

Advanced class - Review 2006/2007 & 2007/2008

Theory and Practice of Meditation

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- Q What is the ultimate goal of Buddhists?
A Nibbana.
- Q Explain Nibbana in one sentence using the 3rd Noble Truth.
A Freedom from suffering (dukkha).
- Q Is Nibbana the only teaching found in the Buddha's teachings?
A No. The Buddha's teaching also includes teachings that lead to happiness in this life and in future lives. It is a graduated teaching that leads to freedom from suffering and happiness.
- Q Was the Buddha a saviour?
A No, he was a great teacher who realized the path to freedom from suffering and taught it to all beings for their benefit.
- Q Who then is the saviour in Buddhism?
A You are. You realize the Buddhist goal of freedom from suffering through your own effort and practice. The Buddha, The Dhamma - his teachings, and the Sangha - his ordained disciples assist you.
- Q What are the 3 components of practice required for Nibbana?
A Generosity, Virtue, Meditation (Dana, Sila , Bavana).
- Q Why is it not Virtue, One pointedness, and Insight (Sila, Samadhi, Panna)?
A Yes, this answer is acceptable. Meditation or bavana can be divided into Bavana that leads to Samadhi and Bavana that leads to Panna. However, Dana, commonly translated as generosity, literal translation of "letting go" is also required.
- Q How does the practice of Dana, Sila, and Bavana lead to freedom from suffering (Nibbana)?
A By slowly eradicating Loba (Greed/lust/strong grasping), Dosa (ill will/anger/hatred) and Moha (delusion/not knowing).
- Q What or who did the Buddha say was essential for the successful practice of the spiritual path?
A A good friend (Kalayana Mitta or Dhamma friend).
- Q How does a good friend assist in the spiritual path?
A By encouraging and assisting in the dhamma path and protecting one from actions resulting from defilements.
- Q What is the most important aspect of a skilful or unskillful action; the mind (intention) the speech, or the deed?
A The mind or intention.

The practice - Dana

- Q A better translation for Generosity more in line with Dhamma is?
A Letting go.
- Q Purification of mind is the desired result of generosity. Two wrong ways to give are?
A For public honour or recognition and expecting something back in return.
- Q For the best results of generosity the mind should be pure during three stages of letting go. They are:
A Before the gift is given during the planning, during the act of giving, and each time you reflect on the act of giving.
- Q How do you know that the mind is pure during giving?
A The joy felt in the act of giving.
- Q Why is the gift of Truth (Dhamma) considered to be higher than the gift of fearlessness (Abaya Dana) and the gift of food, clothes and shelter (Ahmisa Dana)?
A The gift of Dhamma leads to freedom from suffering. This is permanent. All other gifts are impermanent.

The practice - Sila

- Q What does the practice of virtue start with?
A Restraint.
- Q What are the five precepts that lay persons observe daily?
A Restraint from; killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and taking intoxicating substances.
- Q What are the eight precepts that lay persons observe daily?
A Restraint from harsh speech, slander, gossip and wrong livelihood are added to the above. Restraint from intoxicating substances becomes a prerequisite implied and required for the practice of each of the eight.
- Q Are these commandments?
A No.
- Q How should they be undertaken?
A After careful examination, and understanding when you agree that it is in your best interest and the best interest of others to do so.
- Q One starts the practice of virtue with restraint. How does one progress?
A Through the practice of the Brahma Vihara: Metta (loving kindness), Karuna (compassion), Mudita (sympathetic joy), and Uppekka (equanimity).
- Q How does one progress further in virtue?
A Through the practice of thoughts of loving kindness (Metta Chinta).

