Dhamma Questions & Responses

by Ajahn Buddhadāsa

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu (sk)

A Dhamma session offered at Suan Mokkh on 10 October 1991

In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhadāsa 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 Dhamma volunteers. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the volunteers and the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok (suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com).*

Is it possible to practice ānāpānasati *without first understanding dependent origination and the five* khandhas*? I think wisdom is developed from meditation, not from books. I do not like to read books and listen to Dhamma talks. I don't understand. Maybe it is better for me to stop practicing ānāpānasati.*

If you ask the question that way, then we will respond with another question. If that's how you feel then why bother practicing *ānāpānasati*? If that's how you feel, why are you wasting your time practicing ānāpānasati? If one is practicing ānāpānasati one ought to know why one is practicing it. If we speak about wisdom, we have to have some understanding of what wisdom is. Otherwise we don't really know what we're doing; we're not really meditating. The reason we practice ānāpānasati is in order to have a life free of *dukkha*, a life that is free of all problems. We study *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination) because it helps us to understand in the beginning what dukkha is, what our problems are, and how they happen. This is just for a start, it's not the end. But the more we understand what our problem is, the more we will understand how to meditate in order to solve the problem. So there's the understanding about what our problems are, what dukkha is, and there's the way of practice for dealing with those problems and eliminating dukkha. And so these two go together.

To put it a little more briefly, dependent origination helps us to understand ourselves, to understand our own lives, and then it shows us what we need to do

in order to solve the problem of our lives. But at this point we're still unable to solve that problem, so we must also practice ānāpānasati until we have the ability to solve the problem. So we could say that understanding dependent origination is like our map that shows us where to go, where to walk. And then ānāpānasati is walking according to the directions of the map. The two must go together; you can't have one without the other.

Your answers were ok but let's ask Ajahn Buddhadāsa about what love is.

There are two kinds of love. One kind of love is to love without understanding, to love ignorantly without knowing why one loves. The other kind of love is to love with mindfulness and wisdom – to understand deeply what it is to love and why one loves.

The first kind of love happens naturally, instinctually, and it's necessary that we pass through and experience this ordinary kind of love so that we understand what it's good for, what its difficulties are, how to love properly, and so on. It's necessary that we learn through this instinctual love a number of things. This kind of love is necessary for reproduction. It's through this ordinary kind of love that the species continuous itself.

Now this ordinary kind of love can also help us to solve social problems. With this kind of love, if it's developed on a somewhat higher level, it can enable us to solve social problems so that we can live with each other in peace. And then this love can be developed higher and higher until it's a kind of love which is beyond love – a love which is beyond the power of positive and negative. This is the kind of love which is free. The ordinary love is not free. It's under the power of love, one is still under the power of love and so there is no real freedom. But the other kind of love is free. It's beyond the power of love. Both kinds of love happen naturally according to the law of *idappaccayatā* (the law of conditionality), which means that both kinds of love arise through causes and conditions. One should understand both kinds of love, not just one.

In short, love is something which we must conquer. We should not let love defeat us but we should be able to conquer it so that love does not have any power over our hearts or minds.

You have spoken at length about using the law of nature to explain in just the five Buddhist philosophy and practices. Yet even within this impermanence that highlights the law of nature, virtually all living beings are giving individual and/or collective mechanisms for violent self-defense when attacked. How does this aspect of the law of nature relate to Buddhist ānāpānasati *and human self-defense needs?*

As we said earlier, the law of nature, that is dependent origination, helps us to know ourselves and know what the problem of *dukkha* is. And then it shows us what we must do to end dukkha. It shows us how dukkha ends. But still we can't reach this end of dukkha. And so we must practice *ānāpānasati*. Ānāpānasati is the way to develop ourselves so that we can reach the end of dukkha. When we have reached this end of dukkha then our problems are finished and there are no more problems left to worry about. And then we have received the best thing that human beings can get from life. So in short, the law of *idappaccayatā* (conditionality) or *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination) shows us what's wrong and what to do about it, and then ānāpānasati is the way to do what needs to be done until we are successful.

