

Views about Spiritual Paths

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 13:23

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So I'm going to carry on with Bhikkhu Bodhi's book, *In the Buddha's Words*. This chapter is devoted to what he calls approaching the Dharma. It's basically our attitude to spiritual teachings, to those who teach spiritual teachings, the teachers, and so on. And how to be discriminative about spiritual practice and stuff.

He's got certain headings, and so we'll go through them. So it's not a secret doctrine. So what he's teaching is not a secret doctrine. It's not a dogma. You don't need blind belief. It's the visible origin and passing away of suffering. It's something that you can actually perceive yourself. Investigate the teacher himself. Heaven forbid. Don't look at me like that. And steps towards realization of the path. I think that's his fullness of it.

So this evening, really, is just an introduction to this. And in his day, there were a choice of teachers. It was a time when the old Brahminical religion of the Rig Veda, which was based on control of the gods through various sacrifices. And there was, of course, the understanding of rebirth. But that, as I understand it, that was mainly about power rather than whether one was good or not, depending on how you were born. So Brahmin was born from the head of Brahma and therefore was destined to join Brahma somewhere up there.

But by the time of the Buddha, for some time, there'd been people who had really investigated the truth of all that. And that's the beginning of, in the Hindu tradition, of the Upanishads, which are really saying a lot of the things that the Buddha said. And there was... The Jains began there. The Jain leader, the Nigantha, was an elder, contemporary of the Buddha. And it's thought that the ascetic practice that the Buddha did was either connected to him or under some of his disciples. That very fierce sort of ascetic practice. And of course there was the Buddha himself.

And most of the teachers would have been within the tradition of the Brahmins, the Brahminical tradition. The interesting thing about Jainism and Buddhism is that they left that particular tradition entirely and formed their own scriptures from the words of the teacher. So it's a completely different line, you see.

I wrote an essay around the Eightfold Path, and I started off by trying to distinguish five types of

ideologues. So I thought I'd read it to you and then see what you think. So there seem to be five types of ideologues in the religious arena. So these are the five, you see. They are the fundamentalist, the relative fundamentalist, the relativist, the relativist universalist, and the universalist. I will now explain in great detail.

The mountain is a good metaphor to illustrate these five different positions. Mountains come up in most spiritual literature. The interesting thing about mountain climbing is that when you're making the effort, when you're moving, all you can see is the ground ahead of you. And then finally when you get tired or you need a rest, you turn around and there's a view. You suddenly realize you're in a different place. And you never see the full 360 degrees until you get to the top. The Buddha talks about the Arahant who really doesn't see, it's only until we become fully liberated that we can really see things as in the noonday sun. So there's something about that end point which is quite awakening or enlightening.

So the fundamentalist says that his is the only true mountain. You think you're climbing a mountain but actually you're descending into a pit. Whereas my mountain will take me to ultimate happiness, yours will take you to utter perdition. I'm right and everybody else is wrong. Utterly wrong. I mean, that's your fundamentalist, isn't it? Just basically, what can you say?

The relative fundamentalist has respect for the traditions. Yes, indeed, they're all mountains. But my mountain is bigger. See? Whereas mine will reach the ultimate goal, yours will stop short, and at some time you'll have to cross over. Everyone is right, but I'm more right than everybody else. So it's compassion for other people's parts, but ultimately, you know, this is the right one.

It's funny because when I was in India once, I went to this Tibetan doctor, as I've been coals or something. He actually said to me in so many words, look, you're a Theravāda. They've got it all wrong. What you want to join is the Mahāyāna. I was taken aback by it actually. Just the Hīnayāna, the lower path. These days they tend to refer to the two types of Buddhist traditions as the northern and the southern path. Northern and the southern Buddhisms.

The relativist, acknowledging his ignorance of other religions, declares all mountains to be equal but different. They lead to their own idea of what is the ultimate good is, and there's no way of telling which is more true. Everyone is right but different. You take your pick and you guess what you choose. There's a postmodernist view that, you know, you live in your own reality, and if you think you've achieved great happiness, then that's it, you know.

The relative universalist argues that once we look below the surface of culture and words, we find that all religions are actually on the same, the very same mountain, all going up the same place. But that each path is distinct and separate. And we're all going in our own religious and cultural way to the same place. Everyone is different but right, and we all end up in the same place. I think probably a lot of people kowtow to that one, I think.

And then finally there's the universalist who takes this position a step further. So espying that indeed beneath the paraphernalia of rites, rituals, customs and culture there are three paths. The way of knowledge, the way of love and the way of action. And that is why many of the actual spiritual practices such as compassionate service, repetitive prayer, mantra, yoga and indeed *vipassanā* can be practiced by people of different religious persuasions. These three paths are intertwined within the individual according to their temperament, all leading to the same place. The outer form is simply a metaphor for this deeper truth. And indeed, a Buddhist universalist may go so far as to say that even those who disavow all spirituality are also on the spiritual path. Eventually they will bump into the truth, everyone is actually on the same path and heading for the same destination. The ultimate universalist.

I don't think you'll find Bhikkhu Bodhi particularly attracted to that one.

It's interesting because Hinduism knows these three paths quite clearly as Jñāna Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Karma Yoga. The path of understanding somebody like Ramana Maharshi. You've heard of him? Nisargadatta Maharaj, one of my favourites. Do you know him? Yeah, do you know him? Yeah. Yeah. Bhakti. Who was the great Bhakti Guru? Mother. He was into the Great Mother. Was that, was it? Yeah. There are a few like that. Just through love, really. Through the heart, you see. The connection to the ultimate through the heart, rather than through understanding. That's right. Hare Krishna. Yeah, that's right. And then there's the path of action, which is compassionate engagement in the world.

It's interesting because, I don't know, it's just my own take on things, but of the three world, the ones that you can call really world religions, the ones that have transcended national boundaries in a real way, like are Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. And each have a particular bent, don't they? Buddhism is definitely the path of discrimination leading to the path of compassion. Christianity turns that around, doesn't it? The path of compassion leading to understanding. And Islam is the will, you see, the will of the Dharma, the will of surrendering to the truth. You've got these three. So the will, I mean, that's action, giving oneself.

So it's a case really of being aware of our position and not taking it too seriously. And when we approach the Buddha's teachings, his is always one of investigating it. And we'll go into that more deeply later. How he doesn't want us to believe anything. That would be, in a sense it would make, it would distort the investigation of the truth if you come from a position of belief. The liberation in Buddhist terms has to be through something that we have explored and experienced directly for ourselves. And the problem is that if you approach something with a particular view or prejudice, belief, then that's what you'll experience. And that's where the mistakes can be made.

So if you have an idea that *Nibbāna* is some sort of blissed out state, an emotional blissed out state, something like that, a mental state of being blissed out, then in your meditation if you get a blissful moment you'll think, oh that's Nibbāna. But it ain't.

So there's a, I always forget her name, but there's a woman who had this terrible stroke. She's fairly

famous and she's written a book on it and how she overcame it completely it seems. And the right brain shut down and because the left brain was the only part working it... She was just in this total euphoria all the time. And she expresses this as Nibbāna. See, this is the point. So that's one way to get Nibbāna is to have a stroke so you can get rid of your right brain. It's a strange thing, you know. Left brain. Left brain, excuse me, left brain. I'm getting confused. It just shows you what I am.

So there's a little, just an introduction into something that we can look more closely at. The way the Buddha asks us to approach the spiritual life, really.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be fully liberated from all suffering. Sooner rather than later.

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