- Q Is this the same as Metta meditation used for Samadhi?
 A No. The purpose of Metta meditation in this context is one pointedness. It is one of the 40 objects of meditation given by the Buddha for Samadhi. This requires the use of one word such as sukiho (be happy).
- Q How do thoughts of loving kindness help progress in virtue?
 A By reducing anger and softening the mind by directing it to kindness and friendliness.
- Q Why do you start with your self?
 A First, you too are worthy of love and kindness. Second, you can not give to others what you do not have.
- Q Does it really benefit others when you direct Metta to them?
 A Documented case histories show that it does.
- Q Can one start meditation without a strong foundation of virtue?
 A One can start, but one will not progress. The mind will be agitated and will not be calm.
- Q What is the Law of Kamma
 A Skillful and unskillful intentional thoughts, speech and actions lead to pleasant (joyful) and unpleasant (painful) results.
- Q Does the effect of skillful and unskillful thoughts, speech and action occur despite not knowing, believing or understanding the law of kamma?
 A Yes. The law of kamma is a universal law and applies to all just as the law of gravity applies to all. Just because one does not understand the law of gravity does not mean that a ball that one throws up does not fall down. Ignorance of the law of kamma will not change its natural operation.
- Q Is belief in the law of kamma essential to derive the benefits of the practice?
 A No it is not essential. However, confidence in the operation of the law of kamma obtained through study, analysis and experience helps. It helps because this knowledge encourages skillful behavior and discourages unskillful behavior. Virtue is essential to the practice.
- Q Did the Buddha attribute all things to the law of kamma?
 A No. The Buddha spoke of the law of inorganic order (Utu Niyama), that causes natural disasters such as earth quakes, floods, volcanoes, and drought resulting from heat energy of the sun and the bowels of the earth;
 The law of genetics or seed (Bija Niyama), that results in similarities between parents and children and the passing down of genes;
 The power of the developed mind that results in supernatural phenomena (Chitta Niyama), and
 the Law of Truth (Dhamma Niyama), such as all things are impermanent and not self that one can experience for oneself through practice.

The practice - Bavana

- Q What are the two types of meditation essential to Nibbana that the Buddha taught?
A Samadhi or meditation that leads to one pointedness and Vipassana or meditation that leads to insight.
- Q How many types of Samadhi meditation did the Buddha advocate?
A 40 types which he recommended based on the character of the person.
- Q What is the most common Samadhi meditation?
A Breathing Awareness (Anapana Sati) that the Buddha himself used.
- Q What is the goal of Samadhi meditation?
A One pointedness or Samadhi. It also leads to tranquility or calmness and the Jhana (mental ecstasies/absorptions).
- Q What is Jhana?
A Jhana is very high stages of mental development or mental absorptions. The mind is very tranquil and joyful. Feelings of bliss and deep concentration accompany the Jhana. Some times one may also experience super natural powers of the mind. Jhana results in rebecoming in the Rupa (with form) or Arupa (without form) Brahma realms. However, Jhana is a temporary subduing of the defilements. It can be lost.
- Q Why is Samadhi meditation also known as Samatha meditation.
A Because it leads to tranquility or Samatha
- Q Was Samadhi meditation available before the time of the Buddha
A Yes. Alara Kalama and Uddaka Rama Putta had attained the Arupa Jhana through Samadhi meditation before the Buddha.
- Q Is Jhana required to start the practice of Vipassana.
A No. Jhana helps as it subdues the hindrances. The Buddha attained the Jhana. However, Jhana is temporary and can be lost. Our focus should be Nibbana. If one realizes Jhana this is fine. If one does not, this too is fine.
- Q If one has not attained the Jhana (Appana Samadhi), can one begin Vipassana?
A One can begin Vipassana as soon as one has some measure of concentration. However, if one has reached Access Samadhi (Upaccara Samadhi), then it will be easier, as one has the concentration required for Vipassana.
- Q Is concentration or one pointedness a pre requisite to insight (Vipassana)?
A Yes. Vipassana requires Ksanika Samadhi (Instantaneous One pointedness). As such some measure of one pointedness is recommended before one starts Vipassana. Preferably Access Samadhi (Upaccara Samadhi).
- Q What are the hindrances to meditation?
A Desire/lust, anger/ill will/hatred, restlessness/agitation, sloth/torpor and doubt as to the truth of the Path.

- Q How does one overcome the hindrances?
A By changing the meditation and thoughts as the hindrances arise until one is in a stronger and calmer frame of mind.
- Q Changing the meditation to what?
A Impurities of the body (for desire and lust), loving kindness (for anger and hatred), death (for sloth and toper), and virtues of the Buddha (for doubt).
- Q What meditation is best for a scattered mind that is running, agitated, from one thing to another?
A Breathing awareness.
- Q Can breathing awareness be used for Vipassana?
A Yes. When one uses "mindfulness of sensation of breath" one has begun the practice of Vipassana. When one is counting while observing the breath or chanting a word such as 'Buddho' when observing the breath one is practicing only Samadhi meditation.
- Q Was Vipassana unique to the Buddha?
A Yes.
- Q Can one attain freedom from suffering without Vipassana?
A No.
- Q What is the best way to start Vipassana?
A One of the best ways is to attend a ten day Vipassana retreat. If this is not available or possible, then it should be under the guidance of a teacher.
- Q Can one attain Nibbana in this life time?
A Yes. If one has completed the 10 virtues and practices Samadhi and Vipassana meditation (on a strong foundation of virtue) diligently with effort.
- Q What are the 10 virtues?
A Dana (generosity), Sila (virtue), Nekkamma (renunciation), Panna (Wisdom), Viriya (effort), Kanthi (patience), Sacca (truth), Adittana (determination), Metta (loving kindness) and Upekka (equanimity).

