

# Q&A: Kamma/Free Will, Mettā/Attachment, Momentary Concentration (Khaṇika Samādhi)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 39:48

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*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.

What I've done here is put a few questions together since they revolve around the same theme. The first question is: what do causes and conditions mean? The next one was: what about free will? And then there is: why is it we clean our *kamma* when we practice *vipassanā*? And as a side issue to that, the term spiritual bypassing — does that mean that one unskillfully uses the practice to avoid unpleasant feelings and emotions, and if so, what might some of the more subtle indicators of this be when it occurs?

This all revolves around the Buddha's teaching about *kamma*. The main teaching is really around dependent origination, because that's how we create *kamma* — *kamma* here meaning our conditioning, our own personal conditioning. This conditioning is always within conditions. We're never completely separate from the world around us or the relationships around us, so it's always a negotiated process where we're working in a situation from a particular intention, and you haven't a clue what's going to happen once you activate it. The general rule, of course, is that if you do something wholesome, something wholesome arises out of it, and if you do something unwholesome, unwholesomeness arises.

Causes and conditions — that was, of course, what drew Sāriputta to the Buddha when he met one of the five companions that the Buddha was with before his liberation, Assaji. When he asked what his teacher taught, he said, "Where there's a cause, there's a reason for it" — I'm paraphrasing — and that somehow clicked with Sāriputta, who then went off to search for the Buddha.

So everything is conditioned. In all these conditions, which have their own causes, remember there are two types of causes. There's the *idappaccayatā*, I think that's what it's called — the law of this and that. When that happened in the past, this happens now, and when that didn't happen, this didn't happen now. And then of course there's the immediate presence contingency: because this happens now, this happens; because this doesn't happen, this doesn't happen.

My usual example is the group. You've all come from different pasts, different places, different reasons. And once we are here, we create something just out of that. And then when you're here, of course, there's this relationship going on all the time, both with you and the meditation and you with others. So causes and conditions are all mixed up in a process which is happening in the present affected by the past.

You can't separate that, because if you think everything is from the past, then you're into fate. And I suppose logically, as one writer said, if everything was just cause and effect from the past, where would creativity come from? It would be a repetitive universe or cosmos. But on the other hand, if there's no past, if everything happens just spontaneously, then you have chaos. So there's the creativity — things come together from the past to create a present moment, and that's the creative moment.

You can see it in our politics, how the world slowly moves towards psychosis and war. And then there's a healing period and you're all right for about 20, 30 years. And then it all starts moving up again into this catastrophe. So it happens both in the wider scale and of course in ourselves also.

If you take the view that causes and conditions determine everything, then you're on the far side of free will, which is fate — everything's conditioned. There were people in the Buddha's time who taught that everything's determined, so why bother? It'll just happen. I don't know any modern philosopher who has that extreme view, though I'm sure there are some somewhere hidden on YouTube.

And the other side is, of course, complete free will. The teacher of that was Jean-Paul Sartre. He said every conscious moment you have the freedom of choice. You're completely free. But what stops you, of course, is your neuroses, your hang-ups, et cetera. In that very narrow sense that each and every moment presents us with an opportunity for choice, then we could say that there is some sort of free will. But Buddhism is normally put in this middle place which they call compatibilism.

Obviously some of our lives is fated — just the fact that you're born into the society you've got, a language which gives you certain structures. You can't get out of that. It's very difficult. You have to learn another language, you have to enculturate, you have to go native into another language to realize how caught up we are in our own concepts and ideas. One obvious example is the way the West is so individual — "I did it my way" — whereas in the East they don't see themselves that way. They see themselves very much as part of a group, and that's why we find the Japanese and Chinese quite difficult to understand. We think they're just being manipulated or following the group, but they're very much family-centered, group-centered, nation-centered. So that for me is a very obvious difference.

There's a part of us which is already set — it's just part of our conditioning in the world, the society, et cetera. And there's a part of us which has a choice. Now, here we've got to be careful, because when you see somebody going down the biscuit aisle thinking that they have a choice as to what they're going to choose — I mean, I've done this myself where you go in and you think, "Right, I'm going to have something new. I'm fed up with chocolate biscuits." So you go all the way along 100 biscuits at Tesco's, and you keep coming back and you start centering on chocolate biscuits, and in the end you think, "To hell with it, I'll have my usual." So the conditioning is so great. I'm not particularly fond of chocolate biscuits — I once talked about coffee like that and suddenly got all this coffee arriving.

