Spiritual Progress - Stop Trying!

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 50:55

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

This is my New Year address, so I suppose one thing that is good to do is to revise all the teachings we understand and know and see if we can give ourselves some sort of direction for the next year.

One of the major factors in our progress spiritually is to be able to discern what is unskillful from what is skillful, what is unwholesome from what is wholesome. That discernment—where does it come from? What is making the discerning? Who or what is discerning?

We have to be very clear as to what the human being is made up of, and then see where the problem lies, and then see how we can sharpen our sense of discernment.

In the Buddhist teachings, we're made up of three aspects. First of all, there's our physical nature. Then there's the mind, which includes the heart. Remember, our culture has split them apart from each other, but by mind I mean our emotional thoughts, the mental states that we go through. Don't forget, whenever I talk about mind, I'm always including heart. If I talk about heart, I'm centering on the emotional aspect. And then there's this nibbāna dhātu, this element of nibbāna, which makes it very spiritual. What is it, this nibbāna dhātu?

Our practice is to begin to observe all that's going on inside us. In that observation, we access within ourselves the observer, the feeler, the one who knows. In so doing, we are objectifying everything that we are experiencing. This observer, the one who knows, is satipaññā. That's why I call this place Satipaññā. This is the Buddha within, and the practice is trying to isolate that from everything it's experiencing—which is the process of awakening.

What does this awakening refer to? It's simply awakening to the way things really are. That's the Buddha's little pet phrase: to see things as they really are. In fact, I was going to translate that phrase literally as "to see how things have come to be." In other words, the Buddha wants us to become intimately involved in process. How do we create the world that we live in?

Now, that separation within us when we become the observer, the feeler, the one who knows, the one who's experiencing within ourselves—what it's telling us is that everything I'm aware of, I cannot be. The perceiver cannot be the perceived. In the same way that you perceive me, I can't be you. As soon as you've turned something into an object, you've created a dislocation.

So I'm still inside myself, thinking of myself, feeling myself, knowing myself as the observer, the feeler, the one who knows. Even at that point, there's some sort of reflection coming back to this essential knowing of its own existence. Just like when you look into a mirror—the face that you're seeing is not the face as it is. It's a mirror image. But it's still telling you something. It's still looking in the right direction. It's looking back at you.

Now, the paradox is that we'll never be able to see our own faces. We can see everybody else's face, but I can't see my own. I've got to use a mirror, I've got to use some sort of ploy. And that will never be the face as it really is, although I might get very close to it. The point is, I won't have a direct experience of what my face looks like.

This tells us something about this quality of knowing. The knowing can never know itself. Just as the face can't see itself, the eye can't see itself. The tongue can't taste itself. If the tongue had a taste—say a curry taste—it would ruin the ice cream, wouldn't it?

So it's recognizing that all these sense bases are completely empty. They're empty of what it is they're meant to be sensitive to. And that's also true of this level of awareness, satipaññā—that itself is completely empty, except it has attitude. It definitely has attitude. And this attitude has arisen because of some wrong understanding that what it experiences is itself.

Now, if you go back to birth, our birth into life, that's pretty understandable, isn't it? I mean, we arrived—even in the womb there's some consciousness—but we arrived and we're bombarded with all this sense data. And it's understandable that we presume ourselves to be that. We don't have that self-awareness, we don't even have a sort of understanding. But unfortunately it does create the delusion that I am this body, this mind, this heart. And our process is to undermine that delusion by relocating the sense of self. That's your first step.

So often when we are in pain, if we get lost in the pain, if we're overwhelmed by the pain, then you become the pain. You lose the sense of somebody suffering pain—you're just in pain. You stub your foot on the pavement and just for that little moment of "ouch," you are that pain. So what identity means is a loss of any self-awareness into what it is you're experiencing.

This can happen at a physical level through things like dangerous sports. I mean, that's one of the kicks of dangerous sports—that you get lost in it. Just for that one moment, you are totally in that mental state. And it's great. But it is an identity with our physical form.

