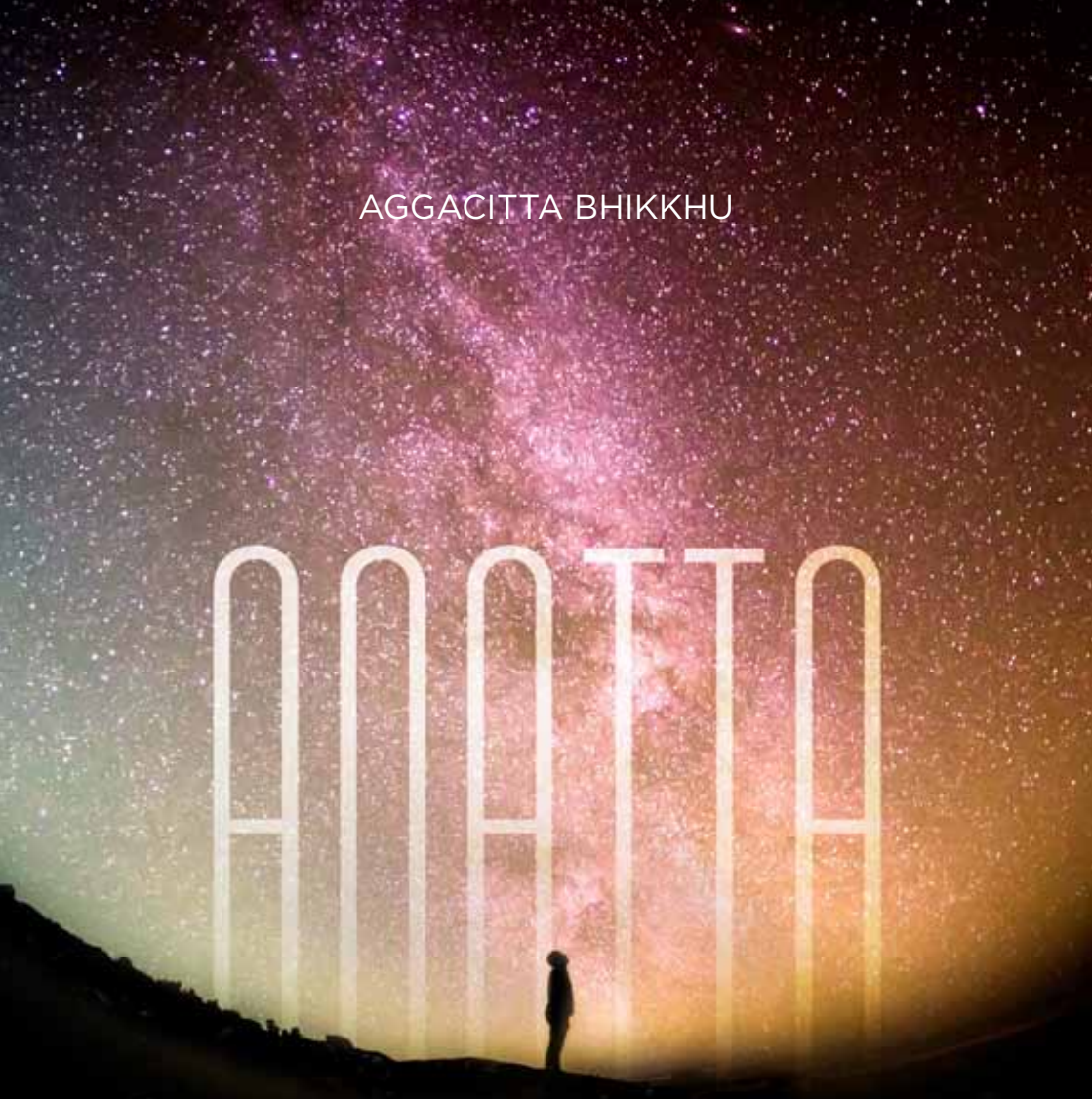
AGGACITTA BHIKKHU



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SELF-RESPONSIBILITY

in THEORY and PRACTICE

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Sāsanārakkha Buddhist Sanctuary presents a series of Dhamma resources that investigate popular interpretations and practices of Buddhism in the light of the Pāli scriptures and real-life experiences. Using a critical yet constructive approach based on the Four Great References of Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16) and Mahāpadesa Sutta (AN 4.180), as well as on Kālāma Sutta (AN 3.66), the series is an attempt to reconcile ancient teachings with selected contemporary life experiences and research findings. In this way, Sāsanārakkha Buddhist Sanctuary hopes to bring us closer to a practical reality we can more easily connect with.

Four Great References

Before he passed away, the Buddha gave us practical advice to assess situations in which we hear a monk proclaiming that what he teaches "is the Dhamma... the Vinaya... the teachings of the Master". He may say that he heard and learned it in the presence of

1. the Buddha himself
2. a Saṅgha in a certain monastery with its elders and leaders
3. many learned elders in a certain monastery who are recipients of the oral tradition, and upholders of the Dhamma, Vinaya and the summaries, or
4. a learned elder in a certain monastery who is a recipient of the oral tradition, and upholder of the Dhamma, Vinaya and the summaries.

