Q & A: Rebirth, Identification, Emotions, and Daily Practice

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 38:50

It's like the dumbest point in arguing about that. But this teaching about rebirth, we should be able to experience it now. Everything of the Buddha is known as *diṭṭha* down there. It's something to be seen here and now. If it's not true here and now, it won't be true in the future. That's all. It's as simple as that.

So let's just take the body. Is it reincarnating, or is it rebirthing? Reincarnation, the word suggests, is the same body arising moment after moment. Now, I think all of you know that every cell, every atom in the body is replaced every seven years. That's what they tell us. So tomorrow, when you look in the mirror, just remind yourself, this face wasn't here seven years ago.

Now the fact is that every seven years the face looks approximately the same. I mean, it is getting worse, but it looks approximately the same. So there's a feeling that it is the same face, but we know it isn't. It's rebirthing. Every cell is rebirthing in its own way. Every atom. That's the process of rebirth.

Think about your emotional life. And when we say the body, by the way, I'm here meaning also the sensations that come from the body. So the sight of our eyes probably get a bit weaker as we get older and things like that. So even though the eyes are rebirthing, they're also getting worse, but that's the way it is. But every moment, every moment, you can't say this is the same body as the last. And yet here it is. That gives us an idea of the distinction between reincarnation and rebirth.

If we go into the mind, just consider your emotions, your emotional life. Sometimes peaceful, sometimes not so peaceful. It's constantly birthing, isn't it? There's constantly this process of emoting all the time. All you have to do is just stop still and place your attention inward and there's some mood there, there's some emotion there, but it's constantly changing. There's this constant state of rebirthing, re-arising into the present moment, but it's never the same emotion.

What about thoughts? Just think about how our thoughts have developed over the years, say from the age of two. It's changed, hasn't it? So you can see, we're still thinking, the thought we arrived at, but it's never the same thought.

So now, when we die, well, let's see what happens. Now the Buddha points out, if we live according to our spiritual aspiration, if we live according to goodwill, generally it will make our inner life more happy, more settled. I mean, if you're in a war situation, no matter how much goodwill you have, it's still not a pleasant place to be. But inwardly, you can begin to have a certain peacefulness about yourself. And by

doing that, we are forming relationships, so it helps the relationships around us.

So by practising peace, by developing spiritually, we're actually making this life, right here and now, something more pleasant for us, more happy, more meaningful. Now, according to the understanding, we're developing conditionings. So if there is no rebirth after death, if we just annihilate, fine, but at least we've had a fairly decent life. I mean, we've been gentle. If we happen to be reborn and find ourselves in another place, another time, then these conditionings come with us. Because you don't arrive there with nothing. So these conditionings come with us and then we'll be very happy that during the last life we did a bit of practice. So it's a win-win situation.

But these concerns about rebirth... What's the point? Our attention spiritually, from a spiritual point of view, is right here and now. It's the only moment we've got anyway. The whole of our practice, the whole of our effort should be getting this moment right. There we are.

You talked earlier about the link between identification and the arising of suffering. Could you say a little bit more about identification as a phenomenon, as a process?

Just for those of you who've been into Buddhist practice for some time, historically speaking, when the Buddha talks, he's very careful to talk about experience. He's very careful to keep his language mainly about experience. So when he talks about *nibbāna*, he's talking about an experience. As Buddhism developed, the action changed away from the experience to what is it that experiences the experience, and that became what's known as the consciousness-only school.

When we're practising and we are pulling ourselves out of this body with its sensations, when I say that I mean they become objects. You can feel feelings. When you pull out of your emotions, you've found a position where you can feel emotions. You're aware of your emotions all the time. This awareness is beginning to disidentify with what it previously would have identified with, and this backwards step leads to the realisation of what this awareness is.

And the word I prefer for that is the knowing, rather than consciousness, because these days that word's been used in all sorts of ways. The knowing is a rather good word in English, because it's one of these gerunds which has a verbal meaning, knowing, so it doesn't coagulate so much into some thing.

