Scientism, Romanticism, Psychotherapy - and Buddhadhamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 59:39

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

Now I'm going to talk about things that I know virtually nothing about. That's a good start. Really I'm just trying to see what some people call the gates—though I prefer to think of them as the avenues down which Buddhism enters into our society. You can't help but filter out what you don't want and see the Buddhadhamma from a particular angle, because that's the way we're conditioned.

For instance, when Buddhism went to China, it became seen through Taoism, and it took quite a long time for people there to realise that Buddhism wasn't quite the same as Taoism, although there were obviously connections. It's the same with us. There are obvious connections, but in a sense these can obscure the fundamental teachings of the Buddha. So there are three areas I'm going to try and point this out in relation to: the first one is science, the second one is romanticism, and the third one is psychotherapy.

Let me begin with science. We have to make a distinction between science, which is the exploration of our physical world, and scientism, which is the philosophy that's drawn from that. These days, scientific materialism is really what takes over most people who are involved in science. Rupert Sheldrake, whom some of you might know, has just written a book about spiritual practices, and he was saying that it was rare to find a group of scientists who weren't materialists.

One of the leading figures is the biologist E.O. Wilson, famed for starting a whole new discipline on the social behavior of animals and humans—the biological aspects of social behavior. He wrote a book called *Consilience*, which means the unity of knowledge. The subtitle is "Unity of Knowledge." It's where all knowledge comes together and forms some sort of whole concept. This is what he says: "From the birth of stars to the workings of social institutions, all are based on material processes that are ultimately reducible, however long and tortuous the sequence, to the laws of physics."

So when you're looking upwards, if you were to create a hierarchy, the first thing you see is physics—stones, the physics of life. From that you get chemistry, from that you get biology, then psychology, sociology, and so on. Everything looks as though it has all arisen from this physical base. That's what Wilson is basically saying. Interestingly enough, he remains agnostic as to whether God exists or not. So that's the basic reductionism of scientism.

One book that I read which was helpful was *Scientism: A Word We Need* by a man called Crowburn. He's written it for people like me who know nothing, so it was quite enlightening. Some of the other books I read became a little bit too technical. There's lots of material on the web, if you care to look it up, with academic criticisms of scientism.

Here we have a couple of problems that have arisen. The first one is this: there's no way of finding out, no way they can tell, how the objective physical world of chemicals and neurons and all those things that we can test translates into the subjective world that we actually experience in terms of emotions, images, moods, and sensations. There's a special word for those things—they're called qualia, or as we might understand it, phenomenal experiences. And there's no understanding as to how the flow of consciousness arises out of that material base.

So it's a presumption. It's a presumption that everything we experience internally is arising out of matter. That's not, of course, what all the spiritual traditions are saying. All spiritual traditions tell us that the mind is something separate, something other. In Buddhism, it's something other, but of course still falls under the three characteristics—well, the main two: impermanent and insubstantial, not-self.

If you want to read more about this problem, there's a great essay by the philosopher Professor Nagel in which he tries to point this out through the question: what does it feel like to be a bat? Now, a bat sees things through hearing.

It can actually discern what insect it's pursuing and whether to eat it or not—through sound alone. It's quite remarkable, the sensitivity of it. And what Nagel is saying is that it's impossible for him ever to know what it feels like to be a bat, because the inner experience is so different from the way we experience things.

Now, all this has brought about a sort of rethink about the whole problem. On one side, you have philosophers and scientists who talk about reductionism—the view that everything will eventually be proven to arise out of subatomic particles. But there are people beginning to question that. There's a very good talk on TED by a philosopher called David Chalmers, and he's positing that consciousness is actually part and parcel of the universe, just as matter, time, and space are. He's very careful not to move into a sort of pantheism—God is everywhere, anything like that. He doesn't want to overstep the line. But in this way, he's saying that consciousness, being embedded in the whole process of the universe, begins at the very base as a sort of proto-consciousness, and it grows.

This reminds me of another thinker—Teilhard de Chardin. He was a Jesuit, a Christian philosopher, and a paleontologist. Because of his study of skulls and ancient skeletons, his word for this growing consciousness was the "encephalization" of consciousness. As consciousness grew, the brain had to grow bigger. And really, we're looking now down upon what we experience, not from below up, from stones upward, but we're looking down from consciousness. We'll see that this gives us a slightly different view of things.

