Ritual in Spiritual Practice

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 38:25

Samantacakkavālesu attharagacchantu devatā sadhammamunirajasāsanantusāgamokadam dhammasavanakālo ayaṃ bhadantānaṃ dhammasavanakālo ayaṃ bhadantānaṃ dhammasavanakālo ayaṃ bhadantānaṃ

Many thanks for the invitation. I was brought up in Manchester. I'm the real thing. Perfectly Northern. So when I was coming up, I asked Dr. Farrokh Gamage what I should talk about. He suggested I talk about rituals, the purpose of rituals, and ceremonies that we have in various types of Buddhism, but specifically in Theravāda Buddhism, and what their role is.

If we go back to the Buddha himself, he came out of a very ritualistic religion. Hinduism at that time—it's now called Hinduism because the British called it Hindu, because it was to do with the name of India. They themselves would have called it Dhamma, the truth, just a law, which became obviously a word that the Buddha himself used, the Dhamma. And as I'm sure you know, it was led by the Brahmin caste, and it was really based around a whole system of rituals, which were to do with appeasing gods and to do with getting power.

It first of all began, as all early religion, the idea was that there were all these gods who ruled, nature gods—god of fire, god of thunder, same as in Greek mythology. And the idea was that you offered these gods something and they did something for you. This became slightly corrupted as time went on because we understood that there came a time, if you did offer something to a god, he couldn't refuse. So therefore, huge sacrifices were made, especially of—the worst one was the horse sacrifice. Thousands of horses were sacrificed so they'd benefit the kingdom. And it was understood that once you made this great sacrifice, whatever you demanded from the gods would be given.

There were all sorts of varied rituals and ceremonies. For instance, as a child he watched his father conducting the plowing ceremony which opened the season for seeding the crops and things like that. So the Buddha grew up in a society which was just replete with all sorts of ceremonies and rituals, empowering rituals. And by the time he himself became enlightened, I don't think—and I stand corrected—apart from the rituals that he established for the order, which was to do basically with coming together once every two weeks to confess to each other any transgressions of the rules, and then to go through the actual ceremony of reading, reciting the rules, apart from that and of course the ordination ceremony and one or two little ceremonies like beginning the rainy season where monks have to stay in a monastery, he instituted very little rituals or ceremonies as we would recognize them in Buddhism as we find it in various countries now. And he seems not to have been at all interested in other rituals which

would have been part and parcel of any Indian life—birth rituals, marriage rituals, and death rituals. There's nothing in the scriptures to suggest that he attended such things or took part in such things. And the general understanding was that the religion of the time took care of that. And his own focus was basically on getting people to begin to move towards what he had discovered, the enlightenment, the end of suffering.

So it's against that background that we have to think of modern rituals and modern things that we've just now, all this chanting that we've done. Then towards the end of his life, he suggests that the four main places to do with his life's journey be a place where people could come and reflect on the teaching and pay homage. The main one, of course, is this huge stupa that was built in Kusinārā, and his birthplace, and where he became enlightened, Bodh Gayā. And all these places these days now, I believe, are huge tourist attractions and places of ceremony and worship by Buddhist followers from all around the world. Huge temples, especially the Japanese, I believe, have built great big beautiful temples. Hotels, of course. Casinos.

So, how is it then that various rituals began to grow up? Well, even there, with the establishment of these four places, places where people could go to reflect upon the teaching of the Buddha and pay homage, there's an understanding by the Buddha that once he's gone, people will need some sort of place, some sort of way of remembering his presence.

Now, if you think, at the time of the Buddha, he was always there. It wasn't necessary to have anything to remember him by. It wasn't necessary to have a ritual to conjure up some sort of relationship with him. He was always there. You could seek him out, find him, and ask your questions and get the direction you wanted. When that went, we can see from even Ānanda's question to him—who will you lead to guide us now, now that you're dying, you've set up the order, who will you lead as the next leader of the Saṅgha, next leader of the Buddhist community? And he says, well, leave anybody, which throws poor Ānanda off a bit, and he says, what I'm leaving you is the teaching that I've given, the *Dhamma*, and you yourself, you yourself must be your own refuge. No point in taking refuge in me. I'm not here anymore. And so he threw it back to Ānanda and he throws it back to us personally, so we ourselves must become our own refuge.

