

# Self-Mortification

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 14:35

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*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa* — Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

So we're going through the first discourse. It's known as the first discourse that the Buddha gave. It obviously wasn't done in this way. He was probably just in conversation with the five companions. But later on it got systematized into this, formalized into this discourse. And it's the basic platform of all the Buddha's teachings, the Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path.

Last week we just introduced it and we talked really about the whole problems of this sensual pleasure business. Remember he says, "Monks, these two extremes should not be followed by one who's gone forth into homelessness." Remember what we mean by that is somebody who's gone into the spiritual life. What to? The pursuit of happiness, sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble and unbeneficial. So he hasn't got a good word for it, for indulgence of any sort, especially around Christmas.

And then there's now the second one, the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble and unbeneficial. Now in those days there were those teachers who taught these blissful states what we now call the *jhānas*, which the Buddha felt were very worthwhile because they develop beautiful mental states. The one about, for instance, *mettā* — if you keep developing that then your whole mind is suffused, your whole heart is suffused with this good will. So you didn't see any problem with that apart from the usual attachment that one gets with beautiful states of mind. It's like when you walk in the country, you get attached to it and you want to go out there again.

But the other thing was this self-mortification and the understanding — even which predates the Buddha — was this whole business of desire. This wasn't something specific to the Buddha, the fact that desire was the cause of suffering. It was there in some understanding or other. Even Socrates said it. Socrates said desire is the cause of suffering. So the whole idea was that this sensual pleasure, which was the world — the world — somehow if you want to be liberated from the world, one other way to do it would be to reduce the appetites of the body. So one obvious way is to fast.

So this is what the Buddha did. One of his main exercises was to fast. In fact, it seems to be the main one that he did. He said he got so thin he could hold his spine through his stomach. He tried that. And the whole idea was that by reducing the appetites of the body, you necessarily reduced your desire for them.

Now, have you ever done a fast, a 10-day fast? Well, what happens is the first three days are pretty awful as the body detoxes itself. But then suddenly, you get into a very nice place and you don't feel hungry. And the reason is the body starts eating itself. You're actually dying. But you never feel hungry. You feel very light. Very light, it's fantastic really. And you can understand why people make a habit of it, and why it became such a thing in yoga to do long fasts, because it is very purifying. And your appetite is simply reduced. Somehow it's just not there. You just don't feel hungry after a while, and the body feels very light.

Other mortification exercises were to sit next to a fire and suffer the heat. You'll see them even today in yoga, in India, with their arms withered still held up in the air, never pulled down. And it's all to do with trying to get rid of the body almost. It's seeing the body as something which is hateful, to be despised, to be got rid of, to be conquered. There's some negative feeling towards the body, and of course we get it through Christianity as well, and especially through its judgments around sexual activity. There's something impure about it.

So this was the practice of the time, and again it was all to do with rebirth. It was all to do with liberating the *atta*, the self, from the body. This is the way you did it — you stopped it from seeking happiness in the body. And one way to do it, of course, is to make the body painful.

But I think we can stretch this a bit more, like last time I was talking about the psychological consequences of indulgence — the boredom, the grief at loss, etc., etc. Here, what we find is all the stuff that Freud really understood about repression and about self-hatred and about self-judgment. Because to me, all that comes into that negative part, which actually is making us suffer. And it's ignoble, meaning that it's not on the path and it's completely useless. So that's his phrase — remember, it's painful, ignoble and unbeneficial. There's absolutely no reason to do it.

So I think we can stretch this, or at least I prefer to do this, to stretch it to all this business around self-hatred, around repression, around that area where we're constantly judging ourselves, putting ourselves down. So it's not just a physical thing, it's a mental thing. And when we do that, of course, when we really suppress stuff that we don't want to go near, we know it leaks out in other ways in other sorts of neurotic patterns of behavior and stuff like that. And if it's more of a conscious thing, this constant self-judgment and doing ourselves down — "you're no good, you're useless, nobody loves you" and all that sort of stuff — it leads to depression, doesn't it, leads to despair.

So it's absolutely a waste of time to do that. And when we see the danger of that sort of self-hatred, that's when the meditation works for us, because we turn around upon it, we name it, we actually acknowledge what we're actually doing to ourselves. That's the point. And in so doing we're pulling ourselves out of it, we're finding another position.