From the Buddha's perspective, we are definitely made up of three parts. There is our physical nature, which can only be known through the mind at the contact point. When we chant the Dependent Origination in the morning, it's that point of contact where we are, shall we say, touching on the physical nature of the universe. And when you think about it, it's quite remarkable. The eyes are actually sensitive to subatomic particles—it's just absolutely amazing. And the tongue is sensitive to chemicals and such. So there is this point of contact.

But then from that, it's taken into what's known as the mind door, and it's the mind door which figures it all out, which puts it into some sort of definition. "This is curry," or "I can hear a car." At the ear door, all you're getting is pressure—the airwaves are just pressure. Everything else is taken back into the mind door. And from that point of recognizing what it is, you then give it meaning. A car begins to have meaning: "It's a taxi coming for me," and all that sort of thing. So all of that is mind.

And there is this third quality—the Nibbānic element. That's how it's referred to in our school. In later schools, of course, they tended to personalize it and call it Buddha nature and things like that, because there was a shift of emphasis. The Buddha himself is very wary of saying it's somebody, or something even. He's much more directed to the actual experience and describing the experience of it. We'll come to that in a minute.

So that's the first thing about materialism. It seems to be impossible to connect the physicality of our nature—neurons, chemicals, and all that—to the way we subjectively experience things within ourselves. There seems to be a divide there.

The next thing I want to point out is another book. There's a man called Yuval Harari who's written two books, and they're really fantastic. One is *Sapiens* and the other is *Homo Deus*. *Sapiens* is about how we got to this point, the growth of humans. And *Homo Deus* is about where we're going to go from here. One of his big themes is to point out that people are actually spending a lot of money so that we don't die—there's a great deal of research going on to stop us dying.

One thing I learned from him was this word "algorithm," which I had thought was a very mystical thing. I presumed that Google has this amazing algorithm that can find anything you want in milliseconds, so it must belong to the area of mysticism. But it turns out that an algorithm is actually just a recipe, like baking bread. When you put that recipe into a machine, the machine bakes bread for you. That's its algorithm. So that was an enormous point of enlightenment for me.

Once we've understood that, when biologists look at nature now, they see this process of algorithms. They see recipes just being worked out, from the very seed to the plant and so on. And so the huge question has come up: what purpose in evolution does consciousness serve? There was no purpose for it.

Because now we have artificial intelligence that can do everything we can do—thinking-wise, mathematically-wise—much faster and much better. And they never tire, never get headaches. So you've

got all these amazing machines that we've created, which tell us that there's some mismatch there in our thinking about where consciousness is. Does a machine have consciousness when it does all your accounts? This has really created a problem for them.

Of course, this goes back in our history right to the Enlightenment, to the scientific revolution. If you go back a little further, actually, to St. Thomas Aquinas, the Christian theologian, he determined that animals don't have souls. That's when Christianity came to the conclusion that, philosophically speaking, animals don't have souls—only human beings have souls. So when we get to Descartes and science, they don't have sensibility. In the seventeenth century, people were experimenting on live animals without any sense of concern, because even though the animals were screaming, it was believed they really weren't suffering any pain.

I get this magazine, *The Week*, which summarizes the news. It always has a little article about science. And I kid you not—one week, a bunch of scientists from somewhere finally discovered or had proven that fish do not feel pain. The very next week, another bunch of scientists proved that they did. How you can prove anything happening inside us, within our own selves, is a mystery. And all they're looking at is behaviour. You hit a fish on the head and say, "Well, look, he didn't do anything, so he can't be suffering."

I just want to point this out. It came to me as a great surprise that now, in evolutionary theory, they have a problem with where consciousness came from, why consciousness should be necessary, how it evolved from matter, and for what purpose—because in terms of algorithms, it's simply not necessary.

