting off each other. So we're learning a few things there by just working with physical pain.

And don't forget that the usual rule about physical pain is that if it carries on after a sitting or after walking, then go to see a doctor, because you never know. Generally speaking, as you know, these things disappear when you get up.

But the other sort of pain, which is, I suppose, more interesting in a way, is the pain that comes from something suppressed in the body, some emotion that's, for want of a better word, blocked or held in a certain part of the body. And again, when those feelings come up, we're employing the same quality of seeing our relationship to it always, and as that dies out to go into the pain to see what pain is made up of. Tightness, burn-

ing, whatever it is, just to get down to that level which makes it very clear that the idea of pain is a concept. It's something the mind works with. The mind conceives it and of course there is a good reason for it. We want to know when the body is in pain.

Sometimes I think that we can become—especially with physical pain I'm thinking now—you can become a little insensitive to what the body is saying to us because we become so equanimous with it. You have to be slightly careful about that. I remember in my, because you can slightly overdo it, I had this occasion once when, actually as soon as I started meditating, I started getting this sort of discomfort in my neck, back of my neck here. And it grew and grew and grew. And I was at that time working with Goenkaji, with that system, you know, a few years ago now. And I went off by myself to his beautiful center in Jaipur. And he's built a castle there, or they built a castle there. And as you go in, it's a rotunda. And as you go in, there's all these little rooms on the outside and the inside. And they're all nice little rooms, you know, when you get in there. You do feel sort of supported by the walls. And this pain was...

was really bad and I got into the habit of thinking that I was just going to squeeze it out of the system because I could feel it was in the musculature. So I began moving my head about and stretching the muscles, and eventually it got fairly wild. Over a period of 10 days, it was really what I would call the lower depths of hell. Often when I walked out and watched the little mice running here and running there.

Anyway, when I got back to the UK, whenever I sat, my head would flop forward. I'd begin like this, but it would end up like this. It was only when somebody complained—there had been a group of monks at the *bihāra* I was staying at, maybe six or seven, and there were two Westerners amongst them. A friend came up and said to me that they were a little bit ashamed that the only monks who fell asleep were the two Westerners, because I wasn't saying anything, you know. I was like this, you see. So that propelled me to go and see the chiropractor.

When he was fiddling about with my head, he told me that my skull had come off the top of my spine. And I said, "What?" He said, "It has." And then, you know, as they do, they get hold of your head, and there was this ten-thousand-world almighty crack. It was alright, back on top of my spine. So you see, you can take things too far. And I dare say that if I'd have carried on in that meditation centre, I might have beheaded myself.

So you have to be slightly careful. It's up to you really to gauge your own personality, because if you're the timid type then you can push a bit, but if you're the foolhardy type then just watch your neck.

When it comes to emotional pain, remember to be very clear in your mind that the cause of it in terms of the external cause—some fright that was given to you as a child or whatever it might be—is not the root cause of that emotional state. The root cause is the conditioning which goes back to the self. Therefore, the memory, any memory which comes up, is irrelevant.

This emotion of fear now will be chasing something to get hold of. So if the fear is there on the surface of your mind and you happen to be walking along and a spider jumps on you, then you end up with this arachnophobia for the rest of your life. So it's always searching for something by way of expressing itself. Well, actually it's an indulging of itself.

By sitting with fear, by sitting with that pain in the body, even though we don't know what it is—it's only when these mental states hit the heart centre that we can begin to recognise them as emotions. Tightness in the belly—I mean you can call it anxiety but you don't know, it's just tightness in the belly. So long as you get those feelings and the tightness in your body and the burning and all those peculiar things that come up, just stay with them, you see, and treat them as physical pain. You go into it, you get into the feelings of it and just get the feeling of allowing it to blow its energy out. In the meantime, we're investigating these three characteristics. And in so doing, we are very slowly beginning to realise all the time that we are not that. We are not that.

There's one last little story which goes with this from the Mahāsi Centre. It's written in a book where all the healings that went on there over a period of so many years are listed, and there was one particular man who turned up with terminal cancer in the stomach. As he describes it, he didn't take any medicine—he was just going to work with it and sit there and die. As it goes, as I remember it, because I've not been able to get hold of this book since, he was sitting there just watching the pain in the stomach, and there was an explosion—that's how he describes it, an explosion—and the cancer disappeared.

Now, not all cancers are caused by emotional states, but in this case, lucky for him, it was. It disappeared. So that's a very graphic example of what's actually happening when we allow these emotional states, which are in the body, to express themselves.

Very good. So this evening we've covered just these three major ones: dullness and lethargy, restlessness and pain. And the next one I'll try and cover the rest. So I just wanted to spend a bit of time on these questions. If I can't answer them all tonight, we can do so tomorrow.

"Please discuss concrete practical means of balancing concentration, energy and mindfulness. How to gauge what is needed without manipulation, that is, without desire."

When it comes to the spiritual faculties—which, of course, these are your three main ones, aren't they? Energy, awareness, concentration—the Buddha makes it very simple for us. All he says is, if you pay attention to something, the other faculties will rise up to support it. So we don't have to worry about things like concentration and effort. As soon as you make the effort to be attentive, that's enough effort you need. As soon as you're attentive, that's enough concentration you need. You don't have to worry about these things.

If you make concentration an obsessive thing, then you're missing out on the awareness because your attention is always on "Am I concentrated enough?" If you're constantly worried about your energy and "Have I got enough energy for this?" then again your attention is moving off being attentive to being worried about whether you've got enough energy or not. But the fact of the matter is, as soon as you are paying attention, you have enough energy and concentration. And the more you keep placing the mind into that attentive mode, then of course it just becomes sharper and sharper.

So abandon concentration and energy. Just let the awareness do the trick. Remember that awareness is always coupled with intelligence. It has to be an awareness with a question mark. You can't be just aware. It has to be that wanting to know. And that's what empowers the system.

"What is the relationship of the *Brahmavihāras* to the Four Noble Truths, the Factors of Enlightenment and the Five Spiritual Faculties?"

Good heavens, there's nothing more to be talked about after we've been through this lot!

What is the relationship of the *Brahmavihāras* to the Four Noble Truths? Well, it comes into Right Attitude, and it comes into Right Livelihood, because your attitudes begin to express themselves in what you do. To practice the *brahmavihāras* as *jhānic* states is all well and good in terms of developing our own mind, but unless you can take those attitudes out into the world...

Remember that the Buddha is constantly saying, "Whatever a teacher can do out of compassion for his students, I have done for you." So his developments of the *Brahmavihāras* were presumably enormous, but they had to be expressed into action. And the word he uses is *anukampā*—which means to move towards the other. So compassion, love and all these, they move you towards the other. That's the relationship.

Now, of course, you don't need them to become enlightened—this is the point. These are the merits, these are your *puñña*, this is what you get as we move along the path of liberation. For liberation we're talking about a level of consciousness. We're talking about a way of looking. So this way of looking is directed through these three characteristics of existence. When we've looked in the right way, one of the obvious insights we get is our interconnectedness. And when that interconnectedness is translated into a heart expression, when it moves into the heart as an expression, then it has to be love, compassion, sympathetic joy. If it just stays up here, well, it's not much cop.

I'm reminded of an incident with a cat. I was at a monastery and there was a cat, and this cat was playing around with a mouse. It didn't want to eat it—it had been fed. It was just playing around with it. When I walked in, there was a cat with a mouse and the mouse was dead, and I said to the monk, "What happened here?" He said, "Oh, he was just playing around with it." And I remember saying to him, "Well, didn't you stop it?" He said, "No, it calmed me."

I was at another monastery when this cat sort of shot out and got a bird, and this monk went up and gave it one hell of a wallop, took the bird out of its mouth, looked at it, realised that its lungs had been punctured and it died. He held it up very beautifully with its wings and chanted, "*Aniccā vata saṅkhārā*"—all compounded things arise and pass away.

Now you see what this first monk didn't realise or didn't understand was that his seeing the cat is part of the cat's *kamma*. The fact that he didn't react to the cat's cruelty is part of the cat's *kamma*. And that's what I mean about it being alright talking about the interconnectedness of the universe and all that, but if it doesn't express itself through a compassionate action then it's dead as a dodo.

"What does one do after leaving the anchor?"

I'm not so sure what that—I think that came up in an interview. It's not that you leave the anchor. The breath is your anchor, it's a primary object. So the whole idea about the breath is that it's always there. I mean if it's not there, worry! So when everything calms down, the mind becomes absolutely silent, the body is absolutely still, and the heart is completely in peace—it's happened once or twice, hasn't it?—then there is only the breath. So now the breath is where you centre your whole attention, and it's through the breath that these characteristics are seen. And that's why it opens up in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse, the discourse on how to establish awareness, because that's where you hone your skills, that's what you can always come back to, and eventually there is only the breath.

"Can you say something about the little thoughtlets which circumambulate, as it were, the primary object?"

Well, if they're only little thoughtlets, you see, just keep turning away. And as you're turning away, remember, you're drawing energy out of the system into the observing. You're actually drawing it out and putting it where it ought to be. So this is just a sort of mild restlessness, isn't it?

Remember there are those two stages: *vitakka* and *vicāra*. So the *vitakka* is when you are constantly bringing that focus back, constantly bringing it back. You know the image of the bee flying towards the flower. And then the *vicāra* is when finally the bee settles on the flower. So when you get that feeling of being settled on the breath—those are signs of that concentration coming, you see. Not that you are worrying about it. You're just worried about being attentive. And then there's that settling.

So now that's a dangerous point because you tend to think, "Oh, I'm finally there, brilliant." And you pull back a bit and off you go—the mind just bursts out because it's not really settled. You've got to keep working on that until there's a real sense of being absorbed into it, real steadiness, you know.

"How does one contemplate the three characteristics of existence without getting lost in concepts?"

So in the discourse on how to establish this mindfulness, there are these three steps that the Buddha points out. He uses the word *sikkhati*, which means to train. He says, "Train on the breath." Once you're settled, he says, "See its quality of *anicca*, the quality of transience." And then he says there comes a point when there is just enough *sati*, just enough awareness and just enough intelligence for insight to arise. At that point one isn't thinking anymore.

You don't have to think because the intelligence, this intuitive intelligence, has already been pointed that way. All we have to do by bringing up the idea in the mind of *anicca*, of transience, is you're directing your attention to a certain quality. Once it's directed to that quality and you begin to look at it, the thinking stops as you become absorbed in just looking. Remember the picture—for those of you who were here—that wonderful little baby with its eyes completely wide open and its jaw dropped. If you can get that feeling of just looking. And that's the point where thinking and all that about the hindrances disappears because you're actually directly experiencing them.

So those are the three stages. So you have to direct the mind, and there's that question mark, that curiosity, the wanting to know: "Am I really seeing this the way it is? Have I really seen the quality of transience? Have I really seen the quality of not-self?"

"Would it not be equally valid to follow the flow of breath sensations at the nose tip while doing walking meditation?"

You can do actually. It's more of a *samatha* practice just to keep your mind on the breath. Make sure that you're walking in a very open space. You tend to walk into things when you do things like that. Just be aware of where you generally are.

"It says that walking meditation balances the faculties. Which faculties in particular does walking meditation balance?"

Well, as far as I remember, the normal thing is that what walking meditation is very good for is concentration. If you're worried about concentration, do the walking meditation, because the walking meditation is gross. I mean, you can feel it. You're there with it. And you can use it to just keep your mind actually on the footstep.

Now the balancing of the faculties—presumably means the factors of enlightenment or the five spiritual faculties. Again, what balances those things is awareness, attention. That's what balances them. So walking meditation is very good for that if you can actually do it in a way that you determine to stop whenever the mind wanders. So you stop, collect yourself, intending to walk, and off you go. You don't have to turn around or anything, but you stop every time the mind wanders.

I'll just do one last one. "Can you say more about *sati* combined with *paññā* and where it's discussed in the suttas?"

Well, the main place is the discourse on how to establish awareness: *Satipaṭṭhāna*.

Very good. I think that's enough for this evening. I hope that my words have been of some assistance. May you be fully liberated from all your suffering sooner rather than later.

Encouragement: The Principles of Meditation and Right Awareness

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 41 min

In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma elucidates the Buddha's teaching on Right Awareness (sammā sati) and its role in liberation from dukkha. He traces the Buddha's own journey from his training in absorptions (jhāna) and ascetic practices to his breakthrough insight through investigative awareness—a childlike curiosity that transforms ordinary absorption into liberating wisdom.

The talk covers the three characteristics of existence (tilakkhana): impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and not-self (anattā), explaining how direct investigation of these through meditation leads to freedom. Bhante emphasizes the importance of relocating awareness from identification with body, emotions, and thoughts into the position of the objective observer, while warning against the hindrances (nīvaraṇa) that pull the mind into either excited states or dullness.

Practical guidance is given on working with resistance and desire during meditation, the healing power of feeling emotions directly rather than getting lost in mental proliferation, and the crucial distinction between suppression and skillful postponement. The talk concludes with clear instructions on establishing concentration through breath awareness and maintaining the investigative quality that characterizes true Vipassana practice.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened.

For posterity, it's just an opportunity I take as a reminder to some, but also as an introduction to a few of you, about the principles of meditation and the difficulties we come across and why we do what we do basically.

When the Buddha talks about right awareness, when the Buddha talks about awareness, he talks about a certain type of awareness. It's not as though awareness ever leaves us in a sense, because even in sleep there is a residual awareness. Something must hear the alarm clock or else we'd be dead. So it's this particular type of awareness that the Buddha is talking about.

The point of the awareness is to take us out of what he called *dukkha*. This word *dukkha* is very central to his teachings and it translates as "a hard place." We normally see it translated as unsatisfactoriness, or at worst unhappiness—just a feeling of life not delivering what we hope it would. That's at its most subtle: meaninglessness, existential angst, all that. But also just the ordinary pains and horrors of daily life—all that comes under this wonderful word *dukkha*. And he said that his teaching was basically about *dukkha*—about this situation within and the end of it. So a bit of hope there, you see. And this right awareness was something that he himself discovered.

We say that the Buddha was self-enlightened—not because he didn't have teachers. He actually went to two of them we know of and practiced what we now call the absorptions under them, these very beautiful mental states that we can get through our meditation. And he also practiced some heavy mortifications which we think was through the influence of the Jain leader who was his elder contemporary, the Nigantha.

But although these gave him techniques, it didn't actually help him to really answer the question that was eating away at him as to whether there was an end to suffering. And in his day that would have meant, as it does to people who believe this, just constant rebirth, just repetitious rebirth. We experience it every day: you wake up and off you go—wash, breakfast, work, back, eat, bed, up, breakfast, bed, back. So it's like a machine. We do it every—you know, then weekend, Monday, off we go. Monday, what do you do? You get up, you eat, you go back to bed. So that's it. When you take that on a more cosmic level, like every lifetime, it's really boring, you see. So this idea of rebirth was pretty horrific in his time, and for those of us who understand that, it's pretty horrific to think about it too. So that was the core of his unsatisfactoriness really.

Remember, he'd left his home life which had delivered all the pleasures that in those days you could achieve. He was from a fairly well-to-do family, a governing family, the ruling class, and left that. And then he did all this other stuff with beautiful mental states, but they disappeared and he just ended up being the same old depressed Gautama. And then he tried this self-mortification which he said was just painful and ignoble—so you've got nothing but unprofitable, painful, and ignoble. So you can't get worse than that. So you can see he comes to a point where he's pretty despairing, and I imagine him really at the end of his tether.

As the story goes, somebody's passing by—a woman's passing by with a bit of rice pudding—and offers him some, and it revivifies him. And we all know the salvific effect of rice pudding. So something happens at that point. It says that he remembers something in childhood, and I think this is really the kernel. He was watching his father doing the ploughing ceremony. He's a child watching his father, and there was some-

thing about that watching which was different. He was in an absorption, he was absorbed, but there was something different about it from all the absorptions he previously experienced.

And that difference was this enquiry. That difference was this sense of "what is happening," this "what is it," the question in the mind, just that wonderful childlike curiosity. And it was that that made him think, "Well, maybe this is it. Maybe I've got to investigate. I've not got to try and achieve happiness. I've got to investigate the way things are." And then with the insight there comes the liberation, and that's exactly what happened.

So once he was liberated he began to teach, and again the core word is this *sati*, right awareness. And when he talks about right awareness, he's talking about a way of looking at something, a way of investigating something. And those were the three characteristics that we did during the sitting meditation: it's seeing the impermanence, radical impermanence; it's seeing how we create suffering for ourselves; and it's seeing that whatever we experience does not constitute me—it's not a me, if only because it arises and passes away.

So the idea is that when we sit, we first of all have to draw the attention into a direct experience of what we're actually experiencing, which means that we have to come off thought. Remember, thought is a big barrier because words, concepts—they hold our history, and what it does is it makes us look at things from this prejudicial point of view of past experience. It stops us experiencing things as they are in this present moment, even at a very simple level. And I'll be reminding you of this when you go and eat.

Just eating a fruit, an apple or something—as soon as we see an apple, as soon as we taste it, we put it into a category. We measure it against all other apples that we've had. We compare it, and it's either a great apple or a useless apple or a tasteless apple. But we never actually taste this apple as apple, as itself. It's always in comparison with other apples.

And to do that, you've got to really let go of the mind, and you do that by putting your attention directly upon your taste. Because the taste doesn't lie. What I mean by that is that whatever your taste buds are giving you, that's what they're giving you. You don't have to layer it on top with some sort of comparison about past apples—it's not going to help the tasting of this present apple.

People who are wine tasters do that in a natural way because they've really got to taste it, and after they've tasted it they can compare. But not while they're tasting it—it would destroy the actual direct experience of the taste of wine. Not that I do it these days—it's only an example.

So when we understand that, there's this real effort in the meditation to draw the attention, to draw this intelligence that we have out of its confusion with the intellect. Most of us would, before we come to meditation, think of ourselves as being the intellect. "I think, therefore I am," that sort of thing. But actually, what the meditation primarily has to do is to bring us out of it.

And it does that by centering upon the body. And the body is giving you sensations and feelings, and they don't lie. They're not comparing themselves to anything. They're direct experience of sensations and feelings coming into that intelligence. And what we have to do is put this question mark in the mind.

And this question mark, this curiosity, is not coming from this place of "Oh, I know—yeah, everything is impermanent, I know that, so I'll see if I can see it. Of course I can see it. The breath rises and falls away." That's a problem, because the thing is, to do that is again coming from this conceptual level of transiency. It's not actually drawing us into the fact that this me is also arising and passing away.

The mind is capable of joining all these things together to give us this sense of continuity. We have that example in a film. I mean, we know—well, in the old films, we don't have DVDs, but in the old films when you had those little frames and they all shot off at different speeds—we know that they're all separate frames, but we don't see that. What you see is continuous action and continuous sound. That's the magic of the mind.

But unfortunately, it confuses us at this very deep level of thinking that I'm always existing. So I know my body's changed. I have pictures of me as a little baby, so I know it's changed, but I haven't changed. And my emotions are not the same as they were when I was three, but I haven't changed. My thoughts are not the same as they were even a few years ago, but I haven't changed. There's always something in me that says, "Well, I haven't changed."

So where's that coming from? Where's this sense of "I" coming from? This idea that, well, in the midst of all this change, it's quite obvious to me I'm not changing. I'm there all the time. Where is it? Where are you going to find this "I"? By investigating, by really looking into what we're actually experiencing, we're also undermining the way that we create out of these experiences this continuous sense of "I."

So that radical sense of impermanence is achieved through very closely observing everything which arises and recognizing that, in fact, even the process of cognition, the process of moment-to-moment consciousness, only arises with an object. You can't be conscious of a non-object. So if there's a non-object, where's consciousness gone? Now that's one thing that we very much associate with—our act of cognition, our act of consciousness.

So that's one way of achieving it. The other way, of course, where we see transience and it really hits deep within us, is when somebody dies—especially when somebody close to us dies and it really hits us hard. As the Buddha says, people don't really wake up until it hits you hard, until the doctor says you've only got six weeks to go. And then you hit this business of "Well, who am I?"

So this "Who am I?" is a very deep question which is actually one of the core questions of Korean Zen Buddhism. That's the koan for those of you who know the koan system of asking a question. That's their question. They don't do all that funny stuff about "What's the sound of one hand clapping?" They're just happy with saying "Who am I?" If the mind answers, you know it's deluded—that's the point. As soon as the mind tells you who you are, you know it can't be that. But you're really stuck.

So the actual grasp of impermanence is one way of breaking through the delusion of the world we create as something constant, something continuous, something substantial. And it is said that even that would take us to the end. Even just constantly being aware of impermanence would actually bring us to the end of our suffering and unsatisfactoriness.

In fact, there's a nice little tale which I'm sure some of you know about a monk who was so dull-minded that when, in those days—remember, they had to learn the teachings; there was nothing written; it's very hard to understand because the Buddha was illiterate—whenever he learnt a phrase of the Buddha's teaching, it would knock the one he'd just learnt out of his mind. So his brother said to him, "Look, you're just not going to get anywhere. You'd better go back and dig the fields."

And when the Buddha heard this, he went to see him and he said to him, "Look, don't worry about that. You stay a month." And he said, "Just take a piece of cloth, a clean cloth, and just keep wiping the sweat off your face and rubbing it. And as you do that, just keep looking at the cloth and saying '*Anicca*, impermanence, impermanence.'" Well, he was fully liberated just by doing that. Now it didn't work for me—I didn't last long enough.

But that's a little story that tells us that actually, just to see one of these characteristics and take it to its depth, to its real depth, you'll come across the others. By seeing *anicca*, by seeing impermanence, you see it's ridiculous to hold on to anything. And the Buddha says that's one of his greatest gifts: when we see *anicca*, when we see impermanence in its real deepest sense, there is nothing—absolutely nothing—in the world worth holding on to. That's the Buddha's word.

That's the liberation that comes with seeing *anicca*. And by not holding on to something, you release yourself from a lot of suffering. But also, by seeing *anicca*, by seeing this impermanence, we also grasp that it can't be substantial. If it can't be substantial, then it can't be me, it can't be mine, etc. So *anicca*, impermanence, is a gateway into the other two characteristics of existence.

The second one is concerned with the second noble truth. So the first noble truth is a very simple, straightforward statement: there is *dukkha*, there is suffering. And the second one is that the cause of it is desire. The psychological level is desire. And this is not all desire—we have to be careful here. The desire to meditate, the desire to be liberated, is not an unwholesome desire.

But the desire which is an expression of our deep delusion is something that we have to recognize. And that deep delusion is that we're seeking happiness in the sensual world. We think this world will deliver, so long as I've got the right partner, right job, right car, and so on. And once you've got it all set up, you think, "Well, that's it. I'm going to be happy forever." And then it all corrupts.

So it's a case of recognizing that whenever we're seeking happiness in the sensual world, it's going to cause us problems. And that's really what we were doing in the meditation when I asked you to observe your resistance to what you don't want—so that's a desire, that's the negative desire, not wanting—and your desire to hold on to and to develop what was pleasant.

So you're watching that process of wrong desire. And even that, if you see that to its very end, you catch this grasping nature. You grasp what it is that's actually grasping, and what we're actually seeing is this relationship we have with the world now.

This relationship we call the self. See, this is the problem with concepts. They coagulate something into an object which seems to be impervious. It seems to be permanent. Even with things like, you know, you say, "Well, this is a dog," and you have a picture of a dog and it has a sort of stillness about it, a substantiality about it. But we know that the dog is in a process of change. We know that something which is very long-lasting is

also in a process of change. We know that these mountains that we see are actually moving. I mean, I've tried to see that, but it's very difficult. But they say they're actually moving.

And it's grasping that that makes us realize: anytime we conceptualize the self, actually what we're doing is we are substantiating, making into something real, which is actually a fluid relationship. If you take, for instance, marriage, you say "marriage"—that points to a type of relationship as though it was something static, a marriage. But you know it's a moving animal. It moves, and it's constantly—this relationship, what the word "marriage" is describing, is a relationship that is in a continual state of change between two people. It describes a certain type of relationship.

This self is the relationship that the knowing has with the world it finds itself in. It thinks, "This is it." And as we meditate, what we're doing is we're relocating. We're relocating out of the body. So the body, a body self, which perhaps we experience most as little children, is something that we find very difficult. Something really big has to happen to get us back into a body self, like, you know, if you catch your finger in the door. See, for that one ecstatic moment there is only the body, and then you shoot out of it and "my finger is hurting." You've lost that identity with the body. So there is a body self.

The one that we find easy to lose ourselves into is, of course, the emotional self. Very quickly: "I am angry," "I am depressed," "I am happy." See, we're quite happy disappearing into an emotion, becoming an emotion. In meditation, we're pulling ourselves out. Instead of saying "I am depressed," we're saying "there is depression."

There's some separation, there's some dislocation from it. And that dislocation means that we must be relocating, so we must be finding another place within us to observe an emotion. So in the same way with thoughts and images. Normally speaking, we are lost completely in those. I mean, just consider: from the moment you wake up to the moment you fall asleep, does the mind ever stop? After all these years of my meditation...

So the mind is in a constant state of offering us thoughts, offering us images, etc. And when we are in this meditation and we see an image, so we're saying we can see imaging, imaging. Or we can—you have to have good concentration—but sometimes you can see a thought actually comes like a neon light just passing through your head. And even when we do that, you see, somehow we've relocated out of the thinking process.

So we've relocated three times, which we can do by an act of will. This is within the power of the self, the so-called self. We've come out of the body, we've come out of emotions, we've come out of thoughts and images, and we've made them objects to observe within us. And we've discovered this very peaceful place. See, when you're in that place, really ask yourself: what does it feel like up here? We're in the position of the observer—the objective observer, the objective feeler, the one who knows, the one who experiences. But there still is the sense of self. We are still aware of yourself being the observer, so you can't be that either, can you? There is another object, you see. So there is yet one more relocation to go, but that becomes completely out of our power. Because as soon as you try and get rid of a self, there has to be another self trying to get rid of it.

You're into a double bind. You can't go any further. So we get out of that double bind by attending entirely to what's happening, and the sense of self-awareness disappears. Now we do that quite naturally when we're very interested in something. It's very easy to lose your sense of self in a film or DVD, and you wake up afterwards and you know that you weren't aware of yourself. You were just watching the DVD.

So why is it that after all these DVDs that I've watched, I've not enlightened? Because I keep losing myself, see? And I lose a sense of time—that's another thing about self. As soon as you lose your sense of self, you lose a sense of time. And it's because we enter into those situations with the wrong intention. So we enter into a DVD saying to ourselves, "I'm going to enjoy this," you see? I'm seeking happiness in a DVD. I'm seeking happiness in ice cream, so I can lose myself in all these wonderful things. But it's actually reinforcing a sense of self. I'm saying, "Now I am happy when I watch a DVD. I'm happy when I have Costa coffee," see? And it's constantly reinforcing a sense of self around an experience.

Now what we're doing through meditation is letting go of all that as a place to find happiness, as a place where we can really seek peace, etc.

And so now, from this position of the observer, from this position of the feeler, the experiencer, we have a very different attitude. Our attitude is to really begin to see that everything that I'm experiencing—which is the world—the Buddha is quite clear about that. He says this world that I'm experiencing is completely made up by me. You have to consider that. You know, what comes into my eyes, what I see, is only what I see. It's not what you see. We can agree on certain things, but basically I experience the world different from you, and this is my world, and I'm creating it. And when I separate out of that world that I'm creating and it becomes an object of my knowing, see, then by putting my attention entirely on that and to see it very clearly as being something which is ephemeral, which has no substance, which is just being created all the time by my

mind, I'm beginning to... that investigation, that curiosity draws me into a concentration whereby I become absorbed in the process of investigation. That's a very different experience because that's liberating.

And in that absorption into the process, I lose that sense of self, lose a sense of time. And when I come out of it, if it's been a proper absorption, there's always a reflection. You'll always find a reflection coming on because—and this is where one of the mysteries... this knowing, this intelligence we have, this Buddha nature within us, doesn't know what it knows until it tells itself. And that's the purpose of the intellect.

So when the Buddha had this amazing experience under that tree, he then spent three nights thinking about it. Three nights he went through the dependent origination one way—those of you who know dependent origination, it's the psychology of the Buddha. He went through it the other way, and then the next night he did it up and down to make sure that he got it right. And then he went out and began to teach. So there's always this reflection about what it is you've actually seen.

And these moments of absorption, they don't have to be days long or something. They can be just snippets, they can be just little moments. Sometimes, especially in the beginning of our meditations, we're not even aware we've done it. But these are little turnings in consciousness, these are little turnings which eventually begin to accumulate into something that begins to penetrate deeper into our psyche by way of an attitude. And it's these little seeings that make us begin to question our attitudes, change our attitudes. And these attitudes then manifest in the way we speak, the way we act, and what we do with our lives. And there's your Eightfold Path. It manifests naturally as the insights come to us through the meditation. So that's what we're trying to do.

Now, in the attempt to do this, we have Mara. Mara is the evil one. Mara is all the hindrances that arise that drag us away from our meditation. And you can generally split it into two types: there are those which make us very excited, and there are those which send us into a black hole.

Now the ones that make us very excited are things like planning my holiday, lovely desires, sex, drugs, rock and roll—great stuff. And then there's all the aversion stuff: the hatred, the irritations, want to wring their necks, all that sort of stuff. Depressions and anxiety: can't do this, can't do that. Self-doubt.

Self-doubts you have to be very careful of because remember that doubt—sceptical doubt—is very undermining. What sceptical doubt does is it stops you from action. It arises from a lack of confidence, a lack of self-esteem. And if you think about that in your daily life, it can really be quite paralyzing. You know, if you have a relationship: is

this the right person, wrong person? Right way, the other person goes—you've missed it. This is the right job, right? The job goes, somebody else gets it. So this sceptical doubt is rooted in fear, it's rooted in aversion, self-aversion.

And when you have that sort of doubt, make sure that you let go of all the fabrications of the mind, all the thinking, and just go into the feel of it. Go into the feel of it. Real doubt—well, not real doubt, proper doubt—wonder, is of course the emotion of the philosopher. It's the philosopher within us that wants to know. And that wonder manifests as statements such as, "Well, I know the Buddha was enlightened, but really I don't know, you know, and maybe... who knows? It's not a cock and bull story. He just wanted to make a new religion and be famous. Who knows what he was doing?" So it's a case of wonder.

The Buddha wants us to investigate what he says because all he's offering us is a hypothesis. He's not saying that he can liberate us. He's saying, "Well, this is what I did, and if you want to try it, this is the way to do it."

So these hindrances which draw the mind away—the real thing that we have to grasp is that every time the mind manufactures a dream based on an emotional state, it is developing itself, whether you intended it to or not. Because as soon as the emotion arises, whether it's some craving, some irritation, some depression, whatever it is, as it comes out of the heart and touches the mind, it wants to express itself. And there's a moment there when we are unaware—and that's why it happens so quickly—when the old habit jumps in and you have a conditioned response. And before you know it, you're off into a dream world. And in that dream world, this emotion is developing itself.

That's why the mind is so pernicious. The more you think about how depressing the world is, the more depressed you become. It's very simple, isn't it? The more angry you get about how the world is and all this business of climate change and all that, the more angry you become. The more you allow the mind to run away on its thoughts, the more it is developing the emotional state, which is the attitude, the attitude that you're developing.

So in our meditation, as soon as you wake up from the thought sequence, the dream sequence, it's telling you what is in the heart. Is it anger? Is it fear? Is it frustration? Whatever it is. Is it boredom? See? As soon as you know that, you come into the body and you contact directly the feeling of your emotion. You bury yourself in it. You feel it.

I often come across people who've done lots of meditation who seem to have been instructed to see impermanence and to see the not-self, and somehow the teaching around *dukkha* has been missing. I've had enough responses from people to begin to perceive that somewhere along the line in the teaching of Vipassana, people are not being taught to actually feel their emotions and experience them. Because I get reports that suddenly something's come up like grief or depression or something, and the person didn't know what to do with it, you know. And then they go to therapy, which is fine—I mean, therapy is very helpful—but this is much cheaper, and all you've got to do...

All you've got to do is just sit with the stuff. That doesn't mean to say that if something comes up very violent, very... you know, where it's actually making you afraid, that you shouldn't seek help. Of course you should. But the healing, the psychological healing, the therapy of Vipassana is in the bearing with, is in the sufferance, the open-hearted sufferance of the emotional state that's arising. And it may be that as you turn inward and you feel your depression and you feel your fear, it becomes much greater. And that's because you're allowing it to manifest. Now you're in control of the process. All you have to do is stop meditating and have a cup of tea, which is the great panacea, as you know.

So it's a case of really, really grasping that. You see, every time—and this is not just in meditation, this is in your daily life. This is while you're having a cup of tea, while you're watching, you know, while you're talking—every time the mind wanders, it's developing a particular attitude. See? And when you know that, when you really grasp what you're doing, then, you know, you get more and more quick about bringing your mind back into the present moment.

And remember, everything you attend to is an act of intention. You know these billboards on the street? Why do they still have them? We've got all sorts of ways of advertising. Why do they still have these silly billboards all over the street while you're riding on the bus? Years ago there was a doubt as to whether they had any effect whatsoever. So I don't know if some of you might remember way back in the eighties—actually, if I remember rightly, early eighties—to prove... the people who had owned these billboards, to prove they worked, they introduced this perfume, and it was from Australia, and it had, you know, the Australian hat with the corks all around it. Does anybody remember that? And it had a special name, and everybody thought, "That's fantastic," and everybody wanted to know where it came from. It didn't exist.

What it proved is that every time you look at a billboard, it goes in. An act of attention is an act of intention. It has an effect. That's why you don't think so much about what you're going to buy when you walk into the shop. You already know. The billboards have told you. The adverts have told you.

So keeping that very clearly in mind: that whatever goes into the mind is conditioning it. And every time the mind goes off on its little dreams, it's reinforcing that conditioning. So there is this instruction from the Buddha to be very careful about what we put into the mind and to practice the virtue of restraint, you see, of not feeding that desire, not feeding into it.

So that's just as a general instruction about what you do when the mind wanders. You just come off it. You acknowledge exactly what the mind is doing—not in terms of its subject. You're not worried about what it's actually doing. You're worried about the attitudinal force behind it. Is it anger? Is it depression? Whatever it is. And you come back into the body, you feel it in the body, and stay with it as best you can, and recognise that that turbulence in the body is actually blowing itself out. See, that's the point. It's blowing itself out. There's a lot of it.

And the other side of the equation is this business of the black hole, you see, the pit, the dullness and lethargy. So again, that's a mental state. We don't tend to think of it like that. It's a mental state, and it's been developed in two ways. First of all, we like sleeping, especially that one on a Sunday morning where you wake up and you're on that little level, and you just about wake up to get a cup of tea, and then you come back down and you lie out and you look at the newspapers, and you... you know that one?

So that's this lovely subliminal state of sleep, which is very pleasant. Then you come and sit here, you see, and you are very still. Well, what does the mind want to do? It wants to get into this lovely subliminal state, and off it goes. So you have to resist that. You have to keep waking up. That's why I say these three basic things about lifting the spine, open the eyes a bit, let the light in, stand up, refuse—you see, just refuse to be annihilated. That's the basic... that's the commandment.

And the other side of it is that we've used sleep to escape things, you know. So when you feel a bit fed up, feel a bit depressed, well, you lay out on the couch, you know. If it gets too bad, this neon light comes on, doesn't it? Head for the bed, and that's it. Lay out for a few hours, you know. And you wake up and it's all been nicely suppressed. Sometimes it doesn't happen like that. You feel even worse. But for the most part, we use sleep to suppress. Remember, all suppression is aversion or fear—aversion or fear.

So that's why in daily life, if you have something come up and you know it's the wrong time to deal with it—you don't want to be at work telling everybody how depressed you are—you can put it to the side. Your attitude is, "I'll just put that to the side and deal with it later." That's not the same as suppression. Suppression has to be something negative. And that force is actually adding more turbulence to the system. Whereas just to say, "I can't handle it at the moment," and just to leave it to the side, is no danger, as long as you give it time later on in the day to actually contact it.

So that's the other side of the hindrances. There's only two actually, dullness and lethargy, which draws us into this topic of the black hole. So all we have to do is just keep making the effort to wake up, and if you can, to make those feelings the object that you are investigating.

One way is to just keep the attention moving up and down the body and just try to find out where you feel the heaviness. If it's in the head, if it's this dullness, you just wander about. The more you keep the attention moving, the more it stays awake. And you may surprise yourself to find that you can be as awake in the most dull states as you would be in one of the brightest of states, because you're drawing your energy back into the process of observing. The motivating force of that is this interest, is this wanting to know.

So just to bring it all together, we have to get ourselves into position in the meditation where we can observe. So we use the breath to establish that sense of the observer, the feeler, the knower. And once you're there, you bring in that quality. I forgot to say that to make the breath somewhere where you want to go, begin to experience it as something pleasant. It's actually relaxing. When we experience something pleasant, not something that we have to do, then you see you want to go there. You want to actually still yourself on the breath more. It becomes a pleasant place to be.

Then you raise this curiosity, and you find this observation post that's still. I think it was reviewed actually in what's that newspaper from America? The Inquiring Mind, do you know it? Yes, it's very good. There's a review there by Joseph Goldstein of *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* by Nyanaponika, and it still is the classic book on meditation if you want one that's easily readable.

You find yourself in this position of the observer, and if you want you can consciously raise the intention to observe impermanence, or to be more aware of the process of wanting and not wanting, or to investigate the sense of not me, not mine. The noting is very good at that because as soon as you note something, there has got to be an object there.

Within that process, we get dragged away. So we have to be very clear that every time we're dragged away on something, we know what to do, and we re-establish the process by going back to the breath. That's it.

Remember that if the whole of your regular two-hour morning meditation is this continuously coming back into the present, coming back, coming back, that's the practice. That's not bad meditation. If you say to yourself in the meditation, if you sit there and say to yourself "I'm a little bit fed up with this, I think I'll just relax," that's bad. You ought to feel really guilty. If you sit there and say "I'm going to do a bit past the meditation" and you think "Oh no, what am I going to do this evening? I'll just think about this," that's really bad. You should really feel deeply guilty.

But if the whole of meditation is wandering, thinking, planning, coming back, coming back gently, coming back, make a resolution, stay here, coming back, that's it, that's the practice. You congratulate yourself after a practice like that. If you sat there all day long... well, you've done this before, I'm sure. That's good practice. That's good practice. That's what it's about. It's about waking up.

But if you're down there and you think... then you should really, really feel very bad about it. You've got a confession.

So that's it in a nutshell. What we could do now is some walking meditation, and with those people who are helping out, would they like to go over and help? Then we'll come and do a sit at one o'clock. I've left it a bit late now. Is that alright? Is that alright Paul? One o'clock and we'll do a short sit before we take our meal at half past one. Then we come back about... what would it be? Two? Half past one, half past two is it? You need a bit more than an hour, do you? About a quarter to three. I prefer to work in the morning because after lunch it's good enough for doing loving kindness, just about.

So yes please, I'd like to do some walking meditation. If there's any questions about the practice, just stay behind and ask me them. It's always unique. There's always something. Yes, because I find I learn as I go along a little bit. And the jokes are wonderful. Don't forget the jokes.

Faith and the Spiritual Life

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 59 min

In this exploration of faith in the spiritual life, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the fundamental questions that arise in human consciousness: 'Who am I? How do I relate? What do I do?' These questions form the foundation of the three paths enshrined in the Noble Eightfold Path. Drawing from the Kālāma Sutta and various encounters between the Buddha and seekers, Bhante distinguishes between faith (saddhā) as confidence and belief as mental fixation that stops investigation. He explores how faith develops through hearing teachings, reflection, and direct practice, emphasizing that true spiritual confidence must be grounded in personal experience rather than mere acceptance. The talk addresses common obstacles to faith including doubt, expectation versus aspiration, and the importance of ethical conduct in maintaining self-respect. Through stories of disciples like Anāthapiṇḍika and encounters with skeptics, Bhante illustrates how faith can arise both gradually through investigation and suddenly through direct recognition. He emphasizes the crucial role of spiritual friendship (kalyāṇamittatā) and warns against the dangers of expectation that can undermine genuine progress. The teaching concludes with practical guidance on working with doubt and the transformative power of commitment in deepening practice.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa

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

So this weekend we're just looking at this process of taking refuge, refuge in the precepts. And for fear of repeating myself tomorrow, I thought I'd just hang around the question of what is the spiritual search? What's the quality of faith? What role does doubt play in it? That area.

There must have been some point in human history where this self-awareness arose. And with it there must have somehow dawned the question of who am I? What am I doing here? There must have been at some point—who knows when—where these fundamental questions must have slowly arisen. These three questions: who am I, how do I relate, and what do I do?

These congealed over time into what are three discernible paths. Hinduism, I think, has very clearly delineated them. But of course it's there in all the spiritual traditions. And in Buddhism, it's enshrined in the Eightfold Path. So right understanding is trying

to answer the question, well, who am I? Or why am I? And the right attitude is, now that I'm here, how do I relate? What is my relationship to other people, to the universe? How should I relate? And then that moves into action. So now that I've understood why I'm here and how I should relate, what do I do?

And that's the path of karma—the path of gnosis or understanding. The path of love, that's what relating is. When you ask the question, how do I relate, you're really asking, what is love? And then finally, what do I do?

According to the Buddha, these questions arise out of suffering. So this word *dukkha* has various meanings. It's not just the awful physical suffering that we can go through or mental distress, but it's at that deeper spiritual level, a sense of alienation, an existential feeling of meaninglessness. Meaninglessness can come across hard to people and it ends up as being a real deep depressive state of living without any meaning, especially in our society which at least on the surface is just driven by a hunt for the next exciting thing to do. What's the next film? What's the next kick? What's the next buzz? It's like we're constantly searching for something to distract the mind. And you're constantly fed the understanding that pleasure and the pleasures of relationship are equated to happiness. Like this car will definitely make you happy.

We know just because of the nature of things, because of the nature of transience, the ephemeral nature of things, the fact that things arise and pass away, change—that can't be so. There's still within us this search for happiness.

Now, none of us here may be drug addicts or completely lost in that commercialism, in that consumerism. We might not. We might know that. But even so, we still do it. We still seek happiness in a cup of tea, Costa coffee. It's like you're always looking for a place where you can find relief. That's your refuge. Every time you do that, what you're saying is that Costa Coffee is my refuge. You go in there and choose a cake.

So next time you do that and you know you're going in there really just to escape boredom or whatever—it's hard to really rationalise or to give some real purpose to coffee—but having done so, one can sit there and gaze at it and say, I am taking refuge in coffee. And let that sink in a while. You shouldn't stop drinking the coffee. It's just acknowledging that it's not going to really give what the heart truly seeks.

If you were to ask, well, what does the heart want? What does the heart want? Now, mind the head, understanding, why is this, why is that? Where does the heart want to be? If you ask yourself that question. Now, even the heart can be confused, can be doubting as to where it wants to be.

A lot of people would want to place their heart in a relationship, trusting a relationship, trying to find the right person. That's going to be the wherewithal of our lives. Taking refuge in somebody else. But that's unreliable, isn't it? People who were deeply in love end up stabbing each other. People take the vow to marry, to take care of, and all the lovely things that they say, till death do us part—it's an idealism, isn't it? There's a presumption in that ceremony that it is actually going to happen. And a few years down the line it corrupts. Even if it doesn't corrupt and people fall apart and go separate ways.

There's that confusion often between what love is and what the emotion that we call love is. I remember doing a little ceremony for people who were getting married. It was combined with a New Age-y ceremony. It was very lovely. And they asked me to say something. When I pointed out that love, real love, had nothing to do with emotions, there was a stunned silence in the room. What is it then if it's not? What we discover of course is that love is an attitude. It's a disposition. It's a way of relating whether you like somebody or not. I mean that's one of the good things about the spiritual life—that when we're practising together we're all helping each other. It's irrelevant whether we like each other or not.

Often the person whom you don't like, the person who's disturbing you, is your teacher. They're telling you where your buttons are. I once, a long time ago, did a retreat and there was this man—in the Eastern tradition all the men sit together and the women sit over there—and he was, for six days, sniffing. Have you ever sat next to somebody sniffing all the time? I wouldn't want to shock you with what I was going to do with that man's nose.

The teacher at the time, it was Ajahn Sumedho actually—some of you will know him—took a break on Thursday, and he thought he was getting too tight or something. I happened to mention this to another man and asked him if this nose was also upsetting him. To my amazement, he hadn't even heard it. He hadn't even heard it. I said, oh, fine. At the end of the retreat, because we had another day to go, he came to me and he says, I did hear it. He said, oh, yesterday. Is that what happened with unwholesome speech? Maybe I shouldn't have said it. I don't know. But he was obviously more annoyed with me than the man's nose. He hadn't heard it.

So, asking ourselves the question, where does the heart want to be? It wants to be content, doesn't it? Isn't that the deepest place you want to be? To be content. And what does that mean, to be content? To accept the way things are, no matter what they are, whether they're pleasant or unpleasant—a acceptance. But not with resignation, resig-

nation suggesting some despair, I can't do anything about it. But more that openness: this is the way it is. And then in seeing the situation clearly, as clearly as we can—always, because we're in a process of time, time moves, possibilities arise.

So searching for that contentment—what I'm suggesting is that that's what we're deeply searching for. It might start off with just wanting to put an end to suffering. It might be phrased that way. It's definitely how the Buddha started. He set out quite clearly—and then he says it himself—quite clearly because he was in a state of confusion, a state of suffering. So he goes off searching for the end of suffering.

As we go searching, as we go into various different types of teachings, somehow we have to make a connection with that teaching if it's going to work for us. And that's really what we mean by faith. A lot of people go through the process of listening. They listen to the teaching or read about it. This brings up a certain confidence, because that's what faith is: a certain confidence in what they're hearing.

So it's not a belief. If what we mean by belief is a total acceptance of a statement, that would be an error in terms of the Buddha, because what belief does is it stops you investigating, it stops you taking the process any further. You take refuge in a mental state of belief. I believe, so I'm all right, I'll be saved. That's also a false refuge. It might make you high. Like, I'm free now. I believe. I believe in God. I believe in the Buddha. Now I can go and have my Costa coffee. It takes away a whole area of problems. I believe. That's it. I don't worry about it.

But that stops the investigation. That stops the process of trying to find out whether it's true for me personally. What we discover, of course, is that the next step, having heard something, we then begin to think about it ourselves, so that this knowledge that we've picked up becomes our own particular way of thinking. We've thought it through ourselves, to some extent. But then we get this practice, we get this direct experience of the path.

Of course, it's in the practice that we're not only, shall we say, stabilising that faith through the practice because it actually works, but the very practice is itself the process of liberation. That faith is an ability to be open, to be willing to have a go, to keep going. All of you must have that or you simply wouldn't be here. So it's there within you.

There are people who don't need to go through that. Sometimes on seeing a person, they just feel it's their path, it's their way. In my own case, both happened. I entered into the Buddhist path in that gingerly way of investigating this, investigating that, having a go. I mean, there wasn't the choice when I started in the 70s, middle 70s. But I remember at one point, when I was with a teacher, there was a very direct, clear con-

nection that this was my teacher. And I went to Burma to be with him. I didn't stay that long, but it was very clear. I never had that with anybody else. I've had lots of teachers, I've had lots of people I've been with, but I just knew that this person was going to get me through, was going to really make it for me.

So that leap of faith which sometimes happens in the heart is also a proper act of faith. And in a sense it's much stronger than a faith which arises through thought, because it's coming from that deeper level within us, that deep connection.

There's that case of Anathapindika in the scriptures, who's a merchant. It was the time when merchants were really becoming a very rich caste or class. The castes weren't so rigid in those days. I think it was his brother-in-law or his brother had met the Buddha and had actually set up a little monastery for him. While he was visiting, Anathapindika mentioned about the Buddha and it would seem that just the word, the Buddha, seemed to have awoken in him this enormous connection already. He went on to become a great supporter, bought him land for a monastery and was forever supporting the Buddha. But that was just an immediate connection, even by a word, something in the air, you might say.

I've known people to do that from pictures of Indian gurus. Just seeing a picture, they've made that connection. Nobody's done it with me. Hang on, I've got to get older.

So there are these two ways in which one can make that faith. It's a confidence, isn't it? You can't move without that. You can't commit yourself without confidence. And that's not just the spiritual part, it's anything. Whether it's a job, sometimes you wonder whether you can do it, whether you should be doing it. If there isn't that confidence, you can't take the job. Or you do it feeling really fearful about it. Same with a relationship, whether you want to start a relationship with somebody or cement a relationship, either a partnership or a marriage. If you're in a state of doubt—well, I might be, I don't know whether I should, maybe I can't, and all this—you can't commit yourself. So that sense of confidence, trusting, has to be there.

In the actual spiritual path, the trust is likely to do with ourselves I think. I mean you can trust the teacher, you can trust the teaching, but eventually you've got to have a trust in yourself. Some people have a lot of problems with that, have a lot of problems with doubt one way or the other. I shall leave exactly what it is we're putting our trust in—the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha—till tomorrow. You'll all fall asleep tomorrow.

But here's a case which gives you an idea of how quickly one can take refuge in the Buddha. There's a Brahmin Janusoni and he comes to see the Buddha. It's basically a question about practice. So this Brahmin is obviously a practitioner. He says to the

Buddha, you know, people who go into the jungle, into the forests, and live on their own, they go mad. Is that not your experience, that people go mad when they go off by themselves?

So there's obviously in those days, there were lots of these men, mainly. There were a few women, but it was difficult for a woman to do it because there wasn't the protection against men. So all these men were going off, doing a hippie trip. That happened in the 60s and 70s. And searching for this enlightenment, this liberation. Obviously some of them were going bonkers out there. They were losing it.

The Buddha then goes into quite a clear definition of what it is that stops you going mad. The two main things are that your virtue is good, that you're not going into that situation with huge guilts and problems and whatnot. That has to be cleared, as it were. Also, even if you have that, you're very clear that from now on you are virtuous, and that gives you a solid rock within yourself. And the other thing is a disciplined mind. Because as we know in our meditation, if the mind's not disciplined, it goes bonkers.

Having said all this, Janusoni is really taken by it. And he also answers another question which is of interest, which I've mentioned before this weekend, is that he says to Janusoni that he keeps going to the forest for his own quiet abiding and as a teaching for others, as a good example for others.

This is the classic response that you get throughout the scriptures to various persons: "Excellent good Gautama"—so they would call him by his family name, your surname basically. "Excellent good Gautama, it is as if one might set upright what has been upset or might disclose what was covered or show the way to one who has gone astray or bring an oil lamp into the darkness so that those with vision might see material shapes. Even so, in many a figure has the Dhamma been made clear by the Venerable Gautama. Thus I am going to the Venerable Gautama for refuge, the Dhamma and the Sangha. May the Blessed Gautama accept me as a lay follower, going for refuge from today forth as long as life lasts."

So he's really taken by it—as long as life lasts. He's really taken by it.

But this wasn't always the case. There's a lovely one. Well, there are two occasions, actually. But this one is a man called, who's termed Dandapan, which means sticking hand. He asks the Buddha in a rather provocative way. He said, what does this recluse assert? What do you proclaim?

So he responds to this by saying, I assert and proclaim that I do not quarrel with anybody, that the world quarrels with me. And then he goes on to explain the teaching.

But even so, Dandapani, who was a Sakyan belonging to the same tribe as the Buddha, shook his head, wagged his tongue, raised his eyebrows until his forehead puckered in three lines, and then departed leaning on his stick. So even though the Buddha must have given him a really good talk, he still went away with great doubts.

There's also a lovely story which shows us that after the Buddha was enlightened, he wasn't a natural teacher. He had to learn how to teach, just as he had to learn the path to liberation. He meets one of these Ajīvakas—these ascetics—just as he's on his way to teach his five former companions. So he's just become liberated, he's thought it through, and he's decided that he is going to try and teach it, when he meets this ascetic on the way. The ascetic says, "You've got lovely bright features, you look absolutely splendid. Who's your teacher?"

And the Buddha goes into this amazing statement about how he has no teacher, how he is the fully enlightened one, the liberated one. And the guy says, "Oh, that's very good," and walks off. As you would, if you think about it. If you stopped somebody in the street and said, "Well, you look quite spiritually advanced," and he says, "Well, I am the new cosmic Buddha, and I live in north London." We used to get letters like that at the Vihara. I often wonder what happened to this guy. Every so often a letter would come to the Vihara saying that the next cosmic Buddha was living in northern London. I never investigated it for fear he was—I mean, that would have changed my path entirely.

And of course that didn't work. I think the Buddha got the idea he had to be slightly more subtle.

So once we've actually established this faith, once we've got this confidence, the question then is: how do we make it grow? How do we take it to the point where it becomes not just a spiritual faculty but a spiritual strength? So faith is one of the spiritual faculties—faith, effort, awareness, concentration, and wisdom. These are the five spiritual faculties. And it's only when we actually have a glimpse of *nibbāna*, when we actually experience the ultimate point, even if it's only, as the Buddha said, like a flash of lightning, that faith becomes rock solid, becomes a *bala*, becomes a strength. You can't deny an experience. You can always, up until that point, say, "Well, maybe, maybe not, who knows." But once you've actually experienced it, then you can't deny it. And that's the culmination, you might say, the fulfilment of faith.

It's interesting in the Christian story, isn't it, where Peter denies Christ three times. Even though he knew in his heart that this was the great guru, he denies him—of course, with tremendous remorse. You can't go against what you personally know, even from fear.

One of the things that supports faith is good companionship. The Buddha is quite strong about that. Ānanda, who was his companion for the last twenty years of his life, once made a statement like, "Well, now I think I understand what you're on about." And the Buddha said, "Oh no, no, Ānanda, no. You've got a long way to go yet." And on another occasion Ānanda said, "I think that friendship, good friendship, being with good people, is half the spiritual life." The Buddha says, "Oh no, Ānanda, no, no, no. It's the whole of it. This is the entire spiritual life—good friendship and companionship, good comradeship. When a meditator has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is expected that he would develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path."

I think most of you who go to groups will know that to go to an evening group once a week is a real fillip. It gives you that little bit of energy, that group energy. And coming here or going to a meditation centre—it's not just the case of coming to practise, but to actually be with people. You go away imbued, as it were, with their confidence, with their energy.

Then there are things which really support that commitment, that faith. The Buddha says to be perfect in virtue. Well, that's a bit heavy. I think for everybody here, at least to move towards it, to move towards virtue. And we won't do that unless we make the connection between virtue and liberation. You can't be liberated, you can't be fully awakened, without having been entirely purified. The one goes with the other. And the reason is simple: all the unwholesome, unskillful things that we do are the measure of our delusion. Once the delusion goes, then obviously all that bad stuff goes too. But it works the other way. If you work against your bad stuff, the stuff that you see is unwholesome, then you must be growing in wisdom too. The one moves towards the other.

In the Eightfold Path, there's right understanding and right attitude. So we can start with right understanding, but you can also start with right attitude. For instance, you might start by saying to yourself, "I want to grow in compassion in some way." Whatever life presents, make that an opportunity for compassion through generosity, through helping, and so forth. Now as you do that, unwittingly you're making that connection of interrelatedness between people. And that of course comes up as this business of being interdependent. So it doesn't matter which way you begin the process—the one will always affect the other.

Training according to the rules of training. So here, although he's talking to monks, this is also to do with our precepts. The precepts that we take, the training rules. They're translated as precepts, but the actual word means training rule. It's an actual training.

Engaging in talk concerning effacement. Not trying to put oneself first all the time or making big of oneself.

Favouring the heart's release. And here we can say that's to do with letting go of those attachments, letting go of those compulsive behaviours. And what the *vipassanā* is doing is showing us how to do that. So we don't just do *vipassanā* when we're sitting. Any time—you could be standing at the bus stop and you could feel this great desire to go into Costa Coffee, but you let it go. You just let it go. And you're observing the feeling, you're observing how strong it is.

Being energetic in abandoning what is unprofitable. That's discerning what's unprofitable and abandoning it. You're making that determination: I'm not going to go down that path. I'm not going to do that again. And although that can feel painful, remember that as soon as you stop doing something, you're withdrawing the energy from that conditioning. You're just withdrawing the energy from that conditioning.

So if somebody has a habit of smoking, the thing to do is to stop. And then, of course, you get the pain, you get the horror of it. But first of all, you have to stop. You have to say, "No, I'm not doing it." So if you see anything that you're doing, anywhere where you feel a compulsive behaviour—which is being imprisoned, isn't it? I mean, you become a prisoner of your desire. It's dragging you around, it's hooked you by the nose: "Come this way, come that way." It's dreadful.

And developing, of course, what is profitable. So there's always the other side. When we start with the five precepts, those are things that we don't do, we try not to get involved in, even at a subtle level. But then there's always the opposite of that. And this is expressed in right attitude as moving from hatred to love, from cruelty to compassion, and from selfishness to generosity. So there's also the positive side of our actions.

And interestingly enough, understanding impermanence. The Buddha seems to have centred on that one—impermanence. And you might say, "Well, why is that? Why doesn't he centre on suffering?" You know, the psychological suffering, the process of desire, because it's there in the Four Noble Truths: the cause of suffering is desire. So why doesn't he emphasise that so much? I mean, he obviously does, but it's this impermanence. And then there's the doctrine of *anattā*—not me, not mine. Why doesn't he go for that?

And the reason is that it's through impermanence that one can see the other two more clearly. So when you see that things are impermanent, you see that holding on to something is going to cause suffering. When you see that something is impermanent, how can it be substantial? How can it be me? Every time I point to, "Well, this is what I am," it's gone, it's changed, it's something else.

We say of people who are stuck in views that they're opinionated. But a definition of a self is that it's whole, entire, doesn't move, knows where it is, stuck. It's solid. But when you look at your phenomenal being—the sensations you get from your body, your feelings in your heart, the thoughts in your mind—they're constantly in this process of change. You can't point to something and say, "Well, I am happy." One minute you say, "I am happy." Next minute, "I'm depressed." Where's this "I"? Where's this "I" to be found?

If you say, "Well, I was happy"—well, that's of course dead. If you try and extend your "I" beyond the present moment, you're losing existence. "I will be happy"—that's a waste of time. I want to be happy now. So being aware of impermanence is a gateway into the other two.

He reinforces this in the *Maṅgala Sutta*, the discourse on the highest blessings: "Not to associate with fools, but to associate with the wise, to honour those worthy of honour." And then relationship with the teacher, this *kalyāṇamittā*, the good friend.

He has a lovely passage about how we can relate to a teacher. "Here one has faith in the teacher and visits him or her. When he visits, he pays respect. When he pays respect, he gives ear. One who gives ear hears the Dhamma and, having heard the Dhamma, memorises it, examines the meaning of the teachings. When the meaning is examined, it develops the intellectual acceptance of these teachings."

So now we're going back to this: how faith grows. "When there is an acceptance of teaching, zeal springs up." That's true, isn't it? When you have faith in something, there's an energy that comes to follow it through. As soon as you have confidence in the task, this energy comes through. Zeal. "And when zeal has sprung up, then the will is applied. And when the will is applied, there's scrutiny." So this is the meditation now. "And the striving, resolutely striving, realises ultimate truth and sees it by penetrating it with intuitive intelligence."

So there's a whole process that happens once you have that faith. And it can come either through the actual practice itself or through a relationship with a teacher. In my own case, going through various teachers—all inspiring, all of them able to point me in the right direction. And if I were to ask myself, "Would I have progressed without these people helping me?" No, it's not possible. A teacher is actually central to the practice.

Not that one becomes attached to the teacher—"my guru." That wouldn't be really where the Buddha's at, because the teacher is one who points, the one who instructs, one who clarifies for the student. I know that in certain forms of Buddhism you do get that guru thing, but it's definitely not there in the Buddha himself. If I remember rightly, he's actually dying, and there's a monk looking at him in that very loving, attached way of "my teacher, my guru," and he sends him off to the forest. The reason is that that sort of attachment is again a barrier to investigating. It's a barrier actually to being able to criticise the teacher. You become fooled. I mean, we've heard stories of people who've been fooled by gurus.

So it's not that sort of thing. It's more to do with respect, openness, an ability to listen, to follow the practice, and to keep that sense of distance so that you can discriminate as to whether the teaching is actually doing you good. That's the point.

Now, there are, of course, dangers that undermine faith, and one of them we've already talked about—the distinction between faith and belief. There's a lovely discourse called the *Kālāma Sutta*. The Kālāmas were a people who were obviously very interested in the spiritual path—this whole village had become very interested. And they complain that one guru would pass through and say, "Well, whatever those gurus say, that's a load of rubbish, and this is the truth." And then the next guru would come along and say, "No, no, no, they're a load of rubbish and they're completely confused."

When the Buddha comes, he says to them not to believe anything. I'll take this from the actual discourse because the translation is slightly better: "Don't go by oral tradition." So in those days things were handed down by rote learning. So just because it's oral tradition, the lineage of teaching—this has been a long lineage—it still might not be true. I think it was Gandhi who said truth can be in a minority of one.

"Not by hearsay"—somebody's told you. "Or by a collection of scriptures." So this must have been added later because the Buddha was illiterate, which always comes as a shock to people, but then so was everybody else. There was no writing. The only people who had writing as such were the growing merchant classes. Even today in Hinduism, the Brahmins still learn it by rote. It's still very much part of their practice.

"Not by logical reasoning." Now, that might come as a surprise to a lot of people, but where's reason taken us? Our own Enlightenment, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which put reason to the fore and did away with tradition. It had to be reasonable. And of course, out of that grew our whole scientific tradition and our technology. It's been a huge exploration and a wondrous couple of hundred years, really, if you think

about what's been invented. And it produced the wonderful Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Declaration of Human Rights. There's no mention of God in that—that's just human reason: how do we live peacefully together? What are our rights?

But it also produced communism and Nazism. So reason is only reasoned on a premise. You can reason anything once you take a premise. If your premise is human beings are not equal, off you go—you can write a fantastic book about that.

"Inferential reasoning"—that's when, for instance, I have a headache. I've had headaches, so when you say you have a headache, I'm inferring that you must have the same sort of pain that I have in my head. He says, "Not even that either. Don't believe it."

Then he goes on: "Reflection"—just on your own reflection. "Just because you've reasoned it, don't believe it." It's a bit heavy, isn't it? "Or by acceptance of the view after pondering it"—the same thing. "Or by the seeming competence of the speaker." Be careful of that. Silver tongues and all that. "Or because you think the ascetic is our teacher, the guru."

But then he says it's only when you know for yourself: "These things are wholesome, these things are blameless, these things are praised by the wise. These things, if undertaken and practised, lead to welfare and happiness." Then you should adopt them. And the opposite: if they lead to harm and suffering, then you should abandon them.

So it's a case of a combination of practice and reasoning. It's not just that you reasoned it. It's also your own personal experience. Take, for instance, people who suffer from things like anxiety or depression. What the teaching will say to them is: "You are the cause of your own depression." I mean, that's a turnaround. Most people think that

You know, it's their partner that's depressing them, or the job, or the country, the prime minister — everybody's depressing them. They're totally depressed. And then suddenly this Buddhist teacher comes along and says, no, you're making yourself depressed. Nobody can make you depressed. Nobody can cause you psychological pain.

So first a person might reject that: "absolute rubbish." And then they say, well look, why don't you just sit quietly with me now and just watch how the mind is working. And then you do the meditation and you realise, oh yeah, it's me — I'm making myself depressed. So it's that sort of exploration, not just believing it, but actually making it true to yourself.

So it's all these things, really. He says it's not just by information, not just by listening to a teacher. It's a combination of both the hearing, the understanding, personal reflection, personal practice, personal experience. And then one comes to realise, oh yeah, this is true, this is true for me.

I mean, the Buddha knew when he was liberated. He knew when he'd experienced *Nibbāna*. It's not as though he came off and wondered, "what was that?" He knew that was the end of suffering. He knew he was liberated as soon as he did it. So that's not to confuse faith with belief anyway, that's all.

The other thing is, be careful not to be too critical. Because often it's all to do with what we expect from our practice. And it's a big — it can be a real undermining of doubt. People come to the practice with expectation. And when these expectations, when these hopes are not fulfilled, then the doubt begins. "It's not doing me any good." I mean, I've come across that many a time. And you have to be careful of that because in a sense what expectation is doing is it's producing a future which has maybe completely contrary to the actual manifestation of the path within you.

So just taking an instance where other people are criticising. So here's a lovely thing. It's called the Bhaddali Sutta. And this monk is always doing daft things or wrong things. And he's always being criticised. And the Buddha said, "This bhikkhu progresses by way of faith and love. Let him not lose the measure of faith and love, as he may if we take action against him by repeatedly admonishing him. Suppose a man only had one eye, then his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives would guard that eye, thinking, 'Let him not lose his one eye.' So too, this bhikkhu progresses by measure of faith and love."

So that's in a sense of people with people, but even with ourselves, be careful not to overdo self-criticism. "I can't do this meditation, my mind's going all over the place, I can't do it." Don't believe your own mind — that's ridiculous. I don't believe in anybody else's, but our own minds are liars. Dreadful things. Wouldn't bother with it really.

Also what undermines the practice is unethical behaviour. It's very interesting that because when you start doing things which you know are wrong, you start losing self-respect. It's to do with the quality of shame, but it's self-respect, self-esteem. And this, as it were, poisons everything you do because it undermines your confidence in yourself. It can have quite an undermining effect on your life to do things which you feel are wrong, you know, which are not quite right.

And this business of expectation — those of you who received my newsletter and actually read it (I don't read newsletters, I'm not one to blame anybody else) — you'll see I had a little essay in there trying to discern between expectation, aspiration and hope.

What expectation does is it puts a completion date on things, it puts an ideal ahead of you and therefore you torture life to fit in with that ideal. I remember I met somebody who said they'd gone on a meditation retreat and he'd read the books and it was about achieving liberation, *Nibbāna*. So he went on a meditation course. It's, you know, like if you go on a course to get a certificate for woodwork, at the end you get your certificate. So he joined a week's course in meditation and he'd get *Nibbāna*. Years later. It's a bit of an awakening, you see. It's not quite like that. So that's what expectation is.

Aspiration is something different. Aspiration is something that comes from the heart. It's not so solid. It's knowing where you want to go. It's a general direction. The Buddha talks about inclining to *Nibbāna*. Inclining. If you stand still and lean forward, you have to take a step. And it's an aspiration, it's a desire, it can be a very strong desire to aspire to become a Buddha, for instance. But there's no time limit on it, there's nothing put around that — it's just the heart's desire. And that's a great freedom and it's a great motivator.

Hope is often used in the sense of good wishes — "well I hope you're well," or "I hope you do this," or "I hope I get the job." But I like to use the word hope in its, if I want a better word, theological meaning, in the way that Christians use it. Hope is that inner knowledge that comes to you through your practice that there is an end to suffering. And that puts this underlying hope in your life, this underlying joy in your life that there is actually an end to suffering. You know, there is an end to suffering. And that becomes a bedrock for our lives.

If that becomes really strong in you, it's a bedrock. Because nothing — it doesn't matter what happens. If you end up in a Chinese prison as a political prisoner or something — underneath it there runs this knowledge that even this too will pass. That there is an actual end to suffering. Without that, there's — what is there? Despair.

So just making that little distinction there. But here's the Buddha, you see, in the Kīṭāgiri Sutta. He says, "I do not say that the attainment of profound knowledge comes straight away. Nevertheless, the attainment of profound knowledge comes by gradual training, a gradual doing, a gradual course. And how does the attainment of profound knowledge come by means of gradual training, gradual doing, gradual course?"

"It is thus, monks: one who has faith draws near. Drawing near, they sit nearby. Sitting nearby, they lend an ear. Lending an ear, they hear the Dhamma, and having heard the Dhamma, they remember it. They test the meaning of things born in the mind, and while testing the meaning, the things are approved of. There being approval of, desire is born." Now this is the aspiration, not desire in the sensual sense. "And when aspiration" — I think I prefer that word — "aspiration is born, they make an effort, and having made an effort, they weigh it up. Having weighed it up, they strive, and being self-resolute, they realise for themselves the highest truth itself, penetrating by the means of wisdom they see."

It's a gradual process. And I'll be talking about this just a bit more tomorrow. But also that lack of faith in the teacher, the Dhamma, the Sangha, the training. And he also says being angry and displeased with one's companions in the holy life. I mean, that's happened. I know people who become very displeased with their companions and shot off somewhere.

But I want to tell you though that this business of expectation is a real killer. When I first started we used to do these long retreats and I met this man who became a friend and it was the way the Mahasi system teaches it — I don't teach it like that at all, but it gives you goals to go for. And this particular friend of mine really got involved in trying to achieve these goals.

And I was there — looking back now, I was there when he gave up the practice. It was a kernel moment in his life. I mean, I didn't realise how kernel it was, of course. But he dropped, like — he was one of these people that did six-month retreats and then six months of sex, drugs and rock and roll. And although he said — I mean, if somebody could meditate, this man could. But because he hadn't achieved it, he lost the faith, he lost confidence, lost confidence in himself. "Couldn't do it, not this lifetime," that sort of argument. And he dropped. And I lost contact.

Ten years later, he turns up and we meet. And that year, he told me — this is a while back when money was, you know, money — he'd just spent £8,000 on crack. So it's quite a danger to fall into the error of expectation. Expect nothing.

So I think that just about brings us to the end of our little discussion of faith. Not another nice story to end with. An admonishment. An exaltation. Don't expect anything.

So faith is a core, basic attitude within us which we can develop through our practice. And if you feel your confidence declining, if you feel your confidence going, try to see that something is happening there which is undermining, try to see what is actually undermining your confidence. Even not keeping resolutions can undermine your con-

fidence. So often people will say, beginners come to meditation and they make this big determination that they're going to sit for two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening, and it lasts till Monday. And then they can't do it. They can't do it. So it's really just being aware of how easily we can undermine ourselves.

And in states of doubt — they'll always come up until we've achieved that deep insight into things — not to be fooled by doubt. Often it's an honest doubt which the Buddha would want, a state of confusion, and just to stay in that and just to feel how uncomfortable it is. We don't like to be in a place of not knowing — very uncomfortable, a lot of fear and anxiety in there.

So this is a real teaching because you know, in some sense we don't know. There are lots of things we don't know. You don't know whether you'll be here tomorrow. You might be up there or down there. Who knows? You don't know, do you? You just don't know. You don't know what's going to happen. And it's living in that "don't know" place which is very instructive and just to stay there.

Often we can't make a decision until more information comes in, until we have more experience, until there's a clarification. Not to push the process because we don't like staying in that position of not knowing.

And when it comes to the growth of faith, like taking refuges tomorrow, to see it as a — for some of you who haven't done it — to see it just as a trial. How does it feel when I commit myself to a path for one month, one year. One year is better, right? One month goes too quick. How does it feel? At the end of that year, what's gone? Has some indecision gone? Has some clarity come?

And remember, it's in the commitment that one can really begin to investigate. Because remember, so long as the commitment isn't there, there's always that pulling off, there's always that shying away.

So hopefully, these words of mine have been of some assistance. May you be liberated in this very lifetime, sooner rather than later.

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 *Sammāsambuddho*, 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.

Fear

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 38 min

In this teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma addresses one of the most universal human experiences: fear. He explains how meditation practice allows us to encounter fear before we label and categorize it, revealing it as simply bodily sensations and mental-physical turbulence rather than a solid entity to flee from.

The talk emphasizes the crucial difference between fear itself and our fear of fear—showing how the latter creates suffering through avoidance and suppression. Bhante guides practitioners through the process of developing bravery by learning to sit steadily with uncomfortable emotions, neither pushing them away nor getting caught in psychological analysis about their origins.

Drawing on the Buddha's teachings about being "in the body and mind, but not of it," this instruction reveals how to cultivate the witness consciousness that can observe difficult states without being hijacked by them. The discussion extends beyond formal meditation to practical applications in daily life, addressing how to maintain Right Awareness when fear arises in action.

This teaching offers invaluable guidance for anyone working with anxiety, panic, or other challenging emotional states, showing how these experiences can become doorways to deeper understanding of the mind's true nature.

Fear.

What the meditation is trying to do is trying to get you in contact with fear before you call it fear. What's fear before you recognize it as fear? What is it? It's a bit nauseating. It's an uncomfortable feeling in the body. As soon as the mind recognises it as fear, it categorises it, blocks it. And as soon as it's done that, it'll react. It'll start being afraid of fear. And that's how we suppress stuff. We just push it away with fear. Don't want to see it. So you can't get right down there, you've got to go through those two barriers.

So when fear arises, this is in your meditation now, when fear arises, you first of all have to hold steady and just feel that panic. See, the panic's the fear of the fear, which is making you run. You just hang on in there, you wait for it to die down. And then what you're building up is bravery, isn't it? Bravery is being able to stand in the midst of fear, not move. So you stand there. And then as your reaction goes away, you're still shaking

from the fear. So then you get interested in it, not as an emotion. Because that immediately brings up all sorts of concepts and ideas. You can even get into a wild goose chase of trying to find out why you're afraid. Get into a personal therapy.

When you get into a personal therapy, just remind yourself that it's the deluded trying to find out how they're deluded. And the definition of delusion is, you don't know where the delusion is, so you wouldn't be deluded. So, when fear comes up and you try and chase some historical moment when all this fear was gathered, then actually all you're doing is not facing the fear. You're trying to get behind it or before it. And even if you did remember the occasion, would it help? So okay, it was when your mother hit you with a banana across the ear when you were three years old. So what? You're still stuck with the fear. You're still stuck with the aftermath.

So one has to get into the feel of it. So then you point your attention to the quality of its feeling, its sensations, the sensations it's calling. And as you go into it, you taste it. You get a feel for fear. And you just sit in the midst of that.

And when you sit in the midst of fear, what's happening? It's just a mental, physical turbulence, isn't it? It's like a bit of bad weather running through the organism, isn't it? You're just sat there just with this nausea or something. It's pitting your stomach or you might have it in your chest. You're just sitting there, that's it. You babysit. Just sit with it.

And as you're sitting with it, you might notice that it's a process. You might notice that there's no such thing as, this is fear. It's just a set of arising and passing away of sensations. They're just little sensations. And you might get that feeling that actually, to be in the midst of that isn't suffering. It's only suffering when you start reacting to it. It's only suffering when the fear of fear arises.

And then when you get comfortable with the fear, it's okay, you want more of it. You just sat there with it and said, well, come on, let's show your face. It's like a snake, show your face. So we just let it come up, let it come up.

Now, when you let things come up like that, because you're not identifying with it, I am afraid, because you're not pushing it away, feeding the system with fear, with more fear, because you're not turning away in aversion, because you're not trying to seek its origin, because you're not trying to do anything with it, you're therefore not empowering it at all. In which case, like any energy form, it has entropy. It will die away. It dies away.

And then you recognize that actually all you have to do with fear is sit with it. Hug it. I don't want to sound too New Agey there, but just sit with it. And then it passes. It passes. And that's where your confidence comes. And then you translate that to all your

negative states. Depression, stress, whatever it is. And you realize you don't have to do anything at all. You just have to sit in the midst of the flames. That's all. And it arises and passes away. And that's it. End of fear. Guaranteed forty years, if you're lucky, because there's a lot down there.

It's not as though you're going to get rid of it. So any ideas of getting rid of fear is also a subtle aversion. You mustn't have any opinion about it. What you're really trying to discover is just how to be with it in a non-reactive way. In so doing, you find, as it were, a place within yourself which is aloof. It's up above. Even though you're in it, you're not of it. So that's what the Buddha's teaching. That's the position we have to take. In the body and mind, in the heart, but not of it.

So that sense of being aloof, of being an observer, an experiencer, a witness. You can get there by just an act of will, by saying, you know, this is an object. You can point to it and say fear. As soon as you point to something, it's an object. So it can't be you, it can't be me. You're already creating a distance just by recognizing it's there. That's not the end point to be an observer. The end point is pure observing. Even that sense of some body observing disappears. But that just arises naturally. You don't have to work at that.

So that's fear. I wouldn't worry about it. There's nothing around that in terms of how you meditate with it, how you actually sit with it. The good thing about strong emotions is that you've, generally speaking, got no problems with concentration.

You have to be aware of your reactions to it too. That's all. Come off all head stuff. As soon as you start thinking, imaging something, cut. Come down to the body. Because that's how an emotion develops itself, through thought. It's through the technique of imaginative thinking that emotions develop themselves. You all know that from when somebody says some little thing that upsets you in the morning and then quite unwittingly you keep thinking about it and thinking about it and thinking about it. By the evening you're chucking them out of the window and doing all sorts of nasty things and all day you've made them insult you. And they only did it once. And it's just because that little irritation has grown and grown through the force of our imagination.

So imagination, any thought around fear, you just recognize it as fear and then you come back into the body. So doing you stop it. So now that feeling of fear has only one place to come out, which is through the body as a feeling. So if you think of the mind as an energy system like the weather, this is just a bit of a storm coming up, let it come and let it pass away.

So now, in daily life, of course, it's a different position. When you're meditating, you're at the interface, you might say, between consciousness and thoughts, consciousness and emotions, consciousness and sensations in the body. When you're meditating like that, ask yourself, where's the personality? It's only when you get up and speak and do that suddenly a personality appears, a personal writing. When you're looking inside yourself, what do you see? A thought? An emotion? So this becoming of a personality is a different position. You're in now the flow of your actions and your speech.

So now, when fear comes up, or anxiety comes up in action, then, as it were, we've still got to try to maintain just that sense of knowing it's there. Knowing it's there. And because of that knowing it's there, you've lifted yourself out of it. Even though this is saying, run, run, run, run, you keep walking. Because you've not fallen into the delusion of the fear. So even though the fear is tearing at you and they're saying, run, run, run, run, you keep walking, you keep walking. Because you're above it.

And if you feel it's the same thing, when the panic comes, you say, just stop, hang on in there. You can't handle it, run. It's alright. And then when it passes, just reflect on that. Hmm, that's interesting. And so in other words, you've got to take your meditation, this insight, into daily life. And don't worry if you so-called don't succeed, because all that's shown is the strength of our conditioning. So that takes a little humility. This is the way it is at the moment. But you work gently against it.

Even if you have a very strong fear, like obsessional stuff. One person who worked with me had problems with contamination. Couldn't go near certain areas that had been contaminated with certain substances. And I was just trying really to, through the meditation, to get her to have enough confidence that she could stay within that fear, and then to try to get the person to walk into that contaminated area.

So, in this case it didn't work that way. If you take that as an example, we all have fear, we all have anxieties and this and that, so it's a case of knowing that it can't kill you, it's only an emotion that comes out. And then just building up through your own self, through your own reflection to move towards that area which is dangerous. Hang on in there. Stay there, just keep moving towards it.

Now ultimately, what's the ultimate point? The ultimate point is the loss of fear of fear. And when you've lost your fear of fear, what's going to frighten you? It's at that point that fear drops away. And that's why, through your meditation, you should see that there's a possibility of the end of fear, the complete ending of fear.

Yes, of course that's difficult. I mean, you can take an absolutist stance and say that all fear is false projection, but obviously there is a level where it becomes inappropriate, shall we say. It's not fixed to the actual situation. As the case that I've just pointed out, this particular person, if some substance or other, if she thought that some substance or other was in this room, she couldn't go into it. And it was irrational. She was irrational. It wasn't as though she was crazy. But she couldn't go into that room.

So often you can perceive that your fear is irrational. For instance, if you have, on holiday, you have a fear of jumping off the high board at the swimming pool. Fear is irrational, isn't it? So, if you have that fear, you go up there and do it. You keep doing it until the fear, until you've actually, until you've no fear of it. But in so doing it with meditation, you're actually learning how to be with fear and not to let it hijack you.

Now, there comes that shady area where you don't know whether it's fear or not, whether it's appropriate fear or not. In which case, what can you do? You have to test it. You can only investigate a situation and find out whether in fact your fear was correct or not. How else? You don't know. That's the problem with delusion. You just don't know. You have to keep testing things.

Absolutely. I mean, there should be, shall we say, that background fear, for want of a better word, whenever we're crossing a busy road, isn't it? It's just that the fear then becomes a guardian, where you never actually feel the fear, but the fear is running as it were in the background because you know if you make a mistake you're going to get run over.

This is much the same as shame, dread, guilt. When we do something which is unskillful, unwholesome, then these emotions arise, these states of mind arise. But what the Buddha calls them, guardians of society. Not in the sense that they are wholesome because we've done something wrong, but when we've done something wrong and we've felt the inner reaction of shame, dread and guilt, then as it were, it's just like that background program.

So the Buddha says, you can get sensitive enough so that as soon as an unskillful, unwholesome idea arises in the mind, it recoils, it recoils like a feather from the flame. And that's that inner conditioning about, well if I do this, this is what's going to happen. And I dare say that there are inbuilt fear mechanisms just in the mind itself, which is self-protective.

But that's not the same as what we're talking about, in a sense, because that just arises and passes away when it's pure. Oops, don't go there. That's it, it's gone. It's like the heart telling you, you know, there's danger there. That's totally different from the normal fears and anxieties that we feel ordinarily.

Oh, well, that's what I meant about as soon as you label it, you categorize it and then all your history comes in and before you know it, you're stuck with an ogre, where in fact it was just a little tickling in the stomach. A little tickle in the solar plexus. That's the problem with history.

I mean, my own personal opinion is that the fully liberated person wouldn't feel fear at all, apart from that fear of just knowing something is dangerous, as a background understanding, you might say. Just on the grounds that there's no association at all anymore, there's no identity or wrong understanding of what this body, mind and heart is. Once it's not you, it's not a big problem, is it?

You can intellectualize, you can rationalize and say, well, I know my body's not me, it's going to die, etc., etc. But then when the doctor tells you you've got six weeks to go, you freak out. So there's a difference between an intellectual grasp of something, an understanding of something, and actually moving to that level of consciousness which no longer identifies with the body.

But I dare say it's root stuff. I mean, the place where these emotions are kept, the amygdala or something, I think that's what they call it, comes from reptilian life, doesn't it? I mean, it's part of that whole evolution of basic life. The reason that our emotions, it seems, are civilized is because they're all channeled through the front part of the brain, which is new to human beings, it seems. But when they escape, that's when you get the road rage, computer rage, things like that.

I had the experience last week of leaving the barn for a week and travelling around and staying in different houses, and I found it very difficult to keep my meditation practice going and the mindfulness. I'm wondering if you had any pointers towards maintaining practice on the road.

Yeah, well, that's the big difficulty, isn't it? First of all, you just have to recognise that a place like this, a meditation centre, has special conditions. People try not to disturb you for a start. Generally speaking, people try to respect your silence and respect what you're doing, which isn't so in the outside world. So you'll never get the same quality in ordinary daily life as what you do in the centre until there's been a real purge of the heart. So I think it's unrealistic to think that you're just going to walk out of a meditation centre or the barn like this and take it with you.

So it's a case of recognising that you have to put in some coping mechanisms. It's very much a case of keeping up the practice morning and evening. The morning is a time when you remind yourself what level of consciousness you want to be at during the day. And the evening - I don't mean just flop into bed, just fall asleep - in the evening, say after work or before you eat, sit and just let whatever you've accumulated during the day arise and pass away. Then, of course, you have a very pleasant meal and a more pleasant evening.

The other thing is just simple things like if you find yourself rushing, stop. One thing at a time. Breathe. When you're talking to somebody, remind yourself to listen. If you've got the answer ready before they finish, you're not listening. You can't listen and answer at the same time. The brain can't do that. So you're presuming what they're going to say and you've already given them an answer. So it's just relaxing into what's happening. And of course what you find is that when you do that, the other person does it.

Yesterday it was rather funny really. I'd gone to a cafe with somebody to have a coffee and then we were walking back because we were trying to open another bank account for this trust. As we were walking there, the pace sort of lifted and halfway through, Anne - some of you know Anne Ashton - she said to me, "God, you're walking fast." And I said, "I thought you were walking fast." And we were just firing off each other without knowing it. By the end of it, I was running to this damn bank. So it's a case of just recognising that - perhaps the coffee was too strong, maybe that's what did it.

If we're sharp enough, if we can maintain that sharpness of mindfulness and recognise that mindfulness or awareness doesn't have to be trapped into one single object, it can be quite wide. Even now, as you're listening to me, and that's where the point of your attention is, you can still be slightly aware of the bird chirping out there and just the colours in the room. It's like that wide awareness. And to get that, you have to be very relaxed. As soon as you get tight, the whole thing contracts. And so it's that effort just to keep relaxing - feel your shoulders, just let the breath go for a little while. Then you just have to keep doing it and keep doing it and keep doing it, and just very slowly you try to take life easy.

And then little reflections like, does it help to rush? Does it help to get irritated? What does it do? What's the point of it? It doesn't mean that we don't get irritated and we don't rush. It's just that we're trying to slowly work against these old habits which are deeply ingrained and are reinforced by society. This is the problem. If you were to stay here for a year or so, then it would begin to undermine a certain conditioning. But the effort has to be made because the one feeds into the other. If you meditate for a

week or something and then go out and have sex, drugs and rock and roll, then you've had it. You come back and you've still got these headaches and backaches and it's as though you've got to take it into daily life.

And don't expect great change - very slow. It comes over a long period of time. I remember once when I came back from the East meditating, and a very old friend of mine came up who's a long-time meditator and his first question was, "Is there a quicker way?" That was the only thing he was actually concerned with. Is there a quicker way than this? I'm afraid that - well, if you find one, come and tell me about it.

Stopping is a very strong technique. If you leave a room, for instance, and you've picked up a bit of irritation there, if you just open the door, close the door mindfully, and then just stand for a moment and just recognise what's happening. And then just wait for it to die out a little. Then you find it doesn't snowball. You don't take it with you into the next room and off it goes. So you ratchet things up all the time.

Any other questions?

Just a question about right effort, that balance between too much effort and not enough, the technique to find the best way to concentrate but not put too much pressure on it. But, you know, staying in an easy... Yeah, just in particular meditation.

Ah. Well, I've always thought that's pretty easy, actually, to get over that one. Because we are Westerners, we have to achieve. Okay? So make your achievement just being aware. That is the achievement, to be aware. That's it. You don't have to worry about insights. Just be aware of what's happening. Put the whole of your effort in just knowing what's actually happening now. As soon as you put any expectation to it, as soon as you put an idea to it, then of course you are bringing some sort of extra to that present moment-to-moment awareness. So you're not looking for anything, you're just looking at what's coming up. And to do that, you have to relax. So your posture should be held up at the spine and everything else relaxed. You relax on the object.

And to keep the attention there, don't worry about concentration. Raise the interest. Just ask yourself, when did you ever lose concentration if you were interested in something? It comes naturally. If the interest isn't there, if there's boredom, then you have to say, "Well, now that's interesting." Any object which comes, you have to raise that question mark. And it's a childlike curiosity. And it's questioning, do I really know? Do I really know?

So I sit there and I think, well, as we were discussing, fear. Do I really, really know what fear is before I name it? Do I really, really know what an emotion is before I conceptualise it? Because that's the process in the mind. First there's a sensation or a feel-

ing, then there's some sort of labelling or perceptual process, and then the history comes in, and that's it. Even in very simple things like, you might see one of these flowers. So you might name it, you know, a rose or something. But do you know it? Do you know that particular rose? Or have you just looked at it and it's just fitted into a pattern of a rose so then you've seen it. But have you gone up and really looked at the colour, looked at the veins in the petals, seen the shape of the petals, have you actually smelt it? But we're happy just to say that's a rose and then we think we know it.

So it's raising that curiosity as to what is actually happening now and recognising that that is the achievement. That's it. That's all the Buddha's teaching. *Satipaṭṭhāna* - awareness and intuitive intelligence. It's just the establishment of that. And it comes when you have right attitude. You just want to know what's happening now. So you just rest your eye on it. So you can practise this on ordinary things. So the next time you're out in the garden there and see a flower, just rest your eye on it. You don't look for anything, just rest your eye on it and see what the perceptual faculty is doing. Observe how the mind observes the flower. Just be aware of where the eyes are going. And that's it.

And when you catch yourself with wrong effort - and you know that because you get tight. I mean the other side of course is that you lose energy and you fall asleep. That's not so painful. But the other side when you get tight and you start feeling nasty about yourself and all that, then just go into the feelings of it, the sensations of it. There's something crept in there about achieving it, that's all. So, as you know, the mind's very subtle. You think you're doing it right, and then you find out afterwards you weren't doing it right. But that's alright. Just to find out that you weren't doing it right is a step forward. And sometimes you find out you didn't do it right, and now you think, "Well, from now on I will do it right." And a little bit later you realise you've done it wrong again. So, that's alright. That's how slippery the mind is.

Does that help?

Any other questions? Anything else? Is it time for tea then?

Forgiveness

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1h02

Drawing inspiration from the story of Aṅgulimāla, Bhante Bodhidhamma presents a profound exploration of forgiveness through the lens of Buddhist psychology. Using the Buddha's teaching on paṭicca-samuppāda (Dependent Origination), he demonstrates how we create our own suffering through our reactions to harm, rather than being victims of others' actions. The talk begins with guided contemplations to understand our psychological responses to being hurt and causing harm, then examines how avijjā (ignorance/nescience) is the root mistake that leads to all suffering.

Bhante explains that since we cannot truly cause others to suffer psychologically—only be catalysts for their own conditioned reactions—we are fundamentally innocent, having acted from delusion rather than inherent evil. This insight makes genuine forgiveness possible. The talk addresses challenging topics including childhood trauma, existential guilt from Western religious conditioning, and the apparent injustice of those who 'get away with' harmful actions.

Practical guidance is offered for releasing victim suffering and victimizer guilt through vipassanā meditation, including a 'four steps to determination' method for transforming unwanted mental habits. The teaching emphasizes that true forgiveness is neither forgetting nor excusing, but a complete letting go of hurt and revenge through understanding the deeper psychology of how suffering actually arises.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.

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

This talk came about because a friend of mine, who's a musician, wanted to write music around the theme of Aṅgulimāla, as some of you may know. The story of Aṅgulimāla is a murdering thief, but he meets the Buddha and undertakes the training and before he dies becomes fully enlightened. So there's hope for us all. He wanted me to write something which he could attach his music to, and having done that I wanted to add something to it to explain the psychology as to how somebody so steeped in evil might arrive at enlightenment even within this very lifetime.

So the first part I'll ask you to do some imaginative work and then we'll do some explanation. Then at the end you can try and have a go at practicing forgiving all those people whom you've murdered and forgiving yourself, rather, and forgiving all those people who've done you harm.

Just try this one for size, shall we say. You can close your eyes and just, what I want you to try and do, and just catch the process of your psychology. Just imagine now, if you can think of an actual occasion in your life, that might be even better, but just think of an occasion now where somebody says something which hurts you. It might be just a flippant thing, like "you're an idiot" or something. So if you can imagine that, and just let the insult come. Now, just catch your reaction.

So I wonder what the reaction might have been. Irritation? Anger? Indignation? And what might it lead you to once you've left that person? What might it lead you to? A slander? A knife in the back?

So now just try something else on a similar line. Instead of somebody saying something awful to you, they actually do something to you. Perhaps they push you, or they stick their finger into you, or at worst they bop you on the nose. Can you imagine that? Can you see what your reaction might be? I would suggest it's much the same unless they're much bigger than you then you'd probably get a bit fearful.

So the question we have to ask ourselves is did that person cause us suffering? Do you think they were the direct cause of your suffering?

So now turn that one around now and just take somebody whom you're going to insult. It might be the same person of course. So as you just make that scene in your mind, you see, offer them your insult and just see how you feel about that. I would suggest that maybe you feel a little satisfied by it. A job well done. Pleased. Supposing they pushed in front of you in a queue or something. You got rather angry about it and you pushed them out. You used a bit of physical force there. Can you imagine yourself doing that? So I would suggest it's much the same as above, only a little stronger.

Now take that person and let them come back to you and say that they're really upset and you've seen that you've been the cause of their being upset. Now how do you feel about that? A little remorseful, a bit guilty, shame.

Let's take an occasion which is much worse. Supposing you've unfortunately had one or two drinks and you knock somebody over on the road. Now what's your first reaction there? Just play it through your mind. Shock, fear, dread of consequences when other people find out, shame when you realize what you've done to the person, remorse.

That's the end of our little escapade of trying to imagine things, just to get you in touch with all those emotions, all those states of mind that revolve around those actions where we're hurting somebody or somebody's hurting us.

So now, if we just take the process of that psychology, what we have is the Wheel of Dependent Origination. And what the Buddha is teaching us there is that whatever, just taking the first instance, whatever somebody does to us, has to stop at the point of reception, at the point where we perceive something. So if somebody called me "you fathead," that's not very nice, is it? They call me fathead, you see, so what actually happens is that I've just heard these words, fathead.

If somebody, then having heard those words, I take them into myself. I take them into myself and I define them as unpleasant. They are, aren't they? So they're unpleasant. So this person hasn't actually made me think they're unpleasant. I'm just defining them as unpleasant within myself. If I didn't speak English I'd probably smile.

So there's something I've done there whereby I've defined this as unpleasant. Now I've taught myself that when something unpleasant arises I have to get rid of it. I want to push it away. So that's my reaction to something unpleasant and again it's done by me within me because of my past conditioning.

So we can see if we look at our psychology very carefully, the person who's called us fathead hasn't actually caused me to suffer. It's the way I've responded to it. If the person who's just called me fathead is reckoned by everybody just to be a bit loopy, then I wouldn't have that reaction. I'd probably just say, "Oh, well, they're a bit daft" or something. So everything, all the hurt that I get when somebody insults me or somebody says something cruel to me is my own inner reaction. I can't blame them for making me suffer.

If somebody now pulls my nose, or tugs my ears, or gives me a shove, where does that stop? It stops at the physical body, doesn't it? It stops at a sensation on the body. But then, inwardly, I see what the person's done, I feel what the person's done to me, and again, I define it as unpleasant. Again, I respond to it with irritation, with anger, with hurt. But that's all happening in me as a response to what this person has done.

I can't say that this person has made me suffer. They've given me, shall we say, severe sensations on the nose, which I've defined as pain, but pain isn't suffering. Pain as such is just sensation, no matter how severe it is. What makes us suffer, what makes it hard to stay with, is our reaction to it, our inability to be patient with it. So it's the internal reaction we have to these things which is actually causing us to suffer.

So those are your links on this wheel of dependent origination which remember is the Buddha's paradigm as to how we cause suffering for ourselves. How we cause suffering for ourselves.

So now you can widen that out and you begin to recognize that nobody in the world can cause you psychological pain. Which is hard to accept because until now we've been very happy blaming everybody else. Parents, society, Tony Blair, all these people have made me suffer, you see. But now when I look into my psychology, I can't say that anymore.

If we now turn it the other way, I now say to somebody, "you fathead." Now, the same process is happening within them. I can't say that I've caused them to suffer, but I have to recognize what's happening in me. What's happening in me is that I am developing a conditioning of hate, a conditioning of cruelty.

Now I might get immediate satisfaction by watching somebody cringe when I call them "you fathead," but inside me I have this turbulence, this desire to be cruel, this desire to get my own back, the hatred within me. And the effect of that is that, not surprisingly, people start staying away. They don't hang about. They don't want to talk to me. So my cruelty, my hatred, goes into the world and the world moves away from me. And it causes me to be lonely, and if I don't see that, I then blame others for not being friendly, for not being open-hearted to me, and I begin to hate them the more.

I'm in a whirlwind, taking me downwards into a perpetual state of hatred and grumbling and whinging, which can keep you awake. Worse still, if I actually hit somebody or push somebody, then that's a more violent act. And therefore the inner violence is even worse.

So here we have a situation where I think I'm hurting somebody, but in fact I'm only hurting myself. So you might ask, well, what stops you from hurting somebody anyway, you see? Well, when we've contacted the hurt that I feel when somebody insults me or somebody harms me, then even though I recognize that I'm the cause of it, it's out of compassion for the other that you don't, that you are not the catalyst whereby they cause themselves to suffer. So you begin to take responsibility not to enter into situations, not to confront people in such a way that you know you're just pressing their buttons.

So, the whole psychology around doing harm is always centred on us. We ourselves create an inner turbulence when we do harm, and when somebody does harm to us, it's we that create within us our own suffering.

Now, although that may seem at first to land us in a load of suffering is the very fact that we create our own suffering that will allow us to escape it in the end. That's the purpose of meditation. That's the purpose of *vipassanā*. So you can see these mechanisms that are causing us to suffer. And then you realize that you must stop behaving like that, which means that in your daily life you have to maintain that sense of sharp mindfulness, knowing your own habits.

Even if you respond in an old way, you don't indulge it. Even though somebody says to you, "you fathead," you see, it stays right there at the point of hurt. You're prepared to let the hurt hurt because you know that is your own personal response to such a thing. But you don't allow yourself to begin to fantasize to get your own back.

So if somebody insults you once, as you know, by the end of the day, they've insulted you a thousand times. And the punishment for their insult has got worse. At first, you just shouted at them in your mind. But by the time you go to bed, you're hanging them. You're chucking them out of the window. So remember, it's through the process of thinking and fantasizing that we are developing these states of mind. This is how we develop our states of mind, through fantasy, through this process of thinking. And it's not a great distance between thinking about doing something and actually doing it.

So what the *vipassanā* or the insight meditation is teaching us to do is to stay right there with the hurt, to let the hurt die away. Now, when the hurt dies away, first of all, we're stopping it developing, but more important, we're actually undercutting that old conditioning of being hurt when somebody calls us a name or does something which insults us, but actually going underneath it so that there will come a time when somebody might say something which in the past you would have felt to be hurtful but actually it just stops at the sense door. You just hear the word. There isn't that reaction.

So you can see that taking full responsibility for our inner suffering using the *vipassanā* to allow things to burn out and to heal is actually the process of psychotherapy, healing the heart, purifying the heart, that would be impossible to do if you think the other person is making you suffer, in which case you'd have to change everybody in the world because a lot of people go around calling other people fatheads.

So even though it's difficult sometimes for us to recognize that nobody can hurt us, actually, that's our salvation. That's the healing. That's the liberation from suffering once we've actually realized that.

With that, there's the other side where we hurt people. So it's recognizing that even though we can't cause somebody to suffer, by actually wanting to hurt people, we're creating a turbulence within our mind, which is suffering, and we're creating a habit

which eventually begins to push people away from us. So once we recognize that the serpent bites back, the serpent is biting its own tail, then you realize that that behaviour has to stop. So again the purpose of the vipassanā is to sit with it in silence to allow it to burn away, but then we have to maintain that sense of sharp mindfulness in daily life so that we don't fall into those old habits.

And what we discover is that very slowly, over a period of time, you know, 20 odd years, those habits of trying to do harm to everybody just fade away. And the opposite takes its place. Nature abhors a vacuum. We're talking here about transformation. So where there was cruelty, now there's compassion. Where there's hate, now there's love. There's openness. There's open-heartedness. Warm-heartedness.

Just as a little aside, just talking about these things that we suffer. So for instance, we have within us a mechanism that decides whether something is good or bad, skillful or unskillful. We call it our conscience. Now, just because our conscience which is the judge remember judging us, just because our conscience says something is wrong or something is bad doesn't mean to say we have to accept it because sometimes this judge is a tyrant, sometimes the conscience is too tight and it creates a life of dread, creates a life of unnecessary shame. On the other hand this conscience can sometimes be very loose so that we don't feel appropriate shame, appropriate dread when we do things.

So we haven't got to trust our conscience. There has to be some reflection about it and talking to other people whom you trust so that there's a balance in the mind knowing what is good, what is bad, at a basic moral level, but remember that at a more refined level, it's what's skillful and unskillful. And when the Buddha talks about what is skillful and unskillful, he's always talking about that which leads to the liberation and that which leads to suffering.

Those two emotions that we feel, dread and shame, shame is that feeling of loss of self-esteem, we haven't lived up to our own standards, that's why we blush, and dread is the fear of consequences, the fear of consequences. Now when we do something harmful and we feel shame and dread in a sense that is not to be seen as a punishment. That's how people would look upon it. It's not to be seen as a punishment, but as warnings.

When we accept the factors of shame and dread, and they become part and parcel of our psychology, they prevent us from doing things. Because as soon as you think, "well, I'll do that," there comes just that little bite of shame, just that little bite of dread, and it stops you. And it's when shame and dread are behaving like this that the Buddha calls them guardians of society.

You can see from the way, for instance, a lot of the youth behave, that the line they draw about shame and dread is pretty low. They can do certain things which they're not ashamed of, nor do they dread any consequence. So you can see that once these reactions are lowered, you're going to get behaviour which is unsociable. When there's no shame and dread there, then we're talking about psychopaths, we're talking about sociopaths. It's an actual psychological disease.

Remorse, on the other side, is suddenly feeling that compunction, that desire to be rid of all the guilt and the shame and to want to be reconciled with the person whom you've hurt or indeed who's hurt you. So remorse is a natural feeling which comes after we accept that we've done wrong. And in our meditation, we have to sit with that. If you try and block it out, you'll just harden your heart. You must respond to that desire to be reconciled. To go to the person, if necessary. But in some way, that remorse has to be answered.

And it's going through that cycle of guilt, shame, feeling bad about oneself, fearful of consequences, feeling remorse, and bringing that remorse to an end by reconciliation, that there's not only a process of healing at that particular event, but also undermining that whole conditioning. So eventually we don't get ourselves into those corners.

Now what helps us is that our conditioning is always fairly much the same. This is what we mean by *kamma*. We're always doing the same thing. We're always making the same mistake. If you look back on your life or whatever, you'll always see that there's a trait within us which is always popping up, given the occasion it comes up. And it's catching that right before it comes up and letting it go, not responding to it, that undermines that whole trait. And why do we do it?

Because we've recognised it leads nowhere but to suffering, to our discomfort.

So now we have to go a little deeper because... In a sense, that tells us how we cause ourselves to suffer, and it tells us how to get rid of it. But the next point on the wheel of dependent origination to investigate is that whole point at the beginning of it, which is *avijjā*.

Now, *avijjā* is translated as ignorance. That's how it's normally translated. But in English, ignorance has a feeling of stupidity about it. But that's not really the meaning. The meaning, I came across this word, nescience, which fits it more beautifully. And nescience just means don't know. I just don't know.

Now, in the Buddha's understanding, when consciousness arises, it arises from a base of don't know. And it moves into this body and mind, body mind and heart, and it simply presumes this is what it is. Therefore you form eventually a concept of yourself:

I am who I am, I'm here, I'm my personality, my character, I'm my body, I'm my emotions etc. etc. See? That little mistake is actually the fundamental cause for all the bit that we've just discussed.

Now if we go back on that and we recognise that right at the very beginning there's been a mistake, it was a mistake, that if it weren't for that mistake we would never have done any harm, then you begin to understand that at fundament we're innocent. It's only because of a mistake, not because of something culpable, not because of something blameworthy. We just made a mistake.

Now, I'll give you an example of that just from one of my experiences when I was in Sri Lanka. They had these very nasty little flies called Ohopatua. Have I said that properly? Ohopatua. They're just little gnats, they fly in the air, and they have a nasty habit of biting you and leaving you with a very itchy pimple for about three days. And sometimes they even can creep through a mosquito net.

So here I am with these little pimples and scratching them, and I'm wondering what to do, and I suddenly realise that a spider has built a web in the kuthi, in the room, in the hut. So I say to myself, that's it, I've got to get spiders in and that'll get rid of them. So I have little signs up saying, this way please.

Well, within a few days, there were hundreds of them. They were everywhere, all around the room. And I thought, well, this is really crazy. And it was getting to a point where I was so bitten and miserable that I decided, you know, I've just got to leave. I've got to go up country somewhere. Just get out of these flies.

Happily, just at that time, a friend of mine, a Canadian monk came and I told him, looking really grim that this was it. And I showed him my pimples and I said, look at this. And he looked around and he said, these spiders webs, don't you get rid of spiders, the webs out of your room? I said, no. He said, well, they breed on those.

So here's a wonderful occasion where innocent ignorance leads me into suffering. Now, at fundament, that's all the Buddha's saying. All he's saying is that we've made a mistake. We're never meant to do any harm. And so at fundament, we are innocent. If we weren't, if it was actually part of our essential nature not to be innocent, then how could we ever become enlightened?

Just one or two reflections on existential guilt. This really refers to people who have been brought up in Christianity or a religion which has a god. Because according to those religions, we are born evil. In Buddhism, evil and all that is a secondary thing, which means that Western people can suffer from what you might call an existential

guilt. In other words, they feel themselves to be essentially evil. In so doing, you can see the necessity of having someone to intercede, somebody who can save, can take away that essential evil, and thereby find some reconciliation with God.

Now, if you're a Westerner and you're brought up on that, then that will probably be somewhere in your psyche. So that also has to be suffered and allowed to pass away. And sometimes that goes very deep. And when you couple it with the idea of eternal damnation, then that's bad news.

So what we have to do is go underneath that and really accept those sorts of feelings. And they can be extraordinarily nasty, like fear and dread and all that sort of stuff. But you have to stay there, you have to feel it, you have to investigate it and recognise your reaction to it, which is of course that we don't want to feel that. And eventually as that evaporates, that essential innocence arises.

Now, there is a movement in Christianity where they don't talk about original sin. That's what they're referring to. Most of you will know the myth of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But you'll also find that there are movements in Christianity that, instead of talking about that, talk about the original blessing. In other words, the fact was that Adam and Eve were born in innocent happiness. So in that sense they come closer to a Buddhist understanding.

So there is an end to guilt, there is an end to shame, and there is therefore an end to forgiveness.

Just two things that always come up whenever I discuss this. First of all, why is it that some people get away with it? I mean, they seem to die... take Stalin, for instance. He died fairly happily in bed, having murdered 40 million people. And it seems to have got everything he wanted, although he must have been in a dreadful state of mind in a way, because he only worked at night and... I think on one trip he had five trains going, all giving the impression that he was on one of them, constantly in dread of being assassinated. But take that to one side and just say, well, some people seem to get away with it.

Well, here, of course, we have to, in a sense, open towards the acceptance of the idea of rebirth, the idea that perhaps this isn't the only life we've ever lived, and it's not the only life we're going to live, and that there is some sort of justice in the process of the world in which individual consciousnesses work their way up towards the enlightenment through a process of being born and being reborn.

However, if a person finds that difficult to accept, it's not actually necessary in order to get the benefits of the psychology that we've just been explaining, because the benefits of that are immediate. Through the practice of insight meditation, to seeing that we

cause ourselves suffering, and to see that we cause ourselves suffering when we cause others, when we press other people's buttons, is immediate. We immediately stop behaving in certain ways and we feel happier for it.

But in a cosmic sense, this was one of the insights of the Buddha. It was part of his enlightenment, when he saw that people were dying and going elsewhere, and that a great deal of the reason for their going where they were going was because of their bodily behaviour, which creates these dispositions within us.

And finally, there's a real difficult one, which is very hard for people to accept, who haven't come across this psychology before. And that's, of course, the suffering of innocence, especially the suffering of a child. But it is the same. It is the same psychology. What is horrific to us about a child's situation is of course its absolute vulnerability and its inability through language or conceptual reasoning to find any distance or objectivity to the suffering that it's undergoing.

But still, the child ends up with a trauma and in a sense the rest of its life is working out that psychological trauma within itself. And it's very rare, I think, for a person not to have a childhood trauma somewhere. These childhood traumas are not simply caused, are not only caused by people who actually mean to do them harm. The very process of birth is a trauma, for heaven's sake.

So, the suffering in the child follows the same psychology, and that's why eventually, as adults, we can empty ourselves of this suffering. Now, for the person who harms a child, well, now that's something else, because they have to now bear the awful responsibility for that child's suffering. They might not be the direct cause of that suffering, but they were the catalyst that caused it.

And just to give you two wonderful examples that bring that home to us, the Moors murderer, Brady, was asked if he ever thought about the child victims that he tortured and murdered up here just in Lancashire. And he said, if I did that, it would drive me mad.

Now, some of you may have come across a book called *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. Have you ever come across that one? It's a really good book. It's written by a psychologist called Oliver Sacks. And he's interested in brain damage and the way people are. The particular title refers to a man who couldn't distinguish objects. And as he was leaving the office after a talk, he simply grabbed his wife's head, thinking it was his hat. His wife I don't think is all that pleased.

In that same book there's a very interesting tale which definitely says something to Buddhists. There's a man who murders his daughter in such a vicious way that the facts of the case are not brought out in public in the court. They're just too horrific. This man could not remember a thing. So eventually they had to convict him as insane and they sent him to a secure prison for the mentally insane. This is in America. So they couldn't convict him as a straight criminal.

While he was there he acted seemingly quite normal and within a few years the staff had such confidence in him that they let him go out on bicycle rides. On one of these bicycle rides, a car hit him and he fell over and banged his head on the road. This had the effect of awakening, when he woke up from the concussion, of awakening in him what he'd actually done. And so the story goes, it took six months for the staff to restrain and stop him from committing suicide.

So eventually the harm that we do catches up on us and to harm innocence would leave us with an enormous sense of guilt and remorse.

So now we come to... well I'll just give you a final reflection on that concerning harm. There's a very famous simile of the saw which the Buddha gives. And he says, oh monks, even if bandits were to sever you savagely, limb by limb with a two-handed saw, he who gave rise to hatred towards them would not be carrying out my teaching. That's heavy, isn't it?

So now what I'd like to do is... I ask you to do another contemplation exercise. And the first one is, how do we free ourselves from a victim's suffering? So from the suffering that we feel when we've been victimised or when we've been a victim. And the second one is, how do we liberate ourselves from the suffering of being a victimiser? So I just want to go through these steps and you can close your eyes and just go through them. And then you'll get an idea of how it might work for you.

So the first one is how to let go of the suffering we feel when we've been hurt. So the first thing to recognise is that to forgive is not to forget. You have to be very careful. If you try and forget the hurt that's been given to you, then all you're doing is suppressing it and it's just working underground and it works as grudges and it just sabotages our lives. When we forgive somebody, we're not excusing them either. And sometimes we feel that if we forgive somebody, somehow in a secret way we're condoning what they're doing. So that's not forgiveness either. Forgiveness is just a change of attitude, a letting go of that hurt, letting go of revenge, and establishing within us that sense of compassion and forgiveness towards the person.

So the first thing, if you now take somebody who's hurt you, it can be somebody real, but not the big one. The first thing you have to, I think, recognise is that there's no need for us to punish them. They themselves will suffer the consequences of their own actions. That's the karmic law. So there's no need for us to seek revenge. And a Chinese proverb warns us, those who seek revenge should dig two graves.

The second thing is to remind ourselves that that person originally has made a mistake. It's by way of delusion that they've come to behave in this unskillful way. That fundamentally they are actually innocent and they didn't mean to do any harm. Sometimes it's good to have a dialogue with the person in your mind having done that, having as it were corrected our relationship to that person, we can then turn inward.

And just get in contact with the hurt we feel. You can run through the occasion. You can bring up the occasion when you were hurt. Now here you've got to be very careful not to be taken away by fantasy. So you've got to keep that attention as much as you can right at the physical base. The feelings around hurt. The anger that may still come up. The desire for revenge. Try and stay as close as you can to the body, to sensation, to feeling.

Now as those feelings begin to decrease, the next step would be to contemplate the other person's better nature. When all the hurt and the desire for revenge begins to decrease you can then begin to reform your relationship to that person. Try and see their better nature. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Send them good wishes from the heart. And if that's too difficult well at least an attitude of no harm. That's the base isn't it? No harm.

So that, as it were, sets our right relationship with the person, right attitude. Now, in the future, we can resolve not to approach that person concerning this occasion unless we're absolutely equanimous, which means we have to wait for the right time. And then when we decide that we are going to approach them, to almost talk as if you're a mediator. You'll be very careful not to put blame, not to lay it on them, but just to be clear about the feelings we felt. We have to take responsibility for our part in the incident. Takes two to tango. And the next thing is not to expect an apology. That's a presumption on our part. If they do so, well, of course, it's very healing. But it's not important to us that they should express an apology. The healing comes by this inner process.

Now sometimes of course we can't do anything because the person's moved on or they may have died. So we have to work with this process of reconciliation inward. Until all the emotional pain around the memory is just slowly drained away. Don't solidify

around it, don't get hard around it, just see it as a process. You can often just sit with an emotion and just say gently, not me, not mine. It's there, I'm looking at it. I'm experiencing it, so I can't be it.

So that's one way that you might try in the future to deal with suffering which comes because somebody has victimised you.

If we now go to the other side and consider some of the suffering that we've been a catalyst to in other people, where we've been the victimiser, then it might be a good start to just reflect on the fact that we are fundamentally deluded, that we've acted primordially out of a mistake, and that we are fundamentally innocent and therefore utter forgiveness of ourselves by ourselves is possible.

Then we have to convince ourselves that of course we do have a responsibility. We did play a role in causing that person harm, we were a catalyst. A catalyst in chemistry is something which causes a change, causes a change between two chemicals, but itself doesn't change. So the word I might have said to somebody doesn't change, or it just hits the same space, but it creates within the other a whole sequence of psychological events that causes them suffering. We have to take responsibility for that.

Sometimes we know how to press somebody's buttons too. We enjoy doing it. But when we do this we have to be careful not to take on false guilt. We're taking on false guilt if we take on their personal suffering.

So now we make resolutions not to do that again. So I was very careful about resolutions because you know the old phrase that the path to hell is paved with good resolutions. So it has to be realistic. These behaviour patterns are deeply ingrained. They've come to us over a long time. So we shouldn't be surprised if we keep making the mistake over and over again. So we have to accept that this process is going to be repeated and repeated and repeated. And what we're hoping is that given a length of time, the behaviour lessens, eventually dies away. But we still have to make these resolutions, these determinations.

And that determination has to be one of being really awake, really mindful. The alarm bell should go off whenever we enter a situation where we know we normally do something stupid, something silly, something unskillful.

Then there's the usual business of sitting with the remorse, the shame, the guilt which is in our hearts. So that's part of the process of *vipassanā* insight meditation. We can do that. And we can watch them as a process. We can see that if we push guilt away, push shame away, or push remorse away, that causes us more suffering. So there we're catching this process of how we cause ourselves to suffer.

We can so distance ourselves from those emotions within us that they become very objective. There's shame. There's the feelings of shame. There's the feelings of guilt. And just watch them as a process. Don't get involved by way of identity or possessing them. They're not me, not mine. These are the things that insight meditation teaches us.

Two of our most powerful reasons for hurting people is jealousy and hatred. All forms of hatred. So jealousy isn't just a simple covetousness. It's not just wanting what the other person wants, what the other person has. It's wanting what the other person has and hating them for having it.

So the antidote to that is having sat with that for a while to begin to rejoice in the other person's good fortune. This is what we mean by sympathetic joy. And that's a contemplation. When somebody wins the lottery, you rejoice for them. You're happy that a bit of the pound you spent went to their fortune. When your friend who went with you for the same job gets the job, you rejoice for them. This sort of thing undermines jealousy.

Hatred is undermined by seeing the other person in a different light. As we said before, to actually bring to mind their good qualities, so there's a balance of attitude towards them. And then finally, if it's possible, to meet with the person and express our remorse, express our sorrow. In the Visuddhimagga it also suggests that we offer them a gift when it's appropriate.

Now supposing at work you'd had a bit of an upset with somebody and you'd gone through this exercise. When you go to work and you're walking through that door of a corridor and they see you at the end of it, our ability to tell where people are at is very refined. We know from a person's body language, we know from what's on their face, even at quite a distance, whether they're friend or foe. And this person may be feeling themselves still hardened by what they did, or they may feel remorse themselves, or they may feel a desire to be reconciled rather. Just by having that attitude, it'll show on our face, it'll show on the way that we walk. So that they know there's a desire in us to be reconciled. So these things are really very important preparatory exercises, so that when we actually meet up with people whom we've hurt, they're open to our apology.

Now the fact is that, generally speaking, unless they've been fortunate enough to come to the Buddha's teaching about pain, they will definitely blame you for the suffering they're suffering. That's what they do. That's what people do. Now, that doesn't mean to say you have to take on their suffering, but there's no point in going into a great dissertation about how they're causing themselves suffering and that your insult didn't actually cause them to suffer. That won't do at all. All they think you're doing is trying to escape your responsibility.

So we apologise. That's not a problem. We apologise, but in our hearts we apologise for our part in the process. That's enough. You don't have to explain anything.

What happens now if the person refuses to forgive, harbours vengefulness, resentment? What can we do about that? We don't have an option, really, do we? We have to accept that this person now sees themselves as an enemy. So that will also create a reaction within us, maybe fear, maybe also a desire to set up battle formations. But because of this psychology they can't actually do us any harm. Outside they might, they might slander us, they might undermine us in all sorts of ways, but inwardly they're not doing us, they're not causing any suffering. So often when you get a person like that, it's often best just to stay out of their way. Because even the sight of you raises hackles. And hopefully there comes a time when you can be reconciled.

It also takes a bit of philosophy to recognise, well, when you do something into the world, you never know what the consequences are going to be, because it enters into a situation over which we don't have control. You may one day say something flippant to somebody, and they take it, they laugh it off, and nothing ever comes of it, because they're a forgiving type. You may say the very same thing with the same sort of slight sarcastic joke and somebody takes it as a personal hatred and off they go on a vendetta. From your point of view it's the same input into the world but you hadn't a clue it was going to come back to you. So when something comes back to you which seems to be completely inappropriate to what you did, then that's a lesson to understand.

Finally, I'd like to leave you with a little exercise, which at the moment I've called four steps to determination. So when you see in yourself a trait which you don't like, then you have to make a determination, you have to go through something of this nature to undermine that particular trait.

So supposing you do have a certain sarcastic twist to the way you say things. So the first thing is that you have to convince yourself that you can undo that particular conditioning. So you have to say to yourself, I can. You have to keep saying that until you convince yourself that you're able to do it, just by letting it go, just by not indulging it, the habit will die out.

Then you have to reinforce that can-do with a sense of ought, a sense of responsibility, taking one's responsibility for one's own self. Now, these words like ought, must, have to, tend to be looked down upon, especially in psychotherapeutic circles, because they cause further blame, they cause a further guilt when you don't fulfil what you said you would do. But that's only when it's imposed upon us. If we ourselves take responsibility, then they become ours, so it's easy to do it.

So I ought to do it for my own benefit and others is an act of compassion on my part. It's a compassion towards myself and a compassion to others. I'm motivated to do what is good for myself and other people. So that ought is not something which is going to cause any trouble.

Then you've got to convince yourself that you want to do it. And you may find that a bit of a sticking point. So you've got to cajole yourself. You do want to do it. You have to convince yourself to give up a habit which you don't want.

And then finally when you feel there is that desire to give it up, a real committed desire, then you have to empower it. You have to say, I will. I will. And then you make the decision that whenever that particular trait comes up, I will resist it. I will resist it.

So these four stages of convincing ourselves that we can do it, that it's our responsibility for the benefit of ourselves and others, that we actually do want to do it, and that we will do it, you'll find I think fairly powerful in helping you to get rid of unwanted traits in our personalities.

The opposite is also true. It works for positive. So if you want to become more generous, you have to convince yourself that you can be, that you ought to be for your own benefit and others, that you want to be—you can be stuck there—and then you will. So any given occasion you'll express your generosity.

I think that brings us to the end of my little effort to explain how it is that we can come to the end of forgiveness. So we've done two major things to understand. First of all, the psychological process as to how suffering arises in us because of our reactions to things that hurt us and because of behaving from an attitude which is unskillful, cruelty, hatred and all that.

Fourth Noble Truth: Noble Eightfold Path in Daily Life

Noirin Sheahan · 38 min

As retreat comes to an end, Noirin Sheahan offers comprehensive guidance on applying the fourth Noble Truth—the Noble Eightfold Path—to daily life. This teaching systematically explores all eight factors: right view (sammā diṭṭhi) through Dhamma study and investigation; right intention (sammā saṅkappa) via mettā practice and cultivating goodwill; the moral conduct factors of right speech, action, and livelihood; and the meditation factors of right effort, right awareness (sammā sati), and right concentration (sammā samādhi).

Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's guidance on full awareness in daily activities—walking, looking, eating, speaking—Noirin demonstrates how mindfulness extends beyond formal meditation. She addresses practical ethical challenges in modern life, from right livelihood considerations to sexual conduct, emphasizing that motivation determines karmic consequences. The teaching concludes with establishing sustainable meditation practice and finding saṅgha support, noting the Buddha's teaching to Ānanda that spiritual friendship constitutes the whole of spiritual life, not merely half.

Daily life, the noble eightfold path.

As the retreat comes to an end, we naturally start to think about the bigger picture, family, friends, work and so on, and how we might bring the benefits of our retreat practice into everyday life.

To get the Buddha's advice on this, we have the fourth noble truth, the path to the end of suffering, with the injunction to follow this path for ourselves. The path itself has eight strands and is known as the Noble Eightfold Path. Noble because it is ennobling and it makes for a worthy life.

I'd been meditating for a few years before I really started taking this Eightfold Path to heart. Earlier I'd been so intent on learning to meditate I didn't take much notice of anything else in Buddhism. But finally the penny dropped. I realised there was so much more I could do, that there were lots of areas of life that could open up as part of spiritual practice. It was a great relief to realise this. I felt empowered and inspired. I hope it doesn't take any of you so long to open up to this teaching.

Each of the strands is described as right, right view, right attitude and so on. This can be off-putting as if there's no room for discussion or error. In practice, much of the path has to be discovered by trial and error, by considering, by experimenting, learning and discussing. But we're not in a sea of confusion either. We have these eight signposts to give us a sense of direction, a basis on which to learn and question and discuss.

It starts with right view or right understanding. This sounds dogmatic and the Buddha wasn't shy about stating his views as right, true, correct, while also saying that we have to investigate, see for ourselves whether they hold true in our own experience also. It's not a path of pure faith that we're following, but a path of wisdom.

Any form of Dhamma study will strengthen this aspect of the Eightfold Path. There are so many good books and after the retreat we'll provide a short list of some of our favourites. Or you could sign up for a magazine like Tricycle, which gives daily Dhamma bites into your email inbox and lots of excellent articles. Listen to Dhamma talks. Again, there are thousands to choose from. We have many on the Satipanya website and an excellent resource is the website Dhamma Seed, which has all the Gaia House talks, as well as those from IMS and other meditation centres. You could join a study program. There are many online courses available, including one that I offer twice a year at Sati Panya, usually lasting around six weeks and based on some aspect of the Dhamma. Could be the four foundations for mindfulness, for example. Each week there are a set of notes with suggested exercises and people post their observations and reflections on a forum which gives way to learn from one another, which can often seem more believable than when it comes from a teacher. And Carl offers an online study programme, meeting monthly on Zoom to meditate and discuss the Dharma.

The second strand of the path is right attitude, which means cultivating an attitude of goodwill in the forms of compassion, generosity, kindness. For this, we have the practice of goodwill meditation, *mettā*. It's a good habit to finish daily meditation with about ten minutes of *mettā* and listen to a guided *mettā* practice regularly. Bhante Bodhidharma has one you can download from the Satipanya website, for example. And there are hundreds to choose from on Dhamma Seed.

We can also get into the habit of making good wishes regularly throughout the day. For example, if you're meeting with someone, spend a moment beforehand wishing them well in your heart. I'm sure you will find the meetings far more meaningful if you do that. As you go into a meeting at work, make a good wish that this will benefit the organisation, the people you serve. As you're sitting on a bus, you can wish well to those

around you. I was on a loving kindness retreat with Sharon Salzberg, a renowned teacher, and she advised taking walks in nature, wishing well to the trees and bushes as we pass. A lovely practice.

I went through a very brief knitting craze a few years ago, and for every stitch I'd make a good wish for someone. There are no end of variations to the formal mettā practice and it's good fun trying them out.

A word of warning though. All the hindrances we come across in Vipassanā show up just as often in mettā. Sometimes we can't stop daydreaming, planning, writing a best-seller. Other times aversion shows up. We feel resentful instead of friendly. Else we doze off or get all fidgety and worried, or doubt this is doing any good to anyone. It's easy to compound the difficulty by assuming we must be a hard-hearted, mean-spirited person, incapable of love, totally unlovable. Instead, we should simply acknowledge that there's a hindrance afoot, and that we need to take it easy, be mindful for a while, rather than pressing ourselves for good wishes. After a while, it may be possible to return to mettā, but at a gentler pace, maybe a good wish at every third or fourth tree, every tenth passenger on the bus.

Mettā can be incredibly effective at repairing a bad relationship. I got off to a bad start with one particular colleague and dreaded every encounter. A friend reminded me to bring him to mind and say, may you be well, as I went about my other tasks. It might have helped that he went on a fortnight's holiday when I started this practice. But when he came back, I found myself relating to him quite easily. And in fact, we became friends as well as enjoying an easy and productive working relationship.

This strand of the Eightfold Path, Right Attitude, brings a lot of happiness into life.

The next three strands of the path concern morality, *sīla* in Pali, but before going through these, I want to show the role of kamma here, how it links morality and happiness.

When we hear of someone's good fortune, we might say, oh, that's your good kamma, and we might think along the same lines for misfortune, but this is a mistake. The Buddha said that karma was one of five laws operating in the universe. As well as the law of karma, we have the laws of the physical world, biology, psychology and finally the dharma, the four noble truths. We cannot ascribe someone's injury or handicap to bad karma. It could be due to biology, could be due to physics. Nor can we ascribe their beauty or longevity to good karma. These could be the biology of inheritance. What we can ascribe to their previous karma is a person's happiness or unhappiness. These operate under the law of karma.

When we think, speak or act motivated by greed, hatred or delusion, we sow karma seeds, which will eventually ripen to diminish our happiness. Conversely, thoughts of goodwill sow seeds of karma that ripen to make us happier. Sometimes the connection can be easily seen. For example, if we decide to give someone a present, then even the thought of this makes us feel happy. Often the process isn't immediate and can be quite subtle, so it can perhaps take years of careful observation to convince ourselves of the law of karma.

But we can see how it happens in broad terms. Motivated by ill will, we say something nasty. We might feel strong as a result, get our own way. So we get in the habit of nasty speech. Each callous remark confirms our position of power. But where does it lead in the longer term? Those of a kind and friendly nature avoid us or confront us openly. More fearful or conniving people, who like being on the good side of a bully, rally around, but will be delighted to stab us in the back when they get the opportunity. We don't have real friends. Deep down we know that, and so we live in a state of suppressed anxiety.

Similarly for greed, the enjoyment is temporary, while the stress of continually needing to satisfy our every need is exhausting, while overconsumption harms our bodies. And everything we consume has to be paid for, so we get stressed out with overwork. Satiating greed makes us feel needy rather than satisfied.

On the other hand, if we speak or act out of goodwill, there will be social benefits as others respond warmly to generosity and kindness. The benefits also go deep within. Each kind word helps heal our own heart. Each act of generosity counters our sense of neediness.

It is the motivation that matters for the law of karma. If a doctor cares for their patients only because of the status of the job and the amount they can charge, they suffer the consequences of greed, no matter how many people they cure.

Because morality, *sīla*, leads to happiness, we're not punishing ourselves by restraining our speech, actions or sexual behaviour. We're seeing that it's in our own best interest to speak and act with consideration for others.

The Buddha divides *Sīla* into three sections, right speech, action and livelihood.

Right speech must be kindly, truthful, timely and useful, as well as being said gently rather than harshly. Sounds heavy going, as though you would have to think for ten minutes before saying anything. But as mindfulness practice deepens and we become more sensitive to subtle emotions, the rules become internalised as a gut feeling, because speech that doesn't meet these criteria leaves us feeling bad.

If we tell a lie, for example, some anxiety immediately starts up because there's always a danger we'll be found out. Shouting and swearing at someone might give some satisfaction when we're angry, but we find it much harder to let go of the anger afterwards and we'll probably come around to regretting our loss of temper. Idle gossip gives the thrill of titillation, but at our next meditation, we probably find our mind full of restless thoughts. On investigation, we see they link to regret, having spoken of someone behind their back.

That's the trouble with practising mindfulness. We just can't get away with bad behaviour anymore. It's because our nature is only at peace with itself when we're speaking and acting out of goodwill. The meanness or subtle cruelty that so easily accompanies lies or harsh speech or gossip grates against our true nature, gives us a hard time at meditation.

Speech is useful if it promotes happiness. You might wonder about small talk. How useful can it be to talk about the weather when we all know it's raining? But remember, it's the motivation that counts. Small talk promotes friendliness, helps us feel at ease. Very useful.

The main temptation towards unhelpful speech is gossip in the form of slander. Sometimes it can be difficult to draw the line between this and the genuine need to discuss a third party's behaviour. It could be because we've been hurt by the person and we need a kindly ear to help us move on. It could be because we've witnessed behaviour we judge as wrong and were troubled by this.

The historian Yuval Noah Harari argues that the main purpose for language development in early humans was so that they could gossip. This gave the tribe an advantage because if one of their members was untrustworthy, the rest of the tribe needed to know this, otherwise they couldn't maintain social cohesion.

If your motive is to do some good by relating a tale about a third party, then this isn't idle gossip or slander. You're protecting others from hurt or fraud. But we often have mixed motives. As well as the genuine wish to prevent harm, there could be strains of anger and vengeance mixed in with the gleeful titillation of speaking ill of someone behind their back. When I sense mixed motives in this or any other aspect of *Sīla*, then I make a good wish of the form, may I do more good than harm here. May I learn from any mistake.

Ideally, we'd confront the person directly rather than tell others of their behaviour. But this may not always be practical and might do more harm than good.

Timely speech is especially important when we have something difficult to say. Maybe you need to tell the person how hurt you were by something they did or said. If the other person looks exhausted or preoccupied, best hold back. It's easy for negativity to spread like a virus. It would be better to ask them to meet to discuss something sensitive so that they would be more prepared for a genuine heart to heart.

Right action means not harming others, stealing their property or hurting through sexuality. While most of us would not want to kill or harm others, there is often some form of exploitation involved in the ways our food, clothing, gadgets and other goods are produced. In fact, it's impossible to be totally non-harming if you look into the matter seriously. But we can minimise harm by strategies such as purchasing ethically produced goods, avoiding factory farmed produce, becoming vegetarian or vegan, or becoming active in causes that support human rights, combat exploitation and poverty.

Not stealing. Few people who come on retreat will be involved in gross theft. But are we using more than our fair share of the earth's resources? Every manufactured item, every flight, every motorised journey adds to our carbon footprint. Are these justified? Do they benefit me? Do they benefit others? A challenging question for most of us, one we need to revisit regularly.

And then there's the thorny question of sexual behaviour. Sexual energy is powerful and can forge and maintain strong relationships, which might in turn sustain a family, a community. The benefits can spread far afield. On the flip side, infidelity can destroy all that, cause enormous hurt.

Abortion. How can we gauge the potential for suffering here? In Buddhist understanding, the foetus becomes conscious at the moment of conception, leaving no doubt that abortion is suffering from the foetus's point of view. But what suffering would be inflicted on a pregnant woman without the support and resources needed to bring a child into the world? No easy answers there.

And we have the horrors of childhood sexual abuse and vulnerable people being manipulated into giving sexual favours or forced into prostitution. Sexuality has the potential to enhance life, to bring great joy, to underpin social cohesion, but it can also cause enormous suffering. There will be big questions for many of us at some stage in life, which relationship to pursue, which to forego. But also more subtle questions such as, am I being friendly here or am I flirting? In a monastic setting, lay people are asked to dress modestly and not to wear makeup as a way of waking us up to the potential for manipulating others by accentuating our sexual allure.

The final strand of morality is right livelihood. The Buddha considered it wrong to make a living by dealing with weapons, poisons, slavery, intoxicants and meat. Although few poisons are sold legally nowadays, there is the tricky area of pest control. If your work involves these, see whether you could stock a compassionate alternative, like traps that do not kill the animal.

Butchery obviously involves great suffering for animals, and there can be long, frightening journeys before slaughter. To be directly involved in this must be a challenge to a sensitive heart and could foster indifference, even cruelty. Raising animals for slaughter is part of the same business. The Buddha's advice is to get out of this aspect of farming and anything else to do with the meat trade for your own spiritual welfare.

Many people are employed in the weapons industry, from soldiers on the ground to scientists in the lab. War seems horrific when seen from a distance. But can you stand by as atrocities are committed? It's a question of choosing the lesser evil. Bhante has an essay, *Is Armed Intervention Ever Justified?* It's on the Satipanya website and here he distinguishes between force and violence. Force is the energy used to put right what is wrong. Violence is the same energy laced with anger, revenge, spite and so on. Again, it's back to motivation.

The injunction not to deal with intoxicants poses hard questions, as almost every shop, restaurant and hotel is expected to supply alcohol. Most of us know people who live good lives while drinking moderately. On the other hand, many road accidents are alcohol related, as well as domestic and street violence and sexual abuse. If we can change job, then best do this. But that might bring its own problems if we let our family down or slide into unemployment and poverty.

Much of the hard work with Sila is to decide which of our various options implies the lesser harm. For each of us, there will be difficult ethical questions to face at some stage in life. We need a clear mind to find the appropriate response and a stout heart to meet the challenge. We also need to be patient with our many mistakes, not torment ourselves about them, but remember we can learn to do better.

The last section of the Eightfold Path concerns meditation practice. This also has three strands, right effort, mindfulness and concentration. Every step we've looked at so far requires effort. The effort to speak truthfully, the effort to act kindly and so on.

It's also singled out as a factor of the Eightfold Path because we can cultivate this quality in our meditation practice. We do this by getting to know what effort feels like as a moment to moment experience. Are we slumping? If so, can we straighten up? Are we slacking, letting ourselves be carried away on every stray thought? If so, can we resolve to be mindful?

Over effort is a problem for many of us. We want to be enlightened now, this minute. Can we relax, remember this is a gradual path, and that we can learn to enjoy the journey? If we can't relax, can we feel the tensions? Let the experience of over effort itself become the focus for meditation.

As we stumble between slacking and over-effort, mindfulness guides us towards right effort, where we're alert and interested, but not hoping to gain anything from meditation. In time, that balance becomes more motivating than the false hopes of over effort or the dozy delight of slacking.

As we develop right effort in meditation, we can apply it in practice. First, we have the here and now effort to prevent harmful states like greed and ill will arising. If we maintain mindfulness, the hindrances don't get a chance to blossom and spread their seeds. It's as simple as that. But sadly, we forget to be mindful a lot of the time in daily life. It's often pain of one form or another that wakes us up. Pain, whether emotional or physical, can stir fear, anxiety, worry, anger, blame, despair. It's easy to make a bad situation worse.

If we can remember this strand of right effort—the need to prevent unwholesome states from arising—we will bring mindfulness to the forefront, contain the negativity, prevent the negative spiral. It's especially important to make this effort during a busy day. Otherwise, minor irritations and frustrations build up and we might end up saying something hurtful, spoiling a friendship.

We could follow the practice of three-minute breathing spaces, which are a part of Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction programme. First, we acknowledge how we feel, let the emotions settle as we track them mindfully. We then follow the breath for a minute and end by reminding ourselves of the larger picture and whatever task or activity it is we're about to resume as we move back into it mindfully.

We can also use right effort in the broader sense, choosing directions in life which will minimise laziness, aggression, meanness—all our worst characteristics—while encouraging our positive qualities. Many people report that life made a turn for the better

when they started meditation practice and found *Sangha* friends, which naturally led to *Dhamma* study and regular retreats. These supportive conditions bring out the best in us, take the rough edges off our worst traits.

Finally, we have the here and now effort to develop and make the most of our wholesome qualities. Meditation is the key. *Vipassanā* strengthens equanimity, joy and all the factors of enlightenment, while *mettā* trains us to see the good in others and the good in ourselves.

Next we have right mindfulness, and for this I thought it would be interesting to go through the Buddhism Bites on full awareness in the teaching known as the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Here's the quotation: "One acts in full awareness when going forward and returning, when looking ahead and looking away, when flexing and extending the limbs, when eating, drinking, defecating and urinating, walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking and keeping silent." Basically, we are to be fully aware in all aspects of life, every moment of every day.

Full awareness requires a broad understanding of our actions, as well as registering our moment to moment experience. Say we're walking to a neighbour's house. We could be mindful of the physical sensations of walking to keep us in the present moment. For full awareness, the context must also be borne in mind. We are going to visit our neighbour. While en route to work in the morning, we can remind ourselves regularly that we are indeed on our way to work, not to Shangri-La or wherever our daydreams are leading us.

Instead of the detailed noting we use for Mahāsi retreat practice, broad brush phrases work better here. We can note: going to work, going to work. Sounds obvious, but how easy it is to forget the bigger picture. We go to work on autopilot, so familiar with every step of the journey that we can devote our time to worrying or daydreaming. The note "going to work" lifts us out of the doldrums, lets us feel more purposeful, helps us appreciate our surroundings.

Within that broad awareness, we keep track of body movements like walking, reaching out, turning and so on. It can be a challenge to include inner and outer realities. At times we want to withdraw, abandon worldly cares, just breathe. At other times our attention is totally external, fascinated by whatever is happening around us. The challenge is to keep both worlds in mind, to include body awareness when entranced by the external world, to remember the broader context when our attention is pulled within.

Reminding ourselves of the broader context can expose hidden emotions. We might be reluctant to note "going to work," for example, but later in the day be quite happy to note "going home." The reluctance indicates some negativity about work. If we don't make the note, that negativity might later sneak out as coldness or irritation. Unwittingly, we alienate our colleagues and make the situation worse.

The note "going to work" shows us the weariness or anxiety or depression. Although it might feel worse than heading for the job on autopilot, bearing with the feelings means the negativity can be acknowledged. Imperceptibly, perhaps our working life gets easier as a result.

Even for less emotionally charged activities, the experience of going forward can differ from returning. Say I have to nip down to the shops for groceries. I'm often bright and purposeful on the way out. My step is light and I look with interest at the neighbour's garden. Coming home, my steps are more plodding, my eyes downcast. What I'm seeing here is the *dukkha* of transience. Each new activity offers a glimmer of hope that this world can make us happy. But when the choice between apples and oranges, biscuits and cake have been made and all the money spent, it becomes clear that my shopping spree has not delivered the goods I was secretly hoping for.

The pattern can vary. For instance, the prospect of meeting friends may find us brighter on the way home than heading out. It's worthwhile noting—it helps us to appreciate our friends when we see how they lift our mood.

The second task is to be fully aware when looking ahead and looking away. Looking ahead reminds us of our destination, our purpose, so it helps with the broad context aspect of full awareness. When we look at anything deliberately, we can also interpret this as looking ahead, even if our head is turning aside to look at something on our left or right.

While looking ahead is often stimulating, looking away often carries subtle *dukkha*. A friend practising mindfulness of speech found that her head turned slightly to one side when reacting against what another person was saying. Once she had detected the pattern, she was then able to use this as a wake-up call to notice aversion. Her communication could then be much more honest and straightforward.

Becoming mindful of looking ahead and away can tune us into the subtle *dukkha* of transience. Maybe the daffodils in a neighbour's garden take our fancy and we spend a moment looking at them. Then we look away, seeking out the next visual treat. Without registering it, we've tired of the daffodils. These persistent, minor disappointments promote cynicism. The world is full of false promises. Everything lets us down in the end.

But if we prime ourselves to be mindful of looking ahead and looking away, we may notice a subtle expectation in the former and disappointment in the latter. Over time, we learn that expectation and disappointment are of our own making. It's much easier to appreciate daffodils when we expect less of them.

Our third task, flexing and extending the limbs, has less emotional significance. Instead, the action connects us with neutral experiences that we usually ignore. We flex and extend our limbs several times while we're washing, dressing, doing household chores, manual labour, opening doors, and numerous other tasks. As we become mindful of these movements, we add bodily awareness to daily life. The body offers a restful focus for a mind that so easily hits overdrive, making grandiose plans and assuming we can do ten things at once. If we put our bodies in the picture, we come down to earth and our plans and promises become more realistic.

Outside of retreat, eating mindfully is often a challenge. The first spoonful might be savoured, but by the second we're already taking out our mobile phones. I find the need to set clear red lines here. No phones, books or entertainment other than the pleasure of mindful eating. This develops an appreciation of joy or *muditā*, a joyful response to the good things in life.

Eating and drinking brings us to urinating and defecating. The activities themselves are usually neutral experiences. It is the thought of what's happening that gets us. The social taboo around these essential bodily functions can result in embarrassment and shame. The way out, of course, is to feel and acknowledge the emotional baggage. This totally unnecessary shame will start to burn out and we develop a healthy respect for the body's ability to discard its waste.

We can practise with the Buddha's guidance in many areas of daily life. During any journey, ideally from the start, we can pick a phrase like "going to the shops" and repeat this regularly. We can do the same on the way home, being curious as to whether the outward and homeward journeys feel the same or different.

We can take an interest in what our eyes are doing and any emotional undertones. Are they looking ahead? Is there a sense of expectancy, interest? Or are they looking away? Is there a quiet judgement, disinterest?

We can be mindful during communications, spotting when we feel hurt, bored or irritated by the conversation and when we feel buoyed up, interested or excited by the interaction.

The final strand in the Eightfold Path is Right Concentration. We need to make time for formal meditation practice, where the mind can come to stillness, rest in present awareness. For this, we need to develop a habit of regular daily meditation. Some prefer mornings, some prefer evenings. If you can do both, ideal. How long to meditate for? That really depends on your circumstances, how many other demands there are on your time. If you can do an hour, excellent. But whatever is possible—forty minutes, thirty minutes, whatever you can manage.

It always helps if you can find support. Would anyone in your household meditate with you? Could you find a local group? The single most important factor in sustaining my meditation in the early years was the fact that I found a local group, got into the habit of meeting them every week for meditation and *Dhamma* study discussion as well. They soon became my best friends and supported many aspects of the Eightfold Path.

There are also lots of online options for support nowadays. For example, there is an online meditation hall that you can access via the Satipanya website. It's a Zoom link and open all day, but the only times you're likely to see others are 6am and 8pm. The 6am slot has an hour's meditation, followed by some chanting and *mettā* practice. The 8pm slot has meditation, followed by *mettā* and joy practices and chanting.

Retreats give the best support for developing concentration. We shut ourselves away from the world for a few days or a few weeks so that there isn't the continuous inflow of stimulation, views, demands, responsibilities that are part and parcel of everyday life. Retreat conditions give optimal support for right concentration. We learn to focus the mind, gather its energies, channel them in the direction of liberation.

Concentration is an unfortunate translation for the Pali word *samādhi*, which conveys a sense of restfulness rather than forcing. We're resting attention on some aspect of present experience. We have the analogy of a bee searching for honey. First, she has to track a flower as it bobs around. This represents the first stage of concentration when we're making an effort to bring attention back to the breath whenever the mind wanders.

Then the bee lands on the flower, is carried around by it, no longer has to make the effort to track. This is the second stage of concentration where our attention is riveted by the sensations and feelings of present experience. We no longer need that effort to direct attention. Mindfulness continues of its own accord. Just as the bee drinks nectar in these moments, we drink the nectar of direct experience, the intimate contact with

reality. It's from direct experience that we learn the *Dhamma* for ourselves, convince ourselves of the Four Noble Truths and the other ways the Buddha expressed his understanding.

So do make time for retreats in your life. It can seem as though we're always too busy for this. When I was working full-time, I used to plan retreats well in advance—several months ahead when my diary was still empty. That way I could give my family plenty of notice and say a clear no to whatever other demands came in during that period, without letting people down.

I hope this resumé of the Noble Eightfold Path helps you to see that there are many areas in life that can be developed as spiritual practice. To come back to one thing: the importance of support. Do make an effort to find friends who also want to walk this path. This is *Sangha*, spiritual friendship. Real life friends are best, but online also works well. I have a friend who lives in India. We regularly exchange *Dhamma* questions and comments by email.

Our friends influence us and we in turn influence them. When we get despondent, they encourage us. When we're trying to pick our way through some thorny moral issue, we have someone to talk it over with. When Ānanda, the Buddha's cousin and attendant, remarked that good friendship was half of the spiritual life, the Buddha replied that good friendship was the whole of spiritual life.

May we all find the friendship and support we need to follow the Eightfold Path in our relationships, our work and all aspects of life.

Fourth Noble Truth: The Path to the End of Dukkha

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

In this teaching, Noirin Sheahan examines the Fourth Noble Truth - the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the cessation of dukkha. Using the evocative metaphor of forming a path through dense jungle, she explores how the eight factors work together across three sections: wisdom (paññā), ethical conduct (sīla), and mental cultivation (bhāvanā). The talk begins with sammā diṭṭhi (Right Understanding) and sammā saṅkappa (Right Attitude), deepened through the four brahmavihāras - mettā, karuṇā, muditā, and upekkhā. She then addresses the challenging ethical dimensions of sammā vācā, sammā kammanta, and sammā ājīva, connecting Buddhist morality to the law of kamma and its role in happiness and suffering. The final section covers sammā vāyāma, sammā sati, and sammā samādhi, showing how right effort, awareness, and concentration work together like children picking flowers from a tree. Throughout, Noirin emphasizes that this path cannot be mapped in advance but forms step by step as we walk it, each strand supporting the others in the gradual disentanglement from the binds of dukkha toward the freedom of awakening.

Tonight I want to talk about the fourth noble truth and how it relates to the law of *kamma*.

The fourth truth states that there is a path leading to the end of suffering, the noble eightfold path. Our injunction is to follow that path.

There is a poem by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado that I find helpful in thinking about the eightfold path. Here is a very loose translation: "Wayfarer, there is no way. The way forms as you walk it."

So we can't look ahead and see where the eightfold path is taking us. We can't work out how long till we get to the end or the next milestone. We can only form the path step by step. We can think of the eight strands to the path as different parts to each step.

The path is divided into three sections: wisdom, morality and the cultivation of our mind and heart through meditation. Imagine trying to form a path through a thick jungle. The strands of wisdom cut through the thicket so we can see more clearly. We express our wisdom in the world by our speech, actions and livelihood. This is our step into the clearing we have just hacked out. Rather than hacking away doggedly at the

thicket in front of us, we rest to contemplate our new position, find the most promising route, the easiest branches to fell. This is the cultivation of heart and mind in meditation. These sharpen the sword of wisdom. And so we are ready to cut out the next step.

Each of the eight strands is described as right. For example, the first section on wisdom has two subdivisions termed right understanding and right attitude. The word "right" can stir the judging mind and I think the translations "straightened out" or "disentangled" give a better description of what happens as we follow the path.

At first we get caught in tangles of thought when we try to work out how to live well. But the more we walk the path the more we sense our thought processes straightening out, our emotional life disentangling. We become more straightforward in our dealings with others. In meditation, we can often feel ourselves getting into knots of tension as the hindrances show up, and then feel the relief as those knots loosen in the light of awareness.

Now, "straightened out" and "disentangled" are both a bit of a mouthful, so I'll follow the convention of calling each step "right this" or "right that." But bear in mind the gentler and more evocative sense that we disentangle ourselves from the binds of *dukkha* as we develop our path.

The first section of the path is right understanding. This is the polar opposite of *avijjā*, the ignorance that forms the basis for the wheel of conditions ending up in *dukkha*. While *avijjā* implies not understanding what causes suffering and what prevents it, this first step in the path leading out of suffering implies understanding those very processes.

Hearing about and reflecting on the Dhamma cultivates right understanding. But if understanding is confined only to the cognitive level, it can tighten into absolute judgments. Rules become commands and to break them is treachery. When cognitive understanding filters in the domain of will and emotion, we take the Dhamma to heart. This is what we mean by right attitude. This is the second strand to the eightfold path.

Wisdom thus has two strands: right understanding, which is mainly cognitive, and right attitude, which means a wise heart. We often use the word "attitude" to describe negativity. We say he or she "has an attitude" to mean that they go their own way without much consideration for others. But in fact one can have a friendly attitude and that is what is meant in the second strand of wisdom.

While cognitive understanding tends to tighten the mind, friendliness tends to soften it. Together they make for a balance: enough honest discernment to be able to tell right from wrong, enough friendliness to forgive mistakes.

Right attitude emerges naturally as we practice mindfulness. But we can accelerate the process by also practicing the four *brahmavihāras*. The term *brahmavihāra* translates as "the abode of the gods."

Mettā, usually translated as goodwill or loving-kindness, is the first of these. We wish ourselves and others to be well and happy. This undermines the aversive habits that cloud our mind: ill will, anger, coldness, fear, and so on. It doesn't uproot the seed in the same way that mindfulness does, but it nulls the aversive effect. In our gardening analogy, you could say it covers over the weeds, preventing them from getting any sunlight, so they can't thrive and sow more seeds.

The combination of *mettā* and mindfulness is very powerful. *Mettā* suppresses aversion to help us be more friendly and live in accord with the Dhamma, while mindfulness weeds away at the hindrances.

The second *brahmavihāra* is compassion. As we undermine our habitual aversion to suffering, our hearts show their capacity for compassion and our speech and activities become more caring. We practice this *brahmavihāra* by bringing to mind someone who is having a hard time—could be ourselves—and wishing them to be free from suffering.

The third *brahmavihāra* is *muditā*, often translated as appreciative joy. As we undermine fear, jealousy and other aspects of ill will, our hearts are more easily gladdened by good news. We're not so ready to dismiss our own achievements with a self-deprecating remark like "that was nothing really," but to congratulate ourselves for the effort we made. And when we hear of another's success, we feel happy for them. We cultivate this *brahmavihāra* by bringing to mind someone who has had good news—again, this can be ourselves—and saying, "May your happiness continue, may your happiness increase," or if you prefer, "I am happy that you are happy."

While compassion lets us bear the suffering in the world, *muditā* helps us acknowledge its joys. *Mettā* forms the basis for both in its cultivation of friendliness.

All three of these *brahmavihāras* need the support of the fourth: equanimity. Equanimity is one of the factors of enlightenment. Remember the bird with the wide wingspan, steadying the flock through the ups and downs of their journey.

Without equanimity, *mettā* easily overshoots into attachment and we become dependent on our friends for our sense of worth. With equanimity, we learn to accept that friends have separate lives, other responsibilities, other affections.

Without the balance of equanimity, compassion slides into pity. What's happening is that we're seeing ourselves as the stronger party caring for the weaker one. It can become an addiction, needing to be needed. Equanimity restores the balance, lets us see the strength at the core of the other's being, trust to their capacity to heal and recover. If the person is dying, equanimity helps see this not as a tragedy, but as part of the mystery of life, nothing to pity them for. After all, our own turn will come quick enough.

Muditā escalates into excitement unless it is supported by equanimity. We latch on to the joy, identify with it and believe life is going to be perfect from now on. When we inevitably fall from grace, we are shocked and confused, wondering what went wrong. Equanimity gives us the balance we need to recognise joy as a temporary gift, to enjoy it to the full and then let it go when the time is right.

What we let go into is equanimity, that peaceful balance of mind which knows better than to cling to the good stuff or struggle with the rotten stuff.

The classic phrase used to cultivate equanimity is the reflection: "All beings are the owners of their *kamma*." This reminds us that we have no direct power over our own or others' happiness. It is designed as an antidote to the delusion of ourselves as a benign deity who can make people happy just by wishing this. It sounds comical, but in fact it is a delusion easily stirred by practicing with the *brahmavihāras*. Even the term *brahmavihāra*, "abode of the gods," suggests this. It feels godlike to have our hearts filled with goodness, kindness, joy, friendliness, as if we are above and beyond the troubles of the world. In that sublime state, our thoughts of a person being well and happy are easily mistaken as the reality for that person.

The reflection "All beings are owners of their *kamma*" brings us down to earth. We realise our limitations. You may be able to find a phrase which carries the same meaning but resonates easier in your heart. For example, I sometimes use the phrase "I trust you to find your own path to *Nibbāna*." This helps me to see the other person more objectively and cultivates respect for their separate path in life.

Just as *mettā*, compassion and *muditā* need equanimity to balance them, equanimity needs the other *brahmavihāras* for its own balance. Without them, equanimity easily slips into indifference. We let go of others to such an extent we no longer feel anything for them. When this happens, it's time to start practising with whichever of the other three is most appropriate.

Right understanding polishes one side of the sword of wisdom. The *brahmavihāras* polish the other side. With this double-edged sword we cut our way through the jungle of hindrances, clearing another step along our eightfold path.

This brings us to the next section of the path, *sīla* in Pali, usually translated as morality or ethics. *Sīla* is the expression of wisdom in daily life. I'm going to use the Pali word *sīla* because we often associate morality with a strict, joyless approach to life. Family photos from Victorian times illustrate this. No one smiles. The children look miserable in their heavy, awkward suits. An austere father towers over them while his wife sits demurely at his side, laced and buttoned within an inch of her life. Desire finds no expression in this picture of morality.

But we need to remember that desire can also be wise. The desire to be happy is perhaps our most basic drive in life. It only gets us into trouble because we don't rightly understand what allows for happiness, what causes suffering. The Buddha promises us that if we follow this path we will be content and therefore happy. Morality in this light is seen as a step towards happiness.

I want to touch on the law of *kamma* here to clarify the link between morality and happiness. *Kamma* is the Buddha's teaching on causality. He discovered that happiness and unhappiness are governed by the laws of *kamma*. When we hear of someone's good fortune, we might say, "Ah, that's your good *kamma* showing up," and we might think along the same lines for misfortune. But this is a mistake.

The Buddha said that *kamma* was one of five laws operating in the universe. The first are the laws that govern the physical world. These, rather than *kamma*, could be at the basis for lots of common misfortunes: infections, car crashes, and so on, as well as major events like earthquakes, drought and hurricanes. And physical conditions and the laws governing them can bring good fortune: health, strength, a good harvest or good weather.

The second set of laws are the biological laws of heredity. We may inherit a parent's musical ear or a family gene for heart disease.

The third are the laws that govern our mind. We might get Alzheimer's and no longer be able to think clearly, or we may be born with a very high IQ or a talent for languages.

The fourth is the law of *kamma*.

Finally, there are the laws of Dhamma, that all phenomena are subject to change, ageing and death. No matter how impeccable our *kamma*, we will die.

Thus, *kamma* is only one of five sets of laws governing events in our life. We cannot ascribe someone's handicap or poverty to bad *kamma*. Neither can we ascribe their musical genius or longevity to good *kamma*. What we can ascribe to their previous *kamma* is a person's happiness or unhappiness. These, the Buddha discovered, operate under the law of *kamma*.

When we think, speak or act motivated by greed, hatred or delusion, we sow bad *kamma* which will eventually ripen to harm us and diminish our happiness. Similarly, thoughts of goodwill sow seeds of *kamma* that will ripen to benefit us and make us happier.

The harm we do ourselves from acting out of ill-will happens at the point of becoming, *bhava*, in the wheel of dependent origination that we spoke of last night. Remember the *saṅkhāra* seeds, our habitual drives, that can germinate and then sprout through our senses to urge us to react to circumstances. At the point of *bhava*, our seed has blossomed into a sense of self who is now about to think, act or speak under the influence of this habitual drive. At the moment the thought, deed or act starts, a seed of that *saṅkhāra* is sown, to sprout at some future time when the opportunity presents itself. For now, this *saṅkhāra* has come out of potential into action, to give birth to a thought, an act or an utterance that carries out its will.

How does this cause unhappiness? Say we were speaking out of ill-will. We say something nasty. We might feel powerful as a result, but since all things fall apart, sooner or later we feel vulnerable again. How do we get back to power? Find someone we can vent our anger on. So we get in the habit of nasty speech.

Where does this lead us? We lose friends and gain enemies. Out of fear, some people might rally around us, but their suppressed feelings get in the way of real friendship, and most will be delighted to stab us in the back when they get the opportunity. A bully lives in a state of suppressed fear that his own deeds will be perpetrated on him.

Similarly for greed, the enjoyment is temporary while the stress of continually needing to consume is exhausting, while overconsumption itself can harm our bodies. And everything we consume has to be paid for, so we get stressed out with overwork. Satiating greed makes us feel needy rather than satisfied.

Delusion manifests in the myriad untested assumptions we make that let us ignore what doesn't serve our agenda. We might take our family and friends for granted, assume they will always be there for us. If one of them suddenly dies or emigrates we might get quite a shock to find how much we needed them. We may have many regrets about how little we appreciated their company and support.

On the other hand, if we think, speak or act out of generosity, goodwill or wisdom, the law of *kamma* tells us that we will reap the benefits. There will be social benefits as everyone prefers people who are generous rather than stingy, caring rather than unkind, wise rather than foolish. Also, the benefits go deep within us, as each kind word helps heal our own heart. Each act of generosity counters our sense of neediness. Each wise thought undermines our ignorance and delusion.

It is the motivation that matters for the law of *kamma*, not the act itself. If a doctor cares for his patients only because he gets well paid, he won't reap the benefits of kindness, but will suffer the consequences of greed. Similarly, if our efforts to solve a conflict end up making it worse, we won't suffer any karmic harm, so long as our motivation was good.

Sīla, the second stage of the eightfold path, is therefore not a simple matter of following rules for good behaviour. We also need to examine our motivation. Often we are aware of mixed motives. We know we are angry, but we still feel it would be best to confront the person who angered us. Which seeds are we nourishing here, ill will or wisdom? We can consciously make a suitable good wish like "May this do more good than harm, may I learn from any mistakes I make," to help us move in the right direction.

The Buddha divides *sīla* into three sections: right speech, right action and right livelihood.

Right speech has four aspects. It must be truthful, timely and useful, as well as being said gently rather than harshly. Let's see how each of these leads to happiness.

Truthfulness in the long run is easier on our psyche than lying. Probably the most usual way we lie is to exaggerate things for effect. If we lie or exaggerate, there's always a danger of being caught out, which leads to restlessness and worry. Apart from that, others come to distrust and disrespect us to some extent, which can limit their friendships.

Speech is useful from the point of view of *sīla* if it promotes happiness. Friendly greetings are useful and small talk can also help us feel at ease. The main temptation towards unhelpful speech is gossiping. To gossip is to talk about the doings of third parties, often feeding on their misfortune. It can easily spread rumours and allow unchallenged backbiting.

I remember a neighbour telling me about a couple who had broken up. They had been building a house extension when the wife ran away with the builder. It might have been funny in a Hollywood movie, and the grin on her face told me she was seeing it in this light, not feeling for the family and the pain this would be causing.

Sometimes it can be difficult to draw the line between gossip, small talk and the genuine need to discuss a third party's behaviour. During friendly chatter we often mention news of people we know in common.

Ask yourself, how would I feel if this person was listening to our conversation? If you would feel any way embarrassed, it's likely that your talk has strayed into gossip.

On the other hand, if we've been hurt by someone, it often helps to discuss the matter with a third party. Keeping it all to ourselves for fear of generating the kamma of wrong speech is not always the wisest course. We often need the help of a friend or counsellor to move towards forgiveness. The motivation here is not to gossip, but to clarify our thoughts and let our heart heal through sympathy. Basically we're asking our friend or therapist for help in bearing the difficulty. We could see it as an extension of mindfulness practice. In mindfulness we let our angry thoughts crash through our psyche. He did this, she did that. I can't understand how they didn't notice. Eventually anger wears itself out. Letting these angry thoughts be heard by a friend or therapist brings the matter to a new level of consciousness. The shared awareness allows a bigger space for the anger to express itself and for the futility of anger to be acknowledged. Often the process can help turn our hearts towards understanding and forgiveness.

Timely speech is especially important when we have something difficult to say. Suppose we feel hurt by a friend's behaviour. If we see they're despondent, harassed or pre-occupied by something else, best hold back. It's so easy for negativity to spread like a virus. What was intended to restore friendship, despondency might translate into rejection, while harassment might see as yet another injustice. Best ask them to meet to discuss something a bit sensitive, so that they will be more prepared for a genuine heart-to-heart conversation.

Harsh speech adds cutting words or a hurtful tone to whatever message we need to give. In the short term, this might make us feel more powerful, in control. But it often provokes the other into a riposte, and an argument can easily break out. Even if the other doesn't react but is crushed by our remark, we've lost some degree of their friendship. So in the long run, caring speech promotes our own happiness, while harsh speech leads us to the unhappiness and social isolation of the bully.

Right action has three components: to refrain from harming others, stealing their property and misusing our sexuality.

The greatest harm we can do to another is to take their life. The Buddha doesn't confine this precept to human life and many Buddhists would also be vegetarian for this reason. However, the Buddha didn't forbid his disciples to eat meat. This was probably pragmatic, for they had to survive on alms rounds, so had to accept whatever they were given.

While most of us would not want to kill or harm others we can take this precept further by asking ourselves what we could do to promote others' welfare. Purchasing ethically produced goods would be one avenue; giving to charities which combat poverty would be another. We can also look after animal welfare as best we can, avoiding factory farmed produce for example, because of the horrendous suffering involved, or becoming vegetarians. Vegans take this a step further and avoid all animal products. This prevents much suffering, for example the separation of calf from cow at the moment of birth, so that we can take the cow's milk for our dairy products.

Moving on to the second component of right action, not stealing. Few people who come on retreat would be involved in gross theft. But we can take this further to ask whether we are using more than our fair share of the earth's resources. Even governments now agree that human activities are adding to the problem of climate change. The effect is already being felt in many developing countries and threatens homes and livelihoods as well as food and water supplies. Consumption of fossil fuel is a major component driving climate change. When we take a flight or drive, rather than use public transport, we add to the problem. Every manufactured item we purchase adds to our carbon footprint. We need to regularly ask ourselves whether our energy consumption is justified or whether we're frivolously frittering away the Earth's resources and fuelling climate change.

The third component of right action is not to abuse our sexuality. Sexuality gives joy that can nourish and sustain a loving relationship. But if it is used frivolously or to gain power over another, it can lead to a lot of suffering. Infidelity can cause enormous hurt and break up relationships. Abortion is surely suffering from the fetus's point of view and very often from the mother's view as well. And we have the horrors of childhood sexual abuse and vulnerable people being forced into prostitution.

While many of us will not have to face the suffering of abortion, sexual abuse or forced prostitution, we do have to face many challenges in maintaining this precept within a society where sex outside of committed relationship is quite common. The main questions to keep in mind are: could this lead to hurt or other harm for myself or others? Will it lead to happiness for myself or others?

The final strand of morality in the Eightfold Path is right livelihood. We need to be sure our livelihood is not harming others. The livelihoods the Buddha listed as wrong were those dealing with weapons, poisons, slavery, including buying and selling children and prostitution, intoxicants and meat. Weapons, poison, slavery and butchery can obviously kill and harm, while intoxicants promote delusion. Few people would argue with the advice not to have anything to do with slavery or forced prostitution. The harm these do is beyond question.

But the other areas mentioned here are tolerated in our society, making this a very challenging aspect of the Eightfold Path for those already employed in one of these. Although few poisons are sold legally nowadays, there is the tricky area of pest control. If your work involves dealing with these, see whether you could stock a compassionate alternative. For example, there are rat and mouse traps that do not kill the animal, and also alternatives for dealing with slugs.

Butchery obviously involves great suffering for animals, and very often there are long, frightening journeys involved before slaughter. To be directly involved in this must be an incredible challenge to a sensitive heart and can only foster cruelty and indifference. Rearing animals for slaughter is part of these same business. The Buddha's unequivocal advice is to get out of this aspect of farming and anything else to do with the meat trade for your own spiritual welfare as well as the welfare of animals.

Many people are employed in the weapons industry, from soldiers on the ground to scientists in the lab. So much war seems pointless and horrific when seen from a distance or with hindsight. Who, in hindsight, could justify the atrocities of the First World War, the Vietnamese War? But many would argue that it was justified in the Second World War in order to prevent the rise of Hitler. In 1995, over 8,000 people were massacred in Srebrenica as the UN stood by. Was the UN right not to attack the invading Serbs in order to defend these civilians? These are hard questions. In war, each side justifies their action, seeing the enemy as the greater threat to humanity. But can you stand by as atrocities are committed? Would it be justified to kill the guards of a concentration camp in order to liberate those within?

There are no easy answers here. It's a question of choosing the lesser of evils. Certainly a soldier's life is not to be envied from the point of view of *kamma*. It would need the wisdom of a Buddha to choose the most compassionate response in such a situation. Bhante has an essay, "Is Armed Intervention Ever Justified?", on the Satipanya website, which explores this in more depth. He distinguishes between force and violence, which helps us clarify *sīla* in our response to the question of war. His essay also cites wonderful exemplars of the non-violent approach to conflict management. Great leaders like Nelson Mandela and Gandhi brokered peace for warlike situations. And figures like Aung San Suu Kyi and Dalai Lama inspire us to look only for a peaceful solution.

The injunction not to deal with intoxicants poses hard questions for many people, as almost every shop, restaurant and hotel is expected to supply alcohol. If we can change job, then best do this, but if not, do we make ourselves redundant to avoid this problem? What about the consequences for our family? Would the harm to them be justified? Our culture makes it easy for us to justify alcohol, and most of us know people who live good lives while drinking moderately. On the other hand, many road accidents are alcohol-related, as well as domestic and street violence and sexual abuse. Our cultural ease with alcohol also facilitates alcoholism with all its problems. And if we're interested in liberation, can it ever help to cloud our mind with alcohol?

As I think you will agree, *sīla* is not an easy matter. For each of us there will be difficult ethical questions to face at some stage in life. We need a clear mind to find the appropriate response in complex situations and a stout heart to meet the challenge.

The last section of the Eightfold Path concerns the cultivation of mind and heart in meditation practice. Let's first take a look to review our progress. We hacked out a clearing using the sword of wisdom with its double blade, right understanding and right intention. We stepped into the clearing as we brought wisdom into our speech, action and livelihood. Now we need to rest a while, assess our new surroundings, polish our sword of wisdom before we tackle the thicket again.

This section of the path also has three strands: right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Right effort involves the factor of energy that we met in the factor of enlightenment. So here we have again the leading trio in our wild geese. To see their interrelation, we have the analogy of three children wanting to pick some flowers from a tree. None of them is tall enough to reach the flowers, so the strongest one, right effort, bends over to let the tallest one, right concentration, stand on his back, while the

steadiest of the three, right mindfulness, provides a shoulder for him to lean on. Supported by right effort, balanced by mindfulness, concentration can then pluck the flowers.

Now this image isn't quite in accord with our image of the wild geese which had mindfulness in the lead. But they can come together if we still see mindfulness as the leader, just not the tallest. Mindfulness tells concentration to draw back if he is overreaching, unbalancing the trio. When mindfulness is happy that the trio are well balanced, it is the ability of our minds to focus on whatever is taking our attention that lets the Dhamma clarify for us.

Right effort involves all the energy and resolution we bring to our meditation practice. The Buddha delineates right effort into four components: to prevent unwholesome states from arising, to let go of those that have already arisen, to encourage new wholesome states and to perfect those that have already arisen.

The effort we make to maintain moment-to-moment awareness prevents unwholesome states from arising. If we can maintain awareness at the level of sense contact and feeling, the hindrances don't get a chance to blossom and spread their seeds. This carries out the first component of right effort.

The second component involves the effort we make to hold attention steady on *dukkha*. This allows us let go of hindrances that already cloud our consciousness. As we notice the transitory, uncontrollable nature of pleasure and pain, we undermine desire. Working with aversion brings us to the edge of our comfort zone. Right effort allows us to hold attention there till the boundary starts to dissolve, and we realise it was all illusion. Really, there was nothing to fear or hate. Our efforts to stir energy through physical exercise and mental resolution undermine dullness and lethargy, while the effort to centre attention on some calming focus undermines restlessness. As we stir the factor of investigation, we clarify the Dhamma for ourselves, undermining doubt.

The third component of right effort involves encouraging wholesome states to manifest. This also results from the effort we make to maintain mindfulness in meditation. For example, all seven of the factors of enlightenment are being developed and perfected and these transmute into the five spiritual faculties to help us through daily life.

The final component involves the effort we make in practising *mettā* and the other *Brahmavihāras*. These bring our wholesome states to perfection.

We bring bare attention to our sensory experience including the sixth sense of our mind with its feelings, emotions and thoughts. We sense any reactions to these. Desire trying to wrap us around pleasant feelings. Aversion trying to push away unpleasant

feelings. Delusion trying to shut out physical sensations for the sake of a mental pleasure world. Sensing the pain of reactivity, wisdom persuades us to relax again, to let pleasant and unpleasant sensations be just as they are.

Concentration, the final strand of the Eightfold Path, describes the mind's ability to focus, like looking through a telescope. It brings stillness to the mind by unifying it with undistracted focus on whatever calls attention. Increasingly, what calls attention is *dukkha* and what causes it, as well as the opposite side of the coin, the absence of *dukkha* and the conditions that foster this. In other words, it is the Four Noble Truths that interest us, and their manifestation in our experience is what calls attention.

At times the hindrances are kept in check by the factors of enlightenment, and we sense a current of ease running underneath our usual sense of experience. Our being tiptoes towards the mystery. What is the experience of ease? What would be left of us if there was no urge driving us into action? We become more familiar with the seeming absence of our usual self, with the fluid, changing, unsatisfying nature of the reality we inhabit, and the quiet mystery that runs beneath. This focus is only possible on the back of right effort, our efforts not to grasp at the temporary pleasures of the world and to cultivate instead the qualities that sustain our meditation. And it needs the leadership of mindfulness, the reminder to relax our focus whenever mindfulness senses that new seeds of grasping or aversion are sprouting up. It's easy for these to sprout as we gaze beyond our usual boundaries. We get confused or frightened, restless or dull, or so deeply desiring the end of suffering that we cloud our minds with attachment to progress and aversion to whatever seems to be getting in our way.

The Buddha's promise is that one day the turmoil will end. We will satisfy our desire for the end of suffering. With that we will know for ourselves what remains when all desire fades away.

A quick recap before finishing. The path starts with wisdom. Lost in the jungle of ignorance, we ponder the Buddha's teaching to get an inkling of what causes suffering and what relieves it. As the truth sinks into our heart, our attitude to the world grows friendlier. The jungle doesn't seem quite so impenetrable, and the sword of wisdom cuts through delusion to form a clearing. Here, *sīla* blossoms in the form of right speech, action and livelihood, to be rewarded by the law of *kamma*, opening our hearts to happiness.

We rest a while in the clearing to cultivate our heart and mind in meditation. We make the effort needed to maintain mindfulness. Supported by effort, led and balanced by mindfulness, our mind focuses on the Dhamma and we learn the Four Noble Truths

for ourselves. This sharpens the sword of wisdom, the first strands of the Eightfold Path. Step by step, the Eightfold Path leads us from the jungle of ignorance to the freedom of enlightenment.

I hope this reflection on the Fourth Noble Truth has been helpful. May we and all beings follow the Eightfold Path to the end of suffering.

Free Will

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 40 min

In this exploration, Bhante Bodhidhamma tackles the Western philosophical problem of free will from a Buddhist perspective, revealing how our fixation on choice and control actually deepens suffering. Drawing from the Brahmajāla Sutta (DN 1), he explains how speculative views about freedom are "merely the feeling of those who do not know and see, the worry and uncertainty of those immersed in craving."

The talk examines three Western approaches—fatalism, libertarianism, and determinism—showing how each misses the Buddha's central insight. Using the honey bowl discourse and dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda), Bhante demonstrates how our experiences arise through contact, feeling, and perception, creating the illusion of a separate self that demands control.

Rather than debating free will, the Buddha's path focuses on clarity and investigation. True freedom comes not through choice but through understanding the conditioned nature of experience and following the Noble Eightfold Path. The talk concludes with the liberating recognition that awakening isn't a choice we make but a discovery we uncover through devoted practice and surrender to the Dhamma.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa

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

I thought I'd tackle the problem of free will. How does that come up in the Buddha's teaching?

This idea of free will has been with us for a heck of a long time. Even going back, were we at the mercy of the gods or could we instruct the gods to do things for us? So in terms of polytheism, that's how it began - this idea that there was some controlling deity or deities, and the idea was to get them on your side, sympathetic magic, things like that.

Then somehow it corrupted into the idea that if you actually did the ritual perfectly, you could then control. And that was when the Buddha appeared. So the Brahmins there, who controlled the whole business of sacrifice, they knew the specific words,

nobody else could learn them, and they knew the specific action, exactly what to do, and this would bring about the desired results. So there's some sort of free will thrown in there with some sense of control. That's what we want, isn't it? Control.

I think in the West we've cornered ourselves into a very sharp individualism. We don't really see ourselves too much as social beings, as social will. We tend to see ourselves as very little individual pods who demand to do what we want to do. So the idea of free will, especially from the Enlightenment, is something that's core stuff for us. And it comes out, as you'll see when I talk later, in capitalism, the idea of freedom, freedom of choice, all that.

The other thing is that with the Enlightenment - that's ours, 18th century, which I totally believe in, the idea of rational - so free will is to do with something about thinking about it and about coming to some sort of philosophical conclusion that we have or we don't have free will.

But there's a very interesting discourse here, or at least there's a part that really interests me, from the Brahmajāla Sutta, the opening discourse, actually the longer discourse of the longer discourses. And he lists quite a huge amount - I think 64 different speculative views. Some of them you'll have heard of: whether the cosmos was infinite or finite, whether the enlightened person was born or died or what not. And everybody has a view on these things. And this is what he says: he says all such views are merely the feeling of those who do not know and see, the worry and uncertainty of those immersed in craving.

And what catches my attention is "merely the feeling." We tend to be up here, and if we can work something out logically, it separates out from feeling. Therefore you believe in free will, whether you actually feel it or not, or rather you discard feeling, you push it away, on the understanding that there is free will. Even if I don't feel free, so long as I say to myself I am free, I go around thinking that I am free. I don't know if that makes sense. Hopefully, as we go on, it will get more obvious.

If we take another discourse, which the Buddha actually called his honey bowl discourse - it's a delicious sweet you can still buy in India. And he gave a cryptic teaching there, and all these monks who were listening to him didn't ask him anything about it. They went off to this other monk called Mahākaccāna, who was very good at expounding the short teachings of the Buddha. So they ask him, and he says to them, "Why don't you ask him?" And they go, "Right then." They say, "Well, whatever." So he gives them the longer teaching, and then they go back to the Buddha and say, "This is what Mahākaccāna said." It's funny, isn't it? And the Buddha says, "Well, if you'd have asked me, I would have said the same thing." A roundabout way of getting there.

Anyway, the core of it is this. What we counter-know is dependent on contact. That's the part of the Wheel of Dependent Origination, contact. So if it's something that's visual, there's got to be contact at the visual base, the retina. But remember there's also the sixth sense in Buddhism, which is emotion, thought. So something must arise into the mind to make contact - your stimulus. So that's, for instance, when you wake up in the morning. The first thing that comes up, you don't beckon it, it just arises. So much of our day is just stuff arising, either coming from an outside stimulus or from something inside us.

And then he says that upon this, feelings arise, feelings and perceptions. Now, in Buddhist psychology, feeling and perception arises at the same time. And all a feeling is, is a distinguishing in the mind between what is experienced as pleasant or unpleasant. And that's your perception. So whatever feeling arises, as it arises, it's always experienced as neutral. But as soon as you flip into a perception of it, it immediately cuts the world up into likeable, unlikeable.

So, for instance, in your meditation, you might find some emotion arising, which you describe or which you label as, or at least your attitude towards it is unlikeable. It's a bit of depression or something. Now, if you take your attention away from the emotional value of it to the sensation value of it in the body, and you get down to just thick feelings or those feelings that come up with depression, whatever - heat, whatever it is - then you'll see as you move towards that base, the idea of like and dislike begin to fade out a bit, until you can get to a point where there's just sensation. And at that point, you're at the point where the stimulus comes in. So you've gone back on it.

When you do something like that, you begin to realise that it's our definition of things. It's our definition of things which is the core problem, because it comes from our view, our view of something. So, for instance, if we're conditioned to be racist, as soon as we see somebody of another race, unpleasant feelings arise. It'll just happen naturally. If you're not conditioned that way, it doesn't arise. So these feelings that we get are also based on our views and opinions. And they arise with feeling. So the heart-mind work in unison. It's we in the West that have split these two up. If you go East, for instance, to Thailand, when they say - I can't remember what their word is for mind, something like *citta* or something - you'll see they're not actually pointing to the head, they're pointing to the heart.

Then he says, as soon as we perceive something, we'll start thinking about it, and then you get that proliferation.

So now, at the root of this feeling perception is the me. That self-awareness. When you're in meditation and you get that very strong feeling of being an observer, you've distanced, shall we say, so much away from your body, your feelings, your sensations, that you get this feeling of the watcher. Turn on that. Where's that coming from? If you're aware of the watcher, you can't be the watcher. As soon as you make something an object, you can't be it. So, if you're observing and there's that feeling of watching, of a watcher, just shift your attention and try and catch where that feeling's arising from.

So now, as it's most deluded, this me thinks it's this body and mind. And what's its purpose? What does the self want? It just wants to be happy, doesn't it? I want to be happy, full stop. So, in order to be happy, it has that feeling, that need to control. If something painful comes up in the body, it wants to get rid of it, so you take a tablet. If emotions come up that it doesn't like, it just suppresses it. And underneath all that, remember, it's always afraid of the body falling sick, the body dying, the body growing old.

So this business of always wanting to live in a pleasant atmosphere, in a happy atmosphere, is, shall we say, the motivation behind the self. But it's coming from that root misunderstanding that we are this body and this mind and this heart, and the happiness of this body, heart and mind is also dependent on the world. So good food makes me happy. So I want to control my food. I want to be able to cook beautiful things for myself.

So this, of course, the Buddha points out in the second sermon that he gives to these five companions who deserted him because he'd gone a bit soft eating rice pudding. And he points out, he says, "Well, if the self were the body, it'd be able to say, 'be like this, be like that,' be able to control it." He's not talking here about simple movements of lifting something. He's talking about what we really want, which is not to grow old, a bit more beautiful, a bit more handsome, and definitely not to die.

So that we have, that wanting to control is, I think, what we mean by free will, the desire for free will. That's actually what I think we mean at the root of it. Because, if we're to receive what we desire, then we need to control the source of pleasure. Full stop. Simple as that.

Now it's because we fail to do that, in the West anyway, we have these three ideas. They split into fatalism, libertarianism and determinism. So you can read all these philosophers and they'll slot into one of these one way or the other.

So fatalism is just that understanding that actually you don't have any free will at all. In fact the self is utterly impotent. So acts of free will don't have any effect. We don't really have any control over our lives. Anything that happens to us was previously ordained, it's going to happen. So now if on Thursday I'm driving into Newton Abbot, it doesn't matter if I go fast or slow, whether I take this turn or that turn, if I'm going to have a crash, I'm going to have a crash. Full stop. It's bound to happen. You get this view from people who believe in the stars, don't they? And then you get that psychology of self-fulfilling prophecy. So if the stars say, "You're bound to fall in love," then they'll find anyone - a chicken, a horse, whatever - they'll fall in love. It's got to happen.

And when you think about it, the really important things of our lives, well, it's difficult to say we've got any control at all. For instance, we didn't choose to be born. We definitely don't know the hour and day of our death. We didn't have a choice in cultural conditioning. What about things like economic, social, cultural? We just ended up with that. And then there's the elements - mercy of the elements. We don't even choose to fall in love, now that I've mentioned it, actually. And I suppose there's a bit to do, I suppose, with the personality as well. If you're a fatalist, that hopeless resignation. If you're that sort of person, you tend to be one, I think. Or the other side, sanguine optimist or something. I suppose at best it might build up a stoic patience, a fortitude, a stiff upper lip. On with the British.

So this whole idea that we don't have choice, everything's predestined. I mean, it comes up in the spiritual literature too. So in terms of the Buddha's day, there was a Makkhali Gosāla. And all he said was, if you went down one side of the Ganges, doing great acts of compassion and huge donations and he came up the other side murdering and pillaging, it would make a blind bit of difference because the whole road of *kamma* was set. Every soul that was born would have to go through the whole process of karmic refinement and in his case it did actually lead to some sort of heavenly state. But of course it undermines any morality because it doesn't matter what you do in the end because the universe is so manufactured through *saṃsāra* that it'll push you to that definite end - a sort of absolute fatalism.

In Christianity you've got Saint Augustine of course - he started the one about predestination. If God knew everything, he knew whether you were saved or not. And at worst that was Calvinism and Scottish Presbyterianism - you're predestined. From that there came the Protestant work ethic, of course. So that even though you couldn't tell whether somebody was going to go to heaven or hell by their earthly deeds, you can understand that one presumed that if you were successful in business, basically you had to go to heaven. So then you get that work ethic, and people who are rich get to heaven, and people who don't, well, they don't go to heaven. They go to hell.

Islam is also fatalistic. It's all written on the tablet, this original tablet. Your life's written on this tablet. And there was a lovely case I heard of where a friend of mine was working on an oil rig out in the Middle East. And two people fell off the rig, two Westerners. And the current was taking them away, and they were shouting for help. And there were two soldiers just standing there watching them. And the manager came rushing down and threw out the lifeboard, pulled it back in. And he said to these soldiers, "Why didn't you do that? Why didn't you help him?" He said, "The will of Allah." Heavy, isn't it?

And in our existentialism, we've got Albert Camus. He's the one who wrote the myth of Sisyphus. Now, Sisyphus ended up in hell, if I remember rightly, because of avarice. And his job, if you remember, was to roll a boulder up a hill, and then, of course, it would go down the other side, so he had to go back down and roll it back up. And for Camus, that was the metaphor of life. Every morning, you roll this thing to the top, and overnight it fell back down again. And when he came to make a judgment about what was the point of having a consciousness which suffered? What was the point of that? It's absolutely absurd. Take God away, take any ultimate freedom away, take the idea of salvation or *Nibbāna* or liberation away. What's the point of being conscious when it's such a misery? So his idea was that a human being, really to maintain his dignity, he only had one choice, which was to commit suicide. Luckily he was saved, the consequence of his own philosophy. Died in a car accident. One wonders whether he'd have carried that one through, actually.

So that's all there's been to fatalism, and definitely the Buddha wasn't into that. Predestination, everything's set.

The opposite of that, of course, is libertarianism. And that, I think, is definitely the fruit of our enlightenment, 18th century enlightenment. Here, of course, it gets corrupted when a person says they want to do their own thing in their own way in their own time - a teenage rebellion. But the idea is that we do feel empowered to make choices. And when you look back, of course, you do see that you have made certain choices. I mean, you could think that those choices are conditioned, but from a libertarian point of view, there's this bit of rationality come in. So that things just don't happen, you can stop, you can think about whether this is good or this is bad. And those decisions, a libertarian would say, are not random, and they're not predetermined. So there's a sense of freedom, a sense of being able to guide one's life. And you can choose - the idea of choice - and thereby we affect our decision-making.

So that view went on to support things like individual rights, freedom of speech, freedom of voting, and indeed the capitalist market, because it's the individual now who has to make choices for themselves, and they build up their own wealth. I mean, that's at its most painful, you might say. On the other hand, it does make an individual entirely responsible for their actions. So if a person ends up a robber, you can't suggest mitigating circumstance. Poverty, it's their choice. It will be a robber, so we'll hang them. Get on your bike when there's unemployment. You blame the worker for lack of skills because they've not got jobs and stuff like that. It leads, doesn't it, to a dog-eat-dog society, if you take it to an extreme.

But the idea of that at a spiritual level, unfortunately from a Buddhist point of view...

Unfortunately, it does give the idea of something inside us, this little person, that is a sort of rational self, detached from the world, able to see things from this vast, indifferent plane, and make decisions about it. Now, from the Buddha's point of view, that's the source of our misery, actually.

So if you walk into a supermarket with the idea of buying biscuits, and you're walking down the aisle, you come across a brand you hadn't seen before, Goblet or something. You pick it up and it says, "Goblet makes you happy." You look at multi-flavoured biscuits. Then you think, well, in my mind I'm going to buy my favourite figs. So there you're stuck between a so-called choice. Well, you can always say, well, all that's heavily conditioned, but there's some sort of rationality there. Do I want this? Do I want that? Feeling.

See, that's the problem with libertarianism, it lifts choice, it lifts freedom into this idea that it's up in the head somewhere. But actually you can see, even on a simple thing like choosing a biscuit, or making a vote, making a vote which we call a freedom of vote, but actually it's your feeling, isn't it? When you see certain politicians, you feel sick. When you see others, you feel happy.

So this business of capitalist freedom of choice, you can definitely argue that it's just juggling with conditioning. And it's based on this immediate fix. See, it's very interesting because before the war, if you look at the adverts before the war for products, they were very centred on the product and very pragmatic. And people only bought what they needed. That was the idea. You only bought what you needed. So if you were selling a clock in an earlier advert, you would simply point out that it has an alarm. It's got red lighting so you can see it in the night. And you'd buy it if you needed it.

If you do it these days, because this was Freud coming through, you've got to put a naked woman next to it. And the desire that comes up is immediately latched onto the clock so you buy it. It keeps you awake.

So that business of a sort of separate rational self, that won't work in the Buddha's teaching. Because that's also embedded.

And the third position is this determinism. So now, here there's the idea that the personal self, that the self does have a choice and it does affect things. So it's unlike fatalism. But unlike libertarianism, even the choices you make are determined. So whatever's going to happen is going to happen. Now, if you think about that, if everything is just cause and effect, cause and effect, as a sort of sequel from the past, it's very difficult to imagine anything but a repetitive universe. Where does the newness come in? Where does something stop this chain of cause and effect? How is it that we have actually a very creative universe? So it can't be just as simple as a direct historical cause and effect.

The Jains seem to have held that in the Buddhist scriptures. Now, you've got to be careful here because this is Buddhist propaganda. There's a man called Upali, for instance, who was a great supporter of the Buddha, a very rich person. And he told the Jain leader, Nigantha, some teaching about what the Buddha had given. And the Nigantha sent him, delegated him to go to the Buddha to prove him wrong. So, of course, Upali gets up to the Buddha there and starts his discussion. And by the end of it, he becomes a follower of the Buddha.

So he wants to become a follower. He says, you know, and I shall leave the Nigantha. This is where the Buddha's magnanimity, one of the little examples of his magnanimity, is, well, don't. Don't stop supporting your other teacher. You can support me, but don't stop supporting him. Anyway, Upali returns back to the Nigantha and tells him that he's now been converted. And the Nigantha, it seems, is so angry that he spews blood and dies. So it's that sort of tale which makes you think, well, when they're talking about Jains, maybe it's a bit of propaganda. I think he died in the Jain way, starving himself to death.

And what the Buddha points out about the Jain theory, which was some idea of predestination, you had to stop. You had to stop doing. So you stopped killing, and eventually you stopped eating. The idea was just to draw *kamma* to an end. So the Jain saint actually dies of starvation. You build up your courage for it, I suppose. What the Buddha points out is that even that decision is part of *kamma*. That actually won't end the sequence of cause and effect. It's like when we don't do something has an effect.

Even if you take this gathering now, we've all come from different paths to create this particular situation. And in this situation, hopefully something creative is happening. Only because we've all come here from different places. So there is something about the way the universe works which is about different lines of cause and effect meeting at a certain point to create something new.

So we see that these three perspectives, fatalism, determinism, libertarianism, I think we might argue that if you look back in time, you might just get the feeling that everything has been predetermined. Your life's actually been fairly set, and you didn't have much of a choice, and you've ended up where you are because... But when you're actually stuck in a present dilemma, when you're actually stuck between this and that, it definitely feels like you've got a choice. So again, it's to do with feeling. It's to do with the way we're looking at something as to which side of this business you tend to fall on.

Anyway, you might be relieved to know that from the Buddha's point of view, we're simply asking the wrong question. So you can now forget the first part of this particular essay. Because this whole business of free will just arises out of this profound delusion beneath us, this nebulous idea of me, me in control. So as the self discovers the world, there's pleasant, unpleasant experiences, so it wants to create something out of it, this dualistic world. So all things are over there as rivals or this side as accomplices. It's just driven by greed, aversion, indulging, accumulating, rejecting, annihilating. And it's this way that the self gains this idea of power. It's just a little game it's playing.

So obviously the right question is, how do we put an end to suffering? Remember that the Buddha always reduced his teaching to a very simple statement, suffering and the end of suffering, full stop. So the question is, how do we end suffering? And how do you get down to really cut the root?

The first thing is to understand this business about conditionality. And as we've already said, it's a concurrence of past events meeting present situations, which allows us this feeling of creativity, something new all the time.

Secondly, the aim is not concerned with freedom of choice at all. The aim to end suffering is not to do with choice at all. It's to do with clarity. It's to do with seeing where the path is. It's to do with investigation and exploration of our lives and the way things are and how it is that we keep falling into suffering.

If you, like for instance, if we set out for a walk in the country, you've already decided where you want to go. It's not random. You've decided where you want to go. So in one sense, you want to be happy. You want to find this happiness. And you've got your map. You've got your compass. When you come to a fork in the road, you don't

choose, well, shall I go down this one or shall I go down that one? You already know where you're going to go. And all you've got to do is consult the map and make the right decision.

So in the Buddha's path, the path is already delineated. So this choice, this feeling of choice that we have, turns out to be nothing but a doubt. It's not actually... See, the self lifts it up to the idea of, well, shall I do this or shall I do that? But actually, if you know all the facts, you wouldn't have a choice. The path would be just directly in front of you. Spiritually speaking, especially.

So, there's two types of doubt when I say doubt. There's what you might call honest doubt and sceptical doubt. So, honest doubt is just coming from that business of not knowing. And it comes from, shall we say, a sense of a grounded humility. Like, I don't know. I really don't know. Accepting that. And it's a very difficult place to be, isn't it? We like to know. That not knowing can cause us extreme anxiety. Like you don't know whether you're going to have the job next week. You don't know whether the cheque's going to come. It creates anxiety.

But if we can sit patiently, if we can sit calmly within that not knowing and accept that state and then just keep looking, keep observing, then the path manifests. It either manifests because somebody's pointed it out to us or because our own experience manifests. One of the points in the process of these vipassanā ñāṇa, the vipassanā understandings, is the business of what is the path and what is not the path.

And it's a very simple thing, most of you have probably been there, is that in your meditation you'll suddenly start maybe getting these beautiful states. They're very peaceful, very spaced out, very lovely and joyful. And of course there's the self immediately wants to get in there and say, well this is it, finally I made it. I remember one man told me he had this, quite deluded really, he had this amazing experience while sitting on the toilet. Now that's not relevant. You can have these amazing experiences anywhere. Remember that Luther had his great breakthrough while he was sitting on the toilet. It's faith only.

But he absolutely insisted. He said it was Nibbāna. And just what he was describing was just amazing. A blissful state, really. So, knowing that whatever nibbāna is, it is not felt. Whatever nibbāna is, it is not an emotional state. Whatever nibbāna is, it cannot be described. Immediately, it takes you off that indulgence. That's a correction. That's a correction to that not knowing, that doubt which comes up from, shall we say, this desire to seek the end of suffering. That's a wisdom thing. That's coming from something deeper than the self.

When you get the doubt which is really a sceptical doubt, a doubt which is a mental illness in the same way that sloth and torpor and all these hindrances are, then of course there's something else going on there, and that's usually a fear of commitment, usually a fear of giving yourself to something because you don't know what's going to happen, but that fear stops you committing and therefore stops you meditating.

One of the people who used to organise the meditation group, his father, when he was a young child, put him on a table and opened up his arms and said, "Jump, son." And he jumped and he moved away. Splat on the ground, he said. And he says, "That'll teach you. Don't trust anybody." You can imagine, yeah? So when he came to the Buddha's teaching, it was quite amazing that he should actually put his heart and soul into it.

So, just to be aware of that, that the path isn't about, shall I do this or shall I do that? And that's one reason for a schedule. You set your schedule down, a schedule that you know you can follow, and you just do that religiously. You don't let this little self come in and say, "Well, shall I do it? Can't do it? Maybe a little kip. I'll go for a walk. Don't feel like it." And all the time you're just feeding the self.

When it comes to joining the order, you say, look, I don't get up in the morning and say, shall I wear blue? It doesn't occur. Even the idea of what shall I eat? What am I going to eat? So it's taking out all that edge around where the self can manifest. It doesn't mean to say it doesn't manifest in very peculiar and staged ways, but at least you try and draw a circle around what you can do, what you can't do. And then you liberate. That's the benefit. You then liberate this wisdom factor, this *paññā*, this intuitive intelligence to investigate.

If this intuitive intelligence gets locked into what the self wants to do, then it's just taken all over the place. Fine, you feel nice when you get out for a walk, but has it helped you overcome suffering? Not at all. All it's done is it's given you a greater addiction to walking the countryside. Just deepening your attachment to the country. Which I've learnt since coming down to Devon, by the way. Terrible.

We could almost say, if you really think about it, when have you been most happy? Isn't it when you've been doing exactly what you wanted to do? The actual doing of it. It's never occurred, has it? When you've been doing exactly what you wanted to do, it's never occurred, shall I do this or shall I not do that? And it's the same with interest. If you notice, whenever you're interested in something, do you ever have any problems with concentration? No. So a lot of our practice is giving up that choice, is raising the interest to discover the path. And all that stuff just follows naturally, the clarity and all that, and the energy and the concentration.

Now when it comes to will itself, there is will, there is will in terms of power. The Buddha equates that to action. So he states it quite clearly. Will I call action. So those of you who know the Wheel of Dependent Origination, there comes that point, so we say it starts off with that contact we talked about. It starts off with a perception feeling of being pleasant, unpleasant. It would then have that reaction of wanting, not wanting. That's your *taṇhā*.

Only then does this self come in. Which is very interesting because in language we say, "I want that." But actually it's, "that want I." That's how it happens in terms of psychology. As soon as that "I" comes in, you can't stop it, you've empowered it. As soon as that "I" says, "I want," then you get that empowerment, that's the will coming in, and you have that next link, *bhava*, which is becoming. That's when you become, that's your act. Act of thought, word or deed.

So that's why in your meditation, when it comes to things like pleasant, unpleasant, you just want to keep the mind very close to that business of wanting, not wanting, liking, not liking, wanting, not wanting. And that's the way out to liberation by understanding *dukkha*, by understanding suffering and unsatisfactoriness.

So this power that we have is quite mysterious. It's totally neutral. It's not good or bad. It depends how you use it. It depends on your attitude. And you can't separate it from the action. You can try. When you do walking meditation, just stand there. Keep saying, "intending to walk. Intending to walk." And even though you're saying it and intending it, nothing's going to happen. And then suddenly the foot lifts. So what is it that has taken something out of a potential into an actual? That's what the Buddha's calling will. And you can't separate it from your foot. You can't say, well, that's it over here, and this is my foot over here. It's one and the same thing. It's within the structure of this whole becoming business.

But the power of that will is your conditioning. So remember, an action forms an intention, moves you to an action. And if that action is wholesome or unwholesome, then you're going to get the product of that conditioning. So if it's an unwholesome action, it moves you towards an unwholesome conditioning. This is inwardly. Remember, all kamma in terms of liberation is inward. It's not something to do with the outside world at all, actually.

And anything you do which is wholesome, it will produce that wholesome conditioning within you. And in Buddhist understanding, that's what's driving us to a particular destiny. And that's why, of course, in the Noble Eightfold Path, right view heads it. As soon as you understand, as soon as there's a seeing, as soon as there's a perception of the way things are, this immediately informs your attitude.

Of course, when it gets down into the attitude, you may find the opposite attitude to be too strong. So you might go down and you very clearly perceive that the body does not need tea. But that's not going to stop you doing it because of this huge conditioning to drink tea. But at least there's the perception that at this present time the body doesn't actually need tea, and it's hanging on to that and waiting for that to drop into the heart as an attitude. And then it balances up with the desire to have tea, and eventually because you're not feeding the desire to have tea anymore, that drops away, and the right attitude of seeing food and water and all that as nourishment for the body—not as a place for seeking happiness—begins to get the upper hand and lead you to the enlightenment. That's the one I'm struggling with!

So that's called *dharmachanda*, the will for Dhamma. And that translates into Mahāyāna as the *bodhicitta*, the heart seeking enlightenment. So eventually, that's the force. That's the force behind your drive to liberation.

And just finally, to end off with this lovely refrain: when anybody gets liberated, you always get this little refrain at the end of it. "Birth is destroyed"—now, this is the birth of self, remember. "The holy life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. There is no more coming into any state of self-existence." Can you feel the relief in that? What had to be done has been done.

So it's a case really of being clear that the path to enlightenment isn't a choice. It's not a choice. It's a discovery. What leads us to it is the general dissatisfaction about our lives. And once you perceive which way to go, then it's a case of building up that courage, that determination, resolution to follow it. And then, of course, you get the benefit of it.

That's the answer. That's what we have to do. So, what's the message? Abandon free will. Devote yourself. Surrender to the path.

May these words have been of awesome help to you in your path to liberation. Thank you very much.

Impermanence and Not-self

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 42 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma delves into two of the three characteristics of existence: anicca (impermanence) and anattā (not-self). He begins by addressing practical meditation questions about emotional purification and the differences between masculine and feminine approaches to working with emotions. The talk then explores the Buddha's teaching on the five khandhas (aggregates) and how deconstructing our experience reveals no fixed, permanent self.

Bhante examines the illusion of control and free will, showing how all our choices are conditioned while pointing toward the unconditioned consciousness achieved through Awakening. He addresses the fear that arises when we truly see impermanence, particularly regarding sickness, old age, and death - the very sights that motivated the Buddha's spiritual quest. The teaching emphasizes that recognizing not-self and impermanence leads not to nihilism but to freedom from compulsive attachments to health, youth, and life itself.

The talk concludes with contemplation on mortality, drawing from Samuel Beckett's meditation on consciousness and last moments. This is essential listening for understanding how vipassanā practice reveals the deepest truths of existence.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa.

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

This evening I'd just like to spend the usual time, 10-15 minutes on just the things that have come up during the day and certain questions.

The first one is this business of when I talk about the process of purification. So that's what I mean partly by emotional purification and partly by mental purification. So the purity of the heart is the transformation of all that negative side of our experience—depression, anxiety, you name it, the whole gamut of human misery—and to transform it into its opposites. So where there's depression, there's joy, where there's boredom, there's interest, and so on. That's the process. It's going from darkness to light, darkness to light.

And the emotional purification is done by bearing it. First of all, by bearing the product of what we've created and by making sure we don't unwittingly develop it through fantasy and through our actions, through speech and body. So that's all that means. In other words, it associates very closely to what we would normally mean by psychotherapy. The added thing, of course, is the spiritual dimension goes down to the core root as to why we're suffering. And that's where it becomes a spiritual practice. So we're not really concerned as such with emotions. We're not concerned as such with wandering thoughts. We're trying to get underneath it.

Just while I'm on emotions, there's the divide between the feminine and the masculine. A feminine person—you note I don't say female—tends to be much closer to their emotions. They're the sort of person who says, "I feel, I feel." And on the other end, of course, the masculine tends to be in the head, and they normally start sentences with, "I think."

So when a person is very close to their emotions, feeling emotions, and they come to meditation, because they know their emotions, because they've always identified with them, because they've always had this relationship of possessing them, it's very difficult for them to create that distance that I keep talking about, to look at it, because the habit is to go into it and feel, experience those emotions.

So for those sorts of people, if you go underneath the idea of an emotion, if you go to the body and feel it as sensation—heat, nausea, heaviness—instead of seeing it as an emotion to see it just as physical feelings, they regain their objectivity. And it's not a suppressive measure, it's just a different view of what it is, because in the Buddha's understanding it's all feeling, it's all feeling, it all comes under one word: *vedanā*, physical and mental feelings.

And just by being there with those feelings and just feeling them at the level of sensation, physical sensation, we're still allowing that energy to dissipate. And that's the curing. That's the healing of that process.

On the masculine side, it depends—this is a big generalisation, but often if people have lived in their heads, they've thought their emotions. They haven't actually felt their emotions. So when they come to meditation and feel their emotions, it's a big shock. And the shock means that they maintain that distance because they've never felt this stuff before. So for them, they can remain more easily with emotions as emotions.

Just yourself, just put yourself on that line somewhere. There are some emotions which we allow ourselves to feel and we justify them—anger for instance, things like that—and there are other emotions that we don't, we don't justify: jealousy and stuff

like that we don't like to look at, guilt, remorse, sometimes that's all hidden away. So even though I've talked very generally, actually everyone has a bit of masculine and feminine in them obviously.

Remember that we're not trying to destroy the reasoning mind. We're not trying to destroy thought. We're trying to be able to stop it. The enlightened person, if they don't want to think, they don't think, the thoughts don't arise. I remember Krishnamurti saying that when he went for a walk in a forest, the thought never arose. When he went for a walk, the thought never arose. He was just there with walking through the forest. It's not a destruction of thought.

Again, remember that thought is always driven by some mental state, by some emotion, by some motivation. I'm talking about just ordinary thinking. So now, as we purify the mind, and this intelligence, this *satipaṇṇā*, this knowing, understands something, it cannot come to know what it knows until it tells itself through thought. That's the paradox.

So when the Buddha's enlightened, it's not as though he came out and just laid out a big book saying four noble truths, eightfold path, off I go. It wasn't like that at all. He came out, he knew that he'd experienced something, and he went along and he began to teach, and he taught individuals and the teaching came out. So if you look at the early parts of the scriptures they're very spontaneous, they're not particularly rigidified or made into lists or anything of that nature. And then in the middle section you suddenly start getting appearing these lists—and of course they're there for memory—and suddenly these lists appear.

And of course the whole teaching then becomes much more of a logical framework. Just for one very simple thing, he talks about the 37 factors of enlightenment. We talked about the 7 factors of enlightenment, that's one thing, but the whole teaching is the 37 factors of enlightenment. The whole of the Buddhist teaching is enclosed in the 37 factors of enlightenment.

Now, there were 37 musical chords at the time. So it's a number which everybody, shall we say, it's in the back of their minds as an important number, as a mystical number, as something like that. And it so happens that his teaching comes out to be 37. He fiddles a bit because the five spiritual faculties, he also says they're five strengths, unshakable strengths when one has actually intuited *nibbāna*. So there's a bit of a double take to get his 37, which is all right.

Talking about that, when I mention the Enlightenment, these are big words. If they don't grab you, forget it. Our work is groundwork, our work is dogwork. We're at the coalface here. Enlightenment is just a word pointing to some sort of end game, there's some sort of process where we're moving towards it.

When we say we're moving towards it, we're not creating it. If you take a train from Newton Abbot to London, it's not as though London is being created by the time you get there. It's already there. So this enlightenment—the Mahayana are very good on this—we're already enlightened, that's not a problem, just we don't know it. That's the problem. And to get to know it they have to go through this whole process of purifying the heart because the impurities in the heart, the distortions in the mind, are the measure of our delusions. So we're coming back on delusions, we're coming back on misunderstandings, on mistakes we've made.

So don't worry about words like enlightenment, *nibbāna*. Just let them one ear and out the other.

These days we expect things to be very quick. I mean, if I wake up and I've got an earache, by nine o'clock I'm at the doctor's and he puts something in it, take a tablet and the thing's gone. The car breaks down, I can phone up a service and it'll be mended within an easy time, half a day or something. So when we come to this sort of work, we think, well, I've been here for a few days now. I've done this for weeks. I've done this for years. And not much seems to have happened. Then you start getting a bit depressed about it.

But what I would say to you is that when you look back over a period of time, especially if you look back something like five, six, seven years, you can definitely see a change within yourself. There is a change, there's a change going on, but it's very subtle. And why does it take so much time? It's because of the strength of these conditionings. I mean, those of you who drink tea, just stop drinking tea. It's hell. When I stop drinking tea, you'll know I'm enlightened.

The teachers that you come across, we're practically as unenlightened as you all. We've done is a bit more training. We've sort of had maybe some good insights, some reading a bit, spend a bit more time than most people and that's it. We're on the same path.

When an idea comes up in your head in meditation which seems to you absolutely sublime, like suddenly you think, "I'm going to create a charity to help the lepers in India," you think, "That's very, very good. Now, I'll think about that." Now that's not meditation. Even beautiful, wonderful, sublime desires and ideas are, as far as we're

concerned, in this retreat, for this period of time, just a mental aberration to be noted and to let go of. If you really, really are interested in setting something up for lepers in India, write a little note and come back to it at the end of the week. There is nothing wrong with that lovely idea. There's lots of lepers in India, aren't there?

Sometimes the body shakes, jerks in meditation. So that's just this energy caught up in the body. And it's trying to release itself. So it could be quite—I remember somebody shaking his head like this, I kept saying, "yes, yes, yes"—but sometimes it's a sort of swaying and it feels good. Of course it feels good because it's letting off this energy.

So what you do is you stop. You stop it. And you mentally bring the energy up the spine, down to the stomach, up the spine. That's where the energy is supposed to move, isn't it? Tai Chi and all that. And you lift yourself up like that. And as soon as you stop, then you may begin to feel the actual underlying disturbance which is causing this swaying. So that's what you have to deal with. That comes up. When it passes, no more swaying.

The breath. So sometimes now, around about this time, people do start becoming much more calm, especially over the next two days, but even today. And there are moments during the meditation when there's this peacefulness comes, this great calm descends, the body's very still, the mind is not thinking, it's pretty empty, and the heart seems to be just calm. And when you look, there's only the breath to watch. There's only the breath.

So at this point, a meditator might say, "Now what?" because they're expecting some explosion or something, something to happen. Well, the thing is that now there is this lovely moment to really plunge into the breath and to go towards the center of the breath. And what we're doing is we are really beginning to focus in on specific area. The smaller the area, it's like when somebody studies for something like a higher degree or something, they always go to a really abstruse little bit—like, why flies land on mushrooms, and there's a whole thesis on that.

And so, as we go into the middle of the breath, as we go into the middle of the breath, we're really sharpening the focus. We're really sharpening the concentration. The intelligence is still there. There's still that question mark in the mind. There's still that sense of curiosity, of wanting to know. It's a relaxation. If your forehead starts furrowing, because you're doing this business, then that's wrong. Remember, this is a relaxation. This is driven by interest. Driven by interest, not a desire to concentrate. Driven by interest.

And as you get closer and closer, because of that focus, because of that focus, time is collapsing. I mean, how long is time? What does it feel like? It's a couple of seconds, isn't it, or something? It's about so long, isn't it? But in reality, it's not like that at all. It's moment to moment. It's minute, the way that things are arising and passing away.

So, as we go into there, the whole of time is collapsing as we go in. And it's right here that we begin to see these things like I'll be talking about, this sense of transiency much clearer. And when we come out, when something does come up, and we have that sharpness of concentration, which is now a quality of that looking, then, of course, we can see it more clearly. So don't waste those times, no matter how long they are. They're only a minute or so. Don't waste them.

So I think that covers this business of the things that came up for today. What I want to do is just, in a sense, complete the three characteristics and just go through them and see where it takes us.

These other two are *anicca*, *anattā*, transience, impermanence, and this idea of not-self. Whereas *dukkha*, suffering, dissatisfaction, unsatisfactoriness, belongs to the realm of sentient beings, belongs to our realm specifically. It's us who suffer. It's us. But when it comes to transience and not-self, that's something which reaches out to the whole phenomenal world. Everything is in a state of arising and passing away. It is one eternal law that everything changes. It's one steady law in the universe. Everything is changing. And the other thing is that everything is not-self.

So I want to start with this harder concept of not-self, just go through one or two ideas with you, and then to move to the easier one, which is this idea of transience, and let's see where it takes us.

So the first thing about not-self is that that's not a philosophical statement. The Buddha's not saying there is no self. It's a teaching tool. It's a way of looking at what we're experiencing and beginning to see that there's no ghost within the machine. There's nothing metaphysical about what we experience. Everything arises because it's in relationship with everything. Everything arises dependent on something. Dependent on something. So nothing has its own essential nature. Nothing has its own being.

Now when I walk around, I feel very individual. I think it's me. Me, I'm walking around. I have this feeling of being me. But when I look at this me, if I look at the body, I don't know where the me begins and the me ends. I mean, when does air become me? Does it become me when it's in the mouth or when it's in the blood? When does food I'm eating become me? There's a sort of boundary, isn't there?

When I say these are my thoughts, how much thoughts are coming in which I'm taking up from radio and people I talk to and all that? What do I mean by my thoughts over this membrane? When I talk about emotions, sure, they're developed by me, but they're also to do with my relationship to people. They evoke things. So there's this sort of passage of communication between us, between nature, wherever I go. So this idea of me, sort of a sharp wall around me, begins to sort of undo.

Now this process of undoing, this process of deconstruction, which I've been pointing you to especially when you're doing the eating, is the main technique that the Buddha uses to get across his idea of not-self.

Now, just to look at one of them, he talks about the five *khandhas*, the five aggregates. So he says, when you take a human being apart, what do you find? Say when you find the body, and that's made up of all sorts of stuff, chemicals and all that sort of stuff, and that's that, and it's all—it's not one thing, it's not one thing. So where this body is me, this is my body. I also have a possessive idea: is my body me?

Now do I lose me if I lose a foot? Suppose I lose a leg. I'm not—I've now moved from being a biped to a monopod. It's still me? Have I lost a bit of me when I do that? At what point do I lose me? Do I lose my arms? Lose my legs? Chop my head off? Do I lose me? Is that me gone? This definition of me is strange, yeah?

Then he says there's this whole process of perceiving, where the mind actually creates pictures, basic pictures that we work on, basic ideas and concepts. They can be very grounded things, like just the colour, for instance, or they can be quite florid, beautiful pictures and all that sort of stuff that I create in my mind, ideas. And it's all bits and pieces. Where do they exist? I mean, have I got them in little drawers around my head?

It's the same with a computer, isn't it? Where's the program? Where is it? You press a button and this thing comes up. Word. Outlook Express. Where was it? So this idea of things being there in their totality, actually in some sort of subconscious, some sort of sub-realm, and they sort of appear when they want to. It's not like that, is it?

Then he says we've got all these feelings. So perception is one thing, they're not feelings, there's something else. Then we say we've got all these feelings. Well which feeling are you? I mean today I felt happy, is that me? Now I'm feeling depressed, no that's me. I mean which emotion are you gonna draw on and say, well this is me? Then as soon as it's you, you've got to hold on to it and say, I am depressed. I'm really depressed. Even when I'm happy, I'm depressed. I mean, you get blocked into this. And it's because you've defined yourself as this is me. Miserable.

And then there are, I've confused there, feelings should have been just the feelings in the body, likeable, unlikable feelings. The feelings I've just talked about, depression and all that, really belong to the next section, which are the *saṅkhāras*, those things that we've developed by an act of will. Remember that the body is conditioned, isn't it? I mean, I can do certain things with it, but there's a blueprint there. It just follows the genome. I can't do much about that. Perceptions are dependent on my brain and mind. I can't do much about that. Feelings are dependent. If somebody kicks me in the shin then it hurts and that's it, I can't do anything about that, it's just something arises. But this whole business of emotions is something that I create through my will and that's what we're all beginning to understand by watching this process within us of these emotions arising and passing away and how we want to indulge them and all that. So which feelings are we?

Are yesterday's feelings the same as today's feelings? Who am I now? Because yesterday I had these feelings, but now I've got different feelings. So who am I? Because the idea of a me is something static, isn't it? Something solid, something I can really point to and say, well, this is me. And the goalposts keep changing.

And then finally there's consciousness. And consciousness is always dependent on the object. If there's no object to be conscious of, who are you? I mean, who are you in sleep? Where do you go in sleep? In the middle of your sleep, do you say, I'm still here? It's gone, isn't it? There's no me. It's not that there's not awareness there, but there's definitely not a sense of me.

If, for instance, the doctor said to you, listen, you've got this very strange and terrible disease. If you fall asleep, you will die. Are you going to fall asleep? See? The reason why we fall asleep is because we presume I'm going to appear again in the morning. I wake up and there I am. Me again.

So we have to really look at this and begin to experience things and realize that this concept of me being this body, me being this personality, me being this character, I can't sustain that, at least not at an intellectual level. I can't sustain it.

So what the meditation does, it takes us in. And by seeing this distancing, that's why we distance. That's the first position. By distancing, we're looking at an object. If it's an object, it can't be the subject. I can't be what I'm looking at. Because there's a distance there, isn't there? So when we make that distance very obvious to ourselves, in ourselves, we're creating that objectivity, that not-self.

And that's what the Buddha says. When you look in and you feel something, just say, not me, not mine, not a self. The body's not a self. It's not me and it's not mine and it's not a self. Emotions, they're not me, they're not mine and they're not a self. Feelings in the body are not me, they're not mine and they're not a self. The consciousness that arises knowing things is not me, not mine, not a self.

So these little reflections burst through the bubble, they burst through the hard idea of me. And of course it's frightening, isn't it? Because as we'll do towards the end, the point of me, where me really comes to an end, the point of death, is very frightening for us. Who am I when I die?

So that's part of the idea that the Buddha uses to deconstruct the idea of deconstructing something, to see that there's no self, there's no me, no I, no self.

The other thing he points to is control. See, this whole idea of free will has badgered Western philosophy ever since, free will. So I walk into a supermarket, and there's something like a hundred biscuits there. And I think, fantastic. I have free will to choose any biscuit I want. And I go along the shelf and I come across Crunch It. And I pick it up and it says, Crunch It really puts you in a good mood. And I think, Crunch It? I've never heard of that. I'll put it back. Then you walk back and you see, McVitie's chocolate biscuits. Oh, that's what I want. Chocolate biscuits. I have exercised my free will. Totally conditioned, isn't it?

I have free speech. I will say exactly what I want. Anytime. I can say exactly what I want anytime. It's conditioned, isn't it? I only say something if somebody asks me to say something. If somebody gives me an opinion on something. Everything I say is dependent on my history, my ideas, my connections.

I have free will. Perfectly free will. I can vote for whomever I want. I don't never vote for liberals. Conservatives? No, I'm fed up with that. I'm not going to vote. I have exercised my free will. Driven by prejudice. Driven by hatred and greed. But I've exercised my free will. See?

So first of all, we have to get rid of that pathetic idea that somehow the will is some sort of floating entity that can choose whatever it wants to do my own thing in my own time and in my own way. So we can get rid of that completely.

And then when we come down, we realize that in fact, we obviously have choices. And what we choose is conditioned. So now, if we want to get to some freedom not to do, but freedom from, freedom from conditioning, we need to know what are the condi-

tionings that make me make certain choices, and do these choices lead to my personal comfort, my happiness, to my well-being? Does it lead to the well-being, comfort, and happiness of others?

Now, if I can see the conditioning, and if I can see the choice, and if I can see the result of the choice, and I can then step back and reflect, is this skillful or not, then I have some sort of choice to say no. But that no is coming from another conditioning which is arising out of the wisdom factor. Now, I'm not going to do anything which leads me to unhappiness. I'm not going to do anything which leads others to unhappiness.

So everything is conditioned and yet we have this through the wisdom, through wisdom, the slow movement, the transformation of all our habits over to the other place from wicked to wonderful just by exercising this reflection driven by the idea of goodness, beauty, love and all that. Even when we do that and we've come to know it, there's no free will about it. There's nothing free about it. You're compelled. As soon as you realize that something's doing you harm, you don't do it anymore. As soon as you realize something's doing you good, then you start doing that.

So there's something within us which is dry, it's driven. It is driven. It's not within the bounds of our ego. It's not within the bounds of our choice, which is being driven to the Enlightenment. The whole world is so manufactured to drive us, herd us, towards the enlightenment. We don't have a choice. Even when you're in hell, it doesn't last that long. And then when you come out, you realize, God, I've been in hell. I don't want to go there again. I'm not going down that road again. See?

So the whole process is one of learning because of this intelligence. It's this intelligence that wants to get out of suffering. It's this intelligence that wants to get out of dissatisfaction.

And yet there is something which is unconditioned. So we chant in the morning, this little chant from the Buddha, *aneka jāti saṃsāraṃ*. And he says, I've been through loads of rebirths, loads and loads, and I've constantly been pulled by the nose, by this self, by this ego. But now, he says, I've seen you. I've broken your ridge pole, I've pulled down your house, and you're definitely not going to build another ego and self for me. And he says, I have destroyed all my impurities, everything is gone, he says. And I have achieved the unconditioned consciousness.

That unconditioned consciousness of the Buddha still, while he's here, still has to live in the world. So his body tells him he's hungry. So he goes out and gets some food and he eats food. And when somebody comes to him and says, now what's all this stuff about? He has to respond. He's using the language of the time, which is totally conditioned.

So that's why he says that the feeling of moving towards the enlightenment is a freedom from not a freedom to do something but a freedom from, a freedom from compulsion. So when we talk about control that's coming from ego, that's coming from ego trying to control things, power and all that.

When we understand rightly, then we understand that we're in relationship. And that it's always a contract. We're always moving around. You decide that you're going to go for a picnic and the weather's pouring. That's okay. You take an umbrella. You work with it.

So now I want to get onto *anicca*, which is, in a sense, a more easy concept, because we can all see everything's arising and passing away. But how much do we see it? We see it out there, and we want it, we love it. Who wouldn't want winter and summer? They're a lovely balance. You don't get that in the East, for instance. It's always the same. But it's when change hits us, old age, death. See? They're changing upwards. That's when we don't want to look at it. That's when we avert our eyes and we don't really recognize that this change is something happening within us, internal.

And because we don't recognize that and we stay with moments, we stay with it, we create this idea of continuity which feeds into the idea of self. It's always me. But just look at the body you were born with. That little screaming hulk. How much of it is left now? It doesn't exist anymore, does it? That baby is dead. That body is dead. It died within seven years, according to our science. Every cell, every atom in that body was replaced. That whole body has very slowly, unwittingly just dissipated, just disappeared, disappeared.

When you look in the mirror next time, you can say to that face, you weren't here seven years ago. That's what transiency is. Things are changing. And yet, because we have this idea, because I can show you through photographs that it was me, that little screaming hulk that doesn't look anything like me now, was me. Was me. Crazy, eh? How can you be a was-me? You've got to be me now. You can't be me then. But I launch myself into the future. So I'm going to appear without any doubt tomorrow. I know exactly what I'm doing tomorrow. I'm coming here to meditate in the morning. That's me.

So this idea of transiency also has to be undone. And it's undone by seeing, just seeing that process, just seeing it, by being aware of it. And when we see it inwardly and it brings up fear, so that's what we've got to look at because this fear is coming from the ego. Fear is the last barrier of the self. That's how it protects itself. There's no worse emotion than fear. You may think there is, but fear is the last thing that the self has to protect itself.

So when fear comes up, that's really something to really move towards. And what you find, of course, is where there's fear, there's the fear of fear. And you bounce off it. And when you're afraid of fear, you get into panic. That's what panic is. And you lose it. You just run away. So when fear of fear comes up, you look at the fear, you stay with that, you try and stay steady between the two, as it were. Very difficult, but you stay steady. And slowly you keep averting your attention to the fear, the original fear. And as you get close to it, you begin to lose your fear of it. Just because of feeling. It's just another state, it's just another mental state, another emotion, another feeling. It's all it is. Not me, not mine, not self.

And when we finally lose fear of fear, what the hell's going to frighten us? See, so the problem isn't the object, the problem isn't the wild beast attacking you. The problem is the fear. As soon as you let go of fear, as soon as you can feel fear and not become afraid by fear, then nothing will frighten you. And that's a sign to the person that they've undone this idea of ego, of self.

The Buddha's often referred to as the fearless one. There is no fear. What is an enlightened person going to be afraid of? Who can hurt you anyway? What can people do to you? What can the world do to you? They can only do to your body. They can't hurt you emotionally. Nobody can cause you psychological pain.

Even when somebody comes to me and says, you're a very stupid, bald-headed monk. See? I swear, isn't it? It stopped here. That's all. It stopped here. But it's me, isn't it? I take it in. Of course I forgive you. But it's me, isn't it? I've created this hatred, this aversion, because I've heard these words. And then I create a relationship with this person. Tell them what I think of them.

So nobody can cause us psychological pain. So the worst the world can do to us is cause us physical pain. But if we're not the body, if it's not me, not mine, you've sat there now in meditation and you've been able to get some distance between that physical pain and you can see that there's an equanimity with it, you can stay with it. If there's a total detachment from it, if there's no connection whatsoever with pain, how can it hurt?

So I want now to just draw us to a conclusion. And I want us to draw us to an exercise which I'll be doing at the beginning of every last session. And it's just to bring to mind sickness, old age and death. These are the three things that drew the Buddha to his enlightenment. When he saw a sick person, a very old person and a dead and a corpse. Each time he said, what is this? He'd been sheltered from this sort of stuff. And each time they said, well, he's a human being. And then the big question, does this happen to me? And that shook him. That sent him into a tizzy. He had a nervous breakdown and ran off. So I'm going to be a monk. So now you know why people have got monks.

So these meditations are to undo. He says when we meditate on the fact that this body can become sick, we undermine this intoxication we have with health, this worry. These household gyms and stuff like that, worry about vitamins and diets and all that. It's all this obsession with health. He undoes the obsession. It doesn't mean you don't care for yourself. It's just undoing the obsession with health.

He says when we contemplate old age, it gets rid of our obsession with youth, with wanting to be young, to be forever flowering. Can't decay. Ugly. Terrible.

and when we contemplate death we undermine this very intoxication, this enchantment, this utter dependency we have on life itself. So we're undermining that, and what does that bring? It brings a freedom. It brings a freedom from obsession with health, a freedom from having to look beautiful and young, a freedom from having to live, having to exist.

That compulsiveness. It's always getting rid of compulsiveness.

Just to put us in the mood, I'd like to read this little poem from my favourite author, Samuel Beckett, whose work is a total meditation on last moments. Consciousness. It's up to you. Sometimes I close my eyes when I listen to poetry.

"Just think if all this, one day, all this, one fine day, just think if one day, one fine day, all this stopped. Just think."

I hope my words have been of some use to you. May you be enlightened even within these seven days.

In the Seeing, Only the Seeing... (Bāhiya Sutta) - read by Finola O'Siochrú

Noirin Sheahan · 45 min

In this talk, Noirin Sheahan examines one of Buddhism's most remarkable stories - that of Bāhiya Dārucīriya, who achieved complete liberation upon hearing just a few words from the Buddha. The teaching "In the seen, only the seen; in the heard, only the heard" points to a way of experiencing the six sense doors without constructing a sense of self around them.

Noirin brings warmth and humanity to this profound sutta, exploring Bāhiya's character - his determination, faith, and single-pointed focus that led him to travel 1,200 miles to find the Buddha. She examines the core practice of 'just seeing' - experiencing the raw data of the senses without adding layers of judgment, story-making, or self-reference.

The talk covers essential Vipassanā principles including the difference between ultimate and conventional reality, the process of grasping and clinging, and how concepts like 'self' and 'other' are constructed through our reactive patterns. Noirin offers practical guidance for working with the conceptual mind in meditation while maintaining the balance between tranquility and investigation that characterizes Right View in the Eightfold Path.

Bahiya holds the record for being the quickest of the Buddha's disciples to reach enlightenment. He only got a very brief training, a few words while the Buddha was on his alms round. These were the first and only words of Dhamma Bahiya had ever heard, and yet he gained full enlightenment as he listened. It's an inspiring story.

Bahiya, we are told, was a respected recluse living by the seashore and known as Bahiya of the bark cloth because his robes were made from bark. One day he pondered his own level of spiritual understanding, asking, "Now, of those who in this world are Arahants or have entered the path leading to Arahantship, am I one?" He couldn't answer this, and we're told that a compassionate *deva* appeared before him saying, "You, Bahiya, are neither an Arahant nor have entered the path leading to Arahantship. You do not even have a practice whereby you can become an Arahant or enter that path."

Bahiya, we are told, was greatly chastened by this, but luckily not disheartened, and immediately asked where he could find an Arahant to teach him. The deva then tells him that the Buddha is currently living at Jeta's grove in Sāvatthi and teaching the Dhamma there. It's a long way away, some 1,200 miles, but Bahiya doesn't hesitate for a moment to set out and hurry as fast as he could to Sāvatthi.

When he gets to Jeta's grove, he is told that the Buddha is out on alms round. Not willing to wait another moment, Bahiya hurries out in pursuit, and upon finding the Buddha, throws himself down at his feet, exclaiming, "Teach me the Dhamma, O blessed one. Teach me the Dhamma, O well-gone one, that will be for my long-term welfare and bliss."

The Buddha at first refuses, saying that he is on alms round and not free to teach. Bahiya repeats his request again and again, arguing that either his own or the Buddha's life could be ended at any moment. On the third request, the Buddha relents, saying, "Then, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus. In the seen there is only the seen. In the heard, only the heard. In the sensed, only the sensed. In the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will only be the seen in the seen, only the heard in the heard, only the sensed in the sensed, only the cognized in the cognized, then, Bahiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, then you are neither here nor there, nor anywhere in between. Just this is the end of suffering."

As Bahiya listened to these words, the penny dropped and he was liberated. The Buddha went on his way and just as he had feared, Bahiya died having been attacked by a cow. When the Buddha later came across Bahiya's body, he told his disciples to cremate this and erect a memorial. When they ask him about Bahiya's destination, his future life, the Buddha replies that Bahiya is totally unbound, meaning that he is liberated from suffering and rebirth.

Before we look at the teaching at the core of the Sutta, I think it's helpful to paint a picture of Bahiya for ourselves. One reason is that the teaching itself, as with so much of the Dhamma, invites us to deconstruct our normal understanding of reality, to see that we're not this, not that. Though this is essential, we also have to make an effort to reconstruct our understanding of reality where I am me and you are you and a dog is a dog and so on. This normal understanding is sometimes described as conventional reality whereas the deconstructed version is termed ultimate reality. The spiritual life requires that we navigate both levels peacefully. If we focus only on the ultimate level,

this can lead to abstraction. We grow aloof from the world. If we engage with the story of Bahiya, we warm up the teaching, bring our humanity to the forefront as we listen to the Dhamma.

We can remember also that the Buddha always chose exactly the right teaching for each person. So if we can put ourselves in Bahiya's shoes, we might hear the teachings in a more meaningful way.

Some people think that Bahiya was already highly developed spiritually. The Sutta doesn't give us much evidence for this, and I like the interpretation given by Buddhaghosa, an Indian monk and scholar who lived about a thousand years after the Buddha. Although interpretations lose some of the original purity, I think they have a value in their own right. The Buddha's presence, his calm, authority, body language, facial expression, all these would have added hugely to the words he spoke. As his real-life impact died away, myths and stories would have been added to the teachings as a human effort to retain some shadow of his presence. Of course, this will include cultural bias, and we don't have to take these as gospel, but they may make it easier for us to hear the teachings, to detect human warmth in them, rather than read them as a very dry manual of spiritual practice.

Buddhaghosa gives us a prequel to the Sutta, suggesting that Bahiya was actually a novice in spiritual terms, even a bit of a fraud. Earlier, he and others had gone out to sea. Their ship sank and all his comrades were drowned, but Bahiya managed to cling to a plank and survive. Perhaps he was battered against rocks because by the time he made it ashore his clothes had been torn away. There was, and still is in parts of Asia, a tradition of making sheets of cloth from the sodden bark of trees and Bahiya obviously had mastered this skill. From other suttas we see that being naked could lead to being despised and abused. It shows great strength of character that the half-drowned, bruised and battered Bahiya managed to weave himself a cloak, a task few of us would have the patience to manage, even in the peak of health and well-being.

By a lucky twist of fate, the bark cloth works in his favour. When the local people saw him, they assumed he was an ascetic who had renounced clothing, even assuming he was fully enlightened and arahant. And so they started giving him food. Bahiya realised he was on to a good thing and decided to eschew fine clothes and continue in his bark cloth, becoming known as Bahiya of the Bark Cloth.

Bahiya then starts to wonder whether perhaps he is enlightened. There are reports of people mistaking themselves as enlightened because they've developed concentration to the extent that the hindrances are suppressed and they live in a state of bliss. Perhaps this was the case for Bahiya. Perhaps all this talk of him being an Arahant per-

suaded him to dabble in meditation. He may well have had a mind that concentrated easily. The ease with which he picks up the Buddha's words suggests that. People with good concentration can achieve a state of *jhāna* where the mind is absorbed in bliss. My guess is that Bahiya fell into a *jhāna* and then started wondering whether this bliss meant he was enlightened.

Whatever about concentration, Bahiya's spiritual assets certainly include energy, determination and perseverance. To have survived a situation where five companions perished shows a real strength of will. Bahiya doesn't give up easily and once he realised that enlightenment involves his long-term welfare and bliss, he becomes single-mindedly focused on that goal. His zeal for liberation would have been spurred by acute awareness of mortality, as is pleased to the Buddha demonstrate. Buddhaghosa's story of near drowning gives a context for this.

Although we might think of someone who suffered such a calamity as very unfortunate, in spiritual terms the shock of a near-death experience can be a great motivator. This is why we are encouraged to reflect on our mortality, go to cemeteries or view bodies decomposing, so as to make this more real. A near-death experience makes us painfully aware of the lack of any security in this life. We become disillusioned, perhaps depressed, lose interest in the pleasures of this world. When the Buddha realized the reality of sickness, old age and death, it is said that he returned to his palace like a lion pierced in the heart. That state of misery prompted the Buddha's spiritual life. Similarly, Bahiya was determined to find a truth and security which transcended worldly life.

Last but not least, Bahiya had great faith. He doesn't waste any time doubting the Dhamma or his own potential for enlightenment. He goes straight for this prize. With a certain naive bull-headedness, he is only interested in learning from an Arahant. The fact that the Buddha is 1,200 miles away doesn't faze him for an instant.

So Bahiya is an energetic, resourceful, determined character, and because of his near-death experience, strongly motivated to seek liberation. He's blessed with great faith in his own abilities, in the reality of enlightenment and in the Buddha. We see his single-mindedness again when, after his 1,200-mile journey, he doesn't dream of resting but immediately rushes out of Jeta's grove in pursuit of the Buddha, doesn't hesitate to interrupt his alms round, pesters him basically, until he receives the teachings.

Bahiya's story is a testament to the power of absolute one-pointed determination, faith and energy. But this do-or-die attitude is easily hijacked by greed. It needs to be balanced by an equal preference for calm and tranquillity, a sense that all is okay, just as it is. The Sutta gives this very beautiful description of the personage Bahiya saw when he eventually caught up with the Buddha on his alms round: "Serene and inspir-

ing serene confidence. Calming. His senses at peace. His mind at peace. Having attained the utmost tranquillity and poise. Tamed. Guarded. His senses restrained, a great one, *Nāga*."

This suggests that it was the very presence of the Buddha that allowed Bahiya to calm down, bring his mind to rest upon the words the Buddha spoke, let them penetrate deep enough for full liberation.

The Buddha's opening words, "Bahiya, you should train yourself thus," clarify that this is a training, not an account of what enlightenment is. The Buddha is not interested in philosophy for its own sake, an abstract definition of truth. Intellectual understanding isn't enough for liberation. The truth of enlightenment has to be lived and for this we need training. The Eightfold Path gives the full scope of training, addressing morality, views and attitudes as well as mental training. But in this very succinct teaching to Bahiya, the Buddha focuses on the first step in the Eightfold Path, Right View. It's the way we see and understand the world that's most important. Everything else, our attitudes, our behaviour, our meditation, clicks into place if only we can be clear about what's actually happening in our moment-to-moment experience.

The Buddha's next words to Bahiya describe the bare simplicity of the practice. "In the seen, there is only the seen." When we see, we normally see something. We see a book, a tree, a person. And then we think about it, whether we read it, whether we'd like to read it. Same for the tree, the person. In reference to the seen, there is the seen plus all the thoughts and images and fond or unpleasant memories this provokes.

Now it's possible of course that we don't properly register what we see. We vaguely scan our environment to avoid bumping into things, too preoccupied to bother giving full attention to the visual scene. No thoughts about books or trees or people are evoked. But if we were to be properly mindful, we would detect a quick judgment, labelling whatever we see as irrelevant, not worth thinking about. So there is the seen plus an aversive reaction, dismissing the sight as irrelevant and the consequent decision to ignore.

Could we properly register the sight of a book, a tree, a person and not react, not add any thoughts? Difficult. The term is just seeing and is the spiritual practice we take from the Bahiya Sutta. We train by noticing the proliferation of the thoughts or the desire to avert our eyes, find something more interesting. We then resist the habitual reactions, drop the thoughts, bring our eyes back to the visual object itself, its colour, its shape, its bookness, reminding ourselves that we are seeing. When we train like this, we're com-

ing back closer and closer to the raw experience of seeing. We're dropping our opinions and judgments and preconceptions about the things we see, getting more and more interested in the experience of seeing.

Can you imagine living in a world where we didn't add a thousand judgments and stories, a thousand summary dismissals as irrelevant, as we let our eyes go about their business of scanning our surroundings? The teacher, Gilles Farcet, gives an example of this when he lived for a time in Morocco. He noticed his mind was much lighter than normal. He wasn't as troubled as usual in public. He eventually traced this to the fact that he wasn't reacting to people around him, making up stories about them. He realized it was because their clothing was so different to Western clothing. His habitual way of categorizing people just couldn't work. He had no way of judging, working out what their lives were like, who was rich, who was poor, who had what trade. So he was just seeing the people around him. This gave him a demonstration of the way we clog up our world and weigh ourselves down by adding layers and layers of unnecessary thought to whatever we see. He tasted the lightness of just seeing.

The Buddha uses the same instructions for the other senses. In the hearing, there is only the hearing. In the sensing, this is understood to refer to sensations from odour and taste as well as body. There is only the sensing. In the cognizing, there is only the cognizing. The latter is interesting. Thoughts and images also have their place in very simple, non-reactive way of relating to the world. The thought "book" could arise on seeing a book, but no further thoughts are provoked about whether or not we've read the book or should read it or any other thought stream.

At the very essence of seeing, hearing, sensing, there aren't thoughts, but simple sensations of colour or pressure or vibrations on the eardrum. But to interact in an intelligent way with these, we need to allow several sensations be processed by the mind so as to form perceptions and concepts like book, tree, person. This is happening all the time in the background as we go about our daily business.

I got a glimpse into the extent of background processing going on in my mind one time as I walked into the bathroom of my apartment. Normally the light switch also turns on a fan. But when I pressed the switch this time, the light came on but the fan didn't. I started hearing the fan nonetheless. In fact, I heard every little nuance of its whirring and buzzing as I'd never heard them before. That's because I was listening properly for the first time, knowing something was unusual but unable to work out what. It took a couple of seconds to realize that this was a mental sound playing in my

mind, a memory of what the fan sounded like, not a real sound impacting on my ears. My mind had made its own very accurate recording of the sound of the fan, and had probably been playing this every time I'd pressed that switch for the past several years.

Perhaps this is my mind's way of policing the environment, projecting whatever it anticipates onto the screen of consciousness so that the real data can be compared to the memory. I don't know the rationale behind the mental recording, but it showed me how much quiet, clever and accurate processing the mind can do in the background of our lives.

The training instructions given to Bahiya describe the body and mind carrying out their functions quite normally, seeing, hearing, sensing, cognizing. It's only our usual reactivity that's missing. And reactivity, remember, involves craving. We crave more of whatever sensations are deemed pleasant. We crave to get rid of those deemed unpleasant. We crave to ignore those we deem neutral.

We see the book. If we're an avid reader, this will be labelled pleasant and craving perks us up as we register the pleasure on offer here. But if we loathe reading, then the image will be labelled unpleasant and we crave to be rid of this irritation. If books mean little or nothing to us, we label the sight as neutral. We crave to ignore the sight, not to waste time letting our eyes rest on this irrelevance.

We're seldom aware of the craving underlying neutral feelings. But if you try resting your eyes on some fairly bland surface, you might soon feel a level of impatience. Your eyes will want to rove around, see something else. Your mind will probably want to think. This gives an insight into how deeply we crave to ignore sights we feel as neutral.

Craving leads on to grasping, sometimes called clinging. This is where we establish a sense of self, a central headquarters for experience. The headquarters we call me or I or mine can now marshal our physical and mental energies so as to fulfil craving. In Bahiya's training instructions, the Buddha clarifies that the goal is not to grasp, not to construct a sense of self, a central headquarters.

When for you, Bahia, there is in the seen only the seen, in the heard only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized, then, Bahia, there is no you to be found in relation to that.

We practice non-grasping in *vipassanā*. When we become equanimous, thoughts and feelings come and go. We watch our dramas without getting caught up. We have the sense of being the observer of our own experience. We're not interfering, just watching. Bhante uses the analogy of a birdwatcher concealed within a hide.

At times, even the observer disappears. There is breathing, feeling, sensing, cognizing, but no one watching all this. Experience is not centered around me. Awareness doesn't seem to be located within my body as it normally is. When a bird sings, we're just aware of the sound. Usually it's me in here hearing the bird out there. Now there's only the sound without any reference to me at all.

We can still recognize the sound as bird song, and we can still locate the sound, know roughly where it comes from. All the essential perceptions and cognitions needed to negotiate the world are functioning perfectly. We've just stopped referring everything back to me, the hearer, me, the observer. In the hearing, there is only the hearing. There is hearing, recognizing, but no one hearing, no one recognizing. We're no longer automatically mapping sensations and feelings into concepts like me, you, self, not self.

As the Buddha told Bahia, when in the hearing there is only the hearing, then Bahia, there is no you in relation to that.

While Bahia grasped all this in a moment, we can make an effort to follow in his footsteps by bringing to mind concepts of you or that when the mind is steady in meditation. It's easiest to focus on just one, say it's the concept you. In my experience, a strong desire to understand the concept is stirred. Tensions build in the body and the mind starts to polarize. I'm experiencing the effort needed, by an unenlightened being anyhow, to frame and hold a concept.

The calming factors, especially tranquility and equanimity, balance the polarizing effect. I realize that I have to continually let go of the concept for any peace. A very vague you takes shape as an image, as if I'm looking at myself in a mirror, then dissolves again. The dissolving is experienced as peaceful, pleasant, but tinged with sadness as if I'm saying goodbye. Then the desire to form the concept, to know this you, starts the process again. It becomes clear that the desire is associated with a sense of self, an I who wants to know this vague, unstable you, which is continually fading away.

This practice helps us make peace with the conceptual mind. It's the attachment to concepts like you and that which snares us in *dukkha*. As we train ourselves to steady the mind around these concepts, we slowly purify our attachments. We learn that concepts aren't ultimate reality. The only reality in the midst of a concept like you are the sensations and feelings experienced as I try to hold the concept in mind.

We have a preference for pleasant feelings. These are associated with the relaxation, the letting go of the concept. It's lucky we're designed like that. Our preference for tranquility won't let us get too attached to our concepts. And yet we want to know

ourselves. *Dhamma chanda* can be described as the desire to know our true nature. This desire springs from wisdom and drives the spiritual life. But because of attachment, *taṇhā* gets mixed in. We want to gain something out of all this effort.

Perhaps it's power. We want to be in control of experience, not at the mercy of circumstances. Perhaps it's the desire to love or be loved. Perhaps we want to save ourselves from dukkha. In pure form, these desires are all worthy aspects of dhamma chanda. But delusion allows them get hijacked by greed. Delusion tells us we are or could be that entity who is in control, who loves and is loved, who saves the world from dukkha.

