Dignity and the Qualities of a Ruler

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 48:56

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

I thought we'd talk a little bit tonight about those qualities that we can develop in daily life. Just a little bit of reading I've done over these past couple of weeks, I've come across this word dignity. I hadn't really thought about dignity. It's not a common or garden word, is it? Dignity. We associate it really with emperors, don't we? Royalty, aristocracy. They act in a dignified way. In the past they did. Well, I think they did. And unfortunately, it moves towards snobbery. So that's not the best of examples, really.

But we do talk about dignified behaviour, don't we? You'll hear it, say, people at funerals. Somebody who's been heavily grieved, they behave in a dignified way. People under duress or in court, falsely accused or even properly accused, act in a dignified manner. It's a certain bearing, isn't it? But that bearing is out of certain qualities that we have in us.

I don't know how many of you saw the YouTube, wasn't it, of Saddam Hussein's execution? Anybody see that? No, I did. Later on I'm going to talk about what we shouldn't be putting in our minds. And you have to say he was surrounded by jackals. Just the cruelty of it. I mean, one or two were trying to give him instructions on what was going to happen, but the rest were taunting him. And within all that he seemed to maintain, well, you could talk about a dignified bearing. That cool stillness that comes when you know you're going to die. I don't know, but I was quite amazed by that. And his daughter then wrote or spoke saying that she was proud of her father in the way that he faced his death. Charles I, he got his head chopped off. So he had a certain dignity, and then he lost his head.

But the inner strength comes up when we're under duress, doesn't it? We find an inner strength which maintains a dignified posture. In a more scriptural incident, when Bimbisara, who was the king of Magadha—that was the kingdom that was really growing in those days around Varanasi on the Ganges—when he saw the Buddha doing alms round, it seems he was taken by his bearing, by the dignified way he was doing it. And it struck him to such an extent that he actually wanted to know who that monk was. And that's how the friendship was first formed.

It is self-worth, isn't it? To feel worthy of yourself, to have a dignified bearing. I mean, that can slip into pride, but there must be some self-worthiness in the word dignity because you feel good about yourself. I think that's a deeper goodness that we feel about ourselves if we see our lives in terms of a spiritual life, in terms of spiritual growth. It puts it into a much greater context, doesn't it?

If one has a bearing because of status that's put upon one, that society puts upon you—certain kudos, having a job and all that—then that bearing, that dignity that comes with it in any job really, is dependent on the job. But if our sense of worthiness comes from living a spiritual life, then really nothing that happens on the outside can upset that feeling of self-worthiness. That's a theory.

This life, in terms of all these religions, is seen as a training ground, isn't it? It's not a matter of being perfect in order to have dignity. It's not a matter of having arrived. It's the sense of worthiness you get from treading a worthwhile path in life.

And I came across these ten factors, these ten qualities of a king in the scriptures. I think they're commentarial. They come in the *Jātaka*, the tales of the Buddha's past lives. But they give us something to work around. And the one that seems to always head the list is generosity, charity.

It's interesting that when he was attacked by the great doubt just before he became awakened—and it's put mythologically as Māra attacked him—the great doubt was: Who was he? Who was he amongst all human beings to think that would be an end to suffering? Who was he to have that presumption that he could find the end of suffering? It was a real deep self-doubt. And he touches the earth, you see, and the goddess arises to say that the quality that he's perfected which allows him to have this presumption, inverted commas, is the perfection of generosity. Which means that he's not doing it just for himself. He sees himself already connected to the whole of humanity, the whole mass of suffering. And that's what gives him his sense of self-worth back, to go back into the meditation. And after that, he makes the break. It's very interesting.

That's a quality of not getting flustered, not getting angry when we lose something or when somebody takes something. There's the Zen story of the monk who was sitting there and a thief came and took all his possessions, even his clothes, left him naked in the moonlight. And he looked up at the moon and he said, if only I could have given him this beautiful moon, if only I could have given him the moon. See, that's generosity, isn't it? And it's that spirit of not just giving when you're asked, but letting go, actually giving when you don't feel you want to give. And to do that, there has to be that connection, doesn't it, to the other.

