

4. Parents and Children

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 13:47

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

So, we're looking this evening at the business of family. And we'll start with parents. Whenever you offer loving kindness in the practice, you always start with your parents.

This is what he says about them. There are five ways in which a son should minister to his mother and father as the eastern direction. Now, we have to take for granted that this is a patriarchal society and sons are the only ones that matter. That's a bit cheeky. For son, read son and daughter.

He should think, having been supported by them, I will support them. I will perform their duties for them. I will keep up the family tradition. I will be worthy of my heritage. And after my parents' death, I will distribute gifts on their behalf.

And there are five directions in which parents, so ministered to by their sons in the eastern direction will reciprocate. They will restrain him from evil, support him in doing good, teach him some skill, find him a suitable wife, and in due time hand over his inheritance to him. And in this way the eastern direction is covered, making it at peace and free from fear. Remember all these little things are always ending up with making it at peace and free from fear.

So we have to accept that the Buddha lived at a particular time, but most of what he says still pertains today. Having been supported by them, I will support them. These days more and more people are going to have to look after their elderly parents, especially baby boomers like my generation. And for some, it's very little. But for others, it's going to be a full-time job.

And this whole business of duty, if you feel that something is imposed upon you as a must, as an ought to, as an outside duty, then obviously it becomes a burden. But when you take it on as your personal responsibility, then it becomes something that you are very happy to take on. That's the distinction. So often when you get in popular psychology, this business of must and ought to are terrible things, it's good to make that distinction.

And of course, just by contemplating what our parents did for us, that one raises a certain sense of gratitude. And with that gratitude, there comes a desire to fulfill our commitments, our duties. I suppose the other thing is, ever since Freud, we've blamed our parents for everything that's wrong with us. So it became fashionable to hate your mother especially.

So there's a case of also recognizing that our parents were probably more enlightened than we are, but definitely unenlightened. And therefore, just did their best. Most of them did their best. And some of them would have been through rough times for various reasons. And that's the way it is. That's the way it probably was in the Buddha's time.

These days, of course, society is a bit more fraught. In his day, it was a much more agrarian society, much more gentle, easy-moving. There were hard times. There were famines. There was one definitely during the Buddha's time. It wasn't all easy. And there were local skirmishes, local wars. So it wasn't... Well, we know that his family, or his people, the Sakyas, were attacked by the local king, the Dudduba. And they had to shift capital. So there would have been lots of suffering there.

But it is this business of just looking at what we mean when we say must and ought to, our duty, duty and responsibility. It tends to be against the modern grain because we tend to prefer to talk about rights. My right. So if we say it's my right to look after my parents, then it's all right. I have a right to look after my parents.

And I will perform their duties for them. I keep up the family tradition. That's an interesting one, which might not pertain very much these days. But when I began to practice Buddhism, this was against the tradition of the family. The family were, by generations upon generations, Catholics on both sides. And I remember when I ordained as a monk, my parents, my brothers and sisters came. I wrote to my uncle, my one and only uncle. That's my English uncle. My mother's Italian, so I had uncles over there. But my only English uncle, I said, I invited him to come. And he said he couldn't, he said, because I'd abandoned the faith of my father.

So there are certain unspoken traditions in the family. One of them might be that nobody's ever been to prison and you've ended up in prison. Or in the older days, again, a lot of these things are much looser now, but divorce. I just can't remember. Oh, yes, that's right. In Sri Lanka, the man who looked after our monastery is an elderly fellow. He was talking to me about his personal life one day and he was saying to me, it was a terrible marriage and I wanted to divorce. So I went to my parents and said, I want a divorce. And they said, well, we don't do that, so I never divorced. So in certain families you do get this very strong tradition.

I'll be worthy of their heritage. And then after my parents' death I'll distribute gifts on their behalf. So this is to do with helping people through good works, passing on your merit to other people. And also in most religions you do things for your parents. In Buddhism, whenever you offer something to the monastery, whenever you give something to the monastery, you always do a *pirit*, and it's always for your relatives who've died. It's always for their benefit. Always bring that to mind.

On the other hand, of course, parents have a duty to their children, and they reciprocate. And they restrain them from evil. So we hear a lot of these days of blaming parents for the way some of the children behave. It's very difficult, isn't it? Because these days a lot of teenagers have their own minds and some of

these families are under a lot of social strain. But they try and do their best. But they blame parents, the newspapers blame parents for all these kids that were out rioting and what not. But some of them are untrainable, aren't they?

You might be interested to know that there was a book published just after those riots in London called the Gangs of Manchester, believe it or not, which went back to the late 1900s, exactly the same problem with riots by the youth and all that. And the same thing, papers going on about parents' duties and all that. And what they did was set up working men's clubs which taught them, which educated the poor people and gave them skills, and eventually found them work. And it took a generation. So that's what we're in for now. All those working men's clubs have disappeared, haven't they? It's been years since I've seen those.

And to find him, to teach him a skill. Educational. To find him a suitable wife. So that's gone out of fashion, hasn't it? And in due time to hand over their inheritance. So these are to be taken as things just to contemplate about our own relationship to our parents and our children.

But here he talks about how much we owe them. So this is how important he understood parents to be. He said, monks, I declare that there are two people one can never repay. What two? One's mother and father. Even if one should carry about one's mother on one shoulder and one's father on the other, and while doing so should live a hundred years, reach the age of a hundred years, and if one should attend to them by anointing them with balms, by massaging, bathing, and rubbing their limbs, and they should even void their excrements there, even by that would one not do enough for one's parents, nor would one repay them. That's good, isn't it?

Even if one were to establish one's parents as the supreme lords and rulers over the earth, so rich in the seven treasures, one would not do enough for them, nor would one repay them. For what reasons? Parents are of great help to their children. They bring them up, feed them, and show them the world. So that's his way of expressing our gratitude to our parents.

However, monks, one who encourages his unbelieving parents, settles them and establishes them in the faith, who encourages his immoral parents, settles and establishes them in moral discipline, who encourages his stingy parents, settles and establishes them in generosity, who encourages his ignorant parents, settles and establishes them in wisdom, such a one does enough for his parents. He repays them and more than repays them for what they have done.

So there is a way of repaying your parents, and that is basically to establish them in the Buddha's dispensation, which is a bit much these days, isn't it? But that gives you an idea of his way that parents were treated in his day. And you still get that in the East. You still get a special honouring of parents. I'm not so sure we do that these days so much.

So that gives you an idea of his advice or his guidance when it comes to dealing with our parents and how

parents should deal with their children. So I think that brings us to the end of this evening's little homily. It'll take me a while to get through his whole thing, but this time next year I should have just about made it.

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

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.