

Intro: Recollection of the Buddha

Insight Meditation Center

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So, welcome to this day of practice and teaching that we'll be sharing together. I'm totally delighted that all of you are here. Feel free to make yourselves comfortable throughout the day and I hope it will be inspiring and interesting and relevant, even if it's a little different.

The cultivation of beautiful qualities is an integral part of the Buddhist path and so I decided to call today “beautiful mind and heart” to attract, to make sure that we're aware that that's part of what we're cultivating. The path to freedom actually includes the cultivation of quite a lot of beauty. Sometimes there's an emphasis on the *dukkha* – it can feel like there's an emphasis on the *dukkha* or the suffering, and that's a big important part also. But I think we get both sides and we need to include everything in our practice.

And in particular, what we're developing is this quality called *citta*, the heart-mind. It's something that's not so clearly defined, let's say, in the Buddhist teachings, but the *citta*, the heart, is something that we have an intuitive sense of. It includes our emotional being, of course, and actually the *citta* includes our mental being also – our cognitive mind. And there's a way in which we are cultivating the beautiful side of both of those.

So you might just check: do you have an idea in your mind, “Oh, I get the part about the emotions, but the thinking mind, there's no place for that, or there's no way that could be beautiful,” or something. We sometimes can have that. There's a way, though, that we can mature both our thoughts and our emotions. Some of you were on the other side maybe, where it's like, “Okay I get the thought part – Buddhism's a great philosophy – but the emotional stuff I'm not so sure about.” It doesn't matter. Whichever side we favor, we're going to come into balance through the practice, and just see what happens for you.

So, in particular, there's a skillful use of thought that purifies it and helps connect it to the heart. One of the issues with the thinking mind is it can kind of float off by itself, no longer

connected to the heart or the body. And there are a number of ways to practice skillful thought, so what I'm offering today is not the only way to work with the cognitive mind but what we're going to do is something called "recollection practice." That's what we'll explore today, and specifically, recollection of the Buddha. (We'll say more about that in a moment.)

This is a way of using our mental capacity to connect into the heart and the body and also to mature that function of the mind. And then the emotional side – one issue we have with that is that it's the side that can be a little bit reactive and get caught up and entangled in things, and we suffer through our emotions. But we can get it to be less reactive, and actually a strength. It can become stronger and healthier for us through the cultivation of what are called "the heart qualities" in Buddhism – the *brahmavihāras*.

We're not going to get through all of them, but today we'll focus on *muditā* (appreciative joy), and *mettā* (goodwill or loving kindness), so two out of the four. The general plan is that in the morning, we'll do the Recollection of the Buddha practice (and I'll say more in a moment), and in the afternoon, we'll focus on the *brahmavihāra* practices that we're going to do today. So that gives you kind of a roadmap, if you wanted to know. I did put out some approximate schedules for the flow of when we'll be sitting and walking, in case you wanted to see that. I think I put at the top "time subject to slight shifting" because that leaves it open so that if things flow a little bit differently that's okay, but we have a general idea.

Okay, so let's begin then talking about the Recollection of the Buddha practice. The formal recollections are actually rarely taught in our insight scene. I don't quite know why, but they aren't. I learned this practice from Bhikkhu Bodhi. Some of you may have heard of him as one of the main translators of the Buddhist texts. He's a Western American monk. I learned it from him on a retreat, and I've been doing it for a while in my own practice. I've been doing it in my regular home practice. I've done it on other retreats I've sat since then, and I've even done it in my daily life practice because it's encouraged – we don't need to only do it on the cushion. So I feel like I have some sense of how it unfolds, what some of its fruits are, and I'm really excited to share it a bit and see if it's of interest to other people.

So the practice is pretty simple, in and of itself. We're given a list of words and phrases about the Buddha – in this case, a certain Dharma topic, but we'll do the Buddha – that is uplifting,

some kind of an uplifting Dharma topic. And we repeat them slowly in our mind, one by one, kind of turning them over in our cognitive mind with a sense of opening to their meaning. So it's not that we are thinking about them, like we're given a topic and then we cogitate off in some disconnected way. We turn them over connected to our heart and our body, but using the mental function of the mind. And as we do this, the mind gathers around that topic and begins to see new meanings in it. It begins to contemplate it in the moment, and we start to see how it connects into our own body, into our own mind and heart, into our own path of practice. And the mind becomes inspired and happy, and it can even go into *samādhi* concentration, a form of concentration or unification.

