The Buddha's Quest - A Public Talk

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 25:06

The talk is about the quest according to the Buddha. I suppose the best thing is to relate to you the story of the Buddha himself. I'm sure you know the bare bones of it, but in a sense, his story is the archetype of anybody who's on the spiritual path.

There are lots of legends around what happened to him before, the way he lived and whatnot. But basically he was the son of a local lord, a local chieftain, and a kshatriya. So he would have been brought up in the art of war and government. That was the duty of his caste.

It was a time of great change, moving from pastoral society to the first monarchical systems. Already the Sakyas were subject to the king of Kosala. They weren't, as they were a bit before the Buddha's time, tribes who had their own democratic way of governing themselves—democratic in the sense that the Greeks thought of democracy, just the ruling caste sharing the power.

Within that change there was not only the growth of kingship and local power, with three or four kings around the Buddha, but the cities grew and trade grew, and a new caste you might say arose within an already existing caste: the merchants became very rich. That sort of shifted the balance of power a bit. At the time of the Buddha the castes weren't so solid as they became. The idea that the Brahmins were the head of society had not yet been fully established. It seems as though it had been established towards what we call Bengal, Calcutta way. But where he was in the middle, it was still fairly fluid. So when you read the scriptures, it's always the Buddha telling them what a real Brahmin is, and suggesting that they weren't as great as they thought.

Around about the age of twenty-nine, that's what he said, he left the home life. I'm sure you all experienced in your mid-twenties a growing realisation that youth had actually, or was coming rather rapidly, to an end. That one had better get serious about life. It's normally a time you might, if you're really forward-looking, take out a pension, start to take your work seriously, and even start a relationship with true intent. So it's a shift within our consciousness around about the mid-twenties. For some, it's an early existential crisis.

I suppose you could reduce the spiritual path to maybe three questions. The first one being something like: who am I, or what am I? The second one being: how do I relate? How do I fit in? And the third one being: what do I do? Those are your three paths—the path of understanding or insight, the path of love, and the path of action.

At that time, because of the disturbance in society, there was a growing movement—something like the

hippie movement—with a lot of people, men, leaving the home life to live as ascetics, wanderers. They were well accepted by society. They were considered to be worthy of support.

What they were trying to do was to find the end of rebirth. The thing that obsessed the mind at that time was this idea of constantly being reborn, having to come back. It's okay if times are good, but because those times weren't so good, and there was a lot of anxiety in the air, the question arose: how do you bring that whole process, the saṃsāra, the onward-going process, to an end?

Various teachers at the Buddha's time had various answers. Some were what we would call materialists. You just lived this life and you died and that was it. Some thought that the passage of karmic lives was completely set—it was fate. They didn't mind whether you went down one side of the Ganges pillaging and murdering and all that and came up the other side with great acts of compassion. It made no difference at all. Whatever you were supposed to be born in the next life, that was going to happen.

And there were others. The Jain leader, of course, was an elder contemporary of the Buddha. They had the idea, which I think was also within the Brahminical system, that there was stuff sort of clinging onto the soul, the jīva. It was done by action, but it was like stuff clinging. And the way to bring it to an end was to really stop. Just stop. Stop creating karma. So you know the Jains are very wary of stepping on creatures and stuff like that.

Because even if you don't mean it, it's bad news. And the Jain saint basically starves himself to death. You bring your karma to an end by simply ending your life.

So when the Buddha left the home life, he left not only because of perhaps joining the obsession of the age—trying to work out whether there was an end to this rebirth thing. It was also because he had become disenchanted with what society had to offer. One image that comes through the scriptures is that he's at a party, and at the end of the party, all he sees is disheveled bodies and people being drunk. And it's like, "Well, what's all this about?" There's a sort of emptiness to the sensual life, really. That was part of his disillusionment. All he could see ahead of him was this ordinary type of living, just trying to be happy all the time with sensual pleasure.

The other part was a more existential insight, which is put in the myth that he was out riding in his chariot, and he came across a sick person, a very old person, a corpse, and an ascetic sitting under a tree. This just awoke in him the fact that these are the facts of life. You get sick, you grow old, and then you die. As the old comedian said, "Life's hard and then you die."

But this idea of an ascetic under a tree awoke in him some sort of hope, some idea that maybe there was an end to this process. And so he goes off, leaving the ordinary household life, leaving really sensual pleasure. That's what he's left behind—he doesn't see any future in sensual pleasure. And it's very dramatic. He leaves his newly born child; he peeks through the curtain of the door but doesn't look because it would draw him back into the household life, and he leaves.

