Mettā: Developing Goodwill

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 56:41

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa
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Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully Self-Awakened One.

So there's quite a bit to get through for an evening. I just want to cover at least three areas. The first one is to revise, and for some of you it may be anew, the teaching of the Buddha on how we condition ourselves. And then to talk a bit about *mettā* and what we call the illimitables. And then finally to say something about forgiveness which we'll be practicing tomorrow.

There are two things about the Buddhist teaching in terms of our conditioning. All our conditioning is self-made. That's a bit difficult to grasp at first, but all the information and all the experiences that you have in the world come at you as it were, and there's an inner process where you begin to react to it within yourself and create the conditionings that you end up with.

So all these things that we tend to suffer from—the depression, anxiety, all that—and on the positive side, over-excitement, indulgence, all that part is actually self-created. You can go further and say that the whole world is self-created if you include your body, because your body filters out what comes in. So if you're blind, you obviously don't live in a visual universe. And then of course the society you live in also filters things out by its own prejudices.

But everything that comes to us is then worked upon within ourselves, and although people influence us and our society influences us, the very language influences us, the fact is that we end up creating our own worlds. Even here now in this room, Theravāda Buddhism isn't an idealism—it doesn't say that this room doesn't exist, like when we all walk out it doesn't disappear, it has its own reality, inverted commas—but it does say that the room that we experience is peculiar to us.

So actually speaking, there are ten different rooms here, because each one of us has a different perspective on it, different feeling about it, and so on. And in that way you begin to understand that we're actually living in our own world. And they're parallel. They're not always harmonious. But when we realize that we're living in our own world, then of course the accent is to throw the responsibility upon us to do something about it.

So that gets rid of all blame. So you can't blame. And there comes a point of, shall we say, maturity where you realize that you can't continue to blame your parents, your society and all the rest of it for the state of

mind that you actually have to bear with. And that taking a personal responsibility about oneself is actually the true beginning of the spiritual path because that's beginning to take a hold of your life. That's the beginning where you decide what changes you're going to make and how you're going to make them. And this *mettā*-practice that we're doing is part and parcel of that.

So where does that begin? Where does that process begin? It begins with an intention. That's why, for those of you who've practiced Vipassanā, seeing your intentions is that crucial point where you have the space to see whether this intention is wholesome or unwholesome, whether it's doing you any good or not. And it's in that little space that you can say, no, I won't go down there, or yes, I will.

If for one moment you lose that moment of intention, it very quickly moves into identification. So what was a wanting becomes "I want." And at that point, really, it's virtually impossible to stop the action flowing out from the intention. So every time you walk past Costa Coffee and Starbucks and the coffee grabs hold of your nose, there's want. If you're not quick enough, you're in there, having a cup of coffee, whether you liked it or not, whether you wanted it or not, whether you needed it or not. And it's those habitual actions that we get caught up in that we have to come back on. And the way we do it is by having this very sharp mindfulness to see intentions as it arises. So the role of intention is crucial in our conditioning.

The next step that we've already touched upon is the process of it being brought from a potential into an actual. So if I stand outside Costa Coffee thinking I'd like a cup of coffee, nothing's happening. That's the power of that old conditioning of wanting coffee. And as long as I stay there with it, no matter how uncomfortable it may feel, actually nothing's happening. Nothing's happening in terms of it being developed. But if we stay with that and wait for it to die away, then some energy within that conditioning has been released. Some energy has been destroyed because it's not been re-empowered.

So there is a moment when having decided to, having had the intention come up to have this coffee, there's a moment of impulsion, there's a moment where an energy goes into that intention and it manifests. That energy is your will. And the Buddha goes as far as to say that it is will that he calls action. So what you do is not so important, but how you do. You know, it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it. You know that one?

So it's a case of catching the intention and holding it so that you don't fall immediately into willing it whereby you reinforce that old habitual action. So that's a crucial understanding in terms of the Buddha's psychology, and it comes in—those of you who know the psychology of dependent origination—where he's putting his finger very clearly on where the problem lies. It lies at that point of *taṇhā*, some of you will know that word, of desire.