Because our lives are under the power of positiveness and negativeness we're always spinning around and acting according to this power of positiveness and negativeness. So there is no real freedom in our lives – and this is dukkha. This lack of freedom always at the backing call of positive and negative is dukkha. Dependent origination helps us to understand this and then shows us the way to get free to liberate ourselves from this bondage of the positive and the negative. And then we practice ānāpānasati in order to get free. So in short, what this is about is conquering the positive and the negative – conquering all problems instead of letting them conquer us and enslave us. Paṭiccasamuppāda is like the map and ānāpānasati is like the travelling. To travel you need a map, but a map without travelling is meaningless. So these go together – the map and the travelling are inseparable.

Because there are problems in life we must solve them but to solve them with violence just increases the dukkha. To have a problem in first place is dukkha and to solve it through violence just makes more dukkha. So we should learn to solve our problems without violence then we will not add to the dukkha of having problems. Now you should understand that problems are of two kinds. There are material problems and mental or spiritual problems. For example, the

animals have their material problems such as finding food and they must solve these problems to the best of their abilities. But human beings have another kind of problem which is deeper, more subtle and profound. This is a problem in the mind, a problem of understanding. Now neither of these kinds of problems should be solved with violence. If we solve both external and inner problems violently, we just create more trouble. So we should solve them with a way that is more subtle, refined so that we don't create more dukkha. We should never use violence to solve problems.

What do you do when personally faced with murder, rape, robbery, etc.?

(SK: He himself has not been personally faced with murder and rape, so I asked the question in more general terms.)

Once again problems are of two kinds. There is the more superficial, shallow kind of problem which is external and then there's the more subtle profound problem which is internal. That someone would try to kill us or rape us or something is of the first kind, the more superficial, shallow, material kind of problem. We should find the kind of knowledge and skills which will prevent such things happening to us. If we are intelligent we will live in a correct way so that these things will not encounter us. But even if they do happen to us then we will find an appropriate way so that they are no danger to us. If we have mindfulness and wisdom, if we are mindful and intelligent then we can find the kind of knowledge and skill necessary to prevent these external problems from being of any real danger to us. But then there is the inner problem, the more refined and subtle one.

When we speak of the inner problem then we can say that we are being murdered all the time, we are being constantly murdered, and we are being raped violently all the time. The criminals which are murdering us and raping us all the time are the defilements – greed, anger, and ignorance, stupidity. These defilements are murdering us and raping us all the time. This is the problem which is truly important. This is the problem that we need to solve. As far as the material external problems, these are not so difficult to solve. They can be dealt with using ordinary worldly knowledge which is quite easy to find if one looks. That's not a serious problem. The serious problem is the spiritual murder and

rape which is going on constantly in each of us. This is what we must protect against.

Once someone has achieved enlightenment what do they usually do with the rest of their life? I guess it wouldn't be their life, it would be the body's life?

This question is the same as asking, 'what does the *arahant* who has ended all *dukkha*, who has put out all the fires of greed, anger, and delusion, what does the arahant do with life?' The answer to this is quite simple. We can base it on the records of Buddhist history. Certain of the arahants, after conquering the defilements, then spend their lives travelling around sharing the Dhamma with people, teaching and spreading the Dhamma in order to help other people make an end to the defilements. Other arahants didn't go around teaching but they lived a quiet life of peace and happiness. Although they didn't teach much or at all, just their way of living, the peace and happiness of a life free of defilements was an example to others. And so although they may not open their mouths, when other people would see them, just seeing them and their happiness would encourage other people to get interested in Dhamma and living and practicing in order to have that peace and happiness. And then some arahants would help somewhat with social problems to the degree that it's appropriate for an arahant to help with social problems and also to the degree that it's possible to help. They would use their understanding of Dhamma to help address the problems of society. So it's not really a problem to ask what does an enlightened being do with their life – it's quite simple – one helps people. And there are these three ways to choose from. One is to wander spreading the Dhamma, carrying out the Buddha's wish so that people can be free of the defilements and dukkha. The second is to live a quiet simple life of peace and happiness as an example to others. And third, to the degree that it is proper for a bhikkhu or monk or nun, one helps to solve the problems of society.

