

The Problem of Every One of Us

by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

A Dhamma lecture (2/6) given at Suan Mokkh on xx December 1986

In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhādāsa gave regular lectures during the monthly international retreats held at Suan Mokkh and then Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage. Usually, Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. Audio recordings are now available from www.suanmokkh.org and www.bia.or.th. The following is a transcription generously made by a Dhamma volunteer. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the Buddhādāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok (suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com).

Today we'd like to continue speaking about the topic we began yesterday which is talking about our problems. If we understand our problems clearly and completely, then we'll be able to start doing something about it [them]. And therefore we need to give adequate attention this subject of our problems.

Like you to recall what we were discussing yesterday. We were talking about 'the burden of life.' And we explained that life itself is that burden. Life is that burden. And so today we'd like to go into detail about how life is this burden – how life is our problem.

When we talk about the burden of life and then say that life is the burden, we have to make some careful distinctions about what we're talking about. So please listen very carefully. Pay careful attention to what we're saying so that you don't misunderstand and then go off and confuse everything. So listen carefully when we make some of these subtle distinctions.

When we talk about life, we can talk about life that is a burden. But if we look carefully we'll see that there are two kinds of life. There is pure life or the essential part of life. And then there is a second kind of life which has something extra – something has been added. And this addition is the burden.

So there are these two kinds of life – pure life and burdened life. You need to understand this carefully and see these two kinds of life. [Be]cause most of us blur the two together and confuse them.

When we talk about the pure life – life that has nothing extra added, just the essentials – we’re talking about *nāma* and *rūpa* (mind and body). Pure life is just mind and body. That’s all there is. But with this burden of life – the life that is a burden for itself – there is something added. There is a third element added to mind and body. In Thai this is called the *tua-ton*. In Pāli it is called the *attā*. In English we might call this the ‘soul.’

When we take the pure life of mind and body, and add a soul to it, then there is this soul which can suffer the burden of life. This is this extra something that has been added to the pure life. By adding this soul – some people call it ‘spirit’ or some ‘self,’ whatever you call it . . . but this idea that there is some eternal substance that makes you into some special individual – some separate personality – that soul is what makes life such a burden. So if we’re wise, we learn to distinguish between the pure life of mind and body – nothing but mind and body – and the burdened heavy life that/where we have added this thing called a ‘soul.’

Now when we talk about this extra thing – the soul – this can be quite a problem for many of us. In fact often when we say that there is no soul, many people get worried or angry. Their attachment and identification to this idea of a soul is so strong that they actually get hostile and aggressive towards us if we begin to say there is no such thing. So we need to explain this a bit so you won’t get mad at us.

The idea of a soul is common to all of us. So this is why we have such difficulties understanding what we’re talking about when we say there is no such thing as a soul. Whether we come from the East or the West, everybody has some kind of ideas and belief in a soul – every one of us, absolutely. It’s a fundamental illusion that arises in all human minds. This illusion of a ‘soul’ is a burden for each and every one of us whether we’re from the West or the East. The Indians, Thais, Chinese, everybody is walking around with this idea of a ‘soul’ or a ‘self,’ or an *atman* or whatever we want to call it. We have to look at this and see if there really is such a thing.

An example of what happens with this idea of a soul or how it works is . . . For instance a child is walking somewhere and it bumps into a chair. We’ve probably all done this ourself[ves]. The child bumps into a chair and all of a sudden it gets

angry at the chair. Maybe the child's leg hurts or something. And it's angry at the chair for making its leg/his leg hurt. And so the kid kicks the chair. He maybe kicks it really hard because he's really angry at this chair.

What has happened is that the child has turned the chair into a little soul. It has identified this chair as an individual thing and given it a personality. And since the chair has aggressively attacked the child, the child strikes back in anger. So we see this silly incident of a child kicking a chair with anger. And this kind of thing happens all the time.

This is the result of not understanding the way things are. The child is ignorant about the reality of a chair. A chair has no personality. So it's absolutely ridiculous to get angry at a chair or at any inanimate object. But because of ignorance and not knowing/not understanding this illusion of a self/of a soul arises, not only towards the chair – where this idea of a separate soul entity arises in the child's mind regarding the chair – but it also arises in the child's mind as 'I' who is different than that chair. And so the situation for conflict and anger arises.

This is a fundamental illusion constantly being conditioned in the human mind – in the mind of all sentient beings. And this is rooted in ignorance – through the lack of knowledge – about truth and reality or we can say the Dhamma.

So in this way this illusion – this idea of a 'self' – is constantly arising in the mind. This idea or feeling that there is a self is real. The feeling itself really happens. We experience it constantly. As you listen you're probably turning me into a soul and you – the listener – into another soul. This idea is constantly arising. This illusion is real but there's no reality behind the illusion. The idea that there is a self happened, but there is no soul. It's just an illusion. And so we're working with all these illusions imparting this soul-ness – this individuality, personality – to things all the time. We're constantly doing this because of our lack of understanding.

This ignorance genuinely arises but what we think exists – i.e., a soul – doesn't. Because this fundamental illusion is so popular in the minds of sentient beings, it makes it very very difficult for us to understand what is said when we talk about this subject.

So please don't get angry or frustrated or nervous or worried about this thing. Just listen and try and understand what is being said. Put your soul aside for a moment and think things through clearly.