These words that come from Scripture, translated from one language to another, is always difficult. And it's translated normally as craving, which seems to me always a little bit over the top, because sometimes you just want it and you just do it. You can't label it as craving. But what they're trying to do in these

translations is distinguish between a desire and intention which is wholesome and one which is unwholesome.

So there is a word in the Buddha's language which is also translated as desire but there's a choice of it being wholesome or unwholesome. Whereas this other word that you get in dependent origination is always unwholesome because it's always coming from the self.

Now, this self that we talk about, the teaching about not-self, it's not a—you have to be careful—it's not a denial, it's not a metaphysical proposition. The Buddha's not saying, there is no self. It's a teaching tool. He's saying, whatever you experience, if it's arising and passing away, how can it be you? And it's that way of looking at things that begins to make you realize that all these things that you've identified with are actually immaterial, they're not substantial. They don't account to anything, any substance in the universe.

So we're in this flow of events. And it's most obvious is this body. I mean, this isn't the body we were born with. It may have a regular blueprint running through it, but it definitely is not the same body. And if we're to believe it, it's not the same body we had seven years ago. So next time you look in the mirror, look in your eye and say, now you weren't here seven years ago, and just keep acknowledging the fact that the body itself is in a constant process of change, and yet we identify with it in very deep ways.

So when death approaches, it's freak-out time. And that freaking out, that terrible shock that comes when it's our turn to go, is the measure of that attachment, is the measure of that identity. So this *taṇhā* is those desires which come from wrong understanding, those desires which arise out of greed and hatred.

Greed here is that whole business of acquisition, and hatred is that whole business of aversion. Actually it's translated as aversion, because again we don't have a word which grasps the total meaning of the original Pali word, but it also includes fear. When you come across something which is threatening you, you either want to obliterate it, annihilate it; if it's too big you run for it. So you've always got this fight and flight syndrome, and that's included in this word. So whenever you hear people talk about greed and aversion, this aversion includes the fear that we have.

So understanding the role of intention in the process of our psychology, and understanding that nothing actually happens until we empower it, until we actually do something, either as a train of thoughts or a process of speech or an action—has it got a conditioning effect? If we don't empower an intention then the energy with which it comes is just allowed to dissipate, and that's basically how you get rid of habits and mental states that you don't want. And that's what we learn very clearly through the process of Vipassanā, but it's something you take out into daily life. It's not just something you do on the sitting stool.

Whenever something negative comes up, it's the acknowledgement of it and just bearing with it, acknowledging it, feeling it, but not doing anything. That's the point—not doing anything and just allowing it to dissipate, the energy dissipate.

Now here of course we have another thing that we're doing, which is the good side of desire, which is coming from another center. That's the important thing to understand. There is within us a different center—call it Buddha, call it your wisdom center, doesn't matter what you call it—but it's coming from a different place than the one which is self-seeking. And *mettā* is what you're developing from that center.

And it's important if you practice vipassanā always to do *mettā*. Although in, say, the Zen tradition, they'll say that compassion arises naturally with wisdom, which is true, but it does help to have a practice which, as it were, just eggs that little movement on. And in the Buddhist teaching, we've got this eightfold path. And the first one is this right understanding.

It's in right understanding that vipassanā is placed, so vipassanā is seeing things as they really are. And then there has to be this attitudinal change. It has to drop systemically—it's a systemic movement from understanding into the heart as an attitude. And that's where it begins then to manifest outward through your thought and your speech and your actions. And that's your next steps. Right speech, right action, right livelihood.

If it stops anywhere on that path, then the spiritual life gets stilted. It becomes twisted. People who practice vipassanā without *mettā*, the danger is that this aloofness that you must have in vipassanā, this equanimity which, as it were, you find from that observation post within yourself, where you can feel and see things and you're watching things, very quickly—or the danger is—it slips into indifference. And once it becomes indifference then it moves to callousness and basically you've lost the path.

So somehow to keep this equanimity there has to be another practice which re-engages that observer within you into the psycho-physical organism and then into the world. And that's what *mettā* does—it helps you to re-engage.

"Can I ask a question? Would samatha have that effect as well?"

