Survey of Theravāda Buddhism

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1:00:42

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.

So now, what I'm going to try and do is give you the full panoramic view of the Theravāda process of enlightenment, the actual practice. Not so much the theory, the theories behind it, but exactly what the practice is.

Interestingly enough, it's not based directly on the Buddha's teaching. It so happened that a certain monk called Punnamantaniputta. His name would be Punna, the son of Mantani, like Sāriputta, called after your mother. And he's been heard of as being very good, he's understood the Dharma. So Sāriputta goes off to see him. And they don't know each other, or rather Sāriputta knows him, he doesn't know Sāriputta. And Sāriputta puts him to these questions and asks him, what's his understanding of the Dharma?

And I'll read this simile first. As to that friend, in other words, how does one attain nirvāna? I shall give you a simile, for some wise men understand the meaning of a statement by means of a simile. Suppose that King Pasenadi of Kosala, while living in Sāvatthi, had some urgent business to settle in Sāketa, and that between Sāvatthi and Sāketa seven relay chariots were kept ready for him. Then King Pasenadi of Kosala, leaving Sāvatthi through the inner palace door, would mount the first chariot, and by means of the first relay chariot he would arrive at the second relay chariot. Then he would dismount from the first chariot and mount the second chariot. And by means of the second chariot he would arrive at the third chariot. By means of the third chariot he would arrive at the fourth. Very exciting stuff. Finally, of course, he does actually get to the seventh chariot. And by means of the seventh chariot, he would arrive at the inner palace door of Sāketa. Then, when he had come into the inner palace door, his friends and acquaintances, his kinsmen and relatives would ask him, "Sire, did you come from Sāvatthi to the inner palace door in Sāketa by means of this relay chariot?" How then should King Pasenadi of Kosala answer in order to answer correctly?

And it's told us again. So now, when he talks about these chariots, he talks about this. Purification of virtue is for the sake of reaching purification of mind. Purification of mind is for the sake of reaching purification of view. Purification of view is for the sake of reaching purification by overcoming doubt. Purification by overcoming doubt is for the sake of reaching purification by knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path. Purification by knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path is for the sake of reaching purification of knowledge and vision of the way. Purification by

knowledge and vision of the way is for the sake of reaching purification by knowledge and vision. Purification by knowledge and vision is for the sake of reaching final *nirvāna* without clinging. It is for the sake of final *nirvāna* without clinging that the Holy One has lived under the Blessed One. Need I explain?

So, this particular system of explaining the Dhamma, the Buddha acknowledged it as being very good, was used most successfully by Buddhaghosa. Well, first of all, it's Upatissa, which was 3rd century AD, or Common Era. And his book is called The Path of Freedom. It got lost and it only existed in the Chinese. And as far as I know, it helped to revive Buddhism in Tibet through Asita, who found the book. It was only recently translated from the Chinese back into English. But who took that system and made it into what must be one of the great world classics of spiritual manual is Buddhaghosa. That's his book. The Path of Purification. Very dense, full of all sorts of little exercises. It's basically a manual on how to practice and all sorts of things. And it's considered to be a handbook on Theravāda Buddhism. So whoever knows this book basically understood Theravāda Buddhism. It's a pleasant weekend read.

So, if we look at, first of all, the purification of virtue, this word *sīla*, it's translated as morality, conduct, precepts. But the Buddha calls the actual precepts, for want of a better word, the *sikkhāpada*. So it's the path, *pada*, of training. This is the path of training. And having established his four sanghas - laymen, laywomen, nuns, monks - he gave a basic *sīla*, a basic conduct concerning what not to do.

So you all know them. It's the five precepts. And then if you want to strengthen it, you do the eight precepts, which these days is talked about as going for an *uposatha*. So you've got a lay junior monastic. Then you take the ten precepts, and at that point you would become an order member. And then you take this whole load of precepts, 227 of them, when you enter the order.

All these precepts, as far as I know, are all negatives, what you don't do. And it's always starting from the position that our behavior, which is unskillful and unwholesome, is a measure of our delusion. So if we can stop that behavior, if we can actually put an end to that behavior, then it draws us into the middle, away from it, when it begins to take off as a virtue.