The more generous we are, the more it mirrors back to us our lack of possessiveness. And when we're generous, we let go of something that we could have used for ourselves, either our wealth or our time for ourselves. Just to do that is to let go of the self. I mean, that's the practice of undermining the self-view in action. This business of undermining self isn't just an act of insight, like when we observe things as separate and all that. It manifests in our virtues. And generosity, the Buddha puts it always at the head of the list because the more generous we are, the more we have to renounce. And that process of renunciation is the spiritual path. It doesn't mean to say that you have to actually let go of everything, but you have to have that attitude with everything of being able to let go of it should occasion demand. Develop that attitude.

Sometimes you can play little mental games with that. Take the most treasured thing you have and then think about it being stolen, being lost. Would it be that important? Can you let go of something treasured? Just do a mental game with it. Because often our fears are unfounded. We think that if we lose this or lose our jobs or lose that, the world crashes around us. But if you just turn it into a little story within the mind, using the creativity of the mind to set up a certain situation, a thought experiment, then you see there's nothing. Even to the point of losing your life, you can try that one. It's a bit heavy.

Last year I went to Auschwitz and just heroic stories around all those years of that camp. Just heroic tales of people who act out of kindness and get severely punished or killed. Killed from it. And you go there and when you go to the place, it grounds all the stories that you've read. And it has quite an effect on you, I think anyway. So even to the point of being able to let go of our lives, that's the ultimate generous act, isn't it? Our greater gift. So this generosity digs deep. It's a profound virtue, isn't it?

Then the next one is morality. Here we can take it more in the sense of not doing what is wrong. That's keeping the basic precepts. Often just to resist the old temptations. Most of us have given up killing and thieving. We're not talking about gross behaviour. But just those little things, little greeds, little aversions. And just to work with them, just to see them as ways of developing that strength of resisting temptations.

Even at these more subtle levels where we can't talk about good and evil, we're talking about unwholesomeness, we're talking about unskilful behaviour. Just attachments to a certain routine in our lives, or the morning cup of tea that's difficult. And just to play little games with ourselves, like what happens if I don't have my Lapsang Souchong this morning? Go through the hell of letting go. And what that does is it builds up your will, your will to resist what is unwholesome for us.

And the idea is, of course, that you keep doing it until you've lost a real connection with it. And then when you go back into it to... Is that a door, is it? There we are. The cats have come. What to do? The cats have arrived. Fancy.

So you try going back into the routine, see how it is? Well, it's a case of breaking routine, you know. The practice is really getting rid of habits and getting other habits. But as soon as we get a habit, we tend to hold on to it. Even meditation becomes a sort of obsessive thing, can become an obsessive thing. You think your day will collapse if you don't do your 40 minutes. It's a case of tempting oneself to let go of things that we've become attached to. And it strengthens our character, strengthens the will, you see, the ability to resist temptations.

It's not necessarily anything which is negative. You were talking about the morning cup of tea. There's actually nothing wrong with the morning cup of tea. It's a question of breaking the habit because you become attached to that particular behaviour. Because the self comforts itself in little ways. In Christian literature they're called imperfections. But the purpose of that is again to renounce. And in so doing, you create a certain inner strength. This is the point. And I think that's one of these things about when you see somebody who has dignity, to use that word—an inner strength. And it comes from being able to resist

what is harmful.

On the positive side, the next one is altruism. If you remember that verse from the *Dhammapada*, "Cease from evil, do good, purify the heart. This is the path, this is the ancient path." This is the path before the Buddha, this is an ancient path. Altruism, putting somebody else before yourself, or at least equal to yourself. When the situation calls for it, you're not saying that there isn't a situation where you're caring for yourself. The Buddha is clear about that. We do things for ourselves, for others, both for ourselves and others. But this altruism is really an expression of that interconnectedness, isn't it? Interdependency, recognizing that. So when we offer our service, we offer our wealth, put ourselves out for somebody.

