Buddha Day Address — The Life, Teaching, and Path to Nibbāna

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 44:15

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa - Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble, and fully Self-Enlightened One.

We are gathered here today to commemorate the life and work of the Buddha himself, our founder. I'm going to talk more about his teaching, but remember this was a pivotal event in the life of humanity. There's no reason to believe that he was the first one to experience Nibbāna - he talked of it as an ancient path. But he was definitely one who came along and began to teach it in a way that was very open to even different cultures.

In terms of world religions, complete world religions that have spread through different cultures, really you've only got the three: Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. Remember that his discovery was such that he was able to step out of the culture of his time. So he stepped out of the Brahminical tradition of the Vedas and was able to establish his own teaching. The Jain leader also was able to do that, so it wasn't as though he was unique in that. But definitely the manner of his teaching and the perception of his insight was such that we don't find anything deeper than that in any other religious form.

So we've come to really celebrate that, the fact that we are receivers of that teaching. And remember that he himself had to discover it. It's not as though he was born with that innate understanding - he went through the whole process of the purification of the heart and the insights necessary for liberation.

Most of us know the story. The pivotal points were leaving the homely life, the household life. So this must have been quite a break for him, especially since his only child had just been born. But that shows you the manner of his state of mind at the time, which we have to be compassionate with. These days we can't understand why anybody should leave their family like that. But then, of course, it was an extended family. It wasn't as though she was left high and dry. And he must have been in a state of severe inner turmoil, what we would call an existential crisis. And it was that that really drove him.

Remember that he tries all the forms that the age was able to offer him, all the yoga forms that were there, the development of mental states that we call absorptions. And he found that wanting only because they came to an end. So these are still belonging to the phenomenal world, the world of the mind.

And then he tried self-mortification. So this was based on that basic understanding that the body itself was a manifestation of bad karma, manifestation of unwholesome actions that we'd done in the past, in the

past lives, and that it was holding the soul down. So the whole process was letting go of the body, by which we mean letting go of the appetites of the body. In a sense, blaming the body for the problems that we have. So if we had no appetite, then we wouldn't be suffering from greed. It was that mentality.

The Buddha tried that, especially severe mortification in terms of food. He said he could hold his spine through his stomach. So if you try that, you'll see how thin he was. And then he gave that up because he discovered it simply to be more suffering. It didn't seem to be getting him anywhere.

And with that, of course, he leaves his companions. And we find him on the roadside, feeling, I should think, pretty miserable for himself. And along comes a woman, gives him some sweetmeats. And this revives him. And he has that memory from childhood where he's watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony. And that memory gives him an inkling as it turns his whole practice around. Instead of trying to achieve happiness, he then turns upon himself and tries to investigate the cause of his suffering. And it's with that inspiration that he sits under the tree.

But even then, under the tree, there's this huge doubt about whether he, in fact, has any right to continue this, to achieve anything beyond the human state, whether there is anything beyond the human state. And in the mythology that surrounds it, he touches the earth to ground himself, and the earth goddess arises and says that he's every right to do this because he has the perfection of generosity. So in other words, he's not doing it just for himself. And it was with that feeling that he was doing it not just for himself, but for everybody he knew, perhaps for the whole of humanity and all beings, that he found the courage to break through that delusion, and then he experiences Nibbāna bliss.

In that process, we say he has three knowledges. The first knowledge was that he has completely transcended, well, completely purified the heart. So there's no more aversion and all the aspects of aversion, fear, etc. There's no depression or anything like that. There's no greed whatsoever. And there's no more delusion about who he actually really is or what that is beyond this phenomenal form, this form of a human being. There's no doubt in his mind after that.

Shortly after that, he then thinks about teaching and he gets this doubt as to whether anybody can understand the subtlety of what he's just discovered. And then again, it's put mythologically that this great god, Sahampati, came down and said, "Look, there are some people with only a little dust in their eyes." So he reflected on it and he thought, "Well, I'll give it a go."

