The Karma Concerning Liberation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 44:55

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened.

I just wanted to talk about *kamma* and give you, well for those of you who haven't come across the teachings of the Buddha on that, just to lay the platform and then see, as we were saying this morning, how we create suffering for ourselves, how we bring it to an end, and how full liberation is possible, even in this lifetime.

The fundamental law that exists beneath everything is what is termed as the this-that law, and it's basically a law of causality. So we're all, I think, fairly familiar with the idea of cause and effect: that something in the past is causing something in the present, and if something doesn't happen in the past, something doesn't happen in the present. If you don't turn up for work, you don't get your wages. Simple as that. So there's both commissions, things that we do, and omissions, things that we don't do, which have an effect.

But the Buddha also pointed out things happen now because things happen now. It's not only a contingency, a sort of connectedness with the past, but an absolute connectedness with the present. So here we have so many people in this room who have all come from a past. You all started off from a different place this morning, you all made your way here, and because that happened I'm able to give this talk. If it hadn't happened, I'd have had a day off. So if you can think of streams of effects coming from the past and meeting, you see.

Now, if everything were just cause and effect from the past, it would suggest a repetitive universe, because where would you find your creativity? Everything is determined. And that would lead us to a morality of fate: things happen, it's in the will of God and all that sort of understanding.

On the other hand, if it were just things happening at present without any connection to the past, you would presume it'd be chaotic because there'd be no order. And that would lead you to a morality where nothing mattered. What does it matter? In the Buddha's time, there was one teacher who said if you went down to one side of the Ganges, murdering, stealing, creating havoc, and came up the other side with great acts of compassion and love, it wouldn't make a blind bit of difference. Sort of an antinomian world.

So somehow, the Buddha said there was a connection between these two. And every moment has both: a connection with the past and an immediate connection with the present. So there's that feeling of an

interconnectedness, a sort of contingency, a touching at all sorts of different levels, and we'll come to that in a bit. So if you carry that in your mind, what it's telling us is this: we don't know what's going to happen. We live in a world where we think we know because generally speaking this room will be here next year, but if you look at that law you really don't know what's going to happen next because we don't know what's going to meet at this particular point in time. And that leads us, if you really contemplate that, that leads us to fear.

Because one thing the self wants is security. It wants to know exactly what's happening next year, because I want to take my holidays in the south of England. And the weather forecast is a wonderful attempt at trying to determine what happens. I mean, I look it up because of the retreats. And it's amazing. Seven days before, they're predicting rain on a particular day. And then the next day, it's not going to be rain. And then it is going to be rain. And it's like, forget it. So one thing they really can predict is what's happening now. Which is a blessing, because they have satellites.

So you've got this edge, this knife edge of existence. See, no past, no future, this knife edge of existence. And when we can begin to recognize that, we get what's known as the wisdom of insecurity. Which means that you never presume. You never live on a presumption. You never live on an expectation. And this takes away a certain delusiveness about our lives.

Nobody expected this financial crisis. And it's affected lots of people and continues to do so. And there was just this blind expectation that the money would just keep growing. Where else could it go? It was quite obvious to everybody. And that edge of insecurity, like we did this morning, is always making us look at the ending of things.

Remember, the self doesn't like insecurity. So it always presumes something's going to come up. Something's always going to be there when you jump out of the plane. Like every moment there's always going to be something. Now that sense of insecurity brings us to the fear of death. And if you look at all fear, it's the fear of death. Death here meaning endings. Death meaning loss. Death meaning that which we cannot control.

Now, paradoxically, the more we're at home with the feelings of those fear, the fear of death, coming to that wisdom of insecurity, the fears disappear, which means that we can live more fully in the present moment. That's the benefit you get of losing fear. Remember, fear has this way of stopping us doing things. It manifests sometimes in doubt, fear of failure. So you don't go into a relationship just in case it's not going to work out. You don't take a job just in case, you see. It becomes a barrier.

So if you want to hit fear right, if you want to put your head right in the mouth of the lion, see, go towards death. And when the fear of death has become undermined, all fear becomes undermined. Now I'm saying this especially because I have a retreat on death. And you're all welcome. That's just a little plug. All the retreats are full, but not this one. And I can't understand why. It's such an interesting subject.

