The Axial Age and the Momentous Discovery of the Buddha

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 43:33

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

I just realised that it's been coming on for two years since I gave a talk which was much more than ten or twenty minutes instead of the Zoom sessions we've been doing. So I've lost all my confidence. I used to be able to rattle off forty or fifty minutes no problem, and I'm suddenly wondering what the hell am I going to say.

So I thought, well, I'll make it easy for myself. I thought I'd just wander, just let the mind wander around the Buddha and the story and all that.

Just to put him in perspective, he was born during what we call the Axial Age. And there were other beings at the time who were making leaps, you might say. So everybody knows Lao Tzu and the Tao. And he starts his work, as you know: the Tao that can be expressed is not the Tao. And then, of course, continues for many pages telling you what it is. And there you have a conundrum really about the absolutes. It's inexpressible, but it has to be expressed. So the Buddha himself, once he'd had this understanding, even though it was inexpressible, ineffable, he spent what, forty-five years trying to express it, but his manner was to tell you what it wasn't.

Then we have Socrates. That's a really interesting thing, which I came across fairly recently really, was that in all these societies that moved, mythology, which held the wisdom of that society, wasn't able to hold the new logical thinkings of philosophy. And it was out of the myth that philosophy grew. And that's where Socrates stands. And of course he was condemned to death because he was undermining the belief in gods. And his final words were something like, "Crito, make an offering of a cock to Asclepius," the god of health. So one wonders whether he himself had actually escaped, whether he still secretly believed in the gods. But at least that was a move, and really the West was stuck with that. We didn't have a Buddha to lead us, we had Socrates.

And when this spread, when the Roman Empire came, it was still stuck in that earlier religion which is about power. It's about gods having power and you have to appease them and you give them gifts and

then the rain comes. And if it hasn't, well either you've done the sacrifice wrong or you've done something that's upset them.

However, at the same time, in the desert there was Moses. So he's also a contemporary. And Moses made an enormous break because I believe it took a thousand years for the Jews to accept it. Because they moved out of the polytheistic religion of the Egyptians. And interestingly enough, they were slaves. Had been slaves in Egypt and it may be that they had rejected the whole of the Egyptian stuff. And when they got to the Holy Land, the land they thought had been given to them, they came across other false gods. And Moses seemed to have leapt into a different place up on that mountain, a real spiritual insight, which really meant that what was governing your happiness was your moral life. And that was the next step, to have a God who really was concerned about whether you were good or not, not whether you'd made the right sacrifice or not.

But again, when Judaism in the form of Christianity moved into the empire, then of course it moved that way into a creator god or a god who's affected by your moral behaviour. And it's only certain mystics who rose beyond that. The most obvious one is Meister Eckhart, the German mystic, thirteenth century. And this monk, he's a Dominican. And he posited that behind the three persons of the God—the Son, the Father and the Holy Spirit—was a Godhead. Well, the Franciscan bishop was very upset with him. And towards the end of his life, actually, they were carting him off to Rome to be tried. And of course, they would have burnt him unless he was ready to recant. Fortunately, he died. So he got let off. But if you read his work, he's really got where the Buddha was, in a sense. Something that was absolute, something that was beyond.

And then there was the Buddha himself and that time in India. So it would seem that there was not only a movement politically, they were all moving away from democratic tribal stuff. Actually, it was aristocratic. It was the Kshatriya class, the warrior caste, who were electing their leader. So it wasn't a democracy as such, moving towards monarchy. So by the time the Buddha was born there were established kings—Kosala, Magadha, places like that—and he would have known them all. He was in that caste. During his upbringing he must have known them as playmates and stuff, fencing matches and throwing spears at each other.

So by the end, when he leaves and becomes a *sadhu*, he has that natural support from, especially these two kings, but they all did, they all supported him. And during that time, you can see there was a huge effort to try and understand this whole thing about suffering. I mean, it was the obsession of the age. And you've got that varied rainbow of people from materialists, absolute outright materialists, who said there was just the body and that's it, to people who were amoral. One of them said you could go down one side of the Ganges committing murder, mayhem, and the other side doing massive compassionate acts and it wouldn't make a difference at all. And then you had people who were like the Jains, who had understood *k amma*.