Only as we sit still, burning with desire in vipassanā, can we start to separate out *taṇhā*, the greed for spiritual progress, from dhamma chanda, the wise desire to be present with experience, just as it is. The desire to know our true nature stirs us to frame a concept like you, while tranquility and equanimity persuade us to let go of the concept. It's a tight rope.

Because of our deep attachment to conceptual thought, tranquility often presents the wisest option. However, we can go overboard here, come to dread and deplore conceptual thought because it's so disturbing. It is useful to be able to think, however. Even an *Arahant* might need to think about issues when deciding on a course of action.

The story of Brahmā advising the Buddha to teach the Dhamma could be interpreted as the Buddha's rational thinking mind in conversation with his enlightened nature. Brahmā in Indian mythology represents the wisest being. While he lived, the Buddha had being nature, human nature. The Buddha's being, because it is no longer deluded, is the wisest being, is Brahmā. Thus, even an *Arahant* will at times need to generate concepts so as to weigh up matters, decide whether a course of action is worthwhile.

The Buddha used concepts like I and me and you and so on all the time as he taught. In particular, he taught the practice of *mettā*, to cherish and care for ourselves as individuals, to care for each being as an individual being. Being able to frame the millions of colours and sounds and sensations and feelings that arise each moment as concepts—me, mine, you, yours—is a very important aspect of human intellect and interaction. And, at least on this side of liberation, is a necessary basis for compassion.

Thus, we undertake the practice of forming concepts in meditation as part of the path of purification. Although we might sense conceptualization as disturbing a more peaceful meditation, and we might quickly detect ourselves grasping onto concepts like

you and I, we cannot afford to shirk away from the task. Otherwise, we simply get attached to tranquility and equanimity. This can lead to the delusion which marked the start of Bahia's journey, wondering whether perhaps he was enlightened.

Working with the conceptual mind in vipassanā links to the teaching on the destruction of craving, where the Buddha advises us to understand experience within the reflection: "This has come to be." This anger has come to be. This peace has come to be. This boredom has come to be. This itching has come to be. Every experience can be understood within the phrase.

At times, when we watch an experience—say it's an itching sensation—we find that it fades away. What are we left with? Our attention can be riveted, focused on the spot where the itching faded, but we can't name what's holding attention anymore. The desire to describe is felt as disturbing. As the body and mind relax, letting go of the desire to think, the focus for awareness broadens, sensing peace in the broad expanse of a mind that isn't interested in thinking. This is a mind that is, for a few moments anyhow, content within itself, not trying to work things out, sort out this from that.

After a while, restlessness or some other hindrance sets in. I often find the mind flickering at what seems like its outer border, trying to expand the circle of awareness. As it peeks momentarily into what we might call the outer darkness, it labels the darkness as that, because it seems beyond its grasp, objective, external. A moment later, it flickers towards a brightness associated with a physical sensation and pleasant feeling. It labels the brightness as this because it feels like me, mine, eminently graspable.

These flickering movements of mind give us a chance to study the next reflection Buddha recommends in the teaching on the destruction of craving: "This arises with that as nutriment." We grasp at pleasant feelings, think of them as mine, because the mind is not satisfied with its own limits. It senses something beyond itself, something external, something it can call that. But the concept that opens the door to the concept this. Our logical mind demands that if there's something external, then there has to be something internal looking out. And so we start grasping towards the body, feelings, perceptions, etc. as me and mine. We become the observer again.

To let go of that sense of being the observer, we need to make peace with the limits of our knowledge. Can we resist the temptation to look beyond what's right here, right now? Challenging, but a worthy practice.

The last thing the Buddha says to Bahia is: "When there is no you there, then you are neither here nor there, nor anywhere in between. Just this is the end of suffering."

When the mind isn't forming the concept me, then there's no location for the self. There can still be spatial knowledge. We can locate books and trees and other visible objects as well as the source of sounds. We can move our body appropriately. We don't get our arms mixed up with our legs. It's just that the mind isn't generating a focal point for me in the world.

Normally, we locate ourselves as here, somewhere within our body. When we see a tree, we think of ourselves as the one who sees. Focusing more closely, we sense that we are identifying with the moment to moment experience of seeing. We're clinging to those atoms of colour that are being strung together to form the concept tree. This is to cling to the sensory process. In this case, the eye and seeing. But clinging is painful.

Realising this, we loosen our grip, relax. It's a relief to let the tree be there, outside of me. Just a tree, after all. But after a while, a niggling doubt sets in. How is it we know what is there outside of ourselves? To our dismay, perhaps, we sense that we are now clinging to the notion there. It's pleasant to think of there being an external world, something I'm not solely responsible for, something I can let go of, ignore when I wish to. And yet I would be very dismayed to find the tree was not there when next I looked outside my window.

Sadly, I have to admit that I've now gone and attached myself to the sense object. In this case, the tree. I'm projecting part of this delusive construct of me outside of myself. And at the moment it's very bound up with the concept of the tree that grows outside my window.

Clinging to the sense doors, we locate ourselves as here within our bodies. Clinging to the sense object, we locate ourselves as there in the outside world. Both attempts to cling are painful. As we let go of these concepts, equanimity grows. Sensations and perceptions associated with both here and there slide from head to heart. We're no longer interested in defining these as one or the other. It's as if the boundaries to the self grow permeable. The heart can now include aspects of the outer world, such as the tree.

If I were to ask, where am I? I would answer that I'm not located at a particular spot, but as a nebulous consciousness, larger than my body, hovering somewhere in between my inner and outer worlds. When we identify as the observer of experience in this way, we're identifying with consciousness, that which knows experience. It's the birdwatcher in the hide, a very beautiful state of being, very worthy.

At least on this side of liberation, however, it's still a conditioned state, a composite knowing of several sensations and feelings. To take another step along the path, we let that observer melt into its underlying nature, the momentary knowing of a sensation, feeling or mind state.

When we can resist all temptations to locate ourselves either here within our inner world or there in the outer world, or in between as the equanimous observer, then there will be in the seen only the seen, in the heard only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized. The body and mind function perfectly. We can interact intelligently with the world. The only thing that's missing is the sense of self. The blackbird sings in the tree. We know this. Hearing happens. But no one hears. No one knows.

I end with the epitaph for Bahia spoken by the Buddha: "Where water, earth, fire and wind have no footing, there the stars don't shine. The sun isn't visible. There the moon doesn't appear. There darkness is not found. And when a sage, a Brahman through his own wisdom, has realized this for himself..."

Investigative Eating Meditation — An Explanation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 16 min

In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma presents eating as a powerful vehicle for liberation, drawing on the Buddha's own approach to food as described in the Brahmāyu Sutta. He explores how mindful eating can help us distinguish between enjoying and indulging, between bodily sensations and mental reactions, and between desire and action.

The talk examines five forms of suffering that arise from indulgence: attachment and compulsive behavior, frustration when desires are thwarted, grief over loss, anxiety about possessions, and the boredom that drives endless seeking. Bhante explains how these patterns reflect the Second Noble Truth's teaching on taṇhā (thirst) as the root cause of dukkha.

Drawing on the Buddha's example of experiencing taste without greed, this teaching offers practical guidance for developing Right Awareness around food and all sensual pleasures. By cultivating attentive eating, practitioners learn to undermine the wrong view of self as a single, undivided entity, recognizing instead our compound nature as the five khandhas. This approach extends beyond food to transform our relationship with all attachments, moving toward the freedom of Nibbāna.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

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

This is a talk about eating meditation or using the process of eating for purposes of becoming fully liberated.

The first thing is, how bad can greed get? Erysichthon, the Greek king of Thessaly, had the temerity to build a banqueting hall over the shrine of Demeter, goddess of earth's fertility and protector of the harvest. In Rome, she became Ceres, from which we get the word cereal. She cursed him with insatiable hunger. First, he ate everything there was to eat in his kingdom. Then he started on his people and even ate his own family. Still famished, he ate himself.

While I was staying at Kanduboda Meditation Centre in Sri Lanka, a man told me that once when out in the wilds he'd got lost and over a period of a few days became so hungry that when he finally caught a pigeon, he ripped it open and ate it raw. He was a good meditator.

Hopefully we will not have to suffer such extreme conditions. Even so, there are other good reasons to investigate the process of eating: to distinguish between enjoying and indulging; to distinguish between the body and the mind, that is, sensations from emotions and thoughts; to distinguish between a desire and an action, the role of the will.

Coming to distinguish between enjoying and indulging. We will want to make that distinction when we come to realise the suffering that indulgence causes.

The first complication that arises from indulgence is attachment and compulsive behaviour. When we indulge some unwholesome but pleasing habit, it means that we are using something to create a certain mental state that we enjoy. It's not the biscuit we want, but the mental state it produces, be it happy or comforting. But this also produces a dependency, and just like any addict, we're compelled to raid the biscuit box. Only a strong act of will and refusal to have biscuits in the house can break the habit. It is precisely at the time we renounce the biscuit that we suffer the strength of that habit and the hold it has on us. But the potential is always there. Just as a person who gives up smoking and after a long time thinks they're immune to becoming habituated, on surrendering at a party to have just one, find themselves buying a packet. That is, attachment is none other than a dependency on something or indeed someone to create a mental state of happiness.

The second complication is the suffering of frustration. Anger arises when we can't get what we want or what we want is denied us. We live at a time of almost immediate gratification. Consider fast food. Amazon has spent millions on delivery, knowing that to satisfy a customer as quickly as possible is to ensure their loyalty. You want some beer? Non-alcoholic, of course. We'll get it to you tomorrow. We can even be angry with ourselves for forgetting to buy tea or coffee. We get angry if the bus, the train, the taxi is late. We get angry if someone doesn't turn up for a meeting. Frustration doesn't help. It just burns us.

The third is grief. The misery we feel when we have to diet. The shock we suffer when we lose a mobile. The distress of leaving an expensive hat or bag behind in a restaurant only to find it has disappeared. But although we believe in possessing things, in reality we can only use them. If a thief has run off with our mobile, for all intents and

purposes it is their mobile, no matter how much we keep moaning and complaining of the loss of my mobile. And grief takes on a different intensity when we lose a spouse, partner, family member, friend.

Fourthly, there's anxiety, which always sits beneath everything we possess. The run on flour, pasta and, bewilderingly, toilet paper at the start of the lockdown is driven by fear of what may or may not happen in the future. The more we possess, the more we feel loss. And the more we have to possess to cushion any blow. A billion pounds to a billionaire cannot be enough. They must cushion it by moving towards a trillion. We're afraid of loneliness, so we build up a coterie of friendships and lots of things to do. We feel insecure so we accumulate excessive insurance or power which manifests in controlling and bullying.

Finally there is boredom. If you remember Māra the evil tempter, the sensual life personified sent his three daughters to inveigle the Buddha to return to the good life: sensual pleasure, sexual pleasure and boredom. Boredom is that state where what once gave such pleasure and excitement is now stale, overindulged and unpleasing. It is an aversive state and to escape it we seek some other pleasure. Variety is the spice of life, is the basic motto of the consumerist. Consider the foodies who choose their holidays depending on a variety of restaurants. And just as all the other consequences of indulgence can become mental illness, boredom can drive you into depression. Indeed, what would be the purpose of living when there is nothing or anyone who can raise any degree of excitement?

Here lies the distinction between happiness and excitement. True happiness is based on contentment. Excitement that passes for true happiness is based on an insatiable appetite for the new and the thrill. This excitement is what fuels consumerism. And the underlying engine is boredom, caused by the lack of excitement, that drives the consumer to seek relief in more excitement. This is none other than the psychology of addiction. Just as a drug addict feels normal when under the influence and abnormal when in need, so the consumer feels they have to buy something or go somewhere, do anything that excites, no matter how little, in order to feel happy. Retail therapy is no therapy at all. It's an addiction.

The second noble truth states that the cause of suffering is the insatiable thirst which generates moment to moment becoming, accompanied by obsessive indulgence, finding fresh excitement now here, now there, namely, the insatiable hunger for sensual pleasures, for continued becoming and non-becoming.

What do we do? Well, first of all, we need to make a clear distinction between the body and the mind, between, on the one hand, sensations and physical feelings, and on the other hand, the heart-mind, with its emotions and moods, thoughts and imagination. This is part of the endeavour to undermine the sense of self, the wrong view of self. This is the sense we have of being one entire undivided integer, a single uncompounded being, whole and absolute. By drawing apart what the body does through the senses and what the heart-mind does, is to begin to realize that we are but a compound made up of many pieces, all depending on each other, to create an embodied person. We are beginning to undermine this delusion. I am what I feel or think I am.

Secondly, we need to distinguish a desire from an action. This will give us that chink of freedom where we can change the conditioning we don't want to a conditioning we do want. Remember, our personality is but a collection of habits and will always be so. Our work is to rid ourselves of habits that bring any degree of suffering and dissatisfaction and develop those that bring a sense of well-being.

So long as there is only a desire, nothing has actually happened. It remains an idea laced with the energy of wanting. It arises out of a state of discomfort and is itself uncomfortable till gratified. If we are fully aware of a desire, we will not be caught up in its demands, but will have the occasion to ask whether it is wholesome, whether it's beneficial to myself, to another, or both myself and another.

If we determine it is unwholesome all we have to do is bear with the desire until it burns itself out. In so doing the habit that it expresses is weakened and will eventually lose all power over us. If a desire is judged to be wholesome, well then we empower it. It produces an act of body, speech and mind. This reinforces the habit. In this quite simple way we can change ourselves. Though, as we discover, it's not easy. We need a highly alert attentiveness, or we are quickly gratifying those habits we don't want, and so developing them.

In the *Brahmāyu Sutta*, there's a passage describing how the Buddha receives food and eats it. Here, he's described what he actually experiences. He takes the food experiencing the taste, though not experiencing greed for the taste. In other words, just the pleasant sensations. This is on occasion chanted by monastics at mealtimes.

Food, I take, has eight factors. It is neither for amusement or for intoxication, indulgence, or for the sake of physical beauty or attractiveness, but only for the endurance and continuance of my body, for ending discomfort and assisting the spiritual life. I consider, thus I shall terminate old unwholesome feelings without arousing new unwholesome feelings, and I shall be healthy and blameless and live in comfort.

What we're developing is an attitude, and an attitude is a way of relating. It's not specific to a particular object. So as we undermine greed around food, we're undermining all indulgence, for the same psychology appears to everything that delights us. Whether it's sensual pleasure, art, nature, even people and animals, the same problem of attachment arises. Once we've understood, I repeat, that attachment is a psychological dependency on some object or other for happiness, we begin to be more aware of other dependencies and slowly begin to let go of all obsessiveness. The Buddha tells us the taste of *Nibbāna* is freedom. It's freedom from unwholesome desires.

Now a warning. I once sat next to a monk, who by the look of him you would presume a true ascetic, hollow-cheeked and gaunt. When the delicious fruit salad with buffalo curd was offered, he placed it before him, and while the other monks continued to eat, he simply stared at the bowl. As we were finishing, he picked up the bowl and as quick as lightning spooned it down his throat.

Of course, I may be judging him very wrongly, but it seemed to me that he was afraid of enjoying the food for fear of indulging. Such an attitude, if taken to all we enjoy, would turn life into a sour grape. As always, in our spiritual practice, we have to tread that narrow path between direct enemies and subtle enemies of virtues. Here, between indulgence and self-mortification, the pleasures and joys of life are a human birthright, but they come and go like everything else. What are we actually holding on to?

In conclusion then, since our personality is made up of a compendium of habits, our psychotherapeutic task is to liberate ourselves from their control. But not the habit itself when it is wholesome. After all, we have to eat. So our task, when it concerns anything which is pleasurable and enjoyable, is to begin to experience what it is like to enjoy and not indulge.

Our insight task is to see clearly how we create suffering. Suffer the renunciation of unskillful desires, arrive at unalloyed joy.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance that they have not caused confusion and that by your careful attentive eating you will liberate yourself from all suffering.

La Libre Volonté

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 51 min

Dans cette conférence en français, Bhante Bodhidhamma examine la question philosophique du libre arbitre à travers le prisme des enseignements du Bouddha. Il explore les trois positions philosophiques principales - fatalisme, libertarianisme et compatibilisme - avant de présenter la perspective bouddhiste unique basée sur la loi de "ceci et cela" (idappaccayatā).

Le talk couvre les cinq lois fondamentales qui gouvernent l'existence selon le bouddhisme : les lois de la chaleur (physique/chimie), des semences (génétique), de l'esprit (psychologie), du karma (loi morale), et spirituelle (les enseignements du Bouddha). Une attention particulière est portée au karma comme loi morale, distinguant les actions intentionnelles des circonstances données par la nature ou la génétique.

Plutôt que de se concentrer sur un libre arbitre absolu, Bhante Bodhidhamma propose que le discernement spirituel soit la clé - comme utiliser une carte pour naviguer vers notre destination spirituelle. Cette approche pratique offre une compréhension nuancée de la responsabilité personnelle tout en reconnaissant les conditions qui façonnent notre expérience, particulièrement pertinente pour la pratique méditative et la vie quotidienne.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Parahato Sama Sambuddhasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Parahato Sama Sambuddhasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Parahato

Hommage au Bouddha, le noble, bienheureux, pleinement éveillé de par lui-même.

Je ne me souviens pas de ce dont j'ai parlé l'an dernier, donc j'espère que cela ne va pas être une répétition. Je pense que je vais donc discuter de la question de la libre volonté.

D'une manière générale, il y a trois positions parmi les philosophes. D'un côté, il y a les fatalistes. Il n'y a aucune liberté dans la volonté. C'est une illusion de le penser et tout est conditionné d'après eux. Même au temps du Bouddha, il y avait un enseignant qui disait que si on allait d'un côté du Gange avec l'amour et la compassion, et de l'autre avec le meurtre et les mauvaises actions, cela ne ferait aucune différence. C'est une question de *kamma*. Tout était conditionné.

À l'extrémité opposée, il y avait des gens qui croyaient en la liberté totale de la volonté, le libre arbitre. On les appelait les libertariens. Jean-Paul Sartre était un libertarien, à mon avis. Il a dit que c'était une position philosophique. À chaque moment de conscience, vous avez le choix. Donc chaque moment vous offre la possibilité de faire une action selon votre libre arbitre. Mais il a dit aussi également que ce n'était pas faisable.

Donc il y a ces deux extrêmes et la plupart des gens sont entre les deux. On les appelle les compatibilistes. Un peu de conditionnement et un peu de libre arbitre en même temps.

Alors, comment le Bouddha pensait que les choses survenaient ? Il faut que nous revenions à ce qu'il appelait les lois basiques de la causalité. Souvenez-vous que le Bouddha ne se préoccupe que de la conscience humaine. Il ne s'intéresse qu'au monde que nous créons et expérimentons. Il ne se préoccupe pas de ce que nous appellerions le monde objectif scientifique.

Cette loi s'appelle la loi de ceci et cela. Donc quand cela est survenu dans le passé, alors ceci survient dans le présent. Quand cela n'est pas survenu dans le passé, alors ceci ne survient pas. C'est ce que nous comprenons en général sous le terme de causalité. Par exemple, chacun d'entre vous dans le passé a dû prendre la décision de venir à ce cours. Et vous voilà. Et si vous n'aviez pas pris cette décision, si vous aviez décidé de ne pas venir, alors vous ne seriez pas là. C'est plutôt simple.

Mais si l'univers était fondé sur ça, d'où alors vient la créativité ? Cela conduirait à penser un univers qui est très répétitif, n'est-ce pas ?

L'autre possibilité également, c'est parce que ceci est ici, alors ceci survient également, en même temps. Et si ceci n'est pas ici, alors cet autre ceci n'est pas là non plus. Ils sont liés mais ils surviennent en même temps ou pas.

Chacun d'entre vous a décidé, venant d'endroits différents du monde, de venir à cette retraite. Et quand vous êtes arrivés, et les autres aussi sont arrivés, vous personnellement, alors la retraite a pu commencer. Si pour une raison ou une autre vous étiez mort en chemin, alors cette retraite n'aurait pas pu avoir lieu. Et je serais très triste.

Si l'univers était gouverné par une relation d'immédiateté entre les différents phénomènes, on pourrait présumer qu'il y aurait une créativité énorme. Mais aucun ordre. Ce serait le chaos, n'est-ce pas ?

Quand on met ces deux phénomènes ensemble, on a une idée de comment les choses surviennent. Ça, ça s'appelle la loi du ceci et du cela. *Idha paccayatā*. Il faut le dire avec l'accent français, ça veut traduire. Sinon on ne peut pas le comprendre.

Le monde ne peut être ni prévu ni prévisible parce qu'il n'est pas complètement conditionné par le passé. Pas uniquement par le passé, il est aussi conditionné par ce qui se passe dans le présent. Donc le monde est conditionné à la fois par ce qui se passe dans le passé et à la fois par ce qui se passe dans le présent. Même si uniquement l'un d'entre vous n'était pas venu, alors ça aurait été juste une retraite un tout petit peu différente.

Au-dessus de cela, il y a ce qui est connu comme les cinq lois. Et ça, ça va très bien avec la manière dont nous voyons le monde.

Le premier, c'est la loi de la chaleur. Et ça, ça revient à notre physique et à notre chimie. C'est la loi de la chaleur, du feu, de l'énergie. Maintenant, quand on revient à notre *kamma* personnel, on ne peut pas dire que quelque chose qui survient de la nature est notre *kamma* personnel. Si vous marchez le long de la route et il y a un tremblement de terre, la terre s'ouvre et vous tombez dedans, on ne peut pas dire que c'est parce que vous avez, dans votre vie antérieure, tué tellement de poulets. On peut dire que, de manière évidente, cela fait partie d'un *kamma* plus général qui consistait à être né ou à passer à cet endroit à ce moment-là. Mais à mon avis, ce serait impossible de le connecter avec quelque chose que vous avez fait ou que vous n'avez pas fait.

Le second est *bījāniyāma*, qui signifie la loi des semences. La génétique. Donc, encore une fois, si quelqu'un est né avec une maladie génétique, on ne peut pas dire que c'est parce qu'il a fait quelque chose de terrible dans une vie antérieure, ou a échoué à faire ce qu'il aurait dû faire dans une vie antérieure. On sait que cela fait partie de notre histoire génétique. Donc ça, il faut le séparer du *kamma* personnel.

Il y a des gens qui disent qu'il y a une connexion entre les deux. Vous connaissez le Padre Pio, en Italie ? Un homme est venu le voir et lui a dit « Pourquoi suis-je devenu aveugle ? » alors qu'il était en train de se confesser. Et il lui a dit « C'est parce que vous avez battu votre père. » Peut-être qu'il avait eu un peu d'insight dans la vie personnelle de cette personne, de vision. Ce que nous faisons a des conséquences physiques. Mais connecter une maladie génétique avec quelque chose que nous avons fait dans le passé, cela est difficile.

La troisième, c'est la loi de l'esprit. C'est ce que nous appelons la psychologie. Et à travers toutes les psychologies individuelles, on peut en déduire une sociologie, comment les gens vivent ensemble.

Il y a certaines choses qui nous sont données. Nos sens. Si vous ne voyez pas la couleur, alors vous ne verrez pas la couleur de la même manière que les gens ordinaires la voient. Si vous êtes né sourd, alors il y a un niveau de communication qui est diminué par rapport aux gens qui ne le sont pas. Et même si vous avez uniquement des problèmes de surdité, que vous entendez mal, alors ce niveau de communication est plus bas. Et également votre capacité à mémoriser les choses, à les comprendre. Ça c'est aussi quelque chose qui nous est donné. On aimerait tous être des génies. Je n'ai jamais surmonté ma déception.

L'ensemble du processus de perception est donné. Juste la manière dont les yeux voient quelque chose et puis créent une photocopie dans l'esprit, une perception. Et puis comment avec une perception similaire on forme des concepts. Tout ça c'est donné. Ça c'est l'esprit. Cela inclut également le cœur, les sentiments, les ressentis. Même d'un point de vue génétique, la physicalité de notre nature est donnée.

Même la manière dont votre langue goûte la nourriture, elle le fait à sa manière particulière, elle ne va pas le faire de la même manière que quelqu'un d'autre. Et quand vous sentez quelque chose, par exemple le parfum d'une fleur, cela vous est spécifique. C'est une réaction chimique qui vous est propre. Peut-être que les gens seront d'accord, mais ce ne sera pas la même chose. Si vous voulez que les autres sentent la rose de la manière dont vous la sentez, alors il faut leur prêter votre nez. Donc vous pouvez voir que le monde que nous expérimentons est très individuel.

Le quatrième, c'est le *kamma*, la loi morale. On y reviendra.

Et le dernier, le cinquième, c'est la loi spirituelle. Je parlerai peut-être de cela de manière plus détaillée demain. Mais en ce qui concerne le bouddhisme, bien sûr, il s'agit des enseignements du Bouddha. Les quatre nobles vérités, le noble sentier octuple, l'interdépendance originelle.

Si on revient au *kamma*, le *kamma* c'est la loi morale entre les êtres humains. Je pense que le bouddhisme dirait entre tous les êtres vivants. Et même les animaux les plus évolués à coup sûr ont des attributs moraux. Lorsqu'une tigresse défend ses petits contre un mâle qui les attaque, elle le fera quitte à en mourir. Mais en général, elle arrive à chasser le mal. Mais pas sans blessures.

On peut être très scientifique à ce sujet. Parler d'hormones. Mais dans des termes bouddhistes, il y a un esprit. Et l'esprit n'est pas le corps. Il y a bien sûr des écrivains bouddhistes qui vont dire que le cerveau est l'esprit. Vous êtes peut-être tombé sur le livre qui s'appelle « L'esprit du Bouddha ». Et au début de ce livre ils disent très claire-

ment oui il y a quelque chose de transcendant. Mais le cerveau et l'esprit. Ce n'est pas vrai d'après les enseignements du Bouddha. Je ne sais pas comment ils sont parvenus à cette conclusion. Mais des bouddhistes très séculiers croient cela.

Pour ceux que cela intéresse, il y a un très bon essai écrit par un philosophe qui dit qu'est-ce que ça fait d'être une chauve-souris ? La connexion entre la chimie intérieure, les impulsions électriques et le monde extérieur, on ne peut pas la démontrer. Et ce philosophe dit, c'est impossible de montrer ça. Mais c'est autre chose.

Kamma est cette loi morale fondamentale qui dit, si vous faites quelque chose avec un bon cœur, alors il en ressortira quelque chose de bon. Avec une bonne intention. Et si vous faites quelque chose avec une intention malhabile ou une intention non bénéfique alors quelque chose de non bénéfique en surviendra. Donc quand on fait quelque chose cela a un effet sur le monde là sur la matrice extérieure. Mais cela a aussi un effet sur la psychologie intérieure, sur la matrice intérieure.

Et le Bouddha dit que chaque chose commence avec une pensée. Chaque chose commence avec une pensée, puis une intention, et après on fait quelque chose. Et alors cette intention, elle a aussi un effet sur l'esprit, sur notre monde intérieur, sur notre vie intérieure.

Pendant ce week-end, il y a eu toutes ces manifestations contre le changement climatique. Et dans le monde entier. Il y a des gens qui sont si engagés qu'ils sont prêts à être arrêtés. Ce qu'ils espèrent, c'est qu'avec ces manifestations, de plus en plus de gens vont s'impliquer.

Le philosophe derrière le mouvement Extinction Rebellion, ou l'un d'entre eux en tous les cas, il dit qu'il suffit de 3,5% d'une population pour créer une révolution. Il a dit quelque chose du genre, s'il y a 3,5% de la population dans les rues, pour chaque personne dans la rue, il y en a 10 qui la soutiennent.

Alors maintenant, il y a quelqu'un qui se fait arrêter, qui prend une amende. Donc, il a une bonne intention et finalement, il récolte de la souffrance. Ça ne semble pas très juste.

Dans la loi du *kamma*, il est aussi compris que quelqu'un est prêt à faire des sacrifices pour les autres. Mais où va être le bénéfice ? Le bénéfice sera intérieur. Le sentiment de dignité. Qu'on a été en réalité fidèles à nos engagements personnels.

Cette histoire de *kamma* n'a rien à voir avec le bonheur au sens ordinaire de se sentir heureux. Il y a un bonheur qui est beaucoup plus profond que le bonheur émotionnel. Sinon, comment expliqueriez-vous les gens qui luttent pour la démocratie et finissent torturés ? Et ils savent que cela fait partie des choses possibles.

Il y a notre psychologie intérieure particulière, notre vie spirituelle intérieure particulière qui peut requérir de nous la souffrance. C'est quelque chose qui n'est pas très bien compris d'une manière ordinaire en Orient.

On avait un vieux monsieur qui, de manière habituelle, s'occupait du monastère, le nettoyait, balayait. Je crois qu'il était un comptable à la retraite. En tous les cas, c'était quelqu'un de très éduqué. Et un jour, je lui ai dit, mais pourquoi pensez-vous, à votre avis, quelle est l'explication au sujet du fait que Jésus-Christ a été crucifié ? Il a répondu, il a sans doute fait quelque chose d'épouvantable dans une de ses vies antérieures. Il n'y a rien à dire à cela. Donc le concept de souffrir pour le bénéfice des autres n'est pas répandu en Orient. Et ça, ce serait du *kamma* bon, positif.

Ils ont aussi une vue très fataliste du *kamma*. Et c'est particulièrement le cas dans l'hindouisme. En Orient, ils ont la tendance de voir les choses d'une manière beaucoup plus fataliste que nous.

Quand le tsunami a déferlé sur le Sri Lanka, beaucoup de gens sont morts, il y a eu beaucoup de destructions. J'ai entendu dire que des conseillers occidentaux sont allés là-bas pour aider à faire face au traumatisme, le syndrome post-traumatique. Et quand ils sont allés là-bas, ils n'ont pas vraiment trouvé des gens qui souffraient du syndrome post-traumatique. Parce qu'il y avait beaucoup plus d'acceptation du désastre. Soit c'était vu comme un *kamma* personnel, soit c'était l'impermanence, *anicca*.

Une partie des bénéfices de voir le monde d'un point de vue bouddhiste, c'est que cela nous évite des problèmes psychologiques terribles.

Et bien sûr, ce n'est pas parce que l'on fait quelque chose de merveilleux dans le monde que le monde le verra comme tel. Il y avait donc une société de bienfaisance dans une petite ville en Angleterre. Et ils envoyaient des vêtements en Afrique. Et en fait, ce qui s'est passé, c'est que d'un point de vue local, il y avait des gens qui faisaient les vêtements et en fait ils n'ont plus de travail. Et alors toute l'économie locale s'est effondrée. Donc en fait ils ont dû rapatrier leurs vêtements. Ou alors en tous les cas au moins arrêter d'en envoyer.

En fait, on ne sait pas quel va être l'effet d'une action parce qu'on ne connaît pas les circonstances de l'être des autres.

C'est la même chose avec l'idée d'accident. Par exemple, vous descendez les escaliers. Et vous loupez une marche. Et vous tombez et vous renversez le café partout. Et votre ami bouddhiste très proche vous dit tu devrais faire les choses avec plus de conscience, tu devrais être davantage en pleine conscience. Et tu veux l'étrangler.

Les accidents surviennent parce qu'on ne connaît pas les conditions.

Perhaps what happened was that when they looked at the stairs, there was perhaps some liquid on a step that made them slip. So actually it's something difficult to do, to connect something that happens to us with something from the past. It's better to see it just as a general law.

Generally speaking, when you do something good, then good things come from it, even if it's very small. And the reverse is true.

To show you how the law of kamma can become very absolute, there's a story that comes from the *Dhammapada*, and this story is told to children. There was a boat on the ocean. And although there was a lot of wind, the boat, the ship stopped. And the captain didn't understand why. He had a group of monks on board. He was very lucky because he had a group of monks on board. And so he asked them to find out why.

They went into a very deep meditation. And they discovered that the cause of all this was his wife. In her previous life, she had drowned many cats, etc. The only way to get the ship moving again was to throw the woman overboard. And that's what they did, the ship started sailing again.

If you're told this when you're a child, how will you see the world when something happens? So for me, it's still a bit more subtle than that.

So we come back to this question of free will. The Buddha said, everything is conditioned. Everything is conditioned by something else, by everything else. So in the conditioning of our mind and our society, then where does free will reside, so-called free will?

You can read other authors who perhaps have a slightly different understanding from mine. I think that if instead of focusing on free will, we go more towards the question of discernment, then we understand things better.

So remember, we always start from a position of delusion. And the very definition of delusion is that we don't know we're in delusion. We don't believe it.

So for example, if you had to take a walk from here to Bulle, and you don't know the way, then you take a map. And when you walk, you come to a fork. Then you look at your map. And thanks to the discernment that is allowed to you thanks to the map, you take the right path to arrive where you wish.

And if you don't have a map, then perhaps you're going to take the wrong path. And you arrive in front of a very big mountain. And you say to yourself, that's not Bulle. Then you turn around. And then you take the right path on the right.

So spiritually, we have a certain direction. From a spiritual point of view, we have a certain direction. If we follow the Buddhist path, the Buddha said that at the end of the path, there is liberation from suffering.

So we walk on this path, we arrive at a fork where we have to make a decision. Then we can consult the Buddhist teachings. We can understand them wrongly. We can think, I know the way. We can also say to ourselves, I know the path. And we arrive in front of the mountain. And we say to ourselves, ah, damn, that's not it. We turn around and then in this way, it helped us to discern which path we want to take and which path we must take to go there.

If a person has no direction, no place where they wish to go, they don't know where they're going. Any path will do. They will constantly be going back and forth and ending up in front of a mountain.

So what do you think? Do we have free will or do we have a tiny bit of choice? When we've decided on a direction, do we have a certain degree of free will once we've chosen a direction?

So now, you have that extra biscuit on the plate. And you have a problem. Are you going to take the path of liberation that you know very well? Or are you going to go to the mountain? You find yourself in front of the mountain.

So in a certain way, we have choice.

I can only hope that my words have been of some assistance. That I haven't caused even more confusion. And that you will be delivered from all your sufferings sooner rather than later.

Living Life according to the Dhamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 58 min

In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma addresses the practical application of Buddhist teachings to everyday life, drawing from the Noble Eightfold Path and the Buddha's guidance for both monastic and lay practitioners. He explores the jewel of Buddhist meditation instruction—the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10)—which was originally taught to lay practitioners in Kammāsadhamma, demonstrating that the path to awakening is accessible to all, not just monastics.

The talk covers Right Speech as speaking with kindness, honesty, and appropriate timing, distinguishing between aggression and true assertiveness rooted in equanimity. The discussion of the five precepts includes nuanced perspectives on vegetarianism, generosity as the antidote to taking what isn't given, and the role of intoxicants in clouding awareness. Bhante emphasizes Right Livelihood as transforming any work into spiritual practice through the attitude of service.

The teaching concludes with an explanation of taking refuge in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) and the five precepts as a formal commitment to the spiritual path. This ceremony provides practitioners with a stable reference point for ethical guidance while remaining open to wisdom from other traditions that align with Buddha-Dhamma.

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

This evening I wanted to pre-empt a lot of questions over the weekend concerning daily life. Not all of them, but some of them. To look at the way the Buddha advises us to live, and then to try to explain what it means to take refuge and precepts, because that's the little ceremony that I offer on Sunday morning. And why we should do it, or why you might want to do it. The ceremony is on the Sunday just after breakfast, 9:30, and I'll talk about that tomorrow in more detail.

When the Buddha started to teach, the first people who were attracted to him were people who wanted to live a similar sort of ascetic life. And many of them had already been living the ascetic life, out in the jungle or the forests, going on alms round rather. That's the preferred state. That's the preferred expression, on alms round, not begging for food. And when they were attracted to him, he said, well, come and try. *Ehi passiko*.

There is of course the story about the women who turned up from his court later on in his dispensation, and I'm sure many of you know the story that when they turned up he didn't want to ordain them. He didn't think that they could take the life, and he refused them three times, which is basically no. But Ananda said, can women become fully liberated? And he said, yes. So he said, well, why not give them a chance? So he did. Ever since then, he's been blamed by the men.

Now, although that story exists, it would seem now actually that that's not quite right. Research has shown something else, that these people who turned up from court were in fact his own relatives. They were his stepmother, his wife and a few other court ladies. So they were obviously people who'd been living the good life. It would be difficult to wear rag robes. They would have been probably still wearing rag robes then, collect robes from the bodies of the dead, sew them up and boil, and that was it. Later on he made people cut them into squares so that when you look at a robe it looks like paddy fields with passages.

And then he made them dye it in arecanut, which turned into a sort of colour of, as one monk said, baby shit. So it's not particularly fashionable.

But there does seem to be, especially a nun there, the name of course escapes me, who seems to have asked him, it's in her verse, if you look at the verses left by the *Therīs*, by the enlightened women. There's one verse there where she states that when she asked the Buddha if she could join him, she'd already had *jhāna*, he said the same thing, *ehi*, come, *ehi passiko*, come and try.

So that was one part of it, and slowly but surely an institution developed, and an institution basically is determined by its rules and regulations. So there were general rules and regulations of the time, but as monks and nuns misbehaved then, or people complained about certain behavior, he would make a rule. One of the ones that you're all suffering from is not to eat after lunch. So that came about because lay people complained that the monks and nuns were turning up at all times and more than once for a bit of food. They got fed up and they said no, this is not right, going back to big bowls of food. So what are they doing all day, just sat there eating? So he made the rule that you can only go out once, it had to be in the morning and it had to be eaten before noon. And the monks complained because all the best foods cooked in the evening like in most cultures, but he was quite strict about that. He said no, if you want to join this dispensation, that's what you do.

So that was one side of his dispensation. The other side of course was that many lay people began to be attracted to his teachings, and so he began to develop a lay way of life because he had to answer their questions. And this comes out in the Eightfold Path,

which we'll come to in a little bit. But the one thing that I really like to stress is that the jewel of the collection, the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse, in which the Buddha describes how to meditate, all the stuff you've been hearing from me is out of that discourse. Like feeling feelings in feelings and all that sort of stuff. That's all from this discourse.

That is addressed to the Kurus of *Kurusadhamma*. That's how the discourse opens. It always opens with where he was and who he gave the talk to. So he was in a place which was close to modern Delhi and he had been there before and he'd given teachings about mindfulness and meditation and all that. And when he came back he was taken by how committed the village was, the little town was, to the practice. And that's where he delivered this discourse.

So the discourse explaining the whole process of meditation, and it ends with, if you maintain your mindfulness for seven years, for sure you will be either a non-returner or fully liberated. Never mind seven years, seven months. Never mind seven months, seven weeks. Never mind seven weeks, seven days. That means you don't lose your attention for seven days. As we found out, that's a wee bit difficult. And it's good to remember that, he didn't pull any punches. He didn't think, well, only monastics with their special form of institution and life can become liberated. Not at all. And there are examples in the scriptures of many people becoming fully liberated. One is a cobbler.

He had to, shall we say, wandering through the countryside. That was his normal thing. He would go from one monastery to the next, spending so much time here, so much time there. And on the way, he would stay in little villages and towns. And in those days, the wandering ascetics seemed to be the entertainment. I mean, there was obviously folk entertainment, bands and jumping up and down, but they would have these big gatherings on full moon. And the people would go to the parks and they'd have these talks given to them by these ascetics, these spiritual seekers, and they'd be questions and all that sort of stuff.

And in fact, we know that the lay people complained to the Buddha that when we go to these teachers, they always answer our questions and these teachers also give, these monks and nuns they also give talks, but yours sit like dumb pigs. So he said right, he made a rule. All these rules come about because of silly things like that. So he said if a monk or nun is asked a dharma question they have to respond. It's a rule.

So he has lots of advice concerning the lay life. And this comes out, as I say, in the Eightfold Path. So it's good to look at that. It's good to look at the Eightfold Path and see what he's actually saying.

So the first is right understanding, right attitude. So that's really what we've been developing over this week. We've been developing our understanding about the way things really are, and hopefully that will in time sink down into an attitudinal base, an attitude. And then from there there's an outflow. So that outflow is into right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

So now right, there's always the negative and the positive. So wrong speech of course, telling whoppers and coarse language and useless language and slander. Those are your four types of wrong speech, and all those bring us problems. Right speech is kindly. It's always from a position of kindness, which you can include any positive attitude of kindness from compassion, kindness from joy, sympathetic joy, kindness from friendliness, from *mettā*. Kindness, honest. That honesty even stretches to not to exaggerate. And then finally, which is the most difficult one, at a suitable time.

So if you want to say something to somebody which you know might upset them, then you have to choose your time, say it kindly, and be upfront about it. And that's what the Buddha is saying. If you choose the wrong time, then you can expect it to completely go wrong. So this idea of choosing the right time, a suitable time, I think is rather insightful. Sort of blurting out.

And that brings us all to this business of aggression and what's that other word where you're being direct, aggressive, assertive, that's right. To be assertive. So people think when you're assertive you have to stamp your foot and put your fist on your hips and say quite straightforward, I will not have this. But to be assertive is coming from a place of no fear, no aversion. That's what they feel. And when it comes from that place it can be terribly kind, but they know that you mean it.

A slight example which gives you some idea of that is, I remember Mother Teresa of Calcutta, she went to Lebanon when that dreadful stuff was going on and some school had been stuck in the middle of two firing lines it seems. And the school has lots of children in the school, they'd been caught in the school, and it was a dilemma as to what to do. They were very afraid to bring the kids out. It's very strange to see because I saw it on television, some of you might have seen it, and she's brought to the school. So I was thinking, why don't they shoot her in a crossfire? But anyway, the officials and all that, they brought her to this place where she could see the school, they told her what the situation was and what to do.

Well she had no problem. She just walked to the school and brought them out. Everybody else is so afraid and full of fear and all that confusion, but that's what had to be done, and she was prepared to perhaps sacrifice her life to at least make the attempt.

So when you find yourself in a position of being bullied or somebody saying something which is rather nasty and all that sort of stuff and you want to talk to them, it doesn't have to be upfront straight on the nose, I will not have this sort of behaviour. Coming from that position of no fear and no hatred, no aversion, to say it very kindly, look, I won't take that sort of language anymore. And it hits much more strongly. If there's any fear, any anger, then subconsciously they'll bounce back off it. So coming from equanimity is a much better place, whatever we do, always, always, always.

It's been a regular experience of mine. I wrote in one of my little diaries, I call them diaries, I call them blogs, on my monthly email where I came, we had to get rid of this big tree, this oak tree, because of oil tank regulations. And I came out of the house, and my neighbour was in an absolute rage. I've never seen, I mean, it was real rage. He completely lost it. And he was saying things like, I'm from Liverpool, and I'll have you shot. Don't say much for Liverpool. A killer, that.

And oh, he doesn't listen to this tape. And the lumberjack who was okay by the way and quite an expert, he was standoffish, he seemed to be very cool, but that's because he had these two great big strapping young lads next to him. And I came out into this and I thought, so I thought it was nothing to do with me, so I was really calm, cool, collected, the peacemaker, and I said, what's going on? And he raged on about this tree should have never been cut, it's not our tree, we've had all this business before, somebody was fined so many thousand pounds, on and on and on.

And then he turns on me and he says, and I'm going to drive my tractor up and down the side of your fence all day to disturb me, all sorts of stuff. And finally sort of cool him down and say, well, and then he realised that I'd employed this lumberjack, he wasn't part of Satipanya. That cooled him down a bit. And very slowly over a little bit of period of time he sort of began to cool down, and this guy then approached and reminded him that he just threatened him with his life. A simple apology would do, and finally he just made a very quick apology. That was good, and he went out with his tail between his legs. He'd got the whole situation completely wrong.

And it was, I mean, I don't know whether I would have reacted like that if I'd have been there at the beginning of the argument. It was that I entered into it thinking it was nothing to do with me. I was absolutely stable, and when he turned on me I was able to maintain that sort of stability. And that immediately gave nothing for this rage to hang on to. So that's always a little example from my own life telling me that equanimity is always the best policy.

So that's this right speech business, approaching people in a way which is always kind. And kindness undermines any form of anger. It's got nothing to hold on to. As you know, if somebody approaches you in a sort of accusatory way, as soon as you say, I'm sorry, that undermines the whole thing. And then, of course, you prove it was their fault. But it's just always undermining their anger is part and parcel of the good life. Which as we can see doesn't stop you from getting your point across. It's just making that little distinction there.

So it's a good thing to keep in mind the distinction between being aggressive and being assertive. And that when we're assertive it doesn't have to be done with a sort of strict, loud voice coming from the position of righteousness. I mean, that's basically another form of aggression in a way. So this right speech has always the negative side and the positive side with these instructions.

When it comes to right action, that's normally described as these five precepts that we say in the morning. And it's basically, that's what you don't do. So we try not to harm any living being, not to kill any living being, not to harm any living being. Well, I mean, as soon as you take that position, then of course you move towards caring for all living beings.

And, of course, this takes us into that whole area of vegetarianism, which is a constant question within Buddhist circles. Should we be vegetarian? In Buddhist culture, the only vegetarians that I know of are the Chinese monks. They can be very strict vegetarian. And I once did a wedding ceremony for a Chinese woman who was marrying an Englishman. And after the ceremony, she came up to me quite worried and said that at the banquet, at the banquet which they would have after this ceremony, they'd be eating meat. So I gave her the normal line that the Buddha didn't ban eating meat. That wasn't the problem. So, it's up to a person's sensibility, really.

At the monastery I joined in Sri Lanka, one of the monks rather proudly came up to me and said, we're vegetarians, because monks eat meat if they're offered meat. It's not a problem, but the message had gone out that monks at Kanduboda were vegetarians. So I'd not been there for two or three meals when fish turns up. And so I didn't say anything, of course. One has to be careful. And I heard later that a rather wry Westerner had said that, well, in Sri Lanka, fish are self-propelling, automated vegetables.

So that's it, you see. So it depends where you draw the line. As you know, in Western culture, the Benedictines were vegetarian, but they did eat fish. They had pools in which they kept fish. So, you know, fish vegetarians.

The problem is not the eating of meat, of course, it's the killing of the animal. And it's up to a person to decide, you know, where they are in that sort of loop. So of course when you buy the meat you support the butcher and so on and so forth and it depends on really what your body needs. So I know a woman who has only got half a kidney you see and basically she has to eat meat it seems. There's also this argument of blood groups, certain blood groups are meat eaters rather than vegetarian eaters which mirror our ancestral history. But I think it's up to every individual to decide whether they want to be vegetarian or not or even vegan or not. It's up to you.

As a monastic of course because you're receiving alms, that's what you eat, you see, because you haven't been in that loop. This is the point, you see. You might say, well, you hold your bowl out and you get a great big chunk of beef. I mean, you know. But the thing is that monks don't invite people to give them food, you see. They can say, I prefer to be vegetarian. In Burma, during the rainy season, when monks and nuns gather to do special practice, often they'll take a vegetarian vow. But if I know that you've killed an animal to feed me, I can't eat it. That's my rule. If it's a leftover or it's part of something and then I turn up at the door with me bowl and you say, I'm a monkey again, give me... took a leg of chicken in there, then that would be allowable. But if I'd known you'd rip this leg off, especially for me, then the chicken was hopping around, I'd have to refuse it, you see.

So there's this whole murky area around vegetarianism where the Buddha didn't basically make any strict laws. And you must remember that in those times there was famine. And you had to kill your livestock to keep alive. And how are you going to teach the Buddha Dhamma to Eskimos? Or Inuits rather, as they prefer these days. Or people who live in deserts. So it's like there's no... In this idea of a relative universe, everything dependent on something else, you can't make absolute laws. Even killing, you can't make an absolute law about killing. When I was at the monastery in Burma it was regularly fumigated for mosquitoes so nobody complained about that. So there are different degrees of moral law out there, you know, and it's up to the individual to decide where they are. That's all. So it's very rare that something is absolutely black and white.

So the second one, of course, is not to take what is not freely given. So that's a pretty, when you think about things that you might even, you might become sensitive to taking even a pen home from work, you see, because it's not given for that reason. So it gets, the more you get into these rules and regulations, the more refined they become. It's not just, you know, thieving something.

In the Buddhist monk's rules, if I have a liking for that bowl, for instance, it's a singing bowl, and I think, hmm, and I'm looking around to see if I can just slip it in my bag and borrow it, you see, then of course that's still at the thought level. So I haven't actually broken any rule. All rules to do with monks and nuns are to do with action. And then if I come in again and see that rule, you see, and then I'm overtaken by my desire to slip it away, and my hand moves towards it, but I don't actually, you know, even to the point of touching it, you see, that's called a *dukkata*, that's a bad thing to do. Moving it, moving towards it, you see. If I touch it, then that's called a heavy offense, you see.

Now if I move it a nano centimetre and then decide not to take it I've still committed an act of theft and I'm no longer a monk. Yeah. See, so the Buddha is quite clear about what constitutes an act and what doesn't constitute an act, see. So if you take that into all sorts of areas of your life you can see so long as it's in the mind it's not manifested outward, it's not done harm out there. It's done harm within here if you've indulged it, but it's not done harm out there. And so long as you're moving towards something, towards you're about to do something, of course, you're now into a dangerous area where you might, you know, might actually find yourself doing something you didn't want to do. But once you've actually done it, even if you then decide not to do it, but once it's done, it's done. That's it. The act is complete, you see.

Of course, the consequence is different. The consequence of, say, just moving that bowl a nanocentimetre and then saying, whoa, no, and then walking away, well, there's going to be no consequence to that. But to actually stick it in my coat and shoot off with it and be caught at the gates, that could be... My whole reputation as a completely enlightened being might just fall apart. You can't imagine the Buddha shoplifting, can you? It wouldn't sort of fit.

So, you know, that whole business about not taking. Now, the opposite of covetousness, of course, is generosity. Move towards generosity. And generosity was the subject that the Buddha always began his talks with when he talked to lay people, because anybody can be generous even a thief can be generous with the stuff we've just thieved. So generosity is not, it's a sort of, it comes prior in a sense to the rule about taking and not taking. Anybody can be generous with what they have. And remember generosity is to do with both time, both wealth and time, and that's what it leads to, you see.

Once you stop thinking about what I want, you see. So at the worst end, it's taking something which is not ours, right? But then in the middle, it's this sort of greed of always wanting something. It's always wanting what other people have and envy and jealousy and all that sort of stuff, you see. And when all that passes, where does that

energy go, you see? All that wanting, you see, it moves outwards into wanting others to have it. And that's this natural transformation of the negative side of our characters and personalities towards the positive. It just happens naturally.

And I think one way that we can judge, it's one of those words, isn't it? One way that we can see that we're progressing spiritually is that we're getting far more delight in giving than in receiving. That's always a good sign, that you delight in giving. That's one of the Buddha's phrases, to delight in giving.

The third one is normally translated as around sexual activity, not to abuse our sexual activity. And of course in those days, as in previous times in the West, that would have been confined to the married life, to a proper to that type of relationship. These days of course it sort of lengthens out to a loving relationship doesn't it, you know. Whenever I talk about this I always say this of course that sex is just by itself it becomes an empty experience and then I always quote Woody Allen but as empty experiences go... Laughter. Laughter.

So you see it's just one of those things but really that precepts I think you can lengthen it out to any lust for anything, lust for food, lust for getting out into the open. It's just that part of us that is, you know, overreaching, you know, overreaching again. It always comes back to this seeking happiness in the sensual world, it's...

The fourth one is wrong. Oh, wait a minute. I said wrong speech first, did I? So it should have been not to harm any living beings, wrong speech. That should have come fourth, actually. Sorry. And then there was not to take what is not freely given. And then there's this business of not to abuse the senses. And then finally, always a tricky one for a Western culture, not to take drigs and drunks. Drigs and drunks. Drinks and drugs that cloud the mind, you see.

So the normal question is well what's wrong with a, you know, what's wrong with a glass of wine, you know, especially if you're French. What's wrong with a glass of wine? Italian, I mean how can you, how can you not have a glass of wine with your spaghetti? So really again this comes back to the individual. I mean generally speaking in our culture to have a glass of wine with food is neither here nor there, it's not... But in the scriptures, the reason for this is that under the influence of, you do things which you would not normally do. That's the problem with specifically alcohol.

And it's up to a person's refinement. I mean, I, you know, some monks would, some teachers would say that you mustn't ever go near alcohol, you know, that sort of stuff. But it's up to the individual to decide what mental state arises when they take alcohol. I remember when I first started meditating I'd come out of an evening session and I

hadn't eaten and I went into a pub and I had half a bitter, you see, just to test it actually, to test the effect of half a bitter on the antibody. That's true. I did, I did, I did. And I drank this half of it and I sat there and I swear I felt this curtain fall down on the brain. It just came right down and I thought well this is it, you see. This is what it does. It, it sort of does have, even a small amount of alcohol does have an effect on your level of consciousness and what, what you're doing.

So considering that we're trying to develop our awareness, you know, the last thing we want to do is do something which is underlying that development. So again it's left up to the individual. The western, the eastern culture is not so alcoholic based as you know. I mean they have alcohol but as far as I know there's none of this, there's none of the culture of wine, culture of tea but not of wine.

And when it comes to recreational drugs, well, that's the same thing. Recreational drugs distort your consciousness, so you'd have to decide whether that's what you want to do or not. So that whole area, really, for somebody who is bent on purifying their minds and on consciousness, then, of course, they'd come off all that stuff.

So those are the five basic rules, you might say, of what not to do. But that doesn't cover, in a sense, all the goodnesses that we're asked to develop. So the four of them, the four illimitables, are love, compassion, joy, and peace. And I'll say more about that tomorrow when we do the loving-kindness meditation, the *metta*. But these are your basic relationships to life and they're illimitable because the development of the mind is seemingly indefinite. It's a bit like number, no matter how great a number you can conceive you can always add one. It's like an eternity of numbers.

So it's the same with the mind, the heart. You can continue to develop it. And there are meant to be innumerable number of beings. So you can be there forever offering metta and an occasional lunch break.

The others are the seven, the ten *parami*. Parami means the other shore. And it's normally translated as perfections, which is a bit, you know, that gives you the idea that you've come to the end of this, you know, a perfection. But basically they're virtues. I would much prefer the word virtues. And they include a host of things. I'll just read them out. Parami.

The first one is this generosity. The second one is moral, the moral law which we've discussed. The third one is renunciation. So here we have to make, you know, I think I've said before the distinction between self mortification and renunciation. Renunciation is giving up something to see what our attachment is to it and in seeing our attachment we wait for that attachment to go, you see.

So one of the things I've suggested is whatever your most enjoyable program is on the telly, to sit there with a cup of tea and a biscuit and don't turn it on. And just feel the pain. So you wait for it to pass, wait for it to pass, and keep doing that until it's all gone and you don't care about that program anymore. So then you can watch it.

Wisdom, of course, energy, so that's, you know, that business of right energy, putting the right energy into something. Patience, the Buddha calls the highest form of ascetic practice, to be able to bear with, not to lose one's patience over things, to become irritable, you know, and all that. So, of course, that, to be patient, you have to sit in the other person's place, don't you? You have to be in the other person's side to understand why they're behaving like that, you know. Why the train is late, you know, all that sort of stuff.

Truthfulness, we've talked about. Resolution, you see, you hear me go on and on about resolution. So there it is in one of the *parami*. It's a commitment, you see. You keep making resolutions. Even if you fail, it doesn't matter. You just keep putting energy into a resolution. And eventually, it grows in energy, you see. And it takes a hold on us.

Loving kindness, metta, which we'll do tomorrow, and of course equanimity.

And I'll just read out what this says in the commentary, which sort of puts them all together for us, so that you can understand that although there is this negative, you know, what we shouldn't do, there's much more about what we should be doing to develop our hearts and develop our relationship to the world. So here's what the... what it said in the *Visuddhimagga*. *Visuddhimagga* is a later work which is considered the handbook, really, of Theravada Buddhism, and it's probably one of the greatest spiritual classics of the world, really.

But this is what it says, anyway. As the great being, meaning someone destined to become liberated or Buddhahood, are concerned with the welfare of living beings, not tolerating the suffering of beings, wishing long duration to the higher states of happiness of beings, and being impartial and just to all beings, therefore they give arms to all beings so that they may be happy, without investigating whether they are worthy or not. By avoiding to doing them harm they observe morality, and in order to bring morality to perfection they train themselves in renunciation.

In order to understand clearly what is beneficial and injurious to beings, they purify their wisdom. For the sake of the welfare and happiness of others, they constantly exert their energy. Though having become heroes through utmost energy, they are nevertheless full of forbearance towards the manifold failings of beings. And once they have promised to give or to do something, they do not break their promise. With unshakable

resolution, they work for the will and welfare of beings. With unshakable kindness, they are helpful to all. And by reason of their equanimity, they do not expect anything in return.

See? That's nice, isn't it? Very good. So that's the positive side of our... what you might call right action.

Then there's the we move on now to right livelihood. So there are those livelihoods we're not supposed to get involved in like, well, one of them is of course killing animals and arms trafficking, human beings. I mean, you know, you can think of those. But the big thing about livelihood is not what you do but how you do it. See, this is, I think this is the real core of the thing. Whether we're doing some, you know, some of the unskilled jobs of society, you know, like clearing parks, cleaning, that sort of thing, or whether we're doing some of the most highly skilled work in society, in spiritual terms it's irrelevant. In spiritual terms it's the attitude of which you do it.

So if you see what you're doing as a service then it becomes a spiritual practice. And once we've grasped that then, you know, it makes, it makes work very worthwhile because all the things that we might suffer at work such as the boredom of it or the tedium of it or the...

the fact that other people are nasty to us all that whole area you see when it becomes at the service of when it's a service that you're giving then it all becomes very worthwhile and I think that's you know if we start from that if in the morning you see having done your two hours meditation you sit quietly and offer *metta* to all beings you see and then you get round to work see where you're going to spend really the better part of our lives you know eight hours a day or so and so you sit there you see and you just consider what you do and you do it for the benefit of see for the benefit of the people you're working with for the benefit of the firm or the organisation and through that for the benefit of all and if we engender that within us of course then it becomes meaningful no matter what we're doing.

When I was a kid you know I got a job from school. I worked in a cake factory. And they had this belt, you know, with the cakes coming off. And there was a group of women, see, and they put me on the end of the line. And the women, of course, were very used to this sort of work, and I'd just joined them. And they were very quick with their hands and could keep up quite complex conversations. My job was to stick this damn cherry on the top. And every time I missed, I had to shut the machine down. They got a bit upset with me. And I didn't quite get the hang of it. They didn't give me enough time. They'd have given me half a day to get into it. But they were very kind. "He's only a lad, leave him alone."

Now you think, well, how could you do something like that and turn that into a spiritual practice? Especially on a sort of production line like that. How could you do that, you see? Well, if you think about it, it's an enormous, you know, if I'd have known, if I'd have been into this sort of practice, this was an enormous opportunity to develop moment-to-moment concentration. Right attitude, completely there with the cherry on the cake. Just like that, on the cake, on the cake. Instead I was, "Oh, bloody hell, I've been doing this for all day." And of course, if you're on the line, you're on the line for hours. You know, it's two hours, ding, the bell goes off, a cup of tea, bang, off you go again. I once had a job just punching holes in this damn thing that shot, you know, in front of my eyes.

So any situation can be seen as having potential for some sort of spiritual practice. So, yes, that is service. Service is the important thing to remember when it comes to work.

So now, you know, if we leave it all there in terms of general guidelines about our lives, I mean, there's books written on it, lots of good books about daily life and all that. The idea of taking refuges and precepts for the people who do it is that, in a sense, you've got to have some sort of reference point in the spiritual life. It doesn't matter what it is so long as it's obviously worthwhile. But if you keep hopping from here to there then it's like you're using different value systems which eventually can just confuse you, see.

So if we look at our lives and think well, is there an authority, a final authority I go to for moral problems, for actual guidance? Is there a moral authority, an ethical authority I go to whom I really trust and from there I would be able to put into context any other information I get, any other spiritual instruction I get? If you take that position it doesn't stop you from this authority taking in other teachings, other traditions, except that it has to make sense to this central authority. If it doesn't you've got two authorities and that's when your confusion starts. Like who do I follow, what should I do? And the idea of taking refuges and precepts is at one level it can be a very general commitment to the spiritual life and at others it can be quite specific.

Okay, so we take refuge in the Buddha. So the Buddha is a historical personage. We have lots of information about his life and how he lived. We have lots of information about the people around him at the time, with an enormous amount of information about his teachings and what he proposed. And to take refuge in that is to take refuge in not simply some personage but an exemplar. So this is your example, you see. And in a sense the Buddha is mirroring some archetypes within us. There's something in us that has to be liberated.

And so that would, and the Buddha's path is, shall we say, specific to the Buddha. If you were a Christian, then Jesus, Jesus Christ would be your central authority. So often I get, for instance, people who are Christians saying, "Can I meditate," you see? So my answer is, I don't see a confusion, but you've got to make sense of this within the teachings of Jesus Christ, see? And if you can't, then it creates a contradiction. It just creates wasted energy.

So some people, of course, won't go near other practices who are more fundamentalist Christians. But there are many monks and nuns, actually, within Christianity, within the Catholic tradition, and also the Anglican tradition here in Britain, who practice some form of Buddhist meditation. And there's a nun who lives who lives out in the Brecon Beacons there and she holds the Chan lineage, the Chinese Buddhist lineage, and she's also an ordained Anglican nun under the Archbishop, Archbishop Canterbury. So she's able to hold these two without contradiction. For her it's a great sort of exploration, but for others it would be impossible.

So it's the same with people who are committed to the Buddha. They wouldn't see it possible to do something like yoga or to practice any other form apart from something which is strictly within the Buddhist tradition. But in our post-modern world where people gather their own spiritual portfolio, the problem is not the amount of choice we have but to make it make sense to some sort of central position. So this is what I mean by having some sort of commitment to a fundamental authority from which you move and you can accept teachings from all traditions and practices from all traditions which make sense to you, which makes sense to that authority.

So in the widest sense, to take refuge in the Buddha is to take refuge within one's own Buddha nature rather than being too specific about this personage in the past. Your absolute refuge is in the Buddha, but because this is connected to the historical Buddha, then the historical Buddha becomes your point of reference.

Now what do we mean by that? The Buddha says quite clearly, "Who sees me sees the Dhamma. Who sees the Dhamma sees me." What he's saying is that his life, his teachings are an expression of the truth. So what we're really taking refuge in is the Dhamma. And I know that we in the West we're called Buddhists, but that's not what Buddhists call themselves. Originally they used to call themselves *Saddhamikas*, which means followers of the true law. And you'll still get that translation in certain Chinese texts.

So we're always coming back not to a person. It's not a guru based dispensation. It's a *dhamma* based dispensation. It's about the teaching. And the teaching has both the theoretical side and the practice. And that's the *dhamma*, see, the Buddha-*dhamma*. So

you'll find some people are committed to Buddhism, being called Buddhist, getting very upset about being called Buddhists, you see. They don't like being called Buddhists. They want it to be called *Buddha-dhamma*, you see, because Buddhism, the word Buddhist centres us too much upon the personage of the Buddha. Whereas in fact that's not the way the Buddha saw himself. The Buddha said, "Who sees the Dhamma sees me," see.

So when we take refuge in the Dhamma, it is taking refuge in these two factors, both the theory and the practice. And then finally it's the Sangha. So the Sangha is all those people, traditionally all those people who've experienced *Nibbāna*. So they stand as witness to the Buddha's own experience. And that's the real refuge.

But of course it can open out, and these days in the West the word Sangha, which is normally restricted to the ordained Sangha, is used to mean any Buddhist community. And I think the reason for that is that there doesn't seem to be a word whereby Buddhists can refer to themselves. So when you refer to yourself, to your group, you might say well this is the Gaia Sangha. And I think that's where, in a country which is all Buddhist you don't have to do that, everybody is Buddhist. But here in the West where every religion under the sun can be found, then there has to be some way in which people who are committed to the *Buddha-dhamma* refer to themselves. And the word that's been chosen is Sangha, which means community.

When the Buddha, when he's dying or towards the end of his life, he says that he's happy that he's been able to establish the four assemblies. That's how it's translated. It's a slightly different word, the four assemblies. The monks and nuns, the lay women and the lay men. And he talks about them as being four assemblies. He doesn't use the word Sangha there, you see. But we, you know, I don't see any problem at all in when we take refuge in the Sangha, we take refuge in, in a restricted sense, of those people who've been fully liberated because they are again our exemplars. But they're also all those people who are practicing with us. And all those people in a sense who are practicing spiritually, they're all part of our support system.

People often say, "Well, it must, you know, it's difficult being a lay person and practicing." Well that's because of the fragmented nature of our society and its enormous restlessness. If you think of say Islam, if you were a Muslim and you went to somewhere like Saudi Arabia and right there at the prayer time, right there when you're having your, if they cos a coffee I presume it's in Saudi Arabia, I can't imagine it not being in Saudi Arabia, and you suddenly stop everything and bow towards Mecca, nobody would bat an eyelid, you know. That's what you do.

Now, if you did that in Britain, you know, you'd probably get locked away or something, you know, you'd sort of carry away. If you, you know, we live in that sort of society where spiritual practice is seen as sort of, well, it's your own thing, it's your own thing, you know, and you keep it to yourself. And generally speaking, it's a bit odd, a bit off, you know. It's all right if you're one of the regular ones, you know. But like, you know, even to the point where people can't wear their insignia, it's become sort of peculiar. You remember that nurse who had to take the crucifix? The stewardess, yeah, I mean, it just becomes, in a sense, pathetic, really, because of this inability, really, to see a spiritual path. You know, it's just one of those things. Everybody's afraid of, you know, fundamentalism and how wild it can get.

So that's this taking of refuges and the precepts, of course, we discussed earlier. So now if it occurs to you that you'd like to do that, what I do, what I suggest, is that you take it for a time. So one year, you see, and if you act according to your commitment, at the end of that one year you can see whether it's been of benefit to you. So that's up to you. Some people take it for life. They've already got that feeling about that commitment. I'd been working with Zen Buddhism only for about a year and a half and I just knew this was the answer to my problem. So I ordained very early on really up at Throssel Hole Abbey there. The Jukai ceremony takes five days for heaven's sakes. By the end of it you definitely know you've committed yourself. This is just a 15 minute ceremony. And if you do, if you think well you might want to take it for a year or for longer, five years, it doesn't really matter.

It's nice to take a name. It's nice to choose a virtue which you'd like, you know, particularly to develop. And if you give me that word I'll find the *dhmma* equivalent and that becomes as it were your little secret spiritual name, you see, which you mustn't use as a password except on *dhmma* sites.

So that's it. So there's plenty of time tomorrow for you to consider this. And if you want to, you're very welcome. So on the Sunday after breakfast, 9:30, we'll gather here. And it's done in a repetition way, not like we do in the morning where we all chant. It's as though I'm handing you the tradition. So I chant and then you chant, you see. And then after that I'll explain it more on the day, but that's the main part of the ceremony.

I hope I've given you an overall general view of the Buddha's teaching when it comes to how to live and that there is maybe a time in your life when you want to just commit yourself to it. So you just stop all the maybes and ifs and all that and just see if it works for you.

Those of you who did it last year, for instance, if you want to recommit, that's also possible. And you can also change your name. Even we can change our names. There was a monk who was named after one of the early disciples of the Buddha who'd been one of his companions. And it was rather unfortunate in English. He was Dutch himself. The word was Whopper. So in time he had that changed to *Jñāna Tusita*, which means the heavenly realm of knowledge. Yeah, it was rather funny that.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and I trust that you will continue your practice and deepen your insights and arrive at that wonderful place of liberation sooner rather than later.

Mettā Discourse

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 2 min

In this beautiful chanting session, Bhante Bodhidhamma recites the classical Mettā Sutta (Khp 9), one of the most beloved texts in the Theravāda tradition. Also known as the Karaṇīyametta Sutta, this discourse presents the Buddha's comprehensive teaching on cultivating mettā (loving-kindness) as both a meditation practice and a way of living.

The sutta begins by outlining the moral foundation necessary for mettā practice—being skilled in goodness, upright, gentle in speech, humble, and contented. It then presents the famous aspiration: "May all beings be at ease," extending this wish to all categories of life without exception. The text includes the powerful simile of a mother's boundless love for her only child, encouraging practitioners to extend such care to all living beings.

The chanting concludes with guidance on maintaining this "sublime abiding" (brahmavihāra) in all postures and activities, while remaining free from fixed views and sense desires. This practice is traditionally used for protection, healing relationships, and developing the heart qualities essential for spiritual progress. Regular listening to and contemplation of this discourse supports both formal mettā meditation and the cultivation of loving-kindness in daily life.

So this is what should be done by one who was skilled in goodness and who knows the path of peace. Let them be able and upright, straightforward and gentle in speech, humble and not conceited, contented and easily satisfied, unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways, peaceful and calm and wise and skillful, not proud or demanding in nature. Let them not do the slightest thing that the wise would later reprove.

Wishing, in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease. Whatever living beings there may be, whether they are weak or strong, omitting none, the great or the mighty, medium, short or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near and far away, those born and to be born, may all beings be at ease. Let none deceive another or despise any being in any state. Let none through anger or ill will wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life a child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upwards to the skies and downwards to the depths, outwards and unboun-

ded, freed from hatred and ill-will. Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down, free from drowsiness, one should sustain this recollection. This is said to be the sublime abiding.

And by not holding to fixed views, the pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision, being freed from all sense desires, is not born again into this world.

Mettā: Developing Goodwill

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 56 min

In this teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the Buddhist understanding of how we condition ourselves through intention and will, emphasizing that all our suffering is self-created. He explores mettā (loving-kindness) as an attitude of goodwill that serves as our default relationship with all sentient beings, distinguishing it from attachment-based love and romantic feelings.

The talk covers the four Brahmavihāras (divine abodes) - mettā (goodwill), compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity - explaining how mettā naturally gives rise to the other qualities. Bhante discusses the relationship between vipassanā and mettā practice, warning that vipassanā without mettā can lead to spiritual aloofness and callousness.

A significant portion addresses forgiveness - of others, seeking forgiveness, and self-forgiveness. Drawing on the Buddha's psychology, he explains how all unwholesome actions arise from the fundamental mistake of wrong understanding about our true nature. The teaching emphasizes that recognizing our actions stem from ignorance rather than inherent evil makes forgiveness possible and necessary for spiritual development.

Practical guidance is offered for integrating mettā into daily life, using spare moments throughout the day to cultivate goodwill toward all beings. This foundational practice supports both formal meditation and ethical living in the world.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully Self-Awakened One.

So there's quite a bit to get through for an evening. I just want to cover at least three areas. The first one is to revise, and for some of you it may be anew, the teaching of the Buddha on how we condition ourselves. And then to talk a bit about *mettā* and what we call the illimitables. And then finally to say something about forgiveness which we'll be practicing tomorrow.

There are two things about the Buddhist teaching in terms of our conditioning. All our conditioning is self-made. That's a bit difficult to grasp at first, but all the information and all the experiences that you have in the world come at you as it were, and there's an inner process where you begin to react to it within yourself and create the conditionings that you end up with.

So all these things that we tend to suffer from—the depression, anxiety, all that—and on the positive side, over-excitement, indulgence, all that part is actually self-created. You can go further and say that the whole world is self-created if you include your body, because your body filters out what comes in. So if you're blind, you obviously don't live in a visual universe. And then of course the society you live in also filters things out by its own prejudices.

But everything that comes to us is then worked upon within ourselves, and although people influence us and our society influences us, the very language influences us, the fact is that we end up creating our own worlds. Even here now in this room, Theravāda Buddhism isn't an idealism—it doesn't say that this room doesn't exist, like when we all walk out it doesn't disappear, it has its own reality, inverted commas—but it does say that the room that we experience is peculiar to us.

So actually speaking, there are ten different rooms here, because each one of us has a different perspective on it, different feeling about it, and so on. And in that way you begin to understand that we're actually living in our own world. And they're parallel. They're not always harmonious. But when we realize that we're living in our own world, then of course the accent is to throw the responsibility upon us to do something about it.

So that gets rid of all blame. So you can't blame. And there comes a point of, shall we say, maturity where you realize that you can't continue to blame your parents, your society and all the rest of it for the state of mind that you actually have to bear with. And that taking a personal responsibility about oneself is actually the true beginning of the spiritual path because that's beginning to take a hold of your life. That's the beginning where you decide what changes you're going to make and how you're going to make them. And this *mettā*-practice that we're doing is part and parcel of that.

So where does that begin? Where does that process begin? It begins with an intention. That's why, for those of you who've practiced Vipassanā, seeing your intentions is that crucial point where you have the space to see whether this intention is wholesome or unwholesome, whether it's doing you any good or not. And it's in that little space that you can say, no, I won't go down there, or yes, I will.

If for one moment you lose that moment of intention, it very quickly moves into identification. So what was a wanting becomes "I want." And at that point, really, it's virtually impossible to stop the action flowing out from the intention. So every time you walk past Costa Coffee and Starbucks and the coffee grabs hold of your nose, there's want. If you're not quick enough, you're in there, having a cup of coffee, whether you liked it or not, whether you wanted it or not, whether you needed it or not. And it's those habitual actions that we get caught up in that we have to come back on. And the way we do it is by having this very sharp mindfulness to see intentions as it arises. So the role of intention is crucial in our conditioning.

The next step that we've already touched upon is the process of it being brought from a potential into an actual. So if I stand outside Costa Coffee thinking I'd like a cup of coffee, nothing's happening. That's the power of that old conditioning of wanting coffee. And as long as I stay there with it, no matter how uncomfortable it may feel, actually nothing's happening. Nothing's happening in terms of it being developed. But if we stay with that and wait for it to die away, then some energy within that conditioning has been released. Some energy has been destroyed because it's not been re-empowered.

So there is a moment when having decided to, having had the intention come up to have this coffee, there's a moment of impulsion, there's a moment where an energy goes into that intention and it manifests. That energy is your will. And the Buddha goes as far as to say that it is will that he calls action. So what you do is not so important, but how you do. You know, it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it. You know that one?

So it's a case of catching the intention and holding it so that you don't fall immediately into willing it whereby you reinforce that old habitual action. So that's a crucial understanding in terms of the Buddha's psychology, and it comes in—those of you who know the psychology of dependent origination—where he's putting his finger very clearly on where the problem lies. It lies at that point of *taṇhā*, some of you will know that word, of desire.

These words that come from Scripture, translated from one language to another, is always difficult. And it's translated normally as craving, which seems to me always a little bit over the top, because sometimes you just want it and you just do it. You can't label it as craving. But what they're trying to do in these translations is distinguish between a desire and intention which is wholesome and one which is unwholesome.

So there is a word in the Buddha's language which is also translated as desire but there's a choice of it being wholesome or unwholesome. Whereas this other word that you get in dependent origination is always unwholesome because it's always coming from the self.

Now, this self that we talk about, the teaching about not-self, it's not a—you have to be careful—it's not a denial, it's not a metaphysical proposition. The Buddha's not saying, there is no self. It's a teaching tool. He's saying, whatever you experience, if it's arising and passing away, how can it be you? And it's that way of looking at things that begins to make you realize that all these things that you've identified with are actually immaterial, they're not substantial. They don't account to anything, any substance in the universe.

So we're in this flow of events. And it's most obvious is this body. I mean, this isn't the body we were born with. It may have a regular blueprint running through it, but it definitely is not the same body. And if we're to believe it, it's not the same body we had seven years ago. So next time you look in the mirror, look in your eye and say, now you weren't here seven years ago, and just keep acknowledging the fact that the body itself is in a constant process of change, and yet we identify with it in very deep ways.

So when death approaches, it's freak-out time. And that freaking out, that terrible shock that comes when it's our turn to go, is the measure of that attachment, is the measure of that identity. So this *taṇhā* is those desires which come from wrong understanding, those desires which arise out of greed and hatred.

Greed here is that whole business of acquisition, and hatred is that whole business of aversion. Actually it's translated as aversion, because again we don't have a word which grasps the total meaning of the original Pali word, but it also includes fear. When you come across something which is threatening you, you either want to obliterate it, annihilate it; if it's too big you run for it. So you've always got this fight and flight syndrome, and that's included in this word. So whenever you hear people talk about greed and aversion, this aversion includes the fear that we have.

So understanding the role of intention in the process of our psychology, and understanding that nothing actually happens until we empower it, until we actually do something, either as a train of thoughts or a process of speech or an action—has it got a conditioning effect? If we don't empower an intention then the energy with which it comes is just allowed to dissipate, and that's basically how you get rid of habits and mental states that you don't want. And that's what we learn very clearly through the process of Vipassanā, but it's something you take out into daily life. It's not just something you do on the sitting stool.

Whenever something negative comes up, it's the acknowledgement of it and just bearing with it, acknowledging it, feeling it, but not doing anything. That's the point—not doing anything and just allowing it to dissipate, the energy dissipate.

Now here of course we have another thing that we're doing, which is the good side of desire, which is coming from another center. That's the important thing to understand. There is within us a different center—call it Buddha, call it your wisdom center, doesn't matter what you call it—but it's coming from a different place than the one which is self-seeking. And *mettā* is what you're developing from that center.

And it's important if you practice vipassanā always to do *mettā*. Although in, say, the Zen tradition, they'll say that compassion arises naturally with wisdom, which is true, but it does help to have a practice which, as it were, just eggs that little movement on. And in the Buddhist teaching, we've got this eightfold path. And the first one is this right understanding.

It's in right understanding that vipassanā is placed, so vipassanā is seeing things as they really are. And then there has to be this attitudinal change. It has to drop systemically—it's a systemic movement from understanding into the heart as an attitude. And that's where it begins then to manifest outward through your thought and your speech and your actions. And that's your next steps. Right speech, right action, right livelihood.

If it stops anywhere on that path, then the spiritual life gets stilted. It becomes twisted. People who practice vipassanā without *mettā*, the danger is that this aloofness that you must have in vipassanā, this equanimity which, as it were, you find from that observation post within yourself, where you can feel and see things and you're watching things, very quickly—or the danger is—it slips into indifference. And once it becomes indifference then it moves to callousness and basically you've lost the path.

So somehow to keep this equanimity there has to be another practice which re-engages that observer within you into the psycho-physical organism and then into the world. And that's what *mettā* does—it helps you to re-engage.

"Can I ask a question? Would samatha have that effect as well?"

Samatha is slightly different. This is a samatha practice, but it's more pointed to the outflow, to the engagement, the illimitables. Samatha itself is really more to do with us finding this calmness, this peace within us, which again is a great help, and it's definitely of advantage if you're going to do vipassanā to have that easy basis of entering into a very quiet, relaxed, focused state.

But it's not necessary in itself to do vipassanā. And again, samatha, just like this practice, can become very selfish. You can practice this to the point where you begin to really get blissed out. And one of the things about doing that is that you realize that these internal blissful states are not dependent on anything out there. Then you begin to understand why people can just live in rags, live under trees, eat what they're given, because it doesn't matter anymore, because their bliss is within them.

The problem with that of course is that it's not connected to the world, so when such a person enters the world and stands on their foot, an enormous amount of anger can arise, and that's the danger of doing something like this without the purification process of vipassanā.

Living in ordinary daily life, living in the world, that really becomes impossible because you have to engage with people. So you have to put this into practice. And the heart will grow quite naturally with that. And it actually, to my mind, grows much better because of that interconnectedness.

Samatha—there's two types of meditation. Vipassanā is this investigation of ourselves. And the samatha practice is to do with establishing, creating and establishing beautiful states of mind. So I'm sure you've heard of people looking at candles and breathing. Regulated breathing. All those are little tricks to get this very one-pointed singleness of attention. And the mind becomes like a focus, like a laser beam. And it creates this lovely energy within you.

"Is that like what mantra is?"

Yeah, mantras are the same. Anything like that. Coloured circles, gazing upon the beloved's face, all that. Anything which produces a beautiful state. But remember, if that beautiful state is dependent on something out there, then that something out there always has to be there for this to arise. If it's created from within ourselves then of course it's always there when we want it. And that's the difference between what you might say is a worldly practice as opposed to a spiritual one.

So now recognizing *mettā* as a practice which re-engages us both with ourselves—it re-engages with ourselves and through ourselves into the world—we have to be clear as to what this *mettā* is. And we touched upon it yesterday. So it's an attitude. Now attitudes pre-exist emotions. It's the heart's way of relating to something, and then the heart as it were begins to resonate, and that's what we call an emotion or that's the emotional feeling part of the attitude. But the attitude is prior to that.

Now during your practice you will have been moving from that attitude of wishing people well but your heart isn't responding—it just feels tired or fed up—and then you realize, ah, this attitude is coming from somewhere behind or before the heart actually begins to resonate. And the big mistake is to confuse those lovely feelings with goodwill. Because then you make the mistake of thinking, I'm not practicing goodwill unless I feel loving. And that's where we get confused between an emotion and the actual attitudinal state, which is being in a state of goodwill with people.

So you can see this is very different from love which arises from attachments. So you have to be very careful here. Attachments gets a bad name in Buddhism. But you have to make a distinction between something which is unskillful or unwholesome and something which is evil. Attachments aren't evil in the sense like murdering somebody, but they are definitely unwholesome.

So an attachment, say, a parent, a mother, to a child is absolutely natural. I can't imagine a mother not having an attachment to their child. But what happens is, of course, is that attachment puts a certain pressure on the child, because the attachment is always wanting the child to be as the mother would want the child to be. And that's where the problem lies, and that's why you get kicked back at teenage because of that contradiction.

Now to separate out the pure love that the mother has—which she also has for the child—from the attachment is very difficult, but it's there. And the wise person will slowly distinguish between the one and the other, knowing that the one is actually turning the person into an object. And that's what an attachment does. Every time you do something out of an attachment, that person is being used to please you. They become an object. They've lost their humanity. No matter how little it is, you're dehumanizing them.

So the way that you overcome the attachment is always to be open to their point of view, to their state. And that stepping into their consciousness, their way of looking at life, is the act of love. That is the act of compassion. And it's obvious, so attachment has a bad name, but it's not to be seen as evil, it's just to be seen as a consequence of delusion, of the way that we are relating to the world that we're in.

And it's a case of recognizing it, recognizing what we're doing when we're with friends, when we're with our relatives and so on. When you see them, just ask yourself, what do you want? What do you want from them? There's your desire coming from some place where they have to feed into your lack.

And this word lack is very important. It's often used as a translation for *dukkha*, which is translated as unsatisfactoriness or as suffering. But what this word lack tells us is that there's an emptiness there and we're seeking to fill the emptiness with things from the outside world. And of course they don't deliver; they don't deliver.

So the word attachment in a sense is a one-way process, and in fact the word connection is both. Both. That's right. And as I say, you connect by being open to the other, by just listening full-heartedly, open-heartedly to what the other has to say, and so on. And that cuts through, you see. And then of course you can feel perhaps a certain disappointment or a certain frustration or a certain fear when the person is not going to feed into your emptiness. So that's the bad emptiness, that's not the emptiness of Mahayana, that's something else.

So you can see it's also not romance. See? Romance is very specific, isn't it? You can't fall in love with anybody and everybody. And that is also a form of attachment. That's the joy, that's the deliciousness of two personalities meeting at that point. And it's very delicious, you know? But as you know, it's often three months down the line you wonder what the hell you were doing. There's a lot of faded... And then there's, and of course, but it starts there, remember, and of course if the relationship develops, and of course it develops into a true love.

And it's obviously not erotic love, but that's very flimsy and transient and empty. If you just practice making love just for making love, it becomes an empty experience because the whole of the human being is not involved. Basically, it's a prostitution. And I always love Woody Allen's little comment on this. He says sexual pleasure by itself is an empty thing, is an empty experience, but as empty experiences go...

So what is this metta then, you see? Well, just ask yourself, what would you want from a good friend? And just as those qualities come to you, then that's what metta is. Whatever companionship, open-heartedness, and so on, all the pleasant things that you would want of a good and close friend, that's metta. That's all it is. And metta is actually connected to the word mitra, which means friend.

Now you can see this metta is your basic relationship to all sentient beings. Last night we practiced that awareness of just relaxing into the present moment. And I pointed that out as your default position. If we can keep coming back to that state of just being in the present moment with an empty mind, what do I mean by that? I mean no thought. When you hear in Zen, no mind, they don't mean that you've lost it. They just mean no thought.

So if you can bring yourself every so often during the day, not just in meditation, but every day, just to collapse, as it were, just draw yourself into the present moment, and you do that, I find the easiest way to do that is by putting my attention on hearing. Just by putting my attention on hearing, I immediately come into the present moment. And because I'm hearing and listening, I'm not responding. So it's a position of real equanimity. It's a position where I'm very open.

And the other trick I found was to put your attention on the left side of the body. Your right eye on your left side of the body. And that cuts out speech. It draws energy from the speech center of your brain. It's quite magic, actually. You'll be surprised. It'll stop you talking.

So, if we consider that to be the default position of the whole of our lives, out of which we rise, out of which we can see an intention, know it to be wholesome, and then to move into action, right? The default position in terms of our relationship to sentient beings, but specifically to human beings, is this metta. Because it's from that basic position that the other two illimitables arise.

If you have a friend and they fall into bad times, you naturally want to help them. It's not a problem, is it? It just rises naturally out of your friendship. And if your friend has good fortune and is happy, you're naturally happy for them. So sympathetic joy, reciprocal joy, all that joy in other people's joy arises naturally. You don't have to work at it. So that's why the Buddha really pushes this metta.

I know that in later Buddhism they began to develop much more the idea of compassion. One can understand that because the Buddha's teaching is about suffering and the end of suffering. So the end of suffering, wanting to put an end to suffering, is compassion. But in his original teachings, as it comes out in the original scriptures, he's very much into this metta as a way. And the discourse on metta really lays it out. And he's asking us to constantly develop that attitude throughout the whole day.

whenever we have a moment of time, and think of how much time we have when you consider things like going from here to there, or waiting for a bus, or waiting at the lights, or climbing up stairs, or waiting for a friend. If you add all those little bits together by the end of the day, I think they come out to a couple of hours frankly. And what we do is we just tend to let the mind wander, let the mind go here and there and just complete waste of mental energy. It's during those times that you can bring these thoughts to mind and it has that effect. It's constantly developing this heart of goodwill.

You would be. That's what I'm saying. It's a natural thing. No, what I'm saying is that once the base of metta is there, and you have a friendship with somebody, then you can understand that you don't have to try and be compassionate. It just arises naturally when you see them in a bad state. You want to help.

So, these are called illimitable because there's meant to be innumerable number of beings. But more interestingly, it's a bit like numbers. You can always add ones. No matter how big your number is, you can always say, and one. So it's the same with love, compassion, joy, equanimity. Their development is indefinite. You just keep on developing it, developing it, so long as you're awake. And in fact it says that, so long as you're awake, develop this attitude, you see.

Now, we haven't practiced the compassionate part, but basically it's very simple. You bring to mind people whom you know are suffering, and the phrase is, may you be free of suffering. It's as simple as that. And with joy, may you be joyful. May you continue to be joyful. May your joy increase. We can't do that this weekend because we don't have the time for it. But you might... You might add it on to one of your blessings, if you wish. Completely up to you. But at this stage, I would really suggest that you keep it just as pure metta, because, as I say, these other two things arise naturally.

Now, just as metta has its dark enemy, what's called its close enemy, as attachment, compassion has a close enemy too, and that's grief. We very quickly fall into a grief for somebody, pity for somebody, instead of what compassion is. And again, that grief comes with attachment because this person fulfills a role in your life. And when they go, it leaves a gaping hole. Whether they fall into misfortune or whether they die or something like that, you're left with this sore within your heart. And that's your grief.

But compassion is actually a joyful emotion. It fills the heart with joy because of the help you're giving people. But if you still feel about some terrible suffering, like at the moment in the combat, if you feel compassion for me, you can feel grief for me, but it's not because... No, but what I think it fills you with is a desire to do something, and that's when we get stuck with this business of impotence, where we don't realize that we only have two rings around us: one of power where we can do something, one of influence where we can get others to do something about a situation. And finally there's only, you know, you can't do anything. And if you can't do anything then the frustration arises driven by this, you know, the sense of grief and wanting to do something. But that's actually based on a wrong appraisal of ourselves. It's actually an ego thing.

And it's only when you bear with your impotence and you realize that's it, that's the only thing you can then do is offer these goodwill practices towards them. And that's where you overcome that first because this is what you can do. And hopefully it affects.

But you'll know that grief is a subtle enemy of compassion, especially when, say, somebody dies and you grieve for them. And because you equate your grief with the amount of love you have for that person, you can't stop grieving. Because every time your grief diminishes, you think you no longer love them. And you get yourself into this swirl down to a deep depression. But when you realize that the grief you're feeling is actually the consequence of the attachment, then love allows the person to go. I mean, love is very liberating.

And these are sometimes difficult for us to grasp because of that lack of distinction between compassion, love and grief. The obvious enemy, of course, is cruelty. That's why cruelty is the worst thing you can do in the Buddhist thing. If you're cruel, the worst of hells is reserved for you. You go down to the Avici hell where you really get thumped about. Because cruelty is the exact opposite of what the Buddha is teaching.

And it's the same with joy. Sympathetic joy also has a subtle enemy and that's this excitement where actually you're getting over joyful, over excited over something. And to recognize that means that you don't get the aftermath of indulgence. So this runs right the way through just the ordinary joys of life.

Remember that there's two things that we have to do. First of all, we have to take the suffering out of pain. So there's always going to be physical pain. And for as long as we're not fully liberated, there'll always be some form of emotional pain. But that's not suffering itself. Suffering comes because of our relationship to that. Our not wanting to be there, our aversion to it, fear of it, and so on.

But the other side of the coin is, of course, to take the indulgence out of pleasure, the indulgence out of the joys of life. And if we don't do that, then we end up with the aftermath. While you're enjoying something, fine, it's heaven, it's not a problem. It's afterwards. Afterwards, where you get the craving for it again, the desire for it, the frustration when you can't get it, the grief when you lose it, and the underlying anxiety of losing something that you're attached to. I mean, that's what a lot of our insurance industry is based on. Like when you go to what was Dixon's, or what is it now? I can't remember. Yeah, that's right. When they con you into buying a three-year guarantee and you fork out more money for the guarantee than you do for the electrical equipment you bought.

So the importance of metta is that it reconnects us, connects us properly to ourselves and to the world, and it's the default position, it's the basic position we have for all these other beautiful mental states to arise. And this is underpinned because they're also called Brahma-vihara. And that means the dwelling place of the highest gods. And

what we're saying by that is that it creates the beautiful mind and the bountiful heart. And that's how the gods live. You know, whether they exist or not is not a problem. That's the ideal, that's the idealism towards which these practices are taking us.

And we've talked about how often we should do it. You should do it all the time, whenever you can. But especially after the passing of the sitting. To re-engage with the world. So that's the metta side of things.

And included in that, we have to practice this forgiveness. So now... going back to that original statement that all the suffering that we are experiencing is self-caused, then the things that come out through doing things which are harmful to others, harm done to us, and the harm we do to ourselves, all the suffering around that is also self-created. And when we realize that, it's much easier to ask for forgiveness, it's much easier to forgive, and it's much easier to forgive oneself.

So, when we harm somebody, it creates within us a certain turbulence. The human heart cannot see another person's suffering without itself falling into some negativity. And the worst one, of course, is callousness. where you're no longer connected to the suffering of another human being. And we've had that with, you know, going right back to the Nazis, right up to present day. As soon as you dehumanize somebody, you have the wherewithal to create enormous suffering for them, physical suffering. And that callousness comes back on us and it turns our hearts into stone, you know.

So once we open up to the fact that we've done harm to somebody, then there has to be those feelings of guilt and shame. Guilt is the fear of consequences. We're not talking here about existential guilt, that I am essentially evil. It's more like if you do this sort of practice, if you do that sort of thing, then the comeuppance will come at some point. And shame, shame is just letting ourselves down, it's a loss of self-esteem.

And when we recognize that these are the consequences of doing something which is harmful, and we actually feel the guilt, we get in contact with it, we let it manifest, and we feel the shame, the embarrassment, let it manifest, then they actually become our guardians. And the Buddha actually calls them our guardians of society. Because when we enter into, get close to an act which we feel is unwholesome, these two come back to remind us of our consequences. So they become our guardians. In the old word, they're our conscience. So our conscience is made up of the knowledge of what happens when you do something harmful.

So how do we overcome that? Well, tomorrow we'll be practicing it, and that is just by, through the power of our own imagination, through the power of our own imaginative thinking, we just set up these internal dialogues and just bring ourselves round to

asking for forgiveness. And then hopefully, if it's possible, to actually do it in real life. But often, of course, we may find that people have disappeared whom we've harmed years ago and all that. People die and we've still got something on our hearts that sort of rankles us. And then you make this insight that you don't need another person's forgiveness to be forgiven. That's a really important insight to have.

What you need to do is to work with these inner states and make that attitude of wanting to be forgiven or asking for forgiveness. And that in itself is the forgiveness.

When the order meets, we meet every, when there's a group of four, there has to be four monks, four nuns, when we meet every half moon, we confess. And most of the transgressions of our rule are forgiven on the confession. There's no tied to the post and whipped confession. It's just having stated what you've done. But the response is, do you see what you've done? In other words, do you accept what you've done? And your response is probably, yes, I do. And then the response is, do you undertake not to break that rule again? So there's a commitment to try and change your ways. So just the ability to state clearly that one has done wrong is in fact the process of self-forgiving, of being forgiven.

If you can put it right, if you've done something wrong which you can actually put right, all the better. Then you stop the karmic flow. So for instance, if you said a sharp word to somebody and you know they're glowering, they're sort of using it behind you and all that, then just to go up and say look, I'm sorry for that. It immediately cuts the flow of that bad karma.

Very simple to do. But if you've got too much pride, if you feel you were righteous, you should have been even more cruel, and of course it just keeps going. There's no end to it.

When it comes to forgiving those who hurt us, we're on the receiving end. So just consider that point where somebody has said something which has annoyed you a bit, and how we keep repeating the insult over and over again until it really builds up into this huge fire, and you have to take an aspirin. And then what you realise is that you're creating your own mental state. This is the point. And as soon as you realise that, well, you say, do I have to do this? Do I have to turn something like that into a huge sort of drama?

So it's again this ability to forgive. And it helps to understand forgiveness, because now, having forgiven somebody, you realise that their suffering either from callousness—which leads to things like being lonely because nobody wants to know somebody who's sarcastic and audible—or they're suffering themselves from feelings of guilt and

shame. So that's your compassion. That's where your compassion comes in. So you also want to release them from their guilt and shame. So you offer them that opportunity by saying, look, let's forget that. Sorry it happened, but I forgive you and all that.

And we do that when we realise that in the act of forgiving, we completely empty the heart of all that rubbish that we've burned up in there. And that the more you do it, the easier it is to do. It just becomes a habit so that there comes a point in our lives when even as the insult is given, the forgiveness arises with it. So there's never any pain around that.

I mean, there's a lovely image the Buddha gives of somebody set upon by thieves and cut from limb to limb with their machete. And he says, if at any point hatred should arise or anger, they're no disciple of mine. When I once said this in the group, somebody said, well, the Buddha had a great sense of humour. I said, he might have had, but I think it actually means what he says.

There is a way of receiving harm from somebody which doesn't bring that energy of anger from us. And that is where we begin to understand, really, the psychology of non-violence. It's only when you realise that nobody can actually make you angry—they can hurt your body, sticks and stones may hurt my bones and all that—but nobody can actually cause you internal suffering. And therefore, you're ready to, in a way, absorb their anger. You absorb their anger.

And I'm sure you've experienced that in your life where somebody's come at you angrily and you've just said, oh, I'm sorry. And that I'm sorry, just actually taking responsibility for that moment just drains the anger out. Whereas if you'd have stood your ground and sort of butted them, then you'd have got into some sort of rage, a road rage or something. Now you may not have been guilty, it might have been somebody else who did it, but you prove that afterwards. But the important thing is to undermine the anger by receiving it, which is difficult. Our normal reaction is to defend ourselves.

So this business of forgiving somebody, you see, we get confused. We think we're trying to forget it, but trying to forget something is just another way of suppressing it. And we know that suppression doesn't do us any good. It just lies there as a turbulence within the mind, within the heart.

Sometimes we think we have to excuse them. But if somebody's robbed from us, they've robbed from us. It's stopped, not to excuse it—they've been robbers. They've done an evil thing. You don't have to lessen their act, but you can forgive them for it. And you can ask for compensation for heaven's sake, if you feel it's right, without feeling that you're being vengeful.

And sometimes we get a feeling of letting them off, almost in a sense condoning what they did, because we get into this business of punishment. You often hear these politicians saying, you know, they're putting people in prison for punishment and all that. Punishment doesn't hold any water in Buddhist understanding, because whenever you do something harmful, there's always some harmful results. So punishment is coming from some other centre. It's coming from some centre where you're trying to frighten the person, so they'll never do that again. A sort of deterrence—you cut your hand off if you steal. I mean, that works, is the point. But the punishment can't fit the crime. If it's the crime, then you'll have another go. So if the punishment is to be a deterrent, it's got to be something which really doesn't make the crime worth it. And they found this in these psychological tests where they've done this business of punishment and crime on a very low level, of course. And they found that the punishment has to really exceed the proceeds of the crime. It doesn't work.

And of course, the other thing about punishment is that it's a way of slaking our vengefulness. And that doesn't work either. You know, people in the United States, in some states, you can see the murderer or the person who's murdered and all that. You can actually be at their execution. And the case is that people come out—like, if one of your family members has been killed and all that—they come out, they've not been satisfied. They wanted it to be more painful, because that's the problem with revenge, isn't it? You can't satisfy hatred. Hatred eats on hatred. It feeds itself on hatred. So these people who actually want to see somebody suffering are simply growing in cruelty. They themselves are becoming more cruel than the criminals. So punishment doesn't hold water.

So now, if you come to the understanding that you can't punish somebody, there's no point in eating your own heart out because somebody's harmed you, even going back to childhood, remember, then that process of forgiving somebody—and it helps to stand in the person's shoes. And we can do that more when we move into that third category, which is forgiving ourselves and for what we've done to ourselves through whatever it might be—overeating, sex, drugs, rock and roll, all that sort of stuff.

And forgiving ourselves is probably the most difficult thing to do. And it helps to understand that all our unwholesome actions have arisen because of a mistake. This is really a crucial, important understanding. The Buddha's word, he begins the process of our psychology with the word *avijjā*, which is translated as ignorance. But ignorance gives you the impression that you're at fault. You know, you should have known, you're just ignorant. But it's not. The word is neutral. You simply don't know. And out of that not knowing, there's been a mistake.

And the mistake is who we really are. And the mistake is to believe that we really are human beings, that we really are this body, this mind, this heart. And by doing so, we then have to seek happiness, which is what all the heart wants—it wants peace and happiness—in the world. And how can you do that apart from accumulating things? The self has to feel safe. So it feels safe by having big bank accounts and having a very secure job and a very secure relationship. That's how it feels safe.

But of course, as soon as you accumulate something, you're in conflict with other people who want what you've got. So the accumulation leads you immediately into a conflictual relationship with life. And then you find that you have to guard what you have and there's your fear and anxiety. You have to get rid of people who seem to be undermining your happiness, and so the whole battle is—you enter into this whole battle that we call life.

Now once you realise it's been a mistake, then it takes away this feeling of being essentially evil. And the knowledge is that just as this not knowing through the practice of *vipassanā*, through the practice of spiritual practice, ends up at knowing—what we call wisdom—from the heart's point of view, it's begun at a point of innocence. It didn't know it made a mistake, just like a child might light a match and burn a house down. It's a bit cruel to put it in jail.

And that innocence is corrupted because of this wrong understanding, and then we end up with all this suffering. Then we get to a point where the suffering is so great we think, I'd better do some meditation. So then you start meditating and you come back on the process, you devolve, but that process is not back to an original ignorant—sorry, not knowing—innocence. It now returns to a purity which matches the wisdom. That's why in the spiritual life you cannot grow in wisdom without growing in virtue. The two go together. The one depends on the mind and the other depends on the heart.

So when you find yourself balking against the precepts, that is a measure to us of our delusion, of our mistake. So recognising that is the first step. And the second one is this business of there's no need to punish ourselves. All we have to do is bear with the consequences of things that we've done wrong, and that's all we have to do.

So I know somebody who just by a simple mistake—it wasn't anything evil or wrong or something—he just wanted to listen to music and he actually put the musical instrument he was playing right next to his ear. Well of course over a period of time it actually damaged his ear and gave him this terrible tinnitus. And then he had this struggle of hating it and fighting it and whatnot. And by undermining that process and just bearing with it and seeing it as a consequence of delusion, then it's just there as this little background whistling. It doesn't impinge upon his life anymore.

And that's the same with people who are suddenly disabled in some way. See, if the disability is not accepted, if they're constantly fighting it, then they're just driving themselves into despair, and as you know, in some cases, suicide. But once it's accepted totally and it becomes part and parcel of the way they live, then it just doesn't undermine the quality of life. Simple as that.

So this process of self-forgiveness is really important. So that's the process that we're going through. We're developing the heart of goodwill, developing the heart of compassion, and then we turn it through the process of forgiveness to correct our relationship to the world where there's been harm, either done to us or by us to others or by us to ourselves.

And remember that you can't do all this in a weekend. This is a process that you have to take with you into your daily life. And I think you'll find that the more you practice it, you get the benefits—tremendous, tremendous benefits. And it's not as though you have to go at it all the time. It's the constant little bits, like in the morning, and during the day when you feel a bit upset about something, to immediately go into the process of forgiveness. And it's just those little points that just very slowly, over a period of time, just change us completely. It's the persistence of practice that's important, doing it whenever the occasion arises.

So I think that draws me to the end of my little homily. A bit longer than I thought, but there we are. So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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.

Not-self - Recap and Metaphors

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 19 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma continues his exploration of the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59), the Buddha's second discourse on the characteristic of not-self (anattā). He begins by recapping the Buddha's logical argument that nothing in our experience can be considered a 'self' because we lack complete control over body and mind, and because all phenomena are impermanent and therefore unsatisfactory.

The heart of this teaching features the Buddha's famous metaphors from the Pheṇapīṇḍūpama Sutta, where he compares the five khandhas to: foam on the Ganges (form/body), water bubbles (feeling), desert mirages (perception), banana tree trunks with no heartwood (saṅkhāras), and magical illusions (consciousness). These powerful images reveal how our experience, while appearing substantial, is actually 'void, hollow, and insubstantial' when carefully investigated.

Bhante explains how insight into these three characteristics of existence—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—leads to disenchantment, then dispassion, and ultimately liberation. He emphasizes that this doesn't lead to emotional numbness but to contentment and joy—qualities of the awakened mind. Practical guidance is offered for daily life, encouraging moments of non-clinging when compulsions arise. This teaching skillfully weaves together intellectual understanding with vivid imagery, making the profound truth of anattā accessible to modern practitioners.

Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namō tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namō tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So we've been going through this *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, the discourse on the characteristic of not-self. And if you remember, the first teaching is concerning control. If this is me, then I should be able to do what I want with it. This is a key understanding at that time as to what a soul or a self was. A soul or a self was completely in control of itself.

So if you look at any part of our experience as a human being, whether it's the body or thoughts or emotions, you can see from this sitting that we've just done that they arise of themselves. Even though we have a certain control, we discover that actually we don't have total control. And the argument would be if you can't control it, it's not

you. It's got another centre. It's got its own centre of control. But he also points out that even that is not a self, as if it were something substantial. It's also something ephemeral, changing.

And that's the next point. The next point about the soul or the self is that it's permanent. So if we look at any of our experience, whether it's physical, mental, emotional, it arises and passes away. So it can't be a soul or a self or anything permanent. And that would be one of the definitions of a soul or a self. That's the point. It's how you define a soul or a self.

And then, of course, he asks the question, well, if it's impermanent, does that bring a sense of dissatisfaction or satisfaction? Well, it's unsatisfactory, isn't it? It might be satisfactory if something is painful and then it passes away. But when it's happy, we can't hold on to it. That's also unsatisfactory.

So in the discourse here, he's actually explaining these three characteristics of existence. They're the fundamental characteristics of existence that he's pointing to, to discover our true nature. When we perceive things as they really are, we also begin to see what there really is.

Now what I want to do is to read another discourse which gives another side of the Buddhist teachings, because this is an intellectual exposition but he also has a way of expressing things through imagery. We'll come to that, but in this particular discourse he gave it to his five companions. So this was after he'd become fully awakened. He searched for them, found them in Benares, present day Varanasi, and at Isipatana, Sarnath, excuse me, Sarnath, is the Deer Park.

And so the story goes, when he gave them a talk, then they went on alms round, and after they'd eaten and had a rest, he gave this talk, and all of them became fully liberated. And I just want to read the end of it, which gives you the formula in which this is said.

So, seeing thus, the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted with form, that's the body as well, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perceptions, disenchanted with volitional formations, so those are your thoughts and emotions, and disenchanted with consciousness. See, that word disenchanted, no longer caught up in the enchantment of the world, you're not bewitched by it.

Now, when we become disenchanted, the next step is to become dispassionate. It doesn't mean to say that you end up being emotionally void, a numb blob. It just means that you don't get passionate about things in the wrong way. Being angry, holding on to things, attachment, you become dispassionate. And it's through this process of dispassion that we're liberated. Dispassion.

So the insight creates a different relationship of disenchantment. This disenchantment affects our relationship with the world, which is the way we experience the world ourselves, which leads to a sense of equanimity, a sense of ease with the world. That's the dispassionate part. And that's, when it's taken to the limit, that's the liberation of the mind. That's the liberation of consciousness. Probably a better word. Although, as you know, the word I prefer is the knowing, that which knows, the Buddha within, the Buddha within.

And once that's done, he understands, it is lovely, destroyed his birth, this rebirth, the spiritual life has been lived, what has been done has been done. Can you feel the relief in that? It's like when you have to redecorate a house and you finish it and it's all very nice and beautiful. And you say what has been done has been done. A sense of relief and satisfaction. There is no more coming back to any state of becoming. This constant rebirthing business.

Now you have to be careful here because at the spiritual level the rebirthing means the recreation of this self which is recreating the wrong relationship to the world. You have to remember that when the Buddha was liberated, he didn't disappear. He was still there. He acted as he was there, fully liberated, walking around as even being. So whenever we read this end of becoming or end of being, as some people translate it, we think of annihilation. It's obviously not.

What's annihilated, the Buddha's clear about this, what is annihilated is that wrong view, the delusion, and with it, all sense of attachment to the world, and all sense of aversion or fear of the world. That's what disappears completely.

And then finally, that is what the Blessed One said, elated, those monks delighted in the Blessed One's statement, and while this discourse was being spoken, the minds of those monks of the group of five were liberated from the taints by non-clinging. Now the taint is just another word of saying all those things in us which are produced by this wrong thinking. And that non-clinging is just another way of saying dispassion.

So you can bring this into your daily life. Every time you have a compulsion to do something, to have that biscuit and a cup of tea, just hang on there. Just wait till it passes away. What's the mind when there's no desire in it? And the more that we move towards that state, the more we're developing the state of contentment. Contentment is a quality of the Buddha mind. Contentment and joy.

So, let's see how he expresses this in imagery. Because he often says there are people for whom imagery works better than an intellectual dry approach. So this is on one occasion, he was dwelling at Ayodhya on the bank of the river Ganges. And there the Blessed One addressed the monks thus. In the scriptures where you come across *bhikkhu*, I can't remember what that figure of speech is called. You know when you say things like all hands on deck, meaning all people. So this is when the commentaries tell us that when the Buddha uses the word monks, he's referring to anybody who's listening.

So suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam and a man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it and carefully investigate it and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too monks, whatever kind of form there is, remember that's the body, whether past or future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near. And the meditator inspects it, ponders it and carefully investigates it and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial for what substance could there be in form?

Now you see we know from our subatomic physics that this body is just a mass of energy. There's nothing substantial in it at all. But that's not how we experience it. You trap your finger in the door, it's definitely got substance. But in reality it's nothing. It's just frazzled energy walking around. Wonderful stuff.

Now suppose that in the autumn when it is raining and the big raindrops are falling, and a water bubble arises and bursts on the surface of the water. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, and insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a water bubble? So too, whatever kind of feeling there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, a monk inspects it, ponders it, carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in feeling?

Now, when we have a feeling, it presents itself as something hard. Feeling, say, if you have a pain in the knee or some pain in the body caused by an emotional state. At first, it feels hard because of that identity with it. That's what hardens it. This, you know, I

am suffering. But actually, when you go into this meditation, as we've just done, and you can feel it, you can see there's nothing there. Once you get into the texture of it, it's got no substance. There's nothing in it at all. It's just a passing state of different sensations.

Suppose that in the last month of the hot season, at high noon, a shimmering mirage appears. Now a man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a mirage? So too, monks, whatever kind of perception there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, a monk inspects it, ponders it, carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in perception?

Now when we perceive something, that is a correlative something which is an image in the mind which relates to what you're looking at. So we know that the eye when it's looking at a picture is just moving around at enormous speeds, picking up little pixels. And it's coming back into the brain, into the mind-brain complex, and it's creating a constant picture. And then, in that amazing way, it then projects it back onto the picture. So what we're actually seeing is the picture in the mind being projected onto the picture that we're supposedly looking at. And therefore, it's a mirage. It doesn't actually exist. We're not actually seeing that picture. What we're seeing is what the mind's creating. That's a lovely image of a mirage.

Suppose a man needing heartwood, that's the very middle of the wood of a tree, seeking heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood, would take a sharp axe and enter a forest. There he would see the trunk of a large banana tree, straight, fresh, without a fruit bud core. He would cut it down at the root, cut off the crown, and unroll the coil. As he unrolled the coil, he would not find even softwood, let alone heartwood. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in the trunk of a banana tree?

So too monks, whatever kind of volitional formations there are, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, a monk inspects them, ponders them, carefully investigates them. And as he investigates them, they appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in volitional formations?

Now, if you think of our emotional thought life, it's layer upon layer isn't it? It's just coming up. You're sitting here and suddenly off on a dream. So if you think of something that makes a little bit more immediate is an onion. As you keep peeling the levels

of an onion, when you get to the middle of it there's nothing there. So all these emotional states we get, all these thought patterns, they're all coming up and they're all just going away and there's nothing in them, there's nothing substantial. Good image.

Now suppose that a magician or a magician's apprentice would display a magical illusion at a crossroads and a man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it and carefully investigate it and it would appear to him to be void, hollow and insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a magical illusion? So too monks, whatever kind of consciousness there is, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near. A monk inspects it, ponders it, carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in consciousness?

Now, the English translation here is a bit strange and is not quite right because consciousness has so many meanings these days. Even in the Buddha's discourses the word consciousness is used variously depending on the context and that's the same with other words because he's having to use the concepts of his time to get across his new understanding and there's always that difficulty of trying to say something and being misunderstood because people hear the word and hear it from another position and hear it from another meaning.

So what's understood here is that a perception is some sort of word, a label that we put on things, and it's also some sort of image. So when you see an apple, you have an image of it, and you also have a word for it. And those all congregate to, shall we say, a perceptual process. This perceptual process grows with the subtlety of your thinking. Large concepts like democracy and freedom and all that which remain in the mind as perceptions, conceptions, all this has to, as it were, come forward onto something that we can see. So that would be like a television screen and at that point there's a cognition and that's what he's talking about.

So just as on the screen of your computer, what is it? Is there any substance there? It's just a picture, isn't it? Or when you're watching a film in a cinema. It looks real, but what it is, it's just a screen, as we know with photons and all that, but there's no substance to it. Even a 3D film, there's no substance to it. And that's a lovely, a magical illusion. It's a magical illusion.

Now, it wouldn't be a problem, but we identify with it. We say, I am my consciousness. I think, therefore I am, and all that. That's the problem. But when we discover we're not that, then we become dispassionate about it. We don't get so involved, we don't get so attached to the world, and the suffering disappears.

So now, as usual, he says, when the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted, see this word disenchanted, not being caught up with, form disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with volitional formations, and disenchanted with consciousness. And becoming disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, his mind is liberated. And when it is liberated, there comes the knowledge it is liberated. He understands. Destroyed his birth, the spiritual life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. Oh, what a relief. And there is no more coming back to any state of becoming.

Here ends the discourse on the quality of not-self by the Buddha. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and that they will lead you to your liberation sooner rather than later.

Practice in Ordinary Daily Life

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1h09

In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma explains how Buddhist practice addresses our emotional life and psychological suffering. He explores the fundamental problem of identity and attachment, showing how we mistakenly seek happiness in the external world, creating dependencies that inevitably lead to suffering when circumstances change. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that all mental states are self-created rather than caused by external objects, Bhante demonstrates how insight meditation (vipassanā) reveals the process by which we manufacture our own emotional reactions. He outlines the precise psychological mechanism: from initial contact through feeling, perception, and identification, to the moment where consciousness becomes entangled in saṅkhāra (mental formations). The talk emphasizes that healing occurs not through suppression or indulgence, but through mindful awareness that allows unwholesome states to exhaust themselves naturally. Bhante explains how this practice gradually relocates our sense of self from body-consciousness and emotional identification to the position of observer, leading to moments of liberation where there is no suffering. He concludes with practical guidance for integrating this understanding into daily life, including the simple yet powerful practice of 'stopping' to return to present-moment awareness.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa — Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

What I'm hoping to do is to explain the Buddha's model as to how the heart heals itself. When I say heart, when I use heart during this talk, I'm simply talking about your emotional life — your moods and emotions both the pleasant and the unpleasant.

This is an area where you'll find that Buddhist practice and modern psychotherapy meet, and I don't see a problem with that. But what sometimes seems to happen is that I get a feeling from some books I read that the Buddha didn't actually tackle this problem of our emotional imbalances. So I just wanted to make it as plain as I can this evening how we create the problems and how we undo them.

The fundamental problem lies with identity — as to who we are. Unsurprisingly, we think of ourselves as human beings. Unfortunately, having thought of ourselves as human beings on this particular planet and all that, our deepest desire to seek happiness,

to be at peace, is sought within the world. And by making our happinesses and our joys dependent upon the world, it means that when the world forsakes us then we have all the downside of that particular commitment.

For instance, if I am attached to my morning cup of tea and I wake up one morning and there is no tea, this is potentially a disaster — one feels dreadful. That dreadfulness is caused because of that conditioning within me which creates morning happiness dependent on English breakfast tea.

At a more solid level of suffering, if my happiness is dependent on my job, on what I do, if I find myself identifying with that, when I lose my job, then I go through an identity crisis. I don't know who I am in society because that's how I've defined myself.

At an even deeper level, there's our relationship to other people, especially those close to us. And when they let us down, either because they leave us or they die, then I'm stuck with this dreadful pain in the heart, this grief, which I mistakenly think is actually the measure of my love, but actually is a measure of my attachment to that person. Because one good thing about love is that it can let go. It can allow the person to do what they want to do. But the grief we feel with the loss is a measure of how much we are dependent on that person for my personal happiness.

And the worst time comes when it's time for me to die. Because then, however I've defined myself looks pretty unsteady. And that's why death comes to us as a great shock. Because death is saying, whoever you thought you are, you're not. If you've defined yourself by your body — I am this body — then for sure we're in for a shock. If you define yourself as, I am this person, I do these things in society, I have these relationships, all this 'I' and how we relate to the 'I', what death does is it undermines all those particular self-definitions and dependencies.

So you can see that somewhere deep within our psyche there's a mistake happening. And it's through this mistake that we form this relationship to the world we live in. And it's not just identity, it's also possession. So we form a certain safety, a safety net around us by possessing things, possessing money. We feel much safer if there's a hundred thousand pounds in the bank and not ten. So all that psychology around possession, around identity, is a cause of suffering for us. Because when we lose it, we feel grief. When we can't get it, we feel frustrated. And we're constantly afraid we might lose it. So there's always this underlying anxiety around those things that we're dependent on for our particular happinesses. Hence, the huge insurance industry.

From that position, we formulate a dual relationship to the world. We either want something or we don't want it. It's extraordinarily simple. If I like something, if I enjoy something, I try to hold on to it. I try to keep it. I try to develop it. If I don't like it, I try to get rid of it. If I don't like somebody, I try to take out a contract on that person and just get rid of them, thinking that in so doing, I should make myself happier. It might be a relief, but unfortunately it doesn't tackle the fundamental problem.

So this is the core of our problem. It's one to do with the question, who am I? And the essential purpose of insight meditation is really to solve that particular question. But you can see that from these wrong relationships we formulate, we've begun to develop a whole emotional life, a whole attitudinal life which is creating this inner atmosphere that I feel that often I have to suffer.

What it's done is it's created habitual patterns within the psyche. For those of you who know the words, these are what's referred to as your *saṅkhāra*. They're things that are put together. They're accumulations. Well, that's not quite the right word. They are inclinations towards a certain type of behavior. So, if one is in the habit of nipping into Costa coffee for an Americano, and you do it two or three times, it's very difficult to pass Costa coffee without slipping into your Americano. What is it that generates that compulsive behavior? And it is what we call these patterns, these habits.

I personally like them to these programs on a computer. If you look at your computer, where do these programs exist? But you press a button and something appears on the screen. Something takes something out of potential and just manufactures it. It's an electrical mechanical habit that if you press this button, the word program appears. Isn't that similar to us? We have these buttons, and if they're pressed, we behave in a certain way. And this behavior in a certain way manifests the strength of that habit. And often our response to things tends to be inappropriate.

Now, here's a really crucial point that the Buddha points to in our psychology. Whatever we experience, whether it's the seeing or the hearing, whatever is done to us by somebody else, whether it's something beautiful or something not so beautiful, what I feel, what I experience as my response or reaction to that is not caused by the object. The happiness that I feel when I enter Costa Coffee for an Americano is not caused by the Americano coffee. All the Americano coffee can do is put a nice taste on my tongue. That's the contact I have with an Americano. That's all. The rest is completely manufactured from within my own psyche.

All the perception of coffee, all the comparison as to whether this coffee is better than Nero's coffee, the whole mentation is all to do with me inside myself and has nothing to do with the coffee that's been poured or the original coffee beans that were

picked. The coffee beans do not cause my mental state. And my seeking happiness in coffee has produced in me a reaction, a learnt reaction to coffee. That whenever I smell coffee or taste coffee, happiness immediately arises. And I think that the coffee is making me happy. But it's not. It's my attitude to the coffee that has created this happiness.

If it were not so, if it were that the outside world were creating my mental states, in terms of the process of liberation I would find myself in an impossible condition. Because in order to make myself happy, this coffee has to be exactly the sort of coffee that I need to make myself happy because this coffee is making me happy. If this person makes me sad, the only way I can get rid of my sadness or my anger is to get rid of this person. That's very simple. But if all my mentation, if all my emotional life, if all my thoughts are self-caused, then I should be able to undo those processes within me which are unwholesome and continue to develop those processes in me which are wholesome. And there are wholesome processes to be developed. Love, compassion, joy, all the beautiful states that we can develop as human beings.

So now, if I perceive that there's something in me, an attitude, a misunderstanding — well I should say a misunderstanding which creates an attitude, which formulates a relationship, which formulates certain habits, is all conditioned on something that is happening within me — then how am I going to undo the processes within me which I see as being unwholesome, painful, and to develop those processes in me which I see as actually beneficial and beautiful.

Here, the Buddha's teaching is again very clear to talk about the practice of *vipassanā*. *Vipassanā* simply means insight or just the ability to find a position within ourselves where we can begin to see these misunderstandings and how they're working and what the trigger is that is actually causing the problem.

In the process, we turn inwards. There's an introspection. But it's not just the looking. It's a direct contact with what we're actually feeling. It's a direct experience of our emotional life. I'm only here talking about emotions. I'm not talking about the body with pain or anything like that. I'm just talking about the emotional life. And as I sit quietly with myself and an emotion arises or a mood arises or a mental state we can call it, say something has happened during the day and I'm feeling irritated and I'm sitting with this irritation — what do I notice happens? Suddenly I find myself in an argument with this person, creating an inner scenario where I'm finally getting my own back. This little scenario.

When I wake up from that I acknowledge — so this is the practice of *vipassanā*. I acknowledge that there is anger. I'm not at all concerned with the narrative because the narrative is only a metaphor for the actual presenting emotion. The emotion is looking

for some way of indulging itself and it's just stuck here as a volition, a wanting to be angry. It's got an energy in it that wants to go out and grab an object and murder it. So there's your anger. And because you're sitting still and the person whom you're angry with is not there, it wants to create a scenario where it can be fulfilling its particular wishes. And it does this through thought.

Something has happened psychologically to move that emotional state into a thought pattern. Something's happened there. And it happens so quickly that we don't actually see what that process is. So the Buddha is very clear. First of all, there arises a consciousness, a knowing, which contacts that emotional state. It's the bare consciousness. And it feels that consciousness as it knows that consciousness as a feeling. And it perceives it at the same time. All this is happening in microseconds. And it also determines whether it's likable or unlikable.

Now, funnily enough, we've trained ourselves to see anger as something quite likable. Think about it. Because when you express your anger, there's a feeling of relief. So this anger now is grasped hold of as a desire to fulfill the desire of the anger, the desire within the anger itself, which is to express itself. And that desire then becomes identified. We identify with that desire so it becomes 'I want.' And as soon as that happens, there's another moment where we put energy into it. And that's the will. And as soon as we energize that process, we're into a whole set of thinking. That's what's happened. And you can, if you're quick enough and you're still enough, sit there and watch the beginning of that process.

In the vipassanā, what we realize is that when I'm sitting still and just feeling the anger objectively, but feeling it, there's no suffering. When I'm aware of the wanting to indulge the anger, there's no suffering. As soon as I identify with it, suffering arises. There's a magical moment where the awareness, the mindfulness, consciousness — for a better word, I prefer the word knowing — loses itself in the process of becoming angry. And at that point, where we put the energy into that process of mentation, we're becoming. This is what the Buddha means by becoming. Moment to moment, we recreate the sense of self. And unwittingly, every time we do that, we empower that particular habit, that particular condition. So we get more and more. There's more and more potential for anger.

Now, you'll all have experienced, I'm sure, sometime in the morning, somebody saying to you something which has slightly upset you. Nothing much. Didn't like it. And then you've put it to the side. You're not going to be bothered by it. That's the way they are. And then you go and have a cup of tea. And the mind works on it while you're eating lunch. By the time you get home, it's raging. You have to take an aspirin. This person

only insulted you once, but you've repeated it. We've repeated it to ourselves a thousand times so that the original little bit of being miffed becomes this huge raging anger, which can only now be revenged by some heinous crime. All that process was never even originally caused by the person who spoke those cold words to us. Even the original reaction of being miffed was self-caused. And we've created this whole world of burning anger all within ourselves and mistakenly determined that they're the problem.

The whole of the Buddhist psychology brings us back into the realization that it is me that's creating my world. Even as we walked into this church, this hall, it's not a denial that the hall exists when we're not here. There is a reality of this hall at a certain level. But all of us would have had a different experience of this hall. We're all living in a different hall, actually, even from what we can see. I'm completely — I'm living in a very different hall from you people, I can assure you. I can see the organ for a start. So everything that I experience is being manufactured by my own psyche. I like the word psyche because for me it joins the whole mental process of emotions and thoughts, which actually work together. It's us that split the two. The one is always firing off the other.

Now, here's the magic of the Buddha's teaching. Having developed a certain conditioning — we'll stick with anger — having developed a certain conditioning of anger, how are we going to get rid of it? Having now developed it to such a delicate degree, how do we now undo this process? If we try and undo it, we find ourselves in contradiction with the given state. We're trying to get rid of anger. Have you ever tried to do that? What you end up doing is pushing it away. What you end up doing is suppressing it and worse, you end up repressing it because no energy can get rid of this turbulence. All you do is you put bad energy into bad energy because you don't want that.

What we discover is by allowing the anger to manifest, it cures itself. It blows itself out. Now when I say allow the anger to manifest, I'm not talking about allowing it to form thought patterns. We've already understood that to be a way in which it indulges and grows. What I'm saying is, what the Buddha says is, sit with it, feel it, allow it to manifest. And — this is the tricky bit — see how you're relating to this anger, to this feeling. Does fear arise? You observe the fear. Do you think it's going to overtake you? You observe that fear. Are you averse to it? Is there some judgmental thing going on? 'I shouldn't be feeling angry. I'm a bad person because I feel angry.' You observe that. That's also another conditioning. Is there a desire to enter into the anger and to develop it? You notice that. But all the time you're centering on the feeling that's arising in the body from this conditioning of anger.

Now, you're neither suppressing it, you're not repressing it, and you're not developing it. So what can this energy do? It can only exhaust itself. And that's how the heart heals itself. You don't actually have to do anything. Once you've understood that process, that's where your attention goes — just to being with the presenting state. Whether it's anger, depression, anxiety, despair, guilt, shame, the whole gamut of human misery. All you need to do is attend to it. And you can even flavor the attending with kindness, so that you're allowing it to come up and blow away.

Now, when it comes to those things that we enjoy, all the indulgences of life, perhaps we have a problem with overeating, it's the same thing. When you sit with those particular desires, you find that they're not actually so pleasant. They're only pleasant when they're being gratified. To be in a state of thirst is not pleasant.

It's only pleasant because we know when we drink the Coca-Cola, I'm going to feel great. So to sit with those desires that we see are over the top and to allow them also to express themselves is to take away that conditioning. And what is that conditioning based on? It's based on this fundamental misunderstanding that happiness is to be found in the sensual world.

So now, if we cannot find happiness, and if we can undo all the unwholesome conditionings that we've got, what is it that we're actually moving towards? What's the process of insight meditation or Buddhist practice? You don't have to do it sitting, it's just an attitude, it's a way of living. Where's it actually taking us?

What we find is that by accessing this position of the observer, we are constantly relocating ourselves to a different centre. When we are a body consciousness, when we think we are the body, then it's very difficult to find any objectivity to the greed and the desires of the body. How do you experience yourself as a body self? Well, I mean, as very young children, I think that's what we are, up to about the age of three or something, I don't know. But when you trap your finger in a door, for that one moment, you are a body. All you are is that searing pain. There's no objectivity, one becomes the pain. That's a wonderful example of being the body.

When you're now finding this position of observing the body, feeling the sensations of the body, you've relocated out of the body. You're not the body because it's an object. You can't—the object and the subject can't be the same. You're feeling the body as an object, the sensations.

Keeping more to our emotional state: when do we become emotions? When are we our emotions? When we lose ourselves. When you go into a rage. When you say to yourself, "I am depressed" and you're completely lost in it. When you're anxious and

you panic and you run around panicked. Then you become an emotional self. There's no distinction between the self and the mental state it finds itself in. But through this process, one relocates to a different position of the observer, the feeler, the one who knows, the experiencer.

And it's the same with thought, except that thought and images are even quicker than both the body with its sensations and the heart with its emotions. And so it's even harder to actually be objective about thought. But at least when we come out of thought, we can see where it is that we've been caught, that what it is we've been caught up in. And by doing so, we relocate to a different position. This relocation is the observer.

And especially in meditation, but also in daily life, just sitting in a park and just watching, finding yourself in that position, you see, is a point where you discover that there's no suffering. Now, this isn't the final point, because obviously there's still a sense of self. If there's a sense of self, you see, then there must be something that knows the self. Right? So even that can't be the final position.

How do we experience, you might say, nirvanic or perfectly happy moments in our daily life? If you put a good intention in your mind to do something and you give yourself to the action, it may be that at first you're aware of yourself doing something and then suddenly there's a loss of that self-awareness. You might have experienced it doing the garden or a job that you're really interested in. But you have to be careful because every time you lose yourself in something, if the intention is not pure, then it'll be developing these other types of habits which causes problems. But if the intention is pure, it'll be developing a habit which is supporting our liberation. Liberation from what? Liberation from suffering. That's all the Buddha's teaching.

And when we enter into those states where we lose a sense of self, when we come out, we also recognize that we've lost a sense of time. Time and self arise together. And we also notice when we reflect on that moment, that in the moment where there was no self and no time, we were perfectly happy.

So even in daily life, even in ordinary daily life, we can begin to move towards those places which we know are going to develop this inner sense of peace and happiness, which is not dependent on the outside world. Not dependent on another person. And that, you could say, is the process of liberation. Liberation from the fetter, from the shackles of belief that the world can produce pure happiness.

Now, having said that, does that deny the pleasures and joys of life? Not at all. All it's saying is your relationship to them are of a different order. You neither want to possess them, nor do you identify with them. You simply enjoy them. And the distinction between enjoying something and indulging is extremely subtle and difficult to get. But in that distinction lies our happiness or lack of it.

And when it comes to those things that we find painful—when we can sit with patience with them and bear with them in a patient way, we find actually there's no suffering. So all this suffering, dissatisfaction, unsatisfactoriness, discomfort, all that stuff has never been caused by the world, by anybody else. It's all been caused within ourselves by a wrong understanding. And that wrong understanding is undermined through right practice and through the insights that we get by investigating ourselves through these processes of insight meditation.

And if we do this with a certain commitment, a certain diligence, then hopefully we should see some benefit and it's always possible that we may be fully liberated even in this lifetime. But I do not want to give you false hope. But at least we can over a period of time feel that there's a sense of deep meaningfulness about our existence. That's where the real joy lies. That we're not here for some peculiar reason. That there is a deep meaningfulness to our lives. And that our lives are becoming more at ease. More at ease. That we're more contented. We tend to want peace. We tend more to want what we get than always get what we want. And we find ourselves living in harmony with the way things are, even when the way things are are not particularly pleasant. But you work with them in such a way that they don't cause the old depressions and anxieties of the past. And these are the telltale signs that we're actually moving spiritually.

And the other great benefit of spiritual progress is the feeling, the growing feeling of connectedness with other beings, with other people. And that manifests in our kindness and gentleness, in our easy forgiveness, in our compassion, in our sympathetic joy. And when you feel these things are growing within you, these are the signs to you that you're moving spiritually.

So with those words of hope, I can only hope that my words have been of some assistance. May you be fully liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

So if there's any questions, brickbats...

You're finding what one writer calls very happily an observation post within yourself. It's like a bird watcher. They find this place, a hide. They actually call it a hide, where you can just view the birds and you never interfere, you're just watching. By the end of it, you can write your bestseller.

So it's the same. As you find this position in yourself of that little hide of this observation point, which we feel, generally speaking, as the observer, the feeler, the knower, the witness, there's all sorts of words for it, then you begin to understand how your psyche is working. It's all birds. Everything.

And what you're trying to see is the connectedness of things and how the one arises dependent on something else. So you put something sweet on your tongue and your heart becomes happy. You put something sour on your tongue or something not tasty and you can feel a bit depressed. The mind comes up, the mind remembers something from the past and suddenly you feel sad, some nostalgia arising. The mind remembers, and you feel it in the body. You feel heavy or you feel whatever. You remember something from the past and it makes you laugh and your body reacts with lovely sensations.

Bless you.

Well, that's right. How many of you have actually done any insight practice? How many have not done insight practice of Vipassana? So you'll be coming tomorrow.

Metta practice is just developing the heart of goodwill. It's often translated as loving kindness, but that in a sense gives it a feel which is not necessary because you can practice goodwill when you feel horrible. You can still send out goodwill messages when you don't feel very well.

Sometimes if you're watching, so we say, suppose you're watching a cat. I've just been at a house where there's a cat. And at first you might just watch it in a sort of disinterested way, and then somehow you form a relationship with it, you're still watching it, you're still observing what it's doing, but there's a sort of kindness exuded towards the cat. So you're inside yourself and you're watching these feelings, perhaps a nasty one, say you feel a bit depressed, you feel it, but there's as it were within the looking, there's as it were in the contact, there's a feeling of embracing it, opening up to it, a certain kindness towards it. These things obviously become apparent with the practice. If you haven't done the practice, it's a bit abstract.

"You said towards the end that doing this suddenly your life has meaning."

Not suddenly. Never suddenly. Yes, it has meaning. Well, normally speaking, the meaning of our lives is dependent upon the life we're living. It depends on my relationships, on my job, on everything else, you see. When I begin to realize that these are very untrustworthy meaningful things, because they can disappear, I'm seeking for a deeper meaning as to why is it I'm here in the first place?

And what spiritual practice does is it takes you to that core purpose of your being here. And in Buddhist terms, it's the evolution of consciousness. It's the evolution of the knowing. Don't confuse that with the act of cognition, which is a mental thing. It's that deep knowing within us which is confused with the body, heart and mind complex. And the process of meditation is the process of extracting that from that confusion. And in so doing, it discovers its true nature.

And the Buddha refers to it, he tends to refer to it in a slightly negative way, as the unborn, the undying, the uncompounded, the unconditioned. Which means that it tells us what it's not. If we were to describe what it is, it puts a concept in our mind and we start searching for it. You see, a soul, see? And as soon as you start defining something, it's very difficult not to search for that thing that you've imagined. But whatever it is, it's beyond the concepts, because concepts are only to do with this particular level of being.

And you'll find that in all *vipassanā*, insight meditation, whether it's that to do with the Theravada school, or the Zen school, or the Tibetan school, all of them tell you to get rid of thinking. They all tell you. Zen puts it as no mind, which people think that you might be zonked out or something. But all they're saying is no thought. Why should they do that? Why is that so important? It's because that's what we are looking at the world through, we're experiencing the world through preconceived ideas.

When you see a tree, you immediately compare it with all the other trees that you've seen. Just the word "tree" conjures up ideas with which you look at a tree. I remember a teacher used to teach art to children. She would take them to a tree and get them to draw the tree, and of course they'd all be this stick with a lollipop on top. And then she would get them all to lie underneath the tree looking up and then draw the tree. And of course, just seeing it from a different perspective produced a much more realistic tree.

Our problem is to go beyond the world that we've constructed through our thoughts and continue to construct through our thoughts. Even at the basic simple experience of taste, you see. As soon as we put something, like if you're eating a pizza, you go and order a pizza, you've got an idea of what a pizza is. And when you get your pizza, it's either a pizza or it's not a pizza. It's just not a pizza. "This isn't a pizza."

But even those, remember the old, I don't know whether they, they don't seem to sell them anymore, but those old pizzas, they used to sell in plastic bags. Now, if you'd never had a pizza before and you tasted one of those, you'd have said, at the end of it, you see, and got into it, you'd say, "Well, that was a rather nice, chewy sort of bread with a hint of tomato. Very pleasant." Call it a pizza and it's a disaster.

So our big problem, this is the biggest problem we have, frankly, is to stop thinking, is to see the world without thought. And we do that by burying the attention in sensation and feeling. That's what we do. That's how you do it. So what is an emotion before you give it a name? What is it? What is pain before you call it pain? That's a mental construct. There's no pain in the body. There's only sensation. Pain is a mental construct. You can prove this to yourself tomorrow.

Even people whom I deeply love are still objects of my mind. I can never know them in themselves. And they can never know me. All we can form is a pleasant relationship. A loving relationship. But I can never know you. You can never see the world as I see it. And I'll never see it the way you see it. In this way we live in parallel universes. So is there any wonder that we get angry with each other?

The Buddha himself reduced all his teachings to a very simple three-word formula in the original language of Pali. And it translates as, "I teach suffering, unsatisfactoriness, and the end of it." That's it. He was only concerned with that area of our lives where we're not happy. His whole psychology centres on that. It's not a developmental psychology. It's all about how do you attain perfect peace and happiness.

And we don't really get on to the spiritual path in Buddhist understanding until we realize that nobody can cause me psychological pain. This at first comes as a great disappointment because it's been very pleasant blaming others. But you cannot say to your partner, your spouse, to your friend, "You make me angry." You can't say that anymore. "You make me depressed, you bore me." Which is a disappointment.

Well, of course, you know, the way one overcomes that is through the rather painful process of forgiveness. Oh, that's not a problem. I mean, you're not supposed to purposefully enjoy suffering, for heaven's sake. Oh, no, absolutely not. No. And if you are putting up with it, then in a sense you've got to ask yourself, why am I putting up with this rubbish? What keeps me in this particular place?

There was an old program, member of, he's going back years now, and they interviewed this bag person. You know these people who carry bags of rubbish? I don't see them these days. Do you see them? It's gone, hasn't it? There was a little neurosis there, a social neurosis. You used to see them around stations and all that. Yeah, I remember them. Yeah, about, I don't know, twenty years ago? They'd be carrying bags of rubbish and bits of paper.

And they asked this lady, this woman, she was sitting there in a cafe. And wasn't mad, wasn't mad at all. They just asked her, "Why are you collecting all this stuff? Why are you carrying this stuff around?" And she said, "I was involved in the death of a child." It's her way of expressing her penitence, her guilt, and inability to forgive herself, which is probably the hardest thing of all to do anyway, to forgive yourself.

But all that harm, all that pain that we have received from others has not been the direct cause of the traumas within our system, or the pain within our system. That's why they can be expunged, either through certain therapeutic techniques or *vipassanā*. But the real thing about all this is forgiveness.

And when you hear somebody say, "I can't forgive," see, that's the child. That's the child who says, "I can't sleep because they want to watch the football." Of course you can forgive if you don't want to. You don't want to let them off. You want to punish them.

And they've done that in the States, haven't they? Where they thought that would be some sort of healing process, where they've allowed the family of the murdered person to watch the execution of the murderer. It's not been satisfactory at all. They didn't think it was painful enough. "Do it again." Because revenge, isn't it?

And there's beautiful stories. I've got a book of beautiful stories of forgiveness where all that pain goes. One of the most startling is of a mother whose son is murdered. And she visits the murderer in prison and continues to visit him. And when he's released, only a young man, she takes him in as her son. That's a bit of forgiveness, wasn't it?

And it's an interesting process if you really give yourself to it. You may actually see, you may actually experience the transformation of hatred and revenge into compassion for the person through a change of attitude within ourselves. You might actually experience that transformation.

She lost her father, Rajiv. Of course. There we are. How interesting.

Yes, one of the core teachings of the Buddha is the role of intention. Everything begins with your intention. An intention you can describe as a desire or a wish. It's a movement in the mind of wanting. If that's unwholesome, it's going to create an unwholesome conditioning. If it's wholesome, it'll create a wholesome conditioning. This is where your true *kamma* lies in Buddhist understanding.

What happens, you put an action out in the world, what comes to you from the world is being—you can't say that's your true *kamma* because it's been messed about with by all these other people in the world. What you get back may be inappropriate to

your original action. For instance, you may go to a lottery and buy a pound worth and you win ten million. That's not your *kamma*. That happens to be part of the whole system of joining a lottery. And if you have an understanding, "Oh well, in my past life I must have given thousands and thousands of pounds away," you're just rationalising something which is a perfectly ordinary, you can put a straightforward rational argument to it.

On the other hand, you might do some good and the person hates you for it and continues to hate you for it. And that's it. That's their problem. Real *kamma*, in terms of the liberation of the heart, in terms of achieving this pure peace and happiness, is within ourselves.

So when we intend something, it's important to recognise, is this going to do me good or bad? And remember that when you pay attention, it's an act of intention. Every time you pass a billboard on the bus and you look at it, it goes in. It's conditioning you. Because you've made an intention to actually attend to it. So that's why your intention is the beginning of your conditioning.

So having recognised that this intention is a good intention, you then empower it and go into the action. As you go into the action you may be aware of yourself doing what you're doing, but as your concentration grows and your commitment grows, you lose yourself in the action. That is, you can call it a jhanic moment. Ask yourself when you finish that, ask yourself how was I in that moment? You'll see there's no suffering. There was peace, there was happiness.

Now, if you go into a situation with indulgence, it's exactly the same. You go in there saying to yourself, "I'm going to really enjoy this film. I'm going to really enjoy it. This is the sort of film I want. A lot of violence and sex, great." So you go in and you lose yourself. Two hours. And you come out, no time, no sense of self. But unfortunately, there are consequences within the psyche. One is a loss of self into an indulgence which is going to create problems, and one is a loss of self into a non-indulgence which creates the beautiful mind.

So that's where it's like in anything like when you give something. Say you want to help somebody, so you're giving your time, or you want to make a donation to something, you're giving of your wealth. When you do something like that, just stop for a minute and get your attitude right. So I'm doing this for the benefit of somebody else. And then you get that benefit of renunciation. And what renunciation does is it loosens that possessiveness on things. It loosens it up. And when your thought is full of that, when your mind is full of that intention, that's when you start doing. Or that's when you give.

Now, is that the end of the problem? No, because as you're doing, these other thoughts can come in as well. But you know what they're there, because you're aware of them coming, and you keep re-establishing your right intention. And in that way you train yourself to keep on the straight and narrow.

When you're giving, and you give something, and you've done it with that mind full of the purpose that this is for the benefit of somebody else, you're actually giving it. As soon as you give it, you always get that little thought come up: "You are truly a very generous and wonderful person." But you turn on that. That's an afterthought. That did not affect my giving. Or it could be more negative: "Too much, get a bit back." Ah, you catch it there. "I caught you there, Mara." This is the evil one. And all the time, you're making the effort to make sure that your intentions are wholesome and good, and eventually, you surprise yourself with spontaneous actions of goodwill.

For which you may not be loved. So you're not dependent on whether somebody appreciates it or not. Then you get into fame and celebrity. Then you've really had it. Then you become the classic do-gooder. The do-gooder is someone who does you the good they want to do you. And you'd better like it.

Well, one of the big things that works for me is to keep saying "Stop." The biggest, one of my biggest tricks for myself is to keep saying the word "Stop." Just get in the habit every time you stop. Great, isn't it? It only lasts a bit, but at least in that moment there's been stop. Wonderful word.

So after you've answered the phone call, stop. When you're doing something here and you're involved in this, the phone goes. There's no need to launch yourself at the phone. I mean, most people will hang on for three rings. So you know you stop. You hear the bell. And then you put it down. Stop. Relax. Relax the shoulders. Stop. So you're constantly bringing yourself back into the present moment, into the presenting moment. Very little, very simple trick.

And whenever you find yourself rushing, stop. If you're going to be late, fine, stop. It doesn't matter. If you lose your job, fine, stop. Relax. So the more we can get the habit of just stopping, that's the big trick.

I visited, some of you will know, Plum Village, you know, Thich Nhat Hanh's place. Do you know that place in France? Well, he has a little trick of—he has somebody who can ring the bell anytime in the whole monastery. So once he rings the bell, everybody stops. You have to stop walking, you have to stop, stop. And even, and he's put it down

even to the phone bell. As soon as you hear the phone bell, you stop. No matter what you're doing, you're brushing your teeth, stop. And it's just a little practice of stopping. I think you'll find that, I find it really powerful.

And the other thing is, when you know that you're doing something which just carries you away, like the computer—you're on there for three hours, for heaven's sake. So, get yourself one of these watches with a timer on it. Just put a thirty-minute timer, and then really obey it. Like, stop. Stop. Cup of tea, when you have a cup of tea, when you have a break. So make that a little ritual, a little ceremony, right, where you stop and you make it a meaningful break.

Most times you make the cup of tea and mind's all over the place and then you put it down and you think, "Did I have that cup of tea or not?" Or you make it and it goes cold, you have to go to the—oh damn, what's that machine called? The microwave, stick it in again. You do that all day with the same cup of tea. So yes, it is, it's not our habit. We're always living in some future time. We're always moving towards the future.

And your own body language, to make sure your shoulders are always relaxed. And the jaws relaxed. Teeth are usually set apart, not clenched. If you relax your face, you can feel a smile come. All the dopamine starts pouring out. Nobody else can see the smile. You still look grim. Just there you can feel it. Just come to the natural relaxation of your face.

"But I suppose for most people that is already quite an advanced stage, you are already able to control yourself, you can stop. What if you were seriously addicted, like addiction to tobacco and alcohol, for instance, how many times would you stop?"

Ah, that's a different, yes, no, no. That's a slightly different type of stopping. I'm just talking about stopping what you're doing and being present. Stopping a heavy habit is hard work.

Well, if you have a... I mean, my father used to smoke heavily. And it was ruining his voice. He used to like singing in a choir. So he stopped himself. He stopped smoking by whenever he would normally have a cigarette, he'd go and take it out on the piano. I mean, that's a sort of skillful way of displacing your energy.

But I think you just have to be careful with an antidote that you're not actually suppressing the problem. That's all. You still have to be in contact with the feelings that are being presented. That's all. But there's also times in our lives when it's inappropriate to express what we feel. We might be feeling a bit depressed in ourselves, but we meet a friend and you lift yourself over it, don't you? And be friendly and joyful. So you're putting it aside, as it were.

But I don't particularly like antidotes because they tend to suppress. Through certain practices like *metta*, the goodwill practice, you can build up a real charisma. A real person that everybody wants to hug. But it's just sitting on top of this pig's will. It's like icing on top of pig's will. It's not really dealing with this stuff. So there has to be some time when you can allow these more unwholesome turbulences to manifest.

"Well, that's another one. It's either it's producing a beautiful state of mind, which is good in itself, or you can observe the quality of impermanence in the breath, in which case it becomes an insightful practice."

"So that could be used as a situation where your mind is repressing that particular emotion, not suppressing it? You could be using it for that. Not wanting to feel something, so you put your attention on a physical action or..."

I mean, there are times when it's skillful to put to one side unwholesome states. Just put it to the side and say, "I'll deal with you later or another time."

"There's also this thing about watching sensations and the connectivity between thought processes and sensations. Would you like to say something about that?"

Well, bodily sensations are, they're perceived by the mind, they're perceived, and then some thought comes up around it. Just an ordinary thing like eating. Just watch your mind when you're eating something. It's always talking about it. Always saying something about it. It's forming a relationship. The mind forms a relationship with sensations. All we have to do is make sure that it's a wholesome relationship. That's all.

So when you eat, for instance, you eat to nourish the body. That's it. If it tastes nice, consider that to be a plus. It doesn't have to. Not if it's just to nourish the body.

Is it time for a cup of tea, is it? Thank you very much.

Premodern, Modern, Postmodernism and Buddhism

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1h22

In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines three historical approaches to truth and spiritual development: premodern society's reliance on revelation and faith, modernism's emphasis on reason and investigation, and postmodernism's focus on individual interpretation. Drawing from the Visuddhimagga's three character types - the person of faith (saddhā), the intelligent type, and the speculative type - he explores how each corresponds to different societal approaches to awakening.

The talk investigates whether enlightenment is possible within each worldview, examining figures like Cūḷapanthaka (the faithful practitioner) and Tuccha Poṭṭhila (the intellectually gifted but inexperienced teacher). Bhante discusses the challenges Western practitioners face, often caught between rational inquiry and the need for trust in the Buddha's teaching. He explores the tension between the Buddha's encouragement to investigate everything personally (as in the Kālāma Sutta) while also emphasizing refuge in the Dhamma.

The discussion concludes by suggesting that balanced spiritual practice requires integrating all three approaches: confidence in the Buddha's revelation, rational investigation of the teachings, and personal experiential verification through meditation practice. This reflects the Buddha's own teaching method, which combined faith-based trust, Socratic questioning, and direct insight through vipassanā meditation.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Homage to the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

This is one of the few times that I'm going to give a talk about which I know very little. So I'm hoping for lots of comments and that you'll reserve your tomatoes and eggs for the end.

I read a very interesting essay by a man called James Kurth who wrote this for the Foreign Policy Research Institute in New York. He called it "Religion and Globalization." He suddenly pointed out to me the distinctions between a premodern, modern, and postmodern society, or should we say ethos. I just began trying to think of it in terms of a Buddhist perspective and to try and link it, just in terms of spiritual practice.

This isn't, I don't mean to confuse this with a comparison between different societies, that one is better than the other. I'm not talking about its history or its art or anything of that nature. All I'm doing is looking at certain ways in which these three societies see the process of enlightenment and see if a Buddhist, or somebody following the Buddha Dhamma, the Buddha's teaching, could actually become enlightened in any of these societies. That's the task. Get my PhD on this, huh? I'm in the right city.

So starting at the beginning with premodern society, that refers to really what we know as the medieval ages. A premodern society depends upon revelation for its spiritual founts. It's a given. In terms of both Islam and Christianity you have a given revelation which is then believed in, and because of the structure of a dogma it demands that you can only have very few people interpreting it. If you have too many interpretations then you start getting what later happens, a reformation. So you have to control the power and it fitted in well with the whole idea of Christianity at that time of establishing on earth a society, a static society which would be ready for the second coming.

It was actually during the 12th century thereabouts that the idea that the second coming wasn't going to happen or was going to happen in a different way began to arise. So what the medievalists tried to do was set up a society in which people knew exactly where they were and you had both the temporal and the spiritual and it was very hierarchical. You know, the serfs just rising up through the lords, king, and finally the emperor. And in the spiritual realm, the ordinary punters are down below, and then the priests, bishops, and then finally the pope.

It was never really a question of questioning the revelation itself. It was always the idea of supporting it, even when it didn't make complete sense. So Tertullian, who was a great theologian, said that we believe because it is absurd. What he meant wasn't our sense of being ridiculous, but that it was beyond rationality. It was something you had to believe, full stop. And the spiritual path was totally dependent upon a practice which took that for granted.

So it demanded what we would call a certain faith, a certain unquestioning faith. That as your basis you then either practice good works or prayer and you would make sanctity. So I think the archetypal saint may be somebody like Saint Francis. Just a total belief, no questioning of the actual revelation as such, but a total giving of oneself to the practice. And even today you might say that somebody like Mother Teresa of Calcutta fits into that mold. When you hear her talk, there's no question that the revelation might not be true or anything of that nature.

So what does that produce in terms of a teacher-student relationship? It's one of hierarchy, isn't it? The teacher is in authority as well as being an authority. He has authority over and the student is one who listens and follows the teacher. There's no question about it. You don't question the teacher, the teacher knows. It's that relationship.

And there are character types in Buddhism based upon the three basic roots of greed, hatred and delusion: greedy types, hateful types and deluded types and the opposite of that. This is later commentary, this isn't so much in the original scriptures: the person of faith, the person of intelligence and the speculative type. And they're positive.

Now, the one who is of faith shares with the person who craves the idea of wanting. But, of course, the wanting here is more skillful, more wholesome. They really want the Dhamma. This is the description of one. This is taken from the *Visuddhimagga*, which is later medieval commentary.

"In one of faithful temperament, there is frequent occurrence of such states as free generosity, desire to see noble ones, desire to hear good dharma, great gladness, ingenuousness, honesty, and trust in things that inspire trust."

So it's the person who just is ready to submit or to give themselves to the teaching without question based on that faith. My experience with Eastern teachers is that that's really your relationship to them. If I were to ask, say, one of my teachers, a sayadaw or somebody, a question as to why are we watching the breath at the nose, he'd be miffed. What do you want an explanation for? Just do it.

And one of the great criticisms of Eastern teachers towards Westerners was that they didn't have faith. And what they meant was this unquestioning reliance upon a teacher. Now, you can imagine, if you're born into a culture, and you're imbued with that culture, and there you have a teacher in front of you, a monk or layperson, whoever, and when they speak, they're part of that tradition, so there's no idea of actually questioning them as such.

The danger, of course, is gullibility. You get led. So many Westerners who fall into the trap of the guru find themselves being led all over the place. Of course, they tell you in Buddhism, in the actual guru tradition of Tibet, that in Tibet people take years to decide whether this person is going to be their guru or not. How true that is, I don't know. But there is a type of westerner who really wants that relationship. Even though we've been through our wonderful enlightenment and arrived at this amazing rationality, there's still a surprising number, surprising to me that is, who actually just wants somebody to tell them what to do. Just do this, do that, and I'll be happy.

Now, to support this in the Buddha's time, of somebody who had just this utter faith, was a man called Cūḷapanthaka. Now, Cūḷapanthaka had a brother called Mahāpanthaka, which means big panthaka. He was Cūḷa, he was lesser, he was a lesser panthaka. And his brother had joined the order, and then asked his younger brother to join him. So his younger brother joined, and after four months, he hadn't learnt a single verse of the Buddha's teachings. So his brother said, you'd better get out. You're wasted time.

When the Buddha heard this, he went to see him, and urged him not to do that. And then he gave him this exercise, some of you will know it. Gave him a piece of cloth, and he told him to wipe his face with the cloth, and keep saying "getting dirty," being aware of the change in the cloth as he's wiping it and looking at it. Remember it's a hot country like we are now and he's wiping his face and he suddenly sees the quality of transience of change and he sees it to such a depth that he becomes enlightened. I tried it. He must have been ready. We can presume he did lots of training in his past life.

But there he was, a person of not particularly bright and just open, just open to the Buddha's suggestion without any question. And there comes that insight. So what I'm saying is that in a society where the truth is being expounded, you may be on a winner just having faith. I mean, if it is the truth, and you have faith and you do the practice, it saves a lot of bother, doesn't it? You don't have to read books, you don't have to argue, you don't have to ask questions, you just do it.

So that's premodern in the sense of that ethos, which we have, of course, still here. I mean, the Catholic Church is very much like that. And as I say, Buddhism in the East, for Easterners, is very much like that. The younger generation who are brought up in the horror of rationalizing do question, very disconcerting.

Now, the rejection of that, of course, was modernism. And the core of the modernist movement was the Enlightenment. I suppose the glory of the modernist movement was the ending of slavery, the demand for equality amongst people, and the turning towards people, towards society as a measure of truth rather than revelation. And therefore reason, being able to reason with people and come to a reasonable outcome was the mark of a modernist approach.

Perhaps one of the glories of it is the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in which I'm pretty sure God is not mentioned. Revelation is not mentioned. It's a document which human beings have agreed upon totally through their rational understanding. You know, the French Revolution: equality, fraternity, liberty. Equality, liberty,

freedom from, freedom, as we have now, freedom to vote for any political party, freedom of speech. All these freedoms that we enjoy were a huge reaction to the very strict, autocratic, premodern society. A huge revolution, really.

And the downside, of course, was that rationality then became its own servant. It couldn't look beyond the rational. And as we know, anything which is rational is always based on a premise. So if the premise, no matter how wonderful the rationality, no matter how much the argument is, the premise is wrong, then in a sense you're moving towards a peculiar situation. So communism, Nazism, although Nazism had a romantic streak about it. So you can see how eventually people became disillusioned.

The other, of course, great gift of modernism was investigation, just that opening of the universe to investigation, our science and eventually our technology. So all these were the products of that modern mind. I don't think the premodern mind could have done it because they weren't interested. What they were interested in was just stabilizing society.

The idea of progress. As far as I've read, I picked up this little bit of information about a monk called Joachim de Fiore, a Calabrian, who came up with the idea, and this was how this idea of progress crept into the West, the idea that we were going somewhere, that we weren't actually static. He talked about the three ages. The age of the Father, which was the Old Testament. The age of the Son, which is the present age. And we're moving towards the age of the Spirit. Everybody will be saved. Here on Earth.

Now, in that society, in terms of your spiritual development, that ethos, the teacher takes a different role and the student has a different role. Because here we have much more of a Socratic approach, where everything that is given to the student, the student is understood to question. It must become their knowledge.

Now, I don't know, I've tried to find somebody whom you might look upon who achieved some sort of enlightenment in the West who might have been brought up with that. Maybe, I don't know, does anybody? You see, because the whole of human effort came off the spiritual. I mean, the whole medieval ages was moving up to the spiritual all the time. All the music, all the art, all the philosophy and theology was all around Christianity was all facing up that way. With modernism, our whole effort flattened out. It wasn't so much interested in the spiritual, but more in this investigation. Not that philosophers like Spinoza and people like that didn't have a spiritual element to it. Would anyone like to mention somebody they think belongs to a modernist ethos who might have achieved? What about Darwin? Well, no, I'm thinking of sainthood. Some-

body who's achieved a spiritual, you would recognize a spiritual. The founder of the Quakers maybe. He started off from a personal revelation. So I'm stuck there. I shall wait for your response afterwards.

Now this relates to the second character type, which is translated as intelligent, but you'll see from the actual quote that it's not quite the intelligence that we expect.

"In one of intelligent temperament, there is frequent occurrence of such states as readiness to be spoken to, possession of good friends, knowledge of the right amount of eating, mindfulness and full awareness, devotion to wakefulness. A sense of urgency about things that should inspire a sense of urgency. And wisely directed endeavour."

So here you get the impression that this person is constantly reflecting wisely upon their lives. They're actually engaged. They're not there with a teacher who says, do this, do that. They're turning upon themselves as, in a sense, the source of their own wisdom. Not without the help of the teacher, because they go and visit people. Possession of good friends. Readiness to be spoken to. There's no actual teacher mentioned as such. I suppose readiness to be spoken to. I suppose that's it.

So such a person has that inner reasoning to be able to understand their own position and has a confidence in it. In the scriptures, the Buddha is often in that position where he actually takes on a Socratic role where he asks, what do you think, what do you think? He said, does everything arise and pass away? Yes, Bhante. If it arises and passes away, is that satisfactory? No, Bhante. It's all pretty simple stuff from our point of view, but it's there as a dialogue. He's not saying everything passes away. And it's that part of the scripture that seems to come across to Westerners. So we tend to think of Buddhism as very highly rational in that sense.

There is an example of somebody and he was called by the Buddha Tuccha Pothila. And Tuccha means empty. Now Pothila was a teacher and somebody who was recognized and understood the Buddha's teaching. He could really talk about it. But he hadn't experienced anything. So the Buddha called him empty. Empty Pothila. And he got rather worried that the people whom he taught were all becoming enlightened and he wasn't.

So, swallowing the bitter pill of humility, he went off to his students and they saw him coming and immediately saw this intellectual conceit. They thought, well, there's no way I can get through this. So they passed him on down the line saying, well, I'm not really the right one. And he ended up with a young novice boy, a little monk. And again swallowing his pride he went and followed this little fellow who took him to an anthill and he said to him:

If there are six holes in this anthill, and there's a lizard or a snake in there, if an anthill's vacated, in the East, lizards, sometimes snakes, live in anthills, how would you get the snake out?

He said, well, you stop up five holes.

And the little boy said to him, that's what you must do. You must stop up the five senses and observe the mind, observe the heart.

Well, as the story always goes, in no length of time Tuccha Pothila became one of the arahats.

One of the paradoxes, no, one of the actual straight contradictions that you'll find people get into in Buddhism is this especially on the monastic side because what makes the monastic order is the rule, it's an institution. So it's the rules of the institution that make you a monastic.

And I've come across this quite a few times in the East, mainly Westerners. Easterners don't seem to have a problem with it. It's the case of this. In order to be enlightened, you have to be pure of heart. But you can't be pure of heart totally unless you're fully enlightened. So people get themselves into this corner and if they've been meditating for some time, then they think that it must be because they're not keeping the rule strictly. In other words, they're not pure in the rule. So they get tighter and tighter and tighter around the rule. And we had one case in Sri Lanka. An Australian fellow. And he went back to the original text.

And he realized that the robes that we're wearing now, these robes, were not the robes that the Buddha had started with all those many years ago. The top robe was just like a shawl you put over your shoulders when you went into a city, sort of like a modesty thing. Generally speaking, you just used the lower robe. So he went to see a very famous teacher. Some of you will know him: Ananda Maitreya of Balangoda. Some of you know him. He died at 150.

And he was a Bodhisattva. During one of his meditations at the monastery I was at in Khandaboda, as you progress there comes a point where some deep memory may arise, and he remembered being in the Buddha's time and making the vow to become a Buddha. So he was known as the Bodhisattva. He said he could remember the faces of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, the two main disciples of the Buddha, but he couldn't remember the Buddha's face unfortunately. When you make that sort of determination in Theravāda Buddhism, I don't know about Mahāyāna, it means you can't progress.

You've got to keep building up your virtues until you're right on the point of enlightenment. And then, when you take your next re-roll, you have to do it all in that one go, in that one lifetime.

So this particular monk went to see him, and Ananda Maitreya agreed that, in fact, the lower robe was that. And the bowl was wrong. If you've seen monks' bowls, they're pretty big, you know. And, in fact, they're supposed to be just... I had a little embarrassing moment over that. I was in India and I was at Goenkaji's centre in Dhamma Giri, near Bombay. And we were lining up for food, and with me there was a Jain monk. And he had a bowl, it was very small, like that. And I made a rather foolish comment and said, "Bhante, that's a very small bowl." And he looked at me and he said, "This is the size of my stomach." And I was there. So I made this sort of limp excuse about it also being the place I put my robes in because it's my luggage case. Yes, he didn't look all that convinced.

And he turned up, this particular monk, at the Kaṭhina ceremony, which is the ceremony at the end of the Rains retreat that monks do where they have to stay in one monastery. At the end all the lay people come offering gifts for what the monastery and the monks might need. And he turned up with this twee little cape tied up around his neck, looked like a bullfighter, and a biscuit tin sweet bowl. And the general opinion was that he'd gone mad. And he eventually drove himself out of the order. So you know, rationality.

But it would seem from the story of Cūḷa Panṭhaka that if a person is completely locked into a way of being in the world which is so totally rational, so totally conceptual, that somehow the person has the intelligence to become enlightened. That's not the problem. The problem is to evacuate that situation of intelligence.

And one of the things that, for instance, Dzogchen... We had Sogyal Rinpoche come down to Gaia House to give a retreat. One of the things that he was trying to do was just to relax people, make them feel so happy, make them feel so... that with a couple of exercises, this original mind would just pop out from that embeddedness in rationality. And the person might just realize their true self, you see. We do it the hard way in Theravāda.

Sweat. So that's the modern society, based on reason. Whether... I mean, most of us are brought up with that mindset. So that's our problem when we start training in the spiritual life: to find a way of coming out of conceptual thinking.

So, for instance, in the methodology that I personally teach, which is the Mahāsi, my own particular practice too, we try to trick the mind by refusing to allow it to think about something, save in the simplest of concepts. So we engage that intellect through a noting technique: rising, falling. So when there's only one word there, at least there can't be a thinking about the object. At least there's only one, shall we say, concept between that intelligence and the direct perception of what it's trying to experience.

And then as the concentration grows, you see, and the ability of that mind to stay absolutely within the present moment, there isn't the time for thought, because thought's always an afterthought, always a comment. And by force of that practice and concentration, suddenly, that intellect will just stop. And then you have that brightness of pure awareness. And hopefully, in no length of time, we join the Arahats.

So now, we come to postmodernism. Now, I haven't a clue. I've read little bits about it. As far as I understand it, postmodernism is a rejection of modernism. And actually, historically speaking, the first rejection of modernism was romanticism. It was people like, I suppose, Rousseau and Wordsworth and all our poets who sort of went back to feeling and sensual experience, took that as the basis of truth. Not thought: "I think therefore I am." "I feel, I sense, therefore I am."

And the problem with romanticism is, of course, that it couldn't accept the present. It looked back into the past for its inspiration. The noble savage idea, Garden of Eden, you see. And in present day, you know, there's certain feminists who look back to a matriarchal age as being... as being better, would have been better than a patriarchal age, a sort of reaching into the past, a sort of nostalgia. I read somewhere that the masculine... Then there was some sort of deep ecology, that's in inverted commas, going back to hunters and gatherers, you know. But the idea of running around with a sort of dog pelt around one's privates chasing rabbits didn't particularly appeal.

So what happened there was there was no particular practice to go back to. It sort of expressed itself more in terms of art. I don't know whether it produced any... I can't think of anybody it produced whom you might look to as a spiritual figure as such, although it was spiritually directed.

As that faded out, the reaction to romanticism, but also in a sense a reaction to pure reason, was the idealists: people like Hegel and Fichte. And the bits I've read of these philosophers, they definitely had a very highly tuned idea of the growth of consciousness. It seems to relate in many ways to Buddhism. But I think the downfall for those people seems to have been they didn't have a practice. The philosopher Fichte said to his students to face a wall and become aware of the observer, and then to become

aware of that. That doesn't sound so bad, actually. But that was it. It was all very heady. It was all wonderful ideas and very inspirational, but there was no practice to it. So it seems as though people got fed up with that.

So then, of course, modernism really took hold. And that's where we ended up with the Second World War and all that sort of stuff. So after the Second World War and communism and all that, then we have this other modern strain of rejection of modernism, which we call postmodern. It comes to be called postmodern anyway.

And I don't know whether you'd agree with me, but the crucial position for a postmodernist is interpretation. So before, it was revelation: it was out there, it was it, it was given. Then it was we, as rational beings, conversing to come to understand the truth together. Since both of those have failed, I'm now reverting to me. So I am now the fount of my own truth, and you are for you. And if we don't agree, that's fine, you see. What's true for you is true for you. Doesn't have to be true for me. And so we move towards a sort of absolute relativism. So there's no objective truth at all. It's just what's true for you. So Noddy is as important as Shakespeare. The books on Noddy, because it depends where you are, you see.

There's no objective reality. I read an article which said that the 9-11 collapse of the Twin Towers put an end to postmodernism because there was no doubt there, from a societal point of view, that that was something which was objective and it did happen. It was through this postmodernist thinking that people could undermine the idea that there was ever a holocaust. Because it's your take on reality. It's your narrative. That's the word, isn't it? It's your narrative. And a society builds up its own narrative for its own purposes. And once you catch that, in fact there's no objective truth to it, then of course it collapses as science, as truth.

In society, it's very strange. When I went to Gaia House, it was a very strange place for me because I'd always been brought up in modernist societies, and the order is almost pre-modern really, in many aspects in terms of its authority structure. But when I got to Gaia, I found that there were these centres of authority who were making decisions without others knowing. It was a sort of... It was all very strange. Things happened, you know. Just recently, for instance, a huge armchair arrived in the lounge, and the managing director, the executive manager, didn't know about it. It just... this big thing arrived, and she looked around. I was in the room with her. So what happens is that since I am now the centre of authority, we're all centres of authority. And when a society has no centre, you can do what you do because it's right for you, and I can do what I do because it's right for me, and you've no right to stop me at all. It's a sort of movement towards anarchism in its absolute true sense.

And a friend of mine told me about a lovely postmodern situation that they found themselves in. They'd been invited to a meal with two friends, and they went there to the house, he and his partner, to this couple's house. And while they were having a meal... sorry, after the meal, they were sitting in the lounge, just enjoying the postprandial discussions and all that sort of stuff, when the lodger, a woman, came down, started doing yoga right there in the nude. And they said to her, you know, "Is this appropriate?" "Well, you do what you do, and I'll do what I like." And it's that me generation, you know.

I've noticed that at Gaia, anybody in their 30s is very different from somebody in their 50s, which is, of course, where I am. In their 50s, you'll still get people talking about responsibility. In their 30s, they're talking about rights. My rights. It's weird. And, of course, the clash is wonderful.

I went on a walk with the managers at Gaia, who tend to be postmodern in this sense. Because, and it's understandable in one sense, because they come from anywhere to offer a year of their lives to the Dharma and end up with people whom they would normally not choose to live with. And so you have a group of people who have to live communally, but the structure there doesn't really allow a community because people are moving in and out so often. Every six months it's like being at a railway station.

So living in that sort of community, you tend to get people who are very fierce about their position and try to come to a consensuality. And the problem with consensuality is that if everybody has a right, then everybody has a right to veto. So even though seven people say they'll do it, if somebody says no, you've had it. You can't move. So they came to an agreement that nobody has an actual veto. They can have a majority rule, I think.

And we went out for a walk. I went out for a walk with a few of them, and we were going to go to this riverside which somebody said was absolutely beautiful, and we'd have a picnic there. And on the way, over a dell down in the bottom, we came across a very delightful little stream. And one of the party said, "I want to stay here," you see. And everybody else said, "Well, we were going over there." "No." This is where the group begins to control the individual. That's what they felt: controlled individual, you see. So we went, "Well, fine. You stay here." So then we had to share the food, and she ended up with the orange juice. And we had to do without the orange juice. Because we all had it in one bottle. Wonderful.

So now we have a big problem, you see. Oh yes, sorry, that's right. I've got a lovely description of art, which gives you an idea: "A rejection of a consistent, coherent aesthetic in favour of a playful, eclectic style which draws on many sources." So in other

words, the artist feels free to use whatever, however they want. And often, as I'm sure some of you have experienced, especially in modern art, very modern art, the artist is really looking to symbols which often make sense to them, but they don't have that objective position where people can relate to it in this way.

So it's Eliot who said art was objective correlative. So I have an experience, I want to relate it to you, and I choose an object through which we can make that communication. Now if I choose an object which is meaningless to you but full of meaning to me, then the communication stops. Although the artist could argue, "Well, you should make the effort, you know, to come towards me, to try and understand this symbology," you see.

So now we have the problem of the role of the teacher. Well, you can see that there can't be a teacher. Because if a teacher says to you, "Listen, I think you ought to do..." you know, like they're saying, "Well, your meditation's not so good, and it's because, you know, you're not working on this particular..." See, the student will reply, "Well, that's true for you. But that's not the way I see things." How do you get anywhere with that sort of relationship?

So, and the student, of course, feels an authority unto themselves, only taking little bits from what they want from different traditions. Building up their own little eclectic style. Yeah? You've all come across those, eh? So you have a bit of yoga and a bit of taijiquan and a bit of *vipassanā*, a bit of Dzogchen. Get it all in, you see. And you decide what you're going to do. And unless you're very, very spiritually inclined, unless there's a clarity in your mind, then you end up with quite a lot of confusion in your spiritual practice.

Now in these character types, there's what's called the confused or the speculative type. And this is the description: "In one of speculative temperament, there is a frequent occurrence of such states as talkativeness, sociability, boredom with devotion to the profitable, failure to finish undertakings, scheming by night and flaming by day, and mental running hither and thither." The scheming by night is planning and scheming. Flaming by day is running around doing. Does that sound... so that's the speculative type, and perhaps also open to skepticism because of that. Open to skepticism, which is that inability to commit yourself entirely to a particular way or path because you know, you've only got your own reason, your own particular experience to go on. You're not prepared to put faith either in a person or in a tradition, either to revelation or to somebody else's guidance. So there's a huge danger there.

And yet, we have in Buddhism this idea of a *Pacceka*buddha. Now, a *Pacceka*buddha is translated as a private Buddha. What it's saying is that some people become enlightened but can't teach. There's a hint that people become enlightened there in other forms, in other traditions. But it's this kernel thing that they can't teach. That's very postmodern, isn't it? Because this person has made their way through their own paths, and in a sense, because it's not part of a tradition, because they've ended up, in a sense, in their own private way... how far they can't teach, I don't know, but it says they can't teach.

Now, one of the amazing things about the spiritual scene today, these days, is the arrival of these independently enlightened beings. Rajneesh, Krishnamurti. Recently the flavour of the month is Eckhart Tolle, Stephen... who am I thinking of... What Is Enlightenment magazine, Andrew Cohen, Ken Wilber. Interesting, isn't it? These people, of course, do have a teaching. Da Free John.

So these people do have, and if you read their stuff, they've obviously had some experience, but not within a particular tradition, or at least they might have touched upon a tradition, but they've had something which is peculiar to them. And then somehow, in their sense, of course, they do have a following. But I dare say there are some people who are enlightened, but simply can't get it across or maybe don't even want it, just happy being enlightened.

So now having discussed these three types of societies, these types of ethos—call it what you wish—premodern, modern and postmodern, I want to try and see what the Buddha's teaching is in terms of the practice. There are two occasions where he's talking to Ānanda. The first one is when he's dying during his last few days. And Ānanda's getting a bit worried as to who will lead the order. So he asks the Buddha who will he appoint to lead the order. And his two main disciples have died. Sāriputta died shortly before his own death and Moggallāna was murdered by thieves on some path or other, so his two main disciples who he perhaps might have handed on his leadership to had died. But his response is, "I'm not going to leave anybody. You should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge with no one else as your refuge." That's very postmodern, isn't it? But then in the same breath he says, "You should live with the *Dhamma* as an island, with the *Dhamma* as your refuge, with no other refuge." Now that's revelation—that's his revelation to the world, he revealed that to the world. That's very premodern, isn't it?

And then there's another occasion where Ānanda is walking with him—he seems to be doing this all the time. Ānanda always says to him, "I think I've understood this," and the Buddha says no he doesn't. It's humorous really. And there's one occasion when he

says to the Buddha, "In my opinion, half the spiritual life is good friendship, is good community." And the Buddha says, "Oh no, the whole of the spiritual life is good companionship, good community." In other words, to be with people who can, as it were, balance your own views. Which would suggest a very modern approach. And when you couple that with the way he would teach, this Socratic way, then you can see he's also got the modernist perspective in there.

So I don't quite know where that leaves us, really. It's really just open to people to have some thoughts around that.

There's also here I've written the *Kālāma Sutta*, which is almost a declaration of free thought, where he turns up at a village, at the Kālāmas, and they complain. They say, "Look, this guru comes along and he says this, and then the next guru comes and says, well, he's a load of rubbish, this is what the truth is. What are we supposed to believe?" And he goes through a whole list of things: don't believe something just because it's tradition, because it makes sense rationally, because somebody with great authority has said so and so on and so forth, but only when you've experienced it as being true for yourself.

Now the last thought that I had was whenever society or whenever we make one of these three things the end all and be all of our spiritual practice—whether it be the written statement or revelation, whether it be reason, or whether it be my own personal experience—it always subordinates the other two to that one. So if you're going to believe in what the Buddha said, then reason is subdued, it goes out the window almost, and your own self goes out. If you say that you've got to be reasonable, then in a sense there comes an undermining of faith in the revelation. And if you put yourself first, then you've almost undermined everything in a sense, because you yourself become the centre of authority. So if a person is deluding themselves into a statement, a belief, it's very difficult for them to get out of that little box they've put themselves into.

So it's only when we have something which reaches beyond the revelation, the rationality and self, where I think we might be able to get this balance of these three. So there's the Buddha's word, which is a touchstone. Then there's our reasoning. And then there's our own personal experience. And that personal experience can only come through actual practice, not through thought, through a basic personal practice. And this is the way the Buddha actually puts the growth of wisdom. First of all you gain wisdom by what you've heard. Then as you take that wisdom in and you think about it, it becomes your understanding, your own thought understanding, but it's still at the

thought level. And it's only then when you turn to the practice and you directly experience the truth that the Buddha is talking about, that it becomes *vipassanā*, insight knowledge.

So I suppose it's a case of not leaning too heavily on these three things, either the Buddha word or rationality or oneself as a central authority.

Now's the time for tomatoes and eggs. I spoke for one hour. That's terrible. Anybody got any thoughts around that? I suppose really what led me to think about this was, you know, what happens after postmodernism? Where do you go after that? I suppose you have to wait and see.

"Well, that's what happens, isn't it? It's too scary, so they become fundamentalists."

Yeah, that is scary. Do your own thing in your own way in your own time.

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's what attracts a lot of people. I think that's what attracts a lot of people in the West. It's surprising how many people don't want to call themselves Buddhists. They don't want the label. And what it suggests to me is they don't want to be part of that tradition as well. They don't want to be labelled. They're happy to be called socialists. When it comes to spirituality, it's like putting on—they feel like a straitjacket or something. Something happens to them. It's as though they give up their autonomy or something.

"Who doesn't like to call themselves a Buddhist but does Buddhist practice? Perhaps you can explain. So why don't you call yourself a Buddhist?"

"I think because for me it's like then I'd have to accept all these things and I'd have to believe them all."

That's very interesting because the whole of the Buddha's position was that you don't believe a word he says. And that's his basis, that everything is up for grabs. You've got to prove it true to yourself. Actually, the early Buddhists never called themselves Buddhists. That's a Christian West thing that we think, like we used to call them Mohammedans. We called them Mohammedanism. The early Buddhists called themselves Saddammikas, followers of the true law. They didn't—I mean the Buddha himself said, "Who sees the *Dhamma* sees me, who sees me sees the *Dhamma*." He was constantly pulling himself out as a personality and laying down the law as he saw it, the truth as he saw it. But it's interesting that you should feel that because sometimes that's how Buddhism comes across, especially in its outer form.

"Sometimes I think there is a bit of a contradiction between you've got to test everything for yourself and you only believe it if you've experienced it. And on the other hand, well, these are the teachings and really just to keep on experiencing until you too agree that the teachings are right. So what's the point in testing?"

No, it's a very good point because I went through a stage when I thought, "Hold on, I'm being brainwashed." Because every teacher was saying, "Impermanence, impermanence," and I'm thinking, "Whoa, yeah, impermanence," and I think, "Well, hold on." Yeah, I suppose it's a case of trusting eventually in the experience of your own meditation. And that will bring you to a direct experience which you don't feel has been conditioned by thought. That's the important thing. If the person has an experience which they think has been conditioned by thought, then that has to be brainwashing. But if the experience is of such a nature that it only reflects, it only realises in a really true way the thought which happens only to be a reflection of the truth, then the tables are turned. Then one realises actually it was a direction—it was somebody pointing and not pushing.

"What do you refer to as practice? What do you think a mark of a practice is?"

Getting out of that—well it's the methodology whereby you prove, this is in Buddhism, it's the methodology whereby you prove that the concept or theory is right. So the scientific method, you know, H₂O and all that. How do you prove that? What's the methodology? What's the practice? The practice is the experiment. So in a sense we are the experiment. There is an enlightenment, so who's going to experience that? How are you going to get there? Do you know what I mean? That would be the practice. Well, that's all you can pass on because in a very postmodern sense, the enlightenment is very personal, which is you. And if somebody says they're enlightened, you can't disprove it. I thought I might try and get more followers, you know. It's amazing what people can believe.

For myself, I don't know, I haven't reflected on that entirely. It's more in the sense of Buddhism coming from an alien culture into this one and it's being picked up by certain historical waves coming through individuals. So Buddhism as a guru-based thing through, say, the Tibetan traditions has a lot of, you know, Buddhism coming through as a very rational approach and investigative through Theravāda. And it attracts—I mean, when I walk into a community of Tibetan Buddhists, it's a totally different feel to a Theravāda community. There's a different feel about it. The people look different as well. It's funny. I can always know—I'm pretty sure that I can always know when somebody's in Zen. It's just the way they hold themselves. They've got this thing about them.

"Do you know why we do something unbalanced? Like if I lived in Tibet, I'd have no choice. I'd have to go—we're in the West, holding to our personality types."

Yeah. In the East, in the Theravāda tradition, you get a whole range of personality types. But when I see Western Theravāda, it's a lot narrower. I think that's true. We've become stereotypical in a particular vein. I think Theravāda Buddhism, because it's only that one Buddhism in a country, tends to have to open up to all these different personalities. So you've got people who just meditate. I mean, like the Mahāsi, you know, he cuts through all that ritual stuff and everything, wouldn't allow any of it. And yet on the other side, the devotional type, there are places they can go to to make these offerings and light candles and all that. Yes, you're right.

But in another society like China, where different strains of Buddhism went, I don't know what it's like there in terms of the different forms. The same as Japan, of course. Sōtō, Rinzai, Shingon. Shingon is the Tantra. Maybe in a place like Japan, there are these different forms which attract a certain type, but they all live, as it were, within this idea of Buddhism. It's an umbrella idea, I don't know.

"My experience is a bit different. Although Theravāda's form, I've always said to myself, I've always been quite surprised at the different personalities. The teachings are different. Each personality teaches a different way, in a way. My experience is that there's quite a range of types of people in one tradition."

Well, I think to a point, but if you look at Europe-wide, Theravādins attract Germans, Anglo-Saxons and Jews. It's very rare to find French, Spanish, Italians. Don't get them. I think I've known one Italian monk who didn't last. A couple of French.

"Where did they go?"

I don't know. I don't know what happened to him. He disappeared in a puff of spaghetti. Yeah, it's a mindset. It's very interesting. The French are huge into Tibetan Buddhism and the Spaniards and Italians too. It's really—it's interesting, you know, because of that Catholicism, perhaps open to it, whereas our more Protestant North... I mean, I'll give you a lovely example.

The vihāra that I used to go to in Birmingham, just up the street, it was a Tibetan vihāra. And I would occasionally go up there just to chat to the monk who was there. I was ordained then myself. And I turned to the kitchen—he was a younger man than myself and he was talking about the Dalai Lama and his visit and he was talking to me. He obviously knew I was Theravādin and he was talking to me and it was just straight, you know, "He came and he gave this very good talk about this." And then just at that

moment a Tibetan nun came in, English Tibetan nun. And he got up to greet her and for a moment forgot I was there, as it were. "And the Dalai Lama came and he passed me. I put up my hand and he touched my hand like that." And then he saw me. Classic.

"You said that whatever tradition, you need to be aware of these various, you know, the fallacies that go on."

That's a good point, yes. The way this is put in the commentaries is that you are that type. I mean you can balance it a bit but in the sense you do have to see yourself as clearly as you can and where your fault line is, and then when you recognise that to work gently against it, you know.

"It was a bit, wasn't it?"

I agree with that. It was a bit. Well, this is Buddhaghosa, you know. Some of you might know him. A great commentarian. Well, it was a bit negative. I have to agree. Where am I? "In one of speculative temperament, there's frequent occurrence of such states as talkativeness, sociability, boredom with devotion to the profitable, failure to finish undertaking, smoking by night, flaming by day and mental running hither and thither."

Yeah, not much hope there, is there? The opposite is just this utter delusion. Yeah, I don't know.

"So what happens then between a teacher and a student in the West? How does it differ? Oh, between a Westerner and a Western teacher?"

Oh, it varies, it varies. I mean, generally speaking, of course, just as this is only my personal experience, but I think it's true for everybody. If somebody, you know, is a law unto themselves, you know, they think, they either don't come at all, or if they do come, it's to prove you're wrong. It's because they've had something niggling in their head and they want to come along and test it and say, "Well, you know."

Most people, well, you've got various levels. I mean, the beginner will always be reliant on the teacher, much more so. But as a person becomes more confident and all that, of course, they don't come. And that's the whole idea, of course. The whole idea is to make a meditator autonomous, isn't it? So they have that inner confidence, they know what they're doing, you know? They don't have to come. I mean, it's a bad teacher who always makes the student feel that they're dependent on them. I think that's terrible. I mean, I always make the open desire at the end that they become enlightened in this very lifetime. But not before me. I consider that unjust.

"I've got more to run still, and one of the things that I've got from postmodernism is not this 'me generation' thing that I agree with what you say about how that comes up, so philosophically it can deconstruct all sorts of things including core aspects of identity, and it's the first time in the West that we've got anything that chimes with *anattā* at all."

And sometimes it's the opposite.

It's actually a generation that sort of can deconstruct the self and can be in touch with experience.

Yeah, no, thanks for pointing that out. Definitely one of the processes that the Buddha's constantly doing is deconstructing the human being. I mean, that's his main avenue of investigation, where he splits you up into the five *khandhas* and the six sense spaces and all that sort of stuff. Yeah, absolutely. That process, definitely.

It's a very radical thinking, and perhaps I was a bit too negative on it. It's a very radical thinking because I heard a program in which there were some very clear distinctions to prove that democracy was definitely not the best form of government, which we're completely sold on because of our modernism. Such examples, the fact that Hitler was voted in, and Berlusconi. And Tony Blair, somebody would say.

So it's like there's a trust in a sort of common reason and goodwill, but obviously there are situations when even that... I think it was Gandhi, wasn't it? Truth can be in a minority of one. I think he said that.

And I think also the little bit that I understand about deconstruction and looking at the text and this idea that there are subtexts going on of which we are not aware, that whole, it's a sort of Freudianism really, isn't it, coming in, the whole idea that when you read a book or anything, a poem or anything, there's stuff going on underneath which you're not actually aware of. And that's giving your interpretation.

So, in terms of spiritual practice, the Buddha talks about these *anusaya*, these latent tendencies, which are sort of almost like these turbulences deep in the mind. We don't know they're there. It's like Jung might have called it the shadow, the part of us we're not aware. Often other people are, of course. And it's just coming through, puts nuances into our speech, gives it a twist. It gives us a shape of the body that we're not aware of, things like that.

They talk about seeing things as they really are, often interlinked with the opening of the heart. And particularly in the Tibetan traditions, they talk about balancing wisdom and compassion, and in the Theravāda traditions, *mettā* and so forth. How is the heart

addressed in Buddhism, which is not romanticized? In the West, we have this head-heart split. But there's very much, though, this knowing things as really are. It isn't a kind of transcendence of a mere intellectual experience.

No, no. No, that phrase, seeing things as they really are, one understanding of that is to see these three characteristics. I mean, that's where the Buddha's always pointing his effort. This idea that everything's transient, there's nothing that can exist of itself, there's no such thing as an entity as such, and that if you have a wrong relationship with the sensual world, that some form of dissatisfaction arises.

Wrong relationship of identity and possession. Once the intelligence, this intuitive intelligence, has grasped that, then the way it expresses itself through the phenomena of the body and personality changes. So whereas before one might have thought that it was good to help others, but the subtext, as it were, in the postmodern sense is, I feel very happy when I do this. And you're not aware of it. So then you only help people because it makes you feel happy. And then you only do things for people that make you feel happy. So when somebody says, can you clean the toilet? You don't want to do it. It's not a real compassion. It's a compassion with this underlying label.

When one sees the dependency upon compassion to make oneself happy and what that's actually doing in the sense of corrupting compassion and making the other one feel uncomfortable in some ways, not good for me, not good for the other, and all that, when one sees that and it becomes open and there's a clarification of that thought, a purification of the heart, then you get that pure compassion coming through. Isn't that right? Something like that?

Yeah, and that's why he rates this as right understanding, right attitude, why it comes down the Eightfold Path. See? And then, right attitude, and then right speech, right action, right livelihood. See, it flows downward from right understanding. I mean, it's not as though you can split those two, split those three. I mean, obviously, if you're doing something, then it's right livelihood. You're saying something or it's right like that and by being aware one understands, so the understanding comes out of the action, as it were. The right heart. So it's those three things feed on each other really, but the kernel of the practice is this awakening of that awareness, that ability to catch these little thoughts that come up that tell us what we're really thinking, which are often embarrassing or we don't want to see. Making that very plain to us. And then we see, ah, that's the underlying, that's the subtext, that's the bit of deconstruction I've got to do there. And that's when you bow to Derrida.

Yeah, definitely. Yeah, yeah. I think Oxford refused to give him a PhD, didn't they? An honorary PhD, didn't they? Remember that? Cambridge, Cambridge! There we are. Dreadful, dreadful. Very recondite, that one.

Are we somewhat caught up in Western thinking, Western dichotomising? Because I think these three types of ethos that you've been talking about, I suppose what you're saying in a way is that these should be all accepted, they all have some value. It's very difficult for us to listen to that without choosing one or the other rather than seeing that they're perhaps all part of the whole thing.

Well, I suppose if I were to... Well, I suppose it's an individual thing. It's balancing those three things within yourself. It's recognizing that there has been a revelation in terms of Buddhism. The Buddha discovered, didn't invent, remember, he discovered these particular things and he revealed them. So it is a revelation. Secondly, so that in a sense is an opening of our hearts to it, an opening of that possibility that revelation is actually true. That would be a pre-modern thing. Putting your trust in it. And that's what, remember, this word *saddhā* means, as one of the five spiritual faculties, putting one's trust in, having a confidence in that.

And then there's this business of really making it, just making it sure that it makes sense to you inwardly. So there's your rationality. It's not a case of just accepting it without question. And then finally, it has to become our personal take on reality through the practice.

So, yeah, I would say it's this recognition, making sure that we're not unbalanced, that we're looking just simply to ourselves, that it has to be fully rational before we'll believe something. Not thinking that everything has to fit into some rational form. Because the Buddha warns us, he says, this stuff is beyond reason. It's subtle, it's beyond reason. You can't reason *Nibbāna*. Because it's beyond words. He says, words only go so far, then they stop.

On the other hand, he's constantly urging us to investigate and to argue with him in a sort of dialogue. And some of the scriptures, remember, people come to him and they don't agree. They go away tutting, as it says, clicking their tongues. Rubbish. He's not unhappy thereby. That's what he says. But when somebody actually receives the Dharma and becomes a follower, he's full of joy.

Psychologie du Bouddha (Lausanne Oct 2009)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 56 min

Dans cette conférence donnée à Lausanne en 2009, Bhante Bodhidhamma présente une exploration approfondie de la psychologie du Bouddha à travers l'enseignement fondamental du paṭicca samuppāda (origine interdépendante). Il examine comment l'ignorance (avidyā) initiale crée une illusion (moha) qui nous conduit à développer l'avidité (lobha) et l'aversion (dosa), générant ainsi les saṅkhāra qui perpétuent le cycle de la souffrance.

Bhante explique comment cette roue fonctionne moment après moment dans notre expérience : depuis la cognition (viññāṇa) et les six bases sensorielles jusqu'au contact (phassa), aux sensations (vedanā), au désir (taṇhā), à la saisie (upādāna), et finalement au devenir (bhava). Il identifie l'espace crucial entre vedanā et taṇhā comme la "porte de secours" où l'équanimité peut briser le cycle automatique de réaction.

L'enseignement culmine avec une discussion sur la conscience pure (viññāṇa anidassana) - cette awareness inconditionnée qui transcende les phénomènes sensoriels et représente notre potentiel d'Éveil. Cette présentation offre une perspective psychologique profonde sur les mécanismes de la souffrance et le chemin vers la libération, particulièrement pertinente pour les méditants vipassanā cherchant à comprendre la dynamique subtile de l'esprit.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa (three times)

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

This evening, I want to see if we can understand the Buddha's psychology. But first, a warning.

The Buddha's companion for twenty years was Ānanda. He was the Buddha's cousin. He had a phenomenal memory and was a man of very great intelligence. Once, while walking with the Buddha, he said, "You know, I think I understand this dependent origination." And the Buddha said, "Oh no, Ānanda, this teaching is very profound." So keeping this in mind, we are going to try to understand the profundity of this teaching of interdependence.

The foundation begins with the word *avidyā*, which means ignorance. But this ignorance is not culpable. It's a state of not knowing. And it's because of this that an error is made. From this error, we create an illusion. So often in Theravāda texts, *avidyā* is translated as delusion or illusion. There are two stages: the stage of not knowing and the stage of illusion, confusion.

If we take what happens to us when we are born, even inside the womb, we begin to feel sensations like our mother's voice. Suddenly we arrive in the world and we are there, so we arrive in the world with no knowledge of what is going to happen, of what is going to happen to us. So we must make sense of this world.

As you know from our own psychology, somewhere around the age of three or four months, an object emerges from this mass of sensations. And this is normally our mother. From this point, we begin to separate ourselves from the world. So at a given moment, we see, "There, that's outside and that's me, that's inside." Then we must learn to create a relationship with this world.

The relationship we are going to create is based on an error. The error is believing that the world is going to give us happiness. We develop two sorts of attitudes toward the world. We seek to acquire what we think is going to make us happy. Everything that makes us unhappy, if what makes us unhappy is too great for us, then at that moment we run away. These two attitudes of aversion and fear, the Buddha makes into just one word.

So in the texts, you see on one side *moha*, illusion. You see *lobha*, which means acquisitiveness, which transforms into greed. On the other side, you have *dosa*, which is aversion. Once we begin to act either from acquisition or from aversion, then all the miseries of the world fall upon us.

So this is the first product of this wheel of interdependence, of dependent origination. These creations are called *saṅkhāra*. We will return to this in a little moment.

So from birth and at each instant, two factors work together. The first is the act of cognition, and on the other side you have body and mind. Body and mind include all sensations, emotions and thoughts. We can say the psychophysical organism. But part of this psychophysical organism is the act of cognition.

For example, you have a television. All this information comes onto this screen. It's on the screen that the image is going to manifest. So this manifestation corresponds to the act of cognition.

Then the Buddha divides body and mind into six senses, but also the mind, here where the mind contacts the brain, this is where the mind makes its first perceptions. So this includes not only perceptions that come from the five senses, but also what happens in the brain and also what happens inside the mind itself.

Unfortunately, we separate what comes from the heart and what comes from the mind. On one side we have the heart and the emotional world, and on the other we have the mental and all the thoughts we create. But according to Buddhism, all this works together. So when I speak of the mind, I also speak of the heart. So the act of cognition also puts on the screen all the thoughts and emotions that appear. This you can experience during meditation. You can be outside this process and see that there is an act of cognition.

The Buddha uses the word *paccaya*, which means dependent on. So dependent on cognition, body and mind are going to appear. If there were no cognition, at that moment you would not know that you are this psychophysical organism. So this organism depends on the six senses. These are what we call the given. To be a human being, you need that. Or at least a conscious human being. We cannot say what people experience when they are in what is called a vegetative state.

Now, because we have this cognition, this body and the six senses, we can have contact. Contact needs three factors: an object that can be here outside or inside like a thought, you need the sense base, and then the act of cognition. For example, if I walk in a dark room, I can see nothing. There is no object. If I am blind, I see nothing. And when I sleep, when I lose my ordinary consciousness, I see nothing either. You can do this with all the senses.

So at the basis of contact, there is what we can say is simple perception. For example, I look at an object, I see the blue color and I see the form. I can also understand that this is a cushion. And so something happens, a relationship is created between both the external world and the internal world, a duality with the world.

Suddenly, we like certain things and we don't like, we hate certain things. Sometimes we like something very strongly and then very strongly the opposite. Even the most neutral feelings will have a tendency to go toward I like something or I don't like. That's a given. This is how we live in the world.

This duality would not cause us any problems. This is how the Buddha exists. He knows what is good and what is not good. Remember his last meal. He was offered a piece of pork, or what pigs eat. When he put that in his mouth, he must have felt something, because in the end, it gave him gastroenteritis that killed him. And he said, before dying, not to blame the person who gave him the food. In reality it was a blessing that it was his last meal.

So this position of "liking or not liking" is now called *vedanā*. So this includes all sensations, all feelings in the body, emotions as they are felt in the body. All of this is included under the term *vedanā* in Buddhist language. We discern them as being pleasant or unpleasant.

This is where this original error manifests. Remember, we seek happiness in the world. And this also means seeking happiness in this body-mind complex. We eat food because it tastes good on the tongue. Otherwise, we would not eat it, usually. Because of this illusion, we now form an active relationship: we want or we don't want.

So there, we have this line where all sensations appear, moment after moment. And we play the game of wanting this, not wanting that, etc. This is often translated as "craving."

At this point, in your meditation, if you can reach this point, and if during meditation you can catch this moment where you feel greed, for example for food, or you experience emotions that are difficult and you feel this resistance of not wanting to go there, if you have found this position of the objective observer, so there is a clear distinction between the one who knows and the reaction to the feeling, ask yourself when you are in this position: "Am I suffering?"

According to the Buddha, at that moment, there is in reality no suffering. But it's the next stage that actually drowns us in dissatisfaction. And this is called *upādāna* or grasping. What happens at this moment is identification or possession. This is where the self manifests. The moment the "I" comes into play, in relation to something that is not beneficial, there is suffering. There is no suffering until the "I" manifests.

At this point, it's very difficult to prevent the next moment from appearing. In fact, I would say that you cannot really stop it. Sometimes, in meditation, you are able to see how one is sucked into the object. And that's identification. For example, you might have experienced in your daily life: you're talking to someone and you feel irritation. Thanks to our meditation, we can feel it. But we are in the conversation. And before we know it, we have lost this separation. And there you are, you are angry. Even at this gross level, you can see identification. I should rather say that it's at the moment when the anger has come out that you can see where you fell.

From the instant there is this identification or this possession, the next step is the act of *kamma*. We do something, either in our head from thoughts, or in speech or in action. And at that moment, something has entered that was only at the stage of potential. For something that is only at the level of wish to be put into action, there needs to be reinforcement. There must be energy to enter into the desire for it to manifest. And that's

the will. So that's why the Buddha says that will is action, so will is *kamma*. You cannot separate will from action. Even in science, once you have thrown a stone, you cannot separate the force from the stone.

In dependent origination, the Buddha calls this *bhava*, "becoming." So this act of becoming is recreated permanently. The self is recreated permanently. Each time the self becomes, it reinforces this becoming.

Once an action has been activated, it has a beginning, a middle and an end. In this action of beginning, middle and end, it has reinforced certain habits. So each time I get angry, I reinforce this habit of getting angry. And thus the wheel turns.

This is understanding dependent origination, moment after moment. For us as meditators, this makes the most sense. But often, it's spread over three lives. The first stage is ignorance, illusion, the habits we have formed in a previous life. When we are reborn again, this conditioning returns in this new life. According to the life we are going to lead, certain conditions will be developed and others will not be. After death, the process of rebirth, life and death manifests again. All this is motivated by a misunderstanding.

So this misunderstanding manifests at one point of dependent origination, just this space between feeling and grasping, desire. So between *vedanā* - what we like and don't like - and the next stage which is wanting, not wanting. And this is where you have the escape door from suffering.

This is why our meditation is concerned with how we react to something. So during sitting, if we feel pain in the knee, that's unpleasant *vedanā*, an unpleasant feeling. When we resist, well that's not wanting. If we can let this resistance pass, we can create a new relationship with pain: equanimity. When we are equanimous, there is no suffering.

It's more difficult when it concerns things that please us. Because when we indulge in something, we are happy. But we don't see the consequences until the moment arrives. For example, when the mind is lost in a beautiful thought, you can see that there is a desire to go there, to create this world. If in our meditation we are not ready to bring back attention, we can suddenly spend a whole meditation period lost in dreams.

So leaving the dream and returning to the body, we can feel excitement or joy. If we remain sufficiently present, we can see the desire that wants to go back into the dream. It's like a magnet. If you can stay present with this and wait for this energy to dissipate, suddenly we can experience a mind without desire. And that is contentment.

Even here, we can have a hint of the Buddha's mind. Even in these small moments, we can begin to have an inkling of what it is to live in the world without desire. So at that moment, we can have a small spark of what it is to live in this world with the Buddha's mind, without desire.

Now, my understanding has been influenced by Mahāyāna teachings, but the teacher with whom I am most in resonance is a Thai master called Mahā Boowa. Do you know him? Some of you may have read him.

In the Theravāda tradition, *Nirvāṇa* is often described as a state of unconsciousness. But this somehow cannot be true since the Buddha was conscious. So it may be that Theravāda has described what happened to the Buddha after he died. We can only imagine what happens when a Buddha dies. As we know, in the Theravāda tradition, the Buddha, at the moment of death, enters *Nibbāna* - complete, total *Nirvāṇa*.

Mais dans la tradition Mahāyāna, le Bouddha peut revenir sur Terre par compassion, ou dans d'autres royaumes, pas seulement sur Terre.

Quand nous commençons à pratiquer *vipassanā*, nous découvrons ce poste que nous appelons l'observateur. C'est celui qui sait, connaît. Donc le mot que je préfère en anglais, c'est l'acte de connaître, de savoir. C'est le connaissant. En utilisant un mot comme ça, nous arrêtons de le transformer en objet.

Quand nous méditons, nous stoppons cette roue de l'origination dépendante. Nous la voyons se dérouler. Et donc ce processus se base à l'intérieur de ce champ de conscience. Et donc ce connaissant, ce champ de conscience, c'est *Satipaṇṇā* — l'attention et l'intelligence intuitive.

Il y a une phrase dans les Écritures Theravāda. Je crois que c'est la seule fois qu'elle apparaît. Elle donne une description très positive de ce niveau d'attention et la traduction est comme suit : « Il y a une conscience qui n'est pas teintée d'aucun sens. Sans limites » — ce qui signifie qu'il ne peut y avoir aucun phénomène. Les phénomènes créent des limites. « Et dans toutes les directions, remplie de lumière. »

Et ça, c'est la réponse à une question. La question est : « Où est-ce que les quatre éléments disparaissent ? » Le Bouddha dit que c'est une mauvaise question. Mais plutôt : « Où est-ce que ces quatre éléments ne trouvent pas leurs pieds ? » En d'autres mots, où ne peuvent-ils pas être trouvés ? En d'autres mots, où est-ce que nous ne pouvons pas les trouver ?

Donc la terre, le feu, le vent et l'eau — c'est le monde matériel. Mais ça fait référence au monde matériel tel que nous l'expérimentons. Donc c'est la base de toutes nos expériences. Donc le Bouddha dit qu'il y a une conscience qui n'a rien à voir avec le monde phénoménal. Et ça c'est l'expérience du *nirvāṇa*.

Quand nous sommes dans cette position de l'observateur objectif, nous sommes à un seul pas de cette expérience, même si c'est une expérience courte, momentanée.

Quand vous êtes dans la position de l'observateur, celui qui sait, celui qui ressent, il y a la connaissance de quelqu'un qui sent, sait et ressent. C'est comme une réflexion. C'est par exemple quand vous regardez la télévision et vous voyez votre reflet dans l'écran. Donc maintenant, vous pouvez soit regarder la télévision, soit voir votre reflet en train de regarder la télévision.

Parfois dans l'assise le sentiment de l'observateur peut être très fort. Donc, puisque c'est un objet, cela ne peut pas être vous. Il ne peut pas être vous, il ne peut pas être le vrai vous, c'est un objet. Le ressenti d'un soi ou le ressenti d'une présence — donc ce sentiment d'une présence, ça ne peut pas être vous puisque vous êtes en train de vous observer. Donc si c'est un objet, ça ne peut pas être le sujet.

Maintenant, nous pouvons, par un acte de volonté, nous déplacer dans cette position à l'intérieur de nous-mêmes. Et par un acte de volonté, nous pouvons nous placer dans ce poste d'observateur. Parce que ça fait partie du pouvoir du soi. Mais le soi ne peut pas se débarrasser du soi. C'est un grand problème.

Donc c'est là que les enseignements du Bouddha sont vraiment les plus subtils. Donc il dit, continuez d'observer l'objet avec l'intention de voir les trois caractéristiques. Et à travers notre concentration, le sens du soi disparaît. Et pendant un moment, il n'y a que le fait de cette connaissance. Il y a une absorption. À ce point, nous expérimentons la pure conscience. Donc ces petits moments sont des instants de *nirvāṇa*. Mais je ne les appelle pas le *nirvāṇa*. Ce sont juste des moments d'attention pure où il n'y a pas de souffrance.

Et même dans la vie de tous les jours cela peut être une expérience. Donc quand vous êtes en train de faire quelque chose de bénéfique, votre cœur est dans cet état de bonté et pendant cette action, vous perdez toute notion de conscience de soi. Et quand vous redevenez conscient de vous-même, vous pouvez regarder cette action et vous rendre compte que deux choses n'étaient pas présentes : la conscience de soi et le temps. Le temps n'existe pas quand vous demeurez dans cet instant présent qui est toujours présent.

La raison pour laquelle il est toujours présent, c'est parce que cette connaissance n'a aucun début et aucune fin. Il n'a pas de naissance et de mort. C'est l'inconditionné.

Et cela, le Bouddha le déclare clairement dans son propre vers de victoire. Donc le Bouddha témoigne : « J'ai parcouru les vies les unes après les autres. Mais maintenant je t'ai vu, constructeur de maison. J'ai cassé les toits et les murs. J'ai atteint l'esprit inconditionnel. » *Asaṅkhatam cittam*, c'est les mots du pāli. L'esprit inconditionnel, la conscience inconditionnée. Nous n'avons pas vraiment une parole pour exprimer cela. « Et toutes mes défaillances ont été complètement détruites. »

Cela est notre destin. Nous pouvons nous réjouir. Même si le chemin est difficile, nous devons entreprendre ce chemin. Et vous qui habitez en Suisse et grimpez sur ces montagnes, vous n'avez pas de problème.

Et cela, nous pouvons l'appeler cet espoir existentiel profond. Nous sommes tous destinés à être pleinement éveillés. Je peux juste espérer que mes mots ont pu vous aider un peu, que vous puissiez vous libérer plus tôt que tard. Merci.

Revising the Principles of Vipassanā

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 43 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma revisits the core principles of vipassanā meditation, offering practical guidance for dealing with challenging mental states. He begins by exploring dukkha as 'a hard place' and explains how our conditioning through thought and imagination creates cycles of anxiety, depression, and suffering. The talk examines how we unconsciously project our internal states onto the world, creating a feedback loop that reinforces our conditioning.

Bhante emphasizes the crucial practice of establishing an 'observation post' within ourselves—a transcendent position from which we can witness thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations as objects rather than identifying with them. This shift from 'my knee hurts' to 'pain is there' represents a fundamental reorientation that breaks our habitual patterns of attachment and aversion. He explores the Second Noble Truth through the lens of our constant wanting and not-wanting relationship with experience, showing how this creates perpetual conflict.

The talk addresses practical meditation challenges including working with emotional states like anger by experiencing them as pure sensation rather than story, and dealing with sloth and torpor without suppressing these energies. Bhante emphasizes that liberation comes not through changing our conditioning but through developing a new relationship with it—allowing these energies to naturally exhaust themselves through mindful observation rather than mental indulgence.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.

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

So it's just an opportunity to revise the principles of meditation and go over the problems that we come across in terms of dealing with certain mental states.

One of the core words of the Buddhist teachings is this word *dukkha*, which translates as a hard place. So we're in a hard place. And the idea is that if we get it right, it'll become *sukha*, it'll be a happy place, an easy place. And the process whereby we bring that about is a dual process, both of allowing old conditionings based on wrong understandings to exhaust themselves and developing new conditionings.

So from an ordinary relative phenomenal point of view, the Buddha—Siddhartha Gautama, when he was fully self-enlightened—the personality, the character, was still conditioned, conditioned by the situation he found himself in. But according to him, he was always happy. Happy or calm, equanimous. "The world argues with me, I don't argue with the world."

Now if we investigate how we create these conditionings then hopefully we can go back on that process. One of the things we do is to use our intellect and our imagination to create within ourselves and to develop within ourselves a particular conditioning. So if for instance we have already a disposition within us which is anxious, then through our thoughts and through our imaginings we'll create an anxious world around us. We'll worry, worry about this, worry about that.

And with all these things there's a presumption that the more you worry the less you'll have to worry about, but the opposite tends to be true. The more you worry the more you worry, and then suddenly you begin to wake up and you begin to perhaps ask the question: am I the one who's creating the worry?

If you have a disposition which is depressive, always looking at the negative side of things, we tend to find more and more things to be depressed about and there's a relief in that because you're always proving yourself right. "I am depressed, the world is depressing, everywhere I look it is depressing." And what we get ourselves into is a lock situation where you don't see the end of that spiral. You try to break out of it, you try to buy some ice cream or something, but then you worry whether the ice cream is doing you any good and you get depressed about it.

So when we realise that it's thought which is actually creating the world for us—thought and imaginings—information comes in and we play with it inside the mind, as it were. And we play with it from a particular disposition, a particular position that we've taken in life, and then we project it, we deposit it on the world. And the world funnily enough mirrors it back to us. So if you go around feeling depressed, looking depressed, everybody else around you gets depressed, and if they don't want to get depressed they don't want to see you. So you end up getting more depressed because now the world is truly depressing.

Now, all the Buddha is saying is, if you stop for a minute and try to take a position within ourselves to observe the mind, to observe what it's actually doing, then we'll come very quickly to understand that all we have to do is stop this form of indulgence. And that's really the training of *Vipassanā*.

So we're discovering a place in ourselves, rediscovering a place in ourselves and constantly trying to re-establish it, a place where we can observe what's going on. And we start with placing the attention on the body itself because that's the most obvious. You can sense the body, you can feel the body, it's not that difficult to get in contact with it. And one of the main reasons for doing that is to try and release this intelligence, try to draw it out of its confusion with thought. That's the first thing.

This intelligence we have, this intuitive intelligence, generally speaking defines itself as thought, as imagining—"I think therefore I am," that statement. But when we take this position in ourselves of the observer, of this observation post, we can actually see the images in the mind; they can become very clear to us. Thoughts are often too quick for us and we wake up after a sequence of thoughts and then reflect on it as some form of thinking or worrying or whatever. But in some good states of concentration when the mind is really steady, when this attention is really clarified, you might even see a thought passing in front of you like a neon sign. And these experiences are telling us that there is something as it were prior to or beyond the thinking process.

When we go into emotions normally or often we find ourselves hijacked by a particular mental state—suddenly you're angry, suddenly you're anxious, whatever. But when you actually sit like this and find that observation post, when a mental state arises you can, as it were, feel it as an object. You can investigate it as if it were something you had in your hands, a piece of putty, a dough. You can actually begin to investigate the feelings, the sensations that we would normally call anger or depression or anxiety. So you're becoming intimate with your psychic life in a way that you wouldn't normally be.

Normally the ordinary person wouldn't make a distinction between that knowing and what they're experiencing. They are what they feel, they are what they're experiencing, they are their thoughts, they are the body. If the body hurts, it's me, it's me that's hurting. But here, by taking that observation post, when we find pain in the body, discomfort in the knee, whatever, it becomes an object. We've distanced ourselves from it. That's our first position, as it were.

As soon as you do that, as soon as we make any of this stuff an object, whether it's the thoughts or imaginings, emotions, feelings, sensations, we've created a very different relationship to it. Before I would have said my knee hurts, but when I'm sitting in meditation here like this and the pain comes and I say pain is there—it's not mine—there's a break in my relationship with it and I can begin to see it as just sensation.

When I can begin to distance myself from these things like this, I become aware of this other relationship that I've had, which at the moment I'm not indulging. And here we're coming to this second noble truth. So the first one is that there is this unsatisfactoriness or suffering that we've created, and the second one is the role of desire. Now we have to be careful with this English word "desire" because it doesn't hit the nail on the head. It's really a relationship we have with the world where we're constantly trying to be happy with it. We're constantly trying to find a way of being in the world which makes us happy so that this happiness is dependent on the world. When I say the world here I mean on what we experience.

So how does that manifest within us? Well, whenever I get something pleasant, a pleasant feeling in the body—say a nice joy comes up or a calmness—I immediately want to disappear into it, absorb into it. I may want to indulge it, I want to maintain it there.

Sometimes we're sitting here and finally we can say we've got some steady attention and we feel that we're calm and peaceful and we're really watching. And then somebody comes in and bangs the door or sneezes into the back of our necks. And all hell's let loose inside. You want to kill somebody. And what that shows us is that we've entered into this beautiful space and unwittingly we've tried to hold it, we've tried to contain it, we've tried to not let it move. And in that way, whether we like it or not, we find ourselves in conflict with the world. So when somebody sneezes, we feel irritated by it. But if we were in that easy state of open awareness, there would just be the sneeze and the sneeze would disappear. It would just be like a bird flying across your sight. Just one thing happening after another.

Now, when we are maintaining that, we'll also see that whenever something unpleasant arises, there's always this resistance to it. You just don't want that. And that resistance is a relationship of wanting to get rid of, destroy, annihilate anything which I am experiencing as undermining my comfort, undermining my particular state. So again I find myself in conflict. I'm always in conflict with what's happening. Either I'm trying to hold on to something and stop something entering into that experience because this is the way I want to be, or I'm trying to get rid of something which I find upsetting. It's exhausting. And if of course this pain or whatever that comes up begins to get a bit too much for me, then the anxiety comes, the fear comes. So those are our three basic positions in the world.

We're either holding on to something, we're either being greedy, we're either trying to maintain a particular situation, or we're trying to get rid of it. We're trying to get rid of a situation. And if that situation is too much for us, we run for it. That's it.

If we observe ourselves, even if you're just sitting watching TV, if you watch yourself, you're constantly shifting your position, moving around the armchair. You just can't maintain any place which is slightly uncomfortable.

Now that wouldn't be so bad in itself, I suppose, were it not that it was based on a wrong understanding as to where we're going to find happiness. I mean, if happiness could be found by playing this wanting-not-wanting game, then we ought to keep playing it. Because, well, we want to be happy. Very simple. But it's when we realise it's not going to deliver that, and we look at our fundamental position.

There's an unspoken presumption that happiness is based upon the sensual world. In other words, I've got to find happiness within this mortal frame, within this body, within this mind. And all the time, the messages I'm getting from the world is, it's not possible. And it's not possible because things are changing anyway. I can't maintain anything. As soon as I try to hold on to something, I just find that it slips out of my grasp. It's like holding water. And then I find I've not got that much control.

So to define myself, to define a self, surely it's about—if this is me, I should be able to control it. If this is my body, if this is me, if my body is me, then I should be able to do what I want with it. I should be able to make it grow a bit more, hopefully. I should be able to eat as much as I want and not grow fat. I should be able to do whatever I want with it, but I can't. I find myself in a peculiar situation of being in a body over which I've got minimal control. I mean, I can wave my arms about and all that. I can't stop it aging. I can't stop it dropping dead. That's the important thing. I don't mind the aging bit, I just don't want to drop dead. I don't mind the body as it is, it's great, I just don't want it to fall ill.

So here we have, we're in this peculiar state where there's a drive within us to be happy in the world and the world just isn't playing ball. It's just not responding in a way that it ought to really. So maybe I've got it wrong.

And this is the Buddha—remember, the Buddha's own life story mirrors this same path. The Buddha isn't just simply the exemplar, the one who actually sets an example. He's the archetype. All of us have to follow this particular path if we want to find this liberation.

And what we begin with through this meditation is this process of renunciation. Now, renunciation is not self-mortification. We're not trying to make ourselves suffer. There's no point in that at all. And this is also something that the Buddha discovered. He went through a period of self-mortification. And he ended up by saying it was just

suffering, more suffering, unprofitable, and well, ignoble really—beating yourself up. So whatever renunciation is, it's not a case of putting ourselves into painful situations just for the sake of it.

Renunciation is that process of beginning to let go of those things that we find ourselves attached to, those things that we are depending on for happiness, because we begin to realise that that isn't true happiness. Any happiness which is dependent on something is fragile. If my happiness in the evening is dependent on watching Coronation Street, it can be very upsetting if the TV isn't working. I then get quite excited. I have to phone friends and ask to put it on DVD and stuff like that.

So the idea of renunciation is to find out where the attachments are. You don't have to go the whole hog, drop everything and live under a tree. But you can do it in simple ways. You can find out where you're getting stuck, where you're holding on to something, where you find yourself getting upset over what is logically a rather silly thing. And you can begin to, as it were, withdraw your indulgence in that. And just feel the pain, the pain of letting go.

And that pain of letting go isn't something which is bad, it's something which is good because it's releasing us from that attachment. That process of experiencing the pain of release is kernel to spiritual growth, because what is it that we're releasing? We're releasing that—not simply that attachment to an object. I mean that would be just too restricted. We're actually releasing ourselves from a wrong view, a wrong understanding. That whatever happiness is to be found, it can't be found in an ephemeral, transient, unpredictable world.

So by letting go of things as best we can, we're actually repositioning ourselves in the world, finding a different relationship with it. And it's beginning to discover that which has the effect on us of developing a sense of calmness with it, of developing a sense of patience—just bearing with things without irritation, not seeing that as a suffering.

Now that's really one of the main things that we're learning when we sit in this meditation posture. Finding that observation post within us, we've already discovered a transcendent position. What we mean here by transcendent is that it is no longer involved or drawn into any confusion with, any identity with, any possession of whatever is being experienced.

So at a very simple level, if I'm sitting here and pain comes to my knee, in normal daily life I'd say my knee is hurting and I would try and do something about it. But here, this is an opportunity to release myself from this relationship of "my knee."

If you were walking along the road and your leg fell off, you'd look at that leg and you'd say, well, is that my leg? It was my leg, but now it's on the road. How can I say it's my leg? That's a fiction. If somebody says, "Whose leg is that?" "That's my leg. It's just fallen off." Now because you've reached this perfect equanimity, you would simply note that your leg had fallen off. And then you would hop merrily into Costa's for a coffee. It would be of little concern.

But that's not what would happen really. I mean, one would be in a state of shock. And that's really the problem with this identity. If it's me, if it's me we're talking about, then I lose a piece of me. That goes deep. That's why anything which happens to the body—we might be glib about it, we might say "oh it's only the body" and all that—but when something serious moves in the body then you come across this huge fear, this shock. And that's the measure of our delusion about who we are.

But it doesn't take that much reflection to realise that we can't be the body, even on a simple level. Well, have you any idea what's going on in your liver at the moment? Do you know where it is? Do you experience your toenails growing? Do you lose a part of yourself when you cut them off? So just reflecting on the body as body, as an actual physical...

piece of mechanism, an organism, you begin to realise actually you don't know it. We can't even see our own faces, for heaven's sake. When you look in the mirror, you think everybody sees you that way, but actually, have you done the double mirror thing? It comes as a shock. You never thought your ear was that big.

Have you done that? Get two mirrors and look into the one that's looking into the mirror that's catching your face. And that's how people see you. It's always the other way around. Don't get too depressed when you see it. Even when you see yourself in the mirror, even in that way, it's only a representation. We can't see our own face as we can see other people's faces.

So this definition of who I am, you see, then you draw yourself into yourself with emotional states. And we find that there's not much control over that either. These emotions arise and pass away themselves. And they're often attached to certain things like meeting people and Coronation Street, things like that. To say to myself now, at this moment, "I will be happy," to command happiness—can't do it. You can pretend, you can jump up and down and be happy, but the heart won't respond on command. You don't go to bed thinking, "Well, tomorrow I'll wake up depressed." You go to bed with the expectation that you wake up refreshed, but you're not. Sometimes you're depressed.

Thoughts. There we seem to have some sort of ability to guide our thoughts, to put our thoughts in a particular way and guide them, as it were. But often it's the thoughts that overtake us. We find ourselves dominated by compulsive thinking. We can't escape the little boxes that we've created for ourselves.

So what the meditation is trying to make us do is to form a different relationship with it. And what we find to our joy is that actually we don't have to do anything. We don't have to change anything of the conditioning that we have. This is quite a relief. You don't have to do anything about our depressions and our guilt and our feelings of embarrassment and all that. You don't have to do anything about it. All we have to do in that sense is this passive ability, this ability to stay with what's arising and give them the time, give them just that time and that inner space to express themselves.

And we find that when you just watch it like that, it evaporates. It begins to expend its energy. And in so doing, it'll eventually draw those things to an end, because it's only when they creep up into this thinking mind, into the imagining mind, that they develop themselves. It's only through thought that an emotion develops itself. And that's a really important insight to make into our psyche. That if you stop thinking depressing thoughts, the depression cannot develop. On the other hand, if you don't feel the depression, then the depression stays in the body as a turbulence, as an energy which isn't doing us any good, creating discomfort, illness, headaches, and all that sort of stuff.

So it's not as though we can get rid of these conditionings at once, but we now know that we don't want to indulge them through thought. And so we're left with just this situation of sitting with them and allowing them to express themselves.

Now when you contact an emotional state—say anger—you feel irritated about something and you've cut off this avenue of constantly going over what it was that upset you, and you come into the body and you feel the anger within your body, and you're still saying to yourself, "This is anger, this is anger," not "I am angry." See? You've separated it. This is anger.

As you, as it were, drop into that emotional state, so you're getting intimate with it, you want to find out what constitutes the emotion of anger. As you go into it, you may be surprised to find that all there is is heat and movement. There's nothing there. The only thing that made it substantial was your positioning of saying, "I am angry." As soon as you say "I," "me," it becomes solid. It becomes something. Whereas when you experience it as just an emotional state, as just a sensation state, you find there's nothing there.

And eventually that little flowering of anger begins to just fade away, fades out. Now it's not as though that's the end of it, because there are these deeper dispositions which take their own time to purify, and that purification of the heart shall we say goes on automatically as soon as you're in this position of observing, of feeling, of experiencing. That's automatic. You don't have to work at it. You don't have to do anything.

And to maintain that objectivity, to maintain that position where you're not going to identify with this stuff, you're not concerned with the therapy of it. As soon as you do that, you become your own therapist. And that's always a danger, isn't it? Because it's the deluded trying to fix the deluded. So abandon that, it's absolutely hopeless. Instead, you see, the Buddha says, don't worry about that. Just let that burn itself out. We don't have to worry about that. That'll happen naturally. What we need to do is to correct our relationship to it.

And he points to these three positions. So the first one is this impermanence. So we begin to see that this solid thing that we used to call depression, anxiety and all that is actually nothing but just an amorphous blob of sensations. There's actually nothing there, there's no substance to it.

And you begin to see that clearly when you experience it just as arising and passing away of sensations—heat, pressure and so on. And by doing that, you come to the second understanding that if that's so, then there's no substance to it. It is insubstantial, it has no entity of itself, it's not an integer, it doesn't have any being, it doesn't have any existence, it's just energy. And in fact I tend to look upon my own emotional life as just weather patterns.

I mean, what's a storm? It's just a couple of clouds coming over and a couple of bangs and flashes and then it moves on. It just blows itself out.

And the third thing is this position that we have caused by that wrong relationship of wanting and not wanting, wanting and not wanting. So we're trying to access this transcendent point. We're at the apex of a triangle and we're looking down upon what is happening as it were beneath us. And on one side we're getting all those things that we've defined as pleasurable and on the other side as unpleasurable, just a longer continuum. And that's your baseline, that's the given of human life. You can't not be alive and not know that things are pleasant or unpleasant. That's never the problem. Things are always going to be pleasant or unpleasant.

Then you get this line that runs parallel to it, which is our reaction to it, which is wanting what is pleasant, not wanting what is unpleasant. And that reaction to it is causing the conflict. And when that reaction passes, there is only the pleasant and the

unpleasant. And having abstracted ourselves, having uprooted ourselves from an identity with the pleasant and unpleasant, we find ourselves in this transcendent position, you see, where there is just experience.

So the Buddha, when he died of a stomach disease, even right towards the end, he's asking, "Are there any more questions?" I mean, the man's dying. He's got gastroenteritis. And he's lying there and he knows he's dying. He knows he's dying and he says, "Is there any more questions before I go?" And then just before he goes, he gives that salutary command. He says, "All compounded things are transient. Work diligently for your liberation." And then he dies, peacefully.

What will be our last words? "Why me?" Why not you? Just the arising and passing away of the human body. And then when he died, there were those younger monks around who weren't so trained and they began to cry. And the elderly monks and the monks who were more advanced said, "What are you crying for? Didn't you know that everything arises and passes away?" And their attachment to the Buddha, you see, was based upon that wrong view.

So that's all we're doing, in a sense, through our meditation, is discovering a new relationship with the world. And the core practice of just being able to turn inward and to this introspection, just to be able to observe ourselves, you see. So this intelligence that we have, this intuitive intelligence, it just begins to understand. And that understanding then begins to change our attitudes. And that attitude then begins to express itself in the way we speak, what we do, how we act, and through our livelihoods. And that's how this thing flows. It's a systemic effect on our lives.

So that's what you might say the more passive side of the practice. The active side is what we'll come to this afternoon, which is, of course, developing the beautiful mind, developing love, compassion, joy, peacefulness, and then through that to move into the world.

So just to recap that: when we're sitting and the mind is wandering, the mind is thinking, unwittingly we're developing the old conditioning, we're making things worse. So we've got to be really right there with it. As soon as we wake up, we have to acknowledge what the mind is doing. If the mind's worrying, we're not worried about content. Just don't give an ounce of interest to content. Just worry—worry about the attitude. So if you see that you're worrying about something, so "worry." When you come into the body, see if you can feel the worry as an emotional state within the body. And if you can't find it, you go back to the breath. And if you can find it, if it's there quite

obvious to you, then stay with it, wait for it to die out. And you'll see the thoughts die out, and then that connection between thought and emotion becomes more apparent to us.

If you're sitting there and you feel a disturbance in the body, a tension in the stomach, something like that, you see, don't guess. Don't say to yourself, "This is anxiety," or "This is worry," or "This is grief" or something. See? Just feel it as feeling. That feeling, which may very well be an emotional state caught up in that part of the body, may rise to the point in the heart, into the heart centre where you can recognise it as an emotion. Or it may dissipate itself through the body. So that when that tension goes, that particular mental state has also been exhausted. This is also true of illnesses that are caused by the mind. Psychosomatic illnesses. Not all illnesses are caused by that, of course.

And the only other thing that I'll mention just towards the end is the other side, which is this disappearing into sleep. So remember, the mind needs rest, sure. The body needs rest. But if you've had a good night's sleep and you feel generally rested, you see, then in your meditation, if this dullness comes and this feeling of lethargy, so you don't fool yourself. Don't say, "Well, I must be tired." Because this is sloth and torpor.

And the instruction there is to remain awake at all costs. So whether you open your eyes or stand up, or if it gets really bad, do some walking meditation. But be absolutely steadfast in your commitment and refuse to be annihilated.

And when you do the walking meditation or your standing, you see, don't try and get rid of it. See, this is the thing that we tend to do. You feel a bit lazy and you go jumping up and down, you see. But actually all you're doing is suppressing that conditioning which is drawing us into oblivion. So when you feel the heaviness and the dullness, stay with it. Make that your object, you see. Allow that energy to dissipate itself. We don't see it as energy because it's drawing us down into something. But it's like black holes. You get drawn into the inner black hole. So it's a real energy, it's a force that wants us to move towards oblivion.

And we teach ourselves that every time the alarm goes and you turn over and wait for the snooze button. Every time you do that, there's another little weight just drawing us down into oblivion. And of course the attraction of oblivion is that there is no suffering. There's no suffering in oblivion. Wonderful. But unfortunately we keep waking up. So that's our problem.

So when we come across this other side, the bit that is lacking energy, when we feel that sort of heaviness and the dullness of the mind, just open your eyes, stand up, stretch yourself. But you're not trying to get rid of it. Don't get into a battle with these conditionings. Just give them the space and time to just burn themselves out.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Right Relationship

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 42 min

In this Christmas season talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the ten pāramīs (perfections) - the qualities that carry us to "the other shore." He explores how the Buddha's teachings on insight must express themselves through our relationships, beginning with the foundational principle of ahimsa (non-harm). The talk focuses particularly on dāna (generosity), showing how true giving requires renunciation and creates meaningful connections with others.

Bhante discusses how renunciation differs from mortification - not punishing the body, but giving things up to discover where our attachments lie. He explains how generosity, gratitude, and patience form a "virtuous circle" that deepens our relationships and creates genuine happiness through meaningfulness rather than mere pleasure. The teaching covers all ten perfections: dāna (generosity), sīla (morality), nekkhamma (renunciation), paññā (wisdom), vīriya (energy), khanti (patience), sacca (truthfulness), adhiṭṭhāna (resolution), mettā (loving-kindness), and upekkhā (equanimity).

Drawing from commentary literature, Bhante shows how these perfections prevent virtues from becoming their opposite - how equanimity prevents love from becoming attachment, compassion from becoming pity, and joy from becoming mere excitement. The talk emphasizes that authentic spiritual practice must manifest in how we relate to others, creating connections based on giving rather than acquiring.

Namo tassa bhagavato arhato samma sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arhato samma sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arhato samma sambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I just thought I'd continue that theme of relationship. Normally at Christmas I do the *paramis*, the ten perfections. The perfections were — it translates to the word *parama*, which means the other shore. It's what takes you to the other shore. They were a later collection of what the commentaries thought was important about the Buddha's teachings.

But just to try and put it in, I'll just speak them and then you can see what they are. So there's *dāna*, there's giving, there's morality. There's renunciation. There's wisdom, which is a mental virtue. Energy, patience, truthfulness, resolution, loving-kindness,

and equanimity. So those are the ten that were chosen by the wise ones out of the Buddhist teachings. And as you know, the Mahayana only have six, so that makes us much more superior.

Just to talk about relationships. So, remember that we were trying to say last night that there's a part of the Buddha's teachings about insights, about actually understanding who and what we are and how we create suffering. But the other part is how it expresses itself in the world through our relationships.

Occasionally when I watch these videos on TED, have you come across TED? It's a website that has lots of talks by experts. Some are very well, I like them. But these people who are into positive psychology, they come across this word connections. That's their way of expressing relationship, which to me is really just about reducing it to some sort of communication. Because academics will always try to find another word on the presumption that they're coming up with something remarkably new. It's quite difficult to use ordinary words like relationship.

So the fundamental relationship that the Buddhas talk about, and which is throughout the East, is *ahimsa*, no harm. And this was variously translated. So the Jains, as you know, thought that when you did harm, even if you didn't mean it, you were going to get your comeuppance. So he basically avoided stepping on ants. They'd come back and bite you in the bum or something. And you see them, brushing their way before they take a step as a very great sensitivity to the amount of harm we can do just because either we're not aware of it or we don't want to be aware of it. It's just ignorance, is it?

But from the Buddha's point of view, that wasn't really the problem. His problem was always to do with how we create suffering for ourselves. And therefore it was an internal thing. And he brought it down to this whole business of intention, empowering an intention. So when we empower intention, remember, you create a habit. An action — the usual progression. An intention, an action, a habit, a personality, and a destiny. That's the sort of trajectory. So our personalities are just these combination of habits.

And it's really recognizing what a habit's doing, if it's doing any harm, then to undermine it, to not go with those particular intentions. But our inner intentional life expresses itself outwardly in obvious ways in what we do, in more subtle ways in body language. And this immediately creates a connection, to use that wonderful word. So you're establishing a relationship.

And the relationships are telling us what we're giving out in the world, even when we're not actually fully aware of it. People with passive aggression, where the person's obviously manifesting aggression, but when you say they're angry, they say, not me, I never get angry. And it's that sort of inability to see ourselves as we are, even in relationship. But when something happens in a relationship, it's mirroring something back to us. Of course, you've always got to take into consideration that the other person's doing the same.

So that's another thing we say, isn't it, that when two people meet, there are six people there. There's me as I see myself, there's me as you see me, and there's me as I really am. And the same applies to you. So in this sort of web of delusion, it's very difficult to work out how or why things go wrong.

But in terms of the Buddha's teachings, at the root of this problem lies this acquisitiveness, this desire, and deeper than that, this sort of sense of thirst, of lack. Other writers use that word, lack. And in order to undermine that, we practice certain things that cut deep into that business of finding safety, finding happiness in acquisition. And that's the process of renunciation.

So again, I'm sure you all know the distinction that's often made between renunciation and mortification. So mortification was based on some idea that the soul was held down by the heaviness of the body. You get it in Christian understanding too, don't you? If the eye offends you, pluck it out. So people often believe it's the body at fault. Sex is at fault. Our sexual powers are what's evil, not the way we use them. That's the devil drawing us down into the pleasures of life.

So the idea was, well, one idea was at that time, that as you undermined the pleasures of the body, the soul released itself. And you often get that sort of self-mortification in other religions too. The Buddha saw that as just more suffering. But he didn't give up the idea of renunciation, you see. It shifted, the definition shifted, and it shifted to giving something up to see where the attachment was. It's as simple as that.

So our fast, depending on what came up for you in the fast, would show you at times your attachment to certain patterns of behavior, you see. Now that would be a sort of negative use of renunciation. In other words, you're positively giving something up in order to see where your attachment is.

So, for instance, we might disguise our loneliness — everybody feels lonely at some time or other — by distracting ourselves, watching TV, listening to radio, always having some input, so we're never actually in contact with the inner person. And then when you go into a silence and there's nothing there and you're not distracting the mind, then

suddenly you're on your own, you see. And in that oneness, there's a sort of feeling of being abandoned, unloved. Nobody loves me. How could they? I'm horrible. And it's getting in touch with that nasty feeling of loneliness and unlovedness.

But, of course, we would do it in order to get in touch with it, to feel it, to actually begin to explore that feeling and find out where its basis was, where it's coming from. And we also know that in that exploration, that malevolent energy that we've created through attachment — we have defined love as how much another person can fulfill our needs. That's what we understand love to be. So when there's nobody there to fulfill our needs, then of course I'm completely unloved. I mean, no Christmas present. I don't get any more Christmas presents.

So when we cut deep into that, and when we say cut deep into it, we're not trying to understand it intellectually. See, then that takes you off somewhere else. Cutting deep means going right into the pain of loneliness. Take that as an example. Then, of course, we find that it begins to transform. The transformation happens quite naturally. It can happen very suddenly. Suddenly you find it's gone and you're perfectly happy with yourself and you've discovered solitude.

Other times it sort of fades out, but there's a sort of a murky sort of stuff there and not going anywhere. But even so, some of that energy is in the process of transforming, of moving to the upper. In fact, I'm trying to use this new word, sublimating. It just, there's no in-between state, it goes from one state to the other.

So that's the negative, to use that word, use of renunciation. We're trying to find out where we're stuck, where we're holding on to things, trying to let go of things, you see.

But any time we behave from the heart of love, there must be some form of renunciation. And the Buddha points this out in *dana*. That's one of his main teachings, *dana*, which is generosity. Whenever he's talking to lay people, he always starts with *dana*. And he points out that anybody can be generous, even a thief. Like after they've stolen your money, they can give it to somebody else who's in need. Or Robin Hood.

So, for generosity, it comes even before *sila*, which means these five basic rules of no harm that we chant every morning. It's even before that. You can be a really ugly, terrible person, but still be kind to your dog and give it biscuits when it's hungry. So that's the easiest one to generate.

Now, of course, every time you're generous, you must be giving something up for the benefit of somebody else. So just in that process, there is a process of renunciation, and renunciation here, not feeding into myself, into my selfish needs, and giving it up for somebody else.

And so one of the things, of course, that excites, and this is the little matrix that sort of spins around, are these three things. What makes generosity very easy, at least to practice, is developing gratitude. I remember once reading Meister Eckhart, 13th century mystic, who said that if the whole of your life you said thank you, that would be enough. I mean, that was his. That's how important he felt this attitude of gratitude was, thankfulness.

I think it's one of the nice things of America that they have that Thanksgiving Day. I think we have one, don't we? Doesn't the Church of England have an autumn Thanksgiving, doesn't it? Is that what it is? When they collect all the stuff for harvest. Harvest festival, isn't it? Is that what you said? Harvest? Oh, sorry, I thought you said hog. Don't ask me why. You said harvest, I heard hog. You see how wars start.

In fact, it reminds me of a lovely moment in the car with my family when I was driving somewhere. And my mother was in a bit of a little depressed, angry little mood. And she was sat at the back glum. My father was saying something. He was a bit high and being jolly. And he said, oh, come on, Rosa, cheer up. And she said, oh, well, you shut up. That was brilliant.

So this little virtuous circle of gratitude, when you think about just what we've received from society. I remember somebody grumbling to me once that they didn't have any children, she didn't have any children, and she didn't know why she paid taxes so that other children could be educated. She found that absolutely obnoxious.

So when you begin to realize that actually a lot of our education has been given to us by the generous taxation of other people. And it's just things like that and things that we take for granted because of our social system. Doctors, the NHS, I mean, there's all sorts of things which we presume now, we don't see them as something which is gifted to us. Not that we don't pay our taxes, but...

So, gratitude enlivens this idea of generosity. And as soon as we give something of time or of wealth, we must be giving it away from ourselves. We must be giving something up. And in a sense, there are various degrees, as you know, of generosity.

I mean, at Christmas, people swap gifts. So that's what kings do. When they meet, they swap gifts. It's just a friendship thing. It's a social nicety, you might say. But it has a purpose. But it's difficult to call it generosity, because if your lump of cheese didn't turn up, you'd be very upset, because you've gone and bought them another different type of cheese. So it's that sort of swapping of things, which is just a social nicety.

But when it comes to real generosity, you know that you are being generous when in a sense what you're giving actually is pushing the boundaries of what you want to give without of course harming yourself. I mean one doesn't want to give all one's wealth away and then end up on the streets. There's a lovely story of St. Francis, one of his monks or friars, brothers, taking this business of complete poverty as a standard, met somebody who needed clothes. So he gave him his robe and he came back naked. And so Francis had to make a rule that you can give everything away apart from your robe. There's a certain sort of, we have to use our common sense.

But it's when you give of time, you see, give of time, that you know that when that boundary is being pushed, that actually you are truly beginning to renounce something.

So I was just talking to my aunt there, and my aunt said — she belongs to that old school, she's middle eighties or something. And she was telling me that when Uncle John got sick, he was very old, she never went to bed for two years. She sat in a chair. One day he got up, he had a little stroke and at night he'd be disoriented. So one night she caught him trying to get out of the window and this really freaked her. So what she did was she put her armchair next to the window and sat there for two years, never went to bed. And she would amuse herself by listening to the radio and knitting and doing all sorts of stuff just for fear that he'd be sleepwalking and do something stupid. And it ruined her sleep pattern, which she's never particularly regained.

And I'm just thinking, well, I wonder if I would do that then. I'd probably just chain them to the bed. put a manacle on their foot. So you've got these different ideas of generosity. And that was her, she felt that was her duty. That was her — she belongs to that age group, which talks about duty, not rights, about responsibility rather than rights, my rights.

So this generosity, of course, you can expand that into really all sorts of areas. So one of them, and it's funny, it's not actually in — I don't know why it's not in the Ten Perfections, it's, I think, presumed in the word love. Because when we chant the loving-kindness discourse, you can see that the Buddha is giving it a very wide meaning of just a loving relationship, which includes both compassion and joy.

So when something comes up which demands us to help somebody who is in need, then the generosity manifests as compassion. So it's the same when somebody's rejoicing over something. So to rejoice with them, to be happy for them, is also an act of generosity. Even more so if you feel absolutely miserable and the world's gone completely wrong for you, but you're able to put that to the side and rejoice with the person who's being happy. That's also an act of generosity.

So generosity is, in the widest sense of the term, is giving of oneself, you see. Emptying, sort of giving oneself, emptying oneself towards another. It's very beautiful how the Buddha talks about his relationship to the people he teaches. He says, whatever a teacher can do for his pupils, I have done for you, out of *anukampa*. *Anukampa* means to move towards somebody, you see. The word that most you know will be *karuna*, which is compassion. But the word he uses, *anukampa*, is to move towards somebody. So when you see somebody who's in need, you move towards them.

And it was one of the things on his big doubt, wasn't it? The great doubt, you see. So remember that in the great doubt when Mara arose and said, who the hell are you to try and become liberated from all suffering? You've been around everybody, everybody, and nobody's made it. And here, you're like... Where's this ego thing coming from, this pride? And it's when he touches the earth and the earth goddess arises. And she defends him by saying, because of his past lives, perfecting the virtue of generosity.

So what does this mean? It means that he saw that what he was doing wasn't just for himself, it was for all beings. And that gave him the courage to withstand the doubt, the inner doubt as to what was he doing this for? This is ridiculous. And that perfection of generosity was basically the — if you want interpretation of that story is, that was the backbone of his effort.

That he wasn't just a matter of me trying to liberate myself from suffering, but also remembering that, you know, probably remembered his own family and his son and all that sort of stuff. And then from then, all his friends and people like that. And it must have occurred to him that if he can crack this problem, then he's cracked it for everybody.

So that gives your effort a meaningfulness which is just beyond yourself, doesn't it? I mean, if you're doing something for somebody else, for yourself, but also for somebody else, it gives it a much deeper meaning.

And if we were to talk about happinesses, you can talk about three sort of levels. You know, one is the ordinary sensual happiness, which is fleeting and all that, but it's a happiness, you know, physical happiness. It can also be intellectual, artistic, even the joys of the practice, you know, when some peace arises very occasionally, then that's a... That is a bit of transient joy and to be enjoyed.

And then there's that type of joy where you get lost in it. I think, what's his name? Aristotle called it *eudaimonia*. And it's when you get lost. It's when you lose the self in something, like a DVD, you see. And then you come out of it and suddenly you're there again. And during that moment, you've been perfectly happy. You've not been self-

aware, but you have been perfectly happy. And then you come out of it and it's gone, you see. And it's catching that gone-ness that brings up this idea of not getting attached to something that you've become so involved in for happiness.

But what makes people really, really deeply happy, which has nothing to do really with transient emotions, because they arise and pass away, and always sense your pleasure, is meaningfulness. And when that meaningfulness goes, you have despair. So that's why I say people who lose meaningfulness in their lives, are really on the point of despair. And there were these soldiers who commit suicide after war and whatnot, for whatever reason, psychologically. But seemingly, they all commit suicide because at some point, they despair. They despair, you see.

