Ethical Behaviour and the Awakening are One

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 43:38

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammasambuddhasa namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammasambuddhasa namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammasambuddhasa

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

I was going to talk about this confusion sometimes that people have between *paññā*, insight, the awakening, and *sīla*, conduct. I think it's still in some circles when you say morality, it gets people very angry. They don't want to know about morality as such, or the ethical life.

In the chant in the morning, we say of the Buddha that he's *vijjācaraṇasampanno*, that he's accomplished both in his understanding and in his conduct. And he himself says that understanding and conduct are like the Ganges and the Yamuna rivers that join and flow into the sea. He doesn't make a distinction between understanding and how it expresses itself.

Some of you will know that the Eightfold Path is normally split into three sections: *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā* — right conduct, right meditation, and right understanding. And that *samādhi* normally refers to the absorptions, but in the Buddha's teachings those are not actually necessary. So the whole teaching can be reduced in terms of the process of purification and awakening to those two words: *paññā* and *sīla*. *Paññā* is this business of trying to understand how things really are, and *sīla* is right conduct, ethical behaviour. Those two sum up the Buddha's teachings.

But then you'll come across writers who split them. And when you go to the East and you see how people behave, you can understand how they might come to these conclusions from their fieldwork, from their anthropological fieldwork. One writer talks about Nibbanic Buddhism and Karmic Buddhism.

Often when you speak to Eastern Buddhists, or born Buddhists anyway, they won't have a doubt that the end point is to become liberated — *Nibbāna* — and that's the point. But their whole life is really centred around *sīla*, which is right conduct. And when you follow that train of thought through, they're not concerned so much with getting rid of this self, but more in the sense of making it a good self, a happy self, insofar as the self can be happy. And so their whole lives are about doing right things, and this is where the word *kusala* comes in, in order to gain merit, and that's *puñña*.

These two words, *kusala* and *puñña*, are key words in the Buddha's teachings. And the general idea is that you stop doing harm, you do as much good as you can, and you get reborn in the heavenly realm. And in the heavenly realm, it's a little easier to seek *Nibbāna*.

Even amongst monks and nuns, you'll find that that is the prevalent attitude. And you'll find the monks in Sri Lanka — I'm not so sure about Burma and Thailand and other places, but being influenced by Hinduism — the hierarchy will tell you that this is the Kala Yoga. And it's impossible for anybody to become enlightened during this particular time, so forget it. The best thing you can do is to do good and get reborn into a better place. It's a bit disheartening, really. But they're happy with that. In a sense, it's a let-out. I mean, if you say to yourself, I can't become enlightened, phew, I may as well enjoy myself. That's the case. So you've got to be careful with that sort of mentality.

But both in the actual way the Buddha behaves, his actual behaviour, and in the general teachings, and even in the psychology, what we chant in the morning, you can begin to see that you can't split the one from the other. The one arises out of the other.

There's this point in the Buddha's life once he's become enlightened, once he's become liberated and he has this deep understanding into the way things are and he spends some time recollecting over it. Mythically it's said three nights he goes through this wheel of dependent origination, forward, backward, both forward and backward. But obviously he sat there and that insight had to permeate his understanding, and he came up with this. And then at that point there is this idea arise in his head: who can he teach? So that has arisen spontaneously in his mind.

Now when he looks around and he sees through his powers that his old teachers have died, and he gets the doubt. And the doubt is that anybody can receive this teaching. It's too subtle. He doesn't believe for a moment there. He doesn't think that people are ready for this.

Now you'll find in some writers that they call this the great hesitation, and they argue that therefore the Buddha's accomplishment is twofold. His accomplishment was both the enlightenment, his liberation, and secondly his teaching, and that he need not necessarily have taught. He could have said, no, I won't, I'll sit here in this bliss until I pop off. And that's where you get some idea that perhaps there's a choice, that you can become liberated and yet not do anything. That it doesn't manifest outwardly into the world.

Supporting that is that myth of the Paccekabuddhist, the private Buddha — the person who's become fully liberated but what it really says about that is that they can't teach. That's the normal thing, not that they don't want to; they just can't. They don't have the skills or the capacity. And if you think of just ordinary life, sometimes you get people who are very clever in their subject but they just can't get it across. So that's another skill.

So in the sense that the Buddha had a special skill whereby he could actually get this stuff across to people is one thing. But the hesitation was only around — this is just my own understanding — the hesitation was only around whether people were actually ready to receive it. The hesitation wasn't in whether to teach or not. Which is a distinction, isn't it?

