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Hunger for Dhamma. (1979)

Good people, all those interested in the Dhamma. This discourse, given during the Visakapuja season, will be the ninth in the series devoted to those ‘important things that we tend to overlook.’ Today’s subject will be ‘Dhammakamayata,’ or ‘hunger for Dhamma.’

We’ve already looked at some of the things we tend to miss, if we’ve absorbed all of that we’ll know that overlooking things that we shouldn’t is dangerous, impeding, as it does, our progress in the Dhamma so that we don’t get the benefit we should.

At this time we’ll take a look at the Pali word ‘Dhammakamayata.’

Dhammakamayata means ‘hunger for the Dhamma.’ The Dhamma being, until some great change takes place in our lives, something we tend to miss out on. We should, therefore, forge a clear and sufficient understanding of this particular form of hunger so that any change that occurs turns out to be wholesome and desirable, turns out to be the right one.

So, ‘dhammakamayata’ hunger, or desire for Dhamma, or, expanding the meaning a little, having an inclination towards Dhamma, having a mind which has developed an appetite for Dhamma.

We should take some time and observe, investigate ourselves to see if we have this hunger.

Now, this hunger can occur on the intellectual, or ‘pariyati’ level, on the practical, or ‘patibati’ level, and on the insight, or ‘pativedi’ level.

When we make the effort and study, when we inquire, memorize, etc. in order to learn about the Dhamma that’s hunger for the Dhamma on the intellectual, the pariyati level. On the practical, the patibati level this hunger reveals itself as the desire to practise, as the strong desire to practise, that now being something one likes to do.

Going on from that there’s desire for the fruit, or results, of practice, which is hunger for Dhamma on the insight, or pativedi level.

Experiencing success from Dhamma practice even on the base level means peace, happiness, and a cooled mind, as it does on higher levels too, until there’s the realization of the path, its fruit, and nibbana. If there’s this hunger for the results of practice then there’s hunger for Dhamma on the high level, on the level of pativedi.

So, hunger for the Dhamma occurs on all three levels: pariyati, the intellectual, patibati, the practical, and pativedi, the level of realization.

Now, suppose that a monk or novice monk makes the effort to study for the examinations, studies the Pali language and willingly goes without sleep while doing so. Does this reveal hunger for Dhamma on the intellectual level? I say not. The monk or novice in this instance isn’t hungry for pariyatidhamma itself, they’re hungry for the results of the subsequent examinations, and the sleepless nights spent studying were for that, for the acquisition of tangible, materially desirable results. Hence there’s no real hunger for the Dhamma here. If

there really was it would reveal itself as a pure desire to know the Dhamma intellectually truly and completely.

Now, there are those people, even lay-followers, who are good talkers. Such people will go anywhere to talk about the Dhamma. They'll make the effort and go and ask this or that person what this or that dhamma is all about, and be quite ready to put up with any inconvenience in order to learn so that they can then show off their knowledge. That can't be called hunger for the Dhamma either. Anyone motivated by a pure desire to know and who's willing to travel in order to learn is one who hungers for Dhamma on the level of pariyati.

Now, practice: practising sila, practising sati, mindfulness, practising techniques for the development of samadhi, practising for the arising of panna, of true knowledge - anyone approaching these forms of practice with the hunger to become someone special, someone who has power, who has wonderful abilities, practising this, practising that for worldly and not for Dhammic reasons, might, in the end, go mad, that being a possible result of not feeling the right kind of desire. One such, even though they try and try, won't have any real hunger for Dhamma.

Now, pativedi, or realization, is the fruit, or result arising from practice, especially the realization of magga, the path, its fruit, or results, and nibbana. People generally, in this day and age probably won't understand any of that because they won't have the hunger, or desire for it. If anyone does hunger, does desire, it will probably be for what's in fashion, for what's currently thought to be good, elevated, noble, sublime, and not for what really is so.

Many people will go for the fashionable version of nibbana, while those who hunger for the real thing will be hard to find. That's because people generally are stuck, are sunk in the world, stuck in the delicious, the delightful, the fun, which they think produces a more satisfying experience than simple nibbana. It may be that when they say 'nibbana' they mean the pleasant, the fun, the stimulating, delightful, delicious experiences people crave and hope to experience over and over again, which is a pity.

We should be aware that the necessity of having the right kind of hunger for Dhamma tends to get overlooked so doesn't form any part of our study and practice. But we, if we want to be really successful, should feel desire for Dhamma in much the same way that we feel desire for food, or feel thirst for water.

