

A Dhamma Talk by
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Changing our Vision

as edited by
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In my life of practising Dhamma, I didn't attempt to master a wide range of subjects. Just one. I refined this heart.

Say we look at a body. If we find that we're attracted to a body then analyze it. Have a good look: head hair, body hair, nails, teeth and skin.¹

The Buddha taught us to thoroughly and repeatedly contemplate these parts of the body. Visualize them separately, pull them apart, peel off the skin and burn them up. This is how to do it. Stick with this meditation until it's firmly established and unwavering. See everyone the same.

For example, when the monks and novices go into the village on alms round in the morning, whoever they see—whether it's another monk or a villager—they imagine him or her as a dead body, a walking corpse staggering along on the road ahead of them. Remain focused on this perception. This is how to put forth effort. It leads to maturity and development.

When you see a young woman whom you find attractive, imagine her as a walking corpse, her body putrid and reeking from decomposition. See everyone like that. And don't let them get too close! Don't allow the infatuation to persist in your heart. If you perceive others as putrid and reeking, I can assure you the infatuation won't persist. Contemplate until you're sure about what

you're seeing, until it's definite, until you're proficient. Whatever path you then wander down, you won't go astray.

Put your whole heart into it. Whenever you see someone, it's no different than looking at a corpse. Whether male or female, look at that person as a dead body. And don't forget to see yourself as a dead body.

Eventually this is all that's left. Try to develop this way of seeing as thoroughly as you can. Train with it until it increasingly becomes part and parcel of your mind. I promise it's great fun—if you actually do it.

But if you are preoccupied with reading about it in books, you'll have a difficult time of it. You've got to do it. And do it with utmost sincerity. Do it until this meditation becomes a part of you. Make realization of truth your aim. If you're motivated by the desire to transcend suffering, then you'll be on the right path.

These days there are many people teaching vipassaná and a wide range of meditation techniques. However, in my opinion doing vipassaná is not easy. We can't just jump straight into it. It won't work if it's not proceeding from a high standard of morality. Find out for yourself.

Moral discipline and training precepts are necessary, because if our behaviour, actions and speech aren't impeccable we'll never be able to stand on our own two feet. Meditation without virtue is like trying to skip over an essential section of the Path.

Similarly, occasionally you hear people say, "You don't need to develop tranquillity. Skip over it and go straight into the insight meditation of vipassaná." Sloppy people who like to cut corners say things like this. They say you don't have to bother with moral

discipline.

Upholding and refining your virtue is challenging, not just playing around. If we could skip over all the teachings on ethical behaviour, we'd have it pretty easy, wouldn't we? Whenever we'd encounter a difficulty, we just avoid it by skipping over it. Of course, we'd all like to skip over the difficult bits.

There was once a monk I met who told me he was a real meditator. He asked for permission to stay with me here and inquired about the schedule and standard of monastic discipline.

I explained to him that in this monastery we live according to the Vinaya, the Buddha's code of monastic discipline, and if he wanted to come and train with me he'd have to renounce his money and private supplies of goods.

He told me his practice was "non-attachment to all conventions." I told him I didn't know what he was talking about. "How about if I stay here," he asked, "and keep all my money but not be attached to it. Money's just a convention." I said sure, no problem. "If you can eat salt and not find it salty, then you can use money and not be attached to it."

He was just speaking gibberish. Actually, he was just too lazy to follow the details of the Vinaya. I'm telling you, it's difficult. "When you can eat salt and honestly assure me it's not salty, then I'll take you seriously. And if you tell me it's not salty then I'll give you a whole sack to eat. Just try it. Will it really not taste salty? Non-attachment to conventions isn't just a matter of clever speech. If you're going to talk like this, you can't stay with me." So he left.

We have to try and maintain the practice of virtue. Monastics should train by experimenting with the ascetic practices, the dhutaṅga, while lay people practising at home should keep the five precepts.¹ Attempt to attain impeccability in everything said and done. We should cultivate goodness to the best of our ability, and keep on gradually doing it.

When starting to cultivate the serenity of samatha meditation, don't make the mistake of trying once or twice and then giving up because the mind is not peaceful. That's not the right way. You have to cultivate meditation over a long period of time. Why does it have to take so long? Think about it. How many years have we allowed our minds to wander astray?

How many years have we not been doing samatha meditation? Whenever the mind has ordered us to follow it down a particular path, we've rushed after it. To calm that wandering mind, to bring it to a stop, to make it still, a couple of months of meditation won't be enough. Consider this.

When we undertake to train the mind to be at peace with every situation, please understand that in the beginning when a defiled emotion comes up, the mind won't be peaceful. It's going to be distracted and out of control. Why? Because there's craving.

We don't want our mind to think. We don't want to experience any distracting moods or emotions. Not wanting is craving, the craving for non-existence. The more we crave not to experience certain things, the more we invite and usher them in. "I don't want these things, so why do they keep coming to me? I wish it wasn't this way, so why is it this way?" There we go!

We crave for things to exist in a particular way, because we don't understand our own minds. It can take an incredibly long time before we realize that playing around with these things is a mistake. Finally, when we consider it clearly, we see, "Oh, these things come because I call them."