At a much more regular level is the identity we have with our emotions. Very quickly we can find ourselves being angry, being depressed. It's very easy for us to fall into that identity. And even more easy is, of course, thought patterns, where you find yourself just daydreaming. Especially when you're sitting—the mind shoots off and you're off. One of my favorite places, Acapulco. And then you suddenly realize that you've been away. What does it mean, you've been away on a daydream? You've actually been

the daydream in terms of your experience during that time. That's what you were.

Now, as soon as we come out of that and we diligently note what it is that's driving that thought—some sort of excitement for that, perhaps—and we come into the body and feel the excitement, immediately we've objectified things. As soon as you objectify things, it can't be the subject. So unwittingly, whether you know it or not, we are constantly undermining that sense of self as something other—the body, emotions, or thoughts—by coming back to the position of the observer, the feeler, the one who knows. You're undermining all those identities. That's the negative side. The positive side is you are re-identifying with this observer.

Now, that mistake we make of selfing—the self is always arising and passing away, but the identity is the same. You're still identifying with the body, even though the body is offering you different experiences. You're still identifying with the heart, even though moods change. And the mind. That process of this intuitive awareness becoming what it experiences is the falling into delusion. That's what we mean by delusion.

When we come out of that and there's a doubt about things, when there's a feeling of not knowing and we're in that state of wondering, but there's some sort of fear or anxiety about a loss of identity—this is an extremely good sign. Because the one thing the self knows about itself but can't face is its own mortality. So every time you have a little hiccup of fear, of not knowing who you are, why you are, that's a sign that something is being undermined. That's good fear.

There's bad fear—paranoia. But the sort of little shock that you get, for instance—I'm sure you've all woken up in a friend's house or in a hotel. And just as you wake up, you don't know who you are. And there's that little panic. Have you all had that? Yes, I see. That moment just prior to the panic was a moment of enlightenment, inverted commas. Because just for that one moment, you didn't know who you were and you were okay with it, but you couldn't stay there. You had to reach out and grab some sort of definitions. And so there's this moment of panic and then suddenly you realise, oh, it's me. And then it disappears.

You're happy again.

Now, what then are the definitions of a self? When you say "I am a self," what are the definitions? These boil down to the three characteristics.

The first one is this sense of permanency. Even though we know the body's changing, even though we know the world's changing, we know everything's changing—but there's something in me, this sense of *me* , that doesn't change. I'm always there. Whenever I'm aware, I'm always there. And there's no definition to the "me" apart from feeling that I am here. So there's a constant, yes? Except, of course, when you fall asleep—then it disappears. But when you wake up again, here I am again. Or "not you again," depending on your mood.

So you've got this sense of *me* that continues. And that's where the delusion of permanence is to be really found. This sense of permanency is then displaced onto the world itself.

So how long is a moment? How long do you experience a moment? The mind is very clever—it's pretty long, isn't it? Don't you think? I mean, things are changing, but the mind holds it long enough to give you a sense of permanency. Somewhere, a moment isn't just a flash; it's actually long enough for it to become "real," inverted commas.

So this sense of permanence actually permeates the very way we experience life. And what our practice is doing is making us center as much as we can on this impermanency. That's one of the reasons in this particular technique, the Mahasi technique, that we go very slow. Because the slower you go, the more the mind slows down, the more you can see this process of impermanence.

Now, that process of seeing impermanence can go to the point where you actually do experience a moment of consciousness.

So what then is consciousness? These words, by the way, are all over the place these days because they're being studied—there are hundreds of definitions. Consciousness in the Buddhist teachings, as I understand it, is a screen. It's a multi-dimensional screen that holds emotions, thoughts, and so forth. And it flashes, it catches something, and it holds it long enough for it to be known.