So if you look at something like the first precept, not to kill, not to kill human beings, that's the most gross thing, but then you can refine that to not to harm any living being. But of course, when you move to that position of not harming any living being, there's a movement towards compassion, isn't there? It's the opposite, towards amity, love and all that, it shades one into the other.

If you think about the next one, which is not to take what is not freely given, so obviously a gross would be to rob a bank. In its more finer thing, it's actually not to take anything which has not been given to you at all, so even a pen from work. You can't take it because it's not been actually given to you for any other purpose than to be at work. It's a refinement. The opposite, of course, what you move into is generosity, giving away. And then of course you find that by being generous, you lose your desire for things. Remember that stealing or taking something that's forbidden is just feeding that ego which feels this lack. So by giving something, you actually undo the process of that lack within you by an act of generosity.

If you take that whole business around sexual behavior, I mean, at its grossest, it's all sorts of horrible stuff, rape and all that. Then as you get more and more refined, you get to the point of, for instance, just sex for sex's sake, which Woody Allen pointed out was an empty experience, but as empty experiences go, it was not bad. If it moves into a loving relationship, then of course it moves into something much more meaningful. But the end refinement of that, very difficult for people to come to accept, is of course celibacy, because it's drawing out the energy or the desire to find happiness in sexual pleasure.

If you take wrong speech, so obviously on one side it's just real whoppers, greatly lies. And as you then stop exaggerating, to stop even an effort to exaggerate, to go beyond as far as you can see what the facts are, and then of course it becomes generous speech, truthful speech, kindly speech, because you're not trying to gain anything from it.

When it comes to the alcohol and all that stuff, at its grossest, of course, getting blind drunk or on drugs. But as you become more and more refined, then you obviously feel that alcohol does have this effect on your consciousness. And interestingly enough, in one of the recensions, one of the classifications of the morality, only the first four are rated. The last one's put in because it's under that influence that we actually do harm. But of course, you can take drugs and drinks and stuff like that which can actually harm the body. So it's a refinement of that, of caring for the body. So then one moves into being very careful what you feed the body, what you put into the body.

So, on the one level, you have all these precepts, all worked out at these different levels, which are guiding us not to fall into error. And then you have, for instance, all the *pāramī*, the perfections, which are telling us what to develop on the other side. So the whole of our personality or psychology is being moved through the practice of these practices of *sīla*, of conduct. We're moving from something which is quite gross and an expression of our delusion towards something which is an expression of the Enlightenment.

So finally, you get to the *Vinaya*, the rule of the monks. So what's the Buddha actually trying to do there? Because it's all what you can't do. There's nothing in the *Vinaya* which says what you can do, it just says what you can't do. But interestingly enough, there's parts of the *Vinaya* which are to do with gross things, like not to steal, not to kill. But when you come to the end, it becomes very refined. Like, for instance, you're not supposed to chapu-chapu and suru-suru. Chapu-chapu means to chop your food, and suru-suru means to slurp your drink. We've got all these little rules, and we're not supposed to talk. If I talk to my neighbour here, I should be in a voice which the other neighbour doesn't hear. So there's an effort to point out that as we become more and more refined, everything becomes more and more refined.

The problem of course for the modern age is that many of these rules and regulations were to do with that particular society and time. But when it comes to the refinement, then it does actually pass through time.

So now the big problem for people who are into developing that purity, the purity of *sīla*, the purity of conduct, is that they can get themselves into a double bind because the double bind is I cannot attain the enlightenment until the *sīla* is perfected. But I can't have perfect *sīla* until I'm enlightened. It only comes

with the Enlightenment. So you'll often get people in the monastic orders especially who get themselves in this ridiculous double bind and they just end up worrying all the time. Going to hell.

So the point of the matter is that these are just guidelines. They're given to us as guidelines as to what not to do and what to do. So even if you look at the discourses concerning people in family life, how the husband should treat the wife, the wife, the husband, and all that. Even though it's dated, you can see that there was a contractual way of dealing with family members, which was to produce peace, harmony, and goodwill.