And that's, by the way—just going back to Moses—the breakthrough was about moral behaviour. Now, interestingly, in Buddhism, later commentary that is, this first level of attainment, the stream entrant, the commentaries went on to say those people who really accepted the law of *kamma* were *chuḷa sotāpannas*—they were lesser *sotāpannas*—which meant in that language that anybody who really understands karmic consequence dependent on moral behaviour was actually on the way to become liberated. In other words, that was the baseline really of the spiritual life. So Moses was at that point, understanding the importance of ethics.

So during the Buddha's time, there were those people, like the Jains, who also understood that, but had an idea that the soul was the sense of self or whatever. I mean, you don't know really because Buddhists, of course, tended to see them as not being enlightened. But what happened was the Jains said that your *kam ma* manifested as your body. And therefore, if you wanted to go into a complete heavenly state, you had to stop doing any harm whatsoever, even if you did it involuntarily, like standing on an ant or something. And the idea was that you drew the body down. And as some of you might know, it's still considered a noble thing to do, is to slowly starve yourself to death, to let go of the body.

So there was all that fermentation going on. And right there within all that, so he's in a *saṅgha*. He's in a supportive environment. And it was acceptable for somebody to leave their family and to really give their life to this search. So we tend to look upon it rather negatively, that he left his wife and his child and all that. But remember there's an extended family. And he himself had been brought up by his aunt. His mother died. And I often wonder whether that didn't leave a scar. I have a cousin whose mother died giving birth to him and I've lost contact now, and I often wondered whether when that happens to somebody whether there isn't some sort of background guilt or something or something lost that's niggling underneath the whole psychology—his whole psychology, Siddhatha.

But as you know, he goes through this crisis, which is not so regular in our society. What we call spiritual emergency and stuff like that, where people have to confront at some point in their lives the fact that they're going to die. And it hits some people really badly and others not so much. So he's at that point and he's in his twenties. So that's normally when, not when I say normally, people sometimes wake up in their twenties knowing that's the end of youth. And what they're looking forward to is sickness, ageing and death, which is miserable. So you can see he's caught into that mentality of despair.

And in those days they would have understood quite clearly that, or at least most would have understood, that you just keep coming back, just keep coming back. And that was the way it was. You might be born in a heavenly realm, you might be born in a hell realm, but you would just keep on this rotor, this wheel of rebirth, or reincarnation as they would say. So that was on his mind, he says that, or at least that's what the scriptures say, that's what drove him to seek this liberation.

So obviously he goes to his teachers, he goes to the ones that are famous, and it seems as though the ones that he went to were ones who could really establish these very beautiful states of mind through

meditative exercises, especially on the breath, mantra and all that sort of stuff. And when somebody does that, and that you can find in all religions. All religions are into the ecstasy. They go into it different ways. So, for instance, in Christianity, it would be through devotion. So this wonderful devotional mental state. I was once, there was this Catholic monk turned up at Kanduboda where I was, and it was funny, he left me, we had a discussion about something, and as he was going, he said, something along the lines of, "Now I'm going into my delicious devotions," which meant that he would go into these beautiful places which is just filled with delight, of devotion, praise. I mean, you get it in a lesser way from pop idols and people like that, when youngsters go berserk. So they're in that place aren't they, very heightened state of happiness or excitement. It's not quite the same mind.

So what he was taught there were these *rūpajhānas*, and that's built upon your breath and whatnot. And eventually, it's as though the mind, the heart-mind, extracts itself from the body and establishes this very beautiful mental state within you. And they can last as long as your strength of concentration. And once that goes, it disappears. And he was such an adept that, as you know, he was invited to be a teacher. He went to a second teacher. It looks as though he wasn't the teacher. The teacher had recently died. It was his son. And he learns how to go through the *arūpajhāna*, or at least the last one, anyway. It's not particularly said. But each time, remember, these mental states, he comes out of them. And he still discovers himself to be in a state of despair over the purpose of life. I mean, that's what it's about. Meaningfulness. What's the meaning of going round and round and round.

