

Signless & Emptiness



Venerable Panadure Chandaratana Thero

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Animitta – Suññata

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Signless & Emptiness (*Animitta – Suññata*)

Venerable Pānadure Chandaratana Thero

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Abbreviations

AN - Aṅguttara Nikāya

DN – Dīgha Nikāya

MN – Majjhima Nikāya

KN – Khuddaka Nikāya

SN – Saṃyutta Nikāya

* All sutta numbers are as per the Chatta Sangāyana CD

Author's Preface

Many yogīs participating in the retreats often ask the question, "What should one do once they have reached emptiness?" This is a challenging question to answer. There are various suttas where the Buddha addresses this subject, and it is important to carefully seek guidance from these teachings. This question became the theme of the retreat we conducted in 2024 at the Jhāna Grove Retreat Centre in Perth. The interesting questions posed by the yogīs helped to further enhance the topic and make it more practical.

At the outset, I wish to extend my gratitude to Ms. Chandima Perera for her meticulous transcription of the sermons. I am also deeply appreciative of Ms. Kumudini Athalage, Ms. Chandrika De Silva, Ms. Tharanga Gunaratne, Ms. Ksharini Goonetilleke, and Ms. Sohani Hettiaratchi for their invaluable assistance in proofreading the book.

My teacher, Bhante Dhammajiva, deserves profound gratitude for encouraging me to visit Perth and conduct this retreat. I must also acknowledge my unseen teacher, Bhikkhu

Analayo, whose book, "Signless and Deathless," has been invaluable in clarifying many doubts and providing concrete evidence about various suttas on this profound topic.

Finally I would like to thank Quality Printers for undertaking the task of printing the book beautifully, and my good friend Amil for designing an attractive cover page that added significant value to the book.

Any shortcomings or misrepresentations are solely due to my own limitations in meditative practice and theoretical understanding. May the merit accrued from this collective effort guide us all in practicing the Buddha's teachings with the utmost dedication and sincerity.

May all beings be free from suffering.

Ven Chandaratana

Mitirigala Nissarana Vanaya Forest Monastery

2024-07-11

Signs and Perceptions

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa

*“Pubbecāhaṃ, ānanda, etarahipi suññatāvihārena bahulaṃ
viharāmi”*

Dear Venerable Brother, Dhamma Friends,

Before introducing the theme for this retreat, I would like to discuss a few initial steps. There are five supports that we extend and encourage yogis to comply with throughout the retreat. Usually, these five supports are discussed at the very first Dhamma Sermon at Nissarana Vanaya.

The first of the five supports is *sīla* - (*sīlānuggahitā*), morality. During this retreat, we commit to observing eight precepts, to advance ourselves from the typically observed five precepts. Observing eight precepts helps us to dedicate ourselves to *sīla*, better than with the typically observed five

precepts. It should not be considered a burden, but rather that we commit ourselves to maintaining *sīla* - moral aspect and ethical conduct. By dedicating to observing *sīla*, we take care to maintain our moral conduct. This gives us a lot of confidence, and helps us avoid any kind of regrets. If we are able to maintain good moral conduct, it helps us to have a harmonious, positive, and uplifting sense within ourselves, telling us, 'Okay, I am suitable for this. I deserve something more.' A very positive feeling would arise as a result of maintaining good moral standards. Therefore, the Buddha mentioned the value of the support of morality (*sīla*).

The second support is to understand the Buddha's teachings by listening to and reading the Dhamma he taught. In the *sutānuggahitā*, the Buddha highlighted the importance of understanding his teachings. The Buddha was a great teacher, and has explained deep and complex concepts in a beautiful and simple way for us all to understand. So, as much as possible we must associate, read, and learn the Buddha's teachings - *sutānuggahitā*. However, as you know, during sitting meditation sessions, we have to maintain a relaxed and fairly peaceful mind.

During sitting meditation, we should not clutter our minds with many thoughts. We have to have some boundaries in that sense. We have to have a beginner's mind, and not think that, 'I am an expert, I know everything.' So, we must maintain a very peaceful, simple type of mindset. This is further highlighted by the Buddha; if you are carrying a heavy

load on your way to go across to another place, assume that you are rowing a boat, then that heavy load you carry will make it very difficult for you to cross to the other shore. So, the Buddha invites us to unload and free up our minds. There is a very beautiful Dhammapada verse related to that.

*Siñca bhikkhu imaṃ nāvam, sittā te lahumessati.
chetvā rāgañca dosañca, tato nibbānamehisi. - Dhṃ 369*

The Buddha invites us to relieve ourselves of the load we have in our minds. This is very important during our meditation. A cluttered and burdened mind is not a suitable mind state, rather, we must relax, calm down and be peaceful.

Therefore, *sutamaya ñāṇa* or knowledge we gather through learning has two aspects. When learning, we go through a process of gathering information, analyzing them, contemplating on them, and then storing or stacking that information into our memory. But to keep the mind very relaxed, we should have the capacity to keep that acquired knowledge aside. That is not easy, and is somewhat of a warning to you, as most of you who are now learning Dhamma and practicing meditation, are fairly educated. However, when we meditate, we must have the ability to keep all these past learnings and training aside, so that the mind is not burdened and crowded, but is in a relaxed state.

The third support the Buddha highlighted is the need for and benefits of Dhamma discussions in the *sācakchānuggahitā*. When we have any doubts, or if we want to

affirm our understanding or verify our understanding, the Buddha recommends open discussions. Sometimes, our own understanding might not be sufficient and accurate to resolve a problem. There may be a better way of looking at that problem. Gaining insights from others who have a deeper understanding of the teaching, may be helpful. During our lives, as we continue in the path, we have taken many decisions. Those decisions may have been correct or incorrect. Discussions will provide us with a platform to pose questions, and to get guidance from shared knowledge of others and their contributions, to help us make correct decisions, and encourage ourselves. Questions presented during discussions may help others in the group who may have similar problems. Further, there may be someone in the group who is not able to frame a question well, but another with a similar problem may be able to do it better. The answers may be helpful to the group as a whole. That's why I invite all of you to participate in the discussion to the extent possible, so that we may learn from each other and encourage each other to forge forward.

The fourth support the Buddha advises to establish is *samathānuggahitā*. Most often, our minds are scattered and distracted. A mind in such a state is not ready or capable of understanding the teaching. Even if we succeed to understand, the learning may be superficial. What we need is a kind of penetrative mind. *yoniso manasikāra* - looking at the source and root causes helps us establish a fair amount of concentration, a focused attention, and a penetrative and an investigative type of scrutiny. That needs a concentrated

mind, a fairly one-pointed mind - *samathānuggahitā*. Therefore, the Buddha recommends tranquility meditation - that is *samatha* meditation, to calm down the mind.

Then, the fifth and the last support is to develop insights and wisdom. The Buddha referred to *vipassanānuggahitā* as a way to develop insights and wisdom. The prerequisites that we have discussed up to this point are to develop *vipassanā*. Wisdom helps us fend off defilements. Therefore, a fair emphasis must be given to the *vipassanā* meditation. Developing wisdom is an ongoing task.

These supports are very much like tools that we must use from time to time, depending on the situation. Assume that you are not feeling confident about your *sila* - the morality, have regrets, or your mind may be accusing you of some wrong doing. In such situations you need to strengthen your *sila*. Sometimes, you need to listen to a Dhamma sermon to encourage yourself, search within yourself, or inquire by reading Dhamma books. These activities too uplift the mind and help clarify doubts. We must support our practice with these five supports - morality, learnedness, discussions, tranquility, and wisdom. When we do that, we will have a better opportunity to establish a completely liberated mind, complete liberation towards wisdom. So, these are the supports that we must rely on throughout the retreat. We must take responsibility to give these supports to ourselves from time to time.

As the theme of this retreat, I have taken certain *suttas* which refer to **Emptiness**.

When I arrived at Jhāna Grove in Western Australia to conduct this retreat, I had to log in to the Wi-Fi here. The password given was 'emptiness.' Isn't that interesting? We will talk about that secret word now.

Let us start with a very interesting incident that happened during the Buddha's time. Once the Buddha was living in Migāramātupāsāda, one of the two main monasteries in Shravasti. The very famous Jetavanārāma monastery was built by Anāthapiṇḍika. The other monastery - Migāramātupāsāda was built by Visākhā, also known as Migāramātu. Migāra was Visākhā's father-in-law. Migāra followed a different faith, but after his exposure to the Buddha's teaching through Visākhā, he became a faithful follower of the Buddha. So, he addressed Visākhā as Migāramātu. Ultimately, she became well-known as Migāramātu. So, this *pasāda* - mansion, monastery that she built, was called as Migāramātupāsāda.

The story goes like this. On one occasion, while the Buddha and the Saṅgha were living in the Migāramātupāsāda, Venerable Ānanda came to the Buddha, and reminded him of a particular incident that happened in a place called Nāgaraka, which was in another city. While the Buddha was dwelling there, the Buddha mentioned '*suññatāvihārenāhaṃ, ānanda, etarahi bahulaṃ viharāmi'ti*. - I dwell in emptiness quite often. Venerable Ānanda heard about it, and wanted to know

more about the Buddha's statement. He wanted to ensure whether he had heard it correctly. Venerable Ānanda came forward while the Buddha was in Migāramātupāsāda, and asked this question, "Bhanthē, while you were in Nāgaraka city, I heard you say that you often dwell in emptiness. Did I hear it properly? Did I properly understand what you have mentioned?" Venerable Ānanda wanted to verify. The Buddha was quite happy about his question, showed appreciation to Venerable Ānanda, and then further explained, *pubbecāhaṃ, ānanda, etarahipi suññatāvihārena bahulaṃ viharāmi. Ānanda, not only previously, even now, often I live in emptiness.*

Therefore, emptiness is something that the Buddha, the Arahants, and even the Nobles, have quite often associated with. Emptiness has become a standard state of their minds. It has become their way of life.

We hope to explore 'emptiness' as much as possible during this retreat. The Buddha referred to 'emptiness' not in a negative manner, but rather, in a more practical way. So, what is empty and what is not empty? The Buddha explained it as a relative term, starting with simple examples, and then gradually advancing to subtle states by giving up gross, rough, and burdened states. Referring to his visit to Migāramātupāsāda, the Buddha recalled how he and his disciples had arrived there traveling from various cities and various places, much like how we have come together at this Jhāna Grove Meditation Centre. While you were in those cities - whatever the country, whatever the situation, whatever the

place - you had a lot of perceptions in your mind; Those perceptions may have been of your friends, your parents, children, husband or wife, colleagues, and other people you came across; and, observations in respect to the country, its political system, various politicians, and many other different aspects. All these come to our mind from time to time. We recall them, we deal with them, and often we take them with us as we travel to different places. If you are employed, you have to comply with different protocols at your workplace. We hold a lot of information in our mind during the day, performing many tasks, while going from place to place.

Our minds are burdened with a lot of information as we perform our duties and tasks. On top of that, we read news, watch news, and listen to the radio, by which we take in so much more information into our minds. Nowadays, we live with information technology, and quite easily we bombard ourselves with loads of information. We go to the internet and browse for new information from many sources. Loads of information is out there. We very easily take in and accumulate so much information. In addition, we associate so many people at work and at various events we attend. With our complicated lives, we overload ourselves with information.

Once we come here to the monastery, we must keep a certain amount of information within ourselves. For instance, we have to keep in mind the guidelines and timetable to follow, times allocated to sit for meditation, the code of

conduct, the manner in which to sit, and to practice. We must keep in mind the rules to follow, and events and tasks to attend to. At the same time, we have to be aware of the setup here that has certain buildings, monasteries, yogis, other people, and so on. Currently we have these things, but not the things we had previously. You had so many things while you were at your home and your office, but after coming here, you have comparatively very few things. We have given up or abandoned a lot of the things we previously had with us, but we still have some other things with us. So, we can say we are empty of vehicles, empty of highways, empty of signal lights, empty of siren sounds, empty of people, empty of our occupation, empty of news and such things. But still, we are not empty of everything. There are rules and regulations here; the monastery infrastructure, the yogis etc. We are not fully empty, but have other things. This is how the Buddha highlights and explains that we are empty of very gross, complicated, and vast amount of information, but, not completely empty.

The Buddha continued further. Now, when we sit here or when we walk, we are trying to be with ourselves. Even though we are among many other people, we are not paying much attention to them; but we are trying to maintain attention on ourselves. We are developing body awareness by being with ourselves as much as possible and focusing on, "here, now, I am sitting." So, you close your eyes, then, assume that you are able to establish awareness within yourself and completely be mindful of your body. When you

are mindful and focus attention to your body, you are empty of various monastery related, Jhāna Grove related information. You do not need to worry much about the timetable, your meals, the time, and other people who are there. Instead, you keep awareness on the body, whatever the sensations of the body - may be aches or pains. So then, we are empty of monastery related, Jhāna Grove related information and perceptions, but not empty of our own body related information, sensations, and perceptions. We would still retain awareness of our bodily sensations and immediate aches and pains.

Now, suppose you continue to concentrate on your body by keeping attention focused on various sensations. There you may select a particular sensation, and not pay attention to other sensations. For example, while walking, rather than considering the whole body, you may keep your attention on the touching sensation felt at the soles of your feet. This sensation may be hardness, softness, the weight of the body, how the weight transfers, or may be the heaviness, lightness, roughness, smoothness that you feel when you are setting your feet on the ground. These can be described as single-element characteristics. We call them earth element characteristics.

When we try to keep our attention on the earth element characteristics, we can say that we are free from many other bodily related information; empty of water element characteristics, empty of fire element characteristics, and

empty of air element characteristics. But we are not empty of earth element characteristics. Now, if I ask you a question: has your mind become complicated and burdened, or has your mind become less complicated and simplified? It is most likely to have become simplified. We are simplifying the mind by paying attention to a few things, and discarding others. Then, by paying attention only to one thing which may be at one level, the mind will become fairly concentrated. True, we are not empty of the earth element, but we are empty of the other three elements. Likewise, from time to time, we may shift our attention to other elements, but one element at a time. So, in a practical way we abandon and unload unnecessary information by paying attention to only one thing. Thereby, simplifying our attention, and focusing our attention.

As the Buddha mentioned, which is pointed out in the Dhammapada verse - *siñca bhikkhu imaṃ nāvaṃ, sittā te lahumessati*, we have to unload, we have to in a way, unlearn first. Although in our daily lives it is helpful to be able to acquire so much information, process, and keep them in our minds. However, in meditation practice, we have to take the opposite direction. We have to unload and keep aside what we have learned (that were necessary or useful for our daily lives), so that the mind becomes very simplified, relaxed, calm, one-pointed, and focused. This will prepare the mind for further development.

We have gathered and maintained different perceptions throughout our lives. We have different perceptions related to

our own selves, and have gathered a lot of perceptions from outside. The term *saññā* (the third aggregate - *saññā upādānakkhandha*) has different meanings. Typically, it is translated as perceptions aggregate, but the *saññā* is a more primitive state.

According to the Buddha's teaching, *saññā* can be described as marks or signs. We gather information through signs. We notice certain marks. We recognize people through certain signs. We recognize that someone has 'become old,' recognize someone as 'my father,' 'my mother,' 'my brother,' 'my sister,' 'my son,' 'my daughter.' We pick certain little signs, and according to these, we are able to distinctly recognize one person from another. When many others are there, how are you going to distinctly recognize your mother, your father, or your child? That distinction is made using certain marks associated with those persons' that are stored in our minds. We pick these distinctive signs and analyze them internally. This is similar to how a computer processes information. The 'CPU' works to retrieve stored information, and give the result - 'this is your mother,' 'this is the mapping.' This kind of identification through signs is actually discussed in the Dhamma, so that we avoid identifying with it.

Let us go a little deeper to understand *saññā*. *saññā* is information in primitive form, information at a very basic or fundamental level. There is an interesting sutta called **Nibbedhika Sutta** in the Aṅguttara Nikāya. There, the Buddha mentions *chayimā*, *bhikkhave*, *saññā*. He said; "Monks,

there are six categories of signs.” They are *rūpa-saññā*, *sadda-saññā*, *gandha-saññā*, *rasa-saññā*, *phoṭṭhabba-saññā*, and *dhamma-saññā*.

Rūpa-saññā: There are various forms, shapes, and colours, which we can see through our eyes. Different colours are there, and we would have learned these colours from our kindergarten teacher as the colour ‘red,’ ‘blue,’ or ‘white.’ Thereafter we recognize them, we store them in our memory. Everybody agrees on that colour. Whenever we see the same colour, then we recognize it.

Saññānāti means recognizing. The term *saññā* has the meaning of *saññānāti*, that one can recognize. You are able to recognize, because the information gathered previously is stored in our mind, in our memory. So, when we see something, then we can recognize them, then map them in our minds. Likewise, when we hear various sounds, we recognize them. For instance, the sound a cat makes is different from the sound made by a dog, and it is easy to distinguish one from the other. Each sound has some unique characteristics, with intrinsic characteristics. Even when we consider two humans - say, different singers are singing different songs. You will be able to recognize a particular singer, singing at a particular pitch and particular tone. You can recognize even when two people are talking, or when they are singing. You can recognize and can notice the very slight differences. “Okay, this is this person who is talking.” Likewise, we have certain

signs and marks attributed to different sounds. Accordingly, to their signs and marks, we recognize those sounds.

Similar to seeing and hearing, we experience tastes, smells, and touch. We can easily recognize sweet taste. We can also recognize bitter and salt tastes quite easily. We can also recognize different variations of sweetness. Even though we call them 'sweet' in general, they are in fact different tastes. So, now we are going to a deeper and more subtle recognition of taste. Then, there are different smells and different tactile feelings. When you are touching and going through certain tangible items, you will be able to recognize different experiences. At times, certain mental images come into your mind. You recognize them as mental images. But sometimes we go beyond that. We will come to that later during this discussion.

Now, this is called *saññānaṃ vemattatā*, a kind of diversity of signs explained in the **Nibbedhika Sutta**. The Buddha mentions, *aññā saññā rūpesu, aññā saññā saddesu* – there are certain characteristics available in the forms. Certain characteristics are available for sounds. Certain characteristics are available for smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and mental phenomena. Each of these has its own distinct characteristics with its own diversities and varieties. Now, the interesting thing is that our senses can pick these little things, but in very limited ways. Our eyes can pick the colours and the shapes. Our ears can pick a certain range of sounds. Our nose can pick a certain range of odours. Our tongue can pick a certain range

of tastes. Our body can pick a certain range of pressure and temperature, and our mind also can pick different ranges of perceptions. Further, these ranges or capacities may differ from someone else's range or capacity.

A very interesting incident happened as I arrived in Perth. We were waiting in line to exit the airport. I had declared that I was carrying certain Ayurvedic medicines with me. The immigration officers placed an 'X' mark on my bag and directed me to a different line. It was a kind of punishment I felt! I was in a foreign country, dressed in an attire different from others, and I was waiting in a special line for additional checking. My level of stress built up a little. Then one lady officer came and said "Oh! What do you have with you that you have declared?" and directed me to another line. So, I went to that line. When I was there, another security person came and said "Okay, you have made a declaration about an item you are carrying with you. You keep your bag here. Sit here - Good!" Then another person came and said "Stand up - Good!" So, everybody was anxiously waiting and may be my stress was building up. In an instant, one girl came with a dog, a very tall dog, and it just sniffed here and there, quickly okayed me and then I was able to exit the airport. Ultimately, the visa to enter Australia was granted to me by that very generous dog!

That dog had the capacity to sniff what we humans could not. The officers did not even open my bag to see what was available inside; they did not even bother to open it; they

were quite sure that this particular trained dog was far more capable than humans of recognizing whether I had any prohibited items inside the bag or not. So, our range of recognizing through the nose and the dog's recognition through its nose is fairly different. So, certain animals are there with different ranges of sensing than humans.

