The Illimitables

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 42:00

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sambhasambuddhassa namo tassa bhagavato arahato sambhasambuddhassa namo tassa bhagavato arahato sambhasambuddhassa

Homage to the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So you can see how that exercise we've just done, loving kindness, *mettā*, it's normally put under this word mettā, but goodwill, developing goodwill, I prefer that to loving kindness. It sounds a bit mawkish to me. And you can see how it complements the vipassanā, I hope.

So, there's one side of our practice which is to do with purifying, the purgatory. And that includes also this insight, these insights into how we're creating suffering for ourselves. And that goes deep, remember. And on the other side, there's developing the heart, developing the heart of goodwill.

And these are expressed as the illimitables, the four illimitables: love, compassion, joy, peace. And they're illimitable in what you might say is a horizontal and a vertical sense. Horizontally, they're meant to be innumerable beings. So there's no limit to the amount of beings that you can offer your goodwill to. Illimitable. We don't say infinite. And vertically, there's no end to the depth that you can develop that attitude. It's indefinite. You can keep on developing love until you become this enormous film star charismatic. People hang on to your every word and want to be hugged.

And it's the same force that you'll see this afternoon that can be used to heal because it's also a very strong relationship to the body. Just remember that the mental force and the physical force, mental and physical energy in Buddhism is just a continuum. It's not as though they're completely separate. The one saturates the other. The mind saturates the body.

And when it comes to the first one, love, the commentaries always talk about a near and a far enemy. An obvious one and a subtle one, that's what it means. So the obvious enemy of love is hate. That's pretty straightforward. You can't hate and love at the same time. Not exactly at the same time. You can hate somebody and love them in a sequence. You can't do it exactly at the same time. And hate of course closes the heart, it shuts it off. And remember, hatred and fear are flip sides.

So it's said, I don't know how true this is, but the paranoid is afraid because they project their hatred into the other person's eyes. That's what we do often, isn't it? You might see a friend walking down the other side of the road and they don't acknowledge you. So you go away thinking I've said something wrong or they hate me now. But actually they just didn't notice you.

So we undermine that hate by again allowing it to arise. Remember you can't kill a conditioning. You've really got to really accept that. You can't kill, you can't annihilate a conditioning. If there's hatred in the heart there's only one way it's going to be cured and that is to allow it to express itself and you have to be very careful not to fall into the fantasies.

There's a little development there. You've all had the experience of being slightly annoyed with somebody in the morning. They've said something at work or something. And quite unmindfully you've allowed this to generate a little story. And it gets worse and worse and by the evening you've strangled them and written poison letters and all that sort of stuff. And that's what the mind does. It'll generate, it'll proliferate. So stopping that, recognizing that, and just staying with the pain, staying with the hurt, you see, you're allowing it to die out. So that's what you've got to really grasp if we want to come to the end of hatred.

And remember that all these negative things are not, how can we say, they're not dependent on an object. A disposition is not dependent on an object. The object is the button which when pressed allows this disposition to manifest. So the Buddha talks about two things, he talks about *anusaya* and *kilesa*. Anusaya is latent tendencies, latent tendencies.

The fact is we don't know how much hatred we've got in the system. We don't know how much fear there is. That's just a fact, it's buried within the psyche somewhere, it's buried in the body. And suddenly when something happens, this hatred comes out, this fear comes out. And often it's entirely inappropriate to the situation, isn't it? You know, road rage, for instance. It might be that just on this occasion somebody cut you up. And suddenly you're full of this rage. You see, if they'd have done it and your business was good and you had a happy relationship, you'd just swear at a bit. But because you're in a bad mood, this rage comes out and you go out and stab them. It happens, doesn't it? It's terrible.

Computer rage. How many of you have smashed up your computer? Totally inappropriate response. And sometimes we can get this inappropriate response, especially with objects or people whom, of course, we feel can't come back at us. You know? The child. The dog. They can't bite you back, so there's a sort of permission to let go of it.