So we've got that basic law: this and that. Things coming from the past, things happening in the present. A sense of unknowability about the future. Not in control.

Now, when it comes to our actions, when it comes to what happens to us, there are five laws. And this gets rid of these very mechanical ideas about *kamma*. That if something happens to you, it's because you did something in your past life, or you did something wrong somewhere in your existence and it's taken eons to come round but it's finally smacked you in the back of the head.

So the first law is what's known as the law of heat, which is basically the physical laws. So the physical laws include for us all the laws of physics, of geology, of chemistry. And it's one set of laws. I mean, if you look at where we're living, you've got all these so-called subatomic laws that govern the subatomic world. You've got the physical chemical laws on top of that. You've got the biological laws on top of that. You've got the psychological laws. And then you've got the social laws. And all these laws are somehow interconnected, but they're quite different. And we live within, I mean, I'm sure there are more, and we live within that mass of contingency. All these things are touching us.

So, for instance, when this terrible flood happened in Pakistan, was that because in their past lives they drowned so many people? So making that sort of very mechanical idea of *kamma* is something the Buddha would not have agreed to. He said there are all sorts of reasons why things happen. So there's your first thing. And it may not be, something might not be caused by you at all, but your *kamma*, and we'll come back to this, is how you react to it. That's your *kamma*.

Then there are the laws of biology. So that's another area where you get awful, really painful statements where if somebody's born with a disease, a hereditary disease, then it's presumed that sometime in their past life they must have done something terrible. If you remember, what was his name, the manager of England? Very unfortunate. I'm not so sure he meant it but they made him mean it. And that really isn't again what the Buddha says because as we know now the body we end up with is caused by who knows what, hundreds of generations who've misbehaved. How could I possibly? So you end up with this body because of other reasons, but how you relate to your body, ah, that's something else.

So you've got all the biological law. Then you have the laws of psychology, which we're fairly familiar about. Most people are familiar with those. How the mind works. Without going into too much detail, I'll come back to this towards the end because I think this is a crucial understanding. We are dependent upon our senses to the world that we create. And in Buddhist understanding, we can't stop information coming in at the level of the senses. It just comes to us. And inwardly, things come up as memories, as emotional states. And all these are conditioned by past behavior or by the world.

Then we have this reaction, this relationship to what is actually happening. And it's this relationship we've been looking at: wanting, not wanting. We create an attitude towards things. And again that comes from a deeper misunderstanding as to who we are. This sense of self.

Then there comes the law of *kamma*. Now the law of *kamma* is to do with our well-being or lack of it. And then finally there are the spiritual laws which are to do with the practices that we're doing, the *vipassanā* practice. Even the law of *kamma* itself is part of the spiritual laws. So when you look at all that you see *ka mma* is only this little slot and it's to do with in a very wide sense of that term our ethical behavior.

So now, if we now look at how we create the world, and this is the Buddhist psychology for those of you who know dependent origination. So there's contact. Now, this point of contact is entirely determined by the sense base. So if a person is colour blind they simply won't see the world the way most other people do. But even our seeing is particular to us. So although we all might be looking at the colour blue we'll all see something ever so slightly different. And I have a very crude tool to express that. I can only say blue. I mean, it's obvious when it's light blue or navy blue, but if it's a blue that we all agree with, it's very difficult to express to each other the shade or the type of blue that we're actually seeing. So there's a point where words can't communicate.

Now this blue that I'm creating is within my mind. And as we know from our own psychology, this picture of blue is then thrown out onto what I'm looking at. So when you've seen these... whenever we look at a picture, we see the full frame, the full picture. But when the eye is actually photographed, as a film, it's actually moving all over the place, scanning completely. And we're completely unaware of that. Just picking up little pixels. And that's what the Buddha means by contact, you see. And it comes into the mind, into the brain-mind complex. Because the brain and mind in Buddhism are two different energies. They're not the same. It comes into there and it begins to be perceived. It begins to put on a sort of screen. And this screen then is magically deposited back onto the object. This we already know from our own psychology.

