

12. Short Review of the Human Condition

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 20:19

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato
Sammāsambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa*

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

Today I wanted to take the opportunity to go over what we did, so that you get the overall picture of what we've been doing these past ten or eleven weeks, because it comes to the end of my session. Next week it's snoring with a bit of luck.

We were really looking at the human condition, and the thing we have to remember is that the Buddha doesn't pull any punches. He wants us really to face reality directly, and he does this in the first discourse, what we call the first Turning of the Wheel of the Law. Now that isn't exactly what he said obviously, but it's the platform of his whole teaching.

It begins with this word *dukkha*. There is *dukkha*. *Dukkha* means hard to bear. We translate it as suffering, but it's also translated as unsatisfactoriness. So it's the whole gamut really of the whole problem of human living. He begins to centre us specifically on the suffering that we can't do anything about. And that's where we started. We started with sickness, old age or aging, and death.

If you remember, he first points out to King Pasenadi of Kosala that it doesn't matter what station of life you are, rich or famous, whatever, sickness, old age and death is going to come. He has the image of the three great mountains stalking on poor King Bimbisāra. So he's full of good cheer.

Then there's the divine messengers. This goes back to the myth that surrounds his own awakening, where sometime in his early twenties, probably, the idea of sickness, old age and death comes to him very much as an existential problem. It drives him to seek an answer. It's put in that mythological sense of, he's out hunting and he sees a very sick person, a very old person, and a corpse, and a *samaṇa* sitting under a tree. So they're known as the divine messengers. But basically they are little awakenings.

If you remember, there's this lovely little parable about this man who's born in hell with Yama. Yama keeps asking him, "Didn't you ever see, my good man, the first divine messenger appearing among humankind?" "I did not see him." "My good man, did you never see a woman or a man, eighty, ninety or a hundred years old, frail, bent like a roof bracket, crooked, leaning on a stick, shakily going along, ailing, youth and vigour gone, with broken teeth, with grey and scanty hair or bald, wrinkled with blotched limbs?" He saw her and he says, "No, I haven't seen her." He says, "Well, it didn't ever occur to you, an intelligent and mature person, that I too am subject to old age, cannot escape it?"

So there's a lovely parable about Yama, King Yama, who's in charge of hell, the hell realms. Remember that hell in Buddhism is not permanent. It's still horrible, but it's not permanent.

He's pointing to the fact that there are things in our lives which are just part and parcel of the human condition, and that we can't do anything about that except form a right relationship with it. That's when he talks about patience and forbearance. Remember, the king says to him, "I've been engaged in these affairs of kingship, typical for kings, who are intoxicated with the intoxication of sovereignty, who are obsessed by greed of sensual pleasures, and who have attained stable control in their country, and who rule having conquered a great sphere of territory on earth."

Then he says, "But this great peril, this terrible thing, the destruction of human life, the human state being so difficult to obtain," and so on. Then he advises him to get his act straight. "As aging and death are rolling in on you, what else should you do but to live by the Dhamma, live righteously and do wholesome and meritorious deeds?"

So it's a case of acceptance that there's no escape from these things in life. What's really going to undermine our suffering around that area is getting the right relationship to it. So the acceptance, the patience, the forbearance.

Then the next section was the suffering that we don't have to suffer. This is, in a sense, more important. If you remember, we had the image of the two darts. It's bad enough being ill, but getting depressed about being ill is unnecessary. Full stop. It's an option. We have an option not to feel depressed when we get ill.

Then he goes on about uninstructed worldlings. Those who are uninstructed experience a painful feeling, so then they sorrow, grieve, lament, weep beating their breast, become distraught. They have two feelings: a bodily one and a mental one. He's pointing to the fact that that isn't necessary.

It's the same with the eight vicissitudes of life. There's gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. How to be above that? Sometimes life works for us and we're doing okay, sometimes we lose it. Sometimes people love us and sometimes people don't. Sometimes people think we're absolutely fantastic, sometimes people think we're horrible. That's praise and blame. And then there's pleasure and pain.

Again, it's this business of being able to deal with these vicissitudes of life so that they don't actually get into us. As today, people are losing work and whatnot, so that's bad enough. But to actually find ourselves getting depressed about it, anxious about it — unnecessary. If you remember, when fame comes, he feels elated. When he meets with disrepute, he feels dejected.

Then we had this whole thing about anxiety and this anxiety about change. Remember the self? We went into all the business of the self and how we regard ourselves, how we perceive ourselves as being some individual, complete individual in a sense, kidding ourselves that we're in charge, that we have this control that we don't have. There were different ways in which we see ourselves: either as the body and

mind, or inside it, or that we're possessed within the body and mind, and so on and so forth.

But it's this business of we always want to stop the world as soon as we've got something good. We just want to hold it there. Don't move, just keep it going. And the fact that everything is impermanent. Therefore we can't control it. Therefore nothing is reliable. So this is the cause of our anxiety.

Remember that for the most part, what we're anxious about never actually happens, because it's the mind's business to try and visualise the future. The mind's always throwing it forward, even when we're ill. If we have a painful illness, actually what's happening in the present for most people, for most illnesses, is some discomfort at some level and some inability — you can't go out or you can't do this or you can't do that. But then the mind launches it into days and months and years of the same problem, and then of course you feel horrible or depressed and terrible.

Then, once we discussed how we cause suffering for ourselves, which is unnecessary, we then talked about the world. What happens in the world? Why is it, the question is, that people end up fighting? I mean, in those days, the warrior caste fought the warrior caste, and the priestly caste, the Brahmins, fought the priestly caste, and householders, householders.

