Not-Self: Indulgence and All

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 50:53

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa
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Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

At the time of the Buddha, there were various ideas around this word kamma. We know it more commonly through the Sanskrit word karma with an R, but the way that Theravāda spells it is K-A-M-M-A, which is Pāli—what the scriptures are actually written in, a dialect from around modern Varanasi, around the Ganges.

Kamma is a core teaching, one of the Buddha's main insights upon liberation, upon his awakening. He talks of three things that happened to him upon awakening, in the immediacy afterwards. First, he was able to see his past lives and see how his ethical decisions had brought him to this place, how they caused him to suffer and put him into dire straits. Then he was able to see beings moving from one realm to another according to their ethical decisions, their moral decisions. What was then a personal understanding, a personal law, became a cosmic law. The third thing he recognized was that all his defilements had gone—there was nothing negative within his character and personality anymore. These are known as the three knowledges.

It's very difficult, I know, and you may come across Buddhist speakers who deny rebirth and things like that, but it's very difficult to read the scriptures without coming to the conclusion that the Buddha definitely understood the process as being very long-term, over lifetimes. The reason for that was that we begin from this point of not knowing. This not knowing is not a culpable state. It's often translated as ignorance—this word avijjā, for those of you who know it. It's referred to as ignorance, and that has a sort of pejorative meaning, as though you should have known, as though you've been an idiot. But it's actually a very neutral state of simply not knowing.

From this not knowing, it's your basic intelligence—that which does not know—finding itself in a situation, making sense of it. And it's made sense of for us by the society, culture, and history that we find ourselves in. It's from there that we build up our characters and personalities. We could say that at any given moment there is, underlying, this state of just not knowing. Because of that, we've moved into a situation of understanding, and this fundamental understanding as to who we are, what we are, or where we're going is actually the fundamental attitude that causes everything else.

One of the main understandings we have is that we are human beings. This is a big problem. Conventionally there's no problem; everybody knows we're human beings as opposed to primates and cats and all that. But when we actually say to ourselves, "Well, I'm a human being," our energies go into trying to make this life the end, the purpose of our living.

Especially these days, many people have lost any spiritual or religious foundation. There is only this life. And when you ask yourself, "What is it that I really want? Really deep down, what do I really want?" I think you can just come to the word: I want to be happy. You just want to be happy. And this happiness is then sought for in the world. What is it that brings us happiness as we understand it? It's sensual pleasure, it's relationships, it's our work sometimes, our hobbies. There's an absolute investment in life as a place where if you can just get it right, you'll be happy.

What this produces is a relationship to life and a relationship to people and what we have as collections. We collect things, we collect money, we collect our job, we collect people. That collection—the word normally used for it is attachment. The reason we're attached is because this makes me happy. I'm attached to the things I own, to my house, to my HDTV and all that, because this is what's making me happy. That's where I actually put the investment.

Unfortunately, having created these little islands of happiness around objects, anything that begins to upset that, I form a very negative relationship towards. That's your aversion. Anything that undermines my happiness becomes my enemy. And if the enemy is too big, then I become frightened, I get very anxious.

So from this fundamental misunderstanding, which is often termed delusion, you have a basic relationship to life of having to collect things around you, hold on to things, keep things which are going to make you happy, and you've got to make sure that mustn't be upset. From that sense of attachment—often referred to as greed, though it's not quite that word, just attachment—we get aversion, which splits into two relationships: one of aversion, not liking, pushing away; and one of running away, anxiety, fear.

From that basic relationship we produce our kamma. Kamma in the Buddhist teaching is a technical word which actually only refers to an action—that's what it really means, just an action. Whatever we do, whether it's an act of thought, an act of speech, or something we actually do physically, an action as such is driven from that particular delusion. Constantly, we're in a constant relationship of trying to jiggle the world to make sure we're sort of happy. Even as you're sitting here, you might find that without knowing it, you become slightly uncomfortable in your seat and shift position. If we just watch ourselves throughout the day, we're constantly moving towards comfort, towards what makes us feel happy, always trying to escape what is uncomfortable, what is making us feel unhappy. These actions—this is what the Buddha referred to as kamma. These are your actions.