And I had a woman phone me up just the other day, you see, in a dreadful state, just at the point of despair, you see, despair, just when you give up hope. And, of course, that's the sign, isn't it, on Dante's hell, you know, abandon all hope you who enter here.

So this idea of generosity has this very deep way of connecting us. And it's only then that our lives seem to take on a much deeper meaning. And in that meaning, that connectedness, that very deep sort of relationship, that is really love at its deepest level, isn't it? And when that's extended from human beings to animals and nature and the world and the cosmos and all that, then you suddenly find yourself in this lovely place of being interconnected. I mean, that's what it means, isn't it? And it comes about through generosity. It comes about through giving, compassion. It doesn't come about because you've thought about it and you've written an essay on interconnectedness. No. It actually comes about just because you've made that effort to give of yourself into that huge sort of matrix.

And you can even see some of the other ones. So *sīla*, I mean, that's the dark side. You know, that's why we say you shouldn't kill and all that sort of stuff. And take what's not freely given and all those things. negative things of not to do that, not to do that. And I think you'll find that every time you are behaving unethically and even in the smallest, simplest, silly way that creates little qualms in the mind, there'll be something against one of those five. The whole rule of the Vinaya, apart from those that are specific to little rules and regulations, are all around these five basic rules. I mean, they're fundamental, aren't they, to our society, fundamental to our relationship.

So, in correcting all the negative stuff that we do on those sides, anger, usual stuff, anger, you know, being callous, little sharp words that we might say to people. By correcting all that, you see, that is also to be seen as a generous act, you see, because you're giving up this inner desire to poke somebody in the eye, which can be very pleasurable. That's *sīla*. Renunciation wisdom.

Patience, you see. Patience is another one. Now the Buddha talks about a more sort of, what would you call it? I'm trying to think of another word apart from negative. It's not negative. It's just the other side of the more positive language. Where the Buddha talks about it as the greatest form of ascetic practice.

So what does he mean by ascetic practice? He means, you know, bearing with suffering. So the self-mortificator, you know, starves themselves, sits next to fires for the heat, stands in the river Ganges for hours on end so the kamma is washed away. And there's all sorts of wonderful ascetic practices. There was even a Christian saint, somebody of, I can't remember his name now, but he sat on a pillar. He was up there all his life. And that was it. He lived on the top of this pillar. So these are things that probably came from the East. And you'll still see in India ascetics who've kept their arm up in the air and it's withered. You know, I mean, I've seen that myself. You know, because of some reasons. I mean, they have reasons for doing these things.

So what he means by aesthetic practice is that, is to bear with, patient forbearance. And of course, it begins inward, doesn't it? Because all this stuff comes up and we've just got to patiently bear with these emotional states that come up within ourselves. But they're the same states that we see in other people. There's nothing that separates us apart from the stories. Everybody has fear. Everybody has depression, all that sort of stuff. But the stories are all different. They're all different dramas. But fundamentally, we've all got these same experiences of life.

And bearing with somebody who's annoying us is an act of generosity, isn't it? You're sort of taking it on. Of course, you don't want to be abused by them, because that's another thing. When you talk about love and whatnot, people get confused that you have to give, give, give, even though you're being throttled. Give of your neck. I mean, there's a limit, you know, like as soon as the person's hurting you, then of course there's a different moral comes in where your love has lost its... has lost its connection with you personally.

See, it's no good giving, giving, giving, and burning yourself out like a lot of people might do, especially, you know, caught up in things like ecology and all that, and they get very frustrated and angry and despairing. And it's all done with goodwill, with active, but they're burning themselves out, see?

And he gives that lovely example, doesn't he? Somebody came along with a machete. He doesn't use that word, but he came along with a sword and chopped you from limb to limb. If ever you were even to be angry, you're no disciple of mine. I once said that in another talk. Somebody said, well, the Buddha had a great sense of humor. But I think he meant it.

So this idea of bearing with people, patient forbearance, it's a perfection, you see. And it undermines all the other stuff as well, especially the whole thing about victimization, you know, being the victim and how people get caught up in that. You know, why me? It moves into a sort of self-pity, you see. And what happens is they're unable to forgive. So they're locked into a really dreadful. A dreadful state, dreadful state. They just can't get out of that because they have been hurt. Nobody's denying that and all that. But there's that self-pity. Why me? And the hatred.

And so long as there's self-pity, you can't forgive. There's a block. And it's only when you begin to put yourself in the shoes of the other person who's done the harm and recognize that they also are going to have a lot of suffering because of the harm they've done. And how do we know that? By investigating the harm that we've done and recognizing that actually, internally, I'm not looking at the amount of suffering in me for the harm I've done to somebody else. And the greater the harm, the more difficult it is to forgive oneself, you see. So that whole victim thing can be a real lock. And patient forbearance is part of that process of forgiveness.

There's, of course, energy, compassion. The Buddha is very tough on energy. I mean, the word comes up right there in the discourse on establishing right awareness, *tapo*, *ātāpī*, *ātāpī*, which comes from this word *tapo*, which comes up in the Maṅgala Sutta there. And it's the energy that you need to really, you know, complete a task. Whatever it is, to complete the task, to finish it, you know, whatever you undertake.

Often, you know, people, they come on a retreat, you see, they come on a retreat, it gets a bit tough. They made a resolution to stay the week, it gets a bit tough, and towards it they give up, you see. Now, what they're doing is that they're undermining their ability to perfect their commitments. So that any time it gets a bit difficult, there's always this little escape.

That doesn't mean to say... I mean, on retreats, I'm sure you've heard me say that to commit yourself to the course, save an extraordinary circumstance or emergency. So it's not as though it's an absolute thing, you know. You know, I like it, you know, if... If the place caught fire, you're not supposed to sit there and, I will not leave this place. So there's also a sort of common sense. But whenever we say we're going to do something and we don't do it, we're actually harming ourselves.

So, for instance, you might say to a friend, yeah, I'll come and decorate. And then your phone will tell you you're not feeling so well today. And it's like you're undermining this ability to make resolutions, to make determinations. And if you think again of the Buddha's own practice, the moment of great determination, to sit under that tree, either to crack this problem or to die. And that's where he got to. It was almost, you

might say, a point of despair, you know. He had this little insight. He had this insight coming from childhood to actually investigate suffering. But he could see no other way. And if this didn't work, well, that was it. So he was prepared to sit there until he died with it. We call that the great determination.

So that's this business of energy. The energy is needed, but resolution is the other perfection. But you need that energy. When you suffer from dullness and lethargy, you see, remember that is also an energy. So you don't look at it negatively. Don't think to yourself, well, you know, this is something dragging me down. It is dragging you down, but it's an actual force. It's a mental energy. It can also be physical. And if we just allow it to manifest, it also transforms, it also sublimates into its opposite, which is good energy. Sometimes it'll flip and become restlessness, but when it's actually moving towards its opposite, it's moving into this lovely flow of energy when our meditation is very easy for us.

Truthfulness here is something quite specific. It's really keeping your promise rather than not telling great big budgies. You know, I mean that's part of it, but it's actually when you say you do something that you actually do do it. So you can see that that melds into the whole thing of resolution and stuff.

And the other one is wisdom, of course. I've not put them in the same order here. Wisdom is a mental, call it that, a mental virtue. So it's really understanding things. And really it all begins there, doesn't it? If we've misunderstood something, then things go awry. So we always have to come back to this, you know, the Buddha's constant encouragement to reflect wisely, see, wise reflection, *yoniso manasikāra*.

So at the end of a sitting, that's why, you know, just to get in the habit of, even if you only pick up one thing from your sitting, to just think about it, let it come to mind. And at the end of a day, you see, just to look back for a moment, pick up one or two things, yeah. We have to be very careful not to always pick up the negative stuff. We're very good at that. We have to also pick up the positive stuff. Positive stuff that's happened to us today. What we've done today.

And that's another thing about joy. You've got to actually excite joy within us. You've got to remember times when you were joyful. and understand how that joy came about. And this sort of builds up a well of joy, you see. We tend to be a bit negative usually, don't we? We tend to remember all the horrible things, because they hurt. The pleasurable things that don't hurt, they're all right. But by doing that, we get a sort of lopsided view of our lives sometimes. It's all miserable and horrible and all that. We forget that we've just had a good meal.

So these are our *pāramitā*. The final one is equanimity. And it's arguable, definitely Nyānaponika Thera, who wrote that very good book, you know, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. It still is really a classic book. But he also wrote other essays and in one he argues quite strongly that the perfection of equanimity is really the perfection because it balances everything. Although equanimity can have its own dark energy, its own dark side of indifference. It does have this ability to not to stop these things overriding, see?

So that, you know, things like love doesn't become attachment, see? So seeing where the attachment is. How do you know? How do you know when you're attached, you see? Well, there's many ways, aren't there? Especially when you're getting irritated with somebody because they're not doing what you want them to do. That's an obvious case of attachment, see? Or when they disappoint you, when you're disappointed in somebody, see? Expectation, stuff like that.

Compassion slips into pity, doesn't it? Pity for somebody. And if you think about how you feel when somebody pities you, then you know how horrible it is for somebody who's being pitied by you. So it stops that, you see. And again, it's this business of being open to what the other person is asking for, not getting into that do-gooder thing.

Joy slips into excitement. So you can, if you take any virtue, you'll see it has a little, it has a subtle energy, a subtle enemy, you see. So courage slips into foolhardiness. I can't think of any more. Mine's gone. But if you think of any virtue, it'll always have its little, slightly subtle negative side that it can slip into. I mean, we can talk about generosity. So it slips into over-generosity. It goes beyond what you're actually capable of doing, and you undermine yourself by doing that.

So that's a quick run-through, you might say, of these *pāramitā*, these *pāramitā*. So it does say here, these qualities were developed and brought to maturity by the Bodhisattva in his past existences, in this way practicing them, illustrating the many birth stories of Jātaka. However, it's only the verses that are regarded as canonical. That's of the stories around the Buddha. You know, where he's reborn as a hare and a... It's all Aesop's fables, really.

So we can end this just by me reading this lovely little paragraph which expresses what the Bodhisattva or the person who wants to develop these ten perfections. As the great being, see Mahāsattva, so that's synonymous really for the Bodhisattva, destined for Buddhahood are concerned with the welfare of living beings not tolerating the suffering of beings wishing long duration to the higher states of happiness of beings and being impartial and just to all beings therefore they give alms to all beings so that they may be happy without investigating whether or not they are worthy by avoiding to do

them any harm observe morality and in order to bring morality to perfection they train themselves in renunciation in order to understand clearly what is beneficial and injurious to beings they purify their wisdom and for the sake of the welfare and happiness of others they constantly exert their energy though having become heroes through utmost energy they are nevertheless full of forbearance towards the manifold failings of beings.

Once they have promised to give or to do something, they do not break their promise. That's the truthfulness. With unshakable resolution, they work for the welfare of beings. And with unshakable kindness, they are helpful to all. And by reason of their equanimity, they do not expect anything in return.

It's nice, isn't it? I remember once this causing a bit of a discussion as to whether you should give without investigating whether they are worthy or not. This is commentary, remember, so we can feel free to question that one.

So I hope my words have been of some assistance. And that you will soon perfect the perfections and enter into that wonderful place, *Nibbāna*, sooner rather than later.

Scientism, Romanticism, Psychotherapy and Buddhadhamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 59 min

In this exploration, Bhante Bodhidhamma investigates three major avenues through which Buddhism filters into Western culture: scientism, Romanticism, and psychotherapy. He begins by distinguishing between science as empirical inquiry and scientism as materialist philosophy, examining how reductionist views struggle to explain consciousness and subjective experience (qualia). Drawing on the Udāna Sutta's famous passage about the 'un-born, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned,' he contrasts both eternalist and annihilationist views with the Buddha's Middle Way teaching.

The discussion moves to Romanticism's emphasis on peak experiences and unity with nature, showing how this movement emerged as a reaction to scientific rationalism yet still maintains materialist assumptions. Finally, he explores how psychotherapy, while beneficial for mental health, tends to medicalize spiritual issues and focuses on accommodation rather than transcendence.

Throughout, Bhante emphasizes how these cultural filters can obscure the Buddha's core teaching of liberation through understanding the Four Noble Truths. He concludes by examining the transcendent dimension described in the suttas - neither of this world nor the next, without time, space, or conditioned existence - pointing to something utterly beyond ordinary experience that represents the true goal of Buddhist practice.

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā sambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato
Sammā sambuddhassa Namō Tassa, Bhagavato, Arahato, Sammā, Sambuddhassa*

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

Now I'm going to talk about things that I know virtually nothing about. That's a good start. Really just trying to see what some people say are the avenues down which Buddhism enters into our society. And you can't help but filter out what you don't want and see the Buddhadhamma from a particular point because that's the way we're conditioned.

So, for instance, when Buddhism went to China, it became seen through Taoism, and it took quite a long time for there to realise that Buddhism wasn't quite the same as Taoism, although there were obviously connections. And it's the same with us. There are obvious connections, but in a sense it can obscure the fundamental teachings of the Buddha.

So there are three areas that I'm going to try and point that out to. The first one is science. The second one is romanticism. And the third one is psychotherapy.

So the first one is about science. We have to make a distinction between science, which is the exploration of our physical world, from scientism, which is the philosophy that's drawn from that. And these days, scientific materialism is really what takes over most people who are involved in science. Rupert Sheldrake, whom some of you might know, has just written a book about spiritual practices. And he was saying that it was rare to get a group of scientists as such who weren't materialists.

One of the leading persons is the biologist Wilson. He's famed for starting a whole new discipline on the social behaviour of animals and humans, the biological aspects of social behaviour. And he wrote a book called Consilience, which means the unity of knowledge. Underneath it, there's a title, Unity of Knowledge. It's where all knowledge comes together and forms some sort of whole concept.

And this is what he says: from the birth of stars to the workings of social institutions, are based on material processes that are ultimately reducible, however long and tortuous the sequence to the laws of physics. So when you're looking upwards, the first thing you see is physics. If you're looking up, then obviously it's about stones, it's about the physics of life. And then from that you get the chemistry, from that you get the biology, then you get the psychology, sociology, and so on. So everything looks as though it's all arisen from this physical base. And that's what he's basically saying. Interestingly enough, he remains an agnostic as to whether God exists or not. So that's the basic reductionism of scientism.

And one book that I read which was helpful was *Scientism, A Word We Need*. It's by a man called Crowburn and he's written it for people like me who know nothing. So it was quite enlightening. Many of the books that I read became a little bit too technical. I mean, there's lots of stuff on the website, if you care to look it up, of criticisms, academic criticisms of scientism. There's one book, I think it cost £75, I didn't go for that one, which is a collection of essays by people.

So here we have a couple of problems that have arisen. The first one is there's no way of finding out, there's no way they can tell how the objective physical world of chemicals and neurons and all those things that we can test translates into the subjective world that we actually experience in terms of emotions, images, moods, sensations. And there's a special word for those things, they're called *qualia*, or as we want to understand it, phenomenal experiences. And there's no understanding as to how the flow of consciousness arises out of that base.

So it's a presumption. It's a presumption that everything we experience internally is arising out of matter. That's not, of course, the tradition of all the spiritual traditions. All spiritual traditions tell us that the mind is something separate, is something other. In Buddhism, it's something other, but of course, still falls under the three characteristics of the main two of impermanent and insubstantial, not self.

If you want to read it, there's a great essay by Professor Nagel, the philosopher, in which he tries to point this out by the question, what does it feel like to be a bat? Now, a bat sees things through hearing. It can actually tell what insect it's going for and whether to eat it or not through sound. It's quite remarkable, the sensitivity of it. And what he's saying is that it's impossible for him ever to know what it feels like to be a bat because the inner experience is so different from the way that we experience things.

Now, all this has brought about a rethink about the whole problem. So on the one side, you'll get philosophers and scientists who talk about this reductionism. Everything will eventually be proven to arise out of subatomic particles. But there are people who are beginning to question that. And there's a very good talk on TED by a man called David Chalmers, a philosopher.

And he's positing that consciousness is actually part and parcel of the universe, just as matter, time, space and consciousness. He's very careful not to move into a pantheism, anything like that. He doesn't want to overstep the line. But in that way, he's saying that consciousness being embedded in the whole process of the universe begins at the very base as a proto-consciousness, and it grows.

And this reminds me of a philosopher. He's a Jesuit, a Christian philosopher. He was a paleontologist. Teilhard de Chardin and he had because of his study of skulls and ancient skeletons and all that his word for this growing consciousness was the encephalisation of consciousness so as consciousness grew the brain had to grow bigger. And really we're looking now down upon what we experience, not from below up, from stones upwards, but we're looking down from consciousness. And we'll see that that gives us a slightly different view of things.

So from the Buddha's perspective, we definitely are made up of three parts. Our physical nature, which can only be known through the mind at the contact place. So when we chant the Dependent Origination in the morning, it's that point of contact where we are touching on the physical nature of the universe. And when you think about it, it's quite remarkable because the eyes are actually sensitive to subatomic particles. It's just absolutely amazing. And the tongue is sensible to chemicals and things like that. So there is this point of contact.

But then from that, it's taken into what's known as the mind door, and it's the mind door which figures it all out, which puts it into some definition. This is curry, or I can hear a car. At the ear door, all you're getting is pressure. The airwaves are just pressure everything else is taken back into the mind door and from that, from that point of recognising what it is then you give it meaning. So a car begins to have meaning it's a taxi coming for me and all that sort of stuff so all that is mind and there is this third quality of the *nirvanic* element that's how it's referred to in our school, in later schools of course, they tended to personalise it and call it Buddha nature, things like that.

And that was because there was a shift of emphasis. So the Buddha himself is very wary of saying it's somebody or something even. He's much more directed to the actual experience and describing the experience of it. We'll come to that in a minute.

So that's the first thing about materialism. It seems to be impossible to connect the physicality of our nature, neurons, chemicals and all that, to the way that we subjectively experience things within ourselves. There seems to be a divide there.

The next thing, and I want to point out another book here, there's a man called Yuval Harari who's written two books and they're really fantastic. One's *Sapiens* and the other one is *Homo Deus*. *Sapiens* is about how we get to this point, the growth of humans. And *Deus*, *Homo Deus* is where we're going to go from here. And one of his big things is to point out that people are actually spending a lot of money so that we don't die. There's a matter of research going on to stop us dying.

And one thing I learned from him was this word algorithm, which I thought was a very mystical thing. I thought Google has this amazing algorithm and it can find anything you want in milliseconds. So I've always presumed it really belonged to the area of mysticism. But it turns out that an algorithm is actually just a menu. So baking bread. So when you put that menu into a machine, then the machine bakes bread for you. And that's its algorithms. So that was an enormous point of enlightenment for me.

So once we've understood that, when biologists look at nature now, they see this process of algorithms. They just see menus just being worked out from the very seed to the plant and so on. And so the huge question has come up, what purpose in evolution is consciousness? There was no purpose for it. Because now we have artificial intelligence that can do everything we can do, thinking-wise, mathematically-wise, much faster and much better. And they never tire, never get headaches. So you've got all these amazing machines that we've created, which tell us that there's some mismatch there about thinking about where consciousness is. I mean, does a machine have consciousness who does all your accounts? So this has really created a problem for them.

Of course, this goes back to, in our history, right back to the Enlightenment. So remember the scientific revolution. If you go back a little bit further, actually, to St. Thomas Aquinas, the Christian theologian, where he determined that animals don't have souls. That's when Christianity came to a conclusion that, philosophically speaking and all that, animals don't have souls. Only human beings have souls.

So when we get to Descartes and science, they don't have sensibility. So in the 17th century, people were experimenting on live animals without any sense of, because even though the animals are screaming, it really wasn't suffering any pain. And there's this, I get this magazine, *The Week*, which summarises the news for us. And it always has a little bit of article about science. And I kid you not. One week, a bunch of scientists from somewhere finally discovered or had proven that fish do not feel pain. The very next week, another bunch of scientists proved that they did.

So, I mean, how you can prove anything which is happening inside us, within our own selves, is a mystery. And all they're looking at is behaviour. So you hit a fish on the head and say, well, look, he didn't do anything, so he can't be suffering. Anyway, so there's this whole problem.

It came to me as a great surprise that now evolutionary, in evolutionary theory, they have a problem with where consciousness or why consciousness should be necessary how it evolved from matter for what purpose because it's in terms of algorithms it's just not necessary.

So when it comes to these views, on the one side remember you've also got the eternalist view. So the eternalist view and I'm quoting here from a commentary which is sometimes clearer because they're defining things so therein what is an eternalist view that the self and the world are eternal now when the Buddha talks about the world the all he's really only talking about the five *khandhas* he doesn't go the great thing that I found about the Buddha is that he doesn't go where there's only inference.

So that's why there's no supernatural stuff or anything like that unless you consider things like levitation and stuff supernatural. But he doesn't go beyond what you can actually experience. And that's why he never talks about what it is that experiences *Nibbāna* because it's a total experience. In the experience there's nobody there who can tell you about it. Afterwards you can reflect upon it. But while you're in a state of transcendent *Nibbāna*, then all he can do is talk about what it's like, what it doesn't have, and we'll come to that in a little bit.

So it goes on, it says that this form of view, and this is actually from the scriptures, is a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views, a seizure, holding on inclination, hanging on false path, wrong way, wrongness, sectarian guide, inverted seizure. This is what is called an internal view. I don't know what an inverted seizure is, I just hope I don't have one.

So on the one side, you have this idea that something within us, the mind, the heart, emotions, the body and all that, how we experience ourselves phenomenally, that there's something in it which is eternal. And of course the Buddha is pointing out that that's the great discourse on *anattā*, not self, that he's asking you to see. If what you're experiencing is impermanent, how can you possibly be it?

And the other side is what we've just been talking about, this annihilationist view. So the self and the world will be annihilated. This again, of course, forms a view, a thicket of a wilderness of view, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views, a seizure, holding on, inclination, hanging on, false path, wrong way, wrongness, sectarian guide, inverted seizure. It's called annihilationist view.

Now, to support that, there is, of course, this very famous quote. Everybody knows this quote, but they usually only quote the opening lines of it. So he says, it's coming from the Udāna Sutta, which is a collection of his inspired verses. And it says, I have heard that on one occasion, this would be Ānanda, The Blessed One was staying near Sāvattthi at Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. And on that occasion, the Blessed One was instructing, urging, rousing and encouraging the monks with Dhamma talk, concerned with liberation. And the monks, receptive, attentive, focusing their entire awareness, lending an ear, listened to the Dhamma.

By the way, the commentaries point out that when they use the word monks, they mean anybody who's listening. It's not just monastics.

Then on realising the significance of that, the Blessed One on that occasion exclaimed, there is monks an unborn and unbecome and unmade and unconditioned. Now, the way the word is used is a, well, I suppose what we would call a gerund. It's using an adjective as a noun. So there is an unborn, not something unborn. So he's very careful not to again solidify it into some idea of a person or a self.

So he says there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned. So everything in the world is conditioned. In other words, everything in the world is dependent on something else for it to arise. We're dependent on air, for instance. but this is completely unconditioned.

Then he says, and this is the bit that people don't usually quote, if there were not the unborn, the unbecome, the unmade, the unconditioned, there would be no way of escape from the born, the become, the made, the conditioned. You could not discern that escape. And he says precisely because of this, there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, and unconditioned. And this is the escape. So that's the fullness of the phrase.

So it's very difficult to deny, in my mind, that he's talking about something which is transcendent. But people do. That's all you can say. So that's to do with all this business of transcendence, annihilation and the reductionism of scientism.

But he does present us with a further problem. By the way, in the Buddha's time there were annihilationists. There was a man called Ajita Kesakambalā. A Lokāyata materialist. So he was a materialist. And his line was the usual thing that is, on death the body's made of earth, you just return to the earth when you die, so you may as well enjoy life while you can. And the opening of the first discourse, where he says, the opening verse, that sensual pleasure, the seeking of sensual pleasure is one of those extremes that we shouldn't be following.

So if you're a real materialist, if you really, really think that you've only got this life, then really you should be heading for as much enjoyment as you can. Get as much sex, drugs and rock and roll as you can. Why not?

And the other side of scientism, of course, is the ethics. So here's Einstein, believe it or not. "A man's actions are determined by necessity"—it's all conditioned—"external and internal, so that in God's eyes, he cannot be responsible any more than an inanimate object is responsible for the motions it goes through." So we're not at all... I mean, this actually had great effect in America during the thirties, I think, where people got off... I'm thinking of one particular case. I was trying to look for it, but I couldn't find it, where a murderer was let off on the grounds that he had no choice. You know, the con-

ditions that he was in, the way he was brought up, and so on. And he walked free and he just committed murder. So there's Einstein for you. It's funny he should talk about God's eyes.

Nietzsche says it in his usual rather roundabout way, but he gets the point across too. He says, "If a man finally succeeds in obtaining philosophical conviction of the unconditional necessity of all actions"—in other words, conditioned actions—"and of their complete irresponsibility, you had to do it, and of getting this into his system, any remnants of pricks of conscience disappear." Why would you have shame? Why would you have guilt? You were forced to pull the man's ears off. It just happened.

Now, of course, in the Buddha's time, you got this similar sort of thing. You got Makali Gosala, who was a fatalist. Powerless, life was predestined, completely conditioned. That was his teaching. And of course that isn't the Buddha's. The Buddha's is, of course, it's not free will—it's not free will—but our growing discernment tells us that certain actions lead towards suffering and certain actions lead towards happiness and eventually towards release. So we are conditioned, but we're able to change our conditioning through our discernment, through wisdom. And the change is brought about by an act of will. So it's a sort of an in-between place. We're not obviously completely free, but we are free to change our habits because we've created them through this wrong understanding, through acts of will.

The way I describe it is like when you go on a walk. If you've got a map with you, you get to a point where the road bifurcates and you don't quite know where to go. So you look at the map and then you see you've got to go right. So that's the same with us. The road is, as it were, towards liberation. Once we're on that road, it's towards liberation. But there are all sorts of little bypasses and forks and stuff like that where we get occasionally lost. And it's through discernment, through this reflection, *yoniso manas-ikāra*, wise reflection, and through our internal experiences where we see, where we come across things like stuff that we've suppressed, little guilts that come up.

One that came up for me was quite remarkable actually when I was about eighteen or nineteen, I think, and it was winter and I was coming home driving the old man's car. It was one of these great big Rovers—it's like a tank. And as I came round into the street where we lived—the street before, so you come off the main road, you turn right and then you first turn left—the car very gently slid across. I got home, and the next morning my mother said, "Oh, there's been a crash at the road and somebody's knocked the wall over of this neighbour." And I went out and took the brickwork off the mudguard, and I said nothing.

And this is when I'm in my middle forties. I'm sitting there sitting and suddenly this huge sort of horror arises in me of not having taken responsibility for it and what might have happened and all that. So I obviously buried that sense of shock in the system. So it's not as though you get away with anything eventually, although I don't know—he presumably got it insured, he got it on the insurance.

Oh, dear me. Just a little older. My mother—this is many years on—but my mother came to me and said one day, "Somebody's hit the wall." So I said, "Oh," I went out there. Well, I couldn't see it. She said, "Yeah, no, no, that's been touched. There's a brick that's sticking out." So we got it redone on the insurance side. I thought, "Anyway, we've got to be done with the insurance." And the insurance man came, and he knocked at the door, and he said, "It's cost you about a hundred quid." And he said, "I can make it two hundred and give you a hundred." And my mother said, "Oh." I said, "No." I said, "No, no." I said, "Well, play straight." And she was very angry with me. Because she was a Geordie. Anyway, so...

That's definitely not the Buddha's teaching anyway. He's not into fiddling. So, he actually talks about shame and guilt as being the guardians of society—the guardians, not the guards. They're not wicked, they're there to tell us. So basically, as we become more and more refined and you do something which you feel is hurtful, both to the other or to yourself or to both, then immediately you get that sense of having done something wrong—guilt. This isn't the great existential guilt that I shouldn't be here anyway because I'm so evil. It's just I did something wrong. And shame. You feel a bit ashamed about it. So you have to put that right to clear the heart. So in that way, shame and guilt become the guardians of society.

So from a Buddhist point of view, scientism, in a sense, leads to a sort of dead end, really. And one thing that would occur to me—I don't know, of course—but it would occur to me that if I were truly a materialist, thinking that, well, at some point I'll die and that'll be the end of it. I can't imagine myself having put so much energy into the practice, especially when it got incredibly difficult. I would have thought, "Well, this is ridiculous. I might as well go out and have a pint. Do something useful." And I think that's a big block.

And of course, these things are self-reinforcing, aren't they? Because eventually you have to justify the fact that you're not putting a great deal of effort in the practice because, well, life's short and I'm not going to get fully liberated anyway, so what's the point? I may as well be a little liberated and make my way as best I can. So in a sense it undermines the great project for us. It's sort of underselling the Buddha's teachings.

So that's the first area, that's the first avenue in which Buddhism is being received, through science. And of course we have now this mindfulness movement, which has brought it into medicine and mental health and it's being used for that purpose. And occasionally somebody actually wants to find out where this comes from, so I do get people very occasionally who come from having done mindfulness and stress reduction or something and they've taken it a bit further. And although sometimes people criticise it because it's not taught with morality and stuff, the fact is it does people good, so don't knock it. That's my own personal opinion, of course.

So now we have Romanticism. Thanissaro, whom some of you might know, has written a very good book on it. And here I just want to pull out one or two things just to show us. So the Romantic movement was a reaction to the scientific revolution and what we call the Enlightenment, the rise of rationalism. So you have Newton telling us that everything is just mechanical and God is *deus ex machina*—he's the God outside the machine. He sort of set it going and let it run. And then you've got Kant telling us we shouldn't really trust our feelings. We should be rational. You know, morality is a rational thing. We've got Descartes telling us that animals don't have any feelings. Don't feel anything. And then there's a sort of reaction against that back to the heart.

So we have it today. Some people say, "Well, I feel," meaning I know. And some people say, "I think," meaning I know. So it depends where you centre yourself. And hopefully for most of us, it's sort of coming together. So the great philosophers of the Romantic movement were the German, really, the German Romantics—Novalis and Schleiermacher.

And I'm just now reducing everything to the basics of what they taught. The first thing, of course, was back to nature. Because what the Industrial Revolution did, of course, was take people out from nature, stick them in these dreadful factories, satanic mills and all that sort of stuff. And there was that loss of connection with nature. So therefore a sense of alienation. And alienation brought about, as described by Marx, by doing things that weren't connected to you. You were making things that you couldn't even buy. And life had become very rigid, it wasn't with the seasons.

I remember a woman who came to the Vihara in Birmingham saying that there was a point where they brought electricity on the farm and they lost time. That's how she expressed what happened to her as a young girl, or she might have been a bit older than just a young girl. So in the old days, say during winter, you'd have this vast amount of darkness and time, where you could tell stories and stuff like that. And suddenly you've got light and you're back up at five o'clock milking cows. And she expressed it as

a loss of time. So you can see that people being pushed out of the country into these horrible hovels to work in mills and stuff were alienated—they felt separate from the world, a sense of dislocation.

So these people tried to get people back to it and the first thing was the love of nature. And of course I'm just quoting Wordsworth here: "I wandered lonely as a cloud that floats on high o'er vales and hills, when all at once I saw a crowd, a host of golden daffodils, beside the lake, beneath the trees, fluttering and dancing." So you see a sort of movement back to nature and with it the feeling that we begin to understand nature as an organic whole. So this is way before James Lovelock and his Gaia theory. And we are part of that organic whole.

And the interesting thing is that although there's purpose in the universe, there's no specific purpose for human beings. They also accepted a lot of science. They didn't reject science. So I think a lot of them were atheists, were annihilationists, what we would call annihilationists. So all they knew was that if you gave yourself to nature, if you went back to nature and meditated and that sense of awe and wonder came, then you would have this experience of oneness, this oceanic feeling. Freud dismissed that as something coming up from being a baby.

So this getting lost in this oceanic feeling, which was the height of spiritual endeavour. And through practice, you could make it last a bit longer, but it definitely didn't last forever. And eventually you died. So it was the idea that the individual was mirrored in nature and nature was mirrored in the individual. And the purpose of life was to find that connection and be reintegrated, to lose that sense of separateness. And that's what you lost when you went into this oceanic feeling of being at one with nature.

I have to say I had a very, for me, a rather strange experience. I was up in the hills of Sri Lanka. And I came out of a retreat, a long retreat. I think I was up there for a couple of months. And I climbed this hill. And just the beauty of the landscape was such that I couldn't stop crying. I was crying my eyes out. It was almost too painful to be able to see.

And this reminds me of a video you can see of Ajahn Maha Bua, who has told us he doesn't suffer, he's an Arahant. And while he's telling people how that moment where he was completely liberated, he remembers the sort of joy, and he can't stop crying. And this old man—he must be in his nineties—and this old man crying, telling people how wonderful it was. And of course all these critics say, "No Arahant can cry, it's ridiculous." He lambasts them. He's written an essay saying, "How do you know how to have a response to life and stuff?"

So that was it. The deepest suffering was this feeling of alienation from nature and the evolutionary process. So they believed in the evolutionary process, the Darwinism. But it could be alleviated momentarily. And we can all achieve this. We can all find our way. There's no set way to do it. So there's no particular religion. You just had to find your way to get lost into this feeling.

Now, the other thing was, of course, again, the ethics tended to be because you were part of that organic whole. There was no free will. So the idea that you were making choices and whatnot was a delusion. So again, we go back to this idea of being completely conditioned without any sense of free will.

And I was going to... this whole idea of life is about—what we get from the romantics is that life is about experience. And that comes right through to our liberal society, that what we're working for is experience, for the holiday, for visiting Machu Picchu and the Norwegian fjords. And if you haven't seen the lights up on the Arctic, then frankly, you haven't lived. You've got to sort of display your T-shirts. And so life is about these peak experiences, and we'll come to that in a minute.

And one thing I thought to get you to imagine is, what would you feel? What would you feel like now, looking at a different life that you've led? Or should we say, knowing that you could have led a life which was about having various experiences. So you're a young boy, a young girl, you're brought up in a village where the routine is just very regular—going through the various seasons, the cold season, the hot season, the rainy season. And then around about the age of eight you decide that you'd like to join a monastery and you join the monastery and you don't play any games and you have times in the day where you do a bit of study and you chant together and you eat together, you sleep together and you get up too early and you feel tired.

And you just go through year after year. About the age of twenty-one, you become a monk and you carry on doing the same things. Sometimes you give a talk, sometimes you don't. And the bell goes at three o'clock in the morning and you get up and you do a bit of meditation or you wander about a bit. And then you turn up for breakfast and it's the same old breakfast. It never changes. Sometimes you get a delightful something that turns up. But generally speaking, and then you wander out and it's similar conversations about the weather and all this sort of stuff. And then you wander back to your hut and you do a bit of meditation.

And then the bell goes for lunch and you get your bowl ready. And you walk up for your bowl and you get your lunch and then you go back again. And you might have a kip in the middle of the day and you might read a bit and you might meditate a bit. You might meet up with people and you go for an evening chanting. And there's a cup of tea

or something. And then in the evening you do a bit more meditation, do a bit more chanting. And then you go to sleep and ready to get up again next morning at three o'clock. Every day, on and on.

And then suddenly you're very old and you get a cough and you drop dead. Is that a worthwhile life from a romantic point of view? They've hardly walked up a mountain. They've never played a game. They've never got drunk. They've never had sex. Oh my God. Can you imagine that? Going through life without having had sex.

So you can see when you contrast that with the way we expect to live in a liberal society, it's just completely different. Just a different aim altogether. And yet this little boy may become fully liberated and live in eternal bliss. And will die with tremendous guilt and horror.

So it's something to just contemplate. How much of our lives are driven by trying to get some sort of what Maslow calls peak experience? And that's what we come to next, really, the psychotherapy.

So psychotherapy really turns everything into some sort of medical problem. It's not really a moral problem. Everything turns into some sort of medical or social problem. The idea of morality doesn't really figure very highly in most psychotherapies.

So we go back to Freud, who of course had the idea that you had this subconscious, this id, that you didn't know about, and it was constantly coming into consciousness, your ego, and this sort of figure above you, which was society, what you'd learned trying to guide you. And your job was to try to find a way to find your way through that morass that was coming at you all the time—sort of uncontrollable urges and the voice of god coming down upon you. I mean I'm being flippant of course. And then you've got people like Carl Jung, Alfred Adler thought it was all about power.

Carl Jung, of course, went a little bit deeper, I think, into all this universal consciousness and stuff. Then you get a break from that with behaviorism, where people like Skinner only looked at your behavior. And the whole idea of an internal life just went by the board. And it was all about conditioning, trying to condition people. And he had some very horrible ideas about bringing up children and making them do things, conditioning them, definitely not giving them love, that would make them soft.

And then there was the great Dr. Spock in the 60s, the American psychologist—the damn doctor I think he was—who brought out this book which has sold millions, I mean 50 millions, it's still in print, where he actually says parents should trust them-

selves and they should love their baby and try and train it and stuff. Yeah, if you read about it, it's all very strange. Like, huge swings within that, within the whole process, the whole development of psychotherapy.

But the one I want to point out is Maslow, because Maslow is a humanist psychotherapist. Maslow looked at people who were having a good time, right, instead of people who had issues. And he talks, and the thing I want to point out to you is this peak experience.

So when somebody has a peak experience, all these things seemingly happen at the same time. There's a loss of the judgment to time and space. So you lose a sense of time and space. There's a feeling of being one whole and harmonious self, free of dissociation or inner conflict. A feeling of using all capacities and capabilities at the highest potential of being fully functioning, functioning effortlessly and easily without strain or struggle, feeling completely responsible for perceptions and behaviour, the use of self-determination to become stronger, more single-minded, fully volitional, being without inhibition, fear, doubt or self-criticism, spontaneous, expressiveness, naturally flowing behaviour that is not constrained by conformity, a free mind that is flexible and open to creative thoughts and ideas.

Complete mindfulness of the present moment without influence of past or expected future experiences. A physical feeling of warmth along with sensation of pleasant vibrations emanating from the heart area outwards into the limbs. Wow. Sounds very *Arahatship*, I think.

So at least there's a movement there to point to something which is of a higher order. But again, it's all to do with the mind, it's all to do with feeling, it's all to do with the way you think, the way you function. There's no hint here of anything that might be transcendent of that. It's not as though psychotherapy is against what we're doing, the *vipassanā*. It's just there's a different aim.

So psychotherapy, generally speaking, as I understand it, is about finding an accommodation to life, working with difficult situations, like you get marriage counselling and stuff like that, and trying to work out, trying to work through mental states that we're suffering from, panic and depression and all that sort of stuff. And in that, of course, it's very successful and very helpful.

In the East, you see, if you get very, very depressed or you have things like panic attack, then you might go to a monastery and they'll just tell you to practice *mettā*. There's not much in Buddhist teaching that I've come across anyway which is to do with helping people with severe mental problems. And it would all be put down to *kamma*.

And the fact that, you know, well, this life you're bearing the *kamma* of what you did wrong in the last life, so don't worry, when you die you'll be born somewhere else and you'll be much happier. So there's this idea of that because you're suffering something from some past action.

So it's really looking at the world from a different angle if we're going to look at it spiritually. So instead of looking bottom up through the physical nature and then up and up and up and thinking that everything arises out of that, if you look down, coming down from, say, this transcendent experience, then you get a different thing altogether. And again, lots of stuff is inexplicable.

For instance, the process of rebirth, the process of how you move from one place to another upon death, is not described in the scriptures. It's talked about, it's spoken, it's actually said that this is what happens, but the actual process is not described. So there's lots of areas which are just left probably to our imaginations.

So the first one, the first very famous, again, statement by the Buddhist, it's considered his clearest statement of the Nibbanic experience or of *Nibbāna*, is this one again from the *Udāna* Sutta, which is the collection of his inspired verses.

So again, Ānanda says, I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvathī, same place, at Jeta's Grove. It was his favourite monastery, an An-āthapiṇḍika's monastery. And on that occasion, the Blessed One was instructing, urging, rousing and encouraging monks with Dhamma talk concerned with liberation. And the monks, receptive, attentive, focusing their attention, lending an ear, listened to the Dhamma. And on realising the significance of this, the Buddha on that occasion exclaimed...

So there is a dimension, there is a sphere *atthi ayatanaṃ*. Now remember this word *ayatana*, you chant it every morning in dependent origination, there's *saḷāyatana*, the six sense spheres. And the thing about spheres is that you can't mix them, so you can't hear through your eyes, for instance. So they are distinct experiences, the *ayatana*. A word here, dimension, is rather nice.

What he's saying is that there is this dimension. So this isn't something, shall we say, this isn't poetry, this isn't a metaphor. He's actually using the same word that he uses for what we experience through the senses, the sixth senses, the sixth being the mind.

So there is, and again the word *atthi*, there's two words in Pali, and I should have mentioned that with the earlier words. A quote that I gave. There are two words in Pali for is. One is what you call a copulative. It's like when you say this is a table or this is an electric fire. It's just something to join two words. And the word for that is *hoti*. But

when you say is to mean exists, then the word is *atthi*. So when they ask the Buddha, does the Tathāgata exist *atthi*? When he, you know, after he dies or does he not exist, etc. The word is *atthi*, right? So this is the word he uses here. He says there is a dimension.

Now he says where there's neither earth, water, nor fire, nor wind. So again, nothing of the physical world. But again, he doesn't go beyond what we can sense of the physical world. So remember, these are referring to qualities, to pressure, fluidity, some sort of temperature and movement.

Then he says there's neither the dimension, neither the same sphere, because that's also called a sphere, of these higher jhānas, the four *arūpa* jhānas, the infinitude of space, infinitude of consciousness, the dimension of nothingness, and the place of perception or non-perception. So even the highest level that you can take the mind to in its most refined state is not there. That's not what he's talking about.

And he said it's neither of this world nor the next world. And now he's being more physical in the sense by saying there's no sun nor moon. So it's something completely transcendent other than, right, other than.

And there is, I say, there's neither coming nor going nor staying. So there's no time. There's no space. There's no passing away nor arising. So there's nothing there which is transient. And in fact, there's nothing there from this side of experience. He says it's not fixed. It's not moving. And it's not evolving. Nothing's happening there. And he says it's without support. In other words, it's not conditioned. It's not dependent on anything else. And he said just this is the end of suffering.

So that's a really clear statement of something which is utterly transcendent of what we normally experience. And of course, that's what we are backing into. See, every time you're practicing meditation and you're observing something, you're turning it into an object, which means that the subject, this sense of the observer, is coming back. It's moving backwards towards a cliff, right? And the cliff happens to be a great place.

And that's the same word *atthi* is used for the earlier quote that I gave about the unborn, the unmade, the unconditioned.

So we have a theory within Buddhism called the Tathāgatagarbha theory, Yogācāra, it's called the Yogācāra school. So here the idea is, or the concept is that the Tathāgata, the Buddha within, finds itself within a psychophysical organism. It doesn't necessarily have to be a human. And it doesn't have any mass, remember. *Nibbāna* doesn't have any mass. There's no earth. So it's as comfortable in a little microbe as it is in an elephant. Or a dinosaur. It just fills it. It's just there with it.

So this finds itself in there and makes this mistake, of course, of believing itself to be this and the urge to seek happiness, the urge to seek liberation. Either impelled from within some sort of intuitive idea that there must be something beyond, or just from living in the world where suffering arises. They're always trying to escape suffering. And then when you realise there's pleasures about, and you're happy when there's pleasures about, then of course you seek more pleasure. For me it's a very straightforward psychological dynamic. I don't think there's anything too stressful about understanding that.

But then, because of that process, this *tathāgata*, this *garbha*, this embryo, begins to grow and eventually end up as the Tathāgata. Tathāgata means it's best translated the basic words mean either thus come or thus gone, but the best translation is of course that he's pointing to something beyond and he uses other imageries like the island so it's when he talks about himself referring to the Tathāgata he's talking about something that has that is transcended right that has transcended.

How this came about, how the phenomenal universe came about, is never discussed. All the Buddha points to is that we're here and we're in a mess and he knows how to get us out of the mess. So it's a very sort of restricted teaching. He doesn't go beyond that. He doesn't really talk about physics or biology or anything like that. It's not in his purview. It's not what he's actually on about.

He sees clearly through the Four Noble Truths when he states it. This is an unsatisfactory situation. And that the problem is how do we get out of that? Is there an escape from that? And that's what he discovers. So his whole teaching is sort of wedged towards this escape. So lots of things are not explained. Lots of things are not scientific in the way that we would like them to be.

So the whole idea of rebirth, the whole idea of *Nibbāna* is unscientific. You're never going to prove it. So eventually it does boil down to a certain confidence that he wasn't having his own and then to put effort into the practice and just begin to see even at the level of the role of desire that there is an escape at the point of desire that you don't have to follow this and that you can actually move your whole conditioning towards which is something more beneficial.

So that's about it I think so you've got these three ways that we look at something that's coming towards us something new from outside our culture you know we have a we we try to make it fit into our science we try to make it fit into this background idea a romantic view of life of what life's actually about um it has to fit in some way into our psychotherapy and um

Once we're clear as to where all these three things are and where the Buddhist teaching is actually, shall we say, isolated within that, the clarity of the Buddhist teaching, we gaining the clarity of the Buddhist teaching, then of course our progress is going to be much better. We won't be sidelined. We won't need, we'll feel that we don't need to come to conclusions. If we don't know, why come to a conclusion?

I was on a train recently, last year, going down to Brighton, and a rugby crowd got on. And these two guys opposite me, and one of them said, you're a Buddhist monk, aren't you? And I said, I am. He said, well, I don't believe in rebirth or reincarnation. I said, do you know whether there's reincarnation or not? And he said, no. I said, well, why make a conclusion? And his mate said, yeah, why make a conclusion? And he just decided there's no such thing as reincarnation. And we had a great old conversation. He still didn't believe in it, of course, but at least I might have halted his... Well, it's pride, isn't it? It's all hubris, you know, like, I know. It doesn't make sense to me, so it can't be.

So as long as we remain in that sort of humble place, meaning truthful to ourselves, don't know, then we leave open possibility of exploration, possibility of insight.

So there we are. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. If not, I'm sure you'll leave me a couple of notes. I can only hope that by your devotion to the practice you may be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Second and Third Noble Truths: Cause and Cessation of Dukkha

Noirin Sheahan · 47 min

In this teaching, Noirin Sheahan examines the second and third Noble Truths through the lens of paṭicca samuppāda (Dependent Origination). She explains how the twelve links—from avijjā (ignorance) through saṅkhāras (formations) to jarāmaraṇa (aging and death)—create the wheel of dukkha in our lives.

Using accessible gardening analogies, Noirin shows how unwholesome saṅkhāras sprout from ignorance, manifest through our six sense bases, and create the experience of self through upādāna (clinging). She emphasizes vedanā (feeling) as the crucial point where mindfulness can stop the wheel from turning toward suffering.

The teaching beautifully illustrates how we can experience the second Noble Truth—that taṇhā (craving) causes dukkha—and the third Noble Truth—that cessation is possible—in our moment-to-moment meditation practice. Noirin offers practical guidance on cultivating appreciation for absence and space, helping us recognize those quiet moments when dukkha is not present as glimpses of Nibbāna.

Tonight I'm going to talk about the second and third noble truths. The second truth states that desire is the cause of *dukkha* and the injunction is to let go of desire. The third truth states that there is an end to *dukkha* with the injunction to realize this for ourselves.

These truths manifest more clearly as we learn to experience the twelve links in the process that leads to *dukkha*. These are described in the Wheel of Dependent Origination. Each link depends on all the previous links having been made. We chant these twelve steps every morning.

It all starts with *avijjā*, usually translated as ignorance. We often hear that word as an insult, but that's not what is intended here. Instead, it means we don't fully understand what causes suffering. One interpretation of this teaching is to see it happening over multiple lifetimes, with each life influencing the next. It's also possible to see the wheel turning again and again within our lifetime, our incomplete understanding of the Dhamma leading us into *dukkha* at many stages in life. We can even see it turning

within the minutiae that we study in meditation practice. Each breath, each footstep, each mood, emotion, thought—to the extent that these emerge from *avijjā*, they result in *dukkha*.

Bhante stresses that *avijjā* is a blameless ignorance. We didn't create ourselves in this ignorant state, so we're not to blame for our predicament. At heart, we are innocents. Most of us will admit to *avijjā*. Even if we've studied the Dhamma and are convinced by the argument that greed leads to suffering, we can happily scoff an ice cream, telling ourselves we'll practice renunciation tomorrow. And when someone pushes our buttons, we still find ourselves reacting, despite the fact that we've heard and read countless teachings on the benefits of equanimity. Once we fully understood the teachings, ignorance will be eliminated and the wheel will no longer get a chance to turn.

In the meantime, however, *avijjā* allows *saṅkhāras* to emerge. *Saṅkhāras* are the drives which push us into and through our lives. These include greed, hatred and delusion, the strong forces which propel us towards *dukkha*. We also have beautiful *saṅkhāras*, for example *mettā*, which means love or goodwill, as well as all the factors of enlightenment and spiritual faculties. In their purest form, these are not linked with *avijjā*, but with wisdom. Thus, they do not cause the wheel to turn. They don't propel us into *dukkha*. It's only the *saṅkhāras* related to greed, hatred and delusion that turn the wheel.

So far, we have ignorance and an unskillful *saṅkhāra* beginning to roll the wheel. In order to exercise their driving power, they need to become conscious. To be conscious is to know experience, to hear sounds, feel body sensations, and so forth. If we're unconscious, we have no awareness of what's going on. Consciousness is often likened to a screen on which a movie is projected. The story of our lives is displayed on the screen of consciousness.

In this case consciousness has been hijacked by a *saṅkhāra* rooted in ignorance. The Buddha gives this form of consciousness the name *viññāṇa*. The drive now operating through consciousness wants to play a particular movie on the screen. A *saṅkhāra* of greed might want a romantic movie with lots of food and sex, while a *saṅkhāra* of ill-will would prefer a violent movie. A *saṅkhāra* of delusion just wants to control the projector. It wants to play a movie within the movie, to be the producer, director and central star of all the movies.

For consciousness to manifest in the world, we need both body and mind. Our bodies are part of the physical world of matter. Our minds inhabit the world of thought and imagination. The pair are termed *nāma-rūpa* and form the fourth link in the wheel. *Rūpa* gives the three previous links physical reality, which is felt and recognized in our

mind. From this, we can see our emotional life as having bodily as well as mental components. Avijjā and saṅkhāra become conscious and can then express themselves through body and mind.

Let's go back to our gardening analogy that we used for the hindrances. The soil is avijjā, ignorance. It contains seeds of unwholesome saṅkhāras. These can grow up to be hindrances if they can work their way through the next links. The seed germinates in consciousness. If you've watched seeds germinate, you will know that two shoots start to emerge, one growing downwards to become the root system, the other growing upwards towards the light. This makes for a neat analogy with the subdivision of consciousness into nāma-rūpa once it comes under the influence of avijjā and saṅkhāra.

The saṅkhāra now has almost all the apparatus needed to make trouble for us. It just needs to decide which of our senses to work through: the tactile sensory system that runs throughout our bodies, or the auditory system ready to receive sounds, or the visual system, taste, smell, or our sixth sense, which is the mind with its feelings, perceptions, moods, emotions and thoughts. These sense bases form the fifth link in the wheel. Working through nāma-rūpa, consciousness can manifest through any of these systems.

Now our saṅkhāra is ready to sprout into the world. Say for example it was a seed of greed. It can now look out greedily through our eyes. It can search the mind for happy memories or exciting plans. Similarly for all the other senses. In our gardening analogy, our seed has found six channels, maybe six little gaps between stones, through which it can sprout up above ground.

This brings us to the sixth link in the wheel, sense contact. A new bit of sense data impacts on our psychophysical system. In our experience, all of the first six links arise simultaneously. We don't experience avijjā on its own, for example, or the avijjā-saṅkhāra combination. It's only when these meet with the world as it impacts on our senses that we become conscious of all six links. We can sense these working in combination to colour our experience at any moment. We might recognise the saṅkhāra of ill-will, for example, and the way it inhabits our body, narrowing our eyes, perhaps, as well as our mind. Maybe we feel angry. We might sense some slight uncertainty along with this, or else a bull-headed determination to ignore all obstacles—manifestations of avijjā. The fact that we are aware of anything is due to consciousness, so we can trace all of the first six links in our moment-to-moment experience.

I had a good experience of this one time during walking meditation. I was quite content until someone came into the room making a lot of noise. I could have sworn the room got darker. Because of mindfulness I could see that the darkening was internal in my mind, but I was struck at how vividly this was projected into the outside world, as if the sun had gone behind a cloud.

By now we have come halfway around the wheel. From sense contact onwards the process occurs sequentially. Let's say the new bit of data was a sound. As soon as we detect the sound, our cognitive processes go into action, opening the filing cabinet of perception to try to classify it. What the *saṅkhāra* needs is to have the sound classified as a threat or an opportunity for pleasure. So cognition compares the sound with those it has previously recognised as threats, such as a loud bang, and opportunities, such as the jingle of the ice cream van. It also compares with the myriad familiar sounds, like birdsong or distant traffic, which are unimportant in terms of this *saṅkhāra*'s survival.

The new sound can be classified anywhere on a very wide scale, from red alert, major danger, to minor irritation, through unimportant, to mildly pleasant, to wonderful opportunity not to be missed. This classification gives a hedonic value to the sound. If you are familiar with this teaching, you'll recognize that what I'm getting at here is *vedanā*, the recognition of any sense contact as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. *Vedanā*, usually translated as feeling, forms the seventh link in the chain leading from ignorance to *dukkha*.

Vedanā is arguably the most important link for us to recognize because we can stop the wheel turning at this point. If we can recognize unpleasant sounds, sensations, and so forth without reacting, no *dukkha* is generated. Using our gardening analogy, the shoot got its first bit of sunlight and has turned green, so it can be seen by the gardener of mindfulness. So far it has been concealed underground and we couldn't influence it, but at this point mindfulness can see the shoot and uproot the weed.

Without mindfulness our system automatically reacts to *vedanā*. If the sound had been classified as neutral, neither a threat nor an opportunity, our system screens it out. Consciousness barely registers the sound and it's quickly forgotten. This is an example of neutral *vedanā* and the reaction of delusion, ignoring most of our experience, only barely conscious of our environment. This isn't the same as letting go of the sound mindfully. It's an act of ignoring, a form of suppression. The sound isn't allowed to get any attention. If we were to look more closely at such sounds, we might find judgments like unimportant or boring backing up the neutral classification. This is due to the work of our *saṅkhāra* seed, jealously guarding consciousness so that the screen will only play a movie it enjoys.

On the other hand, if the sound was recognised as our favourite music, this will be classified as an opportunity for pleasure—pleasant *vedanā*. Our system will be stimulated to perk up. We listen avidly. This is the reaction of desire, our system's first step in getting what it wants. When desire is strong, it can be felt as a strong flow of energy in the body and a focusing effect in the mind, the mind starting to zoom in on whatever it wants, magnifying this in consciousness.

Now let's say the sound was a loud bang. Cognition classifies this as a red alert and our whole system vibrates with shock, waking us up to the danger. This is the fight or flight response and hormones may be released to stimulate and energise us. We start to tense up as unpleasant sensations prolong and amplify the original red alert response. This is the reaction of aversion, our system's first step in trying to cope with danger. Aversion is actually another form of desire—the desire to get rid of what we dislike.

As we bring our attention to the sensations of breathing, we can experience the three links of contact, *vedanā* and any reactions of desire or aversion. Sense contact reveals the rising and falling sensations. Then there is the cognition of these as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. So far we have two links: contact and feeling. It is very beneficial to rest attention here and learn to differentiate these two from desire. We feel desire as a disturbance that quickly turns the wheel towards *dukkha*. This gives a visceral illustration of the second noble truth that desire is the cause of suffering.

When we sense the disturbing effect of desire, we can at times be persuaded to relax and let go. We feel the benefit as deeper tranquillity. Sometimes our system oscillates between the tranquillity afforded by letting the wheel stop at *vedanā* and little jabs of desire that lead to *dukkha*. At such times our system is reinforcing its understanding of the second and third noble truths: that desire is the cause of suffering and that letting go of desire brings an end to suffering.

If we're not being mindful the wheel continues inexorably towards *dukkha*. The next link is termed clinging or attaching. We become attached. Attachment brings up a sense of self to protect and guard our position. If we're mindful, we can feel this happening.

Let's look at how a sense of self might manifest as a result of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feeling. Say we get a compliment. Lots of lovely feelings may manifest as a result. You might feel energised. There may be a sense of expanding, growing taller, as well as a sense of power and control. I like Gregory Cramer's description of this as puffing up.

On the other hand, suppose you're waiting at a bus stop, just idling the time away. You're vaguely aware of your body, the passing traffic and the scene around you, but not interested in these. Instead, you're planning the rest of your day, after the bus comes. Here we have an example of how *saṅkhāra* can feed on neutral feelings. The incoming sense data cannot satisfy its needs and so this is suppressed. Instead, the seed sprouts through the channel of the mind. Here it finds the excitement and pleasure it desires in the ability of the mind to imagine and plan. Do you remember Walter Mitty? If you read the story or saw the movie, you will recognise him as a caricature of delusion, pouncing on every idle moment to indulge his fantasy life.

Suppose, as you're idling away at the bus stop, a car passes at speed, splashing you with water from a puddle, drenching your trousers. This time you might feel yourself deflating rather than puffing up. This is the emergence of self resulting from aversion. It can feel like the air going out of a balloon. The deflation may implode to form a tight constriction. Your face tenses angrily. You might feel constricted within your skin facing a hostile world outside.

These are all examples of clinging or attaching, *upādāna* in Pali. At this step we have the emergence of a sense of self. The mind does a bit more shuffling around in its enormous filing cabinet and decides to classify the incoming sense data as me or mine. When we get the compliment, instead of simply feeling happy and gratified that something has turned out well, we think it is me who is being complimented. This sense of me quickly projects itself into the future and we start feeling powerful and thinking we will always be able to do so well. A very nice way to feel, if only it weren't based on delusion.

When we suppress neutral sensations in order to daydream, the pleasure of being idle is perceived as me who has the power to think and plan and daydream. When we cling to anger at the careless driver, we take their carelessness personally. So we don't just get wet, we get insulted. In our gardening analogy, the weed has blossomed. It's fully developed and is ready to start sowing its seeds.

Our sense of self initiates the next link. *Bhava* in Pali is usually translated as becoming. We experience this as willpower. The self puts its stamp on the world by an effort of will. Up till now the *saṅkhāra* is held as a potential within our body and mind. Now comes the moment for action. We might shake our fists at the careless driver, hurl insults towards the back of their car. We might smile at the person who paid us the compliment and bring a more animated tone into the conversation.

Even thoughts are willed. They don't emerge spontaneously from our mind, but from the intention to think. Willpower keeps us idling at the bus stop, imagining the rest of our day. Think of the effort of will it takes to stop this, to be mindful instead of being lost in thought. This gives us some idea of the strength of will fuelling idle thoughts. In our gardening analogy, the weed is now sowing its seeds. Each effort of will drops a new seed into the soil of ignorance. As we indulge hatred, we sow saṅkhāra seeds of hatred. Similarly for greed and delusion. We shape our own character in the multitude of moments in which we exercise our will. A sobering thought. I'll say more about this tomorrow night.

Once we have exercised our will, something new starts to manifest in the world. This is the penultimate link, termed birth. Say the seed of greed was at the base of this particular turn of the wheel and it found its outlet in reaction to the alluring smell of pizza. The self forms and wills us to get that pizza into our mouth. Thus the whole process of purchasing and eating a pizza is born. If instead the seed of ill will had found its outlet in the careless driver, an angry self forms, angry thoughts are willed into being and a storm of rage initiates. Whenever the seed of delusion finds a mind willing to indulge it, we generate a stream of thoughts and images and we start planning or daydreaming or worrying, whatever is our favourite pastime in idle moments. The chain of events which we have just started gives our saṅkhāra lots and lots of opportunities to sow more seeds.

But every birth leads to death, the last link in the chain. Our idle plans and dreams fall apart when we get that splash from the passing car. Our pizza heaven disintegrates when all that's left on our plate is a few smears of tomato paste. Our bus stop rage could deflate into embarrassment if the car stops, the driver gets out to apologise and we realise we're hurling insults at our neighbour.

With death comes all the dukkha of dying. The enticing pizza turns into a bloated tummy and worries about putting on weight. The plans for our day rarely work out quite so easily as we expect. The bout of rage ends up giving us a headache and raises our blood pressure.

We can sometimes identify these later links from contact onwards to dukkha while emotions fade away in mindful awareness. Say, for example, I've been clinging to rage over some troubling memory. A strong sense of self insists on my viewpoint in the affair. I feel self-righteous and indignant. I can't understand how the other person could have behaved so badly. Mindfulness shows me the effort and strain needed to maintain

my self-righteous stance. I feel the tensions running through my body, the fear and confusion that are maintaining my sense of enmity. I am witnessing the stage of *dukkha*, the final link in the chain.

Sadly, I admit to myself that the effort is too much, that it's taking up all my energy and not getting me anywhere. I realise I will have to let go. Sometimes the emotion simply dissolves at that point. At other times, when the emotion has really run deep, letting go is a very gradual process. Although this prolongs the pain, it also helps me clarify the earlier stages in the wheel.

Once I decide to let go, there is a slight loosening of tension and I now have the mental space to see more clearly. I feel the allure of self-righteousness, how wonderful it is to be morally superior. What I am now feeling is the *dukkha* associated with birth. I no longer want this particular birth into self-righteousness and rage, but I have no choice in the matter. Thoughts condemning the other person hammer through my mind. I feel the intense pressure pushing my face into a grimace, pushing my stomach into a knot, pushing the thoughts into my mind.

As I watch this mindfully, the emotion loses power and the thoughts dwindle down to an attempt to sink them. I can sense willpower pushing the thoughts into being. Because of mindfulness, they now can't get much further than a sort of jabbering, "you, you, you." What is clarifying for me here is the link of becoming, the way we push our emotions out into the world by an effort of will. I also feel the pain of each little jabber, each attempt to define myself as separate from the other person. So this is the *dukkha* associated with becoming.

In time, that effort of will too fades away, and I'm left in a perplexed state, trying to hold myself together. No thoughts form at this stage. It's as if I'm mesmerised. My mind has no flexibility to think. I'm usually holding my breath too. I feel totally stuck. What I'm experiencing here is the *dukkha* associated with clinging. My system is stuck in body and in mind as desire fastens me to what it desires, in this case to rewrite the past, to rid myself of the painful memory.

Eventually, the need to breathe overcomes the attachment. I feel my stuck state dissolve as I take those first tentative breaths. The sense of self fades and instead I feel a strong pushing sensation in my body that I recognise as aversion. I feel my attempts to push against the painful memory, to shut it out from consciousness. This is the link of desire, in this case in its negative form of aversion, the desire to get rid of the painful memory.

If I can hold attention steady on this pushing sensation, it eventually relaxes and I sense the painful memory and the bare sensations involved in grief. But there is some flow now, the memory can flow through my mind and unpleasant sensations flow through the body. I might react occasionally and feel the *dukkha* of enmity. This is now so obviously futile and painful that I'm persuaded to relax again and open to the grief and the painful memory. These are the stages of contact and feeling. I feel the sensations of grief. I am aware of the memory and also of the unpleasantness of the whole experience. But because I know the pain and futility of aversion, I do not react. Wisdom overcomes aversion.

If I can hold steady on that kernel of not wanting, it dissolves moment after moment as it contacts the painful memory and the sensations of grief. The seeds of ill-will are still sprouting in the seedbed of ignorance, hijacking consciousness for their favourite movie, finding their outlets in the emotion of grief and the pain of the memory. But the wheel stops at *vedanā*. Aversion is not being generated and therefore the wheel cannot turn towards *dukkha*. The process is now sensed as a healing one and compassion arises. Sooner or later, I start to see things from the other person's point of view.

As we watch the wheel turn and get to know the feel of its various links, we're also cleaning up the seedbed of ignorance, the first link in the chain. Our understanding of the Dhamma is increasing and so ignorance is transforming to wisdom. Thus the wheel gets fewer chances to start turning.

What can we say about those moments when the wheel isn't actively turning? This brings us to the third noble truth that there is an end to suffering. Our task, according to the Buddha, is to realise this for ourselves. So far, I've been talking about the experience of *dukkha*. To get to know the Third Noble Truth, we have to sensitise ourselves to the absence of *dukkha*.

One danger that's easy to fall into is to over-dramatise this experience. The end of *dukkha* is the culmination of all our training, our years of practice. So surely it should come with loud applause, hoops of delight, balloons and fireworks. But in fact we sense the absence of *dukkha* in quiet moments that don't call for any special attention. Just to acknowledge the moment is enough. The penny drops, we realise *Nibbāna* is close at hand, there for the taking, our natural state.

Another way we screen out those quiet moments is to expect ourselves to be totally enlightened, or at least three-quarters way there, before we experience the end of *dukkha*. Now of course there will for all of us be that wonderful moment when the

teaching finally clicks into place and we know for certain that desire will never trouble us again. But even in our present unenlightened state we can experience fleeting moments when desire is stilled, when *dukkha* is not showing up.

There are various reflections that help develop our taste for quietness and the absence of drama. One is the translation of *Nibbāna* as cooling. The Buddha describes our unenlightened state as one of burning. All our senses are burning with desire. Unwittingly we keep loading on more fuel because of our attachments. But as we learn to let go, the fuel store is gradually burning out. We are cooling down. *Nibbāna*-ing, you could say. As our passions cool off, what remains?

Nibbāna is often described by absence. The absence of ageing, death, pain and any other form of suffering, for example. Also the absence of what we would not normally think of as suffering. Here is an extract from one description the Buddha gave of *Nibbāna*:

"There is, Bhikkhus, that base where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no air, neither this world, nor another world, nor both, neither sun nor moon. Here, Bhikkhus, I say, there is no coming, no going, no staying, no deceasing, no uprising. Not fixed, not movable, it has no support. Just this is the end of suffering."

This description is perplexing, bewildering even. Remember that the Buddha first thought that the enlightened state he had discovered was too subtle to be understood by others. Hearing this description of *Nibbāna*, who could blame him? Although the description is perplexing, I also find it intriguing and inspiring. I'm drawn towards the mystery. But it can also stir grief and anger because we think of absence in terms of loss. Could absence actually satisfy us? That would entail a huge shift in our normal way of seeing things.

But we can tiptoe towards this mystery by learning to appreciate absences. The Buddha specifically asks us to do this in terms of our mind states. For example, we are to notice the mind state of greed and the mind state of non-greed, the mind state of hatred and the mind state of non-hatred. We would rarely ask ourselves what is not in our minds at the moment. But it is part of the practice which sensitises us to *Nibbāna*.

So whenever you are feeling relaxed, see can you note that you don't feel greedy right now and that you don't feel angry right now. Thus we can deepen our appreciation of the state. We can also take note of the ending of any hindrance. If someone or something annoys us, we might be plagued by irritation for hours. Then it passes. We

hardly notice the transition. But it's a very good time to be noting how pleasant it is not to feel irritated. The recent memory of how irritating it was to feel irritated helps us appreciate the absence.

I frequently get cramps in my feet. I used to dread these until I started using them as a vipassanā focus. It amazed me how quickly the pain diminished as I focused on it mindfully. It also intrigued me to find the moment when pain faded away. I noticed how my mind distanced itself as soon as pain started to fade, wanting to find something more interesting to latch on to. It became a good exercise for me to see could I keep track of those lingering sensations until they faded away.

We can practice this with any disturbance, mental or physical. That moment where desire fades away, for example. One moment we were disturbed by our longing for something, the next moment we weren't. It's so easy to miss these fleeting moments of peace as we hurl ourselves forward into the next challenge. But we need to pause for a moment to feel the momentary absence of trouble and learn to appreciate this.

Renunciation gives us an opportunity to practice with absences. This time we're being creative. We are creating an absence, a precious space which attunes us to *Nibbāna*. If we decide not to watch TV for an hour some evening, a whole new space opens up in our lives. If we decide not to eat an extra biscuit, we're diminishing the power of greed as a disturbance in our psyche. Refraining from backbiting a person who annoyed us gives space for forgiveness to grow.

These sound easy but are quite challenging for most of us. It takes continual mindfulness to refrain from whatever is tempting us. Any little slip and we're turning on the TV, gobbling the biscuit and passing a disparaging remark about the person who has annoyed us. The reward for renunciation is not immediately obvious whereas the TV, the biscuit and the catty remark all provide instant gratification. We need to fortify ourselves by considering the long-term benefits of a more peaceful mind.

Sometimes in meditation we feel the urge towards greed, hatred or delusion but have the resources to resist these. For example, while we are watching the breath, we might feel the desire to stray into thoughts and fantasy. It can feel as though my chest, head and neck are almost straining to lift off, tear away from the abdomen with its rhythmic, calming sensations. The energy accumulates in my head and I sense the urgent need to think.

If I can catch all this, I can usually resist the temptation. The note, "not indulging, not indulging," can help. This gives me a more visceral feel for the benefits of renunciation. I sense the tranquility on offer from the sensations of breathing and counteracting desire for heady excitement. It's so obvious looking at this that the rhythm of the breath is more deeply satisfying than indulging desire.

Although this can bring up the grief of renunciation, it also helps me choose not to indulge desire. As well as strengthening willpower for renunciation, this nurtures the taste for absence. It helps us question our preoccupation with clinging. Why does life need to be so full of pleasure? It takes so much energy to hold on to pleasure. Is there a possibility of letting it come and go without so much fuss?

We can cultivate a taste for absence at other levels in life. One teacher described how, having taken down an ugly shed in his back garden, he spent several days looking out the window and enjoying the absence of the shed. In my own case, now that I can no longer talk easily, I can sometimes enjoy the absence of talking. Before the operation, I would have enjoyed the buzz of conversation. While I still grieve the loss of this great joy in my life, I also appreciate the fact that there are now more moments of peace in the company of family and friends. I'm hoping others may also feel this benefit.

For the first months, I couldn't use the electrolarynx and used to carry around a whiteboard and marker everywhere. A friend later remarked that when he saw me coming into a party with my whiteboard and marker, that he felt relieved, looking forward to those relaxing moments of silence while people waited for me to write. I am sure you all sense the benefit of not talking while you are here in retreat, and sense the benefit of this particular renunciation.

Another contemplation I found helpful is on the physical space between things. As we look around us, it's generally the objects we see, not the spaces between them. But what if there was no space? Imagine the clutter. We couldn't move. To find our way from one place to another, we seek out space. We actively search for absence, for the gaps between things. It's only these spaces that have the potential to receive our body as it moves, to let it go as it passes by.

Noticing and appreciating space, gaps, absence of difficulties, the ending of pain and emotional disturbance, the peace of not doing, all sensitise us to the third noble truth, the end of suffering. These unobtrusive, non-dramatic phenomena, so easy to ignore, have nonetheless the potential to alter the course of our lives, to reveal the quiet mystery at the heart of life and death, the stillness that penetrates all things.

Before finishing, I'd like to focus on that crucial mid-section of the wheel and show its potential to reveal second and third noble truths as they show up in our experience. Let's recap on the wheel using our gardening analogy. The soil of ignorance holds seeds of the unwholesome *saṅkhāras*. To get the wheel turning, one of these germinates in consciousness, implants itself in our body and mind to search through our senses for satisfaction.

A seed of greed looks for pleasure, generates the desire for more, and a sense of self emerges to consume the pleasure. A seed of ill-will looks for displeasure, thriving in the battle to destroy and vanquish. It stimulates aversion and a sense of self emerges to fight its battles. A seed of delusion looks for neutral *vedanā*, thriving in the security of our imagination. We are always the boss, protected from reality.

Once the *saṅkhāra* has blossomed into a self, it gets to work sowing new seeds. The willpower needed to drive each thought, word and action drops another seed into the soil of ignorance. And as the thoughts, words and actions manifest in the world, they initiate a chain of events. A seed of greed might get us gobbling some biscuits. A seed of hatred might get us into a tantrum. A seed of delusion lulls us into a spiral of thought and imagination. *Dukkha* emerges as the biscuits transform into indigestion, as the tantrum turns into spoiled friendships, as Walter Mitty falls down to earth.

The remedy for this never-ending round of misery is, of course, mindfulness. Mindfulness of *dukkha* is one starting place, or, whenever possible, mindfulness of sense contact and *vedanā*, the point before the seeds have had a chance to blossom. If we can hold attention steady there, unwholesome *saṅkhāras* don't get a chance to spread their seeds.

At times we can grow quite peaceful, feeling the flow of sensations and feelings. Then a little prickle of desire emerges, prompting us to hold on to the peace. We sense the disturbance, the budding anxiety that edges desire. If we can note "desire, desire," watching the disturbance as it manifests, it eventually fades away, leaving us in peace again.

Here we have the second and third noble truth manifesting in our experience. We sense for ourselves that desire causes suffering and that letting go of desire ends suffering. It's as simple as that. Simple but not easy. I hope this reflection on the second and third truths helps us trust our underlying simplicity, our natural beauty, our birthright of ease. May we and all beings be free from suffering.

Spiritual Progress - Stop Trying!

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 50 min

In this New Year address, Bhante Bodhidhamma presents a profound teaching on the fundamental paradox of spiritual practice: the self that seeks liberation is the very delusion that must be transcended. Drawing from the Buddha's analysis of the three characteristics (anicca, dukkha, anattā), he explains how our natural misidentification with body, mind, and heart creates the suffering we seek to escape.

The talk explores how spiritual progress occurs not through trying to attain insights, but through patient purification of the heart and cultivation of the observer consciousness (satipaṇṇā). Bhante explains the psychology of dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda), showing how desire and selfing arise from innocent misunderstanding rather than inherent evil. He details the traditional stages of awakening and path-moments, emphasizing that these cannot be grasped by the ego-mind.

With characteristic clarity and practical wisdom, Bhante offers guidance for the year ahead: focus on purifying negativities rather than seeking attainments, cultivate discernment between skillful and unskillful states, and trust in the natural unfolding of insight when conditions are right. A masterful teaching on letting go of spiritual ambition while maintaining diligent practice.

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

This is my New Year address. So I'd better make it good, what do you think? This could ruin my future. I'd better get it spot on. So I suppose one thing that is good to do is just to revise all the teachings we understand and know and see if we can give ourselves some direction for the next year.

One of the major factors in our progress spiritually is to be able to discern what is unskillful from what is skillful, what is wholesome from what is unwholesome. And that discernment — where does it come from? What is making the discerning? Who's discerning or what is discerning?

So we have to be very clear as to what the human being is made up of and then see where the problem lies and see how we can sharpen our sense of discernment. In the Buddhist teachings, we're made up of three parts. First of all, there's our physical

nature. And there's the mind, which includes the heart. Remember, our culture has split them apart from each other, but the mind meaning our emotional thought, the emotional thoughts, the mental states that we go through. So don't forget, whenever I talk about mind, I'm always including heart. If I talk about heart, I'm centering on the emotional thing. And there's this *nibbāna dhātu*, this element of Nibbāna, which makes it very spiritual.

Our practice is to begin to observe all that's going on inside us. And in that observation, we access within ourselves this observer, the feeler, the one who knows. And in doing, we are objectifying everything that we are experiencing. And this observer, the one who knows, is this *satipaṇṇā*. That's why I call this place Satipaṇṇā. This is the Buddha within, and it's trying to isolate that from everything that it's experiencing, which is the process of awakening.

What does this awakening refer to? It's simply awakening to the way things really are. That's the Buddha's little pet phrase, to see things as they really are. In fact, I was going to translate that sentence literally — it would be to see how things have come to be. So in other words, the Buddha is intimately involved in, wants us to become intimately involved in process. How do we create the world that we live in?

Now, that separation within us when we become the observer, the feeler, the one who knows, the one who's experiencing within ourselves — what it's telling us is that everything that I'm aware of, I can't be. So the perceiver cannot be the perceived. In the same way that you perceive me, I can't be you. So as soon as you've turned something into an object, you've created a dislocation. So I'm still inside myself, thinking of myself, feeling myself, knowing myself as the observer, the feeler, the one who knows. So even at that point, there's some reflection coming back to this essential knowing of its own existence. Just like when you look into a mirror. See, the face that you're seeing is not the face as it is. It's a mirror image. But it's still telling you. It's still looking in the right direction. It's looking back at you.

Now, the paradox is that we'll never be able to see our own faces. Which is a terrible thing. We can see everybody else's face, but I can't see my own. I've got to use a mirror, I've got to use some ploy to make myself... And that will never be the face as it really is, although I might get very close to it. But the point is, I won't have a direct experience of what my face looks like. This tells us something about this quality of knowing. The knowing can never know itself. Just as the face can't see itself, the eye can't see itself. The tongue can't taste itself. If the tongue had a taste, say a curry taste, it'd ruin the ice cream, wouldn't it?

So it's recognizing that all these sense bases are completely empty. They're empty of what it is they're to be sensitive to. And that's also true of this level of awareness, *satipaṇṇā*, that itself is completely empty, except it has attitude. It definitely has attitude. And this attitude has arisen because of some wrong understanding that what it experiences is itself.

Now, if you go back to the birth, our birth into life, that's pretty understandable, isn't it? I mean, we came, we arrived, even in the womb there's some consciousness, but we arrived and we're bombarded with all this sense data. And it's understandable, isn't it, that we presume ourselves to be that. We don't have that self-awareness. We don't even have a understanding but unfortunately it does create the delusion that I am this body, this mind, this heart. And our process is to undermine that delusion by relocating the sense of self. That's your first step.

Often when we are in pain, if we get lost in the pain, if we're overwhelmed by the pain, then you become the pain. You lose a sense of somebody suffering pain, you're just in pain. So you stub your foot on the pavement, just for that little moment of "ouch", you are that pain. So what identity means is a loss of any self-awareness into what it is you're experiencing. And this can be done at a physical level through things like dangerous sports. I mean, that's one of the kicks of dangerous sports, that you get lost in it. And just for that one moment, you are totally in that mental state. And it's great. But it is an identity with our physical form.

At a much more regular level is the identity we have with our emotions. So very quickly we can find ourselves being angry, being depressed. It's very easy for us to fall into that identity. And even more easy is, of course, thought patterns, where you find yourself just daydreaming. Especially when you're sitting. Just the mind shoots off and you're off. One of my favorite places, Acapulco. And then you suddenly realize that you've been away. What does it mean you've been away on a daydream? You've actually been the daydream in terms of your experience during that time. That's what you were.

Now, as soon as we come out of that and we diligently note what it is that's driving that thought, some excitement for that perhaps, and we come into the body and we feel the excitement, immediately we've objectified things. As soon as you objectify things, it can't be the subject. So unwittingly, whether you know it or not, we are constantly undermining that sense of self as something other — so the body or emotions or thoughts — by coming back to the position of the observer, the feeler, the one who knows. You're undermining all those identities, and that's the negative side. The positive side is you are re-identifying with this observer now.

That mistake that we make of selfing — so the self is always arising and passing away. But the identity is the same. You're still identifying with the body, even though the body is offering you different experiences. You're still identifying with the heart, even though moods change, and the mind. That process of this intuitive awareness becoming what it experiences is that falling into the delusions. That's what we mean by delusion.

And when we come out of that and there's a doubt about things, when there's a feeling of not knowing and we're into that state of wondering, but if there's some fear or anxiety about a loss of identity, this is an extremely good sign. Because the one thing the self knows about itself but can't face is its own mortality. So every time you have a little hiccup of fear, of not knowing who you are, why you are, that's a sign that something is being undermined. That's good fear. There's bad fear. Bad fear is paranoia. But the little shock that you get, for instance, I'm sure you've all woken up in a friend's house or in a hotel. And just for that, as you wake up, you don't know who you are. And there's that little panic. Have you all had that? Yeah, I see. That prior, just that moment prior to the panic was a moment of enlightenment, inverted commas. Because just for that one moment, you didn't know who you were and you were okay with it, but you couldn't stay there. You had to reach out and grab some definitions. And so there's this moment of panic and then suddenly you realise, oh, it's me. And then it disappears. You're happy again.

Now, what then are the definitions of a self? When you say, I am a self, what are the definitions? These boil down to the three characteristics. So the first one is this sense of permanency. Even though we know the body's changing, even though we know the world's changing, we know everything's changing, but there's something in me, this sense of me, doesn't change. I'm always there. Whenever I'm aware, I'm always there. And there's no definition to the me, apart from feeling that I am here. So there's a constant, yeah? Except, of course, when you fall asleep, then it disappears. But when you wake up again, here I am again, or... Not you again. It depends on your mood.

So you've got this sense of me that continues. And that's where the delusion of impermanence is to be really found. And this sense of permanency is then displaced on the world itself. So how long is a moment? How long do you experience a moment? The mind's very clever — it's pretty long, isn't it, don't you think? I mean, things are changing but the mind holds it long enough to give you a sense of permanency somewhere, that a moment isn't just a flash — it's actually long enough for it to become real, inverted commas. Is that right? Yeah, see.

So this sense of permanence actually permeates the very way we experience life. And what our practice is doing is making us center as much as we can on this impermanency. And that's one of the reasons in this particular technique, Mahāsi technique, that we go very slow, because the slower you go, the more the mind goes slow, the more you can see this process of impermanence.

Now, that process of seeing impermanence can go to the point where you actually do experience, as you said, Sita, a moment of consciousness. So now, what then is consciousness? These words, by the way, they're all over the place these days because they're studying it. So there's hundreds of definitions. Consciousness in the Buddhist teachings, as I understand it, is a screen. It's a multi-dimensional screen that holds emotions, thoughts, etc., etc. And it flashes, it catches something, and it holds it long enough for it to be known.

Now if we were to think of, if we were to go to Abhidhamma, this is actually happening at enormous speeds and you can only hold one data of information for every one piece of consciousness. So if you were, for instance, to put your attention on the eardrum and really, really make it there, you would eventually arrive at the place where you're not hearing anything, but feeling the pressure of air on the eardrum. And even that isn't the singularity with which you can experience consciousness.

Consciousness in a flash can come like that and when we experience this arising and passing away of moments of consciousness what is interesting is that something was still there when there was no consciousness. So this drive of *anicca*, this drive of impermanence takes us right down to an experience of what is there before something arises in consciousness, and that of course becomes a little gateway into a different way of seeing the world. When somebody has such an experience it needn't be a cataclysmic thing but it has a systemic effect because that insight now begins to change attitude. So that's the second on the noble path. And then it begins to express itself by the way we speak and what we do and how we behave and in our livelihoods. So it comes down. It's a systemic process which may take time because an insight of that nature has to be matured. It has to be digested and that can take some time and it depends upon the sharpness or the depth of that seeing which will affect the person.

The second process, the second thing that the self does is presuming itself to be this body — the self, what does the self want? It just wants to be happy. Therefore, it seeks happiness in this form. And in seeking happiness in this form, every time happiness comes up, it tries to maintain it, to hold it. And that's what we mean by attachment. It

becomes a psychological dependency for establishing happiness. And anything that upsets that, of course, you have to get rid of. You have to shoot. You have to destroy immediately. So you can maintain your sense of happiness.

Now, when we ask ourselves, when I say I'm happy, what am I referring to? Am I referring to a physical sensation? Would I scream touching my tongue just on a very hot day when I really want it? Does the actual sensation of ice cream on the tongue, do we consider that to be happiness or just a pleasant taste on the tongue? When I talk about happiness, do I mean the thought of an ice cream, which may bring up certain other qualities? But is the thought itself, the sequence of thoughts, is that happiness? As I'm eating the ice cream and my head is saying, this is really good Italian ice cream. If I say that to myself, is that line of thought what I call happiness? Or is happiness the mental state we're in, especially the emotional state? In other words, it's a feeling state, isn't it? It's a state of the heart. When my heart feels happy and I experience the heart being happy, whatever might be the proximate cause, such as ice cream, that's when I say I'm happy.

So now I become intoxicated. My whole life becomes a search for things that are going to bring about this mental state, this happiness, right? Now, it's beginning to see the aftermath of that. That once I'm attached to something, while I'm enjoying things, fine, what's the problem? It's what happens afterwards. The craving that comes. The dependency, the addiction. At worst, of course, you've got drug addicts. But we're all addicted to some extent. And then there's the grief when you lose what you have. And there's the fear of loss anyway. So you have to take an insurance policy. And then there's the frustration where you don't get what you want. And then there's boredom.

And this society refuses to connect boredom with excitement. Refuses to do so. I had a program on boredom. It said nothing about that connection at all. Boredom is that state when you're no longer in that happy state that things give you. So the same thing like an ice cream might be absolutely wonderful and when somebody says would you like another you say well I've had enough. It might of course be a physical thing but you've had enough ice cream, but the fact is that if you keep eating ice cream all the time you get fed up with it because it's not giving you the same buzz. So there's an in-built obsolescence, there's an inbuilt process in pleasure whereby it loses its tang, and that's the same with relationships. You get bored occasionally. I mean, you all know that you get fed up, you get frustrated, and then when they threaten to leave you, oh god, it's fearful. So the whole gamut of human suffering is all to do with this relationship we have with the world that we experience.

That relationship is one of identity and that identity, that self, is seeking happiness in the world and in doing keeps making these pratfalls — it finds unhappiness. So now what the Buddha is saying: come back on the process, come back on that process, and whenever you feel a desire to actually sit with it, to feel it. It may be a need — you've got to eat, for instance — and to actually feel it and to allow it to arise in its fullness, the addiction of it, and to recognize that if you just allow it to arise and pass away, some of the energy in that addiction has been lost. So what we're doing in our meditation when we see these desires, and of course hopefully in daily life, we're actually undermining the conditioning that we've produced ourselves. Nobody can condition us.

Nobody can condition our hearts. We do it all ourselves. It's all an internal process. And if we can become aware of that and beware the aftermath when we're doing those, then of course you start coming off it. You start coming off it. And that's what we call renunciation. That's not this process of self-mortification where we're blaming the body and we've got to punish the body for daring to have appetite. It's recognizing that appetite is natural and that we're putting something on top of that. We're putting an obligation on it. We're putting an obligation on food to make me happy. And when it doesn't do it, then I get upset one way or the other.

Now that psychology is writ large in dependent origination that we chant every morning. And what the Buddha did there was to clearly delineate where the sense of self comes in. If the sense of self began the process, how could there be a mistake? How could there be an escape? Think about it. If that sense of "I want ice cream" — if the "I" is primary — then there'll be no escape from that delusion. It's the fact that that's not the psychology that's happening.

The psychology that's happening is: there's some sort of stimulus, perhaps hearing somebody say "ice cream," and then this memory comes up which brings with it a pleasant feeling. And then there's the desire to recreate that pleasant feeling, and then there's the sense of "I." So the process that we're actually experiencing psychologically is ice cream, want ice cream, like, want, I. And once the "I" comes in, it's very difficult to stop the rest of that process. You can, of course, if you're aware of that grasping. But as soon as you said "I want," it's very difficult to stop the enforcement of that desire, the way that we empower it with will. And before you know it, you're getting the ice cream.

And it's recognizing that process that is part of liberating ourselves from suffering. That's why in the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha says that the cause of suffering — second, number two — is desire. He could have gone deeper. He could have said, well,

the cause, the real deep, profound cause of suffering is a sense of self. But he doesn't. He says it's desire because that's how it manifests. The self manifests as a process of desiring.

So that every time you undermine desires — whether it's for something or you don't want something, a negativity or fear, whatever it is — that is the attitude that's creating wanting, not wanting. Every time you undermine that, you're undermining that false sense of self.

So there's that way of the self arising through its identity with this physical body, wanting to feel happy, using the world in order to create that mental state. And once we start breaking through that delusion that the world is going to offer us happiness — and that real happiness is an emotion, which is ridiculous because emotions also rise and pass away — once we break through that way of thinking, then of course we start letting go of things easily. And we disengage from the heart, so we don't get caught up in it.

So now there is happiness. Not "I am happy" — there is happiness. I mean, that's what you're doing whenever you're sitting here and some sort of peacefulness comes to the heart. There is peacefulness. It's a nice atmosphere. It's like walking into this room. You know, it's a pleasant room to be in. But then you walk out and this room disappears and you're in the walking room, which is cold. So it's a case of recognizing that these emotions rise and pass away.

And even when they're negative, to actually begin to distance from them. We distance from them with aversion — we try to push them away. But if we maintain the meditator's position of "there is unhappiness," whatever shade of unhappiness it is, then in a sense we've liberated ourselves from it. That disengagement is a liberation. It's a taste of *nibbāna*. It's an indication as to where we might actually get to within this body, heart and mind.

And of course, one thing that the self does — and that's the third characteristic, so we may as well move on to the third one — is the sense of self. The sense of self, the Buddha points out, has a major idea about control. So we've talked about it psychologically speaking, that the self wants to make itself happy. But a definition of self — "this is me" — me must have the idea that I'm in control of whatever I define as me. And when I find that I don't have that control, then of course there's this dislocation. There's a fear that arises.

Now we all know intellectually that the body is not under my control. But it still comes as a shock if or when we find out we've got a serious illness, or when we put ourselves in physical danger. It still comes as a shock. That shock, that sense of fear that

comes up, is the measure of the delusion in the self. All these emotions that we feel — like the aversion and the fear and the excitement and all that — these are all measures of the delusion that we're suffering from.

And again, if we can begin to observe the body as not me but something... I remember one teacher talking about it. I remember it was Ajahn Chah said it's more like renting the body. So you don't own the flat you live in — you're just renting it. So if it does burn down, what's the problem? It's somebody else's problem. So it's the same with this body. We're in the body but not of the body. Get it?

So that sense of self has a sense of permanency. It has a sense of seeking its own happiness, and it has a sense of being in control. And when you investigate what it is you're actually directly in control of — directly in control of — it's difficult to find it. I mean, we're not in control, full control of the body. We're not in control of the heart. It governs us. We're not in control of the mind. We're all over the place, the mind in meditation.

So then the question comes back onto this sense of self. Now we've talked about the insight into impermanence — actually seeing things arising and passing away. And by the way, that needn't be entirely at the level of moment-to-moment consciousness. The insight can also be at a much grander level. People suddenly wake up to impermanence, for instance, when somebody close dies, or when they themselves have to go. All these emotional impact of death and dying is also a way of coming to terms with impermanence. So it doesn't have to be on this minute Abhidhamma scale. People can wake up when they actually experience death in some way or another.

And the desire... Now that is a long process, a long process of emptying the heart of its negativities. And that's why it takes so long, because we're full of it. And not only that, we're not 100% committed to it. So we work hard at our retreat and then we go out and it's sex, drugs and rock and roll. And we over-relax and the old habits come back to us. So that's a long process of purification.

But if we can see clearly and directly how the process works — dependent origination — that can also be at the level of a change of attitude, which again then becomes systemic. And this is expressed in the second and third of what we call the path and fruit.

So in the second path and fruit, what the person loses — or what's attenuated — is the amount of greed and hatred they would normally have. That's how it manifests. And in the third level, the sense of greed and hatred — greed and aversion to do with the physicality of life — is virtually undermined. It's not supposed to be there. So that the attachment the person has is more to these refined mental states. And any irritation

that arises, or fear, would be the fear of loss of those, or irritation when somebody upsets them there. One or the other. But what's meant to happen is that — in other words, this Buddha nature within us is no longer seeking happiness in the sensual world. That's the liberation of the third path.

And seeing *anattā*, this sense of not-self, is this sense of control — undermining that sense of "I'm in control of my life." And this takes us to this whole idea of free will.

Free will, and or fate. Free will really is very much a Western idea. I'm pretty sure it doesn't arise in Eastern philosophy. It really arises out of our Christian heritage, where because God has created you so that you could love him — he could love you and you could love him — that love had to be completely free. It's no good conditioning somebody to love you. It's no good making a robot and conditioning it to love you. There's no joy in that at all. Somehow you've got to give this person a freedom, a freedom of will to decide whether they want to love you or not. So there is this concept of a free will which floats above conditioning. Free will floats above conditioning. This is how I understand it. You can read Wikipedia.

On the other scale, you've got fate. And there's a lot of things about life which is fate. Like, for instance, the language that you use. It's fated. You're just born into this situation. And that's a given. For one reason or another, it was fated that it should rain today. It was in the weather system. It's not something that we can particularly control. So there is something in our lives which is determined.

And there is something... In Buddhist understanding, there is no free will. Everything is conditioned. And to talk about free will takes us slightly off the point here. Because the Buddha's path is one of discernment. So it's one of actually recognizing that some things, some things I do are going to make me unhappy. And so I should try and stop them. And some things I do are going to make me happy. And so I should do more of that.

So I liken it more to going on a path. I mean, we call it the path, the way. When you go on a hike or something, you take your map. So there's your instructions. And when you come to a place where you don't quite know where you are, you refer to the map. And then you go on the path which you've actually discerned will take you to the end. Now you might make mistakes, you might go off, but you'll always come back to this central path that you've determined to be on. So you can see the idea of free will doesn't fit in there. It's to do with discernment and then doing what you think is right, doing what you think will take you to perfect happiness, *nibbāna*, however you want to express it.

And these three insights take you to different paths and their fruits. So all that's saying is, when a person has a first insight into one of these three characteristics at a certain depth, which changes their attitude to life, they experience life differently.

So in the first three fetters, as they're called, what goes is — somewhere in the system, this idea of a self is not so strong. It's been undermined. And that will have its effect on how we relate to things — won't grasp them, won't push them away so hard — that we're much more clear about what the path is, so that we don't get caught up in rites and rituals for the wrong reason.

Like when we chant here, it's meant to be as a recollection of what the Buddha teaches. When we take refuges and precepts, for instance, it's a way of recommitting ourselves to the path. But if we thought that either of those — and lighting candles — would actually achieve nibbānic bliss, then we're up the wall. And because of that clarity, all doubt in the Buddha's teaching goes.

So with these three fetters gone, what you have in the second one is then you're really working with your emotional life, your life about where you're attached, as to where you're clinging. And that is undermined again by some deep insight, some deeper insight into one of these three characteristics. Either the fact that things are impermanent, so what's the point? It's unreliable. Or you recognize that this psychology of seeking happiness in the sensual world is always leading you to some level of dissatisfaction. Or you realize that just that very identity is a problem — the identity that we have with this psychophysical organism.

So it's actually deepening one of those. You can go through any of those. And in the third one, where we lose this connection with the sensual life as a place where we can create true happiness, again you go through either one of those gates.

It's said in the commentaries that you can just keep going through impermanence. Because when you concentrate on impermanence, you begin to realize that the sensual world will not deliver. So you're seeing suffering. When you see impermanence, you realize that the sense of self is not permanent. So you're undermining that concept of self that we have — this inner feeling that we have of this continual me. Continual me.

So impermanence is always put first as the entrance into these insights. But it's also possible that each of these paths and fruits, as they're known, are through these three different gates.

And then in the final one, the person loses any attachment to these very beautiful ecstasies that we can get through various practices — just observing the breath, for instance. But it's also... And there are two levels of that, they're known as the material

level and the non-material. In the material level of these absorptions, known as *jhāna*, there's always an object in your mind, there's always an object that you're working on. But in the non-material, all objects go. You're just in a space of pure consciousness.

And this is what the Buddha of course got from his teachers, and he thought it was a good thing to practice, so he didn't get rid of them in his own teachings. And the other two things that I can think of... There's a third one — what would it be? There's two... There's a sense of restlessness.

Now, that restlessness for me indicates that there is still some impurity within the heart. So there's still little fibres of anger which we're getting attached to — that restlessness there.

But when you become an Arahant, when you become someone who's fully liberated, then it's not... I don't think it's particularly true to say that those old habits completely disappear — and I'll tell you why in a minute — but you're no longer, it's impossible for you to get caught up in them.

And then there's the conceit. Now that goes completely — the sense of "I am what I'm experiencing through this psychophysical organism. I am that." When that completely goes, that's also a sign that somebody is liberated from that deep delusion. And in so doing, of course, all ignorance disappears, all delusion disappears.

That's the last of these fetters, chains. And in the Vipassanā process, I mean, this is commentarial. Funnily enough, you won't find it in the scriptures. So there's a hint there that this was something esoteric, this was passed on from teacher to teacher. There are hints of it in the scriptures, but they're all filled out through the commentaries.

And in the Visuddhimagga, which is where it's annotated for the ordinary reader, Buddha Gosar, who wrote that book, the medieval book, he takes us through the various stages that you go through in Vipassanā. These stages don't have to come in a particular set time. I know somebody who went through them and they told me it took him five years. So it's not a case of sitting down and gritting our teeth and going for it. It's just this slow process of continuing our meditation, continuing our investigation. And then very slowly these things begin to manifest.

And that's really the final thing that needs to be said with all these spiritual insights, is that they're not there for this sense of self to attain. In fact, if anything, it's this sense of self that's getting in the way. So somehow you have to change the focus. That's what I

feel. Instead of wanting or trying to get insight, trying to achieve Nibbāna... You see, there's always a self that wants to do that, this essential delusion of somebody is going to achieve something.

It's much more wise, I think, to centre our practice on purifying the heart, because that we can definitely do. And as we allow these negativities to come up, both positive—wanting, wanting—and negative—not wanting—allow them and let them burn away, burn away, burn away. We're actually clearing the field. We're clearing the field. We can see more clearly. And if we take that into daily life, it has an effect of making us much more content with life, much more at ease with it. And just that process itself is undermining the delusions. It's undermining the delusions. It has this sort of back effect on the observer, on the feeler. So that way of looking at life is changing.

So this change in the way we're looking at life, it's sort of like a clock, it's just moving over in little seconds. And when it's done a full turn, there's a sort of seeing which is deep enough to maintain a certain level, a certain attitude to life, which means that the sort of suffering I had before that is not possible. I can't go there again.

I mean, it happens just in ordinary things. I remember just in my own small experience of getting so drunk so often and such a pain in the head that I woke up on a gravestone, I remember. And I said to myself, what if I only get tipsy? And from that time on, apart from when somebody fooled me to drink too much wine, said there wasn't much alcohol in it, I never got drunk again. It was just recognising that the pain of getting drunk wasn't worth it. And I thought to myself, what if I only get tipsy? And I only did get tipsy, and it was great. I was fine. I was happy with that.

And so that's a really bad example of what happens when you lift yourself up to a level of understanding and clarity, and you just can't go there. So that's why it's said that somebody who's obtained the first path and fruit can't go to hell. It can't go into a hell realm. Now, if you want to think of it as a separate realm, fine. But what it's actually saying is you can't, by your actions, make yourself fall into those desperate states that you once did. That's what it's saying. You see? So that's how it works.

If I were to sort of put all that together in a nutshell, my goodness. So... What we're looking at essentially is this fundamental misunderstanding. We call it a delusion. It's a misunderstanding. It's a misunderstanding about who we are and what we are. And that which has made this misunderstanding is not in itself stupid. It's not an ignorance that's come out of stupidity. It's an ignorance that's come out of not knowing.

So the process of that not knowing, it brings us into this suffering from the heart's point of view—it's not coming from a position of evil, some sort of disposition where it's going to create it. No, it's coming from a point of innocence. It doesn't know what harm is. It doesn't know that it is doing harm. So we start from these two positions—we start from a simple not knowing and an innocence.

Then making this mistake, all we're trying to do is make ourselves happy. And in so doing, we create mayhem. We create all this suffering.

And then we come across the Buddha's teachings. Yippee. And he points out that we're looking at things from three different angles, which are wrong. We think things are permanent. We think we can really get happiness. And I really am. And this is what I really am. And I can do it. And when we begin to undermine those, the relationship to life begins to change. Our relationship to life begins to change.

And eventually we arrive at a state, hopefully by New Year, when there is no suffering left. And what we mean by that, let's not confuse this, it's not that the body doesn't give us pain. Remember the Buddha died from some sort of gastroenteritis. But there is no way that this essential nature within us, this Buddha within, this nirvanic element, can fall into a relationship where it causes suffering.

Who's suffering? The Buddha suffers. The Buddha's suffering until it realises where the mistake is. And then it becomes Buddha. Which is a very strange thing to say. People don't see the Buddha as suffering because the word Buddha is, of course, referring to that ultimate state, the one within. But it's the suffering that we're experiencing. When we experience suffering, it's the Buddha within that suffering. Remember, the body doesn't suffer. It's just got physical discomfort. It doesn't know it's suffering. The heart doesn't know it's suffering. There is depression, but the heart isn't saying, oh, I'm suffering. It doesn't have consciousness. Thoughts don't have, they don't think themselves. They don't think about thinking themselves. There's always something behind all that which is clocking it, which is experiencing it.

And that process of disengagement, you see, is the process of liberation. And that process of liberation always takes us, when we're fully, even in the short little moments, experiences of liberation that we have, it always takes us back into the world. You see, takes us back into the world but in a growing way of interconnectedness, and that's what we call love.

I can only hope that my words have been of some advantage. I've not caused even greater confusion. And that by your determined effort, you will become fully liberated sooner rather than later.

The Body and the Discourse on How to Establish Right Awareness

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 50 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma explores the central role of body contemplation in the Buddha's path to liberation from suffering. Drawing primarily from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he contextualizes the Buddha's awakening story and explains how investigating our relationship to the physical body reveals the three characteristics of existence: impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and not-self (anattā).

The talk covers the Buddha's pre-awakening experiences with sensual pleasure, jhānic absorption states, and ascetic mortification practices, leading to his revolutionary insight under the Bodhi tree. Bhante emphasizes how the Buddha's teaching focuses solely on dukkha and its cessation, avoiding metaphysical speculation. He details the practical instructions from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta for body awareness: mindfulness of breathing, clear comprehension in daily activities, contemplation of bodily parts, investigation of the four elements, and charnel ground contemplations.

The discussion includes how proper posture supports mental clarity, how the automatic nature of breathing reveals not-self, and how body contemplation combined with loving-kindness (mettā) leads to balanced practice. This teaching was originally given to lay practitioners in Kuru, demonstrating that liberation through Right Awareness is accessible to all, not just monastics.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sambhasambuddhasa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sambhasambuddhasa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sambhasambuddhasa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully Self-Enlightened One.

What I hope to do tonight is just to explain the importance of the body in the Buddhist teaching and to put it in context of the different exercises that we're doing. The idea of this particular course was to give various exercises to show the extent of Buddhist practice. Most people who come into at least this school just want the meditation, the *vipassanā*, and that's fine. Most people these days anyway want to collect their own little spiritual portfolio — a little bit of this, a little bit of that — and gather their own little direction in the spiritual life. So these exercises may be of use to you in the long term, but at least you know of them.

We've done the body exercise about how to develop a good attitude towards the body, but also how to undermine a certain wrong relationship to the body. This morning we did the *mettā*, which is about developing the heart. We didn't do the forgiveness, which I'll do tomorrow — that's the other side of it. And of course we did *vipassanā*, and part of that *vipassanā* practice was also recognising that you have to establish a basic platform which includes these qualities of not just an awakenedness and awareness, but this attitude of wanting to know, this curiosity, based on equanimity.

This is a very important attitude. In fact, you could say it's the greatest virtue in the Buddha's teachings, because what equanimity does is it puts you in a position of openness and doesn't let you get caught up in things. We were talking about the virtues of love and compassion — so it stops you slipping into the error of attachment and grief and all that. And in terms of insight, it stops you from only seeing what you want to see from your own conceptual ideas of what there is. In a sense, you have to drop all that. You have to drop history, basically.

So tonight, I just wanted to centre on this business of the body, but looking at it also from the Buddha's own particular teaching around suffering.

Just a potted history of the Buddha's own life. Something happened in his twenties, mid-twenties, which we would call an identity crisis. It comes out in a little story about him going out on his hunting trips and whatnot and coming across these four figures: a very sick person, a very elderly person, a corpse, and then this ascetic sitting under a tree. These are now known as the messengers from the gods that awoke him into his path.

But basically it was him coming to terms with the fact that youth was disappearing and ahead of him looked pretty miserable. In those days the idea of rebirth — the idea of being reincarnated is not quite the same as rebirth, but the idea of an ongoing process — was looked upon as horrific. Everybody's trying to get out of that. I mean, life wasn't so easy, especially depending on which caste you were born in, although the castes at that time weren't so set; you could move. But the idea that you'd have to come back and do the same thing over and over again without any escape presented those times with their real existential suffering. How do you get out of that?

There were various teachers at that time. Some of them were just basic materialists. There wasn't such a thing as rebirth. You basically died and that was the end of that. The idea was you got the best out of life that you could, and that's all you could do really. So their idea of a good life was to get yourself as happy as you can, mainly through the sensual delights of life. And that was it. And then you disappeared.

There were others who had the idea, which is very close to our Western idea of a soul or a self, which is everlasting. A contemporary teacher of the Buddha was the Jain founder, the Nigantha. So they seem to have had a very concrete idea of what karma was — in other words, the consequence of your actions, your ethical actions. It was almost something material that got stuck on the soul. The idea was that you went through mortification exercises so that this stuff fell off and then the soul could rise to a different place. And that's why they, in their understanding, believed that whatever you did, whether you meant it or not, if it wasn't good, you got the karmic result. So that's why you see Jain monks going around sweeping the floor in front of them. If they stand on an ant, whether they meant to or not is immaterial. They've killed that life and therefore there's a consequence.

So there was that teaching of self-mortification, of letting go of the appetite to the body. And that was mainly around sex, but a lot of it was around food. The Buddha seems to have practised this for quite some years, to the point where he said he could hold his spine through his stomach. That's a bit extreme. At some point he gave up on that. Somehow that didn't answer his question.

So having left his lay life where he was married, and as the story goes, he'd just had a child born, a little boy — he was a member of the ruling caste. His father was a local headman, you could say. And they all came under the local king in Kosala. So this was also a new development at the time, a movement away from pastoral communities that lived in little groups to a more centralised form of government under a monarch. It was creating all sorts of psychological problems and wars and disputes, and there was a new class began to arise, the merchant class. I mean, for us it's hardly turbulent, but for them it was terribly turbulent — a change in their society that I think created a certain dislocation, a certain feeling of alienation maybe. And so lots of men mainly left to live this life of the *samana*, of the wandering ascetics.

When the Buddha leaves home, the first thing he does is to go to particular teachers who are going to teach him how to create happiness. And that's through these jhanic states, the absorption states. All religions have this. Just by saying a mantra or a prayer with intent, slowly but surely the heart lifts and you enter into your own internal space, which can be ecstatic, peaceful, calm. When we're doing the *mettā* this morning, just by getting to that point of repeating, "may all beings be happy, may all beings be happy," very slowly you begin to lift yourself.

The problem with that was that when he came out of that mental state, he was back to being depressed and anxious, Siddhartha Gautama. So it didn't really answer his question, even though his teachers thought him to be adept enough to actually take on the teaching. Then he tries these mortification exercises and he leaves that too because he just feels he's getting nowhere with it.

So at that point he's in a state of desperation, we can say. He's in a state of despair because he's searched for what the society has to give him and nothing's come of it. So we can only presume that he's in this position of despair.

And so the story goes — I'm presuming one or two of you haven't heard these little stories — there's a woman called Sujata comes along, which means "well-born." And she is carrying some rice pudding or rice cakes — I prefer to think of it as rice pudding — to the local god, to make an offering to the local god. Seeing this poor wretch, she thinks, "Well, he probably needs it more than his god." So he partakes of this, he starts eating this rice pudding and it revives him. Well, you know the power of rice pudding.

So this point, he remembers something from childhood and this is really a core point in his progress. He remembers watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony. Now, he's as concentrated as a little child. We can think of him somewhere between six and eight, six and nine, that sort of age. I would say probably below seven, but anyway. He's concentrating on his father so his level of concentration is acute and he's really interested — he wants to know what his dad's doing. And he realises that there's a quality in that which is different from all the stuff that he's been practising before. Before he's been trying to get happiness, trying to attain happiness. What this insight into this childhood does is it turns the process around for him to ask: well, what's the cause of suffering in the first place?

It's with that inspiration that he goes and sits under what we call the Bodhi tree — it's a religious fig tree. So he goes there with a completely different intent. Now the intent isn't "How am I going to make myself happy?" but "How do I create suffering and who creates the suffering and why I create the suffering?" And so he determines — it's called the great determination — not to rise from the tree until he's cracked it or he drops dead. Well, as you know, lucky for him and lucky for us too, he cracks the problem and he realises that the problem of suffering is first of all at a psychological level that we call desire — it's actually a bad translation, desire, but we'll come to that in a minute — and at a deeper level, something goes wrong, something is a mistaken identity as to who we are or what we are.

So one of the core words in the teaching is this word *dukkha*, which simply means hard to bear, but it encaptures all what we would call as suffering, from the deepest angst and horror and despair and all that to the silliest of irritations and thirsts. It's a whole gamut of human suffering — *dukkha*, hard to bear. And he makes a distinction between that *dukkha* and the suffering that comes from the body which is natural to the body. So the first type of suffering is called *dukkha-dukkhatā* — in other words, the suffering of suffering — and what he's asking us to do is to separate out the physical pain which comes from the body itself and how we make a problem of it, how we turn it into, actually, some real heavy suffering. So that's your first premise.

And when he's pushed, when he's pushed to, you know, "What does he teach?" — because he won't go anywhere near metaphysics. There's no God, there's no reason why we suffer in any ultimate sense, there's no reason for us being here. He doesn't enter into any of those metaphysical areas, simply because you can't prove it. He doesn't want to get into arguments. In those days it was seen one of the big entertainments was to turn up at a park on the full moon where all these ascetics would come and have a real old ding-dong battle as to who was right and who was wrong. So he wouldn't enter into those sorts of discussions.

He constantly drew his whole teaching down to what in the Pāli language — that's the language he spoke — is just three words: *dukkha*, *dukkha-nirodha*, which translates as unsatisfactoriness, suffering, and the end of it. That's all he's concerned with. Of course, it's in that investigation that you come to realise that in fact there's more to us than what actually meets the eye.

So this suffering is caused by this desire. Now when he talks about desire — and we're going to go into it more deeply during the week — he's really talking about forming a relationship to which I mentioned today, about a psychological dependency so that our happiness is dependent on something. And when it's like that, what happens is when that which you're dependent on disappears, then you're suffering.

On the side of suffering itself, if we presume the body will always be healthy, when it falls ill, then there's a lot of suffering. So a lot of our exercises, a lot of the exercises that he gives, are just a constant reminder of the way things really are, which undermines at least the strength of suffering that can happen when somebody goes — when somebody's taken by surprise, when somebody's in a state of shock.

I don't know whether you know the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross — did you come across that? It's a book called *Death and Dying* and she's one of the early investigators into what happens psychologically when you die. She was a doctor and she spent her time in hospices. When you're told that you've only got six weeks, you can imagine it is

a bit of a shock. And that shock is — I mean, why is it there? Everybody knows they're going to die. Everybody knows that everything dies in the end. But somehow, when we're told that it's our turn, it's a real thump. And more so when we've never considered it.

So the Buddha talks about four types of people. There are those who wake up to the reality of life when they hear even somebody hardly famous has died. Then there are those who wake up when somebody famous dies. There are those who don't wake up until somebody close to them dies. And then there's the unfortunate who don't wake up until it's their turn to die. So you don't want to get to the point where you're in a state of terminal shock when the doctor says you've got so long to live.

So part of this, part of the Buddha's teaching, is to bring us always down to this real base. Now when you come down to this base, as you approach it like this, you think, "Well, that's really gloomy. I mean, what do I want to think about death and dying all the time?" But what it does is it takes away the fear, it takes away the anxiety. And in so doing, you live more fully in the present moment. That's what it does.

Remember that a lot of our actions are an escape from suffering. So as soon as boredom comes, you're looking for something else to do. As soon as some pain comes, you're looking to get rid of it. There's always this flight from suffering, always a flight from what is painful, a flight from death. So it's always behind you. And it's only when you bring it in front of you and you accept it as it is, that of course all that anxiety and fear and rush and bother begins to disappear, begins to fade away. And that means that all your energy now is in being in the present moment and living fully. That's the consequence of these sorts of contemplations.

So what I'd like to do is just to go through the importance of that in his discourse on how to establish this mindfulness. Now this particular discourse was delivered to people called the Kurus, in Kurus-dhamma, which is seemingly close to modern Delhi, or it was close to modern Delhi. The important thing about this discourse, which is the jewel of the collection — it's considered the jewel. I mean there are about sixteen collections of these, you've lived a long time — but this is considered the jewel because here he encapsulates all his teachings, his practical teachings on how to become liberated from suffering.

And the important thing for people to understand about this is that this is delivered to ordinary people in a small town. Most of these discourses are delivered to monks because that's who he's talking to most of the time. As he's travelling around and staying here and there, he's giving talks and he's having discussions with kings and with local

people. He'd obviously been to this place and he'd returned to find that actually they were following his teachings. He says there was no idle talk, no gossip. And so he really sits down and he tries to give them this teaching, and it's called the direct path.

The two-way path is to develop this very strong concentration, which we call *samatha*. And that can take time, and you've got to take time off work, and you've got to sit there and develop it. And when it's developed, then you would turn that very clear concentration onto investigating. But in this discourse, he points out that that's not actually necessary. What is necessary is to get these qualities, these factors of enlightenment, and just to begin to investigate things as we experience them.

So the first part is the body. Now this mindfulness of breathing — well actually, excuse me, the first part is how he abides. He abides with his body upright and his awareness set in front of him. So the Buddha is very clear about the importance of posture.

And there are other scriptures, there are other discourses in which that's gone into in more detail. So the first thing is that the body itself is an expression of your attitude and your state of mind. That's pretty obvious really. When you see people in the street looking pretty miserable, they don't walk around as though they're in charge of the world. They're all crunched up and bent over. So as soon as you straighten the body up, you see, and as soon as you lift the spine, you're drawing energy up the body. And this energy that's coming up, this is the same as the *chi* or the *ki*. So as soon as you sit up, you see, and lift up the top of the head, there's not only the physical energy of keeping your body upright, there is this mental energy coming up. And when that mental energy comes up, it'll begin to shake those parts of the body that are holding turbulence, that are holding little pockets of turbulence that are being held there. And that's where you get this physical pain come through the body. So the posture is really of importance, and the part of the posture that's important is the spine. So it doesn't matter really what you do with your legs—you can take them off if you want. It's a case of actually lifting up to the top of the head and maintaining that posture.

So in your meditation, if you find yourself crunching in onto yourself, you just stop and just say, "lifting, lifting," bring yourself back up.

And he talks about putting away covetousness and grief for the world. So in other words, when you sit in meditation, you're putting aside all your desires about life and what you want and all your plans, and you're putting aside all your griefs. In other words, you're trying to bring yourself into the present moment, not allowing the past or the future to cramp this present moment as it is. And we do that by simply stopping the thought, and the thought stops when you give the mind something else to think. And

that's the purpose of these noting words. I think last night I pointed up there to the teacher—the Mahāsi—and the curtain was over it. I presume you could imagine him. Anyway, that's the Mahāsi. Mahāsi Sayadaw.

So here a meditator goes—I mean obviously we talk about different time—goes to a forest, the root of a tree, an empty hut, sits down having folded the legs crosswise, set the body erect and establish mindfulness before him. And ever mindfully breathes in, mindfully breathes out. And the first point is to get in touch with the actual feeling of the breath. So the meditator knows the breath is long or the breath is short. So it's very much getting in touch with the body, getting in touch with feeling caused by the body, sensations caused by the body.

And then once that's established, breathing in, experiencing the whole body; breathing out, experiencing the whole body. And what's meant there is that by this time, as you settle in on the breath, you're staying with the whole flow of the breath. Your mind's not coming off it. So don't be disappointed if the mind keeps wandering away, because that's the practice. You wake up, you know what it's doing, you come back to the breath. But this process of settling on the breath, you see, is bringing about that silence in the mind, silence in the mind, calmness of the heart. So you've got to start somewhere. And the breath helps you to do that.

So sometimes you have to spend just a bit of time allowing the breath to silence the mind, allowing the breath to calm the heart. If you try and do it—if you try and stop thinking, try and stop feeling agitated—then you're in conflict with your mind. You're in conflict with your heart. And that produces even more turbulence. So it's a case of being very calm, very peaceful, just allowing things to happen no matter how long it takes.

And then when your mind is fairly steady on the breath, you see, you train it to be like that. And you train it in order to tranquilize—which is a funny word—it's translated as the bodily formation, and tranquilize. And as you breathe out, you tranquilize the body formation. So in other words, you're just getting calmer, you're getting calmer.

And the important thing to recognize here is that the body affects the mind. Now we know that if you feel ill, then you feel down, you feel depressed about it. And if your body feels good, then it tends to lift you up. That's why you go for a run and you feel good about it. So it's a case of recognizing that and recognizing that the breath, which is something that's happening automatically, has the power of bringing the mind to silence and the heart to calmness. And it all rests upon the body being still. So there's the complete silence, you see. You might say it's the stillness of the body, calmness of the heart, silence of the mind.

And just because you've gathered that within the beginnings of your meditation doesn't mean to say that it's going to stay there. So every time you get lost within your sitting, you always begin again. Just begin again, you see.

You might find that a little disappointing because I think we come to the meditation thinking, "Well, I'm doing everything right, so the mind should stop." But when you think that—from the time you get up in your ordinary daily life, from the time you wake up to the time you fall asleep—does the mind ever stop? In fact, have you experienced the mind not thinking, in a state of no thought? When you come and sit in a meditation center and you think, "Well, now I'm just going to sit in complete silence," but it just doesn't happen. So part of the training, part of the process, the work you might say, is to allow these things to happen. Remember, you're not trying to make the mind be silent. You're not trying to make the heart be calm. You're just using an object, a neutral object—the rising and falling of the breath—to bring about those qualities, just because the breath itself is calming. And as the calming comes, the breath gets finer and finer. And that's a sign to you that the concentration is growing. The breath gets finer, more shallow.

Now, it's not just that the body itself offers us this quality of suffering, this quality of unsatisfaction, this quality of pain. The body offers us pain. It's not just the body offers us pain so that we can investigate what our relationship is to pain, which is the real suffering. It also offers us an insight into a deeper insight into this quality of impermanence.

Now what we all want is something that's permanent and completely reliable. So all the Buddha is saying, "Well, where is it? Where is this permanency? Where is it in this phenomenal world that you're going to find something reliable?"

So here you have the breath, you see. Now, if it were to stop, then I presume we'd panic. But we presume it's going to keep going. We presume it's going to keep going. Now, what we have to recognize is that every breath is a new breath. It's not the same old breath repeating itself. This is a completely new moment. And what it brings us into an understanding that every moment is arising and passing away, arising and passing away. And when we see that in the breath, you see, when something arises, we often attach the word "new" to it.

So with the word "new," there always comes this lovely feeling—something new, a new song, a new product, a new iPad, whatever it is, you see. And the word "new" tends to be good. You don't usually use the word "new" when something's awful. You don't say it's a new revolution in the Arab country. You don't say it's new.

So as the breath starts, it's the coming into life. It's the movement up, you see, and it brings you up. Then it stops and there's a moment when it stops, and then it comes down, you see, and then it finishes. Rising, falling, rising, falling—birth and death. So it's actually contacting you with something very obvious about life, but something that in our deepest recesses we don't fully accept. We don't fully accept that actually this "me" that I talk about is arising and passing away.

My sense of me is virtually continuous from the time I get up. If you ask yourself, "Well, do I have a sense of me, me-ness?" It's always there, isn't it? That never disappears, does it? There's always me thinking, when I become aware of me, that is. It's never disappeared, and it always seems to be static. It always seems to be immovable. It always seems to be above what I'm actually experiencing, you see. So by seeing this impermanence, we're actually asking, "Well, how permanent is that sense of me?"

One of the benefits of seeing impermanence, of course, and unreliability, is that you're much more easy about letting things go, much more easy about just allowing things to happen, letting it go. Then the next moment arises. There's always going to be another moment, another moment.

And the final thing is this business of not-self. So in watching the breath, especially as something automatic, we begin to realize it doesn't need me. The body breathes. The body breathes. And that's when you begin to look into the body, and you find actually that what we actually know the body is very superficial. For instance—I mean, so I'm told; I've never experienced it—the marrow of our bones is actually manufacturing red blood corpuscles, is that correct? And these red blood corpuscles are passing through the bone into the blood. Has anybody actually experienced that?

And when you breathe, they tell us that oxygen is being taken out, carbon dioxide is taken out, and oxygen is taken in. Have you ever experienced that? You experience the breath, but you haven't a clue what's going on with the body. There are trillions of cells. I mean, it's amazing when you look into these biology books. Trillions of cells, and they're all reproducing themselves. And I have nothing to do with it. I have nothing to do with it at all. There's a whole business going on of purifying the blood through the kidneys, and it's just not under my control. I haven't a clue what my liver is doing. But I do know when it hurts.

And my brain—I mean, looking at brain science—I mean, it's just fascinating what we've come to learn about the brain and just the fact that our moods can be moved around by different sorts of chemicals. So when you look into your body like that, and you get the feeling that you're an alien within this frame. So it's a bit like driving a car. When you're driving a car and you're actually absorbed in the driving, when you are

just driving, you become the car. You are the car. You and the car are one. Then of course it breaks down, and suddenly the car is something else. And then you realize that, well, you're not the car—you're in the car, but you're not the car.

So it's the same with this body. There's something in the body, but it isn't the body at all, because it doesn't have this control. So there's the Buddha's explanation of trying to define the self. If it was really me, I would be in control, complete control of the body. If it was me. But because it's not me, I find I'm not in control. And the more I get into that, the more frightening it can be actually. Especially when I realize I don't have any control at all over the aging process and over it dying. We don't know the hour of the day, unless, of course, I take my own life.

So watching the breath, you see, as an automatic thing, as something which is happening by itself, watching it appearing and disappearing, you see, and watching my relationship to it, you see—finding it boring, for instance, all that—that whole process of liberating ourselves from this *dukkha*, from this existential suffering, it can all be done just watching the breath. That's how powerful that practice is, once you turn the investigative eye upon it.

Now that's not the only thing that he suggests. Of course all this business can be done in the four classic postures of sitting, walking, lying down and standing. So it doesn't matter where you are, you can always do this practice.

But now we've got this business of mindfulness. In the Pali language there's only one word—it's *sati*. That's why I call this place Satipaṇṇā, because that's the Buddha mind: intuitive awareness, or awareness and intuitive intelligence. Even though we think it's two things—being aware and having this intuitive faculties—actually they're two sides of the same coin. And we get it in a phrase such as "first you look and then you see." So the awareness is the absorption, is the openness, and the intelligence is the understanding.

Now, in full awareness—here it's been retranslated as if he was talking to monastics—but when flexing and extending limbs, he acts in full awareness. When wearing his robes—in other words, when you're putting on, taking off your clothes—when you're eating, full awareness. When you're drinking, consuming food and tasting, full awareness. When you're defecating and urinating, you see, instead of reading a magazine. He's supposed to be aware of everything.

And one of the things that Brian was pointing out was this business of gratitude, you see. So have you ever thanked your bowels for getting rid of that stuff? That's your relationship to your bowel. Instead of saying something absolutely awfully disgusting, you

have to thank them and say, "Thank you so much for getting rid of all that stuff." Same with your bladder. "Thank you so much for getting rid of that stuff." So you're actually creating a well-being towards the body by just activating that attitude of gratefulness, thankfulness.

And he has this full awareness when he's walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, you see, and waking up. If you go to sleep with a firm determination to that awareness, awareness sparks awake upon the arising of that out of sleep, you see. You might even catch whether you wake up on the in-breath or the out-breath. Have a go.

And aware when you're talking and keeping silent. So awareness is just that sense of presence with whatever you're doing. Awareness can only be in the present moment. So it's always being with exactly what you're doing. So whatever your body is doing, your mind is there. And if your mind is doing, you're there with the mind. So the mind is never allowed to wander and just go off on its own little trips.

Now, the other thing that we did was the foulness of the body parts. So this is right here in the foundations of mindfulness. And he's got a huge list of things that we're meant to contemplate. So not only just simple things like hairs on the head and hairs on the body, skin, bone marrow, kidneys, spleen, lungs, large intestines, and stomach, feces, bowel, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine.

So when you make a list of all these things, the body, you can come out feeling pretty disgusting. But the whole point is to get in touch with that relationship we have and to begin to transform it into its opposite, which is thankfulness, which is a non-disgust. This is the way the body is.

There's a case in the scriptures where some monastics have been contemplating in the forests, and they've been doing specifically this exercise. And the exercise here is that our happiness is not dependent on the body. So one contemplates these sorts of things. The problem with doing it in a non-balanced way is that you end up being disgusted with your body if you keep doing this, you see.

So you're supposed to do the opposite as well, which is this thankfulness to the body, this ability to draw *metta* into the body. When he sees this group of monastics coming out, he sees that they've done this practice very well, but what's lacking is this loving-kindness. So he gives them the practice of loving-kindness, and all of them liberate themselves. That's the story—they all liberate themselves from suffering just with this exercise combined with loving-kindness.

Then there's a deeper sort of experience about the body, which is the way the mind contacts the body at its base before it turns it into concepts and perceptions. Now we did a part of that when we were doing the standard meditation. When I asked you to feel the base of your foot and to really get into the soles of your feet and what you were actually feeling, you discern two types of feelings, which is the pressure and the heat. Those are two. The other one, of course, is movement. So there's your third basic sense. And the fourth one is a sense of liquidity or cohesiveness, a stickiness, something that—an elasticity. Sometimes you can feel that on the breath, it's like an accordion, expanding and then contracting.

Now, in the Buddha's psychology, that's the point of contact between the body and the mind. The mind can only perceive these four things and it's from these four things that it creates its percepts. So the eye for instance would be seen as a fire element, heat, light, and it's from these little pixels that the mind actually takes this in and begins to create a picture. We know for instance that when somebody's looking at a picture, the eye is moving around all over it, but that's not what you're aware of. What you're aware of is the whole picture. That whole picture is being manufactured inwardly. And all the eye is picking up at that sense base are these little pixels.

When you put your attention on the ear, you actually hear recognizable sounds, such as the little tweets of birds. But actually, if your meditation is clear enough, the initial perception isn't a sound at all. It's just pressure, like a drum, and all you experience are drums. And it's from there, from that basic pressure, which is the earth element, as it's put in a more metaphorical language, that the mind takes it in and begins to create an image, which is then recognized and then understood. So that's a whole process that's going on.

So these four elements in Buddhist psychology are the basic perceptual base of the mind touching matter. That doesn't mean to say they exist in matter itself. It's the way the mind experiences matter. It either experiences it as some sort of pressure or lack of pressure, some sort of heat or lack of it, some sort of movement or lack of it—stillness—and some sort of cohesion, elasticity. And it's just from these basic percepts that we create this world around us.

And the final thing in this section on the body are what's known as the nine charnel ground contemplations. So in those days, they didn't bother to bury bodies as such. They offered the body, which after all is just meat and bones, to nature. And they were wrapped in white cloth and ceremoniously put in the charnel grounds, where vultures, foxes, wolves, lions—they have lions in India, maybe—tigers, would feed off them. And one of the contemplations was to sit and watch a body slowly corrupt away.

So he's obviously done it himself, because there are, I think, eleven. Eleven or more. Eleven, I think. Parts of the process. He sees a corpse thrown aside on the charnel ground, devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, various types of worms. And then he sees a corpse thrown on the ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood, and a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, held together by sinews. And a skeleton without flesh and blood held together with sinews. Disconnected bones scattered in all directions. Here a hand bone, here a foot bone.

And all the while, the meditator is saying, as this body is, so is mine. As this body is, so is mine. That's a pretty heavy meditation, that one is. If you can find a body, these days you can't do that sort of thing. It's funny because as a monastic, if you go to the East—I'm thinking of Thailand mainly, and Sri Lanka—you can get easy access into the autopsy rooms and just watch them do what they do to a dead body.

Now again, what's the purpose of it? The purpose of it is to overcome your fear and overcome your delusion as to this body being me, this body being mine. So that in a sense tells you how important the contemplation of the body is in the Buddhist teaching. And all these exercises that we do around the body are really to see these three characteristics—see the lack of control, the changing nature, the dependency of the body on everything outside it, the air, the food, minimal control. And just like when you take something away that you're dependent on, there's always that pain of letting go, and then that's the way it is. So if your car breaks down, or if your iPod breaks down—that's worse—then you've got this pain of not having your iPod. But then, if you can't buy one, and if you can't get one, there's a slow acceptance of that situation, and the pain disappears, the suffering disappears.

So it's slowly just letting go of things, letting go, letting go. When you're in meditation, and you can see a lot of suffering around, of various things that happen in your life, as that comes up you see if you just keep saying let go, let go. So you've got to be careful with that little phrase though—you're not supposed to push things out. So let go, get away, give it a little flip, because that would be an aggression. Letting go just means let it arise and pass away, let it arise and pass away. And when all these things arise and pass away, it's not as though anything is destroyed—that's the joy of the process. Everything is given back but renewed. Everything is given back in its non-attached form.

So when the Buddha for instance went to do this practice, he would have had to let go of thinking. So one of our big problems to let go is to stop thinking. And you would think, well, when he's fully liberated, that would be it. He'd just sit there like an amorphous blob with a sign: "Leave me alone." But the very quality of discussion, the

very quality of being able to argue a point is now re-established, only this time to express his own understanding. So it's the same with emotions. By letting go of these unfortunate emotions, they're transformed. Nothing is lost in that process. So what was grief becomes joy. What was hatred and anger, unforgivingness, all that sort of stuff, becomes love. You can't stop that transformation. It happens naturally.

I mean, we do these exercises to push that process along. But in Zen, they tell you that with wisdom, compassion arises naturally. It just arises naturally. There used to be a very—a fairly low, I mean, famous in England anyway—teacher in Zen in London, Yokyo Ni. And she was quite a fierce person it seemed. I never met her. Died quite a while ago now. And she said doing loving kindness meditation was a waste of time. That was very—that was peculiarly Zen, Japanese. Stop wasting your time. I always love his stuff. Very good.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated through your investigation of the body sooner rather than later.

The Buddha and the Hindrances

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 47 min

Bhante Bodhidhamma provides a comprehensive overview of meditation practice, beginning with the Buddha's own spiritual journey from worldly pleasure through ascetic extremes to the Middle Way of awakening. He explores how the Buddha's childhood experience of natural awareness (satipaṭṭhāna) became the foundation for his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree.

The talk examines paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination) as the Buddha's fundamental insight into how suffering arises from ignorance (avijjā) and the mistaken identification of consciousness with body and mind. This creates the illusion of a solid, permanent self that seeks security through attachment and aversion.

The core teaching focuses on practical guidance for working with the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa): sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt. Rather than suppressing these mental states, Bhante emphasizes acknowledging them and investigating the underlying emotions in the body. He explains how each hindrance tells us to act in ways that reinforce conditioning, while wise practice involves doing the opposite - staying present with the uncomfortable feelings until they naturally subside.

The talk concludes with guidance on using periods of calm concentration to develop penetrating insight (vipassanā) into the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self through careful observation of the breath.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa

I thought tonight to give a wide sweep to our meditation practice, to see if I can put it in some context, beginning perhaps with the Buddha's own experience, and then this crucial teaching of the wheel of dependent origination, his understanding of where our peculiar delusion lies. And then finally at the end, hopefully, a little bit about these problems we come across when we're sitting, these hindrances.

So the Buddha himself is the basic paradigm, he's the archetype of this particular path, that's what he stands for. And his early life is meant to be full of pleasure, easy-going, loving family, all that stuff, everything that people dream about these days. And

around about his early twenties, middle twenties, something happened and he got fed up with it. And what we can say is that he went through what we would now call an existential crisis. He wondered why he was alive. In his terms, why he suffered.

In the mythology surrounding that psychological event, we have this business of him being out hunting or wandering around the countryside when he comes across three different types of people. One is very sick, one's very old, and one's dead. And each time it comes as a surprise to him because previously he'd been shielded from this by his family. So we can take this as a metaphor for the fact that not until our early twenties do we really have an inkling of what death might be. It's the stirrings of a future middle-aged crisis, we can say, and the following old age crisis.

So he's now asking about these three things: sickness, old age and death. Does every human being suffer from this? Do I suffer from this? And it was this recognition that the end of life normally ends with some sickness, some what my father called the decrepitude of old age, and death. And of course it makes nonsense of trying to live a life around pleasure, riches, fame and anything else which is going to come to an end because fundamentally what we want is something which is going to last, some everlasting state.

So there was a movement during his time—it had begun before—this business of leaving home and becoming an ascetic. It tended to be anti-establishment. The establishment was the Brahminical tradition, which eventually developed into what we now know as Hinduism. And they did have their ascetics, but new teachers came along who said quite radically different things. One of them was what we would call now an absolute materialist. You just have the body, and there was the brain, and when you died, that was the end of it.

There were some people with strange ideas about karma, some predestination that you had to run the gauntlet of karma. So from being born a bug, you then had to go right through to a rat, to a cow, to a human being, and onwards until the process just naturally came to an end. And there was nothing you could do about it. So this person said, if you went up one side of the Ganges, slaughtering and pillaging and doing all sorts of rubbish, it wouldn't have any effect at all on this predestined path. And if you came down the other side and did great acts of compassion and wonderful acts of love, it would make no difference whatsoever. It was completely predestined.

So within that atmosphere the Buddha began his training and he began his training with what you might call the conservative orthodox line of Brahmanism. He went to two teachers who basically taught him very ancient techniques of meditation which were about gaining very highly ecstatic states of mind. And whenever he achieved this,

to the satisfaction of the teacher, the teacher would acclaim him as equal to them, these two teachers, and then invite him to teach. But both times, he refused the appointment and said that it hadn't completely satisfied him. He hadn't really got to the end of suffering because whenever he came out of these states, he was as bad as he was before. There wasn't any particular improvement.

So he then went on to a second type of training that was very common in those days, and that was what we now term self-mortification. So whereas the worldly life, the materialist life, presumes that you can get happiness through the ordinary gifts that we get through living, TVs and stuff like that, and perhaps there's a stoicism there that, well, you can't be perfectly happy, that attitude. The meditative school that he went to said that real happiness wasn't to do with the material world, it was mental. So you could create these beautiful mental states. So even here, in our *vipassanā* meditation, sometimes beautiful states do arise, correct? Definitely. And we can presume that this is nirvana, this is actually where we're really aiming for, if we could just maintain it.

The next school said that, in a sense, what was wrong was the body itself. Somehow you had to free yourself from the body. So self-mortification exercises were to do with subduing the body. And the most common was just to starve it, was to eat very little. Now those of you who've done something like a ten-day fast, a water fast, will know that the first three days, just like a retreat, are horrible. And then somehow the body has cleared a lot of its toxins and you can feel quite lovely within the body. Except, of course, that the body is now eating itself. So you can't go on like that for too long.

So they reduced their intake to a minimum, and he says of himself that he came to a point where he could hold his spine through his stomach. That gives you an idea of how thin he got. But this led him nowhere either.

So in desperation, he was by himself sitting on a road, probably looking fairly disconsolate when a woman passed by with, it seems, a bowl of rice pudding to offer to a particular deity in a shrine. But seeing him in such a miserable state, offered it to him. Actually, the commentaries bump it up a bit. They say that she thought he was a deity and therefore offered it to him. I can't really imagine him looking like a deity. Anyway, this rice pudding gave him a certain energy, which he'd been lacking through this self-mortification exercise, and it brought up a certain hope in him, and he must have been recollecting his own spiritual journey.

And he remembered this point in childhood, probably around about the age of eight, something like that, eight, nine, ten, when he's watching his father doing the ceremonial first ploughing of the season. And that state he recalled as being somehow different from all the mental stuff, from all the states that he'd achieved through these medita-

tions. It was a very concentrated state. In the commentaries it says it's a sort of *jhāna*. But something different had been about that state, which he recognized as having some investigative, some curiosity.

Now, the image, when I want to describe to people what this *satipaṇṇā*, this awareness with intuitive wisdom is like, the closest I can get to in terms of an image is of a little child round about the beginning of language, where there's no great conceptual thinking, where they see something like a little bug, which they've never seen before. And they become entranced, don't they? They become totally bewitched by it. They just look at it. You can see them. They're just locked onto the object. And they're watching intently, and even so that the mouth drops, the jaw drops.

Now, one of the things about the posture is that, especially in Zen, because Zen is very good at describing posture, they always say that the lips are together but the teeth are apart. So when your teeth are apart, your jaw is relaxed. In your meditation, if you watch, whenever you're thinking, you may feel very small little movements on your tongue. Because the thoughts always are connected to the tongue, just as a natural thing, because of speech. And any tension about thinking or whatnot immediately brings in the jaw. So sometimes in your meditation, even by concentrating on your tongue and on the relaxation of the jaw, you can find that your thoughts stop. Your thoughts at least are calmed.

So that moment when a child just looks at something with that open curiosity, a child's not coming to that experience with a concept. And while it's there with the experience, it hasn't got conceptual thinking to think about it. So all it can do is just purely absorb directly what's going on. It's only then, after a certain time, will it turn around and ask what it is. What is that?

So trying to get back to that pure inquisitive without a verbal question consciousness—that's what we're trying to do. That's the aim of the practice. And what we're doing is we're trying to lift that consciousness out of its confusion. With confusion, it's blending with everything that we experience in the body as feelings, in the heart, and in thoughts.

So now the Buddha went to sit, and in a sense he was at the end of his tether, so he made this rather remarkable determination that he wouldn't move, he wouldn't shift from the seat until he was fully enlightened, or he'd die. I don't know whether you've tried that. It doesn't last very long for me anyway. It's one too many. But anyway, that was his determination and he just sat there. Luckily for him and for us of course, he made the breakthrough and he came to this understanding.

Now this understanding, it's said, that he then spent the first night going through the psychological understanding of what he'd experienced, to show how suffering arises. Then he went through the next night the other way, to show how it came to an end. And then, in the third night, he recapitulated and did them both. So this is just a way, really, again, of saying that when the Enlightenment came, when he actually realized the way things really are, it took a while for this whole thing to work out in terms of how to teach it, looking at the human being from the point of view of the enlightened person.

Now one thing that I've come across having been in the East and then coming back to the West—in the East always hearing, shall we say, the paradigm about the human being from the Buddhist point of view and therefore going through a spate of years where I'm out of touch with things like psychodynamic theory and stuff like that—coming back to the West I began to realize that the way we look at things is from a different angle.

And this has come up quite sharply since I've been down at Gaia House, where that area around Totnes and Dartington and all that is a hotbed of alternative stuff. So I've got myself a really bad name as being anti-psychotherapy and all that. But I didn't actually mean to do that. What I was trying to do was try and make very clear to people that if you want to become enlightened, if you want to actually be liberated from suffering from the Buddha's point of view, then you've really got to understand the psychology as the Buddha understood it.

So this takes us now into this wheel of dependent origination which we talked a little bit about this morning and during the day. And the fundamental stance of the Buddha, what he came to understand was that the fundamental problem was ignorance. Now this ignorance is not culpable. We're not blameworthy. It's a simple existential state. We don't know.

So, not worrying about whether we have a past life or a future life, but just taking this life. Consider, in Buddhist understanding, the mind and consciousness arise with conception. So that is what consciousness is actually experiencing. Just being in a cellular life, in a very material base. And it's only later, as the fetus grows, that it begins to get some messages about feeling, touch, hearing, things like that. When it's born, then of course we open our eyes, light comes in, we begin to hear things, we begin to understand things. And all this is, as it were, coming into a consciousness which has begun from a position of not knowing.

So that not knowing now makes a mistake which is quite understandable. It presumes itself to be what it finds itself in. I am the body, I am these feelings, I am what I think. I think therefore I am. It comes all the way up to the highest of philosophers, so you can understand that that's a very—I mean what else could consciousness do? It doesn't have another choice.

Now, having made this step, this mistake of thinking that we are this body, we are this mind, etc., which is your basic delusion, on the wheel of dependent origination, that's *saṅkhāra*. That's your dispositions, that's what it's created, a certain mode of dispositions around this essential mistake of thinking we are, for want of a better word, human beings. Now from that, of course, we form a relationship to the world whereby me is here and everything and every other is out there.

Now this me and other become a separation. So this is what Buddhism means by a duality, living in a dual world. There's me here and everybody else out there. And me, I have things, so these are mine. As soon as I've created mine, I've created yours. Having created mine and yours, I live now in a very dualistic world. And the tighter I am about me, the closer I am about me, the more afraid I am about maintaining me, this, what might have been some boundary, becomes more and more a barrier.

So this differentiation between barrier and boundary. A river, for instance, might flow through a certain countryside, and on one side it might be green, and on the other side it might be desert. And what it's doing is it's creating a certain boundary, you might say, where there's a watershed on one side and none on the other. But it's quite possible that things can move across it. But when these two places become two countries, then this river suddenly becomes a barrier, and nobody can move from one place to the other.

So what the me does, this ego—I don't particularly like using the word ego. It is used. The better word is the self, this sense of self that we have. What the self does is, of course, it demarcates very sharply. This is me, and that's not me. This is mine, and that's not mine.

So now, once the self has got itself into that position, it now presumes itself to be more secure. Remember, fear is always the root emotion of self. Fear is right there at the base. It's prior to any other emotion. Why? Because the one thing that self is afraid of is its own death. That's why it's always trying to aggrandize itself. That's why it's always trying to sustain and trying to really make everything secure, batten things down.

So this self now has a relationship to the world whereby it's going to feel more secure the bigger it is. The bigger house I've got, the bigger the pension, the bigger the car, I feel better. And the more things I've got, the more things I own. So you can see how this aggrandizement slips into immorality. Because at some point, I'm up against other people. So I'm now into thieving and not doing my tax returns. Things like that, I try to fiddle, you know, just don't make...

And how now you're into this area of aversion, of hatred, of pushing things away that you find are impinging upon your little bit of security. And how when it's too much, there's fear. This goes right through, not only just material well-being, but even our relationships. My partner, my children. Do you see what I mean? And then you get this barrier turning up. And then you get working for your own family, for your own ethnic group, for your own nationality, for your own civilization. Do you see what I mean? It grows out like that.

And of course, wherever it meets the other, that is your conflict. That is your war.

So, what the Buddha discovered was this root cause, this root cause of self. That's the point. Now, having discovered this root cause, this idea of a self, this feeling of a self, he now discovers that there are these three characteristics which symbolize the state of that self. Three fundamental, you might say, delusions. The first one is that although things, shall we say, change, actually I'm always the same.

The self always seems to be the same self. I go to sleep and I wake up in the morning and I feel the same as I fell asleep. There's a feeling running through life that, okay, everything else changes a little bit, but I, me, inside me, I never change. I'm always the one person that I always thought I was.

Now that, of course, is manifestly untrue, because when we actually look at what we mean by me, it turns out to be the personality, the character, my thinking, because these are all the things that the self says it is. But we know that we're not the same person that we were at the age of two, when we looked at bugs and discovered this wonderful *satipaṇṇā*, this awareness wisdom, which we since forgot.

And this same self now presumes itself to be solid. So it doesn't change. If it doesn't change, it must be solid, it must be substantial. So it somehow stands outside the world that we live in. So that's the self, you see. And these are the two characteristics, the two basic characteristics, that it doesn't change and that it's solid, it's immortal.

When that is taken a step further up into our daily living, then we get this business of a relationship to what we experience. So that's when we get this business of wanting what makes me happy, what gives me pleasure, and not wanting what doesn't give me pleasure. So I'm now caught in a duality, right?

If you just watch yourself in ordinary daily life, you'll see that there's this constant judging going on. Liking, disliking, wanting, not wanting. If I like it, I want it. If I don't like it, I don't want it. So the whole of life is just partitioned into these things. If I like the person, then we can meet for coffee. If I don't like them, I don't want to see them. So this constant shifting of life according to these two different colours, the dark and the bright.

So these are your three characteristics. You can call them existential characteristics because they are fundamental to this whole idea of what is the meaning of our existence. So, again, what is the purpose of our meditation, in a sense, from the point of view of what is it we're actually trying to see? Well, we're trying to see these three things. Because in seeing these three things clearly, and seeing that they are false, that brings about the liberation of that very consciousness, which is identified with everything it did think was permanent and substantial.

So our viewpoint of whatever comes up is always coming from these three angles. So for instance, when I'm sitting here, you see, all these hindrances come up. So the first one may be something like, I've been planning to go on a holiday somewhere. So I've come on this weekend retreat and all I can think about is this holiday I'm planning. Because that's what's uppermost in my mind and that's what I'm really going to enjoy, and I've got all these ideas of what I want to do and where I want to go. So I'm sitting here and it's quite natural because I want to do this, the mind will now be incredibly inventive and give you all sorts of wonderful ideas.

So what we want to do is we want to discover what's empowering this? Why can't I just stop it? Why can't I just say, well this weekend I'll put it to the side and I won't think about this anymore. Why can't we do it? Coming to terms with the fact that we're not actually in control of the mind is a bit of an eye-opener. Whereas we thought it was me thinking, actually it's thinking, and I'm swamped by it.

There are occasions when I can use it. For instance, if I go on holiday, I have to use it for planning. I've got to phone people up. I've got to set up hotels and et cetera, et cetera. So this is a correct use, you see. But overlaying that are all these dreams about what we're going to do, how it's going to be. And that's where the wishing is coming,

that's where the wanting is coming. And once we've begun to build an atmosphere, a conditioning in the mind of seeking pleasure in a holiday, seeking happiness in a holiday, then of course it'll carry on.

So here we come to a meditation and suddenly we can't stop thinking about it. It's completely flooded us. So now, what we've come to realize is that by empowering a certain conditioning, we give it its own life. And the only thing we can do once we've set something in motion is wait for that momentum to die out.

Exactly the same in a way as you drive a car. You can stomp on the brakes as hard as you want, but it's still going to move forward. So, in our meditation here, if we try and stomp on this stuff, what is it we're stomping on? What is it we're trying to put the brakes on? Now that, you can see, is a suppressive measure. So it's no good if we're full of this desire and the mind's just full of thinking, full of thinking, full of thinking, to get hard with it and smack it on and get rigid and start watching the breath come what may. Because that's just putting the brakes on. All we're going to do is create even more turbulence, more bad energy within the system.

So all we can do is recognize that here is the conditioning I've set up. Because only me can govern the mind. Because only me can put ideas into the mind and empower those ideas. So here I am in this enormous desire, and what can I do? So every time I wake up, I just have to recognize, ah, desire, holiday, desiring, desiring. Then I come back.

Now I have two choices. I can either come back to the breath, or I can, as it were, search for the excitement in the body, that sense of wanting to enjoy myself. Now, if I go back to the breath, even though I do it gently, in a way, that's also a very gentle suppression. I've acknowledged it as it is, but I'm still not looking at the root cause.

Now, many a time, the mind is just restless. And often, you'll find that just by guiding the mind back to the breath, it'll just bring a sense of peace. But when it's very strong, then you've really got to go underneath it to find out what the emotion is that's empowering it. So dropping into the body, one feels that excitement, you see. Staying with that excitement at the feeling level means that, A, it isn't going to slip up into these higher faculties and create further dreams. And B, just by watching it here, because it can't do this, it'll just begin to slowly die out.

And the time it takes to die out is a measure of how much we've empowered it. So if it's going to take a couple of hours, it takes a couple of hours. If it's going to take a couple of weeks, it's going to take a couple of weeks. There's not much you can do about it.

Now, whenever the mind wanders off like that, even though it hasn't been a conscious decision on our part, there has been a moment of empowerment. This is known in Buddhist psychology as habitual, an habitual act of will. So there's many things in life that we just do as an habitual act of will. You just catch yourself doing something. Often, even before you know it, an idea for tea's come in your head, and before you know it, you're drinking it. So it's just been empowered naturally as a habit. That's what a habit is.

So now, recognizing that there has been an act of will in there, you see, we're even sharper, as it were, to wake up out of that fantasy and to recognize what's happened. Now, the thing about an habitual act of will is that it will just keep the wheel rolling. It won't actually make it that much worse. It's only if you were to stop here and say, well, I've come on this retreat, but really, what I really want to do is think about Machu Picchu and Antigua. So you sit here, and that's what you do. Well, of course, you're off then. You've written a book.

Now, every time you wake up out of that and you notice, ah, dreaming, dreaming, okay, and you come back, and you come back either to the breath or to the emotion, you see, now that is an act of will, a conscious act of will. That's an empowering act of will. That's beginning to develop a new attitude, a new habit of being in the present.

So there's your practice with desire, with anything which attracts us. When it comes to the second hindrance, aversion, all the little grudges and hatreds and irritations which also do very much the same thing, it's exactly the same technique. You have to observe what it is, you have to recognize, acknowledge what it is. That's irritation, you see. And then again, if it's something small, something silly, perhaps you can come back to the breath and it will just, as it were, die out because it's not being empowered.

But if it's very strong, then you may have to go into the body, as it were, and search the feeling of anger, search and feel the irritation, the grudge, the unforgivingness, whatever's there that's causing it. And you have to stay there, you see, you have to wait for it to burn out, which isn't sometimes very pleasant.

Now, when you get there, you've got to recognize the feeling of not wanting to actually experience these things. So there's your aversion. This aversion is actually what's not allowing that bad feeling, that anger to die out, because we like, we enjoy expressing anger. Correct? It's a relief, isn't it? But with the relief of anger, with the relief of kicking the dog or something, there is a development of that particular way of thinking, that particular way of feeling. So we're actually saying, it's right for me to get angry. So we have to come back on that and we have to notice this relationship we have with anger, with cruelty.

Cruelty is a delicious thing. The torturer enjoys his job. Correct? Definitely. Because he wouldn't do it, huh? So that's this whole business of aversion.

In aversion, of course, there's boredom. So boredom can be a real bane for meditators. And what you've really got to ask yourself about boredom is, where's it coming from, you see? What's the root of boredom? It's expectancy, isn't it? We expect something exciting. We expect something to happen. We expect some great, wonderful thing and nothing's happening. We get bored. I'm just watching the breath. I mean, what the hell? Really boring. See?

So again, you have to be very careful because what boredom will tell us to do is to seek distraction. So you're watching the breath here and you think, I'll watch it here. And then you watch it, yeah, boredom. I'll do a mantra. And then you're all fed up with that. I'm going to do some walking. Before you know it, you're just being swung around by this boredom.

So the last thing you do with boredom is seek distraction. You just keep going back and you feel the boredom. It's an aversion. It's a dislike. Hatred, you see. And again, you always notice your relationship to boredom. How you don't want to feel it. Don't want to feel it.

The next two can be pretty heavy too, the sloth and torpor, especially on the first day of a retreat, first couple of days actually. I must say that those of you who have only experienced one day, two day or three day retreat probably don't realise that it actually does get better. Things do lift and you do get a clarity. For the first three days, you're getting rid of all the stuff you brought with you, you see. So it can be quite difficult and also trying to lift the energy.

Even when we live a very fast, pacey life, it's actually mixed in with things like anxiety and stress and stuff. And that's not a good energy. So when you come here, when you come to a retreat like this, of course, because there's nothing to do, see what happens to all that energy? It doesn't know where to go. So it just collapses into itself. You just feel this exhaustion, this restless boredom, this restless exhaustion.

So the first three days of any course that you go on, of this nature anyway, are always brutal. So sloth and torpor, they refer to just two different states of feeling down. One is the physical tiredness. One is the mental cloud that you can get into. And sometimes they both come together. In fact, they mostly come together. Sometimes you can feel the one and not the other. You can be fairly clear in the head, but you just feel down.

Now, again, you don't do what the hindrance tells you. The hindrance says, have a kip. Ten minutes, you feel great, you see. But in fact you go to sleep and that's the end of it because what you're doing is you're piling more energy pushing down, you see, using sleep as a suppressive. Yeah, remember we were taught that early on as kids? You know, if we get a bit naughty then it's because they're tired, you know. Put them to bed and then you wake up all right and you think oh yeah, if I feel bad I go to bed.

And of course depressives, people who are depressed and especially those who have depression as illness, so much of their time is just going to sleep, just falling asleep because of this awful heaviness and they haven't got the will, they haven't got perhaps a reason to lift themselves up against it.

So the thing to do when you feel slothful or tired is to do the opposite. You put energy into the posture, you open your eyes. If you feel that that's not good enough, do some standing. Stand up. See? Just refuse to be annihilated. And that's why it is important during the day to get every walking period, get a good 10, 20 minutes of fast walking because there is a connection between the body and these sorts of feelings too.

The next one is the opposite of that, a sense of restlessness. Now for me, the way I experience it, is that the one is the other, one's going in, and one's coming out. Now restlessness, of course, tells you to get up and do things. Don't hang about. Don't just sit there and do something. So again, you do the opposite. You sit very still, you don't move, and you just try and get in touch with that feeling of wanting to move, wanting to go.

Often, of course, it begins to express itself in these fantasies. So in which case you've got to work with those desires. But sometimes it can be just almost a pure restlessness, just a feeling of fidgetiness, you see. So the more you relax around that, the more you relax the body. Remember the posture, in the posture the energy is just coming up the spine. That's all the energy you need to become enlightened. If you could sit like that and maintain your mindfulness, the Buddha says, for seven days, you'd probably make it. Either that or what we call the non-returner.

So, you know, it's worth getting the posture right, eh? So, you're lifting the energy up the spine, see, it's straight up the spine, and then with the out-breath, you can imagine it coming down into the abdomen, the *hara*. See, this is where the will is based.

So, whenever there's frazzleness, whenever the body feels restless, just lift the spine up, you see, draw the energy with the in-breath up the spine, with the out-breath down the body, and relax around it, you see, and you'll feel that restlessness. But because it's got nowhere to hold on to, you see, eventually it'll just collapse, it'll just turn.

And this is true, you know, if you feel restless before you sleep. One of the good tricks to go to sleep if you feel very restless is to take a position where you are comfortable, then refuse to move. You don't move at all. And then you'll see, it'll be a battle for a little while. The body wants to move around and do this.

And then suddenly it'll just flip and that's it. Because it's got nowhere to go, so it just burns itself out. But as soon as you turn over, as soon as you get up from the posture, you've empowered it. It feels good — the uncomfortable feeling of restlessness disappears when you move, but the restlessness as a way in which turbulent energy is expressing itself is simply being re-empowered. Do you see? So the more we can suffer this stuff, the more we can burn, the more we can allow ourselves to sit in the midst of these flames, the quicker all these hindrances begin to die out for us.

The other one which is linked in with restlessness is guilt, remorse — all that to do with what happens when we do something which is harmful. And you can see, because that makes you fidgety, doesn't it? Guilt makes you jump a bit. So again, it's very much the same thing. When guilt feelings come up, remorse feelings come up, all those feelings, it's the very same thing. One acknowledges them, one stops the dreaming, one goes into the feeling. One goes into the feeling, one suffers the consequences of one's unwholesome actions.

There's no need for punishment in Buddhism. You just have to suffer the consequences of your actions. There's no need to judge ourselves as evil or bad. There's no need to give ourselves extra punishment. You don't have to give yourself up to the police. Isn't that a relief? You can just sit there and the very pain of coming to terms with these things is the consequence and the healing.

It's very interesting because I read a little article on — if you remember, in England we had that terrible Moors murder with Brady and Myra Hindley. And he's written a book, it seems, about serial killers, and it's meant to be a very insightful book. The person who helped him write it says in the article that he asked him, did he ever think about the suffering of his victims? And his answer is very telling. He said, if I thought about the suffering of my victims, I'd go mad. So it's in him, you see. You can't hurt anybody out there without hurting yourself. Very interesting that, I thought.

And the final one is doubt. The Buddha asks us not to believe anything that he says. It's not a faith religion in that sense, because it's about knowledge, it's about understanding. And faith grows. Faith is an intellectual ascent. It's a confidence we put into the teaching of the Buddha by way of listening, which makes sense to us. So we hear the teaching, it makes sense to us, and then we go away and we think about it ourselves, and we do a bit of practice, and the confidence comes to give the practice a go.

When the practice begins to yield results, then of course you tend to get more confidence in the practice, and so it rolls on until — it is said when a person glimpses, has that glimpse of *nibbāna*, the *sotāpanna*, the stream entrant, as they're called. Once that happens, of course they know now that there is an end to suffering. Even if it's only a glimpse, the Buddha says it's like a flash of lightning, as quick as that. But at least within that person there is this real knowledge of the end of suffering, at which point faith now becomes rock hard. It can't be disturbed.

But until that point happens to us, then there will always be some doubts floating around. And doubt, of course, stops you committing yourself, and therefore you don't do the practice. And there's three areas usually of doubt. First of all, in the actual teaching itself, that it's not going to deliver. There's doubt in the teacher, of course. Don't look at me like that! But the big one, of course, is usually doubting oneself. Everybody else can do it, but I can't. And that's often a big one for a lot of meditators. They have a certain ground faith in the teaching and they see how it works. And they usually have a certain faith in whatever teachers they meet, but they're usually about themselves saying, I can't do it, you see.

So doubt is pernicious. You have to be very careful with doubt. It can really destroy your spiritual life. So whenever doubt comes up, you have to really turn on it, you see, and feel the doubt and really not do what it says, you see. Very careful about that self-judgment — very undermining. That's not only in the spiritual life, is it, it's anything, isn't it? I mean, if you start a job and you doubt you can do it, you won't be able to do it. You just undermine yourself. So whenever doubt comes up, you always have to make that leap of faith, you see — yes I can. Do you see what I mean? To hell with it, yes I can, you see. So beware of doubt if you do suffer from it a lot. Some people do, some people don't. These hindrances vary from people to people. Everybody has their own little constellation of horror which they have to work out. That's our *kamma*, you see.

So I hope that's given you some pointers when it comes to the hindrances. The last thing, of course, to say is what happens when we feel peaceful and wonderful and we feel that everything's going perfectly well? Well, don't rest on our laurels. That's the big thing. You don't say, ah, finally a bit of peace, and you sink into the peace and you're just indulging peace now. So when it goes, you get really frustrated. Why can't I be peaceful like I was yesterday?

So when there's a calmness comes, when there's a certain clarity comes, when the meditation is, as we would say, it is good, right? In fact, remember, in terms of the process of enlightenment, even should we spend a whole hour just coming off these thoughts, that's good meditation. That's the practice. But even so, there are times when

there seems a certain concentration comes, a clarity, a quietness, a stillness and all that, you see. Well then, you see, really use that to begin to penetrate the breath, you see. Because that's what you're left with. There's not much else when you're completely quiet. The only thing that's going on tends to be the very subtle movement of breath.

So you go into that and you're looking at it very closely, very intently, trying to see the exact beginning of the in-breath, the exact ending of it, the exact beginning of the out-breath, the exact ending of it. And where you're driving that consciousness is to the point where mind contacts matter. And it's right there that we can see especially these qualities of transience, impermanence, rising and falling, and the insubstantiality, this not-self. That's when it becomes very apparent.

Now, such is our state of delusion, such is our ignorance, that it just isn't good enough to see it once. You've got to really keep seeing it and seeing it and seeing it, and very slowly the penny drops. Only occasionally does a person have one of these blowout kenshōs or satoris. The normal progress, normal spiritual progress is just this wearing away — this Chinese drip. And slowly we begin to perceive, slowly begins to turn the way we see things. And in turning the way we see things, the personality begins to change, the relationships begin to change. So it's a very, for most of us, a very slow process.

The Buddha as Exemplar and Archetype

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 50 min

In this reflection, Bhante Bodhidhamma presents the Buddha's life as an archetypal journey through twelve stages of spiritual development. Beginning with the initial resolution made before Buddha Dīpaṅkara, he traces the path through countless lifetimes of purification, the dramatic Great Renunciation, encounters with traditional meditation teachers, the Middle Way discovery, and the climactic Awakening under the Bodhi tree.

The talk illuminates how each phase of the Buddha's journey reflects universal spiritual challenges we all face: the choice between worldly success and spiritual liberation, the gradual nature of purification, the necessity of crossing our own 'Rubicon' through commitment, and the ongoing work of teaching and embodying the Dhamma. Bhante particularly emphasizes the psychological crisis that led to renunciation - the confrontation with sickness, old age, and death - and how this existential awakening motivates genuine spiritual seeking.

Drawing from various suttas and traditional accounts, this teaching offers practical guidance for understanding our own spiritual development through the Buddha's exemplar, showing how determination, gradual training, and the balance between effort and wisdom lead to the end of suffering.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa

Homage to the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened ones.

So this is just trying to look at the Buddha's life from the point of view as an exemplar. And I've chopped it up into 12 different things so that you can see the sort of passage that he went through, his own particular journey. I hate that cliché, but I'll have to use it for the time being.

So it's said that way in the distant mists of time when he was born in a particular era of a particular Buddha called Dīpaṅkara, that he met this Buddha and put a cloak down to stop him stepping into a puddle. And he was so amazed by this Buddha that he made there and then a determination to become self-enlightened, a fully self-enlightened Buddha just like this man Dīpaṅkara. Now it's not - I don't think it's of any use to try and discuss whether in fact Dīpaṅkara ever existed or not, because remember Eastern

mythology is very circular, and the way that you substantiate a leader is by saying that it's all happened before. So all these eastern traditions have leaders which have come before - the Niganthas is number so and so in a whole line of Niganthas which produced the Jain tradition.

But for us what's important is this act of resolution, an act of resolution to really make the process of purification, the process of enlightenment, the full aim of our lives. And that total determination, you see. Total determination. And in his case, self-enlightened. But although we have this teaching, that doesn't mean to say that we don't become self-enlightened, because ultimately it's we that have to do the work. All we can say is that the distinction between us and the Buddha was that he gave us some clues as to which way to go. But the fact is that the whole process is completely internally dependent on us.

So that's the first thing that you can contemplate is the importance of making that decision, of making a resolution in your own time and your own way. Now, just to make it once in a lifetime isn't enough, you see, because it has to be constantly reinforced, constantly reinforced. If you think of any other situation in people's lives, for instance, just a partnership or a marriage, they might go through a small ceremony and they think that's it. And of course, seven, fifteen years down the line, they're walking away from each other. And the problem has been is that they haven't recommitted themselves, recommitted themselves and gone through the pain of a relationship. Other people are hell, remember.

So it's a case of understanding that this resolution, this complete commitment of the heart to the path, you see, is the kernel position you have to take, that resolution. So that's the first thing to contemplate.

The second one, of course, is that after he made this great resolution, he was then born, it is said, for countless lifetimes trying to get it right, trying to get the perfections right, trying to purify his heart. Now again, from our point of view, it's not necessary to believe that he lived thousands of lifetimes, but the myth is telling us that this path is very long, very gradual, and very difficult.

Now, I don't want to depress you, but that's what it's telling us, that it's okay to make this decision, but actually, we've entered into a path which is going to demand everything from us, everything, eventually. In the spiritual life, remember, you don't get anything back until you've given up something. And you never know what you're going to get. It's not like you've got an old car which is broken down and you think, well, I'll

get rid of it, I'll go and get a new one. And you know which one you're going to get when you drop yours. In the spiritual life, you don't really know at all what you're going to get until you make that leap of faith and give something up.

So that's the next thing, is to really consider that. And the Buddha, of course, reinforces that in his own teachings. He's constantly telling people this is gradual. It's gradual. There's no sudden enlightenment. Now, I know there are certain schools of Buddhism that talk about the sudden enlightenment, but it's not sudden in that sense at all. If you talk to, for instance, Zen monks about their sudden enlightenment, you find they've been meditating for 25 years before this sudden enlightenment came from them. So it's not nothing - in other words, you don't get anything for nothing. You have to go through the training.

And this training is twofold - it's both the purification of the heart and the growth of the heart. Heart here meaning our whole disposition, our whole disposition. So as you know, as soon as you sit, you can see these hindrances, you can see these impurities arising. And they're there just within deep conditioning within us. Even if you only believe in appearing in this world just this once with birth, you know, we've picked up all this stuff, all this conditioning. And as soon as you come to sit, then of course the stuff begins to arise. And the whole process of meditation is the purification of that part of us.

But the other side, remember, is the growth of all these perfections. One of them, of course, is resolution, the determination to do what you say you're going to do. And that's one of the things that you can impress upon yourself just these three days. Once you've set yourself the rhythm of the retreat that you want, then you maintain it. That's your discipline, that's your courage, and that's your resolution, you see. If you fail, of course, you haven't got to get into beating yourself up and saying you're useless and all that. Sometimes you have to have an act of humility to recognize that you've reached too far. So it's always good to make sure that you're not pushing yourself too much, but on the other hand, you are pushing yourself a bit. As one of my early teachers, Roshi Kennett, used to say, that you have to push yourself gently. Some of you know, I think, Roshi Kennett, or used to know her. She started Throssel Hole.

So that's the next thing, is to recognize that the path is one of effort, and it takes that commitment, and that it's one of purification. You have to work at it. You have to really work at it.

So finally, the Buddha's ready for the big thing. He's ready for the full self-enlightenment show. And he's waiting in the Tusita heaven. Just waiting for the opportunity to arise. And there it comes, you see. North India, born to a prince, a local governor. In

actuality, he was what you might call a local lord who was under the local king of Kosala. But, you know, as it comes to the scriptures, he's this big king in North India. I suppose we would call him that, upper middle class king manager.

And he decides - there's a decision there to be born. And here's your classic Freudian trauma - his mother dies. Mother dies probably because of his birth, and that's somewhere in his heart, isn't it? And he loses his mother and he's passed on - I think it's a week after he's born he's passed on to his mother's sister. And he must have felt that. So already, you might say, this little child has not only gone through the pangs of rebirth, but the pangs of losing his mother. So already, as it were, he's come into life with real suffering already in that heart. The touch of suffering is already there. I might be a bit too Freudian there, but you understand what I'm saying.

And he's obviously precocious. Now that shouldn't amaze us. I mean if you think of somebody like Mozart - I think he wrote his first symphony when he was three or something. So when you realise that there are little beings who arise who are absolutely unbelievable, it was obvious that this little boy was something special. And the tale always goes, and you get it in other myths, that of course they meet the wise man. And the wise man recognizes that here is an extraordinary human being and what he says about this little human being is that either he'll become a world conqueror, a total world conqueror, or a fully self-enlightened person.

Now, that's the same for us. Now, it's not that we're all going to become world conquerors, but the choice is there. Is our lives going to be devoted to being great in the world or to being great spiritually? And that isn't just a decision we make at the beginning of our lives or somewhere. It's constant. Every time we say to ourselves, well, I'm going to have this cup of tea because I want to really enjoy it, we've chosen the world. If you have a cup of tea in order to investigate the process and with the intention to feed the body, not feed our emotional life with it, then we've chosen the spiritual path. So that division is with us all the time. That's not a problem. And in this particular story, it's put at this very heightened level. You see, here we have a little being who could have conquered the whole world or he could have become self-enlightened.

So that's the next thing to contemplate, this idea that all the time the choice is there before us, that choice between choosing the world or choosing spiritual life, choosing our enlightenment.

So, of course, when his father heard this, he was in a state of horror, you see, because this was, at that time, his only son. And as far as I know, it remained his only son. I think I'm correct, yeah. So, obviously, he wanted his only son to be heir. So then we have this part of the myth that tells us that his father went to this great extent to make

sure that his son never suffered, make sure he had all the food he wanted and as he grew older all the sex, drugs, and rock and roll. And as he approaches and he gets through teenage and what not then he comes to a point of going through all that loveliness of getting married and all that but there must be something, should we say, disturbing him at that point, you see. And it comes again through a particular myth.

Before we go into that, do remember that the whole of our society is drawn, is manufactured, the whole of our economic, political life is there to draw us into the world. The whole of capitalism, everything that we have, is to make us emboldened in the world, is to make us see our life in the world. So he's born into the world and the world wants him. But again, there's this little pain.

And it comes out in the story of his meeting with the *devadūta*, the messengers from the gods. That's how it's put. So he's out there hunting and doing his thing, killing beasts and all that. And he comes across, in sequence, somebody who's very sick on the road - there if you've been to India you know exactly what that means - somebody who's very old and crooked and really old, a corpse, and finally this ascetic sitting under a tree.

Each time he asks, you know, what is this? Because he's been shielded from this. This is what the myth tells us. He hasn't actually looked at this stuff. And after they've described it to him, there's the kernel question, you see. Does this happen to me? So here's a young man, full of energy, full of all that virility and all that, and he suddenly sees sickness, old age, and death. And of course there's this ascetic sitting under a tree which in the story symbolises hope, the escape from sickness, old age, and death.

But for him it's obviously become a psychological crisis. I think what we would call today an identity crisis. He's into a proper identity crisis, an existential identity crisis. And when does it hit him? You see, it hits him somewhere in his middle twenties. Now if you think of your lives - I don't know about you, how old are you Gabriel? It's coming.

So if you think of your life and you look back into your middle twenties, you'll see that there's a change of mentality because there's a sudden realisation that youth is over. And that's when people get serious. They get married, they take their job seriously, some even take out pensions. And it all happens in that period as you move towards the first ugly inklings of middle age.

So there he is, you see, at that point. And he decides that he's got to go and really work this out. He's in a psychological crisis. He needs to work it out. And the only way he can think of doing it is to join the ascetics because they are the only people at that time who are offering anything beyond the worldly life. He probably spent hours talking to the Brahmins, talking about their philosophy and understandings, because later

on, of course, he knows it deeply. He knows all the arguments, and he must have picked it up during that youthful time. He studied the Vedas. So he's abandoned that scholastic thing. He wants to abandon the good life.

And there are two things. Well, the other thing that makes him abandon life is that they've obviously had a big party. And in the morning when he wakes up, he's got all these bodies around him. And there's puke and saliva. It's all horrible. And he sees the other side of pleasure, which is, of course, the hangover. And he sees that pleasure is not going to bring that happiness, it's not going to bring an end to the suffering that he feels, this existential suffering of sickness, old age, and ultimately death.

So it hits hard, doesn't it? Those of you who've had a scrape with death know what he might have been going through. Those of you who've had people who've died around you know that it can hit you hard, you see. In fact, the Buddha says there are four types of people. Those who wake up, in other words, who really see that their life has to have the spiritual dimension, upon the hearing of death - just the word will wake them up. Some don't wake up until they realise that somebody has died, comes on the TV or something. Some people don't wake up until somebody very close to them dies, and some unfortunates don't wake up until, of course, it's their turn to die. So you don't want to leave it that late.

So there he is, and two things have shaken him, right? Sickness, old age, and death, and the vanity, the emptiness of pleasure, of worldly pleasure, the emptiness of it. Even sex, for instance, which might bring a lot of pleasure, is ultimately empty. Or just sex, shall we say. And I always remember Woody Allen saying that the experience of sex is an empty experience, but as empty experiences go...

So, it's that realisation. And for us, you see, we wouldn't be here now, actually. We wouldn't at all be in this room, any of us, if we hadn't had some inkling around those areas. But, again, it's not something that becomes a huge crisis for everybody. It's something that can be very gradual, a gradual pulling away because of the little bits of suffering that come from it, little bits of realisation. And of course, our own bodies are our own teachers. That's why I said this morning at the meal time, we're so dependent on the body for our teaching, because it's the body which gets ill, it's the body which grows old, and it's the body which dies. And it's when we realise that we are embodied, we are actually in this body, this body is the way we know the world, it's the way we experience the world, that we suddenly realise, or we begin to realise, that in fact we take care of it, not smash it around too much.

So those are contemplations, those are daily, hourly, moment to moment contemplations. As it arises one contemplates that, one reflects upon these things. And what it's urging us to do is to abandon, is to let go, is not to attach to these things.

Remember, when we talk about abandonment, letting go, it's not a destruction. We're not talking about not eating. We talk about eating in a particular way. So take, for instance, sleep. We're not talking about abandoning sleep, because it's a lovely time and we all want to spend some time in oblivion every day. It's recognizing that sleep has a purpose, it's there to rest the body. But if we seek happiness in oblivion, then of course the bed constantly beckons us. Every time we feel a bit tired, we launch ourselves onto the bed, you see.

As you go to bed, you look upon it as a stinking pit, so you don't see it as a place where you're going to get pleasure. It's just there to rest the body, just like food is there to nourish the body. These are contemplations to be taken up.

So he's now on the point of leaving. So here's what's known as the Great Renunciation. And it's not as though people haven't done this before. Both men and women have had to leave everything to go to war, for instance. People are often drawn out of their style of life for one reason or another. Some people are shaken and they leave everything. Some people are kicked out anyway. People are made redundant and stuff. Some are born to leave, some have to leave and whatever.

So there comes this point where he abandons, he renounces the worldly life. And it's put in the story that he even saw the birth of his son. So there's that huge attachment to this little child. And yet even so, he gets on his favourite horse, his special horse Kantaka, with his servant Channa, and off he goes.

These days that can be harshly judged as his abandoning his family and all that. But you must remember in those days they're very extended families, and I can't imagine that he did it without long consultation and argument and all that sort of stuff and cajoling. And then finally, I'm sure he said to them, as I said to my mother, I'm only doing it for three years. When I said that, she disappeared with this cloud of absolute... I said to her I'm going to join the order and she just collapsed into this awful weeping, and I put my arm around and said, "Mum," I said, "I'm only going for three years," and she stopped. It was just because she saw it as an abandonment.

So one presumes that he did have the goodwill of the family behind him. And there comes this point where he reaches a river. So here it is, you see, crossing the Rubicon. There's a point where we make that crossing, where we've built up the faith, we've built up the understanding, and finally we make that leap of faith.

Now, in terms of the Buddha, okay, it was a big dramatic moment. It's part of the myth. But for us, it's every day. Every day you have to make that leap of faith. Every day you've got to cross that Rubicon. And it's crossing from what? It's crossing from the worldly life to the spiritual life.

And he cuts off all his hair, which was the idea of those days, throws all his rich clothes away, dons rag robes, and even leaves his horse Kantaka, who dies out of grief. It was terrible. But Channa can't leave him. I think he follows him in the end. He follows him, doesn't he, Channa? Eventually. Later on.

So there we have it. Finally, you might say, he's cut from the worldly life. So that's another point of contemplation for us. In our own lives, the idea that we have to really make that commitment some way.

And that's the whole point really of taking, in the Buddhist tradition, taking refuges and precepts, of actually joining a specific tradition within Buddhism. It's in all religions. And that's why it's always ceremonious. That's why it's always done in community. It's just like a marriage ceremony. People I know who've been in partnership for a long time. I mean, I did a little marriage ceremony for a very old friend of mine. Partnership for 15 years. But then a marriage ceremony was something else. It deepens the commitment to the person. It's a funny thing, but anybody who's been in a long relationship who goes to a marriage ceremony, and I'm not talking about a religious thing, it's a communal declaration. Much the way, say, the Quakers do it. And it has an effect. It has an effect of deepening that commitment to the other person as person, as an individual.

So you'll find that in all traditions there is that ceremony of commitment by the person. And when I myself became a Buddhist, I did it up at Throstle Nest Hall, and it's five days. So it's not just a matter of saying a few words. It was a five-day long... There were five different ceremonies. And it was all about this business of renouncing, of burning one's karma. I can't remember the full gist of it now, but by the end of it, you definitely felt you'd joined something. And there was that feeling of settlement. There was that feeling of coming home.

That's one of the big feelings in the spiritual life, that finally you've found your tradition, you've found your teacher. And it might, I mean, as you know, I didn't stay in the same tradition, I started with Zen. It's not as though it's blocked in time, that you can't move, but there's that feeling of grounding yourself finally in a spiritual practice. So that's this crossing of the Rubicon, that's this crossing of the river, and letting go.

So then he joins the great meditation traditions of the time and he goes through two teachers, and what these teachers teach him is how to establish ecstasy within himself. And that means that you don't actually need the world. Just through the practices of *samatha* meditation, concentration meditation, the practices of mantra, the practices of what we call looking at *kasiṇas*, images, which you then internalise, one begins to recognise that you can actually attain enormous ecstasy within your own heart without any help from the outside world at all.

So you don't need sex, drugs, rock and roll, you don't need cinema, you don't need anything. You can actually sit there and develop this enormous state within yourself because that's the capability of the mind and heart within itself. And once you've established it on an object and you've internalised it, you don't even need that object. So one of the main places is using the breath. So you just need the body as it were. So all you need is, in India anyway, all you need is a bit of shelter, a tree, a bit of clothes, somebody to give you a bit of rice every day, and you sit in ecstasy. And that's it. So you can imagine why it was attractive. This is one of the attractions of the monastic life for those who can practise it. It's not within everybody's gift.

So what does that teach us? That teaches us that there is another way of actually producing happiness. But every time he came out of these states, he found himself back in dear old Gautama, back in dear old Siddhartha, just lumped with all this suffering. It wasn't an answer to sickness, old age and death. It wasn't an answer to his existential crisis. It was just another way of displacing his life into a cloud of beauty. A pink cloud. It was lovely when he was there, but when he came out, it was pretty awful.

And of course you can get addicted to that like any drug. So as soon as he began to realise this, of course he recognised that that wasn't the path. And each time it is said he was so brilliant at his meditation that the teacher would ask him to be a teacher with him. And each time he said, well, I can't, I don't, I'm not fully satisfied. There must be something else.

So that's the first thing, that when in your meditation beautiful states arise, fine, we're not trying to get rid of them, we're not trying to destroy beauty or happiness, but that's not the end of the path, that's not what it's about. So it arises, fantastic, and then you notice it passing away. And when you see yourself grasping for it as it's passing away, when you come back to the meditation hall with the intention of re-establishing that state, then know that you've fallen into a relationship of attachment, which could cause suffering, which could cause dissatisfaction.

So then abandoning that, he then went into self-mortification. Now the psychology of self-mortification rests on the idea that all suffering is bodily based. Now if you think about that, most of it is. Where do you experience suffering if it's not in the body? The hunger, wanting to eat, wanting to see something. Just the physical pain of the body. So self-mortification or those exercises, especially the one that he chose, which was to starve oneself, really reduces the body to, shall we say, almost a skeletal state where, as it were, suffering is lessened in the body.

Now, for those of you, if you've done a 10-day fast... anybody done a 10-day fast? Right. So I don't know whether you experienced it, but normally the first three days are horrible because there's this huge, all these horrible things are pouring out of the body. But then you keep drinking water and then there suddenly comes this place where it's absolutely beautiful. And it remains like that. It's just absolutely beautiful. The body doesn't feel hungry. Of course, it's eating itself, but it doesn't feel hungry. And your passions are down. You don't feel passionate about anything. Everything is lovely subdued, beautifully subdued. And, of course, you can go on like that until you get close to death, and I think it begins to hurt.

So the idea is just to eat enough just to keep that idea of the body of not exciting the body because it's all based, excitement has its base in the senses. So all that happened there of course was that he obviously reached these points of suffering and there came this point where we could say he despaired.

Now, that will come to us, the sense of despair about our practice. And it comes to us because of expectation. It comes to us because we think we should be somewhere else than where we are. So there will come these little moments in our spiritual life where we think, nothing's happening, I'm not getting anywhere, and all this sort of stuff. And they're little jabs of despair. So you have to be careful of those.

He himself abandoned that self-mortification business and with it his five disciples left him because he said he'd gone soft. So anyway he wanders off by himself and he's sitting on the roadside and a woman comes along with a bowl of rice pudding, which is a very sacred food in Buddhism. So she comes along with this bowl of rice pudding and she sees this monk by the roadside and the myth tells us that she thought that it was a god and she offered this food to a god. But I think we can realistically say that what she saw was somebody who was on death's door and looking pretty sad, and she probably was carrying it to some sort of family as a gift and when she had a little chat with him she said, look, you better have this rice pudding.

So he eats this rice pudding and of course it lifts, it lifts his body, it lifts his spirits, and he can't let go of the idea that there must be an end to suffering. It's there within him, the kernel of the idea is within him. And he must have been reviewing his life and he must have been reviewing everything he's been through and perhaps he's wandered over the three years that he promised his family and he's thinking he might go back, and as he's reviewing he remembers this point in childhood.

And he must have been about six, seven, maybe eight, and he's watching his father during the ploughing ceremony, just watching his father. And for some reason, he remembers the quality of that watching, something which obviously he hadn't been aware of, either through the *jhānic* meditations, the absorption meditations, or through all these practices which are to do with self-mortification.

And if you think about it, that's quite reasonable because all those practices are about gaining something, about getting something. You're doing something for something else. I'm doing the *jhāna* in order to get over sickness, old age and death. I'm self-mortificating in order to get over. So it's always drawing that person out of the present moment.

But here he remembers this point where he's watching his father and he's just in the present moment. Now, if you think of children, especially around the age of three, four, two, three, four, you see it comes naturally. They see a bug and you see they just absorb into it. Now they don't have the language to think about it. And they just absorb into it just out of a total interest. They're completely there.

And one of the signs that a child is in that state, and we ourselves in that state, is the jaw drops. And you get parents like my old man used to tell me to shut my mouth. "Shut your mouth, son." You see kids, don't you see? And what it is is that when there's no jaw, when there's no tongue, there's no thought. If you're in your meditation you might catch that when a thought comes, there's a vibration on the tongue because it's just so intimately connected.

So it's just like a child, just absorbed into that. And then you see, after the absorption, after that business of taking in the image, then there's a stop and the child turns around and says, "What is it?" So mum says, "It's a slug." So from that point on, there's a title, there's a name, it's a slug. So that child will never look at a slug again. What they will see is the image that they had of a slug imposed upon the slug that they now see. And that's the whole distortion that conceptual thinking does for us.

To get back through all that language and all that conception, back to the original mind, back to that original way of seeing things, is the process of enlightenment. Because once we're back there we're back to that amazing intelligence that we have which is now informed. That's the paradox: it's been informed through language. We couldn't have got here without language. We couldn't have got here without the teaching. But now the intelligence is informed, it clarifies itself of all those conceptual thinking and it sees anew.

So here's the Buddha. He remembers that moment and he's so inspired by it. And also remember he's despaired. He knows now this is it because he doesn't see anything else. He's been through all the traditions. He's done everything. The world can't offer him anything else. So he approaches the tree which we now call the Bodhi tree, and interestingly enough the leaves are shaped like a heart, are they not? And he sits under this big leafy Bodhi tree by the side of the river and he makes this great determination.

So we've had the great renunciation, so now we have the great determination. And the determination is, "Right I've done everything, this is it. I'm going to sit here and crack this problem or I will die." Or I will die. That's the commitment.

And it was interesting because when one of my teachers came to the Bihar in Birmingham and I'd been, I was already ordained for about four or five years or something. And he came along and I'd been practising a little bit in India, I remember, but I was living at the Bihar anyway. And I'd been to Burma before and I'd got very ill with amoebic dysentery and amoebic hepatitis and all sorts of things. And he wanted me to join him, and he sent one of the monks to tell me. He said, "Anita wants you to come and join him."

So I said, "Well, frankly," I said, "the last time I was in Burma, I nearly died. I said, I don't particularly have a, I really don't want to go east again." So he went back, and he came back with a message. "If you're not prepared to die, forget it." So obviously he was mirroring back to me the memory of the Buddha.

So there's the Buddha. He's now made this great determination. So for us, it's little bits, making that determination. So every time you sit, one of the big mistakes we make is because it's become habitual, we just take a seat. We just sit here. And of course, nothing much happens.

The mind wanders, we just get caught up in it, and we might feel a bit more relaxed. So every time you sit, you have to re-establish that commitment. And that's your determination. It's not a great determination, we don't have to worry too much about

death. It's a great determination here, now. The great determination to commit ourselves 101% to this moment of meditation. And that's when you get the fruit. That's when you get the fruits of your practice.

As the story goes, of course, he did become enlightened. It took him six hours. There's your standard. If you can sit six hours, you'll probably make it. So he became enlightened at that point.

Now, he then spends the first night, the first three nights, trying to understand what he's seen. When we chant in the morning, I chant the Wheel of Dependent Origination. So that's the psychology, that's what he understood. It tells us about why we suffer, the psychology of suffering. And I do it three times in the thing to commemorate that moment, because he went forward on it, then he saw how it came back on itself, and then he did it again, forward and back, to make sure that he had fully understood the process. So that's what that chanting is about. It commemorates that moment. And that victory verse is what he was supposed to have told Ananda was what he spontaneously spoke when he became enlightened.

So now, having done that, having now made this moment of realization, realizing what the whole thing was, what is the next thought? What is the next thought that comes to mind? Who can I teach? You see, with wisdom, compassion arises naturally. There was no break within that. It's not, ah, I've done it, fine, great, get back into bed. It was like it didn't end there. There was this immediate movement out of the heart. Who can I teach?

And of course, there's that little doubt. And again, it's put mythically as the great Brahma Sahampati comes down and says to him, look, there are some with only a little dust in their eyes. There are people who will understand this stuff. So it's with that reflection that when he looks at the world, he thinks, who is going to understand this stuff? And then when he reflects, well, what about my old teachers? And then he realizes they're dead, they've gone. So there's a sadness.

I saw this lovely statue in Burma the last time I was there. I'd never seen this before. And he sat in posture like this, but one hand is pointed to his heart like this. And I said to them, what's the meaning of that? I'd never seen that mudra. It's called a mudra posture. He says it's the sadness he felt when he realized his teachers had died.

So, having done that, he then thinks about this five disciples, remember, who've called him a scab and a deserter, and turned away from him and gone off. And he wanders off, and he walks, I think it's well over a hundred miles. So it's not as though he goes next door and says, hey, listen, I'm enlightened now, so I'll give you the mes-

sage. He walks, he goes in search. The teacher goes out in search. Often it's put in the tradition that the pupil searches for the teacher, that when the teacher's ready, the pupil arises and the pupil's ready to teach and all that. Well, of course, we in our search have to search for our teacher. But the teacher also has to be ready, has to go out and search. Although I must say, the Indian tradition tends to be for somebody who feels they're ready to sit under a tree and just wait. And if somebody does come along, that's the test at it. They must be drawn into the teaching. But anyway, he makes this great effort to go out and teach. So that's our compassion.

So now you see, every one of us who've meditated, as soon as you say to somebody you've meditated, they expect you to be somehow different. They say, well, what's the effect? What's it done for you? And as soon as you open your mouth, you're teaching them. So if you go to people and say, well, I go to the Buddhist meditation, yeah, it's fantastic, and you're slowly getting drunk, then people are going to say, well, that's very interesting. So as soon as you take up a spiritual path, you take responsibility. And if you are, I mean again, don't get into big false guilt syndromes, but as soon as you don't behave according to a certain standard that the practice demands of you, then of course you're undermining the process of other people's spirituality because they become cynical. So you take on, whether you like it or not, you take on a certain responsibility.

So having taken on that responsibility, he searches for his disciples. And of course, he meets them. And as it's said, as soon as they saw him coming, they realized something had changed about him. They weren't going to make a seat for him or anything. But as soon as they saw him coming, they thought, well, no, there's something strange. And that's when he gives the first talk about his teaching. And the whole teaching life begins after that. And he goes on, as you know, to establish an institution, to establish people around him, and eventually had enormous effect on human civilization.

But interestingly enough, that's not the full end of the story. Because in the scriptures, it says that *Mara*, the evil one, actually throws doubt and he attacks, Mara attacks with all his armies. And this actually happened just after the Enlightenment. And the question is, who are you to say that you are enlightened? Who are you to say that you've finished the path? How do you know that? So even when he made this huge realization, there was still the doubt, is this really the end of it? Is this really the end of suffering?

Now that doubt, it will always be with us. That doubt will always be with us and you have to be very careful not to get caught up in doubt. So it's not as though the Buddhist teaching is about believing what he said. We know that. It's not a belief system. It's a teaching. It's a practical teaching. We put it into practice and it makes sense. But the

doubt, especially in ourselves, that often comes, everybody else can do it but not me. That's very careful when doubt comes up to make sure you don't get caught up in that thought and that you actually just stay with that position of not knowing. And that's very difficult for us because the self loves to be in control. It loves to know. We all want to know what we're going to do at the end of this course. We've all got it worked out what's going to happen when we leave this place. If you didn't, there'd be this anxiety. What am I going to do? So it's that case of really staying with that sense of doubt, it's an ugly feeling, and not to get caught up in it.

So he touched the earth as a witness to his enlightenment. So you'll often find that statue with his hand touching the earth. And basically, I suppose it's a call to people to say, well, you try and prove me wrong. Because in my understanding, in my experience, there is now no more suffering in me. I don't experience suffering at any level. That's not physical suffering for those of you. The body always has pain. It's the heart. There's no more of all this depression, anxiety, all the gamut of human misery. That's all gone.

But, interestingly enough, for seven years Mara hunts him. So it's an interesting thing in the scripture that we have this figure of Mara. Now you can either see it, of course, as some sort of devil, but you can see it as traces within the Buddha's mind, still there, little traces. So there's been this huge enlightenment, but there's still little traces. And Mara sends his three daughters. Lust, sensual pleasure, and boredom. So he obviously had a big problem with lust. If you compare that with Jesus Christ, interesting, because Christ seems to have been powered, doesn't he? Took him up to the mountain. So those are the three, those are your worldly pursuits: fame, friendship, riches, power, and of course seeking pleasure in the sensual world. So the Buddha obviously had had a good life, hadn't he? All that pleasure stuff. And his three daughters kept tempting him.

Now interestingly enough, why was boredom there? You see, because boredom is part of that pleasure syndrome. The more pleasure you have, the more it becomes obsolescent. You've always got to go for a bigger kick. And therefore, what moves you is the boredom of where you are. So boredom is the great motivator towards addiction. So whenever you're bored, bored in your meditation, you never feed the boredom by distraction. You feed the boredom by, you undermine boredom by repetition. So when you're sitting there watching the breath and there's just this huge thing, this is so boring, so you feel the boredom, you know it's there, but you just keep watching the breath. And then eventually it fades away, because you're not feeding it. You know it's there. Remember, you've got to feel these things. You've got to actually experience them. You mustn't push them away.

So there comes a point, of course, when, and it's said seven years, which is one of these mythical cycles, isn't it? Seven years. His daughters haven't been successful. They go to Mara, their dad, and say, look... oh no, Mara sees that he hasn't been successful. He just can't get through to the Buddha to tempt him into all these things again. And so he says to his daughter, look, let's forget it. It's not working. And his daughter says, well, let's have just one more go, Dad. But eventually he slinks off. And what does the daughter say? Why are you going? Why is it that you are abandoning this quest? And Mara says, the Buddha sees me. And it's seeing, it's seeing what all the world has to offer as vanity, as emptiness, that undermines its power over us. So that by that time, it would seem that all, whatever was there by ancient conditioning was completely drained out over those seven years.

And then finally, what can we expect? What can we expect from this training? Well, there's this lovely tale in the scriptures where somebody says to the Buddha, look, this training you're going on about is bloody difficult. And he said, well, it is. It's hard. You've got to commit yourself and all that. And he said, okay, so what? He said, what do you get to *Nibbāna*? Nibbāna says, so what? What do you get when you get to Nibbāna? He says, when you achieve Nibbāna, you are happy and with it contented. And he's talking about himself. You are joyful and with it contented.

And when it comes to his own time to die, there's a lovely scripture where basically he just waits for the body to die. And he's just lying there on his side, and the people have come around him. Even at the end, he's ready to take somebody into the order, isn't he? Right at the end, right before he dies, he's ready to accept somebody in the order. And there he is, he's dying, and most of us are freaked out, eh? Most of us don't want anybody around. But here's this lovely peace and just this letting go of the body. Letting go of the body.

And of course, great sadness from that, from the younger monks. They all start crying, and the nuns and all that. And the elders say, what do you expect? Everything arises and passes away. And that was one of the Buddha's pet sayings. Everything arises and passes away. There's nothing in this world worth holding on to. Nothing in this world worth holding on to.

So, I hope that's been of some use to you in terms of how to reflect upon your own spiritual life. And that's it.

The Factors of Awakening

Noirin Sheahan · 40 min

In this teaching, Noirin Sheahan explores the seven bojjhaṅgas (factors of awakening) that develop naturally through meditation practice. Using Bhante's vivid metaphor of wild geese flying in V-formation, she presents mindfulness (sati) as the leader, supported by two flanks: three calming factors (samādhī, upekkhā, passaddhī) and three energizing factors (vīriya, dhammavicāya, pīti).

The talk provides practical guidance on how these factors balance each other - concentration and energy, equanimity and investigation, tranquillity and joy. Noirin shares personal insights on working with each factor, particularly around developing tranquillity and maintaining investigation without strain. She explains how these same qualities manifest as the five spiritual faculties (indriyas) in daily life, supported by faith (saddhā) and wisdom (paññā).

This teaching offers both theoretical understanding and practical application, showing how the factors naturally arise through mindful awareness and how to recognize and nurture them in both formal practice and everyday situations. Essential listening for understanding the natural development of awakening qualities in Vipassanā meditation.

The Factors of Enlightenment

While the hindrances describe the difficulties we meet in meditation, the factors of enlightenment are the abilities we develop in meditation.

Bhante uses the image of wild geese in flight and I found this very helpful. The leader is mindfulness. In support there are two flanks. If you watch wild geese, you will often find one flank flying more in the slipstream of the leader, taking it easy, while the other flank is spread out, almost as if they are vying to take over the lead. That's a very helpful image for these supporting factors. Three of them are calming, helping us to take it easy. These three are concentration, equanimity and tranquility. Then there is the wide flank, encouraging us to push ahead. These are energy, investigation of Dhamma and joy.

So let's look in more detail at the seven factors which develop as we meditate.

Starting with mindfulness. It's ironic that this factor which is essentially so simple is also so hard to describe. It's a bit easier to describe what it's not. Mindfulness is not thinking or dreaming or planning or remembering or trying to work out what life is all about. It's the potential we have to know that we're thinking or dreaming or planning, as well as to feel the moods and emotions underlying all the mental activity and the physical sensations that accompany all this.

So much of our lives we are caught up in mental activity. This is the doing aspect of our minds. We're fascinated by our own thoughts and opinions, our stories about what happened in the past and what's going to happen in the future, our speculations on what life is all about. We lose touch with the potential for the human mind to simply know experience without trying to do anything at all.

To practice mindfulness we tune into the raw data that is coming into our mind: sounds, physical sensations and the feelings produced by moods and emotions as well as the thoughts that emerge from the mind as it tries to process all this. We encourage ourselves to drop the fascination with the detail of our thoughts. It doesn't mean we have to stop thinking but to know that a thought is happening whenever it is.

So this basic potential of our minds to know experience is the leading factor of enlightenment. It's hard for us to believe that just knowing is so powerful spiritually. We feel we have to do something about whatever we know in order to get anywhere. But gradually we come to accept that it is our misunderstandings that lead us into trouble. We are reacting too quickly without fully knowing what is going on. As we acknowledge this, we become more willing to spend time gathering the raw data, getting to know the feelings and emotions that drive our thinking mind.

So mindfulness is our first tool in learning what life is all about. Simple data gathering you could say. Getting the feel for the situation. Letting ourselves dwell in the here and now.

Let's look at the supporting factors now. First in the slipstream is concentration. But that word can crinkle our foreheads because we associate it with doing hard sums at school. The word focus is sometimes used. We direct our attention at something. Usually in meditation we start off by focusing on the sensations of breathing. The Pali word for this factor is *samādhi*, which gives the sense of the mind resting. So this factor rests the mind in the sensations of breathing or some other focus for attention.

Why does it help to focus attention? One reason is that it helps us stay present rather than get distracted into daydreams and fantasies. It also quiets the mind when its range of interest is limited, and when we have a narrow focus for attention we can go deeper

into that phenomenon. Think of using a telescope. You have to look through a narrow tube so your range of vision is limited, but you can see far more clearly within this narrow range.

Happily the Dhamma can be learned from anything, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. The four noble truths, the wheel of dependent origination, these are sewn into each sensation of the tummy rising and falling.

In essence then, any focus for attention will do. We normally start with the breath because this anchors our mind in physical reality, so our meditation is grounded, embodied. Also, those sensations are often felt as calming. If not, then try various touch points, the hands resting in the lap, the feet on the ground, whatever sensations provide the easiest resting place for the mind.

Once our usual fascination with stories and thoughts has shifted towards fascination for present experience, we can loosen this focus. Loosening the focus lets our minds be more natural, more ordinary. And that's what we want to get to know, our ordinary mind. So if a sound or an itchy feeling attracts attention, we can let the mind focus on these and learn the Dhamma there. We let the mind dwell wherever it is naturally drawn.

I don't know about you, but my mind is naturally drawn to detail. When I rest attention in any feeling, a fascination sets up, a longing to know it more deeply. So I like the narrow focus. But when that fascination leads to a sense of straining to see more deeply, then I need to widen my focus to see the broader picture and include that very sense of straining. Otherwise, I start getting uptight. When I feel the strain mindfully, I often find that I can relax again.

And whenever a strong emotion comes up, it's usually best to broaden the focus, to take in the full mind-body system and feel how this emotion is embodied. We feel the sensations, the threads of aversion and desire, the thought stream that might be erupting. When the emotion has burned away a bit, we might again be drawn to some focus in the body, often the kernel of the emotion's energy. Attending to this, we might hear the thoughts and sense the feelings that bind us to the emotional state.

This ability to focus and to broaden and narrow the focus as necessary is a great aid in deepening our self-knowledge.

Let's look at one of the factors in the wide flank now which pairs up with concentration so that the two balance one another out. This is the factor of energy. We need energy to accomplish anything. In meditation we need enough physical energy to sit upright or walk. Sounds easy but remember those attacks of sleepiness, how desperately

we long to lie down. We also need the mental energy of resolution. We resolve to be mindful. Every time we notice the mind has been wandering and come back to the breath, we are strengthening this factor of enlightenment.

When this factor is working well, we are alert and enthusiastic about the practice. We are fascinated by present experience and have a sense of zeal, a buzzing dedication to the here and now. At other times our energies go low and we can easily sink into the hindrances. Then again, we can get overly energised, striving impatiently for insight.

We strengthen the factor whenever we work skilfully with the hindrance of sleepiness. At these times we often need to find a more stimulating focus than the breath. That's the idea behind opening the eyes, standing up and so on that we discussed yesterday. Physical exercise is naturally energising, so going quite fast for the first few minutes of the walking meditation session helps. We can also stimulate ourselves mentally by reflecting on whatever inspired us to take up meditation practice and to come on retreat.

At times we can get over-energised, uptight and breathless with enthusiasm and zeal. Again, it can help to broaden the focus to give more room for the energy to burn off. Feeling the whole body can help, as can opening the eyes. Walking around the paddocks, rather than the short span used for walking meditation, can also burn off some pent-up craving for progress. We can also talk ourselves down, reminding ourselves to take it easy, that everything is fine, just as it is.

These two factors, concentration and energy, help each other out. When our energies are too high or too low, it usually helps to have a broad focus. When they are more balanced, the narrow focus channels all the energy into the Dhamma of each passing sensation and feeling.

Looking now at the next two supports. In the slipstream we have equanimity and on the wide flank is investigation. Equanimity is that balance of mind that counters reactivity. It is the willingness not to seize every passing pleasure or oppose every passing irritant. It lets things be. We strengthen equanimity every time we work skilfully with desire and aversion, gradually learning to let go of our addictions and surrender to what we dislike.

This doesn't mean we become a marshmallow. We can still strive for what we feel is right and good. But the striving is not stressing us out or blinding us to others' needs. It's a balanced movement towards an attainable goal. Likewise, we can oppose wrongdoing with equanimity. Great peacemakers like Nelson Mandela and Gandhi exemplify this, responding to injustice and oppression with wisdom rather than hatred.

Equanimity develops naturally as we see how phenomena arise and pass away. We can reflect on this on the broad scale, seeing how ephemeral are fashions and celebrities, for example, how people and institutions and political parties come to power and later fall from grace, how civilizations have died out. We can see it in our own lives. Many of the hopes and ambitions that fuelled us when we were young may be largely forgotten in middle and older age. Many cherished possessions and close relationships will have been lost.

Mindfulness helps us to see this in the minutiae of life. How each thought, emotion, sensation appears and disappears. We start asking ourselves what's the point in getting all hot and bothered about this? It will fade away in a few moments. Now that might sound as though we're distancing ourselves from life, but mindfulness doesn't work at a distance. It's a touchy-feely learning, up close and personal. So the wisdom behind equanimity is very sensitive to our needs and desires and aversions.

The willingness not to react comes from seeing again and again how futile it is to try to hold on to pleasure or avoid pain. As we experience the suffering caused by these reactions, we are persuaded to give up forcing things to be the way we want them to be. Paradoxically, once we stop forcing, we find something else disappears as well. The problem we were trying to overcome vanishes without trace.

I couldn't see this clearly for many, many years. It even frightened me, the sudden loss of focus for my energies. While I struggled with moods and emotions, trying to get on top of things, there was at least a clear sense of what I was doing, struggling to solve a problem that, in my mind anyhow, desperately needed solving. Then there came the moment of surrender and the loss of any boundary against which I could push. It was so confusing I couldn't see the beauty in it.

Nowadays I'm much more used to the space that can open up when we stop reacting. It doesn't frighten me so much. I'm more willing to acknowledge the space and the fact that it has never actually hurt or threatened me in any way, despite all my mistrust and suspicions. As I grow easier with the space, my mind broadens. I find I can see things more easily from the other person's point of view. I'm more open to discussion, less frightened of failure.

So this is the factor of equanimity, a spaciousness that allows what we like and dislike to come and go without the need to clutch what we like and destroy what we dislike. It's a soothing quality which steadies mindfulness.

Equanimity is in the slipstream and is balanced on the wide flank by investigation. By this we mean investigation of Dhamma, discovering the teaching for ourselves. By comparison to equanimity, which has been very challenging for me, this factor of investigation comes more naturally. It may have helped that I was always intrigued by the mystery of life. Where did I come from? Why am I here? What's life all about? I enjoy learning, and the notion that I can learn the Dhamma for myself, from my own experience, still thrills me.

One teaching we can investigate during meditation is the teaching around *anicca*. We can take an interest in the start and end of each breath, each footstep, each sensation. This draws us from our usual preoccupation with facts and concepts, which give the world a sense of solidity and predictability. The study of *anicca* engages us with the more fluid sense of reality as it appears at our sense door.

We can also study the other characteristics of existence, *anattā* and *dukkha*. I'm especially drawn to the whole question of *dukkha*, to see can I pinpoint any source of stress, suffering or dissatisfaction in my experience.

To take one example of working with aversion. At one level, I might know I'm fed up with all this meditation business, for example, wishing it was over and I could do something active and worthwhile. There may also be a strong resistance to acknowledging this, never mind investigating it deeper. That first step is often the hardest, acknowledging. If I can get over that and simply note, OK, this is bad humour, disinterest, not wanting to meditate, then the factor of investigation starts to kick in.

How is this bad humour felt in my body? Is it my jaw, my stomach? My attention would be drawn towards the unpleasant sensations and I begin to get warily curious about them. Are they stinging? Are they aching? Is it tightness I'm feeling? I might also begin to catch fleeting glimpses of pleasant sensations and sense the tight grip with which I'm holding onto these. I might realise that the pleasantness gives a sense of self, insisting, this is mine, I need this, or some variation on this theme.

The unpleasant sensations and associated bad humour loosen a bit to show an underlying fear that my sense of self is being threatened. By then I'm generally hooked on this present moment detective story. And if I can maintain mindfulness with all its supporting factors, the crisis always resolves to give me a deeper understanding of how this being, I call me, is composed. With this understanding comes compassion for the stresses and strains around the kernel of goodness at the core of each human being.

This kind of investigation teaches me the truth of anattā, not self. I feel how quickly and automatically I identify with pleasant mind states like clarity, *mettā*, happiness, and how hard it is to admit to unpleasant states like bad humour. Because of delusion, I believe I should be in control of my mind, always able to get myself into some shade of good humour. Again and again I learn that this mind-body complex has a life of its own and that my level of control is very limited. This is a demonstration of anattā, that there's no one in charge of this entity I call me. It's a very hard truth to digest, but the more often I feel my whole being relax as I let go of trying to control matters, the more persuaded I am that the sense of anattā is a very beautiful one.

The investigation also teaches us about dukkha and the cause of dukkha. Again and again we verify the second noble truth, that dukkha results from us wanting things to be different to how they are right now.

Equanimity and investigation make good partners, balancing one another out. When we are equanimous, the mind feels good, steady, balanced, peaceful. Without investigation, that could become a lovely resting place for the mind, a lovely experience but not leading anywhere. But if the factor of investigation is aroused, we get curious about that lovely, balanced steadiness, and often a subtle clinging will be revealed. Perhaps there is self-congratulating going on. Amn't I wonderful to have such equanimity? At last I'm getting somewhere.

As those little background whispers of thought are revealed, we may also feel a sense of holding, as if there is a hand in our mind clutching the steadiness and holding on to it. That sense of holding contains tinges of anxiety, fear and loss. And so the mind may not feel so steady anymore as we feel ourselves grasping the state of equanimity. So this turns into an encounter with the hindrance of desire. In this case, desire for an equanimous mind. Although our peaceful meditation is lost, we are on the path, learning how to enjoy equanimity without the pain of clinging to it.

On the other hand, when investigation is very strong, we can be buzzing with excitement, determined to get to the bottom of whatever is intriguing us. Perhaps it's a mind state like judgment, for example, and we get really curious about how this is felt in the body and mind. If we're not careful, our curiosity can get the better of us and we're unwittingly putting ourselves under pressure. We can get entangled with the judging mind and start judging ourselves because we can't see things clearly. Once we notice this, we need to try to get back to a more balanced state of mind. So equanimity is our strength here.

The ability to persuade ourselves that the lack of clarity is not a big deal. Nothing to get worked up about.

So let's look at the final pair now, tranquillity and joy. Tranquillity, as you can guess, is in the slipstream, calming us down. Joy on the wide flank, urging us on. Tranquillity is very much bound up with equanimity. When the mind is balanced and equanimous, the heart feels tranquil, at ease. And tranquillity is strengthened when we work skilfully with restlessness.

Tranquillity was a late developer for me. As I look back on it, I can see that I was ignoring whatever little suggestions of calm were on offer. They didn't attract my attention, which was zooming in on stronger emotions. I was so intent on solving all my emotional problems that I skipped over those moments of ease. I'm still plagued by fears and self-doubt. I'm nowhere near enlightenment. What does it matter that there's a moment's peace? Those moments seemed irrelevant.

It took a long time for me to be able to admit, just now, I'm not stressed out. Just now, things are okay. But once I got myself around to noticing what relaxation actually felt like, I started developing a taste for that experience. My determination to solve all my emotional problems dwindled slightly, and to my surprise, some of them solved themselves without me at the helm.

So I would advise you to get curious about ease, to take a real interest, even if it's only momentary, or just marginally easier than normal. The danger is that we judge, this isn't worth anything, I'm still totally uptight, and so the slightest relaxation is snuffed out immediately. This kind of thinking may be quite prevalent in the West because our culture puts so much emphasis on success. We want to be totally relaxed and floating in the clouds before we can judge ourselves to be any way tranquil, but we can only learn tranquillity if we build on whatever small morsels we are offered.

The wonderful thing is that tranquillity feels lovely, and so once we tune into it at all, we are naturally interested in developing it. Nowadays I find it can really help me through the storms of emotion to be able to discern any little chink in my armour of tension and to feel the gorgeous sensations that are released when we relax a tight muscle for a moment. This helps me persuade myself to give up on useless battles and make peace with whatever I am sensing as a problem.

Balancing tranquillity on the wide flank we have joy. At times it may be hard to believe, but we can actually get hooked on the present moment and really appreciate and enjoy meditation. This factor is very much linked with investigation. As we investigate, we get interested in our experience, and interest is in itself a form of joy. If you're interested in a book or a film, you are enjoying it. Think how much you enjoy any hobby, even if it's hard work at times.

We can fall into the same trap as for tranquillity and expect to feel elated and rapturous whenever this factor is working. But if you ask yourself at times, am I interested in this? I imagine the answer will often be yes. That might help you discern the quality of joy in your meditation.

To strengthen this quality, it also helps to take more interest in pleasant sensations and moods. Sometimes we are so intent on seeing *dukkha* and its cause that we ignore sources of pleasure, thinking them irrelevant. But the Buddha teaches us about suffering and the end of suffering. So we also need to get curious about pleasure. We need to sensitise ourselves to those fleeting moments when we're not caught up in stress and suffering. These moments are precious and need nurturing. It's so easy for them to be slapped down by the judgmental mind saying, that's nothing. Think of all my real problems.

Another way we can hinder joy is by being overly fearful of indulging it. We've heard the teaching around indulging pleasure and want to avoid that mistake, so we shy away from pleasant feelings. But if we're in the present moment rather than lost in thought, there's no danger of indulging. We'll feel the sense of clinging whenever it happens and that will do its own teaching. It's a mistake to be afraid of indulging joy. What we're actually doing is indulging fear.

So when any suggestion of joy comes along, go for it. We need to let our minds get familiar with this lovely experience. Our minds welcome what they're familiar with and shy away from unfamiliar states. So the better we get to know joy, the more easily our mind will find it in the future. It's a win-win situation. You can trust mindfulness to sort out any clinging.

At times you might feel some pleasant tingling sensations in your body. These are a manifestation of joy. Let your attention dwell there so as to strengthen this factor of enlightenment. And if at any stage you sense gladness in your meditation, really let it rip. Relax into the experience and give yourself full permission to enjoy for as long as it lasts.

These last factors of tranquillity and joy make natural partners. Joy energises tranquillity, prevents us slipping off to a nice tranquil sleep. And tranquillity calms joy, preventing it running off into excitement.

Before I finish, a word of warning. We can easily start beating ourselves up for not feeling all these beautiful factors of mind. When we're going through any of the hindrances, we can feel anything but joyful and equanimous, for example. It needs the faith developed through long practice to trust that these factors are developing as we

bear with the turmoil mindfully. Although we can't feel the factors in these situations, they're still contained within awareness. So long as we can maintain mindfulness, they're working away on our behalf and will settle back into our minds and hearts when conditions are right.

As a quick recap on the factors of enlightenment, we have the image of wild geese in flight with their V-shaped formation. Mindfulness is in the lead, supported by three calming factors in the slipstream: concentration, equanimity and tranquillity. On the wide flank, pushing ahead, we have the three stimulating factors: energy, investigation of Dhamma and joy.

These qualities of mind and heart are being developed whenever we meditate. Some of these also come to our aid in daily life. Here the Buddha gives another list, the five spiritual faculties. You'll not be surprised that mindfulness is here again. We slip into autopilot, not noticing anything about our surroundings or our inner life if we're not being mindful. We might be lost in daydreams and worries, not noticing how they're affecting our mood, posture, facial expression, tensions in the body, and so on. So first and foremost, we need to wake up, notice that we've been lost in thought, bring ourselves back to the here and now, knowing experience as it's happening, mindful.

When we're mindful, we'll also be on guard against wrongdoing. If we've got into a heated argument and are shouting and swearing, it's very unlikely that we'll also be mindful, deliberately and consciously choosing to shout and swear. The moment we wake up and notice what we're doing, we'll start to calm down. The very discomfort of the body will deter us from continuing. So mindfulness protects us from going astray in daily life, keeps us on the path.

That's not to say that anger is always unwholesome. There may be occasions when we need to shout and swear. But very often it happens for relatively trivial matters because someone's pushed a button. And in these situations we need to find other ways of dealing with the energies of anger. Although this is a long and often painful journey, mindfulness is our saving grace, rescuing us from old habits, showing us the potential for change.

Just as in meditation, the balancing pair of energy and concentration support mindfulness in daily life. Energy here includes mental qualities like resolution and determination, as well as whatever physical energy we need to accomplish our goals. We won't give up easily. But of course we can get over-energetic, doggedly following some fixed idea, not open to reason.

Say we've asked some friends around for tea. We decide to bake a cake for them. But everything goes wrong. We don't have any eggs and the local shop is out of eggs and we have to drive 10 miles to get some and then we find we've run out of sugar and the mixer breaks down. Energy keeps us going, gets us through one problem after another. But we might still be beating eggs when our friends call and too frazzled to make them really welcome.

So energy needs to be balanced by concentration. This reminds us that the aim is to have friends to tea. Baking a cake is secondary, grand if it works, but let's focus on the important point, to make our friends welcome. Concentration has a calming effect, keeps us directed, focuses our energies on what is beneficial.

For daily life, we also need the support of faith and wisdom. Faith, Sharon Salzberg tells us, is not something you either have or have not. It's something you do. Faith in the Dhamma means to set your heart upon it. We start with what can be termed blind faith, accepting the teachings as true, even though we've no personal proof. As we practice and begin to see how we create suffering, how mindfulness reduces suffering, our initial blind faith turns to confidence in the teachings and gratitude for having received them.

Faith, being a quality of the heart, warms up the teachings for us. We might develop a strong devotion towards the Buddha Dhamma Sangha, get more involved, be inspired to do our bit to support our local Sangha. There's always the danger of losing ourselves in devotion, idealising the Buddha or a teacher, rather than investigating whether the teachings are true in our own experience. Thus, faith needs the balance of wisdom.

Wisdom starts with hearing or reading the Dhamma. It goes deeper when we reflect on this, think about how this applies to our life. The deepest wisdom comes from our meditation practice where we experience the teachings as moment-to-moment reality. The partnership of faith and wisdom is likened to a blind person who is energetic and strong pairing up with someone who is frail, crippled but with keen insight. The blind person symbolises faith, while the frail person symbolises wisdom. Wisdom sees where we want to go, but lacks strength on its own. It needs the power and energy of faith to make the journey.

I think of faith and wisdom as a circle surrounding my life. They connect me up with the world, but also set limits. Within the circle I have energy and concentration, helping me do whatever tasks faith and wisdom have agreed on. At the very centre is mindfulness, seeing how all this activity relates to my present experience.

I hope this talk has helped you understand the factors of enlightenment and how they relate to the spiritual faculties, which are the qualities we need and can develop in daily life. In both, mindfulness leads the way. Without mindfulness, our natural ability to know what is happening moment after moment, we backslide into old habits that lead to suffering.

To keep mindfulness sharp, it is backed up by concentration, the ability to focus, to rest attention on some aspect of experience, and energy, the willingness to keep on going, no matter how hard it is. In daily life, this trio are further supported by faith and wisdom. In meditation, faith and wisdom keep developing with the aid of the twin supports of Dhamma investigation, the drive to see the truth for ourselves, and equanimity, the balance of mind that allows us to put up with what we dislike and to resist unnecessary enticements, and their heartfelt expressions as joy, a lively curiosity in moment-to-moment experience, and tranquillity, the quiet ease that comes from sensing that all is well, we're on the path, heading for home.

May we soar like a flock of wild geese to liberation.

The First Discourse: Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta - Turning the Wheel of the Dhamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 51 min

In this teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma takes us through the Buddha's first discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) - the 'Turning of the Wheel of the Dhamma' delivered at the deer park in Sarnath. He begins by contextualizing the Buddha's journey from his training under Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta through the jhānas, his period of extreme asceticism, and finally his Middle Way approach that led to Awakening under the Bodhi tree.

Bhante vividly describes the Buddha's encounter with his five former companions who initially dismissed him as having 'gone back to luxury.' He then explores the discourse's core teachings: the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification, and the Middle Way that transcends both. The Four Noble Truths are examined in detail - dukkha as the five clinging aggregates (pañcupādānakkhandha), taṇhā (craving) in its three forms, the cessation of suffering in nibbāna, and the Noble Eightfold Path structured through sīla, samādhi, and paññā.

The talk concludes with the beautiful imagery of the Dhamma spreading through all realms and Venerable Koṇḍañña becoming the first disciple to achieve realization, earning the name Aññāta Koṇḍañña. Throughout, Bhante emphasizes the practical relevance of working with our ethical conduct and negativity as the foundation for wisdom to arise.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa.

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

What I want to do is take the first discourse, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the turning of the wheel of the law discourse.

Remember that he'd left his family and he'd trained under two particular teachers. *Āḷāra Kālāma* was first, taking him up through the jhānas and through the higher jhānas, and invited him to be a teacher. So he was quite an adept very quickly, because altogether the training took about six years. And then he goes to another person called *Uddaka Rāmaputta*, who takes him through the eight jhānas, the eight steps of jhānas. This doesn't satisfy him, remember.

So he then goes into these austerity exercises mainly around eating. He talks about himself eating less and less and less till he was down to a grain and he could hold his spine through his stomach, so if you try that you'll see how thin he was. And he gets himself to a point of disappointment really because he doesn't feel he's going anywhere and he thinks he's just creating more suffering. So then he's out on the road. He's left his companions.

And then this woman comes along, Sujātā. We know her name means auspicious birth. And she's carrying some sweetmeats for the local shrine, the local god. And seeing this poor wretch, she offers it to him. Of course, the scripture said he was glowing like a god by the side of the road. So you have to put aside all the hagiography, you know, the stories of saints.

So this revives him. He has this memory of childhood where he's watching his father doing the ploughing ceremony. So this is the point where his whole process changes around upon itself, the way he's looking at his practice. So instead of trying to achieve something, these wonderful mental states that people have talked about that he'd heard in the parks where people would gather to listen to the ascetics. By the way that seems to have been one of the big entertainments of the day. On the full moon people would go to these parks where there were shrines and all the ascetics would turn up and give talks and say how they'd got it and this person had completely got it wrong and there were big debates. So he's coming from that sort of background where there was a lot of fermentation going on spiritually speaking.

So his whole practice now turns around upon itself. Instead of seeking happiness, he now turns inward to try and find out how he's creating suffering. And with that inspiration, he sits under the tree. Within six hours, he cracks it. And one thing, remember, there's a point where it's called the Great Doubt, where Māra approaches him and basically says, look, who are you to try and achieve this? And puts a great doubt in his mind as to what he's trying to do. And there comes this point where the Earth Goddess rises and says he has every right to do this because he has the perfection of generosity, he's perfected the virtue of generosity. In other words, he's not doing it just for himself. He's doing it for all beings. So that gives him that little bit of courage. And he carries on and breaks through all the delusion.

So he said he spent seven weeks just sitting there amazed by what he'd discovered and going through his mind as to the meaning of it. And then there comes that point where he says to himself whether he wants to teach or not. And at first he thinks, no,

this is just too subtle. I'm never going to be able to get this across. And then he thinks of his two teachers and he finds out they've died, and then he thinks of his old companions, and he goes in search of them.

So he's around Bodh Gaya, presumably he's still where he was liberated, and he makes his way to the deer park at Sarnath, which is near modern-day Varanasi, which was an old capital, Benares, of that kingdom around the Ganges plain. And it's about 250km, about 155 miles he's got to walk. And that's by modern roadways. So presumably in those days it was little pathways from village to village. And he finally finds them.

It takes half an hour by plane. Five hours to drive. So it says actually walking 50 hours. So anyway, as he approaches them, they recognise him.

This is a lovely setting here. This actually comes up in the Vinaya, the book on the rule, and the discourses. And the gracious one, that's Ānanda Jyoti, he's well known for his work on poetry. He's got a rather lovely website. And I knew him, he used to come to, he was part of the group of monks at Kanduboda where I was. He now lives in Thailand, can't stand coming back to England, it's too cold he says. So he talks about the gracious one, the Bhagavā, while walking gradually on walking tour approached Bārāṇasī and the group of five at the deer park in Isipatana.

The group of five saw the Bhagavā coming from afar and after seeing him they resolved among themselves: "This ascetic, Gotama, who is coming, friends, is given to luxury. His forsaking the striving has gone back to luxury. He should certainly not be worshipped or stood up for, nor should his bowl and robe be taken. However, we can prepare a seat, and if he wishes to sit down, then he can do so."

But as the Bhagavā approached the group of five, the group of five were unable to continue with their agreement. And after going out to greet the gracious one, one of them took his bowl and robe, one prepared his seat, one placed water for washing his feet, the footstool and the footstand. And the Bhagavā then sat down on the prepared seat and washed his feet.

So you've got this lovely scene where they've determined him to be a waster now. He's lost it, really. But there must have been either old friendship, the connection of old friendship. He might have been, in a way, an unrecognised leader of the group. But something made them drop this rather cold greeting that they were going to give him. And they're finally sitting down.

But anyway, they're not letting him off the hook because they approached him and they called him by name, presumably Siddhattha, it doesn't actually say, but presumably by his ordinary name. They address him as *āvuso*, a friend. So in the order, if somebody is younger than you in years, that's in how many years they've been in the order, you address them as *āvuso*. And if they're older than you, you address them as *bhante*. That's scriptural. Every culture has its own way of distinguishing between younger monks and older monks.

Then the Buddha addresses them. So he now calls Nibbāna the deathless. He's pumping it for them, you see.

And they reply: "But you, friend Gotama, by that ascetic lifestyle, that practice, that difficult way of living, did not arrive" - so the practice that he was doing with them - "did not arrive at the state beyond ordinary human beings, a distinction of what is truly noble knowledge and insight. So how can you now, given to luxury, forsaking the striving, gone back to luxury, attain a state beyond human beings, a distinction of what is truly noble knowledge and insight?"

Ha! So he then repeats this then. He said, the realised one, the Tathāgata. The Tathāgata literally means someone who's gone there. And it's translated in lots of ways. I think Professor Harvey, whom some of you might know, he's written a couple of good books and he used to run the online course, says "one who is attuned to reality." So that's taking it a little bit far.

"The Tathāgata is not given to luxury, is not forsaking the striving, and has not gone back to luxury. The Tathāgata is a worthy one, a perfect sambuddho, lend an ear, monks, I'll instruct you about the attainment of the deathless, and so on and so forth, to be experienced and attained by yourselves in this very life."

So again, in those times, presumably, everything was said three times, and if you didn't get what you wanted after three times, you had to shut up. So they approached him again with the same accusation that he's gone back to luxury. How could he possibly have attained any enlightenment if, while he was doing the real practice of self-mortification, he'd attained nothing at all?

So he goes through the round a second time and the third time they approach him. But this time he answers, "Are you aware of my having spoken to you like this before?" And they say, well, certainly not. And then he goes through it again. And finally, they're ready to be, they're ready to open to the teachings.

So that's a lovely little scene, if you can imagine that for yourselves.

This came up, I did a Skype with the Brighton group. What happens to a lot of people, especially if they've come from a religion which is devotional, like Catholicism, they come into Buddhism with that fervour for the meditation and all that. And then there comes this dryness, this lack of heart connection with the teachings. And I know people who, because of that, will continue their practice, but then will go to church. And I know of one person, for instance, who really doesn't go to the monastery, Amara-vati, anymore, but actually just goes to join the Christian group, mainly because of that heart connection.

So the way you would develop that, if you feel that, is by contemplating the life of the Buddha and making that connection to a past personage. So a person might do it for many various things. Like for instance, if somebody now was into civil rights, they might bring to mind people like Nelson Mandela and reading their history, reading their biography, you get that connection and from that connection you get that energy that comes of wanting to be like that person. So that's the devotional thing that some people are drawn to. I mean that's why I've got all these statues around. So there you go, you can make a visual heart connection with the Buddha. So you see my Catholic upbringing.

So anyway, then he begins the teachings, and he starts off: "There are these two extremes amongst that one who's gone forth not to associate with, which is devotion and clinging to the pleasures of the senses, and which is low, vulgar, worldly, ignoble, and not connected with the goal." It's not leading anywhere, in other words.

Now, that would attune to us as a materialist goal, whereby if you think that this is the only life you have, you may as well enjoy it, for heaven's sake. I mean, what's the point of not enjoying it? So your whole effort is in trying to make this time, to make this life something which is going to deliver at least some level of happiness and as regular as possible. So that's why you get people moving, whether they're entirely conscious of it or not, towards fame, power, riches or just sensual pleasure, or all of them if they can.

So it's a case of, the goal for a materialist has to be to be happy now. But their happiness has to be based upon what this psychophysical organism can give them. So it has to be some mental, emotional, mental state, some emotion, which they generate in themselves by accumulating something outside themselves.

They might be adept, they might get into spiritual practice and get into these beautiful mental states, and there would have been people, even in the Buddha's time, who would have practised those without any real understanding, or without any real faith, shall we say, or belief in some sort of future life, because there were materialists in the Buddha's time. And some who even said that it didn't really matter whether you went

down one side of the Ganges murdering and pillaging and all that, and up the other side, with great acts of compassion, your fate was set. And when you died, that was the end of it. So there was all sorts of understandings in those days, as we have these days.

In fact, this materialism in a sense has entered into Buddhist mainstream as secular Buddhism. Not all secular Buddhists are materialists in that complete way, but definitely it opens up the Buddhist teachings to people who are grounded in science, scientism really. You know, the belief that everything comes out of matter, and that's about it. So at least it gives them some way of creating happiness in this life, which is a bit more lasting, really by seeing this whole process of attachment and desire. So that's where it centres, on desire and attachment. And that, of course, takes them back to the whole business of identity. So you never know. They might become fully liberated and they'll be in a state of shock for eternity.

So that's the business of self-indulgence. And of course he'd left all that. What had awakened him, remember, was seeing these four great signs, these four messengers from the gods, as they said. So he's realising in his late, middle twenties maybe, which is a time when normally you leave youth, and you suddenly realise that what you're looking at is sickness, ageing and death, and that there might be an escape. So those were the four images that are given in the scriptures in a metaphorical way: the sick person, the elderly person, the corpse, and somebody sitting under a tree suggesting that there might be a way out of this problem. So he's left the life.

Now, then he, in a sense, followed a similar trajectory when he did the *jhāna*. He was trying to attain happiness through this psychophysical organism. And he finds that that also has a problem because when he comes out of those *jhānic* states, then he just gets neurotic again and depressed and anxious.

So that's one reason, I think, why he then goes into this mortification stuff. Remember that mortification is not the same as renunciation. So this mortification that he was practising, the general understanding was that the soul was trapped in the body. The body was an expression of your *kamma*, your bad *kamma*. You know, else you wouldn't be born here. And so the idea was that through this self-mortification, letting go of the body, the soul would be released into a heavenly place.

This is, the Jains definitely have that idea. That's why they're so careful about not doing anything which harms, even when they don't mean to. Because even when you don't mean to, something suffers. I mean, you stand by accident on an elephant and it suffers and you've got consequences, which you might never have meant, you see, is

the point. So that's why you see Jain monks being very careful, you know, sweeping. Even when they are sleeping, when they want to turn over, they wake up in order to brush away any insects that might be underneath them. I mean, they really are spot on.

So that was the idea anyway, at least one of the main ideas. So the Buddha would have had that in the back of his mind, that he was going to attain this eternal bliss by drawing the body down almost to the point of death.

In the Jain religion, it's considered to be a saintly thing to do, by the way, is to let go of the body through starving yourself. And I actually looked that up for myself, about starvation. There's no suffering, it seems. This idea that we have that if you stop eating, you become ravenous, and you'd eat an animal alive if you caught one, is based on images that we see of people in famine situations where they eat a little starvation. So you're feeding the body and the body wakes up with its hunger. But actually, if you just stop eating, the body goes into this starvation mode. And the passage I read says that the vast majority of animals die just because they can't eat anymore. You know, like the bird gets too old, it can't feed itself, it just dies. And you get these ketones, which I haven't a clue what they are, but...

But what happens is the body seems not to suffer at all. It knows how to just draw on itself, and then one or two of the organs just stop and that's the end of it. I was particularly interested in this because a very close friend of mine died from Crohn's disease.

Anyway, that's the underlying philosophy, should we say, that's driving him to practise these self-mortifications. Renunciation is letting go of attachment to something, so it's not as though you stop eating—you just try to distinguish between the desire which is coming from ordinary appetite from the desire which is seeking happiness in food, which is a completely different idea.

So what he says of that: he says it's painful, *dukkha*; he says it's ignoble, and it's not connected with the goal. So he's trying to get this balanced.

Now, we talk about the middle way, which he then goes on to explain. Just to read it to you: "Not having approached either of these two extremes, monks, the middle practice—the middle way—was awakened to by the Realised One, by the *Tathāgata*, which produces vision, produces knowledge, which leads to peace, deep knowledge, complete awakening and emancipation." *Abhiññāṇa* means knowledge. *Abhi* means very great or very deep—probably could translate it as transcendent knowledge.

"Now, what is this middle way, monks? The awakened to has realised one," etcetera, etcetera, and that's the Eightfold Path.

Now, when we say the middle way, you might think, well, it's a bit of moderation. You do a bit of this and a bit of that, and you're in the middle somewhere. But although it's called the middle way, it's a completely different psychology, a completely different understanding. The middle way doesn't quite—"middle" doesn't quite get to the root of it. It's more, I would have thought, transcendent of those two paths and yet feeding into these two paths.

So on the one side you're still enjoying life, but you're trying not to be attached to it. And on the other side, you're not mortifying yourself, you're not trying to blame the body for anything, but on the other hand, you are renouncing things that you see is not good for you. But it's coming from a different understanding about how we've got into this situation, which goes back to this business of identity and the self.

Anyway, that's just a little side point. So then there's the Eightfold Path, which we'll come to in a bit. And then he goes through the actual Four Noble Truths.

This discourse isn't verbatim, obviously. I mean, he wouldn't have come out with such a formula, such a formulated talk. I mean, you might think, well, he's been there under a tree for seven weeks, so he's got his talk in his head. Because remember, he's illiterate. It's very difficult for us to grasp that, isn't it? He's illiterate. People didn't read, didn't write. It was all memory stuff. But obviously he would have continued in a conversational mode, and then later on the teaching becomes formalised. And so this is a formalised teaching just laying the basis upon which all this teaching is based. And that's why in a sense it can be called the turning of the wheel of the law.

There was a monk who actually suggested they put the symbol of the wheel on one of the doors of the monastery, on the top of the door of the monastery.

So we have to see this discourse not so much as verbatim—in fact it's very difficult to say we have any of the original words of the Buddha. There are parts of the scriptures which are very, very old, but of course they developed as they went through. And what happened was that they would hear a talk. It would be systematised into ways of memory. That's why we've got so many lists. And then groups of monks would take responsibility for remembering certain groups of scriptures. They were called the *bhāṇakas*, the reciters. So it would be very rare if there was ever one monk or nun who knew all the scriptures. So it depended on which group of monks you were with, the flavour of the teachings that you got, because it's quite a collection when you think about it.

So scholars, academics can see that there are different levels in the Pali, in the way the Pali is structured. So Bhikkhu Bodhi has just translated the *Sutta Nipāta*, which is one of the earliest strata. It's a great big book—which isn't such a collection of dis-

courses, it's not such a big collection, but he's added all the commentarial stuff to it. Included in that are the two chants that we do in the evening. The loving-kindness one and the—sorry, the morning loving-kindness one—and the *Maṅgala Sutta*, the blessings. That comes from that stratum too.

So also they would create verse, which would make it easy to remember. So we have to see this discourse as really turning the wheel of the law in the sense that it's the platform upon which all his teaching is based.

So he starts off now by saying: "Look, this, monks, is the noble truth of suffering." Now, birth is suffering, old age is suffering, sickness is suffering. Death is also suffering. Getting what you don't want is suffering, and being separated from what is dear to you is suffering. Not obtaining what one longs for is suffering. In short, the five grasping *khandhas* is suffering.

So now, here in the discourse, we have the first way that he looks at the human being through these five aggregates. And there's a purpose to it, of course. The first one is the body and how the mind experiences the body—so that's the primary sensations that you feel: heat, cold, etcetera. And then there's feeling, where we distinguish between what's pleasant and unpleasant. That's a natural process within us. You can't stop it. As soon as you feel something, we judge it to be either pleasant or unpleasant. This isn't a bad judging—this is just the way we are in the world.

And then there's perception, which moves into memory. And also those feelings, remember, include the feelings caused in the body by mental states. And then we have these volitional conditionings. And then finally consciousness, which is the screen upon which everything happens. It's a multidimensional screen. Everything you experience is flashing on that screen.

So what he's pointing to there is the volitional conditionings which we actually are developing, producing—our habits. That's the best word I've come across for it, just our habits, the way we reinforce certain patterns of behaviour, patterns of thinking, etcetera. And some of them are wholesome, some of them aren't.

But he says it's the clinging nature of these—it's the way we cling to this psychophysical organism. That's what it amounts to. Is what is suffering. The clinging. That's really important. If I give another talk on dependent origination, remember that. There's the feeling, there's the reaction to it of not wanting it or trying to overcome it, and then there's the identity: "I don't want." And what we've got to really grasp is that the suffering doesn't start until the point of identity.

Which is often—it's a difficult point to really grasp because when you're in yourself and something horrible is coming up and you can feel the negativity, it's difficult to realise that actually you've separated out of it. And it's only when that separation becomes more and more obvious that you realise that actually there is this gunk going on, but there is no suffering as such. And that's a different quality when you suddenly say, "I can't handle this," and then you drop into it, as it were. And that's the point of suffering.

So that's why he doesn't say the five desiring *khandhas*. He says the five grasping *khandhas*—the ones that we grasp with a sense of self.

There is, at the same time, in other discourses, a different description of *dukkha*. So this word *dukkha*—that's the root word upon which he builds everything, this *dukkha*, which just means hard to bear.

First of all, there is that *dukkha*—*dukkhatā*—just the pain, the suffering that we engender because of the unsatisfactoriness of the body and mind. Then there's the suffering that arises because of the fact that everything we experience is a compendium. It's a conjunction of things. It's an imminence. It's where all these little bits and pieces come together to create something. And so nothing has any reality. Nothing has any substance to itself. Everything is dependent on something else.

And just contemplating the body—and that it's made up of these billions of cells which can all go their own way if they want, and that's the end of it—you begin to recognise that everything is, it doesn't have that substantiality that we think it has or we experience it as having.

And then of course there's a suffering that comes from change. You can't just stop. You can't say, "Well, this is it, this is what I've always been looking for—stop the world." It doesn't happen.

So those are your three types of suffering: just the ordinary suffering of life and whatnot, which includes sickness, ageing and death; there's a suffering that comes because there's nothing substantial in us—there's nothing we can hold on to and say, "Well, this is truly me" of the psychophysical organism; and everything that we experience is constantly changing.

So that's how he describes the noble truth of suffering. Then there comes the second one: the noble truth of the arising of suffering, *samudaya*, the arising of suffering.

And now he's pointing to this word *taṇhā*. So remember, there's another word in Pali, *chanda*, which means desire. And that can be good or bad—so it's your motivation, it's your intention which makes it good or bad. But the word *taṇhā* is a specific word which refers to desires which just lead to suffering one way or the other. And so you get other translations for it like thirst, lack—a lack. Remember, desire comes out of a state of unsatisfactoriness at some level or other and is itself a state of suffering.

To be in a state of desire is not a pleasant state. It only becomes a pleasant state when we see the end of the desire, that it's going to be satisfied or gratified. If it's not, then it's a state of suffering. So desire comes out of suffering and is itself a state of suffering. Suffering here used in the widest sense—unsatisfactoriness.

That's the other thing too—that *dukkha* used to be translated as suffering. And then of course people said, "Well I don't suffer," meaning that they were having a good life at that time. So they had to find another word for it and they came up with unsatisfactoriness. And that's the other side, remember, that I always keep pumping: this business of how indulgence in pleasure has its comeuppance.

Yes, he says desire is the cause of suffering. The craving for sense pleasure. And he divides it now, this *taṇhā*, into three types: the craving for sense pleasure, *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā*, *vibhava-taṇhā*—craving for continuation and the craving for discontinuation.

Now, *kāma-taṇhā*, the desire for sense pleasures—that's, well we know that, that's sincere enough. *Bhava-taṇhā* is the desire to make it continue, but it's also the desire to keep becoming. So it both refers to the desire of trying to maintain a certain pleasure as best you can, but it's also referring to the self wanting pleasure. The self wants to continue, wants to keep living.

And the same with *vibhava-taṇhā*. *Vibhava-taṇhā* refers to the fact of wanting to get rid of what you don't want—that's sort of aversion to it. But it also refers to wanting to get rid of yourself. Either you're just fed up and bored and depressed and you dive under the duvet or something, or you actually want to make your way to a bridge or something.

Whenever I say that, I always remind this lovely clip that I had from a comedian—I can't remember his name now, but he's extremely funny, around about the '50s, something like that. And he meets this—he's going to jump off a bridge in London, off the Westminster Bridge. And a copper comes. He says, "Excuse me, sir." He says, "You know, you mustn't do that." And they have this sort of argument about life and all that sort of stuff. And the sketch ends when they both jump off the bridge. It was really funny.

So yes, that's the *taṇhā*, right? Sense pleasures, always wanting to maintain, wanting to continue, wanting to live, wanting to get rid of—*vibhava-taṇhā*. I mean, these are pointing us to actually investigate in our practice—to actually name it and say, "Oh, that's an aversion, and that's me being averse to myself, I want to get rid of myself at this present time." So it's just being aware of these—it's just pointing to certain mental habits that we have.

And then, of course, he makes this great statement: he says that there is a noble truth of the cessation of suffering. He says it's the complete fading away, the cessation without remainder of that craving. It's the liberation, the letting go, the release and non-adherence.

So that's a really very direct statement. There's no pulling back on that statement. It's not as though, say, modern psychotherapies might say, "Well, you can get to a decent accommodation with life, you can sort of be generally content and whatnot," but here he makes—I don't know of any psychotherapist that says that there's a complete end to suffering here and now. Not—I mean, a lot of religions will point to the afterlife, you know, like you're working at it now and then you get to the gates and you're away. But this statement is right here and now. And of course you find the same in Hinduism of course—that liberation is right here and now if we work hard enough for it, or if we want it enough.

So that brings us to now the path itself: the Eightfold Path. Now, the normal way that it's written down is, of course, right view, right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. But it's normally taught in the division of *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*, which is moral, ethical—ethic life, your development of meditation, and then the wisdom comes from it.

So now this actually brings it, looking at it that way, actually brings it to, I think, a correct view of how to approach our lives. Coming back from the way that the Buddha—that is put here—there is this great misunderstanding that lies within us, this delusion about who we are, or what it is, or however you want to phrase it. And because of that, we make a sort of bargain with life. We say, "Well look, this is it, this is the way it is, so I'm now going to try and make the best I can of this life, seeking happiness there."

So remember, that's our—that's the platform that we're working off. We're not working off—nobody works off, even the most horrible characters in history—they're not working off the platform "I hate." They're working off the platform of "I want to be happy." If that "I want to be happy" moves towards, "Well, for me to be happy, I've got to

hate you," and that's the way it moves. But our basic human nature right down at that basic is we're actually seeking happiness. Everybody's trying to seek happiness one way or the other.

And because of this wrong understanding, of course, we form a wrong relationship with the world, thinking that if I accumulate things, that's going to make me happy. So there's your greed. And then you've got to defend it because somebody else wants your accumulation. And if whoever wants your accumulation is bigger than you, we've got to run for it.

