

MN20 The Removal of Distracting Thoughts - Vitakkasanthāna Sutta

Presented by Ven Bhante Vimalaramsi on 19th February 2006
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BV: Ok, the discourse I'm going to do tonight is sutta number 20 in the Middle Length Sayings. It's called 'The Removal of Distracting Thoughts.' Does anyone have any distracting thoughts they want removed?

MN:

1. **THUS HAVE I HEARD.** On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvatthi in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapindika's Park. There he addressed the monks thus: "Monks."—"Venerable sir," they replied. The Blessed One said this:

2. " Monks, when a monk pursuing the higher mind,

BV: Which in Pāli is called abhi...dhamma (higher teachings), and here he is referring to getting into the jhānas,

MN:

... from time to time he should give attention to five signs. What are the five?

3. "Here, monk's, when a monk is giving attention to some sign, and owing to that sign there arise in him evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then he should give attention to some other sign connected with what is wholesome.

BV: Now, what is this talking about? This is talking basically about the part of the Eightfold Path that is generally called Right Effort. Right Effort is recognizing when your mind has become

distracted, letting go of the distraction, and relaxing, coming back to your object of meditation, and staying with your object of meditation.

Now, I talked to everybody today and one of the things that came up quite often was that their mind was very active. This is not bad. Just because you have an active mind doesn't mean that you have bad meditation. Meditation is about being able to recognize the movements of mind's attention from one thing to another; recognizing that attention movement. When a thought arises and it pulls your attention away from your object of meditation - that is the feeling of loving kindness and making a wish for your happiness or your friend's happiness - when you recognize that your mind is not on your object of meditation, then you let go of the thought, or feeling, whatever it is that pulls your attention away from your object of meditation, you let that be. You don't try to throw down the thought, stop the thought, stomp on the thought, beat the thought up, because it's there; you just recognize that the thought is there. Let the thought be there by itself. Don't keep your attention on it, and then gently relax the tension caused by that mind's movement. Now smile, and gently return to your object of meditation, and stay with your object of meditation as long as you can.

Sometimes, your object of meditation is only going to be there for part of one thought, and then it goes back. Then you do the whole process again. Allow that distraction to be there, relax, smile, come back to your object of meditation. It doesn't matter how many times in a sitting your mind wanders away. Just because you have an active mind does not mean that it's bad meditation. Bad meditation or no meditation is recognizing that you're thinking something, and you notice it, but you continue thinking. Now, you're not meditating at all, you're getting involved with the story, you're getting involved with the liking and disliking of something. The more you get involved, the less likely you are to let it go, and relax, and come back. So, when a distracting thought or feeling arises, and it pulls your attention to

it, allow it to be there, but don't give it any more attention. Even if you're in mid-sentence, just let it be.

Every time mind becomes distracted away from your object of meditation, there is tension and tightness that arises in both mind and body. That tension and tightness is what the Buddha called craving. Craving is the "I like it, I don't like it" mind. Right after craving, clinging arises. What is clinging? Clinging is all of your opinions, all of your concepts about why you like or dislike the feeling, and then your old habitual tendency arises and you always treat this feeling in the same way. Our old habitual tendency is always, when a feeling arises, is to try to think the feeling. The more you think the feeling, the bigger the feeling becomes, the more intense it becomes, the more attached you become to that feeling. So, when you notice that a feeling arises or a distracting thought pulls your attention away from your object of meditation, as soon as you notice it, let it be, relax, smile, come back to your object of meditation.

It's always kind of comical for me because a lot of people, I'll say: "Ok, tell me about your meditation." - "Ah, I had a great meditation, my mind just stayed on the object of meditation and didn't move at all, and it was just a great meditation." And I kind of ho-hum that. "Yeah ok, you had some candy." But if you come and tell me: "Ah, I had the most terrible meditation, my mind was all over the place!" My next question to you is: "Well, did you recognize that? Did you let it be? Did you relax? Did you come back to your object of meditation?" – "Oh yeah, I did all of that but it still kept on running around." - "Oh, you had a great meditation then didn't you?" It's exactly the opposite of what everybody thinks is a good meditation. Why? Because when you let go of the distraction, relax, smile, and come back to your object of meditation, you are building up your mindfulness muscles. You're building up your ability to observe what is happening in the present moment.

So you had an active meditation, that means you had to roll your sleeves up and you had to do some real work. But it was good meditation, just like lifting weights. You do that, you repeat it over and over again, eventually you start getting pretty strong. When you have an active meditation it means that you are learning how to strengthen your mindfulness muscles, and this is great meditation, it's not just good meditation. Like I said, bad meditation is seeing that you're thinking about something, and then just get so involved with it that you don't want to let it go. Now, you're not meditating at all.

Now, an interesting thing happens when craving arises. It always manifests in the same way as tension and tightness in your mind and in your body. And I told you that craving is the "I like it, I don't like it" mind. What did we start off with here? "I." This is the very start of the atta belief that "this feeling is me, this is mine, this is who I am." And then when craving arises, all of the thoughts about the feeling reinforce that belief that "this feeling is me, this is mine, this is who I am." And it causes mind to contract. And with that contraction comes more of the same, your habitual tendency. In Pāli we call it 'bhava'. It's always translated by most people as 'being' or 'experience', but actually... I had a real good long talk with my abhidhamma teacher, Sayadaw U Silananda, before he died, that it was actually closer to a correct translation that we use the words 'habitual tendency'. Now, what is a habitual tendency? When this feeling arises, I always act that way. When a painful feeling arises, I always have the same reaction. Somebody says something to you and all of a sudden your mind grabs onto it and there's anger there. How did that occur?

