Why Meditate?

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 39:55

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa. Homage to the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I thought I'd try and answer this perennial question as to why we meditate. I think one of the mistakes we make is to come to meditation with some sort of expectation. That expectation is a projection of what we want from the meditation, whatever it might be. It might be some sort of psychological relief. We want to cure our relationships so that everybody stops hating us. It might be to become enlightened, have some sort of deep spiritual experience. But if you come with that sort of expectation, it's getting in the way of this pure intelligence that we're trying to develop.

So the best attitude when you come to meditate is just for the purpose of developing your skills of meditation. That's enough. Developing the skills of meditation. And to do that, you've got to be very clear as to what the point of it is. The point is to establish this moment-to-moment mindfulness.

If we look at the history of the Buddha himself, he starts off by practising what we now call *jhāna* meditations or absorption meditations. And the purpose of that is to develop mental states within us through the process of certain techniques such as a mantra. You keep repeating something beautiful in your mind, "may all beings be happy." And it fills the heart with a certain sensation, a certain feeling, and you keep doing that until you become absorbed in it. It's like watching a good film. You just watch a good film, you get lost in it, and then when the film's ended, that's the end of that.

So it's the same with these techniques to do with absorption or developing mental states. They're just to do with manipulating the mind so that some inner environment is created and it becomes so absorbing that you lose contact with the world. You just become that. So this was great as long as he remained in it, but when he came out of it the old sufferings would arise—depression, anxiety and stuff like that. He didn't find that satisfactory, because remember that what had awoken him to seeking were these two major insights.

First of all, the fact that all life seems to end with sickness, old age and death at some point. And that he couldn't find anything in the world as a young man which was going to give him a sense of permanent contentment—any sensual pleasure, not even relationships. A sort of weariness grew with it. These two things set him out on this task of trying to discover if there was something which was more permanent.

In that age, the real fear was continuing rebirth, continuing reincarnation, no way out of it. That was the

underlying fear of that particular age—that all you could do was just keep being reborn, being reborn, and depending on what you did, you might be reborn as a dog, or you might be reborn as a king, but you just kept this. There was no way out of it. So he's looking within the concept of the age to try and find something which didn't belong to any of that, whether there was such a thing. Already there were some inklings with other teachings that became known as the Upanishads, that there was something which didn't belong to the phenomenal world, beginning to be called *Atta*, the Self. And the whole concept of it being with some greater self, Brahma, was also being developed at the same time. So he tried all that and came up with this negative position that it wasn't much good.

The other process was to go into self-mortification. And the understanding there was that the problem lay in the body. So if you think about it, it's the body, isn't it, which gives us most suffering. The body itself, with its appetites and its sicknesses and all diseases. And even when you go into feelings, even when you go into emotions, they're felt in the body. So if you could somehow starve the body, or take the body to an excess where, in a sense, you lost contact with the body so that there was no suffering there. So the idea was to mortify the body. The most common way was to starve it. And those of you who've done a long fast, like a ten-day fast, know that after about three days when the body feels awful, it actually feels good, it feels all right. And the body feels light, and it seems to be okay. Except, of course, the body's eating itself. It won't last very long.

So he's practising these things and he takes it as usual to the limit. And he's got these companions. And something strikes him at some point where he realises it's a waste of time. He's not getting anywhere with it. And he's sitting by a roadside, feeling pretty glum, and a woman comes along with a bowl of rice that she's going to offer to perhaps a shrine or something. So she offers it to him, this bowl of rice pudding. And he tastes this rice pudding, he eats this rice pudding, he feels good for it. His body is lifted and his mind is lifted, he feels good. It's not that you need to eat rice pudding to become enlightened—that's not absolutely necessary.

Then he remembers this thing in childhood. This is really kernel stuff. He remembers a childhood event. He's watching his father doing a planting ceremony. And it's the state of that consciousness which he remembers as being radically different from all those things that he's practised with the absorption states, and from the stuff that he's been experiencing through the self-mortification. There's something different about it. And it inspires him, so much so that he thinks that this can only be the way. He can't see anything else but that particular state that he'd been in then as a child. So he meditates with that, with that state. And within about six hours, he makes his break, which is now called enlightenment.

