

Right Here in the Heart

Venerable Ācariya Mahā Boowa's Dhamma Talk given on the 16th of January, 1976

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When you listen to a sermon, pay close attention to your heart, for that's where the Dhamma lies – in the heart. At first, before I had practised, I didn't believe that the Dhamma lay with the heart. "How could that be?" I thought. "The Dhamma comes with making an effort in the heart. That sounds better than saying the Dhamma lies with the heart."

"The Dhamma lies with the heart. The Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha lie in the heart. All *dhammas* lie in the heart." I didn't believe this. All 84,000 sections of the Dhamma lie in the texts – that's how I felt at first. But as I kept listening to my teachers explain things, none of them ever deviated from this point: "The Dhamma lies in the heart. The Dhamma lies with the heart." As I kept listening to this, my mind gradually settled down and grew still.

At first, whenever I'd listen to a sermon, I'd focus my attention on the speaker, instead of keeping it focused on myself. "Don't focus your attention outside," they'd say. "Keep conscious of what's going on inside yourself. The Dhamma being explained will come in and make contact with you on its own." I wouldn't listen to this. I kept focusing my attention on the speaker. In fact, I'd even want to watch his face as he talked. It got to the point where if I didn't watch his face, didn't watch his mouth as he talked, I didn't feel right. That's how I was at the beginning.

But as time passed, I came to find that stillness would appear in my heart while I was listening to the Dhamma. That's when I began to believe: "The Dhamma of concentration does lie right here in the heart." I began to have a witness – myself. So from that point on, I wouldn't send my attention anywhere outside while listening to a sermon. I wouldn't even send it to the speaker, because I was absorbed in the stillness in my heart. My heart would grow still as I listened – cool, calm, and absorbed. This made me believe: "They're right. The Dhamma does lie with the heart!"

That's when I began to believe this – when the Dhamma of concentration, mental stillness, and calm appeared in my heart as I listened to the Dhamma. This was what made me want to keep on listening as a means of stilling and calming the heart.

As time passed and I continued my meditation, then whatever results would appear as I practised sitting or walking meditation, they would all appear in the heart. They didn't appear anywhere else. When the mind wasn't still, then whatever was getting me all worked up was there in the heart. I'd know: "Today my heart doesn't feel right." It would be distracted and restless in line with its moods. "Eh? Why is it that my heart doesn't feel right today?" This made me interested from another angle. I'd try my best to calm the heart down. As soon as it got back into place with its meditation, it would settle down and be still. This made the point very clear – Dhamma does lie in the heart.

The world lies in the heart. The Dhamma lies in the heart. For this reason, when you listen to a sermon you should keep your attention focused right inside yourself. There's no need to send it outside – to have anything to do with the person speaking, for instance. When you keep your awareness focused inside yourself this way, the Dhamma being explained will come in and make contact with your awareness.

The heart is what is aware. When the current of sound dealing with the Dhamma comes in and makes continual contact with the heart, the heart won't have any chance to go slipping outside, because the Dhamma is something calming and absorbing. This moment, that moment, it keeps you absorbed from moment to moment with the current of sound coming from the speaker. Step after step, it keeps making contact. The heart gradually becomes more and more quiet, more and more still. This way you already start seeing the rewards that come from listening.

This is why, if you want to listen to the Dhamma in the right way for getting clear results, you have to keep your attention focused firmly inside yourself. There's no need to send it outside, and no need to engage in a lot of thinking while you're listening. Simply let the mind follow along with the current of Dhamma being explained, and the Dhamma will seep into your heart. When the mind doesn't get itself worked up with thoughts about various things, it becomes still; that's all there is to it. But to grow still, it needs something to counteract its thoughts. It won't settle down on its own simply because you want it to. You have to use one 'Dhamma theme' or another, or else the sound of Dhamma while a sermon is going on. Only then can it grow still.

Where is the greatest turmoil in the world? There's no greater turmoil than the one in the heart. If we talk about things murky and turbid, there's nothing more murky and turbid than the heart. There's nothing at all that can compare with the heart in being troubled and pained. Even fire, which is said to be hot, isn't nearly as hot as the heart aflame with the power of defilement.

Defilements do nothing but make us suffer, step after step. This is why we're taught to see their harm, to be intent on keeping mindfulness established, and to investigate things from various angles. When mindfulness and awareness keep in touch with each other, then our practice of concentration and our investigation of things from the various angles of wisdom keep getting results – stillness and deft strategies – step by step.

