

The Bodhisatta Leaves Home

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 20:18

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

Now in the next passage that Bhikkhu Bodhi has chosen, The Quest for Enlightenment, there are a few discourses that describe what happened on his journey to become enlightened, and they're all slightly different, but generally speaking, the thing was he went to these two teachers who taught him how to do the absorption states, then something like two years, and then he spent four years doing these very hard self-mortification exercises, and then he became liberated. But here in this one, it doesn't mention the fact that he went off and did these self-mortification exercises. But it does tell us at the beginning why he left home.

Among these, there are two kinds of search: the noble and the ignoble search. And what is the ignoble search? Here, someone, being himself subject to birth, seeks what is also subject to birth. Being subject to ageing, seeks also what is subject to ageing. And being subject to sickness, he seeks also what is subject to sickness. And being subject to death, he seeks also what is subject to death. Being subject to sorrow, he seeks something which is subject to sorrow. And being subject to defilement, he seeks what is subject to defilement.

So remember that one of his big awakening moments was the realisation that there's sickness, ageing and death. And like the comedian says, life's hard and then you die. So that was one of his reasons for leaving the lay life, the life of the householder, as it's put usually here. But seeking himself subject to sorrow, seeks what is also subject to sorrow. So that again comes back to the idea of impermanence. So the loss of someone you love. So you're seeking something which eventually is going to bring you sorrow. Subject to defilement, he seeks also something subject to defilement. So that can range from anything which forms an attachment like pleasures to something illegal and horrible.

So having stated his ground, he then says, "And what may be subject to birth, aging, sickness and death, to sorrow and defilement? Wife and children." Remember, he's a bloke. So obviously for a woman it's a husband and children. "Men and women slaves." So remember all ancient societies had slaves in one way or the other. It didn't really move very much in the medieval ages either. The word serf comes from the Latin servus which meant slaves. We now have servants and serving. "Goats and sheep, fowl and pigs, elephants, cattle, horses and mares, gold and silver. These acquisitions are subject to birth, aging, sickness and death, to sorrow and defilement, and one who is tied to these things, infatuated with them and utterly

absorbed in them, being himself subject to birth, to sorrow and defilement, seeks what is also subject to birth, aging and death, to sorrow and defilement."

So now, whenever I read something like this out, and of course, in the story of the Buddha leaving the lay life, and the fact that after he was fully liberated, he didn't go back, there's a tendency to think that the Buddha had a real downer on lay life. But remember you have to read it slightly carefully because he doesn't say that. He says "tied to these things, infatuated with them, utterly absorbed in them." That's the problem. Remember the problem is our relationship to the life that we're living, and the usual question that comes up is whether it's better to become a monastic in order to achieve full liberation.

Well, ideally speaking, no. One is either drawn to an institutional form of the spiritual life or a non-institutional form. An institution is defined by its rules and regulations. So there's a lay institution. Before he died, he said he was quite happy because the four assemblies had been established: the monks and the nuns, the lay women and the lay men. He called them the four assemblies. And he felt that these were now grounded and established and he was happy for them. And for each of these he established a certain rule. So the rule of the nuns was slightly different from the monks, and the rule for men and women were generally the same. But even so, as you read the scriptures, there are different advice given to both. But generally speaking, it's the same *sīla*, the same five precepts. So you have to be careful when you read this sort of stuff. The Buddha's not got a downer on the lay life.

So then he says, so what is the noble search? Well, it's someone being himself subject to birth, having understood the danger of what is subject to birth, seeks the unborn supreme security from bondage, *Nibbāna*. Being himself subject to aging, having understood the danger in what is subject to aging, he seeks the unaging supreme security from bondage, *Nibbāna*. And being himself subject to sickness, having understood the danger in what is subject to sickness, he seeks the unailing supreme security from bondage, *Nibbāna*. Being himself subject to death, having understood the danger in what is subject to death, he seeks the deathless supreme security from bondage, *Nibbāna*. Being himself subject to sorrow, having understood the danger in what is subject to sorrow, he seeks the sorrowless supreme security from bondage, *Nibbāna*. And being himself subject to defilement, having understood the danger in what is subject to defilement, he seeks the undefiled supreme security from bondage, *Nibbāna*. This is the noble search.

