

MN-20 The Removal of Distracting Thoughts

Vitakkasñhāna Sutta

Joshua Tree 4

01-Mar-09

Bhante Vimalaramsi

Joshua Tree 4 2009 MN 020

BV: I wanted to talk a little bit before I begin the actual talk, about the importance of keeping the precepts, and keeping them all the time, not just while you're here.

If you break a precept here, it will very negatively affect your meditation practice. So if an ant comes around and you didn't really like him and you didn't think about it and you killed the ant, that will affect your practice negatively. If that happens, please come and tell me. There's remedies for this. I want your meditation to be as good as possible all of the time.

In Burma, there was a man that, he had a habit of saying things that weren't true. And his meditation went from, when he first got there sitting three hours at a time, great posture, no problems, to at the end of the retreat, he could sit no more than fifteen minutes. And that's because he broke the precepts knowingly, and he didn't do anything to correct it. So I can correct it for you, It's not a big deal and there's no finger-pointing or anything like that. If you break a precept, please come and tell me so that your meditation can be settled as much as possible.

Now the precepts are real important to keep in your daily life. If you want your meditation to really progress you have to keep your precepts. Not killing on purpose. Not taking anything that's not given. I'll give you an example of somebody that just did this at the center. They went into a computer and took information that wasn't theirs to have. And even something as simple as that can cause your mind to have a lot of remorse and guilt in it. And that will affect your meditation very negatively. So not taking what is not given is real important. Make sure that what you're taking IS really given, or offered.

Not having any wrong sexual activity, everybody's pretty well clear on that one I think. Then we get into the speech patterns. Not saying something that's not true. Not causing different groups to clash with each other. This is called slander. I don't go to this group and say "Do you hear what they're doing?" And they get upset. And then I go back to that group and I say, "Well, they're upset at you because they think you're doing this and now you're dividing people instead of bringing them together.

Now the next part of the speech is cursing. Harsh speech. It's a habit that an awful lot of people have gotten into, and when I got back to this country from Asia, I was shocked at how much cursing there was on television, on the radio, and how everybody thought it was OK to use all of these foul words. And it's not. It causes your mind to have (1) hatred in it, (2) causes remorse even though you don't notice it. If you can't say words that are pleasing and pleasant, don't say anything. If you get angry and you have curse words, you have broken the precept. If you tell a joke and you use curse words, you have broken the precept. And a little thing like, well I don't want to use any of those words! [laughter] You know what the words are. [more laughter] Now, one of the reasons that you do this is because it helps your mindfulness. It helps your clarity of knowing what you're going to do before you do it. And this is really important.

TT: 5:02

And the last part of the speech is gossip. Now what is gossip? Gossip is sitting around and talking about somebody else and then making up stories about them. That's what gossip actually is. It's just using your imagination to say negative things about other people.

Taking drugs and alcohol is the last precept. Now why don't you take drugs and alcohol? Because you have a tendency to break one of the other precepts. And it dulls your mind. So, taking these precepts that I have you do every morning, I really would like you to continue taking the precepts every morning. Not as a rite and ritual, but as a reminder to keep the precepts all day. And when you break one of the precepts, you don't beat yourself up and criticize yourself and come down on yourself. You forgive yourself for making a mistake, take the precepts again with the determination that you're not going to break them.

Yes?

S: About the precept about singing and dancing?

BV: The precept about singing and dancing is during retreat, but you'll go back to five precepts. There's also the precept of not eating solid food after the

noonday meal. But...OK.

Now, I have actually changed the eight precepts. The last precept in the suttas, it says that you don't sleep on high and luxurious beds. Well we don't have any high and luxurious beds here! [laughter] So I don't think that that's really a necessary thing to worry about. So, I changed that precept to be loving and kind to yourself and all beings. It's a another reminder. Now the importance of keeping the precepts is that the longer you can keep the precepts without breaking them, the easier your meditation becomes. And the less you have trouble with hindrances. You're still going to have hindrances because, how many lifetimes have we lived and how many bad things have we done, those hindrances eventually come back. But it won't be near as troublesome when you keep the precepts.