When we're deluded, the idea of choice is obviously something that consumerism works on — the delusion that you have a choice, that you're the one who chooses this particular piece of clothing, that it

hasn't been chosen for you. From a Buddhist point of view, that's a very delusive area because it's being manipulated by your desires, your attachments, your following of the crowd, being one of the many.

But once we start meditating, then this faculty of discrimination comes in. What discrimination does is it's looking at choices that come up within us from the position of the path — where are we heading? So the aim is to get fully liberated from all suffering. The object arises every present moment which is either off the path or on it. Because of our strong conditioning for certain things — certain habits, certain indulgences and whatnot — we're always slipping off on these little side roads. But eventually we drag ourselves back and get on the path. And what does that, of course, is this discrimination.

You might say that even for somebody who's completely caught up in their desires and whatnot, there remains some sort of choice or at least the potential of choice. I mean, they can say, "No chocolate biscuits today," but it's difficult. And then there are those of us who are on the path who are dragged by old habits, but this new understanding keeps bringing us back to the path.

In what way do we have free will to any extent? But it doesn't work, does it? Because once you know where you're going, then the path is set for you. It's just like when you go for a walk. Tomorrow's my day off, by the way, so I'll probably climb a hill with Mark. It depends on the weather. And of course, once we've decided on a hill, that's it. It's not as though you go halfway up and say, "Hold on, let's do the other hill." You set your pace and you stay on that path. If you come off piste, then there's a chance of getting lost in all the other little side routes, but you keep coming back to the path because you want to get to the top.

In a sense, I would argue that the idea of choice is — I mean, it's there. You can choose not to be on the path. But in terms of where your heart is, where your direction is, where your objective or your aim is, you don't have much of a choice. It's like, "This is the path. I've got to stay on it." So for me, it's a funny one. I try to come off the whole idea of free will and just talk about discrimination and what that actually leads us to do. And then to have the commitment — the understanding comes with the discrimination to know, "Well, this is what you're going to do."

Part of that clarity, part of that discrimination, of course, comes with the purity of the heart, because it's the turbulences in the heart, it's the little delusive habits that we have in the heart that keep taking us away. Whenever we're meditating and we can see this stuff coming up — irritations, anxieties, over-excitements, planning, planning, all that — for us, that's recognizing that these are little devils that sit behind us and keep prodding us and unwittingly often guide our lives without us being fully aware of it.

As these come into awareness and we recognize them as unwholesome, we allow them to burn out. And that's really getting rid of old *vipāka*. If we want to be strictly correct, *kamma* is your action. The consequence is *vipāka*. But I know these days we just use the word *kamma* to mean consequences. So these are the consequences that are in us, in our own hearts, because of past action. And you can't get rid of them just like that. You have to allow them to express themselves. And that's one reason why the meditation is so difficult, because it's 99% purification and 1% chocolate biscuits. There isn't much. But as

you progress, of course, you get more chocolate biscuits. Or at least the misery tones down a bit. That's what we can say. The misery tones down. Remember, right to the very end, there's some form of restlessness in the person.

So a lot of our practice is, first of all, releasing this turbulence in the heart, allowing it to manifest. And the other side is, of course, this discrimination. And that's the wisdom factor. That's this *satipaṇṇā*, this intuitive awareness, coming to realize that it's not looking at things properly, it's not engaging properly, and that's what's creating the problem. So there is a process of purification and a process of insight. And this insight slowly but surely guides us out of those habits that create problems for us. So that's how it happens.

Remember that these internal turbulences need not come out as memories. They need not come out as emotions. They just come out as pain. They can just come out as pain, unfortunately. And when the pain comes out, you know something's gone, but you haven't a clue what it was. And the wonderful thing is you don't have to know. You don't have to do a psychotherapy on yourself — it's always a waste of time anyway. I remember when I was going way back and I read all these books — Freud, Jung, Laing, just reading. And I came to this amazing conclusion. I always remember this. I was about 25 and I thought, "Finally, I know myself." Yes. Delusion.

So one of the dangers of the process is what's been known by — I think his name's Wellwood, I should have looked it up. He's a very good writer. And he was both a psychotherapist and a very good meditator, belonging to the Tibetan tradition, I think. And it was he who coined this phrase "spiritual bypassing."

And this happens when you're not really into *dukkha*. You don't really want to sink into proper *dukkha* — real, real burning, hot, fiery, squeezey suffering. And so what you do is you distance yourself from it. And that's one of our mistakes that we make by pointing at it, especially with the noting. So you say something like "anger, anger, anger," and actually you're pushing it away. You're keeping it well away over there. And of course, that doesn't mean to say that it has the opportunity to burn out. And so it rests there as a dis-ease in the mind. And all the time, the meditator's saying to themselves, "I'm liberated from anger. I never react to anger. I see it coming and it's fine. And I can see it purifying," but actually it's not happening. They're keeping it distant.

