

Introduction to Dhamma

by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

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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 volunteer and the Buddhādāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok (suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com).

First of all, let us express our joy that you have all come here in this way, meaning that you've come here looking for Dhamma. The fact that you have come here, demonstrates that you still feel that there is some lacks of Dhamma in your life. So we express our joy that you've come here with this very important objective.

So the first thing for us to talk about is that which will help you to understand Dhamma. So our first topic today is '*An Introduction to Dhamma.*'

The purpose of Dhamma has two aspects. The most important aspect is to prevent the occurrence of *dukkha*, of suffering, of mental pain and disease. The second aspect of the purpose of Dhamma is to get rid of any *dukkha* that does arise – any suffering happens, then to overcome it, to get rid of it. This is the purpose of Dhamma but be clear that the first one is the most important.

Now Dhamma has been associated with what is called 'religion.' And in the minds of most people, the two are all mixed up. This often leads to quite a bit of confusion and turmoil.

Dhamma is Dhamma and religion is a somewhat different thing. But the two are associated but then we go and tend to mix them up. Dhamma is just the truth of nature – the way things are, naturally, in this world. Religion is not the Dhamma itself but religion is teachings about the Dhamma. We should understand this distinction. It will save us a lot of trouble. So Dhamma is the

natural truth and religions are the teachings about this natural truth. Please don't confuse this or mix them up.

Religion is something that is everywhere. Wherever you go in the world, you can find religion. However, Dhamma is understood in only a few places. This is one of the differences between Dhamma and religion. However, things are improving. People, more people are understanding Dhamma so this is good. Please do your best to keep distinguish the two – Dhamma and religion.

Dhamma is the thing that will solve problems. Dhamma is that, which will end the problem of suffering. Religion is just the teachings about this Dhamma which will end all problems. This is the difference. You, most of all, of course need to be interested in Dhamma itself. If, instead, we are interested just in religion, it may distract us from the actual Dhamma which is what will solve our problems.

Let's now take a look at religion – the teachings about the Dhamma, the natural truth. Each religion begins with a founder, a great person who had profound insight into reality and then from the different founders, arise different religions. There are two basic kinds of religions in the world. We can distinguish them in two basic ways: one are the religions of relying upon oneself; and second is relying on others. So relying on oneself is one way, relying on the others is the other type of religion.

This has to do with how the founders saw things in the time and place where they lived and taught. They looked at people then and there and saw what would appropriate for them. So some taught in a way of relying upon oneself while other's taught relied on others. This depended on the needs and background of the people in each time and place. So in this way, we now have in the world two basic kinds of religion – the religion of relying on oneself and the religion of relying on others.

From childhood, we've lived in this world depending on others, relying upon others. From childhood up until adulthood, we are constantly relying upon others. So a religion of depending on others, is something that is very familiar with most people. It is easy for the majority of people to accept because they already have an inclination in this way and they are seeing it as being positive.

The other form of religion of depending on oneself, this seems to the ordinary person as being negative and so they may not be so in favor of it and it is much harder for the average person to follow the religion of depending on oneself.

In fact, however, it's very important that you will be most careful and take a good look and see which kind of religion is appropriate for you yourself. Now when it comes to Buddhism, a fundamental principle of Buddhism is relying upon oneself. This is most basic and absolute in Buddhism that one must depend on oneself. So in coming here, you should be aware of this in advance that you will be hearing about the Dhamma which is for relying upon oneself, for helping oneself rather than asking others to help us.

Further, another thing to consider is the matter of belief. Buddhism is also very clear on the point that one is not to believe others. In Buddhism there is no need for faith in others whether in our friends or teachers or books or gods or whatever. Buddhism teaches that one must have faith in oneself. That is, the only true thing to believe is what one sees for oneself – to see the causes and results of things clearly for oneself. That is where we put our faith in Buddhism. This makes Buddhism perfectly democratic because in Buddhism we don't even have to believe the Buddha. Instead we believe what we see for ourselves through our own insight and understanding. So in Buddhism, there is no believing in others. There is no relying in others. We rely upon ourselves, help ourselves and believe in ourselves.

