

The Hindrances

Bhante Bodhidhamma · International Talks · 58:01

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So, I thought this evening just to continue with the problems that we come across in our meditation. Tomorrow I would like you to listen to the very first discourse that Mahāsi Sayadaw himself gave regarding his meditation practice. Then tomorrow we'll speak a bit about the more positive, beautiful, luminous aspect of meditation — what we call the factors of enlightenment.

Yesterday we just touched on the problem of restlessness, so today I would like to go a little deeper into this issue. We said that the ways in which we experience energy within our body can be either with a movement inward, which manifests as a state of lethargy, or a movement outward, which manifests as a state of restlessness. And this restlessness can be in both the mind and the body, or both.

We can say that it is part of the way we relate to situations that are painful or uncomfortable. Instead of confronting difficult situations, we usually try to distance ourselves from these situations — to run away from them.

Let's consider, for example, the problem of loneliness. Loneliness is that sensation of being isolated, of being unloved, of being unwanted. So often, what do we do? We telephone a friend and tell them we feel lonely. The friend says, oh, let's do this — let's go to the cinema together. But in this way, however, we are not investigating this sensation of loneliness; we find a sort of easy way out to avoid confronting the situation.

This sensation of being alone, of not being wanted, remains in the system nonetheless. When this emotional situation of loneliness begins to manifest, it often doesn't appear directly in that form but as a sort of restlessness.

There was a meditator who once came to speak with me because she felt so lonely that she was contemplating suicide. So I explained to her this way of dealing with it — of allowing it to manifest, of sitting quietly with it, and just feeling it, experiencing it, and giving it time to unfold. I instructed her on how to relate to this situation, simply sitting with this emotion, perceiving it in the body, giving time for it to manifest and gradually exhaust itself.

Then I asked her what she thought happens when loneliness comes to an end. She said despair. I said no, no, no. When all this complex of sensations and emotions — of being isolated, unwanted, unloved — finally have the opportunity to manifest, what is experienced at the end of this process is a state of

solitude, but not of feeling lonely. Do you understand the difference between these two terms in English?

In English, solitude means that you are perfectly content to be on your own. In the Buddha's teaching, seeking this state of solitude is an integral part of the teaching. *Viveka* is the term that indicates this aspect we have just explored and which should be pursued. He said we should move, wander alone in the world like a rhinoceros. Because the rhinoceros usually keeps to itself — it doesn't go around in groups. And obviously it's a very strong animal. So when we are content with ourselves, there is great strength in this.

For example, we can often pretend to agree with a person even though we actually don't agree with that person at all, because there's a fear that if we manifest this disagreement we will remain alone. So this sense of loneliness can have effects in our lives of which we are often not aware.

The same thing applies to those emotions and sensations that make us feel very agitated, like anxiety. *Uddhacca* and *kukkucca* are the two original Pali terms used by the Buddha in this enumeration of hindrances. The very term *uddhacca* and *kukkucca* gives a sense of restlessness.

Uddhacca is the restlessness that we feel through guilt and shame. Sometimes you might catch yourself experiencing this sense of guilt and fear when we encounter a police officer, even me as a monk. These authority figures can often give rise to these emotional states of which we are usually not aware.

From those three fundamental attitudes or dispositions arise a second level of dispositions that we can identify as guilt, shame, and remorse. The first three levels are greed, hatred, and delusion. Now, from this illusory state in which we want the world to give us happiness, we develop those two fundamental modes of accumulation. We accumulate because the more we have, the more secure we feel.

Let us remember that deep inside we know very well that we live in an extremely insecure world. Tomorrow we could wake up very sick or dead — who knows? So something in us knows this, and anything that gives us a sense of greater security we tend to want to accumulate, to want more of. We feel much more secure with a million euros than with just one hundred euros.

Now, there is part of this process of accumulating that we could almost define, even though the term is a bit curious, as moral. Even in monastic life, the Buddha says we have four requisites: food, clothing, shelter — a place to be protected — and medicine. Obviously, he explains that we should be content with the simplest things possible. We should be happy with what is offered in the alms bowl regarding food. We should also be happy with robes made from rags. We should be happy even living under a tree, depending on the weather obviously. And regarding medicine, we should be happy to be able to use fermented cow urine. I've never tried it.

So we can affirm that there is a sort of wanting to gather material goods, friends, family, which is an integral part of being a human being. But we also know that greed, accumulating, has no boundaries. Ultimately, we would like to be able to possess the universe and control it. There is a point where our acquisitive mode of appropriation begins to take from others.

At this point we begin to enter into an incorrect ethical relationship with other people and with the world. And this is the point where we begin to perceive this sense of guilt. Now this sense of guilt is simply the fear of possible consequences. Just as we have inappropriately appropriated something that wasn't ours, we know very well that the same thing could happen to us. So we begin to enter, to be in a world where we see enemies. And this makes us very restless.

