Christmas Talk on the Path: Goodwill, Ethics, and Liberation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 47:03

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa, namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa, namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

I thought this evening just to let the mind wander a bit about this whole business of goodwill since it's Christmas. This was, if you remember, the message over the manger: "Goodwill to all men," meaning, of course, all humans. And I'm sure you noticed my little sign on the gate. I've extended it to all beings in the hope it might affect the local farmer. You can hear that little dog — he keeps it in a cage with a concrete base and it's obviously quite unhappy, but what can you do?

Goodwill for me really translates the word *mettā,* although I'm sure you've seen it translated as loving-kindness, which gives it its affective value, its emotional value. But we have to link that really with the Buddha's teaching about *kamma*. And *kamma* is an action — I'm using the word technically now, not your comeuppance, not "you get your karma," but more in the sense of just an action. And an action is driven by the will. The action is a point where the will comes in. And then with the will you have the action, and the action of course produces the beginning of a conditioning or reinforces a present conditioning, and that's your *bhava*, that's your becoming.

Really it's just looking at the position that the Buddha puts this whole business of *kamma* into his teachings. When he went through that liberation process he came out with what's known as the three knowledges, the three great understandings he had. The first one was a realisation that he was completely purified of all these negative states. Later in his victory verse he says that he attained this unconditioned consciousness, *asaṅkhata-citta*. But the other two are related to how he got there. The first is he saw all his past lives and saw how he arrived at this particular place. And then he was able to perceive beings moving from one realm to another, driven by the same force, by the same karmic force, by their will. And what was then just a personal law became a universal law for him.

From that, over time, he develops dependent origination, which is the whole psychology of how we create our conditionings. But also he points to the whole business of ethics. So ethics in its broadest meaning is basically our relationship — our relationship to each other as human beings, of course, to the animal world, to the world of nature, to the mineral world, to use an old medieval way of looking at things. So even rocks and stuff like that we have a relationship with. It might not be a very deeply affectionate one,

but we have a relationship with the physicality of nature.

In the Noble Eightfold Path, this comes into play because after we've had some insights, this has to translate itself into Right Attitude. And these attitudes — he names three of them within the Eightfold Path: selfishness to generosity, hatred towards love, and cruelty towards compassion. But you can take any negativity and you can state its opposite as where we're moving towards. And of course that's a change in relationship, and that's what we're talking about, a relationship. And this then expresses itself in right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

This ethics is most keenly expressed in its little detail in the Vinaya for the monks, for the monastic life, the monks and nuns. Because here he's trying to set up an institution, a specific institution, which is to preserve the Dharma and of course to help people become liberated. And he sees that as extremely important. And it's not as though he starts from a position of some ideal as to what the order will be. He follows the normal customs of the time, which was basically to use whatever cloth was about to create clothing, to live very simply in the forests, making your own little hut out of things, out of wood and leaves, banana leaves and stuff, and to eat what was given in a bowl. All these things were set.

And what it tells us is that here's the basis of a spiritual life. We need shelter. We need clothing against the elements. We need food to keep the body healthy. And the fourth one was medicine. And when you look across the world and you see these people who don't have these basic requirements, what we actually understand from the Buddha's teaching is that they haven't even got the basis for spiritual practice. In other words, Buddha's saying that in order to even begin the spiritual practice, you've got to feel safe. You've got to feel safe. If your mind is concerned about where you're going to get your next piece of bread, or how you're going to clothe yourself, or your children, and so on, then you can't begin this process of purifying the heart.

Saint Francis had a similar experience when he gave up everything in a very Buddhistic way and sewed together these bits of sackcloth to create his first robe. He thought to go and live with the beggars, actually live in Rome with the beggars. But he found that they were quite happy to thieve, and the language, of course, and the whole thing. And he had this ideal that, in fact, if you were poor, you were necessarily closer to Jesus, closer to God. But in fact, what he found was that they were robbers and thieves. Probably one or two of them were saintly, but generally speaking, they weren't a crowd he wanted to mix with. And so he left them. He went off on his own back to where he was brought up, started again.

