Meditation and the Weekly Group

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 53:15

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sambha-sambudassam namo tassa bhagavato arahato sambha-sambudassam. Namo dasa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I like to start like that just to remind me that I'm supposed to be teaching what the Buddha taught, in case I slip in with my own little bits.

Just to go through an evening like this and to understand what we're trying to do. When we bow, for instance, if you look at any religious form, it always has some form of bowing. The Muslims bow from the waist, the Hindus bow, Christians genuflect. So there's something about a physical action of bowing, which is, what its main purpose is, that surrender.

When you actually bow, if you just watch yourself with people whom you consider to be slightly above you, have power over you, your boss or whatever, you'll see, whether you like it or not, your position changes, your shoulders lower, you tend to try to lower yourself, your voice softens, and all these little indications which we as Westerners, because of our deep individualism and equality don't like to show, but actually it's just there, it's just manifest.

So the idea of any spiritual path is a surrender to that path. And the reason why all these religions have a physical representation of it is because whatever spiritual path we're on, it'll always ask us to do exactly what we don't want to do. I mean, the whole point is to go against desire, the self, its selfishness and all that. And we don't want to do that. So any spiritual path worthy of its name will always ask us to do things that we simply don't want to do. And that action of bowing is a surrender to that, it's a yielding. It's saying, well, whatever has to be done, that has to be done. That's one of these little pat phrases that comes up in the scriptures when somebody becomes fully liberated. They always say, what had to be done has been done.

And what this takes us to is a different understanding about free will. Free will is really a delusion about somebody having a choice and that choice is somehow an expression of my free will to do what I want. But as we know, everything is conditioned. So this idea of some sort of individual that's floating around the place, completely separate from the universe, who can make decisions, it's just ridiculous. The spiritual path doesn't give you a choice. Whenever choice arises on the spiritual path, it arises because of confusion.

It's a bit like going for a walk. When you take out your map and you think, well, I'll walk up here and I'll go

up St. Brendan's Hill and all that, there's the path. So you get to a place where there's suddenly a crossroad and you don't know where you're going. So what do you do? You don't make a choice. You take out your map and you look at it and you think, well, this is the way. So it's the same with the spiritual path. You can presume that whenever there's a choice coming up, it's usually a point of confusion.

Even in ordinary life, whenever you're presented with a choice, should I do that job or that job, should I pick this tin of beans or that tin of beans, it's confusing. It's just there because you don't know. And we don't like being in a place of don't know. So we tend to make rash judgments. But the point about the bowing in any of these religions is that commitment. Being open to being told what to do. That's the point.

And I failed to light the lamp which was put out there especially so I would light it. It was unfortunate really because light, the flame, is the universal spiritual symbol because of its light which symbolizes the path of understanding, the path of investigation, the heat, the path of love, and its action, the path of doing, the path of action. So those are your three paths and they are expressed through the Eightfold Noble Path.

So one starts the Eightfold Noble Path by trying to understand the way things really are. And what this means is to begin to see things from the enlightened person's point of view, from the awakened person's point of view. And that is to constantly awaken that way of looking, of seeing that everything arises and passes away. Now that's pretty obvious when you look outside yourself and sometimes it's pretty obvious when you look in the mirror. But it's when you go internally to this idea of a self, and you just have to contemplate certain things like, well, when I go to sleep, I disappear. The alarm goes and here I am. So, where have I been? Where have I been these past eight hours? And that's loss of self there.

Now, if a doctor said to you, if you fall asleep, you will definitely die, you're going to pin your eyelids to your forehead to make sure that you do not fall asleep. So the only reason that we fall asleep in that sense of peace is that we presume that the I will arise again in the morning.

So the other thing is to understand the doctrine of not-self. That's a bit more subtle. But remember, the Buddha never saying that there is no self. It's not a metaphysical statement. It's not about who we really are. The whole teaching of not-self is to be able to point at something and say, well, this is not me, not mine. And that takes us to the meditation, which we can go into a little bit more deeply in a minute.

And the other thing is to understand this quality of where does suffering arise. Psychologically speaking, it lies around that quality of desire, desire of attachment. So when we see these things in the right view, there's a change of attitude. And that attitude, which is based on a self, must necessarily always be attentive to the needs of the self. And what the self needs at base is safety. It needs to feel safe. If you don't feel safe, then you feel very anxious, very fearful. So our lives are about making ourselves feel safe. The warm hearth, the food on the table, the insurance policy. Even for the grave. Make sure you get a decent grave.

