No More Ideologies!

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 31:40

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

I've entitled this talk "No More Ideologies." Looking back at this past century, we've had these three secular ideologies. The idea of ideologies really began when writing began, and of course for something like 2,000 years or less than that, it was a Christian ideology. What we mean by that is that there is some sort of vision in the future to which you're heading, whether it be the promised land, the final days, or the wonderful communist state.

This last century we've had these three. Communism posited the idea that the ordinary person should be the focus of all state activity — it should be the commune, it should be the society. As we know from Animal Farm, even though everybody was equal, some became more equal than others. Of course, if you have an idea of where you want to go, some sort of vision, you've got to force people there. So you naturally move towards authoritarianism.

The next one, which came after that, was National Socialism. If communism arose as a response not to industrial society, but to pre-industrial society — the terrible sufferings of the Russian peasants — National Socialism, especially in Germany, was a response to the really atrocious retributions that were demanded after the First World War, which drove the Germans to real absolute poverty. There, of course, like all nationalisms, the nation is the focus. You have an ideal as to what your nation is, and when it's wrapped up with racial ideology, then you've got a real toxic mix. That's what happened in Germany — it wasn't so much in Italy or indeed in Spain. But again, once you have a vision, you've got to force everybody to get there. Anybody who gets in the way, you basically get rid of.

So the first one was dependent on the people, the commune. The second one was on the nation. Now the third one is dependent on the sovereign self. And that's neoliberalism. It came in very sneakily. It came in as an economic program, not as an ideology. But in fact, at the base of it, there was definitely the understanding that the primary person was the entrepreneur. The whole of society should make the market, the free market, their basic platform for the entrepreneur. Everybody had to be within the market. If you're not in the market, then you're useless — you're not part of that process. Anybody who made lots of money, like these billionaires, were the heroes. The whole idea, of course, is that the money would trickle down. Well, it has, but it really is a trickle, and it's all swamped upwards.

So this idea of having some sort of aim, some sort of ideal — the free market at all costs, no matter what — and then the ideal of this wonderful individual. To quote Margaret Thatcher, for which she's very famous,

you can see the shift away from communism: "I think we've gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand, 'I have a problem, it is the government's job to cope with it.' Or 'I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it. I'm homeless, the government must house me.' And so they are casting their problems on society. And who is society? There is no such thing. There are only individual men and women and their families" — note that, families — "and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first."

What's missing in that equation, which is strange for a scientist — she had a chemistry degree — is that the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts. If you've got oxygen and hydrogen, they're completely separate. Put them together and you've got this magical substance called water. When people get together, what you form is community. We know from the way that she behaved, she was quite happy to destroy communities in order to get her aim. But it wasn't so much her specifically — this was the ideology that the neoliberals brought in. If you really want to see how bad it was, read The Shock Doctrine by Naomi Klein. You'll see what a horror story it is for places like Chile. Of course, it was tremendously humiliating for Russia when they gave up, especially with the Americans going around saying, "We won." I mean, that was really crass.

This is individuals seeking their own self-interest benefiting the economy as a whole. That goes back to Adam Smith, where he's trying to explain what the so-called hidden hand of the market is — even though you're working for yourself, you're actually creating benefit for others.

What I was particularly interested in was this idea of a sovereign self: "I do my own thing in my own time, in my own way." You'll all remember Frank Sinatra: "I did it my way." The West has really developed, especially in America and Britain, this idea of the solitary person who makes things happen without anybody else. The fact that they become billionaires on the backs of everybody is immaterial — they did it.

It's the same here. Occasionally people say to me, "You've done an amazing job, what a vision." But there's nothing specifically wonderful about this vision. Anybody who's been to something like fifteen meditation centers like I have knows what a meditation center is supposed to look like. The reason why this has happened as it is, is because when we bought the place, it was already set. There was already a bungalow there and an annex which ended where that wall is. It was only working with that and then asking people — it was people's ideas. It wasn't my idea to have decking, for instance. The fact that we ended up with an accommodation block was because people were moaning about sharing rooms. Everything happened gently. The only thing I take perhaps a little bit of credit for is the *stupa* — that was my ideological statement.

