

Brahmavihāra and Emptiness: Six-day online practice course

Video lecture transcription

Video Lecture 6 – Emptiness 4: Perception of Signlessness

Welcome. This is the last of my four lectures on the gradual entry into emptiness. And as I explained in the first lecture, the Pali version of the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*, there's a problem, probably a textual corruption during oral transmission, and so we leave aside the neither-perception-nor-non-perception. And the next step then from nothingness as not-self is now signlessness, *animitta*.

And in order to appreciate what *animitta* is about, we need to take a look at what the *nimitta* means. *Nimitta*. So the *nimitta* is the sign or the mark. It is what perception takes hold of in order to recognize. Remember the five fingers? The ring finger, *saññā*, perception. So, when we, let's say, your good friend, we meet, and then for a long time we don't see that person. And in the meantime that person may have changed – they, change of hair style, maybe even colored their hair, different clothes, become older. Still, even after a long time, <finger snap> we see and we recognize. That act of recognition is because of the *nimitta* of that particular person that we have in our mind. And, in order for our ability to recognize to function well, we tend to look out for *nimittas* that don't change. My storing in mind of, like, this is so-and-so – if I use the *nimitta* of the clothing and the hair style, it won't work very well. I will not recognize that person when they have changed their hair style, changed their clothing. I need to look out for things that are least amenable to change. This is how our perception works. Because of that, however, when our perceptions get married to the data of experience, there's an underlying flavor of permanency. Constantly as we keep recognizing, it confirms that things don't change – at a very unconscious level. It's like, always like, giving us this sense that things don't change, which of course is inaccurate. It is simply the way our perception works. And, this latching on to the *nimitta* is what we now want to put into question.

And, in order to step back from this tendency of taking hold of *nimittas*, it is very helpful to first understand how this happens – how we normally latch on to *nimittas*. So I want to do a little experiment with you. I will be making a drawing. And I invite you to watch while I'm drawing, and be, at the same time, very much aware of what happens in your own mind, to see when this moment, 'ahhhh! that's what he's doing!'. That is the grasping of the *nimitta*. And after we have done this little experiment, to see in your daily life if you can, from time to time, watch this

latching onto *nimittas*, how the mind always wants to move onwards in experience by recognizing. So let us do this experiment first.

So, one more time, I am going to make some drawing. And I'm not an artist at all, so don't expect anything beautiful at all. The point is simply that I want you to basically keep watching what I am doing, but watch also inside your own mind, to see this, 'ahh! that's what he's doing!'. Once these lines that I'm drawing start to make sense, that is the moment when the *nimitta* is being taken up. Yeah? So let me see. <silently drawing> I think that was enough, no? Did you notice when the mind says, 'ahhh! it's a car!'? That is the grasping of the *nimitta*. I know it's not very beautiful, but I hope it fulfills my purpose.

As I have this here in front of me, and we have just been talking about the chariot in the last lecture, you all agree, this is a car? I disagree. Where is the car? Taking off the wheels. Is that the car? No. Taking out the window. No. This machinery here. No. The, I don't even know how you call it in English. No. Taking out the seats. No. The doors. No. That much I think you still agree with me from the last lecture. The parts are not the car. The car is the functional assembly of those parts, right? What does it mean? It means a car is a functional assembly of parts that enables us to drive. Would you agree? That is what the car is. It's not the parts. The wheels are the wheels off the car. The machine is the machine off the car, etcetera. It is the functional assembly in such a way that we can drive, that makes a car. Would you agree? Then how could this be a car? I can't drive with that; that's a piece of paper, man. It's a *nimitta* of a car. I've been drawing the *nimitta* of a car. This is how you latch onto the idea of the car. Did we get that sorted out? So let's throw away the *nimitta* of the car.

This, this is a car, this is a man, this is a woman, this is a Buddha statue, this is a monk – all of these are *nimittas*. And it is this tendency of the mind to, to move on in experience, to make sense of things, that we are now putting into question. And, the *animitta-samādhi*, the concentration on signlessness, is *sabbanimittānaṃ amanasikāra*. *Manasikāra*, attention, thumb. Not directing attention to any *nimitta*, all *nimittas*, not a single one. Instead paying attention to signlessness. So this is a little bit a question of stepping out of that wanting to experience, that is so fundamental to our being. And if I have not yet exhausted you with all my car and chariot things - it's like driving a car, taking out the gear, the car comes to a standstill. The machine is still running, but the car is no longer moving. In signless concentration, our mind is still

operating, but it is no longer processing experience. I think you all will have had that experience that sitting in a car that is on and not moving is very unpleasant, no? Like a traffic jam and you want to move up, hey, come on, move, let me get, let me get on. And that is a little bit a demonstration of this experience, this settling into the car that is, even though it's working, in working order, it's not moving anymore. We are no longer processing data. And when we dwell in this *animitta* experience, that is really something that we can only do in formal meditation. The other aspects of the gradual entry into emptiness is something we can carry into daily life. We can be aware of the space, the one that knows, the absence of a self, but the *animitta* carried into daily life will make us dysfunctional. We need to be able to operate in order to be able to make sense and live in the world. So it is not that there is something wrong with *nimittas*, and it is also not the case that just having *animitta-samādhī*, the concentration on signlessness, is in itself an attainment. In fact, in the discourses we get the indication that this can even be reached by somebody who otherwise has not highly developed insight. And the point is simply that at this step in the gradual entry into emptiness, at this progression of deconstruction, this is the appropriate next step to take, because we have taken up the sword of wisdom to cut through, now we have to drop that sword of wisdom also. That is the point.

