

The Relay of Chariots (MN 24)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 30:13

Good evening. I trust you had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, though I hope it has been happy.

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.

Yesterday we went through the discourse on the seven chariots and we met Mantani Putta, Puna Mantani Putta, and we saw how these two well-advanced meditators, both of them arahats, fully self-awakened, greeted each other and recognised each other's greatness. Mantani put to calling him the closest to the Buddha himself, a great honour to be called that.

I found out that Kondañña, who was one of the companions of the Buddha — remember right at the end — was actually also a Sakyan, so they must have known each other as kids, although he was older than the Buddha. When he went back home to the Sakya country, that was where his sister Mantani lived, and his sister had a son who was later called Puna. This is a long way around of saying that Puna Mantani was in fact Añña Kondañña's nephew. There's a book on all their names and the research has been done, most of it's commentary. Whether it's true or not, who knows, but they're lovely stories.

Anyway, so the nitty gritty of these seven purifications, the *visuddhi*, the seven purifications. If you want to know them in terms of your practice, the book is Progress of Insight by the Mahasi. I don't know whether you see that. No, I thought it would be the wrong way around. It's called the Progress of Insight. And in it, of course, there are what we call the ñanas, the path ñanas. So we'll come to that with a warning.

So the first one is the purification of virtue. This is really getting your moral act right. In terms of all of your daily life, you know, we want to stop killing people, thieving and stuff like that. But in terms of meditation practice, when you come on retreat, if there's something that's happened which you need to clear your heart of, it's always best to do it. You've had angry words with somebody, and if you come on retreat with that, it tends to be a bit obsessive. So it's always good to come with a clear conscience to a retreat. And that's one of your first purifications.

The next one is the purification of the mind, which is dealing with the hindrances. So, of course, we do that in the meditation — all the desires, the hatreds, the dullness and lethargies, all the restlessness and the shames and guilts. And then finally, of course, doubt. So those, of course, we're dealing with during our practice, but also in daily life. Remember, when desires come up, if you're right there with it, you can always hold on and say, "Is this skillful or not?" Just wait for that energy to disappear. So these visuddhis,

these purifications, are not only applicable to the actual practice of *vipassanā* on a retreat — they're also applicable just in ordinary daily life.

Now sometimes people get into a dilemma because you can't attain full liberation until you're perfectly purified. On the other hand, you can't be perfectly purified until you've attained — until you've attained *Ni bbāna*. Now *Nibbāna* here is the final point when you become an arahat.

Unfortunately, especially in the order, you can get very tight about this. I have a rather sad story of somebody I knew whom I got to know rather well. We were meditating together for some time and he wasn't getting anywhere in his practice. So he presumed that it was because his sila, his morality and the rule keeping wasn't being kept well enough, perfectly. So he left and began to read the Vinaya, all the little rules and everything. And he came across the original size of this upper robe that you see hanging behind the Buddha here. Now, actually, the original size was basically just a cloth that you put over the top part of your body when you entered into a village. It was just a modest thing to do. And in time, of course, it grew to be this long robe, you see.

And also the bowl — the monk's bowl is rather big. When you go on alms round and it's full, there's no way you can eat what they put in that bowl. But the reason it got so big was because it became the vessel that you carried your little bits and bobs in when you went wandering from village to village or from monastery to monastery.

So when he read these rules, he went off to see Ananda Maitreya, Venerable Ananda Maitreya, who was a very famous monk in Sri Lanka. He'll come up again when I talk about the insight knowledges, who was understood to be quite a scholar. And he agreed that these weren't strictly Vinaya.

We went to a Katina ceremony. That's the ceremony at the end of the rainy season, October, November, October, when there's a big party and lay people bring to the monastery those things that monks and nuns might need — the monastics might need — umbrellas, soap, toothpaste, stuff like that. And he came with this little thing on his shoulder, and he also had convinced a younger monk to follow him. And instead of a bowl, because the bowl originally was to be the depth of your hand, of your palm here, you see, that was supposed to be the depth of the bowl. And so he turned up with this natty little cover over his shoulders and a biscuit tin, you see.

And when the monk saw this, they just said he's gone mad. When you slightly go off like that, they just say you've gone mad. And that means that they look upon you with a certain pity, right? They not jump on you and say, "Hey, what about this rule and how dare you do that?" They just say he's gone a bit mad.