So this knowing has the capacity of being aware, and it is our intuitive intelligence. That's what it is, and it's prior to thought. Thought isn't intelligence. It's prior to thought, it uses thought to express its understanding. It's prior to emotion, it uses the emotional life to express its understanding, and it's prior to the body, it uses the body to express its understanding. So these are three so-called intelligences: our physical intelligence that we see in sport, our emotional intelligence and our intellectual intelligence. But these are simply expressions coming from this knowing.

And this knowing becomes more apparent to us the more we distinguish between that which knows, the awareness, the looking, the observing, and what is actually experiencing.

It sounded like intuition to me, some kind of deep intuition, what you just talked about. I was down at the dinner table, and there was this pot of hummus, and I wanted to take something inside me and said, don't do it. And I thought, that's stupid, I really like hummus, why shouldn't I eat it? And it said, don't do it, and I thought, oh, bother. And I took my spoon and lifted it up, and the lady across the table reached over and I smacked the spoon again so I had it on hold for a moment. So I think I had some intuitive inkling, well I shouldn't do it, but I didn't understand it and I didn't listen to it either.

I'm not sure I would take that as a great example. What I would say is that there's a confusion between intuition and the feeling of intuition. Now you've got to be careful because this intelligence in Buddhist understanding is deluded, so you may feel something is right but it's not necessarily so, just as we may think something is right and it's not necessarily so. Everything that we feel and think has to be questioned.

Don't think that just because I have a feeling it must be right. Sometimes these feelings come in other ways, like voices from God, like that guy who went and swam across the lake to see Aung San Suu Kyi. So you have to be very careful about, the intuitive feeling must be right. You have to question it too.

Now this process of stepping back out of the body with its sensations and so on is the process of disidentification. You're redefining yourself: I'm not the body, I'm observing the body. I feel the body but I am not the body. I'm not emotions, I feel them, I know them but I am not that.

So you're constantly stepping out of previous identification. And as I mentioned, I think this morning, the observer is the most difficult one to overcome because you can't step out of that. If you step out of that, you simply create another observer observing the observer. It's a sort of endless mirror process. So that is beyond our control. That happens when the times are right.

So every time we fall into an identification, we become what we identify with. That's why it hurts. That's where the suffering is.

So this pain in my knee, so long as I can observe it as pain, so I'm saying pain, pain, and there's this push away from it. I don't want to, right? Now, in meditation, I'm observing this resistance not to be with the pain in an equanimous way, not to open up to it. And because of that, this reaction, it's only a reaction, begins to die away, and I find myself peaceful with pain. This is on the presumption that it is not about to explode. We're not trying to defeat pain. We're not trying to be better than pain. We're just trying to investigate what pain is.

So now this resistance has gone, and I'm sitting just with this sort of ache in my knee, and I'm saying things like pain or aching. Then, as it were, I drop into the pain, I drop into those sensations. And as I drop into it, deep into it, I actually begin to feel the sensations, my noting work changes. I begin to say things like heat or pressure. And at that point, there's no suffering.

Suddenly, as I move my awareness upwards, as it were, and it becomes pain again, then I get the resistance. Then I realise that pain is a mental construct. It doesn't actually exist. What exists are

sensations coming from the knee. So these are your investigations. And so, in so doing, you disidentify with the idea of pain. And that helps you to find an equanimity with it. Now, as I say, you only do this to a certain point.

So every time we fall into an identification, suffering will come. Even in everyday life, as soon as you identify with your job, right? I am a nurse, I am a whatever. As soon as I am something, there's potential of suffering. You lose your job, who are you? You go through an identity crisis. Rather to say to yourself, this is what I do, rather than this is what I am.

And at the more subtle level, there's the relationship of possession. When you possess something, you possess people. So that relationship is one where this object, or this person, is being held by you, clasped, grasped by you. So there there's tremendous potential for suffering. If the person goes, disappears, dies, whatever, then you're left with this burning ache in the heart, which is that grasping. If you lose something, you get very angry. If somebody takes it, you get even more angry.