So during this time, Christmas, we have this idea of goodwill to all beings. We then have this problem about will itself, meaning some sort of choice. In the West we have this idea coming really from Christianity of some sort of free will. The ancients didn't have that sort of concept. They were, I think, more deterministic, that things were already determined, a fate. And that choice was really some sort of trick that human beings played on themselves. Because they had choice, they therefore had free will. These days you get these different arguments between those who believe in a deterministic idea of the

world and those who believe that we do have some measure of free will.

Now, in the Buddha's understanding, it's hard to talk about this complete free will. It really stems from the idea of the Christian relationship to God. So God has created us out of love. And a love which is determined by him is hardly satisfying. If you could create a dog and program it to love you, then you'd have a hard time thinking that this dog really loves you. I mean, he's already been broken. So the idea of free love was that a person could actually choose to love or deny God. And that was the essential dignity of the human being and the essential oneness of the human being as opposed to God. So he'd created something which was separate from him, and therefore the human being had to find this relationship.

In the Buddha's teachings it's difficult to see this free will because everything starts from this position of ignorance, the position of we're living under a delusion. And this delusion is driving us. So its main manifestation is acquisitiveness, which turns into greed and all that sort of stuff. And the reason is that in that essential delusion as to who we are, there's this presumed understanding that we are what we appear to be — human beings with the body, mind, heart, and so on and so forth. But there is always somewhere in the back of our understanding the problem of death.

All meaning to the self is in life, to the self that feels itself to be this psycho-physical organism. Death is meaningless because my whole effort is to try and enjoy life and make life meaningful for me. And I might extend that into some form of relationship that gives my life meaning. So you have a humanistic approach which is that my life has meaning when I'm helping others. So sometimes you'll get humanists who are just as self-negating, just as giving, just as generous, just as compassionate as anybody who would say they belong to a particular religion. And it gives their life meaning.

But even so, there is this underlying despair, because it's all going to come to an end. And it's very difficult for somebody who sees death as being the end of everything that they aspire to, everything that is meaningful in life, to turn upon death and really look it straight in the face. So there's always this gentle pushing away of it, the denial of death. And what the Buddha is saying is that this essential delusion as to who we are is creating this underlying feeling of disjointedness, of not being actually completely at one with nature that we're embedded in.

Because animals don't worry about that. Animals, as far as we know anyway, they're just happy to live the moment to moment because their minds don't really go beyond. They don't have that imaginative capacity to imagine their deaths. Not to say that they don't know when they're actually dying or being killed, but they don't have that existential fever that can descend upon us.

So when you consider that we've got this underlying delusion which is trying to make sense of this life, then everything is driven by that force. So although on the surface of things, when you walk into Tesco's and you think, well, am I going to have choco biscuits or fig biscuits? And I think, well, this is choice. This is a wonderful thing I have in this society of choice. The governments keep going on about this choice. But eventually, you tend to choose the one you like, the one you've established a decent relationship with.

So even though we have this idea of choice, actually, when we finally make the choice and we ask ourselves, well, why did I make that choice? We find it's actually all conditioned, that we've actually got good reasons for doing it, which is another way of saying it's not been a free will choice. It's not as though free will stands somewhere outside my conditioning and is able to make this choice which has nothing to do with the conditioning that I have within my psychology.

So when it comes to the path, and we're talking about the way to go, it's like going for a walk, isn't it? You set off for a walk and you already have your map, you know where you're going to go. And wherever you come to a fork in the place or where you come to a place where you don't recognise something, you don't have free will. You look at your map and you decide you're going to go this way. Now, you might make a mistake and end up drowning in a lake, but we'll leave that one aside. Presumably you can read the maps, and even if you do start walking into marshy land, you know you've come the wrong way so you come back on yourself. So the path isn't so much one of choice but one of discernment. And if we discern wrongly, if we make the wrong choices, then there are certain things that happen because of that wrong choice, and the world mirrors back to us what it is.