When it comes to these views, on one side you have the eternalist view. I'm quoting here from a commentary, which is sometimes clearer because it defines things precisely. It says: "Therein, what is an eternalist view? That the self and the world are eternal." Now, when the Buddha talks about "the world" or "the all," he's really only talking about the five khandhas. He doesn't go beyond that. The great thing I found about the Buddha is that he doesn't go where there's only inference. That's why there's no supernatural stuff unless you consider things like levitation supernatural. But he doesn't go beyond what you can actually experience. And that's why he never talks about *what* it is that experiences Nibbana, because it's a total experience. In the experience, there's nobody there who can tell you about it. Afterwards you can reflect upon it, but while you're in a state of transcendent Nibbana, all he can do is talk about what it's like, what it doesn't have—and we'll come to that in a little bit.

The commentary goes on. It says that this form of view—and this is actually from the scriptures—is "a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views, a seizure, holding on, inclination, hanging on, false path, wrong way, wrongness, sectarian guide, inverted seizure." This is what is called an eternalist view. I don't know what an inverted seizure is—I just hope I don't have one.

So on one side, you have this idea that something within us—the mind, the heart, emotions, the body, how we experience ourselves phenomenally—that there's something in it which is eternal. And of course the

Buddha is pointing out, in that great discourse on anattā, not-self, that he's asking you to see: if what you're experiencing is impermanent, how can you possibly *be* it?

On the other side is what we've just been talking about—this annihilationist view. The self and the world will be annihilated. This again, of course, forms a view, "a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views, a seizure, holding on, inclination, hanging on, false path, wrong way, wrongness, sectarian guide, inverted seizure." This is called the annihilationist view.

Now, to support this teaching, there is of course a very famous quote. Everybody knows this quote, but they usually only quote the opening lines of it. It comes from the Udāna Sutta, which is a collection of the Buddha's inspired verses. It says: "I have heard that on one occasion, the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī at Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. And on that occasion, the Blessed One was instructing, urging, rousing, and encouraging the monks with Dhamma talk concerned with liberation. And the monks—receptive, attentive, focusing their entire awareness, lending an ear—listened to the Dhamma."

By the way, the commentaries point out that when they use the word "monks," they mean anybody who's listening. It's not just monastics.

"Then, on realizing the significance of that, the Blessed One on that occasion exclaimed: 'There is, monks, an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an unconditioned.'"

Now, the way the word is used here is as what we might call a gerund—it's using an adjective as a noun. "There is an unborn"—not *something* unborn. He's very careful not to again solidify it into some sort of idea of a person or a self. So he says: there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned.

Everything in the world is conditioned. In other words, everything in the world is dependent on something else for it to arise. We're dependent on air, for instance. But this is completely unconditioned.

Then he says—and this is the bit that people don't usually quote—"If there were not the unborn, the unbecome, the unmade, the unconditioned, there would be no way of escape from the born, the become, the made, the conditioned. You could not discern that escape." And he says precisely because of this, there is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, and unconditioned. And this is the escape. So that's the fullness of the phrase.

It's very difficult to deny, in my mind, that he's talking about something which is transcendent. But people do. That's all you can say. So that's to do with all this business of transcendence, annihilation, and the reductionism of scientism.

But he does present us with a further problem. By the way, in the Buddha's time there were annihilationists. There was a man called Ajita Kesakambali, a Lokayata materialist. His line was the usual

thing—that on death, the body's made of earth, you just return to the earth when you die, so you may as well enjoy life while you can. And the opening of the first discourse, where the Buddha says that sensual pleasure, the seeking of sensual pleasure, is one of those extremes that we shouldn't be following—so if you're a real materialist, if you really, really think that you've only got this life, then really you should be heading for as much enjoyment as you can. Get as much sex, drugs, and rock and roll as you can. Why not?

And the other side of scientism, of course, is the ethics. Here's Einstein, believe it or not: "A man's actions are determined by necessity, external and internal, so that in God's eyes he cannot be responsible any more than an inanimate object is responsible for the motions it goes through." This actually had great effect in America during the thirties, where people were acquitted of crimes on such grounds. I'm thinking of one particular case where a murderer was let off on the grounds that he had no choice—the conditions he was in, the way he was brought up. And he walked free and committed murder again. So there's Einstein for you. It's funny he should talk about God's eyes.