So the desire to teach, the desire to actually share what he had with others, arose spontaneously after he

had understood what it was that he had gained. In the Zen tradition, you'll hear it said that with wisdom, compassion arises naturally. So it's not possible to continue in the path and for our behaviour not to change.

To take it at a ridiculous level, you couldn't have a neurotic Buddha. That would be awful, wouldn't it? Worrying about his fingernails while he's teaching. Worrying whether he'll be liked. Worrying whether he'll get any food today. It doesn't sit, does it? And it would be awful if he were immoral. He's teaching all this stuff and going around robbing banks. So there's something that jars when you consider what the behaviour of somebody who is spiritually advanced might be if it doesn't connect with understanding.

There's got to be that immediate connection between a person's understanding and purity. I mean, the whole point is that there's a purification of the heart going on. So here we are, we're meditating, we're doing this vipassanā, and we can see that, A, there's this insight going on, there's this understanding about ourselves and how we're creating suffering for ourselves, but there's also this purification going on — that in fact, we are getting less and less depressed, less and less angry, or at least not for such a long period. And there's a certain progression. If you're not progressing, then you have to look at your practice and find out why. Because that's the point. The point is to progress, both in understanding and in our happiness, our contentedness.

So that business of the slow gaining of understanding into the way we are, manifesting as good action, is right there in the Noble Eightfold Path. It flows right down. So right understanding changes your attitude to life. So for the Buddha, once the understanding had come, the compassion arose. And he himself is constantly saying, *anukampā*, he says, out of empathy, out of sympathy, I teach you. Whatever a teacher can do for his students, I've done for you. And then that manifests: right speech, right action, right livelihood.

Now, we also know that it can go back the other way. Depending on your livelihood, you yourself can be changed, can't you? I mean, just imagine now if we all joined the SAS. The Special Army Services. It would be different, wouldn't it? I mean, you'd be out there with your machine gun waiting to kill somebody, or at least protecting yourself. So your whole mentality would change, wouldn't it?

Or if you, like a policeman — a policeman's always suspicious. A policeman walks in here, he'd be suspicious. I have my brother-in-law in special service. He protects politicians. He's always suspicious. He's got to be. He's trained to be suspicious. He wanted to be suspicious. A teacher never asks a question they don't know the answer. They always make sure they know the answer.

What we do affects us, doesn't it, directly? Our personality, the way we speak, our friendships, our acquaintances, what politics we follow, what particular religion we follow, all that has an effect on us and produces a certain way of behaving, but it also comes with an understanding. And that understanding is either going to take us into further happiness or further unhappiness.

So it runs both ways through our understanding, which is at three levels: actually hearing something which has an effect on us that we haven't heard before, through our own mental processes, our own reflection, and then through this direct insight, through direct experience. So our understanding changes. But it can also change by what we do. So there's an intimate relationship between our conduct and our understanding. It would be false to separate that.

So when you understand that, in lay life, because most of the time you have to be doing something — your job, whatever it is — you can really see quite clearly that this is the path, the path of action. What we're actually doing at any present time, at any present moment, is a path leading us either towards or away from this liberation. And therefore, anytime we do something, there is the importance of that moment of reflection about whether it's *kusala* or *akusala*.

Now this word *kusala*, it has two meanings in English. One is that it's skillful. Unfortunately, if you say, well, I'm only doing this because it's skillful, I'm only being good, I'm only being generous and compassionate because it's skillful, then, as it were, the action is taken off the action itself for some future purpose. So I'm being skillful now, so I can be liberated later. And immediately you cut in between these two processes, *paññā* and *sīla*. So it becomes a utilitarian thing. I'm only being good so that I can become enlightened. I'm only helping you so that I can become... See what I mean? There's a split there.

So now you'll often see in the books that that word is translated as skillful. But that's the danger. And it means that *sīla* itself is not an end in itself. But in fact, the end in this life is perfect conduct, *vijjācaraṇasa mpanno*, perfected, accomplished in his understanding and his behaviour.

So, although we might say skillful in the sense that it's wholesome and it's right and all that, you also have to use the word virtuous. It is virtuous as opposed to being non-virtuous or vicious. And the question is, is virtue an end in itself? Is it? Is the virtuous life an end in itself?

