Buddhist View of Christ's Teaching

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 29:40

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa. Homage to the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

Jim has asked me to offer a little biography and to share the Buddhist perspective on some of Jesus Christ's teachings. So let me begin by establishing that I'm not coming to this from a completely blank space.

I was brought up as a Roman Catholic. My mother was Italian and my father was English. They met when he came up from Africa in the RAF and was billeted on her home. He fell immediately in love, though I think she took a bit more time. On his side, going back to his maternal grandfather, the family came from Milan, and his wife was Irish. So here I am, an Italian Irish Catholic. You can't get more Catholic than that.

My experience of Catholicism is very different from some experiences I've heard from people of my generation, mainly because of my mother. The whole center of my Christian practice was the love of Jesus. I knew full well that if I missed church on Sunday and unfortunately died before I could get to confession, I would definitely spend an eternity in hell. But that was never particularly stressed. It was always the love of Jesus. So I was very devotional as a young boy. I must have been a rare young boy indeed—I actually enjoyed going to Mass.

This manifested later, around the age of eleven and twelve, in a sudden vocation to become a missionary priest. I joined a junior seminary run by the Society of the Divine Word near Birmingham, and I spent four years there. When I think of the regime and the training I had, I can't imagine any modern child even coming near it. We were up at six o'clock in the morning, out in the cold doing exercises, back in for Mass, then breakfast, then an hour of clean-up before starting school. After school there was another religious gathering, and then we had one hour off for games. That was it. The rest of the day was spent in silence.

Interestingly enough, I look back upon the first two years as the halcyon days of my life. I was extraordinarily happy, in a continuous state of ecstasy. Then unfortunately, puberty entered and everything changed. If I could have stayed as a thirteen-year-old, I'd have been happy for the rest of my life.

The practice at seminary was really much to do with what we would call samatha—the development of the beautiful mind. It's done through imagery, through repetitive prayer, where you can lift the heart into a lovely ecstasy. Think of how very empowered business people lift themselves up to tremendous energy, and from the moment they wake up to the moment they fall asleep, they're right there on that plane of

existence. They never drop; they just keep going, always up, always striving. That's what happens when you train yourself to lift your heart into a beautiful ecstasy. It will remain with you all day. Even if people say something rude to you, it doesn't affect you—it just comes off like water on a duck's back. Nothing can touch you because the heart itself is lifted into this lovely state.

Once that had passed, I left and went on to sixth form and then to college. Then something quite peculiar happened, something that has always slightly amazed me. I was lying in bed on a Sunday morning, and I said to myself, "I wonder what will happen if I don't go to church." Remember, this is hellfire we're talking about. And nothing happened. By the end of Sunday, nothing had happened, so I never went again. Just like that. Having been consistent with all my practice, I simply lay in bed, wondered what would happen if I didn't go to church, and when nothing happened, I never went again. People talk about guilt, especially in Catholicism—Holy Mother Church and how could you leave—but there was no guilt, no sorrow, nothing. It just cut like that.

I spent the next ten years looking like a hippie, but actually I was an existentialist. I didn't know what it meant, but it felt good to be an existentialist. I thought, well, I wasn't a nothing—I was an existentialist. It felt so much better than being a socialist, and it launched me into hours of discussion and conversation.

Then, as life has it, tribulations came, and having hit a very low point, I sought some help. At the time, Zen Buddhism was in the air. This was back in the middle to late 1970s. I wrote to the Buddhist Society, and eventually, through one thing and another, I ended up going to a Zen Buddhist meeting held not very far from where I was living in Birmingham. I remember Vajra, whom I look upon as my spiritual mother, inviting me in. Her instructions were very simple. In Zen you sit facing the wall, because of Bodhidharma—that's what I'm called, actually. I'm named out of this particular tradition, but I'll come to that in a bit.

And sit facing the wall, she said, "Just sit here and just watch whatever arises, whatever comes up."

That was it. Those were the instructions. None of this about watching the breath, like all I've done for you now. None of that. Just sit here and watch whatever comes up.

And by the end of that forty minutes, I just knew that this was going to get me out of my problems. I just had that intuitive feeling that this was the path that was going to free me from my emotional state. And over a period of time, that's exactly what happened.

