The Eightfold Path and Daily Life

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 35:03

What I wanted to talk about really was this linkage, trying to make some linkage between the meditation we do and ordinary daily life. I wanted to approach it in a slightly different way in terms of view of the paths, the different paths of enlightenment.

I think we can talk about five different types of ways of looking at the spiritual paths, the religious paths. The first one I think you're very conversant with, the fundamentalist. And the next one is a relativist fundamentalist. Then there's the relativist. Then there's the relativist universalist. And then of course there's the universalist.

What I mean by the fundamentalist is someone who says, I'm right, everybody else is wrong. It's a pretty easy universe to live in. I'm right, everybody else is wrong. I'm the only one climbing a mountain. Everybody else is thinking they're climbing a mountain, but actually they are descending a pit. They're moving towards perdition. And the world's very simple. Everybody's got to become like me. This obviously doesn't have much respect for other traditions.

The relativist fundamentalists are people who have respect for other traditions and accept that they are, in fact, climbing mountains. But of course, my mountain is higher. And at some point you will wake up and realize that I'm up here and you're down there and you'll come over. That's pretty straightforward too.

The relativist is one who says that they're all mountains and you can't distinguish one from the other. You don't know whether the top of one mountain is the same as the other. They're completely relative and it doesn't really matter which one you climb. And that's of course the post-modernist, isn't it? It's basically a lot of the stuff that's peddled these days. How can you tell? It's a case of your take on the truth, your take on reality.

The fourth position is this relativist universalist who actually perceives that all religions are on the same mountain and that they're all going towards some final resolution and that reading the mystics of these religions, they seem to be saying much the same thing. But when I say relativist universalist, it's that they still see religions, they still see three separate four or five separate religions going up this path but I think what the universalist sees and this is of course where I am myself is that there are actually three paths and that they are expressed through a culture in its own way. And that depending on the culture, you get a leaning to one path rather than the other.

Now, the one religion which has them, I think, at least fairly well delineated in a very clear way is

Hinduism. Hinduism talks about the three yogas, jnana, bhakti and karma. And that they refer to the path of knowledge, the path of investigation, insight, the path of devotion and the path of action.

But the three fully world religions, the three that have actually transcended culture and really spread about the world, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, you can see here that each one of them has a particular bent. Buddhism is definitely Gnostic. Most of it is about understanding. It starts always with right understanding. The Eightfold Path starts with right understanding. Christianity is very much to do with love, isn't it? It's coming from a devotional thing, which then expresses itself through compassionate action. And Islam, just its very word, subservience to the will of God, doing the right thing.

And it's very interesting to see these three leaders. The Buddha, in himself, is very outside society. I mean, he's obviously drawn in. People go to him for advice and stuff, but he's very much separate. And he's created this little group of monks and nuns which are specific to a specific task. And lay people, of course, are very much invited in. But he never gets too involved in lay life. So, strictly speaking, there's no ceremonies of marriage, death ceremonies, anything like that at all. He doesn't take part in any of that. He leaves all that to the culture around him. And his drive, ever since he left home, is seemingly this wanting to know. He just wanted to know whether there was an end to this suffering or not, or this dissatisfaction. So that's the driving force. It's the driving force of a scientist, isn't it? Wanting to know.

The devotional person is much more concerned with how to relate, isn't it? How to relate from a heart base. Much more to do with an emotional heart relationship. And Christianity developed these enormous meditations and contemplations of Jesus Christ, through Jesus Christ. Now, if you read the Mystics, interestingly enough, this meditation on Jesus is only half the way. Once you've developed this pure loving, this pure heart which is full of love, if you read people like, say, John of the Cross, then you have to leave all that. You have to leave all that completely. And he keeps going on about nothingness, nothingness. So the whole business of this purification is to do with getting rid of all that is nasty within us which is equally the same with the Buddhist path and then developing this heart of love which is purified and laser beamed and then letting go of that until you leave go of anything which is phenomenal and Christian mystics often talk about things like nothingness. The void.