One of the things that I have to ask you to do - and this is a monk thing - and the Buddha said that we cannot give a Dhamma talk if people are sitting in particular ways: crossing your legs, crossing your arms. So, I have to ask you not to do that. And then I found out some years ago by talking with somebody that was a body language expert, and he did some

experiments with about a hundred people. And he gave them information, but first he said: "First, I want you to cross your legs and cross your arms"; and then he gave them a test on the information he gave them. They got about sixty per cent correct. And then he said: "Ok, uncross your arms, but keep your legs crossed"; and they got about seventy per cent correct. And then he said: "Ok, now open up, don't cross your legs, don't cross your arms"; and he gave them more information, they got close to 90 per cent of what he was saying. So, this is why the Buddha said that monks can't give talks when there are certain kinds of body postures.

When we have craving arise, it always manifests as tension and tightness. Now, I'm talking about very subtle, I'm not talking about gross tensions, although it can turn into gross tensions. There is - it's like a sack around your brain - and every time your mind has a thought in it, it contracts a little bit. It's not real big, but it is noticeable once you learn about it. So, when I say to let go of the tension and tightness in your body, I'm meaning the gross tensions and tightnesses of holding your hands tight, or your shoulders tight, or your back, or wherever it happens to be, but I'm also talking about the subtle tension and tightness that's in your head. Now, everybody here right now has tension and tightness in their head. Notice that there's this subtle tension and let it go. When you let it go, you'll feel a kind of expansion happen in your head, a release of tension, and right after that your mind becomes calm. You'll notice for a brief moment, that there's no thoughts. There's only this pure awareness, and you bring that pure awareness back to your object of meditation.

Now, I know that there are some of you that have been practicing different kinds of meditation, and I'll show you exactly why the Buddha's meditation, the way he taught it, works so well and is immediately recognizable and effective. When you practice normal meditation your mind is on your object of meditation, it gets distracted. Now, there are three or four different methods of dealing with this. One of them says you note it until it goes away;

another one says you let it go and you come back immediately. But what you're doing, when you practice, in this way is, you're bringing that craving - that you haven't let go of yet - back to your object of meditation. And eventually your concentration starts to develop so it becomes very deep, and it will start suppressing hindrances when they arise. Now, there's a little problem with this because your hindrances are where your attachments are. So you practice absorption concentration, you can get real peaceful and calm while your mind is absorbed, but when you lose that concentration then you have hindrances coming at you really heavily. And you're not really very aware of it.

Now, the Buddha's practice is this: your mind is on your object of meditation - that's the same; your mind gets distracted - that's the same; you let go of your distraction - that's the same; but where the Buddha's teaching is different, is the Buddha said: "Tranquilize your bodily and mental formation" - mind and body - before coming back to your object of meditation. Now, it says this often. It says it in the Satipatthāna Sutta (MN10), it says it in the Mindfulness of Body Sutta (MN119), it says it in Mindfulness of Breathing Sutta (MN118). It says it in sutta number 62 where the Buddha's giving instructions on how do to the breathing meditation to Rahula, his son. I'm going to read that to you just so I can let you know that this isn't my idea.

Okay, this is the Mindfulness of Body Sutta number 119. It says 'Mindfulness of Breathing'.

MN: {switches to MN119.4}

"Here a monk, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out. Breathing in long, he understands: 'I breathe in long'; or breathing out long, he understands: 'I breathe out long.' Breathing in short, he

understands: 'I breathe in short'; or breathing out short, he understands: 'I breathe out short.'

BV: Now, did you hear me say "nose," "nostril," "upper lip" or "abdomen"? No. It says you understand when you take a short breath, you understand when you take a long breath. Now, the real instruction occurs:

MN:

He trains thus:

BV: These are key words--"he trains thus."

MN:

'I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body';

BV: Not 'body of breath'. The whole 'body', physical 'body'.

MN:

he trains thus: 'I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.'

He trains thus: 'I shall breathe in tranquillising the bodily formation'; he trains thus: 'I shall breathe out tranquillising the bodily formation.

BV: That's the entire instructions in how to practice mindfulness of breathing. And you have no idea how many times I've gotten in discussion with monks in Asia, with monks here, with laymen teacher here, and I'll say: "It says that on the in-breath you tranquilize your body formation, on the out-breath you tranquilize your body formation. You tranquilize your body formation on the in-and-out-breath. Do you do that?" "Well no, I practice this way." Well, but the instructions that the Buddha gave very specifically, said you tranquilize on the in-breath and you tranquilize on the out-breath. In other words, when you breathe in, you're not focusing on the breath; you see the breath and you relax; on the in-breath, you see the breath and you relax; on the out-breath, and you relax; on the in-breath, you relax; on the

out-breath... that's quite different from the way, in this country in particular, meditation is being taught. Meditation is being taught to focus very deeply on the tiny sensation of the breath, but there's no relaxing that's occurring.