Each of us humans have different capabilities to identify sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and touch. In the animal kingdom, there are many different animals, with different capacities than us humans. This shows we are not capable of having a full range of the different senses, but we operate within a very limited range. So, operating within this limitation, we can only gather limited information. Because of that, our senses are very primitive. The interesting thing is that being within this limitation, we gather data and information, and then use these to create what we think is the 'world.' Through our eyes, we gather some information; from that, we create the world. From the sounds we hear, we gather some other information; we create the world with that. From the nose, we gather some information; we create the world. From the tongue, we gather some information; we create the world. Through the body, we gather some information; we create the world. From the thoughts; we imagine, sense, and cognize certain things in our minds; we create the world with these. So, we use these six senses to interact with the world, and we create our own world. That is one side.

In addition to the information we grasp from our six sense bases and faculties, there are other additions that contribute to forming our perception of the 'world.' Our prejudices, likes and dislikes, perceptions - both new and stored perceptions, come into the picture of shaping our perception of what the world is. These make the situation more and more complicated. If you were to operate simply through the senses, you may assume, since your eyes are there, you could pick shapes and colours, and process it within yourself. This may be straight forward. Since you listen to various sounds, you could pick certain signs from those sounds, and you may operate based on that information. It may be straight forward. But the situation becomes more and more complicated when your pre-conceived notions, your own prejudices, and your own stored ideas, start colouring the whole experience. This typically happens when we do not keep raw data we gather from our sense bases as raw data; but keep adding our own subjective data, prejudices, our own judgments, our own perceptions, and our own imaginations into the picture of how things are, and to the experience. Now, everything becomes very complicated.

The Buddha discussed about distortions or perversions (*vipallāsa*) that affect our perceptions. Because of the primitive nature of our senses, it is not capable of comprehending very subtle differences available in the data that exist in our surroundings. For example, if you want to take a photograph using an old camera (not a present-day high tech one), you request the person to be photographed to remain still without

making any movements, so that you can take the picture. When we ask the person to be photographed to remain calm and still because we intend to take a photograph, you expect some amount of permanence to be there. So, the senses depend on capturing that information; when it is there, at that moment, and that it will not change quickly. If you change quickly, these senses will not be capable of capturing that information. So, in a way, this whole process of gathering information has, underneath, a perception of permanence. We need that perception of permanence to operate, so that the senses are capable of gathering data and gathering new information.

This is similar to the way that we are operating the senses at different levels. Say, at the sensory level, when we are recognizing things to be permanent, then we are able to capture that information. Once that information is being processed inside the mind; what we call as thinking, there also we are getting into the permanence, the notion of permanence, the perception of permanence. Based on that, we come to a conclusion, a decision. That is also distorted. There also, the influence comes from the notion of permanence.

At the sensory level, we expect things to be permanent. However, the notion of permanence, the perception of permanence, are distortions. The Buddha discussed three levels of distortions.

Saññā vipallāsa - distortions of perception. The very basic fundamental level of perception is at the sensory level

which is the recognition part. *saññā vipallāsa* is when we see what is impermanent as permanent; when we see, know, or capture what is impermanent as permanent.

Citta vipallāsa - distortions of thought. Based on what we recognized we think that, "I have information. With that I can think now." Thereby, completely distorting our thinking and our thinking pattern. Due to *citta vipallāsa*, we do not recognize or perceive impermanence, but assume things to be permanent.

Ditṭhi vipallāsa - distortions of view. Our thinking becomes confused or distorted, when we hold wrong or misguided beliefs. Our perceptions also become skewed, affecting our thought processes, and we then arrive at incorrect conclusions, and distorted decisions. This distorted view is known as *ditṭhi vipallāsa*.

We have discussed three types of distortions arising from perceiving impermanent things as permanent.

Further, the Buddha in the **Vipallāsa Sutta** in the Anguttara Nikaya described four perversions or distortions that we are unknowingly or knowingly subjected to or influenced by, during our interaction with the world. Those are;

- perceiving what is impermanent to be permanent,
- perceiving what is unsatisfactory as satisfactory,
- perceiving what is non-self to be self, and
- perceiving what is loathsome as beautiful.

These distortions hinder our understanding and lead to wrong views.

Things become even more complicated and confusing as our thoughts become coloured and conditioned by our own perceptions. As thoughts are processed, they become distorted further. When we come to conclusions with these distortions, it negatively affects our whole sensory analysis and how we interact with the world using our senses. We have just six senses, and using these six senses, we conduct ourselves with the world, and interact with the world. Unfortunately, our perceptions become more and more distorted. So, what you perceive, what you experience, or your conclusions, have become fairly distorted. Your perceptions do not portray reality, nor are they true. Ultimately, it is a kind of falsified perception that you will have.

The Buddha further discussed how perceptions are formed, what causes them to develop, and the sources from which they arise. There, the Buddha mentioned that contact is the cause. When we take the little signs that we have in our minds, we cannot simply keep them to ourselves, but would need to express them to others. We need to communicate with other people. We would need to communicate these data we have gathered. So, we would use expressions, words, and terminologies. This is how languages come into the picture.

The Buddha explained *saññānaṃ vipāko*, which is the result of perceptions and signs, as the consequences or outcome that arise from our perceptions and mental

constructs. These perceptions shape our understanding of reality and influence our actions. This is very interesting! The Buddha said:

vohāravepakāhaṃ, bhikkhave, saññāṃ vadāmi.

yathā yathā naṃ sañjānāti tathā tathā voharati, evaṃ saññī ahosinti

We would need to communicate to others what we have perceived and the information we have gathered. So, the other party receiving this information also must come to an understanding for your communication to succeed. Then only he or she would be able to understand what you are communicating. We would require different ways and methods to communicate different expressions and information. For instance, we may have to communicate on different colours; different signs - say, road signs. We would use words and signs to communicate these. You may communicate using hand signals. There are many different ways to communicate. There are sophisticated languages, with letters and words that have specific meanings. You may use letters in those languages to create words. With words, we can create sentences. Then we come up with essays and novels. Ultimately, everything comes back to our minds, and we become completely disoriented. These descriptions and proliferations may make the mind fully confused in a way.

Our learning processes, and education systems entail so much information. So, loads of information are now being collected in the mind; not in a proper and orderly manner, but

taking one from one thing, another part from another thing, and then storing it randomly.

We will continue the discussion of how perceptions are formed further. Our egos add an interesting aspect as ego gets entangled with the process. As we accumulate information, we begin to identify ourselves with it, thinking, "This is mine. This is who I am." We attach ourselves and identify with the knowledge we have gathered and assert ownership. If someone challenges our perspective, we may even argue with them to defend our position. In a rather foolish way, we identify ourselves with external information we have gathered and knowledge acquired. Degrees, titles, and designations further reinforce this identification. We say, "I am so and so, my name is this, my language is this, my nationality is this," asserting superiority in our affiliations. Even something as simple as a nickname can provoke strong reactions because it challenges our constructed identity. In university, we often remember nicknames more easily than proper names, as they become a part of our identity in social circles. When someone uses a different name such as a nickname for us, some of us may feel offended, as it undermines the identity we have created for ourselves.

We take things like language very seriously, carefully considering its use and nuances, including the correct use of vowels and other linguistic elements. Even a small mistake is significant because we see language as a personal representation of ourselves. We consider language as another

extension of “me, mine, myself, it represents me.” For instance, consider nationality or belonging to a specific group: when people live in a country for an extended period, they develop their own standards, rules, and customs, which become their norms and traditions. If individuals from different traditions come and settle in, they may start comparisons, arguments, and challenges may arise, potentially leading to conflicts and even leading to wars between countries, nationalities, groups, or clans. Although these issues may seem primitive at their core, they may escalate to profound levels of significance due to deeply ingrained issues of personal identities and affiliations taken as “myself, this is mine, this represents me.” These are strong sentiments.

*Saññāṃ attato samanupassati, saññāvantaṃ vā attānaṃ.
attāni vā saññāṃ, saññāya vā attānaṃ.*

With respect to perceptions and signs, the Buddha asked, how do you develop personality using this gathered information, using these perceptions? We create a personality, we create a personality view (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*), with respect to all this information we have gathered. The senses are operating in their own primitive ways, in their limited ways. But now, on top of that, we load more information, including many distortions and then come to conclusions. At the same time, we add particularly a ‘self’ into the picture, an ego into the picture. we hold on to that ‘self’ strongly, grasping it strongly. It becomes very difficult to abandon and relinquish the ‘self’

identity. I am doing the same thing. You are also doing the same thing. So, we all are in a conflict. Standing firm on our acquired positions, we would forge ahead into a conflict if we were challenged. So, things can become very complicated.

That is why in the Dhamma, *saññā* plays a very important role.

Actually, *saññā*, which are signs, marks, or perceptions, are required even in the development of mindfulness. Even though we theoretically understand this as the situation of *saññā*, a certain amount of *saññā* - perceptions, or marks - are required even to abandon that self-identity. Simply knowing things theoretically or by making yourself dumb, you cannot make it. Rather, some kind of mechanism, or strategy has to be formulated through the practice. Then, the stored information, unnecessary burdens, wrong and distorted information may be unloaded. Instead, useful and beneficial perceptions may be adopted. Ultimately, everything will be abandoned. So, the mind becomes released.

Even the path has certain amount of *saññā*. The Buddha also used a language, the language of Pali to communicate what the Buddha understood. We too use languages to communicate, to interact with others, and even to learn the Dhamma. Words and languages serve as tools for seizing opportunities, understanding benefits, and abandoning perceptions. We might have to acquire and learn some good, correct perceptions.

You may have heard about the **Girimānanda Sutta**¹. It talks about nine perceptions; the last one is *ānāpānasati*, which is the method to implement the nine perceptions. It refers to some positive, correct, and beneficial kind of perceptions, because what we most often have are fairly distorted. Instead of that, the Buddha discussed about very useful, beneficial, and correct kinds of perceptions. Therefore, knowing about perceptions does not mean that we are completely rejecting, or completely opposing them. Rather, we are learning about them and are trying to get the benefits, so that we will be able to understand its true benefits and limitations, and not identify with them. So, it is necessary to understand perceptions fairly well. While meditating, during the practice, we have to keep the mind very relaxed and simplified as much as possible, and have fewer perceptions crowding the mind.

That is why we are trying to reduce perceptions. When we come to Jhāna Grove, we are reducing loads of information as much as possible. We are not using the TV, not using the internet, not reading newspapers. So, as much as possible, we are trying to minimize the intake of too much information that is adding to the confusion. Now, we come to a kind of seclusion by minimizing things we have in our possession, and simplifying the way we live. This is a must. Therefore, try to simplify yourself and be with yourself by not thinking too much during the retreat. At least during these few days, give a little rest to the mind, because already we have put too many

¹ Girimānanda sutta (AN 10.60)

things into the mind. Already things have corrupted. So, now we are trying to relax it, trying to unscrew it, un-learn it, and unload it. Then, mind will become somewhat relaxed, lighter, and peaceful. Such an atmosphere is essential. If we think, "I am holding many degrees. I am holding many titles. So, the path should be very easy for me." It is very unlikely to be so. While we are having all these, if we know how to unload and keep them aside and make the mind very simple, then it will be pretty good. Learning something is very essential, but at the same time, we should know how to handle the knowledge we gain properly.

With respect to the *saññā*, we need to learn some more on how to deal with it, and what the impacts or repercussions are. Holding all this information and knowledge, what has happened to us? We need to investigate this. How are we going to free the mind from *saññā* - the perceptions, by using the necessary, useful perceptions? We have to learn how to do this. A fair number of suttas are there to explain this. We are going to explore these suttas, because we live in a whole different world of perceptions. Now we know the reality of perception. We will explore all these in the coming few days.

Hope you all got some foundation level understanding of signs and perceptions, what happens to our minds, how we gather and process so much information, and the impact it has on us. With that note, I would like to conclude today's Dhamma sermon. Thank you very much for your attentive listening.



Issues of Taking Signs

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa

*“Rāgo kho āvuso nimittakaraṇo, doso nimittakaraṇo,
moho nimittakaraṇo”*

Dear Venerable Brother and Dhamma Friends,

We are going to start the second Dhamma Sermon of this Jhāna Grove Vipassana retreat.

Yesterday, we took a particular theme, and discussed how various signs cause various troubles. I started yesterday's Dhamma sermon by discussing the very basics; how our eyes are capable of taking certain data, certain percepts, certain signs, certain shapes and certain colours. Similarly, how our ears are capable of receiving sounds; and the nose - odours, tongue - tastes, body - tangibles and mind with mind objects. Basically, this is how we are interacting and dealing with the world. Yesterday we discussed how this can lead to many problems. Therefore, I thought of discussing further how these

perceptions, signs, and marks cause various troubles and confusions in ourselves once they are taken in.

The Buddha highlights, in many interesting suttas how defilements grow within. For example, in **Kāya Sutta** in Bojjhaṅgā Saṃyutta, the Buddha explains,

ko ca, bhikkhave, āhāro anuppannassa vā kāmacchandassa uppādāya, uppannassa vā kāmacchandassa bhīyyobhāvāya vepullāya?

“What is the nutriment for the non-arisen sensual desire to arise? What is the nutriment for the non-arisen sensual desire to grow?”

Assume that at this moment, there is no lust or any kind of sensual desire. Then, how is it initiated? Once it is initiated, and once it is arisen, how is it growing? The simple answer given by the Buddha is, *atthi, bhikkhave, subhanimittam* - We see things in a very delightful way. We see things as beautiful, we see things as fascinating and wonderful. The way we see these beautiful things in an admiring way, leads to arising of signs - “*subhanimittam*.”

Similarly, the Buddha explains the opposite side;

ko ca, bhikkhave, āhāro anuppannassa vā byāpādassa uppādāya. What is the nutriment for un-arisen ill will to arise?

uppannassa vā byāpādassa bhīyyobhāvāya vepullāya? If ill will is already arisen; how is it growing? What is the nutriment for that?

atthi, bhikkhave, patiganimittam. Monks, there is this sign of ill will.

Actually, we do not directly deal with objects. What happens at the sense base level is that we deal with various signs. Our senses are not capable of totally capturing an object. Rather, it is capable of picking certain signs of the object. When we are looking at someone, it is through the eyes that we pick certain signs, such as, whether the person is tall, short, fat, or lean, the complexion of the skin, the figure, the shape, or any particular marks on his or her face. These are certain marks/signs that we pick during the recognition process. If these marks are pleasing and appealing to us, it creates delight, happiness, and pleasure in us. Then we tend to look further, look closer, and admire. As a result, we get trapped in these signs.

There are many Suttas explaining how the complete process of grasping happens. For example, in the **Samādhi Bhāvanā Sutta** of Khandha Saṃyutta, the Buddha explains: Monks, you have to develop concentration. Only when you are able to develop a fair amount of concentration, you see the reality. There, the Buddha explains how this complete grasping happens, how this complete process of ‘becoming’ happens, with respect to the five aggregates. If we consider only the perceptions aggregate, the Buddha explained how we go and grasp perceptions by saying: *saññā abhinandati abhivadati ajjhosāya tiṭṭhati.* When we pick these signs, we start admiring these signs. For example, a young boy sees a young

girl. Once he sees the girl, if she is beautiful, he is picking certain signs in her. So, the boy becomes happy, admiring, and delighted - *abhinandati abhivadati ajjhosāya tiṭṭhati*. Then, again and again, the signs come to his mind, now his mind is fully occupied, with whatever the images, the figure, face etc. Then his mind becomes adhered to her image. This is how the mind grasps things. It happens in a way that he cannot forget her. Again and again, her image may appear in his mind. Now, it is difficult to be without her; probably prompting him to go after her.

This is how we ultimately get trapped in signs. We start by noticing very basic things. These basic things are capable of occupying the mind. These signs are capable of making a little trigger in our minds. We repeatedly admire it, look at it again and again, take a closer look at it, we might even take a picture and keep thinking about it continuously. By now, the other aggregates too keep coming into the picture. All are helping each other. Ultimately, the mind is trapped in it.

It is so beautiful how the Buddha explains “*tassa saññā abhinandato abhivadato ajjhosāya tiṭṭhato uppajjati nandī*” – When the mind is acquiring it, or happy about it, admiring it, again and again welcoming it, adhering to it, then there is delight arising. Now you are very happy, elated, and even smiling to yourself. *abhinandati abhivadati ajjhosāya tiṭṭhati* - Will lead to a certain happiness in you, a delight in you. *yā saññāya nandī tadupādānaṃ* - So, that very delight causes the mind to go and grasp it.

upādāna paccayā bhavo, bhavapaccayā jāti, jātipaccayā jarāmaranam sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupāyāsā sambhavanti. evametassa kevalassa dukkha'k'khandhassa samudayo hoti.

The Buddha has explained the step-by-step process of how the whole conditioned process happens. How you become something or someone because of capturing the signs, admiring the signs, and adding value to the signs. The end result is that we are trapped in signs, which lead us to be completely entrapped in perceptions. As we have already discussed, this process will cause sensual desire and anger. The sensual desire to grow, or the sensual desire to arise, these kinds of signs are the basic reasons. For anger to arise or anger to grow, these signs and perceptions are the basic reasons. Therefore, we should understand that the signs are playing a pivotal role in our interaction with the world. We need to be mindful of the fact that the situation can get aggravated if we do not maintain mindfulness.

Venerable Mālukyaputta describes it beautifully as²;

*rūpaṃ disvā sati muṭṭhā, piyaṃ nimittaṃ manasi karoto.
sārattacitto vedeti, tañca ajjhosāya tiṭṭhati.
tassa vadḍhanti vedanā, anekā rūpasambhavā.
abhijjhā ca vihesā ca, cittamassūpahaññati.
evaṃ ācinato dukkhaṃ, ārā nibbānamuccati.*

² Mālukyaputta sutta (SN 35.78)

Once someone sees a particular form without any mindfulness, as he doesn't have any sort of mindfulness - he simply looks at it. There is no operation of any Dhamma, or any sort of mindfulness. He simply looks with a muddled mind. *piyanimittam manasi karoto* - he picks these beautiful signs, the triggering signs, again and again, and now his mind is attracted to them. *sārattacitto vedeti tañca ajjhosāya tiṭṭhati*; how he is looking at it is very much like with an infatuated mind, a trapped mind. Now, his mind is adhered to that, already trapped in that. *tassa vaḍḍhanti vedanā anekā rūpasambhavā*. As a result of that particular form, again and again admiring, again and again associating, and now, different feelings are arising. *abhijjhā ca vihesā ca cittamassūpahaññati* - Certain other defilements, such as covetousness and excessive desire arise. On the other hand, the opposite of desire, too can happen, - you can have a certain resistance to it, or a certain despair related to it, an anger towards it. Both extremes can happen with respect to the form.

cittamassūpahaññati; the mind becomes fairly agitated. *evaṃ ācinato dukkhaṃ, ārā nibbānamuccati*; a fair amount of suffering is arising, agitation is arising, friction is arising, and burdening is happening in the mind. You are going away from the peacefulness. When there is no mindfulness at all, you are particularly going away from *nibbāna*.

My reference here is only to the process with respect to the eye. The same is true for the other senses as well. Whenever we hear a sound, the same process takes place.

Imagine that we hear a song while we are walking, we might like it, then we will be delighted to hear it, then we immediately start further thinking, and ultimately, a sort of appreciation builds up. Then the mind gets trapped in it, we become completely enveloped in it, lost in it. Similarly, with odours, tastes, tangibles, and even mental objects - all follow the same pattern with regard to signs.

As explained, un-mindfulness is one factor that aggravates the situation. If you have no mindfulness at all, if you are simply allowing the senses to operate the way they want, without having any established mindfulness, the situation becomes very much like not governable, and ultimately, we will be continuously victimized by this whole process. So, can you say who is the person responsible internally for this whole process? It is not a person. There is no person doing it. As you know, our minds are fairly conditioned with defilements; *rāgā dosā mohā* (greed, hatred, delusion). Internally, our minds are programmed with, or conditioned with, defilements. The defilements are the ones responsible for this whole process.

