First Three Noble Truths

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 32:56

Greetings all. Very good. There are, at the moment, 66 people, all looking at me, for heaven's sake. That's very lovely.

So, I just start in my usual way. *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa.* Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

I'm presuming you can hear me. So it's good to have a little test there. Somebody could say, they could just give me a nod to say they can hear me. That would lessen my sense of overwhelming anxiety. Nobody's answering. Well, I'm just presuming you can hear me. Yes, I'll have to presume. So I hope you had a fruitful day. Very good. Loud and clear. Thank you so much. Very good. Audio is great. Right. I'm with it. That's enough. Thank you very much.

So, yes, hopefully you've had a fruitful day. Just to reiterate, if you want to have, if something comes up which is a bit heavy for you to handle, feel free to get in touch. Use my email, bbodhi at gmail.com. Sometimes it's good just to talk to somebody. I'm thinking, obviously, especially for those people who find themselves locked in by themselves, that can be a bit of a miserable state. Although these days it's lessened with all the social media. It's a blessing, really.

I wasn't plugged in properly. I've got to get used to all this stuff. So I just wanted to... Oh, by the way, the little talk I give in the evenings, you'll find them as separate little items on the channel. So that if you happen to miss some of my pearls of wisdom one night, you can always check it out in the daytime.

So I wanted to answer these questions that were sent to me. To what extent can it be argued that the Four Noble Truths was the Buddha's most important teaching? Sounds a bit like one of these A-level questions. And are all the stages of the Eightfold Path equally important?

This discourse, which is the *Sammādiṭṭhi*, the right view discourse, where Sariputta is being asked, basically, what do we need to understand? What right view do we need to have in order to become liberated? And he gives various answers to that. And there's a suggestion that if you understand any of these fully, that would lead to liberation. Now, that only makes sense when we realize that the teaching, the Dharma, is all one piece, really. Once you investigate one part of it, it naturally leads you to other parts.

Anyway, he's being asked again, but friend, might there be another way in which a noble disciple is of right view and has arrived at this true Dharma. And he says, yes, there is. And then there is what you

might call a regular expression of the Four Noble Truths. So I'll read those out. What is the noble truth of suffering? What is the origin of suffering? What is the cessation of suffering? And what is the way leading to the cessation of suffering? So there's your Four Noble Truths.

Birth is suffering. Aging is suffering. Sickness is suffering. Death is suffering. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering. Not to obtain what one wants is suffering. In short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.

Now, that's pretty straightforward, isn't it? I mean, the whole business of being born is not particularly pleasant either for the child and the mother. And then aging and all. So all of it is pretty straightforward. But then there's this little sentence, not obtaining what one wants. Now, there's your frustration, your anxiety that you might not get it, all that sort of stuff.

Now, this word *dukkha*, that's what it's translating, suffering. These days, people prefer unsatisfactoriness. The word *dukkha* itself means just hard to bear. Du is like, it just means bad, not good. And ka means to bear something. So it's something that's difficult to bear. And it's used figuratively, for instance, to describe an axle in a wheel, which doesn't quite fit. So you get the grinding noise, it doesn't quite fit.

And what *dukkha*, what the Buddha is saying, the way he's using the word is not just on these obvious things like ordinary sufferings and pains and all that sort of stuff. But there is this business of not getting what one wants. And that's to do with our desires, our expectations. So that obviously causes us a lot of suffering.

But the next sentence goes a little deeper. It says the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering. Now, those of you who know dependent origination will know the middle links, which connect, which expresses how we create this suffering. So remember, there is this point of contact. Then there's the discernment that what we're experiencing is pleasant or unpleasant. Liking, disliking, and then of course we choose to grasp at or desire rather, desire what's pleasant and push away what's unpleasant. And that's the reaction. But it's the next one where we *upādāna*, which means to cling, to get hold of.

Now this *upādāna* is manifest in four different ways. It's first of all a clinging to the pleasures of the senses. That's the sort of clinging. And of course, if you are not being pleased, then your response is to get rid of it. So there's always this duality of aversion and desire. And the aversion, of course, splits into two. You either get rid of it or run from it. And then there's this holding onto views, opinions. I'm right, everybody else is wrong. That's also clingy.

Then there's this one about rules and regulations. This is really going back to an understanding of the time when ritual was a way of appeasing the gods or demanding the gods to do something. So if you think that, for instance, bowing to the Buddha, lighting candles and all that sort of stuff actually is going to liberate you, then you are definitely deluded. So that's the rules and regulations.

But the one that I particularly reinforce when I'm talking about this is identity, because that's where the

root cause is. The root cause is the sense of I. And that's really where the suffering becomes existential. It becomes a position of me. And that comes most obvious when death approaches us, but also serious illness or indeed the death of somebody we love or the serious illness of somebody we love. It impinges upon us. It begins to question our identity because this identity, this self, this feeling of me has a feeling about it of permanence. Even though we're quite happy to get rid of it when we fall asleep, there's the presumption that next morning I'm going to wake up and say, oh, here I am again.

