

Dhammapada 1-2: Mind is the Forerunner

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 14:07

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhodassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhodassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhodassa

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So last week I did what is arguably the most famous of the verses in the Dhammapada. This week I want to go back to the very beginning of it, and it opens up with twin verses. So one verse says positive and the other verse says the negative. And the first two really are core teachings of the Buddha.

So I'd like to chant it first in Pali, and then a simple translation, and then we'll read the story.

Mano Pubhanga Madhamma Mano Seta Mano Maya Manasa Chapa Dutena Vasati Wa Karoti Wa tatonandukhamamvaiti chakamvavahato padam.

And the opposite:

Manopubangamadamma manoseitamanomaya manasacchapasaneinavasatiwakarotiwa tatonandsukhamamvaiti chayavaanapayini.

A very literal translation, the most literal that I've come across was by Buddharakkhita: "Mind proceeds all mental states. Mind is their chief. They are all mind-wrought. If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts, suffering follows him like the wheel that follows the foot of an ox.

"Mind proceeds all mental states. Mind is their chief. They are all mind-wrought. If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts, happiness follows him like his never departing shadow."

If we read the little story that's always with these verses, it's about an Arahant who lost his eyesight. One day, Venerable Chakupala, who was blind, came to pay homage to the Buddha at the Jetavana monastery. While he was pacing up and down in meditation, he accidentally stepped on some insects. In the morning, some bhikkhus visiting him found the dead insects. They thought ill of him and reported the matter to the Buddha.

When questioned by the Buddha whether they had actually seen Chakupala killing the insects, they answered in the negative, and the Buddha then admonished them: "Just as you had not seen him killing, so also you had not seen those living insects. Besides, being an Arahant, he had no intention of killing and was not guilty of committing an unwholesome act."

On being asked why Chakupala was blind, the Buddha revealed the following story to explain the nature of karmic effects. Chakupala had been a physician in one of his past existences. Once he had deliberately made a woman patient blind. That woman had promised to become his servant together with her children if her eyes were completely cured. Fearing that she and her children would have to become servants, she lied to the physician. She told him that her eyes were getting worse when in fact they were perfectly cured. The physician knew she was deceiving him, so in revenge he gave her another ointment which made her totally blind. As a result of this evil deed, the physician lost his eyesight many times in later existences. The Buddha then commented that an evil deed committed will follow the evildoer, just like the wheel follows the hoof of an ox that bears the yoke.

So I dare say there's a core truth to the story somewhere about an Arahant killing insects and being thought guilty of doing it on purpose. But of course, his name, Chakupala, ironically means "guardian of eyesight." So I doubt a monk is called guardian of eyesight. Anyway, there's two points here. First of all, is that he's not guilty because he hadn't meant to kill. That's the important thing. And that because he in a past life had committed this terrible deed of making somebody blind, he himself suffered blindness. So that's a very mechanical understanding of karma—it's a bit more subtle than that, and I think at a later time we might go into it.

But let's look at the actual Pali here so that we can understand what the Buddha's saying. *Mano* refers to the part of the mind that when you see something—and it's the same for all the senses—you create a percept, like a photocopy. And as a human being, you put a label on it. So all animals have memory. I mean, they remember their owner. The dog remembers its owner. But they don't have that facility of putting a label on it. And so if we think of *mano* referring to the imagination and intellectual capacity of the mind.

Now, the word for the heart coming from our emotional involvement in life, feeling, that's *citta*. And the *vi jnana* refers to consciousness, which is the screen upon which things come to be known. Now, these words are sometimes used to mean each other. So you have to look at the context, but generally speaking, that's the split.

Now that isn't so surprising for us because even in our own history, through our wonderful enlightenment—I think the 18th century—we got very rational and we have the great philosopher Kant. And as opposed to that, as a rejection of pure logic, we have the Romantic movement, which is much more to do with feeling. So that dichotomy also exists in the Buddhist psychology.

And what he says is that this faculty, this mind, it comes before. It instigates, it starts things. Without that, without that faculty, we wouldn't have this imagination and so on.

And then this word *dhamma*. Now we know it normally as meaning the teachings, but in its plural form *dh amma* it means what the mind actually creates. So it's mental phenomena. The actual philosophical word for it is qualia—I just like that word. So if you come across the word qualia, it's referring to your subjective

conscious experience. So this is what dhamma is here referring to.

And then, of course, he says it's *mano seta*. *Seta* is the one who governs, who rules. So it's the mind that's ruling this process. And finally, *manomaya*, which refers to the mind's ability to fabricate, to make, to produce. So that's the basic statement.

Now, if we were to take that statement entirely on its own, then you might be thinking that the Buddha is teaching a sort of idealism, that there is only the mind—which of course does happen in later Buddhism at the Vijnanavada school. Theravada tends to keep a hold on realism in the sense that it doesn't deny the reality—that's inverted commas of course—of the world outside the mind. So when you look at a tree, the tree actually does exist, have its own existence out there. But what we actually see of it, of course, is being fabricated.

But then when we read the rest of the verse, he's actually talking about something quite specific. The next one is, of course, if with an impure mind—*duṭṭhena*—so with an impure mind, somebody speaks or acts, then suffering will follow them. So there's your process.

Now, there's an incident in the scriptures where the Buddha meets a disciple of the Jain leader. And when he asked the Jain leader, what does the Jain leader teach about karma? He says, the worst thing is an action, is a bad action. Now, from one point of view, of course, it is because that's the outer consequence of bad thinking and it causes a lot of suffering. But the Buddha's insistence is that actually what's most important is your mind because that's where it all begins.

And so here we have the mind offering us an unwholesome thought and we empower that. So there's a bit of empowerment. And this moment of empowerment, which is *chaitanya*, that's the faculty of will, is the moment that we're actually creating something.

Now once something's in the mind buzzing around in the mind, it doesn't take too long for it to begin to express itself in the way we speak and in what we do. So the Buddha is saying, you know, be careful about what you think. And that *chaitanya*, that will, is the point where you actually make a decision to express something either in speech or in action. And it all begins in the mind.

So then of course he warns us that if we do that, then of course suffering will follow. There'll be some comeback, there'll be some consequence. And he uses this image—he's got lots of images, he's very good on metaphors. So it'll follow you, it'll chase you down, just like the wheel follows the footstep of an ox. So here we have an image of burdensome, you know, a beast of burden, just the life that is burdened. And so every time we do something which is unwholesome, this burden will arise.

And of course, in the opposite one, he gives a different image. So here of course we're thinking wholesome thoughts and we're speaking wholesomely and we're acting wholesomely. So then he says of course happiness follows like a never-ending shadow. So it's very light, something that you don't even notice but it's following you all the time.

The teaching here basically is, you know, just be careful of what we think about. That's the basic teaching. And it starts the whole of the Dhammapada. And then the Dhammapada, of course, goes into all sorts of different subjects. But later on, there's lots of little verses teaching about karma itself. And that's a bit too much for this evening.

So that's the two opening verses of the Dhammapada. And I shall offer you to hear my own little translation: "All thinking and imagining are started by the mind. The mind is in charge of them. The mind fabricates them. And as we speak or behave with an impure mind, suffering will follow as a consequence, as the cartwheels follow the hooves of an ox."

So that's my little gift for this evening. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and that by your devoted practice you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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