Now, you wouldn't be virtuous if you look at it the other way. You wouldn't be virtuous unless you knew why you're being virtuous. There has to be an insight into it. It needn't be an intellectual insight. It needn't be something that you can scribble on a piece of paper. When we feel a certain compassion towards somebody, when we want to help somebody, when that feeling comes out, the underlying understanding there is our interrelatedness.

So although we can talk about interrelatedness from this high intellectual level, about how things all fit together, about how things are related to each other, everything is conditioned by everything else and all that, the actual experience of it in terms of our relationship to other beings, and to plants and the earth and all that, is this heart relationship of compassion, love, sympathetic joy. And that's a heart understanding.

If you split the two, then you move towards a dry intellectual understanding. And you miss out on the heart level. On the other hand, if you stick with the heart level without some understanding, then it can so

easily slip into mawkish behaviour. So that's where we were saying last time about the slippage of compassion into pity or grief.

Now when we have this word *kusala*, this word virtuous or skillful, there's always this follow-on of *puñña*, which translates as merit. And it begins to sound a bit like some Christian doctrines, like grace. And you'll often hear in Buddhist circles — born Buddhists, cultural Buddhists, I don't know what you call them — it's like a bank account. You've got all this merit, and you can draw on it at any time, and you can share it with people. And that's meritorious, so you get more merit because you've shared your merit. It's a bank account that manufactures itself, which is wonderful, isn't it?

But when you actually read the psychology of the Buddha, this *puñña* has nothing to do with the outside. Of course the outside might change. For instance, if I make a decision to move away from a certain job or a certain set of friendships which I can see are not virtuous, they're not quite supporting the life I want to lead. That movement away may be painful because I have certain friendships. But in doing so, I am moving into another area. The decision takes me into another area of experience which does support me. So we can say that the friendships that I meet here and the job that I'm doing now is my *puñña*. That's my merit for shifting across. But, in a sense, that misses the point. That's all well and good.

But the real *puñña*, the real merit, is within the heart itself. So that's why, when we become fully liberated, in a couple of days, you'll see that there's no more *puñña*. There is no more merit to be had. Because the liberated person is completely full. They're completely contented and completely happy, so they cannot increase their *puñña*. And this is what it says in the scriptures. You can't increase that. That's it, they've made it.

Yet they still behave out of this compassionate action. And that's when it becomes selfless, because whether we like it or not, when we do good, we are increasing our own goodness within ourselves. So while we're not liberated, we do get the benefit of this *puñña*. But once a person becomes liberated, then there's no more *puñña*.

I'm reminded of, I think it was Sister Teresa of Lisieux. I think it was Teresa of Lisieux, Saint Teresa of Lisieux. And she was asked, if everybody goes to heaven, some people have obviously been better than others. And everybody's in heaven. So how can you all be happy? Because some will have more happiness than others. Probably a bit of jealousy. And her answer was, well, everybody gets a glass and it's completely full, but each glass is of a different size. Everybody gets a glass and it's completely full, but everybody has a different size, depending on their craftsmanship.

If you look at the different arahats, if you look at the different people of the Buddha's time like Sāriputta and Moggallāna, then you can see that. You can see that quite clearly that they have different areas which for them produce, what can we say, a different type of contentment.

So Sāriputta is known as the general of the Dharma, so his whole interest was in understanding and it's

understood that he's only second to the Buddha, perhaps even equal in his understanding to the Buddha. The Buddha definitely praises him as being quite exceptional in his insight. And because of that, because of that whole interest in understanding, he doesn't develop the powers.

Moggallāna, who's the other chief disciple, isn't so interested in that angle of things but develops the powers. And when Moggallāna asks Sāriputta, why don't you develop the powers? Sāriputta's answer is, I'm not interested. Not interested. So there's something about Sāriputta's state, where he is totally content with the way he is, and he doesn't see any point in levitation, or moving from here to there, or doing amazing things. But from Moggallāna's point of view, that was part of his *puñña*, that was part of his happiness.

So there are these three concepts, there are these three or four different concepts that we have to be fairly clear on just to make sure that we are guiding ourselves properly. *Paññā* and *sīla*, our understanding and our conduct, are completely interrelated. And that if we constantly reflect upon our conduct as virtuous, then our understanding will grow naturally.

and if we understand that our understanding must be translated into right conduct, then we should progress.

Secondly, that this whole *kamma*, the whole teaching around *kamma* which is action—that's what it is, it's an action although it also means the consequence of action—has to be guided by our principles, our virtuous principles, which is this *kusala*. So the idea of reflecting about why we're doing something, even the most mundane things, like you might decide that you might want to watch a bit of TV.