My father, towards the end of his life, took out a special £2,000 mortgage to make sure that he got a decent amount of stuff. I still feel guilty about that because he didn't spend it all on his grave. So, the case of safety, and to make ourselves feel safe, then of course we have to accumulate. The more we accumulate, the more we feel safe, and hence we move into greed. Greed, accumulation, all that. And that takes us into, at worst, criminality. And because we need to feel that safety, because we've accumulated these things, then of course we have to guard it against those who might rip it off us, and hence aversion arises. And when that attacker, when that person or society or group feels as though they've got the better of us, then we have to run for it. So we're into the next stage of our psychology, which is just aversion and fear. And from that, of course, comes all the secondary stuff around shame, guilt, remorse, we push things away and get depressed, and so on and so forth.

But the self, once it's been established, it has to have that base of safety. And the fact of the matter is that no matter how much it accumulates, it never feels, it cannot feel utterly safe, because it knows that it arises and passes away. So it's a fact.

So these three ways of looking at things begin to change our attitude. So our attitude moves from selfishness. As the selfishness disappears, the self-centeredness, safety, then of course it turns outwards and it moves towards generosity. It's a natural movement. Where once we felt aversion, we feel love. Where once we practice cruelty, we begin to feel compassion.

So the heart, sometimes you get the feeling that what Buddhism is about is moving towards almost the state of a cold stone, because basically it's all about investigation. But the Buddha heart is there for us to read. He's quite open about his emotional states, about the mental states that he's in. He says he's happy when people take on the Dhamma, take on his teaching, but he's not unhappy when people don't. And he says constantly, he says, whatever a teacher can do for his students out of compassion, *anukampa*, and that word *anukampa* means moving towards the other. It's an actual action, moving towards the other. And whatever a teacher has done out of compassion for his students, I have done for you. So it would be wrong to think that the Buddha went around with some sort of equanimous indifferent heart that didn't actually connect with people. Far from it.

And then once the attitude changes within us, it has to express itself. So attitudes need to express themselves. If you don't, you just become a vegetable. And it expresses itself through right speech, right action, right livelihood. So our language changes, our actions change, and what we do with our lives becomes important. So all that is prefigured in the Eightfold Noble Path. The flame, the light, the warmth and the action is right there in the Noble Eightfold Path. And that brings us to the reason for ritual.

So ritual is just that moment where we actually do something which is symbolic of our spiritual life. So the lighting of the candle, the bowing, and then praising or bringing to mind the quality of the spiritual leader. So here we acknowledge the Buddha as somebody who said he was fully self-enlightened, and that he had worked towards it by himself, and that we have a relationship to that historical figure. It may be a

relationship of just one other teacher, somebody whom we refer to, or it could be that that is our central archetype, the very exemplar of our own life.

So it depends where you put that historical personage. If you look at all these scriptures, if you look at all these religions, the people who follow that leader are simply following that same lifestyle. So the life of love and sacrifice would be a Christian approach. The life of insight and compassion would be the Buddhist approach. So all these paths have a particular view of how to get to the top of the spiritual mountain.

So having praised the qualities of the archetype of the Buddha, one then begins to take refuge. So the refuge is in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. And we take it three times because that's an ancient habit of making sure that you actually mean what you say. So in the scriptures when somebody asks a question of the Buddha and he says no, they always ask it three times to make sure that he actually means it. So he said you take this refuge in the Buddha Dhamma Sangha.

So the Buddha here for people who are born Buddhists, cultural Buddhists this always refers to some historical figure but for those who are into the actual spiritual path what you're taking refuge in is the Buddha within there's something which in us has to be awakened and unless you have an inkling of that unless you have some sort of small faith in that then it undermines the whole practice there has to be that understanding that what we're trying to do is awaken something inside us.

And the Dhamma is that teaching, here specifically the meditation that we're doing. And the Sangha refers to, in the religion, to all those people who've experienced some form of enlightenment, so that we're taking refuge in people who actually have had this same experience. But for us, as practitioners, it's each other.

