Impermanence and Not-self

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 42:32

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

This evening I'd like to spend our usual time on things that have come up during the day and certain questions.

The first concerns this business of the process of purification. What I mean by this is partly emotional purification and partly mental purification. The purity of the heart is the transformation of all that negative side of our experience—depression, anxiety, the whole gamut of human misery—into its opposites. Where there's depression, there's joy; where there's boredom, there's interest. That's the process. It's going from darkness to light.

The emotional purification is done by bearing it. First, by bearing the product of what we've created, and then by making sure we don't unwittingly develop it through fantasy, through our actions, through speech and body. In other words, it associates very closely to what we would normally mean by psychotherapy. The added dimension, of course, is that the spiritual dimension goes down to the core root of why we're suffering. That's where it becomes a spiritual practice. We're not really concerned as such with emotions. We're not concerned as such with wandering thoughts. We're trying to get underneath it.

Just while I'm on emotions, there's the divide between the feminine and the masculine. The feminine person—and note that I don't say female—tends to be much closer to their emotions. They're the sort of person who says, "I feel, I feel." On the other end, the masculine tends to be in the head, and they normally start sentences with, "I think."

When a person who is very close to their emotions comes to meditation, because they know their emotions, because they've always identified with them, because they've always had this relationship of possessing them, it's very difficult for them to create that distance I keep talking about—to look at it. The habit is to go into it and feel, experience those emotions. For those sorts of people, if you go underneath the idea of an emotion, if you go to the body and feel it as sensation—heat, nausea, heaviness—instead of seeing it as an emotion, you see it just as physical feelings. They regain their objectivity. This is not a suppressive measure; it's just a different view of what it is. In the Buddha's understanding, it's all feeling. It all comes under one word: vedanā—physical and mental feelings. Just by being there with those feelings at the level of physical sensation, we're still allowing that energy to dissipate. That's the curing. That's the healing of that process.

On the masculine side—and this is a big generalization—often if people have lived in their heads, they've

thought their emotions. They haven't actually felt their emotions. When they come to meditation and feel their emotions, it's a big shock. And the shock means that they maintain that distance because they've never felt this stuff before. For them, they can remain more easily with emotions as emotions.

So place yourself somewhere on that line. There are some emotions which we allow ourselves to feel and justify—anger, for instance. And there are other emotions that we don't justify. Jealousy, guilt, remorse—sometimes that's all hidden away. Even though I've spoken very generally, everyone has a bit of masculine and feminine in them.

Remember that we're not trying to destroy the reasoning mind. We're not trying to destroy thought. We're trying to be able to stop it. The enlightened person, if they don't want to think, doesn't think; the thoughts don't arise. I remember Krishnamurti saying that when he went for a walk in a forest, thought never arose. He was just there, walking through the forest. It's not a destruction of thought. And remember that thought is always driven by some mental state, by some emotion, by some motivation. I'm talking about ordinary thinking.

As we purify the mind, this intelligence, this satipañña, this knowing, understands something. Yet it cannot come to know what it knows until it tells itself through thought. That's the paradox.

When the Buddha was enlightened, it's not as though he came out and just laid out a big book saying, "Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path," and off he went. It wasn't like that at all. He came out knowing that he'd experienced something, and he began to teach. He taught individuals, and the teaching came out. If you look at the early parts of the scriptures, they're very spontaneous. They're not particularly rigidified or made into lists. Then in the middle section, you suddenly start getting these lists appearing—they're there for memory—and the whole teaching becomes much more of a logical framework.

For one very simple thing, he talks about the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment. We've discussed the seven factors of enlightenment, but the whole teaching is the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment. The whole of the Buddhist teaching is enclosed in the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment. Now, there were thirty-seven musical chords at the time.

So it's a number which everybody, shall we say, had in the back of their minds as an important number, a mystical number. And it so happens that his teaching comes out to be 37. He fiddles a bit, because the five spiritual faculties he also says are five strengths—unshakable strengths when one has actually intuited nibbāna. So there's a bit of a double take to get his 37, which is all right.

