Q&A: Detachment, Engagement, Motivation, Devotion

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 1:04:22

I sometimes wonder if the practice is dulling rather than expanding my openness and appreciative joy. And one concern in this regard relates to creating an unskillful kind of detachment.

I think it's just really being clear as to what the different practices are so that you yourself can balance your practice. Vipassana has two functions. The first one is to purify the heart and the second one is to have insight.

The purification of the heart just happens naturally as you sit, and all the stuff that we've suppressed or repressed or we're working with in daily life, all that just comes up. The turbulence comes up first. It's as simple as that. The lower depths of the ocean are nice and calm, you see, but what we're on is this horrible boat that keeps bobbing up and down on the storms of life.

So it is a case of recognising that a lot of our practice is allowing the heart to manifest its problems and recognising that so long as it doesn't slip into thought patterns, especially purposefully, they are actually dying out. And in time, they do give up.

The other thing to recognize is that when you have, say, anger come up, it has an object. You're angry about something. But that's not the cause of it, remember. The cause is an internal decision to respond or react to a situation with anger. So the anger we have is really a sort of internal attitude. I often use the image of a balloon of anger. And we let little bits of it out whenever something irritates. So it's not actually attached to the object. We can make it attached to the object. When you get thumping music come through the wall, it's us that decides it's annoying. And the more we decide that, the more annoying the music is.

So when we sit in meditation, when any negative state attaches to something, the idea is to come off the attachment that it's holding on to and go into the actual feel of it and to stay with the burn, whatever it is, exhausting its energy. It's not going anywhere; it's just coming out through the body, through feeling. That part of it is the purification. And the really joyous thing about that is that although it is difficult, we don't have to do anything apart from attend. If you think of the word attend to mean more in the sense of how a nurse might attend to a patient—that's when you would bring a certain affection towards what it is that you are having to bear up with.

You're not trying to get rid of it with affection. You're not trying to change it with affection. You're just trying to regard it with affection. That's all. An affectionate regard.

What this does is it undermines the reaction of fear and irritation towards what it is that you're experiencing. You get something come up like anger and it comes up so much you're afraid of it, and you pull off it. But when you actually approach the lion...

So, the way he struggles with his tiger. It's funny that it should disappear once he landed, but we won't talk about that.

If you get that idea clear in your mind as to the mechanics, as to just the way the heart manifests its turbulence—it's we who put words on it. It's we who call it anger, fear, and all that, which then moves it into an area of conceptual understanding about our relationship to things. But actually, in the body, it's just feeling. And when it comes out as just feeling, it's healing. That's poetry.

So that's the first part. Let me be very clear about it. The other part is insight. And the insights are always to do with these three avenues of investigation. When we say investigation, you can actually say to yourself, "Well, in this sitting I'm going to try and be much more aware of how things come to an end—the impermanence of things." Or you can say, "This sitting I'm going to make a special effort just to see how desire arises and how it attaches." Or you can say, "Just in this period I'm going to find that observation post within myself where I feel that everything is happening outside me as an object." These are your three avenues of investigation which liberate the knowing, liberate the Buddha within.

Remember, it's the way we're looking which is the delusion. Delusion doesn't arise in the mind itself. The delusion isn't in the mind itself as thought patterns and emotions, and outside in ordinary life as our relationships—those are the manifestation of delusion. They are manifesting that we're looking at a situation in a wrong way. So that's your vipassana.

Now, you'll note that in vipassana, the seven factors of enlightenment do not include love, compassion, or sympathetic joy. And there's a purpose to that. We don't want mental states—because they're only mental states; they're not permanent; they arise and pass away—we don't want mental states to colour the way we're looking. We need this very clear, equanimous position in order to do the investigation, which would be, say, quite not strange to a scientist. I mean, that's what they're supposed to be doing. You're not supposed to be getting involved emotionally in anything that you're investigating.

