

03-29-22 - Santikaro

Seeing With Eye of Dhamma

Recorded: March 29, 2022

Santikaro 00:05

The general idea tonight is I will talk about a new book that came out this January. I don't know, looks backwards on my screen. But "Seeing with the Eye of Dhamma", published by Shambala. So that will be the extent of the overt sales pitch.

Santikaro 00:43

I'd like to start. Well, I've been thinking of calling this the blessings of translation practice. I'll be talking about the book's contents, but also a bit of the practice of translating and what a blessing it can be. Because I had been in the peace, the Peace Corps in Thailand for about four and a half years before arriving at Suan Mokkh, which is Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery, he founded it with support from his family. And most things there happened in Thai, and I spoke decent enough Thai to have a pretty good understanding what was going on in being said, and that rapidly improved over the next few years.

Santikaro 02:13

Although I must say I was editing an old translation, a few years back, and I was embarrassed by how much I hadn't quite got right. And so was the person who originally translated it. And we had a good laugh about our younger translators selves and then after years of increasing familiarity, but even more so increasing practice, because one can't translate this stuff just because one knows the two languages. There's the crucial ingredient with such works as of basically taking this stuff to heart and digesting it. When I first arrived, I had to translate for myself. Some monks, including our Ajahn Buddhadasa, could speak in English, but he was quite old, his health was poor. And I could learn much more from him, looking, listening to the regular talks in Thai. And I could benefit others because dozens of non-Thais were coming through. And few of them knew Thai. In fact, I met Gil there. And I had the advantage of knowing Thai. But we were Americans, so we could speak in English of course. And so from the start, part of my practice has been translating. And that works in multiple ways, translating for the sake of my own study and practice. Also helping others and then over time This becoming a service I cannot offer to Buddha, dharma, and sangha. I didn't always appreciate that sometimes. It was hard work. There were certain people who were always trying to get me to translate something. And some of it, I didn't want to translate, everyone had their favorite book, oh, you got to translate this one.

Santikaro 05:33

I did need some time to meditate, eat bathe as well. So it could be annoying being seen primarily as a translation machine. But mostly, I received a lot of kindness and support. And, again, something that took time to dawn on me, I was in my late 20s. Back then, that stepping into a need is dharma. One of the core meanings of dharma or dharma is duty. Ajahn Buddhadasa emphasizes this. And to step into the needs of circumstances, one's own needs, the needs of others, the needs of the community. That's dhamma. And as I learned to relax, and step into that, that broad satisfaction, which is something that

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still nurtures me, and was a big part of this book prep project. Also, my ability to translate, which is not only knowing Thai, but having adequate linguistic skills in English, my undergrad degree was in creative writing. And I've never made it as a novelist, like I fantasized back then. But things I learned as an English major were helpful in this. And that provided an opportunity for for a relationship that has guided my life ever since.

Santikaro 07:59

As I said, there was a need. And I showed up with certain skills, curiosity, interest, a bit of young American male arrogance may be more than a bit kind of hiccups with the culture. And let's call that overconfidence. That allowed me to have regular interactions with Ajahn Buddhadasa, which at his age was a special blessing. So being a translator has meant a lot to me, over the years, and in various ways, it's still a big part of my life, whether translating from Thai to English, or studying the Pali suttas. And trying to convey what they say to people who struggle with reading the original teachings or for whatever reason are on the end on interested. But then, the bigger translation for me is taking these teachings whether the suttas or Ajahn Buddhadasa, or others, and even even if reading in English, I mostly read suttas in English. My Pāli is not very good. But the real translation is into practice. And as I touched on earlier, that's crucial for translating dharma books.