These days, of course, that sounds like abandonment, which it was. But in those days there would have been the extended family—it wasn't as though she was destitute. And he talks about his mother and father crying with tearful eyes, saying goodbye to him, so it was all set up. He probably did what I did to my mother and said, "Well, I'm only going for three years." Because that's what happened. I said, "I'm going to become a monk for three years." I had never heard anybody cry like that before in my life. And I put my arm around her and said, "It's only for three years." And she stopped. So I presume it was that sort of goodbye—there was a presumption that he'd have a go and then he'd come back.

So the first thing he does is go off, and he hears about these two very good teachers who both say they've achieved nirvāṇa, they've achieved the end of suffering. What they teach him became part of his system of teaching. We call it the jhānas, or the absorption states. The way you attain these is through mantra practice, through watching the breath. Slowly but surely you build up a beautiful state within yourself, and this state becomes quite calm. It can become ecstatic. You lose contact with the physical world, you lose contact with the body, and it's like a little bubble inside you that you can live in. Depending on the strength of your concentration and practice, you can stay there for quite some time.

One of them taught him to go to a certain stage, and the next one taught him to go one stage higher. Both of them—especially the second one—saw him as an equal, and both invited him to be a co-teacher. But his response was that there was something wrong. He hadn't actually completed; he hadn't actually answered his question. Because when you came out of these states, he was still the same old depressed Siddhartha. So he left that and thought, "Well, the thing to try now is the other way," which was self-mortification. And that's where the Jain leader, we think, had an effect on his practice.

This idea that desire is the problem is rooted in the Brahminical tradition. Even Socrates was aware of that. And one understanding was that it was the body that was at fault. It was the body that gave us hunger and lust and avarice and all that—it was rooted in the body. So if you left society and really starved the body, really stopped feeding into it, then that would bring you to the end of karma.

I'm sure you've all done a ten-day fast? No? Well, if you have, you'll know that the first three days are horrible while the body releases toxins. But then after that, you feel very light, very wonderful. You don't want to eat at all. Of course, you're dying, but that's irrelevant. It's a very happy, calm state of mind.

So it does have that sort of effect, and he goes through this business of eating so little that he says he could hold his spine through his stomach. And what he found was it was just painful. That didn't seem to get him anywhere either. Self-mortification was just painful and unprofitable—ignoble, he actually says.

So he left that, and by that time he had five companions. As the story goes, the little myth that surrounds it, he's left them and he's gone onto a roadside, and a woman, Sujata, comes along with a bit of rice pudding. You all know the soporific effect of rice pudding, yes? So this woman offers it, and it sort of revives him.

And for some reason—maybe because it was rice pudding—he remembers this moment in childhood. This is a key moment in his life. He's watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony. And there's something about that watching which is different from these meditations that he's been doing with these teachers. The meditation he'd been doing had been about creating a state of mind—like we do when, for instance, we're a bit bored and we turn the TV on. As soon as you turn the TV on, you get a different state of mind. And they'd been unsatisfactory.

But there's something about this watching of his father which awoke in him a possibility. This was something different. What it was, was that he was still very concentrated. He recognized that the state he was in as a child had that same level of concentration that he got through these meditative exercises. But he was watching. He was beginning to understand what his father was doing. So something else had come into the equation, which was then what he called the wisdom factor, the paññā, this intuitive intelligence.

If your intent is just to make yourself happy, there's no problem in investigating anything. If it makes you happy, that's fine—why worry? But if something doesn't make you happy, if something goes wrong, like with your washing machine or something, then you want to know. There's that wanting to know.

So although he had this wanting to know—he wanted to know whether there was an end to suffering—the exercises being given were just creating beautiful states of mind, which also came to an end. It didn't occur to him then to investigate those. It was probably because the people he was surrounded with were telling him, "Well, no, this is it. There is no more." There was no inkling as to how to move further with that sort of system. And the self-mortification—that was just painful.

So this memory then led him to decide to continue his practice. He found a nice place near Uruvelā, which is now Bodh Gaya, and a nice bit of tussock grass so he could sit comfortably. You see, you always start comfortable. And he sat there.

He made this determination: now he couldn't see any other possibility. He said, "Now I'm going to sit here. Either I'm going to crack this problem or I'm going to die." It was a very firm determination. Luckily, the bluff wasn't called because he did actually make insight.

Now, the insights were three. He had three insights which gave him an understanding and also liberated him. Because of his very good concentration, he was able to direct his attention to past lives. If you want to do it, I'll tell you where you can get the technique—you have to have very strong concentration. As he went through his past lives, what he saw was that in passing from one life to the next, it depended upon the moral quality of the life before, on the ethical value of the life before.