So those three things—acquisitiveness, aversion and fear—are right at the base manifesting this wrong understanding. So the way that we behave from this wrong understanding—we're not always behaving from wrong understanding, but the way we're behaving from wrong understanding is the way back to undermining that wrong understanding. So it's by living ethically, looking at our moral lives, being careful about what we allow the mind to get caught up in—

or what we indulge the mind with that's the way back as it were to the original problem because as you come back you can feel the energies that are based on this delusion you know renouncing something that renunciation gives you an inkling of how much you are attached to what you want to give up yeah when you're with somebody whom there's a natural aversion for then you're with that part of you that doesn't want to be with anything which is upsetting.

And when you're in a frightening situation, a situation that causes anxiety, you're coming back from it. So by working with our ethical life, by working with our moral lives, which manifests in these attitudes, mental states, emotional states, we're actually coming back to the original problems.

Which is the identity and at base the last guard against undoing that delusion is fear. See, the loss of identity. Who are you? And all that sort of stuff. And that we come close to whenever we are struck by a serious illness or eventually our death. That's when we'll hit that point. And the fear and the aversion that arises for that is the measure of this delusion.

So I always think rather than our meditation, always trying to think about attaining something, some sort of insight, some great explosive experience that's going to change my life. You're far better off working with the negativity within us because there you can eventually begin to see some results. And as the heart begins to purify itself, this intelligence, this *satipaṇṇā*, this intuitive awareness is clearer, because remember, the delusion lies in looking, it doesn't lie in the body, the body's not deluded, the body's just

the body, it doesn't lie within the heart, the heart's just feeling, that's all it is, it's only because we personalise it, it's only because I say, I am angry, or I am afraid that it becomes a sense of me, the heart is just feeling, that's all it is, feeling and the head is just thinking imagining so the delusion isn't there they are manifestations of delusion the delusion lies in this *satipaṇṇā* itself, in other words it's the Buddha himself within us which is deluded so it's coming back on that where we can begin to have little insights as to this business of how we create suffering, how we imagine things are going to last when nothing lasts at all.

And how we give things concrete, how we stabilise things, how we conceptualise things into some sort of reality which we presume will continue. So all that begins to be undermined when we actually begin to look at our ethical lives. So that's produced as right speech, of course, right attitude. He's translated right thought here. But it's more right attitude, I think. Right speech, right action, right livelihood. Don't forget our livelihood, what we do for most of the day, has a conditioning effect on us.

Then there's the meditation itself, which is what we're doing here, the *vipassanā*. And then the insights come, the *sammādiṭṭhi*. So if you look at your practice as *sīla samādhi paṇṇā*, I think it moves much more easily. We don't feel so frustrated about not attaining something. Just allow that to happen as the purity grows.

Anyway, once he'd done this, there's this lovely part now. Then he goes into the three modes of each of these noble truths. The first mode is that there is suffering. It's just a bold statement. There is the noble truth of suffering. And then he says that this ought to be known. It ought to be known. It ought to be understood what he means by suffering. And then he tells us that he has fully understood it.

And then he talks about the arising of suffering, the cause of suffering. And he says that this ought to be given up. So this is where academics become, I think, a little silly. Because it says the noble truth of desire has to be given up. So how can you give up a noble truth? But it's shorthand, isn't it? It's shorthand for it is true to say that we ought to give up desire, you know. Never mind so and then he says that he has given it up see it has been given up then there's a cessation of suffering which has which ought to be realised and he has realised it and then finally the path leading to it which ought to be developed and that he has developed it fully so we ought to be moving to those final statements that you know we have overcome desire we have attained Nibbāna and we have practised the path to its end.

So when to me monks in regard to these four noble truths turned like this in three ways. So that's also this idea of a wheel. Wheel within wheels. Especially in the Abhidhamma you'll find this word *vaṭṭa* coming up all the time. There are little wheels

within wheels. Little ways like that one in Dependent Origination is an internal wheel, you see. The feeling, the desire, the *taṇhā*, and then the grasping. It revolves around each other.

Knowledge and insight, as it really is, was quite clear. Then, monks, I did declare to the world with its gods, Māra and Brahmā, to this generation with its ascetics and brahmanas, princes and men, that I was the fully and perfect *Asambuddho* with unsurpassed complete awakening. To me, knowledge and insight arose. Sure is my liberation of mind. This is my last birth. Now there is no more continuation.

That's a lovely statement, right? You can imagine him saying that, you know, it's just... If you said that here in this room, we'd all go, oh yeah.

So then there's this lovely paeon that says, the master sweet of the truth, sorry, hearing these words, the earth deities, all the gods in the universe, Heaven of the Four Kings, the matchless wheel, this was heard say, the matchless wheel of the truth that cannot be set in motion by a recluse, by a Brahmana, a Deva, a God, a Māra, a Brahmā, anyone in this world is set in motion by the Blessed One at the Deer Park at Isipatana near Varanasi.

And these words were heard in the upper Deva realms, in the *Cātumahārājika* realms. in the *Tāvatiṃsa* and it goes all the way through these all these heavens to the *mahābrahma* the *parittābha* the *appamāṇābha* there's a whole load of them and then and and this cry goes up it's a lovely sort of image all the way through these realms from the lowest right up to the heavens and it says the matchless wheel of truth that cannot be set in motion by a recluse or a brahman or a Deva, or a Māra, or a Brahmā, or anyone in this world, is set in motion by the Blessed One and the Deoparkat, Isipatana and Ibn Aris.

Thus, at that very moment, at that instant, the cry that the wheel of truth had been set in motion spread as far as the Brahmā realm, and the system of ten thousand worlds trembled and quaked and shook, and a boundless, a boundless sublime radiance, surpassing the effulgence of the gods, appeared in the world.

And then the Blessed One uttered this paeon of joy. Verily Koṇḍañña has realised. Verily Koṇḍañña has realised. The Venerable Koṇḍañña then receives the name *Añña* Koṇḍañña. So there was one of his companions who got it.

So that's how this lovely discourse ends with this wonderful sort of image of it rising of the wheel of the teaching rising up through all the heavens and get to the top and then he finally acknowledges that this old companion of his has now become fully liberated so I can only hope this has not confused you or anything but has inspired you to devote yourself entirely to the practice for liberation awaits us

May you be fully liberated from all suffering. Sooner rather than later.

The Five Spiritual Faculties

Noirin Sheahan · 40 min

In this retreat teaching, Noirin Sheahan examines the five spiritual faculties (pañca indriya): faith (saddhā), energy (vīriya), mindfulness (sati), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā). These represent the enduring strengths that develop from cultivating the seven factors of awakening (bojjhaṅga) in vipassanā practice.

Using the practical example of dealing with bureaucratic frustration at a welfare office, Noirin demonstrates how these faculties transform challenging situations into opportunities for spiritual growth. She explains how mindfulness provides objectivity in difficult moments, concentration focuses scattered attention, and energy enables us to 'swim upstream' against unskillful habits. The teaching explores how wisdom discerns helpful from harmful motivations, while faith provides heartfelt confidence when wisdom reaches its limits.

The talk connects the spiritual faculties to the seven factors of awakening, showing how investigation and equanimity develop into wisdom, while joy and tranquillity strengthen faith. Noirin emphasizes the middle way approach to working with difficult emotions like anger - neither suppressing nor being overwhelmed, but channeling raw energy into skillful assertiveness. This teaching offers practical guidance for integrating formal meditation insights into the complexities of everyday life.

The Five Spiritual Faculties

For the past few evenings we've been exploring the Brahma Vihara which described the ways wisdom is expressed in our relationship with others. Tonight I want to take a step back into our individual psyche and look at the strengths that develop from our practice. These are described as the five spiritual faculties and they are mindfulness, energy, concentration, faith and wisdom.

We mentioned these already in relation to the seven factors of enlightenment and this talk also provides a bit of revision on these factors that develop as we meditate. Remember the wild geese analogy? Mindfulness was in the lead, followed in the slipstream by a calming trio, headed up by concentration and then following on were equanimity and tranquillity. Pressing ahead on the wide flank were the stimulating factors of energy, investigation and joy.

The leading trio of mindfulness, concentration and energy have joined us again in the spiritual faculties. This time they are accompanied by wisdom and faith. The seven factors describe the skills used during *vipassanā*, while the spiritual faculties describe the strengths built from our meditation practice and which can then be used in daily life or during challenges in meditation when equanimity, joy and tranquillity desert us.

Let's take an example. Suppose you're at the social welfare office to find out why your payment hasn't arrived this month. The person you normally deal with has been transferred and the newcomer can't find your file. After consulting with others, he shrugs his shoulders and says, "You'll have to reapply for all your benefits." A button pops inside you and rage boils up.

Which of the seven factors will come to your aid in this situation? Your mind won't be equanimous, tranquil or joyful, and you won't be investigating the transitory nature of experience. Thus, four of the seven factors of enlightenment are missing. But you can be mindful and focus your full attention on the interaction with the official, while summoning the energy needed to prevent yourself throttling the officer who is smiling innocuously, happy to have ticked off another client from his list. Thus, we still have the three leaders in the wild geese: mindfulness, concentration and energy.

To back these up, you could remind yourself that speaking out of anger never helps. This is your accumulated store of wisdom, calming the storm of passion that's exploding within you. You might also be encouraging yourself that things will work out somehow. This is the faith or confidence that accrues from practice and helps us see the silver lining within the storm clouds.

So the spiritual faculties are the benefits that accrue from honing the seven factors of enlightenment. Here is an analogy. An ice skater would use skills like balance, physical strength, grace and expressivity while skating. Some of these, like strength and grace for example, will accumulate as personal capacities that are useful in daily life. The skater's off-ice life will also benefit from related offshoots such as physical fitness and the confidence that comes from developing a skill.

Just as ice skating requires a very special set of skills and circumstances, the factors of enlightenment describe the skills involved in maintaining the pretty exalted state we achieve in *vipassanā*. But the accumulated strengths from both activities help us in a very down-to-earth way. Thus the spiritual faculties provide the qualities we need to turn our welfare office encounter and all aspects of ordinary daily life into a spiritual practice. They also come to the fore during turgid, unexalted times in formal meditation while we're threading our way through the hindrances.

Let's go through the five spiritual faculties in more detail and look especially at how to apply these during challenges. Mindfulness describes our capacity to be conscious of present moment experience such as physical sensations, sounds, sights, emotions and thoughts. Although this capacity is natural, we generally ignore whatever is impacting on our senses and instead follow the dictates of whatever thoughts we concoct in our busy minds. During meditation, we train ourselves to experience life at a simpler level than that engendered by the filter of thoughts and beliefs.

In meditation, we usually start by placing attention on the physical sensations of breathing. Then we might notice the pleasure of relaxing from our usual busyness. Bringing the pleasure centre stage, we might see that it has the emotional tone of contentment alongside pleasurable physical sensations associated with relaxation. After a while we may grow sleepy, so we broaden our attention to notice our posture and the sensations that register as we straighten the spine to prevent ourselves falling asleep. In all this we are honing the skill of mindfulness, training our minds to register present experience rather than be ensnared in our mental concoctions.

One strength that builds from this training is a capacity to see through our mental filters in daily life. In our welfare office scenario, the faculty of mindfulness will help us register rage as part of the objective reality of the situation. Without mindfulness the rage would take us over and our minds would only see reality through its filter. Thus the official would, in our minds, become horrible, lazy, incompetent and all the other labels rage places upon him. We might suddenly realise that the whole welfare system is unfair, infuriating, stupid, etc. Our speech and behaviour will then follow the habit pattern we've built up to deal with conflict.

For some, this will mean banging fists on the counter or bellowing into the ears of the official, giving them a perfect excuse to refuse to deal with us further. For others, it would mean channelling all the emotional energy into assertiveness. For others it could mean a collapse into livid despair as we take the forms home to commence the wearying search for documents, all the time cursing the official and the system and whatever else crosses our path.

With mindfulness we will feel the surge of rage as it surfaces. While all the nasty labels may get stamped on the official and the situation, there is also some objectivity about these. We know that our vision and thoughts are being coloured. This gives us some choice in what happens next. For example, we could decide to take a few mindful breaths to help us calm down a bit.

If we've done a lot of practice, we'll be able to acknowledge some of the complexity of emotions and feelings being generated. There may be a physical tension in our face or throat, our eyes may be popping, our brow is furrowed, our jaw stiff. There may be the heady buzz that energises us in conflict situations and a strong sense of self. To the extent that these are registered consciously, their hold over us is reduced and the ill-will driving our response is tempered.

While the Dhamma doesn't give us any prescription for how to deal with conflicting situations like this, mindfulness allows us to learn our own unique best strategy to find pathways which transform the energy of anger into assertiveness. Although the ingrained reactionary habit might still be 99% in control of the situation, we have that 1% of mindfulness reminding us of anger as part of the objective reality. And even if our behaviour follows its usual route, we will at some stage be able to reflect on the situation and learn some lessons.

Let's now look at the faculty of concentration. This is not the furrowed brow concentration required for school work. It refers to our ability to select out some aspect of experience and rest attention there. There are two levels of concentration which are of particular interest here.

The first describes a mind that is approaching its focus. In meditation we might be encouraging ourselves to focus on the sensations of breathing, aware of lots of other sensations, feelings and the mind state in the background, but centring our attention on the breath. The analogy used to describe this is a bee hovering around a flower, following it back and forth in the breeze, waiting for the right moment to alight. This type of concentration is termed *vitakka* or applied thought. The word thought here does not mean that we think about the sensations of breathing. It means we bring our intelligence and curiosity to bear on these sensations.

At the next level of concentration, termed *vicāra* or sustained thought, the bee has landed and is sucking nectar. This type of concentration is more restful. We're no longer making the effort to keep our mind steady. We're now absorbed in the experience of breathing. Concentration works hand in hand with mindfulness, giving the mind a specific focus for awareness. For example, the sensations of breathing or walking. These sensations provide a good resting place for the mind during formal meditation and also during quiet moments in daily life. This helps us to let go of the stress that easily builds up during ordinary life.

But in situations where we need to be actively engaged, it's a good habit to be more broadly aware. Very often the external situation we find ourselves in provides sufficient draw for our attention, so concentration happens quite naturally. For example,

while we are actually talking to the official in the welfare office, our minds will be quite focused on the exchange, so we don't need to use any noting word or phrase to remind ourselves to be aware of present experience. This is the equivalent of *vicāra* in *vipassanā*. We are absorbed within the experience and do not need to encourage our minds to focus.

But in idle moments the mind might wander, for example, while waiting in the queue or while the official was searching for a file. Just as in formal meditation, when we wake up and notice we've been wandering, we can simply remind ourselves of what's going on and encourage ourselves to keep coming back to that reality. You could simply focus on sensations which will have a calming effect. But if you tend to be dreamy, it could help to remind yourself of the job at hand. A broad brush phrase like "welfare office, asking why no benefit received," could be used to marshal your energies for the job at hand.

It will need a degree of effort to keep the mind focused. So this is the daily life equivalent of *vitakka* or applied thought in *vipassanā*. It is worthwhile reflecting on the fact that we mostly don't use a phrase like "welfare office asking why no benefit received" to help us through our day. This reflects the preference for our minds to drift and autopilot, rather than make conscious decisions and be mindful as we carry out our decisions. In effect, this lets us ignore the underlying motivations for much of our daily lives.

For example, our trip to the welfare office might have followed automatically from annoyance that the usual payment hadn't been received. We will be carrying that annoyance unwittingly into the office and it will probably show up as an edge to our voice as we explain the problem. This is a form of aggression and in turn the official will react to that becoming less sympathetic to our case. Using a noting word in *vipassanā* sharpens our perceptions and helps us to see things in more detail. Similarly, noting phrases such as "welfare office asking why no benefit received" will sharpen our perceptions in daily life. This way we will notice the emotional baggage driving us.

This brings us to the third of the spiritual faculties, energy. We'll have noticed the anger driving us to the welfare office. Is that a good enough motive? Hopefully we'll have enough wisdom to say no. To relinquish the anger we need the faculty of energy. The spiritual faculty of energy is the momentum behind right effort. For spiritual progress, we need to make the effort to undermine unskillful qualities like anger and develop skillful ones like *mettā*. It takes enormous energy to make these changes.

An apt metaphor of the Buddha's is that of swimming upstream. We're continually having to work against our ingrained conditioning. We practice swimming upstream in vipassanā. No matter how often the mind wanders, we refuse to give up. We start again. No matter how sleepy we feel, we resist the temptation to lie down. Each time we make those efforts to start again, to keep the sleepy eyes open, to resist the urge to fidget, we are strengthening our spiritual faculty of energy.

One benefit from all this hard work is that in daily life we will have the energy to undermine old habits, for example on the way to the welfare office. Seeing the anger driving us is already to undermine it. Anger may be churning within making our blood boil, but so long as it's contained within the gaze of awareness it can't do any harm. We can then choose a skillful motive for our trip. For example, "May I look after myself well in this situation?" This lets the whole sorry business become part of our spiritual life. It will help us appreciate any positives in the situation. Our friendly outlook may even touch into the heart of officialdom to motivate them to make a more thorough search for our file. Even if the outcome is exactly the same, we will have undermined our habit of acting out of anger. So the encounter will have been a rich one in terms of our spiritual life.

To recap, the faculty of mindfulness honed during vipassanā as we bring our minds back again and again to present experience gives us a degree of objectivity in our daily life. The faculty of concentration gathers our often scattered attention so that instead of jumping all over the place or only vaguely aware of what we're doing, we can focus on each task in hand. As we do so, mindfulness lets our underlying motivations become more apparent. The faculty of energy then comes to the fore, resisting the strong current of unskillfulness, swimming upstream with skillful good wishes.

With the three faculties working together, they simplify life and bring out the best in all situations. The autopilot mind tends to complicate things, building monsters and fairy tales in every idle moment, stoking our underlying and unacknowledged passions, poisoning the attitude with which we approach others. While we're waiting in the queue at the welfare office, annoyance could be prompting grandiose plans of how we would reorganise the system if only we were in charge. If we don't notice this, we'll unwittingly be carrying our annoyance and disapproval into the encounter with the official.

But if we wake up and remind ourselves of our present reality, "welfare office, asking why payment not received," this has the effect of focusing the mind. Thus the energy of anger is transformed to assertiveness and channelled into a rightful business. If we can then add a good wish such as, "May I look after myself happily," we'll achieve the crowning glory of a positive outlook.

Now let's look at the faculties of faith and wisdom. Wisdom lets us discern which motivations are helpful and which are unskillful. Wisdom would remind us, "Acting out of anger doesn't help" in that welfare office. We might undervalue such an obvious statement thinking, "Well everyone knows that." But if everyone knew that, there wouldn't be petty squabbles or gang feuds or murders. It's one thing to know that acting out of anger doesn't help when we're calmly reflecting on life in the comfort of home, well fed, warm and healthy. It's quite another thing to be able to believe that same fact and act upon it when we're cold and hungry, when someone pushes our buttons, insults us or assaults us.

Meditation practice opens many avenues for such wisdom. One comes from seeing how much anger hurts us. We learn this when we have the patience to sit still with angry thoughts and open up to the full experience of the emotional storm. Tensions develop in various parts of the body. Our thoughts tighten us into a knot of self-righteousness and blame. We explode into rage or shrink into a livid pot of hatred.

Eventually though the emotion burns itself out. As it does so we sense the hurt lurking beneath our anger. That hurt is what really needs acknowledgement. Once we've done so, our thoughts become more rational and we somehow come to terms with the situation. On reflection, we see that the bout of anger had been deepening the hurt within ourselves. It hadn't done anything to help the situation. The more often we sit through anger and feel its raw energy, the less easily are we seduced by its appealing thoughts of vengeance and glorious triumph over our opponents.

One very easy mistake to make is to denounce ourselves for anger and suppress all its energy, persuading ourselves we're not really angry. We need to find the middle way: feeling the anger, acknowledging it, relaxing right into the heart of it, but dropping the thoughts and beliefs it suggests moment after moment, thought after thought. This way we learn to appreciate the raw energy stimulated by aversion, the way it straightens our spine, makes us razor sharp alert. Dropping the thoughts prompted by ill-will, this raw energy can be channelled into assertiveness. The strong sense of self stimulated by aversion is then free to think friendly thoughts of goodwill and compassion without an unhelpful peppering of hatred or ill-will.

A word about aversion and the wisdom that can be associated with it. Aversion becomes a hindrance when we identify with it, clinging to thoughts like, "You're bad, you're wrong," and building up a mental case to justify all this. Our practice with anger, ill-will, resentment and all the other emotions stimulated by aversion helps us drop the identification.

But the basic discernment of an unpleasant situation can still be registered. The difference is that we can now act on this dispassionately.

Going back to the welfare office example, we register the unpleasant implications of our file having been lost, that we won't have any money coming in, the burden of having to find all our documents, write to previous employers and so on. There's also the disappointment that the system has failed. All of these are valid judgements of the situation. They're a part of the truth that needs to be acknowledged. So aversion in the sense of recognizing an unpleasant feeling or situation is not a problem.

The Buddha registered aversion when he first thought about teaching others the way to enlightenment. He reflected that it would simply leave him vexed because the truth was too subtle for others to understand. As the story goes, he needed to be persuaded by the god Brahmā that some people had but little dust in their eyes and would be able to follow his lead to enlightenment. Realising there was some point to the undertaking, he could then frame any vexation as worthy within the overall picture. This allowed him to say many years later that when people rejected his teaching, he experienced equanimity. He could register the unwelcome fact that they were rejecting what he held dear and instead choosing *dukkha*, but could then let them go their own way in peace.

Wisdom allows aversive situations to be known as unfortunate, unpleasant, unwanted, but embraced with equanimity. Wisdom is also what saves us in the welfare office. To the extent that we've taken the truth of *dukkha* on board, we know that everything is unreliable, that everything and everyone fails sooner or later. We know that reacting against this makes things worse. We know that the way through difficulties is to embrace them fully. So we don't take the situation as a personal insult or loss. We embrace it as a step on our path of enlightenment.

Wisdom accrues from seeing the three characteristics: *anicca* or transience, *anattā* or not-self and *dukkha*, suffering. Experiencing and reflecting upon the transient, ephemeral nature of all experience, we gradually disentangle ourselves from *dukkha*. We see how identifying with our feelings and emotions intensifies their power, how the mind concocts stories out of nothing, creates mountains out of molehills.

When we see through the false identity, the once powerful emotion reveals itself as a mass of sensations and feelings without any coherent rationale. What was the point of clinging to all that, we wonder? The absence of a storyline becomes more appealing than our usual insistence on rehashing our point of view. Something about the quiet spaces between sensations, thoughts and mind states starts to call our attention. We feel ourselves more and more attracted to that absence of drama. And for its sake we become increasingly willing to let go of our usual desire for pleasure, for things going my way.

We might not be able to put any words to this wisdom. It's a loosening of the ties that bind us to suffering. It is expressed not so much in words but as a way of interacting with the world. We're more willing to experience life at the level of basic sensation than through the veil of our interpretations and ideas. This loosens the absolutist black and white stance we so often adopt in challenging situations. Instead of acting out habitual behaviour patterns again and again, we're looking for the escape route, the way back to peace.

Our muscles relax a bit easier in stressful situations. Our emotions become more apparent and thereby less overpowering. As our emotional armour cracks, whispers of thoughts like "it never pays to act out of anger" can be registered. We might find ourselves clinging to the thought for dear life as a storm of rage blasts us with its fury.

Wisdom is what suggests the thought: it never pays to act out of anger. Faith keeps our hearts up as the storm of anger counters with the barrage of objections. "Of course I should be angry. I need to be angry. He'll walk all over me unless I let fly" and so on. Our problem is that we don't know how to make good of the situation. So wisdom has nothing more to offer other than its original suggestion: acting out of anger won't help. When wisdom runs out, faith steps into the breach.

The Pali word for faith is *saddhā*. This can also be translated as confidence. We're not talking here about blind faith in dogma. We're talking about a heartfelt trust in what inspires our confidence.

At the start of our spiritual journey, we place our faith in whatever spark got us going. It may have been something we read or someone who inspired us to give it a try. It may just have been a hunch or even desperation, sensing that there must be something other than the world of indulgence, individuality, success and failure. That initial inspiration or desperation can be very powerful. It gives us the energy to seek out a teacher, a retreat, a meditation group. It gets us started on our spiritual quest.

In time, however, the initial brightness fades. The teacher doesn't seem so alluring. Retreats are tough. People in the meditation group start to annoy us. Our disappointment crystallises as doubt. Unless we've learned to recognise and work with doubt, we'll give up at this point. We could go off in search of another path, a more inspiring teacher, a more congenial meditation group. But the same pattern of inspiration followed by disappointment will repeat itself until we learn to work through our doubts. As we do so, faith develops.

At times, doubt can turn to self-doubt. We think that we're too dim-witted or too self-centred or too angry, and that's why the Dhamma doesn't seem to be making any impact on our lives. Again, the spectre has to be embraced. The certainties – "too dim-witted," "no impact," etc. – need to be examined mindfully as part of our present experience. What other aspects of experience can we notice? Tensions perhaps? Emotions like despair or self-hatred? Can we muster the energy to sit through these? Would it help to talk with a friend or a teacher?

All teachers will have come through such trials, and may be able to encourage you to embrace the spectre of self-doubt, trusting that, like all spectres, it will at times dissolve into thin air, leaving you wondering, what was that all about?

As we work our way mindfully through the hindrances, our initial bright faith transforms to a deep, heartfelt confidence in ourselves and in the path we have chosen. Faith and wisdom work hand in hand. Wisdom represents our understanding of the Dhamma. Faith represents our willingness to embrace it. Faith is energising, heartfelt, a joyous movement towards truth. Wisdom discerns the *dukkha* of clinging and persuades us to let go. Without wisdom, we would cling to faith, become a zealot, insisting on our dogma. Without faith, wisdom gets stuck in detail rather than taking the scary step into the unknown.

When the two are working in tandem, wisdom asks us to choose the middle way, to abandon reactivity and loosen our clutch on habitual patterns. Faith heartens us in this unfamiliar territory, lets us trust that some beneficial way forward will emerge.

Thus, wisdom and faith, along with the other spiritual faculties of mindfulness, concentration and energy, can steer us through our bout of rage that emerges in the welfare office. There's no saying how the situation will unfold. After a few seconds of gallant resistance, anger might break through anyhow. Or we might become confused, unable to deal with the situation at all, as the next person in the queue shoves us out of the way. We might break down and cry. Or we might find something useful to say. No matter what happens, we've made an attempt to break an old habit in a very challenging situation, and that will stand to us greatly in spiritual terms.

I had some strange experiences the first few times I consciously tried to break unskillful communication habits in conflict situations. My natural habit is to withdraw, say nothing, but be privately disgusted with the other person. The first time I found the courage to say something in protest, I ended up speaking nonsense. I couldn't understand what I was saying myself, never mind expecting the other person to make sense of it. I then had to endure my adversary saying, "Calm down, love, let me explain," as he summarily dismissed every basis for my complaint. So that didn't work out too well. But it showed me the magnitude of the task I was facing in learning a new habit of assertiveness.

The next time I tried was when someone was giving me a blast of their anger. Although I felt cowed and wanted to withdraw into a disgusted silence, I knew I should change the pattern, say something to stand up for myself. Again what came out was pure nonsense. It wasn't even an English sentence. After a few seconds I found myself apologising, saying, "I don't know what I'm trying to say." But this time my incoherence had the desired effect. My adversary, probably sensing my distress, calmed down and apologised for his own outburst of anger. We were then able to talk rationally about the problem and come to an amicable agreement.

So we needn't expect our spiritual life to unfold in a dignified way. But somehow our unskillful habits change for the better and we become more able to address life's challenges and appreciate its beauties.

To finish, I'd like to recap on the qualities we're developing here on retreat and how these link with the spiritual faculties which we need for everyday life. In Vipassanā we are developing the seven factors of enlightenment. The three leading factors of mindfulness, concentration and energy become habits that we can take into our ordinary lives.

Mindfulness anchors our attention in reality, saves us from daydreaming or worrying our lives away. Sights, sounds and all our sense data become meaningful experiences in which our busy minds can rest and recuperate. This grounding in reality gives us some objectivity on the baggage we bring into stressful situations and thereby the possibility of letting go.

The faculty of concentration focuses our attention on the task at hand, lets us become more effective in our lives rather than scattered and superficial.

The faculty of energy gives us the wherewithal to breast the current of unskillful habits and swim upstream with our skillful ones.

The next factors developed in Vipassanā are investigation and equanimity. Their benefit shows up within the faculty of wisdom. As we investigate our experience in Vipassanā, it sinks in ever deeper that greed, hatred and delusion hurt us in many ways. We bring that wisdom with us into daily life where it persuades us not to act out old habits of suffering. With equanimity, wisdom gets some weight and can steady us through a storm of passion.

The thought "it never pays to act out of anger" is only a fleeting thought. As already mentioned, anger will immediately counter with arguments like, "He'll walk all over me unless I blow my top." We can feel the attraction towards these thoughts, the strong, powerful sense of self they conjure up, the sweet sensations they release in our bodies. Our certainty that anger doesn't help will be shattered unless equanimity steadies us against anger's counter-revolution.

While wisdom relates mainly to our rational mind, the faculty of faith is based in feeling rather than the intellect. It is a heartfelt confidence in our path. Thus, it relates closely to the final pair in the factors of enlightenment, joy and tranquillity. To the extent that we've developed joy in Vipassanā, our hearts will be open to the joy of faith. We will be glad to have a practice we can trust, a path to follow. Joy lifts the spirit, lets us become more confident in ourselves and in our chosen path. It gives momentum to our faith.

The spiritual path leads us toward quiet waters where we're asked to surrender much of what we normally prize: pleasure and stimulation, striving to get on top of things, being noticed, being a success, having a story to tell. We're going against the values of our culture here and this would really test our faith unless we develop a degree of tranquillity in Vipassanā. If we can appreciate quiet moments where nothing is achieved, savour the absence of drama, enjoy listening as well as speaking, then our spiritual life can flourish even within the busyness of modern culture.

To let us appreciate the absence of achievement, the absence of excitement, we have the delight of tranquillity. This delight strengthens our faith in a life of surrender and renunciation.

May our meditation practice here on retreat strengthen the spiritual faculties so that every aspect of ordinary daily life becomes part of our path to enlightenment.

The Hindrances

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

In this teaching, Noirin Sheahan explores the five hindrances (nīvaraṇa) that obstruct our meditation practice and spiritual development. Drawing on the Buddha's teachings, she examines desire (kāmacchanda), aversion (vyāpāda), dullness and lethargy (thīna-middha), restlessness and remorse (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā).

Using the beautiful metaphor of tending a garden, Noirin explains how mindfulness acts as the gardener, helping us recognize and work skillfully with these mental weeds before they can flourish and spread. Rather than fighting the hindrances, she advocates for making friends with them—understanding that their basic constituents are the same as our more beautiful qualities, held together by greed, hatred, and delusion.

The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing each hindrance through physical sensations, emotions, and thought patterns. Noirin shares personal experiences and specific techniques for working with pain, difficult emotions, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt. She emphasizes that the hindrances, when met with mindful awareness, actually transform into their opposite virtues—hatred becomes love, delusion becomes wisdom, and greed becomes generosity.

This teaching provides both newcomers and experienced practitioners with invaluable tools for understanding that our meditation difficulties are not obstacles to overcome, but integral parts of the path toward awakening.

The hindrances underlie the various difficulties we come across in meditation: wandering mind, falling asleep, getting discouraged. We have to overcome the hindrances, but not by fighting them to the death. How do we overcome our enemies? By making them our friends. I'm paraphrasing from Abraham Lincoln here, but I think this applies wonderfully to our work with the hindrances.

The analogy of a garden is also useful. A garden has grass and flowers and weeds and needs a gardener to tend it. So too our spiritual life has restful and uplifting aspects as well as hindrances and needs mindfulness to tend it. To a large extent the gardener can leave the grass and flowers alone, just watering or feeding them occasionally. The main work is in pulling up the weeds, if possible to do this while they are small and before they can flourish and spread their seeds. So too, a large part of *vipassanā* involves working with the hindrances, if possible catching these early and letting mind-

fulness weed them out before they prompt us into thoughts or words or actions. It might not be as uplifting as watering the flowers of *mettā*, but it can be satisfying in its own way.

Now, as all you gardeners will know, the weeds have a way of coming back anyhow. Weeding has to be a long-term commitment and when we've done our share for the day to congratulate ourselves and feel the satisfaction of a job well done. Another gardening analogy that's useful here is to see that the basic constituents of the weed are the same as the flowers: roots and stalks and leaves, all made from carbon and hydrogen and oxygen. At heart there is no difference. And so the weed, once uprooted, can decompose to rich soil in which new flowers can grow.

In the same way, the basic constituents of the hindrances are not in essence different to the more beautiful aspects of life, which also decompose into sensations and feelings and moods. What holds the weed together is a combination of greed, hatred and delusion. We uproot the weed by feeling these underlying drives within the sensations and emotions and thoughts. Once these drives are felt and recognized, they start to subside. That's one great power of mindfulness. It allows negativity to burn away. As the negativity in the hindrance burns away, its energy is transformed into the opposite virtue: hatred to love, delusion to wisdom, greed to generosity. So it's really worthwhile work.

So what are these hindrances and how can we recognize them? The Buddha described them in five varieties: Desire, Aversion, Dullness and Lethargy, Restlessness, and Doubt.

Starting with Desire: This is the impulse of wanting that arises in response to pleasure. Although we might not feel particularly hungry when we see or smell pizza, most of us would want to start nibbling a piece. We might be late for work, but when we step into the shower and feel the warm water flowing over us, we want to relax and enjoy it. Seeing an erotic image might stir sexual fantasies. A pleasant memory comes to mind and we want to start reminiscing. All advertising works on desire. We suddenly believe that we would be happy if only we had a BMW, hair coloured by L'Oreal, Starbucks coffee. When we get any pleasurable stimulus, physical or mental, we normally respond with desire, wanting to get more of the pleasure.

Indulging some desires can obviously be harmful and lead to problems like overeating, drug addiction, sexual deviancy, power obsession and so on. On the other hand, many desires are beneficial. The desire for food keeps us alive. Reminiscing about a pleasant memory can help us generate goodwill. Desire for friends helps us to develop social skills. And desire drives our spiritual journey. The desire for enlightenment, for happiness, the wish to relieve suffering – these propel us along the path.

So there's no need to judge our desires as wrong. Desire is neither right nor wrong. It simply arises in response to what we feel is pleasant. It's part of human nature. In daily life we need to be able to judge whether a desire is skillful, like wanting to put on a hat when our head feels cold, or unskillful, like calling in sick when we want to watch Wimbledon. But in formal meditation practice we rarely have to go to the trouble of judging. This simplifies matters. All we have to do is to get to know what desire feels like, to learn to recognize this basic human urge for the good things in life, and to trust that mindfulness is digging away at the roots of desire as we simply feel its effects on our mind and body. Here again we have the magic of mindfulness. Very quietly, without fuss, it transforms whatever it meets.

So what does desire feel like? Look out for a sense of pulling towards something or being pulled towards something. I often find I'm leaning forward slightly when desire is manifesting. For example, while you're waiting in the queue for food, are you totally relaxed or is there something like magnetism pulling you towards the sideboard? During sitting meditation we can sometimes feel that sense of pulling towards a pleasant experience.

When I find myself slipping off into daydreams I counter this by taking an interest in this whole business of pleasure and desire. I feel the pleasure that the daydream is giving me. My mind is drawn towards the pleasant movie that the daydream is projecting. There may be a slight smile on my face. There is often a warm, billowy sensation around my chest or waist. There may be pleasant tingles running up and down my neck. As well as these pleasant sensations, I can feel a sense of strain: tension on my face perhaps, or a kind of desperate need to believe in the daydream. Nowadays I can easily recognize this straining and desperation as manifestations of desire. And I can feel the anxiety inherent in desire, the fear that all pleasure will be lost if I lose my grip on those gorgeous sensations.

The wonderful thing is that our being, physical and mental, learns from experience. Feeling the desperation and tension associated with desire, I am nowadays more willing to relax my hold on the pleasure of the daydream. The desire to daydream fades away. As desire burns itself out, we grow more content. Those insatiable urges for more, more, more, which are so typical of our consumer society, lose some of their grip. We begin to trust that things are actually fine just as they are. What a relief!

Now I made it sound easy, but in fact we will all be working with desire until we're fully enlightened. So letting go of deep desires is not easy. It can be quite scary, but this is an example of working with the hindrance of aversion.

Aversion is at the root of fear, anger, hatred, and at a milder level we can feel aversion in irritation, impatience, sulkiness and other emotions. Aversion is actually another form of desire: the wish to get rid of what we don't like. We normally respond with aversion to any unpleasant stimulus. Our knee starts throbbing and we want to move or stretch to relieve the pain. Someone coughs, disturbing our peaceful meditation and we want to murder them. Many of our emotions spring from aversion. We get bad news and react with anger and anxiety. Our partner leaves us for another person and we are overcome with jealousy. We fail a test and are devastated by despair.

The Buddha described our aversive reaction as getting shot by two arrows. The first arrow is the unpleasant sensation: the knee pain or the disturbing cough. The second arrow is our aversive reaction. Unwittingly we stab ourselves in reaction to the first arrow and it's the second arrow which really hurts.

Aversion can have a very negative impact on our lives, but in some cases the aversive reaction is the wise one. If we witness cruelty, anger may spur us to do something to stop this. Feeling shame after being caught cheating persuades us not to cheat again. So we need to make friends with the experience of aversion, so that we are not afraid of our anger when anger is the wise response, willing to feel shame when shame is the wise response. Aversion is very much linked with wisdom, so working with aversion strengthens our ability to live wisely.

So again, it's important not to judge aversion when it arises in our meditation, but to let our system learn to recognize it, make friends with it.

How can we recognize aversion? Physical pain is one we all have to work with from time to time. See if you can locate the basic pain – the throbbing in the knee, for example. And then let yourself feel how the rest of the body is sitting with that. Is your face in a grimace? Are your shoulders hunched? Is your stomach in a knot? Is your thigh tense? You may also get an overall sense of pushing, as if your body is physically trying to push the pain away. Or it can manifest as a sense of the body straining to get away from the pain, as if it's trying to tear itself away from the painful site.

While physical pain is a great teacher, we shouldn't let our enthusiasm for enlightenment run away with our common sense about how to take care of ourselves. So when the pain gets too bad, it's best to move so as to relieve it. But move mindfully, as this part of the meditation can also be a great teacher, especially if you move very slowly. Keeping your attention in the body as it moves, you might feel the pain fading away. Also, out of the corner of your eyes, so to speak, you might notice your mood brightening. This is an example of aversion fading away. It's a really powerful experience be-

cause it shows us that the real suffering in the situation was in our mental reaction rather than in our knee. The anxiety or bad humour provoked by the pain was the real source of misery, not the physical sensations in your knee.

I remember one time when I injured my back. I was acutely aware of the injury and walking very carefully and stiffly to avoid any sudden pulls and lying down for hours each evening after work. I felt imprisoned by the pain, unable to relax or enjoy anything because of it. But because I was being mindful, I realised that I couldn't actually feel the pain. When I put my attention on the middle of my back where I knew I had the pain, all I felt was a blank. This is one effect of aversion, causing so much mental disturbance that the basic sensation itself is suppressed. It was a few days before my mind calmed down enough to be able to feel the pain, and ironically I no longer felt imprisoned by it. I could enjoy life again. This really helped me believe that the problem with pain doesn't stem from the physical sensation but from the mental reaction of aversion.

Another way to see this is to alternate your focus for attention. If your right knee is throbbing, let your attention dwell there for a while. Then let your attention shift to your left knee. As you switch, you might just feel a slight lightening of your mood. If so, you may also realise that it's the mood that is determining your sense of suffering, not the pain itself.

Now it can be very difficult to sit with pain and let yourself feel all this. Your mind may be buzzing with thoughts: "This is mad, I'm going to injure myself" or "Why am I torturing myself like this?" and so on. So let's remind ourselves why we try to sit and bear the pain. It's to let our system learn about the second arrow. The more clearly we see that the hurt results from our reaction, our wish to get rid of pain, the more willing we are to stop stabbing ourselves with the second arrow. Gradually we learn to relax around the pain and may even experience moments of compassion for a being in pain. The weeds of aversion are transforming into the flower of compassion.

We can work mindfully with difficult emotions in a similar way. Suppose we start feeling irritated and angry, for example. If we don't recognize this as a form of aversion, we could spend the whole meditation period mulling over angry thoughts. Or we could judge the meditation as useless, thinking we can't meditate when we're angry. In both cases, aversion is flourishing. The weed has been allowed to grow and spread its seeds.

But if we recognize that the weed of anger is springing up, we can start digging away at it mindfully. How is anger experienced? The angry thoughts – instead of believing them and following them up, can you note them as "thinking, thinking"? Are your lips pursed? Is your jaw clenched? How does your stomach feel? This approach digs around

the root of the anger. It helps us acknowledge anger as just another manifestation of this body-mind system we inhabit. We begin to relax with the emotion, not to be so judgmental about it or let it rule our lives. Again, we may sometimes feel compassion for a being going through the pain of anger.

One other aspect of aversion that troubles most of us is our habit of judging. I've been saying there's no need to judge desire or aversion as wrong. I remind myself regularly of this too. But the habit of judging goes so deep that I don't always remember my own advice when I'm out of my comfort zone. And then, of course, we can start judging ourselves because we're judging and the misery deepens. It's wonderful to be able to note "judging, judging," and get to know the fierce judginess that demands and expects only the best. In mindful awareness, the judge will also boil down to sensations and feelings and thoughts, nothing to be so scared of.

How does the judge manifest in you? In me, the judge makes me feel top-heavy with the weight of disapproval I feel in my forehead especially. At times then I can also feel the scared child cowering in my chest and throat. Nowadays the scared child and judge often find a way to compromise and forgive each other. The judge asks forgiveness for harshness, the child for mistrusting the protection and guidance being offered by the judge.

One confusing aspect of working with aversion is that the unpleasant feelings are amplified in mindful awareness. We avoid or suppress those painful feelings when we're letting the aversion flourish: mulling over angry thoughts, dismissing the situation as a waste of time. When we dig mindfully at the roots of aversion, we begin to feel the pain of what we've been trying to avoid. This can be confusing. We thought mindfulness was supposed to relieve suffering, not make it worse. So this hindrance can be quite a challenge to work with. But there's no way out. It's only by experiencing the pain of aversion that our system learns to recognize that it is hurting itself. Each demonstration of this painful truth strengthens our faith in the process.

Working with desire, we learn to let go. Working with aversion we learn to come forth. Often it's like walking a tightrope as we step gingerly from one to the other, relaxing the tense grip of desire, bringing attention towards what we fear or dislike.

Along with delusion, desire and aversion are the basic urges holding the other hindrances together. In fact, working with any of the hindrances is strengthening our ability to work with all of them.

So let's look at a third hindrance: dullness and lethargy, or sloth and torpor, if you prefer the formal translation. This is a familiar one for most of us, snoozing happily through the hour's meditation, occasionally jerking awake to realize we're in the meditation hall and hoping we're not snoring before nodding off again. It's such an alluring hindrance. We feel so happy and relaxed as we slip off into unconsciousness. Sometimes we don't actually fall asleep, but the mind becomes heavy, sluggish and dull.

Remember, all we have to do is register the thoughts, feelings and sensations involved. But how can we register anything if we're falling asleep? That's our work, to stay conscious enough to feel the strong pull towards sleep, noting "sleepy, sleepy," and to find the energy to note "dullness, dullness," when that heavy blanket covers our mind.

An upright posture helps us to keep awake, so straighten the spine at the first sense of sleepiness. Noting itself is energizing. So see if you can put more energy into noting "sleepy, sleepy." Try to stir up interest by asking yourself whether this is a pleasant experience. Are you enjoying being sleepy? Often there's a lovely sense of being safe. Why not try to stay awake enough to enjoy this? Also, there may be nice tingly sensations somewhere. Or do you feel heavy, leaden, aversive to the experience? Try to dredge up the energy to note all these.

If that doesn't work and you keep dropping off, then try opening your eyes and look at anything bright – the sky outside, for example. Big wide staring eyes are best. Joseph Goldstein says he imagines there are toothpicks between his eyelids propping them open. And if that doesn't work, try elevating your hands a few inches so they need some energy to keep them elevated.

You can also use whatever mental stimuli might work to keep you awake. Reciting a poem you know by heart or the Metta Sutta if you know that. And if all that doesn't work, then stand up. Again, remember that you're not trying to get rid of sleepiness or dullness, but only to stay awake enough to feel their manifestation as sensations, feelings, thoughts.

As we do this, our system becomes more able to deal with powerful forces of suppression that keep us dull and passive in life. At one retreat, I was working a lot with dullness and sleepiness, until I suddenly recognised the sense of waiting running through them. I realised I was waiting for the dullness to pass, not wanting to engage with the experience. With that, the dullness disappeared.

But afterwards, when I went to meetings at work where I didn't have much to contribute, I often noticed that subtle undercurrent of waiting for this to be over as a form of passivity which was preventing me from engaging with the meeting. Whenever I recognised this, to my surprise, I would suddenly pipe up and say something. And it was always a useful contribution and well received. So the work on retreat with sleepiness helps me become brighter, more forthright and more engaged with others in daily life.

So don't judge a sleepy meditation as a useless one, an easy mistake to make. If you're doing your best to stay awake despite the powerfully suppressive urges towards sleep then you are uprooting weeds at a great rate.

The fourth hindrance is restlessness which the Buddha links with remorse, guilt and shame. We can become physically restless—fidgeting, scratching our head, looking at our watch, and repeatedly adjusting our posture. Or it can manifest as a mental state, as our mind hops from one inconsequential thought to another. We might not be aware of the underlying emotions of guilt, shame and remorse, but these can manifest as a knot of worry or self-judgment.

It's so easy to believe our worries and judgments. If we do, we can spend the whole meditation period in a frenzy of thought, probably not even noticing that we're shifting around and fidgeting as well. This is letting the weed of restlessness flourish and sow its seeds. So our first task is to recognize, oh, this is restlessness, or this is worrying, this is judging. If we can do that, the gardener of mindfulness starts the great work of weeding, replacing each persuasive worry with the note worrying, worrying. We begin to feel the manifestation of this hindrance.

If you find yourself shifting around on the cushion, feel the movement. If you want to scratch your head, desist. Feel the itchy sensation instead. I often get sudden prickles like needles sticking into my thighs. They really make me jump. Sometimes the restlessness fades away after a while of mindful awareness. Sometimes we can't maintain mindfulness and get caught up repeatedly into worrying and fidgeting. It can help to open your eyes and gaze at something in the room to ground you as the worries swirl around in your mind.

As some of you will know I underwent major surgery in 2013 and lost my voice box. For weeks following this I was seething with restlessness and worry. The first days in ICU were the worst but then I was put in a ward and luckily I was beside a window. There was a tree outside and as soon as I saw it my eyes became glued to the tree. I even sent my visitor Margaret away, though I had relied on her so much while I was in

ICU. The tree was what my psyche wanted, not human company. Although I still had a cauldron of restlessness and worry bubbling away inside, it was as if the worries could die away into the strong, steady branches of the tree.

Remember that all we're trying to do is to let the hindrance manifest in whatever way it wants to, using whatever supports we can find so as to maintain mindfulness rather than believe the worrying or judging thoughts or succumb to the urge to fidget. All the while restlessness is expending its energy. The weeds are springing up at a great rate maybe an alarming rate but each one meets with mindfulness before it gets a chance to sow its seeds.

In my own case I can look back and see that a huge level of restlessness burned its energy away during those first weeks post-op. As it did I began to sense a vast ocean of calm that permeates the world. In my imagination, it's there in the spaces between things, quiet and gentle, willing to let my flurries and worries sink into it, endlessly receptive to all my woes. So I have great trust now in the benefit of sitting still with this hindrance, opening my eyes to look at something if I need to anchor my mind more firmly. I might feel almost as if I'm exploding, but after a while I often sense again that quiet ocean lapping at the borders of restlessness. The explosion of sensations and feelings shoot into its darkness and disappear, leaving no trace.

The final hindrance is doubt. It's really challenging for us to sit with our desires and aversions, nodding off to sleep only to awaken all fidgety and worried. So who could blame us for doubting whether any of this is doing us any good? We come on retreat with high hopes of deep insight but after a day or two we can get dispirited. In our disappointment we fall into the hindrance of doubt.

Sometimes we doubt the teachings and wonder whether we should go back to Christianity or try some other path. Sometimes we doubt the teacher. They don't seem inspiring or to have much wisdom. At other times we doubt ourselves. We think we're not up to this practice. Just like worry, it's so easy to believe the thoughts generated by doubt. If we do, we can spend the whole meditation period mulling over unanswerable questions. Is this the right way? Does she know what she's talking about? Even more harmfully, we can confirm our doubts. I'm useless at this. I can't meditate. I should have known better than to come here.

Doubt can have a very negative impact on our lives. It makes for cynicism. We see the flaw in everything and everybody. We grow suspicious and mistrustful. One reason we indulge doubtful thoughts is that they're easy on our psyche. They don't challenge us. They look to pass doubts and confirm them. I can't do this. I knew I wouldn't be able

to. In the short term, it actually feels comforting to confirm our doubts. We can feel strong because we were right. We're always right. Doubt forms an effective border to prevent change and the pain of growth.

But as with all the hindrances, doubt can be appropriate at times. If someone lets us down repeatedly, it makes sense to doubt their word and take steps to protect ourselves against further hurt. On the spiritual path, we are continually being pushed beyond our comfort zone, needing to verify the teachings again and again. These are healthy doubts. We need to be able to note doubting, doubting and be at ease with that state.

The big step is to become aware that this is nothing more than the hindrance of doubt. Sounds easy, but those thoughts can be very persuasive, deliciously confirming of our sense of knowing exactly what to expect of ourselves and the world. If you get as far as noting that you are being hijacked by a storm of doubt, that is a major achievement. From then on, it's a question of maintaining that perspective rather than falling into the temptation to believe the thoughts generated by doubt. Ground yourself in your body, feeling your posture or the breath to provide a solid foundation for your observation of this hindrance. Keep noting, doubting, doubting so that the thoughts won't get a foothold. But remember that we're not trying to overcome doubt by suppressing it. We're letting it manifest, getting to know the experience, allowing ourselves to feel doubtful.

Sometimes I tend to space out when some doubt arises. Physical sensations become vague and distant, as if I'm in a cloud where things seem intangible. I have a sense that something is wrong but can't put my finger on what it is. The noting word unsure, unsure is helpful here or distant, distant. Then I might become aware of some quiet but insistent thoughts that repeat themselves over and over. No, no, no, for example. I change the noting word to insisting, insisting, to help me feel the intensity associated with the thought. This has a physical component, tension in my face perhaps. Once I can find the physical manifestation, it's much easier to maintain mindfulness. The thoughts might subside while the tension grows until eventually I feel myself capitulate and another thought, maybe, maybe, slowly starts to manifest. Thus, some boundary to my psyche is beginning to dissolve and self-doubt edges towards self-confidence.

Self-doubt can also manifest as anxiety. The doubtful thoughts are formed as questions like, am I doing this right? I find this easier to work with because in my experience anxiety is more tangible and has more physical energy. Again, it's a question of allowing the stresses and strains of anxiety to be felt, various tensions in the body perhaps, and the breath may grow shallow and rapid. I usually find some pleasant tingling sensations as well, and can feel how the anxious thoughts seem to buzz around those.

The driving force of anxiety, in my experience, is quite a pleasant buzz. But there is a lot of unpleasant physical tension needed to support the buzz. And as my attention broadens to take this in, the buzz of anxiety loses its pleasure and starts to subside.

Self-doubt was the last temptation to trouble the Buddha before his enlightenment. To overcome it, he touched the ground with his fingers, calling the earth as witness that he had done enough work to merit enlightenment. One teacher suggested we follow his example when we are assailed by doubts. I found it very helpful at times, and so I'm passing on this suggestion.

In summary then, the hindrances represent our various challenges in meditation. They come in five different flavours. Desire to keep hold of the lovely stuff, aversion to the rotten stuff, falling asleep, getting restless and being assailed by doubt. Now you don't have to worry about being able to categorise each difficulty as one or other of these. In fact, several hindrances can be working together at times to make our lives miserable. For example, anger includes a pleasant buzz of self-righteousness. Impatience includes a pleasant suggestion of self-importance.

Sometimes we get a multiple hindrance attack. Our mind wanders restlessly, picking up one thought then another. We get angry at being so restless. We want to get in control of the restless, angry mind to make it conform to what we think a good meditator's mind should be. But we can't get on top of things and start to doubt our ability to meditate. In despair, we grow sulky, we dull out and fall asleep.

At other times we find we can relax and feel each passing disturbance without reacting. We feel the prickles of restlessness but let them be. To our surprise perhaps restlessness dies away. After a moment's quiet the tension of anxiety surfaces and we let it fill our bodies and minds as much as it wishes till it too subsides. We can let each hindrance grow until we recognize it from its basic manifestation as physical sensations, moods and thoughts. Upon recognition, the hindrance dies away to leave a moment's peace till we feel the next one sprouting up, disturbing us. That's okay. This is our path. The hindrances form its borders.

May we and all beings be free from suffering.

The Need for Saṅgha, Community and Questions about Ordinary Daily Life

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 50 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the evolution and essential nature of saṅgha (spiritual community) from the Buddha's time to modern Western Buddhism. He traces how the original monastic orders provided mutual support through an 'economy of generosity' - monastics offering teachings in exchange for material support from lay practitioners.

The talk addresses how this traditional relationship has shifted in the West, where many accomplished teachers are lay people rather than monastics. Bhante explores why spiritual community remains crucial, describing monasteries as 'spiritual hospitals' for those experiencing existential meaninglessness and seeking liberation from suffering.

Drawing from the Udāna and other texts, he emphasizes the Buddha's teaching that admirable friendship (kalyāṇamittatā) constitutes 'the whole of the spiritual life.' He outlines the qualities of good spiritual friends: those who inspire confidence, generosity, virtue and wisdom, and who provide patient support through difficulties.

The session concludes with practical guidance on establishing daily meditation practice, addressing questions about vegetarianism in Buddhism, the accessibility of vipassanā practice, and women's role in Buddhist teachings. Bhante emphasizes the pragmatic, non-ideological approach characteristic of the Buddha's teaching while acknowledging the challenges of maintaining spiritual practice in secular society.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa — Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully self-awakened one.

I just want to say a few words about *Sangha*. The word *Sangha* is traditionally, or in the East anyway, only refers to the monastic orders, the monks and the nuns. But in the West, it's become a self-referential word, where Buddhists refer to themselves as the Sangha. So it also has been widened out to include everybody. And that shows the effect of the secularization of Buddhism and the role of lay people.

But I just want to take you back to the beginning to show you how it began. So when the Buddha decided that he would teach — there was some doubt in his mind over the subtlety of the teaching, who knows — but anyway he went back to his companions and the first two talks where he introduces his teaching, it seems all of them became fully liberated.

We have to presume that they'd done a lot of work beforehand, like he had. I mean, he'd done all the practices of concentration, practices of self-mortification, which he didn't gain much from, apart from suffering. And then, of course, he went off by himself, and his search turned around upon itself. So instead of seeking happiness, he began to investigate how he was causing suffering. And it was that that led him to his awakening. And that's why we say he self-awakened.

There was lots of practice at that time. Lots of men, mainly men, but also some women, who were leaving society and living as *salmoners*, as the homeless ones. So it wasn't that he started a tradition. It had been long there. Within that society it was all part of a great movement in that society. Politically there was a movement away from tribal governance where you had elders and you had a chief elder — so that was like the Buddha's father of the Sakya tribe — and then it was moving towards monarchy. So actually the Sakyans, this little group of people just on the edge of Nepal, under the Himalayas, were under the local king of Kosala. That would have been Pasenadi at that time. So they were vassals. In other words, the system was becoming what we would recognize as medieval.

So when he began to teach, certain people, men at first, but then women, wanted to join him. And we call it the first ordination. He just said, *ehi passico*, which means come and try.

There's a story about him rejecting women for the order, which I'm sure you've come across, where these court ladies, his stepmother — can't remember who else — they came to join the order and to prove that they were up to the raw life of the monastic order. You know, where you just live out in the forest, really, without any of the commodities of life. And when he came to them, he didn't think they'd make it. So he denies entry. And it's only when Ananda says to him, do you think women can become liberated? And he says, yes. And so he accepts them.

But there's definitely little tales in the scriptures that he was accepting women long before that. So this is really, I suppose, the growth of, well, the effect of patriarchy on society, even on the order.

So he was accepting people, and then once he had a group of men and women who were fully liberated, the ordination procedure was to take refuge in him as the teacher, as the living embodiment of the Dharma, the teaching he was giving, and then the Sangha, which were these people who had intuited *Nibbāna* at some level, and some of them were fully liberated. And that's become the lay ordination now. So when somebody wants to join the Buddhist religion, the Buddhist faith or whatever, you would go through a little ceremony.

But then of course after about 20 years there were men and women who joined who weren't quite at the usual standard and were doing terrible and naughty things. So they had to establish rules. And it shows that he was very much a pragmatist. He didn't have some ideal as to where he wanted the order to be. The rules came as the monks and nuns did something which was considered to be not right, not correct.

Some of them were like thieving, any sexual intercourse. All that was — I mean, monks made that mistake. And the first monk was, he didn't have the penalty of being kicked out of the order. And then it goes all the way down to having things you shouldn't have. And so there are ceremonies where you give it up, where you have to hand it back, things like that. So you've got 227 of these rules and many more, which were created as the order went along.

So when you look at them, they're sectioned out in order of seriousness. But they're all higgledy-piggledy, and some of them don't pertain anymore, like not to sit on woolen rugs. So presumably wool in those days was something quite precious.

So the ordination then became quite complicated. People were joining because they were in debt to the government. So you couldn't join if you were in debt. There was a physician called Jivaka, who was very famous at the time, who offered his medical services free to order members. So sick men and women joined the order in order to get this free. That sounds pretty straightforward, doesn't it? So you can't join the order if you're sick.

Now that's not an absolute rule. If you join a particular group of monks or nuns, they can decide to accept you. But if they think your illness is not going to undermine them financially or physically, you have to look after people. But once you're in, then really you have to be looked after. There's no way. And of course they didn't do that at that time sometimes.

And when the Buddha came across somebody who was really sick and because it was diarrhoea and vomiting and all that, nobody wanted to treat him. So he did it. He did it with an anger. And then he turns to the monks and says, well, you know, you haven't got a mother and father who's going to look after you if you don't look after people. He berated them that way.

So you have the order. Now, the order in the East still fills a real role. Virtually all meditation teachers are monks and nuns. You do get lay people, but it's almost considered an encroachment on the monk's role. The people who know about the Dharma, who study the Dharma, and who teach the Dharma, are, for the most part, monks and nuns. And the ones who live by way of that relationship of alms taking are the monks and nuns.

Now, the Buddha wanted that relationship, so I'm coming back to this whole idea about relationship, about interdependence, about love. He didn't want the monks and nuns to be self-supportive. He wanted them to continue to be alms takers, to be dependent on lay people for their well-being, for everything they have, to be dependent on lay people. And what was the other side of the gift was that lay people would go to the monks for spiritual advice, for spiritual teachings. So there was that economy of generosity. The one gave to the other as and when was needed.

And of course, there's this whole idea of *kamma* that by giving, by generosity, you accumulate goodness power. Now, I know that many people in the East do conceptualize it into some sort of bank account so that when you die, you go to a beautiful heaven because you gave all this food to monks. But the basic psychology is correct because remember, whenever you're generous, you're giving something up that you could have used for yourself. Giving up some of your wealth, giving up some of your time. And to do that is renunciation.

So the process of liberation is the process of renunciation. Don't confuse that with self-mortification. Renunciation means letting go of attachments. So every time you give something, you're making a step towards your own liberation. And in the commentaries, it makes it clear that the process of generosity leads to liberation by way of renouncing what you would have used for your own personal satisfactions and joy, and giving it to somebody else.

So, as you do that, your goodness power, that's the proper translation of *puñña*, your goodness power grows. And that goodness power manifests in your growing desire to liberate yourself from suffering.

Now, we have a situation in the West, where, actually, some of the best teachers are lay people. And that most of the monks and nuns either can't teach or don't want to. Which is true also in the East. It's not as though just because you become a monastic you're going to be a great teacher. Far from it. And you might not want to. There's other roles you can play within the order. And you might not want to anyway. You don't have to play a role.

When it comes to academics, the understanding of the scriptures and whatnot, there's massive, brilliant work being done by academics. Some of the best books on Buddhism now, written by people who are PhDs, etc., etc. They're not monks at all. They don't belong to a monastic order.

So, two of these major roles that are played by monastics in the East, of being the teachers of the actual practice and the teachers of the teaching, of the actual teaching of the Buddha, has been, as you were, taken away by lay people. So now there comes a real problem. Why do you want to support a monk? Since the economy of generosity has now disappeared. I'm still dependent on you, but you're no longer dependent on me. So there's something undermining that interdependency. There was a fair swap there. You fed me and I told you how to practice *vipassanā*. Now, let's be careful because this comes a bit like a business deal.

So what would you think might be other reasons why you might support a monastic?

Now, if you take a Christian position, the monastic orders, beginning with Benedictine, had to look after themselves. So they separated out of society. This meant that there was a cleavage. The monks were way over there up in the hills having a great time and we were down here. But we didn't have to support them, and they didn't have to teach us. They're fine. But the belief was, of course, that they're doing a lot of prayer, and especially these enclosed orders, they're praying for the world, and there's a belief that that is doing good.

Then you get this amazing saint, Saint Francis. When I saw his patchwork robe made out of sackcloth, that was quite a little moment for me. So here was a man and the people who followed him, out of St. Claire, who went right back to that absolute poverty and depended upon lay people for their well-being. Although the early friars could work. They could do work and get money for it, labor. And the connection there between friars and the lay people was immediate.

So, coming back to the Buddhist order in the West, there is this bit of a problem, you see. And especially if Western people haven't really taken on the idea of building up a little piggy bank so you get to a better place when you die. Most people are very iffy

about that. First of all, the whole idea of a bank account and the whole idea that you're going to go anywhere after death is very iffy. I mean, you know. Supposedly you don't. And I've given all this stuff away. I mean, that's fair.

So there's a whole area here of having to relocate, of having to find some reason as to why a lay person might support a monastic. Now when the order went to China, you see, beggars looked down upon you. You could not beg. So a famous abbot, whose name I forget of course, said, no work, no food. So in China, the monks began to grow their own food.

And there's a lovely little film called *White Clouds*, something *White Clouds*, where this American has gone to China and he's gotten to know these Buddhist monks way up in the hills, who knows where they are. And there they are, they're planting their own little crops and living secluded lives up in the hills. And every so often they come down into the village to collect stuff. I don't know whether they receive it by generosity or not.

So you can see that the order had to change there in terms of looking after itself, really. But in so doing, lost its connection with lay people. There wasn't that exchange anymore of generosity.

So, why would you want to support me if I didn't teach? If you knew that I was just in this little hut in the middle of Wales, messing about, doing a bit of meditation, reading, and I turn up at your doorstep with a bowl. What would you say? What do you want? What's this about?

And that often happened. It happened to the Buddha. Some Brahmin really berated him and said, you know, you're useless. You don't do anything. You come here and you're begging for food. Who the hell are you? And the Buddha said, well, thank you for the present. I offer it back to you. So he went on his way. So it wasn't as though everywhere Buddhist monks they were, they were thought to be worthy of donation.

So I'd like to offer you one reason why you should support me in my little hut up in the Brecon Beacons in the middle of winter. If you look upon a monastery as a spiritual hospital — so your body can be diseased and we're very happy to help people overcome physical diseases, we have no problem with that. There are mental illnesses. And we're very happy to help people who we see are mentally disturbed and need help.

So now, there are spiritual diseases. And by which I mean those people who are longing for liberation from suffering. Who actually feel their suffering strong enough whereby life as we generally know it has become meaningless. Right?

So one of the signs of somebody who's moving towards a spiritual life is to realize the meaninglessness of life. What's the point of living? I mean, here we are, we've been born. We haven't a clue where we're going. We fill our lives with doing. We give ourselves a sense of purpose by doing something for others because others say how wonderful we are. And looking back in the old comedian saying, life's hard and then you die. See?

So, meaninglessness. Like life, it's an existential crisis that we may come across where we find that there's no reason for living. There's no reason for our lives. Because in the end, you disappear, you die. That's the end of it. So that sense of meaninglessness moves towards despair. It moves towards the existentialist philosophers like Albert Camus who felt that, well, you know, we've got life. Evening can be merry because tomorrow you die. That's the end of that.

So people in the West who normally turn up with a spiritual disease have come across this emptiness. Emptiness meaning meaninglessness of their lives. And somehow there's something in them which says, well, I don't believe it. I don't believe that life is purposeless, that there is something, that there is some purpose in it. And the purpose cannot be out there. The purpose cannot be out there because at some point I'm going to have to turn into myself and die. So the purpose must be within me somewhere. And that's your spiritual search.

So that's the Buddha, you see. The Buddha is living in an age where the obsession was rebirth — constant rebirth, how to get out of this constant rebirth. You know, if you did something wrong you might be reborn as a dog and then the next life you're born as a human being and the next life you're born into a happy realm then you fall from that and you come back as a human being. So one of the terrors of the age was this idea that you'd be constantly reborn. How could you get out of that in any permanent way?

And there were a few people believed in, you know, were materialists. They believed that when you die, that's the end of it. There was also that belief going on. But there was also this search for something which was beyond this constant *samsāra*, this constant onward going.

And so when he left on his search, he would have been in that state of meaninglessness. He would have also been in a state of existential crisis. And it manifests in the tale, the legend of him seeing somebody sick, somebody old, somebody dying, somebody dead, a corpse, and somebody sitting under a tree, a *salmoner*, a mendicant sitting under a tree. And all the time it's put in this mythological way that he asks, you know, what is this? He's never seen this sort of thing before.

Does it happen to me? Yes. Sickness, aging and death. And then the possibility of some sort of answer. So that's what really a monastery is about. Or a collection of people who gather together for spiritual purpose is to find what reason there is for living, for being alive. And worse, what's the reason for dying? Is there a purpose in our death?

So I hope you continue to put some money in the box so that eventually I can escape to the Brecon Beacons in my little hut, knowing full well that there's always going to be a plate of spaghetti for me when I get down the hill.

So now, coming back on that, we have this whole idea of *Sangha*, community. This is, of course, really weighted in all religious traditions, not only religious traditions, humanistic traditions, any tradition. And there's a lovely little saying here when the Buddha says, in the discourse, which is the last moments of his life before he dies, and he says to Ānanda that he feels happy because he's established the four congregations. The monks, the nuns, the lay women and the lay men. And he felt that they were now rooted well enough that they would continue with the teachings after he died.

And when Ānanda says to him at this point, he says, well, the whole of the spiritual life, as far as he's concerned, this is Ānanda talking to the Buddha. He says he feels that half the spiritual life is good companionship, admirable friendship, admirable camaraderie. And the Buddha says, "Oh no, Ānanda. It's the whole of the spiritual life. The whole of the spiritual life is this interdependency." It's the whole idea that you're not on your own and that you do need other people. It's not just the other teacher. You need other people to support you in your practice.

That's why we come together here now. We formed a sangha and we're helping each other. There's no need to speak. There's no need to talk. It's something that's happening within us and yet it's so easy for us. It's much easier, shall I say, for us when we know that everybody else in the room is also suffering. It's much easier to sit here with all this pain and horror, knowing that somebody else right next door to me, sitting right here, is probably going through worse. Mind you, we normally think that they're having a great time. You come in here and everybody's sitting like this, and you think, "Oh my goodness."

So that's the accent the Buddha puts on friendship when it comes to the spiritual life. And if you consider now, if you were a Muslim living in somewhere like Saudi Arabia, and you just wanted to follow those five times a day when you wanted to pray. And right there, in the middle of your coffee break, you got your mat out and off you went. And everybody thought, "Oh, that's a good idea." And they all joined you. Can you ima-

gine doing that in London? Or in Dublin. Imagine getting your mat out in the middle of a work pit, in the middle of a factory, or a workplace, and just saying, "Well, I'm just going to do my prayers now."

So you can see that to live in a society which has lost that general grounding for the spiritual life, it makes it just that much more difficult for us. Just when we want to maintain mindfulness, when we want not to go out and get drunk, et cetera, et cetera, and party and all that, you're considered unsociable. Part of our behavior becomes unsociable because we're not actually joining in the regular behavior of people who don't really have any spiritual vein in their lives. They don't quite know where they're going with that. All their practices is within their work. And it might be good work, too. It's not as though work itself is undermined because your good work is undermined because you don't believe in a spiritual life, far from it. But you can see that because you don't have that immediate companionship, your practice is constantly undermined by the surroundings you're in. So it means you have to work a bit harder.

Now, going back to friendship, just to quote another quote that the Buddha says: "With regard to external factors, I don't envisage any other single factor like admirable friendship as doing so much for someone in training who has not attained the heart's goal but remains intent on the unsurpassable safety from bondage. Someone who is a friend with admirable people abandons what is unskillful and develops what is skillful." I mean, that's the point of a friend. They will support you when you're being skillful and not support you when you're being unskillful. And therefore, you get that support.

When you read the scriptures, by the way, I mean, I've translated it as somebody. It's always monk. But the commentaries tell us that this stands for anybody who's listening to the Dharma. It's like the phrase, "all hands on deck." What is it, a synecdoche? Come on, where's your school?

And when it comes to the lay people, there are a few discourses where the Buddha's explaining how we ought to live. And here he is talking to lay people. And what is meant by admirable friendship? This is the case where the lay person, in whatever town or village he may dwell, spends time with householders and householders' sons, young or old, who are advanced in virtue. He talks with them, engages them in discussions. He emulates consummate conviction in those who are consummate in conviction, consummate virtue in those who are consummate in virtue, consummate generosity in those who are consummate in generosity, and he emulates those who are consummate in discernment. He emulates discernment in those who are consummate in

discernment. This is called admirable friendship. In other words, seeking people out who have these virtues. Generosity, faith, virtue and discernment. Those who have confidence.

To be with people who have confidence fills you with confidence. To be with people who are generous makes you want to be generous. To be with people who are virtuous, you naturally want to be virtuous like them. And people who are wise, you tend to listen to them. So there's his description of good friendship.

But then he goes on. In another passage he says what good friendship is. It inspires love. Good friendship inspires love. It inspires respect. Good friendship inspires respect. It inspires emulation. Good friendship inspires emulation. A good friend listens. A good friend listens. And a good friend gives good advice. A good friend gives good advice. A good friend is able to enter into deep issues with the other. Enter into deep issues. And a good friend helps you not waste your resources—waste your money, waste your time. So here's a description of a good friend.

But he goes on even further. He says, "A friend gives what is hard to give." That's the test, isn't it? A friend gives what is hard to give. So you know your friends immediately. "He does what is hard to do." A friend does what is hard to do. "A friend has patience with harsh speech and has patience with wrongdoing." So if you love somebody, you have to presume they're going to hurt you. If you love somebody and you think they're never going to hurt you, then you're going to be very upset when they do.

So if you presume that your friend, your family member, at some point will do something which is painful for you at whatever level, then you can easily forgive them and re-establish friendship. But if you think they shouldn't do that, if you think that a friend or a family member should not behave like that towards me, then that's it. You've cut off friendship. That's it. That's the end of it. Take them to court.

A good friendship is someone whom you can confide in and someone who keeps your confidences. Someone you can confide in and somebody who keeps your confidences. That's a very deep trust, depending on what it is you're sharing. And often it's very helpful to talk to somebody, to talk out a problem. It can be relieving to the heart to share a burden with somebody. But you wouldn't do it if you thought they'd be off and tell the very person whom you're complaining about.

"And free of contempt." Free of contempt. Somebody who does not despise you. Somebody who may envy you but does not act upon it. Somebody who may feel an occasional jealousy but does not act upon it. So these are good pointers, aren't they? Don't you think so? I rather like them. It points out the difficulty of friendship.

So, sometimes we get the impression that Buddhism is really all about *vipassanā* and meditation and basically that's what it is. And then we forget that there is a whole eightfold path, that the *vipassanā* belongs to the last three, right effort, right concentration, right mindfulness. But that feeds into the first one, which is right understanding. But then once you've got right understanding, it has to become systemic. It has to manifest in our attitudes. And as soon as it begins to manifest in our attitudes, it must express itself. Right speech, right action, right livelihood. And the whole thing flows around upon itself. The one feeds upon the other. So it's a spiral. It keeps turning and turning. And in this way, within a small length of time, if we practice with severe dedication, we will no doubt be liberated.

So, I want to, before I end, I just want to have a look at these questions that I didn't answer yesterday, because they're more to do with the practice. I just want to leave a bit of time too for daily practice.

So, is it difficult for me to reconcile that a practicing Buddhist can be a non-vegetarian? I don't know of any Buddhist country where Buddhists don't eat meat, which doesn't tell you very much. It's a special practice of monks and nuns in Burma that they go through the three month season, the *vassa* season, the rainy season, without eating meat.

The essential problem is the suffering of animals, the killing of animals. And it depends upon your connection with that. Obviously when you're eating the meat you're not killing the animal. If anything you're suffering from greed. But you're definitely not suffering from aversion or hatred or anything like that. But it's making that connection really that when you buy something you're going back to support the abattoir, you're going back to support the killer of the animal. And so it's up to your own sensibility really as to where you feel you can place yourself in that order.

But in Buddhist understanding, all sentient beings suffer one way or the other. And so it's up to the individual to decide. Now, there are some people who actually have to eat meat. I know somebody who has, I think, something like half a kidney or something. And the only way they're going to survive is by... And the body won't accept pulses and stuff like that. It's by eating chicken. So, there is this view that if it's for health reasons, then you should feel okay about that.

And there, of course, are situations in the world. If you live in the Arctic, you're hardly going to grow wheat, are you? If you live in desert, you're going to eat a goat. What are you going to do? If you live in Wales, it's bad enough. Somebody wants you to keep sheep. What can you grow in Wales? If you're up on the Brecon Beacons, it's pretty deserted up there.

So, remember that the Buddha is very pragmatic. There's no ism. He wouldn't have agreed with vegetarianism. Because idealism doesn't fit in a world which is obviously relative. All our morality is relative, it's circumstantial. You can make a declaration of not to kill anybody, but I'm sure you can think of occasions when you'd have felt quite justified in killing somebody. Not to take what is not freely given. You remember the old thing that you get at school about, if you're dead hungry, can you steal a loaf? So once you realize that morality is circumstantial, it's all to do with the situation you're in.

You know that one about the... If I can remember it right now. You might have heard this. This is one of these silly thought experiments. You're on a bridge with a very, very big fat man. And there's a train coming along. And there are people working on the tracks. And you can see that this train is going to hit these people. One way, about five or six people. But if you push the man off, it'll derail the train and save five people. Now, will you push him off? It's a dilemma, I hope. None of us have to face it. It's examples like that that show you that morality can be quite circumstantial.

So yes, it's up to a person to decide that. I have a meditator who comes quite often and she simply cannot eat pulses and beans. She just won't take it. So she normally brings sardines or something with her if she's on a week-long retreat. So there's also health reasons.

And of course, there is the understanding that nature feeds off itself. There's a YouTube. If you type in Yellowstone and you come up with Monbiot, who's this writer. Do you know who I'm talking about, Monbiot? He's not that well known. And he's very much into rewilding the old places. And the video shows you how the introduction of about twenty or thirty wolves completely changed the ecology of Yellowstone Park. I mean, right, now what's he introducing? He's introducing an animal that eats another animal. So you have to understand that nature feeds off itself. So really, it just comes back to us and our particular situation in this society where vegetarianism is very easy to get hold of. You can be a vegan without any problem if you want to.

Does it ever get easier with the meditation? No, that's an easy question. If you keep practicing over years, guess what? For me it seemed easier to meditate when I started. Now it seems harder after a few retreats. Dead on, because the main reason is that you're digging deeper. When you come to meditation you come with beginner's mind and you sit there and you're full of vigor and interest and then like anything else it gets boring. Who the hell wants to watch their breath? What's the daft thing to do anyway? And then there's... and then the stuff starts coming up. So that purification, you just can't get anywhere without going through it. Full stop. That's it. It's just part and parcel of the course.

But generally speaking, of course, you look back and you think, well, life's changed, my attitude has changed, life's just a little bit easier. But that doesn't mean to say it's going to be always like that, because you've got ups and downs. Spiritual life's like that. Sometimes you think you're getting nowhere. And then when that crisis passes, you find you've moved to a slightly different level. So don't give up hope. Not yet, anyway.

How to establish a daily meditation practice in your life. So, it really is, I think, important to meditate a little in the morning. And if you can, to do one in the evening, but especially when you come back from a day out or a day's work, before you eat. After you eat you fall asleep. The beginning of the day is when you set your weather then, where you actually remind yourself you want to maintain this level of awareness, affectionate awareness, to be awake to what's happening. And when you come back from a day, just to let whatever you've accumulated in that day just arise—little aversions, little irritations, little anxieties—just let them come up and clear themselves out. And then you have a much more

restful evening. On top of that, to stop everything a little bit before you go to sleep. There's no point in launching yourself into bed after two hours on Facebook or having watched the latest crime drama and then thinking you're going to have deep sleep. Well, you may, of course, but generally speaking it's best to calm down. Play some music, read poetry, do something which brings the whole system down so when you fall asleep, you're taking that beauty, that beautiful mental state with you. That's how you feel more refreshed, I think.

There's no easy way to establish a daily practice. You've got to establish a real religious commitment. So you have to say to yourself, "Right, I can definitely do twenty minutes every morning. There's no reason why I can't do twenty minutes." If you can't think of that, then five minutes. And then you actually make that absolute determination that for the next six months that's what you're going to do. That's how you establish the practice.

If you do it, then you have to promise yourself something like a celebratory meal. And if you don't, you have to promise yourself, I don't know, jump off a bridge or something. Something terribly wild and terrible that would stop you, would keep you at your promise. But really that's the thing—to do it religiously for the length of time. Then it becomes an internal habit. You might miss a day, you might miss two days, but you don't want to miss more than that.

I remember Nureyev, the great ballet dancer of the sixties and seventies, said that if you didn't practice one day, it was fine. Two days, he felt it. Three days, everybody else did. So if you take that as your standard for practice, then really just keep at it. If you do

miss it and you have to start again, just don't go into this self-hate syndrome—"I'm useless" and all that rubbish. Just start it again. It's important, because that's where you accumulate. This is your goodness. You accumulate the practice. It accumulates slowly.

"With so many varied Buddhist practices, is it best to self-teach using the original text, such as a combination of available books, audio, etc.?" Yeah, obviously listening intently to your audio—that's me, thank you.

In the first place, well, absolutely. No, I think it's important to get hold of a teacher. When I think of my introduction—I wouldn't... What happened to me was I read a book on Zen Buddhism. I was impressed by it, so what I did was, I thought, "I'm going to practice this." So I was on the way to the shops, which would have taken about five or seven minutes. I'm walking up the road, observing myself walking up the road. By the time I got to the top, I thought, "Oh, this is going to drive me crazy." So I abandoned Zen Buddhism.

Later on, through crisis and all sorts of stuff, I ended up with a Zen teacher in Birmingham. She came in and sat me on the bench facing a wall, told me to keep my eyes slightly open—dead man's eyes—gave me a punch in the back so I sat up properly. And then her instruction was, "Watch whatever comes up." That was it: watch whatever comes up. And that was forty minutes of sheer horror and pain and all that. But for some reason, at the end of that, I just knew this was going to get me out of the state I'd gotten myself into.

So without that, I think you've got to go somewhere. I think you need that personal contact. Even if it's only once in a while—it doesn't have to be something constant—but you need to have that personal contact from somebody whom you feel has been there. It's like if you climb a mountain, who are you going to get advice from—a geologist or a mountaineer?

"Buddhism involves considerable self-awareness and concentrated practice that many, for various reasons, are not in a position to do. Their mindset, mental health issues, etc. So, is it only for the select few?"

Well, it's true to say that *vipassanā* isn't good for somebody who's mentally ill. In the East, if you turn up at a monastery with an obvious sign of mental illness—depression or whatever—they just give you *mettā* practice. They don't give you *vipassanā*. But anybody who's in an ordinary state of madness can practice *vipassanā*. What's the problem? I mean, we're all, at one level or another, crazy.

That's why this mindfulness has been so successful, really. It's used as a psychotherapeutic intervention and therefore takes away its spiritual purpose. But for the occasional person, just those introductions, just that simple introduction, understanding how suffering is caused, may very well open the spiritual gates for them. Just because it's being taught as a psychotherapeutic intervention doesn't mean it might not have a spiritual effect on the person. It's not taught like that—generally speaking, it's not taught with any moral instructions with it. But of course there is a presumed morality in it of compassion.

Some Buddhist teachers are a bit negative about it, but I don't see a problem really. It's a bit like yoga—body beautiful. What's wrong with that? You miss out on all the rest of it, but at least you've got a beautiful body. That'll do.

"Is Buddhism like the major religions of the world who see women as inferior? Please say no."

Well, according to the teachings of the Buddha, women seem to be able to become fully liberated like men. What society does with that is something else. I think you can say just looking across the Asian world—Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism—where you find Buddhism, I think you find much more equality. Women in Buddhist countries are equally doctors, etc. The first prime minister of Sri Lanka was a woman. What was her name? Bandaranaike. But I mean, this is ancient stuff. Patriarchy is embedded in... Come the revolution.

I mean, it comes through the scriptures, which is unfortunate. But I don't see the Buddha... If you read, for instance, the verses left by the elders, both the men and the women, the monks and the nuns, and also lay people, you can see that some of the women were just as fully liberated as the men, and just as much praised and seen as teachers as the monks. The monks sought them out.

So yes, we're stuck with history, I'm afraid. These days, if you look across the *vipassanā* teacher scene, women are probably in the majority. Is that a good sign? Are we returning to matriarchy? Heavens above. I shall leave you with that thought.

I can only hope that my words have been of some assistance. That by your severe devotion to the practice you may be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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.

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.

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: prejudice. 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.

The Spiral Path

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 18 min

In this teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the profound Upanisā Sutta and its teaching on Transcendent Dependent Arising—a spiral path that transforms dukkha into liberation. Unlike the familiar twelve links showing how we create suffering, this teaching reveals twelve steps leading from dukkha to awakening.

Using climate change anxiety as a practical example, Bhante explores seven 'entry points' to escape dukkha: faith (saddhā), investigation, virtue (sīla), restraint, dedication, Right Awareness (sammā sati), and inspiration. Each provides a doorway from suffering into the upward spiral of gladness, rapture (pīti), tranquillity (passaddhi), happiness (sukha), and samādhi.

Drawing on teachings from John Peacock and Akiñcano Weber, this talk offers a refreshing contrast to passive Vipassanā observation. Here we're encouraged to actively cultivate wholesome states that lift us from misery. The key insight: even slight disappointment when novelty fades can reveal hidden tranquillity in the body, opening the heart to genuine happiness.

This accessible teaching shows how the spiral path operates in daily life—from washing dishes mindfully to finding inspiration in a sunset. Perfect for practitioners seeking practical ways to transform life's inevitable difficulties into opportunities for spiritual growth.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa

Homage to the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

During the summer I got interested in a teaching commonly known as Transcendent Dependent Arising, the *Upanisā Sutta*. I was drawn to this via the six maxims, ethical practices designed to help us face climate change in a way that preserves our integrity. One of these maxims is to see our good fortune in being alive right now at a time of such crisis for mankind. Instead of seeing floods, droughts, wildfires, soil erosion as horrors, we are to welcome each one as an opportunity to develop courage, resilience, and other gifts that come of meeting suffering with open arms.

The *Upanisā* Sutta provides Dhamma support for this, as it traces out the list of causes and conditions leading to enlightenment. The first twelve steps might be familiar, showing how we create *dukkha*, meaning suffering in all its variations from minor irritation to heartbreak, excruciating pain or abject fear, by believing we can make ourselves happy in a world which is unstable, uncontrollable, inherently unsatisfying.

What is special about this teaching is that it doesn't stop at *dukkha*, but traces an equal number of steps leading from *dukkha* to liberation. It gives us a list of skills and qualities we can and should develop to bring about our own liberation.

I've recently attended a tricycle online course entitled "The Spiral to Freedom," in which the teachers, John Peacock and Akincano Weber, look at this particular teaching, as well as a number of related teachings which explore the same area. They refer to these as the spiral teachings, and call the path leading from *dukkha* to liberation a spiral path. They also stress that all the links in the spiral path can be seen in ordinary daily life.

It all starts with *dukkha*, which I think is really good news. If you know you're unhappy, irritated, out of sorts, then you're already at the launching pad for the spiral path. Taking *dukkha* as a given, the teaching suggests a number of responses, which John and Akincano refer to as entry points to the spiral.

Let's take the *dukkha* of climate change as an example. Suppose we are in a stew of misery at news of another wildfire. How can we meet this with open arms?

For some, faith is the easiest way to counter the pull into negative thinking. This could be the bright faith of the beginner, or the mature trust that grows with long practice. Every time another dark thought takes us back into the pit, we place our trust in the Dhamma to draw ourselves out. It could help to look at a Buddha rupa or whatever symbolises the Dhamma for you. Buddha touched the earth when he needed all his faith, and this is worth trying out sometime. Place your hands on the ground, feel its stability, its solidity, trust the vastness of the earth as a grounding in truth.

For some of us, faith might not come so easily. News of an environmental catastrophe and knowing that this has been wrought by human greed stimulates doubt rather than faith. And we are flooded by questions like, what is life all about? Where the only answer is, I don't know. If we're willing to explore the experience of "I don't know," this is wise investigation, a second entry point to the spiral. Although we don't

have the answers, we have access to teachings that can point us in the right direction. Thus, the feeling of bewilderment is the catalyst that motivates us to learn about suffering and how it can be transcended.

At other times, investigation may seem irrelevant. We want to do something, anything to relieve the suffering. In this case, virtue becomes the link from *dukkha* to the spiral. We respond to the news of the wildfire with ethical action. We might donate to a charity supporting those affected, sign a petition or write to our local council. We find some positive action aiming to minimise the harm and pain. As well as being beneficial for the world, this counters the pull into depression owing to the perilous state of the world, restores our confidence in the power of goodness.

But sometimes we just can't find the energy, the goodwill needed to sign yet another petition or make that donation. Everything in us wants to turn away from the world, forget all its horrors. This impulse contains the wisdom of restraint, which is another entry point to the spiral. We let ourselves turn away from activity, withdraw to some quiet place, let go of all the thoughts about climate change or other news. Give ourselves the silence and rest we need to let our hearts heal. This could mean an hour's meditation, it could mean a long retreat, or perhaps all we can do is a few mindful breaths. Whatever works is fine. We're honouring a wholesome response to *dukkha*.

The opposite can happen too. The news of the wildfire leads to restlessness. We can't keep still and we certainly don't want to turn inwards. Instead, we need something to occupy us. In this case, we can use the entry point of dedication. We could wash the dishes as if this were a sacred ceremony, the most important task in the world, taking care of all the little details. Although we can't fix the wildfire, we can take care of what is at hand. And this is a very worthy response to *dukkha*.

At other times, the thought of taking care of anyone or anything seems an impossible burden. Perhaps thoughts of who is to blame and how it should be fixed crash into one another, making our heads spin. In this case, mindfulness provides a good entry point to the spiral. We don't have to follow each sensation or breath. We can use phrases like "walking to the shops," "making the dinner," "driving to work" to keep us present, alert, mindful. Although news of the wildfire might still be tempting us to fret and worry, we are choosing present reality as an antidote to those dead ends. And this is a valid way to lift ourselves out of *dukkha* and into the spiral path.

Sometimes we can't even muster the energy to be mindful. Everything seems hopeless. In this case, we need to look outside ourselves. Let inspiration become our stepping stone from *dukkha* to the spiral. Who or what will draw attention away from misery? Persuade us that life is worth living. For some it's a weekend camping, others

might sign up for a study course. It could be as simple as meeting a friend, listening to a Dhamma talk, leafing through photos of happier times. I keep some well-worn biographies at hand when I need a lift or go out for a long walk. Sometimes gazing at the sunset is enough to inspire me, remind me of life's preciousness.

Thus, we have seven options for digging ourselves out of *dukkha* and into the spiral: faith, investigation, virtue, restraint, dedication, mindfulness, inspiration. Each of us will have our own strengths, our preferred entry points, and it will also vary from one situation to another and depending on what mood we're in. Working with these entry points is a powerful practice. As we try these in practical situations, we get to know our strengths, learn to play to them.

This provides a contrast with the standard Vipassana approach, where we simply observe, don't interfere, don't try to make things better. To launch ourselves out of *dukkha* and into the spiral path, we're allowed to be biased, seek out and amplify feelings and mind states that lift us up.

Mindfulness is not only an entry point in itself, but it's also working in the background for all entry points. Noticing what works, what doesn't, when we've gone too far, when we need to step back, take it easy. Try another approach when we're ready.

Once we've found an entry point, the next link in the spiral is gladness. A moment ago we were stuck in the pits of *dukkha*, now we've found a way forward. The heart quite naturally gladdens when this happens.

Surprisingly, the feeling of gladness is easily overlooked. We can be so intent on doing our virtuous action, so immersed in the beauty of the sunset, that we don't notice the change of heart. Unless we pay attention to this, we could inadvertently start another round of *dukkha*, stressing ourselves out in the effort to do our good deeds, so inspired by the sunset that the rest of life pales by comparison. We need to be on the lookout for gladness to deepen our faith that there is really a path leading from suffering to liberation. And it is possible for me to follow this.

My advice also would be not to expect too much. A tiny glimpse of gladness is all the evidence we need that there is something here worth cultivating.

Gladness sets up the necessary conditions for rapture, the next link in the spiral. The word suggests an over-the-top joy, but if we are on the lookout for it, we find rapture to be quite a simple down-to-earth experience. The background mood of gladness helps us engage, be interested in whatever we experience. This engaged interest in present experience is what we mean by rapture. This can be experienced quite simply as interest or curiosity. Look out for this at the start of any activity. As you step into the shower,

take the first bite of dinner, say hello to a friend, listen to a podcast. Sometimes it can feel a bit giddy or overexcited, expecting too much. Sometimes very mild, like a gentle uplift or refreshment.

Rapture sets up the condition for the next link, tranquillity. This was one I struggled with, till Akincano described tranquillity as that cooling phase in every activity, when the initial fizz goes out of it. This put a completely different light on tranquillity for me, and true enough, once I investigated that slight deflation, when some new activity lost its sparkle, I detected an inner relaxation underlying the more obvious surface layer of disappointment. I needed to bring attention to the body for this. The mood of deflation still predominated in the mind. But within the tissues of the body, particularly the limbs, I sensed peace and ease. I realised that I had become more grounded, more settled within myself.

So keep an eye out for any slight deflation when a new activity starts to feel humdrum. Ask whether deep down peace has descended. I never knew disappointment could hold such treasure. But don't go straight for tranquillity. Skip over the rapture stage, thinking it's silly to be getting excited by things. For tranquillity to have any depth, we need to put our heart into the activity, while it still strikes us as novel and interesting. The energy of enthusiasm lifts us up and that is the same energy which transforms to tranquillity when the novelty wears off.

Tranquillity sets up the conditions needed for the next link, happiness. Once I had detected and assured myself that tranquillity was really present, the mood of disappointment evaporated and instead the heart softened. I realised I was content, happy. While tranquillity for me could be described as a bodily form of happiness, the recognition of tranquillity allowed the happiness to spread from body to mind. Unless I had looked for tranquillity within that deflationary phase when the fizz went out of an activity, the mood of disappointment would have remained. Nothing had changed in my circumstances to make me happy, only that I'd noticed and paid attention to the physical relaxation that happened as an activity turned from novel and exciting to humdrum.

I hope any of you who often feel depressed will take this point to heart. Trust that it is possible to be happy, even if you can't change the circumstances of your life. But beware the temptation to skip over the early steps and go straight for tranquillity or happiness. Each step needs the support of the previous ones. We need to investigate each one, be prepared to come back to *dukkha* again and again, so as to get more familiar with the entry points, detect the change of heart to gladness and so on.

A happy mind quite naturally rests attention on whatever it chooses to attend to, and thus happiness sets up the conditions needed for *samādhi*. *Samādhi* is the ability of the mind to rest, be still, gather its energies around a particular focus. If we're happily washing the dishes, it won't take any effort to feel the rubbing movements, see the dishes, hear the gurgling of water. It's only when we're unhappy that we get distracted, planning or worrying so intently that we never notice our hands in contact with dishes. The unhappy mind has its energies going in multiple directions as one thought careers after another. The happy mind is unified. While washing dishes, we know we are washing dishes. The only thoughts that come up relate to washing dishes.

There are many advantages to *samādhi*. We sense the gathering of our usually scattered thoughts as restful healing. From the Buddhist point of view, the greatest value is that the gathered mind can see more deeply into whatever it focuses on. If we want to see the cause of suffering and the path to freedom, then *samādhi* lets us see this more clearly. This brings us to the many fruits of the spiral path, which start with understanding the Dhamma and lead onwards to full liberation from all suffering.

To stick with our climate change example, I might start with a confusing mix of anxiety, anger and despair at the news of the wildfire. If I can follow the spiral till the mind gathers in *samādhi*, I might then see how I'm torturing myself with imagined fears. The horror has been grasped so tightly I feel guilty unless I'm suffering too. It comes as humbling relief to admit that I am not suffering physically and this liberates a much more genuine compassion for those who are.

I hope you will try out these teachings, get to know your easiest entry points to the spiral and the transition from misery to gladness as you do this.

A word of warning. Words like gladness, rapture, tranquillity, happiness can set us up for disappointment. Set your expectations very low. A momentary uplift from *dukkha* counts as gladness. The slight buzz that comes from a new activity counts as rapture. The slight relaxation in the body when the buzz dies away counts as tranquillity and so on. Remember, small is beautiful.

In small steps, may we all be liberated from suffering.

The Sufferings of the Pleasure Syndrome

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 49 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the first of the five hindrances: kāmachanda (sensual desire). He reveals how our society's "pleasure syndrome" - the belief that happiness comes from getting what we want - creates a cycle of craving, temporary gratification, boredom, and renewed seeking. Drawing on both Buddhist psychology and modern understanding, he explains how this leads to addiction, meaninglessness, and chronic dissatisfaction.

Bhante emphasizes that the path requires purification of the heart alongside insight development, following the traditional sequence of sīla-samādhi-paññā. He distinguishes between wholesome appreciation and unwholesome attachment, showing how grief measures our clinging rather than our love. Through practical exercises like mindful eating and deliberate renunciation, practitioners can develop dhammachetanā (spiritual will) and discover contentment - the mind without craving.

The teaching offers hope: these mental patterns can be transformed through patient attention and kind awareness, viewing hindrances as "patients" needing care rather than enemies to defeat. This approach builds the inner strength necessary for deeper spiritual development while maintaining engagement with life's genuine pleasures.

Namo tassa bhagavato hara-hatto samma-sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato hara-hatto samma-sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato hara-hatto samma-sambuddhassa

Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

So yesterday evening we went through the various techniques and reminded ourselves that there's nothing mystical about these techniques, they're just skillful means, that's how they're referred to, *upāya*, skillful means to bring ourselves into the present moment. And just like all skills, you've got to work at them. And slowly they work for you. They start working for you, slowing down, getting in the habit of just nothing. These two especially are really quite powerful in terms of centering that attention on what it is you're actually experiencing in this present moment.

So tonight we can have a look at these hindrances. That's the Buddha's word for them. They're more hindrances in the sense of stopping us from concentration. They drag us away from the moment because that's what they do, that's their job. Their job is to keep us occupied on something else. But when we're doing *vipassanā* as such, then

we can see them really as ways to get to know ourselves. And it's often the case that when we begin to meditate we get in touch with emotions that we might not have fully accepted about ourselves before. Often our family history has forbidden us to feel things - crying, being angry, being jealous. All these things in your family history, depending on the situation, have taught you to push things away, not to really look at them. But unfortunately, of course, they remain at that subliminal level and affect our actions. It puts a pressure on what we're doing.

So, for instance, in jealousy, if we're jealous of somebody, but we've never looked at it, and we've pushed it away, and we've felt this subliminal guilt about that, we might be over-praising. We compensate for it. All these things, I think, were very well understood by Freud, actually. He captured all that very well.

So one of the things about our meditation is really to open up to ourselves and to receive whatever we have been suppressing. Often when you come to Eastern teachers - in fact I've just received an email - if you ever work with Eastern teachers, they tend to push effort and concentration. And this often means that the meditator ends up suppressing stuff. In this particular email that I've just received, the instructions from the Burmese teacher was: if an emotion comes you note it like anger or happiness and then you immediately go back to the breath. And the aim of that really is to center the whole attention on the three characteristics, but especially the idea of impermanence. And in this way a person can be pushed towards some sort of deep insight, but it's at the expense really of not purifying the heart. And in the Buddha's teaching, the purification of the heart has to go hand in hand with insight. You can't leapfrog into liberation.

There has to be a complete clearance of the heart. We say the path is *sīla-samādhi-paññā*. *Sīla* is your conduct, is your behaviour. And this manifests your attitude, this manifests your virtue or lack of it. The *samādhi* is the training of the mind to be still, which is just part and parcel of the *vipassanā* process. And the *paññā* is the insight which liberates. So, whether we like it or not, we have to go to hell before we get to heaven. It's just one of those things. There has to be a process of purification.

And what we discover is that the only way to purify the heart is to let it speak, is to let it manifest its feelings. And that's painful for us, we don't like doing that. It's hard to be with depression, anger, the whole gamut of human suffering, which everybody has to some degree or other, I think.

So when the Buddha delineated these emotional attitudinal states he just called them the hindrances. And the first one, not surprisingly, had all those things to do with desire. And looking at the process of desire, we find that when something comes up that we like, that we want - you see, when we like it we want it. Very simple. You like it so you want it.

You see that in little children, don't you? When they see something like a toy, they want it. It's quite natural. So that never leaves us, the wanting because, you know, liking something. Now why do we do that? It's because when we get what we want, we're happy. It makes us feel happy. It gives us a certain gratification. And what happens is then that there's an underlying belief, you see, that if only you can get what you want, you'll always be happy. And you're into the great consumerist society.

And of course adverts play on that to the nth degree, don't they? And they stick desires together. So you always get these beautiful men and women standing next to the car you want. The suggestion of erotic and romantic happiness which goes with a Jaguar. So these desires that we have are not just simple - I want something. They're part of a root theology. They're part of a way that we look at life. It's our relationship to our lives.

Happiness, for heaven's sake. I mean, what do you want if it's not happiness? If you ask somebody, what do you want to be? They want to be happy. And they'll define that - good job, nice relationship, etc., etc., a big list of things. But basically, everybody wants to be happy. And the mistake, the great mistake, is to believe that the world, the sensual world, which is all we experience, is what can deliver that happiness.

As far as the world exists out there is in a sense irrelevant. It's how we experience it which is relevant. And it comes through our senses. Therefore we live in a sensual world from the inner point of view. And when the senses deliver those very pleasant feelings, pleasant states of mind, then we're happy. And the confusion, of course, lies in the fact that happiness is an emotional state. So therefore we're always chasing the next emotional state, the next high.

And in our society that's become a disease. It leads to compulsive action, addiction. The whole of life is about what are you going to do this Saturday? Where are you going to do this Sunday? Where are you going to go for your holiday? Have you seen this film? Have you read that book? It's always, what's the next thing which is going to bring me this little high?

And the downside of that, of course, is when there isn't one. So because we like living on these little highs, on these - what's the next thing to be done - and they're not there, there's that disappointment, there's a sense of loss, a grief. Like, what am I going to do? Worse than that, because of the inbuilt obsolescence of these pleasures, the fact that they can't maintain that same buzz that you got the first time, they lead to an easy boredom.

I read this article where this woman described the first go at crack, as she called it, "riding the dragon." And then she said, after that, you're always chasing that primary experience, but you never get it. And that's the problem with addiction. You're always trying to get the primary wow experience you had. And of course, when it comes to things like drugs and whatnot, the body becomes immune to it, it becomes hardened to it, it finds a way of absorbing the shock.

And when a person comes off drugs they often - they sometimes forget how resistant the body was to the drug they were taking. And often when they slip back into the old habit for one reason or another - they could be rejoicing - they kill themselves. They overdose. Now in a little way, in a less dramatic way, that's what we're doing all the time.

All the time we're seeking happiness in sensual pleasure and we're getting to a point where we're bored. So boredom says, seek, seek more pleasure. Variety is the spice of life. Off you go. And there's incessant search. We don't want to feel boredom. Boredom is not a very pleasant state to be in. And if it gets too much, if it gets really bored, you lose the purpose of living. It moves towards despair.

It can be on a professional level. If your work has always been very interesting and it disappears, what are you left with? You're left with this hole. What are you going to do now? Because you can't gain that same intensity of experience, life becomes boring, becomes empty, meaningless. And it's only because we've defined life as being something which is exciting, something which is always going to deliver this very pleasant state. So there's a real heavy consequence from indulgence.

Indulgence here, by the way, is referring to all types of attachments. So we're not just talking about missing your tea in the morning. I mean, that's pretty disastrous. But we talk about heavy stuff like the loss of your job if you enjoyed your work, the loss of a relationship, the death of somebody close. All these are very extraordinarily painful experiences for us. And the pain is the measure of the attachment. Pain is the measure of the attachment.

So when somebody dies, for instance, there's this - we call it grief. But it's like a huge sore in your heart. It's extraordinarily painful and a real lack. And we like to think of it as our love. This is how much I really love the person. I miss them so much. That's the confusion, you see, because we've confused love with this attachment. But the grief is the measure of attachment.

And if we don't see that, then the grief becomes chronic, because every time the grief begins to lessen, you think you're losing the love of the person. You've got to re-grieve to make sure you're still really loving them. And it's only when you begin to realize that grief - in this sense grief of loss - is actually a measure of attachment that you can let it go. And you begin to realize that love is something of a higher nature. Love allows things to be. If it was the time for the person to die, one is easy with it. You don't indulge in the grief. You see it as something which is unwholesome. It's a product of that attachment.

At a lesser level, you see, objects that we own - it could be something quite costly, like a car, or a computer, a laptop, or something that's not so costly, like your mobile. Somebody thieves it. You feel angry about it. Bloody thief. And there might be some grief. And you go around saying, do you know what? Somebody stole my phone, my mobile. It isn't your mobile anymore. It belongs to the thief. They're using it. They're the ones who have the mobile. But there's still this figment in the imagination that it's still mine.

Which is a social construct. It's a legal arrangement that we've come with each other, that if I say this is mine, it belongs to me. And there's somehow a feeling that it belongs to me in a deep - like it's attached to me in a visceral, emotional way. Whereas when we look at something like a clock or something, or a mobile, actually all you can do with objects is use them. To own them is a painful thing, emotionally I mean. We might legally own it, fine, that's not a problem. I mean if you own something which you actually want to get rid of and you get compensation if somebody does steal it, you leave it in obvious places. That's not a problem. Put your four and a half year old computer, which is guaranteed for five years, and leave it out in the park somewhere. Oh, fiddle these poor companies.

So, one of the first things is to begin to see that psychology within ourselves. That's why I'm so intent on this business of eating and when we drink something, because right there we can see it. I mean, supposing tomorrow, for instance, when it came to five o'clock, you said to yourself, well, I won't have any tea. I won't even have the whiskey. I'll have a cup of cold water and I'll sit here and watch the pain.

And what we're watching is the attachment. Now the great thing about these attachments is that once you stop indulging them they actually do die away. There's a whole process there of deconditioning. And very quickly you become accustomed to a new order once you've set your heart to it. So here for instance, you've come into a very strange sort of regime. You get up at 3:30, breakfast, lunch, sit here, walk. Crazy, really, when you think about it. If you describe it to a person who knows nothing about meditation, they think, well, they must be a bit off. Must have gone off. But I think you'll see that even within three or four days, you just get up, you just do it. You just re-habituate to something.

And really that's the trick when it comes to habits that we find difficult for ourselves is to know that actually all you have to do is go through the pain of detoxing. And replace it of course with something which is more wholesome. Because unfortunately we have time, we keep moving from one moment to the next. You've got to fill it up with something. And if you can find something more skillful than what you were doing, then of course that is going to have a psychological effect. It's going to create a certain contentment.

And contentment is a big word in the spiritual world. Contentment is the mind without desire. The mind without desire. When we say desire here, remember, we're translating this one word, *taṇhā*. There is another word in Pali, *chanda*, which can be either wrong or right, can be a good desire or a bad desire. So that if we want to sit, that's a good desire, and we should reinforce it. The desire that we're talking about in terms of what causes problems is the desire whereby we believe that something sensual, something of this world, this phenomenal world, is going to deliver perfect happiness.

So when we're eating, you see, we're trying to make that distinction. So we're not seeking happiness in food, but we find that when we eat food, a certain appreciative joy arises. And that's natural to that process. It's natural for the body to feel good when you feed it something, and it's natural for the mind to resonate that goodness.

Even at a level, should we say, of just relationships, there's a case where the Buddha is asked, when people listen to your dharma and they don't receive it, they walk away from it, how do you feel? He says, fine, I don't feel unhappy or anything. And the reason for that is this understanding of *kamma*. The person isn't ready to move that way. And it's no skin off his nose. The Buddha's all right. He's got his food and he's under a tree and he's happy. His personal happiness is not dependent on somebody believing or following his instructions or not. But when somebody actually accepts the teaching and begins to train, he's filled with joy. And that's that sympathetic resonance.

I think some people think that when the Buddha was liberated, he turned into this hardened blob. He no longer related to the world. He walked around as an automaton who spoke the Dharma and didn't have an emotional life. But it's quite plain that he did. He was quite charismatic. And we talk about the four illimitables, which we can go into more detail towards the end of the week. In a sense all beautiful emotions, beautiful mental states are illimitable, but the four of them as it were capture a great deal of them: love, compassion, joy and peace. So it's not as though we're trying to get rid of the joy of life.

It's very important to grasp that, because if we make that mistake, if we make the mistake of thinking that it's the body which is the problem - if I didn't eat, then I wouldn't get attached. That's the mistake of the self-mortifier, of the great ascetic who looks like a famine victim. They don't eat, they don't go anywhere near something that's lovely or beautiful.

Again, the Buddha, you see, when he is on alms round, he comes away, he's got his food, and he's with Ananda, his attendant, and he says to Ananda, let's go...

to this shrine to this beautiful shrine and eat our food. Why doesn't he eat just down there on the side of the road in the dust, or find a donkey and be a real ascetic? He doesn't. He wants to go somewhere beautiful. When he goes off to meditate by himself into the forest, leaves the crowds, and they say to him, "Why do you do that now that you're fully liberated?"

And he says, "I do it for my own quiet abiding, and for the benefit of others, as a good example to others." But you notice, it's the quiet abiding that comes first. He doesn't say, "I do it for the benefit of others, oh, and for my own quiet abiding." He says, "No, I do it for my own quiet abiding." So one can imagine that there were times when there were just constant visitors. He was of that caste, the Kshatriya caste, the warrior caste, whereby he knew all these kings, he knew them as children. His father was a local ruler, subordinate to the local king—Kosala, king of Kosala, I think I'm right, doesn't sound right, but I think I am—Pasenadi, who was a great supporter of the Buddha. And the other king, Bimbisara, who was down in Magadha, where now you get Benares, Varanasi on the Ganges there. So all that was another kingdom.

And the Buddha moved around the whole area. Wherever he went, he knew these rulers. And where he went, he would be offered great food sometimes. Even monks in the East, you know, if somebody has a birthday and wants to create great merit, or a marriage or something like that, and they always feed the monks very well, and you get

a few dishes. And of course then, if you're an ascetic, you don't want to really enjoy it, you see. So there becomes this negative feeling about your life, that this isn't to be enjoyed.

So it's really important for us to make that distinction very clear to ourselves, that the pleasures of life, the sensual pleasures, and the pleasures of relationship, of art, even the joys that come up in meditation, are not the problem. The problem is coming from a deeper part of ourselves—this consciousness, this awareness which is misunderstanding and attaching to it as a way of creating this internal happiness which we call an emotional state, and thinking that that's it, that's me.

So all these things that come up around pleasure are really quite important. And a lot of this stuff that we get from misbehaviour of youth is to do, I think, with that frustration of really not finding anything which is truly engaging. So they're always being taught—even at school when I was leaving the profession in FE—there was all this talk about making education more entertaining. It's painful, you see. The teacher then becomes a performer. You've got to perform. And the children expect to be entertained, always to be on this lovely high.

So they forget—it's completely forgotten—that education, the word discipline, is about work. It's about learning your timetables. I know they don't do that anymore. And it gives children the wrong idea of what life's about. And when they hit the reality of work, and for the most part it's not the sort of work they had imagined themselves doing, like fitting tyres onto cars, it's just boring. There's not an acceptance of it.

So a lot of these things that we see in our society is to do with this consumerism. And if we look into ourselves, we'll see the same syndromes, the same psychological states that are arising because of that wrong understanding. So this is a real opportunity, you see, to engage with that and to keep letting go of desire.

When I say letting go, you're not pushing it away. It means to allow it to arise and pass away. You have to be very careful on that. Sometimes this noting technique is used to sort of bat things out of the mind. Like greed—get out, poke in the eye. So be careful, because aversion is very subtle. Not wanting is very, very subtle sometimes. But it's not. The idea, this phrase that you get in meditation circles, this "letting go, letting go," is allowing something to arise and pass away.

So this is an opportunity to do that. And the important thing is to sometimes wait until that desire has completely and utterly passed away, and then just taste that moment that comes after that, where the mind just hasn't got that energy in it, hasn't got that slight turbulence in it which makes it always move towards what it wants. And what we're experiencing there is contentment.

And the distinction between gratification and contentment is very difficult. So every time we indulge a desire, there's always a point of gratification, there's always a point of feeling "oh great!" But unfortunately, all it's done is reinforce that cycle, is reinforce that habit. And then we're off again seeking, seeking, searching.

So when we're working with hindrances here, this is something you can take directly into your daily life. And it's about strengthening the will—the will that is called *dhammachetanā*—the will for spiritual practice, the will for spiritual development. And it has to be exercised, it has to grow. And you do it by the process of renunciation.

So renunciation isn't this self-accusation and self-mortification. It's allowing some desire to rise and pass away. So you're renouncing it in order to see how attached you are to it. And you keep letting that rise and pass away until there's no pain. And then the renunciation has done its job. And then one tries to re-engage with that in a more skilful way.

So one exercise that I always set to people, and probably you've heard it from me before, is to get yourself a nice cup of tea, or if you prefer coffee, and a biscuit, and just sit in front of your TV when your favourite programme's on. And don't turn it on. Just watch the blank screen and feel the pain. And that pain of letting go of *Coronation Street* and *Match of the Day*—oh my God—just sitting there with that and knowing that it's on is a wonderful exercise. And if you do that every week until it's completely gone, you see, then you think, "What the hell was that about? What was I getting so upset about a stupid program for?"

Years and years ago I watched this program. It was an Australian series. It was a storyline, three episodes. And it was about these young women who were travelling in Spain and in Morocco. And there they got fiddled by these two rather handsome men to get into drugs. And they didn't realise they were carriers for these drugs. And when they landed in Spain, they were caught by the police and stuck in jail, you see. And the whole drama is about that predicament.

Well, of course, I missed the third program. And still in my mind, I still get like, "Cripes, what happened? What happened?" And this is a total fantasy. It's a total fantasy. It didn't happen. It's somebody's head. But so often when I think about it, I think, "Oh, one day, one day." I must say, it doesn't cause so much pain these days.

So really work on that and just, and after you leave the course and take into daily life, just find something, one point of the day, or one habit that you have which you know you can do without, and just sit with the desire and let it fade away. And there are two things that when we do that, there's always two things happening: we're letting go of something which is unwholesome for us, but we're also growing in that will for the *Dhamma*, the *dhammachetanā*, which is your spiritual empowerment.

And it's the same when you practice the meditation. So when it comes to doing a morning sitting and hopefully an evening sit, sometime in the evening, there are always a hundred thousand excuses, a hundred thousand reasons, very good reasons why you shouldn't be doing it. There's always something more important. And it's really, and it's sort of catching that, the sort of negativity of the desire of wanting to do something which is more pleasant, you see. It's not just that you don't want to sit, it's that you want to do something which is more exciting, there's something more capturing than just sitting here watching the painful emotions coming up all the time. And it's the ability to let go of that, you see, which is creating this will.

And will in Buddhism is that which is your power. Power means to be able to do something. Like when you walk, there's a power, there's an ability to walk—we call it an ability, but it's a power, it's an ability. And so when we empower ourselves through these exercises, we're becoming stronger within ourselves. And the strength grows, you see, the strength grows to let go, to let go. So that when you get to the, when we get to this point where we're just going to approach the final liberation, we should be as strong as the Buddha, you see.

So remember when the Buddha had finally had got this inkling of perhaps this was what was going to make the break, what was going to bring about liberation from suffering? Remember, he'd been through a bit of despairing there when he gave up the ascetic practices. So he was despairing, he didn't know what to do. And suddenly a memory of childhood comes and it sort of inspires him. And on reflection he says, he thinks, "Well, this is it. If this doesn't work, then nothing will." And he has enough of this *chetanā*, he has enough of this willpower—willpower isn't bad in itself, it's what you put it towards. He has enough willpower to say, "I'm going to sit under this tree and I'm going to sit here, and either I will make this insight, I'll actually understand things and come to the end of suffering, or I'll die."

Now, of course, that wasn't tested because he actually did make a break. But it took him six hours. He sat there for six hours. That's what the scripture tells us.

And so when we use this renunciation, when we actually practice renunciation, it has this added quality of building up this inner strength within us. And we see that in people. We see that in strong people, in people whom we really admire. People like Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, people like that. Mother Teresa. These people have a deep inner power which comes from that place where they've lost a lot of attachment to life. They don't care anymore about their life. They're there for another purpose beyond themselves.

I always remember this case where in that dreadful time in Lebanon—I can't remember, but I remember all that stuff about the camps and the shootings and the killings and all that. And it would seem that right in the two firing lines, which weren't that far apart as far as I remember, there was a school, and it was full of children, but also handicapped children, or children with disabilities, as we say these days. And nobody knew what to do. It was very strange from what I could see, that this school was stuck. Nobody had the guts to go in and do anything. And they didn't know what to do. It was in a firing line.

And they brought Mother Teresa to this point. And what the clip of the film showed you was them explaining to her that there were all these children here and they didn't know what to do about it. They were stuck in these firing lines. And after explanation, seemingly without second thought, she just walked over to the school and let all the kids out. I mean, like nobody had thought of that. Nobody had thought, "Well, I'll just go over there and bring them all out." Why? Because they're afraid of being shot. They're afraid of being in the firing line.

But this, I believe, diminutive little woman, just this enormous strength of the power of her spiritual practice. If she was shot, I don't think she would care. So that's the sort of strength that comes to us when we begin to practice this renunciation.

And as a sort of another way in which that willpower of renunciation is expressed is through generosity. Because every time we're generous, we give something away which we ourselves could have enjoyed for ourselves for the benefit of somebody else. I'm not here talking about social bargaining, you know, where at Christmas you give a piece of cheese and they send you a piece of cheese. You know, and "Yes, I'll come and help you decorate" with an underlying text which says, "Well, I'm going to do my gardening next week."

But that generosity where you actually give for the benefit of others completely, not expecting any return. I mean, that's what we try and practice here, isn't it? This is the idea here that when we come here to do a retreat, everything is already received. It's already paid for. What are you paying for? It's already here. So that when it comes to making a donation, it's always done in the spirit of entirely for somebody else. So what we're doing is saying, "Well look, this little bit of wealth that I have, I could have enjoyed this. I could have gone to the Costa del Sol and drunk a bit of sangria and enjoyed myself. But instead I've sent it off to this charity for the benefit of somebody whom I don't even know."

So that's a letting go of desire, you see. That's your renunciation. Same with time. You know, just helping somebody out, helping somebody, doing some charitable work, not for any reason apart from just helping. So that time you could have spent yourself, could have been watching a decent film, or going out with a friend. Who knows what could have been, we might have enjoyed that time, but instead we've given it. And we might not be doing something we particularly like doing. It might not be something that we particularly want to do, but we do it for the benefit of somebody else.

And in that way, this self, which is always self-centred, you see, it's always looking after itself, understandably so, is slowly being undermined, slowly being undermined. So when we get to this doctrine of not-self, see, what does it mean, not-self, you see? Does it mean that there's no personality, there's a sort of breakdown, sort of schizophrenic, sort of an amorphous block? You end up with no self, no personality, nothing?

No, not at all. All this self that the Buddha is talking about, he's describing, is the relationship we have to the world, to this body. "This is me." All we've got to recognise slowly is that it's not me, and then we have a different relationship to it. So every time I look at "my wealth, my wealth," then it becomes painful. But if I look at it as wealth, then I can do something with it. I can do something for myself, something for others. And I can make a distinction towards myself between that which is selfish and that which is self-care.

So going back to eating, there's a great difference between preparing ourselves a nice meal, which is with the attitude of self-caring, rather than getting in there and just eating for the sake of enjoying ourselves and becoming a glutton. That's a word you don't hear these days very much. With all this obesity about, it's a no-no word, isn't it? Nobody's a glutton, they're all suffering from obesity. They're all just obese. Nobody will actually say, "You greedy pig." You know what I mean? I mean, it's not quite done, you see. It's not politically correct anymore to call a spade a spade. It has to be an illness.

Not to say that some people don't put weight on because of metabolic reasons and whatnot. But most people — I mean, I was shocked myself. I found I had put on half a stone. It was a great shock, I can tell you. And then it got worse. I thought, oh, there's something wrong here. But I put it down to age, you see. How easy it is to be obese and self-forgiving and all that.

So this evening we've just looked at just one of these hindrances. We'll be at it all week, I think, just centring on this business of desire, because I think it's very crucial in our day and age. Tomorrow I'll do the rest of them. I won't hang about so much, but just as a general attitude.

There are those states of mind which are agitated, and they're caused by these sorts of desires — all the negative desires, hatreds and angers and irritations, all that sort of stuff. There are things that cause agitation in the mind that make it restless: anxiety, guilt, shame, all those sorts of things.

And there's doubt, and we'll go into that a bit more deeply, which creates a sort of disturbance in the mind. Doubt makes a person constantly think about it, think about things, and be worried.

So whenever we come across the mind being like that, remember, you always come off the thought pattern. The narrative is irrelevant. In here it's irrelevant. Out there it may be relevant. In other words, if I doubt whether this is the job I ought to take or not, out there it's relevant. Here it's not relevant, because here you can't do anything about it anyway. You're not supposed to be using your mobiles. You're not supposed to be on the phone. You're not supposed to be writing. So here it's irrelevant. That's the point.

So by making all this mental agitation irrelevant and just keeping it to the side, we can go into the actual mental state that's driving these states — the attitude, the emotional state that's driving it — and we can begin to feel it and get a hang of it and see how it works.

And the other one is, the other side is when the energy begins to fall. And that's what we call dullness and lethargy. And over the next couple of days, I hope that the business of sleep imbalance will have been sorted and you'll be very clear to yourself that any sleepiness that comes during the day is in fact dullness and lethargy and is not tiredness. One can be quite strict about that.

And there, of course, the attitude is simply to stay awake and to be with it, to feel it. Remember, it is an energy. It doesn't feel like an energy because it's a sort of collapse into nothingness. Something's dragging us down. It's a dullness, dull, heavy feeling. So

the attitude there is basically to stay awake as best one can. That's why you open your eyes, you stand up. And if in a sitting it just becomes ridiculous and you just find yourself nodding and banging your head on the floor, then go for a gentle walk.

And none of this stuff do you fight. You're not trying to annihilate it. You're not trying to get rid of it. You're not trying to overcome it. You're not trying to beat it. You're not trying to be better than it. You're just trying to attend. See them all as patients. They're all little illnesses. And they just need attending to, that's all.

And that's the quality of awareness. Attention. And you can flavour the attention with kindness. You can look upon these things with compassion. And that often softens the process, by the way. It undermines a negativity towards them by seeing that these are little illnesses, little dis-eases. And that's, I think, a very skilful way to look at it.

Are there any questions? Anything come up? Sounds as though I've perfectly described the problem of desire. May my words be of assistance. May you be liberated sooner rather than later. Thank you.

The Two Darts

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 15 min

In this teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the Buddha's famous parable of the two darts, which illustrates how we compound our suffering through unskillful reactions to life's inevitable difficulties. The first dart represents the unavoidable painful experiences of life - illness, aging, loss, and death. The second dart is our mental reaction: the resistance, aversion, and seeking of escape through sensual pleasures that we add to these natural experiences.

Drawing from the Buddha's discourse to the monks, Bhante explains how an "uninstructed worldling" experiences both physical and mental suffering, while the "instructed noble disciple" learns to feel only the bodily sensation without the additional mental torment. The teaching explores the three underlying tendencies (anusaya) that keep us trapped: aversion to painful feelings, attachment to pleasant feelings, and ignorance regarding neutral feelings.

This talk offers practical insight into developing a healthy relationship with both pleasure and pain, learning to enjoy life's gifts without attachment while accepting difficulties without resistance. Bhante emphasizes that this is not about becoming cold or detached, but about cultivating wise non-attachment that allows us to be fully present to life without the psychological dependency that creates suffering. Essential listening for understanding the psychological foundations of Buddhist practice and the path to freedom through Vipassanā meditation.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa, Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa, Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa — homage to the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So we're following this compilation by Bhikkhu Bodhi and we've been through the heavy bit — sickness, aging and death. We're still unfortunately on the heaviness of life. The joys come at the end. Here the Buddha is now going into what you might call the basic psychology of how we create suffering for ourselves, and he uses the word "worldling" — an uninstructed worldling — as though looking at the world as if we were aliens. But he's just trying to translate a word which just means an ordinary person who doesn't know why they cause themselves suffering and doesn't come across the Buddha's teaching. That's the only word. I think you might wonder what he means by it.

So, monks — and remember that these discourses always begin with "monks," but it stands for anybody who's listening, really — when the uninstructed worldling experiences a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves and laments. He weeps, beating his breast and becomes distraught. He feels two feelings, a bodily one and a mental one.

Now suppose they were to strike a man with a dart and then strike him immediately afterwards with a second dart, so that the man would feel a feeling caused by two darts. So too, when the uninstructed worldling experiences a painful feeling, he feels two feelings, a bodily one and a mental one. While experiencing that same painful feeling, she harbors aversion towards it. When she harbors aversion towards painful feeling, the underlying tendency to aversion towards painful feeling lies behind this.

And while experiencing painful feeling, she seeks delight in sensual pleasure. For what reason? Because the uninstructed worldling does not know of any escape from painful feeling other than sensual pleasure. And when she seeks delight in sensual pleasure, the underlying tendency of lust for pleasant feeling lies behind this.

She does not understand as it really is the origin and the passing away, the gratification, the danger and the escape in case of these feelings. When she does not understand these feelings, the underlying tendency to ignorance in regard to neither painful nor pleasant feeling lies behind this. If they feel a pleasant feeling, they feel it attached. And if they feel a painful feeling, they feel it attached. And if they feel a neither painful nor pleasant feeling, they feel it attached.

This is called an uninstructed worldling who is attached to birth, aging, and death, who is attached to sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair, who is attached to suffering, I say.

There's a lot of meat in this. Books are written on this. I myself have a wonderful talk, which you can download from the website, on the gratification, the danger and the escape.

So what's the Buddha saying? He's saying, first of all, when we feel something harmful, when we feel something painful in the body — now remember there's two types of feelings in the body: those feelings that come from the body itself, such as painful knees when you're sitting, and those painful feelings that are in the body coming from the heart, our emotional states. That's bad enough to be able to sit with that. But then we have this second dart, as he calls it, which is the resistance, not wanting to go there. So we have both the painful feeling and now we've created an aversion to it. So now we're in turmoil.

Because we're in turmoil, we're now seeking an escape. And the escape is tea and biscuits — basically turn on the TV, phone up a friend, do anything apart from feel these feelings. That's the gratification. But unfortunately, if we go on, we don't see the danger of that. Because when we're gratified, when we're enjoying ourselves, it's okay. I mean, we're in heaven. What's the problem? We don't see the problems that arise after that, which is that we've suppressed these feelings and they're there within the system. We haven't actually dealt with them. And secondly, when that pleasant feeling disappears, we find that we become attached to it. Attached here means psychologically dependent on something for our happiness.

There's a lot of psychology here. If we go through it just bit by bit, then we'll see. So when an uninstructed worldlyling experiences a painful feeling, they immediately react to it. They sorrow about it, they grieve about it, they lament, they weep beating their breast, becoming distraught. Just think of the time when you've been even a little bit ill and it stops you going to work or it stops you doing something — a bad cold, a flu. There's that negativity. Now that's the second dart. What the Buddha is saying is that's not necessary. That's the second dart. And what he points out is that therefore, unless we are aware of that, then we'll keep making things worse for ourselves by this reaction.

So he harbors aversion towards the painful feeling. He harbors it. We develop that aversion towards painful feeling. That means there's a lot of fear there too. So whatever we feel, whatever we think there's going to be a bit of difficulty for us, a bit of painfulness for us, we tend to run from it. And the aversion that is manifesting is an underlying tendency to aversion, which means that we already have a conditioning within us to either resist or run from what we find unpleasant. Every time we react like that, we reinforce this tendency, this conditioning, this habit within us. So we're actually making things worse all the time for ourselves.

And because it gets so bad, while experiencing a painful feeling, they seek sensual pleasure. So that's what we do, isn't it? Things get a bit tough, so you get drunk. Anything not to feel those feelings, not to endure them. And because of that, we have this underlying tendency of seeking happiness in pleasure is reinforced. We keep thinking that the way to happiness is to keep reinforcing this pleasure that we get from worldly things. But there's the danger. The danger is that worldly things — they do not understand, as it really is, the origin and passing away. In other words, anything you get attached to is going to let you down because it's going to change. It's going to pass away. Just when you thought you've got the right person, the right job, the right house, the right car, you drop dead. Or worse, it passes away.

So it's a case of recognizing that as soon as we hold on to something, it has a great potential of creating suffering for us. And that's the problem with gratifying ourselves in the world of pleasure. We don't see the danger. And when the danger comes, we're stuck with the suffering. They don't see the escape.

And then he says, when a pleasant feeling arises, they feel attached. This "attached" means attached to something — like for instance, I'm attached to my car. It's that use of the word. When you're attached to somebody, you are in some way psychologically connected with them, but often in a way which if they disappear or if the car breaks down, there's sorrow, lamentation, grief and despair.

So what the Buddha is saying is, it's not necessary for us to get rid of the joys of life, and it's not necessary for us to reject what is painful in life. Life is full of joy and woe. All we have to know is how to relate to this stuff. So when unpleasant things come, to actually just accept it, to bear with it, to endure it. And when pleasant stuff comes, to be careful that we don't form an attachment to it.

Now that's really difficult. It's one of my regular teachings here around food. The distinction between enjoying the food and indulging in it is a very fine one. But you've got to work at it, because when we indulge, the suffering comes. So you have to be very careful that we don't interpret the Buddha's teaching as life-negative. Far from it. Once he was fully liberated, he became one of the most sensual beings that there can be. Why? Because now he's completely open to the sensual world. He's not afraid of it and he's not indulging in it.

So now we have the other side of the equation. Monks, when the instructed noble disciple experiences a painful feeling, they do not sorrow, grieve or lament. They do not weep beating their breast and become distraught. They feel one feeling, a bodily one, not the mental one. Suppose they were to strike a man with a dart, but they would not strike him immediately afterwards with a second dart, so that man would feel a feeling caused by one dart only. So too, when the instructed disciple experiences a painful feeling, they feel one feeling, a bodily feeling, and not the mental one.

While experiencing the same feeling, they harbor no aversion towards it. And since they harbor no aversion towards painful feeling, the underlying tendency to aversion towards painful feeling does not lie behind this. So in other words, even the very conditioning within us that causes this resistance and this indulgence is beginning to fade away. And of course, the liberated person is one that simply can't react like that anymore because that habit has been completely wiped out.

While experiencing painful feeling, they do not seek delight in sensual pleasure. For what reason? Because the instructed noble disciple knows of an escape from painful feeling other than sensual pleasure. And that's what the purpose of *vipassanā* is — it's to discover that escape. Since they do not seek delight in sensual pleasure, the underlying tendency of lust for pleasant feelings does not lie behind this. So that indulgence is not there.

And they understand it as it really is: the origin and the passing away, the gratification, the danger and the escape in the case of these feelings. And since they understand these things, the underlying tendency of ignorance towards neither painful nor pleasant feeling does not lie behind this. So remember, we tend to ignore those sensations that we do not see as either painful or pleasant. So when we come to the breath, generally speaking, we find it boring. And that shows us that we're constantly trying to seek excitement, whereas the spiritual life is drawing us towards silence, towards stillness.

If they feel a pleasant feeling, they feel it detached — they're not becoming psychologically dependent on it. And if they feel a painful feeling, they feel it detached. And if they feel a neither painful nor pleasant feeling, they feel it detached. This is called a noble disciple who is detached — who is not actually, the better phrase is non-attached. Because the word detached tends to give you the feeling of callousness almost, to be detached from people's suffering and all that. So it's non-attached from birth, aging and death, who is non-attached from sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection and despair, who is non-attached from suffering, I say.

This, monks, is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the instructed noble disciple and the uninstructed worldling, which we are no longer.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and that the Buddha's *Dhamma* is coming through loud and clear. May you, by your great efforts, overcome suffering and do not seek escape through indulgence in pleasure, sooner rather than later.

There Is No Reason for Being!

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 54 min

Drawing inspiration from a six-year-old child who declared "there's no reason for being" while playing, Bhante Bodhidhamma explores the profound difference between simply 'being' and the process of 'becoming' (bhāva). He examines how children naturally embody the spontaneous, joyful presence found in play—doing something for its own sake without future aims or pressures.

The talk delves into the Buddhist understanding of how we construct a sense of self through identification with body, emotions, and thoughts, creating the suffering of constant 'becoming' driven by future expectations. Through Paṭicca Samuppāda (Dependent Origination), we see how this process differs fundamentally from the awakened state, where actions arise as kriya (functional karma) rather than driven by self-centered intentions.

Using examples from the Buddha's life and teaching style, Bhante illustrates how awakened beings respond spontaneously from wisdom without fixed positions or future goals. The talk emphasizes how vipassanā meditation reveals the distinction between the observer and observed, gradually dissolving the delusion of 'I am' through direct investigation of our psychophysical processes. This leads to the natural contentment and joy that arise when we relate to life without the constant pressure of becoming someone or achieving something.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambhuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambhuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambhuddhassa

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

On one of the Tuesday evenings, one of the people who came along told us this tale of a six-year-old child who was playing a game and then suddenly said to her mother, "There's no reason for being," and then went back playing. Six years old. So this being, she must have heard her parents talk about it or friends about the meaning of life and all that. And it must have worked on her mind. She must have understood what she was saying because how can you come out with something like that without having some inkling, some feel for what you actually mean?

And the interesting thing is that, of course, she was playing. So the thing about play is that you do it for yourself. You don't do it for any other reason. You don't play Monopoly to make yourself famous. I mean, a game is just a game. I know that we put a lot of things on games these days, like football—it's become an industry. But when a child

plays a game, or when we ourselves play a game with a child, we're just playing a game. It doesn't have any objective apart from just playing the game. And therefore, all your attention is in just that doing.

I think the second quality is, of course, it's very joyful. It's a happy thing to do, playing a game, playing cards. And I think as adults we might have things like hobbies, which don't particularly have any reason beyond themselves. They're just something you like to do. They don't have any aim or objective beyond just that doing. And usually, a person would say that they enjoy their hobby. It wouldn't make sense to have a hobby that you didn't enjoy. So if you cook, for instance, if you like cooking, you do it just for the pleasure of it. And then you might share it with friends. And you might lose a few friends, but it's a joyful occasion. It's something that you've enjoyed doing.

So this little girl, she's playing with "there's no reason for being." So it depends, of course, what we mean by reason. If we mean by reason that there's something outside the game, something outside we're doing, we're aiming at some future result, some end point that we're moving towards, then that puts a pressure, doesn't it? It puts a pressure on what you're doing now, because what you're doing now is not in itself entire and whole. The action is not completed until some future event arises. So these professional games, these footballers and tennis players, sure, they play the game, but it's not just a game, is it? There's something else. There's an ambition about it. There's the climbing up the ladder of success. There's the money. So the game itself now doesn't have that immediate sense of perfect joy that a game might have for a child. It's got a pressure on it now.

Now as opposed to this word being, we've got this other word becoming. And the word in the Pali for that is *bhāva*, to become. So when the Buddha describes this process of becoming, he really describes it quite clearly in the Dependent Origination, which is what we'll chant tomorrow, the sequence of mental events. And somewhere in that process of play, which ends around about the age of seven or so, when we lose that immediate innocence of life, and thought comes in, and thought launches us out into some future. We've lived long enough to imagine a future. How futuristic can a child of three be? What does it mean to a child of three to say that in two months' time there'll be Christmas? They don't live that long to understand what two months is, really. It's an imaginative thing. But for us, having lived so long, we begin to project, don't we? We know where we're going. We've got an idea of time. It's all blocked out for us. So now somewhere in that process, something goes wrong.

Now as opposed to that, as opposed to that going wrong and living for some future event, you have the Buddha or the enlightened ones who don't do that, but they're still living in time. They know what two months is. They also have a clear idea of time. But somehow they don't suffer. Somehow they don't get this comeback which is in the process of becoming.

In the law of *kamma*, when Buddhism talks about *kamma*, it talks about two types of *kamma*: *kusala* and *akusala*. So this translates as wholesome and unwholesome actions, virtuous and unvirtuous actions, skillful and unskillful actions. That's how you can translate it. But interestingly enough, when they try to describe or when they try to find a word for an enlightened person doing an action, they use another word, *kriya*, which is translated in a funny way as functional, functional action. So there's something distinctive between somebody who is fully liberated and somebody who isn't. It's a sharp line. It's not as though it's a progression. You either are liberated or you're not. You might be a little bit liberated, but you're not fully liberated. There's always that peculiar way of looking at things which causes some form of dissatisfaction.

So what is it that goes wrong within that process which causes us to become rather than to be? So when the Buddha is deciding to teach, that comes out of just the desire to share the goodness that he's discovered. It's a natural thing. They say in Zen, for instance, that out of wisdom, compassion arises naturally, love arises naturally. And there's some teachers in Zen that won't touch practices like loving-kindness. It's off the path. You want to get to the enlightenment, to the awakening, and then everything else just happens naturally.

So when the Buddha was awakened and this natural desire came to teach, he thought, well, who could he teach? And having understood or come to know that his two teachers, those were his first people he thought he might help, were dead, he then walks to find his other five companions, those who had told him he'd gone soft and they didn't want to know him anymore because he'd had this rice pudding. And he walks from where he becomes enlightened, where he becomes awakened in Bodhi Gaya, he walks all the way to Sarnath. Now I've got this figure of 400 miles, but I don't think that's quite right, but it's a heck of a long way anyway. It's five hours on the train. So it's quite a long way. So he's off, and he has to ask. It's not as though people have got mobiles in those days. He'll find out where they are.

And then he begins to teach. Throughout his career as a teacher, when somebody comes to him who doesn't accept what he's saying, like there's an occasion when this fellow called Dandapani, which means stick in hand, must have been a nickname, comes and asks him what he teaches, and the Buddha says what he teaches, and he

goes away clicking his tongue, shaking his head, "a lot of rubbish." In fact, there's a lovely incident when he starts off on the teaching to find his five companions and he comes across an ascetic who sees a certain glow around him, a certain brightness. And he says, "My, you're bright. Who's your teacher?" And he launches into this self-panegyric about him saying, "I am the fully enlightened one. I don't need to teach lots of stuff." And the guy says, "Oh, right, OK," and wanders off. And I think that was an early lesson that that's not what you do if you're going to teach.

When people don't accept his teaching, he's not saddened by it, he's not upset by it. And yet when people do accept his teachings, he's joyful. And when he describes the Buddha heart, when he describes how he experiences *Nibbāna* as this present experience, he talks about it being contented and with it happy. Contented and with it happy. And those four limitless, love, compassion, joy, equanimity, but especially the first three, which is about relationship—love, compassion and joy—those contain, as it were, in their various shades, the way the Buddha heart actually responds to the world. And if he's on his own, if he's quiet, or an enlightened person's quiet, they just fall into this state of equanimity.

So you get the sense that somebody who's awakened is living very much in the present moment, doesn't have any particular aim. He's just responding from that wisdom point to a given situation now, without any care for future results. Even when he goes to begin his teaching and men and women approach him to join him, he doesn't seem to have any particular idea of where the order is going. He's just following the general customs of ascetics in those days. And it's only as things go wrong, as certain monks and nuns make mistakes or do something wrong, that he produces a rule. And in the end, by the end of his life, he's produced all these rules and it rests on a particular platform of understanding. That's what you would call an institution. An institution is a given reason, some platform, and then you build up a rule around it to give it some legal solidity. Even say marriage, that's an institution. Marriage just between two people, so there's a basic understanding and then there are rules, spoken or unspoken, which maintain that particular relationship.

And he ends up with that. Not that he had any specific idea as to where it was going, but by the end of his life he can look back and think, well, what's been produced or what's happened is good. He talks about the four sanghas or the four assemblies: monks and nuns, laywomen and laymen. But that happened naturally. He didn't seem to have gone out particularly to establish that. It just happened as he's walking around and people join him.

So you get the sense of spontaneity rather than knee-jerk reactions or some pre-conditioned idea as to where he's going. So that's another quality of play—it's spontaneous. A child is very spontaneous. Perhaps we can talk about a sense of just being in the moment, moving from one moment to the next, responding to it with wisdom, without any sense of some future success and failure—all that's out the window—without any sense of gain, riches or anything like that, without any sense of power, wanting to control. He didn't particularly want to control monks and nuns. He just wanted to set up a situation where eventually all they could do was meditate and study the Dharma. That's the two duties that he put to the monks. And he set up certain institutions for lay people by taking refuge in the five precepts and general guidelines.

So there's no sense of him wanting to be rich, to be powerful, to be successful in any sense. He's not driven by some future aim. And he's not worried about being famous. There's no hint in the scriptures that he gets upset if people don't recognize him. In fact, there's a point there where a monk or somebody enters into a small congregation of monks and they ask, "Well, which one is the Bhagavā?" So he hasn't got a special hat on, or three stripes on his shoulders. He's just an ordinary person. He just looks like—he doesn't try to lift himself above others.

All these are manifesting a relationship. That's what they're doing. They're manifesting a relationship with what happens, a relationship with time, a relationship with their life. The question of "What am I supposed to be doing?" or "Where am I supposed to be going?" or "Why am I here?" "Who am I?" See, all those questions have disappeared. There is just this moment of this relationship and this response, coming from the point of wisdom. In that moment there's that complete openness to it, because there's nothing negative within the person, something that has to be hidden or repressed—some little dislike or guilt or whatever, the usual gamut of human misery. Because there's nothing there, there's that ability just to be completely open to the situation. And whatever the situation presents, there's just coming out from the heart of wisdom.

When it comes to certain incidents like the woman who comes crazed with grief because she's lost her child, her dead. She's got this idea that these ascetics are magic, have some mystical powers. And in her grief-stricken situation, the Buddha is able to realize that to give her the straight teaching is just going to send her off berserk. He gives a little trick to come to realize the way life is. So he sends it off, doesn't he, to find a mustard seed. So mustard seeds are a million a penny. But he says, "You must get it from a house where there's not been any death." So off she goes, desperate, knocking on doors. "I must have a mustard seed. Well, of course. Anybody died? Of course." And by the end of a certain sequence of hours, there comes this dawning that death is part of

life. It just happens. That's the way it is. So she comes back more balanced of mind. And then she's open to the teachings. And as all these stories go, she enters the order and becomes fully awakened.

So he's able to respond easily to people because he's not coming from a fixed place, a fixed point, a presumption, a view, an opinion. This idea of being totally receptive means that you've got to come from the ability to receive different perspectives and bring them into your general way of seeing things. A perspective suggests that you're not holding on to it. You recognize that there are other perspectives, that you're prepared to have your perspective widened or broadened or somehow changed because you hear other people's views, their perspectives. But the word opinion gives us the idea that, well, this is right, nobody else is wrong. It immediately closes you off, immediately shuts you off. It makes the relationship difficult. You're immediately in contradiction with somebody else who has a different opinion.

So when somebody comes to the Buddha and asks him to give a teaching, he never goes into his teaching. He always says, "Well, what do you think?" And then the person says what they think. And then he undermines their position. Bit of a trick, really, I suppose. And then when they're completely floored and completely lost, he says, "Well, now this is the truth." And off he goes. But he doesn't seem to have been that person who said, "Well, look, if you come to me, this is what it is. If you don't accept it, go away." He's prepared to try and understand where that person's coming from, and in so doing, to show that maybe they haven't got it quite right. And then there's an openness to the Dharma. Then there's a subtleness, there's a malleability in that person's mind, and that's when he offers the Dharma.

So we can see that just in general all these qualities are about being very present, like a child is with play. There's nothing being deposited onto this present moment either by way of some past opinion, some view that we've held onto from the past and that we must see this present moment through. There's no launching of this present moment into some future successful result. So it remains just entire and whole in itself. And you're moving through time in these little blocks. But you're not coming from nowhere. That's the point. The Buddha's not coming from a blank sheet. He's coming from a specific way of relating to the world, which brings with it a specific understanding.

So now as opposed to that, you've got this becoming, which is generally speaking what we do. This becoming. What's the core of the becoming? How do these opinions and views and futures and fame and riches and power—from where do they spring?

Around what do they coagulate? What are they an expression of? So this is what the Buddha refers to as the self. And the self isn't a thing. It's not that you can point to it or pick it up or say what it is. It's a relationship. It's a relationship.

So it's a mistake that we make, which is completely understandable. It's not as though it's a culpable mistake. We're not supposed to go beating ourselves around the head because we made this mistake, because we come from a point of not knowing.

There's a film called *Zenoid*, and there's a nice little passage in that where the master is asked by this person, "What happens when you die?" And he says, "Don't know." And then he says, "Why don't you know?" He says, "I'm not dead yet." It's creating, it's recognising that what we've done is we've made a presumption, we've fallen into some sort of what the Buddha called a delusion. And a delusion, by definition, is something that you don't know you're deluded about, or else you wouldn't be deluded.

So there we are, this little bundle of flesh and bones. And what do we know? What do we know? And then society comes at us with definitions, gives us a name. Parents tell us this and tell us that. We pick up the history, we get a language. Everything's dumped on us. So is it any wonder that we should end up thinking, well, this is what I am. And this is what I am. I am English. I am a teacher. I am. I am. This am business. This I with its definition, with its being, you might say, with its sense of self in all those definitions that we have about who we are and what we are.

So once we've cornered ourselves, once we've gathered all these definitions about ourselves, you can see how it becomes an imprisonment. And you get these wonderful statements like, the one I love is, "If I did that, that wouldn't be me. If I thought that, that wouldn't be me." And it's a sort of—you can feel the clampness of that. It's like something that's so tight about who I am.

Now this who I am produces a doing. You walk into life with who I am and you start doing something. So very simply, if you say I am a teacher, then you have to teach. But this teaching now isn't like the Buddha's teaching where he's just in relationship. It falls back on a definition. It falls back on who I am. So if I lose my job, who am I? Then I get the depression. I mean, losing your job is bad enough to lose the income. That's bad enough. But then to lose a definition of yourself, well, that's an identity crisis. You might go around saying, "Well, I was a teacher," which is a bit of a downer.

But that business of identity creates a whole psychology of what we mean by an attachment. Now, of course, it goes deeper than that because at the deepest level we think we're humans. I am a human being. That's a pretty general statement most people on earth would agree with. I am a human being. But when you say, "I am a human being," what do you mean? Are you the body?

If you say, "Well, I am the body, I am this body," how long are you this body for? When you talk about this body, I think every—I don't know, I read it somewhere, but every atom is exchanged in your body something like every few days or something. It's quite remarkable how quickly the body is changing. The cornea on your eye changes every week. I know that for sure because the optician told me, and I believe the optician.

If you go into the biology of certain parts of your body, you'll be quite amazed how they're not actually in unison. Bits are falling off without you knowing. Bits take time to fall off. A bone, I think, takes about three months to renew itself. So even now, you walked into that door with this body, but it isn't this body anymore. It's moved on. It's changed.

So this idea of a self, it has something static about it, it has something solid. This is what I am. But when we investigate the body, we find this am-ness can't be static. And if it's moving, if it's changing, then which am I? Am I the body that I was born with, or this body, or the future body? So the sense of I begins to corrupt, it begins to fall apart.

But if I say I am the body, you can imagine—well, we know, don't we? We know the suffering of I am the body. It comes out when you fall sick, when somebody close to you dies. Then you know, oh, well, if that body went that way, probably mine will follow in the same way. And we all dread the moment when the doctor will tell you you've got six weeks to go. That's not a laughing matter, is it?

So this sense of self, this identity with the body, manifests when the body moves into danger. And that fear that we have, that real fear of death, of dying, of severe illness, of being crippled, of losing our minds, Alzheimer's—all that fear is the measure of that delusion.

See, when the Buddha died, he was in pain. He had gastroenteritis or some sort. He would have been in pain. But by how it's come down to us, he's just lying on his side. And there's even still that desire to make sure that he's said everything. He asks, "Are there any more questions?" And when there are no more questions, he says, "Well, all compounded things arise and pass away. Work diligently for your liberation." And off he goes.

What will be our last words? Why me? What will be our last thoughts? Will they be as equanimous as that? As easy? Will we let go as easy as that? So the reason we can't let go as easy as that is because it's what I think I am. I'm losing a bit of me.

You think about your emotional life. That's changed, hasn't it? That's constantly changing, probably faster than the body's changing. All these intentions we make, all these, the way that we create this inner life within ourselves, all the depressions and anxieties, etc. And the happinesses, the loves and all those, the joys of life. They seem to come and go, don't they? And even more fleeting is thought. So which thought are you? And would you want to go back to being a three-year-old, the three-year-old's thoughts?

So when we begin to investigate this self, this I am, this I am—and you finish it off, I am, I think therefore I am, I feel therefore I am, I walk around therefore I am, I brush my teeth therefore I am. When you investigate that as something solid, entire, whole unto itself, it begins to crumble, doesn't it? It begins to crumble.

But we find that when we're in that state, what it makes us do is to hold on to the present moment tightly or make sure this present moment has some sort of sense to this ongoing feeling of self and it creates this future. You've got to be going somewhere. What's the point of just being here if you're not going somewhere? What's the point of meditating if you're not going to get some results? That's a hard one, isn't it? You've all come here for some result. Very disappointing.

And this self, this becoming, this process of being me all the time, me all the time, is driven by this desire to be happy. That's what we want, isn't it? To be happy, for heaven's sake. I don't want to be rich, I just want to be happy. So being driven by this want to be happy, I've got to manipulate, I've got to actually struggle against the way things are to make me happy because my happiness is defined by what's made me happy in the past. If crumpets and cocoa have made me happy on Thursday, then next Thursday I've got to have crumpets and cocoa. I won't be happy. Simple as that. So I begin to try and manipulate the future.

Now when we say the future, that's not some abstract idea. That means people. I've got to manipulate you to make me happy. If you get in my way, I've got to manipulate you. I've got to play around with you. If an object gets in my way, I kick it out. I burn it. I get rid of it.

I mean, we have these ideologies, don't we? When a group of people take on a similar idea, you get these vast ideologies. Christianity, communism, capitalism. And you can see what it does. It destroys people because they all have to fit into this future idea, this thing that's created only in somebody's head. And if you don't fit in, well, you get shot.

So this self has a way of collecting other selves to support the idea this self has. And then you have a movement. Oh my goodness. That's what happens to religions, isn't it? From the first inspiration, it becomes locked into a series of beliefs and attitudes and then it becomes a movement. And it loses that original spontaneity. And every so often a teacher comes along and reforms it and you get that burst of energy again. But often it will just solidify into rites and rituals, customs. Rules and regulations.

I mean, Jesus, with the Jewish tradition, "Sabbath was not made for—what is it—man was not made for the Sabbath, Sabbath was made for man." That's what he's saying, these rules and regulations are not there to bind us.

So all these problems that we come across, all these conflicts, all the emotional turmoil, all of that, it all falls back on this I am.

Now, that's the crucial importance of *vipassanā* meditation or these other forms, in other forms of Buddhism like Zen, Zazen or Dzogchen. It's all about getting down to that root level of the problem.

Now, I often quote every evening, I quote this business of those who are mindful are in the presence of *Nibbāna*, in the vicinity of *Nibbāna*. So what do we mean by that? Well, when you sit still, and so you've steadied the body and stilled the body, and you've found this observation post within yourself, and you've become an observer within yourself, a feeler, an experiencer, and you're looking into the so-called self, this body, this psychophysical complex organism—that's a very different position from "I am the body," isn't it? Because you're saying, "There's the body."

I mean, when somebody has a headache, they say, "I have a headache, I am ill." But here, suddenly from this position, you're looking at the knee, you're feeling the knee, and you're saying, "Well, there's pain." There's somehow a separation, there's a gap has appeared between this knowing and what it knows. And that gap is a loss of self. It's a loss of a relationship. It's no longer my knee, my pain. It is, there's pain.

When you have an emotion come up, depression comes up, or joy, or some sort of excitement, or this dullness and lethargy—see, normally you'd say, "I am tired." And that's good enough reason to go to bed. "I am depressed," and that's a good enough reason to go to bed. Lots of amazing good reasons to go to bed, but here you can't. If I go to bed, no, I'll be very upset. You have to say, "Oh, there's dullness. There's dullness in the head. It feels like porridge. And there's tiredness in the body."

But somehow this "there is" has made whatever knows, that which knows, separate itself from—it's formed a new relationship with it. It's not me. It's not mine. There is this. It's just like a property that you've sold or a car that you used to have that you've

sold. You have a very different relationship to it, don't you? It's not yours anymore. It's somebody else's. The fact that all the pipes burst, well, you're very compassionate, but it's not your problem anymore, is it? But if it's your house, your car, it's very upsetting if things go wrong.

So can you see that if we can develop a relationship with the body where this is the body, not me, not mine, when things go wrong, why should fear arise? It's not me, it's not mine. Why should I get depressed? It's not me, it's not mine.

Emotions, you see, we find out that they're just these volitional conditionings. That's a sort of translation of the word *saṅkhāra*. They're just conditionings. A mental conditioning. What is it? What is an emotion? What is it before you give it a name?

So here you are, you're meditating and this feeling comes up. And you can see it's not a physical feeling like pain or pleasure. It's a mental feeling. It's more of a subtle sort of energy. And as you look into it, you say, "Oh, that feels like depression or feels like anxiety or it feels like joy, feels like excitement." But to do that, you must have separated yourself. To investigate something, you've got to be outside it. If you want to look at cells, you've got to find an instrument and you're looking at it. If you want to look up in the sky, you've got to get an instrument and you've got to look at it. You can't be the star. You can't get lost in some sort of romantic emotion if you want to study the star.

So here, in order to find out what an emotion is, we've had to separate from it. And that separation, that distinction, is a loss of self because you're not saying, "I am depressed." You're saying, "There is depression." You're not saying, "I am excited." "There's excitement."

And we can take this as far as thoughts and images. When you get into a really good quiet state, you can see a thought coming. You see an image beginning to grow. Sometimes a thought passes through your mind like a neon light. And when you have those sorts of experiences, you know, well, I didn't think that. It just arose and passed away.

So, very slowly, through the practice of *vipassanā*, we are distinguishing, we're finding out that, well, this is not what I am, this is not me, not mine. And that process, of course, leads us backwards. This is the unfortunate thing. You don't know where you're going. It leads us backwards to the knowledge of who I am. That's the koan. That's the big question, as I understand it anyway, of Korean Zen. It's just that. Who am I?

And it's the moment after you've asked the question which is the potential moment. After that the mind rushes in to tell you who you are and what you are. But just to hang on in there, who am I? And that moment of not knowing has all the potential of breaking that essential delusion that hangs around the word I.

So from the Buddha's teaching, this becoming, this constant becoming me, this arising out of one moment into the next, is the fundamental problem that is creating this wrong relationship with the world. And it puts us into a conflict with it. Whether it's a subtle conflict or a major conflict, it doesn't matter. It's always a conflict. Because we're always trying to manipulate things to fit in with this sense of me.

Now when that goes, there's a whole new relationship. Now there is no future. There's no past. You're not coming from a fixed position. You're not going to a fixed position. Our ability will be to be completely receptive, without any sieve, without any separation of what we don't want, what we don't like. And in that, there's that very open communication.

And in that open, immediate communication, whether it be with a person or with an animal or with just nature, with a tree, just an openness to a tree, to a leaf, there's that sense of just being here in a very total way, for no other reason than just to be here. And with it there arises just a natural joy. This is what the Buddha says, just a natural joy. That contentment is that being with the moment, not wanting anything more than what the moment is giving us. And the happiness comes out of the response to that moment. Contentment and happiness.

So that's where we're going. And we should be happier. That's what we mean by hope as opposed to expectation. Hope is the knowledge, that inner knowledge, that inner feeling, that intuitive understanding that there's an end to suffering. There's an end to that wrong sort of relationship. And what the *vipassanā* practice is doing is making us see that, yeah, there's a possibility of an end to this. It doesn't make it any easier, but it does lift the practice a bit to know that there is an end to suffering.

See, becoming has to have this objective.

Becoming has to have this expectancy, which is slightly different. Making a distinction between hope and expectation. Hope is a fundamental position to life, that life is good. It has meaning. There is a reason for suffering. And the reason for suffering is this wrong relationship. And that once the wrong relationship is corrected, happiness, perfect peace, all that arises.

Expectation would want to put a date on it. The expectation would want to achieve it. But what we realize in the meditation is that it's not achievable by you. That's another thing that you recognize, isn't it? That it happens. Once you find yourself in that position, the heart begins to purify itself. You don't have to do anything. It's like the body heals itself.

You can't have a spiritual insight. You can't say, well, I'm going to sit down now and I'm going to have a spiritual insight. You can't do it. You can have an intellectual insight. You can think about something. You can have an aesthetic insight. You can set yourself a task to understand something aesthetically or that way. But you can't make yourself have an insight. In fact, you might argue that when it comes to certain problems, even insights of that nature are beyond the self. You know, scientists will talk about how the answer just came. They'll go to sleep. They'll sleep on an answer, and then they wake up with it. Who thought that one out?

So how do we bring ourselves, how do we begin to train ourselves in daily life to get this sense of being rather than becoming? And the trick there is to really get your intentions right. So when you're eating, you're just eating to nourish the body. You're not asking for it to make you happy. It's as simple as that. If you're asking for it to make you happy, then you've formed a different relationship with food. But if the food is there just as medicine for the body, what's the problem? The fact that it tastes nice is a plus, a little gift.

When you want to help somebody, make sure that your intention is right, that you're just doing it for that person, you're just doing it out of the goodness of heart, that there's no subliminal reasons for doing it, that you want your kitchen decorated too and that you expect them to come along and do it, things like that.

When you do whatever job you do to get it right, that you're doing it as a service, of course there's pay. And of course there's hopefully the enjoyment of the job. But those are to be seen as merit. We have this idea in Buddhism of merit. You get merit, you get something added on because of your good heart. So the merit of doing your job is you get a wage and you get a certain joy out of it. But that's not why you're doing it. The reason we should be doing work is out of a service. You're doing it for the benefit of the other.

It doesn't get rid of the idea of ambition. You don't have to not be ambitious because you've decided to live the spiritual life. But your attitude is, well, these are the talents I've got and I can see that a job, I could do that job, so I'll offer these talents as a service. So if you find that somebody else got the job, there's not that disappointment. Because it was an offering. It's like, you know, you give a present. I mean, if you give a present and the person says, well, it's all right, no, I don't want it. You shouldn't feel bad about it, should you? You only feel bad about it because there's some ego, there's some self involved in the giving of the present. It's like they've not accepted you. You've been rejected. So you feel dejected.

So in terms of our meditation, we're trying to make this distinction as to what is me and what is not me. And mainly the technique is to see not me, not me, not mine, not me, not mine. And then when we go out into daily life to see, to be aware of any selfish, any self-centered intention.

Now you've got to be careful here. There's a difference between selfishness and self-regard, self-care. I mean sometimes you've got to look after yourself. But in terms of what you're doing, you're doing it with the right attitude for the benefit of the other.

So there are three positions. You do things for your own benefit, you do things for the benefit of the other, and you do things both for your own benefit and the benefit of the other. That's how the Buddha states it. And then you see the result. Not the result out there, because you never know what happens when you do something out there. But you see the result inside. Has it caused attachment? Has it caused disappointment? If anything negative comes up from an action, then you know there's something crept in there.

So let's presume that that little girl who said there's no reason for being is already there. She might be fully and completely liberated. You never know. So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated sooner rather than later.

Two Kinds of Thought

Noirin Sheahan · 40 min

In this teaching, Noirin Sheahan examines the Dvedhāvitakka Sutta (MN 19), also known as "Two Kinds of Thought" or the "Simile of the Cowherd." This sutta presents the Buddha's pre-Awakening practice of dividing thoughts into two categories: unwholesome thoughts of sensual desire, ill-will, and cruelty versus wholesome thoughts of renunciation, non-ill-will, and non-cruelty.

Using relatable examples from modern life—from birthday cake planning to television addiction—Noirin demonstrates how to recognize when pleasurable thoughts cross into harmful attachment. She shares her personal experiment with the Buddha's recommended reflection: "This thought leads to my affliction, to others' affliction, and to the affliction of both. It obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from Nibbāna."

The talk emphasizes the Buddha's gentle, non-judgmental approach to working with unwholesome mental states, comparing our vigilance to a cowherd in rainy season who must constantly guide his cattle away from crops. Equally important is learning to appreciate wholesome thoughts without clinging—like a cowherd in dry season who simply watches his herd peacefully graze. This teaching offers practical tools for developing wise relationship with our thinking patterns and steering the mind toward genuine happiness.

Tonight I'd like to look at one of the Buddha's teachings which addresses something we all enjoy very much: thinking. The sutta is called "Two Kinds of Thought," sometimes known as the simile of the cowherd.

Here are the opening words: "Before my enlightenment, when I was still only an unenlightened bodhisatta, it occurred to me: suppose that I divide my thoughts into two classes. Then I set on one side thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill will and thoughts of cruelty. And I set on the other side thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill will and thoughts of non-cruelty. And as I abided thus, diligent, ardent and resolute, a thought of sensual desire arose in me. I understood thus: this thought of sensual desire has arisen in me. This leads to my own affliction, to others' affliction and to the affliction of both. It obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties and leads away from *Nibbāna*. When I considered 'this leads to my own affliction,' the thought subsided in me. When I considered 'this leads to others' affliction,' it subsided in me. When I considered 'this

leads to the affliction of both,' it subsided in me. When I considered 'this obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties and leads away from *Nibbāna*,' it subsided in me." He then goes on to say the same about thoughts of ill-will and thoughts of cruelty.

Our first task is to recognise thoughts of sensual desire. These would be prompting us to get more of the pleasures of the five senses and get away from their painful aspects. I'm also going to include the sixth sense of the mind here, as it's a huge area of sense desire, perhaps even more so nowadays than in the Buddha's time, with all our many choices for entertainment.

Let's start with the pleasures and pains of food. Think of how much time, energy and other resources society pours into the food industry: the agricultural sector itself, distribution, supermarkets, restaurants, bakeries and numerous other food outlets. On top of that we have cookbooks, restaurant reviews, TV shows, the Great British Bake Off, not to speak of all the advertisement needed to sell each packet of biscuits and each carton of orange juice. Even our pets have to get tasty morsels that have been through huge industrial processing and packaging. With all that activity around us, how can we avoid thinking about food?

But not every thought about food is unwholesome. We need to eat and there's no harm in thinking about what will be best to eat and what we can afford. Sharing a meal is a way of celebrating, expressing friendship, gratitude, appreciation. So we can happily devote time and energy to those preparations. What we need to look out for are thoughts leading towards indulgence. If our thoughts are blowing up a bubble of hedonic pleasure, then they are being driven by sense desire.

Suppose you plan to bake a cake for a birthday celebration. Naturally, you need to think about the relative merits of carrot cake and black forest gâteau and lemon sponge, and which kind of icing will let you put candles on top. Lots and lots of thoughts to keep track of here. Mindfulness lets you detect when the hedonic bubble is starting to form. Some tightness will develop in your body as your system starts to curl itself around pleasant feelings generated by all these lovely thoughts.

Remember the pleasure is absolutely fine and to be welcomed. Joy is part of the spiritual path and in this case we have the joy of *muditā* coming from your friendship with the birthday person and the wish for their continued happiness. The danger, however, is that we forget all about the birthday person and start to insist that we make the best ever birthday cake with a background assumption of being the best cook or the best friend anyone could ever wish for.

A brief aside here to tie in with the teaching on the floods. What started off as the flood of sensuality in the form of the birthday cake has swept us away into the flood of views revolving around how to make the best cake and the flood of becoming which whirls us into being the best cook and the best friend. This is one reason it can be hard to identify thoughts of sensual desire. The thought we might notice could be something like "I have to do this for Mary because she's such a lovely person." Hard to label this as an unwholesome thought. One telltale is the insistence, "I have to do this." If we look a bit deeper, we'll find some stress underlying this, signifying that we're being swept into one or other of the floods.

If we don't notice the flood it will provide a pleasant bubble of energy to get us through the business of shopping and baking, but at some stage the bubble will burst. Perhaps the cake flops or the party has to be cancelled or no one gives us any praise or thanks for all our efforts. Even if everything goes perfectly and we get lots of praise, the party will eventually end. The only thing to sustain our bubble is to search for another birthday and to offer to make another cake.

This is an example of the kind of affliction the Buddha asks us to consider, since pleasures cannot ultimately satisfy us. If we succumb to the societal delusion that food is a real source of happiness, then we are on the road to *dukkha* in one form or another. Overweight, cardiac problems, diabetes, food fetishes are all associated with this delusion, as well as psychological stress as our persona becomes embroiled in the food business: being the best cook, frequenting only the best restaurants, food anxieties and so on. I know someone who, despite being several thousand euros in debt, insisted on having the most expensive brand of orange juice for his breakfast every morning. What starts as a pleasure turns into addiction.

Going back to the advice from this sutta, we can nip all this in the bud. As we're planning and making the birthday cake, we watch for thoughts with giveaway phrases like "the best," "fantastic," "absolutely must have," and recognise that these stem from sensual desire. The Buddha's advice is simply to repeat, "this thought will lead to my affliction," and see what happens. It's a gentle approach to working with sense desire. We're not condemning ourselves. We're not making ourselves miserable about the cake and the celebration. We're not quelling joy. We're just being careful that it doesn't lead to the miseries of addiction.

We can work in the same way with all sensual pleasures: the joy and pride we can build out of all our material possessions, our health, youth, beauty, our relationships, sexual joys, love of music and art. And of course, there are the pleasures of the mind. Most perilous are alcohol and drug addictions. But temptations also come from the nu-

merous forms of entertainment on offer nowadays: books, magazines, newspapers, films, TV, internet, as well as the world of ideas and fantasy we can generate within our own minds.

We can get addicted to any of these. On the other hand, we can use them well to stimulate and broaden our minds, to keep in touch with the world, to see where and how we might contribute to society, for enjoyment, as a way of relaxing, to give ourselves a treat, as a social activity. Too often though, we just switch on the TV or check our emails out of boredom or mindless habit rather than with a specific beneficial aim in mind.

This is a real danger. The Buddha included idle gossip in his list for wrong speech, and if we're just passing the time with books, internet, TV, this is the modern day equivalent of idle gossip. We're filling our minds because we don't like them to be empty.

Let's look at an example. While studying this sutta, I'm embarrassed to admit that I was also hooked on a soap opera on Irish television called Fair City. But it made such a good illustration of working with this teaching that I decided to spill the beans. I'm blaming my mother, by the way. She's an avid fan, and to keep her company, I started watching occasionally. But when I was tempted to pre-record all the episodes I would miss while away in Satipanya, I had to admit that sensual desire had overtaken my dutiful daughter role.

During a meditation session, I got distracted into rehashing the plot, hoping Ciarán wouldn't murder Katie. I decided to use this opportunity to follow the Buddha's advice in this sutta. So I said to myself, "this thought will lead to my affliction." My mind gave an "uh-huh" response, a fairly neutral acknowledgement of the suggestion without much reaction one way or another.

I then reflected, "this thought will lead to the affliction of others." At this suggestion, my ears seemed to prick up. It seems my psyche is more worried about causing others a problem than it is at causing problems for myself. By the way, my psyche has got things wrong here, according to the Buddha. Deep down, we are most interested in our own happiness. And even though this might sound selfish, it's actually very wise. We can wish that others be happy, and that wish, if sincere, makes us happy. But we can't make anyone else happy. It's only because we get over-attached to friends and family that we believe their happiness is more important than our own. The psychological term is, I believe, codependency: living life to please others. We get over-anxious about them, fuss around them, trying to make things perfect. Hopefully your psyche doesn't suffer in this way. And when you do the experiment, hopefully you will find your ears pricking up for the first phrase: "this thought leads to my affliction."

I then repeated the third phrase: "this thought leads to the affliction of both myself and others." The "uh-huh" response relating to my own affliction now became energised as if it had been infected by the concern for others' affliction. I could sense myself querying what affliction I might be causing for myself. Rather than dwell on that question, I relaxed and let go, simply noticing the slightly perplexed mind state that had been engendered.

Finally, I moved on to the reflection: "this thought obscures wisdom, causes difficulties, leads away from *Nibbāna*." At this, remorse was stirred. I could see the truth of it. I had started the meditation session ardent and resolute, but had then become completely submerged in the plight of Katie and Ciarán. I could very clearly see this as a loss. I had ruined something quite precious.

From this brief experiment I could already see the value of this teaching. All three phrases had the effect of interrupting my Fair City narrative. Each phrase had evoked a different response and I can imagine that the most effective phrase will vary depending on the particular circumstances. The reflection linking my own and others' affliction is not simply a repetition of the earlier two. Some of us may have a wise concern for our own safety but have not transferred this to a concern for others, or vice versa. By combining the thought of self and other, we're letting wisdom flow from the more developed root into the less developed one.

Of the three phrases, it was the third one which rung most true for me in this particular situation. Afterwards, I found myself wanting more clarity on the afflictions caused to myself or others by getting addicted to Fair City. On reflection, I could see that it was starting to shape my day: what things I'd need to have done before 8pm, what time I should eat. And if anyone called just before 8pm or during the next sacred half hour, my heart would not leap for joy. Basically, the attachment was causing stress, taking priority over more beneficial activities, getting in the way of friendships.

To the extent that we're tied up with any addiction, we devalue our friends and family, as well as our own welfare. The addiction comes first. These come second. We deepen our addictions with every stray thought that finds delight in whatever it is we're attached to.

To clarify this, the Buddha makes this striking and often quoted statement: "Whatever a *bhikkhu* frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind." Every thought about Ciarán and Katie deepens my attachment to Fair City and increases the power that sensual desire holds over my psyche. Every time we nurse grievances, we strengthen our tendencies toward ill-will. Whenever we delight in thoughts of vengeance, we increase the power of cruelty in our minds. A sobering re-

flection indeed. We should often remind ourselves of the Buddha's statement: whatever a *bhikkhu* frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind.

Now it may well happen that the moment we notice ourselves getting caught up in thoughts about Fair City, birthday cake or whatever, we immediately judge ourselves for this. By contrast, the Buddha doesn't judge the sense pleasure or judge himself for having thoughts of sense desire. He describes a completely open-minded inquiry. He knew better than to waste time condemning himself. His energies were always clearly directed towards letting go, moving on, inclining towards *Nibbāna*.

But many of us 21st century Westerners easily succumb to self-judgment. If we want to do the experiment recommended by the Buddha, we have to let go of this. But of course, this can't be done by willpower, saying, "now I want to examine sense-desire objectively, so can I please stop judging this, at least for a few minutes?" Instead, we have to be very patient, letting our attention dwell on the sense of judgment with an open, curious spirit, until, in the gaze of awareness, it starts to dissipate.

Judgment, in my experience, feels oppressive and restricting. Physical energies come downward through the skull, pressing on the forehead and face, causing tension, heaviness and squeezing sensations. If I relax around all these sensations to any degree, I am then in a better position to try the Buddha's experiment.

By then, thoughts about birthday cake or Fair City will have abated, but we can reflect in a more general way: "thoughts of sense desire lead to my affliction." We're not hammering this into ourselves as an absolute truth, remember. We're introducing it to our minds as a thought and seeing what effect it has. A useful image is that of throwing a stone into a pool of water. The stone is the phrase, "thoughts of sensual desire lead to my affliction." The pool is your mind. The stone disappears and you just watch the ripples. When the ripples subside, we can throw in another stone with the next phrase and so on for each phrase.

If we repeat this faithfully, whenever we find ourselves thinking about whatever sense pleasure has got us hooked, we're undermining attachment with wisdom. It's a gentle way of working with attachment. We're not beating ourselves up. We're just asking our minds to acknowledge the burden that goes with any attachment. But we do need to be vigilant not to let new thoughts capture us and start blowing up the hedonic bubble again.

The Buddha gives a vivid image for this: "Just as in the last month of the rainy season, in the autumn, when the crops thicken, a cowherd would guard his cows by constantly tapping and poking them on this side and that with a stick to check and curb them. Why is that? Because he sees that he could be flogged, imprisoned, fined or blamed if he lets them stray into the crops. So too I saw in unwholesome states danger, degradation and defilement."

There are two components to this. Firstly, the vigilance required to keep poking and prodding our unwholesome thoughts. We prod and poke with reflections like, "this leads to my affliction." When we're at leisure, untroubled by sensual desire, we need to reflect on what affliction exactly we're referring to. This is what I was prompted to do after the exercise, to examine my life and see exactly how much stress was being caused by my attachment to Fair City.

I had to admit that the attachment was really degrading. Squeezing activities like Dhamma study into the "has-to-be-done-before-8pm" slot is quite disgraceful when I think about it. I'm well aware of the beneficial effect Dhamma study has on my psyche, whereas the plots in Fair City are rarely uplifting. The more we can clarify for ourselves that sensual desire is indeed a state of danger, degradation and defilement, the more determined we will be to avoid its superficial attraction.

The exercise is exactly the same with regard to thoughts of ill-will and cruelty. In my own experience, however, it needs more time and patience to get any degree of objectivity on these thoughts, as my judgmental reaction is so much stronger in these areas. For this reason, I find it easier to work with the second half of the Buddha's advice, which involves recognising thoughts of non-ill will and non-cruelty.

Here are his words: "As I abided thus, diligent, ardent and resolute, a thought of non-ill-will arose in me. I understood thus: this thought of non-ill-will has arisen in me. This does not lead to my affliction, or to others' affliction, or to the affliction of both. It aids wisdom, does not cause difficulty, leads to *Nibbāna*." He says the same of thoughts of non-cruelty as well as the renunciation of sensual desire.

Most of us would think of *metta* and compassion as the opposites of ill-will and cruelty, while the concepts non-ill-will and non-cruelty are unfamiliar. We find it hard to dwell on or value the fact of simply not wishing each other harm. But this links to delusion, the way we obscure our Buddha nature and fail to see the happiness on offer when we rest in simplicity, without desires for this and that.

Nibbāna, remember, can be described as not this, not that, as in this passage from the Udana: "There is that dimension where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind, neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon." *Metta* and compassion are the worldly expressions of *Nibbāna*. They are the enlightened response to saṃsāric beings like us, who need friendliness and compassion. But the path to *metta* and compassion, according to the Buddha, requires first a withdrawal from ill-will and cruelty.

We might tend to dismiss that state of withdrawal as somehow unimportant. However, in this sutta, the Buddha tells us that he spent time looking for thoughts associated with non-ill-will and non-cruelty, learning to recognize them, consider their effects on his psyche, and ultimately to value them deeply.

We can sensitize ourselves to these notions in a variation on *metta* meditation. Instead of repeating phrases of goodwill, we can repeat a phrase like "no harm" as we think of people in all the usual *metta* categories. We can do the same thing for the phrase "no cruelty." Both of these exercises help us to value the fairly neutral states we often experience in meditation or during quiet moments in life. It's easy to overlook these, but when we reflect on their peaceful, non-threatening nature, it deepens our appreciation.

Thoughts of non-ill-will and non-cruelty will arise spontaneously when we're letting go of their opposites, though again it's easy to overlook these in the heat of the moment. Suppose we've gone through a bout of rage and have been gloating over the details of the punishment we're going to dish out. We've gone from rage to cruelty here, but sooner or later a bit of wisdom will return to suggest that we might be straying off the path a tiny bit.

There may then be the tendency to shoot straight into self-judgment and writhe in shame because of having succumbed to anger and cruelty. We might even despise ourselves in these moments. But the Buddha is asking us instead to fish out any thoughts of deciding not to enact all our delicious punishments, to single these out from the rest of the turmoil and look on them with appreciation.

At some stage in the transition from rage to self-judgment, there is the decision to stop feeding the rage. This decision may have come with a thought like, "This is getting me nowhere, I'll have to stop." It would be easy to forget that thought as the mind sinks into despair or ricochets into self-judgment. To sensitize ourselves to such thoughts, we can steady our attention around the feelings associated with these. This will have the

added benefit of stemming the proliferation of the competing negative thoughts which may revolve around despair, self-judgment, blame, guilt or shame and the odd ricochet back to rage.

Thus, paying attention to the thread of wholesome thought will effectively contain our negativity and we might start to feel better about ourselves, more confident that we can learn to work with anger and not let it harm ourselves or others.

So what do thoughts of non-ill-will, non-cruelty actually feel like? I find these very subtle. A quiet withdrawal of energy from that strong sense of self that builds around anger or its ricochet into self-judgment and shame. The body seems to shrink a fraction during those thoughts and there is a momentary relaxation, a sense of withdrawing.

There is a danger of shrinking further into shame and fear of judgment. But if I can detect the wish to shrink and resist it, the negative energies drain into that midway state of quietness and a sense of confidence starts to work its way through the shame, strengthening the "no harm" attitude. In that more stable emotional state, I might find the mental space to repeat the Buddha's suggested phrases.

"This thought does not lead to my affliction." This usually increases confidence, adds an element of joy, suggests that despite all my failings, I might be on the right path. By comparison, the reflection, "This thought does not lead to others' affliction," is more challenging for my psyche. I still get the extra boost of confidence and joy, but the desire to collapse into shame also increases as I start to acknowledge the harm I'd been planning for my enemy.

The third phrase, "This thought does not lead to the affliction of both," brings more stability and a determination to mend my ways. As mentioned earlier, this contemplation of self and other lets the positive energy from the wiser response support the weaker response. The final phrase, "This thought aids wisdom, does not cause difficulties, leads to *Nibbāna*," usually deepens my remorse and determination not to indulge anger in future.

We can work in exactly the same way regarding thoughts of renouncing sense desire. Following my acknowledgement of the afflictions brought by worries about Katie and Kieran, I decided not to watch Fair City that evening. It would have been very easy to just nod my head wisely and with a touch of shame for needing to make such a decision. But when I repeated, "This thought does not lead to my affliction," I noticed a pleasant feeling of relief.

A touch of pride was added to the relief when I reflected, "This thought does not lead to the affliction of others." A sense of self-care was added to the mix when I reflected, "This thought does not lead to either my own or others' affliction." The final phrase, "This thought aids wisdom, does not cause difficulties, leads to *Nibbāna*," brought a sense of happiness and deepened the commitment to the decision.

With regard to these wise thoughts of renunciation, non-ill-will and non-cruelty, the Buddha adds this interesting reflection: "If I think and ponder upon this thought, even for a night, even for a day, even for a day and a night, I see nothing to fear from it. But with excessive thinking and pondering, I might tire my body, and when the body is tired, the mind becomes strained, and when the mind is strained, it is far from concentration. So I steady my mind internally."

He expands on his simile of the cowherd to clarify this: "Just as in the last month of the hot season when all the crops have been brought inside the villages a cowherd would guard his cows while staying at the root of a tree or out in the open since he only needs to be mindful that the cows are there, so too there was need only for me to be mindful that wholesome states were there."

In the case of unwholesome thoughts, we are to be like a cowherd in the rainy season, poking at them with a stick to prevent them doing harm. But with wholesome thoughts, we can take it easy, just noticing these without any effort to control or develop them. This, in effect, confirms that our natural, relaxed state is inherently wholesome. We don't need to control, protect or develop it. All we need do is notice it. It's a very comforting thought.

This also ties in with what we spoke of in the Sutta on the raft. Once we've crossed the flood, we have to let go of the raft. We shouldn't try to cling to wholesome states. We will only tire ourselves out and put our minds under strain. Awareness is not troubled by the unwholesome and does not depend on the wholesome.

Let's recap with an example. Say you decide not to have an extra slice of cake. Don't let this go unacknowledged amidst what might be posing as more righteous thoughts like, "Of course I don't need an extra slice, how could I be so greedy?" These righteous thoughts reflect an overshoot into condemnation. In condemning our desire for cake, we are unwittingly condemning ourselves for having desires, thinking, "I am greedy."

But the energy of desire itself can be directed towards the goal of our spiritual life. We don't want to suppress this. We want to use it. What we need to find is the middle ground where the basic energy of desire is known and our only job is to check that it's

not directed towards false hopes of happiness. Like our cowherd in the rainy season, we poke at it with a stick, saying, "This thought will lead to my affliction," for as long as thoughts of having more cake are nudging us to pick up a knife and cut that extra slice.

When we feel a change of heart and are no longer edging towards the knife, happy to renounce cake, we can relax. Like the cowherd in the dry season, we simply notice the contented state for as long as it lasts. In this way, we direct our instinctive desire for happiness towards its true goal.

The Buddha closes the sutta with another pastoral simile which this time gives us a broad brush image for our spiritual life. Here are his words: "Suppose, *bhikkhus*, that in a wooded range there was a great low-lying marsh near which a large herd of deer lived. Then a man appeared desiring their ruin, harm and bondage, and he closed off the safe and good path that led to their happiness, and he opened up a false path, and he put out a decoy and set up a dummy, so that the large herd of deer would later come upon calamity, disaster and loss. But another man came, desirous of their good, welfare and protection, and he reopened the safe and good path that led to their happiness. And he closed off the false path, and he removed the decoy and destroyed the dummy, so that the large herd of deer could later come to growth, increase and fulfilment."

The herd of deer represents living beings while Māra, the personification of evil in Buddhism, closes off the safe path. The marsh represents sensual pleasure and sensual desire is the decoy. If your mind likes working with images, try imagining a trail of lush vegetation luring the deer toward the marsh. Ignorance is the dummy. I imagine a scarecrow in the shape of a wolf that blocks off the noble eightfold path that leads to happiness. It is the Buddha who removes the decoy of lush vegetation and destroys the scarewolf, thereby reopening the eightfold path.

The parallel here with Christian imagery is striking. In the Christian myth we have Lucifer, the devil, causing the rift between God and mankind. The rift is then healed by Christ, the Good Shepherd, who cares for us, his flock, and sets up a new covenant between God and mankind.

This image of the deer herd fits very well with the Buddha's teaching on *kalyāṇamit-tā*, or spiritual friendship. To allow such friendships form the whole of the spiritual life, we are to see the Buddha as our spiritual friend and develop a loving relationship with him. The simile of the deer herd provides quite a beautiful image we can use for such a devotional practice.

The whole notion of devotion may turn some of you off, but if, like me, you were brought up with the family rosary, this simile could be a very helpful way of integrating your Christian heritage within Buddhist practice. And since two separate religions have come up with such a strikingly similar image for spiritual development, I think there must be something worthwhile here.

The Good Shepherd image might not appeal to everyone as it likens us to a flock of sheep. A deer herd is a bit easier on our sensitivities and I'm finding this image very useful. Rather than go through all the phrases on affliction, I sometimes picture the Buddha picking up the lush vegetation that is tempting me to take the wrong path.

So far, I still find the notion of Māra quite challenging, though I can see the value of this. It's easy to gloss over the perils of sensual pleasure when we live within a society that actively promotes these. Imagining a leering devil lurking behind the TV during the ads wakes me up to the danger these pose. It focuses the mind to think that someone is really out to get you. Our minds are good at enmity, so we might as well put that talent to a useful purpose.

To balance this, we have the image of the Buddha desiring our welfare and happiness, removing the allure of sensual pleasures with his teaching, destroying the scare-wolf of ignorance that blocks our path to happiness. See if you find it helpful to let your imagination play around with the image of the deer herd.

And don't forget the other pastoral image given in this sutta. Like the cowherd in the rainy season, we prod at unskillful thoughts with wise reflections on the danger they pose. When wholesome thoughts appear, we relax, like the cowherd in the dry season, noticing these without tiring ourselves out by pondering them.

Just before closing, I want to remind you of this very striking line from the sutta: "Whatever a *bhikkhu* frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind." Let's bring that home to ourselves. Whatever we frequently think and ponder upon, that will become the inclination of our mind.

May we develop a wise relationship with thoughts and thereby avoid the alluring swamp of sense pleasure and find the true path to happiness.

Une tentative de comprendre anattā

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1h08

Dans cette conférence donnée à Lausanne, Bhante Bodhidhamma entreprend une exploration approfondie de l'enseignement du Bouddha sur anattā (not-self). Il commence par contextualiser historiquement la notion d'attā (âme) à l'époque du Bouddha - éternelle, bienheureuse et substantielle - avant d'examiner méthodiquement les cinq khandhas (agrégats) : rūpa (forme/corps), vedanā (sensations), saññā (perceptions), saṅkhāra (formations mentales), et viññāṇa (conscience). À travers cette analyse, il démontre que chaque agrégat est impermanent, sans contrôle ultime, et dépourvu de substance.

Bhante explore ensuite le processus de paṭicca samuppāda (production conditionnée) pour révéler comment le sens du 'soi' émerge à travers les contacts sensoriels et les réactions habituelles. Cependant, loin d'enseigner un nihilisme, il présente les paroles du Bouddha sur l'inconditionné - cette conscience pure qui transcende les six domaines sensoriels et constitue la fin de dukkha. La conférence culmine avec des instructions pratiques de vipassanā pour découvrir cette conscience témoin qui observe sans s'identifier, menant progressivement vers la réalisation de nibbāna.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Harahato Sambha Sambhudassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Harahato Sambha Sambhudassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Harahato Sambha Sambhudassa

Hommage au Bouddha, à celui qui est pleinement et complètement réalisé par lui-même.

Je vais tenter de démystifier l'enseignement prodigué sur le non-soi et je ne vais vraisemblablement pas réussir mais ça ne sera pas sans avoir eu la volonté d'essayer.

Dans les légendes qui entourent l'éveil du Bouddha, quand il s'approcha de ses compagnons antérieurs, dans un premier temps, ils ne voulaient même pas l'accueillir. Après tout, il avait quitté la vie ascétique et il était devenu faible. Mais ils avaient l'impression que quelque chose avait changé dans cet homme et donc ils ne pouvaient pas mettre le doigt dessus et ils lui préparèrent néanmoins le siège de l'enseignant.

Il donna son premier discours en décrivant la base de ses enseignements. Maintenant, nous ne savons pas ce qu'il a en fait dit exactement, mais il a été dit qu'il s'agissait des quatre nobles vérités qui sont le fait de l'insatisfaction, la cause de l'insatisfaction -

et la cause de cette insatisfaction est le désir erroné ou faux - et qu'en fait il peut y avoir une fin à la souffrance et ensuite le chemin permettant d'accéder à la fin de cette souffrance.

À la fin de ce discours, Kandanya, un de ses anciens compagnons, eut une première réalisation. Et le Bouddha s'exclama de joie, "Anya Kandanya." *Anya* veut dire celui qui sait. Mais les quatre autres anciens compagnons demeurèrent dans un état d'ignorance. Et donc, ils firent le tour de l'aumône pour aller récolter de la nourriture. Mais c'est peut-être grâce au fait qu'ils s'étaient bien nourris après cette tournée d'aumône que les quatre autres devinrent pleinement réalisés à leur tour. Il donna un discours par lequel les autres devinrent complètement libérés. Et cela est connu comme la caractéristique de non-soi.

En premier lieu, il faut bien se rendre compte de ce que signifiait à ce moment-là *atta*, ce qui veut dire soi ou moi. Et en cette période-là, *atta* était plutôt à considérer comme l'âme. Et quelles étaient donc les caractéristiques de l'âme à cette époque-là ?

La première est que c'était éternel. Et bien maintenant, si quelque chose est éternel, ça signifie que ça ne change pas. Et que ça ne change pas en autre chose. Si cela change, ça doit forcément être quelque chose d'autre par rapport à ce qui avait été avant.

En deuxième lieu, la caractéristique suivante, c'est que l'âme était toujours bien-heureuse, en continuité heureuse. Et la raison de cela, c'est parce que l'âme était en contrôle d'elle-même. Et donc en fait ça veut dire qu'il n'y a pas le phénomène de séparation ou de dualité au sein de l'âme et ça veut dire qu'elle est pleine et entière en elle-même. Elle est en un état de perfection. La perfection et l'éternité vont ensemble.

Et la troisième caractéristique, c'était que cette âme, c'était ce qu'il y avait de vrai, et tout le reste de ce monde-ci, ce n'était que faux, c'était illusion. C'était ce qui était vrai, et par opposition, le monde n'est pas réel.

Donc, le Bouddha dit, "Investiguez-vous." Et il nous a donné des outils pour y arriver. Il divise en cinq tas, cinq catégories, ce qui constitue être un être humain. Alors le mot le plus adapté c'est agrégat parce qu'en fait chaque agrégat est constitué de plusieurs choses.

Et le premier agrégat est le corps. Tout d'abord, est-ce que le corps change ? Alors les physiciens d'aujourd'hui qui sont nos nouveaux dieux nous disent que notre corps, intégrant toutes les cellules du corps, se transforme et se remplace entièrement en l'espace de sept ans. La prochaine fois que vous vous regardez dans une glace, dites-vous à

vous-même, ce visage n'était pas ici il y a sept ans. Dites-vous bien qu'il y a sept ans, le visage que vous percevez n'était pas là. Alors, quel que soit ce que constituait le visage il y a sept ans, tout cela a complètement disparu.

Est-ce que nous avons le contrôle sur le corps pour réussir à atteindre la paix ou tout au moins des expériences qui soient plaisantes ou au minimum neutres ? Alors dans le cas justement de contrôle et de bonheur, le corps ne peut pas nous le donner.

Et quand on dit réel, on veut dire substance. Et la substance, c'est une philosophie que vous avez en même temps à l'Est comme à l'Ouest. Alors la substance est quelque chose qui se trouve en dessous de ce qui est apparent. Et en philosophie, ils parlent de substance d'un côté et d'attribut de l'autre côté. Le meilleur exemple de la distinction entre les deux est la compréhension catholique de ce qui se passe dans l'Eucharistie. Au moment où le curé donne sa bénédiction à l'hostie, cela conserve les attributs de pain mais la substance est devenue le corps du Christ.

Donc, dans l'entendu du Bouddha, pouvons-nous trouver cette substance sous le corps, comme nous l'expérimentons ? En d'autres mots, si vous retirez les attributs de cette main, est-ce qu'il y a une main substantielle ? Alors, si nous enlevons les attributs du corps, est-ce qu'on arrive à trouver la substance sous le corps ? De même que pour la main, si on enlevait les attributs de la main, est-ce qu'on trouverait une substance à la main ? Selon nos scientifiques honorables, ceci n'est pas possible. Mais quoi qu'il en soit, quel que soit *atta*, donc l'âme, et bien ce n'est de toute façon pas le corps.

Alors durant ces temps, et y compris pour le Bouddha, le corps mental était considéré comme séparé du corps physique et d'ailleurs lors de la mort c'est ce corps subtil qui quitte le corps physique, mais en fait les mêmes questionnements peuvent se poser pour ce corps subtil. Maintenant, laissons cela à l'extérieur parce que c'est une question de si nous y croyons ou non.

Si nous revenons au corps présent que nous avons, nous pouvons prendre les mêmes arguments pour l'agrégat suivant qui est le ressenti. Alors, dans les enseignements du Bouddha, tous les ressentis dans le corps sont *vedanas*. *Vedana*, les sensations qui viennent du corps, comme la douleur. Et il y a des ressentis, des émotions qui viennent de l'esprit, par exemple lorsqu'on se sent heureux.

Et tous ces états souffrent des mêmes caractéristiques : ils ne sont pas permanents, ils sont constamment en train de changer, ils n'ont aucune substance, ils sont juste des sentiments passagers et le plus important de notre point de vue, c'est qu'on ne peut pas les contrôler. Et si on pouvait se dire à soi-même "Ah, maintenant, je ne vais plus jamais

me mettre en colère" et puis que ça se passait ainsi, puis ça disparaissait. Donc nous avons très peu de contrôle sur nos émotions. Pour la plupart, ce sont des réactions, des réactions apprises pour faire face à des situations.

Et maintenant, nous passons au troisième agrégat. Et tout ça, ce sont nos perceptions. Et nous pouvons mettre tous nos concepts et toutes nos mémoires dans cet agrégat et là nous pouvons voir encore plus clairement que bien évidemment ce n'est pas notre âme. En fait ils sont très passagers, fugaces, bien des choses de cet ordre là on les oublie, ils n'ont aucune substance. Et à notre désarroi, durant la méditation, on n'arrive pas à les contrôler.

Ensuite nous passons au quatrième agrégat qui sont nos *sankaras*. Maintenant, *sankaras* sont nos habitudes. Et ce sont les habitudes que nous créons à travers nos actes de volonté. Le corps n'est pas sous notre contrôle, nos émotions et nos ressentis ne sont pas non plus sous notre contrôle, mais ces habitudes, on les a créées à travers un acte de volonté.

Alors ça peut être une habitude toute simple comme avoir envie d'avoir une boisson ou prendre une boisson toutes les dix minutes. Ça peut être une habitude d'être irritable chaque fois que l'on voit un lapin. Les taupes ont attaqué mon gazon et pendant longtemps chaque fois que j'ai vu ces montagnes, j'ai devenu très irrité. C'était ma décision de devenir irritable et chaque fois que je voyais ces tas de taupinières.

Donc, ces *sankharas*, ces habitudes, bien évidemment, ils se transforment. Ils n'ont aucune substance parce qu'eux aussi, ils passent. Alors, rappelez-vous que la définition de substance, c'est que ça ne change pas et ça ne passe pas.

Maintenant nous passons au cinquième agrégat qui est le dernier. Et ça ce sont des actes de cognition. Toutes les informations qui arrivent constamment au cerveau et à l'esprit doivent être interceptées sur un écran suffisamment longtemps pour qu'on puisse comprendre et le situer et ça, ça constitue un acte de cognition.

Donc l'acte de cognition change extraordinairement rapidement. En fait cet acte de cognition se transforme selon le Bouddha d'une manière extraordinairement rapide. C'est comme ces vieux films avec les bandes : si le film va suffisamment vite, on a cette impression de continuité. Et ainsi, ces actes de cognition se passent à un rythme tellement élevé qu'on a cette illusion ou cette impression de continuité. Et cette impression de continuité, quand c'est étendu, donne lieu à cette impression de soi. Et nous revenons à ceci dans un moment.

Alors le Bouddha veut qu'on investisse cet état psychophysique de manière à pouvoir voir si effectivement il y a cette âme qui est présente, si l'âme réside dans cette forme psychophysique. Et ça, c'est une des expériences, si on peut l'appeler ainsi, que le Bouddha nous propose. Une coupe perpendiculaire.

Il veut aussi que nous investiguions ça comme un continuum dans le temps et ça il le fait à travers son enseignement de l'Origination Dépendante. Il nous dit que le processus de conscience, pour ne pas trouver un mot mieux que celui-ci - il faut dire que ces jours, les scientifiques étudient la conscience et les philosophes parlent beaucoup de la conscience et ça débouche au fait qu'il n'y a plus que de la confusion. Et d'ailleurs c'est pour cette raison que je n'aime pas tellement utiliser ce mot.

Cela commence avec le corps et l'esprit et avec cela, il y a les actes de cognition. Le corps et l'esprit sont ensuite subdivisés dans les six sens. Et les six sens sont en fait l'esprit et le cerveau, le complexe du mental et de l'esprit. Et à cette étape il y a contact.

Pour un acte de cognition qui puisse se manifester, il doit y avoir trois facteurs. Il doit y avoir un objet, il doit y avoir une base de sens pour pouvoir percevoir cet objet, et il doit y avoir cet acte de cognition. Donc, il y a l'enregistreur et je le vois et il y a l'acte de le voir dans mon esprit.

Le point suivant c'est qu'on détermine si c'est plaisant ou déplaisant. Alors nous vivons dans ce monde où il y a toujours cette dualité qui y est en fait. Alors soit nous expérimentons les choses comme plaisantes ou déplaisantes, ou toute la rangée des émotions entre ces deux possibilités. Et même pour ce qui est de ce qu'on pourrait appeler neutre, il y a toujours une petite teinte, soit agréable ou désagréable.

Le point suivant est une relation avec ce qu'on perçoit comme étant plaisant ou déplaisant. À ce point, une fois que nous avons décidé cela, il y a un point - c'est le point où on veut ou on ne veut pas quelque chose. C'est seulement au stade suivant que le sens du soi ou du moi surgit. Et le point suivant est en fait l'action. Et ça, c'est le point du *kamma*, à savoir l'action.

Et ainsi, nous disons, "Je veux une glace fantastique." Mais psychologiquement, c'est dans l'autre sens : glace, sympa, je veux, je, je prends. Donc ce sens que nous avons de moi apparaît et passe aussi très rapidement. Et donc aussi ce sens du soi ou du moi en fait surgit et passe et disparaît aussi à une fréquence rapide et ça c'est quelque chose qu'on peut expérimenter directement à travers cette méditation *vipassana*.

À travers ces réflexions lorsque nous sommes dans la position assise et bien ça consiste juste à observer finalement ce qui apparaît sur cet écran et rien finalement ne peut être identifié comme une âme.

Alors on pourrait dire à ce stade que le Bouddha enseigne le nihilisme. Et à ce moment, on doit aller à un autre endroit des Écritures où le Bouddha décrit la fin de la souffrance. Il le dit de nombreuses façons, mais celle qui est la plus courante c'est qu'il y a un non-né, il y a un non-crée et il y a un inconditionné.

Il parle aussi d'*Ayatana*. *Ayatana* est une sphère. Une sphère d'un point de vue du Bouddha est une expérience exclusive et il parle donc des six sens. Donc il y a une sphère de vision qui est différente de la sphère de l'ouïe. Et vous ne pouvez pas entendre avec vos yeux et voir avec vos oreilles.

Et ensuite, il dit, il y a une sphère où il n'y a ni soleil, ni lune. En d'autres termes, cet univers, ce cosmos. Et ensuite, il y a une sphère où il n'y a pas de venue, ni de départ. Rien ne se passe. Et il poursuit en disant juste ceci, c'est la fin de la souffrance.

Et la citation finale, c'est lorsque quelqu'un demanda au Bouddha où cela se passe quand les quatre éléments arrivent jusqu'au bout, jusqu'à la fin. Les quatre éléments sont la terre, le feu, l'eau et l'air. Et en fait, ce sont des métaphores. Et ils constituent le monde matériel. Tout ce qui a de la pression, aujourd'hui, on appellerait ça de la gravité, ou tout au moins qui fait partie de la gravité. Le feu c'est l'énergie, l'eau c'est la cohésion, c'est l'élasticité, c'est ce qui rassemble, c'est le facteur de rassemblement et l'air c'est le mouvement.

Et il demanda donc au Bouddha, "Quand est-ce que ces éléments arrivent au bout, où est-ce que ces éléments arrivent à la fin ?"

Sa réponse est de dire que la question est mal formulée. Vous devriez demander : où sont les quatre éléments qui ne trouvent pas de pied ? Vous devriez poser la question suivante : quand les quatre éléments ne trouvent pas pied ? Et ensuite il fait ce constat qui est extrêmement clair.

Il y a une conscience, une connaissance qui n'est teintée d'aucun des six sens. Ce qui veut dire que ça ne peut pas être vu, touché, senti, goûté, entendu. Et ça ne peut pas y réfléchir, on ne peut pas en faire une conception, et ça ne peut pas être ressenti. Et en plus c'est sans frontières. Les frontières sont créées par les phénomènes. Et donc là il n'y a rien du tout. Et en plus dans toutes les directions est plein de lumière. Juste cela est la fin de la souffrance.

Et ça, ça a l'air de ressembler à un *atta* qui n'est pas un *atta*. Les mêmes qualités d'éternité et de substance, tout est dit dans cette sentence. Et en fait, ces qualités d'éternité et de substance, tout ceci est intégré dans cette phrase. C'est permanent, c'est complet en lui-même et de ce fait, c'est heureux, si on peut dire ça, entre guillemets. Mais ça n'a pas de moi, de soi.

Et maintenant Bhante nous amène sur une autre piste et à travers un autre angle de vue. Cette conscience dont le Bouddha parle, si nous pouvons revenir au moment où nous avons été conçus, à notre naissance, alors ça se trouve en fait à l'intérieur du fœtus. Qu'est-ce que ça c'est ? Ça ne sait rien. Alors il croit savoir que ça commence à sentir, à entendre la voix de sa maman, la sensation de chaleur. Et puis quand il est né, qu'est-ce qu'on en sait ?

Quelque part, le long de ce parcours, il y a une identification à cette forme. À un moment donné, jusqu'à l'âge de trois ans, l'enfant devient conscient de lui-même. Quelque part, entre la naissance et jusqu'à l'âge de trois ans, l'enfant devient conscient de lui-même. Et les chimpanzés aussi, d'ailleurs. C'est étonnant, hein ?

Et on peut donc voir que l'erreur est vite faite : je suis cet être humain. Qu'est-ce que nous souhaitons ? Qu'est-ce que nous désirons ? Nous voulons être heureux. Nous pouvons définir notre propre bonheur, mais nous voulons tous être heureux. Donc nous cherchons le bonheur. Et c'est la raison pour laquelle nous allons rechercher le bonheur. Ce sens du soi en fait c'est désécurisant, ça a besoin de se sécuriser, de se sentir vrai et tangible.

L'accumulation des choses devient ensuite de l'avidité. Plus j'ai de l'argent dans mon compte en banque et plus je me sens en sécurité. Et parce que j'ai ces choses, je dois nécessairement les tenir. Et parce que j'ai toutes ces choses, j'ai forcément besoin de les conserver, de les garder. Et j'ai donc toujours peur de les perdre. Et si jamais quelqu'un essaie de nous les prendre, et bien ce sont des personnes à détester. Et en particulier les gouvernements ! Non !

Ici, nous avons nos attitudes basiques face à la vie. L'envie d'acquérir. L'aversion. Et la peur, la crainte. Et tout ça vient à cause de cette erreur concernant ce qu'on est réellement.

Alors, comment dépassons-nous cette erreur ? C'est en faisant la pratique du *vipassanā* et en découvrant un autre lotus, un autre endroit de nous-mêmes. Hier, j'étais un petit peu surpris que certaines personnes n'avaient pas cognisé ce sens de l'observateur.

Donc, quand vous êtes assis en méditation, la première chose dont vous prenez conscience, c'est la respiration. Le fait que vous soyez conscient de quelque chose n'est forcément pas la conscience elle-même. Parce qu'en fait, il y a la conscience d'un côté et il y a l'objet de l'autre. Donc, nous avons enlevé l'identité au corps.

Qu'est-ce qu'on veut dire par l'identification au corps ? Avec les enfants, c'est très simple. Mais prenez par exemple un moment où vous prenez votre doigt dans la porte. Pour cet instant singulier, vous êtes la douleur. Et ça, c'est l'identification au corps. Et

ensuite vous revenez en arrière, vous reculez et vous devenez furieux et vous donnez un coup de pied dans la porte. Donc l'identité avec quelque chose signifie : c'est le soi, c'est ce que vous pensez, c'est une expérience de vous dans ce moment.

Et l'identification au soi c'est en fait l'expérience que nous faisons du soi à un moment donné précis dans le temps. Et lorsqu'il s'agit d'une émotion, c'est plus facile à comprendre. Très souvent nous nous perdons dans des émotions, dans une émotion nous nous trouvons comme la colère elle-même. Nous perdons la conscience de nous-mêmes, nous sommes simplement la colère.

Nous sommes heureux, nous sommes complètement absorbés dans quelque chose et nous perdons totalement le sens de nous-mêmes et nous sommes en fait ce bonheur. Quand vous regardez un film ou un DVD pour une heure ou deux et vous êtes complètement absorbé dans ce film, vous êtes le film ou pas. Est-ce correct ? Dans le même sens.

Donc, il y a un esprit émotionnel. Maintenant, quand je médite, je ressens une émotion ici. Il y a l'awareness et l'émotion. Alors il y a le soi émotionnel, quand vous êtes en méditation et que vous ressentez cette émotion, et bien il y a moi et il y a l'émotion. Voilà, il me corrige, il y a cette conscience d'un côté et il y a l'émotion de l'autre.

Avec les pensées, quand je me sers, parfois je deviens la pensée : je pense, donc je suis. Mais lorsque la méditation est très claire, il m'arrive de voir les pensées passer, voire même de voir comme un train défilier toutes ces pensées qui passent à travers moi. Et à ce moment, je suis conscient du fait qu'il y a à la fois la conscience et de l'autre côté, il y a ces pensées qui traversent mon esprit.

Et ensuite, nous arrivons au positionnement final du sens, du soi ou du moi. Et ça, c'est le ressenti de l'observateur, de celui qui sait. L'observateur. À ce stade là vous ne pouvez pas aller plus loin jusqu'à ce stade. Vous pouvez tout faire avec un acte d'intention. Si vous essayez de vous débarrasser de la conscience de soi, vous créez une autre conscience au-dessus de celle-ci qui, elle, n'aime pas cette conscience de soi-même.

Paradoxalement, ce sens de moi que nous expérimentons en nous-mêmes, en fait, pointe dans la bonne direction. Quand vous regardez dans un miroir, lorsque vous vous regardez dans une glace, vous croyez que le monde vous voit comme cela. Combien d'entre vous ont fait le test des deux miroirs ? Non ? Combien ? Personne ? Non, non, non. D'accord.

Voilà ce qui se passe : c'est qu'en fait quand vous regardez dans le miroir, le miroir inverse le visage de telle sorte que Bhante explique, si j'ai bien compris, que si on met un autre miroir de profil, il faut se regarder dans ce miroir là pour que celui-là reflète

l'image de notre visage dans le premier miroir. Et c'est dans le premier miroir qu'on aurait le vrai visage que les autres personnes nous voient, comme les personnes nous voient. Si j'ai bien compris, la première chose à faire en rentrant !

Alors ce sens de la conscience de soi, alors cette conscience de soi, celui qui observe... parce que nous sommes conscients du fait que nous avons conscience de nous-mêmes, c'est un autre objet. Oui, cette conscience qu'on a conscience de soi, et bien cette conscience de soi ne peut être qu'un objet finalement. Si nous-mêmes on arrive à constater qu'on a conscience de nous-mêmes, c'est comme on arrive à le constater, et bien ça peut être qu'un objet aussi. C'est un objet. Donc on ne peut pas être la conscience de soi-même. Et donc, nous ne pouvons pas nous résumer à être, à nous identifier à cette conscience qu'on a de nous-mêmes.

Alors, quel que ce soit qui est vrai, réel, ça s'attrape dans le mental. C'est seulement quand vous réussissez à atteindre un état de calme profond. Et donc, il y a un sens de paix, de calme. Mettez-vous directement sur la sensation, le ressenti de la conscience de soi.

Maintenant, c'est pourquoi le Bouddha dit que ceux qui sont en pleine conscience sont en présence du *Nibbāna*. Voilà, en présence du. Et quand... la conclusion, c'est que quand nous sommes dans un état où nous avons conscience de nous-mêmes, nous sommes presque arrivés.

Je vous ai dit que j'allais provoquer plus de confusion qu'avant. Alors si nous passons en revue ceci, il y a trois formes d'investigation. Nous devons investiguer cet organisme psychophysique pour voir s'il y a quelque chose de permanent. C'est le plus facile. Nous devons ensuite, dans notre méditation, voir le point où vient l'esprit d'identité. Et nous devons voir dans notre méditation le point au stade duquel la notion d'identité rentre en ligne de compte. Parce qu'en fait, ça nous enseigne et ça nous démontre que l'identité n'est pas permanente. Par exemple, quand on dort, il n'y a pas de sens de soi-même, il n'y a pas d'identité. Mais il y a de l'awareness.

Et en finalité, lorsque nous arrivons dans notre méditation, que nous sommes juste en présence de la conscience que nous avons de nous-mêmes, la conscience de soi, notre conscience est juste sur le ressenti de présence à l'instant.

Je peux seulement souhaiter que mes mots puissent vous aider et vous assister et n'ont pas engendré plus de confusion, mais au contraire a permis de marquer le chemin qui mène à la libération de manière encore plus claire. Et que vous puissiez par votre pratique diligente arriver à ce lieu de paix et de bonheur parfait. Arrivez à ce stade où vous serez en paix et vous serez bien heureux.

Why Didn't the Buddha Return to Lay Life?

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 57 min

In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma addresses a compelling question: why didn't the Buddha return to lay life after his full self-realization? He explores the practical and spiritual reasons behind this choice, examining how the monastic life supported the Buddha's teaching mission and the establishment of the Saṅgha.

The discussion reveals how the Buddha's famous Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) was actually delivered to lay people in Kammāsadhamma, demonstrating that complete liberation is possible for householders. Bhante Bodhidhamma explains how the 'dusty' nature of lay life—lacking spiritual support—creates challenges, yet emphasizes that the same mindfulness practice applies whether sitting in meditation or engaging in daily activities.

Drawing from the three characteristics of existence (anicca, dukkha, anattā), the talk shows how insights into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self can transform our relationship with pleasure, pain, and control. Practical guidance is offered for bringing Right Awareness into relationships, work, and consumer culture, while maintaining the loving-kindness that the Buddha described as 'the noblest way to live.'

Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsaṃbuddhassa Namō tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsaṃbuddhassa Namō tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsaṃbuddhassa

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

So, just roving around the topic of meditation, daily life, practice and all that. I suppose one interesting question we might ask is one of these "if" questions. Why didn't the Buddha return to lay life once he'd become fully self-realised? Good question, isn't it?

Well, I think practically he'd become used to the wandering life and the first people he taught were his old companions who were also wandering ascetics, and they very quickly became members of his order. Very shortly after that, people wanted to follow him, become his disciples.

The first ordination was a simple word: *ehi*, come. So when somebody said, "Well, I'd like to follow your teachings, be with you, join your *sangha*, your community," he just said, "*ehi*, come along."

When the *sangha* was established, then the second type of ordination was established, where people took refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the *sangha*, which has now become the lay way of determining your commitment to the Dhamma.

By around about twenty years – they say for twenty years the people who joined were of high caliber, and then it began to slide down the slippery slope. The ordination then became quite a long one, maybe half an hour or so, in which certain questions had to be asked, such as: Are you still in government employ? Are you in debt? Are you a man? It was a very interesting one. Are you a human being? So various sorts of people tried to join the order.

One of the reasons, just as a little aside, was that the great court physician would treat the Buddha's monks free of charge. And of course, occasionally people would join the order in order to be treated without charge. So one of the questions is, are you sick? And the rule is you can't ordain somebody who has certain illnesses. I remember a sorry case that happened with somebody with AIDS who came wanting to join the order – they weren't ready.

So very quickly he formed this particular grouping. But early on, very shortly after his realisation, he did go home and hugged his mother – or his stepmother – and met all his family, his extended family. And of course that was the moment when his wife said to their child, Rāhula, go and ask your father for your inheritance.

So obviously there's some feeling that the Buddha's not going to come back to lay life, and she wants him to make him the heir to his grandfather's fortunes. But the Buddha of course ordains him – that was his inheritance, the Dhamma.

There are two charming discourses. One when he's given when he's about twelve maybe, something like that, and the Buddha's giving him all sorts of reasons why he shouldn't tell fibs. It's a lovely little one. And then later on when he's eighteen, and he's obviously struggling with perhaps leaving the monastic life. And eventually he also becomes fully realised.

Apart from perhaps that practical reason, it would seem that generally speaking, once one moves towards end game, really nothing there to draw one back into lay life. And that's just one of those things that happens, I suppose.

But on the other hand, there are lay people who become fully self-realised. One that I remember is a cobbler. An ordinary old cobbler becomes fully self-realised.

So why is it that there weren't more people who were self-realised who were lay people? And I think the reason there is the ambience that you're working in. The Buddha talks about lay life being dusty. That's the word he uses.

If we just look at our society, you can see that most people just aren't on the spiritual wavelength. So when you work with people like that, there's always a drag. They're not supporting you. It's like there's a constant negativity towards what you're trying to do.

Consider being in somewhere like Saudi Arabia or one of the virtually all Muslim countries and you yourself want to do the five times a day prayer and all that – well, you wouldn't be considered silly or stupid. Right there in the middle of the office they'd all join in probably. And that's what we lack in today's society – this support from other people in our ordinary lives.

I'm always at pains to say to people that the jewel of the collection, the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse, which is the fullest discourse on how to become liberated – the actual techniques, what we are practising now, not in its detail but in its general format – was given to the people of Kammāsaddhamma. They were a tribe you could call them, I suppose, or a clan or whatever, called the Kurus, and they lived in what now you would recognise as round about Delhi. So he travelled quite a bit – he was all over the place on that Gangetic plain – and he'd been up there and given them some teachings. When he returned on this occasion, he was taken by the fact that they were actually doing what he suggested and very mindful, and there was no idle talk, no gossip, none of that, no argumentation.

So he delivered to them this *Ekāyano Maggo*, this one way path leading to liberation which we now call the Vipassanā-only path – to them, the lay people. Not addressed to the monks or anything.

So he himself had no doubt that a lay person could become liberated. He wouldn't have done that otherwise. He would have given some general discussion which he would normally start with for people who hadn't met him about good and bad, *kamma*, the gods, living the good life. And only when he felt that they were ready for it he'd hit them with the Four Noble Truths. He didn't start with that.

So here he's got orderly people. We're talking about pre-industrial societies, farmers living communally with a committee ruling, a pastoral society. Although there was a great movement at that time towards cities, monarchical rule – the politics were changing. And there was a rise also of the merchant class, which hadn't existed before.

So he lived in times which were changing, not as viciously as ours, but definitely changing. And it was felt by a lot of people, I think, that dislocation when you get times of change. And that was one thing that fuelled the amount of men who went into the forests and lived a solitary life. There weren't that many women, partly because of the sexism, of course, and partly because of the danger as well.

So I think there are practical reasons why he didn't want to return, but I think that also there are spiritual reasons that at that level nothing attracts, nothing attracts back into that form.

But he gave very clear pointers as to how we can turn the lay life into a spiritual life. And in my e-reminders which I think all of you get and read diligently – yes, thank you – I'm going through a day in the life and just delineating how it's possible to turn everything into a spiritual practice. So you're doing the same thing – you're doing the same things. You're still getting up, you're still dressing, you're still brushing your teeth. It's not like you're doing anything different, but somehow the attitude with which you do it is what changes, and that's what turns it into spiritual practice.

So even here now, I keep stressing this business of eating. Before, we're just eating. Either our minds are reading the newspaper, or we're just gobbling, or we're overeating. But suddenly, eating becomes a real spiritual practice in itself, both by way of developing a certain attitude towards food – seeing it as medicine, seeing it as nourishment – and yet not denying the pleasure. This is the point: not denying the pleasure. There is pleasure, that's fine, but not doing it for that reason, not doing it for comfort's sake.

And the important thing to remember is that the psychology of that runs through everything. It's not just with eating. We're talking about dependent origination. We're talking about the distinction between the point of *vedanā* and the point of *taṇhā*. *Vedanā* is the point where we experience sensations, feelings in the body, as pleasant or unpleasant. That's a given. That's what the psycho-physical organism does. It experiences things and gives us feelings. But then it's this other business, this *taṇhā*, which we've talked about this morning.

So that psychology can be translated to all areas of pleasures and joys in our lives. So it's never – see, this is the great thing about the spiritual life – nothing is ever destroyed. The only thing the Buddha said was destroyed was greed, hatred and delusion. So everything is handed back, purified of its kinks.

Because of his style of talking about his Dhamma in a more negative sense, really to undermine concepts about the self and rebirth and all that reincarnation, he tended to favour the negative approach. So saying that there is – see, we quote it in the morning – there is a not-born and not-done. What does that mean? There is a not-born – what is it? So of course he won't go that far. Well, he does actually. But that's his preferred method.

So of course people would say, "Well, you're an annihilator, you're a nihilist. There's not this, not that, so there's nothing. So therefore you're a nihilist."

So he would constantly say no. He said no, the only thing that's annihilated is greed, hatred and delusion. And by delusion, fundamentally he means this idea, feeling, notion of a self.

So when we're looking at pleasure, we're not trying to get rid of pleasure. We're trying to take something out of our relationship with pleasure, trying to reform that relationship. And it's the same with suffering. It's not as though we can ever get rid of physical suffering – it's just part and parcel of the body's way of being in the world: pain. But we can do something about our relationship to it.

Same with relationships. We have difficult relationships. You can't do anything about the personality clash. But you can find a way of being with it where it's not so painful. Take the pain out. Just accept the person as they are.

And that process we call the process of liberation. That's what we're doing. The process of liberation.

So when we go back and we start with: how do we then bring it into daily life? How does the practice that we do in sitting meditation relate to our daily practice? Then that's really what our task is. And if we can't relate it, if there's a distinction to be, if there's a hair's breadth of separation between the practice of meditation and the rest of our lives, we've lost it.

Because the Buddha's teaching is centred upon a type of being in the world that we call mindfulness. So you're here all the time, you're bringing yourself back into the present moment all the time.

And the big trick of that is this business of relaxing. Can't overstress that, really. And this relaxing into the present moment, stopping, just allows you to recognise what's there, what's actually driving you at this present time, and allowing it to become very conscious. And you can let go of things that have been accumulated, and that way, you not only reserve your energy, you actually take control of your life.

For instance, sometimes one is late for work. You find yourself late for work, so there's this anxiety about being late for work – you miss the bus or something. And you can see that anxiety building up inside you. And you can't stop it. This is the point. You say to yourself, "Oh, I'm getting anxious. I won't be anxious. I'll just get there and start doing the work." But to do that is to deny your anxiety. You're up against what's actually happening in your body.

So you have to recognise, "Oh, well, this is an old conditioning of getting anxious about being late." If you're going to be late, you're going to be late. What's the point of being anxious? You have to argue yourself out of it, get a different perspective on it. You can't do anything about the feeling of anxiety because that's coming from a different conditioning. That's happening. But at least one can stop stoking it. That's the point. One can stop stoking it.

And you do it by turning it into an object – there's your meditation right there, sitting on the bus or running for the train or driving like mad. Right there you're right there with the feeling of anxiety. You know it's there – that's enough. You're doing your meditation and your attention is on either that if you're sitting in a bus, or if you're driving of course you're tuning into the traffic.

So by making that your object and relaxing – that takes a relaxation. You have to relax into the present moment. You have to be with it.

So this practice of relaxing when you begin your meditation, of actually stopping and being in touch with your breath and relaxing into the present moment – here it's easier because you're feeling pleasant, neutral feelings. At least it's good to see them as pleasant, neutrally pleasant feelings. And you're developing the attitude of just sinking, of just collapsing, you might say, just stopping in the present moment and just accepting what's there.

Normally speaking, we get this anxiety up, we get this rush up, we get to work and we keep going. It's like it hasn't clicked that we've arrived. Even if we arrived early actually, we're still rushing, we're still moving at this tremendous pace that we've set ourselves on the perception that we're going to be late.

Then when you're here now, we've got beyond the stage of just watching the breath and now you're open to these negative states within you. So let's say you think a bit depressed, a bit anxious and all that, and you're just sitting with the feeling. Now it's very interesting because in the discourse on how to establish mindfulness, the Buddha always talks about the inside and the outside, the inside and the outside. And often this outside is commented upon as being aware of other people's states.

So you get to work and somebody else is anxious. It's worse if you're anxious, but they're anxious too. So they start putting this stress on you. So normal people's reaction is to respond with stress themselves.

I remember this phone call on a mobile in a train and this woman – her voice is rising and rising and rising. And then there's suddenly this wonderful statement at the end: "I'm stressed out!" I wanted to go over and say, "Look, have a cup of tea or something, relax." There was a total desperation in it. I thought, "Oh boy, she's in for a little breakdown or something."

Now here we are sitting with, in this sense, these negative emotions. What we're doing – we're attending to them. We're attending to them like a nurse attends. We're attending to them. We know they're there. We're neither pushing them away nor are we indulging them. Right?

So somebody comes to us with stress – that's what you do. You attend to their stress. There's no need for you to get stressed because they're stressed. What's the point of that? So as somebody approaches you with stress or with anger or with their depression, you attend to it. Your attention is on them. And by doing that, by placing your interest into their attention, you undermine old habits of reacting the way you used to react before.

Old reaction – not respond. It'll flip very quickly. Things happen just in a second. You might be calm for a moment with somebody who's angry. Next minute you've lost it – you've got yourself angry. So you've got to keep that real sharp awareness. And in order to do that, it has to be backed with the right attitude. If we haven't really grasped the right attitude, then it's very difficult to stop that reaction even though we might be good-willed.

We know that when we react to somebody who is in a negative state, it simply compounds the whole situation.

The way the Buddha put it is that hatred is not overcome with hatred, but anxiety is not overcome with anxiety either. And depression is definitely not overcome—it doesn't help a person who is depressed if you become depressed. You both end up being depressed. Isn't that lovely?

I can never remember the name of this comedian from around the middle century, that Second World War time. There's this scene, it's in black and white on the old TV, and I always remember it. He's about to jump off a London bridge, you see. And the policeman sees this and goes up to him and says, "Oh, excuse me, sir"—in that old way, you know—"excuse me, sir. I do believe you are trying to..." And there's this conversa-

tion about why he's jumping off the bridge, and the policeman's all very sympathetic, saying all this sort of stuff about why life is despairing, you see. And of course the sketch ends with them both jumping off. That was brilliant, you know.

And that's what happens, isn't it, when you get caught up in somebody else's emotional state. So in our relationships, both in our personal, more intimate relationships and in work situations, it's just maintaining that attitude of knowing that if one reacts in a negative way to somebody else's negativity, then you both jump off the bridge. It's as simple as that.

So when that's actually been saturated, when that's really saturated your being, you see, then you've established a different attitude. That doesn't mean to say that the old conditionings aren't going to be there. So if somebody comes to you in anger, you can feel the old conditioning want to bite, you see. But because you've established this attitude, you very quickly know that all the person wants is for you to listen to them, isn't it? When you're angry, isn't all you want to do is for them to listen to what you're saying? Not only listen in the sense of what you're saying, but what you're feeling—like "I am angry with you," you know.

And it's being able just to stay with that in that sort of attending way, you see. Not in this passive-aggressive way—or aggressive passivity. It's like you're standing there, you know, "and you're not touching me." Well, I mean, that's really aggressive. That's going to make them really want to bite. But if you manifest the fact that you feel their anger, you know, and that there's that empathy with their anger and whatnot, then there's not that aggressive response. You've always got that magic word, "sorry," you see, that drains people's anger, you know. And then after you've done that, of course, you prove it was their fault anyway. You win anyway. Be careful of that. It's a one-up, you know. Gotcha.

Now, can you see the link between sitting with your own mental states and sitting with somebody else's? The inside and the outside. You're taking the practice directly into your daily life.

When it comes to insight, so all this really is about creating peaceful states around us, how is it that we have this special practice called *vipassanā*, which is about seeing these three characteristics? How does that work? How does that translate into your daily life? Because it's only with those sorts of insights that there are radical changes. These are root changes. We can change our personalities, we can change our attitudes, we can do a lot to change the surface psychology. You can even change your body—you

can do a bit of exercise and stuff like that—but it's not getting to the root of it. The root problems are to do with these wrong ways of seeing things. So where we see permanence, there is impermanence.

Now you might say, well, I can see impermanence everywhere, but the fact is, when we're struck by crises, then of course we find it a big shock. It's the level of shock, it's the level of fear which shows us our relationship to a situation which we thought was steady, permanent, unchangeable. And then there's that business of the wanting and not wanting. So yeah, that's a bit more obvious, taking that into daily life, and we'll come back to that.

And then there's this other business of *anattā*, not self, you see. When you're sitting like this, of course, it's a privileged position because you have found this objective observer place, this observation post, as Ñāṇapoṇika calls it. He's a pretty famous writer in Theravada, a German. He's died now—an observation post. You found this observation post within yourself.

So this is a fairly privileged position you might say, because you're not moving, you're not doing anything, so now you can watch. You can watch the psychophysical organism in action. You can see the body feels, the heart emotes, and the mind thinks. What else is there? What else is there? That's it. And you can see that things are changing, you can see how you're relating to what's inside you and that's something coming from this wrong idea of indulgence and resistance and you can see this business of not me, not mine as you become very clear in your seeing that these are objects.

So what's an object can't be the subject. It's as simple as that. Even the feeling of self-awareness, as we said, is an object. You're aware of a self, so you can't be that either. But it's actually looking at that and constantly re-experiencing that makes these things very obvious to you.

So now how can you have spiritual insight in daily life? You know, when you're washing the pots or when you're talking to somebody or when you're doing a job and all that, you see. Well, the understanding is that this intelligence that is the knowing, this intuitive intelligence, which is prior to the mind with its thoughts, yeah? It's prior to emotions, right? Most people think of intuitive intelligence as a feeling. Sure, it manifests, it sort of communicates its understanding through feeling, but it's not feeling, it's not emotion, and it's not the body either. And that's what we're discovering every time we access this observation post.

Now that intelligence is being primed every time you sit, to begin to see life from one of these three perspectives. Every time you sit, every time you make the conscious effort to see these three characteristics, it is being informed, it's informing itself, and that manifests in your daily life in various ways.

So when this tsunami struck Sri Lanka, there were some very well-meaning counselors went there to help people overcome their trauma, and they were surprised to find that they'd overcome their trauma. It wasn't, for them, for people of Eastern mentality, you know, it wasn't such a huge trauma that it would be, say, to a Westerner, because they accept, they have the attitude of *kamma*, they have the attitude of impermanence. Everything's impermanent, what's the problem, see? It doesn't mean to say they don't suffer the loss of loved ones and all that, but there isn't this ongoing post-traumatic stress. See, all that's gone because of that easy acceptance of the way things are.

So now, you see, constantly reminding ourselves that there is impermanence. Everything is impermanent. You simply do not know what's going to happen in the next moment. You just don't know, you know. Just recently we've had these Israeli attacks on Palestine and on the West Bank, you see. So there were people there. I mean, they're in dangerous positions. They know they're dangerous, but some innocent people, you see, their lives have just been blown out. That's it. Same with the Israelis. Not so many, but these bombs come over and like three people have died in a day just from these rockets going over the fence.

And so you're there, you see, you know, frying your chips, and getting your sausages ready, and you've got your HP sauce out, and that's it. You're up there looking down at all these sausages all splattered all over the place, and you're floating in mid-air. See? I have a very strange sense of humour, but... There was somebody I know, she's about seventy-odd. And she met an old-time sweetheart, going way back to her early days. And, I mean, I got this story, you know, secondhand. And, well, they fell in love, you know, and they got married and she brought all her stuff over from America—a couple of thousand pounds—they set up in this beautiful... I went to visit them actually. They set up in this lovely little cottage in a nice little country village, you know, English country village. And not so long married—I mean, you know, come of a certain age one has to accept things—it seems as though he was just going for the toast out of the toaster when he collapsed.

And I've always thought of the horror of dying as you're grabbing hold of a piece of toast. As you're lifting the piece of toast with marmalade to your mouth, unable to clamp your jaw over it. To me, it's a nightmare.

So it's a case of, you know, once we grasp the impermanence, you see, it takes away the reverberation of disaster. It takes away the reverberation of loss, of grief, and that sort of stuff. There is just the grief, there is just the loss, you know. There's not behind it some feeling of injustice, you know.

Human beings are always clever at making themselves a centre of the universe. It was such a clout to our ego when we realised that the earth actually went round the sun. And it was even worse when we were told that we were just animals. We just rose up from the animals. We were just fitter, that's all. That was a hit, wasn't it, to the old ego.

So what we do as humans, we project our sense of justice onto the universe. There's no justice in the universe, there's only laws, yeah? You know, tsunamis happen because earthquakes happen under the sea or something, or a tectonic plate shift. Nothing to do with justice, nothing to do with morality, to do with the way the earth is, to do with that sort of law, you know? So when people say, oh, you know, it's a shame he died young and all that, you know, it's a law. The body runs along different laws from human justice, and that's the way it is.

So just getting the idea of impermanence, saturating the way we look at things, everything's impermanent, you see. Even to get up in the morning and say to yourself, "Everything's impermanent. I don't know what's going to happen today. I think I know what's going to happen. I've got it all planned. I actually don't know what's gonna happen," see? So that puts us into this mind framework, you see. And the Buddha's great statement about impermanence is that, you know, when we actually grasp impermanence in its real fullness, we realise there's nothing in the world worth holding on to. Nothing in the world worth holding on to. Not even ourselves. This is the point.

Now that, at first, you know, at first it might strike as sort of a bit frightening and whatnot. But it's tremendously relaxing, isn't it? We don't have to hold on to anything anymore. Yippee! So it's like when somebody thieves something from you, you see. We have this idea that I possess something. So I possess my mobile. It's my mobile. I can prove it in law. This belongs to me. I'm attached to it. And then somebody steals it. And I'm still going around saying it's my mobile. It's the thief's. The thief owns the mobile. And I'm suffering like mad because they've got my mobile. And suddenly when you realise actually you can't own anything. What you can do is use it. Ah, what a relief. And then you think, well, you know, the thief might need it more than me. And you're happy to give it away. Just like that.

So that impermanence, you see, it seeps into an attitude. And that's important to understand that. The Eightfold Path begins with right understanding, and the second one is right attitude. And if it doesn't drop into an attitude, it just remains at this nice intellectual level. "Oh yeah, everything arises and passes away. You know, what?" There's no catastrophe when something does arise and pass away, you know. So it has to sink into, and that's a heart state. When I say heart state here, I'm not talking really about an emotion. So an attitude isn't an emotion. You have to be clear about that. An attitude is a way of relating as an attitude. See?

An understanding—everything's impermanent. Right, now, what does that mean in terms of my relationship to objects, my relationship to people, my relationship to myself, my own body? See, how does that relate? And that's your attitude. And then of course it manifests in the way we behave, in the way we do actually relate moment to moment.

Now the next one, you see, which seeps into our daily life is this business of *dukkha*. So *dukkha*, remember, is one of these big words in Buddhism. It sort of covers everything that makes us unhappy in the widest sense of that meaning. You know, from the most trivial thing to, you know, catastrophes. The whole gamut of human misery is contained in this word *dukkha*, which actually means a hard place, that's what it means. This is a hard place. And when the Buddha says, you know, go into this, where is the suffering? Then it's to do with this psychology of wanting and not wanting, wanting and not wanting.

Now, just a very sort of change of attitude, you know, just a change of words, like, you know, not getting what you want, but wanting what you get. So even that, wanting what you get, there's a sort of flip, you know, and you think, "oh," and suddenly you're contented. You know, to be actually, to develop the attitude of contentment with what I've got, you know.

And of course it's difficult in a society which is driven by consumerism, because consumerism depends on your constant discontent. As soon as you're contented, that's it. Consumerism collapses, the whole industrial base. "I don't want a car, I'm content, I'll walk." You can't do that. You can't do that. You've got to be discontent. So this whole feeling of constantly being discontent, the whole of the advert is to make you feel discontent. That's why you want that, you know, whatever it is, you know.

But constantly saying to ourselves, constantly beginning from the platform of, "This is okay, this is the way it is, it's fine, it's not a problem, it's good, it's the way it is, content," you see. And what you do is you begin to separate need from want. Sometimes you need, you need a new pair of shoes and that's the end of it. So you go and get a pair of shoes. And then there's that dividing line.

So you now know this is need, this is want. Wants come up sometimes for various reasons. Say to lift your spirit, you might buy yourself something rather pleasant or ask somebody else to do it. But at least there's not this churning of the heart to go out and constantly exercise this retail therapy. Seeking comfort in shops, for heaven's sake. Ridiculous. I don't feel comfortable unless I'm in Marks and Spencer's. Ridiculous. Where do I go when I'm sad? Marks and Spencer's. When I feel depressed, I go to Marks and Spencer's. Like it's been a disaster, Woolworths has gone. Like it's a catastrophe, Woolworths has gone. Oh my God. There's weird ways of relating to the world.

So you can see that even now, we're watching the suffering of wanting, not wanting. A desire comes up, we want to think about this, we want to plan our holiday, and we're constantly pulling ourselves off and feeling that strong desire, that willfulness in us. When it's something unpleasant, that's even more difficult, but to be able to be easy with unpleasantness.

Now it's cold, the difference between a room temperature and outside is vicious. Our attitude is to resist the cold. We rush from the bungalow to here to get out of the cold. Instead of greeting it, ah, cold, great. Just, ah, the freshness of it. I'm not suggesting you catch a cold, you understand. And to take that attitude into daily life. You can do it. You can do it. And again, it's constant self-reminder.

So as soon as we see ourselves passing a shop and wanting that, yeah, hold on. Just pull it back. Pull back that energy. And of course, all that energy that we're using in getting what we want, it's not being wasted. You can displace it. You can take your interest elsewhere.

In the old days, they used to talk about sublimation, a religious idea of sublimating your desires. You don't hear that word often these days. And that's because, really, I suppose, through the agencies of people like Freud, people think that there are certain instincts and desires that are blocked or locked into certain things, like our sexual appetite. They're just stuck there and you can't get rid of them. But in spiritual terms sublimation means that you guide that energy and put it somewhere else. It's all it is. The mind and body as we know from our great quantum physics is that it's just energy. So if you decide to displace the energy away from say eroticism and you put it into art, then that's your sublimation.

That's what you mean by sublimating. And that transference, that transformation of energy away from desires which you see are unwholesome to desires which you see are wholesome, is part and parcel of that process. I'm not suggesting that erotic desires are per se unwholesome, and they obviously have their place in time, but if you find them grinding on the mind, obsessive, then it's a case of slowly displacing them, putting our interests elsewhere.

So it's the same with shopping. People put a lot of interest in shopping, in fashion and all that stuff. All they have to do is just to draw their interest elsewhere, just to re-educate themselves. That's all it is. It's just a process of re-education. But they won't do it unless they see the suffering. That's the point.

And the problem with pleasure, the problem with joy, indulgent joy, is that while you're in it, it's great. That's the problem. And you're prepared often to suffer the consequences so you can have this bit of joy. It's only when you get the comeback. I was just thinking there of a friend's father, who always smoked, always smoked. Then he had a heart attack, and he suddenly stopped, just like that. He got the comeback. It's unfortunate that it was so strong a comeback, but it just shows.

Now, the comeback of all indulgence is the craving, the possibility of grief if you lose what it is you treasure. The anxiety that once you've got something, the anxiety of losing it. That's why we've got a massive insurance industry. And of course the frustration, not getting it when you want it.

So by taking this inner understanding of wanting, not wanting, into daily life, it moves you towards contentment. That's the joy, that's the subtle joy. And that's another reason why to develop this calmness on the breath and to begin to see there's actually a very delicious place to be.

Often we find it, but we do it in contrast to agitation, in contrast to stress. We'll go home and just flop in the chair and just for a moment there's no radio, there's nothing, we just sink into the quietness of the moment. We might walk into a park or come out into the country or sit in the garden and just for a moment we'll actually sink into that space, to that little bit of peace. But we'll do it as an antidote to another thing.

Whereas what we want to do is to develop it as a prime condition, something that we can return to at any time, and as it were, remains a substrate beneath our psychology. There's always this deep sense of calmness within us, no matter what we're doing on the surface. And again, it's just training, it's just training ourselves to do that.

So the breath there is watching the breath, feeling the breath, seeing it as a place where we can develop this calmness and peace is directly related into daily life. Because you can always come back to your breath. When I say stop every so often, just come to an end of what you're doing, and catch what it is you've accumulated, some anxiety, some stress, whatever, and allow it to pass, there's always the breath. And the breath will be a place that you'll go to, just like your garden or the park. It's a place where you just find that inner peace for a moment.

Now the sense of not-self is one of the key factors and it's in his second talk, the second talk he gives to his five disciples, at the end of which they're all fully liberated by the way. He says clearly that which arises and passes away cannot be under your control.

Now, every time you get into the self, one of the ways that the self manifests is the desire to control power. Every time you see yourself wanting to control a situation, control a person, you'll know it's coming from the self. It's not the same as being in charge or being an authority in which you are given the power to make decisions. I mean that's an occasion where you take on responsibility and you try to make the wisest decisions you can.

But in terms of this other business, where things are not going your way and you're getting angry, where you're getting angry with your spouse, your partner because they're not doing what you want them to do, or your kids, and you're getting frustrated and anxious and all that and that's all to do with this sense of wanting to control.

So again, it's this business of taking that into daily life and just recognizing that our control over things is pretty limited and that things happen outside of our control and that there's, in the old phrase, you gotta go with the flow, you gotta be in harmony with what's happening. That harmony is not always pleasant, but you're actually moving with it. You're not trying to control something which is actually outside your control.

And I think this comes most obvious when we get involved in politics. Politics in the wider sense of the meaning. People's issues, like the business going on with climate change and so on, the economy and all that stuff which are not to be confused with small party politics. One can see what has to be done, everyone can see what has to be done, but there's not the political will.

You can see it. So there arises in people a certain frustration. And that's really not accepting these two rings that are around us. The first one being one of power. What you can do to help the situation. And if you step beyond that, you're into frustration.

You're into despair. And that takes an act of humility. Humility, it doesn't mean humble, humble. It just means seeing yourself as you really are. That's what humility originally meant.

And the other ring is influence, whereby you can get other people to do what you think is right. Beyond that, there's nothing you can do. Nothing you can do in any physical sense, but we do have another outlet which allows us to feel at least that we are, shall we say, in communion. And that is, of course, to offer *metta*. I mean, that's the joy of *metta*, that you can do nothing, but at least you can send out thoughts of intentions, goodwill intentions towards a situation. Even if we don't believe that they actually affect people, at least it's a way in which we might feel within ourselves that we're doing what we can, full stop, develop a goodwill.

Now such is the quality of this intuitive intelligence that it can have insights at any time. And it's well known in the Mahāṣī tradition that insights don't normally come when you're sitting. It's when you get up and do something that the insights come. And the reason is that often when we're sitting, we're very subtly trying to achieve something, trying to see something. And then when we get up from the posture, we sort of say, all right, nothing happened there, forget it, and off we go. But we retain that mindfulness, and lo and behold, there are these sudden insights that come. Because this intelligence has been released from this craving, been released from the self just for that moment.

So it's not as though insights can't come at any time of the day, any time you're awake, once this mindfulness is established. In fact, the Mahāṣī's teacher, that's the Mahāṣī, in case you didn't know, when he was about fifty, I suppose. The Mahāṣī's teacher is said to have intuited *anicca*, the impermanence, as a direct experience of momentary arising and passing away as a dog passed by. There wasn't a dog, there was just a dogging. The dog arose and passed away momentarily. Because that's the teaching of *anicca*.

It isn't something which is changing in the sense that you might take a piece of clay and you make a cup and then you screw it up and you make a saucer. So it's the same clay. And the Buddha's teaching is quite radical. It actually collapses into potential or nothing. I can't say nothing. It collapses into a potential. It's not there. And out of there, it arises again. That's what's happening. The universe is stroboscopic. It's not continuous in the Buddhist teaching. So for him that was a deep enough insight for what we call one of the paths and fruits, stream entrance or whatever level he was at.

So that's I hope I've made fairly clear the intimate connection between your meditation and daily life. If I happen you, you can leave little notes of complaint. Kindly. Notes of complaint. And remember that the root thing is this constant establishment of mindfulness.

And just as a last word, in the discourse on loving-kindness, which we chant in the morning. The Buddha's urging us to develop this loving-kindness. And at the end, where is he sitting? So he says, whether you are standing, walking, sitting or lying down. So those are the same instructions for mindfulness. Sitting, walking, lying. In other words, in any posture, doing anything.

So long as you're awake, so long as you are mindful, you should develop this mindfulness. And here, he's talking about a mindfulness saturated with loving kindness. Saturated with goodwill. That's a bit better. Goodwill. Because it's not meant to be an emotional thing, is it? This, they say, is the noblest way to live, and if you do not fall into bad ways, but live well and develop insight, and are no longer attached to all the desires of the senses, then truly you will never need to be reborn to this world again.

So there you have it. Mindfulness saturated with good wishes. And in the morning when I, after chanting, I say make your resolution for the day. That's an important moment, because that's going to set the underground tone of the day. So find a little phrase for yourself to live... To live consciously with goodwill or something like that which strikes you as the way you want to be.

It's also good to also create something that you're not going to do. You're not going to go down that road today. Keep it in today. Don't go beyond today. It gets depressing. Because I think I'm going to be like this for the rest of my life. If you do it day by day, it's manageable, isn't it? Just today. Today I'll be good. Tomorrow I'll play hell. But today, if we keep doing that, we should arrive.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Identity and Not-Self

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 21 min

In this profound exploration of one of Buddhism's most challenging teachings, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines anattā (not-self) through the lens of our everyday identifications and emotional reactions. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he explains how practicing mindfulness both internally (subjective experience) and externally (objective observation) can help us recognize the suffering that comes from over-identifying with our roles, abilities, and achievements.

Using vivid personal examples—from failed attempts at fixing a gas connector and printer to the emotional storms that follow—Bhante demonstrates how these moments of frustration become 'rocket fuel for Awakening' when met with sustained awareness. He reveals how the process of 'selfing' (upādāna) creates temporary identities that arise and fade based on external circumstances, leading us to recognize the conditional nature of all our various 'selves.'

The talk offers practical guidance for working with the dukkha of identification, showing how unpleasant sensations can serve as messengers reminding us 'this is not who you really are.' Through patient observation of our emotional reactivity, we can discover new pathways of gentleness, patience, and compassion—ultimately leading toward the peace of nibbāna beyond all limited identities.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa.

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

The Buddha's teaching on *anattā*, not-self, is a hard aspect of the Dhamma to understand. We will all be grappling with it till the moment of enlightenment. To motivate ourselves for the challenge, it's worth reflecting on the suffering we experience because of identifying with our body, our mind, our life stories.

