

## **Brahmavihāra and Emptiness: Six-day online practice course**

Video lecture transcription

### Video Lecture 4 – Emptiness 2: Perception of Boundless Consciousness

Welcome. This is the second talk on the topic of emptiness. And it is about the second step in the gradual entry to emptiness in the way I am presenting it here, which is boundless consciousness – the perception of boundless consciousness, not necessarily the attainment as a tranquility practice based on the four absorptions.

The perception of boundless consciousness is simply a way of looking at the experience of boundless space from the viewpoint of the one who experiences it. It is a way of turning inwards towards the mind, towards that which knows, towards consciousness – which, due to having taken infinite space as its object, has itself become boundless. In order for us to appreciate the implications of this experience from a Buddhist perspective, an early Buddhist perspective, I like to talk a little bit about consciousness.

In early Buddhism, consciousness is just a conditioned process of knowing. And this conditioned process of knowing stands in a reciprocal conditioning relationship with what we call name-and-form. Consciousness conditions name-and-form; name-and-form conditions consciousness. This is the basic model to explain the continuity of experience, during life and rebirth from one life to another.

What is name-and-form? Form is the experience of matter. Name are those active parts of the mind that process information: feeling, perception, intention, contact, and attention. One more time: feeling/feeling tone - *vedanā*; perception - *saññā*; intention - *cetanā*; contact - *phassa*; and *manasikāra* - attention. Five. Feeling tone is the little finger, the one that we easily overlook. Seems so unimportant, but it's foundational. It's really that which pushes us into activity. I like it – pleasant feeling – I want it. Unpleasant feeling – oh I don't want it. Neutral feeling - ugh, boring. Ring finger - *saññā* is the place where we marry our own ideas to the things we experience. We have our ideas, we get the data from outside, and we marry it, we put it on top. *Saññā* - our idea is put on top of what comes in. The finger that sticks out more - volition. That's where we get caught up. Our decisions. That's crucial. Our volitions, we are who we are because of our volitions. Now, and past volitions, are what makes up who I am. Contact is the

place for experience to take place. Index finger, pointing to something. Here, there, here. Attention is the one that closes, that can decide what to attend to. It can decide to attend to these five; it can also attend to something else. *Manasikāra* - attention.

These five – Pali “five” is *pañca* – is actually the etymology root of *papañca*, conceptual proliferation. *Papañca* takes place when these five get literally out of hand. They just keep going and going and going and going. That is *papañca*. And in order to counter that tendency of these five to get out of hand, what we can do is, to take *manasikāra* to point to the mind, to consciousness, to the knowing – rather than being involved with the other four. What I’m saying is that, just now as you’re listening to me, your attention can be involved with that process of making sense of what I’m saying – but that can also take place with your attention turning inwards to that which knows. And if you do that, you will feel suddenly there’s a kind of like a place of stillness, quietude. A kind of distance from being caught up in these five, being carried away by the five *pañca* making *pa-pañca* potentially.

And so what I would like to do now is also try to demonstrate in some way what this could be, how this could work. And I will use this gong here. So normally when there’s a sound <soft strike>, we hear the sound and our mind kind of moves out, locates the sound someplace – ‘it’s over there, it’s the gong, Anālayo’s hitting the gong’. Right? That’s the normal way we process. That’s the five fully in action. *Manasikāra*, attention goes over there. And the others, then: feeling likes it, perception recognizes it, then there’s some reaction to it, and there’s a contact. Instead of reaching out for the object, can we just stay at the sense door? at the ear? and allow that sound to come towards the ear instead of us moving out towards it? <loud strike with reverberations> Did you notice how spacious the mind becomes, just by not running after the sound, but staying at the ear sense door? The staying at the ear sense door is actually a very nice metaphor for the practice we have already been doing, the boundless space practice. Because we really allow the space between ourselves and the sound to be the way it is, rather than jumping over it to get at the source of the sound.

