The Principles and Problems of Vipassanā

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 35:55

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

I like to start with that little chant just to remind myself what I'm supposed to be doing, which is to express the Buddha's teaching and not my own peculiar understandings.

So this morning really it's just a little revision for most of you about the principles of meditation and maybe for some of you just an introduction. The Buddha is very clear about his teachings. Even though we have masses of scriptures, stories and teachings that come from his time, they're all really pointing to this one and same thing that he reduced his whole teaching to. He was only concerned with *dukkha* and the end of dukkha. This word is really kernel to his teachings.

There's no single English word that grasps its meaning. It's basically anything that you would consider to be unsatisfactory, suffering. So it traverses the whole gamut of human misery from the slightest discomfort to the deepest despair, panic, all that sort of stuff. But it also is around something that we mentioned this morning, around indulgence and our relationship to the pleasures and joys of life. And so he says that the whole of his teaching is around that and the end of that, the end of that suffering.

And the core problem lies in identity. Once we've grasped that, then we can really begin to undermine a lot of our suffering. Identity is when you say, I am. I am. So, I am unhappy. Well, how can you get out of that? If you say, I am depressed, what way is there out of that? That's what you are. You see what I mean? You've blocked yourself in. You've built this wall around this depression called me. I am hungry. What can you do? You've got to eat. There's no way out of I am. And so the core of the teaching lies around this problem of identity and its secondary problem of possession.

So once you say I am a human being, big problems arise. Of course, I'm not suggesting that, conventionally speaking, we're not human beings. I mean, we are different from other beings. But something goes awry when we make that very deep connection with this form of life. That connection is about being happy. I mean, if you were to ask anybody in the world what do they want to be, they'd be happy. They might have all sorts of definitions as to what happiness means, but they all want to be happy. And therefore, we seek happiness in the world. So that's where things go wrong, because nothing in this world can really fulfill the deep desire to be in a continuous state of happiness, because nothing lasts. It's a big problem for us.

So as soon as I have something which makes me happy, I form a relationship to it. I say, well, this is me or this is mine. So if I'm feeling good, I've just been successful at something or I've just met a good friend and

all that sort of stuff, I say I'm happy, see? And once I found a situation, once I found an environment, a circumstance which makes me happy, then of course there's a tendency to just want to continue it. It's like, the party was great, let's have another one. It's just the next one's never quite up to it, is it?

So this grasping, that's what we mean by this grasping, this attachment, is whenever something happens to us which we associate with happiness, then of course we want to hold it, want to maintain it and if possible to make it grow. And if it's something that we have then of course we want to make sure that we protect it. If you have a car, have a mobile, then there's a relationship with this object which you don't have with other people's cars and other people's mobiles. It's like it's mine.

Do you know what I mean? And it's not only a psychological dependency now, because you get very upset if somebody steals your mobile, it's a legal fiction, isn't it? I mean, if somebody steals something of yours, your mobile, you go around saying somebody stole my mobile, see? As though it was still yours. It's ridiculous, isn't it? Because it now belongs to the thief. They're the ones who have the mobile. So, when we look at our relationship to the things that we experience and the things that we have, and we look at them closely, then we can see it's actually causing some psychological dependency. It's a form of addiction.

And whenever we do that, if things change, then it produces the other side of happiness which is unhappiness. That's only one side of the equation. The other side is this business of aversion. So now we're into really fending off anybody who undermines my happiness. And that puts me into a state of aversion, of hatred, of wanting to get rid of the person. My life would be really happy if you would just disappear, if you'd go away, leave me alone. And then if it's too much, I'm into the obverse of fear, of hatred and aversion, which is fear and anxiety.

These two are very close. If when they arise in you, you actually experience them as sensation, not as an emotion, a named emotion, you'll find that the sensations around those things are very close. You'll find, I'm sure, that hatred is very cold like fear and anxiety is very hot like anger. And at a sensation base, it's often quite difficult to sometimes see a distinction between them. It's the mind which produces the definition and the consequent action that we take.