And the point is that this gradual entry into emptiness is bringing us as close as possible to the actual experience of *Nibbāna*. The experience of *Nibbāna* has the feature of being *animitta*, it is signless. It is *appañihita*, it is desirelessness. And it is *suññata*, it is empty. These three aspects combine in the experience of *Nibbāna*, and they can be the entry doors into it. And so with the experience of signlessness, particularly with this proceeding trajectory of practice we have been doing, we are coming as close as possible to the actual experience of *Nibbāna*. It is not yet *Nibbāna*, but it is very, very close. And the power of the signlessness at this point, and particularly its power to lead over into *Nibbāna*, depends on the earlier practices. And it depends less on the amount of space we were experiencing, for example, or how far our infinite consciousness reached out, but on our clear understanding of weariness – of the non-emptiness parts, the emptiness parts, this, this insight aspect. That is really the key that leads on – that makes this *animitta* part lead onwards. Because when we practice in *animitta* we can't really do things anymore. We have to rely on the momentum we have built up earlier to keep surfing the wave, if you like, based on the momentum already established. How far we then take that experience of signlessness is really closely related to our motivation. I usually invite us to have a clear formulation of our motivation at the outset of the practice. And some of us may have a motivation that will not resonate with the idea of experiencing *Nibbāna* right now and

progressing through the four stages of awakening as recognized in early Buddhism. And I would just like you to be very clear in knowing what your motivation is, and in knowing how far to take this practice. If you have an aspiration of the type where the experience of, say, stream-entry, would be an obstacle, you can take this meditation practice up to the signlessness, but don't go further. And in the part of the guided instruction where I speak about going further, don't go along with that. You can just listen to it as an idea, but don't move along with it. So that the potential of this practice, the way we approach it, is in full harmony with the way you have formulated your motivation. For those of us who, like myself, are, however, keen on *Nibbāna*, are keen on progressing fully to the final outcome of this practice as described in *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* the progression from signlessness – boundless space, conscious of the space, not-self, dropping the not-self – that is a very, very subtle experience. We just abide there, based on the previous practices done, not taking up any sign – so subtle. And when the time comes that we feel it's time to move on, it's coming to its natural conclusion, this looking back and seeing that even this experience, so incredibly profound, is a construct of the mind. It is a construct of the mind and for this reason it is impermanent. It is bound to cease. And this is the understanding that helps us to incline the mind towards that which is not constructed – towards the experience of *Nibbāna*. And you can see how at this point, the characteristic of impermanence comes in. Emptiness is the most prominent one. *Dukkha* we get always woven in with these wearinesses. And now the third of the three characteristics, impermanence, does the finishing touch.

And for this inclining the mind towards *Nibbāna*, I have two similes I would like to give, relating to the three dimensions and the fourth dimension of time. In terms of the three dimensions, we all know that all these material things that we experience here are made up of space for the most part. They're just the electromagnetic forces, attraction, causes and conditions that make things appear by all means to be solid, but we know that inside, this is really for the most part just space and there's just these, let us say, these quarks buzzing around. Now let us imagine – I know this is physically impossible, it's just an imagination – let us imagine that these quarks would stop moving for a moment. What would happen? All of this would just disappear. This solidity, this solidity, is caused by this interaction between these quarks, these energies. If they would just have a moment of resting, it would all just <tcheww> all disappear. But it is not that anything is being destroyed. It is also not that I would then kind of like sink into the earth or something, because my body would also just disappear. It would just be <whhooo>. Everything completely dissipate, just for a moment, just a moment of stillness among all the motion. And then the motion picks up again. This moment of just stillness, when things no longer move – is a

way of having some idea of what it means to incline the mind towards *Nibbāna*. And it may also help to explain why it is so difficult to formulate that experience in a way that it can be understood by others.

Another way of looking at it is from a perspective of time. Time is just our conceptualization of change. Things are changing now, present. They changed in the past. They will change in the future. That's basically what I think there is to be said about time. Now, *Nibbāna* is timeless. And I have another little illustration. Alright. I have these two boxes. And, they are meant to illustrate time when we are meditating, we are well established in the present moment, and we have still this reaching out. This is just an underlying tendency in our mind, to reach out for the next moment, to take the next spoon of experience before we have really swallowed the present one. And to illustrate that, these two boxes are meant to illustrate "now" and "next". This is "now". And this is "next". And as you can see, the "next" is actually covering part of the "now". Because here I am in the "now" – and pulling out towards the "next" – I want the "next" to come. And because of that pulling out, I never get the "now" fully. I'm always pulling in the next moment, wanting to experience, wanting to have the next thing to happen. And I'm never really fully with the "now". And as we keep practicing, and letting go of that reaching out for what is next – as you can see, the "now", this part here is becoming more and more evident. And at some point, now the "now" is fully visible. It means I'm able to see the ending point of the "now". And if I can let go, into that little slit, at the ending point of "now", where the "now" ceases and the "next" has not yet begun, letting go into that slit is the experience of timelessness – the experience of *Nibbāna*.

This is what I wanted to share with you for this last lecture. So by way of summing up again: The last step in the gradual progress to emptiness is about signlessness – about stepping out of our tendency to process experience by taking up signs. In the present case it is the dropping of the sword of wisdom, of that supreme concept of not-self. Even that is being dropped. It's just a *nimitta*. And for those of us who want to take this practice to the experience of *Nibbāna*, coming out of the signlessness, to look back and see that even this experience, so sublime, so profound, is a construct of the mind. It's impermanent and bound to cease. And inclining the mind towards *Nibbāna*, with perhaps one of these two illustrations I gave if you find them helpful.

Thank you very much for joining me in this exploration of the gradual entry into emptiness. I feel very honored to have been able to share a practice that is very dear to me. It's very powerful.

And I sincerely wish you all the best in your practice. May you progress. May your aspirations be fulfilled.

Thank you for your attention.