Talking about that, when I mention enlightenment—these are big words. If they don't grab you, forget it. Our work is groundwork, our work is dog work. We're at the coalface here. Enlightenment is just a word pointing to some sort of end game, some sort of process where we're moving towards it. When we say we're moving towards it, we're not creating it. If you take a train from Newton Abbot to London, it's not as though London is being created by the time you get there—it's already there. So this enlightenment—the

Mahāyāna are very good on this—we're already enlightened. That's not a problem. We just don't know it. That's the problem. And to get to know it, we have to go through this whole process of purifying the heart, because the impurities in the heart, the distortions in the mind, are the measure of our delusions. So we're coming back to delusions, coming back to misunderstandings, to mistakes we've made.

So don't worry about words like enlightenment, nibbāna. Just let them go in one ear and out the other.

These days we expect things to be very quick. If I wake up with an earache, by nine o'clock I'm at the doctor's and he puts something in it, I take a tablet, and the thing's gone. The car breaks down, I phone up a service and it'll be mended within half a day. So when we come to this sort of work, we think, "Well, I've been here for a few days now. I've done this for weeks. I've done this for years. And not much seems to have happened." Then you start getting a bit depressed about it.

But what I would say to you is that when you look back over a period of time—especially if you look back something like five, six, seven years—you can definitely see a change within yourself. There is a change going on, but it's very subtle. And why does it take so much time? It's because of the strength of these conditionings. Those of you who drink tea, just stop drinking tea. It's hell. When I stop drinking tea, you'll know I'm enlightened.

So the teachers that you come across—we're practically as unenlightened as you. All we've done is a bit more training. We've had maybe some good insights, some reading, and spent a bit more time than most people. That's it. We're on the same path.

When an idea comes up in your head in meditation which seems to you absolutely sublime—like suddenly you think, "I'm going to create a charity to help the lepers in India"—you think, "That's very, very good. I'll think about that." See? Now that's not meditation. Even beautiful, wonderful, sublime desires and ideas are, as far as we're concerned in this retreat, for this period of time, just mental aberrations to be noted and let go of. If you really are interested in setting something up for lepers in India, write a little note and come back to it at the end of the week. There is nothing wrong with that lovely idea. There are lots of lepers in India, aren't there?

Sometimes the body shakes or jerks in meditation. This is just energy caught up in the body, trying to release itself. It can be quite dramatic—I remember somebody shaking his head like this, you know, like he kept saying "yes, yes, yes." But sometimes it's a sort of swaying, and it feels good. Of course it feels good, because it's letting off this energy. So what you do is you stop it. You mentally bring the energy up the spine, down to the stomach, up the spine—that's where the energy is supposed to move, isn't it? Tai Chi and all that. And you lift yourself up. As soon as you stop, then you may begin to feel the actual underlying disturbance which is causing this swaying. That's what you have to deal with. When it passes, no more swaying.

The breath.

Around this time, people do start becoming much more calm, especially over the next two days, but even today. There are moments during meditation when a peacefulness comes, a great calm descends, the body becomes very still, the mind is not thinking, it's pretty empty, and the heart seems to be just calm. And when you look, there's only the breath to watch. There's only the breath.

At this point, a meditator might say, "Now what?" Because they're expecting some explosion or something to happen. Well, the thing is that now there is this lovely moment to really plunge into the breath and to go towards the center of the breath. What we're doing is beginning to focus in on a specific area. The smaller the area—it's like when somebody studies for a higher degree, they always go to a really abstruse little bit. You know, like why flies land on mushrooms, and there's a whole thesis on that.

As we go into the middle of the breath, we're really sharpening the focus. We're really sharpening the concentration. The intelligence is still there. There's still that question mark in the mind, that sense of curiosity, of wanting to know. It's a relaxation. If your forehead starts furrowing because you're doing this business, then that's wrong. Remember, this is a relaxation. This is driven by interest—not a desire to concentrate, but driven by interest.

