

Destroying Selfishness

by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

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A Dhamma lecture given at Suan Mokkh on 4 September 1987

In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhādāsa gave regular talks 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).

We have been talking about selfishness. We've discussed how dangerous it is for the individual, how dangerous it is for society, and how very dangerous it is for the world as well. And then yesterday we explained the cause of selfishness, and then the foundations on which selfishness stands. Today we would like to talk about how to get rid of selfishness, so we will be discussing the way to end selfishness.

As far as stopping selfishness or ending selfishness, we can see that sometimes it ends by itself. Selfishness arises, runs its course, and then ends by itself. This kind of ending of selfishness has nothing to do with our ability, our skill, or knowledge. It just runs its natural course and then ends. But there is a different way of ending selfishness that is by our own activity – we take some action, some skillful, wise action in order to end selfishness, and then it disappears. And then there is a third choice, which is even better than the first two. This is to prevent selfishness, to not let selfishness be born, and then we don't have to put it out. This prevention of selfishness is even more cool and peaceful than having to get rid of it once it arises. But in the end, it's another way of ending selfishness. So there are three ways of ending selfishness. One, it ends by itself. Two, we do something to stop it once it has arisen, and then three, we can prevent its arising in the first place.

We would like to remind you about the new life. The old way of life, the old common way of life is filled with selfishness. We would like to remind you about the new life that is free of selfishness. We've been warning you about the dangers of the old life, and now we would like to encourage you and ask you to

face in the direction of new life, to take this as the goal of life, to take this as our purpose in life, to orientate ourselves towards the new life that is free of selfishness.

The new life is the life in which selfishness has been extinguished, in which selfishness has been stopped. So the thing that we must always keep in mind, which we must never forget is the heart of Buddhism. We must always keep the heart of Buddhism in mind. This heart of Buddhism is very simply *dukkha* and the end of *dukkha*, the cessation, the extinction of *dukkha* (suffering). This cessation, the extinction of suffering is what's most important. Suffering is all over the place. It's obvious and clear. The thing that we need to be particularly interested in is the extinction, the end, the cessation of pain and suffering, of *dukkha*. The way to do this is to extinguish selfishness. This is the heart of Buddhism. It's very simple – the extinction of suffering by extinguishing selfishness. This is what we should always keep in mind.

To express this heart of Buddhism a bit more concisely, we can say that if there is attachment to things, then there is suffering. When there is no attachment to anything, then there is no suffering. We can try and express it even a little more concisely than this. We can say, 'If attachment, then *dukkha*. If no attachment, no *dukkha*.' This is the heart of Buddhism.

The Buddha himself declared that "I teach only *dukkha* and the complete extinction of *dukkha*." This is all that the Buddha taught. These things about birth and rebirth and future lives and past lives and things like that were taught way before the Buddha. These things are not what Buddhism is about. These are unnecessary. They are something that we need not spend our time on. The essential matter is merely this thing of *dukkha* and the end of *dukkha*. We're born in this world and there is *dukkha*. This is something we can all be very certain about, and *dukkha* has a way of arising, and there is a way to distinguish *dukkha*. This has nothing to do with future lives or rebirth. It has merely to do with this life right here. This is what Buddhism is about, this life here and now. *Dukkha* exists and there is the way that it arises, and there is the way to extinguish it. This is what we are interested in. We even dare to say that no matter what your religion, no matter what religion you claim to follow, or you proclaim as your own, we challenge you by saying that no matter what religion you hold, *dukkha* arises in this way and it is extinguished in this way. That's all there is to it. This is the matter that we ask you to keep in mind to reflect on, to make this truth very clear, right, and apparent in your minds in order to free your lives from *dukkha*, no matter what religion you follow. This is the essential matter of life. This is the duty of life.

We would like to talk about something that may be a bit difficult for you to understand. But please listen carefully and try to understand what we are talking about. There's a thing that is called 'the good' or 'goodness' or sometimes we

talk about 'the best.' Some people value this very highly and go so far as to claim as 'the good' is god or 'goodness' is god, the highest thing. We would like to point out that this thing called goodness, the good, is the basis of attachment, that if we cling to good like we generally do, than it turns into selfishness. This thing we call the good or the best – we attach to it, we cling to it. This leads to us becoming good, crazy, or drunken – drunk on good, crazy about good. We become infatuated with good. We get lost in it, sink into it, and drown in good, and this becomes selfishness. This goodness – or the good, the best – is the base of attachment. It becomes the basis and cause of selfishness, so we need to take a good look at this. Please reflect on this that you call good or goodness or the best. If we are not careful with it, it leads to attachment. We would like to look at this carefully in order to be free of good, to be void of good, to no longer be trapped and enslaved by good. So we'll look at this thing, the good.