This then leads to two kinds of gods or two kinds of gods in religion – the religion of relying upon others naturally have a god that is a person, that is conceived as in personal terms, someone who we pray to and worship and beg to or plead to – 'please help us.' This is one sort of god.

The other kind of religion of relying upon oneself, has a different god – a god which is not a person – a non-personal god. This god of the religion of the self-reliance is in fact is not a person. It is a law. When we hear the word 'God,' we think of a Thai word *got* which means 'law.' This, in Buddhism, is 'God' – the fundamental and absolute universal law of nature, the absolute truth of nature, of reality. This is the god of Buddhism. So we should learn to tell the difference between the personal god who we pray to and ask for help from and the god of Buddhism which is the fundamental law of nature.

So this leads to two kinds of prayer. Each kind of religion has its own characteristic form of prayer. The religion that relies upon others and has a god – a personal god, in this, the form of prayer is to ask for help. 'Please help me! Please help me!' The other form of religion also has prayer but it is a different form of prayer. In the religion of relying upon oneself then the prayer takes the form of effort, of trying to do one's best, always striving to do one's best, to become better, to understand things for oneself, to help oneself. This is how prayer is in the religion that has no personal god but has a god which is the law of nature.

When you come here and join this course, what you are doing is coming to learn about the prayer, the form of prayer for worshipping or for praying to the impersonal god – the law of nature which is no person or individual. So we come here then to learn how to pray in this way. This will require that you pay careful attention, that you try to the best of your abilities to understand and put into practice the things you will be hearing about, praying to the impersonal god. So please listen carefully as we continue and talk about meditation and related subjects.

In Buddhism, there is no dogmatic system. If it is presented in this way, then it is presented improperly. In Buddhism rather, there is just the call to study nature, to pointing to nature and encouraging us to investigate it in order to see the truth of nature for ourselves. In Buddhism, this is discussed in terms of what we call ‘dependent origination’ which is the explanation of how *dukkha*, how inner suffering arises. In Buddhism then, we are asked to investigate the reality of nature – of nature which we are a part and then through seeing, to look deeply into reality then through looking, seeing it, once we have seen what is happening then we practice accordingly. This is how it is in Buddhism.

So the Buddhism is a religion where belief comes after wisdom. Wisdom is the understanding that comes when we see things directly for ourselves. There are other religions in which faith or belief comes before understanding, but in Buddhism one is asked to believe only in what one sees and knows directly for oneself. So this means that, here, our way of practice begins with learning about the law of nature. We learn about, we study the law of nature in order to understand how things work in this natural world of ours. This is the first thing. Then we practice. Practice is not to learn so much through hearing or even thinking but practice is to learn by doing and experiencing for oneself.

Here is the first aspect of learning about the law of nature, we do by studying the law of dependent origination which we will discuss further. Once there is enough understanding of this law of nature then we are able to practice. So we will also talk about and investigate the practice of mindfulness with breathing. Studying the law of nature enables us to understand how things work in this world. Practicing mindfulness with breathing will develop the mind so that the mind is able to practice according to the law of nature. We may understand the law but not have the ability to follow it. So we must train the mind with mindfulness with breathing in order to practice and live according to the law of nature so that we live without any inner suffering, without any mental pain.

The law of nature which we call *paṭiccasamuppāda* or ‘dependent origination,’ this is the heart and essence of Buddhism. This is absolutely crucial and vital in Buddhism to the point that the Buddha said,

“Whoever sees paṭiccasamuppāda, sees me. Whoever sees me, sees the law of dependent origination. Anyone who does not see this law of dependent origination, doesn’t see me, doesn’t see the Buddha, and has nothing to do with the Buddha.”

So to have any clue of what the Buddha is, one must see the law of dependent origination. This is how important it is in Buddhism.