So then we recognize: how do you get to the pure—how do you get to love, compassion, and sympathetic joy? Remember that the purification going on in the meditation is releasing energy. The energy is not lost. In Zen they would say that with wisdom, compassion arises naturally—you don't have to work at it. But generally speaking, in Buddhist practice, you do have these practices: the practice of metta, sympathetic joy, and compassion, which are extending or reusing that energy which has now been released from its hold in anger and fear and all that. You're using it to develop these better qualities.

And the understanding is that there's no limit to how much of this energy you can actually create. Either way, I mean—we call them the illimitables: love, compassion, joy—but it's illimitable too how much fear

and anger and horror we can develop. So you've got to balance the practice with metta, that's the thing, and you've got to balance the practice with sympathetic joy.

It's taken me a long time to actually bring that into the routine of a vipassana meditation. It was only last year that I finally got round to including sympathetic joy late in the evening, so that we begin in the morning with the practice of compassion, where we bring to mind people who are sick and so on and so forth, and then in the evening we develop metta and then sympathetic joy. So there is this transformation going on.

In other words, the vipassana isn't everything. Vipassana is a specific technique to deal with specific questions. And again, that mental state of mindfulness that we are developing in vipassana—which is, shall we say then, coloured with love, compassion, with an attitude—is something we're supposed to take into daily life, so that there's a continuity of this mindful awareness.

So that's it. And how do we get through this unskillful kind of detachment? The unskillful kind of detachment is when equanimity falls into its near enemy—it's called its subtle enemy—of indifference.

I've told this tale a hundred times, but maybe one of you hasn't heard it, which gives me an excuse to say it all over again. Have you heard about my encounter with a monk and a mouse and a cat? Ah, right, good—there you go, I can tell my tale again, for fear of boring everybody else. So I went to visit this monk. I was in the monastery, so I had a chat with him. And there was a cat playing around with a mouse. So I said to him...

Did you stop that? Because the cat was fat—it wasn't skinny. Often you get animals not being kept very well, but this cat was a fat cat. And I said, did you stop? He said, no. He said, it's cat karma, mouse karma. So he saw the whole thing happening. He was sat there and he saw the cat catch the mouse and then kill it and then just play around with it—the cat wasn't eating it.

Then not so long after that, I was in another monastery. There were four or five of us sitting on a bench in the cool part of the afternoon, chatting. And a cat suddenly jumped out and jumped on this bird. One of the monks, as quick as lightning, got up and gave this cat one hell of a kick, then picked up the bird. Realising it was dead, he held it up and beautifully chanted: "All compounded things arise and pass away."

So of course his idea of what he should do when he sees something which is suffering was completely different from this other fellow, you see. For me that was such a stark contrast. It has always remained in my mind as a distinction between those people who get into this quietism—I think that's what it might be called in the West—a sort of rejection of the world, a non-involvement, and considering that to be equanimity.

But of course we have the Buddha himself as an example. He didn't just sit under a tree once. He didn't just sit there in the bliss of his liberation. He got up and walked—I think it's about three hundred miles from where he was, Bodh Gaya, all the way to Sarnath—seemingly looking out for his old companions.

They must have told him where they were going, or he must have heard where they were going, or it was a regular thing that every year they turned up at Sarnath at this particular time of year, because the ascetics at that time would do their rounds.

That's a great example. He spent his time really cleaning out, cleaning himself up, and then out he went. And it's difficult—if you look at the history of spiritual leaders, it's always the same, really. Myself and Mike were doing this St. Francis thing. St. Francis, you see, one of his great moments of metanoia—his conversion—was when he hugged a leper, which in those days was horrific. You just didn't do that; you kept them well away, you see. But somehow it reminds you of the story of Milarepa. What was it? Can somebody remind me? Milarepa—he had a mangy dog or something and it turned into a bodhisattva. Do you remember that story?

There you see. It's always this: you can't separate the world we're actually living in from the meditation itself, the inner world. You can't separate the inner from the outer world. You can't do that. Or if you do, then you end up in the error of creating this little island where there's just you being happy, and everybody else—well, it's their problem, it's their karma.

