Need, Sufficiency and Greed

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 18:01

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Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa
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Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble, and fully self-awakened.

This evening, I thought to tackle this business of need, sufficiency and greed.

As you know, in the UK here—well, I think it's all over the world—but in Europe and the UK, we've got these huge national debts, and in the UK it's made worse by the wonderful Brexit deal that was made. Everybody's predicting high inflation and a downturn. This is frightening, because you lose your savings, you might lose your work. It can all be very upsetting.

So I thought, well, what we need to do is undermine the fear and anxiety by asking ourselves: what do we actually need?

What I want to do is explain to you—and most of you won't know—what the rules for monks are when it comes to their physical wellbeing.

Shelter

The first one is shelter. In the discourse on how to establish right mindfulness, the Buddha said that we should be happy with the wilderness, a root of a tree, or an empty hut. Now, those reflect the three seasons. You want a hut when it rains, in the rainy season. You want a tree in the hot season. And in the cool season, well, you can sleep anywhere and do your meditation anywhere.

In fact, if I remember rightly, when the Buddha settled down to his meditation which brought about the liberation, the enlightenment, near a place called Uruvila—which is now, of course, Bodh Gaya—it sounds as though it was the cool season, which makes a lot of sense. If you're going to make a big effort, you want it to be cool.

When we look around our houses, our flats, or whatever we're living in, you can ask yourself: what do you actually need? Not what you want, or even what is sufficient, but what do you actually need?

I'm thinking of things like heating. There was a little article where a man explained that when he called up

the electrical company, they told him to reduce heating by just heating one room. He seemed to be quite upset by that. He had a great big house, and he sounded as though he lived on his own. Living on his own in a house, he was quite upset that he had now reduced his heating to one room. Well, if you think about what you actually need, it probably is just the room you're generally living in.

I met somebody at Gaia House when I was teaching there. I've known him for a long time. He says during winter, he lives at 12 degrees centigrade. If you really want to know how he does it, I can always put you in touch with him. But that's what he actually gets down to—12 degrees. He says if it's under 12, then he starts to lose it; he can feel the body heat really reducing too much. So that's all he needs. He needs just 12 degrees.

But of course, we tend to walk around our houses at 25 degrees. In the middle of winter, you find people wearing just a T-shirt walking around the house. So again, if the price of gas is going to go up, well, it throws us back on ourselves. How much do you actually need?

There was an article for people who are really poor, who are really going to have real problems, explaining that they can buy these rather cheap jackets and pullovers that are heated. You just stick the plug in, the batteries fill up, and then the body armour gives you heat. Again, it's just a reflection. One exercise I was going to suggest at the end was: what would you take with you? What would you need if you were a refugee? Of course, there are people who are homeless. We know that people are living really rough, even in the depths of winter. It's not a case of getting to a point where we're like that, but it's a good question to ask. When it comes to dwelling, what do I actually need?

I lived for quite some time just in a bedsit in the house of my teacher in Birmingham. She had prepared this room specifically for a monk. It was just a bed, a place to sit next to the gas fire, and on one side was just a small stove, a fridge, and a little cabinet for pots and pans and stuff like that. I was very happy.

Food

So that's to do with dwelling—what do you actually need? Now when it comes to food, the monastic has to go out with his bowl and just accept what's given. There were famines in those days, and often they would have to just make do with whatever was put in the bowl in terms of rice.

Lay people complained to the Buddha that these monks and nuns were turning up at all times of the day asking for food and being quite a nuisance. So he made a rule. He said, right, from now on you have to go out in the early hours or during the morning on alms round, and you have to finish eating and everything else by noon. Well, a lot of monks rejected that. They got very upset.

They would normally have had an evening meal—three meals a day, as was customary. So there was a bit of a rebellion. And the Buddha said, "Look, if you want to belong to this dispensation, then that's what you're going to have to do." And for the most part, monks try to keep that rule to this day. So again, it's a case of asking: how much food do you actually need?

Of course, there's a distinction between good food and food which is not so good for the body. And that's the problem, I think, with people relying on food banks. When you see footage of a food bank, so much of it tends to be tinned goods, for heaven's sake. But again, it's just settling down and thinking to yourself, making up a little menu which is really basic.

When I was in India, the regular food for the ordinary worker, the ordinary person in North India, was dal, vegetable curry, and a chapati. And that's what you got every day. You didn't say, "Well, I'm going to have Chinese today." It was simply dal, vegetable curry, and chapati. And that's what you made do with.

Interestingly enough, when they started to recruit men during conscription for the Second World War, they were really taken aback to find that many men weren't having three meals a day at all. They were actually eating quite poorly and were happy to join the army just to get some decent food.