Samatha is slightly different. This is a samatha practice, but it's more pointed to the outflow, to the engagement, the illimitables. Samatha itself is really more to do with us finding this calmness, this peace within us, which again is a great help, and it's definitely of advantage if you're going to do vipassanā to have that easy basis of entering into a very quiet, relaxed, focused state.

But it's not necessary in itself to do vipassanā. And again, samatha, just like this practice, can become very selfish. You can practice this to the point where you begin to really get blissed out. And one of the things about doing that is that you realize that these internal blissful states are not dependent on anything out there. Then you begin to understand why people can just live in rags, live under trees, eat what they're given, because it doesn't matter anymore, because their bliss is within them.

The problem with that of course is that it's not connected to the world, so when such a person enters the world and stands on their foot, an enormous amount of anger can arise, and that's the danger of doing something like this without the purification process of vipassanā.

Living in ordinary daily life, living in the world, that really becomes impossible because you have to engage with people. So you have to put this into practice. And the heart will grow quite naturally with that. And it actually, to my mind, grows much better because of that interconnectedness.

Samatha—there's two types of meditation. Vipassanā is this investigation of ourselves. And the samatha practice is to do with establishing, creating and establishing beautiful states of mind. So I'm sure you've heard of people looking at candles and breathing. Regulated breathing. All those are little tricks to get this very one-pointed singleness of attention. And the mind becomes like a focus, like a laser beam. And it creates this lovely energy within you.

"Is that like what mantra is?"

Yeah, mantras are the same. Anything like that. Coloured circles, gazing upon the beloved's face, all that. Anything which produces a beautiful state. But remember, if that beautiful state is dependent on something out there, then that something out there always has to be there for this to arise. If it's created from within ourselves then of course it's always there when we want it. And that's the difference between what you might say is a worldly practice as opposed to a spiritual one.

So now recognizing *mettā* as a practice which re-engages us both with ourselves—it re-engages with ourselves and through ourselves into the world—we have to be clear as to what this *mettā* is. And we touched upon it yesterday. So it's an attitude. Now attitudes pre-exist emotions. It's the heart's way of relating to something, and then the heart as it were begins to resonate, and that's what we call an emotion or that's the emotional feeling part of the attitude. But the attitude is prior to that.

Now during your practice you will have been moving from that attitude of wishing people well but your heart isn't responding—it just feels tired or fed up—and then you realize, ah, this attitude is coming from somewhere behind or before the heart actually begins to resonate. And the big mistake is to confuse those lovely feelings with goodwill. Because then you make the mistake of thinking, I'm not practicing goodwill unless I feel loving. And that's where we get confused between an emotion and the actual attitudinal state, which is being in a state of goodwill with people.

So you can see this is very different from love which arises from attachments. So you have to be very careful here. Attachments gets a bad name in Buddhism. But you have to make a distinction between something which is unskillful or unwholesome and something which is evil. Attachments aren't evil in the sense like murdering somebody, but they are definitely unwholesome.

So an attachment, say, a parent, a mother, to a child is absolutely natural. I can't imagine a mother not having an attachment to their child. But what happens is, of course, is that attachment puts a certain pressure on the child, because the attachment is always wanting the child to be as the mother would want the child to be. And that's where the problem lies, and that's why you get kicked back at teenage because of that contradiction.

Now to separate out the pure love that the mother has—which she also has for the child—from the attachment is very difficult, but it's there. And the wise person will slowly distinguish between the one and the other, knowing that the one is actually turning the person into an object. And that's what an attachment does. Every time you do something out of an attachment, that person is being used to please you. They become an object. They've lost their humanity. No matter how little it is, you're dehumanizing them.

So the way that you overcome the attachment is always to be open to their point of view, to their state. And that stepping into their consciousness, their way of looking at life, is the act of love. That is the act of compassion. And it's obvious, so attachment has a bad name, but it's not to be seen as evil, it's just to be seen as a consequence of delusion, of the way that we are relating to the world that we're in.