In dependent origination, which is the Buddha's psychology as to how we create our misery—we'll go on to happiness towards the end of the talk, a real happiness, so I don't want to get you too depressed—in the

way that we create this unhappiness, the Buddha points out very clearly through the teaching of dependent origination. This dependent origination, you might come across in later Buddhism, was expanded completely into a sort of universal concept of interrelatedness, everything being dependent on something else. But in the Buddha's original teaching, although you may find those sorts of ideas, he's very centered upon our inner personal psychology.

What happens to us on the outside is not really material to the process of liberation. It's always what's happening inside us which is actually causing either the misery or the escape from misery. So, for instance, if I'm in the quiet coach of a train—I'm sure you've all been in a quiet coach—and somebody decides to use their mobile, it's what's happening in me that's turning the quiet coach into a really small little hell realm.

because I'm saying they shouldn't be doing that, this is a terrible thing, it's really unethical and punishable by law, and I'm getting all heated and hot about it. All of that is being created internally—it's not being created by the phone call. And then of course, suddenly my phone goes off, and this call is very important, so I've got to take it. I presume everybody else will understand that.

You can see from this that if we look at ourselves throughout the day, there's always something coming at us from the outside, always something impinging upon our consciousness. And there's always this response—you might call it a reaction rather than a response, because the reaction is already dictated by our past actions, which have produced certain habits, certain patterns of behavior within us. It's really beginning to see how these are produced that allows us to see where the escape is.

So long as people say to themselves, "The reason I'm unhappy is because of the government," or because of bankers, or because of my neighbor, or because of my kids—if I am constantly thinking that the other person is the direct cause of my misery, then I'm always going to be in some sort of relationship to the world of trying to change the world. I'm always trying to do something out there which is going to make me happy in here. And I'm sure we've all experienced people who've tried to change us, and it's the last thing we individually want another person to do. So as soon as you try to change somebody else or try to change a situation, you often find yourself in this very antagonistic position where in fact you're making things worse.

Now, if we go through the Buddha's teaching about how we create these mental states, you see very clearly that he puts the accent on a moment—the moment of identity.

In dependent origination, there is this moment where something impinges upon us through the five senses. The Buddha also calls mind the sixth sense. Something comes from the outside: somebody says something, or you see something, and as it were, it comes into the mind, into consciousness. I'm using these words very loosely because they have so much meaning these days. It comes into the mind as a sort of primary object which is recognized, acknowledged.

So if we're sitting here now and suddenly a bell goes off, the first thing would be the actual acknowledgement that there is a bell going off. That's your first thing. Then it's taken inside, and suddenly we attach a meaning to that bell—it's an alarm bell. As soon as an alarm bell goes, then you get the meaning that there may be fire. So you get higher levels of understanding of what the alarm bell might mean. And then the understanding comes towards the end of that process: I have to get out of here.

Now, take for instance just a normal thing, like you're in a shop and you want to buy something. The normal sentence would be, "I want that." But what the Buddha is actually pointing out is that psychologically it's the reverse.

First of all, you see Costa Coffee, and you smell the coffee—that's your first recognition, the point of perception, of cognition, that this is Costa Coffee. Then with that, there arises the relationship that we might have developed with Costa Coffee, which is our want. So first there's just the simple contact. Then there's this wanting that comes, which is there because of our past experience with Costa Coffee. Because once you've created an act and you redo that act, you are constantly reinforcing a certain relationship. And once that's happened, then the "I" comes in. So it's coffee, want, I. That's the process in terms of psychology.

It's only at that point of "I," with the identification that I want this coffee, that you get the empowerment of that desire, and in you go and buy yourself some coffee. That's the becoming.

This word becoming in Buddhist teaching refers to this constant reinvention of the self, constant reinvention of me, a constant playing around with who I am and where I want to go. An identity is not something static—it's always something that's moving with time and place and with what it is I'm experiencing.