In such situations, without rejoicing in or scorning the monk's words, we should investigate to see if such teachings are included in the sutta or seen in the Vinaya. If they are, we may conclude that they are the words of the Buddha and that they have been well learned by the speaker. Otherwise, we may conclude that they are not the words of the Buddha and that they have been wrongly learned by the speaker, and so we should reject them.

Kālāma Sutta

Also named Kesamutti Sutta and popularly known as "The Charter of Free Inquiry", the discourse was given by the Buddha to the Kālāmas who were perplexed by the conflicting claims of visiting monks and priests. It stresses on cautious discernment, as the abridged excerpt below shows:

"Come, you Kālāmas. Do not go by repeated hearing, nor by tradition, nor by hearsay, nor by scripture, nor by logical thinking, nor by inference, nor by theorising, nor by considered acceptance of a view, nor by apparent capability, nor by thinking: *The monk is our teacher*. When you yourselves, Kālāmas, know: *These things are unskilful, blameable, disapproved by the wise; carried out and undertaken, these things lead to harm and suffering*—then, Kālāmas, you should abandon them ... When you yourselves know: *These things are skilful, blameless, praised by the wise; carried out and undertaken, these things lead to benefit and happiness*—then, Kālāmas, you should live, having fulfilled them."

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Content

PREFACE

Based on a Dhamma talk given during the Firefly Mission-SBS Retreat held in SBS in April 2017, this booklet is produced at the request of Joan and Beng Chee, who found the talk very elucidating and volunteered to do the layout for it.

I have amended some inaccuracies typical of an informal talk, refined the language and provided textual references for passages quoted from the Pāli canon.

My gratitude goes to Mae Chee Punnisa for transcribing the audio recording, Yap Sew Hong and Ghaṭikāra Loo for their feedback on an early draft and my editors for polishing the English and presentation.

Aggacitta Bhikkhu
December 2017


Based on a
Dhamma talk
given during FFMR
in April, 2017

Introduction

Anatta, the concept of not-self, can be very confusing. We say: *Nothing belongs to me; 'not mine, not me, not my self'; all the mental defilements are just external visitors who come in and defile the mind.* Then where does self-responsibility come in? If there's no one there, who will reap the consequences of one's actions?

Conventional Usage of *Self*

We need to understand that the Buddha used the word atta (self) according to context. Sometimes, he would use it in a very conventional way. Sometimes, he would use it in an ultimate sense. I often say: *In the ultimate sense, we are all the same because we are all products of present circumstances and past conditioning; yet we are also different because of the different ways we were conditioned in the past.* For example we may all be in the same situation where we are presented with identical circumstances, but we would react differently based on our past conditioning. Even our bodies are different because our past *kamma* influences which family we are born into and our body form right now. Because the Buddha had to use conventional language to express and communicate his ideas about the ultimate, there are bound to be overlaps and sometimes confusion.

In the Dhammapada, we have this very famous verse:

> *attā hi attano nātho,*
> *ko hi nātho paro siyā,*
> *attanā hi sudantena,*
> *nāthaṁ labhati dullabhaṁ*
>
> *Self is self's protector,*
> *for who else can be a protector?*
> *With the self well tamed*
> *one gets a protector difficult to get.*

What is the meaning of this self in this verse? We always say that there is no self but then here the Buddha says *Self is self's own protector*. The Buddha here is using self in the conventional sense. *Be self-reliant. Don't rely on others*. In such expressions, we use the word *self* in a conventional way.

Furthermore, there's another verse in the Dhammapada:

> *attā hi pathameva,*
> *paṭirūpe nivesaye,*
> *athaññamanusāseyya,*
> *na hi kileseyya paṇḍito*
>
> *One should first establish self*
> *in what is suitable and appropriate*
> *and then only after that should one try to instruct others.*
> *For the wise person should not be defiled.*

In other words, if you want to be a teacher, you have to make sure that you are well practised. There's a famous Zen story of a blind person volunteering to lead people across a river. The moral of the story is: *If you want to lead people to enlightenment or awakening, you must have travelled the path before. You must have seen the light before you can do so.* In this case also, the Buddha is talking about *self* in the conventional sense.

There is an interesting account found in the Mahāvagga of the Vinaya Pitaka[1], which tells about the early days of the evolution of the community of monks, where the Buddha actually asked a group of young men to "look for the self". At that time the Buddha was sitting at the foot of a tree in a jungle thicket. At the same time a group of 30 young men with their wives were frolicking in that area. One of them was single so they got a courtesan for him. While they were heedlessly enjoying themselves, the courtesan made off with some of their valuables. When they found that out they searched high and low for her and

[1] Bhaddavaggiyavatthu, Mahākhandhaka.

in the process bumped into the Buddha seated at the foot of a tree. They asked the Buddha if he had seen a woman. When the Buddha asked what the woman was to them, they related what had happened. The Buddha replied, “What do you think, young men? Which is better: to look for the woman or to look for the self?” They said, “It is better, bhante, to look for the self.” The Buddha then asked them to sit down while he gave them a graduated discourse, at the end of which all of them attained the Dhamma-eye and requested for bhikkhu ordination. Here again, the Buddha was using the word *self* in a conventional sense, perhaps close to that used by some teachers (probably influenced by modern psychologists and psychotherapists) who say, “Search within your self” or “Understand your true self”.