Now this soul – this idea or illusion of a ‘soul’ – is something that’s buried really deep in the mind. It’s really stuck in there and mired in strongly. It’s very difficult to pull this illusion out – very hard to uproot it – for two reasons. The first reason we touched upon is that this idea of a self or soul arises by itself. It’s kind of an instinctual way of looking at things that arises in the minds of all sentient beings as we explained with the example of a child who gets angry at a chair. This illusion of a soul arises spontaneously and so it’s quite common in all sentient beings. And this makes it very very difficult to uproot this illusion. It’s really stuck deep down in the depths of the mind. So it takes a lot of work to uncover it and dig it out.

The second reason that it is stuck in there so deep and is so hard to uproot is that all our lives this illusion has been supported and nurtured and encouraged. Even when you were all small small babies – as you learned to relate to the world around you and as you were taught things by your parents and brothers and sisters – you were taught that this is me, this is you, this is mine, this is ours. You were taught to attach to things and identify with things as I & mine, and as separate entities from the very beginning. This idea of individuality and separateness and attachment and soul was imparted from your youngest days. And so on top of this instinctual tendency for this illusion, it is also trained into us by the people who love us the most.

And then most of us who come from the West have grown up in a Christian culture. And in this Christian background this illusion of a soul is pounded in even more deeply, more tightly. We’re taught constantly about the importance of not doing bad – otherwise we’ll go to hell. And that’s the soul that goes to hell. Or doing good – being/fulfilling certain models and forms of behavior – so that the soul is purified and is good and can go to heaven and be with God.

This idea of a soul is constantly reiterated in the Christian teachings. And so it is very deep and strong within our minds. In fact even though many of you may have/do not consider yourselves practicing Christians – or you may feel very alienated from the Christian tradition – even so, you manage to cling to this idea of a soul. You may have rejected Christianity but you haven’t rejected this illusion of a soul.

So in these ways, this idea or feeling of a soul is very very deep and strong. It’s really stuck in there with very strong glue. And so it takes a lot of work to uproot it.

Now some of you think what we're talking about is crazy. You think it's ridiculous and silly that this idea of a soul can be gotten rid of. You're shaking your heads and thinking these monks up here don't know what they're talking about. They're talking about something that isn't even true.

You may not believe it. That's up to you. But we encourage you to listen very carefully because we're going to be telling you how it is possible to uproot this illusion of a soul which is the cause of all the burden of life.

Even though this idea of a soul may be an illusion, we nonetheless grasp onto it and clutch at it very strongly and very tightly. We're all afraid to let go of it. So that when we talk about uprooting and getting rid of this illusion – to most of you that sounds like killing yourself. You think what we're saying is to kill yourself – to commit suicide. Your attachment to this illusion is so strong that you interpret what we're saying to mean killing oneself. This shows how big a problem this is and how great your confusion is. And therefore we have to really look at this carefully.

So what we encourage you to do is take a fresh look at this issue. Instead of bringing forth all the opinions and prejudices and ideas which you have about a soul, a spirit, a self – all these concepts you have about I, the big I, the little I, the big self, the little self, whatever . . . All these ideas, put them aside for a while if you can. Instead of confusing this issue with all these old ideas and opinions, let's start over again and take a fresh look at the soul. Let's come at it as if we're brand new with clean clear minds that are not clouded up with all the old baggage – with all the old conditioning. Let's look at the soul freshly and see what really is there. What's this soul – what's this illusion – really about?

So don't get nervous or afraid. And don't be judging everything that is being said. Approach it with a brand new mind that you can maybe see the truth that is being discussed.

The reason we insist on you listening carefully is because many people walk away with a confused understanding. For instance don't think that what we're saying is that you have to kill yourself or commit suicide. If you understand our words in that way you're not listening. We're not saying to kill yourself or destroy your life. We're not saying that life must be done away with.

What we're talking about is freeing life of this illusion of soul. This illusion of soul is something that . . . the soul itself doesn't even exist. That's why we say it's

an illusion – a delusion, misunderstanding. We want to free life of this because this is the burden of life. This illusion is something extra. It doesn't even exist. And so to kill this illusion doesn't damage life one bit. In fact it frees life of *dukkha*. This is the way to solve all our problems. This is the way to deal with all the frustration, pain, misery, disappointment, sadness, worry, and fear that interferes with life.

Pure life is just mind and body. There is no soul. So what we're talking about is not killing yourself but freeing life of this burden of the illusion of a soul. So please listen carefully and don't go away with the idea that we're telling you to kill yourself. That would be silly.

Now we'd like to look at the problem of how does this illusion of a soul arise in the mind that has no soul. How does this illusion first arise?

The fetus in its mother's womb . . . Before birth that fetus has no conception or ideas about a soul. But then there is birth. The fetus is born as a child. And then that child will . . . its sense-organs will begin to function. We mentioned yesterday *āyatana* (the sense-organs) – eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind – begin to function. And as these sense-organs begin to gather stimuli from the child's environment, then the child begins to interact with that environment.

