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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa

Summary

This teaching explores and explains the vast meaning of Bhavana and its applications in different Buddhist practices. It includes some methods of developing a ‘teachable mind’, and the importance of Bhavana for practitioners to progress on the Buddha Dhamma path.

The cultivation of Bhavana also extends to develop a broad range of skills, covering everything from worldview, ethics, livelihood and Mindfulness.

The Minds of Bhavana

The word Bhavana is not exclusively a Buddhist word. A google search of the term bhavana will bring up many more hits in reference to Hindu practice and yoga than to its use in Buddha Dhamma. It’s a word that hasn’t caught on in the Western psyche in the same way as the word vipassana has, for example. Yet the word bhavana provides us with a more complete understanding of the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path than the far more popular and recognized words of mindfulness or meditation.

“Bhavana literally means ‘development’ or ‘cultivating’ or ‘producing’ in the sense of ‘calling into existence’. The word bhavana normally appears in conjunction with another word forming a compound phase such as citta-bhavana or metta-bhavana. When used on its own, bhavana signifies ‘spiritual cultivation’ generally”. 1.

From the online China Buddhist Encyclopedia, we read:

“Bhavana derives from the word Bhava meaning becoming or the subjective process of arousing mental states.

“To explain the cultural context of the historical Buddha’s employment of the term, Glenn Wallis emphasizes bhavana’s sense of cultivation.

He writes that a farmer performs bhavana when he or she prepares soil and plants a seed. Wallis infers the Buddha’s intention with this term by emphasizing the terrain and focus on farming in northern India at the time.

The term also suggests hope: no matter how fallow it has become, or damaged it may be, a field can always be cultivated – endlessly enhanced, enriched, developed – to produce a favorable and nourishing harvest.”

In the Pali Canon bhavana is often found in a compound phrase indicating intentional effort over time with respect to the development of that particular faculty.

For instance, in the Pali Canon and post-canonical literature one can find the following compounds:

- Citta-bhavana, translated as “development of mind” or “development of consciousness.”
- Kaya-bhavana, translated as ‘development of body.’”
- Metta-bhavana, translated as “cultivation” or “development of Loving-kindness.”
- Panna-bhavana, translated as “development of Wisdom” or development of understating.”
- Samatha-bhavana, translated as “development of tranquil-Wisdom.”

It means the cultivation (bhavana) of a broad range of skills, covering everything from worldview, to ethics, livelihood and Mindfulness”. 2.

Bhavana implies that the various components of Buddhist practice are working together in a balanced process, like a kind of Dhamma engine which moves our mind along the Path. We no longer practice Buddhism in an ad-hoc fashion or piece meal approach where we focus on the bits we are good at. At this point we have enough knowledge and competency in the primary tools of Buddhist practice that we use them with some level of proficiency.

Bhavana therefore relates to the real progress we can make on our spiritual journey. It implies that we are creating the ingredients for improvement over time, that our mind is being prepared for there to be a worthwhile harvest.

It is the dynamic of our skill, application and expertise as a Buddhist practitioner. Do we practice well? How do we compare in our Buddhist practice to other areas of our life that we do well in, or excel in? Surely, we wish to excel in our Buddhist practice, our bhavana?

Bhavana is about making ourselves teachable with regard to the Buddha Dhamma. Making a teachable moment for ourselves. Producing a teachable mind which can learn the Dhamma directly, each for himself or herself. Being teachable

in Buddha Dhamma means our mind can learn something which is at a higher level than what we already think we know. Where our new perceptions and insights surprise us, or at least bring something into a new perspective. This is new learning which helps. This is a characteristic of learning the Buddha Dhamma.

What is the experience of having a teachable mind like? When we are enjoying something, we have no difficulty staying awake and concentrating. Just think of reading a good book, watching a favorite video or a child playing computer games. Hours can pass quite easily with no thought of escape and without drowsiness. He or she has no doubt about the worth of the trivial experiences of play.

So, it is with bhavana, if the object of bhavana can be made interesting and the experience enjoyable, the mind will be happy and content to stay with the object of meditation for long periods of time with no difficulty. Frank recollects when he was a teenager; he had a hobby of collecting and fixing up old motorcycles. "I remember pouring over anything I could find on this topic. I read and re-read books and articles many times. I absorbed and could recall all the details, facts and features bike by bike effortlessly. My rate of learning on this topic was fabulous.

Buddhist Temples provide the right environment and support for student's minds to switch into bhavana so our Dhamma practice can become fluent and sustained. This difference in our mental state is obvious to the student. Our mind can do things easily which previously may have been a struggle. Mindfulness seems to be self-sustaining, friendliness with a smile a delight, meditation joyful.

Our best opportunity to experience this is on a bhavana course. The Blessing of practicing in a Buddha field at any living temple brings confidence to our mind, and we renew our love of the Dhamma as we more fully appreciate the present moment. This is why we see this time as particularly precious at our centre, something worth planning our life around as much as we can.

At the Buddhist Discussion Centre since the early 1980's we have run three or four Bhavana courses each year. A Bhavana course consists of a four- or five-days period when we put down our worldly activities, put down our worldly thinking, make space in our lives and minds to intensify our efforts and focus upon Bhavana practice.