So now, if we look at our own practices, especially in the Theravāda vision, as I say, we can begin to see where certain rites and rituals might be just part and parcel of any spiritual path. Now, there will always be those people who can give up everything, go and live in the moor, somewhere up on the Peak District, and make it all the way to enlightenment, and with no need for anything, apart from just a place to sit and meditate. But they're very rare, they're very few and far between. Most of us need some sort of support.

And most of us can't get that sort of energy, that what's called *saṃvega*, that enthusiasm, that commitment to become enlightened. Most of us would prefer to do little ceremonies and do good and hope we get a better chance in the next life. So I'm postponing it. On the understanding that so long as we have to be reborn, there'll always be somewhere to be reborn. Very interesting.

So apart from those very rare instances where we get these people who can do that, I'm thinking especially of, there was a very famous teacher in Thailand, Ajahn Mun, whom you might have come across. Have you come across the writings of Mahāboowa, Ajahn Mahāboowa? So his teacher, Ajahn Mun, seems to have been one of these people. He just went for it. He just sat in the forest there in the jungles. They were jungles then. And just finally became enlightened.

So, most of us need some sort of structure, some sort of institution to work within. And if we look at the various rituals, you see that they have a specific role to play in terms of our spiritual practice. Taking refuge in the Buddha, for instance, when we bow to the Buddha.

What is the body language of bowing? In the Christian tradition, people kneel. Muslims bow. Hindus do all sorts of bows. What is that body language when you bow? What does it mean? It means that you're submitting yourself to the teaching, doesn't it? It means that whatever the Buddha says, you follow. It's a submission. It's getting rid of that ego which says, well, I want to do things my way. The Buddha's right, but I think I've got it slightly better than him. I don't need to follow him exactly. I can do it in the way that I want to do it.

I always remember when I first came to Buddhism, I started off in Zen Buddhism. And in Zen Buddhism, they don't do the full bow. They just bow from, like Japanese, they just bow from the hip. And I saw everybody doing this, and I thought, well, this is really weird. And as I did it, I felt this enormous resistance. Which is peculiar because I myself have been brought up a Catholic and you always have that sense of submission. Doing, in Christian terms, doing the will of God. But it felt very strange. And of course it was this ego. It didn't want to submit itself.

So the bowing, the actual prostration—even that word to prostrate oneself, is a physical act where we express this submission to the *Dhamma*. Now, with it there has to be this faith. Now, faith is a cardinal virtue that we have to have. Faith can be understood as an intellectual assent, it's an agreement, it's an understanding that we come to. Many people's progress is undermined by the fact that they can't come to believe entirely what the Buddha says. So there's always this little level of doubt. So long as there's doubt, there can't be commitment. There's always some pulling back. You can't give yourself 101%.

So, one first of all reads about the Buddha, or if you're lucky and born into Buddhism, then this faith is something natural in your heart. In the old days, we used to castigate, we used to look down upon blind faith because it didn't make any sense in a society which more and more believes in scientific investigation, not believing something just because somebody says it's true, the Pope or a Buddhist monk. The idea is that it has to be proved, you have to have an experiment and prove it's there. So, in our society we have this idea that blind faith is something which isn't good in itself. But if you have blind faith in what's absolutely true, then it's an asset, isn't it? You don't have to go through the problem of trying to convince yourself anymore.

So, in a sense, this is one of the attributes that somebody who's born into the Buddhist understanding has

naturally. And if you're not, if you're somebody who's converted to it, or somebody who has slowly come to that understanding, then one has to go through the reading, one has to go through the understanding process, one has to understand the Buddha's teaching, and with it there comes this sense of, this is right, this is meaningful to me, this makes sense to me. And as that comes, the faith grows. Faith itself, although it has its growth in intellectual understanding, is also a heart thing, isn't it? It's a sense of commitment.