But the genuine wish or intention of the Buddha was to work together to help for everyone to help each other to conquer the defilements so that there can be genuine peace in this world. The genuine intention, the true intention of the Buddha, is to dedicate one's life to bringing genuine peace in to the world.

One may accept that one is not-self and only a combination of the five khandhas. *But the same fact then also concerns other people. It is natural that you are more interested in the five khandhas in your own body than that in someone else's. Is it really logical to get rid of a self by the five khandhas? By the explanation of the five khandhas, it is not for me?*

The five *khandhas* is a way to understand oneself, to understand oneself on the physical, mental, and spiritual levels. Through understanding the five khandhas we can understand all three of these levels and how they interact or are integrated. Further, in understanding the five khandhas, we understand that these khandhas are co-dependently originated. They happen according to the law of *idappaccayatā* (the law of conditionality). They're all conditioned according to the law of conditionality, which means that they can't be controlled by us, that is by the mind. We or the mind can't control these khandhas to make them how we want them to be. Therefore all of the khandhas are not-self because they're not controllable by anything of anyone. Understanding not-self, then one no longer needs to attach to any of the khandhas or any of life as self and then there is no more *dukkha*. So we use the understanding of not-self to solve the problems of the life which is not-self. Life has always been *anattā* (not-self). But not knowing this, we create problems for life. And so we use the understanding of the five khandhas to understand that life is not-self, so that this life, this selfless life, no longer needs any problems. So this is what the five khandhas are for if we investigate it wisely. It's not just something we believe but it's something so that we can remove all dukkha from life. If one continues to live according to *attā* (self) – if one hangs on to self then life will go astray and get lost and there will be even more dukkha, more problems than we started with. Life isn't perfect when it begins and through self we make it even worse, but through understanding anattā we can free it of all problems.

We are able to use the biological or evolutionary principle of 'the fittest survive, the fittest survive'; we can use this here. We can use this principle in order to improve and develop the five khandhas so that they are truly fit, so they are most fit, which means they are appropriate, ready, proper, and fit for living in this world without dukkha. When the khandhas are the most fit, then there is survival. So we can use the understanding of the five khandhas in order to be the most fit and then we will survive.

In your last talk you said that desire creates the desirer if there is no right mindfulness. Does this mean that there is already attachment, or is attachment a later development?

You can see this for yourself quite easily. When there is hunger, then there is the hungry one, the one who hungers. Which comes first, the hunger or the one who is hungry? If you watch carefully instead of just thinking about it, but observe, you'll see. The desire happens and then the desirer – which one comes first, you ought to be able to see it for yourself. But what matters is to not let any of these problems happen. To not let the problem of hunger and the hungry one – desire and the desirer to happen in the first place. To use the most profound mindfulness, intelligence, and wisdom so that these problems don't happen to begin with, and then there is no hunger and no one who is hungry – there's no desire and no desirer – and so there's no *dukkha,* there's no problem. We live without any problems without any dukkha. In short what this means is to use mindfulness and wisdom to prevent the defilements from happening. If we prevent the defilements there's no desire and there's no hunger and so what's the problem?

The real question here is, are we able to sublimate or transform the hunger? Can we transform this hunger into a matter of wisdom? Can we transform it into the hunger for wisdom, the hunger to understand? If we can sublimate or transform desire and hunger into the direction of understanding the truth then the problem will end itself. And there won't be anymore dukkha, there won't be anymore desire or hunger.

Hunger bites its owner but mindfulness and wisdom doesn't bite its owner. So we should transform all hunger into a matter of mindfulness and wisdom so that it won't bite us anymore and then our life doesn't have any more problems.

If we hold onto something or if you want to call it 'attachment,' but it hasn't reached the level of attachment to self then it's not a problem. But when we use the word 'attachment' we're always speaking of attachment to self or what is called in the Pāli *attavādupādāna*; the *upādāna* (attachment) that makes us say 'me,' 'mine,' 'self' – the kind of attachment that leads to us talking about self to the concepts of self. Once there is attachment to self then there is the problem, then dukkha is full scale and complete. Before if there's no attachment to self,

there isn't really dukkha but still there are natural difficulties and hassles of life – of the *vedanā* and how to respond to things and so on. But the essential thing is to have the wisdom to prevent this attachment to self because that's where it really becomes a problem and dukkha. So our task is to live without this attachment to self. Another way we can speak of this is, how can life live with things that are not-self? How can life live with things that are not-self? If we understand this, then we won't have any trouble with life.

