

MEDITATION AS A SOURCE OF JOY

(TALK GIVEN AT THE BUDDHIST SOCIETY, LONDON)

Mr. Chairman, Friends,

I am glad that I have been given this opportunity to speak about meditation as a source of joy. What I propose to do is not to touch on the theoretical aspects of meditation, but rather to share my experiences as a meditator and also to share with you the experiences I have had in encountering meditators over the years.

It is interesting that in Buddhism one can see two models, generally speaking, in relation to the practice of meditation. One is trying to overcome suffering by going through suffering. The other is, as is said in the Dhammapada, to overcome suffering with joy. So this is the area that I would like to touch on.

THE PROBLEM OF SELF HATRED

One issue which I have been encountering when working with meditators over the years is this problem of self-hatred. People who don't seem to like themselves. I've often wondered what are the possible reasons why there should be this aspect of not liking oneself. There are two possible reasons for that.

One is that it may be related to our childhood conditioning, where we are given models or ideas as to how we should behave, so there can sometimes be a conflict between what you are and what you should become. And when you are unable to achieve the model that is given to you, it is possible that you can develop hatred towards yourself, to see yourself as a failure.

Another way this self-hatred may arise is again related to the way children are brought up, where sometimes there is a tendency on the part of parents or teachers to point out only the shortcomings and mistakes that one commits. So this may also generate self-hatred and a tendency to disparage oneself. And this can really prevent people from experiencing lightness and joy in their practice.

I use meditation of loving-kindness to work with this condition, where it is psychologically interesting that in this meditation one begins with oneself, learning to be friendly, gentle, tender and kind to oneself, just accepting oneself as one is, without a model of perfection which can be imposed on one.

PSYCHOLOGICAL WOUNDS

Another area where I use meditation of loving-kindness is when meditators have psychological wounds in relation to their past. Such wounds can take three forms, generally speaking. One is that they may be related to what has happened in your childhood. Another area where psychological wounds can be created is in relation to what you have done to another, so you can hold on to guilt and remorse in an extremely self-destructive way.

Another way a wound can be created is in relation to what others have done to you, where you might have hatred and ill-will as forms of psychological wound. So here again meditation of loving kindness can help one to heal these wounds, by learning to forgive oneself, accepting one's own humanness and imperfections, and learning to forgive others by accepting their humanness and imperfections.

And having these psychological wounds can affect one in different ways. One is that it can affect one's relationships. There could be certain destructive patterns which can emerge as a result of unhealed wounds so that they create suffering to oneself and suffering to others.

Another way we can be affected is that these psychological wounds can emerge in our sleep, where we might have nightmares, unpleasant dreams, where we can experience anger, sadness and so on.

Such wounds can also affect our bodies in two ways one is that they can generate psychosomatic diseases. They can also affect a meditator such that he or she can experience tensions, pressure or unpleasant sensations in the body, which may be related to these repressed emotions.

And its interesting that over the years people who have been working with death and dying have realized that at the time of death these psychological wounds may emerge, and that it is sometimes difficult for people to handle them in that situation.

So as I often say, having these unhealed psychological wounds will result in someone not being able to live peacefully, to sleep peacefully or to die peacefully. So I feel that if one is to experience peace and joy, one has to really heal these wounds one is carrying. And here again, meditation of loving-kindness helps one to forgive oneself and to forgive others, and to learn to let go of the past.

LIVING IN THE PRESENT

This brings up another area which arises in meditation. It is the need to experience what is called living in the present, living in the here and the now. Its interesting that when you consider some of the meditation techniques like focusing on breathing, listening to sounds, focusing on bodily sensations, these techniques enable us to live in the present, to live in the here and the now.

It's interesting that in focusing on breathing, you realise that breathing is something objective, it is a fact. Having thoughts which are related to the past and the future can generate unpleasant emotions, but with the help of focusing on breathing you can learn to let go of the past and let go of the future and experience the joy and the bliss of the present moment.

