The Investigation of Eating

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 23:35

Good evening. I trust you had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, but I wish that it has been happy.

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

Homage to the Buddha, blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

Happy Easter to those of you who are still connected to Christianity.

I thought this evening to make a bit of a meal out of that discourse that we read last night. It's a pun on words, of course. Just to center in on the first metaphor that the Buddha uses there about food, the son's flesh, as it's called. He always teaches, first of all, from a rational, intellectual point of view. Then he makes a great effort to give us a metaphor. So there are literally hundreds of metaphors in the scriptures. And he says that some people think that way. They understand things. They make a better connection. Most of us, of course, would use both.

So we were talking about the nutrients. I just want to read that bit again, and then we'll talk about eating meditation, which those of you who've been here will know is one of my obsessive teachings.

Suppose a couple, so we're back in the desert. Suppose a couple, husband and wife, had taken limited provisions and were travelling through a desert. They have with them their only son, dear and beloved. Then in the middle of the desert, their limited provisions would be used up and exhausted, while the rest of the desert remains to be crossed. The husband and wife would think: our limited provisions have been used up and are exhausted, while the rest of the desert remains to be crossed. Let us kill our only son, dear and beloved, and prepare dried and spiced meat. By eating our son's flesh, we can cross the rest of the desert. Let not all three of us perish. And they do that, of course: they kill and prepare dried and roasted meat.

So cannibalism doesn't particularly appeal to us. But this is a very strong image for telling us that hunger is one of our basic fears. And that when we eat, we ought to eat with the right intention, not for indulgence sake, but we'll come to that.

None of us really have experienced hunger. We've experienced being peckish and then just going for that evening piece of toast. And we might have ended up a day in some peculiar situation where we haven't eaten. And when we get home, we're famished. But actually, we've never really experienced hunger, that annoying feeling. I certainly haven't, where you really do believe that if you don't get some food, you're

dying. And you can see some of the gaunt faces in the refugees. And for me, going back to the 60s and 70s, where there were famines, in India especially.

I've mentioned already the myth, the Greek myth of Erysichthon, who upset the goddess Demeter. The Roman name was Ceres, from which we get cereal. She was in charge of all that grows, all the stuff that people eat. And he went and built a banqueting hall over her shrine. So she cursed him with this insatiable hunger. And he ends up eating all the food, everybody, his own family, and finally himself. So this is a myth about what happens when you're actually really hungry. She cursed him with this insatiable hunger.

Now, I did meet a man in Sri Lanka many years ago who told me that he had actually got lost out in the wilderness in the US. And he'd got to this stage of real hunger. And he said, come a point where he caught a bird, a large bird, let's say a pigeon or something. And he actually ripped it apart and ate the raw flesh. So that gives you an idea of how hunger, when it gets right to the point of life or death, becomes utterly overwhelming. The same with thirst, of course.

So I just wanted to take this opportunity to reintroduce some of you, because you might not have worked with me, but remind the rest of you about eating meditation and how we can use it, especially if we're off these two or three days and there's a tendency to have a good meal.

And there are three things when we're eating that we have to try and distinguish in order to liberate ourselves from indulgence. Now, we won't liberate ourselves from indulgence unless we see the consequences. And the problem is that while we're indulging ourselves, it's great. I mean, it's Nibbāna. What's the problem? But it's only afterwards that we begin to realize that there is quite a lot of suffering involved.

And the first one, of course, is just that obsessive nature of indulgence, having to have. We're not, I mean, just a morning cup of tea, try and give that up for a while or coffee and you'll see how obsessive it is. And if you look at any of your habits and you try and stop them, you'll see that there's a real strong desire coming up from that habit, which demands to be satisfied, to be gratified really is the right word: gratification.

And the second problem would be frustration. Frustration always comes when you can't get what you want. So just look at the past week you've been in and see how many times you've been frustrated. Somebody's not behaved the way you wanted them to. A family member, somebody at work, whatever. Some piece of equipment hasn't worked for you. You're frustrated. The shopping didn't arrive at the right time. The bus was late. It goes on and on and on. And what you feel is anger. It's a frustration at not getting what you want. And, of course, once we drop all that, we just begin to establish an equanimity with the way things are. This is the way it is. That's the constant phrase we have to repeat to ourselves. This is the way it is. What's the point of getting upset?