If we don't feel hunger for the Dhamma it won't become a part of our lives, with the result that, in this human world, there won't be any Dhamma. If mankind doesn't want Dhamma there won't be any Dhamma practice, so no development of pariyati, patibati, or pativedi, which it's really the duty of all people to take up.

We want to encourage people to understand and to want that hunger for Dhamma. It's not beyond our capabilities. If we're to become truly human it will be because we do have a real desire, a genuine hunger for Dhamma, for that which will make us more human, then we can seek out the required knowledge and the method, the necessary way of life that will fulfill the desire.

I'd like to make it known that this kind of hunger is based on an instinct that all living beings have, that is, on an instinctual desire for the good, for that which is right and proper. This subject now drifting into biological areas it would need to be looked at from a biological

point of view, which would involve a lot of science and be beyond the scope of this study at this time, so suffice it to say that, according to theory, all living things have several types of instincts, from the instinct for survival, to the instinct to seek sustenance, to defend, to procreate, and so on, all of which are quite normal, quite natural, that is, there's no need for anyone to teach them to us. What we need at this time is an instinctual desire for what is good and right.

Believe it or not living things come equipped with an instinctual desire for the good. Briefly, that called evolution implies a continual development into something better, or higher. There's some unknown factor involved which causes that desire to arise from which something new and different will eventually emerge, as when, over a long, long period of time, an aquatic creature might develop into a land animal.

It's by desire, the desire to be better, that aquatic creatures come onto dry land, that they become amphibians. Those creatures, wanting to be better still, might then become land-animals and dwell only on dry land. Then, desiring, perhaps, to be even better, they might evolve into creatures capable of flight.

That profound feeling, manifesting as the desire to be better, we call 'evolution,' which essentially, is desire for the good.

Even in baser things, things which operate in other ways, that is, in plants, trees, etc. all will harbour a desire to survive, to seek sustenance, to procreate the species, hence they don't escape desire to be better either. So it seems that evolution, as regards plants and trees, also involves desire for the good.

Do we see this instinctual business? If we do then we might bet on it being desire for the highest good, that is, the aforementioned hunger for the Dhamma.

This instinctual desire for what's good can be recognized in dogs, in cats, in chickens, etc. where it can be seen that it's not just a desire for sustenance, for food, it's a desire for what is good, for what will be better.

This desire for the good is easily seen in people, after all it's a basic instinct: everybody wants the 'good,' it just depends on how the word 'good' gets defined. Bad people want to do bad things, that being 'good' for them, while a Pandit will want the good as it's defined by Pandits. Both, however, aim for the good.

Some desire the 'good' that comes from stealing, from taking another person's possessions, hence, what constitutes the 'good' will be different for different people.

We, whether we like it or not, have this instinct, so we should try to improve it, develop it into something higher, more beneficial.

To sum up: Hunger for the Dhamma isn't something strange, something wonderful, something beyond our reach, it exists in all living things, but in an elementary form so that it can't be immediately identified as hunger for the Dhamma. Originally it's there as the seed from which hunger for the Dhamma might later grow.

Now, people in this day and age, do they hunger for the Dhamma? People do have this instinctual desire for the good, but how and in what way is it going to evolve?

At this time the minds of people tend towards desire for those delicious, delightful experiences available through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and the mind. Why? It's because we've become very good at producing the things that lure, entice the mind more and more into mental lowness, into infatuation with the stimulating, and from almost the time we're born until the time that we die.

If we compare the present day with the Buddha's time we'll have to say that in the Buddha's time the production of those things wasn't what it is today. Then, things, food, clothing, dwellings, utensils, etc. were produced in a more natural-seeming manner, there wasn't the endless stream of stimulation available that there is now.

And, importantly, the culture of that time encouraged people to get involved, to take an interest in Dhamma, and to avoid over-indulgence in the material.

People, these days, sink into the material, into the delicious, the stimulating, without pause, so that they never feel boredom with, or dispassion towards such experiences. They maintain their infatuation until the day they die and get put into a box, hence there never is any hunger for the Dhamma, or, if there is, it's so small as to be almost non-existent.

Consider those people we think of as being fortunate. Such are happy, delighted with their heaps of money, of gold, of the things that maintain and please them. Such people won't feel any hunger for the Dhamma because the sensual has dominated their minds so much and for so long that there's not enough time left for it to develop before they die and go rot in a coffin. People these days hunger only for sensual delight, they don't feel any hunger for Dhamma. It's easy to see that this is what prevents sila, proper moral behaviour, from developing, from making a comeback. Sila is deteriorating, not re-generating, the time is upon us when the human world is being overwhelmed by the lure of the sensual. This because we're in the grip of those things and experiences that deceive, intoxicate, and inebriate, hence there's ongoing progress in their creation, while human culture in its decent mode is on the way out.

