Question & Answer Session

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 51:31

Does Buddhism stifle creativity in the birth of ideas?

The mind creates. It's always creating, isn't it? You can't stop it from creating. It's the purpose of the mind. I mean, that's what you might call, define the mind. The mind is intention, isn't it? I think it's something to do with time as well. And something to do with *kamma* in the widest sense of that word. Meaning that at any point in time there's a junction of what is coming out of one's own mind and what is coming into it from the outside. And so there's always, there's got to be always some sort of creativity as we move from moment to moment.

So even just in this walk this afternoon we got to the top and the wind was so great that we had to be creative and come back down. The idea was to continue walking but the conditions were contrary to our expectations. But just in the wider sense of creativity, in the sense of creating art, after the Buddha's enlightenment, after the Buddha's awakening, it's not as though his mind stopped. In fact the first thought that came into his mind was who can I teach this to? There's already a movement outward from that initial insight and the great insights he had.

And of course he spent the rest of his life, forty years, being creative. If you read the discourses, they're very much personal conversations with different people. The later discourses, the ones right at the end of the book, in the long discourses, become much more set pieces. But if you read a lot of them, they're just somebody asking a question and him responding. And he responds normally in two ways. First of all, in a rational way, a logical rational way. And then he always likes to give an example, a metaphor, for those who think better that way. That's how it's put. For those who think more energetically, he expresses it that way. I wouldn't go as far as to say that he was a poet or anything of that nature.

But then all religion finds expression for these truths in some form of creativity, don't they? Paintings, architecture, poetry, music, film these days. So it's not that creativity is stifled, more it's opened up. An endless possibility of creativity on moral, social, economic, religious themes, which are there as a teaching tool. There's no end to it.

If you look at something, if you look at art, you can see that one end of it is sort of base, pornographic in the biggest sense of that meaning, just abusing people's emotions. You could even say some of these films that come out of Hollywood which feed into people's greed and violence is pornographic, there's no way that could be sexual. And then you get films which are much more social or just pure entertainment or whatever, but then you get films which have a deeper meaning.

So it's not that spiritual insight undermines creativity. I would say the opposite. What it does is it stops certain types of creativity because it does harm. Simple as that, really.

When the Buddha was asked what he taught, the way he would express things was always in this negative sense. We read it out, the unborn, the undying, etc. Not that there's no self, but he would talk about not-self. So he would be accused of annihilationism. That was the normal accusation. And he insists that the only thing that was annihilated, completely destroyed, was greed, hatred and delusion. Nothing else.

So everything we have is given back to us, renewed, you might say, refreshed, purified. So the mind is returned in its purity. The heart, see, it's the same with emotions. You might get the impression that *vipass anā*, watching the emotions arise and pass away and fade away, that you're moving towards a sort of... I don't know, like a blob, you know, at the end you've got no emotions, and you're just sitting there like a non-emotional blob. But it's not true, because what happens is the emotions are transformed. The emotions are transformed, and that's the importance of this *mettā* practice. So everything is given back to us, renewed, refreshed, reformed, however you wish to look at it. And that's the process.

On that similar line, you can make a distinction between reaction and response. So a reaction is coming from conditioning, from the past dictating the present, dictating the future. You know, if I did that, that wouldn't be me. That's a lovely one, isn't it? I've heard people say that. If I did that, it wouldn't be me. So they've got this really hard idea of who they are.

And most of our actions, most of our thoughts are continuation of past habitual ways of thinking and feeling and reacting to things. So when that's purified, then we respond to a situation coming from a different level. Not conditioning, but from wisdom. Compassion and wisdom. So the response is creative because of that.

Conditioning isn't creative. Conditioning just completely, constantly makes you go round the same circle. That's the meaning of kamma. If you look at your life, you look back, you'll see that there are rounds of behaviour. You keep falling into the same sort of pit. If you haven't seen that yet, if you don't think that's happened, then you haven't looked closely enough. Because that's what kamma means. It means that you're on this wheel of going round and round. If you want to use a psychodynamic term, that's the meaning of neurosis. You keep going round and round the same thing. An obsession. Obsessiveness.