So what we have is this disposition and I liken it to a balloon and it's being held there, you see, with just this membrane being held there. Something happens and it's just that little pinprick and all of it tries to get out through that little hole. So this disposition, all the anger we have and the anxiety and all that, it's all there as a programming. It's a good way to really see it. It's just there as a latent programming. And you don't know how big it is until something allows it to manifest. And then it becomes this obvious thing, and that's what the Buddha refers to as a kilesa. I can't remember how they translate that now. Can you? Kilesa? Neurosis, that'll do.

So that's part of our practice is to know what to do when something negative arises. That's part of our practice. And the real insight in this is to know that you can't do anything about this stuff except to allow it

to burn out. And that's it.

So in the scriptures the Buddha always talks about going from hatred to non-hatred, cruelty to non-cruelty, see this neutral state. Then there's the transformation. It's all the same energy, remember? So that which we hated, through the practice, through a generous practice, through these sorts of meditations like mettā, become transformed. So the amount of hate we had eventually turns out to be the amount of love we have. And then of course we can develop love. So nothing is wasted in the universe. Nothing is wasted in the heart anyway. Everything eventually through this sort of practice becomes transformed. And you end up with the Buddha heart, the Buddha mind.

Now the subtle enemy of love, of course, is attachment. And that's a difficult one. Because we have all sorts of attachments. Romantic attachments, erotic attachments, attachments to parents, attachments to their children, attachments to friends, attachments to cars. God, there's all sorts of attachments. And that attachment turns the person whom you love into an object. That's what you're doing. Because what an attachment does is it is seeking from that person that which I need to be happy. That's what an attachment does.

So when we have an attachment to something, I only want from that person what makes me happy. As soon as they do something which doesn't come into that little circle of what I like and want, then I get that rejection, I get the hatred, I get the pushing away. So that isn't love.

Now, you have to be very careful here. Not to think that therefore this is somehow immoral. You can't say that a parent's attachment to their child is immoral. But it's not skillful. That's all. It's just not skillful. So we see it in things like when a child gets hurt, you see. If a child is hurt and the parent sees that it's just a scratch or something, then of course they have this, you know, comfort, hugging, all that sort of stuff, it'll be alright, etc., etc. But if the parent sees that the child is really hurt, then there comes this enormous fear. And that doesn't help the situation, does it? So that's a real subtle one, that. You have to really work with it. And again, you can't kill the attachment. You can't get rid of it. You can't pretend it isn't there and develop this open-heartedness. It's just the gentle working with it.

Now, in the discourse on that loving-kindness that I chant, the Buddha likens love to a mother. And he says that, are these four illimitables to a mother? So, with the youngest child, I think it's in this sequence, can't be exact. With the youngest child, she's a friend. A friendly relationship. With the child who's sick, she's compassionate, looks after the child. With the child who's successful, she's full of sympathetic joy. And with the child that leaves home, she's equanimous. Being able to let somebody go.

So that's the sign of a detached love. Because what you're saying to the person is, you're utterly free to be as you are. You're utterly free to be as you are. I don't need you. So we think that part of our love contract is need. But that need is neurotic. That need is coming because we're not looking into ourselves for the fullness.

So that's why the Buddha says, you know, the spiritual person, seek solitude. Be as lonely as a rhinoceros. I don't know anything about rhinoceros, but whatever the habits of a rhinoceros are, they're definitely to be alone. And that distinction between being alone, being solitudinous, and loneliness. See, you know the difference, eh? See, when you're lonely, there's that hole. You want somebody to fill it. So you go and get this person and fill it. There's your attachment. You call it love.

But actually, when that loneliness comes, we should seek that solitude. We should stay by ourselves. And instead of calling up that friend, turning on the TV, making a cup of tea, we should do the vipassanā. We should stay with that sense of loneliness. As that begins to dissipate, what comes in its stead? We have love to hatred, cruelty to compassion. Loneliness to what? To solitude. Solitude is being at peace, at one with oneself.

Occasionally you feel it. But these things have to be developed. And you have to not be confused by those things that are negative in us. They'll always give you a good excuse, you know. You might not, for instance, recognize the loneliness. You say to yourself, ah, Mary, yeah, I'll give her a ring. I'm sure she'd like to hear from me. You displace it onto this poor person. And in fact, you haven't recognized, you haven't locked into your own sense of loneliness.