There's a lovely passage, the scripture I think is called the Anuruddhas, but there's three *arahats*, three fully enlightened monks living together and they live, hopefully not surprisingly, peacefully. And the Buddha asks Anuruddha, how is it you live peacefully? And he says, well, when I get up in the morning, I say to myself, what if I put aside what I want to do and do what the others want to do? I think that only works if the others are saying the same thing. If they're not, I think you'll be messed about. But at least that attitude, you see, just putting aside what I want to do and let's see what the others want to do. You're not getting rid of what you want. You're just putting it aside for a moment so that you can hear what other people want to do, which is not our normal position. We prefer that other people know what we want to do. And then we bargain. Then we have to negotiate. It's coming around it from the other way and hopefully people respond. That's altruism.

Honesty. I think honesty is a great part of this bearing, dignified bearing. Truthfulness with ourselves, truthfulness with others, not to trick people, not to exaggerate. I mean, that comes close to humility, really, in its proper sense of knowing who we are. It comes in all sorts of ways, honesty. To do one's due at work, to give of one's best at work in business.

See, it's funny, on a retreat there was somebody, he was into buying and selling. And he says he can go to a house and somebody will show him something who hasn't seen the antiques road show. And he'll get out of them that they don't really know it's worth. So now he can really say, well, look, I'll give you 20 quid for that. I'll take it off your hands for 20 quid. And he always sells it for a couple of thousand. And I could see he was confused because this was business. This is what you did in business. But there was some doubt in his mind because he asked, you see. I mean, what about that, you see. And before I could say something, I just let it rest in the air, just what the others say. And there was another businessman there, you see. And of course, he went on about integrity. They blew that one out of the water, really. But it's funny how you can confuse yourself by having different aims. So this person's aim, of course, was to make money. It's not his fault the other person didn't know it was worth. They should have known better. It's not his problem, is it? So that sense of integrity, I think, is part of the quality of dignity.

The other one is kindness. Gentleness. We often translate *mettā* as loving kindness, don't we? Kindness. The quality of being kind. Being gentle. It's a lovely word, isn't it? Kind. In a sense, the word itself tells us

what it is. I was always amused by gentleman. I mean, I know in old literature they say gentle woman, but it's very rarely used. It's the man who's about to be gentle. A gentleman. Interesting, eh?

Kindness, yeah. Often it's to see the fragility in others, isn't it? To see their weaker part and not to take advantage of that or hammer them for it. Often you can ask people to do things which they wouldn't do if it weren't asked with kindness. A gentleness about the way we speak to people. It even extends to objects.

How do you close the fridge door? It's just treating everything with that sort of—when I used to go up to the Zen monastery in Throstle Nest, just here in Hexham, North England anyway, they used to insist that we treat even these cracked bits of pottery as if they were Ming vases, you know. Everything had to be treated with that gracious kindness. And you bow to everything out of gratitude. Bow to the room, bow to the door, doorknob. And at first it's all a game and then you realise, no, no, this is what it's about really. Kindness. Remember, these are the qualities that are supposed to be of a king.

Self-control, self-discipline. It's not a word we particularly like, discipline. It reminds us of Victoriana and the old ways. But the interesting thing is that the word discipline actually comes from the word to learn, a disciple, following the advice of a teacher. On this course, for instance, the schedule was your discipline. It set out the rotor of the day. So one tries to follow that particular rotor as best as you can, no matter how you feel or don't feel.

So this discipline is coming from some other centre. It's not coming from feelings. It's not coming from whether you want to do it or not in that feeling way, whether you're bored or not. So one has the discipline, the inner strength, the control to actually do what you've set yourself, like resolution.

There was a robbery in Bishop's Castle just down the road. It's a close town to us. And I was in the builder's merchant's yard. And they said there'd been a robbery in Bishop's Castle. I said, oh. I said, why?

I don't know why I said why. It's not a silly question, really. It's like the bank robber who was asked, why does he rob the banks? He said, because that's where the money is. And he answered me, he said, just lack of discipline, he said, and walked off. Lack of discipline. And that's the way he saw it, lack of discipline. All this bad behavior is all lack of discipline.

I think you have to be careful that it doesn't become a disciplinarian. I mean, that's where we associate discipline with. It's more cajoling. It's more returning to that kindness, to that self-cajoling, to actually do what we'd set ourselves to do.

