

# Overcoming Thīna-middha: Understanding Dullness and Lethargy

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 15:13

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*Namo tassa bhagavato arahatto sammāsambuddhassa.* Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So, this month, I thought I'd have a go at this dullness and lethargy. It used to be called sloth and torpor, which are, of course, moral views of them. And it's also listed in the seven deadly sins of the Christian tradition. You'll know them all: pride, avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, anger and sloth. These days, we tend to use gentler phenomenological titles and call them how we feel them. So we feel them as dullness in the head and lethargy in the body. And of course, cognitive science always comes up with its own little definitions: arousal dysregulation. So when you feel very dull and lazy and all that, you can say, oh, this is just arousal dysregulation.

*Thīna-middha*, that's the word. So *thīna* refers to this dullness in the head and the *middha* refers to this heaviness or physical torpor.

Now, I don't think we put enough accent on this. The other hindrances, everybody knows about sensual desires and ill will, anger and all that. And we know about restlessness and we know about remorse and guilt and shame. And doubt often comes up for us. But I don't think we realize how pernicious dullness and lethargy is.

So how does it come about, this dullness and lethargy? Consider certain situations. Sunday morning, yeah? And you wake up and you're nice and warm in bed and it's absolutely wonderful. And you think, I'll just roll over and roast the other side for a moment. So you don't need it, but it's just a lovely thing to disappear into this sweet oblivion. And especially when it's subliminal, like you're not quite asleep, but you're not quite awake. And it just feels very lovely. Well, of course, that's really bad energy, right? I mean, everything we do creates physical or mental energy. So this energy now is one that pulls us down.

And then there are occasions when we feel a bit bored, or we're a bit upset, or feel a bit depressed. Or we feel a bit depressed, and we think, oh, and you get on the sofa and disappear, or you throw yourself under the duvet. There's one way or another you just get rid of yourself. It's a sort of soft suicide, right? But it takes an effort. You have to do it. So there has to be this intention to disappear and there's an energy that makes you do that. And of course when it comes up in meditation or in ordinary daily life you just get this dullness in your head and this heaviness in the body. So it's just a bad habit, that's all.

Now, there was an arahant in Burma called Sun Lun, and he attained full liberation at record Olympic speed. It seems he was a clerk in an office, and he met someone who taught him how to do breathing meditation. But what they taught him was this very heavy, fast breathing. You can get it on YouTube, S-U-N-L-U-N. And it was something like six months. He just did this practice. And within six months, he'd made it. And then began to teach the system. So, again, you can check it out on YouTube. And he was asked, why is it that people—I mean, you did it in this express speed. How is it people don't? And he said, it's because they're lazy. Right. So there we are. That's coming from an arahant.

So the problem with that dullness and lethargy is that it then expresses itself as a sort of apathy, an unwillingness to do something. I can't be bothered. Boredom sinks in. So it really has a long effect on us in terms of our attitude in daily life.

You have to be careful not to confuse it with depression. So in meditation, the dullness or in ordinary daily life when you feel dull or you feel this heaviness in the body, it's normally just a state base. But if it's depression, it becomes a trait. It's with you a lot of the time. And in posture, it improves with lifting the energy. So if you feel drowsy in the posture, there are a few things you can do. You can open your eyes, let the light in, you can lift your body up, put more energy in it, and it normally will dissipate. The other thing, of course, is to sink into the feeling and just be with it and investigate its qualities, the softness of it, the tingliness of it. You'd be surprised how it feels when you drop into the body. And sometimes if you're dull in the head and you just wake up, as it were, and investigate this porridge in the head, you'd be surprised. You wake up like a light bulb. It's quite remarkable. But if it's depression, it's a mood. It just doesn't move. So you have to be careful not to confuse those two. And if you do think that you are depressed, then obviously you might need some help.