So here we have a real duality of behavior in the world where we're constantly in conflict. Every so often we do reach a stasis, a place that we might call happiness. It never lasts. And so we find ourselves constantly holding on to something, making sure it doesn't move, doesn't change, or we want to get rid of something. So our lives, even at a very simple level, are a conflict.

So you're lying in bed and suddenly you feel uncomfortable, the body feels uncomfortable. So you've got to move. If you don't move, you start getting angry with yourself, angry with the bed, it's not quite the right bed, and so on. It's like when you catch that this deep relationship that we have with this body, this psycho-physical organism, then you see that something's gone wrong at a very deep, profound level. And that's what we're chasing in our meditation. We're trying to see the consequences of this and go back on the process to find out where the original mistake is made.

Now that original mistake is what the Buddha calls the delusion. And it arises out of, really, a very innocent state, which is often translated as ignorance. But ignorance gives it a pejorative meaning. It's as though you should have known. But actually it's a state of not knowing. So it's a very open state in which simply by not knowing the way things really are, so there's a little pat phrase from the Buddha to see things as they really are, to see and understand things as they really are, we just made a simple mistake. Although it's simple, it's also profound.

And the fact is that the society we're born into supports that mistake, supports it completely. And in these days, of course, with our materialism and our materialistic science and materialistic understandings, that's not all of us, of course, but with that understanding subsisting a lot of what our society does, then it completely turns us all towards this life, what this life can give us as a source of true happiness.

So all the Buddha's saying is, look, really investigate this stuff, try to find out whether in fact where you're putting your energy, where you're putting your investments, whether in fact you're getting a decent return. And when you begin to look at it from that point of view in the beginning, then there comes this doubt as to whether in fact we're chasing the right thing here.

One of the mistakes that we can make is to think that therefore the Buddha is saying that what we have to get rid of is all pleasures and all joys of life. But that would be one step too far. He's not negative towards life. He himself knows when he's having a beautiful meal. He knows when he's eating, but he also knows that there is no greed involved. Now that greed is something to do with our relationship to food that we mentioned this morning, seeking happiness in food.

And therefore, one would think, well, if I don't seek happiness in food, therefore the food becomes tasteless, or I lose interest in food, or I don't even want to know about food. But that would be a step too far. We have to understand that the body is always going to give us pleasure and pain. So when pleasure arises, it's to be appreciated. It's to be enjoyed, but somehow not to be seen as a source of happiness. When the heart responds with joy and you're in a state of peace and calm, that's beautiful. It's to be appreciated, it's to be enjoyed. But if you think that's real happiness, then there's a problem.

Because if you think that emotions, that the emotional life is happiness, then you're always going to try and manipulate the whole of life to make yourself feel happy. And that produces a real conflict within us because life just won't do it. Even people, people who sometimes delight us are sometimes extraordinarily painful. And of course, we to them. And it's just that natural ability to see that the emotional life is not really where true happiness lies.

So now, then we're left with the intellect. Then we're left with thought and imagination. And what we realize through our meditation is that it's absolutely rampant. I mean, most people, I think, before they begin to meditate, think that they are in control of their minds. They think what they want to think and feel what they want to feel. Then when they come to meditation, try and sit still, they realize, actually, they're berserk. They're absolutely nutters. The mind simply goes absolutely AWOL.

And then you realize that actually, for most of people's lives, they're acting in a very automatic, automaton way, that decisions are made before they know about them, and then they say that they've actually made this decision. But it's made at a subconscious level because it's habitual. And this came up in some tests that some scientists did about this stuff, where they do brain scans and they can tell when somebody's made a decision. And the decision comes before they actually recognize that they've made a decision.

Now that, in Buddhist understanding, is the mindless life. That's exactly how we often behave even people who've been in meditation for a long time find themselves behaving in that mindless way because it's habitual. It just happens. But then there's this little trick that we play on ourselves where we actually think or we somehow experience that as me making that decision.

Now, what our meditation is trying to do is to waken us up and to be in that state of alertness so that we actually see this movement in the mind and heart of an intention. And it's at the point of intention that we can take control. Because if that intention, we see that intention as being unwholesome, then we have to relax around it, not to be governed by it. And we find that just by letting that energy, that desire, die away, we're actually undermining that conditioning that we ourselves have put there. And every time we see something which is wholesome, then you decide to do it, you empower it. And in that way, the conditioning that we are reinforcing grows for us.

