The Highest Blessings: A Dharma Talk on the Maṅgala Sutta

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 36:03

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhassa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhassa

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

In the evening chanting, we go through the discourse on the highest blessings. So I just thought I'd use it as a template and talk around it. It's always good to start from the base of the Buddha's teachings, where he's coming from.

Remember, he's always coming from this position that the human being is in a state of delusion, and that the delusion isn't something culpable. It's just because we come into a situation of don't know, and from that we make this mistake. The mistake is, of course, to believe we're human beings, which is conventionally true, but ultimately not quite.

So the basic delusion is this belief that we are human beings. And in so believing, we form a relationship with the world of wanting to be happy. And that creates a certain morality. If we talk about ethics as being just relationship, then as soon as we're born, we're into some sort of relationship. And because of this inner desire to seek happiness right from the point of being born, there is that growing attitude of trying to acquire something.

Because fundamentally, right down there at the deepest level, we know we're not safe. We know we're not safe. And so everything we're doing is to contain that fear of not being safe. And that becomes more obvious to you as you grow older. It's not so obvious to the child. But, of course, as soon as the child doesn't see where its mother is or father, then there's that fear comes in. So there's that really fundamental level of not being safe.

And so what we do is we acquire. And acquiring things gives us some sort of feeling of safety—your money, friends, anything. Anything you have a lot of makes you feel much more safe. And then, of course, you have to guard it against enemies. And that's where the aversion comes in. And if the enemy's too big, well, you've got to run for it. So those are your three basic attitudes that arise out of this wrong identity: the acquisitiveness, the aversion and the fear.

So when the Buddha's teaching, he's always trying to undermine those delusions. And he's not trying to undermine those delusions so we end up nowhere. He's trying to undermine those delusions in order for

us to realise or discover or rediscover perhaps what it is we truly are. And that's the unconditioned.

You've all noticed the new chippings on the stone there, I'm sure. They're a bit loud at the moment, but we're assured that over time the stone will weather and it will fade into the stone. So it'll be rather nice, I think.

And so you could say that his teachings all boil down to the unconditioned and ethics—transcendence and ethics. And this transcendence is not just something completely separate. It's not as though there's a place or somewhere else that is transcendent and then we're here. The transcendence is right here within us now. So when we talk about *nibbāna*, it's not as though we're going to create it. It's already here. It's just that we don't see it.

And our view of life is actually clouding over our real true nature, and that's what we're trying to undermine all the time in our meditation. We're trying to see these three characteristics: the process of desiring—that's the direct psychological manifestation of this delusion—that we're always trying to manipulate the world to make ourselves at least comfortable or to run away from things. And then there's the impermanence, which we can see quite clearly around us, but it doesn't strike us until we realise actually we are impermanent as well. And then there's the sense of not self, which is to do basically with, through the meditation, recognizing that everything we're observing is an object. And slowly it dawns upon us that the perceiver can't be the perceived. There's a gap there.

And it also comes across when it comes to control. Because if you think of a soul or a self, you would presume that they are in charge of themselves, that they have their own agency, that they can decide how they want to be. But then when we find ourselves within this organism, we find we don't have that control.

So keeping that in mind, the question that the Buddha has asked is: what are the supreme blessings? Now you can see that from the Buddha's point of view, blessings must be virtues. So it's all about ethics. So it's basically trying to develop in us those beautiful virtues that all of us have to some degree or another. But they are layered over by traits that are unwholesome or unskillful.

So here I'd like to just go through the discourse, just putting the accent on what we can develop in order to be beautiful people—heart beautiful, not Hollywood beautiful.

So it starts off by saying many gods and people. So it was a god who had arrived to ask this question to the Buddha, this put in a mythological sense. But this actual discourse belongs to the early strata of the discourses. So it goes back, really, back to his early teachings.