The Buddha repeated this admonishment or instructions quite often before he passed away:

> *attadīpā bhikkhave viharatha, attasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā, dhammadīpā, dhammasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā.*[2]
>
> *Monks, dwell with the self as an island (or as a lamp), with the self as refuge, with no other refuge; with the Dhamma as a lamp (or an island), with the Dhamma as refuge, with no other refuge.*

This quotation of the Buddha has been interpreted in various ways. Some people say: *The Buddha only talked about taking*

[2] E.g. Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16)

refuge in the self and the Dhamma, so you don't have to take refuge in the Sangha or in the Buddha. Others say: *The Buddha only said take refuge in the Dhamma; the Dhamma means the suttas. So you just have to take refuge in the suttas, nothing else.* But the fact is that the Buddha did not stop there. He asked a question:

> *And how, monks, does a monk dwell with self as an island (or as a lamp), with self as refuge, with no other refuge; with the Dhamma as a lamp (or as an island), with the Dhamma as refuge, with no other refuge? Here, monks, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly aware, mindful, having subdued worldly likes and dislikes...*

And he went on to the rest of the four establishments of mindfulness. So, when you are practising the four establishments of mindfulness, you are dwelling with the self as a lamp (or island), with the self as refuge, without any other refuge.

Thus, the Buddha's words have to be taken in context. Here he's using skilful means to ask you to be self-reliant.

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Experiential Verification of Not-self

Now, in the course of your practice, when I ask you to look at conditionality, you begin to see that your thoughts, ideas, views, opinions, expectations, etc. all arise due to causes and conditions. Then you have an insight into yourself and you stop blaming yourself because you know that what happens in the mind – whether it's defiled thoughts, nasty comments or judgments passed on other people – is the result of present causes and past conditioning. Then you

can begin to forgive yourself: *Eh, not me, not mine. I didn't purposely think this thought. This thought arose because of past conditioning, perceptions and experiences: the way I was taught by my parents, or influenced by the media, or by my religious teachers, school, peers....* Nothing is original. Everything is a product of causes and conditions. So you see that having an experiential understanding of conditionality helps us to understand ourselves, forgive ourselves. People tend to blame themselves for having such 'bad' behaviour. But actually you are not to blame. You are the product of causes and conditions. Nevertheless you should also try to apply Right View to distinguish the unskilful from the skilful and Right Effort to abandon the unskilful and develop the skilful.

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Childhood Conditioning

Many years ago, way back in the 60s and 70s, many psychologists and psychotherapists had this idea: that any dysfunctional behaviour of a person goes back to his childhood. So, if you have any dysfunctional behaviour, any neurosis, any sort of weird behaviour, they always say it's because of parents, or, the way your parents brought you up. Parents and the way they brought you up have deep impressions on you and they are buried in your subconscious. So, the way you react now is highly influenced by the way you were conditioned in the past. But your parents are not to be totally blamed either. They were also brought up in circumstances beyond their control. The way they treated you is a product of past conditioning from their parents and now it's brought over to you and the way you treat your children will be a result

of past conditioning from your parents. So, as long as you are not able to break through this, you are going to continue the lineage.

□ □ □

How to Undo Past Conditioning

So, if you are a meditator, an introspective mindful practitioner, you look back and understand your thoughts and their conditioning. Then you are more informed and you can undo certain aspects of past conditioning. If you don't understand past conditioning, you cannot undo your bad habits. You become a slave of your habits. That's why I always try to tell you: *When you sit, try to sit absolutely still.* This will train your mind to catch urges and intentions, habitual tendencies which you may not even be aware of: fidgeting with your fingers and toes, unconsciously using your arms to adjust your hair, glasses, shawl, and so on. These are actually accompanied by volition but most people are not aware of this because they are not mindful. They have not trained their minds to be mindful. It's very useful to train your mind to be able to catch intentions. You can catch thoughts. You can catch any thought that arises before you act on it. Even when you want to think of something, there's an initial thought or urge which you can process. Once you catch it, you got the space to put it to the BARR test[3] to decide whether you want to pursue it or not. If you want to say or do something, it's the same. You have the chance to process that intention before you decide to pursue it or not.

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[3] Is it **B**eneficial? If so, is it **A**ppropriate? If so, is it **R**elevant? If so, is it **R**ealistic? Only if the answer is Yes to all these four questions should the intention be pursued.

Changing Others' Behaviours

Somebody asked during an interview: "Can we understand that no one is at fault? We are not at fault since we are products of past conditioning. You see somebody who's behaving in an unsuitable or obnoxious way and you have been trying to live with this person for a long, long time. He may be a colleague or a member of the family. Now we have this realisation: *All our thoughts and behaviours are due to past conditioning; so he's not at fault. He's also a product or victim of his past conditioning and present circumstances. Unlike me, he's not a practitioner so he doesn't even know it; but I'm a practitioner and I know. I can forgive him. I can understand.* So what do we do? Do we just let him be? That's his kamma. Let him bear it himself.*"*

Well, you have to put it to the BARR test. You have to see what motivates you to want to say something to correct him, to improve his character. Of course, it's **beneficial**. It's beneficial to you. It's beneficial to that person. It's beneficial to everybody around. But is it **appropriate** or not? Is it the appropriate time? Is he in a good mood? Will he be receptive to what you are going to say to him? Well, if it's the right time, he's in a good mood and he may be receptive, then you have to advise him in a very nice way.

