Equanimity - Foundation of all Virtue

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 48:04

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 one.

This evening I thought I would let my mind wander around the factors of enlightenment and dependent origination, just to see where we go.

One of the things I've been stressing this week—in fact, I tend to stress it a great deal—is this quality of equanimity. It seems to me that equanimity is twofold. But before I go into that, let me say something about its rating in Buddhist virtues: it is the highest. There's a lovely book called *Vision of the Dhamma* by Ñāṇapoṇika. He was a German monk who has since passed away. He points out that equanimity lies beneath any virtue and therefore is of enormous importance to develop.

This equanimity has, as I say, two strands. It is both intellectual and attitudinal, which of course engages our emotions.

In the Buddha's understanding, when we hold onto a view or an opinion, there are three factors involved: māna, diṭṭhi, and taṇhā. Diṭṭhi is the word for wrong understanding. Taṇhā is the emotional grip that we have upon our opinion. And māna is the self or the identity we have with a particular philosophy or idea.

Now you can see this not only in religious circles—fanatics, fundamentalists—but you see it in political life as well. People identify with their opinion, with their understanding, and they label it the truth. "I'm right, everybody else is wrong. It's perfectly obvious to me. I can't understand how other people can't see that I'm perfectly right."

In the early discourses, the Buddha is constantly telling his monks and nuns not to get involved in these debates, which are not about determining what is truth but about who wins. He says if you lose, you go away feeling ashamed and hurt. And if you win, you're full of pride and absolutely more sure that you're right and everybody else is wrong.

So there's an intellectual level to this equanimity. The emotional level is the pain that we have when, as the Buddha points out, we're worsted in an argument—the holding onto our belief systems. And that's all entwined around the sense of who I am. "I am a socialist, I vote Labour." "I'm a conservative." All these "I am" statements. What this does, of course, is create opposition. Just talking on political lines, the fact that people align themselves to a party means you've always got this conflict going on, all the silliness of politics.

If politicians were to think of their opinions, their views, their beliefs more in terms of a perspective, you'd have a very different politic. Because the word "perspective" presumes that there are other perspectives. If you take politics to be a circle moving from left to right or right to left, you can see that you're a dot on this circle looking at the object within—whatever the problem is. And if you see it as a perspective, you're very open to seeing what the person on the opposite side of the circle actually sees. In this way, at least, we can formulate a more correct truth—although you've always got to watch the majority. I think it was Gandhi who said, "Truth can be in a minority of one." He was saying: don't trust the majority. It's a sort of atrophying brain.

So within ourselves, we have all these opinions, all these understandings that perhaps we've never questioned. We've just believed that this is the way it is. You might be an eternalist. You might have been brought up in a religion and felt that you've been in contact with God, and you're simply an eternalist who believes there is a very caring creator who looks after us. On the other hand, you might have been brought up in a more secular, scientific society in which everything can be reduced to atoms and subatomic particles, where the human being is just neurons and such. Because you've settled into that view, because we define ourselves by that view, everything we see is from that standpoint. To shake it, to actually change that view, is extraordinarily difficult for us—at least as a conscious activity.

People say that being brought up in something like Catholicism is a real awful indoctrination, and you end up completely cramped. I dare say some people do. But I'm always surprised by my own experience. I was brought up Catholic, and I woke up one morning—I think I was twenty-one or twenty-two—and said to myself, "I won't go to Mass this Sunday and see what happens."

Now, in those days, not to go to Mass was mortal sin. If you happened to die on Sunday or Monday morning, not having gone to Mass purposefully, well, you were in for hellfire. It was an awful punishment for missing Mass. They've repealed all that now, thank heavens.

But I remember not going, and then saying to myself afterwards, "Well, nothing happened." I sort of broke through this mythical idea that if I didn't go through with Mass, something really horrible would happen. And nothing happened. From that moment on, I never went back. Never. Never stepped into another church for years and years. I went in afterwards for various reasons, but I never went back.

And the year was 1968.