This is about creating the right conditions. Firstly, the right conditions of leisure time, secondly the right environmental conditions, thirdly the right karmic conditions and finally the right mental conditions. We can relate to this simply by recollecting the farmer preparing his field. He is working to prepare himself, his equipment, his seeds and the soil itself so that so that when all the needed factors have been assembled his crop will flourish. If you know any farmers yourself, you will know clearly the analogy is not perfect. Farmers cannot control the weather; they can't control their environmental conditions. But for us the environmental conditions are provided by our Buddhist temple which offers us a suitable environment and organizes the Bhavana course for us.

It is always recommended to make a lot of merit prior to the commencement of the bhavana course so we were not too mentally dry. The merit provides us the condition of nutrient for our mind and fuel or clean energy to support our practice. Our bhavana courses ideally start with the visit of some Buddhist monks to whom we offer dana or lunch, receive Blessings from and be given a Dhamma talk. This helps students calm their mental state and tune in to the Dhamma energy of the Teacher and the Buddha Dhamma field.

Even though we may have prepared ourselves leading up to the bhavana course, it is most important to ensure that we align our agenda with the teacher's. This sometimes means dropping our own agenda at the gate. For example, to help the teacher create the right environment, take the precepts; develop Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha refuge before arriving so as not bring our worldly concerns with us. We use mindfulness to check what our agenda is and to see if it is aligned with the teacher's. What we talk about when we arrive at the centre is a good indicator of what agenda we have on top.

The activities we do on the bhavana course include for example Buddhist chanting, offerings of flowers, light, incense, and water on the altars, offering of food to the Teacher and other students, circumambulation of the temples stupa and Buddha relics, walking meditation, mindfulness, meritorious activities, listening to Dhamma Teachings and prompting wholesome mental states and activity.

Traditionally the Buddhist Pali texts teach that Bhavana comprises three main factors – sila (dana & morality), samadhi (Right Concentration) and wisdom (panna). Buddha Dhamma teaches through correct mind cultivation within the context of the Buddhist Eightfold Path, that it is possible to arrive at a view of reality based on thorough understanding of causes and effects.

Our Members are taught to develop Right View of the Five Styles of our Centre: - Friendliness, - Practicality, - Professionalism, - Cultural Adaptability and - Scholarship.

The Members we see as 'professionals' know cause and effect as supply chain management, and, over time, develop a realistic sense of becoming knowledgeable about the supply chain costs of the goods and services we dispense to Monks, Nuns and laypersons.

Professional Members at our Centre are taught to make 'many fields of merits' more valuable and greater than that field that would arise 'if all the sands in the River Ganges turned into jewels'.

A noble professional person at our Temple "pays his or her way" by raising funds within the law by using established supply chains.

This output of supply chains or getting goods allows our organization to continue to develop and supply others, by passing on goods and services freely to benefit them, that is, the practice of dana.

Students keep 5 precepts at a minimum. The keeping of five precepts in up to fifty ways is sila. On some Bhavana courses the Teachers advise additional precepts should be kept. The precept of no idle chatter for example prevents us from dissipating the clean energy and Blessings we have received and prevents our mind from forgetting what it's doing and losing its way.

To train our mind toward Samadhi requires the development of mindfulness, or sati. When you have the correct sati, you are aware from second to second what forms are happening in the present. There is no 'slipping away from' of things.

Sati is also a guardian. Because with Sati we can be mindful to guard the six sense doors and so prevent defilements from entering the mind, Sati is compared to a gatekeeper who stops thieves and robbers from entering the city.

The distinction made in modern times is that the development of tranquility (samatha-bhāvanā), leads to concentration (samādhi), and the development of insight (vipassanā-bhāvanā), leads to wisdom (paññā).

Tranquility (samatha) is the concentrated, unshaken, peaceful, and therefore undefiled state of mind, whilst insight (vipassanā) is the intuitive insight into the impermanence, misery and impersonality (anicca, dukkha, anattā) of all bodily and mental phenomena of existence, included in the 5 groups of existence, namely, corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness; (khanda).

Tranquility, or concentration of mind, according to Sankhepavannana (Commentary to Abhidhammattha-sangaha), bestows a threefold blessing: favourable rebirth, present happy life, and purity of mind which is the condition of insight. Concentration (samādhi) is the indispensable foundation and precondition of insight by purifying the mind from the 5 mental defilements or hindrances (nīvarana), whilst insight (vipassanā) produces the 4 supra mundane stages of holiness and deliverance of mind.

The Buddha therefore says: "May you develop mental concentration... for who is mentally concentrated, sees things according to reality"

In one sutta it is said: "Just as when a lighted lamp is brought into a dark chamber, the lamp-light will destroy the darkness and produce and spread the light, just so will insight, once arisen, destroy the darkness of ignorance and produce the light of knowledge."

The attainment of Samadhi in meditation is marked by entry into states of mental absorption known as jhanas. Our ordinary mind is in a mundane or worldly state, but when it is in a jhana state it is filled with Bliss and is in an unworldly state as we have let go of all attachment to the world of the 5 senses.