There are six formal recollections that are named in the Pali Canon. I'll just mention them: they are the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha – that might not be surprising; virtue, generosity, and *devas*. What are *devas*? *Devas* are gods. We won't talk about it too much. The recollection of the *devas*, though, if you look at what it's about, really, it's about recollecting certain skillful qualities of mind – in particular, the Five Faculties (spiritual faculties) of mind. But we won't we won't focus on that today. We're going to focus on the Buddha today.

So, why? What is the benefit of doing this? I'll offer three. One of them is, as I said, to be inspired and uplifted. There is a way in which these topics connect directly into our heart and we can be uplifted from that. Second, though is that we can see some aspects of these qualities in ourselves. Yeah, we're not the Buddha – I get that. You only have to look at your own mind to know that, right? But nonetheless, we do have some subtle sense of resonance with these qualities of the Buddha that we're contemplating, and we can realize, “Oh yeah, I can recognize that because there is some of that in me too, maybe in a potential form, maybe in a simple form, but it's there.”

I was on a retreat one time that Gil was teaching. When he came into the Dharma hall, every time he would come up to the front to teach, he would bow to the Buddha-rūpa that was up there. He would just bow and then he would get on to the platform to teach. And I find that I do that too as a teacher. But somebody on the retreat (and I so appreciated this, you know) raised their hand at some point and said, “Why are you doing that? Why are we bowing?” There can be some skepticism or uncertainty in the West about that practice – do I have to do it? What does it mean? etc. So they just asked him, “Why do you do that?” He smiled and

said, “Oh, well, it's mostly out of gratitude and appreciation.” And then he looked thoughtful and he said, “But sometimes I feel a little bit of resonance here,” and he kind of motioned up and down in his chest. Then he said, “Oh but mostly, it's gratitude and appreciation.” So he was humble about it, but he acknowledged also that his appreciation of the Buddha was because there was some resonance in himself.

So, some reflection here. So let's see if we can find that also. That's the second benefit – that we start to appreciate our own good qualities. And then the third benefit is that we can also sometimes get a sense of how that particular quality might be applied in our daily life practice. These contemplations are meant eventually to come off the cushion. And there are ways in which these qualities that we're contemplating show up actually in daily life interactions – in our speech, in the way we write email, when we're cooking for our family. So we might start to realize, “Oh this is something practical that I can use in my life also.” I hope that gives you some flavor. I'm not telling you how to appreciate this, but I'm suggesting things that you might see as you go through these practices this morning.

For the Buddha, the official list of these qualities actually has a name. It's called the “ten epithets of the Buddha.” I say that because it actually exists across multiple Buddhist traditions for all of Buddhist history, so this is not just some minor list that's found somewhere in an obscure corner of the Pali Canon and was forgotten about once the Mahayana came along. Actually, this list of ten has been regenerated; it's been reinterpreted; it's been passed along all the way through all of the three major strands of Buddhism, and is still alive today in Theravada practice and in Mahayana practice. So it's not obscure – I'll just say it that way.

It happens, though, that in the formal practice the first epithet is like a name of the Buddha. Sometimes it's also called “the attributes of the Buddha.” The first epithet is just stated, and then it's the other nine that are turned over in the mind. I'll say that just so that you don't catch me later and say, “You said there were ten epithets of the Buddha but we're only contemplating nine things.” I'm just doing it the formal way – the first one is just stated and then the other nine are contemplated. That's fine, but I want you to be imprinted with the idea that there are ten epithets of the Buddha – that's the real name.

In Pali the word for these is the “*Buddhagunas*” (that’s just what they’re called), and we’ll go through them in a moment. We do use the Pali terms. Just to give you advanced warning, we will be contemplating the Pali words because it’s important to connect to the original language and not contemplate only the English translation. First of all, the translations have sometimes kind of shifted over time. And I think the Pali has a certain resonance to it that the English doesn’t. But don’t worry, I’m going to go through all of them and give an English explanation before we practice. And then when we do practice, each time I name one of the Pali terms I will give you an English prompt to remind you what it is, so in no way do you have to know these Pali terms. Also, you’re going to get a handout later that has them, as well as an English explanation for each one, so if you wanted to practice on your own, you’re going to have all the information later. So you don’t have to write it all down or try to memorize it.