If we were to go to the Abhidhamma, this is actually happening at enormous speeds, and you can only hold one datum of information for every one unit of consciousness. So if you were, for instance, to put your attention on the eardrum and really, really settle it there, you would eventually arrive at a place where you're not hearing anything but feeling the pressure of air on the eardrum. And even that isn't the singularity with which you can experience consciousness.

Consciousness in a flash can come like that. And when we experience this arising and passing away of moments of consciousness, what is interesting is that something was still there when there was no consciousness. So this drive of anicca, this drive of impermanence, takes us right down to an experience of what is there before something arises in consciousness. And that, of course, becomes a little gateway into a different way of seeing the world.

When somebody has such an experience, it needn't be a cataclysmic thing, but it has a systemic effect. Because that insight now begins to change attitude—so that's the second factor on the Noble Eightfold Path. And then it begins to express itself in the way we speak, what we do, how we behave, and in our livelihoods. So it comes down through the whole path. It's a systemic process which may take time, because an insight of that nature, a deep insight of that nature, has to be matured. It has to be digested, and that can take some time. It depends upon the sharpness or the depth of that seeing, which will affect the person accordingly.

The second process, the second thing that the self does, is presuming itself to be this body. The self—what

does the self want? It just wants to be happy. Therefore, it seeks happiness in this form. And in seeking happiness in this form, every time happiness comes up, it tries to maintain it, to hold it. That's what we mean by attachment. It becomes a psychological dependency for establishing happiness. And anything that upsets that, of course, you have to get rid of. You have to destroy immediately, so you can maintain your sense of happiness.

Now, when we ask ourselves—when I say "I'm happy," what am I referring to? Am I referring to a physical sensation? Would that be the ice cream touching my tongue on a very hot day when I really want it? Does the actual sensation of ice cream on the tongue—do we consider that to be happiness, or just a pleasant taste on the tongue?

When I talk about happiness, do I mean the thought of an ice cream, which may bring up certain other qualities? But is the thought itself, the sequence of thoughts—is that happiness? As I'm eating the ice cream and my head is saying, "This is really good Italian ice cream"—if I say that to myself, is that line of thought what I call happiness?

Or is happiness the mental state we're in? Especially the emotional state. In other words, it's a feeling state, isn't it? It's a state of the heart. When my heart feels happy and I experience the heart being happy, whatever might be the proximate cause, such as ice cream, that's when I say I'm happy.

So now I become intoxicated. My whole life becomes a search for things that are going to bring about this mental state, this happiness. And it's beginning to see the aftermath of that. Once I'm attached to something, while I'm enjoying things, fine, what's the problem? It's what happens afterwards. The craving that comes. The dependency, the addiction. At worst, of course, you've got drug addicts. But we're all addicted to some extent. And then there's the grief when you lose what you have. And there's the fear of loss anyway, so you have to take an insurance policy. And then there's the frustration when you don't get what you want. And then there's boredom.

This society refuses to connect boredom with excitement. Refuses to do so. I saw a program on boredom that said nothing about that connection at all. Boredom is that state when you're no longer in that happy state that things give you. So the same thing, like an ice cream, might be absolutely wonderful, and when somebody says, "Would you like another?" you say, "Well, I've had enough." It might of course be a physical thing, but you've had enough ice cream. The fact is that if you keep eating ice cream all the time, you get fed up with it because it's not giving you the same buzz. So there's an inbuilt obsolescence, an inbuilt process in pleasure whereby it loses its tang.

And that's the same with relationships. You get bored occasionally. I mean, you all know that. You get fed up, you get frustrated. And then when they threaten to leave you, oh god, it's fearful. So the whole gamut of human suffering is all to do with this relationship we have with the world that we experience.

That relationship is one of identity, and that identity, that self, is seeking happiness in the world, and in so

doing keeps making these pratfalls. It finds unhappiness. So now what the Buddha is saying is: come back on the process. Come back on that process, and whenever you feel a desire, actually sit with it, feel it. It may be a need—you've got to eat, for instance—and actually feel it and allow it to arise in its fullness, the addiction of it. Recognize that if you just allow it to arise and pass away, some of the energy in that addiction has been lost.