And then he thought of his six companions, whom he then goes in search of. But on the way, he meets Upaka, another ascetic, and Upaka says, "Oh, you look very bright, you've got this lovely serene feeling about you. Who is your teacher?" And the Buddha announces himself as the fully liberated one, the fully enlightened one, "I don't have a teacher," etc. And Upaka shakes his head and says, "Oh, very good, okay," and then moves on. So I think he learns very quickly that's not quite how you get the Dharma across.

Remember that just because he's fully liberated doesn't mean that he actually can teach. It's something

that evolves. And you can see it in his teaching. The first teachings are not so rigidly formulated into four of these and five of those. In the scriptures you can see very early on it's coming out spontaneously. And then over time it becomes very formalized: Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, and so on and so forth.

And then he spends the rest of his life, as you know, wandering around North India teaching the Dharma.

Now the reading today begins with the way that he used to teach lay people, which may be of interest to you. And it was said that he always gave them a step-by-step discourse. And the first thing he talked about was giving, was generosity. So I'll go back to his particular experience. His whole courage, you might say, was based upon the fact that he wasn't just doing it for himself. He found that extra energy that he needed to stay under that tree and continue his investigation.

Now, although it doesn't say this in the scriptures, in the commentary it points out that giving itself is a path to liberation. Just giving itself, just generosity itself is a path to liberation. Now, why is that? When you give something, you necessarily have to renounce it. Something that you might have used for yourself - so much money that you might give to a charity, you could have given to yourself for your own benefit, for your own enjoyment. Time. You could have spent the time on something that you particularly like, but you're giving it up in order to help somebody. So that process of renunciation is also a way of undermining this selfishness, this constantly looking after ourselves, which is a product of that basic delusion that we have about who we are.

And this giving is always easier when we have it on a base of gratitude. So when you consider all the gifts and blessings that you've received in this life, and that some of them have come without your asking - just the very fact of being born was a gift. How our mothers and fathers looked after us, this was all a gift. We never paid for it. Perhaps we should, but anyway, we never paid. It was just given to us and we received it. And when you consider the education system and friends and all these people who at times have come to help, that sense of gratitude allows us to let go of things.

And in letting go of our wealth - not all of it, of course - and in letting go of our time for the benefit of others, we're undermining the way that we tend always to think about me, me, me, instead of we, instead of actually joining the community at some level or other.

So giving, that was the first thing he said. And he said everybody could be generous, even a thief. So a thief can steal something from you and then very generously give it to somebody else. So it was a universal virtue that anybody and everybody could actually practice. So that's where he began.

And he began there because, of course, the development of giving is already undermining that hard sense of self. The sense of self creates barriers. It likes to enclose itself with safety. Remember the self at its deepest level is very fearful, it's very unsafe. For a start it knows it's going to die, which isn't a very happy thought. And therefore it feels safe, it feels grounded, it feels strong, it feels solid when it has lots of money and lots of friends and lots of power. And that's why we collect these things around us as best we can.

And in letting go of that, we're undermining that sense of solidity about ourselves. And of course the advantage of that is letting go of all the problems that come with holding on to things. So remember there's a consequence to indulgence in life. While we are very rich and very powerful and very famous and all that, that's fine. But, of course, it's afterwards when the things begin to decrease, whether just naturally by aging. Then we feel those consequences, the frustration that we feel when we can't get what we want and the grief at loss, the fear of loss anyway, that underlying anxiety.

And in our society, which is so separate, so lifted away, you might say, from the ground of nature - I mean, this whole place is dependent on electricity. It's nothing to do with ordinary nature. And during winter, occasionally, the lights will go out. Everything just blows out for some reason. And suddenly you realize that you couldn't run this plant. In fact, I don't think I could live without electricity. So there's that point where we've created a certain safety, but we know that underneath it, it's a very shallow safety. It can suddenly disappear from us.

And of course, if you live in certain parts of the world, such as now in Nepal, there you are, you're on that tower, perhaps a tourist, and you're enjoying the view, and the whole thing starts to collapse around you. So it's not as though we're not aware of that somewhere within the psyche. And that is an underlying pressure in our lives. And to undermine that, you begin to let go, begin to let go. So that's where he would begin. He'd begin by expressing the importance of generosity.

