On Buddha: Saddhā and the Living Presence

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:01:08

Tonight we're going to talk about saddhā, usually translated as faith, in particular regarding the Buddha.

We start with the question: who is the Buddha? Roughly speaking, there are two Buddhas. There's the Buddha of history—the person who wandered around the Ganges Valley approximately two and a half millennia ago. And there's the Buddha of saddhā, of faith. The difference between them is pretty simple: the Buddha of history is dead, and the Buddha of saddhā, of faith, is alive. This is what we want to explore tonight.

We'll start with the Buddha when he was alive—how he was seen by others, but also how he saw himself, who he thought he was.

We've already in the retreat talked about the encounter between the newly awakened Buddha, when he was quite young, and Upaka. The Buddha had begun his journey to find the five former companions and start the Dharma wheel rolling, and on the way he met Upaka, who was an Ājīvaka—one of the early orders or sects of Indian asceticism.

When Upaka met the Buddha coming in the opposite direction, he was very impressed. He said, "Friend, your faculties are clear. Your complexion is pure and bright. Under whom have you left home? Who is your teacher? Whose Dharma do you accept?"

The Buddha, as we've seen, responds by spontaneously bursting into verse. Of course we've got the English translation, so it's not verse. He says: "I am the one who has overcome everything, who understands everything. I am unstained among all phenomena, letting go of everything, freed by ending craving. Having understood directly by myself, to whom should I point? I am the worthy one of the world. I am the supreme teacher. I alone am Sammāsambuddha. I am called extinguished."

This is the Buddha's view of himself, who he thought he was. You notice that he's got a very clear sense of his identity. If you were feeling a bit hostile, you might almost think that he had a sense of self. He presents himself essentially as the one source of the teaching that leads out of the dukkha, the pain of saṃsāra, which is a big claim.

You notice that while he's claiming to be unique, that there's no one like him, he's not making a cosmological claim. He's not claiming to be a god, or God with a capital G. In our sense of the term, he is not claiming to be a god in the Indian sense of the term. He's human, but he's transcended the human condition. This is what makes him different. In particular, he's the one who points the way to the same transcendence for those who are willing to take him on as a teacher.

Of course, as we know, this is his first attempt to actually recruit someone, and it didn't work. Upaka says, in effect, "Yeah, whatever," and he leaves. Upaka is roundly denounced and criticized by the tradition for being so thick. But many of us share this response, don't we? We know exactly where he's coming from. After all this business about Buddha and Sammāsambuddha and cutting through saṃsāra and all this sort of stuff—it's a nice idea, but maybe we should be realistic. Maybe we should lower our expectations.

So this is the Buddha as he presented himself early in his career, in his mid-thirties. I think the tradition says thirty-six.

Later on, this comes from the Doṇa Sutta. We don't know when this happened—sometime in his teaching career. Doṇa is a Brahmin, a Brāhmaṇa. He meets the Buddha, and he's intrigued, impressed and intrigued. He goes up to him and starts asking him questions.

Drona asks simply, "Who are you?"

"Sir, are you a god? Are you a deva?"

"I am not a god."

"Are you a heavenly musician?" This is the Gandhabba in Pali, Gandharva in Sanskrit.

"I am not a heavenly musician."

"Are you a forest spirit?"

"I am not a forest spirit."

"Are you human?"

"I am not human."

"What are you then?"

The Buddha gives a lengthy answer, but we can trim it down: "Just as a blue, red, or white lotus, although born and grown up in water, rises above the water and stands unstained by it, even so I have overcome the world and live unstained by it. Regard me, Brahman, as Buddha. Like a graceful lotus unstained by water, I am unstained by the world. Therefore, Brahman, I am Buddha."

Here he's making a similar claim, but in slightly different words. Notice what he's not—he's not a deva, he's not human. He is Buddha. Which you could translate simply as "I am awake," a more direct rendering.

This really doesn't help us very much. It still leaves the question: Who is Buddha? What is Buddha?

As we're seeing, his role in the world was primarily that of teacher, and this is how people saw him.

There's a lovely example of this in the Madhupindika Sutta, "The Sweet Essence."

