

Saṃsāra: Onward Going

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 21:20

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa

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Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So we're coming to the end now of this section on the human condition. And it's not been a happy time. Remember I did happy times last year on the blessings that come to us in the lay life. So they're up on the website if you want to make yourself happy. If you want to lift your heart.

So now we're actually going to a bit of... He's ended this chapter with part of it which is called Without Discoverable Beginnings. So some of it's interesting to us from a philosophical or theological point of view. But there's other stuff in it. And I'm hoping that over the next two weeks we'll actually finish this chapter. So I'll read it as usual and then we'll see how we go.

So the Blessed One said this. Listeners, this *saṃsāra* is without discoverable beginnings. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. Supposing a man would cut up whatever grass, sticks, branches and foliage there was in this Jambudipa and collect them together into a single heap. And having done so, he would put them down, saying for each one, this is my mother, this is my mother's mother. The sequence of that man's mothers and grandmothers would not come to an end. Yet the grass, sticks, branches and foliage in this Jambudipa would be used up and exhausted. For what reason? Because, listeners, this *saṃsāra* is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings wandering and roaming on, hindered by ignorance and fettered by cravings. For such a long time you have experienced suffering, anguish and disaster and swell the cemeteries. It is enough to become disenchanted with formations, enough to become dispassionate towards them, enough to become liberated from them.

So *saṃsāra* is just the world of onward going. It's just a way of saying that. The world just keeps turning and turning. Jambudipa is the apple rose country, and that's what India was called at that time, Jambudipa, the apple rose country.

Now, I'll just read the next one because the next one just balances this. Monks, this *saṃsāra* is without discoverable beginning. The first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. Suppose a man would reduce this great earth to balls of clay the size of jujube kernels—that's very small—and put them down saying for each one, this is my father, this is my father's father. The sequence of that man's fathers and grandfathers would not come to an end, yet this

great earth would be used up and exhausted. And for what reason? Because this *saṃsāra* is without discoverable beginnings. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. For such a long time, listeners, you have experienced suffering, anguish and disaster and swell the cemeteries. It is enough to become disenchanting with all formations, enough to become dispassionate towards them, enough to be liberated from them.

So the first thing is, that this idea of no beginning, this is very strange for us because in the West we see time as progress. God began something here and off it went and it's going to end up over there. And our idea of progress is that it's going somewhere. Actually, the whole point of the universe, the whole point of creation by God is that it comes to an end, and then there'll be the big judgment, and some go to heaven, but the point is, we have this idea of progress, right?

So even in our society now, on a materialistic level, we presume that technology will progress, we presume that science, everything is going to progress better and better and better and better and better, and at some point the universe is going to come to an end, right? The Big Bang is going to be exhausted, and that's the end of that. But just as an aside, you'll notice that even though our technology and our science is quite unbelievable, our moral behavior remains much the same as caveman. I mean, there's not much difference between what happened at the beginning of the dawn of human consciousness and what's happening now. And this is because of greed, hatred and delusion.

Now in the East and in fact before Christianity—Judeo-Christian civilization—it would have been the same for the Greeks and the Romans. The idea was much more cyclical so time revolves. And of course you can see that in a sense that every day the sun rises and the sun sets and there's this cyclic. And when you get the idea of a cycle there's no beginning, there's no end, it just keeps going on and on and on. So it's a very different idea about what time is, you see.

Now, what was horrific to the people in the Buddha's time was that there didn't seem to be an end to it. That this was what was in store. Every life, every time you ended a lifetime, depending on your beliefs, some people believed your next life would be determined by your good actions, by what you did or what you didn't do. Some people believed it was just fate. So next lifetime, you ended up as a pig. And that was it. And then the next lifetime, I'd be human again. And for some people, it made no sense at all. For others, there was some idea of progression. That one went on and then went into higher realms. There was, of course, people who were annihilationists—when your life was finished that was it, it was complete. Others thought you went up to this very high realm and then that was it, cut off. So there's masses of ideas but the general thing was, was there a way out of this, you see. So that's the Buddha's—that's what he means by at its basic thing about *dukkha*, about suffering—was there a way out of this onward going, and that's what the word *saṃsāra* means.

