Nibbāna: The Kevaddha Sutta and the Luminous Consciousness

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 16:14

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

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

I'm continuing what we did last time, which is to talk about *Nibbāna*. That's the short and straight of it.

Here I'm going to go through a discourse which is addressed by the Buddha to a certain monk called Kevaddha. As we go through it, you'll see what it's all about.

He says to Kevaddha: there was a monk in this community of monks, the Sangha, where a thought arose in his awareness. Where do these four great elements—the earth property, the liquid property, that's cohesive elasticity; the fire property, that's heat and cold; and the wind property, that's movement or stillness or stiffness, the earth property being heavy or light—where do they cease without remainder? In other words, where are they annihilated?

Then he attained such a state of concentration that the way leading to the gods appeared in his focused mind. So he approached the gods—these seem to be the lowest of them, the retinue of the four great kings. He said, "Friends, where do these four great elements, the earth element, liquid, fire and wind element cease without remainder?" When he had said this, they said to him, "Well, we also don't know where these four great elements cease without remainder. But there are the four great kings themselves who are higher and more sublime."

So off he goes to try and find these four great kings. When he does, they also say, "We also don't know where these four great elements come to an end, cease without remainder." So they suggest that he go a little higher to the gods of the Thirty-Three. When they arrive there, they also say, "Well, we don't know, but Sakka, the ruler of the gods, who is higher and more sublime than we, will know."

In this way, they go up and up through the Yama gods and the Suyama gods and the Santusita gods and the Nimmanarati gods and the Sunamita gods. They're going higher and higher and they're all saying the same thing: "I don't know what it is but somebody upstairs knows better." You can see this is getting to be a bit of a satire.

Then finally the Paranimmita Vasavatti, who was the chief of the Paranimmita gods, said, "Why don't you

go and approach the retinue of Brahma?" When he approaches them, they said, "Of course, well, we don't know, but Brahma himself will know."

Brahma was the Vedic creator god. You can see here that it's beginning to be a bit of a satire on the way the Brahmins would believe or teach about these various gods, but especially the role of Brahma, who was the creator, the starter of all things.

This particular monk approaches Brahma and he also asks, "Where do these four great elements cease without remainder?" He meets this Brahma—actually, just going back a little bit—he says that a light shines forth and a radiance appears and Brahma will appear, for these are the portents of Brahma's appearance. Light shines forth and a radiance appears.

So Brahma appears and the monk approaches the great Brahma and says, "Friend, where do these four great elements cease without remainder?" The great Brahma replies, "I, monk, am Brahma, the great Brahma, the conqueror, the unconquered, the all-seeing, the all-powerful, the sovereign Lord, maker, creator, chief, appointer, ruler, father of all that has been and shall be."

The monk says to him, "Friend, I didn't ask you if you were Brahma, the great Brahma, the conqueror, the unconquered, and so on and so forth. I asked you, where do the four great elements cease without remainder?"

Well, poor old Brahma, he goes off again with his string of attributes: "I am Brahma, the maker, creator, chief, appointer, ruler," and so on. So again, he asks him, only this time, the great Brahma, taking the monk by the arm and leading him off to the side, said to him, "These gods of the retinue of Brahma believe there is nothing that the great Brahma does not know. There is nothing the great Brahma does not see. There is nothing the great Brahma is unaware of. There is nothing that the great Brahma has not realized. That is why I did not say in their presence that I too don't know where the four great elements cease without remainder.

"So you've acted wrongly. You've acted incorrectly in bypassing the Blessed One in search of an answer to this question elsewhere. Go right back to the Blessed One and on arrival, ask him this question. However he answers it, you should take it to heart."

Then because of his powers, as a man might flex his arm, he appears from the Brahma world before the Buddha.

We've been all the way up through all these higher heavens, these sublime places, and he just doesn't have an answer. Now, when he comes back down, interestingly enough, the Buddha says this to him:

"Once, monk, some seafaring merchants took a shore-sighting bird and set sail in their ship. When they could not see the shore, they released the shore-sighting bird. It flew to the east, south, west, north, straight up, and to all the intermediate points of the compass. If it saw a shore in any direction, it flew

there. If it did not see the shore in any direction, it returned right back to the ship. In the same way, monk, having gone as far as the Brahma world in search of an answer to your question, you have come right back to my presence."

