Buddha Day Address: His Training — The Fetters

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 30:47

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

Since it's been a while since we've done a proper Buddha Day here, I thought just to go over his journey. I was going to quote this Mahāsaccakasutta, the long discourse around this fellow called Saccaka, whom the Buddha also refers to as Aggivessana, which is his family name. So this is the Buddha expressing what he went through, his mortifications.

"Then it occurred to me, why don't I practice the breathless absorption? So I cut off my breathing through my mouth and nose and ears, and then there was an intense burning in my body like two strong men grabbing a weaker man by the arms to burn and scorch him on a pit of glowing coals. My energy was roused and unflagging, and my mindfulness was established and lucid, but my body was disturbed, not tranquil, because I had pushed too hard with this painful striving. But even such painful feelings did not overcome my awareness."

Have you tried that? I can't quite visualize it somehow.

"Then some deities saw me and said, the ascetic Gotama is dead. And others said, he's not dead, he's dying. And others said, he's not dead or dying. He's the ascetic Gotama as a perfected one. For that is how the perfected ones live."

Well, he isn't the perfected one yet. They've misunderstood his efforts. So that failed.

"Then it occurred to me, why don't I practice completely cutting off food? But the deities came to me and said, good sir, don't practice totally cutting off food. If you do, we'll infuse divine nectar into your pores and you'll live on that. Then I thought, if I claim to be completely fasting while these deities are infusing divine nectar in my pores, that would be a lie on my part. So I dismissed these deities and said there's no need. Then it occurred to me, why don't I take a little bit of food each time, a cup of broth made of mung beans, horse gram, chickpeas or green gram?"

So that's what I did until my body became extremely emaciated. Due to eating so little, my limbs became like the joints of dried bamboo or withered creepers. My bottom became like a camel's hoof. My vertebrae stuck out like beads on a string and my ribs were as gaunt as the broken down rafters on an old barn. Due

to eating so little, the gleam in my eyes sank deep in their sockets like the gleam of water sunk deep down in a well. Due to eating so little, my scalp shriveled and withered like a green bitter gourd in the wind and sun. Due to eating so little, the skin of my belly stuck to the backbone, so that when I tried to rub the skin of my belly, I grabbed my backbone. And when I tried to rub my backbone, I rubbed the skin of my belly. Due to eating so little, when I tried to urinate or defecate, I fell face down right there. Due to eating so little, when I tried to relieve my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair rotted at its roots and fell out.

"Then some people said, the ascetic Gotama is black. Some said, he's not black, he's brown. And some said, no, he's neither black nor brown. The ascetic Gotama has tawny skin. That's how far the pure and bright complexion of my skin had been ruined by taking so little food. Then I thought, whatever ascetics and Brahmins have experienced painful, sharp, severe, acute feelings due to overexertion, whether in the past, future or present, this is as far as it goes. No one has done more than this. But I have not achieved any superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones by this severe, grueling work. Could there be another path to awakening?"

So he's telling us that he took these ascetic practices to their limit. Now, that one about not eating seems to have been because he had some relationship with the Jains. The Jain teacher was an elder contemporary. In that teaching, your physical body is an expression of your personal *kamma*. So by letting go of the body completely, your soul would then rise naturally into heaven. Jains to this day, when they're very old, they'll just stop eating. It's the way they choose to die. Often, not always.

By the way, those descriptions of him starving do remind you of the pictures we've seen of people suffering from famines. So you have to have that in mind.

"Then it occurred to me, I recall sitting in a cool shade of the rose apple tree while my father, the Sakyan, was off working. Quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unskillful qualities, I entered and remained in the first absorption, which has the rapture and bliss born of seclusion, while placing awareness and keeping it connected. Could that be the path to awakening?"

Now, he had practiced these *jhānas*, remember, right at the beginning, according to the usual way that we see the way his life spanned out. He went, first of all, to two teachers who taught him how to practice these absorption states, which are very delightful. You do it inside yourself. You don't need anything outside. So if you practice loving-kindness and you get beautiful feelings, and they're such beautiful feelings that's all you want to do all day, sit on a tree and practice loving-kindness, you don't need anything at all apart from a bit of food. So he had dismissed that. The distinction here, I think, when he says "while placing awareness and keeping it connected," there's a suggestion there that he's caught on to the idea that although he's practicing these *jhānas*, they become themselves the object of investigation.