General

- Q Why are so many Westerners starting meditation?
A They have realized through experience that meditation (slowly) leads to freedom from suffering. It reduces stress and results in well-being
- Q Is this the only reason?
A No. There are many benefits of meditation. Some meditate for the tranquility it brings, stress reduction, benefits to health and the improved concentration and memory power. Some, especially those using metta chinta for the peace and harmony it brings to their lives and the lives of their loved ones (reducing anger).
- Q Can any one benefit from the practice?
A Yes. The Dhamma is universal truth. As such the benefits of practice is for all beings irrespective of religion, gender, age or nationality.

Q There are many persons who claim to be Buddhists. Who is a Buddhist?
A A person who practices the teaching of the Buddha is a Buddhist. Being born to Buddhist parents in itself does not make one a Buddhist.

Q How would you define 'Practicing the teachings of the Buddha'?

A The Buddha recommended the following seven steps.
1. Analytical study of the teachings. 2. Confidence gained through critical thinking and analytical study that leads to the practice. 3. Practice of generosity 4. Practice of restraint
5. Practice of virtue 6. Practice of concentration meditation 7. Practice of Insight meditation.

Q Does one have to take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha to be a Buddhist?

A Yes, it is recommended that one takes refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha before one claims to be a Buddhist. However, this is not a mechanical recitation or ritual. Neither are you taking refuge for the purpose of salvation. One takes refuge in the Buddha Dhamma and Sangha by developing the qualities of the Buddha - the qualities of awakening within oneself, by upholding the Dhamma (teaching) and incorporating it in your life, and by providing requisite to the Sangha and emulating their lifestyle. The term Sangha includes monks and nuns who have attained any of the four stages of enlightenment.

Q If one has not taken refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha but practices generosity, virtue and meditation as taught by the Buddha will one benefit from the practice?

A Yes, one will benefit. Many persons from other religions are now practicing meditation as taught by the Buddha. As generosity and virtue are common to all religions, most of these persons have a strong foundation of virtue. They are benefiting by the practice. This is why they keep practicing. As the Dhamma unfolds and their merit (effect of past skillful actions) comes to fruition they will have confidence in the Buddha and his teachings. When the Dhamma unfolds and the time is right they will take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. It is not the mechanical recitation that is required but the confidence in the teachings and the practice. They are practicing. Why do you think so many in the West are practicing? You know how difficult it is to sustain a daily practice. It is because they are experiencing the results.

Q Why is it that when the Buddha has given us the Path to the practice of freedom from suffering, some Buddhists resort to prayers and offerings (pujas) and other rituals when encountering suffering?

A Because of the influence of other religions and cultural influences that have occurred over the years based on their birth country. The practice of the Dhamma as laid out by the Buddha takes effort and determination. It is easier to resort to prayers and vows. The influence of religions that co-existed with Buddhism resulted in prayers and vows as most religions are theistic and resort to prayers. The indigenous cultures of the country also influenced the practice.

