

The Purpose of Meditation (Belgium Jan 2006)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · International Talks · 42:02

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sambha sambuddhasa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sambha sambuddhasa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sambha sambuddhasa

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed one, the saint, the perfectly enlightened by himself.

I would like to speak to you about the basic principles of meditation, and particularly about the hindrances. And afterwards, those who have been meditating for only about a year are invited to come downstairs to the refectory to ask certain questions.

What is the purpose of meditation? The Buddha himself was very clear about this. He said, "I teach only *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*." We must therefore understand what he meant by *dukkha*.

There are three kinds of *dukkha*. The first is *dukkha-dukkha*. This is suffering. A suffering that no one can deny. This is suffering due to emotions, to physical difficulties. Then there is a second level of suffering that comes from the fact that things are transitory. We always hope that things will last. But they never stop disappearing. And all this will provoke the appearance of states of mind like greed, nostalgia and the fear of losing what we have acquired. And the third form of suffering is even more subtle; it has to do with the way we experience things and how we see reality.

And the most solid object that we experience is ourselves. I think that I really exist. This is a very big problem. So meditation is the investigation of these three false views - perhaps not false views, but incorrect interpretations of *dukkha*.

How are we going to investigate ourselves? In an objective and scientific way. Because ordinarily we are content to experience things and to feel ourselves existing. And so meditation will give us the possibility of finding inside ourselves a place from which we will be able to observe ourselves.

I have the image of a cone. At the base of the cone, there is a circle. And this is where people and we... and this is where we ordinarily live. So things happen and we seek them or on the contrary we try to avoid them. So life can be experienced as a vicious circle.

When something pleasant presents itself, we seek it. We have the tongue of desires, thirst, greed, possession. And when it is something disagreeable that hurts, we see it, we bite, we fight against it. Or if it is too enormous, we flee. With our tail between our legs.

In other words, our life is conducted by... so life is spent trying to cling to what we like or trying to avoid

or flee when it is disagreeable. And this kind of constant back and forth between what we like, between liking and not liking, is rooted in an incorrect interpretation of what we are.

Now this is quite understandable, we can understand why we made this mistake when we come to realize that we think we are human beings, to realize that we presume ourselves to be human beings. When we are going to realize that we make an error in thinking that we really exist as human beings... We are concretized in this body.

But the body cannot constantly provide pleasure. So we will always be in conflict with this body. We will be disappointed. We will have had enough. We will wish we could be bionic. Our emotional life is conditioned by past experiences.

And when we begin to meditate, we are going to very quickly realize that we do not have much control over this emotional life. When we go to bed in the evening, we can never say to ourselves, tomorrow I am going to wake up depressed. But this is what happens nonetheless. We cannot know when we will be happy.

It is possible that this afternoon I will feel happy, but it is equally possible that I will not feel happy. It is possible that I will be anxious, or depressed, or that I have had enough. Would it be possible to attain an emotional life that would be stable? To be permanently in calm, happiness, peace. This then is the challenge that the Buddha proposes we take up.

He announced that there really existed a place... And from this calm base, the relations of love, joy and compassion arrive. Then there are thoughts and thoughts continue in the head. There are still thoughts and this habit of constantly being lost in thoughts.

We must understand what conditions these thoughts to appear, where do they come from. What is the relationship between our emotional life and thoughts? In our culture and particularly since Descartes, we have made a separation between mind and heart. We think that the mind is limited to thinking and imagining and that the heart is essentially for emotions. In Western cultures the word they use for mind is the same as for the ancient Greeks, Psyche, it signifies both.

But in Asian philosophies, the word that is used for mind is the psyche. We must therefore try to see the link between what the mind thinks and what the heart feels. In this psychophysical complex, there is this intelligence. Intelligence is normally confused by emotions and thoughts. Intelligence is often disturbed by thoughts and emotions. Intelligence thinks that thought exists.

In our meditation, we make all these different parts of our human existence objects to observe - different parts of our human existence, the body and its sensations, the heart with all its emotions and moods, the mind with its imaginations and thoughts.