So now, what is this state? Because then the whole of his life is about teaching people how to arrive at this state, this level of consciousness. If you go back to your childhood, or if you watch a child, you'll see that when a child, especially around pre-language, or pre-conceptual language anyway—that's like three to seven, that sort of age, even a bit beyond that—you'll see that when they see something, they lock on it, don't they? Become totally absorbed in it. And you see the jaw drop. And they're looking at it. And it's only

after they've absorbed this object, a beetle, that they turn around and say, "What is that?" And when dad says, "It's a beetle," that's it. They never see a beetle again. From then on, what they see is what they imagine or conceive a beetle is. They've lost that initial interest in it, that initial pure knowing, that initial investigative intelligence.

So what is that that we have as a child which then we lose through the conceptual mind? People blame it on education, but it's not education at all. It's a natural progress into language, and then we believe that language is more real than the actual experience we're having. We actually believe that language, words, are things. If I say "car," I believe that's a thing, a car. Don't I? I do. But actually, all it is is an idea in my head—"car." It has no existence. If you said to me, "Describe a car," I can describe a car to you, but it won't exist. It'll be in my head. And it'll never measure up to a real car out there, because the description will be different. It's made up in my head.

If you take me to a car and ask me what it is, then of course I'll label it and say that's a car. But because I have a picture of a car, I might never look at that car with that open-mindedness. It'll have to fit into my idea of what a car is. And that way, I don't see the car as car. What I see of the car is what fits into my idea of a car.

So now we're constantly doing that. Whenever you look at something, you'll see that your perception is actually distorting what you're looking at. And it's only when you look twice do you see things there that you hadn't seen. So we're always looking at the world through this glass, this coloured glass of a concept. And then that glass, or that distorted glass, is coloured by our emotional relationship to the world.

So whenever I see something, I always split it into all those things I like and all the things I don't like. So I live in this world where I have everything I like and everything I don't like. And as soon as I do that, I have this response to it of wanting what I like, not wanting what I don't like. And that's what Buddhism means by living in a dual world. And all those things I don't like, I don't look at properly. And those things I do like, I gobble up. So I'm always playing that game in the world.

And the game is being empowered by some deep misunderstanding or deep commitment that I can find happiness in the world if I can get it straight. If I get the right partner, the right job, the right house, I'll be happy. And so I'm constantly manipulating the world like that. Just watch yourself watching TV sometimes. You'll see. If you catch yourself, you're always shifting. As soon as the body feels slightly uncomfortable... We're never actually facing the world as it is. We're always trying to do something to shift it, to move it, to make it fit in to what I want.

So here's the Buddha, and he's found this level of consciousness. And he discovers a new relationship with the world. And then he goes out and he tries to teach it. So what's his approach in trying to make us correct our vision? Because that's where he starts from. He starts from a wrong understanding. That wrong understanding is deep within the way we're actually seeing things.

And what he points out is that there are three distortions that we make. The first is that we have some idea of continuity. Just think, for instance, how long is a space of time? How long does time last, normally? A couple of seconds? If you were to think of how long a space of time lasts... We stretch it, don't we? Because of memory and the ability to conceive. If you stop now, how long is time? A couple of seconds, isn't it? But actually it's not that at all, is it? It's absolutely specific. It's arising and passing away all the time at vast speeds.

Just think of the speed of your thought. Just think of the speed that the eye is moving at in terms of moving around, picking up photons, making up pictures in the mind. And then the mind has to think what it means and then put it into some sort of thought pattern. Then some emotion has to come up. We don't see any of that. What we catch is just this block of time. So the idea we have of things changing is not radical at all. We have a continuity.

So when I think of myself... I think of myself as being the same person as I was when I was born. If I show you a picture of myself when I was two years old, I say, "Look, there, that's me, that's me, that is me when I was two years old." That picture, this is me. And yet we know that physically, this body is nothing like the one we were born with. Every seven years, all atoms are completely changed. But we don't recognise that at all. As far as I'm concerned, this is me when I was two years old.