And remember that it's never getting into the head of it, never getting into the talk of it, or the speech of it, or trying to argue with it, or trying to make it see another point. It's always about sinking into the heart and feeling the self-hatred that we have towards ourselves, the self-judgment, and just being there with it,

the unforgiving nature that we have sometimes towards ourselves, our unkindness towards ourselves, and just to stay with that and wait for it to pass, and to recognize it as just another mental state. Not me, not mine.

That's the important thing. See, every time, remember, we identify with this stuff, it's actually harming us. We're actually telling this very state of mind to do us harm. Every time we have these thoughts like, "you're useless and no good," "I am useless" — see, the I, how do you get out of that? There's no escape from that. You are the one who is useless, who is horrible, whom nobody can possibly love and all that sort of stuff.

So remember that that's also mortifying ourselves. And that's often can be confused with humility in its more subtle sense. We think that we're being humble by doing ourselves down, by always undermining our self-esteem. Sometimes we can mistake that for a sense of humility — "this is the way I really am" — but in fact it's just another form of self-hatred.

Now one of the interesting things about these two types — the type that is self-indulgent and the type that is very self-hating — is that it comes out in the way that we look at rules and regulations. So those people who tend to be self-indulgent are very easy with rules. And if anything, they become lax. It moves that way. Whereas people who are very self-hating, who have this problem with an aversion, an aversive type personality, get very tight around rules. It's like a prison. And they can't distinguish, for instance, the moral law from rules and regulations of society. It's very difficult for them to make that distinction. It's all to do with rules and regulations.

I remember Douglas Bader, the war hero, the guy who flew all the planes and then crashed and smashed his legs up. So I remember him saying something along the lines that, because he constantly broke rules, he said something along the lines that rules are like chains to idiots or fools, but to the wise they're guidelines. And when we are, if we tend to be the sort of person who is very tight around themselves, always self-criticizing, always criticizing themselves, they use rules in order to protect themselves from their own criticism, because every time they break a rule they get the guilt. They get the guilt about having done something, and then again it reinforces the feeling of "I'm horrible, I'm terrible."

So there's a lot of ramifications around this whole business of self-mortification. Now I've really stretched this because I don't think the Buddha himself was thinking about that when he wrote this. I think he's in his own time, in his own place, he's really talked about these practices that were going on at his time.

Now then he goes on to say that without veering towards either of these extremes, the *Tathāgata* has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, and leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to *Nibbāna*.

So, one of the virtues that we have is renunciation. Now, renunciation isn't self-mortification. We're not trying to punish ourselves. What we're trying to do is trying to find out where the attachment is. So when

you walk into the kitchen and you think, "I'll have a biscuit," see? So if you just bring out the biscuit and hold it in front of you, and just feel the attachment, and then say, "Well, I won't have it now," and put it back in the tin — now that sort of renunciation would be the middle way. You're not doing it out of self-hatred. You're doing it to let go of attachment to biscuits.

I mean, one of the things I put to people is just choose your best TV program and get your biscuit and your cup of tea and just sit there and just don't turn it on. And just be there knowing that the football match is on, knowing that the next episode, which is the crucial episode, is next. And it's just feeling that desire and letting it go, which is the whole thing about desire is the problem, attachment is the problem, and it's just letting go. So that would be the middle way.

When it comes to this business of mortification, you are in a sense not feeding into the appetite to the body. You're doing outwardly what self-mortificators would seem to be doing, but for a completely different reason. You're not punishing the body. You're not thinking that this is going to somehow get you a better rebirth or whatever — or it might, because you're letting go of attachment. It's more in the sense of seeing that attachment is actually suffering, and every time you feed into it, it creates more suffering. So by renouncing it and by feeling the pain of letting go — the pain of letting go, that's a healing pain — that finally undermines this whole business of attachment.

So then he goes on after this to go on to the middle path. So that's another little homily. So that's his opening statement. That's the platform of his whole teaching. It begins by this statement: "Monks, there are these two extremes which should not be followed by one who's gone forth into homelessness. What to? The pursuit of happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldliness, ignoble and unbeneficial, and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble and unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the *Tathāgata* has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, and leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to *Nibbāna*."

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated sooner rather than later.

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