Bodhisatta Before Taking Human Birth

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 40:24

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhudassa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhudassa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambhudassa

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

There are different traditions for chanting. Next time I'll shut up and just let you get on with it.

I just thought I would take the life of the Buddha and mosey on around it and just see what thoughts arise when we contemplate the life. I suppose there are two things that the Buddha stands for for us. He's both an exemplar and an archetype. I've got a definition here of archetype: it's a primitive mental image in the collective unconscious and a recurrent symbol or motif in mythology. I'm sure that's what it means, but I suppose what I mean by it is some sort of template, some sort of inner image which we have really already within ourselves and which the tradition defines for us in specific ways, so that the specific actions that the Buddha takes during his life become for us examples of how we ought to behave.

That exemplar and archetype really exists in all walks of life, doesn't it? We have an image of the artist, of the academic, of the worker, and so on. So these sorts of background blueprints exist in our minds anyway. And spiritually speaking, we have these great figures which remain for us, exemplars and archetypes of our spiritual lives.

One of the interesting questions which arose really from the way the West discovered the Buddha is that there was a time when they didn't actually think he was a human being. He was a solar deity and the nimbus that was around his head symbolised this origin of being a solar deity. And the reason I bring it up is because if the teaching had come from a solar deity, how would we feel about that? It had been channelled down to Ānanda and he wrote it all down. And what the solar deity is saying is that there's a place where there's no suffering and that he's got there and he's got the t-shirts and it's possible for everybody to make the same place.

But the fact that it's a solar deity does raise a question in the mind, doesn't it? For instance, if you knew that a deva or some great angel being had climbed Mount Everest, and so you knew it was possible by certain beings, but you weren't absolutely certain that the human being could actually make the top. The fact that one person did actually make the top makes it open to everybody. And everybody can make it, if they want to, that is. And I remember some time ago, a seventy-year-old woman climbed up there. So it just shows that once somebody has actually done something in our history, it makes it open to everybody.

Another example of that would be Einstein's theory of relativity. There was a time, if I remember rightly,

when Rutherford, who was a scientist I think in Britain, said there were only two people who understood relativity: Einstein and himself. Now it seems to be first degree stuff at universities.

Unfortunately, the image stops there, because even though the Buddha did make it, it doesn't particularly make it that much easier for us that there's been 2,500 years of history of people trying to climb this particular spiritual mountain. However, it does make it tangible that another human being actually achieved a state of non-suffering. And that should give us that inner confidence that we have all the same potential. There's no difference in terms of our faculties and being from the Buddha himself. And that is simply a matter of time. And we'll get there. So that should lift our hearts a bit, I hope. Even in the worst moments of our meditation, when we seem to be wallowing in hell, we should remember that there is always that potential and it lies within us, and hell after all is transient.

This idea of the Buddha being an archetype and an exemplar is something that we begin to internalise. And it's not really important – so this is another question that often arises – as to whether it's historically true, the stories around the Buddha are historically true. The only thing that we can say with, I think, absolute certainty is that there was a person called Gautama who lived approximately 2,500 years ago, lived a life and then died and left the teaching behind. The bare bones of the story, how he was born and how he left home and all that, probably has a basic truth around it, but the stories that are built up around it are, shall we say, apocryphal.

Just to give you an example of how that can happen, even in this modern day and age, there's a famous monk in Sri Lanka – at least he's famous in Sri Lanka. He's a Danish monk and he lives out in the forests. And he lives in what is a three-sided kuti. So there's only three sides to his hut with a roof. So that means that he lives quite happily with snakes, poisonous creatures, poisonous spiders and things like that. And that's his life as an ascetic life. There's two or three of them now that live like that up there.

He would wander down to the local village for his food. And on one occasion when he came back, an elephant jumped out, and he told me he didn't have time to chant the *mettā* sutta, and the elephant ran over him. Unfortunately, he stood on his hip and broke his hip, and he lay there all day, all night, until the villagers thought, why hasn't he arrived? So they went off looking for him and found him on the path. Now, the fact is that that elephant did not mean to kill him. They tell you if an elephant means to kill you, it will definitely kill you. The elephant, it seems, only came out to give him a little shock. But unfortunately, in so doing, went and stood on him and broke his hip.