So you might feel, for instance, lethargic during the day for no reason, really. You've slept well. There's no reason to feel tired. But it's more to do with the dullness that we suffer from, the lethargy that we suffer from, which is often, for most people, a big hindrance in the meditation. As soon as you sit, you fall asleep. And in daily life, you might find just feeling a bit tired. So without really thinking, you just lay out on the couch, head for the bed, all that sort of stuff. And unfortunately, without us knowing it, we're reinforcing that little habit. It feels nice, it feels good, but it builds up within us this habit of seeking happiness in sleep. Seeking an escape in sleep.

And of course that's a very suppressive measure, so that sometimes we might wake up feeling better, but it's at the expense of having pushed things down into the psyche, into our psychology. And that comes out later on as greater feelings of dullness, greater feelings of lethargy. And so the wheel turns. And without us knowing, we're just making these little decisions, quite unmindfully, just falling asleep all over the place.

There was once when I was in a monastery and there was a monk there who got himself into this awful state of constantly falling asleep. And as soon as you sat with him, it was a very strange situation really, but as soon as he came to sit with you, you'd be talking to him and he'd just fall asleep like that. And he got himself into this dreadful state, and he complained to me that his concentration was very bad. So I said, well, you've just got to put a bit more energy into life. And that's one of the pitfalls of the monastic life, because you don't get somebody pushing you. So eventually, you can fall into this habit of just, as soon as you sit down, you fall asleep.

It's understanding how we empower these things that begins to make us understand how we can disempower them. So there's a process, and that's why I chant this dependent origination in the morning, because there the Buddha describes very clearly the process whereby we create this conditioning within ourselves. So as soon as we have an idea or some feeling, some state enter into our minds, there's a movement towards it. And that's what he calls this *tanha*.

Tanha translates as craving, but in a sense that gives us a wrong impression really. It's more that there's a desire to indulge it in some way or to resist it in some way. And it's actually staying with that feeling of resistance, feeling of desire, and not empowering it, not doing what it makes you to do, what it wants you to do, that if you stay with that feeling, no matter how strong it is, no matter how uncomfortable it is, stay with it long enough for it to die away, for it to begin to exhaust itself. And you find that energy, that habitual energy, begins to just fade away. Because you're not reinforcing it. It needs, these habits need to be reinforced. They need new energy to keep going.

I went walking up a hill down in Dingle there with this guy. And he's a regular mountain climber. And he climbs two mountains a week. Can you imagine that? Two mountains a week. And in between time he cycles. And he just says if he stops climbing the mountain, even for a week or so, there's a loss of stamina. There's a loss of actual muscle power. So even at a basic physical level, if you don't keep up that practice, the habit immediately begins to atrophy, begins to die.

Now, in terms of the parts of ourselves which are negative, that works for us. All we have to do is not empower an intention. And in so doing, that habit that we want to get rid of dies away. And of course, that sounds easy, but anybody who's tried to give up a strong habit knows that it's extraordinarily difficult. And you've got to keep the effort to just keep letting go, keep letting go.

This phrase that you'll come across, letting go, it's not your letting go of something, it's your allowing something to arise and pass away. Actually, it's not an active part on our side of letting something go, but more in the sense of being with something and allowing it to arise and allowing it to pass away. That's what it really means.

So, the final is that we've talked about this identity business and how we have to actually not fall into the mistake of always saying, I am. In our meditation, we're pulling out of the whole process. That's what the meditation is about. It's about showing us a different position that we can take. So, for instance,

when I've got a pain in the knee from the sitting, I can see immediately that there's a desire to want to move to get rid of the pain. But instead of doing that, I'm actually being aware of that process of wanting to get rid of the pain, of being unable to stay equanimously with pain. And then as I watch that, I might be surprised to find that that desire disappears.

The consequence of wanting to get away from the pain is something that we've taught ourselves, because this doesn't make us happy. And then when we sit with the pain, when we just sit with it equanimously,

we find that there's no suffering. So we made a distinction between a physical discomfort and a mental state. And the two become quite separate for us. And we realize that this suffering is actually a mental position. It's not a physical position. The only thing that a physical position can give us is sensation.

