Mae Chee Kaew and Resolutions

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 41:40

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa

Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully self-awakened one.

So it's New Year tomorrow, and traditionally we look back over the past year, give ourselves a good kicking, and then try and make a resolution for a better year to come. There are various areas that we can reflect on—social, economic, and so on. But of course, what we're particularly interested in here at Satipanya is our spiritual progress.

I want to start with a quote from Mae Chee Kaew. I'm sure I've not pronounced that right, but anyway, she's a Thai forest nun who died late last century—80s maybe, something like that. She wrote an autobiography, and she was acknowledged as an Arahant, fully awakened. This is one of the core quotes from her autobiography:

"Body, mind and essence are all distinct and separate realities. Absolutely everything is known—earth, water, fire and wind; body, feeling, memory, thought and consciousness; sound, sight, smells, taste, touches and emotions; anger, greed and delusion—all are known. I know them all as they exist in their own natural states. But no matter how much I am exposed to them, I am unable to detect even an instant when they have power, any power, over my heart. They arise and cease, they are forever changing, but the presence that knows them never changes for an instant. It is forever unborn and undying. This is the end of all suffering."

I shall read that again. I think it's worth reading a few times, actually. "Body, mind and essence are all distinct and separate realities. Absolutely everything is known. Earth, water, fire and wind. Body, feeling, memory, thought and consciousness. Sounds, sights, smells, tastes, touches and emotions. Anger, greed and delusion all are known. I know them all as they exist in their own natural states. But no matter how much I'm exposed to them, I'm unable to detect even an instant when they have any power over my heart. They arise and cease, they are forever changing, but the presence that knows them never changes for an instant. It is forever unborn and undying. This is the end of all suffering."

Now we have to unpack this so that we can use it as a guide to our own practice. First of all, she says body, mind and essence are all distinct and separate realities. Now when the Buddha finally sat under that tree, he was driven by the question about suffering, which up until then he had tried to answer through achieving happiness. In those days there were two methodologies. One was either through the practice of *j*

hāna—these absorptions which produce ecstatic states of mind. I'm sure all of you have touched upon these states, but unfortunately they arise and pass away. That's what he discovered, even though teachers of his time would have said that this is the highest and there's nowhere beyond it.

The other way was self-mortification. The idea there was to liberate the soul, the eternal soul, from the body. The body being a manifestation of attachment to this form, this realm. So one went into mortification exercise. One gave up the world, but gave up the world in a sense that was to destroy the body. Eventually, in the Jain sects and I'm sure others, the idea was to starve oneself to death. That was the final act of renunciation, the final act of self-mortification, which would then release the soul into heaven.

Remember the Buddha tried that and found it just to be more suffering. When he came to sit under the tree, the whole process had turned around upon itself. Instead of seeking happiness, he began to question how he creates suffering. And that's what led him to his insights.

But there we have this moment of doubt, self-doubt. It's something that we'll all come across, self-doubt. Who am I to sit here under the tree and work out this question which everybody else has been trying to do? There's nothing special about me. It's put in that mythological way that Mara attacked him with all sorts of sensual pleasures, boredom, all the usual stuff, but mostly this sense of self-doubt.

It was when he touched the ground—again, in the mythology of it—and up rose the goddess, the earth goddess. She stated clearly that the reason he had a right to sit there and crack this problem was because of his past past lives through which he had exercised the perfection of generosity. That's the beginning of the bodhisattva vow. In other words, he wasn't doing it just for himself but for others. With that there came the strength to sit through the process of liberation, which includes, remember, a process of purification.

When Mara attacked him, that was part of the purification, of letting go of all these desires and of coming to terms with whatever impurities were in his heart. In our tradition, the Theravada tradition, the Bodhisattva vow is one who determines to become a fully self-awakened Buddha in order to liberate others. This was then extended to mean the idea was to liberate oneself in order to help others. Then finally, you wouldn't yourself become liberated until everybody else was liberated, which is the Mahayana vow. This always seems to me a little improbable, because you'd be hanging around for a long time. It's definitely not a determination that Siddhartha Gautama made.

So I think it's best just to get on with it and become liberated with the intention that you will share it with others. It's impossible not to. It's impossible to follow the path and not cultivate generosity.