The Buddha is staying in what we'd call a monastery, but it would have been a temporary camp with a number of his students. The routine was that in the morning people would go out on alms round, eat their meal, then scatter into the forest to meditate individually. They would return to a central meeting place in the evening for discussion before going to bed.

On this particular evening, the Buddha gives the monks a brief but somewhat esoteric teaching. They nod their heads and say, "Yes, yes, very good, fantastic." Then he leaves, and everybody turns to each other asking, "Did you have the foggiest idea what he meant by that?" No one knew what he was talking about.

So what to do? They go to Mahakaccana, who happens to be in the same camp, because he is famous for his ability to explain at length anything that has been taught in brief.

They ask him, "Can you tell us what the Buddha meant?"

Mahakaccana's first response is to scold these venerables. He says, "Though you were face to face with the Buddha, you overlooked him, imagining that you should ask me about this matter. For he is the Blessed One who knows and sees. He is vision. He is understanding. He is truth. He is the highest. He is the teacher, the proclaimer, the clarifier of meaning, giver of the deathless, lord of truth, the Tathagata."

Remember, Tathagata is this very early title that the Buddha gave himself—it means the awakened one.

So this is the Buddha seen from the perspective of his students. Buddha is the ultimate authority. If we have a question, who can answer it?

The Buddha can answer it.

And in the Theravada tradition—and I suspect also in other traditions, but certainly in the Theravada—the discourses are known as Buddha Vachana, the Buddha's words. In other words, when we read the suttas, the Buddha is speaking to us through these discourses. And Buddha himself is the teacher. Now, he's not *a* teacher. He is *the* teacher, still to this day. There is only one teacher in Theravada Buddhism. That's Buddha. And we listen to his words through the early discourses.

So this is how the Theravada sees him. And if he's the teacher, doesn't this suggest some kind of relationship? Don't we develop a relationship with our teachers? And if there's the teacher, isn't that relationship important? And shouldn't we be concerned about getting it right?

The Buddha is teacher, but he's also more than that. And this comes out especially if we think of a teacher as merely an instructor. He's got a bigger role than that. This becomes clear in the Sutta Nipata, in the story about Pingya.

Pingya was another Brahmin, himself an elderly and distinguished teacher in his own tradition. But he heard about the Buddha and went to see him, taking a whole number of his students with him. There's an

entire section in the Sutta Nipata about the questions these people ask the Buddha and his responses. Pingya converts. He's bowled over by the Buddha and he converts. He was particularly devoted to the Buddha as the teacher, as the guru. But nevertheless, after the visit was over, he left and went home.

After returning home, he was asked why he had left the Buddha's presence. Now, in India, there's this strong tradition of being in the physical presence of the teacher. This is very powerful. This is darshana in Sanskrit—literally seeing or sight. And you get a sense of that in this question: Why have you left the Buddha's presence?

Let's look at Pingya's answer. Notice that Pingya refers to the Buddha by his clan name, Gotama:

I am never apart from him, even for an hour. From Gotama, vast in knowledge and wisdom, he who taught the Dharma to me—the Dharma that is visible, not subject to time, craving ended, beyond troubles, with nothing that compares. Continually in my practice, I see him in my mind's eye, both day and night. Venerating him throughout the night, I conceive myself as living with him. My faith, joy, mind and mindfulness never stray from Gotama's teaching. Whatever direction this one of vast wisdom goes, there I bend my head.

This is Pingya's sense of who the Buddha is and what kind of relationship one has with Buddha. Here the Buddha is alive but physically distant. Yet Pingya is in relationship with him, and this relationship is clearly central to his practice. In fact, Pingya sees his practice as maintaining an intimate connection with Buddha to the point that he can conceive himself as living with him.

Notice that Pingya does not say he lives with Buddha. He says he conceives himself as living with Buddha. This is an important distinction which may become clearer later on.

So these are the ways in which the Buddha talked about himself, who he was, and how other people who knew him talked about him. But of course, eventually he dies. Yet he continues to hold the tradition together. He continued to be the central point of reference. And Pingya's relationship with him becomes, in a sense, the standard—because he's not here anymore.

And this is the Buddha of saddha. This is the Buddha of faith. And this is the Buddha whose image we find everywhere.