Now the sutta that I was going to work with tonight is called Removing Distracting Thoughts. And this has to do with what you do when hindrances arise. Now almost everybody that has had any previous practice, they've been taught that when a hindrance arises, it's a BAD thing. And you need to suppress it, you need to stop it, you need to force it away. That is the opposite of the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha NEVER wanted anything to be suppressed. Why? Because who's suppressing? Who doesn't like it? Who doesn't want it? "I don't. It's ME! These are MY problems and I'm gonna STOP them!" Who wants to control? "Well I Do!" So, what we're doing is we're reinforcing the hindrances and we're causing them to come up more and more as we try to control, as we try to push away and stop.

TT: 9:35

This particular sutta is kind of interesting, because the first part of the sutta is from the Buddha's teaching; and the second, third, fourth and fifth part of the sutta is not. This sutta has come later, after an awful lot of people have had practice in one-pointed concentration and absorption kinds of concentration. And I've talked to a lot of monks that have done this practice, and the last part of this practice it says if none of this other stuff works, then you're supposed to sit mashing your tongue against the roof of your mouth and crushing mind with mind. And I go there laughing, telling other monks, even I've never seen anybody that had to do that, and they're going, "Oh yeah, we have to do that all the time!" [laughter] Well, who's doing what here? Who doesn't like the hindrance? Who wants it to be different? Who's trying to control it? And that's what comes from the absorption kinds of concentration, that kind of thinking. Because the hindrances really are hard to get rid of. And they're real pesky, because hindrances don't only arise while you're sitting in meditation, hindrances arise all through life. And if you don't know how to handle it while you're being quiet, then how are you going to handle it while you're being active?

See, the whole point of the Buddha's teaching is learning how to recognize what mind is doing in the present moment. HOW to recognize. And then you practice the 6Rs. You recognize that your mind is distracted. Release the distraction. Relax the tightness caused by that distraction in your mind and body. Resmile, bring up that wholesome object. Come back to your object of meditation. Repeat this whole process. The 6Rs are not a club to stop anything or beat anything away or change anything. The 6Rs are a way of recognizing how your mind is acting in the present moment. This is Right Effort. In the Eightfold Path, Right Effort—there's four parts. It says, you notice when you have an unwholesome state. You let go of that unwholesome state and relax. You bring up a wholesome state, smile. Come back to your object of meditation. Stay with that object of meditation. Stay with that smile.

So it's a real important aspect of the teaching to learn how the hindrance arises. To be quite honest, your hindrance is your teacher. And it is the best teacher that you could possibly ever ask for. Why? Because it's showing you where your attachments are. What's your attachment? I am that. I am this emotion. I am this thought. I am this feeling. The hindrance, when it arises, does it in the same way every time. I don't care what hindrance it is. The hindrance arises in exactly the same way. You can call it a distraction. Whatever you want to call it. Just don't curse at it! [laughter]

TT: 14:24

A feeling arises. And that feeling can be pleasant, or it can be painful, or it can be neither one, it can be neither pleasant nor painful. As soon as that feeling arises, there is a tension and tightness that arises in your mind and in your body. This is how you're able to recognize when craving arises. Craving always manifests as tension and tightness in your mind and in your body. It's subtle. It happens fast. As soon as that feeling arises, right behind it there's this tightness. Right after that, there's the clinging. The clinging is all of your concepts, your opinions, your ideas, your story about your preferences. And that's where the verbalization starts. And right after that, then you have your habitual tendency. "Every time this series of things happens I always act that way. Somebody says this, I always get angry and yell back at them. Somebody cuts me off, I always pound my steering wheel and yell back at them." So your habitual tendency is where the action or the emotion really lies.

I just went through a major change in my life. My mother just died. My family, they don't get along very well. I had to make a conscious decision to let go of all of my old habitual tendencies of not liking this and fighting with this person or that person. And it's a conscious decision that you make. If you don't make a conscious decision to let go of all of your emotional garbage, then you're going

to continually be caught by it over and over and over and over and over again. This was a pretty heavy-duty learning experience. Some of my relatives would come up to me and they would say incredibly nasty things. Which in the past, would've made me very angry. Now I look at what they were saying, and I'm going, "Oh you poor person, you're really suffering." Compassion came up. I didn't take things personally.