Grief, grief at loss. You know, you've only got to think if somebody actually went off with your mobile phone. That's a heavy grief. That is definitely grief. Our lives are now wrapped up in that little machine. But, of course, grief takes on a much deeper meaning, as we mentioned the other day, when we lose somebody who we're attached to. So grief is always waiting for us when we are possessing something or somebody. At worst, identifying with ourselves.

And then underneath all that, there is this anxiety. There's an anxiety of loss. That's why we have insurance. Some of it's realistic, of course. You want to insure your house. I had a cousin who thought insuring your house was just a trick just to get money out of you. So he never paid insurance for his house. And then there was one very bad storm where his roof caved in. Now, I don't know whether he made up his money, how much that roof cost him, and whether actually over a long period of time, thirty odd years or so, he never paid any insurance. Whether he would have actually saved some money if he had paid the insurance. But when we buy anything from something like a laptop or something, they always want to give you insurance to make it last three years so you don't worry. See, there's your anxiety, worry at loss, worry at breakage, breaking down. So you can see that the more we have, the more we're in for some level of dissatisfaction, some level of suffering. It's all to do with this attachment, this indulgence.

And the final one is boredom, of course. Boredom is when we are not getting the same excitement that we used to get from what we're indulging in. And that boredom is not a nice place to be. I mean, it's an aversive place. And there's a search for something new. Variety is the spice of life. And that's what we do. We chase things, one pleasure after another, just to keep ourselves occupied, keep ourselves happy. But this happiness isn't true happiness. As we see, it's an excitement based on over-wanting something more than we actually get from any object. And that's when we have to remind ourselves that we don't actually want the object so much as the mental state that it produces.

So the three things that we then have to do in order to undermine all this is to distinguish between enjoying something and indulging in it. It's not as though the Buddha is saying we shouldn't enjoy life, we shouldn't enjoy art, nature, friendship and all that sort of stuff. That's perfectly viable. He himself enjoyed, for instance, going to shrines, just the normal things of life. But that distinction is very difficult because indulgence is so close to enjoyment. I mean, aversion pushes you apart from the object, but indulgence sticks you to it.

The second thing is to begin to distinguish the body from the mind. And that's all to do with beginning to deconstruct our sense of self, our sense of an identity, our sense of being a whole, entire, like an integer, one number.

And the final one, which is just as important, is to distinguish between a desire and an action. So we've looked at that a little bit.

So just to go back on those, to distinguish between desire and indulgence, as I say, is difficult. So the way you overcome the indulgence is by putting a clear intention in your mind. So this food, as the Buddha says

with this example of this mother and father who ate their son, there has to be a real purpose for it. That food is something to nourish the body for the purpose of becoming liberated. It has that spiritual purpose to it. If it has any other purpose, then you have to question it as to whether it's wholesome, whether it's actually leading you on the path.

So every time we're with a cup of tea, with that mythical biscuit, with a meal, we have to sit there for a moment and just remind ourselves, okay, this is to nourish the body, full stop, that's all. The fact that I enjoy it has to be received as a gift. You don't have to enjoy food that's nourishing. It can be quite tasteless. Porridge without sugar and all that sort of stuff. So that's the first thing.

And then as you go through the meal, to begin to realize that the excitement that you had at the beginning of the meal is beginning to fade away and there's just this tasting of the food. So there you're beginning to distinguish the overlay of excitement that we have when we have a good meal in front of us, and then very slowly over, say, even as little as ten bites or something, it becomes ordinary. And then that's the chance to really investigate just enjoying, just enjoying.

And to make that clear to ourselves, we separate the body from the mind, the heart-mind, from feeling, from thinking. And you do that by driving your attention, first of all, into the body, into the process of tasting and smelling. And by isolating that physical taste process, you're beginning to realize that this is just the body. It's the mind that is translating it into something beautiful. And when you, as it were, swallow, intending to swallow, and it's dropped, you stop for a moment and you get the afterglow. So that afterglow is the mind. The mind, the heart, the feeling of well-being, the feeling of joy is our habituated reaction to the food we're eating. That's a habit we have. The habit is to become happy and to indulge in the food we're eating. So it's recognizing that these are two different processes.