"Then it occurred to me, why am I afraid of that pleasure? For it's nothing to do with sensual pleasures or unskillful qualities. Then I thought, I'm not afraid of that pleasure, for it has nothing to do with sensual

pleasure or unskillful qualities. Then I thought, I can't achieve that pleasure with the body so excessively emaciated. Why don't I eat some solid food, some rice and porridge?"

So I ate some solid food. Now at that time, the five mendicants who were his companions, thinking the ascetic Gotama will tell us of any truth that he realizes, but when he ate some solid food they felt disappointed in me saying the ascetic Gotama has become indulgent, he has strayed from the struggle and returned to indulgence. After eating solid food and gathering my strength quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unskillful qualities — so the greed wasn't there, remember — I entered and remained in the first absorption, which has rapture and bliss, born of seclusion, while placing the awareness and keeping it connected. But even such pleasant feeling did not occupy my mind.

So this tells you that here he's understood that the *jhānas* themselves become a way of investigation, whereas before when he'd started the path, he would absorb into them and just enjoy them. In other words, it's put here, "did not occupy my mind." A better translation would be, "and even such feeling did not occupy my awareness." If you read that statement on the window ledge out there from the Arhat Meiji Kyodo, you'll see that's exactly what she says. Everything comes in front of the awareness and never enters into what she calls her heart.

"When my mind was immersed in *samādhi* like this, purified, bright, flawless, rid of corruption, pliable, workable, steady and unperturbable, I extended it towards recollection of past lives and I recollected my many kinds of past lives with features and details. This was the first knowledge that I achieved in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed and knowledge arose. Darkness was destroyed and light arose, as happens for a meditator who is diligent, keen and resolute. But even such pleasant feelings did not occupy my awareness."

So this is where he understands that all his past lives were driven by his actions, his *kamma*.

"In the next watch, when my mind was immersed in *samādhi* like this, purified, bright, flawless, rid of corruptions, pliable, workable, steady and imperturbable, I extended it towards the knowledge of the death and rebirth of sentient beings. And with clairvoyance that is purified and superhuman, I saw sentient beings passing away and being reborn, inferior or superior, beautiful or ugly, in a good place or a bad place, and I understood how sentient beings are reborn according to their deeds."

So here he's understood the law of *kamma* is not just his personal law, but it's a universal law. It's interesting, later on we'll mention these four levels of attainment: the stream entrance, once returner, non-returner and fully liberated one. In the commentaries, it says anybody who understands the law of *ka mma* is a *cūḷa sotāpanna*, a lesser *sotāpanna*, a lesser stream entrant, by which is meant anybody who understands the law of *kamma* is already on the path. It's inevitable that they will become liberated in the goodness of time.

"Then when my mind was immersed in *samādhi* like this, purified, bright, flawless, rid of corruptions,

pliable, workable, steady and imperturbable, I extended it towards the knowledge of the ending of defilements. I truly understood this is suffering. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the practice that leads to the cessation of suffering. I truly understood these are defilements. This is the origin of defilements. This is the cessation of defilements. And this is the practice that leads to the cessation of defilements. Knowing and seeing this, my mind was freed from defilements of sensuality, desire to be reborn and ignorance. And when it was freed, I knew it was freed."

So when he attained liberation, he knew it. He knew he was completely free of these defilements. Now this word defilements, usually it's understood to be those things that come because of our immoral, unwholesome actions. But it's more than that. It's also the defilements that come from this fundamental misunderstanding about self. So one of the things that arises because of that misunderstanding is fear — fear of death, fear of illness, fear of others. That fear is also a defilement. Later, they made a list of these ten defilements. But actually, the way he uses defilements in the scriptures is just anything which arises out of this ignorance. And the basic ignorance, the basic delusion is to believe we are human beings in a complete total way.

"I understood. Rebirth is ended. The spiritual journey has been complete. What had to be done has been done. There is no return to any state of becoming."

That's a lovely little phrase there. "What had to be done has been done." You can feel the release, the relief of having finally arrived at the place of liberation.

"This was the third knowledge that I achieved in the last watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed, knowledge arose, darkness was destroyed and light arose, as happens for a meditator who is diligent, keen and resolute, but even such pleasant feeling did not occupy my awareness."

So that's the ending of that discourse where he describes how he finally attained liberation.

We've talked about these defilements, and one of the discourses is on the Bhayabherava where he's in the jungle training, and this great fear comes upon him — wild animals and so on — and he has to overcome that. So that's not caused by some unwholesome action. That's just part of the structure that comes when you have a sense of self, of this body being a sense of self. When the body's in danger, then you get that fear. That would be included in defilements. Also these days when we talk about trauma from childhood and things like that, that's also part of the defilements, which is not caused by personal wrongdoing or anything. It's just something that arises because of our fundamental delusion.

