

Meditation as Taught  
by the Buddha

DhammaCakraTra  
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Dhamma Talk by Bhante Vimalaramsi  
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So, it seems that you're very interested in meditation. That's quite good.

I've been teaching meditation for just over thirty years. I practiced meditation for twenty years with Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw, and U Pandita, and U Lakkhana, and U Janaka; many, many Burmese monks. Then I was invited to go to Malaysia and be at the biggest Theravada monastery in Malaysia. It was a Sri Lankan monastery in Kuala Lumpur.

While I was there I began to study the suttas, the actual discourses of the Buddha. And what I found was the suttas and what I was being taught from commentary was not the same thing. And I also found out that almost everyone is being taught meditation from the commentaries. And there is one step in the sutta that is not mentioned in the commentaries. And when you add this one step to your meditation, it changes the entire meditation.

Are you doing mindfulness of breathing? Is that the meditation that you're practicing mostly here? Ok, I'll give you the instructions in the mindfulness of breathing according to the sutta, and you'll see that it's a little bit different that what you are being taught.

Now, there's four sentences that give the instruction. It says: when you take a long in-breath, you understand that it's a long in-breath; when you let the long out-breath, you understand it's a long out-breath; you understand when it's a short in-breath and when it's a short out-breath. Now, did anyone hear me say, nose, nostril tip,

upper lip, or abdomen? No, because that's not in the instruction. It just says you understand when you take a long breath, and when it's short; you understand when the breath is big, and when it's small; you understand when the breath is fast and when it's slow. That's all this means.

Now, the next part of the instructions are where it tells you exactly how to train your mind. Now, with these instructions, it does not ever mention any location for watching the breath, and it doesn't say to only focus on the breath. And I'll show you that in just a moment.

The next part of the instructions say: he trains thus; 'he' meaning anybody doing the practice. You experience the entire body on the in-breath; and you experience the entire body on the out-breath. That means the whole physical body. It does not mean the breath-body. It means the physical body. Then the instructions go on further and say, you train this way: on the in-breath you tranquilize the body formation, on the out-breath you tranquilize the body formation. Now, what does this mean? On the in-breath, relax; on the out-breath, relax. This is the step that the commentaries leave out, and I'll explain the importance of this in just a moment.

The way that you practice the meditation is that every time mind's attention moves from the breath and relaxing to a distraction; it's a thought, it's a feeling, it's a sound, whatever it happens to be that distracts your mind away. Every time mind's attention moves, there's a tension and tightness that arises in your head and in your mind. That tension and tightness is craving. That's how you can recognize when craving arises. It's not a big tension or tightness, and if you don't look for it, you won't see it. You won't even recognize that it's there. It's a little tightness that happens in the head itself.

TT: 5:19

Your brain is like this (gestures), and there's a membrane that goes around your brain. It kind of holds everything together. Every time mind's attention moves, that membrane tightens a little bit. On the in-breath you relax, you feel your brain kind of "Ah". It kind of opens

up and then becomes calm. What you have just done is let go of craving. When you let go of craving - that is the cause of suffering - and you let that go - that is the cessation of suffering.

When you let go of that tension and tightness - let's say your mind is distracted by a thought - you let the thought go and you relax right then. You feel that kind of openness and become calm, but also you notice that there's no thoughts at that time. You notice that mind is very clear and bright at that time, and you bring that mind back to your object of meditation. Your object of meditation is the breath, and relaxing. You don't focus only on the breath. You use the breath as the reminder to let go of the craving, to let go of the tension and tightness. You do that on the in-breath, you do that on the out-breath. There's a distraction, you let go of the distraction, you relax, now smile.

Now, this is something that most people don't think of when they're doing the meditation. I've been to many, many, many, meditation retreats. I've taken a lot of meditation. I've done a lot; probably twelve three-month retreats; I did an eight-month retreat; I did a two-year retreat. So, I do know about meditation retreats. When I go to a retreat and I look at the people, almost everyone is sitting with a very sour face, and they're kind of working very hard and they've got these deep lines in their face. And I have a tendency when I find someone doing that, go up and tap them: "Lighten up, don't be so heavy." Mostly that is because they're practicing a form of absorption concentration.