- Q What is the difference between Celestial beings (God/s) in other religions and in Buddhism.
- A Most theistic religions believe in an omnipotent, all knowing, permanent creator God who is a saviour. One's salvation, liberation or passage to heaven is in the hands of their personal God. Belief and alliance to the God or his messenger are integral to the religion and salvation. Prayers and vows are also usually integral to these religions.
- In Buddhism the celestial beings (God/s) are not omnipotent, all knowing or permanent. They are compassionate and transient. They have no role to play in our salvation. Rebirth in the heavens is dependent on one's skilful actions not on the grace or powers of the celestial beings. Any one who performs skilful deeds, is compassionate and generous can take rebecoming in a celestial realm. The heavens according to the Buddha are not reserved just for his disciples. When the effect of these skilful actions are depleted the celestial beings will take rebecoming based on their skilful and unskillful actions in another realm. Celestial beings are compassionate but the defilements still lie dormant within them. The Buddha did not encourage prayers to celestial beings for wealth, good health, happiness or salvation. Instead he encouraged his disciples in the practice of the Dhamma.
- Q What are the realms in which a person can take rebecoming?
- A The Buddha spoke of 31 realms in which a person could take rebecoming. Rebecoming in these realms was based on one's skilful and unskillful actions. They are: Four unhappy realms including the animal realm and 3 lower spirit realms. 7 happy realms including the human realm and 6 celestial realms in which beings have sense pleasures. 16 higher celestial realms with form in which beings have pleasures of the mind. And 4 higher celestial realms with no form in which beings have pleasures of the mind. Rebecoming in the higher celestial realms was based on mental development such as Jhana.
- Q If a God does not take you to heaven through his own grace (at death) what or who is instrumental in taking you to heaven or hell?
- A You are. Your strong desire for rebecoming (bava tanha) takes you into your next birth. If you have led a skilful life rebirth may occur in one of the heavens. If you have led an unskillful life it may be in one of the unhappy or lower realms of existence.
- Q I have been practicing Buddhist meditation for many years and have benefited from the practice, however, I have great difficulty giving up on the concept of an almighty God. This is integral to my tradition and what I grew up with. Will this affect my practice negatively?
- A It is natural to cling to beliefs and concepts that one has grown up with. Do not be judgmental about these beliefs. The answer to this question depends on what you mean when you say 'concept of God'. If you believe that salvation is in the hands of your God, If you believe that prayers are necessary for salvation, good health, happiness and prosperity it will affect your practice negatively. Instead of practicing generosity, virtue and meditation you will rely on your concept of God and prayers. However, if your concept of God is this warm feeling of a being with compassion, purity and goodness and your belief extends to being as God-like as possible and working towards these qualities arising within you then it will not affect your practice negatively. My advice is to practice and let the Dhamma unfold within you. This is your currently reality. Just accept it and continue with the practice.

Q Buddhism does not believe in a soul. What or who is reborn?

A This is a difficult concept for the beginner. To really understand this concept one should experience impermanence, not self, and suffering through the practice and see for oneself. I will give you a brief explanation. Rebecoming (rebirth) is happening at every moment every second. You are not the person you were a few years, months or days ago. You are not even the same person you were a few minutes ago. Your mind (nama) and body (rupa) are changing every moment. For conventional purposes we continue referring to you with an unchanging name or the term 'I'.

This person that you call "I" is not the same person you called 'I' when you were 2 years old. Your body has changed and your mind had changed. We can see these changes over a period of time. The changes that are occurring every moment are not visible to the naked eye but nevertheless they are occurring. Over time the effects of these changes are visible. Our body has matured and grown since we were born and it has aged. Similarly our mind has matured and grown in knowledge and wisdom since we were born. The "I" of today is not the same as the "I" of tomorrow.

If I asked you if you are the same person you were when you were 2 years old you would reply, 'you are not'. If I ask you if you are a different person than you were when you were two years old you will reply 'You are not'. Both answers would be true. The Buddha called this 'nacasō naca anno'. It is the same and yet it is not the same. We are an aggregate of an ever changing mind and body. So long as the body is healthy and can sustain life one can understand this concept. At death this ever changing body can no longer sustain life. The ever changing mind that is strong with desire clings to life and takes rebecoming in another suitable body that can sustain life. In general ones skilful and unskillful behavior will determine the place and station of your rebecoming. No permanent unchanging soul passes.

Q How does one end this cycle of rebecoming (rebirth)?

A One ends this cycle of rebecoming when one sees things as they are and lets go the desire to take rebecoming. One experiences impermanence, not self and suffering through the practice and just observes the ever changing phenomena without attachment and clinging. The defilements that feed this cycle of rebecoming desire (loba), ill-will (dosa) and delusion (moha) have been extinguished.

Q This is difficult to understand. What happens to an Arahant after death? Where does he go?

A Yes, it is difficult to understand. This is to be experienced. I will give you an example to make it easier. An oil lamp is kept lit through the oil, wick and supply of oxygen. When these three that fuel the lamp is no more the lamp is no longer lit. The lamp has been extinguished. Similarly when loba, dosa and moha that keeps us in samsara with recurring rebecoming is no more there is no rebecoming. When the fuel for rebecoming is no more, then there is no more rebecoming.

Q Can one benefit from the practice if one does not believe in rebecoming?

A Yes, one can benefit from the practice provided that it is done properly as per the Buddha's guidance and instruction. The Buddha did not encourage blind faith. You need not believe in the teaching because it is your tradition, because it is in your scriptures, because it is accepted by many or because you respect the teacher or founder. The Buddha advocated examination and seeing or knowing for your self. I would recommend further reading and investigation when ever one has doubts. Knowledge of the Dhamma leads to conviction (Sradha). This is very important for the practice.