And so then, when he's left everything and he's absolutely desperate, he then, through that little, I mean, what I normally point to is this incident in childhood where he's watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony. And somehow, somewhere along the line, he turned it around. Instead of seeking escape from suffering, he turned inwards to find out what was the cause of it. And that really, I think, was his inspiration.

So now he's sitting under this Bodhi tree, what we call a big fig tree, very shady, by a river. And he's got a village to nip down to, to get his grub. And he sits there, and he has this really quite colossal breakthrough, which I say really, in Christianity, really only belongs to the mystics. If you talk to an ordinary Christian, they keep talking about this God who does all sorts of things. And occasionally you get, like Saint Francis, or Meister Eckhart, Dionysius the Areopagite. Now there's somebody to look at. He wrote a tract actually in the medieval ages saying what God was and it told you what he wasn't virtually, and it was a document which became very famous in the medieval ages. But of course he didn't get very far and he's basically taking away the idea that it's a person completely.

So he has this experience and he's got to try and explain it. And he's trying to explain it in the language of the earlier religion. And I think everybody who makes a real breakthrough like that finds it almost impossible. Even, for instance, like Freud. He's got to search for new words. Ego, id, superego. Because of his insight, the old language won't do. So the Buddha is trying to use language which is commonplace: *vijñāna* which just means consciousness, *citta* which means your heart or your heart mind—is what the old

word soul used to be—and he's got to juggle these words and sometimes he comes out with what seemingly on paper looks like a complete contradiction. And it's only when you realise that he's actually using these words in a slightly different way, pointing to something different, that you see his difficulty.

So, once he makes this break, he's stunned by it. I mean, if you can imagine having that experience, and there's nobody to support you. There's nothing in the society that supports what you're actually experiencing. I mean I have had people come to me who've had an experience and it's knocked them out and they can't understand it at all and it's unbalanced them. And when they realise when I tell them well this is what we mean by a Nibbānic experience and then it puts it into some sort of framework, it all makes sense. But without that there's this dislocation. They can't understand it at all.

So he sat there for quite some time, let's say, what, a week or something, where he's trying to work out the meanings of all this. Now, if you look at the early scriptures, you can see that really what happened was, as he began to teach, the Dharma began to manifest. It began to become more regularised. So he doesn't start off by teaching the Four Noble Truths. I mean, that's the *Dhammacakkappavattana*, the discourse on turning of the wheel of law, lays it all out beautifully. But everybody understands that now to be something later and it's put as the first because it manifests the basis of his understanding: Four Noble Truths. But he obviously starts by trying to explain what he's just experienced, and he goes, of course, to his first companions, whom he feels have some sort of insight or something, and he was able at least to get Kondañña to have an experience, and he gave him a special name, Añña Kondañña, Kondañña the one who knows. And most of you will know that I've taken this little phrase from Ajahn Tate: make it simple, take it easy and stay with the one who knows, that's Añña Kondañña.

And then of course he does begin to teach and very slowly the whole teaching begins to formulate itself and we end up with masses of lists. Ten of these, four of those. And it's all nicely laid out for us. But I think it took some time for him to get that together, especially so that, as you know, he hasn't got a recording machine. And he can't even write. I mean, how can he be a Buddha and not write and read? It's ridiculous. So you can see he's hampered really. And you can imagine everywhere he goes, he's asked the same questions.

I mean, I know this as a Dharma teacher. Questions are always the same. There might be a twist on them, a certain angle, but they're basically always the same. And wherever he goes, he's got to say this and say it in a way that sounds spontaneous, straightforward, etcetera, etcetera. In fact, one of the things he says when he considers teaching is that it would be bothersome. But then he overcomes that sort of judgment about what teaching might be by saying that his compassion to help people would guide him.

And he roots the whole of his teaching on this one word, this *dukkha*, which translates directly as hard to bear. And I suppose what it's saying is that it's not possible to achieve a steady state of happiness in this life or in any form of consciousness, any form of consciousness, right? And that consciousness itself, in a way, is a disturbance. At its most subtle level, consciousness itself is a disturbance from the Nibbānic state.

And it's normally, of course, expressed in a much more obvious sense, like physical pain, painful people, all that sort of stuff. Remember, there are no painful people. That's just me being cheeky. It's only us finding them painful.