And I've run across a lot of people that have said: "Well, I become real peaceful and calm and serene." When you're practicing without the relaxation, your mind becomes absorbed, there's no hindrances that can arise, you can have all sorts of things that are very nice states that your mind focuses on, but you're not practicing insight while you're practicing your breath meditation. You're practicing a form of absorption if you don't have that relaxing. Now, coming back to the mindfulness of metta - because that's what I teach, I teach insight in metta - there is that relaxing. I'm continually talking about: you see a distraction, you relax; any tension or tightness in your body, in your mind, let it be and relax. So, this is basically the same kind of instruction that the Buddha was giving for the mindfulness of breathing.

When the Buddha was a bodhisatta, he practiced the absorption kinds of concentration where he got to very deep states of absorption, but then he went to the teacher and he said: "Is this all there is?" And the teacher said: "Yeah, this is it, this is as far as you can go." You can get to: the first teacher said the realm of Nothingness; the second teacher said the realm of Neither Perception nor Non-perception. Can't get any higher, that's it. And the bodhisatta said, "I'm not satisfied with that. There's still something there that I'm seeing." He said "There has to be another way." Now, the meditation, the absorption meditation, has been taught from time immemorial. Everybody practices that in one form or another. It doesn't matter what religion you're talking about. When they're talking about some form of concentration, they're talking about absorption types of concentration.

I was in Burma for almost three years. I had the opportunity to go and study with some really, really good scholars. Now, one of the scholars was at the Sixth Buddhist Council, and he was the chief answerer for the Sixth Buddhist Council. He's called the Mingun Sayadaw. He had memorized over twelve thousand pages from the suttas and commentaries. He took a test. Now, you know how everybody here, they complain because "There's a four-hour test I have to take when you're going to college. Ah, it was a killer!" He took a test ten hours a day for thirty days in a row. He got better than ninety percent correct on everything that he did. I mean this man had an amazing mind. He knew the suttas unbelievably well. So, I went to him and I said "Bhante, where in the suttas does it mention 'access concentration' or 'moment-to-moment concentration'?" And he said, "It's not in the suttas. That's in the commentary." I asked him a lot of... in a lot of different ways basically the same thing about absorption concentration: "Is that really what the Buddha taught?" And he said: "No, it was different because of the tranquilizing." - "Well, why aren't we teaching that now?" - "Because the commentaries don't agree with that and we go with the commentaries."

When I let go of the commentaries, and I still use the commentaries occasionally because there's some real good points in the commentaries, but I always check it against what it says in the suttas now. When I started going to the suttas, I started seeing a definite different type of meditation that the Buddha was teaching.

Now, in this country in particular there's an awful lot of people that are very much interested in quote "straight vipassanā." When you look up the word 'vipassanā' in the suttas and you get all of the different references, the suttas that it goes to, and then you look up the word 'samatha' and you go to those references; you start seeing that 'vipassanā' and 'samatha' are always mentioned together. The word 'vipassanā', in the suttas, is mentioned just over a hundred times, I don't remember the exact number.

The word 'jhāna' is mentioned thousands of times in conjunction with 'vipassanā' and 'samatha'. So, what did the Buddha teach? Did he teach straight vipassanā or did he teach samatha-vipassanā? There's a Sutta 149 in the Middle Length Sayings that kind of clears everything up. Now, let me see if I can find this part, it's not there... okay, this is section number 10 if you want to go to it and read it yourself:

MN: {switches to MN149.10}

"These two things - serenity - (samatha) and insight (vipassanā) - occur in him yoked evenly together."

BV: It says: "These two things, serenity and insight occur in him yoked, held together, evenly together."

So there's a little interesting sidebar for you to think about.

What the Buddha taught was how to have a still, alert mind that saw how things occur - how they occur. We don't care about why - why is for the psychologist and the therapist. How does anger arise, what happens first, what happens after that, what happens after that? You can be sitting in your meditation very peacefully, very calmly, and all of a sudden somebody slams the door, they make a sound, doesn't matter what the cause is. And your mind goes "God, I hate that. I wished it'd stop." Now, how did that arise? Okay, first there was a sound, and then there was a feeling, and it was a painful feeling. And then there was craving, "I don't like", and tension, and then there's clinging, and then there's your habitual habit of: "When this kind of feeling arises, I always act with dissatisfaction." So, you're reacting over and over again to a sound. Whose reaction is it? "It's mine, I don't like it, I don't want it to be there, I don't like being disturbed – 'I', 'I', 'I', 'I', 'I'." When in fact, sound arose - that's not good, bad, or indifferent - but it was kind of loud and it was a painful sound. When your mindfulness is sharp, you will see that painful feeling arise - and immediately relax. Then the craving doesn't arise, and the clinging doesn't arise, and your habitual tendency doesn't arise. Your mind is alert, bright, and you bring that mind back to

your object of meditation. It takes some degree of practice because these things happen very quickly, and it's hard to recognize them. Now, what actually happened? When the sound arose, there was a painful feeling and then that "I don't like it" tension, and your concepts, and opinions of the way things should be is fighting with reality, and that causes pain, that causes suffering, that causes all kinds of disturbance.

Now, the way dependent origination works is very fast. Every thought moment, it has dependent origination in it -. (snaps finger) - that was a million times. It happens over and over again very quickly. The more you identify with the dissatisfaction, the more the dissatisfaction keeps arising; the more you identify with it, the more pain you experience. How to let go of the pain.