For sure there is at least something happening like the child drinks some milk from its mother's breast. And there is this taste experience. The mouth of the infant tastes the milk and it likes it. The milk is pleasing, satisfying, enticing. And this gives rise to the *vedanā* that we spoke about so much yesterday. The infant . . . This pleasant, this good-tasting milk – the milk tastes good – it satisfies the infant's hunger. That's an experience. And then the mind of the infant is drawn toward that taste in a positive way. And this is the pleasant feeling, the pleasant *vedanā* that causes so much trouble.

So as the infant is pleased with this milk, satisfied by it, it likes it, there then begins to arise in the mind of the infant the idea or feeling – it may not be an intellectual idea but some kind of feeling – of an 'I.' The 'I' that is pleased. The 'I' that is satisfied. The 'I' that likes. 'I' like. 'I am' pleased. 'I am' satisfied. This 'I' arises in the infant.

Because of this 'I' then – as it happens over and over again with all sorts of different experience, as it's nurtured and supported by the child's parents and by the other beings around it – this idea is supported and grows into the idea of a soul.

At first this idea of an ‘I’ just arises and passes away with these different feelings – with the attachment to these feelings. But as this happens over and over again it becomes a habitual way of relating to life. And so the ‘I’ no longer is something temporary but it grows into what we call a *ditṭhi* (view). When we use this word ‘view’ we don’t mean a flexibly loosely-held opinion. We’re talking about a deep-rooted bias and prejudice of the mind that is very stubborn, very narrow-minded. The mind is unwilling to look at this view with any objectivity. It’s completely absorbed into this view that there is a soul.

So in this way the illusion of a soul arises and becomes a view – a deeply ingrained, habitual bias that everything is seen as a soul. This view cannot be challenged. It’s clung to so strongly that the mind will not challenge it. It will not listen to reason. It will not even observe the situation carefully because it’s clinging to it so tightly. And that infant – or the child as it grows into an adult – just solidifies and ossifies this view more and more. It believes it. It’s sure of it. It thinks always in terms of a soul. And there is no way that any truth can shine into the situation.

So this is how the idea – the illusion of a soul – arises in the newborn’s mind. Originally the mind is free of this. But then through experiencing sensual activity the present feelings condition the sense of an ‘I.’ And then this ‘I’ becomes habitual. And then we are left with the illusion – the view which colors all our ways of looking at things – this view that there is a soul.

And this is how we make the soul which does not exist becomes a real thing in our minds. There’s no such thing as a soul but this view of a soul becomes something real. And then it’s a burden of life.

Now once this ‘I’ arises there immediately and automatically follows the sense of ‘mine.’ There is first the illusion of ‘I.’ And once this is established there follows the illusion of ‘mine.’ And then from the ‘mine’ there is the illusion of ‘myself.’ There is the ‘I,’ the sense of possession/of possessing, and then the ‘myself’ – the things that we possess, that we identify with and attach to as ‘mine.’

These three things together we call *upādāna*. *Upādāna* is a Pāli word we can translate as attachment or grasping and clinging. There are many different words which flesh out the meaning of the word *upādāna*.

So this attachment to ‘I’ leads to the attachment of ‘mine’ & of ‘myself.’ And in this way all sorts of things become burdens to the mind through this attachment

– this clinging to things as I & mine. This is the problem of life . . . is that because of the vedanā some experience gives rise to a pleasant feeling and then this leads to the sense of an ‘I’ & the attachment to things as ‘mine.’

So with the infant, there is the pleasant feeling . . . the infant is pleased and then within the infant’s mind there is ‘I am pleased.’ And then the attachment to that feeling as ‘my feeling,’ ‘my pleasure,’ ‘my happiness,’ ‘my satisfaction.’ And then there is even the attachment to the milk – ‘my milk,’ ‘my mother,’ and things like this. And all other experiences are working in the same way. Through this the vedanā arises – the attachment of I & mine. And in this way the mind starts attaching to everything. All the different things which are meeting up with the mind – which are making contact with the mind, through the senses – all these things are attached to and become I & mine.

And so we make burdens out of everything. We turn everything into an illusion – an illusion of self – that is either ‘I’ or belongs to me. And things get heavier and heavier, and life becomes more and more burdened down with all this unnecessary illusion and attachment.

It gets so carried away in fact that we not only attach to the pleasant things – to the nice, satisfying experiences that happen – the mind also goes and attaches to the unpleasant things – ‘I hurt,’ ‘I am sick,’ ‘my pain,’ ‘my disease,’ ‘my death.’ This becomes so habitual – all this attachment – the illusion is applied with all sorts of experience whether pleasant or unpleasant. And so many of us get so carried away with all this that we even start talking about ‘my world.’ We go and attach to the entire world. We claim the whole thing to be ‘mine.’

This is how this whole process gets really carried away, and how our pride and ego really know no limits in this illusion and attachment to everything to the point that we even think of this as ‘my world.’ And we think that everything in ‘my world’ belongs to me. And thus we make a burden of the entire world and everything in it. Take a look at all this. Look at it clearly, without any prejudices, and see if this isn’t what’s been happening.

