Skillful Discussion: The Buddha's Guide to Noble Conversation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 19:46

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.
Homage to the Buddha, the blessed noble and fully self-awakened one.

I've just picked up on a discourse and it's concerned with how we discuss things with each other, how we talk to each other. So in this age of great polarization, I thought, well, let's see what the Buddha has to say. It comes from the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, which is a collection of the small discourses.

And it starts off like this. There are mendicants, these three topics of discussion. What three? You might discuss the past. This is how it was in the past. You might discuss the future. This is how it will be in the future. And you might discuss the present. This is how it is at present.

Now, at first, that seems a bit obvious. But of course, there are three very different conversations. The first one is all about memory and about opinions about memory and what we thought had happened. The second one is all driven to some future idea, some idealism. And there could be arguments about that. And the present, of course, is an attempt to see things as they are. But everybody sees things differently. So there's all sorts of argumentation.

What the discourse does is it takes the process of discussion. The first one is the skill in questions. So you can see whether it's worth talking to somebody. Here they would say a person is, the discourse says a person is competent to hold a discussion, but what it means is whether it's worth you talking to them. And remember that at that time when you read the discourses they didn't have recording machines. So the way that you got people to be clear was to ask the question three times and to make sure that is that what you mean. And it was done either as two individuals or in a group so that the position taken was clear, what was said was clear, and that would undermine silly arguments.

And at that time they had a imagination, which is called reproductive imagination, not like ours. If you see a car crash, you'll see it one way and then you won't be sure that you've seen it because you didn't record it fully and there'll be questions asked. In those times, they had what was called reproductive imagination, and they were very good at remembering things.

Even today at the 1956 Sixth Great Council held in Burma, there were six monks who knew all the scriptures, all the Abhidhamma and all the Vinaya, the rule of the monks. I mean, that's a massive amount of literature. They knew it off by heart. And when the questions came about certain passages in the

scriptures, which were maybe not quite right or whatever, it was these people, these monks who became the experts who would quote from directly from the scriptures.

Just as an aside, by the way, it seems that the Brahmins, they teach their children the scriptures and learn them by heart and they're concerned with pronunciation. Only when they can learn that do they actually add the meaning of the words, and only when they've got the words and the pronunciation together are they allowed to discuss what the scriptures say.

So here are the sorts of questions that somebody can ask. When a person is asked a question, if it needs to be answered categorically and they don't answer it categorically, then that shows they're not worth talking to. So one of the things that you might say in Buddhism is, is the Buddha impermanent? And if they prevaricate, yes, no, maybe and all that, then what we want is a clear statement. Yes, yes, it is.

Another one is, is UK a European country? Now, I should say, yes. Lots of UK people don't think they are, I think. But that's what should be said, at least geographically.

Now, the next sort of question might need analysis. So one regular question is, is Buddhism a religion? So then you have to ask, well, what do you mean by religion? Another one is when the Buddha is describing this whole idea of not-self, he starts off with control. How much of the body can you control? Is it under your control? Can you make it grow taller, etc.? So then you'd have to say, well, when he means control, he obviously means the body as an organism. But obviously I can move it around. I do have some ability to control it. And of course, what he's really pointing to is sickness, aging and death.

Now, sometimes you ask a question, it needs a counter question. So one Dharma question would be, are the ear and nose the same? So you say, well, in what way? You say, well, in their function. Well, yes, they are. They're the same. They both perceive.

These days, of course, we have this whole thing about immigration. So a question might be, should immigration be allowed to stay? Well, then you say, well, what type, what are the types of immigrants that are coming to the country? And can we make distinctions?

As a teacher, you see, a Vipassanā teacher. So I might say to you, how's your practice going? And you say, oh, yeah, that's good. Now, if I'm a bad teacher, I'll say, oh, very good. I'll take your word for it. But if I'm a good teacher, then I'll say, well, in what way? And you say, well, my mind is more quiet. I'm able to see process more clearly. I say sādhu, sādhu. If you say to me, well, I'm feeling a lot happier. I say, no, it's not about happiness. That's the end product.

And then there are questions that should be set aside. So in a conversation, somebody might ask you a personal question. So you don't have to answer that, even if it seems to be relevant.

Now, in the Buddhist teachings, there were 10 questions that he wouldn't answer. They are known as the *a vyākata*. They are the undeclared 10 statements or questions. So first of all, they run like this. Is the world

eternal? Is the world not eternal? Is the world finite or is the world infinite? So that he wouldn't answer. I don't think he'd know, frankly. Although I have to say in the commentary on the Visuddhimagga it does unfortunately say that the Buddha knew the world was flat. So this he didn't say anything about the world as something objective out there. His main interest was the world that we're creating moment after moment.

The next one is is the soul the same as the body? Is the soul one thing and the body another? Now, he doesn't answer that. And it's something that I think is worth investigating on another little talk. So I won't go into that particular one.

And then finally, there were four questions around a Tathāgata. Remember, that's how he referred to himself, the one who had arrived, who had gone, who had completed the path. And it refers to any Arahant, really. So does a Tathāgata exist after death? Does he not exist after death? This is known as the quadrilemma. Does a Tathāgata both exist and not exist after death? And here's a headbanger. Does a Tathāgata neither exist nor not exist after death? Well, not surprisingly, he didn't make an answer to that. The real reason, of course, was that people were thinking of the Tathāgata or a liberated one as a person, as a self. So he just, he didn't like those sorts of questions. He didn't like any questions that were speculative, basically.