So this fear of consequences is part of the teaching, obviously, of the law of *kamma*. Therefore, if during our meditation practice these emotions of guilt arise — whether regarding having inappropriately appropriated something that wasn't ours or having caused suffering to someone else — it is necessary to let these inner emotional situations manifest. They can also be seen as the karmic consequences of these immoral actions we have performed.

We must remember that we can do absolutely nothing about these emotions we perceive. Now, if guilt arises regarding the way we have treated someone else, obviously we can then apologize to that person, and in a certain sense this will soften this sense of guilt. But often there is much of this guilt that goes back to events we have completely forgotten.

Let us remember that a very strong sense of guilt can manifest in a paranoid state. When I say paranoia, I'm not talking about mental illness. In this case we're not talking about a mental illness, but simply beginning to have that sensation of having everyone against us when in reality it's not so.

So during meditation practice, if this state of guilt arises, it is an opportunity we have to be able to perceive it, feel it, let it manifest. Because you see, usually when these things emerge, we usually get frightened. But in a certain sense it is necessary that we relax, knowing that this sense of guilt will not kill us, and very slowly it will simply disappear. The more we are able to open ourselves to these inner situations and welcome them, bearing them with patience, the faster they dissolve and go away.

The Buddha stated that this was important in spiritual life because this sense of guilt becomes, transforms into a sort of guardian or sentinel for our future behavior. Because every time you think you will do something immoral, you remember that you don't want that terrible guilt. Indeed, he says that guilt and shame are the guardians of society.

Indeed, the Buddha states that the sense of guilt and the sense of shame are the guardians and sentinels of society. If people in society lost this sense of guilt or shame, the community, society would become a lawless place. We can see this — I'm thinking at this moment of England — in some of our cities, where the young population commits terrible acts but perceives absolutely no sense of shame or guilt regarding these actions. Only some.

So now, with guilt comes shame. It is that emotional state that we experience when we betray ourselves — you could say in English — when for example we have an ideal of ourselves as being a good person, and then we do something and it's as if everyone started saying to us, oh, you're not so good after all.

And then we feel this sense of shame and embarrassment. It's a funny thing, but you can feel more embarrassment and foolishness with a simple social gaffe than you can with a real and true immoral act.

There was a wonderful occasion for this at the court of Queen Elizabeth I in England. Walter Raleigh, who was probably a poet who, if we remember correctly, founded the Virginia colony in the United States, and obviously was in quite a close relationship with the queen. And while once in full court, he farted. After this event, he stayed away from court for one year. When he returned, the queen greeted him: "Welcome back, Sir Walter. We have forgotten about the fart."

Now, here is something we must understand more clearly: the emotion is caused by the attitude, not by the action. This is a fact that must be understood very, very clearly. The shame that Sir Walter felt was caused by his understanding, by his attitude regarding what he had done. Someone else might have stayed away from court for only one day.

Now when these emotions, these states of guilt and shame arise, the attitude is exactly the same as we have with all the other things that can arise within us during practice. We let go of the thought and it's as if we let ourselves sink, penetrate into the sensation. We feel it, we let it manifest fully.

And this is the same for the third quality of remorse. Remorse is the healing process regarding shame and guilt. Remorse can be of various intensities; we might find ourselves crying, for example. When crying arises from remorse, we allow the crying to happen. We allow this very strong emotion to express itself. The same thing with sadness.

If an emotion is so strong that it wants to express itself through crying, then we allow this to be. Now, if this should happen to us here in the retreat and we should find ourselves embarrassed by this, then we find ourselves a quiet little place.

I wanted to ask — when guilt and shame are caused by something from the past and so one manages to recognize these sensations that return and manages maybe to observe them, but when instead they are caused by conditioning — maybe in a family where a person would have nothing to be ashamed of or feel guilty about, but for many years experiences this thing, then these sensations arrive that one cannot...

Let's suppose that this sense of guilt and shame cannot really be traced to a single action, but is perhaps the product of an environment, a family, an education, etcetera. This is precisely what I'm trying to explain — that often what we feel in the present has now lost its connection with the past. In English they call them leftovers — which I don't know how to say in Italian — but we cannot trace them back to something specific.

This is precisely the reason why we let go of any kind of backward process of going to search, because it has nothing to do with the emotion being felt here, in this moment, now.

The Buddha gives a very strong image for this. Suppose that during a battle a person is struck by an

arrow. And his friends rescue him to extract the arrow and treat him. And he says, no, no, don't remove it, I first want to know who shot it at me, why they are fighting against us. Before knowing all these things, this poor man dies, right?