So we're constantly identifying with a process, thinking that the process is me. But the process is radical. There's no me that changes in it. Next time you stand in front of a mirror, you just point at your face and say, "I didn't have that face seven years ago. It was a completely different face that I had seven years ago." And if you can imagine looking in the mirror one day and you see somebody else's face, then that break of continuity would be shocking, wouldn't it? Because you identify with that whole process.

So what the Buddha is saying is, if in your meditation you can really come down to a present moment and see this quality of change, then you'll break through that illusion, you'll break through that delusion of thinking that anything is actually continuous. Now one of the benefits of seeing that is that when you really grasp the fact that everything is arising and passing away, what's the point of holding on to it? What's the point of attaching to something which doesn't actually exist, which is only a concept in the mind?

When you do that, you begin to undermine the idea that perhaps there's something here which I can grasp onto, which is going to actually make me happy. So you undermine that grasping nature about life where you're trying to manipulate the world in order to make you happy. Because all you're doing really is just shoring up trouble for ourselves. So these are the sorts of insights he makes. And the insights he makes come from a different level of consciousness. It can't be that awareness which is caught up in those things.

So when you come to meditate, all these techniques that you come across—doesn't matter what the technique is, or what school it belongs to—is to try and lift the meditator to this particular observation post, which is not caught up in this whole business of playing pleasure, wanting, not wanting, and seeing

things as continuous.

So that's why you always begin by first of all trying to concentrate the mind. There has to be some stillness there. It doesn't matter how long it takes, but you have to wait until there's at least somewhat ability to just stay, generally speaking, in the present moment. And that takes an effort. It's not the effort of building a road, and it's not the effort of writing an essay or something. It's just a very calm effort of reconditioning ourselves to be present.

So when the mind wanders, and you acknowledge that the mind's wandering—it's worrying or something—by acknowledging it, you first of all become aware of what we obsess about. But then, you take your attention away from it. By taking your attention away from it, you're disempowering it. By not putting your attention on something, you disempower it. Why? Because every time you attend to something, you've intended it. And intention is what's actually creating the conditioning.

So by doing that, by noting where the mind has wandered, and you actually recognise where it is, and you turn away from it—you turn your face away from it, you turn your eyes away from it, you turn your attention away from it—when you come back to the breath, you make the intention to stay there. So that's empowering this new habit of being in the present.

Once you've got that, once you've got a steadiness of being in the present, you can now take a different position with everything which comes up within you. Instead of when depression comes up, you hear these words, "I am depressed." Like you pick up your phone and say to your friend, "I'm depressed." Or you tell somebody, "I'm angry." Instead of doing that, you're distancing yourself from it so that you're saying, "There, there's depression, there's anger, there's happiness, there's joy."

That little gap, that distance, makes all the world a difference. It takes you out of an identity with your emotions and your thoughts and your body to a position which disidentifies with it. So what is it that's disidentifying? What is it that's finding this new position where it's no longer experiencing itself as an emotion? No longer experiencing itself as a thought? No longer experiencing itself as the body? What is that?

And the more you practise that, the more you find that that's a much better resting place than to be stuck inside these emotions—hijacked by these emotions, confused by thoughts. And that position is an observation post that you've found. And it's from that post that you can begin to objectively observe what's happening inside you and begin to see these, specifically these two characteristics. Nothing that we experience inside us, never mind outside us, lasts for more than a second, lasts for more than a nanosecond.

And there's nothing inside us which, if we attach to, or if we say it's me, is not going to cause us problems. So that ability to stay separate from it is actually creating a very different relationship with life. You become in it—you're still in your body, you're still in your thoughts, you're still in your emotions—but

you're no longer confused by them. You're no longer dragged by them.

So that's the purpose that we're meditating. We're meditating in order to establish a different level of consciousness. And it comes about by making that effort to be present, to be mindful in this present moment. And from that everything flows. Everything flows from that. Is that perfectly clear?

Well, that's the discovery, you see. That's the discovery. You can only know that by doing it. Its quality, its active quality, is intuitive intelligence. It's an intelligence which is prior to thought. It's before thought. It doesn't work with thought. And it's prior to emotion. It's not emotional. And it's definitely not physical. So everything you look at can't be it. You've objectified. If it's an object, it can't be the subject.