These words may go against your feelings. They may not sit very well with you because for most of us, this goodness is what we value the most, whether goodness or better or the best, the utmost goodness. All of these fall under the sway of positivism, which is the thing that just about everybody worships. Everybody is worshipping positivism and hating negativism, and so these words about the good and the best probably grate against your feelings and opinions. But for those who are interested in being free of suffering and free of selfishness, we must understand this business of positivism and negativism and learn to be free of them both, to no longer be trapped by them, to be empty of both positivism and negativism. We're not sure, maybe these words are too strange for you to understand, but please try. If you can understand what it is that we are talking about, if you can truly be free from positivism and negativism, then your lives will be empty of suffering and selfishness, so please give your full attention to this subject.

In the world, in the ordinary world, they are only talking about, teaching about, two things – positivism and negativism. They don't know anything more than this. They don't know anything beyond this. All they can talk about is positive and negative. So worldlings, common ordinary people are worshiping positivism. They are getting enslaved to it. They become infatuated with positivism and become enslaved and trapped by it. This has nothing to do with freedom. This is very far from being liberated. Just to begin to get free of what is low and evil, this is not to be really free. To pass beyond evil and get to what is good and then get trapped and caught in good is not to be free. It is just slavery to the good. This is not liberation. For true liberation, we must go beyond evil and then go beyond good, and even go beyond the best. Transcend all this in order to be above, beyond both the positive and the negative. When there is still self, ego, the sense that I am, then the mind is enslaved to positivism and negativism. But when the mind drops this egoistic thinking, it

transcends even the positive, even the best, and then there is liberation. When the mind is still trapped by dualistic pairs, by the pairs of opposites, by any of these pairs, then it is not free and empty. Whether it's the pair of positive and negative, or optimism and pessimism, or plus and minus, or any of these dualisms, then the mind is trapped, it is not free. To be truly liberated, to be truly emancipated and saved, the mind must go beyond even the positive in order to be free.

For those of you who have Christian backgrounds or Judeo-Christian backgrounds, we would like you to think back to the most important teaching in the whole Bible, the most special and wonderful teaching which is also the heart of Buddhism, within the Christian Bible. Please remember the first teaching, which God gave to Adam and Eve, which was the warning to not eat from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This is the first thing that God taught to man, to not eat the fruit of this tree of the knowledge of good and evil because when we know good, then we attach to it. When we know evil, then we attach to it, and then we become enslaved to good and evil. We become trapped by positivism and negativism. Right in the very first chapter of Genesis, there is this warning from God himself, not indirectly through Jesus Christ, but directly from God, the very first teaching given to mankind. Whenever the child begins to know about good and evil, then attachment arises to these things, and then the child's mind is enslaved and trapped by these conditions. It gets trapped within all the dualistic pairs. So if you come from a Christian background, please be a true Christian. Don't be just a pseudo Christian. Practice this teaching which God gave at the very beginning, to not attach to good and evil. Otherwise you will die.

It's pretty funny that this teaching is actually the only direct quote of God in the entire Bible, whether the New Testament or the Old Testament. This is the only place where God speaks directly to mankind, and the words are very simply – don't attach to good and evil. It's right there in the first chapter of Genesis. This is the only time God spoke directly to man, and still Adam and Eve didn't believe it, and so they went and ate that fruit, and the result is what we call original sin. From that original sin, arose death, spiritual death, which in Buddhism we call *dukkha* (suffering). From this original teaching, God warned about attaching to good and evil. If man were willing to listen to God's warning, we would just see that the things are happening naturally, according to the law of nature, the law of *idappaccayatā*. Things just happen according to causes and conditions. It's merely a natural process, and in that process, there is nothing that can actually be called a self. But when the idea of self arises, when this foolish illusion arises, then man begins to react to things according to our own feelings, in terms of this self, and things that this self likes are classified as good, and things which the self dislikes are classified as evil. So out of this illusion of self arises the mistaken understanding, the knowledge of good and

evil. From this attachment, life becomes trapped in all kinds of dualisms and suffering. But by just seeing that things are happening naturally, by realizing that there is no self, then this problem can be avoided and life will be free. This is the new life, seeing that there is no self, and so the mind is above good and evil.