The first thing we discussed was this attachment to views and opinions. Obsessed with views and opinions. You've only got to think of the Houses of Parliament. I mean, ours has become a civilised fisticuff. But if you look at Syria, for instance, what's happening there, it's absolutely awful.

Then there's this lovely question: beings like all of us want to live without hate, want to live without harming and hostility and enmity. We want to live in peace, yet we live in hate, harming each other, hostile and as enemies. So what's the cause of that? In this particular passage, the Buddha points to envy and niggardliness. I love that word, niggardly. I think selfishness would have been probably — it's just envy and selfishness. Wanting what others have.

Then we have this process. What gives rise to liking and disliking? They arise from desire. What gives rise to desire? They arise from thinking. When the mind thinks about something, desire arises. When the mind thinks of nothing, desire does not arise. What gives rise to thinking? Thinking arises from elaborate perceptions and notions.

Remember, this was our habits. It's a difficult word to translate, but it means everything that we can create through an act of will. And that translates into all our habits, emotional and thought habits. So you're sitting comfortably in a chair and suddenly out of the blue this desire arises to rob somebody from the local post office. Before you know it, you're planning it, you've got your mates and off you go. Of course it can happen on the positive side too. You can imagine yourself saving the world and who knows what could happen then.

So it's a case of recognising the importance of catching our thoughts, catch it right at the inception, to actually know what's driving that thought and then to just let it pass and to stay with whatever negative

state there is in the heart, wait for it to pass.

Then we have this whole business about causation, about everything being dependent on something else. So we can talk about causality. Some of it is dependent on things that have happened in the past, and then they keep producing things. Remember that dependent upon feeling, we had this craving, this desire. Like ice cream — it brings up a nice feeling when you think of ice cream, at least for most people. So then you get a craving for it, a desire for it. Then there's that pursuit for it, wanting to get it. And with that pursuit there comes the decision making. What to do about it, what to do about how you're going to get it.

Dependent on that, the desire grows. And dependent on that there comes the attachment: I really want it. And the possessiveness, keeping it, holding it. And dependent upon this possessiveness, this whole niggardliness comes up again. And depending upon niggardliness, there's defensiveness. You've got to protect what you have. And because of defensiveness, various evil, unwholesome things originate: the taking up of clubs and weapons, conflicts, quarrels and disputes, insults, slander and falsehood.

So it's really also being aware of how things progress through certain stages and being able to stop the process right at the point where you can. Which is the point of the arising of desire. That's where we have control. Once it grabs us, it's very difficult. Once it's really got some power behind it.

Then we go back now to the roots of violence and oppression. This comes down to these three roots of greed, hatred and delusion. Remember the delusion as we experience it is that we want to seek some sort of permanent happiness in the world. Even if it's not permanent happiness, we want to be constantly happy. And we tend to associate happiness with mental state of happiness. So we're always driving towards that end. And because of that, there's a sense of holding on to it. You get your acquisitiveness. And then you've got to protect it and you get your aversion, your hatred. And if it's too big, you run from it.

So it's really understanding that this goes very deep, it goes deep into our relationship to our lives. Whereas in the second section we were talking about how we cause suffering for ourselves, in the third one we talk about how we cause it for everybody else as well. Or at least how we're catalysts for other people's suffering.

Then finally we had these wonderful images of a beginning that is undiscoverable. We had the image of grass and sticks. If you were to cut up whatever grass, sticks and branches and foliage there are in this rose apple land, Jambudīpa — that's India — and collect them all together in a single heap, and having done so, you'd have separated them saying, "This is my mother, this is my mother's mother," the sequence of mothers and grandmothers would now come to an end. You'd be going back into endless time.

Then there was the image of the balls of clay. If they reduced this great earth to balls of clay the size of jujube kernels — I presume they're very small — you say, "This is my father, this is my father's father." And you'd never get to the end. Even though you got rid of all your jujube seed clay balls, you still wouldn't have come to the end of your search for your father's father's father's father.

Then there was the image of the mountain made of solid rock, a massive solid rock, seven miles long, seven miles wide and seven miles high. And every hundred years a man would stroke it once with a piece of fine cloth. How long it would take to wear the mountain down. What a horrible image is that?

Then he gave us the image of the river Ganges. The grains of sand between the point where the river Ganges originates and the point where it enters the great ocean. It's not easy to count these, hundreds and hundreds of thousands. He says it's not easy to count the eons, the hundreds of eons, the hundreds of thousands of eons that we've been roaming around in *saṃsāra*, this onward going.

And then finally, there was the dog on a leash tied to this pole, running round and round and round, helpless, unable to liberate himself. And that post, remember, going back to an early thing, is the sense of self.

So here we've been looking at the darker side of life. The fact of how we cause suffering for ourselves and what the root of that suffering is. And it always goes back to this essential problem about relationship, asking ourselves who we are or what we are, and what is our relationship to the life that we live.

Remember that it's recognising that as something to really investigate that liberates us from that wrong relationship. And the liberation of that wrong relationship is what the Buddha means by *Nibbāna*. *Nibbāna* has various meanings to it. One of them is no more desire. Now that's not wholesome desire. I mean the Buddha upon enlightenment had the desire to teach others what he'd come to understand. It's this desire which gets us into trouble. That's one of the core meanings that the commentaries give to this word *Nibbāna*: no desire.

So that's it. We have to go away glum. Think about our lives, is it? Try to get us out of our glumminess. I can only hope that all these lectures have been of some assistance.

May you be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later. *Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.*

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