So, he says, there's no discoverable beginning, you see. But then he points, of course, to an end, you see. I mean, the reason is, of course, because of this hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. So, the

ignorance, remember, is not knowing who or what we really are. In so doing, we make the mistake, we think we are what we appear to be. And being humans we seek happiness in the human form. And that's where the attachment comes. And that's where the suffering comes.

Then he says of course that it's enough to become disenchanted. And what does disenchantment mean, you see? When you're disenchanted. So when you fall in love with somebody, there is that complete enchantment with the other. Their voice, the way they walk, the way their hair is. That's why nobody fell in love with me, you see. So, there they see that, and then suddenly, of course, about three months on, or six months on, something goes off and there's a disenchantment and suddenly they just—yes, to be enchanted is actually a word coming from witchcraft. You're drawn into, you're enchanted, you're drawn into, you're being mesmerized, enchanted, you see.

So to become disenchanted with something, to become dispassionate, in other words, not to have these feelings about craving and all that around things. And then finally, it's enough to be liberated from them. And of course, that liberation really means this complete disidentification and dispossession, mental dispossession of everything that's in this world. And that's what we mean by renunciation.

Now remember we're talking about a relationship, we're not talking about the actual things. We're not talking about not eating pleasant food anymore, we're talking about not having this wrong relationship with pleasant food. You've got to be careful or else you end up just dying of starvation because you think you've got to give up food. No, you don't have to give up any food.

And then, of course, he says the same thing for fathers, so both mothers and fathers. But that's an interesting thing for us, isn't it? The idea of time, how we perceive time. If it's progress, if we're always looking for progress, and you see that in our economic system, we're always looking for growth. They can't, these people in power, they can't think of an economic system which isn't growing. They can't get their heads around the idea that perhaps it's just sustainability we want. Just something that sustains and gives everybody enough food, enough clothing, etc. It's always really growth. And it's just very much a western thing. Very much a western thing.

Let me carry on because there's another two here which is worth doing. So a certain monk approached the Blessed One and paid homage to him and sat down at one side and said to him, Venerable Sir, how long is an eon? We'll talk about time again. An eon is long, monk. It is not easy to count it and say it is so many years, or so many hundreds of years, or so many thousands of years, or so many hundreds of thousands of years. Then is it possible to give a simile, Venerable Sir? It is possible, monk, said the Blessed One. Supposing, monk, there was a great stone mountain, a yojana long, and a yojana wide, and a yojana high, without holes or crevices, one solid mass of rock—a yojana is seven miles approximately—at the end of every hundred years a man would stroke it once with a piece of cloth. That great stone mountain might by this effort be worn away and eliminated before the eon would still not have come to an end. So long is an eon. And of eons of such length we have wandered through so many eons, so many hundreds of eons,

so many thousands of eons, so many hundreds of thousands of eons. For what reason? Because, monks, this *saṃsāra* is without discoverable beginning. And then you get that repetition: A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. For such a long time you have experienced suffering, anguish and disaster and swell the cemetery. It is enough to become disenchanted with all formations, enough to become dispassionate towards them, enough to be liberated from them.

And I'm beginning to wonder why Bhikkhu Bodhi had so many of these collected. He only needed one or two.

So here again this idea of time, you see, this idea of time. Of course there's what you might call scientific time or physical time, like the time it takes for the earth to go around the sun, something objective of that nature. So we've got hours and years and all that. There's also psychological time, you see.

Remember that sometimes time seems to drag when we don't particularly enjoy it. And sometimes we wonder where the time went. Sometimes we don't get enough time. So there's also this business of time as a mental thing.