Take the example of role identification. Whatever role we're playing in life – father, daughter, gardener – we want to do it well, which is a good motive, no problem there. It's when we over-identify, can't see beyond our role, that *dukkha*, suffering, emerges.

On a good day, we get a buzz out of doing things well: cooking a meal, mending a puncture, teaching a class. But we all have days when these go wrong. The sponge cake turns out as a stodgy lump. The tyre deflates the minute we put the wheel back on. We go blank when trying to teach. This is when the dukkha of identification is felt.

The more we identify as a good cook, a good DIYer, a good teacher, the harder it is to bear the letdown. We can't stop thinking about it. What went wrong? How could I have made such a mess of things? What did they think of me? We look for someone to blame. If he hadn't interrupted, it would have been perfect.

While none of us enjoy those times when we've made a hash of something, it is worth dwelling on them long enough to acknowledge that the source of the misery is not actually the gooey mess or the deflating tyre. It's the sense of me and how badly I've let myself down. That's the real rope: a loss of confidence, perhaps an almost desperate need to reassert ourselves, prove our ability.

The more clearly we can acknowledge the suffering that comes from identification, the more we will be willing to explore the difficult Buddhist teaching of anattā, not-self. And there is no doubt anattā is a difficult nut to crack. We all have a strong sense that we are the ones baking the cake, mending the tyre, teaching the class, living our life. It's hard to even toy with the idea that this might not be so.

The Buddha's advice is to keep breaking down experience into smaller and smaller chunks. It's easier to get glimpses of the truth in these. Then gradually over time, the notion of not-self becomes easier to contemplate. We start to see its benefits, how much easier life is when we're not identified by our roles or opinions or abilities or achievements. It's wonderful to have nothing to defend.

One instruction from the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, that I found very helpful for exploring anattā is the advice to practice internally and externally. Internal can be interpreted to mean our subjective felt experience, while external means our mental understanding of it. We feel the sensations of breathing for internal practice. For external practice, we reflect that we are breathing.

The Mahāsi noting technique provides a way of practicing both internally and externally. We feel the breath and at the same time make a mental note of it. Same for walking, eating, talking. All of life can be known both internally as moment-to-moment sensations and feelings, and externally as our objective mental perception of what's happening.

Say we are practising mindfulness of breathing. Feeling the sensations of breathing is to practise mindfulness internally. Although we don't usually make the thought conscious, we assume we are the one who's sitting here breathing. If we're also practising externally, then we're noting "rising, falling" as we track the breath.

As concentration deepens, it can seem like our identity shifts. Instead of being the one who is sitting here breathing, we sense ourselves as the observer, some sort of spaced-out entity hovering around our head, the one who is watching the body breathing. On a good day, we'll also be able to watch our thoughts coming and going, watch emotions rise and fade, realise we don't have to get caught up in them.

All of this is helping us disentangle our confusion about identity. Internally, we feel ourselves breathing, thinking, growing happy one moment, sad the next. But because of our external perspective, we realise we don't need to identify with our thoughts, emotions, breathing. We see these as happening of their own accord, driven by various stimuli, but not driven by what I now think of as me.

This can be a lovely experience, a sense of coming home, having found our true self: a sort of disembodied entity that hovers in and around the body, equanimous, interested, watching the show without getting caught up in it. But after a while, we might grow uncomfortable. Things start to feel sticky, as if there's a sheet of Velcro passing over each sensation, pulling us along with it. We start getting caught up with experience again, identified with thoughts and feelings and emotions. We are again the one who is sitting here breathing and now anxiously trying to find our way back to the lofty crow's nest from which we've been able to observe the show.

Although there's a temptation to see this as bad meditation, we should really see it as a precious opportunity to learn the Dhamma more deeply. Pema Chödrön likens these episodes as rocket fuel for enlightenment.

To take a practical example: we got a new connector for our gas canister the other day, and so I overcame all my fears about gas and explosions. I went to hook it up. After about a dozen failed attempts, all the bits eventually came together. It looked perfect. But gas started leaking the moment I opened the cylinder. I took it apart, reread the instructions, reconnected it. Still no go. Disappointing.

I was then asked to look at the printer because it wasn't working. It needed a new toner cartridge. And again, I overcame my deep suspicion of all things electrical and mechanical and managed to replace the cartridge, but no go. Every page came out white as snow with nothing at all being printed. Again, I took it all apart, reread the in-

structions, watched a few videos on replacing the cartridge, tried again. Still no go. Another disappointment. And this time I felt the edge of bad humour. My mind was starting to close up, feel oppressed by others and by the world in general.

A bit later, Bhante came over, took the cartridge out and, in his own words, "gave it a few thumps" and put it back in place. Lo and behold, it worked perfectly. Of course, I was impressed and amused and grateful, but alongside these happy responses, my incipient bad humour gave a painful kick within. Why couldn't it have worked for me?

I decided to go to my room to explore this more deeply. Rationally, it was just silliness, the mind building a mountain out of a molehill. And yet there was – not quite a mountain, but certainly more than a molehill of frustration at my failure to connect up a gas cylinder and change a toner cartridge. But what was more distressing was the admission of being so emotionally impacted by such trivial matters. What was the point of decades of Dhamma practice only to be getting distraught over nothing?

This is the dukkha, the suffering of identification. Identifying with self as manager, the one who is supposed to sort out problems. Identification with self as meditator, who should by now have developed outstanding equanimity. Not to speak of self as meditation teacher, who should know the Dhamma upside down and be able to instantly see through this latest delusion.

As always, mindfulness allowed the storm to blow itself out. Looking back now, I sense the truth of Pema Chödrön's advice to see these times when our buttons are pressed and we feel like a two-year-old again as rocket fuel for enlightenment. Emotional storms have so much energy that negative thoughts and feelings we normally suppress come skyrocketing into consciousness. In the light of awareness, their pain becomes so acute that our system is forced to learn a new way of coping with the dukkha.

This new coping mechanism, learned from within, from moment-to-moment awareness, opens up new pathways for energy flow in the body and new doorways in the mind. We discover new thoughts and perspectives which are gentler, kinder, more patient and forgiving.

In my own example, a new doorway opened because of feeling so acutely the pain of identification, how it traps the mind in a prison of delusion. The pain of this prison sharpened when the storyline of me who should be better at everything had fallen away, and I could more clearly feel the emotional patterns underlying the thoughts.

Practising mindfulness internally, I could feel how eagerly the body and mind pounced on a pleasant feeling, sending tentacles of energy around it to clutch and hold as mine, while a bright light switched on in my head, which I perceived as me: confid-

ent, on top of things, in control. A whirlpool of energy raised around my chest and head to sustain this delight. The feeling of confidence was gorgeous, but watching it, the external perspective showed up the craziness and pain underneath.

Seeing this, I desperately wanted to escape the prison of identification. The external perspective let me recognise the crazy whirlpool of energy and the bright light as what the Buddha terms *upādāna*, usually translated as grasping or clinging. It's also sometimes referred to as "selfing". What is happening is that unskillful desire, *taṇhā*, has driven us to create a new identity so as to fulfil this desire.

The better we get to know this experience of selfing, the more we are persuaded of the Buddhist teaching on *anattā*, not-self. Knowing from our direct experience that a "me" has suddenly arisen makes it hard to take "me" too seriously. We start to see how various "me"s arise and fade depending on external stimuli. When things go well, a happy, pleased, self-confident me emerges. But that fades quickly when things go wrong and the deflated, miserable me takes its place instead.

Back to my own example of watching the fallout from my emotional storm. Internally, I was experiencing the selfing process, which was generating a confident, delighted sense of me, one who could fix all the printers and gas cylinders in the world. However, the external perspective knew this as delusion. Undermined by that news, the confident self suddenly collapsed into a timid, scared, stiff entity which felt it had no rights to exist. A moment later, the confident self reappeared, wildly insisting it was totally in control of the situation.

This yo-yo between elated confidence and abject fear continued for some time. Both identities felt excruciatingly painful and vulnerable. There was a strong desire to abandon the meditation, but I persisted, allowing my emotional roller coaster to take its course, trusting that a lesson would eventually be learned.

In *vipassanā*, we can't interfere. We can't tell ourselves to stop being deluded. We have to bear patiently with our greeds, hatreds and delusions, trust them to burn out in the light of awareness, teach us the Dhamma as we suffer their flames.

And sure enough, the energy of the roller coaster gradually diminished. As it did, so my attention extended gingerly beyond the whirlpool of elated and fearful energies in my chest and head to sense my arms, legs, my body sitting. I couldn't really feel these in any detail. I only knew them as faint suggestions. They seemed like strangers from another world – alien, scary.

Luckily, curiosity was stronger than fear, and each out-breath let awareness rest more attentively in the seemingly alien body. At last, some feelings rippled through. These were unpleasant and carried the message that the heady whirlpool of confidence was not me, not mine. The emotionally energetic, deluded part of myself felt this as a threat. But some wisdom emerged from the depths to welcome the unpleasantness. Here was something I would not want to cling to, therefore very welcome.

Letting attention rest on the unpleasantness became a non-interfering way of containing and restraining the deluded self. Gradually, the energetic bright-light me felt glad of being contained and limited, embodied rather than a totally deluded mental entity.

It became like looking in a mirror. Perhaps we've all had similar experiences where we sense ourselves as both watching and being watched. Sometimes I was the watcher, the observer, the disembodied entity that hovers near my head. This was the external mindful perspective. Sometimes I was the mirror image. This was the internal mindfulness perspective, bringing the embodied experience of me – the experience of sitting and breathing and knowing that I was being watched.

The desire to know who I really am has always been very strong for me. And that part of me that was observing, watching, felt this now as an almost overwhelming attraction towards the mirror image. I wanted to grasp hold of the image, devour it even. But whenever I gave in to that desire, it was as if I'd gobbled up my own reflection. All that was left were little shivers of fear and grief as I realised how I'd destroyed what I desired.

I had to suffer the fear and grief, wait patiently till peace prevailed, before I could again glimpse the mirror image. I became grateful for any unpleasant sensations in the mirror image. These acted like repulsive forces, countering the attempt to grasp and own the image. They carried the message: this isn't who you really are. That understanding also helped me not to grasp and thereby destroy the image of me that I desired so deeply.

I became grateful for the fact that the body can repel the mind as well as attract it. By this stage, I'd forgotten altogether about my sense of having let myself down. It just wasn't an issue. And I was very glad I'd persisted with the meditation, hadn't given up at the height of the emotional storm.

The great gift of sitting with the misery was that the message "this is not who you really are" became for the first time totally welcome. As the meditation went on, the message brought joy, relief, gratitude. I understood it as necessary to counter the strong desire to identify with my body and mind – the only reflection I can find for whatever it is I sense myself to be.

In subsequent meditations and in daily life, I was better able to recognise all "me"s as temporary and conditional. I could smile at them, appreciate them, but not be surprised when they dissolved. This is such a gift. The deluded me expects too much of me, expects me always to be on top of everything. Being able to see myself as limited brings forth compassion as well as appreciation for whatever efforts I make to follow the path, fulfil my various roles.

And if I'm getting a bit heated in conversation, clinging to my opinion, then I can focus on some unpleasant sensation and welcome them as messengers that this strongly opinionated one is not your true self either. Again, this brings a smile and allows me to be more flexible, ready to change my mind and see the other's point of view.

I hope this illustration of working with the dukkha of identification encourages you to explore the teaching around anattā, not-self, and perhaps also see how those external and internal mindfulness perspectives can help with this challenging teaching.

In this way, may we all see through our identification as daughter, manager, cook or whatever – see these as temporary, conditional, not ever designed to be satisfactory. As the Buddha said, whatever is inconstant, conditioned, unsatisfactory is not worthy of being thought of as me. We sell ourselves short by investing in these limited identities. Our continued practice leads us to a truth, a resting place beyond all such limitations. May we all experience the peace and bliss of *Nibbāna*.

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.

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.

Removal of Distracting Thoughts

Noirin Sheahan · 41 min

Drawing from the Vitakkasaṇḥāna Sutta (MN 20), this teaching explores the Buddha's five-step approach to handling distracting thoughts that emerge during concentrated meditation states. Unlike standard Vipassanā practice which maintains non-judgmental awareness, this sutta offers targeted remedies for when practitioners become caught in unwholesome mental patterns during deep samādhi.

Noirin details each progressive method: replacing unwholesome thoughts with wholesome ones (like mettā for hatred), examining the dangers of negative thinking, deliberately ignoring distractions, investigating underlying thought formations with gentle inquiry, and finally suppression through forceful mental effort. Through personal meditation experience, she illustrates how these techniques address the deeper layers of greed, hatred, and delusion that surface during intensive practice.

This teaching is particularly valuable for retreat practitioners who encounter strong mental formations that standard noting cannot handle, showing when judgment and even suppression have their place alongside the usual open awareness of Vipassanā meditation.

Tonight's talk is based on the sutta entitled "The Removal of Distracting Thoughts," which, I'm sure you'll agree, sounds like a very attractive proposition.

Last night's sutta on the different ways of dealing with skillful and unskillful thoughts is particularly suited to practice in everyday life and to wise reflection, where we can examine our thoughts on certain matters. Tonight's talk relates to distractions that occur during deep meditation. It offers a broad range of suggestions which include *metta*, wise reflection, calming and investigation. It also includes suppression, which might be a surprise given the very open-minded, non-judgemental stance we associate with Vipassanā. Obviously there is a time for everything.

Here are the Buddha's opening words: "When a *bhikkhu* is pursuing the higher mind, from time to time he should give attention to five signs." Note that these instructions are only to be followed from time to time. Normally we should follow the standard Vipassanā instructions we get from the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Only from time to time are we to use the alternative discussed tonight. The Buddha doesn't outline which circumstances warrant the new approach.

While writing this talk, I used this alternative when my mind became too unbalanced for Vipassanā, and I offer my efforts to follow this teaching as an example. After a tantalising glimpse of a very still mind that simply knew experience, I made the mistake of thinking, "This is the real me." The Buddhist word for this is vanity, which means that we've succumbed to the delusion of self. We cling to what we like in our experience, believing this is the real me.

When I fall prey to vanity, I get overly energetic, striving, delighted with my role as the observer who knows experience and investigates the Dhamma. Ironically, this means that I've lost all objectivity. Energetically, it felt as though my head was trying to lift off my body, shooting skywards like a rocket towards a very enticing brightness. I recognised this as vanity, but the attachment was so deep that I couldn't get any objectivity on the experience, and I felt stuck. This is where the advice given in this sutta was extremely useful. Gradually, the skyrocketing, deluded mind was drawn back down to earth.

So in cases where your mind has become focused, but you keep getting stuck in some experience, unable to remain objective, then this may be the right time to try out the instructions from this sutta.

The Buddha then says, "When a *bhikkhu* is giving attention to some sign," and then goes on to give us advice. But first, what kind of signs is he talking about? The Pali word is *nimitta*, and is used mainly in connection with Samatha meditation, which calms the mind. The *nimitta* are signs that we have a good level of concentration. The mind becomes riveted by present experience and often you notice something unusual. Though it can appear at any of the sense doors, the most common *nimitta* are tactile or visual. You might feel a stream of tingling sensations, for example, or see a pattern of light.

The trouble comes when we become sure there must be some deep message in this strange light or tickling feeling. Instead of being just another unsatisfactory phenomenon that comes and goes, we start to believe that it signals some exalted state of mind or supreme wisdom that we can achieve. That was what was happening when my mind got locked into vanity, as described earlier, believing I'd somehow found the real me, the perfect, clear-minded, objective observer.

Before going on to look at the Buddha's advice, I want to draw attention to another phrase in this opening sentence: "When a *bhikkhu* is giving attention to some sign, and owing to that sign there arise in him evil, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate and with delusion."

The sign, remember, signifies a concentrated mind. So Buddha is saying that evil, unwholesome thoughts can arise because of the sign that we've achieved a concentrated mind. At first sight this seems weird. Surely we concentrate our minds as part of the effort to let go of evil, unwholesome thought. Why on earth undertake a practice that actually causes these to arise?

As our minds become still and focused, underlying troubles show up. We learn the Dhamma as we navigate through these painful states which get covered over by busyness, sense pleasure and other distractions in daily life. This is the path of purification. We easily forget this and believe we're not practicing correctly when negativity shows up while we meditate. It's comforting to reflect that the Buddha expects such negativity to emerge as a natural consequence of good concentration. We can take it as a signal that we're moving deeper within.

How are we to work with this deeper layer of negativity? Let's look at the Buddha's advice: "When a *bhikkhu* is giving attention to some sign, and owing to that sign there arise in him evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate and with delusion, then he should give attention to some other sign connected with what is wholesome."

Normally in Vipassanā, when we notice we've been distracted by a thought, we simply note this and centre attention on the emotions and feelings associated with that thought. Our approach is non-judgemental. It doesn't matter whether the thought is skillful or unskillful. However, this sutta offers five alternatives to the standard approach and judgement plays a role right from the start.

In my state of deluded vanity, I was having thoughts like, "This is it, I've got it now. Oh no, it's gone again." Although I found it hard to consider these thoughts as evil, because I wasn't actually wishing anyone harm, I knew from long and painful experience how much suffering there is for me in this state of delusion. I am identifying with a mind state that is experienced as beautiful and trying to hang on to it. This only brings suffering, deepens delusion, so it is definitely unwholesome.

What are the wholesome signs to which I should attend in these circumstances? In the commentary on this sutta by Buddhaghosa, he suggests that *metta* may be used as the alternative focus when we have been caught by hatred, while the unattractive aspect of the body is the appropriate focus when we've been caught by lust. In the case of delusion, which is my concern, he recommends things like living with a teacher, reading Dhamma books, asking questions about the Dhamma. However, these suggestions

don't fit easily into a meditation session, so I used a simple alternative and imagined myself bowing to the Buddha, to Bhante and any teacher who came to mind. At times, I imagined myself reading a Dhamma book.

All these imaginings had the effect of quelling vanity to some extent, helping me come to terms with the fact that I can't own all the goodness and wisdom in the world. Do you remember the sutta on the raft and the need to sink the raft once we get to the far shore? This is basically what I was doing. The objective observer had become my raft, steadying my mind in Vipassanā, helping me through many emotional ups and downs. Now it was time to let go of that raft, to experience the truth of *anattā* at a deeper level, where sensations and feelings are known, but there is no sense of a person watching these.

When I'm going through a bout of vanity, I'm identifying as the person who watches experience. This showed me my attachment to the fifth *khandha*, consciousness. I want to be the conscious person that detects experience. Bowing helps me surrender my hold on consciousness. Not that I go unconscious. Sensations and feelings arise, slip by and pass away gracefully. The body continues to function as normal, but the mind's usual habit of clinging disappears. And when that goes, I lose the sense of a me who is at the centre of experience, receiving it all. There are only sensations and feelings.

To my surprise, I find that the absence of central headquarters makes absolutely no difference. In fact, everything runs much more smoothly. With each imaginary bow, I got a few seconds where the mind let go of vanity, slipped into the beauty of *anattā*. In the Buddha's words: "With the abandoning of these thoughts connected to desire, hatred and delusion, his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness and concentrated."

As an analogy for what we're doing, the Buddha paints the picture of a skilled carpenter knocking out a coarse peg by means of a fine one. The coarse peg represents our unwholesome thoughts. To drive these out, we insert the appropriate wholesome thought, which in my case was the thought of bowing to some greater wisdom.

However, after several imaginary bows, my mind refused to cooperate, reattaching itself stubbornly to vanity, determined to experience life within its normal, me-centred map. So I moved on to the second of the Buddha's suggestions:

"If, while he is giving attention to some other sign connected with what is wholesome, there still arise in him thoughts connected with desire, with hate and with delusion, then he should examine the danger in these thoughts thus: These thoughts are unwholesome, they are reprehensible, they result in suffering."

This is similar to the advice given in last night's sutta, though the wording here is less nuanced and more severe. Instead of affliction, we have unwholesome and reprehensible. Likewise, the analogy he uses is dark: "Just as a man or woman, young, youthful and fond of ornaments, would be horrified, humiliated and disgusted if the carcass of a snake or dog or a human being were hung around his or her neck, so too, when a *bhikkhu* examines the danger in those thoughts, his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness and concentrated."

We are to develop horror for unwholesome thoughts of the like we would feel if a rotting carcass were to be slung around our necks. This is a far cry from the non-judgemental approach we adopt in standard Vipassanā. Obviously there is a time to be open-minded and a time to be judicious and even severe.

In standard Vipassanā we maintain objectivity so thoughts of hatred, greed, delusion can do us no harm. But in the kind of situations the Buddha is addressing here, we're getting caught up in our emotions, no longer objective. This is when we put our judgemental nature to good use. We give it full throttle to drive out the desire, hatred and delusion that are showing up as we meditate.

However, this is not an exercise in self-hatred. What we're condemning are thoughts of greed, hatred and delusion, comparing them to a carcass being hung around our necks. We're not condemning ourselves. In fact, we're protecting ourselves against these thoughts. So it's an exercise in self-care.

When I thought about my delusive thoughts about being the one who knows all, with this image of a carcass hanging around my neck, it brought on shame for the thoughts and a determination not to keep on getting caught up in these. My attention was still riveted on the bright light and that very still, concentrated mind state that I find so attractive. But with the image of a carcass around my neck as a protector, the meditation proceeded in a more balanced way. Whenever desire sprang up, it was quelled by shame as the carcass loomed large in my imagination. Thus, I could remain objective.

In this precarious balance, I could feel the grief of not being able to fully know and possess that beautiful state. I could also sense the grief as healing, undermining attachment to the very enticing prospect of being the objective observer of my life. Thus I could see the wisdom of the Buddha's harsh judgemental words and image. These are needed to balance the very strong desires, aversions and delusions that emerge when we delve deeply into our experience. When we can't maintain the balance needed to acknowledge these and let them burn out using the standard approach, we can throw an imaginary carcass around our necks as extra ballast.

But after some time, the image of the carcass began to wane and I felt myself slipping back into vanity. I then tried the next of the Buddha's suggestions, which is to simply forget the unwholesome thoughts and give them no attention. He gives the analogy of someone with good eyesight who, not wanting to see a disturbing sight, either shuts his eyes or looks away.

One way we can put this suggestion into practice is by placing attention on calming parts of the body such as the hands and feet. These don't store emotion in the way that the trunk and face often do. What we're doing is diverting our attention from whatever is causing disturbance. In the commentaries, Buddhaghosa suggests placing attention on very mundane things, such as going through the contents of a mending box, picking up the needle and saying, "This is the needle," then picking up the thread and saying, "This is the thread," and so on.

A variation on this which Bhante suggested to me a few years ago and which is more practical during a meditation session is to open the eyes and deliberately look at objects in the room saying, "This is the window, this is the plant, this is the Buddha Rupa," and so on. I keep looking at any one of these for as long as they hold attention, naming them again and again.

It sounds foolish to be staring at objects like this, reminding ourselves what is a plant and what is a window, as if we were in kindergarten. But the mind can get, in some senses, blown apart when we go deep into experience in Vipassanā. We're learning a completely new way of looking at the world without the delusion of a central control mechanism at its core. This is deeply disturbing to our psyche and so these very strong urges towards desire, hatred and delusion can be generated as a defence mechanism.

In such a condition we have to take extraordinary care of ourselves. Recognising and naming mundane objects is simply another way of caring for and soothing an inflamed mind. When we're coming to terms with our misunderstanding about the world at its deepest level, it is very comforting to remember that we can still recognise familiar things. So don't resist the notion of being back in kindergarten. It's a good place for a confused or overexcited toddler, which is sometimes the level which our minds descend in the challenge of Vipassanā.

We've gone through three suggestions so far. First, we use wholesome thoughts like *metta* to combat hatred, unattractiveness to combat lust, or bowing as an antidote to delusion. If that doesn't still the mind, we up the ante by strongly condemning the unwholesome thoughts and conjuring an image of a carcass being slung around our

necks. If the mind is still veering towards desire, hatred or delusion, we try to forget our thoughts by diverting our attention. This could mean focusing on calming parts of the body or finding external objects at which to look while we name them mentally.

After giving each suggestion, the Buddha then repeats the hoped-for outcome: "His mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness and concentrated." However, we still have two more options if we're still too unbalanced for vipassanā.

The Buddha continues: "If, while he is trying to forget these thoughts and is not giving attention to them, there still arise in him evil, unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate and with delusion, then he should give attention to stilling the thought formation of those thoughts."

He gives this analogy: "Just as a man walking fast might consider, 'Why am I walking fast? What if I walk slowly?' And he would walk slowly. Then he might consider, 'Why am I walking slowly? What if I stand still?' And he would stand still. Then he might consider, 'Why am I standing? What if I sit?' And he would sit down. Then he might consider, 'Why am I sitting? What if I lie down?' And he would lie down."

Note the phrasing of the first part of the question as "why." In Vipassanā, we investigate using "what." For example, "What is it that I'm actually experiencing? What happens if I relax?" We don't ask why, as that gets the mind spinning, trying to think our way out of suffering. But in this variation of the usual guidance, we are allowing the cognitive mind some room for manoeuvre. We're looking for the thought formations, meaning the underlying thought or belief, prompting desire, hatred and delusion. The Buddha's "why" question is coupled with the suggestion to relax. There's an attempt to soothe the mind. So the "why" could perhaps be interpreted as, "Why am I bothering?" Although we're listening to our story, we're also trying to talk ourselves out of the frenzy it is spinning us into.

Buddhaghosa gives another analogy which helps us see how to still our thought formations. A hare is sleeping beneath a tree when a large piece of fruit falls out of the tree and hits the ground beside his head. The hare hears the loud thump, feels the vibration and concludes that the earth is being destroyed. In a blind panic, he starts running. When other animals see the hare bolting, they also start running away in a panic. And so the commotion grows until the Bodhisatta, meaning the Buddha in one of his previous lives, this time as a lion, sees all the animals running across the plains. Instead of joining them he decides to get to the bottom of the matter. So he asks each of the animals in turn why they are running.

He starts with the largest animal, the elephant, and gradually works his way back to the hare who tells him of the noise and vibration that woke him from sleep. The lion then asks the hare to take him back to his resting spot under the tree. The lion sees the piece of fallen fruit and realises that this is what had caused all the commotion. Thus the Bodhisatta was able to comfort the hare and all the animals and tell them there is nothing to fear.

Both analogies paint a picture of a very patient process. The lion had to question several animals before he got to the bottom of the hullabaloo. Similarly, the man described by the Buddha slows himself down in several stages. So too we need to be very patient with ourselves as we talk ourselves out of whatever rut the mind is steering us into.

My mind can suggest all kinds of reasons why it needs to continue along its dead end, and each one seems like an absolute truth at the time. When I eventually see through the delusion, it feels like a major breakthrough, and I'll never be the same person again. But afterwards, I can rarely remember any details. It's like an argument with our nearest and dearest. We get stuck fast to our point of view, appalled that they could dare to think otherwise. But when it's all over, we can hardly remember what the row was about.

I persuaded myself to relax for long enough to get my mind around the Buddha's advice. What emerged was the question: Why try to grasp? Why not let go? This quieted my mind for a while as it contemplated the suggestion. But then an underlying fear showed up. I discovered I was very afraid of what would become of me if I lost that lofty glimpse of purity.

Having acknowledged this, another question was framed: Why be afraid? Why not trust? Again, the mind relaxed, considering the suggestion. This had the effect of bringing me more in contact with the fear. As my body sensed all the unpleasant sensations, my mind saw a horrid image of myself as completely worthless, the polar opposite of the ideal state I had been trying to catch hold of. Although I was ninety percent identified with this state of worthlessness, I was just about able to remember that this was a trance-like experience, not my real self.

When I could relax to the degree needed to frame another question, what emerged was a reiteration of the previous one: Why be afraid? Why not trust? After a few moments' consideration, the mind relaxed more deeply into the unwanted state and shame became the predominant emotion. Acknowledging shame brought a degree of relief and with that I could also sense the caring nature of the investigating strand in my mind.

After a while it felt okay to ask, why be ashamed? Why not let it go? After some time pondering this, my mind confessed the kernel of its fear: because I don't know what will happen next. This, I believe, was the thought formation at the basis of all the commotion.

This is a big dilemma for our sense of self, that delusion of being a separate unit from the rest of the world. It needs to be in control, to be able to predict what's coming down the line. It's the foreman in the factory, the headmaster in the school. As far as the boss is concerned, he or she is running the show. But in this situation, the boss is in a fix. All the conveyor belts have jammed, the workers are threatening to walk out, the pupils are causing a riot. The situation has got totally out of control and the boss hasn't a clue what to do.

Through practising with this, I've learned that I can happily embrace the don't-know state. In fact, it can be a great joy because it relieves responsibility. I can step down from my role as the boss, join the rebellious workers in riotous freedom. Though in practice, the riot stops the instant the boss steps down. Everything changes once I stop pretending to be in control.

Though these memories help, I still get stuck to the pedestal, fooled into believing that everything will disintegrate if I don't maintain order. Getting through that barrier of fear, climbing down from the boss's pedestal, this requires lots of patience. As best I can, I bear witness to the fear, feeling its texture in my body, trusting that things will somehow work out.

Eventually, I slipped off the pedestal into a joyful freedom from responsibility. I could also sense the danger of identifying with that carefree state. But of course, this is just another dead end. Identifying with any state of mind, even the most joyous, brings suffering when the state breaks up as it's bound to do eventually.

Knowing this, I made an effort to tread the middle path between carefree joy and the attempt to identify as the boss and control matters. The desire to plunge into identification was very strong. I really wanted to define myself either as the one who is joyful or the control freak. Either identification felt preferable, more stable than the precarious middle ground. I no longer had the balance of mind needed to frame any questions for inquiry. So at that stage I moved on to the last of the Buddha's suggestions for dealing with distractions.

Before going on to that I want to emphasise how gentle we need to be with our questions. The process is like psychotherapy where the therapist needs to be very respectful of the client and not rush them along. The therapist strand in my mind needs constant

restraining. The client needs a lot of reassurance. Using Buddhaghosa's analogy, the lion needs to be reminded not to eat the animals he is questioning. And they need a lot of reassurance that his motives are benign.

This is especially important as the lion approaches the smaller animals and as we go deeper into our fears. The hare, in Buddhaghosa's story, at first refuses to take the lion to his resting place. The lion slowly talks him into this disclosure, speaking sometimes gently, sometimes firmly. And when the lion works out the cause of the problem, he doesn't crow in triumph, but takes time to reassure the animals that there's nothing to fear. This paints a picture of the tenderness and respect with which we care for the fearful strand in our minds as we try to get to the bottom of the disturbance.

Going on to the final suggestion. "If, while he is giving attention to stilling the thought formations, there still arise in him evil, unwholesome thoughts, connected with desire, with hate and with delusion, then, with teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he should beat down, constrain and crush mind with mind."

By comparison to the gentle language of the previous example, he uses very forceful words here. He gives an equally stark analogy of a strong man seizing a weaker man by the head or shoulders and beating him down, constraining him and crushing him. What are we to make of this? Elsewhere in the scriptures, the Buddha praises qualities like patience, care, kindness. But here he is asking us to beat someone up, at least in our imagination.

It would appear that there is a time for everything. And this is the time for our aggressive tendencies to be put to good use. In my case, then, as I attempted to find a middle way between heedless irresponsibility and absolute control, I used suppression as a means of forcing myself back towards the middle ground.

At times, I felt the strong urge towards that sense of absolute control, becoming the boss. To combat this, I put all my energy into saying, "No." Very strong tensions ran through the body to combat desire in this way. My jaw set like iron, my breath stopped. Body and mind were completely locked in combat between "I want" and "no."

Eventually, a truce was called, the breath started flowing, the tension eased up a little, and I felt a trickle of energy flowing through the most jammed up section of the body. The ending of the battle didn't feel like victory or defeat, more like moving on, with the sense of something within having been freed up, although I couldn't name what had changed. The sensations that flowed through the previously jammed up area released a trickle of joy and even bliss in their wake.

But after a few moments the desire to identify locked hard onto some new outlet, at times the trickle of joy, at other times the grief at not being able to control this and call it mine. Again my body and mind stiffened as I resisted this new identity with all my might. On and on it went until desire burnt out somewhat and I could feel myself relaxing, no longer overwhelmed by the need to identify with experience. At that point I returned to the standard *vipassanā* technique, knowing experience objectively without interfering.

Although I was feeling battle-weary, I sensed that some deeper wisdom had been gained. I found myself reflecting on the meaning of *anattā* and saying, "So I really am not this body and mind." Although there was still some fear and grief at the words, these emotions were balanced by acceptance and wonder. The obvious next question, "What on earth am I then?" was not forming, which was a blessed relief. There was a degree of ease with being unable to understand the mystery of what I am. The phrase "peace beyond understanding" came to mind and started to make sense.

At some level I'd broken free from the tyrant within me who demands to know and understand what life is all about. Though I knew this was just a temporary break, I was deeply grateful for the relief.

To close the sutta, the Buddha repeats his five suggestions for dealing with distractions which come up when we get deeply concentrated. First, we give attention to the alternative wholesome thought, such as *mettā*, for example. If that doesn't work, we reflect on the danger posed by the unwholesome thoughts, which is basically the same as in last night's sutta, though in this case the language is more strongly condemnatory, and we sling a carcass around our necks to drive the point home. Thirdly, we forget about the disturbing thoughts, distract our attention elsewhere, such as to the periphery of the body or objects in the room. Fourthly, we head the process of inquiring into the underlying thought formations with the aim of bringing them to stillness. Finally, there is the advice to suppress the disturbance by force majeure.

After each suggestion, the Buddha reiterates the hoped for outcome: "With the abandoning of the unwholesome thoughts, the mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness and concentrated." Note that there is no judgment if any of these steps fail. We don't have to think of ourselves as a bad meditator if we have to go to the last step and suppress the disturbance. Instead we can think of this as a step of deep purification.

The Buddha concludes by saying that using this practice the meditator becomes a master of thought. He will think whatever thought he wishes to think and he will not think any thought he does not wish to think. Wouldn't it be wonderful never to think thoughts we don't want to think? Never again to worry or obsess over details? Never to harbour resentment or jealousy? Never to think ourselves into a panic?

And imagine always being able to think those thoughts we want to think—always able to think well of ourselves and others, to wish ourselves well in all circumstances, to find some positive, optimistic thought, even when we feel depressed or when the situation seems desperate. Even if bandits were sawing us apart limb by limb, as the Buddha describes in another sutta, we could think compassionately of our poor body and of the bandits who are making such bad *kamma* for themselves.

The Buddha's final words on the matter are that having become a master of thought the meditator has severed craving, flung off the fetters and with the complete penetration of conceit he has made an end to suffering.

01. Sickness, Ageing and Death

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 11 min

In this opening talk from the series on the human condition, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines how the Buddha could speak directly about life's harsh realities—sickness, ageing, and death—because he had discovered a way beyond suffering. Through the Buddha's dialogue with King Pasenadi of Kosala, we see how even the most powerful rulers cannot escape mortality through wealth, armies, or political cunning.

The Buddha's teaching reveals that not even arahats—fully awakened beings—are exempt from bodily decay and death, yet they face these realities without being overwhelmed. This discourse emphasizes that when 'ageing and death are rolling in on you,' the only meaningful response is to 'live by the Dharma, live righteously and do wholesome and meritorious deeds.'

Bhante reflects on the Buddha's own experience of loss, including the deaths of his chief disciples Sāriputta and Moggallāna, demonstrating that sadness exists even for the awakened, though without the crushing grip of grief. The episode concludes with the Buddha's memorable verse: 'The beautiful chariots of kings wear out. This body too undergoes decay. But the Dharma of the good does not decay.' This teaching serves as essential groundwork for understanding why we need the Buddhist path.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I'm continuing these little evening talks using Bhikkhu Bodhi's book, *In the Buddha's Words*, an anthology. I thought to begin at the beginning, instead of going all over the place. It starts off with what he calls the human condition. When the Buddha came to his realisation, he saw an end to this suffering business.

If you can imagine a doctor, the awkwardness of having to tell somebody they have a terminal illness and that there's no chance of it being healed. They might say, "Well, you might last nine months, one year, two years," but the news is really bad. It must be difficult, even if they've done it many times, to actually have to say that to somebody, knowing the shock and the horror that it causes in people. It must be similar if somebody has

a chronic illness, something like rheumatoid arthritis. They have to say to them, "We can't do anything about it, we can give you drugs, but you're stuck with it." Again, there's a despairing note about it and no help.

Very different, of course, if the illness is something they can cure. Then they're very happy to tell you that you'll be suffering miserably and terribly for a month, but at the end, you'll be all right. So when it comes to the harsh conditions of our life, the Buddha can be right in our face with it because he's got an answer. He says, "Well, there is an end to this suffering." So he can be fairly straight on the nose business. These passages just tell you how he doesn't pull his punches.

He's talking here to King Pasenadi. There were two areas where he wandered. He never really went over towards Bengal, towards Calcutta. He stayed within that area, Varanasi, Benares, present-day Benares, all the way up to where his people lived, the Sakyas. He seems to have moved right over towards modern Delhi. He wandered for quite a while. It was all over the place, really. He just kept walking.

There were two kings. One was Pasenadi, who was the ruler of the northern part of that area, the Gangetic plain. There was Bimbisara in the south, who ruled the kingdom of Magadha. Pasenadi, he must have known even as a child, because his people, the Sakyas, would have been under that kingship.

You often hear the tales of the Buddha being the prince of a great king and all that. But actually, it was a small tribe, the Sakyas, who lived on the borders of what is present-day Nepal. His father was the head man. He was the chief and elective. It would have been a more democratic thing – democratic only within that caste, the Kshatriyas, the warrior caste, the rulers. They came under the king of Kosala. The king of Kosala was their lord, you might say. Very feudal. There's no record as to whether they paid duty or anything like that. But anyway, he obviously knows him, and King Pasenadi became a great supporter of his.

He's at the capital, Savatthi, and King Pasenadi of Kosala said to the Blessed One: "Venerable Sir, is anyone who is born free from ageing and death?"

"Great King, no one who is born is free from ageing and death. Even those affluent Kshatriyas" – that's the ruling caste – "rich with great wealth and property, with abundant gold and silver, abundant treasures and commodities, abundant wealth and grain, because they've been born, are not free from ageing and death. Even those affluent brahmins and those affluent householders with abundant wealth and grain, because they've been born, they're not free from ageing and death. Even those monks who are arahats, fully liberated, whose taints are destroyed, who've lived the holy life, done

what has to be done, laid down the burdens, reached their own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence and are completely liberated through final knowledge – even for them this body is subject to breaking up, subject to being laid down."

There's no escape. Even somebody who's fully liberated has to go through the horror. Now we know that, for instance, Moggallāna, who was one of his two main disciples and he was known for his powers, was seemingly murdered by bandits. His other great disciple, Sāriputta, seems to have died at home in peace, but it would have been a sad thing for him that both of them died before he went.

When I was in Burma, I saw a beautiful statue with the Buddha sitting and he had his hand pointing towards his heart like that. I'd never seen this mudra – what's the word for mudra? The position, like you get them, well, like this one here, that's the samadhi posture. They said to me it was a sadness he felt when he heard that the two teachers who had brought him so far were dead and he had wanted to pass on his message to them. So this tells us that sadness isn't beyond the Buddha. He's sad, but he's not overwhelmed by it. He's not grieving for it.

There's a little phrase, there's a little verse that he creates: "The beautiful chariots of kings wear out. This body too undergoes decay. But the *Dhamma* of the good does not decay. So the good proclaim along with the good." A little verse just to remind us that the Dhamma is beyond time. It's *akālika*. One of the qualities of the Dhamma is that it exists as a law no matter what time or space you happen to be in.

Then he goes on, and this is quite a long little passage but we'll get through it. At Sāvattṥi in the middle of the day, King Pasenadi of Kosala approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him and sat down to one side. The Blessed One then asked him: "Now where have you come from, great king, in the middle of the day?"

"Just now, Venerable Sir, I've been engaged in those affairs of kingship typical for kings who are intoxicated with the intoxication of sovereignty, who are obsessed by greed for sensual pleasures and who've attained stable control of their country and who rule, having conquered a great sphere of territory on earth."

Intoxicated with the intoxication of sovereignty. "What do you think, great king? Suppose a man would come to you from the east, one who is trustworthy and reliable, and would tell you: 'For sure, great king, you should know this. I'm coming from the east and there I saw a great mountain high as the clouds coming this way, crushing all living beings. Do whatever you think should be done, great king.' Then a second man would come to you from the west, and a third from the north, and a fourth from the south, one who is trustworthy and reliable, and would tell you: 'For sure, great king,

you should know this. I'm coming from the south and there I saw a great mountain high as the clouds coming this way, crushing all living beings. Do whatever you think should be done, great king.' If, great king, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life, the human state being so difficult to obtain, what should be done?"

"Oh, if, Venerable Sir, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life, the human state being so difficult to obtain, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds?"

"I inform you, great king, I announce to you, great king: ageing and death are rolling in on you. When ageing and death are rolling in on you, great king, what should be done?"

"As ageing and death are rolling in on me, Venerable Sir, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds? Venerable Sir, kings intoxicated with the intoxication of sovereignty, obsessed by greed for sensual pleasures, who've attained stable control of their country and rule over a great sphere of territory, conquer by means of elephant battles, cavalry battles, chariot battles and infantry battles. But there is no hope of victory by such battles, no chance of success when ageing and death are rolling in.

"In this royal court, Venerable Sir, there are counsellors who, when the enemies arrive, are capable of dividing them by subterfuge. There is no hope of victory by subterfuge, no chance of success when ageing and death are rolling in. In this royal court, Venerable Sir, there exists abundant bullion and gold stored in vaults and lofts. With such wealth we are capable of mollifying the enemies when they come. But there is no hope of victory by wealth, no chance of success when ageing and death are rolling in. As ageing and death are rolling in on me, Venerable Sir, what else should I do but live by Dhamma, live righteously and do wholesome and meritorious deeds?"

"So it is, great king, so it is, great king. As ageing and death are rolling in on you, what else should you do but live by Dhamma, live righteously and do wholesome and meritorious deeds?"

This is what the Blessed One said. We can only hope that his words have some effect upon us and that we will live righteously and according to the Dhamma. May you be fully liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

02 First Three Noble Truths

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 32 min

In this foundational teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the first three Noble Truths from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), exploring why they form the cornerstone of all Buddhist teaching. He begins with dukkha - not merely suffering, but the fundamental unsatisfactoriness of conditioned existence, including birth, aging, sickness, death, and crucially, not obtaining what one wants. The teaching delves into the five aggregates affected by clinging (upādāna) and how our sense of identity creates existential suffering.

The second Noble Truth reveals taṇhā (craving or thirst) as suffering's cause - encompassing craving for sensual pleasures, becoming, and non-becoming. Bhante explains how our desires are actually attempts to create specific mental states, forming compulsive habits that keep us trapped. The third Noble Truth offers hope: the complete cessation of suffering through relinquishing all craving.

Drawing from the Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta (MN 9), this talk demonstrates how understanding any aspect of Dhamma fully leads to liberation, as all teachings interconnect. Perfect for newcomers seeking to understand Buddhism's foundational framework and experienced practitioners deepening their comprehension of these essential truths.

Greetings all. Very good. There are, at the moment, 66 people, all looking at me, for heaven's sake. That's very lovely.

So, I'll just start in my usual way.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa

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

I'm presuming you can hear me. It's always good to have a little test there. If somebody could just give me a nod to say they can hear me, that would lessen my sense of overwhelming anxiety. Nobody's answering. Well, I'm just presuming you can hear me. Yes, I'll have to presume. Very good. Loud and clear. Thank you so much. Very good. Audio is great. Right. I'm with it. Yeah, that's enough. Thank you very much.

So, yes, hopefully you've had a fruitful day. Just to reiterate, if something comes up which is a bit heavy for you to handle, feel free to get in touch. Use my email, bbbodhibodhi at gmail.com. Sometimes it's good just to talk to somebody. I'm thinking, obviously, especially for those people who find themselves locked in by themselves, that can be a bit of a miserable state, although these days it's lessened with all the social media that's a blessing really.

So I just wanted to... oh, by the way, the little talk I give in the evenings, you'll find them as separate little items on the channel so that if you happen to miss some of my pearls of wisdom one night, you can always check it up in the daytime.

I wanted to answer these questions that were sent to me: "To what extent can it be argued that the Four Noble Truths was the Buddha's most important teaching?" It sounds a bit like one of these A-level questions. And "Are all the stages of the Eightfold Path equally important?"

Now, this discourse, which is the Sammādiṭṭhi, the Right View discourse, where Sāriputta is being asked basically what right view do we need to have in order to become liberated, and he gives various answers to that. And there's a suggestion that if you understand any of these fully, that would lead to liberation. Now, that only makes sense when we realize that the teaching, the Dharma, is all one piece, really. Once you investigate one part of it, it naturally leads you to other parts.

Anyway, he's being asked again, "But friend, might there be another way by which a noble disciple is of right view and has arrived at this true dharma?" And he says, "Yes there is." And then there is what you might call a regular expression of the Four Noble Truths. So I'll read those out: "What is the noble truth of suffering? What is the origin of suffering? What is the cessation of suffering? And what is the way leading to the cessation of suffering?" So there's your Four Noble Truths.

"Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering, not to obtain what one wants is suffering. In short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering." We'll take it one by one.

Now, that's pretty straightforward, isn't it? The whole business of being born is not particularly pleasant either for the child and the mother. And then aging and all... so all of it is pretty straightforward. But then there's this little sentence: "not obtaining what one wants." Now there's your frustration, your anxiety that you might not get it, all that stuff.

This word *dukkha*, that's what it's translating as suffering. These days, people prefer "unsatisfactoriness." The word *dukkha* itself means just "hard to bear." Du is like... it just means bad, not good. And ka means to bear something. So it's something that's difficult to bear. And it's used figuratively, for instance, to describe an axle in a wheel which doesn't quite fit. So you get the grinding noise. It doesn't quite fit.

And what *dukkha*, what the Buddha is saying, the way he's using the word, is not just on these obvious things like ordinary sufferings and pains and all that sort of stuff. But there is this business of not getting what one wants. And that's to do with our desires, our expectations. So that obviously causes us a lot of suffering. But the next sentence goes a little deeper. It says the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.

Now those of you who know dependent origination will know the middle links, which connect or express how we create this suffering. So remember there is this point of contact. Then there's the discernment that what we're experiencing is pleasant or unpleasant, liking, disliking. And then, of course, we choose to grasp at or desire what's pleasant and push away what's unpleasant. And that's the reaction. But it's the next one where we *upādāna*, which means to cling to, get hold of.

Now this *upādāna* is manifest in four different ways. First of all, a clinging to the pleasures of the senses. That's the sort of clinging. And of course, if you are not being pleased, then your response is to get rid of it. So there's always this duality of aversion and desire. And the aversion, of course, splits into two. You either get rid of it or run from it.

And then there's this holding onto views, opinions. I'm right, everybody else is wrong. That's also a sort of clinging. Then there's this one about rules and regulations. This is really going back to an understanding of the time when ritual was a way of appeasing the gods or demanding the gods to do something. So if you think that, for instance, bowing to the Buddha, lighting candles and all that sort of stuff actually is going to liberate you, then you are definitely deluded. So that's the rules and regulations.

But the one that I particularly reinforce when I'm talking about this is identity. Because that's where the root cause is. The root cause is the sense of "I." And that's really where the suffering becomes existential. It becomes a position of "me." And that comes most obvious when death approaches us, but also serious illness or indeed the death of somebody we love or the serious illness of somebody we love. It impinges upon us. It begins to question our identity because this identity, this self, this feeling of "me" has a feeling about it of permanence. Even though we're quite happy to get rid of it when we fall asleep, there's the presumption that next morning I'm going to wake up and say, "Oh, here I am again."

So that's the suffering. It's pretty straightforward: unsatisfactoriness, not being able to get fully satisfied with life. It's always going to let us down a bit, even when we've got everything, the right house, the right car, the right partner, the right children, et cetera, et cetera. At some point, it just begins to disappear. And that's the way it is.

Then there's the suffering which is not getting what you want. And then there's the suffering which is to do with this existential, this sense of self. So this word *dukkha*, which is very difficult to define, very difficult to translate because it has such a wide meaning. And what the Buddha is really saying is that the whole of life, the whole of human life is unsatisfactory.

And I always liked the quote from Jesus on this when he said, "The birds have their nest holes, but the son of man has nowhere to rest his head." So I think that puts it very, very poetically, very beautifully.

So then, of course, there's the origin of suffering or the cause of suffering. And that is: "It is craving which brings renewal of becoming, is accompanied by delight and lust and delights in this and that. That is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. This is called the origin of suffering." It's translated here as origin, but I would probably prefer the word "cause," the basic cause of suffering.

So the word here that's being translated is *taṇhā*, which some authors, I think, probably are closer to the mark when you translate it as a thirst, a lack, a sense of lack. That's another translation that some authors use. And those get close to it. Craving is a bit too strong, although we do have cravings. It's actually covering all desires, even from the simplest thing, like when you're watching TV and you feel a bit uncomfortable, there's a desire to move.

So if you watch all your intentions you'll see that they're all, normally speaking, desires to get rid of something you don't like or get something you do like. And so we're constantly manipulating the world to make ourselves feel comfortable. And it's accompanied, you see, with delight and it's got lust here, but it's more like indulgence, delight and indulgence.

So the question that we have to ask ourselves: when I want something, when I want something or someone from this position of trying to escape suffering, because that's what we're doing when we're often indulging things, and also enjoying it, what is it that we really want? Do we actually want the object we're desiring or the effect that the ob-

ject has on us? Have a guess, what do you think? What is it we really want? I mean, do we really want porridge or do we want what porridge does to us? Toast, that's another one. Yeah, I know I'm a bit obsessive about toast.

So it's trying to establish or trying to develop a certain mental state, isn't it? A certain emotional feeling state. And that's what this craving does or this thirst. And it produces habits.

And what we discover in meditation, and even now with this lockdown, is that when you interrupt a habit, when you stop a habit, it suddenly becomes a choice. Normally, we're running with habits. You get up, you do this, you do that. You want a piece of toast. See, I'm at it again. And off you go. But when you can't, when there's no bread, you see, or when the toaster is broken, the habit's broken, and it comes back at you. And now most times we would fight that and run out and get a toaster. But it also gives us a choice, you see, a choice to bring about an end to that compulsive behavior.

So if we look upon this lockdown, some of us are having to stay in rooms, can't actually leave. This is an opportunity really to see where these obsessive compulsive things are. And of course it can be difficult. It can be very difficult. But that's the whole reason for practicing this *vipassanā*, that you find a different relationship with it so that you allow the heart to express its turbulences, no matter how difficult that may be. And what we discover, of course, is that that's the way it heals itself.

So that's the origin or the cause of suffering. Sorry, I'm not finished yet. There's also the craving for becoming. So there's yourself, you see, always wanting to become. And you'll notice how you're always ahead of yourself. You're always thinking about what you're going to do in a minute or in an hour or this afternoon or when you go to work or when you don't go to work or when you retire. Yeah. What are you going to do, you see? So the self never feels safe just being in the present moment. It can't hold that position because it's unsafe. It doesn't know what's going to happen next, for heaven's sake. So this craving for constantly becoming.

And the other one is craving for non-becoming. So that, of course, takes us to the dark side: to put an end to this because of the suffering that we're having, leading towards suicide, right? That's the worst. Or if you're angry with somebody, murdering them because they're stopping you getting happy. But we've given that up, remember, because we take the five precepts. Yeah, so that craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming, that digs deep again to this existential problem about who am I. And that's the question: who am I or what am I?

Then finally, and then the third one is cessation of suffering. How does all this stuff come to an end? So this is the regular formula: "It is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting of that same craving. Just this is the end of suffering, the cessation of suffering."

Now that sounds really simple, doesn't it? Just to give up the craving, give up all these obsessive desires, this compulsive behaviour, and voila, you've made it. But of course what we discovered is that that's no easy thing at all. And that becomes very obvious when we go on retreat, just the difficulty of changing our habits completely. The first three days, as you know, are all blood, sweat and tears. And then it eases off a bit, but never a lot. And it's always been a struggle. So the practice is hard. The Buddha doesn't pull punches on that.

I'm sure you've heard me quote from the scriptures there. Somebody says to the Buddha, "This training is very hard." And he says, "Well, it is hard, but in the end, you're liberated, you achieve *nibbāna*." And the questioner says, "Yeah, so what?" And the Buddha says, "Well, at the end of it, you are happy and contented." *Tuṭṭhi sukha wahati, tuṭṭhi*. That's the word for contentment, *tuṭṭhi*. Tutti frutti.

So that's this business of cessation. And the final one is, of course, the Eightfold Path.

Now the question is: "Can it be argued this is the Buddha's most important teaching?" Well, if you can imagine when the Buddha had his awakening and it was said he spent a week thinking about especially dependent origination, the psychology that he had discovered, and then he began teaching...

The first part of the scriptures which you'll see... some of you might know the *Sutta Nipāta*, which was translated by Venerable Ñāṇamoli. Ñāṇamoli was the chief monk at the London Buddhist Vihara in the 80s. And when I ordained he was my preceptor. So although all my meditation teachers were Burmese, my ordination was into one of the Sri Lankan orders. And he's translated it. It's a lovely translation, that, the *Sutta Nipāta*. And Bhikkhu Bodhi has done a great big, huge volume which translates the commentary as well.

Now, the interesting thing about the *Sutta Nipāta* is that it's pretty original. And that always surprises me, really, because you can see the original teaching wasn't so formalized. He's answering individual questions. And slowly, you know, the teaching becomes formalized. And that's when you get these, you know, four of these, ten of those, nine of them, and so on and so forth. And that formalization is the middle bit. And then it becomes, towards the end, it becomes very listy, like, to help you remember things and it begins to be a bit like the Abhidhamma, which was a later development which takes

away all that... what would you call it... not humanity. When you read the scriptures you do get the feeling of a person, the Buddha talking and people who are talking to him. And as the teacher becomes more and more intellectualized, that begins to disappear and it really does become lists.

So there's these three waves of development. And it's interesting, I think it's surprising, that the oral tradition maintained those very early teachings. They're there. And then of course you get this more formalized... the Four Noble Truths.

So when he has finally formalized it, these Four Noble Truths are the foundation of the whole teaching. And you could say that if you come across any teaching, so-called Buddhism, which doesn't fit into the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, then it's not right. It's not particularly right.

And each of these noble truths, of course, launches out into various other teachings, and we'll come to some of them very much in this particular discourse. Whenever you start talking about *kamma*, or start talking about the body, it doesn't matter where you start—whatever it is you start talking about, you always end up really investigating the whole of the dharma because it just leads from links one to another until you've virtually covered it. And you'll always come down to this root level about *dukkha*.

If you were going to encapsulate in one word the Buddha's understanding of the human condition, that's the word: *dukkha*. And if you wanted to choose one word which encapsulates the fundamental problem that we have, it would be *atta*—self—the teaching around not-self. And if you were to choose one word which expresses the way out of it, the actual practice to get out of it, it would be *sati*—awareness. But you'd have to put *samma* in front of it—it's right awareness. It's a specific definition.

In other words, if you're thieving, you're fully aware, but it's not going to get you liberated. It might make you rich for a little while.

So that's the phone number. I'm just looking at the time. Oh, it's going on. So I want to leave it there, and then tomorrow we'll have a look at the stages. And the question is: are all the stages of the Eightfold Path equally important? So we can have a look at that tomorrow.

Very good. So yesterday I forgot to take the refuges and precepts for those of you who would like to do it. And then once I've done that, we can sit and, as usual, towards the end, I'll do these contemplations.

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

Very good. So I shall now do the chanting. That's odd. My computer says twenty-five minutes past eight, but my clock says half past eight. I don't know. We can begin.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa

Buddham saranam gacchami
Dhammam saranam gacchami
Sangham saranam gacchami

Dutiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami
Dutiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami
Dutiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami

Tatiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami
Tatiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami
Tatiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami

Panatipata veramani sikkhapa dam samadiyami
Adinnadana veramani sikkhapa dam samadiyami
Kamesu micchacara veramani sikkhapa dam samadiyami
Musavada veramani sikkhapa dam samadiyami

We can begin our sitting. Make sure you're comfortable, feeling comfortable, and settling on the breath.

We can begin our sitting with these evening contemplations, which the Buddha says are there to make us more enthusiastic, to give us some real purpose as to why we're practising. So just repeating these phrases to ourselves:

This body is subject to disease. This body is of a nature to fall ill. This body has not gone beyond sickness.

This body is subject to ageing. This body has not gone beyond ageing. This body is now in a process of ageing.

This body is subject to death. This body has not gone beyond death. This body will die.

There is the unborn, undying, uncreated, uncompounded, the unconditioned—true refuge, harbour and home, perfect peace and contentment.

Those who are mindful are in the presence, in the vicinity of *Nibbāna*.

1st, 2nd & 3rd Noble Truths: Dukkha, its Cause & Cessation

Noirin Sheahan · 37 min

In this teaching, Noirin Sheahan presents the Buddha's core discovery following his Awakening - the Four Noble Truths, focusing particularly on the first three. She explores the First Truth's definition of dukkha as encompassing birth, aging, death, separation from the pleasant, and connection with the unpleasant, culminating in the insight that "the five aggregates of clinging are dukkha." The teaching examines how we mistakenly identify with body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, creating the suffering of false selfhood.

The Second Truth reveals taṇhā (craving/desire) as dukkha's root cause - our wanting things to be different than they are. Through mindful observation rather than suppression, we can learn that desire truly causes suffering. The Third Truth points to the cessation of suffering in moments when desire fades, creating space for peace. Noirin emphasizes cultivating appreciation for these often-overlooked moments of absence and quiet.

Drawing on practical retreat experiences and everyday examples, she shows how understanding these truths transforms our relationship with life's inevitable changes and challenges, moving us from delusion toward wisdom and preparing the ground for following the Noble Eightfold Path toward complete liberation.

Four Noble Truths.

Soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha decided to teach others how to follow his lead. He first sought out his earlier spiritual companions and told them of four observations that had led him to liberation. These later became known as the Four Noble Truths and are the cornerstone for all schools of Buddhism.

All truths concern *dukkha*, a Pali word usually translated as suffering or sometimes as stress, distress or unsatisfactoriness. Dukkha spans the full range of negativity we experience from minor irritations to rage, terror and despair.

The Buddha told his companions that liberation involved seeing for himself that this is suffering. This is the cause of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The word "this" refers to something close at hand. It's not an abstract idea to think about. It's something we can see or feel or experience here and now. This cup, this foot, this thought.

We learn the Four Noble Truths from direct experience. We feel how suffering feels, discover what causes it, realize that suffering can stop, let that guide us along the path that reduces suffering, brings it eventually to a complete end. As we learn the Four Noble Truths, we move from delusion to an understanding of what causes suffering, what makes us happy.

We often think of understanding as a purely intellectual, rational process. We think we should only have to learn the Dhamma once and then have this as a skill we can call upon any time in the same way as we learned how to drive or fix a puncture. But the understanding we need for liberation is not purely cognitive. We have to take the Dhamma fully to heart until we're fully liberated. We'll be continually relearning the Four Noble Truths, feeling the dukkha in experience, searching for the cause.

The First Noble Truth is basically the Buddha's definition of dukkha. Birth is dukkha, old age and death are dukkha, sorrow, lamentations and despair are dukkha. Being connected to what one dislikes is dukkha, and being separated from what one likes is dukkha and not getting what one wants is dukkha. In short, the five aggregates of clinging are dukkha.

Birth is dukkha. We usually think of birth as joyous, but in fact, physical birth is a painful and perilous process for mother and baby. It's when both are pronounced safe and well that the joy arises. Before that, it's touch and go between hope and fear.

We also get a flavour of this when we look closely at the start of any process. A new job, for example. Again, we think of it as good news, something to celebrate, but there is that awkward first day in the office, not knowing anyone or where things are kept or how not to be a nuisance, having to learn a lot of new procedures, watching our P's and Q's, taking care to make a good impression. It's not something we would want to do every day of our lives. It would be too stressful.

Now, some of us love new beginnings. There's a sense of potential. Anything could happen. If we're the optimistic type, we project all kinds of wonders into whatever it is, a new job, a new partner, the start of a holiday, the first few hours of a retreat. Everything is going to be perfect. We'd be enlightened in no time.

This over-the-top optimism is one manifestation of delusion. The truth is that we don't know what's going to happen, whether things will turn out well or not. And that experience of not knowing is so uncomfortable for us that we concoct lovely fantasies rather than feel the experience. But after a year or maybe only a week of the new job, new partner, perhaps only a day or two into the holiday or retreat, we realise that it's not all a bed of roses, that the reality doesn't match up to the fantasies.

And if things do turn out well and our expectations are all met or even exceeded, there will be a time when it all comes asunder. We'll someday have to retire from the job. The holiday will come to an end, as will the retreat. Our partner will die or else we will die and leave it all behind—the job, the holiday, the loving relationships, all our retreats. Everything we know ends at death.

Death is the second example of dukkha which the Buddha gives. Our own physical death is indeed the big one. Unless we can say goodbye to all we hold dear, death will surely be a time of anguish.

We can practice our goodbyes by paying attention to the ending of any activity or event. These can all be seen as mini-deaths. We often make light of them by thinking ahead to what's to come, but that won't be an option at our real death, so we might as well pause at endings now, acknowledge that the holiday or the party or some particular task is coming to an end.

There may be relief, a sense of something accomplished, a job well done. The sentiment is to be treasured. If we can feel the same way at our own death, it will be a great gift. We might also detect grief, knowing that something we were enjoying is now stopping. There can be a surprising amount of grief, even at the close of relatively trivial events, when we pay close attention.

On retreat at Gaia House one time, I was following the usual Mahasi single biscuit in the evening practice, but all the while envying the other retreatants their bowls of soup. I looked forward so much to the final day when I could have that evening treat. Sure enough, the day came and the soup was delicious. I savoured every mouthful until I noticed that the bowl was no longer even half full. A big wave of misery emerged and got stuck in my throat. It was my first real recognition of the truth that all pleasures come to an end. I got the Buddha's full whammy of sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. I couldn't even finish my treasured bowl of soup, but went to my room and howled in misery.

Having realised the emotional impact of delusive over-expectations, I never built such high expectations out of sense pleasures again. This is the benefit of paying attention to ending. We move from delusion to wisdom, and instead of being continually disappointed by the world, by other people, we grow to accept that neither the world nor other people can bring us lasting happiness. We grow more forgiving of our own and others' limitations, more appreciative of whatever does happen to go right.

The Buddha summarizes dukkha by saying the five aggregates of clinging are dukkha. These aggregates of clinging are what we mistakenly assume to be our true selves. That essential element of me, which has been with me since birth and will remain with me to death and perhaps hereafter. In Christianity, we would call this our soul.

The Buddha searched ardently for his essence and on the way discovered a series of false identities which ensnared him in dukkha. He used this discovery as the basis for his teaching on *anattā*, or not self. To find our true essence, we must first see through all the false identities we assume.

At times we identify with the body, feeling proud of our strength or beauty, ashamed of our pimples and wrinkles. This is dukkha. The Buddha points out that such inconsistency is not worthy of being thought of as an essential part of our identity.

At other times, we identify with our feelings, get deeply wounded when these are hurt, yet more dukkha. Sometimes we identify with perceptions, swear that the earth was created in seven days, are ready to die for our belief.

Then again, we can identify with character traits. Perhaps we assume kindness or generosity are essential components of our true self. But this means we have to suppress any suggestions of unkindness or meanness, pretend they aren't happening. More harmfully, we can identify with negative characteristics like self-doubt, thinking "I'm useless, I always make a mess of things." Though the identity is painful, it's also comforting as we never get disappointed because we never expect much of ourselves.

The final aggregate is consciousness, where we assume our essence as the knowing of all our experience, thinking "I am the one who sees and hears and smells and tastes and thinks and experiences the joys and pains of life."

Buddha examined all of these areas but found all such identities to be inconstant, unreliable. Traits like generosity arose depending on conditions, feelings changed when circumstances changed, as did perceptions, and so on. None of these provided a stable foundation upon which he could declare, "this is my true self." He also found that there was great pain, dukkha, in discovering each identity to be false.

We cling vainly to our delusions, saying, "I am feeling miserable," or "I am useless," refusing to believe that these experiences come and go depending on conditions. The Buddha realised that peace came only when he relaxed all attempts to cling, to let go of any attempt to define himself. His teaching on anattā, not self, asks us to recognize that clinging to identity causes suffering, prevents us adapting to circumstances, flowing with life's vicissitudes.

Note that the Buddha never denies that we have a self, an ultimate identity. He just says it cannot be defined or captured in any way that satisfies our craving for sense pleasure, our craving to be someone or to escape it all, be nobody. Any identity we find is temporary. It will eventually break up. But we can use every temporary identity wisely. He repeatedly asks us to look after our long-term happiness by practicing the Dhamma.

We can have and encourage a healthy sense of self, so long as we know this as a friend on the path, a temporary gift, not our ultimate essence.

In summary then, the first truth describes dukkha, tells us that we must fully understand dukkha. We can look for dukkha in any new beginning and in every ending, parting, saying goodbye when we're in sorrow, pain or despair. We can turn towards there as an opportunity to learn more about dukkha and its causes. Similarly, when we're getting over-identified by a role or job or believing "this is me" or "this is definitely not me," these are again perfect opportunities to study dukkha.

The second truth the Buddha wants us to learn is what causes dukkha. We think that the problem lies with the world or other people or the laws of nature. But the Buddha discovered that the cause was within ourselves. Desire, *tanha* in Pali, caused him to suffer. Tanha includes what we usually call aversion, the desire to be rid of something.

We suffer because we want more of the nice stuff, cakes and ale and rock and roll, praise, adulation, fame, beauty, health, youth. And when life gives us instead dry bread and blame and loneliness and old age, with its wrinkles and decrepitude, we don't know how to cope.

The Buddha's wonderful discovery was that when he stopped wanting things to be anything other than the way they were, suffering also stopped. Even physical pain did not have to cause suffering. Once he accepted the pain, stopped making it a problem, suffering stopped. He was at peace.

But as we all know, we can't command ourselves to accept pain or whatever other dukkha life is presenting. That would be to suppress dukkha, not to uproot it. Luckily, we have the capacity to learn that desire causes suffering. As that understanding sinks deeper, desire loses its grip.

On the way, however, we have to learn to work skillfully with the many deluded desires that arise every day. For this, we have mindfulness. We watch ourselves longing vainly for things to be different. We're not suppressing desire. We're using the experience to learn the second noble truth. Is desire really the cause of suffering? With this curiosity in mind, desire loses some of its edge.

Say it was the desire for fame. We've been looking at Celebrity MasterChef and envying the winner, wanting everyone drooling over our crème caramel. If we turn away from the screen, use this opportunity to study tanha, we're halfway there. Desire might fade as soon as we spot it, and we realise how silly it was to be thinking that way.

Other desires run too deep to stop on recognition. In that case, we feel the stresses and strains of longing. Watched mindfully, the desire at first grows very strong, but eventually burns out. The energy of desire usually drives thought and fantasies, which in turn feed that very desire. But now all that energy is contained by mindfulness. It's as if we've put ourselves into a pressure cooker. For a while, the energy might tense our jaws, our throat, our chest. We might be panting with unfulfilled desire. But after a while, desire exhausts itself, fades away.

If we're lucky, we sense a moment of peace as desire fades. The absence of desire is a very beautiful experience, which the Buddha recognized as his third noble truth, the end of suffering.

We're so lucky that the Buddha did the hard work of pinpointing this because otherwise few of us would take any notice of that moment of peace as desire fades. Unless we examine it, bring deliberate attention to it, peace is easily overlooked. It doesn't call attention. It's not a loud experience of joyous bliss that shouts, "this is wonderful." It's simply the absence of any trouble.

Our whole psychology and physiology is designed to be on alert for trouble and for enticement. It's part of our animal nature. We need to survive, so we have to be on the lookout for danger and also for food, shelter, our pals and whatever will help us survive. We're not biologically designed to make a big thing out of peace.

That's why it's so easy for us to miss that brief moment when desire fades, to instead notice the next thing to grab our attention, then a new desire form around that. To sensitise ourselves to the third noble truth, we need to cultivate a taste for peace. Instead of booking one party after another, we spend some time in quietness, meditating perhaps, or walking in nature, sitting by the fire, listening to birdsong.

This might not always feel so peaceful. We may have to combat our cultural conditioning to be always busy, always achieving something. So we might feel anxious or guilty sitting down doing nothing for an evening. Peace is actually not that easy to tolerate for long.

The self, the me I presume myself to be, needs a role, a purpose. It wants to be getting something or getting somewhere, overcoming problems or doing good, affecting the world in some way. In perfect peace, there is nothing for me to do, no problems to solve. Most of us simply doze off after a minute or two, or else we grow restless, start to create problems just so we can solve them.

What we're seeing here is the dukkha of identification. We want to be someone. We want definition. The self is born from reactivity, reacting against what we dislike, busily trying to get rid of it, reacting with desire for what we like, busy planning how to prolong the pleasure, get more of it, be someone important.

To practice with the third noble truth, we can use any moments of peace wisely, let them be felt, acknowledged, notice the tendency to burst out of it with some new identity and just keep relaxing all of that, telling ourselves it's fine to be redundant, to take it easy, have no role to play in life. Quite a practice.

Another way we can practice with the third truth is to start appreciating absences. We usually associate absence with grief, but rarely acknowledge that many absences are very beautiful. We easily notice pain, but we can also start to look out for parts of the body that are not in pain.

The Buddha also advises us to notice when we're not angry, for example, not feeling greedy. When we're feeling uptight and frustrated, we can reflect that dullness and lethargy are absent. We can notice when others aren't irritating us or demanding anything.

A retreat is an especially rich time for this. I used to think of my mother as very demanding, always asking me for something or other. It was quite an eye-opener to reflect that while I was on retreat, she was looking after herself, not putting me under any pressure. At first, I actually resisted the thought. My locked-in image of her as demand-

ing was so strong it could not be budged. But gradually, I learned to acknowledge and be grateful for the fact that she was looking after herself quite well while I was away. I began to see her more realistically, admire and respect her strength of character.

Our relationship improved and I'm very thankful that in her last years when she was more dependent on me, I didn't see this as a burden. Much of the time it was so easy and natural, I hardly thought about it at all. Something I had dreaded throughout much of my adult life turned out to be no problem and on the contrary, a source of quiet joy.

If there is someone in your life who you see as oppressive in some way, it might really pay off to reflect that while you're here on retreat, they aren't oppressing you. We can also notice physical absences.

When an ugly shed was demolished in this garden, the Dhamma teacher Stephen Batchelor spent days looking out the window, noticing the absence of the shed. In a similar way, we can notice that wherever we walk, there is space letting us pass through. We can look for the gaps between houses in the city, see the sky beyond.

As we attune to space and absences and quiet, peaceful moments when life isn't troubling us, we deepen our understanding of the third noble truth, which the Buddha usually describes very simply as the end of suffering.

To give a bit more flavour, we have these analogies from the monk Nāgasena. Just as space is not produced, does not age, does not suffer death, cannot be carried away by thieves, rests on nothing, is the pathway of birds, presents no obstacles, is endless, so also *nibbāna* is not produced, does not age, does not suffer, cannot be carried away by thieves, rests on nothing, is the pathway of the noble, presents no obstacles, is endless.

The great ocean is all in blossom with the flowers of waves, mighty, various, unnumbered. Precisely so, Nibbāna is all in blossom with the flowers of purity, knowledge and deliverance, mighty, various and unnumbered.

Even a brief taste of the peace that comes as desire fades will stir the skillful desire to find our way to Nibbāna, which is exactly the concern of the fourth noble truth, known also as the noble eightfold path.

I had been meditating for a while before it eventually sank in that meditation wasn't the whole of the spiritual life, that the eightfold path described many other areas of life that counted too. That gave me great joy and continues to do so. If I'm feeling glum and demotivated about work, I can reflect that my work is part of right livelihood, one of

the strands of the eightfold path. That lifts my spirits, helps me to take on the work more willingly. Everything can be lifted from the dull and ordinary when we reflect that this is also leading towards liberation.

The path is divided into three sections: wisdom, morality, and the cultivation of our mind and heart through meditation. Each of the eight strands is described as right—right understanding, right attitude and so on. This can make the path seem like a set of rigid rules to follow. Disentangled is perhaps a better translation. It's a good description of what happens as we follow the path. We sense our thought processes straightening out, our emotional life disentangling. We become more straightforward in our dealings with others.

In meditation, we can often feel ourselves getting into knots of tension as the hindrances show up and then feel the relief as those knots loosen in the light of awareness. Because disentangled is a bit of a mouthful, I'll follow the convention of calling each step right this or right that. But bear in mind the gentler and more evocative sense that we disentangle ourselves from the binds of *dukkha* as we develop our path.

The first section is right understanding. We suffer because of not understanding what causes suffering and what prevents it. Reflecting on the four noble truths starts us on the journey from delusion to wisdom. Experiencing these truths in moment-to-moment awareness lets them sink in deeply so that we take the Dhamma to heart. This naturally changes our attitude so that we become more kindly, generous, compassionate. This is what we mean by right attitude, the second strand of the eightfold path.

We can also cultivate right attitude by practicing *mettā* meditation. *Mettā* is usually translated as goodwill or loving-kindness. We wish ourselves and others to be well and happy. This undermines habits like anger. In our gardening analogy, you could say it covers over the weeds, preventing them from getting any sunlight. They can't thrive and sow more seeds.

When we feel our own pain or see that someone else is in physical or mental pain, the friendly attitude of *mettā* takes on the hue of compassion. We're sensitive to the suffering, careful not to make it any worse, ready to do whatever needs to be done to make things easier. At heart, we wish ourselves and others to be free from suffering.

When something welcome happens, *mettā* shades into *muditā*, often translated as appreciative joy. We are gladdened by good news. We're ready to congratulate ourselves for any achievement, no matter how small. Even getting out of bed can be an achievement some days. When we hear of another's success, we feel happy for them.

Mettā cultivates friendliness, while compassion helps us bear suffering, and muditā lets us appreciate our many blessings. All of these need the support of equanimity. Without equanimity, mettā easily overshoots into attachment and we become more dependent on our friends for our own sense of worth. With equanimity, we learn to accept that friends have separate lives, other responsibilities, other affections.

Without the balance of equanimity, compassion slides into pity. We see ourselves as the stronger party, caring for the weaker one. It can become an addiction—needing to be needed. Equanimity restores the balance, lets us see the strength at the core of the other's being.

Muditā easily overshoots into excitement. We celebrate madly and go to excess. When the bills come in, we're shocked. Equanimity helps us recognize joy as a temporary gift, while knowing that all earthly joys are bound to fade.

The Mettā Sutta is a beautiful description of right attitude. We chant this every morning in Pali. Here's an English translation read by Mark Arthur, another teacher here at Satipanya.

So this is what should be done by one who is skilled in goodness and who knows the path of peace. Let them be able and upright, straightforward and gentle in speech, humble and not conceited, contented and easily satisfied, unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways, peaceful and calm and wise and skillful, not proud or demanding in nature.

Let them not do the slightest thing that the wise would later reprove. Wishing, in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease. Whatever living beings there may be, whether they are weak or strong, omitting none, the great or the mighty, medium, short or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near and far away, those born and to be born, may all beings be at ease.

Let none deceive another or despise any being in any state. Let none through anger or ill-will wish harm upon another. Even as a mother protects with her life a child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upwards to the skies and downwards to the depths, outwards and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill-will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down, free from drowsiness, one should sustain this recollection. This is said to be the sublime abiding. And by not holding to fixed views, the pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision, being freed from all sense desires, is not born again into this world.

Right understanding and right attitude combine as wisdom, the first section of the eightfold path. The next section, termed *sīla* in Pali, concerns the expression of wisdom in daily life. *Sīla* is usually translated as morality or ethics. I'm going to use the Pali word *sīla* because we often associate morality with a strict, joyless approach to life.

Family photos from Victorian times illustrate this. No one smiles. The children look miserable in their heavy, awkward clothes. An austere father towers over them while his wife sits demurely at his side, laced and buttoned to within an inch of her life. Desire finds no expression in this picture of morality.

But we need to remember that desire can also be wise. The desire to be happy is perhaps our most basic drive in life. It only gets us into trouble because we don't rightly understand what allows for happiness, what causes suffering. The Buddha promises us that if we follow this path, we will be content and therefore happy. Morality in this teaching is seen as a step toward happiness.

Sīla is not an easy matter. For each of us, there will be difficult ethical questions to face at many stages in life. We need a clear mind to find the appropriate response in complex situations, along with a stout heart to meet the challenge. We also need to be patient with our many mistakes, not torment ourselves about them. But remember, we can learn to do better.

The Buddha divides *sīla* into three sections: right speech, right action and right livelihood. Here are three areas of life where we can tailor our behaviour so as to promote our own long-term happiness. Tomorrow's talk is on daily life and as *sīla* is so relevant to this, I won't discuss it further here. Tomorrow I'll give suggestions as to how we can develop *sīla* as we go about our everyday business.

The last section of the eightfold path concerns the cultivation of mind and heart in meditation practice. And as we've been engaged in this all week, I'll only briefly mention it here. The Buddha describes three aspects to cultivate: right effort, mindfulness, and concentration. So here we have again, the leading trio in our wild geese—mindfulness, energy, concentration.

To see their interrelation, we have the analogy of three children wanting to pick fruit from a tree. None of them is tall enough to reach the fruit, so the strongest one, right effort, bends over to let the tallest one, right concentration, stand on his back while the steadiest of the three, right mindfulness, provides a shoulder to lean on. Supported by right effort, balanced by mindfulness, concentration can then pluck the fruit.

Again, I'll say more about this and all aspects of the eightfold path tomorrow as we look at how we can maintain and strengthen our meditation practice in daily life.

In summary, the four noble truths concern dukkha and how to bring it to an end. The Buddha said that his own liberation came from fully understanding dukkha, from seeing that desire was the cause. As he let go of desire, he realized that dukkha came to an end, simply stopped happening. To bring it to a permanent close, he followed the eightfold path.

Lost in the jungle of ignorance, we ponder the four noble truths to get an inkling of what causes suffering and what relieves it. As the truth sinks in, our attitude grows friendlier. The sword of wisdom cuts through some tangles of delusion to form a clearing. Sila blossoms in the form of right speech, action and livelihood to be rewarded by the law of *kamma* so that we become happier. The jungle no longer seems so threatening and we rest a while in the clearing to cultivate our mind and heart in meditation.

Supported by effort, led and balanced by mindfulness, our mind focuses on the diamond and the four noble truths sink in even deeper. This sharpens the sword of wisdom, which cuts through another thicket of delusion. Step by step, we form the path that leads from the jungle of ignorance to the freedom of enlightenment.

In what is termed his victory verse, the Buddha uses the analogy of a house builder to describe the delusive desire, *taṇhā*, that drives us to seek our essence within the world, build castles in the air. The ridge pole for these castles is ignorance, our lack of understanding about dukkha and its cause.

Here is the Buddha's victory verse:

Seeking but not finding the house builder, I have travelled through the round of countless births. How painful is birth over and over again. Oh house builder, you have now been caught. You shall not build a house again. Your rafters have been broken. Your ridge pole demolished. The unconditioned consciousness has been attained and every kind of craving has been destroyed.

I hope this overview of the four noble truths has been helpful. May all beings come to the end of suffering.

2. Nāma-Rūpa: Body-Mind

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 7 min

In this teaching on paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), Bhante Bodhidhamma examines nāma-rūpa, the body-mind complex that marks our entry into existence. He explains how nāma (mind/name) and rūpa (form/body) represent two distinct yet interdependent energies, with the mind arising multiple times within each material moment.

Using practical meditation examples like watching the breath and experiencing pain, Bhante demonstrates how vipassanā practice involves deconstructing our experience to distinguish between bodily sensations and mental interpretations. He illustrates this with the example of eating pizza—how the tongue provides mere sensations while the mind creates concepts, memories, and emotional reactions.

This separation reveals a crucial insight: we cannot find a substantial 'self' in either component, yet body and mind remain intimately connected—physical sensations trigger mental reactions, and mental states produce bodily responses. Understanding this interdependence forms the first two insights in vipassanā meditation and establishes the foundation for investigating the insubstantial nature of human experience. This teaching provides essential groundwork for deeper exploration of the Buddha's analytical approach to awakening.

So carrying on with these words, look at these two words called *nāma* and *rūpa*. *Nāma* refers to mind and it comes right through to our language through Latin, *nomen*, *nat*—the word *name* actually comes from the word *nāma*. So it's basically referring to the mind. And *rūpa*, actually its definition is really more to do with form, appearance, but basically it's the body. And it's understood that these are two different energies, two different forms of energy we can say. So that in later works it was said that in one material moment the mind arose 17 times. So there were 17 consciousnesses within the arising of one particular material moment. But we needn't worry too much about that.

It begins in the dependent origination as you know. As we go through it, the first of coming into this life is this *nāma-rūpa*—there's a split there, it's the body and mind. And in terms of the process of insight, in terms of the process of awakening, remember that the Buddha's main technique is this process of deconstructing what we are. It's looking at our experience and trying to find out its components to see whether any of these components or parts actually constitute anything real, anything substantial, something that doesn't arise and pass away basically.

So the first thing in our meditation is to make this distinction between this is the body, this is the mind, and to see them as two very separate perceptions. So when you're watching the breath there's the rising and falling of the body—the abdomen is rising and falling, that's physicality—and the actual naming of it rising and falling or the seeing of it is to do with the mind.

When you actually look at the breath a bit more closely, you may find that the mind is also constructing the whole process. So there's an image of the stomach in the mind for a start. If you're watching it there, if you're watching it at the nostrils, it's the nostrils. And there's also this whole idea that something's rising and falling. So where does that come from? It comes from the mind actually contacting the body and through its own processes, feeling that rising and falling process. But actually what's coming from the body is just sensations, just sensations.

So it's when you look at pain, so you might feel discomfort in your sitting. What part of it is the mind and what part is the body? So as you contact it and you're saying, pain, pain, the very word pain is coming from the mind. So as you go into the pain, you begin to discover its various constituents. It might just be heat, it might be pressure, it might be some other things. So you recognise that the pain is a mental construct. What the body is giving is just sensations. And when you react to pain, you're not reacting to the body, you're reacting to your concept about what the sensations are. So it's that breaking up of our experience to trying to find out whether there's anything substantial. Where's the self? When I talk about me, where is it?

When we're eating, you see. So to make a distinction between the actual taste coming from the tongue and the delight that arises in the heart. Most times when we eat, it's just all one experience. So as you put the food on your tongue, there's sensations arising. But then somehow when these sensations come into the mind, the mind immediately distinguishes it as pizza or something. But actually the taste has nothing to do with pizza. The taste is either salty or tomatoey or whatever it is. But it's not pizza. The mind says it's pizza. I mean, it's seen it, of course, but I'm just saying if you hadn't seen it and just put it in your tongue, then the mind would recognise these things as pizza. It's coming from its own memory bank.

But more than that, it's reacting. So I don't know about you, but if I eat pizza, I feel delightful. It's just a natural occurrence. Because in the past, I've always had this pizza and it's always made me delighted. It's very simple. But the delight is nothing to do with the pizza. It's to do with my relationship with the pizza. If I didn't like pizza, I wouldn't feel happy.

So it's making that distinction, it's actually pulling things apart that we begin to realise that this whole experience that we're having is not a me, it's a construct, it's a compendium of things that we put together into a concept, an actual experiential concept, and then we make the mistake of taking it as me.

Now there are two distinctions to be made. Once we've separated out this body and mind, once we've become clear that there is the body which is offering sensations, full stop, that's all it can do, and this is the mind which is interpreting it and reacting to it and has a relationship with it, it's then recognising that there's some relationship going on, that the one arises dependent on the other.

So when you put food on the tongue, the mind reacts. If you don't put food on the tongue, the mind doesn't react. It just doesn't happen. When the mind moves, the body moves. So as soon as you get an angry thought, there's something happens in the body. It reacts with heat. As soon as you have a fearful thought, it reacts with certain sensations, a wobbliness or a weak at the knees or nausea or whatever.

So it's also catching that relationship between the body and mind that they are two separate things and yet you cannot actually separate them because they're both firing off the other at the same time. And this insight is the beginning of the process of investigating this human phenomena to see whether there's anything actually substantial within it. So in terms of the process of insight through the vipassanā these are your first two insights and it's this what raises the curiosity to go into it more deeply.

So nāma-rūpa, this body and mind, are really the beginning of your practice. That's what you're asked to do. The beginning of your practice is to make this very clear distinction in ourselves.

I can only hope that this little homily has brought amazing insight. May you be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

An Attempt to Understand the Teaching of Not-Self

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 49 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma tackles one of Buddhism's most challenging teachings - anattā or not-self. Drawing primarily from the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59), the Buddha's second discourse to his five companions, he explains how the teaching addresses the ancient Indian concept of ātman (eternal soul).

The talk examines the five khandhas (aggregates) - form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and cognition - showing how none possess the characteristics of an eternal soul: permanence, control, and substantial existence. Through careful analysis of impermanence, suffering (dukkha), and lack of control, Bhante demonstrates why these aggregates cannot constitute our true identity.

Moving beyond philosophical explanation, the discussion includes practical meditation instructions for experiencing not-self directly. By noting and distancing ourselves from physical sensations, emotions, thoughts, and even the sense of being 'the observer,' practitioners can discover what the Buddha called 'the unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned' - that awareness which is without boundary and full of light.

The talk concludes with guided exercises for investigating the nature of the observer in meditation, offering a practical path toward the liberating insight that dissolves the delusion of selfhood and leads to the end of suffering.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa —
Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully self-enlightened.

Tonight I'm going to try to be impossible and try to explain this whole doctrine of not-self. The Buddha is very clear that there are certain things where language can't reach. And when we're talking about something which is beyond phenomena, language just won't do.

So if you take, for instance, trying to describe the colour green to somebody who's been blind since birth, and you talk about how it differs from red and grey and yellow, and then you give all sorts of imagery about green valleys and green trees and green leaves. In the end, the blind person has some idea that green is some sort of colour, but they won't be able to visualise it.

So we have to be very careful about conceptual ideas about not-self. Buddhism itself began to develop a very intricate metaphysical philosophy begun by somebody who's recognised possibly as the greatest metaphysician in the world, Nagarjuna, who went on and on about emptiness and then, because trying to get rid of the concept of emptiness, he talks about the emptiness of emptiness. And that's exactly what language and concepts do. They fall into themselves. You're constantly trying to define what you mean.

So with that in mind, we'll have a go at this not-self. But hopefully at the end of the talk, I'll give you an exercise whereby you can actually begin to experience it.

The next thing is to really understand what was meant by *atta*. An *atta*, not self *atta*. What was the *atta*? So at the time of the Buddha there was considerable confusion about what this *atta* was. And what they were taught is translated in the West as not self. Which is unfortunate because the word we should use is soul or spirit. That's what the Buddha is arguing about. He's arguing about something which people believed was internal.

Well, what was it? So, how do you describe something which is eternal, doesn't die, is the unconditioned, is not born, not created, and so on? How do you describe something like that? So, eventually, you can only describe it by what it isn't. So, the Buddha simply says, he puts to the early disciples, he puts to them certain questions as to is it this or is it that.

So now, what would be the constituents of a soul, of an eternal soul? Well, the first thing is it can't change. Because if it changes, it's something different. So it's not eternal. It's as simple as that. If you say, for instance, an emotion, I am happy, and the next minute you're sad, then where's your happiness gone? You can't be the happiness and the sadness at the same time. So we're talking about being. We're not talking about something becoming and changing. So a quality of the soul or spirit is this quality of non-change, unchanging.

The second thing is it can't suffer because it's in control of itself. It is itself. And therefore, it can decide, as it were, that it's going to be happy or sad. If it didn't have that control, then it can't be me. Parents have a certain control over their children. But

they know full well that eventually they have no control. The control is simply a contract between the child and the parent. It's something that's imagined between them. But ultimately, control is part and parcel of the definition of a soul or a self. If it's not in control of itself, then it means that it can be changed by circumstance.

So now one thing the soul can do, this eternal soul, is it can make itself happy. It is in a state of happiness. Now we have to be careful how we define happiness. It's not an emotion because emotions change, so we're talking about something which is a state beyond emotional states.

And the final thing is it has to have some sort of substantiality. It has to be real. So often you get words like the real, the ultimate, the absolute in all religions. So there has to be this quality of is-ness. It exists, defining that as different from it is becoming. If something is becoming then it's stopped being something and it becomes something else, so there can't be any change in that process. On the other hand it has to be substantial.

So now the Buddha is saying well okay, so we have this definition and he says he's just asking these questions. So what happens, remember, after he's become fully liberated, he goes back to his companions who don't really want to talk to him because they think he's gone soft, he's left the hard life. But as he approaches them, they see that something's changed about him. So I suppose reluctantly they offer him a seat. And during the ensuing conversation that he has with them, one of the little repetitions that he says is, have I ever spoken like this before? Have you ever heard me speak like this before?

Now, the first discourse, as it's put, the turning of the wheel of the law, is obviously a later creation, just laying the platform of his teaching. But it would have been in this conversational style. And in the second discourse, they all go off on an arms round, and when they come back and eat and have a rest, he gives them this second talk. And the second talk is called the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*. It's the discourse on this characteristic of not-self. And in this discourse, we do get the sense of this conversational process, like this Socratic process that you get in Plato. Not that I've read Plato, but that's what we mean by this Socratic method of questions and answers. So I'm going to use this discourse as a basis.

By the way these lovely little e-readers and recorders are actually wonderful. I've got a whole library in here. So he says — you see these discourses always start off with "thus have I heard" because they were related after his passing by his companion Ananda, so it's what Ananda heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Varanasi in the deer park at Isipatana. So this is where he went to find out where his

people were. If you take the mileage from Bodh Gaya, where he was enlightened, all the way to Varanasi on the Ganges, I remember it as being something like 400 miles. So his decision to teach really meant that he was on the road. And he spent the rest of his life on the road, really.

And there the Blessed One addressed the monks. "Monks" here means any listener, really. So they replied, "Venerable Sir."

"Now, form is non-self, not self." Now, the word form refers to our physicality. And the Buddha gives us a cross-section of the human being in time. So if you were to stop time, a human being at this moment, and tried to describe what a psychophysical organism was, he put it in these five aggregates, these five heaps, because he wants to show where the problem lies.

So the first heap is all this physicality. The second one is our feelings. All the feelings in the body, both caused by the body itself and by the mind. The next one is all our perceptions which includes both basic perceptions but it grows into concepts. They grow into ways of looking at something. You might include in that both our memory but feeling also has memory too. Then there's volitional formations. These are our habits and they are created by acts of will. And then finally there are acts of cognitions. All of this must be put on a screen for us to know. If it's not on a screen we won't be able to see it. We don't see things when we fall asleep because the screen's fallen. But there's still stuff coming in and every so often you'll hear something tinkling and it'll wake up this act of cognition and you'll know it's time to get up.

So these are the five components as the Buddha saw it of the human being. So physical form is physicality and all the rest is mentality. The feelings as he experiences them in the body, all the perceptions that they have, which includes more detailed concepts in time, all the habits that we have, both good and bad, driven by, created by the will, and finally these acts of cognition. I try not to use the word consciousness because it's being studied these days. And from a Buddhist point of view, enormous confusion as to what consciousness is. Some philosophers and some scientists actually think that the content of consciousness is consciousness itself. Anyway, we don't want to get into that. So I shall leave that word aside.

Cognition is like on a TV screen. You've got all these — what is it that hits the TV? I've forgotten the word for it. You know, it's hitting the screen. What are those little subatomic particles that create the light? Well, it's electrons, isn't it? I can't remember what it is. Anyway, the screen on the television manifests. It brings it into a manifest which you can see. So without that, the TV's useless. So that's the act of cognition.

There's something in this brain-mind complex which creates a picture for us. Those of you who've seen how the eye works when it looks at a picture, it's darting all over the place, completely unknown to us. What we see is the full picture. But the eye is constantly moving, picking up little bits and bobs. But the mind is able to take all that and present us with something that's still. It gives us an impression of wholeness.

So, when it comes to this not-self, see, this is what he says. He says, "If form, the body, were self" — this form, I'm using the word self here, perhaps I should be consistent and say soul — "If form were soul, this form would not lead to affliction. And it would be possible to determine the body. Let my body be thus, let my body not be thus. But because the body is not self, is not the soul, not in charge, this form leads to affliction. This body leads to affliction. And it is not possible to determine our form."

So we have minimal control over the body. I can wave my arm around here while I'm speaking and all that, but I can't stop it falling ill, I can't stop it getting older, and I can't stop it dropping dead. So this control I have over my body is a way of saying that whatever soul is, is not the body.

Feeling. When we discuss feeling from this point of view, we see that we don't have much control over feeling. When you put your foot on the ground, it feels. You can't say to your foot, don't feel the footstep. It'll just simply do it. We don't have that control. Same with emotions. If you get angry over something, you can't stop your body feeling hot. That's the way it reacts. If you feel happy, it feels light. So again, it's to do with looking at feelings and knowing that, well, this can't be a soul. It can't be eternal.

Perceptions. Perceptions are changing even more quickly because every time we look at something that we know, it's ever so slightly changed. So every time you look at a tree, it's always refining your idea of a tree. Every time you see a cat, it comes on to the concept of a cat so that you can see, well, this is a cat. But by looking at that cat, your concept of a cat will slightly change. It's always changing. So perceptions, which are manifest in our words and images, are constantly in the process of renewal or forgetting. You forget things that you knew. So again, when it comes to control, our control is minimal.

Then we have these volitional formations, habits. Well, these are created by acts of will. So often we have a habit that we might not want. Say, like a smoker doesn't want to smoke anymore. That's a habit, so they have to work against the habit. If they weren't able to change the habit, then of course they would have no control whatsoever. But what we find is that habits have an inner strength in themselves. Trying to get rid of a habit takes time. And the kernel of it is always there. So often you hear stories of people who have not smoked for years. And then they retire. And at a party, they think, oh, I'll

just take the one. And of course, what they've done is they've kick-started this potential within them of enjoying a cigarette, of enjoying nicotine. And then they find it difficult to stop. So even though we've kicked a habit which we felt has dominated us for a while, the potential is always there, as a little kernel, a little seed.

And then finally these acts of cognition. So acts of cognition happen quite naturally. As soon as you place your eye on something, you see it. You can't not see it. As soon as a sound comes at your eardrum, you hear it. You can't not hear it. You can't decide, well, I won't listen to that because it's already happened. So, at this basic level of control, we find that if we define a soul, an eternal soul, as something which is in control of itself, then we find that this psychophysical organism doesn't live up to it.

Then you get this question and answer business. So now he's going on to the quality of impermanence. So he says, "What do you think? Is form, is the body permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, venerable sir."

You're very good at these ones.

"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"

"Oh, suffering, sir."

"Is what is impermanent suffering and subject to change fit to be regarded as: this is mine, this I am, this is myself?"

So here we have three relationships. Something that I own. Now think about it. When you say, this is mine, what are we actually saying? So when I, like this e-reader you see, Kindle, this is mine. And I'm very attached to it, by the way. Somebody comes along and sees my Kindle and decides they want it. So they take my Kindle. Now I go around saying, somebody stole my Kindle. Somebody's taken my Kindle. It's not mine, is it? It's the thief's. The thief's got it. It's his Kindle. So this "my" business is just a legal fiction. It's just something we've made up in society concerning my-ness. "This is mine." What we come to understand is when it comes to objects, you can only use them. As soon as you start possessing them, you end up suffering. The potential for suffering.

"This I am." So now, if you pose yourself a question, if you pose this little sentence, "I am," and finish it off. So, "I am a nurse. I am a teacher. I am..." Is that permanent? This "I am" is always having to describe itself. It's always self-referential. If you say "I am happy," where does the I go when you're unhappy? So this "I am" is always a definition. It's always you have to finish the sentence and then you realise that this I is only a way

of describing what there is being done at any given moment. So if you're teaching, yes, "I am teaching." But is there a teacher there? If the teacher is being created by the sense of I, what's actually happening is the process of teaching.

And then finally, "my self" or "my soul." Remember, when we talk about self, we talk about soul, something eternal. So can we say that about the body? No. I hope you agree with me.

So then he goes on to the other parts. So feeling, is it permanent or impermanent? Perceptions, are they permanent or impermanent? Our volitional formations, these habits that we have, are they permanent or impermanent? And are these acts of cognition? Are they permanent or impermanent? So the answer, of course, is they're all impermanent, venerable sir. And is what is impermanent suffering or happiness? Well, it's unsatisfactory, isn't it?

Now, why is it that these things are unsatisfactory? It's because we're searching always for that complete, utter happiness and contentment. It's within us to do that. As a human being, we find ourselves in a constant surge of trying to be happy, however you wish to define it. You might be happy with a lot of money, might be happy with a lot of friends. It doesn't matter how we define it, but we always want to be happy and contented. But because as soon as we get something which we say is happy and then we finally come to a point in our lives and we say oh now I've got everything I wanted, as soon as you've said that it's gone. You want to stop the world. Now I've got it. But the very grasping of that moment undermines its joy. "To kiss a joy as it flies is to live in eternity's sunrise" — Blake. But we don't want to do that. We want to catch it.

So what is impermanence? Is suffering subject to change? Is what is impermanent and unsatisfactory and subject to change? Should we regard it as this is mine? Should I become attached to things when I know that there's potential for unsatisfactoriness there? Sometimes great suffering.

This gets very difficult when you start talking about relationships. How can you love without the attachment? This I am, see a self definition as soon as you say that, and it's undermined. Then you're into some form of suffering. And this is my real, this is my soul, this is my eternal self. Well, that's difficult.

So then he tries to put all this together. Therefore any kind of form, that's the body remember, whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross, subtle, inferior or superior, far or near. See, he's trying to cover all angles. All bodies, all physical natures should be seen as they really are with the correct understanding. This

is not mine. This is not me. This I am not. And this is not a soul or a self. And then of course he says that of the other four heaps: the feelings, all the feelings that we have, all the perceptions, all the different habits that we collect, and our acts of cognition.

Then he says, when we see this, when we really grasp this, the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted with the body. Disenchanted. So, what does enchantment mean? It's caught up in a dream, caught up in a fantasy. So just to break that fantasy, break the dream. And disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with habits, volitional formations, and disenchanted with acts of cognition. And becoming disenchanted, it becomes dispassionate.

Now that sounds empty, like what happens if you've no passion, if you've no emotions? So remember, these are the emotions that he's talking about driven by wrong understanding. This is not the Buddha heart. The Buddha heart is full of love, compassion, sympathetic joy, peacefulness, and all the things that we love. But what he's talking about here are all those mental states that are driven by this sense of self.

It even corrupts things like love because love slips into its near enemy of attachment. It corrupts compassion because it slips into its near enemy, its subtle enemy of grief. It corrupts joy into excitement, over excitement. And equanimity slips into indifference. It's all done because we're not actually seeing things, in his terms, as they really are.

Now it's through this undermining of this wrong relationship that finally somebody comes to be liberated. And then that person understands: destroyed is birth. The spiritual life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. Lovely sense of completion there. There is no more coming back into any state of becoming.

Now, when the Buddha became fully liberated, he did not disappear. Nor did he become a sort of amorphous blob by the side of the road with a sign saying, "Liberated. Do not disturb." From other people's point of view, his personality was the same. He looked the same. Visually outside, nothing had happened. But internally, something had changed. And what had changed was that sense of me.

So what he's talking about is the rebirthing of me. The rebirthing of a wrong sense of self. That's what disappears.

Now when the Blessed One had spoken this, elated, those monks delighted in the Buddha's statement. And while this discourse was being spoken, the minds of the monks of the group of five, these were his five early companions, were liberated from the taints of non-clinging. We're all liberated right then and there. Anybody here? No? Go and ask her.

So we have here a very clear exposition. And none of it is philosophy. None of it is philosophy. You have to think about it. You have to experience it for yourself.

Now, he gives this description of not-self in this cross-section of time. If you were to take a human being in the present moment, you would end up with these five categories. But he also takes a human being and sees it in a process that we call dependent origination. And there's not the time to go into that deeply, but what he points out in that process is that the sense of I comes late in the process.

First of all, there is contact. Then when there's a contact with something, there arises a definition of it in terms of its, as the books say, hedonic value, which means whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. We decide whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, or a shade of that. Once that's decided, we form a relationship to it. We either want it or we don't want it.

And it's only then that the sense of I comes. So in our language, we will say, "I will get this nice ice cream which I've seen in the shop. I will get the nice ice cream which I saw in the shop." Psychologically, what's happening is the other way around. See, ice cream in the shop. Like, get. Sorry, I, get. The I, the sense of I, comes quite late in that process of recognising something and deciding to do something. So the I is not always there. But because the mind is moving at such terrific speed, we get this sense of a constant me in that process.

These neurobiologists have done tests to show that decisions are made before the person knows them and then as it were agrees to it, but the person actually believes they've made that decision. Now in Buddhist terms, that's called the unaware life because one of the things we're doing on a retreat is being aware of our intentions.

When you're aware of your intentions, then you re-empower yourself to take power over your life, to take control of your life. Because then you decide. But when we're living at an automated level, you're just behaving on a habitual level. But then we do this little trick where we think that actually we've made the decision. So you walk down the aisle with all these hundreds of biscuits, thinking that you're going to have a choice. But you end up buying the chocolate biscuits. And then you say to yourself, "Well, I decided to buy these chocolate biscuits." Phooey. What rubbish. It's only when you make the process conscious to yourself that you can then make an informed decision. So that's dependent origination.

Now, how do we approach this? Okay. So let's take a more modern approach in the sense of what happens to us from the point of in the womb onwards. So somewhere in the womb it seems as though we slowly become aware of what's around us. We don't know it's around us. We feel it's in us. We feel it is us. But we can hear our mother's voice. We can sense her moods and so on. This is what they say.

Then we're born. And it would seem that for the first three or four months, we just live in this bath of stimulus, which has no depth to it. It's like a kaleidoscope. All we know is when it hurts and when it doesn't hurt. And when it hurts, we scream. When it doesn't hurt, we feel okay.

Somewhere within that mass, it seems, after about three or four months, the first object looms out of it. And for the most part, of course, it's our mothers. So there's some separation going on. And it would seem that when a child, when a baby is lunging out in the pram for its baubles and bangles, it's actually creating a 3D world. It doesn't exist until they've actually created it.

Now, you can see that what the baby's doing is pushing the outside world outward from its sense of self. It does because it doesn't have a conceptual idea of itself. It just experiences everything as itself. As it pushes everything out, somewhere along the line, I don't know how old the child is, probably at the point where it becomes self-aware, which, I don't know, somewhere around about the age of one and a half, is it? Perhaps a little earlier. I think chimpanzees get there by the age of three, don't they?

So finally, this little baby has pushed the world out and is becoming quite clear that the world is out there and I'm in it. This is me. And usually somewhere along the line, perhaps, I don't know, before three, I ought to read this stuff to get it clear. The child knows they're a boy or a girl. And they're quite clear about who and what they are and what they are not. So this is not me. Not. They've got lots of mine, but it's not me.

Now, in our meditation, that's all we're doing. We're taking that process inward to make outward. To push away from this sense of self what we've always presumed to be me. As soon as a pain comes in the body, normally speaking, a person might say, "Oh, I've got pain," and then take an aspirin or something, or shake their leg about it. But we don't do that. We sit with it. We observe it. And these noting words are very good at making it quite a distance. So I'm saying, "pain, pain."

I can make it more obvious to myself by saying, "there, there's pain, there's pleasure, there's a sense of comfort." And by doing that, I'm relocating my sense of self into that which is observing, which is feeling. Now that's the easy one.

It gets a little harder when it comes to emotions, because we identify with emotions in a more inward way. So I'm sitting here and somebody coughs just about when I was going to be fully liberated. And a great irritation arises. But I'm quick enough to sit there and observe this feeling of irritation. What have I done? I've pushed it away from my sense of me. I'm saying "irritation, there, there."

I hear a bird and the sound of the bird's voice raises joy in me. And I say "joy, there's joy, there's joy." See? In so doing, I'm pushing away this sense of me within the joy, making joy an object. And this sense of me now relocates to that which is feeling and knowing.

When it comes to images in the mind, right? A big image, sometimes people get colours or strong images in the mind. You're there, you can see it. You're looking at it. You can say "imagining, imagining." And in so doing, again, you've pushed out into an objective, an inner objective world, what was before you thought was me. And again, the sense of identity is falling back into the observer, the feeler, the knower.

To do that with thought, you've really got to be quite awake. But you can actually, with good concentration, good attention, you can see a thought arising and passing away, like a neon light.

So then you're left now, within yourself, with a sense, a strong sense of, I am the observer, a feeler, the one who knows inside ourselves. And you've pushed everything out. So everything you've done unwittingly, you've actually said, "this is not me, this is not a soul, this is not self." It's not permanent and so on and so forth. But the feeling of being the observer has a certain permanency about it. The feeling of being the observer has a certain steadiness about it.

So now, when you get to that point and you really have a clear feel of being the observer, when you come out of that state into a reflection, ask yourself: what were the inner constituents of the observer? When there's pain in the knee, I said this to I think the small group this morning, we might go into the pain and we might find actually the noting word changes. It becomes tight, stingy, a lot of heat, but we don't say pain.

When we come away from that position of observation in the pain and we come to the surface of that feeling, suddenly the word pain arises and we know then that the word pain is a mental construct. It's not that we don't want to lose it. We want to know when there's pain in the body so we can go to the doctor. But we're not fooled by it. Pain doesn't exist. What exists are those feelings, those sensations.

When we come out of that sense of the observer, when it's very clear to us, and you stop and you just reflect on what were the inner qualities of the observer, that's the first little exercise that you might do.

The second one is more meditative. When you get that sense of the observer, difficult to get it in a weekend, you understand, but when you get that sense of the observer, turn to it, the feel of it, the sense of presence. That sense of presence is often thought by people to be their soul, a sense of presence. But it's also an object. It can't be you.

The feeling of self-awareness, right? You're aware of the feeling or the idea of self-awareness. So therefore, that can't be you either. It's very mysterious. So what we do then is we put the attention just on the feel, the sense of presence. And then at some point there may be some realisation or some understanding that that which is looking is what we've been looking for. But we'll never be able to see it. That's the problem.

So in the Mahāyāna they talk about the eye. The eye can never see itself. The nose can't smell itself. The tongue cannot taste itself. If the basic taste of a tongue was curry, it would mess up the ice cream. It's the fact that it's empty. It doesn't have any taste that we can taste. It's the fact that the eye cannot see itself that it can see. So we can only be, we can only experience that within us which is not part of this phenomenal world.

So now we have the Buddha trying to explain this. A little bit more straightforward than I'm doing. I'm just going to find the location here. Okay. Oh, sorry, wrong one. Try again.

This is a very famous, often quoted. So, this is the point where the Buddha's talking to the listeners to his audience. Often mixed between monks and lay people. And he's instructing them about the Dharma, which is the teaching, the truth, connected to *Nibbāna*. And to those who are receptive, those who have ears, let them hear.

"There is an unborn. An unbecome. An unmade. An unconditioned."

So there is. Now the word he uses, there are two words for is in the Pāli. One is *hoti* and it's used like a connective, so if I say this is a shrine it's just a connecting word. But *ati*, the word he uses, means exists. There exists the not born. He uses an adjective so he doesn't concretise it. The unborn, an unbecome, something which isn't in a process of becoming, changing. And unmade, uncreated. It was never created. It's not born, it's not created. And unconditioned. It's beyond conditioning. Conditioning only happens when there's two things there.

So, because I'm in this room and in this way, and in this retreat, I'm being conditioned to sit in this manner. But this is something which is beyond all conditioning.

"If there were no unborn, no unbecome, no unmade or unconditioned, no escape could be discerned from what is born, from what does become, what is creative and what is conditioned. But because there is, there exists, that which is not born, doesn't die, doesn't become, is not creative and not conditioned, there is an escape to be discerned from what is born, become, made and conditioned."

That's pretty clear. But there's another passage where he's even clearer. Because he's asked by somebody, where is it he says, that the four great elements come to an end completely.

Now the four great elements are earth, fire, water and air. And they're symbolic for pressure, gravity, fire, heat, energy, water, that which congeals elasticity, holds things together, and movement. It's the way the mind experiences matter. Not to be confused with the grand theory of physics. The Buddha's descriptions are always about the mind and the way it experiences the world.

So this questioner says, where does the world come to an end? That's what he's saying. The physical world. And the Buddha says, the question is not put rightly. What you should be asking is, where does the world not find a footing?

And he comes out with a phrase which only occurs two times in the scriptures. "There is a consciousness." Now again, we've got to be careful of this word consciousness. I would prefer there is a knowing or there is an awareness. There's an awareness which is without boundary. Now boundary is only created by phenomena. It's only because we've got four walls here, not this room as a boundary. So it's without boundary. There's no phenomena. There's nothing there in that sense. Not coloured by any of the senses. So the senses are in Buddhism the five ones that we know, but also the mind as a sensing base.

Which includes our images and thoughts. So nothing is there that we would normally describe a human being by. And in all directions, full of light and awakenedness. Just this is the end of suffering.

So now, our job is to find what that is. When we say find what that is, it means direct experience for ourselves. And the process is one of negation. Not me, not mine.

So in your meditation sometimes you might sit down and just say to yourself, well, in this particular practice, this quarter of an hour, an hour, whatever you want to take, I'm just going to point to things as they come up and I'm just going to say, there. So there's pain, there's comfort, there's joy, there's a thought, there, there, there, all the time. And when you get to that sense of self, there's a sense of self, there, there. Constantly pulling

yourself out of this enmeshment, this enchantment with the psychophysical organism. And there is no doubt that within good time insights will arise which will liberate us from our delusions.

So what is the delusion that the Buddha talks about? What is this essential delusion? It's a delusion about who we are. And the deeper process of our meditation, of our practice, is to find out what it is that we really are. To put it in a very positive way.

So, we've talked about these five *khandhas*. The body, feelings. *Khandhas* here means aggregates, heaps. They're all different. The body, sensations, feelings. Feelings in the body. Our perceptions and conceptions, all our habits that are made by will and therefore can be unmade, and this is where the suffering is. To distinguish between suffering and pain. So pain in the knee is just pain. What we make of it is the suffering, our aversion and fear of it. And finally acts of cognition. And each time he's asking always: is this permanent? Does this can this be defined as a soul, an eternal soul?

And then he talks about impermanence. And because things are impermanent, they have an inbuilt suffering because they can't satisfy. And that's the meaning of *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is a core word in the Buddha's language. We translate it as unsatisfactoriness, as suffering, a sense of lack, a sense of incompleteness. It's always there, even though we might have ecstatic moments. It always passes. So there's always a sense of... And you know you can't get that again. It's a disaster, isn't it, when you have a great party and you say, let's have another one. But you just don't do that.

And then we talked about this more modern way of looking at the way our sense of self retreats out of the world into a sense of me, the person. And how the meditation is just taking that inward. And eventually of course what we realise is that the outer world and the inner world are all being manufactured by the mind. We live in this bubble of consciousness which we are actually manufacturing moment after moment. So in a sense what we make of it is our own problem.

And then finally statements which point to something in us which doesn't belong to this realm of phenomena, this realm of the sense world. And a little couple of exercises which might take us there. That being able to label things, being able to point to things and say well there, there it is, so you're always creating a distinction between the object and the one that knows, the one who knows.

And that other final thing, that when we become very clear about the sense of the observer, as distinct from everything that's happening, the reflection afterwards: what's it made of? What was inside this observer?

Okay? I expect an answer by noon tomorrow. I'll give you marks.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you by your clarity and devotion to the practice be liberated from all delusion and suffering sooner rather than later.

You're supposed to say sādhu. If you don't say that, I'll go away feeling... It's been terrible.

Anusaya - Latent Tendencies

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 8 min

In this DhammaBytes talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the concept of anusaya - latent tendencies or predispositions that lie dormant in our psychic system, ready to manifest when conditions arise. Drawing from early Buddhist scriptures through to the Abhidhamma, he explores how these seven fundamental tendencies evolved in the Buddha's teaching: sensual lust, attachment to existence (bhava), aversion, conceit, wrong views, doubt, and ignorance.

Using the compelling analogy of a computer's latent potential, Bhante explains how these anusaya exist not as stored memories but as pure potentiality - conditioned by past saṅkhāra (volitional formations) yet having no substantial existence until activated. He maps their psychological structure, showing how ignorance forms the foundation, branching into conceit and wrong views, which then manifest as the three primary responses: greed (wanting pleasure and becoming), aversion (not wanting), and confusion (doubt).

This teaching offers profound insight into how our conditioned responses arise and why insight meditation is essential for liberation. As Bhante emphasizes, until these latent tendencies are eradicated through wisdom, unwholesome actions will continue to arise. The talk connects ancient Buddhist psychology with modern understanding of subconscious conditioning, showing how paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination) can be broken at the crucial point of ignorance through vipassanā practice.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā sambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā sambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened.

So the word tonight is *Anusaya*, A-N-U-S-A-Y-A. And the translation in the Pali text dictionary is a bent, a proclivity, latent tendency and predisposition. And the one that really interests me is this translation of latent tendency. But we'll come to that in a minute.

In the early scriptures, the Buddha only talks about *anusaya*. He doesn't actually say what they are. It's just latent tendencies. We've all got latent tendencies. But later on, in the scriptures, a different level of the scriptures, perhaps as his teaching matures, things are added to this latent tendency. Pride, doubt, ignorance, lust, and so on. And in the end, in the Abhidhamma, they list it as seven.

So the first one, well, the way they list it is sensual lust. I think it's probably better, even though it says *kāmarāga*, it does mean body lust, but anyway. Attachment to existence, aversion, conceit, wrong views, doubt, and ignorance. So none of them have come as a big surprise, eh?

Now, to try and make sense of this list... It seems to me that you've got to just turn the order around a bit for some reason. If we take ignorance as a basic platform, as a latent tendency in the sense of not knowing, then you immediately enter into the delusion on the one side of wrong views and on the other side of self, which expresses itself as conceit. So it's, I have this view, I'm right and everybody else is wrong. That's your basic position.

And from there, you fork into three, which relates to the way that the self relates to the world. Sensual pleasure and becoming. So that's to do with greed and acquisitiveness. Then you've got the aversion, so that's the negative side, not wanting. And then the doubt, which is the befuddlement that comes because of this basic ignorance. So that's your sort of latent dispositions.

Now, these latent dispositions, what... It can't be the fact that, at least as I understand it, the Buddha didn't teach that we had some sort of store memory that you pick books off, like a library or something. It's more like, and that's why I like this word, latent tendency, some sort of predisposition, but it doesn't actually have any actuality.

And I think one of the best analogies is of a computer really because if you take metaphor to a logical end it's normally a sign of madness so it only works at certain levels so when we shut the computer down and unplug it and all that it's dead it's not but we know it's got this tremendous latent ability and then when you plug it in You can connect to the whole worldwide web, for heaven's sake. I mean, that's the potential of it. But when it's unplugged, it remains there just as purely latent.

So all these conditionings, see the other word it uses, predisposition, and that links us with these *saṅkhāras*, these volitional conditionings. So they're lying there in wait, you might say, but in this sort of non-existent form. But it's there within the psychic system, you could say. So something happens and they're there to be pulled out.

And that I think connects rather nicely with our modern psychology about subliminal stuff and subconscious stuff. Although you do get the feeling from Freudian stuff and all that, that's already there as it were. It's in a sort of stored memory. But I think this is slightly more subtle in the sense that every moment comes to an end completely. It's a radical impermanence. So you can't hold anything, and yet there's the potential. So it's one of these little mysteries, really.

So really, without going into all these different things more deeply, those are your seven latent tendencies. Ignorance, the not knowing, which forks into this I am conceit with wrong view. And that again forks into these three avenues, the sensual pleasure, the becoming...

There's always that. There's the *bhavataṇhā*. When he describes *dukkha* as such, it's attachment to pleasure, the desire to keep becoming, becoming a self, in other words, keep being reborn as me. And the opposite is *vibhava*, which is the desire to put an end to that. And that comes into the other fork, the aversion, not wanting. It comes in obvious forms of not wanting something and not wanting to live. And the third one is this doubt which comes from befuddlement, which comes from confusion that arises out of this self.

So those are your seven *anusaya*. And in a sense, if you think about it, that is the platform out of which we then create the world. We create these *saṅkhāras*, create these volitional conditionings.

So underneath it, there is that not knowing. It's creating a certain disposition, which then manifests a disposition of I am with a view, then manifests as this more obvious psychological thing of wanting, not wanting, being confused. And then as something happens to us in daily life, It picks up on one of these and then you suddenly find yourself being greedy or being hateful or being confused. And that's basically, I think, how it is.

So these *anusaya*, you could look at them as the potential which has been created from past actions that we call these *saṅkhāras*, volitional conditioning. So these volitional conditionings become, sink, as it were, into this level of sheer potential. And I think that's what the Buddha is saying.

And the final thing is that until these *anusaya* are actually eradicated from the system, there's no way our unwholesome actions can stop. And the only way you can undermine them is through insight, which breaks the delusion. That's why in dependent origination the real break is at that point of ignorance.

So that brings to an end my little homily on the Anusaya. I can only hope it has been of some benefit. May you be liberated from all your Anusaya sooner rather than later.

Basics for Meditation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 51 min

In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma weaves together the Buddha's life story with practical meditation instruction for both newcomers and experienced practitioners. He explores the historical context of the Buddha's spiritual quest, from his privileged upbringing through his experiments with blissful absorptions and severe asceticism, to his breakthrough under the Bodhi tree when he turned investigation inward upon suffering itself.

The talk elucidates the Buddha's distinctive teaching of Right Awareness (sammā sati) - that childlike, non-conceptual attention free from thinking and comparison. Bhante explains how the Mahasi method uses noting practice and slow, mindful movement to cultivate this original mind, helping practitioners return to direct sensory experience beyond conceptual overlay.

Practical guidance covers working skillfully with the five hindrances - desire, aversion, restlessness, drowsiness, and doubt - emphasizing the importance of acknowledging mental states without engaging their storylines. The discussion introduces the three characteristics of existence (tilakkhana): impermanence (anicca), suffering/unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and not-self (anattā), showing how investigation of these qualities leads to liberation from the delusion of a substantial, permanent self.

The teaching concludes with specific instruction in the Mahasi technique's two key elements: noting practice to reduce thinking to simple acknowledgment, and slow, deliberate movement to develop penetrating awareness of moment-to-moment experience.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I'm mindful of the fact that one or two people here know very little about Buddhism, and some who know quite a lot, so I'll try to weave a story that encompasses both, and also talk about the Mahāsi and the technique that we're using for *vipassanā*.

When we practice meditation, I think we have to be clear about three things. First of all, what does the Buddha mean by right awareness? And then, how do we maintain that awareness against all the hindrances, how the mind wanders off all the time? And what is it we're investigating? What is the process of liberation? What do we mean by that? What does the Buddha mean by delusion?

So it's always good to start the story with the Buddha himself. He lived in what you might call an upper middle class—well, I suppose almost nobility. His father was a head man of a group of people, a tribe called the Sakyas, and they were under the local king of Kosala. So all the stories about him being a very rich prince and all that is all later stuff. But he was brought up as a Kshatriya, which is the warrior caste, so he would have spent a lot of time learning how to use swords and spears and also governance.

But it's interesting to remember that he would have been illiterate. Writing as such was coming in, but it was coming in much like it happened in Europe, I believe, in accounts—business people keeping their accounts. But that didn't mean, of course, that the language wasn't highly developed. It was passed on through memory. So even today in Hinduism, the Rig Veda would be learnt off by heart by the Brahmins. And it's interesting how they do it. They first of all teach the child how to pronounce the syllables. Even before they know what it means, they pronounce the syllables. And then when they've got it off pat, then they tell them what it means. And only after they know what it means can they begin to philosophise. It's completely the opposite to what we do. We expect people to be philosophers and creative before they've got the basics. So that's the sort of society he lived in.

And of course there were pleasures. There were lots of pleasures. And he would have had lots of free time as opposed to the labourers and the lower caste. The caste system wasn't so rigid in his day. It was becoming so, but not so rigid. And it was to the east of him, out in present-day Calcutta—that area, present day Bihar—that the Brahmins were getting ascendancy. Before that the ruling caste, the warrior caste would have been considered higher than the Brahmins. And there would seem to be some disaffection with society going on, much like the hippies of the 70s. And there were lots of men—mainly men but often their wives and occasionally women—who would leave the homely life, who would leave household life, and live very basic lives out in the forests, and come in for alms round.

So all that was established before the Buddha himself set out. There was an established custom of how to live the ascetic life. And it's thought to go back right back to the Mahinda Dharo civilisation in the Indus Valley which somehow disappeared and we can't read any of their stuff. But when the Aryans came down from the north and conquered all that area, it seems as though some of their yogic practices passed into their culture. So it has a very long history, this idea of ascetic practice and building up the powers that the mind has as opposed to the body.

Now at some point he gets fed up with the pleasures and joys of life. They become insipid, vapid. And because of that emptiness, that's one of the underlying reasons for him leaving his household life. But at a deeper level, it was what we would call an existential crisis. He came to realise that there was in fact sickness, ageing and death and that's where he was moving towards. And it's something I think that comes to all of us at the end of youth at some point. That's part of growing up. And normally speaking people start taking life a bit more seriously in their mid-twenties. Career, marriage, partnership, all that takes on a more serious quality as they move towards a real involvement in social life, in the life of society. So at that time these things are on his mind and it comes to a crisis point.

So he gets permission from his family, his wife, to shoot off and spend some time as an ascetic. I can only presume—this is just a personal presumption—that it was a bit like myself when I left, when I joined the Order. I said to my mother, who wept bitterly, can't understand why, that I would just go for three years. It was just trying it out. I just needed a bit of space, a bit of time. And then, of course, you get habituated, I suppose. So anyway, he left with this deep psychological questioning about life.

And it was something that was in the air. In that time, one thing that they were trying to escape was rebirth. So it was taken for granted. And not everybody—there were materialists—but it was taken for granted that you basically got reborn. And you could be reborn in any realm. You could be reborn as an animal. And the idea of being reborn wasn't all that happy an idea, especially back onto the earth, because it just meant going through the same old routine: work, sickness, aging and death. So there was an existential fear that ran through the society at that time, which fueled this idea of trying to seek something which was beyond that.

And so when the Buddha left, he left already into a set system, a set way of being an ascetic, set customs—can't call them rules, more like customs. There were regular teachers, very well-known teachers of the time. It was one of the pastimes of the age to turn up at the park, these lovely parks that they had—bamboo park and so on—especially on a full moon. When in the east, for those of you who have been, as you know, you can actually see colour, it's that bright. And on the full moon they would all go to these parks and listen to the great debates and arguments of these ascetics between each other, and that was one of their entertainments. That was before videos.

So he left the home life to join that life and the first thing he tries is teachers who teach him how to attain blissful states. All religions have these blissful states. They're attained through prayer, through mantra. And what we discover in that technique, such as the *mettā* we did, we can build up a very tremendous ecstasy within ourselves. The

heart—although I was saying to you that when we practice *mettā*, we don't worry about the emotions. It may be not feeling so good. It may be a bit depressed and whatnot. But eventually, the heart does begin to resonate with the will. And as you keep making these very gentle... the heart resonates more and more and they become quite internal ecstasies.

Now, one of the benefits of being able to develop that is that you're happy. You're happy while you're in the absorption and when you come out of it, it stays with you. It's not as though that mood suddenly disappears. And when you become an adept at such a thing, you can move in and out of that at will. And so you can understand how if you're going to find a way of being blissed out all the time, what do you worry about sex, drugs and rock and roll for? Or food or anything like that? You're quite happy under a tree with your loin cloth and you nip around for a bit of food every day and you don't mind what you eat. It's immaterial because all you want to do is just sustain the body so you can get back under your tree.

So that blissful practice was already well developed, and he brought it into his teaching, and we call them the *jhānic* states, the absorptions. And one of those practices is the *mettā* we were doing this morning. But the problem is that these things do die out, and that underlying them, because they don't deal with problems, they don't deal with psychological problems, they definitely don't deal with the fears and the aversion of sickness, aging, and death. And so whenever these things passed away, whenever the old thoughts returned, he realized that actually that wasn't an escape from suffering. It was like icing over dung, if I'll excuse the expression.

So with that, he left his teachers, who taught him these absorptions. And then he tried—this is the normal chronology that you get taught, but it's not absolutely clear which came first—but anyway, he then tried what's known as the ascetic practices. The main one was starvation, really drawing the body down to its limit.

So there were two major philosophies which you can see even these days. The first was a materialist philosophy, which basically meant that you die and that's it. That's the end of it. You may as well enjoy life as much as you can. And that was the idea of just enjoying the ordinary pleasures of life, but also these absorptions. At least you enjoyed life. Some thought that you had these absorptions, and then you went from rebirth to rebirth, right into higher and higher and more subtle levels of peacefulness and joy, and that was it. Then you disappeared. So there were all sorts of theories about how our life progressed.

And on the other side, as opposed to that annihilationist idea, there were those of course who believed in an eternal soul and the soul was trapped in the body. It was trapped by its *kamma*. *Kamma* had become physical. It was your body and it was your attraction to the senses that kept you down at this level. And therefore if one could let go of this through ascetic practices, then the soul would be released from the body, or the desire to be reborn in this realm, and it would rise into eternal bliss. So the Jains were very much into that philosophy. And it's understood that the Buddha actually worked with them. He was his elder contemporary, the Jain leader, the Nigantha.

And so the idea was, of course, the main thing was to not give any pleasure to the sense bases. And he seems to have practiced this quite severely. He talks about holding his spine through his stomach. If you have a go at that, you'll see how thin he was. And at some point, he wakes up and he realizes, actually, this is getting him nowhere either. And in fact, all it is, is more suffering.

So he leaves his companions and they're quite disgusted with him because they think he's gone soft or he's lost his courage. Remember that the Jain saints, the ones that they really praise, are the ones who finally stop eating. I mean, that's the way they would express their saintliness, just to finally stop eating and die, let go.

So we have this rather dejected young man by the roadside, and somebody comes along—we actually know her name, Sujata, means happy birth—with some offerings for the local god. Although it's a sweet rice thing, but I much prefer rice pudding. And when she sees this poor wretch... in the scriptures, of course, they talk about her being bowled over by this god-like figure by the roadside. But I mean, if he's almost starving himself to death, it can hardly look like that. Anyway, he eats. He has this rice pudding, which of course is a break away from all that ascetic practice. And it revivifies him.

And something happens at that point, which then brings about a turnaround in his practice. And it's because of this that we say he is self-enlightened. Up until now, there's no direction. He remembers his father doing a ploughing ceremony. And he's a child. And he remembers the state that he was in when he's watching his father doing this ploughing ceremony. It's to open the sowing season. And he recognizes in that state the same attentiveness, the same concentration that he's been able to gain through his practice of the absorptions, the concentration practice.

But there is within that also a question mark. So there's the child observing his father, completely absorbed in what's happening, and with the wonder, like, what is this all about? What's going to happen in his mind? And it's because of that little memory that

he turns the whole process of meditation around upon itself. So instead of trying to find an escape from suffering, trying to find a place where there's no suffering, he turns around upon suffering to ask how suffering is caused in the first place.

And it's with that inspiration that he sits under the Bodhi tree, which is the fig tree. It's a great big tree. It's lovely. On a hot day, you definitely want to sit under it. And it's there that he sits and makes this what we call the great determination. So there's the great renunciation when he leaves home—everything's greater. And there's the great determination when he sits under the tree. And he determines because he sees no other way of dealing with this existential crisis within himself, that he will sit and either he'll crack this problem or he'll die.

Now, I always say, lucky for him and lucky for us, it only took six hours, according to the legends around him. And he makes this break, he makes this real breakthrough, and with it there comes this release from what he termed delusion.

So let's go back a bit and just talk about this right awareness. So it's the image of a child. I usually have a picture hanging up, but I've not had time yet to put it up. If you bring the image of a child, usually even up to the age of 10 sometimes, 10, 11, and they become absorbed in something, you notice what their face is like. Their eyes are fixated. If they see a bug or something they've never seen before, they just become completely absorbed. They lose a sense of all their surroundings. You can shout at them, but they're completely absorbed. And their mouth drops. They look gormless. So their parents usually tell them to close their mouths or a fly will go in or something. Give them a clip on the back of their head to tell them to wake up. And in so doing, of course, ruin that moment, its potential for full liberation.

So just think of that face. So the fixation of the eyes, the complete absorption, the wonder, the wonder, and the jaw dropping. When the jaw drops—and this is why we say lips together, teeth apart, the jaw's relaxed—this is connected to your thinking. So the thinking stops. The thinking stops and there's just the watching, just the observing. And then when, of course, the child has absorbed what it is they're looking at, the question arises, what is it? And, of course, they're told that's a beetle or something.

And as soon as the beetle is known, the word beetle, it attaches itself to an image in the mind that we call a perception. Every time that child from now on sees a beetle, it just says there's a beetle. It never really looks again. And that's where we are. We never get down to the direct experience of things because we presume the concept we have of it is a direct perception. So even when you look across at the meadows here and you see a tree, you'll know it's a tree. We see it's a tree, but we don't actually look at the tree in that same original way, the original mind, the beginner's mind of a child.

The whole process of *vipassanā* is to get back to that original mind, to get back to that non-conceptual way, non-thinking way, non-energetic way of looking, feeling and experiencing things. And of course very difficult for us because ever since we were children we've been taught the opposite. The more literate, the more visual, the more we depend upon images, TV, all that, the less actually we're in contact with the sense bases as the sense base itself directly experiences something.

So, for instance, if you go to a restaurant and you decide you can have a pizza or something, and you have a pizza, you already have an idea of a pizza. So the pizza turns up and it's not so good, it's a very good pizza. It's immediately compared with all the past pizzas. But this pizza itself is completely original in itself. And there's an inability to accept it as it is. It's always in a state of comparison, which either makes us happy or unhappy.

So you can see how the mind with its concepts and perceptions and history distorts our present experience. Now it's not as though we want to get rid of it. We do need to know when we see something that it is a car, that this is a pizza. It's a case of knowing that there's another way of experiencing things, and that's this direct contact with our sense bases.

So that's what he means by right awareness. Now when we say sense bases, don't forget there's the inner sense base. The mind in Buddhism is also a sense base, and that's when we experience images, it's when we experience our emotions, the inner feelings of the body. All those are internal sense bases, and the mind itself with its perceptions just to be able to look at an image, not get involved in it, but just to observe it. So that's also perceiving the mind as it's working.

So this right awareness is quite specific in trying to get us back to this original mind. So if you're robbing a bank, for instance, you're fully aware and alert, but it's difficult to see you becoming fully liberated. So it's a very specific thing that the Buddha is talking about, this right awareness.

And of course we use the body to get back to that mind. So the breath, the sensation caused by the breath. Even though we use noting words, and we'll come to this a bit later, the noting is trying to reduce thought to a simple concrete word. But our attention isn't on the word, it's not on what we're saying, as I'm doing now. I'm concentrating on what I'm saying. The attention is on what the feeling is, the sensations which are arising in the body. I'm trying to abstract, I'm trying to pull this intuitive intelligence out of its confusion with thought and images.

Now then we come across all these things that mess us about, and I'll be talking about that a bit more in depth tomorrow. But you can split them quite quickly into two different. One of them excites us and one of them sends us asleep. So all those that excite us, things that we want, that bring up a certain sense of joy in the heart, holidays and all the rest of it. There's all the aversions and the little petty irritations and hatreds and plannings of murder and all that sort of stuff. Then there's all this just general restlessness, the mind just full of energy thinking about this and that. Sometimes it feels that you're going mad because the mind just won't stop. So this is just the energy in the whole process of thinking. There's all this stuff around guilt and shame, remorse, all that sort of stuff. And there's doubt, doubt in the sense of doubting whether the teaching is really for me and all that sort of stuff. Doubt in the teacher, heaven forbid. And there's a deeper doubt in myself.

Especially, you might look around sometimes, but if you're sitting there in an absolutely wonderful posture, you think, oh, God, I can't do this. And that doubt is quite pernicious. Be careful with doubt. I'll talk about that in more detail tomorrow. It comes from often a fear of failure. It's often driven by fear.

So when we find ourselves, the mind is caught up in that. We find ourselves caught up in it. And there's this language going on and these emotions are growing. So make sure that you're very clear. You pull out of it as it were and you point to it. You say, well that's aversion. That's planning, and that's doubt and that's guilt and all that sort of stuff. And what you're doing is you are acknowledging the mental state that's driving it, the attitude that's underneath it. So don't be concerned with the story at all. It might be here you might actually have a real problem back at home, and it's no good figuring it out here, because while you're here, everything's changing out there. The problem might have disappeared.

If you really convince yourself that you can't do anything about your present life while you're here, then it stops the mind wandering. And it stops the mind attaching to something, thinking that you can work something out. It's much better to use this time to let those thoughts disappear, and to enter a clarity. Often when things that are disturbing us or upsetting us, we don't realise that we're getting our thinking process being clouded, it's being distorted by the emotional value that we put on it, the fear, the anxiety, the anger, all that sort of stuff. When all that dies down, we can normally see quite clearly how to bring an end to the problem. Not always, sometimes these things have their own way of working out.

So the storyline is just to be let go. Don't concern yourself with the story at all, and you won't concern yourself with the story when you realise that it's through the stories that these emotions build themselves up. So if you want to get depressed, really start thinking depressing thoughts purposefully. Sit there thinking how depressing life is and then don't be surprised that you end up feeling really suicidal. So once you realise that that thinking, when it's attached to a negative emotion, is pernicious, so then you make the effort, you come off it, and you sit within the heart, you sit within the emotional state.

And the other one is of course sleepiness and doziness. We've already said that there's probably some real imbalance in sleep when you come. It might take two or three days to work that out. But then afterwards, remember that doneness and lethargy are conditionings within us that we've developed. Often, for instance, when you're fed up, you just sit in a chair and fall asleep. Hopefully you wake up feeling a bit better. And then there's all that dozing away in bed, Sunday morning, that subliminal state for hours on end. Can't be bothered to get up. So all those things are developing within us, this idea that oblivion is a beautiful place to be in. And in a sense it is. There's no suffering in oblivion. It's just that unfortunately we keep waking up. And then we find that actually we're dozy and muzzy-headed even when we don't want to be.

So again it's this case of making determined not to fall into that state, but to make that state something to investigate. So you're investigating. Remember, this is not a historical investigation, it's not a psychotherapeutic investigation. Right, there's nothing to do with psychotherapy. This is a direct contact with your mental state. And of course what you realise is that by allowing these mental states to manifest, these conditionings to manifest, they're actually burning themselves out. And there's your therapy. It's much cheaper. It's much harder because you've got to sit with this stuff. But if you can spend the time, then you'll find it quite purifying. Purification of the heart is part of the process.

So don't be afraid if, don't be surprised, especially those who are new to this, that emotions come up quite strongly because often we know that we're anxious, but we've never really felt it. We've always put our attention somewhere else. We're trying to find a solution. We're sort of gently running away from it. It's the fear of fear that's causing this underlying panic. But actually, when you turn round upon the anxiety and sit with it, well, it can come up with quite a really heavy force. Same with all these things. Some old grief, some anger, depression. All these have quite a lot of power behind them. And often when we come to sit for the first time, but even all the way through the spiritual life, you'll find that you're opening up to it. So don't be surprised to find that it's stronger than you thought it was.

But if you just stay with it, just stay with it. And this idea, this affectionate awareness, affectionate awareness, to embrace it with loving kindness. So, ah, there's my lovely depression again. See? And that undermines your reaction to it. And it's the reaction which is causing the problem. So again, we'll talk about that a little later when we come to discuss dependent origination, which is the Buddha's teaching on our psychology. That's what we chant in the morning.

So that's just in brief. When it comes to physical pain, remember we're not trying to defeat pain. For the most part, you won't get the better of it. Pain will get the better of us. That's not the point. The point is to recognise our relationship to pain. So physical pain in the knees or some feelings of nausea or headache or backache or stomachache, the whole gamut of human misery. Our job is to recognise how we're relating to it. And how when we're averse to it and pushing it away, that's where the suffering starts. And we're trying to find a way of being equanimous with it, of being at ease with it, being calm with it. And that means opening up to it too.

And of course when it gets too much, when it just becomes a point where you're struggling against it, where it's just silly, then you change posture. But when you do change posture, or you stand up or do anything, really note, really be aware of that transition. How one minute there's pain, and there's this reaction to it, the aversion to it, and how once you make an intention, intending to move, and you move slowly, how the physical part of that experience begins to soften off and almost disappear into a neutral position, a neutral state, and how the heart responds also, how it becomes calm again.

So what we're seeing there is this connection between the body and mind, how the one is intimately connected to the other, how one reacts off the other. When you're angry, the body gets hot, gets restless, it feels awful sometimes. When there's pain in the body, the mind reacts. When we say mind, by the way, it's just our language. Heart-mind. We've sort of split them up, really, ever since the so-called Enlightenment, which has had its benefits. But in the East, you'll still see people pointing to their hearts when they say, I think. Not up into their heads.

So the heart responds when I say heart I mean just the emotional life, how the heart responds to pain. So you can see this connection that there are two different systems going on here. There's a system within the body itself, the cellular life and the way that we experience life through the body. And there's the heart which is an emotional mental thing going on. And then there's these much finer things going on, these thoughts and images. And it's catching that process and seeing that it is interconnected, but there are three different things going on all the time. And how they relate, interrelate.

So these are beginning to deconstruct our experience. And that's really the basic technique the Buddha uses. To deconstruct, and to keep asking the question, well, who am I? Or what am I? Am I just made up of these parts? Is there anything within all these parts that is solid, that is stable, that doesn't move, doesn't change? And of course that brings us now to the point of what is it we're investigating.

So we're investigating these three characteristics of existence, as they're called. The first one is impermanence. And, I mean, if you ask anybody in the street, if you say to somebody, oh, everything changes, well, they wouldn't be surprised by that. I mean, everybody's aware that things change. But at a more subtle level, are we aware of I am changing? This I, this sense of self, how it arises and passes away. Do we think it's permanent? I mean, where's it gone when you're asleep? And in the morning you wake up and, here I am again. So it's not always there, is it? So that can't be permanent. The sense of self.

So, this impermanence, the mind is very good at creating continuity. When we listen to music, we're actually only hearing one note at a time, or one section of note at a time. And yet, the mind gives us the impression of hearing music as a flow. It's a bit like the old films with the, what do you call them? With the frames. If you play it, if there's a speed of something like twenty-five per second or something, it gives us the idea of continuity. But when we slow the film, when we slow that down, of course, it's just one section after the other. And that's what the Buddha's talking about now.

In fact, although we have this impression of living in a continuous form, actually, as you look more and more closely, you'll see it's stroboscopic. It's actually this and then nothing, and this and then nothing. The mind is very clever at creating continuity for us. And this continuity gives us a feeling of substance, that I am real. This sense of me is actually something which sustains. It's an entity and somehow independent of the universe. The sense of I detaches itself from everything around itself, even parts of the body at times, and gets the feeling that, well, I can do my own thing in my own way in my own time. And that feeling of something substantial depends upon this sense of continuity.

That's why people have nervous breakdowns when their idea of themselves suddenly slips from under their feet. It could be a loss of their work. I am, you finish that sentence, you put the finish on that, then you'll see where your delusion is. I am a nurse, I am a decorator. When you can't finish it off, when the job's gone, who am I? And that leads some people to real despair. And that's on top of the real, what you call the real suffering of loss of income, etcetera, etcetera. It's compounded by that loss of identity. And then all these other identities that we have, our political identity, our

social identity, our family identity. So when you complete that, every time you complete that I am something, you'll know that in there there's going to be the potential of suffering because the identity doesn't have any reality in it, doesn't have any substance.

When the Buddha, nowhere in the scriptures by the way does the Buddha say there is no self, but you have to understand what the Buddha meant by a self. The self, the *attā*, could be translated into our language as a soul, but then you've got to be careful because when we use words that come from the Western tradition, it gives us all sorts of ideas. But generally speaking, most people who were eternalists, that's what they were called, would have some idea of a soul which was eternal, which was completely happy, and so on and so forth, whatever constitutes a soul. So all the Buddha's saying is, well, if this soul exists, where is it? If it's eternal then it obviously can't change. If it's changing then whatever it was is now gone. So there's obviously some sort of process whereby it may disappear.

So looking at change, looking at impermanence, we're always questioning well is that, if that's impermanence, not me. So the connection between continuity and a feeling of substance. The connection between things being impermanent, unreliable, and the sense of self being undermined are intimately connected. Now, it's because of the sense of self that we define ourselves as human beings. Now, conventionally, of course, that's perfectly true.

But what it does is, it makes us seek happiness in this form. And that manifests as acquisitiveness, greed in its more moral thing, but the more you have the more you feel substantial. You feel far more safe if you have a million pounds in the bank than if you only have ten. If you have lots of friends you feel much more substantial than being on your own, being lonely. You feel much more substantial if you have power and you can do things, and then you find yourself powerless.

So all these things, all this feeling of substantiality, of something, of me, something real, is based upon what I've accumulated. Now, of course, what I've accumulated other people want. And therefore anybody who undermines my accumulation has to be my enemy. So aversion arises naturally. And if the enemy is a bit bigger than me, then of course I've got to run for it. So fear arises naturally.

So these three attitudes is the undercurrent of our lives because of a delusion as to who we are. Acquisitiveness, greed, aversion and fear. And from that all the gamut of human misery arises. All the future unethical actions that we commit and the guilt and the remorse. Misery, misery all the way.

So our process is twofold, and again I'll try to speak more about that at some future time. It's both this understanding, this investigation of who we really are, or what we really are, and a process of purification. Because our relationship, our relationship to each other, to the world, to anything—our relationship is our ethics. The way we relate is the way we are either ethical or unethical. So it's all connected. It's all connected. And so the process of purification is part and parcel of the path. And that's the hard bit of the practice.

I just wanted to say something about the Mahasi. So the Mahasi was a teacher last century, which was a great revival of Buddhist practice. It had gone dead by the end of the 19th century, so it's said anyway. But during the last century, many teachers arose, really very great teachers. And both in the Tibetan and in the Chinese, and in Japanese tradition, all these traditions, suddenly these very great teachers arose. And in the Theravāda tradition, the Mahasi was definitely one of those.

There's a book written by Jack Cornfield, which used to be called *Living Buddhist Masters*, but they're all dead now, apart from one. So it's been retitled. And in it, there are, I think, about ten or eleven masters whom he interviewed, all of whom had a system through which they would get across the teachings of the Buddha. Two of them have become, maybe three, have become very regular in the West.

The one is taught more famously by Goenkaji, who died recently, which is one system of vipassanā. The more generalised system is very simple. Just watch the breath and whatever arises and passes away. And in that sense, it's very close to Zen. But the other system is by the Mahasi. And whichever Buddhist meditation centre you go to, if you see people walking slowly, then they've been infected with the Mahasi technique. And most, virtually all the teachers in the Theravāda tradition would have practised in the Mahasi tradition and probably mixed it with other things.

Here, I try to keep it fairly close to its original form. And there are two parts to the system without going into great detail. First of all, this noting that we've practised. And the idea there, as we've said, is to reduce the thinking mind to a single point. It also has the ability to make us recognise what's going on. To really acknowledge what it is that's happening in the body, heart and mind. And it has this added addition, added benefit that in pointing at something, you're actually recognising it's not you. If it's an object, how can it be the subject? How can the perceiver be the perceived? How can the knower be the known? And that separation is part of the process of liberation from this deep delusion as to who we are, or what we are.

So it's something that you might want to really develop while you're here. And in a classic Mahasi meditation, which we do for the rest of the year, it's done all the time. You don't have a break from it. As soon as you wake up, you're noting, and you keep on noting until you fall asleep.

The other thing is going slow, stopping and going slow. So going back to the old films, but we know from these nature programs when they take pictures of, say, I mean, the one I always remember is the frog and the way it catches a fly. And because they can speed up the action of the camera these days, they can really slow it all down and you can see the action perfectly, how it does it. You may be surprised to know that the fly is caught underneath the tongue. Did you really know that? And was it necessary to know it? But the important thing is that that could not be seen unless the whole process had been slowed down.

So it's the same with us. The slower we go, the more we'll see. Just in the same way as either driving through the countryside, cycling through it, or walking through it. The slower you go, the more you see. So really get this feeling that there's plenty of time to do things.

Opening a door. So this is the last little example I'll leave to you. Closing doors here is part of the fire regulations. But for us, it's a much deeper practice. It's about our existentialist, our existential understandings. Remember that the person who stands on one side of the room, by the time they've gone out to the door, have changed. Even in that small moment, whoever was standing there and now is standing here has changed. It might not be particularly perceptible, but there must have been a change.

So as you approach the door, stand for a moment. You can just stop for a moment and then intending to open. And as your arm stretches out, stretching, stretching, as your fingers touch the handles, you get the feel of it. The feel of the metal. Touching, touching. And as you press the handle, be in communication with the spring. Neither too much, nor too little. In perfect communication with the spring. And then pulling as you open the door. And then stepping, and so on and so forth. And then when you've closed the door, one moment of stopping. And then the next intention.

Now sometimes you can't do it because people are waiting, but whenever you can really get into that habit of stopping as many times as you can during the day and just get into that state of just being and seeing the next intention. And remember that the importance of intentions in Buddhism is that all our conditionings begin with an intention. It's when we empower an intention that we produce a habit, and when we have a compendium of habits we have a personality. Once you have a personality your destiny is before you because your habits drive you in a certain way.

So becoming aware of our habits and knowing which habits we want to develop and which habits we want to get rid of is also part of our practice. And one important spiritual practice is to stop and be in that state of just being for a change.

So we've had a quick look through the Buddha's life and came to see that because of the memory the child's face, if you can image that before you sit, can be a powerful reminder. And that his liberation from suffering brought about these understandings. And lucky for us, a way of teaching it. We talk about *Pacceka Buddhas*, Buddhas, private Buddhas, people who've become liberated, but don't leave a dispensation. Either they don't teach or the opportunity wasn't there. Who knows?

So one of the gifts of this particular person, the Siddhartha Gotama, was that he left a systematic way of achieving the end of suffering. And then we talked about the hindrances, which we'll go into more deeply tomorrow, and how, generally speaking, how to approach them. And the basic instruction, of course, is to come off the story and stay in the body, stay with the feelings.

And then we talk about the three characteristics, a sense of impermanence, a sense of not-self, and the process of desire. We didn't say much about that but we'll cover it in more detail tomorrow.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you by your fierce determination achieve full liberation sooner rather than later.

Sādhū. Sādhū. Sādhū.

Basics of Insight Meditation 02

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 34 min

In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma traces the Buddha's spiritual journey from his departure from family life to his profound breakthrough under the Bodhi tree. He explores how the Buddha's childhood memory of natural concentration and inquiry during a ploughing ceremony became the key to his liberation, shifting from trying to escape suffering to investigating its very nature.

The talk introduces core Buddhist concepts including the three characteristics of existence (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self), the five khandhas, and the six sense bases. Bhante explains how vipassanā practice involves returning to that childlike awareness—simply receiving and observing without conceptual overlay. He discusses the five hindrances not as obstacles but as teachers, showing us the three characteristics in action.

Drawing from the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta and referencing the Kevaddha Sutta's description of non-manifestive consciousness, Bhante emphasizes that awakening involves recognizing the observer within—that which is aware of experience but doesn't suffer. He concludes with practical guidance on cultivating Right Awareness through simple observation, warning against the poison of seeking progress rather than understanding the present process of liberation.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So if you can imagine what it was like for the Buddha to leave his family. He's twenty-nine, he's married and he's just had a child born. It's not as though he made a sudden decision — he's off. It must have been hanging around for quite some time. I often wonder whether his marriage was in good faith or bad faith — according to the philosopher Sartre — just to follow customs and not to follow what your heart's really telling you. I'm wondering whether the birth of his child was like a crisis point where he realised he wasn't ready to be a father or whatever. But obviously, during that late youth, round about twenty-five onwards, there is usually an awakening to the fact that youth is passing. For some people, it can be like a midlife crisis, an early midlife crisis.

So he leaves anyway. I can't imagine he was happy about leaving, but determined to do so, perhaps just to taste the life of the *samaṇa*, the recluse, the wandering recluse. What drives him is, of course, this urge to try and get beyond suffering. That was the big theme of the age. Everybody was concerned about bringing suffering to an end. Some thought, well, if you practice the *jhāna*, these absorptions, that's where you ended up forever in these heavens. Others were materialists — they just said, well, when you die, you die.

So he goes in search of teachers and he probably already knows them because one of the entertainments of the age was to go out into the park at full moon — and the full moon in the east is really almost like the sun coming out — and to listen to these debates where these religious leaders would try to better each other. So he was well into it, and we know that because after he becomes liberated, he's able to hold his own with his arguments and understandings. He's well into the whole spiritual, religious turmoil that was part of that time. It was the same time that the Jain leader was there and all the Upaniṣads, the Hindu scriptures, began to appear. So it's an age of awakening. I was going to say a bit like ours, but I'm not sure about that.

He tries these various teachers and the first two tell him how to get into these blissful states. In both cases, he's good enough to become a teacher in that tradition. In both cases, he leaves because when he comes out of those states, he's back to being anxious, depressed, and so on. They've not answered his fundamental urge within him to find if there's an end to suffering, which I think for him would have been the end of rebirth, because it's there in the scriptures. He often talks about "and this is the end of becoming." Now, you have to underline that as the end of becoming as a self.

So then he tries this other form, this very hard ascetic practice with the understanding — which I think was a Jain understanding — that the soul, the eternal soul, was trapped in the body and that the body was a manifestation of your bad *kamma*. So if you didn't have eyes, you wouldn't have lust. If you didn't have a tongue, you wouldn't have greed. So the idea was to draw the body down, and that was done mainly through fasting. He got so thin, he said, he could hold his spine through his stomach. So if you try that, you'll see he was very thin.

At some point, if you can imagine it, he's there with six companions who probably have been with him all that time. So they're close mates, spiritual companions, all urging each other to be more and more ascetic. At some point, he realises he's not getting anywhere — he's just more suffering, he says. And he leaves. I'm sure that in all our

lives we've taken up something and then realise it's not working for us and we're going to start again. We've got to go somewhere else, got to find another way of spending life. So I can only imagine that he's pretty depressed in our terms.

We have two fairly acceptable biographical points in his life that we know about. There's something in his early life, which I'll come to, and there's this point where he's sitting on a road and a woman with offerings for the local god offers him some — a mince pie. It revives him and it makes him consider what he's doing. That's when some determination takes him to have one more go. It comes from this memory, which is understood to be a real, true biographical moment where he remembers watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony.

He remembers himself being concentrated and full of inquiry, full of a sense of curiosity. I think that means that his whole approach completely turned around on itself. Instead of trying to get rid of suffering, he now turns towards it to find out what the cause of it is. He finds himself a nice place near modern day Bodh Gaya, and there's a village close by where he can get some food. He sits and he becomes liberated from suffering in his own terms.

Such is his demeanour that when he turns up again to see his friends because he thinks, well, who can I teach? — and at first he has that doubt about whether it's worth doing it — but when he approaches his people, they first of all turn off. They don't want to know him. He's gone soft. But as he approaches them, they begin to see that there's something about him which has changed. In the conversation that follows, which is in the Vinaya rather than in the scriptures, he's constantly asking them, "Have you ever heard me speak like this before?" So he's made a real profound breakthrough and he's trying to get it across to them.

That breakthrough goes back to that childhood way of looking at things. When we're born, we've already got it. It's there at birth, this ability to just receive. It is said that during the first four months, it's just a catastrophe of information. We're seeing things, we're hearing things, and it's just coming at us. There's no objectivity. We're absorbed in the process. That little baby knows very clearly what's pleasant and unpleasant. So you're born directly into that duality.

Then it would seem after four months, you begin to push the world outwards. The first object tends to be your carer, your mother. So eventually, what was right in the head here, happening here, becomes out there — pushing it out there, becomes an object outside. We forget that everything we're observing and seeing is actually being put out onto the world out there. What we're seeing is what the mind is creating at this present time.

That sense of awareness that he found, that intuitive awareness that he discovered by just relaxing within himself and observing, he picked up from that experience he had watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony. That's probably, I would have thought, around about the age of seven and eight because that's when we become a bit more self-aware in that way. For instance, guilt comes into play around about the age of seven, and around about the age of seven we drop the idea that what we can see or what we can imagine has to be real. So Father Christmas can't come down the chimney anymore.

This awareness that he then isolates from everything else that's in the body, all the senses, the consciousnesses that arise dependent on the senses — that whole process, that whole process of investigation is the process of liberation. That's what he discovered. That's what he's trying to tell us to do. This word *vipassanā*, which just means to see clearly, to really look and see.

He's very clear on what it is that we're trying to investigate. It's not amorphous. It's not some funny, fuzzy idea. He says, "Have a look. Have a look at desire, this process of desire." He gives us three models of a human being — actually, there's another one, too — but the three main ones are the five *khandhas*, whereby he deconstructs the human being as a cross section. So there's your physicality. Then your mentality is made up of your feelings, your perceptions, all your habits, which are made by us through acts of will. That's the important thing. They're conditioned and conditioning. And consciousness, which here means a screen upon which all the information lands upon.

Then he points out that the consciousness is dependent on the six sense bases. There's the five obvious ones, which are your five physical bases — your eye, ear, nose, and so on — and the mind itself, which is sensing your emotions and your thoughts. Then the final one, which again is more like a cross section.

Then he gives us a process, which is dependent origination. He starts off with that sense of ignorance. This ignorance isn't culpable. It's not as though that four-month-old baby should have known better. It's just that's what happens to us. We come in not knowing. That's the word, not knowing. Then we manufacture some idea of ourselves, a sense of me, which concretises round about the age of three. So that you have a very little individual boy and an individual girl. That's necessary. We have to start off with a self. It has to be a stable sense of self, a good sense of self. Often in the scriptures and especially in the Dhammapada, there's a whole section on being a good self.

But once you've established it, once it's stabilised, then we've got to — it's not that you get rid of it completely — it's just that you recognise that it's also creating a wrong relationship of identity. Every time we come into the *vipassanā*, we've moved our iden-

tity. So we have a physical identity sometimes, like when you bite your tongue when you're eating. Just for that one moment, you and that excruciating pain are one. Then you get angry with yourself. Then you become an emotion. Then you might reflect upon why it happened. Then you become your thought processes and so on and so forth.

Here in the *vipassanā*, we've accessed some place within us, this observer, this feeler, which also has a sense of self. That's the one that has to be cracked. That's the last sense of self that has to be undone, you might say. In the discourse on not-self, which is the second discourse that he gives according to the tradition — so the first one is just laying out the teaching which eventually formalises into the four noble truths, but one person listening to that, one of his six companions, becomes what we call a stream-entrant. He makes a breakthrough through that delusive idea of self.

Then they all go off seemingly to get some food and they come back and have a bit of a lunch, have a rest, a cup of tea, and then he gives his second talk centring on this *anattā*, not-self. It begins by saying, "If I were the body, I could make it different. If the hair on my head was mine, I'd make it grow, but it'd disappear completely. What to do? If this body and if these emotions were mine, I'd have total control over them." But obviously, we don't have that sort of control. If the sensations in my body were under my control, I'd be able to do something. Now, it's not as though we don't have some control, but it's very surface. Even if you think about your body, have we any idea at this moment what the spleen is doing? I'm not so sure I even know what a spleen is. All I know is you don't want to get rid of it or try not to get rid of it.

Then he talks about impermanence and he says, "If it's impermanent, how can it be me?" So he's struggling with this word *attā*. This was the word which was being used for an eternal self. It's the same word *ātman* in Sanskrit. It's used by the Hindus or the Brahmins — it's not Hinduism as such yet, it's Brahmanism we call it — it's used by other teachers, such as the Jain teacher, to point to something which is not part of this psychophysical world, this psychophysical material world.

The discourse is not saying we don't have a self. So remember, it does get confusing. Here what the discourse is a pointer, which is saying, "Look, if there is this self, where is it? What is it?" The next point he comes to is impermanence. He says, "Well, if this self is meant to be an eternal soul, an eternal spirit in our language, if it's so, it can't arise and pass away."

So even by investigating everything that we're experiencing as momentary experiences, we're beginning to understand that anything I experience can't be me. It can't be this soul. Can't be this permanent sense of self. Even the sense of self disappears when we sleep. So I can't be that either. So it was really trying to point people to really invest-

igate whether there was this eternal soul. It was this process of investigation which is the liberating factor. So this is the path, you might say. The specific path of the Buddha was the process of investigation.

Then of course he says if something arises and passes away and you're clinging on to it then it's going to cause suffering, and that's the *dukkha*. In a later way of explaining that, he talks about the three types of suffering. So there's the suffering of reactivity, *dukkha-dukkha*. Life has suffering whether we like it or not. But how we relate to that, the unpleasantness of life, that also causes suffering. Everything is suffering if we're attached to something. We get attached to what is pleasant, to what is beautiful. The impermanence of that — catching the impermanence — that we can let go. We accept beauty. So that's the thing: it's accepting and enjoying beauty, enjoying that ecstatic mental state. When it goes, to remind ourselves, it's gone. That will never repeat itself. I'll get something like it. But I'm chasing the dragon. Well, it's the same psychology as any drug addict.

Then finally, the *saṅkhāra dukkha*. It's the *dukkha*, the suffering or the dissatisfaction that comes by not seeing that everything's compounded. There's nothing that has any solidity, that has any substance. We know that. On a physical level from our science — somebody once said to me, if we took all the space out of the body, we'd end up with something like a centimetre cube of matter. So that's what we're made of, these subatomic energies, whatever. It's magic when you think about it.

So it's investigating these three characteristics that lead us to discover within ourselves something which is not part of that process. He doesn't like to name it. He doesn't like to call it something. He prefers to talk about the experience *Nibbāna*. What he says about *Nibbāna* is that there's nothing in it which you've ever experienced or can experience. It is beyond the body and mind and heart. It's beyond all. Whatever we call being a human being, it's not that.

Then in another scripture where he's in a sense pushed by the question to answer in a very direct way — it's called the Kevaṭṭa Sutta, it's very famous amongst monastics, amongst certain monastics, because it goes against the idea that *Nibbāna* is nothing. Like it's a clever way of talking about annihilation. There's this monk Kevaṭṭa, and he wants to know where the world comes to an end. So now the world in this sense, and the Buddha often uses it in this sense, is the world you're experiencing. It's your world. It's not the world as an objective thing. He goes and asks somebody, and they don't know, and he asks these devas, these gods, and they keep saying, "Well, we don't really know the answer to that. You need to go up higher to the next load of gods." And he goes...

He goes up and up through all these scales of godly realms, deva realms, till he gets to the great Brahma, who is the creator. And he says to Brahma, where does the world come to an end? And Brahma answers, "I am Brahma. I am the creator of the world. I am the all-powerful, the all-knower," and so on and so forth. And he says, "I didn't ask you that. I wanted to know where the world comes to an end." And this happens three times. It's quite a funny discourse.

And then Brahma pulls him aside behind a curtain. And he says, "Listen, I don't want them to know that I don't know the answer to that question. But I do know who knows. And that's the Buddha. And you made a mistake coming up here. You should have gone to him."

So he nips down back to see the Buddha. And he asks the Buddha, "Where does the world come to an end?" And he says, "That's not the right question. The question is, where does the world not find a footing?" So *Nibbāna* exists at the same time as the world, as it was for him, the Buddha.

And then he comes out with a statement. He says, there is a consciousness. So now, whenever somebody has an insight into the human nature or into the world as it is, there's always a struggle for a word because the words that we have are always based on history, are always based on what we know. So, for instance, Freud, he has a real deep insight into the human psyche and there's no words that he can use, so he makes them up. The id, the ego, the superego.

So the Buddha doesn't particularly make up a new word. He is using consciousness in a particular way. And what he says is that there is this consciousness which is non-manifestive. And what he means by that is you won't find anything that the six senses offer us. So that's one way of looking at a human being, that the consciousness is based upon one of the six senses. You're either seeing or hearing, feeling, thinking. And he says there's nothing, there's no manifestation within that consciousness. And then he says that there's no boundary. There's no boundary. In other words, there's nothing there which there is a relationship to. It's complete, whole and entire unto itself. And then he says it's full of light.

And that's one experience, an experience of *Nibbāna*. So, that's our aim. *Nibbāna* can be experienced in different ways. I mean, that is a specific experience of the Buddha within itself. But every time we sit in the position of the observer, we're actually almost on the point of a *Nibbāna* experience. Because when you're in that position, ask yourself, am I suffering?

It might be that there is some very negative mental state there. You might be feeling very sad about somebody, somebody who's died, for instance, a friend. And as soon as you become aware of it, as soon as it's there, you're allowing the heart to express its sadness and therefore its healing. But whatever is aware of it, ask yourself, is that actually suffering?

So this is a magical position to find within ourselves. It doesn't heal the heart, it allows the heart to heal itself. That's all the heart wants to do. The heart just wants to express its problems. And it expresses it in feelings. And that's where we start dealing with these so-called hindrances. All those things that are agitating, are depressing. The five, all the ones to do with desires that we want, all the aversions that we have, which include the fears and anxieties, all the internal dullness and lethargy which has been a way of indulgence and a way of suppressing stuff.

Often when we're in a miserable state we'll just throw ourselves on the sofa and fall asleep, and so it's a nice way of just pushing things away, and of course it's very pleasant, isn't it? I mean, you wake up in the morning on a Sunday and you might just have been tempted just to keep sleeping in that subliminal state where you just keep turning over and you might get up and have a cup of tea and get back in the bed. So there's all this laziness. Well, of course, it's building up a mental state. And that's what we often feel when we're sitting as a hindrance. A hindrance meaning it's the danger of us being pulled into it, of giving into it. That's why it's a hindrance, is that they're actually teaching us something, these hindrances.

And then there's all that area of shame and guilt, remorse, secondary stuff that comes when we've not behaved in a way that's moral or ethical. And there's also included in that the sense of just that restlessness. A restlessness which can be physical. It can be emotional. It can be mental. It can be the three of them. And you just can't stop fidgeting. You can't stop doing something.

And the final one is doubt. But this is a type of doubt. I mean, the Buddha definitely wants us to doubt in the sense of ask ourselves questions, is what the Buddha's teaching true for us. Remember, this is a process of investigation. So belief becomes a real hindrance. He doesn't want us to believe anything, but he does want us to have confidence. And that's what skeptical doubt takes away from us. Because if you don't have confidence, then that doubt takes you over in anything, in any walk of life, and you can't move. You're paralysed.

I once had a student, I don't know what happened to him, but he got into this terrible psychological place of extreme doubt. He couldn't decide whether to get out of bed or not. I mean, it's just amazing when you think about it. And I'm not so sure I could help.

I'm not sure I helped him except to say, make a decision at some point to get out of bed and get out of bed. But he couldn't motivate himself. It was very strange. Unfortunately, I lost contact, but I presume he's found a way out of that.

So these mental states, these hindrances that come up are actually to be used in order to keep reinforcing in ourselves to reestablish a different relationship with the world, not me, not mine. And of course the danger is then that you're opting out, you're finding a place where you're becoming non-engaged, and that's why whenever we practice vipassanā it's always good to do a bit of *mettā* because that re-engages us. And basically that's what the Buddha did, if you remember having attained this full liberation.

No, just before that, you get the great doubt where Māra attacks him. So he's sitting there and all those old desires are coming up, to go back to the family, back to the life that he once loved, et cetera, et cetera. And he tries to steady that doubt by touching the earth. And the earth goddess rises and says, "You've got every right to seek this liberation," because Māra is telling him that he's not good enough. He's no good. It's a waste of time. Why are you doing this? And having perfected the virtue of generosity, it means that his purpose wasn't just for himself. It was actually to try and recognise that if he found it, he could help everybody else. And that was his engagement. That was what gave him that courage to just break through.

And then afterwards, having overcome the doubt that anyone would actually understand him, sends him into forty-five years of teaching. And that's what he devotes his life to.

So just to sum up, right awareness, bring to mind that childlike way of looking at things before conceptual thinking, before words, just to be able to see. And we can practice that just a very simple way. We can stare at something. Just stare at it and let the information come to us. And what it is, we're actually investigating these three characteristics and to use the five hindrances as ways of seeing these three characteristics. And slowly but surely, I'm sure you've all experienced life getting a little bit better because of our practice. Just a little.

So abandon progress. That's a poison, honestly. It's a poison. Students always get saying, "I'm not progressing" or "Where am I going?" You're not going anywhere. You're standing right here and you're observing process. And in observing process, that is the process of liberation. To see and understand how things have come to arise. That's the Buddhist sentence.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. And that by your devotion to practice, you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Bodhisatta Before Taking Human Birth

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 40 min

Bhante Bodhidhamma begins a contemplative series on the Buddha's life, starting with the period before his final human birth. He explores how the Buddha serves as both archetype and exemplar for practitioners, examining the story of Sumedha's encounter with Dipankara Buddha and what it reveals about our relationship to spiritual authority and surrender.

The talk addresses fundamental questions about how we relate to teachers, the meaning of bowing and humility in practice, and different conceptions of time - circular time versus linear progress versus the timeless present of awareness. Bhante discusses why spiritual development takes so long despite intellectual understanding, emphasizing the deep conditioning that requires patient, sustained practice to overcome.

Drawing on the traditional accounts while acknowledging their archetypal rather than purely historical nature, this dharma talk offers practical insights into developing right attitude toward the path, cultivating inner confidence in our Buddha-nature, and understanding the position of the observer in meditation practice.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhudassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhudassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhudassa

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

There are different traditions for chanting. Next time I'll shut up and just let you get on with it.

I just thought I would take the life of the Buddha and mosey on around it and just see what thoughts arise when we contemplate the life. I suppose there are two things that the Buddha stands for for us. He's both an exemplar and an archetype. I've got a definition here of archetype: it's a primitive mental image in the collective unconscious and a recurrent symbol or motif in mythology. I'm sure that's what it means, but I suppose what I mean by it is some sort of template, some sort of inner image which we have really already within ourselves and which the tradition defines for us in specific ways, so that the specific actions that the Buddha takes during his life become for us examples of how we ought to behave.

That exemplar and archetype really exists in all walks of life, doesn't it? We have an image of the artist, of the academic, of the worker, and so on. So these sorts of background blueprints exist in our minds anyway. And spiritually speaking, we have these great figures which remain for us, exemplars and archetypes of our spiritual lives.

One of the interesting questions which arose really from the way the West discovered the Buddha is that there was a time when they didn't actually think he was a human being. He was a solar deity and the nimbus that was around his head symbolised this origin of being a solar deity. And the reason I bring it up is because if the teaching had come from a solar deity, how would we feel about that? It had been channelled down to Ānanda and he wrote it all down. And what the solar deity is saying is that there's a place where there's no suffering and that he's got there and he's got the t-shirts and it's possible for everybody to make the same place.

But the fact that it's a solar deity does raise a question in the mind, doesn't it? For instance, if you knew that a deva or some great angel being had climbed Mount Everest, and so you knew it was possible by certain beings, but you weren't absolutely certain that the human being could actually make the top. The fact that one person did actually make the top makes it open to everybody. And everybody can make it, if they want to, that is. And I remember some time ago, a seventy-year-old woman climbed up there. So it just shows that once somebody has actually done something in our history, it makes it open to everybody.

Another example of that would be Einstein's theory of relativity. There was a time, if I remember rightly, when Rutherford, who was a scientist I think in Britain, said there were only two people who understood relativity: Einstein and himself. Now it seems to be first degree stuff at universities.

Unfortunately, the image stops there, because even though the Buddha did make it, it doesn't particularly make it that much easier for us that there's been 2,500 years of history of people trying to climb this particular spiritual mountain. However, it does make it tangible that another human being actually achieved a state of non-suffering. And that should give us that inner confidence that we have all the same potential. There's no difference in terms of our faculties and being from the Buddha himself. And that is simply a matter of time. And we'll get there. So that should lift our hearts a bit, I hope. Even in the worst moments of our meditation, when we seem to be wallowing in hell, we should remember that there is always that potential and it lies within us, and hell after all is transient.

This idea of the Buddha being an archetype and an exemplar is something that we begin to internalise. And it's not really important – so this is another question that often arises – as to whether it's historically true, the stories around the Buddha are historically true. The only thing that we can say with, I think, absolute certainty is that there was a person called Gautama who lived approximately 2,500 years ago, lived a life and then died and left the teaching behind. The bare bones of the story, how he was born and how he left home and all that, probably has a basic truth around it, but the stories that are built up around it are, shall we say, apocryphal.

Just to give you an example of how that can happen, even in this modern day and age, there's a famous monk in Sri Lanka – at least he's famous in Sri Lanka. He's a Danish monk and he lives out in the forests. And he lives in what is a three-sided kuti. So there's only three sides to his hut with a roof. So that means that he lives quite happily with snakes, poisonous creatures, poisonous spiders and things like that. And that's his life as an ascetic life. There's two or three of them now that live like that up there.

He would wander down to the local village for his food. And on one occasion when he came back, an elephant jumped out, and he told me he didn't have time to chant the *mettā* sutta, and the elephant ran over him. Unfortunately, he stood on his hip and broke his hip, and he lay there all day, all night, until the villagers thought, why hasn't he arrived? So they went off looking for him and found him on the path. Now, the fact is that that elephant did not mean to kill him. They tell you if an elephant means to kill you, it will definitely kill you. The elephant, it seems, only came out to give him a little shock. But unfortunately, in so doing, went and stood on him and broke his hip.

This story filtered down to Colombo, which is about, I suppose, maybe at the most eighty, one hundred miles away. And I was visiting Colombo at the time, and there was a Swedish monk there. And he said to me, have you heard about so-and-so? And I said, I have. By then, I'd only heard rumours. I said, yeah. I said, this thing about an elephant. He said, oh, yeah. He says, quite remarkable, he said. He was sitting in posture under a tree in meditation and a big she-elephant with a little child came along and they were entranced by him, and the little baby elephant moved towards him and tried to sit in posture, fell over and broke his hip.

So this happens within a couple of months, one hundred miles distance. So this gives you an idea of how apocryphal stories gather around somebody who has a certain reputation about them. But for our purposes, the stories are just there really to enhance the basic template, which is the path that we're on, that's all.

So in the story, of course, the Buddha doesn't begin with the life that he's born into. He's been through these thousands of rebirths. And there's a point when he is an ascetic called Sumedha. Now, you won't be surprised to know that Sumedha was, in fact, a very rich prince who gave everything up when he saw the vanity of life and ended up taking on the ascetic life. He heard about the Buddha, and having heard the name of the Buddha, was greatly moved by it. So he went to meet Dīpaṅkara. And when Dīpaṅkara came, there was a puddle of water. I'm sure you know the story. And he threw his cloak upon the puddle and threw himself down upon the cloak and asked that Dīpaṅkara, the Buddha, and all the Arahats who were following him should use his body as a stepping stone. And when Dīpaṅkara saw this and saw the qualities of Sumedha, he prophesied that this person would indeed become a future Buddha.

So now, you see, we have to consider, is there anybody you know that you would do that to? Throw your coat down, lie in front of them and say, please use my body as a stepping stone? So it brings up this whole relationship that we might have to a teacher and how we relate to the teacher in our spiritual lives.

One of the two things that come to mind are around this word authority. So we say somebody is an authority and we also say somebody is in authority over authority. And these two things are very different relationships, aren't they? So when somebody is in authority over you, it inspires fear, a certain anxiety, because they have power over your life. But an authority is somebody who obviously you respect, and that brings up in you a certain sense of reverence.

However, that split is not so, shall we say, easy. You can't just say, well, I look upon the Buddha as an authority, but he definitely doesn't have any authority over me. There is that, shall we say, point where having respect for somebody, you therefore accept their teachings. You, as it were, surrender to what the person says or what the person is asking us to do. So even these days when we're very sceptical of doctors, once we've, shall we say, had faith in the doctor, once the doctor has prescribed a certain thing, we tend to follow the prescription.

So when we're thinking about our relationship to the Buddha, and indeed to any teacher, there is that reflection to be had as to what my relationship is to this person. At one end, of course, you've got the fawning devotee, the one who goes around kissing the teacher's feet, and whatever the teacher says must be true. So this isn't quite what the Buddha would have wanted, I think. He wants a person to maintain a certain independence. And if you remember, I think it was just before he died, wasn't it, there was a

young monk looking upon him with great admiration while he was there, and he sent him packing off to the forest, didn't he? He didn't particularly want to be surrounded by people with adoring eyes.

And yet the other end, of course, is the continual sceptical follower who doesn't believe a word you say and who won't actually do what you want them to do. So those of you who have been teachers, I know they must have come across these two types of people. So it's a case of, again, recognising that the *Dhamma* that we have is spoken, is passed on to us by another human being. And it has that quality of having been lived, having been experienced.

So sometimes reflecting upon that, reflecting upon the personage or the person of the Buddha, brings about that sense of reverence, that sense of right attitude to the teaching. Then of course there's the whole business of relationships even to our teachers here and now, who we listen to. And that ability to receive and yet not to lose one's own independence, as it were, to receive and to have that attitude of trial and error to make sure that there isn't just that blind acceptance, a blind faith to what's being said or to what we're being asked to do.

So all these things are important in our spiritual life, just to get the attitude right. And these attitudes, remember, are beneath our practice. They're there as certain traits that are subconscious, or should we say subliminal to our practice. And so if you find yourself, for instance, always balking and always not wanting to do things, sometimes ask yourself, what is your basic attitude to the *Dhamma*?

So here we come to this whole business of bowing. So bowing for Westerners is a bit of a pain, really. I remember when I first went to my first classes in Zen, and there they only bow from the waist, of course. And everybody did it, so I mean, I did it, but I thought, oh, this is ridiculous. And it took me quite a long time to get the hang of what bowing was about, actually. I mean, I did it. You do it because, well, because he's doing it.

And in the Zen practice, of course, you bow even to the room you're leaving. You bow to your cushion. You bow to your plate. You bow to your toilet. There's nothing you don't bow to. So in the end, you get the feeling that there may be something in this bowing. And bowing is just a strong body language, isn't it, for surrender, for that ability just to receive without negativity, without aversion. And that connection between the mind and the body.

Remember that the Eightfold Path always begins with right understanding, then right attitude, and then right speech, right action, right livelihood. So somehow the right understanding and the right attitude needs to be expressed in a certain way. So when you feel a resistance, when you feel a resistance against the practice, some form that you don't want to do it, you can't do it, something like that, bow. Just actually try it, just actually, just secretly in your room – you don't have to do it as a public display. And to actually bow and to, when the body is in that posture, it's in that posture of surrender. It's ready to be trod upon and to be used by a higher being as a stepping stone. So that brings about that sense of humility. And in there, that feeling of reverence. I was going to say the word obedience, but that's a horrible word for us. We don't want to be obedient.

So these little stories, when you read about them about the Buddha, if you just let your mind wander about it and just ask yourself, what's its meaning for me? How does it relate to me personally? How can it inform my own practice? And in that way, this archetype, this exemplar is imbibed. It becomes part of our own nature.

The next thing of course is the whole teaching around these rebirths. And at some later date maybe I'll go into the idea of rebirth. What always interests me is this underlying conception of time, how we relate to time itself. So in the Buddha's time, the idea was that time was circular. It was constantly repeating itself. And I think if you just look at just an ordinary year, then you can see how that can be understood. I mean, it's the seasons. And every day the sun rises and it sets and you get up and you go to bed and you're born and you die. And so there's that feeling that, in fact, although everything is, shall we say, a little bit different, the underlying blueprint, the underlying motion is one of constant circularity, constantly going round and round and round.

And if you can just imagine now, if you really believe that, just for one moment put yourself into that mental state of believing that you've lived a life over and over and over again. Sometimes there's a horse or an elephant. Sometimes there's a little being, a mouse, and then a human being. But always you just keep coming back, keep coming back. And it's always birth, old age, sickness, death, a bit of happiness stuck in there somewhere. But this never-ending, ceaseless movement of just going round and round, the same old thing, the same old job, the same old relationships, the same old fallouts, and the same old making it up, and the same old breakfast, and the same old toilet. It's always the same, going round and round.

And you get that feeling, maybe, of that growing despair of how the hell do you get off this wheel? So if you have an image, shall we say, of a roundabout, and you've got your horse, and you're going round and round, and having a good time, and the beer

and all that. And then suddenly, the leg falls off your horse and you've got to get off and put it back on and things fall off and arguments start and people start throwing bottles about and you think, I want to get off. And then when you want to get off this roundabout, all you see around you is this void. Whether you look down or up or across, there's just nothing there. You're just stuck on this roundabout and there's no way off it. And if you were to jump, then you just get sucked back into it.

So if you can imagine that mentality, that was the mentality around the Buddha's time of circularity, of constant repetition, of no escape. And so the idea of escaping this was one of the obsessions of the time. How do you stop this rebirthing? So there were many answers, of course. There were some who believed in...

even at the end of this life, you completely annihilated and that was it. And that the best bet would be to make the best of this life as you can and really go for it. So that sort of thought is well known to us these days. And there were some who thought that you went on for a few rebirths and then you're annihilated after that. And then there were some who thought, well, you did carry on rebirthing, but it got better. And you ended up being a great Brahma up in the high heavens.

These things, of course, the Buddha would have known. He would have known all these arguments, all these ideas. And even so, as you know, through his practice, he came to realize that no matter what beautiful state of mind he could attain, it didn't last. There was still that falling off, that particular level of being, you might say.

Now, as opposed to that, these days, and that's why we find it difficult, perhaps, to accept this idea of rebirthing, is that our idea of time is an arrow. We actually think we're going somewhere. We have this idea of progress. We're going from this place to that place. This is embedded, really, deep within the Judaic Christian religion, but especially in Christianity, where the early Christians for many years presumed that the second coming was about to happen. And the idea of the medieval society was to establish something stable, something which was godlike, ready for this second coming.

As the centuries rolled on, and it didn't quite seem that it was going to happen, there came the idea started off by a monk, writing at the time, who talked about three ages. The age of the Father, which was the age before Christ, the age of the Son, which was the age that we're living in, and the age of the Spirit, which would come in some future time when the human race had progressed to receive it. So there came this idea of progression, the idea that we were going somewhere, the human race was actually going somewhere.

And this has been accentuated in our day and time by technology. It would be foolish to say that technology has not progressed. And we get the impression that just because we have this enormous progression in technology, therefore we must be going somewhere. But unfortunately, when we look around us and see what we're doing with this technology, then that hope begins to fizzle and fade. But even so, we're stuck on this idea that this progress, that we're actually moving towards some sort of aim.

And when we bring that to the Buddha's teaching, then we find the idea of rebirth difficult to accept because we've lost that sense of circularity of time, that constant repetition, the repetitiousness of time within time. And this idea of progress, of course, seeps into our practice. So there is that quality. It's not as though Easterners don't have a sense of progress—people who live still with that sense of circularity, which is, I would say, most Easterners. It's not as though they're not grasping in their practice, but in a sense it's coming from a slightly more superficial level. Within us, I think, we have a much deeper level that we think that there's some sort of progress to be had through the practice.

And what it does is it seeps into our practice as a sense of trying to do something. Trying to do something. So we've been able to do a lot with our technology. So when we come to sit, there's that underlying, I think, understanding or presumption that we can do something. And the idea that actually we don't have to do anything but just watch is difficult for us.

Sometimes when I was in the East, and especially in the villages, it always seemed to me quite remarkable how people could just sit and seemingly stare. They would just stare at things, whether it was a fly going around a window or just the countryside. But when you looked into their face, it wasn't as though the face was dead, but they were just able just to stare. And that ability of just to relax into the present moment and just to be in it without wanting anything from it at all, but just to be completely receptive.

So we find that, I think, a little difficult. And I'm suggesting that maybe it's to do with our conception of time at a deeper level, the idea of progress, that we've made progress, and that it's up to us to do something. And the idea that the whole process of purification of the heart and of insight comes by actually a process of relaxing and just watching, and everything arises quite naturally, is, I think, just a little bit difficult for us.

With these two types of time—the circular time and this arrow, the time as an arrow—there's another time, and this time we can call the immediate presence. In Christian mysticism, they talk of the *nunc stans* and the *nunc fluens*. So there's a now which is in a state of flow and a now which is absolutely still.

Perhaps you've had the impression sometimes on a train where there's another train next to yours, and when one of them moves, you don't know whether you're moving or whether the other train is moving. It just takes that little bit, that little moment to gather the fact that either you are moving or you're not. You might have got the sense sometimes, driving, especially driving, just driving down a motorway, for instance, of instead of you passing through that space, that you were still and the space was passing through you. It's something you can try anyway, so it's only another way of positioning yourself. So suddenly to find within yourself that position where there is that stillness and everything that is arising within our perceptual faculties is what's moving.

Now that presents us with a different idea of time because the idea of circular time and the idea of time moving as an arrow demands that we go with it, demands that we are part of that motion. So now when we sit in meditation and we gain that position at least of the observer, being aware of transience, being aware of things arising and passing away, means that that which is aware of it can't itself be arising and passing away.

And it's sitting in that position which gives us a different feel for time. It's not that time isn't circular or that there isn't some sort of movement. For instance, you can't go back on time. But the fact is that in terms of the actual experience of being in time is only momentary. So this idea of time is just a way that the mind relates the way things have happened in the past.

When we talk about space, what do we mean? We mean simply the relationship of objects, don't we? It's the way all that space is, is a measurement between objects. If there were no objects, there couldn't really be any space. So it's with time. If there were no events, there'd be no time. And our concept of time, circular or arrow, is dependent on how we, the mind, that's it, this particular consciousness, organizes events.

So all memory is past. You can't go back on memory. That's it. It's finished. And the future hasn't happened. So by remembering that, all these concepts that we have of time are simply mind-made. And that if we can find this position within ourselves of observing events arising and passing away, then we find this other position where there's no time.

The other thing that comes up with the idea of rebirth and these constant, such a long time that it takes to become an enlightened being is the question of why it takes so long. Why is it that once we've grasped the teaching, the *anicca dukkha anattā*, everything arises and passes away, we cause our own suffering and there is no self anymore—why isn't that enough? Why isn't that enough for us to move forward rapidly and find ourselves in a week or two fully liberated?

I remember a friend of mine who, when he first heard about Buddhist teaching and Nibbāna and all that, he decided to do a course. And if you think about it, when you go on a course, at the end of the course, you achieve what you get, what you went in for, and you get a certificate. So he presumed that by the end of the week he'd have grasped this idea of nirvana and he'd be away. And he told me, as the week wore on and the time came for him to leave, there was this growing sense of despair and disappointment. Later on he was able to overcome that, of course, and continued his practice.

But the fact that we have this idea or this hope that things might progress very quickly is undermined by our practice. We find it hard, we find it difficult. And surely the reason is that our conditioning is so deeply ingrained and we keep falling back. Every time we progress a little bit, we then fall back a bit. So here we're working very hard for a couple of weeks, a month, a whole year, and then we go out, and before we know it, we slip back into the old ways. And so all the old conditioning gets lighted up again.

So it's a case of recognising that it's going to take quite a time to develop enough momentum to keep moving forward at a pace which seems to us obvious. Often you can only really look back over a good space of time, maybe five, ten years, and say, oh yes, I have progressed. But if you look back over a week, it does seem appalling. I put all this work in and we don't seem to be getting very far.

So it's a case of, again, that sense of realism, really, a sort of humility about ourselves. There was a very famous Hindu saint in Sri Lanka whose saying was, the spiritual life was one step forward, two steps back. So you can see it's even, in all traditions, it's understood to be difficult. And it's a case of building up these *pāramīs*, these virtues within us, and that takes time.

The other question, of course, when we go back to this archetype and exemplar, is the fact that there must be something in us which already knows that it needs to seek liberation. These stories which talk about eons and eons and eons and going back to Dīpaṅkara Buddha many world systems ago, from an archetypal point of view, is suggesting that within us, at all times, there has been that seed that wants to find out its own true nature.

When Buddhism developed through the Mahāyāna, of course, it became known as the embryo of the Buddha. And the embryo of the Buddha, through the practice, through these constant rebirths, finally becomes the Tathāgata. The Tathāgata Garbha, the embryo of the Tathāgata, becomes the Tathāgata. So the idea that there is something in us which is seeking liberation is presumed within the practice.

And this, of course, is in the Buddha's own life, in his growing dissatisfaction with the way he was living. So, in a sense, whether the Buddha had arisen or not, we would have been seeking, we would have been, in our own way, seeking our own liberation.

So that then now brings us to his descent into his mother's womb. And I wonder if I might not have too much time to do this. I suppose the last... The last thing to say before I go on to, because this will take two or three talks to finally get through his life and just see what we can glean from it.

Just to go back on the whole idea of the Buddha being an archetype and an exemplar. The idea that he was an actual human being and that we as human beings therefore have the same capacity to attain exactly what he attained and how that rises in us, that inner faith and confidence about our own practice. So when you have doubts about yourself—everybody else can do it, but I can't. I'm special that way. So remind yourself that, in fact, the capability of becoming fully liberated is there within you. And to ponder that, to ponder that, to really sit within that inner confidence.

The idea of a relationship that we have towards a teacher as an authority or in authority and how those two can become confused and how we must maintain that certain distance within ourselves, that certain capacity to constantly reflect upon our practice and make sure that we know what we're doing.

The idea of time, time being only a figment of the imagination, it's only the way that we look at things, experience things. And that if we can, as it were, stand outside the process, which is exactly what we're doing when we're sitting, standing outside the process. Remember that everything is being created by our own minds, even though the world out there has some reality. The reality that we experience is only being created by our own minds. So to be able to sit back and take that position within ourselves and to watch our minds and to watch the flow of events within our minds immediately pulls us out of this idea that time is circular or that it's going anywhere. That is another position.

And to have the patience to work with it, not to presume that things are going to happen too quickly. So I hope my words have been of some assistance and that before very long you will join the Arahats and become fully liberated.

Bodhisatta's Birth to Renunciation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 46 min

In this exploration of the Buddha's early life, Bhante Bodhidhamma guides us from the Bodhisatta's miraculous birth at Lumbini through his privileged youth to the profound existential crisis that led to the Great Renunciation. Beginning with the practice of spiritual reading (lectio divina), Bhante emphasizes approaching these accounts not as historical facts but as archetypal teachings that speak to our hearts.

The talk examines key themes: the prophecy of Asita revealing the two paths of world-conquering monarch or fully Awakened being (representing our eternal choice between worldly and spiritual pursuits), the significance of birth under the sal trees (highlighting the Buddha's connection to nature), and the early loss of his mother Queen Māyā. Bhante particularly focuses on the Buddha's encounter with the four signs—sickness, old age, death, and the peaceful ascetic—as catalysts for spiritual awakening.

Central to this teaching is the concept of nibbidā, often translated as 'disgust' but better understood as 'world-weariness'—that natural arising of 'enough' when we fully experience pleasure without grasping. Drawing parallels with Camus' Sisyphus, Bhante explores how confronting life's apparent absurdity can awaken genuine spiritual seeking. He offers practical guidance on mindful eating as a way to understand the difference between satisfaction (which increases attachment) and contentment (a quality of the liberated mind).

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhudassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhudassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambuddhasa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I hope you don't draw any meaning from that small hesitation. The mind suddenly stops.

I just wanted to carry on a little bit with the Buddha's life and something I should have actually said in the last talk, but better late than never. The idea of spiritual reading as opposed to the way we would normally read. So we normally read really with an effort to accumulate knowledge, trying to gather information. But spiritual reading for spiritual purposes was developed I think best by the Benedictines. And they had these three methods called Lectio, Meditatio and Contemplatio. So one reads a

book, an inspiring book rather than something like a — say a book by Ajahn Chah or something like that, which is written from the heart rather than an academic book, although even academic books can inspire.

And you read it as if you're reading poetry or listening to music. You're reading along and, of course, it's going in, whatever you're saying. And every so often there'll be a paragraph, a sentence or a phrase which seems to hit, to catch you. And what you do is you keep repeating that until, as it were, you've absorbed it. Like you might listen to a piece of music over and over again or read a poem over and over again. You're not thinking about it. You're allowing the heart to grasp it, you might say, an intuitive feel. And then when you feel you've had enough of that, you just stop still. And maybe some thoughts come around it, some ideas, some thoughts. So you can follow them for a little while and develop them. And then you just drop them and you fall into silence. And then you go to the next passage.

And what you may find is it has an inspiring effect. It makes you want to go and sit, as it were. And it's interesting because it pops out when you're talking every so often. You haven't tried to remember it or anything, but it's there, as it were, more deeply absorbed.

And in a sense, that's the purpose, really, isn't it, of all art, is to allow us to re-experience in our own way what somebody else has experienced. T.S. Eliot called it the objective correlative. Need I explain? What he meant by that, as I understand it anyway, was that I have an experience and I want to pass it on to you. I have to find some symbolic way in which your heart and mind can, as it were, communicate with me or with my mind. So I have an idea, say music, it comes out as a feeling, say joy for a start, as something different. So joy comes up in the heart and I'm a musician and so I want to express that joy and express it through a certain medium. And it's specific culturally, isn't it? Unless you've listened to, say, Chinese or Japanese music or even Indian music, you've got to get into that symbolism, that way of expressing these particular emotions and understandings, music understanding. And that way, we two people can communicate at a deeper level than just an intellectual level. If I say I'm depressed, that's one thing. But if I write a piece of music that makes you depressed, then we have some deeper communication.

So when I'm going through the life of the Buddha here, I'm really just allowing thoughts to arise in that way and just to see what comes up. And often when I go through the same thing, different thoughts come up because other information from somewhere else has come in and other feelings come up. So every time I reread the life of the Buddha, there's always something new comes up for me around it. So this isn't an

academic approach. Whether it's history or myth, it's in a sense immaterial because it lies there within the Buddhist tradition as an archetype, as an exemplar whom we're following. And anyway, I'm not an academic. I'm a would-be academic. So you have to take everything I say with a pinch of salt.

So the first thing is that we got to the point where he was about to be born. And he was born somewhere around 2,300, 2,500 years ago. And when you consider that, the length of time, and you consider how many religious leaders have probably appeared, started something, and then their offering, their teaching has disappeared. One example of that would be, say, the Jains. The Jains, if you look at the ancient maps, were, I think, just about as numerous at some point, maybe even more numerous than Buddhists in India. But somehow they fizzled out and are now down to somewhere around 3 million, which in the population of India is very small. Which doesn't mean that the teachings of the Nagantha were wrong or anything like that, but there's obviously some feeling there of fading out. I mean, it may grow again. But there's lots of little religions, and especially these days, you know, with gurus popping up here and there, and then that sudden rush of interest and it builds up and then it slowly dies away. So when you think that this is a 2,500-year-old tradition, you know, that inspires faith and inspires a certain trust.

So remember that faith in our understanding is not a belief. A belief is putting faith in a statement. So if you were to say, I believe the Buddha was enlightened, you're in great danger of being deluded. There's a difference in believing it, in believing that statement, and in trusting it. And in a sense, we don't know, do we? We don't know what the hell he was talking about until we get there. And when we get there, we don't know whether it's the end. There may be something more. Who knows? So it's a case of trusting, and the trust grows as we practice because we get the benefits of it. And that leads us towards that goal and hopefully we get a peak of it, a little touch of it, and then at that point that faith becomes immovable because now we've had a taste of that end that we're moving towards.

So when we consider that for 2,500 years millions of people have been practicing in this way and have been considering the life of the Buddha, and it's affected them, and cultures have grown around it. One, it's part of the basis of our faith, the fact that it's been such a long and deep tradition, and that it's spread over cultures. So obviously similar to Christianity and Islam, which have been able to go beyond greatly their cultural bounds and move into different cultures, being developed by them in their own way. And so there is, I think, that trust comes with something which has such an ancient history.

So that's something that, you see, in the sense of this meditazione and all that, thinking of that, it raises that feeling of faith. It raises that feeling of trust, you see. And you stay with it. You delight in it, you see. So remember that part of our practice is going through all this hell stuff. But the other part is developing what is beautiful in us. Just when something joyful comes up, don't kick it out. Say, oh, where's all my depressions and anxieties? It's a case of when if you're reading, say, in the library or you're listening to a tape and suddenly you get this lovely piti come up, this joy around the teaching or this interest, you see, then stop the tape, stop the book, you know, and just stay with it, you know, and let the heart absorb it. Don't rush through it, as it were.

That age, of course, just as an aside, was quite an age for human beings because at the same time there was Moses, it was Lao Tzu in China, Socrates. And it's known in the history books as the Axial Age. Something happened in human consciousness. Something moved, something turned. And from that you can say history begins. Written history, the history that we know, actually begins around about that time. History in India begins with the life of the Buddha, frankly. That's when it begins at that time. History in the sense of facts begins.

So anyway, he's born, and being a very advanced being, he's chosen his mother and father, and seems to have chosen rather well. He's a local potentate, and his mother also belongs to a family which is also rich and powerful. He's got the good *kamma* there, you see. And as you know, she wants to go home to have her child, and he's born under these Sala trees on the way. She gives birth in the park at Lumbini.

So this is the theme, isn't it? The Buddha and nature. He's born under a tree, he's given the light under a tree, and he finally dies under a tree. And that connection with nature, something that in our society, obviously, you can lose, especially living in a city. I remember I was once out in a meditation center and this little chick had fallen on the ground. It had fallen out of a nest. And being a townie, I just looked at it and wondered what to do, you see. And I'm looking at this chick thinking, now, what do I do with this, you see? So I went down to pick it up and put it on the wall just in case the cat would take it, you see. And as I bent down to pick it up, it bit at me and I leapt out of my skin. This little tiny little bird's scaring me to hell. So eventually I did finally get it on the wall and I don't know what happened to the little thing. And I was saying afterwards, probably if I'd have found that in the town, I'd have probably stamped on it and put it in the bin. That's how detached you can become from living beings and nature.

So, again, it's a case of just recollecting on those things and what nature means to us. Walking in nature, being close to it, hugging a tree occasionally. How close are we to the ground, to the actual earth that we live on. Do we ever sit and consider how we are ut-

terly dependent on what the earth is giving us in terms of the produce of the ground? The air that we breathe, things like that. The water that we drink. And that understanding of the body being just in this constant change of it's like a double edged fountain with stuff coming in on one aperture and then escaping through all the rest and you get the feeling of the body not being at all static but this flow it's actually in a state of flow it's digesting and giving away and receiving and digesting and giving away so you get this feeling of being a little bit part of that process that we see in nature.

Then, of course, it's a consideration to think about the importance of our parents. So he's chosen these two people. Well, I doubt if we chose the people whom we ended up being born to. And just to recollect what we owe our parents that usually we hold on to the more sticky bad memories that we have of them but when you consider what our parents actually did for us then you come to the conclusion of the Buddha that even if you were to carry your mother and father on your shoulders all your life you would not have repaid them their gift even if they kicked you around a lot. You're still here. You made it. And parents being so much part of our makeup, even the little habits we have, just the way that we do things, we pick up from our mother and father, just that intimacy that we have, especially with our mothers.

And then, of course, his mother dies within a week. So one wonders what effect that might have had on a weak old baby. We know that the intimacy is already there. It's already there in the womb. The child actually knows the mother's voice, the feel of the mother. And having tasted her milk and got close to her, and then suddenly there's a change. There's a change of environment. And although it's her mother's sister, one wonders whether there's how that early child would have been affected by that. Knowing later on what identity crisis he goes through, his existential crisis, sickness, old age and death, there's a suggestion from our own in-depth psychology that this was the beginning of his suffering in terms of that awakening to loss. Never mind the birth process.

So now he's born, and the next thing is, of course, is that he is recognized by the seer, the ascetic. And the ascetic says he's either going to be a world-conquering monarch, or he's going to be fully enlightened, a fully self-enlightened being. This business of the world-conquering monarch is like an alter ego that runs through the scriptures. There's always a picture of this monarch who rules the world out of the Dharma by way of the precepts. And it runs almost, you might say, concurrent with the idea of the Buddha being the fully self-enlightened being. In other words, if he hadn't have chosen that path, this is what he would have done. He would have set his horse loose, this is the way he did it, and followed his horse, and wherever the horse went, he'd have conquered, and eventually the whole world would have been brought under his Dharma rule.

The story about the *Chakravartins* is that finally one of them doesn't keep the precepts and the whole thing begins to collapse. And there's one discourse which is rather interesting from a modern point of view, well, from any point of view, but specifically these days, and that is that poverty is the root of social evil. That's what the particular discourse says. And that's something also that we can think about.

But this idea of the split within us between the worldly life and the spiritual life, see, that stays with us all the way, doesn't it? That stays with us all the way. And there's a not to say that we're going to become world-conquering monarchs, but there's always that pull towards the world, you see. What is the world? It's riches, isn't it? Riches, power, fame and sensual pleasures, you know, the pleasures of life. And so even here, you see, you know, when you're doing your meditation and you get that feeling, really, which is not sustainable from the body's point of view, that you might have a cup of tea and there's no need for it, and then you might say, oh, there's the world-conquering monarch, you see. I have to let go of that. And then I get back onto your seat. So if you consider that there's always that split within us, one of renouncing the world and one of being dragged away into it. And it's just good to see it in these terms.

So here the Buddha has been prophesied that he's going to take the one or the other. So now he's brought up in a very worldly way. So once his father knows that he could shoot off and become an ascetic, he definitely doesn't want that. He wants him to follow him in the family and build up the empire. He surrounds him with pleasures, basically. This is the tale.

But I would have thought that his particular group, the warrior caste, the *Kshatriya* caste, which were the dominant caste in that part of India. As you move towards what is now Bengal, it would have been the Brahmins. But in his part of India, it was definitely the warrior caste, which were the top caste. That's why you'll see him always taking the mickey out of the Brahmins in the scriptures. He always says, well, a true Brahmin does this and does that. He doesn't do this. He never talks about the warrior caste. The true warrior caste is always the Brahmin. So he's knifing occasionally. In, of course, a very compassionate way, I'm suggesting. It's usually, of course, Brahmins that are approaching him when he's talking about Brahmins.

So he's there in his palaces, and we go through this whole business of an identity crisis. So it's very interesting, really, from a point of view of the general growth of our psychology. He's married around about the age of 16. This is the myth, which would have been normal in those days. We know in India you get married pretty soon. And somewhere in his mid-20s, I would have thought, and this happens, I think, to a lot of people. You know, it's the first crisis in life about leaving go, letting go, like youth is

passing. There's something within the person which is saying, actually, let's get serious. So it's usually around about 25 onwards that people get married, they get a job, and they stop being fools. And they think more about what they can get out of society.

And this carries on, doesn't it, until the midlife crisis when you're looking for a bridge to throw yourself off. So it's a case of... In that time of the age of 25, I'm not at all surprised that he suddenly begins to waken up to the reality of life itself having had such a good time for 25 years – sex, drugs and rock and roll.

And this crisis has two parts which is rather interesting. The first part is he's had a – they've had a good old party and there's a disgust comes up. This is the story of Gautama Buddha, and it's the Jataka. It's one of the tales, and it's creative. And it's got some lovely passages. And here it's describing how he woke up after this night, and this is what he saw, you see.

"As the Bodhisattva woke up and sat cross-legged upon the couch, he saw those women" – see these are the women who had been enticing him and dancing, etc., etc. – "who had lain aside their musical instruments and were sleeping, some of them with saliva pouring out of their mouths, some with their bodies wet with saliva, some grinding their teeth, some talking in their sleep, some groaning, some with gaping mouths, and some others with their clothes in disorder, revealing plainly those parts of the body which should be kept concealed for fear of shame. He saw the disorder in which they were and became all the more detached from sensual pleasure. The large terrace of his mansion, magnificently decorated and resembling the abode of Sakka, king of the gods, appeared to him as an existence, seemed to him a house in flames. He made the inspired utterance, 'Alas, this is beset with obstacles, alas, it is constricted,' and his mind was greatly drawn towards renunciation."

Now, unfortunately, it stresses the business of disgust. And to me, that's always been not a very good word. They often talk about, they translate this word *nibbidā*, which also you'll see comes up in one of the sermons. *Vipassanā* knowledge is *nibbidā*. For some reason, they always describe it as a disgust. Now, to me, the word disgust always has an aversion to it, an aversion. But if one were to enter the life, to enter a spiritual life with aversion, then obviously there's some feeling there of pushing away, of not wanting. And that will come back upon you because you have to face that disgust. You have to go beyond disgust.

Sometimes boredom. Sometimes, yes, it's described as boredom. But I think the real word in English is weariness. Weariness. When you've done something often enough which has brought you pleasure, you get weary. You might listen to the same piece of music and get a lot, and then you become weary of it. It's like you've had enough of it.

And one of the things that you might have experienced is, for instance, playing tiddlywinks with a child. I don't know what you call it in the States. It's just flicking little things into a pot. And a three-year-old might come to you and say, "Come and play tiddlywinks." So because you want to communicate and you enjoy being with the three-year-old, they're delightful little beings, you play tiddlywinks. And after a good 10, 15 minutes of tiddlywinks, when all the little things are in the pot, you know, you think it's been a good little game in your way, but the kid's jumping up and down saying, "More, more, more," you see? And suddenly you're saying, "Well, you know, I've got to get on, I've got to do this," because another game would definitely make you feel weary.

So it's a case of, it's that sort of, if you can get the idea of world weariness, like you've had enough, you know, enough of trying to get rich, enough of getting into the rat race, enough of worrying about this, worrying about that. And it's not that you're disgusted with it or angry with it, it's just you've had enough.

I had a friend of mine who told me that he was a bit of a jazz follower. And he went along to this jazz concert. And just the way through it, there just came this sense of weariness. It wasn't a disgust. It was just like, enough of, and that was it. He didn't need it again.

So there's something about staying with a pleasure. Be careful that you don't push pleasure away out of fear, but actually experience the pleasure fully. If, for instance, you've got... I mean, you can try it. I shall be in another country, so you won't be able to sue me. If you have an obsession with something, like food, say you're a chocoholic, something like that, and so take a piece of chocolate and really nibble at it and make every nibble worth its salt. Actually completely taste it, let it drip around your tongue, slap it around the mouth. Do all your sorts, do everything you can to get the fullness out of that. And you may find that after one piece, you've actually had enough. Because normally speaking, you're feeding into something else when we're obsessed with something, when we're addicted to something. You're trying to feed something else. And when you see how horrible chocolate can be, then one becomes weary of chocolate.

Just as I always remember, slightly to a slight point, but you know during student days one tends to drink a bit. And I remember going through this period just getting absolutely paralytic. I don't think you have this syndrome in the United States so much, but in Britain we have what's called binge drinking. And you just go, you just drink. You just drink, drink, drink until you drop. And it seemed, I know the people on the continent seem to be getting into it now, so it's not a very good thing. But I remember waking

up, literally I woke up in the gutter. I woke up in the early morning and my head was in the gutter. My body was laying on the pavement and my head was in the gutter. And I woke up and turned over and I thought, "Oh my God, this is terrible."

And I got up and this throbbing head and all that and feeling sick. And the closest place to me was a graveyard. So I entered into the graveyard and lay, because I was feeling so bad, I lay on top of this grave. And it slowly dawned upon me that the suffering that I was getting from the pleasure wasn't worth it. It wasn't worth getting that drunk. So I set myself this task that the next time I'd get tipsy, but I wouldn't go over the top. And to my surprise, I really enjoyed myself. And so I came off all that binge drinking and still have a decent liver.

So you can see it's... Sometimes there's a lovely little poem from Blake which I was trying to find, but I just can't get it. He says it so beautifully, that the road to salvation is often through the road of excess. In other words, you get to this point where you've just saturated yourself so much with this stuff that you just don't want it anymore. You're over-weary with it.

So when it comes to pleasure, you see, here especially, make it a real exercise in food to really get in contact with what is pleasure. Get in contact with the tongue. When you approach the food, get in contact with the body. There's hunger there. This hunger is mixed in. It's both a natural appetite coming from the body, but there's greed there. There's a seeking of happiness in food, a seeking of relief. I mean, after that sit, you really want to have some happiness. So there's this seeking of happiness in the food, and that's greed.

And as you approach the table, you see, and you put the food on your plate, just be aware of how much you're putting and be aware of the feelings and the contact you're making with the food and the way the mouth is salivating and all that. And remind yourself you can always go for seconds. So then when you eat and you're sitting in front of the plate, just wait. Get in contact with the body and just feel that magnet. You want to become... You want to become the... What is it? Ghetto, ghetto we had today. We want to become that food.

And then, you know, mindfully making that intention, you see, and lifting, lifting up, scooping, lifting. And then as that food touches the tongue, you get this amazing explosion of delight, you see. Now stay with that, stay with that at that physical level, you see, and make that very clear to yourself. This is taste, this is the physicality, the basic ground upon which all my happiness rests. There's two inches of skin on top of the tongue. At this moment, my happiness is dependent on that.

So, and I'm chewing, I'm feeling the texture of it, and I'm actually feeling, we're actually feeling the sensations of pleasure. See, what is pleasure? That's the question. What is pleasure? It's not a question of trying to describe it, but of a direct experience of the tongue in delight. And then when that's really, really clear in your mind, as it were, and you've penetrated it, you might take a few bites, as it were, sometimes, or even at the beginning, it depends, you know, it depends how you want to tackle this.

You can come away a little bit and you can see that it's surrounded with this joy. See? And that's the mind. That's the heart. It's delighted in this food. And then if you stay off it like that, you see, especially if you just leave the fork on the table there and just stay there looking at the food. You can see that there is this desire for the sensual pleasure. There is this desire to eat more. And somehow what was being satisfied when we were eating now becomes like a magnet, like a drawer. Like sucking you into the plate.

And if you can just stay with that, and all we're doing is we're just investigating. Because remember, part of it is natural. Part of it is appetite. You've got to eat. And just stay with it. And then as you keep eating, and investigating these three qualities, the basic sensual stimuli that are coming into the brain and which the mind is working with to produce an idea, spaghetti, lettuce. What are the sensations it comes up with when it says spaghetti, lettuce?

So then, and you're aware of the delight. That's to be had. Delight in food, there's nothing unskillful about that. The heart should respond with delight to things. But there is that something twisting it, something putting a kink in it of that consciousness wanting to seek delight, to somehow identify with it, to grasp it, to attach to it, and you might be able to feel it with as a sort of magnet as a draw it sucked and if we keep eating like that very at some point we get this beginning to get these really clear signals from the body enough you see enough now you can't always trust that because if you have some emotion in the body like you feel a bit anxious or something then it's tight and it doesn't take all that much food but.

Let's say, just generally speaking, you are relaxed, you're in a decent mood. So the body begins to give you these signals, "Enough, enough," you see. Now normally we override that and just go for the cream cake. But here, because we're strictly doing our meditation, we hang on in there, you see, and we feel the override more deeply. More. See? And you hang on in there. You wait, you wait, you wait, you wait, you wait, you wait, and wait right to the very end of that. Right to the very end.

Now, what we want to make a distinction between is the satisfaction, to use that word, the satisfaction of eating something fulfilling desire. The satisfaction, which, remember, increases our attachment, increases our desire, and after a little while we

want more, more, more. So that's satisfaction. And call it contentment, which is when the mind is not in a state of desire. And it's to taste those two as something quite separate experiences, and to know that contentment is a figure of the nirvanic mind.

One of the qualities of the unconditioned mind is that there is no desire. So we can experience that by watching right to the end point when the desire just goes out right at the end. Like a light on a wick, it just goes and it's out. And then just catch that peace in the mind and that contentment.

When the Buddha is asked, when the Buddha, somebody complains to him, as a deva complains and says, "Look, this training is very hard." He says, "Well, it is." He says, "But people do it and they attain liberation. And *Nibbāna*." And he says, "*Nibbāna*, yeah, but so what?" And he says, "Well, when you get liberated, you are contented and with it happy. *Tutti sukha vahati*. You are contented and with it happy." So he's describing to this person his state of mind. He's contented and with it happy. That's the state of his heart, at peace, contented, happy.

Now we can begin to taste that in these moments when especially desire has been very strong and we just watch it, feel it just dying away because we're not feeding it. And of course the added benefit of that is that we get over our obsession with food.

The next thing, of course, that moves him are what's known as the four signs, sometimes the three signs. So you remember the story, he's out hunting three times, he comes across a very sick person, a very old, bent-over person, and a corpse. And in some stories, an ascetic sitting under a tree, in which case there's that hope. Maybe there's a way out of this suffering.

So here, he's entering into what we would call these days an identity crisis, some sort of existential crisis, a sort of feeling of the absurd. If you say to yourself, "At the end of this life, there is complete disappearance, there's complete annihilation, that's it," you're stuck with this terrible fact that we're conscious and we're suffering. So why, you know, the idea of suffering becomes absurd. It becomes ridiculous. It becomes unreasonable, absurd, beyond reason.

And I thought to bring along this, the myth of Sisyphus, whom some of you might know. Sisyphus is, well, it just says he was going back to ancient Greek mythology, so he promoted navigation and commerce but was avaricious and deceitful. He killed travelers and wayfarers and from Homer onwards Sisyphus was famed as the craftiest of men. When Thanatos, Mara, the king of death, came to fetch him, Sisyphus put him in fetters so that no one died till Ares came and freed Thanatos and delivered Sisyphus to his custody.

But Sisyphus was not yet at the end of his resources. For before he died, he told his wife that when he was gone, she was not to offer the usual sacrifice to the dead. So, in the underworld, he complained that his wife was neglecting her duty, and he persuaded Hades to allow him to go back to the upper world and expostulate with her. But when he got back to Corinth, he positively refused to return, until forcibly carried off by Hermes. It's a lovely story. And of course, finally, he has to go to hell. He's in hell, you see, because he's been a bad boy.

And his job is to roll a boulder up a hill. And when it gets to the top, it rolls back down. And so he's got to roll it back up. That's his job for eternity. For eternity. And Albert Camus, who was one of my favorite... Well, he was, yeah. He was one of my, a French existentialist writer, actually wrote a book called *Sisyphus*, in which this became a motif for the absurdity of life.

If you really, really believe all there is, is annihilation, why get up in the morning to roll that boulder up the hill, and go to sleep, and then let it roll down again, and the next morning you're going to roll it back up the hill? And when he was absolutely at one with this idea of the absurdity of suffering, which I think the existentialists understood very well, they definitely understood the first noble truth, he said that the only dignified way to approach this problem was to commit suicide. That was his answer. Luckily, he did not have to follow his own thought too much because he sadly died in a car crash.

In 1956 he didn't have to take his logic into action, you might say. So this idea of death, especially death, the whole process of dying, of illness, of growing old and then dying—unless there is some understanding, then you have to really face the whole thing of annihilation.

In last week when I was answering a question about afterlife and rebirth and all that sort of stuff, one thing I like to say is that in terms of the Buddhist teaching, the people who don't believe anything's going to happen when they die are, in my estimation, much closer to becoming liberated than the people who are. For the simple reason that when we believe something is going to go on, it comforts us. The self feels comfort in the fact that, oh, when I die, I shall be born. I'll be happy if I'm born a rat, as long as I'm born, as long as I keep going, this I. And so there's never facing the collapse of the self, which happens at death. I mean, that's supposed to happen.

And even, I think, Muhammad said, "You have to die before you die." You have to die before you die. And I think even Christ put it in some way. "Unless you are born again"—he put it in a more positive way—"you will not enter into the kingdom of heav-

en." You will not be born again. So there's something about facing the horror of that point of complete loss of self, which is death, which is part of the process of our liberation.

And he was so shook by this that, of course, he decided to leave home.

So in your meditation, when these fears come up, you see, these fears of sickness, old age, and death, go into them. They've come as messengers from the gods. They're there to awaken us. And remember that it's all delusion. It's all symbolic in the mind. You have to, as it were, remember, always go beneath the thought, beneath the image, to the viscera, to the actual mental state that's driving it. You have to go into that fear, feel it, get accustomed to it, get comfortable with fear and really allow it to express itself.

Because this fear, remember, is always generated out of that delusion of self. And as we become accustomed to fear, that's Māra. That's the expression of our fear, expression of our delusion. So as we become accustomed to fear, then of course the sense of self is disappearing. The sense of self manifests through these negative states. But as we become accustomed to them, we see them. If you remember Māra, when he attacked the Buddha every so often, Māra had to slink away because the Buddha saw him.

Seeing, feeling those emotions, burying ourselves in them, seeing them even going beyond the idea of an emotion, beyond the idea of a feeling, to the constituents themselves—you know, like the feeling of sickness, the feeling of tightness, the nausea, getting right down to the physical level, and in so doing, it's a process of depersonalising. You are depersonalising the process. And that, of course, eventually relieves us, and hopefully we can stay steady in fear. So once we've lost our fear of fear, what is to frighten us?

And I shall quote your own very great president, Roosevelt, who said, "What are we to fear but fear?" I think I've correctly...

So I'd like to bring our little talk to an end there and I'm going to in one of the times anyway, I want to do an exercise rather than give a talk on looking at the body, an exercise of looking at our relationship to the body, our feelings of disgust with the body and all that. These are exercises that come out of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse. And then to move it just towards the end, towards a little new age input of healing. And I'll tell you when I'm doing it, so if you're not particularly attracted to that, you needn't come.

Because somehow we have to find a way of making this deeply meaningful to us in ourselves, rather than it just being stories, as it were. So I can only hope that my words have been of some assistance to you and I can only hope that even by the end of this course you will be fully liberated.

Bodhisatta's Training to the Awakening

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 59 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma traces the Bodhisatta's path from leaving palace life through his crucial spiritual training. The talk begins with the great renunciation, distinguishing between mere boredom and genuine spiritual dispassion that arises when one truly has "had enough" of sensual pleasures.

The discussion moves through Siddhattha's training with two yoga teachers - Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta - examining why jhāna states, despite their blissful nature, ultimately failed to solve the fundamental problem of suffering. Bhante explains how these absorption states create temporary refuge but don't eliminate the underlying saṅkhāras that cause dukkha.

The narrative then explores the Bodhisatta's turn to severe asceticism and self-mortification, practices aimed at controlling the body to liberate the mind. After nearly starving himself to death, the crucial memory arises of a childhood state of natural awareness - what we might recognize as satipaṭṭhāna - characterized by open, absorbed attention without the grasping quality of jhāna practice.

The dramatic climax describes Mara's assault through the classical account from the Jātaka literature, interpreted as the final resistance of selfing before the breakthrough. The talk concludes with the three foundational discourses: the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta establishing the Four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path, the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta on not-self, and the Āditta-pariyāya Sutta on the burning of all experience. Bhante emphasizes the importance of religious emotion and devotion as supports for practice, encouraging appreciation for the magnitude of the Buddha's achievement.

**Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato
Sammāsambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa**
Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So for those of you who have just joined us, I've been using the story of the Buddha as a platform to talk about the Dhamma. The first talk was about him before he was born, in his previous lives, and we talked about it all the way up to the point where he was leaving home.

There's one thing I wanted to revise from the part of the great renunciation. Remember what threw him out of the good life was getting fed up with pleasure, and there was a thought that occurred to me that we often get confused between boredom and dispassion or disenchantment—a spiritual state. It occurs to me that the real difference is this: when we get bored with something and then go on a diet or a fast, after not too long a time, we get the craving come back up again for the same old thing. So that's not the feeling of disinterest that comes when a part of us has truly had enough of something. So even though it's placed before us and time has passed, there's nothing drawing us to that old pleasure, and that would definitely suggest that it's a movement in the heart moving away from the sensual life.

When we refer back to the disgust he felt after the party when they're all hanging about looking terrible, if we stress the disgust I think we're slightly off the point. It was the fact that there was no drawing towards it again. There was no pleasure to be had there, no happiness to be had there. And on top of that, remember there were the four signs, the messengers of the gods: the sick, the very aged person, the corpse, and the person sitting under a tree in some of the stories.

And then he makes the great renunciation. He leaves. I don't know whether I said this last time, but there's that lovely little bit where he peeps in and sees his newly born son with his wife. And he doesn't go towards them because that would again bring up all his doubts. And that gives a human touch to what seems to be like desertion. But he was just empowered to go. There are many times when people are called away from the family life in war and such. In fact, when I was thinking about this, I remembered somewhere in the 80s, the British government decided to position American missiles in Greenham Common, and there was a huge uproar about that from a certain section of the population. It was taken over by women. It became an encampment for women, and I remember for two years some of them were there. I remember this one woman being interviewed, and she'd left a family, a young family. Not very young—they were 10, 12, 13. So there are times when things are even more important than our families.

So for the Buddha, or the Bodhisattva as he was then, there's that drawing. And there may be times in our lives when we get that feeling of wanting to go deeper into the practice. So we have to honor that as best we can.

When I was in Sri Lanka there was a young girl who would tell her father that in the evening whenever he went to bed, she would go up to the *dāgaba*. And in the *dāgaba* there were shrines where the Buddha and other hats would appear and get teaching,

and she got that and wrote the story. The Buddha, she actually was collecting notes for a book on the Buddha. And the father would humor her, and she was eight, nine, ten—I think it was ten when she came to our monastery.

She got fed up with her parents not believing her. So one night she said to them, "I'm off now." And right there before their very eyes, she rose up and disappeared. The father and mother then thought, "This is very strange." So when she reappeared, they went visiting monasteries with her and ended up at Kanduboda. I wasn't there for the interview, but I heard the little cassette that they made of the interview. She said exactly what I said to you. She wouldn't bow to monks because she was an Arahant. When they asked her about what meditation was, she seemed to know what it was. There was no problem there. She said she'd come down really to look after her grandfather—that's why she'd taken rebirth.

But the reason I mention it is that in this book she was writing, the Buddha turned back six times before he finally made the decision to cross the Rubicon and make the big detachment. So this is where, when you read the scriptures, you always get this coming in of what we might call the supernatural, that which is above what we would consider to be nature. These days we tend to poo-poo all that, but unfortunately it is right there within the scriptures. So that's just to contemplate that the spiritual life does ask us to renounce things that we truly love. It can be very difficult, but once that seed is within you, once you know you've got to go, then you've got to go.

So now he's left and he's cut his hair off and his horse has died from sheer grief. Poor old Kantaka. He's put on the rag robes and he goes off to his first two teachers, two yoga teachers: Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. Remember that his big quest is: is there an end to suffering? Is there an end to unsatisfactoriness? Is there an answer to the reason why we're conscious and why we should be suffering because we're conscious?

Both of these trained him in what we now call the *jhānas*. The first person, Āḷāra Kālāma, took him up to the third *arūpajhāna*, and Uddaka Rāmaputta took him to the end. So he did the four *rūpajhānas* and the four *arūpajhānas*. On both occasions, they were so taken by his adeptness at entering and re-entering these *jhānas* that they both said that he was their equal and would he come and teach with them. On both occasions, he says no. It doesn't really answer his problem.

So what is it about the *jhānas* that doesn't answer the problem of suffering? Remember that when we practice *jhāna*—and it's becoming more fashionable. When I came into Buddhism, it was no-no. You didn't do things like that. The Zen school that I

was in called it "ghetto Zen," bad Zen. And everybody else from Ajahn Sumedho right through to the Mahasi tradition put you off it. But these days it's coming in with, I think, the work of Leigh Brasington and especially perhaps Pa Auk.

So what is it about the *jhānas* which make some schools avoid it? It's because, remember, that the *jhānas* are about creating a state of mind, just as we do when we see a good film or have a good meal. You're trying to create a beautiful environment within ourselves. That's what it's about, because that's where the pain is. That's where the suffering is. It's inside us. So we seek pleasure often. We seek distraction often in order just to get away from the pain inside us. Even here in our meditation we might find ourselves walking just because we don't want to sit anymore—it's too painful. So even little small things can be little distractions for us.

The *jhānas* are just developing a state of mind and there are many ways that you can do it. Why is it that it can be such a path which can take you away from the practice? That's because when a person is truly adept at the *jhānas*, when they can just turn it on, it stays with them all day. It's not that they go into that deep absorption, but the mental state stays with them all day. So the teacher of *jhāna* knows when the student is becoming adept, when even if you were to pull their ears and box them around the nose, they're still very happy. They're not touched by it because their heart's gleaming with happiness and joy. It's that telltale sign that the mind, now the *citta*, or perhaps just the heart and mind, are being lifted up to that level.

People in ordinary daily life might do that on a slightly different level. For instance, somebody who is tremendously interested in what they're doing. So their lives are empowered by that interest or empowered by being in power. Or business people who have this goal and are driving themselves towards it can usually often just lift themselves to that level of energy and commitment whereby they never drop until, of course, the business fails. And then they drop. That really is the point of the *jhānas*.

So when the *jhānas* go down, then what comes up is the same old Siddhartha Gautama. That's what he discovered: that while he was in this state and could maintain it, actually he hadn't rooted out some of his emotional problems. Deeply he could see that when you come out of that, then you're back to where you were.

So with that disappointment—I mean it must have been disappointing for him, we can presume that as a layperson in the palace that he had explored all these things both theoretically with the Brahmins and people like that, and that now he was into the practice and that this was the practice that everybody was saying, "This is where it's at."

And the idea, remember, of the *jhāna* wasn't simply to feel happy now; it was that when you're reborn you get reborn in the *jhāna* realms, and they last for eons upon eons, endless times.

So the idea is that as you go up the *jhāna* scale, you enter into the lower heavenly realms, then into the *arūpa* realms, and finally into the great big brahma realms, where you can hang about for a heck of a long time. But then it drops, but because of your good *kamma*, you probably only drop to being a human being, where you do the *jhānas* again, rev them up, and you go back up again. So in terms of, if you remember the way that people would think in those days of this constant round of birth and rebirth, at least that seemed to be a viable answer. It was much happier up there in those realms than it is in this one.

Anyway, he's disappointed with that and the next thing he does is he goes off to practice these mortifications. Now, I've never been able to really find what was the understanding behind the mortifications. I've tried to look at it, but the only reason I can think of, which is really taken also from the Christian tradition, is that the reason why we're unhappy is because of the body. It's the body that lets in images. It's the body that has greed. It's the body that has lust. We feel it in the body. So if we can somehow control the body, then this would liberate the mind.

So all these things that the Buddha did—he said he starved himself. He was down to a grain of oats or something every day. He got to the point where he could hold his spine through his stomach. That very fierce asceticism, really I think was based on that understanding that if you reduce the appetite to the body, then somehow the mind is liberated, the *citta* is liberated.

Now for those of you—I'm sure all of you—have done a 10-day fast or longer, a month fast, you'll know that the first three days are absolutely horrible while the body's clearing out its rubbish. But then after that, you do enter into this very clear, very easy state. And no feelings of hunger because the body's eating itself. So, in that clarity, it's much easier to do certain practices. I've always presumed that that's what self-mortification is about.

Interestingly enough, the whole practice, if you look at the words, is actually about self-mortification, about the destruction of self. But here we're using it in that old form of controlling the body. But for whatever reasons there were—and remember that some of them came from the other leader who was a contemporary elder of the Buddha, the Jain leader, who was definitely into these sorts of things. His idea rested on *kamma*. His idea was that as soon as you do an action, you're creating more *saṅkhāras*.

So you've got to stop doing. You've got to stop doing. So eventually the Jain saint starves themselves to death. That's the Jain way of doing things. There's a presumption that the Buddha followed that a little bit just to find out what all that was about.

But eventually, as you know, he ends up being very disconsolate and he just says it was just painful, that's all. He didn't seem to achieve anything at all.

So now we can imagine him coming to a point of despair. He's taken everything that the society has given him in his search and it just seems to have come to a dead end. In the story, he's sitting on the roadside when a woman, Sujātā, comes along with a bowl of offering for the gods. She's going towards the shrine, and she sees him. The scriptures are, you know, these apocryphal tales will be what they are. She sees a *deva* sitting by the road, and she honors him. But, frankly, he must have looked pretty ragged and pretty awful. As she's walking by, she must have thought, "Oh, this poor ascetic probably needs my rice pudding."

So she offers this rice pudding and somebody actually corrected me and said that that was a British Raj invention. That is, there was no rice pudding. What there was, was a rice cake, which they have in Sri Lanka called *kiribat*. It's basically rice boiled in coconut milk, which is then boiled out and it's patted out and it's made a little block. Now if I had a choice, if I was in the Buddha's position there and had a choice, I'd definitely go for the British variety. The reason for that isn't just facetious.

It's because as he's eating this, or at some point close to that time, he remembers this point in childhood. What he remembers is watching his father opening up the plowing season by doing some sort of plowing ceremony. There's something about that watching, there's something about the way he's looking which gives him an inspiration. Somehow he remembers being in a state, to use that word, which is different in quality to all the *jhānas* he's done and all the states that might have come up when he was doing the self-mortification.

I was walking through Birmingham Station in Britain and as I was going up the escalator to the shopping mall, there was a great big poster up there with different pictures on it. There was one picture which, as soon as I saw it, I almost shouted with glee. And before they took me away, I was able to take a picture. This little picture is what I call Satipanya. I think it's the closest thing I've seen as an image to that state of mind which arises, shall we say, either just before or just upon the seeing.

This little baby—you see, all those eyes are completely open, completely absorbed in what... Well, you can't tell it's a she or he. That's the other thing about Satipanya—it's not been diversified. And the mouth has dropped. Now, that relaxed jaw is a great sign

to us that the thinking mind has stopped, because the connection between the tongue and the jaw is intimate. You may have seen that when you're thinking, there are these little vibrations on the tongue. It's already ready to move.

As children, we have that very simple capacity, especially until around about the age of six or seven, of just being able to look. I'm sure you had the bad experiences I had of having looked like that and your parents tell you to shut your mouth because you look gormless. And after that, you never look the same, which is very unfortunate.

So if you ever see a child looking like that, you have to stop very still while the child's absorbed it. And if you see a child doing that, there's a moment of complete silence, you see, and then suddenly the question, "What is it?" But it has to be absorbed first.

So, this quality of *satipaññā*. Now, in the *jhānas*, there's *sati*, awareness. In fact, I mean, right awareness. Well, it's awareness, shall we say. Awareness never leaves us. It's there when we're asleep. I mean, something turns us over. Something pulls the blanket over us when we're cold. So, it's not as though awareness goes or disappears completely. It's always there in some way.

And when somebody practises *jhāna*, awareness is there, that's not the problem, you see. But it's this other quality that was missing, this *paññā*, this *jñāna*, this intuitive intelligence, that question mark. And that question mark is talked about in Zen as the great doubt. Not meaning that you're doubting the practice, but that wanting to know. Hmm?

So that's what he remembers. That's what he remembers. So now, this brings also to mind the importance of food. So keep that in mind.

So now, having made a discovery and really sort of enlivened by that, now he's got a new tack, a new something to follow. He goes to find this place near the river Nerañjana where he's going to find a place to sit. And again, one of these lovely little apocryphal stories, he puts his bowl into the river and it goes upwards. And it goes against the flow.

And for those of you who come to my little morning tip, I pointed out that I once got a card which had a dead fish flowing in the river and the title was "Only dead fish go with the flow." So if you think of this magical moment which is representative of the fact that the Dhamma will always go against our conditioning, the self-conditioning. So it's always an uphill struggle, right? Much less, you don't want to fight it. But you've got to go up, you've got to go against the conditioning all the time. And I'll try and spend a bit of time on one of these talks, just revising some of the hindrances.

So now he's found himself a seat and he makes this wonderful great determination. And in the scriptures it's "Let my skin, bones and sinews remain and only and let the flesh and blood in my body dry up but not until I attain the supreme enlightenment will I give up this seat of meditation." Have you tried that? You can give it a go. It's sort of humiliating, but it's worth doing it. Because then you see that to be able to make that sort of determination, he's really built up that determination and power. I mean, resolution, forbearance, and all that sort of stuff. And in fact, you might say that he's come to a point where either he finds the answer to this, or he may as well not hang about. He may as well die. What's the point?

So at this point, of course, he gets the attack of Māra. And this book is "The Story of Gautama Buddha." It's from the Nidāna, the Jātakas. And I thought I'd read out this lovely battle so that you get the way that these stories build up in that sort of metaphysical, that supernatural way. So we've lost a lot of this in our over-rational culture, but it's a lovely scene.

So Māra has come. He's a *devaputra*. He's the son of the gods. He's not a devil from the hellish realm. He's somebody who entices people. It's like the Satan in Islam. When Ayatollah Khomeini called America Satan, he wasn't thinking of it as an evil, as a Christian devil. He was thinking of it as that which entices you away from the way of Allah.

So now he's come with all his armies, you see. And he's about now, he's really wound up and he's going to attack the Buddha and get him off the seat because he shouldn't be there. Māra should be there. The world is about the sensual world. It's not about getting enlightened. He's in the wrong seat.

"So then the devaputra Māra raised a tornado wishing to drive away Siddhartha with it. Instantaneously such gales rose from the east and other directions as would have shattered to bits mountain peaks of the height of half a yojana, two yojana or three yojana and could have uprooted shrubs and trees of the forest and could have reduced to fragments the villages and townships of the neighbourhood, but by the virtue and majesty of the great being they lost their force and on reaching the Bodhisattva they were not able to shake even the hem of his robe.

"Wishing to engulf him in water and slay him, he next caused a heavy downpour of rain. By his great miraculous power, clouds gathered in hundreds of thousands, layer upon layer, and poured forth rain. The earth was hollowed out by the violence of the torrential downpour. A great flood came, submerging the treetops of the forest, but it could not moisten his robe, even to the extent of the little space on which a dewdrop could fall.

"Next he raised a great shower of rocks. Large mountain peaks came swirling through the air, issuing smoke and flames. But on reaching the Bodhisattva, they turned into wreaths of heavenly garlands.

"Next he raised a storm of missiles. Swords, daggers, darts and other weapons, single-edged and double-edged, came hurtling through the sky, smoking and flaming. But on reaching the Bodhisattva, they turned into heavenly flowers.

"Next he raised a shower of burning coals, embers of the hue of kimsuka flowers came flying through the sky and were scattered at the feet of the Bodhisattva, turning into heavenly flowers.

"Next he raised a storm of ashes, red-hot ashes, glowing like fire, came flying through the air, fell at the feet of the Bodhisattva and turned into sandalwood powder.

"Next he raised a sandstorm. Fine particles of sand came smoking and flaming through the sky, fell at the feet of the Bodhisattva and turned into heavenly flowers.

"Next he raised a storm of mud. The mud came smoking and flaming through the air, fell at the feet of the Bodhisattva and turned into heavenly ointments.

"He next created a gloom which was as thick as when four conditions are found in combination. And on reaching the Bodhisattva, it disappeared as darkness that vanishes with the oncoming radiance of the sun."

It's lovely stuff, huh? And it's sort of literature, I suppose. You can call it literature. And eventually, of course, he won't budge. And so Māra then approaches him, you see, and he asks him this question.

Well let me just read it. "So now remember all this is being watched by the deities on the ridge of the universe. This is a square universe. Continually raised their heads and craning their necks looked out saying, 'Alas ruined indeed is the handsome physical frame of Prince Siddhartha, what will he do?'

"Then the great being told Māra as he stood there claiming the throne accruing on the day of their enlightenment to Bodhisattvas who fulfilled their perfections: 'Māra, who will testify to your having given away in charity?'

"Māra stretched forth his hand in the direction of his army, saying, 'All these are my witnesses.'

"Instantaneously, the cry of one accord, 'I am witness, I am his witness,' coming from the followers of Māra, resounding like an earthquake.

"Then said Māra to the great being, 'Siddhartha, who will testify to your having given in charity?'

"And the great being answered, 'You have sentient beings as witnesses to your having given away in charity, but in this place I have no living being whatever to be my witness. Let alone the generosity I have practised in all other existences, let this great and solid earth, non-sentient as it is, be my witness to the seven hundredfold great alms I gave when I was born as Vessantara.'

"And extricating his right arm from underneath the folds of his robe, he stretched it out towards the earth, saying, 'Are you or are you not witness of my having given the seven hundredfold alms in my birth as Vessantara?'

"And the great earth resounded with a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand echoes, as though to overwhelm the forces of Māra, and saying as it were, 'I was your witness to it then.'

"Then as the great being continued to reflect on the alms he had given to Vessantara, saying to himself, 'Oh Siddhartha, you have given away vast charities and made the highest sacrifice,' the elephant Girimekhalā, which is Māra's elephant, which was 150 yojanas in height, went down on its knees. And the followers of Māra fled in every direction. No two fled the same path, and they ran in whichever direction that lay before them, discarding their head ornaments and the clothes they were wearing."

So that's the great attack of Māra, put in a metaphorical way. And of course, those are the hindrances coming. Those are the final shaking of the self, which doesn't want to come off. And at root, it's fear, isn't it? When you get right down to the root emotion of delusion, it's fear. The fear of the loss of this idea of who I am. And that's what it's really portraying. Trying to get across that. If you just hold your ground, it disappears. It turns. It changes. It just turns into its opposite.

And what keeps him there, what keeps him able to resist the attack is, of course, his perfections. Here, of course, it's the charity. But in our meditation, it's that ability to stand and to observe those reactions that we get when fear arises and to be with it and to allow it to just be there and to get accustomed to fear. And if we can begin to lose our fear of fear, well, nothing can frighten us. But it's that ability to stand still you see. So even though this is a mythological way, it's a lovely sort of way of portraying what must be the sort of final death throes of the self, that moment when it just disappears.

So I'll try and do a bit more of that, go a bit more deeply into the hindrances another time. But I want to just move on to what happens then. He, of course, is moving towards the Enlightenment now. And one of the things that I suppose has always been a little disappointing for me...

Because having been brought up in something like Catholicism, which in my experience was a happy religion. It doesn't go for everybody who is a Catholic. But also Christians and in the Judaic tradition too, there is this sense of jubilation, this sense of rejoicing and blowing horns and music. And when you remember this lovely music, say, of Bach's Hallelujah Chorus or Handel's Messiah, you see, and it sort of lifts you, you see.

Well, I always remember Buddha Day. Now, Buddha Day is, you know, the big, it's the big one. It's celebrating the founder, you know. Everything that, even this place is all, this place here now is totally a root dependent on this being that existed 2,500 years ago. And so one wants to blow horns and whoop a bit, you know.

So on these lovely Buddha days, especially, you know, I'm thinking more, well, it's the same everywhere, but I remember at Kanduboda where I was at most of the time, the only difference between Buddha day and everything else was you lined up a bit earlier for food because there was more stuff around. And that was it. And then there were these terrible talks and then you went away. And that was it.

And I want to read out just one more last piece, which at least shows you that in the literature there is this *mudita*, there is this wonderful sense of rejoicing at this great act.

And I remember I was visiting a very famous monk, he's died now, Ajahn Tate, who used to live on the Thai, right up on the Mekong River there, right up at the top of North Thailand. And they were building this meditation hall. I slept in it, actually. And on the wall, this artist was drawing a depiction of the Enlightenment and a more glorious picture you couldn't have come across. I mean, it was just full of action. It was like an exploding star with these beautiful colours. In a sense, sometimes we forget that. We forget that actually there's a point where you can actually rejoice and be happy and sort of have a feast.

So here, just before he becomes enlightened, you see, so now the gods know that Māra has been completely routed and the path is completely open for the Bodhisattva. So the signs go up from one realm to another realm and the whole of the thousand world system is now a gleam, you see.

"So the radiance of the banners and streamers hoisted on the eastern ridge of the world sphere spread as far as the western ridge. Similarly, the radiance of the banners and streamers hoisted on the western ridge, the northern ridge and the southern ridge spread as far as the eastern, southern and northern ridges respectively. And the radiance of the banners and streamers hoisted on the surface of the earth remained in constant contact with the world of Brahmā and that those held aloft in the world of Brahmā penetrated to the very surface of the earth.

"Flowering trees in ten thousand world spheres blossomed forth. Fruit bearing trees were weighed down with clusters of fruit. Flowers that bloom on tree trunks, branches and creepers blossomed in their respective places. Lotuses on stalks sprang in clusters of seven breaking through rocky surfaces and were heaped layer upon layer. The ten thousand world systems revolved and remained like a wreath of garlands tossed about or like a well-arranged spread of flowers.

"The intervening regions of 8,000 yojana between the world's spheres, which had not been lit before even by the radiance of seven suns shining together, became one mass of light. The great ocean, 84,000 yojanas deep, turned into sweet water. Rivers ceased to flow. Those blind from birth were able to see objects. Those deaf from birth were able to hear sounds. And those crippled from birth walked on their feet. Bonds and fetters broke loose and fell apart."

So this rejoicing, he now, of course, makes the big breakthrough. And that's the point of his, what we now call his enlightenment.

And there's just a little thing here I'd like to say before I leave is religious emotions. You know, what part do they play in our spiritual life? Because especially in something like Theravāda, you get pretty dry. Just doing your vipassanā. But that sense of awe that we get, for instance, in the carol Silent Night. Just to let the story of the Buddha come and just get that sense of awe, the brilliance, the amazing thing. And then to shift it over to consider the Dhamma as an actual living force that runs through the universe. Praise, adoration. It's actually one of the objects of jhāna meditation is contemplating the Buddha. You can get, it seems, to first or second jhāna with that. And the sense of rejoicing that we just heard. To bring that up, a sense of rejoicing.

Then, of course, there's that gratitude. Just a feeling of that lovely feeling of gratitude. The more poignant because, you know, this stuff cannot be repaid. You can't pay the Buddha back for what he did. In fact, you can't pay anybody back. That's an idea of paying somebody back. But just being able to receive the gifts. And that's why we have this flow of what I call a gift economy. I read that somewhere. Where people give each other gifts. The Dhamma and sustenance.

And devotion. In the morning when I ask people to devote themselves. Not so much a hard sort of... a hard sort of giving yourself. It's more like the heart wants to do it. You have to cajole yourself. You have to sort of massage the heart to feel that way.

And one thing that I think especially we in the West have to begin to look at is this whole thing of bowing and what bowing actually means. Now as you know there are many ways to bow. The Tibetans do a full prostration. The Theravādans do this bowing like I do when I come in here. And then there's the Zen which is just bow from the waist. And then there's just that some people sort of come in and just bow their head. And then again there's just that blink. It's just a suggestion of bowing.

So bowing, at first, it always seems a bit strange. And I remember when I first had to do it in Zen. I did it because everybody else did it.

But I didn't really get into it for a long time. And if you think of bowing as a body language, as a way of expressing these types of emotions, then it's a way of reinforcing the action of the heart. It's a way of actually giving it a vehicle in which to express these sorts of religious emotions. And these religious emotions are all bound up and around the faith and the trust and the act of giving oneself to the practice. There's a sort of underbelly of it.

