Opening of Dhamma Centre in Ghent: Community, Practice, and Daily Life Integration

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 41:23

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So first of all I want to say I'm very joyful to be here at the opening of this little centre in Ghent and really joyful that Linda has achieved her dream, for heaven's sake. Wonderful thing to set out an intention and then find yourself actually living it. So many congratulations.

And really I just want to remind people and inform people who don't know about the Buddha's teaching just how important it is to have a little centre like this in the city. When the Buddha set up his order, it tended to be a time of tremendous enthusiasm. It is said that for the first twenty years, he didn't have to make any rules. Everybody who joined was committed and kept to the general customs of the monastic life. And then after that they began to corrupt a bit and they had to make rules and regulations and we've ended up with 227 of them. So that's only the beginning, frankly. There's all sorts of rules and regulations. And of course what your rules and regulations do is they establish your institution. Yes, so that your institution is basically what your rules and regulations are. The way a country is ruled, its institutions define your country, don't they?

And what happened eventually, just as a long sweep of Buddhism, is that of course the monastics began to create these big university monasteries and monasteries that were stuck out into the forests and the jungles. And there was a slow, whether they liked it or not, there was some sort of disconnect because some time or other there was this movement that we know as Mahayana which really began to put the accent not so much on seeking your own liberation but also on compassion.

So although for instance my little place is out in the country, one of its drawbacks is that it doesn't, I can't see it unless something happens, it forming a sense of community around people who do similar things. Because everybody who comes to me then sort of disappears back to where they live, which is basically all over the place. Whereas when you have a centre in the city, what it does is it creates a little focal point and there's a chance of some community forming around it.

And the importance of community is right there: *Sangha*. You see, it's the third refuge. So during the year, he would encourage, the Buddha would encourage his monks and nuns to live quite isolatedly, go find a

foot of a tree or build a little hut somewhere and to carry on by themselves. But when the rainy season came, he would urge them all to come and live together. One of the reasons that they gave was that they shouldn't be trampling around killing little beasts during the rainy season walking around. But that seems to me sort of an excuse. The fact is that he saw the importance of actually people living together and actually being in communion.

And we need other people because if you don't have other people, there's a danger of you living in your own little world. And when we live in our own little world we don't see where we're going wrong. You need other people in a sense to correct your behaviour and to be a correspondence with, to sort of resonate with.

This morning we mentioned this eightfold path, you see. So the first one is this right understanding. So that's the importance really of meditation. And what a place like this does, it does encourage you to come every week to just make the effort to come to a place to sit and meditate together.

Just in my own development, looking back now, I was extraordinarily fortunate because in Britain in the late seventies, there were very few monks, just a handful of monks really dependent on the ethnic group. So there would be a Thai monk for the Thai community, etc. But in Birmingham, in the centre of Britain, the centre of England, there was a Burmese monk came to live there. There wasn't a particularly large Burmese community at all. In fact, it's never been very large. But he came to live there. And it's a bit of a funny story because what happened was the Tibetans were established up the road, the Tibetan group. They had asked the Karmapa, the old Karmapa, the one who died about twenty years ago I think, to send a monk and he sent Dr. Revatedama you see, who was a Theravāda monk. They were all very disappointed. And what happened was that there was this big house and eventually Revatedama had the top floor and the new Tibetan monk came and had the bottom floor.

And what it allowed people to do was to come every week to do their meditation, to meet, and to take it with them back home. Now just that, I found that just the effort of one evening of a week of having to make my way across town and sit with people and came back was like a little boost of energy. And I would continue throughout the week until the next boost. If I missed a couple of weeks my practice would go down. So I really made a big effort to make sure that I got there just every week.

The other benefit that I found at that time was that because after a few years, two or three years, he was able to move to a different place. So it became a sort of Theravāda centre. So I began going there also to do day retreats. And I ended up with the habit of going there once a month to do two days. That was a resident thing. You could stay there. And that again was a sort of boost.