When you don't take what arises personally, then you have a balanced perspective. You have a balanced mind. And with that balanced mind there's nothing that will knock you off-balance. And it just goes. These relatives were always—and I've got a lot of relatives—they were always coming up to me in one form or another, trying to make some kind of negative reaction happen. And what I had to do was to be able to recognize that that's what was happening, release it, relax into it, and smile. It drove them crazy. [laughter] They didn't know what to think of it. And after a while, they stopped trying.

So, hindrances can come up at any time for any reason. They can be little, they can be big. A lot of them are real sneaky, they'll just creep up and all of the sudden they're there. Now, where is your mindfulness? What does mindfulness mean? Give me a definition, somebody. Not you. Somebody. What is mindfulness, what's the definition of it?

S: Awareness of the present moment.

BV: Part of it.

S: Seeing how mind moves.

BV: Seeing how mind's attention moves from one thing to another. It's that observation mind. It's the mind that's really clear and bright and alert.

TT: 20:00

So, what is the fastest, easiest way to develop your mindfulness?

S: Metta meditation.

BV: Well, that's—

S: 6Rs.

BV: Smile. [laughter] And all of you were right too. The more you can smile during the day, the more uplifted your mind becomes. The more uplifted your mind becomes, the more alert you are when your mind starts to get heavy and

starts to be pulled down. And you can notice that, recognize it, really quickly.

You know, the way I was taught Buddhism, is that the Buddha talked a lot about suffering. All life is suffering. Oh, this is suffering, that's suffering. Dukkha, dukkha, everywhere you look is dukkha. [laughter] That wasn't what his teaching was! His teaching was, yeah it's there, welcome to real life, but there's a cause of it, and there's a way to let go of it! So you can be happy! The main thrust of the four efforts: Recognize the unwholesome state, let it go, bring up the wholesome state, and keep the wholesome state going! What does smiling do? [pause] See? And it sharpens your alertness, more than a little bit. You really become aware of what your mind is doing in the present moment. It's real easy to see when your mind grabs onto something, says, "Oh, I don't like that person." Whoa! What's that? What kind of state have you just developed? Isn't that a kind of hindrance? The whole point is being able to recognize these things, so we don't get caught by them. And I haven't even started reading the sutta yet. [laughter]

SK: I don't ~, I think you're doing really good! [laughter]

BV: OK. This is the way the sutta goes, and I'll get more into this in just a minute.

MN 20:

1. **THUS HAVE I HEARD.** On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvattṭhi in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. There he addressed the bhikkhus thus: "Bhikkhus."—"Venerable sir," [119] they replied. The Blessed One said this:
2. "Bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu is pursuing the higher mind, from time to time he should give attention to five signs. What are the five?"
3. (i) "Here, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu 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. 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..."

BV: Question--you can't answer it this time. [laughs] You know the answer already. What is delusion? It's a common word everybody knows. What is it?

S: Well, it's almost like a dreamlike—things that aren't there. Picturing things that aren't there.

BV: Not quite.

S: Not seeing the truth?

BV: And what is the truth?

S: The ultimate reality.

BV: What is the ultimate reality?

S: Maybe ~ our thoughts are fabrications? Everything I think is really just made up because I can think what I want so it doesn't really—it cannot be true.

BV: That's close.

S: Not ~?

BV: That's it! [laughter]

SK or S: Ding!

S: I just watched the dhamma talk previous ~. [loud laughter]

S: Stay in there team!

BV: A mind that's deluded is a mind that's taking things personally. This is me, this is mine, this is who I am. That's a deluded mind. Why? Because you get caught up in your thinking about and identifying with. And that is a cause of suffering.

Ruth: Hmm. Put the I in, personality,

BV: Yeah.

TT: 25:00

Ruth: ~ always see it as--in order to make it truly believable, this delusion, you have to write first of all the "I" capitalized, huh?

BV: Yes.

Ruth: It makes a statement and, it is—I lost it now. Does that happen to you too?

BV: Yes it does. Isn't that annoying?

Ruth: And it runs away. And you see it goes by like ~ Oh yeah, putting the

possessor, the proprietor, on top already. We are ~ personality.

BV: Yeah.

Ruth: Now "I" think that and I have my opinion and so on.

BV: Yeah.

Ruth: Then you put another proprietor on top of that whole process of delusion.

BV: You ~

Ruth: It's nice to see it that way.

BV: Yeah. And when you get right down to it, we only think in concepts. This is a BIG one. We only think in concepts. And we always take concepts personally.

