

Brahmavihāra and Emptiness: Six-day online practice course

Video lecture transcription

Video Lecture 5 – Emptiness 3: Perception of Nothingness

Welcome. This is the third of my four lectures on the gradual entry into emptiness. And, a step I want to look at today is nothingness. And the formulation used here - it is very important, I think, that we handle that carefully. My approach to nothingness is based on another discourse, the *Aneñjasappāya-sutta*, 106 in the Middle Length Discourse collection, where we are offered different approaches to nothingness, *ākiñcaññāyatana*. And one of these is *suññam idam attena vā attaniyena vā*, “this is empty of a self and what belongs to a self”. And this really brings in the “Buddhist” emptiness. You can even say this thing here is empty, empty of content. But the Buddhist emptiness is that something, everything, is empty of self. That is the key.

And this understanding of ‘empty of self’ or not-self, *anattā* – uhh, there’s some different perspectives on it in the course of the history of Buddhism. And it’s good if we can look at this a little bit to clarify what we are talking about, from an early Buddhist viewpoint. And this is particularly pertinent because the actual name of this perception is ‘perception of nothingness’. But empty of self is precisely not just that there is nothing at all. This can easily be misunderstood. A good example is the whole simile of the chariot. It’s a simile that is already used by a bhikkhuni actually in the *Samyutta-nikāya* in the *Bhikkhuni-samyutta*. She is accosted by Māra. Māra is the tempter in early Buddhist thought. And it is important to understand its role appropriately. There is a trend in Buddhist modernism to assume that Māra is invariably a representation of inner uncertainties or defilements. This is not an accurate reflection of early Buddhist thought. Māra has the pedagogical function of embodying challenges by outsiders. And then those who he challenges can show how to deal with those challenges. This is one of the functions of Māra in early Buddhist thought. This also explains why the Buddha, who was fully awakened, still had encounters with Māras. This certainly does not mean that the Buddha was not fully awakened. Such a conclusion is flat wrong. It just means that these episodes show how a fully awakened one, the Buddha in this case, deals with certain challenges. And in the discourse on the – I think the first occurrence of the chariot simile in Buddhist literature – Māra has come to challenge this bhikkhuni with the idea of a being. And he is speaking here of a living being in the sense of some reified ideal, a true self or whatever. So she says that such a being does not exist, and she illustrates that with the example of a chariot, saying there’s just

different parts coming together that make up a chariot. But there is no chariot as such, no essence, nothing, no permanent essence behind a chariot. It's just a functional combination of parts. This is what a chariot is about.

And this is really also what the teaching on emptiness of self, or not-self, is about. Saying that Anālayo is devoid of a self, empty of a self, doesn't in any way intend to say that Anālayo is not there, at all. Of course I'm there; you can see me, you can hear me, no? But, whatever you see, whatever you hear, is just the result of causes and conditions. This whole bodily and mental continuum is a constantly changing process – an interplay of a network of causes and conditions. Nothing more, nothing less.

The chariot simile comes up again in the *Milindapañha*, the 'Question of King Milinda' - the first encounter of somebody with a background in western thought and somebody with a background in traditional Buddhist thought, a monk, Nāgasena, and Milinda, a Greek king. And the whole debate between the two starts off with the king challenging Nāgasena. He's, he has actually misunderstood the not-self teaching in a way. So he pulls him apart, and says: 'Is this part of your body Nāgasena? And that, that, that, and that?' And there's no Nāgasena. He draws a wrong conclusion there. It is precisely to, meant to show what, according to his understanding, is an incoherent "religious" belief, the belief in not-self. And then Nāgasena turns the thing on him by doing the same with his chariot. He says: 'Didn't you come here with your chariot? So what is the chariot? Is the wheel the chariot? Is the this, this, this this chariot?' And there's no chariot. It's, it is meant to show that the conclusion from the fact that something is composite – the conclusion that it doesn't exist is a wrong conclusion. The chariot exists – as an assembly of parts.

But in later tradition, we sometimes then get this way of speaking that: 'There's no chariot, chariot doesn't exist.' 'Human beings don't exist; men, women, don't exist.' This is based on a distinction between conventional and ultimate. Conventional and ultimate language, and conventional and ultimate truth. This distinction is not found in the suttas. It is not part of early Buddhism. And, in some way, it seems to be a way of getting by with statements that are not fully coherent. Like, if I say 'there is no Anālayo' – then this is not really a coherent statement. It, this kind of doesn't really make sense, unless you join me in my language game, and say: 'This is from the ultimate perspective, you see. From the ultimate perspective there is no Anālayo. It's just conventional that there's an Anālayo sitting here.' But, I think we can let this whole distinction be, and leave it aside. It must have its meaningful purposes. Otherwise it wouldn't be

such a widespread tool in the Buddhist traditions – although, I have not yet been able to fully understand what purposes it would fulfil. But from an early Buddhist perspective, we do not need to have to create two types of languages. We do not need to create two types of truth. We can make it all just one coherent thing. Anālayo exists – as a conditioned process. That chariot exists – as a conditioned assembly of parts. The word ‘chariot’ simply refers to this combination of parts that make it possible to drive. The word ‘Anālayo’ just refers to this body and mind continuum of causes and conditions - and these exist. And for these I have to take responsibility. If I say something that misleads you or offends you, then I can’t go: ‘There’s no Anālayo.’ I have to take responsibility for what I do. And that can easily be lost from sight when we have this, when we start to separate this ultimate and conventional, and don’t really understand fully what the teaching of not-self is about. The teaching about not-self *is* the other side of the coin of the teaching of karma and conditionality.