And because you recognize, you begin to realize that actually, unless you're with a group, unless you're with people around you who are going the same way, it's very difficult. Just to come here and make that effort once a week through the hail, rain and snow to come to a meeting is an act of will. And that act of will is a commitment to the path. And just to come here once a week and practice has an effect on your weekly practice. I know all this from my own personal experience. Just to make my way across Birmingham, come hail, rain or shine, it had an effect. And if I laid off it, if I didn't go a couple of weeks, it would revert back to my morning practice. It's as simple as that. And what we're doing by making that effort is strengthening that commitment, strengthening that will. And that reverberates through the rest of our lives.

So then, having taken the refuges and precepts, and that little blessing I gave, it just simply says that we've taken the refuges and precepts, and then it leaves you with the final exhortation of the Buddha, which is to practice diligently for our own liberation.

Then we come to the actual practice. What is that? Well, we're trying to find out. We're trying to find an

observation post within ourselves, some sort of position where we can actually observe this psychophysical organism that wanders around the world calling itself me. And you want to know when you get that position.

So this is a very exceptional position. You really can't do this if you're walking around and in action. In the sitting posture, it is specific about finding this position where you can feel sensations and you can actually investigate them. You can investigate your relationship to those sensations. If it's pleasant, how you want to indulge it. If it's unpleasant, how you want to turn away from it. In this position, you can actually begin to feel an emotion as something not me, not mine, rather than saying, I am depressed. You say, there is depression. You point to it there.

And it's by making that inner world as objective to yourself as the outer world is objective, which begins to abstract, disembed that which in us, which is the Buddha nature. And that Buddha nature is simply the one who knows. And as you begin to see thoughts as arising and passing away, distance, not me, not mine, emotions arising and passing away, distance, not me, not mine, feelings in the body arising and passing away, distance, as not me, not mine, you're then thrown back to this feeling of being the observer.

But that feeling of the observer, remember, is also a distortion, because it's the self, it's that intelligence catching its own presence within the atmosphere, within the mirror of the mind itself. So I liken it to watching television. When you watch television, sometimes your image is in the screen, so now you can decide, are you going to watch yourself watching television, or are you going to watch television? And if you keep concentrating on the television, that sense of a self disappears.

So in your meditation, even though you might feel that very strong sense of being the observer, the witness, the one who feels, the one who knows, keep putting your attention on what it is you're actually trying to investigate. And every so often you might just experience just the disappearance of the knower, the observer. So there's a collapse of that which knows into what it knows. And that, in a sense, is your pure *vipassanā*. It's only at that point that we can talk about pure *vipassanā*. Not that insights can't come before that, that's fine, but it's only at that point that we can begin to experience things at a level which truly begin to turn the way we see things.

So that's the point of the practice, and that's why we need to do it morning and evening especially, because in the morning we have to set ourselves to that way of being in the world. You have to remind yourself that you must keep that sense of awareness of what I'm doing from the time I get up to the time I fall asleep. And in the evening it's important. Best done when we come back from work, have a cup of tea or something and relax. Not when you go to bed, you just fall asleep. It's a case of sitting there and just seeing what we've accumulated during the day. Any tensions, any irritations, whatever we've accumulated, we sit there and we just wait for it to pass. And then we acknowledge these have arisen because during the day I've lost that moment to moment life on earth. And then you normally have a decent evening.

Then finally, there has to be this *metta*, this goodwill. So the purpose of that is to remind us that we are

drawing this intelligence into the heart. And that change of attitude will come naturally with the growth of wisdom, but we can definitely help the process by practicing this loving-kindness.

By bringing people to mind, there's that reconnecting with the world. If you don't do that, this meditation can have the effect of you remaining too aloof and people feel that you're distant from them. So you have to be careful. You have to bring it into the heart and reconnect with people. And in so doing, you then remind yourself that you're actually also doing this for the benefit of all beings. When you change, the world changes. Not immediately, of course. So that's the whole idea.

So that connection is made in your meditation. So we're moving from that inward gaze, the inward understanding, then an attitude out into the world, and when we rise from the seat, it should express itself in the way we speak, and what we do, and in the livelihood that we choose to follow. Yeah. Easy, easy peasy.

When you talk about bringing the intellect into the heart and bringing *metta*, what exactly do you mean by heart?