Now, when we talk about *kamma*, remember, in the sense of that which is leading us to liberation, it's never something outside us. So, if, for instance, I find myself being fired from every job that I happen to get hold of, and I keep saying to myself, these people really don't understand me, they're absolute fools and all this other stuff, then slowly but surely it might occur to me that maybe I'm the fool and not these people I've been calling the fool all my life. But until I make that little bit of insight, the world keeps mirroring back to me exactly what I'm doing.

But if I were to say that losing my job is my *kamma*, then I'd be slightly off centre, because my real *kamma* is the conditioning I have inside me, the conditioning which is creating this personality, these relationships, which continually find me dumped. If on the other hand, take the opposite, if on the other hand I find myself constantly in situations which are creating happiness around me and joyfulness around me, then again that's mirroring back to me my relationship to the world.

So when anything happens to us, there is that business going on. That doesn't mean to say that other people's *kamma* isn't affecting us. I mean, the old adage that just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you. In other words, things happen to us, but it might not be specifically our fault. Somebody else is also dumping their stuff on us. And to sometimes distinguish that is very difficult. In fact, the closer the relationship is, the more difficult it is to discern that.

So, when it comes to this goodwill to all beings, we're really always looking at our relationships. That's what it actually means, just what is our relationship. And when it comes to ecology, and the world and all that, and we have all these deniers and all that sort of stuff, we might say to ourselves, well, even if it isn't the overheating that's causing this, it would be better anyway to think it is just in case it is. If it isn't, fine, then the world is just changing in its usual patterns. But if it happens to be this business of overheating,

then maybe I ought to do something about it.

So there was a meditator here who I asked about ecology and whatnot. Somehow it came up in the conversations that they took two baths a day. And I said, well, isn't that a bit ecologically vandalistic? And their reply was, well, nobody else is doing anything. So you can see how in this particular case this person was judging their particular ethical relationship to the world by other people and excusing what they obviously thought, because of their reply, was in fact ecological vandalism. Their excuse was because nobody else was doing it.

When it comes to ecology and things like that, our question is to ourselves, what am I doing about it? What is my responsibility within this particular situation I find myself in? So here, for instance, I've gone to all sorts of silly extents to try and cut down the amount of fuel we use to heat water. And some of them have been slightly ridiculous. That thing you're using now, which I bought, which was meant to be one of these super kettles that would keep water warm, turned out to be — I mean, that's why I've got that glove around it, that covering, because it was just letting off heat all over the place.

My latest escapade, as you've noticed over the sink, is a hand washing thing, but actually that water which comes straight from the well, straight from the cold water system, is perfectly drinkable. So if you ever want warm water, then you can take it straight from that. And this allowed me to cut down the heat in the tank itself, which I hope you've all forgiven me for. So that is basically just hand hot. It's not even that, is it? It's lukewarm. And then, which is all you need. You only need lukewarm water.

I mean, I go back to my experience in the East where only the rich can have a hot shower. You just don't have hot showers. Most people still shower at wells and it's always cold. Always. Mind you, of course, you're in the tropics, but even so.

So one thing that we can look at is just what is our relationship to the material world? How much heat do we need? What sort of clothes are we wearing so that we don't have to have the central heating on so high? The food we eat. So you go back to your basics — the food, the shelter, the clothing. I mean these days with clothes being so cheap people have quite large wardrobes. I'm now getting to that age group where I can be like the Monty Python sketch where he says, well in my day we had leather for breakfast, things like that.

But this whole explosion of material goods means that people don't have a sense of kindness towards things. They don't treasure anything because, well, if you break a cup, you're going to buy another one. But there was a time when you broke a cup, you'd get a crack around the back of your head because that would cost money.

So it's a case of re-establishing really the preciousness of things. In the Japanese tea ceremony, which I know very little about, part of the conversation is to appreciate the actual vessels that you're using, which may be cracked and very old. There was a lovely tale told by Suzuki, who wrote *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*

, where when the monks go off and take water with them, they always reserve a bit to bring back, to pour back into the river that flows past the monastery. And it's that sort of relationship that I think we have to re-establish.