So all you can do is, and this is the whole point of vipassanā, is to lift that awareness, that intelligence, so that during the day one is with the mind, one is with the heart, one doesn't get caught up in it. That's the whole point of developing the vipassanā mind. During the day you see, ah, lonely, you see. Then you see that desire to seek this, seek that. You just stay still, wait for it to pass. And eventually, you develop a love which is non-attached.

What does that mean? Does it mean that sometimes there's a detached love? It sounds cold, it sounds horrible, detached love, you know. But all it means is a love which is not dependent on the object. So it doesn't matter who stands before me, they get the same treatment. They get the same generosity, open-heartedness, etc. Now I'm not talking personally, understand me. But that's what we're trying to develop, we're trying to develop that open hearted love not dependent on the object.

When it comes to compassion, you can see the same thing. The obvious enemy of compassion, of course, is cruelty. It's completely the opposite. Compassion is a desire, this is how it's stated, is a desire to alleviate somebody's suffering. It's as simple as that. You want to help somebody who's in some sort of pain or suffering. Cruelty is the opposite. You want to enjoy it. The worst hell in Buddhism is reserved to those who are cruel, because it's obviously the complete opposite of the Buddhist teaching. I mean, here it is going around telling everybody how to alleviate suffering, and there are people going around purposely trying to make people suffer. In Buddhist understanding, there's nothing worse.

So again, when we feel that cruelty, you know, that very subtle desire to put somebody down, slander them, stand on their toe when they're not looking, things like that, give them a push onto the... When you feel that, you know, when you don't like somebody and you hear that they've got a serious illness and you

can hear yourself saying, good... There are all these little cruelties stuck inside us, you see. So he mustn't feel guilty about that.

See, that's something else. We're not supposed to feel guilty about conditioning. Conditionings that we end up with are being manufactured out of ignorance, out of delusion. So now we're coming out of that. We're coming to a point of wisdom where we recognize, that wasn't very nice. One doesn't blame oneself. One just recognizes, that's a conditioning I don't want to develop. It's as simple as that. I just don't want to develop that conditioning anymore.

So we know that conditioning will come up again and will fall again. But our attitude now is we don't want to develop it anymore. So we get more skillful. We don't feed it anymore. And eventually it dies away. Or at least it doesn't hijack us. That's what we don't want.

Guilt and shame in Buddhism, the Buddha calls them the two guardians of society. But he's not referring here to the guilt we feel when we do something wrong, the dread of consequences. And he's not referring to the shame we feel when there's a gaffe, a social gaffe or something, or we hurt somebody. He's not talking about the consequence of unskillful action. He's talking about that little memory, that little warning that comes up when we are tempted to fiddle the taxes, which is highly topical, when we're tempted, as soon as the temptation comes, you see, the fear of consequence arises, just as a memory, the shame, you see, and immediately they guard us from doing that.

If that's not internalized, well, that's a psychopath, isn't it? A psychopath has no sense, a sociopath, they've no sense of right and wrong. You see these kids, you know, no sense of right and wrong. No sense of shame. There was that incredible thing I heard on the radio or television, I can't remember, where that little black boy was killed in London. Damilola Taylor, that's right. And they interviewed all the young people, the police interviewed. And one of the young kids, we're talking 10, 12 years old, so the policeman's asking this question, and he nuts him, broke his nose. It's amazing, isn't it? It wasn't within my generation to do that. There's just absolutely no fear of consequence. It can't be touched. And it just produces anarchy, doesn't it? It produces terrible stuff.

So those two things, fear of consequence, I'm not talking about now the guilt which arises from a feeling of being evil. That's something else. That's a sort of existential guilt, you might say. That goes deeper in a definition of self. I am evil. So when that comes up, just note it and let it pass. No, I'm just talking about those feelings of dread, you know, like you didn't... You shouldn't have done that, something's going to happen at work, that sort of thing. And they become your guardians, see? So that's a sort of sensitivity.