Santikaro 10:23

I met someone a few years ago who was wanting me to produce a lot more. I'm a very slow, meticulous, translator and writer. And he was telling me of software that you can train on existing translations, and then it will produce rough drafts, which I can then add it. I looked into that for about 45 minutes. But it never grabbed me and probably never will. Because and speaking especially for seeing with the Eye of Dhamma. It was by the painstaking, slow, meticulous digesting of the manuscript. Going through the Thai manuscript many, many times going through the original translators work. And then polishing, editing, refining, re translating. working mostly in two languages, occasionally, a bit of well, quite a bit of Pāli terminology as well. And turning that into my own practice, I was fortunate in a way. Or at least for me, COVID was a silver lining. I was just before COVID really hit here I was in Brazil, leading retreat, doing other stuff, and at the time, finalizing the agreements about my role with this book, which had shifted from just doing some polishing, to doing a complete workover of the manuscript. And then I came home and early March 2020. And for the first time, in many years, had a sustained period time to work with a text. And fortunately, I had one that was quite meaningful to me. In the past, because I travel a lot teaching for us too. I would do this kind of work in chunks. And that, for me, was quite disruptive. Now, although I was doing some online retreats, in 2020, into 2021, I had the benefit. And it's weird because for many COVID was, as you know, quite higher than disruptive. And for me, it was in certain ways, like financially. For me, my wife, and Kevala Retreat, it was pretty scary on that side. But on the dharma side, it opened up all this space. And so for weeks and months, over a year, I was working with this book, and translating it into my own practice. I came to see the book as a contemplative journey and that's was based on my own experience of chapter by chapter. And as I said, I'm slow. Plus, there are things to do around our center animals to take care of chores, things like that. And each day working with the themes and teachings of Ajahn Buddhadasa's book ever like to share some of the highlights that were particularly meaningful for me. And if you've seen the book or are inspired to pick up a copy, you'll, you'll find these highlights having a prominent place.

Santikaro 16:07

One that really got me was his repeated and extended exploration of dhatu. Dhatu is a Pāli word in some ways, similar in meaning to dhammas, phenomena. But it's usually translated elements. And it didn't know. And it's a teaching I've struggled to fully take it in. And I think that's because I grew up learning chemistry where the elements are in the periodic table. And plus I grew up in a materialistic culture, capitalism all over the place, consumerism. And it I've worked with the elements teaching four elements, six elements, gazillions of elements. For Ajahn Buddhadasa, following the Buddha, everything's an element. But they're not elements in the periodic table. The way I finally got this was elements of experience. If we pay attention to physical experience, will find the elements of solidity and taking up space amusing Ajahn Buddhadasa's explanations of earth element, cohesion, holding together, water element, temperature and combustion, fire element, movement, including all change when the element and these requires space element, and there's no awareness of them without consciousness element. These six are kind of the fundamental elements of experience, feelings, an element of experience, perception, thought, greed, hatred, delusion, kindness and compassion. All these are elements of experience. And if we practice with this teaching, which I enjoy doing, particularly in the chapters where I really needed to take this in and find words that conveyed Ajahn Buddhadasa's meaning, and hopefully the Buddha's meaning that if we start paying attention to elements of experience, we notice that they keep happening in combination with other elements. If we keep watching the combinations, we'll notice how this keeps changing. I don't want to throw big Pāli terms at you like impermanence, or anicca. Because that's not the point.

Santikaro 20:24

It was contemplating this. And I think Ajahn Buddhadasa was pretty good at not telling us what we're supposed to see. Not giving us the answers, but say, look, look, look, which was his understanding of vipassanā. Looking is contemplation if we keep looking, there's seeing, which is the meaning of the passage, or insight. So, that's, for me, a major highlight of the book, and one of the bonuses for me as translator. Coming to terms with a teaching, that I've taught to others, but feeling a much, much deeper connection, right now, elements of experience, sound, visuals, recognitions, memories, words, and then words with meanings, elements, combining, shifting, changing. And on one level, that's all life is this ever changing, combining and on combining, of elements of experience. And I'm not talking about some external reality, I'm sure that's got its elements to which kind of leads me to another highlight of the book, worlds.

