Right Speech, Action and Livelihood

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 22:32

Greetings and good evening. I trust you've had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, though I hope it has been happy.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā-sambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully enlightened one.

I just want to read an email that came through. They say they thank me for the live stream. "I have been meditating with you daily and have set up my evenings around this time. You won't be surprised by this, but it's changed my life. I'm sleeping better, feel less burdened in the day. During meditation, I'm able to stay with painful surface and deeper emotions whilst holding them with metta. Seeing you meditate and knowing lots of others are doing the same at the same time offers a sense of connection and commitment to my practice. Thank you." There we are. Thank you so much. So a little bit of feedback there. I am presuming that that's the same for everybody.

Now, I just want to go back and try to complete a little bit of this Eightfold Noble Path. Remember that my aim over this two months or more, let's hope it's just two months, was to introduce you to the various discourses in the Middle Length Sayings. So I'll try to get through most of this this evening.

Remember, we started with *sammā-diṭṭhi*, right understanding, the Eightfold Path which is transcendental, not in between indulgence and aversion, but rising above it. In that sense, it's the middle, it's transcendent. And remember that this *sammā-diṭṭhi* is to do with conceptual — the way we conceive, the way we look at things and experience things through our concepts.

The big mistake, according to the Buddha, is to seek any sort of lasting happiness in anything to do with this world, that things are impermanent, radically so. They're arising and passing away momentarily. And that this whole concept of me, the self, is causing a great deal of problems. And that manifests through our attachments. Attachments are psychological dependencies. We use things, we use people in order to make ourselves feel happy. That's not the same as *mettā*, compassion and generosity. That's coming from a different place, coming from the place of wisdom, coming from the place of not "me, me, me."

This conceptual, the right concept draws us into these social virtues — the main ones being generosity, love, goodwill, and compassion, the desire to help people. Now, once this is passed into our attitudes, into our intentions, then of course they begin to manifest in the way we think, which is an internal speech, an internal speaking. I speak to myself. Sometimes I'm speaking to myself, but also I find myself speaking to lots of other people too inside this little head of mine.

And it includes, of course, speech in ordinary daily life. And the type of speech we don't want to get into is, of course, untruths. We don't want to do that. We don't want to slander people. Blake says, "A truth told with bad intent beats all the lies you can invent." So that's a beautiful little verse. It depends on your intention, which makes it either slander or having to say something which might undermine somebody's reputation, but it might be for good reason. Abusive speech, using speech in order to upset people. And finally, just chit chat, just talking for talking's sake, just a waste of time, really.

And we hate silence when you're walking with a friend or walking with somebody who's close to you — your partner or a child — there's always this compulsion to have to communicate. You have to speak. And it's a sign of maturity of a relationship that you can be silent with each other. That's my understanding anyway.

So when it comes to free speech, there was a period a couple of years back where free speech came up around this whole business of Islam and not insulting the prophets. And there came this phrase, "the right to insult." And that's a very aggressive way of saying that. Everybody has a right to express their opinion, even though they know it'll upset somebody. But it became very hard. It became a sort of aggressive thing, the right to insult. I don't think you have a right to insult. You have a right to express yourself, your own truths, even though it might upset somebody.

And we normally, when that happens, we normally introduce it, don't we? We say, "I know this is going to upset you. I hope you don't mind," and so on and so forth. So it's a case of being kind, being gentle. That's one of the qualities of right speech, being gentle and being truthful, of course — truthful to ourselves, truthful to the situation, and the sense of being beneficial. You're speaking for either your own benefit, somebody else's benefit, or your own and somebody else's benefit. And with a heart of loving kindness, the Buddha says, coming from a heart of loving kindness.

Sometimes that's difficult, of course, when you're talking to somebody who's being aggressive and whatnot, in which case at least you can come from the heart of no harm. There's no point in upsetting ourselves and getting angry ourselves. That's just a waste of energy.