And as you get closer and closer, because of that focus, time is collapsing. I mean, how long is time? What does it feel like? It's a couple of seconds, isn't it? It's about so long. But in reality, it's not like that at all. It's moment to moment. It's minute, the way that things are arising and passing away. As we go into there, the whole of time is collapsing. And it's right here that we begin to see things like this sense of transiency much more clearly. When we come out, when something does come up, and we have that sharpness of concentration as a quality of that looking, then of course we can see it more clearly. So don't waste those times, no matter how short they are—even if they're only a minute or so. Don't waste them.

I think that covers the things that came up for today. What I want to do is complete the three characteristics and go through them, seeing where it takes us. These other two are anicca and anatta—transience, impermanence, and this idea of not-self.

Whereas dukkha—suffering, dissatisfaction, unsatisfactoriness—belongs to the realm of sentient beings, belongs to our realm specifically. It's us who suffer. But when it comes to transience and not-self, that's something which reaches out to the whole phenomenal world. Everything is in a state of arising and passing away. It is one eternal law that everything changes. It's the one steady law in the universe. Everything is changing. And the other thing is that everything is not-self.

I want to start with this harder concept of not-self, go through one or two ideas with you, and then move to the easier one, this idea of transience, and see where it takes us.

The first thing about not-self is that it's not a philosophical statement. The Buddha is not saying there is no self. It's a teaching tool. It's a way of looking at what we're experiencing and beginning to see that there's no ghost within the machine, that there's nothing metaphysical about what we experience.

Everything arises because it's in relationship with everything. Everything arises dependent on something. So nothing has its own essential nature. Nothing has its own being.

Now when I walk around, I feel very individual. I think it's me. Me, I'm walking around. I have this feeling of being me. But when I look at this me, if I look at the body, I don't know where the me begins and the me ends. When does air become me? Does it become me when it's in the mouth or when it's in the blood? When does the food I'm eating become me? There's a sort of boundary, isn't there? When I say these are my thoughts, how much of what I'm thinking is coming in from the radio, from people I talk to, from all of that? What do I mean by my thoughts over this membrane? When I talk about emotions, sure, they're developed by me, but they're also to do with my relationship to people. They evoke things. So there's this passage of communication between us, between nature, wherever I go. This idea of me, this sort of sharp wall around me, begins to undo.

Now this process of undoing, this process of deconstruction, which I've been pointing you to especially when you're doing the eating meditation, is the main technique that the Buddha uses to get across his idea of not-self.

Just to look at one of them, he talks about the five khandhas, the five aggregates. He says, when you take a human being apart, what do you find? You find the body, don't you, and that's made up of all sorts of stuff—chemicals and so on. It's not one thing. So where does this body being me come from? "This is my body." See, I also have a possessive idea. "My body is me." Now do I lose me if I lose a foot? Suppose I lose a leg—I've now moved from being a biped to a monoped. Is it still me? Have I lost a bit of me when I do that? At what point do I lose me? Do I lose my arms? Lose my legs? Chop my head off? Do I lose me? Is that me gone? This definition of me is strange, isn't it?

Then he says there's this whole process of perceiving, where the mind actually creates pictures—basic pictures that we work on, basic ideas and concepts. They can be very grounded things, like just the colour, for instance, or they can be quite florid, beautiful pictures and ideas that I create in my mind. And it's all bits and pieces. Where do they exist? Have I got them in little drawers around my head? It's the same with a computer, isn't it? Where's the program? Where is it? You press a button and this thing comes up—Word, Outlook Express. Where was it? So this idea of things being there in their totality, actually in some sort of subconscious, some sort of sub-realm, and they appear when they want to—it's not like that, is it?

Then he says we've got all these feelings. So perception is one thing, but feelings are something else. Which feeling are you? Today I felt happy—is that me? Now I'm feeling depressed—no, that's me. Which emotion are you going to draw on and say, "Well, this is me"? Then as soon as it's you, you've got to hold on to it and say, "I am depressed. I'm really depressed. Even when I'm happy, I'm depressed." There's no way out. You get blocked into this, and it's because you've defined yourself—this is me, miserable.