The fact that all of us have problems in our lives, the fact that we have suffering, pain and all kinds of little internal conflicts, tensions and turmoils, this shows that we do not understand dependent origination. All of these forms of dukkha happen to us because we lack the understanding of dependent origination. When we do not understand the law of nature then there is no way that we can live correctly. We do not live in harmony with nature and its law, and this discord or lack of harmony leads to all forms of suffering, of inner pain. So it is important to give, to summon our abilities and concentrate them as best as we can on a study of dependent origination that is thorough, clear, profound so that we have some understanding then of how to live our lives without suffering.

We have eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind and these senses of ours are receiving, are experiencing objects in the world constantly. When we experience the objects of the world, if we do so without adequate understanding of the dependent origination then it becomes suffering. We turn our experience into suffering and inner pain if we lack this necessary understanding of the law of nature. If, however, as we experience sights, sounds, smells, taste, touches, and mental phenomena, if we experience these things with sufficient understanding of dependent origination then our experience will not become suffering. It will not be painful. So it is imperative to study this matter thoroughly so that we can live in this world and experience this world without suffering.

The Buddha declared and insisted that happiness and suffering do not occur due to old *karma* – that is actions in past life. The Buddha insisted that happiness and suffering of this life is not dependent upon actions in past life. Further, he insisted that happiness and suffering in this life is not determined by *Īsvara*. *Īsvara* has the meaning of ‘God.’ This was the word in the Buddhist time for god. The Buddha said that our happiness and suffering are not determined or created by god. Instead, he said, happiness and suffering here and now in this life occur depending on whether we act correctly or incorrectly regarding the

law of nature. Only this determines whether there is happiness or suffering in our lives.

When all happiness and suffering in this life depends on how we act in terms of this law of nature, the law of dependent origination, then we'd better do our best to understand this. Please don't think that it is just something to play with; that it is something for intellectual games or for argument or so on. Please don't think that it is dry and boring or anything like that. Instead, please come to appreciate – look at it and see its importance in our lives so that you are all able to study it adequately, so that you are equipped with an understanding of the law of nature that will enable you to live rightly, in harmony with this law. This law of dependent origination is the heart of Buddhism – understanding it is necessary to understand Buddhism. And further, it is the heart of the law of nature or of Dhamma. This law of dependent origination is the essence of Dhamma. So it is worthy of all the attention and investigative powers that we can bring to it.

We should tell you in advance the essential meaning of dependent origination so that you have a chance to begin understanding it right away. The essence of *paṭiccasamuppāda* is that we have eyes and in the world there are visual objects. When the eye and a visual object are sight, interact, they will arise eye consciousness which is consciousness of the object depending upon the eye – the sense organ of the eye. These three things together, the eye, the object and the eye consciousness are called 'contact' or in this case 'eye contact.' The same thing happens for the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind sense organ.

At this moment of contact, when the eye, the object and consciousness work together, this is where we need our understanding of dependent origination. If we understand dependent origination at this moment of contact where we and the world meet and interact, this will happen without suffering. The experience will not be a problem. However, if we lack this understanding of dependent origination, there will arise an ignorant feeling towards this contact. We feel about it in an ignorant way. This will lead to foolish, blind desire. This desire will then be the basis for attachment which is deluded thinking that ends up thinking '*I am,*' '*I exist,*' '*this is mine.*' When there is this existence of the ego, of the self then it grasps onto things in the world and takes them to be '*mine.*' And in this way, life is turned into suffering. This is what will happen if we experience things – if contact occurs without an adequate understanding of dependent origination.

Now, even if we understand this law of nature, we may not always be able to practice according to it. Although we have the understanding, we may not

have the ability to stop the flow of dependent origination and so then our suffering will still arise. For this reason then, we need a way of practice to develop the ability, to practice according to this understanding. We need a way of practice that relates to the body; that enables us to understand and master the body, to understand and govern the feelings of pleasure, displeasure and in-between feelings which arise from our experiences. We need to understand and master the mind which is that which leads or orders the body. And then we need to understand the facts of nature which are related to the body and mind. *Ānāpānasati* (mindfulness with breathing) is a way of practice which will lead to developing these abilities regarding the body, feelings, mind, and natural facts so that we then have the ability to practice correctly in line with the law of dependent origination. So then we will match understanding with ability and can therefore live without suffering.

