

01 Introducing the Buddha

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 21:33

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.

I'm going to start on this new chapter, which is entitled "The Bringer of Light" from *The Buddha's Words* by Bhikkhu Bodhi. I want to begin by quoting something from his foreword.

When Buddhism first came to the West, they thought that the Buddha was really the sun god, a mythical figure. It was only later that, when they rediscovered the sites in India—I think it was Cunningham, who was an army surveyor—found the actual sites and therefore established the truth that in fact he was a human being, lived about 500 years before the common era. At the same time was the Jain leader, the Mahāvīra. And at the same time that the scriptures were being developed in the Brahminical religion, which we now call Hinduism.

But it says here, depending on our biases and predispositions, we may choose to regard the Buddha as a liberal ethical reformer of a degenerate Brahmanism, as a great secular humanist, as a radical empiricist, as an existential psychologist, as a proponent of a sweeping agnosticism, or as a precursor of any intellectual faction that meets our fancy.

Whenever Buddhism has gone into a different country, it's always been reinterpreted by that country. And it's always kept the basic tenets. Nobody can declare Buddhism without the Four Noble Truths. It's absolutely basic. But the way that a country receives it depends on their tradition they receive.

So, for instance, in Tibet, the shamanism of Bon had a great effect on it. And then when it moved to China, Taoism had a great effect on the reinterpretation of the Buddhist teachings. When it got to Japan, it was similar. The Japanese had a similar problem with things like rebirth, because they didn't have it. They had ancestors and they worshipped, but they didn't have this idea of onward-going rebirthing. And their way of tackling that problem was to simply centre the teaching on the immediate presence. So whenever you read Japanese Buddhism, it's all about the here and now, rather than these future lives, which you would get from the scriptures.

When it comes to the West, what's happened in the West is that a whole load of stuff has come. All types of Buddhism have landed on our doorstep. From every country where there is Buddhism, it's here. It's here in Britain, it's here in Europe, it's definitely here in America. So as it comes in, we ourselves have our own interpretation. Not only as a society as a whole, but individually.

Here we have a list of ways that people have seen the Buddha. Often he attracts people who believe in only one life, who are based in science because the way the Buddha talks about the psychology is so close to the way we understand it. And that's one of the reasons why all this mindfulness has entered into the mainstream. It's because we can understand it, we can understand the human being from that point of view. It's almost basic psychology, and the role of desire, addiction, all that. So it makes immediate sense to us, that part of the Buddha's teaching.

He's an empiricist. In other words, nothing is given to us without it being tried out. If it doesn't work, it isn't Buddhism, full stop. So everything that he puts to us through the meditational practices, which isn't just this *vipassanā*, it includes the goodwill practice and all. There's a whole flurry of practices. And they're there as something for us to try. It has to be something experienced. And it either works for us or it doesn't.

One of the things that annihilationists in his day, materialists, would say to the Buddha was, "I don't believe in all this rebirth stuff." He said, but even so, if you follow the Dharma, if you follow these teachings, you'll get benefits in this life. And if after this life you're just annihilated, fine, but at least you'll have the benefit of it in this life.

And then existential psychologist. So it's a psychology for this present moment with nothing beyond really the psychophysical organism. It's like defining a human being only by their body and their minds. Their mind meaning their emotional life and their thoughts.

And then a sweeping agnosticism, like not believing in anything. This often refers to a discourse where he goes to these people called the Kalamas, and we'll come to that later on in the book, who are very confused because this teacher says this, this teacher turns up and says that, so they're completely confused. And by the end of this talking to them, he says, "Look, if it's not right for you, it's not true. You've got to try it out. You've got to actually make it true for yourself."

So in a sense, it's that sort of not believing anything, not believing anything in the sense of a blind belief. It's more in the sense of a confidence. So we have this quality of *saddhā*, which is translated as confidence, not so much faith, because if you say faith to people, it tends to give the suggestion that you've got to believe it, whether it's true or not. But that would be the wrong attitude. From the Buddha's point of view, that would actually undermine your investigation. And it's the process of investigating ourselves which is the process of liberation. So if you don't investigate yourself you just stay as you are. You can read as many books as you want which is not going to liberate you from suffering.

So that's the first thing, that basically we have to remember that when we read about the Buddha himself, the Buddha as a person, we're always interpreting what he does from what satisfies us. But, unfortunately for a lot of people, the Buddha doesn't talk about himself in quite such humanistic terms, in terms of "I am just this body and mind." He actually refers to himself as the *Tathāgata*.

Now this word, the word that it is, is *Tathā*, which means "there", and it can be either translated as "come there", *Āgata*, or "gone there". And basically it translates as transcendent. It's somebody who has transcended the psychophysical organism. Now that's a very different sort of statement. And in that sense, he's fulfilling, in his own terms, some very deep, original archetype that is within us, that there is something in us which is actually beyond this body and mind.

So, depending on where you stand, that would either be an impossibility, and you're not prepared to accept it, or it opens up a possibility. I had a person come there. He was studying some sort of science. It might have been biology at a university. And he came on one of the courses I was holding at Gaia House, and he came to me after two or three days when I'd given these talks, and he said, "I came here to meditate. I don't believe all this stuff about afterlife and all this stuff." And he couldn't handle it. Off he went. I would never put it to him that he has to believe this in order to get the benefit of the meditation. But he just couldn't handle being in any situation that suggested that there was anything beyond this body and mind. The human being as you can actually see them.

This idea of something beyond, all over the scriptures, the explanation of *Nibbāna* is always something beyond the phenomenal. It's an island. It's something which is separated from, that you have to move towards. So that's there within the scriptures. But again, you have to remember that that's not something you have to believe, but it's something we need to know. That he doesn't talk about himself as just being a liver and heart and a bit of emotions and the brain.

