

Dhamma Desana

“BEYOND THE VEIL”

GIVEN ON POYA DAY MARCH 2005

UPUL GAMAGE SIR, NILLAMBE

We like meditation and there is a special place for it in our lives. For some of us, meditation has become a part of our daily routine. When we have time, we also like to go on meditation retreats for an intensified practice. We talk about meditation, read related texts and listen to Dhamma talks. Meditation has become part and parcel of our lives.

So it is important to focus on the fundamentals of meditation. What is meditation? Why do we meditate? What happens in meditation? Surely, about ninety nine percent of you would say that meditation is ‘focusing the mind’ or ‘achieving one pointed concentration.’ What do we focus the mind on? On the breath, feelings of loving-kindness, external objects or *kamatahan!* This is exactly the common and popular definition of meditation today!

Over the years, we have been conditioned to believe that meditation means focussing the mind and we sit with the intention of achieving one pointed concentration or cessation of thought process or emptying the mind. Naturally, the struggle starts right at the on set of sitting because of the wrong attitudes we hold. Our subconscious starts tossing all these deep-seated opinions out to the conscious mind and ‘achieving one-pointed concentration’ becomes our objective automatically. This is why meditation becomes a battle with our own mind for most of us!

At times, we get disappointed with the sitting meditation session when the entire half an hour we do nothing other than trying to focus on the breath. So we finish the session with feeling frustrated and angry towards us, even at the beginning, we are enthusiastic and high-spirited as we expect a successful sitting. But despite the will, the mind goes astray and the great expectation makes us feeling defeated.

Those who try to achieve one-pointed concentration end up losing the battle, even before they start it. Next we try harder to think only of the breath. Still, there will be a flood of other thoughts that come in and the mind gets involved with them in a flash. If at all, it will be just a few minutes that we are able to concentrate properly in an average half hour session! So the thought ‘I will never be able to meditate unless I relinquish all my responsibilities and go into seclusion or to a meditation centre’ becomes our dream or fantasy. This imaginary sitting or phase of a still mind/ non-wandering mind becomes a powerful fantasy.

This is a clear indication that something is fundamentally wrong with our attitudes and perceptions about meditation. So, what is meditation then? It is watching the wandering mind and letting go of the wandering thoughts. How do we do it? Be aware of the mind when it wanders and as soon as a memory of a past incident or a speculation or sensation arises, be aware of it and disconnect instead going along with it. Using aware presence, we nip the train of thoughts in the bud.

It is useless trying to stop the wondering mind right at the beginning. Important is to study, to know the nature of the mind. What is the truth of mind, the true nature? The Dhamma helps to identify the workings of the mind and to know whether a particular thought is needed or not at this moment. Relevancy of a particular memory or thought is only a relative matter. We need mindfulness in this exercise to identify what is needed and what is not. However, meditation is not a passive exercise of focusing on the breath, let us make this very clear.

In our kitchens at home we have many varieties of spices, seasonings. Cooking tools are nicely stacked in readiness which will count up to 30-40 types. How many of those are really needed to cook a meal?

Of course, it depends on the type of dish you want to make and cannot generalise. Do we need all of that to make a cup of tea? Certainly not! Similarly, if we want to make a *‘pol sambol’*, we select only the relevant items and leave the rest out.

A similar process has to take place during meditation with each thought or memory that arises in our mind. Consider whether this particular thought is productive or not at this moment? Does it enhance the serenity and peacefulness of mind or does it upset me? Keep asking this question every time a thought arises in the mind. You can just drop anything that is

counterproductive or upsets stillness and calmness and bring back your attention gently to the breath.

Meditation is a simple activity and should certainly not be a constant struggle with the wandering mind. We do not get entangled with the thought flow, rather drop them and break the thought train. When a thought arises simply investigate as to what influence it does have on the still mind; does it enhance or destroy the serenity? Does it improve the clarity of the mind? Nip in the bud anything that is destructive or counter productive. Do not encourage anything that destroys stillness and calmness of the mind.

The Dhamma points out that the mind is luminous, immaculate and tranquil by nature. All the external defilements are clouding the natural state of the mind (clarity and luminosity) like the sun gets concealed by the wandering clouds. Can we enhance the brightness of the sun that is obscured by clouds? Of course not and when the clouds pass the impeccable sun returns in its full power; just chasing away of clouds is all what is needed.