So he says not to associate with fools, but associating with the wise. So if you look at your past life, the question would arise: how many daft relationships have I had? How many? And what has awakened me out of that? And what are my relationships now? So if our purpose is to liberate us from suffering, the Buddha says that good companionship is absolutely crucial. Who you mix with, who you associate with

are going to have an effect on you. So he's basically saying those who are wise—stay with the ones who are wise. But here, this wise, you have to read it a little bit. It's not worldly wise. I mean, that's included, but it's more to do with spiritual companions because he's always looking to liberate us from our delusions.

And to honour those who are worthy of honour. And so our heroes, the people whom we see as people who are paragons, the people whom we can measure ourselves against. Now, it's funny, when I was a child, being brought up in a very religious Catholic family—my mother was very religious, and so was my father—the actual reading books we were given were the Book of the Saints. And I'm just wondering, how many children these days get a Book of the Saints for Christmas? Even if it's on their computer. So very early on, my heroes were these saints, people who'd done these amazing things and were holy. They weren't pop stars or anything like that.

So our question is to ourselves: well, who do I praise? Who are the people in my life whom I see as worthy to praise? And this should bring out a feeling of wanting to be like them. When, as a child, I would read these saints who've done these amazing things, there would be an admiration arise in me, and somewhere within me, I would want to be like them.

And, of course, you would still get that sort of religious approach in the East, especially in places like Burma, which have remained fairly—well, up until fairly recently, maybe—fairly religious in their society. So it would always, children would always be taught about all the saints, the early Buddhist saints and the Buddha himself. And they would be their heroes. So it's good just to contemplate who do we see as our heroes.

Then he goes on to say living in a suitable place. So that's—the Buddha is not just simply up in the air somewhere with all these wonderful virtues. He is grounded and he's talking about living in a suitable place. And again, a suitable place would be somewhere where you can feel you can practice. And that's not always possible, of course, but at least one can do one's best. But it's interesting that he should put that down as a blessing. Remember that all these are meant to be fortunate blessings.

And to have done good deeds in the past. So this is a reminder that we are bearing the fruits or suffering the fruits of things that we've done in the past. And there's no way out of that. You've got to stay with it. But hopefully they've been very good and now we're very happy.

And then he goes on to say, right aspirations. So what are our aspirations? How do we see ourselves guiding towards what future? Because that's a guiding light within our lives. If you don't have somewhere to go, then you might end up anywhere. So spiritually speaking, our aim is quite direct. It's trying to, first of all, purify the heart and to get in touch with this unconditioned nature within us. And not to be caught up with false hopes, false ideas of what we can do. So an aspiration.

The big aspiration, of course, in Buddhism is to become a *Bodhisattva*, which is rather—the big aspiration

is to become a fully self-awakened Buddha. And we have a special word for these people. They're called *Bo dhisattvas*, you see, *Bodhisattas* in the Pali. So that would be an aspiration.

There was a monk called Ananda Maitreya, very famous in Sri Lanka. And when he died, thousands came out for his funeral. And he had been to Kanduboda, which is where I myself had trained, and had practiced with the Mahasi himself there. And it is said that when somebody goes through the process of insight in order to enter the first path and fruit, just before you go in there, ancient or earlier aspirations arise, come up. And he remembered making this aspiration to become a fully self-awakened Buddha, and he said he could remember the faces of the two main disciples Moggallana and Sariputta, but not of the Buddha, unfortunately.

And it stopped him moving, because what the tradition says is that to become a fully self-awakened Buddha, you have to have all the virtues ready, all the perfections ready. And then when you're born, you go through it in one lifetime. And I presume that's why you end up being a fairly good teacher, because you've actually experienced the whole process in one lifetime, which is not necessary otherwise. So he remembered that and he couldn't go through. And he reinforced his commitment, as far as I know. Reinforced his commitment.

We have another example of that, of Ajahn Mun, whose biography was written by Ajahn Mahabua. It's a great story. And he remembered making this vow to become a fully self-awakened Buddha. And then he realized it was just so difficult that he renounced it. It just meant for being an ordinary, fully enlightened being.

So these are our aspirations. What's your aspiration? What is your aspiration?