The reason why understanding this act of karma, this action, is so important is because when we understand that things are happening in this way, then you can see the escape. If it happened the other way, if the identity came in immediately, there would be no gap—not enough of a gap between the "I want this" and the actual action. Because the "I" is that point where you've absorbed into the wanting; it's like you've become the wanting.

But when we're actually awake—and I'm not talking about sitting here in meditation, I'm talking about just walking down the street—when you're actually with that earlier process of wanting as a force within you, of actually moving you towards the object, then there's no identity. You're still aware of the desire. And being aware of something means you can't be it. You've already created a separation.

When you look into that separation, then you begin to understand what the Buddha's teaching about not-self is. Because if you separate from something, you can't be it. So as soon as I'm walking down the street and I get this wonderful whiff of Costa Coffee, if I'm aware of that desire arising in me, then it creates a little distance, a little separation. And that separation allows me just enough time to reflect upon

whether I should go in and have this Costa Coffee or not.

This becomes a deep and profound moral problem for anybody trying to undo past conditioning. Now you might say to yourself, "Well, yes I will." It could be so overpowering that in fact you miss that moment, and before you know it you're there drinking your coffee.

I'm sure this happens to you at home, or at work, where you're doing things and then suddenly—tea—and before you know it you've drunk your tea, and then you suddenly realize you've drunk your tea and you don't remember drinking it, so you may as well have another cup. This is called the unmindful life.

What you're trying to do is come back on that process to regain control over your life. That's what it is. It's about actually going back to a position where you're in control and not the habits that you've created.

Remember, nobody else has created these habits within us—that's another insight. We've done it through the mechanisms of our own psychology. And it's in seeing how we're entrapped in these particular habitual formations—these are your sankharas for those of you who know the term—that you begin to try to pull out of it. Now, you don't pull out of it until it begins to hurt.

So long as you're getting your satisfaction from these habitual actions, and you're getting some pleasure, and the happiness is outweighing the unhappiness or the effort that you have to make to achieve that happiness, then you tend to stay on that treadmill. You tend to keep moving. But as soon as something disappears from that equation and you find that actually there's more suffering involved than there is happiness, that's when you start looking for some sort of spiritual practice to help you out of the hole.

So if, for instance, you have a habit of drinking tea or coffee a lot, it's only when the doctor says, "You've got really high blood pressure here—you'd better come off the coffee," that something comes in and destroys that easy equation. There was coffee equals happiness. Now coffee equals happiness, but it also equals ill health. And suddenly you have to pull yourself out.

As you pull yourself out of any habitual action—some of which may be deeply ingrained from early childhood, and some of which may be physical, like smoking or alcohol—what you come across is this enormous resistance. The whole psychological mechanism has been set up to find happiness in this particular habitude. And suddenly you're saying, "Well, I want to stop that." Then there has to be this pulling back, which is the suffering of coming off a habit.

So if you find yourself constantly grazing throughout the day—little snacks here, snacks there—and you've suddenly bloated into this huge balloon, and the doctor says, "Well, you know, if you don't lose weight, you're going to explode, or worse." You think, "Oh God, I've got to stop." So now you have to come off all these little snacks, which were little comfort zones where you found happiness. And it's painful. You've got to really work at it.

In coming off that, you're beginning to realize—or we are beginning to realize—that this whole process of

liberation, this whole process of karma, is tied into the whole process of ethical living. And that is tied into deep insight into how we create suffering for ourselves. It's all one and the same thing. It's not as though there's all this meditation going on with great insights into not-self and conditioning, and you can separate that from your daily actions—because the one is an expression of the other.

So here we are on the wheel of dependent origination. "Dependent" meaning that every step is dependent on some step before it, or dependent on some present conditioning—that's what it means. And there's no absolute origination; nothing arises of itself. Everything that arises is dependent on something else.

