Kamma, Paṭicca Samuppāda, Virtue and Liberation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 43:05

Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I wanted to bring all the teachings a little bit together for you using a schema that the Buddha himself seems to have liked very much. In fact, he said until he'd understood the world this way he hadn't attained the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment, so these three moments are important. They're translated as gratification, danger and escape.

I'll read the discourse. It's only a little thing. "O monks, I set out seeking the gratification in the world. Whatever gratification there is in the world, that I have found. I have clearly seen with wisdom just how far the gratification in the world extends. I set out seeking the danger in the world. Whatever danger there is in the world, that I found. I have clearly seen with wisdom just how far the danger in the world extends. I set out seeking an escape from the world. Whatever escape there is from the world, that I have found. I have clearly seen with wisdom how far the escape from the world extends."

And then to complement that in another discourse, he says, "If monks, there were no gratification in the world, beings would not become enamoured with the world. But it is because there is gratification in the world, beings become enamoured with it. If there were no danger in the world, beings would not become disenchanted with the world. But because there is danger in the world, beings become disenchanted with it. And if there were no escape from the world, beings could not escape from it. But as there is an escape from the world, beings can escape from it." So this little schema: gratification, danger and escape.

None of this will come to you as a surprise. It's what you've been listening to all the time you've been here. This word gratification — I looked it up because I think it's a good translation. I tended to use the word satisfaction, but Bhikkhu Bodhi uses this word gratification. I mean he does translate this particular Pali word with it, but I think it's actually a better word in some ways than satisfaction. And I looked it up in the dictionary and it gave two examples: "She was gratified to see the shock in Jim's face," and one that shouldn't surprise us — "A thirst for sexual gratification." So this word gratification I think has a slightly stronger meaning than satisfaction. It suggests that compulsive behaviour or a demanding nature about the desire that we have, and so I think it's probably a slightly better word for us than satisfaction.

Now if we go back to the Buddha's own particular life story, there is that time, there's a little incident

which comes up when he's having a good time — sex, drugs and rock and roll — and he's just had a party, and he wakes up in the middle of the night and he sees all these men and women, all dishevelled and saliva dripping from their mouths. He goes into great detail of how disgusting it was, and it's then when he wakes up from the gratification that he's had from the party before. So there's something about the search for gratification in the sensual world. Now why is it that we seek happiness there? Why is that?

See, there's no denial on the Buddha's part that there is gratification in the world. I mean, there is gratification in ice cream and Costa coffee and all those things that we enjoy. So there is gratification. It's not that he denies that. It would be foolish of him to do so. And what is it that draws us to that then? Why is it that we seek it there?

So if we go back a little bit into the sequence of our psychology, remember that we're born into this frame, we're born into this body. And right from the beginning we're seeking milk because it's nice to taste and it comforts us. We seek the touch of our mothers. So there's an immediate connection right there, even in the womb they say, with the voice of your mother and things like that, where that unborn and the born child finds pleasure. And this pleasure isn't just physical, is it? It's actually an emotional well-being, a well-being of being protected and of being close to some other being.

So it's right there at the beginning of our experience, I think. Now, it shouldn't be strange for us to realize or to accept that right there, even though it's not an intellectual thing, there's an immediate, there's a total identity with that experience. There's an identity with it. I mean, obviously the child's not saying, "This is me." It's just the way they experience life. It's a total identity with what they are experiencing. And I think that goes on. I would say an ordinary person would say that they are what they experience in that total identity way.

What we tend to do, isn't it, is to try and develop comfort around us. We want to be comfortable. Even in our sitting posture, if it gets a bit uncomfortable, there's that urge to move. If you watch yourself watching TV sometimes, there's a shuffle here and there. As soon as it becomes slightly uncomfortable, we move the body. Even at that basic physical level, we're always trying to be comfortable.

And when it comes to the more delightful things — what we eat and our friendships and all that — then of course there's an added factor of a real delight. There's loveliness in life, there's beauty in life, there's all the things that we enjoy. All these things the Buddha wouldn't have denied. There is gratification.

