The Dangers of Indulgence

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 20:41

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

I thought tonight I'd tackle this problem of indulgence. If I were to quote the Buddha from the first discourse, which is really just a formalised teaching he had—I can't imagine that this is exactly what he said—but he says that indulgence in sensual pleasures, which is base, vulgar, worldly, ignoble and not beneficial. And then he says the practice of self-mortification, which is simply painful, ignoble and not beneficial. And then he talks about the middle path.

This middle path isn't a little bit of indulgence and a little bit of mortification. It's something which transcends them. That's the middle, as it were. It's a way of saying that there is a path which does not include either the indulgence or the practice of self-mortification. That self-mortification is blaming the body for our problems. So if your eye sees something which brings up lust, you start blaming the eye. Well, that wouldn't be correct, would it? In those days, especially the Jains, they thought that the body itself was the product of our *kamma* and you had to let go of the body. So to die, to stop eating was considered to be the way to go. And I believe elderly people do that even these days.

Anyway, we're talking about indulgence. And this is an essay I've written really around eating. But hopefully I'll try and spread it out to include everything.

I always like the Greek myths. So how bad can greed get? Erysichthon, the Greek king of Thessaly had the temerity to build a banqueting hall over the shrine of Demeter, goddess of earth's fertility and protector of the harvest. She cursed him with insatiable hunger. First, he ate everything that was in his kingdom that was able to eat. And then he started on his people and even ate his own family. Finally, still famished, he ate himself. So that's how bad it can get.

Actually, when I was staying at Kanduboda in Sri Lanka, there was an American turned up and he was telling me that when he got lost in the wilds once, he went through a period of a few days where he just didn't have any food. And when he eventually caught a pigeon, he said he just ripped it open and ate it raw. So I don't think we ever get as close to that sort of hunger usually. Normally, when we feel a bit peckish, we'll put an end to it as quick as we can. Those are the extreme conditions.

But what we have to do—there are three things that we have to become clear about. Remember, this is the other side of suffering. So everybody knows the depressions and the anxiety. We know how to deal with that. But this indulgence is rather difficult because it's so close to enjoyment.

The first thing is to be able to distinguish when we're enjoying something as opposed to indulging it. And the second one is to begin to see the distinction between the body and the mind and what the body is actually giving us, which is pure. So all that's coming in, for instance, through the ears is the vibrations in the air. And then from there, it's taken into the mind and it's the mind which gives it meaning. So you get a bell, alarm bell, and so on and so forth. And then finally, to know the distinction between a desire and an action. So this is the Buddha making as clear as to what the role of the will is.

The first thing is to really begin to understand what the downside of indulgence is. The problem is that when we're indulging something—we're getting food or we're out in nature and we're loving it and we're bathing in it—while we're doing that, there's not a problem. It's heaven, isn't it? We think it's *Nibbāna*. It's the aftermath that we have to become aware of.

So the first thing that arises from that indulgence is of course that sort of compulsive behaviour. Here, the psychology is the same as any addict. I mean, they've got it bad, but for most of us, it becomes a sort of obsessive thing that we need. Just to take a very simple example, everybody has a special time for a tea or coffee and biscuits, coffee and a piece of cake. And when you get to that time, if you just sit in front of it, you'll feel the process of that wanting and the compulsive nature of having to have it. You can get quite depressed if you don't get it. But that's the other side too. It's a case of recognising that as soon as we have one of these unwholesome habits, there's a certain compulsion around that behaviour.

I've got an example here of somebody who gave up smoking and thought that they were completely over it. And then at a party, they just have that just one, just one cigarette. And before they're knowing it, of course, they're buying a packet. Now, I know that has a physical dependency to it, but it's the same sort of psychology even for biscuits.

The second problem is the frustration that arises when we don't get what we want. So if you've forgotten to buy the tea, that's terrible. Or to buy the coffee, that's even worse sometimes. And Amazon, of course, has spent millions on getting their products to the customer as quickly as possible, just knowing that if they can gratify a person's desire more quickly than anybody else, then they get their loyalty. And of course, it's worked. We get angry over silly things—the bus doesn't arrive on time and the train's late as usual and things like that. And that's the frustration of not getting what we want. And that comes from an attachment to something.

The third one is grief. So especially, well, with things, it's especially if you lose something which is treasured by you—an engagement ring, a marriage ring, or some token of friendship, some heirloom, if that's stolen from you. I remember at college, my girlfriend at the time, she was living in this place with other girls and the landlord turned out to be some sort of thief. And just one day they found that all their little treasures were completely stolen. All the jewels that they had—it's absolutely awful. And of course, when we lose something like a mobile, we get more angry than anything, but there's a sense of grief there.

And when it comes to objects, it's good to remind ourselves that the idea of possessing an object is a legal

fiction. It's something that we presume on the object, that the object is mine. But actually, when you think about it, you can only use objects. You can only use your phone. And when the thief takes it, it's his. It's not mine anymore.

So the fourth one is anxiety. Under anything we possess, I'm sure you will find some level of anxiety about loss. And the more we have, the more the anxiety is there. And you can see that from people who are very rich. Once they reach a billion, it's hardly enough. They've got to insure that billion by having another billion. And it's the same with other things that we have, like friendships. We feel more safe when we have lots of friendships, people whom we can call our friends, family, like that. And there's also to do with power. The more power you have, the more safe you feel. So when those things begin to dissipate, when they begin to lose them, that's when you touch this underground anxiety we have.

And of course, that anxiety goes right to the basis of the real problem that sits under everything. And that's the idea of a self. And the self is telling us to enjoy ourselves, to try and make this life really enjoyable. And so when that joy begins to disappear that we become attached to, then you get that anxiety. Now, that isn't to say that there isn't enjoyment and the joys of life. And we'll come to that in a bit.