I've confused things there. Feelings should really just be the feelings in the body—likeable, unlikeable

feelings. The feelings I've just talked about, depression and all that, really belong to the next section, which are the sankaras, those things that we've developed by an act of will. Remember that the body is conditioned.

I can do certain things with it, but there's a blueprint there. It just follows the genome, you know? I can't do much about that. Perceptions are dependent on my brain and mind. I can't do much about that either. Feelings are dependent too—if somebody kicks me in the shin, then it hurts and that's it. I can't do anything about that. It's just something that arises.

But this whole business of emotions is something that I create through my will. And that's what we're all beginning to understand by watching this process within us—these emotions arising and passing away, and how we want to indulge them.

So which feelings are we? Are yesterday's feelings the same as today's feelings? Who am I now? Because yesterday I had these feelings, but now I've got different feelings. So who am I? Because the idea of a "me" is something static, isn't it? Something solid, something I can really point to and say, "Well, this is me." And the goalposts keep changing.

And then finally there's consciousness. Consciousness is always dependent on the object. If there's no object to be conscious of, who are you? Who are you in sleep? Where do you go in sleep? In the middle of your sleep, do you say, "I'm still here"? It's gone, isn't it? There's no me. It's not that there's not awareness there, but there's definitely not a sense of me.

If, for instance, the doctor said to you, "Listen, you've got this very strange and terrible disease. If you fall asleep, you will die"—are you going to fall asleep? You see? The reason why we fall asleep is because we presume I'm going to appear again in the morning. I wake up and there I am. Me again.

So we have to really look at this and begin to experience things and realize that this concept of me being this body, me being this personality, me being this character—I can't sustain that, at least not at an intellectual level. I can't sustain it.

So what the meditation does is take us in. And by seeing this distancing—that's why we distance, that's the first position—by distancing, we're looking at an object. If it's an object, it can't be the subject. I can't be what I'm looking at, because there's a distance there, isn't there? So when we make that distance very obvious to ourselves, in ourselves, we're creating that objectivity, that not-self.

And that's what the Buddha says. When you look in and you feel something, just say: not me, not mine, not a self. The body's not a self. It's not me and it's not mine and it's not a self. Emotions—they're not me, they're not mine, and they're not a self. Feelings in the body are not me, they're not mine, and they're not a self. The consciousness that arises knowing things is not me, not mine, not a self.

So these little reflections, you see, they slowly burst through the bubble, they burst through the hard idea

of me. And of course it's frightening, isn't it? Because as we'll explore towards the end, the point of me, where me really comes to an end—the point of death—is very frightening for us. Who am I when I die?

So that's part of the idea that the Buddha uses to deconstruct. You see the idea of deconstructing something, to see that there's no self, there's no me, no I, no self.

The other thing he points to is control. This whole idea of free will has badgered Western philosophy ever since—free will. So I walk into a supermarket, and there's something like a hundred biscuits there. And I think, "Fantastic. I have free will to choose any biscuit I want." And I go along the shelf and I come across Crunch It.

I pick it up and it says, "Crunch It really puts you in a good mood." And I think, "Crunch It? I've never heard of that." So I put it back. Then I walk along and see McVitie's chocolate biscuits. "Oh, that's what I want! Chocolate biscuits." I have exercised my free will. Totally conditioned, isn't it?

"I have free speech. I will say exactly what I want, anytime." But it's conditioned, isn't it? I only say something if somebody asks me, if somebody invites my opinion. Everything I say is dependent on my history, my ideas, my connections.

"I have free will. Perfectly free will. I can vote for whomever I want." "I never vote for liberals." "Conservatives? No, I'm fed up with the lot." "I'm not going to vote." I have exercised my free will—driven by prejudice, driven by hatred and greed. But I've exercised my free will, you see?

So first of all, we have to get rid of that pathetic idea that somehow the will is some sort of floating entity that can choose whatever it wants, to do my own thing in my own time and in my own way. We can dispense with that completely.