To take life as being self is instinctual. It's a kind of instinctual understanding that we see life as being self. Even though it's instinctual, it leads to the problems that we have been talking about. So we must learn to transform this instinctual understanding into wisdom, into genuine intelligence. If we can transform or even sublimate the instinct of self so that it leads to the developed wisdom of not-self, then we can bring about a reconciliation between the instincts and wisdom – they need not be in conflict but we can take that instinct of self and for self preservation and develop that so it's no longer just instinctual but it's what we call 'developed knowledge' so that we achieve the highest benefit for oneself which is to be free of all dukkha which only happens through seeing that this self is not-self, it's not really self. If we can sublimate it or transform it in this way we won't have any problems with this instinctual kind of understanding.

It's like the instincts have a self in order to attach to it, so we must improve or develop the instincts so they don't need a self to attach to until there's no self for the instincts to attach to. In this way the instincts can be developed or transformed into wisdom so that we don't have any more trouble with life. What we thought was self is seen to be not-self and then there's nothing to attach to. And not attaching to anything, there are no difficulties or hassles in life.

For instance, enlightened people are said to keep staying alive because of their commitment to help others to overcome suffering. Would this be an example of selfless attachment? Or otherwise what keeps the commitment from fading away?

The *arahant* or so called 'enlightened being' who has transcended all self doesn't have any self to attach to. For the arahant there is no self to attach to, so the arahant has no *dukkha*, has no problem. Empty or void of self, the arahant is

full of wisdom. But this doesn't erase or annihilate kindness, friendliness, and compassion. Just because there's no self doesn't mean that there is no compassion. And so when seeing that people still suffer because of attaching to self, the arahant will do what can be done to help them, to have a self which is no longer attached to as self. The arahant will help others to see for themselves that there's nothing worth attaching to self until those people have no more self to attach to and are themselves free of dukkha. So the arahant, in being void of self and free of all trouble, is full of wisdom.

If there is still attachments one cannot really love another. If there is still attachment that any love will be selfish. If one still has self then love will be tainted by this self and selfishness and one will always be trying to use love for one's personal benefit – this is unavoidable. But when there's no more attachments, when one is free of self, then love is pure and love will not be used or twisted by ego or by selfishness. So there are these two very different kinds of love – the love where there is self, where there is attachments which will always be selfish, it cannot be avoided, and then there's the love which is pure which involves no attachments and no self. So to really love someone, to really love, to really help, one must be free of attachments and self. If one is still attaching, how can one help others to not attach? If one is still attaching then our help will always be mixed up with our own personal benefit and advantage. But when one has gotten free of all self then one can truly help because there is pure love. Be very careful not to mix up genuine love with selfish love, the love of attachment.

By means of ānāpānasati, *while walking amongst the coconut trees and by regarding my physical body, I have had a strong direct experience of the impermanence and changeability of all things in the world. During this experience I was aware that the body was not my body, the experience was not mine. Just as surely I was aware of a self that was the vehicle of the experience – by this I mean 'I' was having the experience. This self was the same self that usually inhabits the body that's not my body with the same memories and personal identity. My question is this – although I understand 'not mine' I am confused by 'not-self.' So far in this course, the distinction between 'not me' and 'not mine' has not really been made – they're generally mentioned at the same time. Is it usual to experience one without the other?*

At first we are still stupid, there's a great deal of ignorance (*avijjā*). And so life is full of self –nothing but attachment, self, selfishness, and *dukkha*. But then we learn from that attachment and that dukkha and we become more intelligent until we reach a level that we've seen the hassles and troubles of a life full of self, we've seen the dukkha of all that attachment. And then we reach the level that can be called 'the self of wisdom.' At first there is just the self of ignorance or 'the stupid self.' Then we come to a level where there is the wisdom to live life correctly, and this can be called 'the wise self.' And then through living correctly further and further, we come to the stage where one sees that nothing is worth clinging to as self – there's nothing worth taking to be self or regarding as self. This can be called 'the level of the self' which is not-self. So we can repeat this again – at first there's the totally ignorant self, the self that is full of dukkha because of attaching to everything. Then there is this self which is half-wise, it has the wisdom to start living correctly in order to really develop, but there is still this feeling, this sense of being self. But then in the end, there is this self which is not-self. If we still want to call it a self we need to be clear that this is not really self, it is really not-self. You could say the self of perfect wisdom – the self which is not-self. So there's the self that's full of dukkha and ignorance, the self that's half-wise and doesn't suffer so much, and then there's the self which is not-self, the self of pure wisdom and no dukkha.