So if you go through the whole gamut of your experiences in life where you've been happy — from just ordinary basic things like eating to lovely times in relationships and being out in the country and listening to beautiful music, and in the meditation sometimes these beautiful states of mind arise — all that is given. They're going to come hopefully till we die. It's not that we're going to disappear because we meditate, I hope not. So there's always that part of life which gives us comfort, pleasure, joy — all those things.

And even in our meditation, we're trying to develop these factors of enlightenment to the point where they are just the way we are. So there is that calmness and there is that equanimity and openness. And what that means, of course, is there's no fear. It's fear that stops us being open, isn't it? And there's just an attention, a quiet attention to things. And then there's the four great *Brahmavihāras*, the dwelling place of the Brahmās, the great gods — perhaps better understood as the illimitables: love, compassion, joy and peace. So that's the Buddha mind, or the Buddha heart shall we say, is always in that state.

I think sometimes we get the impression through the coolness of *vipassanā* meditation that you end up being soulless or emotionless — a little bit like a dried prune, I suppose, but very wise. Well, I mean it isn't like that, is it? The Buddha says he feels joyful, he feels happy, he feels compassionate. So his experience of life at the emotional level is always in these lovely beautiful states, always in these beautiful states. But somehow he's not fooled by it. In this sense, he's not gratified. He's not gratified. So what is it that makes this gratification in the joys and pleasures of life gratifying?

Unsatisfactory. Not in the end gratifying. So basically very simple, isn't it? The fact they arise and pass away. Just when you think you've got everything sorted, it chucks a spanner and that's the end of it. You try and build up a life which is meaningful and fulfilling — good job and relationship and all that — and then your partner dies or they leave or the job suddenly disappears. So there's nowhere you can rest.

I love the sayings of Jesus on that: "The birds have their nests and the foxes their holes, but the son of man has nowhere to put his head." And I think that's it, isn't it? There's nowhere in this world that a human being is going to be comfortable in that total way.

And then when we come to investigate the psychology around pleasure, then we see all these downsides: the frustration, because of the attachment that you've built to it, because of the dependency on what's giving you happiness. There comes that frustration when you can't get it. And there's the fear of losing it, all the insurance that we have to buy in order that just in case we do lose it we can buy another one. And then there's the grief, of course, when you do lose it. So there's a whole messy psychology in the aftermath of having indulged in something that's very pleasurable or joyful.

And that connection, that identity, you see, is the root cause, isn't it? It's because I'm saying I am. I am, or I have. There's that peculiar connection with things that we have, which is very subtle, but it manifests mainly in these negative emotions and that indulgence, right? So it's catching that, it's understanding that, that we begin to see the danger. See, there's the danger of it. In fact, these things hurt.

And then, having seen that danger, one seeks for the escape. So that's the Buddha. So he saw the danger of the emptiness, the vacuity of sensual pleasure. It wasn't going anywhere. That's when he leaves and he's prepared even to leave his wife and his child that was just born. So I mean those decisions wouldn't have been taken lightly, would they? I mean people are called away from their families for various reasons, for war. And in this case the Buddha felt — or the Bodhisattva he would have been then — just compelled to go and try and work out what was at the core of his deep-seated unhappiness.

And I think when you get to that level, you're really at an existential level of suffering. And what I mean by that is questions of why am I alive and why am I conscious? And in the Buddha's more immediate experiential question: why am I suffering?

Why am I suffering? Couldn't work it out. When we do in the evening when we go through these recollections on sickness, old age and death — which refer back to the mythical way that they explain that the Buddha slowly came to awoke, really, to these factors of life — seeing somebody who was sick, old and dying while he was out in his chariot. Remember he also sees an ascetic. He also sees this ascetic sitting under a tree, and that awakens in him: is there an escape? Is there a possibility of an escape?