Nietzsche says it in his usual rather roundabout way, but he gets the point across too. He says, "If a man finally succeeds in obtaining philosophical conviction of the unconditional necessity of all actions"—in other words, conditioned actions—"and of their complete irresponsibility, and of getting this into his system, any remnants of pricks of conscience disappear." Why would you have shame? Why would you have guilt? You were forced to pull the man's ears off. It just happened.

Now, of course, in the Buddha's time you got this similar sort of thing. You got Makkhali Gosala, who was a fatalist—powerless, life was predestined, completely conditioned. That was his teaching. And of course that isn't the Buddha's.

The Buddha's teaching is not free will exactly, but our growing discernment tells us that certain actions lead towards suffering and certain actions lead towards happiness and eventually towards release. So we are conditioned, but we're able to change our conditioning through our discernment, through wisdom. And the change is brought about by an act of will. So it's a sort of in-between place. We're not obviously completely free, but we are free to change our habits because we've created them through this wrong understanding, through acts of will.

The way I describe it is like when you go on a walk. If you've got a map with you, you get to a point where the road bifurcates and you don't quite know where to go.

So you look at the map and then you see you've got to go right. So that's the same with us. The road is, as it were, towards liberation. Once we're on that road, it's towards liberation. But there are all sorts of little bypasses and forks and things like that where we occasionally get lost. And it's through discernment, through this reflection—*yoniso manasikāra*, wise reflection—and through our internal experiences where we come across things like stuff that we've suppressed, little guilts that come up.

One that came up for me was quite remarkable actually. When I was about eighteen or nineteen, it was winter and I was coming home driving the old man's car—one of these great big Rovers, like a tank. As I came round into the street where we lived, the street before, you come off the main road, turn right, and then the first turn left—the car very gently slid across. I got home, and the next morning my mother said, "Oh, there's been a crash at the road and somebody's knocked the wall over of this neighbour." And I went out and took the brickwork off the mudguard. And I said nothing, you see.

This is when I'm in my middle forties. I'm sitting there in meditation and suddenly this huge sort of horror arises in me—of not having taken responsibility for it, of what might have happened, all of that. So I obviously buried that sense of shock in the system. It's not as though you get away with anything, eventually. Although I don't know, he presumably got it on the insurance.

The Buddha actually talks about shame and guilt as being the guardians of society—not guards, they're not wicked, they're there to tell us. Basically, as we become more and more refined and you do something which you feel is hurtful, both to the other or to yourself or to both, then immediately you get that sense of having done something wrong—guilt. This isn't the great existential guilt that I shouldn't be here anyway because I'm so evil. It's just: I did something wrong. And shame. You feel a bit ashamed about it. So you have to put that right to clear the heart. In that way, shame and guilt become the guardians of society.

So from a Buddhist point of view, scientism, in a sense, leads to a sort of dead end really. One thing that would occur to me—you don't know, of course—but it would occur to me that if I were truly a materialist, thinking that at some point I'll die and that'll be the end of it, I can't imagine myself having put so much energy into the practice, especially when it got incredibly difficult. I would have thought, well, this is ridiculous. I might as well go out and have a pint. Do something useful.

And I think that's a big block. These things are self-reinforcing, aren't they? Because eventually you have to justify the fact that you're not putting a great deal of effort into the practice because, well, life's short and I'm not going to get fully liberated anyway, so what's the point? I may as well be a little liberated and make my way as best I can. So in a sense it undermines the great project for us. It's sort of underselling the Buddha's teachings.

So that's the first area, the first avenue in which Buddhism is being received—through science. And of course we have now this mindfulness movement, which has brought it into medicine and mental health, and it's being used for that purpose. Occasionally somebody actually wants to find out where this comes from, so I do get people very occasionally who come from having done mindfulness-based stress reduction or something, and they've taken it a bit further. Although sometimes people criticise it because it's not taught with morality, the fact is it does people good, so don't knock it.

That's my own personal opinion, of course.

So now we have Romanticism. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, whom some of you might know, has written a very

good book on it. And here I just want to pull out one or two things just to show us how this influences our reception of the Dharma.