For example, the Buddha teaches us: “Birth is suffering. Death is suffering. These are Noble Truths.” Birth is suffering but we're pleased by birth. When a child is born, we're happy. When a grandchild is born, when our friends and relatives have children, we're happy. We don't think of the pain and suffering the child goes through, surviving almost certain death in that narrow passage before being born.

If we don't look at both the beginning point – birth – and the endpoint – death – so as to see them clearly, both these points will cause us unending joy and sorrow. Actually, the child has to survive almost certain death before it can become a human being. If it doesn't survive, it dies right then – either in the womb or in the moment of birth – because it's pained to the point of death. That's how we human beings die. Once we're born, then no matter what our age, we have to be pained to the point of death before we can die.

Pain is something we've experienced from the moment of birth, but we don't see it as a Noble Truth. Actually, it's something we should see as harmful, as dangerous and threatening, so that we can find a way to get past and go beyond it through our own efforts – and especially through the efforts of our mindfulness and wisdom. When we enjoy the beginning but dislike the end – when we like birth but dislike death – we're contradicting ourselves all the time. And where can we get any happiness with these contradictions in the heart? They have to make us suffer. There are no two ways about it.

So in order to put the beginning and end in line with each other, we have to contemplate the entire course of events – to see that birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, death is suffering – for these are all an affair of suffering and discontent. They're the path followed by suffering and discontent, not the path to *nibbāna*, and we cannot progress until we have them thoroughly understood through our skill in contemplating and investigating them. The Buddha teaches:

dukkham natthi ajātassa

“There is no suffering for those without birth”

When there's no birth, where will there be any suffering? When there are no seeds for birth, there are simply no seeds for suffering, so there is no suffering in the heart. This is why Enlightened Ones (*Arahants*) have no feelings of discontent or pain in their hearts. They have no moods in their hearts at all. There are no happy, sad, or indifferent moods in the heart of an Arahant.

We're the only ones with feelings in our bodies and hearts. Arahants have all three kinds of feelings in their bodies: they feel physical pain just like we do, but their hearts have no moods. The three kinds of physical feelings can't have any effect on their hearts. Their hearts aren't swayed by influences the way ordinary hearts are. They know pleasure, pain, and neutral feeling in their bodies, but there are no moods in their hearts – because they have gone beyond moods, which are all an affair of conventional truth. Their hearts are pure, unadulterated Dhamma and nothing can infiltrate their hearts at all. Feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither-pleasure-nor-pain are all impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self – and so can't possibly get involved with the nature of a pure heart at all.

If you want your heart to prosper and grow, try to develop inner goodness and worth. Don't let yourself lapse in generosity and virtue. These are good qualities for nourishing your heart and connecting up with good states of rebirth. If you have a good foundation of inner worth as your sustenance, then no matter where you're reborn, that goodness will have to stick close to you so that you can look forward to a good destination.

As long as we haven't yet gained release from suffering, we're taught to exert ourselves and not to be lazy or complacent. If we're able to meditate so as to inspect our hearts – which are full of all kinds of discontent – then we should keep right at it. Polish the heart every day. Polish it every day. When the heart is polished every day, it's bound to shine. And when the heart is shining, you're bound to see your reflection, just as when water is clear you can see clearly whatever plants or animals are there in the water.

Once the heart⁸ is still, you'll be able to see whatever poisons or dangers it contains much more easily than when it's murky and turbulent with all its various preoccupations, defilements and effluents. This

⁸ The word heart in the context of this chapter refers to the "*citta*", which is the underlying essence of mind that manifests as feeling, memory, thought, and consciousness. The *citta* is that fundamental quality of knowing in the heart upon which everything else is based. *Citta* is referred to as heart because the experience of those who are skilled in meditation is that the incoming sensations appear to "gravitate" to the heart, so it is from here that the manifestations of the *citta* appear to spring forth.

is why we're taught to purify the heart. In the teachings gathered in the *Pāṭimokkha* exhortation, we're taught:

*“Never doing any evil,
fully developing skilfulness,
cleansing the heart until it is pure:
These are the Buddhas' teachings.”*

This is what all the Buddhas teach, without exception. Whatever is evil or debasing they tell us not to do, telling us instead to do only things that are skilful, through the power of our own wisdom. This is what 'fully developing skilfulness' means: fully developing wisdom.