So this dukkha, that's the ground of all his teaching. And to understand that this dukkha arises out of a misunderstanding, a wrong way of looking at things, a delusive way of, A, this whole business of trying to find happiness anyway in this life and grasping onto it. That's what we mean by attachment. You become dependent on something for a mental state. I mean, that's what happiness is to most people. It is to me—a sense of happiness, an emotional feel, an inner atmosphere. And of course, Nibbāna has nothing to do with that. When somebody says to Sāriputta, you talk about the bliss of Nibbāna, when there's no emotions in Nibbāna, he says, that is the very bliss of Nibbāna, that there's no emotions there, which is a bit confusing. Because we always define ourselves by how we feel, right?

So this dukkha, this hard to bear, arises out of that initial mistake of wanting to seek happiness in the world. And then there's a trick of the mind itself, this brain-mind complex, which somehow creates this continuity and gives us a feeling of actual stability. So even if you ask yourself, well, how long is a second? How long is a moment? When you say, "I won't be a moment," how long is a moment? It stretches, doesn't it? It does for me anyway. I mean, it's not immediate and then gone. It keeps stretching. And if you think about listening to music, somehow this complex organism is able to hold the tune so that each note fits in and builds up an atmosphere. But actually what's happening is just this little ping on the ear every so often. It's magic, isn't it?

And it's really breaking down that sense of continuity which gives us also a sense of being. It's a wrong sense of being. So it gives us a sense of solidity. So that's the other bit about *anattā*, not self. And when you move over to the understanding of anattā, it's always about control. So in the discourse on anattā, which again is put as his second discourse, but it's obviously something that was developed later and then put into this form, he goes to the root teaching as to where the real problem lies. And of course that is expressed through his victory verse where he says, "I've seen you house builder, I've seen you, I've seen where the initial problem is, this arising of a sense of self. And I've broken your raft. I've messed you up. I've kicked you out. That's the end. You're not going to be there for me anymore."

So this sense of self expresses itself—it's not the sense of self, even though you might have it. Like when I say I'm talking now, I'm referencing myself. I can hear myself talk in the sense of me there. It expresses itself in terms of a sense of control. What you can control. And a sense of that identity. So that's why we have this dual relationship to the body of "I am sick," but "I have a headache." So we've got these peculiar relationships which we don't really acknowledge. So undermining that sense of self is part and parcel of our process.

So these three characteristics he discovered to be a way in to undermining that delusion. And with the delusiveness gone, there was an awakening to the way things really are. So the question is, well, what is it

that holds the delusion? What is it that holds the delusion? And it can only be whatever's looking. There's something wrong with the way we're looking. So it reverts back to this sati, this awareness. So the delusion is actually in the awareness itself. And when that delusion disappears, the awareness finds itself in that bright spot, in that bright area where there is no more delusion, and that is the awakening. So our whole process is to look at these three characteristics and slowly begin to realize that there's something wrong with the way that we're looking at the world, the way that we're relating to it.

Now, if it were just that, we'd all be enlightened very quickly. That's not really a big deal. You just sit down and observe these three characteristics. But unfortunately, there's this backlog of horror that we have to make our way through. And they constantly interfere with us. It's what we call the hindrances. All this depression and anxiety and the whole horror story of our lives, all keeps coming up to sort of drag us away and entertain us. It's sometimes not a particularly happy entertainment. And we're caught up in the mesh of this delusive thinking.

So that without us even trying, we're creating massive stories in our heads of being either angry with somebody or saving the world from climate catastrophe. So the mind is full of these wonderful ideas and creative ideas. And when we're doing something in life, even though we're grounded on what we're actually doing, whatever work we're actually doing, we're doing it always from this delusive angle. It's always me doing something for somebody else. It's always me creating something. Me, me, me, it's always there. Whenever you find yourself in a fantasy or anything, it's always you, you're always there in the middle of it, you're always leading it, you're always winning, one way or the other, unless you really hate yourself.

