

DHAMMA DISCUSSION SERIES

volume one

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Sayadaw U Panditābhivamśa

The following is a Dhamma discussion given by the Venerable Ovadacariya Sayadaw at Panditarama on 28 August 1994

What is the meaning of Noting, Labelling and Knowing? What are the benefits of noting?

Noting means paying proper attention so that the mind can be concentrated on the object of meditation. The mind will also be aware of their true nature. Let me explain further.

If you do not note, *kilesas* will enter your mind. In other words, your mind will scatter and become unclean and polluted. However, if you do note, your mind will not scatter. You will be exercising some form of control or mastery over it. Therefore, through the act of noting, you will be able to prevent the defilements from entering and polluting your mind.

As an example, we take the case of a child. Now, we are well aware that on his own, the child may get into all sorts of dangerous situations. Therefore, we employ a nanny to take care of him. We know that the very presence of the nanny serves as a protection for the child from harm and danger. The nanny does not harm the child at all. This is the same with noting.

In modern day language, there will be no accident of the mind if you note. It is only when you fail to note that unwholesome consequences may take place. For instance, when we encounter something pleasant, we may follow and go after it. If, on the other hand, we experience something unpleasant or hateful, we might react and perform unwholesome verbal and physical actions.

Now, when you drive a car, you have to be quite careful. You must drive in the proper lane. You should have a good knowledge of the traffic regulations. You should also have full control over the car. If you do all these, it is not easy to cause or meet with an accident. As a motorist, you are said to be faultless. You do not pose as a danger either to yourself or to others. Nobody will come to harm because you drive carefully. However, if you fail to be careful and pay attention, then others might be injured by your carelessness. Thus, by having full control over the car, you will not harm others. This applies to your practice. By noting, you will exercise some control over your verbal and physical actions. Those around you will not be affected nor harmed by your outward behaviour. This is one of the benefits that you gain from noting properly.

If you are noting the objects that arise, you will be making yourself wholesome and your mind clean. Your behaviour will not be coarse or distasteful. By purifying yourself, you will not be harmful to others.

On the other hand, if you fail to contemplate, you will not be satisfied with yourself. Furthermore, your associates and those around you will not be satisfied with your behaviour. When your behaviour deteriorates and becomes crude, you may perform unwholesome and blameworthy deeds. Action will then have to be taken against you. Correspondingly, you may fall to the realms of suffering in your future existences as a result of your unwholesome actions.

This kind of scenario does not occur if you are able to contemplate on objects as and when they arise. You will be purifying yourself gradually and therefore, will not be harmful to others. This is another benefit that you may acquire if you note.

Let us now leave behind the benefits that others gain through our diligent noting. Let us now talk about ourselves.

When you note the objects that arise, your verbal and physical behaviour becomes refined and cultured. If you, however, fail to note, your behaviour will become crude and distasteful. Through the act of noting, you will be able to possess a soft, pliable, cultured and smooth character. You will be making your life one notch more beautiful and excellent. Therefore, in order to possess a satisfactory character, you must have continuous mindfulness.

As I have mentioned before, you must note the objects that arise. You must not fail to do so. If you do this, your mind will become clean and pure. However, the noting of the objects must be continuous, unbroken and thus, without gaps. Take a look at this floor. It is made out of parquet flooring. If there are gaps in the flooring, in between the pieces of wood, dirt can settle in there easily. Similarly, when your notings are unconnected and there are gaps in between, the defilements can enter your mind. Your mind can only be clean and stable when there is continuous and unbroken noting. You will be then able to develop mental energy. It is only through the progressive development of mental energy that insight can gradually arise.

Therefore, if you exercise mindfulness and pay attention, you will acquire true knowledge of phenomena or occurrence by yourself. To put it in another way, once your mental energy develops, you will be able to develop and deepen your concentration. This in turn results in the development of insight. When all these happen, you will come to know the true nature of phenomena. At this point, you will have the ability to resist the *kilesa*. It is through the development of insight that you will acquire this spiritual stamina or resistance. You will then be able to experience real peace. These are the benefits that you can gain for yourself if you contemplate on the objects that arise.

By the way, the benefits mentioned here do not arise from my reasoning or understanding. They are found in the Buddhist literature. In fact, the Buddha himself assured us of these benefits at the very beginning of the *Satipatthana Sutta*. Through the diligent noting of the objects as they arise, one can be freed either partially or momentarily from the defilements of greed (*raga*), anger (*dosa*) and ignorance (*moha*). You may even become totally freed from the defilements and thus, become an arahant. You will be freed from worries, physical and mental suffering. In other words, you will dispel the defilements once and for all, and attain *ariya magga-phala*. You will then attain to *nibbana*. These are the benefits the Buddha guaranteed us if we note and contemplate on the objects as they arise.