When we begin to observe, to feel and to see these things objectively, then we have, as if it were the case,

disembedded ourselves. We have removed this psychophysical phenomenon. We are then going to succeed in extracting ourselves from this psychophysical process. So this position of being able to observe ourselves, to observe the sensations... the place from which we are going to observe in a detached way these sensations, these emotions, these thoughts - this is precisely the summit of the cone. This is the position of *vipassanā*.

And this is where *vipassanā* is found, this is the position of the *vipassanā* meditator. So, very simply, what we are trying to do is observe what happens in our body and in our mind. And if we succeed in observing this body, this heart and this mind objectively, they will no longer be part of this psychophysical system.

This is often experienced by the meditator as the observer or the experiencer or the feeler, something separate from the body, the heart and the mind. So this position, we can develop this status voluntarily. We can take the habit of returning regularly to this place in order to be able to observe objectively.

But this is nevertheless not yet pure *vipassanā*. Because there is still always the sensation, the impression that there is someone who observes, someone who experiences.

What prevents us from staying at the summit of the cone? How do we find ourselves in the circle struggling? These are what the Buddha calls the hindrances. But these things are only hindrances if we have immersed ourselves in them. Inevitably, each time we lose ourselves, we develop this particularity.

For example, if I have a worry in my mind, and I wonder if I left the gas on or not before coming to the retreat, I wonder for example if I didn't forget the gas before coming back to the retreat. This idea begins to scratch my mind. The anxiety rises, fuelled by the thought. And before I know it, I'm in an anxious state, worrying what to do. And without even realizing it, I find myself very quickly in a state of anxiety, wondering what I am going to do.

Then, I wake up from this state and I become aware of the sensation of anxiety. And with that, there was anxiety. When I fell into this circle, when I fell into this habit of fearing, I reinforced this habit. And so at the moment when the thought appeared in my mind - did I forget the gas? - I began to worry, and the fact of falling into worry will make this tendency to be worried strengthen itself.

So you see that the process of purification of the mind and heart is a very difficult process because these conditionings are very anchored in us. For beginners, for example, those who are beginning in meditation, it is necessary to realize that this is not a success that will be quickly obtained. One must think in terms of 25 years.

Then, it is possible that we see some small changes. I don't want to depress you. Because, remember that even if progress can seem slow, our lives in fact become much more meaningful. We begin to lose this feeling of the uselessness of life. We begin little by little to lose this impression that our life is useless, that it has no meaning, that it is an alienation. And we no longer ask ourselves so much the question of why am I here.

So, when the hindrances are going to manifest, we must know what to do. And this is directly in relationship with the skill, the art of meditating. So as soon as a desire manifests in the mind, whatever it may be... Sex, drugs and rock'n'roll! Sex, drugs and rock'n'roll!

So, as soon as a desire manifests in the mind, one must be very quick and see it very quickly. If it is a sexual desire, for example, one must immediately recognize it as such and register it as such. Then one, as it were, returns into the body and there you feel the excitement and you wait for it to pass. And while staying there, one feels the desire to indulge these particular thoughts.

And while doing this, the person is going to feel the need, the desire to indulge in it. You must persevere, continue to observe and be interested in this whole process. You must observe well so as to see what desire consists of and what it does. See the transitory nature of this process. And see that, because you are looking at it, you are feeling it, you are experiencing it, then it cannot be you.

And understand that, given that you are capable of distancing it and observing it objectively, it is impossible that this desire is you. From time to time, you can repeat to yourself, "No, no, no, this is not me, this is not me." And so, this technique... this process that consists of letting the desire come, observing it objectively and seeing it pass, this process must be applied to all forms of desires.

And with everything that we do not like. For example, if you have a sensation of irritation, of annoyance, you must let it penetrate into your body and observe it. And do not forget that in reality we like being cruel, being angry. Otherwise we would not do it. And so, in this way, you are going to be able to catch this desire, the very desire to be this person who is angry. Poke him in the eye. So now you see what thoughts pass in the mind of a monster.