So we’ve been talking about how this illusion and all this attachment arises and how that’s been working throughout our life. So now we come to the present, to today, as we’re sitting here. What are we going to do about all this? What we need to do is learn to discriminate between two situations. We have to be able to observe carefully and notice the difference between when the idea – when this illusion of an ‘I,’ of a ‘self,’ a ‘soul’ – arises in the mind and the situation when there is no

such illusion – when the mind is free of the soul illusion. We need to be able to look carefully, to observe the mind very very closely with great hunger to want to see this until we can discriminate between the two conditions – the condition of when the mind is burdened with this illusion and when the mind is free of this illusion. This must be discriminated.

When we begin to see this – that there are these two different conditions in the mind – we’ll see that the illusion of soul is very very heavy and then you’ll understand what we’re talking about when we say the burden of life. And you’ll see that the absence of this illusion leaves the mind very light. When there is the illusion of a soul, the mind is heavy. When this illusion is gone, the mind is light. This is a very very sharp difference which you should be able to discriminate if you observe the mind carefully.

Then you’ll know the big difference between life that is pure and life that is burdened. The life that is pure and free because this illusion of a soul is not there anymore. Once we begin to be able to discriminate these two conditions, then we’ll be able to watch and see how it is that this illusion arises. It’s always coming and going. In the sentient being’s mind this illusion comes and goes. And so we can begin to see how this happens. We can observe it carefully if we really want to know how it is that this works. Then we can see and understand how this illusion arises – see where the soul comes from. You can see it. You don’t have to believe what we’re telling you. You can see it for yourself.

And then once you understand where this illusion comes from and how it is that it arises, then you’ll be able to know what to do about it. Then you’ll see what must be done – how you must practice – in order to eliminate, to pull out and uproot this illusion.

So what we need to do is we have to begin by observing very very carefully with very strong motivation. You have to really want to see this because it’s subtle and if you don’t look carefully you’ll miss it all as you’ve been missing it all your lives. So we need to begin by looking very carefully so that we are able to discriminate between these two states – when the mind is burdened by the illusion of a soul and when the mind is light and free, at ease, peaceful and clear because there is no illusion of a ‘self’ or a ‘soul.’

This self or soul is the first burden. Today we’re talking about the burden of life. That’s the first burden we want to talk about – of some kind of self that this burden arises. Usually . . . or the most common way we discuss this in the

Buddhist tradition is by saying that the five *khandhas* – the five groups of clinging or the five categories of things we attach to – these are the burden of life. So this is another way of talking about attachment or the ‘I.’ These khandhas are different things that we identify with as ‘I’ or ‘mine.’ We need to talk a lot about these five khandhas and we’ll do so in a later talk. But today we’ll leave it at . . . is the attachment to the illusion of ‘self’ and ‘soul.’ This is the first burden.

Now when this first burden of a self arises, there follows very closely upon it the second burden which is the burden of selfishness. As soon as there is a self, then there is selfishness. Though these two are very different, they are none-the-less inseparable. The self arises and then selfishness is there also.

Selfishness is a very powerful and destructive burden which you can easily observe in yourself and the world around you – all the damage and pain that this causes both to yourself and to others. Selfishness arises and is caused by the self – by the soul – and then with this selfishness there arise all the various different kinds of problems that we meet with in life. Selfishness gives rise to love, greed, anger, hatred – gives rise to fear, worry, frustration, envy, jealousy, possessiveness. All of these are aspects of selfishness. Love – through fear and worry – are just different aspects of selfishness. These are the second burden of life.

All this selfishness is such a powerfully destructive burden upon the mind – it really weighs the mind down – which you can easily verify from your own experience. Maybe when you come to Suan Mokkh – where you don’t have much attachment to anything – this idea of a self isn’t arising very much. And so you’re not very selfish here. Your selfishness doesn’t happen so often here at Suan Mokkh because of the nature of the place. It’s very hard to be selfish about trees and rocks and puddles and mud. And so maybe while you’re here, this burden of a self and of selfishness doesn’t happen so much.

But once you leave and go back to places where you have lots of attachments, where you go . . . Or if you are the people who sneak out to the coffee shop for a cigarette or cup of coffee every day, then you’re going back into your attachments and you’re getting caught up again in that burden of self. Or when you go back to whatever situations you’re in where there are responsibilities and attachments – where there are all kinds of things that are I & mine – then you are under the weight of these burdens – the first burden, the burden of the soul, and then this second, very destructive burden of selfishness.

And so . . . Just because these things aren't so heavy on the mind while you're here at Suan Mokkh, don't ignore what we're talking about because these things are real. And just by paying attention, if we get outside our little worlds and start to observe what's really happening around us and also within us – if we get out of our clouds and daydreams and really observe – then we'll see all this selfishness and all the destructive harm and pain that selfishness causes both oneself and others. All this love, hatred, greed, jealousy, fear, worry – you can see all the damage it does to oneself and others. So this is the second burden, the burden of selfishness.

The problem of selfishness is a terrible burden for the entire world. If you really observe what's happening in this world of ours, you'll see that all the problems – all the conflict, all the crises which are so common – that all of these are the result of selfishness. Many of us come to Asia to get away from the constant sense of crisis and problems that we've met with in the West. But we can't escape that by coming to Asia because the same problems and crises are here as well but we may not notice them because we don't speak the language or the crises come in a different form.

