Towards a Whole Life Practice

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 47:56

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So we've either refreshed our understanding or been introduced to a particular practice, a particular methodology to investigate our situation. That's the *vipassanā*. We've gone into the characteristics which is what it is we're trying to actually see more clearly. From the Buddha's point of view, remember, it's the way we're looking which is our fault. We're not seeing things, as he would put it, as they really are. And he points to these three avenues of investigation: the impermanence, the idea of not-self, not-me, not-mine, and the psychology around desire, sensual desire, desire which basically says we're seeking happiness in the sensual world—as the three avenues of investigation which should eventually correct our view and have an effect on us. In the Eightfold Path, the effect is meant to be systemic, and we'll come to that this evening.

And then we talked about the various hindrances, the mental states that arise in meditation, which we have to work with. But from the importance of this suffering business it was also recognising that even though we're investigating these three characteristics, the actual process of purifying the heart—what would these days be called therapy—is actually happening quite unwittingly. It's just happening of itself, and the main technique there you might say was to depersonalise it. And we depersonalise these emotions when we take the stories away, the stories that turn them into a continuous sense of me or mine. When we just bury our attention into just the feeling, just the feeling sense of an emotion, the sensational sense of an emotion, then it becomes a very different sort of experience. And at that point we have to be aware of our reaction to these things, where another story starts up. You know, I can't take it, I want this. The I always appears somewhere.

So now, this evening, it's really the time to talk on the more positive side of how we bring about a transformation. If we stay just there, you know, there might be an understanding, well, you just end up without greed or without hatred, and it's a sort of flat state, or a nondescript state of not being anything. But according, again, to the Buddha's understanding, what happens is almost a natural transformation of those particular attitudes into their opposites. In the Zen tradition, they'll tell you that compassion arises naturally with wisdom. And there was one teacher in London, she died recently, her name's just slipped my mind, who wouldn't do any loving-kindness practice—it was a waste of time. Because from her point of view, with wisdom, compassion arises naturally.

And in a sense that's what you might say happened to the Buddha himself, because his great intention was

to seek some sort of answer to his own problems, even at that most existential level, the angst of the question of why am I here in the first place and who am I in the context of the cosmos and all that. And having answered all those questions and understanding what he'd come to realise, quite naturally, you know, the desire to pass on this information to other human beings just arose naturally. There was a doubt, a doubt arose in his mind at the time as to whether anybody would actually understand it, so subtle had been his experience. And as it's put in the mythology, the great Brahmā Sahampati came down and said to him that there were people with only a little dust in their eyes. So that's when he started off on his teaching journey.

So how are we already generating in our practice, in the actual sitting, and with the work we've been doing this weekend, the foundations for this transformation? So when we talk about transformation, we're just talking about this energy that we experience within ourselves that we call emotions and mental thoughts. How do we move them over to the opposite of the more negative states that we experience? How does hatred transmute into love and cruelty into compassion? How loneliness transmutes into solitude? Things like that. How stinginess and selfishness transmute into generosity?

So the first thing is to recognise how important this quality of equanimity is. That's what we've been developing when we're practising this quiet abiding. The thing about equanimity in this sense is that it's the platform, you see, upon which these other qualities can develop more purely. It seems to balance them out. It seems to give them a pure basis to arise from. And that's really the importance of this quality of equanimity.

What is that quality? From the mind's point of view, it's coming from a position of don't know or not sure. So we're open. We're actually open. We're ready to receive some information. And from the heart's point of view, it's not coming from a prejudicial situation. It's not being discoloured by whether you like somebody or don't like somebody. It's an open-heartedness and an open-mindedness. That's the qualities of this *upekkhā*, equanimity. And you'll see that some writers, like Nyanaponika in his book on Vision of the Dhamma, quite clearly states that this is the greatest of all virtues, because of that, because it sustains the balance of the others.

So when it comes to something like the other three illimitables, there are four qualities that are called illimitables: love, compassion, joy, and this equanimity. And they're illimitables in the sense that there's no end to which you can develop them. It's an indefinite development. We can't say infinite or eternal, but we can definitely say indefinite. And because there are innumerable numbers of beings in the world, there doesn't seem to be an end to the amount of beings that you can offer your good will towards.

