Renunciation and the Buddha's First Occasion to Teach

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 21:00

Greetings, I trust you had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, I say fruitful.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa, Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa.

It's not that I don't wish you had a happy day. It's just that happiness comes and goes, but we can make it fruitful through our spiritual practice.

I just want to share a quote from one or two emails that came through concerning our subjects. Harold writes, "I was on retreat last summer near Glastonbury, organised by Gaia House. Walking out in the evening, I discovered nearby was a cemetery. So a couple of evenings, I went and sat there and studied the gravestones, reflecting on how many had died before my current age, nearly 69, and how their bodies would now have rotted down to skeletons. However, I feel that experience was probably too comfortable to be really effective.

"That probably had to wait until a meditation first thing one morning shortly after the first recommendation to socially distance, when the potential impact of the events I had been attending up to then suddenly hit me with waves of panic which no amount of rationalisation on actual probabilities of anything happening to me could quell. So I just sat with it that morning and the next morning, and it slowly subsided, but not fun while it was happening."

So that's when death strikes, when we feel the horror that we feel of serious sickness and death. That horror, that sickness is the measure of this false idea of who I am, this self.

He also then goes on to say that it was good to hear my reminiscences of frugality. "I can remember about 1960 being tasked with cleaning the grate in my grandfather's house and carefully laying the fire for the evening with paper twists when my parents were staying there. When my parents bought their own house in the mid-60s, this had partial central heating, which heated the ground floor and their bedroom on the first floor, but not mine. Well, I wasn't there all the time. This meant in the winter I would crawl out of bed and switch on the electric fan heater and then get back into bed until the room temperature was high enough for a morning wash to be considered."

Softie! So there we are, a bit of frugality. I mean, these days, people wander about in midwinter in their shirts and blouses, with the house at 24, 26 degrees as if they were living on the Mediterranean. Terrible.

There's a little email here from May, who spent time in Japan at Bukoku-ji, a training monastery there with her teacher. But there was a monk there from Chile called Chiku-san. He had travelled by foot alone in India and became ill with fever. He was in a village, she doesn't know where exactly, and had begun to accept that he would die. However, a herdsman brought him to his hut and treated him with what he believed was cow's urine. And he recovered after a week or so.

There we are. It's meant to be fermented, so any germs or anything like that in it would hopefully be destroyed. But according to Ayurvedic medicine, it's *Gāl-mutra*, that's what they call it. It contains nitrogen, sulphur, phosphate, sodium, manganese, iron, silicon, chlorine, magnesium, malic, citric and taric acids and calcium salts, vitamins A, B, C, D and E, minerals, lactose, enzymes, creatinine, hormones and gold acids, whatever that is. And it says that the urine is actually similar to the human body in some way. So an old Ayurvedic medicine, and it seems to have cured this Zen monk from Chile. So there we are.

Those are just a little bit of replies. But I must say that yesterday evening, I didn't really stress enough that it's an occasion to begin to test our powers of renunciation and what happens when you renounce something. And for a Dharma teacher not to be teaching, that is terrible. I gave myself very poor marks, but I'm going to make up for it now.

So remember that the whole of the spiritual life could be said to be renunciation. And we're not talking about self-mortification. We're not talking about blaming and beating ourselves up. We're talking about seeing where desire, where we get caught up with desire, with reaction, wrong desire, of course.

And this is just an opportunity. If we find ourselves, for instance, out of work, furloughed, or our wages reduced or whatever, it is an opportunity to let go of certain things. Some of us may still be in a job, but we can't fly anywhere. We can't go anywhere. We might be isolated, although I prefer the word secluded. And of course, we have to let go of certain desires that come up through our past habits.

And it allows us to sit with them, sit with them and just feel their energy, feel their power. And the important thing is to stay, if you can, till the very end of that feeling. Because right at the end of that feeling, there's a switch, there's a change, there's a sense of being relieved, a sense of relief from that grip. The more the grip, the more the relief. And then you get that sense of peacefulness.