Now I want to take a step further. I want to take a step further in the sense that we don’t just stay at the sense ear door, the ear sense. We actually allow the sound to take us to that which knows the sound. To take us inward in a way. The idea is not about trying to locate consciousness, consciousness of sound, ear door consciousness, anywhere physically. We can’t locate it. But the idea is simply that, as the sound comes towards the ear, if we let go and

go along with it, it takes us to that which knows. <strike with reverberations> *Manasikāra*, attention. *Manasikāra* can go for the sound; it can go for the ear; it can go for ear consciousness. It can point at any of these three. That's our decision. We can be with that which knows, while experiencing sound. And the same works with all the other sense doors. But sound is particularly good. And I like to do the same thing one more time, and I will now do it with a hard sound. 'Cause for some of us, the soft sound works better, for others, the hard. So let us try again to hear the sound, and allow the sound to travel inwards towards that which knows. <hard sharp strike> One more time. <hard sharp strike> The sharpness of the sound really gives us this feeling of cutting through. For some of us it's easier to have this letting go, for others more this cutting through kind of thing. Whichever way we use, the point is to be with that which knows.

And to provide a little bit more of a narrative context for this, I would now like to turn to the Bāhiya instruction. It's a very beautiful story in the *Udāna*. We don't have a parallel to this story in another lineage of transmission of the discourses. But the same instruction is also given to a monk by the name of Māluṅkyaputta in *Samyutta-nikāya*, and there we have Chinese parallels, so the instruction as such is definitely early Buddhism.

The *Udāna* story is that Bāhiya was a very highly respected religious practitioner in the area of modern Bombay. He was believed to be an arahant. He believed that himself, and people thought he was an arahant and were highly respectful towards him. So we assume he must have had very good virtue and also some high degree of concentration. And, there was a good friend of his, who had been reborn as a celestial, and this *deva* came and told him: 'Okay, you are actually not an arahant. And, there is the Buddha, and he's the one who is genuinely an arahant and he can teach how to become an arahant.' And Bāhiya was so sincere in his aspiration that he dropped everything there and immediately started to walk across half of the Indian sub-continent to Jeta's Grove in Sāvattihī, to, to meet the Buddha, the one who can show him the path to awakening. When he arrives at Jeta's Grove, the Buddha had just gone out to beg for alms. He can't wait. He just follows him into town. He meets him on the streets of Sāvattihī, and says, 'Bhante, instructions!' The Buddha says, 'Look, I'm here on my alms round, this is not the time.' 'Bhante, instructions!' 'Okay.' The Buddha gives him a very short instruction. Soon after that, Bāhiya is killed - he has an accident with a wild cow - and the Buddha informs the monks that he passed away as an arahant. This means that somebody who had no acquaintance with Buddhist doctrine whatsoever, with this short instruction he got, was able to

get all the way through to full awakening. Of course, he must have had very ripe *indriyas*, faculties, in all other respects – so he just needed that short input of wisdom, liberating wisdom, to allow him to complete the whole thing.

The instruction is very simple. It says: 'In the seen, just the seen. In the heard, sensed, cognized, just the heard, sensed, cognized.' That was what we just did with the, with the gong here. We were just trying to be with experience as such – not allowing our five friends to get out of hand, not putting something on top of experience. Bare awareness. Bare awareness in the sense of cognizing without making it into anything. It's a way of, we will still know what it is, you'll still hear the sound, you'll still know what it is – but you're not making it into something, you're not reacting to it, you're just allowing it to come in the way it is. It is a way of stepping, to some degree, out of the construction of experience.

The instruction to Bāhiya continues. The Buddha says: 'Bāhiya, when you are able to train like this: *diṭṭhe diṭṭhamattaṃ* - in the seen, just the seen; *sute sutamattaṃ* - in the heard, just the heard; *mute mutamattaṃ* - in the sensed, just the sensed; *viññāte viññātamattaṃ* - in the cognized, just the cognized; *tato tvaṃ Bāhiya na tena* - then, Bāhiya, you are not thereby. *Yato tvaṃ Bāhiya na tena, tato tvaṃ Bāhiya na tattha* - Bāhiya, when you are not thereby, you are not therein. *Yato tvaṃ Bāhiya na tattha, tato tvaṃ Bāhiya n' ev' idha, na huraṃ, na ubhayam antare. es' ev' anto dukkhassa* - Bāhiya, when you are not therein, you are neither here, nor there, nor in-between. This itself is the end of suffering, of *dukkha*.