So when you turn it on, you have to ask yourself, do I want to watch this programme or not? What am I putting into my heart when I watch this programme? What am I doing to my head when I'm watching this programme? And as soon as you see that it's not quite doing you good, then we have to have that strength of will to turn it off.

One exercise that I've set people is to sit in front of your favourite programme, EastEnders, and get a cup of tea, make yourself comfortable. And when the time comes, you don't turn the TV on. You just sit there watching that screen. And just feel that compulsiveness to actually know what's going on. And your mind's making up little stories, trying to work out, just in case you might have missed the plot. And you keep doing that until you don't want to watch it anymore. You do it every day, or whatever it takes. And then when you're totally equanimous with sitting in front of that screen knowing that EastEnders is on now, then you can turn it back on. When you turn it back on, then you can ask yourself, should I be watching this or not? Should I be watching this programme or not?

What about listening to the radio? All of it. TV, it doesn't matter. Whatever entertainment. Friendships. Even going for a walk. Everything has to be questioned. Is this the right thing to be doing now? Is this the virtuous thing to be doing now? Remember, skillful, virtuous. You've got to balance that.

How could you explain that to a friend? Like, I feel maybe it's not a virtuous relationship and I don't want to see your friend. Well, you can be stark. You can say that if you want. You know, I find my relationship with you utterly unskillful and unvirtuous, and I have no wish to see you again. That's it. Well, you can be assured that that would be the end of that relationship. I mean, that's what you call a sword of wisdom. But I'm sure there are more kindly ways of getting the message across that you don't particularly want to see them again. Just showing a lack of interest. Making little white lies. It depends. Well, it's up to you. But at some point, if you decide that a friendship is not virtuous, then you have to get rid of it. Full stop.

Angulimāla is one of these stories like the good thief on the cross. And what the story does is to show that no matter how awful you've been, yet you can become totally liberated. Now, again, you have to make a distinction between this *puñña*, this merit, and... The merit that Angulimāla finished up with when he met the Buddha was—I'm just guessing—an angry, hateful, fearful, vengeful, grudgeful mind. That's in his mind. So when he meets the Buddha and something happens there, some magic happens where he suddenly sees how badly he's behaved and the consequences of it. And remember in those days, the whole idea of *kamma* would have been fully accepted and rebirth and all that and going to the hells. And suddenly when he realises what he's done, he has to come back on that.

So the first thing he does is he joins the order. So immediately, from what we've been talking about, he cuts away from one type of behaviour into another, like a knife. He just moves out of all that business of murder, whatever it was, into the *brahmachariya* life. That's a direct cut. Now, it's said that he was unarmed, round people threw stones at him and bricks and whatnot. Because he was in robes, because of people's respect for people in robes, it seems nobody really went for him, tried to lynch him or anything like that. But he still had that outside effect of children running away from him and people throwing things, spitting at him, things like that. So that's his *kamma*. But that's only the outside reflection back to him, or that's other people's reaction to him.

The process of liberation is now him within himself dealing with all that horror of remorse, guilt, which will be with him because of his past actions. So if you take the Moors murderer, Ian Brady—his biographer, I've not read the book, I don't even know if the book's out actually, I just read a little bit in the newspaper about it—his biographer asked him, does he ever think about the children he tortured? For those of you who don't know, he and a woman called Myra Hindley tortured little children, actually put it on cassette, so they were actually heard in court. It was in the 60s. And he was asked by this biographer, does he ever think about the suffering he caused those children? And his answer was, "If I did that, it would drive me mad."

So even in the most dastardly of human beings, the most awful of human beings, there's always that seed of compassion, that seed of recognition of our total humanity. So here he is. Now, is he going to be able to turn on that? Is he going to be able to turn around and see it?

Some of you might have read that book, "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat." Have you come across

that? It's a great old book. Oliver Sacks. Definitely worth a read. It's about people with mental illnesses because parts of the brain go. But there's one story in there which is very apt for somebody who is into the Buddha Dharma. There's a man who murders his daughter atrociously, so much so that the facts are never actually publicised, even in court. It's horrific, absolutely horrific. But the man can't remember. He has no memory whatsoever, so they can't convict him. What they can do is put him in a mental home. And in the mental home he acts perfectly normally and within a certain amount of time the staff have enough confidence to let him go out for bike rides. And on one of these bike rides a car hits him and he lands on his head. And this little bump on his head awakens that memory. And according to the book, it took over six months for the staff to stop this man wanting to commit suicide. They had to actually tie him down. You'd have to read it for the details.