Now, of course, to think that they themselves alone get us to be liberated would be a silliness, but they're there as a sort of support. And some people feel a need for that more than others. The more intellectual you are, the less you feel you need it, but probably the more you do need it. And to find a way of expressing that devotion in some sort of body language, I think you'll find very helpful.

The first time I went to Burma to work with Bhūjanaka was the only time. After doing the old hard Mahāsi thing in a hall, I got the opportunity to visit Rangoon. And it was difficult to get let out. You had to have a good reason. So I gave him the reason that I wanted to buy religious books. At that time, to get religious books out of the country, you had to go from one government department to the next to get these bits of paper. The religious department, the censoring department, the export department, and of course I would take a whole day going to see these departments, and therefore spent the last week wandering around Rangoon.

And walking into the beautiful big pagoda, it's supposed to be one of the seven wonders of the world, the Shwedagon Pagoda, I walked in and I saw these people pouring water over Buddha *rupas* and bowing and mumbling. And I remember distinctly the sentence that came into my head. It said, well, I'm not a Buddhist. And that immediate rejection of any form of ritual was almost automatic. It was cool and cold and like that.

As this whole idea of religious emotions came to me and slowly began to develop, the last time I was in Burma, which was in the year 2000, and I was at Paṇḍita's place, I had again the opportunity to go to Shwedagon Pagoda. And it's quite remarkable to find myself not quite pouring water over Buddhas, but hanging around this lovely, limpid atmosphere. And there's a beautiful temple in Sri Lanka called Kelaniya, which is just outside Colombo, if you ever go. And if you go there on a full moon day, you can actually, it's like slicing through butter, the feeling of devotion in the air. And it's enormously beautiful.

With people just wandering around the Bodhi tree and making their blessings and making their offerings. And you might say that what it does is it gives a glow to the practice. It gives a certain glow to it underneath. And it's something that you may consider most people try to do a bit of *mettā* to soften the practice, but even these things are very softening and give the practice just that little bit of juice sometimes, especially when it gets miserable like the weather we've been having.

So these things that I've read out are really just examples of how the heart moves sometimes. Buddhism, generally speaking, will always veer towards that more wisdom base because it's centered on knowing. It's centered on this idea of perception, of discernment. But these little practices that we can do just put the heart in the right sort of position for it so it moves with that desire to investigate.

So I thought that I would then just read out for you the three sermons which he gave. Just read them out because they're pretty straightforward. So remember that when he was enlightened, he left searching for his people. And I'll come back to that as another lecture. But on this one here, I'd just like to read the discourse on the turning of the wheel of law. And I've been a little bit, I've done my own little bit with it so that it reads more smoothly, because sometimes it feels stilted.

So this is what I heard. On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Benares in the deer park at Isipatana. And the Blessed One addressed the group of five ascetics, "Venerable friends." "Yes, venerable friend," those ascetics replied. "Venerable friends, these two extremes should not be practiced by anyone who has entered the spiritual path. Firstly, the pursuit of happiness in sensual pleasure. This is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble and unbeneficial. And secondly, the practice of self-mortification, which is ignoble, unbeneficial and painful. Avoiding these two extremes, the *Tathāgata* has discovered the middle way. This gives rise to insight, to knowledge, leads to peace, experiential understanding, to enlightenment and *Nibbāna*."

"And what is this middle way, awakened to by the *Tathāgata*? It is this noble eight-fold path: right view, right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right awareness and right concentration. Now this, venerable friends, is the first noble truth of unsatisfactoriness. Birth is suffering. Aging is suffering. Sickness is suffering. Death is suffering. And being with what we dislike is suffering. And not being with what we like is suffering. In fact, not to get what we want is suffering. In short, the five aggregates of grasping — form, feeling, perceptions, emotions, thoughts, and consciousness — are all unsatisfying."

"The second noble truth of the cause of unsatisfactoriness is the craving that leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and indulgence, seeking happiness here and there. That is the craving for sensual pleasure, the craving to become, and the craving to annihilate. And the third noble truth of the cessation of suffering is the fading away without remainder, the cessation of that craving, the giving up and relinquishing of that craving and the freedom from it, non-attachment."

"The fourth noble truth is the path that leads out of this unsatisfactoriness. Now, venerable friends, in regard to these understandings that have never been known before, there arose in me the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the penetration, and the light, namely, that this is the noble truth of unsatisfactoriness. This noble truth is to be fully understood, and this noble truth has been fully understood. This is the noble truth of the cause of unsatisfactoriness. This noble truth is to be abandoned. This noble truth has been abandoned. This is the noble truth of the end of unsatisfactoriness. And this noble truth is to be realized. And this noble truth has been realized. This is the noble truth of the path leading to the end of unsatisfactoriness. This noble truth is to be developed. This noble truth has been developed."

"So long, venerable friends, as my knowledge and vision of these four noble truths, as they really are in their three phases and twelve aspects, was not thoroughly purified in this way, I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world with its *devas*, *māras* and *brahmās*, in this population with its ascetics and brahmins, its *devas* and humans. But now that these noble truths have been fully realized by me, it is so proclaimed. This is the knowledge and vision arose in me. Unshakable is the liberation of my *citta*. This is my last birth. There is no more renewed becoming."

This is what the Blessed One said. And those venerable friends delighted in what he had spoken. And while the discourse was being delivered, there arose in the venerable Koṇḍañña the dust-free, stainless vision of the Dharma: "Whatever is subject to arising

is all subject to passing away." And the Blessed One proclaimed, "Koṇḍañña knows, Koṇḍañña knows." And that is how Koṇḍañña earned his name, Aññāta Koṇḍañña, the Koṇḍañña who knows.

So that's when he went up and he met with them. And remember that they first rejected him because they had this feeling that he'd been soft and gone off and eaten rice pudding. And that was the limit. So when he went back, they didn't particularly like him coming. They thought, well, he's coming to tempt us. But in fact, it seems as though they were so taken by the way he looked that they were prepared to sit down and discuss these things with him. These things, of course, these scriptures were written after the event.

So then they all went off to get their alms round. On the way back, having eaten their alms round, they all sat down and he gave them another talk. And this one is the characteristic of not-self.

This is what I heard. On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Benares in the deer park at Isipatana. And there the Blessed One addressed a group of five ascetics, "Venerable friends." "Yes, venerable friend," the ascetics replied.

"Form is not self. If form were self, then it would not lead to affliction. And it would be possible to determine form: 'Let my form be like this. Let my form not be like this.' It would be the same with feelings, perceptions, emotions, and thoughts, and even consciousness itself. If consciousness were self, we would be able to say, 'Let my consciousness be like this, let it not be like this.'"

"Now I ask you, is form permanent or impermanent?" "Impermanent, venerable friend." "And whatever is impermanent, is that satisfying or unsatisfying?" "It does not satisfy, venerable sir." "And is that which is impermanent, does not satisfy, and is subject to change, to be regarded as, 'this is me, this is mine, this is myself'?" "Not at all, venerable friend." "Can we not say the same of feelings, perceptions, emotions, and thoughts, and even consciousness itself?" "Indeed, venerable friend," replied the five ascetics.

"So it follows that any kind of form whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all form is to be correctly regarded as, 'this is not me, this is not mine, this is not myself.' And the same goes for feelings, perceptions, emotions, thoughts and even consciousness itself."

"Now, venerable friends, when someone who has heard this understands in this way, they become disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feelings and perceptions, disenchanted with emotions and thoughts, disenchanted even with consciousness itself.

And once disenchanted, they become dispassionate. And through this detachment, the *citta* is liberated. And when liberated, it realizes this is liberation. And they come to know: birth is no more, the spiritual life has been fulfilled, what had to be done has been done, there is no more returning to any state of becoming."

This is what the Blessed One said, and those venerable friends delighted in what he had spoken. And while this discourse was being delivered, the *citta* of those group of five ascetics were liberated from the floods through non-clinging.

So now we've got five *Arahats* in the world.

And I'd like to read this one too. It's also a little short one. Well, I've made it short. I'm taking out all the repetitions. This is the one that T.S. Eliot writes about. And it's in his poem somewhere. And it's the one where he's describing burning. And here he's talking to a thousand monks. This is not so, you know, I mean, in the story this happens very shortly after his enlightenment.

This is what I heard. On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Gayā, at Gayā's head, together with a thousand monks. And there the Blessed One gave this discourse to them.

"All is burning. And what is this all that is burning? It is the eye that is burning, forms are burning, eye consciousness is burning, eye contact is burning, and whatever feeling is conditioned by that eye contact, whether it be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fires of craving, the fires of aversion, the fires of delusion, burning with birth, aging, sickness and death, burning with sorrow, pain, desolation and despair."

"And so it is with all the senses, with hearing, tasting, smelling and touching. And the mind itself is also burning, burning with the fires of craving, the fires of aversion, the fires of delusion, burning with birth, aging, sickness and death, burning with sorrow, pain, desolation and despair."

"Now when a meditator, properly instructed, grasps this by direct experience, they become disenchanted with the eye, disenchanted with forms, disenchanted with eye consciousness, disenchanted with eye contact, and disenchanted with whatever feeling is conditioned by that eye contact, whether it be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. And so it is with all the senses and the very mind itself. Once disenchanted with the sensual world as a source of happiness, the meditator loses interest. And through this dispassion, they become liberated. And with that liberation there

comes this knowledge: There will be no more birth. The spiritual life has been fulfilled. What had to be done has been done. There will be no more returning into states of becoming."

That is what the Blessed One said. Elated, those monks delighted in the Blessed One's teachings. And while this discourse was being delivered, the hearts of those thousand monks were liberated from the *āsavas* through the way of non-clinging.

So, just to... Sometimes I think we don't read the scriptures enough, you know. So, I just want to bring this to an end by just going back to his victory verse, and then I shall chant it in Pali, and we'll sit for a while, a bit of silence, and then we'll do the *mettā*.

So now he's fully enlightened, he's broken through, he's awakened, and this is the victory verse that he told Ānanda that sprung spontaneously to him upon that awakening.

"Seeking but not finding the house-builder, I have travelled from birth to birth countless times. Painful indeed is birth over and over again. But now, O house-builder, you have been seen. You shall not build another house again. Your rafters have been broken, your ridgepole demolished. My *citta* has attained the unconditioned and gone beyond any kind of craving."

Aneka jāti saṃsāraṃ, sandhāvissaṃ anibbisaṃ, gahakārakaṃ gavesanto dukkhā jāti punappunaṃ. Gahakāraka diṭṭho'si, puna gehaṃ na kāhasi, sabbā te phāsukā bhaggā gahakūṭaṃ visaṅkhataṃ. Visaṅkhāragataṃ cittaṃ, taṇhānaṃ khayam ajjhagā.

Buddha Day Address — The Life, Teaching, and Path to Nibbāna

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 44 min

In this Buddha Day address, Bhante Bodhidhamma reflects on the profound significance of the Buddha's life and revolutionary teaching. He traces the Buddha's journey from leaving household life through his failed attempts at extreme asceticism to his breakthrough under the Bodhi tree, emphasizing how the Buddha's compassionate motivation — seeking liberation not just for himself but for all beings — provided the courage needed for Awakening.

The talk examines the Buddha's systematic teaching approach to laypeople: beginning with generosity (dāna) to undermine selfishness, progressing through moral virtue (sīla) to purify relationships, discussing the heavenly realms as reflections of wholesome mental states, and warning of the dangers of sensual indulgence before finally presenting the Four Noble Truths. Bhante explores dukkha as the fundamental unsatisfactoriness of conditioned existence, explaining the three types of craving (taṇhā) that perpetuate suffering.

The discourse culminates in a detailed exploration of Nibbāna — described through the Buddha's various metaphors as an island, an unconditioned sphere (āyatana), and boundaryless consciousness full of light. Through the analogy of child development and the practice of vipassanā meditation, Bhante explains the progressive stages of letting go: first separating from the external world, then from the internal world of thoughts and sensations, and finally transcending even the observer itself to realize the deathless element of Nibbāna.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa - Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble, and fully Self-Enlightened One.

We are gathered here today to commemorate the life and work of the Buddha himself, our founder. I'm going to talk more about his teaching, but remember this was a pivotal event in the life of humanity. There's no reason to believe that he was the first one to experience Nibbāna - he talked of it as an ancient path. But he was definitely one who came along and began to teach it in a way that was very open to even different cultures.

In terms of world religions, complete world religions that have spread through different cultures, really you've only got the three: Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. Remember that his discovery was such that he was able to step out of the culture of his

time. So he stepped out of the Brahminical tradition of the Vedas and was able to establish his own teaching. The Jain leader also was able to do that, so it wasn't as though he was unique in that. But definitely the manner of his teaching and the perception of his insight was such that we don't find anything deeper than that in any other religious form.

So we've come to really celebrate that, the fact that we are receivers of that teaching. And remember that he himself had to discover it. It's not as though he was born with that innate understanding - he went through the whole process of the purification of the heart and the insights necessary for liberation.

Most of us know the story. The pivotal points were leaving the homely life, the household life. So this must have been quite a break for him, especially since his only child had just been born. But that shows you the manner of his state of mind at the time, which we have to be compassionate with. These days we can't understand why anybody should leave their family like that. But then, of course, it was an extended family. It wasn't as though she was left high and dry. And he must have been in a state of severe inner turmoil, what we would call an existential crisis. And it was that that really drove him.

Remember that he tries all the forms that the age was able to offer him, all the yoga forms that were there, the development of mental states that we call absorptions. And he found that wanting only because they came to an end. So these are still belonging to the phenomenal world, the world of the mind.

And then he tried self-mortification. So this was based on that basic understanding that the body itself was a manifestation of bad karma, manifestation of unwholesome actions that we'd done in the past, in the past lives, and that it was holding the soul down. So the whole process was letting go of the body, by which we mean letting go of the appetites of the body. In a sense, blaming the body for the problems that we have. So if we had no appetite, then we wouldn't be suffering from greed. It was that mentality.

The Buddha tried that, especially severe mortification in terms of food. He said he could hold his spine through his stomach. So if you try that, you'll see how thin he was. And then he gave that up because he discovered it simply to be more suffering. It didn't seem to be getting him anywhere.

And with that, of course, he leaves his companions. And we find him on the roadside, feeling, I should think, pretty miserable for himself. And along comes a woman, gives him some sweetmeats. And this revives him. And he has that memory from childhood

where he's watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony. And that memory gives him an inkling as it turns his whole practice around. Instead of trying to achieve happiness, he then turns upon himself and tries to investigate the cause of his suffering. And it's with that inspiration that he sits under the tree.

But even then, under the tree, there's this huge doubt about whether he, in fact, has any right to continue this, to achieve anything beyond the human state, whether there is anything beyond the human state. And in the mythology that surrounds it, he touches the earth to ground himself, and the earth goddess arises and says that he's every right to do this because he has the perfection of generosity. So in other words, he's not doing it just for himself. And it was with that feeling that he was doing it not just for himself, but for everybody he knew, perhaps for the whole of humanity and all beings, that he found the courage to break through that delusion, and then he experiences Nibbāna bliss.

In that process, we say he has three knowledges. The first knowledge was that he has completely transcended, well, completely purified the heart. So there's no more aversion and all the aspects of aversion, fear, etc. There's no depression or anything like that. There's no greed whatsoever. And there's no more delusion about who he actually really is or what that is beyond this phenomenal form, this form of a human being. There's no doubt in his mind after that.

Shortly after that, he then thinks about teaching and he gets this doubt as to whether anybody can understand the subtlety of what he's just discovered. And then again, it's put mythologically that this great god, Sahampati, came down and said, "Look, there are some people with only a little dust in their eyes." So he reflected on it and he thought, "Well, I'll give it a go."

And then he thought of his six companions, whom he then goes in search of. But on the way, he meets Upaka, another ascetic, and Upaka says, "Oh, you look very bright, you've got this lovely serene feeling about you. Who is your teacher?" And the Buddha announces himself as the fully liberated one, the fully enlightened one, "I don't have a teacher," etc. And Upaka shakes his head and says, "Oh, very good, okay," and then moves on. So I think he learns very quickly that's not quite how you get the Dharma across.

Remember that just because he's fully liberated doesn't mean that he actually can teach. It's something that evolves. And you can see it in his teaching. The first teachings are not so rigidly formulated into four of these and five of those. In the scriptures you can see very early on it's coming out spontaneously. And then over time it becomes very formalized: Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, and so on and so forth.

And then he spends the rest of his life, as you know, wandering around North India teaching the Dharma.

Now the reading today begins with the way that he used to teach lay people, which may be of interest to you. And it was said that he always gave them a step-by-step discourse. And the first thing he talked about was giving, was generosity. So I'll go back to his particular experience. His whole courage, you might say, was based upon the fact that he wasn't just doing it for himself. He found that extra energy that he needed to stay under that tree and continue his investigation.

Now, although it doesn't say this in the scriptures, in the commentary it points out that giving itself is a path to liberation. Just giving itself, just generosity itself is a path to liberation. Now, why is that? When you give something, you necessarily have to renounce it. Something that you might have used for yourself - so much money that you might give to a charity, you could have given to yourself for your own benefit, for your own enjoyment. Time. You could have spent the time on something that you particularly like, but you're giving it up in order to help somebody. So that process of renunciation is also a way of undermining this selfishness, this constantly looking after ourselves, which is a product of that basic delusion that we have about who we are.

And this giving is always easier when we have it on a base of gratitude. So when you consider all the gifts and blessings that you've received in this life, and that some of them have come without your asking - just the very fact of being born was a gift. How our mothers and fathers looked after us, this was all a gift. We never paid for it. Perhaps we should, but anyway, we never paid. It was just given to us and we received it. And when you consider the education system and friends and all these people who at times have come to help, that sense of gratitude allows us to let go of things.

And in letting go of our wealth - not all of it, of course - and in letting go of our time for the benefit of others, we're undermining the way that we tend always to think about me, me, me, instead of we, instead of actually joining the community at some level or other.

So giving, that was the first thing he said. And he said everybody could be generous, even a thief. So a thief can steal something from you and then very generously give it to somebody else. So it was a universal virtue that anybody and everybody could actually practice. So that's where he began.

And he began there because, of course, the development of giving is already undermining that hard sense of self. The sense of self creates barriers. It likes to enclose itself with safety. Remember the self at its deepest level is very fearful, it's very unsafe. For a

start it knows it's going to die, which isn't a very happy thought. And therefore it feels safe, it feels grounded, it feels strong, it feels solid when it has lots of money and lots of friends and lots of power. And that's why we collect these things around us as best we can.

And in letting go of that, we're undermining that sense of solidity about ourselves. And of course the advantage of that is letting go of all the problems that come with holding on to things. So remember there's a consequence to indulgence in life. While we are very rich and very powerful and very famous and all that, that's fine. But, of course, it's afterwards when the things begin to decrease, whether just naturally by aging. Then we feel those consequences, the frustration that we feel when we can't get what we want and the grief at loss, the fear of loss anyway, that underlying anxiety.

And in our society, which is so separate, so lifted away, you might say, from the ground of nature - I mean, this whole place is dependent on electricity. It's nothing to do with ordinary nature. And during winter, occasionally, the lights will go out. Everything just blows out for some reason. And suddenly you realize that you couldn't run this plant. In fact, I don't think I could live without electricity. So there's that point where we've created a certain safety, but we know that underneath it, it's a very shallow safety. It can suddenly disappear from us.

And of course, if you live in certain parts of the world, such as now in Nepal, there you are, you're on that tower, perhaps a tourist, and you're enjoying the view, and the whole thing starts to collapse around you. So it's not as though we're not aware of that somewhere within the psyche. And that is an underlying pressure in our lives. And to undermine that, you begin to let go, begin to let go. So that's where he would begin. He'd begin by expressing the importance of generosity.

And then he would talk about moral virtue. So in Buddhist psychology, all our unwholesomeness is based upon a wrong understanding. And we have to have a certain compassion for ourselves there because we're born into the human state and we presume ourselves to be human beings. I mean, that's pretty straightforward. And in that presumption, we are depending upon this physical form in order to gain happiness. Because that's all we want. We just want to be happy.

But in so doing, we are creating that basis of unreliability. And because of that, we have this relationship to life of gathering things around us to make us feel solid, getting rid of anything which is going to undermine that. That's the aversion. And when something is too big, you run for it. So there's your fear. So there's your three basic attitudes to life because of this wrong understanding: acquisitiveness, aversion and fear.

And this immediately leads us into wrong actions, wrong relationships. And that's where the problem comes, because then, of course, we're building up habits which are unwholesome. And when we act upon unwholesome habits, we get that second tier of unwholesomeness, which is to do with shame, guilt, remorse, etc. So it all tumbles upon itself.

And what he's saying is if you begin to really look at your moral life, your ethical life, and begin to chip away at that, you're also undermining this wrong understanding as to who we are. So that would be his second point to get across to people, the importance of *sīla*.

Now, I've talked about the negative side. It's the opposite too. The better word is ethics, really, rather than morality. Morality we tend to limit to avoiding what is unwholesome. But ethics is just about relationships. So our relationship has its negative side, but remember that we've also got to develop its positive side. And that's these il-limitables: love in all its facets, compassion, sympathetic joy, and so on. So that's what he would be talking about.

And then he would tell them that, in fact, in so doing, they would be entering the heavenly worlds. Now the heavenly worlds are simply mirrors of what we experience as human beings. So in actually developing love within ourselves, in developing joy within ourselves, that's mirrored in some cosmological heavenly state.

These days, for a lot of people, rebirth and being born in other states is a bit difficult to understand. And it's not necessary, of course, to believe it. But generally speaking, I think the better position is not to come to a conclusion. Because if there happens to be other worlds, then we're in for a bit of a surprise or a shock one way or the other. So it's best just to leave that on the back burner, as they say. And it may or may not happen.

And the Buddha, of course, came across the same skepticism. And that's exactly what he says. He says, "Look, if you practice the Dharma now, you'll get the benefits now. If there is a future life, then you'll get the benefits also." So it's not as though you have to believe these things. But it's good to know that the Buddha himself definitely did know about them because that was the other two knowledges that came to him at his liberation.

The first was being able to go back to all his past lives and see very clearly that it was the ethical decisions he made which had the greatest effect on his future life. Now that's a breakthrough for the age, I'll explain that in a minute. And secondly, he saw other beings moving from one realm to the other according to the same law.

So remember that at the time of the Buddha, the old Brahminical system, which was widespread in places like Rome, Greece, Mesopotamia, Egypt, it was this polytheism. It was this idea that there was a whole realm of gods that ruled the world. And that your job as a human being was to appease the gods, was to pray to them, to ask them for favours, etc. And so in the Vedas and the Brahmins, even the Brahmins of that time, you would do these massive sacrifices to get what you wanted from the gods. And the sacrifices became really very refined rituals and you had to get everything right or else the god wouldn't respond. And of course these rituals weren't really delivering everything that they were expected to deliver. So there was a general losing of confidence in that whole process of polytheism.

So it's to do with power. It wasn't to do with being good or bad. It was to do with you making the sacrifice to a particular god and getting what you wanted. So you can see the whole shift towards ethical life was quite a revolution. Where the Buddha's saying, "No, if you want to get reborn in a happier place, it's to do with your ethics. It's not to do with these gods. It's not to do with the power of other deities."

And then he would talk about the dangers of sensual indulgence.

So we've mentioned that really, every time we indulge, what we're actually doing is creating a psychological dependency on something for our happiness. That's the problem, you see. If you just indulge and then you could let it go, that'd be fine. But when we indulge, we're actually placing a certain commitment to whatever it is that makes us happy at a psychological level. That's why it's so painful when it disappears. It doesn't matter what it is.

So he's pointing out the dangers of that and the advantage of renouncing them. Here there's sometimes a confusion about what this renunciation means because it's not the same as what he was practicing when he was doing the self-mortification business because that was based on a completely different understanding. The idea of the soul being trapped in the body and letting go of the body meant that the soul could escape and rise to heaven. This was more in the sense of renouncing in order to undermine that psychological dependency that grows with our indulgence.

Remember that if you look at even the basic things, like on retreat here, we often look at this whole process around eating. That attachment to porridge, for instance, I'm very attached, is translated. You see, it's the same psychology. That's the point. It's the same psychology no matter where you become attached, whether it's to art or nature or to a person.

So when we undermine that, we think that we're actually also undermining our ability to enjoy pleasure and our ability to love. Because that's how it feels. Losing excitement feels like a loss. And we won't want to lose it unless we see the aftermath. See, that's our problem. In a society where pleasure is just there at hand, you just turn the TV on for heaven's sake. We don't make the connection between the aftermath of indulgence with the actual process of indulging. So when we're indulging, what's the problem? We're enjoying life. It's the business that comes afterwards that we've mentioned, the frustration, and also the sense of boredom because the happiness that an object gives us, whether it's a person or food or whatever, has an inbuilt obsolescence. It begins to lose its flavour, you know, like chewing on the bedpost. And it just loses its flavour. So you can't keep scraping the chewing gum off and chewing it.

So what you have to do is begin to accept that there's a loss of excitement and you have to wait for the letting go. And when you've let go of something, you really do have to experience that moment of liberation. And it's catching the moment of liberation when you let go of something where you'll catch the deeper joy. See, what we do is we tend to let go of something, but we don't hang on and wait for it to completely drop out of the system. And then you get that moment of liberation.

Now, that moment of liberation is a taste of Nibbāna. That doesn't mean to say that the old habit doesn't come back. Of course it does. It's not that easy. But it's just letting go of something. Just try it. Anything that you are attached to at some level, just keep not feeding it and just wait for that moment when you feel it's just left the psyche, just gone like that. And it's that moment of liberation which has to be tasted. And once we begin to get a taste for that, you see, then it becomes easier and easier and easier to just let go of all the rest of it. But if it's always this struggle for letting go and then you fall back into the old habit, then it just becomes miserable. So make sure that if you are going to practice renunciation at any time, and you can do it at any time, just wait for that moment when you feel the release, the relief of it. That's very important.

So that's the advantage of renouncing them. And then it says, when he felt that the mind was ready, open, without hindrances, inspired and confident, then he expounded to the listener the elevated Dharma teaching of the Buddhas: *dukkha*, its origin, its cessation and the path.

So in other words, this teaching that he had to give, he felt he had to prepare. He couldn't just go bang on in and say, look, life's suffering. You need to do something about it. He just slowly prepares it. And he prepares it by pointing out that the path of liberation also has its joys. See, so we've talked about the joy of generosity, that very subtle joy of letting go. And the consequence of the ethical life, the feeling of the beauti-

ful heart within us and the possibility of future beautiful rebirths. So with all that, you see, he's got the person, he's whetted their appetite, and then he tells them the truth. Life is suffering and horrible. Life is unsatisfactory. There is unsatisfactoriness.

And so we'll also be reading the opening discourse that he gives about dukkha. Dukkha, remember, is that essential concept upon which the whole of his teaching is built. Dukkha. It means hard to bear in its basic meaning. Unsatisfactoriness. So it's always recognising that life itself, although it brings its joys and pleasures, life itself holds its own level of suffering – aging and death. We can't escape that. And to make the distinction between the given, which is pain, and our reaction to it, our relationship to it, which is the suffering.

So the Buddha always talks about two darts. See, the first dart is given. So you have a headache. That's given, you see. Now, how you react to your headache is an option. So you can either be very patient with it, or you can get angry with yourself for having a headache. So he tries to make that distinction. And he talks about, he begins by first of all pointing out these two extremes, by not falling into the error of these two extremes. So we've explained that. The one is to do with indulgence of pleasure and the other one is self-mortification. So he's pointed that, the middle way. The middle way is actually not in between these two, it's transcendent of it. It's something that rises up above and is showing a particular path. And that, of course, is the Eightfold Path.

He then goes on to the dukkha, this is painful, it'll be read out, but I'm sure most of you have read it. Birth is painful, aging is painful, separation from what is liked is painful, not to get what one wants is painful, and so on. Then the reason for it, the unsatisfactoriness, is this craving. Now the craving is both for these sensual pleasures that we've been talking about, but it's also a craving to keep rebirthing ourselves.

So when people ask me about rebirth, I say, well, if you actually see what's happening now in this present moment, from moment to moment, you won't have that much problem with the process of rebirth after death, because it's happening now. For instance, this body seems to us very solid, seems to us the same body that I woke up with this morning, for instance. But we all know that every seven years, every atom is completely changed. So next time you look at your face in the mirror, just remind yourself you weren't there seven years ago. You know what I mean? It's like recognising that the body is constantly dying. It's constantly dying and being reborn.

The mind, thoughts are constantly dying and being reborn. You get new thoughts every time. No thought is ever the same. Even if you were to say the same thing twice, it's not the same. If I said banana, banana. The second banana is not the first banana. It's completely different. It's another word, even though it means the same. Our emo-

tions never stop. They're constantly gurgling up from the depths. They can't be the same. You can't repeat anything in nature. Even though they might feel the same from a perceptual point of view, they're always different. This whole form is constantly re-birthing, moment after moment. And what keeps pushing that whole process is this attachment to this form. It's the belief that I am this human being. I am Bodhidhamma. And anything that undermines that just makes me crazy.

And then there's this craving for annihilation. Now, that's a completely different – that's the other process. That's the aversion side. That's when things get too much, you want to just get rid of yourself. When you've had a hard day or something, when you've been depressed, what do you do? You launch yourself onto the couch and disappear for a while. And that's a process of self-annihilation. The worst, of course, is suicide. So this whole process of getting rid of ourselves because we're fed up with ourselves at one level or another is the self trying to get rid of itself. Unfortunately, you always wake up. It's just one of those things. And remember that the seeking of oblivion is there because in oblivion there's no suffering. That's the relief of being in a deep sleep.

So this craving is on these three levels. The level of sensual pleasure, the level of constantly becoming me in one form or another, constantly taking on different roles throughout the day, throughout my life, and at times just not wanting to be me one way or the other. So these are the cravings.

And Nibbāna, he doesn't actually say Jesus is the end of suffering, is exactly the end of that craving. The complete fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and the relinquishing of it, freedom from it, no longer any reliance on it, this craving. But remember, what sustains the craving is that sense of self, is a sense of me.

Now when it comes to Nibbāna, he has various ways of explaining it, various images that he gives us. One is of an island, completely separate. One is of an island. So Nibbāna is the island that we're making towards. He talks about an āyatana which is a sphere. A sphere in his language is a level of experience which is entire and complete unto itself. So for instance, there are six spheres dependent on our senses. So the eye, our visual capacity, is a sphere of experience. And you can't hear through it. You can't hear through your eyes and you can't taste through them. So all these senses are quite separate and they create certain levels of experience. And he says there is a level where none of this happens. There's no tasting, seeing. There's no earth, there's no moon, there's no coming, there's no going, there's no staying still. You can only stay still if you're coming and going. So it's a place which is completely transcendent. He talks about it as the unborn, the undying, the unconditioned.

And the word he uses there is *ati*. *Ati* means, when they ask him this quadrilemma, this is the big logical positions of the age, does the Buddha exist after he dies? Or does he not exist? Or does he exist and not exist? Or does he neither exist nor not exist? That's a killer. You can't go beyond those four. That's your logical proposition. Now the word in Pali which is used for that is *ati*. There is another word for is which is *hoti*. And *hoti* is like a joining word like when we say this is a clock. But he actually says *ati*, so there exists that which is not born nor died.

But his most clear statement arises in one of the discourses when somebody approaches him and asks him, where is the end of the world? In other words, where is the end of the phenomenal world? Now, in those days, which is different from us, the world and consciousness were both the same thing. We are under the illusion that when we look at the world, we're actually seeing it as it is. That's to do with our upbringing and our so-called enlightenment and science, that we think that when we're looking at a tree, that's the way the tree really looks. But actually, it's totally dependent upon our eyes, our perceptual faculties, what our brain and minds do with it. And so if we were all to look at the same tree, we'd all be looking at a different tree. In this room, we're all in this room. Nobody would deny the room exists, but we all experience this room in our own particular way. So the world and consciousness were the same thing.

Now what this man is asking is where does the world come to an end? Where does consciousness come to an end? And the Buddha says this question is not put properly. The question should be where does this world not find a footing? So our process is not the destruction of the world. It's to find this island. And then he says there is a consciousness which is not coloured by any of the senses. So in Buddhism there are six senses. There's the five that we normally count and also the mind, the process within the mind. None of those can be found in this consciousness. He says that it is without boundary consciousness. Now, a boundary can only be created by phenomena, can only be created by objects, by things. So there's nothing there. And in all directions full of light, awakenedness, just this is the end of suffering.

So this *Nibbāna* is not something which is some sort of idea. It's something to be personally experienced by us. And so how do we get to that experience? And this is the process of *vipassanā*, you see.

Now, so when you're sitting, when you're sitting and you're feeling and you're observing what's happening within you, unwittingly, we're making the inner world an object. I don't know whether you know this, but there was a woman called Margaret Mahler. She was a student of Freud. And she studied babies, babies until the age of three. And she made these wonderful discoveries, which have been all reinforced since

her. For the first four months, there's no objects. All it is is a bath of information coming in, and the baby lives seemingly in a two-dimensional world. It doesn't have any depth. And that's why you get babies reaching out for rattles. They're actually creating a 3D world in doing so. And then round about four months, the first object looms out of all this information. And it's usually your carer, your mother. And then very slowly, all this information coming in is turned into this outer world. And it takes to the age of three. It takes three years for that child to come to know themselves as an individual separate from the world around them. That's why they're very clear about whether they're a boy or a girl and all that. It's like, that's it.

Now, what we do then is we fall into that error of saying, well, look, that's the world out there and I'm me the way I experience the world. What we're doing is we are finding a position in ourselves to observe the inner world with all its information, which is the sensations in the body, all the emotions coming out from the heart, all the thoughts that are coming out. All of this we're actually pushing out just like that baby did with all the actual outer world. The inner world we're also pushing away from us. It's becoming an object to observe, to feel, to understand. And in so doing, again unwittingly, what is it that's pulling out? What is it that's pulling out? And that's when we begin to experience the observer within us very clearly. The one who knows. The observer, the feeler.

And the observer is a mirror image. Because when you're in that state of clear observing, you're aware of yourself being the observer. Am I correct? So, if you're aware of yourself being the observer, you see, you can't be that, can you?

Now, that's when you have to keep looking with an eagle eye, because at some point, whatever is in us, that is this Nibbanic element, to use the language of the scripture, of the Abhidhamma, the element of Nibbāna, to get that, to have it, to that experience, is being able to go beyond even the sense of the observer, the feeler.

So there's these three, shall we say, backward movements which take us into a Nibbanic experience. The first one is, as a child, we separate out from the world and become this individuated little being. Through our meditation, we're separating out from the inner world to become this individuated sense of the observer, the feeler, the one who knows. And it's just one step beyond that. Even now, we could just step behind and that'd be it.

So that's the process of liberation. The process of liberation is simply letting go of these three worlds.

And remember that when the Buddha was fully liberated, he didn't disappear. He didn't sit by the roadside there with a sign saying, "Fully liberated, do not disturb." He re-entered the world. He re-entered the world, the phenomenal world, and was able to pass on his message to others.

So what do we lose in the end through this process? When the Buddha, because of the negative way he would talk about *Nibbāna*, was often accused of being an annihilatist, he insisted, "No, the only thing that's annihilated is greed, hatred and delusion. All the rest is given back purified."

Now that, I think, is a joyful message.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by your fierce determination to achieve liberation, finally arrive at that heavenly place sooner rather than later.

Buddha Day Address: His Training — The Fetters

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 30 min

In this Buddha Day address, Bhante Bodhidhamma draws from the Mahāsaccaka Sutta (MN 36) to recount the Buddha's intense ascetic practices before his Awakening under the Bodhi tree. He vividly describes the future Buddha's extreme fasting and breathless meditation attempts, which nearly killed him, before his breakthrough realization that the jhānas could be used as objects of investigation rather than mere absorption states.

The talk then explores the ten fetters (saññojana) — the mental shackles that bind beings to saṃsāra. Bhante explains how the first three fetters are broken at stream-entry (sotāpanna): self-identity view (sakkāya-diṭṭhi), doubt (vicikicchā), and attachment to rites and rituals (sīlabbata-parāmāsa). He traces the progressive weakening and elimination of sensual desire, ill-will, and the subtler fetters through the four stages of Awakening, culminating in the arahat's complete freedom from conceit (māna) and ignorance (avijjā).

This teaching offers profound insight into both the historical Buddha's journey and the systematic path of purification that leads to liberation, making it essential listening for understanding the graduated training in Theravāda Buddhism.

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

Since it's been a while since we've done a proper Buddha Day here, I thought just to go over his journey. I was going to quote this Mahāsaccakasutta, the long discourse around this fellow called Saccaka, whom the Buddha also refers to as Aggivessana, which is his family name. So this is the Buddha expressing what he went through, his mortifications.

"Then it occurred to me, why don't I practice the breathless absorption? So I cut off my breathing through my mouth and nose and ears, and then there was an intense burning in my body like two strong men grabbing a weaker man by the arms to burn and scorch him on a pit of glowing coals. My energy was roused and unflagging, and my mindfulness was established and lucid, but my body was disturbed, not tranquil, because I had pushed too hard with this painful striving. But even such painful feelings did not overcome my awareness."

Have you tried that? I can't quite visualize it somehow.

"Then some deities saw me and said, the ascetic Gotama is dead. And others said, he's not dead, he's dying. And others said, he's not dead or dying. He's the ascetic Gotama as a perfected one. For that is how the perfected ones live."

Well, he isn't the perfected one yet. They've misunderstood his efforts. So that failed.

"Then it occurred to me, why don't I practice completely cutting off food? But the deities came to me and said, good sir, don't practice totally cutting off food. If you do, we'll infuse divine nectar into your pores and you'll live on that. Then I thought, if I claim to be completely fasting while these deities are infusing divine nectar in my pores, that would be a lie on my part. So I dismissed these deities and said there's no need. Then it occurred to me, why don't I take a little bit of food each time, a cup of broth made of mung beans, horse gram, chickpeas or green gram?"

So that's what I did until my body became extremely emaciated. Due to eating so little, my limbs became like the joints of dried bamboo or withered creepers. My bottom became like a camel's hoof. My vertebrae stuck out like beads on a string and my ribs were as gaunt as the broken down rafters on an old barn. Due to eating so little, the gleam in my eyes sank deep in their sockets like the gleam of water sunk deep down in a well. Due to eating so little, my scalp shriveled and withered like a green bitter gourd in the wind and sun. Due to eating so little, the skin of my belly stuck to the backbone, so that when I tried to rub the skin of my belly, I grabbed my backbone. And when I tried to rub my backbone, I rubbed the skin of my belly. Due to eating so little, when I tried to urinate or defecate, I fell face down right there. Due to eating so little, when I tried to relieve my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair rotted at its roots and fell out.

"Then some people said, the ascetic Gotama is black. Some said, he's not black, he's brown. And some said, no, he's neither black nor brown. The ascetic Gotama has tawny skin. That's how far the pure and bright complexion of my skin had been ruined by taking so little food. Then I thought, whatever ascetics and Brahmins have experienced painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings due to overexertion, whether in the past, future or present, this is as far as it goes. No one has done more than this. But I have not achieved any superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones by this severe, grueling work. Could there be another path to awakening?"

So he's telling us that he took these ascetic practices to their limit. Now, that one about not eating seems to have been because he had some relationship with the Jains. The Jain teacher was an elder contemporary. In that teaching, your physical body is an

expression of your personal *kamma*. So by letting go of the body completely, your soul would then rise naturally into heaven. Jains to this day, when they're very old, they'll just stop eating. It's the way they choose to die. Often, not always.

By the way, those descriptions of him starving do remind you of the pictures we've seen of people suffering from famines. So you have to have that in mind.

"Then it occurred to me, I recall sitting in a cool shade of the rose apple tree while my father, the Sakyan, was off working. Quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unskillful qualities, I entered and remained in the first absorption, which has the rapture and bliss born of seclusion, while placing awareness and keeping it connected. Could that be the path to awakening?"

Now, he had practiced these *jhānas*, remember, right at the beginning, according to the usual way that we see the way his life spanned out. He went, first of all, to two teachers who taught him how to practice these absorption states, which are very delightful. You do it inside yourself. You don't need anything outside. So if you practice loving-kindness and you get beautiful feelings, and they're such beautiful feelings that's all you want to do all day, sit on a tree and practice loving-kindness, you don't need anything at all apart from a bit of food. So he had dismissed that. The distinction here, I think, when he says "while placing awareness and keeping it connected," there's a suggestion there that he's caught on to the idea that although he's practicing these *jhānas*, they become themselves the object of investigation.

"Then it occurred to me, why am I afraid of that pleasure? For it's nothing to do with sensual pleasures or unskillful qualities. Then I thought, I'm not afraid of that pleasure, for it has nothing to do with sensual pleasure or unskillful qualities. Then I thought, I can't achieve that pleasure with the body so excessively emaciated. Why don't I eat some solid food, some rice and porridge?"

So I ate some solid food. Now at that time, the five mendicants who were his companions, thinking the ascetic Gotama will tell us of any truth that he realizes, but when he ate some solid food they felt disappointed in me saying the ascetic Gotama has become indulgent, he has strayed from the struggle and returned to indulgence. After eating solid food and gathering my strength quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unskillful qualities — so the greed wasn't there, remember — I entered and remained in the first absorption, which has rapture and bliss, born of seclusion, while placing the awareness and keeping it connected. But even such pleasant feeling did not occupy my mind.

So this tells you that here he's understood that the *jhānas* themselves become a way of investigation, whereas before when he'd started the path, he would absorb into them and just enjoy them. In other words, it's put here, "did not occupy my mind." A better translation would be, "and even such feeling did not occupy my awareness." If you read that statement on the window ledge out there from the Arhat Meiji Kyodo, you'll see that's exactly what she says. Everything comes in front of the awareness and never enters into what she calls her heart.

"When my mind was immersed in *samādhi* like this, purified, bright, flawless, rid of corruption, pliable, workable, steady and unperturbable, I extended it towards recollection of past lives and I recollected my many kinds of past lives with features and details. This was the first knowledge that I achieved in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed and knowledge arose. Darkness was destroyed and light arose, as happens for a meditator who is diligent, keen and resolute. But even such pleasant feelings did not occupy my awareness."

So this is where he understands that all his past lives were driven by his actions, his *kamma*.

"In the next watch, when my mind was immersed in *samādhi* like this, purified, bright, flawless, rid of corruptions, pliable, workable, steady and imperturbable, I extended it towards the knowledge of the death and rebirth of sentient beings. And with clairvoyance that is purified and superhuman, I saw sentient beings passing away and being reborn, inferior or superior, beautiful or ugly, in a good place or a bad place, and I understood how sentient beings are reborn according to their deeds."

So here he's understood the law of *kamma* is not just his personal law, but it's a universal law. It's interesting, later on we'll mention these four levels of attainment: the stream entrant, once returner, non-returner and fully liberated one. In the commentaries, it says anybody who understands the law of *kamma* is a *cūḷa sotāpanna*, a lesser *sotāpanna*, a lesser stream entrant, by which is meant anybody who understands the law of *kamma* is already on the path. It's inevitable that they will become liberated in the goodness of time.

"Then when my mind was immersed in *samādhi* like this, purified, bright, flawless, rid of corruptions, pliable, workable, steady and imperturbable, I extended it towards the knowledge of the ending of defilements. I truly understood this is suffering. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the practice that leads to the cessation of suffering. I truly understood these are defilements. This is the origin of defilements. This is the cessation of defilements. And this is the practice that leads to

the cessation of defilements. Knowing and seeing this, my mind was freed from defilements of sensuality, desire to be reborn and ignorance. And when it was freed, I knew it was freed."

So when he attained liberation, he knew it. He knew he was completely free of these defilements. Now this word defilements, usually it's understood to be those things that come because of our immoral, unwholesome actions. But it's more than that. It's also the defilements that come from this fundamental misunderstanding about self. So one of the things that arises because of that misunderstanding is fear — fear of death, fear of illness, fear of others. That fear is also a defilement. Later, they made a list of these ten defilements. But actually, the way he uses defilements in the scriptures is just anything which arises out of this ignorance. And the basic ignorance, the basic delusion is to believe we are human beings in a complete total way.

"I understood. Rebirth is ended. The spiritual journey has been complete. What had to be done has been done. There is no return to any state of becoming."

That's a lovely little phrase there. "What had to be done has been done." You can feel the release, the relief of having finally arrived at the place of liberation.

"This was the third knowledge that I achieved in the last watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed, knowledge arose, darkness was destroyed and light arose, as happens for a meditator who is diligent, keen and resolute, but even such pleasant feeling did not occupy my awareness."

So that's the ending of that discourse where he describes how he finally attained liberation.

We've talked about these defilements, and one of the discourses is on the Bhayabherava where he's in the jungle training, and this great fear comes upon him — wild animals and so on — and he has to overcome that. So that's not caused by some unwholesome action. That's just part of the structure that comes when you have a sense of self, of this body being a sense of self. When the body's in danger, then you get that fear. That would be included in defilements. Also these days when we talk about trauma from childhood and things like that, that's also part of the defilements, which is not caused by personal wrongdoing or anything. It's just something that arises because of our fundamental delusion.

So these four attainments, the stream entrant, he says it's like a flash of lightning. A person who has that stream entrant sees everything, but on the other hand, it's not deep, it's just a flash. Often when a person does have that experience, they can't really say. Sometimes they don't believe they've had it. It's that subtle, it's that underlying realization. But it's not big enough to be held, to be contemplated about.

The next one, when we rise to the once returner, he said it's like a starry night. So there you can hold, there's enough insight for it to be held and for it to be understood. But the *anāgāmi*, the one who is not going to return, and we'll explain that in a minute, it's like a full moon. So it's very clear, but there's still this darkness around it. Finally, the *arahat*, the one who's fully liberated, is like the full noonday sun.

So one way of looking at this process is through these fetters. *Samyojana*. The word *saṃyojana* has the word *yoga* in it. That fundamental word is one of those words that comes right through the Indo-European languages. Our word "yoke" comes from the same place.

There are ten of these fetters. The first three are what goes when somebody has this little insight, this first insight. So the first one is this *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, which is translated as self-identity view. So it's basically the view, the notion, the belief that I am this human being. I am this person.

Even at an intellectual level, when you talk about the body, well, we know it changes every seven years. They tell you all the cells have been changed every seven years. I mean, I've almost had eleven bodies by now. Time I got rid of it.

When you think about your thoughts and what you used to think when you were three years old and what you do now, your feelings, your emotions, you can see it's a flow of events, isn't it? It's just a flow of events moving one into the other.

The example I use is when you bite your tongue. So you're eating away and you're enjoying your food and you bite your tongue. For that one wonderful singular moment, you and the pain are completely one. That's identity. Then you jump out of it and you find yourself a little angry with yourself. Now you've become anger, you see. So identity is when you lose that sense of objectivity about what you're experiencing is what you are at that moment.

So you trap your finger in a door. Pain's wonderful at doing that for us. But sometimes great pleasure, great joy. Also, you absorb into it and become it. You lose that sense of somebody enjoying something, somebody feeling something. You are that feeling. You are that pleasure or that mental state. That's what we mean by identity. So that's the first fetter that goes.

The second one is doubt. So this is a particular type of doubt. It's the doubt that stops you doing anything. It's the doubt that will stop you from committing. Often you might find in life that you come across a certain situation like a job and you apply for it, but then you go through this doubt business. Can I do it? Should I do it? And all this. Sometimes that doubt, that self-doubt is so strong, you don't take the job. You lose it, you see. So you don't give yourself a chance.

It's the same in meditation. You sit and then you think, well, everybody else is amazing. I'm absolutely useless. And then you keep convincing yourself that you're no good at it. So you may as well stop. It's the same with the Buddha Dharma. There may come a time when you think, well, I don't know whether the Buddha is right, whether it's Dharma for me, and so on.

But that goes completely with somebody who has this level of insight. There's no more of that sort of prevarication, that doubt, that oscillating doubt. That's not the same as honest doubt. I mean, the Buddha actually wants us to investigate what he says because the process of investigation itself is the process of liberation.

And then the third one is an attachment to rites and rituals. So this goes back to those times when, for instance, say in Hinduism, just to bathe in the Ganges would get rid of your *kamma*. That reminds you of something I met. This is years ago when I went out there as a sort of pseudo hippie. And I met this young woman. I was young myself, of course, in those wonderful days. And I went to this yoga center and she was there and she had all these spots and things all over her face. I said, what happened? She said, well, you know, I went down to the Ganges and joined them in this washing, in this getting rid of *kamma*. And I drank some of it. And I said, what? And not only does everybody's toilet goes into the Ganges, we get dead bodies of all sorts, even humans. And this poor woman was just getting over what looked like almost blood poisoning or something. And she's getting over it.

So we do little rituals like lighting candles, repeating the refuges and precepts. But if we were to believe that that was a part, that itself would help us to become liberated, then that, of course, would be a severe delusion. So it's going back to those days where people might have thought certain rituals, undergoing certain rituals were cleansing.

So that would then be undermined by this insight, which would be telling the person who has it that the path is one of purification. So remember, the Buddha only taught two things: the path of purification, which is getting rid of all these defilements within us, and the path of insight, which is seeing things as they really are.

So what do we mean when we say things really are? Well, we mean how we cause suffering. So there's the process of desire and how it leads us into a certain ways of attachment. How that attachment then begins to create people, situations, things that we don't like. Because as soon as you're attached to something, you're cutting off the other bit that you're not attached to. So you immediately create a conflict. And then there's impermanence. So that's the three things: *dukkha*, *anicca*, *anattā*.

And impermanence is really driving home that everything comes to an end. I mean, we're very good at noticing beginnings, you know, the beginning of a film, the beginning of... Well, you see these pop stars come and then they disappear. You don't know what happened to them. There's all things like that. It's really beginning to recognize that everything comes to an end. So after you finish a meal to recognize this is one less lunch in this lifetime. After you finish the day, this is one day less of my living. And it's slowly driving it home, coming to terms with the fact of what impermanence really means for us.

Our gaze is always averted towards the beginning and sustaining. So as soon as the ending comes, we're thinking of something else. We're on to the next film. We're on to the next holiday. What am I going to do when I retire? What am I going to do when I retire?

And the final one is this *anattā*, this not-self. So the easiest way to investigate this *anattā* is, he states it in the discourse on not-self, is to see what, when you talk about this body or this mind or my mental state, how much control have we got of it? How much control do we have over it? Then you realize that your control isn't absolute. So if your control is not absolute over something, it can't be you. That's the definition of me, that I'm in control. So that's how he begins the discourse. He said, if this body were mine, I'd make it grow taller, I'd make my hair grow more, etc., etc. But you can't. There are certain things you simply can't do. So we find that this sense of control over us, over this organism, is quite surface. I can move my arms around and all that, but I can do things with my body, but once my back goes, that's the end of it. I've learned that the hard way.

So all those three chains, shackles, disappear. That fundamental idea of identity, even though the notion is snapped, it still stays with us to the very end as conceit. So it's not as though you get rid of that sense of self just because you've had this insight. The doubt goes, though it may reappear in different forms, but doubt in the Dhamma itself is usually rock solid. Sorry, faith in the Dhamma itself is usually rock solid. And a distinction

between why you do little rituals and they're not actually going to create salvation or purification. So that word salvation, although it's a Christian word, it actually does mean healing.

Now, it's only until we come to the second level, the once returner, that these two major things are undermined, which is our sensual desires and all our aversions. But they're only attenuated. They're not actually destroyed. And that only happens when you get to the third level, the non-returner. So that's why a person who's at the third level doesn't come back because they're not interested in sensual pleasure anymore. It's as simple as that. And their happiness comes from these absorptions and these beautiful mental states that they can achieve.

So finally, when we get to Arahant, these two things, the *jhānas*, these absorptions, are now no longer places to indulge. It doesn't mean to say that they can't achieve them, because the Buddha was often going through the *jhānas*. But they weren't something that they would be attached to as a source of personal pleasure. So the awareness would always be there.

Finally, this conceit goes, which is that sense of I am. So conceit always draws us into a comparison. So I'm better than somebody. All right. So that's obvious pride. I'm worse than somebody that often masquerades as humility. You know, I'm not as good as so-and-so. And then finally, there's a more subtle one about we. If I say, well, I'm right, and I can get a few other people to say, I'm right, I agree with you, this sense of I, of the conceit, grows because now it becomes we. It's not just I believe this, it's we believe this. So there's that more subtle sense of conceit, whereas normally we might think, oh, well, that's not conceit, that's not pride, but it's just an extension of our conceit.

Restlessness goes. This restlessness is all the remaining defilements that are there. But now they're so fine, they're so disempowered that they finally just disappear. But it's understood that even after liberation, there are still traces of those habits in the mind. And if you read what Meichi Kyao says, that's exactly what she says. She says she still gets these little traces in the mind of greed, aversion and delusive ideas, but none of them ever enter into her heart. So in other words, this sense of awareness is always something distinct. And that's where she is.

And then finally, that ignorance, really, that's just a blanket statement that all ignorance has gone and the delusion that arises from it. And that fundamental ignorance, of course, is the definition of who I am.

So these are your ten fetters and they are shackles. So if they're shackles, something must be unshackling. So something is being shackled by these shackles. So what we discover, of course, is that the very thing that's being unshackled is awareness. So every time you sit in meditation and you see an object, that object can't be you. No matter what you're seeing inside yourself, whether it's a feeling or a thought or some sort of physical sensation, as soon as you turn it into an object, this awareness is separating out from it. And that process of separation is the process of unshackling. And that's where the sense of release comes from, the sense of relief. And that's why the Buddha says the taste of Nibbāna is freedom. The taste of *Nibbāna* is freedom.

That's it. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. That it has not driven you into deep sleep and somnolence. And that by your diligence you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Buddha Day Address: What Was the Mindset of the Bodhisatta When He Left His Family and What Made Him Carry On?

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 37 min

In this Buddha Day reflection, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the psychological state that compelled the 29-year-old Bodhisatta to abandon his comfortable life as a Khattiya (warrior caste) prince and newly born son Rāhula to seek an end to suffering. Drawing parallels with modern existential despair—"what's the point when you just end up a photograph on someone's computer?"—he explores how the fear of endless rebirth, rather than annihilation, drove the Buddha's spiritual quest.

The talk traces the Bodhisatta's journey through various teachers and practices, from jhāna states to extreme asceticism, before his revolutionary insight: instead of seeking happiness externally, he turned inward to understand how we create our own suffering. Bhante explains the Four Noble Truths as the Buddha's foundational discovery about dukkha, taṇhā (craving), and the possibility of complete liberation.

Through practical examples of meditation and daily life awareness, he demonstrates how we constantly recreate ourselves moment-to-moment through identification with body, emotions, and thoughts. The teaching culminates with insights on 'not-self' (anattā) as a practical method rather than philosophical doctrine, and the liberation that comes from recognizing the unchanging awareness that witnesses all experience. A powerful discourse on the Buddha's relevance for contemporary seekers facing life's fundamental questions.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa (three times) — Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble, and fully Self-Enlightened One.

I want to start with a quote from somebody who sent me an email: "I thought I had a pretty good grasp on death, but I can't get a handle on it right now. It all just seems so futile and pointless, all the striving. Whether it's striving to earn enough money, striving to maintain ethics, striving to make good memories, what's the point when you just end up a photograph on someone's computer?"

Now, you might be thinking to yourself, today we're celebrating the Buddha and his life, why is this monk making me depressed? Well, the reason that this caught me was not only because of its poignancy, but also there's a truthfulness about it, and it gives us a feeling for why the Buddha should leave his family.

You've got a 29-year-old — this is the story told around the Buddha — and he leaves his wife, his family (that would have been a long extended family in those days, very close) and a newly born child whom he calls Rahula, meaning chains. We have these pictures of him having a peek and then obviously getting on his horse and shooting off into the homeless life.

Men and women, of course, have left their families for various reasons. War, for instance, is a regular one. But he was living in a place which had peace. It was a small clan that was living in the south of present-day Nepal, part of the greater kingdom of Kosala. His father was the head man, head honcho. So he would have had a bit of influence, a good future to look forward to. He was a Kshatriya, which meant the warrior caste.

The caste system was fairly well established. The Brahmins were still considered second class in his area. More to the east, towards present-day Bangladesh, it seems they'd become first, the top of the caste system. They were the mouths of Brahma, and the Kshatriyas were the shoulders, and all the rest were the body and the legs. That image of a caste system, quite rigid.

His life would have been fairly pleasant. He wouldn't have been toiling as such, messing about most of the time, I would have thought — practising maybe a couple of arts, a couple of the martial arts, generally talking about government and all the stuff that was going on, but generally not a stressful life. So something in him drove him. Even around that time there's nothing to suggest that there was a close death or anything like that, although remember his mother had died at childbirth, so I'm sure that hangs somewhere in a person's memory.

It's the way this person puts it, you see: "I thought I had a pretty good grasp on death." I think most of us would say that. We've got a pretty good grasp on it. And then somebody close dies, or it's our time, and then you suddenly realise that this grasp hasn't got such a good hold. You can't get a handle on it, you see — death shocks you. The reason is that death is so final. That's it, isn't it? Everything is lost, you see, at death.

I remember there was a little joke about an elderly lady who died, who was very rich, and they asked the solicitor, "How much did she leave? What did she leave?" And he said, "Everything." That's it — everything. When it touches upon you then you get that feeling of ungroundedness, that floatiness, that fear, that anxiety, and that sense of uselessness, desperation, meaninglessness.

That takes us to the existentialists of the middle of the last century — people like Albert Camus, who said that consciousness was absurd. That was the general existential position, that consciousness itself is absurd. In other words, there was no reason for it, and it was completely absurd to suffer. So Camus' idea was, well, enjoy life while you can, and if you can't, well, jump. Get rid of it. What's the point? So here he has got into this worthlessness, this meaninglessness of life.

That gives us some idea, maybe, of the Buddha's mental state when he left. Because in those times, the horror wasn't this finishing, wasn't this annihilation. It was this continuous onward going — that you'd be reborn again as a human being over and over again. There didn't seem to be an escape from it at all. Although there were teachers who said there was an escape, it was usually into some higher realm, and it was all predicated on a particular person's experience — mainly, from the Buddha's point of view, as he came to find out, based on your meditative experiences.

We have these absorption states which are very refined states of mind. So if you were to die in that state, or you were an adept at getting into that state, then you would be reborn into this higher realm. That actually still exists in the cosmology of Buddhism, Theravāda Buddhism.

We have to capture him at that moment there of, in a sense, a desperation which comes with meaninglessness — the whole point of having to come back again and again. So it's with that, of course, that he goes on his search, and he goes out with the hope of actually discovering, as he would put it later, the end of suffering. But actually, I think, in his own mind, it would have been the escape from rebirthing, from reincarnation, constant reincarnation.

When he practises with the first two teachers, remember he gets these very deep mental states, and again it's this idea that if you die in that state, you'll be reborn there, and that you'll be there forever in this beautiful state. But as he was a human being, he kept falling out of it. So there was a suggestion there, must have been a suggestion in him, that even though he was born in this heavenly place, the *kamma*, the energy that would keep him there would eventually run out, and he'd fall back into being a human being. That's basically also some of the teaching that we have from the Buddha, that in this rebirthing process, depending upon the energy or the amount of power that there is in that state, you can fall from it when it's been exhausted. You would fall down or perhaps move up with it, who knows.

So he found that to be not satisfactory. It wasn't giving him some way of putting an end to this constant rebirth.

When he practises self-mortification, that's a completely different philosophy. That's the understanding that the soul is trapped in the body and the body itself is a manifestation of your bad *kamma*. So the idea is to try and get rid of your body, especially the appetites of the body. So you deny yourself in order to reduce your appetites for the body, reduce your attachment to this life form. By doing so, the soul would then untrap itself and rise to heaven and stay there. This would have been an understanding of the Jains, for instance.

You can see there's a lot going on. There were also materialists who, like this person, believed that once you die, that was it. And there were people who didn't believe in good works or bad works, that they would have an effect. They would say that if you went to one side of the Ganges, full of compassion and love and joy, and came down the other side with hatred, greed and aversion, it didn't actually matter because it was all fate, it was all driven by circumstance.

You can see he's in this area of tremendous fermentation, a bit like today really. If you look at the human race, all over the place. You get this feeling that there was a lot of investigation going on about the purpose of life.

He goes out, you see, with this sort of despairing state, this feeling about the meaninglessness of life. When, of course, he becomes fully liberated, what he discerns is how we create this suffering. The whole accent then turns upon who is actually — or what is actually — causing this rebirth.

Now whether we believe in rebirth as something that happens after death doesn't really matter, because all we have is this present moment and we must be rebirthing now. We must be in a process of recreating ourselves all the time. It's not a case of launching it into an after-death process. That really remains within your own personal belief, your own personal perspective on life. If you've had a past life experience, then you probably have some proof within yourself that you go on. But if you haven't, then you take it on, as we say, confidence for the while and hope for the best.

The fact that there might be annihilation upon death is in itself not that tremendously horrible, because once you're annihilated, well, at least there's no suffering. That's it, it's gone. But the thing is that it's really to catch the teaching as a moment-to-moment teaching — that actually here and now we are rebirthing — and to understand what's actually empowering that.

When we talk about rebirth, if we just go through what it is to be a human being from moment to moment, first of all, there's this body. Now we know this body is made up of something like 10 trillion cells and it's got 100 trillion guest cells. These cells are constantly dying, reproducing themselves. So this body is not the body that we were born with. Well, they tell you it's not the body you had seven years ago.

That's something really — when you look into a mirror, you can say to your face, "You weren't here seven years ago and you won't be here in seven years." It's like reminding ourselves that this feeling of being me, this hardness, this constancy, this substantiality that we have a feeling around this body, this me, actually doesn't have a basis.

When you look at the body like that, and then you ask yourself things like, "Well, what do I know about my body?" You might know things theoretically — you might know, for instance, what your liver does — but do you know what it's doing now? Well, it better be doing a good job, because it's supposed to be doing a good job now, right?

If you ask yourself things like, "What would I have known about the brain before modern science?" All I know actually about the brain is that I'm up here somewhere, aren't I? Most times I'm talking to you, I'm talking to you up here somewhere, about half an inch or so behind this bone. I feel myself to be up here, and I'm talking to you, and I haven't a clue what's inside there at all. I've no direct experience of it.

If you look at me now, what do you know of your face? It's a big hole, isn't it? It's a big hole and you're looking through it. It's weird, isn't it? And then I can see your face, but you can't see yours. Very strange situation we're in.

If you grasp the fact that the body itself has its own life form, it's actually doing its own thing. As you know, it can let us down terribly.

Then if you look at your heart life, your emotional life, well, it's all over the place, isn't it? You get up feeling great and then you're all over. There's no control over it. There's no absolute control. You can push things away. You can suppress stuff and put your mind on something which makes you happy, which lifts your spirits. But apart from that, you're still going to have to deal with this stuff because, well, we know it's all under there.

So the heart itself is in this constant process of changing, of moving. In meditation, if we look closely, what happens is that we put words to it. We say, "Oh, I'm angry," or "I'm depressed," or "I'm happy, I'm joyful now." But actually when you go into it, and you ac-

tually feel what's there, well, it's just a feeling. It's just a feeling, like a sensation, like an itch which you want to scratch and then it disappears. There's nothing substantial about it at all, except that we give it a substantiality by saying it's me.

Something happens with the body and the heart whenever we turn it into something that I am. It's impossible to escape. As soon as I say to myself, "Oh, I'm depressed," that's it, isn't it? I'm depressed — where are we going to go from there? It's like Prozac, isn't it? There's no escape from "I am depressed." Worse is "I am happy." Because in the midst of "I am happy," I am happy. And then the happiness goes. Then what am I? See?

This process of identifying with it, identifying with the emotional state, gives it some sort of solidity, some sort of permanency, some sort of reality. But when we distance from it and we look at it and we feel it, it's just a feeling. It's just a feeling. Mental feeling, maybe, but it's just a feeling.

Even more fleeting are these thoughts. When we see these thoughts come and go, most times we're caught up in them. And for most times, rightly so — we're having a conversation, we're on the telephone or whatever. But what we notice when we come to meditate, it goes completely haywire. We've no control over it at all. Then you realise that maybe that's the way it is in daily life and I'm just fooling myself.

You realise that no thought ever repeats itself. There's no repetition. Everything is absolutely creative. Therefore there's no ability to hold on to something. You can't hold on either to this body — it's changing — to the heart states, although they're very similar. One state of depression generally feels very much like the next. But they're all completely different in the sense of what's actually happening in this moment.

The idea of trying to hold on to something, which is what we do, it becomes ridiculous. See? That's one of the drives of our meditation. When I say meditation, I'm not just talking about in a sitting posture, but even in ordinary daily life, just to be aware at the end of a day that the day is gone. That's it. It's finished. Complete. At the end of a meal, it's gone. Finished. You can't do anything about it. You never come back. That's it — and feel the grief.

It's just catching that impermanency of things, that absolute annihilation. That's where we get the feeling of annihilation, in the present moment, that every moment actually annihilates. Phenomenally speaking — in other words, the consciousness that we have, what we experience, even though the stimulus is given to us from the outside world — everything that we have completely comes to an end and it annihilates. That's it. It's gone.

Concentrating on that, concentrating on the end of things, brings us right face to face with this problem of death. That's where I think the Buddha must have been when he started on his journey.

Something, as we know, something changed in him when all these things failed. There was this change of way of looking at things. We can only imagine that, having been to all these teachers, he was in a bit of a state of despair, really, because there was no answer. Nobody had shown him. He'd been through all the exercises. He knew all the arguments, because later on, after his liberation, he could argue his point with all the other teachers that were around, all the other philosophers and people like that. Yet he'd come to this point of desperation.

So there was a flip, there was a turnaround. The turnaround was basically: instead of chasing for happiness, instead of trying to find happiness, he now turns inward to see how he creates suffering. What his discovery is, you might say, is that the world we're creating is the one that we are creating. Even in this room now we have as many rooms as there are people, and when you grasp that — if you grasp that actually...

Everything that you're experiencing now is being manufactured within here, within this body, the heart process as well, and the feeling of the room. It's all being manufactured through the sense bases of the body and what the brain does with it and the mind does with it. And we have this consciousness which is only limited by phenomena. I'm only limited to what I can see by these walls. If these walls weren't here, then my conscience would be able to contain the whole area. If I was stuck in the middle of the universe, I'd be able to contain the whole universe because my conscience is as loud or as wide as what comes in through my sense bases. But it's all here, it's all me, it's all projections. None of it actually really exists outside me as something I can experience. That's why I can't experience the world you experience.

So there's some sort of disconnection between us. And we can only contact each other through language, through a certain empathy, through a certain feel. But you can't actually be in another person's world. We're trapped in this consciousness. We're trapped within our own world, which is a terrifying idea if you think about it.

So when you begin to realize that, then the problem is how do I then make this world that I'm manufacturing somewhere where I want to continue living, where I want to actually enjoy life rather than being always in a state of conflict. And that's when we come back into this process and realize this whole thing about desire and attachment, and aversion, and having a relationship with what we're experiencing, always to do with either wanting, grasping, or pushing away, or running away.

And then, as you come behind that, you find that there's somebody that wants to do this. So your original, the original problem lies deep, deep, deep within our psyche, all around this idea of, who am I? This sense of identity. And in our meditation, when we distance something from us, as those of you in the room this morning, and those who've been meditating anyway, what we're doing is we're finding a kernel of identity within ourselves which is separating out from the psychophysical organism with its sensations and feelings, emotions, moods, thoughts and images.

Now, that's a very strange place. Think about it. Because now you are the observer. You're actually saying to yourself, in so many words, I am the observer of, right? The perceiver can't be the perceived. You can't have the two. And I am, my feeling is that I am this observer. I am this feeler within what everything's going on in my mind. So, I'm an alien. Right? I mean, I shouldn't be here. I've lost my identity at a certain level with the body, heart and mind. It's a very strange place to be.

Now, the thing is that when you get into that place, when you get into that place and you're very quiet and you're in that place, just have a glance back into it and find out what's not there. And that's where you get the teaching of the Buddha about not me, not mine. So this not me, not mine is not a statement that there isn't a self, that there isn't a soul, that there isn't something which is transcendent. There's no way in the scriptures he says there is no self. It's a teaching tool. What he's saying is everything that becomes an object to your awareness, you should be saying to yourself, the perceiver can't be the perceived, it can't be me. So that's not me and it's not mine.

I can't possess something which is, if I don't have a relationship with something, I can't possess it. And most of our possession, remember, is either some sort of emotional clinging or a legal fiction. I mean, if somebody steals your mobile, you might go around saying, somebody stole my mobile, it's not yours anymore. It's just possession. You have to watch the way that the mind works in terms of identifying and possessing something.

So now, as we go down through the layers, so here we are, we've looked at the body and it's just a pile of cells constantly changing completely out of my control. I mean, I can't get into a cell and tell it to divide. I can't do anything with the cellular makeup of my body. When it comes to my heart level, I can allow the heart to manifest and it will slowly heal itself of its problems and I can build up the heart through the same process of imagination so that I actually have a beautiful heart, a beautiful mind and I can do something about thinking so there's some way of controlling it if you consider a driver in a car for those of you who have cars, those who can drive.

When you're driving and you're actually in the driving, you're in the zone driving, you and the car are one and there's this feeling of total control and it's only when the wheel drops off that you realise that actually you're not in control, you freak out. So there's that sense of identifying which gives you a sense of control. This is the problem with identity. And so here we are constantly disidentifying with things. And in so doing, undermining the relationship that identity creates, which is wanting to control.

And that wanting to control manifests in terms of desire and attachment. So as soon as something is pleasant, you want to control it. You want to maintain it. You want to increase it. And as soon as something is unpleasant, you want to get rid of it. So we're in constant conflict with the way things are. Now I'm talking within ourselves. I'm talking within ourselves, a psychology which is the negative part of us. Don't confuse this with compassion and love, which is coming from a wisdom center, where you're trying to do something, but from a very different angle. And it's coming out of trying to find an honest and a skillful relationship. That's what we're moving towards when we develop this goodwill, this compassion and joy. And that, of course, brings a happiness which is not clinging. Love doesn't cling. Love allows.

So this was his discovery. And it's interesting that as it's put in the mythology of his teaching, the first teaching was around these Four Noble Truths, just laying the platform that there is suffering. So this is it, there is death. And it's like really laying the platform about life as unsatisfactory. That we shouldn't be seeking permanent happiness in life. The joys in life come and go. Simple as that.

And then the second noble truth to point to the very kernel, which is the problem, the desire, which is to do with our relationship to things, right? This English word desire is a bit, it's not quite right because you can have a good desire, an honest desire. I'm translating the word *taṇhā*, which is often translated as thirst or craving. But all it is, is desire based on wrong understanding, desire based on delusive understanding.

And then the third noble truth, a really clear declaration that there is an end to suffering. You can't get clearer than that. No Western psychotherapist has said that. They all say you can get to an accommodation with life, but nobody has ever stated in the West that you can come to the end of suffering in this very life. Not that I know of anyway. Is there one? No, I don't think there is.

So, and of course, the fourth one is how to get there, the Eightfold Path. And the top of the Eightfold Path is this right understanding. And right view is probably a better way of expressing it. And to begin to turn the way we see things, to turn them around. Constant reminder about how things arise and pass away. Constant reminder that every time suffering arises, there must be something wrong within my relationship to

what's happening here. There's something in me that's got it wrong. And to look into it and take responsibility for it. And the fact that not to substantiate things, not to make this sense of I so strong.

And you do that, of course, by connecting with other people. One example is the Buddha visits these three monks who are liberated, completely liberated. He calls them the Anuruddhas. And he asks one of them, how is it that you live so peacefully together? And the kernel statement within the discourse is, well, when I get up in the morning, I say to myself, what if I do what the others do? What if I put aside what I want to do and do what the others want to do?

Now, how many of you get up in the morning and say that to yourselves? What if I put aside what I want to do and do what the others want to do? Now, frankly, in a community, that only works if everybody says it. I should end up being slightly abused. Because everybody will make you do what they want to do. So there has to be that reciprocity.

So we can see now, as we go through this, just the amazing insight that the Buddha had. I mean, I couldn't have got there myself without the Buddha. I mean, I couldn't have got there without my teachers who told me to look this way. I mean, I'd still be a raving lunatic. I would never have been able to have grasped this were it not for the direction from my teachers and they going right back to the Buddha who made that kernel insight.

So that's where he stands within our particular tradition. He's the founder. He's the fountain of all that insight that we have. And he's the exemplar because he himself went through this whole process. It wasn't something that he thought up. It was something that he himself personally experienced about himself. And in the sense that he's an archetype because all of us have to go through this process of renunciation.

And if you look at any spiritual tradition, it doesn't matter what religion it is, you'll find it's always a process of renunciation. And the renunciation, remember, isn't the denial of the world. It's not a world negative thing. It's a denial of seeing the world as the place to become perfectly happy in. And what we're aiming towards is that when we are in a state of joyfulness, we can actually fully enjoy it without wanting it to be repeated, without holding on to it. And that when we're in a state of misery and pain and all that, that we're able to be patient with it and just bear with it. That's where we're going to.

So the Buddha, when he died, he was praised afterwards for his patience, for his bearing of his illness. He had food poisoning. He had food poisoning. And even there, just finally, even there before he died, he's able to encourage people. All compounded things arise and pass away. Strive diligently for your liberation. Always ask, what will be our last words? Why me? There was a lovely cartoon with all these ladies around, this elderly lady who was dying, and she's looking at them and saying, why me? Why not one of you?

So you can see that that's where it's leading us towards anyway. That's what we mean by liberation from suffering. We don't mean liberation from the pains and the emotional stuff around life. We mean a liberation from it.

In fact, just to bring the talk to an end, could you bring me that thing, Marion? That picture frame. It's not a picture. Just a picture frame, yeah. I didn't think I'd need this, but I said I had it. It's just that when you start talking, you never know where you'll end up. Thanks a lot, mate.

So this is an amazing woman. I mean, she died in 1991. She was 90 years old. And here she's telling us what it's like to be fully liberated. I mean, this is a very clear, straightforward statement. She says body, mind and essence are all distinct and separate realities. The body, the mind, and then she's talked about essence. So just keep that word in mind.

And absolutely everything is known. It's not as though she doesn't experience things as they come up. When she talks about earth, water, fire and wind, she's talking about her sensual experience, which is weight, temperature, movement, feeling, memory, thought and consciousness. So they all come up. Sound, sight, smells, taste, touches, emotions, anger, greed and delusion are all known.

Now note that, anger, greed and delusion. So the enlightened person hasn't got rid of all the habitual little tendencies within the mind, right? So they're known when they come up, and I know them all as they exist in their own natural states. But no matter how much I'm exposed to them, I'm unable to detect even an instant when they have any power over my heart. So now notice that word, over my heart. No power over my heart.

And they arise and cease, they're forever changing, but the presence that knows them never changes for an instant. It is forever unborn and undying, and this is the end of suffering. Presence.

So she uses three words to try and point to something which is indescribable. It's an essence, it's a heart, and it's a presence. And our job in our practice is to actually begin to recognize what that is. And we recognize it more easily by constantly making everything that we experience an object of our experience, by pointing to it.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and it has not caused even greater confusion. And that you will, by your own deliberate and devoted practice, soon liberate yourself from all suffering. Sooner rather than later.

Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu.

Delayed but yet sweet to the ear. Three teachers.

Buddha as Refuge

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 12 min

In this illuminating DhammaByte, Bhante Bodhidhamma unpacks the profound meaning behind taking refuge in the Buddha by exploring the traditional nine epithets that describe the Awakened One. He examines each quality in detail: Arahat (one who has completed the path), Sammāsambuddha (fully self-awakened), Vijjācaraṇasampanno (accomplished in wisdom and virtue), Sugato (faring well), Lokavidū (knower of worlds), and others.

The talk emphasizes why the Buddha is called 'self-enlightened' – having found awakening through his own insight after leaving his teachers and remembering that childhood moment of pure, curious awareness during his father's ploughing ceremony. Bhante explores the inseparable relationship between wisdom and virtue, explaining how ethical purification naturally accompanies deepening insight.

Particularly valuable is the discussion of the Buddha as 'knower of worlds,' relating the six realms not only to cosmological destinations but to our own mental states – how we can experience hell realms through panic or depression, animal realms through intoxication, and celestial realms through wholesome mental states. The talk concludes by clarifying that while we take refuge in the historical Buddha, this also points to our own potential for awakening, whether as Paccekabuddhas or Sāvakabuddhas following the Buddha's path.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So I thought actually this evening for my little Dharma bite, I'd actually do this word Buddha. And we chanted these nine attributes.

So the first one we say is *iti pi so bhagavā araham*. This word *araham* refers to having completed the path of training. It's the fourth level of sainthood. The first one being stream entrance, when a person intuitively attains Nibbāna. And then the next two are developments of that insight. See that it's always into the same thing: the three characteristics, impermanence, not-self, and how we create suffering. So this word *araham* simply means that he's completed the training to full awakening.

The next one is *sammāsambuddho*, so fully self-enlightened. So why do we say he was self-enlightened? Because he went to various teachers, and then he practised mortifications. And really the influence, we think, of the Nigaṇṭha, the leader of the Jains,

who would have been his elder contemporary. We say that because remember he comes to a crunch where he leaves his five companions and he sits by the roadside pretty dejected. And when I contemplate that moment, I would have thought it's a pretty heavy moment of anguish because he's left his family, he's left everything, he's gone out, he's done this training and it didn't work, and then he's done all this starving himself almost to death, and that didn't work, and there was nothing else on offer, nothing else in the spiritual field on offer. But he was still there with his original problem as to suffering—why was he suffering? And remember, in those days it would have been put in terms of continuous rebirth, *saṃsāra*. There would have been seemingly no end to being reborn in this realm, in that realm.

And it was in that desperation, remember, that he remembers this childhood occasion. And that's why we say he's self-enlightened, because it was the memory of how he was watching his father doing the ploughing ceremony that gave him the inspiration to sit again. And of course, what he remembered was that childlike mind, which we develop in our meditation, of just watching, just looking, with that curiosity, that enquiry. And that's the reason we say he's sambuddho, he's self-enlightened.

We also say he's *vijjācaraṇasampanno*, which means that he is fully developed in both his wisdom and his virtue. And that's something which is important to understand, that those two are concurrent. You can't grow in wisdom without the growth in virtue, because the defilements we suffer from, the unethical behaviour that we commit, is an expression of delusion. That's what it is. So as we grow in wisdom, there is a growth in virtue. You can't have the one without the other.

So I remember, it's not so bad these days, but there was a time you couldn't talk about morality. People didn't want to know about it. It was Victorian. So people would do... I mean, I know people who used to do six months head-banging meditation and then go out on sex, drugs and rock and roll, and it's like they won't get anywhere. You can't do that. At some point there has to be this purification of the heart, this purification of intention. And it can happen naturally just through the meditation. It becomes systemic as it drops into the attitude. Or you can develop it as an exercise in itself through right action.

So remember there's an eightfold path, it's not just the onefold path of right understanding. It runs systemically through our intentions, which is based in the heart, our attitudes, and then through the way we speak, the way we act, and into our livelihood. So that's why we say he's accomplished both in his wisdom and in his virtue. The one comes with the other.

Then we say he's *sugato*, which means he lives a happy life, he's at ease. He fares well through life. In other words, he's happy. He's found the end of suffering. So when you find the end of suffering, it seems, you're happy, which makes sense, doesn't it?

There was an occasion when somebody complains about the toughness of the training. And he says, you know, it's hard. And the Buddha replies, yes, it is, but people attain liberation. They attain *Nibbāna*. And the guy says, *Nibbāna*, so what? He says, well, when you get to *Nibbāna*, you are contented and really happy.

So the contentment is a mind, is a heart without unskillful desires. And the happiness is the basic flavour of the mind, which expresses itself in various forms of love, compassion, joy, and so on. That's where we're heading for. Have faith.

Then there's *lokavidū*. So he's the knower of the worlds, and this really points to, remember, the three insights that he had upon enlightenment. The first one was all his past lives and how he came to be the enlightenment. And then he saw that beings moved from one realm to the other according to their moral behaviour, which was new for the age. Most people thought it was just destination, but our destination is determined by our morality. And thirdly was that he was free of all defilement. So in that he's saying he saw how the law of *kamma* works. And in that case he saw the six worlds.

So there's the hell realms, there's the animal realm, there's the hungry ghost realm—that's a being driven by insatiable desires. There's the demon world, which are those people driven by hatred and anger and jealousy and all that stuff. There's the human world, here we are. And there's the celestial world, which is the happy realm.

And of course, these not only refer to specific realms, which is either provable or not provable, it doesn't matter, but they refer also to our own states of mind. So if we get drunk, for instance, we've entered into the animal world, the lack of intelligence. And if you fall into a deep depression or a psychotic episode and things like that, then you're in a hell realm. Even if it's for a moment where you find yourself in a place like a little panic. The whole point of those places is that you don't see the escape. That's hell. So he's *lokavidū*, he's the knower of the worlds.

He's also said to be the *anuttaro purisadammasārathi*. So *sārathi* is a charioteer, so he's a trainer, incomparable trainer of human beings. And this refers to the fact that he didn't just leave a teaching, he left a methodology which includes the rules of engagement. So we do the five precepts, you can take on the eight precepts, you can do ten precepts, and finally you get 227 if you become a monastic. So all the way he's creating institutions whereby people can actually see the training that they want to get themselves.

And we call them sikkhāpada. We don't call them commandments. Sometimes they're called precepts, but even that's not quite right. They're sikkhāpada. Pada means footsteps, sikkhā is training. So they are footsteps of training. They're the training rules. So that's why we say he is the incomparable trainer and leader of human beings.

Then we say he is satthā devamanussānaṃ. So satthā means a teacher, so he teaches in these two specific realms, the celestial realms, but also to human beings. So he's the actual teacher. And he takes that role seriously. There's a point where he may not have taught, but just out of compassion, the desire to pass the good news on to people arose in him. And the only doubt he had was whether people in fact could receive his message. And it's put in this mythological sense that the great Brahmā Sahampati came down and said, there are people with just a little dust in their eyes. And then he went out and began his teaching.

And one of the little phrases he comes up with, he always says that, whatever a teacher can do out of compassion for his students, I have done for you. So he's really committed to that whole process. And all his life, from 35 to 80, he spent just wandering around teaching. That's his life after that. So he's the teacher, he's the teacher of gods and men.

Buddho comes from the word budh which just means awakened. And I think that's the better word to enlightenment. Enlightenment gives the impression of something sudden, but it's a gradual awakening. And here it's almost like an adjective. He is the awakened one, the buddho.

And then finally Bhagavā. That's an honorific. It means anything from the sublime one to the reverend to the illustrious, the blessed, depends how you want to translate it. And that's how he's talked of in the scriptures. He's referred to as the Bhagavā, the blessed one.

And those epithets really, those descriptions of him, encapsulate this word Buddha. So when we actually take refuge, we are taking refuge in that historical figure, see? There's a trust, a confidence in that. But it also, remember, can refer to that within us, which is to be awakened.

Of course we don't have to be fully self-enlightened Buddhas. There are two other types. There's the Paccekabuddha who is fully self-enlightened but doesn't teach, either because he can't—it wouldn't be because he won't, maybe he just can't—and then there is the Sāvakabuddha which are those who become Buddhas simply by following a Buddha. So everybody can become the Buddha.

And that's about it, my little Dharma bite. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be fully liberated sooner rather than later.

Comments on a Statement by Mae Chee Kaew

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 45 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines a powerful statement by Mae Chee Kaew, a recognized Thai forest nun: "The presence that knows them never changes for an instant. It is forever unborn and undying. This is the end of suffering." Using this as a foundation, he provides a comprehensive exploration of the Buddha's core teachings on dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) and its cessation.

The talk delves deeply into the Four Noble Truths, examining how our fundamental delusion about selfhood creates suffering through the process of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination). Bhante explains how we create our experiential world through the six āyatana (sense spheres) and how attachment arises through vedanā (feeling-tone). He emphasizes the crucial distinction between experiencing pleasant and unpleasant sensations versus becoming identified with our reactions to them.

Drawing from the Mahāsi Sayādaw tradition, Bhante highlights the importance of observing intentions as they arise, explaining how this awareness allows unwholesome sankharas to exhaust themselves naturally. He explores the Eightfold Path as a systematic approach to liberation, showing how right awareness (sammā sati) serves as the foundation for all spiritual development. The talk concludes with reflections on the transcendent "presence that knows" – the unchanging awareness that remains unaffected by all arising and passing phenomena.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambudassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambudassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambudassa — Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully self-enlightened.

Noreen keeps up her group of Skype — about four or five of them who discuss the Dharma. They take a book or they take something, and this was something that came up for them. She sent it to me because there was a question about something which we will come to later.

So Mae Chee Kaew is a Thai forest nun who is recognised as a fully liberated being, and this is one of her statements. We'll use it to find out how we can get there, even this week:

"Body, mind and essence are all distinct and separate realities. Absolutely everything is known. Earth, water, fire and wind. Body, feeling, memory, thought and consciousness. Sounds, sights, smells, tastes, touches and emotions. Anger, greed and delusion — all are known. I know them all as they exist in their own natural states. But no matter how much I am exposed to them, I am unable to detect even an instant when they have any power over my heart. They arise and cease. They are forever changing. But the presence that knows them never changes for an instant. It is forever unborn and undying. This is the end of suffering."

That's pretty clear. So how do we get to this point, I wonder? The end of suffering.

We'll come back to this in a moment, because if we want to teach people the Dharma, then we've got to be pretty clear ourselves about the basic position the Buddha took. To actually be able to feel that you have the internal logic of his teaching, the internal rationality of his teaching, to make that bold statement — there is an end of suffering. I don't think there's a single Western psychologist or school that says there's an end to suffering. Maybe if they were Christians, they would have thought so. But in the sense of there being an end of suffering right here in this very life, I think that's quite a bold statement to make.

So for us to revise, really, just to go through our minds, the four basic truths that the Buddha taught. The truth of *dukkha*. Remember, *dukkha* means something hard to bear — that's its translation. Hard to bear. It's not only referring to the pains and aches of the body and the emotional upsets, the pressures and the stress of life. It always boils down to these three characteristics. That our deep suffering, the deeper level of existential suffering, comes about because we're not actually seeing things as they really are. That's his normal statement.

Now that statement, which is a translation of the Pali, isn't actually absolutely correct. The translation is "to see and understand how things have come to be." So this is the Buddha — he's interested in process. He's interested in process. So when we, today for instance, when we're observing the process of eating — it's the whole process that we are trying to engage with, trying to understand. How is it that we create this world within this psychophysical organism, this body and mind, this fathom-length body, as the Buddha puts it? Within this fathom-length body is the world, the creation of the world.

It's really beginning to understand that we are limited by the body as to what we can experience anyway. And then whatever information the body gives us is always taken inward and fixed into our concepts about things. And these concepts about things are built up from past perceptions.

Very simply, today we had chilli beans. Well, we've probably made our own chilli beans and had chilli beans elsewhere. So as soon as we tasted these chilli beans, we knew whether they were the real chilli beans or not — because either they're not the proper chilli beans, or they are the proper chilli beans, or they're almost the proper chilli beans. So it's this judging mind. And that's something else — remember, judging — there's a distinction between judging and judgmental, but putting that aside, this whole process of creating the world within ourselves, having this memory of past events, re-living really the world through our particular memory patterns. And that's the *saṅkhāras* — that's our habits.

So when the Buddha talks about this *dukkha*, he's digging deep at the level of our perception, how we perceive things. And one of them is that we perceive continuity, and we actually really do believe that the person — me — who got up this morning, well, I'm pretty well the same person now. I don't see, I don't experience myself arising and passing away. I experience myself as absolutely constant within a mass of change. It's me always that's doing stuff. And getting down to that *anicca*, getting down to this real deep level of impermanence, is to see that the actual self is arising and passing away — the sense of me arises with every momentary experience I'm having.

So this again digs even deeper to the point of identity. Now here in this statement, she says, "I am unable to detect, even for an instant, when they have any power over my heart." To have power is to have control — it's the self. Whenever you say, "This is me," and then you define it. If you say "I am" and you put something at the end of that sentence — "I am angry," "I am happy," "I am an engineer," "I am a nurse" — whatever you say after that, you're locked into that definition, even if only for that moment, for that time. And that's how we define ourselves. When that definition disappears, then of course at times it can send us into a process of not knowing who we are. So you get this crisis, an identity crisis.

I remember that I used to have a Tai Chi teacher. He was a lovely man. And I stopped going, and I met him years on — well, not that far on, maybe two or three years on — and he was half the man I remember him. And I said, "What's happened?" I thought he'd had an illness. He said no, he just lost his job. So with his job, lost his identity. It wasn't only the pain of loss of the income, but the whole self-definition of who he was and what his position was in the world — it was just taken away from him. And he had the usual depression and all that sort of stuff that comes with that loss of identity. And of course, the final loss of identity is when they lay us out in the morgue. I mean, that's when we know we've lost our identity.

So the way the Buddha digs really deep — and it's a place, of course, that most therapies don't want to go; it's a bit frightening to get down to that level — but that's where we want to get to. We want to get down to this business of who am I before I describe myself, before there's something coming after the "am" — "I am" whatever. And it's because — remember — because of this deep delusion as to who I am, meaning this body, this heart, this mind, this person. Which exists, by the way. The person exists in the sense that it's momentary. It's a momentary total conception of me. There are experiences in meditation where you can step out of the self. It's a bit strange, but you can step out of it and you see, oh, there's the self. And that self — but it's not permanent. That's the problem.

Now because of this identity thing, of this identity of being this person, then remember that I have this relationship with the world now. And when we ask ourselves, "How do I want to be? What do I want to be?" I think we've come to this word: happy. "I just want to be happy, for heaven's sake." Everybody will define their happiness in their own way, but that "I want to be happy" is just — that's all I want to be.

You want to be happy, and because of this delusion though, remember, we seek the happiness in just these wrong places. And that's where we form attachments. And attachments are simply our psychological dependency on something. And then we find we don't have control over it, and so the whole gamut of human misery starts — the frustration, grief. And of course, once you've gained something, you've got to protect it one way or the other, whether it's against some nasty person or a government — you've got to protect what you have. And so there's that aversion and the fear of loss.

So you can see from this deep delusion that arises a more tangible *dukkha*. I mean, if you were to say to somebody, "Are you suffering?" they'd probably point to these sorts of things — like "I'm depressed, my job's not going well, my relationship's collapsing," all that sort of stuff. So they're pointing to something actually concrete and something they can actually feel and explain. But at a deeper level we have this inexplicable sense of identity.

You can see from her statement that something's missing there, isn't it? Because no matter what's happening to her at any level, it doesn't have any power over her heart. In other words, she cannot be grasped by it. She cannot be lost in it. Deluded by it. So that's where the Buddha stakes out his cause: there is *dukkha*, and there's no way — there can't be *dukkha*. That's the point. There's no way for us, with the idea of a self, there can be anything but *dukkha* in the end. And even when we are totally happy,

when things are going perfectly right and the world is full of gold and shining, there is always that awful feeling underneath that things are passing, that you don't have control over it. So nothing can give us absolute total satisfaction.

Again, it's usually expressed in the negative: "The presence that knows them never changes for an instant." This is the end of suffering. So in terms of how we would normally define our happiness, normally define a state of *adukkha* — not suffering — we would normally define it in a very positive way, such as feeling happy, going on holiday, having a good job, all that sort of stuff. We would actually define it as some sort of existing experience. But this can't be that, can it? Because she's opted out of all experiences. This is a presence that knows. Never changes for an instant. It's forever unborn and undying. In other words, it's not part of the process of the phenomenal world that we're experiencing, which is arising and passing away. Complete distinct from it. This is the end of suffering.

So our question is then — what is the next position that the Buddha takes? What's the cause of it? Now he doesn't — having stated these three delusions of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* — he doesn't drive at the cause — this is an important point — he doesn't drive at the cause of being; the problem is identity. That's not where he's positioning us, because that would be impossible to work with directly. He's pointing to how this delusion and this wrong identity manifests. And it manifests in our desires.

So then he gives us this dependent origination, which is in the second noble truth. He tries to point out to us where the weak link is in this whole process of creating suffering for ourselves. And you'll notice that at the base you've got this sense of ignorance. Now remember that ignorance is not culpable. It's not as though we should have known better. It's a state of not knowing. And just like we don't know some things, we then presume to know, or we think we know, or we make a guess, or we take a leap — and it's usually into some sort of pit.

So it's accepting that at the base of us, the fundamental part of us, is a state of not knowing. And this, remember, translates into the heart as a sense of innocence. So from a moral heart point of view — compassion, joy and peace — we start from the point of innocence, which means not doing harm. It's the Latin: no harm. So there's "no harm" and "not knowing" are combined to form what she's referring to here as body-mind — mind especially. I don't know what words she's referring to in the Pali.

The Buddha uses words contextually. Sometimes they seem to contradict each other if you're going just for a word. So take the word *citta*. *Citta* could be translated in our language as the combination of mind and heart, the old word "soul" as opposed to "spirit" — psyche. We split those in our enlightenment period, in the great 18th century en-

lightenment, so that we think of ourselves as rational beings or feeling beings. So you get people say "I think," and then others say "I feel." So this split is something that we have, which has, of course, had its brighter side — it's brought about science and technology and all that. But in the Buddha's understanding, that would all be just one faculty, and that's known as *citta*.

And yet in his victory verse, the one that we chant in the morning, he says he's achieved the *asaṅkhataṃ cittaṃ*. So he's achieved something which is not conditioned. That obviously can't be the body, the mind-heart matrix. So we have to be careful about — I don't know what words she's referring to here.

So we have this dependent origination, and we need to be clear about why the Buddha taught it. So he's teaching us how we create the world, and it's the creation in time, because these links don't always come at the same time. The first few are always there at any given time. So there's always that not knowing beneath everything we do, a sense which express themselves as a lack of wisdom. And because of that, we've created these delusions, these *saṅkhāras*. And they're running underneath every moment as a potential, like a program in a computer.

And then you have a moment of action, a moment that drops into this flow, you might say. Of course, they're momentary, arising and passing away and all that. But even so, you've got this drop into the moment, and that's when you get the body, mind and consciousness. And he separates them. The body and mind are one matrix — the body and the mind working off each other. So that's what we do when we're eating — we're seeing that there's the body taste, the heart responds with a bit of joy and so on. So that matrix is always happening, and there's the consciousness of it.

So consciousness here — you have to be careful — it's a discriminative consciousness. There is included in there a certain knowing, a certain habitual way of discriminating things, just even at a very simple perceptual level. You know that when Cook arrived in Australia, the Aborigines didn't see the ships because they didn't have a context in which to see them. It's the same with me. When I was in Sri Lanka, I heard this barking. For some reason, I hadn't associated that sort of noise, barking, with monkeys. And when they told me it was monkeys and they were up there, for the life of me, I couldn't see them. And they were just amazed that I couldn't see these monkeys. And then suddenly I saw them, because I had a picture of a monkey in my eye. They go, "Surrounded by blooming monkeys." I didn't see this — it's astonishing really.

So that whole process has to be put onto a screen, and that's your *viññāna*. But it also includes all the knowledge and the intelligence — all the knowledge and the understanding that we have is on that screen. Now once that's happened — remember, so

you've got the body, you've got the splitting up of that into the six *āyatana*. Now *āyatana* are spheres, and what the Buddha is saying is that each sphere is distinct and discrete. So you can't hear through your eyes and you can't see through your ears. It's just one of those things. I know there's this thing about synesthesia, but I think that's just in the mind — that's the mind itself working on it inside; that's the sixth sense.

The fact is that you're never going to hear through your eyes whether you like it or not. So it's recognising that we experience the world through very different avenues, which we have to collect onto this screen. So even here, you can hear me, you can see me, you can feel the atmosphere of this room. All of that is happening in little blips and blobs, but somehow it's held on this screen. And that's what the *viññāna* is referring to.

Now when that's held there, we have our moment-to-moment contacts. So there has to be those three things there.

An object, the sense base, and that consciousness, that holding on a screen for us. Now it's the next point which turns this world into likeable or unlikable. And that's the *vedanā*. And once we've experienced something like that, remember, there's always a reaction to it, of always wanting to make the world pleasant for myself and get rid of anything that's unpleasant. And it's at that point that we see the escape.

The escape is between experiencing things as pleasant and unpleasant and seeing how we're reacting to it, which is then creating a relationship to it. Now, if we see that, we also become aware that actually even at this point there's no suffering. Have you grasped that in your meditation? Have you seen that when you're aware of, say, pain in the knee, and you're aware of aversion to the pain, not wanting it, if those two become clear objects in your mind, you're not actually suffering. Even at that point, you're not actually suffering.

It's only at the next point when, as it were, you dive into, you lose yourself in that reaction, and you become, "I don't want." So the point of real suffering is always at the point of identity. Now, the question is, who's suffering? It's the Buddha who's suffering. The Buddha's suffering, and that's why he wants to get out of suffering.

See, there's no suffering as such in the body and mind. All there is, is what is pleasant and unpleasant. The point of suffering is when this very thing, this very thing, I am unable to detect, even instant, when they have power over my heart. This knowing. As soon as this heart or this knowing falls into that wrong identity, it's that which is suffering. It's the Buddha's suffering, and the Buddha wants to get out of suffering.

So grasping that, what's happening at the point of identity is that this Buddha within us is actually losing itself through the delusion, that initial delusion of believing that true happiness is to be found in the sensual world. Sensual here means the whole phenomenal world, the world that's being created by the mind out of quite minimal data, I believe.

So then, of course, having said that this is the cause, he then tells us how to do it, just missing that third step about *Nibbāna*, the end of suffering. He then tells us how we're actually going to achieve this. And you'll notice that it's completely systemic. The fact that just because we understand something or see something doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to become systemic.

So just seeing, for instance, how desire arises when we're eating and we know that there's an overlay of greed, there's an overlay of attachment to the food, an overlay of wanting to seek happiness there, just the seeing of that clearly, clearly, clearly, even though we see it absolutely clear, it's clearly not enough because we keep being greedy. So there's something else that has a problem here.

And then when we look down into the lie, we find attitude. Now, attitude refers to these conditionings within us, what our attitude is. And when we look at one of them, this selfishness, which manifests as anything we do for our own good, for our own benefit, driven by the idea that this is happiness. That's always the internal delusion there. When we see that, in fact, it has to be hit at an attitudinal level.

Now, how do you change at an attitudinal level? It's by seeing these intentions. By seeing these intentions, and that's why this is such a strong teaching within the Mahāsi tradition, the Mahāsi Sayādaw's tradition. To see an intention is to see the manifestation, the initial manifestation of a delusion, an initial manifestation of a habit that we've created which is unwholesome for us.

So as soon as I see this desire for scones, for instance, arise tomorrow, as soon as that desire hits me, I say, "Oh, that's the old greed. I'm hoping it's as good as last." So it's actually catching that moment. Now, if we have this mindfulness, this awareness, this alertness to actually be with that, then we'll allow it to exhaust itself. And every time we do that, we're drawing energy from that old habit.

So that this compact energy that we've got now directed just towards this object that we call a scone is now being drawn out. So tomorrow, when the scone is there, you'll be able to say, "I'm going to renounce the scone and sit with the pain of renunciation." Knowing that this pain is a healing pain. Because it's drawing the poison out of the sys-

tem. When all that's gone. And you feel perfectly equanimous. Then of course you can have your scone. But not without clearly seeing any arising of greed for the scone after that.

So on the opposite of course, is that when the intention is seen as wholesome, then we empower it. And in this sense, the heart's growing. So when we look at right attitude, it's normally put in those three ways, isn't it? Selfishness to generosity, hatred to love, cruelty to compassion.

Now you'll notice that there's no in-between state. You're either greedy or you're not greedy. There's not an in-between state there. So I've tended these days to use the word subliminate rather than transform because it immediately changes. So as soon as you let out this greedy feeling and you just let it burn itself out, that energy is not lost. It's there as potential and it'll be used for the right intention. And in this way, the growth toward light, from darkness to light as the Buddha says, becomes a natural process through this process of renunciation.

And that's what we mean by renunciation remember. It's not we're not trying to beat ourselves up, we're just trying to really feel those initial intentions and to stay steady amongst them and wait for it to just die away. And then of course the intention there of course doesn't finish there, does it? Because then it has to translate into the way we speak, to what we do, and into our livelihood. So in other words, it has to manifest.

Now, remember that an intention, unless it's empowered, hasn't done anything. It's not what we call a *kamma*, an act. So just my feeling greedy is, shall we say, an energy coming out of a past habit, but it's not been potentialized. Nothing's happened.

Have you heard about the rule about stealing from monks? Have I explained that to you? All the different levels of stealing that a monk can get up to when he's really bad. Have you heard it? I think you have. What it points out is very clearly the distinction between these processes.

For instance, if I pass this gong and I like it, I can feel the draw to it of wanting it, and if I just let that go then it'll disappear. But if I don't and my mind works on it, then I might get a real greed for it. And at some point passing it again, my hand might stretch out to it. Now and then I pull it back, think what are you doing you fool, but I've already committed what's known as a *dukkata*. This is a small offence against the *Vinaya*. And if I'm lazy minded and I don't watch my thoughts and next time I really go for it and I think yeah I do want it and I put my finger on it, that's *āgāro*, that's a very heavy offence.

However, if I then under a point of weakness, because I'm so entranced by this gong, I reach out and I move it a nano centimetre and then pull my hand back, that's it. I've done it. That's the theft. It's completed. I can't, I lose my robe. There's no way you can get beyond that. Even if, and I don't even get the gong. I left it there. It's absolutely useless. But the act was done.

So you can see through these, this lovely way that the *Vinaya* splits up the way that we create a bad act by not seeing that initial intention. So in the same way, of course, we sometimes have initial good intentions, but we don't act upon them. But it's actually catching a good intention and then making that effort so that it translates. So in other words, an attitude is potential. And it manifests its potential in an intention. And the intention still remains potential until it's intentioned. An intention has to be intentioned. It's this peculiar language we've got. And then you commit an act.

And that act can be of an internal thought. So you're creating a thought which is malevolent. It can be an act of speech. It can be an act of something that we've done. And it's our livelihood. And when you think of livelihood, you think, well, why would he put that in? Because it comes under action, really. That's what we do. But he's pointing out that what we do for the best part of our lives, in a sense, our work in society, it's where we put a tremendous amount of our energy, is conditioning us.

So if you work in a pub, that's one place. And if you work in a nursery, that's another place, as an effect. It's not as though these places are essentially, pubs are essentially evil, but it'd be difficult not to have an occasional drink. So if you look back on your life and the work you've done, and just consider the effect it had on you as a personality, as a character-forming thing.

And then, of course, subsisting all that is this mindfulness, right concentration, right mindfulness, and right effort. And that's, of course, always to do with a certain level of awareness, a certain being here. And that's, of course, very difficult for us because we're constantly forgetting to do that. And so this idea of stopping as often as we can during the day and just reestablishing that sense of presence.

Look what she says. But the presence that knows. The presence that knows. We have to reestablish that every moment. Even though the presence that knows may still be a little off, may still have a chink in the eye, it's still a presence that knows. And it's constantly going back to that presence that knows. That is the reminder. And then, once we're in that presence that knows, to make sure that the intention that we're going to actually act out and go into and absorb into, this is the point, absorb into, is going to help us to maintain that presence.

Now, remember that when we're in action, well, no, let's go back to the sitting meditation. In the sitting meditation, we're always trying to get this presence that knows, to be the presence that knows, to find that place within us of the observer, that observation post, where we can see things that are happening within this body, heart, and mind. Now, when we're in that position, to really recognize it as something transcendent. It's no longer caught up in what's happening.

So there may be pain in the knee and there may be a reaction to it of aversion, but there's no doing. There's just that happening. Within what? Within that presence. Within that awareness. When you hear a bird or a song of a bird, there is the sound of the eardrum and you can clearly see it. It's there in the ear and then you can feel that your heart might lift, unless it's one of these raucous crows, but if it's a nice little bird, then your heart lifts and you can see that, but you don't get lost in it, you're observing it.

Now, even though we want to get to that position and stabilize it in our meditation, remember that's only a first position in terms of what we want to do. The second position is to become so curious about what's happening within this body our mind that we center in on something and as we do that we absorb into it. Now because we've absorbed into that, whatever's happening within us, some emotional state some feeling, we've gone into it with the right intention to understand the dhamma. When we come out of that and we're back to being the observer, we've actually developed that sense of curiosity.

And with it we've developed an understanding because we've gone into the subject in a more intimate way. Now in the opposite side, when we absorb into something with a bad intention, you come out the other side with that being developed. So that's why this process of right awareness is paramount in our practice. To be aware, to keep bringing ourselves back into the present moment, is the practice, that's all it is. You can file it down, you can put all the Buddha's teachings in terms of the practice into that one word, *sati*, *samasati*.

So, how can we now understand what she's saying here? So the body, mind and essence are all distinct and separate realities. Now, I'm presuming that what she means by the essence is this very sense of presence. Because all there is is body and mind and essence. Remember this is translating the Thai. It's all second hand.

Absolutely everything is known. So within that field of awareness nothing is blocked out. Nothing is separated out or put to one side or given special attention. It's just the stuff that arises through this psychophysical organism. So earth, water, fire and wind. So these are the four elements. Remember those four elements don't exist out there. I

mean I know it's put as earth, water, fire and wind. What they're telling us is how the mind contacts matter. The mind contacts matter by way of this sensibility to heat, to elasticity, to pressure and to movement.

And then there's the body, feeling, memory, thought and consciousness. So you remember that you can actually when you're observing something, you're observing something on that screen of consciousness so it's there. There's nothing behind it. There's nothing behind it. You can't get behind it. You can't get through it. That's it. That's the world we're living in. Whatever we're conscious of.

Now here's a funny statement. This is why Noreen emailed me. "Anger, greed and delusion are all known." Now here I'm presuming that she's actually meaning that she sees anger, greed and delusion in other people. And that it's not affecting her. It's not coming into her. I'm presuming that she hasn't got that within her, because it wouldn't make sense for her to have that within her as such, because she's undercut the whole process by destroying that wrong identity from which it all arises.

But I did suggest to Noreen something else. You'll know that there are these four levels of sanctity, of spiritual attainment, the stream-enterer, and then the once-returner, the non-returner, and the *arahat*. Now, normally speaking, the way it's normally understood, the way the commentaries would normally put it, is that there's a *magga* and a *phala*, the path and the fruit. And it's normally said that when a person becomes a *sotāpanna*, there is a moment, that initial moment, is the path. And then all the other moments of their lives, as a *sotāpanna*, is the fruit of that insight.

Now, and that's the same for them all, but there's definitely evidence in the scriptures to say that actually these are two paths and this makes great sense to me personally. The first one is to do with the right understanding where a person sees quite clearly one of these three characteristics. And the seeing of these characteristics now has to become systemic. It has to run through right attitude, right speech, right action, right livelihood. It has to manifest outwards that way. And until it's done that totally, we can't talk about the fruit of it.

So one of the arguments for that is the experience the Buddha himself had where it's said in the scriptures he has this moment of enlightenment but then Māra chases him, remember, for seven years with his three daughters, sensual pleasure, eroticism and boredom. We can see that that's where his problems lay. He wasn't so much in power. If you remember, Jesus was tempted by power. He's saying to the top of the mountain about the devil, "You can have all this." So there's always power, riches and sensuality. So that was where you might say he'd been stuck.

So seven years, Māra finally gives up on it. Says, he sees me, Māra sees me. But the purity had not become systemic. There's a suggestion there.

Whether it was seven years or not, who knows? But there's an understanding there that it took time for this huge insight, for this new liberation to find its way through all his habits. And because his habits were still there, he would have seen them as unwholesome. So it may be that that's also what she's referring to, and she's not yet reached the fruit of her insight.

But I prefer to see it the other way, that she has actually, and that she's quite aware when somebody's being greedy, deluded, she's not fooled by it. But what a wonderful thing to be able to say: I'm unable to detect even an instant when they have power. Any power over my heart. I want to be able to say that.

Yes, they arise and cease. They are forever changing. But the presence that knows them never changes for an instant. Never changes for an instant.

And we can get a hint of that in ourselves because when you finally, when you've isolated the sense of the observer very clearly in yourself, and then you reflect at the end of your sitting, what was it like to be there? What's inside the observer? What's it made of? And that's where we're getting a hint that where the Buddha says, those who are mindful in this way are in the presence of *Nibbāna*. He's not actually saying that we can't get a taste for it, we can't get a feel for it.

And it's important because the more we get that feel for it, the silence of it, the lack of excitement. Our happiness is always gauged by how happy we are emotionally, how excited we are, what the future has to offer us. And yet here there's a pointing to some sort of stasis, some sort of peacefulness that never changes. An internal position of silence.

And when we begin to sense that it's also begin to realize that it's not part of this process of arising and passing away. It is forever there. Now that's very difficult for us to grasp because for us there is time. We can't imagine something not being in time, not being caught up in some sort of changing process.

But she's pointing to that. She's forever unborn and undying. It's not part of this process of the phenomenal world.

And then finally, just this is the end of suffering. May it be that Mae Chee Kaew has inspired us, driven us to greater efforts. May we all be fully realized and free from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Sādhū. Sādhū.

Control and Loss of Power

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 51 min

In this New Year dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma addresses the fundamental human drive for control and power, examining how our attempts to manipulate circumstances for happiness inevitably lead to suffering. Drawing from the Buddha's own spiritual journey—from sensual pleasures through jhānic absorptions to severe asceticism—he illustrates how each path that seeks to 'steal from heaven' through personal control ultimately proves unsatisfactory.

The talk explores the three characteristics of existence (tilakkhana)—impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and not-self (anattā)—showing how our identification with the psychophysical organism creates the illusion of a controlling self. Through vipassana meditation, we can access the position of 'the observer' that temporarily liberates us from identification with body, emotions, and thoughts.

Bhante emphasizes the importance of accepting 'this is the way it is' without resignation, distinguishing between hope (which arises from practice) and expectation (which creates frustration). He concludes with practical guidance for sustainable practice, encouraging patience and consistent effort while avoiding the trap of putting timelines on spiritual progress.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhasa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhasa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhasa—homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble, and fully self-enlightened one.

So I'm slightly aware that my New Year address is directed at what is known in language teaching as false beginners. They are the ones who used to practice, stopped, and have now returned to the fold. So I have to make a special effort to enthuse you all, especially those, so that this will never happen again. And from this day on, until you slip into the warmth of the grave, you will continue to practice.

As you know, many people come to meditation for various reasons, especially these days with this mindfulness movement. But the spiritual search, I think, begins when there is some sort of existential crisis, whether it's a very small sea or an earth-shattering one. And I think that's really where in spiritual practice you have to put your attention, and the questions come up in various forms such as: Why am I here? Why is this here? This whole universe—what is it here for? Why am I conscious? Why am I con-

scious of it? All these questions, and worst of all, why am I conscious of it and then I have to die just when I'm getting used to it, just when I start getting old and things happen.

So these questions bring up in us all sorts of emotional reactions. And it's the investigation of that question, really, which is the spiritual quest. So in the Buddha's own terms, in his day, it was this awful idea that he kept coming back. Kept coming back. There's rounds of rebirths. And there seemed to be no escape from it—it was a constant being born and then depending on your karma you ended up either as a dog or worse, and sometimes as a king, but those opportunities were very rare of course. So it was the horror really of this rebirth which was seemingly one of the obsessions of the age.

And in a sense, if you're an annihilationist, that's a fate worse than death. You have to keep coming back. Sisyphus—I can't remember what he did. Does anybody remember what he did? He did something terrible. And his punishment was to roll this boulder up to the top of a hill and then to see it roll back down and then go back down and start again. And that was it. That was his life, you might say, in hell.

So when we think of the spiritual quest, we're really trying to answer these deeper questions. And the Buddha's own quest led him to a particular answer, a particular experience that we call awakening or enlightenment. And from that moment onwards, he said, he didn't suffer. And then, of course, you have to define what he meant by this word *dukkha*. But as far as he was concerned, he always lived in a state of some joyous heart state, whether it was just pure equanimity, contentment. And when he was in relationship, it was either love, compassion, or joy. And remember that compassion is not a sad thing. Compassion is a joyful state. If compassion leads you to some sort of morose state, then something else has slipped in—perhaps pity or grief—but compassion is the joy that you get when you're helping people, just knowing your limitations, and that help might only be offering them goodwill. You can only do so much.

Today in some of the interviews this whole idea of what can you do—the modern Western koan of: After you've done everything you can do, what can you do? It's very difficult for us to accept that, the limitation of doing. So I always describe it as a ring of power around us. And that's all you can do. You can't go beyond what you can do. And then, of course, you can get other people to do things. That's your influence. Then after that, trying to get beyond that is just frustration and depression and all sorts of things. Burnout.

The whole idea of power, if you consider Tolkien, Lord of the Rings. See if I've got the names right. Frodo, that's right. Frodo has this ring and Sauron—Sauron—he wants this ring. And this is the ring of power. I mean, you can have all sorts of interpretations to

Tolkien's story. But for me, this ring of power—and once Sauron had it, he would rule the whole of Middle-earth, which is a horrible idea, as you know. So Frodo doesn't take on the power of that ring. He actually takes it to be destroyed. And in destroying all that sense of power and the sense of control and domination, wins him eternal life. Only because, not because he's upset Sauron and destroyed that potential, but because he himself has let go of all power and all desire for power. See? This is perhaps my own interpretation, you understand, but that's as I see it.

One of the things that the Buddha talks about is this whole idea of a self and what it means and how it comes to be. And when we talk about an existential crisis and we talk about why am I here, what consciousness is, what is it we're talking about? We always talk about me. The sense of me being conscious and me dying. The whole idea of power in its bad sense is to be able to control the world, control our situation, so that me always feels safe. Me is always in charge, in control. And whenever that control slips from us, it's a horror story. And unless you're ready to let go of that desire for power, the wrong desire for power, or rather the desire for wrong power, it just becomes a battle.

People who fight the idea of growing old, fight their situation, their loss. I always think of that—this is years ago now—of the policeman who was paralysed by a criminal. And he couldn't hack it; eventually he committed suicide. He was only paralysed from the waist downwards. He wasn't totally paralysed. But being a sports person and very active, he couldn't let go of that. And therefore it drove him to really seeing his life as useless, meaningless.

So this idea of power, of control, is very much tied up with the self. Now, what does the Buddha do? He makes the mistake of so many of his age—he tries to be happy. And he must have tried at home to be happy and found that the sensual pleasure was somewhat wanting. It became vapid. It didn't have any depth to it. So you have a good meal and that's the end of it. Sex, drugs and rock and roll—they're vapid. And it's that weariness, the weariness which is trying to seek happiness and sensual pleasure. The weariness of it. Just the sheer exhaustion of clubbing every night. You just can't take it anymore.

And then there was this other offering of the age, which was the *jhāna*, the absorption stuff, which you find in all religions. These beautiful states. Ecstatic. We can get that sort of ecstatic state by doing something extreme. By getting extreme sports and stuff like that. Or getting lost in music. Just for that moment there where we lose a sense of self. And we're totally absorbed into the extremely joyous state. That sort of happi-

ness is again very—it's very fulfilling if it's wholesome, it's very fulfilling, but it passes. So in the end again there's a sort of weariness, and if we compare that to the *jhāna* then we find ourselves in a similar situation.

The *jhāna*, the absorptions are self-generated. You don't need anything outside you. The *mettā* that we do, if you just keep practicing that, you'll see slowly but surely this beautiful state arises in you. I'm sure you've experienced it. And the more you do it, the stronger that state is. And it gets so strong that, as it were, you fall into it and you lose the sense of somebody doing the *mettā*. There is just the lovely state that you're in. It's an absorption. That's why they call it an absorption.

We do it on a much, shall we say, obvious level when you're watching a film. So when you're watching a good film, for that two hours, you're lost. There's not somebody watching the film. There's a loss of that somebody, that self, that self-awareness—there's just the film. And then when you come out, you arrive again. You arise. You say, oh, that was fantastic. And that absorption is a type of happiness and it can become more and more refined as you practice these other more religious forms—prayer, mantra, even coloured circles in Theravāda they have 40 of these particular subjects which can lead you to various depths. But again, it's a happiness which is dependent on conditions. It's a happiness which is dependent on your body, your mind, whatever you're using. It's dependent on somebody giving you food, things like that. It's always dependent. And therefore, you don't have total control. And worse, it comes to an end. You can't sit there forever.

So there was always something which didn't satisfy you. And as you know, he got very good at it. He was invited to teach. But he just didn't hack it. And I presume, although he doesn't say this, one has to interpret it a little bit, that after a while, he had that same sort of weariness. You know, not another *jhāna*. There must have been something unsatisfying about it. Because for the others, for the ones who were following that path, they didn't leave. They didn't say, you know, I'm fed up with this. They were really into it. Just developing these beautiful mental heart states.

And then he goes into another form of practice which was prevalent at the time, which was this self-mortification. And I presume that even then he's practicing *jhāna*, but here the problem was the body itself because it was understood by some at that time, the Jains for instance, that your karma expressed itself in your physicality. Your body was your karma. It was like a physical thing which held on to your soul. And if you could let go of the body, then the soul would rise. Of course you had to work out all the karma that you'd accumulated through past births.

I met a Jain actually the other day. I'd heard about this, but he confirmed it for me. That the Jain saint is the one who finally determines to stop eating. And he says when somebody does that in the Jain community, he's like divine. I mean, he's suddenly become somebody of enormous importance. And he actually has the courage to let go of this life form and then rise into—his soul to rise into heaven. I don't know, we don't know whether the Buddha believed that particular theory, although the Jain leader was his contemporary, elder contemporary. We can presume it, but at some point he found it also just more suffering. That's what he said—just more suffering. It somehow didn't work for him. Again, we don't know the mental processes that he went through, but he definitely found it wearisome and useless, that's what he calls it—useless. He doesn't say it's unprofitable, he says it's useless. Profitless.

And so that's when he leaves, remember. That's when he leaves. So up until now, we could say that he's trying to steal from heaven, like us all. We're trying to grab something from the eternal life through our own personal effort, through a personal effort of gaining, attaining, controlling. And as you know, he's despairing. He's by the roadside. He wonders what to do. And then he gets this wonderful gift from Sujātā. You remember the rice pudding? Which has amazing effects, as you know. So this vivifies him. And he has this memory, remember, of a childhood where he's watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony, and he recognises that state as a child as being the same as the jhānic states that he was in with an extra component which was that sense of curiosity.

That's the point where he actually becomes self-enlightened. Before that he's just following the paths that the society were offering him and finding them weren't satisfactory. And now he has this insight—instead of trying to grab happiness and trying to hold it, find it, keep it, he now turns upon the suffering and asks the question, why do I suffer? His whole meditation, as it were, turns around on itself. And it's with that new inspiration that he sits. And he seems to have been so inspired by that and seems to have thought of it as, well, there's nothing else but this now. And he makes this great determination not to rise either to crack the problem or die.

So, I mean, I always say, very lucky for him, lucky for us, he cracked it. And in a sense, he opened up the gates, the gate of the deathless, that's what it's called. He opened up the gates to the deathless. And if you think of anything that people do in the world, there's always somebody, there's always somebody who makes it first. You know, somebody climbs Everest and everybody gets up there. Nobody wants to get up there. As soon as it's made available by one human being, it's made available to everybody. So when he opened this gate to the deathless, he opened it for everybody. Anybody who wants to liberate themselves from suffering—it's there to be taken. And fortunately, he had this great ability to teach, which meant that he laid down a very clear path as to

how we actually make it. So it wasn't just a theory, it wasn't just an idea, a philosophy. In fact, he wouldn't really rate it as a philosopher at all. He was more of a psychologist, an ethical psychologist. And he laid down a real specific practice, which we term right awareness or *vipassanā* and words like that.

So there's this path that he's laid out. And he centres on a particular mental quality. This quality of desire, which is where—which he calls the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering. Desire is the cause of suffering. He talks about the three avenues—the three perspectives, the three characteristics of existence. That there is impermanence, everything is impermanent. That there is nothing in the world which is going to ultimately, completely and fully satisfy us. That's the *dukkha*. And that the idea of a self is an illusion. It's not that you don't need the illusion of a self, but it is knowing what the illusion, or better still, the delusion is. So these are the three gates, you might say, or the three avenues of investigation, but the fundamental cause is desire. The psychological fundamental cause is desire.

And this desire, when you think about it, is about power. It's about us wanting those things that are going to make me happy. And having control over them. Whether it's by money or just naked power. And it's about getting rid of all those things that are undermining my happiness. Just annihilating enemies. Anybody whom I don't like. I like to annihilate. Get rid of completely. And then surely I'll be completely happy.

So that's—if you look at desire from the point of view of controlling the environment, controlling our environment, in order to make it something that is making me happy. I'm always seeking this happiness. And of course people define happiness in all sorts of ways. It can be riches, it can be hanging about, it can be sleeping. It doesn't matter how you define happiness, but we're always trying to manipulate the situation in order to make ourselves comfortable and at best, happy. It's about power.

Now that's what he points out as the cause. The cause of suffering is desire. This wrong desire. It's not a wrong desire to want to escape suffering, let's be right in it. The desire is to seek happiness in the sensual world. By which we mean a permanent happiness. The fleeting happinesses of sensual pleasure, the joys of relationship, the joys of nature—fine. But even there, we twist it, trying to hold it, trying to maintain it, trying to squeeze the last pip out of the orange, the last little drop of juice. So it's that, and that's the attachment. Attachment.

So what is attachment? Attachment is this very desire, this very psychological dependency on something over which we're trying to control but which we can't for happiness. It's a really wrong, it's a really painful investment of our energy, a useless in-

vestment of our energy. Then you might ask well okay, because I'm still on this existential business. Why am I here? Why am I doing that? Why am I trying to manipulate the world and trying to seek some sort of permanent happiness?

Now when I dig deeper, I find that we come to this essential delusion about the self. The self is an identity. It's an identity. There's no such thing as a self because the identity keeps shifting. So when I was a child, my identity was very much with the body. Three, four, well, up until teenage, I suppose.

I am the body. Then maybe around about teenage, you start being emotion. I am my emotions. I'm identifying with emotions as separate from the body and thought. I am the thinker. I am thought. Who am I if I can't think? And the identity shifts from moment to moment depending on what you're experiencing. So if you happen to be having a cup of tea, then you're a physical self. If you happen to be sitting there musing about your existential crisis, then you're a thought self. If it's emotional, emotional self.

So this self isn't something that exists outside your experience. It is a relationship you're having with the experience. And that relationship is being defined as me. And me.

Now when we sit in meditation, when we sit in *vipassanā*, we bounce out of, we pull ourselves out of that enmeshment and we discover a different me within ourselves that we call the observer, the feeler, the one who knows. And suddenly all those things that before I thought were me become objects to observe, to feel. I'm distancing, I'm pushing out of, I'm lifting into a different orbit within myself.

And it may be that in so doing that, you suddenly realise actually, in that position of the observer, at least for a few moments during every sitting, you are in fact liberated from the body, heart and mind. You are liberated from painful emotions because you're looking at them. It doesn't make them any less painful in themselves, it's just that you're no longer entrapped by them. And you're no longer caught up in all the mentation, the stories that they make the mind develop.

And in that position, you realise that you don't have the power that you thought you had. So the body, the knee begins to hurt. Whether you want it to or not, it just hurts. And if you say, stop hurting, nothing happens. It gets worse. And if you fight it, it gets even worse.

And emotion comes up. You didn't ask for it. It just arose. And there you have it. It might be anxiety. It might be joy for it. It could be something lovely for a change. And it just arises. And you're there. You're watching it. And it's come. And you're feeling it. You know it's there. And if you say, go away, it won't. It'll keep on coming. You can avert

your attention, you can leave the meditation room and go for a run or something, but you can't while you're in that state and something arises. You've pulled out of it, you're in a different orbit for want of a better word, but you're actually releasing control. Actually releasing control. You're actually beginning to drop this dreadful ring into the furnace of destruction.

And it's being comfortable with that. It's being able to realise or to see or to experience that actually there is a place where we can find within ourselves that is temporarily liberated from all the stuff that goes on within us. And then you realise that when you re-enter into the psychophysical organism, that it is this very knowing which is, it's within the very knowing that the distortion is to be found.

There's a way of seeing. We're seeing things. We are understanding things in a wrong way. And that's what the problem is. The problem isn't the body. The problem isn't the heart. The problem isn't the mind. It's somehow our engagement in this psychophysical organism which isn't right. Which is warped. There's something wrong with it. And that something wrong with it is the identity with this very psychophysical organism. Because when I say to myself I am Bodhidhamma. I am that, you see. Then it's in this form that I'm trying to seek happiness. See.

And that's what we're always seeking at all times. We're always at all times seeking happiness. Even if it's the happiness of oblivion. Even if you get so fed up with things you launch yourself into the bed and disappear. You're still seeking happiness. You know.

So the process of awakening, the process of enlightening ourselves, is to catch where the warp is, to catch where the distortion is coming. The *vipallāsa* as it's put. *Vipallāsa* means to see things as permanent or to think they can be permanent when they're not, or at least they'll stay similar and they never do. To find, to try and seek happiness in something which is not going to deliver. And to see something substantial which doesn't have any substance. Especially internally, the sense of self. The sense of me.

So when we practise *vipassanā*, which is the core practice, and it's from there that we take awareness into daily life, etc., etc., there's your core practice. In the morning, when you enter into that state, even if it's only for a short time, you're reminding yourself of this higher way of being in the world, which is the observer, the feeler, the knower, the one who knows.

And even though there is even then a distortion because that's also a false sense of self, at least we're telling ourselves every time we do that, we're somehow getting the message across that we're not this physical, this psychophysical organism. That's the message we're constantly telling ourselves. And when we're in the state of the observer, something very strange is happening because there is a knowing that there's a knower.

Now, what's that telling us? It's telling us that this self, this self-awareness is somehow pointing in the right direction. Just like in a mirror, it's pointing in the right direction. It's a sense of that knowing within the mind. But just as the mirror distorts our image, so this sense of the observer is also a distortion. But it's a much better place to be than a physical self, or an emotional self, or a thought self. It's a much wiser place to be.

And what we hope is that in accessing that in the morning, we remind ourselves of this position. It can be a reflection, but actually the doing of it, the doing of it is an experience which stays with us. And the more we do it, the more we become aware of that position of being the observer. This liberates us from entering into delusions which are offered by the body, heart and mind. Or better expressed, which arise because of our identity with the body, heart and mind.

So here in meditation when pain comes, and you see the reaction. You want to move. Why should I suffer this? All that sort of stuff. And you stay with that reaction. The reaction is coming from this self that wants to manipulate the world to make it always comfortable or happy. But if you stay with that, two things are happening. First of all, this reaction begins to die away, so the old habit of trying to control is being undermined. And secondly, you are reinforcing a new identity of being that which is not the body, heart and mind.

And in the same way, when an emotion comes up, it's a nasty one, we don't want to feel it. See, somebody's emailed me about toxic shame. I mean, real heavy shame that goes back to childhood or something. And how destructive it is, you know. And he was saying to me that it was a good job that he did get into drugs, otherwise he would have killed himself. It was so painful. And it's only now that slowly but surely he's able to turn toward this dreadful feeling of shame. Every time he's in company, he feels people can penetrate him, can see the way he really is, which is, you know.

And to be able to stay with that, you see. So that's undermining this reaction of not wanting. Having control. Trying to manipulate things. It's the growth of patience, the being able to bear, to bear with. And it's also the ability, or should we say, the growing realisation that there is something above the shame. There's something beyond the shame. The observer, the feeler, the knower.

And as an aside to that, something which happens as a consequence, quite naturally, unwittingly you might say, the heart's healing itself. So two things we realise through our meditation practice is that when an emotion catches the mind and creates a story, it's developing itself. I mean you know that. Every time you get angry, somebody says something nasty to you, you repeat it a hundred thousand times to make yourself even more and more angry. And seek true revenge. See? So we know that we have to stop the mind creating stories.

And when an emotion is releasing itself as a physical sensation, as a felt state, it's actually expending its energy. It needs an active act of will to develop. And even when the mind slips away in one of these little stories, there's been a little empowerment there. Even though it's habitual, there's been little empowerment. And if you're not careful, that's why we can spend hours in meditation thinking about how we're going to kill somebody. Or worse. Or worse.

So when you realise that, you come back, you see. And then if we can just stay with an emotional state long enough to see it dissipate, no matter how painful that is, that's when we get the confidence of being able to stay with this stuff. Because then we begin to realise that actually that's the process of healing. That's the setup.

So now we have to return to this essential question as to, you know, why am I here in the first place? I mean, this is the new year, if I can say. So I should be making new resolutions and lifting up my heart of courage and all that, you know, shield and sword and into the fray and all that sort of stuff.

So returning to our question, you know, why are we here? Well, in terms of some sort of theology, in terms of some sort of grand philosophy, the Buddha is characteristically quiet. And I think there are two reasons for this. First of all, once you go beyond personal experience, you're into inference. But secondly, the experience of *Nibbāna* is total and complete. It doesn't have a reason beyond itself.

When we were doing the standing meditation, just being, just drawing our attention into the present moment. And just for one moment letting go of a reason for being, a reason beyond itself. And a future that we have to plan. Planning is also a form of control. I mean, there's good control, remember. I mean, if you've got to go to the dentist, you have to control events to get there on time. You don't want to miss a dental appointment. But just for a moment there, every so often, to just stop. And just be with the moment. Just be with the sensuality of the moment. Bury yourself into the body. Just being here.

And that's where you get this sense of timelessness. So it's the mind that creates time. It's the mind which creates this idea of movement in time. It's a mental construct. Actually, as we all know, you only exist in this present moment. Which doesn't deny the fact that you've got to plan and all that sort of stuff. But it's just every so often during the day to stop and remind ourselves that there is a different mode that we can enter. Just this pure being.

Just because we're self-aware in that moment, it's still getting the message across. Still getting the message across. That there are two modes. One of being and one of doing. They don't cancel each other out. But if you're always doing, you're missing out on the being. And that's our problem. We're always doing something.

Now when you're just being, there's no control. Because there's nothing to control. You're in the present moment. It arises and passes away. That's it. So there, we're getting a hint of the Buddha mind.

And coming back to the position of the observer, when you're in that state in your meditation, and it's pretty clear to you that you are orbiting, that you've pulled yourself out of the body with its sensations, the heart with its emotions, and the mind with its thoughts and images. When you've been in that state for a while, and you come out of it, and you reflect upon it, just ask yourself, what is inside the observer? What's it made of? Are there any sensations there? Are there any emotions there? Any emotional states at all? Is there any thought there? Thought patterns.

So we're obviously beginning to experience something which is not phenomenal. It's not something which is arising and passing away. And when you've come out of that state, and it's been very clear to you, ask yourself, was it satisfying?

Because the Buddha says, and I shall leave you with this. Those who are mindful are in the presence of *Nibbāna*. In the presence, in the vicinity of it. That's how close we are. It's as though we are looking into it and not being aware of that state. And then you realise why all spiritual practice anyway, in all these traditions, always moves towards silence. It always moves towards some sort of silence.

So another approach is to just develop that taste for calmness, a taste for silence, a taste for non-doing, without letting the mind just go off on its own. Now that position has also got some relationship to what it is that you're experiencing. Whether it's physical, emotional or mental. It has the relationship of non-attachment. Of not grasping, of not wanting to have power. That's the relationship. Because you're watching it, you're investigating it. See?

So now, when we re-enter into the psychophysical organism, you see, and through that into the world of action, we find very slowly that we're actually undermining that whole idea of controlling. We're undermining the idea of trying to manipulate things. And that brings us round to that sense of contentment which is wanting what one has, not always trying to get what one wants.

And you start from there, you see. You start from this is the way it is. Which doesn't undermine potential. It's just that you're starting off from a realistic base before you would have normally tried to manipulate things. This is the way it is.

So a neighbour of ours, he fell out of bed. And slipped his disc really badly. He was in a wheelchair. And I met his wife, who's a delightful, lively woman. And she's moaning about him. She's saying, you know, I've got to do this and I've got to do that. And then she says this lovely phrase, she says, it shouldn't be like this. And I said, ah. I said, yeah, there we are, you see, that's where the suffering is. That it shouldn't be like this.

I think it's in the film, what's his name, Clint Eastwood, Unforgiven. Yeah? Yeah. And at the end, Clint, he kills them all. And as he dies, this terrible, nasty, sadistic sheriff, can't remember his name, he's a great actor, remember his name? He says, just before he goes, he says, it shouldn't have been like this. How many times do we, you know, in the day say, it shouldn't be like this. It shouldn't rain. I mean, damn it, I've come here on retreat. It should be nice. And she shouldn't cough like that. And what's the meaning of that? Why is the door clicking like that? It's all this business of trying to manipulate, control.

Now, it's not as though understanding this, that it's all going to stop. Oh, if heaven did, only it would. But at least now we're not fooled by it. That's the point, not to be fooled by it. So we know as soon as we hear the phrase, it shouldn't be like this. Aha! So you say, Māra, I see you. That's it. No longer does it have the power to upset our contentment. This is the way it is. It's a lovely little phrase to repeat to ourselves.

And remember that's not the same as resignation. Resignation is a despair. This is the way it is, I can't do anything. This is the way it is, what can be done? It's grounding ourselves in the way it is without coming to a situation, coming to a moment, coming to a relationship with prejudice, expectation. Expectation. Preference. Preference. Preference.

So I've bumped around here and there and all over the place, but I hope that you get this idea of a central control panel called the self that really just wants to be happy. That's all. Just want to be happy. And it's trying to constantly manipulate the situation. Holding on to, grabbing what makes it happy. And pushing away, annihilating. And if it

gets too much, run for it. So those are your three main attitudes that arise out of the self. Aggrandisement. Accumulation. Aversion. And fear. Those are your basics. And from out of these three snakes, yes, arise all our miseries.

So it really is beginning to see that in our daily life. Slowly but surely, cutting away, cutting away, cutting away.

Roshi Kennett, who started the Zen order in the West at Throssel Hole Abbey—some of you might know it, lovely place—she talked about the practice of being like a huge granite mountain which you had to shift, and all you had was a little teaspoon.

So, getting across that this is not easy, but we should contemplate on the benefits of our practice and how it's helped us in our lives. And that, in a way, is a sort of self-encouragement, and it makes you want to give a bit more, do a bit more. And this doing is always arising out of that lovely sense of calmness, one of the factors of enlightenment.

Don't put a time slot on it. An expectation. So remember there's a distinction to be made between hope and expectation. The hope that arises from the practice is something which comes to us because we begin to see, we can perceive that there is an end to suffering. I mean that's what the practice is about. It's about actually perceiving how we can actually become fully liberated. That's the hope.

The expectation is when we put a date on it. Then we've had it. Then there's sheer frustration and despair. So it's not good to think of practice too much in terms of progress, because it's very much up and down.

So this year we might start off with a firm commitment to up the practice a bit. Get up to Satipanya to do a four-week retreat. Why are you all laughing? To get up there and do some extra work, you see. And then next weekend you're drunk. And you wake up and, oh, come on, don't do that. What is it? So it goes up and down. But it's keeping the nose in the right direction. Keeping your nose in the right direction. And very slowly over time one sees the effect of the practice.

But don't put milestones on it. Oh boy, that's wicked. Putting milestones on your practice. "I should be here now. Why have I not been doing this? I've been doing this for thirty years. Why am I not aware all the time?" Thirty-seven years, let me say. "My mind's still going all over the place." See? See? I mean I should be in a state of despair. Anybody should be in this room anyway. But it's a case of just keep, just keep, just keep taking the next step. Taking the next step.

So hopefully tomorrow I'll give you some template that you can work on to reflect upon your life, which you may or may not want to use, and try and build up some sort of resolutions for the year. One, two, not too many. And I've got to work out a little ritual which I would normally do at the stupa at the centre. A burnt offering. So I'll try and work something out with Mark. He'll be the carrier of the flame. And we'll try and organise just a little ritual. Putting little bits of paper into a bowl and setting fire to it. Burnt offerings, burnt offerings.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by your renewed commitment and invigoration of the path, reach the end of suffering sooner rather than later.

Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.

Cultivating Joy: Beyond Suffering to Muditā and Daily Happiness

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 17 min

In this uplifting talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma addresses a often-overlooked aspect of Buddhist practice: the cultivation of joy. While Buddhist teachings frequently focus on the cessation of suffering, the Buddha himself experienced happiness when students accepted his teachings, and prescribed joy as one of the four brahmavihāras (divine abodes).

The talk explores the paradox many practitioners face: the fear of indulgence that can destroy our capacity for joy, versus the trap of craving that comes from attachment to pleasant experiences. Through vivid anecdotes from monastic life, Bhante illustrates how this fear can lead to joyless asceticism that misses the Buddha's middle way.

Drawing from the Dhammapada, he explains how virtue naturally leads to happiness, and introduces muditā - appreciative or reciprocal joy - as an antidote to envy and jealousy. The discussion includes practical exercises for remembering daily joys, cultivating appreciative joy for others' happiness, and using joy as a restorative when feeling low.

The talk concludes with guided meditation instructions for joy practice, parallel to mettā meditation, offering the blessing 'may you be joyful, may you be ever more joyful, may you attain the sublime peace of Nibbāna.' This teaching provides a balanced approach to spiritual joy that avoids both indulgence and joyless austerity.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So being spring, or April anyway, I thought we would have a go at joy. The first thing I did was to look up all the synonyms we have: pleasure, enjoyment, happiness, gladness, delight, thrill, exaltation, elation, bliss, ecstasy, rapture, and absorption. That's not bad, is it? And it's all good. It's not as though the Buddha asked us to be miserable all the time, even though most of the teaching is about getting rid of suffering. He was asked, how does he feel when he teaches and somebody doesn't accept the teaching? He said he feels all right with it. It's calm. But when somebody does accept his teaching, he feels happy, feels joyful.

Now, it's an interesting thing that all my teachers never introduced us into the practice of joy. It's very strange. *Metta, metta* all the time. Compassion a little bit, but joy never. I'm thinking they did it because of the problem of indulgence. And I think that's what goes wrong, of course. All these beautiful mental states to which we are heir corrupt as soon as we try to hold on to them or want more of them. So it's a case of recognising that nothing is repeatable and that when it's gone, it's gone and there's no point in hankering after it. So that, for instance, if you take a morsel of food which you delight in, once you've swallowed it and the aftertaste is gone, that's it. Let go.

Now, this fear, this fear of indulgence actually destroys joy. And I noticed it in the monastic life more than in lay people. At the monastery, Kanduboda, there would be occasions when people would come with special foods to celebrate a birthday, a marriage and so on. And one of the things that is quite lovely is buffalo curd, *miikiri*. And it was handed out, you see, and you put loads of sugar with it, or kittle juice, a bit like maple juice. And it's wonderful. And we're all eating it, you see. And there was a monk sat next to me who was the picture of the ascetic, very gaunt, and his cheeks were like this. And as we got around, while we were eating, he was glaring, as it were, at this curd. And as we came to the finish, he leant forward quite slowly, lifted it up slowly, and then basically shovelled it down his throat. And I've always presumed he was just so afraid of indulgence. So that's no good, is it?

There was another case, too. There was my teacher, Sayadaw Ujanaka. About ten years ago, he taught at a place called Beatenberg, which is in Interlaken, those beautiful lakes in Switzerland. And from it, on a beautiful day, you can see these three great mountains: the Eiger, the Mönch and the Jungfrau. During the retreat, the weather was miserable, rainy, cloudy. And one day it all opened up and it's a glorious sight. The white peaks against this deep blue sky. So everybody on the retreat went out onto the balcony and outside to have a look, you see. Well, he gave them hell, didn't he? He upset a lot of people. He told them they were useless meditators. They were just indulging and he was wasting his time and all sorts. So I don't think he was invited again.

And I remember whenever I would say something like, "Isn't that a beautiful flower?" he would say, "Ah, yes, but it fades, it dies." A bit of a killjoy, really. But his intention, of course, was to awaken me to the problem of indulgence. And that seed of indulgence is always there, right to the bitter end. Mara is always right there, just waiting for the moment to creep up on us.

So it's a case of just recognising these two things: if we begin to see what the consequences of indulgence are, then we'll make ourselves afraid to enjoy something. But actually, if, for instance, you have a biscuit, right, and you finish the biscuit, the last bit

goes down, flavour's gone. And then you get this: "I think I'll have another one." So as soon as that comes, oh well, that's greed. So you have to sit down and wait for that to exhaust itself. Now, once you've done that, you've exhausted the karmic consequence of the greed that arose while you were eating that biscuit. I think it's as simple as that.

I know somebody who got into the habit of eating biscuits just before they went to bed. And he was getting rather afraid of it. So instead he turned to music. And that's a skilful thing. If you find that an indulgence feels a little bit overwhelming, then put your attention on some other joyful thing that you like to do.

So there we are. There's the fear. The fear of indulgence undermines, destroys enjoyment of joy. And to become indulgent with our joys, wanting more of this, more of the same, is just the old suffering.

Now the question is, why is it we remember mostly at the end of the day the painful parts and hardly any of the joys? Well, I suppose the reason is because painful things hurt. But unfortunately, it does shadow out the joys of the day. So we have to make a special effort to remember the joys of the day. Instead of obsessing about our failures and our upsets, we can contemplate the successes and joys of the day.

Now, the interesting thing is, the more you make yourself aware of the joys of the day, the more you bend that way and the more you see what is actually undermining your joy. And this, of course, creates even greater joy. So we try to rid ourselves of behaviours which undermine our joy and over time, our joy grows. And of course, this is done with a certain affectionate awareness. And this is towards ourselves, being kind to ourselves, gentle to ourselves and seeking what lifts the heart. Music, nature, friendship and so on.

Now, this word *mudita*, which is one of the four Brahma-viharas - remember, so love, compassion, joy, and peacefulness, equanimity, are the four great mental states. These we can develop indefinitely. And it's often translated as appreciative joy, reciprocal joy. And what this does, of course, is it undermines envy and jealousy. And I define those two as saying that envy is wanting what the other person has and jealousy is wanting what the other person has and hating them for having it in the first place.

Now, it's interesting in the East, if you make a donation to a cause, if you make a donation to, say, a monastery, all the names are posted up with exactly how much you gave. So it starts off with, I don't know, maybe a thousand pounds and it goes all the way down to a couple of shillings. That's an old word, isn't it? And it's done because in the East, it's understood that people will rejoice in the good karma that you have gained by your offering.

Now, when it came to Bill Gates giving his millions away, I wonder what our response was. When he got all that money, he should be able to give something away, the one percenters. Did we say, "Oh, good on Bill, may he receive many blessings"? He's got enough blessings. So here we have that reciprocal joy of actually being joyful in somebody else's successes and joys.

And I think it comes as a revelation that we can actually be more joyful for others than for ourselves. And this is not strange, of course, to parents who rejoice in the successes of their offspring. I remember once I must have been about maybe twelve years old because my sister's eleven years younger than me. And I got back from school and I sat opposite my mother and she held Maria, you see, and encouraged her to walk towards me. And of course, when she did, I mean, it was joy. It was wonderful to see this little toddler making her way. So this development of being joyful for other people in the joys of other people and the successes of other people is really heart-lifting.

And joy is also a restorative. Somebody's called it restorative joy. So there you are down in the dumps, and you think to yourself, well, how can I lift my heart? How can I bring joy into my heart? Whatever level, it doesn't always have to be amazing, ecstatic joy. It's just feeling happy, generally happy. So that's when you meet up with a friend or you watch a good film and so on.

In the monastic life, of course, the daily routine tends to be the same. Even when there's a feast day, the only difference is you turn up for a better meal and then you go back and it's just the same. So it can move you towards a sense of apathy, a sense of laziness and all that. And it was then that I realised the amazing power of a long, mindful cup of tea. No doubt about it.

If we just list all those things - this is not an exhaustive list, but the sensual joys that we get that lift the heart, relations of happiness, the religious joys of feast days. Now, the ethical joys are really what the Buddha points to. As far as he's concerned, virtue, goodness equals happiness. And in chapter 20 of the Dhammapada, a lot of the verses are devoted to being happy. This is what he says: "Oh, how happily we live without hate among those with hate! Among people who hate, we live without hate. Oh, how happily we live without misery among those in misery! Among people in misery, we live without misery. Oh, how happily we live without ambition among those with ambition! Among people with ambition, we live without ambition."

Now, just a note on that ambition. There's nothing wrong with us offering our talents for the benefit of the company, people and so on. But of course, it becomes corrupt when we start thinking about money and power.

So the whole idea, really, if we want to develop joy, is to bend that way. What have we talked about? We've talked about the enemies of joy. We realise how corruptive indulgence is, how it becomes an obsession, how it's what they call feeding the dragon. And because of that, we can't allow ourselves to enjoy something. And then, of course, there's the indulgence itself, which becomes a trap in itself. That's feeding the dragon. And the way we do it is by becoming more aware of our daily joys and just bending life towards that way, just as we do with *metta*. Then we have this reciprocal joy, undermining envy and jealousy and really being happy for other people's happiness. And finally, to use joy to lift the heart when we feel a bit down in the dumps.

So here are some exercises. You have to make a resolution, you see. If at the end of today you sit and you think now, how happy was I today? And all you can remember is the miseries. Then you have to make a determination that tomorrow you'll actually acknowledge when you're happy, any level of happiness, any level of joy. It could just be contentment. And just to acknowledge it and doing that, of course, you remember it by the end of the day.

The other thing you might try to do is to contemplate every evening for about a week, maybe five, ten minutes, and just go back in your life and just think of all the joys you've had. All the joys you've had. And by the end of the week, you'll have a big smile on your face.

And the other thing is the practice of joy, which is like *metta*. So you go through all the categories, but the blessings are, may you be joyful, may you be ever more joyful. Now, those are the ones that are regularly used. I like to add, may you attain the sublime peace of *Nibbana*. Now, the problem with *Nibbana* is that there's no emotions in *Nibbana*. So it's not that sort of happiness. In fact, that's what Sariputta said. He says it's the very absence of emotions, which is the bliss of *Nibbana*. That's a bit difficult for us, but at least we can make that intention because, according to the Buddha, this is the highest of all happinesses.

So may you be joyful. May you be ever more joyful. May you attain the sublime peace of *Nibbana*. I think peace rather than bliss. I've sometimes used bliss. Peace gives you, I think, a slightly better feel for it. And as I say, at the end of this hour, that's what I'll be doing. I'll be doing joyful meditation instead of *metta*.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused confusion, and that by your development of joy, you will be joyful sooner rather than later.

DHP 314-317 From the Chapter on Hell

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 26 min

In this engaging exploration of Dhammapada verses 314-317 from the chapter on hell, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the consequences of wrong views (micchā diṭṭhi) and misplaced shame. The verses address being ashamed of what is not shameful while remaining unashamed of what truly is, and finding fault where none exists while ignoring real faults—all leading to unfortunate rebirths (durgati).

The teaching includes commentary stories about Jain ascetics and their practices, illustrating how wrong understanding leads to suffering. Bhante provides a detailed explanation of the six realms of existence: the deva realm (driven by vanity), asura realm (jealousy), human realm (desire), animal realm (ignorance), hungry ghost realm (greed), and hell realm (hatred and cruelty). He emphasizes these can be understood both as literal realms and as psychological states we experience in daily life.

The talk concludes with Nāgārjuna's profound insight that saṃsāra and nibbāna are distinguished not by different worlds, but by our relationship to experience—when we cease clinging and cultivate equanimity, loving-kindness, and compassion, we transform suffering into peace. Richly illustrated with traditional hell imagery from Thai, Tibetan, and Western art traditions.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

I shall do my usual little bit of chanting here. These are from the Chapter on Hell.

Lajitāya na lajjanti, micchādiṭṭhi samannāgā, sattā gacchanti duggatim. Abhaye bhay-asamino, bhaye cābhayasamino, micchādiṭṭhi samannāgā, sattā gacchanti duggatim. Avajje vajjamatino, vajje cāvajjasamino.

Now the translation. This is taken from Gil Fronsdal's book.

Ashamed of what's not shameful and not ashamed of what is, those who take up wrong views go to a bad rebirth.

Seeing danger in what's not danger and not seeing danger in what is, those with wrong views go to a bad, unfortunate rebirth.

I'll read the commentary that goes with that. A group of monks once saw some naked ascetics on their alms round. These would have been the Digambara Jain ascetics who don't wear clothes. You've probably seen them at the Kumbh Mela, the twelve-year celebration, and they cover their bodies with ash, which is antiseptic.

A group of monks once saw some naked ascetics on their alms round. They were naked, but they had their bowls covered with a piece of cloth. The monks remarked that perhaps they should put the cloth in the front part of their body. The naked ascetics retorted that they cover their bowls because they do not want insects or miniature life-forms to enter the bowl and be killed by them later.

When the monks returned to the monastery and told the story to the Buddha, the Buddha responded with this verse, saying that one who is ashamed of what is not shameful, but not shameful of a shameful thing, surely will go to a bad rebirth.

And on the next verse, just a little addition: we should be ashamed and afraid of things that are truly bad. Causing suffering to others is bad, and we should always be ashamed and afraid of doing so. On the other hand, being afraid and ashamed of something that is not bad at all will not help us in any way towards awakening. Thus we only accumulate demerit and suffer an unfortunate rebirth in the next life.

The next two verses I'll do together. I'll put the four together because they're all about going to hell, except the last verse where you get to heaven.

Finding fault in what's not a fault and seeing no fault in what is, those who take up wrong views go to an unfortunate rebirth, bad rebirth.

This little refrain: those who take up wrong views. But knowing fault as fault, and the faultless as the faultless, those who take up right views go to a good rebirth. The word is actually *duggati* and *suggati*. *Gati* means to go, destination. *Du* means not good and *su* means good. So you've got *dukkha*, hard to bear suffering, and *sukha*, easy to bear happiness.

The story goes that all members of a certain family at Sāvatti were followers of an ascetic. They did not want their children to mix with the Buddha's followers' children. They specifically forbade their children to go to Jetavana monastery. But once all the children were playing in the vicinity of the monastery and got thirsty. They asked one of their friends whose parents were followers of the Buddha to go to the monastery and bring them some water. The boy went inside, paid respects to the Buddha, and told him about his friends who were not allowed to enter. The Buddha invited the children in to have a drink and gave them a discourse, and in the end all the children became his followers.

Now when they came home, they told their parents what had happened. The parents were very angry and accused the children of disloyalty. But the neighbours, who were followers of the Buddha, were able to change their view gradually, and before long the whole family converted to the Buddha's teachings. When the Buddha heard this, he spoke that verse.

And the little addition for the next verse, the one that goes to heaven: In order to ascertain a good future existence, both in this life and in the next one, we should always understand and distinguish right from wrong, good from bad. We also must use our understanding and insight to be able to decide which is which. Without this understanding, we might choose wrongly and believe the good to be bad and vice versa. And in this way, our future existence will not be good.

Actually there are a lot of things to discuss there, just the meaning of various things like what we should be ashamed of or not. When we feel shame, that's a loss of self-esteem, isn't it? And if we do something that makes other people see us in a bad light, then obviously we suffer from this embarrassment or shame.

There are things like when you go to a hospital or a doctor's or the dentist. When you go to the doctor or the dentist or the hospital, everybody has their name on the lapel: Mary, Barbara, Fred. They always speak to you in your first name. Now my first name is John. Nobody ever called me John. I was always called Pete. But legally speaking my name's John, so they say "John do this," "Oh yes John, good to see you, John, John, John." At the end you say something like "Thank you very much Mary," and oh my goodness, do they give you a dirty look.

I was at the hospital for a procedure and I was introduced to Sister Margaret something. And again it's all this "John, John, John" and I said "Thank you very much Sister." Oh my God, it was like an insult. I find that very confusing really. There are little overt rules and covert rules, things that you don't know about, and then suddenly you break them and it's all embarrassing.

When it comes to danger, I always think that's really to do with indulgence. Because even we think that everything in moderation, so a little bit of indulgence is not a problem. But unfortunately, it still ties us into the world of the senses.

Finding fault in what's not fault, I think that's being judgmental rather than judicious. And in the final verse, I think when it says, because these four verses all have these two last lines: those who take up wrong views go to hell, those who take up right views go to a good rebirth. This not knowing fault as fault and the faultless as the faultless, that would be referring back to all of them, I think.

The important thing here is this wrong view, because everything begins with wrong view. It starts the Eightfold Noble Path. If you've got wrong view, then you're going to have not very good attitudes. If you don't have good attitude, which is the second on the path, obviously we're going to make mistakes.

And there is a distinction to be made between right and wrong and good and bad, I think, although here the commentary doesn't make that distinction. I think if we say something is good and bad, we are referring to something moral, something ethical. Right and wrong, I would have thought, might be referring to institutional laws which are made up. Well, institutions are described by their laws.

As a monastic I have a rule not to eat after twelve, not to take any substance after twelve. I'm allowed certain things but not a meal. And that's not a moral rule. I mean for twenty years there wasn't that rule amongst monks. It was just lay people complained that monks and nuns were turning up at all sorts of times, sometimes twice or more a day. So they got fed up with it and complained to the Buddha. So then he made this rule: you have to go out in the morning and eat before twelve.

Well many monks didn't like it. They grumbled and he said, "Well look, if you belong to this dispensation, if you want to be my disciples, then this is what you do." So I presume a lot of them wandered off actually.

I thought those things about good and bad and all that, there are many of the *Dhammapada* verses concerned with that, but since this is in the chapter on hell, I thought we'd have a look at the realms.

Now these six realms: there's the *deva* realm, the happy realm, the happiest of realms, and there's the *asura* realm. They're the realm of the angry gods. And then there's the human realm. And then there are these lower realms of the animal realm, the hungry ghost realm, and the hell realm. And they each have a particular mental state that goes with it.

The heavenly realms are obviously there because we've acted in a good way, but it produces a certain vanity, a certain smugness, and the person loses touch with ordinary suffering. Eventually that *kamma* dies out and they end up in another realm dependent on their past *kamma*. But you can see that this is also something which relates entirely to human beings. These people are incredibly rich and live on yachts. They're hardly going to worry about people who are at the moment destitute. That's for somebody else to worry about.

The angry God realm is driven by jealousy. That's interesting. And these two are always warring. The angry gods are always having a go at these *devas*. The *devas* are always winning. And in a sense, that tells us something about ourselves, how we relate to people who have been more fortunate than us or who have better abilities than we have. And that jealousy often puts us into a very antagonistic relationship with people.

Often we'll say something like, "Oh, I envy you." But that's often, I think, in its more positive sense, is really praising the person. And it's something that you would like to be. But when that envy begins to want what the other person has, and then you begin to dislike and hate the other person for what they've got, then I think we're moving into the realms of jealousy.

The human realm is driven, of course, by desire, unquenchable thirst, as we now know from neoliberalism and consumerism. So that's pretty straightforward. And of course, that does draw us into, again, this negativity of getting rid of anything which doesn't satisfy us.

Now, the lower realms: the animal realm is driven by ignorance. And it's often a case that somebody might die in a state of dullness, alcoholic stupor, so they might end up in an animal realm. But in terms of a human being, that's where your intelligence is now. You've dropped down, you've lost your human intelligence.

And the hungry ghost realm is driven by greed, by a total commitment to greed. And it's a worse world than human beings. It's insatiable greed. And they're often depicted with big bellies and tiny mouths. If you look in the mirror and you've got a big belly and a small mouth, then you're probably in the hungry ghost realm.

But then finally hell, which is driven by anger, but I think the worst thing is cruelty, of course. Any form of hatred or cruelty would put you into a hell realm.

Now, whether these realms exist or not, of course, is just a matter of personal belief or understanding. Some people in meditation say they've experienced these things. But they obviously relate directly to the human realm as well. And we move in and out of these realms. So whether these realms actually exist as separate realms can be taken as something that actually, that's the way it is, or it could be that there is a realm where spirits, for want of a better word... these words have been debased by science. Ghosts, spirits, disincarnated beings... one gets lost for words really. But if we just use spirits, that there may just be a world of spirits where beings are just like here, either full of greed or full of hatred and so on.

But hell is something that all these religions like to pump as a fear factor.

The one I actually like, this is from Thailand: you've got people being put in boiling pots of water. There's somebody here who's being tied to something and somebody's poking them. Oh look, a crucifixion. This is a modern picture of... there's another one here, this is a modern picture of somebody being sawed in half. So lots of good imagery.

Oh, this is from Tibet. So you're in a great big pot of boiling water and everybody looks as though they've been stabbed. It's all good stuff, isn't it?

But this one from the West, of course, this is Hieronymus Bosch. He's got you being eaten here. Look, you've got people being eaten and people strung out on guitars. And liars, I suppose that music was seen as something not particularly leading to heaven. Look at this rabbit chewing on somebody's foot.

But I think the best one I came across was this one, and this is from Thailand. Look at that. That gets it across, doesn't it? It's left to your imagination what the heck's going on underneath there. We're all trying to get out. We're all reaching up somewhere or other to get out of hell.

And I'm reminded of that sign on Dante's hell: abandon all hope, ye who enter here. The thing is, of course, that in Buddhist understanding, it's not eternal. So that's a relief, isn't it?

In the *Abhidhamma*, by the way, they do create even more realms, up to thirty-one, which has to do with the *jhānas*. So once you're into absorptions, and if you were very good at getting into these absorptions, you would end up in different realms.

I suppose the last thing I'd like to say is... oh yeah, I've got a story. At the monastery I was at, Kanduboda, one Christmas, it was Christmas because I usually went to a friend for egg on toast. When I came back, I was told that a father had come with his daughter. And the daughter, who was around about ten or eleven, had kept saying to him in the evening, "I'm writing a biography of the Buddha." And he would humour her: "Oh that's very good," all that. And she knew he didn't believe her.

And one evening she said this to him, "I'm going up to this particular realm to write the story of the Buddha." And she rose up in front of him and disappeared. And so he thought, "Well I better take her to a monastery." So he brought her to Kanduboda.

And the monks questioned her and she said she was an *Arahant* and that she had been born specifically to help her grandfather, and that she would go to this realm where the Buddha was and all the other saints, all the other *Arahants*, and she was writing his story. And when they questioned her about meditation, she seemed to understand it. And she wouldn't pay respects to the monks because she was an *Arahant*.

Now, unfortunately, I went back, I came back to Britain at one point and then came back to Kanduboda. And unfortunately, they'd lost contact with her. So I don't know what happened to her.

But obviously, I'd love to have heard what she had to say when she was a little bit more grown up. So that makes you think, doesn't it?

Just a final thing. Nagarjuna, the great metaphysical philosopher of the Mahayana, points out that when we talk about *samsāra*—so that's a word I haven't mentioned up until now—*samsāra* is a word which just means "onward going," and it refers to this constant rebirthing, rebirthing, which at the time of the Buddha, for most people, would have been something quite horrible, because you never knew where you were going to be reborn, and it would happen. Some thought it was just fate, and that would be your fate, lifetime after lifetime after lifetime. There were materialists, of course, who thought that life ended with death. But the general understanding was that you would be constantly reborn.

What Nagarjuna points out, of course, is that what makes it *samsāra*, the world of suffering, is our relationship to it. Because, remember, everything we're experiencing is being created by this psychophysical organism right here and now, and we're living in the world that we're actually creating. And once we have changed our relationship to that world, of no longer clinging to it, no longer seeing it as a place to find any sort of permanent happiness, letting go of all our irritations and fears, then of course it becomes *Nibbāna*.

So *Nibbāna* is really—one way of looking at it—is just changing our relationship to the world that we're actually experiencing right here and now. And every time we're in a state of calm, equanimous, loving, compassionate states, then we have to ask ourselves, am I actually suffering? So it gives us a little hint as to the path that we're actually moving on when we practice meditation and in daily life.

So he made no distinction whatsoever between *samsāra* and *Nibbāna*. It was all to do with relationship.

So I can only hope a revision of the six realms will be an occasion for you to really work on your practice, and be liberated in no time at all. Peace and joy.

Daily Rhythms; Fetters, Hindrances and Inclinations; Rebirth

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1h02

In this comprehensive Q&A session, Bhante Bodhidhamma addresses three interconnected aspects of Buddhist practice and understanding. He begins by examining our natural daily energy rhythms in meditation, distinguishing between physical tiredness and the mental hindrance of sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), offering practical guidance for working skillfully with dullness and lethargy during practice.

The discussion then moves to the Buddha's systematic categorization of mental states: the anusaya (underlying inclinations), the five nīvaraṇa (hindrances that arise during meditation), and the ten saṃyojana (fetters) that bind us to cyclic existence. Bhante explains how these different frameworks help us understand the path from stream-entry (sotāpanna) through to full awakening (arahatta), emphasizing that liberation requires constant vigilance while maintaining a relaxed, non-forceful approach.

The final section explores rebirth from both traditional Theravāda and the innovative interpretation of Ajahn Buddhādāsa, who understood the dependent origination (paṭicca samup-pāda) as describing the moment-to-moment rebirth of the sense of self rather than literal re-incarnation across lifetimes. This perspective offers Western practitioners a more psychologically accessible understanding while preserving the transformative power of the teaching for immediate spiritual practice.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa

Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One

Many thanks for your questions. There are only so many topics that you can talk about, probably a dozen or more. And what a question does is make you look at a particular topic from a slightly different angle. So it allows a bit of creativity rather than coming out of my usual pattern.

I'm not going to answer these in order because they work better if I jumble them around a bit. The first one is concerning the experience that we have during the day. So the question is: I've noticed over the past three or four days that the same sits each day

have the same quality of energy. So first thing in the morning is good, and late afternoon, early afternoon the energy is low. And late after an evening, it's good again. Is it possible that we have a distinct rhythm of energy like a daily pattern?

Yeah, I think most people experience that. Most people have a... And I mean midday is a classic time when the body energy does go down. You're supposed to have a rest after lunch. As you know, I'm an aficionado of the siesta. I've no problems with that. So people are different. They have different metabolisms, don't they? People are good risers and some people are poor risers. People like to stay awake at night. I mean, I know one person, his rhythm is, he works till one o'clock in the morning. So when he comes here, it's a hell realm. So I have to adjust things for him because it's silly really because he spends most of his time falling asleep. Because that's when he's awake. He's awake when we're asleep and asleep when we're awake. So everybody has these different rhythms.

But the important thing is to know the difference between that which is natural to us and that which we're laying on top through bad habit. So the bad habit would be that when we feel tired we simply go to sleep. We don't question it, that's all. And as you know, we often go to sleep or get dozy often when we're fed up with things or a bit depressed or we just, I'll have a sleep now. And it's a lovely form of self-annihilation. And as you know, there's no suffering in oblivion. I mean, that's the lovely thing about oblivion. It's like there's nothing there. There's nobody there. There's no suffering or anything. It's just that we insist on waking up.

So then, you see, there's this habit. Now remember, these habits are dispositions. They are wells of potential energy so we don't tend to think of dullness and lethargy as energy we tend to think of them as a negative thing, a loss of energy. But it's not. If you look at them closely they're dragging you down into a black hole, which is not the same as tiredness. Tiredness is a clean energy, and when you wake up from it you do feel refreshed. But it's often the case that when you oversleep or when you're sleeping to escape something, sometimes you feel worse than when you first went into sleep. So it's really distinguishing those two on a retreat. Knowing the distinction. It's not always easy.

I mean, as you know, the usual thing I say is the first three days, there's a natural tiredness that comes because of the imbalance in most people's sleep. They're either oversleeping or they're undersleeping or they're not sleeping well or something. That's normally ironed out. And I do see it on people's faces. That's one of the things that you

see after three days. The face changes dramatically. Partly because, I think, of the sleep business, but also because just for a moment they've dropped the cares and woes of life. They forget about it finally, just for a day. It is remarkable.

And what you see is the modern stress. I remember when I used to go and visit up to the uplands of Sri Lanka where they were living really the old agricultural life. They lived with the seasons. They lived very, very close to the earth. It was just a hut. They had a bit of, they had maybe a small bit of furniture they'd bashed up together. And the land up there is plentiful. Up on the highlands, I mean, it's just so lush. And the rainfall is twice a year. The monsoon comes twice. And there isn't that existential fear, you know, like you get when there's an economic crisis. As far as they're concerned, they're still going to get curry. It's not a problem. It's just there.

And you see a very different atmosphere about them. Obviously much more relaxed, much more at peace, much more at ease, you see. Now, that's one of the blessings, isn't it, that we give with *mettā*. It's to live in ease, you see, not to have this constant worry and stuff that the modern society really pushes on top of us. As a monk I, when going out to the Easter course, I escaped all this. I know what it's like when you know you're going to get lunch and you have only a few clothes and you know that's enough and they'll last for years. And you have a roof over your head and it's always warm. You never get that cold that you can't put a jumper on and feel warm.

So this little escapade here, Satipan, has been a bit of an awakening. Because here all I've been assailed with constant worries and it's wonderful, the real awakening. I was living in a false Nirvana, that's what it was. And I must say this, the laying of this car park and the placing of that statue, that's it. It's taken two years to get to a point where there is really nothing more to be done. I mean, there are always one or two things, but all the big stuff's gone, and that's it, really. The only thing is hopefully in time we can place some small buildings or something for people in wheelchairs, wheelchair access, which we haven't got. You know, and a proper toilet pan for disabled people. So yes, that's that then.

So that's the only thing with your rhythm. So it's natural to feel tired at certain times of the day and just to know that that's physical and not an unwholesome mental disposition. And finally, of course, you've got to take that into daily life. You can't make the effort here and then in daily life you just go berserk and sleep all the time. It's just like the practice has to go into your daily life. So that you're always gently lifting your energy. And energy is just like anything else. The more you exercise it, the more you have of it. It's not as though you've only got so much energy and that's the end of it.

I'm sure there's a limit, physically anyway. You can't be running up Everest. But I think we've got much more energy than we think we have, or potential for more energy than we think we have.

Does any questions arise from that? Any clarifications? Yeah. You describe sloth and torpor as an energy that you look at and investigate. But I find that if I try and be aware, I get wrapped up in it and fall asleep. Yeah. So, yeah.

Well, sloth and torpor... sloth and torpor. They're an early translation. And it tends to put a moral no-no on it. It's a moral, you know. So the, I tend to prefer dullness and lethargy and let people off a bit. I more feel guilty and shameful, which you ought to, of course. I mean, that's the truth of it. But the modern person doesn't like that.

Yes, there are various things you can do, of course, which is to put yourself in a position where it's difficult to fall asleep. And it depends on the strength of the dullness and lethargy. So, one can open one's eyes and still feel it. You see, you're feeling the sensations. That's what you're doing so if it's a dullness in the mind your attention is in this area you see just feeling the dullness and you can stand up and you can walk and you'd be surprised when you keep making that effort to be aware of these feelings, which are neutral feelings, they're not painful, they're quite restful actually. It's like the energy draws back into the watching, into the knowing, and you become bright, absolutely bright. It's like walking into a cloud. It's like that, it's like being in a fog. You're awake, you see, but you're there with these feelings.

And remember, you're not trying to get rid of them. You're not trying to do anything to them. Just like all these forms of energy, you're just allowing it to dissipate. And as it dissipates, you're losing a bit of the energy from that disposition, *saṅkhāra*, from that particular habit. So that's why you've got to take it to daily life, because if you don't, you go back, you reinforce the old habit. So every time you come to meditation retreat, you keep having to suffer the same things. There's a lot of it. We're not going to run out of it. Well, not for a while.

I think it is actually. That's one of the things you don't like people to do in a meditation hall is yawn. Gets you going. Physically it's even easier because you can take the mind up and down the body and discover what parts of the body actually don't feel it. Like you don't feel, generally you don't feel lethargy in your toes. Although you can. If you stretch your toes you get that feeling of tiredness in them, or at least I do anyway. Maybe I've just got very sensitive toes.

So yes, you can work with those in the same way, and you can just be aware of it, you can just feel it, you see, you can just feel it. You can sometimes turn your inquiry or your interest into the process or go deeper and find out what are the constituent feelings of it, the softness, hardness, softness, the gentleness. You can go beyond the definition of dullness and lethargy and actually find out what are the sensations that make up this concept. Things like that, see, awaken your interest in it. But sometimes it's just good enough to sit with it. Just walk with it. You know, like I say, you take the big fat dog for a walk. Come on, boy. Drag it round the paddock. Just keep moving the foot.

Yeah, there was a time, there was a time those things used to, I remember distinctly, it used to last ten days with me at one point. I was on a long retreat and when it hit me I knew it would be around for ten days and I'd just be in this miasma for ten days and then it would slowly lift. So it comes and goes anyway, but over time if you're working with it as a constant effort in your daily life, you see, don't be brutal, you know, you're not fighting it, you just know you're tired and you ask yourself, am I really tired? So you get up, walk around a bit, stretch, you know.

Yeah? So that's the question about the practice. We can move to one about the fetters here.

So as I understand it, the fetters are the bindweed that generates the hindrances. These are always coming up in meditation and life. We can combat them with mindfulness, but can we get all the bindweed out? Or do we always have to be vigilant? I'm thinking of the delusion of a permanent self and the things that accompany this. As above, might cultivating positive mental states help? And if so, which and or and in what ways? Sorry it's so long.

I like long questions.

Well, the first thing is to be clear in our mind what these fetters are and what their categorization is. So the Buddha categorizes the human experience in various ways to give us different angles. Two of the ways that you can look at this psychophysical organism, the human being, is either by the *khandhas*, these five heaps, the body, perceptions, feelings, conditions, our habits and all that, and consciousness. But then he also says you can look at a human being by way of the senses. So there are six consciousnesses, six ways of knowing the world, the five physical ones and the mind itself, you see.

So here, he first of all, I want you to point out that there's also what's known as the *anusaya*. Now the *anusaya* come very close to, I think anyway, the Western idea of something subconscious, something that we're not fully aware of. And it's one of these lists I haven't learned. They're known as, here it's translated as the proclivities, which is not a very regular word, is it? Inclinations or tendencies.

Now, they won't surprise you. Sensuous greed. Grudge. I don't know about grudge. Normally hatred, yeah? Speculative opinion. In other words, I'm right, everybody else is wrong. Skeptical doubt. Conceit, craving for continued existence always wanting to become and ignorance which covers it all really.

Now although this actually is enumerated, I've read that the Buddha used it very generally, the word *anusaya* to suggest that there were these potential conditionings within the system and that they related in some way to actual behavior to the way you think and speak and act. And when they do that then you can actually see them, so that's when he categorizes them in terms of our meditation practice into the five hindrances.

So now we know when something unwholesome comes up, we should be able to fit it into one of these five. And then when we're doing that, we're doing the fourth establishment of mindfulness, which is to see what we're experiencing by way of the Buddha's Dharma. *Dhamma-dhamma-nupāsati*, right? To really look into the Buddha's dharma and to see what we're experiencing from his point of view. This is the point, you see.

Which is difficult for us Westerners who have a different psychology and a different philosophy. What we tend to do is place that upon the Buddha's teaching and reinterpret the Buddhist teaching by way of our understanding and I think that's some of the problems that people come across. One of the early mistakes I mean it was the early Christians who came upon Buddhism and just presumed because of the descriptions of *Nibbāna* that it was extinction. It was often translated just annihilation even though the Buddha goes out of his way a hundred times to say he doesn't teach annihilation he only teaches the annihilation of greed, hatred and delusion so you get things like that you see.

So it's good sometimes to contemplate the teachings of the Buddha because it makes us see our situation in a different way and I would say that it's by doing that that you get the fullness of the practice. I mean one example might be the quality of *anicca* impermanence so normally I think we would think it's the same stuff which just changes. Like you might see a tree, the leaf of a tree, but it's always the same stuff that produces leaves. Do you know what I mean? So you get the idea that impermanence is like a cloud. It's the same thing, but it's changing.

But actually, it's more like the way leaves are in a tree. It's a completely new leaf. The leaf grows, drops off, and then you get a completely new leaf. And that's how the Buddha saw time. It collapses momentarily, you see. And mentally speaking, those collapses aren't into annihilation, but into this rather funny word, *bhavanga*, which means life continuation. We would just call it unconsciousness. But it's a potential. And then you rise out of that. And the longest piece of that *bhavanga* that we have is, of course, when we fall asleep. But those are happening minutely throughout the day, they're not just when we're asleep.

So those are the things that we from the West might impose upon the Buddhists without even knowing it, we just presume we know when in fact we haven't really understood what he was talking about.

So now these five *nīvaraṇa*, as they're called, the five hindrances those come specifically within the practice of *vipassanā* because he tries to encapsulate in those five all the various unwholesome mental states that you might come across. That's all he's done and the reason why he's categorized them like that is because each of them demands a different approach a different way of dealing with them so obviously if you're dealing with a compulsive desire it's something that's really grabbed your imagination and it's really taking most of your meditation into this dream world

So you have to come off, and there, you know, it's an indulgence as opposed to something which you don't like. So for instance, if some anxiety comes up, there may be anxious thinking about it, but when you come into the body you don't want to stay there. So normally what we do then is of course rush off somewhere where we can enjoy something.

So often you find that when you're involved in a pleasant daydream and you keep coming off it, it's actually a bit of icing on top of this dung which wants to come up, you see. And that's the way we often escape from our problems, by just indulging in something pleasurable. It's understandable, isn't it? I do it myself. But it's just knowing that these various categories have different ways of dealing with them. So we just talked about dullness and lethargy. So that's the hindrances as such.

Now the fetters... So in terms of the question, you see, the bindweed, that which binds, that's another category, only this time he's talking about these big leaps in spiritual understanding that are real turnarounds in the way that we relate to the world.

So, in the first stage, what's known as *Sotapanna*, the stream-enterer, the insight there is such that the person glimpses the fact that this personality is not a self, it's not a me or a mind, it's not substantial. The other insight is that all the religious practices

which are not to do with insight but more to do with raising devotion—all the little rituals that we do like the bowing and the taking the refuges and stuff like that—are all supports but in themselves don't produce any awakening.

Now, if you go back to Hindu, to the times of the Buddha, it was presumed that certain things would bring *moksha*, you know, would release you from *kamma*. And I still think probably there are some forms of Hinduism that still believe that, like standing in the Ganges gets rid of all your *kamma*, bad *kamma*, you know, get rid of you too. And a lot of the rituals that we see in other religions, you see, which people, from a Buddhist point of view, might mistakenly think that this actually brings liberation.

But you then don't want to go to the opposite side and think that all ritual is useless and a waste of time, because the whole point of ritual is to prepare oneself, is to get the right frame of mind, the right attitude, the right atmosphere within oneself. So the Buddha is not saying don't have any ritual—he's just saying don't believe that that's enough to get you liberated.

And the third one, actually it's number two, so the first one is personality belief that this body, that this personality is a real self, so there's a glimpse of that, there's a real understanding of that. And the second one is the ending of skeptical doubt, so that person doesn't have that hindrance come up in terms of the Buddha's teaching. See, it doesn't mean to say that they might not doubt in ordinary daily life, like whether they should take this job or not. It's not that. But there's no skeptical doubt as to the Buddha's teaching because they themselves have glimpsed *Nibbāna*. That's the point.

And the Buddha talks about it like a flash of lightning. And it's interesting because when some people have this experience, it's like nothing. They don't even know they've had it. It's like it's virtually no consequence to them. They don't even know it sometimes. Even though the teacher tells them, they say, well, I don't think you're right. For others, it's a sort of huge, amazing thing that's happened to them. And the way I personally make sense of that is because, of course, in past lives if you have attained that then when you come back to this life you're simply regaining the position where you were.

It's like for instance going through the first big change in our relationship to the world at the age of seven—it just happens naturally doesn't it for most anyway. Very few people know they're going through that process of a seven-year-old. You know there are two major things that happen there. The first one is that you take on guilt, you come across the law of *kamma* at the age of seven, that when you do something harmful, harm comes to you. Before that, a child might not be clear about it, but from the age of seven on, it becomes more and more clear.

But the other thing that happens to us around the age of seven, of course, is that our imaginings cannot be real to us anymore. You know, Father Christmas cannot come down the chimney anymore. For a three-year-old, that's not a problem. It's just presumed, you see. But after seven, I'm afraid we lose the magic.

I was once with a mother and a child, she was about three. It was Christmas, wasn't it? Roundabout Christmas. And unfortunately, I thought, well, they were talking about Christmas, and the mother kept saying, but you know, it's not real. And I could see the girl was slightly confused by this. And I kept thinking, no, don't kill it. There's only three, for God's sake. Believe in Christmas. It's like... It was like she was trying to be, trying to make the child what it can't be at the age of three, you know. Never mind.

So those are the fetters that disappear. Now fetters, that's a nice word, bindweed. You know, they sort of hold you there, you can't, and you don't even know it, of course, because of the delusion. So these three, you can see they don't quite equate to the five hindrances or to the *anusaya*—they sort of double up a bit. But it's said that when a person does reach this their morality is also enhanced, you see, their virtue is enhanced. And it's said that if such a person cannot commit a crime or do something so heinous that would put them into a hell state—it wouldn't be possible for them to do that.

All these various realms remember are to be experienced, can be experienced as a human being. Buddhist cosmology simply—it's a later thing. Although the Buddha talks about it, the way it's all worked out with all these different heavens and all that, this is a later sort of intellectualisation of it. But they're basically cosmologising states that you can experience right here and now. So when you're really depressed or when you're in a panic, you're in a hell state, you know. When you feel very dull, when you've had a few drinks, say no. You're in animal state. You've lost it. You know what I mean? When you're in a very angry state, you're in the angry gods. When you're very happy, you're in heaven. You're in one of the delightful heavens. When you achieve one of these beautiful states in meditation, an absorption state maybe, then you're in one of the higher realms. You see what I mean? They're all...

So now the second one, you see, when you reach the second stage which is the stage of once-return, it's presumed you have to come back into this form again to let go of your desire for sensual pleasure. So this is the realm of sensual pleasure. And even though you've attenuated greed for sensual pleasure and aversion, there's still something to be done. So those are the two things that are attenuated. They're just lessened. They're not so strong.

It's only in the third one, the non-returner, where this searching for happiness in sensual pleasure and aversion and all that disappear. And all that's saying is that such a person is no longer attracted to this particular form. It doesn't attract them anymore. Just as children, as we grow out of certain toys, we're not attracted to rattles anymore. I've moved on, usually. I know some people still have their teddy bears, but we can forgive that.

And then finally when you finally reach Arahāt and the self disappears, that understanding of a self, then you get the craving for these two rather finer states which is caused by the *jhāna*. So the *jhāna*, the ordinary *rūpa-jhāna* and the *arūpa-jhāna*—so these are technical terms but they're basically blissful states within us.

And the whole point about the *jhānas* is that they are created by the mind itself through mantra, through watching the breath, through loving-kindness. And therefore you don't need anything out there to feel absolutely blissed out. And that's why when you get to that stage you can live under a tree—what the hell does it matter? You know, you don't need retail therapy anymore. You can just sit under a tree and get blissed out. And you wake up, go for a bit of lunch, find yourself a park bench and off you go again.

So even those areas are now let go of as true happiness. This is the point. The delusion that these are going to bring true happiness disappears. And with that, with the self goes conceit. Now conceit in Buddhism, the word used *mana* has a root form which means to measure. So the self is always measuring itself against other people. It's either getting envious or feeling superior, and that's the conceit.

It can be inferiority conceit—I'm worse than everybody else—superiority, and then a rather subtle one where I'm equal. So by saying you're equal to somebody you're basically forming a group which is either inferior or superior to anybody else's group. This is the subtle—it's like when you say we're Buddhists, you know, as though that's better than being anything else. So that's conceit that goes because there's no self that is judging anymore or measuring.

Restlessness goes. Now this has always interested me. I think what's really meant here actually is that all the old problems are there that are within our personality and that through the practice and over a period of time they just become less and less and less until they're just this little restlessness. They're not disturbing so much, they're not so cloying, they're not so demanding, they just lost energy. See, that's my understanding of it. Technically, it's just feeling restless, you know, fidgety or whatever. But when you look into your own restlessness, you'll always find there's something making you rest-

less, you see. So even that goes now because the heart's completely purified, you know. There's no, for want of a better word, there's no neuroses, there's nothing in there which has a negative effect on us.

So now the heart is now full of these more positive qualities, mainly or the four illimitable—love, compassion, joy, peace. We'll come to that. And then finally of course ignorance goes. So now a person is wise, wise meaning that they know about how they've created all this suffering for themselves. They know themselves to be liberated from it and they know that they cannot fall back into that suffering. That's what this ignorance is. It's not as though when you become wise you know all about quantum physics. Unfortunately they do put things like that on the poor Buddha, but I'm sure he didn't. But he definitely knew he was liberated and he definitely knew how he had liberated himself and he definitely knew how he got into the mess. And of course that's what he then went on to teach.

So that I hope covers a bit of that. I don't know if there's any questions arising from that. It's always good to read these long questions again actually. I shall just read it. "As I understand it the fetters are the bindweed that generate the hindrances." I'm not so sure they generate the hindrances—I mean one of them does, ignorance—but it's like a different categorisation. The hindrances are the expressions of the bindweed, something like that. Yeah, why not? I'll let that pass.

"These are always coming up in meditation and life and we can combat them with mindfulness. That means in a sense that they don't overtake us. But can we get rid of all this binary?" Well, the answer is yes, you see. But unfortunately, as the question goes on, "Do we always have to be vigilant?" Absolutely. See, so his final words, *apamādo sampadeta*, you know, struggle and strive on, *apamādo*, diligently, vigilantly, it's often translated as vigilant. So, you bat an eye and you've fallen back. He's like, you've got to keep on the ball.

But remember, the attitude should be one of being relaxed with that process. If any force comes into it, if any struggle in that wrong sense comes into it, then actually you're making it worse. We're making it worse for ourselves. And it's just a good habit to keep relaxing into the present moment as often as you can, as often as it comes to mind. Just to stop, relax the body, relax the shoulders, just stop. And then you rise out of that into your next action. And that keeps an ease about life.

Spiritually speaking, you're not trying to attain any of this. You're not trying to attain these four paths and fruits. You're not trying to attain *Nibbāna*. What you're trying to attain is moment-to-moment mindfulness. Because once that's attained, the path manifests. You don't have to do anything. And that's the genius, you might say, of the

Buddha's teaching. He doesn't land us with goals in the future. So that everything we're doing now is some sort of Nibbanic bliss in so many hundreds of thousands of years. He says, no, he says, just be aware now and you'll begin to taste it. Just be aware now and those hindrances that are stopping us moving forward will begin to lessen. So the whole accent is upon now, you see. And that makes it easy for us, doesn't it? It's like you don't have to worry about the future. It will take care of itself.

I want to do the next one now which is about the self actually. So if the last question was long, wait for this one.

Bhante, I just wanted to say one more thing about rebirth. We had a discussion on rebirth. If rebirth is fuelled by thirst or desire to become, then it follows that if the human race were all to simultaneously realise the Absolute Truth of things and attain Arahantship, then from that moment no more human beings could be born. I make this point not to be ridiculous but because rebirth explained in this way seems to be saying that life and existence is the problem. Now for me life manifesting itself in all its wonders is truly beautiful and that the problem is not existence but our wrong relationship with existence. I think to regard rebirth, if it happens, as something to hopefully one day be done away with, misses the very opportunity, the very point of our existence, which with the right view takes us into the realm of great love.

Now, this rebirth is a big problem for Western music. But you might have come across a teacher called Buddhadasa, Ajahn Buddhadasa. He's written quite a few books. He had a monastery. I say he had because he died. He's died now. He had a monastery in the south of Thailand called Suan Mokkh. And he is probably the only writer I've met who actually has hit the nail on the head and it's really very much against the normal teaching of Theravāda or the way that Theravāda normally talks about rebirth and all that.

So the normal thing is that we keep being reborn as human beings or as other beings and when we become liberated that's it. Like it's what happens nothing is spoken of it, nothing is talked of it. Mahāyāna tried to correct that by having the Buddha constantly appear out of compassion for all beings in his bliss body, basically as an angel, inverted commas, that's his bliss body. And that within the bliss body there's the Dharmakāya which is this Buddha within, the Buddha nature, call it what you wish, you see. So there's a whole philosophy and a whole understanding about that which is highly elaborated in the Mahāyāna system.

Now, if we take the Theravāda, according to Buddhadasa, the big mistake came very early on, talking about rebirth as if it was one person being reborn, maybe as a different personality, but basically that was the process that came to an end.

When he studied the scriptures in his own depth, to his own understanding, and I think this is what comes across once you begin to see where the Buddha is coming from, this whole process of rebirth is the rebirthing of self.

So this dependent origination, for instance, is often talked of as three lives. The first, your past life is your ignorance, your delusion and all your dispositions. You're born into this life with these dispositions and fundamental delusion, and your culture then helps you to produce a personality, a character which has as its base these particular conditionings. Depending on the situation, certain conditionings will come to the fore and others won't. So if, for instance, you have a lot of fear within these conditionings at birth, but you're born into a situation which is very supportive, then it's obviously going to be helpful. If you're born in a war zone, you're not going to do so well.

In this life all the middle section happens—all the business of the desire, the becoming, and so on. Then after this becoming there's this rebirth in another realm of sickness, old age and death—birth, sickness, old age and death. In other words, that's your future life. So that's how it's taught traditionally.

Now what Buddhādāsa has pointed out, which is already there, but he really makes it very clear, is that this wheel of dependent origination is actually about present moments. It's actually happening now. So even now there is this basis of delusion within us, and there are these dispositions. Every moment we enter comes with that little bit of baggage. We react from delusion—this is not wise, not from a wisdom point—we react to it in a deluded way, and before we know it we're stuck in some desire, some aversion, and we rebirth the self. That's at the point of the *upādāna*, the grasping. Then when that process is over, it's as though there's a drop, there's a finish, and the potential lies there. Then you walk into the next moment and another self is created.

So it's not as though you have a self which is blocked and that's it, it's final. The self is constantly being reborn. And it's not always happening—it's obviously not happening when you sleep, and it's not happening when we're doing something from a wisdom base.

So if we look at the Buddha, once he'd become fully liberated, from then on all his actions are moving along a similar psychology. An idea comes: "I'll go and teach these people, my old companions." Then he reinforces the idea, it's an intention, he's empowered it, and he's walked a couple of hundred—I think it's about a hundred miles or so, can you remember how much it was? It's a long way, at least a day. So from where he was liberated to go and find these companions right up in Benares, Varanasi, was an act of will. But that whole process and going there and teaching did not produce another self. See?

So that idea of a self has gone. Now, does that mean that the Buddha doesn't have a sense of himself as it were? Like it's a schizophrenia or an uncentred personality? What's happening if he doesn't have a self?

Well, the thing is that it depends how you want to express this. The way I personally express it is that once this *satipaṇṇā*, this intuitive intelligence, has discovered its own true nature, it forms a very different relationship to this body-mind complex, which is this personality, this character, this body. It doesn't see it as me. It's simply a vehicle, like you might get in your car. So if you get in your car and then say, "This is me," they probably take you away slowly. "Yes, come on, dear." You don't say that. You say, "I'm in"—I mean, you might say it's my car, you have a relationship to it, but you don't say it's me.

So it's the same with this *satipaṇṇā*, this Buddha within us. It no longer says, "This is me." It's coming from some other place, and it's driven by similar—on a wholesome level it's driven by similar attitudes of love, compassion, joy—but this time it's not being corrupted. It doesn't have the kink of a self in it. In other words, "What's in it for me?" It's coming from a pure heart, a pure wisdom base.

So now that is, I think, a more acceptable way of understanding rebirth, and I think it's a way that allows us to use the concept of rebirth very much as part of our spiritual practice. So here I am being reborn as a greedy person again. You see what I mean? It's like, "Here I go again. It's me again. Hello." And it's recognising that. I say, "You greedy person." Not damning, of course, not judging, but simply no longer enjoining it, no longer indulging in that.

So now, what happens when we die? This is the next big thing. What happens then when we die? Well, in terms of spiritual practice, it's irrelevant because all we have is this present moment. You're either practising or you're not. When you die, well, if you're not anymore, fine. There's no suffering there. You won't be bothered at all if you disappear completely. On the other hand, if you reappear, then it might—if you actually reappear then of course there's a problem again. You're stuck with this being. "Here I am again." It's like when you wake up in the morning, isn't it? "Here I am again." What are we doing? You wake up, where have I been? So all of a sudden—and I just read a quote about that in the final chapter on the question. Do you remember the quote?

Along the lines of, if there is no such thing as rebirth, but you've lived an honourable life, well, that's all very good. And you've lived a life of happiness and peace. And if there is rebirth, then your rebirth will be positive.

That's right. A win-win situation.

Yes, I know the Buddha points that out. Because obviously in his day too there were annihilationists. The people who thought that when you died that was it. There were some people who had a more convoluted system where you went through all these different realms and then disappeared, but there were definitely annihilationists in his day. And yes, he gives this win-win situation where, you know, if you live a virtuous life, at least you get these benefits, and then fine, you disappear. And if you live a virtuous life and wake up somewhere else, then you've got at least the benefits of that, of your virtuous life.

The Buddha talks about the *citta* body, the body of the mind, the mental body, which he says through meditative practices you can exit from the body like a sword from the scabbard—take it out. And I've been—I know people who have had this subtle body leave the physical body and go for a walk and come back. And it still has the same unfortunate qualities as the physical body—it still arises and passes away, but it's just of this finer material. And that would be, in the Mahāyāna system, as I understand it, that's your body of bliss when it becomes enlightened—that's your *sambhogakāya*. This is known as your *nirmāṇakāya*, which is your apparition body or something, your creative body that's created. Now in all this there's the *dharmakāya* or the Buddha within. And of course that's of a different nature, and people experience that too outside their bodies—those people who've had near-death experiences where this consciousness has exited from this whole system and yet is obviously very conscious.

So, in terms of rebirth, it's never caused me any problems, the idea that one goes on in some way. But it's necessary to also understand that that belief is not necessary. Often when people come to Buddhism, if they've been brought up in one of the religions, the monotheistic religions—Christianity or Judaism or whatnot—it's like there's a misunderstanding that they have to believe what the Buddha says or else it's not going to work. It's like you believe that Jesus died to save us all. And you have to believe that or else you don't get your comeuppance, you don't get your grace. But of course, Buddhism is very different from that. It is very much a hypothesis, it's a theory that the Buddha puts to us and says, "Well, this is true for me, you'll have to find out for yourself whether it's true for you." It's an investigation. And that process of investigation is the process of liberation.

So, I can take out the salient points of this question. Yeah, so then what happens, I mean, if all human beings disappeared, well, that'd be it. The Earth would be liberated from very deluded beings. That's for sure. Probably Mother Earth would feel joy and jump up and down with joy. "Yippee! She's got rid of a few species every so often." She just shakes them off, doesn't she? And then reinvigorates herself and starts again. Wonderful.

Now, this question about all beings, it's just that I know it's a hypothetical question, but it reminds me of a lovely question that was asked of Ñāṇaponika, who was this German monk. He's the one who started the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy. And she said to him, in a similar vein, "Supposing everybody became monks and nuns." That would be the end of the human race. And he said, "My dear, it won't happen. It just won't happen." So, even though I know this is a hypothetical question, if all human beings became liberated all at once, it just won't happen.

But the question goes on and says, "Life manifesting itself is all in wonderment." Now, the Buddha is definitely aware of beauty, even in the very simple way of the way he asked his order, the monks and nuns, to robe. You remember in the early days they were happy with just taking bits of cloth off the charnel grounds where they put dead bodies in shrouds and cut it into pieces, sewed it together—anything would do. But when he saw a group of his monks dressed like this, he didn't like it at all when he saw it as a way of manifesting his teaching. And that's when he asked them to cut it into various pieces and sew it in such a way that it looked like paddy fields. That's what they looked like. And to dye it, to boil it with this nut called an areca nut, which gives it a light brown colour.

And if you read the final discourse, which leads to his passing, which leads to his *parinibbāna*, he's walking along with Ānanda, his companion, his assistant, and he says, "Oh, this lovely grove, let's go and eat this in a lovely shrine." He doesn't say, "Let's just sit down here in this ditch and eat this stuff." He actually seeks out what is beautiful.

And if you think about it from—I think it's Plato, isn't it? Plato said, I think it's very true, that with truth, with truth there arises virtue. And with virtue, beauty. So now, the truth is the intellect, it's understanding. Virtue is your will, how you manifest your understanding in daily life. And beauty is the heart. It's art. It's the way that you manifest your feeling, your—this question used the word love. I mean, that's what love is, isn't it? So the Buddha doesn't deny that. He doesn't deny that's what life is. That's what I definitely understand by it.

And I shall end with a little story. I think I've answered the question. End with a little story about this young girl who turned up at the monastery at Kandalama, which is my monastery in Sri Lanka. And her father said that every evening she would come and tell him that she was going to a particular heavenly realm because she was writing the biography of the Buddha. So she was only a little girl, nine or ten or something. So he humoured her and said, "Oh yeah, very good," and she got to bed. Anyway, one day it would seem—you can only believe what people tell you—she got fed up with her dad and rose up in front of him and disappeared.

So he rushed her off to this monastery, Kandalama, with this big question, and she came along. And her answers are on a tape. They're in Sinhalese, so I don't understand it, but the gist of it was that she was an *arahant*, and she didn't bow to monks. And she didn't, because she was completely liberated. And she had come back to help her grandfather—this particular person—and when she went up to this particular heavenly realm all the Buddhas, the Buddha and all the disciples were there, and there were shrines where they came and gave talks. Now it's a strange thing, isn't it? I don't know whether you have to believe this or not.

So many—about three or four years later I went back to Sri Lanka and I asked about this girl, but unfortunately she had disappeared. She'd now be I suppose twenty, twenty-odd. It would be interesting to try and seek her out and find out whether she was dreaming or not. But her father said she rose up in front of him and disappeared. No, mind you, Jesus—the Ascension. So there are wonderful things in the world.

So unless there are questions arising, I trust that my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Deconstruction: The Five Khandhas and Dependent Origination

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1h12

In this teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma explores the Buddha's systematic deconstruction of human experience to identify where suffering arises. He begins by examining the five khandhas (aggregates): rūpa (body/form), vedanā (feeling), saññā (perception), saṅkhāra (volitional formations), and viññāṇa (consciousness). Through careful analysis, he shows how these heaps of experience are impermanent, insubstantial, and not-self.

The talk then moves to the six sense bases and how consciousness arises at tremendous speed, creating the illusion of continuity. Bhante emphasizes that true freedom lies in recognizing the sankharic processes - our habitual reactions - as the point where we still have choice.

The second half explores paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), the Buddha's revolutionary insight into how suffering is created moment by moment. Starting from avijjā (ignorance/not-knowing), he traces the twelve links that lead to dukkha, highlighting that the critical point of escape lies between vedanā (feeling) and taṇhā (craving). Through mindful awareness, practitioners can break this chain and gradually empty the saṅkhāras that perpetuate the illusion of selfhood.

This teaching offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners a clear framework for understanding how liberation occurs through the systematic observation and objectification of all inner experiences.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhu Dasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhu Dasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhu Dasa

Homage to the fully self-enlightened one.

I've observed that laziness or sloth and torpor is a state closely related to one's intentions. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. There's a distinction between sloth and torpor and laziness to be made. It's a vocabulary distinction. Sloth and torpor are products of past laziness. Laziness as I see it is where you make a decision not to put energy into something, being lazy. That could come from just not caring or just because you're fed up or whatever, but laziness is more to do with an attitude. Rather than when we're talking about defilement, sloth and torpor, they're referring to the con-

sequences of laziness. So that heaviness in the head and the heaviness in the body and all that. So when it comes to laziness it's definitely to do with your intentions. Don't be lazy.

Could you please say a little about developing equanimity? I find I can't let go and not react to things. Equanimity comes with an attitude from a position of not knowing, not wanting to engage. So when something comes up and you find yourself unable not to be drawn into it, try and sit back within yourself to see that resistance or the desire to engage. It's one of the two - it's either a desire to indulge or a desire to push away. Just try to get in contact with that. As soon as that becomes an object to you, it's more like an energy more like an energy than an emotion or anything.

As long as you can keep that there, you must have moved back into an equanimous position. It arises naturally. You don't have to worry too much about equanimity as such. What you have to be concerned about is being able to make that compulsive wanting, that compulsive indulgence, or compulsive rejection, the object. You've got to come back on yourself.

A couple of times I've said the body becomes extremely heavy while the mind remains completely wide and awake. Can you say something about this? These conditions just arise, that's it. So sometimes the body, that heaviness is in the body, which means that the mental state is in the body. And yet you're bright and awake. Now, you may find that even in the head, when you feel really dull, and it's like porridge in there, and you can feel yourself constantly falling into that sleepiness, and you don't feel you're awake within it. If you really make the effort to keep moving around and feeling it and feeling it and experiencing it, you'd be surprised. You'd wake up like a light bulb in the midst of that fog. But it does take that effort. Very good.

So, this evening I just wanted to talk about the way the Buddha deconstructs our experience. So I'm especially aware of people who are new to Buddhism, so I'll try and keep it fairly straightforward. The first thing is he talks about - the first thing he gives us cross-sections, so you take a moment and split the human being into various parts, and then he does that in two ways, and he does it in terms of a process. The process we call dependent origination, and the cross-sections are the *khandhas*, the aggregates, and the six consciousnesses. So these are three that we can look at.

When it comes to the *khandas*, which means a heap or an aggregate, or a mountain - see, a mountain is just a collection of stuff. So if you can imagine, there are these five collections. The first one is to do with the body. Now, at a gross level, it's the physical body that we've got. But at the more subtle level, it's how the mind contacts the body.

And when the mind contacts the body, if you go right down into a feeling, you'll find some combination of these four great elements. So that's your earth element, fire, water, and air.

The earth element is the weight, the heaviness of it, or the lightness. The fire element is the temperature you feel. Cool all the way to boiling hot. The water element is the elasticity that you feel. Sometimes when you're watching the breath, perhaps you can feel an elasticity in it, a cohesion. So that's the water element. And the air element, of course, is movement. And when you go into something like a pain in the knee, for instance, when you go in there, you may begin to see that actually what you're experiencing are movements, little movements, fire elements, some heat. When you change your posture and you keep your attention in the knee, you might just find that stretching, that elasticity.

So any combination of these brings you a feeling. And it's understood that whatever combination it is, we then perceive it as pleasant and unpleasant. We give it a name. It gets a bit more subtle with the eyes, which would be seen as more of the fire element. The ear, of course, as you know, is just pressure. It's just the earth element. A movement. When it comes to taste, of course, it gets even more subtle in terms of trying to describe it with these four elements, but you can obviously feel the toughness of the food, the heat of it, the coldness of it, and so on.

So that's the body element, the body heap. And all that is a given. You're entirely dependent upon your body for what comes in through the senses. There's virtually no control over that process. I mean, you can guard yourself, you needn't put yourself too close to the fire, but the fact is you can't stop the body feeling heat as you approach the fire. It's just a given. That's not under our control. Now that's to be contemplated.

So think about your body. Do you know now what your liver's doing? Can you feel red corpuscles being made in the marrow of your bones? Do you guide them through your bones into the bloodstream? Have you any idea that as you grow older, the grizzle on the end of your nose is growing? I doubt you might. There's a whole load of stuff. When you look at your body, you presume that you are the body, that this is you. But actually when you investigate your relationship to the body, you find you know nothing. And you can't do anything about it. Not after a certain age, anyway. I'd have loved to have been tall, lots of hair. You're just given it, you may as well be happy.

So that relationship is to be - and what it does, of course, if you suddenly realize that, there is this consciousness, there's this awareness, and it's an alien within this body. Weird. So that contemplation around the body is well worth it. And of course, that takes

you into the sickness of the body, how the body falls sick, whether you like it or not. And eventually it's death. Eventually it's collapse. So all that contemplation is all around the heap that we call the body, *rupa*.

The next is to do with feeling. So from the body we get these feelings. And feeling is a point where we determine something to be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. And there are two types of feelings that we've experienced. The first one is coming from the body. So obviously, pain in the knees. And the other one is coming from our mind, the heart. In Buddhism, the body and mind are not the same. They suffer from the same qualities. They are impermanent. They're insubstantial. You can pull it all apart. They're just energy forms. But they're two different energies. And although it doesn't fit in with our modern materialist science, at death they separate. And whatever is separated out as the mental part, that is the bit that goes on to be reborn into the next moment, whatever it is. Luckily you don't have to believe this to become fully liberated. So don't make it a clause.

So, feeling, when we experience feeling, that also is a given. You know power over changing a feeling as it arises. You can make yourself feel things, you can stick a pin in your hand if you like doing things like that. But it's not as though you can stop feelings and sensations arising. That's also a given. And it creates a heap, you can say, a heap of all sorts of different types of feelings and sensations. Some coming from the body, some coming from the heart.

When I say heart-mind, unfortunately in English we've lost this word which connects them. The old word was soul. The old split, the old way that we looked at human beings was soul. Body, soul and spirit. But now soul has become spirit. And since our wonderful enlightenment. And we moved into the mind. And we lost in a sense contact with the heart. We now have to say heart mind. But when you go to the east. And often when they talk to you. And they say what do they think. They point actually to here. They don't point up here. Whereas for us the heart is something else. But I am here. I think, therefore I am. That's a bit of a problem for us.

So we've lost that, I mean it's good to have lost that connection in a sense because it allowed us to make all our discoveries and technologies all come from that objectivity. But unfortunately we've lost contact with the fact that the heart and mind are actually one and the same thing. The one is firing off the other all the time. So the feelings that we experience are determined by the body itself, over which we have no control. The body will give us these feelings when we do these sorts of things. And the heart will give us these feelings when we act in a certain way.

The next one is all to do with perception. Now, perception is this amazing ability of the mind to make photocopies. And what we do is we see something, like an apple for the first time, and it registers. It registers as a perception. And then, as we eat more and more apples, our definition of apples grows. So some are red, some are green, some are soft, some are hard, some are sweet, some are not so sweet, etc. So that by the end we end up with a concrete definition, concept of an apple. And all these belong to our memory. And these perceptions, of course, become very fine in terms of our freedom and democracy and all that. All these are perceptions which have grown into conceptions, our concepts. And all that is another heap, another collection of bits which are all to be separated. They don't all form one composite. One thought comes. It disappears. Another thought comes. It disappears. That's another heap. And they're not the same as feelings. And they're not the same as the body. These are three quite distinct heaps.

Now the fourth one is *Sankhara*. Which translates as volitional conditioning. That would be the old regular way of translating it. Other people have tried various things like concoctions and stuff like that. But I think we get close to what we mean by that when we talk about habits. Now this is where - the Buddha's trying to separate out for us where the problem lies. Remember he's only - his only concern is to teach suffering and the end of suffering. That's it. When he's asked what does he teach? Does he teach about God? Does he teach about the universe? He says, no, he says, I only teach about suffering and the end of suffering. Unsatisfactoriness and the end of unsatisfactoriness.

So, the reason why we are deconstructing ourselves is not just for the fun of it, it's to find out where the problem lies. The problem lies right here in *Sankhara*. *Sankhara* means volitional conditioning. So, it's the volitional bit which is the important bit. It's the bit where we're making decisions based upon wrong understandings that are causing *Sankhara's* habits. Causing certain habits which include both the emotional feelings and the thought feelings. And it creates a habit. A way of expressing ourselves. And some habits that we have are beautiful and some are not so beautiful.

But the important thing about this particular heap that's in us is that it is being created by our will. This is what we can take control of. When we say we can take control of it, the bit that's already been created, you can't do anything about. That's what we're suffering when we sit here. All the sadness and the anger and occasionally a bit of joy. So all that stuff that's come up, that's a consequence of past decision making and all we can do with that is bear with it and make sure we don't indulge it because every time we indulge it we empower it again and that's the process of will.

So when you're doing your standing meditation for instance and you're standing still and you're saying to yourself intending to walk intending to walk - stay there for a while with that intending which is another way of saying desiring. So intending to just feel the energy there. Feel the energy and how the body wants to move. And then suddenly there's a decision and the foot moves. What is it that's brought something out of potential into an actual? That's the will. And you can't separate the will from the action. So the Buddha says, what I call *kamma*, an act, is the will. It's a bit like, as far as I know, and I stand to be corrected of course, it's when you throw a stone into the air, you can't separate the force from the stone. And what is it anyway? You can't separate force from the object that is moving. Interesting. Am I right? Is there a scientist amongst us? If I've made it up, forgive me. I read it somewhere years ago. The thing is in science it changes so much you don't know where you're at.

So you've got that *sankhara*, that heap, that aggregate. The last one is consciousness and consciousness is the ability of the mind to hold an image for us. That's what consciousness is, like a screen and it holds the image and that image is multi-dimensional and that image holds feelings, it holds everything and it holds it long enough for it to be registered. If it's not registered, we hardly know it, we hardly see it, we're hardly aware of it. But when it registers, it's there for the moment, and then it passes away. And consciousness is arising at tremendous speed, and it's giving us the impression of continuity.

So, for instance, when we are watching, say, a film or something, we can hear the conversation, we can see what's going on. We're drinking coffee and tea, or popcorn, or whatever it is, and we can taste it. All that seems to us to be happening at the same time. But in Buddhist psychology, what's happening is, moment after moment, consciousnesses are arising at some tremendous speed, and it gives us an experience of continuity and the closest we can as a good image for that is the old film where it was 26 frames or something or 25 frames a minute and it gave us the impression of continuity. And as soon as it slowed down you realise actually it was just these moments of flashing images on a screen and that's how consciousness works.

Now, when you pull yourself out into the position of the observer, all that is becoming an object. Before we came to meditation, before we came to this, we would have just presumed ourselves to be this human being. You wouldn't have made an object of yourself. You'd have been aware that, for instance, you've got a pain in the knee or a pain in the head, but there wouldn't have been that separation of the knowing from what's being known. And there would have been a real attachment to your body in terms of its illness and whatnot.

Now, in the meditation, what we're doing is, we are pulling something out of these five aggregates. And we're making these five aggregates objects to observe. That which is pulling out is your intuitive awareness. Now that doesn't mean to say that once we've begun to practice this and see this that suddenly we become totally equanimous and content and you can stab me in the back and I'll be fine. No it's not. But at least there is within us this inkling of a knowledge that there is something which doesn't belong to the five *khandhas*. That is this human being. So that's one way that the Buddha deconstructs our experience.

I'm going to connect all this to Dependent Origination. Oh heavens, it's ten past seven. I've only just started. I might have to... I'll finish with this because I hate going on and on. And then tomorrow I'll sort of go into dependent origination. Yes, that's what I'll do.

The next way that he deconstructs our experience is looking at our sense bases. And the sense bases in Buddhism are six. The five that we obviously know, and the sixth is the mind.

In the psychology of Buddhism, when you hear something, actually what is being received at the sense door is pressure. There is no sound, right? There's no sound in the universe, okay? And there's no light in the universe, right? You have to have these senses to hear something. And you have to have these senses to see something.

So when the air waves begin to touch upon the eardrum, they are little messages, little stimulus going in. And that's all the ear actually does. From then on, it's taken into the mind, and there's a process of recognition. So, bell. Yeah, bell. Just the sound of a bell. Then when the process of the bell is completed, there's the understanding of what a bell means. Right? Then the bell is put into a time slot where you understand that it's an awakening bell. And then, only then, at the end of that process, does the mind come in and say, I've got to get up. Right?

That whole process is one after the other. And believe it or not, you can actually experience that. That can be experienced, but you've got to... you've got to really get down to your meditation today. You've got to be really on the ball. But that's how deep you can go. You can actually see these momentary consciousnesses and how the mind actually creates everything from this original, very simple stimulus.

Now it's the same with seeing. I'm sure you've seen these diagrams which show you that when we look at a picture, the eye is darting all over the place. It's never still. It's quite amazing to see how the eye is just moving. But we don't experience that. What we

experience is the picture. And of course we can focus on different parts of the picture. And we still are not aware of the fact that even then the eye is moving at tremendous speeds all over it, picking up little pixels.

And even that can be seen. Even that, you can actually be looking at something and it all frazzles up into a sort of... you know these pointillist paintings? You know these where they paint with little dots? Shimmering like that in front of you. And then it congeals into a picture. And that means that this mind, the actual perceiving mind, is right up against the sense door.

Now, the purpose that the Buddha again points this out is that each sense door is individual and discrete. You simply cannot smell through your eyes. And therefore, the way that we experience the world is in these discrete moments: seeing, hearing, smelling, touching. And somehow the mind, at a deeper level of its processing, can put it all together into an experiencing.

Here we go. Say your prayers. It's just pressure. Just pressure. Yes. It's just pressure waves.

So that's a specific way that the Buddha also deconstructs our experience. So here we have two ways of deconstructing. And what's the purpose of it? It's to take away the sense of substance. It's to take away the sense of me. Me.

And again, in that process of observing what's coming in, of actually being at the process of hearing. So when you're outside, just to stand there with that spacious awareness, putting your attention entirely upon one of the ears. You see? And just hearing, hearing. And just keep it there, steady. When you're looking, just keep your eyes steady on the flower and just watch the perceptual process. Watch the eye doing.

So you're always, as it were, standing one step behind yourself to see process. Nothing remains. Remember that. Everything's in a process. Everything's changing. And it's to be able to stand still enough to be able to see that. And in our meditation, we're trying to constantly access that point of stillness within us. The observation post, the observer, the knower. See, so that constant effort to come off the thinking mind and to bring ourselves back to the direct experience at the sense bases of this particular moment. Always feeling, always in the body. Ground yourself in the body.

And in this way, the sharpness, the discriminative faculty of this intuitive awareness becomes finer and finer. So, in a sense, if you really want to deepen your practice, you've got to make that effort of continuity. So you can't be... you have to give up cups of

tea for a start. You've got to make the effort to, from here to the walking place, right? There's your objective. Your objective is the walking place. You bring yourself back here and every footstep is known. Every footstep is felt.

And then you stop and you do your walking meditation, right? And you might start with a bit of an exercise, just going up and down quite rapidly to get the energy up and just to relax. And then slower and slower and slower, you see? Very, very slow, watching every movement, you see? And then when the bell goes, to come in at a speed where you don't lose that collectedness.

Now there's the true meditator. This afternoon I walked out there and there were two meditators sunbathing. I thought, well that's the pits. They're obviously not suffering enough. Because if you're suffering enough, you want to get rid of it.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. I will, of course, carry on deconstructing tomorrow. And by your fierce and determined effort, I'm sure you will make plenty of insights that will bring you to your liberation sooner rather than later. So if you'd like to take a break.

I have to apologise. Yesterday, when I looked at the clock, it was ten past seven. And I should have gone on, it was nearly quarter past, and I should have gone on until half past. But I was working on the time that we keep at Sati Panya, where everything's half an hour early, and where we rise at 3:30, which is the proper time. So, I've got... I got confused, so maybe I'll just extend a little bit if I don't finish what I need to say.

So we were talking about this whole process of deconstructing. Remember that even in objects, you take a car. When you're driving, for those of you who drive, there are times when you and the car are one. You don't experience yourself as separate from the car because you're totally involved or absorbed into the action of driving. Especially when there's a tricky corner or somebody's doing something nasty to you. And then you wake up and there you are in the car. And you still think you have control over the car. And then suddenly it stops. And then you realise that actually your control is superficial. You can move it this way and that way. You can back it up and back it into somebody. But you can't actually do anything about the inner workings of the car.

So that's the situation that we find ourselves within this body. We can move our arms about and wave them and all that. You can't make your arm grow any longer. You can't do much with the body as it is. And when we look into the workings of a car, especially a modern car, it's quite mystifying, at least to me. I once thought of myself as a bit of a mechanic because I pulled engines apart. And about four or five years ago, a friend of

mine stopped. The car just stopped. And I was with him. And we opened the bonnet. And I said, oh, it sounds to me like it's the distributor. And I pointed to the distributor; you see. I said, you know, we'd better call the RAC.

So the RAC came over, and he looked in, and it was just a fan belt. And mysteriously, the distributor had moved to the other side of the engine. So I don't quite know how that happened. Anyway, so you see how delusional he is.

So it's that business of recognising that we're in this very strange situation of being in the body, but not of the body. And what is it that's in the body that's not of the body?

So through the process of deconstruction, the Buddha's trying to make us investigate the way it really is, not the way we presume it to be, through our delusion. The delusion is, I am this person, I am this body. Now, as I think I've mentioned before, you know how deluded you are about your body when the doctor tells you you've got six weeks to live. Then there's freak out. And that level of paranoia and fear around death is the measure of our identification with the body. See?

So, in these five aggregates, these five heaps, he's trying to separate out, and he's telling us, in a sense, what's the given. The body's the given. Perceptions are given. It's part of that whole psychological process. Feelings are given. But in the *saṅkhāra*, these conditions, here we have a measure of control.

Saṅkhāra are conditions, and they are conditioning. So when you have, shall we say, the habit of getting really excited about something, as soon as that something that you get excited about comes up, the excitement will come, because that's how you've trained yourself. You've trained yourself to be excited. But in the coming up of the excitement, the excitement itself is developing itself.

So all these habits that we have, whether it's the fear of things, anxiety, depression, joy, falling in love, all that is something that we've conditioned ourselves and when it becomes active, it is conditioning. So conditions are not stable. And our understanding is to catch where the intentionality is because it's at that point we still have a choice. We can either indulge it or let it go. Or, in some cases of course, develop it. If it's something beautiful, then we should develop it.

So he points to the *saṅkhāra* as the place where we have to really look as to where suffering arises. Pain arises in the body. Pain arises from the *saṅkhāra* in the body. That's where you get emotional disturbances within us. That's a given. But what do we mean by suffering? Suffering is our relationship to what's happening. And that's all within the *saṅkhāra*.

When these *saṅkhāra* go into the memory, *saññā*, that's when they produce this lovely word, *papañca*, proliferation. The Buddha points out when these *saṅkhāra* arise, they go into your memory and they start producing a story. And it's through the story that they develop themselves. That's why in *vipassanā* we're constantly coming off the mind. Coming back into the body.

And the final one of course is this consciousness. So there's your five *khandhas*. And then we talked about the five sense bases. And how each consciousness is confined to a sense base. In Buddhist understanding, an eye consciousness arises. And that's all. And then a hearing consciousness arises. And that's all.

So although we... because of the speed of these consciousnesses, we get the sense of it all being one. And all being continuous. That's the delusion. So in our practice, we're constantly moving down deeper and deeper. What we mean by deeper here is less and less time slot.

How long is a moment in time? How long do you experience a moment? Interesting question, no? I mean, how long is it? Is it half a second? Is it a second? How long is a moment, you see?

And what we're doing is, we are bringing our attention slowly and slowly. See, there's a noting and the attention. The noting of the attention. And then we're locked into the moment. The noting stops. That's if you develop that concentration well enough. And then in that moment, it's as though time collapses into that actual present moment. And that's when you realise that actually these moments are infinitesimally small.

Even there, even there, will have some measure because you're not actually seeing the arising and passing away of individual consciousnesses, see. So that's our practice is to... the Theravāda approach you might say is not so much the spaciousness but the minuscule, you know. What is it? The universe in a grain of sand. It's actually going down to the minuscule moment. And that's where we're constantly driving the attention. Okay?

Now, those two ways of looking at this deconstruction process are cross-sections. You can take any moment in a human being's life, draw a line, and you'll find the five heaps, the five aggregates, and the five consciousnesses. One or the other, I mean.

Now, when he tries to deconstruct the timeline of how we create suffering, that's what he's interested in, remember, just suffering, we have Dependent Origination. And this seems to have been completely new to the age. There's nothing like it, seemingly, before the Buddha. This is what the academics tell you. So it's a real deep insight into how we create the world that we're living in and where the mistakes come.

Now, if you look at that chanting sheet, you'll be able to follow me because I'm just going to go through the Dependent Origination. So that's in the middle of the *pūjā*, middle of the *pūjā* sheet, the morning *pūjā* sheet, that's what you want. And it's in the middle of it. And you'll notice that it starts off with the Buddha's victory verse.

Victory verse, you see, he says, let me get my goggles on. Can't wait for summer when I get my other operation. I'll be able to see anything.

Now then, he says, "Seeking but not finding the house builder. Okay, so this house builder is this I, this self. I have travelled through the round of countless births. How painful is birth over and over again. Oh house builder, I have now caught you. I shall not build a house again. Your rafters have been broken. Your ridge pole demolished."

Okay. So there he's talking about this self, this construct of a person. And what does he come up with? What does he attain through that? He attains a consciousness which is unconditioned. We should go into that a bit later. And all craving, all the defilements have gone. So that's the process that we're into now. We're into this process of finding out who the house builder is, what the house builder is, getting rid of it, destroying the house, and ending up perfectly happy and wonderful. It's worth it, isn't it? All this suffering.

So it begins with this word *avidyā* and it's often translated as ignorance. But it's not a culpable ignorance. We've just landed into a place of not knowing. So if you think of a baby, you see, when we're born, there we are, we scream a little bundle of cells. What do we know?

So go back to that moment of being born, you see. We don't know anything. From then on, the information starts coming in, and we start building up the world.

As you know, well, some of you might know, the wonderful worker Margaret Mahler, who was a student of Freud, studied children up to the age of three. And later studies, of course, confirmed her findings. For up to the age of four months, all we experience is a bath of sensations. There's no depth to it. There's no 3D. That's why you see children reaching out for things. They're actually creating a 3D world.

And then from four months onwards, it seems, the first object, something looms out of this... this... I mean, there's no concept of me, this me that I'm experiencing, and it's usually your carer, your mother, usually. And slowly, that outer world gets pushed out. And it's not until the age of three that you're actually clear that I am me and everything else is not me. I'm a boy, I'm a girl. You know, that's the moment, round about three. That's how long it takes to separate the outside world.

Now, all we're doing is the same inwardly. We're just pushing the inner world out to make it an object. Now, the ignorance is to think that we are this inner world with its emotions, thoughts, etc., etc.

Now, that *avidyā*, be careful, it's not a culpable ignorance, right? We're not guilty, right? Which is a relief, I think, for all of us. We're not existentially guilty, right? We never did nothing wrong before becoming ignorant. We just didn't know. I did find a word which means not knowing. The word is nescience, but nobody knows it, so I don't... I only point out that there is a word for not knowing.

So this *avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā, saṅkhārā paccayā* — so all he's saying is: be out of this, out of this position of not knowing, we've created these conditions. These habits, right? That's all he's saying.

And then, *saṅkhārā paccayā viññāṇaṃ*. Now, it's out of the body-mind complex — remember — there arises this ability to hold things on a screen. Now, if there was nothing there to be held on a screen, there'd be no screen. So, for instance, when in deep sleep, there's no obvious consciousness because there's nothing coming up, awakening, as it were, on that screen. But it's because of these *saṅkhāra* that the screen is, shall we say, brightened up. And this screen is consciousness.

And consciousness — remember — English words don't really catch it because these days academics and scientists are studying consciousness. I mean, that's the end of clarity for about a hundred years. So it's basically... in Buddhist understanding, if you think of consciousness like a three-dimensional hologram which you can see, and in it there are feelings, images, thoughts, the whole damn thing is there, can be held within that consciousness.

So it's not to be confused with *sati*. See, this is the important thing. That there is something which can see what's on the screen of consciousness. And that's what you're experiencing every time you see a pain in the knee and you say, "There's a pain." The pain must be held somewhere for us to be able to acknowledge it, to see it. And there's something that acknowledges it. See, that's separation.

So there you've got your *avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā*. So dependent on these *saṅkhārā*, this consciousness arises. And depending on consciousness, the body and mind. So here he's, as it were, taken consciousness out of those five aggregates that we talked about. So *nāma-rūpa* — body-mind — he's taken it out and he's pointed out that these two things are like — in those days — two sheaves of wheat leaning against each other. You can't have consciousness — you can't have that ability of consciousness — without the body-mind complex, and without consciousness you wouldn't know that there was a body-mind complex.

So the two come together. But what he's saying here is that these are two different processes. That's the point. Constantly deconstructing. Constantly deconstructing.

Now when it comes to the — where are we now? So now we've been through the five heaps, which is the consciousness and the body-mind. The next step is to see that actually the way we contact the world is through the six senses. And that's your next thing. Dependent on this body-mind complex, the six sense bases arise. So that's the five that we obviously know. And the other one is where the brain and mind contact to create the inner percepts and then eventually concepts. See? So that's the point where the ability to contact the world out there and the world in here arises at the six sense bases.

So when an image comes, it's on the sixth sense base. When an emotion comes in the mind, it's on the sixth sense base. And then dependent on the *saḷāyatana*, we have this *phassa*, we have this contact.

Now, contact is the moment where we experience something. What has to be there? There has to be a sense base. There has to be some sense base. Either the five or the mind. Emotions, thoughts, okay? There has to be an object which is being sensed. And there has to be this consciousness. That's the moment of contact.

Now, when I describe to you what to do with pain in the knee, and your first noting is "pain, pain," and all that, and "aversion, aversion," and then you get that equanimity with it. I say go into the pain. And that's when you go beyond the concept of pain. Into where the mind and the body meet. And that's when you're noting changes to things like heat. Pressure. Stinging. All that — which is the four great elements that we talked about. The fire, earth, water and air. Which stand for pressure, temperature, elasticity, cohesion and movement. So you're right there at the point of contact. When you get down there, you can't go beyond that. That's it. And it's upon those sensations that we're building the world. See?

Now dependent on *phassa*, *vedanā* arises. So what's *vedanā*? *Vedanā* is the five feelings. The five feelings of painful, pleasant — painful and pleasant physical feelings, and painful and pleasant mental feelings, which we would call emotions. And neutral. Neutral feelings, both physical and mental.

Now what's happened there? We have defined what we're experiencing as either pleasant or unpleasant. And that's when you get the concept of pain. See? Now the world lives — we have to live in that dual world. Because everything we experience will either decide it's pleasant or unpleasant. Right?

Now at that point, something happens. Something happens which is arising from this fundamental base of ignorance. Now, that not knowing, it's produced a delusion. What is the delusion? The delusion is, "I am a human being." What a terrible delusion. I am a human being. And therefore, we are seeking happiness in the form of a human being.

Seeking happiness in the form of a human being manifests as acquisitiveness, because I want to feel safe. Greed, acquisitiveness. The more I have, the safer I feel. It manifests as aversion. Anything that threatens what I have, I want to push away and destroy. Murder. And if it's too big, I run for it. At worst, suicide.

So there's my relationship to the world from the position of delusion. The delusion is, "I am this human being. I want to be happy. This is what makes me happy." And I collect all the money, all the friends, all the whatever. And anybody who takes anything from that is my enemy, is my rival, and must be destroyed. And if the rival and the enemy is too big, I've got to run.

So those are my attitudes that are arising from this delusion of thinking, believing, identifying with this psychophysical organism. That fundamental delusion is running underneath every moment we live. Okay?

And when something comes into consciousness which we perceive as pleasant, we'll immediately go up and grab it and try to hold on to it and try to develop it. And if in consciousness something unpleasant comes — that arises from this delusion — the desire to get rid of it, to destroy it, or to run for it.

That's the point of *taṇhā*. That's what we're doing every time we fall into the error of — it's translated as craving, but you can see that word doesn't capture the meaning of it. It's the desire, it's the greed, it's the hatred, it's the aversion, etcetera. And the anxiety — that's coming from the pressure of not being able to handle a situation. And that's when it arises.

So everything up to now has been a given. Even the Buddha experiences that. He experiences sensations coming in. He experiences them as pleasant or unpleasant. He experiences emotions. He experiences the four great *brahmavihāra*. Love, compassion, joy and peacefulness. He's not a callous and cold heart and pure wisdom. I mean, it's like the wisdom and compassion arises naturally, is it? He's huggy-wuggy. Out of compassion. "Whatever a teacher can do out of compassion for his students, I have done for you." He doesn't say out of wisdom, he says out of compassion.

So up until then, it's natural to all human beings. But from an enlightened point of view, there's not this other relationship because that fundamental delusion about who we are has disappeared.

Now, every time we make in our meditation an object of what we are experiencing, we're undermining that delusion of a self. Because this self is saying, "I am this body." So when you get a pain in the knee and you say, "There's pain," you're undermining that delusion that I am this knee, or this knee is mine. Every time you have an emotion — anxiety, depression — every time you push it away inside, creating an outer world of the inner world, and you say "There's depression," you're undermining this fundamental delusion about who you are.

And that's the release. That's the process of liberation. That's the process of awakening. Same with thoughts. Thoughts are a bit quick, but definitely with images. You can hold an image and say, "Well, there's an image." And in that way, that objectification of the inner world is the process of liberation.

But whenever we fall into this *taṇhā*, we've lost it. We're back into the delusion. Now, that's the point of desire. And that's what we're doing all the time in terms of noting intentions. Some intentions of course are powered not by ignorance but by wisdom, so they're obviously ones to be developed. But when it's coming from this centre of a self, then, of course, you have to be careful. Then it becomes something which is negative, undermining.

But at that point, remember, nothing's happened. That's what we're trying to really grasp by noting intentions. Nothing happens at the point of intention. Now, the next step, as you'll see, is... what is it? Where am I? Oh, dear me. *Upādāna*. *Upādāna* is the actual holding of the grasping. And that's the point where you say, "This is me." That's the identification.

Now, you can catch it in your meditation. You can be there, holding that pain separate. And you're noting "pain, pain, pain." And then it just gets a bit too much. And then you say, "I can't stand it." At that point, you see, the identification's gone in. And that's the point of suffering.

So long as you can hold in your attention pleasant, unpleasant feelings as objects, you're not suffering. Make sure you can clearly see that. The separation of the consciousness, of that awareness from what it's being aware of, should be clearly acknowledged. There's pain — fine — but there's not suffering. Then this aversion comes. "I don't want it. I don't want it." Making that your object, making it very clear, you're still not actually suffering. It's not a pleasant place, but you're not suffering. And as soon as you say, "I can't take it," that's it. You're in there, and you're suffering. See?

So the point of suffering, as the Buddha points out, as opposed to pain, is at the point of identification. Now, the next step is the bit where the horror begins. Because *up-ādāna paccayā bhava*. Now, *bhava* is the point where you act. That's the point where the will goes in. And you create an act dependent on the delusion.

Now, he uses the word *bhava* because *bhava* means becoming. What's becoming? The self is recreating itself all the time. The self isn't static. It feels static. You know, you wake up in the morning and you say, "Oh, it's me again." Or, "Oh, not me again." It's one or the other. So it's like you wake up and you suddenly realise, "Oh, it's me." You wake up to yourself. That me, that me, you see, is the essential delusion that's underlying all this. And as it comes up and identifies, it empowers that intention.

And so the *bhava* is referring to a few things. It's referring, A, to this self reproducing itself as the one who's doing the action. It refers to the act of will that has gone into that process to take it from an intention into an action. And it's produced an act. See?

And that's the next bit where he says, from that point of becoming, that's the point of the birth of your action. And from the birth of your action, you complete the action and it comes to the end. So that birth and death refer to the process of the action that you've determined. And you can't stop the consequence once you've put that out into the universe and into the inner universe. You can't stop what's going to happen. You can ameliorate it, you can mitigate its effects, but you can't actually stop that energy from flowing outwards and inwards.

So for instance, if you're sharp with somebody, you can't stop the effect of that. You might have lost a friend forever, even though you might apologise. Inwardly, you've developed more of that nastiness.

So that's a run-through — dependent origination. The underlying ignorance about who we are, creating certain attitudes — the acquisition, the aversion, the fear — and how it manifests in a process, which is completely opposite to our language. So, "I want, and I scream, and I buy it." But the psychological process is, "I scream, want, I buy."

Now, if the I was first, there'd be no escape, would there? If the identity came first, you'd never be able to break through the process of desiring. It's the very fact that it comes after the process and therefore you can see the process of desiring that you can break the chain. You can see how amazingly deep the Buddha's insight was into our psychology. He saw exactly where the problem was.

And it's like anything... when somebody climbs Everest... like it's done... it's possible... up until then it's not possible... and then somebody climbs Everest... and every man and his dog can get up there... you see what I mean? It's like he's opened the gates of the deathless.

So that's dependent origination. Now... on the way back... whenever you stop... that process of wrong desire... unwholesome desire... the end of that process doesn't happen. It just fizzles out right there at *taṇhā*, at desire. And that's the cure. That's the emptying of those *saṅkhāra*, those conditionings which are running underneath every day of our lives. And underneath that is the ignorance.

So you've got this underlying energy of the not knowing, the essential delusions and all the habits that we've created by it, just running underneath every moment. Every moment there's some stimulus — a greed, something that we greed for, or hate, or afraid of — and it comes into our consciousness, and something from below rises up to grasp it. If we can catch that rising, it'll just go and then plop, and that's the end of it. It just disappears. And that way we empty these *saṅkhāra*, that way we undermine this fundamental delusion.

That's the point of escape between *taṇhā* and *vedanā*. *Vedanā* and *taṇhā*. That's the point of escape. And every time we're pushing something away to make it an object, we're actually cutting deep down into that sense of self. And there will come a time, be assured, when that sense of self is completely cut and the whole house of cards completely tumbles. And that's the point of total liberation. Maybe by Saturday noon. We'll have a bit of luck.

So that's the process that he's pointing out when he goes backwards on it. It's not so much backwards, it's more like the negative qualities. Undermining that *avijjā*, undermining that wrong understanding, the whole thing starts to collapse.

And do remember that often because of the way he would explain things, it came out quite negatively. And so he was accused of annihilationism. So there's the not born, the not dying, the unconditioned. We say some of these things in one of our pūjās. But he said, no, he said the only thing that's annihilated is this — is this acquisitiveness, aversion and fear. Everything else is given back, renewed.

So remember, once he was fully liberated, there immediately arose within him that desire to help other people. It's not possible for wisdom to arise without that connection, the connection with other people. And as he is teaching, his teaching grows. There are early parts of the scriptures — some of you might know the Nipāta Sutta — where he's getting his thoughts together, because it's conversations with people. Then the middle part, it's all been formalised. Four of these, ten of those, twelve of them. He goes on like lists upon lists. And it's like he has to learn how to teach.

I think I mentioned it on Saturday, where he rises from his seat with the idea of offering people this teaching, and he meets an ascetic on the road who says that, you know, "You really look brilliant, you look absolutely shining." He says, "Who's your teacher?" And he makes this amazing declaration: "I need no teacher, I am the fully liberated one," and all that, you see. And the fellow says, "Very good," and walks off.

Which you would do, wouldn't you? Somebody stood here and said, "I am the great guru, I am the cosmic Buddha." So I think he learned that you don't quite approach the process that way.

So the last thing I want to add to it is *kamma*. *Kamma*. By the way, I've done the dependent origination as a moment-to-moment process. Remember that there's also the teaching that this refers also to lifetimes. So that when we come into this life, we bring with us our past delusion and bad habits, our potentialities, and depending on the situation we're in, they'll be somehow developed.

So we know this from children, that early childhood, often a child will react to things which are completely innocuous, but because of the delusion or unresolved feelings in them, they'll see it in a certain way, and it becomes possibly a trauma. And then there's this business of false memory syndrome, where you get false memory and all that.

Well, just to reinforce that, I had one myself. Because in the early part of my meditation, when I was practising Zen, I was just resting and I lay on the bed and this huge fear came up. Every cell of my body was electric with this fear. And a very clear image that I walked into the room to my grandfather. And I mustn't have been more than two years old because he died shortly after that. And I shook him and I said to myself, he's dead, they've killed him. They happen to be my parents.

I went to my father, luckily he was still alive, and I said to him, "Dad, I found grandfather dead in the front room." He says, "No, he died in bed, I was with him." Now, if he wasn't there, I'd go around telling everybody, you know, I had this terrible trauma, caught my grandfather dead in the chair. Now, the point is, it's true, in the sense of that's how I interpreted what I saw, but it wasn't true historically.

Now, the interesting thing about that particular experience was that when it came up, I had a backflow, a forward flow of all my relationships to show me how that particular trauma had cancered every relationship. And from that moment on, my relationships changed. That's how deep our delusion can lie. Not everybody has these things, by the way. It's not necessary to have a trauma.

So that for me was a great teaching about karma. So somehow, I put credence in the whole idea of past lives, but even if you don't, just the idea of a young child who is feeling vulnerable. So you know children react. They think that if the parents are arguing, they're the problem, etcetera, etcetera. So whatever that decision was, remember the child is filled with that complete delusion that I am the body. And so that remains in the system. And you can see the karmic flow of it.

So karma, in terms of—I'm using karma in the more common sense of, you know, your comeuppance. Karma is to do with your inner world. It's not to do with your outer world when it comes to the process of liberation. And when something happens to us, there can be a multitude of reasons for it.

In Buddhist understanding, there are five laws. Most of them equate to our own modern laws. The first one is known as the law of heat or energy—that's all the physical laws. So these poor people in Nepal, I mean they've had another terrible earthquake up there—that's not because in their past lives they crushed a hundred thousand ants to death. I mean, it just happens because you happen to be on the earth. So you can't say that an earthquake or a flooding is your personal karma. It's ridiculous.

So it's the same with *bija*, the seeds. That's our genetics. You can't say the body, you know, you deserve the body you've got. It's a given through that whole genetic line. So that's not your personal karma. It's not the karma that you're looking at when you want to be liberated.

Then there's the whole law of psychology, the *citta*. The whole psychology, which includes our perceptual process, etcetera, etcetera. And a lot of that is dependent upon the brain that you were given. And then number four is karma, which is to do just that point of willing things and creating habits. There's your karma. And it's that karma that

will make you do things which then reverberate back on you. Like just getting angry with somebody, then you find they're getting angry with you for heaven's sake. So it's that understanding that it's really only around ethics that we have personal karma.

And go back to the original experience of the Buddha there upon enlightenment—those three knowledges that we talk about. The knowledge that he has no more defilements in him, that he sees all his past lives driven by his ethical decisions. And he sees beings being born from one realm to another also driven by their ethical decisions. So it's ethics.

And then finally, of course, there are the spiritual laws, which include the Four Noble Truths, etcetera, etcetera.

So karma, dependent origination and karma, are to be seen as one and the same thing. He's actually describing how we create karma for ourselves and how we can overcome it.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and it has not brought more confusion. And that by your careful investigation, discrimination of all your experiences, you may finally reach that pure liberation from all suffering, sooner rather than later.

Dependent Origination and the Quality of Right Awareness

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 53 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma takes us through the Buddha's teaching of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), exploring how ignorance (avijjā) creates the fundamental delusion of identity that underlies all suffering. He explains how this process unfolds moment-to-moment: from ignorance and saṅkhāras (mental formations) through consciousness (viññāṇa), mind-body (nāma-rūpa), the six sense bases, contact (phassa), feeling (vedanā), craving (taṇhā), clinging (upādāna), becoming (bhava), birth, aging and death.

The talk addresses crucial questions about karma, free will, and rebirth through the lens of Buddhist psychology. Bhante emphasizes that desire arises before identity formation, which creates the crucial gap where Right Awareness can interrupt the chain of conditioning. Through vipassanā practice, we learn to observe this process without identifying with it, gradually undermining the delusion of selfhood.

Using practical examples from meditation and daily life, including analogies about vision and consumer choices, Bhante shows how spiritual development is less about 'free will' and more about right discernment and ethical living. He concludes by explaining how understanding this moment-to-moment process naturally leads to comprehension of rebirth and the path to nibbāna.

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arhato Sama Sambuddhasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arhato
Sama Sambuddhasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arhato Sama Sambuddhasa*

Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully self-enlightened one

There were some questions that came up during the interview, so I'm going to wander around one or two of the questions that arise around the Buddha's teachings—the ones about *kamma*, maybe a little touch on rebirth, the problem of free will or the lack of it.

The easiest place to start really is dependent origination, which we chant in the morning. The Buddha there starts with this word *avijjā*, which they translate as ignorance, which really has a feeling that we shouldn't know. But it's a pure not knowing. And that not knowing, when it comes across information, presumes that the information belongs to it, or that it is that information. That's just modern speak for identity.

What I'm saying is that when we're born, we don't know anything. We have potential, but we don't know anything. And as the information comes in, we experience it as me. So there's no separation between the information coming in and the me. It's all me. So there, right at the start of our lives, is the fundamental problem to do with identity: Who am I?

Remember that this *avijjā*, this not knowing, then produces acts in the world, which is translated as *saṅkhāra*, which we can translate as habits, our habitual way of saying things. And it would seem that even before three years old, we've got settled attitudes to life. We've got an attitude.

So, with our distorted view of the world and as to who I am, and all this information coming in from society and parents and all that sort of stuff, we end up with a body of habits—habitual ways of thinking, habitual ways of seeing, habitual ways of understanding things. You can see it most vividly between cultures. But even between individuals within society, they live in different worlds. We live in very different worlds sometimes.

So these worlds are constantly created by us within ourselves from whatever information comes through our senses. One of the obvious ones would be sight. So if somebody's color-blind, they obviously live in a different world of color to people who have ordinary sight. And they might not know it for years.

When I went to an optician once, the glasses didn't seem to fit straight. So when I went back, he told me I had astigmatism, which distorted things like a wave on glass. I didn't know I had that. To me, the world looked perfectly alright, except when I put these glasses on. And he'd forgotten this astigmatism—that's what he had. He hadn't actually done the astigmatism. That's a really good example of ignorance.

Not knowing that I had astigmatism, I presumed I was seeing the world as it really is, or as it really ought to be, or I was seeing it from a sight point of view, that is the way it is. But I wasn't. And it was only through the clever work of an optician that I could see the world more clearly. But it's that point that you don't know. The whole point of our delusion is you don't know where you're deluded, or else you wouldn't be deluded. It's a paradoxical definition.

So that's a double bind, isn't it? I don't know where I'm deluded. How the hell am I going to find out where I'm deluded? It puts you in an impossible situation.

But whatever the situation is, we've ended up with these habits. They're not all horrible and terrible, of course. Some are beautiful.

And then, we enter into, with that as an underground, with this distortion, the distorted way of seeing the world and what it creates—all these habits running underground—there are moments of existence, you might say, momentary existences. And it's in that moment that the rest of the middle part of the Dependent Origination was clearly seen by the Buddha.

First of all, you have consciousness, and then the body and mind. He separates consciousness from body and mind. Consciousness from body and mind—*nāma-rūpa*. So he's making a distinction there, because what he's saying is, without the act of consciousness, *nāma-rūpa* is a waste of time. You may as well be dead. And consciousness is a waste of time unless there's something to be conscious of. And they both arise at the same time. You can only be conscious of something as it arises and passes away. And that's your momentary existence. Your consciousness is basically, in Buddhist terms, what we experience.

Now, if I were to give an analogy of that: If you take a monitor or a television, there's all this information coming in, and it has to be put onto a screen—all these percepts, and all these emotional stuff. All that. It has to be put somewhere where it can be cognized, where it can be seen. That's the act of consciousness. And the awareness is what knows what's on the screen. I'll come to that in a bit later.

