

A Dhamma Talk by

**Ajahn Chah**

*Sìla, Samádhi, and Paññá*

as edited by

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I practised Dhamma without knowing a great deal. I just knew that the path to liberation began with virtue (*sìla*). Virtue is the beautiful beginning of the Path; the deep peace of samádhi is the beautiful middle; wisdom (*paññá*) is the beautiful end. Although they can be separated as three unique aspects of the training, as we look into them more and more deeply, these three qualities converge as one.

To uphold virtue, you have to be wise. We usually advise people to develop ethical standards first by keeping the five precepts so that their virtue will become solid. However, the perfection of virtue takes a lot of wisdom. We have to consider our speech and actions, and analyze their consequences. This is all the work of wisdom. We have to rely on our wisdom in order to cultivate virtue.

According to the theory, virtue comes first, then samádhi and then wisdom, but when I examined it I found that wisdom is the foundation stone for every other aspect of the practice.

In order to fully comprehend the consequences of what we say and do—especially the harmful consequences—we need to use wisdom to guide and supervise, to scrutinize the workings of cause and effect. This will purify our actions and speech. Once we become familiar with ethical and unethical behaviour, we see the place to practice. We then abandon what's bad and cultivate what's good. We abandon what's wrong and cultivate what's right. This is virtue. As we do this, the heart becomes increasingly firm and steadfast. A steadfast and unwavering heart is free of apprehension, remorse, and confusion concerning our actions and speech. This is samádhi.

This stable unification of mind forms a secondary and more powerful source of energy in our Dhamma practice, allowing a deeper contemplation of the sights, sounds, etc., that we experience.

Once the mind is established with firm and unwavering mindfulness and peace, we can engage in sustained inquiry into the reality of the body, feeling, perception, thought, consciousness, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, physical sensations and objects of mind.

As they continually arise, we continually investigate with a sincere determination not to lose our mindfulness. Then, we'll know what these things actually are. They come into existence following their own natural truth. As our understanding steadily grows, wisdom is born. Once there's clear comprehension of the way things truly are, our old perceptions are uprooted and our conceptual knowledge transforms into wisdom. That's how virtue, samádhi and wisdom merge and function as one.

As wisdom increases in strength and intrepidity, samádhi evolves to become increasingly firm. The more unshakeable samádhi is, the more unshakeable and all-encompassing virtue becomes. As virtue is perfected, it nurtures samádhi, and the additional strengthening of samádhi leads to a maturing of wisdom. These three aspects of the training mesh and intertwine.

United, they form the Noble Eightfold Path, the way of the Buddha. Once virtue, samádhi, and wisdom reach their peak, this Path has the power to eradicate those things which defile the mind's purity, the *kilesa*. When sensual desire comes up, when anger and delusion show their face, this Path is the only thing capable of cutting them down in their tracks.

The framework for Dhamma practice is the Four Noble Truths: suffering (*dukkha*), the origin of suffering (*samudaya*), the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) and the Path leading to the cessation of suffering (*maggā*). This Path consists of virtue, samádhi and wisdom, the framework for training the heart.

Their true meaning is not to be found in these words but dwells in the depth

of our hearts. That's what virtue, samádhi and wisdom are like. They revolve continually.

The Noble Eightfold Path will envelop any sight, sound, smell, taste, physical sensation, or object of mind that arises. However, if the factors of the Eightfold Path are weak and timid, the defilements will possess our minds. If the Noble Path is strong and courageous, it will conquer and destroy the defilements.

If it's the defilements that are powerful and brave while the Path is feeble and frail, the defilements will conquer the Path. They conquer our hearts. If the knowing isn't quick and nimble enough as forms, feelings, perceptions, and thoughts are experienced, they possess and devastate us. The Path and the defilements proceed in tandem.

As Dhamma practice develops in the heart, these two forces have to battle it out every step of the way. It's like there are two people arguing inside the mind, but it's just the Path of Dhamma and the defilements struggling to win domination of the heart. The Path guides and fosters our ability to contemplate.

