

Medicine for the Mind

Venerable Ācariya Mahā Boowa's Dhamma Talk given on the 13th of December, 1975

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This world of ours – no matter how hot and feverish it may get – still has the teachings of the religion as its medicine. At the very least, it has the religion as its medicine so that there's a way to relieve its sufferings to some extent. Just like a disease – no matter how serious it may get, if there's medicine to treat it we can gain at least some relief, unlike a disease we let run at its own rate without using any kind of medicine to treat it.

If the hearts of the world – our hearts – take their orders from nothing but defilements and suffering, then no matter what our race, class, or nationality we won't be able to find any happiness or peace in the world at all, because our hearts have no teachings of the religion to give them relief.

The phrase “teachings of the religion” means teachings that adhere to the principle of cause and effect. In its most basic sense, the word ‘religion’ means cause and effect put together. To believe in the religion means to believe in the correct principles of cause and effect, and not to resist them. If we practice in line with these principles, there will be a way to reduce the suffering and discontentment of the world, both within and without.

People who don't have any religion lurking within them – no matter where they live, no matter how well-educated or how wealthy they may be – can't find any happiness in which to set down the burdens of their hearts for even a moment because they have no place to set them down. And where could they set them down? All they have are their defilements, which are masses of flame. All they have are their unlimited desires, wanting things to happen in line with their hopes. Each of their desires creates suffering and discontent which then turns around to burn them. But for the most part they don't get to meet with the things they want, and instead keep meeting with things they don't want. This is where the power of defilements leads the beings of the world.

But if we let the power of cause and effect – the power of the Dhamma – take the lead, then even though we meet with some pain and difficulties in going against the defilements as we follow the way of

reason, the results when they appear still give us enough happiness and pleasure to relax and unwind our sufferings. This is why the religion is an extremely essential teaching for the hearts of the world. In particular, we as human beings – who are more intelligent than the other beings of the world – should have the teachings of the religion as a treasure to adorn and protect our thoughts, words, and deeds to make the various aspects of our behaviour beautiful to the eye and cooling to the heart, both individually and on the level of society at large.

The religion is an offshoot of pure Dhamma. It branches off from the superlative Dhamma – the marvellous Dhamma discovered by the Buddha – and takes the form of a prescription that says, “Do this . . . Don’t do that,” and so forth, so that we can follow it and not be at odds with the Dhamma of the correct and admirable path. Once we trust the principle of cause and effect, then no matter how difficult the path may be we give it our best, even when it goes against the grain. Actually, when it goes against the grain that means it goes against the defilements, which are the enemies of the Dhamma. In other words, we go against the grain so as to do those things that are in keeping with the Dhamma. The heart gives the orders, so happiness, peace, and calm are results we’re bound to receive.

I’ll give you an example: Suppose you think about something today that gets you all worked up and upset. Your entire heart becomes a mass of flame. This is especially true if it is something that has really annoyed you and made you indignant. The mind gets wrapped up in the things that annoy it and make it upset. Day and night, sitting, standing, walking, and lying down, you won’t let them go. You take them, instead of your meditation object, as your preoccupation, so how can the result be happiness? It has to be fire, burning continuously – because the matter itself is fire, and your thoughts about it are fire, so how can you expect them to result in any ‘water’ at all? They’ll have to result in more fire, there are no two ways about it. The more you persist in dwelling on them, the more you damage your own heart. The final result is that you can’t eat or sleep and hardly have enough presence of mind to put a stop to yourself. There are not just a few cases where people go crazy this way, destroyed by the things they think about.

What causes this destruction? The affairs of defilements, not the affairs of Dhamma. For this reason, when you resist thinking about bad things like these, when you block your trains of thought with mindfulness and break them off with wisdom – even though it’s difficult and goes against the grain – the results you can expect are mental peace, or

at least enough mindfulness to contemplate the proper path to follow. You can evaluate what's right and what's wrong concerning the topic you've been thinking about and can see why you felt compelled to think about it in the first place. *"You know it's no good, so why think about it? Can't you straighten yourself out for your own good?"*

This is how reason – the principle of cause and effect – deals with the matter. All its deliberations are for the sake of seeing the harm of those preoccupations because suffering and discontent are already clearly obvious in your heart which is so hot and troubled, and they come from your thoughts about that topic. "If you persist in dwelling on it any further, what's going to happen to you? As it is, the suffering is already blatant. If you keep thinking in that way, won't it grow until it overflows your heart? How will you be able to hold up under its weight? If you keep thinking in that way, the suffering will just keep growing and growing, and where will you get the strength to withstand the suffering you keep churning out with your thoughts about the things that have you so upset? Are you still going to keep thinking about them? Are you still going to keep piling more and more suffering on yourself?"