And then, as I say, as the meal goes on and the excitement dies out, then one can get close to this business of just enjoyment. And you might find that when you're just enjoying something, there's a sense of loss because before you really enjoyed it. See, that's the overlay of excitement. And then you have to remind yourself, well, fine, I can indulge, but then I've got consequences. So it's this constant reminder. And eventually, of course, we find that indulgence is just too much. It's too much sugar, and you just want to taste things as they are without overlaying excitement onto it.

Years ago, when I was teaching at the Birmingham Buddhist Vihara, there was a young man came and when he came again the next week, he said that he'd been meditating and he could no longer listen to heavy rock. So there you can see how refined this young fellow was becoming.

And then the final thing, of course, is action: the distinction between a desire and an action. And so when you have your cup of tea, and I would suggest you try and do it at least once a day with a cup of tea and a biscuit or a sandwich, it doesn't matter what, just sit with it, get the feel, get the hunger, feel the hunger, know that some of it is natural appetite and some of it is this excitement that we get from indulging, and just stay there with it for a while. And then feel, just feel the force of that desire of wanting to eat. The

more hungry you are, of course, the greater that desire will be.

And then at some point, a decision is made. A decision is made. Something, yes, like you're giving permission for the desire to manifest. And that manifests through an act of will. That's your power. The power is to bring something from potential into actual. Now, the will itself is completely neutral. It's just a power. It's the intention which matters. It's the intention which is conditioning us. And it's good to make that distinction and to realize that actually you really can sit with a desire which you don't want until it fades away.

Now, when we sit with a desire which we don't want, no matter how strong it is, and wait for it to fade away completely, you get your little gift. The gift is one of feeling released from it, as if you've been imprisoned or shackled. And with that, there comes a sense of joy. But more than that, we're undermining that very habit that we don't want. And if we keep that going, eventually there comes a point where the habit just doesn't have the force over us, doesn't have that force and we can just see it come and let it pass. And that just comes by constant practice.

If we fail, if we find ourselves chucking ten biscuits down our throats, then it's no point in getting guilty or feeling horrible about that. You just notice that, well, just for that moment there, you gave in, but then you have to make a firm resolution, a resolute resolution that you'll be very quick to see when that desire arises and just to stay with it, suffer it. So you've got to suffer. You've got to stay with the feeling of it until it completely passes away.

And the opposite, of course: if a desire comes up which you see is wholesome, then of course you empower it. Now, just in that very simple way, we can actually change ourselves. We are nothing but a compendium of habits. We're just a collection of habits. And it's a decision to keep some of them, develop some of them, and get rid of the ones we don't want. And that's just that process.

I'm not saying it's easy. The stronger the habit, the more powerful, the more established a habit, the more difficult it is to get the better of it. And eventually, of course, once we're fully awakened, once we're fully liberated from suffering, the traces of that habit might still appear in the heart, the heart-mind, but they just don't have any power over us at all.

So I've tried to put this in a little essay, which I'll post. I'll post it up onto the website there. On the front page, next to videos, because I've gone and posted all the videos up on the website. You'll see that on the front page. But somebody told me that you can't download them from there. It just goes back into YouTube, and you have to pay a fee for it. I'm thinking about how to overcome that. I've just put one on Dropbox because somebody in New Zealand wanted it and just see if she comes back and says that she was able to download it. Very good.

So yes, and the final thing to say is that when we practice this on something so obvious as eating, which we have to do every day. It's not as though you can give up eating. So it's a constant little practice for us, a

constant reminder.

When we do that, we begin to realise that actually this cuts across everything in our lives in terms of our enjoyment of art, television, film and all that, our enjoyment of nature, the hobbies we have. Anything you enjoy will have that overlay of wanting something more from it.

And of course, relationship—obsessive relationship, the obsessive part. That often manifests in the way that we try to manipulate the other, demand of the other, try to control the other, feel disappointed in the other, frustrated by the other, and so on and so forth.

So this practice on just having a cup of tea with a biscuit will eventually bring that insight into our lives and begin to change it. Going back to what we said about the Eightfold Path, this is the feedback. This is the feedback from our right understanding through right action. And that reinforces the insight. It makes the insight more and more real for us.

So I think that's enough about food for the moment. I suggest that we now turn to our meditation. I can only trust my words have been of some assistance and they have not caused greater confusion.

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