I used to get a kick out of one of my friends that was a Zen teacher, and he would teach people about Buddhism and he would say "Buddhism is about pain." And then he'd just sit there and he wouldn't say anything more. He didn't say anything about the cause of the pain, or the possibility of the cessation of the pain, or the way to do it. He just said, "Buddhism is about pain!" And I know some people that are teaching *vipassanā*, that they want you to have pain arise. So they tell you as soon as a painful sensation arises, you put your attention right in the middle of that pain and watch, quote "its true nature." So you stare at that pain in your knee, or wherever it happens to be, and you watch all these different characteristics arise and pass away, but you're missing something when you do that. You're not seeing mind's reaction to the pain, which is tightened around it, "don't want it there". Pain by nature is a repulsive thing. So, is the Four Noble Truths being taught, when they say, "Put your attention right in the middle of the pain?"

Now, what I'm telling you is, when this feeling arises - pain is going to arise - welcome to having a human body. What do you do with it? First you notice all the thoughts about the pain, and you let those thoughts go and relax. Now, you notice a tight

mental fist around that pain. Now, the truth is when these kind of sensations arise, they are there. Anytime you try to fight with the truth, anytime you try to control the truth, anytime you try to make the truth be something other than it is, that is the cause of suffering. So, what do I tell you to do? Allow the pain to be there. "It hurts." Yeah okay, it's a painful feeling. But it's okay for that painful feeling to be there; it has to be okay because that's the truth.

Allow the painful feeling to be there and relax into that. Now, bring your smile back to your object of meditation. The nature of these kinds of sensations is they don't go away right away. So your attention is going to go back to it. So you treat it in the same way again. Let go of the thoughts about it, relax, allow the space for that sensation to be there, relax. Come back to your object of meditation. What are you doing when you do that? You're practicing the entire Eightfold Path. You're changing it from: "This is my pain and I don't like it" to "It's this sensation and it's okay for it to be there because that's the truth, it's there." You've changed your perspective. You've changed your view from "This is me, this is who I am" to "It's only that." Every time you change your perspective, there is a lessening of tension and tightness. There is the learning how to lovingly accept whatever arises in the present moment. Anytime you try to fight with what's happening in the present moment, anytime you don't like what's happening in the present moment, you can look forward to dukkha. You can look forward to pain, you can look forward to suffering, you can look forward to stress. I don't care what name you put on it; it hurts.

What is the cause of suffering? The Second Noble Truth: the cause of suffering is craving. How does craving arise? Craving arises as tension and tightness in your mind and in your body. Every time you let go of the tension and tightness in your mind, in your body - that's the Third Noble Truth - that's the cessation of the suffering. And the way you do it is by practicing the Eightfold Path, which we'll get into at another talk down the way.

So, every time there's a distraction, every time your mind gets pulled away from your object of meditation, there is this craving, there is this tension and tightness. And every time you see it, you allow it to be and relax, you are practicing the Third Noble Truth.

Now, one of my monk friends - it was another scholar in Australia - we got in a big discussion about the word "Nibbāna." What is Nibbāna? And he kept on saying there's two kinds of Nibbāna. I'd never heard of that before. How can that be? So, there's a mundane kind of Nibbāna: "Ni": no - "bana": fire. Putting out the fire. The fire of what? The fire of craving. You must experience the cessation of craving - the tension and tightness - many thousands, many tens of thousands, many hundreds of thousands of times before you will be able to experience the supramundane kind of Nibbāna. Letting go of that tension and tightness every time it arises gets you one step further, one step closer, to the supramundane Nibbāna.

You will hear me say over and over again: "When a sensation arises, allow it to be, relax, come back to your object of meditation.

MN:20.3 Repeated

When he gives attention to some other sign connected with what is wholesome, then any evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion are abandoned in him and subside. With the abandoning of them his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated. Just as a skilled carpenter or his apprentice might knock out, remove, and extract a course peg by means of a fine one, so to... when a bhikkhu gives attention to some other sign connected with what is wholesome... his mind becomes steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated.

I was telling some of you today about the five Rs: Release, Relax, Re-smile, Return, Repeat... but, I came up with another one. So, there is six of them. First is Recognize; recognize that your mind

is pulled away from your object of meditation. Then Release the distraction, and Relax, Re-smile, Return, and continue doing it, continue on smiling, continue on with your object of meditation, Repeat. Anyway, when your mind is on your object of meditation, it's very peaceful and calm, and it's wholesome, it's staying with a wholesome object. When your mind gets distracted, that's when the craving, the clinging, and the pain begin. The more you get involved with that distraction, the more there is the "This is me, this is who I am, and I want to control it, and I want it to be the way I want it to be." And it never is, so there's your suffering.