This is another very deep aspect explained in the Dhamma. For example, in the **Mahā Vedalla Sutta** this point is highlighted in this way;

rāgo kho, āvuso, nimittakaraṇo, doso nimittakaraṇo, moho nimittakaraṇo

When lust is operative in our mind, it does this *nimittakaraṇa*. In a way, it is a kind of function of accepting these signs, picking these signs, and selecting these signs. This whole operation is a function of lust. *doṣo nimittakaraṇo* - When there is anger, the tendency of anger, ill will, which is available and operative in the mind, picks signs; it is the cause to formulate the sign, and select the particular sign. *moho nimittakaraṇo* – when there is ignorance available in the mind, it is the cause to pick the signs, formulate the signs, and select the signs. For example, let us say a family is watching a teledrama while having dinner. Assume that the family is composed of grandparents, parents, daughter, and son. All are watching a particular teledrama. Suppose, the ongoing scene is of a beautiful old song. All are listening and watching that episode. Then, it changes into a political scene which can be related to an ongoing issue in the country. The actors are all shouting, arguing, and protesting. There is a big commotion, may be about a burning current political issue. The next episode is a romantic one. A couple is expressing their love for each other, holding hands, etc. The last episode is with children playing, laughing, and enjoying themselves. Several episodes are there bundled together. So, this is a beautiful teledrama, and all are watching very much absorbed in it – *jhāna* there!

Here I have taken four episodes. So, while watching the teledrama, what is the reaction of the audience to these different episodes? When an old song is being played; may be a song from 20 years ago, who will be delighted in it? What do

you think? The grandparents may be delighted with it, because it takes them back to their youthful days, reminding them how they enjoyed life at that time. Their past memories are coming back to the mind. They become quite happy just by looking at it; but the parents and children are not that happy about it. When the burning political issue is going on, the father may even come forward and increase the volume. Even the mother may be quite interested in that episode. Probably, the mother wants to prevent the father from getting too engaged in it. So, they both may be fairly interested in that episode. Then, what about that romantic scene? The parents may be interested in it. If the children are adults, they too may be interested, but may not be the grandparents. If there are sports events, the children may be quite interested.

All episodes are different from each other in this drama. Why are people interested in different ways to these different episodes? What is the deciding factor? Is it really the age that matters, or something more than that? What comes to the picture is the internal root of defilements. Internally, we are operative and influenced by these different defilements. They are the ones that decide our preferences. It is not that 'I' am deciding it. It is being influenced by internal defilements. Internally, we are being influenced by the defilements to pick our preferences.

Rāgo kho nimittakaraṇo, doso nimittakaraṇo, moho nimittakaraṇo.

The picking of the signs is being influenced by lust. Picking of the signs is being influenced by anger. Picking of the signs, selecting the signs, appreciating the signs, and being delighted with the signs are being influenced by delusion. The defilements are playing a huge role here.

Yesterday, we discussed that one result of picking the signs is that we need to express it. Once we pick signs, and once we recognize something, we can't keep it to ourselves. We want to communicate or express it to another person. In order to do this, we are coming up with letters, marks, words, languages, and many different ways of communicating. So, different expressions take place.

In **Samiddhi Sutta**³ the Buddha mentions,

*“akkheyyasaññino sattā, akkheyyasmim̐ patit̐thitā.
akkheyyaṃ apariññāya, yogamāyanti maccuno.*

The Buddha explains; beings who perceive what can be expressed, become established in what can be expressed. What we discussed was that first we recognize something, once we recognize, then we want to express what we have recognized. Now, what is available throughout and all around is something we can recognize. Already all the information is stored in the mind. So, we can easily recognize. All the stored information and data are available. What happens at this

³ Samiddhi suttaṃ (SN 1.20)

point? Beings who perceive what can be expressed; now, everything becomes expressible. I can tell, "This is a clock, this is a mug, that is a laptop." So, all can be expressed. I can communicate. I can distinctively recognize all these different objects. People have given names to each and everything. So, naming is there, labeling is there. We all agree to that. As a society, as a group, we all give a name to this, a label to that. We have fixed these names. Although we are the ones who have given names, what happens is that we basically get trapped in it. What can be expressed becomes our world. We do not understand their real nature. Instead, the names given, the labels given, become very prominent, very important to us. Actually, we are the ones, who introduce these labels for our easy communication, and ultimately, conventions become extremely valuable to us, extremely important to us. We take it as the truth. We give an extreme value to it. If someone wants to change it, then we do not want to allow it to be changed, because we are so adhered to it, we are so attached to whatever the convention. Then convention becomes a reality. We are trapped in the convention.

There is a beautiful old folk tale, Most Venerable Katukurunde Ñāṇananda Mahā Thero has highlighted; The story talks about three magicians. When the three magicians were walking in the forest, they saw a dead tiger with only a few parts of its body remaining. The skeleton was scattered here and there. One magician declared saying, "I can combine all these scattered parts together. I can prepare the complete skeleton." The magician is declaring through his magical

powers, that he can combine all the parts. He casts the spell, and it is done. The complete skeleton is reconstructed. The second magician says, "I can add the flesh and all the other body parts, so that it looks like it has just died. To that extent, I can make it." He was so competent. He performed all the spells, and at the end the tiger looked like it had just died. So, what is left to do? There is still no life in the tiger. Then the third magician comes forward, saying, let me tackle the last challenge. I can give him life," and with his spell, he gave it life. Now, the tiger is alive and in full swing, and it looks around. Since it had not eaten any food in a long time, it pounces and kills the three magicians! That is a very interesting folktale. This is exactly how our conventions are consuming us. We human beings are actually establishing these rules, accepting all different conventions, and giving various labels and names. Ultimately, we become consumed by them. We are attacking each other because of these conventions, names, and labels. We get trapped in it. We can fight each other over a mere word, over a language issue, or for whatever norm we have all agreed to. If someone wants to change it, we will go to the extent of fighting and even killing each other. It is fascinating to see how we slowly get trapped in all these conventions.

Another important thing is its relevance to thinking. Obsessive thinking has a great impact on signs. In **Kalahavivāda Sutta**, there is a statement that reads as, "*saññānidānā hi papañcasaṅkhā.*" We actually think, based on various concepts, and to formulate concepts, we use signs.

Whenever we see something, we tend to pick these signs. Then, all the concepts are remembered, and then we start thinking, pondering, fantasizing, fabricating, and ultimately getting into complete conceptual proliferation. For these different concepts to formulate, the signs become the root cause. That is why the Buddha explained: *saññānidānā hi papañcasaṅkhā*. Therefore, signs play a significant role in our sensory perceptions and how we deal with the whole world, as they influence our thinking. Once we capture these signs in our minds, we start thinking about them. The problem is that our senses are not capable of taking in the truth, exactly as it is. What is actually there is coloured by our own perceptions, judgments, evaluations, tendencies, and biases. Therefore, what we consume is a kind of mixture of all these. A kind of distorted recognition, which can be called *saññā vipallāsa*; a kind of distorted data that we ultimately consume. Based on this, we are again thinking. This too is distorted, *cittha vipallāsa*. Based on this, we come to a conclusion. This is also distorted. This is called *diṭṭhi vipallāsa*.

Even though our initial contact was with very basic things, our thinking leads us to come to a different conclusion. Ultimately, this is what we are holding. So, we hold a particular perception, about people, government, society, etc. We are holding on to various perceptions, and we are bound to these perceptions. Typically, *saññā* is translated into English as perceptions. However, the word *saññā* has many connotations and different meanings; starting with the very basic signs and marks. We think about them and ultimately

come to a perception. So, perceptions becomes operative in our mind. Our minds are being conditioned now. This is how we decide, this is how we think, and this is how we operate. So, perceptions are now playing a huge role in the mind. For example, I may have a perception about you. You may have a perception about me. We may have a perception about the country. We may have a perception about the government, and similarly have perceptions about different things. As a result, our mind is fairly conditioned, and fairly coloured by various perceptions. This is how we are operating in the whole world. This is why we need to understand that we are fairly trapped, conditioned and coloured. Our task now is to release these traps and come back to the source, to understand what has happened, how my mind is being conditioned, and how I am being influenced by all these different things. This is why the Dhamma is utterly important. The Buddha is showing us different techniques, which are extremely valuable to us to understand this trap.

In order to learn how to overcome these, let us look at a few areas. First, let me begin with the establishment of mindfulness. When you establish mindfulness, you are aware of what is going on, at least to some extent. Still, as we are operating at a conventional level, we cannot immediately wipe out all kinds of signs or perceptions, but we have to start somewhere. So, you establish yourself with your body, try to simplify things, and minimize too much thinking. In a way, we are attacking from many directions, not from a single direction. We understand the repercussions of taking these

signs. Now we are tackling all the different consequences in many different ways.

When paying attention to a simple task, we are trying to minimise excessive thinking, or obsessive thinking, by giving value to the task at hand. For example, when eating, you are mindful of eating. The mind is fairly occupied with eating. While walking, you know you are walking; while sitting, you know you are sitting. Your mind is aware of the action you perform. This is how we have to be mindful of the actions we perform.

In order to establish mindfulness, the Buddha comes up with a kind of formula; a step-by-step process – ‘begin with where you are.’ Be mindful. Don't allow your mind to think too much about the past and trap yourself in past memories. Don't fantasize about the future. Just simplify your whole thinking process. Come back to ‘this moment.’ Come back to the body. Develop body awareness. Then the body appears like a refuge, as an anchor, at least to restrain the mind from too much obsessive thinking. Even though we cannot go to the extreme depth yet, there is still a little bit of calmness, a little bit of tranquility, and a little bit of lightness in the mind; just by establishing ourselves, focusing our attention on whatever the simple task at hand. During daily activities, while working, while sitting, establish mindfulness; while writing something, try to be in that particular task. It is very simple in a way. This is how we have to start.

To further sharpen mindfulness, suppose, you are engaged in a formal sitting posture, you sit cross-legged and establish your mindfulness in the body. As highlighted in **Cūlasuññata Sutta**, now try to forget about all the other loads of information you are burdened with. Now you are empty of all the political stuff, environmental/climatic stuff, what has happened in the past, what is going to happen in the future, all the people, your job, vehicles, and all the other stuff. We have to purposely forget and drop everything in some way. Now try to establish your mind in the body. "This is the body. I am here at Jhāna Grove." You may have Jhāna Grove related information in mind. Unloading all unnecessary information and simply occupying the mind with some basic things, limited things, is somewhat alright! Then, coming back to your very own body, you see there may be pains; there may be aches, may be feeling drowsy and lethargic, and here and there you experience different feelings. But this is better than thinking too much about Jhāna Grove monastery related external stuff.

Once you come back to the body, you are aware of only the body. "The body is placed like this. I am standing like this. I am sitting like this. I am walking like this.". You are developing body awareness. So, the body becomes an anchor to the mind. Otherwise, what happens? Once you open your eyes, again, you will be carried away by what you see. When you hear various sounds, again, you will be carried away by what you hear. The same thing is true for odours, tastes, and

other things. So, again and again, we are bringing our attention to the body, binding our attention in the body.

ajjhataṃ eva cittaṃ santitṭhati sannisīdati ekodi hoti samādhiyati.

you are keeping your attention internally. Again and again, bringing attention internally. Establishing mindfulness internally. In a way, it's a kind of simplifying process. Even though we know that the Buddha's teachings are extremely deep, we are going through a simplifying process. Not a complex or complicated process. We normally like complications. Our mind prefers complications, but now we are purposely dropping things, de-learning things, unloading things, simplifying our attention to the body, and establishing mindfulness in the body. Now, I can feel the body. "Yes, I am aware of the body."

Assume that you are practicing elements meditation. The elements that are operative in our body are the earth element, water element, fire element, and air element. These are the physical elements operating in the body and in any physical entity. You are now recognizing how they are operating. You are reaching a more simplified area now. When we have various names and titles, such as, "I am so and so. My occupation is this. My education is this. My degree is this. I am a resident of such and such a place." Too many things are there in the mind. But the Buddha's teaching is to simplify things. "This whole body is nothing but four elements." Now my reference is only to the four physical elements. I am not

referring to space (*akāsa dhātu*) and consciousness elements (*viññāṇa dhātu*). When I am watching the body closely, may be at one point, one element becomes prominent. Assume it is the earth element; so, you are now trying to be aware of the earth element characteristics: hardness, softness, roughness, smoothness, heaviness, and lightness. Thus, the process is further simplified. Other elements are discarded for the moment. You are operating only with one element. You are fully aware of the earth element. Then you take another area – when we practice like this, sometimes, our mind might bring forward various beautiful sights, remember various things, because the mind is used to consuming so much information, and so many perceptions. It likes so many beautiful things. But, right now, what is presented is very dry and boring to consume. It may be a struggle to keep away all the fantasies.

Suppose that you are practicing *ānāpānassati* (Breath meditation). It is very boring, isn't it? This is why people fall asleep while paying attention to the breath! Attention to the breath appears very primitive. You might think, 'the Buddha should have told something more, but I am supposed to just keep my attention on the breath. How primitive!' While watching the breath, the mind may definitely jump to this and that. When particularly the breath becomes more subtle, it will simply invite so many fantasies, may be even a beautiful Buddha image. You can get trapped thinking, "This is very beautiful. The Buddha is almost like trying to talk to me. I am now opening my eyes. My goodness! The Buddha was here, and gave me instructions. Sadhu! Sadhu!" So, you get trapped.

Again, it is just a perception, an image that is stored in your mind, mind has discreetly taken it forward, you have given some appreciation to it, a value to it. You get trapped again and again in concepts, in perceptions. This is why, while we are practicing *ānāpānassati*, while we are practicing any kind of *satipaṭṭhāna*, as our mind gets refined, we get caught in many traps and fall into many pitfalls. So, if we give value to them, then we simply go off track.

That is why, the Buddha particularly highlights *marīcīkūpamā saññā* - these perceptions, these signs are like a mirage. They appear very beautiful. They appear real. But they are not. When a particular image comes to mind, it appears to be very real. When in- breath and out breath become very subtle, a beautiful image might appear in front of you. That may be very beautiful, very attractive, almost like real. This depends on your character. If you have a faith-based character, faith related images can appear - like a Buddha image, or a pagoda, or a Bodhi tree, or maybe images of deities, celestial beings. You may even hear different sounds; like chanting. But that does not mean that everyone would go through these experiences. It depends from person to person. If you have an angry character, images that appear to be dangerous, images of corpses, or something similar can appear. Depending on your character, different images might appear, because the object to which we are paying attention becomes more and more subtle. So, we give value to the image. We think, "Someone has come to give me instructions. The Buddha has come, a monk has come, and the Brahma has

come to give me instructions. Then, I will start communicating with him. It becomes something for me. Next time also I am sitting just to establish that communication. When my breath calms down, that image appears. It becomes my way of communicating. So, it will start telling me this and that, instructing me how to do this, how to do that.” You might think you can start may be a predictions related business, or you can start giving medicines and predicting illnesses by using some psychic power. So, what happens? We completely lose the path.

Because these things are very beautiful and attractive, it is very common for meditators to lose their way, as they easily get deluded by these images. When the breath becomes very smooth, almost unperceivable, at that time everything is very dry and boring, so, whatever appears becomes very prominent. Easily, we can get trapped again in perceptions. Even though we started with the intentions of developing mindfulness, we end up on a completely different and wrong path. This proves how harmful perceptions are. When we are trapped by these perceptions, we rarely get the opportunity to practice the Dhamma, but end up with a completely deluded path.

This is why the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* has to be kept very simple. Very direct. We should not add too many things to it. If you add too many things to the technique, it becomes a burden, it becomes more complicated. If your mindfulness technique is too complicated, then it is not going to work. The

technique should be very easy and simple. Simplicity takes you to the profundity. A complicated process will not take you to a more profound understanding, rather, it is the simplicity that will take you to a more profound understanding. It operates completely opposite to the way we have been used to thinking. We used to think, that if things were very complicated and really complex, it would take us to a kind of profound understanding. However, the fact is that once the mind becomes very soft, gentle, lucid, and clear, it will take us to an even more silent, still, and deeper understanding.

That is why we have to be very humble, as, we have to drop many things, and abandon many things, to allow the teaching to operate in us. Rather than trying to put our own perceptions and judgments into it, rather than trying to manipulate it, we have to let the teaching purify us.

Now let us say that we heard the Dhamma and we are practicing accordingly. We are trying to do it as we have heard. Next time when we practice *ānāpānassati* once again images appear. Now I am fully aware of it. I know that it is like a mirage, and not real. So, I drop it. Either that, or I pay attention to the body or establish mindfulness back on the breath. Even if I cannot let go of it, I can open my eyes, and the image will be gone, because it is possible for me to see only through my eyes. So, if I can see something when my eyes are closed, it is a mind-made object. It is an illusionary thing. It is a kind of hallucination. So, why am I giving a value to a hallucination? Therefore, visualizations are not the path,

hallucinations are not the path, and visuals are not the path. The development of body awareness is very much a tangible start. You can verify the body. It is very fundamental. You can be with the body, and you can touch the body. You can feel the body.

That is why *kāyānupassanā* is a very direct path. *satipaṭṭhāna* is a direct path (*ēkāyana magga*). It does not have too many things. It is not fabricated with beautiful and wonderful things. It is taking us on a direct path. A very simple, direct path. But we have to convince ourselves, as the mind does not like simplicity. The mind likes complexity, fabrications, and the mind likes perceptions. But the path is very direct, very simple. So, we are coming back to the body, and we establish mindfulness in the body. We are starting with that.

Another area we need to pay attention to is sense restraint. Already, by using our senses, we have accumulated so many things into our mind. Even though the senses are the ones that pick up all these signs, none of the signs remain in the senses. Ultimately, all these signs occupy the mind, get stored in the mind. “My mind is already corrupted. So, let the senses be used in a mindful way. Let me be a little bit careful about my usage of the senses. Even though I can see many things, let me restrain what I see. Even though I can hear things, let me restrain what I am going to hear. Even though I can smell, taste, touch, and even think many things, let me have a little bit of restraint. This is where the *sīla* comes to the picture. So, I have to maintain certain moral standards, rather

than allowing the senses to operate the way they want, let me guard the senses." That is why guarding the senses, protecting the senses (*indriyesu guttadvāratā*), come to the picture. We have to understand the real value of the *sīla*. We have to guard the senses. Even though we have all the opportunities and enough money to buy things to enjoy the senses and gratify the senses, ultimately, we have to work hard to get rid of what we have accumulated. If you have loaded so many things and excessively gratified your senses, one day, if you want to purify yourself, you will have to work hard to clear all that is being stagnated or accumulated in the mind.

That is why we have to reflect, "What is the situation right now? How have I used my senses? As a result of the way I have used my senses, what has happened right now? I have to take responsibility, at least not to further destroy or further pollute the mind." That's why the sense restraint is important. In that context, sense restraint plays a fair role.

Venerable Mālukiyaṭṭa explains beautifully, how to establish mindfulness by saying;

*“Na so rajjati rūpesu, rūpaṃ disvā paṭissato.
virattacitto vedeti, tañca nājjhosāya tiṭṭhati.
yathāssa passato rūpaṃ, sevato cāpi vedanaṃ.
khīyati nopacīyati, evaṃ so caratī sato.
evaṃ apacinato dukkhaṃ, santike nibbānamuccati.*

A person with established mindfulness, he too can see, he too can hear. He is still operating in the world. He sees things, but with established mindfulness. He tries to be aware,

“I am in the present moment. I can see things now.” *rūpaṃ disvā paṭissato* - He is with established mindfulness. Still, he can see things. *virattacitto vedeti* - But now, he does not allow the mind to get infatuated. Rather, he protects and guards the mind. Even though he sees things, he knows the potential now. He knows the danger. “Previously, when I saw without established mindfulness, I got trapped. I started thinking. I started imagining and ended quarrelling. Let me guard myself. Now I am aware that this kind of situation is going to happen. Let me be careful.” A certain amount of attention is there. *tañca nājjhosāya tiṭṭhati* - he is not allowing the mind to get trapped nor adhere to it. Rather, he is safeguarding himself. Not allowing the mind to go and delight in it, rather prevent it. Now, he has a certain amount of mindfulness already. Mindfulness operates as a guardian, as a protector. So, it is very much like mindfulness is now being with us.

yathāssa passato rūpaṃ, sevato cāpi vedanaṃ - whatever the situation, if there are any feelings still arising, you are now aware of the feeling. If I see a beautiful picture, it can cause certain happiness in me. You are now aware of the feeling. “Now, happiness is arising, I feel a little happy about what has happened.” But the instruction is *khīyati nopacīyati, evaṃ so caratī sato* - the Buddha says, not to develop that happiness, not to develop that delight. Rather, you are working to let it go, fade away; because if I become delighted with what has arisen, if I am starting to think about it, again, I get trapped. I know the danger. So, whatever has arisen, now I allow it to fade away. *khīyati nopacīyati* - I am not going to accumulate it. I

am not going to fuel it, and I am not going to feed it. Rather, I am going to drop it. *evaṃ apacinato dukkhaṃ* - therefore, the dukkha; the suffering, whatever the agitation, which could happen as a result, is not available now. Now, I am not promoting it. *santike nibbānamuccati* - You are getting closer to *nibbāna*. You are getting closer to peacefulness. So, the operation is very much like that we have to be aware. *evaṃ so caratī sato* - one has to complete the day with some amount of mindfulness. I need to be aware of what is going on right now, maintaining mindfulness, because I am still not an Arahant. Still, the defilements are there. Still, the lust, hatred, and delusion are available. The defilements may tempt me to do this and that and be happy about it. The danger is still available, but the mindfulness is operating as a protector and as a guardian, warning me, "You are going to get trapped. You are going to react like this. Last time also, you reacted like this. Be careful." It is guarding me. It is helping me, giving me a warning. So, I can be prepared for the situation.