And it's that distinction between being aggressive and being assertive. That's a very clear way of putting it — that you can actually state your truth coming from a position of strength, a position of goodwill, a position of compassion. You don't have to come from anger. In fact, if anything, anger manifests a certain weakness because sitting underneath anger, there's always fear. You don't get angry unless you're afraid. It's underneath it. It's underpinning the fear. Fear is underpinning anger.

And one of the interesting things the Buddha says, of course, is to say at the right time — to choose your time to say things. There's a right time and a wrong time. And I'm sure we've all experienced dropping a clanger. So it's a case of recognizing a situation and being careful about what we say.

And I think the key to that when we're with people is the ability to listen. And I think we find listening

difficult, especially when somebody is expressing ideas or positions which are not the same as ours, even opposed to ours. Then there's a sort of fear, I think, that we're going to be converted, that if we allow ourselves to listen, open-hearted, open-minded, there's this terrible danger that they might change me. But if we come from that sense of inner stability, just that calmness, and with a willingness to understand the world that they are living in.

I mean, we're all creating our own little worlds, and the intention is to understand, well, where are they coming from? Where are they coming from? It doesn't have to convert us. But on the other hand, we may find ourselves that our views and opinions are nuanced by what other people say. And that's coming from the heart of humility. None of this business of "I'm right and everybody else is wrong." I'm special that way.

So there's a whole area of right speech, which we can conduct on a daily basis. And that would be the purpose of an evening reflection, an evening reflection where you look back and you've had a conversation with somebody that didn't go right, or you had a conversation with somebody where it really did go right, where you felt you were skillful, wise, and stuff like that.

And on both counts, you can reinforce, you can encourage yourself. You can congratulate yourself. There's nothing wrong with that. "Well done. Well done, Bodhidhamma." Absolutely. And if you haven't done so well, you can always encourage yourself: "Go do better now. Go do better than that." So there's no need to get angry with oneself, hate oneself. It's a waste, a complete waste of energy, useless. It doesn't go anywhere at all except to more misery, just creates more misery for us.

So that's the position of right speech. And again, it's coming from these attitudes that we've developed because of our different view about life. See, it all goes back to view. And this is what I meant about they're all important. And we'll see why when I come to the end. But some precede others.

When it comes to *sammā-kammanta*, which is right action, that's usually expressed as the moral law, just basic morality — not to kill, steal, offensive sexual behavior, conduct. And, well, there's including in this being untruth. And, of course, the use of drugs and alcohol and stuff, which isn't very good for us.

And the move there is towards refinement. It's towards refinement. So where obviously we've given up killing, at least for a while, and we're moving towards protecting — protecting each other, protecting animals, protecting the wildlife, protecting flowers. It's all so — it's a change of attitude and protection.

Stealing moves us towards generosity. Offensive sexual conduct moves us towards right relationship — treating the other as a person, not as an object to satisfy our personal erotic desires. When it comes to right speech, well, we've done that, of course.

And this idea of non-alcohol, which is very difficult for our society because we are alcohol-based. And it's a case of recognizing that under the influence, especially if we've drunk a little bit too much, we can do things which aren't particularly good. And when you consider that our purpose is to maintain a sort of

bright awareness at all times, as soon as you wake up to the point you fall asleep, we're supposed to be bright. We're supposed to be mindful. Putting alcohol in the system really doesn't help.

I had a very good experience with that myself. I'd given up alcohol and I'd come out of a Zen session. So I was going right back to the beginning of my practice. And just on the way home, I sort of slipped into a pub and had half a beer, half a mild or something. And I did it in order to see what effect it would have. And to my surprise, after I'd drunk it for a little while, I just felt this sort of curtain. It's difficult to describe, a sort of net coming down, an actual physical feeling in my brain. And that convinced me that I had to give it up, which I did.

So when you consider that poison, I mean, this is the point, isn't it? That alcohol is the most vicious of poisons for the body. I mean, it kills brain cells. It messes your liver up. It does all sorts of bad things. And non-alcoholic beer is very good. So there's no reason for drinking alcohol at all.

So those are the sort of things we're moving towards, moving towards refinement. The other thing in that is to do with restraint of the senses. That's one of the big teachings of the Buddha, to restrain, to guard the senses, to be on the lookout for when the senses do get involved in stuff and to be aware of that reaction that we have to what we see, to what we hear. Restraining the senses.