This reminds me of an incident which is recorded in the Buddhists texts, in the Buddha's time - a non-Buddhist visits a monastery where meditating monks are living, and this person was very impressed, very inspired by the serenity of the monks, by the way they were relaxed and joyful in their behaviour. So he goes to the Buddha and asks him: Pray tell me what you teach your disciples?.

Then the Buddha said: I teach them not to worry about the past, because it is gone; and not to be anxious about the future because it is yet to come - rather to experience the joy of the

present moment. And with that they have been able to exude this joy, peace and compassion in their behaviour.

Now living in the present can raise a question: is it possible always to live in the present? What about planning? What about using the past? If you let go of the past you will not be able to find your homes, you will not be able to use language, you will not be able to recognize anything. So what is meant here, what one has to experience, is that with this process of recalling and anticipating you do it *now*. This is a very important point for one to experience and realise, that what is considered as the past is just a thought in the present, and what is considered the future is also just a thought in the present. So when you realise this, when you experience this, you will be able to relate to the past and the future in an entirely different way, where you can use the past and the future functionally and not allow the past and the future, in this process of recalling and anticipating to generate unpleasant emotions which create our suffering.

WORKING WITH UNPLEASANT EMOTIONS

Talking of unpleasant emotions brings up the next point. We all know how experiencing unpleasant emotions such as depression, fear, anxiety, guilt, jealousy and so on, can generate suffering in ourselves. Now how does one work with them in the context of meditation?

What normally happens in meditation is that the meditator assumes that one should only experience pleasant states of mind, that one should not have these unpleasant states of mind. So this can give rise to a split, a division, a dichotomy in oneself, always looking for pleasant experiences such as calm, tranquillity, loving-kindness and so on, and resisting and disliking unpleasant emotions such as I mentioned earlier.

So I feel it so extremely important to overcome this division, this split, by transcending the pleasant/unpleasant dichotomy. And for this one needs to realise in one's own experience that when you have these unpleasant emotions, in trying to resist them, trying to get rid of them, you will be giving them more power and more energy.

So that in the context of meditation, one of the things that can be attempted when having these emotions, is neither to repress them nor to give in to them. So, without repressing and without giving in to them one is expected just to create space for them. The phrase I like to use is: learning to make friends with them, befriending your emotions. By doing that and being open to them you will be in a position to transcend them, and then not to like pleasant states of mind and not to dislike unpleasant states of mind. And if you can truly develop such a state of mind then whatever happens to you in relation to these emotions you will be able to develop what is called in Buddhism a mind that is non-discriminating.

PRACTICING A VIRTUOUS LIFE

Another aspect which is important in the practice of meditation is practising a virtuous life, having a moral perspective. Now because of this need to lead a virtuous life, it is possible that one can sometimes do that in a very puritanical way, and this can generate a lot of conflict, a lot of suffering, considerable guilt. So here with the practice of awareness you will be able to develop a kind of sensitivity, and from this a kind of natural morality will emerge.

And in this connection there is a beautiful phrase which is used in Buddhism, and in Pali it is *anavajja sukha*, the bliss that comes from harmlessness.

So that by leading a virtuous life, by being moral, what happens is, as I said, that one develops this kind of sensitivity. And then in daily life you are not inflicting any suffering on yourself and you are not inflicting any suffering on others. And this enables you to lead what is described in the Dhamma as a blameless life. And when one leads this blameless life, this can give rise to considerable bliss – the bliss of blamelessness, the bliss of harmlessness.

RIGHT EFFORT

Another aspect of meditation which is related to joy and lightness is learning to discover what is described in the Dhamma as right effort.

Now in developing right effort one needs to overcome two extremes. One extreme is trying too hard, and the other extreme is not trying at all. In this connection, it might interest you that when I meet Westerners I have to tell them not to try too hard, because I think in Western culture there is such a lot of emphasis on being goal-oriented and trying hard. And as you can guess, when I meet Sri Lankans I have to tell them to exercise some effort because they fall into the other extreme of not trying at all, being too laid-back!

And this balance of right effort one has to discover through one's own experience. So in the context of meditation you realise that when you try too hard the result may be restlessness, tension, and doubt. It may generate self-hatred, feeling inadequate, and so on. And then when you are not trying at all the result is sleepiness, sluggishness and so on. So by knowing what is happening when one meditates it is very important to realise what is called right effort.