So can you see that even at the level of something so tangible, something that we see, something that we touch, it's all being internally created. It's all being internally created. So this world that we're living in is just a bubble around me. The world I'm living in is a bubble around me. Outside that bubble the world doesn't exist. And this world that I'm living in is not the same as yours. It may be very similar but it's not the same. And you can't enter my world, and I can't enter yours. I mean, that's why we have art, isn't it? Because I have an experience and I want to express it to you I find a medium through which I can get that maybe I can get that across.

In the Buddha's time there wouldn't have made a distinction between the world and consciousness. The world and self. Self, consciousness and the world were all the same thing. It was understood at that time that the world was always completely subjective. In our own culture, we objectified it. I think it crystallised somewhere around the 18th century, our enlightenment. I'll say that twice. Our enlightenment. And in objectifying the world like that, it gave us control. We began to control it. And that's where we get our wonderful science and technology. But then we entered into this delusion that actually we are all experiencing an objective world. And I believe only now neurobiology is telling us that in fact we're not. We are experiencing the world as we can only experience it. There is no objective world. There isn't one.

When I say there isn't one, I mean from experience. It doesn't mean to say that when we all leave this room, this building disappears. That would be an idealism, wouldn't it? To be is to be perceived. But you can see the logic in that. You'll find that certain schools of Buddhism towards the Mahāyāna actually came to that form of idealism. But the Buddha didn't go that far to say that everything is created through mind. The Buddha is very grounded in what is it that we can know, rather than speculate on.

So, for instance, with, if I remember rightly, the philosopher Berkeley, Bishop Berkeley, when he argued very strongly that to be is to be perceived, and this is what we're actually saying, in a sense. When he was asked, how does everything else exist when you can't perceive it? Well, it's in the mind of God. See? That's an easy way out, that. So the Buddha, having declared that there wasn't a God, is stuck. The Buddha is very careful not to enter into anything which is of that sort of transcendental sort. That sort of thinking he doesn't go there. So he doesn't ask all those questions that we'd love to ask like why am I here? He's only answering the question: you are here, how is it you're suffering?

So if we can now imagine that we are in this bubble and the edges of this bubble are in contact with things that come towards it. And it has these senses. It sees, it touches, it smells, it tastes, and so on. At that point, we bring this stuff in, and it's perceived.

Now, there's something happens inside the bubble, which is our relationship to what we're experiencing. And that relationship is either we're saying to ourselves, this is fantastic. And you want to hold it. And you want to develop it. You want to find out how you can get more of it. Or you're saying, I don't want this. And you're trying to push it out. Trying to push it out of the bubble. Trying to get rid of it. So this duality of wanting and not wanting, of acquiring, of being in conflict, and of course the other side of aversion is that if something's in the bubble that we don't like, then of course try and run from it. Try and turn away from it, find a little hiding place. Or stamp it down somewhere. Put it under a heavy load.

And every time we react that way, we create a conditioning. This conditioning is simply, when this comes, this is the way I react. So if I find that somebody has given me a chocolate, and I put it on my mouth and I think, ooh, that's very nice. And there comes this relationship with this piece of chocolate. I then think to myself, that would be nice to have some more of that. And all the time, by doing that, I'm creating a relationship with chocolate. Now, this relationship with chocolate is creating within me an atmosphere. This atmosphere I call happiness. And it's not the chocolate so much that I want, is it? But the happiness that it creates.

So now this happiness is dependent on chocolate. It's crazy. And if I look at all my happinesses they're always dependent on something over which I can't control. The worst is other human beings. You cannot trust another human being. They're generally horrible.

And worse than that, they die. I mean, just when you've got this love relationship the person disappears. So that relationship we have with things coming in, you see, with things beautiful coming in, that are creating this beautiful internal space, always have the potential of making us unhappy.

But there's more, because we now become addicted to what's there, and we start doing things to really maintain it. And that leads us to immoral action, meaning that we're doing things which are actually harmful. Harmful to ourselves and harmful to others. I can't remember his name now, but a bank robber in America was asked, why does he rob banks? And he said, because that's where the money is. See? What's the problem? That's where the money is. So you see, we get into such a corner that money means happiness and it's in banks. So what's the problem? You don't get it.