Santikaro 22:39

We like with the elements of the periodic table. It seems most often if we speak of the world, we might mean the planet, we might mean society, in sometimes the Buddha seems to abuse the word world, as society, people in general, in the area where he lived. But in a number of important ways, the worlds that we contemplate and this is the contemplation. I continue to work with is the worlds of the senses. The Buddha spoke of various worlds of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind, or if you prefer heart. Some of these are Heavens, are paradises. Some of them are hells, in places of torment. And there are direct quotes from the Buddha of these worlds arising with the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind are awareness or consciousness. Worlds of memory, worlds of emotion. Worlds of opinion. Some people are very curious about how the world formed. How many billion years ago was it and the Big Bang even more billions, the so called universe that's interesting stuff. But in dhamma, practice the worlds that Ajahn Buddhadasa probably in line with the Buddha, kept encouraging through this book is to pay attention to the worlds of the senses.

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Santikaro 25:16

And, again, there's some things he told us about what to see, but one of the primary ones is, it's just so. So instead of laying on the official Buddha's line of what insights about, there's some of that, because he's loyal of Buddhist in many respects. But often, he would use the word, his translation of the pāli tathāgata, which is often translated thusness, just so. Just like this. Which actually says nothing. It just says there's this. And the rest is for consciousness, mind to pay attention, with enough focus, calm and clarity to see. I think this is brilliant stuff. Rather than telling us what to believe, or programming ourselves to be good Buddhist. And much of his original audience, they had already picked up all these Buddhist teachings. And what he's trying to do in seeing with the Eye of Dhamma, is to see use these. I would say, eyes use these eyes of dhamma to look and see. So whether it's looking in terms of elements of experience, or looking at the worlds watching the worlds of the senses.

Santikaro 27:31

And I must say, I find this real helpful. As I continue to be concerned about climate change, habitat destruction, ongoing wars, in the world, wars that my own country has done, far too much to encourage or the war, the wars, the United States initiate and, of course, those were just wars. Unlike the war in Ukraine. Those are things that don't sit well with me. And it's real easy to feel overwhelmed by all the stuff. Put it simplistically bad stuff going on in the world. And I've no interest in denying stuff like climate change or brutality in Ukraine, you Yemen, or factory farms in rural Wisconsin, or California. But what we're actually experiencing are the worlds of the senses. And a lesson for me that was a highlight of working on this book, is that by being mindful of the worlds of the senses, we're in better shape to respond to the worlds out there. I hope that's coherent. Part of it is watching how worlds are created, and how worlds pass away. It's going on constant and played, and that may be true of galaxies way out wherever. But it's totally true of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind or memory or imagination or thought, right? Right here. And again, the contemplation is to look, observe, watch, have enough focus or samādhi, which is another big theme in the book, to see clearly, without bias, without opinions, without ideology, and so on.

Santikaro 31:02

Another aspect of the book that I had lots of fun with is, everything is samsāra. For to go back in my own history with Buddha's teachings and practice, when I first heard often dogmatically about traditional notions of rebirth, they never appealed to me. And regrettably, I had a certain aversion to traditional rebirth teachings, whether in Theravada forms, or Tibet, or Chinese or whatever. These were common in Thailand, and around the Buddhist world. And so I got used to samsāra as a way of talking about rebirth. And samsāra, in the popular understanding, as I understood it, back in the 80s, and 90s, was, oh, samsāra is you're born, you die, you get born again, and you die again. And it's just suffering and suffering from over and over again, until you get enlightened and somehow escaped from all that. In short, I had a certain bias, certain aversion bias, and tended to just disregard this teaching. But I couldn't disregard it when there was a major chapter in this book about some samsāra, at least half a chapter. And so I had to bite the bullet and digest this, which was healthy, because aversion and biases regarding teachings, even if they turn out to be not what the Buddha actually said, although it's hard to prove. And we don't have to form opinions one way or the other. But at least uncertain things where the evidence is murky. But the aversion, the bias, the opinionatedness, oh, don't worry about that stuff. That's not so healthy for practice, I feel. So I was kind of stuck. And as I worked on the sections about samsāra and due to time I'll simplify. Ajahn Buddhadasa emphasized that samsāra means spinning.