So we would like to stress to you again that although you may understand dependent origination, if you cannot control your mind then you will not be able to practice correctly, you will not be able to put this understanding into effect or at least you can only do so partially. So it is very important to practice until you can master the mind so that then, not only will there be the understanding, but we can put that understanding into practice perfectly, completely, when we can control the mind. So please do your best to practice and able to control the mind, to order and discipline the mind; only then we will be able to put our understanding of dependent origination into practice fully. Please be most interested in this practice.

To explain in brief what mindfulness with breathing is about, the first thing that we need to know about and master is the body. We need to be able to master these bodies so that they are fit and appropriate for our practicing according the law of nature. However, it is not possible to control the body directly, so what we do is we learn to use the breathing to master the body. The body is dependent upon the breathing and so the breathing can be used to govern and regulate these bodies in order to have bodies that are fit and ready for further development and practice. This means the body which is calm and cool. This is the body that is appropriate to be a foundation for a mind that is calm, cool, and able to understand on a deeper level.

The second thing are the feelings. This world of ours is full of feelings. The world is full of things which cause feelings for us or which are the source of feelings. Without feeling, it would be as if the world did not exist for us. Now, feelings are crucial because everything in the world is experienced with feeling. Sometimes the feeling is pleasant. It feels good. Sometimes it is unpleasant or dissatisfying and sometimes there are kind of middling sort of feeling which is not quite pleasant but it is not quite unpleasant. These kinds of feelings can be

very powerful. If we do not understand them, then they will lead to all kinds of thoughts and these thoughts will tend to be foolish if not downright stupid. And these stupid thoughts can get us into all sorts of problems. So first of all, we need to understand the feelings – what they are, how they occur and what influence they have upon the mind. But again, understanding them is not enough. We need also to be able to control them. We must train the ability to master the feelings. This means, when certain feelings arise, to not think in certain ways – in certain harmful ways, to train the mind to be able to think in beneficial ways, no matter what the feelings, or to not think at all. To train the mind in this way then to have an understanding of and then to develop the ability to control the feeling will prevent the feelings from causing us any problems. When we can do this, it is to have mastery over the world, to master the feelings is to master the world because all things in the world can enslave us due to the feelings that come with things. This is the second part of our practice of meditation.

The third thing to work with is the mind. So here we study the mind until we understand it in all its aspects and conditions. We study this mind until we have a thorough and subtle knowledge of all the forms and shapes the mind can take. Once there is this understanding then we train the ability to master the mind. We learn to make the mind, to put the mind in whatever state or condition we wish. We can train the mind to be delighted, to be glad and joyful no matter what the situations, to immediately make the mind joyful. This is one way of training it. Another way is to make the mind firm, to collect it so that it is absolutely stable and unshakable. This is another way of training the mind. And further we train the mind to let go. We train it so that it is free of all things, so that it is not enslaved or attached to anything. So we study the mind to understand it and then we train it in order to master it in these ways. This is the third aspect of practicing mindfulness with breathing.

When we speak about the firm, stable mind, there is a special meaning here which you need to understand. This firm mind has three aspects of quality. The first is that it is perfectly clean. It is pure. There is nothing dirtying it or messing it up in the least. Then its energy is gathered together, collected, and focused into a single point. And then this mind is perfectly active. It is perfectly ready to do whatever needs to be done. It is the mind that is absolutely ready to perform its duty. These three qualities of cleanliness, of being focused onto a single point, and of active readiness are the qualities of the firm, stable mind. Although this is something most important, you probably will not be able to train this ability within a mere ten days. So please use this opportunity to get the information you need about how to practice. Please use this opportunity to develop an understanding of how to practice so that even after the ten days are over, you can continue practicing until one day you are able to do this. Please

do not get frustrated by judging yourself or having unrealistic expectations. In ten days, it is probably not possible to be able to do this. But you can learn how and you can begin to practice doing so. So that when you leave in ten days, you will take with you an adequate understanding about how to train and control the mind. Please understand this properly so that you can avoid wasting your time with frustration, with judging yourself and other useless states of mind.