But the whole world is under this burden. And this burden – all these crises, all the war, all the competition, exploitation, destruction of the environment, all the pollution, all these terrible problems . . . the population growth that is still out of hand in much of the world, the way certain countries pile up food while people starve in other countries – you can trace all of these back to selfishness. It doesn't take much thought. Just look at these things without prejudice and a little clearly and you'll see that all of our problems – all of the war and strife, and this lack of peace – is all rooted in selfishness which in turn comes from the belief that there is a self or a soul.

For example take the U.N. The U.N. is this beautiful dream that the politicians came up with at the end of World War II or it was an older idea that began even before World War I. But the United Nations which has been formed supposedly to create peace in this world . . . How successful is it? The U.N. itself is handicapped by this problem of selfishness. The U.N. is more a forum for the selfishness of individual countries or blocks of countries. They're all grouped into groups of this, the group of what 77, the group of 103, the East block, the West block, the third world. There are all these little groups banding together and clinging to each other in selfishness.

So the U.N. is so dominated by selfishness that it is unable to seriously do anything to develop peace. So the U.N. is dominated by selfishness and this is just a symptom of the selfishness that not only dominates the world but that is deeply rooted in ourselves. Because so long as we cling to this illusion of a self there will be selfishness. And as long as there is this selfishness in us, we cannot blame anyone else for this selfishness that we see around us that is causing all the wars and poverty and conflict and destruction that is happening in this world.

This is the burden of life and the entire world is suffering from it. And you're very deluded if you think you can separate yourself out of that. As long as the world is suffering from selfishness, you will suffer too. As long as that you cling to the cause of selfishness, the illusion that there is a self or a soul . . .

Selfishness is this terrible burden for the world. Because of it all our activities are done for our self. Everything is oriented to our self – not to what is right, what is correct, what is best. So this is how selfishness prevents the arising of Dhamma or doing what is correct, what needs to be done.

This is a terrible problem for the whole world. And it's also a problem for us because each of us is in the world. We're part of the world. And so this is our problem as well.

However it is beyond our ability to change or to solve this world problem. It is beyond each of us to destroy all selfishness in the world. So let's bring it back down to ourselves, to our individual problems. We wanted to illustrate the importance of selfishness and so we talked about it as a world problem but let's come back to our personal problem of selfishness.

Selfishness arises because of the *vedanā* as we talked about. There are the *vedanā* – these feelings toward our sensory experience. We like things, we dislike things, and we're uncertain of other things. And as we mentioned, these *vedanā* are our masters. We're at their beck and call doing whatever they tell us to do. We're slaves to the *vedanā*.

With the arising of a *vedanā*, this conditions what we call the *kilesa* which is another good word to remember. K-I-L-E-S-A. In Thai we say *gilet* or *gilesa*. You might say *kilesa*. We can translate this as 'mental defilement' or 'mental impurity.' These are dirty foul things which besmear the mind – which pollute the mind.

The defilements arise because of selfishness. They arise toward these feelings. There are three basic kinds of defilement that we can talk about and it will be obvious how they're related to the three kinds of *vedanā* we mentioned.

The first group of *kilesa* we call *lobha* which are the *kilesa* where there is a trying to get. There's a drawing toward movement of the mind. The mind is trying to acquire – to get, to become – things. This is the *lobha*, often translated 'greed' or 'lust' category of *kilesa*. And the characteristic of it is a mind that is trying to scoop up everything and get everything it can get its hands on.

The second category of *kilesa* we call *dosa*. This is the opposite of the *lobha* group. *Dosa* is trying to get rid of things – knocking them away, hitting them, kicking them – going so far as to kill the things that we don't like. This is translated often anger, aversion, ill will, hatred. This is the *dosa* group of defilement.

The third group is the *moha* group. This has the characteristic of the mind running round and round in circles around the object. There's neither the trying to accumulate and get, or[nor] the trying to get rid of and destroy – but there's the confusion, the delusion of running round and round the thing, the object, because the mind doesn't know what to do. So it just runs round and round in circles.

This is what the *kilesa* do to the mind. There's either this greedy acquisitive kind of mind that's trying to rake in everything or this angry ugly mind that's trying to get rid of things and destroy them. And then the confused mind that is spinning round and round in circles without knowing what it's doing.

These are the *kilesa* and they arise in response to the *vedanā*. And the *kilesa* are all rooted in selfishness. If you observe the mind closely enough that you see the *kilesa* in action – when you really see the defiled mind – then you'll know what a burden these things are, how dirty and ugly they are, what damage they do to the mind. Then you'll be seeing what our problems are, these *kilesa* – the defilements of *lobha*, lust and greed; *dosa*, anger and hatred; and *moha*, delusion. These are our burden of life.

Once the *kilesa* of *lobha*, *dosa*, and *moha* have arisen, they give rise to the next burden. There is the word *kilesa* which means 'defilement' and every time one of these defilements arise, they leave a little something behind. They're like pigeons – they always leave something behind. And what they leave behind piles up in the

depths of the mind. And this pile of dirt and filth that is left behind by the defilements we call, in Thai, the *anusai* or in Pāli the *anusaya*.

The *anusaya* are these . . . this is a familiarity with defilement that has been built up. It's this dirty filthy pile of tendency towards greed, anger, and delusion which piles up in the depths of the mind or, we could say, the sub-stratum of the mind. It's not so important where in the mind this is happening but if you observe the mind you'll see that it is happening – that this tendency, this familiarity with defilement is being developed. The more these *anusaya* pile up – the more these filthy tendencies develop – the easier it is for the defilements to arise.