It suggests that perhaps there were monks in the order, monks and nuns, monastics, who were still, as it were, going for advice to the Brahmins, especially if they were Brahmins themselves. I don't know what it actually means, but it's an odd thing to admonish this poor monk.

Anyway, what he says to this monk is: "Your question should not be phrased in this way: 'Where do these four great elements, the earth element, liquid element, fire element and wind element cease without remainder?' Instead, it should be phrased like this: 'Where do earth, water, fire and air find no footing? Where are long and short, small and great, fair and foul? Where are name and form, body and mind brought to an end?'"

And the answer is this: "Consciousness that is signless, non-manifestive, limitless, without boundary and all-illuminating in all directions, full of light. There water, earth, fire and wind find no footing. There long and short, small and large, pleasant and unpleasant. There name and form, body and mind have all been brought to an end. With the cessation of consciousness, all is brought to an end."

Now we have a problem. The Buddha is a little bit like really any person who suddenly sees something which is beyond the culture, which is something which is new to the culture. They're always scrabbling for new words. An obvious example would be Freud, who had to come up with id, ego and superego to get across his model of the human mind.

Here he's using consciousness in two different ways. The first consciousness is the one that is going to cease, is going to come to an end. This is the consciousness that the Buddha describes by sense bases: there's eye consciousness, there's ear consciousness, nose consciousness, mind consciousness. This consciousness belongs to the five aggregates, which are the body or our physicality, all our feelings driven by both the body and emotions, all our perceptions and the *saṅkhāras*, these habits of thought, habits of actions, which we remember create through an act of will, and this consciousness. This consciousness is like a screen upon which this information arises. That's the consciousness which disappears. That's the consciousness which can experience these four great elements. He goes as far as to say that even the mind and the body also are brought to an end. But this is not a final end. It's where they find no footing.

Then he describes this experience, which has to be the experience of Nibbāna. He says there's a consciousness, so there's a knowing, which is non-manifested. The word is *nidassanaṃ*, cannot be seen. What cannot be seen? What cannot be felt? It stands for all the sense bases. It is limitless. It doesn't have a boundary. It's not dependent on anything. Interestingly, it is all-illuminating, or in another translation, in all directions full of light. It is here that the earth, the fire, the wind and water elements find no footing.

What we have here is, again, a restatement that there is a mundane experience that we have through this

form of body and mind. And there is something which sits within it, but beyond it. When we experience what is beyond in its purity, then what is mundane, the body and mind, do not appear. That really is one of the most profound experiences of not-self. Because everything that we experience, we tend to associate with either by way of identity or possession. But here, everything's gone, and yet there remains this luminous consciousness.

Just as a reminder, going back to the early quotes of last month, here he says there's a dimension where there's no earth, no water, no fire, no wind. He's saying the same thing here, but he's not actually telling us what it is. He's telling us what's not there. He says no dimension of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, neither perception nor non-perception. There's none of those higher states of mind that we refer to as the *jhāna*, the absorptions. There's not this world or another world. There's no moon, no sun. I say there's no coming or going, remaining or passing away or reappearing. There's absolutely nothing there which is either phenomenal or physical.

Then we have this other quote, which again tells us what's not there: "There is that which is unborn"—this is how it's translated—"unborn, undying, uncreated, uncompounded," which means it's unconditioned. There is something which was never born. It's never died. It was never created, doesn't develop, and is not bound by any conditions.

We've had these statements now both of the negative—what is not in Nibbāna—but also this very positive statement about an experience that is nibbanic. This is only quoted twice within the whole of the scriptures and it doesn't appear in the *Udāna* collection, which are a collection of his inspired verses. So there's some filtering going on.

Just as an aside, in the Mahāyāna when Buddhism developed into the Mahāyāna, there was a school, the Yogācāra school, that actually has a transcendent—that's what they call it—a transcendent Abhidhamma, and it's based upon this particular phrase, this particular verse that we've just been reading.

This does not complete the mystery of Nibbāna, unfortunately, and there's more to be said, and I'll find some time in order to talk about it.

I can only hope these words have been of assistance, that they have not caused confusion, and that by your careful investigation through your practice of *vipassanā*, you will attain this particular experience.

Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.

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