When he sits under this tree, again we have it in the mythology, that he broke through the delusions. Three knowledges came to him. The first was that he was completely clear of these impurities. The second one was that through recalling all his past lives, he saw that the key to that process was in ethics.

Just making a quick distinction between morality and ethics—most people look upon morality as "thou

shalt not." So it is a bit of a loaded word. But ethics just means relationship. What is your relationship to the world, including people, animals, etc.? So through these past decisions, he moved from life to life until completely purified, or should we say ready to make this big breakthrough.

He also notices that other beings are moving from realm to realm according to the same conditioning. So what was a personal understanding of him, a personal law, became universal. In this process of liberation, there is both the process of insight and the process of purification.

Now, when he then begins to teach, he makes this distinction between the body and the mind. So this is it. Our separate realities, body and mind. This doesn't sound very materialistic, scientifically speaking, correct, because everything, as you know, from a material scientist's point of view, arises out of subatomic particles. Consciousness arises out of subatomic particles. So in Buddhist understanding, these two are different forms of energy, but they're not the same.

One of the distinctions we make in our practice, which is a *vipassanā* insight, is to clearly see that the body is one thing and the mind is something else. So there's desire and the body moves. Somebody stands on your toe and anger arises. It's being able to separate these two processes that is your first *vipassanā* insight. The second one is to see that the one is always dependent on the other. So that's the beginning of this whole process of deconstructing our experience.

It's in that process of deconstruction that we come across what she calls the essence. Now I don't know whether essence actually translates her Thai word, but it'll do. Essence meaning something which is at the core of our existence. Something which is essential. The rest is not essential, but this is essential. If we take it at that meaning, that is also a separate reality. In later Buddhist understanding—the Abhidhamma—they would talk about conventional realities, which is the body and mind, and ultimate reality, which is *Nibbāna*.

In the Buddha's own way of expressing things, he was much more interested in the experience of *Nibbāna*. He was much more careful not to move into the area of, well, what is it that experiences *Nibbāna*? It was more the sense of experiencing it and then a person deciding what its qualities were. In later Buddhism, the accent changed. It changed to, well, if there is this *Nibbāna,* something must know it. So we get words coming up such as Buddha-nature. A change of accent.

That was the first thing in our practice, in the *vipassanā* practice, which comes down to us through the dependent origination. So this is the psychology that the Buddha teaches as to how we cause suffering for ourselves. Right there, he's stating that there's two different realities, *nāma* and *rūpa*.

Then she goes on to say, everything is absolutely known. Now, when she says that, it's only what arises in consciousness at this present moment is known, meaning understood. It's not a case of just knowing it like it's there, like there are lights in the ceiling. It's a case of understanding what lights are. So in this sense, absolutely everything is understood. Absolutely everything is understood, not in themselves in a scientific

way, but understood from a spiritual angle as to what they are in relationship to this essence. That's what's being understood.

So this process that we're going through of deconstructing our experience, which means just unpacking it, just separating the bits, just seeing how it all coheres, how it all comes together into this experience of being a human being, that whole process leads us to discovering this essence. The delusion lies in thinking that we are this process, that we are this human being with body and mind.

In other words, the whole of spiritual life ranges around a crisis of identity. The "who am I" or "what am I" is the fundamental question beneath all of spirituality. It's a question of who am I? Or perhaps a little bit more accurate, what am I?

Then she describes the body. So the body is earth, water, fire and wind. Not wind in the sense of flatulence, but wind in the sense of motion. So here we have these four characteristics. Now, this is where the separation of the body and mind become more obvious to us. When we talk about the body, we're normally talking about something physical, something that we can feel and touch like my hand. But when I ask what is it that I know about my hand, rather than what I think I know about my hand, then we come to realize that actually what we know about the hand is only possible through the mind.

Blood, for instance—there's blood coursing through my hand. I don't feel it. It's creating a certain colour of pink and red and all that, but I'm not aware of it. I'll only be aware of my bones when I knock them. When we're talking about the body in Buddhism, yes, there is a physical body, but it's how the mind experiences the body which is where the problem lies. The mind experiences the body at a feeling level through these four characteristics. It's either through some form of heat, through some form of movement, some form of pressure or heaviness, lightness, or some form of cohesion, stickiness.