And then again, he's grounded. He wants us to have great learning and craft depending on what we do in life. Right livelihood is right there in the Eightfold Path. So right livelihood is where you are sharing your gifts for the benefit of society as a whole. So even if the job is the most menial, it's irrelevant because it's a way in which you share what you have for the benefit of others. And therefore, there's a sense of service to it. And that undermines things like boredom and hopelessness and all the things that might come up in a work situation. So that's there also deep in his teachings.

Can I just suggest you open that back door and the window in the corridor. Just get a bit of air through. It's all right if you fall asleep. It would be terrible if I did, in mid-sentence.

And then to be well disciplined. That's a word we don't particularly like these days, discipline. We usually think of it as being enforced upon us. But it's something, of course, that we have to develop ourselves. So it's just making sure, for instance, that we do do that morning meditation—I'm not going to quiz you—and things like that.

And well-trained. When I was in Burma once, there was this grandfather. He had his little boy with him, his little grandson. And he didn't say, we've taken him to school, we're having him educated. He said, this

is my little grandson. He has to be trained. Very different approach.

Speaking—yes, well, speech is the big one because again it's in the eightfold path, right speech. And the Buddha simply asks us to be timely—to say it at the right time, to say what is true or at least not to be purposely false, to be gentle in our speech, and to make sure it's beneficial. So sometimes it's best not to speak. And always coming from the heart of goodwill. The heart of goodwill.

So remember, these are all supreme blessings. They're not only something we develop, but they're also a consequence of good practice. And virtue makes us happy.

And then he's looking at relationships. So attendance on one's mother and father, looking after one's spouse and children. So remember, these are advices giving to lay people. And then he talks about work which is not stressful. You can translate the word as not stressful. So even in those days, seemingly, they had stressful work. So obviously, something that's not new.

Then comes this generosity. Generosity—whenever he was speaking to lay people, he always began with generosity. It's the simplest of virtues to exercise. He pointed out that you can even be generous to a thief who's just stolen your stuff. And there's this virtuous circle of gratitude, generosity and renunciation.

So when you contemplate how much you've been given in this life, I think you very quickly come to the conclusion that there's no way you can repay it. If you go back to your childhood, to your education, to your health system, the whole lot—when you look backwards, you've been given so much that it's impossible to find a way of repaying it.

Now, what this does is it puts a certain desire in you, almost a demand to try and repay at least some of it through a process of generosity. Now, every time you're generous, you're giving away something that belongs to you, which you could have personally enjoyed. It could be your wealth. It could be your time. And you've got to give that away. And there's your renunciation.

So what you are holding on to, you've got to give for the benefit of others. And it's a difficult area because to be truly generous, to know that you're being truly—it has to hurt a bit. You've not given away something that just pinches you. And that's the process of renunciation. And the whole of the spiritual life eventually is renunciation.

Because remember, our problem is acquisition. We're always trying to hold on to things, keep things. So that's an important virtue to consider.

And then living according to the *Dharma*—that's pretty straightforward. And then he recaps. Remember, this is a poem, so it's a bit all over the place. And then looking after one's relatives.

Then he goes on to say, behaving in a way that is blameless. So here you have these qualities of shame and dread. So now in the Buddha's understanding, these two happen to be guardians of society. Because if you do stuff which everybody sees as shameful and you're not ashamed, then obviously there's not much to

stop you doing things which are, frankly, could be evil. And not worrying about consequences of doing something.

So if in a society—I mean, this is some of the problems that we're having even now because of the reduction of the police force—that people who are committing crimes, low-level crimes, stealing and all that sort of stuff, are just simply getting away with it and not being followed up. So that means that, generally speaking, the message goes out: you may as well do it because it's a win-win situation.

So again, that loss of dread of consequences and a loss of inner dignity about your own moral stance means that you start doing things which are basically immoral. So those are things that we have to ponder. So if we find ourselves in a situation where we feel there's a moral dilemma there, an ethical question, just ask yourself: well, if I do it, how am I going to feel? How am I going to live with it? And that's one way of seeing that these two mental states, shame and dread, are actually guarding us. They're guarding us from doing something.