Not just in this room, but even in gardens. There was a time—and this fashion seems to be over now—but I remember coming back from Asia at one point. I was staying with my mother, and we went off to the garden centre to buy some things. I'm following her through the garden centre, and then—whoop—there's Buddha. Right there. I thought, "Oh my God, what's he doing here?" I looked around, and there were lots of them. What's going on? Has there been a mass conversion to Buddhism in Australia since I last came?

It was fascinating. They appeared everywhere, usually in gardens. For a while, they actually seemed to replace the garden gnome. But I've seen from recent visits to Bunnings that the garden gnome has made a

comeback, and Buddha has rather evaporated.

So here we are in twenty-first century Australia. We are educated and rational materialists, and our faith is in science. This faith in science is profound. Just to give you an example, I've often come across situations in which people indicate that they can trust the Dhamma, or some aspect of the Dhamma, because they feel it is supported by science. They explain that the latest brain research upholds this particular teaching, or that the theory of evolution upholds this particular understanding—and therefore it's reliable. In other words, if a Dhamma teaching is scientifically proven, then we can have faith in it. Then we can feel it's respectable. But if a Dhamma teaching is contradicted by science, then we feel free to drop it. We might call it a cultural custom, a cultural accretion, and so we get rid of it. It's not the real Dhamma teaching.

This is very much the culture in which we live. I was struck by this many years ago when Stephen Batchelor's book *Buddhism Without Beliefs* came out. It was very popular and people were talking about how profound it was. So I got a copy and read it. As far as I could see, it was chock full of beliefs—but the belief was in science and scientific materialism. There was a lot of belief. Yet it seems that Batchelor himself and many of his readers appear to be blind regarding their faith. They take a particular worldview for granted as being obvious, and so they do not see their faith commitment to it, although it's clearly there and clearly very strong.

Given this cultural context, how can we deal with the idea of a Buddha who is alive even though he's dead? And in fact, should we even try? Or should we be content with a dead Buddha who has left behind some very useful teachings? Surely that's enough.

Here we come to the concept of saddhā. If we are to approach Buddha as a living presence rather than as, say, an academic project, we have to approach him through saddhā, like Piṅgiya. So we shall begin by clarifying our terms.

We have the word saddhā. This is the Pāli word normally translated as faith or confidence. Sometimes you see it translated as trust. And again, when you see different translations for the same word, you get a sense that there isn't an English equivalent. So what's it talking about?

The Pāli word saddhā—in Sanskrit, śraddhā—comes from the root *dhā*, meaning to put or to place, and *śra d* in Vedic, or *sad* in Pāli. This *sad* or *śrad* is an old word for heart. So saddhā means to place the heart, as in what we might call putting our heart into something. Or saddhā can mean to place in the heart, as when we say that we are taking something to heart.

Saddhā is about the heart connection with what we think is going on, with reality as we perceive it. This is important to understand in our culture, because saddhā is not belief. It's about a felt connection with reality.

It's not cognitive. It's affective. It's not about the head. It's about the heart.

So this is important for us to get because in our modern world we assume that faith means accepting impossible beliefs because someone tells us to. But this is not saddha. It's got nothing to do with saddha. If saddha is faith, then it's closer to faith in the sense of being faithful to someone or something.

Let's say when we commit ourselves to a relationship with another person, we agree either implicitly or explicitly to be faithful to that person. Now this does not mean that we believe impossible things about him or her. It means that we are committed to this relationship in such a way that we allow it to shape our life. The relationship gives us a sense of direction, a sense of what is important to us and what is not so important. And therefore it becomes a basis for the decisions that we make. This is much closer to what the Buddha is getting at when he talks about saddha.

The Buddha pairs saddha with paññā—in Sanskrit, prajñā—which is wisdom or understanding. Paññā is spelled P-A-Ñ-Ñ-Ā, with the Ñs having little curly things on top, and the final A having a horizontal line, a macron, because it's long. It comes from the root ña, to know or to understand, and the prefix pa-, which acts as an intensifier.