And the one that I think where we associate with the Buddha is, of course, with his humanness. So he goes through that struggle. He actually liberates himself as a human being here on this earth. And the path that he treads is the path that he's actually pointing to. And he says that he's not inventing the path, he's discovering it, he's rediscovering it. It was always there, it's just that he was able to rediscover it and lay it out before us. So it's not that he invented Buddhism. And that's what I think to us as Westerners, that's where we make our connection to him as somebody who also practiced, who also went through all the problems that we have and then declared that he didn't have those problems anymore.

And of course included in this business of things that we find hard to believe is the whole teaching around rebirth. And we'll come to passages which presume that that's exactly what happens to us. Now, I've put on my website, if you go onto it, on the front page on the left panel there, there's a special page. I've named it "Subjects." And if you click on that, it'll take you to a page which looks at certain things that we have difficulties with. So rebirth, euthanasia, vegetarianism. And there's a link there to a YouTube of a young American boy who remembers his past life as a pilot being shot down by the Japanese in the Pacific. And if you follow that through, you see him both as a little kid, about four years old, and later on as an 11-year-old. And there's no doubt that he... It's astonishing because he knows things about the family. He doesn't belong to his old family. But he remembers them. He remembers who it is. And when he goes to see his sister, who then is an elderly lady, he tells her things that only the family would know. So you've got a big problem if you think it's something that comes through on your genes, because he's come from a

completely different gene family.

So I just want to read this opening passage which actually is the Buddha declaring himself as to who he is and what he is. And remember when we say monks it's anybody who's listening.

"Monks, there is one person who arises in the world for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare and happiness of *devas* and humans. Who is that one person? It is the *Tathāgata*, the *Arahant*, the perfectly enlightened one. This is that one person."

Now, you'll notice here he says, for the multitude. Often that's translated as "the many." He doesn't say for everybody. Some people just aren't ready for it. And this word compassion is a lovely word. It's not the usual word that some of you might know, *karuṇā*. It's *anukampanā*. And *kampati* means to shake, to tremble. And *anu* means to tremble towards. So you get the feeling of a resonance, out of resonance with other human beings, he offers this teaching to alleviate their suffering.

"There is one person arising in the world who is unique without a peer, without counterpart, incomparable, unequalled, matchless, unrivaled, the best of humans. Who is that one person? It is the *Tathāgata*, the *Arahant*, the perfectly enlightened one. This is that one person."

Now it sounds really sure enough, doesn't it? I mean, can you imagine saying something like that about yourself? "I am the one." So here we have to recognise that these scriptures were worked on and there are three levels to the scriptures. The original level you can see, it's very chatty, it's very conversational and you can see that his teaching has not been formalised so greatly as it becomes. Then there's the middle section which is the formalised part and this would be part of that. And then towards the end of the scriptures, you get these lists, lists which move then into a later work, which is called the *Abhidhamma*. And he obviously said things about himself, which were then built up into these statements.

"The manifestation of one person is the manifestation of great love, of great vision, of great light, of great radiance. It is the manifestation of the six things unsurpassed, the realization of the four analytical knowledges, the penetration of the various elements, of the diversity of elements. It is the realization of the fruit of knowledge and liberation, the realization of the fruits of stream entry, once returning, non-returning and *Arahatship*. Who is that one person? It is the *Tathāgata*, the *Arahant*, the perfectly enlightened one. This is that one person."

Now there's a hell of a lot in that little paragraph because it presumes that we understand all these different things that they're talking about. But what he's saying here is that he has discovered this path, and he's not only discovered it, he knows it root and branch. And he's been able to lay down all the facets of that particular path. And you can see that from the massive amount of teaching that there is around these scriptures. So that every part of that journey is covered. And that's what he's saying here.

This stuff comes up later, so we needn't go into it in such great detail. But just so that the six things that are

unsurpassed is the unsurpassed sight of the Buddha and his disciples. The unsurpassed hearing of the Dharma from the Buddha and his disciples. The unsurpassed gain, the gain of confidence in the Buddha and his disciples. The unsurpassed training. So this is the higher morality, higher mind, higher wisdom as taught by the Buddha and his disciples. The unsurpassed service, the service to the Buddha and his disciples, and the unsurpassed recollection. So that's meditating, contemplating the Buddha and his disciples. These are the six unsurpassable things.

When it comes to the analytical knowledges, the four analytical knowledges, it's basically a way of discussing things, a logical way, a philosophical way. And they include an analysis of a meaning of something, the reasons and causes and conditions why they arise, an analysis of the language that you're actually using, and understanding all the processes that bring about something. It's an analysis of that. So the Buddha's teaching is really about deconstructing things, about analyzing things and seeing how they come to be.

And then finally, all that business about the elements, all that is to do with what makes up a human being. Again, there'll be another time we can go into that in more detail. Obviously, the first two big elements are the body and the mind. And then these things that we mentioned at the end, the stream entry, once returning, non-returning, and *Arahant*, these are the four paths and fruits that are entered upon on the path. And they are gradations of insight as you go through. And they each have an effect on our personality and on our characters.

So, for instance, by the time that you're a non-returner, you've lost, really, any attachment, any psychological dependency on any pleasures of this world for your happiness. So your happiness is based on something else. That's what attachment is. Attachment is psychological dependency on something outside ourselves for our personal happiness.

So that gives you some idea of how the Buddha talked about himself. So, although there are these interpretations, remember that it's for us, really, to decide where the Buddha stands for us in our lives, and yet not to be closed by that definition that we've put on that person, just to be open to the fact that actually what he's saying about himself may actually be true.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and that in contemplating the Buddha's life it may bring about a certain urgency to your own spiritual practice that you may arrive to that lovely place of *Nibbāna* sooner rather than later. *Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.*

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