And when it comes to self-control of the senses, the Buddha's hot on that. Because everything that comes into the senses is conditioning you. An act of attention is an act of intention. Intention is an act of will.

I always like to refer to that example of these billboards on roads. In the 80s, I was living in Birmingham, and there was obviously some doubt about the efficacy of these billboards, whether they had any worth in terms of advertising. So the owners of the billboards advertised this really funny perfume from Australia.

I had a funny name, which I've forgotten. Did you ever see it? And it had a hat on top of the bottle with corks. It was really funny. And the amount of inquiries about this proved without a shadow of a doubt that these billboards worked. I can't remember the name, but I definitely remember the shape of the product. Anyway, it didn't exist. And so there you are on the bus, you see, and you're just lazily looking out and you're catching these bubbles. And it's coming in, it's coming in.

So the Buddha always talks about restraint of the sense spaces. Restraint of the sense spaces. So we have to be careful about what we put into our heads. What we see on TV, stuff we read. It's not a matter of guarding ourselves against, shall we say, bad news, but it's just being, you know, just recognizing that what we put into the mind has a conditioning effect, that's all. Now remember that these conditionings are not everlasting. It's not as though, oh my God, I'm about to go to the Avicii Hell or something. It's a case of recognizing that, you know, if there is a negative conditioning in the mind, then we're going to have to suffer, stay with, be patient with that conditioning coming out and exhausting itself. That's all.

But once we put a conditioning in the mind to which we're attracted, then there'll always be that, every time you put it in, you're reinforcing that conditioning. That's the problem. So it becomes more and more difficult not to resist, more and more difficult to resist the actual temptation. So this self-control is absolutely necessary for the spiritual life.

See, the Buddha, all these rules that we have, it's 227 on the last count, so many of them were to restrain the monastics from doing things. I mean, one of them was food. In the early times, the monks and nuns could go out anytime with their bowl, collect a bit of food, go back, have a munch. There was no rule as such. And then the lay people started to complain. They said, look, your monks are turning up any time of the day. And they're all rushing off with all this food, you see. So then he made this rule. He said, from now on, you have to go out in the morning and you can only go out once and you have to eat it by midday.

And the monks didn't like that. They rebelled. They said, no, we're not having that. But eventually they came to their senses and agreed to have it. And there were proper arguments like, well, everybody cooks the best food in the evening. You go in the morning, are you going to get his rice? But he wouldn't have it. I can't forgive him.

And you get things like that. There was once he saw monks coming away from a village or something with loads and loads of cloth. So he thought, well, that's not right, the robes. Because by that time, obviously, they'd become well-established in society and were getting lots of presents from there, lots of gifts from lay people. So he himself went out and seemingly tried to eat. At night, he just put his, he had his two robes. And then as the night got a bit cool, he put another robe on top of it. And in the early morning, the coldest hour, you need another robe. So he made a rule. You can only have three robes. The one, the under robe, the over robe, and the last two he put as one. You have to stitch them together. And that's it.

So all these little rules that we have, these institutional rules, are there really to restrain the senses. That's the idea, you see. So it's up to you, self-restraint, like, you know, retail therapy. That's a bad one. Nipping

in, getting a pair of shoes you don't really need. I mean, if you gave one away, if you gave one blouse away or one skirt away or one pair of trousers away and then bought another one, there might be something. I mean, like the wardrobes get bigger and bigger.

Then there's non-anger. Oh, this is a very strange area for us. This question comes up often, this righteous anger. I mean, it's there within Christianity, depending on how you interpret the actions of Christ, you know, when he overturns the table. I mean, I don't see why he should necessarily have done it with anger. He could have done it in a dignified way, couldn't he? You know, just get out of here and just tip the table over. You know what I mean? Like it's, but they always think that he's all rage, like berserk. Which doesn't, I don't know, I don't know. Anyway, but this idea of righteous anger, you know.

Anger itself, anger itself always has an underbelly of cowardice. Because you'll only manifest anger to somebody you can beat. If the person's bigger than you, you're not going to get angry. If the person is more powerful than you, you're going to keep it cool because you don't want to lose your job or you don't want to get flung into jail or something. So that anger always rests on the presumption that you'll win the battle. It's not a very strong position to come from, I think.