So these four attainments, the stream entrant, he says it's like a flash of lightning. A person who has that stream entrant sees everything, but on the other hand, it's not deep, it's just a flash. Often when a person does have that experience, they can't really say. Sometimes they don't believe they've had it. It's that subtle, it's that underlying realization. But it's not big enough to be held, to be contemplated about.

The next one, when we rise to the once returner, he said it's like a starry night. So there you can hold,

there's enough insight for it to be held and for it to be understood. But the *anāgāmi*, the one who is not going to return, and we'll explain that in a minute, it's like a full moon. So it's very clear, but there's still this darkness around it. Finally, the *arahat*, the one who's fully liberated, is like the full noonday sun.

So one way of looking at this process is through these fetters. *Saṃyojana*. The word *saṃyojana* has the word *yoga* in it. That fundamental word is one of those words that comes right through the Indo-European languages. Our word "yoke" comes from the same place.

There are ten of these fetters. The first three are what goes when somebody has this little insight, this first insight. So the first one is this *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, which is translated as self-identity view. So it's basically the view, the notion, the belief that I am this human being. I am this person.

Even at an intellectual level, when you talk about the body, well, we know it changes every seven years. They tell you all the cells have been changed every seven years. I mean, I've almost had eleven bodies by now. Time I got rid of it.

When you think about your thoughts and what you used to think when you were three years old and what you do now, your feelings, your emotions, you can see it's a flow of events, isn't it? It's just a flow of events moving one into the other.

The example I use is when you bite your tongue. So you're eating away and you're enjoying your food and you bite your tongue. For that one wonderful singular moment, you and the pain are completely one. That's identity. Then you jump out of it and you find yourself a little angry with yourself. Now you've become anger, you see. So identity is when you lose that sense of objectivity about what you're experiencing is what you are at that moment.

So you trap your finger in a door. Pain's wonderful at doing that for us. But sometimes great pleasure, great joy. Also, you absorb into it and become it. You lose that sense of somebody enjoying something, somebody feeling something. You are that feeling. You are that pleasure or that mental state. That's what we mean by identity. So that's the first fetter that goes.

The second one is doubt. So this is a particular type of doubt. It's the doubt that stops you doing anything. It's the doubt that will stop you from committing. Often you might find in life that you come across a certain situation like a job and you apply for it, but then you go through this doubt business. Can I do it? Should I do it? And all this. Sometimes that doubt, that self-doubt is so strong, you don't take the job. You lose it, you see. So you don't give yourself a chance.

It's the same in meditation. You sit and then you think, well, everybody else is amazing. I'm absolutely useless. And then you keep convincing yourself that you're no good at it. So you may as well stop. It's the same with the Buddha Dharma. There may come a time when you think, well, I don't know whether the Buddha is right, whether it's Dharma for me, and so on.

But that goes completely with somebody who has this level of insight. There's no more of that sort of prevarication, that doubt, that oscillating doubt. That's not the same as honest doubt. I mean, the Buddha actually wants us to investigate what he says because the process of investigation itself is the process of liberation.

And then the third one is an attachment to rites and rituals. So this goes back to those times when, for instance, say in Hinduism, just to bathe in the Ganges would get rid of your *kamma*. That reminds you of something I met. This is years ago when I went out there as a sort of pseudo hippie. And I met this young woman. I was young myself, of course, in those wonderful days. And I went to this yoga center and she was there and she had all these spots and things all over her face. I said, what happened? She said, well, you know, I went down to the Ganges and joined them in this washing, in this getting rid of *kamma*. And I drank some of it. And I said, what? And not only does everybody's toilet goes into the Ganges, we get dead bodies of all sorts, even humans. And this poor woman was just getting over what looked like almost blood poisoning or something. And she's getting over it.

So we do little rituals like lighting candles, repeating the refuges and precepts. But if we were to believe that that was a part, that itself would help us to become liberated, then that, of course, would be a severe delusion. So it's going back to those days where people might have thought certain rituals, undergoing certain rituals were cleansing.

So that would then be undermined by this insight, which would be telling the person who has it that the path is one of purification. So remember, the Buddha only taught two things: the path of purification, which is getting rid of all these defilements within us, and the path of insight, which is seeing things as they really are.

So what do we mean when we say things really are? Well, we mean how we cause suffering. So there's the process of desire and how it leads us into a certain ways of attachment. How that attachment then begins to create people, situations, things that we don't like. Because as soon as you're attached to something, you're cutting off the other bit that you're not attached to. So you immediately create a conflict. And then there's impermanence. So that's the three things: *dukkha*, *anicca*, *anattā*.