Maybe not directly, but indirectly in a way that is acceptable to him so that he won't be defensive but can think over it. Most people don't like to be criticised. They don't want to be told that they are wrong. That's human nature – the ego wanting to preserve itself. Knowing very well that old habits die hard, if you really want to change another person, you have to be very, very patient. You really have to have compassion and patience. You have to do it again and again, looking for the right time, the right mood, and the right expression to be able to do that. If you can't change the other person, change yourself; change your attitude towards that person. That's easier. It's very, very difficult to change another person. So, you just have to learn to live with that person if you can't get away.

□ □ □

Not-self and Self-responsibility

Now, let me address the issue of self-responsibility. You see all these unwholesome things arising in your mind: anger, jealously, conceit, being upset, resentment. You know that they're unwholesome; for example, attachment (clinging on to dear ones who passed away a long time ago, still clinging and still suffering, thinking about them). You know these are all defilements. They are visitors. They come in and invade the mind and overwhelm you. So, what do you do? They're not-self anyway. Even if you do something bad, if there's no one there, who is responsible for the action? Who will reap the bad results?

From the ultimate point of view, there's no one there – just the five aggregates which are changing all the time. There's no one there who experiences the results of past kamma. The five aggregates are experiencing them. Then, if

some bad kamma was done in the past, who did it? The five aggregates. Which one? *Saṅkhārā* – volitional formations. That's the one responsible for unwholesome and wholesome actions because they come from volition. The other aggregates – form, feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) – don't have volition. They are resultants. They are the products of past kamma.

According to the Abhidhamma, four of the five sense experiences are accompanied by neutral feelings. Only the fifth one, the body sense, experiences bodily sensations accompanied either by comfort or discomfort; pleasant or unpleasant feelings. The rest are all neutral. Whenever you have any discomfort, it is not because you will it, but it is the result of past bad kamma.

In the suttas[4], the Buddha said that wholesome kamma will produce pleasant, desirable results while unwholesome kamma will produce unpleasant, undesirable results. In another sutta[5], he talked about old and new kamma. He said that all the six sense faculties – eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind – are old kamma. When the Buddha used the term *old kamma*, he's actually referring to the

[4] AN 10.217
[5] SN 35.145

result of past kamma. So, all your sense bases – your eyes, nose, tongue, body and mind – are resultants. They are the results of past kamma. But they are also nourished and developed or they deteriorate because of other circumstances besides all these past kammic forces, e.g. by the food you take (nutrition) and the environment you are exposed to. In other words, there are many influences on your body besides being just the result of past kamma.

What is *new kamma*? New kamma is any volitional activity that you create now, i.e. present kamma – all those reactions in your mind in relation to what you are exposed to through your senses.

So who is suffering? There is no one who is suffering. Who is feeling? There's no one who is feeling. It is vedanā that feels. Vedanā or feeling feels. Saññā recognises and identifies; consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is just conscious of its specific object in a very rudimentary way. If you did some bad kamma in the past and it's time to repay the kammic debts, your aggregates that you have right now will be the ones which are experiencing them. Then vedanā will experience all the unpleasantness. It's going to be saññā (recognition, identification) that recognises what's happening to you.

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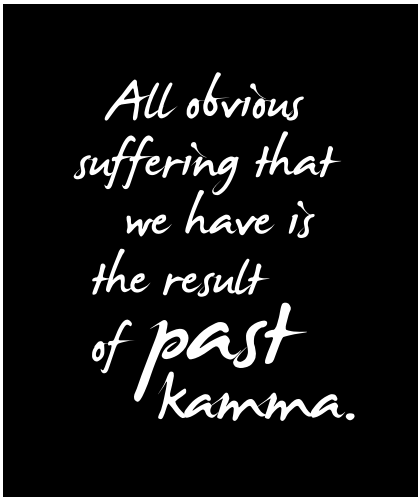
Distinguishing Bodily Sensations from Bodily and Mental Feelings

When you watch pain, the mind actually shifts back and forth from watching bodily sensations to watching feelings. If you are just watching heat, hardness

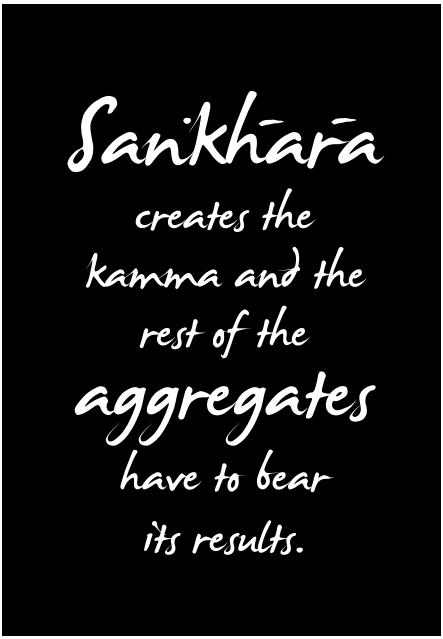
and so forth, those are bodily sensations. If you watch also the discomfort, the unpleasant feeling at the spot where it's hurting, that is watching bodily feelings. When you look at your mind, you see that your mind is reacting. If your mind doesn't like it, there is aversion or rejection; that is, unpleasant mental feeling accompanying that rejection or aversion.