So when that's clarified, when that's cleared out, then there is a spontaneity in the present moment which has to be totally creative because now you're not coming from a fixed idea or a fixed habit. It's coming more from wisdom and wisdom simply means that you really see the situation as it really is, not as you would want it to be, hope it to be, how it ought to be, just as it is. And that clarity allows you to respond in a way which feels spontaneous. It's spontaneous because it's not coming from a habit, it's coming from a preconceived idea of how to behave. And that's one of the meanings of living in the moment, living in the present moment.

How is it possible to put into practice Buddhist teaching and method into the wider society, and how does it relate?

That's a very... I mean, there are books written on that. Engaged Buddhism, you know? Engaged Buddhism.

The Eightfold Path, you see, you'll notice that the Buddha begins with right understanding, so there's a correction in the way we see things. This affects our attitude. And then both this understanding and attitude express themselves in right speech, right action, right livelihood. Now, logically speaking, you didn't have to put right livelihood in there because it's part of right action. But livelihood is, in that wider sense, how we affect society.

So from a personal point of view, what we do in society is our teaching. You see, every time you move, every time you say something, you're presenting an example, whether you like it or not. Other people might not see it as that, or accept it as that, but everybody in that sense is a teacher. And as you know, if you happen to tell somebody that you now meditate, you know, you're meditating in a Buddhist fashion and that is all the past, now and then they see you wandering around the streets completely drunk and they say oh that's what meditation does for you. So as soon as you state who you are to what you do, there comes a sort of responsibility with it.

So when it comes to the wider society, each of us have to consider what we do, what we support, the way we vote, what we say about things that are happening in the world, and to make sure it's true to our own understanding. And whether we like it or not, that goes into the general understanding of a society, of mankind, doesn't it? It feeds into it. It's like stuff coming into the computer. As soon as you say something, it becomes part of human thought patterns. It's there in the ether, you might say.

Specifically, this is what Buddhism is working with. It's one of the areas it's working with. How do you translate teachings that were given 2,500 years ago into a modern society? And there's lots. Personally, you could read of people like Ken Jones, he's written a nice book on that. Everybody, there's a lot of people now who are trying to make sense of that, trying to make sense of what would a Buddhist economy mean? What would a Buddhist society look like without getting into idealism, some sort of, somebody called it, Buddhopia? That wouldn't be particularly Buddhist to have some sort of idealistic end point, because then you're imposing upon a future an idea which you've had in the past. That's exactly what you don't want to do.

So when the Buddha is formulating the order you can see he's not got a particular ideal he's working with. The forms that were already there in society for people who were living in this ascetic way, so there's nothing particularly new about that. There were plenty of people sleeping under trees and all that sort of stuff. And it's understood that for the first twenty years such was the high calibre of people joining the orders that there was no need to make rules. And then people of lesser calibre began to enter and did silly things and so you had to make a rule. So these rules grew up and they grew up in a sort of peculiar way

because there are rules there in the order which are to do with morality, to do with things like thieving and sexual conduct and all that, but a lot of them are also to do with the monastic relationship to lay people and to society, even going down to the way we eat. You're not supposed to suru suru and chapu chapu, you're not supposed to slurp and chomp loudly. These minute little rules.

An institution is defined by its rules, isn't it? That's what an institution is, its set of rules. Whether it's something like marriage, or something huge like the WTO. And in fact you could say that as soon as, even you yourself, even you yourself, if you live on your own, have your own rules and regulations, your own routine. So when somebody comes in and says, I'll wash the pots, you get very irritated when they don't wash them the way you wash them. You're supposed to wash them, no. Polish on your shoes with the cloth, not the brush. I just remember that as a huge argument with my parents when I was a kid, still hangs on in my mind, you know. I could only have been about eight.