Ah, just your emotional life. Your warmth, your feelings... I mean, it includes all, everything that you would normally describe as emotions, moods, mental states. But they would be around... Well, it depends, you know, we split. I mean on one end of the scale there are the thinkers, who think their emotions are up in their head, and on the other end you get the feelers, who think their thoughts are actually in the heart. And it depends where you are on the scale of things as to what you have to do. Generally speaking.

I think, you know, I know that some people, for some people, such is their block in thinking, that they actually think they feel their emotions up here. I don't think it matters where you actually feel the emotion as long as you understand that that is an emotion. But I think as you begin to meditate and that separation of thought comes from the emotional base, then it's here that you feel emotion. This is the exchange box for emotions. I mean, you might feel nausea, or you might feel tightness in the stomach, but you're only guessing that it's anxiety. It's only when anxiety rises into the heart that you know, oops, I am actually anxious. As a mood, as a felt emotion.

So we know that certain parts of the body tend to hold emotions for us that we've suppressed out of consciousness. And often in our meditation what we think is actual physical pain is none other than an emotion trying to release itself. And often if that emotion has been deeply suppressed it needs to come out as a physical feeling and you never know really what the emotion was. So, for instance, pain in the neck, headaches, pain in the back, stomach pain, chest pain, all sorts. And sometimes you don't know. You don't know what it was.

What I'm saying may be silly, but when I'm meditating... normally the attention is turned on the breathing. But I also heard about turning the attention away from the breathing and on to mind, the nature of the mind. But when I do that, okay, there's something, mind there, all right, but right there in front of me, or

somewhere in my head, I seem to have this ball of tangled rope, or something like that. It's there, and if I let my mind rest on that, and I can more easily than on my breath, I can keep it there. And sometimes my body begins to twitch. I don't know what it's all about. Could it be, because you just said something about some people feel their emotions in their head, is it something related to that?

When you say a ball of string, are you saying that's an actual image that you see?

It's almost tangible. It feels like something inside my head or inside in the area that I'm observing. It's quite distinguishing. I suppose it feels a bit like a ball of tangled rope.

Well, what's important is to know the relationship between the mind with its thoughts and images and stories and what's motivating them, which is these emotions, these emotional states. In the Wheel of Dependent Origination, which is the psychology of the Buddha, he points out that at the point of contact, consciousness arises and awareness arises of something. That contact is either physical, something we see or hear, it's emotional, coming out from the heart, or it's something that touches the mind, a thought, an image.

As soon as you've got that contact, that basic percept, perception arises for it to be either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. At that next point there is a grabbing of that object in terms of either indulging it, pushing it away or ignoring it. Now, how do we indulge an emotion? How do we indulge an emotion? It's through the head, isn't it? There's a feeling of irritation comes and before you know it you're arguing with somebody in your head. You're feeling depressed and there you are walking to the bridge. You see? It's all in the head.

When you begin to recognize the connection between what we do in our heads and what we do in our emotions, you cut your head off. You really do. You cut your head off. And what you do is, as soon as a thought arises, you just cut it. Absolutely. Cut it. And any time an image or a film arises, you cut it. And you turn away from that to what is actually empowering those thoughts. And you always find it in the heart as a mental state or emotion. You see? I'm talking about all these things that are negative, by the way, and unwholesome, yeah?

And when this emotion, when this state of mind, which is nothing but an energy form, and when you go into it, what is it that you actually experience depression as, or anxiety as, or anger as? What is the actual direct experience of that emotion as a felt state, not as a thought? You see, that's what you've got to discover. When you get down there, what do you feel? A bit of heat? A bit of pressure? Sensation? It's nothing at all. And we made such a big thing, didn't we?

And when you can stay with that in a calm and sensible way like that, you see, where has that energy got to go? It can't go anywhere. It needs your empowerment for it to grow. And the way you empower it is by creating a fantasy around it. The fantasy feeds into it and it builds up. It's like you put your foot on the accelerator. If you take the foot off the accelerator, where does it go? It fizzles out, it goes out. So all these

deep depressions, anxieties, eventually they all fizzle out. 25, 50 years. I don't want to give you false hope, because this stuff is really empowered.

Now, when you recognize that and you recognize the power of the mind and what it's actually doing, of course, every time you get a skillful thought, a wholesome thought, then you generate those thoughts. And that's what we're doing with the *metta* practice.