So these three illimitables starting with this idea of love, you see, *mettā*—so after this when we do, after the walking period, we'll do an extended practice of *mettā*—and those are all the qualities that you would expect of a good friend: companionship, interest, gentleness, openness, companionship. All the qualities that you would expect of a good friend would be included in the idea of *mettā*.

And when it comes to the active qualities, so you've got this passive quality of equanimity and you've got these active qualities of love, compassion and joy. When it comes to those three active qualities, love again becomes the basis of your relationships. Now, in later Buddhism, in the Mahāyāna Buddhism, they stressed compassion a great deal. And that really was a historical development because it was felt that the early schools had been too self-centred, too much about saving themselves. And one of the adjustments that was made during that time was to bring in the idea of compassion. So often if you take refuge with the Mahāyāna school, you take the vow not to enter into Parinibbāna until everybody else goes in there. Which wasn't, luckily for us, the Buddha's own decision.

So this *mettā*, the Buddha himself, we talk about now his own teachings, that was what he reinforced. That was one of his teachings and he would balance it really with the *vipassanā*. In the discourse on loving-kindness he says that we should develop this open love and it should be balanced with insight meditation. There's a very good reason for that, because if you only do *vipassanā*, there's a great danger that it remains a sort of heady thing, and it doesn't move. It doesn't move. The wisdom can become a sort of indifference.

Have I told you the story of these two monks? Did I mention that? Because I always tell these stories. I never know when I've told it and when I haven't. Well, a couple of things happened when I was in the East which sort of really showed this up, you see. Because I was with one monk and there was a cat and it obviously killed this mouse and it was still playing with it. And I said to this monk, I said, why didn't you stop that? Because this particular cat was well fed. He said, well, it's cat kamma, it's mouse kamma.

And I was at another monastery and there was three or four of us just sitting on this bench talking and this cat suddenly leapt out and jumped on a bird. And one of the monks, who was fairly elderly, shot up like lightning, got a hold of his cat, gave it one hell of a belt, and then saved this bird. But unfortunately, the lungs were punctured, it had died. So he very beautifully held it up by the wings and chanted the sort of death chant: all compounded things arise and pass away.

So what was the difference between the first monk and the cat kamma business and the second monk and his jumping up in an attempt to save a bird, you see? And the difference was that the second monk realised that his consciousness was also part of their awareness, part of their kamma. There wasn't that indifference to suffering. There wasn't that separation between that knowing, as it were, and what it knew.

So when we're sitting in *vipassanā*, we create this distance. We have to do so in order to see things more clearly. And we go into it. Sometimes, of course, you can lace your looking with a sense of kindness. I haven't mentioned that over the weekend, but you might find that also softens things. So like when you're investigating, say, feelings of depression, you can still investigate them, but you can bring a sense of kindness to your investigation. And that has quite a softening effect.

So here we have, you see, two incidents where the one, you know, was practising, or at least had

understood that there was no connection to be made, and the other one found an immediate connection with the suffering of the bird, you see. I remember a woman came to see me in one of the interviews and said that her partner found her cold and unresponsive after she'd meditated. So I said to her, well, don't you do any *mettā* after you meditate? She said, no. I said, well, you've got to do *mettā*. And you've got to bring your partner to mind, and often a bit of *mettā*, you see. And, well, that cleared that one up. So you have to reconnect, you see. You have to reconnect with the world.

And once we've developed that reconnection, it's a specific quality, *mettā* is a specific quality of having the same relationship with everybody, in fact with all beings—a friendliness with all beings. So that means it goes beyond this like and dislike, and that's where the attachment is. The attachment isn't in the friendliness, the attachment is in just this personality thing of like and dislike.

Now, I'm not so sure we can ever get over that. It's just knowing that it's there. Even when you read the scriptures, there's definitely for me a feeling that the Buddha had his inner crowd. Obviously, the earlier disciples who stayed with him, Moggallāna, Sāriputta, they seem to form a sort of inner group, you know. And there's a man called Kassapa who actually leads the council after the Buddha dies, who is definitely considered to be an Arahant and worthy of respect and all that sort of stuff. But there's a feeling that whenever he arrives, everybody goes... And he's one of these hard forest-blowing monks, you know, hard on the Vinaya and all that.