So that's what we need. We need to have community. We need to have a place where you can keep giving yourself little kickstarts. And by coming here just of an evening, it gives you a kickstart for the next week. And if you did a day retreat here once a month or so, that would be a little boost, you see. And then once a year to try and get a decent week in, you see, then you complete the cycle.

And the process of spiritual growth is just very slow. For the vast majority of people, it's a slow process. The Buddha actually warns us, it's gradual. So very few people have this cataclysmic insight and are suddenly boomeranged into the higher realms of the spiritual life. Most of us, it's just an uphill slog. It's just one foot after the other, up and down. And it would be all right if it was directly up, but it isn't, is it? It's up and then down and then up and then down, then down and down, then up and up. But eventually over a period, you can see that there's been some change, some progress, you see. You know, say twenty-five years. And you look back and think, oh, I have changed, you see. But if you look back over a week or a year, you think, well, nothing's happening. So it's a case of taking a very long-term view of the spiritual practice.

Now, the core scripture, the jewel of the collection, as it's known, is the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse. And it's a discourse on how to establish this awareness, this awareness that leads to liberation, leads to knowledge and insight. And who does he deliver that core discourse to? Now, you'd think, well, he delivered it to his order, to the monks and what not. He didn't. He delivered it to the ordinary people of Kuru Sadamma. And the Kurus, in a special town called Kuru Sadamma, lived approximately where you get modern Delhi. And he'd been up there teaching, teaching them, and they'd been sort of very interested. And when he went back to visit them, he was surprised to find that they were actually following his teaching.

See? I mean, I found this when I first began to teach. I would give these instructions, but hardly anybody really followed them, you see. And I used to get irritated, you see, just in myself, I didn't show it, of course. And I'd say, you know, why didn't you follow? So, and then I found out, well, people aren't going to follow your instructions, you see. So now I rejoice when somebody actually follows my instructions, see. So I never get irritated. I say, oh, finally, somebody's doing it.

So you see, he got back there to Kuru Sadamma, and he found all these people actually practising this moment to moment mindfulness. And he said, there are things like there was no well talk. So in those days, of course, you'd go to the well and you'd have a gossip. But they weren't doing that. They were actually following his instructions. And it was there that he gave this talk about how to establish a specific type of mindfulness that led to liberation.

So this shows us two things. First of all, that he really took practising lay people seriously. It wasn't as though he was just connected to his monks and nuns. And secondly, most important, he had no doubt that lay people could become just as enlightened as monks, if only they gave themselves to the practice.

So, as a lay person, your job is to bring the Dharma into everything you're doing. Now, in the standing meditation there, I pointed out to you that seeing of an intention is the point of change. If we don't see an intention, then we'll just do it in a thoughtless way.

Recently I read this report, I think it was about a year ago, that psychologists had found that decisions are made before you're aware of them. Did you see that report? Where they've shown that in the brain, in these circuits, they show that actually a decision has been made and then the person becomes aware, does

it and then thinks that they've actually made the decision. But the decision was actually made before they became aware of it. Now that is a simple, pure, wonderful example of the unaware life. That is the deluded life where you think you're making the decisions, but actually you're being an automaton. You're actually running according to past habits.

Now, the whole point is that as you become aware of those intentions, then they don't get empowered. You see the intention coming up, like we did, intending to sit. If you're there still, you see, with that awareness, and you see that intention to sit coming up, there's a moment there where you can say, well, should I be sitting or should I be walking or should I be doing something else? See? That's how you take control of your life.

How many times has suddenly you've said to yourself, oh, I'll have a cup of coffee. And you're just making a cup of coffee. You don't even think about it. You're just done. And then while you're drinking your coffee, your mind's running all over the place and you finish your cup of coffee and you think, hold on, did I have that cup of coffee or did I not have that cup of coffee? Completely lost. No memory of it at all. And you think, well, I'll have another one. Because you didn't enjoy that coffee at all. You meant to enjoy it, but your mind was somewhere else. So this is the unaware life. I mean, that's what we're trying not to do. And just observing that intention re-empowers us. This is the point.