The Romantic movement was a reaction to the scientific revolution and what we call the Enlightenment, the rise of rationalism. You have Newton telling us that everything is just mechanical and God is *deus ex machina*—the God outside the machine who sort of set it going and let it run. Then you've got Kant telling us we shouldn't really trust our feelings, that we should be rational, that morality is a rational thing. And we've got Descartes telling us that animals don't have any feelings, don't feel anything at all.

Then there's a sort of reaction against all that—a return to the heart. We have it today. Some people say, "Well, I feel," meaning "I know." And some people say, "I think," meaning "I know." So it depends where you center yourself. And hopefully for most of us, it's sort of coming together.

The great philosophers of the Romantic movement were really the German Romantics—Novalis and Schleiermacher. I'm reducing everything to the basics of what they taught. The first thing, of course, was back to nature. Because what the Industrial Revolution did was take people out from nature, stick them in these dreadful factories, satanic mills and all that sort of stuff. There was that loss of connection with nature, and therefore a sense of alienation—alienation brought about, as described by Marx, by doing things that weren't connected to you. You were making things that you couldn't even buy. Life had become very rigid; it wasn't with the seasons anymore.

I remember a woman who came to the Vihara in Birmingham saying that there was a point where they brought electricity to the farm, and they lost time. That's how she expressed what happened to her as a young girl—or perhaps she was a bit older. In the old days, during winter, you'd have this vast amount of darkness and time where you could tell stories and such. Suddenly you've got light and you're back up at five o'clock milking cows. She expressed it as a loss of time.

So you can see that people being pushed out of the countryside into these horrible hovels to work in mills were alienated. They felt separate from the world, a sense of dislocation.

The Romantics tried to get people back to it, and the first thing was the love of nature. Of course I'm just quoting Wordsworth here: "I wandered lonely as a cloud that floats on high o'er vales and hills, when all at once I saw a crowd, a host of golden daffodils, beside the lake, beneath the trees, fluttering and dancing in the breeze."

So you see a movement back to nature, and with it the feeling that we begin to understand nature as an organic whole. This is way before James Lovelock and his Gaia theory. And we are part of that organic whole. The interesting thing is that although there's purpose in the universe, there's no specific purpose for human beings. They also accepted a lot of science—they didn't reject it. I think a lot of them were atheists, were what we would call annihilationists.

All they knew was that if you gave yourself to nature, if you went back to nature and meditated, and that

sense of awe and wonder came, then you would have this experience of oneness, this oceanic feeling. Freud dismissed that as something coming up from being a baby. But this getting lost in the oceanic feeling was the height of spiritual endeavor. Through practice, you could make it last a bit longer, but it definitely didn't last forever. And eventually you died.

So it was the idea that the individual was mirrored in nature and nature was mirrored in the individual. The purpose of life was to find that connection and be reintegrated, to lose that sense of separateness. And that's what happened when you went into this oceanic feeling of being at one with nature.

I have to say I had a rather strange experience, for me. I was up in the hills of Sri Lanka. I came out of a retreat, a long retreat—I think I was up there for a couple of months. I climbed this hill, and just the beauty of the landscape was such that I couldn't stop crying. I was crying my eyes out. It was almost too painful to be able to see.

This reminds me of a video you can see of Ajaan Maha Boowa, who has told us he doesn't suffer, that he's an Arahant. While he's telling people about that moment where he was completely liberated, he remembers the joy, and he can't stop crying.

And this old man—he must be in his 90s—this old man crying, telling people how wonderful it was. And of course all these critics say, "No Arahant can cry, it's ridiculous," you know what I'm saying. He lambasts them. He's written an essay saying, "How do you know how an Arahant should respond to life?"

So that was it. For the Romantics, the deepest suffering was this feeling of alienation from nature and the evolutionary process. They believed in the evolutionary process, in Darwinism, but they felt that this alienation could be alleviated momentarily. And we can all achieve this. We can all find our way. There's no set way to do it, no particular religion. You just had to find your way to get lost into this feeling.

Now, the other thing was that ethics tended to derive from being part of that organic whole. There was no free will. The idea that you were making choices was a delusion. So again, we go back to this notion of being completely conditioned without any sense of free will.