And after the Buddha's death, he meets Ānanda. Ānanda was the Buddha's companion for the last twenty years. And also an awakened being. And when he meets him, he calls him like a little kid or something. He talks to him as somebody below him. And Ānanda, who's with Ānanda, gets angry with him. So there's some sort of, even at that level, there's just a natural quality of the way personalities touch each other. But that shouldn't be a barrier to our way, to the way that we actually treat somebody. This is the point. In other words, that you like somebody or dislike them is probably a personality issue, just the way we are. But that doesn't mean to say that we should therefore treat somebody any the less friendly because of that. And it's making that distinction which creates this quality of universal love, you see. And that's the *m ettā*.

Now, the reason why I say that *mettā* is the basic relationship that we have with each other, with all beings, is because you can see that once you're a friend to somebody, the other two illimitables arise quite naturally. So if a friend falls ill or into misfortune, there's a natural desire to help. It's not a problem, it just arises naturally out of that friendliness. You don't have to work on it. And if somebody, if a friend has good fortune, you tend to congratulate them and you're happy for them. You feel there's a resonance, a resonance, a joyful resonance. It's called sympathetic joy or reciprocal joy. It's a resonance. You feel their happiness and you're happy for them. If they win the lottery, you're extremely happy. You don't want a penny. You're not upset when they don't even buy you a drink. It's that sort of, and you're still gleeful that they're having such a good life. So that love, you see, that Buddha asked us to develop is the platform for all these other qualities.

Now, when it comes to love itself, as we've pointed out, the big obstacle there is affection. The obvious one is hatred. I mean, that's pretty straightforward. But the more subtle one is affection or attachment. And you can see this often in the case of a parent. You know, like if their little child comes home with a black eye, you know, it's the end of the world, you know. But if it's a cheeky kid from down the street, well, it deserves it. There's that sort of attachment which sort of creates a speciality around the person whom you have that relationship with.

Now, as I say, you can't do anything about that. It's just like when we open up to ourselves and we find these various states. It's a case of making ourselves aware of that and making sure that we're making decisions, intentions that go the other way. Now one of the things this weekend was really trying to catch these intentions a bit, because remember it's at the point of intention that we have this ability to choose and we can see the quality of that intention. And if you see that the intention you're making is flavoured or is laced with some sort of attachment, then just make sure you make the right intention and work from that intention.

So it's just like with food, you see. With food, as soon as we make the intention to eat to nourish the body, it creates a different relationship to food. But as soon as you seek their happiness, then that's it. It doesn't mean that the food doesn't make you happy. It's just that your intention corrupts your relationship to food. It then becomes, you know, sort of a dependency. Your happiness becomes dependent on a particular food that you like.

When it comes to compassion, that again is, I mean the opposite is obvious, cruelty. We don't have to work too much on that. But the subtle one is grief, you see, pity, pity, grief. That's a bit difficult for us to grasp really, because the association of compassion with grief is quite intimate. We think that the more we feel sorry for somebody, the more in a sense we're compassionate. But if you think about it, to move from the heart of compassion is actually a joyful moment. A heart is filled with joy when you're helping somebody.

Let's take a very simple case: if a blind man wants to walk across the street, and you just do it out of kindness, and you take his arm and lead him across. A sense of joy, isn't it? If you grieve for the blind person, then what is it you're adding to that? And is it necessary? Sometimes it's easier to understand that when you actually think about yourself. Supposing you were, shall we say, struck down or something, and everybody around you started weeping and wailing. I mean, would that help you? It's like it just makes you more sad, you know, go away. I've got enough grief.

If you take, for instance, which is, you see, these things are completely understandable. And I think you have to make a distinction here between good and bad in the sense of evil and skilful, unskilful, wholesome, unwholesome. We're not saying that grief is some sort of great evil. We're just saying it's unnecessary suffering. It's not necessary. We can relieve ourselves of the need to grieve for somebody else. It undermines the purity of our compassion.

If you take for instance somebody who's feeling ill and they go to the doctor and they have a diagnosis and

the doctor tells them that they've only got six weeks to live, but they just can't contain their grief and they're blubbering and saying, how would you feel about that? You think, this is highly unprofessional. So, of certain professionals, we're quite happy for them to tell us, you know, in a kind, sympathetic way.