So, if we feel something negative within us, then whatever image the mind offers, come off it, come off it, go into that state. You go into the state.

If you turn off what's in the mind, does it automatically go back into the heart centre?

No, you've got to put your attention there. You see, every time you put your attention on something, whether you like it or not, you've made an act of intention. Whatever you attend to is conditioning you. So even going along the road in the car and you see a billboard and you look at it, you've conditioned yourself. You've always got to buy the same biscuits. And it's really understanding the power of attention and its conditions and how it conditions us that then you understand the Buddha's advice to restrain the senses. Not to look, not to listen to those things which you know are unwholesome. The restraint of the senses. It's so strong.

You started off at the beginning talking about choice and decision, and you're saying it's conditioned. I didn't quite understand that at the beginning, because surely you make choices. That's one of the only things you can really do as a human being, to be aware, to make a choice.

Yes, absolutely. You have a choice, you make a decision, but the choice is always because of confusion, of not knowing. Unless you wouldn't have a choice, you wouldn't know what to do. See, if you get up in the morning and you know you have to go to work, you don't have a choice. You just go to work. Well, you think you do.

Isn't it more subtle than that? You say, for instance, you have a choice. Maybe there is no confusion. Maybe you know quite well. Then surely you can bring... that's not a problem but when you go into your reasons as to why you've chosen to do good rather than evil you'll find that those conditions were conditioned your reasons were conditioned.

And the whole point of the practice is to begin to see clearly how every time we act from the base of an unskillful thought, an unwholesome thought, we actually create suffering for ourselves. It's a consequence. And every time we work from the basis of a skillful, wholesome thought, it actually makes us happy. And that's all we're doing. There's no mystery about it at all. It's just basic psychology.

And remember what we're trying to do is to liberate, that's the word, liberate this quality, this essential quality we are from its delusive relationship with the body, mind and heart and the world it finds itself in.

It would be difficult to teach very young children that kind of philosophy, wouldn't it?

Well, the thing is with young children, little Fionn here, is it's all there as little seeds, it's dropping into his ears and it's there hanging around and at some point I'm sure he'll be fully liberated. But remember, for children, it's about doing good and all that. It's the usual thing that you would teach children. I don't know if it's 25, 50 years, he's got a better chance than that. He has indeed. Definitely.

If you were conditioned from a very young age to this kind of idea, it would be a great advantage, wouldn't it?

Well, yes.

Would they be able to take it in?

Well, not necessarily. I mean, you go to Buddhist countries and they're just as pathetic as we are. It's just that every religious tradition has its own wisdom and stuff, but there are other things going on, aren't there?

So just to go back to this business of choice. If you, say tomorrow, you decide that you will note every time a choice comes into your head. Like, for instance, shall I have a cup of tea? Right? And you stop. And you go into that sense of choice. Will I have or will I not have a cup of tea? So as soon as you stay with it, you see, you'll find the mind arguing for and against. For and against. And then you make a decision on one of these for or against.

Now then you say to yourself well I had free will I could have chosen this but I didn't I chose that but you didn't this is the point you didn't choose the other one so therefore your choice was conditioned by your own arguments do you see what I mean you can't escape the conditioning that you are.

So now, the self holds this wonderful position where it thinks that it has made a choice. Because at one point it had two things it could do, have a cup of tea or not have a cup of tea. And therefore it gets this lovely sense of itself being above the world and above conditioning. And it can do what it wants in its own time, in its own way. And that is one of the great delusions.

Where is the origin of the idea that you have choice?

Well, it's actually, we have to blame St. Augustine for this. You see, it doesn't exist in the East. This idea of a free will does not exist in Hindu and Buddhist or in Chinese.

How do they make a choice?

There is no choice. It's *kamma*. And what you do is, through your wisdom... If you make a choice or decision about, say, a career or a life option, how do they do something like that?

Well, they'll think they were just conditioned to do it. And what they're trying to do is understand things so that it changes that conditioning and therefore changes their choosing. But they don't fall into this idea of free will. All acts that we make are determined.

But isn't it just another way of saying the same thing, really?

I know where you're coming from, but I think what she's saying is that basically Easterners have a different word for it. Whereas we call it free will, they call it *kamma*. But in fact, the natural law cannot be broken. I think that's what you were saying. Basically, the natural law is there. And even if we think we're breaking it, or changing it, or doing something, we can't actually go against it. Because if we go against it, we'll end up in a negative place. We'll end up collecting all of that negative power. If we go in the positive direction, we'll accumulate the benefits, and so will everybody else. That's what I think.