So what we're doing in our meditation when we see these desires, and of course hopefully in daily life, is actually undermining the conditioning that we've produced ourselves. Nobody can condition us. Nobody can condition our hearts. We do it all ourselves. It's all an internal process. And if we can become aware of that, and beware the aftermath when we're engaged in those patterns, then of course you start coming off it. You start coming off it.

And that's what we call renunciation. That's not this process of self-mortification where we're blaming the body and punishing it for daring to have appetite. It's recognizing that appetite is natural and that we're putting something on top of that. We're putting an obligation on it. We're putting an obligation on food to make me happy. And when it doesn't do it, then I get upset one way or the other.

Now that psychology is writ large in paṭicca-samuppāda, dependent origination, the teaching we chant every morning. What the Buddha did there was to clearly delineate where the sense of self comes in. If the sense of self began the process, how could there be a mistake? How could there be an escape? Think about it. If that sense of "I want ice cream" were primary—if the "I" were primary—then there would be no escape from that delusion.

The fact is that's not the psychology that's happening. The psychology that's happening is this: some sort of stimulus, perhaps hearing somebody say "ice cream," and then this memory comes up, which brings with it a pleasant feeling, and then there's the desire to recreate that pleasant feeling, and then there's the sense of "I." So the process that we're actually experiencing psychologically is: ice cream, want, I. Ice cream, want, I. And once the "I" comes in, it's very difficult to stop the rest of that process. You can, of course, if you're aware of that grasping. But as soon as you've said "I want," it's very difficult to stop the enforcement of that desire, the way that we empower it with will. Before you know it, you're getting the ice cream.

It's recognizing that process that is part of liberating ourselves from felt suffering, from dukkha. That's why in the Four Noble Truths the Buddha says that the cause of suffering, number two, is desire. He could have gone deeper. He could have said the real deep, profound cause of suffering is a sense of self. But he doesn't. He says it's desire because that's how it manifests. The self manifests as a process of desiring. So every time you undermine desires—whether it's for something, or you don't want something, a negativity or fear, whatever it is, that attitude that's creating wanting, not wanting—every time you undermine that, you're undermining that false sense of self.

So there's that way of the self arising through its identity with this physical body, wanting to feel happy,

using the world in order to create that mental state. And once we start breaking through that delusion—that the world is going to offer us happiness, and that real happiness is an emotion—which is ridiculous, because emotions also rise and pass away.

Once we break through that way of thinking, then of course we start letting go of things easily. We disengage from the heart, so we don't get caught up in it. Now there is happiness—not "I am happy," but "there is happiness." That's what you're doing whenever you're sitting here and some sort of peacefulness comes to the heart. There is peacefulness. It's a nice atmosphere. It's like walking into this room—it's a pleasant room to be in. But then you walk out and this room disappears, and you're in the walking room, which is cold.

So it's a case of recognising that these emotions rise and pass away, and even when they're negative, we actually begin to distance from them. Usually we distance from them with aversion—we try to push them away. But if we maintain the meditator's position of "there is unhappiness," whatever shade of unhappiness it is, then in a sense we've liberated ourselves from it. That disengagement is a liberation. It's a sort of taste of nibbana. It's an indication as to where we might actually get to within this body, heart, and mind.

And of course, one thing that the self does—and that's the third characteristic, so we may as well move on to it—is this sense of control. The sense of self, the Buddha points out, has a major idea about control. So we've talked about it psychologically speaking, that the self wants to make itself happy. But a definition of self, this is me—"me" must have the idea that I'm in control of whatever I define as me. And when I find that I don't have that control, then of course there's this dislocation, this fear that arises.

Now, we all know intellectually that the body is not under my control. But it still comes as a shock if or when we find out we've got a serious illness, or when we put ourselves in physical danger—it still comes as a shock. That shock, that sense of fear that comes up, is the measure of the delusion in the self. All these emotions that we feel—the aversion and the fear and the excitement—these are all measures of the delusion that we're suffering from.