Now, 1968 was a pivotal year. There was a lovely Canadian film—I can't remember the name of it, I've been racking my brains—about a man in his early sixties who is dying of cancer. It's really a film about him dying, about his family during that time. At one point, his son comes back with his girlfriend. The son works the stock markets in London, and the girlfriend is an art dealer. She gets invited by a priest to come and see various artifacts. When she walks into the room, it's all those dreadful plaster statues that used to be everywhere in Catholic churches.

As art, I mean. As religious objects, of course, they work.

The priest wants to know what she might consider their worth. She looks at him rather sadly and says, "I'm afraid you might find an individual collector who's interested, but artistically they're of no value whatsoever."

And then he muses. He says, "You know, it began in 1968. The churches just emptied."

That was the year of the great uprising in Paris, the student revolution. So that's just a little aside, but it says something—that in my case, letting go of old philosophies came easily, partly because it was in the atmosphere of the time.

For most people, I think, it's quite the opposite. They take on rigid opinions, rigid views, and find anybody else's views simply wrong. I know somebody who calls all religions apart from Christianity "man-made." The only one that's God-made is Christianity. It's a bit damning, but there we are. He doesn't feel negative about it. It's simply: this is the real one, and the rest is made up.

When you think about these different opinions, when you think of the awesome wars—the last century was really the century of ideologies, which is exactly that. An opinion lifted to the point of belief, to which people adhere both emotionally and intellectually. There's an intellectual backing for it. And before you know it, you've got catastrophe on your hands. That's still going on, you know—these Islamists and others who simply can't let go of their vision.

Now, what equanimity is asking us to do is disidentify. To see that any particular view is just a perspective. It's not a case of it being wrong or right. It's just a perspective. No human being can hold the whole truth. It's as simple as that. And therefore there has to be some sort of conversation, some sort of communication.

The Buddha himself, having come to his realization, never went around shouting, "I am the enlightened one!" Actually, there's a charming little story around this which some of you might know. He was on his way to meet his five old companions when an ascetic saw him and was taken aback by how he looked, by the radiance of him. The ascetic said, "Oh, venerable one, you look quite radiant. Who is your teacher?"

And the Buddha goes into this enormous panegyric: "I am the fully enlightened one! I am the one who knows!" And on and on.

The ascetic said, "Oh, there you go, yes," and walked off.

I find it funny how that little story hints that perhaps the Buddha had to wake up to the fact that this wasn't quite the way to teach—establishing oneself as some cosmic leader. You do get this feeling that he had to learn how to teach. These skills don't come with awakening. They're abilities you have to develop yourself.

So his doctrine, if you read the early level of the scriptures, you can see it's very spontaneous—replies to people, not really a fixed system. The idea is all there, but it's not yet arranged into "four of these, ten of those, one of these." That formulation comes later. The structuring of his teaching into the Four Noble Truths and such—that develops over time.

But his normal approach, when somebody came to him and asked, "What's your teaching on karma?" or "What's this or what's that?"—he would always ask, "What's yours?" He would invite them to speak their understanding first. And then he would discuss their understanding with them.

Of course, the scriptures only record those understandings that didn't accord with his teachings. Otherwise it was simply, "Very good, come and join me"—no problem. But those who disagreed, he would then argue his point. And most would then be able, as it were, to let go of their hard opinion—their stance of "I'm right, you're wrong." In so doing, he would lay out his own doctrine, which they would take up. Not always. Some didn't take it up. There are cases where he argues the point with somebody, but they're not convinced, and off they go.

So there's that whole business about entering into the meditation, entering into this experience, from a position of don't know, or not sure. And that's always a bit frightening for us, because we're always coming from a sort of stable base about "I know." But unfortunately, those concepts, those ideas, those opinions—even when they're right, you see, even when they're right—they undermine your meditation. One expects.

Now, if one has an idea of nibbana, having read the books and formed some notion of it, one begins to meditate with the idea of achieving nibbana. The problem with expectation is this: if you do achieve what you're expecting, because it's simply an expression of a concept, you'll be absolutely deluded. And if you don't achieve it, you're deeply disappointed. Whenever we're chasing a concept, it necessarily cramps the direct experience. It gets in the way.