And it's a case of recognizing it, recognizing what we're doing when we're with friends, when we're with our relatives and so on. When you see them, just ask yourself, what do you want? What do you want from them? There's your desire coming from some place where they have to feed into your lack.

And this word lack is very important. It's often used as a translation for *dukkha*, which is translated as unsatisfactoriness or as suffering. But what this word lack tells us is that there's an emptiness there and we're seeking to fill the emptiness with things from the outside world. And of course they don't deliver, they don't deliver.

So the word attachment in a sense is a one-way process, and in fact the word connection is both. Both. That's right. And as I say, you connect by being open to the other, by just listening full-heartedly, open-heartedly to what the other has to say, and so on. And that cuts through, you see. And then of course you can feel perhaps a certain disappointment or a certain frustration or a certain fear when the person is not going to feed into your emptiness. So that's the bad emptiness, that's not the emptiness of Mahayana, that's something else.

So you can see it's also not romance. See? Romance is very specific, isn't it? You can't fall in love with anybody and everybody. And that is also a form of attachment. That's the joy, that's the deliciousness of two personalities meeting at that point. And it's very delicious, you know? But as you know, it's often three months down the line you wonder what the hell you were doing. There's a lot of faded... And then there's, and of course, but it starts there, remember, and of course if the relationship develops, and of course it develops into a true love.

And it's obviously not erotic love, but that's very flimsy and transient and empty. If you just practice making love just for making love, it becomes an empty experience because the whole of the human being is not involved. Basically, it's a prostitution. And I always love Woody Allen's little comment on this. He says sexual pleasure by itself is an empty thing, is an empty experience, but as empty experiences go...

So what is this metta then, you see? Well, just ask yourself, what would you want from a good friend? And

just as those qualities come to you, then that's what metta is. Whatever companionship, open-heartedness, and so on, all the pleasant things that you would want of a good and close friend, that's metta. That's all it is. And metta is actually connected to the word mitra, which means friend.

Now you can see this metta is your basic relationship to all sentient beings. Last night we practiced that awareness of just relaxing into the present moment. And I pointed that out as your default position. If we can keep coming back to that state of just being in the present moment with an empty mind, what do I mean by that? I mean no thought. When you hear in Zen, no mind, they don't mean that you've lost it. They just mean no thought.

So if you can bring yourself every so often during the day, not just in meditation, but every day, just to collapse, as it were, just draw yourself into the present moment, and you do that, I find the easiest way to do that is by putting my attention on hearing. Just by putting my attention on hearing, I immediately come into the present moment. And because I'm hearing and listening, I'm not responding. So it's a position of real equanimity. It's a position where I'm very open.

And the other trick I found was to put your attention on the left side of the body. Your right eye on your left side of the body. And that cuts out speech. It draws energy from the speech center of your brain. It's quite magic, actually. You'll be surprised. It'll stop you talking.

So, if we consider that to be the default position of the whole of our lives, out of which we rise, out of which we can see an intention, know it to be wholesome, and then to move into action, right? The default position in terms of our relationship to sentient beings, but specifically to human beings, is this metta. Because it's from that basic position that the other two illimitables arise.

If you have a friend and they fall into bad times, you naturally want to help them. It's not a problem, is it? It just rises naturally out of your friendship. And if your friend has good fortune and is happy, you're naturally happy for them. So sympathetic joy, reciprocal joy, all that joy in other people's joy arises naturally. You don't have to work at it. So that's why the Buddha really pushes this metta.

I know that in later Buddhism they began to develop much more the idea of compassion. One can understand that because the Buddha's teaching is about suffering and the end of suffering. So the end of suffering, wanting to put an end to suffering, is compassion. But in his original teachings, as it comes out in the original scriptures, he's very much into this metta as a way. And the discourse on metta really lays it out. And he's asking us to constantly develop that attitude throughout the whole day.

whenever we have a moment of time, and think of how much time we have when you consider things like going from here to there, or waiting for a bus, or waiting at the lights, or climbing up stairs, or waiting for a friend. If you add all those little bits together by the end of the day, I think they come out to a couple of hours frankly. And what we do is we just tend to let the mind wander, let the mind go here and there and just complete waste of mental energy. It's during those times that you can bring these thoughts to mind

and it has that effect. It's constantly developing this heart of goodwill.