Before we do that, let me just say a little bit more about the practice in general and some of its fruits. Then I’m going to spend some time going through the nine, and then we’ll do our first sitting together on this topic. So let’s just say up front: this is a devotional practice. This is a devotional practice. I’m delighted that you came to a day-long that is doing a devotional practice. It’s not so – let’s say, forward, in our tradition in the West that we do that, but it’s very common in Asia; they’re much more devotional there. It’s so beautiful, and I feel like we could really benefit from a little more exposure to some of this. It’s not saying anything about how you need to be or that you need to do this all the time, but please enjoy it this morning and see what it does for you.

I love that we’re using the thinking aspect of the mind in a devotional way. That’s actually important. We’re meant to be touched in an emotional sense by this practice, so let yourself be moved by it if that comes. But nonetheless, we’re developing a kind of a healthy relationship with the cognitive mind through doing this practice. We’re letting it in in a particular way so that we see it’s not always a problem – there is wholesome thought. Mental functioning is part of the path if we let it, and if we guide it.

There’s even a *sutta* where the Buddha says that these recollections – these ten epithets of the Buddha – actually, for a certain practitioner, they come forth spontaneously after the person has done some practice and realized that their mind has been partially freed of certain negative qualities. It says that, as a natural result of realizing that the practice is starting to

work, you might spontaneously think of this reverence for the Buddha. It might come into your mind spontaneously. So we're going to do it deliberately and consciously, but it can be spontaneous also, that we just feel a reverence for the Buddha and start to get an understanding of the deeper meaning of what the Buddha really is.

I've already given you a little hint that as we do this, you're going to be connecting in with the Buddha. What is that? Do we know? We call this "Buddhism." You don't have to be Buddhist to do this, by the way, or think of yourself that way, but was it a guy who lived 2,600 years ago and wandered around northern India with a robe and bowl? Yes, in some sense. And what does that mean for us living here, in a totally different culture, millennia later? I think there's a real potential to understand a little more deeply what that represents.

In the *suttas* it says that this recollection leads to inspiration. It says specifically that a person becomes "inspired in the meaning and inspired in the goal" of the practice. So there's something that comes, and then from that there comes a series of five things: gladness, joy, tranquility, happiness, and *samādhī* (concentration or unification). That doesn't mean that you're going to see all of that today necessarily, but I think it's helpful to point that out.

There are multiple forms of *samādhī*. We can think of *jhāna* or something – some very deep absorbed kind of practice. I think the *samādhī* that comes from recollection practice comes in multiple forms. I've experienced it as a very interesting – I call it "daily life *samādhī*." Because you're using your thinking mind, the mind can unify, but it just has a sense of being gathered in the present moment. It's a different state than our usual cognition, and it took me a while to recognize, "Oh, this is the *samādhī* that they're talking about that comes from thinking." There is *samādhī* that comes from thinking, if you do a certain kind of thinking. So I recognized that – that was very interesting.

And then another time I've done this practice when I was doing it on retreat, I did the phrases until the heart qualities, the heart aspect started to flow – the happiness, the joy, the tranquility. And then I dropped the cognitive mind and I did drop into *samādhī* that comes from sitting. So this practice can – if you drop the cognitive part – lead into the more traditional *samādhī* that's on the cushion. Again, I'm not sure you'll feel this today; we have only a short time. But I think it's worth saying because this can be new. I think this is new for many of us.

And then the terminology – I don't think “recollect” is quite the right verb. It's a great translation of *anussati*, which is the Pali word. *Anussati* has connotations of “remembrance” and “contemplation,” so, yeah – “recollection,” okay.

So I think that's good that you still call this “the recollection of the Buddha.” I think that's a good way to think of the practice. But from doing the practice, I would like to offer some more creative interpretations of this term. Let's say the first one is “knowing the Buddha.” Not in the sense of something cognitive, but knowing the Buddha like you would get to know a person.

“Familiarizing the Buddha” – not familiarizing yourself with the Buddha – familiarizing the Buddha. Can you hear the difference? So the Buddha becomes like family – becomes something integrated to us, maybe part of our DNA. Familiarizing the Buddha.