All of the senses have some combination of those four. So seeing, for instance, would be mainly fire. Hearing is definitely—at the point where the sound comes into the ear is pressure. Remember, everything else is interpreted within the brain-mind complex, but actually there at the eardrum all there is are pressure waves. At a more subtle level, we have sense of smell and tasting. But when we get down to that, you'll see that it's some form of these four characteristics.

So the reality that she talks about of the body is, in a sense, not contactable by us except through the mind. Except how the mind actually senses and feels the body. So for instance, your toenails. Every so often you cut them off. I mean think about that. You just cut off a bit of your body. There's no grief. In fact, if anything, there's probably relief if they've grown too big. You haven't a clue that at this moment they're actually growing. There's nothing, there's no way in which you can tell that your toenails are actually growing at this present moment. But we presume they are.

When you actually investigate what is it that you directly know or experience of your body, it really is quite minimal. It's like being in a car. You're in a car and you feel yourself in control of it and you can feel

the movement of the car and you can direct the car and put little lights on all over the place. But actually, you know, you have an image of the motor but you haven't a clue what's going on inside the engine at that time. If the piston blows, that's the end of it. You've no control over it.

It's the same with the body. So long as it's motoring along, everything's fine. But then when your leg drops off, then you think what the hell. So the distinction here is the body is one thing and the way the mind knows it and contacts it is something else. They are completely distinct, but they're obviously not the same. But she is clear that there is earth, water, fire and wind, which is movement, and that this is the way we know the body through these basic sensations.

Then she uses a different form of categories, which are the khandhas, the five aggregates: the body, feeling, memory, thought and consciousness. So here now, the Buddha is deconstructing the mind itself. We've talked about the body and how the mind contacts the body.

Feeling are those sensations in your body which are caused both by the body, such as when you stub your toe and it hurts, and those feelings that are coming from the mind, emotional states. Those are your feelings. They're all feelings. Even though we might have different words for them, like sensations, feelings, emotions and all that, actually, they're all just feeling. The fact is that they're either pleasant or unpleasant. Even neutral ones, when we go close to them and really investigate, you'll see that they side onto either being ever so slightly unpleasant or ever so slightly pleasant. That's our feeling life.

Memory—it's interesting that she translates, or the word *saññā* is being translated as memory, because the direct translation normally is perception. But of course our perceptions are like photocopies in our minds of things that we've experienced. These photocopies grow the more that we experience the similar sort of event. So the more I eat apples, the more my idea of an apple grows, depending on all my experiences with apples. So what might begin initially as a simple perception then becomes a concrete concept of what an apple is. So I can distinguish between an apple and a pear.

All that becomes your memory. It also includes all your words, all your understanding about various abstract concepts—art, freedom, democracy, all that sort of stuff. All that becomes part of your memory bank and words are a way of holding that understanding for us. So when we say a word like Buddhism, it comes up with a whole presumed set of understandings that we've conjured up for ourselves through our reading, etc.

Now here it's translated as thought, but that isn't really a good translation for *saṅkhāra*. *Saṅkhāra* are those habits that we've created through acts of will. There's a very clear understanding as to why the Buddha has deconstructed our experience in this way. There are other ways of deconstructing a human experience, such as Freud with his superego, his ego, and his id. There are different ways of looking at a human being. But this way is a way which is meant to help us liberate ourselves from suffering.

These particular *saṅkhāra* are where we actually have the power to change our relationships to the world.

This ethics. The ethics is within these *saṅkhāra*. Every time we've had an intention which is wholesome, and we have empowered it into a good continuous habit, we're creating these conditionings, volitional conditionings. In the same way, something unwholesome, we develop that too.

What we discover is, by recognizing something as unwholesome, and allowing the power of that desire to arise and manifest as desire, not indulging it through our thoughts, through our language and through our deeds, allows that energy to exhaust itself and we undermine that particular habit. Eventually, it should be completely destroyed. In the same way, when we see something wholesome and we actually empower it...

it grows and the mind is illimitable when we talk about these four great attitudes you might say compassion love compassion joy and peace these are known as illimitable because the growth of the mind is indefinite it's not limited by space it's not limited by time any moment now in this present moment we can be completely full of love completely full of joy

There's nothing limiting us but ourselves. And the ability to create that as an attitude in the heart is with us all the time. All this comes under these *saṅkhāras*, rather unfortunately translated here as thought.