Each time a defilement arises it strengthens the tendency to defilement. And so if we allow this to continue the defilements grow stronger and stronger. The *anusaya* becomes stronger and stronger, and the defilements occur more and more often. And so in this way the tendency for say, for instance, anger develops. And then anger itself happens more and more often.

So these *kilesa* are one burden and they cause this other burden of the *anusaya* – this familiarity with impurity and defilement which can develop. And then because of these *anusaya*, they in turn can cause further *kilesa*. And this is how this whole problem of this burden can develop.

If you really watch it and observe it and experience it, instead of trying to run away with it, deny it or convince yourself that 'Oh, I never get angry'; 'I'm never greedy'; 'I'm never confused or stupid' . . . If you begin to face these things, then you'll really begin to see what a problem they are. You'll actually observe this burden and this weight upon the mind. And then you'll understand – not intellectually but you'll realize through your own experience – how much *dukkha* these things are. This is another aspect of the burden of life.

These *anusaya* . . . Take a look back over your life and take a guess at how many times the *kilesa* have arisen. How many times have you been angry or greedy or confused? How many times has this happened? That's how much and how strong the *anusaya* are. That's how strong your habitual *kilesa* are. Can you even guess how many times the *kilesa* have arisen throughout life?

It's as if we had a big jar for storing water and water dripped in it one drop at a time. And after all these drops the water in the jar begins to become more and more. And the jar begins to fill up. Each drop is a *kilesa* and it begins to fill up the

mind. And the mind becomes more and more full with these habitual kilesa, this familiarity and tendency toward defilement.

Now imagine there was a leak – a small hole – in the bottom of the jar. But the jar is filled up with a lot of water. The water would leak out very quickly and easily through that small hole. In fact it would shoot out because there is so much pressure.

So as the defilements deposit all these anusaya and it builds up, there's this pressure which will shoot out through these little holes. That's what a burden the anusaya are. These habitual defilements are this kind of burden and dukkha. Because as they build up they develop this pressure, and then that pressure shoots out through the cracks in the mind. This aspect of the burden of life needs to be observed.

So through the arising of defilement, the tendency or familiarity with defilement piles up. Then whenever there is some sense experience – whenever there is some sense experience – this can open up a leak in the mind. Whenever there is some sense-object making contact with the mind, this can open up a small hole. And then the anusaya can shoot out through that hole. And in doing so that becomes defilement again. So in this way the anusaya shoot out.

There's a special name for this kind of defilement that is shooting out through these gaps, these small leaks in the mind that are opened up by sense objects. These are called the *āsava*. *Āsava* means flowing outward, flowing out. So there's this flowing out from the anusaya. This is called the *āsava* and it results in the same old defilements arising.

And as this happens it's just perpetuating this circle – a vicious circle – of defilement. Defilement arising. Defilement piling up as anusaya. And then flowing out as *āsava*. Becoming defilement again which further strengthens the tendency, which further builds up the pressure, which increases the amount of outflow leading to more kilesa.

If we allow this to go on forever, it just gets deeper and stronger and filthier and heavier, and causes more and more dukkha for the mind. It's like being caught in the middle of the ocean and being spun round and round in some gigantic whirlpool. Just going round and round in all this defilement and all these tendencies and all this outflow. It's like being trapped in the ocean in some great whirlpool, being always spun round.

Does that appeal to you? Is this kind of life the kind of life you want to lead? Or is it frightening? Is it fearful? Is it ugly? This is something you ought to consider.

Now that you've had a description of how the kilesa, anusaya, and āsava function, imagine what would happen if there was enough mindfulness (*sati*) and wisdom (*paññā*) – enough mindful wisdom – to prevent that outflow of the āsava. So that when some object makes contact with the mind, the mind doesn't follow the tendencies that have built up. But mindfulness and wisdom stop that tendency toward defilement. And so in that circumstance the āsava don't flow outward and then the kilesa don't occur.

It's as if with that jar – instead of allowing things to make leaks in the jar so that the water will squirt out – we use *sati-paññā* to plug those leaks. Every time something comes up to start a leak, *sati-paññā* stops it. And so there aren't any leaks developing in the jar. In this way . . . what also happens . . . it's as if in the same time we start to empty the jar of the water that is built up. So what is happening by using mindfulness/mindful wisdom, it not only . . . it prevents this out flowing of the āsava and it lessens – it weakens, it diminishes – the tendencies, the anusaya.

So in this way that the deposits of anusaya begin to get cleaned up. And as they weaken, there is less and less of a tendency to defilement. The defilements arise less often. And in this way this process can be reversed through *sati-paññā* (mindful wisdom). Or we also say *sati-sampajañña*. *Sampajañña* is wisdom in action, applied wisdom. Through *sati-sampajañña* (mindful wisdom in action) the āsava are prevented and the anusaya begin to dry up.

If this is continued diligently the anusaya can be completely cleaned up so that there's no more of this filthy water left in the jar. It can be all pumped out and gotten rid of. In this way there are no more outflows, no more āsava. And when the āsava are ended, that's the meaning of being perfected.