If you are practicing in this manner, then there is a fair chance that you will not get caught again. If something happens, you will not react to it. As we have already discussed, if I didn't have much mindfulness already established, what I see, provokes me. Immediately, anger arises. It is possible, because there may be a reason. Naturally, the mind tends to pick the signs, because the lust, anger, and hate are still available. So, they pick the signs. The action happens very quickly, recognition happens quickly, thinking

happens very quickly, and emotions rise to a high level very quickly. All these things happen very quickly.

The Buddha has explained things in a step-by-step manner, but it doesn't take a long time for these things to happen in our mind. For example, whenever we see someone, whom we don't like, immediately anger can arise. We take the signs very quickly; we think and recognize very quickly. Everything happens very quickly. But the point is that when we have developed mindfulness, at least at one level, we will become aware, "Oh, my goodness! Again, anger has risen. Again, some agitation has happened. I am going to again hit that person. I am going to again argue with the person. Can I stop? Can I avoid it?" Like that, now I have a choice. Rather than simply being a victim of this whole thing, now at least I have a choice – to step back and see it, and not to be victimized by this anger again. "Now I have a little chance to control it."

Further development of mindfulness will give you a fair chance to get to that trigger at its early stages. The anger is there, but you know it, you recognize it, and you notice it at an early stage. Then you have a fair choice. Burning is less. You have a fair choice to operate "Okay, anger is there. Now, I know how to handle it" You are not burning. When you are with that person, you can take some simple action to avoid it because still you are not confident about yourself. You can skip the situation, or you can take a different route because you do not want to face the person. As we further develop, we

may be able to recognize anger at its initiation, at its very early stage. Probably by that time, you can even deal with the person, it may be in a positive way, because you know even while talking, while being with that person, you are looking after yourself. You are aware of yourself. Even though you are talking, even though you are interacting, you have kind of another thread going on looking after yourself, being aware of what is going on in your own mind - "How am I reacting? How am I talking?"

Mindfulness development is one area to overcome all the problems that we already have discussed. Even though I am using the term 'mindfulness,' it has a much broader meaning. The development of *satipaṭṭhāna*, in that sense, is a good solution to overcome the problems we discussed. There are many areas that we need to discuss in this whole Sutta. We will discuss them one by one, step by step.

With that, I would like to conclude today's Dhamma sermon. Thank you very much for your attentive listening.



Knowing Perception

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa

“Sikkhā ekā saññā uppajjati, sikkhā ekā saññā nirujjhati”

Dear Venerable Brothers and Dhamma Friends,

We are going to start the third Dhamma sermon of this Jhāna Grove retreat. Yesterday, we started discussing how to abandon perceptions that are not useful. We spent a fair amount of time understanding how we get caught up in various signs. How signs then turn into different kinds of wrong thinking, perverted thinking, and then how it can even lead to perverted views, distorted views, and distorted conclusions. When we start overthinking, we ultimately get trapped, or get confused, leading to so many repercussions.

Then, we discussed how to abandon and how to stop overthinking. We discussed a little bit about restraining the senses; how to maintain a fair amount of restraint with regard

to guarding the senses. We understand that we are not allowing the senses to be misused now. If misuse or overuse of the senses is allowed, then again and again the mind gets corrupt. So, we are maintaining a fair amount of sense restraint and good moral conduct. That is one aspect of what we discussed. We further discussed a little bit about the development of mindfulness. When one becomes mindful, he has the capacity to be in the present moment. He is fully aware of what is going on. Since an awareness has been developed, he is now careful about how he is handling things. He is careful whenever he encounters a person or a situation, and about what might happen. So, guarding the senses become easier for him. Even when he is guarding the senses, there is still a possibility of lustful thoughts arising, or any other unwholesome thoughts arising, causing a certain amount of agitation in the mind. But if he is mindful, there is a fair chance for him to respond in a manner that will promote the fading away of all arisen thoughts. He is not promoting them, because he has understood that if he promotes them, again and again, he will get deluded. He understands that again he can get caught up, and the previously experienced *dukkha* (suffering) is going to recur. So, now he is abandoning it, and not promoting it. We touched on these points yesterday.

Now, let us look at what other strategies the Buddha has discussed. I will come back to *satipaṭṭhāna* later.

Let us start by looking with respect to the *jhāna* side. There is a very beautiful sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya, where the

Buddha discusses abandoning gross forms of perceptions. Although the Buddha particularly does not mention the term *jhāna*, the explanation given is based on the practice of making use of *jhāna*. That is actually highlighted even in the **Cūḷasuññata Sutta**. We will take both these suttas together. The Buddha particularly makes a very interesting statement; a kind of theory;

“sikkhā ekā saññā uppajjati, sikkhā ekā saññā nirujjhati”⁴ -

By means of training, you can abandon whatever the gross forms of perceptions, but you may be able to arouse and attain a more refined state of perception.

For example, we all know about the five hindrances: sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness/regrets, and doubt. As we already discussed during the Q&A session, by developing concentration factors; *vitakka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, ekaggatā*; (the applied mind, sustained attention, rapture, certain amount of happiness, and one-pointedness) one is capable of abandoning or temporarily suppressing the hindrances. The concentration helps to overcome the hindrances. This is one technique. What happens is, when the hindrances are available in the mind, they bring different kinds of perceptions. For example, if you have a lot of sensual desire operating in your mind, various kinds of lustful images and various kinds of lustful thoughts may come into your mind. Lustful images appear in your mind, as a thought is

⁴ Potṭhapāda suttaṃ (DN 09)

actually attached to an image. Because of these associations with various signs, the mind becomes fairly corrupt and lustful. Yesterday, we discussed this as well; how an un-arisen lustful thought could arise, because of our attention to this *suba saññā*, i.e. we take different images as beautiful, and think of them as something joyful. By paying attention to these thoughts again and again, lust can arise. The same thing happens with anger.

We now understand all these hindrances; either lust or anger, can be abandoned, provided we develop a fair amount of *samādhi*. As a practitioner, if you can maintain a fair amount of *samādhi*, at least to some extent, that indicates that these five hindrances are abandoned. For example, let us take *ānāpānasati*; we are paying attention again and again to the breath, abandoning many lustful thoughts, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of doubt. Many thoughts must be abandoned. Our memories and our plans must be abandoned. Only then can you apply your mind again and again to the breath. The breath is a fairly neutral object. But an interesting thing is being developed here; we are developing *vitakka* - the applied mind. When we pay close attention to the breath, we are further developing - *vicāra* - the sustained attention. As we become successful in the practice a fair amount of joy arises; may be even rapture (*pīti*) may arise. Then we feel comfortable; the body feels comfortable, and the mind becomes lighter. Happiness is there, and mind becomes one-pointed (*ekaggatā*). For example, you may now be able to continuously observe 100 breaths. Say further, you can

observe 150 breaths, and then you can observe 200 breaths. Even though we started with a very simple technique of developing mindfulness, what has happened now is you have developed more than mindfulness, you have developed concentration as well. The mind remains one-pointed. It does not want to switch to other objects. It does not want to get distracted. It does not want to get scattered. It can remain calm on the breath.

However, we are not yet in the first *jhāna*; although you may feel a fair amount of lightness, calmness, and tranquility. Now, you are not getting lustful thoughts, lustful images, or anger related images into your mind. No more political related, village related thoughts are coming to your mind. As the Buddha explained in the **Cūḷasuññata sutta**, previously, your mind was filled with so much of sensual world related perceptions; signs and marks. Now, all these are abandoned. This is the training.

‘sikkhā ekā saññā uppajjati, sikkhā ekā saññā nirujjhati’⁵ - the concentration training (*samādhi sikkhā*), that helps you to abandon all these confusing, unwholesome perceptions, marks, and signs. Now you have another sign, but it is a very refined sign. That is the sign of the concentration. For example, before you attend the *jhāna*, you may get a *nimitta* (*ānāpānasati nimitta*) - the concentration sign. It may be some sort of a light. Assume that you experienced a light. You can

⁵ Potṭhapāda suttaṃ (DN 09)

simply observe that. You can simply be with that. It is a very pleasant sign; still a sign, but a very refined sign. Assume that one day you get absorbed in it, you simply merge with it, and fully be with it. Then the mind simply associates this and nothing else. I am taking one example of the first *jhāna*.

The Buddha says;

*purimā kāma-saññā sā nirujjhati. vivekaja pītisukha sukhuma sacca saññā tasmim samaye hoti*⁶.

Previously, we had so many hindrances related, unwholesome, sensuality related perceptions, signs, and marks. Now, all that is abandoned. *purimā kāmasaññā, sā nirujjhati. vivekaja pītisukha sukhuma sacca saññā tasmim samaye hoti*. Now you have a very refined, very subtle delight, a kind of happiness. That is the only perception remaining. Although refined, what is available is still a refined perception. The Buddha does not stop here. The Buddha goes on to elaborate the second, third, and fourth *jhānas*. When one attains the first *jhāna*, he may understand that it is a fairly good state compared to where he was. But he wants to further refine that perception. Now, he gets into the second *jhāna*. There too he finds a very subtle, refined perception. He has abandoned the previous perception and has come to a new, more refined perception. From the *suññatā* (emptiness) point of view, we can say, that when one attains the first *jhāna*, you are empty of

⁶ Potṭhapāda suttaṃ (DN 09)

all sensuality related perceptions. You only have the first *jhāna* related perception. It is a very refined, very subtle, and a very sublime kind of perception. It is there. Mind is not empty of that.

Now, suppose you get into the second *jhāna*. Once you come into the second *jhāna*, it has an even further refined state of perception. You abandon previous refined perceptions, which were available at the first *jhāna* level and come to the second *jhāna* level. Still, you have a perception. You are not empty of the second *jhāna* related perception, but you are empty of the first *jhāna* related perception. You are empty of sensuality related perceptions.

The point highlighted here and explained by the Buddha to Poṭṭhapāda is, that the training helps us to abandon all the gross perceptions, and takes us to a very refined perception. When he keeps going on following this pattern, he can abandon all matter related, physical related perceptions, and he can even attain *arūpa jhāna*. At this point there are no matter related perceptions available, but you are in a complete space (*ākāśānañcāyatana*). That too is a very refined perception, and it is still available. However, all gross perceptions are not available. The Buddha takes us even further to the infinite consciousness (*viññāṇañcāyatana*), and from there, even further to the nothingness (*ākīñcaññāyatana*). There, the Buddha gives a clue to Poṭṭhapāda.

We can now understand the order as it comes one after the other. The Buddha says, once he comes to that particular

summit of perception, he comes to a kind of radical reflection. He reflects; "I was able to abandon some sort of gross perceptions, but still, I have new perceptions. I am doing this again and again. Previously, I had so much of sensuality related perceptions. Then, I intended to come to the first *jhāna*. Then, I had first *jhāna* related perceptions. Then, I intended to come to the second *jhāna*. Practicing again and again like this is somewhat of a burden for me. How about completely stopping this process by not going to a new perception, or not arousing a new perception? Instead, I am going to abandon what is available now."

You can see he is arriving at a kind of radical reflection. You can see that it is possible to come to a more and more refined perception through the training. However, it continuously goes on and on. At one point, he is concluding that he will not continue this, because he realizes that these intentions are troublesome, this thinking is troublesome, and this activity in the mind is troublesome. Instead, he calms down all the activities in the mind. He stops all formations in the mind. He completely stops different perceptions in the mind. So, he comes to a kind of radical conclusion there.

The Buddha explains that in the **Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** – '*cetayamānassa me pāpiyo, acetayamānassa me seyyo*' - continuously thinking, deciding, determining, and again and again planning the next stage, is not going to work. Let me stop thinking. Let me stop going to the next stage. Let me abandon what is currently available. That is a kind of radical

decision he arrives at. By not thinking and not imagining, he is able to abandon what is available. At that point, all the perceptions are completely abandoned. No perceptions at all. There, the Buddha says, he is touching *nirodha - nirodham phusati*⁷ - he touches the cessation. For the time being, let us say, this is the cessation of perceptions. No perceptions are there. The mind becomes completely free from perceptions.

A similar explanation is given by the Buddha in the **Cūḷasuññata Sutta**. The Buddha explains; once he enters a particular *jhāna*; may be an *arūpa jhāna*, he decides to take it to the signless state (*animitta samādhi*). Not the *nirodham phusati*. So, different mind states are there. I have taken two suttas. In the **Poṭṭhapada Sutta**, the Buddha says, once a yogi decides at a particular summit of perception, that he needs to stop now, and he is not going to develop a new perception, then he abandons existing perceptions. Thus, he is able to overcome all the different perceptions. On the other hand, in the **Cūḷasuññata Sutta**, the Buddha says, that once he comes to a certain level, he decides to turn off all the different perceptions. He lets his mind become completely signless. No signs at all. This is in a way, a kind of *samatha* approach (tranquility approach) available for one to overcome different perceptions; but it is still a temporary state. We should not think that he is now completely free from all the different

⁷ *tassa acetayato anabhisankharoto tā ceva saññā nirujjhanti, aññā ca oḷārikā saññā na uppajjanti. so nirodham phusati. - Poṭṭhapāda suttaṃ (DN 09)*

perceptions, or he becomes completely blank and he cannot remember anything. It is not like that. Temporarily, he can maintain a mind free from all distortions that happen due to perceptions. A mind free from all different obsessive thinking that happens because of perceptions. He is now temporarily free from perceptions. Once he emerges from that state, (once he 'gets up') again the typical perceptions come to the mind. It is a kind of temporary relief he has gained through *samatha* meditation.

Now, let us return to the *satipaṭṭhāna* aspect of the *vipassanā* practice. When one develops mindfulness (as we discussed yesterday), he becomes more careful. He is, in a way, mindful about what is happening right now in the present situation, so that he is not promoting too much thinking. He has understood, 'This has a great impact on the mind.' So, as much as possible, he is trying to keep his attention on his body. His objective is not to allow the mind to simply wander. He allows the mind to latch on to the body, be with the body, in a somewhat relaxed state, and he has simplified his experience. He has merely the body related perceptions; may be aches, pains, hardness, softness, etc. So many other perceptions are not there. He is fully mindful that he has some perceptions related to the body.

As he continues, because he has a fair amount of concentration, he is now able to understand various element characteristics. The mind is not distracted. The mind is focused and attentive. He can understand sometimes there are

vibrations happening, sometimes there is hardness, sometimes there is softness, sometimes there are movements, sometimes heat, and sometimes cold. From time to time, different element characteristics, different sensations are manifesting. He can pay attention to whatever the prominent sensation is. He is observing it. He is recognizing it.

In a way, we are still talking about *kāyānupassanā dhātu manasikāra* (elements meditation); but we are now developing wisdom - not merely related to *samādhi*. Now we are trying to develop a fair amount of wisdom by observing and through investigation. This investigation help us to understand the true nature of the physical phenomena or elements - how they are operating, changing, and disappearing. What happened previously was that he identified this body as 'me, myself, and I.' He was fairly deluded, but now as a result of the practice, he is beginning to understand that this body is nothing but elements. With this insight, he may be capable of reducing a fair amount of unnecessary thinking. When we grasp the body as myself, thinking that there is a person here, this body as a compact unit, this is me, myself, I am beautiful, I am so and so (name, credentials, occupation, etc.), it promotes overthinking, it promotes so much of concepts, and it promotes obsession. But now, as a result of the practice, he understands this is merely a body operating through the elements. They are being supported by various other external sources and conditions. It is a kind of dependent situation. He understands to some extent the reality with respect to the body. This understanding

alone may help to drop too much thinking, unnecessary thinking, and promote a fair amount of wisdom.

During the Q&A session, one yogi presented his report saying, he understood that only mere elements are there in the body. Whenever vibrations are there, that is all it has, nothing else. Similarly, it is the same if you look outside as well. The Buddha said,

“yā ceva kho pana ajjhattikā pathavīdhātu yā ca bāhirā pathavīdhātu pathavīdhātūvesā”⁸

he who understands whatever the elements available inside, whatever the elements available outside, are merely elements. There is no difference. We are the ones who have introduced all these demarcations. But elements are merely elements. Based on this understanding, he is now developing a fair amount of dispassion. These understandings and insights are helpful to abandon unnecessary thinking, too much delusion, ignorance, and too much information that may be available in the mind.

There may be a possibility that the mind can become completely free from all attachments even at this level. It can become completely non-grasping; unattached. *anissito ca viharati, na ca kiñci loke upādiyati*. The Buddha in fact highlighted that the potential is there to completely free the mind temporarily, even at the *kāyānupassanā* level. However, if

⁸ Dhātuvibhaṅga suttaṃ (MN 140)

we do not have much experience, even though the potential and the capacity are there even at the *kāyānupassanā* level, we can get trapped in feelings. As you feel lighter, the body feels comfortable, very soft, pleasant, and blissful, generating very pleasant feelings. You get attached to these feelings. It is possible, as these feelings are more appealing and very soft, compared to the gross body feelings. So, we can get trapped in feelings. We get attached to feelings.

At this point, we have to continue the *vipassanā* practice, by focusing on feelings - *vēdanānupassanā*. There are different feelings available. For example, pleasurable feelings are there; they come and go, they are subject to arising and passing away. Painful feelings are there; they too come and go. They are also subject to arising and passing away. Equanimous feelings are there; they also come and go, subject to arising and passing away. With this practice, he is now developing further understanding with respect to feelings. He is developing understanding and developing insights, by using feelings. He is investigating the true nature of feelings. He is not attached to feelings either. So, when we develop such understanding, it is possible to have a detached attitude in our mind towards feelings. Typically what happens is, when we get attached to feelings, we grasp feelings, and we think feelings are, 'I am, I am doing good, I am well, I am happy, I am unhappy, I am suffering.' This is how we get attached to feelings; we identify with feelings. In *vēdanānupassanā*, we can step back and watch the feelings objectively as merely feelings.

Feelings that come and go. They have the nature to arise and pass away. Accordingly, we develop this understanding.

As a result, now we stop identifying with feelings and stop preparing any kind of unhappiness or sorrow when things go wrong, when there is sickness, or pain. We understand as much as possible, it is a mere feeling. It has the nature to arise. It is arising due to contact, due to causes, and then it passes away. Feelings are merely feelings. You develop some understanding with respect to feelings. As we further develop these kinds of insights, your mind becomes relaxed, you stop too much thinking, and you drop unnecessary perceptions. A fair amount of wisdom is operating in the mind. It does not want to get trapped, get bound and feel burdened. Rather, it wants to be free. This kind of taste of freedom is something the yogi may experience from time to time. He understands now, that there is a bit of clarity in his mind. Previously, his mind was fully crowded, but now, his mind has some space. It becomes clear. Not many thoughts. There may be a few thoughts that come in between. You understand that there are gaps between thoughts. Sometimes, there can be a complete absence of thoughts. You are now tasting some amount of insights, some results of the *vipassanā* practice. We can even enjoy that. We can appreciate such a state.