And this happens when you're interested in impermanence. "Oh yes, very good, yeah. And not me, not mine." But this "not me, not mine" is really being used to push things out of consciousness, to keep it in consciousness in a way that you feel comfortable with it. And what you're not looking at is the reactivity, which is not wanting to feel this stuff. So what happens there is that all the stuff is accumulating.

Because remember, every time you sit, you're beckoning the heart to manifest itself, because you've pulled off the suppressive measures. You found this observation post inside yourself. It's this place where you're above the mind, or should we say slightly beyond it. And so you're not reacting, you're not reacting with fear or aversion, and therefore the heart feels free to begin to manifest. And in so doing, it can come up to

such a point where the meditator keeps pushing back.

In the Mahāsi tradition, and in fact in Theravāda in general — just as we chant in the morning — it's impermanence, suffering and not-self. That's the process. And the reason why impermanence is put first is because it's a way into the other two. What arises and passes away radically can be seen as having no substance. It's not real. It's an attack. And what arises and passes away, it makes it useless to grasp onto something, to attach to anything, because it's gone anyway. It's only by dint of force that you hold onto things.

So *anicca* is a way into seeing these two, but not actually experiencing them. That's the problem. You see it, you can see it from one angle, but in a sense you've got to also see it from the angle of *anattā* and the angle of *dukkha*.

The angle of *anattā* is, of course, to see you're not in control, you don't have full control. So that's the opening part of the discourse on the *anattalakkhaṇa sutta*, the discourse on the characteristic of not-self. The first question is — I'm paraphrasing — "If this were my body, could I make it grow taller, have more hair, things like that?" And they say, "Oh no, Bhante, no." So you can see there's limitations of power over the body, the heart, the mind, et cetera. So that limitation, that lack of control, is one of the sources of insight from the point of view of *anattā*, not from the point of view of *anicca*, although it might hint at it.

And when it comes to *dukkha*, that's what the dependent origination is pointing us to, to this whole business of reactivity, of how we react to things and unwittingly cause ourselves more and more problems. So that little escape route between *vedanā*, feeling, and *taṇhā*, which is that movement towards it of wanting it or pushing it away.

I've got it in blue, you see. I'm answering orange at the moment.

In the discourse on the *Satipaṭṭhāna*, he has this recurrent phrase, *vedanānupassī vedanāsu*, which means to see feelings in feelings, to feel feelings in feelings, to understand feelings in feelings, to understand the mind in mind, to understand the body in the body, *rūpa*. So there's something — to me, it always suggests that he has this difficulty of getting people to actually open up to and receive fully what's actually happening.

One of my teachers, Sayadaw Pandita, used to use this phrase: to plunge into it. You have to go into it deeply, you have to absorb into it, you might say. And this allows us to recognise this reaction, you see. So you can't do that while the reaction is there. So if you can't investigate a physical pain or an emotional pain, there's something getting in the way and you don't want to go there.

And if something is stopping you from seeing things as they really are at the pleasurable level, at the emotional, joyful level, it's because you're colouring it with wanting more, demanding more from it. So there's your indulgence. So that *dukkha* — although you can get a grasp of it from impermanence, if everything's impermanent and you see that, what's the point of attachment? But you're not dealing with

this reactivity. That's the problem. So you're bypassing it, you see.

And of course, you can remain cool. You can remain cool in life, you see. Somebody gets angry with you, you can immediately pull back on yourself and say, well, I'm a peaceful person. I don't get angry at all. And you can kid yourself into thinking that you don't have any anger.

So the three avenues of insight — this *dukkha* and *anicca* and *anattā* — they both have their own specific ways of looking at things, which connect with the other two. One connects with the other. But even so, you have to give the three of them your full attention.

So the questions were: what causes and effect, what do they mean about free will? How do you cleanse *kamma* when you practice *vipassanā*? And the term spiritual bypassing. So now the next one, and I've also slipped in there feelings within feelings.

To go with that, there's just a quick question here about *khanika samādhi*. In his book *In This Very Life*, I think Sayadaw Pandita explains this completely. So he talks about *vipassanā jhāna*, *vipassanā* absorptions, as opposed to *samatha jhāna*. So in the commentary, what you get is *ā lambana jhāna* and *tilakkhana jhāna*. *Ā lambana* means object and *tilakkhana* means the three signs, the three characteristics.