And we have this little thing about being aggressive and being assertive. Now, being assertive, as far as I can see, is far more wise than being aggressive. And to be assertive, you don't have to be angry. And I think that's part of this dignity. It means that you're coming from the place of truthfulness. And the strength of that.

In, you know, today we have this problem of these wars. I had, just last week actually, was it last week? Or the week before? Anyway, I gave a talk to Her Majesty's Armed Forces on this business of non-violence. And I think the problem... The problem lies around this word force and violence, you see. I mean, force, I think, can be assertive. Violence is always aggressive. So force, so violence is force with something added. Violence is forced with anger, with revenge, with all that.

Now, of course, it's difficult if you're a soldier and your mate's just got shot, not to have a sense of redress or something after the enemy. But I don't think it has to be like that. I mean... People who are sent out by the UN, peacekeepers. Even the Yiddish army does that, doesn't it? It was out in Israel, wasn't it? On the border, wasn't it? Their job isn't to kill, but to protect. It's a very different attitude, isn't it? So I think that distinction between force and violence is important. In a sense, you've got to have a righteous cause. That's your other problem.

But leaving aside armed conflict, I think when we feel angry, it's this business of sublimation. That's another word I... They very rarely come across, but it's there within a lot of Christian literature in the old days. I just don't hear it, to sublimate. Now, I believe I'm right in saying, do correct me if I'm wrong, that in science, in chemistry, to sublimate means that when something sublimates, it moves from a solid directly into an air. What's the word I'm looking for?

Gas. Thank you. It doesn't pass through the fluid state. So, somehow to, I mean anger is energy, that's all it is, it's energy. And to somehow turn the energy around and use it for benefit, you know, it can really give you a lot of force. But somehow you've got to take the turbulence out of it. Somehow you've got to drop down to the righteousness of your cause, and to work from a base of equanimity, then it becomes very powerful, I think.

Your energy, the person's ability to stand their ground without anger has a lot more force than somebody jumping up and down. It's that inner strength, people feel it. I mean, all these people that we praise these days, like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, all these people all have that. That's one thing they've really developed, isn't it? Not to get angry when they're being attacked, but to maintain that dignified presence and the strength that comes from it. It's very difficult.

So that's this non-anger, that was non-anger. And then, funnily enough, they put non-violence underneath non-anger as the ninth, I think it's the ninth, is it? No, it's halfway down the list. They put non-violence, harmlessness. I think that's what they mean by that, harmlessness. So that's the positive sense is caring for all living beings, coming from a sense of care. Non-anger, non-violence, they're very close really, aren't they?

And then you always get this in the list, forbearance, patience. The Buddha talks about it as being the greatest form of ascetic practice. You don't have to line the bed of nails to get the best form of ascetic practice. Just be patient with what you're doing. Enormously annoying. Remember old Frank Sinatra, I did it my way. I took the blows. Frank took the blows.

And the idea that you can't win all battles. You're not going to win all your battles whether it's at work or in the family or anything. Somehow there has to be a point where you say well I'll give into that, you know. Even I mean there's only myself and a manager I said at Satipaṭṭhāna and sometimes I think, no, it's not worth it. Let that one go. And it's good practice because then you give up trying to win battles. You know, like, you've got to always try to be the one who gets their way. And just to lose a few, it's easy then, you see. I mean, we're not talking about immoral things. Just, you know, doing it my way.

When I was a kid, I remember a raging argument between my mother and father over polishing shoes. My father having been in the armed forces, you put the polish on with the cloth and then you brush it up with the brush, bloody obvious. And my mother who wasn't trained in these fine arts just used the brush all the way through. The thing was the shoe came up just as bright anyway, but that wasn't the point.

So it's a case of, you know, being able to give in a bit sometimes. I think that's a quality of patience, forbearance. And in meditation, of course, we are, we're learning that, you see. You want the heart to be other than it is. But you can't, you have to let it go. If it feels a bit depressed or a bit anxious or whatever, as soon as you try to get the better of it, then you're in conflict. Somehow we have to be able to let the heart do its thing and yet put our energy into the way we ought to be behaving at the present time. And then deal with the heart later. You don't put yourself in conflict with your own heart, with your own mind,

or with your body, heaven's sake.

