Discourse on the Highest Blessings

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 44:33

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa.

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

Normally today, because we're celebrating the Buddha, I would spend most of the time just describing his life and what set him off on his path and what he eventually achieved. It'll come into what I'm saying. But I thought this time we'd concentrate just a little bit more upon endgame, upon exactly where we're supposed to be going.

I'll read this out. These are synonyms, adjectives for *nibbāna*. So he starts by saying to them: "I will teach you the unconditioned and the path leading to the unconditioned. And what, monks, is the unconditioned? The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion. This is called the unconditioned. And what, monk, is the path leading to the unconditioned? Mindfulness directed to the body. This is called the path leading to the unconditioned."

And then he talks about... He's describing what this unconditioned is. "I will teach you the uninclined, the taintless, the truth, the far shore, the subtle, the very difficult to see, the unaging, the stable, the undisintegrating, the unmanifest, the unproliferated, the peaceful, the deathless, the sublime, the auspicious, the secure, the destruction of craving, the wonderful, the amazing, the unailing, the unailing state, *nibbāna*, the unafflicted, dispassion, purity, freedom, non-attachment, the island, the shelter, the asylum, the refuge, the destination and the path leading to that destination."

And doesn't that make you want to go? Enough there, isn't there?

"And what, monks, is the destination? The destination is the destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion. This is called the destination." And then he basically repeats himself.

So in order to grasp that in some way, we have to go back to his own particular experience. So remember that he's left a household life. And what's meant by that is that he's not searching for any end of suffering in what we would call the ordinary pleasures and delights of the world. So something there has undermined his confidence that that's possible.

In those days, of course, they would have believed quite easily that there was a process of reincarnation. And although there were materialists, what we would call materialists, that you just had a body and it died and that was the end of that, there would have been many teachers who would have explained how

to achieve higher realms of existence and some idea that there was an end to it.

At that time, there were the scriptures written by what we now call Hinduism. And they were beginning to understand that there was something that was unnameable, something that was transcendent. It was that, you know, people, one or two teachers in their scriptures had come to that conclusion through their own practice.

So when the Buddha set out, there was already a ground of understanding and a huge history of practice. How far back? We don't know. Some think it goes back to the Indus Valley civilization, the yoga practice. But it has deep roots.

And what he learned from his teachers is basically how to establish very beautiful states of mind that we now call the *jhānas*, the absorptions. These, of course, you find in all religions, ecstasies. And you get them through the practice of prayer, mantra, watching the breath, anything which calms and steadies you, anything which creates a delight, such as *mettā*, *mettā* practice, loving-kindness practice, that would eventually begin to develop in your very beautiful state, such that you would absorb into it. And there are deep enough states where you even lose contact with the world around you.

So these absorptions were something that he became an expert at, and was invited by his teachers to join them, twice. So such practices seemingly were quite easy for him because it said that he left home when he was 29 and he was already liberated by the time he was 35. That's only six years. And he spent four of those years in practicing these self-mortifications.

So that was on the understanding that the soul, the eternal spirit within us, was locked into the body by its past actions. So the body itself was an expression of past unwholesome deeds. In other words, your unwholesome *kamma*. And for this spirit, this soul to be released back up into an eternal heaven, you have to somehow reduce the body, to let go of the body. And so you've got these mortification exercises, seemingly a lot of them based around not eating. And the Jain leader was one of the teachers of that. And the idea was that eventually, in Jainism, you just, well, you die. And that's your, and you've completely let go of the body.

So when the Buddha tried this... So he would have only been in his 30s, yeah? He just found that he just created more suffering. It didn't help him overcome this internal questioning that he had, which we would now recognize as some sort of existential crisis. What's the meaning of life? Why am I alive? Et cetera, et cetera. So it would have come with a sense of despair, a sense of frustration and so on.

He left that, and he left his companions, who didn't like him for doing that. They thought he was going soft and all that. And then remember that there's this occasion when he remembers something from his childhood, which awakens in him some sort of turnaround upon his practice.