So when Angulimāla, no matter how horrific his murders and all that has been, there is that being able to turn upon oneself and to sit within himself, your sense of misery, sense of remorse. Now, you see, what we have to understand is that once we've acted, once we've done an act, you can't go back on it. If you steal something, that's it, it is done. You can do something to assuage or to undermine the consequences by slipping the money back that you stole. But the action is done, and therefore the consequence will be there.

That consequence outwardly, the effect of that consequence outwardly will be totally dependent on circumstance completely beyond your control. It might never be known, and you die very rich. On the other hand, it might be known, and you end up in jail. And all that has been completely out of your ability to control. But this inner guilt, this inner feelings of remorse and all that will be there to be handled. And you'll never escape from that because that's the world you're actually living in. The world we're living in is this mental world that I'm creating. So there's no escape from that.

It doesn't say how long it took for Angulimāla to become liberated but it was years. So once he was given the same instructions that we've been given, he would have had to sit with the horror inside him about all the stuff that he's created, and just like we sit with our depressions and our guilts and our remorse, so he would have had to do that. And at some point that would have all passed away, that would have all gone.

Now that for us is one of these stories that allows us to have tremendous hope. Because if somebody who has been truly evil can become liberated within a lifetime, then there's a good chance for us, isn't there? Before next new year, perhaps? I mean, it's a story of hope. It's a story that nobody is incapable of becoming liberated. That's what it means. And in Buddhist history, there was only one time when there was a heresy where a particular school began to teach that there were some people who were so thick that they just wouldn't be able to make it. And they were called the Icchantikas, the ones who go on forever. There was no escape from *saṃsāra* for these people. And that's the only time. And of course, that is definitely not mainstream Buddhism.

So that's the underlying hope within the Buddha's teaching. And Angulimāla stands as an example of that.

No matter how extreme and horrible we've been, yet the liberation from all suffering is ours to achieve.

So just to sum up there, there's just those things to reflect upon every so often: that relationship between our understanding and our conduct, and the other way around, our conduct and our understanding, that at an ethical level, which is where we're actually creating our mental states which are going to cause us happiness or unhappiness. Is it virtuous? And remember it's not just tied to the basic precepts about not to kill and steal and all that. That's basically fundamental. It now becomes much more subtle about the relationship we ought to have to our own emotions.

So we were talking yesterday about attachment. You can't say attachment's evil. But it's not skillful, it's not virtuous. It's not skillful for the person who is the object of your attachment, because remember, attachment is always coming from the self, and necessarily turns the other person into an object, an object to service your needs. So you dehumanise somebody, actually, as soon as you attach to them, whether you like it or not, which may not be your intention, but that's what happens.

So that business of *kusala*, and to understand that, there's always this *puñña*, this merit, this merit to be gained. So the spiritual life is constantly rewarding us for what we're doing. There's a reward. There's always this consequence for correct understanding and ethical behaviour. It doesn't always seem like that, does it?

You know, like your dad says to your mother, you know, how can you be a Buddhist and not a log? You know what I mean? The world doesn't seem to get any better, but the practice seems to, the insight seems to get better. Then you go through the barrier, if you like.

When I first began to meditate, I was doing Zen meditation in Birmingham. When I first began to meditate, I had this dream. And the dream was, I was running like mad. Running, running, running, running. And there was a shower of javelins coming after me. And then I stopped, and every javelin just went into my back.

So when we start practising, that's exactly how it feels. Because you're always running ahead of your suffering. You're always trying to escape your immediate suffering. A bit of discomfort, so you shift your seat. A bit bored, so you phone up a friend. You're always moving off the discomfort. And as soon as you begin practising, you can't do that anymore. And all that conditioning, all that horrible stuff just hits you from behind of all places. So it definitely feels it's getting worse.

And it's the same when, for instance, when you join the Order. You join anything, actually, even if you join a new group or a new work. There's that lovely honeymoon bit which lasts a few months. And then there's the struggle because you have to enculturate yourself. You have to change into what the institution wants you to change into, behave in a certain way. So the first three years, for some forever, is a miserable process. That torturing, you have to behave in this way. And sometimes some people don't, some people decide it's not what they want. They don't want to be manoeuvred that way.

So the understanding is, in those wonderful terms, it has to get much worse before it gets better. And that's where your faith has to be. You have to hang on in there just to see.

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