In the core of his teaching, he teaches this dependent origination, okay? And dependent origination without going into it in too much detail is the psychology of either delusion or liberation. And there's a point in the process of mentation, in the process of how we think and do things where feeling arises which is either pleasant or unpleasant. It can be caused by anything. So it might be that just at this time of day, I always have coffee. So this unpleasant feeling comes up and it has to be assuaged. It has to be answered and the answer is coffee. So with that unpleasant feeling, there comes this intention, coffee. Now that intention is coming from past habit of always drinking coffee at four o'clock in the afternoon. Is it four o'clock yet? See, at four o'clock in the afternoon. Not yet. No, it's near enough. Okay, it's getting close. Okay. Relax.

So, this intention for coffee comes up, you see. Now, normally speaking, there's an immediate identification with it. I want coffee. The I comes in at that point. And once the I comes in, it's impossible to stop the next moment of willing. See? So, it's coffee. Coffee. Right? Feeling coffee. Want. I. Get. That's how it goes. Now, in our language, we say, I want coffee. But it's not. It's coffee want I. That's the process. And because it's coffee want I, you can stop it at the want. And you don't have to identify with it. See? And in not identifying with it, means you don't collapse into, you don't become the desire. And that moment gives you a moment to say to yourself, well, should I, should I not?

And if you say no, and it's a strong desire, then you have to sort of stay with it, right? And wait for this pain, this suffering to give way. You see, you get this tremendous urge for coffee, just to wait. And as it passes away, what's actually disappearing, what's actually being undermined is the force of that habit.

See? So the next time that intention comes up for coffee, it's not so great. It's not so grasping. See? And eventually it'll die out.

Now if we did that as a constant throughout our lives, every time we saw, first of all, to be awake to see an intention, secondly to have the patience when we see there's an unwholesome intention to die away, you see, very quickly you change your habits. And of course in the opposite, every time you see an intention which you come as wholesome, and there's this negativity saying, no, I don't want to do that. But you actually do it, you see, then you're producing a habit which is taking you into wholesomeness. That's all.

Now, that is practice in daily life in a very simple way. See? Now, what we do is, the coffee comes up, you see, and you say, no, no, and you suffer and you suffer and you suffer and then it finally gives away and you think, great, I gave up coffee, you see. And then you're a bit anxious, you're a bit depressed, you see. Coffee comes up, whoop, you have coffee. So one minute we're letting go, and the next minute we're finding it again. And that's why it takes so long to become liberated. But if we were actually fierce in our intention and never gave way, then we'd very quickly change ourselves. And that's the core practice. And that's the core practice. It doesn't matter whether you're a lay person or a monastic. That's the core practice.

Right as right speech, right action and right livelihood. So take livelihood for instance. Whatever your livelihood is, you see, unless it's obviously immoral, you know, I don't know, arms trafficking, human trafficking, that's pretty immoral. So if you're not doing that, you're all right. So most people have jobs which are in themselves wholesome.

What turns it into a spiritual practice is your attitude to the job. If you see yourself doing work which is a service to others, that's an immediate act of generosity. Whether you want to or not is immaterial. It's the fact that you've now intended your work to be a service to others, and of course you include yourself, others and yourself, but mainly your intention is to be of service to others in whatever way you can. Immediately you see whether you like it or not you're developing a beautiful attitude. And at first it may, you may be still stuck with the effects of an old attitude of being grumpy, of not wanting to do the work, of hating this and hating that, you see. But as those die away, that sense of service begins to resonate in the heart and that's where you get your joy. And then your life work becomes a joy, no matter what it is. Whether it's sweeping the streets or being a nurse or being an astrophysicist, it doesn't really matter, because it's your intention as to why you're doing it, and that becomes right livelihood.

And in ordinary daily life, just washing the pots, you see, washing the pots, I mean, that becomes a practice in itself, right, to actually just turn it into a mindfulness exercise. And then every time you wash the pots, you can see your mindfulness increasing, you see. And then you start looking for a job washing pots. You see, it's such a wonderful practice.