Paññā has a wide range of applications and is very closely linked to mindfulness. When the Buddha talks about the practice of mindfulness, he sometimes uses the compound sati-sampajañña, where sati is mindfulness and sampajañña could be translated as clear understanding. You notice that sampajañña has the ña in it, that root in it. It's a particular form of understanding or wisdom. And paññā, wisdom, understanding, is not affective—it's cognitive. So saddha, faith, is affective, it's of the heart. Wisdom is cognitive, it's of the head. Together they represent an alliance between the affective and the cognitive within a human being, to the point where mature saddha becomes indistinguishable from paññā. Mature faith becomes indistinguishable from wisdom.

This comes out in the Āpaṇa Sutta. When the Buddha was living at Āpaṇa, he was accompanied by Sāriputta. Sāriputta was one of his two chief students, foremost in wisdom. The Buddha asked Sāriputta to teach on the five indriyas, or faculties. This is a list of saddha, viriya, sati, samādhi, paññā—faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom.

Now this is a list of five factors, but you notice that it's in a sense two lists. In the middle we have energy, mindfulness, concentration. Where do we come across that? It's in the Eightfold Path, the meditation section of the Eightfold Path: right energy, right mindfulness, right concentration. So we have that list, and then it is flanked on one side by saddha, faith, and on the other side by wisdom, understanding.

As you know, the Buddha was extremely fond of a good list. And the use of a list is actually quite sophisticated. Sometimes when you see a list, the important members are the first and the last. In a sense, they contain the list. And so you have meditation, as laid out in the Eightfold Path, flanked and contained by faith on the one side and wisdom or understanding on the other.

For Sāriputta, as he explains, faith is directed towards the Buddha and the Buddha's awakening. Basically

it focuses on awakening, and in particular it's concerned with the felt sense—and again it's affective, it's of the heart—the felt sense of the reality of awakening. By this we mean the felt sense that there is a real possibility for me of awakening. This is a genuine possibility. And notice the sense of reality, at least in potential—not necessarily now, but potentially in the future.

What I have saddha in must be sufficiently real for me to act upon it, to do something about it.

So this is the first member of the list, saddha, which Sariputta explains. And then the last member of the list, Sariputta says, is directed towards understanding dependent arising and realizing nibbana. So faith on one end, wisdom on the other—they hold the list together until the practitioner's practice matures, when faith and wisdom merge.

And this is how Sariputta puts it. He says, "Striving again and again, being mindful again and again, unifying her mind again and again, and understanding again and again, a cultivated student's heart is firmly placed in this way. Those things that once I had only heard about, now I live, touching them with the body, seeing them cleave through. This is the faculty of faith."

So he goes through the five, and at the end of it is wisdom. And then he circles back to the beginning, to faith. But this is how he describes it here. You notice he's talking about doing the practice—striving again and again, being mindful again and again. Notice the "again and again." Got to keep doing it, got to keep doing it, got to keep doing it. A cultivated student's heart—so the cultivated student is the mature practitioner—her heart is firmly placed. This is the verb *abhisadahati*. In this way, those things that once I had only heard about, now I live, touching them with the body, seeing them cleave through. This is faith.

So "those things"—this is a translation of dhammas, phenomena. These are the experiences that come and go in the practice. And dhammas are touched with the body and seeing cleaves through. So it looks like we're being presented with two different modalities of experience. Touched—this suggests vedana, feeling. Seeing suggests wisdom, understanding. Touching suggests intimacy. Seeing cleave through suggests detachment. Touching suggests the heart, and seeing cleave through suggests the head.

So here we're presented with mature saddha, mature faith, basically indistinguishable from wisdom.

Now the verb translated here as "firmly placed," *abhisadahati*, begins with the verb "to entrust one's heart," *sadahati*, and then adding *abhi* at the beginning, which is again an intensifier. And so you notice that it's not a case of saddha now, pañña later; faith now, wisdom later; faith here, wisdom there; or, as in the European tradition, faith and wisdom at war with each other. Both are present equally, but different.

So saddha, faith, is intimate and physical, touching with the body. This is an affective relationship with reality. While pañña sees right through. This is a cognitive relationship with reality. And both are central to the path. At the end of this discourse, the Buddha approves—gives Sariputta a wombat stamp, or the equivalent back in the day.

"Patrick, that sounds like faith in the teaching rather than faith in the Buddha."