Anyway, seemingly he drove himself into this dead end corner where he's absolutely obsessive about keeping every little rule so that he can move spiritually. And what I heard later was that he left and he went to Thailand and they basically stopped him, asked him to leave the monastery. And he left eventually and went back home.

So a bit of a sad story there. So don't get obsessive about purity. We just work with it as it comes, just as it comes.

So that's the purity of the mind. We've been through the purity of our basic morality, purity of the mind. And then we come to the purity of view. And that really do with over time. All this business about self, which we've been through before, it's beginning to understand what the difference between the body and the mind, looking at it more closely.

It's basically looking at the five aggregates. So we've been through that, if you remember, just to recognise that this is a compendium. It feels like one being, it feels like me. But actually, the body has its own little life form, all these billions of cells or whatever. And then we've got this whole feeling thing that's going on inside the body, which is both from the heart — the emotional stuff — and from the body, feelings, sensations. We've got all the stuff about how we build up memory with images and conceptual images and abstract thinking. And then we have all our habits and the way we think, which we've taken a lot from our culture, and some of it, of course, has been our own ingenuity, creating our own little special habits. And all of that appears on consciousness. The consciousness is like a screen upon which things appear.

So it's beginning to separate all that and beginning to get the feel of this not being a person, an entity, whole, entire unto itself. It's made up of pieces. So that's this beginning to understand the purification of view.

When it comes to the purification of overcoming doubt, that's to do with conditionality. And this brings us to things like dependent origination and seeing that everything is conditioned. We do have a choice. We know that when especially around desires. If we see a desire which is unwholesome, we can hold it there and let it pass. But even that is conditioned by our wisdom. So everything is conditioned. Everything has a cause. And that's beginning to understand that.

Now, this whole idea of cause and effect is quite profound. It's understood that when a person really grasps conditionality, that they're actually on the path. And in the commentaries they're called a chula sotapanna, which means a lesser sotapanna, a lesser stream entrant. That's how important understanding conditionality is. Everything is dependent on something else. Nothing arises of its own accord.

And so we're always looking at the immediacy of those components that bring something about and what's happened in the past to bring something about. Perhaps we'll come to that at a later stage. Conditionality. And its main expression is through dependent origination.

So that's why we're always looking at this distinction, especially this little trilogy of contact — sorry, of *ved anā*, which is the feeling, the feeling tone of what we're experiencing, pleasant, unpleasant — how we're reacting to it and then that sudden grasping and to stay steadily between the original feeling, the original pleasant, unpleasant state and that reaction and waiting for the reaction to go. And that gives us that clarity, that wisdom to then act in a way that's going to be a benefit to us.

And then the next one is knowing what is the path and what is not the path. This on a worldly, on a very obvious level, we begin to realise that all the sensual pleasures really have to be let go of as places where we're going to seek our liberation. They're all right when they come as — what's his name — Blake said in that lovely poem, "To kiss a joy as it flies is to live in eternity's sunrise." But as soon as you grasp it, as soon as you try and hold on to it, misery awaits you.

So it's this business of recognising that now in our practice when we actually come to practice. Often in our sittings we'll get these beautiful states, you see, and then we'll think, "Oh, well, that's it. That must be it." And, of course, it isn't.

And this comes about — there are various ways in which these beautiful states arise. There are ten of them, actually, nine of which are fine. It's the last one, the holding on to something, which makes them into kilesa, defilements.

So the first one is that people have insight. It's quite remarkable. Some people in their practice suddenly see something and they almost go out and write a book about it. They've just had that clarity of understanding. And they think that therefore they must have had a really deep insight. I remember one monk I met who was really very clear about the Dharma. He was absolutely certain that he was born as a stream entrant, that he had it in his past life. But else, how could he explain the Dharma so clearly? How could he speak about it so clearly? And that's a confusion, that is. The intellect is very clever at confusing you. Remember the story of Lucifer, who thought he was equal to God in intellect? He found himself in hell, so be careful.

Then sometimes people get beautiful light, like they're suddenly surrounded, like an inner light which is overwhelming sometimes. And that, again, is just a product of good concentration. And some people might think, "Oh, well, that's it."