The fourth aspect of this practice has to do with Dhamma. Dhamma here means ‘the law of nature’ or the law of the reality of nature, we call this ‘Dhamma’ or ‘Dharma.’ This is something that we must understand. However, it is not something that we can control. Rather, we control ourselves so that through understanding Dhamma (the law of nature), to control ourselves so that we act in harmony with it, so we behave correctly in line with the law of nature’s reality. This is the fourth aspect of this kind of meditation.

The law of nature is just like god or like the way they talk about god – meaning we cannot control this law of nature. Rather, it is something to be seen and understood. And then we use that understanding to control ourselves so that we act rightly towards this law of nature. So it is important for us to study carefully this law and to see it deeply as it works within us so that we start to act in line with this law. We cannot control it but we can be in harmony with it. We can act correctly as it dictates for us.

This law of nature, this reality of nature is to be seen as it is. This means seeing the constant change and impermanence of everything in the world, to see the quality of painfulness in all these changing things. And then to see the fact that all these painful and impermanent things are not-I and not-mine. These facts of nature – these three facts cause people to cry constantly. People are whining and mourning and crying because they do not see these truths and so their life is full of suffering to the degree that there are many people who’ve even gone and killed themselves because they have not understood the truth of life. However, if we understand these basic facts of impermanence, painfulness and not-I, not-mine then there is no need to cry. There is no need to suffer and surely there is no need to kill ourselves.

Understanding these truths of nature helps us to recover from our stupidity. When we do not see things as they are, this is a stupidity. But as we start to see and understand the facts of life then we can overcome, we can recover from our foolishness. When we are not foolish then we stop grasping at things in the world. We stop clutching at them as ourselves or as our possessions. So by replacing foolishness with wisdom, specially the understanding of impermanence, painfulness and not-self, not-I, not-mine, in this way we overcome our stupidity. Then we are above all suffering. Our minds are raised

above any possibility of suffering again. For this, we need to take ourselves as the lesson. You cannot go and learning this in someone else. We take ourselves as the lesson. We need to look carefully that, right now, what am I attaching to? What am I grasping at? Right now, what am I thinking of? To be aware as clearly as we can at this moment – what am I attaching to? And seeing that this attachment causes conflict and suffering. If we can study this within ourselves, we have the means to get free of future suffering.

We need to look at this though only within ourselves.

Please look and see most clearly that when we attach to anything then we are the slave of that thing. We are like this, day-in and day-out without any break or a gap, constantly attaching and clinging to things. We cling to positive things in order to love them. We cling to negative things in order to hate them. And so constantly, day-in and day-out, we are creating suffering for ourselves. Look until you see this most clearly.

Forgive us for saying so but now the whole world is talking about a stupid kind of freedom. They are talking about freedom but it is an upside down freedom. They don't know about and so they don't say anything about true freedom.

When we love something then we are the slave of it. When we hate something then we are the slave of it. When we are angry at something then we are its slave. When we are excited about something then we are its slave. So all the things that are involved in our lives, we become slaves to them in this way. And when we are slaves like this from minute to minute, there is no genuine freedom.

Finally, what is most ridiculous, excuse us for saying so, what is actually quite insane is that we are the slave of ourselves or even slaves to ourselves. We attach to the self. So there is no freedom left at all because of the insanity of clinging to self. There is not even the least bit of freedom remaining.

When we are foolish regarding these things then our life bites us. Our own life chews on us and bites us because we are stupid about these things. We lack true freedom in our lives and there is way too much suffering in our lives because of our foolishness, because of our lack of wisdom regarding these things.

In fact, it is worse than stupid. It is more than crazy. This – being a slave to oneself, being enslaved to the self, this is more stupid, more crazy than we can put into words. So just go off and find out the best words for it on your own and see how crazy and ridiculous this situation is.

If one practices the fourth part of mindfulness with breathing one will first understand this reality of nature, one would know the way things really are and then one will be able to live in line with these truths. Then all of these problems will disappear. All of these stupidity and craziness will disappear and there will be genuine freedom.