So then he splits up this *nāma-rūpa*, the body and mind, into its various faculties—what he calls the six senses, the sixth one being the mind-brain complex where everything is sorted out and you end up with a point of contact.

So that point of contact, which means this present moment, the point of contact in the present moment, must have an object, it must have the consciousness, and it must have a sense base. So if any of those are missing, then you can't be conscious of something. So when you're asleep, you're not conscious of small sounds, because there's no consciousness there, there's no awakened consciousness. If you've lost your hearing, then you don't hear anything. And in a very silent room, you normally don't hear anything, at least out there. So these three things have to come together—what the Buddha called this point of contact.

And it's then you see that we make this dual world, because what we experience is then separated into two types—either it's pleasant or unpleasant. There's a whole lot of neutral stuff, but when you look into a neutral feeling, you go really towards it, you'll find it splits ever so gently either into what is unpleasant or pleasant. So that's the natural duality of the world we live in—it's either pleasant or unpleasant. And that's given. And everybody has their own way of experiencing the world as pleasant or unpleasant, and a lot of these things are culturally bound, as you know—say food. You tend to like this food more than that, et cetera, et cetera.

So all that is, shall we say, a given from every moment, conditioned from the past. It arises. I shouldn't say conditioned from the past entirely, because it's conditioned also by the present incoming stuff. Then, that's the point of *vedanā*—feeling.

And then there comes this reaction, which now links into this underlying stuff, this not knowing and these habits, whereby we have a reaction to something. So obviously when we don't like something, there's a reaction to get rid of it. When we like it, we want to indulge it. So that's the greed and the aversion. Aversion splits into two, of course—fear if it's too big. So those are your basic attitudes to the life that we're living in terms of coming out of ignorance: greed, aversion, and fear.

And again we go back down to this point of ignorance. And what it manifests—delusion. So the ignorance manifests as delusion. And the delusion is the sense of identity: I. I am. When you finish that sentence, that's where the delusion is—the I with the object. So "I am a man"—well, that's fine conventionally speaking, I hope—but it's the business of the sense of I being this particular being. And of course it gets undermined with serious illness and death and all that sort of stuff.

So you have that underground ignorance beginning to manifest as a reaction to what we're actually experiencing. It's coming out of these habits, this group of habits. So obviously, today, as soon as we see the soup or something, there comes a natural habit of feeding our appetite. But there's also within there the habit of indulging. So that pops up. That pops up out of this quagmire that exists underneath the present moment. And it's like a little button that comes up, shoots up. And that's the greed coming.

So then, now that point, the next point is you put down the grasping of it. And what this means is the sense of I comes in. This is really quite crucial and an amazing discovery by the Buddha, because if this wasn't discovered, there would be no escape. The fact that the desire comes first and then the identity means that you can stop the process. If the identity came first, you wouldn't be able to stop it.

In other words, in the process of soup, you like—that's the *vedanā*—like, want soup. "I like want soup." That's the normal way. If the I came in first, how could you stop that process? Because you're identified with it. Identity means absorbed. You're it. That's it.

Now, that's our speech that betrays us, because it tells us that the I comes first. So if I say "I am depressed," that's it, isn't it? I'm stuck. I am depressed. So what the Buddha discovered was that it's actually the other way around. It's soup, like, want, I. And it's because that process is before the absorption that through awareness, we can stop it right there, and let the wanting—the wanting that we don't want, that is—begin to express itself and die away. Otherwise it would be impossible.

Now that's what we're doing when we sit. We're stopping that formation of *upādāna*, of the grasping of the identity. So when you sit and you can see there's a pain, and then you see the reaction—"I don't want the pain"—and the desire to move, but you don't do anything, that means you've not identified with that process.

In not identifying with that process, what are you identifying with? Because there's definitely a sense of I still there. So somehow, somehow, through the process of *vipassanā*, we begin to realize that there's a different position which is above the normal physical, psychological processes and can actually view it and see it and feel it and know it and eventually, of course, understand it.

And the other thing we realize is that there's no suffering until the identity comes in. That might be difficult to grasp when your knee is exploding, but if you look very carefully, you've got to ask yourself the question after the experience—don't think about it. You're looking at pain, for instance, in the knee, and then you see the reaction that you don't want it, and then you see that desire—desire of wanting to move, shift. And there's a difficulty because there's a leakage, there's a leakage of identity into that process, and it feels uncomfortable.

But when you finally abstract yourself from it and make it really an object to observe, there's a separation, isn't there? And the observer is no longer suffering—they're just with it in that equanimous way. The equanimity is the measure of non-attachment.

And it's catching that process which establishes in us that inner experiential knowledge that this body is not me, not mine. And what that's doing is it's ricocheting down through all these habits down to this fundamental ignorance, this not knowing. And the view from not knowing is slowly being turned, slowly being turned. So the way we're looking at the world is slowly being turned, and that slow turning is developing a new relationship with the world, and it's taking us out of suffering over a period of time.

So what you're saying is that the desires or the things we don't want are not ours either?

That's right. Nothing belongs to an I because the I is fabricated. It's fabricated by this delusion that begins at birth that we must... Because we have no reflection, we've got no language, we can't think about things. There's just that presumption. I feel uncomfortable in my tummy, so I start crying. It's me. I don't say this is my tummy, I'm just in pain, and I just start screaming until mummy comes. There's no... That early consciousness stage, so they say, about four months, is completely wrapped within a two-dimensional world of just sensations. It's only when you see babies reaching out for rattles that it seems that's when we're creating the three-dimensional world. Otherwise it's flat on you—your face is right in the screen.

Now, the next point is, what happens when we identify? Now, there's a very... just as an aside, this process, up until the desire, the wrong desire, is exactly the same for an enlightened person, for the Buddha. He has a body, and he's hungry, and he has to make decisions. It's time for going out and around. So there's nothing inherently wrong with all that. But what he lacks is the next stage of this grasping nature or the aversion nature. But he still has to make a decision, which is the next step.

So the next step is having identified "I want the soup," there's the action—there's the empowerment of that desire, which is the becoming. So in here he talks about it as the becoming because he uses that word because it's the becoming of the I. The I is creating itself all the time, a sense of person. So this person now that I am now is completely re-fabricated in the now. In the now I do something stupid, and that disappears, that person disappears. But the next person that comes up has to carry the tag. That's the process, right?

I can say truly, I think, that at this moment, I did not overeat at lunch, because this I didn't exist. But the I that did have lunch did overeat a bit. So I was suffering after lunch from a slightly heavy stomach. You see what I mean? It's not as though... It's the problem of responsibility. The problem of responsibility arises because you end up with the consequences of what this other person did a couple of hours ago. And it's your problem in the present moment. It's my problem now.

So that's why he uses *bhava*, becoming, because it's the I constantly recreating the sense of I. We're constantly recreating the sense of I, which includes everything I'm experiencing now in this present moment.

Now in that *bhava*, in that becoming, to do that there has to be an act, and that's what he calls *kamma*. And the consequence of the *kamma* is a *vipāka*. So at that point, something has to take something potential and manifest it as a word, an action, a thought. Something has to manifest. Now what makes it manifest he calls *cetanā*—that's the will.

Now the important thing to really grasp here is that nothing's happened at the point of desire. There's no *kamma* and therefore no consequence so long as something remains as a desire. But as soon as you empower the desire into a thought, a pattern of speech or an action, then it's processed. You've had it. It's committed. And that's the becoming. So the becoming has both a reinforcement of a sense of I, but also a consequence because of the content of the act.

I always give an example out of the Vinaya at this point, concerning thieving. Some of you might have heard it. Has anybody heard it? Oh, it's new, isn't it? Very good.

For instance, if I wanted this bowl here, this gong, I passed it by and I saw it and I thought, "Well, that's a nice gong." And then there was this desire came up: "I'd like that." Nothing's happened. Nothing's happened.

However, if I pass the gong a second time, and I say, "Oh, it's a nice little gong," and I go over to it with an intention of, shall we say, somewhere in my mind that I might just borrow it for a little while, then I've actually done something. So this is called a *dukkata*. This is a small offense.

On the third pass, I'm slightly overwhelmed, and I actually touch the gong. I actually touch it. So this is called a *garu*—this is a heavy offense. I'm very close to losing my robes there.

On the fourth pass, I really cannot, and the desire overtakes me, and my hand shoots out to the bowl, and it moves a nano-centimeter. And I think, "No, no," and I let go, and I run away. I've had it.

I've committed theft. At that moment, even though it moved only a nanocentimetre, the theft was committed. I lose the robe, and I don't even get the bowl.

So that's a lovely way of pointing out just there in an action how the intention grows and grows and grows and finally commits a real act. Of course, on the other side, there's all the loveliness where you might think of helping somebody and then you go a bit closer and then finally you actually commit to helping somebody. Then, of course, you get the benefit, the beauty of compassion and love.

So that business there - if we can clearly understand what the Buddha's talking about when he says *kamma*, he's talking about an act, a desire which is empowered. In our language now, we say "it's your karma," and what it means is your consequence. But actually, strictly speaking, in the literature of Buddhism, you'll see that *kamma* is one thing, *vipāka* is the consequence of it. So there's your *bhava*. And the end of the process is the beginning of the act, the whole process of the act, and the completion of the act. That's the life, that's the birth, decay and death - that's at the end.

That's taking the understanding of dependent origination as a moment-to-moment phenomenon, which is understood these days much more clearly than it would have been not so long ago, because there they would reinforce the three-life theory. In your previous life, you built up this sense of not knowing, this ignorance, which has created all these habits, and when you're reborn, you're born with it. Then you get the whole run of this, and then of course life is beginning of life, decay and the death of it.

So it can be taken both as a minute thing, as a string of things that happen within a given time slot, or it can be taken as one life, as a lifetime teaching. It doesn't really matter which way you take it, except the moment-to-moment one you see now.

When the Buddha acts in his life, what's missing is that little bit about the grasping nature or the aversion nature. But there's still an act. And in later literature - we call it the Abhidhamma, this later work - they try to give it a new word. So it's an action coming from the self - is either good or bad. And it has consequences. The consequences are outward, of course, but they're also inward. They're also inward.

We don't know what the consequences of an act will be. You might hope that they will be such and such, but you don't know, because when you act, the force of your action goes into a matrix of relationships. And the interesting thing is, it also goes inward into a matrix of relationships, into your psychology. So you don't know how life-changing a small little decision can be, and then you're amazed how you've ended up in jail. "But I didn't do anything!" And the opposite, of course, is true.

This is very similar to what scientists call chaos theory, where a given condition with surrounding supporting conditions can blow up into something awful. I mean, they always have these doomsday views, but it's also nice to think that a small act of kindness somewhere towards Syria is a kernel point where the conflict is healed.

So now, if we talk about what is coming at us now, it is given. We already have a structured personality full of habits and ways of responding. So where's free will?

Now the idea of free will is a very Western thing. It really came about through Christianity and, as far as I understand, through the work of particularly St. Augustine, a philosopher. It was basically an argument about the relationship between a human being and God. So God creates a human being and he wants a relationship of love towards this creation. But if that creation is so constructed to love him, then that's not much of a love, is it? If you create an object to love you, it might feel good, but you know it's not real. It's not real love. So therefore, it had to be argued that there was free will that was beyond conditionings, which could freely, out of an act of understanding and love, be a free act of love.

And what that's translated to for most of us, I think for most of us in the West, is this idea that free will stands outside the conditional world. Now, when you walk into a supermarket and buy chocolate biscuits, this was an act of real free will. You went in there and decided freely that "Yeah, I know about the adverts, but I have decided I am going to buy chocolate biscuits." And this tremendous sense of selfhood, of separation, of an entity completely enclosed within myself. I mean, I see all you people, but you're completely separate. There's no real connection with you in terms of my free will. And it doesn't matter that there's a special offer on chocolate biscuits. I happen to have bought it out of my own personal free will.

So this idea of free will standing outside the conditioned world is something that I think belongs mainly to the West. In the East - and I'm thinking of Hinduism and Buddhism and places like that - there's not that sense of the free will being outside the process. It's more in the sense of you're making decisions about a situation within given parameters with so much information and from your point of view you're making a decision, and it's conditioned both from the conditions you're in and from your point of view. Now that might strike us as a loss of free will.

So all of you had various reasons for coming here. So there were reasons for coming here, and there was your own personal connection with those reasons, and then you ended up here. So looking back on that decision, was it an act of free will, or was it just something that was empowered because of the conditions you found in yourself and what you know of Satipanya?

When it comes to choice - I mean, this is what the consumer society, the religion of the consumer society tells you, that you have a choice. But choice is only there when there's confusion, when there's not knowing really what you want to do. So when you walk in the supermarket and there are - you know, you only normally eat one type of biscuits, and suddenly you're struck with "As well as chocolate, there's fig biscuits." There's a moment of confusion, is there not? Now you could just swear and pick one up,

which is absolutely stupid. In which case there's definitely no free will because you didn't make a choice. Or you sit there with the confusion, arguing with yourself as to which one you might prefer this week. And then you have to look deeply into your heart and think, "Fig biscuits is what..." And then the choice is made, and one feels, "That was a good choice. I really made a good choice there."

And of course it's all been manufactured by my habits and the fact that maybe I got fed up with chocolate biscuits for the moment and I need a change, and by the loss leader that the supermarket has given me on fig biscuits. Who knows? So it's a moot point, isn't it, whether we have this free will? And yet there's something in us which tells us that I am making decisions. I am making decisions. So there's definitely an act of will.

So if we go now back to the original state and just ask ourselves, what is it we all want? Fundamentally, right down there, even before we exist, what is it we want? We just want to be happy. Am I correct? We just want to be happy. And each of us will have a definition of what that happiness is. And that's what we're chasing. We're chasing the dragon, the dragon of happiness. We just want to be happy.

And through our experience of life, we begin to realise that some things make me happy and some things don't. And as we deepen our meditation and we get to this point of identity, we realise that maybe something is wrong around that area. And we begin to realise, I think, that my happiness depends a great deal upon the motivation, the intentions with which I do things. And when I look into my intentions and motivations, they're all about some form of relationship to the world. I may call it wanting or not wanting, but it's about a relationship to the world.

When we talk about relationships, we talk about ethics. We talk about how do I treat somebody, or how should somebody treat me. So life now moves towards an ethical basis. And this you might say was the great shift in human consciousness. Somewhere around the time of the Buddha, this business of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." That was the great teaching both of the Buddha, of Moses, Socrates. That business about relationship and about ethics.

And it moves religion from a power struggle with the gods, where you are appeasing gods to get your way through sacrifice. The big moment in the Bible, of course, is - who nearly sacrificed his son? Abraham. Isaac, excuse me, Isaac. That was a crucial moment in human understanding, that God didn't want sacrifice. And then it moves to Moses where he wants ethical living, he wants harmony, he wants peace and joy and all that. And that was the real shift in human consciousness there, I think.

So now, the problem isn't free will, is it? It's actually more to do with right understanding and following the right understanding, because you know that will lead you to happiness. And if you're following a right understanding that leads you to unhappiness, then there must be something wrong with the right understanding. So it all comes back to the way we're actually seeing things again. This all comes back to this point of view of how we're relating, how we're seeing things.

So the spiritual path, as opposed to the path of the consumerist, is delineating the path. And as you walk along the path, because you don't know where the end is - in Buddhist terms it's this foggy place called *Nibbāna*, or foggy state called *Nibbāna* - and you're making your way over there and you're happy with this present moment because you can see it fairly clearly. As you move along the path, decisions come up, forks appear in the path which seem inviting, and these are points where there has to be some discernment. So you have to go in - well, you have to look at your maps and you have to get your compass out and your GPS and all that. And you have to work out where you are in the middle of this place that you're walking through. And then you make a decision and you stay on the path.

And as you go along the path, there's always going to be a doubt: "Well, is this the right path?" So it's through that process of investigation, discernment, that we find slowly this path. But the path is already delineated for us. The Buddha's written it very clearly.

I know that they always talk about the Buddha's freedom of religious thought. And they always quote the Kalama Sutta. So the Kalamas were a group of people who were very confused. They said to the Buddha, "Look, this guru comes along and he says this. And this guru comes along and says, 'That guru is a load of rubbish. It really is all about this.' And we're completely confused."

So the Buddha says, "Well, you have a right to be confused. Don't believe anything because the person's famous or because of tradition or because it's written in a holy book and all that. Don't believe anything. But do what you know to be right for you."

But then, people forget, he then went and hit them with the old Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path. I mean, it very clearly delineates the line, which he says, "Now, this is the truth, no matter all these other gurus." But he does say, "And it's up to you to discover whether this is right for you." So he throws it back to us to actually investigate what he said. He doesn't put it to us as a belief system.

So as we move spiritually, what we find, I think, is that everything we do, from the moment we get up in the morning brushing our teeth, to the work we do, to the point where we fall asleep, everything is on that path. Everything has to be part of that path. And if it's not, it shoots you off somewhere else. And it creates a ricochet, it creates a disturbance.

So our effort is not so much about free will, it's about right discernment. Because as soon as you discern something to be right, what's the point of free will? You've just got to do it. And it's only in those times in our lives when we know that we're doing exactly what we want to do that we feel most happy. And that was this meaningfulness that I was talking about the other night, this deep sense of happiness, a deep sense of connection that we have with our deepest motivations and the connection of that with the world. Even, as we know with some people, it ends them up being tortured and jailed and awful stuff. But they're connected to this much deeper path of meaningfulness within them.

And then just as a final addition to that is the whole process of that becoming. When it's perceived, when it's understood, there's - remember in our meditation also - a recognition that there is something within this psychophysical organism which is the discerning faculty, which is an intelligence, an intuitive grasp of things. And it really is a case of - I keep repeating this - but when you're in that state of the observer and everything's fairly clear and whatnot, and you come out of that at the end of a sitting or something, one of the reflections is: What is the observer made of? What constitutes the observer?

And just go through the list. Are there any sensations in the observer? Are there any emotions? Are there any thoughts? That might be a difficult one because it so easily identifies with thinking. Are there any images? So how do we know? How do we know what's in the observer? We know what's in the observer by knowing what's not in the observer. And we know what's not in the observer because it's an object. Whatever is perceiving cannot be the perceived. And that's where we are, shall we say, rooting ourselves in something that really is our true nature.

So obviously in Theravāda Buddhism, they don't like to talk about *Nibbāna* in a personalised way. The Buddha, in the original teaching, was much more insistent on talking about an experience. It was only in later Buddhism that the question was asked, "Well, if there's an experience, there must be something that experiences it." And that's when you get phrases like Buddha nature, eventually just "the big self, which is not a

self" - massive contradictions trying to express the fact that there is something in us which does not belong to this phenomenal world, to the world in which we actually live.

And yet, and this is the paradox, it cannot come to know itself without this world. And nor can it know what it knows until it tells itself through thought. And you've all, I'm sure, experienced that when suddenly you've said something enormously wise and wondered where it came from. And somebody said, "Well, that sounds very wise." And you say, "Well... I have this wealth of wisdom which occasionally leaks onto the world."

So it's really, that's our investigation. And I think it's much easier if you abandon the idea of free will and talk much more about what ought I be doing in order to develop my spiritual path. And then just abandon the idea, frankly.

So we've covered quite a bit of ground, really. I mean, books are written on this, aren't they? So, dependent origination. And it's for us to make that a personal, experiential knowledge.

Like, it's something we know through our meditation. We know the body and mind. We know the sense bases. We know the point of contact. That's when you're down in the knee and you're just feeling sensations. That's the point of contact. As soon as the word pain comes up, you're into *vedanā*. You're into the point where you discern things as pleasant or unpleasant. And then you know this process of desiring, skillful and unskillful desiring. Remember, there is skillful desire. The desire to sit, to meditate, is a skillful desire. But even so, there's still an I that's doing it. The fundamental delusion is under there. But that fundamental delusion is... through doing what is intentionally wholesome is undermining itself. It's undermining that sense of self.

So one of the great ways of undermining that is through love, because through an act of love the sense of I becomes a sense of we. So you're undermining it. Even though we talk in a negative sense about the I, and get rid of the I and smash it up to pieces and all that, the I melds into a connection with all beings and with nature and everything. It becomes connected, interconnected with it. And in that sense, it's no longer self-seeking. It's no longer selfish because it sees that the happiness of others also is part of its own happiness. That lovely prayer of Saint Francis... may I love rather than be loved.

It's only when... I mean, one sign, one sign I think of our growing spiritual wealth is the joy of giving something to somebody is greater than the joy of receiving something from somebody. So when that joy is bigger, it's a little signal to us that actually, the release of the I into a we, into a connection, is part of that undermining of a sense of I.

So what does the Buddha say? The Buddha says, "Whatever a teacher can have done for his disciples, I, out of love, out of compassion, have done for you." And the word he uses is *anukampan*, which is moving towards, or giving towards. So that was, when you look at the Buddha's life, that's what he did. He became fully liberated. He didn't just sit there glowing in his liberation with a big sign, "Leave me alone." Because he actually gets up. There's a moment of doubt that comes across to whether people would understand what he's got, but he's quick to overcome the doubt when he thinks about his teachers and then his companions, whom he realised were very close to understanding.

And then we talked a little bit about this whole problem of free will and around *kamma*. And just the suggestion that whether we have free will or not, in a sense, is slightly off the point. Because from our point of view, we're coming from a position of not knowing. And this not knowing is causing us problems. So our aim is correct discernment, to seeing things as they really are. That's a very common phrase in the scriptures: to see and understand how things have come to be. It's normally translated as to see and understand things as they are, but it's not. It's the past pastable. It's how, in other words, process. The Buddha's very much into process. How did we get to where we are? And then you can see that process and correct it or reinforce it if you see it as beautiful.

And just a final little addition. When we see clearly what's happening in the present moment, there's no problem with understanding rebirth after death. It's catching exactly what's happening now that you realise the process is going to be endless. What confuses us is the identity with this physical form. That's what confuses us. So we think that when the physical form drops that's the end of it. But hopefully at some point you'll discern clearly that the mind is something other than the body. Essentially. It's also arising and passing away.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. Not too confusing. May you by your sheer moment to moment commitment to mindfulness break through the delusion and arrive at that wonderful place of *Nibbāna*. Sooner rather than later.

Sādhū. Sādhū.

Dependent Origination is based on Not-Knowing and Innocence

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 41 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination) as the Buddha's fullest expression of understanding, containing the entire teaching within its twelve links. Beginning with the Buddha's victory verse after his Awakening, he explores how dukkha encompasses the full spectrum from minor dissatisfaction to existential suffering, emphasizing that it refers to our relationship to life's inevitable changes rather than the changes themselves.

The talk traces the twelve-link chain from avijjā (not-knowing) through saṅkhāra (mental formations), viññāṇa (consciousness), nāma-rūpa (name-and-form), and the six sense bases to vedanā (feeling), taṇhā (craving), upādāna (clinging), bhava (becoming), and ultimately birth and death. Crucially, Bhante explains that avijjā represents innocent not-knowing rather than culpable ignorance, and that the sense of 'I' arises within the process rather than initiating it—providing the key escape point for liberation.

With practical meditation guidance, he shows how vipassanā practice helps us recognize the arising of craving before identification occurs, allowing the energy to dissipate naturally. This understanding of dependent origination as both a moment-to-moment psychological process and a path from innocence to purity offers hope for liberation through sustained Right Awareness practice.

It's been a while since I've given a talk, much longer than twenty minutes. So after one and a half years, I've lost all my confidence. Even so, we'll have a go at fulfilling forty-five minutes, oh my goodness.

I just want to take the Buddha's victory verse, which tells us what the end game is. The moment where he breaks through the veil of delusion. Where he says: "Through many births I have wandered on and on, searching for but never finding the builder of this house. To be born again and again is suffering. Oh house builder, you are seen. You will not build a house again. All your rafters are broken, the ridge pole destroyed. The mind has gone to the unconditioned and has reached the end of craving."

I don't know whether he said this immediately after he was liberated or whether they said... insight about identity. So I thought this evening just to run through the dependent origination, which is really the fullest expression of his understanding. It con-

tains the whole teaching because each one substantiates all his teaching, and once we've grasped it, it gives us at least some map whereby we can see where our practice is going. And it's centred really on *dukkha*.

So this word *dukkha* — it means hard to bear, that's its root meaning. And then it becomes anything that is suffering. Anything that was originally translated as suffering. But in a sense, that doesn't get the fullness of the word. The word also means a sense of dissatisfaction, all the way from the littlest, minutest disturbance, all the way to existential horror. So it's the whole gamut of human misery that this word *dukkha* is trying to capture. And he centres the whole teaching just on that fact.

So he really grounded: there is *dukkha*. I don't think the human being could ever deny that, that there is *dukkha* in that sense. But this *dukkha* must not be confused with life itself being unpleasant. The whole process — the being born, the growing old, the falling sick, the dying — that's inbuilt in our process. And that isn't what he's talking about when he talks about suffering. He's talking about our relationship to that.

So he himself, of course, was born and his mother died at birth. And I often wonder, actually... I have a cousin whose my aunt died at giving birth. And I often wonder whether that remains in the psyche of the person, the loss of that mother, and produces something, some underground disturbance, which may have caused this existential crisis in his twenties. Anyway, that's just an interesting thought.

So he grounds all of his teaching on this word *dukkha*. And then he says, and then the next sentence is, of course, the cause of it. And he points to the specific quality of desire. Now, we're translating, remember, this word *tanha*, which comes from the word thirst. So it's a wrong desire. It's a desire which is based on wrong understanding. That's his statement. And then he gives the path leading to the end of suffering.

So where is the original mistake? When we look at dependent origination, what we start with is this word *avijja*, which just means not knowing. It's not a culpable not knowing, you just don't know. And it's translated as ignorance, but that is an event which is not in the word. The word is simply not knowing.

And because we don't know and we're born into a situation, we make that connection that this is me. And that's your basic delusion. So if you can imagine as a baby, we come out and we have this catastrophe, you might say, of information which we can't make any head or tail out of. And then somewhere around four months, it seems, we start to distance and we start pushing the outer world outwards. The first one, first object being your carer, your mother usually.

And so by the end of three, the child is very clear: I am me and everything's not me. That's really... and of course it knows what it possesses. This is mine. I used to have lots of fun with my nieces and nephews stealing their toys. There's always that look of surprise on their face and I said, oh, I like that. I'll have that. And that would take me... just shouting to mother. So, anyway, apart from that bit of teasing.

So there we have this: by the age of three, we have a very concrete idea of me, of me-ness. And that delusion now is underneath everything we do. We never lose that delusion. It's underneath the whole of our lives, this fundamental delusion. It's running underneath all the programs.

And what it's producing is the next phase, the *sankhara*. So because of this delusion, we produce certain habits. And the habits based on this delusion of a self are to do with our relationship to the world. So in order to substantiate ourselves, to make us feel more real, more safe, we collect things, we become acquisitive.

So that's where we get the greed and the lust and the lust for power. It makes us feel much safer. If you've got a million euros in the bank, it feels far safer than just a few euros. So the basic ground of our happiness as deluded beings is safety. That's what we expect of our governments, to keep us safe from COVID and all the other stuff. So you can see that's the ground. As soon as you don't feel safe, then the fear comes, the tremendous fear. And to make ourselves feel safe, we collect things.

So there's your — it's normally translated as greed, but it's far better to think of it as acquisitiveness. And then of course you have to protect it. So anything that undermines what you've collected, you have to push away. And there's your aversion. And if it's bigger than you, you have to run for it. So there's your fight or flight. So that's what's coming out of this delusion of a sense of me, which of course is based on this body. The sense of me is based very much on this actual body that we inhabit. And that's why anything that affects the body is of course very frightening. Whether it's affecting us on a physical level with a physical illness or a mental level with a mental illness, you see. And so that sense of being me is grounded in this body.

So what we have then is that consciousness. So dependent on these habits, this fundamental delusion, dependent on the habits, there arises consciousness. Now this consciousness is not a knowing consciousness, it's a mirror. It's a screen upon which information arises. That's where it actually is.

Some of you know the five aggregates. Which the Buddha again splits us up into to give us a cross-section of the human being at any given time. So at any given time, you have a body, your physicality, you have all your feelings and sensations in the body, you

have all your perceptions, concepts, memories... need is consciousness — it's translated as consciousness — and you have to be careful with words in the scripture because here we have somebody who has made an insight for which the language of the time has no way of describing. And so what happens is you get the use of the same word to describe something which is... and a word which is describing something which is transcendent.

And one of them is this *viññana*. This translates as consciousness. But in the *khandhas*, it is just the screen upon which something arises. So with the arising of a habit, it must display itself on this consciousness.

And dependent upon this consciousness, we have materiality and mentality. These things are often translated in different ways. But if you think of it just as your body and your mind, then that gives you an idea of the first deconstruction. So the Buddha's big on deconstruction. And what he's doing by deconstructing something... so feeling substantial, I am me, the first, shall we say, deconstruction is to see that the body is one thing with its own processes and the mind is something else.

And that's what we are experiencing when we do this eating meditation. By driving your attention into the tongue, you're actually right up against where the mind touches the body. And that's all we can know. We can only know the point where the mind touches the body. We can't know matter in itself. So in other words, even though we can feel our bones, we can't actually get into them. We don't actually know what a corpuscle is in the blood. We don't know what the liver's doing.

It's like there's a presumption that I am the body. When you investigate it, we know very little about it by our direct experience. And then we find that actually we don't have that much control because things go wrong and that's the end of it.

So that first split is the first — believe it or not, that clarity about the body and mind is the first insight of the process of this insight that leads us to liberation. And the next one is to realize that the one is always firing off the other. So whenever the body, if you stand on somebody's foot, it has a mental reaction of anger, see? If you feel angry, the body gets hot. So they're completely intertwined. So you can't separate them in any real way, but you can through your meditation realize that these are two very different systems. The one working with the other, yeah?

And this is important in the longer term, which is to do with rebirth. Because it's the mind which separates from the body at death. And for some people, they have that experience, they know. But that's not necessary, that experience is not necessary for us to have an insight which takes us towards liberation.

So because of this consciousness, these... dependent on the body and mind there are the six sense bases. And here this is where it becomes obvious that the Buddha is talking about some screen because your consciousness is dependent on the sense base and they are discrete experiences. So you can only hear with your ears. No matter how hard you try, you'll never hear with your nose.

So it's that deconstruction of realizing that there are these six sense bases, the five being of the body, the sensual bases, and the other one being of the mind. In other words, emotions and thoughts have to arise on that screen of consciousness for them to be known.

So we have this concept of subconscious in our psychology. That's there within the teaching, but it's never actually pointed to, because there's no point in knowing that there are things that you can't know. So you can't guess what's in your subconscious. You can only know what's there when it arises on that screen, that mirror.

So those six sense bases again deconstruct our experience. So this is much closer to our experience. The world we live in is given to us by those six sense bases. So whatever world that we are creating now, the little universe that we find ourselves in, is all dependent upon those six sense bases. So obviously if you lose your sight you lose one dimension of experience.

So moving on from that, dependent upon your sense bases you have contact. So this contact is the moment-to-moment experience where an object and a sense base and consciousness come together. And that's a moment of contact.

Now, when you're doing the practice of eating, and you're burying your attention directly into the tongue, and you're just tasting, just tasting, that's the point of contact.

So there's always that moment before feeling anything. So feeling then, what we do then is we give it a quality as to whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or in that shady area of neutral. So before that, there's no pleasant and unpleasant. There is just sensation, whatever it is. And then the next point is a definition of that sensation in terms of whether it's pleasant or unpleasant.

And that's the world we actually are living. We live in that duality of moving from pleasant, joyful situations to unpleasant, unjoyful situations. We live in that. And there's a small area there of what we call neutral. But when you actually go and investigate a neutral sensation, a neutral feeling, you'll find that it shades off into one or the other, because that's what the mind does. It's constantly making this division for us into what's pleasant and unpleasant.

And then of course you have this reaction. So this is where the problem starts, this reaction. So the reaction is: once something is pleasant you want it, and when it's unpleasant you don't want it. It's very simple. But right there is the escape route. Right there, to put the attention right there at that moment where the reaction arises, is the point of liberation. Because from that point on there's very little scope of escape.

The next position, if we don't catch that, is one of identity. So we described identity before as being what you're experiencing. So as soon as something is described as pleasant and we want it, the I comes in immediately. And it's, unless you're super duper attentive, you can't stop the next action, which is the empowerment of the desire.

So there's a crucial point there where we can see this reaction to something. That's possible just by being generally awake. You can see, I mean, you know, you pass a coffee shop...

Now, that process of wanting and not wanting is also part of these *sankaras*, also part of the habitual actions that we have concocted, we have produced throughout our lives. And that's why, of course, it's so difficult to change ourselves. So even though we can see quite clearly at breakfast this process of desiring, and that it will take us towards some level of suffering, and we see it clearly, we still can't stop ourselves. We keep on overeating or doing something which is harmful.

So that's when the practice comes in, that's when this practice of renunciation. So renunciation, which you might say is the core practice, of this core spiritual practice, mustn't be confused with... sometimes they translate it as self-mortification. So you're not trying to punish yourself. We're not trying to punish ourselves to stopping greed. We're not trying to kill greed. We're just trying not to indulge it.

And that is a process of letting it go, allowing it to arise and for its energy to dissipate. And that's what we mean by renunciation. We're renouncing that. So it's the same with the negative stuff. So renouncing, letting go of anger, letting go of shame and all the rest of it. It's a case of bearing with it, knowing it, feeling it and letting it go.

Now when we say letting it go, that's not active on our part. We're not letting anything go. We're letting it go. If you think, oh well, I've got to let this go, and you get active about it, then you're putting that energy, which is a disguised aversion, into the system. And of course the devil keeps biting you back. So it's allowing things to arise and pass away, which is what we mean by letting something go.

So now that process of seeing something but then not being able to change our habits, I think that that came to me very forcefully when I was thinking about smoking. I never did smoke myself, but it was very clear during the sixties that the tobacco com-

panies were telling great big porkies and that it was actually killing you and the science came through. So then everybody began to wake up and realize that in fact smoking kills you one way or the other... to get over. It wasn't possible.

But you would hear of people, like I'm thinking of the father of a friend of mine who had a heart attack and he stopped it immediately. He had to first of all have a heart attack in order to stop smoking. So sometimes you just need that little kick.

So once we perceive the problem, then the practice... then the process of renunciation begins. And that's why it takes us so long to become liberated. I mean, if it were just a matter of seeing the way things are, well, we can find how we do it. It's just, unfortunately, we've got to purify the heart. So it's known also as the path of purification. And that's what we read: this is the path to purification.

So remember that this *avijja* is normally understood as a wrong understanding. So that's of course coming from the point of view of wisdom. And this process is moving us away from that not knowing and the delusion towards wisdom. But remember that from the heart's point of view, we start from the point of innocence.

There was no time that we really, really meant to do harm. We might have done so, but fundamentally, there wasn't any real desire to do harm. It was always to do with this self-protection and this crimped sort of love. Even when you think of people like Stalin or Hitler and all that, they did actually love their people. Hitler loved his dog, things like that. He wasn't capable of it. It was just crimped. It was just torn. It was just brought into this very specific definition. And of course, everything else was their enemy.

So remember that when we talk about *avijjā*, and it does come across in the literature as being wrong understanding, which is true, and the Eightfold Path begins with wrong understanding, remember it also referring to the heart in terms of innocence. And even though we create all these mistakes, and we've got all these problems, emotional problems and all that, and we mess people up and everything else, we're heading towards that original purity. So it's from innocence to purity. And when that purity is conjoined with right understanding, that's when you have proper compassion, love and joy. That's how it expresses itself through this medium, through this psychophysical organism.

So going back to this Dependent Origination, which is only describing how we create suffering. We've got this point: I want. Now, in our language, the I always comes first, right? So, I want a cup of tea. I want to go here. So from the language point of view, from our personal experience point of view, this I always comes first. If the I always

came first, there would be actually no escape. The identity draws us into a connection, an inner connection with something from which there's no escape. Once you've said I and you've empowered it, that's it, you've done it. You've created something, an action of speech, of thought, or of the body.

So it's because, and this is for me such a crucial insight that the Buddha had, it's because the I comes after the process, or in the middle of the process, that the escape happens. Otherwise, see, if it were pleasant feeling, I want pleasant feeling, there'd be no escape. It's the fact that there is, first of all, the wanting that allows us to see where the escape is. And then there's the I want. And then, of course, there's the empowerment.

So if you were to say something like, you're passing something like a coffee shop, and you say to yourself, you know, I'd like a cup of coffee. If you go back on that, in the proper process of psychology, it would be smelling, seeing, coffee. There's your contact. There would be pleasant. Very pleasant. Then there'd be wanting. And then there'd be I want. And then you'd be into the shop. You'd be in there buying coffee.

So it's: Coffee smell. Pleasant smell. That's the contact. Coffee smell. Pleasant coffee smell. Want pleasant coffee smell. I want pleasant coffee. I get pleasant coffee. So there's an empowerment of that desire. So that's how the actual process is working all the time, you see. And that's why there's this escape. But to see that escape, you've got to be completely awake. You've got to be aware of it.

So we all know it's there, you see. So in our daily lives, the idea is to maintain that sort of mindfulness so that we're quickly at the point before we become identified with it. And this can be difficult in areas where you're irritated by somebody. You see, normally speaking, you'd be out there quick, you know. But if we're there and we can feel that irritation growing in us, we can hold it, you see, hold it there for a second and raise the attention towards what the person is saying. So we're stopping that reaction. And if you stop the reaction, you stop the identity. Yeah. And when you go home, you make an effort.

So once we see that process, it re-empowers us. It gives us our power back, you see. So the next point of interest, *upādāna*, is translated as grasping, by the way. So it's craving, which obviously, what the word craving is telling us is that it's a wrong desire. But it's gone from tiny desire to something that is overwhelmingly desired. And then there's this process of identity.

And the next one, the next word is *bhava*. So this translates as becoming. So at that point, the self keeps on recreating itself. So remember that process isn't a one-off thing. It's constantly going over and over and over throughout the day. So there are some times when it's not happening. So if you're just resting and you're being silent, then that dependent origination isn't working. It's only working when that desire comes up, or the aversion, the opposite.

So at the *bhava*, there's the becoming, there's three things: there's the becoming, and there's the will that allows something to be manifest. And in the Buddha's understanding, the action and the will are the same thing. So just in ordinary physics, as far as I understand, when you throw a stone into the air, you cannot separate the force from the stone. So it's the same with an action. You cannot separate the will from the action that you're performing. If you were to withdraw your will, then the action would stop.

So at that point there, there's a few things happening. It produces a consequence. So the consequence is the beginning of the action, the process of the action and the ending of it. Now that dependent origination is also posited as a three-life process, but for us it makes much more sense if we actually reduce it to moment-to-moment, moment-to-moment experience.

So there it is. Underlying every moment of our lives is this delusion, right? Even if we have an inkling of it, even if we're aware of it in some way, it still remains as a habit of identity. And all these habits, all these programs running underneath this little being. And then you have a moment where some information comes in. So it could be information from the outside, you hear something, or it's information coming from inside, some thought, some emotion comes up or something.

And as soon as that happens, then the reaction comes in, the identity comes in, the empowerment comes in, and the whole process turns over. And every time it does that, it makes things worse. Every time it does that, it makes things worse. And if we can just stop it at the point of reaction, that's when the whole thing collapses.

So there's two points of collapse. That one there, to recognize when desire is there and to allow the desire to exhaust itself, which drains this underlying habit of its power. So if we work on, say, a habit that we don't want and we keep working on it and we keep draining it of power, eventually the habit runs, but we're not fooled by it. We're not sucked into it. And it's often a good thing to go for the big one, because if you go for the big one, it seems to drain all the others too. Because all the time we're growing in that sort of spiritual energy of not being caught up in things that are unwholesome for us.

And the other point is the *avijjā*, you see. So recognizing that. That's how you know that it's activated, that it's there within us. And this sense of self, I think we went through it this morning about this identity that if you bite your tongue just for one moment, you are the body. That's what we mean by identity.

And the most subtlest form of identity is this position that we take when we are practicing *vipassanā*. So here, we have, whether we are aware of it or not, we've pulled ourselves out of the whole psychophysical organism. We found a place within us, which one writer calls, a great book to read, by the way, "Being in Time," which he calls the observation post. So you found this place up here usually just behind you, just behind the forehead where you are centered, where you are positioned, and you're able to observe and feel everything that's being offered from that position as an object. Now as soon as something is an object, you can't be it.

That's an important thing to keep hammering home. Even when you're there just sitting by yourself and you get a pain in the knee, you say, there's a pain in it, not my knee, there's a pain in it. And you point to it and you say, well, it's down there and this is up here. That separation, that distance is disidentified. And you can do that with emotions, you can do that with thought.

Now this isn't the disidentification that comes from mental illness because that just causes confusion. What this should do is ground you in the observer, the position of the observer. So you're more grounded in that ability to observe, to feel and to know what's going on.

Now even that is a delusive self. Because, how do you know that? Because you're aware of being the observer. If you're aware of being the observer, you can't be that either. Everything you're aware of, you can't be. So you have to go even one step beyond that.

But here we come across a real difficulty. Because as soon as you try and get rid of the observer, you create another person who's trying to get rid of it. So we're into a real deep paradox. So here's where the Buddha's teaching is, shall we say, at its most clear. You don't worry about that at all, right? You just keep pointing your attention to what you're actually experiencing. And then when the time is ripe, there is an experience of just pure awareness. And at that point, the person knows this is the real, everything else is not the real, okay?

So that process of not identifying, what you can do, I was talking to somebody today, what you can do in your meditation is when you're very calm, when you're very peaceful, everything's very still, the mind's not wandering all over the place, and you have

this very clear identity of the observer. That image of the observer, the feeling of the observer, is actually also coming up on this mirror, on this screen of consciousness. That's what's happening. So the awareness itself is becoming aware of itself because it feels its own presence on that screen.

And when you look at your face in the mirror, it gives you some idea. If you haven't done the two-mirror trick, then it's always instructive to do it, right? Where you look in the mirror, you have another mirror looking at the mirror, and that's the one that you look at because it's turned your face around. And that's where you see how other people see you. For some people, it's quite a shock. So beware.

There's something about the observer, the feeling of somebody observing, which is telling us, there's something that's telling us about the actual awareness itself. And as it's put in some literature, and this is more Mahāyāna than Theravāda, there's a sort of glancing back into the awareness. And just ask, and then once you've done it, to ask yourself: What was there? What's it made of? What wasn't there? And that gives us an inkling that this awareness is something which transcends, is something of a different order to the psychophysical organism that we find ourselves in. And people who have, for instance, out-of-body experiences, they would know that for sure as a real experience.

So the process of *vipassanā* is helping us. It's helping us in daily life to see this process of desire and not get caught up in it. And it's helping us in our sitting to begin to see, to undo, shall we say, the veils of delusion that we've fallen into just by simple mistakes. Quite understandably so, you know, reading about it, mulling over it. But when you sit in *vipassanā*, you forget all that, just put it completely to the side.

And we have to have this clear confidence that this intuitive awareness actually has the power to liberate itself. And that's really the paradox. It's the Buddha within that's doing the unveiling, and the disappearance of that delusion is the process of awakening. Awakening to the way things really are. And that's basically what we're in the process of. So there's hope, you see, somewhere.

So I don't know how we're doing. Oh, it's not so bad. I can only hope my words have not caused even greater confusion and that you will by your practice liberate yourself from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Developing the Factors of Awakening

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 46 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma provides detailed guidance on cultivating the seven bojjhaṅgas (factors of awakening) through vipassanā meditation practice. He leads practitioners through a step-by-step meditation exercise, demonstrating how each factor—sati (awareness), dhammavicaya (investigation of dharma), vīriya (energy), pīti (joy), passaddhi (tranquillity), samādhi (concentration), and upekkhā (equanimity)—naturally supports the others when properly established.

The talk emphasizes that these factors are not special qualities reserved for advanced practitioners, but natural human capacities that can be developed through gentle, sustained effort. Bhante explains how negative mental patterns like depression are cultivated through repetition, and similarly, positive spiritual faculties can be strengthened through mindful practice. He distinguishes between mental states (citta) and levels of consciousness, showing how vipassanā creates an observational stance that prevents identification with passing phenomena.

Drawing from the Buddha's core insight that delusion lies within our way of seeing rather than in thoughts or emotions themselves, Bhante guides practitioners to investigate the three characteristics of existence directly. The teaching concludes with practical advice on maintaining these factors during daily life, emphasizing that true achievement in meditation is simply being aware in the present moment.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasah Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasah Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasah

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

So make sure that you're comfortable. Always begin your meditation by creating at least that physical comfort. Begin by making sure your basic posture is comfortable and then lifting up that spine without any tension. Then just begin to physically relax around it. Pass your attention over your forehead, your jaw, your shoulders, and just feel that relaxation coming.

If there's any spots that are tense, like the shoulders, give them a squeeze. Or if you feel a lot of tension in the face, give it a squeeze. Screw it up and let it go. Sometimes a deep breath, holding it for a little while and just letting it go.

Now as you scan your body, as you feel the whole of your body, you may just feel the calmness there. So that calmness is *passaddhi*. It's one of the qualities, one of the factors of enlightenment. It can become quite delicious, that sense of calm.

So having established that at a basic physical level, we can now just bring the attention to the breath, becoming aware of the sensations of the breath. Now you can do it at the nostrils, but with this sort of exercise, you can contact the abdomen, just the rising and falling of the abdomen, just the sensations there. Just get in touch with them, feel them, experience them as if you were feeling cloth.

What you're bringing to that is just awareness, which is the leading factor of enlightenment. As you begin to become aware of those sensations, those gentle feelings, calm *passaddhi* feelings, calm feelings, the rising and falling of the abdomen, use a little noting word just to keep the mind steady: rising, falling. If there's a gap after that out-breath, feel a touch point like your hands: rising, falling, touching.

As you contact these sensations, these feelings, as it were, go closer to it. Get the feeling of focusing in. It's a gentle thing. If you're knitting your brow and forcing it, then that's putting any pressure. You're just looking and you're focusing. It's like you're looking at a countryside in the distance, you see something, and suddenly your eyes stop and focus in on that object. Get that feeling of focusing down into the breath.

That's the concentration, and all the effort you need is just to keep that focus in and hold it there. In the old cameras you had to turn the lens to focus it; now it's done by electric motor. So the effort, the gentle effort, just focusing in on the object are two factors of enlightenment. As you focus in on the object, other things begin to fade into the distance, as it were. You become less aware of sounds, other feelings in the body. All this is a sign that you're beginning to focus in, to concentrate on the object.

You can see it's very much a relaxation, just drawing your attention more and more particularly into the sensations and feelings caused by the breath. So now we have a general calmness and awareness. We know what's going on. We can see, feel, experience the breath. There's a general focusing down and an energy to support it.

Now we bring in the factor of investigating the dhamma, which means that we don't just focus on the feelings and sensations, but on the quality of impermanence, transience, change, process. Become aware of that now. This is the quality of investigating the dhamma. Now this is supported by the quality of equanimity, which means that we're not coming from a fixed position, some expectation, some idea. We actually want to experience the arising and passing away, first of all, of the gross long breath: the beginning and the end of the in-breath, the beginning and the end of the out-breath.

We can say, yes, the in-breath begins and ends. The out-breath begins and ends. Very simple. As we draw our attention to that, you might feel a sort of joy, a sort of delicate energy in the body, and that's the interest. Now we've raised that wanting to know, a childlike curiosity. Am I really seeing things as they really are? Or am I just seeing a concept in the mind, an image in the mind?

So hopefully now you're actually moving towards pure *vipassanā*: awareness, focusing and effort to keep us there. Calmness of the body and the joy of interest. Equanimity, not coming from a fixed position, investigating the quality of impermanence.

As you observe the breath, you might notice that there's an image in the mind of the abdomen rising and falling. There's even an idea that something is rising and falling. These are mental concepts, mental constructs. Focus in more deeply into just the sensations.

That brings us to the end of our little exercise. You see you can talk yourself into that. Going through these qualities, remember that all of this rests upon a quality of trust, a quality of faith, *saddhā*, which is a spiritual faculty. We wouldn't be here if we didn't have that initial confidence.

When that confidence goes, for instance, the usual loss of confidence is in oneself: everybody else can do it but not me. When you get that wavering, that doubt in the mind about one's own capacity, that's when you have to remind yourself that these qualities are natural to all human beings and just there within us. It's not as though they are special qualities to somebody who's a Buddha or who's already spiritually advanced.

Once a child's over the age of seven, you can talk them into this sort of state. It's easy, any time before puberty. After that it gets very complicated. So these qualities are just to be developed, just like any other mental quality that we have.

We're very good at developing the negative qualities. We've learned how to do that very well. So you feel, you start whingeing, and you know how to do that. You whinge. You know that sound with the whinge, and you just develop it. At the end you become a whinger. If you look at all these qualities that we've developed which are negative, all the irritations, same with depression. You feel a bit depressed, so you say to yourself, "I'm depressed." Then you go around saying, "It's really depressing. Everything's depressing." Then you start saying, subtly underneath it all is, "I am a depressive. May I be depressed?" Then you want to spread that out. "May all beings be depressed." Then you feel you're in communion. You look for other depressives.

I once went to a Depressives Anonymous. A bit sad, really. They're all sat around in this circle, and the leader said, "Like everybody who'd like to just speak out," in one of these counselling sessions. "How do you feel?" So everybody told everybody else how depressed they were. Everybody said, "Yeah, really depressing." I was getting depressed.

There was one fellow who said he'd had a fantastic week. You could see he was on a high, he was manic. He was lifting himself up. So everybody was looking at him. Then there was this lovely moment where the leader of the group said, "Well, I've had a very good week, and I was doing very well and I was keeping high. It's all the experience of talking yourself into this high. Then I tripped over a pavement. So I wrote to the council and said, 'I've just tripped over your pavement and I've hurt myself, and I asked for compensation.' Well, they wrote back and said that there was no compensation for that. So I felt really angry about that. And now I'm depressed." It's amazing. I was out there thinking, hmm.

At the end of it, I gave this talk on how we make ourselves depressed. It was funny. I said, "Well, I teach over in North London there at the Bihar." Of the twenty-odd people that were in the room, maybe seven or eight came over to see me, and they all determined that they'd come over and learn this meditation so they wouldn't get so depressed. Well, they never turned up. I just presumed they got so depressed they couldn't come and see me.

I left that meeting feeling very sad, because they were obviously trying to help themselves. There was nothing immoral or wrong about it. It just hadn't clicked. They just hadn't understood how they were continuously recreating the same old scenes and just driving themselves deeper and deeper into depression. Anyway, after a while, I heard that they must have gotten really depressed because the money ran out and they had to stop the meetings. It's very unfortunate. Very depressing.

Here you can see that through practices like *mettā*, you can develop quite the opposite. Now, if you develop *mettā*, that's loving-kindness, compassion, all those sorts of things, but you don't develop the *vipassanā*, then you're laying over the top of your mind like a manic. You're laying over it this sort of icing, like an icing on top of dung. When it cracks, all this stuff comes pouring out. It's very depressing.

Here, in the *vipassanā*, we're actually trying to create a level of consciousness. Don't confuse that with a mental state. I'm using mental state to mean a general state. So the physical feelings, for instance, that go with depression, the heart state, the depression in the heart, and the thoughts that go with that depression - all that I'm calling a mental state. This is, in the Pali, for those of you who know, that's *citta*. That's the mental state.

Now, to associate with that, to identify with that, to go around saying "I am depressed," is a level of consciousness. Because there, you believe yourself to be that state. So there's no separation between me and that. "I am depressed." It's there in the sentence. The "I" and the depression are one and the same thing.

What we're doing in our meditation is we have the same feelings as anybody who's depressed. You've got the sensations, you've got the heart feelings, and you've got the mental thinking that goes with it. But now you're observing it. You become an observer of your own inner state. So you must have pulled yourself out of that. You no longer identify with it. You no longer say "I am depressed." You're saying "there's depression." That's it. Can you see that's a very different way of relating to ourselves? It's a different level of consciousness, and the image I gave you this morning of a cone: on top of the cone looking down on this vicious circle.

What we discover is that we can develop beautiful mental states. We do that with pleasurable things like ice cream and stuff. But here, when we develop these states, they're dependent on something within ourselves. So they're not dependent on something outside. The weather can be awful. There can be no ice cream. There can be no tea. And yet you can develop these beautiful mental states just by this inner exercise.

All you have to do is just keep gently pushing yourself. Just gently. When I say push, it's against the grain. The grain wants you to fall asleep, get tired, go to bed, take a walk, jump up and down, beans on toast. When you go against that, it feels like you don't want to do it. But as you keep doing it and these beautiful feelings start arising - the calmness, sense of joy, the wanting to know - then all your energy begins to move that way. Very slowly these factors of enlightenment are becoming developed.

The Buddha says they have to be developed to perfection. The perfection is when you start having insights. When it comes to all the negative stuff, these five hindrances that we've mentioned - the greed, the hatred, all that sort of stuff - you have to see how they arise and how they pass away, and how they are not maintained. You've got to see that process. That's the *vipassanā*, when you're doing insight on these negative states that are arising.

On the other side, you've got to see: now this is a spiritual faculty, this is a factor of enlightenment, this has to be developed. So the acuteness of my awareness, the sense of one-pointedness in the mind that we call concentration - that word concentration is unfortunate for us because it goes back to school and people giving us cuffs on the back of the head and told to concentrate. But actually, when you're interested in something, when you're really interested in something, have you ever had any problems with concentration?

It's raising that interest, that wanting to know, and immediately you get that focus. Immediately you get the mind coming into *ekaggatā*. *Ekaggatā* means going one way. It's not coming here and there. One-pointed is probably a much better word for us than concentration. A one-pointed attention.

It all begins with this factor of *sati*, this awareness, which is essentially the Buddha mind. It's essentially that Buddha nature within us. *Sati*. It knows. There is this knowing. Its quality is knowing. In English we have this facility of making a verb into a noun. So there is the knowing. If you say consciousness, it blocks it into an object. Whereas if you think of knowing or the awakening, it gives you the sense of process. It gives you a sense that it's not something, it's a faculty, it's an ability.

There's this knowing, *sati*, awareness. They've got all these other words for it: mindfulness, being in the moment, being now, being here, all that sort of stuff. But its quality is it knows.

As you place your awareness on the breath, so you always begin with that to create these faculties. As you put your awareness on the breath, there is that raising of interest. I've done it slightly different, but you can do it another way. You can raise the interest by saying, "Oh, let's see this. What is this?" You can drop a question in there. "What is this? Who am I?" It doesn't matter, but you don't think about it. You just stay in that emptiness after the question. "What is this?" And then you look.

As you focus down, as you become focused down, all the peripheral stuff begins to fade away. So you can become centred on the breath, and you don't hear anything. Then suddenly somebody coughs, and you can be shocked out of your meditation. You might want to kill the person, but that's a good sign to you that you were fairly concentrated. There'll even come a point where you're so concentrated, somebody coughs, fires a gun, and you won't hear it. Because you've brought yourself down into this singularity.

That's an effort. That's all the effort you need to become awakened. Just that. Just that of looking. Just like in the body, all the effort you need is just to keep the spine erect. You can get away with just breakfast. If you just have breakfast and meditate all day, within seven years - the effort needed is a very gentle effort.

If there's any force comes in, if you feel that forcing, something's getting in there. You're trying to see. As soon as the trying to see comes in, there's the "I." It's looking for something. As soon as you know that, as soon as you get the tightness - you stay with

the body, you can feel the tightness coming - then you know, stop. Wanting to see something. That's not like you're looking for something. What we should be doing is just looking at.

Have faith. Have faith that if you look at something, there will be a seeing. This is the Buddha. He says, first of all, just look at something, and the insight arises naturally. For instance, if your car breaks down and you open the bonnet, first you look, don't you? If you go to the bonnet with preconceived ideas as to what's happened, then you can be looking for a long time. But a trained mechanic, they know what they're looking for. They open the bonnet and they see. Same with the doctor.

It's a case of training ourselves to see these three characteristics. With something neutral like the breath, it's always the sense of transience. Always the sense of something arising and passing away. It can also be the sense of that distance, not me, not mine, that you can get. But remember that that's only a first position. Once you've created that objective stance, you go towards the object, investigate it. So that concentration is better developed when you draw up the interest of wanting to know.

And you'll see there's a natural focusing in on the object. And just that effort of wanting to know—that's enough. You don't have to go beyond that.

Now, as you do that, this is supported by the calmness in the body. So that calmness in the body is balancing the joy that's coming from the interest. Sometimes you might, if the calmness goes a bit too far, then that's when you begin to get feelings of heaviness, sloth, torpor. There's too much of it. So when you feel that, you just lift the spine, correct your posture, and just raise the interest. So the interest will raise the energy of wanting to know. If you start looking for something, so the interest overreaches itself, then you find yourself getting restless. So all these are little pointers to what's happening within us. So it's that sense of general awareness and then being aware of anything that's happening and then slowly just moving towards the object.

Now, we've been primed and this is where the faith comes in. What we've understood from the Buddha's teaching is that the delusion lies within the looking. It doesn't lie within thought. The thought is only an expression of our delusion. It doesn't lie within the emotional life. That's only an expression of our delusion. The delusion lies deep within that which is looking. It can't see properly. There's a kink in the way it sees things. And what the Buddha points out is that this manifests in these three characteristics.

So where there is real radical impermanence we have a sense of continuous time. But actually there's no such thing as time in any continuous sense. Time is just the way the mind relates events or experiences a sequence of moments. How long is a moment in time? Is it as long as the word "time"? It's a bit longer than "time." How long do you experience an actual piece of time for? Interesting, isn't it? But at some point we lose the present. It suddenly becomes the past. But this present is long enough for us to believe that it's the same person moving through time. We've got this idea that there's time like a tunnel or something like that, and we're moving through it. So the past somehow exists in a way, and the future exists because we're going towards it. But actually, nothing in any essence exists.

When you get down to the actual moment as it arises and passes away it's just a sudden coagulation of energy and it dissipates—it's gone. That's why when you keep watching the breath eventually you'll get down to a point where there's no breath. All there is is a sequence of arising and falling away of sensations, which is frightening. Because before, you thought you existed. And this existence was based on your experience of your body, and of your emotions and thoughts. So it's beginning to perceive that.

Now, the process is undoing, undermining all our concepts about who we are and what we are. We believe we're human beings. This is a big mistake. If the word "being" means anything beyond the present moment, it's a big mistake. Because at some point, the body of the human being will be as lifeless as a useless log, it says in the scripture. It'll just lie there, totally lifeless. Somebody will pick it up and chuck it in a hole. So, whatever we mean when I say, "I am a human being," and you go into that as an investigation—not much there, is there? Investigating that is to begin to realize that this self that we've constructed is a delusion. It doesn't exist.

So by observing the quality of transience and by observing that quality of "not me, not mine," we're undoing these essential misunderstandings we have. Now, if it were to lead us just to an annihilation, just to the fact that there was nothing there anyway, and that's the end of that, and when you die you disappear, then that would be depressing. But what the Buddha's saying is that as you begin to perceive what you are not, what you truly are becomes more and more obvious to you. So the process is one of negation. It's one of "not me, not mine." Now to do that these spiritual faculties have to be clearly honed. They've got to be nicely developed and you've got to be able to hold that steady gaze within the calmness. Keep the interest going and keep looking at these three qualities.

Now even when the negative stuff comes up, even when the body now begins to shake with restlessness or it begins to feel heavy with tiredness or sloth and torpor, even then you can maintain that same quality of watchfulness. Even then there can be that quality of, as it were, calmness behind what's happening on the surface of the body and the mind. Even then you can maintain an interest. Even in dullness where all it is is just porridge in your head, you can wander about that and be completely awake as if you'd woken up brightly in the morning. Because it's within that awareness to be awake like that. It's only by way of association and habit that it keeps falling into that state of drowsiness and sloth and torpor. By way of habit. By way of, in the past, seeking refuge there. Seeking refuge in the bed. The final haven. When everything goes wrong, go to bed. Just when everything goes bad, you get this little neon sign come up. "Head for the bed." That's it. You dive in and you wake up and you feel better, usually. And all you've done is use sleep to suppress, to push it down. Whatever it was that made you head for the bed.

Now you begin to see all these things. You begin to see how we are moving away from what is unpleasant, moving towards what is pleasant. And that's that psychological vicious circle that we get caught up in. So again, having established this watchfulness, having got these seven faculties developed, we begin to see that. Just the seeing and the understanding is the moment of liberation. It's the moment of liberation in the sense like a moment, "Ah, now I understand." But then, of course, there comes the training. If it were just that, well, I should think in a very short while we'd be all fully awakened. If it were just a matter of seeing these things, I should think we'd be very quickly out of this state.

But the problem is that the conditioning is so heavy and so deep that you have to keep working against it all the time. So here on this retreat, you're moving forward a bit. Then you leave. And you say, "To hell with it," and you go back a bit. This spiritual life is like up and down, up and down. That's why it takes so long to look back and think, "Oh, something might be happening." So that effort has to be kept up even in daily life. Remember, this is not whipping yourself or kicking yourself or forcing yourself. It's a gentle self-cajoling, encouraging yourself.

So, just to revise these seven factors that we've tried to distinguish in our meditation, which you, in every sitting, that's how you should begin. You should begin by trying to establish that state. If you lose it, go back, start again. Bring yourself back to the breath, et cetera, et cetera. When I say lose it, I mean when there's too much thought around. But remember that sometimes the mind is just like that. It goes mad and you just have to have patience and you just keep bringing it back and bringing it back. And remember that you can have these seven factors even though there's a negative mental state

there. You can still see the quality of transience as we've mentioned. The depression, you can still see how you relate to that depression, which is understanding how we create suffering. You can still see that there is depression—not me, not mine.

So these factors of enlightenment, as it were, are sitting behind, or beneath, the presenting quality that's arising in the mind. So the essential quality is this *sati*, this awareness, the knowing. And what empowers us, what empowers the meditation is that sense of interest, the wanting to know. And it's wanting to know something quite specific. It's wanting to know these three characteristics. It's wanting to experience them, to see them very clearly.

And to support that, the body has to support it. So there has to be that stillness. So even though you might feel depressed in the chest, the body can still be quite energized and relaxed. Even though you feel restless, very restless, you can still relax the body around that restlessness. So that quality of what's known as *pīti*—often it's translated as "bliss" I think, which is way over the top. It's just that sense of joy in the body and the calmness of the body balancing each other. And what's driving that is that interest.

And then you're investigating the Dharma. You're investigating these three characteristics. And to investigate that you have to come at it as somebody who doesn't know. You don't know. You've heard this from the Buddha but you don't know. So you've got to keep looking. So you've come from a point of no position. You've not taken a position. You're not saying to yourself, "The Buddha said everything's transient, so it must be right." If the Buddha says everything's transient, "I'm not so sure about that. Let's have a look." So it's a case of that investigation. That equanimity.

And you have to be careful with the sense of achievement. It's a difficult word for us in English because achievement is always something in the future. You're doing something now to achieve something in the next moment, in the next year, by the end of your life, when I'm retired. Achievement is always ahead of time. But if you define your achievement, if you want to use that word, as being aware in this present moment, then that's the achievement. So to be aware is to be there. There's nowhere else to go.

So if you think about achievement in your meditation, don't think about some insight, or where you'll be in ten years' time or something, or what you're going to do, like planning to live in the now. That's a lovely one. Actually, just bring yourself, just say to yourself, "Am I aware?" Yes, well, that's it, that's the achievement—I'm aware. That's it. Once you're aware, you're there. So you keep saying that to yourself. It's a secret mantra. "I'm aware, I must be there. I've done it." And so, get rid of the idea of something achieving in the future time.

So, awareness. And we can actually make things very simple for ourselves. Sometimes, especially for those of you who are more established in your meditation, you can see these faculties, you can do things to balance them. So that's the skills of meditation. But for those of you who are new, and all this sounds very complicated—what, seven of these, ten of those, and five—you can actually put all that aside because the one factor which draws everything into balance is that awareness. And that's the key discovery of the Buddha. Once you place your awareness on something with right intention, to observe the characteristics or to be stilled, then all these faculties just come up to support that awareness.

Now that awareness, you might say, is our intuitive intelligence, but it's in its passive mode. In a passive mode, it's receiving, "to be aware of." And as that information comes in, there's a sudden seeing. So that awareness has an active mode of an intuitive understanding which is known as *paññā*. And you will notice that our trust is called *satipaññā*. *Satipaññā* is the Buddha mind. It's that which is to be liberated, to be awakened, to be enlightened.

So, having said all that, having gone on like this for too long, there is a very simple approach which is just to keep placing the awareness on the object. Just that activity of wanting to feel, experience exactly what's going on now, whether it's the subtle feelings of the breath or the feelings that are associated with a heavy state or a beautiful state, that's enough. Just doing that, and the insights will arise. Remember these insights are not cataclysmic. They're just little incremental points which over a period of time for most people build up to a change in the way we see things. It's a change within consciousness and when that change begins to take place it has a systemic effect. It affects your attitude to things.

So if you see transience, then of course you don't hold on so much. So when you're watching the TV and somebody phones you, you can turn it off right in the middle of a soap. It doesn't matter. Just as he's about to score the goal, you can turn it off and go and answer the phone. Before you couldn't do that. Now you've understood. So it's a case of this change becoming a change of attitude and that immediately expresses itself in the way we speak, in what we do and how we do things. And in our livelihood. People change their livelihood if they meditate sometimes. Because they find themselves in a livelihood which they find doesn't fit with the Dharma. So they make this effort to move over. Change. Even if it means a loss of wealth. A dislocation.

Now, just as that happens that way, outwardly, from understanding into livelihood, remember, it's also coming back the other way. So your livelihood has a great effect on your attitude. It has a great effect on your general understanding. So as you know, if

you're trained as a policeman, you're always suspicious. You have to be. You're trained to be suspicious. Anybody you see, you think, "Hmm." If you're a soldier, you're trained to kill. So your profession—those, of course, are heavy examples. If you're a nurse or a doctor or in a more helping profession, then you're developing that compassion, usually.

So, remember that the whole of the teaching is one composite. It's a mandala. As soon as you affect one part, the whole mandala changes. Something happens. So, I hope that little explanation does clarify for you these factors of enlightenment and how to establish them and to use them in order to gain slowly, just to gain little insights and change our view of things. So I hope that's been a benefit and I can only hope that your liberation is sooner rather than later.

Dhamma as Refuge

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 11 min

In this exploration of the second refuge, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the Dhamma as that which sustains and upholds, going beyond mere belief to practical experience. He delves into the six traditional qualities of the Dhamma: svākāto (well-expounded), sandiṭṭhiko (immediate), akāliko (timeless), ehipassiko (to be experienced), opanayiko (leading onward), and paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhī (knowable by the wise).

Drawing from the early scriptures, Bhante illustrates how the Buddha's teaching evolved from spontaneous responses to formalized doctrine, eventually crystallizing into the 37 factors leading to Awakening. He emphasizes the immediacy of the Dhamma - that its effects are not postponed to future lives but experienced here and now in meditation practice. The talk addresses the common misconception of practicing for future results, instead pointing to the present-moment awareness that characterizes true vipassanā.

Bhante explains how the Dhamma represents timeless spiritual laws that the Buddha discovered rather than invented - an ancient path leading to the complete end of suffering through Nibbāna. This refuge offers both psychological purification and the ultimate transcendent realization, making it accessible to those wise enough to seek liberation from dukkha.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So the next refuge that we take is the Dhamma. *Dhamma* itself is a word that has a root meaning in that which sustains or upholds. It's often translated, especially in the Far East, as the law, the true law. But it's also regularly translated as the teachings or the dispensation of the Buddha.

The first thing that we say about it is that it's *svākāto*, which means it's well expounded. When he begins his teaching, and he's teaching for 45 years, you can see from the early level of the scriptures that it's very spontaneous, in the sense that he knows what he's talking about, but it's not been fully formalised. It takes a few years for it to become formalised in terms of the Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, Five Spiritual Faculties, and then he goes on and on. The purpose for that was that it was a way of remembering things, the mnemonics. In those days, they didn't have memory sticks, they

just had their heads. So they had to remember things just by these lists, and then very slowly towards the end of the scriptures, after many years, you can see the beginning of just lists, and they say that's the beginning of this later work called the Abhidhamma.

Because what you get from the scriptures are specific answers to certain questions given by individuals, it gives a feeling of immediacy about his teaching. He's not a philosopher writing in his room and publishing a book. It's like he's out on the streets and somebody comes and asks him a question. And then he gives that answer. So no particular scripture gives you the fullness of his teachings. You have to try and get it all together. That's why you get these books on what the Buddha taught. Because it's difficult. You have to read quite a few scriptures to congregate all his teachings.

But eventually you can actually reduce them to the 37 factors leading to awakening. There's a scholar, Warder, who studied the two main bodies of scriptures that still remain, ours and the other ones called the other sect, the other school, the Sarvāstivāda school, which is actually only in the Chinese. When he studied them both, he came up with this: The only thing you could say that the Buddha actually taught were these 37 factors that lead to enlightenment. The ones that you know, like the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the Five Spiritual Faculties, and it just goes on. You get 37, and that's really the bedrock of his teaching. It's all fully explained. I mean, there are commentaries on it, of course, as usual. But eventually that's what comes through is the fullness of the teaching, both as theory and as practice. So that's why we say it's *svākāto*, it's well expounded.

The next thing is *sandiṭṭhiko*. This means it's immediate, and that's the thing about the *dhmma*. Although it suggests a future to us in terms of development and end-game and *Nibbāna* and all that, the effects are immediate. You don't have to wait tomorrow to see effects. As soon as you meditate, the effect is there. It's not something that you do now for some future result. And that's the immediacy of the *dhmma*.

So questions about future lives and all that stuff, they sometimes lead you off the actual point of the practice, which is that the enlightenment has to be here, the awakening has to be here, or it's not here, it's immediate. If we're not in a state of wisdom at this present moment, then there's no point in doing the practice. If you're trying to achieve something, if you're doing something now to achieve something in the future, then you're missing out on the present moment. It's like when you travel somewhere and your head's exactly where you're going to arrive, so you miss the whole train journey.

So it's this bringing ourselves back into the present moment and actually seeing that the *Dhamma* is right here and now, it's to be seen right here and now, felt here and now, experienced here and now. And that's the quality of the *Dhamma*, that it's immediate.

The next quality is *akālika*, which means timeless. It's not something which belongs to the process of time. It stands outside time. It's an underlying law. Just like you might get these basic laws of our universe, they're not to do with time as such, they're to do with something which transcends time. It's right there within, you might say it subsists the process of time, so the *Dhamma* is already there. The Buddha didn't invent it, he discovered it. He said it was an ancient path he basically rediscovered or discovered what was already there.

What is already there is not, in this sense, the spiritual laws, such as the whole teaching around desire, which is a cause of suffering, is something that is just there as a substrate to the whole process of what we see around us, the creation of the world. So in that sense it's archaic, it's timeless.

The next one is *ehipassiko*. This means to be experienced. It's actually got to be experienced. It's not something you just keep in your head. When the first monks and nuns asked to join him in the ascetic life, he simply said, "Ehi," come. *Ehipassiko*, come and try. That was the initial ordination. Come and try. I want to join you. Come and have a go. So this *ehipassiko* refers to the actual practice that it has to be experienced. It has to be done. And it's in doing it that one actually sees this immediacy, this business of immediacy.

There's something else involved in that. In fact, it's not a belief system. It's no good believing what the Buddha says. It's not going to get you anywhere. It's something that has to be tested.

The next one is *opanayiko*, it means that it's leading somewhere, so it's not as though we're doing the practice which is not going somewhere. Now I've just said that we don't practice for the future, but in a sense there is a future, there is this eventuality of complete awakening, the complete end of suffering. I mean that's what's being offered. But the practice is in the immediate moment, but it is leading somewhere, and it's leading somewhere in two levels. It's leading somewhere psychologically, it's purifying the heart, so eventually we should feel better. And it's leading somewhere spiritually in the sense that it is going to an end point which we call *Nibbāna*.

Nibbāna can be described as a transcendent experience. That's what he called himself, he referred to himself as the *Tathāgata*, the transcendent one, the one who's gone beyond. So that's this *opanayiko*.

The final one is *paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi*, and that simply means that it's to be, it's open to those who are wise, who are open to it. So it's something that a person is drawn to at a particular level of seeking within themselves. Whatever their quest is, then they will seek it out, and at some point they'll come across this ancient path.

Remember that the ancient path, although it's well expounded by the Buddha, is not peculiar to him. I mean, it's there within most religions that you find. Whether it's taught well enough, who knows, but the point is that it's there within us. We ourselves, having made a decision, can become self-enlightened if you want to become a bodhisattva. That's a person who makes the decision to become fully self-enlightened. So it's not as though the path exists somewhere outside us, it's right there within us. And if we're wise enough, if we're driven by a desire to be liberated from our suffering, then we'll naturally seek the end of suffering. That's one of the statements of the Buddha: it's suffering itself which makes us want to seek the end of suffering. Whether we like it or not, we will achieve it. It's just one of the, it's part of the evolution, you might say, of consciousness. That's getting a bit metaphysical.

So this is what we're taking refuge in when we say, when we're actually saying I take refuge in the *Dhamma*. And this word refuge, you go there to feel safe, don't you? You're taking refuge in something. Finding it as a medicine, something that's going to help you. So that's taking refuge in the *Dhamma*.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be fully liberated sooner rather than later.

Dhp 153-154: The Buddha's Victory Verses

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 17 min

In this profound exploration, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines verses 153-154 of the Dhammapada—the Buddha's celebrated Victory Verses spoken after his Awakening. These verses describe the end of saṃsāra through discovering the 'house builder' of rebirth and breaking free from conditioned existence.

The talk then delves into the remarkable Kaimaka Sutta from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, which illustrates the crucial distinction between intellectual understanding of anattā (not-self) and the deep-rooted sense of self that persists even after stream-entry (sotāpanna). Through the dialogue between the ailing Venerable Kaimaka and senior bhikkhus, we learn how the conceit 'I am' lingers as an underlying tendency even when one no longer views the five khandhas as self.

Using vivid similes of flower scent and cloth washing, the sutta reveals how continued vipassanā meditation on the arising and passing of the aggregates gradually eradicates this final delusion. Bhante emphasizes the practical importance of observing impermanence in both formal meditation and daily life, showing how this leads to complete liberation from dukkha.

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

I've chosen the victory verses of the Buddha to end my little five efforts at the Dhammapada. So I shall chant it. This is the one I know, by the way, because we do it every morning.

Anekajātiṃ saṃsāraṃ sandhāviṃ anibbisaṃ gahakārakaṃ gavesanto dukkhā jāti punappunaṃ. Gahakāraka diṭṭho'si puna gehaṃ na kāhasi sabba te phāsukā bhaggā gahakuṭaṃ visaṅkhitaṃ visaṅkhāragataṃ cittaṃ taṇhānaṃ khayamajjhagā.

So the translation: Through many rounds of rebirth have I wandered, looking for the house builder, but not finding him. Painful is repeated rebirth. O house builder, you are seen. You will not build this house again. All your rafters are broken. The ridge pole is destroyed. My *citta* is not conditioned and I have attained the end of all cravings.

Just to go through the Pali there. The word for wander also means to run, so a word like coursing through rebirth after rebirth. I think it gives the idea of that onward going *saṃsāra*. There's a lovely little word, *aneka*, which translates as not one, therefore it means many. It's just a nice way of saying it: not one.

Now, of course, these are called the victory verses of the Buddha, which there's some idea that he spoke them after his awakening. But I dare say he manufactured them. He created them sometime afterwards to express what his kernel insight was. And we shall come to that.

So now the house builder, you have seen, you have been discovered, you have been uncovered. You'll not build a house for me again. Your rafters are broken. Now the word for rafter is also the word for rib, so that makes sense. The ridge pole, the top of the roof is destroyed, and that's basically what the Pali says: the top of the roof.

Now, the *citta* is translated usually as mind, but obviously it can't be part of the *khandhas*, part of the aggregates, because it's not conditioned. The aggregates, which are of course your physicality, your feelings, all your perceptions, concepts, all your habits and momentary consciousnesses that manifest these things, are all conditioned. Now the word here is *visaṅkhāra*, so *vi* is another way of saying not, and the word there is *saṅkhāra*, so it's not conditioned.

And then the last verse is *taṇhā*, is again this destruction of this wrong desire based on the delusion of the house builder, which of course manifests as greed, aversion, and fear as a basic relationship to the world we live in.

So that's the verses. Now, normally speaking, this would evoke then the life of the Buddha, how he became fully liberated, etc. But I think most of you know that. And there's this quite amazing little discourse from the *Samyuttanikāya*, the grouped sayings. They're the small discourses, and it's called "With Khemaka."

So it's about this senior monk. So I'm going to read it, take some time over it, because it's quite delightful.

At one time several senior mendicants or monks were staying near Kosambī at Gosita's monastery. Now at that time the Venerable Khemaka was staying at the Jujube Tree monastery and he was sick, suffering, gravely ill. In the late afternoon these senior mendicants came out of retreat and addressed the Venerable Dāsaka: "Please, Venerable Dāsaka, go to the mendicant Khemaka and say to him: 'Reverend Khemaka, the seniors hope you are keeping well. They hope you are all right. They hope your pain is fading, not growing. That it's fading is evident, not it's growing.'"

So Dāsaka wanders off, and I presume it's quite a way because he's living in another monastery. It would have been close by, but at least he's got to go over and find him. And when, of course, he gets to Khemaka and relates this to him, Khemaka says, "No," he said, "I'm not all right. My pain is terrible and growing, not fading. And its growing is evident and it's not fading."

So Dāsaka then goes all the way back to the seniors, and the seniors say, "Ask him, say: 'Reverend Khemaka, the seniors say that these five grasping aggregates'" — so actually five *khandha* — "'have been taught by the Buddha. That is, the grasping aggregate of form, feeling, perception'" — it's got, and here's a translation from Sutta Central, which is Sujato's website where he's translated all the discourses — he's translated *saṅkhāra* here as choices. Not habits, not volitional condition, but choices. I thought was rather nice — "and consciousness. Do you regard any of these five aggregates as self or as belonging to self?"

Anyway, off Dāsaka goes, and he asks Khemaka this, and he says, "No, concerned, I do not regard anything among the five grasping aggregates as self or as belonging to self." So Venerable Dāsaka goes back and he tells the seniors, and then the seniors say, "That is," you know, because he does not see them as self or belonging to self. "If, as it seems, Venerable Khemaka does not regard anything among these five grasping aggregates as belonging to self or self, then he is a perfected one with defilements ended." In other words, he's an *arahant*.

So off he goes, Dāsaka, to see his poor Khemaka who's suffering — I mean, he's in pain — and he says, "No, I do not regard anything among these five aggregates belonging to self, yet I am not a perfected one with defilements ended. For when it comes to the five grasping aggregates, I'm not rid of the conceit of 'I am,' but I don't regard anything as 'I am this.'"

So off he goes, Dāsaka goes back to the seniors on the other side of the fence, and the seniors send him off again. So the seniors say, the message this time to Khemaka is, "When you say 'I am,' what is it that you're talking about? Is it the form or apart from form? Is it feeling, perception? What is it you're talking about?"

So Venerable Khemaka now gets fed up with this and he says, "What's the point of running back and forth? Bring me my staff and I'll go and see these senior mendicants myself."

So off he goes. And when he arrives, of course, the usual exchanging of greetings. And then he sat down to one side. So they say to him, "When you say 'I am,' what is it you're talking about?"

"Venerables, I don't say 'I am' with reference to form or apart from form, and that's the same for feeling, perception, choices, *saṅkhāra*, consciousness. But when it comes to the five aggregates, I'm not rid of the conceit 'I am,' but I don't regard anything as 'I am this.'"

Then he gives this simile. "It's like the scent of a blue water lily or a pink one or a white lotus. Would it be right to say the scent belongs to the petals or the stalk or the pistil?" "No, Reverend." "Then reverends, how should it be said?" "It would be right to say the scent belongs to the flower."

"In the same way, reverends, I don't say with reference to form or apart from form, I don't say 'I am.' The same with feeling, perception, conditional volitionings or choices, and consciousness. For when it comes to the five grasping aggregates, I am not rid of the conceit 'I am,' but I don't regard anything as 'I am this.'"

"Although a noble disciple has given up the five lower fetters, they still have a lingering residue of the conceit 'I am,' the desire 'I am,' and the underlying tendency 'I am,' which has not been eradicated."

Now, the five lower fetters go with *sotāpanna*, the stream entrant. Something's broken, but not this sense of self.

"After some time they meditate, observing the rise and fall of the five grasping aggregates: such is form, such is the origin of form, such is the end of form, and the same with feeling, perception, choices, and consciousness. And as they do so, the lingering residue is eradicated."

And then he gives another simile. "Suppose there was a cloth that was dirty and soiled, so the owners gave it to a launderer. The launderer kneads it thoroughly with salt, lye, and cow dung, and rinses it in clear water. Although that cloth is clean and bright, it still has a lingering scent of salt, lye, and cow dung that has not been eradicated. The launderer returns it to the owners, who store it in a chest permeated with scent, and the lingering scent would be eradicated."

"In the same way, although a noble disciple has given up the five lower fetters, they still have a lingering residue of the conceit 'I am,' the desire 'I am,' and the underlying tendency 'I am,' which has not been eradicated. And after some time," etc. "The lingering residue is eradicated."

Now, when he said this, the senior mendicants said to Venerable Khemaka, "We didn't want to trouble you with our questions, but you're capable of explaining, teaching, advocating, establishing, disclosing, analyzing, and clarifying the Buddha's instructions in detail. And that's just what you've done."

That's what Venerable Khemaka said. Satisfied, the senior *bhikkhus* were happy with what Venerable Khemaka said. And while this discourse was being spoken, the minds of sixty senior *bhikkhus* and of the Venerable Khemaka were freed from defilements by non-grasping. So they all became fully liberated.

The distinction here is between a view of self and a sense of self. One incident that comes to mind is concerning smoking. You know, there was a time when smoking was not thought to be particularly harmful. And then during the fifties, especially as I remember, fifties and sixties, it slowly became apparent that in fact it caused things like cancer, lung cancer. And of course, there was the usual effort by the tobacco companies and any company to protect itself with false science and fake news. But when it finally came through, the science did come through, then people became convinced that smoking actually caused cancer and death.

Now, even though the view of the smoker was changed from being non-harmful to being harmful, did they stop smoking? No.

So here, even though the view of a self — seeing this psychophysical organism as me — is broken with the stream entrance, still there lingers on this idea of me, and it's an underlying tendency. So it's very deeply ingrained. And that me, remember, is the way that this awareness, this *satipaṇṇā*, this intuitive awareness, the Buddha within, experiences itself within the five *khandhas*. That's the sense of self you get when you become the observer, the feeler, the knower.

And of course, you can't get rid of that by an act of will. But what Khemaka is saying, and what he's saying that the Buddha said was, you just keep investigating the impermanence of the five *khandhas* of this organism, and at some point, you'll break through that final delusion and become fully liberated.

So the task in hand is very clear. We have to keep meditating, and not only in meditation, but in ordinary daily life, to keep on realizing that everything is arising and passing away. It has no substance and therefore it's not worth clinging to.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused greater confusion, and that you will, by your practice, liberate yourself, as Khemaka did, from all suffering.

Discourse on the Highest Blessings

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 44 min

In this Buddha Day talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the Buddha's extensive descriptions of nibbāna using thirty-two synonyms from the suttas, including "the unconditioned," "the deathless," and "the island." He traces the Buddha's own journey from householder life through ascetic practices to his final awakening under the Bodhi tree, emphasizing how the breakthrough came not from gaining something but from investigating the very process of creating suffering.

The talk explores the fundamental role of self-identity in generating dukkha, examining how our sense of being a separate self drives the endless cycle of craving, aversion, and delusion. Bhante explains how mindfulness of the body serves as the path to the unconditioned, and how meditation practice works on two levels: purifying the heart by allowing emotional turbulences to exhaust themselves, and developing insight into the constructed nature of the self.

Drawing connections between ethics and transcendence, the discourse shows how virtuous qualities like generosity, love, and compassion naturally undermine the barriers of selfhood. This accessible yet profound teaching offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners clear guidance on understanding the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice and the practical steps toward liberation from suffering.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā sambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā sambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā sambuddhassa.

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

Normally today, because we're celebrating the Buddha, I would spend most of the time just describing his life and what set him off on his path and what he eventually achieved. It'll come into what I'm saying. But I thought this time we'd concentrate just a little bit more upon endgame, upon exactly where we're supposed to be going.

I'll read this out. These are synonyms, adjectives for *nibbāna*. So he starts by saying to them: "I will teach you the unconditioned and the path leading to the unconditioned. And what, monks, is the unconditioned? The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion. This is called the unconditioned. And what, monk, is the path leading to the unconditioned? Mindfulness directed to the body. This is called the path leading to the unconditioned."

And then he talks about... He's describing what this unconditioned is. "I will teach you the uninclined, the taintless, the truth, the far shore, the subtle, the very difficult to see, the unaging, the stable, the undisintegrating, the unmanifest, the unproliferated, the peaceful, the deathless, the sublime, the auspicious, the secure, the destruction of craving, the wonderful, the amazing, the unailing, the unailing state, *nibbāna*, the unafflicted, dispassion, purity, freedom, non-attachment, the island, the shelter, the asylum, the refuge, the destination and the path leading to that destination."

And doesn't that make you want to go? Enough there, isn't there?

"And what, monks, is the destination? The destination is the destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion. This is called the destination." And then he basically repeats himself.

So in order to grasp that in some way, we have to go back to his own particular experience. So remember that he's left a household life. And what's meant by that is that he's not searching for any end of suffering in what we would call the ordinary pleasures and delights of the world. So something there has undermined his confidence that that's possible.

In those days, of course, they would have believed quite easily that there was a process of reincarnation. And although there were materialists, what we would call materialists, that you just had a body and it died and that was the end of that, there would have been many teachers who would have explained how to achieve higher realms of existence and some idea that there was an end to it.

At that time, there were the scriptures written by what we now call Hinduism. And they were beginning to understand that there was something that was unnameable, something that was transcendent. It was that, you know, people, one or two teachers in their scriptures had come to that conclusion through their own practice.

So when the Buddha set out, there was already a ground of understanding and a huge history of practice. How far back? We don't know. Some think it goes back to the Indus Valley civilization, the yoga practice. But it has deep roots.

And what he learned from his teachers is basically how to establish very beautiful states of mind that we now call the *jhānas*, the absorptions. These, of course, you find in all religions, ecstasies. And you get them through the practice of prayer, mantra, watching the breath, anything which calms and steadies you, anything which creates a delight, such as *mettā*, *mettā* practice, loving-kindness practice, that would eventually begin to develop in your very beautiful state, such that you would absorb into it. And there are deep enough states where you even lose contact with the world around you.

So these absorptions were something that he became an expert at, and was invited by his teachers to join them, twice. So such practices seemingly were quite easy for him because it said that he left home when he was 29 and he was already liberated by the time he was 35. That's only six years. And he spent four of those years in practicing these self-mortifications.

So that was on the understanding that the soul, the eternal spirit within us, was locked into the body by its past actions. So the body itself was an expression of past unwholesome deeds. In other words, your unwholesome *kamma*. And for this spirit, this soul to be released back up into an eternal heaven, you have to somehow reduce the body, to let go of the body. And so you've got these mortification exercises, seemingly a lot of them based around not eating. And the Jain leader was one of the teachers of that. And the idea was that eventually, in Jainism, you just, well, you die. And that's your, and you've completely let go of the body.

So when the Buddha tried this... So he would have only been in his 30s, yeah? He just found that he just created more suffering. It didn't help him overcome this internal questioning that he had, which we would now recognize as some sort of existential crisis. What's the meaning of life? Why am I alive? Et cetera, et cetera. So it would have come with a sense of despair, a sense of frustration and so on.

He left that, and he left his companions, who didn't like him for doing that. They thought he was going soft and all that. And then remember that there's this occasion when he remembers something from his childhood, which awakens in him some sort of turnaround upon his practice.

So whereas before, like many of the people around him, the ascetics around him, was about gaining something, getting something, the practices were about achieving something, it made him turn around upon himself and begin to investigate exactly how he was creating suffering. This is what it turned out. Instead of trying to get rid of his mental anguish, he actually began to feel it, to watch it. And in which case, eventually, he saw the whole process whereby he creates suffering for himself. And that's this dependent origination.

You might say that's the core of his teachings, that he was able to define clearly where the problem lay. And in the Four Noble Truths, as you know, he states that the cause of suffering is this desire. It's a specific desire. It's a desire about trying to get happiness from various sources, trying to be happy, but always based on a profound misunderstanding, which he called the self.

And the whole teaching centered at a deeper level about this sense of identity we have. So here we've got a trajectory of going into ourselves, of seeing the psychological mechanisms whereby we create these problems within ourselves. And then, as it were, to go deeper in that and to seek the builder.

So, I forgot to get my little book out here. So we chant in the morning, this is called his victory verse. And that's what it's put down to.

"So I've traveled the round through the round of countless rebirths, seeking but not finding the house builder. How painful is birth over and over again. But oh, house builder, you've now been caught. You shall not build a house again. Your rafters are broken, your ridge pole demolished. The unconditioned consciousness has been attained and every kind of craving has been destroyed."

So you can see here in that short little verse that he's got right down to the core of the problem. And there are many, all these adjectives are pointing to certain qualities about what happens to us when we finally undermine that basic misunderstanding.

So when you look at his teachings, you see that they divide fairly clearly between all those what we would call morality or ethics or how to behave and this transcendence. And to understand that, we have to go back to this sense of self.

So this is not the self of pride or the self of embarrassment. It's that pure sense of being here, which you get when you're sitting. So when you're sitting quietly like this, and you're pulling away from the body, heart and mind within yourself, you might say. And you feel yourself to be this observer, the feeler, the one who knows, the one who's experiencing things. So that sense of self there is the beginning of the problem. It's the first object that we make, the sense of me.

So every time you get up in the morning, you're awakened to this idea, oh, this is me, I'm here, I'm here. Just now I woke up, I must be tired from that travelling yesterday, because I woke up in the middle of the day, just after this little kip, after my little siesta, and had one of those lovely moments of wondering where I was. I suddenly realised it's midday and I've got to get out there and give a talk, oh my God.

So a sense of not knowing who you are or what you are is one of those lovely little moments where we see how that creates within us such a disturbance, such a search for identity.

So now that self is a relationship. It's a relationship that I have with my sense of being here. I am here. I've got this sense of me being here. And of course, me being here is within this psychophysical organism, but it's also in the world. And the natural drive

is to be happy. I mean, you could say that you can see that run through even animals, ordinary animals and the animal kingdom that everybody, all sentient beings just want to be happy. Of course, how you define happiness is entirely idiosyncratic. I mean, it's just up to you. Some people are happy just chewing liquorice all day.

But how you define happiness will be your goal, will be your aim. And what the Buddha is pointing out is that all these aims, all these objectives we have are about relationship. So everything he's talking about is based upon ethics, upon relationship. And he points out that there are some relationships we have, even with biscuits, which can cause us lots of problems. And there are some relationships that are very supportive and help us.

So it's a case of navigating our path through this distinction between, well, what is wholesome for me and what is unwholesome for me? Now, most things are pretty clear. I mean, everybody knows you're not going around murdering people or something like that. But when it gets to just the subtle things about how we relate to various things in our society, which in a sense we've just taken for granted and we never question them.

So just that sense of relationship to our wonderful politicians and this whole business of Brexit, which has overtaken us. And to recognize what is our response to that. And to all the troubles that our society has or the world has, how are we relating to it?

Take the problem of, well not the problem, but take the whole business of compassion. So it's interesting to note that everybody knows about the refugee crisis and the fact that people around the middle belt of the earth are beginning to suffer a bit more than us from climate change. And that there's a natural desire for people to move away, to look after themselves. And for the most part, there's a knowledge of that. And there may be some natural feeling of wanting to help, but sometimes not really accepting our fear of them, that suddenly everybody is pouring into Europe. Why don't we go to China?

So you get this confusion of feelings about the refugees. And then suddenly, as you know, we had this terrible little picture of this little boy who drowned in the ocean and Angela Merkel is inviting a million refugees into Germany. So somewhere along the line that compassion has moved away from just a knowing to a direct experience which is awoken within us, that sense of wanting to do something about a situation.

So this business of ethics, it begins right there with that sense of self. That sense of self is because it identifies so much with the body. You'll notice here in this particular discourse that he says that the mindfulness directed to the body, so how important is the body in our lives? Now you might say well that's pretty obvious, it's straightforward, but can you think of anything that hasn't come through your body?

I mean, it's quite obvious that anything physical comes through your body, what you eat, et cetera, your exercise and your eyes and everything that you see. But everything else, all the information that we get from society, all the information that we get through our relationships to people is all coming through the body, through the ears, through the brain, into the mind. So the body is absolutely, it's our basic sense of being in the world. And we know how desperate that can become when the body falls ill and we find ourselves close up to death. That's when the shaking comes. That's when the horror of our situation arises in our mind.

So this relationship that we have, this sense of self, also mirrors back to us that sense of consciousness or awareness. Be careful with words because they have all sorts of meanings, but that sense of awareness. And that sense of awareness has a sense of itself, of itself being aware. But that sense of itself being aware is a mirror of that awareness within the mind itself.

And so what happens is that seeking happiness, it goes, as it were, through that sense of self into the psychophysical organism and begins to feed itself to make itself feel happy and comfortable. And then, of course, it's up against the world, which is ready to offer all those things to us. We begin to accumulate.

Now, because this awareness wakes up and begins to realize that, in fact, things are impermanent, that sense of impermanence undermines that quality of happiness. So every time it accumulates something, there's always a fear of loss. The fear of loss means that you've got to accumulate more. So a lot of our acquisitiveness is about making ourselves feel safe. It's not just about enjoying things. It's about making ourselves feel secure within a world that we're not certain about what's going to happen next.

And once you're dependent upon what you have for your sense of security, anything that undermines that becomes your enemy and your aversion arises quite naturally. And when that enemy is a bit bigger than you, then you've got to run for it. So those three attitudes arise out of this false sense of self: acquisitiveness, aversion and fear.

And it's from that base when we're feeling agitated or when we're feeling threatened, that's where we work from. Once we behave from that base, then, of course, we produce certain habits within us, certain mental states, certain conditions

that we call *kamma* or consequences. And there's a second tier, you might say, of suffering that comes from that agitation, which is, of course, guilt, shame, and the comeback from other people who see you as selfish and not generous, et cetera. See you as not compassionate enough, see you as not loving enough.

So, all those maladies arise from a mistake, from a mistake that goes so deep that we're not aware of it. And it all comes back down into that sense of self.

So when we're meditating, we're trying to get down to that. We're first of all trying to purify the heart. So remember that the way that the process works in purifying the heart is to allow the heart to express its turbulences. So where we find anxiety, a sense of depression, sadness, grief, overexcitement, a desire to indulge, et cetera, where that comes out of the heart, remember, it's always seeking to satisfy itself.

And one of the insights that we have is that that desire is insatiable. It can never have enough. Partly because it's enjoyable and partly because we want more of it, meaning that there's a lesser chance of losing it. So there's always that sense of safety about things.

So when these things come up in the mind, we have to be very careful. I should say come up in the heart as an emotional mood state. When it comes up in the heart, I have to be very careful not to let it grasp hold of the mind and create a story. Because that's how we begin to recognize that these things develop themselves, even in ordinary daily life, not just sitting.

Just when you find yourself dreaming, where you're not doing very much, you're sitting in a chair or you're traveling somewhere on a bus or something. And the mind's just wandering, wandering, getting hold on its old usual habitual little ways of thinking. And you've got to come off that because we have to wake up to ourselves to realize that every time it does that, I'm just making things worse for myself.

So coming back into the heart, we allow these emotional states, these turbulences to express themselves. And of course, that's the difficult part of our practice. It's not very pleasant. We have to stay with that. We have to wait until they begin to exhaust themselves.

And it's important at least once or twice to wait until it completely ends, to wait till that process of turbulence completely ends. Because when it completely ends, what you get is your present, what you get is the consequence. And what you see clearly is that what you're suffering from moves towards its opposite.

So, whereas once you've got all this agitation, this sort of, shall we say, a lot of anger about something, if you wait until the anger completely disappears, you find your perspective changes completely and you're able to see the other side. In other words, love arises quite naturally. It's the same with any cruel thoughts we have or any selfish thoughts. If you wait until the end of that, you see, then the opposite arises quite naturally. And if you can just do it enough times to convince yourself that that's what actually happens, then you get that inner conviction, that inner determination to actually stay with the turbulence of the heart until they heal themselves. That's an important insight, psychotherapeutic insight, you might say.

But in terms of this deeper malaise, this sense of self, then that comes out in that more inward state when we're sitting. And when he would have been sitting under the tree, when he suddenly saw that that sense of self was completely manufactured. It's manufactured moment after moment. It's not something that is always there. And that's the huge insight for us, because normally speaking, we have a sense of continuity, sense of substantiality of this me all the time. And by seeing that the self arises only within a process, only within a process does the Buddha realize that actually it has no base at all. And that sense of self, remember, is a relationship. It's that sense of me being here, me, that sense of me.

So you can see that our practice has developed both these two sides, it has the side of purifying the heart and the side of insight, the side of actually seeing where this fundamental problem lies. And these adjectives are pointing to what happens when the self completely disappears and there is just that awareness.

So now he's pointing to something which is transcendent. And he's telling us, he's saying that it's a wonderful thing, but he can't describe it. It's beyond description. But his words are the uninclined, which means that it's no longer seeking for something. So that statement, no longer seeking something. That statement that by the nun who was liberated, I've got up there, Meichi Kyao — Meichi just means a nun. Kya is a name. I think I pronounced it right. Expresses, she expresses quite clearly what that state is once you're liberated from that deep delusion.

So this sense, this awareness is no longer inclined to try and seek happiness in the world. It's taintless. So these taints refer to something quite deep, the desire to become, the desire to continue, the desire for sensual pleasure, and that fundamental ignorance that we suffer from of not knowing who or what we really are. So those have gone. The truth by which he means something that is irrefutable. The far shore, that's one of his regular descriptions of it, the island, you're going beyond, over the sea of troubles, to a completely different place. It's transcendent.

The subtle, the very difficult to see. So again, the reason why it's so subtle is because we identify with this sense of self, with being our self. That sense of identity is when you lose your objective view of things. So, for instance, if you're angry, you can be aware of being angry, but then suddenly you can lose it and rage. So that point of raging is a point where you completely identify with that mental state, and then you've lost all objectivity.

The unaging, so there's no — I mean, that's what he found, that there was, in that state there's no birth, there's no death, there's no aging. It's stable, there's nothing moving in it. It's not disintegrating, it is completely substantial. It's the unmanifest. Now that's an interesting thing, that it can't be seen. You cannot see, you cannot hear or feel or know *Nibbāna* as an object. The unproliferated. So it's not one thing or two things. It's just in itself, just pure awareness. It's the peaceful, the deathless, which same as the unaging, the sublime, the auspicious, the secure. So that's this business of always feeling that sense underneath it of our existence, of being insecure, insecure against sickness, aging and death. So all that's completely gone. It's un-ailing in the sense that there's no suffering there from being sick or being ill.

He calls it *Nibbāna*. *Nibbāna* has two general meanings. That is, you're liberated from that wrong desire. So remember, there's two types of desire. So when the Buddha can see that somebody's come to him with a question which is troubling, there's a desire to help. So compassion, sympathetic joy, love, all those basic wholesome attitudes are still there. All the unwholesome ones have gone. It's the unafflicted, that's just saying there's no more suffering there. Dispassion, meaning here that you don't get caught up in other people's problems. There's not that reactivity. Purity, purity in an ethical sense. There's no more negativity within that state.

Freedom, now that freedom is not the freedom to do something, it's the freedom from. It's the freedom from these wrong desires, from these painful desires. And that's another way of saying non-attachment. And then he says the island, which again links to this other shore. The island, something which is completely separate unto itself, not attached to the land, not attached to anything else. And the shelter, so there's your safety. It's the asylum, the refuge. All these are telling us that once you're there, you simply can't suffer. You've gone beyond the ability to engage in the world that you find yourself in, in a way that is going to cause you suffering. There's a profound liberation. It's the destination, the path leading to the destination.

So his description often of that end game is more negative than positive. This is quite something to come across in the scriptures. I think there's only one other place where so many adjectives are put, about 32 of them or something, put in a way that has both that negative side of what it's not and the positive side of what it is. But when you put all those ideas together, they never sum up to the actual experience of *Nirvāna*.

So how do we get a feel for it? How do we get a sense of what *Nirvāna* might be? So in your practice, when you're sitting there, you might come across this deep sense of stillness, a deep sense of silence within yourself, even if only for a moment. And as that appears within you, that comes to you and you get that sense of you being in the midst of that, a sense of the observer, the feeler, just for a moment there, just become internally aware of that sense of self, of the sense of the feeler, and just ask yourself, what's it made of? And that's when you begin to recognize that the awareness is something quite separate from all the other things that you can experience through the body.

All our emotions and moods are through the body, all our imagination and thought are through the body through the brain, all our physical feelings are through the body. So the body is there as a basic platform upon which we experience things, experience everything that in this world. It comes through the body and it's of the body. And here you are, separated within yourself into this observation post, this platform within yourself where you can see all this. You're separate from it. And in moments of real peacefulness and calm, that sense of self becomes very clear, the observer. And it's just a case of holding that long enough to, as it were, glance inwards and just see what is that awareness made of, what's inside the awareness. And that gives us a clue as to what our destination is.

So when the Buddha had discovered this, of course, he spent something like seven days, seven nights, just going through that whole process and thinking about it, reflecting on it. And from then on, he spent his forty-odd years, forty-five years, teaching, wandering around North India. When you read the scriptures, that wandering really comes out because as he's going from place to place and he's being asked questions by people, this word, how to describe the mind becomes very undefined.

So the word consciousness is used in many ways. It's used as just a screen upon which something happens, but it's also used as a discriminative process, an understanding process. The word *citta*, which is another word for consciousness, is used also as awareness, but it's also used as your emotional base, your mental state. And it's only by really doing the practice that these things begin to clarify themselves.

And why he began to deconstruct our experience into these, what he called these five aggregates. All those things to do with the body, our direct physicality, such as pure tasting, movement, the sense of cold and heat and all that. And then there's a whole section about feeling. And feeling, the one word, covers both the physical feelings and the mental feelings, how we feel inside ourselves with various different emotions or moods. And that was a whole, he separated that out from the actual sensations that come directly from the body. So the body and mind in Buddhist teaching, remember, are two different things, but they work, the one saturates the other. You can't really separate them by way of experience.

And then there's a whole process of mentation, how we're able to create symbols in the mind, images in the mind, which through more and more experience become concepts. So as soon as a child, we would have seen a spider. And then after a lot of seeing of spiders and pictures and all that, we've ended up with a concept of a spider in our mind. So as soon as we see a spider, we'll name it. We'll know what it is, a spider. But we won't actually look at it. And very few of us are capable of actually feeling it. So it's a case of recognizing that there's a mismatch comes through the process of conceptualization. And that's a section of these aggregates.

Then there comes this whole section of habituation, of habits. And this is crucial in the way that he separates that because these are something that we actively create through our will. And that's where the suffering lies, in these *saṅkhāras*, these compounded things that we've created. Well, we call them our habits, volitional activities.

And then there's consciousness. And then beyond that, there's this sense of awareness. And that sometimes you might find confusing in a lot of Buddhist literature because often writers don't make that distinction. And what happens is then the idea of *nibbāna* becomes something so abstract, it's outside our ability to even get a glimpse of it. So long as awareness is confused with consciousness, then it's not possible to see what *nibbāna* might be. It's only when we begin to realize or recognize or open up to the possibility that awareness is not the same as consciousness that then there becomes this insight into what might be transcendent of our psychophysical organism.

So consciousness is really just that screen upon which we're seeing and experiencing everything. But we're right in it. It's like our face is in the monitor. It's not separate from it. It's not outside the monitor. Your face is in the monitor, in the monitor screen. That's what it is. And every time you pull out, every time you sit back into your desk and begin to recognize that you're watching a monitor, that's what you're doing when you're sitting in meditation. You're pulling out.

And that sense of self is, again, a mirror image of awareness on that screen. And the best example was given to me by Noreen, really, when talking about looking into shops when you're doing shopping. So when you look in there and you see all these lovely things, you might catch your own mirror image looking at you looking into the shop. And if you stop for a minute, you can actually comb your hair in the mirror. It's that, well, I used to. So that sense of mirror image is exactly what we mean by this self-awareness at its original apparition. And it's through that consciousness of that screen, of that window on the shop, you see, that you're entering into all this shopping. And I wonder we have, what's it called? Shopping therapy or something. It's all there as you walk down the high street.

So just to try and pull all that together, the Buddha teaches two things. You can categorize them as two major teachings, ethics and transcendence. The transcendence is just a little bit because you can't say that much about it, but you can describe the path leading to it. And he points out that the fundamental problem is one of identity. It goes back to that ancient Greek thing of know yourself or who am I? That's the deepest question we have, really, of who am I?

And this who am I manifests itself outwardly as a connection with the world it finds itself in, in a way which creates suffering for itself. That's the peculiar situation we're in. We're seeking happiness, but because it's not in the right way, it rebounds back to us as a sense of unsatisfactoriness. You just can't get out of life what you would like to get out of life as a constant. You can hold it for a second or two and that's it.

And then we begin to let go of all that, begin to allow it to manifest as turbulences in the heart. And as that purification becomes more and more within us, there's a growth in virtue. And the Buddha equates ordinary mundane happiness with virtue. The more virtuous we are, the more happy we are. So you can always begin to examine. We can always examine our lives by asking ourselves, well, exactly how generous am I? Exactly how loving am I? How compassionate am I? And these are all little telltales to us that we're moving along the path.

So the first part of the path is right understanding. And that's basically the point of this insight business and understanding the teachings. Underneath that, there comes immediately right attitude. And right attitude is normally written as from selfishness to generosity, from hatred to love, from cruelty to compassion. But any negativity you have moves towards its opposite. But you can see that you can undermine this sense of self by going the other way, by practicing, by developing generosity, love, compassion. You're undermining the sense of self. How? Because you're beginning to recognize that we're not an identity, we're not separate from the world around us.

And that undoing of that barrier between me and somebody else is part of undoing this concept of a self, of who I am. And eventually that identification, you might say, with all beings is the manifestation of love. It's what we practice when we say *mettā*. May all beings be happy. It includes me as well. So I'm in there. I'm in the mix. And it's me trying to find a relationship whereby I'm not coming from me all the time. I'm coming from a sense of we and a sense of you. The Buddha put it nicely as that we do things for ourselves, for others, for both ourselves and others.

When we begin to behave in that more virtuous way, that sense of self begins to dissipate. There begins that communication, you might say, between us, between others, between nature. And that is beginning to understand how we can live in the world whereby we're no longer suffering from it.

So that's something to contemplate. The Buddha doesn't actually suffer. Not that he fell ill. As you know, he growled, he died. He went through all the processes that we would go through. But none of it was his suffering. And I would really invite you to read that statement by the nun because she says it so perfectly.

You see? Even the cat understands. Very, very... The peculiar cat is from next door. I blame it on John, he used to greet it. I have a horror of cats.

Mainly because they always leave the field with a mouse in their mouths, or some sort of animal. And it's not as though they're not fed. You can call him Buddy, by the way.

So anyway, I hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused even greater confusion, and that you will, by your complete devotion to the practice, liberate yourselves from all suffering, sooner rather than later.

Sādhū, sādhu.

Discourse to the Kālāmas

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 16 min

In this talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the renowned Kālāma Sutta (AN 3.65), often cited as exemplifying the Buddha's non-dogmatic approach to teaching. The discourse addresses the timeless question: how do we know what is true? The Kālāmas faced competing religious teachers, each claiming their doctrine was correct while disparaging others—a situation remarkably similar to our modern spiritual marketplace.

The Buddha's response was revolutionary: don't accept teachings based solely on tradition, scriptural authority, logic, or respected teachers. Instead, examine through direct experience whether teachings lead to harm or benefit. Using the concrete examples of greed, hatred, and delusion versus their opposites, the Buddha shows how we can evaluate teachings by their fruits in our lives.

Bhante Bodhidhamma explores the Buddha's emphasis on personal investigation over blind faith, connecting this ancient wisdom to contemporary challenges of discerning truth in our information-saturated world. The talk concludes with the Buddha's famous deathbed instruction to Ānanda: 'Take the Dhamma as your lamp, take yourself as your lamp.' This foundational teaching establishes the principle that ultimately, each practitioner must verify spiritual truths through their own careful investigation and experience.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa

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

There's a very famous discourse that people always quote to express the non-dogmatic way that the Buddha taught, and it's known as the *Kalama Sutta*, the discourse to the Kalamas. The question, of course, is how do we know something is true?

Here's a time where all sorts of gurus and ideas are coming forward. It's quite an exciting little time, really. And you're living in a town, a small town, with only a few thousand inhabitants. These gurus keep turning up and telling you what for. They're all saying slightly different things, and of course, saying everybody else is absolutely useless. So you're stuck. You wonder, well, who's right and who's wrong?

If you think of these days, somebody who's been brought up in a non-religious family suddenly becomes interested in the religious field and goes out in search. I mean, it's colossal, isn't it? Where will you start? So this is, in a slightly lesser degree, the situation of the Kalamas. It's very modern in a way.

So I'll just read it through so you get the feel of the discourse, and then say one or two things and continue next week.

Thus have I heard. So remember all these scriptures were related by Ananda, his assistant, remembered by him. He had to repeat them all at this meeting.

On one occasion the Blessed One was wandering on tour with a large sangha of monks when he arrived at the town of the Kalamas called Kesaputta. Now the Kalamas of Kesaputta had heard: "It is said that the ascetic Gautama, the Sakyan son who went forth from the Sakyan family, has arrived at Kesaputta. Now a good report about that master Gautama has been circulating thus: that the blessed one is an Arahant, perfectly enlightened, accomplished in true knowledge and conduct, fortunate, knower of the world, unsurpassed leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of devas and humans, the enlightened one, the blessed one. And having realized, with his own direct knowledge, this world, with its devas, mara and brahma, this population, with its ascetics and brahmins, with its devas and humans, he makes it known to others. And he teaches a dharma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end, with the right meaning and expressions. He reveals a spiritual life that is perfectly complete and purified. Now it's good to see such a worthy one."

Then the Kalamas of Kesaputta approached the Blessed One. Some paid homage to him and sat down to one side. Some exchanged greetings with him and after greeting and cordial talk sat down to one side. Some saluted him reverentially and sat down to one side and some remained silent and sat down to one side.

And the Kalamas said to the Blessed One: "Venerable Sir, some ascetics and Brahmins who come to Kesaputta explain and elucidate their own doctrines, but disparage, debunk, revile and vilify the doctrines of others. But then some other ascetics and Brahmins come to Kesaputta and they too explain and elucidate their doctrines, but disparage, debunk, revile and vilify the doctrines of the others. For us, venerable sir, there is perplexity and doubt as to which of these good ascetics speaks truth and which speaks falsehood."

"It is fitting for you to be perplexed, O Kalamas. It is fitting for you to be in doubt. Doubt has arisen in you about a perplexing matter. Come, Kalamas, do not go by oral tradition." So this is the bit that's always quoted. "Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage

of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of texts, by logic, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think the ascetic is our teacher. But when you know for yourselves these things are unwholesome, these things are blameable, these things are censured by the wise. These things, if undertaken in practice, lead to harm and suffering, then you should abandon them."

"Now what do you think, Kalamas? When greed, hatred and delusion arise in a person, is it for his welfare or harm?"

"For his harm, Venerable Sir."

"Kalamas, a person who is greedy, hating and deluded, overpowered by greed, hatred and delusion, his thoughts controlled by them, will destroy life, take what's not given, engage in sexual misconduct and tell lies. He will also prompt others to do likewise. Will that conduct be to his harm and suffering for a long time?"

"Yes, Venerable Sir."

"Now what do you think, Kalamas? Are these things wholesome or unwholesome?"

"Unwholesome, Venerable Sir."

"Blameable or blameless?"

"Blameable, Venerable Sir."

"Censured or praised by the wise?"

"Censured, venerable sir."

"Undertaken and practiced, do they lead to harm and suffering or not? Or how is it in this case?"

"Undertaken and practiced, these things lead to harm and suffering, so it appears to us in this case."

"It is for this reason, Kalamas, that we said, do not go by oral tradition..." I'm going to repeat that. Remember, this is the oral tradition, so it's put in a very repetitious way so people can remember it.

Now he goes on to the opposite. "So what do you think Kalamas? When non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion arise in a person, is it for his welfare or harm?"

"For his welfare, venerable sir."

"Kalamas, a person who is without greed, without hatred, without delusion, not overpowered by greed and hatred and delusion, his thoughts not controlled by them, will abstain from the destruction of life, from taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct and from false speech. He will also prompt others to do likewise. Will that conduce to his welfare and happiness for a long time?"

"Yes, Venerable Sir."

"What do you think, Kalamas? Are these things wholesome or unwholesome?"

"Wholesome, Venerable Sir."

"Blameable or blameless?"

"Blameless, Venerable Sir."

"Censured or praised by the wise?"

"Praised, venerable sir."

"Undertaken and practiced, do they lead to welfare and happiness or not? Or how is it in this case?"

"Undertaken and practiced, these things lead to welfare and happiness. So it appears to us in this case."

"It is for this reason, Kalamas, that I said, do not go by oral tradition, and so forth."

And then he gives them this practice: "Then Kalamas, that noble disciple, devoid of covetousness, devoid of ill will, unconfused, clearly comprehending and ever mindful, dwells pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving kindness. Likewise the second, the third and the fourth. Thus above, below and across and everywhere and to all as to himself, he dwells pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving kindness, vast, exalted, measureless, without hostility and without ill will."

And this he says also of compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity.

"When Kalamas, this noble disciple has thus made his mind free of enmity, free of ill will, uncorrupted and pure, he has won four assurances in this very life.

The first assurance he has won is this: if there is another world and if good and bad deeds bear fruit and yield results, it is possible that on the breakup of the body after death I shall arise in a good destination in a heavenly world.

The second assurance he has won is this: if there is no other world and if good and bad deeds do not bear fruit and yield results, still right here in this very life, I live happily, free of enmity and ill will.

The third assurance he has won is this: suppose evil befalls the evildoer. Then, as I do not intend evil for anyone, how can suffering affect me, one who does no evil deed?

The fourth assurance he has won is this: suppose evil does not befall an evildoer, then right here I see myself purified in both respects.

When Kalamas, this noble disciple has thus made his mind free of enmity, free of ill will, uncorrupted and pure, he has won these four assurances in this very life."

"So it is, blessed one, so it is, fortunate one, when this noble disciple has thus made his mind free of enmity, free of ill will, uncorrupted and pure, he has won these four assurances in this very life."

And then the usual ending: "Magnificent Venerable Sir, Magnificent Venerable Sir, the Blessed One has made the Dharma clear in many ways, as though he were turning upright what had been overthrown, revealing what had been hidden, showing the way to one who was lost, or holding up a lamp in the darkness so those with good eyesight can see forms. So now we go for refuge to the Blessed One, to the Dharma and to the Sangha of Monks. Let the Blessed One accept us as lay followers who have gone to refuge from today until life's end."

Very successful, eh? So let's just look at this, the main thing that he says. The first one he says is don't believe anything. Don't believe anything just because it comes from these things that are established by scriptural authorities or something coming from the past - so oral tradition, lineage of the teacher, hearsay, collection of texts. So fundamentalists might be described as people who believe that the texts are infallible, that they are true records and that they have to be entirely and fully believed.

My brother-in-law believes that the whole of the Bible is the word of God, full stop. And you'll find people in the East who believe that all the scriptures are actually the word of the Buddha, I mean the direct word of the Buddha. Sometimes you can get the flavour of the Buddha's teaching coming through, but to say, you know, to make a statement that it's the actual words he spoke... but it gives them assurance that, you know, it must be right. Of course they don't recognise that the way they read it is their own interpretation. Putting that aside, they just take it for real.

Then there are the four rational grounds: logic, inferential reasoning and reasoned cogitation and the acceptance of views after pondering upon it. Now most people would think that if they'd thought something through it must necessarily be true. But we know from the history of our own rationality that it can lead you in a very strange place.

I mean, our 18th century enlightenment, which was about rationality, and probably its greatest product was the Declaration of Human Rights, also produced communism and Nazism, which were very rational doctrines. Remember, all rationality has to be based on a premise. And if the premise is wrong, then you're going to end up somewhere else. A lot of people would believe that just because they've thought something through, it must be therefore right. It's a dangerous one, eh?

And then there are those on authoritative persons, the impressive speakers and the respected teachers. So we've had the sad death of... maybe that, yeah. I was just reading some of the responses. It's unbelievable, actually. It's as bad as it was when she was there. The opposing views. And, you know, you just don't believe somebody because they have authority.

So now you've got this real problem of how do you find out whether something is true or not? Then on top of that, you've got the post-modern understanding that all our truths are completely relative to the individual person. So whatever's true for you, well, it might be true for you, but it's not true for me.

So you have these three ways of trying to decide for ourselves as to what's true: what's given to us from traditions, what we can think about and rationalise with others and come to some understanding, and what's true for me. So the Buddha simply says well go back to your experience and that's why he talks about something which is so concrete as greed, hatred and delusion and he asks you well does this create harm or not. So he's always going back to direct experience and to using that as a basis for our understanding of what truth is.

So remember that when he died, when he was dying, Ananda asks him, are you going to leave somebody to lead us? And he says, no. He said, take the Dharma, the teaching, as your light, as your lamp. Take yourself as the lamp. See? So the Dharma, of course, is the tradition and all that, and the logic and all that. But eventually, I'm afraid it's us. And if we get it wrong, it's only us that suffer.

So it's a very important point for us to think about. How do we know something is true? How do we know something is true?

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by your investigation of this, arrive at that place of utter happiness sooner rather than later.

Divine Abiding: Compassion

Noirin Sheahan · 43 min

In this exploration of karuṇā (compassion), Noirin Sheahan examines how mettā (loving-kindness) naturally transforms when encountering suffering, becoming compassionate goodwill without anxiety or aversion. Drawing on moving examples from the Buddha's care of sick monks and contemporary situations, she illustrates how true compassion maintains inner peace while responding with appropriate tenderness to suffering.

The teaching carefully distinguishes compassion from its near enemies—pity (which creates separation between helper and sufferer), grief (which paralyzes through overwhelm), and self-pity—as well as its far enemy of cruelty. Through personal anecdotes and practical guidance, Noirin shows how aversion underlies these obstacles and how mindfulness practice develops the non-reactivity essential for genuine compassion.

Offering practical methods for both formal meditation and daily life application, this talk provides essential guidance for cultivating one of the four brahmavihāra (divine abidings) with wisdom and skillful means, recognizing that opening the heart naturally brings up defensive patterns that can be worked with rather than eliminated.

Tonight I want to look at the way *metta* shades in tone when we come across difficulties. Metta itself remains intact. Our basis is wishing ourselves and others well. But the goodwill is expressed in compassionate terms with sensitivity to the particular situation.

Compassion is sometimes described as the trembling of the enlightened heart in response to the suffering of the world. There is deep sympathy with the suffering being and the wish that their suffering may come to an end. But there is no anxiety about the situation. This can be very difficult for us to understand. The enlightened being is in touch with a level of peace that is untouched by the suffering and can sustain a calm tenderness even when the heart is breaking or the body is being torn apart. Within the context of peace and tenderness anything can be born.

This is what Julian of Norwich learned when in revulsion at the sufferings of the world she heard the words "All shall be well. All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." Compassion is the manifestation of wisdom in the face of suffering. It allows the suffering to elicit a response of tenderness and care without any hint of anxiety.

ety or aversion. Sustained by compassion, the enlightened person does not get in any way flustered by the situation and can respond appropriately. For example, caring for an injured being, finding words to comfort.

The Vinaya, the book of monastic discipline, includes a story of the Buddha and Ananda coming across a monk who had acute dysentery and was lying in his soiled robes. You can imagine the sight and the stench. The Buddha and Ananda cleaned the monk and his robes. Afterwards, the Buddha addressed the sick monk's fellows, clarifying that it was their duty to look after one another in case of illness. "Monks," he said, "if you don't tend to one another, who then will tend to you? Whoever would tend to me should tend to the sick."

Another part of the scriptures describes the Buddha finding a monk who had been abandoned by his fellows because of the sores oozing all over his body. His robes were sticking to him and again just imagine the stench and the sight of this man as he lay there abandoned and dying in agony. The Buddha boiled water and washed the monk with his own hands to clean off the pus. He similarly washed the soiled robes and waited until these were dry. Once the monk had been comforted, the Buddha talked to him of the Dharma, and as you can expect, the monk became fully liberated.

In both of these stories, the Buddha modelled a steadiness of heart that allowed compassion to flow where most people would retreat in alarm and disgust. At other times, compassionate action could take the form of warding off an aggressor. Sharon Salzberg tells the story of being attacked while in a rickshaw in India. She was badly frightened when she told her teacher Munindra-ji about the incident. He replied, "Oh Sharon, with all the goodwill in your heart, you should have taken your umbrella and whacked that man with it."

Compassion does not mean passivity. We can oppose injustice vigorously so as to prevent suffering. At other times there may be no appropriate action, no way to prevent or minimise the suffering. In those cases, just to stay nearby and witness the suffering is our only option and is a very precious gift. Simply staying with a suffering person, refusing to abandon them though we can offer no practical help, gives them the best possible opportunity to let their suffering open the door to wisdom. If we can take to heart the first noble truth that there is suffering, this opens the door to the other truths which liberate us from suffering.

Whether we are caring for a sick person, vigorously opposing injustice or witnessing some suffering we cannot prevent, we need to be able to resist the reactivity which comes up in the face of suffering. Such non-reactivity is learned every time we sit with difficulties during *vipassanā*: even a slight pain in the knee, the noise of machinery,

someone fidgeting nearby, a worrisome thought. All these are forms of suffering. As we learn to bear with these types of disturbance in meditation and their myriad spin-off thoughts and anxieties, we are cultivating the skills we need to respond compassionately in the face of deeper suffering in our own lives and in others.

True compassion has this non-reactivity as its basis. Even though we may be speeding around in an effort to cope with the reality, a compassionate hurry is motivated by care rather than alarm and is completely at ease with the situation. Barriers to compassion, as with all forms of *dukkha*, come back to reacting to our feelings. In the case of suffering, there will be an unpleasant feeling at the core and the automatic urge to get rid of this. In many real life situations, we won't have the level of calm concentration needed to recognise this very simple level of our being. We will be spinning such a complex story around the unpleasant feeling that we get hooked by the myriad emotions that the story generates.

The stories we tell ourselves at times of distress emanate from the perceptions of self. The notion that there is a substantial entity lodged somewhere in our body and mind. This self is, or should be, in control of matters.

Imagine you have a pet goldfish who swims quietly around in a tank in your living room. Today when you sprinkle some food into the tank, Goldie doesn't dart around after these nibbles as he usually does. He stays put at the bottom of the tank. Taking a closer look at him, you notice he's lost some of his lustrous colour and there are some whitish spots amongst his scales. By this stage there will be unpleasant feelings stirring, causing your face to frown and perhaps stiffening much of your body in tension. What happens next will depend on your habitual tendencies in the face of a perceived threat.

Let's say you're a leap into action type. A sense of yourself as powerful and resourceful will be established. A determination to save Goldie from peril. Although you have hardly given Goldie a thought for months beyond tossing a few grains of food into the tank from time to time, he's fast becoming your nearest and dearest and a sense of enmity is forming around those white spots on his scales. Your eyes narrow as you examine them. "Aha! Fungus!" Dear Goldie, attacked by rotten spores of horrid fungus, outrage and indignation. It's you and Goldie versus the microscopic world.

"Don't worry, Goldie," you whisper into the fishbowl before making a dash to the computer to search for solutions to goldfish spots. You pace about in consternation as it goes through its infuriating start-up routine. "Everything's going to be fine," you call, banging the keys furiously to get "white spots goldfish" into Google's search line. "Mummy's looking after everything."

What's happening is that compassion has got entangled with one of its near enemies, pity. Pity lets us feel superior to the suffering person. Goldie has been reduced to a pathetic entity that you must rescue and restore to health. There's a clear separation between me, the valiant saviour, and Goldie, the poor creature who needs me. In pity, we can also be suppressing our fears that exactly the same kind of suffering could be visited on me. Thus we can quietly despise a drug addict while outwardly sympathising with their plight. The experience of compassion, on the other hand, unites us with the suffering person. Our own heart trembles in resonance with their plight.

Pity so easily masquerades as compassion. It doesn't help that pity is listed as a virtue in many Christian texts. But in the context of the Christian virtue, the word pity is being used to mean compassion. The difference between the two is that pity includes aversion. We have generated a sense of enmity around the unwelcome sight of those white spots, which in turn evokes a sense of self to combat this enemy.

In our rush to rescue, everything that gets in our way is seen as the enemy: computer delays, an incoming phone call, the rest of our agenda for the day, the cat crying for her saucer of milk. These are all irritating demands on our time which is urgently needed for poor little Goldie. And when our trawl through the websites convinces us that most fungal problems result from unclean water, we ourselves become the enemy. We berate ourselves angrily, trying to remember the last time we changed the water. Later, as we scrub and scour the tank, Goldie, in his replacement bowl, can also become the enemy. "That good-for-nothing fish putting me to all this trouble."

While compassion has goodwill as its basis, pity adds a big dollop of aversion to the mix. It's very easy for compassion to slide stealthily into pity when we are caring for someone who is ill. With compassion we can see the sick person's strengths as well as their illness. We respect them fully and value their friendship despite their reduced state. When compassion slides into pity we sense ourselves as strong and resourceful, the other as needy and weak depending on us. Whenever there's a very clear dividing line between yourself and the person you're caring for, it's likely that pity is emerging.

Like attachment, pity is a normal aspect of human relationships. It gives us energy and motivation to look after vulnerable people. But it's destructive in the long term. In subtle ways, we might even be preventing the other person from recovering. We fuss over them, trying to anticipate their every need. We sympathise profoundly with every complaint. We counsel against taking any risks, never mind what the doctor says. "Doctors don't understand." All of this excessive caring drains our energy. In our low mo-

ments we resent the sick person and we see ourselves as the victim of their neediness. The aversion has now found a different outlet. Instead of the sickness being the enemy, the sick person has turned into the enemy.

To complicate matters, the sick person often reacts against the aversion underlying our pity. They resent being reduced to the role we are creating for them, the needy person. In their low moments they hate us for so clearly showing them their dependent status. Pity breeds resentment in both parties.

When we see ourselves as the injured party, self-pity is a common reaction. Suppose we valiantly scrub out Goldie's tank and replace it with sparkling clean water. We do this daily for a week. But still Goldie isn't recovering. The spots are getting bigger and the food is still untouched. What started out as aversion to the spots now grows to encompass aversion to all the work I'm doing for no reward. "It's all so unfair. It's not just Goldie who is injured." We've joined him and feel ourselves as the injured party. The only comfort is to sympathise with ourselves.

We run through the story from our point of view and insist again and again that we're doing absolutely everything right and how unfair and awful it is that there's no good coming of our hard work. Sympathy feels pleasant and we cling to it, unwittingly prolonging and deepening the injured party role and nursing a victim mentality. We start telling all our friends about our plight, eliciting their sympathy. Goldie, who for months went quite unnoticed, becomes the centre of our lives.

Instead of being the spring-into-action type, let's suppose your habit when faced with suffering is to crumple in grief. So when Goldie refuses his food, you stare at him in dismay. When you notice the white spots, your worst fears are confirmed. "He's a goner." Your head hangs in misery until someone or something helps you snap out of it, leaving Goldie to his fate. While pity can spur us into action, grief takes the suffering so deeply inward that it paralyses us. We mistake grief for compassion because we want the suffering to stop, but we overlook the role aversion is playing, distorting our perceptions, overstating the problem.

I remember one time when I was sitting on a park bench watching a group of pigeons pecking at some food on the ground. I noticed that one of the pigeons had lost his toes on one foot. That leg ended in a bulbous stump and rather than walking he was hopping from place to place on the other foot. "Oh no," I thought, "how awful." Inwardly I was writhing and my face was wincing. I would have sworn that I was feeling the pigeon's pain. I had noticed that before, the belief that I could feel the pain of other beings when I saw their physical wounds. But I had never questioned this belief as my attention was always so fixed on thinking about the awfulness of their situation.

However, this time I registered the belief and started to wonder about it. How could I possibly be feeling the pigeon's pain? It didn't make any sense. I don't have any special powers of that nature. I closed my eyes, took a few deep breaths and vowed to let mindfulness sort it out. It took a while and I went through a lot of fear and confusion. But after a while it was as if a veil lifted and I realised the pain was in my own body. It was simply an unpleasant tingling at the base of my spine. Once I could locate the pain, it became quite bearable. My mind stopped amplifying it and projecting it onto the pigeon. After a few moments, I hardly even noticed it.

I opened my eyes again, and this time when I looked at the pigeon, I noticed how well the pigeon was coping with his lameness, how he was managing to hold his own and get at some food. I saw that he was actually quite plump and healthy looking. Within this more hopeful scenario, my spirits lifted and with this came a simple wish that he come to no harm on account of his injury. Instead of feeling awful about him, I felt respect for his plucky attitude and grateful that he had taught me a worthwhile lesson. Since then, I've never been quite so overcome when seeing a person or animal with a physical injury.

When we are grief-stricken in the face of suffering, aversion is colouring the whole scene. We can only think in negative terms about the suffering person, about ourselves, about the future. We've taken one instance of suffering and magnified it out of all proportion, just as I was doing in the case of the pigeon. This paralyses us. We've become so bound up in suffering that we have no resources left to add anything positive to the situation, not even a good wish. A child stands by in mute misery as their sibling is punished by an enraged parent. We look away from our bereaved neighbour, feeling anguish on their behalf but not knowing what to say.

When grief gets overwhelming, we can go into a state of shock and even denial. A friend told me of her meeting with her cardiologist. When he told her she would need open heart surgery, she looked around to see who he was talking to because she knew it couldn't possibly be her.

C.S. Lewis's book *A Grief Observed* gives a very honest and poignant account of the moment to moment experience of grief. The book was written from a journal he kept during the first weeks and months after the death of his wife. It opened with the statement, "Nobody told me grief was so like fear." His perceptive inquiry showed him the fear underlying all the thoughts and emotions resulting from her loss. He needed company but dreaded when the spotlight was turned on him. "Why can't they just talk to

one another but not to me?" His book gives many insights into the development of compassion and equanimity by means of his scrupulous and honest track through the suffering of bereavement.

To develop compassion we need to learn to feel our fear without buying into the thoughts and perceptions it suggests to the mind. It can motivate us to sit through knee aches and itchy noses when we remember this. As we learn to disentangle the knots of confusion that emerge in reaction to these, we are freeing our capacity for compassion in response to the inevitable sorrows of life.

Grief, pity and overwhelm are examples of the near enemies of compassion. We sympathise with the suffering person and wish to relieve the suffering. But the very thought of suffering gives rise to these reactions. At the opposite extreme of reactivity we have cruelty which is the direct opposite or far enemy of compassion. Cruelty shows up in circumstances where we feel threatened and need to defend ourselves. Anger arises and energises us to overcome our enemy. But then the anger sticks around even in victory, compelling us to twist the knife. Cruelty prolongs the other's suffering and enjoys the power that enables us to do this.

Cruelty can take the form of bullying, where the more vulnerable person is physically or emotionally abused by the bully. We regularly read of abuse of animals, children, the elderly and those with mental and physical handicap. A recent academic review reported that if a physician was seeing 20 elderly patients a day, then at least one of these was likely to have been abused in the previous year.

A recent probe into abuse of mentally handicapped adults in a care home in Ireland showed patients being treated with quite casual cruelty, refusing their requests to be taken to the toilet, being made to sit in their own urine, being slapped when they made a disturbance. And a few years ago, the UK Secretary commented that cruelty had become the norm in some health and social care institutions.

Lots of cruelty is not from willful glee in the suffering of others but because we neglect to examine what is happening. As a society we tolerate widespread abuse of animals in factory farming and when they are transported on long journeys for slaughter. Even as vegetarians how often do we think of the suffering of cow and calf separated from each other so that we can enjoy our dairy milk and cheese. If fish could cry out, would we still be fishing as a peaceful recreation?

As against so many instances of cruelty in our society, there are also outstanding individuals and institutions that oppose cruelty and treat the vulnerable with care and respect. Many voluntary organisations look after animal welfare. There are hospitals and

care homes which don't hit the headlines but do quiet, often heroic work to care for the sick and the handicapped. Web-based pressure groups get millions of signatories daily in an effort to prevent injustice. All such efforts bear witness to the innate human quality of compassion, the antidote to cruelty.

Hopefully none of us seriously committed to the Dharma will be involved in overt brutality. But cruelty can show itself in subtle ways. Does a sarcastic remark slip out now and again? Do we indulge daydreams where the boss gets his just desserts? When someone we dislike is losing an argument, are we secretly gloating, cheering on the opponent? When caring for a vulnerable person is our tone of voice at times chosen to show how idiotic we think they are? Or do we take it out on ourselves, chiding ourselves savagely when things go wrong?

Because most of us are conditioned to view cruelty as appalling, it's very hard for us to admit to cruelty. It helps to remember the Buddha's assertion that the basic problem is ignorance, not understanding the nature of suffering and how to bring it to an end. Because of this, we make all kinds of mistakes in trying to shield ourselves from pain. One of these mistakes is cruelty.

After the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1989, the media probed into conditions in many Romanian orphanages. I remember one image in particular, a little boy of about two, hitting his head repeatedly against the bars of his cot. His face was cut and bruised and someone was trying to restrain him, but the moment they let go of his head, he would bang it forcefully against the bars again. I think he gave us a graphic image for the innocent mistake at the basis of cruelty. As I see it, he senses the world as awful and naturally tries to find a way out. Because he can't change anything else in his environment, he turns on himself. Banging his head against the bars gives him a sense of control. The sense of control is gratifying, probably his only source of pleasure, so he keeps it up. This is self-inflicted cruelty. But the child is not inherently cruel. He just can't find any other way of asserting himself.

Similarly, our moments of cruelty do not make us a cruel person. For that moment we take the only pleasure we can envisage in the situation, delight in prolonging suffering. When conditions change, we can be kind and caring.

Because we tend to judge cruelty as appalling, we find ways of denying or justifying our subtle cruelties. For example, the phrase, "there is no other way to deal with them," can quickly dismiss the person and cover over our harshness. That kind of blanket justification is what allows institutional abuse to flourish. A culture of brutality can grow

around such simple slogans. Such thoughts harden our hearts against whoever we are dealing with. In the stress of the situation, we are denying their humanness and vulnerability, their need for understanding and love.

When we are being cruel, we delight in the misery of the suffering person or animal. By contrast, pity and grief lock us into some identity with the suffering state. The challenge is to find a balance, to open our hearts to suffering without taking on the role of perpetrator, heroic saviour or victim. At times compassion flows naturally. But then the suffering touches a deep core within and we sense ourselves taking one of the reactionary roles. We're suddenly flooded with aversion or overcome with anxiety and can't find any way back to the easy flow of compassionate goodwill. We need to be patient with our repeated encounters with the near and far enemies and find ways of working alongside these rather than expect them to disappear.

To cultivate compassion the classic phrase is, "May you be free from suffering," but vary this if it helps. For example, "May you have a peaceful death. May you not despair. May you not be troubled by little things." Use images if these work better than words. Some people like to visualise a healing light flowing into a person. Others like to imagine the healing as emanating from their own breath. Remember, it doesn't matter if you don't feel anything. What matters is the wish that suffering will stop.

In formal meditation it's best to start with someone who you know is having a hard time and then go through all the various categories of people, not forgetting yourself and ending by radiating in all directions. It helps to take a few breaths so as to relax between each good wish.

Directing compassion at the difficult person is often a challenge. Don't be surprised if the far enemy emerges and you find yourself thinking, "Well, they deserve it," and gloating gleefully at their plight. This is part of the purification process. Even if we don't behave in overtly cruel ways, the practice of compassion can show up our deep fears where cruel retaliation seems like our only defence. Glimpsing our underlying savagery can be quite dismaying.

One teacher told me that the deeper we go in meditation, the more clearly we see that we have the seeds of all things within us. The child molester, the schoolyard bully, the rapist, the murderer. Our job is to recognise these urges, see them in the calm light of wisdom and decide not to follow them because they lead to suffering. Our usual reaction of self-judgment is a second arrow which deepens the suffering rather than relieves it. The more practice we get at letting go of the second arrow, the more easy it will be to feel the enticement towards cruelty and contemplate this calmly.

Where do these urges come from? In my own experience, I sense cruelty as a refusal to forgive. Deliberately shutting my heart to myself or others gives me a self-righteous glow. But if I look carefully at that glow, there is a shadow side, the sneer of the tyrant.

To give an example, I ordain when I come here to Satipanya, but then go back into civvies when I am at home in Dublin. I also wear a wig to cover up my bald head. I haven't told many people in the family as many of the older generation were brought up in a strict form of Catholicism and I reckon they wouldn't be cheered up by the thought of having a Buddhist nun, even just part-time one, in the family.

As you can guess, the inevitable happened. My aunt came to visit for a few days. I was in my room getting ready to go to bed. I had taken off the electrolarynx and the wig when I heard her knocking at my door. I couldn't tell her wait a moment because the electrolarynx was at the other side of the room. I just managed to grab the wig when I saw the door open and her head appearing around to ask whether she could take a sandwich. For a second she gaped at me in horror while I glared at her in fury.

I was infuriated at the invasion of privacy, leaving my bald head suddenly exposed and my own powerlessness to say anything in protest. I barely managed a curt nod to indicate she could take all the blasted sandwiches she wanted so long as she got out of my room fast.

Although I was very angry, mindfulness let me watch the process play itself out and after a while I was able to giggle at the humour of the situation and see that she had meant no harm. When I could manage to forgive, I felt the welcome relief of friendliness and the wish to meet with her and explain all.

But then a deeper tangle showed itself. How to explain my attraction to ordaining as a Buddhist nun within what I anticipated as her abhorrence at the idea? In an instant friendliness was replaced with an image of myself fully wigged up, haughtily asking her not to enter my room until I answered the door. It would have been so easy to ignore the note of cruelty in this, painting it over with a thought like, "That's what she deserves for being so rude."

But because I could sense the glow of power as I clung to that haughty image, I recognised the underlying cruelty and had to admit that this wasn't exactly in keeping with my aspirations as a Buddhist nun. With that, the journey towards forgiveness resumed, and the following morning I was able to explain that I was now enrobing when I'd come to Satipanya. The conversation went through a few ups and downs, but ended with her telling me of a sorrow she bears in regard to her own religious life. Thus we ended with a sense of mutual understanding and compassion.

One great advantage of being able to recognise and work skilfully with our own urges towards cruelty is that we can start to understand and forgive cruelty in others. We can practice compassion even for tyrants whose cruelty has caused horrendous suffering in the world. No longer so horrified by our own feelings of cruelty, we can imagine their world and feelings and the feelings that drove them. We can take them to heart and wish that they find forgiveness for their deeds.

Sometimes when we feel our own cruelty, the second arrow of self-judgment brings on anxiety. This is the flip side of cruelty, fear. Suppose a bully is taunting his victim. The glee comes from the thought, "This is happening to you, not to me." But bullies can't maintain their superiority forever. Sooner or later, perhaps in sickness or in old age, they have to admit their vulnerability. Knowing what can happen to vulnerable people, they are petrified. Think of how much reassurance you would have to give that person before they would dare to trust you. That is the amount of reassurance we need to give ourselves when we catch a glimpse of our underlying urges towards cruelty and shrivel back in fear of ourselves. If we can keep reassuring our inner bully that they will only meet with kindness and forgiveness, then any urge towards cruelty can be transformed to the response of compassion.

Before finishing this section on working with cruelty, let me say a word about self-judgment. We have to be careful just to note this impartially rather than reacting and thinking we shouldn't be so judgmental. When we can calm down and see things impartially, such judgment can even become an ally. Guy Armstrong, a renowned Vipassanā teacher, tells how he found it impossible to forgive someone for their behaviour until he saw the element of cruelty in his anger. His self-image revolted against the notion of himself as cruel and this persuaded him to forgive the person. So in this case, his conditioning to censure cruelty served him well. Within the light of wisdom, all our emotional habits can be transformed so that they can help us along the path.

At other times when you bring a suffering person to mind, you might find yourself being pulled towards pity. For example, getting lost in plans or worries about how you could help. Or you could find yourself getting overcome by grief. Recently, a meditator described how he would become saturated by a kind of horrified anxiety when he was practicing compassion for the refugees trying to find their way into Europe. Or your mind may just go blank and refuse to engage. This is another example of grief. In this case, grief has led to overwhelm. These are all instances of the near enemy of compassion.

Try to simply acknowledge and continue knowing that the emergence of the enemies near or far just indicates that we are ploughing new depths in our heart. So we don't have to be discouraged by them or start judging ourselves because of them. Smile at them if possible and soldier on. We're not interested in how we feel, remember, but in the wish that suffering be alleviated. So we can put these feelings to one side and focus on the good wish. Similarly, for any of the hindrances, acknowledge and then re-engage with the compassion practice.

If self-judgment, pity or any emotions become overwhelming, experiment with self-compassion. "May I be free from self-judgment. May I be free from pity. May I be free from grief." Or add in some *mettā*. "May I be happy and confident and free from self-judgment." And so on.

Radiating compassion is quite a challenging practice. In ordinary life, our hearts have so many clever tricks to stop us from acknowledging suffering. In compassion practice, we do the opposite. We ask ourselves to think about the suffering of our friends, our benefactors and all other categories of people.

We need to remind ourselves that in compassion, as for all Brahmavihāra practice, we always try to make things as easy as possible for ourselves. Look for the route of least resistance in the heavenly direction and be prepared to experiment. For example, it often helps to switch back to *mettā* regularly and think of the person in happier circumstances. Or try putting a hand on your heart to steady yourself.

I often prefer to work on compassion while walking rather than sitting and when the going gets tough it often helps to look around, not at people but at surfaces and furniture and to touch surfaces as I pass them by. This practice, remember, deliberately brings suffering to mind. So it can bring up deep fear. Looking at surfaces and touching them helps reassure me of the basic goodness of the world.

If the emotions become overpowering, then I take a Vipassanā break, acknowledging the emotion without any attempt to generate goodwill.

Finally, let's look for a moment at how we practice compassion in daily life. Any effort to alleviate suffering is also a practice of compassion. For example, feeding the birds, looking after a sick friend, contributing to good causes, campaigning for human or animal rights, safeguarding the environment. If we have hurt someone, we could apologise and see if there's any way to make reparation. To practice self-compassion, we could make time for an activity we enjoy like swimming, yoga or music.

The near and far enemies will also surface in daily life. The attempt to engage with vulnerable people may show us how callously we feel towards them, how easily we get exasperated by their limitations. As in meditation, acknowledge and continue. Remember, the opening of the heart naturally brings up these defence mechanisms. The experience of callousness could indeed be welcomed as a sign we are moving beyond our comfort zone.

At the other extreme we might be fussing anxiously about them. Here we need to restrain ourselves and if we feel overwhelmed by the situation we need to extend compassion inwardly. This may mean simply wishing ourselves well or we could reinforce the wish with a caring gesture.

May we find ways to comfort and encourage ourselves through every obstacle as we develop true compassion.

Equanimity — Foundation of All Virtue

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 48 min

In this exploration of equanimity (upekkhā), Bhante Bodhidhamma reveals why this quality holds the highest rating among Buddhist virtues. Drawing on teachings about the seven factors of awakening and paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination), he examines equanimity's dual nature: the intellectual aspect of holding views lightly as perspectives rather than absolute truths, and the emotional dimension of releasing our grip on beliefs that define our identity.

Bhante illustrates how our attachment to opinions—whether religious, political, or philosophical—creates the three factors of wrong understanding: diṭṭhi (wrong view), upādāna (emotional grip), and māna (self-identification). This process keeps us trapped in cycles of rebirth through the dependent origination sequence, from avijjā (ignorance) through taṇhā (craving) to bhava (becoming).

The talk offers practical guidance for developing equanimity through meditation and daily life practices, including the transformative power of simply stopping throughout the day. Bhante emphasizes how this foundation of non-attachment enables clear seeing of the three characteristics and supports the cultivation of the pāramī (qualities leading to liberation). Essential listening for understanding how equanimity underpins all spiritual development in the Theravāda path.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa —
Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

This evening I was just going to let my mind wander around the factors of enlightenment and dependent origination, just see where we go. One of the things I've been stressing this week, in fact I tend to be stressing it a lot, is this quality of equanimity.

And it seems to me that equanimity is twofold. Its rating in Buddhist virtues is the highest. There's a lovely book called *Vision of the Dhamma* by Ñāṇapōṇika. He was a German monk. He's died now. And he points out that equanimity lies beneath any virtue and therefore is of enormous importance to develop it.

And this equanimity has, as I say, two strands. It's both intellectual and attitudinal, which of course engages our emotions. In the Buddha's understanding, when we hold onto a view or an opinion, there are three factors involved: māna and diṭṭhi and taṇhā.

Diṭṭhi is the word for wrong understanding and taṇhā is the emotional grip that we have upon our opinion and māna is the self or the identity we have with a particular philosophy or idea.

So now you can see this not only in religious circles with fanatics and fundamentalists, but you see it just in political life. So people identify with their opinion, with their understanding, and they label it the truth. I'm right, everybody else is wrong. Perfectly obvious to me. I can't understand how other people can't understand that I'm perfectly right and everybody else is wrong. And in the early discourses the Buddha is constantly telling his monks and nuns not to get involved in these debates which are not about determining what is truth but about who wins. And he says if you lose you go away feeling ashamed and hurt. And if you win you're full of pride and absolutely more sure that I'm right and everybody else is wrong.

So there's an intellectual level to this equanimity. The emotional level is that pain that we have when, as the Buddha points out, we're worsted in an argument. And the holding onto our belief systems. And that's all entwined around the sense of who I am. So I am a socialist, I vote Labour, I'm a conservative — all these I am. And what it does, of course, it just creates opposition. Just talking on political lines, the fact that people align themselves to a party line means that you've always got this conflict going on and all the silliness of politics.

If people, if politicians were to think of their opinions, their views, their beliefs more in terms of a perspective, you'd have a very different politics, because a perspective presumes that there are other perspectives. And if you take politics to be a circle moving from left to right or right to left, then you can see if it's a circle, you're a dot on this circle looking at the object within — whatever the problem is. And if you see it as a perspective, you're very open to see what the person on the opposite side of the circle actually sees. And in this way, at least, we can formulate a more correct truth, perhaps, although you've always got to watch the majority, haven't you? I think it was Gandhi who said, "Truth can be in a minority of one." When he was saying, don't trust the majority. It's a sort of atrophying brain. Truth can be in a minority of one, that's what he said.

So within ourselves, we have all these opinions, all these understandings that we've maybe never questioned. We've just believed that this is the way it is. You might be an eternalist. You might have been brought up in a religion and felt that you've been in contact with God and you're just an eternalist and you believe there is a very caring creator who looks after us. On the other hand, you might have been brought up in a more secular scientific society in which everything can be reduced to atoms and subatomic particles. The human being is just neurons and stuff like that. And because

you've settled into that view and we define ourselves by that view, everything we see is from that standpoint. And to shake it, to actually change that view, is extraordinarily difficult for us. At least as a conscious activity.

I mean, people say I was brought up a Catholic and people say being brought up in something like Catholicism is a real awful indoctrination and you end up completely cramped. I dare say some people do. But I'm always surprised that I woke up one morning — I was, I think, 21 or 22 — and I said to myself, I won't go to Mass this Sunday and see what happens. Now in those days, not to go to Mass was mortal sin. If you happened to die on Sunday, or on Monday morning, not having gone to Mass purposefully, well you were in for hellfire. It was an awful punishment for missing Mass. And they've repealed all that now, thank heavens.

But I remember not going and then afterwards saying to myself, well, nothing happened. I broke through this mythical idea that if I didn't go to Mass, something really horrible would happen. And nothing happened. And from that moment on, I never went back. Never stepped into another church for years and years. I mean, I went in afterwards for various reasons. But I never went back. And the year was 1968.

Now, 1968 was a core year. There was a lovely film, a Canadian film. I can't remember the name of it. I've been racking my brains for it — in which it's the story of a man who, round about 60 odd, this was made a few years ago, who is dying of cancer. And his family — really it's a film about him dying of cancer, basically. But at one point, his son has come back with his girlfriend, he's working the stock markets in London, and the girlfriend is an art dealer. And she gets invited by this priest to come and see all these artifacts. And when she walks into the room, it's all those dreadful plaster statues that used to be all over Catholic churches and stuff. As art, I mean. As religious objects, of course, they work. And he wants to know how much she might consider their worth. And she looks at him and rather sadly says, I'm afraid you might get an individual collector who's interested, but artistically they're of no value whatsoever.

And then he muses. He says it began in 1968 — that the church just emptied. And that was the year of the French Revolution in Paris, the great uprising, students' uprising. So that's just a little aside but to say that in my case it was an easy letting go of old philosophies, but then it was in the atmosphere of the time.

And I think for most people it's quite the opposite. They take on quite rigid opinions, rigid views, and they find anybody else's views as simply wrong. I mean, I have somebody I know who simply calls all religions apart from Christianity man-made. The only one that's God-made is Christianity. It's a bit damning, but there we are. But he doesn't feel negative or anything. It's like, well, this is the real one, and the rest is made up.

So all these different opinions, when you think about them, when you think of the awesome wars — I mean, the last century, of course, was really the effect of ideologies, which is exactly that. They're an opinion which have been lifted to the point of belief, and to which people adhere, both emotionally and intellectually. There's an intellectual backing for it. And before you know it, you've got catastrophe on your hands. And that's still going on with these Islamists and people like that who just can't let go of their vision. It's "I am. I am."

Now, what equanimity is asking us to do is disidentify. It's to see that that is a perspective. It's not a case of it's wrong or right. It's just a perspective. And no human being can hold the whole truth. It's as simple as that. And therefore there has to be some conversation, some communication.

The Buddha himself, having come to his realization, never went around shouting, "I am the enlightened one." Actually, there's a cute little story around that which some of you might know. He was on his way to meet his five old companions. And an ascetic saw him and was taken aback by how he looked, by the radiance of him. And he said to him, "Oh, venerable, you look quite radiant. Who is your teacher?" And the Buddha goes into this enormous panegyric about, "I am the fully enlightened one. I am the one who knows," and on and on. And this ascetic said, "Oh, there you go, yes," and then walked off.

And I think it's funny how that little story — which is funny — I mean, how he must have woken up to that's not quite the way to teach, to establish oneself as an ex-cosmic leader. And you do get this feeling that he had to learn how to teach. These things don't come with awakening. These are just skills which you have to teach yourself.

So that his doctrine, if you read the scriptures, the early level of the scriptures, you can see he's very spontaneous replies to people. It's not really a fixed doctrine. The idea is there, it's all there, but it's not into four of these, ten of those, one of these and all that stuff that comes later — the formulation of his doctrine into the four noble truths and things like that.

But his normal ploy when somebody came to him and said, "What's your teaching on kamma or what's this or what's that?" — he always asked, "What's yours?" He would ask them to speak their understanding. And then he would discuss their understanding with them. And of course the scriptures only record those understandings that didn't accord with his teachings. Otherwise it was very good, come and join me. It was no problem. But those who disagreed, he would then argue his point. And most would then be able to let go of their hard opinion — their stance of "I'm right, you're wrong." And in

so doing, he would then lay out his own doctrine, which they would take up. Not always — some didn't take it up. There are cases where he argues the point with somebody, but they're not convinced, and off they go.

So there's that whole business about entering into the meditation, entering into this experience from a position of don't know or not sure. And that's always a bit frightening for us because we've always coming from a stable base about "I know." But unfortunately those concepts, those ideas, those opinions — even when they're right — become undermine your meditation one expects.

Now, if one has an idea, shall we say, of *nibbāna*, so you've read the books and you've got some idea of it, so one begins to meditate with the idea of achieving *nibbāna*. Now, the problem with expectation is that if you do achieve it because it's simply an expression of a concept, you'll be absolutely deluded. And if you don't achieve it, you're deeply disappointed. It's like whenever we're chasing a concept, it necessarily cramps the direct experience, it gets in the way.

So we can see this in very simple things like looking at flowers. You'll pass a shop and you'll see a flower that you recognize — roses. And as far as we're concerned, in a sense, we've experienced that rose or that bunch of roses. We tend to be satisfied with that. There's something in it that says, "Oh yeah, that's roses. That's a green finch. I know a green finch." And it stops us looking at the rose, at the green finch, as an individual phenomena. And when you look at something and keep looking at it — and I hope you've been experiencing this a bit — and you lose that definition of what it is, suddenly the object brightens up as it were. It takes on certain qualities that coming at it from a perception has been gently pushed aside by the mind.

And we do it with people. We do it most obviously when we fall in love. When you fall in love and there's this wonderful romantic tune going on, one sees only the beauty of the other. One cannot see the cracks. It's not possible. Three, six months at best, nine months down the line, things begin to go off. And well, then we may find a deep relationship or we may not, but the fact is that that romantic aura, that lovely surround that we put onto a person, is in itself deluded. It's two hearts meeting, isn't it? Two persons meeting at that lovely level.

So this idea of coming from a particular position of knowing, any form of knowing, must necessarily cramp the experience we're having. We're not fully open to it. And one of the benefits of noting is to make that label obvious to us. So when you note you can see exactly what — it's like a recognition of what it is. But that's always a halfway house. The point of it is to then allow that word, as it were, to recede as our attention

grows upon the object. Until hopefully, occasionally, perhaps today, some of you have experienced just that still gaze upon something. A total absorption into the object, even if it's only for a small time.

Now, when we let go of something, when we start letting go of definitions and of treasured opinions and all that, the heart revolts. It doesn't feel safe, it doesn't feel safe at all. And that's the fear, which is based on this definition of who I am.

So, it may be that somebody who's a theist, who believes in a personal God, coming to opening up to the fact there may not be one, is horrific. I mean, think about it. If all your life you've believed that there's this wonderful loving being who's going to greet you upon death and you open up to the possibility that there might not be one, well, it's pretty awful, isn't it? Much in the same way that somebody who had already settled into a nihilistic point of view, an annihilationist point of view, meaning that upon death everything goes away — the idea that in fact they might reappear in a farm shed as a cow is something horrific. I mean, of all things. Possibility is stunning.

So how can we approach the Dhamma, and we're talking here about the Buddha's Dhamma, how can we approach the Dhamma in that very open-hearted, open-minded way? That's our big problem.

So when we begin to sit and we're beginning to investigate these three characteristics, it's good just before you begin to say, well just for this time being I'll put aside — that's easy, isn't it? I'll get rid of and I'll change everything — I'll just put aside my understandings for a while and just see if in fact what the Buddha is talking about is true. That at least opens us up to the possibility of experiencing things. Even when we experience things directly sometimes they may be wrong. I mean, every day we experience directly perceptually the sun rising and then falling. Now we know, or at least I believe, that it is us going around the sun. I've no proof for that. My proof is that the sun rises and the sun sets and it's definitely going around us.

So at the perceptual level, it doesn't mean that just because we perceive something, therefore it's right. And in much the same case with meditation, just because we perceive something at once, doesn't mean that's the end of it. One has to keep on until one is absolutely sure that, yes indeed, everything, everything arises and passes away. That everything that I'm experiencing does not constitute anything permanent, substantial, a self. You have to keep seeing it, keep seeing it until you're sure of it.

Is all desire to be banished? What sorts of desire are allowable? What sorts of desire do lead on to liberation and what sorts of desires don't? All these things are left up to us to discover ourselves. Nobody can put that in you.

There's that very too often quoted statement that the Buddhas only point the way. That's all they can do. They can only say, look, there's the door. For us to actually go through it.

So this whole investigation is always coming from a point of not sure. Even when we've experienced something which we feel is absolutely right, it's only when we have repeated that experience often enough—it's like the scientific method in that sense—do we then become pretty sure about where truth or where liberation lies.

All this week we've been looking at pleasure around food, so we might have experienced a few things during that time. We might have experienced how the body and mind fire off each other—pleasant taste, pleasant mind, pleasant heart. We might see that process of desire, we might know that some of it is to do with appetite, some to do with greed and what not. And we may have experienced just letting go of greed—greed in that very wider sense of seeking happiness in sensual pleasure, confusing sensual joy with real happiness. That's where the problem lies. And we might have seen it in the way the mind constantly seeks distraction.

But really, even though we see it, even though we see it and we might be fairly clear, the fact is that unless it begins to move into behaviour, we haven't really seen it. Often you'll get these stories of people who've had catastrophic happenings which have changed their lives, and that tells us that often that's what it takes for us to wake up.

You get people who've had near-death experiences whose lives have been completely changed around. People who've been shamed in public. I was just reading somewhere along the line about the old Profumo case, way back in the 50s, I think it was, or 60s, where there was a scandal around prostitutes and this minister of the government under Heath. And he became then the head of some big charity and he spent the rest of his life guiding this charity and seemingly very good at it. So often for a real change of behaviour it takes quite a thump, and that shows us that oh yeah, we've seen it but we're not going to change.

Perhaps a more obvious example is people who smoke. I mean, they've seen pictures of it, they cough, all the signs are there that they might have a heart attack, they might have cancer, but it's only when you get a heart attack that they say, oh, I'd better stop now. I have a case in point of a friend's father who smoked all his life, had a heart attack, and just stopped, ba-boom, like that. He had a good constitution, went on to live quite a lot into old age.

And the Buddha puts it rather nicely when he says, some people wake up when even upon the hearing of the word death. Some people wake up when somebody famous dies, somebody whom they've had some sort of relationship with through TV or something. Other people don't wake up until somebody close dies. And then there are those unfortunate who don't wake up until it's their time to die. It's a bit late, isn't it? "What's my life about? Well, I've got about six weeks." It's not very helpful, is it? So at least we're a bit ahead of that one. Coming here to do this meditation is asking that question—what's my life about?

So this equanimity, you can see, first of all puts down the conceptual world. This conceptual world, remember, contains all our history, all our experience is entwined in words. So if you say apple, when you see an apple, when you take an apple, for instance, at lunch, you're not taking that apple, you're taking every apple that you've ever eaten. That's what you're taking there with that apple because you presume this apple will be the one that you want to taste. If it tastes too bitter or too soft, well, it's not an apple, is it? "This isn't an apple. It doesn't fit into my definition of apple."

So all that has to go away, you see. All that has to be put aside. And the purpose of the noting is to make that obvious to us by the singularity of a single word and then to be able to put the word aside by attending entirely to the feel of the experience.

And then there's the emotional bit, which is our prejudice. We get emotionally involved in our understanding and the way things are. On one retreat, you see, a guy came who was a scientist at Oxford, studying, if I remember rightly, PhD or something, and he'd had some idea of meditation. The gist of it was, I think, that he thought it would just calm him and it would help him in his studies. And when he came on this retreat like this, you see, he came across belief systems that he just couldn't handle. And after about a day or so, he said to me, "I just can't handle all this business about the body and mind and stuff." So off he went another time again.

So he wasn't at all open to the experience that he might have got through *vipassanā* which may have changed his opinion, you see. And that's where you get the scare tactic, that's where you get the scared, the scare coming up. Of course it's blocked. It's blocked by "I'm right, everybody else is wrong. What do I need to investigate for? What do I need to investigate this for? I'm perfectly right and you're perfectly wrong, full stop."

So putting all that aside, you can see, is the basis of very clear investigation, isn't it? Even in science we're not only talking here about spiritual practice, but scientists have to do that as well. They don't have to come from a creed. There was that dreadful case

in Russia, wasn't there, of that agriculturalist, the guy who created all the famines. I can't remember his name. And of course the reason why Stalin liked him was because it fitted into communist ideology and all that, because it created huge famines.

So even the scientist, anybody investigating anything has to come in with that sort of clean slate. A judge—what do we expect of judges? We don't expect them to have pre-conceived ideas of the case. We don't expect them to be politically motivated, and they were at one time, weren't they? The 18th century was full of judges who just did it for political reasons. They hanged you because they didn't like you. We don't expect them to be judging from a position of fear, a fear of favour. We don't expect them to be prejudiced. All these things we expect of a judge because the judge has to be equanimous. He has to be in this position of non-involvement, detachment from the case.

So you can see that equanimity is the ground of our practice. And whenever we begin a meditation session, to actually start by establishing that—the calmness of the heart, stillness of the mind, and just a moment of letting go, and then that curiosity to determine whether we can see things as they really are, not as I would want them to be.

And to do that we need faith. So faith here isn't the belief. That's very corrupt. Faith is more trust. We have to trust. Now, it's not only trusting in the Dharma, in the teaching of the Buddha. We must trust ourselves. We must trust ourselves that investigation of truth will actually bring liberation. To see ourselves as we really are will bring at least liberation from delusion.

I mean, when the Buddha went and sat under that tree, he had to let go of everything that he'd learnt because none of it—I mean he'd tried everything as best he could and none of it had led him anywhere. So he was ready, as it were, to let go. He was ready, as it were, to restart the investigation. And all this is undermining this dependent origination.

So in dependent origination we begin from the point of view of delusion, ignorance, not knowing. And what this creates is a wrong relationship with the world. So that's when we say *avijjā-paccaya saṅkhārā*—dependent upon this not knowing, upon a mistake, we create these conditionings. We create our conditionings. And the purpose is to make us feel safe, to make us feel happy. That's what you want to be, isn't it? You want to be safe and you want to be happy.

And through the next section where the Buddha points out the body and mind through the six senses and through contact, which is a given—we're dependent on this body for our relationship to the world—we express those delusions, we express those misunderstandings. And those misunderstandings develop into certain conditionings

within us which manifest as relationship. So when we see food, as we say, there is that greed for food. You see, it comes up as a pleasant feeling, comes up as a pleasant feeling. So that's a condition that's arisen from past behaviour.

So that's the given. Then we have this reaction of wanting and not wanting. And it's at this point that this original delusion manifests. That's why the Buddha points to this desire business. It manifests there as desire. And it's knowing that desire for what it is and being able to sit with it and not run with it, not just give in to it, which is the process of drawing out or releasing or allowing that conditioning which has been built up from the past to die away. So that's the drainage point of the whole process of delusion, of creating this constant delusion.

If we miss that point, the next point is this *upādāna*, this grasping. That's when the I comes in—"I want." And once that's happened it's very difficult to stop the next process, which is the empowerment of that wanting, and that's the becoming, that's the *bhava*. So we see the object strikes us, it comes to us, and we have the relationship come up, very pleasant. So it starts off with just that contact, very pleasant, very nice, want, "I want," "I get." That's the psychological process. In our language we think the I comes first, but actually the I comes quite late in that process, and that's why we can step in. Because once there's the identity it's very difficult to stop yourself doing something.

So it's catching the wanting at this emotional level, at that sort of power level of wanting, that allows us to have that wisdom to see it as something which is unwholesome for us, not skillful, not virtuous. Virtue here meaning that which does us good. If it's not doing us good, then it's not virtuous. And then we have to create the will to let go of it, to endure, to be with that craving until it passes away.

So while we're practising this, remember, the other side of the spiritual life is being exercised. And we call that the *pāramī*, translated as the perfections, which isn't quite right. *Pāramī* just means those things that lead you to the other shore. One of the ways that the Buddha often talked about *Nibbāna* was the other shore. So you have to swim across to get to the other shore. And that effort to get to the other shore is the path. So these *pāramī*, one of which is this determination that I put on the door there—to make a determined determination is one of those things that we have to develop.

Perfection gives you the idea that you get to a point where you don't have to develop it anymore. Well, in a sense, that's not quite right. It's more in the sense that it has to be continuously developed. Patience, constancy, determination—all these are qualities that we get naturally from this process.

Now, that business of *bhava*, that business of becoming, that's what the Buddha means by rebirth. Indeed there's this process of rebirth when we die, but that has to be—unless you yourself have had a past life experience or something—that will always have to be in some sort of belief system somewhere which you may or may not believe. But that's not kernel to the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha's teaching is that right here and now we keep rebirthing into this self, a new self every time we make a decision. The self has moved, the self has become another self.

So take for instance, say these days one might find oneself unemployed. So before one was working in an office and now you're working in a chip shop. So you've rebirthed. You've moved out of an office into a chip shop. It's probably a better move. Probably a very good move.

So this business of rebirthing applies to the self. And there are many times we're not rebirthing. The most obvious one is when we're asleep—that's not a process of rebirth. We're not rebirthing in that sense of a self becoming all the time. Sometimes we are not rebirthing the self when we're acting from the pure heart of generosity, of compassion and love. That's not rebirth in the Buddhist sense of rebirthing the self. So when he became enlightened, he had stopped rebirthing.

See? I mean, it says in that little phrase that we chant in the morning, that "I've seen the house builder." This is what he says: "I've seen the house builder, I've broken the rafters, I've smashed the house, there's no more rebirthing, there's no more going on for me. Painful has been this rebirthing." Now, traditionally, that's life to life, life to life. But spiritually speaking, that's every time we become a self. We're rebirthing into some sort of suffering.

And the worst of the sufferings is when we think we're happy. That's the worst because when your happiness is dependent on something which is transient, then you're looking at some form of suffering because of it. And what this practice is making us do is find a deeper sense of happiness which is not dependent on whether something is pleasant or not.

And we know that we're experiencing that when we begin to experience contentment. Contentment is probably the greatest of all virtues that comes with this process of liberation from happiness which is dependent on the world. So one is content with the way things are. This is the way it is. That doesn't mean to say you don't change something or try to better something, but it's coming from the position of contentment, not from the position of more.

This word "more" in our culture is a noun, isn't it? It's not an adjective. "I want more sugar" or "I want more this"—"I just want more." Full stop.

So the virtue of equanimity is something that we need to develop constantly, and we do that by stopping. All the time—I'm not just talking here in a retreat, but all day long. There's a fairly renowned teacher called Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese teacher who lives in France. He has a centre in France. And I went to see his monastery, I went to stay there for a couple of days. And he had instituted this idea that somebody had a bell, and every time the bell rang, you stopped. It didn't matter what you did.

And the phone as well. When the phone rang, you didn't lurch at it as if your life depended on it. One waited, you see, for three rings. You had to wait for three rings. That's something I took on. I always wait for three rings. Most people will wait three rings, haven't they? Just to give you enough time to grab hold of the phone. But I find that, for instance, a really helpful little trick, little tricks like that.

I have my stopwatch on, my watch, every 40 minutes. It varies really, but 40 minutes tends to be. When that watch, beep, beep, beep, I just know where I am, and I just stop. And when you stop, you see, you can catch what it is that you've been gathering.

Very early on in my experience, in my meditation experience, I woke up with a dream. And the dream was me running, running, running, running, running. And behind me was this huge avalanche of darts and spears heading for me. I was running, running, running. And I stopped. And these things just went into my back. And that's what meditation is, you see. You stop. And everything you've accumulated just comes straight at you. And so you know this is what I'm running from.

So there you are at work, and the break comes, and instead of just going in and carrying on that energy into the cup of tea and into the chat and all that sort of stuff, just to sit quietly somewhere. Just to let things subside and just see what it is that's been mounting behind your back—a little bit of anxiety, a bit of irritation, all that sort of stuff—and just wait for it to subside. You've only got to wait for it. You don't have to be there for hours. And then the next thing to be done, then you can join the party.

Same when you come home that night after work—just to find a little bit of space. It doesn't take long. Five, ten minutes. I mean, if you can make forty minutes, it's all good and proper, but even ten minutes just to sit quietly and just see what accumulations have come through the day, just to let them go. Well, it opens up the evening for you, you see.

So this business of stopping, I think, is probably the most skillful way to bring that sense of equanimity into your lives. And remember that from that equanimous base you just see things more clearly. There's just greater clarity because you're not running with an attitude, you're not running with an emotion, you're not running with a thought. So this has a direct effect on our lives if you just bring that little practice into it.

And you can use this little standing exercise that we do at the beginning, where just for a minute you just fall into that. When the stuff has come through and you've let it drop for a little while, you can then just open up into that pure awareness of things around you—achieving nothing, going nowhere, being nobody—just for a moment. And somebody shouts, "Hey, what are you doing? Get on with it!"

So all these things that we're doing here, you see, you can take in some way or other into your daily life, and that's how the practice begins to saturate your life and hopefully turns it for the better.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Eroticism, Romance, Love, Distraction and Boredom

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 47 min

In this dharma talk on the hindrances, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines what he calls 'deliciousness' - particularly the erotic, romantic love, and attachment. He distinguishes between the natural beauty of these experiences and our unskillful relationship to them through lust and clinging. Drawing on the Buddha's own journey from sensual indulgence to awakening, Bhante explains how these pleasant experiences can mask underlying grief, loneliness, and anxiety. He offers practical guidance for meditators on working skillfully with sexual thoughts through noting practice and the contemplation of the body's true nature. The talk explores the difference between romantic feelings and genuine love, discusses the spiritual potential within relationships following the traditional brahminical life stages, and addresses the role of celibacy on the path. Bhante also examines attachment to loved ones - family, friends, and even animals - explaining how attachment differs from true love (mettā) by making others into objects for our happiness. The session concludes with guidance on working with distraction and boredom in meditation, emphasizing that these hindrances arise when we seek happiness in temporary phenomena rather than cultivating inner stillness and wisdom.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasah Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasah Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasah Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

So I wanted to just continue for another session the hindrances, just to go into perhaps a little bit more detail. And this evening I wanted to investigate deliciousness. And the two areas, the three areas, that you can look at particularly is the erotic, the romantic and love.

I call it the erotic, not lust. Lust is our relationship to the erotic. The erotic and the romantic are just part and parcel of the loveliness of our lives, occasionally. And the erotic, just to think about that for a minute. So that's really to do with some sort of physical attraction towards another person. And it only happens between certain people. You don't feel normally erotic to everybody you meet. It would be exhausting. So there's that case of something very particular and... As you know, it's said that, gen-

erally speaking, if you abstract, if you separate out the erotic from the romantic from love, then it becomes a bit like eating. And in itself, it's a sort of empty experience. It loses meaning when you just do it by itself.

Whenever I say this, I'm always reminded of Woody Allen's little crack, where he said... Just sex is an empty experience. But as empty experiences go.

So, as usual, when you look at anything which is delightful, it's either because we like it, quite obviously, we like to indulge in it, it brings, as it were, immediate sense of happiness. That's the point. It brings happiness. The whole point about the erotic, the romantic, and love in the general sense, not the true *mettā*, I mean love as attachment, is that it brings joy. It brings joy to the heart. It's a lovely experience.

But the other side of it is, as usual, that we may also be using it to escape something. That's the point. So that we are seeking entertainment to escape something that we don't like. So things like such a very obvious and loud sensual experience, such as sex, is something that you can get lost in and forget the worries of your life.

So there's always this duality with anything that we enjoy in terms of the self, in terms of how we relate to it. Part of it is just sheer indulgence. We like it. And it creates a lovely feeling in the heart. And the other side is that we may be running away from something.

So once we have that clear in mind, with anything that we indulge in, in those two parts, then as it were, as you watch that indulgence, as it fades away, don't be surprised that underneath it there lies maybe grief, anxiety, anything that you're pushing away. So that these pleasant things can be used to suppress just as anything else. So we talked about sleep, as a lovely way to suppress things. So here, anything which is enjoyable can be used just to push it away, just gently push it away, to ignore it, for it not to be there.

And because the sexual energy is so related to life, to the life force, any time that death appears or anything like that, there's a great desire to run that way and to reinforce the fact that there is life. Interestingly enough, I picked up a quote from William Blake. The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. You see?

So remember that in the Buddha's life, we saw how all that loveliness that he was experiencing with his dancing girls and all that sort of stuff, and presumably his drinking, and the good time, having a good time, that in the end, it's like squeezing blood from a stone. Like it loses its buzz, basically. And there comes that weariness with it. And remember we, and I'll mention again towards the end, there is a distinction to be made between weariness and boredom. Weariness is that coming to the end of seeking happi-

ness in that place. Boredom is just that you're fed up with it for a while you need a break you need a fast you need a diet and then you can get back to it again refreshed so boredom is just as we say coming from overindulgence and then but then you still want to get back to it once the hunger for it arises.

So in our meditation, of course, it can be, if you don't watch it, these thoughts around lust can be really obsessive. And we have to be extraordinarily patient with that and just keep coming off them and back into the body and just feel the excitement, feel what's actually happening there.

And that business of really acknowledging what's going on, you see, sometimes you might think, well, we're too old for this, we shouldn't be thinking these things. But you're never too old. I think it was Pope John XXIII. I just remember a quote from him where he said the loveliness of being, I think he was 85 or something, was that the flesh had finally quietened. So you can expect to be harassed by this sort of thing until who knows when.

So it's a case of being very quick with that because remember that when a thought arises and carries on, there's some force behind it which the Buddha called *cetanā*. And that force, remember, is not the intention. Force is just a force. It's just an energy form. It's the same as when you throw a stone up into the air. As far as I know, they still don't quite know what it is. That makes the stone keep going. But we call it force.

So there is something which takes... That which is a thought in the head, just an idea, a wish, a desire, an intention. See, that's why we're also being very careful to note intentions and it suddenly flips and you're away. It's gone. You're either doing something or you're thinking something or you're saying something. And remember, at that point, it's become an action. That's a *kamma*. And therefore, you are reinforcing your conditioning.

So here, if we're not very quick with these delicious thoughts, then they just run away and you've had it. And then it takes a time, you see, then it takes time because you've re-empowered that.

A good metaphor for that are people who suffer from drink problems, alcoholics. They can be off for so long and then maybe just out of weakness or a little bit of hubris, a little bit of pride, thinking they're now above it. And it's just that one drink and off they go. Because it's re-empowering an old habit. Of course, in that case, there's a physical element, but it's the same with smoking. Even though there's a physical element too

that people can be off smoking for a long time. And then just when they feel a bit down or when they're in the wrong company, they just take that one cigarette and then they're surprised how difficult it is, how suddenly that whole engine is restarted.

So if you see these thoughts coming up, to be very quick with them and come back and just think about what that thought is doing and bring yourself back to the body.

Now, there is an exercise that you can do, which we did partly, for those of you who were here for my New Age Healing session. And there you actually take the image that you've got towards which you find erotic, you see. So it's not lust yet, it's only lust when you indulge it. So as soon as you see an image which is erotic, to actually begin to take the skin off. Look at the parts, just see that in fact, you know, we say beauty is only skin deep. And when you do that, then if you do it to parts which naturally raise a sense of disgust, you don't have to make yourself vomit, you understand. When you just raise that little bit of disgust then you'll see the mind balances itself and what we're trying to do with that exercise is to get the mind to be conditioned so that as soon as a lustful thought comes up the mind itself will change it for you you can make that a habit in the mind to do that.

And by doing that, you're undermining that process of spinning off onto these thoughts. If you end up being disgusted all the time, then you have to stop it. Because that's not the point. The point isn't to end up with disgust for the human body. It's just a little trick that we can play to make the mind flip, you see. And, I mean, I've practiced this myself, and it definitely works, I can assure you of that.

And you have to be slightly careful with it too because you can be slightly unwittingly you can be suppressing see that's another point that we have to be careful of all we're thinking about is thoughts and then we have to get down to the root feeling which is that desire to be at that place which gives us so much pleasure so you have to be quite careful with the old suppression which we know from Freud becomes twisted and ends up in all sorts of peculiar behaviour.

So the thing is that what we want to do with sexual energy, or what we want to do in terms of the spiritual life, is to withdraw the unnecessary energy that we ought to have around sex. And there's a word that, I don't know, you never hear it these days. It's got a bad name because I think it was confused with suppression. And that word is sublimation, to sublimate. In science, I looked it up, I don't know anything about science. In science, it means when a solid evaporates immediately into air, into a gas. There's a special word, sublimate.

And to sublimate means, in terms of your energy, is to divert unskillful impulses or unskillful desires into something which is skillful. So if we have an image of the way the mind works as just an energy system which coagulates, forms a tightness around a particular idea and spins around it like a whirlwind, and that's all we're talking about. We just talk about energy. And if I can draw that energy away, as it were, to something which, shall we say, is more useful or even expresses that in a sublimated form, then what I get is poetry, art, music. I don't have to go that way. I can draw that energy away and put it into some loving energy, some compassionate energy.

Now, you just have to be slightly careful with that because you've also got to acknowledge that whirlwind. So if you don't acknowledge the whirlwind, then you think you might be putting your thoughts in better places, but you're not acknowledging this turbulence. So that turbulence remains. So you have to acknowledge the turbulence, feel the turbulence, and then cajole yourself to draw the energy into something which is more skillful. And there's that transformation going on.

Now this of course became the root understanding of Tantra. That's all that Tantra is. It's just the transformation of that energy. It's just that understanding that all you're playing around with is some sort of energy force and that therefore through certain imagery and even through certain actions you can sublimate it, you can draw it out and take away that habit and what we want to do is get rid of that obsessiveness around these things.

I'm sure you all know that, if lust gets hold of us in a meditation retreat, it's got a tight hold, so you have to be very sharp on that. And remember that it can be an escape from something, a usual escape from anxiety, from loneliness, from all sorts of things.

And romance, that delicious feeling that we get when we fall in love with somebody. And the dreams and the books written, my goodness, and the films, I mean, it's just never ending. It's always the same plot, which is really annoying. It's always, but somehow, we still wring juice out of it. It doesn't matter how many romantic films people see, they love them. So it's that sheer deliciousness, isn't it, of being in love with somebody?

And again, I'm talking now about being in a meditation retreat, when the mind is wandering that day and it's fantasizing about, some enchanted evening. And you're out there on, oh my good, with old Frank Sinatra in the background. And you've got, and you have to see that immediately and go into it, you see. Now there'll be that deliciousness there because of the memory of the wanting to be at that place in that special way with another person. I mean, it is pure deliciousness. I can't think of anything more

delicious myself. Apart from maybe the *jhānas* and that's why you have to be slightly careful so remember that again there's always these two things it's delicious, we like to indulge in but it's also an escape it may be an escape, it doesn't have to be an escape.

May be an escape so when we're sitting here and we're beginning to be assailed by these romantic feelings and romantic dreams and you come back and you allow that feeling remember remember that feeling emotions all these things are all seeking metaphor. They're all seeking metaphor. They're all seeking a way in which to express themselves.

But when you just note romance, falling in love, and you note that and you turn away into the body and you feel the delicious feelings, as they begin to dissipate, don't be surprised if underneath it what you come across is a deep loneliness. Because that's what we're running from.

So it's a case of remembering that so that when the loneliness comes up then there should be this little aha that's why I'm so obsessive about these romantic films and stuff it's because of this loneliness and of course you have to go into the loneliness you have to let the loneliness express itself.

You know, you are unlovable, nobody loves you, you're alone in this world, kill yourself. So you have to stay within those awful feelings, don't get caught up in those words. And then again, don't be surprised that as you sink into that loneliness, allow it, allow it to express itself and let it dissipate. Suddenly you're just sitting there in this really lovely state of solitude. You see, just being at one with oneself.

It's a sense of lack, isn't it? There's a writer called David Loy. He can be a bit heavy because he's a very good philosopher. He's American. Works in Japan. And if you haven't come across his books, do look him up, David Loy. And he likes this word lack for *dukkha*. Not suffering, not unsatisfactoriness, but lack. There's a lack there. And when you think about it, that's just another way of saying desire, a wanting for something.

And remember that the self is an empty thing. Not empty in the old Mahayana, the great emptiness. Emptiness ends up, there's nothing there. It's got to fill itself with something. Sex, drugs and rock and roll.

So, again, it's a case of being very clear about what's happening there, and to stop the mind. When I say stop the mind, you have to be careful not to back these things away. You're not trying to destroy the mind, you're not trying to kill it, you just note it. Now, as

soon as you note what's going on, that which has been going on, the thought, the romance, it has to stop, because you can't think two thoughts at the same time. It's as simple as that.

So if you keep saying, romance, romance, as soon as you've said that, the romance is gone. So what that means is that we've stopped with that noting, the acknowledgement, we've stopped the escape of this emotional energy from slipping up into these higher faculties to create this imaginary world, a virtual reality. That's what it is, eh? And if you get lost in that, then of course you tend to throw it out into the world.

So by coming off those very patiently, just know that you come back into the heart and you just feel, feel what's going on there. And don't be surprised if suddenly, as it dissipates, some rather nasty feeling turns on. And of course, as those nasty feelings disappear, then there's nothing impelling this search for escape, happiness in romance and all these things, and therefore the obsessiveness begins to grow.

And remember, as I keep saying, that all the energy we have, nothing is lost in this process. It is actually being slowly transformed. And all these things are transformed into love, compassion, joy, or peace. That's what we're doing.

Now, you know, whenever I talk about this, especially as a monk, everybody thinks, well, you know, he's just a monk. He's against the erotic and the romantic. He's taken about celibacy, so he's bitter. But it's not true. And if you think about the ordinary passage, I personally like the Brahminical path, because I think it's a bit, as usual, a bit male-dominated, but it is the way that you can see how the relationship between two people can lead to ultimate renunciation and then finally a true love and then finally renunciation.

So the idea is that you're a student until you're twenty-five, thereabouts. Then you get married and you live the lay life. You live an involved life. And if possible you have a family—that's not necessary in this particular, in the spiritual sense. And during that time you go through a relationship and go through these particular moments where there's a block to be, there's a contradiction to be solved, a conflict to be solved, and in so doing the relationship gets closer and closer until there's what you might call a real union.

And then around about the age of sixty-five or thereabouts, they're supposed to leave family. They're supposed to go away and live like hermits. And then at the age of seventy-five, the man—and presumably the woman, we never talked about—the man disappears completely. He goes away, tries to lose his caste name. He's supposed to become a beggar. You're not supposed to approach him as an uncle or a father or anybody. And

when you think about that, isn't that just the natural way of life? I mean, here you've got the leaves, and you can see it, the early buds, the full blossom, the slow dying, and then the disappearance.

And so here you have the idea of a full life, if possible—you've got to have a bit of luck there—where, through meeting somebody, you form this very close, intimate relationship, which is very supportive. And we all know how difficult it is to get that. And then you work through that until it becomes utterly mature. Then there comes a time when you realise that even that has to be let go of. So remember, the spiritual path, whether we like it or not, eventually, at some point, is a path of renunciation. It's like, whether you like it or not, it's got to come that way.

I heard Joseph Campbell—some of you might know, the mythologist who wrote the book called *Something of the Gods*, and a very well-known writer. And he was interviewed on this and he was talking about two relationships that people sometimes go through. The first one being the worldly relationship and then a change in midlife, and then you finally find your spiritual partner and off you go, and he reckoned that this was a regular thing. So there is within a relationship a real possibility of true spiritual friendship, true spiritual growth, and eventually the eventual path of renunciation which has to come at the end, you see.

And talking about this, it's very interesting how people get a very negative view about marriage and things like that. I'm surprised how many Buddhists think that, for instance, it's not worth having children and bringing them into this life of suffering. And once a young man came to see me while I was in London, and he said that he was having problems with his relationship, which had been absolutely fine, but now she wanted kids, and he said he couldn't see the point because life is suffering, and he gave me all this stuff about suffering and pain. I thought, why bring a child into this, you see?

So I slowly argued that this was a very special place. That in fact it was right here that all the conditions are where a being can actually make very good, very quick spiritual progress. So I explained this to him. And then I said, apart from becoming an Arhant, apart from becoming perhaps an Anāgāmi, a non-returner, I can't see in the world anything more compassionate than to bring another being into this world and to give it that basic moral and spiritual teaching for its own growth. So he thanked me very much and I never saw him again. Which goes to show that he just didn't want kids.

So I think we have to correct some of that because Buddhism has come to the West through the eyes of Christianity and it's still there as a life-negative religion. As a life-negating religion. And that's just not true. It's just not true.

And then just finally within this area is of course celibacy. And I'd like to coin a phrase from dear old Sir Winston Churchill. Some are born celibate. Some choose to be celibate. And some have celibacy thrust upon them. And we have to say that in the ordinary run of life we do find ourselves in celibate situations. Now for us on the spiritual path, those are times to get in contact with all the stuff around relationship, around this sort of relationship. And that's an opportunity.

Remember, in daily life, here you see there's no point in getting into all these fantasies because it's really just taking out energy somewhere else. But in daily life, when we enter into daily life and these energies come up, and you can see there's no point in indulging them, then this idea of sublimation, of recognising that energy and then cajoling it, as it were, into some other area of activity. If one, of course, makes the decision that one wants a relationship, then have the faith, go with it, hope for the best.

Just one last thing that I had slightly forgotten to mention is that I was very surprised once I did a talk at a marriage ceremony. Well, two things actually. A talk at a marriage ceremony, not for Buddhists. I was just a friend of this—well, he was a Buddhist, yeah, that's right. And everybody else wasn't. And I gave a talk. And in the talk, I simply mentioned the distinction between romantic feelings and real love.

And I said that romantic feelings towards your partner just come and go. Sometimes you feel them and sometimes you don't. Often you feel hate, disgust, fed up, could get rid of the person, all that sort of stuff. And I said, but love, love has nothing to do with the emotional life. I said, love is to do with a commitment coming from a deeper centre that you have devoted your life to sharing your life with somebody else. And that is the underlying motivation. And if that goes, then definitely get a divorce.

So I was surprised how many people came up to me afterwards and thanked me for that distinction. And I could only presume that in their own relationships they'd been utterly confused because they woke up in the morning and said, well, I don't love you. You turn over and you see this person and you think, oh, God, ten years, what am I doing? And you think, I can't live, I've got to get out, I've got to find somebody else. And it's just that confusion about things, you know.

And the other thing that I might say just on this little level is how I've conducted marriage ceremonies for people who've been in partnership for years. I mean, ten, fifteen years. And all of them, and they tell me of friends who actually go through a marriage ceremony, that there is a distinctive difference once it moves into a state of vowing. Because when we make a public statement about our intentions, that really roots us very deeply in something. And that's why we take public oaths. That's why, say, when

the president is elected, he makes a public oath. And that is a public commitment, and the whole of society is meant to be supportive, to support you with that. That's the idea of it.

But that extra commitment—it just, as it were, deepened the whole relationship. Which means that in the partnership, there was always something holding back. Just something holding back. Just in case, after ten, fifteen years, this is the wrong person to be with. Which would be very disappointing. After fifteen years you suddenly decide this is not the person I ought to have been with.

So just remembering all that and remembering that here in our meditation to be very quick with those thoughts because they are, they're delicious.

So the idea of when we find ourselves in a celibate situation is that this is a time to allow those things to pass away. And again, this sublimation so that we can see that times of celibacy and for monastics, the idea is to refine that energy, to take it away from there and to actually refine it, you see. That's the idea of that. And it's displaced into the spiritual path.

I think I've just got a bit of time, I think, to talk about attachment. So this is also a love with a little kink in it. And just think of all the people whom we are attached to—children, family, friends, even animals. You can love an animal as much as you can love a human being. And there's an attachment to it. And the unfortunate thing is that we don't know the depth of the attachment until the beloved disappears. You don't know how attached you are to your cat until it dies. You don't know how attached you are to your mother until she dies. I can tell you that. And this is one of those things that we don't really know.

Now, the only distinction I like to make is that we're not here talking about something evil. We're not talking about something evil. We're talking about something unskillful. When the Buddha uses the word *akusala*, see there's two words in the Pali, *papa*, which means evil, and *akusala*, which just simply means unskillful, unwholesome, not virtuous. And in terms of the path we're just trying to shift all our conditionings towards the virtuous, so it's not a case of feeling guilty about attachment, it's a case of knowing that there is some attachment there that there has to be some attachment there and say within parents, you see, that's the rebellious teenager, they just want to get away from that grip, that hold.

And of course the root reason for that is that we're seeking happiness in human beings. Now that's ridiculous. Anything in the world to depend upon for happiness is definitely not a human being. I mean, that's really awful. I mean, they leave you, then they

hate you. And then they die on you, for heaven's sake. I mean, there's no way that, when you think about it, you'd want your happiness to be dependent on a human being. I mean, rather a rock. That will stay there for a while. I mean, it should outlive you. You can keep hugging the rock. Or a tree. Love a tree. That's much better. But a human being is very, very fickle.

So once we see that, you see, and we take the attachment away, and then the confusion disappears between what attachment is and what love is. And just to be aware of that. And of course the downside of attachment is that the person becomes an object. They become something to satisfy your lack. That's what an attachment does—I want you to be like this, I want you to grow up like this, you know, to get angry.

And you can see in certain behaviours, for instance, supposing you were told or somebody was told that the doctor said to them that they had terminal cancer. And when the doctor told them that, they begin to break down and weep and cry, gnash their teeth, bang the table, how terrible it is and all that. You think, well, that's very unprofessional. I don't expect the doctor to do that, you see. And you expect them to be compassionate, kind, softly spoken, but, you know, just, as we say, with you in that quiet way.

And when you go home and you say to your partner, I've got terminal cancer, and they reply, well, what do you want to wear in the coffin? And you think, my goodness, don't you love me? I expect you to weep, gnashing of teeth and all that sort of stuff. And so you can see how behaviours change when that attachment comes. And it's a case of just recognising that.

With children, you see, you can see parents, if the child hurts itself—and it's just a scratch and the parent knows it's just a little thing, you see. But the kid's screaming, you see. The parent's very calm, very quiet, hugs the child, everything's all right, all that sort of stuff. But if the parent sees that the child has actually broken a leg or really banged his head and, oh my goodness, then the fear comes out and all that. And of course that feeds right into the child and the child becomes the object of fear. The poor kid's trying to handle all this pain and the mother or father's berserkness. But it's just part and parcel of that relationship.

So, if we find ourselves here in the meditation, you see, wanting to phone somebody, expecting somebody to phone them, wanting to get in touch with some family member, some friend, you see. If you see that, that's a product of attachment. Just let it pass, let it pass. And then there might be that feeling of guilt, of some sort of loss of love, you see. Because there's that confusion between what love is and what that attachment is.

I've got time just for one more thing I wanted to... Oh, yeah. And just to take the deliciousness to that other area of distraction. So be careful, especially on a retreat, you see. We might think to ourselves, oh, it would be nice to go for a walk now. I think I feel I need a walk. But actually, if you sit with that—actually just fed up with being inside. You're just trying to escape being inside. Or you don't want to walk up and down the same walking path anymore. You want to have a distraction, do it somewhere else.

And if you can really let that go, and as it were, draw the space around you closer, making your boundary less and less, you'll see it has a great force on your meditation and your stillness. Because every time you wander off on a walk, you're in a different place. You're exciting something. Something's arising. And it's very difficult. I'm sure you've all experienced, so we say, even doing quick walking as an exercise, how suddenly the mind will start wandering. And you've walked up and down for ten minutes and you've been everywhere and anywhere.

So all these desires for distraction, you see. So remember that if we really want to get to know the mind and to really get into its turbulences, if we really want to squeeze the pimple, as it were, then you've got to, as it were, stop the input. That's the point, you see. You've got to stop the input. You've got to stop looking, stop listening. Hearing is different from listening. And as soon as you stop the input, then there's no way these turbulences can find a way to express themselves. See?

And the mind starts going berserk, but you keep playing with it. And when that's cut off, what can they do? All these griefs, guilt, fear, the whole gamut of human suffering. It booms out as it comes out. It comes out as these awful, awful, terrible feelings. But that's the purification. That's purgatory. Just hang on in there. And just keep saying to yourself, there is an end to suffering. There is. There's got to be.

So that's why in meditation we're always encouraged to go inward, to stay with what's happening within ourselves. And just as an addenda to all that, of course, is the problem of boredom. So remember, boredom is that frustration, is that getting fed up with distraction and pleasure.

So be very careful with boredom, because boredom will tell you to seek distraction, to do something else. Remember that the whole point of the pleasure syndrome is that there's an inbuilt obsolescence. You can't keep chewing the same sweet. It gets boring. You've got to go for the raspberry flavour or the coffee flavour. You've got to move a little bit to get that same sense of pleasure or joy out of it.

So whenever boredom comes up, you see, you feel the boredom, you don't get confused by boredom on the breath, boredom on this, boredom on that, boredom with food. You stay with the boredom, you see. And the way to overcome boredom is to keep doing what you're doing, repetition. Just repetition and keeping in mind, keeping that boredom, as it were, within your attentiveness. And then don't be surprised if the boredom suddenly disappears and what arises is its opposite which is interest—only this time because you've let the boredom go some wrong purpose has been got rid of. That's the point. Boredom has come because we're seeking happiness in whatever it is we're experiencing.

I mean, our society is really bad with that because pleasure is so easy at hand and we expect to be distracted, we expect to be entertained all the time, TV, radio, the whole thing. And to enter into a place where there's nothing, then you get this boredom arising.

And going back to the Buddha's own experience, remember, after he had become enlightened for seven years, Māra stalked him with his three daughters: sexual desire, pleasure and boredom. See? So there's little boys saying, this is really boring just sitting here, why don't you get on with it?

So, with that in mind, be careful of these delicious areas.

So I think there's just some time to complete some of these questions. Now, unfortunately, I lost the list. I brought the wrong list that I was working with last week, but I shall answer a few more next week. Let me just give some indications to these.

"Can you please discuss the differences in practices and goals in the Theravāda, Zen, Dzogchen and Vajrayāna tradition?" Well the way that I think you'll find eventually, people who have practised, say, even two, three or four of these, is that the only difference is skilful means, that's all. We're just using different ways in order to achieve the same end. What is that end? It's *sati*, right awareness and *pañña*, insight. That's all it is.

And either you get it by observing the phenomena of the mind, which is more Theravāda-based, or you become aware more of the space within which this is happening, which is that consciousness. And just that begins to separate consciousness out from the contents that it sees within itself. So it doesn't matter. Even in Theravāda one becomes aware of the knowing as a different faculty from everything it knows.

So remember that all these traditions arose as they passed through cultures, and even in our culture now you can see the effect of western psychotherapy on the practice of the Dhamma and it's bound to happen and it's a good thing because that's the way we are.

"Please discuss the pros and cons of being in the breath of the nostrils as opposed to the abdomen." The general or the usual instruction is you watch the breath where you feel it most and that's the important thing because it's your primary object, it's something you want to go back to, it's something that you want to develop a certain stillness with. I don't use the word concentration. And it's something which, when everything quiets down, the still mind, the peaceful heart, and the quiet body, or the quiet mind, still body, there is only the breath, and that becomes the object which you are looking at.

So, keeping that in mind, that the primary object is supposed to be the breath, and at the point where you feel it most, I think you generally agree with me, those of you who've tried both, is that when you watch the breath of the nostrils you tend to lose the body. It's a very good technique for concentration meditations because you don't have to worry about the body, you become concentrated up here. Whereas when you stay down at the abdomen you're buried in the body, you tend to feel more in contact with the body.

The other thing is that in the Mahāsi tradition, of course, the rising and falling of the abdomen is then carried into the rising and falling of the footstep. So that this constant awareness of transience, arising and falling, beginning, ending, beginning, ending, radical ending, full stop, something arising. And so if we use the abdomen and the rising and falling of the footstep, there is just that constant pointing of the attention at the quality of *anicca*.

Of course it still works at the nostrils because the breath is coming in, stopping, going out. But it's not so obvious as this rising and falling of the abdomen and the rising and falling of the footstep. But in the end it's really up to a person and where they feel also most comfortable. The Mahāsi himself was not strict. He started off with touch points. And he just ended up with the belly and that became the focus of most teachings. It was only I think later teachers who insisted on watching the abdomen.

So I hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all suffering even by the weekend.

Ethical Behaviour and the Awakening are One

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 43 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma addresses a common confusion in Buddhist practice: the false separation between paññā (insight/understanding) and sīla (ethical conduct). Drawing from the Buddha's own description as vijjācaraṇasampanno (accomplished in both understanding and conduct), he explains how wisdom and virtue are like two rivers flowing into the same sea.

The talk examines the distinction between 'Nibbānic Buddhism' and 'Karmic Buddhism,' exploring how insight naturally gives rise to compassionate action, as seen in the Buddha's spontaneous desire to teach after his Awakening. Through the Noble Eightfold Path's structure of sīla, samādhi, and paññā, Bhante demonstrates how right understanding transforms into right speech, action, and livelihood, while ethical behavior supports deeper insight.

Key concepts include kusala (skillful/virtuous action), puñña (merit), and their relationship to spiritual progress. The dramatic story of Aṅgulimāla illustrates how even the most terrible past actions cannot prevent liberation when genuine transformation occurs. This teaching offers practical guidance for reflecting on our daily choices through the lens of virtue and wisdom, showing how every moment presents an opportunity for spiritual growth through mindful ethical action.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhasa namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhasa namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhasa

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

I was going to talk about this confusion sometimes that people have between *paññā*, insight, the awakening, and *sīla*, conduct. I think it's still in some circles when you say morality, it gets people very angry. They don't want to know about morality as such, or the ethical life.

In the chant in the morning, we say of the Buddha that he's *vijjācaraṇasampanno*, that he's accomplished both in his understanding and in his conduct. And he himself says that understanding and conduct are like the Ganges and the Yamuna rivers that join and flow into the sea. He doesn't make a distinction between understanding and how it expresses itself.

Some of you will know that the Eightfold Path is normally split into three sections: *sīla*, *samādhī*, *paññā* — right conduct, right meditation, and right understanding. And that *samādhī* normally refers to the absorptions, but in the Buddha's teachings those are not actually necessary. So the whole teaching can be reduced in terms of the process of purification and awakening to those two words: *paññā* and *sīla*. *Paññā* is this business of trying to understand how things really are, and *sīla* is right conduct, ethical behaviour. Those two sum up the Buddha's teachings.

But then you'll come across writers who split them. And when you go to the East and you see how people behave, you can understand how they might come to these conclusions from their fieldwork, from their anthropological fieldwork. One writer talks about Nibbanic Buddhism and Karmic Buddhism.

Often when you speak to Eastern Buddhists, or born Buddhists anyway, they won't have a doubt that the end point is to become liberated — *Nibbāna* — and that's the point. But their whole life is really centred around *sīla*, which is right conduct. And when you follow that train of thought through, they're not concerned so much with getting rid of this self, but more in the sense of making it a good self, a happy self, insofar as the self can be happy. And so their whole lives are about doing right things, and this is where the word *kusala* comes in, in order to gain merit, and that's *paññā*.

These two words, *kusala* and *paññā*, are key words in the Buddha's teachings. And the general idea is that you stop doing harm, you do as much good as you can, and you get reborn in the heavenly realm. And in the heavenly realm, it's a little easier to seek *Nibbāna*.

Even amongst monks and nuns, you'll find that that is the prevalent attitude. And you'll find the monks in Sri Lanka — I'm not so sure about Burma and Thailand and other places, but being influenced by Hinduism — the hierarchy will tell you that this is the Kala Yoga. And it's impossible for anybody to become enlightened during this particular time, so forget it. The best thing you can do is to do good and get reborn into a better place. It's a bit disheartening, really. But they're happy with that. In a sense, it's a let-out. I mean, if you say to yourself, I can't become enlightened, phew, I may as well enjoy myself. That's the case. So you've got to be careful with that sort of mentality.

But both in the actual way the Buddha behaves, his actual behaviour, and in the general teachings, and even in the psychology, what we chant in the morning, you can begin to see that you can't split the one from the other. The one arises out of the other.

There's this point in the Buddha's life once he's become enlightened, once he's become liberated and he has this deep understanding into the way things are and he spends some time recollecting over it. Mythically it's said three nights he goes through this wheel of dependent origination, forward, backward, both forward and backward. But obviously he sat there and that insight had to permeate his understanding, and he came up with this. And then at that point there is this idea arise in his head: who can he teach? So that has arisen spontaneously in his mind.

Now when he looks around and he sees through his powers that his old teachers have died, and he gets the doubt. And the doubt is that anybody can receive this teaching. It's too subtle. He doesn't believe for a moment there. He doesn't think that people are ready for this.

Now you'll find in some writers that they call this the great hesitation, and they argue that therefore the Buddha's accomplishment is twofold. His accomplishment was both the enlightenment, his liberation, and secondly his teaching, and that he need not necessarily have taught. He could have said, no, I won't, I'll sit here in this bliss until I pop off. And that's where you get some idea that perhaps there's a choice, that you can become liberated and yet not do anything. That it doesn't manifest outwardly into the world.

Supporting that is that myth of the Paccekabuddhist, the private Buddha — the person who's become fully liberated but what it really says about that is that they can't teach. That's the normal thing, not that they don't want to; they just can't. They don't have the skills or the capacity. And if you think of just ordinary life, sometimes you get people who are very clever in their subject but they just can't get it across. So that's another skill.

So in the sense that the Buddha had a special skill whereby he could actually get this stuff across to people is one thing. But the hesitation was only around — this is just my own understanding — the hesitation was only around whether people were actually ready to receive it. The hesitation wasn't in whether to teach or not. Which is a distinction, isn't it?

So the desire to teach, the desire to actually share what he had with others, arose spontaneously after he had understood what it was that he had gained. In the Zen tradition, you'll hear it said that with wisdom, compassion arises naturally. So it's not possible to continue in the path and for our behaviour not to change.

To take it at a ridiculous level, you couldn't have a neurotic Buddha. That would be awful, wouldn't it? Worrying about his fingernails while he's teaching. Worrying whether he'll be liked. Worrying whether he'll get any food today. It doesn't sit, does it? And it would be awful if he were immoral. He's teaching all this stuff and going around robbing banks. So there's something that jars when you consider what the behaviour of somebody who is spiritually advanced might be if it doesn't connect with understanding.

There's got to be that immediate connection between a person's understanding and purity. I mean, the whole point is that there's a purification of the heart going on. So here we are, we're meditating, we're doing this vipassanā, and we can see that, A, there's this insight going on, there's this understanding about ourselves and how we're creating suffering for ourselves, but there's also this purification going on — that in fact, we are getting less and less depressed, less and less angry, or at least not for such a long period. And there's a certain progression. If you're not progressing, then you have to look at your practice and find out why. Because that's the point. The point is to progress, both in understanding and in our happiness, our contentedness.

So that business of the slow gaining of understanding into the way we are, manifesting as good action, is right there in the Noble Eightfold Path. It flows right down. So right understanding changes your attitude to life. So for the Buddha, once the understanding had come, the compassion arose. And he himself is constantly saying, *anukampā*, he says, out of empathy, out of sympathy, I teach you. Whatever a teacher can do for his students, I've done for you. And then that manifests: right speech, right action, right livelihood.

Now, we also know that it can go back the other way. Depending on your livelihood, you yourself can be changed, can't you? I mean, just imagine now if we all joined the SAS. The Special Army Services. It would be different, wouldn't it? I mean, you'd be out there with your machine gun waiting to kill somebody, or at least protecting yourself. So your whole mentality would change, wouldn't it?

Or if you, like a policeman — a policeman's always suspicious. A policeman walks in here, he'd be suspicious. I have my brother-in-law in special service. He protects politicians. He's always suspicious. He's got to be. He's trained to be suspicious. He wanted to be suspicious. A teacher never asks a question they don't know the answer. They always make sure they know the answer.

What we do affects us, doesn't it, directly? Our personality, the way we speak, our friendships, our acquaintances, what politics we follow, what particular religion we follow, all that has an effect on us and produces a certain way of behaving, but it also comes with an understanding. And that understanding is either going to take us into further happiness or further unhappiness.

So it runs both ways through our understanding, which is at three levels: actually hearing something which has an effect on us that we haven't heard before, through our own mental processes, our own reflection, and then through this direct insight, through direct experience. So our understanding changes. But it can also change by what we do. So there's an intimate relationship between our conduct and our understanding. It would be false to separate that.

So when you understand that, in lay life, because most of the time you have to be doing something — your job, whatever it is — you can really see quite clearly that this is the path, the path of action. What we're actually doing at any present time, at any present moment, is a path leading us either towards or away from this liberation. And therefore, anytime we do something, there is the importance of that moment of reflection about whether it's *kusala* or *akusala*.

Now this word *kusala*, it has two meanings in English. One is that it's skillful. Unfortunately, if you say, well, I'm only doing this because it's skillful, I'm only being good, I'm only being generous and compassionate because it's skillful, then, as it were, the action is taken off the action itself for some future purpose. So I'm being skillful now, so I can be liberated later. And immediately you cut in between these two processes, *paññā* and *sīla*. So it becomes a utilitarian thing. I'm only being good so that I can become enlightened. I'm only helping you so that I can become... See what I mean? There's a split there.

So now you'll often see in the books that that word is translated as skillful. But that's the danger. And it means that *sīla* itself is not an end in itself. But in fact, the end in this life is perfect conduct, *vijjācaraṇasampanno*, perfected, accomplished in his understanding and his behaviour.

So, although we might say skillful in the sense that it's wholesome and it's right and all that, you also have to use the word virtuous. It is virtuous as opposed to being non-virtuous or vicious. And the question is, is virtue an end in itself? Is it? Is the virtuous life an end in itself?

Now, you wouldn't be virtuous if you look at it the other way. You wouldn't be virtuous unless you knew why you're being virtuous. There has to be an insight into it. It needn't be an intellectual insight. It needn't be something that you can scribble on a piece of paper. When we feel a certain compassion towards somebody, when we want to help somebody, when that feeling comes out, the underlying understanding there is our interrelatedness.

So although we can talk about interrelatedness from this high intellectual level, about how things all fit together, about how things are related to each other, everything is conditioned by everything else and all that, the actual experience of it in terms of our relationship to other beings, and to plants and the earth and all that, is this heart relationship of compassion, love, sympathetic joy. And that's a heart understanding.

If you split the two, then you move towards a dry intellectual understanding. And you miss out on the heart level. On the other hand, if you stick with the heart level without some understanding, then it can so easily slip into mawkish behaviour. So that's where we were saying last time about the slippage of compassion into pity or grief.

Now when we have this word *kusala*, this word virtuous or skillful, there's always this follow-on of *puñña*, which translates as merit. And it begins to sound a bit like some Christian doctrines, like grace. And you'll often hear in Buddhist circles — born Buddhists, cultural Buddhists, I don't know what you call them — it's like a bank account. You've got all this merit, and you can draw on it at any time, and you can share it with people. And that's meritorious, so you get more merit because you've shared your merit. It's a bank account that manufactures itself, which is wonderful, isn't it?

But when you actually read the psychology of the Buddha, this *puñña* has nothing to do with the outside. Of course the outside might change. For instance, if I make a decision to move away from a certain job or a certain set of friendships which I can see are not virtuous, they're not quite supporting the life I want to lead. That movement away may be painful because I have certain friendships. But in doing so, I am moving into another area. The decision takes me into another area of experience which does support me. So we can say that the friendships that I meet here and the job that I'm doing now is my *puñña*. That's my merit for shifting across. But, in a sense, that misses the point. That's all well and good.

But the real *puñña*, the real merit, is within the heart itself. So that's why, when we become fully liberated, in a couple of days, you'll see that there's no more *puñña*. There is no more merit to be had. Because the liberated person is completely full. They're completely contented and completely happy, so they cannot increase their *puñña*. And this is what it says in the scriptures. You can't increase that. That's it, they've made it.

Yet they still behave out of this compassionate action. And that's when it becomes selfless, because whether we like it or not, when we do good, we are increasing our own goodness within ourselves. So while we're not liberated, we do get the benefit of this *puñña*. But once a person becomes liberated, then there's no more *puñña*.

I'm reminded of, I think it was Sister Teresa of Lisieux. I think it was Teresa of Lisieux, Saint Teresa of Lisieux. And she was asked, if everybody goes to heaven, some people have obviously been better than others. And everybody's in heaven. So how can you all be happy? Because some will have more happiness than others. Probably a bit of jealousy. And her answer was, well, everybody gets a glass and it's completely full, but each glass is of a different size. Everybody gets a glass and it's completely full, but everybody has a different size, depending on their craftsmanship.

If you look at the different arahats, if you look at the different people of the Buddha's time like Sāriputta and Moggallāna, then you can see that. You can see that quite clearly that they have different areas which for them produce, what can we say, a different type of contentment.

So Sāriputta is known as the general of the Dharma, so his whole interest was in understanding and it's understood that he's only second to the Buddha, perhaps even equal in his understanding to the Buddha. The Buddha definitely praises him as being quite exceptional in his insight. And because of that, because of that whole interest in understanding, he doesn't develop the powers.

Moggallāna, who's the other chief disciple, isn't so interested in that angle of things but develops the powers. And when Moggallāna asks Sāriputta, why don't you develop the powers? Sāriputta's answer is, I'm not interested. Not interested. So there's something about Sāriputta's state, where he is totally content with the way he is, and he doesn't see any point in levitation, or moving from here to there, or doing amazing things. But from Moggallāna's point of view, that was part of his *puñña*, that was part of his happiness.

So there are these three concepts, there are these three or four different concepts that we have to be fairly clear on just to make sure that we are guiding ourselves properly. *Paññā* and *sīla*, our understanding and our conduct, are completely interrelated. And that if we constantly reflect upon our conduct as virtuous, then our understanding will grow naturally.

and if we understand that our understanding must be translated into right conduct, then we should progress.

Secondly, that this whole *kamma*, the whole teaching around *kamma* which is action—that's what it is, it's an action although it also means the consequence of action—has to be guided by our principles, our virtuous principles, which is this *kusala*. So the idea of reflecting about why we're doing something, even the most mundane things, like you might decide that you might want to watch a bit of TV.

So when you turn it on, you have to ask yourself, do I want to watch this programme or not? What am I putting into my heart when I watch this programme? What am I doing to my head when I'm watching this programme? And as soon as you see that it's not quite doing you good, then we have to have that strength of will to turn it off.

One exercise that I've set people is to sit in front of your favourite programme, EastEnders, and get a cup of tea, make yourself comfortable. And when the time comes, you don't turn the TV on. You just sit there watching that screen. And just feel that compulsiveness to actually know what's going on. And your mind's making up little stories, trying to work out, just in case you might have missed the plot. And you keep doing that until you don't want to watch it anymore. You do it every day, or whatever it takes. And then when you're totally equanimous with sitting in front of that screen knowing that EastEnders is on now, then you can turn it back on. When you turn it back on, then you can ask yourself, should I be watching this or not? Should I be watching this programme or not?

What about listening to the radio? All of it. TV, it doesn't matter. Whatever entertainment. Friendships. Even going for a walk. Everything has to be questioned. Is this the right thing to be doing now? Is this the virtuous thing to be doing now? Remember, skillful, virtuous. You've got to balance that.

How could you explain that to a friend? Like, I feel maybe it's not a virtuous relationship and I don't want to see your friend. Well, you can be stark. You can say that if you want. You know, I find my relationship with you utterly unskillful and unvirtuous, and I have no wish to see you again. That's it. Well, you can be assured that that would be the end of that relationship. I mean, that's what you call a sword of wisdom. But I'm sure

there are more kindly ways of getting the message across that you don't particularly want to see them again. Just showing a lack of interest. Making little white lies. It depends. Well, it's up to you. But at some point, if you decide that a friendship is not virtuous, then you have to get rid of it. Full stop.

Angulimāla is one of these stories like the good thief on the cross. And what the story does is to show that no matter how awful you've been, yet you can become totally liberated. Now, again, you have to make a distinction between this *puñña*, this merit, and... The merit that Angulimāla finished up with when he met the Buddha was—I'm just guessing—an angry, hateful, fearful, vengeful, grudgeful mind. That's in his mind. So when he meets the Buddha and something happens there, some magic happens where he suddenly sees how badly he's behaved and the consequences of it. And remember in those days, the whole idea of *kamma* would have been fully accepted and rebirth and all that and going to the hells. And suddenly when he realises what he's done, he has to come back on that.

So the first thing he does is he joins the order. So immediately, from what we've been talking about, he cuts away from one type of behaviour into another, like a knife. He just moves out of all that business of murder, whatever it was, into the *brahmachariya* life. That's a direct cut. Now, it's said that he was unarmed, round people threw stones at him and bricks and whatnot. Because he was in robes, because of people's respect for people in robes, it seems nobody really went for him, tried to lynch him or anything like that. But he still had that outside effect of children running away from him and people throwing things, spitting at him, things like that. So that's his *kamma*. But that's only the outside reflection back to him, or that's other people's reaction to him.

The process of liberation is now him within himself dealing with all that horror of remorse, guilt, which will be with him because of his past actions. So if you take the Moors murderer, Ian Brady—his biographer, I've not read the book, I don't even know if the book's out actually, I just read a little bit in the newspaper about it—his biographer asked him, does he ever think about the children he tortured? For those of you who don't know, he and a woman called Myra Hindley tortured little children, actually put it on cassette, so they were actually heard in court. It was in the 60s. And he was asked by this biographer, does he ever think about the suffering he caused those children? And his answer was, "If I did that, it would drive me mad."

So even in the most dastardly of human beings, the most awful of human beings, there's always that seed of compassion, that seed of recognition of our total humanity. So here he is. Now, is he going to be able to turn on that? Is he going to be able to turn around and see it?

Some of you might have read that book, "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat." Have you come across that? It's a great old book. Oliver Sacks. Definitely worth a read. It's about people with mental illnesses because parts of the brain go. But there's one story in there which is very apt for somebody who is into the Buddha Dharma. There's a man who murders his daughter atrociously, so much so that the facts are never actually publicised, even in court. It's horrific, absolutely horrific. But the man can't remember. He has no memory whatsoever, so they can't convict him. What they can do is put him in a mental home. And in the mental home he acts perfectly normally and within a certain amount of time the staff have enough confidence to let him go out for bike rides. And on one of these bike rides a car hits him and he lands on his head. And this little bump on his head awakens that memory. And according to the book, it took over six months for the staff to stop this man wanting to commit suicide. They had to actually tie him down. You'd have to read it for the details.

So when Angulimāla, no matter how horrific his murders and all that has been, there is that being able to turn upon oneself and to sit within himself, your sense of misery, sense of remorse. Now, you see, what we have to understand is that once we've acted, once we've done an act, you can't go back on it. If you steal something, that's it, it is done. You can do something to assuage or to undermine the consequences by slipping the money back that you stole. But the action is done, and therefore the consequence will be there.

That consequence outwardly, the effect of that consequence outwardly will be totally dependent on circumstance completely beyond your control. It might never be known, and you die very rich. On the other hand, it might be known, and you end up in jail. And all that has been completely out of your ability to control. But this inner guilt, this inner feelings of remorse and all that will be there to be handled. And you'll never escape from that because that's the world you're actually living in. The world we're living in is this mental world that I'm creating. So there's no escape from that.

It doesn't say how long it took for Angulimāla to become liberated but it was years. So once he was given the same instructions that we've been given, he would have had to sit with the horror inside him about all the stuff that he's created, and just like we sit with our depressions and our guilts and our remorse, so he would have had to do that. And at some point that would have all passed away, that would have all gone.

Now that for us is one of these stories that allows us to have tremendous hope. Because if somebody who has been truly evil can become liberated within a lifetime, then there's a good chance for us, isn't there? Before next new year, perhaps? I mean, it's a story of hope. It's a story that nobody is incapable of becoming liberated. That's what it

means. And in Buddhist history, there was only one time when there was a heresy where a particular school began to teach that there were some people who were so thick that they just wouldn't be able to make it. And they were called the Icchantikas, the ones who go on forever. There was no escape from *saṃsāra* for these people. And that's the only time. And of course, that is definitely not mainstream Buddhism.

So that's the underlying hope within the Buddha's teaching. And Angulimāla stands as an example of that. No matter how extreme and horrible we've been, yet the liberation from all suffering is ours to achieve.

So just to sum up there, there's just those things to reflect upon every so often: that relationship between our understanding and our conduct, and the other way around, our conduct and our understanding, that at an ethical level, which is where we're actually creating our mental states which are going to cause us happiness or unhappiness. Is it virtuous? And remember it's not just tied to the basic precepts about not to kill and steal and all that. That's basically fundamental. It now becomes much more subtle about the relationship we ought to have to our own emotions.

So we were talking yesterday about attachment. You can't say attachment's evil. But it's not skillful, it's not virtuous. It's not skillful for the person who is the object of your attachment, because remember, attachment is always coming from the self, and necessarily turns the other person into an object, an object to service your needs. So you dehumanise somebody, actually, as soon as you attach to them, whether you like it or not, which may not be your intention, but that's what happens.

So that business of *kusala*, and to understand that, there's always this *puñña*, this merit, this merit to be gained. So the spiritual life is constantly rewarding us for what we're doing. There's a reward. There's always this consequence for correct understanding and ethical behaviour. It doesn't always seem like that, does it?

You know, like your dad says to your mother, you know, how can you be a Buddhist and not a log? You know what I mean? The world doesn't seem to get any better, but the practice seems to, the insight seems to get better. Then you go through the barrier, if you like.

When I first began to meditate, I was doing Zen meditation in Birmingham. When I first began to meditate, I had this dream. And the dream was, I was running like mad. Running, running, running, running. And there was a shower of javelins coming after me. And then I stopped, and every javelin just went into my back.

So when we start practising, that's exactly how it feels. Because you're always running ahead of your suffering. You're always trying to escape your immediate suffering. A bit of discomfort, so you shift your seat. A bit bored, so you phone up a friend. You're always moving off the discomfort. And as soon as you begin practising, you can't do that anymore. And all that conditioning, all that horrible stuff just hits you from behind of all places. So it definitely feels it's getting worse.

And it's the same when, for instance, when you join the Order. You join anything, actually, even if you join a new group or a new work. There's that lovely honeymoon bit which lasts a few months. And then there's the struggle because you have to enculturate yourself. You have to change into what the institution wants you to change into, behave in a certain way. So the first three years, for some forever, is a miserable process. That torturing, you have to behave in this way. And sometimes some people don't, some people decide it's not what they want. They don't want to be manoeuvred that way.

So the understanding is, in those wonderful terms, it has to get much worse before it gets better. And that's where your faith has to be. You have to hang on in there just to see.

Ethics, Not-self and Liberation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1h06

In this teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the intimate connection between ethical conduct (sīla) and the insight into not-self (anattā) that leads to liberation. Drawing from the Buddha's three knowledges at his awakening, he shows how the end of defilements, understanding of kamma across lifetimes, and universal ethical law are all interconnected.

The talk explores how our fundamental delusion—falling in love with a false sense of self—creates the three poisons of greed, aversion, and delusion. Through examining the five aggregates (khandhas) and the process of consciousness, Bhante reveals how awareness itself suffers through wrong identification. He emphasizes that we cannot manufacture insights, but we can transform our ethical behavior and develop Right Awareness to see through the mirror-image of selfhood.

Using vivid analogies and practical examples, this teaching demonstrates how ethical conduct naturally flows from wisdom, creating a feedback loop where better behavior changes our attitude, leading to deeper insights. The discussion covers everything from daily relationships to the deepest levels of meditation practice, showing how the path to awakening necessarily involves both purification of conduct and penetrating insight into the impermanent, suffering, and not-self nature of all conditioned existence.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully self-awakened one.

I thought this evening to wander around this notion, this understanding of not-self and ethics.

The Buddha belonged to what's known as the Axial Age. It's quite a lift in terms of human consciousness at the time, 2,500 years ago. So we have Confucius and Lao Tzu. Confucius turned what was empty ritual into something meaningful, coming from the heart. Moses got rid of all these mammon and established a single god, but most of all, an ethical code, which wasn't based on the power of gods or trying to appease gods. And then you have Socrates at the same time, who brought rationality to the fore, undermining superstition. And in the Buddha's own country, people like Mahāgantha and others who were really trying to investigate consciousness, which was more of an Indian thing rather than to do with relationship to the world, although it came about. It was

a peculiar investigation by Indians into what consciousness was as such. And so he belongs to that rise of understanding in human society. Even today, not many of us have risen to that, but at least it stands as a standard where we can aim.

In the Buddha's time, the distinction between the world and consciousness wasn't so objective as we might think these days through our scientific revolution, where the West pulled rationality completely out of its connection with the heart and created this very scientific way of looking at the world. We've got all our knowledge from it, all these subatomic physics and the technology that goes with it. But there's a loss of connection to the heart. And the first people who revolted against that were the romantics: people like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Schelling and Wordsworth. They all rebelled against this hard science which really understood the universe as some sort of mechanic, a car. Everything was like a jigsaw. All you had to do was fit it out. It was a machine. God became the God outside the machine that he'd created.

The Buddha himself stands within a tradition which is not so technological. Still carts and oxes and all that. All his imagery is about agriculture. But this huge interest in consciousness and what that meant. And I think in those days, as it was for the ancients, even Socrates—I'm not sure he made such a distinction—but the world as we experience it is the only world that consciousness can offer us. So through the mind and body, whatever we're aware of is, as far as we're concerned, the world. We might think that the world exists out there or know through science that the world exists out there. There's meant to be light years away, all these planets and galaxies and solar systems. But actually, we don't know that. We don't know that by our personal direct experience. And indeed, neither do scientists. What they get is light from who knows when. They only presume that it's carrying on. Might have all finished light years ago.

So the Buddha's not really concerned with that. There's a telling passage where somebody asks him, where does the world come to an end? And he said, that's not rightly put. That's not the right question to ask. He says the question that should be asked is, where does the world not find a footing? That's a completely different question. And what he's pointing to is a level of awareness or an attainment of an awareness which doesn't belong to the world. So what he means by the world is everything that the body, mind and heart can create. So it's everything you see and feel. It's your thoughts. All that belongs to the world of present day consciousness, moment to moment consciousness. And he's saying that there's something that transcends that. Not touched by any of it, not touched by any of the senses, including the mind. And he states this as the end of suffering.

So why is it that ethics is so important? That's the question that really begs an answer because you might think well the enlightenment or the awakening rather is really just a matter of contacting this level and making it and holding it there and that's about it really. And that's the end of the job. So it's a process of just insight, just sitting, just keep looking, looking, looking, and eventually the penny will drop. But somehow he interlocks really deeply our whole behavior in terms of our thinking process, of how we relate to people, and so on and so forth.

And this goes back to what's known as the three knowledges that came to him when he was awakened. The first one was that all the defilements had gone. He had no more defilements in his heart. So that's also an ethical statement. There was no defilement left in his heart. There was no anger. And then he said that he saw all a series of his past lives where he saw that they were driven by his ethical decisions. So in the three knowledges, his awakening is not described as some blissed out state. It's telling you what there isn't there. And what there isn't there are these defilements. And then he says that these defilements were originally created by me through a series of lifetimes. And then the third one was that he saw beings moving from realm to realm dependent on their ethical decisions, their morality. So what was a personal law for him became a universal law. And he even included animals. Now that might be a bit strange to us, but there are clips on YouTube now where, without any doubt, at least the higher animals do make ethical decisions. But maybe not quite as consciously as we do. Some of you might have got my news bite about the panther, the black panther.

So, where does the problem of relationship begin? And how does it manifest? And how is it we get it wrong? So the process that we're going through is twofold. We're actually trying to understand how we create this mess. And we're also going through a process of purification, where we begin to allow these defilements, that's what he calls them, to arise and pass away. And the process of insight meditation is that dual process.

So it's not a process of developing the heart. That's done by other exercises such as *mettā*, *mettā* practice. And through action, through actions, compassionate, loving, joyful. Don't forget joy. Everybody talks about compassionate love. Forget joy. You can actually be joyful and rejoice in somebody else's joyfulness. That's also part of the Buddha mind that we're trying to develop. So this opening up to our own hearts in the meditation is part and parcel of allowing these defilements to go.

In the Buddha's own experience, even though he was liberated during that moment, there was still what's known as *vāsanā*. *Vāsanā* are leftover habits within the mind. And so it is said that for seven years, Mara the evil one chased him with his three daughters. Sensual desire, sexual desire, and... Now those of you who know, you mustn't say. But

those of you who don't know, what was the third one? Have a guess. So there was sensual desire, sexual desire, and... Yes. Did you know? No. Well done. Fantastic. Very rare anybody gets that. Yes, and boredom.

Because as we discussed this morning, boredom is the engine that pushes you to seek more and more excitement, seek something different to do. And it took seven years for Mara to finally leave him. His daughters insisted that if they kept going, they'd get him. But he gave up. And what he says is, the Buddha sees me. See, the Buddha sees me. Now, of course, that's put in a mythological sense. When we, in our meditation, observe our defilements come up, be it their anger or something exciting or planning, just the seeing of them releases us from their grasp, just to be able to see them. This seeing also means to feel them, to actually experience them as they arise and pass away within that awareness, that consciousness.

So we've got these mental defilements coming up, and they are habits. They are known as *saṅkhāras*, habits that we have created ourselves. And the essential thing about the *saṅkhāras* is that they are empowered through will. So the Buddha goes as far as to state that an act and the act of will, in his sense, are one and the same thing. Will and an act are one and the same thing.

So when we find ourselves thinking about something which is unpleasant and we're indulging in it, there's actually an act of will in there. And the same as when we speak something or when we act. And even when we do it unwittingly, even when we do it unintentionally, as it were, there's actually been a moment of intention. So we talk about habitual unethical actions and really empowered ethical action, when you really decide to murder your rival. That's a clear decision in time that you are actually going to murder them. Not that you do it unintentionally.

So often a lot of our thoughts that come up and we get dragged into are just because of these habits. And what we discover in our meditation is that they're incredibly powerful. And that even if we struggle against them, they're always there in the background. Even if we become acutely aware of our greed, there's always these little sneaky little selfishnesses where we take the biggest slice of cake and things like that. So these are very sneaky little things. And so the ability to actually see these things is a liberation. But remember, we're not entirely liberated from them because then there has to be the decision not to engage. And that's what we're learning through our meditation, that no matter what unethical thoughts or habits come up, we can distance from them and refuse to engage.

Of course, the danger there is that in the refusal to engage, you're actually very subtly pushing them away. And we push things away out of aversion and fear. Those are our repressive measures. So one thing we come to be aware of is that there's an internal mechanism whereby we make things worse.

So here comes the old greed, and then there's the empowerment of the greed, by way of indulgence. Here comes a little hateful thought about somebody and we empower it because we actually enjoy it. Yeah, of course we do. We enjoy getting angry with people and biffing them on the nose and things like that. There's a certain enjoyment in it. Otherwise we wouldn't do it. So when it comes to depression, we don't want to go into that mental state, so we push it away, push it away by distracting ourselves.

So a lot of the pleasures that we have in life are empowered not only because we enjoy them and indulge them, but because they're ways of not facing up to this other horrible stuff. And that's why addictions are so difficult to get rid of. And I'm not talking about big, heavy addiction. I'm just talking about biscuits and things like that.

So, in a sense, when we understand that, then we see where the struggle is, where when the Buddha's last words are, strive diligently. He doesn't say hang about and think about things and investigate. It's strive. *Sampadeta* is a very strong word. It's not work at it. You've got to work at it. And you can see from our meditation that the work is not only something that you can do the once and then you'll never be greedy again. These snakes appear and crocodiles, they appear constantly. As soon as we see something that we have a relationship of indulgence with, then immediately the greed for it arises.

So these *saṅkhāras*, our internal habits, are really to be known. So that's what the Buddha says. You've got to know how they arise. You've got to know how to let them go and let them disappear. And you've got to know how, in such a way, that they never arise again. Of course, they never arise again until the deep fundamental problem is sorted out. And that's to do with identity.

So in one way of looking at the path, it's put in these three different ways, *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*. *Sīla* meaning morality, *samādhi*, concentration, and *paññā*, insight. And it's funny that as he describes the Eightfold Path, he comes down from the insight path. and the insight becomes systemic. So once you have insight into, for instance, how indulgence creates suffering, this has to move into an attitude. That's your second on the Eightfold Path, *sammāsaṅkappa*, right attitude. You've got to change your attitude to indulgence.

Noreen, whom some of you know, does a course, an email course. And there was one young fellow there who, the exercise was around seeing greed and whatnot. And one young fellow wrote back and said that once he'd begun to do this practice, he just wasn't enjoying things as he wanted to. So he wasn't ready for that. And he would stop the exercise. It just shows how deep is our commitment to greed. And that commitment manifests also in all the other negative stuff too.

So this *sīla*, this morality in the path comes after that. It comes after right attitude. Then you get this right speech, right action and right livelihood. But the way that we can also see it is that you can go the other way. So you can start looking at our ethical behavior and that will also begin to change our attitude. The more we change our attitude, it has to come back into the way we understand things. You can't change your attitude and not also change your understanding. So the path is a feedback, it's a loop, it's a feedback loop system.

And you lose nothing by really putting the accent of your spiritual life into right relationship. which might be a definition for ethics. Ethics is basically how you relate to human beings, to animals, nature, and so on and so forth. And by putting the accent on that and seeing how we relate to those things, and how we're creating suffering for ourselves, but also situations where other people might suffer. Remember, we don't cause other people to suffer, but we can definitely create situations where it's very difficult for them not to make the decision that they're going to suffer. So it's a case of recognizing that we also have a responsibility to create situations for other people that they may not make these wrong decisions.

So by coming back onto that you immediately change your attitude and that attitude is one of connection. So another word for connection is love. So love is in its most universal sense a sort of a sense of interconnectedness, a sense of an interconnectedness with the all, as the Buddha would say, which is the all within our consciousness. And to make that connection as the connection demands.

So sometimes there can be a certain directness, a certain... Aggressive, what's the word? Not aggressive. Thank you very much. Assertiveness. You can be very assertive and not seem kindly, but it's exactly what was needed in that particular situation. And other times you can be very warm-hearted, compassionate, and so on. So it's a sensitivity that we have to develop towards any situation we're in. And that means that you've got to launch your attention outwardly into other people around you, into the animals you see, into nature and all that. And to, as it were, not only take this very isolated position of me in the midst of all this. So the me has to turn towards a connection which produces a we, a communion, a community.

So all that is part and parcel of this growing ethical relationship to the world. One other way of perhaps talking about ethics is to try and create situations which are to our own benefit. The Buddha talks about our own benefit, the benefit of somebody else. You might do something which is not to your particular benefit but to somebody else's benefit. and to both of myself and to another. And in that relationship you have that connection, it's always demanding a certain generosity. And that generosity has that ability to make that connection real, because you're giving. You're giving something of yourself, whether your wealth or your time for the benefit of others.

And at times you're giving it to yourself. Sometimes you deserve a biscuit. Very rare, of course, but occasionally you might say, well, I deserve a biscuit.

So it's a case of recognizing that ethics is beginning to change our attitude. And as you move outward towards people, move outwards towards nature and animals and all that sort of stuff, of course, you find the opposite, that they're coming towards you. That's the point. They're coming towards you. And that's where the interconnectedness, shall we say, becomes more real for us. Because we realise that the whole thing is some sort of theatre piece. It's a sort of play that we're in. A serious one. If you want to take a Hindu image of it, a dance, or a Mahayana one, Indra's net. Everything is interconnected and those interconnections are holographic. They contain everything else within themselves as potential.

So our behaviour in ordinary daily life, the way we act in ordinary daily life, is this constant effort to see the situation more fully, not just myself isolated as an individual. I remember that's very much a Western thing, this individuality business. I do my own thing in my own way in my own time, to hell with you lot. And that sort of individuality causes us to disconnect with people, tremendous loneliness, and with it, of course, anxiety.

And somehow we have to reverse that process and begin to make these connections to create a sense of community, even if the people whom you're with have no sense of community at all, right? So you're catching the whole situation where everybody's these individual little pods looking after themselves. And we've somehow got to make that connection with them and to see that they are undermining potential by only turning in towards themselves, only what I want. And that by opening up to that, your relationship changes somewhat, and it opens up for them the possibility of changing their relationship.

On a negative side, who's the Russian-American author? Atlas, what was it, Atlas Shrugged. So the arch, I mean, it's funny that she was Russian, coming from presumably a communist background, this sort of arch-individualist, where it's up to you.

You're the one that has to make the world. You're the one who makes decisions, and the world you live in is completely manufactured by you. You did it. And so all these people in Silicon Valley, one or two of them anyway, believe that the billions they've got is all because of me. I did it. Without me, this would never have happened.

Now, in a sense, of course, there is a touch of truth in that. They probably instigated it. They probably had the first idea, like Steve Jobs. I mean, really a man of, he had these wonderful little ideas. But to say that all these billions came because of me, to hell with the workforce, to hell with everybody else who's putting their little chips, is just an insanity. I mean, they're so isolated, they should put you away.

So it's a case of recognizing that the West especially got itself into this corner. See, the Eastern people don't think like that. I saw a program on China, and there was a young woman there saying that she felt that they thought differently. They thought more in terms of community. That sort of bringing in other people in some sort of connection where you don't see yourself as forging ahead, the lone pioneer, creating the world just for yourself. And that's very much, of course, the Buddha's own way of looking at things.

So here we have somebody who has this tremendous insight. And for one moment, as you know, those of you who know the story, he doubts whether anybody would understand it. He discovers something which is so extraordinary. And there's nothing like it being taught anywhere else, remember. And he doesn't think people would really grasp it. And he says, it would be just an annoyance to me to try and do it, constantly trying to make people understand this sort of stuff. But then, in the myth, this great god appears and tells him that there are some with only a little bit of dust in their eyes, and so off he goes.

And there's a lovely little telling tale of how he learns how to be a teacher. So remember, the insight doesn't make you a genius. It doesn't make you a teacher. It doesn't make you anything else. So on the way back, on his way to see these old companions of his, that's his first thought, he'd go back to these companions that he'd struggled with. He meets this another ascetic, his name doesn't come to mind, and the ascetic sees him and he sees the charisma, he sees perhaps the glow that's coming from him in terms of this enlightenment that he's just experienced. And he says to him, you're amazing. Who is your teacher? How did you attain this? And he says, I am my own teacher. I am the savior of the world. I am the fully liberated one. And the guy says, all right, okay. And clicks his head and off he goes. So he must have learned pretty quick that's not quite how you get the message across.

And when he actually meets his old companions, it's completely different because there he sees that he goes back to an old relationship, a friendship with them. And there's a whole process of discussing. And while he's discussing with them what he's discovered, which are slowly being formalized in his mind, he constantly asks the questions, have you ever heard me speak like this? So as he's talking to them, he interrupts himself and he says, have you ever heard me speak like this? Have you ever heard me say anything like this? And just very slowly, they're sort of attracted to his teachings and actually all become fully liberated in these wonderful stories.

So this whole business of relationship goes right back, in terms of the Buddha's teaching, right back to him. And that he didn't just sit there with a sign saying, do not disturb, I'm fully liberated. But actually he got up and walked. So from Bodh Gaya to where he found his people over in Sarnath, which is in Varanasi, just north of Varanasi. I can't remember, it's a few miles, about 300 or 400 miles. India's a big place. So it wasn't as though he thought I'd just nip down to Dublin and have a little chat with my old mates. You've got to walk.

So here we have this teaching about *sīla*, about morality. And what we're saying is that if we keep our attention on that, this is something we can actually do. You can't make a decision to have an insight. You can't say, well, look, I'm going to sit down now and I'm going to have a great insight and liberate myself. It just doesn't work. It doesn't work like that. So we can't make ourselves have an insight. Insights come when the conditions are ripe. But what we can do is really correct our behavior and become much more aware of how the delusion is manifesting, the essential delusion to do with the self. And that's pretty easy for us to perceive.

And through the meditation, if we can maintain a certain level of awareness in daily life, so don't find ourselves rushing and all that sort of stuff, but try to maintain a certain calmness, then we should slowly change these habits. Slowly allow habits that we see as unhealthy to die away, and to build up the good ones through these practices of *mettā*, through goodwill practices, and through having right attitude.

So, for instance, work. It may be that work's hard at this time. It may be that it's meaningless to you. It doesn't have any particular meaningfulness to you. You just ended up doing this work because that's what was on offer. It just brings on the bacon. But you can change your attitude completely and see it as one of service. And then you immediately connect with whomever you're servicing.

There was an example of somebody who was on the coins on these motorways, tolls. And the way she made it meaningful to herself was to greet people when they came meaningfully. What a great day. How are you? Well, that's a sort of connection there. It

wasn't just stick the money in there looking really glum inside this little box. So she found meaningfulness from it, from just that simple connection. And that, of course, lifts your heart.

So there's all sorts of little parts of our lives. If you keep a diary or keep some sort of log of in the morning. Who are the first people you meet? Have you prepared yourself to meet them? So the matter in the morning, if you're going to work and there's people whom you're upset with, if you direct your goodwill towards them, it does change your behavior to them. And when they see that you're not angry, you're not about to get your revenge, it opens up a little avenue for them to reestablish a working relationship. Not always, but at least one can try.

So there's a whole process there of ethical behavior which we can actually get hold of. We can actually do something about. But then when we go deeper into that, into ethical behavior, then of course we come across this business of a self. And really that's where the trouble really lies.

So when the Buddha talks about delusion, he talks about these three things, greed, aversion and delusion, or acquisitiveness, aversion, which also includes fear, and delusion. This delusion is really one of identity. And so the meditation is trying to undermine this wrong identity we have by making everything into an object for ourselves.

So that's the importance of really noting, really creating that space between the knowing or the knower, at this point the knower, the feeler, the one who knows, and really holding that point within ourselves where we are actually not so much sometimes aware of what's happening, but the distance between the knower and what's happening. So for instance, now looking at me, you can be aware just of me, but you can also become aware of the space that is between us. So it's becoming aware of the mental space that lies between the knower, the feeler, the one who is experiencing things, and the actual experience that's being had.

By doing that, we're actually unwittingly disidentifying with it completely, because it's not me. And the noting can be of great help there, because you're actually pointing to it. Say, there's pain, there's an emotional state, there's an image in the mind. Thought's a bit more difficult, but...

So that process of disidentifying, all we're doing is relocating our identity. So the basic identity would be physical. So when we eat something and we just get lost in that beautiful taste, or when we trap our finger in the door, there's just that one moment where we are the body. Me and the pain, there's no separation. And then of course you jump out of it, get all angry and kick the door.

So it's a case of recognizing that there is a body self. So what we mean by identity is a loss of self-awareness into becoming what it is we're experiencing. Another example would be watching a DVD. So you can watch a DVD from the point of view of just an interest in the acting or the directing, in which case it always remains something objective you're looking at. But you can also just fall into it as an enjoyment. And you just get lost in the mystery or the criminality or whatever it is. And you lose the sense of me watching the film. Me and watching the film become one. So at that point, you're identifying with all the mentation that's going on created by this film. So you become the mind, right? You become the heart, become your emotions. So that's what we mean by identity, right?