So here's another little exercise you might set yourself: spend a day as if you were poor, as if you couldn't simply buy whatever food you wanted. What would you eat? What would sustain you for that day? It's about taking away this fear that if we become very poor for one reason or another, that's the end of the world. You just make do.

I'm old enough to have memories of just after the war. I remember going to my aunt's for food. On the toast, you'd put the butter on and then scrape it off, and what you were left with was just a sort of suggestion. Then they did the same with the jam—I couldn't believe it. I was only a child, about six or seven, watching this: you'd put jam on the bread and then scrape it all off and stick it on another piece. These were considered luxuries. The food was the bread itself.

When it comes to clothing, the Buddha noticed that people were coming away with huge amounts of cloth from the laypeople. So he actually set out one night—this would have been during the cold season—to determine how many robes you actually need. At the beginning of the night, he had his lower robe and his upper robe. Then as the night grew colder, he needed another robe, so he took one more. And towards the end of the night—the coldest hour is just before dawn—he felt he needed one more. So he had three robes: the lower robe, the upper robe, and the sanghati, the one you see monks putting over their shoulder. That was it, and that became the rule.

Of course, rules are rules, and you find ways around them by having extra cloth—which is a bit cheeky, I know. But the point was coming down to what you actually need. We're talking about the tropics, of course, but the question remains: what do you actually need? How many coats do you need? How many pairs of shoes?

Drawing ourselves down to that basic need—I think that gets rid of a lot of the fear that comes from loss of wealth, whatever that wealth might be, loss of your job and so forth. And just as an aside, it does make us more aware of where we're getting our clothes from.

I met somebody in Shropshire who showed me this jumper they had just bought for three or four pounds.

They'd gone to another shop—probably Marks and Spencer's—where a similar jumper was twelve pounds. When I said to them, "Yes, but this is probably made in one of those satanic sweatshops in Bangladesh," they were taken by surprise. It hadn't even occurred to them to think that way.

Now the final requisite. We've covered shelter, food, clothing. The final one is medicine.

The Buddha said that we should be contented with fermented cow's urine. Now, that might come as a big surprise. But in fact, it's a very well-known Ayurvedic medicine. It's an antibiotic, anti-fungal, and if you take it regularly, it maintains the homeostasis of the body, lowers cholesterol, relieves tension, enhances liver function, and slows down aging. So tomorrow morning, you need to get out there and get your bottle of fermented cow's urine!

That's what we're supposed to be happy with. Frankly, I've never tried it, so I don't want to say whether it's any good or not. But it's definitely Ayurvedic medicine, and people do drink it.

So here we have this whole business of asking ourselves what we need—what we actually need to sustain life. This concerns only our physical needs. There's also the other side: our cultural needs, our heart needs. In the Buddha's instructions to the monks, the day was to be spent meditating, remembering, studying, and understanding the Dhamma. In those days, of course, you had to memorize the teaching. They didn't have clever little gadgets like we have to remember things.

So one exercise you can set yourself is to live one day—just one day—with only what you need, and find out for yourself.

The second consideration lifts our perspective to the level of sufficiency. This depends a great deal upon our culture. When it comes to clothes, for instance, people need a set of clothes for work, a set for leisure, a set for climbing mountains and activities like that. So it's not a case of making ourselves miserable, but simply being clear in ourselves as to what we actually need.

I think that if you spend just one day with need, it undermines a lot of the fear and anxiety that comes about with the loss of wealth. No matter how much or how little wealth you have, to suddenly find yourself unemployed and on the dole is pretty miserable. But you discover you can live with it, at least at a physical level.

And then, of course, there's the final consideration of greed. Well, that takes us to another step entirely. I think most of us know when we're being greedy. I don't think I need to go into that too much.

So here are a couple of exercises. When it comes to food, just have one day with what you feel is the cheapest and most sustainable food that would be good for the body. Just one day a week, simply to remind ourselves.

When it comes to clothes, go through the wardrobe and see how much you're not wearing. I remember somebody who was in the habit of putting any piece they used—a shirt or dress—at one end of their

wardrobe. Over the year, they would see all the clothes they hadn't actually used, and they would take them down to the charity shop. There are all sorts of little tricks we can play on ourselves to come down to sufficiency. Eventually it saves a lot of money, you know.

When it comes to heating, that's quite crucial for us these days, and our heating bills are going to go up something awful. But just by being careful with it and wearing jumpers, it won't be that heavy on us, I don't think.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused any confusion, and that by your devotion to practice and the practice of poverty—simplicity, that's the word, simplicity—you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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