So I don't know whether anybody wants to make a comment on that, or add to it. Is the questioner happy with the answer? Oh, he's impressed.

A participant mentioned they were going to buy a friend a book called *A Thousand and One Ideas That Will Change Your Life*, and they read a few entries about things they knew something about, just to test it. The one on Buddhism was interesting, and they asked what I thought about it.

Burn the book! Burn the book! It really is awful. Well, I'm now just reading a book by a Burmese author—it's the Burmese really, through the Abhidhamma, who've tended to describe Nibbana as a sort of oblivion. The early Christian missionaries didn't make much headway because they just saw it as annihilation, as a very subtle form of annihilation. I don't know how you can make annihilation subtle—you're either here or you're not.

No, it's quite clear in the scriptures that there are two states. There's the one in which the Buddha nature, for want of a better word, is within itself. And that is described as boundaryless and full of light. It's a complete awakeness, but it is a totally enclosed thing—like, for instance, if you were inside a light bulb without the glass. That's the sort of thing.

But when that comes into the phenomenal world, which is through the psychophysical organism, it mirrors back to itself, through that organism, its view or its way of being with life. And therefore, the Buddha says—for instance, one person asks him, and this is a regular quote, "This training is very hard." He says, "Yes, it's very hard, but then you reach Nibbana." So the person says, "Nibbana, so what?" He says, "Well, when you get there, you are contented and with it happy." And that's the direct translation: *tutti suco aharati*—contented. That's one of the big signs of somebody. Contentment just means this is the way

it is. Whether it's painful or unpainful, one is at peace with it, one is at one with it, you might say.

So yes, you must give them that book, but write something in there that says, "This is a lie."

As to the greater understanding of what happens to somebody who's fully liberated when they are reborn, Theravada tends to just say, well, it's Nibbana. But the Mahayana point out that that nature can re-manifest in the world in a beautiful form. One thing that the book I'm reading actually points to is that there's no overall clear definition of Nibbana which would bring all the different sects together. They've all got their own little nuance on what Nibbana is.

But in Theravada, it's described both in a negative form. For instance, it wouldn't be right, or it would be difficult, to say that Nibbana is happiness. Because as soon as you say happiness, you have an idea of what happiness is. And it's beyond ideation. It's not an emotion—there are no emotions in Nibbana. It's not a thought—there's no thinking. It's not a feeling—there's no sensation. So as soon as you say happiness, you're stuck.

So the Buddha prefers the negative. It's *adukkha*—there's no suffering. Which sounds really dry. And when he talks about the actual experience in itself, then he talks about this consciousness which is boundaryless. Boundaries are only created by phenomena. Without boundary, not touched by any of the senses. So there's nothing phenomenal at all in there. There's nothing that arises and passes away. There's nothing that has any substance in our sense of the word. And in all directions, full of light.

Someone asked, "Is that what people refer to as emptiness?"

Yes. Well, emptiness—in our scriptures, there are two words: *anatta* and *sunyata*. And in our scriptures, the Buddha remains very, very centered on the individual, on you as a person who's suffering and how to get out of suffering. So there's no philosophy as such.

There's no extension of that into any great philosophical concept, you might say. And the anatta draws you into yourself to ask: what is in me that is unchanging? What is it in me that is not suffering? And is there something in me which I don't experience as a self, as something which is objective? If I look at my hand, my hand becomes an object. It becomes *my* hand.

The word sunyata simply means that it's empty of all phenomena. Now, later on in Buddhism, as it got more philosophical, this concept was extended to all things. Everything is sunyata, everything is empty. Empty of substance—it arises and passes away, it has no existence as such. Although again, some schools say it exists at least for a moment. But I don't think that would be correct in our scriptures. It would be this constant swirl of energy which never substantiates, never holds. It's only the mind with its cognitive faculties that can actually hold an image long enough for us to see it as something which has some sort of substance to it.