So, this whole business of the I is what the Buddha centres on as one way of undermining that fundamental delusion that the self has about its relationship to the world. And that's of course what makes the practice so difficult because especially in a society that offers us everything we could possibly want to get us away from Nibbāna. It's like anything you need to escape Nibbāna is handed to you on a plate unless of course you happen to be unemployed and one of the—what do they call them? People who can't afford heating or eating. Destitute. I was thinking about that. They use another word. What's the other word for it? Homeless. Yes, homeless. No, there's another word. Somewhere there's another word for people who are beyond poverty. Who've gone beyond poverty. So we have them now, don't we, in our society? And... it'll come to me all of a sudden. Actually, you've got it. You've got it. So... I haven't found it yet. It's coming. Any moment now... It'll drop down from the sky and I'll know exactly the word I mean.

So that's really our task in hand. And talking about society, we talk about social kamma. But actually, in Buddhist understanding, there isn't a social kamma as such. Because we ourselves contain the history of our culture. We ourselves contain it within ourselves. We are an expression of our culture. And in our little worlds that we create, the one that I'm actually experiencing now, this little bubble that I'm in, is expressing both the culture, both the history, and its onward movement. And if it's skewed, then of course I'll be moving towards what's unwholesome. And if I'm using what's in the culture which is beneficial,

that's the way I'll be using it.

Now, what we tend to do is congregate around people who think like us, and there you've got a group, and there you think you have some sort of—you're holding something which is meta, above the individual, that it's some sort of social thing, a social kamma. But it's not, in Buddhist understanding it's just individuals getting together to achieve some sort of aim. And that's the same when you have a catastrophe. So the tsunami for instance that killed thousands. So when you think about or the bombings and all that stuff and you think... I've just been watching, I've just watched all through The World at War which was a '60s program I think or early '70s, and Laurence Olivier narrates it. And the pictures of Europe after the war, it's just stunning. I mean, they're just skeletons of buildings. The whole city is just skeletons of buildings. 9/11 day. It is indeed, yeah. Thanks for reminding us. 9/11 day.

And it's just skeletons of buildings. And people without homes, without food, without water, it's just everything that we can see in other parts of the world. We went through during the World War, especially Germany, of course, but Russia too, but especially Germany, which we bombed heartlessly. A thousand bombers. Every night, a thousand bombers every night. That was the British. Then the Americans went in during the day with a thousand bombers. It was absolutely, when you look at what was happening and then you get these pictures of cities, it really is, it really takes you aback.

So, where have I gone now? I've lost myself. Oh yes, thank you. Social kamma. So even when you get millions of people dying, right? And there was, weren't there, in the Second World War, something like, I don't know, 65 million? 65 million altogether? You think of it as a mass thing and it's overwhelming. But actually it's just individuals. And some would have died immediately from an explosion. And others would have died in terrible agony over some time. So, eventually, it always comes back to us, the individual. That's really where the Buddha is at.

And then, of course, he leaves us high and dry, really, because having established this Nibbāna, that's as far as he goes. He won't go into anything which is beyond Nibbāna as a personal experience. So there's no understanding of a god or as Hinduism went into some sort of Brahma, a neuter, so Brahma was the creator god and then they moved beyond that to this Brahma who was a neutral but it's an understanding of some consciousness of or something great of which we are all part. So every atta is coming from the Brahma and it's finding its way back. One explanation I heard was that Brahma sort of burst himself into all these attas and then all these attas have to find their way back to Brahma. So you can understand that once you try to explain anything beyond a personal experience of the ultimate, you're into really creative theology.

Or, you know, you've got, like for instance, I know there's one South Sea Island, believes that the world was created from a coconut. Now, you might think at first, ha ha. But of course, what they're saying is, there must be a seed, there must be a beginning, there must be something out of which something grew. And you get that in all early mythology, especially the Aborigines in Australia. They had this wonderful

mythology about how the earth began.

And so the Buddha never goes there. He doesn't tell us how the earth, how it all began. He doesn't tell us where we're going. Once you've achieved Nibbānic bliss and you die, there's no inkling as to what happens. Who do you join? Do you go into this massive other consciousness which envelops the world and is saturating the world and we just disappear into it? That's a nice thought except I don't want to lose myself.