I stayed with Zen Buddhism—there's a monastery up in Northumberland—for three years, and then I became involved with the Theravāda type of Buddhism, which you find in Southeast Asia: Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, those sorts of places. And it was in that tradition that I met my teacher of this particular practice that I've taught you, who was a disciple of the Mahasi Sayadaw, a very famous teacher from Burma. Shortly after that, after a bit of a struggle, I decided to spend three years in the order to develop meditation.

And it's been twenty years. I've just not been able to get out. It's just one of those things. I only joined up for three, and here I am.

The reason for telling you these little things is because one of my struggles—you can say, small 's'—was to accommodate what I had learned in Christianity into my Buddhism. It wasn't a case of saying that was all in the past, all rubbish, and I didn't want anything to do with it. Within my heart there's always been this very intimate connection with Jesus Christ, because I developed it for the first fifteen years of my life, for heaven's sake. So it wasn't a case of trying to deny that—that would have been ridiculous.

I had to, as it were, come to terms and find an explanation for the teachings of Christ through this new prism that I'd found in Buddhism, which had worked for me. And of course, I reminded myself that in the early days, Christianity had worked for me too. The form that I had been given had actually provided the basis for all the spirituality that came afterwards. That basis was, first of all, a moral understanding of life—a clear moral understanding—and secondly, an understanding that there was an interior life. These days, so many people have no idea of what religious emotions are. No idea whatsoever. They confuse it with rock music and stuff like that.

On that basis, when I came to Buddhism and found what Buddhism was doing—investigating this whole phenomenon which I call myself, this psychophysical organism—I had to meld them together and bring them away from what was a feeling of contradiction to a feeling of complementarity.

I've chosen here three or four quotations just to give you an idea of what that has meant for me personally. This isn't *the* Buddhist interpretation of the works of Jesus, you understand. This is a particular person's perspective on his words.

The first one I'd like to point to is the very rich young man who comes to him and says, "I have followed the law perfectly. What must I do now to enter the kingdom of heaven?" And Jesus' reply is: "Go sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me."

This business of "go sell everything"—in other words, give everything up.

He then goes on, in another place (these are two different gospels; the first is in Mark, the second in Luke), where he says something which is very hard for us to take: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate their father and mother, their wife and children, their brothers and sisters, yet even their own life, they cannot be my disciple." That's pretty heavy, isn't it?

And if you remember, there's one point where he says to his mother, "I have no mother." Now, the fact of the matter is that he had a mother. So what was he saying? What did he mean? What does he mean by saying those who hate their father and mother? What does he mean by giving up everything?

One of the core teachings of the Buddha is the teaching around detachment and what detachment actually

means. In the meditation here, I asked you to catch how you were relating to what was arising—how everything which you were perceiving as pleasant, you were moving towards and trying to develop. Even if you didn't catch it in your meditation, just consider how you gravitate towards a cup of tea. And what it feels like when there is no tea. Can you imagine waking up in the morning and finding there's no tea in the house? That's pure misery.

So that attachment, that gravitation, that holding on to things—what are we actually doing when we do that? What are we doing when we say, "I have to have my tea"? Clinging on to relationships: my wife, my children, my family. What are we doing?

In Buddhist understanding, we're seeking happiness right there. That's what we're doing.

We are investing in something phenomenal, something which is arising and passing away, and demanding that it make us happy. The problem is that when you attach like that, when you demand something like that, anything in this phenomenal world is going to let you down. Because the first thing I asked you to notice was that everything is arising and passing away.

So the Buddha's statement on "go sell everything you have" would be this: there is nothing in this world worth holding on to. That's what would be the Buddha's commentary, should we say, on Jesus's "go sell everything."

Now, in his lifetime, if you remember the story, the Buddha comes to what I would call an existential crisis. He gets to the age of twenty-five, the middle twenties, when most people come to recognise that youth is over and they'd better start taking life a bit more seriously. They get married, get a job, and the pension comes a bit later.