You would be. That's what I'm saying. It's a natural thing. No, what I'm saying is that once the base of metta is there, and you have a friendship with somebody, then you can understand that you don't have to try and be compassionate. It just arises naturally when you see them in a bad state. You want to help.

So, these are called illimitable because there's meant to be innumerable number of beings. But more interestingly, it's a bit like numbers. You can always add ones. No matter how big your number is, you can always say, and one. So it's the same with love, compassion, joy, equanimity. Their development is indefinite. You just keep on developing it, developing it, so long as you're awake. And in fact it says that, so long as you're awake, develop this attitude, you see.

Now, we haven't practiced the compassionate part, but basically it's very simple. You bring to mind people whom you know are suffering, and the phrase is, may you be free of suffering. It's as simple as that. And with joy, may you be joyful. May you continue to be joyful. May your joy increase. We can't do that this weekend because we don't have the time for it. But you might... You might add it on to one of your blessings, if you wish. Completely up to you. But at this stage, I would really suggest that you keep it just as pure metta, because, as I say, these other two things arise naturally.

Now, just as metta has its dark enemy, what's called its close enemy, as attachment, compassion has a close enemy too, and that's grief. We very quickly fall into a grief for somebody, pity for somebody, instead of what compassion is. And again, that grief comes with attachment because this person fulfills a role in your life. And when they go, it leaves a gaping hole. Whether they fall into misfortune or whether they die or something like that, you're left with this sore within your heart. And that's your grief.

But compassion is actually a joyful emotion. It fills the heart with joy because of the help you're giving people. But if you still feel about some terrible suffering, like at the moment in the combat, if you feel compassion for me, you can feel grief for me, but it's not because... No, but what I think it fills you with is a desire to do something, and that's when we get stuck with this business of impotence, where we don't realize that we only have two rings around us: one of power where we can do something, one of influence where we can get others to do something about a situation. And finally there's only, you know, you can't do anything. And if you can't do anything then the frustration arises driven by this, you know, the sense of grief and wanting to do something. But that's actually based on a wrong appraisal of ourselves. It's actually an ego thing.

And it's only when you bear with your impotence and you realize that's it, that's the only thing you can then do is offer these goodwill practices towards them. And that's where you overcome that first because this is what you can do. And hopefully it affects. But you'll know that grief is a subtle enemy of compassion, especially when, say, somebody dies and you grieve for them. And because you equate your grief with the amount of love you have for that person, you can't stop grieving. Because every time your grief diminishes, you think you no longer love them. And you get yourself into this swirl down to a deep

depression. But when you realize that the grief you're feeling is actually the consequence of the attachment, then love allows the person to go. I mean, love is very liberating.

And these are sometimes difficult for us to grasp because of that lack of distinction between compassion, love and grief. The obvious enemy, of course, is cruelty. That's why cruelty is the worst thing you can do in the Buddhist thing. If you're cruel, the worst of hells is reserved for you. You go down to the Avici hell where you really get thumped about. Because cruelty is the exact opposite of what the Buddha is teaching.

And it's the same with joy. Sympathetic joy also has a subtle enemy and that's this excitement where actually you're getting over joyful, over excited over something. And to recognize that means that you don't get the aftermath of indulgence. So this runs right the way through just the ordinary joys of life.

Remember that there's two things that we have to do. First of all, we have to take the suffering out of pain. So there's always going to be physical pain. And for as long as we're not fully liberated, there'll always be some form of emotional pain. But that's not suffering itself. Suffering comes because of our relationship to that. Our not wanting to be there, our aversion to it, fear of it, and so on.

But the other side of the coin is, of course, to take the indulgence out of pleasure, the indulgence out of the joys of life. And if we don't do that, then we end up with the aftermath. While you're enjoying something, fine, it's heaven, it's not a problem. It's afterwards. Afterwards, where you get the craving for it again, the desire for it, the frustration when you can't get it, the grief when you lose it, and the underlying anxiety of losing something that you're attached to. I mean, that's what a lot of our insurance industry is based on. Like when you go to what was Dixon's, or what is it now? I can't remember. Yeah, that's right. When they con you into buying a three-year guarantee and you fork out more money for the guarantee than you do for the electrical equipment you bought.