Labelling, on the other hand, is the act of giving objects names as they arise. This is because you have to know one object from another. You cannot just look at an object without giving it a name. When the object arises, you have to label it according to its nature.

Take the case of a person employed as a gatekeeper in a certain factory. This gatekeeper has to take down the names of all the workers who come in. This is to allow him to know exactly who has entered the factory. This situation is also found in one who contemplates. When heat arises, you put a name to it by labelling "heat, heat". If stiffness arises, then you must note it by silent labelling, "stiffness, stiffness". If tension arises, then you must again silently label it as "tension, tension".

You have to give a name to the phenomena or occurrence according to their nature. If you fail to put a name to it - at least for a beginner yogi - you will not know one object from another. If you are to progress in your practice, you have to be aware of the

objects distinctly one after the other. Only when you are able to distinguish distinctly one object from another can you develop concentration.

Look at the small school children. They start their education by learning A, B, C. When they are doing so, they must pronounce A as A, B as B and C as C. This will help them to know the letters A, B and C distinctly from one another. When they get a little older, they will be able to say the word "CAT". They however must follow the sound; they must pronounce the word correctly.

In the practice, you cannot just study the objects that arise within the field of your awareness. You must put a label silently to each and every object that arises. In the case of the school children, they would have to pronounce the words aloud so that they will later become proficient in speech besides their pronunciation.

When you go to an airport or a ferry jetty, you will come across a number of officials. You will be able to recognise and identify these officials because they have identification tags on them. These tags display their names and designation or function. When you look at the tags of the officials, you will be able to know exactly who they are and what their individual responsibilities are. However, if you do not know their individual names and respective designations, it will be difficult for you to distinguish one official from another. Nevertheless, it must be said that names are merely names. What is more important in meditation is to know the objects clearly.

Let us now return to the school children. They begin their education by learning A, B, C. In this way, the school children will learn how to spell words. When they continue their education, they will also learn how to form sentences and say them aloud when reading. At a later stage, they will no longer find it necessary to read these sentences aloud when reading a book. They will be able to read the whole book silently in their minds only.

Yogis are like these school children. At the beginning, they will have to note the objects by labelling. This will allow them to know the various objects distinctively from one another. As they keep on meditating, their mental energy becomes stronger and they begin to develop insight. At this point, there is no longer any need to use labelling. The yogis do not have to put a label onto each object anymore as their foundation of mindfulness has somewhat been developed. Instead, when an object arises, they just keep their minds on that object. By doing so, they will be able to know the true nature of phenomena.

Therefore, knowing is nothing but the development of insight and wisdom. Labelling will give you the development of mental energy which in turn allows insight to arise. *Satipatthana* meditation is a method by which you can have the development of both mental energy and insight. By pursuing this way of mindfulness, you will be able to have development of the mind and that of insight. These will be of great satisfaction to you.

This talk was given by the Venerable Sayadaw in response to the following questions during a Dhamma discussion at Panditarama.

When subtle thoughts enter repeatedly in one's everyday activities in a practice that has been consistently thought-free and concentrated, should one take some action or simply watch mindfully to learn the nature of the thoughts which arise?

Should one try to note the many single subtle thoughts which arise in one's walking meditation and everyday activities, or simply notice them in the background?

One may think purposely or one may have thoughts while noting on the objects. Whatever thoughts they are, the nature of the mind is very quick. Within one second one can be thinking about the past, one can be thinking about the future. There will be many thoughts like this within one second. But since the speed of the thinking is very fast, the speed of the *bhavana* mind, in other words, your noting mind, cannot catch the thoughts.

Most of us may think that we are not thinking. However, only when our minds fall on our bodies to a high degree will we know that we are having wandering mind. There are many thoughts that arise in us which we do not realize. The thoughts that we realize are few.

Even when we have good concentration or our concentration is strong, there could still be wandering mind. But as we develop insight, the noting mind can catch the thinking mind, the noting mind can *catch up* with the thinking mind. At this stage, at the very

moment when the thinking tends to arise, you will realize the phenomena. At this stage, the mind which has now a lot of mindfulness can catch the thinking and if we are strong in noting, we will be able to catch the thinking properly.