We talk about the Arahants. The Arahants are the 'perfected ones' – minds that have completely shut off the outflow of the āsava. This means that no more kilesa are arising. All the tendency to defilement has been cleaned up. And the mind of a perfected one is completely free of defilement. This mind . . . this is a kind of mind that has completely dropped – just let go of, tossed away, and refuses to have anything to do with – the burden of life. This is a mind that has put down all these

heavy loads and burdens, and is light and liberated. This is the Arahant – the perfected one.

The way to do this is to train and develop *satipaṇṇā* (mindful wisdom). These have to be trained, strengthened and developed. And the way we do this is through *samatha vipassanā* meditation. *Samatha* means ‘tranquility.’ It’s the aspect of meditation by which the mind is calmed. *Vipassanā* means ‘insight’ – seeing clearly into the reality and truth of nature. *Vipassanā* is the knowledge aspect – the development of wisdom aspect – that happens in meditation. Sometimes we just say *vipassanā* or sometimes we say *samatha-vipassanā*. It’s a way of describing meditation. If we just say *vipassanā* it still includes the *samatha* aspect, the tranquil calming aspect. Otherwise *vipassanā* will not occur.

So through *vipassanā* meditation mindfulness and wisdom – or wisdom in action – are developed and trained so that they can be used to clean up the *anusaya* and stop the *āsava* from flowing outward into defilement. This is why we practice *vipassanā* – to develop mindful wisdom.

So let’s go back and summarize this whole mess that’s going on. It’s all rooted in the illusion of a soul – this belief in some ‘I’ – and the attachment and clutching to this ‘I.’ All this mess – all these problems, this heavy burden upon life – all comes from the ‘I.’ Because of this soul belief . . . because of this concept of I and the attachment to it, there arises selfishness – the second burden. Because of the burden of selfishness there arise the defilements – a third burden. These defilements pile up, deposit these piles of filthiness that we call the *anusaya*, the tendencies, the habitual defilement – another burden upon the mind. And those in turn lead to the *āsava*, the outward flowing of defilement – a fifth burden.

All these burdens of life – all these sources of *dukkha* – are all rooted in the illusion of a soul – this deep bias towards a self that some ‘I’ exists individually, importantly, significantly. This is the root of the whole problem. And so all this mess – all this filth, pain, burden and weight – can be cleaned up and dropped. You can just let go of it all by learning how to pull up that illusion of self – to cut off this illusion.

When we talk about this we always like to use the symbol of Christianity. We find this symbol very inspiring and appropriate. The Christians have taken the cross as their most important symbol. And there’s a lot of meaning in this – very deep and profound meaning – though many Christians may miss it. But if we look at the cross, the upright is the ‘I’ and then the cross beam is the cutting of the ‘I.’

So there's this illusion of a soul and then there's the cutting off – the cutting through, the destruction – of that illusion. This is the meaning that we see in the cross. And this symbol of the cross is perfect as a symbol of what spiritual practice is about.

In fact we'd like to go so far as to even boast a little bit and say that Buddhists are better Christians than most Christians because the Christians have this symbol of the cross – of cutting off the 'I.' But many of them aren't even concerned with this problem of the self and the soul. And instead of trying to carry through with the meaning of this symbol and cut off the 'I,' instead we often see Christians strengthening the belief in a soul – building up this illusion of an 'I.' But Buddhists are always trying to cut off and destroy this 'I.'

So we Buddhists are really making use of this symbol, the cutting off of the 'I' – the destruction of the illusion of self. This is how to drop all these burdens – to free the mind of all the dukkha, all the heavy weight which is making life less than it could be. Cut off the 'I.' Use the cross as the symbol of your life and practice. Cut off the 'I' and you will drop all the burdens of life. You clean up all this mess of selfishness and defilement by following through with this symbol of the cross.

So we've been talking about the burden of life and explaining how life becomes the burden. You've been listening and have observed life as it's occurred to you as you have experienced it, then you'll begin to see the truth of what's being said.

Life becomes the burden because of this 'I' – this 'self,' this illusion of 'soul.' This extra weight is stirred up and imposed upon life. And then as selfishness, as the self and selfishness in this vicious circle of the defilements – as all these things go on and on and are conditioned – these dominate life. And so the life as lived is nothing but self, selfishness, and defilement. And in this way life becomes the burden because life is made up of just these burdens.

And so this is how life becomes the burden. We've been trying to explain this. We mentioned earlier that life free of this burden is just pure mind and pure body – just pure mind and pure body. That's the life that is free, at ease, clean, clear, bright, light. It is not burdened with all these problems and weights and dukkha of the self, of selfishness, and defilement.

If we talk about the mind and body – the mental aspects of what we call 'life' and the physical aspects of what we call 'life' – we can . . . With the body it's quite

simple. The body is nothing difficult. Modern science has been able to analyze it in much more detail than is necessary for our purposes. So the body aspect of life – this physical material aspect of life – is no problem for us in understanding. But the mental aspect is much more complex.

There's basically one body – it's always changing but there's this body throughout – from birth until it disintegrates at death. In that period of the body's lifetime, there are innumerable minds arising and passing away. So when we talk about the mental aspect of life – the mind – it's much more complex. Our usual way of talking about the mind is to talk about the four different functions of mind that we can distinguish. So life has this material aspect and then it has these four mental aspects which we'll talk about.