Cleansing the heart until it is pure is something hard to do, but it lies within our capacity as human beings to do it. The Buddha went through hardships, his disciples went through hardships, all those who have reached purity have had to go through hardships, but these were hardships for the sake of purity and release – as opposed to going down in failure – which is what makes them worth going through.

The heart, when it's overcome with dirt and defilement, does not seem to have any value at all. Even we can find fault with ourselves. We may decide that we'd rather put an end to it all. This is because we're so disgusted and fed up with life that we're ashamed to show our face to the world. And all of this is because the heart is very murky and dark, to the point where it becomes a smouldering fire.

Life doesn't seem worth living when the heart is so dark, because things that are dark and worthless have overwhelmed it. We can't find any real worth to the heart at all, which is why we think it would be better to die. But where will we get anything 'better' or 'good' after we die? Even in the present, nothing is any good. If things got better with death, the world has had people dying a long time now, so why isn't it any better than it is? There's no good in us – that's why we want to die. Once the heart is good though, it has no problem with life or death, because it's already good. Why does the heart seem so thoroughly worthless when it's overcome by worthless things?

When we wash these things away, step by step, the heart gradually starts showing some of its inner radiance. It starts growing peaceful and calm. The entire heart becomes radiant. Happy. Relaxed. Whatever we do – sitting, standing, walking, lying down or whatever work we do – we're happy with the pleasure that has appeared in the heart.

When the heart is peaceful and calm, then wherever we are, we're content. The important point lies with the heart. If the heart isn't any

good, then no matter where we are, nothing is any good at all. We keep fooling ourselves: “Over here might be good. Over there might be good. This lifetime is no good. The next lifetime will be better. Living is no good. Dying would be better.” We keep fooling ourselves. The troubled part of the mind – that’s what fools us. The part that’s stirred up with its various issues – that’s what fools us. “This will be good . . . That will be good,” but it’s no good at all. No matter where we go, we end up the same as where we started – because this part is no good. We have to straighten it out and make it good through our own efforts.

Try to investigate and eliminate it by making a persistent effort. Practice concentration so that the heart can be still. Constrain the heart at that point where you are practising concentration. The time when you’re constraining the heart and training it to meditate is not the time to let it go wandering as it likes. We call this making an effort, being persistent – making a persistent effort to straighten out the heart and uproot its enemies, until the heart can grow still. The heart grows still because our efforts force it to, not because we let it go wandering as it likes. This is when we see the rewards or the value of our efforts, because the heart has been brought to stillness through our efforts and stays that way through our efforts, step after step. The value of effort becomes more and more apparent, in line with the worth of the heart which appears as the result of that effort.

So. When the time comes to investigate in terms of wisdom, focus on investigating so as to see things clearly. Contemplate everything in the world so as to see it in line with its truth. The world may be infinitely wide, but when the heart is obscured by defilements, we’re caught in the most narrow and confining thing there is. It’s confining right here. Whether you sit or lie down, there’s no comfort at all. Wherever you go there’s no comfort, because the heart is confined. It weighs on itself. So open it up right where it’s confining and give it space to blossom and be bright. It’ll then feel free, calm and at ease.

This is the point where you can investigate discontent and pain, because the mind now has the strength to investigate. It’s ready and willing to investigate because pain is a whetstone for sharpening wisdom. Concentration and wisdom are what we use to slash defilements and mental effluents away. Wisdom is what uproots them, but concentration is what first catches them and ties them down. Concentration stills the heart and gathers it into one so that it doesn’t get scattered around to the point where you can’t even catch hold of it. Once the heart is gathered into one, wisdom opens it up and unravels it to see clearly where its concerns and attachments lie – with sights, sounds, smells, tastes,

and tactile sensations, or with form, feelings, memory, thought, and consciousness. Wisdom takes these things apart to see them in thorough detail, in line with their truth as it actually is.

Wisdom contemplates these things and investigates them, over and over again. These are the points where it travels. These are its whetstones. The more it investigates them, the more it branches out, step by step, understanding things for what they are and letting them go. Letting them go means putting down the burdens that weigh on the heart under the sway of attachment.

What is the mind thinking about? What good does it get from its thoughts? The moment a thought forms, it ceases. A good thought? It forms and ceases. A bad thought? It forms and ceases. Whatever the thought, it forms and ceases. These are called thought-formations. *They form. They arise. They cease.* Their forming and ceasing happen together. They arise and cease in the same instant. So how can we attach any sense of self to these things – to this arising-ceasing, arising-ceasing?