I know somebody who actually felt that. There's also a knowledge, much the same as insight, that they suddenly understand things at a more intellectual level, and that also can be a bit of a trap.

Then you can feel extraordinarily happy, extraordinarily joyous, and you think to yourself, "This is so pure a joy, this is what *Nirvāna* is." And then you have to remind yourself that there's no mental states in *Nirvāna*. There are no emotions in *Nirvāna*. And when Sariputta is asked, "How is it you talk about the bliss of *Nirvāna* when there's no emotions there?" He said, "Well, it's the very absence of emotions, which is the bliss of *Nirvāna*." Well, that's very confusing for us, isn't it?

And then you can have this wonderful sense of peace, this real deep peace where, "Oh, you know, this must be *Nirvāna*." And then there's happiness, which is more of a — the rapture, the rapture is felt more as a physical thing, a physical ecstasy, whereas the happiness is more of a mental ecstasy.

And then suddenly you get this huge determination, which is over-determination actually, and it can cause you to try and get *nibbāna*, and that can also be a bit fatal.

A load of energy can come up, it's quite remarkable, you can sit for — you can go through a whole night without any sleep. I know somebody went through two nights. Just a pure energy comes up where you can just maintain that mindfulness just continuously, over and over. And, of course, such a person might think, "Well, this is it, I've made it."

Also awareness, the awareness can be very bright and very sharp, especially for somebody who hasn't done very much practice. Suddenly to have this really sharp awareness, they think, "Well, that's it."

And the delight at the end really is hanging on to these things as meaning, as being some sort of real spiritual practice. But actually, they're all expressions of the pure heart and concentration. So then you have to let go of that. So you know, well, that's not the path. You see, that's not the path. And so one returns to the meditation. One returns to just observing, just feeling, just experiencing.

And during that time, again, these three characteristics become more and more obvious to a person. So they might be more obvious of desire at certain times. They might be more obvious of impermanence. They might recognise that things are happening of their own accord, that they're not always under our control.

And this is not only in the meditation room, it's also in ordinary daily life. You might ask yourself, for instance, if you drive a car and you've driven between point A and point B or you've actually arrived and you can't remember yourself driving because you might have been somewhere else. Well, who's been driving, for heaven's sake? So if that isn't an experience of not-self, I don't know what is. And then you might come in and you've opened the door and you put the keys down and you can't remember where you put the key. But something happened. You did put the key. There was a putting of the keys down. And that was done by whom? So it's little things like that that awaken you to the fact that this self isn't entirely in control.

And then finally, there's the first what you might call true insight, which is the knowledge of rise and fall. A person sees that now much more clearly on the breath. And this, again, this doesn't need to happen while you're sitting. It can happen while you're riding on a bus, while you're walking down the street. This awareness, this intuitive awareness can grasp these things at any time.

And then the next one after that, after there's a clearer viewing of that, is dissolution. Now, this point of dissolution is just when there's a real grasping, a real direct insight, you actually experience, there's an experience of things actually vanishing.

Now, that has a big effect on us because, normally speaking, we're much more aware of when things begin. So you'll notice that as soon as you finish one piece of chocolate, before you've actually swallowed it, you're on to the next one. So we're always one step ahead of ourselves. We're always into something new, something exciting, something drawing us always into the future. But this is actually a sudden realisation that everything actually does disappear. Everything does collapse. Everything does vanish. And

that has an effect on us. It's like coming to terms with death in a way. It's an opening that recognises that things end kaput and all that.

And so what happens then is some fear comes up. And during the next period which are known as the suffering *ñānas* or the *dukkha* *ñānas*, also it can be mixed up with your own psychology. So there's this underlying awakening of your spirit of spiritual insight into the way things really are, but it also can bring up stuff from your more surface level psychology.

So there's fear comes up, which is a shock. It's a shock.

And then after that, there's a sort of downer where you might feel depressed, and all these things can last any length of time. It's not a case of zipping through it in a few days or something. I know people who've taken years to go through these stages.

And then after that, there's a sort of disinterest in life, a real profound disinterest. It's like nothing's worth doing. You lose interest in everything. And often in that sort of case, a person might just stop. And that's a bit dangerous. You've got to keep going. In the Christian literature, it's known as the desert. So you've got to keep walking on.