So whereas before, like many of the people around him, the ascetics around him, was about gaining something, getting something, the practices were about achieving something, it made him turn around

upon himself and begin to investigate exactly how he was creating suffering. This is what it turned out. Instead of trying to get rid of his mental anguish, he actually began to feel it, to watch it. And in which case, eventually, he saw the whole process whereby he creates suffering for himself. And that's this dependent origination.

You might say that's the core of his teachings, that he was able to define clearly where the problem lay. And in the Four Noble Truths, as you know, he states that the cause of suffering is this desire. It's a specific desire. It's a desire about trying to get happiness from various sources, trying to be happy, but always based on a profound misunderstanding, which he called the self.

And the whole teaching centered at a deeper level about this sense of identity we have. So here we've got a trajectory of going into ourselves, of seeing the psychological mechanisms whereby we create these problems within ourselves. And then, as it were, to go deeper in that and to seek the builder.

So, I forgot to get my little book out here. So we chant in the morning, this is called his victory verse. And that's what it's put down to.

"So I've traveled the round through the round of countless rebirths, seeking but not finding the house builder. How painful is birth over and over again. But oh, house builder, you've now been caught. You shall not build a house again. Your rafters are broken, your ridge pole demolished. The unconditioned consciousness has been attained and every kind of craving has been destroyed."

So you can see here in that short little verse that he's got right down to the core of the problem. And there are many, all these adjectives are pointing to certain qualities about what happens to us when we finally undermine that basic misunderstanding.

So when you look at his teachings, you see that they divide fairly clearly between all those what we would call morality or ethics or how to behave and this transcendence. And to understand that, we have to go back to this sense of self.

So this is not the self of pride or the self of embarrassment. It's that pure sense of being here, which you get when you're sitting. So when you're sitting quietly like this, and you're pulling away from the body, heart and mind within yourself, you might say. And you feel yourself to be this observer, the feeler, the one who knows, the one who's experiencing things. So that sense of self there is the beginning of the problem. It's the first object that we make, the sense of me.

So every time you get up in the morning, you're awakened to this idea, oh, this is me, I'm here, I'm here. Just now I woke up, I must be tired from that travelling yesterday, because I woke up in the middle of the day, just after this little kip, after my little siesta, and had one of those lovely moments of wondering where I was. I suddenly realised it's midday and I've got to get out there and give a talk, oh my God.

So a sense of not knowing who you are or what you are is one of those lovely little moments where we see

how that creates within us such a disturbance, such a search for identity.

So now that self is a relationship. It's a relationship that I have with my sense of being here. I am here. I've got this sense of me being here. And of course, me being here is within this psychophysical organism, but it's also in the world. And the natural drive is to be happy. I mean, you could say that you can see that run through even animals, ordinary animals and the animal kingdom that everybody, all sentient beings just want to be happy. Of course, how you define happiness is entirely idiosyncratic. I mean, it's just up to you. Some people are happy just chewing liquorice all day.

But how you define happiness will be your goal, will be your aim. And what the Buddha is pointing out is that all these aims, all these objectives we have are about relationship. So everything he's talking about is based upon ethics, upon relationship. And he points out that there are some relationships we have, even with biscuits, which can cause us lots of problems. And there are some relationships that are very supportive and help us.

So it's a case of navigating our path through this distinction between, well, what is wholesome for me and what is unwholesome for me? Now, most things are pretty clear. I mean, everybody knows you're not going around murdering people or something like that. But when it gets to just the subtle things about how we relate to various things in our society, which in a sense we've just taken for granted and we never question them.

So just that sense of relationship to our wonderful politicians and this whole business of Brexit, which has overtaken us. And to recognize what is our response to that. And to all the troubles that our society has or the world has, how are we relating to it?

Take the problem of, well not the problem, but take the whole business of compassion. So it's interesting to note that everybody knows about the refugee crisis and the fact that people around the middle belt of the earth are beginning to suffer a bit more than us from climate change. And that there's a natural desire for people to move away, to look after themselves. And for the most part, there's a knowledge of that. And there may be some natural feeling of wanting to help, but sometimes not really accepting our fear of them, that suddenly everybody is pouring into Europe. Why don't we go to China?