And then when we come down to it, we realize that in fact we obviously have choices. And what we choose is conditioned. So now, if we want to get to some freedom—not freedom *to do*, but freedom *from*, freedom from conditioning—we need to know what are the conditionings that make us make certain choices. And do these choices lead to my personal comfort, my happiness, my well-being? Do they lead to the well-being, comfort, and happiness of others?

Now, if I can see the conditioning, and if I can see the choice, and if I can see the result of the choice, and I can then step back and reflect, "Is this skillful or not?"—then I have some sort of choice to say no. But that no is coming from another conditioning, one arising out of the wisdom factor. "I'm not going to do anything which leads me to unhappiness. I'm not going to do anything which leads others to unhappiness."

So everything is conditioned, and yet through wisdom we have this slow movement, this transformation of all our habits from one place to another—from wicked to wonderful—just by exercising this reflection, driven by the idea of goodness, beauty, love, and all that sort of stuff.

Even when we do that and we've come to know it, there's no free will about it. There's nothing free about it. You're compelled. As soon as you realize that something's doing you harm, you don't do it anymore. As soon as you realize something's doing you good, you start doing that.

So there's something within us which is driven. It is driven. It's not within the bounds of our ego. It's not within the bounds of our choice. It is being driven toward enlightenment. The whole world is so manufactured to drive us, herd us, toward enlightenment. We don't have a choice. Even when you're in hell, it doesn't last that long. And when you come out, you realize, "God, I've been in hell. I don't want to go there again. I'm not going down that road again."

So the whole process is one of learning, because of this intelligence.

It's this intelligence that wants to get out of suffering. It's this intelligence that wants to get out of dissatisfaction. And yet there is something which is unconditioned.

So we chant in the morning, this little chant from the Buddha: *aneka jāti saṃsāraṃ*. And he says, "I've been through loads of rebirths, loads and loads, and I've constantly been pulled by the nose by this self, by this ego." But now, he says, "I've seen you. I've broken your ridge pole, I've pulled down your house, and you're definitely not going to build another ego and self for me." And he says, "I have destroyed all my impurities, everything is gone." He says, "I have achieved the unconditioned consciousness."

That unconditioned consciousness of the Buddha, while he's here, still has to live in the world. So his body tells him he's hungry. He goes out and gets some food and he eats. And when somebody comes to him and says, "Now what's all this stuff about?" he has to respond. He's using the language of the time, which is totally conditioned.

So that's why he says that the feeling of moving towards the enlightenment is a freedom *from*, not a freedom *to* do something—a freedom from compulsion. When we talk about control, that's coming from ego. That's ego trying to control things, power and all that. When we understand rightly, then we understand that we're in relationship, and that it's always a contract. We're always moving around. You decide that you're going to go for a picnic and the weather's pouring—that's okay. You take an umbrella. You work with it.

So now I want to get onto *anicca*, which is, in a sense, a more easy concept, because we can all see everything's arising and passing away. But how much do we see it? We see it out there, and we want it, we love it. Who wouldn't want winter and summer? They're a lovely balance. You don't get that in the East, for instance—it's always the same.

But it's when change hits us... Old age. Death. They're changing us. That's when we don't want to look at it. That's when we avert our eyes and we don't really recognize that this change is something happening within us, internal. And because we don't recognize that, because we don't stay with moments, we create this idea of continuity which feeds into the idea of self. It's always me.

But just look at the body you were born with—that little screaming hulk. How much of it is left now? It doesn't exist anymore, does it? That baby is dead. That body is dead. It died within seven years, according to our science. Every cell, every atom in that body was replaced. That whole body has very slowly, unwittingly, just dissipated, just disappeared.

When you look in the mirror next time, you can say to that face, "You weren't here seven years ago." That's what transiency is. Things are changing.

And yet, because we have this idea, because I can show you through photographs that it was me—that little screaming hulk that doesn't look anything like me now—was me. Crazy, eh? How can you be a "was-me"? You've got to be me now. You can't be me then. But I launch myself into the future. So I'm going to appear without any doubt tomorrow. I know exactly what I'm doing tomorrow.