So cruelty is the opposite of compassion. The subtle enemy is grief. Grief. It's interesting, isn't it? Grief. Subtle enemy is grief. So often people grieve for somebody, pity, pity their state. So what's that? What's happening there when you do that? Where's that coming from? I mean, the desire, if somebody's sick or somebody, whatever, and you want to help them, the desire should be a joyful desire, a desire to help, a desire to help them in their situation, lend them some money, whatever.

But if you slip into pity, pity them, what's happening there, you see? Can you agree with some of these thoughts? I mean, you haven't said anything. Well, the question is, is it necessary? I mean, we do it. We do it, but does it help? Does it help to pity somebody? I mean, how do we feel when somebody pities us? It's coming from a conceit, isn't it? It's coming from some place, almost, I always feel it's coming from some place of displaced fear, actually, and anxiety might happen to me.

And it gets in the way, of course, because then you overdo. You overdo. You get into that do-gooder thing. Because you're compensating. Oh, let me help you. Let me help you. Go away. And the other subtle one of compassionate action is compassion. When we do something out of compassion, when we help somebody, we do get a pleasant feeling.

But when we make that pleasant feeling the purpose for doing, then of course we end up as a real do-gooder then. So I always think, supposing now you went along to your friend and said, you heard they were sick. So you said, you go along and help them. I'll come over and help you. So you go over there with this idea of cooking them chicken soup or something. When you get there, they say, can you clean the toilet? I didn't come here to do that. See what I mean? Whenever we're acting out of compassion and very subtly we're doing it in order to feel happy, we don't want to do what another person wants us to do. We want to do what I want to do for you. That's really oppressive.

So again, you can't kill that conditioning. You've really got to accept that that's the way it is, that's the conditioning arising. And then, having acknowledged that, you may be doing it in order to feel happy. You see, you just acknowledge it, it's there within the heart. But there's also the true compassionate desire to alleviate somebody's suffering. So you make that your conscious desire. And the conscious desire that you empower is your new conditioning. So the more you empower a positive thought to help somebody in whatever way they want to be helped, see, that is developing the upper part of the egg, that's developing the compassion. It doesn't mean to say that there won't be all that disgust coming up, fancy asking me to clean the toilet, all that sort of stuff. So that still comes up, but it's a sort of afterthought, it's a leftover. One hasn't empowered that.

So it's the same with generosity. When we give something, a present or a donation or whatever, you see, as you give, there may be some feeling of goodness about it for the benefit of others. So you might be doing it for that reason. You might be doing it for guilt, I've got too much money. Not too many of those, but... But what you do is, before you give, before you actually commit the action, you have to suffuse your heart and mind with the right intention. So I'm giving this for the benefit of others. And when it's there, there's a real purposeful giving. That's when you give. As soon as you act, that's your karma, that's your action, that's your conditioning.

So there's an intention, there's an action, and those actions produce a conditioning, which grow depending on how you keep on supporting that intention. So there you are, and you've given, and you've said, I give for the benefit of others. Really suffuse that and you give it, you see. And you hear this little voice. You are

so wonderful. Now you see, that's old conditioning. That's coming up from the old thing about wanting to be somebody's pet, wanting to be somebody's friend. So you just recognize that. That's the old conditioning. You haven't empowered that. And eventually that would die away.

Or you might get the other side. Too much, get some back. So you just let it go, pass away. If you feel guilty about that, you know the guilt, because it's inappropriate. He didn't mean, that wasn't what was empowered, that's just an old conditioning coming through. So again, you can see the purpose of mindfulness. You don't just give. So you have to stop for a minute and really get your heart right. You don't just go out and do good. You really get your heart right.

When somebody says, can you help me? You don't say yes. A lot of us suffer from that, don't we? I mean, I do. Can you do yes? And then you think, I don't want to do that. If you just stop a minute, you see. There's all these little tricks of language. Well, I might be busy. I'll have to look that up in my diary. And then so long as you've got the good reason for doing it, then you do it. If you don't want to do it, you shouldn't feel guilty about that. If you feel guilty about that, then one should note that, one should see, ah, guilt. Feel it, allow it to pass away.