Right speech, you see. The Buddha talks about kindly speech, right? To make sure that when you're talking to somebody, it's always coming from some sort of heart of kindness. It's honest, right? And the third one,

which I think is particularly important, that is at a suitable time. You don't put your foot in it. You're actually saying that you might want to say something kindly and you might want to say something honest, but it might not be the right time. You have to be careful when you say things. So if you take those three little guidelines, then you're careful in what you say, in what you speak. It's probably the hardest of all these training rules is right speech, because we're always talking.

So you can see that every moment in our lives, from a spiritual point of view, offers this opportunity to bring awareness, to bring goodness, to bring virtue, and naturally—so you have to work at it—the joy arises.

Now that's the positive bit. The negative side is, of course, that you have to also work with stuff that comes up, the anxieties, the depressions and whatnot. And slowly, by finding this position of being able to bear with them, being patient with them, allowing them to manifest at the right time, so that you're no longer hijacked by your emotional states, they no longer govern your life. See, that's a liberation. And also not getting that attitude of being against them, fighting them, being frustrated by them, wanting them to go. You're immediately in conflict. If you feel a little anxiety and you want it to go, you're in conflict with it, you're creating even more disturbance.

So when we have these negative states, to actually find the space and time to let them express themselves. And in so doing, you're allowing that turbulence to die out but also developing an attitude of not being affected by them so that you can carry on your daily life no matter what mental state that happens to arise. And remember we were talking about it this morning that when something negative comes you can always park it like a car—which is not the same as suppressing. Suppressing is you push it away with anger or with fear. But just by putting it to the side and then putting your whole attention on what you're doing, then as it were you're building up another mental state to the side of it which is joyful. And then you find some time in the day or in the week where you can go back to this mental state and let it manifest, and that's how you work with negative mental states.

So from negative mental states you're bearing them when you can so that they are dying out. And you're being skillful in the sense that you're not being governed by them, overtaken by them, by putting your attention, by training yourself to put your attention in what is positive and wholesome. And on the positive side, whenever you see something wholesome or where you want yourself to develop, you put your whole attention and effort into that area. Very slowly you move across from darkness to light. Easy-weezy-peasy.

And when we fail, you see, when we go back to old habits, when you find yourself going down again, you see, so at some point you have to bump, you have to stop, you see. And then you have to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again. That's it. And frankly, most of our spiritual lives is picking ourselves up, dusting ourselves off and starting all over again. That's it. Just very slowly. Resilience. Resilience, you see. Continual effort. Very slowly. And that's really basically how we bring the Dhamma

into our lives.

So there's no mysticism about Buddhist practice. It really is about developing the good heart, letting go of the heart which is full of horror and misery, and developing the good heart. And as we're doing that, as we're doing that, you see, there's a natural separation of this awareness, this consciousness. There's a natural bringing, there's a natural elevation, a movement of this consciousness out of the psycho-physical organism. Out of emotions, out of the body, out of mind—meaning thoughts and images. And as it pulls itself out, it comes to recognize its own true nature.

And it's the slow recognition of this consciousness, of this awareness, that is the spiritual part of your practice, the real spiritual part, because this is what doesn't belong to the earth, it doesn't belong to nature, it's something other than. And as it gathers its own inner understanding, you see, it now goes back into this psychophysical organism and into the world in order to spread its understanding.

So when you're sitting in meditation, you're displacing your attention into an observation post. It's like a crow's nest on a ship. You know the bit where the sailor climbs up to see if he can see the land? So he's up there, you see. You've discovered this place of the one who knows, the observer, the feeler. So this is a special place from which you can observe the body with its feelings, the heart with its emotional states, the mind with its thoughts and images, the process of desire which is where the problem lies. And from that state you see—whether we are aware of it or not, really recognizing it or not—this consciousness has been displaced, it's relocated somewhere, and in that relocation it's discovering a new identity.