Our understanding of the brain and of the mind is so superficial. It's beginning, exactly. So that's the level

at which we're at at the moment. I'm sure there's more to it.

You remember how Dr. Atadama was so keen on these little particles? Kalapas, yes. That's right. In Abhidhamma, there are seventeen mental moments in one physical moment. So when, for instance, a photon hits the back of the eye, for that to actually go to the first position of a percept, a single percept of that one photon takes seventeen thought moments. And these thought moments build up and build up on each other until finally you see a flower. So these little moments are called kalapas. They're these infinitesimal time slots.

And what I'm insistent on saying these days is this: when you're very clearly in the position of the observer, of the feel of the experiencer, when you're actually there and that position is very clear to you—that everything you're experiencing is out there, outside the observer—when you come out of that position, just ask yourself: what was inside the observer? Because the observer, the feeling of self there, is a mirror image coming back into the knowing. We're very close to it. That's why the Buddha says, you know, those who are aware are in the presence of nibbana. He's actually pointing in the right way. Looking back at it.

The example I usually use is of a mirror.

So when you look in the mirror, it's your face you're looking at. But remember, it's the other way around. It's not actually how people see us. In a way, when we get that feeling of the observer within ourselves, there is a feeling of somebody watching, somebody feeling. Now that somebody is the face looking back at us. But it isn't what's looking.

What I'm saying is, just observe. Be in that position. Afterwards, reflect on what were the inner constituents of the knower. I think that is the biggest conundrum, isn't it? The whole not-self.

I have written an essay which I will post on my e-reminder, which I hope makes things just a little bit clearer. All the Buddha's saying is, if there is something in us which has the quality of what we would recognize as the spirit, it doesn't change. It is alive. It is awake. What is it?

So all he says is, observe your experience at a physical level, at an emotional level, at a mental level, and ask yourself, is that it? And invariably you come up with the answer, no, it's not it. And then you begin to realise that there must be something that knows, that can see something changing, which can't be changing in itself at certain rates. So it's a case of stepping back, not knowing where you're heading for. And you're heading for a cliff. And when you drop off, that's it.

So you don't know what it is you're looking for, you're simply investigating what it is you're not. That's the usual thing, *neti, neti*, not this, not this. Does that make a bit more sense?

If you start looking at the observer, then you create another observer looking at the observer. It's a trick of the mind. You can't do that, you see. It's just being in the position of the observer that one begins to realise

that, for instance, there's pain in my knee and there's somebody that knows it. Right? Okay. That's enough.

Now, you can actually go for the feeling of the observer. That won't create another observer. You have to go into the feel of the observer.

Someone asks: In the past years, I've felt that an increased awareness of sensations of fear and sadness and disgust has somehow reduced my engagement with life, reducing my willingness to undertake challenge. Not where I expected the path to take me.

Well, it depends what the original challenge was, you see. Often when we suffer from fear, we'll create challenges, you might say, in order to prove that we're above fear. It leads us to a sort of foolhardiness. Do you know what I mean? We create false challenges, really motivated from a wrong attitude.

When all those attitudes begin to calm, then our challenges are more realistic. And if no challenges come to us, what are we complaining about?

You know, sometimes—for instance, many people who become involved with the crisis unfolding around climate change—on the surface of things, they're putting out compassion for the world and spreading that gospel. Compassion for the world. This is the world we owe to our children. All that sort of thing.

But underneath it, they themselves might be suffering from tremendous fear that they will be caught up in the catastrophe. Yet they're not recognising that. It just stays there, unexamined. And what it does is fuel their activity. It comes out in this peculiar way of overplaying your cards. One manifestation is frustration and anger.

"Yes, there are things in my own practice where concern for the self turns into such preoccupation that it becomes a hindrance in itself. It's not self-mettā—it just gets muddled. And it's all fear."

Exactly. I mean, if you talk to a jihadist or somebody like that, they would tell you that their motivations are perfectly wholesome. They would quote scripture and justify their anger. And then they justify their incredible cruelty to other human beings. Some of the reports are absolutely horrific. And it all comes from this underlying anger which is based on fear.