And some of you will hear me say, if somebody steals something from you, you still go around saying, they stole my car, they stole my purse. It's theirs. Of course. It's about the living in the delusion that is yours. And as soon as you click onto that, then you see compassion arises. You say, well, they can have it. Just like that. You've got insurance anyway.

You can only use objects, you can only do your work. As soon as you identify or possess, problems will arise.

Can you talk a little about how to remain grounded in meditation and why this might be important?

Well, I think I mentioned it again this morning. The process of insight, real insight, can only happen when this intuitive intelligence can completely pull itself out of, disidentify with thought. So thought here includes not only words but images. Words and images contain our history. They contain our past experience. And they are like coloured glasses that make us see present experience from the view of the past, and therefore we're always in a state of comparison or contradiction even if it's a very subtle thing.

So you meet a friend and you expect them to be like this because of your past experience with your friend. If they're not like this then you get upset. When you have some food, an apple or something, we always take the apple and we're always eating all our history of apples. Every time you bite that apple it's in comparison with all past apples, so it's either not sweet enough or it's just absolutely perfect this is the apple. But actually to taste this apple as this apple is, you have to get rid of all that.

Now how do we bring this intelligence back to direct experience of things as they are, to understand and see things as they really are, the Buddhist way? So you have to bring that intelligence out of thought and you do that by grounding it in your physical feeling experience. So if you want to taste the apple, put your attention on your tongue. If you want to see a tree, keep looking at it until, as it were, you're absorbed into the tree, rather than just seeing it as another tree.

So in the meditation, that's what we're doing. We're constantly trying to unshackle, disentangle this intelligence from its identity with thought patterns, ideas, and these things are very subtle. So in your breath, when you're watching the breath, for instance, the rising and falling of the abdomen or at the nostrils, wherever you're watching it, you'll see there's first of all some idea of movement, something coming in, something coming out. There's somewhere a picture in your mind of your nose or your abdomen, and there's sensation.

Now what there is is sensation. The idea of it rising and falling and the picture of the nose or the abdomen are mental constructs. So by drawing our attention into the breath of sensation, this intelligence begins to let go of that and begins to see sensation as sensation. And in this way it's clarifying itself, unshackling itself from these thoughts and images as a direct experience.

Now it's not as though we want to get rid of that capacity. Remember that after the Buddha was awakened, I mean, he spent forty years teaching, walking around, talking, all these miserable people. And walking up and down and being ordinary. He wasn't a schizophrenic or anything. He didn't become a sort of amorphous blob under a tree with a sign, I am fully awake. I mean, he's an ordinary human being. He's going around in contact, speaking.

So we don't lose the capacity of thought, we just want to gain the capacity of letting it go, being able to be directly in contact with experiences as they are, not as we think they are or would wish them to be. And that's part of the liberation that comes with *vipassanā*.

So how do you ground yourself? You ground yourself in your physical felt experience. What's an emotion before you give it a name? That's what you want to find out.

You talked about staying with the emotions in meditation. Is there a time for this in daily life?

Sometimes you might find a bit of space to stop, just to stop and just as it were contact your present condition. But if our awareness, if our mindfulness is spacious, just generally loose, easy, then as you're talking to somebody, you can be aware of what's happening inside of you. You can even be aware of the breath on the periphery of your attention. If you concentrate too much, then you lose it. But it's a case of feeling at ease and just relaxing into a present situation.

When you walk into a room, just stop for a minute and just receive the room. When you're with somebody and they're speaking, we tend to already be preparing our answer, but if we just receive what they're saying and feel what they're saying, that's a mode of openness, receiving. There's always a little break while the thing switches and we have to respond. In that way the person really feels that you're really listening to them, rather than trying to defeat them in an argument or something.