When one has not developed concentration and insight, in other words when the mind is not strong yet, there can arise the coarse form of thinking. One may know that the mind has wandered off or one may not know that there has been wandering mind. Even when we are free from the *nivarana* or hindrances, when our minds become calm, when we develop concentration, even at that time there can be thinking or wandering mind. But at this stage, the thinking will be a subtle form of thinking. This thinking will not be associated with the sensual pleasures. And it is not the everyday thinking whereby we look for a particular sensual object and think about it.

This subtle form of thinking happens without having to think purposely. And when the mind wanders off like this, the noting of the main object such as rising, falling, sitting, touching will still be there. One will be knowing about the main object although there is this subtle form of wandering mind. At this stage, the yogi may think that even when his mind is calm, there is still a lot of wandering mind. But, it is only now that the yogi realizes that he is having wandering mind. Before he did not know he was having wandering mind.

At this stage, it is not necessary to take action when there is subtle thinking. It is not necessary to catch this type of thinking with mindfulness. If at this stage, the yogi is noting on the main object, or other objects which arise in the body, that are many times more distinct than this subtle form of thinking, his noting on the main object, or other objects, will not lose momentum. Moreover, this

kind of subtle thinking will not have any effect on the yogi's noting of the main object or other objects. Therefore, it is not necessary to take any action towards this subtle thinking or to catch the subtle thinking with mindfulness.

What is more important here is to note on the object with good aiming and focusing so that there will not be any pollution of the mind or *nivarana* - the hindrances. It is necessary to pay more attention so that the *nivarana* or hindrances will not arise. It is not necessary to catch the subtle thinking. But if your noting on the main object or the other objects loses momentum, then you may have to switch and note the thinking.

When the yogis reach this stage, the yogis from the East especially from this country, Myanmar, will report that while they are noting on the main object, in-between they have thoughts. But the noting on the main object does not lose momentum. "There has been thinking" - they will say like that. These yogis from the East such as from Myanmar report in a very clear manner.

But the people from the West, when they experience this, they do not report in the same manner. Rather, they will report that while they are noting on the main object, there is thinking in the background. The Westerners reported like this to the Sayadaw. At the beginning, Sayadaw was at a loss because it was not clear to him. Sayadaw had to further question them and find out what the Western yogis exactly meant to say in their reports. The Westerners do not report like the people from Myanmar.

Now, when concentration becomes strong, while the yogi is noting on the main object, the Myanmar yogi will say, "In-between there are thoughts but the noting on the main object does not lose momentum." Furthermore, their knowing of the thinking is in an

automatic manner. On the other hand, since the Westerners do not report like the Myanmar yogis, they say the thinking is in the background.

At this stage of the practice, the yogi's noting on the main object does not lose momentum and at the same time he is aware of the thinking that arises in-between. The reason is the seeing is strong. The seeing is wide. In other words, the yogi sees the object that he is noting in a very clear manner. While noting the main object or other objects like this, without having to note purposely, he is aware of the thinking that arises in-between. He does not have to exert effort to know about the thinking that arises in-between the noting. Now, what is meant here is that the yogi is aware of the object that he is aiming for. He is also aware of the thoughts that he does not aim for. He is knowing about the thinking in an automatic manner.

This is what Sayadaw means by wide seeing and strong seeing. You are aware of the main object for which you are aiming while at the same time being aware of other objects such as thinking that arise in-between. Now, you will have this situation when your mindfulness becomes diligent and strong.

When your mindfulness becomes diligent and strong, your seeing will become strong, your seeing will become wide. You are now complete with the energy of mindfulness. So when one becomes strong with the energy of mindfulness, one's seeing will become strong, one's seeing will become wide. Now, in the scientific community, when a scientist does some research on a particular project, he is looking for something out of that project. For example, he may want to know something about a particular material. Similarly, what the meditators here are doing is just like this. During the process of meditating, we may come across

something that we do not really aim for. In the same vein, the scientist may stumble across items during the course of his research that he does not really aim for. At the same time, he may find the actual thing that he had intended to in the first place.

A good example would be the discovery of plastic. Plastic was discovered while scientists were doing research to look for something else. The practice too is like this. While we are noting on and aiming at the various objects, we may discover and be aware of other objects, such as the thinking that arises in-between. When mindfulness becomes strong and steadfast, we will not only come to know about the objects that we are aiming at, we will also come to know about the objects that arise in-between. A good example would be the thinking. We must, however, realize here that the thinking is not something that we aim for. It arises while we are noting on the main object; we become aware of thinking at that point.