And then there's so there's all these wonderful ideas you can come up with, but the Buddha never goes, they say. And I think it's just something we have to accept that is unknowable. It's something that cannot be known. And I came across this through science, actually. I listened to a lecture by a physicist who was saying, we know that there's dark energy. We know it's there because we can tell it through mathematics and through its effect. And we know there's dark matter. So there's something which is similar to what we're experiencing, energy and matter, but there's no way they can find of actually experiencing it. It's not to be experienced, and yet we know it. You know it's there. So in a sense, it's a sort of leap of confidence or faith that this Nibbāna is the end. That's it. And that when you've achieved that state, there aren't any more questions. That's it. It's completely self-fulfilling.

And when you read the nun Mae Chee Kaew, that I put there, she doesn't talk about God or anything like that. She's completely, she just, her heart, as she calls it, she has other words to refer back to the Buddha within, is enough, that's it. You're completely satisfied. There isn't an effort to try and get beyond that. It's completely self-satisfying. So that's why you don't get any metaphysics from the Buddha as such. He just doesn't go there. And he doesn't go there for another reason. From his point of view, it's an absolute waste of time anyway. Even if he knew that there was this wonderful thing that you're going into and whatnot, it wouldn't actually help your situation here and now.

Because the whole process is the individuation, the maturation of this self within us. The higher self, I shouldn't say that, should I? It's not Buddhist at all. Of this Buddha within. It's the extraction by the Buddha within of itself from its own delusion with the world it finds itself in. And in that individuation, in that realisation of its own true nature, that's enough. You've done it. You're out. You won't be born again into this world.

Now having said that, we have this seeming contradiction in Buddhism as a whole. There are those who believe that when the Buddha dies, it's unknowable, but basically it's not something, it's not an existence, it's not a becoming. So it's a darkness. You go into it and that's it, completely happy. And people who experience it normally talk about it as a blackout. Although that particular phrase is limited to people who are non-returners. The point is that when people experience this moment it's usually a sort of, it's a blackout and yet when they come out of it something's changed and their lives are changed by it, so it's not going to sleep, that's for sure.

On the other hand there are people who have the experience of pure awareness. So you get these two

schools, you've got them in Theravada. You've got, say, the Burmese especially, who love the Abhidhamma, who say it's a blackout, that's it, you're gone. There's no reason to come back, there's nothing attracting you to come back. You remain in that restful darkness.

And yet we have the forest tradition coming up from Ajahn Mun, and Ajahn Sumedho, whom many of you know, who talk about it as an awakeness, as a consciousness. And in the scripture you get statements saying exactly that. That there is a consciousness which is without boundary, no limits, not touched by any of the senses, so it's not phenomenal, and in all directions full of light.

In Mahayana, you again have that split. You have the Nagarjuna, the great philosopher of the Madhyamaka school, who says it's a blackout, who says that's it, it's finished. And then you get the Yogacara school, of Vasubandhu especially, who rewrote the Abhidhamma as something which was pointing to something beyond just this blackout saying that in fact the Buddha can reappear both as a being in his delightful body which we would call a spirit or a deva, a god, and it can be coarse and have a more sort of physical representation. So we had those three bodies, the body of the Buddha himself that's the Dharmakaya, the body of the apparition Buddha, like...

spirit Buddha anyway is the *sambhogakaya*, the body of delight, and the *nirmanakaya*, which is the body of some substance. And so you've got these two apparent contradictions.

I don't know of any school that commits itself to combining them at all. So it remains something for us personally to explore and to find out what's actually true.

But as you see on the logo of Satipanya, I've included them, you see. I'm a heretic. In the center is that black spot, which is representative of this *nirodha*. And then there's the bright white light of pure awareness. And then, of course, the manifestation into the world.

So, yeah, that's it really. And then, of course, he gives us the practice to be able to attain that. So it's a fabulous, a fabulous legacy that he's left the world, the Buddha.

I think I'm drying up now. It's really what time it is. How are you? Good heavens, I have done it. I've done 40 minutes, haven't I? I have actually, I've made it. That's it.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. They have not caused greater confusion. And that you will, by your efforts, liberate yourself from all suffering.

Thank you.

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