Now, what's the difference between what I just suggested that the Buddha said and the way most people are practicing? Your mind is on your object of meditation - on the breath - mind gets distracted; when you're practicing absorption types of concentration, you let go of the distraction and immediately come back. Now, what are you doing? Because you haven't relaxed that tension and tightness, you're bringing the craving back to your object of meditation, and that changes the meditation a lot, not just a little bit. What I'm showing you is: your mind is on your object of meditation, that's the same; there's a distraction, that's the same; you let go of the

distraction, that's the same; but you add one extra step; you let go of that tension and tightness before you come back to your object of meditation. That changes the meditation and you don't go into absorption concentration when you do this.

TT: 9:50

I've practiced vipassana meditation for twenty years. I went through all of the insight knowledges and I was not satisfied with the end result. I was never taught to relax the tension and tightness. With vipassana meditation they tell you, when you have a pain - say you get a pain in your knee - they tell you "Put your attention right in the middle of that pain and watch its true nature." Every time I did that, I noticed that my mind was just like a rock. It is so tense and tight, so hard, because it's difficult to put your attention in the middle of a pain and stay balanced, stay at ease. Your mind, it's painful, and the more you put your attention in the middle of that sensation, the bigger it gets. So your mind naturally does this (gestures).

Now, when I teach meditation, when I give the instructions, I give very precise instructions in what you do when a sensation arises in your body. It doesn't matter whether it's a want to cough, or it's an itch, or it's a heat, or it's a vibration, or it's a pain. You treat all of these in the same way. When your attention gets pulled away from the breath and relaxing, it goes right to that sensation and the first thing you'll notice is you start thinking about all of the reasons why you don't like that: "I wish it would stop. Just go away and leave me alone." Right? Every thought about that sensation makes the sensation bigger and more intense. So, the first thing that we do is, let go of the thinking about it. Now, because you were thinking, there's some little tension and tightness; relax. Now you notice that your mind is there and it's not thinking, but it's still painful. And any time a painful feeling arises, there's a tight mental fist around that pain that says "I don't like it, I want it to go away."

Now, the Dhamma - the truth - is, when a pain arises it is there. That's the truth. Any time you try to control the truth, any time you try to fight with the truth, any time you try to make the truth be the

way you want it to be, that is a cause of suffering. So what do we do? Well, the truth is, when this pain arises, it's there and it's ok for it to be there. It has to be ok because it's the truth, it's there. So you allow the space for that pain to be there. Now you notice there's tension and tightness in your head and you relax, and you come back to your object of meditation. You come back to the breath and relax on the in-breath, "Whoops, there it goes again." Now you have thoughts about it, so you let go of the thoughts and relax. You allow the space for that sensation to be there. This is learning how to lovingly accept the present moment without trying to change it. It's a very important step. So, you relax, you allow that feeling to be there, you relax the tension and tightness caused by mind's attention moving, and you bring this clear, pure mind back to the breath.

Now, the whole point of meditation is to teach you how mind's attention works. That's what meditation is for. And as you keep bouncing back and forth from the breath to that sensation, as you become more familiar with this process, you start to notice right before your mind got all the way to the sensation, something else was there... "Oh, look at that." And you relax and let it go and come back. The next time, you notice that again. So you start letting go right there instead of getting carried away with big, heavy feelings about this sensation. As you let go more and more, and allow that sensation to be there, there's not resistance to that feeling, there is acceptance of the fact that it's there.

TT: 15:38

And also, your mind is starting to gain balance. You're starting to change your perspective, your view of that pain. At first, when the pain comes, and you have all of these thoughts about it and tightness around it, you're taking this sensation personally; "This is me, this is mine, this is who I am." As you start to see this as a process, you start changing that view to "Oh, it's only this feeling." See the difference? "This is me, this is mine, this is who I am" and you change to "It's only this feeling" pssst (gestures). Let it be, relax into it, allow that feeling to be without trying to do anything to make it different. Now you're learning to lovingly accept whatever arises in

the present moment. As you become more and more familiar with how that sensation arises, and how your mind acts when that sensation arises, it turns into one of the best lessons that you can teach yourself.