And then he would talk about moral virtue. So in Buddhist psychology, all our unwholesomeness is based upon a wrong understanding. And we have to have a certain compassion for ourselves there because we're born into the human state and we presume ourselves to be human beings. I mean, that's pretty straightforward. And in that presumption, we are depending upon this physical form in order to gain happiness. Because that's all we want. We just want to be happy.

But in so doing, we are creating that basis of unreliability. And because of that, we have this relationship to life of gathering things around us to make us feel solid, getting rid of anything which is going to undermine that. That's the aversion. And when something is too big, you run for it. So there's your fear. So there's your three basic attitudes to life because of this wrong understanding: acquisitiveness, aversion and fear.

And this immediately leads us into wrong actions, wrong relationships. And that's where the problem comes, because then, of course, we're building up habits which are unwholesome. And when we act upon unwholesome habits, we get that second tier of unwholesomeness, which is to do with shame, guilt, remorse, etc. So it all tumbles upon itself.

And what he's saying is if you begin to really look at your moral life, your ethical life, and begin to chip away at that, you're also undermining this wrong understanding as to who we are. So that would be his second point to get across to people, the importance of *sīla*.

Now, I've talked about the negative side. It's the opposite too. The better word is ethics, really, rather than morality. Morality we tend to limit to avoiding what is unwholesome. But ethics is just about relationships. So our relationship has its negative side, but remember that we've also got to develop its positive side. And that's these illimitables: love in all its facets, compassion, sympathetic joy, and so on. So that's what he would be talking about.

And then he would tell them that, in fact, in so doing, they would be entering the heavenly worlds. Now the heavenly worlds are simply mirrors of what we experience as human beings. So in actually developing love within ourselves, in developing joy within ourselves, that's mirrored in some cosmological heavenly state.

These days, for a lot of people, rebirth and being born in other states is a bit difficult to understand. And it's not necessary, of course, to believe it. But generally speaking, I think the better position is not to come to a conclusion. Because if there happens to be other worlds, then we're in for a bit of a surprise or a shock one way or the other. So it's best just to leave that on the back burner, as they say. And it may or may not happen.

And the Buddha, of course, came across the same skepticism. And that's exactly what he says. He says, "Look, if you practice the Dharma now, you'll get the benefits now. If there is a future life, then you'll get the benefits also." So it's not as though you have to believe these things. But it's good to know that the Buddha himself definitely did know about them because that was the other two knowledges that came to him at his liberation.

The first was being able to go back to all his past lives and see very clearly that it was the ethical decisions he made which had the greatest effect on his future life. Now that's a breakthrough for the age, I'll explain that in a minute. And secondly, he saw other beings moving from one realm to the other according to the same law.

So remember that at the time of the Buddha, the old Brahminical system, which was widespread in places like Rome, Greece, Mesopotamia, Egypt, it was this polytheism. It was this idea that there was a whole realm of gods that ruled the world. And that your job as a human being was to appease the gods, was to pray to them, to ask them for favours, etc. And so in the Vedas and the Brahmins, even the Brahmins of that time, you would do these massive sacrifices to get what you wanted from the gods. And the sacrifices became really very refined rituals and you had to get everything right or else the god wouldn't respond. And of course these rituals weren't really delivering everything that they were expected to deliver. So there was a general losing of confidence in that whole process of polytheism.

So it's to do with power. It wasn't to do with being good or bad. It was to do with you making the sacrifice to a particular god and getting what you wanted. So you can see the whole shift towards ethical life was quite a revolution. Where the Buddha's saying, "No, if you want to get reborn in a happier place, it's to do with your ethics. It's not to do with these gods. It's not to do with the power of other deities."

And then he would talk about the dangers of sensual indulgence.

So we've mentioned that really, every time we indulge, what we're actually doing is creating a psychological dependency on something for our happiness. That's the problem, you see. If you just indulge and then you could let it go, that'd be fine. But when we indulge, we're actually placing a certain commitment to whatever it is that makes us happy at a psychological level. That's why it's so painful when it disappears. It doesn't matter what it is.