Now, this was not the way the Brahmins thought at the time. Karma for the Brahmins was to do the ritual properly. Remember, the early polytheistic societies personalized forces in nature—the sun god, things like that. And the first sacrifices were there to propitiate these gods to get what you wanted. It was an asking. Later on, it became more that if you did the ritual perfectly right, the god had to answer. So your

karma was getting the ritual perfectly right. It had nothing to do with ethics.

The entrance of ethics into the Indian system was, according to the books I've read, peculiar to the Buddha. It came later on, of course, in Hinduism. So he saw that this was true of his own life—that depending on his moral actions, good or bad in the past life, he would be reborn according to that. It had become a personal truth for him.

Because of his ability to see things, he was able also to see beings passing from one realm to another according to the same law. So what had been a personal law then became a cosmic law for him: that according to your ethical actions, you'll reap the results—good or bad.

And the third knowledge—these first two were deep insights into the way things were, but they didn't liberate him. The liberation came with the collapse of ignorance and the answer to the question: Who am I? And that led to this doctrine that people find very confusing—anatta, not-self.

The first thing to understand is that it's not a philosophical statement, not a metaphysical statement. It's a technique to investigate ourselves. When we're sitting, or anywhere, every time you experience something and recognize there's a split between that which is experiencing and the experience—there's a split in your consciousness—then whatever you're experiencing cannot be you. There's a break.

And this goes back and back. You step back from the body with its sensations. You step back from the heart with its emotions. You step back from the mind with its thoughts. And the final one is this feeling of presence, the feeling of being that we might have occasionally—a sort of self-awareness. Even that, you see, if you're aware of a self, you can't be that either. That's also an object. So this movement backwards from what you're actually experiencing is the process of liberation.

The basic existential delusion lies within that question: Who am I? As a child, I don't think we made any distinction between me and my body. Later on, we begin to use certain language—"I am feeling unwell," where you think you are your illness. But then, "I have a headache"—so we already have a dualistic relationship to what we experience. That process of identity and possession is at the core of all our suffering.

The reason is this: once you have identified something—I am this, I am that—what is your search? Your search is for happiness. So you've got to seek it within what you think you are. If you think you're a human being, you've got to make it right here and now. If you think it's to do with pleasure, then you've got to manipulate the world to ensure it gives you as much pleasure as possible, because only then do you feel happy. If you think it's relationship, then you're constantly dependent upon somebody else for your personal happiness. You form an attachment, and at worst an identity, with what you're experiencing.

It's only when you begin to realize there's an aftermath to these experiences that you have the same inklings the Buddha had—that maybe there's something else, maybe I've got something wrong here. Because in Buddhist understanding, nobody and nothing can cause you psychological pain. It's all

self-inflicted. Pain in the body is a given; you can't do much about that. The body has its own life form. But suffering is optional. And we've opted to suffer, mainly because of delusion.

So the process of liberation is that process of detachment. And that's what the meditation is about, the one I've just taught you. It's about beginning to realize: I'm not this, I don't own this. I'm not that, I don't own that.

Now, people think that if you continue this process, you just end up being nothing—a blob. Because you're not this, not that. You just sit under a tree looking enlightened. But what happens, of course, is that in undermining the wrong relationship to the world, we discover a proper relationship. And what we discover is that everything we thought we were letting go of is given back to us.

Once the Buddha was enlightened, all the intellect he had developed through his discussions and arguments at home came into the service of expressing the Dhamma. All the earlier attachments which he would have considered as love, as compassion—these were cleansed of that attachment. But immediately after realizing what he'd understood, there was an immediate desire to express this for others out of compassion. Immediate connection with other beings to bring them out of suffering.

And as soon as he did that, there was a bit of a shake, because he didn't think anybody could understand it. The great god Sahampati came down and asked him to teach, because some people had only a little dust in their eyes.

So then, having determined to teach, off he goes. He walks. And that's his action. Within that enlightenment, these three questions become answered: what he is in terms of his ultimate state, what his relationship is to the world, and what he has to do.

I started by saying that his life was archetypal. So we also have to go through that process. And I think you'll find it right across the board of the spiritual life. No matter what form it takes—Christianity, Islam, and so on—if you look at the mystics, they're all doing the same thing, one way or another. There has to be a leaving of the world to re-find it.

So don't look so glum.

In the end, you're happy. He was happy, and he died very peacefully—died on his side. Right before he died, he said, "Any more questions?" Can you imagine? "Any more questions?" What will ours be? "Why me?"

And then he gave his last piece of advice: "All compounded things arise and pass away. Work diligently for your liberation." Just like that.

So that's the end of my little homily.

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