So that's the basis. Now when we go through these, it's not a case of that they come, first you do this, then you do that. It's a continual motion. So being aware of our ethical behavior, of our moral behavior, is the basic rule for spiritual advancement. Every time we behave unskillfully, it's a measure of our delusion. So you can't, a lot of people might like to say, well, I want to meditate, I want to get on with it, but I don't want to keep these rules. They get in the way. But in fact, you can't do that, because these rules that you break are measuring back to you your state of delusion.

The next section is the purification of the mind. Now this actually refers to the development of the *jhāna*, absorptions. So having now worked with trying to get rid of unskillful actions of speech and body, that's what *sīla* is. It doesn't matter what's going on in your head. It's just that you don't throw it outward into the world in terms of something that you say or something that you do. You then work inwardly through concentration exercises.

And concentration exercises can take you into these lovely jhānic states. And what the meditator knows by that is that in order to get these beautiful states, ecstatic states, they don't actually need the world out there. You can produce them within yourself just by repetition of a word or the use of an image or the use of an emotion like love, *mettā*. And you can go through these little stages of bliss and reach these lovely states of inner happiness and they're not dependent on what you've eaten or who's been talking to you.

And the danger, of course, is to find yourself in a little hut stuck somewhere up in a mountain and being absolutely blissed out. But remember that the problem with *samatha*, the problem with that meditation, is that it always sits upon those parts of us in our hearts which have not been dealt with.

Now that can be extended. That can be extended to the *abhiññā*, the powers. So you end up with things like the divine eye, the divine ear, which means that you can see through walls and hear things which other people can't hear. You can read people's minds and all those things. And that's the development of the mind which goes beyond the frame, the physical frame.

You can see how in the development of *sīla*, conduct, it can shade off from what is unwholesome to wholesomeness and you move into compassion so you can see the extension of *sīla*, the extension of the *p āramī*, the extension of perfection is the bodhisattva ideal which is what the Mahāyāna did with it. When it comes to the *jhāna* and the powers you can see the Tantra took that line and began to develop it and

took the position that to be a fully fledged Buddha you had to be able to do this.

So now, having developed these different powers of *jhāna*, which is not necessary, remember that there are two paths, the *dveyāna*, in Theravāda they use the word *yāna*, somebody remind me, *yāna*, what does it mean? Vehicle, thank you. The *dveyāna* and the *ekayana*. So the *dveyāna* is to practice your concentration and your *vipassanā*. One developing against the other. One of the great masters of that, if you read his books, is Ajahn Mahā Bua. He has it in his manual on how to practice. He practices the *jhāna*. He goes for a rest in *jhāna*. When he's ready, he goes back to *vipassanā*. When he's had enough of that, he goes back to *jhāna*, refreshes himself. And in this way, you can sit for hours.

But the *ekayāna*, the direct path, if you're a fundamentalist, the only path, according to Ñānaponika, Bhikkhu Bodhi, those of you who know, corrected him and put the direct path here. *Ekayāna* means the one-way path, which is through just *vipassanā*. And that's really the path of the Mahāsi. The Mahāsi system is just that one path, which is not at all concerned with trying to get blissed out or anything of that nature, but to develop *vipassanā* to the bitter end.

So that's your second purification. Now, at this point, we're ready to move, as it were, into the purifications of view, which is going to change our relationship to the world and bring about the liberating peace. And the first thing is the purification of view, meaning here wrong view about the personality, about the body, and you begin to separate the body from the mind.

So the first thing that in your meditation you begin to do is recognize that this is the body and this is the mind. So for instance, the rising and falling of the abdomen is the body. That which knows it, notes it, is the mind. They're two different things. You begin to separate these things out. When you're eating, you note that the sensation on your tongue is the body. The heart with its response of joy is the mind. This is beginning to undo this wholeness, this whole, the idea that things are whole.

If you look at the canon, the Buddha's constantly trying to deconstruct what we think to be entire. He does it by way of the five *khandhas*, the five heaps. He does it by way of the six *āyatanas*, the six spheres, referring to the six senses. He does it by way of the *dhātus*. So he's constantly saying to us, look, if you look, you'll see everything's compounded. But that looking has to be within ourselves through this careful investigation, this careful watching of what's happening inside us. So that's actually a *vipassanā* knowledge. And that has to be more and more clarified as we meditate. And that changes our relationship.