In the case of plastic, while the scientists were conducting their research, they were able to not only find the solution they were looking for, they also discovered how to make plastic. In the case of the meditators, we will have this similar situation only when our noting is good and diligent.

In Myanmar, we have a saying, "When the noting is diligent and becomes strong, our seeing becomes strong; our seeing becomes wide". So here, when our mindfulness (*sati*) becomes strong, our seeing becomes strong and wide. Now, when our faculty of concentration (*Samadhindriya*) becomes strong, our seeing becomes sharp. We see sharply and in a very sharp manner. And when our faculty of faith (*saddhindriya*) becomes sharp, seeing becomes clear, active and clean.

What the Sayadaw is trying to get at is this. When the yogi's effort is strong, even though he may encounter difficulties during the course of his meditation, he does not go "backward" or surrender. This is due to his strong faculty of effort (*viriyindriya*). He faces the problem with guts and bravery. By facing the various difficulties in this manner, his experiences and awareness will develop and progress.

Briefly, there are these four faculties: the faculty of mindfulness, which gives you strong seeing; the faculty of concentration, which gives you sharp seeing; the faculty of faith which gives you clear and active seeing; and finally, the faculty of effort which allows you to have progress in your seeing. Now, all of these are explained in the scriptures and all of the faculties are good. So, we should therefore strive to acquire all these four faculties.

Actually, the faculties of faith, effort and concentration are not really concerned with the question. However, Sayadaw has mentioned these three faculties because they have a lot to do with the yogis who are practising at this meditation centre. Some of the yogis have been practising at this centre for quite some time; some for months even. Yet, because their concentration is not so good and their faculty of concentration is not strong, their seeing or experience is not sharp. Their seeing is rather blunt.

Furthermore, the faculty of faith in some yogis is weak and not strong. They do not practise to be free from the *nivarana* or hindrances. The way they practise is not continuous. That is to say, they practise in a stop-and-go manner. If one practises in this way, stopping for a while and then practising again, the hindrances or *nivarana* will arise in-between and cause trouble for the yogi. These hindrances pollute the mind and make the mind unclear.

For instance, we may have a pool of water. Beneath the surface, at the very bottom, there can be a layer of mud. If you were to stir up this pool of water, depending how vigorous the stirring is, the water can be muddy. However, if we were to instead keep the pool of water still and not stir it up, the water will of course remain clear. Now, water that has become muddied is sticky, slippery and slimy. Clear water is not like that. We can say that clear water is like a clear and active practice. The muddy water is quite the opposite. These hindrances can weaken the yogi's mindfulness and concentration.

If the yogi is taking frequent and regular breaks in his practice, there will be frequent and regular opportunities for the hindrances to arise. These hindrances will muddy the mind; it will weaken one's wisdom and therefore, one's seeing or experience will not be clear, active and sharp.

In today's world, Westerners depend a lot on machines and gadgets. They are used to living in a comfortable manner. Therefore, because of their strong dependence on these gadgets, they are no longer used to facing and overcoming difficulties. They lack the quality of patience and endurance. This is particularly so for them in the meditation practice.

When they encounter a certain meditation experience, they become reluctant to go on. They do not want to practise. They hesitate and are afraid of taking risks. It is worthwhile to remember that when you meet your enemy, if you are to surrender or retreat, your enemy will overcome you. However, if you are able to stand up to your enemy, he will eventually go away.

Therefore, it is crucial and necessary for you to have bravery and guts. If you are brave, courageous and have guts, the armies of *kilesa* will go away. Your mind will then have progress. This is very true for the yogi whose effort is good. When putting in effort, the yogi must do so in stages.

Firstly, you put in the initial effort in order to begin your meditation practice. After that, you boost your effort so that you can overcome sloth and torpor (*thinamiddha*). You then increase once again your effort until the goal is reached. If you have this sort of aiming, you will progress.

However, if you fail to develop nor possess these faculties, you will not have any progress even if you have meditated for a long time say one, two or three months. Sayadaw stresses once again that these three faculties out of the four are not really concerned with the question here. However, Sayadaw thinks that it is only appropriate to include them in our discussion here today so that the yogi will understand them and be able to practise better.

To digress, it is necessary for you to be able to note the object that arises. Only in this manner, will you have progress. You can develop concentration only when you are able to note on the object that arises without having the mind wandering off. Furthermore, while noting on the object, you must have mindfulness. You should not think about the object. You should instead note the object in a hurry. If you practise this way, you will be having progress. Your seeing or experience will become strong and wide.