Let us add for those of you who are Christians or from a Christian background, please don't forget the one sentence in the Bible where God spoke directly to Adam and Eve. This one sentence is the only place in the Bible where God spoke directly to a human being and in that God warned them to not attach to the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of the Good and Evil. He warned them – *“Don't go and attaching to good and evil. If you do, you will become their slaves and then you will die.”* This one sentence in the very beginning of the Old Testament, this is not only the most profound commandment of God but it is also exactly the same as the heart of Buddhism. Those of you who are Christians or have any interest in Christianity, please don't ever overlook this most important sentence in the Christian Bible.

If one is beyond the influence of good & evil, then one is beyond all influence of positive & negative also. This means that we are thoroughly beyond the influence of anything. This means there is nothing that can enslave the mind. There is nothing anywhere that can have power over the mind and then the mind is so above things that there is no words to describe it. The mind is above being above or beyond being above everything. To be above good & evil is to be above all the pairs of opposite. This means to be beyond all duality. All the pairs such as to be beyond good & evil, to be beyond happiness & suffering, to be beyond heaven & hell, to be beyond right & wrong, to be beyond positive & negative, winning & losing, getting & losing, male & female and on and on and on – all this dualism that people believe in. In this way, the mind can be beyond them, can transcend them all.

Most important is to be above, beyond the influence and power of the defilements. It is to be beyond the influence of time which causes us so many problems. To be beyond all these preoccupations and obsessions is to be totally free, to have no more problems and to be utterly beyond all suffering. Please be most interested in this.

Look at your own life and you will see that there is not everything in your ordinary daily life that is not either positive or negative to you. Everything in your life either is positive or negative for you and so this means that you are the slave of all these things. Look at your life carefully and see how we still are unable to free ourselves from all these things that we take to be positive and negative.

Ānāpānasati has four parts. The first is to know and be able to master the body. The second is to know and be able to master the feelings. The third is to know and master the mind, and the fourth is to know, to understand and be able to master the influence of the law of nature.

You probably won't be able to finish this practice in just ten days but please do your best to understand it clearly, to know what needs to be done and how to do it so that you can continue practicing after the ten days and eventually be successful.

So please, may you, all of you consider these matters carefully and then have an appetite for studying these things carefully so that your whole day will be an intimate, subtle, sensitive and profound study of this reality.

Please have an appetite for this study and then you will find success in it and in your life.

This word 'study' in English is something that we do not exactly know what the meaning is, specially we do not know exactly how you understand the word 'study.' This is used to translate a Thai word *sueksa* or a Pāli word *sikkhā*. This is a crucial word and we would like for you to understand it the way we mean it. For us, the word 'study' or *sueksa* has a very profound meaning. It means to look oneself, to see oneself, to know oneself for and by oneself and then to practice by oneself. This is very important – study, *sueksa*, must include all of these. First we look, we look and look and look within ourselves. It is not a matter of looking outside, it is looking within. Look, look, look within until we see. We look and see and we keep seeing and seeing until the seeing becomes very firm and clear knowing. We see, we see then we know, we know and we know. From this knowing, there arises a commitment to practice. So there is this commitment, they come from understanding and then we practice according to what we have looked, seen and understood within ourselves. This is 'study.' Study, *sueksa*, for us is not a matter of reading books. It is not even a matter of listening to talks like this. This is just preparation for study. The real study is to looking within, seeing within, understanding oneself, by oneself, within oneself and then practicing according to the truth that we have seen within ourselves. We hope that this understanding of the word 'study' will be of value to you.

Please observe that even the highest level of education in this world, even the best universities or institutes in this world, that none of them are complete in terms of these four aspects of study. None of them includes all four aspects so they are all incomplete.

So let us impress upon you the fact that if you are able to study with all four of these factors, if your study includes all four of these factors then you will be

able to understand dependent origination thoroughly, profoundly, and completely. And you will be able to practice mindfulness with breathing in all its aspects successfully and in a way that is of great value and benefit to your life. So may all of you who have come here without any freedom, may you leave as people who are free. All of you who have come here as tourist, may you leave as pilgrim.

So allow us to end today's talk. We thank you for being good listeners.

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