And I was going to mention—this whole idea that what we get from the Romantics is that life is about experience. That comes right through to our liberal society, that what we're working for is experience: the holiday, visiting Machu Picchu and the Norwegian fjords. And if you haven't seen the Northern Lights up in the Arctic, then frankly, you haven't lived. You've got to display your T-shirts. Life is about these peak experiences—and we'll come to that in a minute.

But one thing I thought to get you to imagine is: what would you feel like now, looking at a different life that you could have led? You're a young boy, a young girl, brought up in a village where the routine is just very regular—going through the various seasons, the cold season, the hot season, the rainy season. Then around about the age of eight, you decide you'd like to join a monastery. You don't play any games. You have times in the day where you do a bit of study, you chant together, eat together, sleep together. You get

up too early and feel tired. And you just go through year after year.

About the age of twenty-one, you become a monk and carry on doing the same things. Sometimes you give a talk, sometimes you don't. The bell goes at three o'clock in the morning and you get up and do a bit of meditation, or you wander about a bit. Then you turn up for breakfast and it's the same old breakfast—it never changes. Sometimes you get something delightful that turns up, but generally speaking... And then you wander out and it's similar conversations about the weather and all that. Then you wander back to your hut and do a bit of meditation. The bell goes for lunch and you get your bowl ready, walk up for your meal, get your lunch, then go back again. You might have a kip in the middle of the day, read a bit, meditate a bit, meet up with people, go for evening chanting. There's a cup of tea or something. Then in the evening you do a bit more meditation, a bit more chanting. Then you go to sleep, ready to get up again next morning at three o'clock. Every day, on and on.

And then suddenly you're very old and you get a cough and you drop dead.

Is that a worthwhile life from a Romantic point of view? They've hardly walked up a mountain. They've never played a game. They've never got drunk. They've never had sex. Oh my God—can you imagine that? Going through life without having had sex.

So you can see, when you contrast that with the way we expect to live in a liberal society, it's just completely different. A different aim altogether. And yet this little boy may become fully liberated and live in eternal bliss. While we will die with tremendous guilt and horror.

So it's something to contemplate: how much of our lives are driven by trying to get some sort of what Maslow calls "peak experience"?

And that's what we come to next, really – psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy turns everything into some sort of medical problem. It's not really a moral problem. Everything becomes a medical or social problem. The idea of morality doesn't really figure very highly in most psychotherapies.

If we go back to Freud, there was this idea that you had a subconscious, this id that you didn't know about, constantly coming into consciousness, your ego. And then this sort of figure above you, which was society, what you'd learned, trying to guide you. Your job was to try and find a way through that morass coming at you all the time – uncontrollable urges and the voice of society coming down upon you. I'm being flippant, of course. Then you had people like Alfred Adler, who thought it was all about power.

Carl Jung went a little bit deeper, I think, into all this universal consciousness and such. Then you get a break from that with behaviourism, where people like Skinner only looked at your behaviour. The whole idea of an internal life just went by the board. It was all about conditioning, trying to condition people. He had some very horrible ideas about bringing up children and making them do things, conditioning them,

definitely not giving them love – that would make them soft.

And then there was the great Dr Spock in the sixties, the American paediatrician, who brought out this book which has sold millions – fifty million, I think – and it's still in print. He actually says parents should trust themselves and they should love their baby, not try to train it. If you read about this history, it's all very strange. There were huge swings within the whole development of psychotherapy.

But the one I want to point out is Maslow, because Maslow is a humanist psychotherapist. Maslow looked at people who were having a good time, rather than people who had issues. The thing I want to point out to you is this peak experience.

When somebody has a peak experience, all these things seemingly happen at the same time. There's a loss of the judgment of time and space – you lose a sense of time and space. There's a feeling of being one whole and harmonious self, free of dissociation or inner conflict. A feeling of using all capacities and capabilities at the highest potential, of being fully functioning, effortlessly and easily, without strain or struggle. Feeling completely responsible for perceptions and behaviour. The use of self-determination to become stronger, more single-minded, fully volitional. Being without inhibition, fear, doubt, or self-criticism. Spontaneous expressiveness, naturally flowing behaviour that is not constrained by conformity. A free mind that is flexible and open to creative thoughts and ideas. Complete mindfulness of the present moment without influence of past or expected future experiences. A physical feeling of warmth along with a sensation of pleasant vibrations emanating from the heart area outwards into the limbs.