The jhana states are one tool of mental development. During the jhana state, mind is focused 'one-pointedly' that is, with focus and concentration, upon its object.

Jhanas are also known as states of moral consciousness because the mind is so absorbed in its object there is no room for unwholesomeness, hence no boredom.

In order to reach these states of satisfactory practice and see into reality more as it is, five hindrances must first be removed.

They are almost certain to appear when you practice bhavana.

These are:

Kamacchanda: Sensory Desire

Vyapada: Ill will

Thina-middha: Sloth and Torpor

Uddhacca-kukkucca: Restlessness and Remorse

Vicikiccha: Doubt

To be contented is to be happy simply to know what is happening in that moment, just labeling it as pleasant, unpleasant or neither unpleasant or pleasant; desirable, undesirable or neither undesirable nor desirable.

Sensory desire may be towards persons or objects.

Ill-will (Vyapada) may be ill-will towards others (hatred or dosa in the Pali language), or ill-will towards oneself (where it is experienced as guilt) or even ill-will towards your meditation object or your meditation cushion!

Thina-middha is that state of heaviness of body and dullness of mind that leads to weak mindfulness and even to falling asleep during meditation.

Sloth and torpor are a way that the mind shows it is not content to be in the moment and seeks to escape into dullness and sleep.

To overcome sloth and torpor it is necessary to rouse energy by finding joy in the bhavana.

The fourth hindrance is Uddhacca-kukkucca is the most troublesome for most persons. It can be translated as restlessness and remorse, or more simply, flurry and worry. Here the key to overcoming this hindrance is to practice loving kindness before you go into retreat, so it can be used as a tool in retreat.

If you have feelings of worry, of remorse, of an uneasy conscience these can be overcome by the practice of metta towards yourself.

Of course, the best protection against feelings of remorse is not to have done anything to be guilty about.

This is why morality, or sila, is so important in Buddha-Dhamma practice.

It is important if you are disturbed by kukkuccha to be kinder to yourself. Accept that you are not pure, that you have bad qualities. They can be recalled by practice. Everyone has both good and bad qualities so see them both as they are – as conditioned, as the product of karma, not self.

Remember the first hindrance is vicikiccha or skeptical doubt. This refers to a very wide range of doubts that can be experienced and has the nature of wavering. It will appear as indecision. There can be doubt regarding the Buddha, the Dhamma or the Sangha.

To understand the use of loving-kindness means to understand that its development makes it a powerful "weapon" to protect the meditator under various hazardous conditions that living may produce. On Buddha's advice, Monks must not carry weapons. Instead they practice loving-kindness (metta) for protection from wild animals and enemies in the forest.

By sending strong metta to the surrounding beings when sitting in meditation in a forest location, Monks can prevent harm from coming to them from potentially dangerous animals, such as snakes, and thus continue their meditation safely. Most Monks having long past forest experience still display loving kindness as a potent mental force.

Metta is also an effective means to overcome anger as it is the opposite of these violent and destructive mental states, to build up the required concentration base for the development of insight, because with metta, our mind concentrates rapidly, and for a healthy relationship with every living being – so important for a happy family, society and the world.

When Metta is practiced correctly all four of the sublime abiding arise and develop together like the four pillars of a meditation hall.

One night, while the Buddha was sitting in meditation under a Bodhi tree, the end of His religious quest was finally achieved. He started to see, like in a mirror, His previous lives, what He had been, the families He had had; He started to see backward in time to see many previous lifetimes to arrive perhaps to the point when it all started. Then He saw the life of other beings similarly, like in a mirror and one thing became clear to him: the plane of existence (out of the six planes of existence) where these beings were reborn from one life to the next was determined by the accumulated effects of their actions in previous lives, in other words their own karma, a word which in Sanskrit means action.

As He progressed through the night, He acquired a more detailed understanding of the Law of Karma: He realized the Four Noble Truths and the twelve links of the Law of Dependent Origination which is a more detailed formulation of the working of the Law of Karma and the truth of anatta, the truth that nowhere in the universe there is a permanent self to be found.

Finally, when the sun rose, He had become an Enlightened One, He was no longer an individual in the ordinary sense of the word. The point when all learning had stopped, the final destination of His religious quest had finally been achieved.

We can look at this experience as the manifestation of the law of causality in the ethical domain but not as a type of mechanistic causality as it could be inferred from a study of scientific disciplines. This causality is expressed in its standard formulation like this:

"When this is present, that comes to be; from the arising of this, that arises.

When this is absent, that does not come to be, on cessation of this, that ceases."

This equates to a supply chain mechanism.

May you develop bhavana as a path of living, may your teachable minds increase, may your good causes fruit as wisdom minds, may you attain and realize nibbana.

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1. <https://www.definitions.net/definition/bhavana>
2. <http://www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php/Bhavana>
3. The Buddhist Hour Radio Broadcast Script 256 – “The Path of Bhavana”, Sunday 22 December 2002
4. Buddhist Hour Broadcast for Sunday 3 August 2003, “Buddha Dhamma Bhavana”
5. Buddhist Hour Broadcast for Sunday 15th January 2012, “How to get the most out of a Bhavana Course”