On the other side you've got all the negativity. So something comes into consciousness, we don't like it and we form a negativity, a resistance. If that discomfort is too much, then we start moving towards an antagonism. The aversion moves into a real irritation, an anger, a frustration. It moves into a deep-seated hate. Very quickly you can move across the whole gamut of human horror in just relating wrongly to something that we're perceiving is actually causing me unhappiness.

So, this comes in, you see. Somebody says something like, you know, you stupid bald-headed monk. Possibly. You see, these words have stopped here, you see. And the emotion, the hatred, stopped here. It didn't come any further. That's the surface of my bubble, you see. But, of course, I'm incensed. I mean, how could anybody say that to me? So I take it in and these words are there within my within, they're resonating around and my reaction is I'm getting angry, and then I say to myself hold on I'm a monk I better not do that I suffer down, cool down, cool down, and then while I'm having a cup of tea, all these are coming from past experiences to anything that I experience as being unpleasant. And remember the unpleasantness stops here at the feeling level. The unpleasantness I feel within me is being caused by me as a reaction.

So I find that my anger is making me unhappy and if I can't do anything about my anger I push it down, I get depressed, all that sort of stuff. And if the enemy, if I experience the enemy as too great, then it begins to build up this internal atmosphere of fear. And that fear I find very difficult to be with. I push it away, I run away, I do anything just to get away from this outer stimulus.

But remember, all these outer stimuli are not actually creating this business inside. That's the crucial understanding. Nobody can cause us psychological pain. You have to really sort of grasp that point. Nobody can cause us psychological pain. It's all being produced by us. Discomfort, yes, I mean, I hear the words, I hear that, but that's nothing. The internal stuff that comes up, the turmoil, the addictions, all that, are caused by me, inside. See?

So here we have this little bubble, you see, and I'm creating this world inside and that's what the Buddha means by karma when it comes to the karma of liberation. This is the karma he's talking about. This is where his whole teaching is centred on how to turn this internal life into a way which brings us towards happiness. Now that happiness is not, remember, to be confused with *Nibbāna*, may come to that at the end. It's basically trying to clear up our ethical lives.

Because what we find is that my relationship to the world is always being governed by liking, not liking,

wanting, not wanting. The liking not liking is a given you can't stop that, that's part of the perceptual process. We can see when something tastes and it doesn't taste nice. That's not a problem. It's the not wanting it, it's the internal reaction which is causing the internal atmosphere of disgust or whatever it is. Once you've clicked into that, you see first of all it's incredibly disappointing. Because from now on you can't blame anybody. Nobody can make you unhappy. I mean, it's not right, is it? On the other hand, it now gives you total power over your own well-being. When you realise that actually your well-being is not determined by what's outside of it.

So, let's take this financial crisis. Many people are going to suffer. Suffer loss of job, loss of income, all that sort of stuff. That's bad enough in itself. But there then comes the internal suffering of the loss of status, the loss of what money would normally bring, and the anger about that, and then the depression about that. All that is not directly caused by the situation, by this person's internal reaction to it. And society would generally say that was justified.

So everybody now feels that unless they are angry about the situation, something's wrong. Something's wrong with them. They ought to be. They ought to go out and kill somebody. That's the only way to really bring justice to the world. So what the society is telling us is that there's no way that you can be at peace with the situation as it is. Right?

But when you realize that that isn't necessary, that all that internal anger and all that stuff isn't necessary, then what that does is liberate you. It liberates you to actually work with the situation as it is. The other negativity is drawing energy, it's drawing energy away from you and it's throwing it out, more bad energy, whereas when something happens like this financial crisis, if it only stops at the point of economic pain, it is pain, then there's this liberation inside, there's this freedom inside to work with the situation.

That doesn't mean to say that we don't go and hang some of these bankers. There's got to be justice somewhere. What I'm saying is that the internal horror is not necessary here. I mean, the whole point of a judge is that he doesn't get angry. He's not supposed to sit up there and say, you, how could you do that? I'll have you hanged. He's supposed to remain calm, not get involved with the emotions of the lawyers. He's not supposed to be confused by their clever arguments. He's not supposed to be prejudiced and all that. So we expect these very clear attitudes of a judge. But we don't expect it of ourselves.