So he's pointing out the dangers of that and the advantage of renouncing them. Here there's sometimes a confusion about what this renunciation means because it's not the same as what he was practicing when he was doing the self-mortification business because that was based on a completely different understanding. The idea of the soul being trapped in the body and letting go of the body meant that the soul could escape and rise to heaven. This was more in the sense of renouncing in order to undermine that psychological dependency that grows with our indulgence.

Remember that if you look at even the basic things, like on retreat here, we often look at this whole process around eating. That attachment to porridge, for instance, I'm very attached, is translated. You see, it's the same psychology. That's the point. It's the same psychology no matter where you become attached, whether it's to art or nature or to a person.

So when we undermine that, we think that we're actually also undermining our ability to enjoy pleasure and our ability to love. Because that's how it feels. Losing excitement feels like a loss. And we won't want to lose it unless we see the aftermath. See, that's our problem. In a society where pleasure is just there at hand, you just turn the TV on for heaven's sake. We don't make the connection between the aftermath of indulgence with the actual process of indulging. So when we're indulging, what's the problem? We're enjoying life. It's the business that comes afterwards that we've mentioned, the frustration, and also the sense of boredom because the happiness that an object gives us, whether it's a person or food or whatever, has an inbuilt obsolescence. It begins to lose its flavour, you know, like chewing on the bedpost. And it just loses its flavour. So you can't keep scraping the chewing gum off and chewing it.

So what you have to do is begin to accept that there's a loss of excitement and you have to wait for the letting go. And when you've let go of something, you really do have to experience that moment of liberation. And it's catching the moment of liberation when you let go of something where you'll catch the deeper joy. See, what we do is we tend to let go of something, but we don't hang on and wait for it to completely drop out of the system. And then you get that moment of liberation.

Now, that moment of liberation is a taste of Nibbāna. That doesn't mean to say that the old habit doesn't come back. Of course it does. It's not that easy. But it's just letting go of something. Just try it. Anything that you are attached to at some level, just keep not feeding it and just wait for that moment when you feel it's just left the psyche, just gone like that. And it's that moment of liberation which has to be tasted. And once we begin to get a taste for that, you see, then it becomes easier and easier and easier to just let go of all the

rest of it. But if it's always this struggle for letting go and then you fall back into the old habit, then it just becomes miserable. So make sure that if you are going to practice renunciation at any time, and you can do it at any time, just wait for that moment when you feel the release, the relief of it. That's very important.

So that's the advantage of renouncing them. And then it says, when he felt that the mind was ready, open, without hindrances, inspired and confident, then he expounded to the listener the elevated Dharma teaching of the Buddhas: *dukkha*, its origin, its cessation and the path.

So in other words, this teaching that he had to give, he felt he had to prepare. He couldn't just go bang on in and say, look, life's suffering. You need to do something about it. He just slowly prepares it. And he prepares it by pointing out that the path of liberation also has its joys. See, so we've talked about the joy of generosity, that very subtle joy of letting go. And the consequence of the ethical life, the feeling of the beautiful heart within us and the possibility of future beautiful rebirths. So with all that, you see, he's got the person, he's whetted their appetite, and then he tells them the truth. Life is suffering and horrible. Life is unsatisfactory. There is unsatisfactoriness.

And so we'll also be reading the opening discourse that he gives about dukkha. Dukkha, remember, is that essential concept upon which the whole of his teaching is built. Dukkha. It means hard to bear in its basic meaning. Unsatisfactoriness. So it's always recognising that life itself, although it brings its joys and pleasures, life itself holds its own level of suffering – aging and death. We can't escape that. And to make the distinction between the given, which is pain, and our reaction to it, our relationship to it, which is the suffering.

So the Buddha always talks about two darts. See, the first dart is given. So you have a headache. That's given, you see. Now, how you react to your headache is an option. So you can either be very patient with it, or you can get angry with yourself for having a headache. So he tries to make that distinction. And he talks about, he begins by first of all pointing out these two extremes, by not falling into the error of these two extremes. So we've explained that. The one is to do with indulgence of pleasure and the other one is self-mortification. So he's pointed that, the middle way. The middle way is actually not in between these two, it's transcendent of it. It's something that rises up above and is showing a particular path. And that, of course, is the Eightfold Path.