I mean, that sounds like suppressing something. But it's not. It's sort of holding and saying, no, we don't want to keep developing that particular mental state. So, like, for instance, when you see something which draws a certain anger out of you or draws a certain neurotic feeling out of you, to actually catch it at the beginning and just say, no, you don't want to go there. And that way you're undermining an old habit, undermining an old habit. I'm not saying, by the way, that there aren't times when erotic feelings are to the point. That's within a proper relationship.

Right livelihood. Now, the importance of livelihood is an expression of our desire, of the way we see ourselves. If you happen to have the job that you wanted, if you happen to have the area of work that you wanted — your own personal interest, your own personal bent, your own personal special qualities. So people want to move towards helping other people. So they end up being nurses or doctors or involved in some sort of hospital medical staff. But even wanting to be involved in a hospital as a cleaner, that might be it — that desire to be involved in that sort of place of helping people.

Other people want to develop their lives to art, or to nature. They want to be involved in gardens and things like that. Other people want to be involved in artificial intelligence and information technology and all that sort of stuff. And what you do is actually developing your particular characteristic, your particular character. So it's a case of recognizing that the work you're doing is actually affecting your personality and your character. And that's why it's so important.

And of course, there are particular types of trades that we don't want to get involved with. Trading in arms, in living beings, slavery and prostitution, meat, alcohol and poison. So those are the five ones that

you try not to get involved with.

So that shows you that there's a flow down from right understanding, right attitude, manifesting in the way we speak, in the way we behave and in our work. And the last three we'll come to at another time. They're basically to do, of course, with our meditation, both in the sitting, both in our sitting practice, but also in daily life.

This mindfulness, affectionate mindfulness. The Buddha, when we chant, when we read or chant the loving kindness discourse, when he talks about we should always live with this mindfulness, he's talking about a mindfulness which is imbued with a sense of kindness, a sense of goodwill. So the heart's always involved. It's the same with your work. I should have mentioned this — that there are these two qualities: being attentive, like you're attending to what you're doing, but you have to give the heart a good reason. So there's attention and care. Attention and care. You can always bring care into anything, a sense of care.

And the important thing is that all of these feedback, they feed back into themselves. Although we began with the importance of conceptual, of getting our concepts right, of understanding how we create suffering, of getting our attitudes right, and from then there's a flow, there's a feedback because as we behave coming from that position of wisdom, it feeds back into the wisdom. It supports the wisdom. And there's a desire to deepen that wisdom. There's a desire to grow in those attitudes — love, compassion, joy, peace, and all that.

They're known, remember, as immeasurables. You can develop them without boundaries. They can just keep going. They can just be developed ad infinitum. There's no limit to how much we can develop mental states. And that's unfortunately true of evil states too. But here we're only concerned with what's good.

So there's a sort of feedback loop in this. And the interesting one is between attitude and understanding. Because if we are drawn to compassionate action, to compassion which is driven by goodwill, action which is driven by generosity, by giving, remember that is constantly undermining the sense of this isolated me, is constantly reinforcing the fact of we, that we're all in this together, that I am my relationships. And that's what I am.

And that undermines this very isolated sense of self. And every time we give or do something which hurts a little, like what you give through generosity or what is demanded of you from your compassion, all that is undermining that sense of "me, it's all about me, me, me." That doesn't, of course, undermine self-care. It just takes away this barrier of me. And we see ourselves more as interrelated. We know all these words — interrelated, interdependent, interbeing. That's Thich Nhat Hanh, that sort of stuff.

And that manifests through the way we actually speak, the way we act, and so on. So that reinforces again, that changes our concepts, changes our concepts. If, for instance, if you've been a sort of person who's not been very generous, and then suddenly you begin to be generous and you realize the joy that you're giving to people, and when you give joy to people, you find your own heart rejoicing, then that's your feedback.

Then you realize, well, this is where I can find some real happiness, which is based on community, based on communication.

OK, so time has moved on and it's time to do our little meditation.

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