One of the big things that the Buddha taught - and this is major - is that whatever arises in the present moment: "It's not me, it's not mine, I didn't ask it to come up." Do you sit and think "Well you know, I haven't had a sad feeling for a long time. I think I should be sad now." Nobody's crazy enough to do that. It comes up because the conditions are right for it to arise. What you do with what arises in the present moment dictates what happens in the future. If you resist what's happening in the present moment, if you try to fight it, if you try to control it, you can look forward to having more and more sadness - or whatever the catch of the day is - getting bigger and stronger. Why? Because you're taking it personally. You're saying "This feeling and these thoughts are me. They're mine. This is who I am." You have the choice of doing that, which is your old habitual tendency - your old pattern - or seeing it for the way it actually is: allowing it to be, relaxing into it, gently coming back to your object of meditation after you smile.

Now, I'm real big on smiling. I think it's a real important aspect of the meditation. They did a study in the University of Minnesota I think it was, years and years ago, and the study was on the corners of your mouth. When the corners of your mouth go down, so does your mental state. When the corners of your mouth go up, so does your mental state. When you smile and have your mental state arise and come up, your mind is much more alert, your mind is much clearer, your awareness is much faster.

So, over the years I have developed what we call a mnemonic system. It's a way of remembering how to do the meditation. This mnemonic system is:

- 1) You 'Recognize' when your mind is distracted.
- 2) You 'Release' the distraction. How do you release the distraction? Say it's a thought, you don't keep your attention on the thought anymore.

- 3) You 'Relax' the tightness caused by that mind's attention moving.
- 4) Now you 'Re-Smile'.
- 5) And then you come back, 'Return' to your object of meditation.
- 6) And you 'Repeat' staying with the object of meditation as long as you can remember to do it.

TT: 20:26

Now, I call this the 6Rs. Recognize, Release, Relax, Re-Smile - this helps pull your mind up a little bit, Return to your object of meditation. When you smile a little bit and come back to your object of meditation, your mind is more clear, alert. So, you'll be able to catch distractions more quickly. Then you Repeat this process. You stay with your object of meditation as long as you can.

Now, when people are doing meditation, they have the idea that hindrances are the enemy and we have to fight them, and we have to push them down, and we have to stop them from coming up. The hindrances: you have lust - greedy mind, I want it mind; you have hatred - aversion mind, the I don't want it mind; you have sleepiness and dullness; you have restlessness and anxiety; you have doubt. Now, all of these hindrances when they arise, they will take your attention completely away and you'll get involved in some kind of story about it; why you want something, why you don't want something, how your mind dulls out, how your mind gets super restless.

Now, every distracting thought is part of restlessness. Ok? Now, the thing with the hindrances is, every time a hindrance arises there is the belief that "I am that", that comes along with it. This is where your attachments are stored in your hindrances. Now, most people that practice meditation, they have the idea that you have to force the hindrance away, knock it down, beat it up, push it down, stop it from coming up. But this is where your attachment is. If you push away a hindrance and stop it from coming up, it will stop for a little while and then it'll come back stronger. Why? Because you're feeding it with your attention and your desire to crush it. Hindrances are your best friends; hindrances are your teachers. I'm not a teacher - I'm a

guide - you teach yourself. When a hindrance arises, you don't fight it, you don't try to control it.

Let me show you this: there are five aggregates - khandhas they call them in Pali. This makes up this mind and body process:

- 1) You have a physical body (rupa).
- 2) You have feeling - vedana. Feeling is not emotion, feeling is feeling. It's either a pleasant feeling, or a painful feeling, or a neither painful nor pleasant feeling.
- 3) You have perception (sanna). Perception is the thing that gives names to different objects. You look at this and you say "A piece of paper." The part of your mind that said "paper", that's the perception. And this also has memory in it.
- 4) You have thoughts (sankhara).
- 5) And you have consciousness (vinnana).