And with it, of course, there grows this other great virtue, which is hope. Hope is that heart feeling, that heart state which knows that the enlightenment will come. We live in the hope of that eventuality. Hope is not here to be confused with expectation. Expectation is hope with a date—if I begin meditating now, I'll be enlightened in a couple of weeks.

So now this faith that we have has to be expressed. We have to express it some way. All our understanding, remember, is always expressed. It's expressed by the way we speak, by the way we communicate to people, by the way we move. It's expressed through our personality. Whether we like it or not, we're all teachers. As soon as somebody knows you're a Buddhist, then immediately, or at least involved in the *Dhamma*, or a meditator, then they immediately begin to judge you according to that yardstick. And whether we like it or not, we become teachers to anybody whom we're around.

So, this business of faith allows us to move into that area of right action, right speech, right livelihood, because from that faith there comes a conviction that the Buddha's teaching is correct and that somehow I have to re-engage with the world in a slightly different way.

So these rituals that we do, the first one, the simplest one, which is bowing to the Buddha, bowing to the *D hamma*, and then bowing to the Saṅgha, is this idea of submission, of a sort of contract, a negotiated contract that we have with the Buddha as a living memory. But it also, of course, has a much deeper spiritual understanding, because when you're bowing to the Buddha, you're really bowing to yourself. Because it's we, ourselves, that become the Buddhas. We, ourselves, have become Savaka Buddhas, Buddhas who have followed the Buddha as a way, rather than Sammāsambuddhas, Buddhas who have become enlightened by their own particular endeavour.

So there is that, bowing to the Buddha within us. And that means that we have to listen to this higher voice within us, which is, if we listen carefully enough, it's always guiding us into the skillful path, into the path which leads to our own liberation, because it's there within us. It's not something—remember, *Nibbāna* or these… the enlightenment itself is not something which is manufactured. It's not something that arrives at the end of a path. It's like for instance you take a train from London to Manchester and on the way Manchester grows and appears. When you get there Manchester is always there. So this Nibbānic element, for want of a better word, this buddho, the enlightenment is already there within us. It's a matter of discovering it, uncover.

It's a matter of lifting that consciousness, this *paññā*, this intuitive intelligence we have, to really discover this new relationship to the world, which the Buddha calls this liberation from suffering, liberation from

delusion. The process of liberating ourselves from delusion. So that when we bow, it's also an acknowledgement that we ourselves have this Buddha within us, have the *Dhamma* within us, have the actual truth already within our hearts, it's within our minds, it's within our bodies, it's right here. We don't have to go anywhere to get it, we don't have to buy it from somewhere or import it, it's already here.

And the bowing of the Saṅgha is, in a religious sense, it's accepting that there are people who came after the Buddha who have said that, by their own experience, they also proclaim the enlightenment. And we ourselves, when we bow, we also join that Saṅgha. We may not have achieved any of the noble powers and fruits, but it's there as a potential.

So when we do this bowing, it has a purposeful way of connecting us with our spiritual wealth, with our spiritual essence, which is within us.

Now, we then take the five precepts. So the five precepts are our basic moral law, just at least getting the coarse level of our behaviour to be more refined. It's the beginning of a refinement of our personalities. And that again is, we repeat it with the intention of taking them as training rules, right? They're not commandments, they're not something which have some sort of penalty behind them apart from the law of *kamma*. The idea of punishment isn't necessary. The law of cause and effect is a good enough teacher.

Various other rituals such as, we don't do it in the West, but in the East things like bowing to the Bodhi tree, things like that, are all to do with a similar sort of faith, a similar sort of devotion, a similar sort of giving, of emptying oneself for that moment of any ego desires and saying, that I commit myself to this path.

Now, when we come to things like Buddha Rūpa, the actual manifestation of the *Dhamma* in terms of art, in terms of temples, in terms of Buddha-rūpa, they're all there to create an atmosphere, to create a certain space where we can enter. This goes way back in human psychology, the magic circle. We need to create a special space where we can go, and it immediately affects us.