So you get this confusion of feelings about the refugees. And then suddenly, as you know, we had this terrible little picture of this little boy who drowned in the ocean and Angela Merkel is inviting a million refugees into Germany. So somewhere along the line that compassion has moved away from just a knowing to a direct experience which is awoken within us, that sense of wanting to do something about a situation.

So this business of ethics, it begins right there with that sense of self. That sense of self is because it identifies so much with the body. You'll notice here in this particular discourse that he says that the mindfulness directed to the body, so how important is the body in our lives? Now you might say well that's

pretty obvious, it's straightforward, but can you think of anything that hasn't come through your body?

I mean, it's quite obvious that anything physical comes through your body, what you eat, et cetera, your exercise and your eyes and everything that you see. But everything else, all the information that we get from society, all the information that we get through our relationships to people is all coming through the body, through the ears, through the brain, into the mind. So the body is absolutely, it's our basic sense of being in the world. And we know how desperate that can become when the body falls ill and we find ourselves close up to death. That's when the shaking comes. That's when the horror of our situation arises in our mind.

So this relationship that we have, this sense of self, also mirrors back to us that sense of consciousness or awareness. Be careful with words because they have all sorts of meanings, but that sense of awareness. And that sense of awareness has a sense of itself, of itself being aware. But that sense of itself being aware is a mirror of that awareness within the mind itself.

And so what happens is that seeking happiness, it goes, as it were, through that sense of self into the psychophysical organism and begins to feed itself to make itself feel happy and comfortable. And then, of course, it's up against the world, which is ready to offer all those things to us. We begin to accumulate.

Now, because this awareness wakes up and begins to realize that, in fact, things are impermanent, that sense of impermanence undermines that quality of happiness. So every time it accumulates something, there's always a fear of loss. The fear of loss means that you've got to accumulate more. So a lot of our acquisitiveness is about making ourselves feel safe. It's not just about enjoying things. It's about making ourselves feel secure within a world that we're not certain about what's going to happen next.

And once you're dependent upon what you have for your sense of security, anything that undermines that becomes your enemy and your aversion arises quite naturally. And when that enemy is a bit bigger than you, then you've got to run for it. So those three attitudes arise out of this false sense of self: acquisitiveness, aversion and fear.

And it's from that base when we're feeling agitated or when we're feeling threatened, that's where we work from. Once we behave from that base, then, of course, we produce certain habits within us, certain mental states, certain conditions that we call *kamma* or consequences. And there's a second tier, you might say, of suffering that comes from that agitation, which is, of course, guilt, shame, and the comeback from other people who see you as selfish and not generous, et cetera. See you as not compassionate enough, see you as not loving enough.

So, all those maladies arise from a mistake, from a mistake that goes so deep that we're not aware of it. And it all comes back down into that sense of self.

So when we're meditating, we're trying to get down to that. We're first of all trying to purify the heart. So remember that the way that the process works in purifying the heart is to allow the heart to express its

turbulences. So where we find anxiety, a sense of depression, sadness, grief, overexcitement, a desire to indulge, et cetera, where that comes out of the heart, remember, it's always seeking to satisfy itself.

And one of the insights that we have is that that desire is insatiable. It can never have enough. Partly because it's enjoyable and partly because we want more of it, meaning that there's a lesser chance of losing it. So there's always that sense of safety about things.

So when these things come up in the mind, we have to be very careful. I should say come up in the heart as an emotional mood state. When it comes up in the heart, I have to be very careful not to let it grasp hold of the mind and create a story. Because that's how we begin to recognize that these things develop themselves, even in ordinary daily life, not just sitting.

Just when you find yourself dreaming, where you're not doing very much, you're sitting in a chair or you're traveling somewhere on a bus or something. And the mind's just wandering, wandering, getting hold on its old usual habitual little ways of thinking. And you've got to come off that because we have to wake up to ourselves to realize that every time it does that, I'm just making things worse for myself.

So coming back into the heart, we allow these emotional states, these turbulences to express themselves. And of course, that's the difficult part of our practice. It's not very pleasant. We have to stay with that. We have to wait until they begin to exhaust themselves.