TT: 24:21

When a painful feeling arises, the first thing we try to do is think the feeling away, but feelings are one thing and thoughts are something else. Never the two shall meet. The more you think about the feeling, the bigger and more intense the feeling becomes. Just like in the instructions I was telling you a little while ago; when a pain arises the first thing you have to do is let go of the thoughts. If you don't, the pain becomes bigger and more intense. Now, this doesn't matter what kind of feeling it is. It can be a feeling of sadness, it can be a feeling of any kind of emotion. It has the feeling arise and it has the thoughts about the feeling. The thoughts are part of clinging. Clinging is all of your concepts, all of your ideas, all of the story about why you like or dislike the feeling. The more you think about the feeling, the bigger the feeling becomes. So what do we have to do? We have to let go of the thoughts and relax. Allow the feeling to be there without trying to make it different, and relax, smile, come back to your object of meditation.

So, the five aggregates, they can be affected by clinging or not depending on your awareness at the time. And when you start practicing this way, you'll notice at first you're not going to be very

good at it. Any time you try something new, you're not going to good at the start, but as you persist in relaxing, you start seeing things in a deeper and deeper level that you've never seen before.

I have people that I've been teaching meditation to for a long time. They'd been practicing all kinds of different kinds of meditation and then they came and started practicing with me and started practicing the way that I'm teaching, and without doubt they say that this is the best meditation that they've ever run across. And it's funny because it's not my meditation, it's the Buddha's meditation. All I did was read what the Buddha said and said "I want to try that to see if it works", and I saw that it did.

When I give a retreat, I insist that everyone smile because that lifts your consciousness up, it lifts your mind up; your mind is much more easily aware of when it starts to go down, so you can let go of that more easily. When I give the retreat, I rather expect people to advance in their meditation quickly. If in two or three days you haven't advanced very much then I talk to you and find out "What are you doing different than the instructions?"

Now, the way the commentaries have been taught these days is, they say "Jhana practice is here; vipassana practice is here. Don't do jhana practice - it doesn't lead to nibbana - only do vipassana." When I started looking at the suttas, I started noticing something very peculiar. When they talked about vipassana, they talked about jhana in the same breath, in the same sentence. And when you start looking at the suttas, the word jhana comes up many, many thousands of times. The word vipassana comes up very few; around a hundred times as compared to quite like ten thousand. So, what do you think the Buddha was teaching?

I ran across another sutta and it said that vipassana and samatha - which means tranquility, which means jhana practice - are yoked together. It's like you have a bullock cart, and if you only have one bullock, it's very hard to go in a straight line. You need two, and they need to be pulling equally so that you can go in a straight line. If one of them tries to go a little bit faster than the other then you start

going in circles. It's the same way with vipassana and samatha, they need to be equally strong. When you add this extra step of relaxing the tension and tightness, it takes the vipassana right into the jhana practice. Now what is jhana? Jhana means a level of understanding. It doesn't mean absorption concentration, it doesn't mean concentration at all; it means a level of understanding.

TT: 30:27

Now, let's get back to the hindrances. Remember those guys? You have a hindrance arise. What do you do with that? You allow the hindrance to be there by itself. It pulls your attention away, you see it, you allow it to be, you relax, smile, and you come back to your object of meditation. But the nature of hindrances is they're strong so your mind gets pulled back. Now, as you become more familiar with being pulled away from your object of meditation and allowing it to be and relaxing, smiling, coming back to your object of meditation, there it goes again. It doesn't matter how many times your mind gets distracted by a hindrance. Remember, this hindrance is your helper. It is showing you where your attachment is. Every time you relax you're letting go of - for just a moment - you're letting go of the belief of "I am that hindrance." Just for a moment then you have this clear spot, you bring that clear spot back to your object of meditation. The hindrance starts to get weaker, and weaker, until finally it fades away.