Craving not to experience something, craving to be at peace, craving not to be distracted and agitated—it's all craving. It's all a red-hot chunk of iron. But never mind. Just get on with the practice.

Whenever we experience a mood or emotion, examine it in terms of its impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selfless qualities, and toss it into one of these three categories. Then reflect and investigate: these defiled emotions are almost always accompanied by excessive thinking.

Wherever a mood leads, thinking straggles along behind. Thinking and wisdom are two very different things. Thinking merely reacts to and follows our moods, and they carry on with no end in sight. But if wisdom is operating, it will bring the mind to stillness.

The mind stops and doesn't go anywhere. There's simply knowing and acknowledging what's being experienced: when this emotion comes, the mind's like this; when that mood comes, it's like that. We sustain the "knowing."

Eventually it occurs to us, "Hey, all this thinking, this aimless mental chatter, this worrying and judging—it's all insubstantial nonsense. It's all impermanent, unsatisfactory and not me or mine." Toss it into one of these three all-encompassing categories, and quell the uprising. You cut it off at its source. Later when we again sit meditation, it will come up again. Keep a close watch on it. Spy on

it.

It's just like raising water buffalos. You've got the farmer, some rice plants, and the water buffalo. Now the water buffalo, it wants to eat those rice plants. Rice plants are what water buffalos like to eat, right? Your mind is a water buffalo. Defiled emotions are like the rice plants. The knowing is the farmer.

Dhamma practice is just like this. No different. Compare it for yourself. When tending a water buffalo, what do you do? You release it, allowing it to wander freely, but you keep a close eye on it. If it strays too close to the rice plants, you yell out. When the buffalo hears, it backs away. But don't be inattentive, oblivious to what the buffalo is doing.

If you've got a stubborn water buffalo that won't heed your warning, take a stick and give it a stout whack on the backside. Then it won't dare go near the rice plants. But don't get caught taking a siesta. If you lie down and doze off, those rice plants will be history. Dhamma practice is the same: you watch over your mind; the knowing tends the mind.

“Those people who keep a close watch over their minds will be liberated from Mára's snare.” And yet this knowing mind is also the mind, so who's the one observing the mind? Such ideas can make you extremely confused.

The mind is one thing, the knowing another; and yet the knowing originates in this very same mind. What does it mean to know the mind? What's it like to encounter moods and emotions? What's it like to be without any defiled emotions whatsoever? That which knows what these things are, is what is meant by the “knowing.”

The knowing observantly follows the mind, and it's from this knowing that wisdom is born. The mind is that which thinks and gets entangled in emotions, one after another—precisely like our water buffalo. Whatever directions it strays in, maintain a watchful eye. How could it get away? If it roams over to the rice plants, yell out. If it won't listen, pick up a stick and stride over to it—“*whack!*” This is how you frustrate its craving.

Training the mind is no different. When the mind experiences an emotion and instantly grabs it, it's the job of the knowing to teach. Examine the mood to see if it's good or bad. Explain to the mind how cause and effect functions. And when it again grabs onto something that it thinks is adorable, the knowing has to again teach the mind, again explain cause and effect, until the mind is able to cast that thing aside.

This leads to peace of mind. After finding out that whatever it grabs and grasps is inherently undesirable, the mind simply stops. It can't be bothered with those things anymore, because it has come under a constant barrage of rebukes and reprimands. Thwart the craving of the mind with determination. Challenge it to its core, until the teachings penetrate to the heart. That's how you train the mind.

Since the time when I withdrew to the forest to practise meditation, I've been practising like this. When I train my disciples, I train them to practise like this. Because I want them to see the truth, rather than just read what's in the scriptures; I want them to see if their hearts have been liberated from conceptual thinking.

When liberation occurs, you know; and when liberation has not yet happened, then contemplate the process of how one thing causes and leads to another. Contemplate until you know and understand it through and through. Once it has been penetrated with insight, it will

fall away on its own.

When something comes your way and gets stuck, then investigate. Don't give up until it has released its grip. Repeatedly investigate right here. Personally, this is how I approached the training, because the Buddha taught that you have to know for yourself. All sages know the truth for themselves. You've got to discover it in the depths of your own heart. Know yourself.

If you are confident in what you know and trust yourself, you will feel relaxed whether others criticize or praise you. Whatever other people say, you're at ease. Why? Because you know yourself. If someone bolsters you with praise, but you're not actually worthy of it, are you really going to believe them? Of course not. You just carry on with your Dhamma practice. When people who aren't confident in what they know get praised by others, they get sucked into believing it and it warps their perception.

Likewise when someone criticizes you, take a look at and examine yourself. "No, what they say isn't true. They accuse me of being wrong, but actually I'm not. Their accusation isn't valid." If that's the case, what would be the point of getting angry with them? Their words aren't true.

If, however, we are at fault just as they accuse, then their criticism is correct. If that's the case, what would be the point of getting angry with them? When you're able to think like this, life is truly untroubled and comfortable. Nothing that then happens is wrong. Then everything is Dhamma. That's how I practised.

Reference

Ajahn Chah. 2006. *Meditation*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society

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