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Wondering might be a little more accurate, but the word that really got me was spinning. And then he is he's describing how everything is spinning. And this is you know, with dhatus combining, this combining worlds being created, passing away. I got into watching spinning, which means cycles and patterns. And going through days where I see significant periods of watching patterns, all the patterns in me the patterns of sunrise, sunset, the phases of the moon, the seasons.

Santikaro 35:47

If we pay attention, everything is made of cycles. The water cycle that we depend on, for example, digestive cycles, breath, breathing in breathing out cycles. And so I came to see samsāra is all about recycling, forget about rebirth, not my favorite belief. But I am much more tolerant of it these days. But recycling, constant recycling ensured that that's what we do with our, our plastic with little triangles on it and glass bottles and stuff. But it's all recycling. And this, this helped me. I have certain lazy tendencies. I'm not good at cleaning. And there are things like that are flossing, that actually, I'm still not good at flossing, but I'm better at cleaning. Now. By seeing that these things like cleaning, all the onerous chores are just keeping my living quarters in decent shape. Cooking food over and over doing dishes over and over. Some of those things I quite liked, like cooking, making coffee and tea, cleaning cat boxes, sweeping the floor, scrubbing toilets. Those are the ones I like. But seeing them within cycles of basically Life helped me to relax and just okay. Just participate in these cycles of life. This is part of Ajahn Buddhadasa take on samsāra as well as elements and everything else. It's all nature. And so instead of picking and choosing the stuff we like the stuff we don't like, seeing it all as nature, recycling. And of course some awareness that that's happening with this body. Awareness. It's happening right now as I'm recycling teachings that go back through various transmissions to the Buddha. I hope unless I've butchered things and these, these just move in ripple and expand and change.

Santikaro 39:26

Kind of running out of time, so I'll wrap up with this highlight. And seeing in the recycling, the spinning, there's an aspect to it. That's just nature and then sometimes there's the perceiving part of it as me and then the rest as other. And taking the "me" part as special or central, giving it weight and importance. Sometimes in really messed up neurotic ways; sometimes in nice creative loving ways.

Santikaro 40:24

Watching the natural samsāra was like the movement, I live in the not quite in the woods, but next to the woods, a nice valley. It is easy to watch the sun and moon move through the sky. Watching the trees respond to weathers. Squirrel, birds, things in the house cats interactions with my partner and so on. There's the natural just life doing its thing. And then there's the particular samsāra has of liking and disliking, craving and cleaning, ego identification.

Santikaro 41:26

And what follows from that these are some samples of contemplations I got a lot out of and still do. From this particular project, and signing on for a translation job of an important dharma book requires really practicing in these ways. And as well as doing standard setting practice of various forms and incorporating elements. And samsāra is noticing all of the samsāra that goes on in meditation, the natural sort, like breathing in and out, and the, neurotics or the, or is Ajahn Buddhadasa emphasizes the stuff we don't understand, the stuff we don't see clearly. That is the ignorance stuff. It's not ignorant. But then not seeing clearly is where the ignorance is. Ignorance simply means not knowing, not understanding. People tend to take it as pejorative, and somehow negative. It's just a description. Often

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there's not understanding. And so things get neurotic, messy, and there's suffering. By contemplating such things, we inevitably observe how suffering happens. It's not required to point out the suffering. If we pay attention to the elements of experience, the world of senses, the rebirthing of all these cycles, patterns, opinions, opinions are a particular kind of pattern. So our beliefs if we pay attention to these we'll also see suffering and how it happens. And then we find important clues to freedom from suffering. Which can't really be taught. It can be pointed to talk about in certain ways, but really, it's by contemplating all the stuff of life that it becomes possible to see. Freedom from samsāra samsāra continues But there's freedom

Santikaro 45:09

Oh, and I should conclude by I'll leave this one with out much explanation because probably doesn't take much. Ajahn Buddhadasa also observes that practice is not complete without mettā. It's fine to practice for our own well being and benefit. Practice is completed when mettā kindness, and karuṇā Compassion blossom. There's a chapter of the trees of the dhamma life that we nurture. And the last tree is the tree of kindness.