This story filtered down to Colombo, which is about, I suppose, maybe at the most eighty, one hundred miles away. And I was visiting Colombo at the time, and there was a Swedish monk there. And he said to me, have you heard about so-and-so? And I said, I have. By then, I'd only heard rumours. I said, yeah. I said, this thing about an elephant. He said, oh, yeah. He says, quite remarkable, he said. He was sitting in posture under a tree in meditation and a big she-elephant with a little child came along and they were entranced by him, and the little baby elephant moved towards him and tried to sit in posture, fell over and

broke his hip.

So this happens within a couple of months, one hundred miles distance. So this gives you an idea of how apocryphal stories gather around somebody who has a certain reputation about them. But for our purposes, the stories are just there really to enhance the basic template, which is the path that we're on, that's all.

So in the story, of course, the Buddha doesn't begin with the life that he's born into. He's been through these thousands of rebirths. And there's a point when he is an ascetic called Sumedha. Now, you won't be surprised to know that Sumedha was, in fact, a very rich prince who gave everything up when he saw the vanity of life and ended up taking on the ascetic life. He heard about the Buddha, and having heard the name of the Buddha, was greatly moved by it. So he went to meet Dīpaṅkara. And when Dīpaṅkara came, there was a puddle of water. I'm sure you know the story. And he threw his cloak upon the puddle and threw himself down upon the cloak and asked that Dīpaṅkara, the Buddha, and all the Arahats who were following him should use his body as a stepping stone. And when Dīpaṅkara saw this and saw the qualities of Sumedha, he prophesied that this person would indeed become a future Buddha.

So now, you see, we have to consider, is there anybody you know that you would do that to? Throw your coat down, lie in front of them and say, please use my body as a stepping stone? So it brings up this whole relationship that we might have to a teacher and how we relate to the teacher in our spiritual lives.

One of the two things that come to mind are around this word authority. So we say somebody is an authority and we also say somebody is in authority over authority. And these two things are very different relationships, aren't they? So when somebody is in authority over you, it inspires fear, a certain anxiety, because they have power over your life. But an authority is somebody who obviously you respect, and that brings up in you a certain sense of reverence.

However, that split is not so, shall we say, easy. You can't just say, well, I look upon the Buddha as an authority, but he definitely doesn't have any authority over me. There is that, shall we say, point where having respect for somebody, you therefore accept their teachings. You, as it were, surrender to what the person says or what the person is asking us to do. So even these days when we're very sceptical of doctors, once we've, shall we say, had faith in the doctor, once the doctor has prescribed a certain thing, we tend to follow the prescription.

So when we're thinking about our relationship to the Buddha, and indeed to any teacher, there is that reflection to be had as to what my relationship is to this person. At one end, of course, you've got the fawning devotee, the one who goes around kissing the teacher's feet, and whatever the teacher says must be true. So this isn't quite what the Buddha would have wanted, I think. He wants a person to maintain a certain independence. And if you remember, I think it was just before he died, wasn't it, there was a young monk looking upon him with great admiration while he was there, and he sent him packing off to the forest, didn't he? He didn't particularly want to be surrounded by people with adoring eyes.

And yet the other end, of course, is the continual sceptical follower who doesn't believe a word you say and who won't actually do what you want them to do. So those of you who have been teachers, I know they must have come across these two types of people. So it's a case of, again, recognising that the *Dhamm a* that we have is spoken, is passed on to us by another human being. And it has that quality of having been lived, having been experienced.

So sometimes reflecting upon that, reflecting upon the personage or the person of the Buddha, brings about that sense of reverence, that sense of right attitude to the teaching. Then of course there's the whole business of relationships even to our teachers here and now, who we listen to. And that ability to receive and yet not to lose one's own independence, as it were, to receive and to have that attitude of trial and error to make sure that there isn't just that blind acceptance, a blind faith to what's being said or to what we're being asked to do.

So all these things are important in our spiritual life, just to get the attitude right. And these attitudes, remember, are beneath our practice. They're there as certain traits that are subconscious, or should we say subliminal to our practice. And so if you find yourself, for instance, always balking and always not wanting to do things, sometimes ask yourself, what is your basic attitude to the *Dhamma*?