I'm coming here to meditate in the morning. That's me.

So this idea of transiency also has to be undone. And it's undone by seeing—just seeing that process, just seeing it, by being aware of it.

When we see it inwardly and it brings up fear, that's what we've got to look at, because this fear is coming from the ego. Fear is the last barrier of the self. That's how it protects itself. There's no worse emotion than fear. You may think there is, but fear is the last thing that the self has to protect itself.

So when fear comes up, that's really something to move towards. And what you find, of course, is where there's fear, there's the fear of fear. And you bounce off it. When you're afraid of fear, you get into panic. That's what panic is. And you lose it. You just run away.

So when fear of fear comes up, you look at the fear, you stay with that, you try and stay steady between the two, as it were. Very difficult, but you stay steady. And slowly you keep averting your attention to the fear, the original fear. As you get close to it, you begin to lose your fear of it. Just because of feeling. It's just another state, just another mental state, another emotion, another feeling. That's all it is. Not me, not mine, not self.

And when we finally lose fear of fear—what the hell's going to frighten us?

So the problem isn't the object, the problem isn't the wild beast attacking you. The problem is the fear. As soon as you let go of fear, as soon as you can feel fear and not become afraid by fear, then nothing will frighten you. And that's a sign to the person that they've undone this idea of ego, of self.

The Buddha is often referred to as the fearless one. There is no fear. What is an enlightened person going to be afraid of? Who can hurt you anyway? What can people do to you? What can the world do to you? They can only do to your body. They can't hurt you emotionally. Nobody can cause you psychological pain.

Even when somebody comes to me and says, "You're a very stupid, bald-headed monk." It stopped here.

That's all. It stopped here. But if I take it in, I've created this hatred, this aversion, because I've heard these words. And then I create a relationship with this person, tell them what I think of them. So nobody can cause us psychological pain.

The worst the world can do to us is cause us physical pain. But if we're not the body, if it's not me, not mine—you've sat there now in meditation and you've been able to get some distance between that physical pain and you can see that there's an equanimity with it, you can stay with it. If there's a total detachment from it, if there's no connection whatsoever with pain, how can it hurt?

So I want now to draw us to a conclusion. And I want to bring us to an exercise which I'll be doing at the beginning of every last session. It's simply to bring to mind sickness, old age, and death. These are the three things that drew the Buddha to his enlightenment.

When he saw a sick person, a very old person, and a corpse, each time he asked, "What is this?" He had been sheltered from such things. And each time they told him, "He's a human being." Then came the big question: "Does this happen to me?" And that shook him. That sent him into a kind of tizzy. He had what we might call a nervous breakdown and ran off to become a monk. So now you know why people become monks.

These meditations are meant to undo our delusions. The Buddha says that when we meditate on the fact that this body can become sick, we undermine this intoxication we have with health—this worry, these household gyms, this concern about vitamins and diets and all that sort of thing. It's all this obsession with health. He undoes the obsession. It doesn't mean you don't care for yourself. It's just undoing the obsession with health.

He says when we contemplate old age, it gets rid of our obsession with youth—with wanting to be young, to be forever flowering. We can't bear to decay. Ugly. Terrible. And when we contemplate death, we undermine this very intoxication, this enchantment, this utter dependency we have on life itself. So we're undermining that.

And what does that bring? It brings freedom. A freedom from obsession with health. A freedom from having to look beautiful and young. A freedom from having to live, having to exist—that compulsiveness. It's always getting rid of compulsiveness.

And just to put us in the mood, I'd like to read this little poem from my favourite author, Samuel Beckett, whose work is a total meditation on last moments, on consciousness. It's up to you—sometimes I close my eyes when I listen to poetry and sort of look at it.

Just think if all this, one day, all this, one fine day—just think if one day, one fine day, all this stopped. Just think.

I hope my words have been of some use to you. May you be enlightened even within these seven days.

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