Ruth: But isn't that the same, having a proprietor, kind of?

BV: Yeah, it is. It is. It's just a different way of saying it.

Ruth: Yeah. Concept. That is difficult to understand.

SK: We always talk in concepts.

Ruth: Yeah yeah, we have to talk in concepts.

BV: Well, because that's the only way we know how to communicate.

Ruth: But now, there is a layer below that.

BV: Yes.

Ruth: You talk of this, this concepts but there is this faculty which is called knowing ~

BV: We'll get to that in just a minute.

Ruth: Yeah?

BV: Yeah. [laughs]

Ruth: Ah so.

BV: OK. So, the whole thing is, a deluded mind is a mind that's taking whatever it's thinking about personally.

Ruth: Un hun.

BV: And that causes your awareness to contract. And that causes tension to arise in your body. That's how you recognize craving. Every time you see tension and tightness in your mind and in your body, especially in your head, because that's where it's subtle and that's where it really does start to grab on. You have a headache. What do you think is actually happening with that headache? There's this contraction, I don't like it, this feeling is unpleasant, I don't like it, and it keeps getting worse and worse and worse. If you recognize that that's happening, you relax all of the muscles in you neck, relax that tension and tightness in your head, it's amazing how fast the headache will go away. And you don't even need an aspirin! And that's not 100%. There are other physical causes for a headache. It depends on toxins in the body and that sort of thing that we won't go into.

SK: But a stress-based headache, that's the one.

BV: Yeah. OK. So, we have

"...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: Hmm. Sounds like the 6Rs to me.

Ruth: I missed it. [laughter]

BV: Well, letting go of the distraction, relaxing and smiling, means putting your attention on another object that's wholesome.

MN:

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.

TT: 29:43

BV: How can they be abandoned and subside? Every time you let go of the craving, the tension and tightness, you'll notice right after that, your mind is very bright. Your mind is very alert. And your mind is pure. Bring THAT mind, back to your object of meditation. That's how you build that wholesome faculty. And

there's pure knowing when you don't have any craving in it. And surprise, surprise, this is the Third Noble Truth! The cessation of suffering. So every time you practice the 6Rs, every time you let go of that craving, you're experiencing a tiny moment of relief. And that relief has no heat in it. And that lack of heat is Nibbana. It's mundane to be sure, and you have to experience it, oh, hundreds, well, maybe millions, maybe a few hundred millions of times, before it becomes habit and your mind just goes, oh, let's just let go of this craving all the way. It can happen though. It does happen. Not can, does.

So the whole thing about what we're talking about here is learning how to gently let go of the cause of suffering. Not suppress it, not taking a stick and beating it down. They use some words like "abandon." And in a way, this is a very good word to use. Now, I'll give you why that is right now. When you have a hindrance, and you get involved with a hindrance, you're trying to control it, [makes growling sound effects], and you're all caught up in it, by keeping your attention on the hindrance, you're feeding it. You're giving it food. You're giving it nutrition. When you allow the space for that hindrance to be there without trying to change it, without trying to make it any different than it is, you let it be, and you relax, and you come back to a wholesome object, you're taking that food away. You're not feeding the hindrance, so the hindrance doesn't get stronger and stronger and stronger. It starts to get weaker, and weaker. Until finally, that hindrance gets so weak it can't even arise again. When that happens, you feel a very strong sense of relief. Right after that relief, you feel joyful, strong joy, uplifting joy, feel very light in your mind, light in your body. Really a happy feeling. That will last for a little while. And right after that, you'll feel very tranquil, peaceful, calm. And mind will stay on the object of meditation without moving, without much problem at all. That is what the Buddha called happiness.

Now what I just described to you is how you experience the first jhāna. It's not mystical, it's not magical, it takes a lot of work to get there. By recognizing the hindrance, letting go of the hindrance, relaxing into that, smiling, coming back to your object of meditation and staying with your object of meditation.

TT: 34:59

Now the hindrances, they're absolutely brilliant for some people. They come up so much, they're so troublesome, that they get to find out where their attachment truly is. Now, the difference between the different kind of meditation practices that are happening today is, that this one extra step of relaxing and letting go of that craving, is not practiced very much. And when it's not practiced, your mind tends towards the one-pointed concentration or absorption concentration. Now, this in itself is not necessarily bad, but what happens is, let me explain how you do the one-pointed concentration. Your mind is on your

object of meditation of meditation, it gets distracted. You let go of the distraction and immediately come back. You do that for a period of time. You go through a lot of changes and eventually your mind becomes absorbed and stays on this one object of meditation that you're pointing your mind at.