So that's the suffering. So it's pretty straightforward unsatisfactoriness, not being able to get fully satisfied with life. It's always going to let us down a bit, even when we've got everything, the right house, the right car, the right partner, the right children, et cetera, et cetera, at some point it just begins to disappear. And that's the way it is. Then there's the suffering, which is not getting what you want. And then there's the suffering, which is to do with this existential, this sense of self.

So this word *dukkha*, which is very difficult to define, very difficult to translate, because it has such a wide meaning. And what the Buddha is really saying is that the whole of life, the whole of human life is unsatisfactory. And I always like the quote from Jesus on this when he said, the birds have their nests, but the son of man has nowhere to rest his head. So I think that's put it very poetically, very beautifully.

So then, of course, there's the origin of suffering, or the cause of suffering. And that is, it is craving, which brings renewal of becoming, is accompanied by delight and lust, and delights in this and that. That is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. This is called the origin of suffering. It's translated here as origin, but I would probably prefer the word cause, the basic cause of suffering.

So the word here that's being translated is *taṇhā*, which some authors, I think, probably are closer to the mark when you translate it as a thirst, a lack, a sense of lack. That's another translation that some authors use. And those get close to it. Craving is a bit too strong, although we do have cravings. It's actually covering all desires, even from the simplest thing, like when you're watching TV and you feel a bit uncomfortable, there's a desire to move. So if you watch all your intentions, you'll see that they're all, normally speaking, desires to get rid of something you don't like or get something you do like. And so we're constantly manipulating the world to make ourselves feel comfortable.

And it's accompanied with delight, and it's got lust here, but it's more like an indulgence, delight and indulgence. So the question that we have to ask ourselves, when I want something, when I want something or someone from this position of trying to escape suffering, because that's what we're doing when we're often indulging things and also enjoying it, what is it that we really want? Do we actually want the object we're desiring or the effect that the object has on us? Have a guess. What do you think? What is it we really want? I mean, do we really want porridge or do we want what porridge does to us? Toast, that's another one. Yeah, I know I'm a bit obsessive about toast.

So it's trying to establish or trying to develop a certain mental state, isn't it? A certain emotional feeling

state. And that's what this craving does or this thirst. And it produces habits, produces habits. And what we discover in meditation and even now with this lockdown is that when you interrupt a habit, when you stop a habit, it suddenly becomes a choice. Normally we're running with habits. You get up, you do this, you do that. You want a piece of toast. See, I'm at it again. And off you go.

But when you can't, when there's no bread, or when the toaster's broken, the habit's broken and it comes back at you. And now most times we would fight that and run out and get a toaster. But it also gives us a choice, a choice to bring about an end to that compulsive behaviour. So if we look upon this lockdown, some of us are having to stay in, in rooms, can't actually leave. This is an opportunity, really, to see where these obsessive-compulsive things are. And, of course, it can be difficult. It can be very difficult. But that's the whole reason for practicing this *vipassanā*, that you find a different relationship with it so that you allow the heart to express its turbulences, no matter how difficult that may be. And what we discover, of course, is that that's the way it heals itself. So that's the origins, or the cause of suffering.

There's also the craving for becoming. So there's yourself, always wanting to become. And you'll notice how you're always ahead of yourself. You're always thinking about what you're going to do in a minute or in an hour or this afternoon or when you go to work or when you don't go to work or when you retire. What are you going to do? So the self never feels safe just being in the present moment. He can't hold that position because it's unsafe. He doesn't know what's going to happen next, for heaven's sake. So this craving for constantly becoming and the other one is craving for non-becoming. So that, of course, takes us to the dark side to put an end to this because of the suffering that we're having, leading towards suicide. That's the worst. Or if you're angry with somebody, murdering them because they're stopping you getting happy. But we've given that up, remember, because we take the five precepts.

So that craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming, that digs deep again to this existential problem about who am I? And that's the question, who am I? Or what am I?

And then finally, the third one is cessation of suffering. How does that come to an end? How does all this stuff come to an end? So this is the regular formula. It is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting of that same craving. Just this is the end of suffering, the cessation of suffering.

Now that sounds really simple, doesn't it? Just to give up the craving, give up all these obsessive desires, this compulsive behavior, and voila, you've made it. But of course, what we discovered is that that's no easy thing at all. And that comes very obvious when we go on retreat, just the difficulty of changing our habits completely. The first three days, as you know, are all blood, sweat and tears. And then it eases off a bit, but never a lot. And it's always been a struggle. So the practice is hard. The Buddha doesn't pull punches on that. I'm sure you've heard me quote from the scriptures there. Somebody says to the Buddha, this training is very hard. And he says, well, it is hard, but in the end, you're liberated, you achieve *nibbān a*. And the questioner says, yeah, so what? And the Buddha says, well, at the end of it, you are happy and

with it, contented. *Tutti sukha wahati, tutti*. That's the word for contentment, *tutti*. Tutti frutti. So that's this business of the cessation.