There have been some beautiful metaphors which the Buddha has used in this connection. He has compared it to a musical instrument with strings, and if the strings are too tight or the strings are too loose the music that emanates would not be tuneful. So this is why, as I said, one needs to discover the balance of right effort, avoiding these two extremes.

And one aspect which helps you to do this, which I emphasise very much, is to make an effort to be aware, to be alert, to be awake when you are not doing formal meditation. Unfortunately meditation is associated only with a particular posture, mostly the sitting posture, at a particular time. So if you can develop this skill of being alert and awake in your everyday life, then meditation becomes a way of life. And then meditation becomes natural and effortless. The result is that you tend to enjoy your practice, when you experience what can be described as 'joyful effort'.

A SENSE OF HUMOUR

Another area which can generate a lightness and joy in one's practice is the ability to have a sense of humour, which I feel is very important. Now humour can have different aspects, but in the context of meditation, of spiritual life, it is extremely healthy, it is extremely wholesome to be able to laugh at ourselves, at our models, our expectations, this private world that we have created. And how we would like things to correspond to this private world we have created. And when things correspond to this private world, how we find the world very nice, very friendly; and when things don't correspond to this world we have constructed, how we start resisting.

So if you can see what we do to ourselves in this respect, and if you can have the ability to laugh at yourself having these models, these expectations, projecting this world you have put together, this can generate a lot of lightness and joy.

In this connection I would like to relate a couple of stories – I like relating stories. One is about a meditator who was practicing on his own on a mountain. There was a couple looking after his needs. So one day the wife visits the meditator and tells him her husband will visit him in the evening. And the meditator realized his room was untidy, in a mess. So he swept the room and made it tidy, until it was impressive. And then as a meditator he reflected on what he had tried to do. So when he realized that he wanted to project a particular image to the visitor in the evening, he saw through his action and then he started to make the room untidy, until it was in a worse state than it was before! And when the visitor came in the evening the meditator told him about what had happened, and as the story goes, as he was laughing at himself he became enlightened.

Another story which brings up the importance of humour in relating to different situations is a story related to Socrates. One day when Socrates returned home his wife who was washing dishes was extremely abusive to him, but he remained calm and collected, and that provoked her more. Then she threw the dirty dishwater on him and Socrates very calmly said: I am not surprised, because I expected rain after thunder and lightning!

THE BUDDHIST MODEL OF MEDITATION

I would like to present very briefly the Buddhist model of meditation. The initial effort one has to exercise is working with our hindrances, as it is said in the Dhamma, which obscures our ability to see things as they are. So in psychological terms it involves working with our unpleasant emotions: strong likes, strong dislikes, restlessness, doubt, sleepiness, drowsiness and so on. And the next phase is replacing these unpleasant emotions with pleasant emotions. In traditional Buddhism they are described as experiencing jhanas, absorptions. And they can be seen as replacing unpleasant emotions with pleasant emotions like joy, bliss, tranquillity, one-pointedness of mind.

And the next phase is that now one has made one's mind calm, strong, stable and spacious then you are in a position to allow anything to arise. And then this state is described as having a mirror-like mind. And a mirror-like mind merely reflects things as they are. When an unpleasant emotion arises it would reflect it as it is. If a pleasant emotion like joy or bliss would arise, it would reflect it, as it is, neither liking nor disliking, neither accepting nor rejecting. And such a mind can be described as free and unconditioned. Because in a sense you don't have a model of what should happen or what shouldn't happen.

And one very important aspect of this is learning to see such states of mind as empty, empty of a separate self, which can be described as our egos. And this is a very important and profound teaching of the Buddha, the experience of anatta, of selflessness, of egolessness. And this would generate freedom, and enable one to experience a mind that is unconditioned.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

I would like to pause at this stage and if you have any questions I would like to try to respond to them.

QUESTION: I'm interested in the idea of not liking positive emotions, like joyful emotions, and the kind of benefits you gain from such positive experiences.