Here we have this internal psychology which is trying to make sense of the world and trying to create happiness for itself. And every time we go into that mode of seeking happiness in the sensual world, then this wheel turns. It's not turning all the time—it doesn't turn when you're asleep. But every time it turns, it reinforces the habit, reinforces the habit. And it's only when we come off the habit that we realize how strong the habit actually is.

So here we get this teaching of renunciation. Now, the Buddha himself, of course, tried very heavy self-mortification exercises, which had as their understanding that the problem was with the body. So if the body didn't have an appetite, then you'd never suffer from overeating. If your body didn't have any sexual organs, then you wouldn't suffer from lust. That was the idea. By going into self-mortification exercises, you reduced the importance of the body. You stopped feeding the body, thinking that as soon as you weaken the body, desire weakens with it.

He found that to be pretty useless, definitely not on the path, and just more suffering. So he abandoned that, but he didn't abandon the idea of renunciation.

Renunciation is the point where a person says to themselves, "I have to give this up"—for whatever reason, might be health reasons, psychological reasons, money reasons, whatever. And you stop doing a certain action, you stop behaving in a certain way, and of course what you find is this enormous resistance. It can be physical. If one of our problems has been around food, then it begins to claw at the mind. So it's being able to sit with that, being able to sit with that pain, where what you're actually doing is allowing the engine of that particular habit to lose power.

This is where you could say the psychotherapy of Buddhism takes place. Once we've identified that a certain habit is unhealthy for us, I don't know of any way in which you can undo that habit without going through the pain of allowing that desire to express itself and release its energy. And if you come across an easy way, please tell me.

So you've got this habit, for instance, of taking snacks during the day, eating all the time. Every time you approach food, you have to stop. This is a really powerful, wonderful word in English: stop. I was in Spain recently doing the Camino. I was greatly overjoyed to see that the road sign was "Stop." Every time you came to a junction, it said "Stop." I thought, very intelligent.

When you say this word "stop," it puts a brake on things, and it allows you to feel this animal, this urge for that biscuit. It comes up like that. And if you can just stay there with it, if you can just bear with that urge and allow it to die away, what you're doing is draining that particular conditioning of its power, of its energy. It comes to a point where it no longer has that sort of energy in it. And we experience that as an ease of being around food and being able to say no.

It's these little victories along the way where we realize that by simply developing that little power of renunciation, we're actually changing ourselves very deeply. And it's not just the change—and this is where we're moving into a bit of happiness now—it's not just the change of letting go of something which is painful. There's also always some form of transformation happening. Because energy is never lost. It's not lost either in the universe, I believe, but it's definitely not lost psychologically. And in fact, it can grow.

So, take something like loneliness. Often we might find ourselves in a situation where we feel lonely. It could be forced upon us by circumstance—perhaps all our friends have gone on holiday and we're just sat there watching television. We've got this loneliness, you see.

Now, my normal reaction would be to phone up a friend and say, "What are you doing tonight? Do you want to go somewhere?" Not actually recognizing that what's making me do this is a deep sense of loneliness.

When we look into that, when we stop that impulse and say, "Right, I'm feeling lonely, I'm just going to sit here and actually investigate that feeling"—by which I don't mean doing some sort of psychotherapy, trying to find out why I feel lonely and trace it all back to childhood. It's simply to sit there and think, "What is loneliness? What is it, really?"

The heart speaks in feelings. It doesn't need all these memories. Those memories may have given us some original cause, but what we're left with is the product of these things that have happened to us. The technical word for that in Buddhism is *vipāka*—it's the result. There's a *kamma*, an action, and then you get the result.

When we stop still with something like loneliness, what we're getting is the full force of the result of conditioning within us that produces this state—a discomfort of being on our own. It might be a sense of not loving ourselves, of hating ourselves, whatever it might be. But it's definitely a discomfort of being alone, perhaps an anxiety.

This feeling is the product of all that past conditioning. So I don't have to go into the past conditioning. Whatever happened before is irrelevant to this actual product at the end of it. This is the big part—this is the product. All I have to do is deal with this product. This product now is very painful. I feel lonely. I feel alone. Nobody loves me. And I'm sitting there with this self-pity, this self-loneliness.