As long as we are able to contemplate accurately, the defilements will be losing ground. But if we are shaky, whenever defilements regroup and regain their strength, the Path will be routed as defilements take its place. The two sides will continue to fight it out until eventually there is a victor and the whole affair is settled.

If we focus our endeavour on developing the way of Dhamma, defilements will be gradually and persistently eradicated. Once fully cultivated, the Four Noble Truths reside in our hearts. Whatever form suffering takes, it always exists due to a cause. That's the Second Noble Truth. And what is the cause? Weak virtue; weak samádhi; weak wisdom.

When the Path isn't durable, the defilements dominate the mind. When they dominate, the Second Noble Truth comes into play, and it gives rise to all sorts of suffering. Once we are suffering, those qualities which are able to

quell the suffering disappear. The conditions which give rise to the Path are virtue, samádhi, and wisdom. When they have attained full strength, the Path of Dhamma is unstoppable, advancing unceasingly to overcome the attachment and clinging that bring us so much anguish. Suffering can't arise because the Path is destroying the defilements.

It's at this point that cessation of suffering occurs. Why is the Path able to bring about the cessation of suffering? Because virtue, samádhi, and wisdom are attaining their peak of perfection, and the Path has gathered an unstoppable momentum. It all comes together right here. I would say for anyone who practises like this, theoretical ideas about the mind don't come into the picture. If the mind is liberated from these, then it is utterly dependable and certain. Now whatever path it takes, we don't have to goad it much to keep it going straight.

Consider the leaves of a mango tree; what are they like? By examining just a single leaf we know. Even if there are ten thousand of them, we know what all those leaves are like. Just look at one leaf: the others are essentially the same. Similarly with the trunk: we only have to see the trunk of one mango tree to know the characteristics of them all. Just look at one tree: all the other mango trees will be essentially no different. Even if there were one hundred thousand of them, if I knew one, I'd know them all. This is what the Buddha taught.

Virtue, samádhi, and wisdom constitute the Path of the Buddha. But the way is not the essence of the Dhamma. The Path isn't an end in itself, not the ultimate aim of the Blessed One. But it's the way leading inwards. It's just like how you travelled from Bangkok to my monastery, Wat Nong Pah Pong.<sup>1</sup> It's not the road you were after. What you wanted was to reach the monastery, but you needed the road for the journey. The road you travelled on is not the monastery. It's just the way to get here. But if you want to arrive at the monastery, you have to follow the road.

It's the same with virtue, samádhi, and wisdom. We could say they are not the essence of the Dhamma, but they are the road to arrive there. When virtue, samádhi, and wisdom have been mastered, the result is profound peace of

mind. That's the destination.

Once we've arrived at this peace, even if we hear a noise, the mind remains unruffled. Once we've reached this peace, there's nothing remaining to do. The Buddha taught to give it all up. Whatever happens, there's nothing to worry about. Then we truly, unquestionably, know for ourselves. We no longer simply believe what other people say.

The essential principle of Buddhism is empty of any phenomena. It's not contingent upon miraculous displays of psychic powers, paranormal abilities, or anything else mystical or bizarre. The Buddha did not emphasize the importance of these things. Such powers, however, do exist and may be possible to develop, but this facet of Dhamma is deluding, so the Buddha did not advocate or encourage it. The only people he praised were the ones who were able to liberate themselves from suffering.

To accomplish this requires training, and the tools and equipment to get the job done are generosity, virtue, samádhi, and wisdom. We have to take them up and train with them. Together they form a Path inclining inwards, and wisdom is the first step. This Path cannot mature if the mind is encrusted with defilements, but if we are stout-hearted and strong, the Path will eliminate these impurities. However, if it's the defilements that are stout-hearted and strong, they will destroy the Path.

Dhamma practice simply involves these two forces battling it out incessantly until the end of the road is reached. They engage in unremitting battle until the very end.

## Reference

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