So keeping in contact with just our general feeling gives you a greater sense of control over your life, rather than just be driven by emotional states. You might be talking to somebody and you got a bit irritated. But before you walk towards somebody else, you just try and find a little space there to let it dry

out a bit. And then turn with that goodwill, open-heartedness towards the other person.

And you'll find stopping, constantly telling yourself to stop. It's a really lovely, powerful little word. One of those four-letter words. Stop. Stop. Get good at it. You just say stop and the next thing to be done. So if you can create that little gap before you do anything, you see the intention. So at that point you can say to yourself, should I be doing this or not?

Should I take the hoops?

Be careful of this ability that we have of generating further and further like a whirlwind of emotions throughout the day that by the end of the day you feel exhausted. And you do that again by just stopping and whatever's come up you just let it begin to drain away. You don't have to wait till it totally goes but begin to drain away. I think you'll find you reserve a lot of energy. We use a lot of energy in these emotional states. Anything else about that?

"I consider myself a reasonably happy person. Rewarding though it is, should I be concerned with the ethics of putting so much effort into being happier?"

The purpose of the practice isn't to be happy. I remember once when a teacher arrived, and somebody said to him, "Oh, I'm so happy to see you, Sayādaw." And Sayādaw said something in Burmese. And the translator didn't translate it. And later on, the person who said, "I'm so happy to see you, Sayādaw," went to the translator and said, "Well, you know, what did he say?" And he said, "Well, he said, I'm not here to make you happy. I'm here to make you aware."

So our purpose is not to be happy. Happy is a consequence of the practice. If you try to make happiness your aim, then you're into a struggle. Happiness is a consequence. Peace is a consequence. You can't peace a situation. The active ingredients are love, compassion, sympathetic joy.

"Death. What is it that scares so many so much? Where is thy sting?"

Well, this goes back to our problem of identity. If I think I am this body, and it goes off, and it's going to die, then heck, I'm going to be afraid, aren't I? It's me. It's me that dies. So that identity has, at its deepest root, a real basic fear. And our problem is that we know we're not real, but we don't accept it. We know we're not real. You can walk out of here and that'd be the end of that. You might get knocked over by a car. Boom, boom, that's it. And what happens to your body? Stick in the box and off it goes. We know we're not real. But we insist we are. And our feeling of reality comes at its most painful when that reality is denied. And it's denied most obviously by our death. No wonder so many of us are so scared. I am.

So that's what we're trying to do. You could say that the practice of *vipassanā* is a preparation for a peaceful death. That's what you could say. One of these phrases: "You have to die before you die." Spiritually speaking, that means die to this self before you die. And Jesus put it another way, slightly more joyfully: you might say you have to be reborn. So to be reborn something must have died. Spiritually

speaking, that's what it's talking about. It's not talking about jumping up and down for Jesus.

"Gardening. You mentioned joy being the way of love and a way of love and being akin to desire for gratification. The right way for true love of being – can you explain please?"

With all these virtues that we have, they have obviously what's known as in the commentarial literature an obvious enemy. So the obvious enemy of love is hate. But they always have a subtle enemy too. So love, as we've said, is attachment. That means that you want, you need something. Some of your happiness is dependent on something out there. That's what attached love is. In other words, you need to be loved. It's that sort of feeling.

Loneliness is the need for somebody to say they love you, or to express their love – you feel alone. You don't feel alone, you feel lonely. And they're not very nice feelings. In fact, in some cases, it can lead people to despair, even suicide. But the more you demand that people feed into this loneliness, paradoxically, the more lonely you feel. Because you know it's a demand, it's not coming from them, it's not natural, it's not given from their heart.

So how do you deal with something like that? You have to sit with the loneliness, feel it, get in touch with that feeling of not being worthy, self-hatred, whatever comes up with it. And as it begins to die away, you begin to see these little, little arisings. It's beginning to transform. And the transformation is what? From loneliness to what? There you go. Solitude.