And then after that, there's a rising out of that, a desire to escape, to sort of run away, and a tremendous restlessness comes. And again, the meditator can fly out of the meditation hall or can just be very restless in ordinary daily life. And of course, it's very difficult to separate that from a person's ordinary restlessness, ordinary disinterest in life, ordinary sense of boredom.

Going back to that disinterest, that can be confused with boredom. But boredom always is a sort of rest period where you're a bit fed up with doing the same thing for a while, but then the urge to go back and do the same thing again comes back. And that's a sign of boredom. Whereas disinterest is you don't want to go back there again. You've had enough.

And after this restlessness, where often a meditator just wants to escape, there comes an insight. And this insight is always a deeper insight into one of these three characteristics. It's always about the three characteristics of existence, how we create suffering, the role of desire, impermanence and not-self.

And then after that, the *dukkha* *ñānas* seem to come to an end and one enters into a very beautiful place of peacefulness, equanimity, and awareness is very easy to maintain. And again, this can happen in ordinary daily life. It doesn't have to happen in a meditation centre or while you're on a retreat. And there's an immature part and a mature part.

What separates them is often something comes out — some deep trauma maybe, doesn't have to be. It could be just a memory of something. Now the monk I mentioned before, Ananda Metteyya, who is a very famous monk and highly respected, he did a Mahāsi retreat when the Mahāsi came to Sri Lanka in the 1950s, '56 or something. And on retreat he came to this point and at this point he remembered right back

in the Buddha's time when he took the vow to become a fully self-awakened Buddha. He said he could remember the face of Sāriputta, Moggallāna, but unfortunately not the face of the Buddha.

And at that point he could have made a decision to actually renege on that desire or to reinforce it. Now he must have decided to carry on with that determination, that avowal, because he couldn't move after that. He could not enter into stream-entry because the understanding is that somebody who is training themselves to become a fully self-awakened Buddha — in other words, without any help from anybody — has to develop all the virtues necessary in order to make it in one lifetime.

So in the story of the Buddha, we find him up in the Tushita heaven, ready to take rebirth, having developed all his perfections, as they're called, his *pāramī*. *Pāramī* means those virtues that you need to get to the other shore. So he didn't make it to stream-entry. And that's Ananda Metteyya.

And then, of course, right at the end of that there is a quick process where you finally break through. You really do see deeply into one of these three characteristics. And seemingly, according to the scriptures, it could be the same one four times. You could see impermanence more and more and more deeply and become fully liberated. But I think it's more regular that with every step you go on, you see things from that other angle. So if at first it was impermanence, maybe the next time you see not-self more deeply and the next time you see the process of *dukkha* more clearly by seeing the process of dependent origination.

And that's it. And then you start all over again. This is the thing, you see. You have to go through this four times minimum to become fully liberated.

And that brings us to the end of these seven purifications. This book — as I say, if you want to read through it, it's a snazzy little book, about 36 pages and you can download it as a PDF — "The Progress of Insight." It is really about the meditation retreats. It's not about daily life. It's how you experience these seven purifications while on retreat.

Now the only real warning is that when you read the insight knowledges — as a lot of people do and a lot of writers write about them — you are of course building up concepts about them and then those concepts become a real hindrance. So we're not trying to get any of those insights. They come when the time is ripe.

Why do you read them? Really just to give you faith, to give you confidence that there is an actually highly delineated path, but we're not in charge of it. It comes of its own time, of its own accord. So always remember, you go back to that childlike mind, what Zen called beginner's mind.

And personally, I feel myself extraordinarily fortunate that I began with Zen. Because they don't talk about any of this in Zen. Any of this sort of talk is just verboten. They don't allow it. The student might talk about it with the teacher on occasion when something happens. And therefore, when I was practising, you see, I really did have beginner's mind. And because of that, I was able to progress.

So remember, that childlike mind, that childlike way of looking at things. When we finally settle into our

practice — and you can do it in ordinary daily life — you can look at things, just to stare, you know, just to put your eye on something and stare, or just to keep your attention on your ear and just hear, without any interference, no judging, nothing.

Well, I can only hope that all this has been inspirational and not confusing, and that you will devote yourself to your practice and become liberated sooner rather than later. So we can begin our practice now, I think.

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