You know, like pushing the body to do things when it's not capable. See these, you know, when somebody comes to meditation for the first time and they have to judge, you know, from the body, but generally speaking, once you've reached 30, you know, forget the cross-leg business. It's just, like, it's not worth the pain. I mean, I did it, but I mean, looking back at that guy, it could have been easier. Sat there with a raging bull in your knees.

And these little things are so annoying. It's amazing how they can make us so angry about the smallest of things. And that's because remember these emotions aren't caused by the object. These emotions are like a big bag full of rubbish, a big bag full of air, stinky air and all you got to do is put a pinprick and all of it wants to get out through there like a balloon. So we've got all this vast reservoir of anger and self-righteousness and all that sort of stuff. And somebody's only got to, you know, just in the right time at the right place. Put a little punch in there and you go, boom! It's completely inappropriate.

It's funny how we gauge when that's possible. If somebody comes into the house who's a stranger or a visitor, they knock something over, it's, oh, no problem. But if the kid does it, you go for a second. If the dog does it, you hang him. And that sort of inappropriate behaviour that we have, you know, just to have patience with things, just develop that patience with things.

And then finally there's this business of uprightness. And I presume that's the word for dignity really, just the courage to stand up for what one thinks is right. What's that lovely phrase, I always forget it, about, you know, if people of right mind stood up for something, then these bad things wouldn't happen. If they only spoke their mind and stood up for what was right. Have I touched upon anybody's memory? One of these beautiful quotes. Can you remember the quote? It's to that meaning, isn't it? No, no, that's about... No, it's a different matter. It's a lovely thing, actually.

For evil to flourish, it is only necessary that good men stay silent. That's the one. Sorry. Yes, and I want to write that down afterwards. Could you say that again, Ruthie? For evil to flourish. For evil to flourish, it is only necessary for good men to stay silent. Yeah, see? There may be one or two words out of place, but that is definitely what it is.

That's it, that's it, you see. So that's that sort of uprightness.

So these qualities, I mean we haven't discussed other qualities that we'll I'll go into a little bit tomorrow, the mettā karuṇā, the loving kindness, the compassion, the joy. These are just things that were listed as qualities of a king.

Who's list is that? Well, it comes from the Jātaka tales, it comes from later commentarial stuff.

But it's not what the Buddha himself said? Not in so many words, I think, as far as I can see. I don't have my books, so I can't really say for absolutely sure.

Is it presented as being from the Buddha or from his advice? Well, usually the Jātakas are, but they're not canonical. They're not put into the canon as such. But they'll do, won't they? As a list, as a starter.

It occurs to me actually, very interesting, that list is absolutely vital, given the nature of kings in those days, and in fact even today, because without a list like that, you've got mayhem, because the king is all-powerful. So it's a way of tempering the king's power to assign him all these qualities.

That's right. In the scriptures you have this figure of the world-conquering monarch, who seems to me to be like the alter ego of the Buddha. So remember when he was born, the wise man said he would either be a world-conquering monarch or a fully self-enlightened being. And so you have this figure coming up through the scriptures of this very good, very gracious king who does everything right according to the model law and everything's very peaceful.

And if you think about it, supposing we just took the first precept. Everybody on this earth took the first precept not to kill another human being. I mean... Just that, never mind the rest of it. It is totally revolutionary, the idea that a king shouldn't kill another human being. That would essentially forbid warfare, wouldn't it?

Yeah. That's right. But by this time, he's conquered everything anyway. He's rolled his wheel. He doesn't have any opposition, really.

There is a nice little scripture where there's lots of robbery and the kingdom goes into disarray because the king has not kept these rules. The advice is given by the Buddha in a previous life that he ought to stop inequality of payment—there shouldn't be anybody who's poor.

It says when you get rid of poverty, then the stealing stops and the hatred stops and the killing will stop. That's an interesting ancient idea.

So anyway, that's it. This gives us some ideas how we can walk around in a dignified fashion from now on. 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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