Now, just as an aside, remember the mind is always projecting a future for us. So when we're happy, the mind presumes, that's how it's going to be forever. So when the stock markets rose, and they rose, and they rose, everybody thought, well, it's going to be forever. When you're in the other side, when you're in depression, the mind says, well, this is how it's always going to be. When you've got pain, this is how the mind's going to always be. So, really be careful of that because the mind is always fooling us. It's always creating a future. And it's always regretting or nostalgic for the past. The mind won't stay in the present. It doesn't like the present. Because it experiences the present as a sort of deadness. Like nothing happens in the now. If you're right in the now, nothing much happens. And if you're in the now, you don't know what's going to happen next. And that's too fearful. So the mind is always creating the next moment for us.

Now that's what you're doing in meditation. You're watching how the mind is always creating the next eon. What are you going to do when you retire? I don't have to think about that anymore.

Just do take a next one just to finish off. Then there's just one more for next week and we'll bring it to an end. Again, something very similar.

At Rajagaha in the bamboo grove, the squirrel sanctuary, a certain Brahmin approached the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. Now Rajagaha was the capital city of Magadha which is present day all around Varanasi—it's all that area—and Bimbisara was the king who was a great supporter of the Buddha. And it was around there that there would have been this shrine area where ascetics would collect and sit and then people would come ask them questions, bring food, etc.

If you go to Rajgir now, and it's a circle of mountains which would have been great for fortification. Now it's just a village on one end of it. And on the other side there's a hill called Vulture's Peak where the

Buddha gave many a talk, especially in the Mahayana tradition. And if you go there now, there's still the hot baths. So that's probably why the king and his people chose it to be their capital city.

So when they had concluded their greetings and cordial talk, he sat down to one side and asked, Master Gautama, how many eons have elapsed and gone by? The Brahmin, many eons have elapsed and gone by. It is not easy to count them and say there are so many eons, so many hundreds of eons, so many thousands of eons, so many hundreds of thousands of eons. But is it possible to give a simile, Master Gautama? It is possible, Brahmin. Imagine, Brahmin, the grains of sand between the point where the river Ganges originates and the point where it enters the great ocean. It is not easy to count these and say there are so many grains of sand, so many hundreds of grains, so many thousands of grains, so many hundreds of thousands of grains. Brahmin, the eons that have elapsed and gone by are even more numerous than that. It is not easy to count them and say there are so many eons and so many hundreds of eons and so many thousands of eons and so many hundreds of thousands of eons. For what reason? Because, Brahmin, the point is not discerned. This *saṃsāra* is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. For such a long time, monks, you have experienced suffering, anguish and disaster and swell the cemeteries. It is enough to become disenchanted with formations, enough to become dispassionate towards them, enough to be liberated from them.

And just as a final thing, modern science, which equates very much with the Buddhist understanding of the mind, this idea of the vacuum which contains this unknowable energy, out of which the manifest universe seems to arise, the manifest and the unmanifest. And in Buddhist understanding there is this what you might call ground consciousness, the Nibbanic consciousness. And this Nibbanic consciousness finds itself in what you might call what we experience as the mind. And what we mean by mind is thoughts, images, emotions, and how the mind actually contacts the world physically—light, etc. And that, actually speaking, everything is coming out of that base nine. It's not the other way around.

So, you could say that a materialist, looking only at matter, has to then find a way of explaining how consciousness arises from subatomic particles. And they can't. It's called a hard problem. But from a spiritual point of view, it's actually coming the other way. It's as though they're looking at the world at the wrong end of the telescope. It's actually coming out of this emptiness, this vacuum, which, within us, is this Nibbanic consciousness, the knowing, you see.

Every time we're in that position within ourselves, observing, observing thoughts, observing images, feeling and observing sensations and feelings within our bodies, we're actually moving back into that primordial state of pure intuitive awareness. That's why the Buddha says those who are mindful are in the presence of *Nibbāna*. But the Buddha told us not to identify with that. Well we won't go into that not tonight anyway—actually that isn't quite correct but I'll bring this to an end so that we can move on to a discussion.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you become disenchanted with life and move towards your own divine bliss sooner rather than later.

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