So the importance of metta is that it reconnects us, connects us properly to ourselves and to the world, and it's the default position, it's the basic position we have for all these other beautiful mental states to arise. And this is underpinned because they're also called Brahma-vihara. And that means the dwelling place of the highest gods. And what we're saying by that is that it creates the beautiful mind and the bountiful heart. And that's how the gods live. You know, whether they exist or not is not a problem. That's the ideal, that's the idealism towards which these practices are taking us.

And we've talked about how often we should do it. You should do it all the time, whenever you can. But especially after the passing of the sitting. To re-engage with the world. So that's the metta side of things.

And included in that, we have to practice this forgiveness. So now... going back to that original statement that all the suffering that we are experiencing is self-caused, then the things that come out through doing things which are harmful to others, harm done to us, and the harm we do to ourselves, all the suffering around that is also self-created. And when we realize that, it's much easier to ask for forgiveness, it's much easier to forgive, and it's much easier to forgive oneself.

So, when we harm somebody, it creates within us a certain turbulence. The human heart cannot see another person's suffering without itself falling into some negativity. And the worst one, of course, is callousness. where you're no longer connected to the suffering of another human being. And we've had that with, you know, going right back to the Nazis, right up to present day. As soon as you dehumanize somebody, you have the wherewithal to create enormous suffering for them, physical suffering. And that callousness comes back on us and it turns our hearts into stone, you know.

So once we open up to the fact that we've done harm to somebody, then there has to be those feelings of guilt and shame. Guilt is the fear of consequences. We're not talking here about existential guilt, that I am essentially evil. It's more like if you do this sort of practice, if you do that sort of thing, then the comeuppance will come at some point. And shame, shame is just letting ourselves down, it's a loss of self-esteem.

And when we recognize that these are the consequences of doing something which is harmful, and we actually feel the guilt, we get in contact with it, we let it manifest, and we feel the shame, the embarrassment, let it manifest, then they actually become our guardians. And the Buddha actually calls them our guardians of society. Because when we enter into, get close to an act which we feel is unwholesome, these two come back to remind us of our consequences. So they become our guardians. In the old word, they're our conscience. So our conscience is made up of the knowledge of what happens when you do something harmful.

So how do we overcome that? Well, tomorrow we'll be practicing it, and that is just by, through the power of our own imagination, through the power of our own imaginative thinking, we just set up these internal dialogues and just bring ourselves round to asking for forgiveness. And then hopefully, if it's possible, to actually do it in real life. But often, of course, we may find that people have disappeared whom we've harmed years ago and all that. People die and we've still got something on our hearts that sort of rankles us. And then you make this insight that you don't need another person's forgiveness to be forgiven. That's a really important insight to have.

What you need to do is to work with these inner states and make that attitude of wanting to be forgiven or asking for forgiveness. And that in itself is the forgiveness.

When the order meets, we meet every, when there's a group of four, there has to be four monks, four nuns, when we meet every half moon, we confess. And most of the transgressions of our rule are forgiven on the confession. There's no tied to the post and whipped confession. It's just having stated what you've done. But the response is, do you see what you've done? In other words, do you accept what you've done? And your response is probably, yes, I do. And then the response is, do you undertake not to break that rule again? So there's a commitment to try and change your ways. So just the ability to state clearly that one has done wrong is in fact the process of self-forgiving, of being forgiven.

If you can put it right, if you've done something wrong which you can actually put right, all the better.

Then you stop the karmic flow. So for instance, if you said a sharp word to somebody and you know they're glowering, they're sort of using it behind you and all that, then just to go up and say look, I'm sorry for that. It immediately cuts the flow of that bad karma.

Very simple to do. But if you've got too much pride, if you feel you were righteous, you should have been even more cruel, and of course it just keeps going. There's no end to it.