In ancient times there was a culture both in the home and outside it of venerating the Dhamma, of worshipping god, of respecting religion, now that culture has been so overtaken by materialism that it's almost disappeared. Children don't get the sort of training that would lead them to hunger for Dhamma, so they hunger after the delightful, after the material, the shallow, instead.

I heard on the news, and also read in a newspaper a few days ago something which was disturbing: A doctor had conducted a survey of the mental attitudes of a group of female college students, the results of which revealed that around ninety percent of them found the doctrine of free love acceptable.

This is alarming: it seems that there are those who would govern, control carnality, and those who would allow it free rein, which way should we go? Those who thought that free love was appropriate for today's world amounted to ninety percent of those students interviewed.

And, when a further examination was made as to how far this had gone, fifty percent admitted to having had the full experience - out of the ninety percent who were in favour, fifty percent admitted to having had full experience.

This is how those female students surveyed felt. Some of the female youth of today, it seems, are willing to worship at the altar of carnality, to admit the doctrine of free love.

When this is the case how can there be any hunger for Dhamma? People who let themselves go to this extent, who worship carnality are more than one hundred percent negligent as people. What will they be like in the future? Because they're so careless, daring to pursue the doctrine of free love, how can they turn into good parents?

In mentioning this we want to point out, again, that progress in the creation of those things which promote and facilitate this form of behaviour has been very great so that people in this world have turned to the worship of carnality, of sensuality. How, then, can there be any hunger for Dhamma?

When this is the case what should we do?

What can we do to help our children develop an inclination towards the Dhamma, to feel hunger for Dhamma, as was the case in the past when both Dhamma and morality still prospered.

It's easy to see that this will depend on the parents, on whether the parents know the Dhamma or not, on whether they themselves have any hunger for Dhamma. If the parents still have this hunger then it won't be hard to cultivate it in their children. Should parents, even unintentionally, encourage their children to live in this way it would mean that there was a family culture of keeping with the good and avoiding the bad, of fearing wrong-doing and of being willing to do the right thing, which would inevitably bring their children into contact with the feelings called 'hiri' and 'ottappa.'

'Hiri' is to be ashamed of doing wrong, to dislike evil, while 'ottappa' manifests as fear of wrongdoing, fear of that which is evil.

If there is the environment and training so that children know hiri and ottappa, so that they have the feeling of being shamed by, of being afraid of wrongdoing imbedded into their minds, then they'd possess the seed from which hunger for the Dhamma could begin to grow. Children are born without any knowledge of good or bad, of the defiled or the clean, hence, when small, they might, for instance, play around with their feces. Subsequently the parents or the nurse will plant the necessary dislike, telling them that such things are dirty so that the children come to avoid, cease to play around with such things. On the Dhamma level it works in much the same way, in that the parents need to instill feelings of disgust towards wrongdoing generally so that the children come to avoid it.

This dislike of wrongdoing we call 'hiri,' which increases to become the fear we call 'ottappa.' Wrongdoing is dangerous and to be feared, in the same way that a child, once equipped with the knowledge, will fear a poisonous critter.

Parents whose domestic behaviour is good will be able to instill hiri and ottappa in their children. They'll need to make the effort until the children know the difference between good and bad, between good and evil, and, even more so, between gain and loss.

If things are allowed to go along in the usual way children will believe that getting something is good, not getting something isn't. We have the duty of teaching them that although getting something can be good, to be so it needs to be achieved by doing good, not by doing evil.

Don't just take it that getting is always good, it needs to be the result of having done good, then it really will be good.

Losing is the same, it isn't always a bad thing, losing can be a good thing, as when, for instance, we sacrifice, or give up something beneficial for someone else's sake.

Don't let children fall into the understanding that getting is always good, losing is always bad, don't let them make that into a fixed principle of life. Teach them how to distinguish good and bad from getting and losing, because getting and losing can be understood in both ways.

Hence, let there be hunger for the Dhamma? If there were that hunger try to imagine what that would mean. A person would, for instance, operate always in the Dhamma way so would experience the fullness of Dhamma. If one loved the Dhamma then everything would flow along in the right way; as it's said: One prospers who desires the Dhamma. Because that desire, that hunger for the Dhamma would keep one on the right path one would then move through life fulfilled, contented. Being satisfied with the Dhamma there wouldn't be any desire for sensual delight because one would find their delight in the Dhamma.

People probably won't believe that the Dhamma, once attained, is a more delightful experience than anything sensual, so it's something we leave with you to ponder over.