That was enough for him to become an arahant. My understanding of this instruction is: First step, bare awareness. If we are able to remain established in bare awareness of experience just as it is, we are not *tena*, thereby – instrumental. We are not carried away by it. We are not moving along with our five friends who want to make *papañca*. When we are not carried along - by what after all is our own construction of experience – when we are not carried along thereby, then we are not therein. Absence of joining the game of our five friends, diminishes that sense of a solid 'me' at the center of experience. This is in fact what most of our mental distraction is about. You know when you meditate and the mind just goes blah blah blah blah? That is just to reinforce and assure us that we are there at the center of experience. It's all about ego, selfing, about I-making, conceit, etc. Not therein. We do not get established as some sort of solidified self at the center of experience. When we are able to do that, we are neither here nor there nor in-between. That's the complete letting go.

And this basic procedure in the *Bāhiya* instruction – I like to match it with the gradual entry into emptiness. I have no authority for doing that. There's no reference in the *Bāhiya-sutta* to the gradual entry to emptiness, or in the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* to the *Bāhiya-sutta*, but it's just my own idea. I like to relate the 'in the seen, just the seen' etc. to the experience of space – and the 'not thereby' to the experience of boundless consciousness. To that idea that our *manasikāra*, our attention, instead of getting involved with these other four – towards that which knows, pointing inward, towards the mind as such. 'Cause in that way we are not carried along thereby. We are not allowing ourselves to be pulled here, pulled there by experience – but we are just here, in the center. In that stillness, in that undoing, in that peace, that is accessible to us in any situation. All that is required is that U-turn – from the tendency to reach out to things, U-turn and coming back to that which knows. <shhooo, shhoo> Consciousness. Just being with the knowing part of experience – the consciousness part of experience.

And experiencing that in formal meditation then takes the form of infinite consciousness – where we understand that the whole world is in our mind. Once again: not an ontological statement, but a soteriological strategy. Not an absolute truth statement, but just a meditative tool. As far as I am concerned, you all exist only in my mind. Apart from my mind there is no way for me to be in any way related to you. But I'm of course not saying that you only came into existence once I cognized you all, came to know about you. So it's not taking idealist position. You all exist independently of whether I know you or not. But for me, from the viewpoint of my subjective experience, everything is within my own mind. And it is in that sense that boundless consciousness, as a step in emptiness, can lead us to an experience of mind only – that there is just the mind, and everything is happening in the mind. That our own mind is the stage of the drama of existence that we keep enacting. We are the stage, we are the actors, and we are the spectators, all together. It's all happening in the mind. And again, particularly important with this experience because it can be incredibly powerful: empty of solidity, and empty of space. We are not only leaving behind the weariness of material things; we are leaving behind the very weariness of objects. We are stepping out of the subject-object duality, that bifurcation of experience that is so fundamental to our way of relating to the world. We are letting go of objects as the subject turns towards itself. Or if you like, the subject takes itself as the object. So powerful. Don't latch onto that, please. This is also a type of weariness. This is a type of non-emptiness. That is the key that we should never forget about in these practices. Yes, empty of the weariness of solidity. Yes, empty of the weariness of objects. Yes, non-empty of the

weariness of that very perception of boundless consciousness. If we are able to maintain that clarity, the clarity that all experiences are fingers pointing to the moon. Let me use the finger to look at the moon; let me not keep looking at the finger or latching onto the finger. Let me use the tool for letting go – for progressing ever further into emptiness. Then we are on the right track.

This is about what I had in mind for this lecture, so let me just wrap it up. Main idea is, in the meditation practice, from the experience of infinite space to come to the experience of infinite consciousness by turning inwards, towards that which knows. And this turning towards that which knows is something accessible to us any time, even right now, even with the hitting of the gong. This U-turn, coming to the center, as a way of relating to the consciousness side of experience, instead of getting involved with the naming part. The naming part as such is not problematic. Still arahants would use name. But these five easily get out of hand, to lead us into *papañca*, conceptual proliferation. And the understanding that this is actually, in terms of the gradual deconstruction of experience, this is stepping out of the subject-object duality – of that basic bifurcation of our way to experience ourselves as a subject that has objects to which to attend to, to which to experience. But turning the subject towards itself, and resting with the subject as such. And the key: not to make this into a thing. Not to go, 'ahh, boundless consciousness, I got it, ha!'. Just a tool. Just a perception. Just a weariness still left.

Thank you very much for your attention.