

SEEING EMPTINESS

THIS DISCUSSION BETWEEN GODWIN SAMARARATNE AND UPUL GAMAGE (GODWIN'S SUCCESSOR AS TEACHER IN NILAMBE) IS TRANSLATED FROM THE SINHALA MAGAZINE PAHANA (1990)

UPUL: *What is meditation?*

GODWIN: It is the effort to understand how the mind and body work and thereby eliminate the suffering created by oneself.

UPUL: *Isn't this the same as what biology and psychology are trying to do?*

GODWIN: In biology and in western psychology 'ego', the root cause of suffering, is not eradicated.

UPUL: *Could you describe the common meditation methods that can be found in the world today?*

GODWIN: According to Buddhism, of course, most meditation methods can be described as Samatha, or concentration meditation.

UPUL: *What happens in Samatha meditation?*

GODWIN: The mind becomes concentrated.

UPUL: *What are the results?*

GODWIN: The five hindrances known as sensual desire, aversion, sloth & torpor, restlessness & remorse and doubt get subdued temporarily.

UPUL: *How do these results relate to daily life?*

GODWIN: Through the calmness that results from Samatha meditation, one can better face problems in life. When hindrances arise, that also can be noticed.

UPUL: *If one can be unruffled when facing problems in life with the help of concentration meditation, what is the need for Vipassana, or insight meditation?*

GODWIN: The purpose of Vipassana is to realize the selfless, impermanent and unsatisfactory nature of the hindrances that are subdued in Samatha. Unlike living with the tranquillity developed through Samatha, in Vipassana one realizes deep within that everything is empty. This brings forth a deep silence, which does not get shaken when facing the vicissitudes of life. Samatha develops awareness, and Vipassana develops wisdom. Both can be used in daily life.

UPUL: *Is it correct to regard the tranquillity that arises in Samatha as a result of the practice, while the tranquillity or the silence that comes about in Vipassana is due to realization?*

GODWIN: Yes. The benefits of Samatha are temporary, but the benefits of Vipassana are permanent.

UPUL: *You mentioned two results of meditation: awareness and wisdom. Can you explain these?*

GODWIN: If I were to explain them with the help of an example found in the Dhamma, awareness is similar to a surgeon knowing where the tumour is that needs surgery, while removing the tumour is similar to wisdom.

UPUL: *Can you clarify that further by using an example from day to day life?*

GODWIN: If there is awareness, one will know that one is angry. If there is wisdom, one will realize that anger has no owner, and that it is something empty.

UPUL: *According to the first example, shouldn't the function of wisdom be to remove anger?*

GODWIN: Defilements such as anger can exist only as long as there is an owner. When there is wisdom, they get uprooted completely.

UPUL: *By saying that there is no owner to anger, do you mean that it occurs spontaneously?*

GODWIN: No. It is the result of a cause.

UPUL: *You said that anger is something with no substance. But when there is anger, one feels as if there were an enormous energy. Anger and hatred can even lead to killing hundreds or thousands of people.*

GODWIN: Until realization, all defilements can appear to be very strong. But after realization, there is nothing but emptiness.

UPUL: *What is the purpose of realizing that defilements such as anger are the result of a cause and that they are empty?*

GODWIN: If one can realize that, then anger cannot exist any longer. Owning anger is itself providing sustenance for it to survive.

UPUL: *Traditional Buddhist teachings emphasize that defilements such as anger must be eradicated with effort, but what you say seems to be something else.*

GODWIN: If the traditional teachings are referring to concentration meditation, then, yes, it is necessary. But in Vipassana, as I said before, one must be open in regard to the defilements and realize their emptiness.

UPUL: *By speaking of opening to defilements, do you mean to succumb to them?*

GODWIN: No. Being open is neither suppressing nor giving in to defilements.

UPUL: *When there is attachment to something, how can this "being open" happen?*

GODWIN: If you see some food that you like very much and you feel greedy, neither not eating and thinking it is bad, nor eating with greediness, is opening to greed. But observing how greed arises, stays for some time, and passes off, this is opening to greed. Another method is reflecting upon greed. That means going deeper into the thought of greed.