Now, when that happens, what happens is the force of the concentration suppresses and stops the hindrance from arising. So when you lose your concentration, guess who comes for dinner? You get these hindrances coming at you from all different ways, you don't know what it is, and you go, "Oh, geez, I gotta run back and sit in meditation because that's the only relief I can find!" Now when you're practicing what I'm showing you right now, your mind is on your object of meditation, it gets distracted. You let go of the distraction, relax. Smile, come back. That one extra step of relax changes the destination and the way the meditation works. So, it's real important to remember that that relax step is the one that lets go of the craving.

Now, you can be going along and all of the sudden a hindrance comes up, and you're distracted by it, and then you recognize it. It doesn't matter whether it's lust or hatred or aversion or sleepiness and dullness or restlessness or doubt. It doesn't matter what the content of that hindrance is. Your job as the meditator is not to wonder, "Why did this have to happen to me right now? I wish it would stop and go away." Your job is to allow the space for that hindrance to be there without trying to change it or make it any different than it is. Then, relax into that, smile and come back to your object of meditation.

Now the next time that hindrance arises, which it will, how'd that happen? How'd your mind go from being on your object of meditation, to over here to whatever this hindrance was? How, is the question. As you become familiar with this as a process, instead of a personal thing to fight with, you start to see that right before your mind really got taken away for a period of time, there's something else that was there. So you let it go and you come back and you go, "I'm going to watch for this, see what happens before that." And right before your mind gets taken away you see it again. And you go, "Ah, there is something there." And you let it go and relax and come back and you get distracted. As soon as that something else, I'm not going to tell you what it is, [laughter] arises, you'll see it, and you'll let it go right then. Then you're not distracted anymore for long periods of time.

TT: 39:50

What happens is, as you become more familiar with this as a process, the hindrance is teaching you exactly, precisely, how Dependent Origination actually works. You remember what I was saying before? There's a feeling that arises, and then the craving and the clinging and habitual tendency—guess what? That's

Dependent Origination! That's not all of it, but you're not going to see all of it at first. You're just going to see different parts. And the hindrances are the thing that's teaching you that. So as much as a pain in the neck as it is sometimes, it's really a necessary thing to have the hindrances, to have the distractions. Because they help you go deeper. Now, after you let go of one and you go through all of this great stuff, all of the sudden your mindfulness slips, hindrance comes again! Now you get to work with this hindrance. And finally you let go of this hindrance and you'll go deeper into your meditation. The hindrances help you to go from one level of understanding to another, because you're starting to look more and more closely at how the process works.

This is what meditation is about. It's not about sitting on some rock blissing out. It's about learning how we act and react, all the time. Learning how to recognize the hindrances when they come up, and not take them personally. And like I said, I had to do that very consciously. And sometimes we have to do it that way. We have to just, we're going to say, OK, I'm going to take a day, or I'm going to take a week, and I'm not going to let ANYONE upset my mind. They can say ANYTHING to me, they can do ANYTHING they want, and I'm not going to have this old habitual tendency rearing its head and grabbing on and getting into all kinds of emotional turmoil. So the more we can make that conscious decision to BE HAPPY, and not take things personally, the clearer our mind becomes, the more balance we have in our life, and life actually starts to become fun. Novel idea, isn't it? [laughter]

So, the more we can practice this way, the easier life becomes. The more contentment we have, with what's happening in the present moment. Now I had to go into stores and do things this last month or so. And what I started noticing is my mind didn't have any buttons to push. I was looking around at other people and they were smiling. They looked at me and started smiling. I wasn't smiling at them first. They were smiling at me because they felt a release that I had in myself. We affect the world around us whether we like to admit it or not. And the more we let go of our attachments, our anger, our dissatisfaction, the more we affect the world around us positively. I know what's happening in the economy right now, it's all frightening, there's nothing to be afraid of. The Buddha was magnificent at showing how you manifest things. He manifested food for all of the monks every day. He didn't magic— He did it with uplifted mind. He taught the monks to have an uplifted mind, to be happy. And everybody else around them went, "I want some of that! And I'm willing to support you to keep doing that!"