But if you have good samādhi (composure) that experience becomes very interesting. You can look at the sensations. You can see the bodily pain there but there's no negative mental reaction. The mental reaction is equanimous, the feeling neutral. If you reach that stage, you will be able to understand very clearly what is bodily feeling and what is mental feeling because they are obviously two separate things. But if you have not reached that stage because mindfulness and samādhi are not strong enough, you will think that mental and bodily suffering occur at the same place where it hurts. That is because you are unable to separate these three things: bodily sensation, bodily feeling and mental feeling.



All obvious suffering that we have (in terms of unpleasant, undesirable circumstances that we encounter in life) is the result of past kamma and that past kamma may not necessarily be just past life kamma. They could be present life past kamma. What you did earlier on before that point of time will also have effects on your five aggregates.

So, in the final analysis, there is no one there. No one creates the kamma and no one is responsible for it. Saṅkhārā, the fourth aggregate creates the kamma and the rest of the aggregates have to bear its results. It's vedanā that feels. Vedanā is the poor fellow who has to feel everything - all the good and bad effects of kamma.



It's very, very important to be able to watch the mind. That's why I always emphasise that you should pay more attention to the subject than the objects, because the objects are the results of past kamma. It is only the subject that is creating new kamma. The subject is the culprit. You should always look at the subject more than the objects. The objects are means to anchor your mind to give you peace and calm, to extract you from the compulsive habit of getting involved in thoughts.

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Mental Development and the Luminous Mind

Buddhist meditation or mental cultivation is actually about developing the wholesome qualities of the mind. In the Aṅguttara Nikāya, Book of Ones,[6] the Buddha said:

> *Luminous, monks, is this citta. And it is corrupted by incoming corruptions. That an uninformed worldling knows not according to what has occurred. Therefore I say "There is no development of the citta for the uninformed worldling."*

What the Buddha meant is there cannot be development of the mind (citta) if you have not experienced this luminosity of the mind. In the next paragraph, the Buddha said:

> *Luminous, monks, is this citta. And it is freed from incoming corruptions. That an informed disciple of the noble one knows according to what has occurred. Therefore I say "There is development of the citta for the informed disciple of the noble one."*

What is this luminosity of the mind? It means that the mind is pure and bright, in the sense of being free from defilements. When you practise focused awareness or open awareness, sometimes you wonder why it appears so bright even though you are sitting in the dark. But the mind is intangible and it cannot be perceived in terms of colour, shape or proportion. Brightness is a manifestation of form, or what modern physicists would term *a mass of photons*. So how can that be the mind? A possible explanation is that when the mind is pure, i.e. freed from defilements, it produces mind-born matter (*cittaja-rūpa*) manifesting as luminosity, as a mass of photons.

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[6] AN 1.51 - 52

This brightness of the mind can be especially apparent for people who do focused awareness. But even if you do open awareness and your samādhi is good, you can also experience this luminosity of the mind when the mind is free from hindrances for a sufficient period of time and has become pure and luminous.

The development of the mind actually starts when the five hindrances have been abandoned temporarily. I don't think it's something very difficult if you are able to do your open awareness meditation by keeping yourself busy with the senses. Then thoughts will become less and less – spaced further and further apart. When that happens, because your mind is no longer engaged in thoughts usually accompanied by greed, hatred and delusion, the mind is pure. So that's the time mental development begins – when the hindrances have been abandoned.

□ □ □

Importance of Subduing the Hindrances

Let me repeat the opening explanatory paragraph of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* which I recited just now:

> *Here, a monk dwells contemplating body in the body... feelings in feelings... mind in mind... dhammas in dhammas, ardent, clearly knowing, mindful, having subdued longing and dejection in regard to the world.*

Note the last clause which says: *having subdued longing and dejection in regard to the world*. This actually refers to the five hindrances, taking the first two as the header. The first two are longing for sensual pleasures and

aversion, for which dejection is here used as a synonym. These are the two main elements of the five hindrances. Having subdued them does not mean that they are completely cut off. You have subdued them, that is, they are temporarily put in the background but they can arise again. That's why the first exercise in the 4th establishment of mindfulness, contemplation of dhammas (*dhammānupassanā*) is about the hindrances.

Although they are temporarily abandoned they can still arise. When they do arise you are supposed to observe them to see how they arise, how they are abandoned and how they will not arise again in future. So, you are looking at causes and conditions even when there are hindrances in the mind. If your hindrances have not been sufficiently subdued, you will not be able to practise the four establishments of mindfulness effectively.