Yeah, it gets expressed as faith in the teaching because in this case, what I heard about now actually is real now. But when that happens, there's faith in the teacher because this is the person who worked this system out. And faith in reality, the Dharma itself, because this is the way things are. So you get multiple layers of meaning. And at different times or for different people, you get different emphases. So what constitutes faith for one person may be different from what constitutes faith for another person. You get a variety.

If you look at the three treasures—Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha—Buddha can be the teacher, as in the historical Buddha or the Buddha of faith. Buddha can be seen as the potential for awakening for everyone, including oneself. Dhamma can be the teaching, but Dhamma can also be reality, what one awakens to. And Sangha can be the community of, in particular, the monks and the nuns over the centuries who have handed the whole thing on. But it can also mean the community of practitioners who support what I'm doing. And it can mean the community of all those awakened beings without space and time.

You see, these concepts are not pinned down as only one thing. They can serve different purposes.

So where does faith begin? Here I'll be personal and talk about my own experience.

Faith begins as a question that provokes a challenge—a question powerful enough to move us out of our usual sense of what is possible, powerful enough to shake us out of our normal, taken-for-granted world.

For me, *saddha*, faith, began with a figure of the sitting Buddha, which I bought in Chiang Mai on my first visit to Asia in 1971. On this tour we started at Singapore, then traveled overland through Thailand to Vientiane—which is interesting, we went to Laos in the middle of the war—and then back into Thailand, to Chiang Mai, down south, Singapore, and Bali on the way back home.

When we reached Chiang Mai, we were heading south, on the way out, as it were. And I decided I had to buy myself a Buddha image because I was in Thailand. I was bowled over by all the Buddha images, the monks, and the whole trip. I found it fascinating. I had a bit of money left over, and I thought, I've got to get myself a Buddha.

So I bought this teak sitting Buddha who's sitting on my altar as we speak. I bought him from a young fellow who was minding the shop, and after I had safely paid him the money—so I couldn't back out—he said, "Make sure you keep him high up." This is very important in Thai culture. So I said, "Okay, I'll do it, don't worry."

I came home and put him on top of my bookcase, so he was suitably high up. And then he sat there without moving, in perfect posture, just looking down at me—completely calm, serene, peaceful. Meanwhile, on the floor level, on the ground level, which is where I was, life was something of a chaotic mess, full of suffering. I was rampaging about, and every now and again I'd look up and there he was. He

hadn't moved.

After some time, I realized that his stillness was a challenge. Basically, the Buddha's serenity, as pictured in a good quality Buddha image, represents a truth claim—a claim that some other way of life is possible. Because others apparently have led such a way of life, and they left behind all these records.

The figure of the Buddha attracts. He awakens desire—and in particular, he awakens desire in the midst of pain. The Buddha image is meant to evoke desire. The posture attracts.

This is particularly evident in the traditional Buddha images. Sometimes you get contemporary artists who produce an "artwork" of the Buddha, and I never find them convincing because they've lost the proportions that were worked out, probably over at least decades, if not centuries.

There used to be, in this bare corner here, a Thai-style altar which was given to the center. It looked like a series of tables with Buddha images, and at the top was the largest image. At one point, many years ago, I ran some posture workshops here in this hall on weekends when I was a resident teacher here. I was assisted by—well, I wouldn't say assisted by, actually the person who really ran it was a local yoga teacher who came in.

This teacher's approach was quite interesting. Basically, we'd have a bunch of people and he'd say to one of them, "Okay, sit the way you sit in meditation." They'd be sitting there, and then he'd tell everybody, "Now tell me what's wrong with that posture." We'd go around offering observations. He'd say, "Yes, yes, and that's wrong, and this other thing is wrong," and then he'd adjust and construct the good posture for the person.

At some point during the weekend, he pointed toward the altar with the different Buddhas and said, "Can you tell me which of these Buddhas has the best posture?" So we headed over to do the same examination. But before anybody could even arrive at the images, one young man who was doing the workshop said, "That one." He pointed to the one that was just underneath the main quarter image. Just, bang—"That one."