Now let's look at our own lives, these lives that are attaching to both good and evil, which are trapped by this dualism. All of this happens because of the belief in self. This attachment to self is the basis of good and evil. This is the cause of good and evil. This is the fundamental source of the dualism of good and evil. Good and evil only have value to the self, to this illusion of self, but they have no real value in themselves. But when there is this idea of self, then what is pleasing to the self is judged to be good; what is unpleasing or unpleasant is judged to be bad. It's merely that – just attachments arising from the attachment to self. From this arises all the dualities, all the positivism and negativism, pessimism and optimism, in which our lives are trapped. This is the old life; this is the life in which we suffer.

We need to understand this thing we call life, this life which we take and attach to and turn into suffering. Really all there is, is just the five *khandhas* (the five aggregates) which we discussed yesterday. All that life is, is the functioning of these five khandhas, the various khandhas performing their duties. That is what life is and nothing more. But when ignorance leads to attachment, then we take these various khandhas to be the self, and this illusion is what creates all the problems. In reality it's just the natural functioning of these khandhas, but the ignorant mind takes ... for example, when the body performs its duty, then the mind says 'I' so the body moves. The mind thinks 'I' move, 'I' move. Or when there is a feeling in the mind, 'I' feel, the ego feels, this is 'my' feeling. Or when the mind performs the function of discrimination, 'I' discriminate – the mind thinks there is the illusion that 'I' think. Or when there is knowing of the sense objects, there is the illusion that the ego, the self knows. Really it's just the natural functioning of these khandhas, but as soon as the self comes in, when there is a self, the idea of self arises in terms of these five functions, then this leads to further foolishness and stupidity. This basic stupidity of self grows into the attachments to good and evil, positive and negative, and all these other attachments which entrap life. So we need to look at and understand life and understand this thing that we call the self – this illusion, this delusion that is imposed upon the five khandhas.

We would like to stress this point about the attachment to the functioning of the five khandhas, that this 'self' idea clings to these five functions and thus arises the idea of self. This all is happening because of ignorance, because of not understanding the way things really are. When there is this basic ignorance arising to the illusion of self, then this self is taken to be permanent; this

temporary fleeting idea of self is clung to and taken to be something solid and permanent, and then from this we don't see impermanence; rather we see permanence in things. We don't see the unsatisfactoriness in things. We see them as satisfying, and we see all things as selves because of this fundamental ignorance. Instead of seeing the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self of phenomenon, they are taken to be permanent, satisfying, beautiful and selves. They are taken to be permanent little entities, individual little entities. This is all arising from the fundamental ignorance of our own clinging to things as I & mine. But if the mind can begin to see things, see the working of the five khandhas as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-self, then this chain, this process can be stopped and the mind can become free. This is what we will go into next.

So this brings up three most important things that all of us need to understand completely and clearly. These we can call the three characteristics or three truths or three facts, whatever. These are three characteristics of the five khandha, and when they are characteristics of the *khandha* (the aggregates) then they are the characteristics or facts of life. The first characteristic is impermanence. The five khandhas or life is always changing. It's flowing, nothing stays still for even a moment. This is impermanence, this constant flux and flow. When things are always changing like this, they can't stay still; they can't maintain themselves in any state and form. Nothing can stay in one form, and this means that it is difficult to endure or bear. This is what is meant by dukkha. When things are difficult to bear, impossible to stand up to, that means that there is no self, there is no real self that can stand up and stop that change. There is no self that can prevent that change, that can stand that dukkha. This is the third characteristic, the characteristic of not-self. There is no self in any way, shape, or form. So these are the three characteristics of the five khandha, or of life, that we all must know. Everything is changing, is impermanent. That change is very difficult to bear, and there is nothing which can stop it or control it. These are the three characteristics of life – impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and not-self (*anattā*).