When it comes to forgiving those who hurt us, we're on the receiving end. So just consider that point where somebody has said something which has annoyed you a bit, and how we keep repeating the insult over and over again until it really builds up into this huge fire, and you have to take an aspirin. And then what you realise is that you're creating your own mental state. This is the point. And as soon as you realise that, well, you say, do I have to do this? Do I have to turn something like that into a huge sort of drama?

So it's again this ability to forgive. And it helps to understand forgiveness, because now, having forgiven somebody, you realise that their suffering either from callousness—which leads to things like being lonely because nobody wants to know somebody who's sarcastic and audible—or they're suffering themselves from feelings of guilt and shame. So that's your compassion. That's where your compassion comes in. So you also want to release them from their guilt and shame. So you offer them that opportunity by saying, look, let's forget that. Sorry it happened, but I forgive you and all that.

And we do that when we realise that in the act of forgiving, we completely empty the heart of all that rubbish that we've burned up in there. And that the more you do it, the easier it is to do. It just becomes a habit so that there comes a point in our lives when even as the insult is given, the forgiveness arises with it. So there's never any pain around that.

I mean, there's a lovely image the Buddha gives of somebody set upon by thieves and cut from limb to limb with their machete. And he says, if at any point hatred should arise or anger, they're no disciple of mine. When I once said this in the group, somebody said, well, the Buddha had a great sense of humour. I said, he might have had, but I think it actually means what he says.

There is a way of receiving harm from somebody which doesn't bring that energy of anger from us. And that is where we begin to understand, really, the psychology of non-violence. It's only when you realise that nobody can actually make you angry—they can hurt your body, sticks and stones may hurt my bones and all that—but nobody can actually cause you internal suffering. And therefore, you're ready to, in a way, absorb their anger. You absorb their anger.

And I'm sure you've experienced that in your life where somebody's come at you angrily and you've just said, oh, I'm sorry. And that I'm sorry, just actually taking responsibility for that moment just drains the anger out. Whereas if you'd have stood your ground and sort of butted them, then you'd have got into some sort of rage, a road rage or something. Now you may not have been guilty, it might have been somebody else who did it, but you prove that afterwards. But the important thing is to undermine the

anger by receiving it, which is difficult. Our normal reaction is to defend ourselves.

So this business of forgiving somebody, you see, we get confused. We think we're trying to forget it, but trying to forget something is just another way of suppressing it. And we know that suppression doesn't do us any good. It just lies there as a turbulence within the mind, within the heart.

Sometimes we think we have to excuse them. But if somebody's robbed from us, they've robbed from us. It's stopped, not to excuse it—they've been robbers. They've done an evil thing. You don't have to lessen their act, but you can forgive them for it. And you can ask for compensation for heaven's sake, if you feel it's right, without feeling that you're being vengeful.

And sometimes we get a feeling of letting them off, almost in a sense condoning what they did, because we get into this business of punishment. You often hear these politicians saying, you know, they're putting people in prison for punishment and all that. Punishment doesn't hold any water in Buddhist understanding, because whenever you do something harmful, there's always some harmful results. So punishment is coming from some other centre. It's coming from some centre where you're trying to frighten the person, so they'll never do that again. A sort of deterrence—you cut your hand off if you steal. I mean, that works, is the point. But the punishment can't fit the crime. If it's the crime, then you'll have another go. So if the punishment is to be a deterrent, it's got to be something which really doesn't make the crime worth it. And they found this in these psychological tests where they've done this business of punishment and crime on a very low level, of course. And they found that the punishment has to really exceed the proceeds of the crime. It doesn't work.

And of course, the other thing about punishment is that it's a way of slaking our vengefulness. And that doesn't work either. You know, people in the United States, in some states, you can see the murderer or the person who's murdered and all that. You can actually be at their execution. And the case is that people come out—like, if one of your family members has been killed and all that—they come out, they've not been satisfied. They wanted it to be more painful, because that's the problem with revenge, isn't it? You can't satisfy hatred. Hatred eats on hatred. It feeds itself on hatred. So these people who actually want to see somebody suffering are simply growing in cruelty. They themselves are becoming more cruel than the criminals. So punishment doesn't hold water.

