Neoliberalism and Mindfulness

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 19:36

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.

So I thought this evening I'd tackle this neoliberalism and the role of Buddhism, of Buddha Dharma, in that particular ideology. Just to remind ourselves, an ideology is a set of beliefs and principles that go on to inform policy. But as an ideology, as an idealism as well, there's always some future goal, some Shangri-La that it's always heading towards. And it always has — even in Marxist terms, the seed of destruction is always in capitalism. But that's true, as we've discovered from the last century, of any ideology. Communism, national socialism, even democracy — but democracy at least has this self-correction every so often. And as we've discovered, it only really works when the society tends to be fairly peaceful with itself. As we see these days, there's a leaning towards the right again, towards authoritarianism.

So the Buddha himself didn't fashion Buddhism. He simply taught a practical path to liberation and the understanding that underlies it. So it's really about ethics, and he belonged to a period before writing. So therefore, there isn't this philosophy and systems theory and all that. It just didn't exist at that time. The thought was really very practical.

Now, the fundamental attitude that actually drives neoliberalism is greed, acquisitiveness. I'm just quoting here from Oliver Stone's movie, which was in 1987 called Wall Street. Some of you might have seen it. Gordon Gekko is the antihero played by Michael Douglas. And he gives this speech and he says, "The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all its forms — greed for life, greed for money, for love, knowledge — has marked the upward surge of mankind." Doesn't sound very nice, does it? So what it does is it makes you a very special human being. You're out for yourself. This very selfish attitude that I should have what I want when I want it. If you remember Frank Sinatra's old song, "I did it my way."

And of course, it's a corruption of what Darwin said. Darwin — I quote him here — "It is not the strongest of the species that survive, not the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change." So this word "fittest" actually means adaptable. But ever since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, we've had this idea that there'll come a time when we can produce enough stuff so that everybody has everything. So there's a couple of books here that I can mention towards the end. I might come back to that. But I just mentioned this book by Sally Weintrobe called The Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis. And it brings

together many things. But one thing that she points out is that the wealthy nurtured the concept of neoliberalism through right-wing think tanks, and they captured the Republicans and eventually the Tories. So that's dear old Margaret Thatcher for us.

So now this acquisitiveness, this greed, it operates in a market. So we're all now entrepreneurs in this market and we all want everything all at once. And what it does, of course, is it creates this competition. But of course, it's a competition that is antagonistic because either you're my rival, at best, or at worst, you're my direct enemy. So I'm always working against somebody.

Now, you can't say that competition is all bad, because it does actually create efficiency and inventiveness. In fact, in the worst cases where you have this aggressive competition — war, in the Second World War, remember — jet planes, jet engines, radar, and the computer were developed. So there's a tremendous irony there. But the thing is that what neoliberalism presumes is that society is at best when it services the market. We're all individuals. We're all working against each other in order to get the biggest piece of the pie we can. And the whole process is very antagonistic.

But when you look at something like academia, where scientists from all over the world might be working on a particular project, they're very happy to share with each other their discoveries. Now, they're not motivated by power or money. I mean, they're given a salary. I mean, they might covet the Nobel Prize, but it's usually just sheer interest in the scientific investigation. So here we have a collaborative competitiveness, which is a very different atmosphere altogether. I think it's something the Buddha would have liked.

Now, the downside of this, of course, is that if you're not a player in the market, then in a sense, you've only yourselves to blame. And in blaming the victims — if you remember going back to the Thatcher period, those from the rest of Europe won't remember this, but we had this fellow called Tebbit who told people to get onto their bikes. Like, it's up to you. You've got to get the work. And if you don't get the work, well, that's your problem. You're to blame.

So workers begin to lose their rights because basically you have to negotiate with your employer. And the competition between workers determines the cost, which will go down and down. So this is the gig economy, isn't it? This is what we mean by the race to the bottom.

So I give a definition here of a race to the bottom: a competitive situation where a company, a state, or a nation attempts to undercut the competition's prices by sacrificing quality standards or worker safety or reducing labour costs. And you can see, for instance, when Uber started in London — I'm hoping that the situation is the same in the rest of the world, or I'm not sure — basically, those who wanted to join Uber were in competition with each other. So you can imagine: a parent who has children, holidays and all that sort of stuff; a young woman who has a mortgage; and a young fellow who's got no problems whatsoever, he's only about 21 or something. And they are bidding for your ride. Well, if the man with all the problems is charging you 30 and the woman charges you 25 and he charges you 20, then if the parent wants that

ride, they've got to come all the way down to 20. And that's what happens. Everything starts moving downwards.

The worst example, of course, is this recent sacking of 800 workers by the P&O ferry line. Interestingly enough, they were losing 100 million, but at the same time, they paid out 270 million to their dividends, to their shareholders. So you can see it's not very fair, is it?