And again, if we can begin to observe the body as not me but something... I remember one teacher talking about it. It was Ajahn Chah who said it's more like renting the body. You don't own the flat you live in; you're just renting it. So if it does burn down, what's the problem? It's somebody else's problem. It's the same with this body—we're in the body but not of the body. Get it?

So that sense of self has a sense of permanency. It has a sense of seeking its own happiness, and it has a sense of being in control. And when you investigate what it is you're actually directly in control of—directly in control of—it's difficult to find. We're not in full control of the body. We're not in control of the heart; it governs us. We're not in control of the mind; it's all over the place in meditation.

Then the question comes back onto this sense of self. Now, we've talked about the insight into

impermanence—actually seeing things arising and passing away. And by the way, that needn't be entirely at the level of moment-to-moment consciousness. The insight can also be at a much grander level. People suddenly wake up to impermanence, for instance, when somebody close dies, or when they themselves have to go. All the emotional impact of death and dying is also a way of coming to terms with impermanence. So it doesn't have to be on this minute Abhidhamma scale. People can wake up when they actually experience death in some way or another.

And the desire—now that is a long process, a sort of long process of emptying the heart of its negativities. And that's why it takes so long, because we're full of it. And not only that, we're not one hundred percent committed to it. So we work hard at our retreat, and then we go out and it's sex, drugs, and rock and roll. We sort of over-relax and the old habits come back to us. So that's a long process of purification.

But if we can see clearly and directly how the process works—dependent origination—that can also be at the level of a change of attitude, which again then becomes systemic. And this is expressed in the second and third of what we call the path and fruit. In the second path and fruit, what the person loses, or what's attenuated, is the amount of greed and hatred they would normally have. That's how it manifests. And in the third level, the sense of greed and aversion to do with the physicality of life is virtually undermined—it's not supposed to be there. So the attachment the person has is more to these refined mental states, and any irritation that arises, or fear, would be the fear of loss of those states, or irritation when somebody upsets them.

But what's meant to happen is that this Buddha nature within us is no longer seeking happiness in the sensual world. That's the liberation of the third path.

And seeing anattā, this sense of not-self, is about undermining that sense of "I'm in control of my life." This takes us to the whole idea of free will—free will or fate. Free will really is very much a Western idea. I'm pretty sure it doesn't arise in Eastern philosophy. It really arises out of our Christian heritage, where because God has created you so that you could love him—he could love you and you could love him—

That love had to be completely free. It's no good conditioning somebody to love you. It's no good making a robot and conditioning it to love you. There's no joy in that at all. Somehow you've got to give this person a freedom, a freedom of will to decide whether they want to love you or not. So there is this concept of a free will which floats above conditioning. Free will floats above conditioning. This is how I understand it.

On the other scale, you've got fate. And there's a lot of things about life which is fate. Like, for instance, the language that you use. It's fated. You're just born into this situation, and that's a given. For one reason or another, it was fated that it should rain today. It was in the weather system. It's not something that we can particularly control. So there is something in our lives which is determined.

And in Buddhist understanding, there is no free will. Everything is conditioned. But to talk about free will takes us slightly off the point here, because the Buddha's path is one of discernment. It's one of actually

recognizing that some things I do are going to make me unhappy, and so I should try to stop them. And some things I do are going to make me happy, and so I should do more of that.

I liken it more to going on a path. We call it the path, the way. When you go on a hike, you take your map. Those are your instructions. And when you come to a place where you don't quite know where you are, you refer to the map. Then you go on the path which you've discerned will take you to the end. Now you might make mistakes, you might go off, but you'll always come back to this central path that you've determined to be on. So you can see the idea of free will doesn't fit in there. It's to do with discernment and then doing what you think is right, doing what you think will take you to perfect happiness, nirvana, however you want to express it.