Then there are these emotions that we do not like, that are painful, like depression, anxiety. Here, it is our refusal, our resistance that we must observe. We must let these emotions express themselves freely. In this way the heart is going to purify itself. See the heart rather like a weather system.

So one must try to see the heart and mind like a weather station. Sometimes there is rain, clouds, sometimes there is sun, it changes constantly. One must see this as energies of turbulence.

There is then the hindrance of drowsiness, of torpor, of lethargy. In fact, drowsiness, sleep, is a refuge. We see sleep as a refuge. When we are a bit depressed or a bit tired, we will put ourselves on the couch. When life becomes a bit too difficult, there is a thought that arrives in the head, in neon lights. When life becomes too difficult, there are luminous letters that appear before the mind.

In forgetfulness, one does not suffer. But unfortunately, one will have to wake up. So even in sleep, it is not possible to find permanent happiness. *Nibbāna* is in no way a state of forgetfulness.

We use our sleep... we therefore use sleep to escape from what we do not like, but we also use sleep quite simply because we like it. On Sunday morning we spend our time in bed with a cup of tea and the

newspaper or coffee. And when we are tired of being in a certain position, we turn over. We go back to sleep. And then we wonder why we have the impression of being so tired.

So why be surprised when we sit to meditate, why be surprised to feel so tired? And so when lethargy and drowsiness are going to appear during meditation, we must make a real effort to stay awake. And we must take as object of investigation this sensation of torpor, of heaviness in the mind as if it were porridge. So it is these sensations of heaviness in the mind that become your object of attention. And you must also observe your desire to disappear into this torpor.

Opposite to drowsiness, there is agitation. There is agitation at the level of the body, the need to always move, and agitation at the level of the mind, all the thoughts. So, in the same manner, we must be very patient. When the mind moves away, you note it and you come back.

And so one must be very careful with this. As soon as the mind starts to think, one must realize it, be conscious of it and bring back the attention. If during the whole hour you spend your time going away thinking and bringing back the mind, thinking, bringing back the mind, this is very good meditation. This is very good meditation, this is a very praiseworthy effort to weaken, to attenuate this tendency to think.

And it is the same thing with the body. If there is agitation in the body, one must learn to relax around this agitation. And wait patiently for it to pass. But remember that during all of this, we are studying the sensations. What is impatience? And do not forget that, in the meantime, you are investigating, you are seeking to see what this agitation really consists of. What is our relationship to this agitation? Do we desire it, do we not desire it? Do we want it, do we not want it? And we wait until it passes.

And so in this way we are going to begin to understand the relationship that we have with these different states of mind and we are going to on the other hand leave to these states of mind the possibility of disappearing.

And the last hindrance is that of doubt. So this is doubt about whether you can do meditation or whether you should do it. So when doubt arrives in the head, come out of the thought into the body. So when doubt manifests, let it introduce itself into the body. What does doubt consist of? What does one feel when doubt is present? Is it the fear of failing? Is it quite simply aversion, desire to do it? Is it the fear of committing oneself? Try to see what makes the mind begin to doubt.

And so the art of meditation is the capacity to be conscious of our relationship with all these states of mind so as to be able to maintain as long as possible the state of objective witness at the summit of the cone.

This sensation of which I spoke to you previously of being the observer, the one who experiences, the one who feels, I told you that this was not the final stage of *vipassanā*. And so we are perhaps going to feel ourselves to be this person who observes, who feels, who experiences. We must simply become aware of this state of mind and return to the pure observation of everything that happens in oneself.

And if we proceed thus, we are going to, little by little, become more and more concentrated on the present moment, and we are going to become so interested and focused on what is happening that this sensation of being someone who observes is going to disappear. And soon there will be only pure observation, pure experimentation, and that is *vipassanā* - it is seeing things as they really are. This cannot be done by an act of will.

This cannot happen through will. This can only happen when the conditions are there for it to happen. And these conditions are what the Buddha called the seven factors of enlightenment. And we are going to do a little exercise and I am going to explain them this evening. But I will speak to you about this tonight because I would like to do a bit of exercise. But this does not mean that you cannot practice *vipassanā* until tonight.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.