Now just going back a little bit on the psychology of this, remember that because of this deep identity that we have with this life form, with being a human being, there isn't just that side of greed, there isn't just that side of lust and seeking happiness in the sensual world, and indulgence — you can put it all as indulgence or acquisitiveness. As soon as we've done that, remember, as soon as we hold on to something, we put a fence around it, we put a barrier around it, and that defines what our pleasures are. So anything beyond that boundary becomes unpleasant. It becomes something that we don't want or we don't need. So our attitude to something which is unpleasant but which is neither here nor there is to ignore it. That's what we mean by neutral feelings. We don't get particularly angry about it, we just don't notice it.

But as soon as these things outside this fence, outside this boundary, begin to look a bit dangerous to us, look as though they're undermining what we own and what we identify with, then you start getting these negative things: aversion, the pushing away and the anger and the hatred and the spite and all that. And that all comes under aversion. And in our meditation, it's boredom. That's an aversive state: boredom.

And included in that, remember, is that when these things that seem to be undermining us, seem to be overpowering us, then we start getting this other side of anxiety and fear. And it all comes down to this basic position of seeking gratification in the world.

And then once we've established in childhood this way of behaving, then you can see how it moves into another layer of psychology when we hit the whole problem of good and evil. So when we do good and we attach to it, then of course you get into the business, the downside of really using compassion, using love, using sympathetic joy in order to make yourself happy. So when the other person, for instance, doesn't appreciate what you've done, then you feel hurt, you feel broken, you feel angry. Things like that. "What I've done for you," and all that.

And on the other side you've got the evil — evil in the sense of doing what is harmful. It can be something rather unskillful, which is neither here nor there. But we're capable of doing great evil, really doing something which is tremendously harmful both to ourselves and to other beings. And then you get into all that other psychology of guilt and shame and remorse and all that. And you can see how all this builds up and up and up until you get this massive human suffering stuck in this fathom-long body, as the Buddha would call his fathom-long body.

And it all begins from this mistake, this unfortunate mistake we make at the beginning of seeking gratification in the world, in the sensual world. So all those things are all linked, they're all there. And of course when you suppress them, when you push them away, when you don't want to look at these turbulences, these negative turbulences within us, well that's when they manifest as feelings of depression. See, depression and tiredness and lethargy and all that. All those are when I push them away. I don't want to see them. Keep them away.

So when you're meditating, of course, all this starts to come up, doesn't it? It's like, I think I say on one of the tapes, like lifting a lid off a dustbin. See, suddenly it all comes up. So suddenly the depression comes up now, and you've got to see it as a consequence of past conditioning. See? You've got to see that actually we've manufactured this. This hasn't come because your mother hit you around the ear with a banana when you were three years old or something, as you might have done, but it's how you reacted to this banana which is causing all this problem.

Now that doesn't mean to say that childhood is fraught with both ecstatic joy and disaster. It needn't be that any parent has actually physically or purposefully done you harm. You can just fall off a bed and it would be a catastrophe which remains as a trauma inside you. But even so, that is how the child has reacted, and there's that continuation of all those things that we learn in childhood throughout life, you see, until we get really bad and then we look and we try and find an answer. We come to meditation.

So when we are meditating, you see, we're opening the gates. We're opening ourselves up to all the stuff that's been suppressed and all that. But also from this understanding we're beginning to see the danger of this wrong relationship we have to the world. And it's seeing that danger, you see, which is painful. It's hard to sit with it. It's hard to bear with some of the stuff that comes up. But there's no other way. There doesn't seem to be any other way of curing our psychology except in this conscious way.

Drugs don't help. They just suppress the physical frame, don't they? And then you feel good, but when the drug passes, oh it's even worse. See, there doesn't seem to be — I don't know of any spiritual practice whereby you don't have to go through this purging, this purgatory, the process of purification. It's just a matter of fact.

But if you understand it as a growth in consciousness, as a growth in wisdom, then you see there's no other way. Because how else would you know that the gratification is wrong? How else would you know that there is danger? How else would you seek the end of suffering?

So if you see your life as more to do with an evolution of wisdom or an evolution of consciousness—perhaps the word wisdom is far better, actually—an evolution of wisdom, and not to confuse wisdom with knowledge. Wisdom is a relationship. It's how you relate to the world you're in. That's your wisdom.