The first thing to observe, to realize, is that there is merely a process of cause and effect, a process of conditioning and in that process, there is no self. All that is taking place is a series, a process of causes conditioning effects, causes leading to effects, various things cooking up conditioning, compounding other things. This is a process, a flow that is taking place, and if we observe it carefully, we just see it as a natural process, happening under the law of *idappaccayatā* (the law of nature). And in all that, there is no self. There are merely these conditioned things, these phenomenon, arising and passing away, and in this process, further conditioning in cooking up other phenomenon, and this process just goes on and on, but there is no self anywhere to be found. This

is the first thing to realize, and then it is possible to realize the end of selfishness.

If we look closely at life, we look at this operation of the five khandhas, we'll see that life is just this flow, just this process of changing things, arising and passing away, arising and passing away. See that in the operation, the functioning of these five khandhas, there is just this process, this natural process and that each of the five khandhas, each of these functions is completely empty of self. There is no self in there. They are just natural functions. These five functions which make up life – that is empty of self. If this is reflected on, contemplated, and seen most clearly, then the mind can be freed from this illusion that there is such a thing as a self. Merely close your eyes and observe. Stop thinking about it all, but just observe this process of change, this process of these five khandhas arising to perform a function and then passing away. Observe this natural process and see that nowhere is there any self. It's merely natural things, natural functions and phenomena operating according to the law of nature. When this is seen, then the mind is freed of that delusion of self, and it stops cooking up all these fantastic ideas about good and evil, beautiful and ugly, positive and negative, pessimism, optimism and pacifism. The mind that is empty of self, that sees the emptiness of the five khandhas, this mind no longer cooks up all these illusions. It is no longer attached to these deluded ideas, thoughts, and feelings, and then that mind is free. So just close your eyes and observe this process, this empty selfless process.

The next thing is a little bit more difficult to understand, but please give it your fullest attention. In the functioning of these five khandhas, all of these empty selfless khandhas, in their functioning one of the khandhas in particular – *saññā khandha* – the perception recognition discrimination aggregate, sometimes the way this one works is it perceives things as selves. When this khandha is working in this deluded way, in this ignorant way, then it gives rise to the perception, the classification of things as self. This illusion of self is just this one function of the *saññā khandha*, and that's all. *Saññā khandha* sometimes perceives itself as self. *Saññā khandha* classifies *saññā khandha* as 'self' or as 'myself,' and then it discriminates or classifies the various other khandhas as 'selves' or 'belonging to selves,' depending on which one is functioning in the circumstances. That's all, there are these five khandhas functioning, but *saññā khandha*, because of this illusion, goes and perceives self in the functioning of the individual khandhas or sometimes takes life as a whole to be a self, and then projects selfhood on other external things. But this is all arising out of ignorance, so the only thing that can be done, the thing that we must do, is to wisen up, to bring wisdom into the operation of this *saññā khandha*, to stop perceiving things as self, to develop the wisdom and understanding that things are not-self, and then this can correct the functioning of *saññā khandha* so that this illusion is not longer applied to the five khandhas or to life.

The way to extinguish or destroy selfishness is to get rid of this attachment to things as self, to see that each of the five khandhas are neither self, that they do not belong to self, that in them there is no selfhood or anything of that sort, to see that the five khandhas are completely empty of self. This will destroy the illusion of self, and that in turn will destroy selfishness. This is a very simple, fundamental principle. The way to get rid of selfishness is to get rid of this illusion of selfhood, and this is why we study the five khandhas in order to see that they are merely natural functions, which are free of any self. This is a fundamental principle which you must try very hard to understand, and then see, realize, observe it, in nature, in life.

Another thing which would be wise to observe is that as soon as we talk about extinguishing selfishness, just about everybody starts to complain that 'I can't do that, that's beyond me.' 'I can't live without selfishness.' Just about everybody reacts in this way. Then when we talk about extinguishing the belief in self, then people really complain. They complain that it's impossible, that they can't do it, and they become afraid. It's just about everybody who is so attached to this idea of self that they think that by extinguishing this, they would die. So everybody becomes afraid of this, these words, this teaching. The more attached to good, to goodness that someone is, the more afraid they are, the more lost and attached and enslaved to things they value, the more afraid they are of this truth. So they complain, and they try not to pay attention and they argue and all of those things. This is something that happens with everyone, so it's worth observing.