So now, once we've clicked into that understanding that we are creating our own suffering, then that's a liberation for us. Okay, that's a liberation for us. Because now we can take control. And what we find is, of course, that working with it is not easy. Because as soon as we sit, the old habits, these old habits have enormous momentum, right? But the other thing about recognizing that the outside world or what is happening to us on the outside is not the direct cause, the catalyst, but it's not a direct cause for our internal stuff. It means that...

When we realise that we are in control of this life, it gives us the ability to work with it internally. And that's what the meditation is about.

So the actual anger we feel towards something, or the fear we feel towards something, is, I would say, never appropriate. Never appropriate. Because what there is, is a conditioning of anger, is a conditioning of fear and all the rest of it, and a conditioning of excitement and lust and all that sort of stuff. So there's this conditioning, okay? It's like a potential. And if you imagine it like a balloon, and something that pinpricks that balloon, all the energy in that balloon wants to go out through that little hole. And that's what happens when something makes us angry. When something makes us despair. When something makes us excited. All that conditioning wants to express itself through that particular stimulus.

And that's where we also begin to recognize that the stimulus is not actually causing the mental states. It's coming from somewhere else. Then we're left with the karmic results. I'm using karma here to mean the way we normally use it, like your consequences. The actual word karma means an action and the proper word for result is *vipāka*. We'll put that aside. Karma, our karma here now, we can't get rid of it. You can't just stick it in the bin and they'll take it away from us. It's just stuck within the whole machination of our psyche. And when you open up to yourself, that's what you come in contact with. These very strong habitual tendencies. The Buddha called them tendencies.

In a sense, it's almost like, you know, we would talk about the subconscious, but it's not a thing. It's not as though it exists. It's more in the sense of a potential. A bit more like a computer which holds these programs, but you've got to press a certain command and it manifests. And the awful thing is that we don't know how much of this stuff there is down there. We don't know ourselves in that way.

So every time something happens and the stuff comes up, some anger, some depression, some anxiety, whatever it is, you see, that's an opportunity for us to just sit quietly with it, be with it, and allow it to express itself. And that's what we begin to recognize is the process of healing. That's where we recognize that this is the way that the heart has to empty itself, right? These things have to be, in a sense, liberated. And they have to be done into consciousness.

So that is what he means by suffering our karma. This is the quality of patience. Patient forbearance. Which he says is the highest form of ascetic practice. And we learn it mainly within ourselves. Never mind other people and kids. But we learn it by sitting within ourselves and bearing with the stuff that's coming up.

Now, if it were just that, it might be just an ordinary psychotherapy, you know, just an ordinary healing process. But what turns it into a spiritual process is beginning to recognize the mechanisms by which it's created, which is this wanting-not-wanting. And to know that if we just stay with the wanting-not-wanting and let it drain its energy, that particular conditioning is exhausting itself. That's how it comes to an end. And when we look at it as something which is impermanent, something which is constantly changing, it helps us to disidentify with it. And that position of the observer is a transcendent position.

See, consider that. When you've found that observation post within yourself, everything that you would normally say was me has now become an object that you're experiencing, but it's still an object. So the

pain in the knee, the pain in the back, the emotional state that arises, a thought, thoughts are difficult to catch, images, images, they're all objects to be seen. So there's something which is separated out from that process and found a perch, you see.

Now when you find that perch in yourself and you're very clearly within yourself, the observer, just try to reflect on that state. What's it like being that rather than these emotional selves and physical selves? And the Buddha says that those who are mindful, and that's what he's talking about, those who are mindful are in the presence of Nibbāna. They're in the vicinity of Nibbāna. So we're actually very close to some sort of deep recognition.

Now as we sit in that place of the observer and that very strong sense of self is there, the self-awareness, the self-awareness. Normally speaking, people might say, well, this is my sense of presence. This is what I am. But it's an object also, isn't it? You're aware of this sense of self. So you can't be. Anything you're aware of, you can't be. But even so, that place that we found is crucial in terms of our investigation.

And the investigation that the Buddha presents to us is not finding out what there is, but finding out what we're not. So it's a bit like walking backwards to the edge of a cliff. We can only hope that when we fall off, something wonderful is awaiting us. If you turn around on that sense of self, all you get is more senses of self. So there comes a point where that sense of self disappears just because of the one-pointedness of your attention.