As for me, I insist on it: Dhamma has a charm, has a delicious flavour which, if anyone should meet with it, will make one abhor and turn away from those more worldly delights and hunger for the Dhamma.

Someone who finds infatuation with the sensually delightful won't like the Dhamma; as it's also said: One who dislikes the Dhamma declines, degenerates. Because one dislikes the Dhamma one slips away from the Dhamma path, there's no Dhamma, and without rightness there must be degeneration. Hence no hunger for the Dhamma either.

Now, is there anybody in this world who hungers for Dhamma? Even you who read this, examine: do you feel hunger for the Dhamma? Does, for instance, anyone feel hunger for the Dhamma in the same way that a certain Phra Vessantara felt the hunger to give?

We may know the jataka tale concerning one Phra Vessantara. Vessantara had a hunger for giving, that is, he would sit and wait until someone came and asked for something from him. Because Vessantara hungered to give, that Jataka tale, the denouement of which we know, came to be.

Now, is there a person in this world who feels hunger for the Dhamma in the same way that Vessantara felt the hunger to give alms.

That hunger for Dhamma is rooted in and comes from an instinctual desire for the good which we can develop, can train until it comes to fulfilment.

People in the Buddha's time were into that sort of thing. It was cultural both in the home and in the community that people would seek higher and yet higher Dhamma knowledge. To feel hunger for the Dhamma was, for some, customary, a tradition. The Dhamma was revered, venerated, aspired to, and had become part of the way things were done, hence it was fairly easy for such people to attain.

To repeat: people who have a fundamental hunger for the Dhamma are those fit and ready to attain it. Hence we read in the scriptures that the Buddha, in some cases, needed to say only a few words for people to attain. Such didn't need to sit vipassana, nodding the months, the years away as with people today, rather just sitting and exchanging a few words with the Buddha allowed many to attain arahantship. It happened because they were fit, they were ready to receive, it was already much in the minds, ingrained in the behaviour of some folks from those times. Observe and compare, spot the differences between then and now and we'll know just why people in today's world find it so hard to attain the Dhamma. It's because we're not in the same place mentally as those for whom a few words with the Buddha might have been enough, now our mental life is differently based, once it was more based in hunger for the Dhamma, now it's more based in hunger for the lokiya, for the defiled, the worldly, for the sensual.

What to do? It's very difficult to get people today to turn towards the Dhamma because they're constantly being drawn after and pulled into seeking out more and more of those materially delightful experiences.

At this point we'd like to draw your attention to a word which is met with in the Pali language: 'dhammatanha.' 'Dhammatanha' means desire, or thirst, tanha, for Dhamma.

I used always to explain that if desire is of the tanha variety then it must come from avijja, from ignorance, it must be desire under the power of avijja. If, on the other hand, desire is motivated by vijja, by knowledge, by sammaditthi, right understanding, it will carry a different name.

Why are Dhamma and tanha fused together into one word? It's because even the Dhamma can be the object of foolish, blind desire. For instance: Someone might want Dhamma because it's fashionable to want it, or because of certain ambitions; they may not know the Dhamma, they just know that it's said to be good, that it's generally admired and respected. Such would have developed tanha towards the Dhamma.

I think that's still a good thing however, because it's better than not being connected to the Dhamma at all. Even liking Dhamma while still under the spell of ignorance is better than not liking it at all. Hunger for the Dhamma, although ignorantly based, can be looked on as a beginning, as a starting point, after all, everyone starts with ignorance, with that ignorance which can be gradually changed into panna, into real knowledge as time goes by, so to say.

Perhaps we seek after fortune, after rank, status, fame, our desire then is the defiled form called tanha. Later, perhaps, the time comes for us to seek change, to make our desires wise, from which time onwards we no longer act foolishly, we try not to go astray, we try to avoid becoming the slaves of money, fame and fortune, because those are still a possibility.

Dhammatanha, desire, albeit defiled, for the Dhamma. Consider, do we feel this sort of desire? Do we, for instance, want to know about Dhamma so that we can show off our knowledge, so that we can teach and make some money, so that we can gain fortune, gain rank, so that we can achieve fame? That sort of thing would still be better than having no interest at all in the Dhamma. Dhammatanha thus is useful, beneficial. Feeling tanha towards the Dhamma is better than feeling nothing at all.

When making contact with the Dhamma message some will experience dhammatanha, which will be for their benefit and happiness, because having made a connection with the Dhamma in some way then wrongdoing must diminish. Dhamma having the unchanging characteristic of being ‘just like that,’ that is, of being the ‘real,’ then, if one should make the connection they must to some extent begin to follow the Dhamma path, and finally, perhaps, meet with the full experience.

Now I want to talk about another another Dhamma word: ‘Dhammapiti.’