We're not asking them to be brutal, but in a kind, sympathetic way, in an understanding way. But we would hate for them to collapse into tears. As a surgeon, if he's weeping while doing his job, it wouldn't help, would it? It means there's something definitely wrong.

If you really look into pity — and pity is perhaps a slightly better word, although it melds easily into grief — going back a little bit to love: when somebody dies, you're left with grief. Now, what is that grief? Is that a measure of your love or a measure of your attachment? That's the point.

I had an old lady come to me whose son had died, and she'd been grieving over this son for years. It just wouldn't leave her and depressed her all the time. When we discussed it, and she came to realize that actually the grief was a measure of her attachment and not her love, it just lifted. I could see it lifting even then and there when I was talking to her. She actually wrote me a letter later saying that all her grief had gone once she'd separated the idea of grief from love.

Remember that attachment is like that word — it's a rather nice word — it's like you're glued. When somebody you're glued to is ripped out of your life in death, you're just left with this wound, this inner wound. Just because you might now think this is because of my attachment doesn't mean it hasn't to be suffered and allowed to heal. That's the grieving process. But as soon as you say to yourself that this grief is a measure of my love, every time your grieving begins to lessen, you have to say to yourself that you don't love that person as much as you did. So you've got to grieve again. You've got to keep pumping it up, because you can't handle the guilt of not loving the person.

But love is easy, isn't it? Love allows people their destiny. If a person has had to die young or whatever, that's it. You let them go. It's just the way it is, as we say.

Now this compassion — one of its things is grief. But there's an even more subtle problem, especially with compassion, and that is the do-good factor. It makes you feel good when you do good, especially when somebody thanks you and obviously appreciates your help. There's a very subtle shift, often without a person knowing it, that in fact you start doing good in order to feel good. Then you become the classic do-gooder, and the do-gooder is the person who's going to do you the good they want to do you, whether you like it or not.

You can always catch that little do-gooder in ourselves, because if you've jumped the gun — and this is where equanimity comes — because with equanimity, one goes to the person who needs help with that open-minded, open-heartedness, and you say, "What do you want?" When they tell you what they want, then you can say to yourself, "Can I do it or can't I do it?" It's a very simple choice. If you can, then you help. If you can't, you can't. But if you jump the gun and suggest to them what they need and they brush

you off and you feel hurt, then you know there's something else going on in this transaction. You have to be careful with that one.

The other thing about compassion that I think people feel these days is a feeling of impotence, of not being able to do what they know has to be done — even about big things like the disaster in Burma or in China, or the fact that we now have a food shortage for no reason other than the futures market. People get into that emotional involvement with the world and what's happening to the world, and then they get this terrible feeling of frustration, complete impotence, feeling unable to do anything, unable to do enough. That really is not a pure compassion. That's not coming from equanimity. That's coming from pride. Pride here doesn't know the limits of power and influence.

When we do something, it's within our power. You have a ring of power around you — what you can actually do. Then there's another outer ring of influence — what you can get other people to do. Beyond that, that's it. That's the end of what you can do and can get others to do. It's just being able to accept that and being equanimous with it, that one has done what one can do.

I went on a retreat once where there were four different traditions. There was a Chan teacher, there was me doing the old *vipassanā*, there was an Orthodox monk, and there was — would you believe it — the Archbishop of Canterbury himself. We were supposed to be sharing these teachings. On the koan, he gave us all these koans to do, and some of them just don't make sense to me at all. But the last few at the end were very modern koans, and one of them really struck me. It said, "What can you do when you've done everything you can do?" It's that point where we think we can always do more than we can. That's where the frustration comes. That's where the sense of impotence can come. We have to be realistic about what our role is in any given situation.

Even when it comes to giving to charities — they're constantly coming to the door, and it always says fifty pence or fifty cents, and you think, well, by the end of it, if you're giving fifty cents to all these charities, you end up being a pauper. So it's a case of recognizing that this is what I can do, this is what I can get other people to do, and then you just rest in that. That's the quality of equanimity.