The teacher was impressed because he was right. The teacher asked, "How could you tell that so quickly?" And the fellow replied, "Look, I don't know anything about posture—that's why I'm doing the workshop. But I do know about art. And that's the most beautiful Buddha."

I think he was dead on. This is the beauty of the Buddha—it's designed to move the heart, for the heart to say, "I want that."

That particular Buddha, by the way, I'm actually taking home with me after this retreat. They gave it to me after they demolished the altar.

So there I was. This is in the 1970s. Thumping around, and every now and again I look up and there he is.

And it got to me. Because I realised I want that. And I want it passionately. And the longer the time went on, the more I wanted it.

But the question was, do I want it enough? Do I want it enough to throw everything else aside, everything that stands in the way of getting this, in order to chase after it? Because it's clear to me that to get this, I must throw away everything that I know and understand up until this point.

And so the Buddha's serenity throws out a challenge. Is this really possible? Can it be true? The posture of the Buddha challenges me as a truth claim.

But it's important to point out that I do not believe this claim. I'm not an idiot. And I know I have absolutely no basis for any such belief. Sure, there's lots of books, and I've collected a lot by this stage, and they all say nice things, but they're books saying nice things. So what?

I have no basis for actually believing this claim, but this claim is such that it demands my attention, and it demands that I do something about it. This is something I must find out about. I must respond.

So during this period I read whatever books are available and I discover that Buddha means "awakened one," and what he's awakened to is a condition called bodhi—awakening or enlightenment. I gradually develop some content to what all this means, an idea of what enlightenment might mean and how it might relieve my pain. But still, as the library grows, I have no way of knowing if any of this is true.

But I know that if it is true, I have to get it. Which means I have to find out if this is true. And the only way I can find out is by embarking on the practice.

So awakening or enlightenment may be an illusion. I don't know and I have no way of knowing. But I must find out whether it's true or not. And the only way I can find out is by embarking on the path and embarking on it seriously, as if my life depends upon it. Because in a real way it does.

For awakening to be a real possibility means that I must be prepared to live as if Buddha is real, even if there's no confirmation of that. So the commitment is real, the direction is real, in the sense that they move me to commit to a certain way of life, even though I have no rational basis for believing that any of this is true.

This commitment demonstrates the power of the image of Buddha. And by image, I don't just mean the statue, but the very concept of Buddha.

And so finally in 1977, I toss everything else aside and I fly to Sri Lanka and India with no idea of what might happen, terrified that I'm chasing an illusion, but knowing that even if it is an illusion, I have no choice but to go there and find out.

So I'm leaping into the darkness. And this leap is an act of faith. But you notice it's not an act of belief. It's something else.

And in this way, I enter into a relationship with Buddha, although I'd already entered into it—he was irritating me all those years sitting on that shelf.

To illustrate, a couple of vignettes. I think I might have talked about this, but when I was meditating at Chanmyay Yeiktha in Rangoon, I told you there was this hall with a big stage and a huge Buddha statue—he's teaching the five companions—and on the floor, smack in front of him, eyeball to eyeball, was this old man who used to sit in the same spot every day without moving.

And I was restless and consumed by my suffering and anguish. Every now and again I'd look at this old fellow and I would envy him, because it was perfectly obvious that it didn't matter what he went through—he knew he was being held and everything was fine. I didn't know that. I wished I did. But he was quite clear about it.

Years later, when I became a teacher, I used to teach what was called the Dharma Gathering. I don't know if any of you ever went to these. There were three teachers, and I was one of them. It was kind of half semi-retreat, semi-workshop. And one time we had a question and answer session where people could throw a question at each of the three teachers.

Somebody tossed out a question that they wanted answered by each teacher. And the question was, is Buddhism a religion? I thought, that's an interesting question. I wonder how my colleagues are going to handle it. So the first colleague said, "You know, relax, settle down. No, no, no, it's not a religion." And the second one said, "No, no, it's not a religion. Don't worry about it. Relax, calm down, it's okay." Then it was my turn, and I had no idea what I was going to say, but the words that came out were essentially this: I said, "I don't know. All I know is that I talk to Buddha, and sometimes he answers." And that was the truth, because this is the relationship that I've developed with him.