What happens in meditation is more or less the same thing. Instead of adding things on all we do is identifying and getting rid of the elements that hampers the tranquillity. It is really a cleansing process. It is more an emptying than accumulation! Not only in meditation, the whole essence of Buddhist teaching is letting go of things that may hamper our path to liberation.

Could we not take an inventory of our possessions? I think it is essential for us to be aware of the people, household durables, trees, plants, positions etc. We do not have to let go of all these, instead a mere 'knowing my possessions' is synonymous with 'knowing myself.'

We have heard of the greatest and unparalleled degree of 'giving' -- including own life, wife/children, wealth and power-- that Bodhisathava practiced over numerous lives. Yet, he was not able to accomplish the perfection of generosity by mere giving away of physical objects alone.

"My things" goes beyond the external and physical items to encompass internal and mental possessions. One really needs a trained mind to let go completely with graciousness and joy. It is a significant skill that one has to develop.

There are two types of letting go of things. We take possession of objects in order to receive benefits or to make an end to meet. For instance, when a pen finishes ink and reaches the point 'of no use or not satisfying our needs,' we

throw it away somewhat reluctantly, which is one type of letting go. In this way, we let go of relationships, friendships unwillingly and despondently, when we do not receive the desired results from them. This is not a letting go that is triggered by generosity, but by aversion and repulsion leading to not so virtuous ramifications or to bad karma.

The other type of giving is the donating what we have for someone else's benefit, to enhance the quality of another's life. Letting go of some of my possessions for the welfare of others!

The function of virtue or morality eliminates the rough edges of our behaviour and words, which is a reduction or emptying as opposed to adding on. The same thing happens in meditation too. The veil that covers the tenderness and generosity of heart would be removed instead of getting strengthened. No great giving or '*Dana*' is able to produce such a profound cultivation as meditation does, and that is the reason why Siddhartha Gautama had to practice intense meditation even in the last life despite fulfilling the perfection of generosity (*Dana paramita*) over countless past lives. He was not born enlightened, and still there was some internal/psychological letting go that he had to fulfil.

We should recognize the bad habit of nurturing our negative emotions within us, and let go of such destructive behaviour: we nurture them by ourselves. Elimination of counter productive habits is all what we do in giving, morality and meditation. What is there to gain, otherwise? What does a giver or a donor gain? What does a moral person gain? What does a meditator gain?

There is a story of a *yogi* who lived in a cave for a long time. One day, a robber entered the cave while the sage was fast asleep. The sleeping sage asked, 'Who are you?' surprising the thief of the wakefulness of the sleeping *yogi*. It is generally believed that the consciousness may completely or partially be lost during sleep, which makes people quite unaware of what is taking place. The wakefulness of the sage was quite extraordinary. Also, the general belief that we take a rest during sleep doesn't seem to be true because quite a lot of people wake up exhausted.

A *yogi* doesn't need mental rest, for he does not tire the mind. Maybe the body needs some rest, but surely, not the mind. It is a well-known fact that a meditator wakes up with the freshness of a flower: restful and lively.

Why is it that we are not conscious during sleep? Do we know what is happening when we are awake? Well, most of us spend our lives unconsciously like we are in a great slumber!

Coming back to the story, answering the query the thief said, “I am a thief,” which is again extremely significant as to why the man did not lie. Why do we lie in the first place? Maybe we lie to safeguard our reputation and self-esteem. Another reason why people lie is to avoid judgement or to show innocence, especially in front of the law enforcers, for the human society is highly judgemental! On the one hand, the person who is subject to judgement instinctively tries to defend his position by lying. On the other hand, in the presence of a non-judgemental person, there is no reason for anyone to lie. The sage was non-judgemental and full of love and compassion, and the thief had no reason to lie in the presence of the holy man. There is no room for lies and ‘acting out’ or pretence in an environment filled with understanding, trust and loving-kindness. The sage spoke from his heart and not from his intellect, which addressed again the thief’s heart triggering the response ‘I am a thief.’ The sage went on,” If you find anything valuable here, please take it with you. Anyway, for the 30 years I have been here, I have never found anything.”