In the Buddhist texts, it says that the *devas*, the divine beings, the heavenly lives are the most afraid of not-self. The better that life is, the better one's life is, the higher, more happy and exalted one's life is, the more one is afraid of not-self. The different ideas about heavenly beings and so forth, about divine lives, these are the ones that are most afraid because their lives are so nice, so beautiful that they're so good, that they become very attached to this goodness, and then that just leads to being afraid. The better off we are, the more good we have, the more attached to it we become. And this leads to fear. This is a problem that we must correct because it makes it impossible for us to lead our lives in a way that is new life. All this goodness that just inspires and incites attachment makes it impossible to live a new life, to end selfishness. So this is a problem to look at and realize and then correct.

Another fact that we need to consider is this thing we call 'the instinct of self,' this fundamental instinct of there being a self. This instinct is very powerful, and it is difficult to overcome it. For many of us it would seem impossible. But there is one way we can deal with it, and this is that if this instinct is operating, then be very careful with it, keep it under control so that there is this self, but don't let it be selfish. If you still value this instinct of self,

then at least don't let it become selfish. Keep it under control. Remember that in truth, this instinct is not really true. It's a bit foolish and ignorant. It serves the purpose of survival, of allowing life to survive, but it's not actually true. If we can use this understanding to keep this instinct under control so it doesn't become a defilement, doesn't lead to greed, anger, confusion and so forth, then it can become a self that is not selfish. This is a technique that we can all use to see, to use that instinct of self, that is, and not let it become selfishness, and then life can continue. We will survive, we still continue living, but not selfishly. By doing this, then we can begin to apply the knowledge that comes from concentration insight meditation. By using the powers of concentration and insight, it will become possible to see the reality of this instinct. If we can keep that instinct under control enough to have a peaceful and calm enough life, to practice meditation, then it will be possible for the knowledge to arise from the practice of concentration and insight, that that self is just a creation of the mind. It's just a conditioned thing, just a phenomenon, an idea arising and passing away in the mind. If this knowledge can be developed, then the mind can be completely free of selfishness.

This instinct of self can follow two paths. It can either take the path of enlightenment or bodhi, or it can take the path of kilesa, of defilement. If the instincts are controlled and kept so that they are correct, especially this instinct of self, if it is kept from being selfish, then it will stay correct, and it will follow the path of *Bodhi*, of awakening or enlightenment. Then in doing so, it is possible to eventually realize the truth that all things are not self. We have to prevent the instincts from following the lower path, the path of kilesa because these instincts have a tendency to just follow the things which entice it, which lure it, all the delicious, attractive, exciting, beautiful, enjoyable things in the world. These are always luring the instincts towards defilement, towards selfishness. So there is this tendency to take things as self, to attach and to become selfish, so we must be very careful with the instincts to maintain them in a way that is correct so that they follow the path of awakening. If they go on this low path, that's just the common, cheap, ordinary life. Many people are willing to surrender to the instincts and allow them to become defiled. Many people aren't willing to put forth the effort to control the instincts and live in the higher way. Most people aren't willing. They give up in surrender and let the instincts chase after beautiful, delicious, attractive, fun things. But if life is to be correct and free from selfishness, these instincts must be controlled and led along the path of *Bodhi* (awakening).

Before we end today's talk, we would like to remind you of a metaphor which we used a few days ago. This is a metaphor that describes the life in which there is self, the life of attachment, of clinging to self. In this life, it's like there is a rope around one's neck, pulling one upward, and there is another rope around our feet, pulling us downward, and then there is a fire scorching us in

the belly, the fire of greed, the fire of hatred, burning and scorching our gut. Please reflect on this metaphor of the life of attachment, the life of self and selfishness. There's a noose around the neck pulling upward, and another rope around the feet, pulling one downward, and in the middle are these very painful fires of lust and hatred burning one's guts. If you reflect on this metaphor of the life of attachment and selfishness, you begin to see the pain inherent in such a life, in this old life. And when you begin to see the pain of the life of attachment, you'll start to think about, you'll seriously consider removing this illusion of self, getting rid of the self and selfishness. So please use this metaphor and reflect upon it, and see the life of attachments, see selfish life as it truly is – the rope around the neck, another around the feet, pulling one apart, and the fires of lust and hatred scorching one in the middle. Then you'll begin to have some genuine interest in a new life, a life that is free of self and selfishness. We'll end today's talk with this metaphor because time is up.

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Transcribed in March-September 2015

Audio files: 5125300904030.mp3 & 1987-09 (3) The extinguish selfishness.mp3

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