These insights take you to different paths and their fruits. All that's saying is, when a person has a first insight into one of these three characteristics at a certain depth, which changes their attitude to life, they experience life differently.

In the first three fetters, as they're called, what goes is this idea of a self—somewhere in the system it's not so strong, it's been undermined. And that will have its effect on how we relate to things. We won't grasp them, won't push them away so hard. We're much more clear about what the path is, so that we don't get caught up in rites and rituals for the wrong reason. Like when we chant here, it's meant to be as a recollection of what the Buddha teaches. When we take refuges and precepts, it's a way of recommitting ourselves to the path. But if we thought that either of those, or lighting candles, would actually achieve nirvanic bliss, then we're up the wall. And because of that clarity, all doubt in the Buddha's teaching goes.

With these three fetters gone, what you have in the second stage is that you're really working with your emotional life, your attachments, where you're clinging. And that is undermined again by some deep insight, some deeper insight into one of these three characteristics. Either the fact that things are impermanent—so what's the point? It's unreliable. Or you recognize that this psychology of seeking happiness in the sensual world is always leading you to some level of dissatisfaction. Or you realize that that very identity is a problem—the identity that we have with this psychophysical organism. So it's actually deepening one of those. You can go through any of those gates.

In the third stage, where we lose this connection with the sensual life as a place where we can create true happiness, again you go through either one of those gates. It's said in the commentaries that you can just keep going through impermanence. Because when you concentrate on impermanence, you begin to realize that the sensual world will not deliver. So you're seeing suffering. When you see impermanence, you realize that the sense of self is not permanent. So you're undermining that concept of self that we have—this inner feeling of a continual me.

See? So impermanence is always put first as the entrance into these insights. But it's also possible that each of these paths and fruits, as they're known, come through these three different gates.

And then in the final one, the person loses any attachment to these very beautiful ecstasies that we can get through various practices—just observing the breath, for instance. There are two levels of that, known as the material level and the non-material. In the material level of these absorptions, known as jhāna, there's always an object in your mind, always an object that you're working on. But in the non-material absorptions, all objects go—you're just in a space of pure consciousness. This is what the Buddha got from his teachers, of course, and he thought it was a good thing to practice, so he didn't get rid of them in his own teachings.

There's also a sense of restlessness that needs to be released. Now, that restlessness for me indicates that there is still some impurity within the heart. There are still little fibres of anger which we're getting attached to, that restlessness there. But when you become an Arahant, when you become someone who's fully liberated, I don't think it's particularly true to say that those old habits completely disappear—and I'll tell you why in a minute—but you're no longer, it's impossible for you to get caught up in them.

And then there's the conceit. That goes completely—the sense of "I am what I'm experiencing through this psychophysical organism. I am that." When that completely goes, that's also a sign that somebody is liberated from that deep delusion. And in so doing, of course, all ignorance disappears, all delusion disappears. That's the last of these fetters, these chains.

Now, in the Vipassanā process, this is commentarial. Funnily enough, you won't find it in the scriptures, so there's a hint there that this was something esoteric, passed on from teacher to teacher. There are hints of it in the scriptures, but they're all filled out through the commentaries. In the Visuddhimagga, which is where it's annotated for the ordinary reader, Buddhaghosa, who wrote that medieval book, takes us through the various stages that you go through in Vipassanā.

These stages don't have to come in a particular set time. I know somebody who went through them, and they told me it took him five years. So it's not a case of sitting down and gritting our teeth and going for it. It's just this slow process of continuing our meditation, continuing our investigation. And then very slowly these things begin to manifest.

That's really the final thing that needs to be said about all these spiritual insights—that they're not there for this sense of self to attain. In fact, if anything, it's this sense of self that's getting in the way. So somehow you have to change the focus. That's what I feel. Instead of wanting or trying to get insight, trying to achieve nibbāna—you see, there's always a self that wants to do that, this essential delusion of "somebody is going to achieve something."