Suppose you have not been maintaining your continuity of practice. You return home and you are back to your normal unmindful mode and suddenly you get angry and somebody says: *Be mindful! Be mindful!* Can you be mindful? No. You can only be mindful when there is continuity of practice, when the hindrances have been suppressed temporarily. Then when suddenly something happens, causing the hindrances to arise again, you can practise watching them. If there is no continuity of practice, there are long gaps without mindfulness; you will not be able to practise effectively. You will not be able to step back and look at them objectively and abandon them. So, continuity of practice is very important.

□ □ □

The Sense of "I Am"

Now, let me return to the subject of self. We all know that the *sotāpanna* (stream-enterer) has already eradicated the wrong view of a permanent unchanging self and yet he still has conceit. So, there seems to be something wrong. If he doesn't have this wrong view of a permanent unchanging self, how come there is still conceit which is all about the self? This type of conceit in Pāli is called *asmimāna. Asmi* means 'I am', and *māna* means 'conceit'. "I am so and so", "I am intelligent", "I am superior"; or if one has an inferiority complex: "I am inferior", "He is better than me"; or an equality complex: "We are all humans. What's the difference? Whether he's a monk or not I'm also human. So why should I pay respects?"

Any sort of comparison with another person, whether putting yourself above, equal or below is a form of conceit. It doesn't mean that you are considered to have *asmimāna* only when you feel superior. And even more pervasively, any identification with the sense of 'I am' is already *asmimāna*.

How do we overcome conceit? There's a sutta called Meghiya Sutta[7]. Āyasmā Meghiya was once the attendant of the Buddha before Āyasmā Ānanda became his permanent attendant. At that time, monks would take turns to attend to the Buddha. The monk on duty would follow the Buddha on his journey and take his bowl and robe as his attendant.

One day, Āyasmā Meghiya was walking up and down along a river bank and saw a beautiful mango grove. He was inspired to do his personal retreat there. So, he asked permission from the Buddha. "Bhante, I saw that beautiful mango grove and I wish to meditate there with your permission." The Buddha replied, "Wait, Meghiya, wait. I am alone. Wait until another monk comes." But Āyasmā Meghiya could not still his urge and he kept on pestering the Buddha for the second and third time. Finally the Buddha said: "Well, when you say you want to meditate, what can I say? Do what you think it is now time to do."

So, he left the Buddha and went to the grove to do his self-retreat. But as he sat down there he could not settle down at all. His mind was assailed

[7] Ud 4.1

by thoughts of sensuality, ill-will and cruelty. In the end, he packed up, went after the Buddha and related what had happened. Then the Buddha said: “If you are not ready, you should do the following things.” He gave him a few pointers, including (1) associate with good friends (*kalyānamitta*), (2) be perfect in the monks’ precepts and in moral conduct and behaviour, (3) practise mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānassati*) to abandon discursive thinking, (4) practise mettā to overcome ill-will, (5) develop the perception of not-beauty (*asubha*) to overcome lust and sexual desire and (6) develop the perception of impermanence (*anicca saññā*) in order to overcome *asmimāna*, conceit.

Somebody once asked me, “If you contemplate *anicca*, then you have to go on to *dukkha* and then to *anatta* eventually. But if you contemplate *anatta*, then the other two are automatically included. Is this correct?” That’s what one can deduce from three consecutive suttas[8] in the *Saṁyutta Nikāya*.

When you look at impermanence, how does it help you to subdue or abandon *asmimāna*, the ‘I am’ conceit? I would think that it’s not enough to just see your thoughts arise and pass away. You also need to see the causes and conditions. When you see causes and conditions behind your thoughts that arise and pass away, then you begin to understand what is ‘not mine, not me, not my self’ because these thoughts were not formed by you. They came about because of causes and conditions. So, I think you need to see that thoughts are impermanent in the light of causes and conditions, not just impermanence, arising and passing away.

□ □ □

[8] SN 22.15 - 17

Wrong Views Due to Not Seeing Causality

If you see things arising and passing away without understanding or seeing the causes and conditions behind their arising and passing away, it can lead to two types of wrong views. One is, since you can't see causes and conditions you could think that they're random. They just arise and pass away. There's no causality involved. That's *ahetuka-micchā-diṭṭhi*, the wrong view of non-causality that was prevalent during the Buddha's time.

The other extreme wrong view is: "Since there's no cause, no condition and I didn't evoke those thoughts, there must be somebody up there who is playing tricks on me, a creator God or some other being up there who is pulling my strings." That's another sort of wrong view.

When you see cause and conditioning, these two wrong views have no place. You cannot say that things happen randomly because there are causes and conditions behind every thought that arises in your mind and you cannot say that there's someone up there manipulating all these because the causes and conditions are obvious.

That's the cornerstone of the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha often talked about conditions: *when this is there, this happens; from the arising of this, this arises*. When you understand conditionality, depending on your level of spiritual maturity, you can even become an arahant.

There's this story[9] of a monk called Āyasmā Khemaka. He was sick. Some elder monks sent a younger monk, Āyasmā Dāsaka, to inquire about his health. "How are you getting on? How are your painful feelings? Are they increasing or subsiding?" Āyasmā Khemaka said, "I'm not feeling well. My unpleasant feelings are not subsiding; they are increasing."