Consciousness is the ability of the mind to hold a present moment, and it's multidimensional. It has both what we can see depending on the circumstance, what we can hear, what we can feel, what our emotional state is. It's like a multidimensional monitor screen or television screen. It holds in this moment what this moment offers us, and it's known. Without that ability to hold perceptions arising, images arising, emotions arising, it could not be known. Something has to manifest from moment to moment, and these are these moments of consciousness.

Unfortunately, even in the Buddha's language, the word *vijñāna*, which he uses here, is also used in other ways. So he actually sometimes refers to the essence as a *vijñāna*. So even he is struggling, using the language of his day in order to express his understandings, because they were radically different. They were based on a different experience. And these days, as you know, consciousness is heavily investigated, and I have a book on it, and confusion reigns. From consciousness being something ethereal to consciousness and its objects being the same, et cetera, et cetera.

But in Buddhist understanding, I think we're close to understanding it if we see it more like a multidimensional screen, and it holds this moment for us, and then it collapses, and then new information comes in, and it holds the next moment for us. And it's moving at such a speed that we get the sense of continuity. And one of the insights of our practice is to get down to that very infinitesimal moment to see the collapse of consciousness. And that is seeing *anicca* at its most subtle, direct level. And it's in these sorts of insights that we break through the delusion of, well, this is me. But it's just disappeared.

The next section she talks of sounds, sights, smells, tastes, touches and emotions. These are another way that the Buddha deconstructs our experience by talking about consciousness and the way consciousness

works. And he points out that the various senses that we've got can't be mixed. You can't smell through your eyes, and you can't see through your ears. So each consciousness is a specific avenue of experience. And again, if we are to understand the Abhidhamma, this whole process is happening in minute little pixels, you might say, picking up on all these little bits of information coming in from all the senses, which are held just long enough in consciousness for it to be known. But it's another way of deconstructing our experience.

So we say, again, in the Dependent Origination, it's the *salāyatana*, it's the six spheres of experience, *āyata na*. And this word, again, he uses to describe *Nibbāna*. It is an *āyatana*, it is a sphere of experience which has no connection with these six spheres of experience. The sixth one, of course, being the mind, here translated by emotion, which is a bit odd. I don't know who translated this. But it's normally just put as the mind.

So remember, when sensations come in, they come in as just raw information, and it's the internal processes of the mind that's actually involved creating something that we recognize and acknowledge. So in other words, all that's coming from these light bulbs in the ceiling is just photons, and the retina is picking it up, and it's going in there, and it's going through a process of being recognized and acknowledged. By which I mean, first of all, there's a recognition that it is light, and then it's there for a purpose, so I put it all in a context of what that ceiling light means. All that belongs to the sixth sense base.

So we've had these deconstructions, first of all, of the body, more accurately how the mind experiences the body: earth, water, fire and wind. We've had a deconstruction by way of the different *khandhas*, the different heaps, just like a heap of sand. They're all little bits, but they're separate heaps: the body itself, feelings, memory, perceptions, concepts, these volitional conditionings, our habits, and consciousness. And now we've had this other way of looking at the human being, which is through the *āyatana*, through the spheres of experience. So she's listed those for us. There's a whole load of Buddhist teaching around them.

Then she says, anger, greed and delusion. So now, here we're talking about an Arahant: anger, greed and delusion. So now this presents us with a question. How is it that an Arahant can still have anger, greed and delusion arise? Well, it might be that she's here perhaps talking about what she sees in other people. I can't imagine that she is deluded, because the whole process of becoming fully liberated is the undermining and complete destruction of the delusion of who I am.

But on the other hand, there can be traces, or should we say there can be traces of how delusion manifests in the mind itself, left over. And going back to the Buddha's own experience, after he was fully liberated, Māra still tempted him. Māra sent his three daughters, which were sensual desire, sexual desire, and boredom. And they hunted him down, it seems, for seven years. And it was only after seven years that they said to Māra that Māra gave up. And what Māra says is, "The Buddha sees me. The Buddha sees me." And at that point, those temptations came to an end.

Now, without going into a different way of looking at this process of what we call entering the path and fruit, you know, the stream entrant, the once returner, the non-returner, and finally the one who's fully liberated, what we get from that particular story, which again is put mythologically, is that even after he was fully liberated, the Buddha still went through a further purification process to finally banish the consequences of his past delusion. So it may be that this is what Mae Chee is actually referring to.