So that whole area of how does the Buddhist teachings relate to society is something which is thought about a great deal these days and presumably will be a constant investigation of how the teachings relate to modern society. I can't see that really coming to an end as such. You all know of the N.E.B.D, the Network of Engaged Buddhists and the publication they make? So that's, you know, they deal with all sorts of vegetarianism and all that sort of stuff. I used to be active in that in the early days, the peace, what was it called then? Peace, something peace. We used to on those peace marches and we had the sort of arrogance of bringing peace to the peace march. We hit people who became unpeaceful. Now we would sit from a great height, peace.

How to best use one's time? As a monk, nun or householder? As a householder, how much time to spend on oneself meditating, meditation contemplation, and with others doing good service to others? What does the Buddha say?

Well, I don't think it's a case of a person saying, just to answer the first part of the question, whether one should be a monastic or not. I don't think it arises like that. I remember the old, well I knew it was very old, Ñāṇaponica, who wrote The Heart of Buddhist Meditation, which is still the classic. And it seems as though somebody came to see him, a few people came to see him, and they were talking about monastic life and what it was all about. And there was a woman there said to him, but supposing we all became monks and nuns? And he said, don't worry my dear, it won't happen.

I think it's not a case of a choice of being a monastic or a householder. One is simply drawn one way or the other. Not to say that people don't try or spend a bit of part of their life. There's a lot of people, I feel, a lot of Westerners who've become monks and nuns for a while. In fact, most of those who pass on to teachers have spent time in the order. You know, like Christopher Titmuss and even Joseph Goldstein I think spent a month or two. So remember that the order is very fluid like that. In Burma you can join for any time. And I think that's a lovely thing because even if one is not drawn to it as a way of life for themselves, it's a lovely thing to do. And it connects you with the monastic orders. It gives you a sort of heart feeling for

them. That's what I think.

In terms of being a householder, how much time do you spend on yourself, meditation, contemplation, or with others, doing good and all that? Well, that's very individualistic, isn't it? The split is rather false, really. At first it does seem that meditation is here and everything else is over there. And I'm only really doing spiritual practice when I'm sitting in meditation. And that's a false split, of course, because it's right there in the Eightfold Path. That right livelihood is part of the path. So somehow you have to make your work and what you do in society, you have to make it material to your spiritual life. That's your responsibility to yourself. And I can talk a bit more about that tomorrow.

But that's very important. When we're in meditation, those of you who've done a course, we also create that sort of hierarchy even within a meditation retreat. Sitting is important. Walking is a little less important. And everything else we're doing during the day, like eating, is unimportant. So the mind gets concentrated in meditation and then loses it all for the rest of the day.

But when you realize that every moment of the day is concerned with establishing this mindfulness, then of course it doesn't matter what you're doing. It doesn't matter what you're doing, as long as you're being mindful. Even now you see, as you're listening to me, you can be attentive and still generally feel what's going on in your body. It can be quite a spacious, restful awareness. And when a speaker is saying something which is asking for more attention, then one loses attention on the body, one loses that contact with the body, one becomes attentive only to the spoken word.

Now, to be focused in on something like that, or to have the wide focus, it's all meditation, it's all awareness. So what we have to stress to ourselves is that the object of awareness is not awareness. The object of awareness, in other words what you're aware of, is not the awareness. So whether you're aware of, in your meditation, a single arising of a sensation, or you're aware of the whole body sensation, the whole body feeling, it's all awareness.

And you can be aware of transience, the rising and falling away of a single sensation and you can also be aware of it in the wider sense of the coming and going of seasons. The arising and falling of a human being. Every time somebody dies whom you know, that's also reminding us of the transience of life, the impermanence of it.

So to develop the meditative mind, to develop the contemplative meditative mind, to develop this wisdom, that's a constant effort. You can't take a holiday. You can't take a break now and do something else. Every time you do that you create another bad habit. You go back on old habits. And that's why it takes so long because we make this big effort, we make an effort in meditation. And then we go home and forget all about it.