We can see this in very simple things, like looking at flowers. You'll pass a shop and see a flower you recognize—roses, you see. And as far as we're concerned, in a sense, we've experienced that rose, that bunch of roses. We tend to be satisfied with that. There's something in the mind that says, "Oh yeah, that's roses." Or, "That's a greenfinch. I know a greenfinch." And it stops us looking at the rose, at the greenfinch, as an individual phenomenon.

When you look at something and keep looking at it—and I hope you've been experiencing this a bit—when you lose that sort of definition of what it is, suddenly the object brightens up, as it were. It takes on certain qualities, because that perception has been gently pushed aside by the mind.

We do it with people too. We do it most obviously when we fall in love. When you fall in love and there's this wonderful romantic tune playing, one sees only the beauty of the other. One cannot see the cracks. It's not possible. Three months, six months, at best nine months down the line, the thing begins to go off. Well,

then we may find a deep relationship, or we may not. But the fact is that romantic aura, that lovely surround we put onto a person, is in itself deluded. It's two hearts meeting, two persons meeting at that lovely level.

So this idea of coming from a particular position of knowing—any form of knowing—must necessarily cramp the experience we're having. We're not fully, fully open to it. And one of the benefits of noting is to make that label obvious to us. When you note, you can see exactly what it is—it's like a recognition. But that's always a halfway house. The point of it is to then allow that word, as it were, to recede as our attention grows upon the object. Until hopefully, occasionally, perhaps today, some of you have experienced just that still gaze upon something—a total absorption into the object, even if only for a small time.

Now, when we let go of something, when we start letting go of definitions and treasured opinions and all that, the heart revolts. It doesn't feel safe. It doesn't feel safe at all. And that's the fear, you see, which is based on this definition of who I am.

It may be that somebody who's a theist, who believes in a personal God, coming to, opening up to the fact there may not be one—that's horrific, isn't it? I mean, think about it. If all your life you've believed there's this wonderful loving being who's going to greet you upon death, and you open up to the possibility that there might not be one—well, it's pretty awful.

Much in the same way, somebody who had already settled into a nihilistic point of view—an annihilationist point of view, meaning that upon death everything goes away—the idea that in fact they might reappear in a farm shed as a cow is equally horrific. Of all things! The possibility is stunning.

So how can we approach the Dhamma—and we're talking here about the Buddha's Dhamma—how can we approach the Dhamma in that very open-hearted, open-minded way? That's our big problem. So when we begin to sit, and we're beginning to investigate these three characteristics...

it's good just before you begin to say, "Well, just for this time being, I'll put aside"—that's easy, isn't it? Not "I'll get rid of" or "I'll change everything," but simply "I'll put aside my understandings for a while and just see if in fact what the Buddha is talking about is true." That at least opens us up to the possibility of experiencing things.

Even when we experience things directly, sometimes they may be wrong. Every day we experience directly, perceptually, the sun rising and then falling. Now we know—or at least I believe—that it is us going around the sun. I've no proof for that. My proof is that the sun rises and the sun sets, and he's definitely going around us! So at the perceptual level, it doesn't mean that just because we perceive something, therefore it is right.

In much the same way with meditation, just because we perceive something once doesn't mean that's the end of it. One has to keep on until one is absolutely sure that yes, indeed, everything arises and passes

away. That everything I'm experiencing does not constitute anything permanent, substantial, a self. You have to keep seeing it, keep seeing it, until you're sure of it.

Is all desire to be banished? What sorts of desire are allowable? What sorts of desire do lead on to liberation, and what sorts don't? All these things are left up to us to discover ourselves. Nobody can put that in you. There's that very often quoted statement that the Buddhas only point the way. That's all they can do. They can only say, "Look, there's the door"—for us to actually go through it.

So this whole investigation is always coming from a point of not sure. Even when we've experienced something which we feel is absolutely right, it's only when we have repeated that experience often enough—it's like the scientific method in that sense—do we then become pretty sure about where truth or where liberation lies.