And it's important at least once or twice to wait until it completely ends, to wait till that process of turbulence completely ends. Because when it completely ends, what you get is your present, what you get is the consequence. And what you see clearly is that what you're suffering from moves towards its opposite.

So, whereas once you've got all this agitation, this sort of, shall we say, a lot of anger about something, if you wait until the anger completely disappears, you find your perspective changes completely and you're able to see the other side. In other words, love arises quite naturally. It's the same with any cruel thoughts we have or any selfish thoughts. If you wait until the end of that, you see, then the opposite arises quite naturally. And if you can just do it enough times to convince yourself that that's what actually happens, then you get that inner conviction, that inner determination to actually stay with the turbulence of the heart until they heal themselves. That's an important insight, psychotherapeutic insight, you might say.

But in terms of this deeper malaise, this sense of self, then that comes out in that more inward state when we're sitting. And when he would have been sitting under the tree, when he suddenly saw that that sense of self was completely manufactured. It's manufactured moment after moment. It's not something that is always there. And that's the huge insight for us, because normally speaking, we have a sense of continuity, sense of substantiality of this me all the time. And by seeing that the self arises only within a process, only within a process does the Buddha realize that actually it has no base at all. And that sense of self, remember, is a relationship. It's that sense of me being here, me, that sense of me.

So you can see that our practice has developed both these two sides, it has the side of purifying the heart and the side of insight, the side of actually seeing where this fundamental problem lies. And these adjectives are pointing to what happens when the self completely disappears and there is just that awareness.

So now he's pointing to something which is transcendent. And he's telling us, he's saying that it's a wonderful thing, but he can't describe it. It's beyond description. But his words are the uninclined, which means that it's no longer seeking for something. So that statement, no longer seeking something. That statement that by the nun who was liberated, I've got up there, Meichi Kyao — Meichi just means a nun. Kya is a name. I think I pronounced it right. Expresses, she expresses quite clearly what that state is once you're liberated from that deep delusion.

So this sense, this awareness is no longer inclined to try and seek happiness in the world. It's taintless. So these taints refer to something quite deep, the desire to become, the desire to continue, the desire for sensual pleasure, and that fundamental ignorance that we suffer from of not knowing who or what we really are. So those have gone. The truth by which he means something that is irrefutable. The far shore, that's one of his regular descriptions of it, the island, you're going beyond, over the sea of troubles, to a completely different place. It's transcendent.

The subtle, the very difficult to see. So again, the reason why it's so subtle is because we identify with this sense of self, with being our self. That sense of identity is when you lose your objective view of things. So, for instance, if you're angry, you can be aware of being angry, but then suddenly you can lose it and rage. So that point of raging is a point where you completely identify with that mental state, and then you've lost all objectivity.

The unaging, so there's no — I mean, that's what he found, that there was, in that state there's no birth, there's no death, there's no aging. It's stable, there's nothing moving in it. It's not disintegrating, it is completely substantial. It's the unmanifest. Now that's an interesting thing, that it can't be seen. You cannot see, you cannot hear or feel or know *Nibbāna* as an object. The unproliferated. So it's not one thing or two things. It's just in itself, just pure awareness. It's the peaceful, the deathless, which same as the unaging, the sublime, the auspicious, the secure. So that's this business of always feeling that sense underneath it of our existence, of being insecure, insecure against sickness, aging and death. So all that's completely gone. It's un-ailing in the sense that there's no suffering there from being sick or being ill.

He calls it *Nibbāna*. *Nibbāna* has two general meanings. That is, you're liberated from that wrong desire. So remember, there's two types of desire. So when the Buddha can see that somebody's come to him with a question which is troubling, there's a desire to help. So compassion, sympathetic joy, love, all those basic wholesome attitudes are still there. All the unwholesome ones have gone. It's the unafflicted, that's just saying there's no more suffering there. Dispassion, meaning here that you don't get caught up in other people's problems. There's not that reactivity. Purity, purity in an ethical sense. There's no more negativity

within that state.