Karen Armstrong—she's very good, wrote *A History of God*—she did a study of fundamentalists in America. What motivates them is fear. They genuinely fear that modern society is undermining them.

Recently I noticed that Google now gives seasonal greetings—a "seasonal festive greeting"—it doesn't call it Christmas anymore. So I clicked on that, and there was an article saying they'd done a survey in America where society is split almost in half between those who don't believe at all and those across all shades of belief. But the underlying trend is that among young people, from about sixteen to thirty, non-belief moves up to about sixty or seventy percent. So if you're a fundamentalist and you're seeing all these young people not coming to church, that fear turns, doesn't it? You attack the enemy.

I don't know where we're going with this.

I think if we look back at our lives and notice that normally we would really go for a particular challenge, but now we're not, that might actually be progress. A person would have to reflect upon it, to see the situation as clearly as they could, and ask oneself: what does this situation demand of me? There's more wisdom in that approach—that you're not being driven by unconscious motives, unconscious motivation. We know all about that from Freud. He had quite an insight into these things. *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life.*

I suppose a tell-tale point might be when something is asked of us which is testing, as you might say, and we find ourselves able to rise to the challenge. That might be a sign of progress. Whatever it might be—it could be something out there in the world, it could be personal illness. I just don't know.

Any comments?

As the drives fueled by attachment dissolve, as the things that used to drive and motivate us fall away, where does action come from? How does one choose to do anything at all?

There are three types of kamma, which remember in Buddhist terminology simply means action. So you have wholesome, unwholesome, and then what they call functional kamma.

Normally speaking, so long as we have a self, there's always somebody doing something which is unwholesome or wholesome. And so long as we have a self, what we're trying to do is move over to the wholesome side. Remember that the Buddha also has a psychology, an inbuilt understanding of our psychology, which is not so much to do with nibbāna as such but to actually make us happy within ourselves by working with these emotional states and developing the opposites. We're actually supposed to be getting happier in ourselves through the practice. You can't tell it on a direct line—it goes up and down, up and down—but generally over a period of five or ten years, one might look back and think, "Well, I am generally more happy."

Now, you've got to be careful here. It might not be happy in an emotional sense, but more in a meaningful sense. Your life is more directed. It's a subtle thing.

So there is that, you see. As long as we have a self, we have to act. Just as soon as you get up in the morning, you're acting. There's always an intention in everything you do. We're trying to develop our wholesomeness and let go of our unwholesomeness.

Now when you're fully liberated and there's no self, the Buddha still gets up and acts. He still gets up, he feels hungry, he puts his robe on, he picks up his bowl, and he goes off for alms. Or he teaches. He's always acting. In fact, occasionally he would go off by himself—he says for his own delight and as an example to others. But he seems to have led a very active life. He was on call, on tap, always walking everywhere. We know where he spent his rainy seasons—they tended to be between the two main kingdoms of Magadha

and Kosala.

So he was acting, but somehow these actions weren't wholesome or unwholesome. All that's saying is that there's no self; it's not self-serving. Even when we do something wholesome, there's a bit of self-service. But when there's no sense of serving this imaginary self, and you are, as it were, in direct, spontaneous communication with the people and nature and the world around you, you see yourself as simply part of the flow of energies moving from one person to another. All you're doing through your understanding is helping the flow of goodness along.

There's nothing there which attaches and says, "Oh, this is me, or this is not. I am teaching, I am this and that." There's just that interconnection, a contingency which happens spontaneously to somebody who's liberated. For us, what we do is create little barriers, that's all, and stop the flow of energy. We draw it back into ourselves, for "me."

The whole thing about taking on the form of a human being is that it becomes a vehicle of expression—whether negative or positive, or in this sense neither negative nor positive. The process of liberation doesn't stop you from acting; it just makes the acts more and more in direct communication with the way things really are, not being perverted by self-regard.