I have a niece who works around ecology for schools. She sets up little projects for schools, a charity of such. When I was asking about that, her reply to me about people and ecology was, "People don't care. People don't care." And it's a sadness. We watched a film that was done by a French ecologist, and there was this very moving scene in Uganda where the hippos on this lake were being slaughtered by poachers. All the fish in the lake lived off the hippopotamus poo. That's what they did. That's how the fish lived in the lake. Of course, as they killed these hippos, the fish stocks went down. The man who was looking after it, when he saw that a little gang of hippos had disappeared, he starts weeping, he starts crying because he's so distraught at the uncaring nature of these poachers and the inability of the government or anybody to stop the slaughter. So it's a case really of thinking about our relationship to nature.

When it comes to animals, the animal world, it's a similar sort of thing. It's very difficult really to find products which don't use something from animals. Here I think you can get very tight around things. Although the Buddha pointed out these rules about not harming living beings, they were never set to us as commandments, as "thou shalt not." It wasn't to do with that. They're training rules. *Sekhapada*. You can't make an absolute law in a relative universe because, depending on time and place, human beings, if they want to stay alive, have to eat animals. I'm talking about people in deserts and people up in the icy parts of the world. So it's not as though we have to be particularly tight about that, but it's something that we could think about and ponder and just look at the food that we actually eat. The idea of having a vegetarian meal or two during the week seems to be catching on. But I think one of the problems is that when we move into that moral area, we become moralistic. So again, it's not being too tight around these things and just working with the situation.

Here myself and Martin had to make a big decision about Christmas. As you know, the Trust has made a commitment to using less animal products if we can, but careful not to name it as veganism, because then that locks you into a particular ism. That's not really where the Buddha was at. I remember talking to a German man who'd come to the monastery and he was very uptight about Buddhism. He just didn't like "Buddhism," he just didn't like this word. "We should call it *Buddhadhamma*," he said, because as soon as you enter into an ism, it's as though it becomes set in concrete. So when we talk about not being involved in taking life unnecessarily, I think we always have to be careful not to get into that ism business, but take each situation as it comes. Anyway, we decided that it was Christmas and we would have roast and use eggs to bind it. So it's just one of those things we gave in to that.

When it comes to human beings, it becomes very complicated because we have all sorts of ways of behaving towards each other which are unhealthy and equally as many ways as we can which are healthy. Tomorrow we might go through the perfections, as they call the *paramī*. But again, it's recognising that other people are our teachers. That's one really very positive way of looking at it. When somebody is

creating some negativity within us, it's pointing out where we may be stuck, where we are actually holding on to views and opinions. It's a case of really doing that moment-to-moment *vipassanā*. We see *vip assanā* as being something that we sit and do as a practice, and that's true, that's not a problem. But to keep that awakenedness in us so that when we meet somebody and they're pressing buttons, we're right there with the inner turmoil, not to identify with it.

This is the whole point of practising *vipassanā*, is to disidentify with what we're experiencing. When anger comes within me, when I'm sitting and I've got a memory and some anger comes up, I'm gently pushing it away from me to observe it. In so doing, I realise it's not me, not mine. But in daily life, we tend to forget that. As soon as anger comes up, well, I'm going to be angry to hell with it. But the whole idea is to remain with this sharp awakenedness so that as soon as I feel the first stirrings of irritation, I'm right there with it. I can override that. This is the point. I can override that with goodwill. The measure of goodwill could be just a certain openness to the person, just to actually listen to what they're saying without this immediate reaction. If I'm going to identify with something, then let me identify with goodwill.

Here we come to another thing, this whole business about the self. The Buddha, in his teachings, it's not about getting rid of the self. It's about creating, first of all, a self which is beautiful, a self which feels dignified, self-worthy and has a lot of self-esteem. It's only when we feel that certainty within us that we can begin to go deeper and drop the idea of what a self might be. All his teachings, if you go through it, is all about, at this ethical level, of moving away from negative states towards positive states, from darkness to light, as he would put it. There are some beings moving the other way, he says, but hopefully we're moving the right way, from darkness to light.