Now, all this is very well, but isn't it just pursuing a fantasy? I mean, okay, talking to Buddha? Really? Seriously? We live in a material world. How is creating a Buddha of my mind real?

So here we need to look at how the Buddha himself conceives reality. As we've been talking about over this month, the basics of this practice of mindfulness involve bringing our center of gravity away from our conceptual world into the world of our directly encountered senses, including, of course, the mind. So the basic principle is that the world of our habitual concepts—what we take to be real, quote-unquote, normal, quote-unquote—is a construct. And it's constructed from the three roots of the unwholesome, or the three fires of attraction, aversion, and delusion. We create a world of concepts centered on a self who exists, who is real, only as a network of concepts. And this is the teaching of anattā, not-self. In other words, the world is not what we think it to be. This practice is not what we think. Our concepts are not the reality that they point towards.

Now this is a really basic principle that we've been kind of hammering away at over the past month. Does that mean we reject concepts? Which brings us back to: is Buddha real?

So let's approach this question by asking a parallel question. We could ask, is justice real? Now how many of us would be happy to conclude that justice is not real because it's just a concept constructed by our culture for its own purposes? And if this is so, then surely in our scientific and material world we have no business believing in it and no business living according to its demands. Or are we happy to conceive of justice as real so that it actually can guide our actions in the material world in ways that enable us to flourish?

Justice is not real in the same sense that Buddha is not real. We cannot see justice, we cannot hear it, we cannot smell it, we cannot taste it, we cannot touch it. But our sense of justice does affect the material conditions within which we live, including how we respond to these conditions, what kind of life we find worthwhile, what kind of life we find meaningful, satisfying. Would we be willing to surrender our ideals of justice just because they are not materially real?

So Buddha is real in the same sense that justice is real. If Buddha is real as a concept, and if this concept has a positive effect on the quality of our practice and on the quality of our life, isn't that real enough?

So how does Buddha affect our life? First of all, there's his teaching, the Dharma. And through this teaching, he gives us an ordered, meaningful world within which we live. And we need an ordered world, a world with a sense of meaning built into it. Our lived world, the world we actually inhabit, needs a principle that points beyond itself, beyond our everyday concerns, to give us a sense of an ultimate destiny, an ultimately worthwhile meaning or purpose. And this is what the concept of Buddha provides.

In my case, it was that Buddha image sitting on the bookshelf that gave me a felt sense that some other way of life was possible. And that this other way of life had meaning and purpose. And therefore it could provide a deep sense of satisfaction. So the sitting Buddha moved me to encounter the Dharma. To find out whether Buddha is real or not real.

So how do I know Buddha is real? Well, my heart and my mind have been shaped by years of practice, study, life. And what I've learned is that the way I conceived the world back then, when I put that image on my shelf, was completely inadequate. I now live in a world where Buddha is real and where he and I are in relationship. And this world is much richer and more sustaining than the world I lived in back then. I flourish within this world.

This felt sense of Buddha normally lies just underneath the surface of my everyday experience, but it pops up in unexpected moments. For example, when I practice intensively, my mind quietens to the point where sometimes, if I listen, I can hear the sound of his voice. Sometimes I hear his silence, which paradoxically can be even more powerful.

Now, is all of this an illusion? Possibly. And in fact, if someone came to that conclusion, I would not argue with it. But does this relationship enrich my life? Does it provide me with a support and a direction that otherwise I would not have? Definitely.

Can I prove the existence of Buddha? No. Impossible. But I'm content to have this relationship based on saddha, on the movements of the heart, rather than rely on the scepticism of my rationality. Because one thing I've learned over the years is that rationality is a rather thin guide to life.

So I live as if Buddha is real. Which means, of course, that Buddha is real.

That's enough of tonight. Any questions?

Someone mentioned the uproar if the Buddha statue had moved by himself. Well, I wouldn't be here, would I? It's quite possible. But I think that's getting a bit beyond—it's kind of unnecessarily weird as opposed to usefully weird. I'll stick to the usefully weird.

Someone asked about early Buddhist representations: they had heard that there didn't used to be statues, but rather this notion of just a seat, a chair, and perhaps footprints in the sand representing the Buddha's walking. It was almost like the imprints or the space that could be occupied by Buddha rather than a physical representation.