So all this week we've been looking at pleasure around food. We might have experienced a few things during that time. Experienced how the body and mind fire off each other—pleasant taste, pleasant mind, pleasant heart. We might see that process of desire. We might know that some of it is to do with appetite, some to do with greed. And we may have experienced just letting go of greed—greed in that very wider sense of seeking happiness in sensual pleasure, confusing sensual joy with real happiness. That's where the problem lies. And we might have seen it in the way the mind constantly seeks distraction.

But really, even though we see it—even though we see it and we might be fairly clear—the fact is that unless it begins to move into behavior, we haven't really seen it.

Often you'll get these stories of people who've had catastrophic happenings which have changed their lives, and that tells us that often that's what it takes for us to wake up. You get people who've had near-death experiences whose lives have been completely changed around. People who've been shamed in public. I was just reading somewhere along the line about the old Profumo case, way back in the fifties or sixties, where there was a scandal around this minister of the government. And he became then the head of some big charity, and he spent the rest of his life guiding this charity—and seemingly very good at it.

So often, for a real change of behavior, it takes quite a thump. And that shows us that, oh yeah, we've seen it, but we're not going to change.

Perhaps a more obvious example is people who smoke. They've seen pictures of it, they cough, all the signs are there that they might have a heart attack, they might have cancer—but it's only when you get a heart attack that they say, "Oh, I'd better stop now." I have a case in point of a friend's father who smoked all his life, had a heart attack, and just stopped—ba-boom—like that. He had a good constitution, went on to live quite a lot into old age.

And the Buddha puts it rather nicely when he says some people wake up even upon the hearing of the word "death." Some people don't wake up until somebody famous dies, somebody whom they've had some

sort of relationship with through television or something. Other people don't wake up until somebody close dies. And then there are those unfortunate ones who don't wake up until it's their time to die. It's a bit late, isn't it? "What's my life about?" Well, I've got about six weeks. It's not very helpful, is it?

So at least we're a bit ahead of that one. Coming here to do this meditation is asking that question: What's my life about?

So this equanimity, you can see, first of all puts down the conceptual world. This conceptual world, remember, contains all our history. All our experience is entwined in words. So if you say "apple"—when you see an apple, when you take an apple at lunch—you're not taking that apple. You're taking every apple that you've ever eaten. That's what you're taking there with that apple, because you presume this apple will be the one that you want to taste. If it tastes too bitter or too soft, well, it's not an apple, is it? This isn't an apple. It doesn't fit into my definition of apple.

So all that has to go away, you see. All that has to be put aside. And the purpose of the noting is to make that obvious to us by the singularity of a single word, and then to be able to put the word aside by attending entirely to the feel of the experience.

And then there's the emotional bit, which is our prejudice. We get emotionally involved in our understanding and the way things are. On one retreat, a guy came who was a scientist at Oxford, studying for his PhD, and he'd had some idea of meditation. The gist of it was, I think, that he thought it would just calm him and help him in his studies. And when he came on this retreat, he came across belief systems that he just couldn't handle. After about a day or so, he said to me, "I just can't handle all this business about the body and mind and stuff." So off he went.

So he wasn't at all open to the experience that he might have got through vipassanā, which may have changed his opinion. And that's where you get the scare coming up. Of course it's blocked—it's blocked by "I'm right, everybody else is wrong. What do I need to investigate you for? What do I need to investigate this for? I'm perfectly right, and you're perfectly wrong. Full stop."

So putting all that aside, you can see, is the basis of very clear investigation, isn't it? Even in science—we're not only talking here about spiritual practice—scientists have to do that as well. They can't come from a creed. There was that dreadful case in Russia of that agriculturalist, the one who created all the famines. The reason Stalin liked him was because it fitted into communist ideology, and of course it created huge famines.

So even the scientist—anybody investigating anything—has to come in with that sort of clean slate. A judge: what do we expect of judges? We don't expect them to have preconceived ideas of the case.

We don't expect them to be politically motivated—and they were at one time, weren't they? The 18th century was full of judges who acted purely for political reasons. They hanged you because they didn't like you. We don't expect them to be judging from a position of fear or favor. We don't expect them to be

prejudiced. All these things we expect of a judge because the judge has to be equanimous. He has to be in this position of non-involvement, detachment from the case.