Now, what happens is as you become more familiar with this hindrance pulling your mind's attention away - your mind's attention doesn't just jump from one thing to another - it is a process; you start recognizing this process. You are teaching yourself how your mind's attention actually does work. You are seeing - I don't know if you are familiar with this term - dependent origination, you know that? Ok, dependent origination is real. It's not a philosophy. It's not particularly hard to understand, once you learn it.

How does something arise? In order to see, you have to have good working eye; it has to hit color and form; then eye consciousness arises. The meeting of these three things is called eye contact. With

eye contact as condition, eye feeling arises; eye feeling pleasant, pain, neither painful nor pleasant. With eye feeling as condition, craving arises. Craving is that tension and tightness. Craving is that part of the mind that says "I like it. I want it." or "I don't like it and I don't want it." This is the beginning of the identification with that sight.

With craving as condition, clinging arises. Clinging is all of your thoughts, all of your opinions, all of the concepts, all of the stories about why you like or dislike that sight. And with clinging as condition then your habitual tendency arises. Every time this kind of feeling arises, I always act that way. That's dependent origination. The hindrance is showing you this process very, very nicely. As you get more familiar with the distraction and how it occurs, you see something happens right before your mind got carried away and got into a story. So you let go there and you relax, and as you become more familiar with letting go there, you notice there's something right before that. You are teaching yourself how dependent origination actually works.

That's why I said a jhana is a level of your understanding. Why? Because after a period of time, when you don't feed that hindrance and try to control it anymore, you just see it as something else to let go of and relax, and watch the process. That hindrance starts to lose strength and becomes weaker, and weaker, and weaker, and then it doesn't even arise anymore. Now what happens? You have a very big sense of relief "Ah". It's just like somebody took a big pile of rocks off of your shoulder.

TT: 35:24

Right after that relief you feel very, very strong joy. And the joy is a very happy feeling, and it's an excited feeling: "Oh, this is really great. I love this feeling when it comes. This is why I'm meditating." But joy is a feeling just like the hindrance, and just like a pain is a feeling. You allow that feeling to be there, pleasant as it is, you relax into that, you come back to your object of meditation. You'll go back to the joy. If you try to say "Ah, I love this joy. I want this joy. I

never want this feeling to go away again." That's the fastest way to make it go away. So you allow that feeling to be there, and then when it fades away, you will feel very, very strong tranquility. You feel "Ah, just peaceful. Great stuff." And you start feeling very comfortable in your body, no pains arise. You feel very comfortable in your mind, no disturbance. Very, very calm and peaceful. And your mind stays on your object of meditation very easily. It can still have some distracting thought, but if a thought arises, you'll see it very quickly; you'll let go very easily, relax, smile, and come back, without any effort at all.

Now, I have just described to you what happens in the first jhana. This is called an aware jhana. You will still hear things - a motor cycle goes down the street, you hear it - but it doesn't make your mind wobble, it doesn't make your mind shake and go to it, and then get caught up in thinking about "Why doesn't he go down the street some place else where he won't bother me." You won't have that. You'll just notice that there's a sound there, and you know what kind of sound it is, but it's ok. You're starting to develop this balance of mind.

Now, the hindrances are where your attachments are, so you're going to have hindrances arise... not only while you're sitting. But this is happening all the time, isn't it? How many people, you hear somebody say something and you don't like that. Now, what is that "I don't like?" The "don't like" is the second hindrance; "I don't like" is aversion. And there's craving attached to that, and then there's clinging attached to that, and then there's the habitual tendency attached to that. But as you go deeper in the meditation, as you teach yourself how the hindrance actually works, you start having more balance of mind - not only while you're sitting in meditation, but out there. This is called personality development. This is how you develop your personality so you don't have a lot of negative emotions arising, you don't have a lot of problems anymore because your mind starts to gain more balance because the hindrance doesn't knock you off balance.