Just being able to think in this way is enough to bring the mind to its senses. And as soon as the mind comes to its senses, it can begin to calm down and rein itself in. It can try to let go of that preoccupation by using reason to push itself away and bring its thought processes under control. The suffering that resulted from those thoughts will also be brought under control, because the causes – those hot, burning thoughts – have been curbed. The fact that you're able to curb them is because mindfulness has reined them in. This is enough to show that your ability to resist those thoughts with mindfulness and evaluate them with wisdom, to whatever extent you can, gives these sorts of results – calm and peace in the heart. And at this point, the suffering is curbed and disappears.

Even though the heart may be difficult to restrain, difficult to control, we should try to think up strategies for unburdening it in this way. Admittedly this is difficult, but it's a difficulty of the right path, for it results in well-being and happiness. The affair is no longer troubling and upsetting; our sufferings stop piling on. We have a chance to relax, to unburden ourselves of our burning embers – the suffering and discontentment in the heart. This is one principle we can use in evaluating all the bad things that come our way.

For example, suppose that people curse you or spread gossip about you. You don't know how many days, how many months ago that curse

or that gossip passed through their lips and out of their memory, but you find out about it today and immediately get upset. Actually, you don't know how many months or years ago the breath with which they cursed you or gossiped about you passed through their lips, but now a new breath passes through somebody else's lips and into your ears: "They said this about you ... Mr. X and Ms. Y said these awful things about you." This second breath is the one you grab onto to burn yourself for no good reason at all. This is because of your own wrong assumptions. If that second person hadn't told you, your heart would have been fine, perfectly fine, even though those other people actually said those things about you. At the time it happened, you didn't feel anything at all, because your heart hadn't stirred itself up to be aware of those things. Your mind was in its normal state and so no pain or distress affected it in any way.

If we're mindful and people say these sort of things we immediately realise that there's nothing good about the matter, so why should we grab hold of it to burden and dirty up the mind? We've already had experience with dirty things, haven't we? Even when we walk along a road and come across something dirty, we give it a wide berth. We don't want to touch it, not even with the sole of our foot, because we know that there's nothing good about it. If we go touching it, we're sure to get dirty too. So why is it that we like to let the mind roll around in things we know are dirty? Why do we like to mess with them and think about them? To let ourselves get all worked up over things like this to the point where the entire mind gets dirty, the entire mind is set on fire, isn't proper at all!

When we think in this way, we can put a stop to those thoughts and concerns. The moment we start thinking about them again, mindfulness is there – quick and alert – so that we can let them go, instead of holding onto them to burn the heart again and again.

All that I've discussed so far is a principle of Dhamma for protecting yourself, for looking after yourself. If you use this method as a staple medicine in all your activities, your mind can keep its equilibrium and will rarely ever harm itself with the things that make contact through your senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Even if the thoughts that arise exclusively in the mind disturb you with bad things from the past, or whatever else makes contact, you'll be able to shake them off immediately because mindfulness and wisdom are right there with the heart. As soon as you put them to use, you get immediate results.

The only problem is when we completely forget about our protectors

— mindfulness and wisdom — and let bad things come in and trample our hearts so that we have to endure the resulting pain. If we could admit to the fact that the suffering comes from our own stupidity and heedlessness, there would be no need to complain about it. But the fact is that people all over the world complain. Why? Because they don't want to suffer. If they don't want to suffer, then why do they keep thinking in ways that lead to suffering? Why do they persist in thinking about them? Because they aren't alert to what's happening inside themselves. When this is the case, what can they use to be alert to these things? They have to use mindfulness and wisdom, so that they can be up on events and not at a total loss, so that they can hold on to at least something for themselves in the beginning stages of the practice. Eventually they'll be up on events in every case, able to attack and win in every manoeuvre.

When we deal with ourselves in line with the principles of the religion, this is how we have to do it. If all of us in the world used reason as our guide, in both our internal and external affairs, we all would evaluate, understand, and avoid anything that posed dangers to ourselves individually or to the common good. We wouldn't persist in destroying ourselves and others by flirting recklessly with those dangers. As for that which would be of benefit to ourselves and the common good, we'd try to think up ways to produce those benefits. The whole world would prosper and flourish and we'd all be happy and at peace. When we take the principles of the religion as our guide, they lead us in the direction of peace through correct practice in line with the principle of cause and effect, which is a universal principle leading to the prosperity of the world.

This is why the religion is something essential for enabling us to live together. Here I'm talking about our life together in the present. Even in the present we can be happy and secure, free from trouble and turmoil in body and mind. If the religion spreads out through society so that each person feels this way, the world can be at peace.

When we turn to consider the future of the mind — when it holds to reason as its basic principle, when it has Dhamma within it, what trouble can come to it? From where? After all, the mind itself is what produces its own troubles. If it doesn't produce any and if it has the Dhamma as its protection, then no matter what world the mind goes to after death, there will be no suffering or trouble that can come to oppress it at all.