So here we come to this whole business of bowing. So bowing for Westerners is a bit of a pain, really. I remember when I first went to my first classes in Zen, and there they only bow from the waist, of course. And everybody did it, so I mean, I did it, but I thought, oh, this is ridiculous. And it took me quite a long time to get the hang of what bowing was about, actually. I mean, I did it. You do it because, well, because he's doing it.

And in the Zen practice, of course, you bow even to the room you're leaving. You bow to your cushion. You bow to your plate. You bow to your toilet. There's nothing you don't bow to. So in the end, you get the feeling that there may be something in this bowing. And bowing is just a strong body language, isn't it, for surrender, for that ability just to receive without negativity, without aversion. And that connection between the mind and the body.

Remember that the Eightfold Path always begins with right understanding, then right attitude, and then right speech, right action, right livelihood. So somehow the right understanding and the right attitude needs to be expressed in a certain way. So when you feel a resistance, when you feel a resistance against the practice, some form that you don't want to do it, you can't do it, something like that, bow. Just actually try it, just actually, just secretly in your room – you don't have to do it as a public display. And to actually bow and to, when the body is in that posture, it's in that posture of surrender. It's ready to be trod upon and to be used by a higher being as a stepping stone. So that brings about that sense of humility. And in there, that feeling of reverence. I was going to say the word obedience, but that's a horrible word for us. We don't want to be obedient.

So these little stories, when you read about them about the Buddha, if you just let your mind wander

about it and just ask yourself, what's its meaning for me? How does it relate to me personally? How can it inform my own practice? And in that way, this archetype, this exemplar is imbibed. It becomes part of our own nature.

The next thing of course is the whole teaching around these rebirths. And at some later date maybe I'll go into the idea of rebirth. What always interests me is this underlying conception of time, how we relate to time itself. So in the Buddha's time, the idea was that time was circular. It was constantly repeating itself. And I think if you just look at just an ordinary year, then you can see how that can be understood. I mean, it's the seasons. And every day the sun rises and it sets and you get up and you go to bed and you're born and you die. And so there's that feeling that, in fact, although everything is, shall we say, a little bit different, the underlying blueprint, the underlying motion is one of constant circularity, constantly going round and round and round.

And if you can just imagine now, if you really believe that, just for one moment put yourself into that mental state of believing that you've lived a life over and over and over again. Sometimes there's a horse or an elephant. Sometimes there's a little being, a mouse, and then a human being. But always you just keep coming back, keep coming back. And it's always birth, old age, sickness, death, a bit of happiness stuck in there somewhere. But this never-ending, ceaseless movement of just going round and round, the same old thing, the same old job, the same old relationships, the same old fallouts, and the same old making it up, and the same old breakfast, and the same old toilet. It's always the same, going round and round.

And you get that feeling, maybe, of that growing despair of how the hell do you get off this wheel? So if you have an image, shall we say, of a roundabout, and you've got your horse, and you're going round and round, and having a good time, and the beer and all that. And then suddenly, the leg falls off your horse and you've got to get off and put it back on and things fall off and arguments start and people start throwing bottles about and you think, I want to get off. And then when you want to get off this roundabout, all you see around you is this void. Whether you look down or up or across, there's just nothing there. You're just stuck on this roundabout and there's no way off it. And if you were to jump, then you just get sucked back into it.

So if you can imagine that mentality, that was the mentality around the Buddha's time of circularity, of constant repetition, of no escape. And so the idea of escaping this was one of the obsessions of the time. How do you stop this rebirthing? So there were many answers, of course. There were some who believed in...

even at the end of this life, you completely annihilated and that was it. And that the best bet would be to make the best of this life as you can and really go for it. So that sort of thought is well known to us these days. And there were some who thought that you went on for a few rebirths and then you're annihilated after that. And then there were some who thought, well, you did carry on rebirthing, but it got better. And

you ended up being a great Brahma up in the high heavens.

These things, of course, the Buddha would have known. He would have known all these arguments, all these ideas. And even so, as you know, through his practice, he came to realize that no matter what beautiful state of mind he could attain, it didn't last. There was still that falling off, that particular level of being, you might say.

Now, as opposed to that, these days, and that's why we find it difficult, perhaps, to accept this idea of rebirthing, is that our idea of time is an arrow. We actually think we're going somewhere. We have this idea of progress. We're going from this place to that place. This is embedded, really, deep within the Judaic Christian religion, but especially in Christianity, where the early Christians for many years presumed that the second coming was about to happen. And the idea of the medieval society was to establish something stable, something which was godlike, ready for this second coming.

