2021 Gratitude, Generosity and Renunciation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 18:03

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā-Sambuddhassa
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Homage to the Buddha, the blessed and noble self-awakened one.

This is our inaugural Full Moon Day meeting. I've always wanted to do this, but I've never found a way to do it. So I was really happy when Magda suggested that I try it on this medium. I think we can keep this going. Luckily it's fallen on a Sunday and I'm inclined to in the future choose the closest Sunday to the full moon because that's most convenient for people. In Sri Lanka they are public holidays, all the moons are public holidays so there's no problem in keeping the full moon itself there.

My idea is that with every full moon we look at some of the teachings of the Buddha and eventually throughout the year, we cover it all. So I'm going to start with this lovely little trilogy, a virtuous circle of gratitude, generosity, and renunciation.

Starting with renunciation. The big problem here that can arise is confusing what it is that we're actually renouncing. Remember the body is not our fault. When the body has appetite then it has appetite and when you put something lovely sweet on the tongue it will taste lovely and sweet. That's never the problem. The problem is our relationship to it, which is wanting more, depending on it in order to establish a beautiful mental state. That's what we've really got to grasp. We use the sense bases, not because they are lovely in themselves, but because they are a way of creating a lovely mental state. Hence, you might have a piece of toast in the evening to raise your spirits.

The unfortunate thing is that you have dependency. And that dependency is what we call attachment. And so there's a suffering there. If there's no bread and there's no toast, well, it's misery, isn't it? So when we click onto that, we become much more sensitive to this draw towards what is pleasurable. And this renunciation is therefore not to be confused with what they call self-mortification. In other words, blaming the body for our mental states. That's an important distinction to make. We're not trying to get rid of the pleasures and joys of life at all. And the Buddha himself did enjoy life. He enjoyed taste, but he didn't greed for it. That's what it says in the scriptures.

This whole idea of renunciation will arise on two different types of grasping, which is one about our wealth and the other about our time. We can be greedy with our time, but not greedy with our wealth. We can be generous with our wealth, but if somebody asks us to do something for them, we shy off it and the

other way around. We can be very happy giving time, but if somebody asks us for a bit of money, we're not inclined to give. So again, we have to look at that.

This trilogy, this little virtuous circle of gratitude, generosity, and renunciation, is not actually taught in the scriptures themselves as a way to liberation. This is more a commentary pointed out. And this directly concerns our daily life. This is our daily life in our daily work in the way we are with people. So if we can generate that virtuous circle, it's actually drawing us towards liberation. Letting go of attachment and letting go of dependency is the path to liberation.

You might say that the whole of the path is one of renunciation. Because eventually you've got to renounce the sense of self. That's the last thing to go. This little idea that somewhere within us, we actually do believe ourselves to be this psychophysical organism, for want of a better word. So that's this renunciation business.

Now, to go to the front of the trilogy, this sense of gratitude. When you feel gratitude, it really is a heartwarming feeling. And when we feel this gratitude, we always want to repay it. If we spend some time considering what we've received from our parents, our parents gave us our life. Our mothers. When you think about that, you might have problems with your mother and your father. In fact, somebody once asked, how do you know when you're fully liberated? And they said, well, go and spend a week with your mother. And then you'll know.

So it may be that our general relationship is a bit fractious and so on and so forth, but you still have your life through your parents. And the Buddha said that even if you were to carry them on your shoulders the whole of your life, you'd never repay them. In fact, it's unrepayable. And that's what you begin to realize, I think, when you contemplate everything that's been given to you from your family from your friends the good deeds and the companionship of family and friends. All this is given to you.

Then there are things like what society gives us, all our education. Most of our parents could not have afforded to educate us and it's the same way the social services. We might not have needed them up until now but if we get old enough, you definitely begin to need them. And of course, there's our health system. It's funny how you take something as a right and presume that something isn't given because either you've paid for it through the national insurance or because it's taken for granted. But how many times have you thanked your doctors, thanked the dentist?

The dentist I had here in Bishop's Castle was really good. The front tooth here finally gave in and he put this false tooth in, and it was pretty awful. You've got to get used to it. You couldn't eat nuts. All the nuts got behind the tooth, behind the palate. So you had to take it out and wash your mouth out and stick it back in. And when I told him that it was a little inconvenient, he finally decided to give me a bridge. And there it is. It's absolutely fantastic.

It's a case of recognizing all these gifts that people have given us. If you bring to mind, for instance, the

teachers, one or two favourite teachers that you've had, it does fill the heart with a sense of gratitude. And finally, of course, there's nature, the earth that we live on, which we become more and more aware of these days.

What gratitude does is it makes you want to repay. And because you can't repay what has been given, you can't repay something that has been given to you freely, you have to find a substitute. And that draws you towards being generous ourselves. And that moves us into this whole area of generosity.