In that seriousness, the Buddha's own experience is put in mythological form. He's guarded from the certain realities of life, and he's out hunting on three occasions. On each occasion, respectively, he sees somebody who's very sick, like a leper, somebody who is very old and crotchety and hardly able to move, and a corpse. Each time his question is, "What is this?" And he's told, "This is a human being. This is what happens to people." Then he asks the crucial question: "Does this happen to me?"

Here we have the existential crisis. It was with this that he left his wife, his child just born. Some people think that's very selfish, but a man's got to do what a man's got to do. He leaves his child, cuts his hair off, goes to the river with his assistant Channa. He goes with his horse, his lovely horse that he loves and the horse loves him, Kantaka. He goes to the river—remember the Rubicon, over the river, it's all mythological—cuts his hair off, throws all his robes and finery away, puts on rag robes and crosses the river. And his horse is so upset he dies of grief. Then the Buddha spends his years in training.

So here you see: "one who comes to me and does not hate their mother, hate their father, wife." If you define the word hate as some sort of negativity towards these people, then obviously I think you've misunderstood the teachings of Christ. I've read somewhere that this is a very strong Jewish way of saying

to be detached—not to find happiness in that other person.

Now, this whole process of letting go—if you get into Buddhist circles, you come across these little pat phrases like "letting go," "let it go," "let it pass," "don't own it." When you are in yourself in the way that you were instructed a minute ago, you were detached. That's what the Buddhist understanding is.

Most times, when you feel depressed, what do you say to yourself? You say, "I am depressed." So how are you going to get out of that? "I am depressed." That's it. All you can do now is get depressed about being depressed. Then you get angry about being depressed, and you get very afraid of being depressed, and it goes down into a spiral, and you end up on Prozac.

If you were to sit inside yourself as I instructed—there—and you notice that there is depression, not "I am depressed," then of course you don't have the reaction of being depressed about being depressed. You've discovered a place within yourself which cannot be touched by depression.

When you have pain, should we say—the sitting posture there, you might have had some pain or discomfort, or you've got a headache sometimes. Instead of saying "I have a headache," owning the headache, immediately forming a relationship of attachment, you sit there quietly and feel the sensations of your headache. There's the headache, there. And that which is experiencing the headache comes to understand that it itself does not have a headache.

These are very deep insights, because there is something in us which is experiencing directly everything that we call ourselves to be as a human being—our sensations, our actions, our feelings and emotions, our thought, our images—and yet which isn't that. So what is it?

If that within us is not the body, if that within us is not the heart with its emotional states, if it's not thought, then it hates—it is detached from the very psychophysical phenomena that we call a human being.

Now that detachment is often confused with being some sort of callous, unregarding, unlovable way of being. But when you discover that position of yourself, of being with your body, heart, and mind, you begin to realise that you can now use it, as it were, or have a relationship with it which is kind, which is generous, which is compassionate. And yet, somehow, because you're detached, you're no longer upset by what it's actually doing.

If this body is something that this within us dwells in—we would call it something like the Buddha nature—when the body gets sick, there's a compassionate movement towards the body. Why fear it? Why should you fear the sickness of the body when it's not you? And when an emotion comes, why should you be so concerned about it when it's not you?

Somehow this detaching is a process of liberating ourselves. That's exactly what the Buddha means by detaching, and that's exactly what we mean by nibbāna. Nibbāna translates as unshackling. What is it

that's being unshackled?

What is it that's being liberated? It's that within us which knows, which experiences. And once we can develop this sort of attitude towards ourselves, we develop the same attitude towards others.

So at the end of this particular period, I'll do a loving-kindness meditation. The loving-kindness meditation, or the meditation of goodwill, is taking what we feel about somebody we like. It's easy to love somebody you like. So you take somebody whom you like, whom you have a warm relationship with anyway, and then you keep displacing that image with people whom you hardly know, extending it to all beings, so that this love we are developing is not dependent on the object standing before us.

If I was doing this practice properly, whoever is before me—whether somebody I know intimately, somebody belonging to my own family, somebody I've never met in my life before, somebody who stinks, or somebody who hates me—I still have that same attitude towards them. That attitude of love, compassion, sympathetic joy is what we mean by detached joy. Because it's not attached to the object. It's an attitude we have within our own hearts, developed within our own hearts, not dependent on the object.