And if you see that that's what you're doing through your meditation, is to discover a wiser way of being

with the world, then in a sense you're prepared to go through the purgatory. And also I think when you actually go through the purgatory, when you actually see that it is a process of healing, you're more and more open to actually going through it. And that's important.

It's important that you actually see that there is gratification and that somehow something goes wrong with that. And this is what we mean by indulgence, whether it's indulgence in something which is pleasant or indulgence in something which is outwardly unpleasant, like anger. But it is pleasing to let go of your anger and bang the door and bump somebody on the nose. That's gratification. To finally get your own back. But it's not particularly skillful, it's not really wise.

So it's actually beginning to see that, that we begin to see the path out, you see, and that's the next business of it, the *nisarana*, the escape.

If there were no escape in the world, then, boy, we'd be miserable, wouldn't we? And people who get themselves into these dead ends, these sort of dead ends of the meaninglessness of life. Or a religious person—I've met a few people who think they're damned. What do you do? They're damned. Now, in Buddhist terms, that's to really believe that there's no escape from *samsāra*. That whether you like it or not, you'll be reborn and reborn and reborn—first as a shrew in a meditation room and then you get chucked out with a bit of cheese out in a paddock, and then you're reborn as a human being picking up a shrew and chucking it out, and there's this constant *samsāra*, this onward going.

And in the Buddha's day that was the horror. It wasn't ecological disaster. It was this thing about having to be reborn and reborn and reborn again. And there's a lovely conversation in one of the scriptures—I can't remember the details now—where two of the Buddha's cousins, if I remember rightly, decide that, discussing whether to actually take up, whether to follow Gautama and take up the robe and bowls. And the argument goes something like, "Look, what is life? You've got to go out there, you've got to plow the ground, you've got to harvest the seed, you've got to eat it, and then you do it again next year, and it's really boring."

And one of them gets really into this and says, "Yeah, you're right." And he goes off with the other fellow and says, "No, it's for you. I'm still enjoying this." So he doesn't leave, you see. He's still getting something out of the life form. But it was this fellow who was pointing out to this man who finally leaves how terrible life is in this boring, repetitious way, which I think would have been perhaps more obvious to people in those days, in some ways anyway, because there wasn't this huge entertainment industry.

It reminds me of an old pre-war comedian. He's gonna jump—he's on London Bridge and he's gonna jump in—and the policeman sees him and he calls him over, you see. And they start having this big discussion about life, you see, as to why suicide. And the policeman's arguing that life's worth it, and the comedian is arguing how useless it is, and the conversation goes on and on, and they finally jump—both of them jump off the bridge! That's brilliant—"Yeah, you're right!"

This finding of the escape—so that's the Buddha's great thing, isn't it? And he says that what he's discovered, he's not invented it. He says this is an ancient path. He's just rediscovered it. It's not as though he's the first human being that's ever done it. He doesn't claim to be that. In fact, in the mythology of Buddhism, there are Buddhas previous to him. Going back, I don't know how many times—there are twenty-eight previous Buddhas named in previous huge eons of world systems. It was just the way that you begin to think when you think of time being cyclic.

I think I mentioned it this morning, that the years just roll over, just keep going, and the whole universe is expanding and then it'll collapse, and then it expands again and collapse. So there's that idea that this has been going on ever since. He says that he doesn't see the beginning of *kamma*. He doesn't see that there is a beginning. It's always been like this. And presumably in that sense he doesn't see the end of that process, but as an individual he found an escape.

Now this escape is—be careful here—because this escape, as hopefully you've all come to realize in your meditation, is not the destruction of the world. There's a very interesting discourse in which somebody asks him, "Where do the four *mahābhūtas* come to an end?" Now the four *mahābhūtas*, the four elements, the four great elements, they are earth, fire, water and air. And they constitute the physical universe. So what the person is asking is, "Where does all this come to an end?"