TT: 39:27

Now, again the difference between the meditations - the absorption kind of meditation - the force of the concentration pushes the hindrance down, while you have good concentration. You get up, you lose your concentration, you go out in your daily life, a hindrance comes and it knocks you over. You really get angry at somebody, you really get upset, you really get sad, you really get depressed, because you haven't learned how mind's attention actually works. The force of the concentration stops your lessons. While you're sitting in this deep concentration state, it can be wonderful, it can be very peaceful, it can be very calm. It's great, but when you get out and you lose that concentration then somebody cuts you off in a car and immediately you start yelling at them. Why? Because you haven't really looked at how the hindrances arise or how your attachment has gotten a hold of this hindrance and it starts pushing you around.

See, the whole point of the Buddha's teaching is learning how mind's attention actually works, and seeing how the mind's attention - when you start letting it go and stop feeding hindrances, and feeding dissatisfactions, and feeding all of these different things - how when you let that go there is happiness, there is a kind of deep "Ah." So you get into the first jhana, you experience all of these wonderful states - and you're there for a little while - but eventually your mindfulness slips a little bit, and when it does, you're not in the jhana anymore, you have another hindrance to work with. The hindrance is the thing that is helping you go deeper, and deeper into your meditation. It's showing you more and more subtle things about how mind actually does work.

See, if you just focus on the breath, you never learn these kind of lessons because your mind becomes absorbed just on the breath. But when you put that extra step of relax of the tension and tightness, it changes the meditation. And now you start teaching yourself - more and more - how to be happy. And that's what the Buddha was trying to teach us, all along. He was trying to teach us how we can learn to be happy, no matter what happens.

Ok, I've been talking for a long time. I wanted to ask if there is any

questions that you have with what I was saying or any comments, anything like that.

ST:

Did I understand you to say that the thing that you understand is by teach yourself in ~ in the first jhana?

BV: 44:01

Yes. In every Jhana. It goes more and more subtle. When I was practicing vipassana, the big thing that they wanted me to understand was that everything is impermanent, everything is suffering, everything is not-self. When I started looking at the experience they said was nibbana, it was seeing impermanence, suffering or not-self three or four times in a row very, very quickly and then you have this blackout. When you get out of this state then you have the reviewing of all the insight knowledges. Ok? When I started looking in the suttas, it only talked about attaining nibbana through the understanding of dependent origination. So, the end result is not the same. So, the understanding that you gain by just adding this one extra step of relaxing, it takes you so much deeper into your practice than you ever thought that you could get.

ST:

Did you say that before you relax, you release?

BV:

Yes.

ST:

And what does that imply relaxing ~

TT:45:02

BV:

No. It has to be intentional observation of the subtle tightnesses that are still there.

ST: ~

BV:

You have to relax that subtle tightness, and it has to be intentional. Where an awful lot of people are running into problems with the breathing meditation is, they say "Well, I am tranquil. I am peaceful", but they still have this tension and tightness that they didn't even recognize is there. It has to be intentionally recognizing and you have a definite feeling of expansion when you let go of that tension that's around your brain, you feel your brain just kind of "Ah". Now, this kind of meditation has more "Oh, wows" in it than you've ever thought possible. Because you start to understand how this works, and you go "Oh wow! I've never seen that before. This is great."

An awful lot of people, they practice meditation for fifteen years, twenty years, and they become bored with it because they don't feel like they're progressing. It never happens with this kind of meditation that I'm showing you. You have so many new things that you're seeing all of the time that you look forward to go sitting so you can see more, and it really turns into a lot of fun. Now that's something I bet you haven't heard before, in the same sentence: meditation and fun. (laughter) Yeah.

ST:

So, you mentioned when you do the meditation and you have a feeling, we're not trying to, we're not trying to, ah...

BV:

Don't stop the feeling. You can't. Just relax into the feeling. Lovingly accept whatever arises in the present moment.

ST:

Ah, we're not trying to go back to contemplation, what happens if it doesn't go away? It will?

BV:

One time, you release, you relax, smile, come back to your object of meditation. If it's still there, your mind will go back to it. That means that there's a lot of attachment to it, there's a lot of identifying with

it. So, do it again. You have to develop your patience with this. Eventually when you finally let go, you're going to have an "Oh, wow." You're going to have a "Oh, wasn't that nice?"

47:55 Tape ends.

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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 . . .

Transcription by Chris Farrant December 2008

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