The earliest images don't show the Buddha Rupa, the Buddha figure. They show either the place where he's sitting, but that place is empty, or they show his footprints. In the discourse where Dona approaches the Buddha and asks, "Are you a god? Are you a heavenly musician?"—he approaches the Buddha because he's walking along a dirt road with the Buddha ahead, and he notices the Buddha's footprints, where you have the wheel and all the marks that you see on the images. It's that which arouses his curiosity. So the footprint was an earlier image of the presence of the Buddha.

There's some debate about Gandhara, which is the northwest Pakistan and Afghanistan area. It was an ancient Buddhist kingdom, and quite early they started to create Buddha images of human beings. There's clearly a Greek influence there. But there's also a school of sculpture headquartered in Mathura on the Ganges Plain, which has much more Indian-style images of the Buddha. People speculate whether the idea of actually having an image of the Buddha is a European import, or whether that influence was present but it was already happening in India. Nobody really knows. But the image came later.

Someone reflected that when they first heard about these early representations, it seemed connected to this notion of direct experience rather than conceptual experience. The seat represents what you inhabit as a Buddhist practitioner. Your footprints invoke that sense within you, the felt sense, rather than concept or construct. For them, it felt more aligned with how we understand Buddhism and the notion of direct experience.

That's really interesting. And of course, the Buddha Rupa also invites direct experience—the Buddha image. Technically, it's called a Rupa. Form.

Visible form. So the Buddha invisible in a visible form. Because think about what looks like the worship of the Buddha—and for a lot of people is the worship of the Buddha—actually, the aim is not to worship the

Buddha, but to become Buddha. So the Buddha image gives you a visual representation of what that might look like in an idealised form, through the perfect balance and harmony that it expresses, and that a good Buddha image can express.

So if it's a good image, it's like it radiates something indefinable. I suppose this notion of the figure—or rather the non-figure—can also radiate the same thing, but more so, because the figure, as you say, can easily become, and very often does become, a thing of worship rather than an aspiration of what you want to become. It's just so easy to fall into that.

The Buddhist footprint—you go to Thailand and see Wat Pho, and you've got these enormous feet, incredible. You can see the Buddhist footprint in Sri Lanka, up on top of the mountains, ginormous, like he must have been very big. And people go up there and worship; that's the pilgrimage up to the peak, Adam's Peak. The Christians believe that's Adam's footprint, the Buddhists believe it's the Buddhist footprint. So the Christians go there as well.

What about the image of the Buddha lying down? Now that's usually taken to be the Buddha's death. He's passing into Parinibbāna, the Great Release. How old was he when he died? Eighty. And he died of food poisoning. He had bad digestion. He almost died several months before from indigestion, but he pulled himself together. Then he ate some bad food and died.

When the Buddha died, what happened next? Well, that's a big story. We won't quite have time to get into it, but it's quite radical. There's one discourse in which Venerable Ānanda, who was his attendant—this is after the Buddha died, and Ānanda is now a major teacher in his own right—was visiting the kingdom of Magadha, and he was questioned by some heavies, by the prime minister and by the main general. "So what's happened to the organisation since the Buddha died?" And the first question was, "Who has inherited his position?" Ānanda says, "No one." Then they asked, "Well, have the community of the monks got together to elect a leader?" And Ānanda said, "No, we haven't done that."

Now, these first two questions both reflect the two dominant forms of political organisation in India at the time. Monarchy—someone inherits the job. Or republicanism—someone's elected to the job. And so the next question is, "So how do you decide who's in charge?" And the answer is, "The Vinaya is in charge." The Buddha left behind a legal code, and we live according to that code. That's what's in charge.

In other words, in India, BC, you get the rule of law being presented. We live under the rule of law, not under the rule of a person. It's quite radical.

And the next question is, "So how do you basically decide who's enlightened, who can teach?" And Ānanda says, "If the community recognises someone as being well-developed in those qualities, then they're asked to teach." So the transmission doesn't come down from heaven; it comes up from the community. It was quite radical. But of course that didn't last, because you can't have a functioning republican system in an age of absolute monarchy, so it died away.

Anyway, we are digressing, and it's getting late. Thank you very much.

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