So now, if you come to the understanding that you can't punish somebody, there's no point in eating your own heart out because somebody's harmed you, even going back to childhood, remember, then that process of forgiving somebody—and it helps to stand in the person's shoes. And we can do that more when we move into that third category, which is forgiving ourselves and for what we've done to ourselves through whatever it might be—overeating, sex, drugs, rock and roll, all that sort of stuff.

And forgiving ourselves is probably the most difficult thing to do. And it helps to understand that all our unwholesome actions have arisen because of a mistake. This is really a crucial, important understanding. The Buddha's word, he begins the process of our psychology with the word *avijjā*, which is translated as

ignorance. But ignorance gives you the impression that you're at fault. You know, you should have known, you're just ignorant. But it's not. The word is neutral. You simply don't know. And out of that not knowing, there's been a mistake.

And the mistake is who we really are. And the mistake is to believe that we really are human beings, that we really are this body, this mind, this heart. And by doing so, we then have to seek happiness, which is what all the heart wants—it wants peace and happiness—in the world. And how can you do that apart from accumulating things? The self has to feel safe. So it feels safe by having big bank accounts and having a very secure job and a very secure relationship. That's how it feels safe.

But of course, as soon as you accumulate something, you're in conflict with other people who want what you've got. So the accumulation leads you immediately into a conflictual relationship with life. And then you find that you have to guard what you have and there's your fear and anxiety. You have to get rid of people who seem to be undermining your happiness, and so the whole battle is—you enter into this whole battle that we call life.

Now once you realise it's been a mistake, then it takes away this feeling of being essentially evil. And the knowledge is that just as this not knowing through the practice of *vipassanā*, through the practice of spiritual practice, ends up at knowing—what we call wisdom—from the heart's point of view, it's begun at a point of innocence. It didn't know it made a mistake, just like a child might light a match and burn a house down. It's a bit cruel to put it in jail.

And that innocence is corrupted because of this wrong understanding, and then we end up with all this suffering. Then we get to a point where the suffering is so great we think, I'd better do some meditation. So then you start meditating and you come back on the process, you devolve, but that process is not back to an original ignorant—sorry, not knowing—innocence. It now returns to a purity which matches the wisdom. That's why in the spiritual life you cannot grow in wisdom without growing in virtue. The two go together. The one depends on the mind and the other depends on the heart.

So when you find yourself balking against the precepts, that is a measure to us of our delusion, of our mistake. So recognising that is the first step. And the second one is this business of there's no need to punish ourselves. All we have to do is bear with the consequences of things that we've done wrong, and that's all we have to do.

So I know somebody who just by a simple mistake—it wasn't anything evil or wrong or something—he just wanted to listen to music and he actually put the musical instrument he was playing right next to his ear. Well of course over a period of time it actually damaged his ear and gave him this terrible tinnitus. And then he had this struggle of hating it and fighting it and whatnot. And by undermining that process and just bearing with it and seeing it as a consequence of delusion, then it's just there as this little background whistling. It doesn't impinge upon his life anymore.

And that's the same with people who are suddenly disabled in some way. See, if the disability is not accepted, if they're constantly fighting it, then they're just driving themselves into despair, and as you know, in some cases, suicide. But once it's accepted totally and it becomes part and parcel of the way they live, then it just doesn't undermine the quality of life. Simple as that.

So this process of self-forgiveness is really important. So that's the process that we're going through. We're developing the heart of goodwill, developing the heart of compassion, and then we turn it through the process of forgiveness to correct our relationship to the world where there's been harm, either done to us or by us to others or by us to ourselves.

And remember that you can't do all this in a weekend. This is a process that you have to take with you into your daily life. And I think you'll find that the more you practice it, you get the benefits—tremendous, tremendous benefits. And it's not as though you have to go at it all the time. It's the constant little bits, like in the morning, and during the day when you feel a bit upset about something, to immediately go into the process of forgiveness. And it's just those little points that just very slowly, over a period of time, just change us completely. It's the persistence of practice that's important, doing it whenever the occasion arises.

So I think that draws me to the end of my little homily. A bit longer than I thought, but there we are. So 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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