Jesus Christ, of course, was very much half way, wasn't he? I mean, he was in society, but he wasn't particularly involved in it, but he definitely wanted to change it. Unlike the Buddha, he definitely wanted to change things in that society and bring about revolution in that, especially with the way that religion was being taught, through rules and regulations, and to bring in this whole idea of something which was beyond religion. To my mind anyway, a personal God, believe it or not. But that's just my own little view on things. It was only later that when Christianity left Judaism and came into the Roman Empire that it began to be reinterpreted by way of those people. And remember that the Roman Empire at that time was polytheistic. So the next movement from believing that there are many gods is to believe in one personal God. That's your shift. And then only then do you shift to a higher level where there is an impersonal God so you see that in Hinduism from Brahma, Shiva and then they go on to Brahman, the neutral you can see

that shift of consciousness so you see that Jesus is very much involved and he lives in society he doesn't go out into the, I mean he has little times off in the desert but basically he lives right there he moves from house to house living with ordinary people.

And his teaching, of course, is basically about love, isn't it? About love.

Now, when you get to Muhammad, Muhammad was rather interesting because he obviously had a very deep spiritual insight, but he didn't like monasteries. He didn't like it at all. He was married and lived an ordinary life. So what he had to do, in a peculiar way, was to create a monastery around him. So instead of creating a little group of people who would be directly involved in trying to become enlightened, he has to involve everybody. Well, in doing that, of course, you've got to deal with all sorts of characters, and hence the rules have to be a little bit more strict, so you get this growth of the Sharia. But his thing was the will of God, action, the will of God. And the jihad was, in its most corrupt form, of course, is about the spread of Islam, but in its most purest form, he himself said the inner jihad is more important than the outer one. So this inner jihad, of course, was to struggle with the bad conditionings that's inside us, to purify ourselves. And again, if you read Sufi literature, they also talk about getting into this final state of nothingness. The word just slips my mind now. Faniya. And what they mean by that is, if you read the literature seems to be saying the same thing as what the Buddha is saying.

So if we just for a moment take this universalist position that there are three paths, the path of understanding, the path of mind, the path of the heart and the path of action, the body, and we turn to the Eightfold Noble Path, then we can see that, in a sense, it is included in that.

What we have, first of all, is right understanding. And what the Buddha means by that is that we have to see things correctly. And we have to get beyond the delusion that ego puts us into. Now, the fundamental delusion of ego is to believe that this is what we are. When you look in the mirror, this is me. When you've got a headache, I'm suffering. When you feel happy, it's me that's happy. So everything we experience, we experience as me. Now what he's saying is that this is a delusion. So he asks us to, as it were, deconstruct the event.

Through the meditation you begin to see that what we thought was whole and entire is just made up of parts. Even the simple act of eating. There's many things going on. There's taste at the sense base. There's a heart response of enjoyment. And there's this consciousness that knows. There's lots of little bits and pieces that go into making up one simple event.

He asks us to see that nothing is permanent. The ego likes to be permanent, doesn't it? You want to be here forever. Forever. We don't want to change. And we don't see that change. We might see it in the leaves outside and in people dying and all that, but we don't particularly see it in ourselves. If we really saw it in ourselves, then we wouldn't be so attached to these emotions, to these thoughts. We'd actually see them as just passing phenomena.

And at fundament, in terms of our psychology, we're very much committed to this life form. We think we can be really happy here if we just get it right. The right job, the right partner, the right... And then I'll be happy. You can draw a line, finally. So that investment in our lives as a place where we're going to find happiness, from the Buddhist point of view, is a profound illusion because everything's arising and passing away. And secondly, there's a presumption there of it being me, of an identity, something that you can control. That's the definition of me, isn't it? I can control it. And the fact of the matter is that even when we are delightfully happy with something, there's an inbuilt obsolescence to pleasure. I mean, the same chocolate won't do, will it? You've got to go out and buy something else. Variety is the spice of life.

So now, if we take that as right understanding, how does it affect the heart? That's your next step, right attitude. So you drop down into right attitude. From right understanding, we develop right attitude. Right attitude is normally described as moving from hatred to love, cruelty to compassion, stinginess or selfishness to generosity. But in fact, it's the movement of all vice to virtue. And that is a development in our attitude, in other words, the way we feel about things, the way we look at things, and that immediately affects our emotional life.