Freedom, now that freedom is not the freedom to do something, it's the freedom from. It's the freedom from these wrong desires, from these painful desires. And that's another way of saying non-attachment. And then he says the island, which again links to this other shore. The island, something which is completely separate unto itself, not attached to the land, not attached to anything else. And the shelter, so there's your safety. It's the asylum, the refuge. All these are telling us that once you're there, you simply can't suffer. You've gone beyond the ability to engage in the world that you find yourself in, in a way that is going to cause you suffering. There's a profound liberation. It's the destination, the path leading to the destination.

So his description often of that end game is more negative than positive. This is quite something to come across in the scriptures. I think there's only one other place where so many adjectives are put, about 32 of them or something, put in a way that has both that negative side of what it's not and the positive side of what it is. But when you put all those ideas together, they never sum up to the actual experience of *Nirvān a*.

So how do we get a feel for it? How do we get a sense of what *Nirvāna* might be? So in your practice, when you're sitting there, you might come across this deep sense of stillness, a deep sense of silence within yourself, even if only for a moment. And as that appears within you, that comes to you and you get that sense of you being in the midst of that, a sense of the observer, the feeler, just for a moment there, just become internally aware of that sense of self, of the sense of the feeler, and just ask yourself, what's it made of? And that's when you begin to recognize that the awareness is something quite separate from all the other things that you can experience through the body.

All our emotions and moods are through the body, all our imagination and thought are through the body through the brain, all our physical feelings are through the body. So the body is there as a basic platform upon which we experience things, experience everything that in this world. It comes through the body and it's of the body. And here you are, separated within yourself into this observation post, this platform within yourself where you can see all this. You're separate from it. And in moments of real peacefulness and calm, that sense of self becomes very clear, the observer. And it's just a case of holding that long enough to, as it were, glance inwards and just see what is that awareness made of, what's inside the awareness. And that gives us a clue as to what our destination is.

So when the Buddha had discovered this, of course, he spent something like seven days, seven nights, just going through that whole process and thinking about it, reflecting on it. And from then on, he spent his forty-odd years, forty-five years, teaching, wandering around North India. When you read the scriptures, that wandering really comes out because as he's going from place to place and he's being asked questions by people, this word, how to describe the mind becomes very undefined.

So the word consciousness is used in many ways. It's used as just a screen upon which something happens,

but it's also used as a discriminative process, an understanding process. The word *citta*, which is another word for consciousness, is used also as awareness, but it's also used as your emotional base, your mental state. And it's only by really doing the practice that these things begin to clarify themselves.

And why he began to deconstruct our experience into these, what he called these five aggregates. All those things to do with the body, our direct physicality, such as pure tasting, movement, the sense of cold and heat and all that. And then there's a whole section about feeling. And feeling, the one word, covers both the physical feelings and the mental feelings, how we feel inside ourselves with various different emotions or moods. And that was a whole, he separated that out from the actual sensations that come directly from the body. So the body and mind in Buddhist teaching, remember, are two different things, but they work, the one saturates the other. You can't really separate them by way of experience.

And then there's a whole process of mentation, how we're able to create symbols in the mind, images in the mind, which through more and more experience become concepts. So as soon as a child, we would have seen a spider. And then after a lot of seeing of spiders and pictures and all that, we've ended up with a concept of a spider in our mind. So as soon as we see a spider, we'll name it. We'll know what it is, a spider. But we won't actually look at it. And very few of us are capable of actually feeling it. So it's a case of recognizing that there's a mismatch comes through the process of conceptualization. And that's a section of these aggregates.

Then there comes this whole section of habituation, of habits. And this is crucial in the way that he separates that because these are something that we actively create through our will. And that's where the suffering lies, in these *saṅkhāras*, these compounded things that we've created. Well, we call them our habits, volitional activities.

And then there's consciousness. And then beyond that, there's this sense of awareness. And that sometimes you might find confusing in a lot of Buddhist literature because often writers don't make that distinction. And what happens is then the idea of *nibbāna* becomes something so abstract, it's outside our ability to even get a glimpse of it. So long as awareness is confused with consciousness, then it's not possible to see what *nibbāna* might be. It's only when we begin to realize or recognize or open up to the possibility that awareness is not the same as consciousness that then there becomes this insight into what might be transcendent of our psychophysical organism.