And impermanence is really driving home that everything comes to an end. I mean, we're very good at noticing beginnings, you know, the beginning of a film, the beginning of... Well, you see these pop stars come and then they disappear. You don't know what happened to them. There's all things like that. It's really beginning to recognize that everything comes to an end. So after you finish a meal to recognize this is one less lunch in this lifetime. After you finish the day, this is one day less of my living. And it's slowly driving it home, coming to terms with the fact of what impermanence really means for us.

Our gaze is always averted towards the beginning and sustaining. So as soon as the ending comes, we're thinking of something else. We're on to the next film. We're on to the next holiday. What am I going to do when I retire? What am I going to do when I retire?

And the final one is this *anattā*, this not-self. So the easiest way to investigate this *anattā* is, he states it in the discourse on not-self, is to see what, when you talk about this body or this mind or my mental state, how much control have we got of it? How much control do we have over it? Then you realize that your control isn't absolute. So if your control is not absolute over something, it can't be you. That's the definition of me, that I'm in control. So that's how he begins the discourse. He said, if this body were mine, I'd make it grow taller, I'd make my hair grow more, etc., etc. But you can't. There are certain things you simply can't do. So we find that this sense of control over us, over this organism, is quite surface. I can move my arms around and all that, but I can do things with my body, but once my back goes, that's the end of it. I've learned that the hard way.

So all those three chains, shackles, disappear. That fundamental idea of identity, even though the notion is snapped, it still stays with us to the very end as conceit. So it's not as though you get rid of that sense of self just because you've had this insight. The doubt goes, though it may reappear in different forms, but doubt in the Dhamma itself is usually rock solid. Sorry, faith in the Dhamma itself is usually rock solid. And a distinction between why you do little rituals and they're not actually going to create salvation or purification. So that word salvation, although it's a Christian word, it actually does mean healing.

Now, it's only until we come to the second level, the once returner, that these two major things are undermined, which is our sensual desires and all our aversions. But they're only attenuated. They're not actually destroyed. And that only happens when you get to the third level, the non-returner. So that's why a person who's at the third level doesn't come back because they're not interested in sensual pleasure anymore. It's as simple as that. And their happiness comes from these absorptions and these beautiful mental states that they can achieve.

So finally, when we get to Arahant, these two things, the *jhānas*, these absorptions, are now no longer places to indulge. It doesn't mean to say that they can't achieve them, because the Buddha was often going through the *jhānas*. But they weren't something that they would be attached to as a source of personal pleasure. So the awareness would always be there.

Finally, this conceit goes, which is that sense of I am. So conceit always draws us into a comparison. So I'm better than somebody. All right. So that's obvious pride. I'm worse than somebody that often masquerades as humility. You know, I'm not as good as so-and-so. And then finally, there's a more subtle one about we. If I say, well, I'm right, and I can get a few other people to say, I'm right, I agree with you, this sense of I, of the conceit, grows because now it becomes we. It's not just I believe this, it's we believe this. So there's that more subtle sense of conceit, whereas normally we might think, oh, well, that's not conceit, that's not pride, but it's just an extension of our conceit.

Restlessness goes. This restlessness is all the remaining defilements that are there. But now they're so fine, they're so disempowered that they finally just disappear. But it's understood that even after liberation, there are still traces of those habits in the mind. And if you read what Meichi Kyao says, that's exactly

what she says. She says she still gets these little traces in the mind of greed, aversion and delusive ideas, but none of them ever enter into her heart. So in other words, this sense of awareness is always something distinct. And that's where she is.

And then finally, that ignorance, really, that's just a blanket statement that all ignorance has gone and the delusion that arises from it. And that fundamental ignorance, of course, is the definition of who I am.

So these are your ten fetters and they are shackles. So if they're shackles, something must be unshackling. So something is being shackled by these shackles. So what we discover, of course, is that the very thing that's being unshackled is awareness. So every time you sit in meditation and you see an object, that object can't be you. No matter what you're seeing inside yourself, whether it's a feeling or a thought or some sort of physical sensation, as soon as you turn it into an object, this awareness is separating out from it. And that process of separation is the process of unshackling. And that's where the sense of release comes from, the sense of relief. And that's why the Buddha says the taste of Nibbāna is freedom. The taste of *Nibbāna* is freedom.

That's it. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. That it has not driven you into deep sleep and somnolence. And that by your diligence you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.