It's much more wise, I think, to center our practice on purifying the heart, because that we can definitely do. And as we allow these negativities to come up—both positive, you know, wanting, wanting, and negative, not wanting—allow them and let them burn away, burn away, burn away, we're actually clearing the field. We can see more clearly. And if we take that into daily life, it has the effect of making us much more content with life, much more at ease with it. Just that process itself is undermining the

delusions. It has this sort of back effect on the observer, on the feeler. The way of looking at life is changing.

This change in the way we're looking at life is like a clock, just moving over in little seconds. And when it's done a full turn, there's a kind of seeing which is deep enough to maintain a certain level, a certain attitude to life. This means that the sort of suffering I had before is not possible. I can't go there again.

It happens just in ordinary things. I remember in my own small experience getting so drunk so often, such a pain in the head, that I woke up on a gravestone. And I said to myself, "What if I only get tipsy?" From that time on—apart from when somebody fooled me into drinking too much wine, said there wasn't much alcohol in it—I never got drunk again. It was just recognizing that the pain of getting drunk wasn't worth it. And I thought, what if I only get tipsy? And I only did get tipsy, and it was great. I was fine. I was happy with that.

That's a really bad example of what happens when you lift yourself up to a level of understanding and clarity, and you just can't go there anymore. So that's why it's said that somebody who's obtained the first path and fruit can't go to hell.

It can't go into a hell realm. Now, if you want to think of it as a separate realm, that's fine. But what it's actually saying is that you can't, by your actions, make yourself fall into those desperate states that you once did. That's what it's really pointing to. Do you see? That's how it works.

If I were to put all of this together in a nutshell—my goodness.

What we're looking at essentially is this fundamental misunderstanding. We call it delusion. It's a misunderstanding about who we are and what we are. And that which has made this misunderstanding is not in itself stupid. It's not an ignorance that has come out of stupidity. It's an ignorance that has come out of simply not knowing.

This process of not knowing brings us into suffering. But from the heart's point of view, it's not coming from a position of evil, some sort of disposition inclined toward destruction. No, it's coming from a point of innocence. It doesn't know what harm is. It doesn't know that it is doing harm.

So we start from these two positions: simple not knowing, and innocence. Then, making this mistake, all we're trying to do is make ourselves happy. And in so doing, we create mayhem. We create all this suffering.

And then we come across the Buddha's teachings. Yippee! And he points out that we're looking at things from three different angles, all of which are wrong. We think things are permanent. We think we can really get happiness from them. And we think, "I really am this. This is what I really am. And I can do it."

When we begin to undermine those views, our relationship to life begins to change. And eventually we arrive at a state—hopefully by New Year—when there is no suffering left.

Now, let's not confuse this. It's not that the body doesn't give us pain. Remember, the Buddha died from some sort of gastroenteritis. But there is no way that this essential nature within us, this Buddha within, this nirvanic element, can fall into a relationship where it causes suffering.

Who's suffering? The Buddha suffers. The Buddha is suffering until it realizes where the mistake is. And then it becomes Buddha—which is a very strange thing to say. People don't see the Buddha as suffering, because the word "Buddha" refers to that ultimate state, the awakened one within. But it's the suffering that we're experiencing. When we experience suffering, it's the Buddha within that is suffering.

Remember, the body doesn't suffer. It simply has physical discomfort. It doesn't know it's suffering. The heart doesn't know it's suffering. There may be depression, but the heart isn't saying, "Oh, I'm suffering." It doesn't have consciousness in that way. Thoughts don't think themselves. They don't think about thinking themselves. There's always something behind all of that which is clocking it, which is experiencing it.

And that process of disengagement is the process of liberation. And that process of liberation always takes us—when we're fully present, even in those short little moments of liberation that we have—it always takes us back into the world. It takes us back into the world, but in a growing way of interconnectedness. And that's what we call love.

I can only hope that my words have been of some advantage, that I've not caused even greater confusion, and that by your determined effort, you will become fully liberated sooner rather than later.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.