Even though the body and feelings are abandoned, not attached and relinquished, in *cittānupassanā*, perceptions can arise. As we discussed even in a previous Q&A session, when

our meditation object becomes more subtle, whatever the stored images in our mind, different perceptions in the mind, can appear vividly, very beautifully. If we give some prominence to it, value to it, and importance to it, we get trapped there. As we discussed, say, your breath becomes very subtle, very calm, equanimous - at that time, an image of the Buddha appears in your mind, or some other beautiful image appears. We can get easily attracted to that image, forgetting the breath. These things are possible. This is why the Buddha mentions that perceptions are very tricky, like a mirage. We can easily get trapped in perceptions. Once we understand the trap, we are ready for it, and we can be prepared for it. When it happens the next time, you drop it, you are not attached to it, you are not giving any value to it. You clearly understand that it is a trap. You are not promoting it. You are not thinking about it. You simply come back to your body, or if you cannot, you can definitely open your eyes and drop it; because you understand these are merely traps, that you encounter in the path.

Assume you have gone through all of this. Now you are able to directly watch the mind. You can watch the mind even while walking, while sitting, or while engaged in some activity. Different thoughts are coming, and you understand that it is a thought. Previously, you did not have this capacity, and when a thought came, you immediately gave value to it, thought about it, and further added many thoughts to it. You weaved thoughts. When you keep on thinking again and again, rumination, proliferation, and all sorts of thinking

happen. As a result of the practice, now you are able to understand a thought as a mere thought. Merely as a lustful thought, or merely as a thought of anger, ill will, or jealousy. You are able to keep them in their proper place.

Sadosaṃ vā cittaṃ 'sadosaṃ cittaṃ'ti pajānāti, vītadosaṃ vā cittaṃ 'vītadosaṃ cittaṃ'ti pajānāti.

Even if a loving kindness thought arise, now you are not going to practice loving kindness, nor promote loving kindness. Rather, you understand it is a loving kindness related thought. They have the nature to come and go. It is not because the Buddha says it, but because you see it with your own wisdom. You see the true nature of how a loving kindness thought arises. If you are not promoting it, and if you are not feeding other thoughts to it, it will drop and fade away naturally. That is its intrinsic characteristic; it will fade away and disappear. Now, through the practice of *cittānupassanā*, you are also developing insights. The Buddha says,

*samudayaḍhammānupassī vā cittaṣṣiṃ viharati,
vayaḍhammānupassī vā cittaṣṣiṃ viharati,
samudayaṃvayaḍhammānupassī vā cittaṣṣiṃ viharati -*

You understand how even different thoughts are coming and going, arising and passing away. We are learning their true nature. Now we are further developing wisdom. The yogi understands now that the mind is different, and thoughts are different. You have the ability to be aware of thoughts.

Thinking is not a must. Previously, we thought that thinking was 'myself,' thinking is very important, thoughts represent me, thoughts represent my character. But now, you are not attributing that much importance to the thoughts. Thoughts become merely thoughts. They have the nature to come and go. So, you step back. You are not promoting thinking.

I will give an interesting example here. Say, you are watching a Katina Perahera (procession). You see different characters coming. The drummers are coming. They are making different drumming sounds. May be the flower bicycles are coming. You watch that. May be the dancers are coming. You watch that. Then fully decorated elephants are coming. You watch that. May be the trumpeters are also coming. You watch that. So, previously, what happened? If the dancers were very interesting, you might have danced along as well. You could not stop yourself. Once, a yogi reported, that while walking, he heard some music, and later he found that his steps were kept according to that music. It can happen. We get naturally absorbed into that music. We easily get attached to that music. We get fully operated by that music. Similarly, while we are watching a procession, if there are very interesting items displayed, we can easily get attracted. Assume a situation, where you are able to watch all these different characters by simply maintaining a fair amount of clarity in your mind. Dancers are coming. They dance and go, but you are not dancing. Flower bicycles are coming. They show different flowers and go. You watch that. Elephants are also coming. They perform, and they also go. You remain

calm. You are simply watching the characters. You do not dance with them. You do not play with them. Instead, you simply watch them come and go.

Apply the same principle to your mind. In your mind too, different dancers come, different flower bicycles come, and from time to time even elephants can come! You simply watch them without promoting them, without getting attached to them, without getting attracted to them. You know that it is a mere thought. That is why you are putting them in the proper and correct perspective. For that, we need mindfulness.

The Buddha says that we need to have clear comprehension, because we need to distinctly see things as they truly are. A lustful thought as a lustful thought. A loving kindness thought as a loving kindness thought. An angry thought as an angry thought. A jealous thought as a jealous thought. Whatever different thoughts you have, you know them exactly as they are, as mere thoughts. There is no need to identify with them as they simply pass away. You are not attributing so much value to them. You are not thinking that thoughts belong to you. You understand that 'thoughts are thoughts.' When we practice like this, then the number of thoughts becomes lesser and lesser, because we are not feeding them, we are not promoting them, and we are not getting deluded by them. They simply start passing away.

As the number of thoughts become less and less, you may understand the gaps between thoughts. The mind

becomes lighter and more spacious. A fair amount of clarity is available in the mind. Probably, you will understand that thoughts typically carry an image. For example, a lustful thought carries a lustful image (*subha saññā*). It may be something attractive. A thought is always attached to its image. Anger is also like that. When there is an angry thought, it may carry a particular person's image. It may be a particular situation. Some amount of images, perceptions, marks, and signs of that situation may be there. If you are able to pay attention to these signs and marks, you may be able to understand that these too come and go. They are merely signs. You do not need to attribute a person to it.

Now, we are going to another level. For example, while you are meditating, all of a sudden, you remember one of your relatives. Maybe that person is not in a good condition, or maybe he is hospitalized. That person's image comes to your mind. What comes is an image, but quickly we develop a feeling, and then we recognize it, we think, and we personify. We attribute a person to it. "Oh, my goodness! What is going to happen? I did not call him. I was here for many days, and I should have called him. I should have written a letter. I should have at least emailed," and so on. Without going on like that, understand that this is a mental image, a kind of perception, a kind of mark, and maybe it links to someone. However, now you are keeping it only as a sign. Similar to how we kept a thought as a thought, you can understand a sign as merely a mental image. If you practice this way, the mind becomes further cleansed. More clarity is available in the mind, more

space is available in the mind. You can understand now bodily related physical perceptions are not there. As you are not holding on to any feelings, feelings are also not there. You are not holding on to thoughts either, nor are you holding on to perceptions. You understand that they all have the nature to come. They all have the nature to go. They have the nature to arise. They have the nature to pass away. When we practice *satipaṭṭhāna*, we may be able to arrive at a point where the mind does not grasp anything in the world.

Let me connect with another Sutta here. There is a beautiful Sutta called **Attadīpa Sutta** where the Buddha highlights:

Saññāya tveva, bhikkhave, aniccatam veditvā vipariṇāmaṃ virāgaṃ nirodham, pubbe ceva saññā etarahi ca sabbā saññā aniccā dukkhā vipariṇāmadhammāti, evametam yathābhūtam sammappaññāya passato ye sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupāyāsā te pahīyanti. tesam pahānā na paritassati, aparitassam sukham viharati, sukhavihārī bhikkhu 'tadaṅganibbuto'ti vuccati.⁹

One understood that all these different perceptions, feelings, whatever the bodily phenomena, mental formations that are pursued through the senses, all have the nature of impermanence, all have the nature to change, all have the nature to fade away, all have the nature to cease. This understanding is through your own investigation, and not

⁹ Attadīpa suttaṃ (SN 22.43)

merely because the Buddha said so. It is not just because we have heard it, but we have investigated through our own mindfulness, through our developed concentration, by maintaining a proper balance of effort, through investigation. You are practicing *vipassanā* method again and again, and as a result, you experience this through your own capacity. Now you are sure about it. Not because it is written in the book, but because you saw it. You understood it through your own experience. Now you are quite sure about it. There is no need to blindly believe in someone, but it is something that you are quite sure about.

This is a point where we need to be fairly thorough, because as long as we do not have enough understanding, we go ahead and grasp, giving it more value. The more understanding we have, then naturally our mind starts dropping things, relinquishing things, abandoning things, and effortlessly letting things go. If we do not have enough understanding, then letting go might not be easy. We are still holding onto something, still thinking about something, still imagining about something, and still a lot of perceptions are coming and crowding the mind. Then, the mind again gets filled.

May be when certain insights are practiced, temporarily, you may feel that your mind gets clear once everything is abandoned. For example, a pool of water (a river) may be covered with moss and different algae. You know there is water underneath. If you remove the impurities

with your hand, then you can clearly see the water. But once you take your hand out of the water, again the moss covers the water. Similarly, these understandings and insights help us to temporarily abandon defilements, abandon too much thinking, unnecessary perceptions, different signs, and marks. Temporarily, you get quenched.

This is highlighted in this **Attadīpa Sutta**.

evametaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya passato ye sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupāyāsā te pahīyanti.

Previously, you were attached to so many things. As a result of that, you were going through a lot of anger, sorrow, lamentation, and despair - so much suffering. But now, because of the understanding, all that has reduced – there is less worrying, less regrets, less thinking, and not much fantasizing and not much thinking. So, the mind becomes fairly calm and relaxed. A fair amount of clarity is there. *tesaṃ pahānā na paritassati* - once all that is abandoned, the mind is not agitated. It remains very quiet, very calm, very tranquil, and relaxed. *aparitassaṃ sukhaṃ viharati* - it is a peaceful abiding. There is no agitation. There is no suffering. There is no inner burning. Therefore, you are very happy, very relaxed, calm, tranquil, and peaceful. *sukhavihārī bhikkhu 'tadaṅganibbuto'ti vuccati*. The Buddha mentions, to that level, the yogi is quenched. Temporarily, he has attained *nibbāna*. It is a temporary quenching. Because of wisdom, *vipassanā* insights are operating in the mind, and they take care of abandoning all the unnecessary defiled states. So, you are able

to experience peace. It is a kind of stillness of the mind; nevertheless, it is a temporary state.

For example, while at the retreat, you are able to practice smoothly, everything is happening properly, no doors are opening and closing, and people are not dropping in and out; you attain this state of peaceful abiding – *tadaṅganibbuti*. But all of a sudden, if an intruding thought comes, again you may lose this state of peaceful abiding. In case any disturbance happens, or you couldn't practice for some time, then you may lose this state. Again, too much thinking can happen, again, too many images can crowd your mind, and again agitation can happen. We need to understand that even though the *vipassanā* practice is capable of cleansing the mind, it is still temporary.

As you practice this way, you may probably understand that even though your eyes are open, the mind is not interested in capturing too much information. It is not going after what you see. This is a result of the practice. It is another quality being developed as a result of the practice. Previously, while walking, in case there was a sound, you would have immediately got distracted and started thinking and imagining. You would have even stepped out of the path and checked it out, getting completely distracted. However, if the same thing happens right now, the mind will remain calm. That is the beauty. That is the strength. You may even look around while walking, but the mind remains with you. It is an additional benefit you experience. Previously, you could not

do that. You had to maintain a proper distance. You had to do things in a controlled manner. But as you move forward, as the insights are strengthening, you feel more relaxed. You can even look around when walking, while still paying attention to your foot, and the mind does not get distracted.

When you come to this level, *anissito ca viharati*, and *tadaṅganibbuti* - a temporary quenching is available, a temporary non-grasping state of mind is available. This means you are not keeping your mind at any place. *na ca kiñci loke upādiyati* - the mind is not grasping anything in the world. Mind does not have any object as such. You may see things, but it does not register in the mind. It does not disturb the mind. No thoughts are arising in the mind with respect to what you see. You may hear things, but no thoughts are arising with respect to what you hear. Similarly, you may smell, touch and taste. Thoughts may come from time to time. But they are all abandoned. This peaceful state starts remaining with you.

This is something that we need to experience. If you are practicing *vipassanā*, or if you are practicing *satipaṭṭhāna*, this is a kind of state that we have to arrive at. If you understand that your mind has this kind of capacity, you need to ask yourself, "I have been practicing for several years now. Is this kind of capacity being developed in my mind now? When the eye sees things, does the mind remain uninvolved? Even though the ear hears things, does the mind remain uninvolved? Even though the nose can feel odours, does the mind remain

uninvolved? Even though the tongue may feel different tastes, does the mind remain uninvolved?" The mind does not want to think too much about it, mind does not want to write a book, does not want to write a poem, does not want to think about it. Now the mind prefers seclusion. The mind likes its peacefulness. The peacefulness becomes something readily available. Something quite significant.

The Buddha highlights this state to Bāhiya. This is the way to restrain yourself. So, once you arrive at this capacity, you better develop it further. The Buddha says,

*Diṭṭhe diṭṭhamattaṃ bhavissati, sute sutamattaṃ bhavissati, mutemutamattaṃ bhavissati, viññāte viññātamattaṃ bhavissati. evañhi te, bāhiya, sikkhitabbaṃ*¹⁰

When you are capable of maintaining the mind, even though your eyes may see things, the mind remains calm, and you are able to abandon what you see. It does not disturb your mind. Even though you hear sounds, it does not disturb your mind. The mind remains calm. Even though you smell different odours, the mind remains calm. It does not disturb the mind. From time to time, even thoughts may come. But they do not register as you do not promote thinking. You are not going into obsessive thinking. Thoughts come and go. You have developed a mindful space. Now the Buddha advises to

¹⁰ Bāhiya suttaṃ - Udānapāḷi, bodhivaggo

further train, to further restrain, to further develop this state, and to dwell in it.

The same point is highlighted in the **Indriyabhāvanā Sutta (MN 152)** as well. Once you arrive at this kind of a state, agitation can still happen; because the defilements are still there in the mind. The possibility is still available. Certain thoughts can intrude. Certain images can intrude. Assume you are a young person, and while you are walking you see an old woman; but you are able to maintain your mind. But what if you see a beautiful girl? Probably your mind might get involved. You need to understand that, still the potential is there for lustful tendencies to come up. Certain thoughts may not penetrate inside, but certain thoughts will still penetrate. Certain images may not penetrate, but certain images will still penetrate.

Now the Buddha gives a warning. In case, due to a little trigger, such a penetration happens, and a disturbance occurs in your mind. The mind gets agitated, and you become happy, elated. The Buddha says, not to stay there. But to come back quickly to the previous, neutral, equanimous stage. How quickly? That depends on your practice. That is why in the **Indriyabhāvanā Sutta** - a very practical sutta - the Buddha says; not to indulge in whatever the agitated state is. To get back to where you were, the middle, very much like the baseline, to touch the baseline. It is very neutral, very calm, very relaxed, and very peaceful. Basically, nothing is there. However, from time to time, agitations can happen, certain

images can penetrate, you might tend to think, or you might become a little emotional again. The Buddha says not to encourage any of these.

The Buddha recommends a different technique here. But the goal is very much the same. If you become agitated again, the Buddha says, to understand this agitated state as a gross state, compared to the very simple, calm, and relaxed, state you were in, where there was not much activity in the mind. Compared to the previous state, the agitated state is very gross (*oḷārika*). Do not stay in this agitated state, but return to that calm, neutral, and relaxed state. The gross state is a burden to the mind. Do not stay there. The Buddha says to contemplate that the agitated state has happened because of constructions. You have added your own stuff, your own assessments, and your own judgments. For example, once you saw the image of that girl, you added your own stuff. You have attributed your own stuff. That is why you have got agitated again, and your mind has become elated. It is a situation that was constructed. You see the constructed nature of this new state. So, return to the previous state. *etaṃ santam etaṃ pañitam yadidaṃ upekkhā* - That previous state is sublime, that is more peaceful, that is equanimous. But it may appear boring, with nothing much to do, isn't it? Just be! No thoughts. No images. People ask me, 'It is boring Bhante. Am I going in the correct direction? I cannot feel much here. I feel lost. I feel secluded. Am I practicing the correct path?'

Actually, that is why the *sutamaya nāṇa* is fairly important to give us the assurance that we are on the correct path. Because even though we may arrive at a reasonable level of progress, if we are not properly tallying the practice with the Buddha's teaching, we may even devalue what we have experienced. That is why the Dhamma is utterly important. Some encouragement is extremely important.

Another important thing to observe at this point is, there is no presence of an ego at this level. You cannot feel an ego here, you cannot feel a kind of boosted person here. It is a very neutral state. For example, you go to a cafeteria to buy a beverage to quench your thirst. Are you buying a bottle of water? or are you buying a cappuccino? Are you buying milk or an orange drink? So many varieties are available. So, what are you going to buy for your thirst? Coca-Cola? Fanta? Who is going for water? Water is very boring, isn't it? Water is just water. So, the mind, while with nothing, is like water. Nothing is there. Very neutral. No taste as such. Who likes it? Water is difficult to sell. That is why Bhante Dhammajiva says, that this path is difficult to market. We have to teach a lot. Otherwise, people will go for some other beautiful thing. They will go for Coca-Cola, or they will go for cappuccino. Although many interesting varieties are available, they can cause sicknesses, may be diabetes, they can cause a little agitation in the mind. If you drink too much, you can feel sick. Many possibilities are there. But water? There is no harm. Even if you drink too much, there is not much harm.

Likewise, the unagitated state of mind, or non-grasping state of mind may appear to be boring, or may appear to be monotonous. But even scientific research has shown that what is good for a healthy mind is an equanimous, balanced state of mind and not an elated or a worried state of mind. Here, we are coming to a fairly healthy equilibrium of the mind, a very balanced state of mind.

In summary, in the **Bāhiya Sutta**, the Buddha highlights: if you are able to maintain a mind like this, by not grasping anything in the world – i.e. what is seen is not grasped; what is heard is not grasped; what is cognized is not grasped; what is sensed is not grasped - then you are not making a 'self.' You are not there on the external side of seen, heard, smelled, touched, and thought.

Similarly, if we say, "I am seeing things," you are making a self here. "I am hearing it. I am the one who heard it first;" you are making a self here. "I am the one thinking." You are making a self here. Thoughts may be external, but the thinker is here. Sight is external, but there is a seer. Sound may be external, but there may be a listener. You are making a self here. Is it possible for us to stop the making of a seer when we see things? Is it possible for us to stop making a listener when we hear things? Is it possible for us to stop making a thinker when there are thoughts? A couple of years ago, Mark Epstein, a Buddhist psychotherapist published a beautiful book titled "Thoughts without a Thinker." Thoughts are there, but there is no thinker. It is quite against Descartes's statement, "I think,

therefore, I am." Thinking is there. So, I am here. But Mark Epstein is saying in his book "Thoughts without a thinker" there may be thoughts, but there is no thinker.

Anyway, why bother? Thoughts are there, let them go. You mind your own business! Now we are coming to a very beautiful state, where a kind of awareness is there – but without making a self. Senses are operating – but not making a self.

We will discuss this further tomorrow. With that, I would like to conclude today's Dhamma sermon. Thank you very much for your attentive listening.



Non-Grasping and Signless

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa

“Katamā ca, āvuso, animitto cetovimutti?”

Dear Venerable Brothers and Dhamma Friends,

We are going to start the fourth Dhamma sermon.

Yesterday, we discussed to the point where a yogi is capable of maintaining his mind without any grasping. We discussed, particularly about perceptions, talking about various signs and marks, and the impact they make on the mind. Also, we discussed on *jhāna*. How one can attain various *jhānas*, successively, abandoning gross perceptions and attaining more and more refined perceptions, and ultimately getting into a complete, signless state. Then we explained the same process through the practice of *vipassanā*, and how one can begin to understand various phenomena with wisdom.

For example, in *kāyānupassanā*, you are keeping your attention on various bodily phenomena, (the form aggregate) and there you are able to understand their true nature. In *vēdanānupassanā*, you are able to maintain attention on various feelings (pleasurable feelings, painful feelings, or equanimous feelings), and you understand their true nature. In *cittānupassanā*, you are able to understand the true nature of different kinds of thoughts arising, and the true nature of various perceptions. And in *dhammānupassanā*, all five aggregates are visited again and again to understand their true nature.