Remember that the question was, what are you trying to do in meditation? This is the first position, you see. You're trying to isolate an experience, a quality within, which eventually turns out to be not phenomenal. It doesn't arise and pass away. And when you get into that state, even though you might be surrounded by unpleasant feelings, you just pop a question in your mind. Am I suffering? Is there suffering here?

Well, first of all, you have to develop that state of being able to observe, you see. To observe an emotion as an object, not to get caught up in it. The example I give is, you know if you watch TV and you've got a light on, and you can see yourself watching TV. So now you have a choice. Do you watch yourself watching TV, or are you going to watch TV?

So this intelligence senses its presence within the mind, which is like a TV screen. And that's where you get this feeling of an observer. And when you have that feeling of an observer watching what's happening, that's exactly what's happening. There are two consciousnesses there, one after the other, very quick. Very quick. You can't actually see it unless you've got extremely good concentration, where there's this sense of presence, the observer, and what it's observing.

By continuing to put your attention on what you're observing, the observer will disappear. And it's at that point that you're doing pure *vipassanā*. And you won't know it until you come out of it. When you come out of it, you'll know that you've been in a state where the idea of a self has disappeared, and with it the sense of time. It actually comes quite often, believe it or not, but they're in such small little bits that the meditator doesn't actually catch it.

What we're trying to do is inform ourselves to find out who we really are, or what we really are. So we're not this body. If we were this body, then all we're looking to is annihilation at death. So you'd end up being an annihilationist. That's definitely not the Buddhist position. On the other hand, if you say, well, I am something, so I am this observer, then you fall into the error of eternalism. And he said he wasn't that either. So you're really stuck. So there's something beyond the concepts of something completely ending and something constantly existing. But the meditation has a practical result.

If you take, for instance, these two positions—the position of the person who's seeking happiness and the

position of one who has moved into, for want of a better word, this level of consciousness, or the *vipassanā* state, shall we say. If you watch a film and your intention is to enjoy the film, I'm going to enjoy this film. You're saying that to yourself, I'm going, oh great, I'm going to enjoy this film. You turn the TV on and because you're interested in the film and because you want to enjoy it, you'll enter into the absorption of that film, won't you? You'll lose a sense of time, lose a sense of self, and you'll wake up at the end of the film and think that was a fantastic film.

Now the problem with that absorption is that it's conditioned us to seek happiness in films. That's the problem. Which means that we're always looking for a good film to see so that I can be happy. How can we watch a film where we appreciate it and yet we don't get that hangover of wanting, needing, a compulsive desire to see films?

So that's what we're learning. We're learning how to be with something in a completely absorbed way, but not coming off the platform of seeking happiness there. We're trying to come off the platform of simply wanting to know, simply wanting to experience something in order to understand it. So it's the same thing in meditation. The driving force in meditation is interest. It's a wanting to know.

Well, you've got to be careful here. It's a striving in order to know what is in the present moment. What is in the present moment. So therefore there's no conceptualisation, there's no launching into the future, and there's no grabbing into the past for some answer. It's right here and now. Therefore it can't be conceptual. Thought is always an afterthought. It's always a launching. If you're in the present moment, there can't be a self, there can't be an ego. Ego needs time. It needs time to reflect and needs to know what it wants. And then it needs to be able to manipulate in order to get what it wants.

Whereas what we're trying to do is to see things as they are now. That's the interest, to see things as they really are now. As a scientist might want to do that at the material level. He wants to see what is happening actually now. So there's no room to manipulate that now to fit in with what I want because it's happening. I can't think about it.

Time is a concept, absolutely. In that state, we don't make any judgements either. We're not saying then, this is good or this is bad. We're talking about meditation now. If the statement comes up, this is good, this is bad, then that is also observed as a sentence. There's no need to agree with it or disagree with it. Because what you're interested in is the mind as it expounds itself into your consciousness. You're investigating something. To start judging it would be already to manipulate it, to decide what you don't want to see and what you do want to see.