The whole training, part of the training is the Eightfold Path, is right speech, right action, right livelihood. What it's doing is creating this beautiful conditioning. When I associate with that, when I say, "Well, I am generous," then it's creating within me this sense of self-esteem. When I've forgiven somebody and I feel the relief that comes with that, I'm purifying my heart. When you're practising *mettā* and you're saying, "May I be safe, may I be well," it doesn't matter whether we believe there's an ultimate I there or not, but all we're doing is creating these conditionings which eventually build up to make us feel good about ourselves.

When we move into that meditation, the next stage is to investigate this sense of I. So it's a sort of parallel process. The process of insight and the process of ethical purity run together. If we're very disturbed over something, we're going through a patch in our lives which is full of anxiety and anger and all that sort of stuff, then it's very difficult to separate from it. Even if we keep falling into these habits of getting angry and all that sort of stuff, at least we know that we've fallen into a place where we don't want to stay. This is the point, we don't want to stay there. Often people will get themselves into this horrible place and they keep churning at it.

I remember Rob, who's our treasurer, he's a solicitor helping people through divorce and whatnot. I

remember saying to this man something along the lines of, "You'll lose what you want. You're not going to win this case. And you're going to spend a lot of money, right?" So his whole argument was, let it be, come to an agreement and let it go. But he was too caught up in this bitterness and hatred and he was going to go for it, even though it was actually completely illogical. That's what we tend to do. We get ourselves into these whirlpools of thought. It's impossible to step out of it for a lot of people. They're just caught up in it.

There was another case just recently on the radio of a man who had been tortured by the Japanese on that River Kwai business really, really badly. His heart was just filled with hatred and anger. It was there, undealt with within his heart. His first marriage eventually broke up. Later on in his life, perhaps late middle age, he's just on a train and he meets somebody and begins to talk to her. This stuff begins to just flow outward. He gets in touch with all this goo, all this horrible stuff inside him. For some reason, I can't remember the details, he sees this article where this Japanese man, who was his torturer, has written an article in which he's asking for forgiveness and whatnot. So he determines to go and meet him in Japan and give him the old waffle. But as soon as the man walks in, he meets this Japanese man. He just goes down on his knees and begs him to forgive him. It's like he can't do anything. The forgiveness just pours out of his heart and they become good friends.

In his case, he was very lucky that the fellow who now regrets bitterly the way he made these other human beings suffer actually had the opportunity to tell this victim how he felt about it now. If not, this man may very well have been still twisting in the little hell of his own making, just unable to forgive.

What our practice is teaching us is that all this negativity is not me in the sense that I don't have to do that, I don't have to indulge it, I don't have to associate with it even. I can see it as just another mental state. Even if I'm caught out by it every so often, and I find myself murdering people and stuff like that, even so, I can then remind myself after the act, "You lost yourself there. There was a loss of myself into that." If I can bring myself out of that and re-establish this good self, then at least I'm not justifying the act. A lot of people might justify anger, righteous anger and all that sort of stuff. But in Buddhist terms, it's very difficult to justify anger. You can sublimate it, you can turn your anger into doing something, but anger itself, the feeling of anger, the hatred that's involved in it, as soon as you put that out, it's a negativity, it's a negative force. It'll have its effect in one way or the other. Even if you get your own way, you'll have got your own way, which may be perfectly just, at the expense of friendship. The person might do it just out of because you've hammered them, because they're so afraid of you. But that's hardly a good reason for them to do it.

What we're trying to do at the level of self, at the level of me feeling I am, I am this, I am that, is moving myself towards this better place. When I get there, I find myself being more contented, less caught up in these mental states and so on and so forth. This allows my meditation to go deeper because these are, in our meditation, what we call the hindrances. They're actually stopping us from going deeper and seeing where the initial problem lies.

This goodwill that we are generally spreading around all over the place at Christmas is something that we also need. It's not only an outward flow, it's an inward flow towards ourselves. One of the purposes of practising *mettā-bhāvanā* is to get that feeling of self-worth about ourselves.