He then goes on to the dukkha, this is painful, it'll be read out, but I'm sure most of you have read it. Birth is painful, aging is painful, separation from what is liked is painful, not to get what one wants is painful, and so on. Then the reason for it, the unsatisfactoriness, is this craving. Now the craving is both for these sensual pleasures that we've been talking about, but it's also a craving to keep rebirthing ourselves.

So when people ask me about rebirth, I say, well, if you actually see what's happening now in this present moment, from moment to moment, you won't have that much problem with the process of rebirth after death, because it's happening now. For instance, this body seems to us very solid, seems to us the same

body that I woke up with this morning, for instance. But we all know that every seven years, every atom is completely changed. So next time you look at your face in the mirror, just remind yourself you weren't there seven years ago. You know what I mean? It's like recognising that the body is constantly dying. It's constantly dying and being reborn.

The mind, thoughts are constantly dying and being reborn. You get new thoughts every time. No thought is ever the same. Even if you were to say the same thing twice, it's not the same. If I said banana, banana. The second banana is not the first banana. It's completely different. It's another word, even though it means the same. Our emotions never stop. They're constantly gurgling up from the depths. They can't be the same. You can't repeat anything in nature. Even though they might feel the same from a perceptual point of view, they're always different. This whole form is constantly rebirthing, moment after moment. And what keeps pushing that whole process is this attachment to this form. It's the belief that I am this human being. I am Bodhidhamma. And anything that undermines that just makes me crazy.

And then there's this craving for annihilation. Now, that's a completely different – that's the other process. That's the aversion side. That's when things get too much, you want to just get rid of yourself. When you've had a hard day or something, when you've been depressed, what do you do? You launch yourself onto the couch and disappear for a while. And that's a process of self-annihilation. The worst, of course, is suicide. So this whole process of getting rid of ourselves because we're fed up with ourselves at one level or another is the self trying to get rid of itself. Unfortunately, you always wake up. It's just one of those things. And remember that the seeking of oblivion is there because in oblivion there's no suffering. That's the relief of being in a deep sleep.

So this craving is on these three levels. The level of sensual pleasure, the level of constantly becoming me in one form or another, constantly taking on different roles throughout the day, throughout my life, and at times just not wanting to be me one way or the other. So these are the cravings.

And Nibbāna, he doesn't actually say Jesus is the end of suffering, is exactly the end of that craving. The complete fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and the relinquishing of it, freedom from it, no longer any reliance on it, this craving. But remember, what sustains the craving is that sense of self, is a sense of me.

Now when it comes to Nibbāna, he has various ways of explaining it, various images that he gives us. One is of an island, completely separate. One is of an island. So Nibbāna is the island that we're making towards. He talks about an āyatana which is a sphere. A sphere in his language is a level of experience which is entire and complete unto itself. So for instance, there are six spheres dependent on our senses. So the eye, our visual capacity, is a sphere of experience. And you can't hear through it. You can't hear through your eyes and you can't taste through them. So all these senses are quite separate and they create certain levels of experience. And he says there is a level where none of this happens. There's no tasting, seeing. There's no earth, there's no moon, there's no coming, there's no going, there's no staying still. You

can only stay still if you're coming and going. So it's a place which is completely transcendent. He talks about it as the unborn, the undying, the unconditioned.

And the word he uses there is ati. Ati means, when they ask him this quadrilemma, this is the big logical positions of the age, does the Buddha exist after he dies? Or does he not exist? Or does he exist and not exist? Or does he neither exist nor not exist? That's a killer. You can't go beyond those four. That's your logical proposition. Now the word in Pali which is used for that is ati. There is another word for is which is hoti. And hoti is like a joining word like when we say this is a clock. But he actually says ati, so there exists that which is not born nor died.