Or to put it even more simply, at first there was the self which was totally self, one hundred percent self, and then later we only had half a self, then no self at all. And when there's no self at all then we don't have to ask questions like this.

Can you explain your own experience of 'not-me'? Or is it an inference you have deduced from your experience of 'not mine'?

After we have practiced *ānāpānasati* well enough, we have the experience that all things are impermanent, have the inherent quality of *dukkha*, and are not-self. We see that every time there is the experience or feeling of self, that dukkha bites us. Seeing this, we live carefully, mindfully, not giving any opportunity for this feeling or experience of self to happen, so that it can't bite us. But even if sometimes we slip, are a little careless, or make a mistake we're

still smarter than we were before and so there is less dukkha to bite this self which is not-self.

Whenever we are careless and think or experience self, then life bites, then life is changed into a situation of biting and life bites its owner. Remember the different symptoms of life biting its owner that we mentioned earlier. Sometimes love bites, sometimes anger bites, sometimes hatred bites, sometimes fear bites, sometimes worry bites, sometimes worrying about the future or longing after the past bites, jealousy bites, envy bites, possessiveness bites. When some negative experience happens we don't want it to happen, we want to get rid of it, and that aversion bites. Positive experience happens, we want it, we desire it and that wanting and desire bites. If we understand this then there is a technique, there's a principle and a technique or a method to not let the self arise when we make contact with positive and negative experiences. And then these positive and negative experiences don't bite and life doesn't bite its owner. There's a way to do this if we are careful.

Does ānāpānasati *explore the subconscious mind in any way?*

If we have practiced *ānāpānasati* correctly, deeply, and successfully until reaching the level where we are well-versed or expert in ānāpānasati then the understanding that has been developed through this expert practice of ānāpānasati, will remain as merely subconscious understanding or experience so that whenever a situation arises in life, that understanding that has come from the practice of ānāpānasati will be available for dealing with the problem.

(SK: I have tried to keep asking the question because our usual western fascination with the subconscious doesn't interest Tan Ajahn in the theoretical way that western psychologists like to talk about. Instead he replies like this)

You should know that the subconscious has two aspects – the wholesome and the unwholesome, or the beneficial and the harmful. One can experience how the subconscious can help us and harm us. Through really practicing ānāpānasati, then one will have the deep experience of impermanence, of dukkha-ness, and not-self. And this understanding will then be subconscious so that whatever we meet in life we will know it as impermanent, being inherently dukkha and not-self. In this way this subconscious understanding or experience

will be solely beneficial. And all the harmful unwholesome aspects of the subconsciousness will be calmed away, they will disappear. So there will remain only a subconscious which is able to understand impermanence, dukkha-ness, and not-self – so it will be a beneficial subconscious.

(SK: His reply is in practical terms rather than a theoretical concept)

The unwholesome or harmful aspect of the subconscious every time it activates or functions would do something harmful or dangerous to life. It leads to life experiencing dukkha and stress and all kinds of problems. But that aspect of the subconscious which is correct, which is wholesome and beneficial, leads to dealing with life correctly and brings about a perfection of everything we need in life – not what we desire but what we need. This correct or beneficial aspect of the subconscious is called '*pāramī, pāramī,*' which means 'that which leads to perfection.' They're often translated as 'perfections' but they mean 'that which brings perfection.' The unwholesome harmful aspect of the subconscious is called the *anusaya* (defiled tendencies). You can call it a collection of evil and harmfulness, a collection of harmfulness. The other is a collection of that which is useful and healthy and beneficial. If we understand the subconscious in this way, it will make it easier for our study and practice. There is the pāramī aspect which leads to perfection of what we need and the defiled collection of unwholesome tendencies which just helps to make more problems.