Dhammapiti means satisfaction, contentment in the Dhamma, feeling joyful in the Dhamma. One who doesn’t have real Dhamma knowledge cannot meet with dhammapiti. When one encounters the fruit of Dhamma realization there’s mental coolness, peace and happiness, one is then experiencing dhammapiti, and there’s satisfaction in the Dhamma to the extent that dukkha is gone. If there’s always contentment with the Dhamma there can’t be any dukkha, and even though one may be face to face with death if there’s dhammapiti there won’t be any dukkha involved.

Hence we have something which can make people interested in the Dhamma. Dhammapiti is an enjoyable, or, we could say, a delightful experience, but it’s enjoyable, delightful in the Dhamma sense. Experiencing dhammapiti one experiences the flavour of Dhamma, that is, one experiences the result of having attained to the Dhamma.

Dhamma, being free from deceptive additives, has a pure, clean, unadulterated, flavour, hence on connecting with the true Dhamma one experiences dhammapiti, feelings of purified satisfaction and the highest happiness.

Now when a person meets this true satisfaction I liken that to being married to the Dhamma. However, say this and the criticism soon arrives; criticisms come when anything different, anything which hasn’t been heard before, is said.

It’s called ‘being married to the Dhamma’ because there’s the constant maintenance of dhammapiti for one who’s met with success in the Dhamma, who’s attained to the lokuttara, to nibbana.

If someone feels true, unchanging satisfaction with the Dhamma they can be said to have ‘married the Dhamma.’ That one then dwells ‘above’ the world. The mind which can let go of the world dwells above it and attains the path, its fruit, and nibbana. Such a mind is said to be ‘married to the Dhamma.’

Another way of stating the case would be to say that one was married to sunnata. Sunnata means emptiness, so one is empty, or void - void of the feeling of being ‘me’ or of anything being ‘mine.’ Such an one is said to be married to sunnata.

Worldly people, people with much kilesa, much defilement, have the ‘me’ and ‘mine’ problem too. Both sides of the equation, both men and women, have this problem, hence they must marry, one to the other, under the power of the defilement of tanha, and under the power of ‘me’ and ‘mine.’ Tanha will cause a lot of trouble, that is, it not being pure desire, it can change and transform, hence those who marry under its influence will have many opportunities to argue, to ‘bite,’ perhaps even to kill each other.

But if it's marriage with the Dhamma, or marriage with sunnata, then it's a matter for those who've put an end to 'me' and 'mine,' and thus to the defilement of tanha. Those superficialities being completely gone then all that remains is freedom, freedom from 'me' and 'mine' for both partners, hence there's a perfect blending together with no opportunities arising for one to 'bite' the other, to dispute, to argue, or to separate, to break up. This would be the offspring of a marriage with sunnata, with voidness, or with nibbana, or with god, or, as the Hindus say, with paramatman, or, as the Chinese have it, with kevala, the ultimate, the universal one and only.

This state of grace can be accessed, but only when 'me' and 'mine' have been destroyed. Freedom from 'me' and 'mine' appears, and the ultimate, timeless, limitless freedom is experienced. Buddhists call this freedom 'nibbana.' In other systems they give it different names, they might call it 'god,' as would be their wont, but it's the highest form of happiness, one which doesn't change its character.

Some call it 'paramatman,' the great 'self,' the highest 'self,' consisting in unchanging happiness.

Or some will call it 'kevala,' the 'one,' the undivided, which is a word not applicable to this human world which is divided, splintered by us and our tanha, our defiled desires. Kevala: that highest, immutable happiness. That itself is the peak, the highest dhamma.

Our hunger for the Dhamma is a hunger for the most high, and not for anything less, a hunger for the peak, that called Dhamma.

I've spoken for, perhaps, too long a time, because in truth we just want people, our fellow human beings, to experience hunger for the Dhamma. More importantly, we want children to create, over time, the subconscious habit of feeling this hunger too. They'll have to experience the world's deceptions but give them the first inkling, give them the seed of hunger for the Dhamma, and it just might flourish, might become attainment full and complete.

Don't overlook this; overlooking things is what causes present-day humanity to be without Dhamma, to be disconnected from the Dhamma. It's because people don't want the Dhamma, because we don't feel the necessary hunger that the world cannot become a peaceful place.

It's right here: if there's hunger for the Dhamma we'll live in the Dhamma way, otherwise we won't. Don't overlook this 'hunger for the Dhamma.'

We'll stop here and give you the opportunity to chant the Dhamma and create some inspiration. May you all be energetic in practising the Dhamma to higher and higher levels until every right desire has been fulfilled.