So finally, and I don't think this is an exhaustive list, there's boredom. So if you remember, after the Buddha became fully liberated, Māra, the evil one, sent his three daughters and they were sensual pleasure, sexual pleasure and boredom. So this boredom is an aversive state. What used to give you happiness doesn't give you that happiness anymore. And if we look at it, it's actually not so much the happiness that we're after, it's that little sliver on top, which is the excitement. And that's the big delusion of our consumerist societies, to confuse happiness with excitement.

So if you think of a Christmas cake—this is a British and Irish Christmas cake—you get the solid bit, the fruit cake underneath it all. And then you get this sliver at the top of marzipan and the icing. And children will peel that off and just eat that, of course. And that, of course, gives the cake that little special zing. So it's just an ordinary fruitcake unless you have that little bit of marzipan and icing on top. And of course, that's what gives you diabetes, isn't it? The sugar. But we're not worried about that. We'd rather just enjoy it.

So it's the same with this happiness and excitement. And often when we make the right intention to just enjoy something and not to indulge, there's always that sense that we've lost a little bit of that little pleasure that we used to have through indulgence. And that's your renunciation. When the Buddha talks about renunciation, and that renunciation is the path to liberation, it's getting rid of that excitement.

The Buddha was happy. He actually says, when you get to *Nibbāna*, you are contented and with it happy. So we're not going to lose contentment and happiness, but it's giving up that little sliver of excitement. Well, even though I say it's a little sliver for most, for a lot of people, that's what it is. And that's where you get this sort of clickbait that they talk about, when people are scrolling through all these fashions and computers and anything else that they want to feed off.

And what it's doing is, at a physical level, we know it's sort of drenching the brain with dopamine. But at that mental level, it's that what we call the attachment. That's the dependency. And that's what we mean when we talk about attachment. We mean that we are dependent on something to give us happiness. But when we look at that happiness, it's actually a little level of excited energy. And that's what we've got to give up because if we don't, it creates all these problems afterwards that we've been through. We talked about compulsive behaviour and frustration and grief and anxiety. And finally, this boredom.

If your whole life is about being excited and it begins to lose that excitement, it could be through illness, for instance, the boredom arises. And what boredom is saying is, what's the purpose of life if I can't be excited? I've got to search something. So you can see that this boredom is the underlying engine of the whole consumerist society. It's the boredom that makes you seek the next thing that's going to make you excited.

And we have this phrase, don't we? Variety is the spice of life. Well, that sort of attitude is the path to perdition, the path to hell. But that's not necessary. We can just be happy.

The big thing that we have to do is to make sure that whenever we're going to do something which is going to bring happiness, is to be very clear about our intention. So just taking food as an example, which is pretty straightforward. What's the purpose of eating? The real purpose of eating is to nourish the body. That's the real purpose so that we can continue living and practising and doing our practice. The fact that it tastes nice is part and parcel of that process. It might not be the taste that we expected, et cetera, et cetera, but at least that's just there, but we're not eating it for that reason.

So we go back to that little phrase, are we eating to live or living to eat? And it's just making those intentions very clear to ourselves and moving from that intention. And that's what undermines this desire for excitement.

And it's very difficult to separate excitement from indulgence. Aversion is clear. Aversion pushes you away from the object you don't want to know. To be aware of aversion is much easier because it separates out from what it's averse to, same with fear. But when it comes to indulgence, it sort of melds. The connection is melding. So it's very difficult to sort of pull it apart and to see what the indulgence actually is.

And of course, one way to do that is if we find ourselves having a habit which is compulsive is, of course, is to stop it. And when the desire comes, you sort of sit with the agony of letting go of that. One example I used to use, it doesn't work anymore, as you'll see, was to have a favourite TV programme, a serial or something like that. And you sort of turn it on and just look at the blank screen. And that would send you absolutely berserk. These days, of course, you can't do that because everybody's got iPlayer or something else.

But the whole point of renunciation or an act of renunciation is to contact that desire. It's an

unwholesome desire. And as you work with that over time, of course, that habit begins to dissolve. It's not being fed and therefore it just begins to die away. And then once it's got low again, once you've got it down to a decent basis of control, then, of course, you simply have to watch that it doesn't get the better of you again. That's all.

But eventually, we've got to give all that up. And we don't give it up unless we see the juice that comes from it, the fruit of that renunciation. And so if you take something which you can see is compulsive, it might be just a cup of tea at a certain time of day, and you just sit there with the empty cup. And you get that feeling of wanting it. And if you just sit with it, it's quite remarkable. If you just sit with it and wait for that desire to go away, that bad energy, remember, is transformed. And what you find is that suddenly you're contented and you don't want a cup of tea. And that's the joy of renunciation.

So remember, we're not trying to confuse enjoyment with indulgence. And it all comes down really to our intentions. So the more we're aware of our intentions and we correct our intentions towards just enjoying something, then you'll find yourself being a bit more contented with the way things are. And with it, happiness.

Just to end off with the Buddha's own quote—he talks about the taste of the sea, the taste of the ocean is salt. And just as that has a taste, the taste of *Nibbāna* is freedom. Freedom from what? Freedom from this sort of compulsive desire. And remember, this is the desiring side for pleasure. Remember, there's the other side too, which is all about suffering. It's all about anxiety, depression, et cetera, et cetera.

So just to recap there, when we get into this indulgence business, we can expect there'll be an aftermath. There will be compulsive behaviour. There'll be frustration. There'll be grief. There'll be anxiety. And there'll be boredom. And if we can get into that, then hopefully we'll liberate ourselves from it. That's the whole point of our practice, really.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused confusion, and that by your devotion to separating indulgence from enjoyment you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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