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[9] SN 22.89

Then Āyasmā Dāsaka returned to the elders and reported their conversation. The elders sent him back to ask Āyasmā Khemaka if he regarded any of the five aggregates subject to clinging as the self or belonging to the self. When Āyasmā Dāsaka returned to ask, Āyasmā Khemaka answered, "I don't regard any of the five aggregates subject to clinging as the self or belonging to the self." Āyasmā Dāsaka brought this message back to the elders and they replied, "If so, then Āyasmā Khemaka is an arahant, with taints destroyed." They then sent Āyasmā Dāsaka back to relay that message. Āyasmā Khemaka said, "I don't regard any of the five aggregates subject to clinging as the self or belonging to the self; and yet I'm not an arahant, with taints destroyed. In regard to these five aggregates subject to clinging, the sense of 'I am' has not vanished, although I don't see that 'I am this.'"

Āyasmā Dāsaka returned and reported to the elders who then asked him to ask Āyasmā Khemaka what he meant by the sense of 'I am'. Did he mean "I am each of the five aggregates subject to clinging or apart from each of them?" When Āyasmā Dāsaka approached Āyasmā Khemaka again for clarification, the latter said, "Enough of this going back and forth, friend. Bring me my staff. I shall go to the elder monks myself."

Then he explained to them by giving two similes. The first is the scent of a flower. To paraphrase what he said: *Although I do not regard any of the five aggregates subject to clinging as the self or belonging to the self, there's still a sense of 'I am' in regard to them. It's just like the scent of a flower. Where does the scent come from? Is it the scent of the petals, the stalk, or the pistils? No, it is of the whole flower. So, in the same way, although I see that each of the five aggregates is not the self or belonging to the self, I still have a sense of 'I am' in regards to the five aggregates.*

The second simile is that of a piece of soiled cloth. After a piece of soiled cloth has been washed with detergent, the smell of the detergent still lingers on.

Only if that piece of cloth is tightly kept in a sweet-scented casket for some time will the residual smell of the detergent vanish.

He continued to explain: *In the same way, even if one has become an anāgāmi, there is still, in regard to these five aggregates subject to clinging, a residual conceit, desire and underlying tendency of 'I am' that has not yet been uprooted; but if one continues to contemplate how the five aggregates subject to clinging arise and pass away, then it can become uprooted.*

As he was explaining this to the elders, he and all sixty of them became arahants.

It looks like they were all watching their own five aggregates while one was talking and the others listening. This story brings to mind one of the suttas in Aṅguttara Nikāya called Vimuttāyatana Sutta (Bases for Liberation)[10]. Preaching the Dhamma and listening to the Dhamma are also bases for liberation. By preaching or listening to the Dhamma, joy can arise, leading to happiness then composure (*samādhi*). When the mind is composed, and you continue to practise by being ardent, heedful and resolute, then you can reach liberation. That was probably what they were doing. They were speaking or listening intently and also doing introspection. That's probably how all of them got enlightened when they successfully contemplated how the five aggregates arose and passed away.

This sense of 'I am' is both very illusive and elusive, something very difficult to abandon unless one becomes an arahant. Even though you may see causes and conditions, the sense of not-self may still not be there. There are some yogis here who say: *I'm very, very grateful. I see causes and conditioning. I see all these thoughts arise due to causes and conditions, but I don't get any insight into anicca, dukkha, anatta. I don't think that it is not myself. I see conditioning but I don't think that it's not me. I still associate or identify with*

[10] AN 5.26

those thoughts. That's true. Because this is not real insight yet. This is just doing the intellectual foundation.

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The Buddha's Definition of Vipassanā Practice

Remember that there are three steps involved in vipassanā. This was spoken by the Buddha himself in Tatiya Samādhi Sutta in the Aṅguttara Nikāya[11] where he talked about four types of individuals:

1. One who has attained internal stillness of mind (*ajjhatta-ceto-samatha*) but who has not attained distinct seeing of things through direct knowledge (*adhipaññā-dhamma-vipassanā*). In other words, he has samatha but not vipassanā.
2. One who has attained distinct seeing of things through direct knowledge but who has not attained internal stillness of mind, i.e. he has vipassanā but not samatha.
3. One who doesn't have samatha or vipassanā.
4. One who has both samatha and vipassanā.

The Buddha continued: *Of these four types of individuals in this world, the first one who has samatha but no vipassanā should go and learn from someone who has vipassanā. The person who has vipassanā but no samatha should go and learn from someone who has samatha. The one who doesn't have both should go and learn from someone who has samatha and vipassanā. The one who has both samatha and vipassanā*

[11] AN 4.94

should not rest content with lower attainments but should strive on until the final goal.

The Buddha also said: *This person who has samatha but no vipassanā should approach someone who has vipassanā and ask him three questions:*

1. *How are saṅkhāras to be viewed?*
2. *How are saṅkhāras to be investigated?*
3. *How are saṅkhāras to be distinctly seen?*

So, these are the three steps. The last one – *to be distinctly seen* – is the direct translation of *vipassitabbā*, a form of verb. Vipassanā is its noun.

Now, let's look at each of these three steps. The first one is: *How are saṅkhāras to be viewed?* It is interesting because here the object of vipassanā is defined by the Buddha. What is it? Saṅkhāras. The first thing you need to do is to view saṅkhāras. How do you view saṅkhāras? It is not stated in this sutta but when you research other suttas you will know that you should look at them in terms of anicca, dukkha, anatta and conditionality. For example, there is this Dhammapada verse which we chant every night during the retreat.

Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccāti,
yadā paññāya passati,
atha nibbindati dukkhe,
esa maggo visuddhiyā.

Intellectual understanding

According to this verse, all saṅkhāras are to be seen as anicca. If you see this with right wisdom, then this is the way that leads to purification.

This first step is just intellectual understanding of the theory. When you observe saṅkhāras, you are supposed to interpret them in terms of anicca, dukkha and anatta. If you are not a Buddhist, you may not look at saṅkhāras that way. You may look

at them in other ways like scientists, for example. Scientists are also looking at saṅkhāras, looking at physical objects which are products of causes and conditions. But they don't look at them in terms of anicca, dukkha and anatta to get out of saṁsāra. They look at them in order to understand how they work so that the understanding can help them achieve their worldly objectives.

The second step is: *How are saṅkhāras to be investigated?* Again, it is not elaborated in this sutta. That's where meditation teachers teach you how to do so. What we do here is to ask you to stay anchored to the five senses. When the mind is calm enough, then you look at things in terms of anicca, dukkha and anatta. You see them arise and pass away and after that you don't intellectually try to figure out the causes and conditions. You just pose the question and allow the mind to answer itself. *Why does this thought arise? What are the causes and conditions?* You just ask. Don't try to intellectualise. Don't try to reason it out. That's how you investigate. Investigate not by intellectual reasoning but by posing the question. Ask the question, then don't think about it. Come back to your senses and the answer will come.

When the answer comes, that's how saṅkhāras are seen distinctly. This is step 3: *How are saṅkhāras to be distinctly seen?* That's called vipassanā. But there are various levels of vipassanā. Sometimes, it's very extraordinary. It hits you like a thunderbolt as a very transformative experience that changes your world view and life too. It could be as dramatic as that. Or it may not be so dramatic. It may be slow. It may gradually unfold and you get deeper and deeper understanding but your mindset would have changed. Instead of being a control freak that you were in the past, now you begin to understand that things happen due to causes and conditions. Many times, they are beyond your control. So whenever you see anything happening, whether to you or

externally, automatically the mind will just look at it in terms of causes and conditions. When you look at it that way, it's very easy to let go; very easy to accept.

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Fatalism and Conditionality

However, we should not have this fatalistic view: *Everything is due to cause and conditioning, so there's nothing we can do about it; just let it be.* That's being indifferent. You have to use wisdom. That's why you need sampajañña (clear awareness). Whatever you do now is also a cause and condition for future events. Whatever you do now may be obstructed by other causes and conditions beyond your control. Or they may be supported by other causes and conditions due to your past good kamma. So it's very complex. You don't know for certain what's going to happen. You do whatever you can within your means and ability, e.g. time constraints and financial resources. You do your best and whatever turns out is okay.

I hope that this concept of anatta is clear to you. It doesn't mean that you should become cold and indifferent. It helps you to understand yourself, forgive yourself or your shortcomings as well as those of others but you should always bear in mind that whatever you do is also a cause and condition for the future. It changes something for the better or the worse, but you cannot be absolutely certain what will actually happen.

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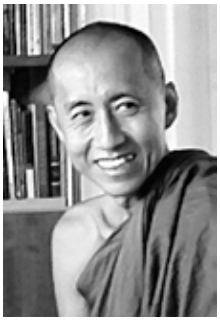

Aggacitta Bhikkhu is a Malaysian Buddhist monk who received higher ordination from his preceptor (upajjhāya) Bhaddanta Mahasi Sayadaw in 1979. He trained under various teachers, notably Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, Sayadaw U Tissara (Yankin Forest Monastery), Sayadaw U Āciṇṇa (Pa Auk Forest Monastery) and Sayadaw U Tejaniya (Shwe Oo Min Dhammasukha Forest Centre).

Besides practising meditation, he studied advanced Pāli grammar under Sayadaw U Dhammananda at Wat Tamaoh, Lampang, Thailand, and the Pāli Tipiṭaka in Myanmar, and researched on its interpretation and practice until his return to Malaysia at the end of 1994.

After a four-year solitary meditation retreat in Sarawak, he returned to West Malaysia at the end of 1998 and since then has spent considerable time investigating popular interpretations and practices of Buddhism in the light of the Pāli scriptures, real life experiences and contemporary research findings. Using a critical yet constructive approach, he has been sharing his findings with interested parties in order to bring them closer to a practical reality they can more easily connect with. The titles of his published Dhamma resources can be viewed at http://www. sasanarakkha. org/.

In 2000 he founded Sāsanārakkha Buddhist Sanctuary (SBS) nestled among secluded valleys and brooks near Taiping, Perak, Malaysia.

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Sabbadānaṁ dhammadānaṁ jināti.

The gift of the Dhamma surpasses all gifts.
– BUDDHA –

We offer a share of the merits accrued in the writing, editing and sponsorship of this gift of the Dhamma to all our deceased relatives from time immemorial and to all other beings. May they appreciate and rejoice in this dana and be happy, well and peaceful.
Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu!

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