People do not meditate to find treasures, rather to understand that ownership is an illusion. Maybe to some extent we can understand this in relation to people and objects. But it is not easy for us to understand it in terms of our mind states, thoughts and emotions. Who really owns our emotions? Do I own my anger? Am I hot tempered, stingy or fearful? Just see how many destructive emotions that ruin our peace and tranquillity we own.

“Who owns this anger?” is a very good question to ask from ourselves. Do I own this anger or this desire or this suffering? This inquiry is what we call *Vipassana*. Seeing clearly and identifying the huge pile of garbage – defilements- - that we have taken to be ours. Does any one control or regulate the intensity of our anger (emotions) like we control the volume of a radio? It doesn’t work that way. We have just been deluded into believing so. Meditation gets us to know this and detach us from such defilements and wrong views.

Once, a friend - a first timer- and I visited the wondrous *Avukana* statue of the Buddha. I believe that many of you here have paid homage to this phenomenal Buddha statue. How do you feel in the presence of this statue? Actually, it’s a wonderful place to sit quietly and listen to the murmuring of the Lord Buddha! Yes, these statues do really talk! Especially, the *Samadhi* and the *Avukana* statues

do talk to us though one cannot see it. One has to truly listen. Close your eyes and listen deeply!

There is a nice verse penned at the feet of the colossal sculpture by a pilgrim born and bred in the highly materialistic city, who was neither religious nor spiritual (local poet *Mahagamasekera*.) Having deeply touched by the infinite tenderness and loving-kindness that emanates from the statue, he made a humble request to teach him the meaning of life

If we take time to visit such places and become one with the statue-- the universal consciousness—it would be a unique and life enhancing experience. In the same way, one can look at the sun and unify oneself with the Buddha Nature, and this is what we call *Kasina* meditation.

*** (Please find the poem at the bottom of the write up)

Anyway, so we came to the *Avukana* Statue and contemplated the incredible sculpture and its creation. An onlooker said, “I wonder how this was sculpted!” My friend responded, “Nobody created it. Someone has simply removed the parts that did not belong to the Buddha image and let the statue surface from the rock. The Buddha image or Buddha nature has been there concealed right from the beginning of the hard rock though it was not visible.”

How true it was! Nobody can create a calm and tranquil mind. Instead, we can get rid of the garbage that covers the naturally calm mind. Similarly, instead of injecting tenderness and kindness, we have to remove the roughness that mars the tenderness within. As we let go of roughness, the innate tenderness gradually emerges. When we let go of delusion, awakening fills in. When we lose clinging to anger, loving-kindness emerges. It is quite possible because we deal with roughness and suffering.

Thus, meditation by no means is a battle with the wandering mind. Stop nurturing any thought that deludes and causes suffering in you! Meditation means this ‘stopping (*nirodhaya* in Pali).’ Do not let such thoughts cloud the mind.

There is a beautiful phrase of the Buddha, “the *wisdom eye was opened*.” As human beings, we are born with our eyes closed. At the death, too, we close our eyes and leave the earth. In between these two events, we spend our short life span with the eyes shut, metaphorically, and that is the reason why we are unaware of what happens during sleep.

Meditation is a lively as well as a free exercise that can be practiced with much friendliness and loving-kindness. It is a process of gradual dropping of all the irrelevant elements or garbage one by one till only the essence or the cream is left behind. Yes, there would be residual, which is tranquillity and peace. As the disease disappears, healthiness lingers on. Joy, freedom and bliss, which are the outcome of meditation, may stay with you.

*** The poem

**The Free Verse of Mahagamasekera at the *Avukana* Buddha Statue
(This is just an attempt to express it in English for the benefit of the
English Audience/reader.)**

Being an arrogant atheist,
I mistook you to be
Just a cold rocky sculpture,
Insensitive, and
Entirely devoid of compassion

But, you proved me wrong.
Filled with unparalleled tenderness
Quite strange for a stone statue
You understand the feelings
And poetry of a human heart

Wretched, and helpless
I left the defiled city
In search of insight,
and at long last
Taking refuge in the woods

At your blessed feet,
I make a humble plea
Oh Lord! The Most Compassionate,
Teach me the meaning of life
If there is any!