Muditā, sympathetic joy — that's a lovely quality, isn't it? To be able to rejoice in other people's good fortune. It undermines the obvious thing, which is envy and jealousy. Those are two things that we don't like to see in ourselves. Envy is not so bad — you can say to somebody, "I envy your lifestyle" or something. But jealousy is one of these traits within us which we don't particularly like to see, because when we're jealous, we're actually saying to ourselves that this person is better than me. So it's often a very subconscious thing which comes out in all sorts of ways.

In our meditation, if it comes up, really catch it and get the feel of it. It's not a pleasant mental state at all. There would have been a time when I would have gone around saying I'm not jealous of anybody. But I remember — this is a little while back — I used to try to write plays at one point. By this time, I was beginning to recognize that I wasn't quite going to make Shakespearean standards. But there was this

young fellow who got a play on, and one of the few times I really caught my jealousy. It was a really nasty moment. I thought, "Oh my God!" It really is a nasty emotion. But it really undermines joy. This is the problem with all these negative things — they kill your own joy. You can't be joyful and jealous and envious at the same time.

The more subtle thing about joy is overdoing it, getting excited, jumping up and down a bit too much, so that it takes on a false character. You have to be careful of that too. But it's probably the easiest one for us to enjoy more purely anyway, especially with friends.

Going back now to this fundamental position of love — this *mettā*, this goodwill. It's translated sometimes in a slightly mawkish way as loving-kindness, which they take, I think, from a fourteenth-century mystic. But to me it just means goodwill, which I think translates it very openly. Then all the other things that we suffer from, trying to find a way to generate the opposite.

You'll see this evening that whereas in *vipassanā* we try to stop the thinking mind, try to stop the imaginative mind completely — it's a hindrance to actually seeing things as they really are — when it comes to developing these qualities within us, we actually begin to use the imaginative mind to reinforce and to develop certain qualities. When we practice the *mettā*, as we did a little bit last night, you bring people to mind and you offer them your goodwill, your blessings. Whether these things actually affect them or not is up to you, whether you want to believe that or not. But what it's doing is developing an attitude within us. As we widen that scope out to include all beings, we're slowly developing an attitude of goodwill to all beings. We're using these very faculties that in the past have become hindrances. It's the same with the compassion and the joy.

If you look at other things like loneliness — sometimes you might feel lonely. What do people do when they feel lonely? Normally, you'd ring up a friend and say, "I'm lonely tonight." "I'm lonely too." Two lonely people watching a film or something. But to feel the loneliness, what is it? What is the feeling of it? This is how you begin, just like in your meditation. You begin by sinking into that, the feel of loneliness. It's a lack of self-love, isn't it? That's basically what it is. You don't like being on your own.

As you sink in there, you might get all sorts of things, little blips arriving. "You're unlovable. Nobody loves you anymore." All that rubbish comes up. But if you stay with your *vipassanā* and you go into the feeling base of it, as it begins to evaporate, then the opposite begins to appear. When loneliness disappears, what can you expect at the end of the line? Solitude. Solitude is being perfectly at peace and at one with yourself.

To develop that, you have to give blessings to yourself. You have to start turning this *mettā* and this compassion towards yourself. That's how you begin to undermine these feelings of depression, loneliness, lack of self-esteem. You don't get caught up in the usual fantasies and the thinking around those negative feelings. You do your *vipassanā*. You could be on a bus, you could be standing under a tree — doesn't matter — and you just sink into that feeling. Then as it begins to loosen up, you don't have to wait for it to

completely end, though best if you can, but it's not necessary, then you start offering yourself these blessings. In that way you're developing another conditioning.

Remember, a lot of our opinions about ourselves we've picked up from other people. It's when teachers have told us we're stupid or our parents have told us they'd rather keep a rat. Things like that. We pick this up from people and ingest it, and it becomes part of our own mentality. Don't get into blaming them, by the way. That's just something that naturally happens to us as children. It's just recognizing that. But again, always not to get caught up in the fantasies, in the way we talk to ourselves.

That gives you some hints as to how we can generate the positive side. There are many other qualities, and the final one I'd like to mention is the one that the Buddha always began his talks with whenever he talked to lay people. Whenever he introduced himself as a teacher and what his teaching was about, he always talked first of all about generosity. Then the nature of good conduct, wholesome, ethical conduct. Then he would talk about the heavens and future life births and all that. When he felt that the audience was malleable, ready for the thing, he'd smack them with the old *dukkha* — the Four Noble Truths: "There is suffering." But he sort of softened them up first with a couple of nice things.