Well, no, it wouldn't be. You see, what can we say? The Buddhist position is not that we are essentially evil. There's a very different tack on life. Well, the Buddhist position is that we're essentially deluded, which is a very different position. And the delusion is entered because we come into life in a position of not knowing. So whether you want to believe in past lives or not, even in this life, what did you know in the womb? What did you know at birth? So we come in in a state of not knowing.

Now that not knowing is not culpable. You can't blame somebody for not knowing. So then from then on we are told what we should know. And then round about the age of 16, 17, 18 or something, for some people much earlier, they reflect on this and they begin to shake off those things that they've been conditioned with or they agree with it. In that not knowing, we fall into the error of thinking that this body, this person, this personality is me. And just as we described before, this leads us into safety, the problems of safety, the problems of accumulation, the problems of aversion, etc., etc.

So evil and unskillfulness is secondary. Now, what this means is that because evil is secondary and has been caused by a mistake, when you go back on the process and the mistake is undone, you find that that ignorance had in it an essential innocence, and therefore you can return to purity. If you were essentially evil, you couldn't do it. So, ignorance moves to wisdom, innocence returns to purity.

What you've been saying, though, would also indicate that I'm not really fully able to make a decision, say, for good or for evil. Because I'm being conditioned. So I can always say, well, you know, when I took that money, that person was just conditioned.

Yes, absolutely. Well, no, you see, that undermines the fact that there is also this intelligence. So although we are not essentially culpable for our unskillfulness for our evil, we are paradoxically fully responsible for it. And that's the law of *kamma*. And there's no way you can undo the law of *kamma* apart from suffering the consequences of your actions.

Now, your actual *kamma* is not something coming at you from the outside world. It's not the fact that you end up in prison or that you win the lottery, anything like that. Your *kamma* is your mental state. When you sit like that, in your posture, that's your *kamma*.

Yeah, but can I say that I've inherited it?

From?

From the past, from past lives.

Yeah, absolutely. What we're talking about is not thought, we're talking about attitudes.

What you inherit from your past lives are your attitudes and understanding. Even in this life, you wake up in the morning and you're carrying the whole of this life into that morning. Only one part of it becomes part of your consciousness, but it's all there as potential, and given certain conditions, certain potentialities manifest. But you can change.

Ultimately the idea is that you recognise that you've actually created this mind, you've created this personality. People have given you things, shall we say, people have given you material to work with—your language, your culture. But what you make of it, you discover, is totally you. That's why you can't blame anybody for your internal suffering. You have to give up the comfort of being able to blame your parents for all your misery and society. It's all us, we've done it. And when you actually take full responsibility for this, then of course you begin to change it and you realise that the very things that, the little acts of internal will that you made which created these states, can now be undone.

You end up with a heart which you can then develop indefinitely. So love, compassion, joy and peace don't have a definite ending to them. They're difficult to say infinite, but indefinite. That's why they're called illimitables. These states are illimitable.

"Can I just ask you about the choice thing?"

"What's the choice thing?"

"I understand when people are making a choice about eating a cup of tea, or not a cup of tea, that's something you do in a split second. But when people are making even more serious choices, life-changing choices, whether they're moving home, whether they're moving country, whether they're moving jobs, that kind of thing—you were talking about all that to-ing and fro-ing and all the conditioning that goes on in people's minds, and sometimes people can take months to make decisions. But where... How do people come to that point then of making a decision for either or?"

Well, I think sometimes it's because we lack information. Just simple information. And also because there is that lack of clarity in the heart as to what it actually wants to do. So often you have to just wait.

I mean, just to take my personal experience, it took me two years to decide to robe, to leave the job and robe. And I struggled with it for one year. And when I went to see my teacher and said, "Bhante, I want to become a monk," he said, "You're too old." And I felt an enormous relief. I thought, oh, that year in my head going around with lists and all that.

And then I struggled with it a bit more and I went back and he gave me another excuse, something about

he needed me at the Vihara because by then I was teaching and very involved. And then I went away and I spent two weeks by myself in Wales, in somebody's little cottage out there, and there just came that absolute certainty. It took two years.