Ordinary people have a subconscious which is just these defiled tendencies. I asked if he meant this one hundred percent that ordinary people have subconsciousness which are one hundred percent anusaya, and he said well that if they're one hundred percent ordinary then they have one hundred percent *anusaya*, subconsciousness. If they're totally worldly then that's all their subconscious will be.

They're always ready to love, get angry, hate, fear, be envy, jealous, worry even in their dreams.

Why do people who understand dukkha *and* attā *and dependent origination, know they should apply themselves to the Four Noble Truths and to the Eightfold or Tenfold Path and yet they don't? In other words, how does one*

explain the human tendency of irrationality in terms of dukkha and dependent origination?

It's like they've got a map, they're got the best map in the world, but they refuse to travel, they refuse to walk according to the map. Why this is so they don't know, this is hard to explain. It seems that there is still bait in the world which is tricking them. There's all kind of bait that keeps them attached to the world – wanting to have fun, wanting to be entertained, wanting to be loved, wanting to own things, wanting pleasure. The deliciousness, the pleasure, the loveliness, the creativity, the excitement of the world is a kind of bait which keeps them stuck in the world and so they have no interest in walking according to the map. But once they see how this bait just makes them stupid and keeps them wallowing in *dukkha*, then they begin to practice *ānāpānasati*. And if they practice seriously and correctly they can overcome the alluring qualities of all that bait.

All they know is the name of dukkha. They know the name of dukkha, they can say the word, the sound, but they don't know the dukkha itself. They don't know the reality of dukkha and so they don't despise and fear dukkha. And if they don't despise and fear dukkha they're not going to put any effort into practice in order to get free of dukkha. But once one knows dukkha itself, the reality of dukkha, then one will despise it, one will be disgusted by it, and one will be terribly afraid of it, and then one will practice very seriously to get free of dukkha. Once you really hate and fear it, you won't mess around and play any more games with it.

You need to recognize that dukkha comes in both forms – there are the positive forms of dukkha and the negative forms of dukkha. You probably only pay much attention to the negative kinds of dukkha. It is easy to hate and fear the negative forms of dukkha. But most people don't give any attention to the positive forms. People are still infatuated with things, they still want to have fun with things – with the positive forms of dukkha. They even volunteer, people are totally willing to experience the dukkha of positive things because they're so infatuated and obsessed with these things. The primary example of this is sex. Sex is so very positive for people and so they're very willing to experience the dukkha of sex because of this positiveness. But once we see that even in the positiveness there is dukkha, there is entrapment, there is slavery, there is stupidity, then one begins to despise and fear even the positive kinds of dukkha. And then one can begin to get free of those things and no longer be infatuated

and obsessed with them. So remember that there's not just the negative dukkha like physical pain or illness or not getting what you want and so on, but there's the positive dukkha of being obsessed of good health, with the dukkha of getting what you want, and the dukkha of sex.

When a fish is caught on a hook it knows that the hook is painful, it knows the dukkha of being caught on the hook. But we're not as intelligent as the fish. This hook that we're caught on, we're dangling and wiggling from this hook, but we think it's fun, we think it's entertaining, exciting, beautiful, wonderful. And so we don't hate or fear the hook. In fact we seek it out and we pay lots of money to get hooked. The fish isn't like that, it knows that the hook is dukkha, it hates and fears the hook but we're not like that. We have no hate or fear for the hook. And so we continue to dangle and wiggle from the hook.

So last of all thank you. Time is up for this morning. We'd like to thank you for coming here with your interest in Dhamma, which gives this place value. Suan Mokkh is only of value and our life is only of value here when people come to study and investigate the Dhamma. So we thank you for making this place and our life worthwhile. That's all for this morning.

• • • • • • • •

Transcribed by Tripur Manandhar (*tripur7@gmail.com*) in 2015
Proofed by Bill Weir (*arizonahandbook@yahoo.com*) in Dec. 2016
Audio files: 5125341010040.mp3 & 1991-10 (4) Dhamma Questions and Responses.mp3