So this identity is the observer, the feeler, the knower. It's still false because there's still somebody there. It's not the end product. But it's a place where we can observe the whole process as to how we create happiness or unhappiness for ourselves. And then slowly but surely, as that becomes more and more obvious to us, then we'll want to stay there more. You'll want to stay in that peacefulness.

And what we discover is that whatever happiness is—it's a difficult one—whatever happiness is, real happiness, true, unchanging, everlasting happiness, is not an emotion. So that sort of discovery, you see, leads us to a different place.

Now does that mean that you therefore, does the Buddha not have a heart? You see? No, not at all. Because when that Buddha mind re-enters into the psycho-physical organism, the human being, it then begins to act as a human being. So the Buddha's asked, he says, when somebody comes to you, hears your teaching but does not respond, how do you feel? He says, it's all right. He's their *kamma*. I've done my bit and it's up to them now. And they ask him how do you feel when somebody does accept you? He says, I feel joyful, sympathetic joy. So there's, it's as though the heart is a sort of resonance, see, to the mind, to this consciousness. It resonates. So that's the spiritual part, you see.

And when you connect the ordinary psychological daily action, the ethical part of our lives, with that process, then you see the connection that when we are coming into a situation, when we are acting from

the point of delusion, misunderstanding, it manifests in unethical actions. And when we're coming from the point of wisdom, it manifests in virtuous action. So you can't separate ethics from the spiritual life. The one goes together.

Yeah? I mean, how would you feel if the Buddha was caught shoplifting? Terrible, wouldn't it? Shoplifting, stealing from a shop. It wouldn't be good, would it? You know, the Buddha being carried out by police. You know, for shoplifting, for heaven's sake. I mean, murder, we can understand. But, you know, silly stuff. It's petty, it's ridiculous, you see. It doesn't work, does it? Yeah? So complete virtue and complete enlightenment are one and the same thing. The one is the mirror of the other. So that's why when you take the refuges, you always take the precepts, because they're connected. You can't have the one without the other.

See, when I started meditating, there was still the aftermath, really, of, you know, of the hippie period and all that sort of stuff. And I would meditate with people who would meditate really hard for six months, I mean, you know, sweat to the brow, I mean, really give themselves, you know? And then after that it was sex, drugs and rock and roll. You know what I mean? And they never got anywhere, you know? What to do?

So hopefully these days we've gone beyond that a bit and recognise that there is a connection between spiritual growth and our ethics, our moral lives.

So that's it really. The beauty of having a little center like this is it allows you to come here once a week to recharge your batteries, your spiritual batteries. And then to make sure that in daily life you always have a right intention for everything you do. And that even when you're rushed, you can still stop. Even when you have to do something quickly, you needn't get into a rush. See, that's also a skillful thing to be able to do. And that you begin to understand the role of intention in developing yourself.

And that just by that action of coming to a center, meditating this *vipassanā*, finding that position of the observer, doing it every morning so that you always re-establish that place, and know how to get back to it at any moment of the day. See. Close the door. Just stand there for a minute. That's it. You just stop. You got it. See. And always moving from that point. Right. Making the right intention. And that's it. And just very slowly. The whole process works for you. Becomes a habit. Once it's a reinforced habit, even when you don't meditate for a day or a week, you see, then you still go back to it.

There was a very famous Russian ballet dancer, Nureyev, in the 70s, some of you might have seen him, and he used to say, if I didn't practice for one day, it was okay. If I didn't practice two days, I felt it. If I didn't practice three days, everybody else did, right? So there you've got your standard, you see. You can miss your meditation for a day. The second day you'll feel it and the third day everybody else will. So it's just getting yourself into that continuous.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated by your constant and

ever energized practice from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Very good. So now what do we do now? Got to get this, the strings. Ah yes, the long strings. Okay. Right. Yes. So now is this company coming in just in time for the blessing? Wonderful. Is that door open? Is that...