So I stop all the verbiage. I stop the mind working on this emotion, working on that particular state. And that's how, by the way, these emotions develop—we develop them in the mind. If you feel lonely, your

mind will enter into the higher faculties of imagination and thought and begin to create wonderful reasons as to why you are lonely, useless, and should make your way to the nearest bridge.

It's a case of recognizing that the mind is actually now developing the state. So the first thing we do, the first thing you learn when you come to sit in meditation, is you simply stop the mind. And the reason I think people don't want to stop the mind is that they think they're suppressing something. But you're not suppressing anything. All you're doing is stopping the indulgence of the mind, of yourself, in that particular mental state.

Now, stopping the mind while not looking at the presenting emotion that's causing it—that would definitely be suppression, that would definitely be repression, because there's a negativity there. The two forces that keep things out of our minds are the very forces that keep things away from us in the world that we don't want: aversion and fear.

So instead of running off and finding a friend or doing a bit of clubbing, I decide to sit in this room with this loneliness. I stop the mind from agitating around it, proliferating around it, and I'm just sitting and bearing with the pain of loneliness. As I sit there with that pain, I can actually begin to understand the underlying feeling, the motivation of loneliness. Occasionally words may come to mind, but I'm just staying with the feeling.

And then to my enormous surprise, as I sit with it, it begins to dissolve. There may come a point, even that first evening, where that loneliness completely dissolves and I suddenly find myself in this beautiful state of solitude. Then I realize that if I stop indulging this loneliness and just bear with that particular state of mind—because that's all it is, just an emotional state—it will actually die out. And when it dies out, that energy transforms into solitude. Solitude is to be perfectly content with being on one's own.

If I take any negative state of mind and do this, the same thing happens. And the joy of that process is that I don't have to do anything. You don't have to do anything to change yourself. All you have to do, in that sense, is do nothing—but bear with what is actually being presented.

Now, that is the *kamma* which leads to liberation. No matter how many good works you do in the outside world, or bad works, that's not what's going to be directly relevant to this inner process of transformation leading to liberation. That process is always inward. What the world does is either press buttons that awaken us to painful conditionings within us, or present us with situations where we can take this transformation and begin to develop the good heart.

It's up to us to recognize that our real power is internal, not particularly external.

Obviously, if you have power externally—you're a boss or you're the prime minister or something like that—then of course one wants to do good. But internally, in terms of liberation, it's always some internal process happening within us that moves us towards this freedom. There comes a point where one is liberated and cannot be touched by the world, cannot be moved by the world.

In the Buddha's own words: "The world argues with me, I don't argue with the world." I'm sure some of you will have come across that striking statement he makes where he says, "If bandits were to come along with their knives and cut you limb from limb, if anger should arise in you, you're no disciple of mine." When I said this once to a group, they said, "Yeah, but the Buddha had a great sense of humor." I said, "No, I think he actually means it." The separation of that consciousness within from the body is such that yes, there is pain, but it doesn't produce negativity because at the deepest level, there's a loss of identity with it.

Now, if we go back on this process, what we find is that this sense of identity is the point where I am saying, "I am." I am, meaning I exist. And when you look into that at its deepest level, you're always talking about your physical and mental processes. What is there beyond your physical and mental processes, beyond your body, mind, and heart, beyond your emotional life, your thought life, and your physical life?

So: "I am." Immediately that "I am" is producing a certain relationship to this body and through the body to the world. When you take that one step further—to what I am—then you get, "In this particular moment I am angry, I am depressed." There's always this direct relationship, this identity with what we're actually experiencing. And if it's not a direct identity of "I am," it's an identity of ownership: "I have."

So is there something which can break that process and allow us to find, for want of a better word, a different identity?

One of the key teachings of the Buddha is this business of not-self, *anattā*. All he's saying—it's a skillful means by which he allows us to investigate this phenomena that we call "me" in such a way that we're always creating distance. We're always creating separation between that which knows and what it knows.