Samudayadhammānupassī vā, vayadhammānupassī vā, samudayavayadhammānupassī vā – a fair amount of investigation helps us to understand the true nature of different condition phenomena. This understanding is based on the *vipassanā* practice. It is not a forceful abandonment, rather, it is a natural process of letting go that happens as a result of the practice. When one has understood their true nature (*yathābhūta ñāṇadassana*), then *nibbidā virāga* is obvious. i.e. disenchantment and dispassion are inevitable results. When disenchantment and dispassion are there, relinquishment is another inevitable result. So, the relinquishment, abandonment, and letting go happen naturally. As a result of the mind letting go of everything, it grasps nothing. It does not want to associate anything. It is capable of maintaining its own independence - a kind of free mind. *anissito ca viharati, na ca kiñci loke upādiyati* - the mind has the capacity to maintain itself without associating anything, without lingering on anything,

without keeping its foot on anything - not grasping anything in the world.

This non-grasping state of the mind was discussed yesterday. We also discussed with reference to the Buddha's advice to Bāhiya in the **Bāhiya Sutta**. The Buddha advises; now, make this state abundant, make it as a kind of restraint. When you see things, keep it only to 'mere seeing' - *ditṭhe ditṭhamattaṃ bhavissati*. When you hear something, it is 'merely heard.' Not to go on and on. Let what you have heard be just what you have heard. Similarly, if you have recognized any kind of odour, taste, or tangible, keep it only to that level of mind state. Keep the mind as much as possible in that non-grasping state. Similarly, when a thought comes to mind, do not go on and on thinking, rather, let it go. Keep the thought to a 'mere thought.'

This is continuous training. *evañhi te, bāhiya, sikkhitabbaṃ*. The Buddha says to Bāhiya, 'This is the way you need to restrain yourself.' One can arrive at this kind of a non-grasping state through the *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. So, he needs to make this state abundant, make it more and more available to him. Suppose, during sitting meditation, he is able to maintain such a non-grasping state for 10 minutes, he needs to develop it to 15 minutes, and then to 20 minutes, and keep developing it to 30, 40, and 45 minutes. Now you are making it abundant. You may need a certain amount of practice in order to reach that level, because your mind is yet to understand this as a mind-state. You may need a little bit of

initiation; may be through *kāyānupassanā*, may be through *cittānupassanā*, you develop wisdom, and you come to a certain level, and then abandon everything, making the mind temporarily released. Now you can maintain that temporarily released state.

Similarly, you have to develop this during walking meditation. The interesting thing is that while walking, you can see things, you can hear things, and probably you can even smell, taste, or touch things. Although all these things are available, still the mind becomes released. This is a very interesting phenomenon. While sitting, you have experienced this released state of mind in a kind of controlled environment with your eyes closed, with your body still, and may be in a silent environment. Are you able to get such a state of mind even while walking?

You can understand it is not dependent on any deep concentration, rather, the main influence is coming through wisdom. Wisdom is taking care of the abandonment – in all different postures; while sitting, while walking, while lying down, and while standing. Now you maintain this further and further, keeping the mind released, keeping the mind in this non-grasping state. It is a kind of training in which we are expanding and enhancing our capacity within.

When you are practicing in this way, the Buddha says: There should be a sense of happiness, calmness, and tranquility in your mind. Mind is not getting to *soka parideva*

dukkha domanassa upāyāsā te pahīyanti – mind is slowly abandoning all kinds of suffering, lamentation, and worries.

Tesaṃ pahānā na paritassati - there is no agitation in the mind. *aparitassaṃ sukhaṃ viharati* - this person lives a happy life, a contented life. *sukhavihāram bhikkhu 'tadaṅganibbuto'ti vuccati*. As we discussed in the Attadīpa Sutta (SN 22.43), the Buddha emphasizes that this is a temporary quenching, dependent on wisdom. It takes care of maintaining the mind in a very pleasant abiding without grasping anything, without holding anything, and without associating anything, with the amount of wisdom we have developed. The mind is quite happy. It is not the kind of happiness with a lot of blissfulness or too many pleasurable feelings; rather, it is a state closer to equanimity, more into contentment. So, he is maintaining such a state of mind.

Now, we can get on to a further development; the signless concentration (*animitta samādhi*). When one is developing this kind of ability, that state becomes fairly registered in his mind. We came to this point through *vipassanā* practice; may be using *dhātu manasikāra* - elements meditation, may be using *vēdanānupassanā* - observing various characteristics of the feelings, may be using *cittānupassanā* - observing characteristics of the thoughts. So, this has given us a kind of momentum to build wisdom. Then only the mind gets released. Now, you are dwelling in this released state for longer periods, which enables the mind to recognize this state, to know that you are there, and that it is quite a good state. It

is quite pleasant, with no burdens, and there is no friction in the mind. This is a pleasant state of mind. Thus, the more you dwell in this state, it gets further registered in the mind.

Now, is it possible to quickly jump to this level without going through the practice? Is it possible to quickly settle our mind in a released state, without going through each and every meditation practice of *dhātu manasikāra*, *ānāpānasati*, *vēdanānupassanā* or *cittānupassanā*? That is an interesting experiment one can do. May be one might be successful, or sometimes might not be successful, because the necessary wisdom might be available in the mind, or might not be available, or it is available but not yet persistent in the mind. In case you have only a limited amount of capacity, then even if you establish your mind there, it will last only for a few minutes, and again it will get entangled in some kind of thought; or some image, or a little grasping. The grasping can happen because the momentum, the strength, and the support coming through wisdom are not yet adequate. But the more you try, the more you become capable of maintaining that non-grasping state of mind. You do not need to go through the systematic practice now to get to that state, as you have already had a fair amount of practice. Say now you are able to maintain that non-grasping state for 45 minutes. As you continuously practice this way, this state gets more and more registered in your mind. Now you can quickly take your mind there, and just be there, without going through that step-by-step process.

Once there, you can now get on to signless concentration. There is a fair amount of information available in **Mahavedalla Sutta** about the *animitta samādhī*.

Katamā ca, āvuso, animittā cetovimutti? What is this signless concentration?

sabbanimittānaṃ amanasikārā animittaṃ cetosamādhīṃ upasampajja viharati.

Without paying attention to any signs, you are now keeping your attention on nothing.

We cannot call it even space; it is more like the absence of everything. When you go through the *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, again and again, as I have described, maintaining yourself in that non-grasping state of mind, the mind recognizes a kind of emptiness, a kind of absence of anything, because there is nothing to associate. There are no thoughts there, there are no signs, and there are no elements there. You are not paying your attention to anything purposefully.

This state of mind now gets well registered in your mind. As the practice continues, the Yogi may be able to be in this state even when he is not meditating. He may be able to maintain the mind without paying attention to signs, even when his eyes are open. Similarly, even though he hears sounds, he may not pay attention to those signs available in the sounds. Typically, in the Dhamma, in the commentary, the signless concentration is explained as a way of understanding the nature of impermanence. As conditioned phenomena

quickly arise and pass away, it is difficult to pick a sign. Typically, in order for some signs or marks to register in the sense base, they should exist for at least a couple of seconds. For example, if there is a sound and it quickly disappears, then I might not hear it as it did not register in my eardrum. It needs a certain amount of time to exist in order to be heard. But in the event that things quickly arise and pass away, one becomes unable to pick up the marks of that phenomenon.

For example, when you are practising *vēdanānupassanā*, at the beginning, you may be able to understand a pleasurable feeling as a pleasurable feeling, a painful feeling as a painful feeling, and an equanimous feeling as an equanimous feeling. You may be able to categorize them differently. Later, when you sharpen mindfulness, and sharpen clear comprehension, you will realise that these feelings do not last for a long time. They are quite momentary. Yes, there are different feelings, but they are very momentary. Momentary and impulse-like. You can't put a label as such to indicate whether it is pleasurable, painful, or equanimous. It is very difficult to differentiate, because they come and go very quickly. You see it like a flux, a vibration, a kind of coming and going, a kind of mere feeling. The point is that at this level, we cannot give it a name, we cannot put a label, we cannot give a sign, because feelings are quickly arising and passing away.

When the mind cannot capture a sign, the mind tends to abandon things, because it is a must to capture a sign in order to grasp. But when signs are not visible, when it is

signless, everything may be abandoned and temporarily released - *animitta, vimokkhamukha* - this is the door to *nibbāna* through signless. This is achieved by particularly seeing the impermanent, transient characteristics of phenomena. This is one way of attaining signless state.

Through the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, you further enhance that unattached, non-grasping state longer and longer. You may have had a taste of signless momentarily. But as you practice non-grasping, letting go becomes more predominant. The mind is not grasping things, not holding things anymore. It has existed in this state for quite a long time. When all these capacities and skills are being developed, the yogi may be further capable of abandoning signs by not paying attention to anything, keeping attention only on pure emptiness – a kind of blank state, kind of an empty state of mind.

Then the question is, how is one going to maintain this state? This question is asked in the **Mahā Vedalla Sutta**

“Kati pan’āvuso, paccayā animittāya ceto, vimuttiyā ṭhitiyā?”

What are the reasons or supports for one to maintain this signless state, signless concentration?

sabbanimittānañca amanasikārā - One support is that you should not pay attention to any signs now. In case you pay attention to signs, again you might get trapped. So, you should not pay attention to signs.

animittāya ca dhātuyā manasikāro - Next, you need to pay attention to nothing, kind of a blank state. You are paying attention to that blank state, nothing state, empty state. You are purposely abandoning the signs.

For that, you need previous experience and training - *pubbe ca abhisāṅkhāro*.

In order to maintain a signless state for a long time, there are three requirements. Firstly, you need to have an intention; the intention to want to do this ("Okay, I am going to do this!") Next, you need to know what you are going to do - i.e. not pay attention to any signs - that is the second requirement. And the third requirement is to pay attention to nothing. You have to pay attention to the empty state. This way, he can maintain that signless state for a long time.

Interestingly, the Buddha has highlighted that one can come to the same state of signless through attainment of *jhāna* through the practice of *samatha* meditation, as well as through the practice of *vipassanā* meditation techniques. This indicates that *samādhi* is not the primary focus here. The important aspect is the process of letting go. If you are able to let go of the signs, then you can maintain your attention to nothing. You can be there for a long time, depending on the capacity to let go of things. That letting go is not forceful. One should be able to maintain a signless state in any posture; while standing, while sitting, while lying down, or while walking. Now it is a matter of training.

The **Mahāsuññata Sutta** explains how to expand this emptiness and this signless state in all comprehensive daily activities and daily living. We can see that signless and emptiness are fairly related. We can say that not picking any signs and being in signless, is a state that is empty of a self, and what belongs to a self. On one hand, in signless, we are not picking any signs, and on the other hand, empty means (as explained earlier when defining emptiness as stated in the **Cūḷasuññatasutta Sutta**), it is empty of whatever signs that belong to the mundane world. You may end up with only having signs that belong to the monastery. Then you abandon the monastery related signs as well. But you may still have signs that belong to the body; i.e. elements. You are still not empty of that. Then you can abandon three elements and focus on one particular element, say the earth element. Then you are empty of the other three elements, but you are not empty of the earth element.

Thus, as we go through the *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, one understands the non-self-nature in the context of *suññata* – emptiness. *suññamidaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā* - it is empty of a self and what belongs to self. That is a very critical definition. It is an insight. You cannot simply program your mind to believe, ‘I am not here. I do not have anything.’ Rather, the practice has to convince you. *Anatta* - The non-self-nature has to be understood. As a result of the understanding, the mind naturally starts abandoning things. ‘Nothing belongs to me, and there is no I.’ There is no self, and nothing belongs to self. If one is capable of maintaining signless, an advantage is that

one can understand how I-making happens, how self-making happens, and how again and again a possessing attitude happens in the mind.

Even though to some extent we may have tasted the non-self-nature, the tendency is still available in the mind to once again create a self. Therefore, signless is a very good platform to understand how we create a self, as it can be visualized, properly traced, and properly noticed while dwelling in signless.

Now let us look at how to further develop signless. This is discussed at length in the **Mahāsuññata Sutta** in the Majjhima Nikāya. It is explained that we can develop it in all postures. You may have started the process probably while sitting, but it has to be developed while walking, while standing, while lying down – in any posture. You are developing it as much as possible, trying to particularly understand whether there are any defilements.

Evam maṃ caṅkamantaṃ nābhijjhādomanassā pāpakā akusalā dhammā anvāsavissantī'ti

He is continuously reflecting to know, if there are any defilements in the mind, while standing, sitting down, lying down, and walking.

He is using this signless state to purify the mind. That is an advantage, in a way, for us to understand that this is a very good platform, a very clean platform to maintain our

mind, so that even the slightest defilement could be easily visible, easily traceable.

Assume that you have a dirty piece of cloth, full of impurities. There are different kinds of dirt, and it is fully discoloured. If another drop of dirt is mixed, it might not even be visible, because the cloth is already quite dirty. What if you have a completely clean, white cloth? Even if a little dust particle gets on it, it will quickly be visible, because it is pure, completely white. The signless state of mind is something like that. When the mind becomes completely pure, basically there is nothing there. When even a thought arises, we may be able to trace it. When even a particular image appears in the mind, we may be able to notice it. Whenever grasping happens, we may be able to notice it. Therefore, it is a very good platform for us to maintain, in order to recognize defilements.

That is what is highlighted in the **Mahāsuññata Sutta**. Whenever any defilement arises, you may be able to trace it. Similarly, in speech, the Buddha gives very practical advice regarding speech. As we all know, in our daily lives, no one can simply stay without talking. So, let's say he gets an idea that he has to talk. Now he is concerned about what he is going to talk about. The Buddha explains in detail that there are 32 different topics that are harmful and not useful to us. You may have heard about the 32 unskillful talks; for example, talking about politics, about trade, about kings, about the queens, about the ministers, about wars, basically, whatever we talk about in our daily lives will be there in the list of 32! In

a way, there's really nothing to talk about when we consider the topics in the 32 list!

In that case, is there anything we can talk about? Yes, the Buddha recommends talking about the Dhamma, to talk about putting more effort into the development of *sīla*, *samādhi*, *pañña* (development of ethical conduct, development of concentration, and development of wisdom). Further, the Buddha recommends talking about Dhamma related topics. This way, a fair amount of awareness and concern is there about what we are saying. Speech is carefully handled now. The idea is not to allow the mind to get polluted and get defiled again.

What about thinking? What are we going to think about now? There too, the Buddha highlights, not to think about thoughts that are not useful to you, thoughts that are not useful to the others, and thoughts that are not useful to both parties. Think thoughts that are only useful, think thoughts that are only beneficial. Now we can say that the thinking happens under our control. Previously, thinking was, a kind of situation that just kept going on and on, where I did not have much control. I was a victim of thinking. As we practice more and more, conceptual proliferation (*papañca*), too much thinking, and overthinking, has to be abandoned as much as possible. That is a must! A great emphasis has to be given on abandoning thoughts, without which, we cannot silence the mind.

Let us assume, as an example, that you used to write novels, and now you write short stories. After sometime you may start writing essays. And later you may write only sentences. Then, maybe you will write only SMS, or may be a WhatsApp message, and then you might only use short signs. Similarly, the mind must be trained to be quiet without words. This inner silence is something that is beautiful. It is something that we need to start enjoying. We have to experience this kind of an inner silence. Without experiencing it, one might feel such a state of silence is very boring, or maybe even useless.

Let us take it from a different angle. By thinking, we keep torturing the mind. How about giving it a rest now? How about giving it some kind of calmness? How about giving it some tranquility by not dumping too much garbage into it? How about protecting the mind? All the skills we have developed through *vipassanā* practice are for the well-being of the mind, for the proper evenness of the mind. We have to protect the mind in a skillful way. All the strength is available now, all the tools are available to guard the mind. So, let us protect it. Therefore, the inner silence; the inner quiet attitude, is something we need to protect.

In the **Sakkapañha Sutta (DN)**, and in many other suttas, the Buddha highlights that you may be able to develop to a fair level in a wholesome way with the practice of *vitakka* and *vicāra* (thinking and pondering). However, the most sublime thing is that we have to abandon even that

wholesome thinking, and keep the mind in silence. Someone can ask, "Isn't the practice geared to generate only wholesome thoughts; and abandon all unwholesome thoughts? Why can't we maintain only wholesome thoughts?" That is a valid question.

But there may be a possibility to even abandon wholesome thoughts, because they too are conditioned. So, in the *cittānupassanā*, you may understand that even though it's a thought of loving kindness, it has the nature to come and go. Even though it is a thought of ill will, it also has the nature to come and go. So, we cannot find refuge in thinking. Thinking is a conditioned phenomenon. Silence of the mind goes beyond that, silence of the mind indicates, in a way, getting closer to *nibbāna*. You are not dependent on thinking. Rather, you are now getting more into that silence. So, inner silence is there for a reason. We need to start appreciating this state. Keep the mind quiet.

Ajahn Brahm gives a very good example, saying that one can watch a cricket match while listening to the commentary. Your understanding, your enjoyment, and your appreciation of that cricket match are influenced by what the commentator is saying. Isn't that correct? Suppose two countries are playing, and let us assume that the commentator has a bias towards a particular country. If he has a bias towards a particular country, he may be commenting according to his preference. While watching the cricket match, we are being influenced by his own comments. Our enjoyment

is being conditioned by what he is saying. How about watching the match in complete silence, with no commentary? You are simply watching the match, may be on a large screen where you can clearly see the entire ground. Or may be you are at the ground. Either way, you are watching the match in complete silence. Then, only your influences, your judgment, and your preferences may be working, as no sound is coming from the outside. Similarly, are you able to see anything with a silent mind, without making any judgments, without applying your pre-conditioned ideas to what you are seeing? Can you have your meals with a silent mind? Can you walk while maintaining a silent mind? That is something that we can try.

We need to train ourselves to maintain a silent mind. Thinking is not a 'must do' in our lives. Thinking now becomes a kind of tool, that is used only when necessary. We do not think when it is not necessary. As stated as a concluding point in the **Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta** in Majjhima Nikāya – *vasī vitakkapariyāyapathesu* - one becomes a master in thinking. You can see how beautifully the Buddha has explained this same point in many different suttas, taking from different angles. You become the master of thinking because you think only when you need to think. Other times, the mind remains silent, no thinking. The Buddha advises to think only about what is beneficial. When you are thinking, you are now fully aware of what you are thinking. You are the master of thinking. Defilements are not taking you for a ride. Rather, you are allowing the mind to think what you want to

think, then you finish thinking, and you stop the thinking. Reduce the volume!

The Buddha says in the **Mahāsuññata Sutta**, again and again, to constantly reflect about what is available in your mind.

abhikkhaṇaṃ sakaṃ cittaṃ paccavekkhitabbaṃ. atthi nu kho me imesu pañcasu kāmaguṇesu aññatarasmiṃ vā aññatarasmiṃ vā āyatane uppajjati cetaso samudācāro'ti?

What is still available in your mind? Are there any thoughts or any obsessions going on, even from time to time?

Let us say, yesterday, you watched a drama and you thoroughly enjoyed it. Today, you are trying to practice signless, trying to maintain an empty mind. From time to time, certain scenes, or certain episodes of that drama, might appear in your mind. Images keep popping up again and again in your mind. Why does this happen? Because you have enjoyed it. You should be able to notice this process. Let us take another scenario; say, you had an argument with someone. But now you are calming down and trying to maintain yourself. However, bits and pieces of what happened probably keep popping up in your mind. You should be able to notice what is happening. All that pops up, all those advertisements, all the momentary kind of little disturbances happening in your mind should be visible. And when that happens, can you notice if there is any kind of agitation in the mind? Is it causing any kind of mental excitement? In case,

excitement does happen, you need to return to the unexcited state, that non-grasping state, that unagitated state as quickly as possible. That is the bottom line.