Santikaro 46:25

So I'll stop here with some of my favorite highlights from Seeing with the Eye of Dhamma. And we've got 35 minutes for whatever you'd like to talk about. There are questions, I'll respond. I may not have any answers. If you want to comment on something, I'll listen. And I guess we raise hands and then I call on you, Aaron, if I pronounced that correctly.

47:19

Santikaro, thank you for doing the translation of this. This book. I've just started reading it. And I can't help but think that the title has something to do with stream entry. Could you make a comment? Could you comment about that?

Santikaro 47:41

Um hmm. To be honest, that's not Ajahn Buddhadasa's title, his title was Little Dharma Book, which you might have seen in the foreword. By but there was agreement, I was the last one to sign on to this. But the editors and various people said, that's not going to work on bookshelves. So we, because of the theme of contemplative journey, we brainstormed and ended up with Seeing with the Eye of Dhamma. So in our thinking stream entry wasn't mentioned. But I think it's a reasonable guess on your part, it might not be too far off. I actually don't think in terms of stream entries so much myself. But stream entry, one traditional notion of a which is maybe what you're thinking of is to have that first real penetrating insight into what in the book is called non fabrication or non concocting. Traditionally, that's spoken of as nibbāna when there's a clear enough vision of the end of suffering, life changes course. So I, I don't remember stream entry coming up at the time. But it's Reis reasonable. thought. Thank you. Chris

50:06

Santikaro, thanks so much. Um, I was turned on to Buddhadasa, his work by Larry Rosenberg. And who else? Jack's book of him? Guy Armstrong, Gill, there's a number of teachers that spoke to him. And I read additionally Hartwood many years ago, and I just picked it up again a few hours ago to get prepped for this because I've been meaning to reread it. It finally made sense to me. When I read it 10 years ago, I mean, I needed like another decade of practice to sort of get in alignment for it with it. So

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thanks so much for the translation. I just wanted to, um, also honor the Peace Corps, it seems as you, Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, and Sumedo. All were all entered that in practice through the Peace Corps, so I don't know otter JFK and the Peace Corps. Anyway, thanks so much for your work.

Santikaro 51:01

Thank you. Yeah, Peace Corps. My reasons for entering were somewhat muddled. But it opened up cool stuff. And I have lots of Thai friends, if I ever have to leave the US. I've got a place to go. And especially my understanding of Buddhism before Peace Corps was minimal. And so I'm very grateful for Thai culture, Thai society, and Thai Buddhism, and peace car. I wish Peace Corps had something near the budget of the Pentagon. I'll lead by

Santikaro 52:11

Hi, thank you so much, sir, for being here with us and sharing that words of wisdom. I was just wanting to get your opinion on the habits that you had mentioned about the samsāra. Because I do have these mental habits that it's harder to overcome. It's been like, ingrained for so long. And also, especially during the pandemic, as you mentioned, I've created like some physical things that I'll do the way I pour the tea at certain time or fix the I mean, I've fallen into different pandemic created havoc habits. And jailbreaking those would you say we'll make the ones that are easier, like physical stuff to be able to access the mind? Hopefully habit, habitual patterns and thinking patterns? No, I was wondering if you could comment on that. Thank you.