Having said that, it's not as though the Buddha didn't take care of his body. Brushing your teeth doesn't mean you're serving the self. No, you're taking care of your teeth. And considering they're the last lot we're going to have.

So it is.

I was also thinking about how, conventionally in our day-to-day lives, we tend to think about meaning in terms of "I'm dedicating myself to X." But if that sense of meaning is dissolving... I think Adyashanti says that meaning is just another thing that the ego looks for, which is a very shocking statement in a way.

It depends. It's all to do with who the meaning is for. If it makes me feel bigger and better, makes me feel stronger and more powerful, then it's obviously a meaning which is corrupting me. But if the meaning of my life is for the benefit of others, flowing outwards, then I'm at service. To give oneself to service, you must let go of yourself because you're at the demands of other people. It's not that you forget your own needs, but you're out there for other people. That's the whole point of seeing service as a way of completely getting rid of the self.

In Zen understanding, the best place to be is in the kitchen as a cook, because there you have to feed all these different monastics and be aware of their little peculiar diets and whatnot, making sure the food is right. And it's always for them, for them, for them. You eat, but you're actually doing it for them. There's that sense of service, and that completely undermines the self—which is always thinking about itself.

If somebody wants an interview when I'm happily engaged in this book, and I think "oh bloody hell," I've

lost my sense of service. My sense of service should be spontaneous—as soon as somebody asks, I'm out, because that's what I've said I'm doing. I'm teaching now. That doesn't mean to say that when I go on a personal retreat I have to respond, because then I'm looking after myself. But as soon as I feel I've put myself out into the arena as a Dharma teacher, then if any negativity comes up when I'm being asked to respond, that shows my sense of service is not yet purified.

Now, the peculiar thing is that the more you give yourself to others—not forgetting one's needs as it were—the more the sense of self disappears. And the more the sense of meaningfulness grows. That's your paradox. Our sense of meaningfulness, the measure of our meaningfulness, is the measure of our commitment to something greater than ourselves.

It's interesting that the Buddha would say things like, "Who sees the Dharma sees me; who sees me sees the Dharma." He had this tremendous respect for the Dharma, for the way things are, and he serviced it completely—so that he could actually make that connection. Who sees me sees the Dharma in action. And who sees the Dharma also sees me. In other words, Buddha nature. How it ought to be.

So I don't know, Adyashanti might have been thinking of it in a more egotistic sense, or more storytelling-like.

A student shares: "What you just said about authorship maybe helped me, because I had a very hard time when my book was published. Up to that point it was all about service, and then suddenly it became about me, my name. And it was devastating because some of the interviews were about me and my skills, and it was just awful."

You've got to be careful, because remember there are three conceits. "I am better than"—which is of course the usual one we think of. But "I'm worse than"—that's a conceit too.

It's an inverted conceit, isn't it? An inverted pride. And the subtle one is "I am the same as" – because we group with people who are the same as us, and other groups are perceived as either better or worse than us.

What I mean is, in my work it was all about being a vehicle, being a servant to the subject. And then suddenly the world puts the spotlight on you, and you think, "No, why are you looking at me? Look at *it*." So that was a big disappointment.

Well, we live in a society of celebrities. In the old days, you never put your name on work, did you?

A question came up: In the introductory talk, I used the words "abiding in the present moment." Someone pointed out that this doesn't have the emotional punch of the Christian hymn "Abide With Me." How will Theravāda ever make up the levels of emotional support that Christianity seems to offer?

That reminds me of someone who would describe herself as a Buddhist. She was a good meditator and went to Amaravati regularly. But it was just too dry for her. She had to go along to a Christian church to get a bit of emotional sustenance.

I think there's a deficit in the way Buddhism comes to the West and in the way it's taught. When you go to the East, you see there's no deficit on the emotional side. It has to do with why we come to the practice. We come really to sort out our problems, to understand the world, and unwittingly we're not enriching it with religious emotions.

That was one of the purposes behind the carol service – to try and access these emotional supports. And as you point out, Christianity is excellent at doing that. The music is so moving.