Generosity is, from the Buddha's point of view, a really important quality to develop. When you're generous, it's an act of love. It's an act of compassion. You're giving something for the benefit of somebody else. But in doing so, you have to give something up. You either have to give up some of your wealth or some of your time. To do that means an act of renunciation. Every time we give, every act of renunciation, we actually are cutting into the solidity of the self.

Somebody might say, "Can you come and help me?" and you want to watch your favourite program on TV. You have to give that up — that's the attachment to this program. Every time you make an offering of your wealth, you're giving up something which you could have bought for yourself, which you could have enjoyed for yourself. Every time you do that, especially in an act of generosity which tweaks a bit — you don't have to really suffer, but where you know you're actually giving something up — that's undercutting this attachment to yourself, this idea of the concreteness of the self, just being able to let go of something for the benefit of the other.

When you give, whether you give to a charity or to a friend or whatever, it's always getting this intention right, being very clear about your intention. At the point of saying yes or the point of giving something, your intention is very clear that you're giving this for the benefit of the other and you do not want any return. It's a complete letting go of the gift, whatever it might be.

If your friend says, "Can you come and help me do a bit of decoration?" and when you ask them if they could come and do a bit of decoration for you, they say no, that's fine. There's no pain, no sorrow. You've completely forgotten, in fact, that you'd helped them do their decoration. It's that sort of giving.

You've got to put that clearly in your mind, just like with food. You say to yourself, "This is just to nourish

the body." Then you do the act, or you give your donation or whatever. As soon as you've done that, of course, you're bound to get these little comments: "You are such a generous person. You really are wonderful, amazing how wonderful you are." Or, "Too much — take a bit back. You can't spend a whole day doing that." But you know them — you say, "Ah, that's old Mara." You've caught her, you've beaten old Mara there. Very slowly, those voices, those little negative conditionings, they die away and this more spontaneous action comes.

That's what we want, isn't it? We want to live spontaneously, not by way of just some reaction, some old habit. That's what the qualities give us. They give us this feeling of spontaneity in our lives where joy just arises naturally out of any action that we do. That's one of the gifts of developing these particular qualities.

You can see here the development of the spiritual life.

The *vipassanā*, the right understanding, getting things right, turning it into intentions. There's the Eightfold Path, right intention, right attitude. Turning them into clear intentions, clear intentions.

And then the way we speak, the way we act, even our livelihood. So how do we turn our livelihood, what we actually do within society, how do we turn that into a spiritual practice? And again it's turning it into a service. Again it's that generosity, it's the offering.

And then that whole spiritual practice becomes systemic. There's not a part of you which is not involved in that progress. If you stop at any point, there'll be a block, there'll be something, something won't pass, something won't happen for you. It just has to be like that.

And the last three of the Eightfold Path, the right effort and the right mindfulness and the right concentration, those follow us wherever we go, see? That's this business of just being in the moment, relaxing into the present moment, wide awake. That's your default position. And you can do that all the time. You don't have to do it just when you're on retreat.

Anytime during the day when there's a break, when you're not doing something, you remind yourself just to fall into that state. It doesn't matter how long. It could be a second. It could be just a second. And always in that state you can see the next intention. That's the importance of it.

When you're in a rush, when you're always moving, you get grasped by old conditionings. But if you can keep collapsing everything into this state of just being here, you can see the next intention. And it gives you that sense of control, you see, over your life. You're actually guiding yourself. You're actually moving the way you want to move.

So I can only hope that my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated sooner rather than later.

You have to say sādhu! I feel really bad. There were talks that the Buddha gave where the monks did not

respond. I don't know how he felt. There were others where the monks were delighted and the listeners were delighted, and there were other discourses where the listeners were delighted. They always said things that they didn't want to hear.

So if we do some walking meditation until about half past seven. And during this one, in order to support the *mettā*, the loving-kindness practice, do more just relaxing, just being with the walking. Don't worry too much about the investigation. Just develop that quality of calmness. And just that momentary attention, just momentary attention to what you're doing. And then we'll come back and do the next one.

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