Just zooming forward to the Buddha. So he had his early two disciples, Moggallāna and Sāriputta. They were brahmins. And they became, of course, his two chief disciples. And Moggallāna went to him for some advice about dullness and lethargy. And he gave these sorts of advice. He says, change the focus, put your attention on something which is going to raise your energy. In his terms, it could be reflecting on the dhamma. You can even do some chanting, just something to lift the energy. He also suggests that you pull your earlobes. So you can always try that. If you really press your fingers in, it really hurts. In the old days, that's what your parents used to get hold of, just to wake you up. And then there's light, of course. I've mentioned opening the eyes and letting the light in. And then he says, oh, and walking meditation, of course. You can always do that.

And also, just in ordinary daily life, remember, after you've eaten, even if it's the right amount, if it's carbohydrates, the body does produce a chemical that makes you feel drowsy, wanting you to spend some time resting in order to digest and go through that whole process. But you have to be careful that you don't give in to the sleepiness of it. That's all. And if in fact you are overcome by sleepiness after you've eaten, then you might be eating too much. And then he says, when all that fails, he talks about mindful rest. All right. So to actually rest and just try a yoga thing of the yoga nidra, something like that, just to relax and

not to actually lose consciousness.

So let's go back a little bit. So just to run over those causes again: there's overeating, sometimes oversleeping—that's when you're indulging in blissful oblivion. Be careful of boredom, that also makes you want to go to sleep. So you have to lift up a bit of interest. And physical exercise, don't forget physical exercise. It doesn't have to be much, but you've got to take care of the body in terms of its energy systems. So doing things like tai chi, yoga, but also some aerobic stuff like walking or cycling or something. All these add to a general feeling of energy.

Now, one thing you can do if you do feel sleepy is to, again, remind ourselves of the urgency of the situation. Every morning we wake up and I'm sure that we are absolutely sure that we will live the whole day. But there's nothing certain about that at all. And we can drop dead any time or we could be caught up in an accident or fall off a cliff. Who knows? It's getting that feel that we're living on this knife edge and that brings a sense of urgency of wanting to really bring the practice into daily life. Sometimes you can bring inspiring teachers to mind, in teachings to mind.

Basically, it's a hindrance, right? It's one of the hindrances. It's a mental state that I think we have to take quite seriously. In my own practice, I've spent hours dealing with dullness and lethargy. And at one point, it used to last for ten days. I used to just walk around in this fog.

And there was a lovely occasion in a meditation room that I was staying in Malaysia at the time. I was working with Upandita. And everybody, of course, was getting up at half past three. And the diligent ones were, if they were falling asleep in the meditation, they were doing walking meditation at the back of the hall. And the lights were quite low. And we're all sitting there. And there's this hell raising of a crash, glass broken. It sounded terrible. And this poor meditator—he might have been a monk or a nun—walks straight into a glass picture. So that's how dull you can get. He wasn't hurt, but it was a funny occasion.

I think we've covered all those areas there. So I'd like to leave you with something I haven't said for a very long time, which is to recognize that we were most probably conceived on a bed and we probably were born on a bed. And we spend a third of our lives in bed. And when we're sick, we go to bed and we'll probably die in a bed. So it's good to remember that the bed is probably the most dangerous place on earth, right? And just stay with it. Every time you look at the bed, just think of it as the pit. So that you actually regulate how much you're falling asleep. Because any oversleep, that creates this bad energy, this downer.

On a final note, there is a connection between restlessness and dullness and lethargy. Often in your meditation, you'll be quite restless and then suddenly find yourself dozing. And sometimes you're feeling very dull and unenergetic and suddenly you become restless. And as I experience it, it's the same energy. One of it's coming up and the other one's going down. So one trick when you are feeling dull is to start from the feet and just bring your attention up the body, feeling things—it's an exploration. But don't go down, start again at the feet and just keep coming up. And that also, for me anyway, has an effect of lifting

that energy.

Very good. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and that by your diligent practice, never falling into the error of dullness and lethargy, you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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