When my father died, I was in Sri Lanka at the time. On hearing the news, I cried a little bit. But by the time I got back to my kuṭi, all that had passed, because I had a very good relationship with him, and he lived a good life. I really was quite at peace, you know. He died very quickly; there was no lingering. So I was fairly okay with it all. Then I was with my mother at the church ceremony, and there was this hymn – I can't quite bring it to mind, something about the love of Jesus – but as soon as it started, the tears were flowing down my face. It really opened everything up, just the music.

So music, as you know, has this tremendous power to elevate. And there's not much of it in Theravāda Buddhism. You're just chanting.

Now, an interesting aside: there was an Orthodox monk in London, years and years ago, who led a choir. He said it was so difficult to stop the choir singing emotionally. And if you listen to plainchant, it's not emotional in that sense – it comes out of silence, it returns to silence. In my humble opinion, ever since plainchant, there's been nothing but corruption.

So if you consider what spiritual emotions actually are, they're actually available in Theravāda if you want to do the exercises.

The first one is a sense of gratitude. By gratitude I mean just going through the Buddha's life, what he went through, and what we've received from it. Then every time you look at a Buddha statue, you feel this enormous gratitude. That comes easily to Easterners.

There's also a sense of awe – when you realise what he achieved, when you realise the ineffability of the Dhamma.

The whole thing—why we're here—is never really explained. How is it that we're here in the first place? Where does this Buddha nature arise from? There's a whole range of metaphysics which is just completely dark, and the Buddha never went into it because, from his point of view, it would just be inference. All we can know is what's within this bubble of awareness that we have.

And then there's praise. That's where you get the joy, the wonderful joy. If anybody goes to one of the

main shrines in Sri Lanka—or anywhere really, but I'm thinking of a particular one in Sri Lanka—and you go along on a puja day, which is the full moon day of the month, that's the main one. You can slice the emotions like butter. You can see people are completely in that seventh heaven of emotional bliss.

In a sense, that's something perhaps instilled in you as a child. As you move into adulthood and you haven't got that—which a lot of young people now don't have. I mean, they've got all the music stuff, but they don't have these subtle religious emotions.

In my own case, I didn't really get into the emotional side of Buddhism until quite late. I would have been already fifteen years or so practicing. Then slowly I began to see that I hadn't developed a heart relationship to the religion I had chosen. As that came along, I realized that's what I needed to do. That's why I've got all these statues and Kuan Yin and a stupa. A stupa is really a tombstone—that's what it is. It's representative of the Buddha's life.

I try to share that, but not with too much avail, I'm afraid, because most people who come to meditation really just want to sort themselves out. I think that emotional value, that feeling of a heart connection with a religion we're in, grows in time.

Having said that, you know, being brought up a Catholic, when I walk into a Catholic church, I'm in a certain event. I'm just back there—it's just beautiful, the feeling.

Student: I went to what I think was a Tibetan Buddhist service with a friend of mine in Seattle. They were doing singing, using translated Tibetan texts but set to very westernized melodies. That struck me as so artificial. For me, it was not a pleasing solution. No sense of profundity.

Yes, it didn't have the profundity of the chant. Or even the profundity of the Western traditional music.

It's very difficult, isn't it? I think Amaravati have done a decent job. If you listen to their chant, they still chant in Pali and in English, and it's still a chant. I think they do it nicely. People ask me why I don't do it here, but that takes—I would need to know a musician, and I need to... I mean, I'm happy with the Pali.

Student: Well, it's lovely. I thought the chant this morning—I really enjoyed it.

That's right. It just has a quality to it. It's a Burmese-type chant.

Student: For about ten days after I left the retreat back in the summer, every night it kept ringing in my ears. It turned into a lullaby, and it was incredibly soothing and comforting. So I do think that's part of the process at some point. There has to be—I don't know about an emotional punch—but some heart connection. Otherwise it becomes very dry.

The other way people do it is through the practice of metta, of course. That's another way.