When the Buddha talked to lay people, he always began with generosity. He pointed out that even a thief can be generous. He's taken something off you and he's very kindly given it to somebody in his family or friends. So when we think about generosity, the ability to give without some idea of being repaid, that's quite difficult for us. So we have to clarify the mind about that.

There are certain times you give gifts such as Christmas, which is more like a little ritual reestablishing friendship. You get your pair of socks and they get their pair of socks. And that's fine. Unless, of course, the pair that they've given you is obviously much cheaper than what you spent on the socks that you gave them. So that's when the trouble starts. There's always a bit of bargaining going on. It's always like a business.

If we want to have an act of pure generosity, then you have to listen to what's going on in the background of our minds about being repaid, about being adored because of our generosity. So if you're going to give, for instance, a donation to a charity, and there are so many of them these days, you have to get yourself into that mental state where that's the only thing in your mind and heart that you are giving this in order to help somebody. And there's no hope of repayment. The charity is not going to give you any money back. So you're doing it for that purpose. And when you do it for that purpose, that's when you act. That's when you make the donation, whether it's by card or by cash, it doesn't really matter.

Then, of course, once you've done it, you'll hear these little voices like you are truly a very wonderful person. Or you might get the one of, oh, that's too much. What do you give so much for? You could have... So you have to not be caught up in that. The Mara did not catch you there. So you can let those thoughts disappear. And if guilt comes, you have to point to it and say, well, that is false guilt. Because when I actually made the action, my heart was full of generosity.

The same arises when you do something for somebody. I think most people, I certainly do, say yes too quickly. So if somebody says, I've moved into this new house. It's actually happened to me. I've moved into this new flat, and we're painting it. Would you like to come and give us a hand? And I said, yeah, yeah, I'll come on Saturday. And then as I'm walking away, I'm thinking, what? What have I given this Saturday away? In that case, at that time, I was advanced enough to actually make myself do it, to teach myself not to say yes. Because somebody asks something, you don't have to say yes. And there's a point where you can actually reflect for a moment and then say yes. So it's coming from a point of reflection. You're not done it by habit.

Again, that point of generosity has to be there has to be a certain reflection about it and that you are doing it from the heart of goodwill and that you're not even expecting a thank you. And that's very difficult. When I became a monastic, we're not supposed to say thank you. I mean, I say it in the West because people get very upset. But in the East, you're not supposed to, you don't say thank you. It undermines the person's gift. That's the understanding. Because if somebody gives something to you, they don't expect you to say thank you. But if they expect you to say thank you and then you don't say thank you, then, of course, they feel very upset. And that tells you that the gift is slightly corrupted. They wanted praise. They wanted appreciation. So to be able to give something without that desire to be acknowledged is leading us towards a real pure heart generosity.

The other little telltale is to give that little bit more that pinches. That little pinch is where you're truly being generous, where you're giving that bit of extra time, that little bit of extra money and that's the point where it begins to hurt a little bit. That's the point where you are truly extending our generosity.

To recap, we have this lovely virtuous circle of this feeling of gratitude and one exercise you can give yourself is to say that tomorrow, everything, I will say thank you to everything. I'll say thank you to the door that opens. In Zen, of course, you're always gassho when you enter a room. You're taught to thank everything. You have to gassho when you approach the table. You gassho to the chair. So this whole attitude of actually not presuming on anything, not thinking that we have a right to everything, but that everything is a gift. And if you go through the whole day like that, you'd be surprised how it lifts you. It really does lift you.

Then once we've established more and more this sense of gratitude and the knowledge that you can't repay directly what people have given to you, there has to be, you have to find a way of expressing that gratitude through generosity. And when we are being generous, to stop for a moment and to make sure that you're doing it for pure reasons. That's all. And then to realize that when I've actually made an act of generosity with a pure heart, I've renounced something. I've let go of something I'm holding on to. And I'm actually practicing renunciation, letting go of that grip on things.

That loosening of a grip, that letting go of these tight desires, wrong desires, is a little, every time we do that and we feel that loss of grippiness, that in a sense is a touch of *nirvana* because one of the descriptions of *nirvana* is that it is desireless of these sorts of wrong desires.

So there's a lovely little practice there which is ongoing day in and day out. And it's only a matter of reminding ourselves to do it. And very slowly, it becomes a habit, that's all. Really, that's what we're doing in our practice. We are changing our habits, moving away from habits which cause ourselves suffering and aren't very pleasant for others, and moving towards habits which bring us happiness.

There is the gift of the practice is a natural happiness in life. It's not Nirvana, it's a natural happiness. And this happiness that we talk about is the internal environment within ourselves. So this is a really powerful practice. And I try and remember to do it myself occasionally.

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

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