When you're practising *jhāna*, when you're practising absorption, really, you just want to have one object and you definitely don't want to discriminate. You don't want to get into trying to understand it because then it shifts over to *vipassanā*. You just want to absorb into it. That's all. And the delight of it. Now, that sort of practice, when it's practised with *vipassanā*, is, of course, a strengthening thing, because when you come out, you have a very sharp concentration. Much the same as when we practise walking meditation, although it still remains a sort of *vipassanā* practice because of the impermanence, the rising and falling. It is very much to do also with a sense of ease, a sense of collectedness, a sense of concentration. So when you come in, you can keep that with you, you see.

So with *tilakkhana jhāna*, the concentration is known as *khanika*, it's momentary, meaning it's one object, then another object, then another object. But that's not relating to the strength of your concentration. That's something else. The strength of your concentration can be described at different levels.

So, for instance, as you begin to quieten down on the objects that are arising, there may come a moment when you feel quite still, you see. So that's the moment of what would be termed *vitakka*. So there's this image that they use in the commentaries — it's *Visuddhimagga*, for those of you who know it — of a bee flying around the flower. So it's flying all over the place and then it finally finds this flower. So it's going around, but it's not landed and it can shoot off anywhere at any time. So it's the same with the mind, you see. You think you're there, you see, then you stop noting, which is a sin. And then the mind wanders, see?

But then there comes a point where you sort of drop. Often people experience it as an actual drop. And then you're set. You're in there, you see? And that's known as *vicāra*, *vitakka vicāra*. So the bee's landed, you see? It's sucking on the... Now, when you've finally landed like that, slowly, driven by your interest —

this is what it is, driven by your interest, looking at it, you see, which supports... I mean, for the way I personally experience it, driven by your interest of wanting to know, there's this tremendous support comes and your concentration, all the faculties, the seven factors of enlightenment become more and more strong and it becomes more laser-like. But still there might be a changing object, see.

So frankly, by then, usually you're down to sort of one object like the breath or something or a pain or something that's very steady in its process. Usually the breath. So the distinction between... When you hear momentary concentration, it doesn't mean you've got concentration this moment and then the next moment you've lost it. And it sometimes feels like that. But that's not what this phrase is referring to. It's referring to a steady concentration with changing objects. And that should be *vipassanā*. Whereas the *samatha*, the *ālamāna*, the concentration based on an object, is usually the same object. Some sort of repetition, some mantra, some image or whatever.

So that's the momentary concentration. You wouldn't find it in an ordinary dictionary. It's a bit scholastic really. But I'm pretty sure that Sayadaw Pandita talks about it in his book.

Then there's two here that link together. Well, it's the same question actually. It's about the Noble Eightfold Path and where mental chatter comes in. And some thoughts come under right intention, which is the *sammā saṅkappa*. And Nyanatiloka has right thought for step two. This is the *sammā saṅkappa*. But I've seen it translated as right intention, right resolve, etc., etc.

OK, so if we go down the path, the *sammā diṭṭhi* is to see things clearly. Now, in a sense, that has to become systemic. You can't just see. If the whole process of liberation was just seeing that things were rising and passing away, not-self, then I think we'd have made it by yesterday. Frankly, that's not a big deal. You can see those things at various levels. But somehow it has to become systemic. And the first thing it affects is the way you're seeing, it affects your attitude, it affects your relationship.

Now *sammā saṅkappa* is described as moving from selfishness to generosity, from hatred to love, and from cruelty to compassion. So you can see it's to do with some sort of change of behaviour as an attitude. It's not hit the behaviour yet. That comes on the next three steps.

I know some people describe it as right thought, but I don't think that hits the nail on the head. I think it's more to do with right attitude and how that brings about, sometimes you say right intention or right resolve. That's my own understanding. So the attitude would, of course, produce resolves and intentions. It's dropping down from your attitude, isn't it? And then it has to be activated. So that's your right speech, right action and livelihood.

And although right speech is normally put out as what you actually say, but then, if you look internally, you're always talking to somebody. I mean, it's like there's an internal dialogue going on with everybody you hate and everybody you love and all that. So it's not as though I don't see a distinction between that. It's still talking. It's still speech. When I swear at somebody in my head, and hopefully it never comes out

through the mouth, it's still unwholesome. It's not as though it's okay to have these murderous thoughts in my head. Well, I mustn't actually do it.

And in one of the discourses, the Buddha actually says, when you talk about what's worse, what's more dangerous, is it something happening in your head or something you say or something you do? So he points out, well, it all begins in the head. It all begins in the way you think. I mean, if you're going to rob a bank, you've got to plan it. Look at the maps. You've got to figure out how it is.