Investigate pain, which is something we all fear. Everyone fears the word ‘*pain*’, so how can we hold onto it as us or ours? Are you going to persist in holding to this mass of pain as you? To hold to it as your ‘self’ is to hold onto fire to burn the heart. Know pain simply as pain. What knows the pain isn’t the pain. It’s the heart. The heart is what knows all about the pain. When pain arises, the heart knows. When pain remains, the heart knows. When the pain ceases, the heart knows. It knows through its wisdom. Wisdom sees clearly, distinctly, that pain is pain, and what knows is what knows.

Memory. However much we can recognise and give meaning to things, we forget it all. If we want to remember, we have to recognise and give meaning again. The mind establishes a meaning that then ceases in the same instant. Can this be our ‘self’? We recognise the meaning, and then it ceases, ceases, ceases, arises and ceases, arises and ceases like everything else. Can this sort of thing be our ‘self’? Can this sort of thing be ours? If it’s us, if it’s ours, then we’re wriggling all the time because of memory and pain. Memory arises and ceases. Pain arises and ceases, arises and ceases, giving us trouble and turmoil without let-up, without stop. This is why we have to investigate so as to see those conditions – the factors of body and mind (*khandhas*) – that arise and cease all around us, all around the heart.

Consciousness: How long have we been conscious of sights and sounds? Ever since birth. And what lasting worth have we ever gained from these things? As soon as we’re conscious of anything by way of the

eye, ear, nose, tongue, or body – Blip! – it ceases in the same instant, the very same instant. So what lasting worth can you get from it? Nothing at all. Can sights be our ‘self’? Can sounds? Can smells, tastes, tactile sensations be our ‘self’? Consciousness – acknowledging whatever makes contact – can this be our ‘self’? It acknowledges – Blip! Blip! Blip! – and immediately ceases. Immediately ceases. Can this be our ‘self’? There’s no way it can be.

How can we hold to this arising and immediate ceasing as our ‘self’? How can we put our trust in these things? They arise and cease, arise and cease. Are we going to persist in holding to this arising and ceasing as our ‘self’? If so, we’re in a turmoil all day long because these things are arising and ceasing all the time! No matter whether they are form or feeling – pleasure, pain or indifference – memory, thought, or consciousness, they’re constantly arising and ceasing, each and every one of them. So how can we grab onto them as us or ours even though we know full well that they arise and cease? This is why we have to use wisdom to investigate them so as to see clearly what they really are and to let them go for what they are.

What knows doesn’t cease. The true heart – what knows – doesn’t cease. It knows whatever ceases, but “that which knows” doesn’t cease. All that ceases is what appears and ceases in line with its own affairs. Form, feelings, memory, thought and consciousness for example – these are all natural conditions that come under the three characteristics.

The three characteristics are impermanence, discontent, and not-self. How can we hold to things of this sort as us or ours? If we investigate into their causes and effects using our mindfulness and wisdom, there is no way we can hold onto them. Only when our defilements are thick, and the heart hasn’t investigated – and doesn’t know what’s what – can we be deluded into becoming attached. Once we’ve investigated so as to see these things for what they really are, the heart lets go of its own accord.

When the time comes to go into battle – *when the time comes to die* – take these things as your battlefield. In particular, feelings of pain will stand out more than anything else when things start to break apart. Take pain and the heart as your battlefield. Investigate them so as to see their truth. No matter how great the pain may be, it doesn’t go past death. Pain goes only as far as death. The body and *khandhas* go only as far as death, but the heart doesn’t go only as far as death. It goes past death, because the heart has never died. It lies above all these things. Pain is pain only as far as death. It doesn’t go past it. No matter what feelings

arise, they go only as far as their ceasing, and that's all. Whether they're very painful or only a little painful, the heart keeps knowing, knowing at all times.

When there's mindfulness, the heart keeps knowing each stage of the pains that appear. What knows doesn't cease, so why should we be worried and concerned about pains, which aren't us or ours. They're just conditions that arise. They depend on the heart for their arising, but they aren't the heart. They depend on the body for their arising, but they aren't the body. They're just feelings. Pain, for instance, is something different, something separate from the body and heart. That's its pure, unadulterated truth.

If we don't try to go against the truth, the heart can reach peace through its investigation of pain, especially at the last stage which is the break-up of the body. Give it your all! You can see what ceases first and what ceases after because what knows will keep on knowing. Even when everything else has ceased, what knows still won't cease.