But what I want you to get in the habit of doing is seeing how this distraction arises. Again we don't care about why it arises - well, the door slammed, that's why - who cares? it's just a sound. It's just sound waves hitting the ear. Your ear is in good working order, the sound wave hits the ear, ear consciousness arises. The meeting of these three things is called contact. With contact as condition, feeling arises. Feeling is pleasant or painful, or we could go all the way up to 108 different kinds of feelings, but I don't want to do that. It basically comes to either pleasant or painful. With feeling as condition, craving arises. Craving always manifests as tension and tightness, and it's the "I like it, I don't like it" mind. With craving as condition, clinging arises; all of your opinions and story about. With clinging as condition, habitual tendency arises. "I always think this way when this kind of feeling arises." Every time somebody slams the door, there is dissatisfaction: "I always act that way when that happens." That's the cause of a lot of suffering because "I don't like the door to slam. I don't like that sound. I want the sound to stop so it doesn't quote "disturb me." But sound is just sound, it's not good, it's not bad, it's just sound. And it's okay for the sound to be there, it has to be okay. Why? Because it's there - it isn't dependent on whether you like it or dislike it, it is there - you don't have any control over it. Your reaction is the cause of suffering: "I don't like it. I hate that when it happens. It disturbs my meditation. It makes me upset and frustrated" and your mind goes off into a thousand different things. And then with that

distraction then comes more distraction, and it pulls your mind away further and further away from your object of meditation. Sometimes you can get caught for a long period of time. And then somebody else slams the door or the wind catches it or another sound happens, and your mind takes off with that one. What you think and ponder upon, that is the inclination of your mind. Whenever this sort of thing happens: "I don't like it. I want it to be different than it is." The more you get into disliking something, the more your mind will tend towards that dislike.

Now, in the morning, one of things that we said was that hatred can never be overcome by hatred in this world; hatred can only be overcome by love. I like to change that around a little bit because hatred is such a hard word. How about aversion can never be overcome by aversion? Aversion can only be overcome by loving acceptance. How's that sound? "Well, you always act in this way!" How many times has that been said in relationships? "You're always like this!" Well no, you're not, but because you think that over and over again, your mind tends towards that and that leads to more and more suffering.

So how to overcome this habitual tendency? Sharpen your awareness to see when something happens and the feeling that arises because of that contact, and relax right then. If you relax that craving right then, then you don't have clinging, you don't have your habitual tendency. Your mind is very alert; your mind is very receptive for whatever else arises; you have gained a state of true equanimity. That's what this practice is for, that's what this practice is all about: sharpening your awareness so you can see how these things happen. That's the question that the Buddha asks: How? Why? 53:04.231 Oh, there's millions of excuses of why things happen. "Well, I don't like these sounds because one time when I was in the crib, somebody made a real loud sound and scared the heck out of me and I've never liked loud sounds since." Why? Who cares! Why isn't the question. How did this arise? Now, the whole idea of getting rid of your hindrances is seeing how they arise.

Now, restlessness is a great hindrance, and you better be friends with it because it's going to stick around for a while, until you become an arahat anyway. What is restlessness? Restlessness first off is a painful feeling. There's "the I like it, I don't like it" and then there's all the stories about what's happening in the restlessness. Restlessness is every distracting thought. Every thought that pulls you away from your object of meditation is part of restlessness. So, you're sitting in mediation and all of a sudden you think about what happened last year, what happened last week, what happened yesterday - doesn't matter - what's going to happen tomorrow, doesn't matter what the distraction is. As soon as you recognize that your mind is not on your object of meditation, then let go of that distraction, relax, smile, come back to your object of meditation. The nature of these kinds of distractions is they're not going to go away right away. So, your mind gets pulled back and starts thinking again. How'd that happen?

Take more interest in how the movement of mind's attention got from being very peaceful and calm on your object of meditation, to being distracted. How'd that happen?

As you take more and more interest in how your mind gets distracted, you start becoming more familiar with the process because it is a true process. A lot of people will take words like 'restlessness' or 'automobile' or 'pain'; all of these words are concepts. Now, we'll take automobile as a great concept. Go outside and show me where you automobile is. Is it the wheel, is it the bumper, is it the headlight, is it the steering wheel, is it the motor? You can go on and on and on. This is a thing that has many little parts that are put together to make up this idea that this is one thing. The same thing happens with pain. What is pain? Is it heat, is it anxiety, is it dislike, is it vibration? And it can be made up of all of those things. But when it's pain, it turns into "my pain." When you start taking it apart and saying "Well, this is heat, and here's some vibration, and here's some dislike of it, and this feeling arises, and all of these different parts." You start

seeing that it's not yours, it's just part of a process that arises. It happens in the same way every time. Tell me how it happened.

With restlessness: what happens first, what happens after that, what happens after that? When you become familiar with how your mind becomes distracted, you start letting go a little bit more quickly because you're recognizing this process. It's not "me", it's not "my restlessness", it's not "my thoughts", it's just a bunch of little things that are put together to make up this concept. Now, you're taking the concept apart and you're starting to see these little things arise. As you become more familiar with how they arise, you can let go of them more quickly, more easily, and that process is called dependent origination. There's not very many people in this country that will teach dependent origination in a meditation retreat because people, to be quite honest, don't really understand how it works. And you'll be getting more of that later, I promise. But dependent origination - sometimes there's five links that you look at, sometimes there's seven, sometimes there's nine, sometimes there's eleven. It just depends on the situation and how clear your mind is at that time, how good your awareness of this process is at that time.