So abstaining from what is unwholesome, avoiding immoral actions, and then, of course, a very difficult one: restraint from intoxicants.

So they had problems even in those times. Restraint from intoxicants and being heedful. Heedful, that word is very much one of his favourite words. In fact, it's the one he used on his dying breath. You know, all compounded things are impermanent. Strive diligently for your liberation. That's *appamāda*.

And then respectful, humble. Humble is a word that gets a bit confused for us. It feels like you're doing yourself down or something. But it's really just seeing yourself as you are, being humble. Being content. Now, that's a big one, content, because content suggests no more of those unwholesome desires. And it's a quality of the Buddha, contentment.

When he's asked, or when somebody says to him, this teaching you're giving us, this practice is very difficult. And he said, well, it is, he says, but in the end, you achieve *Nibbāna*. And the questioner says, Nibbāna, so what? He says, well, when you get there, you are happy and with it content. You are content and with it happy. And that contentment means you have no attaching desire, no grasping desire. It's not as though the Buddha doesn't have desire. He has desire to help people, for a start. But he doesn't have that grasping desire, that sticky desire.

And then there's gratitude comes up there. So we've discussed that. Listening to the Dharma at the right time. So there are three levels of understanding that he points out. The first one is the understanding you come to when you hear something or in our case also read something. And then there's the understanding that comes when it becomes your own personal intellectual understanding, your own intellectual property, you might say. And then finally, it's brought about as a real experience through your practice. Daily practice, practice in your daily life, doesn't matter what you're doing, but it's brought into a sense of this is real for me, it's not just an intellectual understanding.

So it is important, I think, to keep feeding ourselves with some Dharma. It doesn't matter how much, it's up to you to decide how much, but as you know, there's masses now on the websites, up on the web there. Listening to a talk, reading a book or something, even if it's only a little bit. And to find something that inspires you. I think that's important. So it's listening to the Dharma, he says, at the right time. I suppose at the right time means not while you're eating. Find a time when you can actually devote your entire attention to it.

Patience. So patience is a big one too. He talks about it being the highest form of ascetic practice, patience. Asceticism has a bad word for itself. It's like you're making yourself suffer to see how much you can bear. But here, of course, it means the asceticism of letting go, of not reacting, of non-reaction. And the big example he gives there, he says, you know, if somebody were to come and saw you apart or machete you apart in bits and pieces, and if at any time hatred should arise in your heart, he says, you're not a disciple of mine. And I once said this to a group and somebody said, yeah, but the Buddha had a great sense of humour. I think he actually meant it.

Anyway, that's patience. So all the time you'll find we're always impatient because the problem with attachment, remember, is a sense of frustration that you get when you're not getting what you want. So even if the train is late or it arrives late or the post hasn't come or you get to the shop and somebody's taken the last piece of bread, there's always that frustration, people who don't do what you want them to do.

So this patience has a real role to play in our lives. Easily spoken to. That's a bit difficult too. We don't like to be told that we're doing something wrong. That's always a bit of a thump to our pride. But just the ability to acknowledge, yeah I shouldn't have done that, and an easy way of asking for forgiveness just saying sorry. Some people find that extraordinarily difficult. But it's a relief to the heart because sometimes you do make mistakes. Sometimes completely unconsciously. And then you're blamed and you just say, fine, I'm sorry.

Seeing spiritual teachers. Yeah, that's part of listening to or seeing people on the web and whatnot. That's also part of our practice, really. But then there's discussing Dharma at the right time. So that's the bit where really you begin to make it your own. Personal knowledge is when you can actually discuss it with somebody, when you actually talk about it, rather than just having it as a passive reception. And that's when you really begin to make it your own understanding.