Now it happens, actually, in a wrong way when we get lost in DVDs and films and conversations. When you are watching a DVD, you wake up, don't you? An hour or two later. Where have you been? There's been no sense of self. Time has disappeared. Sense of self has disappeared. It's a bit like sleep too. You fall asleep and then you wake up and here I am. The bell goes and you wake up. I'm here again. Where were you? Where were you in sleep?

That loss of identity into what we're doing unfortunately has been empowered by the desire for happiness. Seeking happiness in films. Seeking happiness in food, in conversation, seeking happiness. So all we do is engender a conditioning of seeking that happiness there. That's the karma. That's what Buddha talks about, his karma. And all we're trying to do is to re-enter the world, re-enter situations, but without that sense of wanting, not wanting.

So, this is where that crucial point on the dependent origination, the weird dependent origination, the crucial point of intention, right, comes into its own. Because intention is the beginning of karma. And intention arises, and at that point, all it is, is some idea laced with desire. Nothing's been activated. Yeah? Tea. See? Nothing yet. Just comes up tea. But before I know it, I'm making tea. I've drunk it and I don't even know I've done it.

So it's just like tea. If I can be awake at that moment, I can feel the power of that energy coming up from this balloon we talked about. It's got a little hole. It wants to get up there through tea. Desire. If we can stay

there and just let it go, let that energy go, something has been deflated from that balloon. Something's gone out of that balloon. That's the process of purification. In seeing that, we also recognize that we created it and we can uncreate it. That's where our choice lies. That's where our power lies, is to allow things to exhaust themselves and return the heart back to its original purity.

So there are these two lines in terms of the process of liberation. There's the process of purification of the heart which we've been talking about, which is recognising that we are creating our own internal suffering, our own psychological pain, and that there are ways in which we can allow this to exhaust itself and this leads us to purity. It began at a point of innocence. There's a point, in we can't say in time but there's a point beneath our existence which is innocence, meaning we never meant to do harm. Then there comes this crucial moment of an identity.

So, coming into every being, like the baby being born, what do they identify with? You identify with your body. You identify with your emotions, with your thought patterns. You identify with people around you. This identity congregates around a concept that we call the self. And this self is now trying to manipulate the world to make itself happy. So, so long as we see these characteristics, we're undermining this fundamental mistake of who we actually are.

And so that process is a dual process, quite clear in the Buddha's teaching, of insight, driven by this *vipass anā*, began with ignorance, a simple not knowing, not culpable, but then there was the mistake of identity. And this identity of self, seeking happiness in the world, creates misery and mayhem. Wakes up to its horror and begins the process of devolution.

As it processes devolution it begins to see where the problem lies and it's in these three characteristics. The role of desire, seeing permanence where there's impermanence and seeing substantiality, self, where there isn't any. And it leads us to insights which undermine this mistake and takes us back to our original position, but this time with wisdom so we know who we are. The Buddha knows who he is and he's not a self.

Running concurrent with that is the product of that delusion which is all the karmic stuff we've got inside. That's the karma of liberation. Through the process of purifying the heart it becomes immaculate. So it began at the point of innocence, created havoc and mayhem, goes back on the process and returns to purity.

That's why, in the end, and it's not possible, psychologically speaking, for human beings not to become fully liberated. He never states that. That's me. Because if he'd have said that, he'd have been called an eternalist. But when you see this psychology, you see it's not possible for sentient beings not eventually to liberate themselves. And the goal which is driving that liberation is suffering, is what the Buddha said. What drives us to the end of suffering is suffering itself. And so these two are always concurrent: with every purification of the heart there arises some insight; with every insight there arises some purification of the heart.

So that's why when a person becomes liberated he is also ethically beautiful. It would have been disappointing if the Buddha had been caught shoplifting.

I can only hope my words have not added to your confusion, would have clarified the situation, and that with your constant endeavour you will attain full liberation sooner rather than later. And you're supposed to say, "Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu."

Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.

And if you don't say that, you see, I get depressed. There are scriptures where the listeners delighted in the words of the Buddha, and there are others where they were silent.

So I have to bring it to an end there, because we have to get out by five o'clock.

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