So consciousness is really just that screen upon which we're seeing and experiencing everything. But we're right in it. It's like our face is in the monitor. It's not separate from it. It's not outside the monitor. Your face is in the monitor, in the monitor screen. That's what it is. And every time you pull out, every time you sit back into your desk and begin to recognize that you're watching a monitor, that's what you're doing when you're sitting in meditation. You're pulling out.

And that sense of self is, again, a mirror image of awareness on that screen. And the best example was given to me by Noreen, really, when talking about looking into shops when you're doing shopping. So

when you look in there and you see all these lovely things, you might catch your own mirror image looking at you looking into the shop. And if you stop for a minute, you can actually comb your hair in the mirror. It's that, well, I used to. So that sense of mirror image is exactly what we mean by this self-awareness at its original apparition. And it's through that consciousness of that screen, of that window on the shop, you see, that you're entering into all this shopping. And I wonder we have, what's it called? Shopping therapy or something. It's all there as you walk down the high street.

So just to try and pull all that together, the Buddha teaches two things. You can categorize them as two major teachings, ethics and transcendence. The transcendence is just a little bit because you can't say that much about it, but you can describe the path leading to it. And he points out that the fundamental problem is one of identity. It goes back to that ancient Greek thing of know yourself or who am I? That's the deepest question we have, really, of who am I?

And this who am I manifests itself outwardly as a connection with the world it finds itself in, in a way which creates suffering for itself. That's the peculiar situation we're in. We're seeking happiness, but because it's not in the right way, it rebounds back to us as a sense of unsatisfactoriness. You just can't get out of life what you would like to get out of life as a constant. You can hold it for a second or two and that's it.

And then we begin to let go of all that, begin to allow it to manifest as turbulences in the heart. And as that purification becomes more and more within us, there's a growth in virtue. And the Buddha equates ordinary mundane happiness with virtue. The more virtuous we are, the more happy we are. So you can always begin to examine. We can always examine our lives by asking ourselves, well, exactly how generous am I? Exactly how loving am I? How compassionate am I? And these are all little telltales to us that we're moving along the path.

So the first part of the path is right understanding. And that's basically the point of this insight business and understanding the teachings. Underneath that, there comes immediately right attitude. And right attitude is normally written as from selfishness to generosity, from hatred to love, from cruelty to compassion. But any negativity you have moves towards its opposite. But you can see that you can undermine this sense of self by going the other way, by practicing, by developing generosity, love, compassion. You're undermining the sense of self. How? Because you're beginning to recognize that we're not an identity, we're not separate from the world around us.

And that undoing of that barrier between me and somebody else is part of undoing this concept of a self, of who I am. And eventually that identification, you might say, with all beings is the manifestation of love. It's what we practice when we say *mettā*. May all beings be happy. It includes me as well. So I'm in there. I'm in the mix. And it's me trying to find a relationship whereby I'm not coming from me all the time. I'm coming from a sense of we and a sense of you. The Buddha put it nicely as that we do things for ourselves, for others, for both ourselves and others.

When we begin to behave in that more virtuous way, that sense of self begins to dissipate. There begins that communication, you might say, between us, between others, between nature. And that is beginning to understand how we can live in the world whereby we're no longer suffering from it.

So that's something to contemplate. The Buddha doesn't actually suffer. Not that he fell ill. As you know, he growled, he died. He went through all the processes that we would go through. But none of it was his suffering. And I would really invite you to read that statement by the nun because she says it so perfectly.

You see? Even the cat understands. Very, very... The peculiar cat is from next door. I blame it on John, he used to greet it. I have a horror of cats.

Mainly because they always leave the field with a mouse in their mouths, or some sort of animal. And it's not as though they're not fed. You can call him Buddy, by the way.

So anyway, I hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused even greater confusion, and that you will, by your complete devotion to the practice, liberate yourselves from all suffering, sooner rather than later.

Sādhu, sādhu.

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