It's interesting, there was a passage there of Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth. But he was an ascetic. He only wore cloth made out of bark, which to us sounds ridiculous. But in those days, with certain trees, you can beat them and they turn into cloth. And it seems as though he'd heard about the Buddha and he came to see him. And he says to the Buddha, look, can you give me the teaching? The Buddha's on alms round. And he says, well, yes, I'll just finish off my alms round and then we can talk, you see. And he says, look, I'm old. I'm really old. I could die any minute. So the Buddha has pity on him.

And right there and then, he gives him this teaching. It's a very famous teaching. It says, in the hearing, there's only the hearing. In the seeing, there's only the seeing. In the knowing, there's only the knowing. There's a bit more to it, but I can't remember. And he becomes fully liberated right there and then. And the Buddha gave titles to people. For instance, Sāriputta was called the general of the Dharma. So the title for Bāhiya was the one who became enlightened the quickest. He made it there and then. Anyway, as fate would have it, he was finally gored to death by a cow. It's a little story. So he was right. He didn't have long to go.

The next one is simplicity. So the old monastic way of talking about that was poverty. Poverty now has a meaning of not having enough to eat, etc. But it's more to do with simplicity. What do you actually need? So that's something we can ask ourselves, especially with all this climate stuff going on. How much do we actually need? How much hot water do we use? It's like drawing ourselves down to a level of sufficiency. What is sufficient?

Living spiritually, that's pretty straightforward. Insight into the noble truths. And finally, the experience of *Nibbāna*. So that's obviously something that would be a great blessing.

And then there's an ending. He said, those whose minds do not wander when tempted by the things of this world, they are without grief. They're without grief. See, no sorrow. One can let things go, you see. Even people who are close to us who die, to be able to just let that go, not to get into the cycle of grief again, confusing grief with love. So every time your grief disappears you feel you're losing their love, you see. Whereas you might be sorry, you might have a certain sorrow especially if they died young or unfortunately, but to just accept their *kamma*. We're heir to our kamma, we own our kamma and so on and so forth.

And we're pure and serene of heart, you see. When the mind doesn't get tempted by the world, it's pure, it's serene. It finds this inner serenity. And those who follow these instructions, they're not overwhelmed. They're not hijacked any time. So it's this effort to develop these virtues which run alongside awareness. The more you're aware in the proper way, right awareness, the more these virtues naturally develop. So wherever they go, they are safe from spiritual danger. You're not safe from being run over, but you're safe from spiritual danger. And so these are the highest blessings.

So that's a discourse. It's not comprehensive, but it gives us some idea of how to reflect upon things. That's all, you know.

And I thought I would finally end off with Brexit. I can't give a talk without the word Brexit in it. I could leave it there. We're all very upset. Just I came across something which might be of interest to you. Edmund Burke, who was a philosopher and an MP, he was the one who expressed his very famous statement, all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing. He's well known for that, you see. But he was an MP for Bristol and he was only one session because they got rid of him after that. And he went into another easy place.

But this is what he says of an MP at Parliament. And I think it's something to reflect on in the context of what's happening today. He says, by the way, he's considered to be the founder of modern conservatism and the founder of the party system and to have established what a Member of Parliament is, right?

So he says here, Parliament is not a Congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests, which interests each must maintain as an agent and an advocate against other agents and advocates. But Parliament is the deliberative assembly of one nation with one interest, that of the whole, where not local purposes, not local prejudices ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You choose a member indeed, but when you've chosen him, he is not a member of Bristol, but he is a member of Parliament.

Ah, it's a strong statement, huh? So I thought I'd leave it there. Just a clarity, because there's lots of confusion about parliamentary democracy. Yeah, send it to Boris. Well, now you've got to be careful, you see. Some people like Boris. So we're not taking sides here. I was just clarifying what an MP is supposed to be. Send it to them all. Well that might do. I'm sure they know it. It's not that they don't know it. They probably read Edmund Burke. I've only read the statement. Oh I think they know it. They just decide not to behave like that.

So I hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused even greater confusion and that by your constant effort you will indeed become liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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