GODWIN: It's interesting that when meditators have positive experiences like joy in fact I encourage them to have them, because I tell them at last you have got a break! But here

again if you identify with such states of mind, then when they go away you will be disappointed and frustrated. That is why you should develop a mind eventually where you would be able to let go of your likes and dislikes, and ideally have no particular preferences. In that situation there is no room for you to suffer and be disappointed. Such a mind can be described as a mind that is free.

QUESTION: I'm interested in the question of meditation and mental problems. Have you used meditation with mentally disturbed patients in a psychiatric setting?

GODWIN: Yes. The patients that are referred to me are people who suffer from mild neurotic problems. So when they are referred to me, one thing I try to do with them is to try to develop a relationship with them, a supportive relationship. Another thing I try to communicate to them is not to consider having such unpleasant emotions as a mental illness, not to see themselves as different from others.

And then, depending on the person, I would offer particular meditation techniques. Some of the techniques I use are, firstly, learning to focus on one's breathing. It's interesting that with this technique perhaps you will learn for the first time to let go of your thoughts and to let go of your emotions which are generating your suffering.

Another technique, which I use very much, is meditation of loving-kindness. It is learning to develop friendliness, and if one can really learn to be friendly to states of mind that arise, befriending your emotions, that can be a very important breakthrough.

Another technique that I use is what is called the noting technique. You just note or label whatever happens. So if thoughts are arising you don't get involved in the contents of your thoughts, but just note it as a thought. And one can do the same in relation to one's other senses. So hearing sounds, you don't get involved in the individual sound but you just note it as a sound. You can do the same thing in relation to a sensation. And ideally when you do that you may be in a position to get a distance from what is happening.

Another technique which I use is what is called sweeping, which involves just being aware of your body, the sensations and the movements in your body. So here again one can learn to let go of one's thoughts and emotions and come back to the body, which can be considered a reality. So one learns to distinguish between what is real in the context of the body and what is unreal as constructions of the mind.

So that what I try to communicate to such people is for them to be their own psychotherapists, if you like, encouraging them to handle whatever arises by themselves. Sometimes I would take them up to my Centre; otherwise I would offer them these techniques and they would practice them on their own.

QUESTION: I want to ask you two questions – three actually. The first is about the Tamils in the North of Sri Lanka doing nasty things, the second is about the Japanese in the Second World War, and the third is about Bangkok, Thailand, where they have paedophiles flying in to have sex with children, and then flying back to their own countries without being arrested. I do not regard this personally as a good advert for Buddhism. I just wanted your opinion on the matter.

GODWIN: Yes, I think, as I said earlier, the imperfection of human beings, their humanness is bound to emerge in any country, whether it is a Buddhist country, a Christian country or a Muslim country. It's interesting that to my mind two of the greatest prejudices human

beings have are the racial identification and the religious identification. And wherever they emerge, here again whether in a Buddhist country or a Christian country, the patterns would be the same. So this would be one way of understanding what is happening in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma and elsewhere.

QUESTION: What advice do you give to those who try too hard?

GODWIN: Mmm – one thing is that people who try too hard are very much concerned with achieving certain states of mind, having strong expectations of what should happen when one meditates. So in a way it is paradoxical: in a sense one has to have a goal, an expectation of what should happen when one meditates, but at the same time I think that when you meditate you have to let go of that expectation. You have to learn to let go of that goal and be open to whatever arises.

So the metaphor that I use is that is it like someone who is climbing a hill. The idea, of course, is to reach the top. But in climbing one need not be preoccupied and concerned with what you are going to see when you reach the top. What can be more interesting, more fascinating, is to find out what is happening in the process of climbing.

In this context, rather than being concerned about having particular states of mind or certain expectations, if you can learn to be aware, learn to create space and to make friends with whatever is happening, then you will realise that you need not exercise too much effort.

Another aspect that I touch on is that sometimes such people do this only when they are doing formal meditation, only when they are sitting on the cushion do they exercise too much effort. And then when they leave the cushion they leave the meditator behind! So if one is really serious about meditation, as I said earlier, one needs to continue to have this awareness, this alertness, in other situations as well.