The principles of the Dhamma teach that a mind with inner quality and worth is bound not to be reborn in a place where it will meet with

suffering and pain, because it doesn't have any of the sort of *kamma* (*karma*) that can force it to go there. All it has is the goodness – the inner quality – that will support it and convey it to good destinations, one after another. That's what its future holds in store.

A person who practices the Dhamma, who has Dhamma in the heart, is far different from one without any Dhamma. Even though they both may live in the same world and have the same sort of appearance, the differences in their knowledge, thoughts, views and actions grow greater and greater, so there is no way they can expect to receive similar results. The results must differ just like the causes. This has been true from time immemorial.

This is why the Buddha said: “*Kamma* is what differentiates beings, such as the base and the refined.” These differences don't come from anything outside of *kamma*, which is why *kamma* is the biggest issue facing the beings of the world. Why is it big? Because each of us is constantly creating *kamma*. Even if we don't think that we're creating it, the good and bad results that come from our *kamma* – from each of our actions – can't be stopped as long as we're still creating it.

What is *kamma*? The word *kamma* means action. It's a neutral term. Our thoughts are called mental *kamma*; our words, verbal *kamma*; our deeds, bodily *kamma*. In each of these cases, we are the ones who constantly give rise to these things, so how can we expect to prevent their results from following as good and evil? And as we are constantly producing good and evil, the phenomena we produce come to wield power over our hearts and can support them or force them to be born and live in any place on any level of existence at all. There's no power acting over and beyond the results – termed *vipāka* – of the *kamma* we ourselves have made. *There's no power greater than the results of our own actions.* These results are what help us or oppress us after the *kamma* has been done.

This is what the principles of the religion teach. They don't have us believe in anything outside of the good and bad activity of our thoughts, words, and deeds, called *kamma*. This is where our insurance, our guarantee lies. So this, and only this, is what can either destroy or help us. Nothing else can destroy or help us at all.

Our bad thoughts, words, and deeds are the means by which we destroy ourselves. Our good thoughts, words, and deeds are the means by which we help and foster ourselves. The way which we can ensure that we won't fall into undesirable situations lies here, and only here – in the principle of *kamma*. There's no power higher than this, which is why we shouldn't harbour unreasonable fears about this or that. Otherwise we'll

end up like the rabbit who thought the sky was falling – even though we say we follow the Buddha, the model of insight and wisdom.

The things we should fear most are any thoughts, words, and deeds which create dangers for us. We should realise that the true danger is what's coming out in our thoughts, words, and deeds right now. If we aren't willing to come to our senses and straighten ourselves out, these acts will constitute the most serious danger we face, not only now but on into the future, until the *kamma* we've done reaches the end of its power and efficacy. That's when the danger and suffering will end.

If we believe in the religion, we have to believe in the principle of *kamma* and the results that spring from it. Is there anyone among us who has gone beyond creating *kamma*? No one at all. Each of us has to create *kamma*. Whether or not we believe in the religion, we're all creating *kamma*. It is a principle of the nature of action inherent within us, a principle of cause and effect correctly taught by the Buddha when he said that all of us have our *kamma*. *We can believe this or not as we like, but that has no power to erase the truth of kamma.* There is no way that either *kamma* or its results can be erased. *Kamma* has to remain as *kamma* and give good or bad results throughout each lifetime. There's no power above the *kamma* and its *vipāka* – its results – which come from our own good and bad actions. So we shouldn't harbour blind and unreasonable fears. *If you're afraid of hell, you should be afraid of the pit you're digging right now in your heart. That's the important one, the real pit of hell!*

The factor that causes the fires of hell to burn you is right there in your heart. So come to your senses and use mindfulness to focus on – and wisdom to investigate and straighten out – the tools of your mind that are either thinking wrongly and creating danger or else thinking rightly and creating inner quality within your heart. Make your choices here and follow them through carefully so that there will be no more dangers for you or any of the other beings of the world.

So then. Is or isn't the religion a necessity? Right here is where we should decide. The person who taught us the religion – the Buddha – fully knew the ways of *kamma* and its results. There's no way you can dispute with him. He knew everything of every sort concerning his own *kamma* and that of other living beings, as well as the results of his own *kamma* and that of all living beings throughout the three levels of the cosmos. There's no one else who can even try to reach the full extent of his knowledge of *kamma*. This is why he proclaimed these truths for us to hear so that we can conduct ourselves without error – unless of course we go against his teachings by doing things that are bad, so that

the results end up going against our wishes and lead to disappointment and suffering. Right here is where the basic principle lies.

Which is why I said: *If we in the world have the teachings of the religion in our hearts, then even if we meet with sufferings large and small, we'll have a place to put them down.* It's comparable to a disease. If we can treat it with medicine, instead of simply letting it follow the full course of its strength, there's a chance for us to recover.