Now I'm not suggesting that we get to a point with pain where it's not making us scream. As soon as we stop learning from pain, there's no point, to my mind anyway, in bearing with it. We can move. It's not a macho thing. You're not trying to defeat pain. I don't think you'll win, frankly. So as soon as you recognize this aversion towards pain, then we watch that. So already I've pulled out of a certain psychology. Already I've discovered a different position within myself. Instead of "I don't want, I don't like this pain, I will move away from it," suddenly we're saying, "There is the desire to move away from pain. There is dislike."

That shift, that shift from "I am" to "there is," is radical. It's a completely different level of identity. I'm hoping everybody's shaking.

So when you get an emotional state, you feel depressed or you feel anxious, our normal reaction is to say, "I am depressed, I am anxious." Here you're sitting in your meditation and you feel the depression. You feel it as a physical state, as a mental state. You feel your anxiety, you feel your anger, all the usual rubbish. So as you feel that, instead of saying, "I am angry," you're saying, "There is." You're pointing to it, saying, "There is."

Now that's a radical shift, isn't it, in your position. Before you were "I am anxious," and now "there is anxiety." That shift in perspective, that shift is a shift of identity. You're now identifying with that which knows, that which feels, rather than what it feels and what it knows.

Now that little shift of identity, really, when you do that, really investigate it, really be with it, really see what its qualities are, and ask yourself: when my identity is with the knower, with the feeler, with the experiencer, am I actually experiencing suffering? Is there suffering there? Even though the situation I'm in may not be particularly good, even though the anxiety creates a mental state, an inner environment, an interior which is not particularly pleasant, am I actually suffering?

So make that very plain to yourself. And this constant pulling out from what we're experiencing within ourselves, constantly bringing ourselves out into the knower, the feeler, the experiencer, is the process whereby we're re-establishing a different identity. And so when we do that, we can see that all the body is offering us is sensation. Pain is a mental construct.

When you have pain in your knee and you're using a noting word, "pain, pain," and you're getting close to it, see if you can bury your attention directly into the sensations that you're calling pain. When you go deep enough, you'll find that the word "pain" disappears. You'll find the word "pain" disappears and you're using other words. Perhaps you're using the word "pressure" or "heat." And at that point, the whole concept of pain disappears. All you're left with is sensation. When you pull back a bit, then suddenly the word "pain" crops up again. And this is how we begin to realize that pain, suffering, all the stuff that we

have, are actually caused by the mind and not by the body. All the body can offer us is sensation.

Now when it comes to the mind itself, and you've got these painful emotions and stuff, then it's the same process. As soon as you go into depression, you lose the word "depression." What are you left with? Heaviness, dullness. As soon as you stop saying "anger" and you go into the feel of anger, what words are you using? Fieriness, heat, agitation, but you're not using the word "anger." And as soon as you step back a bit more, as it were, then suddenly the word "anger" appears in your mind.

And what's happening is that these emotional states, which are actually only feeling states, in the Buddha's vocabulary there's only one word to cover sensation, feelings and emotions as they are experienced in the body. That's the *vedanā* that you come across in what we chant. Then what you realize is that there's a movement of that energy into this higher faculties that we call our imagination and thought. And it's through the imagination and thought that these emotions are finding expression. But it's not just expression, they're actually indulging themselves.

So as you know, the more you work on anger, the more angry you get. The more somebody's upset you and the more you keep bringing it up in your head, then the more angry you get and by the end of the evening you're raging. You've insulted, you've repeated the insult a hundred thousand times. They only said it once and you've used it to crank it up so you can go out and have a very good purpose for killing them. So it's a case of recognizing that it's the mind which is causing the problem. In the Buddhist understanding, this is proliferation.

So that's why we make this very great effort in meditation, that as soon as the mind wanders and we wake up within it, we note what the attitude is that's propelling the mind into these thought patterns. We're never concerned with the content. Now, why is it we're never concerned with the content? Because it's not the content, it's not the person that's causing the problem. The problem is deep within ourselves to do with our relationship, our attitude.