And perhaps also, “reflecting the Buddha.” That's not reflecting *on* the Buddha. I'm deliberately changing it to “reflecting the Buddha.” And that's the sense of, we reflect the qualities of the Buddha in ourselves and we see the qualities of ourselves that are imitations of the Buddha or emulations of the Buddha so we stand as a mirror before the Buddha and there's a reflection.

I offer these as other ways to connect in with this practice as we go forward. [So please be aware that the meditations we're doing today will include a fair amount of guidance. And, especially in the morning when we're learning this practice that is likely new to many of us, there will be silent stretches of time. but if you were hoping for an entire silent day-long, that's not today.]

Let me go through these nine items that we'll be contemplating which are the ten epithets of the Buddha, and then we'll do them in a sit. The first one is actually Tathāgata. You may have heard that term in the *suttas*. It literally means “thus come” or “thus gone,” depending on how you read the Pali. It's the first epithet and it is not traditionally contemplated or turned over in the mind. We just say the Tathāgata is, and then these other nine that we turn over. So that allows me to skip over Tathāgata, which really means “Buddha,” and go on.

The first one that we would be turning over in our mind during this practice is *araham*. Remember, I'm going to give you the Pali. That literally means “a worthy one.” [That's what the word means.] But what it means is “worthy of veneration, worthy of offerings, a purified one, a liberated one” – someone who is totally free of greed, hatred, and delusion. Now we're not there, but we might see in ourselves: “You know, from this practice I am a little bit shifted away from being caught up in greed, hatred, and delusion.” And wow – the Buddha took this all the way.

The second one is *sammā sambuddho*: the perfectly enlightened one who has removed all obstacles and understands the nature of the Dharma. What's important about saying “perfectly self-awakened, fully awakened” is that the Buddha saw not only his own path out of suffering based on his conditionality, but he saw so deeply that he saw all the paths. That's why he's able to convey it so clearly and why his teachings are still relevant after 2600 years. He didn't just free a mind that had the conditioning of an Indian culture 2600 years ago, whatever that brought that was specific to that time. We have our stuff here, but he saw so deeply into the human heart and mind all the way to the roots that he could teach from there. And so we still feel the benefits of that. So the Buddha's knowledge was that complete.

The third one is *vijjā-caraṇa-sampanno*. *Sampanno* means “accomplished,” like competent, really good, like a master. And *vijjā* and *caraṇa* are “knowledge” and “conduct.” So the Buddha didn't just realize awakening – he manifested it. He lived it. He could be it, in the way that he was in the world. So his very actions could inspire people – when he put on his robe, when he walked for alms round. There are accounts in the *suttas* of people seeing him walking. Like a king one time saw him walking down the road and he looked out, he's like, “Wow! Who is that?” And he sent one of his guys out to find out who that guy was. I think the Buddha wasn't even awake at that point, or maybe he was still on the path. But he could manifest. He didn't just have the knowledge internally.

The fourth one is *sugato*. Literally, it means “well gone.” It's translated usually as “the happy one.” *Sugato*. So the Buddha has gone to the bliss of nibbāna. He is always in touch with peace such that no conditions in the world can shake him, doesn't matter. I mean the Buddha lived in the world. All the monks did all kinds of crazy stuff when he was trying to lead his community and he had to work with all of them. And you know, he lived in an ancient culture

like ours. There was war; there was poverty; there was famine; there was disease. It wasn't that perfect a world, but the Buddha wasn't shaken by any of it because he had a reference point that was always peaceful and happy. We may not have that all the time but we can see in ourselves that the practice cultivates a stability in us that is a resource, a reference point for us to some degree.

The fifth one: *lokavidū* – knower of the world. *Loka* is the world. *Vidū* has to do with knowledge or seeing, actually, so: one who knows all the different realms of existence, who knows all types of conditioned phenomena, and who knows the minds and hearts of living beings. So the Buddha had complete knowledge internally of all the ways his mind worked and he could see everyone else and how their karma was unfolding, how it all works, why it is that when we do things that are unskillful, [he could see,] that will have unhappy consequences. He saw how all of that worked. So he had a complete understanding of the lawfulness of how the universe works and therefore could see the path out of suffering, of course. So it's interesting that he didn't just keep his knowledge internally. He looked out and saw how the whole universe worked. He made clear that he had both internal and external knowledge. That's pretty inspiring.