But his most clear statement arises in one of the discourses when somebody approaches him and asks him, where is the end of the world? In other words, where is the end of the phenomenal world? Now, in those days, which is different from us, the world and consciousness were both the same thing. We are under the illusion that when we look at the world, we're actually seeing it as it is. That's to do with our upbringing and our so-called enlightenment and science, that we think that when we're looking at a tree, that's the way the tree really looks. But actually, it's totally dependent upon our eyes, our perceptual faculties, what our brain and minds do with it. And so if we were all to look at the same tree, we'd all be looking at a different tree. In this room, we're all in this room. Nobody would deny the room exists, but we all experience this room in our own particular way. So the world and consciousness were the same thing.

Now what this man is asking is where does the world come to an end? Where does consciousness come to an end? And the Buddha says this question is not put properly. The question should be where does this world not find a footing? So our process is not the destruction of the world. It's to find this island. And then he says there is a consciousness which is not coloured by any of the senses. So in Buddhism there are six senses. There's the five that we normally count and also the mind, the process within the mind. None of those can be found in this consciousness. He says that it is without boundary consciousness. Now, a boundary can only be created by phenomena, can only be created by objects, by things. So there's nothing there. And in all directions full of light, awakenedness, just this is the end of suffering.

So this Nibbāna is not something which is some sort of idea. It's something to be personally experienced by us. And so how do we get to that experience? And this is the process of *vipassanā*, you see.

Now, so when you're sitting, when you're sitting and you're feeling and you're observing what's happening within you, unwittingly, we're making the inner world an object. I don't know whether you know this, but there was a woman called Margaret Mahler. She was a student of Freud. And she studied babies, babies until the age of three. And she made these wonderful discoveries, which have been all reinforced since her. For the first four months, there's no objects. All it is is a bath of information coming in, and the baby lives seemingly in a two-dimensional world. It doesn't have any depth. And that's why you get babies reaching out for rattles. They're actually creating a 3D world in doing so. And then round about four months, the first object looms out of all this information. And it's usually your carer, your

mother. And then very slowly, all this information coming in is turned into this outer world. And it takes to the age of three. It takes three years for that child to come to know themselves as an individual separate from the world around them. That's why they're very clear about whether they're a boy or a girl and all that. It's like, that's it.

Now, what we do then is we fall into that error of saying, well, look, that's the world out there and I'm me the way I experience the world. What we're doing is we are finding a position in ourselves to observe the inner world with all its information, which is the sensations in the body, all the emotions coming out from the heart, all the thoughts that are coming out. All of this we're actually pushing out just like that baby did with all the actual outer world. The inner world we're also pushing away from us. It's becoming an object to observe, to feel, to understand. And in so doing, again unwittingly, what is it that's pulling out? What is it that's pulling out? And that's when we begin to experience the observer within us very clearly. The one who knows. The observer, the feeler.

And the observer is a mirror image. Because when you're in that state of clear observing, you're aware of yourself being the observer. Am I correct? So, if you're aware of yourself being the observer, you see, you can't be that, can you?

Now, that's when you have to keep looking with an eagle eye, because at some point, whatever is in us, that is this Nibbanic element, to use the language of the scripture, of the Abhidhamma, the element of Nibbāna, to get that, to have it, to that experience, is being able to go beyond even the sense of the observer, the feeler.

So there's these three, shall we say, backward movements which take us into a Nibbanic experience. The first one is, as a child, we separate out from the world and become this individuated little being. Through our meditation, we're separating out from the inner world to become this individuated sense of the observer, the feeler, the one who knows. And it's just one step beyond that. Even now, we could just step behind and that'd be it.

So that's the process of liberation. The process of liberation is simply letting go of these three worlds.

And remember that when the Buddha was fully liberated, he didn't disappear. He didn't sit by the roadside there with a sign saying, "Fully liberated, do not disturb." He re-entered the world. He re-entered the world, the phenomenal world, and was able to pass on his message to others.

So what do we lose in the end through this process? When the Buddha, because of the negative way he would talk about *Nibbāna*, was often accused of being an annihilationist, he insisted, "No, the only thing that's annihilated is greed, hatred and delusion. All the rest is given back purified."

Now that, I think, is a joyful message.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by your fierce determination to achieve

liberation, finally arrive at that heavenly place sooner rather than later.

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