And remember that in that process, the energy is being transformed. Nothing is lost. So whatever energy was caught up in that turbulence of desire, wrong desire, will then turn into pure energy, which can be used elsewhere. Given a situation, it may manifest as love, compassion, joy, or just being peaceful, just being calm.

So don't miss this opportunity. Every time you feel you want something, really, check it and stop and say, "Ah, yes, this is a desire. Now let me have a look at it. Let me feel it." And then by renouncing those things that we have to renounce anyway—and this is the whole point—in a situation like this, you find yourself having to renounce stuff. So you may as well make spiritual capital from it, if you'll excuse the expression.

Yes, and baths, giving up baths. Somebody's given up having hot baths. There we are. I mean, remember in the old days, medieval days, you only had one bath a year. Yes, it was taken in May or thereabouts. And you only had one big tub where, first of all, your dad got in and then your mum and then all the kids from the eldest to the youngest. And that's where we get the phrase, "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater." So you know what the water must have looked like by the time they had their baths.

Right up until the 80s, somewhere around about there, people were happy just having a shower a week, a bath a week. Now we find that very difficult. Now you have to have a shower every day. But actually, you don't. You don't need a shower every day. By the way, that's why most marriages took place in June. That was before people began to stink a little.

So you can look at your lifestyle and just see what's actually necessary. What is actually necessary? And then you can add a little bit on top of that, maybe. But you're beginning to define what our indulgences are. It's funny how we need things just because we have them, but you don't need many things that we have.

So I'm putting that aside now. And I am continuing to resolve to talk about the Eightfold Path and to answer the question. But I do want to sidetrack a bit. You have to excuse me just one second. I just want to take a reading, really, about the Buddha beginning his teachings.

There's a whole discourse here, the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, the Discourse on the Noble Search, where the Buddha tells his life story up until how he became fully liberated. And it gives you some idea of the person, how he was.

So he said, "When I was staying at Uruvelā as long as I chose"—so that's where he became fully liberated. That's close to what they think is present-day Bodh Gayā. Some of you will have been there. "I set out to wander by stages to Benares." So that's present-day Vārāṇasī on the Ganges there.

"Between Gayā"—so that's the town near Bodh Gayā—"and the place of enlightenment, the Ājīvaka Upaka saw me on the road." Now, the Ājīvakas belonged to a sect that were fatalists, really. You could call them that. Makkhali Gosāla, who was a fatalist. Everything was predestined. There were many of these, remember, these people who'd gone out, mainly men, but some women, had left society to live as *samaṇas* . *Samaṇa* means somebody who strives for spiritual—or anybody who strives, but in this particular case, it's striving for spiritual attainment.

Anyway, when Upaka sees him, he says, "Friend, your faculties are clear. The colour of your skin is pure and bright. Under whom have you gone forth? Who is your teacher? Whose Dhamma do you profess?"

And the Buddha replies in verses, "I am the one who's transcended all and knower of all, unsullied among all things, renouncing all things by craving ceasing freed. Having known this for myself, to whom should I point as my teacher? I have no teacher and one like me exists nowhere in the world with all its gods because I have no person for my counterpart. I am the accomplished one in the world. I am the teacher

supreme. I alone am a fully enlightened one whose fires are quenched and extinguished." That's the fires of greed, hatred and delusion. "I go now to the city of Kāsī"—that's Vārāṇasī. "To set in motion the wheel of the Dhamma, in a world that has become blind, I go to beat the drum of the deathless."

That's very impressive, eh? But Upaka replies, "By your claims, friend, you ought to be the universal victor. The victors are those like me who have won to destruction of the āsavas." So remember, these are the four basic problems that we have, basic misunderstandings. "I have vanquished all evil states. Therefore, Upaka, I am a victor."

Now, when this was said, the Ājīvaka Upaka said, "Hmm, maybe so, friend." Shaking his head, he took a bypass and departed.