Solitude is being perfectly happy being on your own. Now if you're perfectly happy being on your own, you can see that there's a lot of energy there to love somebody else, and you don't expect them, you don't need them to fill the hole within your own heart.

So whenever you find yourself in a position of loving or compassion and you can feel these subtle enemies – like grief for somebody in compassion. How does that help? Grieving for somebody. Compassion should be a joyful emotion. You are helping somebody. Sympathetic joy becomes excited so that it's feeding into your need to be happy. All these are very subtle things that happen within us and we get confused and say, "Well, this is true love, this is true compassion."

But as you know, if I start doing things in order to be happy, going back to this other thing about "I'm happy, why should I be more happy?" – if I start helping you so that I can be happy, then I get into this classic do-gooder position. And I define a do-gooder as a person who wants to do you the good they want to do you.

So true love – how would you go about establishing true love? It's always beginning from where the other person is. You're trying to relate to this person. So you know where you're coming from, right? And then you try and put yourself into their position. And you do that by asking them: what do they want?

There's a lovely scripture – I can't remember what it's called now – but the Buddha approaches these three

arahats. They're fully liberated beings, they're three monks who are living together. And he asks them, "How do you live so peacefully together?" And Anuruddha replies, "Well, I say to myself: what if I put what I want to do aside and do what the others want to do? And in this way we live peacefully."

Now that really only works if the other person is saying the same. You get to be used and abused. But you can see the attitude: let me just put aside what I want to do for the moment and let me hear what you want to do. Ask. True love, that's open. Then you can buy and do what you want to do. So it's a case of putting yourself in somebody else's shoes, and that's when you get this feeling of relating – real communication with somebody.

Joy being the way of love. Well joy, as I say, joy arises naturally as another type of relationship of rejoicing. So you're rejoicing in somebody else's happiness. And what it undermines – the subtle enemy of that is of course envy and jealousy, where you want what the other person has. Jealousy – you hate them for having it as well. These states, they arise naturally, you know, once you get that basic platform right – the one of love.

"Can you discriminate a bit between skillful desire and unskillful desire? I thought all desire was to be wary of."

It's the English, really. The word he's trying to translate is *taṇhā*. This taṇhā is a specific word. It means the desire that – it's wrong desire. It's the desire that arises of seeking happiness in the wrong places. It's not a skillful desire. There is another word, *chanda*, which is used to mean both good and bad desires.

So for instance, the desire to sit is a good desire – we should develop that. And all desires that come from these attitudes that we've been talking about – love, compassion, joy, equanimity – they are to be developed. What we want to be able to discriminate against are those desires that are coming from misunderstanding. And to try and do that, you'll see translators translating this taṇhā as craving, which is – you know, there's no English word really. You'd have to say an unskillful desire, put two words together. Craving is a bit strong.

So all you have to do is, again, this general awareness. When you see an intention arise, a desire arise, if you're still, you can see: is this wholesome for me or not? And then what we have to do is build up enough willpower to resist that temptation, if we see it's not good, and just wait for the – you know, just stay with the agony of letting it go. And when it goes, you're disempowering it all the time. You're disempowering that condition. And when we see a desire which is good and we want to develop it, every time you practice it, you develop that particular conditioning. That's how it works.

So, you know, in Buddhist psychology, everything begins with a desire, with an intention. And these intentions produce actions. Speech, body, mind, thoughts. Thoughts are actions. And through these, we create conditionings, habits. And the whole compendium, the whole collection of habits that we have is our personality. That's what the personality is. Our character, personality. And it's that which is driving us

to a destiny.

So it's becoming aware of those things which are driving us to unfortunate destiny and those which are driving us to happy, happy hunting ground. So it's a case of discriminating for ourselves what's good for us and what's not bad. And in this way we change this conditioning. This is the way we experience life – we're changing the way we experience life. Any comments? Criticism?

"Have you toured it?"

Yeah. I don't know what's wrong with it.

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