So, if somebody shouts at me and says, "You stupid, bald-headed monk," that's very painful, isn't it? I mean, I could get very upset about that. But actually, it stopped at the ears and it stopped at the heart level where I can perhaps feel their anger towards me. But that's where, that's all they can do towards me. Then, as it were, I take those words inwards, and I chew over them, and I think, "Who the hell," and then before I know it, I've got myself in a rage over this person who dared to call me that. And all that's done by me.

If I'd been mindful, I would just have heard these words, "stupid, boring," and the feeling of anger, and it could have just stopped there. And instead, I could have been pouring out my great compassion towards them. So, what we begin to realize is that nobody actually is causing me suffering. This is a radical statement. Nobody can cause us psychological pain.

And once you realize that, then of course, at first, it's a bit disappointing, because it's good to be able to

blame somebody. But in the end, it's actually our liberation, because if I'm causing all this problem, then maybe I can undo it all. And that's exactly the Buddha's position.

So, our meditation, the actual practice of meditation is this constant effort to come out of what's happening and to observe it, to feel it, to experience what's happening from this vantage point of the knower, the observer, the feeler, the experiencer.

Now that's not the end point because there's still a sense of self there: "I am the knower" or "I am the one who knows." But at least that point is a very objective point and it allows us to see how we're creating the suffering for ourselves. How the world that we are creating is in a constant state of change. And now every time we fall into an identity with what's happening or a possession of what's happening, some form of unhappiness arises. Even if it doesn't feel immediate. For instance, when we indulge in something. So when you're indulging in something, while that's happening, it's pure heaven. It's when it comes to an end that you get the aftermath.

So although you find these loads of books written on Buddhism and heavy philosophy and deep psychology, actually speaking it's extraordinarily simple. All you have to do is just find this position in yourself, make sure that you know it quite clearly as to this observation post, that's a happy phrase by one writer, an observation post within ourselves, and you just watch. You just feel what's arising, just experience what's arising.

This intelligence which is liberating itself from the delusion, where does this delusion lie? It lies in the looking. It doesn't lie in the body. The body isn't deluded, the body is just the body. Emotions don't know themselves, do they? Emotions can't reflect upon themselves. There's some intelligence within us which is not looking correctly.

One good example of that is these astigmatisms in people's lenses, in their eyes. I mean, I'm supposed to have one. And it's like in the old glass where you've got that wavy because they hadn't perfected the way of making glass and you've got that wave. It's a distortion. But actually, if you've got one in your eye, you can't really tell it's there. It's really a very strange thing, but it's there. It's somehow distorting your sight. It's like a person who's colorblind, who's never been told they're colorblind. And they see the colors what they see. It's just that not everybody else is looking. Nobody else sees that. They're completely happy in the world that they've created.

So it's the same with us. We've created this world for ourselves coming from a distortion which we're not fully aware of. And we keep blaming the world, we keep blaming others, we keep blaming ourselves. But actually the fundamental problem lies in the way that we're looking, the way we're relating.

So, as we pull out from the body with its sensations, pleasant or unpleasant, you pull out from the heart with its emotional states, pleasant or unpleasant, as you begin to observe these thoughts that are coming through and not getting caught up in them, we're constantly correcting this astigmatism that's in the way

we're looking. And the Buddha is very clear about how that astigmatism is destroyed, completely taken out of the equation. And he says, just observe that things are rising and passing away.

So when you do that, when you realize that everything is rising and passing away, never repeats itself, then you immediately start letting go. What's the point of holding on to something which is going to disappear? And the radical position is that there is nothing in the world worth holding on to.

And then when you realize that this relationship we have of always seeking happiness in the world, can we be in the world in a different way? Can we just appreciate it, enjoy it, without holding on to it, without defining our happiness by what we experience, by what we have, by our mental state? And then finally there's this business of identity. And we do that through meditation. We do that through pointing at something. That's the noting techniques, extremely good at making us be very clear that what I'm experiencing is not me, not mine, because I'm actually pointing to it.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you continue to put great effort in your meditation and be liberated from suffering sooner rather than later.

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