Now, to get to that level, you've got to go and sell everything and hate your mother and father. Do you really have to do that? If you take these words literally, you're really going to have to sell everything. And if you take the word hate literally, you're really going to have to hate. But it's not that at all.

What Jesus, from a Buddhist point of view, is pointing to here is forming a completely different relationship to those things you own, and a completely different relationship to those people you relate to. The underlying movement in the philosophy behind it all is that whatever happiness is, you're not going to find it in the sensual world. And you're not going to find it in somebody else. Other people can't make you happy. When you grasp that, you'll stop demanding that they do so. And it feels very liberating for those people around you, I can tell you.

Now I want to get a little more mystical. But first, the third quote: "My commandment is this, to love each other as I have loved you." This is in stark contrast to "hate your mother, hate your father." You're not going to understand this love business unless you understand clearly this other statement about hating your mother and father. Those two statements go together.

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate their father, their mother, their wife, their children, their brothers and sisters, yet even their own life, they cannot be my disciple." But "my commandment to you is this, to love one another as I love you." If you can get beyond that paradox, then you've understood the true message of the spiritual life. And you'll find that in every religion through its mystics.

Now I want to get more mystical. There's this commandment, but Jesus also says, "I and the Father are one. I am in my Father and you are in me and I am in you."

This was the real struggle I had. Remember that in Catholicism, the host at mass is changed into the veritable body of Jesus Christ. So the bread is the body, even though it's under the species of bread. It tastes like bread, but actually it is the body. And the wine is actually the blood, even though it tastes like wine. This is the separation of substance from attributes. And it really just didn't make sense to me.

If I wanted to give you a critique of that from one of the greatest philosophers of the human race, Nagarjuna—who in a sense brought metaphysical philosophy to an end—he simply states: if the substance of a thing is different from the attributes, how do you know it exists? Because the only way you know something exists is from its attributes—whether it's hard or soft, whether you can see it's yellow or blue. And then he says: if the substance and the attributes are the same, why make a difference? This problem around substance and attributes is a philosophical problem.

Jesus says—and correct me if I'm wrong here—unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Something like that. "Eat my body"—and of course people were disgusted and they all walked away. Then just before his passion, he instigates this ritual, which is to my mind the loveliest of rituals you'll come across in any religion: the sharing of bread and wine. He says of the bread, "This is my body, take of this," and of the wine, "the blood I shed for the new covenant."

So he's equated flesh and blood with the bread and the wine. And he's always referring to himself.

Now, I struggled with this for a long time, and it was only because I visited a friend of mine who was an elderly Sri Lankan man—and I must tell you, in truth, I went there for toast. But while I was eating my toast, I was able to have long conversations with him about this business. And for him it was not a problem, because he was brought up Catholic and then became a Hindu. He accepted all the teachings that Catholicism had given him, but in that mystical way, in the way of metaphor.

And it was funny how long it took for the penny to drop. It was a way of looking, a way of thinking, that every time Jesus Christ talked about himself, he was actually talking about the phenomena that we call Jesus—meaning the body, heart, and mind that you've just been examining in your own experience. That was where my confusion lay, coming to me through my Catholic upbringing.

It was only when I realized that when he talked about flesh and blood, when he talked about bread and wine, he wasn't talking about that at all. What he was talking about was the Christ within him. "I and the Father are one. I am in the Father, you are in me, I am in you." You can't get more profound than saying "I am in you and you are in me."

So now, what is the bread and what is the wine within that nature he's pointing to—that which is in me, in you, that through which "I and the Father are one"?

When you meditate, when you begin to do this form of meditation I've taught you, you will begin to abstract, to disembed from the mass that you call yourself, this peculiar quality of intuitive intelligence. And it begins with awareness. It begins now. It's not as though awareness is not always with you. It's not

as though consciousness is not always with you. It's always there. It's even there when you're asleep. Somebody turns you over. Somebody pulls a blanket over you when you feel cold. And somebody wakes up. Somebody hears the alarm clock, and then there you are.

Normally we associate awareness with just "here I am." You go to sleep, and where are you?

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