As the centuries rolled on, and it didn't quite seem that it was going to happen, there came the idea started off by a monk, writing at the time, who talked about three ages. The age of the Father, which was the age before Christ, the age of the Son, which was the age that we're living in, and the age of the Spirit, which would come in some future time when the human race had progressed to receive it. So there came this idea of progression, the idea that we were going somewhere, the human race was actually going somewhere.

And this has been accentuated in our day and time by technology. It would be foolish to say that technology has not progressed. And we get the impression that just because we have this enormous progression in technology, therefore we must be going somewhere. But unfortunately, when we look around us and see what we're doing with this technology, then that hope begins to fizzle and fade. But even so, we're stuck on this idea that this progress, that we're actually moving towards some sort of aim.

And when we bring that to the Buddha's teaching, then we find the idea of rebirth difficult to accept because we've lost that sense of circularity of time, that constant repetition, the repetitiousness of time within time. And this idea of progress, of course, seeps into our practice. So there is that quality. It's not as though Easterners don't have a sense of progress—people who live still with that sense of circularity, which is, I would say, most Easterners. It's not as though they're not grasping in their practice, but in a sense it's coming from a slightly more superficial level. Within us, I think, we have a much deeper level that we think that there's some sort of progress to be had through the practice.

And what it does is it seeps into our practice as a sense of trying to do something. Trying to do something. So we've been able to do a lot with our technology. So when we come to sit, there's that underlying, I think, understanding or presumption that we can do something. And the idea that actually we don't have to do anything but just watch is difficult for us.

Sometimes when I was in the East, and especially in the villages, it always seemed to me quite remarkable

how people could just sit and seemingly stare. They would just stare at things, whether it was a fly going around a window or just the countryside. But when you looked into their face, it wasn't as though the face was dead, but they were just able just to stare. And that ability of just to relax into the present moment and just to be in it without wanting anything from it at all, but just to be completely receptive.

So we find that, I think, a little difficult. And I'm suggesting that maybe it's to do with our conception of time at a deeper level, the idea of progress, that we've made progress, and that it's up to us to do something. And the idea that the whole process of purification of the heart and of insight comes by actually a process of relaxing and just watching, and everything arises quite naturally, is, I think, just a little bit difficult for us.

With these two types of time—the circular time and this arrow, the time as an arrow—there's another time, and this time we can call the immediate presence. In Christian mysticism, they talk of the *nunc stans* and the *nunc fluens*. So there's a now which is in a state of flow and a now which is absolutely still.

Perhaps you've had the impression sometimes on a train where there's another train next to yours, and when one of them moves, you don't know whether you're moving or whether the other train is moving. It just takes that little bit, that little moment to gather the fact that either you are moving or you're not. You might have got the sense sometimes, driving, especially driving, just driving down a motorway, for instance, of instead of you passing through that space, that you were still and the space was passing through you. It's something you can try anyway, so it's only another way of positioning yourself. So suddenly to find within yourself that position where there is that stillness and everything that is arising within our perceptual faculties is what's moving.

Now that presents us with a different idea of time because the idea of circular time and the idea of time moving as an arrow demands that we go with it, demands that we are part of that motion. So now when we sit in meditation and we gain that position at least of the observer, being aware of transience, being aware of things arising and passing away, means that that which is aware of it can't itself be arising and passing away.

And it's sitting in that position which gives us a different feel for time. It's not that time isn't circular or that there isn't some sort of movement. For instance, you can't go back on time. But the fact is that in terms of the actual experience of being in time is only momentary. So this idea of time is just a way that the mind relates the way things have happened in the past.

When we talk about space, what do we mean? We mean simply the relationship of objects, don't we? It's the way all that space is, is a measurement between objects. If there were no objects, there couldn't really be any space. So it's with time. If there were no events, there'd be no time. And our concept of time, circular or arrow, is dependent on how we, the mind, that's it, this particular consciousness, organizes events.

So all memory is past. You can't go back on memory. That's it. It's finished. And the future hasn't happened. So by remembering that, all these concepts that we have of time are simply mind-made. And that if we can find this position within ourselves of observing events arising and passing away, then we find this other position where there's no time.