When I was living in Birmingham, I used to go and do a retreat every month at the local Vihāra for a weekend. And I would always notice that the effect of that weekend would last till about Tuesday. It sort of

began to fade completely out by Wednesday and Thursday.

So that's it you see, but over a period of time it sort of had an effect. So you have to have that sort of patience, perseverance. So if you find yourself judging your spiritual progress, be careful. If you judge it over a week, you get very depressed. You have to make an effort and judge it over, say, twenty-five years. You think, I have moved, I can see I've moved. Because one thing we come across, isn't it, in our practice is how tenacious, how clinging these habits are. They go deep.

So when it comes to daily life, how much time you spend on yourself and how much time you spend with others is very much to do with your circumstance and your inclination, your personal inclination. Some people are more drawn to contemplative life, others more to an active life. It's just up to you to decide, to get that balance. It's the balance you want, so that you feel your life is balanced. You've got enough time for yourself and enough time for others. And of course it changes. It changes at different times in your lives and depending on what's happening around you. So it's nothing fixed. You don't get the idea of some sort of mathematical equation.

Please discuss skillful ways of dealing with a situation in which someone seems repeatedly to harm others. I don't know. If somebody is repeatedly harming others. Well, it seems to me if somebody is... If I find myself in a situation where somebody is harming me, emotionally, shall we say, emotionally abusive, or something like that, and I'm aware of it, and I'm aware of the dynamics, but the other person isn't, or they are, which is worse, and they intend, quite consciously, to do you harm. It seems to me that after you've made a fair effort to get them either to become self-conscious about what they're doing or to ask them to stop, really the only thing you can do is to get yourself out of that situation, isn't it?

I mean, I presume here we're not talking about a psychopath or anybody. We talk about this, the subtle ways that people can harm each other. So if we find ourselves in a relationship, and I'm not particularly talking about a partnership or something, or a marriage, any relationship, at work, you can be bullied. These terrible stories you hear about being bullied at work. So there's a point where you do what you can and then you say to yourself, well, no, I've got to guard myself, I've got to get out. I mean, somebody who bullies, somebody who harasses is very clever because they always have a very good rational reason for doing what they do. Very difficult to... And they're often not aware of it. Sociopaths. Various levels of sociopathology.

So, as a general thing, one tries... one makes an effort to mend the situation, to correct the relationship, but when you see that it's just going to go on and on and on and there's really no end to it, then I would have thought the best policy is to get out of it. And one has to have a certain trust in the Lord of Karma. At some point the situation that the person's creating through their harmfulness will come back on them at some point. I mean to give it the full karmic value there has to be some openness to the idea of some future life some future way in which the habit that they've created creates enough enemies that finally the enemies all gang up and hit them with a mallet. It builds up and up and up until there's a whole sea of enemies

ready to rain down upon them. Or worse, they just find themselves being completely isolated, completely lonely, completely blocked off, nobody wants to know them.

There's an interesting story from Jung about a woman who turned up for counselling. And it was a confession, really. It was a confessional. And she said to him that she was so jealous of this woman who had fallen in love with the man that she wanted that she poisoned her, killed her. And that this guilt and this horror of what she'd done had affected the relationship between herself and her future husband. And the relationship had broken up. And it also had affected the children, so that the children don't speak to her. And she had somehow come to this point of connection as to how that murdering somebody had caused her situation of total isolation within her own family. And then Jung goes on to say that he didn't feel he needed to report it to the police, because she'd actually come to understand how it was that she'd ended up in this pitiful state.

Please can you explain how we can skillfully lose it when all else fails and not lose our mindfulness. Well, you can't. Once you've lost it, you've lost your mindfulness. But if... That's it, you've lost it. If you mean by that, how can you express something forcefully or get across your disfavour in a forceful way, I'm sure you can do that mindfully. I'm sure that there's even a sort of skillful way of showing anger, like an actor does. I mean, parents sometimes, they were children, don't they? Sometimes they pretend to be angry so that they have a five-minute peace. You know what I mean? So there is the actor in us, but you have to be a good actor. If he comes out a hound, nobody's going to believe you, you know? They won't believe you. But, you know, you can't, once you've lost it, you've lost it.