So in the Buddhist way of doing things, you move from right understanding, so it affects your attitude, and then the next flows, right speech, right action, right livelihood. So if we go into a situation with the right understanding and the right attitude, then our speech will be truthful, it will be kind, it will be gentle, and so on. We won't fall into the error of telling whoppers. Coarse language, shouting at each other. And when we're in an action of any sort, then we'll do it with that mindfulness, with that carefulness. And finally, our livelihood will be careful what we do with most of our lives. Because what we do has an effect on our personality, doesn't it? I mean, supposing now you decided to join a drug gang. It would be different, wouldn't it? And you'd have to develop different qualities. So what you do is very material.

Now, you can see the feedback here, can't you? There's a loop. So what we do, what we say and how we act feeds back to reinforce that attitude. There's a feedback because the world responds to us when we're good in some way. So there's a feedback which reinforces it. This attitude then reinforces or puts a stamp of approval on the way we've seen things. And therefore there's more effort to see things even more clearly. So there's a round there.

And that fundament beneath all that, that is this practice of meditation, which is basically to do with getting that right, the right understanding, the right attitude, and the right action, speech, and livelihood. That's what it's supporting. So what the Buddha's saying is that we have to take some position within ourselves so that we can see very clearly what's going on, where we're making mistakes, where we're being unskillful, and where we're being skillful, where we're actually doing what is correct.

So our meditation is primarily concerned with accessing a post of observation in ourselves, in the sitting posture, where we can see the mind and the heart unfolding, just offering its goods to us, sometimes turbulence, sometimes loveliness. And then somehow we have to learn how to maintain that mindfulness

when we go from the sitting posture into ordinary daily life.

And one of the important things to remember is that when you move into daily life to maintain that mindfulness, you have to be careful not to be hijacked by emotions, snowballed by them. So there has to be this constant effort to stop whatever you're doing, to stop, recollect what you've done, catch the little bit of silence, the centeredness, and then intend and do the next thing. And in this way you create these breaks.

Even answering a telephone, the normal action is to launch yourself at it. But I mean, most people wait for three rings. I'm very impatient if they wait for three rings. So when you hear the bell, if you're in an office or something, you have to spend a moment just recognising what you're doing. It's a moment of acknowledgement, of recollection. Then you turn to the phone, and in that moment there's a little silence and you're ready to receive the phone call. If you try to do two things at once, then this motor starts up. So it's these little techniques that bring this mindfulness to daily life.

The mindfulness is coming from right understanding. The right understanding sees a situation and what it needs. It also sees what it needs from the heart point of view. The right attitude arises within a given situation and the right action is taken. And the whole thing begins to, as it were, work for us. It's a new conditioning.

Now because there's this loop, you can see you can start from any vantage point. Generally speaking in this school you always start from the meditation but you could equally start by just developing right relationships with people and concentrating on that and that would loop into the way you understand how things are and how you should do things properly.

If you concentrate on doing, on good works, and it can be anything, remember. It doesn't have to be, you don't have to go and look after lepers or something. I mean, you can just carry bins about, but it's the way we do things with this carefulness and attention. Even that has its effect upon the way we see things and the way we feel about things.

So there are three starting points. This right understanding, right attitude, and right action, speech, and livelihood, which include just this right action, this way of doing. So when lay people say to me, well, it's all right for a monk, you're not doing anything all day. You've got all this time in your life. But what about us? Well, that's a wrong understanding to my point of view because there's too much of an accent on the sitting meditation. There's too much of an accent thinking that you've got to do these vast long sits in order to get enlightened. But actually, if you get your daily life right, you'll see that the whole thing begins to work for you.

Because it's coming from right livelihood, right action, right speech. As soon as you do something good, there's got to be a training in the heart. There's got to be a right understanding.

So that's why in the scriptures, a cobbler becomes fully enlightened cobbling his shoes. And a woman has

this great insight, I think it's first path and fruit, just caring for the bread in the oven, just the crackling, seeing the *anicca*, the transiency.