However, if you fail to note the object that arises, your seeing will not become strong and wide. Thus, you will find yourself reporting the same thing over and over again for almost every interview. Why is this so? This is so because you allow nivarana or the hindrances to come in during the gaps or breaks in your practice. This happens because you take a rest every now and then. During

the course of your meditation, if you were to experience something, you would stop and think, "What is this?". If you were to further experience something extraordinary, if the taste of experience is very good, you may cling to it. When this happens, your seeing will become muddy like the example of the pool of water. If you stir up the pool of water, the layer of mud at the bottom will cause the water to become muddy.

If you have faith instead, there can be no muddy water. Therefore, you should ask yourself these questions: "Do I really have the faith? Am I practising in a clear manner, one free from the hindrances? Can I note like this?". If the nivaranas come in, your experience or seeing will not be clear.

You should further ask yourself: "Am I practising risking life and limb? Do I believe that this is the only Dhamma that I want? Am I practising risking everything and aiming solely for the Dhamma? While I am noting on the objects, should I encounter difficulties, am I able to overcome them? Do I have the aim in my meditation? That is, do I aim for the goal?". These are the things that you need to assess for yourself.

If you do not possess these factors, your seeing or experience will not have progress. The worst thing when you experience something is to think, "Why? What? When?". If you think in this fashion, the hindrances will come in, and your seeing will become cloudy. If you note in this way, you will be able to achieve something by way of thinking only. However, in the practice, you will not have achieved anything. Instead of thinking, it might be better if the yogi were to fall asleep. At least when you are asleep, you will have a nice sleep.

In the sitting practice, if one's sitting posture consistently leans off more and more to one side, should one tend to straighten up as soon as the leaning appears in one's awareness? Or instead, should one allow the leaning to go to its extreme, correcting it just before the body topples over or when the pain becomes unbearable? Should one even sit against a wall to stop such a leaning tendency for a short period?

If one tends to salivate upon oneself during the sitting practice, should one simply be mindful of it, or try to strictly control it?

If the mindfulness, concentration and wisdom are not in balance, the yogi can lean during meditation. He can lean to one side, backward or forward. This sort of event can occur. If the posture of the body is not in balance, if the yogi leans to one side, the weight will shift to that side. At that moment the yogi may find the pain unbearable.

However, even if the body leans to one side, if the yogi can bear it, he can note on this leaning posture. But if he is unable to bear it, he should also note this phenomenon. And if this is not enough, if he wants to straighten up, he must first note the intention to straighten up. He must then straighten up his body very slowly, with mindfulness.

When mindfulness, concentration and wisdom are not in balance, a simile can be given. Take the winding of a clock. In the old days, you had to wind the spring. Now through the regular and frequent winding of the spring over some time, the strength of the spring becomes weak. Similarly, when there is an imbalance between mindfulness, concentration and wisdom, the yogi tends to lose some

strength. He becomes a little weak. This is why the body leans. The yogi is unable to keep his determination to hold the body straight. If that happens, he has to note it. If he is unable to control the leaning, he has to note it.

Now, the yogi may lean against a wall. The Buddha himself did not lean or support himself against the Bo Tree. The Bo Tree you see behind the Buddha is not a tree he leans against. It is merely in the background.

When Sayadaw was young, he had the habit of leaning against a wall whenever he practised. Now, after some time, he began to think about this. "Now I have this habit of leaning against a wall. As long as there is a wall, I shall be able to practise. I shall be alright because I depend on the presence of a wall. However, if I should happen to practise in a place where there are no walls, then I am going to have trouble". So from that day onwards, Sayadaw did not lean. Later on, he was able to practise well without the aid of the wall.

Now, some yogis who are not in very good health and who have some health problems are asked to practise leaning against a wall or in a lying posture. These sort of practices are allowed for sick yogis. However, if you are strong and healthy, it is better to do the sitting meditation ninety degrees to the floor.

With regard to salivating, this is a phenomenon of oozing due to the element of *apo*. If you should find the saliva oozing, you may note "oozing, oozing". If a lot of saliva comes out and gathers, you may note "gathering, gathering". If you intend to swallow, you have to note the intention to swallow and then swallow the saliva while noting "swallowing, swallowing".

You should not control the true phenomena. It would be like attempting to stop a very strong flow of water. Should the salivating become excessive and you desire to spit out the excess saliva, you may do so at an appropriate place. However, you should still note all the actions performed during the process of spitting out. You must not control their true nature. You must only control the kilesas, the defilements of the mind. Should you fail to control the defilements and they arise, you have to then note these defilements.

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