Santikaro 53:14

Yeah, I'm, I'm less concerned by the physical habits. I think of some of them, like I have my cooking oatmeal routine in the morning. And I think of them as rituals. And unless I see them causing trouble, I'm not so concerned. But the mental habits. And for for me, I'll stick with the themes of the book that I've mentioned. But to start to look, what are the elements that go into those habits? And the I mentioned the sensory worlds but especially I've I continue to find it helpful. When I observe an opinion as a pattern. That's a step to disentangling my identity with it. Often, you, on some level, if there's an opinion, it's my opinion. Some suttas, this is called Stand points or basis. That mind is grounded it self in something to try to feel security, solidity, control and to relax into see patterns and the opinions, all of us, maybe all of a sudden or gradually, they're not so solid. And if watching what goes into creating an opinion or I found it helpful to ask, where did I get that opinion or that view. And in Gil's translation of the Book of Eights is great. And what's wonderful about that book is all the suttas on view. And no, where does the Buddha say we should hold views, it's all about letting go of views. And so I'm using opinions or views, which is different than skillful perspectives. And then there are other thinking patterns, habitual planning, worry, self deprecation, and so on. But how, how to loosen that ego identification is crucial. And for me using the word samsāra, as a mantra, and, and honestly spending major parts of many days watching cycles. And so an opinion comes up, it's another cycle of worry comes up another cycle of tension between my wife and I, it's another samsāra. But to call it that, relaxed, some of the me, it doesn't have to be my samsāra. It's just samsāra. My wife and I are in a certain dance me and each of the cats, we have dance. And with each loosening, it's possible to see more clearly. Because if we've got some idea of all I need to get rid of that. Sorry, that sort of opinion.

Santikaro 57:56

If my be conventionally correct, like, oh, that's disruptive, you'd be better without it. But the drawback is, it's your opinion. It might be another you because we're all schizophrenic or multiple personality in that

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sense. And so just to have an opinion about other opinions or worry about other worries, doesn't break the cycles. Seeing the cycles allows us to see through them. Thank you. You're welcome. Thought I saw a hand or a chat. Oh, Beth, found the comments about views and opinions. Absolutely wonderful. Well, that's gratifying. A few samsāra has just happened. They're pleasant ones. Thanks both. Right. You're muted.

59:28

Thank you for these very interesting teachings. I appreciate it. I had a question regarding your idea of samsāra as being a recycling, basically the way nature evolution recycles, you know, material energy, that sort of thing. How is that connected with this Buddhist principle of dependent origination? For example is samsāra seen as a manifestation of dependent origination? Or is dependent origination somehow different than what you're describing?

Santikaro 1:00:18

I would say depends partly how you use the word dependent origination or I prefer dependent co-arising. Ajahn Buddhadasa has a book that. In our understanding, paṭicca-samuppāda, is the conditional processes that lead to suffering, that conditions support underpin, foster, and maintain suffering. From that perspective, dependent co-arising describes these samsāras of suffering. Unlike what I called the natural samsāra was like the, the water cycle or the circulation of blood in the body, the digestive processes, these need not be suffering depending co-arising is a careful look at how through not understanding there's a particular energy Ajahn Buddhadasa called the the power of concocting that shapes, how we experience life and react and their reactions based in clinging to self which is unstable and basically neurotic.

1:02:32

Would clinging clinging to self that results in suffering. Is the clinging an example of the the conditions that you've contributed to making the suffering come about?

Santikaro 1:02:53

Conventionally yeah. But cleaning is what makes it you. Because it's not really you. It's just these natural elements combining. But we the cleaning the core, the core meaning of cleaning, is clinging to the subject. Taking the subject of experience as me and that gets then layered on to the sense of me a separate we can still try to solidify our separateness. Anger and fear really exaggerate that separate is make it worse, make it more conflictive and so on.

1:04:02

Thank you

Santikaro 1:04:06

Sorry about the you part. It's a sub pattern I've got just drop in one piece of the penultimate chapter of the book is about sankhāra. And these sankhāra, concocting, are fabricating and non-concocting, non-fabricating. And it's possible to conceive of these as separate or opposites and in a way they are, but I want to end with the theme I've been mentioning it's by watching the fabricating the concocting that there are glimpses of non concocting and then there's nobody to be liberated. There's no need to get enlightened getting enlightened is samsāra