How can I cultivate the negative emotion within me of intolerance? You don't mean that, do you? How can I cultivate the negative? I think you mean undermine, is it? It is a weakness in me that I am ashamed of, but have difficulty in letting go. It is an intolerance of myself and an intolerance of others and things.

I think everybody suffers from that to some extent, intolerance. Well, intolerance comes down to not wanting things to be the way they are. You become frustrated by it. And if it's very frustrating, if you take a position, this is not the way it should be, then you become intolerant. Then all you want to do is get rid of that which annoys you, which you think shouldn't be there.

So, this goes back to this whole idea of patience. And patience, I think, is based on acceptance you know this is the way things are that's a lovely little sort of mantra this is this is the way things are now this is the way it is yeah when you walk into a situation or something happens you know just keep saying that now this is the way it is you see until you've actually until you've actually come down to that position of this is the way not this is the way it ought not to be or I want it to be or I expected it to be or it should be you know what I mean all those

You see, when you get down to it and you say, this is the way it is, then I think you'll find patience arising easily within that. And that intolerance, the intolerance towards ourselves, I mean, that also is an acceptance of, well, this is the way it is. This is the way I am at this present, or this, be careful here, This is

the conditioning as it is now. So if I find myself, say, anxious again over something stupid, over something silly, then I say, OK, this is the way it is now. This is the way it is now. And then you work with that, letting the anxiety pass, etc., etc.

And once you've worked with that a little while, once you've allowed the intolerance to die away, that sense of, you know, it shouldn't be like this, like that person, this is the way it is, then that's when you find *mettā* having a very strong effect. Once that's died, as soon as you wish goodwill towards somebody or to yourself, then that creates a different attitude, you see. And that attitude of openness, kindness, gentleness, acceptance begins to undermine all this business of, it should be like this, etc., etc.

And although I'm coming very late to it in my practice, I'm really beginning to see that the practice of mettā is, I think it's quite crucial really. It's quite crucial. Because it's to do with developing right attitude. When you're meditating, for instance, and you feel, for instance, you feel very impatient with yourself because the mind's wandering so much. And you're judging yourself, you see. So that immediately becomes your object to observe, to feel, to experience. Judging, judging. And you feel the self-hatred. So, all that sort of stuff. When that dies away, you see, then there has to be that effort to turn upon oneself with compassion, to turn the stream of compassion within oneself by offering oneself good wishes. And that eventually completely undermines the basis. You can't be loving and angry at the same time. That's the point. These two mental states can't exist together. So the more that we bend the mind towards being gentle, being kind, that undermines those old habits with things like intolerance.

Remember there's always a view and an opinion there are these three states conceit, view and attachment so if you take religious intolerance. There's a view, very simple. I'm right, you're wrong. We can't get more simple than that. I'm right, you're wrong. There's a conceit there. I'm right, you're wrong. I've got it all right. And there's an attachment to it. There's a heart attachment to it. So the head is here with this is the truth, everything else is not the truth. There's an identity with it, I'm right, you're wrong, and there's a heart attachment to it. And that's why intolerance, whatever intolerance it is, is so hard. Because how can you penetrate a wall which says, I'm right, my thinking is right, your thinking is wrong, this opinion is right, your opinion is wrong. You see, you can't. You're up against a real block.

When my grandmother demands that one of us make her a cup of tea, because it is important that we respect our elders, what is the most compassionate and skillful response. It is to make the tea with absolute attentiveness and compassion, and then to accidentally spill it all over. After you've done that a few times, she'll stop asking. Yes, there's nothing more off-putting than somebody asking you to be compassionate out of moral duty. It undermines the whole idea of being compassionate. So, I don't know. Oh, I think I would just do it. It depends. If I have to live with her, it would be different. Is it patient acceptance by any chance? It is, yes. Patient acceptance, yes. Patient acceptance.