Wow. Sounds very much like Arahatship, I think.

So at least there's a movement there to point to something of a higher order. But again, it's all to do with the mind, all to do with feeling, the way you think, the way you function. There's no hint here of anything that might be transcendent of that.

It's not as though psychotherapy is against what we're doing, the vipassanā. It's just that there's a different aim. Psychotherapy, generally speaking, as I understand it, is about finding an accommodation to life, working with difficult situations – like marriage counselling and such – trying to work through mental states that we're suffering from, panic and depression and all that sort of stuff. And in that, of course, it's very successful and very helpful.

In the East, you see, if you get very depressed or you have things like panic attacks, you might go to a monastery and they'll just tell you to practise mettā. There's not much in Buddhist teaching that I've come across which deals with helping people with severe mental problems. It would all be put down to kamma. The thinking would be: well, this life you're bearing the kamma of what you did wrong in the last life, so don't worry, when you die you'll be born somewhere else and you'll be much happier. There's this idea that you're suffering something from some past action.

So it's really looking at the world from a different angle if we're going to look at it spiritually. Instead of looking bottom up through the physical nature and then up and up, thinking that everything arises out of that, if you look down, coming from this transcendent experience, then you get a different thing altogether.

And again, lots of things are inexplicable. For instance, the process of rebirth, how you move from one place to another upon death, is not described in the scriptures. It's talked about, it's said that this is what happens, but the actual process is not described. So there are lots of areas which are just left, probably, to our imaginations.

The first very famous statement by the Buddha – it's considered his clearest statement of the Nibbānic experience, of Nibbāna – is this one, again from the Udāna Sutta, the collection of his inspired verses.

Ānanda says: "I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī at Jeta's Grove" – his favourite monastery – "at Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. And on that occasion, the Blessed One was instructing, urging, rousing, and encouraging monks with a Dhamma talk concerned with liberation. And the monks, receptive, attentive, focusing their attention, lending an ear, listened to the Dhamma. And on realising the significance of this, the Buddha on that occasion exclaimed..."

"So there is a dimension, there is a sphere..."

Now remember this word *ayatana* – you chant it every morning in dependent origination. There's *salayat ana*, the six sense spheres. And the thing about spheres is that you can't mix them. You can't hear through your eyes, for instance. So they are distinct experiences, the *ayatana*. The word here, "dimension," is rather nice.

What he's saying is that there is this dimension. This isn't something, shall we say, this isn't poetry, this isn't a metaphor. He's actually using the same word that he uses for what we experience through the senses – the six senses, the sixth being the mind.

So there is – and again the word *atthi*. There are two words in Pali for "is," and I should have mentioned that with the earlier quote I gave. One is what you call a copulative. It's like when you say "this is a table" or "this is an electric fire." It's simply something to join two words, and the word for that is *hoti*. But when you say "is" to mean exists, then the word is *atthi*. So when they ask the Buddha, "Does the Tathagata exist?" – *atthi* – after he dies, or does he not exist, the word is *atthi*. So this is the word he uses here. He says there is a dimension.

Now he says where there's neither earth, water, nor fire, nor wind. So again, nothing of the physical world. But he doesn't go beyond what we can sense of the physical world. Remember, these are referring to qualities – to pressure, fluidity, some sort of temperature, and movement.

Then he says it's neither the dimension, neither the same sphere – because that's also called a sphere – of

these higher jhanas, the four *arupa* jhanas: the infinitude of space, infinitude of consciousness, the dimension of nothingness, and the place of neither perception nor non-perception. So even the highest level that you can take the mind to in its most refined state – it's not there. That's not what he's talking about.

And he said it's neither of this world nor the next world. And now he's being more physical in the sense by saying there's no sun nor moon. So it's something completely transcendent, other than. And there is, I say, there's neither coming nor going nor staying. So there's no time. There's no space. There's no passing away nor arising. So there's nothing there which is transient. And in fact, there's nothing there from this side of experience. He says it's not fixed, it's not moving, and it's not evolving. Nothing's happening there.