Number six: *anuttaro purisadamma-sārathī*. *Sārathī* is a trainer, like an elephant trainer or a horse trainer, or these days, a dog trainer – something like that. I think it also had implications of a charioteer – someone who could handle a chariot. *Anuttaro*: unsurpassed, the best. And *purisadamma*: *purisa* is a person; *damma* is not “*dhamma*” like the teachings. It has to do with taming, so it's literally translated, at least in the Theravada tradition, as “unsurpassed trainer of persons to be tamed.” How about that!

I like to see this as we've made a transition. *Lokavidū* was the middle out of the nine and it's the transition between just describing the Buddha's own qualities of being awakened, manifest, happy. This is all about him. *Lokavidū* – he knows what's going on. Everything after that, he turns toward helping other beings to get there. He didn't just rest in his own awakening. He taught; he trained, so he's the unsurpassed trainer of even the most difficult and obstinate people – he can have some impact on them. There's a story of a rampaging elephant being set upon him by somebody who didn't like him actually. But even with an enraged elephant, which was kind of the ancient Indian idea of the worst thing that could be

barreling at you, the Buddha expressed his loving kindness and the elephant stopped, it said in this myth. So this is the unsurpassed trainer of persons to be tamed.

Number seven: *satthā devamanussānaṃ*. *Satthā* is a teacher. *Devamanussānaṃ*: devas and humans – of devas and humans, so, a teacher of devas and humans. He points out what's wholesome and what's unwholesome, and he guides us toward what is wholesome. This is a little bit different from training the parts of us that are unskillful. Like when you train a dog you don't really explain to the dog that this is harmful, this is beneficial, let's do the [beneficial]. You can't really communicate with the dog quite at that level. But for devas and humans, the higher kinds of minds, the Buddha actually teaches us the process. He teaches us the practices. He explains this is why this is true, this is how this unfolds, these are the teachings, this is the path. We can actually understand those things. And it's inspiring that he takes the time to lay it out in a way that we can get. Even when we start out wrapped up in our self-pity and all of our self-concerns, he explains the path in such a way that we can progressively let go into the peace of nibbāna. Wow, thank you for that. So we can appreciate that.

Number eight: *buddho*, which just means "the enlightened one." Now we could have a question the second one you might remember was *sammā sambuddho*. It includes that same word and it's much fuller: "fully self-awakened one, fully awakened." Why do we just have *buddho* late in the list? The usual understanding, the conventional understanding, is this is like the Buddha's direct, clear, powerful awakens that has the potential actually to help other beings realize wisdom and maybe awaken also. He doesn't have the magical ability to awaken others – we have to do our own work. But if we have some training and some practice in our mind, some preparation, we can experience the awakens of the Buddha if we're in his presence. And there are numerous examples of this in the teachings – of people whose minds were somewhat ready, who had some faculties already developed. They would come; maybe they would hear a discourse, and they could awaken. they could or they could at least have an insight of some kind. So, *buddho* is like you can feel it.

And then number nine – *bhagavā* – the last: the blessed one, the fortunate one, the one who practiced and fulfilled all the meritorious qualities and then extends waves of blessings out to

the world. Okay, wow – this is getting a little out there, maybe, for our Western minds but it's meant to really open to the unfathomability of the Buddha's mind. I mean, what does it mean that he could extend blessings? The Buddha's physical body has been dead for a long time but there's an echo of what happened under the Bodhi tree happening even now. It resonates through the texts that were written down, through the people who chant this chant every day. This chant of nine, by the way, is chanted every day in Theravāda monasteries. It extends out through teachers who explain and pass along these teachings as well as they can, and through all of us who practice, as well as we can, the Eightfold Path in our life. Simple daily acts of goodness and simple meditation – mindfulness practice at its most basic level is an echo of this. And it's all part of *bhagavā* – it's ongoing. We get to the end of the contemplations and we have to admit the mind of this guy is unknowable. Still present in some way, maybe, so I'll leave that to you to resonate with in the sitting. Any questions on this overview or kind of early explanation? I know it was a little long but we're ready to practice now, and I'm curious and just want to make sure everyone's ready. Any questions? Oh good. It was clear enough; okay.