Mae Chee means none, but the thing is, and this is the point, "all are known," meaning all are understood. "And I know them all as they exist." In other words, she's quite clear as to what they are. They fall into one of these categories. She's no longer deluded by any of it. And they're all in their own natural states, meaning this is the way saṃsāra is. This is the way the world is. So she knows that. She's very clear about it.

Now, then she says, "No matter how much I'm exposed to them, I'm unable to detect even an instant when they have any power over my heart." Now, the word heart here is translating the word *citta*, which translates as mind normally. But here, over my heart, is the *citta* of *Nibbāna*. So again, this is one of those words that the Buddha has to play around with because there just isn't the language for it. So just as he uses *vijñāna*, consciousness, also to refer to the nirvanic consciousness, he uses *citta*. And in that victory verse that we chant every morning, he says *cittaṃ asaṅkhataṃ*, the *citta* which is non-conditioned.

So in other words, this isn't the consciousness that we've been talking about, this screen that holds something. This is something other than. And all these things that are happening within this screen of consciousness never touch that essence. Remember, that's the other word she uses: essence, which she calls here the heart.

"They arise and cease. They are forever changing. But the presence that knows them never changes for an instance." So again, she's using a different word to point to this *Nibbāna*: the sense of presence.

Now in your meditations, when you are the observer, when you are the feeler, the one who knows, when you feel yourself to be quite separate from sensations in the body, from feelings and emotions in the heart, from your thoughts and images, when you get that sense of true separation and you experience yourself as the one who knows, that is the sense of presence. But remember, that's not the end point. That's also a delusion, because we're aware of it. If you're aware of something, you can't be it. The perceiver can't be the perceived. It's very simple. But when you get to that point, sometimes in your meditation, afterwards reflect upon it, because that's what she's referring to.

"But the presence that knows them never changes for an instant. It is forever unborn and undying. This is the end of all suffering."

So there we have it. Here we have somebody not born 2,500 years ago. Here we have somebody of our own lifetime who is actually stating that she became fully liberated: "This is the end of all suffering." So it's important to understand that it's possible. That it isn't something mythical that only belongs to some sort

of past age, some sort of Shangri-La. It's up to us really. It's within our grasp to at least move directly towards that sort of goal.

And although it demands a certain effort, demands that we pass through periods which are difficult and all that, the fact of that purification is that it always gives you a gift at the end, because it's like getting over an illness. If you've got an illness, no matter whether it's just a simple cold or something quite serious, when it's gone, there is just that sense of relief and a release from it. So it's the same with all these agitations and turbulences that are within us. When we see them passing, when we see that they're actually not so strong, that they don't control us as much as they used to do, that they don't last as long, when we reflect on that over time, there comes to us a sense of relief, a sense of being slowly released from our own suffering.

So this is an opportunity really tomorrow when we have time to reflect and whatnot, and on the day itself, New Year's Day, when we go up to the stupa and put our resolutions, we burn our resolutions as offerings, burnt offerings. It's just an opportunity to really make that commitment. And remember that vows last as long as you say them. Even a minute after you've made the vow, the strength of the vow begins to disappear. So it's not as though you say, "Right, well, this year I'm going to practice two hours every morning." You've got to say every morning, and you've got to keep yourself at it until it becomes habitual. Even when it's habitual, there's always the danger of fallback. So the New Year's resolution is to be repeated day after day after day after day. And that's the way it has an effect on us.

And when you repeat a resolution to yourself, you have to speak it very gently into your heart. And you have to keep saying it and keep saying it and keep saying it until you feel a sort of digestion. You can almost feel it; there's a physical change in the heart. I don't mean the physical heart, I mean the centre of your chest where the heart chakra is. And you can almost feel it being digested. That's when it's beginning to get a hold on you. And that's the point, that's the real purpose of repetitive prayer or repetitive well-wishings. You have to keep saying these things, saying these things into the heart. And then very slowly you can feel that it's actually beginning to have an effect. Then it begins to manifest through what you think and what you say and what you do. And in that way, the feedback comes back to the heart and reinforces that resolution. And it does even more so when you see the benefits of it.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that you are not thrown into deeper confusion, but that you feel that some clarification has taken part, and that through your eternal devotion to the practice, you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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