Yesterday, we also discussed in the **Indriyabhāvanā Sutta**, the beautiful simile the Buddha gives about how quickly we need to get our mind back to the non-grasping state. For example, when you are seeing things, in case you do get agitated, the Buddha says, you need to return 'in a blink of an eye.' Similarly, when you hear something, if you get agitated, in a blink of an eye, you need to return. So, that is the reference the Buddha is giving. You can see, as a teacher, the Buddha has given a very tough reference. But that is the target. Are you able to return in a blink of an eye? You need to maintain that non-grasping state, that very pure undefiled state of mind, for as long as possible. And in case any kind of agitation happens, you need to very quickly return.

At the beginning, this practice may appear to be very difficult. Some of you may be beginners, and you may be feeling so. But the interesting thing is, the more we practice, the more you become capable and confident about your own progress. The more we practice, the skills become readily available to us. The practice itself becomes easier.

For example, in the **Indriyabhāvanā Sutta**, for the typical practitioner, the Buddha says, you probably have to do a little bit of reflection to return when the mind gets disturbed. For example, if your mind gets excited, you need to understand that this excited state is somewhat gross. You

understand ‘previously, you were in a fairly refined, very soft, very simple, serene, calm, quiet, and peaceful state. Where you are now is a gross state; it is a burden. So, better to get back to the previous state.’ By reflecting this way, you may engage in a little bit of thinking. It may take a few minutes.

Otherwise, the Buddha says, you need to understand that it is a kind of conditioned state. You have prepared that state by putting your own two cents. That is why you have become excited. You have put your own influence on it. You are the one who constructed it. So, this new state is a constructed state, a conditioned state. See that it is *saṅkhatam* - a constructed state. Where you were, was closer to an unconditioned state. You were simply there. Doing nothing. Fairly empty. No activities. Quite signless. Closer to *nibbāna*. So, return from the conditioned, constructed state to the unconditioned, signless state. This is how the Buddha instructs the typical practitioner.

Suppose, one day the yogi becomes a *sekha* - a trainee or a *sotāpanna*, then, the Buddha advises differently. He says, now you do not need to practice all these steps. However, because he is still a trainee and not an Arahant, the possibility is still there for grasping to happen, excitement and agitation to occur in the mind. In case it happens, then the trainee should be ashamed of what has happened - *aṭṭīyati harāyati jigucchati*. Be ashamed of what has happened because you understood, “I have to maintain a peaceful state of mind, an unagitated state of mind, a non-grasping state of mind. This is

the place I have to be. But this fool has again come to this excited state. What a shame!" So, that shame alone is enough to return to the previous state. As a parent, when we are nurturing and educating a child, at the beginning, you have to do a lot of things for him, because he doesn't have his own understanding. But later, as he matures, you may simply indicate the right direction to him. You may not need to spend hours advising or punishing him. But by simply giving him a little hint, he will get back on track. It is the same practice with our mind.

When one is abandoning defilements and is maintaining a pure state of mind for a fair period of time, even attainments are possible. At this point, let us talk a little bit further on other reflections possible for a *sotāpanna*. There are seven reflections explained in the **Kosambiya Sutta**. I will briefly explain these.

In this sutta, the Buddha invites us to look at the mind. 'How is it behaving?' Are there any obsessions still not abandoned in the mind? For example, say, you are in love with someone, so you are listening to music, talking; self-talking, thinking, fantasizing, writing letters or emails, and sending WhatsApp messages; many sensual/lustful thoughts are occupying your mind. All these are obsessions. Or, you may have ill will related thoughts about someone you had an argument with earlier, and for hours you keep thinking about what you said, what he said, how you contributed, and so on. That is also an obsession. If again and again you are being

quite lethargic, drowsy, and sleepy, and therefore the mind is in a sluggish state (sloth and torpor), this too is an obsession. Further, if your mind is occupied with many doubts, that too is an obsession. So typically, we are talking about hindrances. When there are many hindrances occupying the mind, that means obsessions are there. When there is too much thinking, the mind is fairly occupied, there are so many signs, so many marks, it is a fairly crowded mind, it is a fairly burdened mind, you feel the heaviness of the mind, your face is not nice, there are no smiles, your face looks very serious – all these indicate there are obsessions in the mind. You have to further reflect to see if there are any un-abandoned obsessions in your mind. Depending on your circumstances, there can still be world related, political related, and visa related obsessions. Reflect and see if there are any such obsessions occupying your mind. The Buddha asks us to reflect in this manner. The Buddha says a *sotāpanna* cannot have long-term obsessions. There may be a temporary obsession, but, as a result of his practice, he would be able to abandon that quickly. In Pali it says; *pariyutṭhānaṃ ajjhattaṃ appahīnaṃ. pariyutṭhāna kilesa* - obsession has come to the surface. Basically, a *sotāpanna* will not have any obsessions in the mind for a long time, they may exist for a short period. With continuous practice, and with careful attention, slowly they will disappear, and the mind will retain its clarity.

Next, the Buddha says, a *sotāpanna*, a trainee means, he has already found the path, he has understood the path, and he has the correct view. He is confident that when he is

developing this practice again and again, he is able to quench the mind, cool the mind, and calm down the mind. Why? Because he has understood the path, he has realized the path, and he has the correct view. Is this view capable of further calming down the mind, further cooling down the mind, and further quenching the mind? That is another reflection the Buddha asks us to do.

Next reflection is, to see outside the Buddha's dispensation, outside the *sāsana*, outside our training, are there any other teachers, or any other religious groups talking about this kind of calmness? This level of tranquility? This depth of quenching? Probably, you may get the answer as 'NO.' That is where the faith is established, that the Buddha is the supreme teacher, the Dhamma is the only path, and that we are practicing the pure Dhamma. You become an inheritor of that practice, and that is what is working in you right now. You become an example for that. Therefore, you are quite sure about the practice now.

Next, the Buddha gives a further provision, because you are not yet an Arahant, and because you are still a trainee, to reflect that you still may commit some kind of offence. Grasping, getting excited, or even transgressions are still possible. But the important thing is, now you have the quality developed in you to confess your offence immediately as you notice it. You open up about it rather than hide it. What happens typically is when a mistake happens, you want to hide it, you will defend yourself, saying, "I am not the one

who did it. He is the one who did it.” You point the finger at others, and always try to protect you as a person. But the Buddha says, that when these qualities are being developed, you are not going to protect you as a person. In case a mistake happens, or any kind of offence happens, you simply reveal it.

And then, the Buddha mentions to reflect on the many responsibilities you have; may be regarding your family, may be your children, may be your colleagues, may be your occupation. There can be many responsibilities, and you may have a lot of involvements doing many tasks. Amidst all this, do you still have a concern nagging you, constantly reminding you, that you need to practice, even though you are engaged in so many different activities?

Furthermore, you have some kind of indication always reminding you that you are not yet an Arahant. Reflect that there are unfinished defilements, and that you need to practice ardently. This concern about the practice is prevalent in the mind. There is a keen desire to continue the path even though you are currently engaged in something else, which is another reflection.

And lastly, the Buddha says to reflect on whenever a very good Dhamma sermon is being preached; you have a keen interest in listening to it. You are listening with concentration. And when you are listening to the sermon, you gain a lot of inspiration, because you have inherited the Dhamma, you have experienced something, and you feel connected to what is being said. You feel so inspired.

These are the seven reflections the Buddha asked us to often put to the test, so that we can verify whether we have honestly progressed in this path. These are not over-estimations as you cannot do a fair over-estimation with these. One can only develop when they practice. Only when you practice does one get the correct answers, the positive answers, for all these reflections. The Buddha asks us to do these reflections, inquiring to see if there are any defilements in the mind while dwelling in that emptiness.

There are many other suttas that highlight the same point. For example, in the **Sacitta sutta (AN 10.51)** in the Aṅguttara Nikāya the Buddha says;

sacittapariyāyakusalo bhavissāmi'ti – evañhi vo, bhikkhave, sikkhitabbam

monks, you have to be talented in looking at yourself. You need to reflect about your mind, you need to assess your mind, see what is there in your mind. It is a kind of inner reflection, an introspection. Reflecting to see if there are any defilements going on in the mind, are there any lustful thoughts available in the mind, are there any angry thoughts, or thoughts of ill will going on in the mind?

There is a long list of different forms of defilements. In case, you get the answer 'yes' to any one of them being available in your mind, then the Buddha says, you have to start working on it immediately. You have to work hard. You are still in the mud. You have not yet found the path. Do not

waste time. On the other hand, if you feel that you have developed fairly well, and that wholesome factors are being well developed, then you can be happy about it. But you have to continue to work hard to abandon the fetters, and to overcome the influxes, because still they are not fully eliminated.

That is where the problem lies. Currently, you may not have lust, but the potential could be there, for lust to arise. Currently, there might not be anger, but the potential to make you angry is still there. The latent tendencies are still not abandoned, they are still operative, but they are latent. We have to continue the path, so that even the latent tendencies are abandoned, even the influxes are fully abandoned. In a way, the path now becomes less strenuous. It is not that you prepare a schedule and do one hour of sitting and one hour of walking meditation. It is not that kind of strict routine; rather, now it is a relaxed path. Now things are very much dependent on mindfulness, and wisdom. Mindfulness will tell you what the state of mind is. You have to let wisdom take care of the letting go. Therefore, letting go becomes more and more an easy task, a doable task. The maintenance of *animitta* – maintenance of signless, becomes a more smooth, possible, and relaxed activity.

Therefore, further development of the *bojjhaṅgās* (enlightenment factors) is not something strenuous. Rather, the Buddha says, that it has to be a smooth, seamless kind of

development. You may have to further develop the enlightenment factors in a more relaxed manner.

Satisambojjhaṅgaṃ bhāveti vivekanissitaṃ virāganissitaṃ nirodhanissitaṃ vossaggapariṇāmiṃ.

dhammavicayasambojjhaṅgaṃ bhāveti vivekanissitaṃ virāganissitaṃ nirodhanissitaṃ vossaggapariṇāmiṃ.

vīriyasambojjhaṅgaṃ bhāveti vivekanissitaṃ virāganissitaṃ nirodhanissitaṃ vossaggapariṇāmiṃ.

The Buddha talks about the enlightenment factors. How does one develop the enlightenment factors? *vivekanissitaṃ* – by keeping the mind in silence, with less activity, in a relaxed state. *virāganissitaṃ* – by maintaining a kind of dispassionate attitude towards worldly affairs. It has to come from within you not to have much interest in worldly affairs, because you are now heading in a different direction. *nirodhanissitaṃ* - I, self, ego, may not be available temporarily. You may feel the absence of a self; the *dukkha* may not be available. There is no agitation in the mind. There is no sorrow, lamentation, crying, worrying, or excitement in the mind. You are maintaining a relaxed state, a calm state, a cool state. As such, *nirodha* can be experienced.

For the time being, it is very much like the self has been abandoned; temporarily. Suffering has been abandoned, and the craving has been abandoned. It is not fully abandoned yet, but for the time being it is *nirodha*. Craving is not present. So, you are not driven by craving. You are not driven by many

ambitions or unfinished jobs, or by too much sensuality. These types of burnings are not available in the mind. You are experiencing a fair state of calmness and tranquility. *vossaggapariṇāmiṃ* - the whole practice is very much oriented towards relinquishment, relief, and freedom.

The practice is not like what you were doing several years ago, rather, now the practice is seamless. You know how to handle it. You know how to go through a particular situation without getting agitated, keeping the mind more relaxed, and calm, without making a self, without allowing the mind to grasp. Now you are maintaining the mind in a more relaxed state, more concerned about the clarity of the mind. So, you are careful about maintaining the clarity, not allowing the mind to get obsessed again, crowded again, excited again, and agitated again. Rather, keeping it quiet, relaxed, silent, unagitated, and content.

These are the qualities the Buddha highlights that we have to further develop. Tomorrow, let us discuss the outcome of the practice as we continue like this. With that, I would like to conclude today's Dhamma sermon. Thank you very much for your attentive listening.



Supreme Emptiness

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa

*"Animittañca bhāvehi, mānānusayamujjaha,
tato mānābhisamayā, upasanto carissasī"ti.*

Dear Venerable Brothers and Dhamma Friends,

We are going to start the last Dhamma sermon of this Jhāna Grove retreat. Yesterday, we discussed how one would develop the non-grasping state of mind, the unassociated state of mind, either through the *jhāna* practice or through the *vipassanā* practice, based on the mindfulness. From there onwards, we discussed how one may attain the signless state (*animitta samādhi*), by not paying attention to any signs or any particular object, instead, by paying attention to nothingness or emptiness; Kind of blankness. Then maintaining that state purposefully by being there for a while. At the beginning, it appears to be artificial and difficult, but when one engages in the *vipassanā* practice, the letting go becomes more possible, natural, and effortless.

Though it appears to be difficult at the beginning, when you gain a fair amount of wisdom, the wisdom plays a pivotal

role by helping us to abandon things, rather than holding on to things. Instead of crowding the mind, now wisdom helps us to keep the mind very clean, very clear, unattached, and unbounded. Therefore, as we continue the *vipassanā* practice, letting go becomes natural. You may be able to maintain an empty mind in an effortless manner. However, if you make an excessive effort, this could be detrimental to the practice. For example, if you are taking a lot of effort to attain the signless state of mind, it would be very difficult, and you can end up with various headaches and many other bodily pains, because you are going in the wrong direction.

It is true that we have spent a fair amount of time practising hard, putting in a lot of effort, and maintaining a strict schedule and morality to get to this point. All these things are very true and quite essential as we continue the practice. But once you arrive at this signless state, particularly, after developing a fair amount of *vipassanā* and gaining a fair amount of wisdom, now you are able to maintain this unattached state. While in that unattached, non-grasping state, there is nothing to do. It is a matter of just being there. Not doing is the key. Rather than doing, now you just need to be! “JUST BE!”

Once you familiarize yourself with it and want to maintain the same state of mind, just be with it; there again in an effortless way. For example, while sitting on the cushion, you may be trying hard to attain a signless state of mind, and assume that you could not achieve it. Then, you get up and go

to your chair and just look very far without paying attention to anything or aiming at any particular object. Then, probably, you will attain what you wanted naturally. That is the interesting part here. Previously, effort and hard and strenuous practice were essential, but now it is happening the opposite way. Now you have to adopt a more relaxed and effortless manner. You need to let the practice take over, rather than applying unnecessary involvements. In typical parlance, we say there is a “doing kind of meditation.” Now, it is a matter of simply “not doing kind of meditation,” or “JUST BEING kind of meditation.” You let the meditation, the practice take over, rather than you manipulating it.

Ānāpānasati Sutta has two different approaches to developing enlightenment factors. The first approach is a step-wise process, starting with mindfulness (*sati*), then getting on to the investigation factor (*dhammavicaya*), and proceeding to effort (*virīya*), rapture (*pīti*), tranquility (*passadhi*), concentration (*samādhi*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). It is done in an orderly and effortful manner. That is where we start the development. But later, once you are able to fairly recognize the non-grasping state of mind, and while being there, it is a matter of maximizing and familiarising it, being in it, and dwelling in it.

As I mentioned yesterday, the Buddha now switches the development of the enlightenment factors to a different theme. Now what you need to do is;

*Satisambojjhaṅgam bhāveti vivekanissitaṃ virāganissitaṃ
nirodhanissitaṃ vossaggapariṇāmiṃ.*

*dhammavicayasambojjhaṅgam bhāveti vivekanissitaṃ
virāganissitaṃ nirodhanissitaṃ vossaggapariṇāmiṃ.*

We keep repeating all the enlightenment factors to relax and calm down the mind. Now we need not maintain a strictly focused attention. Rather, it is an open awareness, giving up things, releasing the mind, and keeping the mind empty and objectless. By not pointing the mind to any particular place, we let it be natural, open, unestablished, and effortless.

Now, we need to switch to that mode. If not, we will go in an entirely wrong direction. Sometimes, unknowingly, people will keep on trying, applying too much effort, even after they arrive at this state. Since this can lead to various difficulties, we need to clearly understand this distinction as we progress in our practice. Even as one continues in this state, defilements can arise. Let me tell you a very interesting story about the power of defilements, which can arise even in this state.

Once, the Buddha and the Saṅgha were living in Isipatana in Varanasi, where the Buddha delivered his first discourse. One morning, particularly, the elderly Saṅgha had gathered and were having a highly interesting and deep Dhamma discussion on many themes, especially on the higher attainment. There was one young monk, called Hatthisāriputta who kept interrupting the Dhamma discussion from time to

time. One Arahant, called Mahākoṭṭhita, who was in the crowd, noticed this interruption. He intervened and said, “Please do not interrupt. These elderly monks are in a deep discussion. Just wait till they finish the discussion.” When this was said, a companion of Venerable Hatthisāriputta said to Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita, “Bhante, this Hatthisāriputta is quite astute and capable.” Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita, being an Arahant, responded, “You can't find out the capacity and capability of a monk merely by an assumption.”¹¹

He further explained, “When a particular monk associates a good teacher and good companions, he may maintain good *sīla* (good conduct). But once he is free from the group, the monastics, and the teacher, he may again start associating so many unnecessary things. He may again start dwelling with lay people too much, making intimate relationships, and talking too much, which will ultimately create lust again and again in his mind, and he might even disrobe.

Not only that, Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita said, “There could be a monk who attains first *jhāna*. After attaining first *jhāna*, he is actually happy about it, quite delighted about it, and over estimates himself. Now he starts thinking, ‘Okay, I am a *jhāna* practitioner. I am the one with the first *jhāna*. I can master *jhāna* now.’ As a result of that, now he starts associating with too many lay people, has too many intimate

¹¹ Hatthisāriputta suttaṃ (AN 6.60)

relationships, engages in too much talking, and socializes, which causes him to neglect his practice. Lust and various other defilements may overcrowd his mind, causing him to disrobe.”

Thereafter, Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita explained in the same manner for the second *jhāna*, third *jhāna*, and fourth *jhāna* as well. And then, interestingly, he mentioned, “There may be a person, or a monk, who already has the signless concentration. He has practiced; may be *vipassanā*, and was able to attain the signless state of mind. Now, he is quite happy because he has made a fair amount of progress in the practice and about what he has gained. ‘Now, I have the *animitta* state of mind - the signless state of mind. I am somewhere now.’ So, he again overestimates himself. *lābhimhi animittassa cetosamādhissā’ti saṃsaṭṭho viharati* - he thinks that he is fairly a developed and attained person now, and overestimates himself. He starts being with others, socializing with them, maintaining close and intimate relationships, and getting involved with too much talking and chattering.”

What happens now? *tassa saṃsaṭṭhassa vissatthassa pākatassa bhassamanuyuttassa viharato rāgo cittaṃ anuddhamseti*.

Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita explained, “When that monk is associating with others (*saṃsaṭṭhassa*), becomes intimate with the others (*vissatthassa*), loosens up (*pākatassa*), talks too much (*bhassamanuyuttassa*), again the lust can basically come and deceive him (*rāgo cittaṃ anuddhamseti*).”

He gives a very interesting simile here. “Assume that there is a forest, and there may be a king passing by that forest. Before the arrival of the king, various sounds of birds’ singing and chirping could be heard. But when the king arrives there to spend the night, accompanied by so many elephants, horses, and his various other armies, the forest becomes fairly noisy with the sounds of the people, elephants, and horses, so that the birds chirping and singing cannot be heard.” Now, Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita asks, “Would that mean that the birds’ chirping and singing can never be heard? No. When the king and the army leave the forest, again the birds’ chirping and singing sounds may reappear.”

It is the same thing with the practice too. He particularly mentioned here about the *animitta* - the signless concentration. “So, in case you are excessively dealing with others, being with others, talking with others, having too many close relationships with others, getting involved with mundane activities excessively; then you may loosen the practice, not continue in the practice, not give enough opportunity to continue to progress. Ultimately, all previously given-up signs and defilements can come back and occupy the mind, and you might even disrobe.”

That is the warning Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita gave. Interestingly, after this explanation was given, after some time, Venerable Hatthisāriputta actually disrobed. And then what happened? His monk friend again approached Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita, and asked, “Bhante, did you see

Venerable Hatthisāriputta's mind that even though he has all these capacities and attainments, he may ultimately disrobe? Have you seen it through your mind? Or, is there any deity informing you that this Venerable has this kind of capacity, but he may ultimately disrobe?"