Student: There's a reason it's making me think. I can't remember who she is—a contemporary Christian mystic.

I just read a quote from her sometime this year, where she was saying that yes, her own path is difficult, but she has a hard time imagining the faith required to have faith in the present moment, if you will, like the Buddhists do, rather than faith in the judgment of Christ.

I think that's in part why religious Buddhism, as you're saying, in Southeast Asia, still does focus very much on the person of the Buddha. That is the human connection—definitely. It is a very personal connection, and we're not very good in the West when it comes to complete devotion.

I'm remembering the Herzog documentary about the pilgrimage to the biggest Dalai Lama gathering—the Kalachakra, with hundreds of thousands of people. Some people, it took them three and a half years to make the journey, not walking but doing full prostrations the entire way, bowing and rising, bowing and rising. They're all physically damaged now. They have measured the earth with their bodies. That's a kind of devotion and commitment you rarely see in the West.

Of course, that's also connected to karma—either creating good karma to counterbalance bad karma, or generating good karma in itself. But you're right, it is driven by this incredible devotion. It's lovely when you see it.

I suppose the unfortunate thing with the devotional approach is that it moves rather easily into superstition. That's the problem with it. There has to be a balance. The Buddha himself didn't like being the object of adoration. Right there on his deathbed, while he was dying, there was a young monk who looked at him with those glistening eyes—"Bhagawan, Bhagawan"—and he sends him off into the forest. "I don't want that, thank you very much." He wasn't personally into that, and of course he didn't leave himself; he left the Dharma. He was very clear about that.

As you know, for a very long time he wasn't represented physically—it was always symbolic. The Greeks undermined all that, and I think later on too, because of the very devotional aspect of Hinduism. Buddhism and Hinduism fenced with each other for fifteen hundred years in India. Then there was this apparition of further Buddhas—all the Buddhas of the Mahayana, which were really aspects of the Buddha turned into separate Buddhas: the Buddha of compassion, the Buddha of healing, things like that. I think that was all part of trying to reach the ordinary person, not just the intellectual.

That was one of the criticisms of early Buddhism which began the split, as early as three hundred years after the Buddha's death—that it had become far too focused on the Arahant ideal, that you were just in it for yourself, expecting people to support you while you lived in your monastery like at Nalanda with thousands of monks, completely disconnected from ordinary people. When they realized they were losing people to a more emotional, devotional approach, they started coming up with these innovations.

Interestingly enough, in the history of Sri Lanka, when there was an attempt by a certain person to convert the island to the Mahayana, he wrote a particular discourse called the Lankavatara Sutta—"Going to Sri Lanka." The monks from Anuradhapura, from the two big monasteries there which had created two

different lineages, left the capital and went south. They told the king's close advisor, "Look, if you don't watch it, you're going to lose everything to the Mahayana." There were Mahayana monks and Mahayana temples there; the Mahayana sculptures remain to this day. These Theravadins, you see, they prevailed. So the king decided on Theravada and kicked all the Mahayana monks out of the monasteries. But the practices of Mahayana—this devotion to the Buddha—

Offering flowers and all that sort of devotional practice was absorbed into Theravada. That's where scholars think all the devotional practices of Theravada came from. In my understanding, it's quite late—maybe three or four or five centuries on. There's an article written about this in the Middle Way journal if you're interested. I think it was the last issue we received. It surprised me actually. So the Mahayana still had an effect on Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka. And I think throughout Burma and Thailand and all those countries as well, because you find lots of devotional practices there.

Just as a final thing, I was in Sri Lanka and I came across a group of women who were living as a community dressed in white—in other words, observing the eight precepts. They bunched their hair up into a bun, all of them, and they had a teacher guiding them.

In the shrine room, they had the Buddha statue, but every day they also had a chair. Every day they offered slippers to the chair, to the Buddha, and water, and a pot of tea, and all that. They sort of set him up for the day. Incredibly sweet. I'd never seen that before. They were very, very committed. My goodness. Very good.

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