So I think the Buddha realised this isn't quite the way he was going to spread the Dhamma. Now, we also have to accept there's a bit of hagiography here. Hagiography is the story of the saints. And you always build a saint up—legends and myths all surround them and they become much greater in a sense in some ways than they actually were because of this mythology that surrounds them. So I doubt if he came out with a set of prepared verses. He probably said that he felt he was, that he knew himself to be fully liberated, but he didn't convince this Ājīvaka.

Now, that reminds me that when I was living at the Birmingham Buddhist Vihāra in Birmingham in the 80s, early, middle 80s, somewhere around about there, we used to get cards and letters from somebody announcing that the next world leader was living in London, somewhere in Pudding Street or something. And I remember picking these up, about seven or eight of them came to my memory, picking them up and thinking, "Oh, yeah, just like Ājīvaka. Oh, yeah, right, okay." And I never got round to finding out who this person was.

Anyway, he then, of course, is on his way, the Buddha's on his way, to see his old friends whom he'd been training with. So he wandered in stages and eventually came to Vārāṇasī, Benares, to the deer park at Isipatana. "And I approached the group of five.

"Now the bhikkhus saw me coming at a distance and they agreed amongst themselves. 'Friend, here comes the recluse Gotama who lives luxuriously'"—remember he'd given up the path of self-mortification—"'who gave up his striving and reverted to luxury. We should not pay homage to him or rise up for him or receive his bowl and outer robe. But a seat may be prepared for him. If he likes, he may sit down.'

"However, as I approached those bhikkhus, they found themselves unable to keep their pact. One came to meet me, took my bowl and outer robe, another prepared a seat, and another set out water for my feet. However, they still addressed me as friend. Whereupon I told them, 'Do not address the Tathāgata by the name of friend.'" *Tathāgata* was how he referred to himself. It means the transcendent one. "'The Tathāgata is the accomplished one, a fully enlightened one. Listen, Bhikkhus, the deathless has been attained. I shall instruct you. I shall teach you the Dhamma. Practising as you are instructed by realising

for yourself here and now, through direct knowledge, you will soon enter into and abide in that supreme goal of the holy life, for the sake of which clansmen rightly go forth from home to homelessness.'" So that's a very pat phrase that you get throughout the scriptures.

And then he tries to talk to them, of course, about this. And then there's this lovely passage where the usual thing is everybody tries three times, or a second time, and then he actually says the same thing a third time. And then he asks them, he says, "Bhikkhus"—bhikkhu, remember, is anybody on his list, but here it's his five friends—"have you ever heard me speak like this before?" They said, "No, Venerable Sir." He says, "The Tathāgata is the accomplished one," and then he goes through this business.

"And then he says, 'I was able to convince the bhikkhus of the group of five. Then I sometimes instructed two bhikkhus while the other three went for alms. And the six of us lived on what the other three bhikkhus brought back from their alms round. Sometimes I instructed three bhikkhus while the other two went on alms. And the six of us lived on what those two bhikkhus brought back from their alms round.

"'Then the Bhikkhus of five, thus taught and instructed by me, being themselves subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, seeking the unborn supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna, attained the unborn supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna. Being themselves subject to ageing, sickness, death, sorrow and defilement, having understood the danger in what is subject to ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement, seeking the unageing, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, and undefiled supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna, they attained the unageing, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna.

"'The knowledge and vision arose in them. Our deliverance is unshakeable. This is our last birth. There is no renewal of becoming.'"

So there you have a nice little passage which gives us some idea of his early movements. But of course, they've been souped up a bit with verses and stuff like that. But at least we can get an image of him, of how he walked—I think it's about 250 miles, he walked 250 miles from Bodh Gayā to Sārnāth—with the sole purpose of seeking out these old companions whom he felt were open enough or developed enough to receive his Dhamma.

Time is passing on and I did want to read the actual discourse, which is what you might call the root discourse of Theravāda, the root discourse of Buddhism, frankly. It's not just Theravāda, it's the root discourse and it's all about the Four Noble Truths. So I'm afraid because time moves on, I shall have to leave that little delight for tomorrow evening. And I will be getting round to the Eightfold Path sooner.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.