And we all know about this tremendous — well, it comes out to be a lie, doesn't it? This thing about trickle down, eventually the wealth trickles down and everybody's happy. But it doesn't trickle down to the unemployed, to the disabled or the old, the aged. And these players, of course, are not in the market. So now that would be a real drag, draining money from the market. So the only way to get around that is, of course, to privatise all the social services so that these companies get their 10%. I don't know what's happening in the rest of Europe, but now there are many GP surgeries that are being taken over by a company called Centene. And even the Daily Mail said it was the most avaricious of insurance companies. So it's all bad news, isn't it?

But the big thing is, of course, that this competition just undermines a sense of commonwealth. It's no longer a caring society. You're not actually caring for each other. You're just trying to find your way, make money. So that means that any government or charitable effort that tries to do something about your basic physical or material well-being, people in need, would undermine the entrepreneurial spirit of competition. See, people have got to get out there and get into it. And of course, neoliberalism hates governments interfering with the markets. So there was this whole business about very few regulations. Well, we knew what happened. The banks went berserk. And then who had to step in to save them? Us, the poor ordinary punter.

So you can see that this is diametrically opposed to anything that the Buddha would teach. And the wonderful thing is that, of course, people are highly stressed in that sort of system, all the way down from CEOs, all the way down to the ordinary worker.

Now, it seems that the World Economic Forum at Davos, where the rich and the powerful, the high and mighty meet to decide how to rule the world, they were overjoyed to hear about mindfulness. So mindfulness would help people with their stress. So they began to tell all the workers who were stressed out, you've got to take a course in mindfulness and stress reduction. And if you happen to be even more stressed by even more stress, well, all you had to do was find a place in the office or somewhere and just sit there for a while and watch your breath and it would all disappear — as though stress were entirely a person's internal response to a situation. But as we know, the stress that's put upon you from the outside has a great deal to do with our own mental states.

So this wonderful gift that the Buddha gave us of investigating our lives and our being in order to achieve complete liberation from suffering is now being used to support a system which is doing exactly the opposite. What an irony.

And of course, what the neoliberal system is doing is the work of Mara. Now, Mara is the evil one. If you remember, just before the Buddha's liberation, Mara came and gave him this great doubt. He said, "Come on, what are you doing? Why are you doing this? Why are you going through all this pain, this suffering? Why don't you get back to your family and get back to sensual pleasures and how it was in the old days before you took up this silly idea?" And of course, the Buddha touches the earth. Now, this is the important thing. He touches the earth and the goddess of the earth arises and says to Mara, "No, the Buddha has every right to do this because he has perfected the virtue of generosity."

In other words, the Buddha's commitment came from his desire also to free everybody from suffering. And this is really interesting — something that undermines the neoliberal agenda: the idea that we can actually be like citizens who are helping each other. So if you remember during the lockdown here, suddenly neighbours realised they could help themselves. It was unknown. You could actually knock on a neighbour's door and say, "How are you doing?" and be there to help them out. This was a new discovery, it seems.

So now, just before I carry on with generosity, the question is, what can we personally do? Well, the obvious thing, of course, is to be aware of what we're buying. So not to support these satanic factories in Bangladesh and Cambodia and even in China.

But coming back now to generosity, I'm sure you've noticed that when you do something out of a sense of care for yourself, like you might buy a warm jumper or something like that, there's always a feeling good about that. You feel good about yourself. You're caring for yourself. Have you noticed that when you care for somebody else, when you look after somebody else, when you buy something for somebody, when you give something for somebody or spend time for somebody else, the joy that comes from it is much more long lasting? And it's that shift towards going away from this "me" towards "we" is where we can begin to find a different sort of economic system.

Of course, that sounds a bit glib, "me to we" and all that. But basically, it's that sense of bringing back that sense of community.

And I would just like to end this with a lovely quote that I've got from the Buddha: "If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would the stain of miserliness overcome their minds. Even if it were their last bite, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared, if there were someone to receive the gift. But because beings do not know this, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they eat without having given and the stain of miserliness overcomes their mind."

So it's possible that we can have a life of joyfulness, which is a shared joy with people around us. And to get away from this very tight sense of this little self, like a little castle, which has to defend itself against everybody.

And you see it in the new woke, especially Extinction Rebellion, which is trying to wake people up to recognising that things are getting worse. We have to do something about it. And you'll find great resistance from those people who, of course, are committed to neoliberalism.

So all we can hope for is a change of attitude. You'll get politicians saying, "Oh, well, what we need is better jobs and better housing." But that's all within the system of neoliberalism. So in a sense, if we're going to move towards something which is much more just, much more equitable, much more kind, much more caring, it's that fundamental attitude that has to change. And let's hope that when it does happen, because the seeds of destruction are within capitalism itself, when it does happen, hopefully in the near future, let's just hope it's not another ideology, because that again will create problems.

And what the Buddha is saying is, if you ground yourself in the right attitude, and you recognise that times, that situation and times are in a constant flux, then you can always come at a particular situation, not from some preset view and opinion, but from this attitude of compassion, of sympathetic joy, of caring, of love, for heaven's sake.

Anyway, I hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused even greater confusion, and that by your commitment to the good life of compassion and joy, you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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