There was a wonderful article from "The Survival of the Richest" by Douglas Rushkoff. He says: "As a humanist who writes about the impact of digital technology on our lives, I'm often mistaken for a futurist. The people most interested in hiring my opinions about technology are usually less concerned with building tools that help people live better lives in the present than they are in identifying the next big

thing through which to dominate them in the future. I don't usually respond to their inquiries. Why help these guys ruin what's left of the internet, much less civilization?"

"Still, sometimes a combination of morbid curiosity and cold hard cash is enough to get me on a stage in front of the tech elite, where I try to talk some sense into them about how their businesses are affecting our lives, out here in the real world. That's how I found myself accepting an invitation to address a group mysteriously described as 'ultra-wealthy stakeholders,' out in the middle of the desert."

"A limo was waiting for me at the airport, and as the sun began to dip over the horizon, I realized I'd been in the car for three hours. What sort of wealthy hedge fund types would drive this far from the airport for a conference? Then I saw it, on a parallel path next to the highway, as if racing against us, a small jet was coming in for landing on a private airfield."

"The next morning, two men in matching Patagonia fleeces came for me in a golf cart and conveyed me through rocks and underbrush to a meeting hall. They left me to drink coffee and prepare in what I figured was serving as my green room. But instead of me being wired with a microphone or taking to a stage, my audience was brought in to me. They sat around the table and introduced themselves. Five super wealthy guys — yes, all men — from the upper echelon of the tech investing and hedge fund world. At least two of them were billionaires."

"After a bit of small talk, I realized they had no interest in the speech I had prepared about the future of technology. They had come to ask questions. They started out innocuously and predictably enough: Bitcoin or Ethereum? Virtual reality or augmented reality? Who will get quantum computing first, China or Google? Eventually, they edged into their real topic of concern: New Zealand or Alaska? Which region would be less affected by the coming climate crisis?"

"It only got worse from there. Which was the greater threat, global warming or biological warfare? How long should one plan to be able to survive with no outside help? Should a shelter have its own air supply? What was the likelihood of groundwater contamination? Finally, the CEO of a brokerage house explained that he had nearly completed building his own underground bunker system and asked, 'How do I maintain authority over my security force after the event?'"

"The event — that was their euphemism for environmental collapse, social unrest, nuclear explosion, solar storm, unstoppable virus, or malicious computer hack that takes everything down. This single question occupied us for the rest of the hour. They knew armed guards would be required to protect their compounds from raiders as well as angry mobs. One had already secured a dozen Navy SEALs to make their way to his compound if he gave them the right cue. But how would he pay the guards once even his crypto was worthless? What would stop the guards from eventually choosing their own leader?"

"The billionaires considered using special combination locks on the food supply that only they knew" — it's crazy, isn't it? — "or making guards wear disciplinary collars of some kind in return for their survival.

Or maybe building robots to serve as guards and workers, if that technology could be developed in time. It's as if they want to build a car that goes fast enough to escape its own exhaust."

"I tried to reason with them. I made pro-social arguments for partnership and solidarity as the best approaches to our collective long-term challenges. The way to get your guards to exhibit loyalty in the future was to treat them like friends right now, I explained. Don't just invest in ammo and electric fences. Invest in people and relationships. They rolled their eyes at what must have sounded to them like hippie philosophy."

"This was probably the wealthiest, most powerful group I'd ever encountered. Yet here they were, asking a Marxist media theorist for advice on where and how to configure their doomsday bunkers. That's when it hit me. At least as far as these gentlemen were concerned, this was a talk about the future of technology. Taking their cue from Tesla founder Elon Musk colonizing Mars and Palantir's Peter Thiel reversing the aging process, or artificial intelligence developers Sam Altman and Ray Kurzweil uploading their minds into supercomputers, they were preparing for a digital future that had less to do with making the world a better place than it did with transcending the human condition altogether."

"Their extreme wealth and privilege served only to make them obsessed with insulating themselves from the very real and present danger of climate change, rising sea levels, mass migrations, global pandemics, nativist panic, and resource depletion. For them, the future of technology is about only one thing: escape from the rest of us."