So long as there's a sense of self observing something, feeling something, then it's a connection of possession. In other words, what I'm looking at is not me, but is owned by me. So I'm talking internally. I'm talking about pain in the knee. So it'd be my knee. Right? Even though I say I feel anxious, the fact that I'm aware of it means that it can't be me, but somehow I own it. Somehow I'm identifying with it as a point of ownership.

Now, ownership, of course, brings a lot of pain with it, as you know, because even of things that you own, if somebody nips off with your mobile or something like that, I mean, it's a horror, isn't it? It's weeping and gnashing of teeth, anger. Call the police. I mean, anything arises negatively because somebody's thieved your phone. For heaven's sake.

So we don't know the suffering behind possession until we lose what it is we possess. That's pretty straightforward. And when we actually look at it rationally, the only thing you can do with a thing, like a phone or a TV or a car or whatever, is use it. You can only use things, right? To own it is a fiction, isn't it? It's a legal fiction, which works so long until the thief takes it. And then it's his. It's no good you going around saying, he's got my phone. It's his phone.

I like to make the point of that because it was an occasion in the Sangha, that's the Buddhist order in Sri Lanka, where a thief came and stole this monk's little watch. That's what I remember it as, this little clock. And he ran after the thief and got it back. And he was accused by Sangha members of thieving. And he actually had to leave the order. It's because it's no longer his and he took it back. Which is really strange to anybody else in the world. But that's basically it. Strange, yeah? So it makes you think about ownership.

So we've got this relationship of identity with something. And remember that happiness, real happiness in the sense of an absolute happiness, is when we fall into the emotion of happiness. We become the happiness. When you watch an uproarious film and

you're just laughing your head off, great guffaws and all that, you, the guffaw in the film, become one and the same thing. When a comic comes on and you're laughing your head off, you, the comic, you lose that sense of me watching television. You're just there within the laughter.

And that's one reason why you get people doing these dangerous sports, because in a dangerous sport, you've got to give your whole attention and you lose yourself in the sport, canoeing down rapids and stuff like that, which are dangerous in themselves, which mean that there has to be a heightened sense of awareness. You've got to be right there with the moment, and there's a sheer joy of the adrenaline coming up. And you lose yourself into it, and it becomes like an addiction to try and get back into the zone.

These moments of happiness, when we're completely happy, paradoxically is when we don't know it. As soon as you come out of that happy state, you've lost it. There may still be a feeling of happiness, but actually there's something in you which knows that the happiness is on the way out. It's gone. So it's one of these little paradoxes about identity.

And it's the same, of course, on the negative side, when you identify with a hellish state with something. Just for that one moment. That's what you are.

So, we have to take a little step even further back there to find out where this sense of identity originates. So, in our meditation, when we sit there observing, feeling, things like that, we've accessed this observation post. There's a lovely phrase that comes from Nyanaponika, his book, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* is still a classic, really worth reading. And there's some body up here somewhere, somewhere a couple of, I don't know, centimeters or so behind this point here, which is looking, feeling, and knowing everything from this sort of place. And from that place, we've detached from the body. It's no longer us. There's the body. That's why we use these noting words and we don't put the sense of I feel something. There's just the feeling. So we're trying to make it quite objective. Same with emotions, same with images that come to the mind.

So that sort of disengagement, that sort of pulling ourselves, pulling this awareness out of its confusion with this psychophysical organism. Just be able to see it.

And it finds itself as being this very objective observer, objective feeler, objective experiencer. But of course, it can't be that either, can it? It can't be what it's aware of. The perceiver can't be the perceived. So this sense of "I am looking, I am feeling," that sense of self there—right there—that can't be you either. Is that correct? Not vigorously, please.

See, so there's something that is aware of itself. There's something that is aware of itself. Now, the only time that we experience that, so we say physically, is when you look in the mirror. So when you look in the mirror, you're aware that this is your face. But you know it's not your face. It's actually just a mirror image of your face. And of course, it's the wrong way around, isn't it? It's not how people see you.

You've all done the two mirror trick. I always ask that. Who hasn't done the two mirror trick? Fancy. Oh, you haven't lived. You've got to do the two-mirror trick. So you've got to look into a mirror, and you've got to take a second mirror that looks into the mirror. And you've got to catch your face in this mirror, because it's turned around again. Well, it's a horror thing, isn't it? It's like listening to your own voice for the first time. Or worse, seeing yourself in a video.

So there's something about that sense of self. Now, I came across this—I remembered this myth of Narcissus. And in Greek psychology, of course, it's about a wrong self-love, a pride, I think. And he looks into the pool and falls in love with himself, as you might say. And, of course, he goes to embrace it and falls into the water. Water is always, remember, an image of creation in mythology. So here we have, from a Greek point of view, somebody who falls in love with themselves through a sense of pride and what-not. But it works brilliantly as an image for our essential delusion.

And the important thing to grasp is that we actually fall in love. We're actually in love with ourselves. That's the basic platform. We wake up—I know sometimes, well, sometimes you wake in the morning and you say, "Here I am again," and sometimes you wake up and you say, "Oh, not you again." But prior to that, you see, there must be a moment where this awareness becomes aware of itself. But it can never see itself. The eye cannot see itself. The nose can't smell itself. If the nose had a constant odour of, say, I don't know, curry, how could you—everything else would be ruined by it.

So the sense bases are completely clean of exactly what it is that they are aware of, that they sense. So this awareness, you see, can never know itself as an object. And therefore that sense of self-awareness must be a delusion. So the mirror image. So now, what technique, what can we do to undermine that very deep delusion? Because that's our primary object. The primary object we make is this awareness coming into the mind and catching its own image.

How do we experience that image of the self? It's a presence, isn't it? It's a sense of presence. Whenever you're awake, there's always you. There's always a sense of presence. Now that sense of presence is a feeling image of the awareness in the mind. So it's as though that now has to become the object to observe and to really see whether in fact it's permanent or not.

Now in Buddhist psychology, in the human being, the Buddha talks about these five aggregates. So the first one is the body. But it's not the physical body that you might think of. It's often translated as that, just our physicality. But you have to ask yourself, what is it you actually know of your body? Do you know what your liver is doing? Now, see? Have you any idea what's happening in your brain? Did you know it was mostly fatty substance? That's what they tell me anyway.

Did you know that your body has 10 trillion individual cells? And they're all screaming for whatever. And you also host 100 trillion guest cells, which are helping you do things like digest. Did you know that the cornea of your eye changes once every week? Every week, you can look at the mirror and say, "You weren't here last week." And they tell you that every atom in your body has changed every seven years. This is what they say.

So it's not as though we know the body. The body has its own little life form. Who knows what? What we can know is how we experience the body. And that's where this business of pain, pleasure, and all that comes in. So that's the first aggregate, is how we experience the body. And the basic experience of the body is the breath. It starts with the breath, and then we have what's known as the four elements, the four great elements, which is fire, earth, water, and air. And these refer to temperature, pressure, elasticity, connectivity—can't think of the word—and movement.

So whenever you drop down below pain, the image of pain, and you go into the pain, then you're at the level of the body itself. Not the body itself, but how the mind experiences the body. That's your first heap, just an aggregate of sensations and feelings.

And then the next one is feelings. Feelings are physical and mental feelings. Not to be confused with mental states. They're what mental states create in the body as a feeling. So when you feel heavy because you're a bit depressed, that's the *vedanā*, that's the feeling. And according to the Buddha, all these feelings are feelings. There's no need to differentiate them apart from the fact that some of them are coming from the body into the mind and some coming from the mind-heart into the body. So that is the connection there.

Then there's perceptions. So these are, remember, your photocopies that you make. And these grow into concepts, concrete concepts, even abstract concepts. And what they do is they make you look at the world in a certain way.

And then the fourth one are your *saṅkhāras*. So these are your mental states. These are what we're referring to when we talk about our habits, the way that we can become happy, the way we become sad, and so on and so forth. The mental states that we're in.

And finally, consciousness. Now, the problem is translation. And the Buddha himself has problems trying to find the right word to express what he wants to express. And the words change depending on the situation. So in the Pali there's two major words. There's *citta* and *viññāṇa*. *Citta* refers to what we would normally have called in the old days the soul. Not the everlasting spirit, but the soul meaning this combination of heart and mind, which we split. In our age of enlightenment we took rationality and feeling away from each other.

So bringing them together as one composite. So what you think you feel and what you feel you think. And if you look at every time you think of something you'll see the heart's in there somewhere. And when the heart moves you'll see there's a thought related to it. So it's not as though they're completely separate. They're working one off the other. But they're obviously two different modes.

And all these things have to be held somewhere. They have to be held somewhere to be known. So that which knows is awareness. But something has to hold it long enough for it to be known. And that's the screen. That's the screen of consciousness. So when we talk about consciousness, we're not talking about—we're not talking about the process of that, the process of reasoning. We're not talking about the process of emotions and moods. We're not talking about the process of perceiving. We're talking about some sort of multidimensional screen that just for a moment holds the totality of that moment for us as we experience it through this psychophysical organism.

So if I stub my toe, on the screen there just comes pain. Right. That's the first. And then that disappears. And then the reason why I stubbed my toe. Right. So I'm getting this chopped up momentary screenings of what's happening in the present moment. And so fast is this screening that it's all joined together into a continuum. And that's where we perceive some sort of continuity when it's not there. And the continuity gives us the impression of everlastingness. And that gives us the impression that it's always me. I never change. All these other things are changing, but not me.

And that's one of the core insights of the Buddha, that the sense of me, the sense of self, is also arising and passing away. Right? And that's what he means when he says that there is a self, but it's not a self. Because in those days, the self would have referred to something that we might refer to now as an everlasting soul or a spirit. Now, this self that we're talking about is that mirror image, which is being held every so often on that screen, and we get a sense of the feeling of presence there.

So in your meditation, you see, when everything's quite calm and you're watching the breath and et cetera, et cetera, in that calmness, turn towards that sense of presence, right? And make it an object that you're looking at. Okay? And in that way, you're

coming to distance away from the mind at that initial level of contact. And becoming more and more aware that what is aware is not part of that matrix, of the body, heart, mind matrix. And that's the process of awakening. The awakening is in the awareness. Awakening is in the awareness. It's not in the mind.

And one of the other understandings that we have is actually awareness that's suffering. That's suffering. It's suffering. It's the awareness that is suffering. Through that wrong identity. So the body doesn't suffer. The body just has pain. Correct? The heart doesn't suffer. The heart just has emotions. You can distance from them. See? Thoughts are hardly suffering. They're usually just flitting little things. So there's something in us which, through its wrong relationship, is actually causing suffering for itself.

And that's the Buddha within. That's where the search for the end of happiness, the end of suffering, as well, that's where the search for the end of suffering is coming from. It's not coming from the body. It's not coming from our emotional or mental state. It's coming from this essential nature seeking its own liberation. So when you actually contemplate that, you can see how subtle it is. The problem is in the seeing. It's not in what is being seen.

I'll give you an example of that from when I went to Sri Lanka. I was standing with one or two monks and there was this barking going on. And I couldn't work out what this barking was. And it's monkeys. I didn't know monkeys barked. And I said to them, when they said, "Well, those are monkeys," I said, "Where are they?" They said, "They're up there." And they pointed to this tree. And for the life of me, I couldn't see any monkeys. I said, "I'm looking up there." I said, "Where?" I couldn't see. They said, "There's a whole troop of them. There's about 20, 25 of them up there." And I'm looking and looking and looking. And then just suddenly, woof, I can see these monkeys. They're everywhere. And it's because my eye wasn't trained to see. See?

And in that delusion, I would have gone away and said, "Well, monkeys are ghosts. Only some people could see them." There was a case of somebody who was born blind—I read this little article—who was given sight. And the psychiatrist who was helping him would take him to places. And the one that he mentioned was a zoo and took him to a cage where there was an ape. And he couldn't see it. I mean, an ape in the cage. You could not see it. So he took this man to a statue of an ape. And he felt it with his eyes closed so that he got a mental picture of it. And when he went back to the cage, he could see the ape.

So our search for liberation from suffering, from our own personal suffering, is the sharpening of this internal seeing. And the Buddha gives us these cues, he gives us these clues as to which way to approach it. So it's the impermanence, impermanence,

but radical impermanence. It's not that something is changing, it's that something is arising and passing away. Now when we say that something is arising and passing away, we're not talking about the physical world as we know it, or as we don't know it. We're talking about consciousness. Consciousness arising and passing away. See? See? And consciousness is just a mirror. But it seems so real to us. That's the problem. It seems so real.

And then there's this whole business of relationship that comes up because of this essential delusion of always trying to protect myself. Remember that our relationship is one of love. So I'm acquiring things so that I can feel safe. I feel so much safer if I have a billion in the bank rather than just a few pounds. And I collect things. I collect friends. Makes me feel safe. I collect objects. See, that acquisitiveness is really trying to make me feel safe.

Now, when I feel safe, I obviously don't want anybody to disturb me, to disturb my happiness that I've got now from this security. And so the aversion comes. Anybody who's going to upset me is an enemy, whatever it is. And, of course, if the enemy's too big, I've got to run for it. So there's your three basic attitudes arising out of that delusion: acquisitiveness, aversion, and fear.

And from then, when we act out of that, by the way we think, by the way we speak, and by the way we act, we're actually creating our ethical creations in this world, and they, of course, have consequences. They not only have consequences outwardly, but they have consequences inwardly. So the more you feel fearful, the more you'll hate. The more you hate, the more you fear your enemy. I mean, the paranoia is just there within us. The more you have, the more you're afraid of losing.

So it's really going beyond that and recognising that when you look at the spiritual traditions, the people whom we really honour, like Jesus Christ, St. Francis of Assisi, they don't have anything. I mean, I'm a monastic. I'm not supposed to have anything, but I've got a lot. I've got my mobile phone for a start, which I'm very afraid of losing. So you see, this idea of letting go of something is to be manifest in the way that we actually live. And that brings us back to our ethics.

So we've really been around the houses this evening, my goodness. So we started off by talking about ethics and the fact that there's a feedback. If you look at your ethics and you begin to behave more beautifully, it has an effect on your general attitude to life, which brings you its insights, that it works. Even if people hate you, at least you yourself are peaceful. I mean, you might be the most peaceful person in the world, full of charisma. Somebody out there is going to want to shoot you. I mean, it's just as simple as that.

And there's this other way where we are investigating ourselves, which again brings about a change of attitude and then becomes systemic in the way we behave, the way we think, the way we behave. So that whole process is one of insight and ethics, and you can't separate them.

And the original ethical stand was falling in love with ourselves. That's the problem. And it's coming back to that level and really investigating that sense of presence, a sense of self, which is really cutting to the core of the problem. And that's exactly what the Buddha found on that wonderful day.

Oh, I can only hope my words have been of some assistance that I have not caused even greater confusion. That by your devotion to insight, practice, and ethical standards, you may be liberated sooner rather than later.

"Can I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"Yeah. Because earlier on today you said that—"

"I agree with you entirely. No, it's not a case of getting rid of enjoyment. It's a case of getting rid of indulgence. Indulgence means that your sense of happiness is now dependent on preparing food, making sure that somebody's going to eat it, making sure that you like it. You see what I mean?"

There's a whole process of attachment to it whereby you're presuming that when you do this, you're going to feel happy. And that's different from a spontaneous joy that comes up when you are preparing food for preparing sake. When you're feeding people just for the sake of feeding people, not to make yourself happy.

I mean, that's the paradox. The more we do good without thinking of ourselves, the more happiness arises spontaneously and naturally within us. That's the bit about non-attachment. And in that, which is slightly more difficult, is, of course, we have to do it for ourselves as well without becoming attached. So preparing food for ourselves, just by ourselves, is to take a joy in that. Now, if there's a sense of loneliness there, that tells you that for you food isn't enjoyable unless somebody else is talking their heads off and eating at the same time.

It's like, if you can actually sit down and in the same way prepare food very carefully for yourself, for the benefit of your body, and the joy comes up in having treated yourself with kindness, that's love. But as I say, these distinctions are very close together.

And we'll never get rid of the attachment until the essential delusion of self disappears. So you've got to work at it. But at least we can undermine it by recognizing when that indulgence comes in.

For instance, in relationships... When does love turn to control? When does love get confused with control? It's a really essential point. Because at the point of control, the other person is no longer a person, they're an object to feed your needs. So every time you're angry with somebody, bored with them, if they're angry, they're not doing what you want. If you're bored with them, they're not making you laugh anymore. And you go through the whole thing of all these negativities and it's all coming from the point of view of this person is here to make me happy.

So you can always tell when the indulgence is not being fed. The difficulty is knowing when you're feeding the indulgence because it's so close to love and enjoyment. What a drag. Very good.

How are we doing for time? Somebody give me a time slot. Twenty-two past eight. Oh, that's not bad. So if we take a break, and then we'll come back and finish the evening off.

Ethics, Not-self and Liberation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1h06

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the profound relationship between ethics and liberation, situating the Buddha's teaching within the Axial Age alongside figures like Confucius and Socrates. He explores how ethical conduct (sīla) and insight into not-self (anattā) form an essential feedback loop in spiritual development.

Drawing on the Buddha's three knowledges from his awakening night, Bhante explains how defilements (kilesa) are created through our actions and perpetuated by habitual mental formations (saṅkhāra). He shows how our fundamental delusion lies in falling in love with a mirror-image sense of self - like Narcissus seeing his reflection.

The talk offers practical guidance on transforming daily activities into spiritual practice through right relationship and connection, moving beyond Western individualism toward genuine community. Bhante emphasizes that while we cannot force insights, we can skillfully work with our ethical conduct and observe the arising and passing of our sense of presence and identity.

This teaching integrates the five aggregates (khandha) with practical meditation instructions, showing how awareness itself suffers through wrong identification, and how the path of liberation requires both ethical purification and penetrating insight into the impermanent nature of consciousness.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambhodassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambhodassa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambhodassa — Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully self-awakened one.

I thought this evening to wander around this notion, this understanding of not-self and ethics.

The Buddha belonged to what's known as the Axial Age. It's quite a lift in terms of human consciousness at the time, 2,500 years ago. So we have Confucius and Lao Tzu. Confucius turned what was empty ritual into something meaningful, coming from the heart. Moses, of course, got rid of all these mammon and established a single god, but most of all, an ethical code, which wasn't based on the power of gods or trying to appease gods. And then you have Socrates at the same time, who brought rationality to the fore, undermining superstition. And in the Buddha's own country, people like Mahanta and others who were really trying to investigate consciousness, which was, I

think, more of an Indian thing rather than to do with relationship to the world, although of course it came about. It was, I think, a peculiar investigation by Indians into what was consciousness as such.

And so he belongs to that rise of understanding in human society. Of course, even today, not many of us have risen to that, but at least it stands as a standard where we can aim.

In the Buddha's time, the distinction between the world and consciousness wasn't so objective as we might think these days through our scientific revolution, where the West pulled rationality completely out of its connection with the heart and created this very scientific way of looking at the world. And, of course, we've got all our knowledge from it, all these subatomic physics and the technology that goes with it. But there's a loss of connection to the heart.

And the first people who revolted against that, of course, were the romantics. People like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Schelling, and Wordsworth. They all rebelled against this hard science which really understood the universe as some sort of mechanic, a car. Everything was like a jigsaw. All you had to do was fit it out. It was a machine. God became the God outside the machine that he'd created.

The Buddha himself stands within a tradition which is not so technological. Still carts and oxes and all that. All his imagery is about agriculture. But this huge interest in consciousness and what that meant. And I think in those days, as I think it was for the ancients, even Socrates, I'm not sure he made such a distinction, but the world as we experience it is the only world that consciousness can offer us. So through the mind and body, whatever we're aware of is, as far as we're concerned, the world.

We might think that the world exists out there or know through science that the world exists out there. There's meant to be light years away, all these planets and galaxies and solar systems. But actually, we don't know that. We don't know that by our personal direct experience. And indeed, neither do scientists. What they get is light from who knows when. They only presume that it's carrying on. Might have all finished light years ago.

So the Buddha's not really concerned with that. There's a telling passage where somebody asks him, where does the world come to an end? Where does the world come to an end? And he said, "That's not rightly put. That's not the right question to ask." He says the question that should be asked is, where does the world not find a footing? That's a completely different question.

And what he's pointing to is a level of awareness or an attainment of an awareness which doesn't belong to the world. So what he means by the world is everything that the body, mind and heart can create. So it's everything you see and feel, your thoughts. All that belongs to the world of present day consciousness, moment to moment consciousness. And he's saying that there's something that transcends that. Not touched by any of it, not touched by any of the senses, including the mind. And he states this as the end of suffering.

So why is it that ethics is so important? That's the question that really begs an answer because you might think well the awakening is really just a matter of contacting this level and making it and holding it there and that's about it really. And that's the end of the job. So it's a process of just insight, just sitting, just keep looking, looking, looking, and eventually the penny will drop.

But somehow he interlocks really deeply our whole behavior in terms of our thinking process, of how we relate to people. And this goes back to what's known as the three knowledges that came to him when he was awakened. The first one was that all the defilements had gone. He had no more defilements in his heart. So that's also an ethical statement. There was no defilement left in his heart. There was no anger.

And then he said that he saw all a series of his past lives where he saw that they were driven by his ethical decisions. So in the three knowledges, his awakening is not described as some blissed out state. It's telling you what there isn't there. And what there isn't there are these defilements. And then he says that these defilements were originally created by me through a series of lifetimes.

And then the third one was that he saw beings moving from realm to realm dependent on their ethical decisions, their morality. So what was a personal law for him became a universal law. And he even included animals. Now that might be a bit strange to us, but there are clips on YouTube now where, without any doubt, at least the higher animals do make ethical decisions. But maybe not quite as consciously as we do. Some of you might have got my news bite about the panther, the black panther. Did you get that?

So, where does the problem of relationship begin? And how does it manifest? And how is it we get it wrong? So the process that we're going through is twofold. We're actually trying to understand how we create this mess. And we're also going through a process of purification, where we begin to allow these defilements, that's what he calls them, defilements, to arise and pass away. And the process of insight meditation is that dual process.

So it's not a process of developing the heart. That's done by other exercises such as *mettā* practice. And through action, through actions, compassionate, loving, joyful. Don't forget joy. Everybody talks about compassionate love. Forget joy. You can actually be joyful and rejoice in somebody else's joyfulness. That's also part of the Buddha mind that we're trying to develop.

So this opening up to our own hearts in the meditation is part and parcel of allowing these defilements to go. In the Buddha's own experience, even though he was liberated during that moment, there was still what's known as *vāsanā*. *Vāsanā* are leftover habits within the mind. And so it is said that for seven years, Mara the evil one chased him with his three daughters. Sensual desire, sexual desire, and... Now those of you who know, you mustn't say. But those of you who don't know, what was the third one? Have a guess. So there was sensual desire, sexual desire, and... Yes. Did you know? No. Well done. Fantastic. Very rare anybody gets that. Yes, and boredom.

Because as we discussed this morning, boredom is the engine that pushes you to seek more and more excitement, seek something different to do. And it took seven years for these, for Mara to finally leave him. His daughters insisted that if they kept going, they'd get him. But he gave up. And what he says is, the Buddha sees me. See, the Buddha sees me.

Now, of course, that's put in a mythological sense. When we, in our meditation, observe our defilements come up, be it their anger or something exciting or planning, just the seeing of them releases us from their grasp, just to be able to see them. This seeing, of course, also means to feel them, to actually experience them as they arise and pass away within that awareness, that consciousness.

So we've got these mental defilements coming up, and they are habits. They are known as *saṅkhāras*, habits that we have created ourselves. And the essential thing about the *saṅkhāras* is that they are empowered through will. So the Buddha goes as far as to state that an act and the act of will, in his sense, are one and the same thing. Will and an act are one and the same thing.

So when we find ourselves thinking about something which is unpleasant and we're indulging in it, that's actually, there's got an act of will in there. And the same as when we speak something or when we act. And even when we do it unwittingly, even when we do it unintentionally, as it were, there's actually been a moment of intention.

So we talk about habitual unethical actions and really empowered ethical action, when you really decide to murder your rival. That's a clear decision in time that you are actually going to murder them. Not that you do it unintentionally. So often a lot of our thoughts that come up and we get dragged into are just because of these habits. And what we discover in our meditation, of course, is that they're incredibly powerful.

And that even if we struggle against them, they're always there in the background. Even if we become acutely aware of our greed, there's always these little sneaky little selfishnesses where we take the biggest slice of cake. So these are very sneaky little things. And so the ability to actually see these things is a liberation.

But remember, we're not entirely liberated from them because then there has to be the decision not to engage. And that's what we're learning through our meditation, that no matter what unethical thoughts or habits come up, we can distance from them and refuse to engage.

Of course, the danger there is that in the refusal to engage, you're actually very subtly pushing them away. And we push things away out of aversion and fear. Those are our repressive measures. So one thing we come to be aware of is that there's an internal mechanism whereby we make things worse.

So here comes the old greed, and then there's the empowerment of the greed by way of indulgence. Here comes a little hateful thought about somebody and we empower it because we actually enjoy it. Yeah, of course we do. We enjoy getting angry with people and biffing them on the nose. There's a certain enjoyment in it. Otherwise we wouldn't do it.

So when it comes to depression, we don't want to go into that mental state, so we push it away, push it away by distracting ourselves. So a lot of the pleasures that we have in life are empowered not only because we enjoy them and indulge them, but because they're ways of not facing up to this other horrible stuff. And that's why addictions are so difficult to get rid of. And I'm not talking about big, heavy addiction. I'm just talking about biscuits and things like that.

So, in a sense, when we understand that, then we see where the struggle is, where when the Buddha's last words are, strive diligently. He doesn't say hang about and think about things and investigate. It's strive. Sampādetā is a very strong word. It's not work at it. You've got to work at it. And you can see from our meditation that the work is not only something that you can do the once and then you'll never be greedy again. These snakes appear and crocodiles, they appear constantly. As soon as we see something that we have a relationship of indulgence with, then immediately the greed for it arises.

So these saṅkhāras, our internal habits, are really to be known. So that's what the Buddha says. You've got to know how they arise. You've got to know how to let them go and let them disappear. And you've got to know how, in such a way, that they never arise again. Of course, they never arise again until the deep fundamental problem is sorted out. And that's to do with identity.

So in one way of looking at the path, it's put in these three different ways: *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*. *Sīla* meaning morality, *samādhi*, concentration, and *paññā*, insight. And it's funny that as he describes the Eightfold Path, he comes down from the insight path, and the insight becomes systemic. So once you have insight into, for instance, how indulgence creates suffering, this has to move into an attitude. That's your second on the Eightfold Path, *sammāsaṅkappaḥ*, right attitude. You've got to change your attitude to indulgence.

Many—Noreen, whom some of you know, does a course, an email course. And there was one young fellow there who, the exercise was around seeing greed and whatnot. And one young fellow wrote back and said that once he'd begun to do this practice, he just wasn't enjoying things as he wanted to. So he wasn't ready for that. And he would stop the exercise. It just shows how deep is our commitment to greed. And that commitment manifests also in all the other negative stuff too.

So this *sīla*, this morality in the path comes after that. It comes after right attitude. Then you get this right speech, right action and right livelihood. But the way that we can also see it is that you can go the other way. So you can start looking at our ethical behavior and that will also begin to change our attitude. The more we change our attitude, of course, it has to come back into the way we understand things. You can't change your attitude and not also change your understanding.

So the path is a feedback, it's a loop, it's a feedback loop system. And you lose nothing by really putting the accent of your spiritual life into right relationship, which might be a definition for ethics. Ethics is basically how you relate to human beings, to animals, nature. And by putting the accent on that and seeing how we relate to those things, and how we're creating suffering for ourselves, but also situations where other people might suffer.

Remember, we don't cause other people to suffer, but we can definitely create situations where it's very difficult for them not to make the decision that they're going to suffer. So it's a case of recognizing that we also have a responsibility to create situations for other people that they may not make these wrong decisions.

So by coming back onto that, you immediately change your attitude and that attitude is one of connection. Another word for connection is love. So love is in its most universal sense a sense of interconnectedness, a sense of an interconnectedness with the all, as the Buddha would say, which is the all within our consciousness. And to make that connection as the connection demands.

So sometimes, as you know, there can be a certain directness, a certain—what's that word? Not aggressive—thank you very much—assertiveness. You can be very assertive and not seem kindly, but it's exactly what was needed in that particular situation. And other times, of course, you can be very warm-hearted, compassionate. So it's a sensitivity that we have to develop towards any situation we're in.

And that means that you've got to launch your attention outwardly into other people around you, into the animals you see, into nature and all that. And to, as it were, not only take this very isolated position of me in the midst of all this. So the me has to turn towards a connection which produces a we, a communion, a community. So all that, of course, is part and parcel of this growing ethical relationship to the world.

One other way of perhaps talking about ethics is to try and create situations which are to our own benefit. The Buddha talks about our own benefit, the benefit of somebody else. You might do something which is not to your particular benefit but to somebody else's benefit, and to both of myself and to another. And in that relationship you have that connection, it's always demanding a certain generosity. And that generosity has that ability to make that connection real, because you're giving. You're giving something of yourself, whether your wealth or your time for the benefit of others.

And at times you're giving it to yourself. Sometimes you deserve a biscuit. Very rare, of course, but occasionally you might say, well, I deserve a biscuit.

So it's a case of recognising that ethics is beginning to change our attitude. And as you move outward towards people, move outwards towards nature and animals and all that sort of stuff, of course, you find the opposite, that they're coming towards you. That's the point. They're coming towards you. And that's where the interconnectedness, shall we say, becomes more real for us. Because we realise that the whole thing is some sort of theatre piece. It's a sort of play that we're in. A serious one. If you want to take a Hindu image of it, a dance, or a Mahāyāna one, Indra's net. Everything is interconnected and those interconnections are holographic. They contain everything else within themselves as potential.

So our behaviour in ordinary daily life, the way we act in ordinary daily life, is this constant effort to see the situation more fully, not just myself isolated as an individual. I remember that's very much a Western thing, this individuality business. I do my own thing in my own way in my own time, to hell with you lot. And that sort of individuality causes us to disconnect with people, tremendous loneliness, and with it, of course, anxiety. And somehow we have to reverse that process and begin to make these connections to create a sense of community, even if the people whom you're with have no sense of community at all.

So you're catching the whole situation where everybody's these individual little pods looking after themselves. And we've somehow got to make that connection with them and to see that they are undermining potential by only turning in towards themselves, only what I want. And that by opening up to that, your relationship changes somewhat, and it opens up for them the possibility of changing their relationship.

On a negative side, who's the Russian-American author? Atlas Shrugged. So the arch – I mean, it's funny that she was Russian, coming from presumably a communist background, this sort of arch-individualist, where it's up to you. You're the one that has to make the world. You're the one who makes decisions, and the world you live in is completely manufactured by you. You did it. And so all these people in Silicon Valley, one or two of them anyway, believe that the billions they've got is all because of me. I did it. Without me, this would never have happened.

Now, in a sense, of course, there is a touch of truth in that. They probably instigated it. They probably had the first idea, like Steve Jobs. I mean, really a man who had these wonderful little ideas. But to say that all these billions came because of me, to hell with the workforce, to hell with everybody else who's putting their little chips, is just an insanity. I mean, you're so isolated, they should put you away.

So it's a case of recognising that the West especially got itself into this corner. See, the Eastern people don't think like that. I saw a program on China, and there was a young woman there saying that she felt that they thought differently. They thought more in terms of community. That sort of bringing in other people in some sort of connection where you don't see yourself as forging ahead, the lone pioneer, creating the world just for yourself. And that's very much, of course, the Buddha's own way of looking at things.

So here we have somebody who has this tremendous insight. And for one moment, as you know, those of you who know the story, he doubts whether anybody would understand it. He discovers something which is so extraordinary. And there's nothing like it being taught anywhere else, remember. And he doesn't think people would really

grasp it. And he says, it would be just an annoyance to me to try and do it, constantly trying to make people understand this sort of stuff. But then, in the myth, this great god appears and tells him that there are some with only a little bit of dust in their eyes, and so off he goes.

And there's a lovely little telling tale of how he learns how to be a teacher. So remember, the insight doesn't make you a genius. It doesn't make you a teacher. It doesn't make you anything else. So on the way back, on his way to see these old companions of his, that's his first thought, he'd go back to these companions that he'd struggled with. He meets this another ascetic, his name doesn't come to mind, and the ascetic sees him and he sees the charisma, he sees perhaps the glow that's coming from him in terms of this enlightenment that he's just experienced. And he says to him, you're amazing. Who is your teacher? How did you attain this? And he says, I am my own teacher. I am the saviour of the world. I am the fully liberated one. And the guy says, all right, okay. And nods his head and off he goes.

So he must have learned pretty quick that's not quite how you get the message across. And when he actually meets his old companions, it's completely different because there he sees that he goes back to an old relationship, a friendship with them. And there's a whole process of discussing. And while he's discussing with them what he's discovered, which are slowly being formalised in his mind, he constantly asks the questions, have you ever heard me speak like this? So as he's talking to them, he interrupts himself and he says, have you ever heard me speak like this? Have you ever heard me say anything like this? And just very slowly, they're sort of attracted to his teachings and actually all become fully liberated in these wonderful stories.

So this whole business of relationship goes right back, in terms of the Buddha's teaching, right back to him. And that he didn't just sit there with a sign saying, do not disturb, I'm fully liberated. But actually he got up and walked. So from Bodh Gaya to where he found his people over in Sarnath, which is in Varanasi, just north of Varanasi. I can't remember, it's a few miles, about 300 or 400 miles. India's a big place. So it wasn't as though he thought I'd just nip down to Dublin and have a little chat with my old mates. You've got to walk.

So here we have this teaching about *sīla*, about morality. And what we're saying is that if we keep our attention on that, this is something we can actually do. You can't make a decision to have an insight. You can't say, well, look, I'm going to sit down now and I'm going to have a great insight and liberate myself. It just doesn't work. It doesn't work like that. So we can't make ourselves have an insight. Insights come when the conditions are ripe.

But what we can do is really correct our behaviour and become much more aware of how the delusion is manifesting, the essential delusion to do with the self. And that's pretty easy for us to perceive. And through the meditation, if we can maintain a certain level of awareness in daily life, so don't find ourselves rushing and all that sort of stuff, but try to maintain a certain calmness, then we should slowly change these habits. Slowly allow habits that we see as unhealthy to die away, and to build up the good ones through these practices of *mettā*, through goodwill practices, and through having right attitude.

So, for instance, work. It may be that work's hard at this time. It may be that it's meaningless to you. It doesn't have any particular meaningfulness to you. You just ended up doing this work because that's what was on offer. It just brings home the bacon. But you can change your attitude completely and see it as one of service. And then you immediately connect with whomever you're servicing.

There was an example of somebody who was on the coins on these motorways, tolls. And the way she made it meaningful to herself was to greet people when they came meaningfully. What a great day. How are you? Well, that's a sort of connection there. It wasn't just stick the money in there. Looking really glum inside this little box. So she found meaningfulness from it, from just that simple connection. And that, of course, lifts your heart.

So there's all sorts of little parts of our lives. If you keep a diary or keep some sort of log in the morning. Who are the first people you meet? Have you prepared yourself to meet them? So the *mettā* in the morning, if you're going to work and there's people whom you're upset with, if you direct your goodwill towards them, it does change your behaviour to them. And when they see that you're not angry, you're not about to get your revenge, it opens up a little avenue for them to reestablish a working relationship. Not always, but at least one can try.

So there's a whole process there of ethical behaviour which we can actually get hold of. We can actually do something about. But then when we go deeper into that, into ethical behaviour, then of course we come across this business of a self. And really that's where the trouble really lies.

So when the Buddha talks about delusion, he talks about these three things, greed, aversion and delusion, or acquisitiveness, aversion, which also includes fear, and delusion. This delusion is really one of identity. And so the meditation is trying to undermine this wrong identity we have by making everything into an object for ourselves.

So that's the importance of really noting, really creating that space between the knowing or the knower, at this point the knower, the feeler, the one who knows, and really holding that point within ourselves where we are actually not so much sometimes aware of what's happening, but the distance between the knower and what's happening. So for instance, now looking at me, you can be aware just of me, but you can also become aware of the space that is between us. So it's becoming aware of the mental space that lies between the knower, the feeler, the one who is experiencing things, and the actual experience that's being had.

By doing that, we're actually unwittingly disidentifying with it completely, because it's not me. And the noting can be of great help there, because you're actually pointing to it. Say, there's pain, there's an emotional state, there's an image in the mind. Thought's a bit more difficult, but...

So that process of disidentifying, all we're doing is relocating our identity. So the basic identity would be physical. So when we eat something and we just get lost in that beautiful taste, or when we trap our finger in the door, there's just that one moment where we are the body. Me and the pain, there's no separation. And then of course you jump out of it, get all angry and kick the door.

So it's a case of recognising that there is a body self. So what we mean by identity is a loss of self-awareness into becoming what it is we're experiencing. Another example would be watching a DVD. So you can watch a DVD from the point of view of just an interest in the acting or the directing, in which case it always remains something objective you're looking at. But you can also just fall into it as an enjoyment. And you just get lost in the mystery or the criminality or whatever it is. And you lose the sense of me watching the film. Me and watching the film become one. So at that point, you're identifying with all the mentation that's going on created by this film. So you become the mind. You become the heart, become your emotions. So that's what we mean by identity.

So long as there's a sense of self observing something, feeling something, then it's a connection of possession. In other words, what I'm looking at is not me, but is owned by me. So I'm talking internally. I'm talking about pain in the knee. So it'd be my knee. Even though I say I feel anxious, the fact that I'm aware of it means that it can't be me, but somehow I own it. Somehow I'm identifying with it as a point of ownership.

Now, ownership, of course, brings a lot of pain with it, as you know, because even of things that you own, if somebody nips off with your mobile or something like that, I mean, it's a horror, isn't it? It's weeping and gnashing of teeth, anger. Call the police. I

mean, anything arises negatively because somebody's thieved your phone. For heaven's sake. So we don't know. We don't know the suffering behind possession until we lose what it is we possess. That's pretty straightforward.

And when we actually look at it rationally, the only thing you can do with a thing, like a phone or a TV or a car or whatever, is use it. You can only use things. To own it is a fiction, isn't it? It's a legal fiction, which works so long until the thief takes it. And then it's his. It's no good you going around saying, he's got my phone. It's his phone.

I like to make the point of that because there was an occasion in the Sangha, that's the Buddhist order in Sri Lanka, where a thief came and stole this monk's little watch. That's what I remember it as, this little clock. And he ran after the thief and got it back. And he was accused by Sangha members of thieving. And he actually had to leave the order. It's because it's no longer his and he took it back. Which is really strange to anybody else in the world. But that's basically it. So it makes you think about ownership.

So we've got this relationship of identity with something. And remember that happiness, real happiness in the sense of an absolute happiness, is when we fall into the emotion of happiness. We become the happiness. When you watch an uproarious film and you're just laughing your head off, great guffaws and all that, you, the guffaw in the film, become one and the same thing. When a comic comes on and you're laughing your head off, you, the comic, you lose that sense of me watching television. You're just there within the laughter.

And that's one reason why you get people doing these dangerous sports, because in a dangerous sport, you've got to give your whole attention and you lose yourself in the sport. Canoeing down rapids and stuff like that, which are dangerous in themselves, which mean that there has to be a heightened sense of awareness. You've got to be right there with the moment, and there's a sheer joy of the adrenaline coming up. And you lose yourself into it, and it becomes like an addiction to try and get back into the zone.

These moments of happiness, when we're completely happy, paradoxically is when we don't know it. As soon as you come out of that happy state, you've lost it. There may still be a feeling of happiness, but actually there's something in you which knows that the happiness is on the way out. It's gone. So it's one of these little paradoxes about identity.

And it's the same, of course, on the negative side, when you identify with a hellish state with something, just for that one moment. That's what you are.

So, we have to take a little step even further back there to find out where this sense of identity originates. So, in our meditation, when we sit there observing, feeling, things like that, we've accessed this observation post. There's a lovely phrase that comes from Nyanaponika, his book, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* is still a classic, really worth reading. And there's somebody up here somewhere, somewhere a couple of centimetres or so behind this point here, which is looking, feeling, and knowing everything from this sort of place. And from that place, we've detached from the body. It's no longer us. There's the body. That's why we use these noting words and we don't put the sense of I feel something. There's just the feeling. So we're trying to make it quite objective. Same with emotions, same with images that come to the mind.

So that sort of disengagement, that sort of pulling ourselves, pulling this awareness out of its confusion with this psychophysical organism. Just be able to see it.

And it finds itself as being this very objective observer, objective feeler, objective experiencer. But of course, it can't be that either, can it? It can't be what it's aware of. The perceiver can't be the perceived. So this sense of "I am looking, I am feeling," that sense of self there — right there — that can't be you either. Is that correct? Not vigorously, please.

See, so there's something that is aware of itself. There's something that is aware of itself. Now, the only time that we experience that, so we say physically, is when you look in the mirror. So when you look in the mirror, you're aware that this is your face. But you know it's not your face. It's actually just a mirror image of your face. And of course, it's the wrong way around, isn't it? It's not how people see you.

You've all done the two mirror trick. I always ask that. Who hasn't done the two mirror trick? Fancy. Oh, you haven't lived. You've got to do the two-mirror trick. So you've got to look into a mirror, and you've got to take a second mirror that looks into the mirror. And you've got to catch your face in this mirror, because it's turned around again. Well, it's a horror thing, isn't it? It's like listening to your own voice for the first time. Or worse, seeing yourself in a video.

So there's something about that sense of self. Now, I came across this — I remembered this myth of Narcissus. And in Greek psychology, of course, it's about a wrong self-love, a sort of pride, I think. And he looks into the pool and falls in love with himself, as you might say. And, of course, he goes to embrace it and falls into the water. Water is always, remember, an image of creation in mythology. So here we have, from a Greek point of view, somebody who falls in love with themselves through a sense of pride and whatnot. But it works brilliantly as an image for our essential delusion.

And the important thing to grasp is that we actually fall in love. We're actually in love with ourselves. That's the basic platform. We wake up, I know sometimes — well, sometimes you wake in the morning and you say, "here I am again," and sometimes you wake up and you say, "oh, not you again." But prior to that, prior to that, you see, there must be a moment where this awareness becomes aware of itself. But it can never see itself. The eye cannot see itself. The nose can't smell itself. If the nose had a constant odour of, say, I don't know, curry, how could you — everything else would be ruined by it. So the sense bases are completely clean of exactly what it is that they are aware of, that they sense. So this awareness, you see, can never know itself as an object. And therefore that sense of self-awareness must be a delusion. So the mirror image.

So now, what technique, what can we do to undermine that very deep delusion? Because that's our primary object. The primary object we make is this awareness coming into the mind and catching its own image. How do we experience that image of the self? It's a presence, isn't it? It's a sense of presence. Whenever you're awake, there's always you. There's always a sense of presence. Now that sense of presence is a feeling image of the awareness in the mind. So it's as though that now has to become the object to observe and to really see whether in fact it's permanent or not.

Now in Buddhist psychology, there are — in the human being, the Buddha talks about these five aggregates. So the first one is the body. But it's not the physical body that you might think of. It's often translated as that, just our physicality. But you have to ask yourself, what is it you actually know of your body? Do you know what your liver is doing? No, see? Have you any idea what's happening in your brain? Did you know it was mostly fatty substance? That's what they tell me anyway. Did you know that your body has 10 trillion individual cells? And they're all screaming for whatever. And you also host 100 trillion guest cells, which are helping you do things like digest. Did you know that the cornea of your eye changes once every week? Every week, you can look at the mirror and say, "you weren't here last week." And they tell you that every atom in your body has changed every seven years. This is what they say.

So it's not as though we know the body. The body has its own little life form. Who knows what? What we can know is how we experience the body. And that's where this business of pain, pleasure, and all that sort of stuff comes in. So that's the first aggregate, is how we experience the body. And the basic experience of the body is the breath. It starts with the breath, and then we have what's known as the four elements, the four great elements, which is fire, earth, water, and air. And these refer to temperature, pressure, elasticity, connectivity — can't think of the word — and movement. So whenever

you drop down below pain, the image of pain, and you go into the pain, then you're at the level of the body itself. Not the body itself, but how the mind experiences the body. That's your first heap, just an aggregate of sensations and feelings.

And then the next one is feelings. Feelings are physical and mental feelings. Not to be confused with mental states. They're what mental states create in the body as a feeling. So when you feel heavy because you're a bit depressed, that's the *vedanā*, that's the feeling. And according to the Buddha, all these feelings are feelings. There's no need to differentiate them apart from the fact that some of them are coming from the body into the mind and some coming from the mind-heart into the body. So that is the connection there.

Then there's perceptions. So these are, remember, your photocopies that you make. And these grow into concepts, concrete concepts, even abstract concepts. And what they do is they make you look at the world in a certain way.

And then the fourth one are your *saṅkhāras*. So these are your mental states. These are what we're referring to when we talk about our habits, the way that we can become happy, the way we become sad, and so on and so forth. The mental states that we're in.

And finally, consciousness. Now, the problem is translation. And the Buddha himself has problems trying to find the right word to express what he wants to express. And the words change depending on the situation. So in the Pali there's two major words. There's *citta* and *viññāṇa*. *Citta* refers to what we would normally have called in the old days the soul. Not the everlasting spirit, but the soul meaning this combination of heart and mind, which we split. In our age of enlightenment we took rationality and feeling away from each other. So bringing them together as one composite. So what you think you feel and what you feel you think. And if you look at every time you think of something you'll see the heart's in there somewhere. And when the heart moves you'll see there's a thought related to it. So it's not as though they're completely separate. They're working one off the other. But they're obviously two different modes.

And all these things have to be held somewhere. They have to be held somewhere to be known. So that which knows is awareness. But something has to hold it long enough for it to be known. And that's the screen. That's the screen of consciousness. So when we talk about consciousness, we're not talking about — we're not talking about the process of that, the process of reasoning. We're not talking about the process of emotions and moods. We're not talking about the process of perceiving. We're talking about some sort of multidimensional screen that just for a moment holds the totality of that moment for us as we experience it through this psychophysical organism.

So if I stub my toe, on the screen there just comes pain. Right. That's the first. And then that disappears. And then the reason why I stubbed my toe. Right. So I'm getting this chopped up momentary screenings of what's happening in the present moment. And so fast is this screening that it's all joined together into a continuum. And that's where we perceive some sort of continuity when it's not there. And the continuity gives us the impression of everlastingness. And that gives us the impression that it's always me. I never change. All these other things are changing, but not me.

And that's one of the core insights of the Buddha, that the sense of me, the sense of self, is also arising and passing away. Right? And that's what he means when he says that there is a self, but it's not a self. Because in those days, the self would have referred to something that we might refer to now as an everlasting soul or a spirit. Now, this self that we're talking about is that mirror image, which is being held every so often on that screen, and we get a sense of the feeling of presence there.

So in your meditation, you see, when everything's quite calm and you're watching the breath and et cetera, et cetera, in that calmness, turn towards that sense of presence, right? And make it an object that you're looking at. Okay? And in that way, you're coming to distance away from the mind at that initial level of contact. And becoming more and more aware that what is aware is not part of that matrix, of the body, heart, mind matrix. And that's the process of awakening.

The awakening is in the awareness. Awakening is in the awareness. It's not in the mind. And one of the other understandings that we have is actually awareness that's suffering. That's suffering. It's suffering. It's the awareness that is suffering. Through that wrong identity. So the body doesn't suffer. The body just has pain. Correct? The heart doesn't suffer. The heart just has emotions. You can distance from them. See? Thoughts are hardly suffering. They're usually just flitting little things. So there's something in us which, through its wrong relationship, is actually causing suffering for itself.

And that's the Buddha within. That's where the search for the end of happiness, the end of suffering, as well — that's where the search for the end of suffering is coming from. It's not coming from the body. It's not coming from our emotional or mental state. It's coming from this essential nature seeking its own liberation. So when you actually contemplate that, you can see how subtle it is. The problem is in the seeing. It's not in what is being seen.

I'll give you an example of that from when I went to Sri Lanka. I was standing with one or two monks and there was this barking going on. And I couldn't work out what his barking was. And it's monkeys. I didn't know monkeys barked. And I said to them, when they said, "well, those are monkeys," I said, "where are they?" They said, "they're

up there." And they pointed to this tree. And for the life of me, I couldn't see any monkeys. I said, "I'm looking up there. Where?" I couldn't see. I said, "there's a whole troop of them. There's about 20, 25 of them up there." And I'm looking and looking and looking. And then just suddenly, woof, I can see these monkeys. They're everywhere. And it's because my eye wasn't trained to see. See? And in that delusion, I would have gone away and said, "well, monkeys are ghosts. Only some people could see them."

There was a case of somebody who was born blind — I read this little article — who was given sight. And the psychiatrist who was helping him would take him to places. And the one that he mentioned was a zoo and took him to a cage where there was an ape. And he couldn't see it. I mean, an ape in the cage. You could not see it. So he took this man to a statue of an ape. And he felt it with his eyes closed so that he got a mental picture of it. And when he went back to the cage, he could see the ape.

So our search for liberation from suffering, from our own personal suffering, is the sharpening of this internal seeing. And the Buddha gives us these cues, he gives us these clues as to which way to approach it. So it's the impermanence, impermanence, but radical impermanence. It's not that something is changing, it's that something is arising and passing away. Now when we say that something is arising and passing away, we're not talking about the physical world as we know it, or as we don't know it. We're talking about consciousness. Consciousness arising and passing away. See? See? And consciousness is just a mirror. But it seems so real to us. That's the problem. It seems so real.

And then there's this whole business of relationship that comes up because of this essential delusion of always trying to protect myself. Remember that our relationship is one of love. So I'm acquiring things so that I can feel safe. I feel so much safer if I have a billion in the bank rather than just a few pounds. And I collect things. I collect friends. Makes me feel safe. I collect objects. See, that acquisitiveness is really trying to make me feel safe.

Now, when I feel safe, I obviously don't want anybody to disturb me, to disturb my happiness that I've got now from this security. And so the aversion comes. Anybody who's going to upset me is an enemy, whatever it is. And, of course, if the enemy's too big, I've got to run for it. So there's your three basic attitudes arising out of that delusion: acquisitiveness, aversion, and fear.

And from then, when we act out of that, by the way we think, by the way we speak, and by the way we act, we're actually creating our ethical creations in this world, and they, of course, have consequences. They not only have consequences outwardly, but

they have consequences inwardly. So the more you feel fearful, the more you'll hate. The more you hate, the more you fear your enemy. I mean, the paranoia is just there within us. The more you have, the more you're afraid of losing.

So it's really going beyond that and recognising that when you look at the spiritual traditions, the people whom we honour, really honour, like Jesus Christ, St. Francis of Assisi, they don't have anything. I mean, I'm a monastic. I'm not supposed to have anything, but I've got a lot. I've got my mobile phone for a start, which I'm very afraid of losing. So you see, this idea of letting go of something is to be manifest in the way that we actually live. And that brings us back to our ethics.

So we've really been around the houses this evening, my goodness. So we started off by talking about ethics and the fact that there's a feedback. If you look at your ethics and you begin to behave more beautifully, it has an effect on your general attitude to life, which brings you its insights, that it works. Even if — even if people hate you, at least you yourself are peaceful. I mean, you might be the most peaceful person in the world, full of charisma. Somebody out there is going to want to shoot you. I mean, it's just as simple as that.

And there's this other way where we are investigating ourselves, which again brings about a change of attitude and then becomes systemic in the way we behave, the way we think, the way we behave. So that whole process is one of insight and ethics, and you can't separate them. And the original ethical stand was falling in love with ourselves. That's the problem. And it's coming back to that level and really sort of investigating that sense of presence, a sense of self, which is really cutting to the core of the problem. And that's exactly what the Buddha found on that wonderful day.

Oh, I can only hope my words have been of some assistance that I have not caused even greater confusion. That by your devotion to insight, practice, and ethical standards, you may be liberated sooner rather than later.

"Can I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"Yeah. Because earlier on today you said that..."

"I agree with you entirely. No, it's not a case of getting rid of enjoyment. It's a case of getting rid of indulgence. Indulgence means that your sense of happiness is now dependent on preparing food, making sure that somebody's going to eat it, making sure that you like it. You see what I mean?"

There's a whole process of attachment to it whereby you're presuming that when you do this, you're going to feel happy. And that's different from a spontaneous joy that comes up when you are preparing food for preparing sake. When you're feeding people just for the sake of feeding people, not to make yourself happy.

That's the paradox. The more we do good without thinking of ourselves, the more happiness arises spontaneously and naturally within us. That's the bit about non-attachment. And in that, which is slightly more difficult, is, of course, we have to do it for ourselves as well without becoming attached. So preparing food, say, for ourselves, just by ourselves, is to take a joy in that.

Now, if there's a sense of loneliness there, see, that tells you that for you food isn't enjoyable unless somebody else is talking their heads off and eating at the same time. It's like, if you can actually sit down and in the same way prepare food very carefully for yourself, for the benefit of your body, and the joy comes up in having treated yourself with kindness, and that's love.

But as I say, these distinctions are very close together. And we'll never get rid of the attachment until the essential delusion of self disappears. So you've got to work at it. But at least we can undermine it by recognizing when that indulgence comes in.

For instance, in relationships... When does love turn to control? When does love get confused with control? It's a really essential point. Because at the point of control, the other person is no longer a person, they're an object to feed your needs. So every time you're angry with somebody, bored with them, if they're angry, they're not doing what you want. If you're bored with them, they're not making you laugh anymore. And you go through the whole thing of all these negativities and it's all coming from the point of view of this person is here to make me happy.

So you can always tell when the indulgence is not being fed. The difficulty is knowing when you're feeding the indulgence because it's so close to love and enjoyment. What a drag.

Very good. How are we doing for time? Somebody give me a time slot. Twenty-two eight. Oh, that's not bad. So if we take a break, and then we'll come back and finish the evening off.

Exploring Dukkha

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 43 min

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines dukkha - often translated as suffering but more accurately understood as unsatisfactoriness or life being 'a hard place.' He explores the three types of dukkha, beginning with ordinary suffering rooted in wrong view and the psychological cycles that perpetuate our distress.

Drawing on the Buddha's core teaching, Bhante explains how our meditation practice offers a third way beyond suppression and indulgence - the transcendent position of mindful awareness. Through developing Right Awareness (sammā sati), we learn to objectify our experiences rather than identify with them, discovering the liberating insight of anattā (not-self).

The talk weaves together practical meditation guidance with profound psychological insights, explaining how we construct our experienced world through mind and how the three characteristics - impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and not-self (anattā) - work together to deconstruct our fundamental delusions. Bhante emphasizes that awakening comes through understanding rather than force, offering hope that small tastes of nibbāna are available in daily life through practices like mindful eating and letting go of unnecessary desires.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

The Buddha's teaching is a mandala. It doesn't matter at which point you enter it. You end up touching all parts of its petals, and somewhere along the line you touch the base. It's one whole teaching. It makes sense in the whole. Just occasionally I allow myself to wander around and see where it takes me.

So my entrance point is this little word which is central to the Buddha's teaching: *dukkha*. This word *dukkha* has various etymologies put to it, the roots where it comes from. One of the strangest ones, I think — because in those days the early commentators were creative in their etymology; if a word sounded like something else, it must have its root there — is an axle and the rod which goes into the bracket doesn't fit properly. You get that? It's not... you get that crunch. But the one that's most obvious is just a hard space or a hard place.

So what the Buddha is saying is that this life is a hard place. If he had left it at that, we'd have been stuck in the existential horror of just being in a hard place and not being able to make much sense of it. But through his own investigations, he discovered at least the psychological cause for it — the deeper causes, but at least the psychological cause — which we translate slightly badly as desire. And then, of course, the announcement that there is an end to it. There is an end to *dukkha*. It is possible to come to an end to *dukkha*, which is not annihilation, by the way.

So what does he mean by *dukkha*, this word of a hard place? Well, the first one is rather comically called *dukkha-dukkha*, which means just the suffering of ordinary suffering. I don't think I have to go into that too deeply. That's just the pains in the body, the emotional states we come across. Even these pains in the body are not, strictly speaking, what he's referring to as *dukkha*, although they are unpleasant.

These emotional states that we get into, these mental states, have their root cause in some sort of wrong view. We aren't seeing things properly. We don't have a right perspective. And this perspective causes us to form wrong relationships. That wrong relationship includes within it a whole set of emotional responses which we end up as conditioning. These emotional responses, because we can't find our way out of them, reinforce the original wrong view. So we get caught up in this cycle.

This cycle of going round and round — that's the root meaning of the word *kamma*. That's what we mean in Buddhism by *kamma*. It's not, strictly speaking, what happens to you on the outside. You can also call that *kamma*. But in terms of what we're trying to do, which is come to the end of suffering, this *kamma* that the Buddha is referring to is these cycles within our own head. These cycles within our own head, of course, are then projected onto the world and we keep recreating similar situations. And through our dullness, we blame the other. It's got to be my parents. I would never have ended up like this were it not for my mother. Comes in for a lot of stick, poor mother. And then there's society, education, educators. Oh my goodness. Everybody has caused me this dreadful suffering.

So this sense of ordinary *dukkha*, this sense of ordinary suffering, has its root cause in some sort of wrong view. We're not seeing things properly. We'll come to that in time. Our meditation is concerned with undermining that whole process. That's what we're doing when we practice *vipassanā*. *Vipassanā* is not simply a correction of view — that's its actual main point. But fortunately, as one of the gifts of *vipassanā*, the purification of the heart takes place of its own. You don't have to do anything to purify the

heart. In fact, if you try to purify your heart, then it's a bit like the blind leading the blind. It's the very deluded part of ourselves which is trying to do something about the effects of its own delusion. And you just end up being in a mess.

So when we're sitting here and this *dukkha*, these mental states arise, what possibilities have you got? What can you do about them? One side, of course, is to suppress it, to turn away from it, turn your attention somewhere else. If you feel lonely, turn the TV on. Easy enough. But it's there, you see. It's a conditioning within the mind. That hasn't been dealt with. So we know that from our own Western psychology. And it sits there, just bubbling away, boiling away, burning, burning. This is the Buddha's old expression of burning.

The only other side is to indulge it. If you indulge loneliness, you get into self-pity. Why me? And that self-pity simply fuels that sense of loneliness more and more. Eventually you end up on Westminster Bridge on Prozac.

So here we are, we're stuck with a feeling of me wanting to do something about myself. As soon as I want to do something about myself, as soon as I want to change myself, I have to engage in this state of mind. This engagement leaves me with two options. I can either suppress it, try to destroy it, kill it, turn away from it, ignore it — or try and do something about it and get involved in it. Both sides, we begin to realize, are actually going to cause more suffering. More suffering.

Through vipassanā, we discover this third position. If you imagine a triangle, and the base is this suppression-indulgence, suppression-indulgence, suppression-indulgence, creating this vicious circle. And at the top of the triangle, or the cone perhaps, the circle of the cone — that's good, I never thought of that. Yeah, that's good. The vicious circle at the base of the cone. That's a good one. And as you climb up the cone, as you lift yourself out of that involvement with what the heart is presenting you, you're discovering a transcendental position. It's transcendent of this game, of this play. It's transcendent.

Because now you're able to discover a place where you're looking at something. You're no longer involved in it. When you shift your consciousness to that point, when you lift yourself up to become the onlooker, the experiencer of what is going on inside you, you've discovered a different level of consciousness. It's not the same as a consciousness which considers itself to be emotional: "I am happy. I am sad." It's not the same as a thought consciousness: "I think, therefore I am." And it's not the same as a body consciousness: "I am this body." It's something which is, shall we say, transcendent of all that.

Discovering a position where it objectifies, it turns into an object, everything that previously in our lives we've experienced as a subject: "This is me." As soon as we do that, you see, we have, as it were, discovered the understanding of *anattā*, this very difficult doctrine of not-self.

Now, when the Buddha talks about not-self, that's not a philosophical or metaphysical position. He's not saying there is no self. If he were in his day to say there is no self, then he would have been in this constant argument with people who said that there were. He didn't have to argue. The *anattā* doctrine, the doctrine of not-self, is just a skillful tool with which whatever you experience — whatever you experience, within yourself or without yourself — can be looked at and you can say, "Well, this is not me. This is not me." Which doesn't deny the fact that there may be something. We'll come to that in a bit. It's just a very skillful tool in which we can say, "Well, this is not me."

That's the purpose of accessing that level of consciousness. Because every time you experience something — a pain in the knee — you can look at it, you can feel it, you can sense it, and because of that distance you've created, because you haven't fallen into the error of suppressing it, turning away from it — "I don't want to feel this" — or indulging it — "Oh, my knee" — all that stuff. Because you're there, just feeling, sensing, experiencing the pain, you see, it's an object. You're looking at it. If it's an object, it can't be the subject. It's as simple as that.

Even though I say it's as simple as that, when the pain gets too heavy, of course, if you feel that your knee is just about to explode, all that lovely doctrine disappears. This not-self business takes us so far, but when it comes to the hard point, then we immediately collapse into the old level of consciousness of being a human being.

Level of consciousness here, not to be confused with a state of mind. What I'm referring — the word in the Pali, for some of you who know, is *citta*. So, a state of mind is, you know, whether you're happy, whether you're sad, the thoughts that go around that, the physical feelings that arise with that. All that, you can say, is a state, a state of mind, you can say.

A level of consciousness is concerned with how we understand things. So one of the obvious leaps of consciousness that happens to the vast majority of human beings happens to us around about the age of seven. Two important things happen to us around about the age of seven. First of all, we shift from a universe which has no basic moral laws to one in which suddenly there is right and wrong. So this is the truth within the myth of the Garden of Eden. The other thing, of course, is that we stop believing in our imagination as being real. It has to be reality-tested.

That's why now we are in this pitiful situation of being unable to believe that Father Christmas will come down that chimney and present us a present. Which is sad, isn't it? I mean, those magic days, they've all gone, they've disappeared. We now live in this rather terrible reality. So that shift, you see, is a change in the way that young consciousness understands and sees the world.

When the Buddha's talking about the process of awakening, in our language, in our terminology, it is a movement within consciousness itself. Because the root problem lies in consciousness itself. It's consciousness itself that knows which doesn't know properly. That's why it's so difficult for us to awaken. Because that which is trying to awaken is that which is deluded. And the whole definition of delusion is that you don't know where the delusion is. If you knew where the delusion was, then you wouldn't be deluded.

So here's the Buddha with his very clever teaching saying, "Listen, don't worry about who you are. You don't get involved in that question of who you are, but who you are not." If you can find who you are not, eventually you should end up finding out who you are. So the doctrine of *anattā*, the doctrine of not-self, is a teaching tool. It's not a philosophical statement.

In our meditation, through the process of distancing from what we experience, that little distance which objectifies what we're looking at is taking us backwards. So we're not the body, we're not the emotion, we're not thought. And then we're stuck with this: "I must be the thinker, the knower, the witness," you see. So now we make that final mistake of thinking that we are that consciousness itself.

The mistake there is one of, shall we say, a mirror. When you look at your face in the mirror, generally speaking you believe that's how people see you. Big mistake! Because they see your face the other way around. It's only when you use two mirrors do you realize how big your ears are. I was very upset with my sister. I was surprised at the size of my ears when I cut my hair off. It can hurt, you know. So it's coming to recognize that what we see in the mirror isn't actually what people see.

Now, when this knowing, this awareness — I'm just using the word consciousness — just, you know, awareness, there's many words for it: sense of being, sense of presence, the now. There's all sorts of ways that writers try to explain this level because it doesn't happen in our language. We don't have an actual word for it, in a sense. The closest we get to it is intuitive intelligence and intuition.

When we're at that level, you see, this consciousness feels its presence within the mind. A good example of that is when you're watching TV and you can see yourself in the screen watching TV. Now you can decide: are you going to watch TV or watch yourself watching TV? But as you're watching TV, you're aware of that thing. So there's a slippage. There's moments of consciousness which are absorbed in the TV program, but also switching over to this image that you see of yourself in the television screen. So it's oscillating like that.

That's what's happening when we are very much self-aware of being the onlooker, the witness, the feeler, the experiencer of what it is we're actually experiencing — whether it's a pain, an emotion, a sound, something we're looking at. That's why in meditation there's always this accent of bringing ourselves back into the present moment. The immediate present moment which isn't any longer than a millisecond, if that. And that's what we mean by this concentration.

Now whenever you say to somebody "concentration," you always get this tension. "You've got to concentrate." Knitted forehead. I remember as a kid getting a clout on the back of the head because you weren't concentrating. This idea of force. But actually concentration comes about mainly through interest. Did you have any problem with concentration when you were interested in something? It doesn't arise, does it? If you're interested, there's an immediate giving of oneself to what you're actually doing.

So, in our meditation, again, there is this wanting to know. I mean, that's the essence of this Buddha mind within us. It wants to know. And that wanting to know, if you join into it, will draw you into the investigation of things that are arising and passing away. And that in itself is strong enough to actually make us focus in and in to a single point.

But when that single point appears — very occasionally, virtually impossible on a weekend retreat, I'm sorry to say, although I know that you are good enough probably to get there — there is that single point where there isn't time for that reflection. And those are the moments of pure vipassanā. Those are the moments when this consciousness is experiencing itself in its purity. And at that point, to confuse matters, the object-subject relationship collapses. There's no object and there's no subject. There's just that direct experience.

We get it occasionally in our lives as adults. It's very difficult for us to get that. It's like you'll get it, for instance, just for a moment when you trap your finger in the door. There's just a single moment there of pure pain, and there's nobody experiencing it. It's only the moment afterwards that you say, "Oh, my thumb." Just that moment of absolute pure stillness within the present moment.

So when you're meditating, you see, and you're watching the rising and falling of the breath and you're looking at its quality of transience, you're looking at the quality of its process, what you're trying to do is to see it more and more closely so that you begin to break up the idea that somebody's breathing, that there is anything called a breath. That's only a mental idea.

All there are are minute moments of sensations arising into consciousness. It's from these minute moments of sensations that the mind is able to build up a concept whereby you can hold a certain length of time within which you call it the in-breath or the out-breath. And that's all mentation. That's all done in the mind. The only thing that's actually happening in terms of input are these little sparky moments of sensations.

To get down at that level is to deconstruct the way we construct the world around us. It's to begin to see that everything that we experience is being totally, completely manufactured by the mind. Everything. Even this room — you wouldn't doubt the objective existence of this room in the sense that if we all left, the room would disappear. The room has, in a sense, its own being, using that word very loosely. But when we walk into this room, there aren't as many rooms as there are people here. Because each of us experience the room in our own way. So in this sense, you see, we're living in a world which is completely mind-made.

This *dukkha* that we're looking at, one of the ways that the Buddha talks about it is *loke dukkha*, *dukkha nirodha*. It's in this world that there is this suffering, this unpleasantness, whatever, and there is an end to it in this world. And when he defines "in this world," he defines it as this body, mind and heart. In his terms, it would have been, for those of you who know, the five aggregates.

So this whole world that we're living in which has no doubt an objective existence outside us is recreated by us and we have to live in it, we have to live within that creation. Now what we do of course is to project all our ways of looking onto the world we're living in, and if that projection is wrong, if that projection is unwholesome, unskillful, then it's not surprising that the world should mirror that back to us.

So, for instance, if I have an angry disposition, I shouldn't be surprised that people should get angry with me. Because I'm exciting in them. There's a resonance between us, isn't there? Even though there's no direct contact within our emotions, there's a resonance. So we can feel another person's emotions against our own hearts. So if I go into a situation angry, that resonates. So everybody comes back at me angry. Or fearful, or run away, which is preferred.

So this unwholesome place that we found ourselves in, is slowly being manufactured by us. The first of it is to do with this wrong view, this me, this mind. That's where its root is.

Now, if you really think that this body is what you are, taking it at that absolute basic level, if you think this body is what you are, then two things, isn't there? First of all, it has to be protected at all costs. That's the first basic thing, isn't it? That's what we want from our government. We want safety first. Prosperity next, but you definitely want safety first. So we try to make the world safe. Safe at all levels.

That safety, of course, overreaches itself. And we feel far more safe with a million pounds in the bank than 10,000. Or than none, definitely. So there's that accumulation, that greed. And that greed steps into other people's territory. You can see how the world, especially at the moment, through our economic system, is just constantly trying to fill this gap, this lack, this feeling of any minute now something terrible could happen. So I have to surround myself with security.

Consider, consider the amount of money spent on insurance, all through fear. And silly things like, you know, that council that wanted all those flowers taken away from lampposts in case they fell on somebody's head, which they hadn't done for 1,500 years. Now, of course, it may happen, who knows? And it would have meant some sort of compensation, the fear.

So this self that we have, this idea of self in the body, seeking safety means that subconsciously it lives in a state of fear. So the root emotion of the self is fear. And we touch that when death approaches us. We touch that fear when death approaches us.

Now, once we have the understanding that the more I accumulate, the safer I feel, then of course anything which approaches that safety from a negative point of view is seen as an enemy. You get your aversion, you get your pushing away. And of course if you can't, if what you're pushing away is too big, then you run for it. So that fight-flight syndrome is the other side of the self, presuming always that this is what I am.

Through the process of our insight, as we disengage from that, as we deconstruct all that sort of wrong understanding, the fear lessens. You begin to live in a more benign world. Now there comes a point through the process of awakening when a person knows quite distinctly that they're not this body. So the fully liberated person has no doubt whatsoever, they know they're not the body. So you can see if you now are absolutely certain within yourself through your personal experience that you are not the body, what can frighten you? And that's really why we say that the liberated person doesn't have any fear, can't have fear. There's nothing there to be fearful about.

Now, how do we begin to undermine that sense of self, you see? First of all, it's to use that technique of distancing within our meditation where noting something is like pointing at it. So when you've got a pain in the knee, if you say, "pain, pain," you're already distancing from it. You have to be careful with that technique because it might be a way of pushing it away. You know, "pain, pain." It's more like an acknowledgement, a clear acknowledgement. And once you've steadied yourself to go towards it, to plunge into the experience of it.

Same with our emotions, no matter how painful they are. To distance for a moment and say, this is an emotional state, whatever it might be. Despair, all that sort of stuff. And then once you've gained that equanimity, once you've gained that position of courage to go into the emotion and to stay there and just watch it as feeling, just as sensations.

If we can stay at that level, you see, it loses its name. Despair is just an awful sickly feeling. Fear is just an awful sickly feeling. And you can stay there with it. And all the time, you're just allowing this state, what is it? An energy. That's all it is, a turbulence. To express itself. All these emotional states, remember, all they're saying is, you know, listen to me, I'm very afraid. Help. They only want to tell you how they feel. That's all. And to allow that to happen is the process of liberating ourselves through understanding dukkha, through understanding suffering.

So, the distancing allows us to understand that this is not me, not mine, undermining that fundamental position that we have, that this is me, I am a human being. I am in a sense of continuous, continual am in a sense of forever. There's this feeling that you're never actually going to die. Everybody else does but it might happen tomorrow. So it's that case of undermining that and then of going into what you're being presented with to actually see how we create the suffering. So how do we create these mental states?

So that's when we begin to discover this split of indulging and suppressing, indulging and suppressing, indulging and suppressing. That process of psychology which is called in Buddhism the wheel of dependent origination, sometimes they call it interdependent origination, is the psychological teaching of the Buddha. And as far as I've read from people who should know better than me, it was completely new within Indian literature. There was nothing like that sort of psychology until the Buddha came.

And the Buddha begins with this lovely word, *avijja*, which means not knowing. So this consciousness that we've been talking about begins from a position of not knowing. Sometimes it's translated as ignorance, but that gives it a sort of pejorative, heavy, you know, like you're stupid. But it's not that, you just don't know. And from this not know-

ing, it begins to build up a world. So this world is built up around the middle part, where we experience the world as pleasant or unpleasant, and then we try to that accumulation.

Now that process of accumulation, that process of attachment, that process of holding on to things, grasping on to things, that's what's meant by this word desire. And unfortunately that word desire covers also desires that we ought to have. Desires such as wanting to meditate continuously. So you have to be careful with that word desire. Sometimes it's translated as craving, which is over the top. It's desires which arise from a wrong view of self.

And what we build up, the picture of the world that we build up and live in, in this uncomfortable way, you see, when you hit the root, when you hit the root of this not-self, when you begin to see it's not me, not mine, you're actually taking away the foundation. So the whole pack of cards just falls. It's not a case of having to go back step by step. It's as soon as you see something, the whole delusion collapses.

So for instance, if somebody were to come up on the street and give you a kick in the butt, and then you turn around and they ran off, you might go away thinking, you know, that's the worst thing that's ever happened to me in my life. You know, how could anybody do that? And you'd be angry and furious. And then you read in the evening news that it was somebody who'd lost their bottle and was going around kicking people in the butt. And they suddenly think, oh, well, the guy was a lunatic. Suddenly, everything's forgiven. He's just gone off his rocker. There's a sudden forgiveness, all because of a change of understanding, a change of view. So that's all we're doing. We're trying to undercut the original view we had. And in so doing, this whole pack of cards just begins to crumble.

The third view, so the first is that seeing of not-self. The second is trying to understand how we create this suffering through attachment, through grasping, through aversion, through suppression. The third view is to see the transience of things. To see that everything that we're experiencing is only here for this millisecond and it disappears.

And that's where we get, that's you can see that most in the breath. That's why we always begin with the breath as a certain position. First of all, it's always there, or you've got problems. And secondly, because of its movement, especially in the belly, especially in the abdomen, it's rising and falling. And just to stay with that flow, just to stay with that wave of rising and falling, and if you can, to feel how delicious it is. They're very subtle, gentle sensations.

We always live on this high point of wanting sensation, our sensational life to be sensational. We're always living at that point where we ought to be in a state of gross happiness, jumping up and down. And the point is that there's a much deeper and a much more subtle and a much more gratifying happiness to be found in peace. And that peace is measured or is found in the body in these neutral sensations. Just a state of contentment with just a simple, neutral feeling. And as you get into that, you'll see there's a lovely loveliness there.

Now, you can go down to the river here, you see. Now, that river isn't exciting. It's probably one of the most boring rivers. It just flows and it's flat. There's no ripples, I mean, on this little corner here. There's no ripples, there's nothing, it's just this glass plate which continually changes just slightly catching the shades of light. And if you watch, if you keep your mind on that and just keep watching it, you'll catch its peace. And it's trying to use nature like that or just the starkness of the trees, just the blueness of the sky which never changes in a sense. And just to see that there's a real deeper sense of contentment and happiness in stillness, in quiet, in silence. In fact, one of the epithets of Nibbāna is the noble silence.

Now, when we watch the breath and we're beginning to see actually that that's just a concept. You can't see the belly, you can't see the air. All you have is sensations. And from these little building blocks of little sensations, the mind builds up a concept. The stomachs are rising and falling or the air is coming in and out of your nose. And there's an image there, you can see your nose, or you can see somewhere in your mind, your belly. But behind that, there are just these sensations.

And it's cutting through that, through this process of just looking, just focusing, drawn by interest, that we begin to experience that in fact life is extraordinarily momentary. Now what's the effect on our psychology when we realize that everything is extraordinarily momentary? Well, there's nothing worth holding on to. There's an immediate release. There's an immediate stopping of trying to grasp things, keep things as they are. It's a relief. And one of the things that the Buddha says, which we read out in our little opening ceremony, the taste of Nibbāna is the taste of freedom. It's the liberation from, it's the relief. Every time you get that little sense of relief, of letting go, of just letting be, in all these little pat phrases that you get, these are little touches of Nibbāna.

Tomorrow, I hope I remind you, I probably will forget, as usual, but when you're eating, you see, there's a distinction to be made, these are just my own distinctions of words, between satisfaction and contentment. So if you want satisfaction, you keep eating until you feel satisfied, until you feel completely full, bloated, and you think that's enough, and then you go and have a sleep.

Now, if you practice your meditation when you're eating, and you can feel that draw of greed just for that extra toast. We're promised toast tomorrow. Just for that extra piece of toast and marmalade. And you wait and you know that this is not necessary. This is overeating. Bad for the body. Producing early death. Toast can be lethal. Taken in vast quantities. Once you see that, now hold on, this is greed. And you just hold on in there. And you let the greed come. This wolf. Marmalade after all. And you just wait for the wolf to die. To die, you see. There will come a point where there's no desire in the mind. That's contentment. That is a taste of nirvana.

So it's not as though nibbāna or this awakened state is something which is totally transcendent from what we actually can experience here and now. It's something that we can get little bites of. But you have to acknowledge it because this consciousness does not know that this is actually a better place than satisfaction. It's driven by everything in this society. The whole of our industry, the whole of our advertising is driven to satisfaction. And it's only when you begin to realize that that place actually produces more desire, more greed, a non-end to it, a churning of it, that you begin to realize there must be a better place than this. And that's it. Now, you can't get there without enduring happily, joyously, the suffering. That suffering is not the suffering of hell. That's not going to get worse. That's the suffering of purgatory. That's the suffering of purging.

I was brought up a Catholic and we had these three distinctive realms. Hell, purgatory and heaven. Hell, you were stuck. You couldn't get out of that one. Couldn't even get a drop of water from heaven. Purgatory was a transient state where you went through these sufferings in order to attain the final glory of heaven. Now, in terms of whether these actually exist or not is not a particular consequence to us here and now. But in terms of mental states, definitely. Those mental states that we enter where we see no end to it, the despairs, the sudden impossibility of life, all that, that's hell. Purgatory are those states of mind where we're quite happy to suffer because we know there's an end to it.

So our meditation is 99.999% purgatory. I hold out no great hope for sudden or swift liberation. And neither did the Buddha. He said it was a gradual path and I shall leave you with this quote. Somebody comes to him and says, listen, this training you've got to be doing, very hard, very painful, very awful. And the Buddha said, well, yes, it is. But, you know, you just keep going and you'll attain Nibbāna. And the reply was, Nibbāna, so what? And he says, well, when you get to Nibbāna, you are contented and with it happy. And he's describing his own state of mind, contented and with it happy.

Faith, Hope, and Aspiration on the Path to Awakening

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 19 min

In this nuanced exploration of spiritual motivation, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the critical differences between faith (saddhā), hope (āsa), and aspiration (chanda) on the Buddhist path. Drawing from the early discourses, he reveals how the Pali texts present hope as a subtle form of craving (taṇhā) that leads to disappointment, while distinguishing this from the healthy spiritual aspiration that energizes practice.

The talk explores faith as one of the five spiritual faculties—not as belief, but as confidence and trust that enables investigation rather than hindering it. Bhante discusses how skeptical doubt can paralyze decision-making, while unrealistic expectations about nibbāna corrupt our practice. Through the story of the monk Soṇa and his over-efforting, we learn about right effort and the importance of focusing on process rather than progress.

The discussion includes the four bases of spiritual power (iddhipāda), religious fervor (saṃvega), and the eight contemplations that inspire urgency in practice. Bhante emphasizes that true hope is grounded not in future attainment but in directly seeing the three characteristics of existence—impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and not-self (anattā). This seeing provides glimpses of what nibbāna represents and cultivates the patience needed for authentic spiritual development.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa — homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So we're looking at this idea of hope. At the top of my page, I've got faith, hope, aspiration, expectation, disappointment. So the idea is to define all this and to see what the Buddha is actually saying.

Faith, of course, often translated as confidence or trust, is a foundational virtue. It's one of the five spiritual faculties: faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and insight wisdom. For our purposes, there are two pretty obvious enemies. One is to turn it into a belief system, which would then stop you from investigating. So it's the process of investigation, which is the process of liberation. And the subtle one — and now I'm going to use the word hope because that's how it's defined in the scriptures — is sceptical doubt. We'll come to that a little later.

So we've got to make clear what we mean by faith, and then we can understand a bit more the other stuff. Remember that all our problems root back into this idea of a self, which doesn't like to — it likes to know what's going to happen. It's forever planning, organising the future. And once we come across the Buddha Dharma, we hear about this goal, *Nibbāna*. For some of us anyway, we don't have an idea of what Nibbāna is, and yet there's some sort of hazy concept. And we're told it's the end of suffering, the end of compulsive desiring. That doesn't tell us what the actual experience is.

Even when the Buddha's explicit — so-called explicit anyway — talks about a consciousness without boundary, without an object, full of light, we still have to exercise our imagination to come up with something. And then we have an idea that this is what Nibbāna is. So we strive. The yogi sits full throttle, noting diligently the three characteristics of existence — how we create suffering through wrong desire, impermanence, not-self — but subconsciously somewhere trying to achieve the escape from suffering, which is another way of expressing Nibbāna.

Of course, it ends with disappointment, which it has to do because the subtle aim is not true. We're chasing a false idea, a fake idea. And of course, it's exhausting. You're making this great big effort, getting nowhere.

So what we have to understand is that when we're practising, the purpose is just to see these three characteristics. The subtlety of the Buddha's teaching is to distinguish between an aim, which is a bit fuzzy for us, and the immediate objective which gets us there, which is to observe and examine exactly what's before us, what we're actually experiencing at this moment. And those are the three characteristics.

We've got an example of wrong effort from a monk called Sona. He was desperately trying to get fully liberated and over-efforting. He was about to leave the order when the news came to the Buddha. He goes to see him and talks about tuning a veena — that's an instrument like a lute. Too tight, doesn't work; too loose, you don't get the note. And so ultimately, you've got to get it just right. Getting it right is to do with intention. Once the intention is right, which is just to discover experience, the three characteristics, that's enough. We don't have to worry about the future.

Anyway, you can understand from our life experience that having expectations often leads to disappointment.

Now, in the actual discourses, the word for hope, *asa*, doesn't get good press at all. It seems to be understood as a subtle form of craving. And it's linked to failure and suffering in itself because it's never fulfilled. Somehow it's got to be transcended. So the Buddha talks about *nirāsa*, which we translate as hopelessness. Well, that gets us towards despair. So there must be some misunderstanding here somewhere.

Anyway, I'll give you a flavour of what it says in the discourses. This is one living in hope and one who has abandoned hope. One who is cut off, lost, and one who's at peace. So one who lives in hope is going to be cut off and lost. That doesn't sound so good for us. Then it goes on: hope is suffering in the world. The person who lives with hope is called one who is defeated. When one's hope fails, disappointment arises and it is suffering.

Then we've got a verse from a nun, Mutateri — one of the enlightened nuns of the period — translated by Norman, who's an expert in this. Somehow she says, "That hope which some have here for children and wives and for the love of a woman, such hope does not apply to me." So I don't quite know how that fits her as a woman, but anyway. Again, she's abandoned all worldly hopes, at least.

So you can see that in the scriptures, in the discourses, hope has a shade of yearning for some outcome, slips into expectation.

Now, in the Mahāyāna, it's redeemed, at least in our understanding of hope. But they do use a different word, *praṇidhāna*, which in the Pali, the language of our discourses, is *paṇidhāna*, which means aspiration, a longing. So it fits into the Mahāyāna because of their bodhicitta ideal, which is a heart devoted to awakening through compassion. The Bodhisattva vow, as I think most of you know, is a vow to redeem everyone before yourself. It's a universal awakening rather than a personal attainment. But again, that word — there is a word in Sanskrit, *āśā*, which means hope — it's not used.

So it's all a bit semantic. We have to just work out what this actually means. But of course, in our terms, if there's no hope, then the practice feels as though it's going to run into a cul-de-sac.

If we look at the word aspiration, that I think gets us better on the path. Here we have a word like *chanda*. Chanda is one of the four bases of spiritual power, which I covered in January 2023. I'm sure you all remember it. The other three of the four bases are effort, consciousness, and investigation. We said at the time that these four bases of power can be used in ordinary daily life. You need obviously a desire to attain, to achieve something. And then you need the effort to get there. You need consciousness, of course. And then you need the ability to figure out what to do — the investigation.

So here we have this word *chanda*, which means a very strong desire. And then we have the word *saṃvega*. The Buddha goes on about *saṃvega*. This is a religious fervour. It's a heartfelt desire to attain something.

Now, in the *Visuddhimagga*, which is the medieval spiritual manual, he points to eight objects which induce this devotion, give us a sense of urgency about our practice. I don't think any of them will come as a surprise. Birth, ageing, sickness and death, of course — contemplating those. Contemplating the idea that if we don't do the practice and we fall into error, we'll end up in one of the *apāya* realms, which is either purgatory — sometimes that's translated as hell, but it's not permanent, remember, thank heavens. And then there's rebirth as an animal or as a hungry ghost, always feeling empty, and in the realm of conflict, the *asura* realm. And of course, finally, as number eight, there is just being here in this world of *saṃsāra*, the world of onward going led by delusion.

But you can see that these realms are also quite obvious to us right here and now in the world. This desire, this eagerness to become liberated, you have to be careful that it doesn't corrupt into expectation. And this is where faith comes in really. We've got faith, which — remember — not a belief. It's a sense of trust, of confidence. Without that, of course, you don't do anything. I mean, the obvious enemy here is sceptical doubt, which is obviously based on, or usually based on, some sort of fear — fear of failure, fear of being fooled and so on.

If we don't have that faith, then you don't make a decision. You can't make a decision. You can't act. And this is true in daily life. It can become a bit destructive. If a person can't make up their mind about someone they're attracted to, a job they've applied for, well, the opportunity just slips away. I had a student actually for a while who couldn't decide whether to get out of bed or not. It can become a bit of a mental illness, I think.

So even if we have this great confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha and the Eightfold Path, it doesn't mean it's unshakeable until we reach first path and fruit. That's when we have such a clear insight into one of those three characteristics of existence that our faith becomes unshakeable. We just know it's right. But until then, there's always a danger of losing it. And one of them is the bad behaviour of monks. Everybody goes around saying it's hypocritical. But the other, of course, is that we have this unrealistic aim. That's the expectation. And then we drop out and we try something else.

Now for some people who achieve liberation, faith is their dominant quality. It doesn't mean to say they don't have to understand or experience the three characteristics of existence. It just means that it doesn't have to be so penetrative. They're driven on

by a sense of devotion. The Buddha qualifies that. He says there are two people: those who are driven by faith and those who are driven by curiosity and usually have a better intelligence in order to achieve a deeper insight.

We have somebody called Puna. He comes up in the Dhammapada. Puna, he was a monk. He said of himself, whenever he learned a verse, a new verse from the Buddha, it kicked the one he just learned out of his head. So he didn't have a very good memory. And his brother told him, "Well, you know, you're just not going to understand the Dharma and you may as well leave and do something useful in lay life."

When the Buddha heard about this, he went to see him. And he knew of the devotion that this Puna had towards himself and towards the practice, that he trusted him implicitly. So he gave him a cloth to rub. And while he's rubbing the cloth, he's supposed to be saying "impermanence, impermanence," just watching impermanence. Well, he became fully liberated. And I don't think it works for everybody, but you can have a go.

So that means that we don't have to have any big intellect to become liberated. It's really to do with opening up the intuitive intelligence, which is the active side of awareness. Remember that *sati* is *satipaṇṇā*. It's a passive awareness, observing awareness — feeling, letting the information come. And then that moment of grasping — that's the intelligence working, the intuitive, grasping intelligence.

What of hope as such, and where does this aspiration come from? We have to understand that there's always going to be a subtle desire of trying to attain something for me. And that's, of course, this *taṇhā*, which translates as thirst. It's a different type of *taṇhā*.

Secondly, we see the impermanence. While we're meditating, while we're actually practising, we can see the role of this *taṇhā*, this desire, and how that's a direct agent of creating suffering for ourselves. While we're practising we see impermanence, we can see things that are insubstantial — they're just arising and passing away, there's nothing that remains. And so every so often by being in that position we come across a hint as to what Nibbāna is.

And here's where our real hope is grounded. It's not in some future attainment. It's grounded in the fact that we can see these three characteristics more and more clearly. And then there comes that patience to await for the great day of awakening.

Just as two asides — because we're embedded in society and the way we live, the way we interact, the way we work, it affects others. So even on a day when we feel depressed, when things aren't going our way, there's the ability to rest somewhere within ourselves in the assurance of the Dharma that gives us an air of acceptance. This is the

way it is. And calmness — this too will pass. And so as we're heading along the path, there comes more and more acceptance, more and more contentment. That's how it works.

It's also of great value when we come to die. To believe on our deathbed that we're dying into some sort of annihilation — it's not a particularly comforting thought. A poor return for a life that's generally done the best it can for the better of ourselves and others. Some say they are accepting this as humanist, but that's, of course, before the dying process.

I struggled myself with this contemplation in my twenties. But of course, at that time, you never believe you're going to die. That's the presumption of youth. Even so, it did lead me to an understanding or to an experience that proved to me personally that death wasn't an end and that it was, in fact, another beginning.

Similarly, when somebody is dying, it makes it easier for us to know that there is a purpose to life and that we don't have to rely on an outer power or a miracle to stop the process, but more accepting of it. We have the example of the Buddha, of course, in his death, that we call the *parinibbāna*, total Nibbāna, which gives us an example of someone who reaches the goal just ready to let go of life. Even as he's dying, he's asking people around him if they've got any last questions. And then he says, "Don't be shy in asking and then regret that you didn't take this opportunity to do so."

So in the actual discourses, when you read it and you come across the word hope and it says it's an absolute waste of time, it's a terrible thing to have, I think it's better to translate it as expectation. And that there is an aspiration, a real grounded hope through the practice. That's where the hope is grounded. That we can see clearly that this desire is the direct cause of attachment, which creates suffering, et cetera. And that we can actually get rid of it. We just don't empower it and it just disappears. And it's doing that until we finally get down to the core desire which arises out of that sense of self — the core desire of wanting to become, wanting to become a person. That's your core, that's the core desire that we're really working with.

So it energises our practice if we do it that way. You just have to be careful it doesn't corrupt into expectation. It's really putting our attention on process and abandoning any — I dare say hope — just not thinking about progress. Abandon progress and put your full attention upon process. That's it.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that by your practice you will find that path to liberation sooner, of course, rather than later.

Fear and Courage

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 23 min

In this exploration of human psychology and spiritual development, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines fear as the most fundamental emotional state dependent on delusion. He explains how the illusion of self creates uncertainty about sickness, aging, and death, leading to protective behaviors and accumulation of possessions, power, and pleasures. Drawing from the Dhammapada (verse 39), he shows how the Buddha promised that all fear disappears for the awakened mind.

The talk systematically explores six areas where courage is needed: physical (facing pain and illness), social (overcoming embarrassment and criticism), moral (standing for right and wrong in complex situations like abortion and immigration), emotional (opening to difficult mental states through vipassanā practice), intellectual (expressing views despite opposition), and spiritual (facing the unknown mystery of nibbāna). Bhante shares the Buddha's own account of conquering fear in the forest, demonstrating how to turn toward fear rather than flee from it.

This teaching offers practical guidance for working with fear as a friend that protects us, while using each encounter with fear as an opportunity to undermine the delusion of self. The talk is particularly relevant for meditation practitioners learning to sit with difficult emotions and for anyone facing challenging life situations requiring courage.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.

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

So, I've chosen this topic of courage, but really, what we're talking about is fear, isn't it? Overcoming fear.

Now, fear is, I would argue, the most fundamental of our emotional states dependent on delusion. This delusion of a self has created a self which feels uncertain because of sickness, ageing and death and all that. Therefore, it has this fear about itself and it reacts to this fear by making itself safe. That's when we start accumulating stuff. So money makes us feel safe. We've got a big bank account, lots of friends and power, of course, and lots of pleasurable things to do. So we keep our mind off these horrible things.

This fear of death or fear of sickness, ageing and all that, has this effect of making us try to escape it. Of course, this is one of the great awakeners. This was the awakener that drove the Buddha to seek liberation: sickness, ageing and death. So it plays a big part in our lives, obviously. It shapes our behaviour whenever we're in any situation which is dangerous or stressful or in any way a challenge. So it's something we need to deal with. I'm sure all of you have to some extent or other. It won't go until the very last moment when the self is destroyed. So it's going to be with us for a while.

We have to see it as a friend. After all, it is trying to protect us, right? So we have to give it a hug. Then we have to open up to it, get the feel of it, and not run away from it. Of course, that running away from it is the panic, isn't it?

If we consider the amount of fear that we have as a measure of the delusion of self, every time we undermine this fear, we're undermining the delusion of self, right? So there is a plus to it.

In fact, the Buddha in the *Dhammapada*, verse 39, tells us that in the end, all fear would disappear. This is what he says: "For one who has awakened, whose mind isn't agitated, whose heart isn't tormented, and who has abandoned both merit and demerit, fear does not exist." So once the mind has been silenced and the heart calmed, and there's no attempt to create *kamma* based on a self, me creating stuff, fear is completely gone. So the prognosis is good. This is what we have to keep remembering.

Now, psychologists have delineated six areas of experience where we experience fear. I'm indebted to Gwen for this, who runs the monthly meeting on climate change, climate crisis. So it's the physical, the social, moral, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. This is sometimes where we need to find a certain level of courage.

The physical, I think, is pretty straightforward—just straightforward with the fear of pain, fear of debilitating illness, etc. Whenever that touches us, we come across this fear and it's being able to sit with the fear, allow it to arise, pass away. That's the courage, the internal courage. Of course, some people have to find that physical courage in daily life. I'm thinking of sports. A lot of sports demand physical courage, especially boxing. I don't know if any of you have done a bit of boxing, but you definitely got to have a bit of physical courage there. And then there are occupations—soldiering. If we think of what's happening now in the Ukraine, both sides demand physical courage. Even the police sometimes need that.

This identity with the body is profound. You can't be here without one. It's the physical representation of our existence. So it's important that whenever this comes to us that we really turn towards it, see it as a friend, see that it's actually trying to protect us and allow, get almost get comfortable with the feelings of fear. That's the big thing. Not to push it away.

So we may use that as a sort of question of ourselves. Has there been a time in our lives when we've been physically timid, when we should have done something? And how do we feel about that? Is there some guilt and shame that we haven't worked through? And then to make these silent inward resolutions that if it's demanded of us, we'll do our best to manifest courage. So that's the physical part.

The social part usually is to do with feeling embarrassed in a meeting. So you don't want to ask a question in case people think it's silly and stuff like that. We're afraid of criticism, saying something which other people will jump down our throats for, things like that. Even expressing ourselves to neighbours, to a neighbour who you know has a different opinion or a different understanding. So that social courage is sometimes really we have to try to express.

Obviously we have great examples of that—Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela. All these people who are out on demonstrations, which are getting to be more and more policed and more danger of being fined and sent to prison. Of course, when you think of countries and the amount of courage you need, like, for instance, that terrible time in Iran, where the morality police murdered that young woman and the tremendous repressive measures that the government took, even capturing people and then hanging them.

We've got, of course, Russia. There's a man called Kara-Murza who is a political activist, journalist, author, filmmaker, political prisoner. So he spoke against the present war and he's ended up in jail for 25 years. Unless Putin is somehow got rid of, he's going to be there for 25 years. And then, of course, there's that Russian opposition leader, Navalny, who's, I think, tremendously courageous. It's unbelievable, really, whom Putin actually tried to poison.

Even if you look back into Russian history, the misery of the Russians is unbelievable. I think it's quite remarkable. And yet they find this courage through, if you remember Stalin's time when the Samizdat, when they were writing poems and all sorts of stuff and passing it on bits of paper to friends, trying to keep the resistance alive.

Of course, there's the investigative journalists, 67 being murdered last year. The most prominent, of course, was when the Israeli forces shot, murdered Shireen Abu Akleh in the occupied West Bank. It's awful, awful, awful.

So again, it's just social courage. It's again an opportunity for us to contemplate where we haven't made our views known out of fear, out of fear of criticism or whatever, being mocked, attacked. Again there might be some shame or guilt around that so you have to work through it. You have to allow it to come up and then to make that resolution: should I find myself in such a situation I'll make my understandings known.

Shading into that is moral courage. It's more to do with right and wrong. I'm reminded now of the 60s, which, of course, is prehistoric now. But we had a person in the UK called Mary Whitehouse who really led the charge against the loss of moral compass. In those days, it was called permissiveness, and people were getting very upset about it. Of course, we did lose the moral ground. We found out about the behaviour of the famous DJ, Jimmy Savile, and then the Catholic priests and all that, and paedophiles. So there was something that happened in the 60s which took away a grounding that we used to have as a society in morality.

But of course, these situations are never absolutely white and black. It's quite difficult to decide. Then we have things like abortion, which in Europe is now a dead subject, really. But we can see the tremendous war that's going on in the United States over it. The usual battle between the mother's rights and the right of the foetus.

I think more upfront these days for us is immigration and the impact it's having on society. No one has a clue. I haven't a clue as to what the answer is to the growing level of immigration. When climate change really begins to bite, presumably it's going to get much worse. These people are coming out of areas of abject poverty and almost unliveable. On top of that, there's the political refugees.

Of course, the danger here is that it pushes society to, the indigenous society, we can say, to defend itself and move over towards fascist regimes, which is happening. We've got Orban in Poland. We've got Meloni in Italy. And this comes out of fear. But it's something that if we want to maintain a liberal society, it's something we really have to tackle.

So again, there's this whole area of morality which demands courage. Has there been a time in the past we could have been more morally courageous? And again, to make that resolution.

The next one is the emotional courage. Well, that points to opening up to these very difficult mental states that we have within ourselves. That's, of course, very much part of our practice of *vipassanā*. Just to allow very difficult mental states to arise and to be able to see the aversion that we have to it, the fear that we have to it, and just to allow that to pass away, and then just to sit quietly with it, to sink into the fire, tie ourselves to the bonfire and just allow it to rage. We do that because that's the healing. Once these emotions have a chance to liberate themselves, of course, what we mistake is that when we begin to create these stories in the mind and it feels like a relief. If you're angry and you go off onto a fantasy of beating somebody up, then it feels like a relief, but actually it's just exercised the anger. It's when you feel it as a physical sensation that it's actually being released. So this, of course, we know through our *Vipassanā*.

There's a little passage here that I've copied from the Buddha who had to tackle fear when he first went out into the jungles: "And while I was staying there, a wild animal would come or a peacock would make a twig fall. The wind would rustle the falling leaves and the thought would occur to me, is this that fear and terror coming? And then the thought occurred to me, why do I just keep waiting for fear and terror?" So instead of that, this is what he determines: "What if I, in whatever state I'm in, when fear and terror come to me, were to subdue that fear and terror in that very state?"

"So when fear and terror came to me while I was walking backwards and forwards, I would not sit down or stand or lie down. I would keep walking backwards and forward until I had pacified the fear and terror. When fear and terror came to me while I was standing, I would not walk or sit or lie down. I would keep standing until I had subdued the fear and terror. And when fear and terror came to me while sitting, I would not lie down or stand up or walk. I would keep sitting until I had subdued that fear and terror. When terror and fear came to me while I was lying down, I would not sit up or stand or walk. I'd keep lying down until I had subdued the fear and terror."

So, in other words, he turned towards it. The word subdue does suggest some sort of suppression, but that's not what he means. So again, if we have a specific mental state that arises that we find very difficult, if it comes up at a convenient time when it's just you by yourself, whatever, just to be able to move into it and stay with it.

Then there's the intellectual. So recently here in the UK, we had a Professor Kathleen Stock, who's a philosopher and a gender critical academic. She's been hounded out of the university that she worked in. There was a whole rumpus at Oxford University, asking her to be cancelled. She basically stated in her book that trans women are not, it's difficult to say, are not the same as born women. Let's put it that way. So that's created quite a rumpus. Of course, she lost the job and everything from it.

This whole area is one where people have to have the courage to speak their truth, you might say. It's a dodgy area because it depends which way you're looking at it. One of the paradoxes of this particular argument is nobody complains about a woman who becomes a man, changes her gender to a male. I presume that's because there's not much problem with that. If a trans man walks into a male toilet, it's not a problem for the men. If they happen to be in the same sport, boxing or something like that, it wouldn't be a big problem for men. But on the other side, it's obviously some women feel threatened by it in hospitals, in toilets and in sport. So it's a difficult area, difficult area.

We need to think about it because there may come a time that we have to express our views, our opinions and feel free to do so. Here in the West, we have that freedom. Interestingly enough, in Hindu or Buddhist countries, and I think also true in the Far East, there isn't this obsession with sex at all. The funny thing is that in the East, Buddhist especially, there's a myth that you're much better off to become enlightened if you happen to be born a man. So many women make the determination to be born a man in the next lifetime. There was a case in Sri Lanka, which is the opposite, where a Catholic bishop became a Buddhist. Towards the end of his life, this is, I think, going back to the 60s, 50s, 60s, towards the end of his life, he determined that he wanted to be reborn as a woman. So he began dressing as a woman and trying to change his gender before he died.

Anyway, it really is just a case intellectually of really being able to hold our views and opinions just a bit more lightly to see them more as perspective. If you hold on to your views and opinions too strongly, I'm right and everybody else is wrong, then there's always conflict. But to be able to be open to critique, to have your views challenged, even nuanced, that really takes courage.

Finally, we have the spiritual courage. There's one little example here, which I think really affected me when I found this out. When the Inquisition started, and they attacked the Cathars, the Albigensians, down in the south of France, what's today the south of France, there was an occasion where about some escaped from the first town that was attacked in Béziers, and they ended up in a place called Minerve, which was a heavily well-fortified small town with a river running through it, etc.

There was a certain Simon de Montfort, who was really quite a cruel soldier. Anyway, they were eventually conquered and he just kept lobbing stones at them with a catapult. When they finally collapsed and they entered into the town, they built a big

bonfire and 140 Cathars threw themselves onto the flames. That's courageous. And ironically, there is a monument to that right in front of the Catholic Church. So that's a bit cheeky.

So in our actual spiritual practice, there is, remember, this whole process of renunciation, of letting go, letting go, letting go. Really, this idea of *nibbāna*, it's a shady idea. The Buddha tells us it's the highest happiness. It's absolutely you want it when you've got it. But we don't know what it is. In the Christian tradition, they talk of the *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans*. So it's the mystery which is both frightening, makes you tremble, and yet it fascinates you. Yet you want to find out what it is. So it's going to take some courage because it's like you're walking backwards towards a cliff. There's a drop coming somewhere.

You know, you've got to let go of everything at some point, but you don't know when it's coming and you haven't a clue what's going to happen when you actually fall off the cliff. So there's a bit of anxiety, fear, existential anxiety around the whole process of spiritual practice. So again, whenever that sort of fear comes up, we just turn to it. The usual thing, give a hug. It's only trying to protect us and make a determination to continue with our practice.

So these six areas just give us a way of examining ourselves. The whole idea of timidity when fear comes and courage.

There is another side to this, which I'll tackle on another talk. And that, of course, is the courage of forbearance, the courage of patience. And the Buddha has a lot to say about that.

Yeah, very good. So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused confusion, and that by your ability to stay with fear, to overcome fear, you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Feeling (Vedanā)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 46 min

In this exploration of vedanā (feeling), Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the second of the five aggregates, tracing how feelings arise from the initial point of contact (phassa) at the sense bases. Drawing extensively from the Pañcakaṅga Sutta, he unfolds the Buddha's detailed classification of feelings—from the basic two-fold division of pleasant and unpleasant, through the traditional three-fold classification, up to 108 different types of feelings when categorized by sense base, time, and spiritual quality.

The talk addresses a fundamental insight: what we truly seek in life is not external objects but the inner feeling of happiness itself. Bhante explores how this understanding transforms our relationship to experience, distinguishing between worldly feelings based on sensual pleasure and renunciation feelings based on seeing impermanence. He clarifies common misconceptions about karma, explaining that not all feelings arise from past actions—many result from present conditions like weather, diet, or current mental states.

The discussion extends to the refined feelings experienced in jhāna states and the ultimate cessation of feeling and perception. Throughout, Bhante emphasizes the practical importance of developing awareness of vedanā in meditation, as feelings form the bridge between sensory contact and the mental proliferation that leads to suffering. This detailed examination provides essential groundwork for understanding how feelings condition our entire experience of existence.

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

So last week, last couple of talks, we covered *rūpa*. The first one was really about the sense bases, how the mind receives information, how it's then processed. And then the second one, which I should have done first, I suppose, was about the body as body as a contemplation object. So it was about movement, bringing mindfulness to movement, the cemetery contemplations, contemplating death and things like that.

So now the next one is *vedanā*. So of the five aggregates, because that's what we're looking at, the five aggregates. And to start with *vedanā*, we've got to go back to the point of contact, *phassa*. So at *phassa*, what we have is some information coming in at

the sense bases. There has to be a sense base and then there has to be this consciousness. So it must arise on some sort of field, a screen upon which it can be known. So those are your three absolutes.

And whatever comes in at that base is very minimal sensation, but it still comes under just about the idea of feeling. The distinction between that and feeling is that when it comes to feeling, it's defined as being pleasant or unpleasant. And the definitions get even more complicated. But at the point of *phassa*, there's definitely a feeling. So some of them are very difficult to catch, like the feeling of photons on the retina. I'm not so sure that can be felt. But the fact that we can actually perceive light, that it's actually touching, is a sign that something must be being contacted.

With the ear, it's a little bit better because at the eardrum, you can actually experience the sound waves just as pressure. I mean, that's possible. And then you really know that there is a point where at the sense base, you're just getting raw data. And then the next thing is it takes it into the mind, the mind door. And it's at the mind door that we begin to perceive it differently.

So this *vedanā* feeling and perception, they arise together. I'll try and do a bit about perception, but I think there's a lot to be done here. So we'll see. And this point of contact is even there when it comes to the transcendental experiences. There must be some sort of contact that's known. And then after the experience, one reflects upon it, right?

And those three contacts are, first of all, not self. So the contact of being empty of self. *Śūnyatā*, empty of anything there at all. There's also what's known as the signless contact, which is basically that there's no impermanence. That's what they call it, signless. And then there's the freedom from desire. That's the one to do with *dukkha*, the suffering. So each one of these experiences which release us from delusion also have this point of that point of knowing, that point of contact, you see, and then the rest is reflection.

How important is that point of contact just in the order of daily life? Well, there was, I think I mentioned this before, for those of you who've listened to all my talks. When I used to go to work we there were all these billboards and suddenly that appeared these adverts for an Australian perfume and it had a cork with a sort of Australian hat with corks of hanging around it you see and what had happened was that people with this modern advertising had lost faith in these billboards didn't think they're having much in effect.

But the amount of inquiries about this Australian perfume was such that, of course, they began to realise, in fact, it has an enormous effect. So just consider you're sitting on a bus and you're in a half dream. You're thinking about this, you're thinking about that and all that. But, of course, you avert, your eye catches this thing and it goes in. And that's it. It just goes in. And once it's in, you're conditioned. And the next minute, you know, you're craving for this Australian perfume.

So that point of contact is the point of the beginning of conditioning. So that's why the Buddha says, this business of restraint, restraint of the senses, not to look at things that are going to build up old bad habits, to look at those things that are going to build up good habits. Well, that's one of the reasons for statuary and pictures, you see. As soon as you see, I mean, now, as you know, the Buddha statues become a sort of garden gnome. You can buy these things anywhere and stick them in your garden. Oh, there's a Buddha. So you can see it has people, even if they know nothing about Buddhism at all, they see in the statue some sort of expression of peacefulness, I presume, anyway. So that's how important that point of contact is.

So now, this word *vedanā*, interestingly enough, is rooted in the word *vid*, which is similar to our idea of feel, when somebody says, oh, I feel it's wrong. So there's a feeling content, there's a sort of knowledge content with feeling, it arises, right? And that you could put down to knowing whether the feeling was wholesome or unwholesome. And you'll see later on, all sorts of other categories.

Just as an aside, a writer does suggest that this split between the body and mind is a sort of Cartesian duality. You know, the mind is one thing and the body is something else. But they reckon it's a sort of spectrum of energy that moves from the physical energy into mental energy. And I dare say there's a truth in that. But there's also the mental body is actually has its own existence, as it were, which in traditional Buddhist understanding, when you die, that's what comes out, your mental body. And it's the mental body that then seeks rebirth. And if it hangs around where you actually died, that's your hungry ghost.

I have no problem with that sort of understanding because even when I set up this place in London, a little meditation center we're trying to set up a meditation center there, there was definitely somebody in the house and I could hear them moving about, I could hear them rattling around. At that time there was a friend of, actually, she was on the trust, Ramini, and she brought a friend along who was a medium. And we were just talking about this and that. And then I said, you know, I think there's somebody

here who's hanging about. I said, because, you know, I got a feel for it and I can hear it. I can hear him. I didn't know whether it was a him or her. I just said him. I remember saying that.

And she went into a silence, closed her eye and went into a silence. And it was about maybe three, four, five minutes. And when she came out, she said, it's all right. I've helped him find somewhere else to live. And from that time onwards, I didn't hear anything. And there were no mice. There was nobody. There was no dogs, no cats. So anyway.

So the one thing that I think we need to ask ourselves is, when I seek happiness, what am I actually seeking? So, for instance, when I eat lovely food or see a film or have a romance and all that, there's obviously a base of things that I want, the food, the romance, etc, etc. But what is it that, for want of a better word, I really want from those experiences? What does I really want?

Can I suggest that what we really want is a beautiful inner environment. We want to feel happy. We want actually an emotional state, a mental state in which we are happy. In other words, the food is secondary, the romance is secondary, everything's secondary. What I want to do is feel happy, not think happy. That doesn't get me anywhere, does it? And I can think, well, the word happy, it doesn't do much for me. But I want to feel happy. Am I getting regular nods at the back there? The four judges. Sitting on a high plane. Yes.

So if we just take that for a moment, that actually all I want is to feel happy. And then, of course, I'm taught by society, et cetera, et cetera, culture and nurture and all that as to I'm brought up to believe that this type of food makes me happy, this type of music, this type of person, et cetera, et cetera. So I then begin to manipulate the world to try and really feel happy. Yeah. And in meditation, of course, that's what we're all yearning for, isn't it? The end of this continuous suffering and to just get blissed out for a moment or two and hopefully get into *jhānas* and stay there forever.

So it's OK. Once we realize that, then what it does is it turns your attention towards the feeling content of your experience. You see. And then the question is, the question arises, is it worth it? Is it worth it? What I'm doing is the energy that I'm putting out there in order to get this inner feeling. Is that worth it? Now I'm being a bit cynical here because obviously there's a whole business of ethics involved, but we won't get into that just now.

So it's the feeling tone of our existence, isn't it, as living beings, sentient beings. And the Buddha splits them all into different types. And so I just want to go through this particular discourse, which does that for us. It's called the Pañcakaṅga Sutta. And Pañcakaṅga was a carpenter and he went to Venerable Udāyin and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. He was sitting there.

As he was sitting there, he said to Venerable Udāyin, "Venerable Sir, how many feelings has the Blessed One spoken of?"

"Householder, the Blessed One, has spoken of three feelings, the feeling of pleasure, the feeling of pain, and the feeling of neither pleasure or pain. These are the three feelings that the Blessed One has spoken of."

Now when this was said, Pañcakaṅga, the carpenter, said to Venerable Udāyin, "The Blessed One has not spoken of three feelings, he's spoken of two feelings, a feeling of pleasure and a feeling of pain. And as for the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain, the Blessed One has spoken of it as a refined pleasure."

The second time, Venerable Udāyin said to Pañcakaṅga the carpenter, "The Blessed One has spoken of three feelings." And the second time, Pañcakaṅga the Carpenter said to Udāyin, "No, the Buddha has not spoken of three feelings, but of two feelings."

The third time, the Venerable Udāyin said to Pañcakaṅga, "Householder, the Blessed One has not spoken of two feelings." And the third time, Pañcakaṅga said, "No, the Blessed One has not spoken of two feelings."

Now the Venerable Ānanda overheard this discussion between Venerable Udāyin and Pañcakaṅga. So he went to the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed to him, sat to one side. And as he was sitting there, he told the Blessed One the entire discussion between... heck of a discussion. I'm not so sure it was a discussion, but it's often the way we sort of talk to each other. Yes, I am. No, I'm not. Yes, yes.

And then Venerable Ānanda, true was the exposition of Pañcakaṅga the carpenter would not accept from Venerable Udāyin and true was the exposition that Venerable Udāyin would not accept from Pañcakaṅga the carpenter. "There is the exposition by which I've spoken of two feelings."

So now he goes on. We actually get to 108, believe it or not, by the time it's finished. This is this whole business of deconstruction and trying to, through that deconstruction, trying to categorize different types of feelings so that we're clear as to what we want to develop in our own hearts.

So the first two, of course, are a very simple split between pain and pleasure or what is unpleasant and what is pleasant. And in a sense, that at the base is the dual world we live in. You can't escape that. I mean, it's just part of our existence that we either feel happy or unhappy and so on.

But then he goes a little bit more into categorizing. And then he's got the three feelings, which is *dukkha*, *sukha*, *ka* means to bear, *dukkha* is hard, *sukha* is easy. So hard to bear, easy to bear. And that which is neither easy to bear nor hard to bear. Now, the reason for that, of course, is to make us in our meditation become much more aware of these more subtle feelings that we tend to ignore.

So we're usually aware of what's painful and what's pleasurable. But there's a whole set of feelings, neutral feelings that we're not particularly interested in. And it's just becoming aware of them. And of course, when there are no strong physical feelings, painful or pleasant feelings around then that's what you have you have that sort of pleasant neither pleasant nor unpleasant and of course the obvious one is the breath that's usually as long as there's no tension around the area that's usually very very neutral it's neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

And then he takes us just a little bit further and he talks about *dukkha*, *sukha*, *domanassa*, *somanassa* and *adukkhamassukham*. So this is trying to distinguish again. So he's always trying to deconstruct what we have. Those pleasures and pains that come from the body and the pleasure and pain has to do with the mind. So mental pleasures, mental happiness, happiness and unhappiness. So I suppose we would translate it as pain and pleasure. Happiness, unhappiness and neither. And that neither covers both types. So those are your three feelings.

Now, again, it's the case of sort of in our meditation, just being aware that some feelings, some sensations are body based and some sensations are heart based. And again, that's that split. And of course, that does affect what we do in our meditation, because if it's something physical, we have to discern whether in fact it is truly just physical pain in the knee or something like that, or whether the physicality, the pain in the chest also has some sort of mental feeling involved in it, some sort of tension.

And it's by investigating that that you might actually discover this separation where the physical feeling actually separates from the mental feeling. And of course, if you have that sort of experience, then the teacher becomes very clear to you that this mental feeling is causing this physical upset. And the physical pain or pleasure is like a sounding board. It makes everything louder. Mental feelings are not so loud but when

they affect the body and then the body comes back as it were so anger is anger but when the body gets heated up and comes back with tension and ferociousness a ferocious sort of tightness then of course it makes it just that much more obvious to us.

So that's the reason for making that sort of distinction.

Then there are the six feelings and they're based on your senses. Some of them are pretty straightforward, like hearing and smelling. Some are more subtle, like the eye. And then again, what comes in through the sense bases may have a physical base, but of course it's taken into the mind base. And that's when we determine it as being pleasant or unpleasant. So those are your six feelings.

Then there are 18 feelings depending on the sense base. So each of these sense bases has an unpleasant and a pleasant and a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling. So you end up with 18 different types of feelings. And the sixth one, don't forget the sixth one, which is, of course, the mind. So our experience of that we call emotions or feeling, emotions or moods. Even feeling covers that in our language. In the Buddha's language, there was this seemingly, was just this one word, *vedanā*, which covered it all and had to be defined.

And then finally, so that leaves you with 18, three types. That's right. Then you can split them all again and get 36 different types of feelings, depending upon whether these feelings, physical, mental, etc., are worldly or non-worldly. Now that, of course, is an important thing because if you remember in one discourse, the Buddha says, one of the things he realized was that these thoughts were wholesome and these thoughts were unwholesome. And that if he followed the unwholesome thoughts, things got worse. And if he followed the wholesome thoughts, things got better.

So this, in a sense, is at the feeling level. So these 18 are dependent on those three types of feelings multiplied by the six sense bases. And the sixth one is the mental one. So it includes all our emotional and mood life. He says, this is another discourse, this is what he actually says.

Seeing a form via the eye, one explores a form that can act as a basis for happiness. One explores a form that can act as the basis for distress. One explores a form that can act as a basis for equanimity. And he goes through the different ones, the ear and so on. And then finally, cognising an idea via the intellect. One explores an idea that can act as a basis for happiness. One explores an idea that can act for the basis of distress. And one explores an idea that can act for the basis of equanimity.

So that's one of the reasons why he split these into 18 different categories. It's what we do with the feeling that either makes it into something that's going to be wholesome or unwholesome. That's the 18.

So we can split these 18 again into what is wholesome and unwholesome, or as he would say, worldly and non-worldly. So now, if I can just read this. What are the six kinds of happiness? It's householder happiness. Here it's using the word householder, *agarika*. But the other word it uses would mean based on the flesh, based on sensual pleasure. Happiness that arises when one regards an acquisition, the acquisition of form cognizable by the eye, agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, connected with worldly baits. And when one recalls the previous acquisition of such forms after they have passed, ceased and changed, this is called householder happiness.

So you've only got to think of times when you decide to go to a restaurant and you go through all the things that you might like. Is it going to be a curry? Is it Chinese? Are you going for a pizza? And you're reliving past experiences, right? Which is based upon our physicality, upon being a householder.

However, we're renunciates. So what kind of six kinds of renunciation happiness? So the happiness that arises when experiencing the inconstancy of those forms, their change, fading and cessation, one sees with right discernment as it actually is, that all forms, past and present, are inconstant, stressful and subject to change. This is called renunciation happiness.

So it's not that I think he's not saying that we shouldn't go to restaurants and have pizzas and all that. It's just recognising that the attachment to that is going to cause distress. But when we see that even pizzas come to an end, then we liberate ourselves from the possibility of terrible depression. And of course, that's the same for all the other senses, for sensations and ideas. So that's to do with happiness.

So the similar formula. What are the six kinds of household distress? So the distress or unhappiness that arises when one regards as a non-acquisition, the non-acquisition of forms cognizable by the eye. The language gets a bit tortuous. Agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, connected with worldly baits. And when one recalls the previous non-acquisition of such forms, after they've passed, ceased and changed. This is called householder distress.

So in other words, you wanted the pizza, but it wasn't open. So now you've got distress. So now you're going to have to have a Chinese, whether you like it or not. So that's what he's saying. If you don't get what you want, then you have this distress.

So then he says, what are the six kinds of renunciation that cause this distress? The distress coming from the longing that arises in one who is filled with the longing for the unexcelled, when experiencing the inconstancy of these, of those very forms, their change, fading and cessation, he sees with right discernment, as it actually is, that all forms, past and present, are inconstant, stressful, subject to change, and he is filled with this longing. Oh, when will I enter and remain in the sphere of the noble ones?

Now, enter and remain in. That's a strange sentence. And when will I enter and remain in the sphere that the noble ones enter, are now in and remain in? So in other words, when we actually discern the distress that comes from not getting what we want, then there's this longing to become liberated, to be with the Buddha. And that longing, if it really takes us, it's known as a *sanvega*, which translates as an urgency, a having to do it.

So then the next one, of course, is what are the six kinds of householder equanimity? The equanimity that arises when a foolish, deluded person, a run of the mill, untaught person who's not conquered his limitations, all the results of actions and who is blind to danger, sees a form with the eye. Such equanimity does not go beyond the form, which is why it is called householder equanimity.

So he's using the word equanimity, but it's a bit of a downer really, isn't it? It's the sort of feeling you get when you don't know the distress or the happiness you're in. You can't see where happiness is because you're too dull-minded. And even though you're in distress, you don't see yourself as being distressed. So people that say, I'm not angry, I'm not depressed, so when you get that deluded attitude which is driven by some wrong understanding then it's a sort of equanimity but obviously it's a poor equanimity. I suppose our word would be indifference.

What's six kinds of renunciation equanimity? So the equanimity that arises when experiencing the inconstancy of the very forms, their change, fading and cessation, one sees with right discernment as it actually is that all forms, past and present, are inconstant, stressful, subject to change. This equanimity goes beyond form, which is why it's called renunciation equanimity. So spiritual renunciation equanimity.

That's the equanimity when we accept the way things are. Things change, things pass, things die away, and so on and so forth. So that equanimity is to be discerned away from the equanimity that comes simply because we can't see. We're dull-minded equanimity.

So, having explained the 36, if we then, through our memory, remember past times of those six particular types, so the six types. And if we then dream or think about future things, like now most of you, I'm sure, are dreaming of the amazingly wonderful things that will happen when you leave this place. And a sense of freedom and liberation that comes with it. So that launching into the future, all that brings us now to 108 different feelings, which can either be pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. They can be worldly or unworldly, spiritual renunciation and all that stuff.

So that's how he split up all these feelings. He does say somewhere that people see feelings differently, categorize in different ways. But all the categorizations that the Buddha does is always to make us see more clearly where the point of delusion lies. So all these are about making us discern feelings. First of all, from just this simple separation of pleasant and unpleasant. And then through to pleasant and neutral and so on and so forth. And how to discern what is good for us and what is not so good for us. To know what to do with it.

Just another discourse, just to read it out. Thus have I taught the Dharma by means of exposition. When I've taught the Dharma by means of exposition, it can be expected that when there are those who do not consent to, assent to or accept what is well spoken and well stated by another, there will be arguing, quarrelling and disputing, and they will dwell wounding one another with the sword of the tongue.

Thus have I taught the Dhamma by means of exposition. When I've taught the Dhamma by means of exposition, it is expected that when those who do consent, assent to and accept what is well said and well stated by another, they will live in harmony, with courtesy, without quarrelling, like milk mixed with water, regarding one another with friendly eyes.

Obviously, it's a little reference to Udayin and Panchakango, seeming like these other's throats.

Okay, there is a whole section then about the different types of refined feeling that come with concentration meditation and the eventual cessation of feeling and perception. So in the process of *jhāna*, they're all beautiful. So there's no negative mental states or anything like that. But the first one, as you might know in our tradition, there's what we call the soft *jhānas*. For which there are seemingly scriptural support for that. And there are other types of *jhāna*, which are deeper, which are known as the *Visuddhi jhānas*. Written by Buddhaghosa. So that's a late text, about 700 years, I suppose, after the Buddha.

But there are these two types of beautiful mental states that we can achieve. But they do have an agreement between them as to what the contents are. So the first one is that there is still some sort of mentation, even like the noting it can be as simple as the noting but the general feel is one of a physical joy, a mental joy, and then have I missed one out? And then equanimity is that right? Yes before I've missed one out there's physical joy and there's mental joy oh dear.

I've lost it. And you ain't worried. I'm just trying to regain it. So you have the first two and then you drop one and you drop the other and then you go to equanimity. I think it's, yes, that's right, I think it's just the four.

So on the first one, there is this mentation going on, but there's also a physical feeling of pleasure, a mental feeling of happiness, and behind it all is equanimity. And then as you go deeper and deeper, as it were, you move away from the mind, then from the body, and then from the happiness in the mind until you reach that state of equanimity. And from there, you can even go into what's known as the *Arupajhānas*, where it's just pure equanimity.

We're talking now about the feeling content of these mental states. There is a point where even the last of the *Arupajhānas*, the ones that are not based on any material base. So, for instance, remember that when you start the *jhāna*, you start on the breath and that becomes your base, you see. But with the *Arupajhāna*, there's no base. There's nothing there as such.

So it says another pleasure, more extreme and refined. What, Ananda, is another pleasure more extreme and refined than that? What is the happiness which is even more refined than even these very refined *jhāna* states?

There is the case where a monk with the complete transcending of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, so that's the last of these *jhāna* states, enters and remains in the cessation of perception and feeling. This is another pleasure more extreme and refined than that one.

Now it's possible, Ananda, that some wanderers of other persuasions might say, Gautama the contemplative speaks of the cessation of perception and feeling and yet describes it as a pleasure. What is this? How can this be? When they say that, they are to be told, it is not the case, friends, that the Blessed One describes only pleasant feeling as included under pleasure. Wherever pleasure is found, in whatever terms, the Blessed One describes it as pleasure.

So it's the English here. He describes it as *sukha*. In other words, he describes it as happiness, right? So it's not physically based. So that's a state supposedly that can only be achieved by people who attain the third path and fruit, *anāgāmi*, the cessation of feeling and perception. And there is some dispute as to whether that is *nibbāna* or not. But we won't worry about that. Just for the moment.

Okay. So one of the misunderstandings of *kamma* is of course that everything that happens to us is *kamma*. Any bad feelings we have, physical anyway, is because in the past life we did something terrible, or even in this life we did something terrible. And the Buddha is quite clear about that. That doesn't hold.

So Sivaka, the song to purse called Sivaka. Some feelings arise on account of irregularities in the bile. Some on account of irregularities in the phlegm. Some in account of wind. Some on account of the confluence of numerous factors. Some on account of changes in the weather. Some account of irregular exercise. Some on account of external dangers, some on the account of *kamma* results.

So after all these, there are results from *kamma*. That feelings arise dependent on these different causes is something you can see for yourself and that people everywhere acknowledge. On this account, any recluse or holy man who claims all feelings that arise, be they pleasant or unpleasant, are entirely the result of previous *kamma*, can be rightly said to have spoken in excess of what is obvious to people everywhere. And I say that such views are wrong.

So that confusion is not just in present day Buddhists, but also in that time where everything was seen as fate. There were teachers who taught that everything that happened to you is caused because of past *kamma*. And his argument would be, what about what you do now? What is the effect? If you do something now, it has an effect on you. So it's not just the past coming at you, it's your decisions that you make now which have effect.

Monks, when there is an intentional, fixed and steady deliberation on any theme, that theme becomes an object for sustained consciousness. Where there is an object, consciousness has an abiding object. When consciousness is so firmly established and developed, birth in the new sphere ensues. That's the *bhava*. And when there arises into a new sphere of existence, birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation and pain. This is where the arising of this whole mass of suffering arises. This is where all that suffering arises.

So this is just something else that whatever happens to us now is not entirely dependent upon some past action. In fact, I would say a lot of things, most things aren't. It's just that to be able to distinguish why something has happened to us from some karmic act or from what's happening now. The Buddha said, try and work out your *kamma*, drive you mad.

But in terms of our inner life, you see, where there is an intentional fixed steady deliberation on a theme, where we're thinking about something, especially obsessively, that thing becomes the object of sustained consciousness. And where there is an object, consciousness has an abiding, right? So the consciousness has an abiding in what you're actually thinking about.

Now there is somewhere else where he actually says that the mind has its abiding in the body. If you remember on the earlier talk, we were wondering where was the sense base of the mind, right? So we know that with eyes, it's the retina and so on. So where's the mental sense base? So it becomes pretty clear that it's the whole body.

So when consciousness is so firmly established and developed, then you get that rebirth, right? So that's your dependent origination, that's *bhava*. Now *bhava* here means not only intention, an empowered intention, right? An act of will, right? It is an action and the self recreates itself. So you're constantly recreating that sense of me through time. And it's because of this that all the rest of it happens. A new sphere of existence. Birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. That's quite a list, isn't it? This is the whole mass of suffering.

So just to recap there, *vedanā* has its base in the initial contact. And then from then on, it's all mentation. It's all the mind working with feelings. And our lives are a jumble of these feelings. And the question is, what sort of mental state do I want to develop? What sort of mental state do I want to be in all the time?

So if we look at the Buddha, we can presume that all that negativity had gone. So when he's in contact with somebody, the social virtues, love, compassion, joy, gratitude, they would all arise naturally as beautiful mental states. And when nobody's there, or when other people are there, but they're sitting quietly or whatever, the heart would just slowly come down to that equanimity. And that equanimity is the basis for all the other mental states, because it stops the other mental states falling into their

subtle enemies, near enemies sometimes, it's translated as so. Love towards affection, compassion towards grief and joy towards excitement.

So that's where we want to get to, isn't it? We want to get to that underlying steady line of contentment, contentment and equanimity. And then you get these little pleasant blips that arrive. A bit of love, a bit of compassion, a bit of joy. And then just the silence of equanimity.

So that's where we're heading over the next couple of days, of course. Or we can live in hope. Why not?

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused even greater confusion. May you, by your constant effort to establish the right type of mental state, be fully liberated sooner rather than later.

First Three Noble Truths

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 32 min

In this teaching from the Coronavirus Lockdown series, Bhante Bodhidhamma addresses whether the Four Noble Truths represent the Buddha's most important teaching. Drawing from the Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta, he examines the first three Noble Truths in depth.

The talk begins with dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) - not just obvious suffering like birth, aging, sickness and death, but the deeper existential suffering arising from not obtaining what we want and the five aggregates affected by clinging (upādāna). Bhante explains how clinging manifests in four ways: to sensual pleasures, views and opinions, rules and rituals, and most crucially, to identity or sense of self.

He then explores taṇhā (thirst/craving) as the origin of suffering, including craving for sensual pleasures, becoming, and non-becoming. Using practical examples, he shows how our habits and compulsive behaviors stem from trying to manipulate mental and emotional states. The third Noble Truth - cessation through the complete letting go of craving - appears simple but proves extraordinarily challenging in practice.

Throughout, Bhante emphasizes how lockdown conditions offer unique opportunities to observe our compulsive patterns when normal habits are interrupted, making them visible as choices rather than automatic responses.

Greetings all. Very good. There are, at the moment, 66 people, all looking at me, for heaven's sake. That's very lovely.

So, I just start in my usual way. *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa.* Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

I'm presuming you can hear me. So it's good to have a little test there. Somebody could say, they could just give me a nod to say they can hear me. That would lessen my sense of overwhelming anxiety. Nobody's answering. Well, I'm just presuming you can hear me. Yes, I'll have to presume. So I hope you had a fruitful day. Very good. Loud and clear. Thank you so much. Very good. Audio is great. Right. I'm with it. That's enough. Thank you very much.

So, yes, hopefully you've had a fruitful day. Just to reiterate, if you want to have, if something comes up which is a bit heavy for you to handle, feel free to get in touch. Use my email, bbodhi at gmail.com. Sometimes it's good just to talk to somebody. I'm thinking, obviously, especially for those people who find themselves locked in by themselves, that can be a bit of a miserable state. Although these days it's lessened with all the social media. It's a blessing, really.

I wasn't plugged in properly. I've got to get used to all this stuff. So I just wanted to... Oh, by the way, the little talk I give in the evenings, you'll find them as separate little items on the channel. So that if you happen to miss some of my pearls of wisdom one night, you can always check it out in the daytime.

So I wanted to answer these questions that were sent to me. To what extent can it be argued that the Four Noble Truths was the Buddha's most important teaching? Sounds a bit like one of these A-level questions. And are all the stages of the Eightfold Path equally important?

This discourse, which is the *Sammādiṭṭhi*, the right view discourse, where Sariputta is being asked, basically, what do we need to understand? What right view do we need to have in order to become liberated? And he gives various answers to that. And there's a suggestion that if you understand any of these fully, that would lead to liberation. Now, that only makes sense when we realize that the teaching, the Dharma, is all one piece, really. Once you investigate one part of it, it naturally leads you to other parts.

Anyway, he's being asked again, but friend, might there be another way in which a noble disciple is of right view and has arrived at this true Dharma. And he says, yes, there is. And then there is what you might call a regular expression of the Four Noble Truths. So I'll read those out. What is the noble truth of suffering? What is the origin of suffering? What is the cessation of suffering? And what is the way leading to the cessation of suffering? So there's your Four Noble Truths.

Birth is suffering. Aging is suffering. Sickness is suffering. Death is suffering. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering. Not to obtain what one wants is suffering. In short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.

Now, that's pretty straightforward, isn't it? I mean, the whole business of being born is not particularly pleasant either for the child and the mother. And then aging and all. So all of it is pretty straightforward. But then there's this little sentence, not obtaining what one wants. Now, there's your frustration, your anxiety that you might not get it, all that sort of stuff.

Now, this word *dukkha*, that's what it's translating, suffering. These days, people prefer unsatisfactoriness. The word *dukkha* itself means just hard to bear. Du is like, it just means bad, not good. And ka means to bear something. So it's something that's difficult to bear. And it's used figuratively, for instance, to describe an axle in a wheel, which doesn't quite fit. So you get the grinding noise, it doesn't quite fit.

And what *dukkha*, what the Buddha is saying, the way he's using the word is not just on these obvious things like ordinary sufferings and pains and all that sort of stuff. But there is this business of not getting what one wants. And that's to do with our desires, our expectations. So that obviously causes us a lot of suffering.

But the next sentence goes a little deeper. It says the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering. Now, those of you who know dependent origination will know the middle links, which connect, which expresses how we create this suffering. So remember, there is this point of contact. Then there's the discernment that what we're experiencing is pleasant or unpleasant. Liking, disliking, and then of course we choose to grasp at or desire rather, desire what's pleasant and push away what's unpleasant. And that's the reaction. But it's the next one where we *upādāna*, which means to cling, to get hold of.

Now this *upādāna* is manifest in four different ways. It's first of all a clinging to the pleasures of the senses. That's the sort of clinging. And of course, if you are not being pleased, then your response is to get rid of it. So there's always this duality of aversion and desire. And the aversion, of course, splits into two. You either get rid of it or run from it. And then there's this holding onto views, opinions. I'm right, everybody else is wrong. That's also clingy.

Then there's this one about rules and regulations. This is really going back to an understanding of the time when ritual was a way of appeasing the gods or demanding the gods to do something. So if you think that, for instance, bowing to the Buddha, lighting candles and all that sort of stuff actually is going to liberate you, then you are definitely deluded. So that's the rules and regulations.

But the one that I particularly reinforce when I'm talking about this is identity, because that's where the root cause is. The root cause is the sense of I. And that's really where the suffering becomes existential. It becomes a position of me. And that comes most obvious when death approaches us, but also serious illness or indeed the death of somebody we love or the serious illness of somebody we love. It impinges upon us. It begins to question our identity because this identity, this self, this feeling of me has a

feeling about it of permanence. Even though we're quite happy to get rid of it when we fall asleep, there's the presumption that next morning I'm going to wake up and say, oh, here I am again.

So that's the suffering. So it's pretty straightforward unsatisfactoriness, not being able to get fully satisfied with life. It's always going to let us down a bit, even when we've got everything, the right house, the right car, the right partner, the right children, et cetera, et cetera, at some point it just begins to disappear. And that's the way it is. Then there's the suffering, which is not getting what you want. And then there's the suffering, which is to do with this existential, this sense of self.

So this word *dukkha*, which is very difficult to define, very difficult to translate, because it has such a wide meaning. And what the Buddha is really saying is that the whole of life, the whole of human life is unsatisfactory. And I always like the quote from Jesus on this when he said, the birds have their nests, but the son of man has nowhere to rest his head. So I think that's put it very poetically, very beautifully.

So then, of course, there's the origin of suffering, or the cause of suffering. And that is, it is craving, which brings renewal of becoming, is accompanied by delight and lust, and delights in this and that. That is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. This is called the origin of suffering. It's translated here as origin, but I would probably prefer the word cause, the basic cause of suffering.

So the word here that's being translated is *taṇhā*, which some authors, I think, probably are closer to the mark when you translate it as a thirst, a lack, a sense of lack. That's another translation that some authors use. And those get close to it. Craving is a bit too strong, although we do have cravings. It's actually covering all desires, even from the simplest thing, like when you're watching TV and you feel a bit uncomfortable, there's a desire to move. So if you watch all your intentions, you'll see that they're all, normally speaking, desires to get rid of something you don't like or get something you do like. And so we're constantly manipulating the world to make ourselves feel comfortable.

And it's accompanied with delight, and it's got lust here, but it's more like an indulgence, delight and indulgence. So the question that we have to ask ourselves, when I want something, when I want something or someone from this position of trying to escape suffering, because that's what we're doing when we're often indulging things and also enjoying it, what is it that we really want? Do we actually want the object we're desiring or the effect that the object has on us? Have a guess. What do you think? What is it we really want? I mean, do we really want porridge or do we want what porridge does to us? Toast, that's another one. Yeah, I know I'm a bit obsessive about toast.

So it's trying to establish or trying to develop a certain mental state, isn't it? A certain emotional feeling state. And that's what this craving does or this thirst. And it produces habits, produces habits. And what we discover in meditation and even now with this lockdown is that when you interrupt a habit, when you stop a habit, it suddenly becomes a choice. Normally we're running with habits. You get up, you do this, you do that. You want a piece of toast. See, I'm at it again. And off you go.

But when you can't, when there's no bread, or when the toaster's broken, the habit's broken and it comes back at you. And now most times we would fight that and run out and get a toaster. But it also gives us a choice, a choice to bring about an end to that compulsive behaviour. So if we look upon this lockdown, some of us are having to stay in, in rooms, can't actually leave. This is an opportunity, really, to see where these obsessive-compulsive things are. And, of course, it can be difficult. It can be very difficult. But that's the whole reason for practicing this *vipassanā*, that you find a different relationship with it so that you allow the heart to express its turbulences, no matter how difficult that may be. And what we discover, of course, is that that's the way it heals itself. So that's the origins, or the cause of suffering.

There's also the craving for becoming. So there's yourself, always wanting to become. And you'll notice how you're always ahead of yourself. You're always thinking about what you're going to do in a minute or in an hour or this afternoon or when you go to work or when you don't go to work or when you retire. What are you going to do? So the self never feels safe just being in the present moment. He can't hold that position because it's unsafe. He doesn't know what's going to happen next, for heaven's sake. So this craving for constantly becoming and the other one is craving for non-becoming. So that, of course, takes us to the dark side to put an end to this because of the suffering that we're having, leading towards suicide. That's the worst. Or if you're angry with somebody, murdering them because they're stopping you getting happy. But we've given that up, remember, because we take the five precepts.

So that craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming, that digs deep again to this existential problem about who am I? And that's the question, who am I? Or what am I?

And then finally, the third one is cessation of suffering. How does that come to an end? How does all this stuff come to an end? So this is the regular formula. It is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting of that same craving. Just this is the end of suffering, the cessation of suffering.

Now that sounds really simple, doesn't it? Just to give up the craving, give up all these obsessive desires, this compulsive behavior, and voila, you've made it. But of course, what we discovered is that that's no easy thing at all. And that comes very obvious when we go on retreat, just the difficulty of changing our habits completely. The first three days, as you know, are all blood, sweat and tears. And then it eases off a bit, but never a lot. And it's always been a struggle. So the practice is hard. The Buddha doesn't pull punches on that. I'm sure you've heard me quote from the scriptures there. Somebody says to the Buddha, this training is very hard. And he says, well, it is hard, but in the end, you're liberated, you achieve *nibbāna*. And the questioner says, yeah, so what? And the Buddha says, well, at the end of it, you are happy and with it, contented. *Tutti sukha wahati, tutti*. That's the word for contentment, *tutti*. Tutti frutti. So that's this business of the cessation.

And the final one is, of course, the Eightfold Path. Now, the question is, can it be argued is the Buddha's most important teaching? Well, if you can imagine, when the Buddha had his awakening, and it was said he spent a week thinking about it, especially dependent origination, the psychology that he had discovered. And then he began teaching. The first part of the scriptures, which you'll see in, some of you might know the Nipāta Sutta, which was translated by my Upajjhāya, Dr. Saratissa, Venerable Dr. Saratissa was the chief monk at the London Buddhist Vihara in the 80s. And when I ordained, he was my preceptor. So although all my meditation teachers were Burmese, my order was into one of the Sri Lankan orders. And he's translated it. It's a lovely translation, that, the Nipāta Sutta. And Bhikkhu Bodhi has done a great big, huge volume, which translates the commentary as well.

Now, the interesting thing about the Nipāta Sutta is that it's pretty original. And that always surprises me, really, because you can see the original teaching wasn't so formalized. He's answering individual questions. And slowly, the teaching becomes formalized. And that's when you get these, four of these, ten of those, nine of them, and so on and so forth. And that formalization is the middle bit. And then it becomes, towards the end, it becomes very listy, like, to help you remember things. And it begins, you can see it begins to be a bit like the Abhidhamma, which was a later development, which takes away all that, what would you call it, not humanity.

When you read the scriptures, you do get the feeling of a person, the Buddha talking and people who are talking to him. And as the teacher becomes more and more intellectualized, that begins to disappear. And it really does become lists. So there's these three waves of development. And it's interesting, I think, or surprising, shall I say, that the oral tradition maintained those very early teachings. They're there. And then, of course, you get this more formalized, the Four Noble Truths.

So when he has finally formalized it, these Four Noble Truths are the foundation of the whole teaching. And you could say that if you come across any teaching, so-called Buddhism, which doesn't fit into the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, then it's not right. It's not particularly right. And each of these noble truths, of course, launch out into various other teachings and we'll come to some of them very much in this particular discourse. And so whenever you start, whenever you start to talk about *kamma*, start talking about the body, doesn't matter where you start talking about what it is you start talking about, you always end up really investigating the whole of the Dharma because it just leads from links one to another until you've virtually covered it.

And you'll always come down to this root level about *dukkha*. If you were going to encapsulate one word which expresses the Buddha's understanding of the human condition, that's the word *dukkha*.

If you wanted to choose one word which encapsulates the fundamental problem that we have, it would be *atta*, self, teaching around not-self.

And if you were to choose one word which expresses the way out of it, the actual practice to get out of it, it would be *sati*, awareness. But you'd have to put *sama* in front of it. It's right awareness, yeah? It's a specific definition. So in other words, if you're thieving, you're fully aware, you know, but it's not going to get you liberated. It might make you rich for a little while.

So that's the Four Noble Truths. I'm just looking at the time. Oh, it's going on. So I want to leave it there, and then tomorrow we'll have a look at the stages. And the question is, are all the stages of the Eightfold Path equally important? So we can have a look at that tomorrow.

Very good. So yesterday I forgot to take the refuges and precepts for those of you who would like to do it. And then once I've done that, we can sit and as usual, towards the end, I'll do these contemplations.

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

Very good. So I shall now do the chanting. That's odd. My computer says twenty-five minutes past eight, but my clock says half past eight. I don't know. Okay, we can begin.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa, Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa, Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa. Buddham saranam gacchami, Dhammam saranam gacchami, Sangham saranam gac-

chami. Dutiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami, Dutiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami, Dutiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami. Tatiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami, Tatiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami, Tatiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami. Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami, Adinnadana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami, Kamesu micchacara veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami, Musavada veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami, Suramerayamajja pamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami.

So we can begin our sitting. So make sure you are comfortable, feeling comfortable. Settling on the breath.

We can begin our sitting with these evening contemplations, which the Buddha says are there to make us more enthusiastic, to give us some real purpose as to why we're practising. So just repeating these phrases to ourselves.

This body is subject to disease. This body is of a nature to fall ill. This body has not gone beyond sickness. This body is subject to aging. This body has not gone beyond aging. This body is now in a process of aging. This body is subject to death. This body has not gone beyond death. This body will die.

There is the unborn, undying, uncreated, uncompounded. The unconditioned. True refuge, harbour and home. Perfect peace and contentment.

Those who are mindful are in the presence, in the vicinity of *Nibbana*.

Foundations for Mindfulness (Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta) - read by Finola O'Siochru

Noirin Sheahan · 50 min

In this teaching, Noirin Sheahan presents the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), described as "the jewel of all the Buddha's teachings." This discourse reveals how to observe our experience directly to gain the insights that lead to awakening, offering what's called the "direct approach" compared to the "indirect approach" of samatha meditation.

Noirin guides us through the four "pastures" where the mind can graze for wisdom: body (kāya), feeling (vedanā), mind (citta), and dhamma. Each foundation offers specific exercises from breath awareness and posture contemplation to the four elements meditation and contemplation of death. The teaching emphasizes the threefold approach within each foundation: focused attention for calming, investigation of transience (anicca), and bare awareness.

Addressed originally to laypeople, this sutta demonstrates that the profound insights necessary for liberation are accessible even amid busy daily life. Noirin skillfully weaves together the seven factors of awakening (bojjhaṅga) and dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda) to show how mindful investigation can interrupt the cycle leading to dukkha. The teaching concludes with the Buddha's promise that seven days of sincere practice according to these foundations can bring deep insight, perhaps even full liberation.

Tonight I want to talk about the four foundations for mindfulness. In Pali this is the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. *Sutta* means a teaching or a discourse and the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is considered the jewel of all the Buddha's teachings.

For the past few days we've been focusing on the Four Noble Truths. These describe the insights the Buddha discovered on his way to enlightenment. The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* tells us how to observe our experience in order to come to these very insights. It's the how-to of the Dhamma.

It's often called the direct approach, by comparison to the indirect approach of *samatha* meditation, which includes an extra step, generating a deep state of concentration and peacefulness. The meditation described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is termed *vipassanā*, while the deeply peaceful states are termed *samatha jhāna*. In this teaching, the Buddha clarifies that we do not need to attain the *samatha jhāna* in order to have the insights necessary for liberation.

This is really good news for lay people because the samatha jhāna are best supported in secluded monastic conditions. By comparison, vipassanā is possible even when we are living a busy life. Perhaps to emphasize this, the Buddha addressed the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the jewel of his teachings, to lay people. It was given when he visited the town of Kammāsadamma and was impressed by how diligently the native Kuru people were practicing mindfulness in their ordinary daily lives. Although the Buddha refers to the meditator as a *bhikkhu*, which nowadays only refers to an ordained monk, it originally referred to anyone who practiced the Dhamma.

Let's look for a moment at the word *satipaṭṭhāna*. The Pali word *sati* means mindfulness. The word *paṭṭhāna* is usually translated as foundation, but I like an alternative that Joseph Goldstein suggests: pasture. It evokes a pleasant image of the mind grazing in various pastures. This suggests restfulness, but also engagement. The mind isn't idly sunbathing in the pastures. It is finding and taking nourishment in each. Our journey to enlightenment involves nibbling and digesting the insights on offer when attention dwells in these pastures.

Think of a rural landscape with gently undulating ground. Our mind can rove around here and there, exploring all its little nooks and crannies, its bright patches and its shady copses. There are mucky patches too, and marshes and rocky cliffs and perhaps thickets of briars. Our job is to get to know them all.

Here and there in tonight's talk, I'm going to dovetail this teaching with that on the seven factors of enlightenment and with the wheel of dependent origination. So just a quick recap. The wheel describes the twelve-step process leading from ignorance to *dukkha*. The gardening image is a helpful way to remember the wheel, all the problems starting with the whirlwind of ignorance, carrying in seeds of *saṅkhāra*, which can then implant themselves and grow up to become a bed of weeds, which are themselves decaying and dying when we come to our final step of *dukkha*.

The seven factors are the beautiful qualities we develop in meditation. Remember our wild geese? These give an image for the seven factors. Mindfulness is in the lead supported by two flanks. There is a wide flank eager to push ahead and a slipstream flank calming everything down. If you want to put all three images together, think of our job in meditation being to get those wild geese into our pastures to nibble away at the seedlings before they grow into a thicket of briars and thistles.

Before describing each of the pastures, the Buddha describes the attitude needed for vipassanā. First, we need to be ardent. This indicates a degree of fervour. We speak of an ardent lover. We won't gain insight if we are cynical or offhand in our approach. We need to put our hearts into the practice.

The next phrase can be translated as mindful with clear comprehension. This corresponds with the factor of investigation in our seven factors. The phrase "ardent, mindful with clear comprehension" signifies mindfulness supported by the wide energetic flank of our wild geese.

The final phrase is: "Having put aside covetousness and grief with regard to the world." Thus we need to let our worldly cares take a back seat for the purpose of practicing vipassanā. This doesn't mean we suppress our cares. It means we let them become our focus for meditation whenever they show up. When grief shows up, we know we are grieving. Letting our worldly cares be examined like this helps focus the mind and cultivates calm and equanimity. So here we have the other flank of our wild geese, the slipstream.

The four pastures are body, feeling, mind and dhamma. It's interesting that the Buddha doesn't list these as four nouns as I've just done. Lists of nouns tend to objectify and simplify the world. The way the Buddha puts it tends to draw the world into our inner experience. He describes them within the meditation practice itself. "A bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware and mindful, having put aside covetousness and grief with regard to the world. He abides contemplating feelings as feelings," and so on for all four.

Burying the noun within his description of the attitude needed for vipassanā suggests that the type of attention we bring into the posture matters as much, if not more, than the posture itself. The phrases "contemplating the body as a body, feelings as feelings," etc. are also striking. This indicates our attention needs to sink into these four areas to glean the wisdom offered by their contemplation. It is only by experiencing them mindfully with clear comprehension that they can deliver us from suffering.

The sutta then goes on to describe how to practice within each of the pastures. The section on body contemplation starts with the breath, knowing when we are breathing in and when we're breathing out, knowing when our breath is shallow and when it's deep. The next steps describe calming ourselves using the breath by bringing the thought of tranquility to mind as we feel the breath rise and fall. Remember, we talked of the need to calm ourselves whenever the wide flank of our wild geese are rushing ahead and tending to scatter the flock. So here is the Buddha's suggestion for doing just that: noting, calming, calming with each breath.

The next section is described as a refrain because it was repeated again and again throughout the sutta. It describes the various ways insight can arise. By insight, we mean a glimpse of some aspect of the Buddha's teaching, for example, the Four Noble Truths.

It may be an insight into the first truth, dukkha. We may really feel the changing nature of experience, that all experience is passing away like grains of sand slipping through our fingers, and sense that nothing lasts long enough to satisfy our deep needs for security.

Or we may get a glimpse of the second truth, that desire is the cause of dukkha. Suppose a memory of some argument has come up and we are embroiled in indignation and anger, insisting over and over again that we were right and the others were wrong. Every few moments we wake up to what's happening and feel the pain of this experience. Eventually, worn out and in despair, we give up the battle. Lo and behold, the pain disappears. We realise that clinging to the notion, "I was right," was what was causing us to suffer. It wasn't the memory, it was our reaction to it. That's a direct experience of the second noble truth.

A revolutionary thought surfaces. Maybe it doesn't matter much which of us was right or wrong. That moment when the pain disappeared was also an insight into the third noble truth, the fact that dukkha stops. We need to sensitise ourselves to those lulls in our emotional storms, to start taking them seriously. Until we're fully enlightened, dukkha will eventually start up again, perhaps as we start craving that this moment of peacefulness will go on forever. Sad, isn't it? We have to let peacefulness come and go, just as it will. Paradoxically, when we can surrender to that sad fact, we experience deeper peace.

At another time, we may get a glimpse of some aspect of the fourth noble truth. For example, we may be worrying that we're not meditating correctly, feeling nervous and constricted, as if we're going to get thrown out of the dhamma hall any moment. Then, miraculously it might seem, something changes and we decide, "I'm doing okay, this is good enough." Our hearts lighten, we stop worrying. Our attention sinks more easily into our breath and we sense the joy of simply being present, breathing.

In that moment we gain confidence that meditation could show us a way towards the end of suffering and we can see the importance of right attitude. When we were worrying and condemning ourselves, we were caught up in the hindrance of aversion. When we said, "This will do," we were accepting our experience. That's the only thing that changed. This gives us a direct insight into the fact that an accepting attitude is integral to the path.

These are some examples of insights that can happen as we meditate. These insights can happen while we are following any of the exercises described in the sutta. The refrain tells us what to do in order to deepen our insight. There are three subdivisions to the refrain.

Firstly, the Buddha says, "In this way he abides, contemplating the body as a body internally." Contemplation requires full awareness and understanding. We're not just vaguely aware of breathing. The Mahāsi noting of the in-breath and out-breath gathers our mind in this way, calming us down and focusing our attention on the experience of breathing. This first section of the refrain reassures us that gathering the mind and calming ourselves is an integral part of gaining insight. We don't have to be calm and focused for insight. They can be sinking in as we are using the breath to encourage ourselves to calm down.

He then says we can practice in this same way, but externally. The most common interpretation for this is that we contemplate the breathing of another person. It would take very deep concentration to be able to discern when another person is breathing in or out, a much more challenging practice, which may be why it's so rarely taught. The next suggestion is even more challenging, to contemplate the body both internally and externally, following our own breath and that of another simultaneously—maybe in our next lifetimes.

Although I won't labour the point, it's worth knowing that he repeats this suggestion for all other exercises in the sutta, so we can gain insight by bringing awareness to the feelings of others, as well as to their mind states, for example. Although it would take supernormal powers to be able to directly intuit the feelings and minds of another person, it fosters *mettā* to make any attempt in that direction.

For the purposes of this retreat, we'll confine ourselves to our internal pastures. But outside of retreat, we can practice becoming more aware of others in this moment-to-moment fashion. Following their breathing, if we can detect it, their walking, their postures, daily activities and all the other exercises in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta that we'll go through now. This is a deep form of *mettā* practice. We have the Buddha's assurance that this is also a perfectly valid form of insight meditation.

So that's the first of the three suggestions in the refrain: to bring our full awareness and understanding to the breathing process. The second suggestion directs our attention to the transitory nature of bodily experience. Each breath arises and passes away and within that each sensation of breathing arises and passes away. He describes this as the arising and vanishing nature of the body.

He first directs our attention to its arising nature. Can you sense the breath coming into being each moment? The in-breath is particularly useful here. Can you feel its first manifestation and how it then continues to swell the body?

Next he directs attention to what he terms "the body in its nature of vanishing." One breath vanishes before the next one can appear. The out-breath is most helpful here, following its movement moment after moment until it stops. His next suggestion is to be aware of both the arising and passing nature of the body. Here we sense the full breath, in and out, as a flow of discrete sensations. As one vanishes, the next arises.

These three exercises help us to see the truth of *anicca*, transience. Although our minds project continuity and permanence into the world, the experiential truth is that things are constantly changing. They arise and a moment later they vanish. We can nudge our minds towards this truth by experiencing the breath arising and passing as the Buddha suggests in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.

His final suggestion for insight is simply to be aware of our bodies. In the Buddha's words, "Mindfulness that there is a body is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness." This suggests a very light touch, bare knowledge. It's quite a contrast to the first suggestion, to abide contemplating the body as a body, which suggests more energetic gathering of our powers of attention and understanding.

So, we have the three suggestions for gaining insight. The first involves calming and focusing the mind on the body. The second explores its transitory nature. The third simply requires bare knowledge of the body.

The first describes the active effort we need to make to calm ourselves and steady attention within the felt sense of breathing. Here we're working on the slipstream flank of our wild geese. Once we're settled, we can afford to open our minds to be more exploratory. So this is where his second suggestion comes in. We explore the transitory nature of experience. This is the particular expertise of our wide flank, the ones that push us ahead.

At times our minds come to a point of delicate balance and we sense mindful investigation carrying on of its own accord. We sense any attempt we make to either calm or probe more deeply as slightly disturbing. So we can refrain from any effort. At this stage, the third suggestion, bare attention, comes into play.

At times this exploration pulls us towards a deep state of peace. Sometimes it's the opposite. We get fearful and all kinds of underlying emotions come to the surface. In both cases the third suggestion of bare knowledge can be applied. Take the emotional storm. This can batter us with wild thoughts and painful feelings. But so long as we're aware of a body that exists in the midst of it all, we're still on the direct path to enlightenment. We're in the pasture and our intelligence is open to insight even in the midst of

a hurricane of anger or lust. We're not doing any deep investigation. It's just the lightest touch of body awareness. The geese are flapping around at a great rate, devouring the weeds.

Bare knowledge of the body also grounds us when the mind is being drawn towards the calm of a *jhāna*. In these states, we can lose touch altogether with our bodily sensations. The danger is that we also lose any degree of intelligence. If we have to keep remembering our physical nature, we would be bringing wisdom into the realm of *jhāna*. Our slipstream geese are lulling us to sleep, but the wide flank have just enough energy to keep prodding us awake.

So no matter what aspect of the four pastures you are examining, you always have three choices for how to attend. You can calm and gather your attention by focusing on any of the exercises suggested in the sutta. When your attention is steady, you can examine the transitory nature of your experience. The final option, bare attention, applies when there is that knife edge of balance between calm and curiosity. It grounds you through temptations to drift into an emotion or *jhāna* state.

The Buddha's final comment in the refrain is that he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. This is a reminder not to identify with whatever it is we are experiencing. Remember it's all going to change. If we cling to joy, calm or clarity, we will later be screaming with frustration when these are so unfairly taken from us. If we resist states like confusion and agitation, we unwittingly prolong them. In contrast, relaxing into them shows us that they also are composed of sensations and feelings which simply arise and pass away, nothing to be worried about, just another hillock in our pasture. All states can deliver the insight we need for liberation.

So that's the refrain. The various suggestions for how we look at our experience. The sutta then goes back to describing what it is we look at. First, we had the breath. The Buddha next goes on to describe four bodily postures as foundations for mindfulness: standing, sitting, walking or lying down.

The next section describes more broad-based mindfulness. Being fully aware when we are looking about, moving around, eating, drinking, talking, keeping silent, even defecating and urinating are included. This covers all of our daily life. After both sections the refrain is repeated in full. We might have an insight as we're sitting on the loo.

The next section involves the use of thought or mental images. We bring to mind the various parts of the body: hair on the head, body hair, nails, teeth, skin and all the way through the major organs and down to spittle, snot, oil of the joints and urine.

We don't often dwell on the separate parts of the body. The exercise can stir disgust or fear. But of course these can be experienced mindfully as a means of purifying our relationship with our bodies. We lose some level of deluded identification with our physical body as we go through this contemplation. Disgust changes to humble appreciation as we realise that our path to liberation depends on entities like snot, spittle, oil of the joints and urine as they do their quiet work to keep us alive.

The next section is more appealing, contemplating the body in terms of the four elements: earth, water, air and fire. While the previous exercise involves the faculty of thought and imagination, this exercise involves physical experience. The earth element describes the experiences of hardness, softness, weight and pressure. For example, try this exercise just now. Gently squeeze one hand within the other. Can you feel areas of bony hardness and fleshy softness? Squeeze more tightly. Can you feel the pressure? Try lifting one hand in the other. Can you feel its weight? All these are explorations of the earth element in your body.

The water element is easier to experience externally as you're washing the dishes, for example, or taking a shower. Feel the way it flows around you, always changing its course to suit your shape. It can also be sensed as the fluidity in the movement of joints. Try rotating your wrist. Can you sense the fluidity required for this? Rotate your shoulders. It couldn't happen if the bones weren't separated by layer of fluid.

The air element is sensed in movement. Gently move your hands or arms now. How do you sense movement? Isn't it very subtle? As light as air. You can explore this during walking meditation, especially when the foot is moving forward.

The last of the elements is fire, which describes our sense of temperature. This includes both heat and coolness. Scan your body now to see if any areas feel warm. Try putting your hands on your face. Often there's a difference in temperature and so we feel both warmth and coolness. It can be hard to work out which part is cool and which is warm. Whenever you go outdoors, see can you sense any change in temperature. I find the exercise on the elements helps my attention to dwell on the body for longer periods.

By contrast, the next exercise is more likely to shoot my attention outwards into clouds of thought. This is the contemplation on death. In the Buddha's time, human bodies were left to decay in open areas called charnel grounds. He asked his followers to go there and watch the process of decay. Although this sounds horrific, the purpose is to meet our fear of death and come to terms with our mortality. We can practice this contemplation on death by reminding ourselves that our bodies too will fall ill, grow old and eventually die. If we can bear mindfully with any emotional responses, we may

eventually come round to a deeper appreciation for the body in its present live and functional state, and a determination to make the best of this short stay on earth that we have been offered.

After each of these exercises, the Buddha repeats the refrain, emphasizing that insight can be gained as we do any of these. This brings to an end the section on the body. All of these exercises in this first foundation require that attention rest at the point of sense contact in the wheel of dependent origination, in this case involving sense contact from seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching. Sense contact, the midpoint of the wheel, is where our inner world, our potential, finds an outlet to explore and perhaps express itself in the outer world. If we can ground ourselves at sense contact, the wheel can't turn all the way to *dukkha*. Our wild geese are pecking at the weeds the moment they show their head above ground.

The Buddha then goes on to describe the next foundation for mindfulness: feeling, which, as you may remember, is the next link in the wheel of dependent origination. Once our senses have made contact, we then categorise the sensation as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. In Buddhism, that basic categorisation is what we mean by feeling. When the mind is tending to wander easily, it is often helpful to ask what feeling is fueling these thoughts. This can draw us towards the root of the problem, as it is our reaction to feeling that drives the wheel to the wandering mind and thereby to *dukkha*.

Often there will be a zone of tension in the body corresponding to the attempt to cling to pleasure or get rid of unpleasant feelings. The emotion underlying the thoughts has its root here. If we can bring attention to that area of the body, we get a sense of ourselves clinging to some feeling at the centre of the knot. At that stage, our thoughts often quieten down.

However, this is not an easy process. Feeling is a more subtle level of experience than sense contact. We need a degree of calm and equanimity to be able to steady the mind on feelings. So have patience with this foundation. Coming back to our wild geese, when emotions run deep, the wild flank tends to go a bit wild when I turn attention on feelings. So it needs constant rebalancing. The body is a great help here. Coming back again and again to the sensations of breath or of posture takes the heat out of the situation. Slowly, slowly, catchy monkey.

After some perseverance, attention may be able to rest in or near the physical sensations associated with the emotion and be able to detect their pleasantness and the tendency to grasp onto this, or their unpleasantness and the tendency to push these away. The third category of feeling, neutral feeling, won't be at the core of emotional tension. We don't try to grasp or push away neutral feeling. The habitual reaction is to ignore it.

We're working with neutral feelings when we're persuading our attention to rest on the breath and the footsteps. Our difficulty in holding attention steady is not that we dislike or are enthralled by the physical sensations, but that we want a more exciting focus.

Although it can be quite a challenge to get our attention to rest calmly in this foundation, the pickings are very rich. We're learning not to identify with our feelings, letting go of the habitual reactions of desire, aversion and ignoring. I'll say more about feelings tomorrow night, but for the moment I just want to mention that in this Sutta the Buddha also points out another distinction in feeling between worldly and unworldly feelings.

Worldly feelings are based on sense contact. Unworldly feelings are associated with spiritual endeavour. For example, generosity, *metta*, compassion, meditative joy are all unworldly feelings. They also happen to be pleasant feelings, and of course there's a danger that we cling to them unwittingly, thinking, "I am generous, I am filled with loving kindness," et cetera. This feels fine until something bursts that bubble. The fall to earth can be very sore and bring out the worst in us. Suddenly we hate everyone. But if we can be mindful of the pleasant feeling, we can appreciate it and use it to fuel our generosity and *metta* and all other beautiful states.

There can also be unpleasant feelings that come from spiritual endeavour. For example, we may feel ashamed or depressed because our minds keep wandering or because we can't understand the *Dhamma*. The big danger, of course, is to identify with these feelings and let ourselves become discouraged. But if we can open to the feelings, they can bring up a tender compassion for our unenlightened state. This is quite a deep degree of self-acknowledgement and self-care. Very healing. Once we sense this, the very unpleasantness locks us into the compassionate response and thereby propels us along the path.

Neutral unworldly feelings are associated with equanimity. If we don't notice these, we can set up a subtle level of clinging, thinking, "I am equanimous." But of course, this bubble also bursts in time. If we acknowledge the neutral feelings, these can release us into a wise appreciation of equanimity.

The Buddha again repeats the refrain after describing this second foundation. Here he is clarifying that we can gain the insight needed for liberation by knowing whether we are feeling a pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling and knowing whether it comes from sense contact or spiritual endeavour. Similarly, we can study transience in our feelings, noticing that these too arise and pass away. As for the body, the third possibility is to simply note there are feelings, without any attempt to categorise or detect their transient nature.

The next section of the Sutta involves contemplating our mind. This involves, for example, knowing when we're angry or greedy, and all the variations on these. For example, anger may take on hues of irritation, fear, frustration, jealousy or cruelty. Greed can take the form of excitement, romance, lust, euphoria or passionate attachment. To correlate this with the wheel of dependent origination, we're now focusing on the early stages of the wheel, the stages prior to sense contact. These make up the attitude we bring into being at the point of contact.

We think we see and hear things objectively, but in fact our perception is coloured by whatever mind state is driving us to sense contact. I had a good illustration of this one time when doing walking meditation. It was a big airy room and I had been alone until someone came in and started walking quite close nearby. I felt myself contract in aversion. At the same time I could have sworn the room went dark. I had experienced the darkening of the room and the darkening of my mind simultaneously, and could intuitively sense their connection.

Nevertheless, I couldn't quite believe that my perceptions could be so easily modified. I looked out the window to check whether a big rain cloud had appeared, but it hadn't. The sky was still blue. Reluctantly I accepted that even my perception of light could be influenced by my mood. I was quite dismayed. The outside world wasn't quite so stable and objectively real as I had believed.

When we dwell mindfully in this foundation, we are noting what moods or mind states we're bringing to being at every point of sense contact. Otherwise, we're being controlled by the mind state. It is driving us into thought and action, but we're not conscious of this. We believe the thoughts. For example, something irritates us and we grow tense in indignation, generating thoughts like, "It's not fair." The resulting unpleasant feelings of tension prompt us to think yet again that it's not fair. So we think the thoughts again and again, convincing ourselves of their truth. The thoughts fuel the underlying emotion and so we get more deeply caught in the negative spiral.

The first step is to replace the thought stream with the noting word "thinking, thinking." This takes one level of feedback out of the loop. The body is our great ally in coming close to the root of the problem. We might need to calm for a while, using the breath for example. Then, if we can feel where the body is tensing, this draws our attention towards the underlying emotion. We can simply note "feeling, feeling" here. But sometimes getting the right noting word is like hitting the nail on the head. All the mind state really wants is recognition. The more often we bring attention into this foundation, the better we get at discerning our moods and emotions. In this case, for example, noting "indignation" might bring a palpable release of that pent-up energy.

However, if the emotion runs deep, we must be patient and keep on noting while it eventually burns itself out. A moment's lapse in mindfulness and we will be building up the story of how unfair life is again.

The Buddha's advice is very simple. For example, he notes "a mind affected by anger as a mind affected by anger." There is no judgment required. Simple acknowledgement of our afflicted mind states is all that is required. Judgment tends to contract us further. But of course, we can't undo our habit of judging so easily. So whenever we sense that we're adding the second arrow of self-judgment, we simply let attention graze in the feel of judgment, feeling its physical expression in our bodies as well as whatever emotions show up: disapproval, self-disgust, self-hatred. From the point of view of insight, all these are equally welcome. Wisdom grows as we witness these.

The Sutta also advises us to note the absence of mind states like greed and anger. This isn't something we often do. We tend only to notice our minds when they're troubled, not when they're clear and at ease. But noticing the absence of trouble helps us appreciate those states. We find it easier to let go of excitement, for example, when we learn to appreciate the pleasantness of being calm.

Just now, for example, are you angry? If not, note "not angry, not angry," and get a felt sense of that mental state. Similarly, you could ask yourself if your mind is excited, wanting more stimulation. If not, note "not excited, not excited." We need to get to know these unobtrusive mind states. Our minds like familiarity. What the mind knows and is familiar with, it comes back to again and again.

Apart from the variations on greed and anger, our minds can be deluded, thinking there is a very powerful me in control of all my experience. Again, we can simply note this as "delusion, delusion." The belief and the felt experience may be the same, but they have now been brought within the foundation for wisdom to graze upon. Very gradually the wild geese nibble away at our delusions. Similarly, we can note the presence or absence of sleepiness, restlessness, distraction, concentration, peacefulness and any mind state.

The Buddha then repeats the refrain, reiterating that insight can be gained as we note the presence or absence of our mind states, as we sense them arise and pass away, or as we simply ground ourselves in the knowledge that there is a mind without any attempt to be more discerning than that. The latter is the kind of light touch mindfulness we need when any attempt to probe more deeply would disturb the experience.

The final foundation is called *Dhammas* and there's a lot of controversy about how to translate this. The *Dhamma* is the teaching of the Buddha and is usually spelled with a capital D. But the word *dhammas* here is plural and with a small d. The classical translation is "mind objects." But that's not very helpful since all the other foundations can also be described as mind objects. We make the body, feelings and mind into objects for contemplation in those foundations.

Recently the translation "categories of experience" is gaining favour. But that's not very elegant. It's hard to relate to. Looking ahead to see what the foundation describes, it is actually a number of the Buddha's teachings. The teachings he picks out include the hindrances, the factors of enlightenment and the four noble truths, as well as two more which we'll discuss over the next two evenings. In my simple way of thinking, I can see why we don't call this foundation the *Dhamma*, because here we are in fact contemplating the central core of the Buddha's teachings.

Whatever we call it, this last foundation asks us to let our attention dwell on the moment-to-moment experience of the hindrances, factors of enlightenment, four noble truths and other teachings. This makes it abundantly clear that these teachings are not simply lists of human attributes or philosophical statements. The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* clarifies that we must know and understand these teachings within the realm of our individual subjective experience. We are to let our attention dwell on these teachings as they manifest in our body and mind, ingesting their wisdom moment by moment until we eventually see these from the Buddha's point of view. This is what it means to be a follower of the Buddha.

I'm not going to say any more about this foundation tonight, because all the teachings mentioned here are explored in other talks. Let's just skip to the conclusion of the *Sutta*, where the Buddha assures us that if we can explore our experience, according to *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, for just seven days, we will have deep, deep insight, perhaps even full liberation. Luckily, there are still seven days left in this retreat. So now you know what you have to do.

Persuade yourself to be an ardent lover of truth. Bring your mindful intelligence to the quest for truth. Put aside your worldly cares, or if they refuse to subside, let them become the focus for meditation. Draw your mind into whichever foundation beckons you. When you're settled, start exploring the transient nature of your experience. Lighten the attention to bare registration of the foundation when you feel that would suit the situation best. That's all. As Bhante would say, "Easy-weezy-peasy."

May your exploration of the four foundations for mindfulness bring you to full enlightenment in this very lifetime.

Good Friendship, Good Companionship, Good Comradeship - Ubuntu

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 26 min

In this teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines the Buddha's famous declaration to Ānanda that good friendship, companionship, and comradeship constitute the entire spiritual life—not just half of it. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he explores the refrain of observing 'internally, externally, and both internally and externally' across the five khandhas (aggregates).

The talk beautifully weaves together the African Ubuntu philosophy—'I am because of who we all are'—with Buddhist teachings on interconnectedness and not-self (anattā). Bhante demonstrates how our bodies, feelings, perceptions, mental formations (saṅkhāras), and consciousness are constantly shaped through relationship and interdependence. From the food we eat to the concepts we form, nothing exists in isolation.

Using examples ranging from sports psychology to a poignant story of a feral child, the teaching illustrates how we are fundamentally relational beings. The discussion includes the Buddha's humorous discourse on dog and ox duty ascetics, emphasizing how our volitional conditioning shapes our spiritual development. This accessible yet deep exploration offers practical insight into how awareness of our interconnectedness can lead to greater choice and ultimately to liberation.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa

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

I'm going to investigate this phrase that the Buddha says. So Ānanda was his companion for the last twenty years of his life. He was a cousin of his, and he had a contract with the Buddha that whatever he taught, even if it was to the devas, he had to come back and tell him what it was. Anyway, he used to get things wrong.

At one point he says to him, "Bhagavān, I think good companionship is half the spiritual life." And the Buddha says, "Oh no, Ānanda." You always say, "Oh no, Ānanda." "This is the entire spiritual life, Ānanda. That is good companionship, good friendship,

good companionship, good comradeship. And when a person has good friends, a good companion and a good comrade, it is to be expected that they will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path." So we're going to investigate that a little bit.

I'm using these words in a slightly different way. So friendship, good friendship, that's really all the people whom you know. They compete from the intimate to just acquaintance, really. Your friendship group, your social friendship group. And it's an encouragement if you have amongst that group people who are keen on the Dhamma. That's what you might say is an understanding of your friendship group.

You can tell a person about the company they keep. You've heard that one. Good companionship. So these are the people whom you spend some time with. They might not be within your particular friendship group. They could have been here, for instance. So the people who are with you on retreat were your companions, your spiritual companions for this time. And you can be motivated by them. You can have what you might call a wholesome envy for people who seem to be able to practice better than you, because it's all in your mind, of course. You don't know what's going on in their head.

And then finally, you've got good comradeship. We use the word comrade, don't we? It connects us with the Communist Party. So it gives you an idea that your comradeship extends to all people who are connected with the Buddha's teachings. So when you go to, say, a festival or something, so if you went to, say, the London Buddhist Vihara for their Buddha Day, there'd be so many people there, you wouldn't know any of them apart from just a handful. But you get that sense of comradeship.

So that's what the Buddha says, but exactly how deep does that go? I don't know whether you've come across Ubuntu. I'm not talking about the programming. I'm talking about the actual word itself. So it's a South African word used by people even in Zimbabwe. So it's all the people that live down there, Xhosa, Zulu and all that. And this is what they say: "I am because of who we all are. I am because of whom we all are." So you could translate that as "I am my relationships." And for those of you who know Krishnamurti, that was one of his big statements: "We are our relationships."

I mean, how true is that? So if we look at the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse, there's a recurring phrase, a recurring refrain that says, they meditate on an aspect of the body, or feelings, or mental states, or a teaching of the Dhamma, internally, externally, and both internally and externally. All right, so we're going to have a look at that.

And to make it easy for us, I'll use the schema that the Buddha uses in terms of a cross-section of a human being. So there's the body, there's feelings, perceptions, all our habits where the will comes in, and consciousness.

So if you just think about the body itself, where does it come from? Did you choose it? So you just ended up in it. You woke up one day and thought, "God, this is my body." So it's a case of recognising that the body itself is not something that you have or even own, because it has its own life force, doesn't it? I mean, what is it? It's just a collection of cells. Billions of cells just doing their own thing. And we've also got these guest cells, haven't we, in the gut to keep us going. So there's a whole thing about there, there's a connection with the body itself.

And through the body, there's dependency, obviously on nature: air, water, food and all that sort of stuff, plants. But it's all mediated through human beings, isn't it? All the food we get is mediated through human beings. They grow it, they collect it, they sell it to us at ridiculous prices, and then we eat it. And most of it, virtually all of it is processed. Some of it is just gently processed. All this stuff is cancer producing, so we've got to thank them for that.

And if you think about air, how it's being affected by human beings at this present time in our history anyway. And the water, oh my goodness, the sewage and all that. So you can see that even at that cellular level, there's this connection going on, this incoming information and the way we produce and the way we work with it, and then we produce it. So if you're cooking, then you're actually producing something from what somebody else is giving you. It's passing through you, right? So if you say "this is my cheesecake, it's a wonderful cheesecake," it's not quite right to say it's mine, is it? Because all the ingredients belong to somebody else.

And that goes for things like clothes, right? All our clothes are mediated through the fashion industry, except mine. Mine was set by the Buddha. He gave me this great freedom that in the morning I'd have to wake up and wonder whether I'm going to wear blue. It's just there.

And the dwellings, they're all constructed, they're all designed by architects and builders and all that sort of stuff. The medicines that we take, they're all invented, developed by people, and they're given to us by people, by doctors, nurses, etc. So you can see that everything that we have is being mediated into us, and we then shared it one way or the other.

I've got, since I had this sciatica, I've got boxes of medicines. I've got chemistry. So I've got a chemist in my room at the moment because they keep giving you these medicines and then you read the label and you read the instructions and you think, "Oh my gosh." So they build up on your shelf. So everything, well, virtually everything. Even the water, like town water, it's got chlorine in it and stuff like that. It's all coming in. We're doing something with it and then we give it out.

And yet we still have this perception, don't we, of a body, of something substantial that doesn't change. There's always some concept that we have about our bodies which remain static even though it's changing before our very eyes. But it holds it together, and that's what concepts do. They hold things together into a whole, and then we presume that that is real. That's the problem.

So for instance, if you were to lose an arm or a leg or something, I mean, it'd be a loss, but it wouldn't undermine that sense of I. It would change it. But you're still me, aren't you? I'm still me. You don't have to hop everywhere.

And there's this word that you might come across called proprioception. And it means that you know where the body is at all times. It's not conscious. You just know whether it's standing up or falling over. You're generally aware of that, unless you've had too much to drink. And then there's that sense of force, the heaviness of the body, the lightness of it.

Now you might have noticed that when you're on retreat, you get this, sometimes this perception that your arm's over here, your head's on top of your knee. You've got this dislocation of the body in places. That's because the information from the body is not coming up into the mind, the brain, to be able to position you. You've lost contact with the body. The body's become so relaxed that it's not sending the signals, so it makes things up. So that should really warn us about the mind. It's constantly making things up.

I mean, if you think of that, of the artistry of sports people, tennis players and footballers. They never think about their bodies, do they? I mean, those services are coming at them about a hundred miles an hour, aren't they? For me, yeah. And somehow they hit it back. I've always been amazed at that.

So this body is always in relationship with something else. So when you're walking down the street, you're constantly dodging pedestrians, aren't you? So walking, if it's a crowded place, you don't think about it, but the body's always moving. Why? Because you're in relationship with these other people.

When you walk up a set of stairs, you might find yourself feeling you're enclosed, right? And your body shrinks a bit. If you're with somebody who has power over you, your boss or something like that, whether you like it or not, your body shrinks. And if you happen to be powerful and over somebody, whether you like it or not, you'll be extending your body. It's just the way we manifest these things.

You're always negotiating your situation with the floor when you're walking on it, or with the couch lying on it, or when you're in the bed, the pit. So even then you're constantly shaping your body to make it fit in with your surroundings. And when you walk with people, it depends. If they're fast walkers, you've got to adjust your pace to them. And if they're slow walkers, you've got to slow down a bit. So there's this constant communication going on. Most of it, of course, is completely subconscious.

Now, if you go on YouTube, there's an interesting little thing about a feral child, this poor man. When he was a young kid, his parents thought he had an evil spirit in him, so they stuck him in the chicken coop. Would you believe that? And he was in there from about the age of two or more and a half or something. And there was a woman, an Australian woman, Elizabeth Clayton, who lived in Fiji. And when she heard about this, she went to see him.

And basically, if you look at the first video, he's standing like a chicken. These are his arms. He's standing like that. And he's clawing the floor with his foot like chickens do. Unfortunately, we don't hear him squawk or anything like that. I don't know whether he actually copied their voices. But when he got too big to be in the chicken coop around about eight, nine, ten, they stuck him in Old People's Home and tied him to a bed. And that's where she found him. So he's been like that for twenty plus years. Twenty years tied to a bed.

So when she found him, of course, she had some sort of background education, some training with children who had educational difficulties and whatnot. But she definitely took him under her arm, and then she went on to set up an orphanage. But he can't speak. He's gone beyond the ability to speak. If you don't learn to speak within four years or so, that's it, you've lost it. All the social graces, what do people, people's faces and the way their faces change to express certain emotions and relationships, all that he slowly began to pick up. And you can see he's... He never will be adapted to human life. He's been absolutely crunched.

So that tells us how important our parents were, and our siblings, cousins, all the friends we've had, because it's this constant communication on how we speak and how we relate to people.

So when it comes to the senses, the senses themselves are just gateways for objects to come into the body. They themselves are empty of the objects, remember? So that's why it'd be horrible, wouldn't it, if your tongue had a basic taste of curry. How would you get to enjoy pizza? Or cheesecake, for that matter. It'd be horrible. So it's a case of recognising that the senses themselves are absolutely empty of what they're aware of. And that of course refers us back to awareness itself. Awareness itself is empty of everything it's aware of, and that's the process of awakening. But that's just by the side. So a nose doesn't have a scent, thank heavens.

Our relationship to the world out there is completely based upon what our senses will give us. So obviously, if you're colour-blind, you're seeing a world different from most. If you're deaf, then you're unable to experience that level of communication. What does the Buddha call it? *Āyatana*, that sphere, dimension, that dimension of human communication. You're unable to have it. A lot of people lost their sense of smell through COVID. So flowers aren't what they were. They can see them, but they haven't got that ability to appreciate their smell.

And every time you sense something, it's always changing the concept that you have of it. And the word for that is that perception. Every time you have an apple, it changes your concept of an apple. It might be ever so slight, you might not be aware of it, but every time you see an apple, your concept of an apple is ever so slightly changed.

So that also tells us about this constant communication, this interrelatedness that we have of the world through our senses, and even more so of the person. Everybody meets somebody whom you know, you have a concept of them, you have a way of being with them. And during that conversation, during that meeting, it'll ever so slightly change. So there's again that constant relationship.

When it comes to feelings, emotions, so the medieval philosophers thought of human beings as these four types: choleric is the angry type, the melancholic the sad type, then there was the sanguine who was the happy type and the phlegmatic types, the ones who was lazy, couldn't be bothered. So if you actually define people in that very simple way, then you can see they have a certain emotional life, which is then again mediated through the people whom they meet. And they probably copied their parents in some way or other.

So again, it's a case of recognising that all this stuff is being mediated to us through television, YouTube, social media, whoever you meet. We're constantly being changed. And we are changing, of course. Don't forget that. We also have an effect on others. But

it's just a recognition that nothing is static here. Not even our emotional life is static. It's always changing. And we have a power. This is the whole point of moving into habits. We have a power to change ourselves. This is the point.

So we've talked a little bit about concepts and perceptions and this word, our perception of how things change. Even on a wider scale of society, there was a time in this country where if you insulted the monarch, *lèse-majesté*, well, you could have your head chopped off. And there was a time you could actually declare your desire for republicanism quite openly even during the king or queen's appearance. But now you get arrested. So it just shows you how times change. You know that, don't you? There was the Republicans at Charles' coronation. They went and arrested them, for heaven's sake. That made world news.

So then we come to habits. So these are *saṅkhāras*. They are translated as volitional conditionings, by which we mean this is what we have really the power to change and the power to grow, the power to get rid of when we don't want them. And we find what we found in our lives that we might have had a certain understanding which has produced a certain type of behaviour. And then when you came across the Buddha's teaching you find yourself changing. That ability to change from one type of behaviour to another is to do with our volitional conditionings.

And this is our work. I mean, in terms of spiritual life, that's our work. Can't do much about our senses, but you can definitely do something about your...

your habits. So I want to read a little bit here from the discourses. This is a discourse about two ascetics. There were some very strange ideas during the Buddha's time, which is probably equally strange to some of the stuff that you get these days. But the idea was by these two ascetics that they were in a sense trying to beat *kamma* by being what they might be at some future time.

So they were practising dog asceticism and cow asceticism. I don't know, there's a lot of humour in the discourses and you never know whether this is actually for real or not, but it definitely points to the fact that some people had some very strange practices.

So there was Punna, the son of the Koliyans. Now the Koliyans were actually on the opposite side of the Sakyan on that river. They almost got into a war over water rights. It's interesting, isn't it? 2,500 years ago they had water rights. And they would have been connected some way. They would have been very close as peoples.

Anyway, the son of the Koliyans was an ox-duty ascetic, and also Seniya, who was a naked dog-duty ascetic, went to see the Blessed One. And Punna, the ox-duty ascetic, paid homage to the Blessed One and sat down at one side. And while Seniya, the naked dog ascetic, exchanged greetings with the Blessed One, and when the courteous and amiable talk was finished, he too sat down by the side and curled up like a dog.

Now, when Punna, the ox-duty ascetic, sat down, he asked the Blessed One: "Venerable sir, this naked dog-duty ascetic Seniya does what is hard. He eats his food when it is thrown on the ground. That dog duty has long been taken up by him and practised by him. What will be his destination? What will be his future course?"

"Enough, Punna, let it be. Don't ask me."

So the second time he goes through this rigmarole: "Please, can you tell me what will happen to him?" And the third time, Punna, the ox-duty ascetic, said: "Venerable sir, this naked dog-duty ascetic Seniya does what is hard. He eats his food when it's thrown on the ground. That dog duty has long been taken up and practised by him. What will be his destination? What will be his future course?"

"Well, Punna, since I certainly cannot persuade you when you ask and I say 'Enough, Punna, let it be, do not ask,' I shall therefore answer you. Hear, Punna. Someone develops the dog duty fully and unstintingly, he develops the dog habit fully and unstintingly, he develops the dog mind fully and unstintingly, he develops dog behaviour fully and unstintingly. Having done that, on the dissolution of the body after death, he reappears in the company of dogs. But if his view is such that 'This is virtue' or 'This is duty' or 'This is asceticism' or 'This is religious life, I shall become a great god or some lesser god,' that is wrong view. Now there are two destinations for one who has wrong view, I say: hell or the animal womb. So, Punna, if his dog duty is perfected, it will lead him to the company of dogs, and if it is not, it will lead him to hell."

When this was said, Seniya the naked dog ascetic wept and shed tears. And later, of course, in the discourse, they become disciples of the Buddha. In the discourses, anybody who comes to ask the Buddha, it's very rare for them not to become a disciple.

So, just in summary, if we were to sum up, there's this lovely word: osmosis. In a chemical way, it's when one solvent passes through a semi-permeable membrane into another one. I think the salty one will... The water goes into the salty one. Is that right, Lorena? It was the other way around. They'll try and even each other out anyway.

So what we have, it's also used figuratively, osmosis, as a gradual and unconscious assimilation of ideas and knowledge. And I think that's what's happening to us ever since we were born. Without you knowing it, you take stuff in, you work with it from

your own perspective, your own little experience of life, and then you give it out by the way you speak and the way you act and what you do. And this constant ebb and flow of things.

So nothing is ever still, nothing is ever steady. And everything, if you think about it, everything that we have or experience is somewhere connected to other human beings. And in that sense you can go back to this idea of Ubuntu: where I am because of what you all are, I am because of what we all are. And we've lost that sense in the West because we've gone for individualism, and that's unfortunate because we go around thinking that I do my own thing in my own way, in my own time. That was the old hippie.

So having reflected on that, it's a case of recognising that this flow is constantly going on. So that's what the Buddha says. To be aware of what... Ah, come in, Pam. To be aware of what is internally happening, to be aware of what is externally happening, and to be aware internally and externally. So that's what he's asking us to do all the time in the discourse.

And the discourse, although it's centred upon the actual practice of meditation, remember, there's a whole section there about ordinary daily life, about how we behave in ordinary daily life. And when he does that, the same refrain comes through: internally, externally, both internally and externally. And it's just making ourselves more and more aware of that. That's all.

And the more aware you are of something, the more your choice is there. Now, it's not as though you've got free will. It's a conditioned choice because you know which way you're going to go. So for instance, if you decide to go for a walk and you've got your map, you've come to a crossroad, then you've got to figure out which road you take from that crossroad, especially if you've got multiple offshoots.

So it's recognising that and beginning to make the right decisions which draw us closer and closer to happiness. That's all we want to be, isn't it? A bit of happiness. For heaven's sake.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and that by your practice of inwardly, outwardly, both inwardly and outwardly, will lead you to ultimate liberation sooner rather than later.

Good Friendship, Good Companionship, Good Comradeship is the Whole of the Spiritual Life

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 18 min

In this illuminating dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines one of the Buddha's most striking declarations: that good friendship, good companionship, and good comradeship constitute the entirety of the spiritual life. Drawing from the exchange between the Buddha and his attendant Ānanda, Bhante explores the profound nature of kalyāṇamittatā (spiritual friendship) and its central role in developing the Noble Eightfold Path.

The teaching gains deeper resonance through connection with Ubuntu, the South African philosophy encapsulated in "I am what I am because of who we all are." Bhante demonstrates how this interconnected understanding illuminates the Buddha's words in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), particularly the practice of observing phenomena "internally, externally, and both internally and externally."

Through practical examples spanning our physical bodies, mental states, and conceptual frameworks, Bhante reveals how we exist in constant communication and mutual influence with those around us. This understanding transforms our appreciation of spiritual friendship from mere companionship to recognition of our fundamental interdependence. The talk offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners fresh insight into how our relationships shape our spiritual development and why cultivating wholesome spiritual friendships is essential for progress on the path to Awakening.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsaṃbuddhassa

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsaṃbuddhassa

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsaṃbuddhassa

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

This evening I thought we'd tackle this advice that the Buddha gives us. As you know, Ānanda was the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty years of his life. He was his cousin and he would listen to all the Buddha's talks, and he had a contract with the Buddha when he took on this work that the Buddha would always relate to him anything he'd said when he wasn't there. He had this phenomenal audio memory.

He would say things, give his opinion, and the Buddha would gently correct him. So one was that he had now really come to understand dependent origination. And the Buddha said, "Oh no, Ānanda, dependent origination is deep, profound," et cetera, et cetera. Well, he made the same mistake when it came to the spiritual life. Ānanda said that he thought good friendship, good companionship, and good comradeship were half the spiritual life.

And the Buddha said, "Oh no, Ānanda, it is the entire spiritual life, Ānanda, that is good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a person has a good friend, a good companion and a good comrade, it is to be expected that they will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path." In other words, your *kalyāṇamitra*, your spiritual friend.

So if we just look at those three things with arbitrary definitions of these different words: If we take good companionship, a companion is usually somebody who travels with you. So really, it's those who are closest to you - your spouse, your partner, your very close friend. And you can understand that, let's take partners for instance. If both of them are actually on the same path, that's a tremendous refuge, isn't it? Even if one is a Tibetan and the other one is a Theravāda, I'm sure they can find some support for each other. So there's that intimacy, an intimate relationship. If that intimate relationship exists and both people are actually on the same path, that's obviously a great support.

On a wider level, we talk about good friendship - they're all the people whom you know, apart from those who are close to you. And I think some of you will have found, like I did, that as I moved into the Dhamma, I became more and more involved. I found that I was losing my interest in the theatre, the local semi-professional theatre that we had in Birmingham at the time. And eventually I stopped going. I didn't actually say goodbye to anybody. When I look back, I didn't say goodbye to anybody and tell them what I was doing. I just faded out, you might say. And interestingly enough, I can't remember meeting any of them again. And that's part of that movement towards a spiritual life for me, and you might have found that also to be true of yourselves.

When it comes to comradeship, for me the word comrade is associated with the communist party - "Comrade Boris" - I'm not talking about big Boris, of course. So that gives us a feel that we're in something that is much bigger than just our personal relationships and it's something that's very grand. So Buddhism is of course a world religion and it's not only got so many million people who are following the Buddhist path, it also has a massive history, two and a half thousand years. And I think what that does when

you reflect on it, it gives you tremendous confidence. You would have thought by now, after 2,500 years, that people would have sussed out whether the Buddha was telling the truth or not, whether it was just a big tale.

So when I used to contemplate this about friendship being the entire spiritual life, it never matched up for me. I couldn't quite work out why it should be the entire spiritual life. But then, of course, I came across Ubuntu. Now, some of you will know it as the open source operating system on Linux. But that's not what I'm actually referring to. Ubuntu is a South African philosophy from, say, Zimbabwe downwards. So the Zulus and the Xhosa people, all those people have this philosophy of Ubuntu and you can encapsulate it in one small sentence: "I am what I am because of who we all are." I am what I am because of who we all are. In other words, I am my relationships. And I remember Krishnamurti saying that actually.

So in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse, the Buddha actually, in the four sections - one on the body, one on feeling, one on mental states, and one on the teachings of the Dhamma - there is this recurrent phrase that goes through it. They meditate observing an aspect of the body or feelings or mental states or teaching of the Dhamma internally, externally, both internally and externally. And it's this last one that I want to centre on. In other words, the Buddha is asking us to be aware of ourselves, aware of others, but also this interaction that is constantly happening between us.

If we just take one or two examples: this body, for instance. This body that we've got isn't something we chose. I definitely would have chosen something better, I think. I just happened to end up with this body because of all the genetic history that came before it. And this body expresses that genetic history. It's part and parcel of that specific genetic history.

When it comes to the body, the food I eat, not only is it grown by others and sold by others and often cooked by others, but the actual recipes that we use are usually made up by other people. So there's this constant flow of information about what's nice to eat, what makes a good meal. It's the same with clothes and fashions - the fashions change. Who changes them? Some bright spark has an idea and then after that we're all wearing different clothes. I mean, in my own life, my pseudo-hippie stage, I went around with flowery pants.

When we look at our dwellings, these are all designed by other people, all the furniture we have in it. And of course, this becomes obvious when you look at different cultures and then you see different food, different clothes, different ideas of how houses should look. And finally, medicines and care. All these medicines are produced by other people. They're coming into my body. They affect me.

So we get this idea that this body isn't static in any way, not physically. The water that we're drinking, here we've got this chlorine in it. The air that we're breathing is full of CO₂ because of people using fossil fuels and all that. So you can see that the body itself is in a process of communication with the world around it.

And in terms of other areas, we're actually just expressions of our culture. The problem is that this sense of self seems so static, it seems so real. You don't seem to think you change except when it's obvious that you change. You get this sense of substantiality. But then when you contemplate it, you realize it's just a concept. And the concept holds us in present time, as it were, but unfortunately creates a wrong relationship.

We've got this word proprioception. Proprio means self, perception of self, perception of the body. So you've only got to watch how your body changes, for instance, with whatever you're sitting on - a chair, a metal bench, an armchair, lying on the bed, doing yoga on the floor. We're constantly having to negotiate with the environment around us.

And when you're walking with somebody, you have to be in step. If they're walking too fast, you tell them to slow down. If you're walking too slow, they tell you to hurry up. So there's this constant negotiation going on.

If you catch yourself, for instance, with somebody who has authority over you - it could be a policeman - suddenly you feel guilty anyway, even if you've not done anything wrong. But you'll notice that when you're with somebody who has authority over you or whom you respect, who is an authority, whether you like it or not, you'll shrink your body. That's how we express that respect or deference. And in the same way, when we feel ourselves to be in authority or in authority over others, you'll lift the body up, you'll pull your shoulders back. And all that's to do with communication.

I don't want to spend too much time on this because there was a video I came across about this poor young kid whose parents thought had an evil spirit, so as a toddler they put him in with the chickens and basically he became a chicken. When he got too big for the chicken coop they put him in an old people's home and tied him to a bed. A woman called Elizabeth Clayton - you can see it, it's on YouTube, there are two videos. One, you see him as a young man and later on as much more socially interactive. But he's actually standing there like a bird. He's got his shoulders like this as though they're flopping wings. It's awful. And he will never be able to speak, never be able to communicate. And what that does for me is it puts in sharp relief how much we owe to our relationships.

Our mental states are constantly - we'll notice that our mental states are often affected by the people we're with. So if you're with people who are depressed, who feel down, it pulls you down. I mean, you might try to lift yourself up but in the end, you might give in. Whereas with people who are in a happy state, who are bubbly, it just lifts you up. So there's this constant communication at the heart level.

And there's also a communication at perceptual level, at a conceptual level. Take something like big concepts like free speech or democracy or something like that. You can see that what we read in the newspapers, what we hear people say on the television and things like that, what we discuss amongst ourselves, constantly our concepts are beginning to change, they move. And what's understood there, there's an actual word for it, it's called apperception. So for instance, we all have a concept of an apple. But every time you see an apple, that concept is slightly changed. And so it is with these rather more abstract concepts that we have. And you can see these change over time.

I was just thinking about kings and queens since we have one here and other countries too. But there was a time when you could insult a king or somebody like that. It was lèse-majesté and you'd find yourself being whipped or chucked in a jail or worse. And if you think about Putin and Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un, you can see that depending on the country you're in or where you're at, your concept of how a country ought to be ruled changes. There are people who will support Putin and Xi Jinping and all that. And all these concepts we're absorbing and we are doing our own little interpretation of them, but we're in constant communication.

So I think that sums up this statement by the Buddha. And I just want to return to it. So this is what the Buddha says: the entire spiritual life is good friendship, good companionship and good comradeship. And when a person has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected they will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path.

And in his life, you remember, he had these six companions who probably followed him from those times when he was practicing those absorption states to when he was practicing the ascetic practices of almost starvation really. And remember when he left them, they didn't want to know him. As far as they were concerned, he'd gone soft. And then when he came back, it took them a while to realize that maybe he had changed. And there was a conversation there which comes out when he talks about his new understanding and he asks them, "Have you ever heard me speak like this before?" So right there within the Buddha's life, he had these six companions.

And if we then understand that within the concept of Ubuntu, I am what I am because of who we all are - I am my relationships - so the Buddha is trying to urge us, or at least trying to make us understand that the people around us are our inspiration, they're our support. But they're also supposed to be checks. A good friend tells you when you're not doing things as you ought to be doing them.

So that's what I was centring on. And I just felt that I had a better concept of what the Buddha was talking about when I came across this teaching or this philosophy of Ubuntu.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused confusion, and that by your development of good friendship, you will complete the Noble Eightfold Path and be fully liberated sooner rather than later.

Gratitude, Generosity, and Renunciation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 18 min

In this inaugural Full Moon Day teaching, Bhante Bodhidhamma introduces a powerful trilogy of interconnected practices: gratitude, generosity, and renunciation. He clarifies that true renunciation is not self-mortification or rejecting life's pleasures, but rather letting go of our attachment and dependency on external conditions for happiness. The Buddha himself enjoyed taste without greed.

Bhante explores how genuine gratitude—for our parents who gave us life, teachers, society's gifts like education and healthcare, and nature itself—naturally leads to wanting to give back. Since we cannot truly repay what has been freely given, this gratitude flows into generosity. He offers practical guidance on pure giving: acting without expectation of repayment, acknowledgment, or praise, and giving that 'little bit more' that creates a healthy pinch.

This virtuous circle culminates in renunciation—each act of pure generosity loosens our grip on possessions and desires, providing a taste of liberation. Bhante emphasizes this is daily life practice, not a formal meditation technique, but one that naturally changes our habits from those causing suffering toward those bringing genuine happiness and moving us closer to awakening.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa

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

This is our inaugural Full Moon Day meeting. I've always wanted to do this, but I've never found a way to do it. So I was really happy when Magda suggested that I try it on this medium. I think we can keep this going. Luckily it's fallen on a Sunday and I'm inclined to in the future choose the closest Sunday to the full moon because that's most convenient for people. In Sri Lanka they are public holidays, all the moons are public holidays so there's no problem in keeping the full moon itself there.

My idea is that with every full moon we look at some of the teachings of the Buddha and eventually throughout the year we cover it all. I'm going to start with this lovely little trilogy, a virtuous circle of gratitude, generosity and renunciation.

Starting with renunciation, the big problem here that can arise is confusing what it is that we're actually renouncing. Remember the body is not our fault. When the body has appetite then it has appetite and when you put something lovely and sweet on the tongue it will taste lovely and sweet. That's never the problem. The problem is our relationship to it, which is wanting more, depending on it in order to establish a beautiful mental state.

That's what we've really got to grasp. We use the sense bases not because they are lovely in themselves but because they are a way of creating a lovely mental state. Hence you might have a piece of toast in the evening just to raise your spirits. The unfortunate thing is that of course you have dependency and that dependency is what we call attachment. And so there's suffering there. If there's no bread and there's no toast well it's misery, isn't it?

When we click onto that we become much more sensitive to this draw towards what is pleasurable. This renunciation is therefore not to be confused with what they call self-mortification, in other words blaming the body for our mental states. So that's an important distinction to make. We're not trying to get rid of the pleasures and joys of life at all. The Buddha himself did enjoy life. He enjoyed taste, but he didn't greed for it. That's what it says in the scriptures.

This whole idea of renunciation will arise on two different types of grasping which is one about our wealth and the other about our time. We can be greedy with our time but not greedy with our wealth. We can be generous with our wealth but if somebody asks us to do something for them we shy off it. And the other way around we can be very happy giving time but if somebody asks us for a bit of money we're not inclined to give. Again, we have to look at that.

This trilogy, this little virtuous circle of gratitude, generosity and renunciation, is not actually taught in the scriptures themselves as a way to liberation. This is more a commentary pointed out. This directly connects with our daily life. This is our daily life, in our daily work, in the way we are with people. If we can generate that virtuous circle, it's actually drawing us towards liberation.

Letting go of attachment, letting go of dependency is the path to liberation. You might say that the whole of the path is one of renunciation. Because eventually you've got to renounce the sense of self. That's the last thing to go, this little idea that somewhere within us, we actually do believe ourselves to be this psychophysical organism, for want of a better word. So that's this renunciation business.

Now, just to go to the front of the trilogy, this sense of gratitude. When you feel gratitude, it really is a heartwarming feeling. And when we feel this gratitude, we always want to repay it. If we spend some time just considering what we've received from our parents, our parents gave us our life, our mothers. When you think about that, you might have problems with your mother and your father. In fact, somebody once asked, "How do you know when you're fully liberated?" And they said, well, go and spend a week with your mother. And then you'll know.

It may be that our general relationship is a bit fractious and so on, but you still have your life through your parents. The Buddha said that even if you were to carry them on your shoulders the whole of your life you'd never repay them. In fact it's unrepayable and that's what you begin to realize when you contemplate everything that's been given to you from your family, from your friends, the good deeds and the companionship of family and friends. All this is given to you.

Then there are things like what society gives us, all our education. Our parents could not have afforded, most of our parents could not have afforded to educate us. It's the same with the social services. We might not have needed them up until now, but if we get old enough, you definitely begin to need them. And of course, there's our health system. It's funny how you take something as a right and you presume that it's something that isn't given because either you've paid for it through the national insurance or because it's taken for granted. But how many times have you thanked your doctors? Thank the dentist?

The dentist I had here in Bishop's Castle was really good. The front tooth here finally gave in and he put this false tooth in. It was pretty awful. You've got to get used to it. You couldn't eat nuts, all the nuts got behind the tube behind the palate so you had to take it out and wash your mouth out and stick it back in. When I told him that it was a little inconvenient he finally decided to give me a bridge and there it is, it's absolutely fantastic. It's a case of recognizing all these gifts that people have given us.

If you bring to mind for instance the teachers one or two favourite teachers that you've had, it does fill the heart with a sense of gratitude. And finally of course there's nature, just the earth that we live on which we become more and more aware of these days.

What gratitude does is it makes you want to repay. Because you can't repay what has been given, you can't repay something that has been given to you freely. You have to find a substitute. And that draws you towards just being generous ourselves. And that moves us into this whole area of generosity.

When the Buddha talked to lay people, he always began with generosity. He pointed out that even a thief can be generous. He's just taken something off you and he's very kindly given it to somebody in his family or friends. When we think about generosity, the ability to give without some idea of being repaid, that's quite difficult for us. We have to clarify the mind about that.

There are certain times you give gifts such as Christmas, which is more like a little ritual re-establishing friendship. You get your pair of socks and they get their pair of socks and that's fine, unless of course the pair that they've given you is obviously much cheaper than what you spent on the socks that you gave them. That's when the trouble starts. There's always a bit of bargaining going on. It's always like business.

If we want to have an act of pure generosity then you have to listen to what's going on in the background of our minds about being repaid, about being adored because of our generosity. If you're going to give for instance a donation to a charity and there are so many of them these days, you have to get yourself into that mental state where that's the only thing in your mind and heart and you are giving this in order to help somebody. There's no hope of repayment. The charity is not going to give you any money back so you're doing it for just that purpose and when you do it for that purpose that's when you make the donation whether it's by card or by cash.

Once you've done it you'll hear these little voices like "you are truly a very wonderful person" or you might get the one "that's too much, what do you give so much for? You could have..." You haven't been caught up in that. The *mara* did not catch you there so you can let those thoughts disappear. If guilt comes you have to point to it and say well that is false guilt because when I actually made the action, my heart was full of generosity.

The same arises when you do something for somebody. I think most people, I certainly do, is say yes too quickly. If somebody says, "I've moved into this new house, it's actually happened to me. I've moved into this new flat and we're painting it, would you like to come and give us a hand?" And I said, "yeah, yeah, I'll come on Saturday." And then as I'm walking away, I'm thinking, "What? What have I given this Saturday away?"

In that case, at that time, I was shall we say advanced enough to actually make myself do it, to teach myself, not to say yes just because somebody asked something. You don't have to say yes. There's a point where you can actually reflect for a moment and then say yes. So it's coming from a point of reflection. You're not just doing it by habit. Again, that point of generosity, there has to be a certain reflection about it and that you are doing it from the heart of goodwill and that you're not even expecting a thank you. And that's very difficult.

When I became a monastic, we're not supposed to say thank you. I mean, I say it in the West because people get very upset. But in the East, you don't say thank you. It undermines the person's gift. That's the understanding. Because if somebody gives something to you, they don't expect you to say thank you. But if they expect you to say thank you, and then you don't say thank you, then of course, they feel very upset. That tells you that the gift is slightly corrupted they wanted praise they wanted appreciation.

To be able to give something without that desire to be acknowledged is leading us towards a real pure heart generosity. The other little telltale is just to give that little bit more that pinches. That little pinch is where you're truly being generous, where you're giving just that bit of extra time, just that little bit of extra money. That's the point where it just begins to hurt a little bit. That's the point where you are truly extending our generosity.

Just to recap, we have this lovely virtuous circle. This feeling of gratitude and one exercise you can give yourself is just to say that tomorrow everything I will say thank you to everything. In Zen of course you always *gassho* when you enter a room. You're taught to thank everything. You have to *gassho* when you approach the table you *gassho* to the chair. This whole attitude of actually not presuming on anything, not thinking that we have a right to everything but that everything is a gift. If you go through the whole day like that you'd be surprised how it lifts you. It really does lift you.

Once you've established more and more this sense of gratitude and the knowledge that you can't repay directly what people have given to you, you have to find a way of expressing that gratitude through generosity. When we are being generous, just to stop for a moment and to make sure that you're doing it for pure reasons. That's all.

Then to realize that when I've actually made an act of generosity with a pure heart, I've renounced something. I've let go of something I'm holding on to. And I'm actually practising renunciation. Letting go of that grip on things. That loosening of a grip, that letting go of these tight desires, wrong desires, is a little every time we do that and we feel that that loss of grippiness that in a sense is a touch of *Nibbāna* because one of the descriptions of *Nibbāna* is that it is desireless of these sorts of wrong desires. There's a lovely little practice there which is just ongoing day in and day out and it's only a matter of reminding ourselves to do it and just very slowly it becomes a habit. That's all.

Really that's what we're doing in our practice we are just changing our habits moving away from habits which cause ourselves suffering and aren't very pleasant for others and moving towards habits which bring us happiness. The gift of the practice is a

natural happiness in life. It's not *Nirvana*, it's just a natural happiness. This happiness that we talk about is the internal environment within ourselves. This is a really powerful practice. I try and remember to do it myself occasionally.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused even greater confusion and that you will, by your practice, become liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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.

Happiness

Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1h00

In this dharma talk, Bhante Bodhidhamma examines what the Buddha meant by happiness and well-being, contrasting it with our ordinary understanding of pleasure-seeking. He explores how attachment (taṇhā) to sensual pleasures, relationships, and experiences creates a cycle of craving, fear, and suffering. The talk addresses the Buddha's negative expressions for Nibbāna (such as adukkha - non-suffering) and explains why liberation involves the elimination of greed, hatred, and delusion rather than the destruction of joy itself.

Bhante discusses the four foundations of well-being - safety, health, mental happiness, and contentment - while showing how our misconceptions about happiness lead to acquisitiveness, aggression, and fear. He demonstrates how true spiritual practice involves attending to negative mental states with awareness rather than suppression, allowing the mind to naturally purify itself. The talk concludes with practical guidance on approaching experiences without expectation, distinguishing between enjoying and indulging, and cultivating the brahmavihāras (love, compassion, sympathetic joy) as natural expressions of wisdom. A handout on well-being across physical, material, social, and spiritual dimensions accompanies this teaching.

Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namō tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namō tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

I thought I would just center on happiness. I was watching a talk, I'll probably put it in one of my e-reminders, about mindfulness. And the amount of literature on mindfulness over the past three to five years has zoomed. It's, I believe, well, it says that editors tell writers in self-help psychology areas to make sure they put mindfulness in the title and the other thing is happiness. So we've now got gross national happiness and you'll see books appearing just on happiness. There was a whole issue of Resurgence on happiness, well they termed it well-being, which is a term I prefer. So I just thought to center on what the Buddha means by happiness.

And the handout you've got is for your reflection tomorrow, not particularly now. And this word happiness, by the way, comes from an old English word, hap, which means lucky, luck. So you get things like to happen, that was later developed, and then happenstance, which normally has a good meaning to it, happenstance. So that happi-

ness comes from an idea of luck in a way, which is strange. And we don't use it like that now. But if we try to define what we mean by happiness and just clarify that, then it'll help us really in our practice.

So the first thing is, is happiness essential pleasure per se, just by itself? Would that bring happiness as such? I don't think we normally associate sense pleasure as happiness. We associate what happens when we have sense pleasure, the mental states that arise, but we tend to see there's something separate from the word happiness, I think anyway.

And if you think about happiness as an emotion, happiness. So when are you happy? When are you feeling happy? About a couple of minutes a day, is it? So if somebody said to you, are you happy? It's a difficult one, isn't it? It's very rare that you would have such an intensity of emotion as happiness. And it might shade into excitement.

Or perhaps happiness refers to a mood, an underlying mood, but then moods also are not stable, they don't hang around all that long. So this word happiness has a few meanings and if somebody says happy do they mean your general disposition to life, are you happy? So people, I often get the question, people come and they look around this place and look at me and say are you happy? And I sometimes say, well, not right now. Because it depends what you mean by happiness. So I tend to prefer the word well-being. But even that has limitations.

But if we go through what we mean by well-being. So our blessings, when we do the *metta* sutta, our blessings are: May you be safe. That's pretty basic, isn't it? You want to be safe from physical danger, safe from financial collapse. There's a connection with the world we're living in, the society we're living in, the state of the world, which creates a sense of safety. I would have thought that's basic to happiness, basic to a sense of well-being.

So, for instance, if people get very much involved in this climate change business, there's an underlying anxiety, frustration, despair about the situation, which would feed through to all the rest of their lives, wouldn't it? And it's there within us all, that sense of danger.

And then there's health, of course. The state of your body can undermine your general state of well-being. It might be just something simple. Just having a bad flu. Would you ask somebody who's got a really bad flu, do you feel happy? Are you happy? Have you got well-being? And then there's chronic illness, of course. You've got a chronic illness. That can be undermining to a sense of well-being. And if you're told you've got so

long to live, see these people that were mentioned earlier, so one person there, six months, would you still have a sense of well-being? Would you still be happy about that? So, the sense of happiness, well-being.

And then may you be safe, may you be well, may you be happy. So that also comes into our blessings. May you be happy. That's also here referring to a mental state. And the last one is ease of living. I've translated that as being content with the way things are. Content with the way things are. And live in harmony. So even if things aren't going so bad, we're at least working with it, and we're seeing potential, we're seeing an end to the problem, which can lift the heart. If we resign ourselves in that bad sense to something, then you tend to begin to despair, not feel so good. Well-being goes out the window.

But to try to just go on a different tack, what the Buddha constantly goes on about is this attachment, *tanha*. He has a special word for it. It refers to that relationship we have to things for the purpose of seeking happiness, that's basically it. So you could say from the wisdom point of view there's a misconception, a misunderstanding which is about who we are. So that misunderstanding basically is I am a human being. I am a human being. And finding ourselves with this definition, I am this person, I am this human being.

We then, from the heart's point of view, we're trying to seek happiness. So we seek happiness as a human being in the human world. And that leads us to this connection with pleasure. Connection with, not just simple pleasures, eating, sex, drugs, and rock and roll, that sort of stuff, but art, nature, relationships, anything to do that brings that combination of pleasure and happiness that we can generate, that we can experience through this psychophysical organism.

But immediately we're in a relationship with the world on this misunderstanding that the world can somehow, if we engineer it correctly, if we move around it properly, we can somehow find happiness. So from that you have these basic relationship. The first one is whatever is making you happy you want to acquire. You want to acquire more of, you want to sustain it. And when that moves into a relationship, whatever it is, even with objects, you're moving into an ethical situation, so ethics in its broadest sense is about relationship.

So if I acquire something then I have a relationship to it. So if it's an object, a certain dependency, our computer is just messing up so there's fear, despair, anger, the whole lot, it all comes up when the computer doesn't work. So we have this relationship both

myself and Martin with this machine. Now if I have it with a machine that doesn't particularly affect the machine as such, I mean the machine doesn't know I have this relationship with it.

But with a person it's slightly different because with a person if I have an attachment it means I'm demanding of that person that they make me happy, and that tends to take away their humanity, their individual personhood, because you're only looking at them from a particular point of getting them to make you happy. So they become an object. I mean all our relationships are a mixture of that, they're a mixture of true love, a true connection with the person, but also a certain often unspoken, covert demand.

This comes out in silly things like you buy them a great big lump of special cheese for Christmas, they don't send you anything, that's very upsetting. That you're expecting your usual piece of goat's cheese. It just didn't arrive. So you've got this relationship with people, you see. Part of it is from this misconception about people making you happy. The computer makes me happy. Things make me happy. People make me happy. And then there's all the other areas of art and nature.

So you might have looked on the weather forecast and it says it is going to be good tomorrow, and so you prepare to go out and enjoy nature, and it turns out to be cloudy and horrible. That's terrible, isn't it? That's profoundly upsetting and despairing. And of course we live in a country where you can't judge what's going to happen, which is really good for spiritual practice. I mean Sri Lanka, it just gets hot, and you can expect it to remain like that.

So, this relationship of acquisitiveness, right? When we are actually enjoying it, see, remember, when we're actually enjoying something, that is *nibbana*, by which I mean perfect happiness. I mean, when you are completely lost, for instance, in a DVD or in a bit of food, when you lose that sense of self-awareness, when you become, in that total way, what it is you're experiencing, see?

Remember, every time self-awareness comes up, there's always a break. That's another consciousness. The consciousness is watching you, watching the DVD. You're watching yourself eating. Even if it's a break, you see, there's still not that absorption. While we are absorbed, in the boiled sweet, while we are absorbed in it, as far as we're concerned in that moment, it becomes timeless, doesn't it? There's no self there. So, in the scriptures, the Buddha goes through these various levels of *nibbana*, you see. But he says it's not very good because it doesn't last. You know, the boiled sweet comes to an end. Then despair arises. Unless you can find another one. See? And that's what happens, isn't it? You get this dependency, right? This addiction. Addiction.

This constant having to re-perform in order to get the same bliss and of course there's an inbuilt obsolescence to pleasure isn't there because the same one won't work so you've got to try a different flavour. So you've got this constant chasing. I think in drug circles they call it chasing the dragon. So you're constantly chasing this dragon, trying to get the same high that you had before. So there's your addiction, you see.

Then, of course, if you don't get it, if you can't get your boiled sweets, then you tend to feel frustrated, and you write your MP, things like that. You get very angry. If you've just laid out on a whole bag of special boiled sweets, gobstoppers, if you've got a whole bag of gobstoppers and you leave them on the train or the bus, boy that's very upsetting isn't it? I mean there's sorrow there, there's deep grief. So when you lose something which has given you a lot of pleasure then there's grief.

And then of course while you're carrying your bag of gobstoppers, you're always aware that they might go. So there's an underlying anxiety of loss. I was in India once and I bought a bag of peanuts. And I was walking away really enjoying these roasted peanuts. Suddenly there was a slap on the top of my head. Real shock. And it went. Just like that, just disappeared. Cheeky monkey. Came out of nowhere. It just landed on me and stole my flip.

And then, of course, there's boredom. Boredom. So I like to point out that in an obvious sense, greed is the engine of the consumer society. Everybody wants more, more, more. In fact, more is no longer an adjective, is it? It's a noun. You say to somebody, what do you want? They say, more. That's enough. Just more.

But the underlying driving force, the subconscious driving force, subliminal driving force, is boredom, isn't it? So boredom is that state of negativity, a state of, it's not a very nice place to be bored. So as soon as you're bored, you're looking for distractions, you're looking for something to do to get you out of this boredom and in so doing you again try to repeat the same old process of getting pleasure, getting happiness somewhere.

So these underlying, these post-traumatic stress that you get from indulgence, yeah, so whenever we indulge it's fine. But it's the aftermath where we realize the pain is actually causing it. So there's the compulsive nature, the addiction to it, the frustration when you don't get it, sorrow when you lose it, fear of loss, insurance policies, and boredom. To mention only five, there's probably others.

Now if you take that up from gobstoppers to people, then you can see there's a lot of suffering, isn't there? Our attachment to people, the sense of pleasure we get in it, the sense of joy and happiness. So this whole idea of happiness is a bit strange, isn't it?

Now when the Buddha was asked, used to be accused rather, of annihilation, because he prefers to talk in the negative. So when he talks about Nibbāna for instance, this is a real Nibbāna, he prefers not to use the word *sukha* which means happiness. He simply refers to it as *adukkha* which means non-suffering. So he's pointing to something which is beyond our normal experience.

Now this acquisitiveness, remember it's formed, we formed a relationship with the world of hoping that it brings to us certain circumstances, certain ways in which we can be happy. Unfortunately because of the acquisitiveness we're now in a sense of guarding it because of fear of loss. So the other side of fear is always aggression. So aggression arises naturally, there's a potential of aggression which is commensurate to the amount of acquisitiveness.

So if for instance you are afraid of losing things, of your house being burgled, you see, then you buy two great big Rottweilers. And you train them to bite people and kill them. Because you don't want your TV and your super-duper computers stolen. You're prepared to have people's limbs ripped off their bodies to safeguard your particular property. I say this because just up the road, if you ever take a walk, you'll come across two rather nasty Alsations.

So you're in immediate sense of guarding, guarding, keeping hold of against others who may want what you have. So aggression arises naturally out of acquisitiveness. And if the enemy is bigger than you then you've got to collect all your stuff and run for it. So there's the fright, there's the fear. The two sides of aggression, the two sides of aversion is fear and aggression, fear and anger, fear and hatred.

Now those three attitudes are the basic relationship we have to our life, to what we experience, because of this essential delusion. So greed, hatred, greed, fear, acquisitiveness, fear, hatred, anger, those are deep dispositions and they're there to maintain our happiness, to maintain our happiness. And once we begin to see the falseness of that then of course we begin to generate a different relationship to the world.

So now, the Buddha was accused, because of his negative way of expressing things, the unborn, the undying, of being an annihilationist, an annihilationist. And he was at pains to say that he wasn't. He said the only things that are annihilated through the process of liberation, process of enlightenment, is this greed, hatred and fear, and the delusion of course, the underlying delusion. So his whole practice you might say is about undermining that relationship, that wrong relationship that's from the heart's point of view. From an intellectual or from a wisdom point of view it's undermining a wrong understanding, a wrong perception. We've conceived something wrongly, see.

Now remember that we're moving towards this liberation, we're moving in our own pace and our way towards this enlightenment, this awakening. Now this awakening can't be manufactured because it doesn't come, according to the Buddha, from the world. It exists before the world began. What he means by the world beginning is being born every moment into this particular world. The world as far as we're concerned is the world we experience. That doesn't deny other worlds. It's just that the only world that we know or can know is the one we're actually experiencing.

Well this is the world right now as far as we're concerned. And he says it's in this world that there is the end of suffering. In this world. The world that we're experiencing. So it's this business of turning that investigation inward to ourselves to find out where the mistake is being made and to see that this mistake is creating some wrong relationship.

So when he talks about *nibbana* which is the highest happiness, right, yeah, he talks about it as the highest happiness, he goes through these various stages. So he says, is the highest happiness sensual pleasures? Is it all to do with the world as we experience it? So he doesn't deny there's happiness in it. He just denies it's the highest happiness. And then he goes through all these ecstasies, these inner ecstasies, the *jhanic*, the absorption states that we can achieve. And each one he asks, he says, this is *nibbana*, but it's not the highest *nibbana*. And then finally he gets to...

a place of non-contact with the world you might say and he says this is the highest Nibbāna. So now this generates a lot of argument in Theravāda circles and sometimes between Theravāda and the other schools. I think there's enough evidence in the scriptures that Nibbāna is a real experience. It's not a darkness. It's not a sort of annihilation. The Buddha wasn't walking around 45 years not knowing what he was doing. He wasn't asleep or something. He wasn't in this nirvanic bliss. He was right here and now and communicating and everything else. And he enjoyed life. It's not as though he didn't enjoy life.

So when he talks about what is annihilated, it's only this greed, hatred and delusion. It's only this wrong understanding and the relationship that comes of it. So there's no way that in this life we can escape from unfortunate things. There's no way we can escape from just the basic stuff of falling sick and growing old and dying. There's no way we can escape from relationships that go wrong. There's no way we can escape from having to work and all that. So it's not an escape. He's not asking us to find an escape from these things.

Now you might say, well what about you monks and nuns? You escape. Nip off somewhere and live in these caves. Just come out and get your grub and then go back. Well of course the holy life can be abused. It can be abused. But basically, of course, a monastery, if it's really working well, a monastic center or a meditation center, if it's really working well, is a hospital. It's a spiritual hospital. It's where you come to have a look at your diseases, your spiritual diseases, and try and sort it out. With the intention, at least in Buddhist understanding, for the benefit of others. That's the Bodhisattva ideal.

So recognizing that the pleasures of life and the joys that life give us are not reliable from the heart's point of view, they're not reliable from the wisdom point of view, they're impermanent, it's accepting that. So when we really accept that there's nothing in the world that we can rely on for happiness and there's nothing in the world which is sustainable, then the attitude has to change, doesn't it? You've got to actually, when happiness arises, there's not that clinging to it, there's not that trying to hold on to it, but just accepting it as something which will arise and pass away.

So if we can develop that attitude to the joys and pleasures of life, then we shouldn't have this aftermath, we shouldn't be feeling sorrow when it goes. We shouldn't be feeling frustration when it's not there, fear of loss - all that should begin to lessen as we just accept each moment as it comes to us. This is it, now it's gone. This is the way it is. If we find a little phrase which captures for us just the way it is - this is the way it is - and just drive it home that it passes, now first you can get a negativity about it. I remember once saying to my teacher what a wonderful sunset that was, and he said ah yes but it passed away. And my thoughts inside were what the bloody hell is he there for? I know it passed away. He just tried to destroy my happiness, you see.

But it's that quiet self-reminder, how things pass away, that allows us to re-establish a moment-to-moment wise relationship with the pleasures and joys of life. So that's the one side of it. The one side of it is to continuously see this relationship of attachment. Remember, you can't get rid of it. You can't say, well, from now on, I'm not going to be attached to coffee. I'm not going to be attached to cigarettes, if you smoke. You can't just say it. You've got to go through the pain of letting go. And that's mainly what stops us from doing it.

So now we've fasted or we've eaten very simply. I mean, nobody's dead. Nobody's lost enough weight to be rushed off to hospital. It's setting ourselves little tasks where we actually face the attachment we have. So now you can do it gently. When something comes up and you enjoy it, to remind yourself now it's gone and just to feel whatever's

arising. You can't stop it. If you suppress those feelings, if you suppress the nostalgia, you want more of it, if you suppress the frustration of not having enough, then of course that all feeds back into the psyche and it just creates more problems.

So for instance after a meal, just to sit there for a moment and just catch what comes up. And it's seeing what comes up actually relates to how we've related to that meal. So if after your meal you sit there and you feel gratified - now be careful of that because that gratification may be to do with feeding the pleasure to a point where it is gratified. Now that gratification feels very close to contentment. That's the problem. Because at that moment you might say, I feel really contented now. But that gratification has within itself the seed of furthermore. All we've done is satisfied a desire to the point where it's now feeling okay, and then a little bit further down the line it pops up again. So to distinguish between gratification and contentment.

So how are we going to undermine this whole process of attachment? As often as we can, it's the intention with which you enter into an experience which is going to determine what you develop. So when we come to a meal, what's your intention? We haven't read it today, but tomorrow we'll read this thing, and it's just there to nourish the body. The fact that it tastes nice is to be taken as something extra. And we're not eating it in order to be happy. We're eating it in order to maintain health, the nourishment of the body. That's a very different attitude.

Now, when you put the food on your tongue, of course it tastes nice. And with that nice taste there arises a certain contentment in the heart. It doesn't always have to be - you can have a nice taste and feel terrible. So it doesn't always have to affect the mind in a very direct way like that. But let's say that for the most part, at least for the purpose of this talk, you put something pleasant on your tongue, a piece of pizza, and the heart goes bright. So that's a given. That hasn't to be destroyed. We haven't got to take that away. That comes up naturally because that's our physical nature.

So it's the same with friendship. It may be that certain friendships, certain relationships, intimate relationships, relationships of parents to children and all that - there's a natural beautiful joy that arises from those relationships. But there's always that underlying business of this person is here to make me happy, and that's the corruption. So how do you overcome that? It's by opening up, by always reminding ourselves to open up to the other person. It's being open to the other person and seeing their desire for relationship and there's that communication. Whereas if you move towards a person with these often unnoticed desires, then it comes out in the way we speak and the way we act.

And you can always tell when attachment has slipped into a relationship because if the other person doesn't respond in the way you want them to, then that's when you feel these things. You feel the frustration with them, you feel a bit angry with them, you feel disappointed with them. Then you might feel afraid that they might not want to be your friend anymore. Terrible. So all these things, all these negative states often show us that there's something underneath the apparent friendship.

Let's take a very regular mistake I think that people make. And that's to do with the loss, the loss of friendship or at a more extreme sense, death. So you lose somebody, they die. Now, the grief we feel - the grief we feel, as opposed to sorrow, I'll come back to it in a minute - the grief we feel is actually a measure of our attachment. The pain that it leaves in the heart is the measure of them disappearing. It's that ripping out of the heart. They're gone. And we're left with memories. They're like ghosts within us. Whenever I, for instance, remember my mother, she's stuck in time. I remember this particular phase, this particular time. And every time she comes up, there's a certain generation of the relationship I had with her.

If I go back to all these people or some who have left me, they're like ghosts within me, aren't they? And I've got this continuing relationship which is frozen in time. It's not being fed again by the reality of this person. And that grief is a measure of that relationship. And of course, normally speaking, if we do it properly and we recognize that, then the grief dies away. And what's left is a sense of gratitude for that relationship. Even if the relationship was terrible, it was horrible, there's still an ending of that process of the pain that's with it, and just an acceptance and maybe some learning about what one's personal relationship was, what one was doing in order for that relationship to be so painful. But it's never just the one, is it? We like to think that. I think it's all you. I like to think it's all you. But that tends to be very delusive.

So we've got this teaching from the Buddha that everything, that our relationship to life is an ethical relationship. And this ethical relationship, if we get it right, will naturally produce all the opposite to that acquisitiveness and the hatred and the aggressiveness and all that and the fear. And the opposites will begin to appear. So now we have always these beautiful states - the love, the compassion. So again, compassion not to be confused with grief. Compassion isn't feeling sorry for somebody. Compassion is wanting to help. And what naturally arises is a beautiful, happy state of mind because you're helping somebody, haven't you?

Sympathetic joy, to be able to really feel happy because somebody else is happy. And these are resonances, human resonances that come to us. We do it easily with nature. So you might wake up on a beautiful morning and hear the birds and you resonate with

their little chirpings and it's all very lovely and beautiful. So it's not as though the Buddha is saying that we have to let go of these things and then there comes this arid desert-like state where there's no suffering but it's actually dead. No, the mind and heart actually begin to produce quite naturally these very beautiful states of mind which through certain exercises you can extend. You can actually develop them within you even more and more, and there's no limit to that. There's no perceivable limit to how much you can develop the quality of love. It's just not perceivable. That's why they call them illimitable. There's no perceivable limit to our compassion or to our sympathetic joy.

So the spiritual life or the life according to the Buddha is really this whole business of trying to get this relationship right. And the relationship itself, once you start working on the negativity of the relationship, the positive sides arise naturally. You don't have to work at it. As we begin to lessen our selfishness, generosity arises naturally. As we begin to lessen all the angers and hatreds and petty frustrations and all that, love arises naturally. As we begin to lessen all our little back-bitings and cruelties and knife-in-the-back stuff, compassion arises naturally. Cruelty to compassion, hatred to love, selfishness to generosity.

But you can take any of the painful traits in our lives - loneliness. Well, normally speaking, what's loneliness? It's a feeling of not being loved or not being loved enough, not being accepted, being separate, being isolated, being on your own, not being able to communicate. I mean, you sit there saying, and then you start saying, I'm a horrible person, which you might be, of course, but you can change.

So you've got this. Now, when you allow loneliness to express itself and you sit within that loneliness - that's what the Buddha is asking us to do. He says, you can't push these things away. You can't destroy them. You have to attend to them. So all this negativity, whatever it is, you attend to it. That's the attention. So that word attend suggests not just the looking, not just the observing, not just the investigation, but a heart's relationship to it, an attention to it in that kindly way, as a nurse or somebody nursing might have towards a patient.

And what happens is, this is what we experience in our meditation, that these things simply arise into consciousness and begin to evaporate. Begin to evaporate. So once we take away our definitions of these things as solid states, as blocks, as emotional states - see that word state - but see it more as just a turbulence, just shades of different turbulences, clouds, cumulus clouds, all those other clouds just passing through the mind like weather systems. And we're just watching it and feeling it and allowing these things to

arise and pass away. The system itself, I mean, that's the amazing thing about this teaching. The system itself purifies itself. You don't have to do anything. The heart itself purifies itself.

As soon as you get in there, there's always a danger that you're doing something just slightly off. You're developing love in order not to look at the hatred you have. And then it becomes like two different mindsets. You've got all this turbulence of hatred and on the top you're laying this ice cream of love. And it's just a case of recognizing that the negativity within us has to be released. It has to be allowed to express itself. And that is done through the *vipassanā*.

The insight is to see it's not me. That's the deep insight, that as soon as you experience an emotion as an object, as something you are experiencing, this you being the observer, the feeler, immediately you've pulled out of it, you're no longer it. The identity is broken. And therefore, in that position, if you look at it carefully, there is no suffering. Even though you might be in a deep depression or a great anxiety or there's stuff coming up, if you can pull out of it to the position of the observer - ask yourself, is the observer, the feeler, the knower, is that actually suffering?

And when you turn on the investigation, it becomes something you're investigating, as a scientist might investigate pollution. It's just mental pollution. So there's no suffering in the knower. As soon as the identity forms, as soon as you fall into that relationship of ownership, identity, suffering arises. So when we chant in the morning, this dependent origination, he lays it out very clearly. With that desire there comes the grasping. The grasping is the identity. And then as soon as that happens, some action is performed, either indulging it or pushing it away or doing something. And there's your act. These actions produce a certain conditioning and there you've got your compulsive behavior.

So now when it comes to the way the Buddha describes his own life, at that point of liberation he's discovered a completely different level of consciousness. Now this word consciousness is used these days in so many different ways that it's very difficult to really use it. The best word I ever came across to try and get this across is knowing. Even the knowing isn't quite right. It's just knowing.

So we have this facility in English, these verbal nouns, gerundum or gerund, which gives you a dualistic understanding that it is something but it's a process. It's also something which is nothing because it's always in a process. So this knowing is telling us that it has this facility, this ability to understand. And that's the Buddha, that's the Buddha

within us. And once he'd achieved that, once that became completely separated from the psychophysical organism, and he re-entered into it, he was living in a completely different world.

So this completely different world, remember, is not the outer world, it's the world that he's manufacturing. And from that point onwards, suffering doesn't arise. It's not possible for it to arise because the relationship's not there for it to arise. So this suffering is something that is simply coming out of a relationship.

That doesn't mean to say he didn't have physical pain. We know he had physical pain. I mean, he said to Ānanda to take over the talk because his back was hurting. See? I feel good. My back hurts. You know, like the Buddha. This is my big connection to the Buddha, bad back.

So if we can understand that, you see, at least intellectually, then we take it into our practice. So right here, now, while we're sitting, some unpleasant thing arises. Just by getting that attitude of investigating it, of finding that position other to it, of turning it into an object to be investigated, we're not suffering. And then when it comes to the pleasant part to do exactly the same so when pleasant stuff comes up to enjoy it but not to indulge it.

Now that's really difficult for us because the distinction between indulging and enjoying they are up against each other. You know, when you don't like something because it pushes it away from you as an object you know when aversion arises. It's very difficult to know when the indulgence slips in. See?

So that's why when something pleasant comes up in your meditation, you see, just for a moment, just reflect, you see. This is beautiful. This is lovely. I'll just be with it and enjoy its characteristics. That's all. So that means that when the sitting finishes, you don't come back into your next sitting thinking that it's going to rise again because it never does anyway unless you're an adept at these absorptions. So you don't get disappointed, you don't expect it.

So when it comes again, oh, very nice. So if we can take that same understanding into daily life, you see, so something beautiful happens and it disappears. Something beautiful happens and it disappears. So you don't expect anything. So expectation is always going to put a pressure on life which is going to undermine the full potential of happiness.

So now there, there we come back to a real sort of deeper understanding as to what perception is doing, what concepts are doing. So remember, you know, just take an example of food. Remember, whenever you see food, unless you've never seen it before,

you've got a concept about it. So you've got, you're looking at an apple. Now there is already an expectation of what this apple ought to taste like. It's just there. Because we've had so much experience with apples. As soon as you say apple, there comes this idea of what a good apple is.

So as soon as you taste this apple, it's always in comparison with past apples. So your direct relationship to that apple as it is, is distorted. You won't actually taste certain things because you don't want to taste them. Or you immediately have a negative attitude towards the apple. Can you imagine that? Then really negative towards an apple. Because this is not the apple you expected.

It often happens, for instance, with pears. So the pear looks absolutely beautiful, but it's not matured. And you sink your teeth into it, and it's got no taste whatsoever. It's got the slightest taste, and you can hear the mind saying, "God damn it, we should have waited. This is a waste of a pear." See, two, three days on, it would be absolutely luscious.

So it's when we understand that the concepts we have, the expectations we have are always messing around with the direct experience of things. So if we can approach an apple as if we'd never eaten an apple before, that apple would be fine unless it's obviously rotten. The apple's fine. It's just as it is.

How do we do that, you see? We do that by driving ourselves to the sense base. If we're right there with the tongue, that's what we'll taste. We'll taste the apple. But if we're there at the level of concept, we'll only allow the tongue to give us the taste that we will allow it to give us.

It's the same when you, you know, culture-wise, you know, these days we're much more multicultural. But there was a time when, you know, Chinese music just didn't make sense. It was awful. You'll still get Italians who won't eat anything else but spaghetti. They're not open to things. It's getting better, by the way. I know there's some Chinese shops, but I haven't seen many curries. But that's by the by.

So it's a case of recognizing, just realizing that to go beyond our concepts, to go beyond our history, which is always impinging on the present, you have to drive your attention to the actual experience that's happening.

So it's the same with people, isn't it? When you meet somebody, there's already this expectation of the person. You've built up an inner image, an inner concept of the person. And therefore, when this person does something which is out of the ordinary, whether it's beautiful or not, there can be a tendency to feel that they're not playing their role again. I mean, this happens most distinctly, say, in a partnership or a mar-

riage where, I mean, this happens, for heaven's sake, where somebody gets involved in meditation. You know, and there's a whole war coming out because this isn't the person I married. You know, this isn't the person that I formed a relationship with. Because you've defined that person in the way that pleases you from the history. So when that person changes too much, you just, you know, it's like that's just unacceptable.

So it's always a case of understanding that when we're practicing *vipassanā* we're actually practicing how to live. There's no distinction to be made between the mindfulness that's in the sitting and the mindfulness in the ordinary day of life. It is to be there with what's happening in that very open, spacious way and to be aware of any judging that we're putting on a situation. Remember all these things have always got, you know, little underlying aspects. I mean it's not as though you want to stop judging; you want to know it's judging. I mean if you know somebody's as rotten as they come you don't want to lose that. It's just that you don't want it to impinge upon your direct experience of them because there's always a chance that they might change.

But if you're always going to go to them knowing in your heart of hearts that they're as rotten as they come, it stops any possibility of change between you and that person. And if you go to the person with always the idea that they are truly a wonderful person and they do something that's horrible, that's the end of the friendship because it's broken your idea of them.

So it's a case of recognizing that this whole business of the delusion, the delusion of who we actually are and why we're actually here and to see how it affects our lives in terms of just that relationship of always holding on to acquiring, maintaining, and then the opposite of pushing anything away, either aggressively or running for it, that seems to undermine these little islands of joy and peace that we manufacture, that we actually try very hard to create for ourselves.

So this little handout, if you just have a quick look at it, I've tried to give some indications for tomorrow. This isn't particularly the rest of the day. This is just for tomorrow. If you want to do some reflection, you see. So you see, you saw another year. Again, make revolutions once more. So you've got this achievable revolution.

So these are four areas, you know. And any comment on this little pamphlet would be greatly appreciated. So physical well-being. So if you look down there, you see. So eating. That means basic stuff. Eating, sleeping, exercise, health issues. So what's your relationship to all that? How can you make it even better? What mistakes are we making?

Then material well-being. So this is all to do with wages, consumer items, cost of living, ease of living, unemployment. What's your relationship to your work? Actually, I'll put that in the next one. But it's just material well-being. You see, how much of our happiness is based on wealth? You know, on being able to take a plane and go on holiday somewhere whenever we feel like. How much of it is based on that? Or a car, see? A car gives you mobility, doesn't it? You just jump in a car and go somewhere. Remember Spike Milligan? He said, "They say that money can't make you happy. But I just want to have a try."

Then there's social well-being, which is a huge area. It has to do with all our relationships and the wider family, friends, workmates. And work itself. What's our relationship to work? Even if the work is not what we want to do, even if the work isn't what we want to do, can we form a relationship with it which is at least meaningful, spiritually meaningful? Civic responsibility, see? How seriously do we take that? That means, you know, things like voting and local issues and stuff like that. It's not that we have to do these things; it's just a case of in what way do they impinge upon our well-being. Would we feel better to get more involved? Would that make us actually feel better in ourselves? Charity work. Do we do any? See? And leisure. So leisure here I'm putting things like art and walking in the country. Anything that doesn't fit into the other categories.

And then finally there's spiritual well-being. So this is again ethics. So remember the Buddha's teaching is all about ethics. Ethics in the widest sense of that meaning of relationship. You can boil all his teachings in terms of the life we live, down to ethics. Even closing a fridge door is an ethical problem. Are we closing it with complete disregard for the door? Disregard for the actual machine which is banging it to. How do we open a door? It goes down to the actual minuscule.

And then there's just lifestyle of a spiritual voice. That includes everything, your lifestyle. And then finally, your spiritual practice.

So in the morning, when I point to all these people at this present time who are suffering, you know, from sickness and wars and all that, see, the last one is who find life meaningless. That's pretty despairing, isn't it? If you feel that fundamentally your life has no meaning, that's a sort of despair, isn't it?

Now what the Buddha says is that the meaning of this life is to discover this perfect place, this perfect happiness. This is what he calls *Nibbāna*. He talks about it as an *āyatana*, as a sphere of experience, which is completely separate from the moon, the sun, from going here, there, standing still, from all the senses. It's an actual experience.

He's pointing to that as something which makes sense of everything. It's not just a final place in itself; it makes sense of the whole of our lives. It's the discovery of our Buddha nature, for want of a better word.

So we should enter the new year with hope in our hearts. This is with great hope and great effort. You see, and if you want you can join in then you see this little ceremony on New Year's Day. So it's a case of putting your resolutions on a bit of paper and we shall take them up and put them in a little container which I've yet to find and we shall offer them as a burnt offering to the Buddha. And then we shall take our resolutions, sorry, all the things that, all our, yes, that's right, and then we shall transform that into action, into an attitude, you see, by chanting at the statue of Kuan Yin. It should be great fun.

So I think that's it. I've been on a bit. I can only hope my words have been of assistance. May you by your continuous effort liberate yourselves from all suffering and find true happiness and well-being and of course the final joy of *Nibbāna* sooner rather than later.

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