The other thing that comes up with the idea of rebirth and these constant, such a long time that it takes to become an enlightened being is the question of why it takes so long. Why is it that once we've grasped the teaching, the *anicca dukkha anattā*, everything arises and passes away, we cause our own suffering and there is no self anymore—why isn't that enough? Why isn't that enough for us to move forward rapidly and find ourselves in a week or two fully liberated?

I remember a friend of mine who, when he first heard about Buddhist teaching and Nibbāna and all that, he decided to do a course. And if you think about it, when you go on a course, at the end of the course, you achieve what you get, what you went in for, and you get a certificate. So he presumed that by the end of the week he'd have grasped this idea of nirvana and he'd be away. And he told me, as the week wore on and the time came for him to leave, there was this growing sense of despair and disappointment. Later on he was able to overcome that, of course, and continued his practice.

But the fact that we have this idea or this hope that things might progress very quickly is undermined by our practice. We find it hard, we find it difficult. And surely the reason is that our conditioning is so deeply ingrained and we keep falling back. Every time we progress a little bit, we then fall back a bit. So here we're working very hard for a couple of weeks, a month, a whole year, and then we go out, and before we know it, we slip back into the old ways. And so all the old conditioning gets lighted up again.

So it's a case of recognising that it's going to take quite a time to develop enough momentum to keep moving forward at a pace which seems to us obvious. Often you can only really look back over a good space of time, maybe five, ten years, and say, oh yes, I have progressed. But if you look back over a week, it does seem appalling. I put all this work in and we don't seem to be getting very far.

So it's a case of, again, that sense of realism, really, a sort of humility about ourselves. There was a very famous Hindu saint in Sri Lanka whose saying was, the spiritual life was one step forward, two steps back. So you can see it's even, in all traditions, it's understood to be difficult. And it's a case of building up these *pāramīs*, these virtues within us, and that takes time.

The other question, of course, when we go back to this archetype and exemplar, is the fact that there must be something in us which already knows that it needs to seek liberation. These stories which talk about eons and eons and eons and going back to Dīpaṅkara Buddha many world systems ago, from an archetypal point of view, is suggesting that within us, at all times, there has been that seed that wants to find out its own true nature.

When Buddhism developed through the Mahāyāna, of course, it became known as the embryo of the

Buddha. And the embryo of the Buddha, through the practice, through these constant rebirths, finally becomes the Tathāgata. The Tathāgata Garbha, the embryo of the Tathāgata, becomes the Tathāgata. So the idea that there is something in us which is seeking liberation is presumed within the practice.

And this, of course, is in the Buddha's own life, in his growing dissatisfaction with the way he was living. So, in a sense, whether the Buddha had arisen or not, we would have been seeking, we would have been, in our own way, seeking our own liberation.

So that then now brings us to his descent into his mother's womb. And I wonder if I might not have too much time to do this. I suppose the last... The last thing to say before I go on to, because this will take two or three talks to finally get through his life and just see what we can glean from it.

Just to go back on the whole idea of the Buddha being an archetype and an exemplar. The idea that he was an actual human being and that we as human beings therefore have the same capacity to attain exactly what he attained and how that rises in us, that inner faith and confidence about our own practice. So when you have doubts about yourself—everybody else can do it, but I can't. I'm special that way. So remind yourself that, in fact, the capability of becoming fully liberated is there within you. And to ponder that, to ponder that, to really sit within that inner confidence.

The idea of a relationship that we have towards a teacher as an authority or in authority and how those two can become confused and how we must maintain that certain distance within ourselves, that certain capacity to constantly reflect upon our practice and make sure that we know what we're doing.

The idea of time, time being only a figment of the imagination, it's only the way that we look at things, experience things. And that if we can, as it were, stand outside the process, which is exactly what we're doing when we're sitting, standing outside the process. Remember that everything is being created by our own minds, even though the world out there has some reality. The reality that we experience is only being created by our own minds. So to be able to sit back and take that position within ourselves and to watch our minds and to watch the flow of events within our minds immediately pulls us out of this idea that time is circular or that it's going anywhere. That is another position.

And to have the patience to work with it, not to presume that things are going to happen too quickly. So I hope my words have been of some assistance and that before very long you will join the Arahats and become fully liberated.

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