So you can see that this, what we're doing here as a sitting practice, is specifically important every day, every moment of our lives, to keep that awareness going, so that when you're talking to somebody, there is that more spacious awareness, that you're aware of what they're saying, but you're also aware of your reaction here. Not to always be going outward. Sort of balanced awareness. Even now as you're listening to me you can be aware.

Joy. The enemy of joy is jealousy. Envy. It really cuts through, doesn't it? You can't feel joyful for somebody if you're jealous of them. So when jealousy comes up, and it's one of those things that we never, we don't like to acknowledge about ourselves at all, the fact that we're envious or jealous, because what it's suggesting is that somebody's better than us. Nobody wants to believe that. And I just make an arbitrary distinction between envy and jealousy all over it. Maybe it's not quite like that. But envy is wanting what they have and jealousy is wanting what they have and hating them for having it. Which is an added twist.

So again, all you can do is accept that that's there and let it burn, pass away. And of course the joy that comes up is then that much more joyful. You can feel great joy, can't you, for people whom you love. That's not a problem. Parent for their children, it comes naturally. Sympathetic joy, reciprocal joy. And the subtle thing is again that sort of attachment. Wanting to be joyful in order to feel always joyful. So you're not joyful for somebody, you're only joyful for them because it makes you joyful. So again, you're turning that person into an object and you want them to do things that are joyful for you. So again, you make people do things that make you happy.

I mean, that's also a parental thing sometimes, isn't it? The parent wants the child to be in a way that they foresee would be good for the child, which would make them feel happy about their child. Getting a degree and stuff like that. Pushing them. And it's done under the guise of it's good for you. But often it's

this business of, I want to feel happy about you. But that's not a sympathetic joy. Not reciprocal joy. And that's something you can develop. You can develop joy every time you hear of somebody who has won the lottery and stuff like that. To say to yourself, how wonderful. May they be happy. The person who got the job that you wanted, may they be happy.

And then finally there's equanimity. So now equanimity is a funny one. It's a funny word, equanimity. It's balance of mind. A balance of mind. So you expect a judge to be equanimous. No matter what the emotional state is in the court, you expect them to be above it. You expect them not to get caught up in that. Not to be judgmental. So obviously there's your main enemy, to be judgmental, to lose that balance of mind, to take sides. You lose it.

And the subtle enemy is just again seeking to be calm for calm's sake. See, as soon as you make these virtues their purpose, it immediately corrupts it. If you want to be generous to get the joy of generosity, then it corrupts your generosity, because often you're asked to be generous with exactly that which you don't want to give. Some people are very generous with their time, others with their money, some with neither. It's just a fact. So some people might be very generous with their time, but if you ask them for a penny for a cup of tea, they don't want to see you. And that's them, that's them, drawing a circle around their idea of generosity.

So as soon as you start practicing a virtue for the virtue's sake, then you'll find yourself in this, you'll find yourself drawing a line, you'll find yourself being unable to develop it illimitably. Illimitably. So that, these are the four principles. Illimitables. And you can see that their development is equally important to developing this *vipassanā*, this insight.

Any questions about that? Anything that's come up about that? Clarifications? Observations? Criticism?

"What did you say earlier? Doing it for itself."

Yeah, always making it its own object. To be joyful in order to be joyful.

"It took me a second when you were referring back, when you were saying about guys in the basement. It took me two seconds to say, who's putting up on you? In this case, it was the kid. But in relation to the last one, equanimity, which you were saying there, and you've made an earlier reference to kids, or these young people. It sort of came across to me that it was a sort of general criticism of people who would be in a certain condition and would only know how to react one way."

Oh, no, that's presumed. They've not been taught. They're in a sort of vicious circle. Family and social circumstance, definitely. But they, you see, these children, if they move into the spiritual life, they can't blame. They can't put blame on that social circumstance and parents and all that. So this is the point. If you keep doing that, then you're unable to come out of the vicious circle within yourself, because you presume that this conditioning has been caused by others, whereas what we've discovered is that it's actually produced by ourselves.

Now, you've got to make a distinction between responsibility and culpability. You're not to be blamed because we've ended up with cruelty in our hearts, but we are responsible for it. That's a subtle difference. In other words, unwittingly, at an early age, because of circumstances, I have created within myself a lot of cruelty. Now, I can't be blamed for that because at that time I was unaware, deluded. Now I end up, through the meditation, all through ordinary life, realizing how much cruelty is in my system. So it's my responsibility now to get rid of it. See?