So now we move on to a different section, which is the skill in the conventions of conversation. So when a person is asked a question, if they're not consistent about their position, or what their position is and what it isn't, about what they propose, and then they change the subject, about speaking from what they know and not from some fake position, and that it's appropriate to the procedure. So this is really when you're having a discussion with somebody, you're not speaking over each other. Politicians are very good at that.

I was watching a BBC interview with Varoufakis, I think that's his name, the Greek economist, some of you may know. And there was an economic lecturer there. She was from some Oxford or somewhere. And of course, the interviewer. And at first, he was asking the questions. They were answering it all, looked very civilized. And then right at the end, the three of them spoke all together trying to crush the other. It's just weird. And of course, I didn't get a word of it.

So when a person is asked the question, if they're consistent about their position, what their position is and what it isn't, about what they propose, about speaking from what they know and about the appropriate procedure, then that person is competent to hold a discussion.

How people engage when being attacked. So you can know whether or not a person is competent to hold a discussion by seeing how they take part in a discussion. When a person is asked a question, if they dodge the issue, distract the discussion with irrelevant points, display annoyance, hate and bitterness, then that person is not competent to hold a discussion. So that's politicians, isn't it? Dodging the issue, distracting it, saying something irrelevant and occasionally getting a little bit uppity about things.

So when a person is asked the question, if they don't dodge the issue, distract the discussion with irrelevant points or display annoyance, hate and bitterness, then that person, we can talk to them.

The next question is how people engage with confrontation. So afraid of being bettered. So you can know whether a person is competent to hold a discussion by seeing how they take part in a discussion. When a person is asked a question, if they intimidate, crush, mock and seize at trivial mistakes, then they're not competent to hold a discussion. In other words, don't talk to them. But when a person is asked a question, if they don't intimidate you, crush you, mock you, seize upon trivial mistakes, then it's worth talking to them.

And often in conversation, it's about winning, not about finding some truth, not about finding some way of compromise, not even coming to a position of agreeing to differ. It's about who wins. I saw really quite a horrible discussion on YouTube between a university professor and Jordan Peterson. And somebody whom you'll know, I just can't bring his name to mind, but it was vicious. It was about woke. And the professor especially was very insulting. But, yeah, what can you do? I think the other two, Jordan Peterson and the other fellow, I mean, Jordan Peterson is a right wing guru. And the other fellow was on the left. If I was any of those, I'd have just walked out. He's just insulting.

So now we have a general disposition. You can know whether or not a person has what's required by seeing how they take part in a discussion. If they actively listen, they have what's required. And if they know what they're talking about, well, actually, the next section is about the Four Noble Truths. But there the Buddha is actually stressing the fact, the ability to listen, not to be afraid of actually what the person might say. Be open to the fact that your own position may be changed, may be nuanced.

Often when we enter into a discussion about something, there's an underlying fear of being changed, of losing.

So the next one is much more to do with the scriptures. It says, for someone who has what's required, directly knows one thing, completely understands one thing, gives up one thing and realizes one thing. That one thing, of course, is *Nibbāna* and the path to *Nibbāna*. And here the Buddha points out that the purpose of all discussion, as far as he's concerned, and consultation, sitting close and listening well, is the liberation of the mind by not clinging, by not grasping.

So finally, there's a coda. Those who converse with hostility, too sure of themselves, arrogant, ignoble, attacking virtues, they look for flaws in each other. They rejoice together when their opponent speaks poorly, makes a mistake, becomes confused and is defeated. But the noble ones don't discuss like this.

If an astute person wants to hold a discussion connected with the teaching and its meaning, the kind of discussion that the noble ones hold, then that wise one should start the discussion. Knowing when the time is right, neither hostile nor arrogant, not overexcited, contemptuous or aggressive, or with a mind full of jealousy, they speak from what they rightly know. They agree with what is well spoken. See, you

know, actually praising the other, the person who has a contradictory idea, praising them or at least accepting when they've made a decent argument without criticizing what has been poorly said. They don't persist in finding faults, nor seizing on trivial mistakes, nor intimidating, nor crushing the other. Nor would they speak suggestively, snidely.

Good people consult for the sake of knowledge and clarity. That's a really good statement. Good people consult for the sake of knowledge and clarity. That's how the noble ones consult. This is noble consultation. Knowing this, a wise person should consult without arrogance.

So that's the final section of the discourse. And remember, we shouldn't take these discourses as final statements about these things. Even subjects like dependent origination crop up in various discourses from various angles. So it's not as though we take a discourse and say, well, that's everything to be said about discussion. Far from it. They're just pointers. And our task is to translate what we have understood back into our own lives and, of course, into society, especially these days. When, as you know, there's so much polarization. The Buddha himself, when somebody reported to him what one of his monks or nuns had said, he would say, well, if you'd have asked me that question, I would have said the same thing.

So now just before we finish off, I just want to point to three books and I'll put them on the website. The first one is Nonviolent Communication by Rosenberg. And that is really a very famous book and definitely worth reading about how to talk to people. The other one, I've not read it entirely, but I read little sections of it. It's called Difficult Conversations. Finally, I don't think you'll be able to get this book, but you might do. It's called Bad Arguments. And it tells you all the silly, all the ways that people don't answer your question, don't converse with you in a proper manner and just cause confusion and anger usually. So very good.

I hope this little discourse is of some use to you in your life and in society and is just part and parcel of your path to complete and full liberation from suffering sooner rather than later.

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