Now, one of the big things that's happening in this country is everybody is talking about the importance of impermanence, suffering, and the not-self nature of everything. In the Mahavagga - that's one of the books of the of discipline - and anytime that's brought up, everybody thinks: "Oh, the book of discipline, rules for the monks!" It's a lot more than that! It has a lot of suttas in it. It has a lot of direction in how to do the meditation. In the Mahavagga it says: "You can see anicca, dukkha, anatta, without ever seeing dependent origination, and you can never see dependent origination without seeing anicca, dukkha, and anatta." That's a pretty powerful statement right there. That's pretty important, actually. You can always see impermanence, suffering, and the impersonal nature of everything when you see the process of dependent origination and how it works. You will become more and more familiar as

your mind begins to calm down. And, don't be impatient. You play with this, you make this a game, and your awareness will take off, and you'll be able to recognize these things. Not all of them at once, you'll see one thing at a time, but that's ok. The thing that you want to be aware of - that the weakest link in dependent origination is craving. You can recognize it because it does that in your mind and in your body. And as soon as you see that you can start relaxing and letting it go. Then the suffering doesn't arise so much anymore. And you start gaining more of a sense of balance in your practice, in your everyday life.

Now, one of the things that I found, especially coming back to this country is: everybody assumes that the hindrances only arise really while you're sitting on the cushion; that's the only time you need to take a look at them. Wrong. Hindrances are arising all the time. When you're sitting on the cushion, is the time that you can really spend watching how it arises. And you become more familiar with that, so when you get caught by a hindrance out there, you won't get caught for as long. You'll be able to recognize it, see it for what it truly is. See, this is an all-the-time practice. That's one of the reasons why I try to impress the idea that, while you're doing your daily activities - I don't care what you're doing - I want you be watching the movements of mind's attention. Stay with your object of meditation. If you can't stay with your object of meditation, at least smile; at least. Why? Because when your mind is uplifted, your attention is very quick, alert. And your mind is very agile; it sees things much more quickly when you have an uplifted mind.

I'm told that I'm crazy quite often because I try to get people to smile and have fun. "Well, meditation is supposed to be serious." - "Life is supposed to be serious." I'd like to catch the guy that wrote that statement and smack him one. Who said life is supposed to be serious? I mean really! We all have this idea that that's the way quote "grownups" are supposed to act. But I'd rather be a kid; I am a kid. Who am I kidding? When you have a mind that has joy in it, you have a mind that is not attached at

that time. But one of the mistakes that happens in Asia is: the monks that do the teaching of meditation, they're pretty severe. Because all the people in Asia, they're around monks all the time, they're happy go lucky folks, they're not real serious, they like to play and laugh and talk and have a good time, and then when it's time for them to do meditation, the monk has to be really severe. And they have joy coming up all the time, so they go to the teacher and they say: "Well, I have some joy coming up and it's really neat." The first thing the teacher says is: "Don't be attached!" Well, what happens when Westerners - who are very serious minded, and goal oriented, and hard working - go to Asia and get a teacher like that? They tell us we got to try harder. "You got to note fifty thousand times in an hour! You have to really put out the effort!" Well, we knock ourselves out doing that, and as a result the progress in the practice is not very good because we're trying too hard, we're putting out too much energy, too much effort.

And it's only taken me a few years of being back in this country to really figure this out. I tell people just the opposite. You're already goal oriented, you're already trying too hard, lighten up, have some fun, relax! Why? Because that puts your mind in balance. In Asia they had to do it the other way. They were already too light, they had to get serious, they had to get pushed into getting in balance. But here we don't need that. I've seen an awful lot of retreats - except the ones that I give - where nobody smiles. And you see these deep wrinkles in their forehead where they're really trying hard. Well, if I see you doing that, I'm going to come and thump you on the head. Don't do that, relax, have fun! We need that kind of balance. And from my experience, it's... I haven't run across any Asian teachers that don't stress putting in a lot of effort, and a lot of energy. So, I'm starting up a meditation where you don't have to do that so much. I'm starting up a place where we can have fun and get in balance, and still have a really good practice.

I practiced straight vipassanā for twenty years. I put a lot of effort into it. I went to a lot of different teachers. When I started practicing according to the way it teaches in the suttas, I started recognizing that I didn't have to put out that much effort. I didn't have to put out that much energy because I was already serious and trying hard as it was. I didn't need to add any more to it. It actually slowed down my progress in the meditation. And it was funny when I was in Malaysia because there was a lot of people that were practicing straight vipassanā, and they would come out of a one-month retreat, and they were miserable. And they were saying things to other people that were horrible things, they were hurting people's feelings. And they'd come running to me and they'd say: "I need to take one of your retreats!" I only gave a one week retreat. "Ok, you come and do a metta retreat. I'll teach you how to re-smile again." And then their mind got in balance, and then they were off to the races, do whatever they were going to do. But I didn't let anybody walk around being serious; you hear me laugh fairly often. Why? Because I want you to laugh. I want you to not try so incredibly hard that you turn out to be your own worst enemy. I want you to try, but be happy while you're doing it. Lightly, not in a heavy way. The Buddha's practice was always about balance. So, we need to practice smiling to have that balance.

When a hindrance arises, try to see how it arises, and have fun with it. Treat it like it's a partner, it's a game. "Well, this anger, I don't feel like smiling, I don't feel like playing, I feel like being mad!" Ok, you be mad, you suffer, you make yourself miserable, your choice. You can do that or not, it's up to you. Me, I like to laugh, makes my body feel good, makes my mind light. Let go of all kinds of attachments when I can laugh at how crazy my mind truly is. And I got a whopper, I'll tell you. But this is like going in and teaching people: "Well, I've always been running a circle this way", and now I'm coming along and saying 'Well, I want you to go the other way.'" - "Well it's hard." - "Well, your old habits, hard to let go of. Your old habits of being grumpy, your old habits of being fearful, your old habits of having anxiety, or depression,

whatever the catch of the day happens to be, it's hard to let go of." Why? Because we've thought about it a lot and our inclination of mind tends towards that. Now, I'm saying: "I want you to smile, and I want you to think loving and kind thoughts, and feel those thoughts in your heart." Change your old habit into a new habit. The more you do it, the easier it becomes, I promise.