And often you'll see in the discourses that's exactly how he describes *Nibbāna*. It's unborn. It's unaging. It's unailing. It is the deathless. That's a very regular one, the deathless. It is undefiled and it is sorrowless. There's no *dukkha*, there's no sorrow in *Nibbāna*. So whatever is the cause of our unsatisfaction in today's life, that you will not find in *Nibbāna*.

"Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened *bodhisattva*" – remember this word *bodhisattva* means someone seeking, in Theravāda Buddhism it's someone who seeks full self-liberation – "I too, being subject to birth, sought what was also subject to birth." And then he goes on and he says, "And I

considered thus: why, being myself subject to birth, do I seek what is also subject to birth? Why, being myself subject to aging, sickness, death, sorrow and defilement, do I seek that also which is subject to aging, sickness, death, sorrow and defilement? Suppose that being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, I seek the unborn supreme security from *Nibbāna*. Supposing that being myself subject to aging and sickness, death, sorrow and defilement, having understood the danger of what is subject to aging, sickness, death, sorrow and defilement, I seek the unaging, the unailing, deathless, sorrowless and undefiled supreme security from bondage, *Nibbāna*."

Now this word, seeking from bondage, one of the definitions of *Nibbāna*, the words that make it up, is to be unshackled. Unshackled. And one of the things that you're liberated from are the ten fetters, so it's another way of describing *Nibbāna*. And he talks about the taste of *Nibbāna* is what we read in our little verses here. The taste of *Nibbāna* is freedom, is this unshackling freedom.

"So now later while still a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth in the prime of life, though my mother and father wished otherwise and wept with tearful faces, I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the ochre robe and went forth from the home life into homelessness." So his mum and dad were really upset. There, of course, it says ochre robe. See, that again is an anachronism because at the first, he would just do what a lot of the ascetics at that time were doing, which was just picking up these rag robes from the charnel grounds, or any old robe, and just sewing it together in any bits and pieces.

And it's interesting that in the West, we have the example of St. Francis. He did exactly the same. If you ever see his robe in Assisi, it's just a patchwork of sackcloth. Very inspiring. I suppose that's how bad it can get. Wait till the day of floods, wait till the day of doom. We'll all be out there collecting little bits of rags and trying to keep warm.

"Having gone forth, monks, in the search of what is wholesome, seeking the supreme state of sublime peace, I went to Ālāra Kālāma and said to him, 'Friend Kālāma, I want to lead the spiritual life in this dharma and discipline.'" Now, in those times, there were, of course, many teachers who had their own disciples and who taught a particular way of meditation, particular attainments. And here, all of them had a dharma and a discipline. So the dharma is the truth, the practice and the way of the truth. And the discipline was the rules and regulations to support it. And that's exactly what the Buddha said he left when he died. He said, "I've left you the dharma, the theory and the practice, and the vinaya, and the rule, the *sīla*." And that's your institution.

"And Ālāra Kālāma replied, 'The Venerable One may stay here. This dharma is such that a wise man can soon enter upon and dwell in it, realizing for himself through direct knowledge his own teacher's doctrine.' I soon quickly learned the dharma. As far as mere lip reciting and rehearsal of this teaching went, I could speak with knowledge and assurance and I claimed, 'I know and I see.' And there were others who did likewise. And I considered, 'It is not through mere faith alone that Ālāra Kālāma declares, by realizing it for himself with direct knowledge, I enter upon and dwell in the dharma. Certainly Ālāra

Kālāma dwells knowing and seeing this dharma.' Then I went to Ālāra Kālāma and asked him, 'Friend Kālāma, in what way do you declare that by realizing it for yourself with direct knowledge you enter upon and dwell in this dharma?' And he replied, in reply he declared the base of nothingness."

Now, you'll see here a distinction which the Buddha makes between knowing the dharma as an intellectual understanding and actually realizing it for himself. And now he's asking Ālāra Kālāma, "Well, what is your realization?" And he says it's the base of nothingness. In other words, what is your *Nibbāna*? What is the point of this whole practice?