As for this healing process, it is precisely allowing the heart in its rawest emotionality to express itself.

Oh my God, there is much to say. Let's move on to the problem of doubt.

In the Buddha's life there comes a moment of tremendous doubt. After having followed all possible training and not having found the answer yet, he decides with great determination to sit under that tree and either find the solution to end suffering or die. And as it was said in those times, Māra appeared. And so as it was put in the language of that time, Māra jumps out and Māra says to him, "Who do you think you are to be able to sit under that tree seeking the end of suffering? This world belongs to me." Māra concerns the pleasures, the joys of the world, all these things.

But the Buddha was quite strong thanks to his perfections, especially the one regarding generosity. Any kind of weapon that was thrown against him was transformed into flowers and perfumes. What does this mean? It means that if we sit here with all these negative states, finally we will see their transformation. We see that they transform into their opposite. So all selfishness transforms into generosity, all hatred into love, all cruelty into compassion, all negative loneliness into positive solitude. Everything will transform into its opposite.

This thing is stated in the second of the Noble Eightfold Path under the denomination — how can it be expressed in English? Right intention, sometimes translated as right thought, but it's not quite correct because the example given by the Buddha is the one I just referred to you. Love to hate, hate to love.

So doubt arises from fear. It comes from that place, that position of "I don't know, I don't recognize, I don't dare." I want to go into a wood, into a dark forest, but I don't know what's in there and I don't go. I don't dare to go there.

Now, regarding meditation practice, what gives us courage is the fact that we are using a very ancient wisdom tradition. If it were just the Buddha, we could say, well, there's not much to trust, but since it's a tradition of 2,500 years...

So this substance, this medicine, is available to us. When doubt arises in this religious field, it can present itself in three main forms: doubt in the Buddha, in the teachings, in the tradition. Doubts regarding the teacher? Well, I don't want to say no to that. Doubts regarding the teacher? And naturally, especially doubts about ourselves.

We have serious doubts about whether we can relate to these emotions. Maybe we'll go crazy, who knows. Everyone else manages to sit, but not me. I'm special like that. I am special.

So when these doubts arise, don't listen to the language. Let's remember, the mind is a liar. So go into the

feelings of doubt, the fears. Really immerse ourselves in the sensations of doubt, in the fears. When they start to lose their power, then we can convince ourselves again of the validity of this path.

Often we find, especially those of us who are new to this type of meditation, that it's very powerful. Especially people who are new to this type of meditation can discover that it's quite powerful. Especially if you're the type of person who doesn't actually feel their emotions very much, but stays more in the head. Very often people of this type, when they come into contact with this emotional world, have a situation of shock, of horror. It certainly happened to me.

So when one finally enters into contact with this emotional life, these inner turbulences, it's necessary to let it manifest, to express itself. And if we feel it's a bit too powerful in that moment, we can gently shift our presence a little. We can go for a walk, in cases like this we can even read a book. But whatever we do, we don't run away, and remember that you can come and talk to me about this. Don't think that you're wasting my time or that I'm not interested in this. This is my job.

What you'll find, especially those of you who are new, is that if you can get through one crisis, then the others are not a problem. What we discover, especially if we're new to this practice, is that if we can get through one crisis, the subsequent ones are no longer a problem. It's managing to overcome the first obstacle. The first obstacle.

Even in the process of spiritual awakening, emotions arise that have the characteristic of being somewhat spiritual emotions. For example, we might feel anxious, insecure about our work. So when we begin to investigate this area of the self, this question arises: well, who am I?

Often great fear arises because the self has an enormous fear of losing itself. Until now the self has believed itself to be a human being with a body, emotions, thoughts. But suddenly all these things become objects. And this can be experienced by the meditator as something rather frightening, scary. So this type of emotional experience is a spiritual emotion. Because one is discovering what one really is.

So it's necessary to leave home in order to discover one's true home. In Christian mysticism these two terms are used: *fascinans et tremens* - fascinating and yet fearful. It's something fascinating, that is, a fascination - the translation from Latin is fascinating - and trembling, that is, it fascinates and interests, but at the same time inspires fear. One is curious, wants to know, but at the same time is afraid. These two elements are often found in our practice. We often find these two elements in our practice.

I think that's enough, at least for me. So let me encourage you because after two days we're really entering into the retreat, feeling a bit more at home. So what we can do is try to centre ourselves more and more on our own self. So let's try not to communicate with other people, even simply by looking at them. Let's try to close the world around us a bit. In this way it becomes clearer how the mind behaves. We're trying to reduce distractions.

If there are questions about this talk, or questions in general, you can always write them and put them in

this basket here. Let's sit quietly for a moment.

I hope my words have been of some use to you, and I sincerely hope that you will be liberated sooner rather than later.

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