It's stunning, absolutely stunning. That's where we're at. That's the end game of neoliberalism, the sovereign self.

What we have still, just about in this country I think, is a liberal democracy which is trying to hold the balance between social demands and personal needs, allowing individual liberty within the constraints of community. But as you know, when it comes under pressure, then you have these two wings come up.

So where can you go now? What's the next ideology? We've done the community bit with communism, we've done the nation bit, and we've done the sovereign self. There's nowhere else to go. You've got to go back — become a communist or a national socialist or keep banging on about being a sovereign self. We seem to be locked now in an ideological cul-de-sac. Can you think of any other ideology? An ideology, remember, is some futuristic aim that you're going towards and you just make for it.

There's a lovely little tale about a big communist conference in Moscow — it was a French writer, but I can't recall the name. They were talking about the perfect communist state. What would constitute the perfect communist state? Someone asked, "What about accidents?" Seemingly there was a silence. Then a voice came out from the darkness: "In a communist state, there will be no accidents." That would be brilliant.

The question is: What can Buddhism offer? By the way, I love quoting this — you see it quoted all over the

place now. "The Second Coming" by Yeats: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer." That's wonderful — the rich can't hear the poor, the powerful can't hear the powerless. We sort of separate — natives can't hear the immigrants and so on and so forth. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." It's great, isn't it? "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

You might have come across Jem Bendell and others trying to work on catastrophe studies. There are actually university departments now — collapsology. There's an actual discipline now. That's how bad it gets. "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." You can see that, can't you? The liberal establishment is confused. It doesn't know what to do about mass immigration. It doesn't know what to do about climate change. It doesn't have a clear direction, which it would have had after the Second World War.

Somehow we have to transcend this. If we go back to the time of the Buddha, there are no ideologies, because nobody was writing. There wasn't anything written. He was illiterate. There wasn't the opportunity to think about thinking — no systems theory, nothing like that at all. What there are are customs, laws and customs that have been worked out through ages and ages, and moral reasoning. If you look at Hinduism or Jainism or Buddhism, it's all about the psychology of moral behavior. Their language is that — whereas we would talk about the purification of the heart, these days it's medicalized, it's a therapy to get over your internal problem.

If you now put aside any idea that we're going anywhere, right? There's no such thing as a perfect society. There's no such thing as moving towards some sort of future Shangri-La. It's always going to be like this. There's always going to be misery, suffering, spiced with an occasional bit of joy. This is what we call *sams āra*.

But we do have an aim, but the aim is completely beyond the phenomenal world. It's beyond anything that you can imagine. It's beyond anything that you can create with your mind as a beautiful and wonderful society. The fundamental error or delusion that we suffer from is to believe that we are human beings and therefore we do seek happiness in this form, in this world. It's because of that that we create all this business about selfishness, which is translated as the sovereign self — "greed is good." Of course, that creates problems for us.

So we push away, we get rid of anything that we don't like. So you get the aversion. If it's too big, you run for it. So there's your basic fundamental attitudes that arise from that delusion: acquisitiveness, aversion and fear. And from there, all our actions spread outwards and create a second tier of horror, of shame, guilt, remorse and all the rest of it.

So if we start from a basis of no ideology, in other words, we're not going anywhere to some great, amazing place and instead draw ourselves, like the Buddha would have done, down to his present day situation... And obviously it wasn't perfect. For instance, there's lots of talk in the scriptures about these

useless, massive sacrifices that were made on the understanding that the gods would respond so long as the sacrifice was done perfectly.

So this had moved away from the time when they were petitions to gods, where the gods might or might not reply, but it came to a point by the time that the Buddha was alive that if you did the sacrifice perfectly—we talk about hundreds of cattle, hundreds of horses, the king's sacrifice—then the gods had to reply. And of course it probably wasn't working, just like in Socrates' time people were losing faith in the gods.

And so it's not as though everything is right at the Buddha's time. I mean, obviously not. And there were kings who were creating war and all sorts of messing about. And there was ordinary crime, etc. But there was no sort of, as I say, this Shangri-La.