This is our investigation. All it takes is for you to see causes and effects in this way just once, and your courage in the face of these things will spring right into action. When death comes, you'll immediately take a fighting stance. You'll take your stance as a warrior going into the battle between the *khandhas* and the heart. You'll investigate, using your wisdom. You'll take mindfulness and wisdom as your weapons in slashing down to the truth. And when you've slashed everything down, where will you end up? Right there with the truth.

Use your mindfulness and wisdom to slash down to the truth of everything of every sort. *When you reach the truth, everything will be levelled. Everything will be still. Nothing will be left to disturb the heart. If anything is still disturbing the heart, that means you haven't investigated fully down to its truth.* Once you've reached the full truth in every way, there's nothing that can disturb or provoke or incite or jab at the heart at all. There's nothing but a state of truth penetrating everywhere. This is called being levelled and made still by the truth, which comes through the power of mindfulness and wisdom investigating to see things clearly.

Right here is where the Buddha and his Arahant disciples, all those who have gone beyond suffering and discontent, have gone beyond – right where suffering and discontent exist. And where do they exist? In this body, these *khandhas*, this heart. When we take things apart, we take them apart right here. When we know, we know right here – right where we were deluded. Wherever we don't know, mindfulness and wisdom – our tools for slashing our way into the truth – will make us

know. There's nothing to equal mindfulness and wisdom in breaking through to the endpoint of all phenomena, in washing away all defilements and absolutely eliminating them from the heart. They are thus the most up-to-date tools for dealing with defilements and mental effluents of every sort.

So put mindfulness and wisdom to use when you need them, and especially when you're about to die. There's no one else who can help you then. Even if your relatives, parents, brothers, sisters, wife, husband, children are all thronging around you, none of them can really help you. Everything depends on you. As the Buddha says: "The self is its own mainstay." Realise this in full measure! What can you do to be your own mainstay and not your own enemy? If you bring out nothing but weakness, confusion, and lack of wisdom, you're being your own enemy. If you use mindfulness, discernment, conviction, persistence, and courage in line with the principles taught by the Buddha, investigating down to the causes and effects and the facts of all the conditions of nature, that's when you're truly your own mainstay.

So find yourself a mainstay. Where can you find it? "I go to the Buddha for refuge." This reverberates throughout the heart and nowhere else. "I go to the Dhamma for refuge" reverberates through the heart. "I go to the Sangha for refuge" reverberates through one and the same heart. The heart is their vessel. The Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha are all gathered into this one heart because the heart is the most appropriate vessel for all *dhammas*. Get so that you see this – and especially so that you see that the whole heart is the Dhamma in full.

So cleanse your heart. If you can make it gain release at that point, so much the better. You won't know where to ask about the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. You won't ask – for you'll have no doubts. You'll simply look at the knowingness showing its absolute fullness inside you and know that what that is, is what they are. The Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha are all one Dhamma – one single, solid Dhamma.

These are the results of the practice of eliminating our defilements and mental effluents from the very beginning, when the heart had no worth, since it was filled with nothing but the excrement of greed, hate, and delusion. Wash away that excrement by using the principles of the Dhamma. When it's all gone, the heart will become Dhamma. Once it's Dhamma, it's infinitely at ease. Wherever you go, you're at ease.

"*Nibbāna* is the ultimate void." Whatever is annihilated in that void, this is where you'll know. Whatever is still there, this is also where you'll know. Who can know this better than one without defilements? – for

the Buddha, in saying that *Nibbāna* is the ultimate void, was speaking from his absolute freedom from defilement. He said this from having seen *Nibbāna*. But we haven't seen it yet. No matter how much we repeat his words, we just stay where we are. Investigate so that you truly see it. The saying "*Nibbāna* is the ultimate void" will no longer be any problem, because it will be fully clear to the heart what is annihilated and what's not.

"*Nibbāna* is the ultimate happiness." Listen! *The ultimate happiness here isn't a feeling of pleasure or happiness. Instead, it's the happiness that comes with the absolute purity of the heart, with no arising or ceasing like our feelings of pleasure and pain.* This has nothing to do with the three characteristics. The ultimate happiness as a constant feature of the pure heart has absolutely nothing to do with the three characteristics, nothing at all to do with impermanence, discontent, and not-self – it doesn't change, it always stays just as it is.

The Buddha says *Nibbāna* is constant. What's constant? The pure heart and nothing else, that's what's constant. Get so that you see it, get so that you know.