So take heart. It's only around the corner. Keep struggling with it.

Let me just say something quickly about daily life. I think this business of stopping and starting, really cutting the day up into pieces where you recollect what you're doing and stopping, just allows any emotional turbulence which you've accumulated through some sort of conversation or somebody says something nasty to you, just allows it to die down. And then, just in that little moment, you can collect yourself and then go into the next moment with that sort of more liberated mind. A mind which is not caught up in something.

You can do it any time. You can do it walking up the stairs, opening and closing a door. So you're in one room and somebody's something and you're irritated. Well, normally you'd walk into the next room and take it with you. And whoever's in there gets it as well. But if you just stop for a moment, just close the door and just let it all die down, and wait, just wait for it to pass, then you don't carry it.

There's this business of bringing a bit of ceremony back into our lives. I mean, now, so many people just grab something out of the fridge, stick it on a plate, turn the TV on and sit there munching and watching. And it's like life becomes more coarse. There's a certain coarseness to it.

The idea of ceremony is it's a sort of help to your concentration. It's a sort of help to the whole feeling of something. So we all know what it's like when you prepare a meal well and you set a table out well and you sit there in front of it. And there's a certain ceremony to it.

Instead of... You say, I want a cup of tea. So you go in there and you bang the kettle about and you stick it under the tap and plug it in and bang the teapot on. Slap the kettle, stick it back and you wonder whether you've had a tea or not. You know what I mean?

Whereas if it's a moment of mindfulness, then just that way of doing it mindfully immediately brings about a certain way of doing things, a certain ceremony. Taking our time. Actually tasting the tea. Even tying your shoelaces with delicacy.

Well, it's just there's always the next thing to be done. So you make it actually a very conscious, self-conscious, a very conscious decision. Often we have about four to five intentions in our mind. That's why we're rushing about. We're trying to do ten things at once. And you just get jumbled over. You just trip over yourself.

Whereas if you just stop and you prioritise and you make your intention for the next thing, then there's a clarity. Because normally you can't do more than one thing at a time. When you finish that, you stop, you recollect what you've done, you start. So you keep regaining that ground of peaceful existence, of calmness, quietness. And I know that's difficult in work situations which can be stressful.

The other, I think, very important insight is to really, really grasp the fact that nobody makes you angry. Nobody upsets you. Nobody makes you happy. I wonder if you've really, really grasped that because when you do, it's an awesome liberation. You can stop blaming people. You can actually find the source of the problem within yourself. You can correct the whole of your life overnight once you've actually really, truly grasped that nobody can affect your heart directly. It's always our conditioned response to a given situation or a given person. Always.

You're looking at me as though you don't believe me. How many of you would say you'd actually grasped that? You'd actually seen it? It's very liberating, isn't it? Because now you stop blaming people. And you can just take control of your own life. But that still doesn't mean that you'll stop reacting in that way because of the conditioning. So you have to guard your heart. You have to be quick to put a guard, as it were, in front of your heart so that it doesn't bounce off this incoming stimulus.

So an obvious situation is when somebody is angry with us. So the anger comes, we can feel it, we can see it, the person's angry with us. So our normal reaction is either to combat it, to come at it with anger, or to shrivel, to sort of wither, because you're afraid of it.

Now you have to guide yourself against that sort of connection. So how are you going to do it? Well, mindfulness, of course, to be mindful of it is the first step. Most times we just slip into the old habit of either getting into the argument or allowing that person to ride over us. So the first thing is the mindfulness, but then there has to be this sort of moment of just inward glancing, where you actually contact the way you're feeling. And then, as it were, you've got to put your hand over it. You've got to sort of quieten it.

And when you look up at the person, or when you re-contact the person, you have to be very careful that you only deal with the problem, not with the person. Now this means that the person now who is angry with you has to answer the problem and not your personal reaction. It's sort of an easy thing to do when you try it.