So you can see that equanimity is the ground of our practice. Whenever we begin a meditation session, we actually start by establishing that—the calmness of the heart, stillness of the mind, just a moment of letting go—and then that curiosity to determine whether we can see things as they really are, not as we would want them to be.

And to do that we need faith. Now, faith here isn't belief—that's very corrupt. Faith is more like trust. We have to trust. It's not only trusting in the Dharma, in the teaching of the Buddha. We must trust ourselves. We must trust that investigation of truth will actually bring liberation. To see ourselves as we really are will bring at least liberation from delusion.

When the Buddha went and sat under that tree, he had to let go of everything he'd learned, because none of it—and he'd tried everything as best he could—none of it had led him anywhere. So he was ready, as it were, to let go. He was ready to restart the investigation. And all this is undermining dependent origination.

In dependent origination, we begin from the point of view of delusion, of ignorance—not knowing. What this creates is a wrong relationship with the world. That's when we say *avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā*—dependent upon this not knowing, upon a mistake, we create these conditionings. We create our conditionings, and the purpose is to make us feel safe, to make us feel happy. That's what you want to be, isn't it? You want to be safe and you want to be happy.

Through the next section, where the Buddha points out the body and mind through the six senses and through contact—which is a given, we're dependent on this body for our relationship to the world—we express those delusions, those misunderstandings. And those misunderstandings develop into certain conditionings within us which manifest as relationship. So when we see food, as we say, there is that greed for food. It comes up as a pleasant feeling. That's a condition that's arisen from past behavior.

So that's the given. Then we have this reaction of wanting and not wanting. It's at this point that this original delusion manifests. That's why the Buddha points to this desire business—it manifests there as desire. And it's knowing that desire for what it is, being able to sit with it and not run with it, not just give in to it, which is the process of drawing out or releasing or allowing that conditioning built up from the past to die away. That's the drainage point of the whole process of delusion, of creating this constant delusion.

If we miss that point, the next point is this *upādāna*, this grasping—that's when the "I" comes in. "I want." And once that's happened, it's very difficult to stop the next process, which is the empowerment of that wanting. That's the becoming, the *bhava*. We see the object, it strikes us, it comes to us, and we have the relationship come up—very pleasant. So it starts off with just that contact: very pleasant, very nice, want, I

want, I get. That's the psychological process. In our language we think the "I" comes first, but actually the "I" comes quite late in that process. And that's why we can step in, because once there's the identity, it's very difficult to stop yourself doing something.

So it's catching the wanting at this emotional level, at that power level of wanting, that allows us to have that wisdom to see it as something unwholesome for us—not skillful, not virtuous. Virtue here meaning that which does us good. If it's not doing us good, then it's not virtuous. And then we have to create the will to let go of it, to endure, to be with that craving until it passes away.

While we're practicing this, remember, the other side of the spiritual life is being exercised. We call that the *pāramī*, translated as the perfections, which isn't quite right. *Pāramī* just means those things that lead you to the other shore. One of the ways the Buddha often talked about Nibbāna was as the other shore. You have to swim across to get to the other shore, and that effort to get there is the path.

So these *pāramī*—one of which is this determination that I put on the door there—determination is one of those things we have to develop. "Perfection" gives you the idea that you get to a point where you don't have to develop it anymore. Well, in a sense, that's not quite right. It's more that it has to be continuously developed. Patience, constancy, determination—all these are qualities we get naturally from this process.

Now, that business of *bhava*, that business of becoming—that's what the Buddha means by rebirth. Indeed, there's this process of rebirth when we die, but unless you yourself have had a past life experience or something, that will always have to be in some sort of belief system somewhere, which you may or may not believe. But that's not kernel to the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha's teaching is that right here and now, we keep rebirthing into this self—a new self every time we make a decision. The self has moved; the self has become another self.

Take for instance, say these days one might find oneself unemployed. Before, you were working in an office, and now you're working in a chip shop. So you've rebirthed. You've moved out of an office into a chip shop. It's probably a better move. Probably a very good move.