You walk into a hospital and you walk into an atmosphere. You walk into a school, you walk into a police station, you know exactly what the atmosphere is there. So when you walk into a temple or any holy place, there's an atmosphere, there's something about a place, a space, a circle, which allows us to enter into a different mind space, a different way of being in the world.

And the Buddha Rūpa itself—I mean, there were no Rūpas, as I'm sure you know, for about 500 years. The first Rūpas appeared in the Indian style in Mathura and in the Greek style in Gandhāra. And that's why they had this knobbly little head, by the way. This was the Greek way of expressing nobility. They used to curl their hair and put it in a topknot. So, we've been handed that. I'm sure the Buddha never quite had that on top of his head, but later on, as you see it develop, for instance, in the later stuff, especially of the Thais, you see that this thing turns into a flame, the flame of enlightenment.

So it becomes very symbolic in that sense. Now, the root for itself is there. I mean, what is that? It's meant

to be some sort of image of the enlightened mind — the composure of it, the silence of the face, the energy in the body posture. It's all meant to be a teaching thing. But it was something quite late before that. The Buddha was represented by the Bodhi tree footsteps. Various sorts of symbols were used to keep in mind for all who came along, in a devotional sense, that the Buddha, the Enlightenment, was somehow right there amongst us. We didn't have to... it was a point of reference, you might say.

Now, I'm sure you all saw that scene of the Buddha Rupa being blown up in Afghanistan. I have to say, it took me by surprise. I think it was the violence of the explosion, but I felt quite a pain in my heart. I felt, God, I think I was expecting it just to crumble, but the actual explosion was really terrible. An expression, really, of their anger, wasn't it? I mean, they're just very angry people. But in a sense, of course, we don't need any of this. See, that's the point. It's not part of our spiritual practice. This is something that we need because they're little helps, they're little something which lifts us on the path. They're not absolutely necessary.

So when it comes to these rituals, they are little entrances, little performances, little entrances to get us into a different frame of mind. Now, what is that different frame of mind for? It's to get us into meditation. And that's the purpose of it. The bowing is that expression of, you know, I'm now going to obey the Buddha's teaching. And what is the Buddha's teaching? The Buddha's teaching is to meditate. The Buddhist teaching is to practice specifically, not simply meditation, but the way we behave in ordinary daily life. But it's an entrance into a state of mind which is about turning our lives around and becoming to express the purity of heart.

So, even privately, when we're in our own homes, to, in the morning, to take the refuges, to bow, to take the refuges, and to take the precepts sets us into that frame of mind where we can then sit and begin to do some small meditation. Now, what is it that the meditation does? The meditation connects us with what we've just bowed to. That's the whole point of it. The whole point of meditation, the whole point of the *vipa ssanā*, is to discover that within us which is the enlightenment. As soon as we are in a state of good *vipassa nā*, we're already beginning to touch upon, we're already beginning to taste the taste of *nibbāna*. The Buddha says in the Dhammapada, he says, those who are mindful are in the neighbourhood of *nibbāna*. That's how close we are when we're in a meditative state.

Now, if you don't meditate, what's going to happen? This is the problem. The problem is if you don't meditate, then what happens to all these rituals? They start to become empty forms. There's no meaningfulness to doing that unless there's a movement from the ritual into practice. The ritual is there simply to create a ground, simply to create an atmosphere within ourselves so that we can then begin to practice.

Now, although I've said meditation, because I think meditation is a core practice in the sense that if we can do even twenty minutes in the morning it sets us, it puts us in contact with that state of mind that we have to carry throughout the day. I say state of mind, but it's more truthful to say a level of consciousness, a

way of being, a way of seeing things. And from there we go into ordinary daily life and we connect, we keep trying, even though we lose it throughout the day — the sense of mindfulness, the sense of being here, the sense of being attentive and careful with what we do, what we say, the way we behave, the way we communicate. Even though we lose it, the whole point is to come back, to keep remembering.