In our meditation, when there's pain in the knee, there's pain in the knee. There's something that knows the pain in the knee. And by taking that objective stance, we discover a liberation from the pain. That liberation expresses itself by a lack of aversion towards the pain, a lack of fear towards the pain. So already, right there, with something as simple as pain, we've experienced liberation.

We've experienced liberation. Nibbāna is actually staring us in the face. It's just that we can't break through the veil. Every so often we do it and we don't recognize that in fact we've actually touched upon a completely different level of consciousness.

Whereas before I had a headache and would say, "Oh, I've got this terrible headache and I can't handle it," and take aspirins and whatnot, I now use it as something to observe. When the reaction stops of "I don't want this headache" or "This is my headache," and I'm just aware of the headache as headache—I'm not saying it's not a headache, I'm not saying it's not painful—there is that gap. That little gap between awareness and the object of what it's aware of is the nibbānic gap. I'm not suggesting that's Nibbāna, because Nibbāna is a technical word meaning the end of the process. But what we are experiencing by these little separations is: I am not that.

By doing so, this sense of "I" is always moving backwards. Whereas before you might have said, "I have a

headache," now there is a headache. Whereas before we might have said, "I am angry," we're now saying, "There is anger." That little separation is a liberation from not only that anger but from old ways of reacting to that anger, old habitus by which we may have behaved whenever we were angry. All these little separations are little moments of liberation too.

When that's taken to its final degree, what we discover is this awareness is not actually part of this whole psychophysical organism—it's something other than that. That's what the Buddha points to when he says there is a consciousness which is not manifested, there's nothing in it, which has no boundary because there's no phenomena, and in all directions full of light. What he's guiding us towards is something transcendent. He would refer to that by speaking of himself as the Tathāgata, which literally means "gone there." When you look at his imagery, it's always about going to the other island, across the sea, across water.

These are very ancient images telling us that there is something other—an "other" which is separate from, distant from, completely different from the way we normally experience life. And that end process does not mean a negation of life. Often Buddhism has been portrayed as a negation of life. What happens is that this transformation re-establishes a new relationship to life, to people, to things. And that relationship we describe as love.

Love is the basic relationship you have towards people and even objects, which allows us to be in the world without being touched by it.

The great example the Buddha uses is that of a mother in his discourse on how to establish mindfulness. He talks of a mother with her four children. The first one, a little child, is ill, so there's a natural desire to help—that's compassion. One child has become successful in their exams or whatever, so she's naturally joyful for that child. One child she's simply a friend to—friendliness, and that's the love, *mettā*. And when one child leaves home, that's fine—that's equanimity.

Equanimity stops these three great relationships of love, compassion, and sympathetic joy from sinking into their near enemy of attachment. Love can become "You do what I say." Compassion can become pity, grief, "I'm so sorry for you." Joy can become getting all excited, wanting to share that joy in a wrong way. If somebody wins the lottery, of course you're happy for them, but you're waiting for them to send you a little check—they are your best friend after all. And if it doesn't come, you're very angry. That shows us the near enemy of sympathetic joy is envy, jealousy. Equanimity cuts through all that.

If I were to pull this all together: when we normally think about karma, we think of something coming to us because of our actions. If I say something rude to somebody, that person's going to be angry with me and I'm going to get my comeuppance—they're going to tell people how horrible I am. That is of course a result, a karmic result, but that isn't really pertinent to the process of liberation.

The liberation comes when that person reacts to my rudeness, and I now have a chance to either see the

pain I'm getting from their response and let go of that, undermining my own habitude of being rude, or I can use it to increase my rudeness by having good answers, good comebacks. That karma, that action, is produced from some habitual way I behaved in the past. Therefore, I have to be careful to come back on that process. Coming back on that process means I've got to keep really alert.