So this business of rebirthing applies to the self, and there are many times we're not rebirthing. The most obvious one is when we're asleep—that's not a process of rebirth. We're not rebirthing in that sense of a self becoming all the time. Sometimes we are not rebirthing the self when we're acting from the pure heart of generosity, of compassion and love. That's not rebirth in the Buddhist sense of rebirthing the self. So when he became enlightened, he had stopped rebirthing.

See? It says in that little phrase that we chant in the morning: "I've seen the house builder."

This is what he says: "I've seen the house builder, I've broken the rafters, I've smashed the house, there's no more rebirthing, there's no more going on for me. Painful has been this rebirthing."

Now traditionally, that's understood as life to life. But spiritually speaking, that's every time we become a

self. We're rebirthing into some sort of suffering. And the worst of the sufferings is when we think we're happy—that's the worst. Because when your happiness is dependent on something which is transient, then you're looking at some form of suffering because of it. What this practice is making us do is find a deeper sense of happiness which is not dependent on whether something is pleasant or not.

We know we're experiencing that when we begin to experience contentment. Contentment is probably the greatest of all virtues that comes with this process of liberation from happiness which is dependent on the world. One is content with the way things are. This is the way it is. That doesn't mean you don't change something or try to better something, but it's coming from the position of contentment, not from the position of *more*.

This word "more" in our culture is a noun, isn't it? It's not an adjective. "I want more sugar" or "I want more this"—no, "I just want more." Full stop.

The virtue of equanimity is something we need to develop constantly, and we do that by stopping. All the time—not just on retreat, but all day long. There's a fairly renowned teacher called Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese teacher who lives in France and has a center there. I went to stay at his monastery for a couple of days, and he had instituted this idea that somebody had a bell, and every time the bell rang, you stopped. It didn't matter what you were doing. And the phone as well—when the phone rang, you didn't lurch at it as if your life depended on it. One waited for three rings. You had to wait for three rings.

That's something I took on. I always wait for three rings. Most people will wait three rings anyway, just to give you enough time to grab hold of the phone. But I find that a really helpful little trick. Little tricks like that. I have my stopwatch set on my watch, every forty minutes. It varies, but forty minutes tends to be it. When that watch goes beep beep beep, I just know where I am, and I just stop.

And when you stop, you can catch what it is that you've been gathering.

Very early on in my meditation experience, I woke from a dream. In the dream I was running, running, running. And behind me was this huge avalanche of darts and spears heading for me. I was running and running. And then I stopped. And these things just went into my back.

That's what meditation is, you see. You stop. And everything you've accumulated just comes straight at you. And so you know: this is what I'm running from.

So there you are at work, and the break comes. Instead of just going on and carrying that energy into the cup of tea and into the chat and all that sort of stuff, just sit quietly somewhere. Let things subside and see what it is that's been mounting behind your back—a little bit of anxiety, a bit of irritation, all that sort of stuff. Just wait for it to subside. You've only got to wait for it; you don't have to be there for hours. And then the next thing to be done. Then you can join the party.

Same when you come home that night after work—just find a little bit of space. It doesn't take long, five or

ten minutes. If you can make forty minutes, all good and proper, but even ten minutes. Just sit quietly and see what accumulations have come through the day. Just let them go. It opens up the evening for you.

So this business of stopping is probably the most skillful way to bring that sense of equanimity into your lives. And remember that from that equanimous base, you just see things more clearly. There's greater clarity because you're not running with an attitude, you're not running with an emotion, you're not running with a thought. This has a direct effect on our lives if you just bring that little practice into it.

You can use this little standing exercise that we do at the beginning. Just for a minute, fall into that. When the stuff has come through and you've let it drop for a little while, you can then open up into that pure awareness of things around you—achieving nothing, going nowhere, being nobody. Just for a moment. And then somebody shouts, "Hey, what are you doing? Get on with it!"

All these things that we're doing here, you can take in some way or other into your daily life. That's how the practice begins to saturate your life and hopefully turns it for the better.

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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