That's a relief, isn't it, when we think like that? We're not looking to blame anybody or to put the finger on somebody. All we've done is that we've ended up with this personality, with this conditioning. And now that we've woken up to it, the job is to clear it out. And here's a system that can help. If we start blaming or looking for somebody to blame, then that creates another negativity in the heart, doesn't it? Revenge and all that. Yes, sure.

"So it is in the nature of the being then that we have a constant battle, even if we go to a certain level of cruelty and compassion and try and keep on moving forward. Is it a part of being human?"

Well, you see, at some point in existence, as consciousness grows, we simply make this mistake of thinking that this is what we are. That's the big problem. So therefore, you get into this contradiction with the world. The contradiction is, this is me, and I want to be happy, so I'll accumulate around me things that make me happy. And that moves to greed, it moves to crime, etc., etc., yeah? Anything that touches me, which makes me feel unhappy, then I want to push away. So it moves to hatred, cruelty, all that sort of stuff. So I'm caught in that contradiction all the time. I'm always in a state of contradiction.

And the only way I can overcome that is by seeing that contradiction and stop playing that game. So the image I have is of a triangle. So the bottom part of the triangle is this aversion, accumulation, aversion, greed. And we're constantly running up and down this base of a triangle, completely caught up in it. When we lift ourselves up out of that in meditation, we're at the apex of a triangle. We can see this gain.

So that's why I say in that exercise on forgiving somebody, you bring up the memory and you can see how you want to get your own back. You don't want to forgive them. You can see that. And that's the game of the base of the triangle. When you stand up at the top and you just watch this game, because you're not in it, you're not empowering it. So it has to die away. And that's the role of will in Buddhism. The will is what empowers the gain. So as soon as you withdraw your attention from it, withdraw your awareness from that level, that's a level of self. And you come to the level of observing that, then of course you've withdrawn the energy from it. So it goes on and on, but eventually it dies away.

But that's a very important distinction to make between responsibility and blame, and blaming somebody. And remember that in Buddhist understanding, nobody eventually escapes their problems. So if somebody's being cruel, they themselves will suffer the consequence of that. So the idea of punishment is untenable in Buddhism. That doesn't mean to say you can't put somebody away if they're a danger or put them somewhere they can be re-educated or something. But you can't have the attitude of punishing

them. It's a form of revenge. Which doesn't mean to say that in Buddhist countries people don't punish each other. But it's untenable. Because it's just understood. As soon as somebody does harm, they will suffer the consequence of that. And that's what we're doing. Every time you sit, I mean, all that restlessness and all that stuff, what is it? Where's that coming from? Some of it's coming from deluded decisions at a time when we weren't aware. But some of them are coming from active wrongdoing.

"When is it appropriate to intervene in a situation which is really not in your business, even though it's obviously obvious?"

Yeah, there was... This comes up. I had with a friend of mine out in Thailand and he had this idea of detachment. He was developing detachment. So when he saw a cat playing around with a mouse, he didn't do anything. He was completely detached. Whereas I've seen also in monasteries where a cat has got hold of a bird, the monk has run out and given the cat a kick. And then just held the bird up. It was actually quite beautiful. The bird had been killed. Its lungs had been punctured. And he just held it up with its wings. All compounded things arise and pass away.

I should think those sort of decisions really, it's up to a person's own sensitivity to that, whether they're open to advice. Sometimes you give advice or you want to help, but actually you're making things worse because they don't want to know. But our attitude should be, of course, yes, to undermine suffering wherever we see it. I mean, this is what's come up with all this business of these wars on terrorists and stuff, the massacre in Rwanda, for instance. If we'd have been a more advanced international society, we probably wouldn't have let that happen. Just got in there and pulled them apart.

"Yeah, sometimes it's wise not to say anything?"

Time, place and suitability. Right speech, the Buddha says. When you want to say something, make sure it's suitable. Make sure it's the right time and the right place.

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