And he says, "It's the wrong question." He says, "Where do they not find a footing?" It's very interesting. Where do they not find a footing? In other words, is there an experience, is there something experiential where you will not find these, but it doesn't deny their existence or destroy them or annihilate them?

And then he goes on to say there is a consciousness which is not touched by the five or six senses. So there is a consciousness which is not colored by the six senses. So there's no hearing and there's no seeing and there's no—there's nothing there, there's no thought, there's nothing. And yet it is without boundary, and the reason it's without boundary is because there's no phenomena. You've got to have something to create a boundary. If there's nothing in this universe, then it's empty space—there's no boundary in it. It's what we have, it's the things we have that create boundaries for us.

And he says there is this consciousness which is without boundary, and in all directions full of light. So he's pointing there to an experience which is a total escape from the world. Now remember that when we say an escape, he's still there. It's not as though he's disappeared in a puff of smoke and there's just this mystical voice arising from nowhere. So this escape is not the destruction of anything.

So again, when they ask him, "Does he believe in any form of annihilation?" he says, "No." He says, "Everything arises depending on something else and there's no annihilation." He says, "The only things that are annihilated are greed, hatred and delusion." And greed, hatred and delusion are this way of expressing this wrong relationship we have to the world, which in a psychological sense is this seeking gratification. And that's what he means by this desire. When we chant in the morning this *taṇhā*, that's what he's referring to.

But remember that there's a completely different psychology, and that's the psychology of the Buddha. That's the psychology of the enlightened beings, which doesn't have that downer, it doesn't have that gratification, it doesn't have all the downers of gratification—the grief, the fear, the anger, the frustration, all that sort of stuff—it doesn't have that. It doesn't have any anger, it doesn't have any fear. The fearless one—that's one of the epithets of the Buddha. He's fearless. What's he afraid of? There's no connection to the world whereby suffering could arise. How does suffering arise? It arises through the connection of attachment, identity, possession. If that's all gone, what then is our relationship to the world? What might it be?

So that escape is suggestive of all the teachings of the Buddha concerning the practice which leads us to this point of liberation. It's an escape. It's like escaping from prison. It's like you're finally released.

So now this is where our practice comes in, because it's a fundamental practice. And what we're learning is not only to see that gratification is wrong because it has these dangers, but we're seeing this escape. And that's all we're doing—we're just seeing where the escape is. And the more the escape becomes clearer to us, then the more we'll practice, because it's like when you see the finishing line, you really want to go for it.

So even in our practice when we're confused or when we don't think we're getting anywhere or we don't think we're progressing—that's a regular one for meditators, because you still keep doing these pratfalls and you think, "Well, I'm still as I was before," you see—so if you have those sorts of feelings, those sorts of ideas about yourself, remember that all those come from this gratification. You're now seeking gratification as it were in the spiritual life, meaning you're seeking a certain type of comfort there. And that comfort usually comes from the sense of achieving.

But if you abandon those ideas of trying to achieve anything and draw that word simply into moment-to-moment mindfulness, then you're always achieving, as long as you're mindful. You're always here. And that mindfulness, that sharp mindfulness, is a guard, because as we begin to realize, the problem begins or starts with these intentions. So when we see these intentions and we're awake, we're bright with it, we're not caught up in it, we're not suddenly dashing off and doing something, then that gives us that moment of choice. And then we begin to see, "Oh, here's the escape, here's the escape."

And when we access that point within us, which is the observer—so that's not the fullest escape because there's still a sense of me there—but we can see that that's an escape from all the pain that the body might offer us, because from there we can feel the pain, we can see the reaction to pain, we can allow the reaction of fear and aversion, all that, to die away, and we can find this equanimity, this peacefulness with pain, just this patient forbearance. And that's an escape. It's an escape from all the fear and the anxiety that we have around the body.

It's the same with these emotions. When you distance them, when you can feel them there, rather than being them, it's an escape, isn't it? You've transcended them. You're in a different position. You're not

identifying with them. You're not possessing them. You're saying, "Oh, look, there, there's anger. See, there's grief. There's depression." And it's seeing that clearly that we begin to say, "Oh, here's the escape. Here's the escape."