When the mind functions in a way that is knowing and experiencing the *vedanā* – which we've talked about more than enough – this is one function of mind. The *vedanā*. The knowing and experiencing of the *vedanā*.

The next aspect of mind is called *saññā*. This is the mind functioning in the way of perceiving – of discriminating and distinguishing things – and also is the aspect of mind that includes memory. So: remembering, recollecting, perceiving, distinguishing, discriminating. This is the second mental aspect – *saññā*.

The next aspect is called *saṅkhāra*. This is the thinking, the process where . . . the mental function where different things are stuck together, are conditioned. This is the thinking – the stringing together of ideas. Or it can be the emotions – your sentiments – which are a different kind of conditioning – of formations – happening within the mind. This is called *saṅkhāra*.

And then the fourth mental aspect is called *viññāṇa* which is the aspect of mind that knows the sense-objects through the eyes, that is sights, forms and shapes. It knows the sounds. It's the aspect of mind that knows smells, tastes, touches, and all the various things that happen within the mind itself. This is often called 'consciousness' but this is a very misleading translation. It generally confuses everybody. So you're better off sticking with the word *viññāṇa* – the function of the mind that knows sights, smells, tastes, touches, and mental objects.

Together, the body and these four mental aspects of life are called the five *khandhas* – the five groups of clinging. These are the five groups of things that we cling to – that we attach to as 'I.' Based in these five things is where this fundamental problem of the self or soul arises. And so these five *khandhas* are life.

These are life. And when there is just the five khandhas, life is pure. But when there arises the illusion of soul upon these five khandhas, with/through this attachment arises the burden of life and dukkha.

So understanding these five khandhas is very important. If you can bear with us . . . If you've got the strength, energy, and wisdom to listen, we've got the strength and patience to go through these five khandhas. There's five of them so we can spend five days discussing them if you are up to it. So the five khandhas – these are life. And if we study them, then we'll begin to see the difference between the life that is pure – pure body and pure mind – as opposed to mind and body which is burdened with the illusion of soul – with the great 'I am,' with ego and self.

So we'd like to point out for one last time what the problem is. If we go back to the example of the child kicking a chair, there we see the body *khandha* (group) being clung to by that child as a self. The child takes the body as a self and there a rant, anger and everything arose.

Or sometimes there is a feeling arising, a pleasant feeling. And that feeling of 'I who feel' – 'I the feeler' – arises. And this is attachment to the *vedanā khandha* – the *vedanā* group of clinging.

Or sometimes there is *saññā* (perception). The mind perceives red, it perceives blue, tallness, shortness or it perceives something. And there is the feeling in the mind . . . the mind . . . there arises the thought of an 'I who perceives' – the perceiver.

There is *saṅkhāra khandha* – the thinking, the mental proliferation. And then there arises the thought, the thinker – 'I who thinks.' This is attachment to *saṅkhāra khandha*.

And then there is the *viññāṇa*, that which knows the sensory activity – the seeing, the hearing, the smelling, tasting, etc. And sometimes . . . then there can be attachment to this. The 'I who knows' – the knower.

And so this is how these five khandhas – body, feeling, perception, thought, and knowing/sensory knowing – how these five can be bases for the arising of the self. The ignorant mind – the stupid mind that hasn't figured out the way things really work, as we explained earlier – goes and misunderstands and drudges up this concept of an I and attaches importance to it and becomes prejudiced in favor of this self or soul illusion. In this way the five khandhas are used as a basis – the foundation – for the arising of this illusion.

Basically most of the time there is some attachment to one khandha or another. Maybe now it's to feeling, then to the body, then to knowing, then to thinking or perceiving. So don't let this happen.

Through this arising of illusion comes selfishness and all the burdens of life. So why let it happen? Why allow this attachment to arise – this thinking, this feeling or awareness of the mind that there is the I who thinks or the I who feels, the I who perceives, the I who knows or the I body? Don't let this happen. For sure don't get carried away as some Western philosophers have done, such as Descartes who went so far as to say *Cogito ergo sum* which is generally translated “I think, therefore I am.” This is – “I think, therefore I am” – is nothing but attachment to the fourth khandha – to the saṅkhāra, the thinking khandha.

This is a misunderstanding of what is really happening. Yes, maybe there is thinking now, or perceiving or feeling or knowing or body. At each moment there is one of these khandhas. But that's all. There is just this aspect of life but that aspect is pure. It's either pure mind or pure body. There is no self or soul. So don't allow this confusion, this illusion, this foolishness to arise in the mind. Cut it off, like the cross. Don't let it happen and then the mind will be pure. Life will be pure and light and free of all of these burdens and *dukkha*.

This is the essential problem. We've been discussing what our problem is – the burden of life. By now you should understand how life is turned into the burden. But now we've also been pointing the way to freeing life from this burden – how to clean up life and bring it back to purity – so there's just pure mind and pure body, the pure *khandhas* that are not attached to as 'I' or 'mine.'

That's enough for today. We will end the talk here. See you again tomorrow.

• • • • •

Transcribed by Arthur Brown in April-May 2015
Audio file: 1986-12 (2) The problem of every one of us

© Liberation Park, 2016