So what the person's getting from you is that their anger, whatever it is they're trying to lay on you, isn't having an effect. And they feel that in your voice, which is steady, assertive. So what's the problem? So you actually discuss the problem. And that often takes all that stuff out of the situation.

Now, in this sense, we're taught always to offer loving kindness and all that. But when the heart's responding in that sort of way, it's good enough just to offer no harm. You don't have to gush with love every time somebody comes at you with a knife. No harm is a decent position to take. You can get pretty skillful at that.

I myself have used this business of... you see this posture of the Buddha here. So that's called the *abhaya* posture, the fearless posture. It's meant to come from a time when the dastardly Devadatta set a mad elephant on him. And as the elephant came towards him, roaring down towards him, he held his hand up

and offered him loving kindness. The elephant collapsed into a state of adoration by the time he got close to the Buddha. It's a lovely story, isn't it?

So what he was doing, this hand, was fearless. But from the heart, he was offering loving kindness. So I find for myself that's a very potent sort of way of just to image this hand. It's the Buddha hand. My own hand is here. So it's a case of allowing this stuff to come at me, but it doesn't get beyond this hand. It stays there on the outside. And from behind this hand, at least I can offer an attitude of no harm, or of at least wanting to know what the problem is, not getting involved in personality.

There's a case where, I think I might have mentioned it before, where the Buddha turns up at a house and this Brahmin has nothing but insults for him. You know, useless and all that sort of stuff. What people normally say about me. And he listens patiently. He just takes it. And then he simply asks the man, if somebody offers you a present, do you really have to accept it? He says, no, you don't have to. He says, well, everything you offered me, I offer back to you.

So when people are offering you their stuff, you don't have to accept it. That's their stuff. You want to take somebody else's suffering off, haven't you got enough of your own? Leave it with them. Leave it with them. And you can do that by taking this objective stance, by seeing the problem, not getting involved in the emotional thing, being aware of what's happening inside us and just being still.

So this is a moment when that consciousness is both outside and inside. So you remember we have to develop these three positions. Sometimes we're aware of the inside, sometimes the outside, sometimes both the inside and the outside. So it's to find that steadiness, and that's really the purpose of the morning meditation.

The morning meditation is a time when we re-establish, recognise where we ought to be for the rest of the day. So if you miss that, in a sense, you've missed clicking into that frame of, into that level of consciousness. So then you stay with it and you keep bringing yourself back to that. As many times as you can during the day, you just bring yourself back to that, just to that silence, just to that stillness. Then you move.

Then when you get to in the evening, the evening meditation is about letting go of all the accumulations. So it may be that you've developed little irritations and little sadnesses and who knows what. So you have to sit with it and wait till it goes out.

Just now I got an email, a very old friend of mine who's just died. And it's funny. You read it and it hits you. You can feel it. You know, an old friend died. That's how you feel. You feel the sadness. So I'm going to have to sit with that. Then it'll go and I'll be happy again. These things come at us and we have to feel them and then you sit with it. You don't do anything about it. You just let the heart do what it wants and then it passes away.

The other thing which is important in terms of the spiritual life is to really find, this is part of the Eightfold

Path of right effort, is really, you know, begin to tackle some part of the personality which is unskillful and really work with it. And what happens is, if you deal with one part of the personality which is unskillful, whatever it is, it shades all the way through, it shades all the way through.

So for instance, since we've talked about anger and all that, if you are very quick angered, you really work with it. Which means that you have to sit with it, you don't respond to the anger, you keep reminding yourself that any time you walk into a situation this is the way you're going to behave. And of course that will feed right the way through the personality. Remember everything is this interconnected business.

And the other thing to do is to choose a virtue. You don't have to choose it for a very long time, just for the period of time which you want to develop. And actually develop that virtue. Some people, for instance, find it very difficult to forgive. They hold grudges. So work on it. Every time somebody says something, I forgive you, just keep saying it. Don't actually indulge. And then eventually there comes this easy forgiveness, just easily letting go of little insults and little daggers that people stick in us.

So this is the last time I'll probably be seeing you in this way. So may I wish you a very fruitful practice and that you be enlightened by the end of the week even. I give you a little blessing.

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