That doesn't mean to say at all, does it, that it's easy. It's very difficult in fact, to stay with these mental states as they arise. But the more we see that this is the escape, the more we'd be happy to stay there. The more we see it actually as a place where there's healing going on.

And then finally, all this takes a long time. So there's always going to be that little bit of self left right to the bitter end. It's not going to let go. So there's always going to be these pratfalls on the way. There's always going to be moments when we feel we've slipped back and we're not moving forward and all that. But we have to keep reminding ourselves that this is an onward going. This is a long-term commitment. In the Buddhist sense we're talking lifetimes, not just talking this life. So it's a whole process that we're going through.

So there we have it—these three ways of looking at our practice: to be aware of where we're seeking comfort, where we're seeking gratification; to see that greed, that lust, the avarice—we've got lovely, great big words for all that—all centering around the four great lusts: power, riches, fame, to be famous, powerful and rich. Everybody wants to do that. That's pretty simple. And what do you want to be? "I want to be famous, powerful and rich." And sensual pleasure. They're your four main areas, aren't they? And it's just to see how the mind is constantly moving that way. It's always trying to achieve that particular state. And that renunciation is the point where we allow that desire to just fade away, to just begin to release itself.

And as I've pointed out in the morning, to let any desire fade away and then just to stay with it long enough to see what the mind is, what the heart is when there's no desire there. See that lovely contentment. And then with it comes the peace. And hopefully you're beginning to experience that even during these times of quiet abiding where we're trying to develop the more passive side of the factors of enlightenment: the calmness—calmness of the body, just being still; calmness of the heart, stillness, the silence of the mind—all that comes under calmness in a way.

And the attentiveness, just the ability to just be attentive, focused, not particularly focused on any one thing, but just to be here, and to focus on whatever arises and passes away, that very spacious, open awareness. And the equanimity, just that ability, just the openness to what's coming into our field of awareness.

And just every so often to be like that and just to rest within the present moment, you see, relaxing into the present moment, wide awake. And then as you do that, when it passes, to ask yourself, "Now what was that like? Was that a pleasant place to be?" Now fair enough, we can get attached to that too, and then our practice becomes a sort of quietism, that we're just seeking this lovely quiet place—"Leave me alone. Get out of my way."

But then, of course, that's balanced because we then bring in these other factors, the more active factors of the process, which is that interest, the interest of wanting to see, the effort to begin to see things, and the effort to remain at that point of interest, and the investigation of the Dhamma.

So, during your day, try to balance those things. Just go through your day and say, "Well, this is when I'm practicing this *samatha*-type meditation, peaceful abiding, and this is when I'm doing *vipassanā*." And get to know yourself. Know where your weak points are during the day. Say, "Well, now here I've got to—I mustn't fall asleep again. Or here I just let my mind go, I give up effort at this particular point in the day." And just catch your rhythm. They're probably also to do with just the natural rhythms of our bodies, the circadian rhythms as they call them. So there's all those rhythms going on too, you see. So once we've attained, once we've got to this point of observation, then we can see all this happening.

Let's just pause for a moment and just whatever thoughts come up, let them come up and pass away.

So, let me encourage you to keep putting in that little bit of effort. For, Nick and Sarah have been here now for two weeks, you see. It's coming to the end, so you have to be careful that your energy level doesn't drop. More like the long-distance runner when you see that wire. You've got to put on that little extra spurt to get there. So that's important. And this is about your fourth day, isn't it, Haji? So in a sense, hopefully, you'll be more at ease with the schedule, with the regime. So with that, there's a danger of, "Well, this is now easier now." And there's a drop of commitment, a drop of energy.

So you've got to keep lifting it. You've got to keep seeing where the effort begins to drop, and you just very gently push yourself. That's what one of my teachers used to say: push gently. And then you'll see the energy comes, the energy comes. So keep going. That's all there is to it.

May you be liberated sooner rather than later.

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