The purification of view, which is this careful investigation of body and mind, clearly understanding how we're constituted. The purification of overcoming doubt, which is to do with understanding karma and conditionality, how everything arises dependent on everything else. The purification by knowledge and vision of what is and what is not the path, which is recognizing the arising and passing away of phenomena and seeing the three characteristics clearly.

The purification by knowledge and vision of the course of practice, which includes those *vipassanā*

kilesas, those defilements of insight that can be so seductive, and then the difficult passage through the dissolution knowledge and the dukkha ñāṇas. And finally, the purification by knowledge and vision, which is the actual attainment of the path and fruition, the shift in consciousness that marks stream entry and the subsequent stages.

These stages aren't just theoretical constructs. They describe a very real psychological and spiritual journey that countless meditators have traveled. The beauty of this map is that it gives us confidence. When we hit the difficult patches, when our meditation seems to be going nowhere or when we're struggling with restlessness or sloth and torpor, we can understand where we are in the process.

I remember when I first encountered these teachings, I was struck by how practical they are. They're not philosophical speculation but a careful documentation of what actually happens when we undertake this journey of investigation into our own experience. The path isn't always pleasant, but it is reliable. If we follow the instructions, if we maintain our effort and our curiosity about what's really happening in this moment, the insights will come.

What's particularly important to understand is that this isn't a path we travel alone. We're part of a community, a *saṅgha*, that has been walking this same route for over two and a half thousand years. When we sit in meditation, we're joining this great lineage of practitioners who have made this same journey of discovery.

The ultimate goal, of course, is the complete liberation that comes with full enlightenment, with becoming an *arahant*. But even the first taste of that liberation, stream entry, fundamentally changes our relationship to existence. We've seen that there's something beyond this constant struggle to find happiness in the conditioned world.

This is why the Buddha called his teaching the *Dhamma*. It's not just another philosophy or belief system. It's the natural law, the way things actually work. And when we align ourselves with this natural law through our practice, liberation becomes not just possible but inevitable.

And then we begin the insight knowledges. The separation of body from mind, their connection, and then you go through the real *vipassanā jhānas*, which is to see the three characteristics, to see dissolution, and then to go through the suffering of what is actually the suffering of death, the loss of self. The depression and all that sort of stuff, the running away. Suddenly there's an insight which directs you towards the goal, the equanimity, and then the reaching of the goal, the release of that consciousness from its fetters, which has been causing it trouble, and an establishment of a certain level of consciousness, which is a way of relating to the world, not to be confused with a state of mind, which is an emotion or a thought. It's the way we relate to the world, the way we are in the world, which is what is changing through the practice of Vipassanā.

So, if you really want to know about that, in much more detail, I've written some books down for you. I

think the ones that I'd like you to add is *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* by Nyanaponika. It's still, I think, the classic. *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation: The Handbook on Mental Training Based on the Buddha's Way of Mindfulness* by Nyanaponika. And another minor classic, absolutely wonderful little book, *Insight Meditation* by Joseph Goldstein. These are just little essays, and it is based on the Mahāsi technique, but it's a lovely little book. And it's something you can use on a personal retreat and just read the occasional chapter. It's a lovely little book.

The one for the stages of insight are the ones I've given you there on that piece of paper by Nyanarama, the seven stages. Also Mahāsi has written one called *Progress and Insight*. I've written that down for you. He's got his *Practical Vipassana Exercises*. *The Seven Contemplations of Insight* are just a greater explication of the three characteristics. This is definitely a classic: *In This Very Life* by Upandita. And that's where he explains these vipassanā jhānas which confuse so many people. That'll keep you going.