UPUL: *In some meditation methods, reflection is defined as labelling the experience. When you get angry you say "anger", when you feel greedy you say "greed" etc. But you describe reflecting as going deeper into a thought.*

GODWIN: What I described is the method to find out the true nature of something, labelling is yet another method.

UPUL: *When reflecting like that, what can happen?*

GODWIN: When you are inquiring into greed, it becomes apparent that it is related to past experiences and concepts.

UPUL: *Can you elaborate on this more fully?*

GODWIN: For example, greed for "ice cream" is related to memory. When you tasted ice cream in a previous instant, you reacted to that taste. Present greed is the concept that resulted from that reaction. Today, when you see that food, you go beyond recognizing it as food. You recreate the concept that was a reaction to the taste. Vipassana means recognizing the difference between perception and the concept, and stopping there without developing further concepts, arguments, counter arguments etc.

UPUL: *Here you used some profound words such as cognition, concepts, etc., what do you mean by these?*

GODWIN: Recognizing ice cream as ice cream is the purpose of perception. The rest can be described as the subsequent mental formations or creations, which are developed based on past experiences, memories and concepts. If these subsequent mental formations are not created, then there won't be any greed.

UPUL: *But if a person who became sick owing to a particular type of food would then stop at recognizing that same food as a food, and does not remember the ill effects of that food, wouldn't that be harmful?*

GODWIN: Memory is something else. One might remember this and avoid eating it. But one would not develop a conflict with that food.

UPUL: *Do you mean that memory causes no problem?*

GODWIN: Yes.

UPUL: *When one recalls a past event that caused pain, would one not feel the same even today? Isn't that due to memory?*

GODWIN: One may be grief-stricken during one's mother's death at that moment. But one may recall that event many years later without feeling the same. Doesn't this show that memory has no pain?

UPUL: *Is there a difference between the ending of sorrow due to time and the ending of suffering through realization in Vipassana meditation?*

GODWIN: In the first situation suffering ends after a long time and by doing many things. But in Vipassana, once you don't own the suffering, that moment itself the suffering ceases to exist.

UPUL: *Isn't forgetting sorrow over time limited only to that event? But in Vipassana, doesn't understanding gained over one incident affect the rest of one's life?*

GODWIN: It may be so, but realization on one occasion does not necessarily extend to the rest of life. The extent to which the 'ego' is reduced, to that degree suffering will be reduced. The degree to which 'ego' is there - there will be suffering.

UPUL: *In this Dhamma discussion you described how we create worry and suffering owing to memories. In that case, can you explain what living in the present is?*

GODWIN: Every thought is connected with either the past or the future. Living in this moment is a state free from these thoughts.

UPUL: *This poses some practical difficulties. Recognizing stimuli that come to the six faculties depends upon past knowledge. If one were to recognize them, but also become aware that they are related to the past, isn't that then living in the present?*

GODWIN: Yes, but only if there is no relationship with what is happening, thoughts of "there is no ego" should not be there.

UPUL: *In traditional teachings we are asked not to get attached to physical objects such as house and property, men, women, etc. But your emphasis from the beginning was to realize that there is no ownership for thoughts, feelings and concepts, and that one should realize the emptiness of those. What is the difference between these two paths?*

GODWIN: Will a person who doesn't own anything on the inside, own things outside? But a person who analyses only external things as impermanent, without substance and unsatisfactory may stop half way without achieving full realization.

UPUL: *According to your analysis, is the body internal or external?*

GODWIN: It is internal.

UPUL: *Should one enter the meditative path possessed of some knowledge of the Dhamma?*

GODWIN: Knowledge of Dhamma is not knowing what is in books. If one knows what is one's problem, and what is the best medicine for that, then that much is adequate for meditation. That you may have got from a meditation teacher or a book, but only that is essential. Knowledge of dhamma beyond that is not essential. That is just accumulation of knowledge. It can even be an obstacle to meditation.