TT: 45:20

There's three parts of meditation. And almost nobody talks about the first two. The first part of meditation is practicing your generosity. What are you doing

right now? You're sitting wishing somebody else well. Oh, you're practicing your generosity with your mind, aren't you? Practice it with your speech. Practice it with your actions. It doesn't mean that you have to always give something to somebody else, outside of sometimes it just takes a pat on the back.

My one brother was at the sink doing something in the morning. And I went up to him and I patted his fat stomach. He looked at me and he said, "If you do that again, I'm going to have to kiss you." [laughter] Sometimes I could do that with my brothers and sometimes I couldn't. Sometimes we'd have great fun laughs, and other times it wasn't. And that's, well that's part of life too. The mind stays balanced.

When you make the conscious decision, "I want to change, I don't want to stay the way I've always been," then it takes the practice of doing it. The smiling. The wishing other people well. The happiness with yourself. The laughing. And I know monks aren't supposed to laugh! "Well there's a rule that says monks can't laugh out loud in a monastery." Bunk! That's not a curse word. [laughter] I've been to a lot of monasteries. Monks are giggling and laughing all the time! They don't show it to laymen very much, and that's a mistake. If you want to teach somebody a lesson, then don't talk to them about what you want to teach them. Show them. Teach by example. If you want to show somebody else how to be happy, then be happy. And be happy not only when you're with somebody else, be happy when you're by yourself.

One of the things that monks learn straight out--pretty quick after they become monks, is how to be alone, without being lonely. I prefer being alone. I hide away as much as I can. Because I like being WITH myself. How many other people do you know can say that? If I had the time and opportunity I would hide away for weeks without ever seeing anybody else, and that's fine! Don't get depressed, don't get sad, don't get upset. Takes practice. That's what you're doing here right now. And you say "Well, that's being selfish, going out and hiding for two weeks." I spend a lot of time practicing my generosity even though there's nobody around to practice with. I practice it with everybody.

TT: 50:10

The second part of the meditation is keeping your precepts. This is all interconnected. So meditation is generosity, morality, and then mental development, in that order. If you don't have your *sīla*, you don't have your morality high, then doing your meditation, you're going to have a lot of time walking through the mud, trying to clear out all of this other stuff that you've caused problems for yourself by breaking the precepts.

Another part of the meditation is that you cannot blame anything out there for

your suffering. I had somebody tell me that they, "Oh, we gotta get away from this place because they gossip, and I don't want to be around gossip." You can be around gossip or not. You can pay attention to it or not. You can get up and walk away. You don't have to leave a place because somebody else is breaking a precept. And you have to—there was another monk, he was from Korea, in Burma, while I was there. And he was another one of these guys that could really meditate a lot. He was really good. He'd come in, I saw him sit for six hours without moving. I mean, that's impressive. And he decided that he didn't like the rule of not eating after the noonday meal and he started eating. And before long he couldn't sit more than five, ten minutes. And he caused that for himself. And it caught a lot of monks and caused them to have a lot of hindrances because they saw him doing it and then they were judging him as being a bad monk. And I finally looked at that and went, "What do I care whether he eats or not? Doesn't have anything to do with me. Let him go, let him learn his own lessons." I don't have to get caught up in the things that are happening around me and get into this critical, judging mind. What is a critical, judging mind? Unwholesome.

So, the whole thing comes down to learning how to have this uplifted, happy mind all the time. And because we have old habits that we might be doing for a lot of lifetimes, looking at things in a particular way, liking this, disliking that, it takes work to let go of old habits. But it's just another hindrance. I mean, it's more grist for the mill, it's nothing.

I had to see what time it was because I still got a lot I wanted to say. Oops!
[laughter]

OK, I wanted to go to this section here that talks about what you do when you're practicing one-pointed concentration. And I want to show you where this is taken word-for-word from another sutta that says "Don't do this," but this is saying, "Do it."

MN 36:

7. (v) "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. [121] When, with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he beats down, constrains, and crushes mind with mind, then any evil unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate, and with delusion are abandoned in him and subside."

BV: Can you imagine, how could they be abandoned? OK, now this is sutta #20.