Now, the base of nothingness is what we call one of the *arūpajhānas*. So, the *arūpajhānas*, these absorption states, these ecstasies, are based on something which is created by the mind. So it could be through a mantra, it could be through the breath, it could be through *mettabhāvanā*. But then, and you can go right up with certain, not all of them, like you can't get the fourth *jhāna* with something like *mettā* because it's a feeling. But with the breath you can, you can attain this state of equanimity. Here meaning this absolute stillness of the mind. But then there's a flip, and the mind, as it were, leaves the phenomenal life and enters into this other state called the *arūpajhāna*.

And these *arūpajhānas* have the same quality, but within them there is a different perception, for want of a better word. So the first one is the perception of space and then the perception of consciousness, the perception of nothingness and the perception of neither perception nor not perception. So all these are words you might say, but the point is that in that realm of the mind, completely abstracted from the sensual world and from the perceptions and feelings of the sensual world created by the mind, so the mind has now completely abstracted itself from connection with the world, there is this state called the state of nothingness, which means that there's nothing in it. So it's like being conscious, being fully conscious with nothing in it. As an image of that, being in a completely dark room and yet being awake, being conscious in it. You're not conscious of anything. So that was what he got to, this state of being.

"So I considered, 'Not only Ālāra Kālāma has faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom, I too have faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom. Suppose I endeavor to realize the dharma that Ālāra Kālāma declares he enters upon and dwells in by realizing it for himself with direct knowledge.'" Now, you'll notice here that even at this stage, before he's fully liberated anything, he's saying that he was aware that you needed these five spiritual faculties: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration of wisdom.

So the faith, of course, is basic. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as faith, but that has all sorts of connotations for us in the West because of belief. It's more like confidence, a complete confidence in the teacher and in what he's suggesting that we can attain. The energy, of course, is the energy to be mindful and to continue with the investigation, or the practice, rather. And then there's the concentration, which is that steadiness of attention. It doesn't wander all over the place. So here already, he's suggesting that he understood what the five faculties, the five spiritual faculties were.

"I soon quickly entered upon and dwelled in that dharma by realizing it for myself with direct knowledge.

Then I went to Ālāra Kālāma and asked him, 'Friend Kālāma, is it in this way that you declare that you enter upon and dwell in this dharma by realizing it for yourself with direct knowledge?' 'This is the way, friend.' 'It is in this way, friend, that I also enter upon and dwell in the dharma by realizing it for myself with direct knowledge.' 'It is a gain for us, friend, it is a great gain for us that we have such a venerable one for our fellow monk. So the dharma that I declare I enter upon and dwell in by realizing it for myself with direct knowledge is the dharma that you enter upon and dwell in by realizing it for yourself with direct knowledge. And the dharma that you enter upon and dwell in by realizing it for yourself with direct knowledge is the dharma that I declare I enter upon and dwell in by realizing it for myself with direct knowledge. So you know the dharma that I know and I know the dharma that you know. As I am, so are you. As you are, so I am. Come friend, let us now lead this community together.' Thus Ālāra Kālāma, my teacher, placed me, his pupil, on an equal footing with himself and awarded me the greatest honor."

"But it occurred to me, 'This dharma does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to *Nibbāna*, but only to rebirth in the base of nothingness.' Not being satisfied with that dharma, disappointed with it, I left."

So here, even though he attained this very high state of concentration, very high state of stillness, complete stillness in the base of nothingness, yet he realized that it was only going to produce more rebirth into this state and therefore did not undermine his enchantment with life, his lack of being caught up in life, the dispassion. It wasn't a cessation of suffering. It wasn't going to bring an end to his unsatisfactoriness. It didn't lead to peace. And it wasn't a direct knowledge of enlightenment itself and therefore was not what he was really seeking, which he's already calling *Nibbāna*. Even though if you remember, Ālāra Kālāma also thinks that he's also achieved *Nibbāna*. But he now comes to the conclusion that he hasn't. And he says, "Not being satisfied with that dharma, disappointed with it, I left."

So I shall leave that for this evening. And if you come back next week, there's a very exciting installment when he meets Udaka Rāmaputta. I can only hope that you have been greatly excited and drawn to deeper practice. May you be fully liberated from all suffering and not be confused by different *Nibbānas* sooner rather than later.

Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.

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