Then, Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita said, "Actually, I have seen through my mind the mind of Venerable Hatthisāriputta. I understood that even though he has the capacity like this, he may disrobe. A deity also came and informed me."

Thereafter, this Venerable, who had the discussion with Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita informed the Buddha of this situation. "Bhante, we had this kind of situation. Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita explained like this, and Venerable Hatthisāriputta has actually disrobed." Then, the Buddha made a very interesting comment, saying that, before long, Venerable Hatthisāriputta will understand the value of renunciation and will come back.

Hatthisāriputta eventually did come back. He understood the mistakes he made. He again involved himself with the practice, he avoided getting into wrong, excessive associations, talking, etc. He became an ardent practitioner and ultimately became an Arahant.

The point here is that, even the signless concentration and even the other capacities cannot be taken for granted, as the power of defilements is still available. Even though we can temporarily maintain the mind free from defilements and

keep the mind pure, still the latent tendencies are there. Still, the *āsava* (taints) are there. Influxes are still available. But, at the surface level, the mind is clean and very pure. That is the hard part. That is why we should not overestimate ourselves. We should not be in a hurry to give certificates to ourselves.

How can we overcome other defilements? Venerable Rāhula closely associated the Buddha and Venerable Sariputta, and often got advice from them. In the **Rāhula Sutta** of Sutta Nipāta, there is a very interesting verse that the Buddha mentions to Venerable Rāhula.

*Animittañca bhāvehi, mānānusayamujjaha;
tato mānābhisamayā, upasanto carissatī''ti.*

The Buddha advises to develop *animitta*; the signless state of mind (*animittañca bhāvehi*). *mānānusayamujjaha* - This may help to overcome conceit. *tato mānābhisamayā* - To completely break through conceit. *upasanto carissatī''ti* -then you will be able to live a tranquil, calm, and peaceful life.

Developing *animitta samādhi* is a very good state for us to see how the comparisons happen; 'I' making happens, a personality happens, mine making happens. To see a self-arising in ourselves. For example, say you are packing to leave the retreat, because today is the last day. Suppose now you go to the wash-room and see yourself in the mirror. Immediately the 'I' may come up, because you see yourself in the mirror. Now, you all are listening to the Dhamma. There is not that much of an ego or any kind of 'self' in you right now, but all

of a sudden when you see yourself in the mirror, again, that boosting of 'I' happens. Likewise, possibilities are there, whenever our name is called, whenever we are praised, blamed, or criticized; there are opportunities again and again for 'I' to come out, a person to come out, an ego to come out. We need to recognize this.

While maintaining a signless, pure state of mind, we need to guard ourselves as much as possible. We need to look after our minds. When again and again, 'I, person, individual, myself, ego' comes out, and pops up. We need to notice it, not feed it, and not promote it. Rather, simply recognize it and slowly keep it aside. You kind of disclaim it. This disclaim has to happen again and again.

Another interesting thing is that 'I' making and personality view can only happen when a certain amount of grasping is present. Without grasping, there cannot be 'I,' a self, and conceit. Grasping is a must. We can see where the mind still goes and grasps. Is there any kind of attachment, association, desire, or obsession in the mind? If so, there are higher possibilities for 'I' to pop up, a person to pop up, and an ego to pop up. Therefore, without grasping, there cannot be any 'I' making.

Lord Buddha advised Venerable Bāhiya: how to live; *diṭṭhe diṭṭhamattaṃ bhavissati*. When you are living in the world, you can see things. When you see things, just limit what you see to a "mere seen." When one develops a fair amount of *vipassanā*, this skill gets developed. It is not that we

are trying to do this artificially, nor by mere sense restraint. When you see something, you cannot simply act like a blind person. You may see; but when you practice *vipassanā*, say *satipatṭhāna*, even though you see, still the mind remains calm. Mind does not want to go and get involved and get entangled with it. The mind prefers to be secluded and maintain its peacefulness. It is a natural skill that one may develop through practice. So, once you have it, it is a matter of maximizing it, enhancing it.

That is the advice given to Venerable Bāhiya;

*ditṭhe ditṭhamattaṃ, sute sutamattaṃ, mute mutamattaṃ,
viññāte viññātamattaṃ.*

You may see things, but keep your mind unattached and uninvolved; you may hear things, but keep your mind uninvolved; you may sense smell, taste, and touch, but keep your mind uninvolved. From time to time, thoughts may come, but just keep the mind uninvolved. This is how you restrain yourself - *evañhi te, bāhiya, sikkhitabbaṃ*.

Now the interesting point here is that if we are able to keep our mind unattached and uninvolved with respect to the outside objects; such as sights, smells, tastes, tangibles, and the mental objects, we are not attributing a 'self' there. We are not making a 'self' on the outside. For example, when you see something beautiful, you get attracted and get completely absorbed in that, so you become 'that.' One can say, "I am that." I am completely absorbed in that. That is where you create a 'self' at the outside end.

On the other hand, you can create a 'self' on the inside as well (experiencer side). You think that there is an experiencer: there is a person who is seeing - a seer, listening - a listener, cognizing - cognizant, knowing - a knower. Thus, creating a "self" on the inside and the outside. Both of these ideas go against the Dhamma. It is a very interesting principle introduced by the Buddha called "*atammayatā*" (non-identification).

Ajahn Buddhādāsa, an eminent monk, who lived in Thailand, highlighted this special quality called "*atammayatā*." How do you avoid any kind of identification? It can happen at the outside edge, or at the inside edge. Either way, you identify with something. The quality of *atammayatā*, is that you are not making any 'self' at any place; you are not being anything at all; you are not making any person at all; one will not be made of anything. For example, if you take a steel plate or spoon, we simply say "it is a steel plate or spoon. It is made of steel. The item is made up with that material." Now, when our mind associates with something again and again - say a sight - again and again associating; again and again appreciating; again and again valuing it; again and again attracted to it - the mind ultimately becomes that. The mind is made with respect to that sight. Mind is being coloured by that sight, conditioned by that sight, whatever the object maybe.

Is it possible for us to maintain a mind that is fairly pure, not conditioned, not coloured by anything outside, not purposely making anything inside, not thinking that there is a

person who is seeing/who is listening? Last time we discussed Descartes's principle, i.e. "I think, therefore, I am" - Thinking is there: So, I am here. On the other hand, there are thoughts, but there is no thinker. Now we have to start practicing in this manner. There may be thoughts, but there is no thinker. If 'there is,' then I am a fool. A fool is still there. So, if we make a thinker, then that is foolish! Let the thoughts happen, but we should not make a thinker.

We can see how the Buddha delivers the Dhamma in a very interesting way to show us how to avoid making "a self." When we get attached, there may be a possibility to make a self. That is why we have to keep letting go of things (relinquishing). Then the mind remains quiet, calm, and peaceful without making a self. While maintaining our silent state of mind, we should be able to recognize the "I-making" "mine-making" any kind of attraction, desire, or defilement appearing in the mind. These should be visible and evident to us. We should be able to trace it by knowing it. We should be able to drop it, rather than making a self. Previously, we might have made a "self." For example, as lay people or as monks, we may need a kind of reputation, a personality. We have a purpose or have a need to develop that. We have learned a lot, obtained a degree, had our occupations, titles, etc. We were very skilled in making "a self" and we enjoyed that, even used that to put down others. We have made ourselves quite conceited.

As *vipassanā* practitioners, we have to completely revert to the practice of "letting go of things." It does not mean that now you become a "no one" and you allow everyone to blame

you. If there is a role, you can play it, knowing that it is just a role. For example, suppose you are an administrator; how are you going to work as an administrator? When everyone else is under you, you have to instruct and control them. So, you definitely have to play a personality there. Without it, you may fail. But you play the role knowing, “This is a temporary role. I am just acting.”

Recently, Bhante Dhammajiva pointed this out by quoting a very beautiful song. The lyrics go like this;

Rajinata Andā, Raja Kumariṭa Andā
Diktalāṭa Andā, Lencināṭa Andā,
Mama Nandā!

I was performing as the Queen, I was performing as the Princess, I was performing as *Diktalā*¹², I was performing as *Lencinā*¹³

but I am just Nandā!

I am not any of them. I am still Nanda. But Nandā also has to be let go!

Likewise, we are playing different, temporary roles. You, as a mother or a father, may have to play a temporary role. As an administrator, you may have to play a temporary role. As-senior monks we may have to play a temporary role.

¹² A beautiful woman in Ummagga Jātaka story.

¹³ A beautiful woman in a Sinhala folk story.

These are all merely temporary roles for the time being. Just do the task properly. Once it is done, you know how to become no one again. Trying to become no one also can be someone. That is also a very tricky area. So, you have to be careful.

The interesting point is that we need to see how tricky this mind is, how tempting, and how deceitful this mind is. When we are talented in one area, we might again get caught up in another area. Quite often, we are using our talents to prepare a self. All of us have different talents. We may use these talents to make a self. Now, we have to be careful. These talents are quite helpful to find a job, or to do something. But we should know the drawbacks as well, particularly, when we are on the Dhamma path.

When we continue like this, the Buddha explains what happens to our defilements. Assume that we understand the path and are continuing in the path. Now what happens to the defilements? Let me go back to the **Cūḷasuññata Sutta**. There, the Buddha mentioned,

*‘ayampi kho animitto cetosamādhi abhisāṅkhato
abhisāñcetaṃyito.*

Even this signless state of mind is still conditioned, still prepared; you may purposely be there. Still, it is vulnerable. The moment the mind goes and gets attached to something; you lose the signless state of mind. You may intentionally go there. Yesterday, we discussed how to attain *animitta* state of

mind. You first have to make an intention: "I better put my mind to that." So, you purposely avoid paying attention to any signs. Instead, you pay attention to nothing - a blank, signless state where kind of a mental activity is there. That itself, the Buddha says, is constructed, and we can use it to understand that it is impermanent. Therefore, the Buddha mentions,

*yaṃ kho pana kiñci abhisankhataṃ abhisañcetaṃ
tadaniccaṃ nirodhadhamman'ti pajānāti.*

Even this is impermanent, and it may cease, and one should not get attached to this either. The signless state of mind is not something to be delighted with, or to be attached with. As you can see, as a teacher, the Buddha has never advised us to get attached to anything.

However, temporarily you may have to hold it. As we have already discussed, one needs to develop *vipassanā*. You need to recognize the non-grasping state of the mind. Thereafter, you have to further enhance this state, prolong it, and maintain it for a long time. This is something you have to appreciate. Then, you switch to *animitta* - the signless. You need to appreciate it. You need to prolong it. So, a fair amount of work is needed. A fair amount of appreciation should be there. But, once you are in signless, even that is not to be held on to. That is not to be attached with.

In case someone is attached to that state, he or she may start being there for an unusually long time with great effort.

It can cause distortions. The path now has to be very much effortless. In an effortless way, you are simply dwelling there, rather than with effort and with lots of desires and attachments. It is a matter of letting things happen naturally, letting the Dhamma operate in you. Rather than you drive the process, now you allow the Dhamma to take over. You become completely a passenger. Just enjoy the ride. Be in the back seat, and not in the driver's seat.

If we are continuing like that, now the Buddha mentions,

“tassa evaṃ jānato evaṃ passato kāmāsavāpi cittaṃ vimuccati, bhavāsavāpi cittaṃ vimuccati, avijjāsavāpi cittaṃ vimuccati”

The more you are practising, seeing various defilements, fluctuations, and agitations happening in your mind from time to time, by not promoting them but calming them down, then all these influxes start fading away. How are we going to recognize this change? The Buddha mentions,

ye assu darathā kāmāsavaṃ paṭicca tedha na santi.

For example, previously, you had a lot of sensual desires; you understood the state of your mind, such as there was too much thinking, too much planning, too many lustful thoughts, and so many lust related images. But now, as a result of the practice, you should understand the mind is empty of these kinds of lustful images, lustful thoughts, lustful desires, or any kind of inner burning.

The idea is that the more the influxes are reduced, *kāmāsava* (the taint of sensual desire) is reduced. Then, *kāmāsava* related thoughts, mental images, burnings, and any kind of other mental hindrances should not appear in the mind.

Ye assu darathā bhavāsavaṃ paṭicca tedha na santi. There may be *bhavāsava* (the taint of being) related hindrances in the mind. Now, as *bhavāsava* is reduced, *bhavāsava* related corresponding defilements, thoughts, and images should not appear in the mind. You need to understand what is really happening in the mind as we progress. Previously, it was so crowded, but now it is fairly empty. Previously, it was burning; now it is cool and peaceful. Previously, it was thinking too much. There was excessive thinking, obsessive thinking. Now, a fair amount of qualitative, calmness and inner silence is in the mind.

You need to understand, comparatively, is there any progress now? “Am I going in the correct direction? Compared to previous days, months, or years, am I often entertaining peace, silence, and calmness in my mind? Previously, my mind was filled with so many plans. Is it now satisfied, contented in the present moment?” Likewise, we need to understand, “Is there any impact on the mind, because of my practice?” The *bhavāsava* is always driving us, giving us a lot of motivation and aims. Never satisfied! But when the practice is operating, we find some kind of calmness and peacefulness, particularly a kind of contentment. “I am happy in the present moment. Let the future happen. I am not

making any huge plans. Whatever happens, I am just navigating through it, not going after huge plans. I am simply navigating through things, and finding a lot of contentment and peace." As you proceed this way, all the *āsava* (taints) related burnings, and influx related hindrances will be slowly reduced. The Buddha mentioned, the end is when all the influxes (*āsava*) are exhausted. That means one becomes an Arahant.

yathābhuccā avipallatthā parisuddhā suññatāvakkanti bhavati.

The best form of emptiness, the best form of signless is nothing but the Arahantship. The Buddha mentions this in the **Cūlasuññata Sutta**.

This is the time you understand; now the mind is completely empty of *kāmāsava* (the taint of sensual desire), completely empty of *bhavāsava* (the taint of being), and completely empty of *avijjāsavā* (the taint of ignorance). Remember how emptiness is defined: when something is not there, it is empty of that; when something is still there, it is not empty of that. Now one understands that when *bhavāsava* is present, a related number of obstacles, a certain amount of agitations, are present in the mind. From time to time, at least I feel some degree of agitation. Sometimes I feel worried, sometimes I feel anxious and sometimes I feel unhappy, because still the *kāmāsava* is operating. Sometimes, some sensuality related thoughts are coming, and lustful images are popping up, because *kāmāsava* is still operating. But as we

continue, we feel a little bit of reduction in these *āsavas*; say, one year ago, I had this much craving, but now comparatively, there is less burning. One year ago, even though I could see anger, I often got angry, but now I have become less angry. So, in this way, we need to assess ourselves. We need to reflect.

As we discussed yesterday, we need to do self-reflection, an honest reflection, looking back at ourselves. What are the things still available in the mind? What are the thoughts available in the mind? What are the images available in the mind? What are the burnings and irritations available in the mind? From time to time, the Buddha invites us to do a self-reflection. If you are doing such a reflection, as we discussed yesterday as per the **Kosambiya Sutta**, then you may be able to understand that there are no such obsessions currently available.

Papañca – proliferations and overthinking, have to be fairly reduced. A mind that is burning too much has to be cool now. Worrying and regrets have to be reduced. Too much planning and fantasising have to be reduced. The mind has to become more and more purified.

In the **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta**, the Buddha pointed out;

ekāyano ayaṃ, bhikkhave, maggo sattānaṃ visuddhiyā

there is a direct path for the purification of the mind. *sokapariddvānaṃ samatikkamāya* - to abandon worries and lamentations. *dukkhadomanassānaṃ atthaṅgamāya* - to overcome various kinds of suffering and despair. That is a direct path for

the foundation of mindfulness. We should be able to experience through our own practice what the Buddha has forecasted.

If we practice like this, the Buddha says this is the best state one can achieve - the complete eradication of the *khīṇāsavā*. This is the genuine, undistorted, pure, supreme descent into voidness.

yathābhuccā avipallatthā parisuddhā paramānuttarā suññatāvakkanti bhavati.

The Buddha is giving the best kind of vocabulary there, saying that this is the pure, genuine, undistorted, supreme kind of descent into voidness. If there was any kind of pure voidness any Arahant has experienced in the past, this is what they have experienced. If any Arahants in the future are going to experience any pure voidness, any pure emptiness, this is the pure emptiness they are going to experience. At present, if there are any Arahants existing, this is the pure state of mind they may be experiencing. In the **Cūlasuññata Sutta**, the Buddha very clearly gives this kind of assurance.

Now, let us come to another valid point. One deity came to the Buddha and asked, “Bhante, there are so-called Arahants; they still say,

“ahaṃ vadāmītipi so vadeyya, mamaṃ vadantītipi so vadeyyā.

I speak like this; they spoke to me; I am the one who mentioned this.” Bhante, they still use such terms. Is there still

a personality in them? Is there still any conceit in them?" This is a valid question, right? So, they are the Arahants, but they are still using this kind of terminology. Why is that?

The Buddha gives a very beautiful answer.

*Yo hoti bhikkhu araham katāvī, khīṇāsavo antimadehadhārī,
aham vadāmītipi so vadeyya, mamaṃ vadantītipi so vadeyya,
loke samaññaṃ kusalo veditvā, vohāramattena so vohareyya.*

The Buddha says, *yo hoti bhikkhu araham katāvī* - There may be a monk who is an Arahant. *khīṇāsavo antimadehadhārī* - He is completely rid of all the defilements and all the influxes, and he is actually holding the final body. This is the final birth. There is no future birth. But, *aham vadāmītipi so vadeyya* - he refers to 'I speak. I talk. I mention.' So, he is also using the term 'I.' *mamaṃ vadantītipi so vadeyya* - sometimes, when he wants to refer to the fact that someone else has told something, he may use terms like 'they told me, they have mentioned to me, they have given something to me, they have offered me dāna etc.' He is using the typical mundane parlance.

loke samaññaṃ kusalo veditvā, vohāramattena so vohareyya

But the interesting thing is that this Arahant has skillfully understood the world's parlance, the typical words, vocabulary, and conventions used in the world. *vohāramattena so vohareyya* - He is merely using it just for expression, just to communicate. He does not find any intrinsic personality in it, but an understanding that these are merely words used to communicate.

For example, say your kids are playing, and they have built a playhouse. They are going to have a party in there and they are inviting you, “Father, mother, we have built a house. Come and see it.” Once you go there, they offer you milk, they offer you rice, etc. But are they really offering milk? Are they really offering rice? No. They may simply use a little bit of sand, pretending it is rice. They say, “This is rice.” Then, as the mother, what are you going to say? Will you say, “Son, is this rice?” No! Instead, you will show that you are also enjoying it, and you will say, “Very tasty!” So, you have to behave in that manner, right?

The same thing applies here as well. We are also like children. We are using all these conventions and parlance. Arahants also may come and tell us, “Okay, this is the way. This is good. This is bad. This is the regulation. This is the time. This is the time you have to come,” and so on. They are merely using words. Therefore, the idea is, they also may use the typical parlance, typical words, and typical vocabulary, but do not adhere to it, or do not identify with it. In the **Samiddhi Sutta** also, it is beautifully highlighted.

akkheyyaṅca pariññāya, akkhātāraṃ na maññati

They understood the vocabulary thoroughly. They understood the conventions as mere conventions. But, *akkhātāraṃ na maññati* there is no person who is expressing. There is no person inside who is using it. They are not making a ‘self’ inside. Therefore, we can understand the point here. This path is beautifully explained by the Buddha. It is a matter

of understanding the path correctly, practicing to the best of our ability, and getting the maximum benefit!

With that last note, I like to conclude today's Dhamma sermon. Thank you very much for your attentive listening.

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yesaṃ sannicayo natthi, ye pariññātabhojanā.  
suññato animitto ca, vimokkha yesa' gocarō.  
ākāse va sakuntānaṃ, gati tesam durannayā. - Dhṃ 92

Those who do not accumulate, who know their food aright, for  
those whose resort is the liberation that is emptiness or signless,  
like the birds in the sky, their track is hard to find.



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