And he says it's without support. In other words, it's not conditioned. It's not dependent on anything else. And he said just this is the end of suffering.

So that's a really clear statement of something which is utterly transcendent of what we normally experience. And of course, that's what we are backing into. Every time you're practicing meditation and you're observing something, you're turning it into an object, which means that the subject, this sense of the observer, is coming back. It's moving backwards towards a cliff. And the cliff happens to be a great place.

And that's the same word *atthi* used for the earlier quote I gave about the unborn, the unmade, the unconditioned.

So we have a theory within Buddhism called the Tathagatagarbha theory, Yogacara – it's called the Yogacara school. Here the idea, or the concept, is that the Tathagata, the Buddha within, finds itself within a psychophysical organism. It doesn't necessarily have to be a human. And it doesn't have any mass, remember. Nibbana doesn't have any mass. There's no earth. So it's as comfortable in a little microbe as it is in an elephant. Or a dinosaur.

It just fills it. It's just there with it.

So this finds itself in there and makes this mistake, of course, of believing itself to be this. And then the urge to seek happiness, the urge to seek liberation—either impelled from within, some sort of intuitive idea that there must be something beyond, or just from living in the world where suffering arises. We're always trying to escape suffering. And then when you realise there are pleasures about, and you're happy when there are pleasures, then of course you seek more pleasure. For me it's a very straightforward psychological dynamic. I don't think there's anything too stressful about understanding that.

But then, because of that process, this garbha, this embryo, begins to grow and eventually ends up as the Tathagata. Tathagata means—the basic words translate as either "thus come" or "thus gone"—but the best understanding is that he's pointing to something beyond. He uses other imagery like "the island." So when he talks about himself, referring to the Tathagata, he's talking about something that has transcended.

How this came about, how the phenomenal universe came about, is never discussed. All the Buddha points to is that we're here and we're in a mess, and he knows how to get us out of the mess. So it's a very restricted teaching. He doesn't go beyond that. He doesn't really talk about physics or biology or anything like that. It's not in his purview. It's not what he's actually on about. He sees clearly through the Four Noble Truths when he states it: this is an unsatisfactory situation. And the problem is, how do we get out of that? Is there an escape from that? And that's what he discovers. So his whole teaching is wedged towards this escape.

Lots of things are not explained. Lots of things are not scientific in the way that we would like them to be. The whole idea of rebirth, the whole idea of Nibbana is unscientific. You're never going to prove it. So eventually it does boil down to a certain confidence that he wasn't having us on, and then to put effort into the practice and just begin to see—even at the level of desire—that there is an escape at the point of desire. That you don't have to follow it, and that you can actually move your whole conditioning towards something more beneficial.

So that's about it, I think. You've got these three ways that we look at something coming towards us, something new from outside our culture. We try to make it fit into our science, we try to make it fit into this background idea—a romantic view of life, of what life's actually about. It has to fit in some way into our psychotherapy.

Once we're clear as to where all these three things are, and where the Buddhist teaching is actually isolated within that—gaining the clarity of the Buddhist teaching—then of course our progress is going to be much better. We won't be sidelined. We'll feel that we don't need to come to conclusions. If we don't know, why come to a conclusion?

I was on a train recently, last year, going down to Brighton, and a rugby crowd got on. These two guys sat opposite me, and one of them said, "You're a Buddhist monk, aren't you?" And I said, "I am." He said, "Well, I don't believe in rebirth or reincarnation." I said, "Do you know whether there's reincarnation or not?" And he said, "No." I said, "Well, why make a conclusion?" And his mate said, "Yeah, why make a conclusion?" He'd just decided there's no such thing as reincarnation. We had a great old conversation. He still didn't believe in it, of course, but at least I might have halted his... Well, it's pride, isn't it? It's all hubris—"I know. It doesn't make sense to me, so it can't be."

So as long as we remain in that humble place, meaning truthful to ourselves—don't know—then we leave open the possibility of exploration, possibility of insight.

So there we are. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. If not, I'm sure you'll leave me a couple of notes. I can only hope that by your devotion to the practice, you may be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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