The first day of the retreat, it's the pits. It's always hard because your mind is still running around just like it always did out there. So, it starts to take to the discipline and then it says: "Well, I'm going to get sleepy for a little while, I'm going to run around and get restless for a little while, I'm going to dislike this, and I'm going to like that, and I'm going to hold on to this, and..." And you're doing all the things that you normally do, and I'm showing you a way of changing that habit, at least for a period of time. How much you change: how closely do you follow the directions? Don't add anything, don't subtract anything. Just smile. Feel that radiating feeling of love, the wonderful glowing feeling. Make a wish that you want to feel yourself, and then put that wish in your heart, and give it away! And keep giving it away.

One of the things that is not really brought up in this country in particular, is that there's three parts to meditation. The first two – they're never talked of; only sitting and walking, that's meditation. The Buddha said it's dana, sila, bhāvanā; that's what meditation is. Dana is giving: "Oh, the monk's talking about giving, he wants to get rich." No, I'm not talking about that. There's three ways to give: you give with your speech; you give with your actions; you give with your mind. I'm asking you to give with your mind. Every time I'm saying: "Stay with your spiritual friend, and wish them well", you're practicing your generosity that way. Now, there's three ways of giving too. Prepare your gift with a happy mind; give your gift with a happy mind; reflect on giving that gift with a happy mind. There's a lot of happy around here, isn't there? Do it often, as much as you can remember to do it, and not only while you're sitting on the

cushion. Right now, I want you to do it all the time. I don't care if you're eating, I don't care if you're going to the toilet, I don't care what you're doing, keep giving. It feels good, makes you happy.

The next part is practicing your precepts. And this is incredibly important stuff, and this is something that most retreats that I've been to in this country, the teacher will give the precepts one time in Pāli, and never mention it again. And you never really get a feeling for it. We do it every day, we do it every morning. Not as some kind of rite and ritual, but as a reminder to keep your precepts. You break your precepts, you can look forward to restless mind, fear, anxiety, depression. Now here we're taking eight precepts. When you get off retreat, I will give you five precepts. But don't just take the precepts and say: "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah." I highly recommend that you take the precepts every day to keep them in your mind. You break the precepts... you can look forward to a lot of restlessness, anxiety, fear, depression, all of the stuff, all of the negative mental states arising. What do you think the hindrances are all about? They're about breaking precepts. The hindrances arise because you don't keep your precepts as good as you could.

I know people that they've done lots of retreats. They get off retreat, they forget about their precepts, go back to life the way that they normally live it. Come back, do a retreat, the retreat's two weeks long, it takes them a week to calm down, so that they can actually get some benefit from the retreat. Well, they're not being very serious about what the Buddha is talking about, or practicing. This is an all-the-time practice. Keep your precepts as closely as you possibly can. If you break one of the precepts for whatever reason, then stop right then, forgive yourself for making a mistake, make a determination not to break the precepts again, and take the precepts again, right then and there. "Ah, but a glass of wine is good after a meal or with a meal." Now, the precept says: "Don't take any drugs or alcohol." There's a real good reason for that. You take drugs and alcohol, one: it dulls your mind out right then, and you have a tendency

to break the other precepts. But, more importantly, it affects your meditation in a negative way. Your mind gets dull for periods of time, and that's directly from taking alcohol. "Oh, it's only one glass, once in a while it doesn't matter." Yes it does, it does matter. Don't do that, not if you really want to purify your mind. Keep your precepts as closely as you possibly can, all of the time.

Now, I've told this story over and over again, but I'll tell it again. I had a lady that, she was in Malaysia, she came to me and she said: "I want you to teach me how to meditate." Never done any mediation before. She kept her precepts really closely. She was real kind and helpful to a lot of people. And I said: "Fine. I'm giving a weekend retreat. Come." So she came, and her first few sittings... right after that I walked by her and I saw she had kind of a frown on her face. I said: "Come on, let's talk!" I said: "How's your meditation going?" And she said: "Well, I can only sit for about forty-five minutes!" And I said: "Well, why don't you sit longer?" She said: "I have such pain in my legs I can't believe it!" So, my being an American, I said: "Well, then don't sit on the floor. Try sitting in the chair." Now, this is one day of meditation, right? She had a four-hour sit. She got it! She got the meditation very well and very easily because she had spent her lifetime living by the precepts. And the Buddha said, if you keep your precepts really closely, your mind will naturally tend towards tranquillity and calmness. I know people that, years and years of practice and they finally get a little bit of concentration. This is a lady that did it one day and she progressed further than many people. It was amazing. She was so good I wanted to smack her in back of the head. Nobody's that good.