One of the earlier definitions of *sati* was remembering. Remembering what? Remembering to, in terms of Buddhism, remembering to be here. *Sati*, awareness, mindfulness. Whenever we're aware, whenever we're mindful, we're here. You can't be anywhere else if you're mindful. You're right in the present moment. So the whole point of the meditation is, in terms of ordinary daily life, is to keep on connecting us with this centre. And throughout the day, even though we lose it a million times, we keep coming back, we keep coming back, we keep coming back. Now that's the practice. That is the practice. There isn't anything more to it than just that, than just bringing ourselves back into the present moment. We're establishing mindfulness.

Now, if you don't do that, then what happens to all these rituals and all these performances? They take on a certain empty quality because they won't have, it won't lead to this meditation which ultimately has an effect on your life. Even in the Buddhist monastic life, there are certain things that... very simple things, like putting on the same robes every day in the morning, having to cut your hair off every couple of weeks, or whenever the society of monks that you're with do so. These are all little rituals just to keep reminding the person who is in the monastic order that they've joined the monastic order. It demands a certain way of behaving, a certain way of speaking, a certain way of being in the world.

And this morning ritual that, really, I think, is necessary for most people who practice in the Dharma — this idea of just spending a small time in the morning to reconnect with the teaching and to go through that business of committing ourselves to the teaching and then to take the precepts as a basic way of behaving. All this is very meaningful so long as there's the effort to live in that state of mind, in the state of the enlightened person. If you lose that, then these rituals just become empty. And eventually, because there's no effect from the ritual, there's a great danger that the doubt seeps in. Before you know it, you basically stop practicing and stop doing the ritual.

So I don't know whether that's clarified a little bit of the situation. If there's any questions about... observations, contradictions — I always like a contradiction — criticism, editorials.

"Whilst accepting that the rituals give us a framework eventually to be in touch with meditation, *nibbāna*, could you enlighten us how the concept of *pañcakūle* evolved and what's the purpose of — I have heard that it's good to give the *pañcakūle* when you are alive?"

Can you remind me what *pañcakūle* is?

"That's the one death ritual."

The death ritual, that's right. Excuse me. You mean making offerings for the benefit of the dead?

"Yes, and that I have heard the philosophy that it's good to give it if you're when you're alive rather than somebody else offering it at your funeral."

Oh yeah, you mean as soon as you're born you do a funeral tradition? That's not bad. At least it puts you in a good frame of mind, doesn't it, for the rest of your life. I don't know.

You see, all these rituals about doing something for our ancestors and for our forebears, as far as I'm aware, there's nothing of it in the scriptures. These are something really which are there for the person who's bereaved, so they feel that they can do something for the person and in doing so there's a certain relief in that person, that they can are offering something of their lives, of their benefit, to this person who's passed on.

Now, I think we can presume since the whole universe is interconnected and everything has an effect on everything else that maybe they do receive these blessings from us. But I think most of these exercises are much more understandable if you actually see them as practices for ourselves and practices for the healing of our own hearts when they're broken, and for the growth of our hearts.

If you take, for instance, loving-kindness. Now, we practice loving-kindness, first of all, in the classic tradition of first of all to ourselves, then to those who are near, etc., etc., and then we go out to those who we're indifferent to, and finally to enemies. Now, I think we can generally believe that, in terms of minds, that we might be connected and that it affects other people when we offer them benefit, even if they live on the other side of the world or in a different realm.

But what we're really doing is developing the heart of love within us. We're developing a different relationship to the world. And that's what we're really doing. So that, for instance, when we take that loving-kindness that we might feel quite naturally to those we love, and then we bring to mind people whom we're indifferent to, and eventually enemies, then that love doesn't become bounded by attachments.

The difference: *mettā*, love, is an internal attitude that the Buddha has within his heart which is not dependent on the object. That's what *mettā* is. For most of us, unenlightened beings, that love is dependent on whom we see. We feel more love towards this person and less to all these other persons. So, what we're trying to do is re-educate that heart, transform it, transform those negative states into an inner attitude which is no longer dependent on the world. It just comes out of that enlightened mind.