"So it was from the heart then at that point and not from the head, really?"

Well, it was always coming from the heart, but the head was confused. That's the point. Because of attachment. I was attached to the way of life I was with and what it meant, selling the house and all that, and I knew it would be the end of the career as such. It's like a massive change. And of course there is that question, do I really want to do it? Do I really, really want to take three—at that time it was just three years—take three years out to do a bit of meditation?

"And because of that, actually, what you're saying there is that sometimes in a choice, and I have found myself in big choices like that, you really want to do both."

"Yeah, that's it. And that's because of conditioning."

"It is. You just said it right, the attachment."

"Yeah, you want your cake and to eat it."

"Absolutely, yeah."

"Was that a clue for the cup tea? Sounds like it. Sorry, he had the last of the cake."

"I had the last of the cake."

If you're fairly well enlightened, you don't have to worry about making choices that come to you naturally. I would—who can guess what the Buddha's mind is like—but I can't imagine him worrying about a decision. It wouldn't make sense.

"So are you saying you don't need to go through that two years of turmoil and..."

"I know you do. You still have to go through it."

"Yeah, yeah."

Because that's the measure of our delusion. You have to work through it. Sometimes it is painful.

I remember my sister went, two years, I think she took three years to decide to marry this poor bloke who was certain after about a month of needing her. Kept waiting about her. I mean, for her, of course, she was then a strong Catholic. I mean, it was a real decision because you presume it's going to last the rest of your life. It was a good decision. She's all right.

"When I was trying to decide... in France and we had always had the ambition to come back and live in

Ireland. And we worked and worked and saved and everything. And we had so many good reasons for coming back. There were so many good reasons. And then when we fixed the date about two years before we did come, I began to question the reasons. I was excited anyway. And I found myself, I found that every one of them was in bad. I wasn't worth coming back to Ireland for. But I stayed where I am. And then we had to, but we went through all the motions of putting the house up for sale and things like this. And the day came when we had to say, yes, I know what we're selling the house. And I had about half an hour to think about it. And I walked up here on the road. There were no reasons to come back. Why go through all that trouble? And then all of a sudden, brightness came into my life. Ireland, for me, is brightness. Illuminosity. I never thought of that before. And that became a valid reason for going back and it has proven true. Even for my children, they speak in the same terms. Where did that come from?"

Well, eventually, the truth comes forth. It was a thing I didn't look for.

I mean, if you look at all these great spiritual leaders, they all go through that huge business. Christ in the desert, the Buddha in his desperation getting his little pot of rice pudding and then deciding that he was going to ascend to the tree and die or make it. And he's there in total confusion. He's sitting by the roadside wondering what the hell he's going to do. He's tried everything, getting nowhere. I put it all down the rice pudding, of course.

And just in that moment, the light comes. He remembers this point in childhood and the way he was watching his father doing the ploughing ceremony. And that gave him the clue. It's only in those moments of catastrophe, the break, it's like—what's that theory in evolution of the stick—two forms. Do you know what I mean? I can't remember that. If you remember it, will you tell me? Because it's exactly what happens in the spiritual life or in any form. You're bending the stick and you're bending it and the more you bend it, there's more resistance. More resistance, more pain. Then suddenly snap and you've got a different state. You've got two sticks.

And that's, generally speaking, how we work spiritually. You just keep working and working. And it's just at the point of its most intense pain that the snap comes. And it's often where people give up. This is the problem.

"Yeah, and isn't that then important, this point to remember, to stay with the wish we make? Where do I want to go? In times like that, and the more... the more intense it becomes, the more it's important to remember this wish again and again and to work against the ingrained habits which always come back and the stronger the possibility at this point for change, the stronger is also the counter power. And then to stick with this wish and to remember, remember, remember."

That's right. That's symbolised in the life of the Buddha, the attack of Mara, the armies of Mara came bursting upon him.

"With cups of tea."

"We are very silent, thank you very much."

"Can I say something? Why does it have to all be so agonising?"

Well, for some people it... No, we're not simple people, basically. For some people it isn't. I mean, I've just run this retreat at Sunyata. It was about seventeen-odd people, eighteen people. And if you'd have talked to most of them, it was agony, it was painful and all that, right? But there was one on that retreat who was blissed out all the time. She was in seventh heaven every time she sat.

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