The mindfulness that we do when we sit is the very mindfulness that has to come with us throughout the day. As soon as we feel, as soon as we see that initial difference—

Desire coming up, negative or positive desire, but basically unethical—you're either being greedy or you're being hateful. As soon as we see that, there is that ability to stay with it and not let it express itself through thought, word, or deed. And just by allowing that desire to come up, no matter how forceful it is, and remaining still within that storm, we allow that energy to expend itself. In so doing, we undermine the whole habit we've produced from the past. And remember, that habit now is not wasted energy. We find it being transformed through actions driven more from goodwill.

What we begin to see is that there's a process whereby there is an intention, and there is an identity with that intention. It's this point of identity—this "I am"—which is so dangerous to us. Because once we've said "I am angry," "I am unhappy," then we've lost our separation from it. We become that. And that's what the Buddha means by becoming. We're constantly reinventing ourselves, constantly reinforcing old habits by saying "I am this, I am that."

And at a slightly less intense level, "I have." If you take any object and say "I have," legally speaking you probably do own it. But when somebody steals it or you lose it, there's this enormous unhappiness, especially around something you've attached to. Then you realize that having this possession is just a legal understanding between human beings. Whoever stole it—they have it now. It's their possession. So to go around saying that somebody stole your mobile doesn't make sense anymore, because it's not your mobile. It belongs to the person who actually has it. By undermining these definitions, we undermine our relationship to the object. Whether we lose it or not, it's not going to cause suffering.

There's a lovely tale, fairly modern, of a thief who kept coming into a convent to take things. The nuns tried to catch the thief. Eventually, when they saw the thief running away, they ran after them calling out, "It's an offering! It's an offering!"—just to stop the thief from feeling bad about what they'd stolen. This is an ability to let go of things, which doesn't come if you have a strong sense of identity, of strong possession.

One little exercise you can do when you go home: look at something you really do like, something you feel is truly yours. Then imagine what happens if it breaks or gets stolen. Through these imaginative exercises, one can begin to release oneself from these little imprisonments around objects.

Far more difficult is this business of identity—"I am." That comes up most clearly when death approaches us. When death approaches, we realize this whole idea of "I am" is built completely on sand. When death

comes, who are you? When the light goes out, where's the "I am"?

It's a case of recognizing that process of identity in our daily lives, stopping it, then finding some positive way of establishing good habits. If you're making an offering, helping someone, you have to be aware of any subliminal small print saying, "If I do this for you, when I need help, I expect you to help me." Being aware of that, and being aware of any self-hatred for having such thoughts, any self-judgment—all the stuff that arises when we open up to the negative things inside ourselves. Let that go. Put the real purpose of your helping in your mind and make it an act of pure giving. In this way, we develop the habit of helping people.

This whole process of bringing into consciousness everything that has been unconscious—these little unknown intentions—gives us back control over our lives. We undermine the process driven by this deep sense of identity, of "I am a human being." When that collapses, we find a completely different relationship to the world. In a very broad sense, another identity.

It's good to remember that when the Buddha became fully awakened, he didn't disappear in a puff of smoke. He didn't become reduced to a useless blob by the side of the road. He was still recognizably Siddhartha Gautama. When he walked around, everybody recognized who he was. When he approached his friends—because he was thinking about whom he could pass this good news on to—and started talking to them, he constantly asked, "Have you ever heard me speak like this before?" Every time he said something: "Have you ever heard me speak like this before?" Eventually they were convinced that something had happened within Siddhartha Gautama and began to open up to his teachings, finding the same liberation.

So that's our task: to really understand that the world we're living in is the one we are personally creating. There's no world outside our own consciousness. Once we grasp that, we look for the causes of suffering inwardly, never outwardly. It's the inner conditioning we're constantly investigating, finding ways to change it, understanding how we create this world that is not always happy for us.

Ultimately, the message of the Buddha is that there is a way of being in this world where there is no more suffering. I don't know of any psychotherapeutic school that has ever claimed you can actually, now, in this world, in this very life, find a place where there's no suffering. That's pretty radical.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all suffering—sooner rather than later.

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