Even during this time, it depends how you wish to spend tomorrow, but you might spend some time just reflecting. Just try to guide your thoughts towards those areas where we find ourselves stuck or where we find certain irritations, certain fears, anxieties, and just see them that actually they're telling us something about ourselves, the situation out there, the person out there. Then just to find a way of allowing yourself that original fear, anger, whatever it is, to arise. As it moves away, as it turns away, to establish the right relationship, the right relationship with a situation or with a person.

As we all know, this isn't easy work. You've got to keep at it. Even though sometimes you might feel things are going worse, sometimes it feels like that before it gets better. I'm sure you've heard that one before. So it's a case of really seeing our lives as an ethical process. It's not just this insightful process into impermanence and whatnot. It's actually an ethical process. It's a process of correcting our relationships. In a sense that's looking at the third middle characteristic of *dukkha*, of suffering. Remember, it always comes down to desire. This desire is a specific desire. It's not all desire, the desire to meditate, the desire to be liberated. It's not this *taṇhā*. This desire is always based on some wrong relationship we have, which is a fundamental delusion about who we are.

Even when we turn towards things like the ultimate things, like death, the Buddha's not shy about hitting nails on their head, like, "Life is uncertain, death is certain." I mean, he keeps poking you in the eye, sort of wake you up. It's being able to turn on that, turn on that certainty and looking at that fear because right there at the very fear of death we find this self. It's the self, it's this wrong relationship which is creating that initial, that deepest of all fears.

Just trying really to make that path quite clear to ourselves, that on the one side there's the process of insight, the process of seeing things as they really are, as the Buddha said. On the other side, it's how it manifests in our daily actions, speech, actions and livelihood. The one has to mirror the other. The way to liberation can come through any of those points on the Eightfold Path, especially those points about right speech, right action, but especially that right livelihood because in our actions we come across where the self is creating barriers, where the self is not able to extend itself in a fluid way into a situation, definitions, opinions, views, and all that sort of stuff.

Just as a final example of the distinction between what you might call a barrier and a boundary, boundaries are fluid, using that word as a fluid thing, is this whole business about opinions and views. If we see an opinion as just a perspective on a particular situation, political, social, etc., if it's just a perspective, we're much more open to accepting that other people have different perspectives. There's an ability there to work with it to find a compromise. So in terms of a self which is not so self-seeking, the word compromise is not a dirty word. But as soon as you identify with your opinion, "I am..." it's very

difficult to find that bridge. We see it constantly in places like the Middle East. There doesn't seem to be a way that these two sides can even come close to some sort of compromise, some sort of way of understanding each other and giving each other the sense of freedom they want.

However, it is Christmas, and we have to spread a bit of goodwill. And this evening in our *mettā*, perhaps we can bring these things to mind, like the Middle East, and send out our goodwill.

Just another final thing. Some people doubt the power of prayer, goodwill, blessings, and that sort of stuff. But there's a woman called Caroline Myss, some of you might have heard of her. And she tells a tale of a car crash in which the woman dies, comes out of her body. And as she looks down the line of cars, all these people are swearing and getting very angry with her and all that sort of stuff. But there's one woman who's praying for her. And what she sees is this energy going up and then coming down upon her. Anyway, as it is, she didn't die and she goes back into the body and all that. But she remembers the number plate of this person and seeks her out and takes her a bunch of flowers.

So even though we might do mettā only to help recondition our own hearts towards what is goodwill, I don't think we should doubt that it has some force. I'm always bemused, really, because, as you know, we read out these names in the morning, and occasionally somebody will say it really helped. And I can't really understand how it did it, but they actually feel it.

And there was one occasion—I mean, if you're a scientific materialist, obviously it's not going to make sense to you. But there was one case where somebody was dying and we were offering mettā and it so happened they died during that period when we were offering mettā, which I thought was extraordinary. Which means, I suppose you could translate that as being we killed them. But I think of it more positively as helping them move on.

So anyway, I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be fully liberated by observing these twin parts of the path of insight and ethical relationships. Sooner rather than later.

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