I'm going to sutta #36. [turns pages] Here. And, this is called the Greater Discourse of Saccaka. And this is a discourse about a lot of the ascetic practices that the Buddha did, like holding his breath or not taking food. It goes through all of these different things. He went as far as he could with each one of these practices to see whether it was the right way or not. OK. So:

MN: 36:

"I thought: 'Suppose with my teeth clenched and my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrain and crush mind with mind.' So with my teeth clenched, my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down and constrained, and crushed mind with mind. While I did so sweat ran from my armpits. Just as a strong man might seize a weaker by the head or shoulders and beat him down, constrain him and crush him, so too, with my teeth clenched, my tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, I beat down, constrained and crushed mind with mind, and sweat ran from my armpits. But although tireless energy was aroused in me and unremitting mindfulness was established, my body was overwrought and uncalm because I was exhausted by the painful striving.

BV: Now what is that telling you? Is this a good thing to do or not? [laughter] What he's saying is, this is a practice that really is not a good practice to do. It does not lead to Nibbāna. It does not lead to happiness. I've read many, many books, short books, long books, on the hindrances. And almost everybody that writes about the hindrances, writes about them being some kind of a problem, to push away, to stop. But the hindrances are where our attachments are. If you're pushing away your attachment, you're not seeing your attachment. If you're not seeing it, you're not letting it go. You're not practicing what the Buddha taught.

RD: It's part of the whole practice, isn't it?

BV: It's a major part of the practice. Yes. It's very, very important not to fight with these kind of disturbances when they come up. And the more clearly you can recognize them while you're sitting in practice, the easier it is to recognize them with your daily activities.

TT: 59:46

And this brings us to the realization that meditation is not about sitting. Meditation is not about sitting. Meditation is about living. And that's one of the things that people practicing absorption concentration, a lot of your Zen people, they talk about sitting, and then "real life". "Oh, just go on the cushion, that'll take care of everything for a little while." And then real life comes up and bites them and they have all of these emotional outbursts, these unwholesome states arising, because they're identifying with these unwholesome states so much of the time.

So it's real easy to want to fight something that's as unpleasant as restlessness. It's not a pleasant feeling. Anger is not a pleasant feeling. But the problem with the hindrances, is that they don't come up one at a time! One of them will come up, and then another one right behind it. And they start ganging up on you, and beating up on you. "Well I have this feeling of restlessness, I don't like this feeling. I want it to stop." Who has aversion in their minds? You see you've got restlessness AND aversion! It's like that old saying of "kick 'em while they're down." That's what the hindrances do! [laughter] Especially when you take it personally. As you keep allowing the space for these things to be there without trying to make them different than they are, a painful feeling when it comes up, the truth is, it's painful. And it's OK that it's painful. It HAS to be OK. That's the truth. Allow the truth to be there by itself. Release it. Relax. Come back to your object of meditation. Smile. If you can get in the habit of doing this, you are naturally going to have personality development. And that's a positive thing. The things that used to get you unhappy, now, eh, never mind, not that big a deal. Takes a lot of effort to do that. And it takes a lot of courage to do it. Because once we get into a habit, we like the habit to stay. Even if it's an unwholesome habit. We don't want to really change. Change is frightening. "Well what happens if I don't have this response anymore?" Well, I'll tell you what's going to happen, you're going to be happier, but you have to prove that for yourself. I wish I could give everybody all the happiness in the world. But I can't. We've got to do it for ourselves. And what's the first step in doing that? Smiling. Wishing somebody else well.

There's another thing I want you to do with your meditation and I forgot to say it last night. And that is, when you're going to sleep, you make a determination that you're going to wake up at a particular time. Don't make it the same time every morning. 4:59, 5:01, like that. And, that you're going to wake up smiling and happy. It's a nice way to start the day. Once you have the smile going, keep it going. Make it sincere. Not just a painted-on smile, although a painted-on smile is good. Even if you don't feel like smiling, smile anyway. It has its positive effects.

TT: 1: 05:00

OK. Does anybody have any questions? Questions about their practice or what you heard tonight? Yes.

S: You were speaking earlier about three things that people teach in an Asian ??? Three aspects of meditation, two of which most teachers don't teach, one of those was generosity.

BV: And morality.

S: Morality, OK.