Now, that's the, shall we say, the real reason for doing it, but when we're doing it you can see it does have an effect on us in the way we behave. So for instance, so many people have told me who do the practice that for instance if at work or amongst their family there's someone with whom they've got a big contradiction, a lot of aggression and stuff, just practicing at least the level of no harm — no harmful response, no backbiting, no response to their hatred or dislike. That's presuming that they dislike you rather than you dislike them, right?

So, in a situation like that, what happens by creating this *mettā*, by creating this loving-kindness, when you see the person, and remember that human beings are extremely good at recognising people's states from way off — you can tell, even from a person, I don't know how many yards away, whether they're your friend or not, just by the way they're walking, the look on their face and everything. So, just going into work, going into that situation where there's aggression towards us, and having established this attitude of no harm, it's already in our posture, it's already in our body language, it's already on our face, which means that the person with aggression has nothing to get hold of. Anger needs something to be angry with it, for it to grow. If anger is just anger, it just fades away if nothing responds. And so, many people who practice loving-kindness find that these situations of aggression and all that are just dissolved by it.

Now, you can be mystical if you want. You can think that this amazing loving-kindness has burst out of your heart every morning and evening towards this audible person, has changed their hearts and all this other stuff. Or you can believe that just the practice has changed you. And because it's changed you, it's changed them.

Now, in terms of this whole business of death and separation, these are really heavy times for us, aren't they? We ordinary human beings, we suffer a lot when somebody dies, somebody that we love. It's a painful, painful situation. And somehow we need a ritual. Somehow we need to express that loss. We need to reconnect with the dead person in some way and express all the things that perhaps we never expressed when they were alive and to find some way of relieving our hearts of this grief.

Now the problem with great grief of course is this confusion as to what love is, because we love in an attached way, and it's the attachment, remember, that's caused the pain, not the love. There's a hole in the heart caused by that attachment. We presume that if we stop grieving, we therefore stop loving, because the only way we've ever loved is through attachment. And therefore you can get into this awful downward spiral of going into morbid grief. Yeah, and then you have to end up on Prozac. So it's pretty useless.

So, these little rituals, a way in which we human beings can let go, can let go and say, well, whatever I did that did any harm to you, I'm trying to make up. You see what I mean? It has that sort of... Now, in terms of the Thai tradition, which I didn't know actually, in a sense, that's what the Buddha is teaching. I mean, what woke him up, what woke him up out of his indulgence in pleasure, in believing that life, the life he was living would just go on forever, which we do, don't we, when we're young — in the twenties, you never think you're going to die, do you? I know, they're good times.

And then what wakes him up, sickness, old age and death. That's what he sees, and for him it creates what we would call these days an existential crisis. He doesn't know what he's living for. I mean, there he is having a great old time, and suddenly he realises that he's going to come to an end. And such was the refinement of his mind that it really hit him hard. And that's why he goes to the drastic steps of leaving his family in search of some end to suffering, because he was in touch with that suffering. He realised he was

going to die.

So one of the great meditations that he set for us in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the discourse on meditation, on awareness, on establishing awareness, is the meditation, the cemetery meditation, where you observe the body decomposing over its nine stages. There was an American who turned up in Sri Lanka. He was in the newspaper, actually. Happened before I got there. I think he was very young in the practice, and he decided to do this practice of watching dead bodies corrode.

Now, what he did was, he got himself a cave, as far as I understand it, and he got himself a cave up in the hill somewhere, and he built himself a glass box with a funnel coming out of it. And he carried a dead body up there to watch it decompose, and it seems that he got permission to do this. He got a body of a criminal or something. That was a strange story, yeah.

So he took it up there and began to watch this body decompose and meditate on it. And the next thing, and the newspaper said, now finally, here's a real monk. Finally we found a real monk who's doing a real meditation watching dead bodies decompose. And the next part, then the newspapers went dead because he shot off to Calcutta to see Mother Teresa. I don't know, it was a breakdown probably. It's a heavy meditation, isn't it?

So... this constant remembering, this constant reminding us, reminding ourselves that in fact sickness, old age and death will come. Old age may not.

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