This is all intertwined and interconnected. You don't just take one part of what the Buddha is teaching and say: "Well, I'm going to perfect that, the heck with the rest of it." Doesn't work. You're going to spend years and years of getting frustrated and then - like what's happening in this country - well, we'll try yoga *vipassanā*, and we'll try psychotherapy *vipassanā*, and we'll try Hindu *vipassanā*, and Christian *vipassanā*! Well, what's the

matter? Why is that happening? Why is it there are so many people that have been practicing twenty years or more that don't have any real progress in their practice, so they start going to other things and incorporating it? Why is that happening? Because they're not following the Buddha's teaching completely. And they're starting to throw in some New Age ideas about this and that.

Now, I've gone off of the sutta a little bit, but it agrees with what I'm talking about and I am talking about what this Sutta is talking about.

How do you get rid of a hindrance? How do you get rid of a distraction? Now, one of the things that has happened in the suttas is, over the years there have been some things that have been added. This particular sutta was added some time later than the time of the Buddha, because he wouldn't have given these kinds of instructions. The kind of instruction I'm talking about is the favourite quote, in Burma, from their teachers to the students: When you have a distraction that's so bad...

(Note – this is what NOT to do!)

7. "If, while he is giving attention to stilling the thought-formation of those thoughts, there still arise in him evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion, then, with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he should beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind."

That's one of the instructions. That has to do with absorption concentration. That doesn't have anything to do with what the Buddha was teaching. This particular sutta was added by some Brahmans about three hundred years after the Buddha had died, and it got into the suttas, and it's basically been overlooked every time there's been a Buddhist Council; that happens occasionally. There are some other suttas, the... one of the suttas says that the Buddha said that there would never be a country run by a

female. And that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. The Buddha would never say anything like that, but that is in one of the suttas. And it just gets kind of overlooked because it's not any major kind of teaching, so the heck with it.

But the way you overcome any hindrance, any distraction, is by recognizing that your mind has been pulled to that distraction, let the distraction be, relax, smile, and come back to your object of meditation.

Be more alert as to the process of the distraction. Let's say with dullness, sleepiness, okay? How does sleepiness arise? Well, you're kind of on your object of mediation; and then you kind of let your mind ho-hum and think about this and think about that; and then your mind starts to get a little bit more dreamy; and then your back starts slumping; and then all of a sudden you almost fall over because you're asleep; and then you try to put in a lot of effort and straighten up real fast. But you haven't put in the right kind of effort and you still have those ho-hum thoughts, and the whole process happens again. So, how do you overcome the sleepiness?

You don't overcome it at the start, you overcome it at the end. You become more familiar with how this arises. When you start seeing that your back is starting to slump, if, at right then, you recognize that and let go of that, straighten your back, come back to your object of meditation, then you'll go only that far. You won't go till you're bobbing! And then you see the process of what happens right before that. As you do this a few times, you'll start to see: "Oh, this is how that works!" As you recognize this more quickly, you start to let go more quickly. As you let go more quickly and relax into that, you stop identifying with that as being yours. And the hindrance eventually gets so weak that it won't even come up any more.

What happens then? A real sense of relief. Right after the relief, you feel joy coming up big time, very light in your body, very light in your mind, happy feeling, really, really happy. There's

some excitement with it. When that fades away, then you feel more comfortable than you've ever felt. Your mind feels comfortable, your body feels comfortable. Your mind stays with your object of meditation, doesn't move.

What I just described to you was the first jhāna. How did you get to that first jhāna? By understanding the process of the hindrance, how the hindrance worked and letting go of that attachment to it. What's the attachment? "I, this is me, this is mine, this is who I am." You've broken it down enough, so that you see that this is part of an impersonal process. It's just stuff coming up, always comes up in the same way, so you start letting go as you recognize it. You've let go of that attachment. And for that, you get some candy.

Now, the hindrances are incredibly important. Your mindfulness is going to be real good and sharp for a period of time, and then for one reason or another it starts to get weaker. And before long, there's another distraction. So, you get to work with that. Every time you let go of a distraction, relax, smile, come back to your object of meditation; your mindfulness gets a little bit clearer, stronger, you're able to watch it more clearly and not identify with the hindrance so much any more. You're starting to see every hindrance as part of a process. So, the hindrances are absolutely a necessary part of your practice. It's good that they arise. Why? Because it makes you go to work. So, you have to let go of them. It helps you to see how the process works more and more clearly. And this happens going from one jhāna to the next. Every time you let go of a hindrance, you'll be able to experience a deeper kind of jhāna because your understanding in how the process works becomes more clear.

When the Buddha was talking to someone about the way to experience Nibbāna, he described it in dozens of places in the suttas that the way that you experience Nibbāna is by seeing dependent origination. That's the way you experience Nibbāna ... not by seeing anicca, dukkha, anatta; you see that automatically. But it's seeing and recognizing the process as being an

impersonal process, and that's the way it works. Your understanding is the thing that gets you to Nibbāna. It's not a mystical, magical pop... there it is. It's your understanding of the process.

That is what the Blessed One said. The bhikkhus were satisfied and delighted with the Blessed One's words.

Let's share some merit, then.

*May suffering ones, be suffering free
And the fear struck, fearless be
May the grieving shed all grief
And may all beings find relief.*

*May all beings share this merit that we have thus acquired
For the acquisition of all kinds of happiness.*

*May beings inhabiting space and earth
Devas and nagas of mighty power
Share this merit of ours.*

May they long protect the Buddha's dispensation.

Sadhu . . . Sadhu . . . Sadhu

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