Just as a little aside, I always remember there was a very famous bank robber in Alcatraz or something. They asked him, why do you rob banks? And he said, that's where the money is. That was very funny. What a stupid question. That's where the money is. So he obviously had wrong intention driven by money.

So that I think brings us to the end of that, the Noble Eightfold Path. There's just one about chanting. So I really find it helpful.

I'll just say something about chanting. It says, where does it come from? Is it part of tradition or more general? Chanting, of course, has its roots in the oral tradition. So everything was learnt off by heart, remember, for 500 years. 500 years. And it came to a point about 500 years on, in Sri Lanka, the big universities there, the big monastic universities, that they felt they were losing it, either because monks and nuns weren't making the effort to remember, but they decided to write it down. And that brought to an end that sort of way of remembering things.

So when you read the scriptures, they're very repetitive, because it's a way of remembering things you keep. And you get line after line after line, which changes just one word. But that's the chanting, you keep at it. But it's also, of course, a contemplative practice. I mean, if you're a monastic, and you can't go shopping, you can't do any cooking. So what are you going to do? I mean, you can sit there for some time, but not all day. You can do a bit of chatting, have a chat with people. And then you think, well, why not do a bit of chanting, see?

And the chanting, like some monks do a lot of it, is, of course, a way of concentration. It's a way of lifting the heart. And some of them, there's this phenomenal sort of... In 1956, I think that was the date, when they had the sixth great council. So there's been six great councils since the Buddha's times. In Rangoon, they held this big sixth great council. It was Theravāda, Theravāda. And there were, if I remember rightly, six monks who knew all the scriptures. All of them, so that's all the discourses, all the Vinaya, the rule of the monks, which is another six books, and all the Abhidhamma books.

And they were the ones who would sit there, and the Mahāsi Sayadaw was the *pucchaka*, I think it was called, the person who asked the questions. So he himself was a renowned scholar in his own time. So he asked the questions as they went through certain problems. And it would have been these six, really, who would have decided whether it was being properly remembered. I don't think there were any... I mean, they do have small changes, I believe, but nothing of any importance.

So the chanting really works on a heart level. I mean, it obviously has meaning when you chant, but if you put a certain emotional value to it, so just like when you're chanting about the Buddha Dhamma Sangha, the heart could be filled with gratitude, sense of praise, sense of awe, see. And then it has that ability to raise, to sort of develop the heart towards the Buddha Dhamma Sangha. And the *mettā* is easy, of course, in the sense because you just want to send out this goodwill.

Now, remember that when you actually say to yourself, well, I'm very grateful to the Buddha, don't always expect the heart to suddenly beam with this wonderful feeling of gratitude because the heart has its own ways of doing things. But with practice, it'll come, you see, quite naturally. Music, is really quite... has a huge effect on us, on the heart. So, I mean, I was brought up Catholic and the High Mass was a huge theatrical occasion. I mean, it's unbelievable, the incense, the colours, the music. So, it's absolutely, you get lost up in the clouds somewhere in the heavenly realms.

So that's the chanting. Now it says, where does it come from? This chanting that we do, I used to chant with my teacher. And it's pretty regular. I think it's for town monks. Short, half an hour. And we used to chant the discourse, the first discourse, the *Dhammacakkappavattana* together. And every morning we used to chant. And when you first start off, it's lovely, you're chanting with your teacher and all that. And then you think, couldn't we chant something else? And then you go through this board and then finally you just chant and it is a relief just to chant.

But the actual chanting, the actual music of the chants here, I'm afraid most of it is my own concoction. And the reason for this is that Venerable Rewata Dhamma was utterly and totally tone deaf. So he had this sort of monotone bagpipe drone went on, you see, and I weaved around it these little tunes, which seemed to work well.

And we went to a funeral once for a Tibetan lama and we had this way of... he's like a bishop, he's gonna walk in and walk to the top. So we sat there at the top and they said, would you chant the *mettā*? So we did. So we chanted the *mettā* together. So you can imagine me chanting that *mettā* with this drone at the back. And then it was so funny.

As we were coming down, this Tibetan nun came up and said, that was the most beautiful chanting, Bhante. I thought, what? But it must have worked, like bagpipes. So yes, that chanting there. If you listen to Thai chanting or Sri Lankan chanting, you'll see it's slightly different. That's where that comes from. But the actual chant, the actual what we're actually chanting, is something that we used to chant at the Vihāra. And they still do. When I go there now. They chant for half an hour.

I think that brings us to the end of the questions. 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.

*Q&A: Kamma/Free Will, Mettā/Attachment, Momentary Concentration (Khaṇika Samādhi)*

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