Really, and the last is a caveat, is a warning. This is, I think, to my knowledge, I think I've done it twice before actually, this is the only time that I've actually taught this stuff. And the reason is very simple. It's so easy to get a conceptual idea of what the path is, and then you start striving for it. And you really, really have to tell yourself that this is completely beyond your control. Completely. You cannot make any of these insights happen. And if you try, then that's the ego getting in the way. You see? That's the ego getting in the way. So my advice to you is to read them and just, as it were, know they're there because they're part of faith. I mean, this is a well-worn path. People experience it. It's there to be had. And then just to forget them.

It's about the faith. Well, it's to point out, you see, people don't realise how delineated the path is. They think it's some hazy thing. But it's very clearly delineated. And by the way, this isn't the only way you can become enlightened. This is the Theravāda way through the practice of Vipassanā. It's very, you know... It's possible. Forget time. I've known people to struggle for five years. I've known people to do it in six weeks. I've known people still at it. So forget time. It doesn't work like that. It doesn't work at all. But knowing this and within that system, then you just keep working and things arise. In this life or the next or the next. So I think that's my little bit. Really, it's just questions.

Well, I think that what he was establishing through the monastic path was a way, was an institution for that commitment. If you really wanted to become enlightened, if you really did, you'd drop everything right now. Well in any path you want to choose, if you really want it you'll go for it.

Can't you become enlightened without one of those paths?

I don't know of any process of enlightenment which doesn't have a path to it, because it's a progress. It's not as though you're not enlightened and suddenly you're enlightened. It's a development, there's a progress to it.

I think it's a very valid question. Say somebody just living on their own in the middle of nature. This is just

an example. It could be anything. Living on their own in the middle of nature. Just living their life. I mean, without a program like you've set out, could they not in their own way achieve some degree of whatever it might be?

I don't know. I wouldn't do it. I don't sense that wisdom is held back by the world. I mean, I don't know. Just being honest, I felt. It can be a little dull. I didn't do it when I was young. But just the thought came up to me, Krishnamurti. And I mean, his approach and his teaching seems to be very much about not following a path.

Well, two things there. You're presuming he was enlightened. That's number one. And number two, even though he said meditation was useless and shouldn't follow a path, if you read his writings, it's full of a path. If there's a book on elements, element publication, by somebody who's written a book on Krishnamurti's teaching, it's definitely a path. I think there's a lot of contradictions there, but I think that's probably part of growing up into a way to investigate all of this in the West. I think that's part of it, but he seemed to offer, or suggested, whether he was enlightened or not.

I think that some Buddhist teachers... Yeah, I think... He just seemed to offer alternative ways.

Well, you'd have to be... Yeah, that's it, you see. You'd have to make up your mind which path you're on. If you're a Krishnamurti, then get over there and do it. If you're on the Buddha's path, stay with the Buddha. It doesn't work. It doesn't work shifting... I know that you feel this. I know that you feel what you just said. I do. I don't feel it, is it? It's a fact.

You say, I don't know. I mean, practice perhaps. I can really see the argument for committing to the practice at some point.

Well, it's up to you. It's up to you, you see. I mean, to me, the great image of the spiritual path is climbing a mountain. If you want to go across the mountain to join another path, fine. But then you're going to have to learn new techniques because it's a different path. If you stay on the one path and you're quite certain it's going to the top, then you stay with it. I think that's what I meant.

Do you have to... Do you have to follow a path? Can you just find the path? Does everybody have to ask?

Well, you know, a technique is simply a trick to get that consciousness into a particular position so it can watch. That's all a technique is. So if your technique is to hit yourself on the head with a mallet every so often to come back into the present moment, fine, that'll do. It doesn't matter. There are as many techniques as there are teachers. The Mahāsi technique really caught hold of the imagination, A, because of the clarity of his teaching. It's always clarity that draws people. Secondly, because at the time there was a real dearth of Vipassanā meditation. It was quite new. The other person who came along was U Ba Khin, with the thing you did this afternoon with Christina. And there was a void there of vipassanā teaching. And he had such a clarity about it. But more than that, he's one of these people who could get people to work. I mean, you hear this tape, four hours sleep. This isn't easy.