And the final one is, of course, the Eightfold Path. Now, the question is, can it be argued is the Buddha's most important teaching? Well, if you can imagine, when the Buddha had his awakening, and it was said he spent a week thinking about it, especially dependent origination, the psychology that he had discovered. And then he began teaching. The first part of the scriptures, which you'll see in, some of you might know the Nipāta Sutta, which was translated by my Upajjhāya, Dr. Saratissa, Venerable Dr. Saratissa was the chief monk at the London Buddhist Vihara in the 80s. And when I ordained, he was my preceptor. So although all my meditation teachers were Burmese, my order was into one of the Sri Lankan orders. And he's translated it. It's a lovely translation, that, the Nipāta Sutta. And Bhikkhu Bodhi has done a great big, huge volume, which translates the commentary as well.

Now, the interesting thing about the Nipāta Sutta is that it's pretty original. And that always surprises me, really, because you can see the original teaching wasn't so formalized. He's answering individual questions. And slowly, the teaching becomes formalized. And that's when you get these, four of these, ten of those, nine of them, and so on and so forth. And that formalization is the middle bit. And then it becomes, towards the end, it becomes very listy, like, to help you remember things. And it begins, you can see it begins to be a bit like the Abhidhamma, which was a later development, which takes away all that, what would you call it, not humanity.

When you read the scriptures, you do get the feeling of a person, the Buddha talking and people who are talking to him. And as the teacher becomes more and more intellectualized, that begins to disappear. And it really does become lists. So there's these three waves of development. And it's interesting, I think, or surprising, shall I say, that the oral tradition maintained those very early teachings. They're there. And then, of course, you get this more formalized, the Four Noble Truths.

So when he has finally formalized it, these Four Noble Truths are the foundation of the whole teaching. And you could say that if you come across any teaching, so-called Buddhism, which doesn't fit into the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, then it's not right. It's not particularly right. And each of these noble truths, of course, launch out into various other teachings and we'll come to some of them very much in this particular discourse. And so whenever you start, whenever you start to talk about *kamma*, start talking about the body, doesn't matter where you start talking about what it is you start talking about, you always end up really investigating the whole of the Dharma because it just leads from links one to another until you've virtually covered it.

And you'll always come down to this root level about *dukkha*. If you were going to encapsulate one word which expresses the Buddha's understanding of the human condition, that's the word *dukkha*.

If you wanted to choose one word which encapsulates the fundamental problem that we have, it would be *atta*, self, teaching around not-self.

And if you were to choose one word which expresses the way out of it, the actual practice to get out of it, it would be *sati*, awareness. But you'd have to put *sama* in front of it. It's right awareness, yeah? It's a specific definition. So in other words, if you're thieving, you're fully aware, you know, but it's not going to get you liberated. It might make you rich for a little while.

So that's the Four Noble Truths. I'm just looking at the time. Oh, it's going on. So I want to leave it there, and then tomorrow we'll have a look at the stages. And the question is, are all the stages of the Eightfold Path equally important? So we can have a look at that tomorrow.

Very good. So yesterday I forgot to take the refuges and precepts for those of you who would like to do it. And then once I've done that, we can sit and as usual, towards the end, I'll do these contemplations.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused even greater confusion, and that by your devotion to practice, you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Very good. So I shall now do the chanting. That's odd. My computer says twenty-five minutes past eight, but my clock says half past eight. I don't know. Okay, we can begin.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa, Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa, Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa. Buddham saranam gacchami, Dhammam saranam gacchami, Sangham saranam gacchami. Dutiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami, Dutiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami, Dutiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami. Tatiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami, Tatiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami, Tatiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami. Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami, Adinnadana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami, Kamesu micchacara veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami, Musavada veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami, Surameraya majja pamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami.

So we can begin our sitting. So make sure you are comfortable, feeling comfortable. Settling on the breath.

We can begin our sitting with these evening contemplations, which the Buddha says are there to make us more enthusiastic, to give us some real purpose as to why we're practising. So just repeating these phrases to ourselves.

This body is subject to disease. This body is of a nature to fall ill. This body has not gone beyond sickness. This body is subject to aging. This body has not gone beyond aging. This body is now in a process of aging. This body is subject to death. This body has not gone beyond death. This body will die.

There is the unborn, undying, uncreated, uncompounded. The unconditioned. True refuge, harbour and home. Perfect peace and contentment.

Those who are mindful are in the presence, in the vicinity of *Nibbana*.

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