So if you can learn to do this, which I consider is very important, then your meditation becomes effortless and natural because you don't see it as anything different when you sit. There used to be a meditation master in Sri Lanka who would say that when you sit, if you consider sitting as something special then you are bound to have special problems!

Another aspect that is related to trying too hard is again something cultural, that in cultures where there is such a lot of emphasis on doing things perfectly – what I call the perfectionist model – when you are conditioned by that, then what happens is that when you meditate you want to be the perfect meditator. So here again I encourage meditators to allow their humanness, to allow their imperfections to arise, and not to be hung up on this idea of perfection.

And another thing is that I try to encourage them to relax, to take it easy and to add a little humour to what is being done. As I said, the ability to laugh at one's own seriousness, the ability to laugh at one's own solemnity can be very useful. So these are some of the things that I encourage a meditator to do when I meet someone who is trying too hard.

Perhaps another interesting point related to this is that as I said in the beginning, people who have a sense of self-hatred towards themselves, not liking themselves, sometimes in the name of meditation they may be punishing themselves. Especially those with problems of guilt, and without their realizing it. So it might be helpful to point this out to them and to get them to work with such conditions so that they are in a position to work through them.

Which brings up another important aspect in meditation, which I have realized over the years, that its not only practising techniques. It's extremely helpful to try to understand the type of person you are, because that comes through in your practice of meditation.

QUESTION: Do you think there are any dangers or any advantages in practising meditation unsupervised or untutored?

GODWIN: I think it may depend on the person and also on the techniques one might be practising. Now there are some techniques which involve visualizing. Practising such techniques without a teacher sometimes may be harmful.

If your practice involves just practicing awareness then I don't see any danger in practising on your own. But if you are going for deep concentration and so on, I feel it might be helpful to do it under guidance. Sometimes what seems to happen in meditation, depending on the person, is that certain repressed material can emerge, certain unhealed psychological wounds may emerge. And sometimes it may be possible for a meditator not to be able to handle such experiences on their own. So, as I said, much depends on the person and the type of meditation they are doing.

QUESTION: I recently stayed at Godwin's centre in Sri Lanka and it is very beautiful, on top of the hills, and with very beautiful natural surroundings. I would like to ask Godwin to comment on what part the enjoyment of the beauties of nature, and more generally music and art, the positive enjoyment of beautiful things, what part that has to play in meditation?

GODWIN: Yes, in fact I should have mentioned that as one way of experiencing joy and lightness in one's practice. In our Centre, in our schedule we have a time for what is called individual and outdoor meditation. During this time I encourage meditators to work on some particular areas.

One is to see how one relates to being alone with oneself. Because its interesting that sometimes when we are alone with ourselves, not having to do anything, we realise that we don't seem to enjoy our own company very much. We seem to become bored with ourselves and lonely. Now when such states of mind would arise I would encourage meditators to work through such states of mind, to go through them rather than escape from them. Some of the things we do may be an attempt to escape from ourselves. By going through them you may experience 'aloneness', which is entirely different from 'loneliness'.

Then you learn to enjoy your own company, and you become self-contained within yourself. The external dependencies that we have, which we assume would give rise to joy and happiness, can be replaced by being self-contained within yourself. So this can be attempted while doing individual and outdoor meditation, learning to be your most valued and precious friend.

Another aspect which I have learned over the years is that with this emphasis on being aware and introspective, it is possible that you can become too enwrapped and preoccupied with yourself, having no regard for the people around you and the environment. Therefore I encourage meditators, especially in the context of nature, to make an effort to develop sensitivity to their surroundings, so that this ideally gives a balance between being introspective and extrospective. And in that process one can experience a beautiful self-forgetfulness in merging with the nature which is around you.

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Another thing which can be attempted with nature is to be able to see things very clearly and to hear things very clearly. With meditation one may develop the capacity to see things and hear things as if for the first time, to develop a sort of mind which can be described as innocent, fresh, alive, childlike.

So these are some of the advantages one has in relating to nature. Another aspect is that having that sensitivity, developing the sense of experiencing something beautiful, will inevitably generate joy and lightness.

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