That's the thing you've got to get across to yourself. It's not easy. You can't lie in the bath in the middle of nature and listen to the birds and become enlightened. At least, very difficult. Why? Because this consciousness is forever seeking happiness in the phenomenal world. That's the fundamental delusion about dukkha. It's always seeking comfort in the phenomenal world. Therefore, the path necessarily is uncomfortable. If you go to a monastery and feel comfortable, nothing's happening. Nothing's happening. If you're meditating and you've spent a week and all you can say is, it was absolutely beautiful, I was blissed out, I was fine. When you come off a big pastoral retreat, the question is, what have I come to know? What have I come to know? What have I understood? What have I come to know?

I don't want you to look so glum, Anneliese. I'm not. I've still got great questions for myself.

So, Billy Darwin, I have a question here that we wrote down. We were talking earlier and we wanted to know what understanding of awareness, do you believe that awareness and consciousness are the same?

Is that a question to me? Awareness and consciousness? Yeah, it's tradition, because Christina was saying that everyone, lots of slightly different traditions, view this very differently.

I think most of the confusion is around words. And most of the confusion arises about what Nibbāna actually is. And if you look at the different schools, it splits into two. Even in Theravāda you'll get the same split, like the people in northern Thailand, under Ajahn Mun, who Ajahn Chah was a disciple. We'll talk about the Buddha. They'll talk about a level of consciousness. And you can point directly to the scripture and quote the Buddha. There is a non-manifestive consciousness, a consciousness without object. Without boundary and in all directions full of light. So you get those schools that tell you that the enlightenment is an actual living, live consciousness, which when it descends into the world of phenomena, in other words, being human beings, has a very different relationship to that world to the person who is not enlightened.

Then you get the other school who think it's *Nirodha Samāpatti*. Now Nirodha Samāpatti is *Saññā Vedanā Nirodha Samāpatti*. It's a state of, for want of a better word, unconsciousness, where all the ending of feeling and perception has gone. And it can only be got through the jhāna. And it's only meant to be available to those people who are non-returners and the fully enlightened. And you'll get a whole load of people that tell you that Nibbāna is that state of nirodha.

And it's difficult because the Buddha says: When you have sensual pleasure, people think this is the highest happiness. But then they experience first jhāna, and they know that this sensual pleasure was quite low. First jhāna is the highest happiness. And then this way he takes you all the way up to the jhānas, and then he says, and when you come to the fourth jhāna, you flip into this nirodha samāpatti. This is the highest happiness. So you're going to always have that argumentation in Buddhist schools as to what the actual end is, because for some reason the Buddha wasn't particularly clear on this one. He didn't make a complete statement, we can say.

And to my mind, and the way it works for me is very simple. What you see in the universe, is it not, is a

constant clicking off and on, isn't it? Sleep and awakeness, winter and summer. Even moments are arising and passing away, arising and passing away. So for me, that consciousness can, as it were, step out of, into itself, in which case it does not experience itself as being in the phenomenal world. And it can also experience itself within the phenomenal world, awake. This on-off, on-off, rising-falling seems to be the fundamental movement within the whole of the universe, both at the phenomenal level and the spiritual level. So the battle is always between death and birth, and death and birth. And this suffering arises because this consciousness has simply identified with the phenomenal world of feeling, sensation, etc.

So it depends on which school you want to belong to, where you want to go. But for me, in a sense, that's all endgame. When we bring the practice right down to the present moment, then it's quite simple, quite straightforward.

What about awareness? You spoke about consciousness and different ideas about consciousness.

This is just a question of definition. It's a question of words. You see even the Buddha uses vijñāna as one of the khandhās and then he goes and uses it to express this consciousness which isn't a khandhā, it isn't one of the five aggregates. He talks about *citta* and it's translated as the mind and we normally translate it as the heart mind, what the old word soul used to refer to, or I should say what the soul used to refer to. And citta and yet in his victory verse he says he's achieved the citta, the unconditioned citta, the unconditioned mind that can't be... can't be emotions and thoughts. And one of the kernel questions that somebody asked Sāriputta is: How is it Nibbāna is blissful if there's no emotions? He says there's very absence of emotions which is the bliss of Nibbāna.

Now if that seems horrible to you, that's a measure back to us of how we rate our happiness according to our emotions. So I trust you're all confused.

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