So one very good example is of a bird watcher. See, a bird watcher doesn't manipulate the birds. Just watch the bird. You watch the bird and at the end you write a book and make a million pounds. You just watch. Write your little notes. That's all you're doing. You're just trying to find a position in yourself where you're watching. Then you come to understand, ah, this is causing me suffering. This is causing me happiness. This is where real happiness lies. This is where suffering lies. If you get it right within us, then

of course outwardly we get it right without any problem.

So you take, for instance, a very simple thing once you go out into the world. Say compassion. That's a very simple one. So you want to help people. It might be just helping somebody across the road. It might be doing something for a charity. You want to help somebody. So the ego says this is a very good thing to do. So you start helping.

Now there's a part of it which is coming out of a wisdom base, coming out of a desire to alleviate somebody's suffering. Because we've suffered, we see their suffering, so we want to help them. Normally speaking, you tend to help people who've suffered like you. If you've had a drink problem, you tend to be very good at helping people with a drink problem. It's very simple, there's a relationship to it.

So, you then go to help this person, and of course, you feel good. And the ego says, when you do that, you feel good. So then you start doing that, not particularly to want to help the person, but because you want to feel good. Then you become a do-gooder. See? So a do-gooder is somebody who does you the good they want to do to you. If you ask them to do something else, they get very upset. See? So then that's ego coming in, you see, whereas somebody who is helping for the sake of the other, the self can't be there. They're at the service of the other. So if the other says, can you do this for me? Yes, I can, as long as it's skilful, moral, and all that sort of stuff.

So the feeling of goodness, the feeling of happiness would still arise, but it doesn't become your aim. If it becomes your aim, that's self-driven. It's the same with food, isn't it? Why do you eat food? Are you eating there so that you can have a good time? So that finally you can experience half an hour of delight? Or are you eating in order to nourish the body? If you eat in order to nourish the body, you still get the delight, but you don't get the hangover, you don't get the fat. Because the body will tell you enough, and then you stop, because you don't need to eat more than that.

But if you're finding happiness in food, you can't stop. You're always stocking up the fridge, there's always a snack, there's always a biscuit. Why? Because the self has found happiness there. It's just killing the body, that's all.

So that distinction between coming from the base of wisdom and coming from the base of self begins here within us as we observe what the self is doing. And the self is always caught up in that duality. Wanting, grasping what it likes, pushing away, running away from what it doesn't like. That's the game at the bottom of the triangle. Wanting, not wanting. Wanting, not wanting. And what you've done is lifted yourself to the apex of that triangle and you're looking down on that game. You're trying to liberate yourself from that.

There's no drive towards surviving. There is life. So long as there is life, one is alive. I mean, when the Buddha came enlightened, he didn't kill himself. He didn't say, well, that's it, that's finished, and jump off a cliff. He kept living. He kept living until the natural term of his life came to an end. Why?

It's a good question. Why? I mean, you could turn the question around itself. Why should he kill himself? He was happy. He was happy with the way it is. This is the way it is. I'm neither happy nor unhappy, this is just the way it is.

But I must say there was also something else, because remember that upon the enlightenment, what was the first thought that came to his mind? Once he'd actually understood what he'd actually come to experience, what was his first thought? His first thought was, who can I help? So with wisdom, compassion arises naturally. And that set him off on his teaching career. He didn't just sit there and say, great, I've got it, to hell with everybody else, I'll just keep asking for rice pudding.

You've been going to the Tibetans, I can see. Because I never agreed with them. Well, historically it happened the other way. Historically, the Buddha suffered, like us all, and he decided to see whether there was an end of suffering for himself. Having done that, then this thought came, who can I help? So it would be silly, from his point of view, to say that he had started off in order to help others. He started off wanting to help himself. Having done that, he then goes out and can help others.

Mahāyāna tended to be a reaction against the early Buddhism which was very much about individuals becoming enlightened so they tend to... but you can see that compassion is wisdom in action. It just flows. And then the Buddha put it in the Eightfold Path as soon as you have right understanding your attitude changes. Once your attitude changes your speech, your action, your livelihood changes just a natural outflow.

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