BV: It's not that they don't teach it, it's that they don't teach it as, these are part of meditation. They teach them separately. But meditation has one meaning. That means sitting like a rock, not moving. And it's not that. Meditation is life. Life is meditation. And that's how we have to practice it. You know, it's not, my practice is over here and I'm going to do anything I want over here. They have to be interconnected. And that's why when the Buddha was teaching so many farmers, they were very simple folks. He taught them very simply. You smile, you be happy, you practice your generosity, you be a good person and keep your morality going. That's ALL of your meditation. And that's why he was so successful.

SK: You said once, I thought it was really nice, that the generosity part of the training was the preparation of opening the heart. And that if you're not understanding the generosity as the development of a generous mind, generous speech and generous actions, then you're not taking all the steps to open the heart, to prepare the heart, for the next part of the training. Which is one way to look at it.

S: In the suttas that you were reading, the word "sign" comes up a few times. Is that what you mean by concept?

BV: Your object of meditation. That's the sign.

S: There's also the sign, it's a negative sign.

BV: That's the hindrance.

S: That's hindrance.

BV: Yeah.

S: OK.

1:07:44 S2: I think for some people here it might be worthwhile to enumerate the categories of the traditional hindrances, I don't remember you saying them.

BV: I didn't, I did.

SK: Yeah you did do the five.

BV: There's lust, or greedy mind. "I" want it. There's hatred, or aversion mind.

"I" don't want it. Same coin, different sides. One of them is trying to do this, the other one is trying to do that. [hand gestures probably] Sleepiness, dullness. "I'm tired. I'm bored." Boredom is one of the signs that you're actually doing the meditation correctly. [laughter] Just go through it. [laughter] Restlessness, anxiety. It causes your mind—well, in the Satipatthāna Sutta, it says that contracted mind is sloth and torpor. And the distracted mind is restlessness. And then there's doubt. And that's not doubt of whether I should go into town today, or wear pink or wear blue. It's, "Am I doing this right? It doesn't seem right." It's questioning what you're doing. The only way to overcome doubt, the "I don't know" mind, is come to the teacher.

Now, the fastest way that I know of to let go of a hindrance, is by laughing. Laughing at how crazy your mind is for getting caught AGAIN. And I'm not saying laugh out loud, I'm just saying—when you laugh, you go from "I am THAT" to "Oh, it's only that." It goes from "I'm personally, this is me" to "No, it's just the stuff, it's OK." So the more fun you have with your meditation, the lighter your meditation is, the faster your progress becomes. Somewhere along the line after all of us were two years old, somebody got a hold of us and said, "Life is suffering." And before that it was always fun. I want to be two!
[laughter]

S: In the sutta you were reading, it talked about distractions and the evil of the—I'm not sure but the word evil came up.

BV: Yes, evil unwholesome.

S: I'm just kind of curious how that word is ~

BV: Evil unwholesome means you're taking it personally. OK. And that's why it is evil, because it's causing your mind to do this, it's causing your mind to really grab on, try to control and force things to be they way you want them to be. Some people spend their whole lives doing that and they're quite successful. But, they're not necessarily happy.

S: Or crazy.

BV: Right.

S: I mean, that's craziness, I have direct experience.

[laughter]

BV: Yeah, it happens.

S: So when I meditate, let's say I focus on my object to meditate, I'm sending kindness to a friend and then I have a distraction. Is that always a part of a hindrance?

BV: Yes. Anything that pulls your mind away from radiating the feeling of loving-kindness, making a wish for happiness and sending that happiness to your friend, anything other than that is a distraction. Now, something that you have to really understand is, there can be distractions like the sound of a door or whatever, but it doesn't really pull your mind to it. If it doesn't pull your mind to it, just let it go. It's nothing. But if your mind, like a fly lands on you, your mind really goes to where that fly is, NOW you treat it like a distraction.

S: All this ~ you know, this chatter going on in your head—

BV: If it's not pulling your mind to it, just don't even pay attention to it.

S: Oh, OK.

BV: Makes life easier, doesn't it. [laughter] OK? 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

Sutta translation (C) Bhikkhu Bodhi 1995, 2001. Reprinted from *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* with permission of Wisdom Publications, 199 Elm Street, Somerville, MA 02144 U.S.A, www.wisdompubs.org

Transcript prepared by Uma Sarason
June 2009

Text last edited: 05-Jul-09