Ah, she's shy. Look, you see. She doesn't want to be seen. I love it. You see, that's very interesting, isn't it? Because when you see, if like, if you're sitting on a train and there's a baby there, looking at you, seeing you're going, and then, and then they look at you, and then suddenly they're like what's going on, you know? And then there comes this point where the baby actually sees that you're looking at them, see. At first it's just them looking at you, that's it, you see. Then suddenly you're looking at it and actually you gotta hide. Other people's eyes are like, oh, they bore into them, yeah. It's funny, isn't it? Little children. The growth of consciousness.

So, okay, so now we have to pass this string around and as we do it, it's very bad *kamma* if it touches the ground. I'll only say it once. I'll only say it once.

No, you take it. Yeah, that's it. Just make sure you wrap it around. No, you want a bit more because you want to keep your hand down there. Give it plenty, give it plenty. I don't want you to pull the jar over. Yeah, you're alright.

So this, you see, is going into the water here. You see? And it goes around the Buddha, around the flowers, and then it's going around everybody. Everybody has to piece this ring, you see? So you're all connected, so that when we do the chanting, this water becomes entirely empowered by your kindness and love. It starts to boil.

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. Doesn't matter how it goes, zigzag, it doesn't matter. Just keep passing it around. It'll come up in a minute. It doesn't have to go around your head. It doesn't have to do that. It could hang itself. I don't want people to throttle themselves. Ah yes, all around the back. What's the little girl called? What's the little girl called? Um...

And then, oh, I just thought you've got to do the pouring, haven't you? Yeah. Can we just shift this a bit? Yeah. Actually, no, if you come, I have to tell you, the best thing is for you to come here. That's it. For you to come here. That's the best. That's better. Have you got enough string there? I have enough string, yeah. How are we doing? Is it coming up this way again? Now, if you hold it there, you see. Are you going to hold it there? Yeah. Okay, okay. Whoa, whoa, whoa. Okay. Right.

Now, I'm going to chant the discourse on loving kindness, and then afterwards Linda will read it in Dutch. And then while I chant, now you're going to pour the water, and remember it overflows, see. So this is an opportunity for you just to offer your goodwill. There are four classic blessings: may you be safe, may you be well, may you be happy, and may you live contented in harmony with the world, see. So it doesn't matter what blessing you use, but use it in order to spread it out to yourself, to everybody here, and to this lovely little building. Okay.

Sabbe sattā averā hontu abyāpajjā hontu anīghā hontu sukhī attānaṁ pariharantu. Sabbe sattā sabba-dukkhā pamuccantu. Sabbe sattā sabba-rogā muccantu. Sabbe sattā sabba-upaddavā muccantu. Sabbe sattā sabba-dukkha-domanassa-upāyāsā muccantu. Sabbe sattā sukhī hontu.

Sukhino vā khemino hontu sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhitattā. Ye keci pāṇabhūtā pāṇā vā thāvarā vā anāvaseṣā dīghā vā ye mahantā vā majjhimā rassā-kānikā-thūlā dīrghā vā ye diṭṭhā vā adiṭṭhā vā ye ca dūre vasanti avidhure sabbesattā bhavantu sukhitattā.

Na paro paraṁ nikubbetha nātimaññetha katthaci naṁ kañci kiñcanena viheṭhayetha na aṇḍaṁ sajīvaṁ hanyāt. Mātā yathā niyaṁ puttaṁ āyusā ekaputtam anurakkhe evampi sabbabhūtesu mānasaṁ bhāvaye aparimāṇaṁ.

Mettañca sabbalokasmiṁ mānasaṁ bhāvaye aparimāṇaṁ uddhaṁ adho ca tiriyañca asaṁbādhaṁ averaṁ asapattaṁ. Tiṭṭhañcaraṁ nisinno vā sayāno vā yāvat-assa vigata-middho etaṁ satiṁ adhiṭṭheyya brahmam etaṁ vihāraṁ idha-mahu.

If you are wise and you want to achieve a state of peace, you should be capable, upright, perfectly upright, compliant, gentle, and humble.

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