So all the teaching of these dispensations were always drawn towards the society as it is now and how you could make it better. And so when it came to the Buddha's own thing, he has quite a bit of advice on what keeps a society together as a community.

And so this is it here. See, at the time when the venerable Ānanda was standing behind fanning him, the Blessed One addressed him. This had happened because the son of Bimbisāra, whose name just escapes me now, had sent a diplomat or one of his ambassadors to see the Buddha to ask whether this was a good time to attack the Vajjis. I mean, what an interesting question to ask the Buddha. Is this a good time to attack them? Well, he didn't actually answer directly, but he gave these things to consider.

And he asks—he's asking Ānanda, you see. He says, "Have you heard, Ānanda, that the Vajji Confederacy has frequent gatherings and their meetings are well attended?" And there's a refrain after each of these questions: "I have heard, Lord, that this is so." "So long, Ānanda, as this is the case, the growth of the Vajjis is to be expected, not their decline."

And then he goes on. "Do the Vajjis assemble and disperse peacefully and attend to their affairs in concord?"—considering our politics. "Do the Vajjis neither enact new degrees nor abolish existing ones, but proceed in accordance with ancient constitutions?" That sounds very conservative, small c, but that would be the basis where you start from. You accept those and then presumably you'd move from them.

"Do the Vajjis show respect, honour, esteem and veneration towards elders and think it worthwhile to listen to them? Have you heard, Ānanda, do the Vajjis refrain from abducting women and maidens of good families and from detaining them?" So this, of course, you could extend to all the prejudices—sexual, racial, and I may as well plug ageism here.

"Do they show respect, honour and esteem and veneration towards their shrines, both of those in the city and outside, and do not deprive them of due offerings as given and made by them formerly?" So this of course is pointing to freedom of belief, freedom of speech and so on. And then finally, "Do they duly protect and guard the arhats so that they can come to the realm and live there in peace?" So this is really

respecting both religious and civic leaders.

If all these are followed, then according to the Buddha, then you can expect growth and not decline.

So I mean, you have to always translate this stuff, of course, into our present day. But you can see that he's very much about community, about people talking to each other and discussing things, coming to agreements.

And then a passage here where he talks about six things that foster love and respect, helpfulness and agreement, harmony and unity. So again, this is just basic ethics. So he's talking to monks now, but you can translate it, obviously: "When one acts with love towards one's companions in the spiritual life, both in public and in private; when one speaks with love towards them, both in public and in private; and when one thinks with love towards them, both in public and in private; when one shares with them, without reservation, whatever one has acquired justly, even if it be no more than the food in one's alms bowl; when one possesses together with them virtues that are complete, unbroken and freedom-giving, praised by the wise and conducive to concentration; and when one possesses with one's companions in the holy life, both in public and in private, the understanding that is noble, leading to freedom, and which conduces to the complete destruction of suffering. Then will there be love and respect, helpfulness and agreement, harmony and unity."

So again, you have to translate this into ordinary daily life. But you can see the directions are always about ethics, about moral behaviour.

And then finally, there's a lovely passage where he meets some *Arahats*, I think three of them living together, and he asks them, "How do they live in harmony, mutual appreciation and agreeability, like milk and water mixed, regarding each other with kindly eyes?" And one of them, Anuruddha, replied, "I always consider what a blessing it is, what a real blessing, that I'm living with such companions in the spiritual life. I think, speak and act with love towards them, both in public and in private. I always consider that I should put aside my own wishes and acquiesce to what they want, and then I do that. Thus, we are many in body, but one in heart, one at heart."

So here we have both an idea of what the Buddha—an approach—what we're interested in is not exactly what he says, but his approach to community, which is to establish that sense of togetherness and the whole business of sharing and of kindly love, etc., etc.

So I think if we could just for one minute abandon all ideologies and just come down to a basic grounded moral and ethical reasoning, with a present day aim of creating a consistent state of community with everything that word means—that is my hope.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused even greater confusion or argument, and that you will, by your devotion to practice, liberate yourself and help others liberate themselves sooner rather than later.

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