Well, that's the way she was brought up, obviously. And how does one reach ninety and have developed the ability to request a cup of tea respectfully and skillfully when this is the model demonstrated to us?

Oh, well, that's it, isn't it, you see? One reaches ninety understanding how painful it is to have your duty demanded. One then at ninety, in that sort of very weak, demanding, compassionate voice, asks for a cup of tea. Drawing on your nieces and nephews and whoever, your grandchildren's compassion.

As meditation is now known to have such a beneficial effect on our spiritual life, why is it not more part of the Judeo-Christian form of worship? Well, these the Judeo-Christian and Islamic form of spirituality is to do, has its roots in relationship, has its roots in a relationship with God and therefore is centred very much on the meaning of love, meaning of love, loving service. The Eastern religions, although love is there, and especially in Hinduism with Krishna, the Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna tells Arjuna that the path of love is easier than the path of insight. So there was also an understanding of love in both and I'd have to look up the scripture now but there's I think there's a monk called Pingala or something in the scriptures where the Buddha tells him that his path to awakening is through the path of love and faith in him specifically. Very guru thing, which seems so out of place within the Buddhist context but it's there. It is there as a path you see.

Now if you read the Christian texts, if you read people like St John of the Cross, it is very much a situation of attending, attending, attending and in that attention, open attention, there arises these negative states, just like in meditation. And the instructions are to feel them and let them go. Feel them and let them go. So I'm not so sure there's all that greater separation, really, between the one and the other. And although in, shall we say, specifically Christian terms, one uses the image of Christ as the beginning of that love. When you read the mystics, that also has to be got rid of. In the end you enter into that place of no image. No image, you see.

Now, you know, I don't know much about it myself, but from what I read and from what I have been told by certain monks, well one monk really, in the Christian tradition, the process of mental purification arises through compunction. If you go back on the Buddhist idea that everything begins with delusion, once we enter a state of self, we then form this relationship based on the self. And immediately there arises this fork of attachment, greed and hatred, etc. As soon as we move off the base of that delusion, we're doing harm. And once we do harm, the only way to overcome, the only way that, I'll put it this way, the insight into the harm we do allows compunction. It allows tears.

So, for instance, in the prayer of the Eastern Orthodox, Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on us. Something of that nature. The mercy is to seek forgiveness or to feel the forgiveness, to feel the compunction for having done things wrong, unskillful things, which have always harmed other beings. So whether we like it or not, sin is there in the sense that we're constantly doing harm at some form, some level within our... Now, that is completely dissolved through... and you may find that even in your meditation great feelings of sorrow about one's past actions comes and it's feeling that sorrow which is the process of cleansing the heart. As you work on that path of forgiveness then of course you have to come down to the very base of why it is that you're behaving like that and then you come across the self. And it's that separation of our true being with, shall we say, the all, that is dissolved through this process of

compunction. That's as I understand it. And, to a certain degree, I've experienced that myself through my own meditation. So sorrow about one's own actions leads one to seek the root cause as to why we behave like that in the first place.

For ordinary Christians it would seem that that form of meditation just isn't taught. They don't seem to know it. And that's one of the sad things really. I think that's one of the reasons why we see churches haemorrhaging really. In Buddhist understanding, if the dispensation of the Buddha comes to a point where the meditation has gone and nobody on earth has now had an experience of nibbāna, so there is nobody who really has experienced the truth of the Buddha's teaching, it is said that the religion will descend into empty ritualism. You know, just bowing and lighting candles and doing things for good karma and all that sort of stuff. At that point it just becomes a useless ritual. Which doesn't mean to say that ritual in itself is useless, you know. It does prepare one's mind, like the chanting and all that, prepares you to do the meditation. Gets you into a mindset. Some people need it more than others, you know.

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