I have this, umm, one of my favorite sayings: “The void of emptiness is filled to the brim with causes and conditions.” Allow me to say it one more time. “The void of emptiness is full to the brim with causes and conditions.” When we talk about not-self, we are talking about causes and conditions – the existence of causes and conditions. We are saying things exists as conditioned processes; we are not denying their existence. So not-self and karma or rebirth are entirely compatible. In fact, the one needs the other. When we get that clear, then we have the required understanding for proper cultivation of not-self. Not-self in the sense as a philosophical position that there is no permanent inherent blissful entity anywhere. And as a meditation strategy, trying to identify, recognize, understand, whenever we create a sense of ego, the I-am conceit... like you, I might say, “I’m a monk.” – or I might say, “*I’m a monk.*” There’s a world of difference between those two statements, even though we are using the same words. The one was just a matter of fact statement. The other one was adding all this ego about me being so grand, ordained, these lay people, what can they understand. All this kind of trip can be there. And all of that is not needed. All of that is just ego. And this tendency, besides the I-am conceit, owning things. My things. Want to get more of mine. This is not mine. This whole tendency to appropriate.

And these two - the appropriation, doesn’t only happen with material things. In fact, it can quite easily happen also with meditation experiences. *My* attainments. *I* am the great meditator. And that is when the practice actually leads us off the path. When we are actually using meditation practices, meditative tools meant to lead to deconstruction, to letting go - instead we misuse them to construct, to make ourselves into a something, to build up our ego as the great

meditator who owns these experiences, has these attainments, and parade these in front of ourselves and others. This is what we are targeting. This is what we are trying to look for. This is what we are trying to let go of. And the reason is very simple. It's just, life just goes so much better without that stuff – for ourselves and for others. It's just, this is an incredible burden of the ego, all the time carrying on and... dropping that off. It's just such a relief. And that is what the present step in emptiness is inviting us to do. To see if we can let go of this sense of this conceit I-am that is lurking at the background of unawakened experience. To see if we can let go of this tendency to wanting to own and make it as mine - what we experience – to see if we can let go of that. Not as some strong conflict. Not at all. Because if we get into a conflict, then the one that wants to push it out, is the very way to reconstruct the ego. It is a letting go. The image I have is of, you know, leaves in autumn – and the trees at some point, they just drop them. In fact that's the way how you can tell the difference between a tree in winter and a tree that's dead. On the dead tree, the leaves stay. But the other trees, they just drop off their leaves. And they don't make any effort. They just let them go, like <chooo>. And in the same way, like dried leaves, you just drop all this “*I am. This is one.*” All these constructions, just shed them like dried leaves that really have no more purpose. No use for them. The tree needs to drop them so that it can survive the winter. If it has all these leaves and gets the snow, then the trees will break. We need to drop these leaves so that we can function much better.

And in the actual practice, we are coming from boundless space to boundless consciousness. At this point, we have gathered the whole world of experience into the mind, made it all like one thing. And now we can take hold of the roots of defilements, having gathered them together at one point, and cut through them with the sword of wisdom. The sword of wisdom is the perception of not-self. Taking out that not-self, that tendency to selfing, tendency to appropriating as mine, in that very experience. The image I have is a little bit like, you take a glass of water, you hold it against the sun, you can see little particles in there. That is the perception of boundless consciousness. It's still a little bit dirty. We filter it with not-self perception, the water becomes completely clear. Crystal clear. It's the same experience, but the I-making, my-making, the conceit, the clinging has been taken out. And that same dropping of the burden of selfing, the burden of ego, is something that can then carry on from the meditative practice into daily life. There is no situation, there is no time, when it is not, in principle, possible to diminish the burden of ego. We can drop it anytime, anywhere. And every time we drop it, it's such a relief.

In fact, a particularly nice reward we may get from this practice is when we move again through the *brahmavihāras*, when we cultivate the *brahmavihāras* without a sense of ego. This is such a palpable experience of how much letting go of the ego makes us simply feel better, and be more functional, function much better than with that whole overlay of 'I-am' conceit, and that clinging as 'mine'. This is the most powerful insight tool early Buddhism has to offer. Not-self; empty of self. Yet, within this particular practice, this is also a form of weariness. It's incredible. But that's what the *Cūḷasuṅṅata-sutta* is telling us. Infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness in the sense of absence of a self – that there's nothing in this experience justifying the conceit I-am, nothing in the experience I can latch onto as me and mine. Understanding, the weariness of boundless space left behind. The weariness of boundless consciousness, objects, left behind. That perception of not-self, that perception of this is empty of a self and what belongs to self – is the weariness still left, is the non-emptiness still left. That's the sword of wisdom still there. Even this should not be reified. Even this should not be clung to. Even this should not be made into a thing.

This is what I wanted to say on the third step in the gradual entry into emptiness. So just to wrap it up. The key to this experience is the understanding of not-self, which does not mean that there is nothing whatsoever. It only means that there is nothing permanent, substantial entity. And it is an invitation to let go of the conceit 'I-am' and of the clinging as 'mine'. And this is something we can do in relation to the experience of boundless consciousness, in the formal meditation practice, leading us to the experience of nothingness. This is something we can do in everyday life situation. We can do it when we walk, walking meditation, walking without a sense of walker, without a sense of ownership, without a 'I am walking'. Anything. And that is really the practice that can have a continuous flavor, from formal meditation to walking to other activities. That letting go of selfing. And in the formal meditation, with the understanding that this is also a form of weariness, is not yet the final step.

Thank you very much for your attention.