Premodern, Modern, Postmodernism and Buddhism

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 1:22:50

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

This is one of the few times that I'm going to give a talk about which I know very little. So I'm hoping for lots of comments and that you'll reserve your tomatoes and eggs for the end.

I read a very interesting essay by a man called James Kurth who wrote this for the Foreign Policy Research Institute in New York. He called it "Religion and Globalization." He suddenly pointed out to me the distinctions between a premodern, modern, and postmodern society, or should we say ethos. I just began trying to think of it in terms of a Buddhist perspective and to try and link it, just in terms of spiritual practice.

This isn't, I don't mean to confuse this with a comparison between different societies, that one is better than the other. I'm not talking about its history or its art or anything of that nature. All I'm doing is looking at certain ways in which these three societies see the process of enlightenment and see if a Buddhist, or somebody following the Buddha Dhamma, the Buddha's teaching, could actually become enlightened in any of these societies. That's the task. Get my PhD on this, huh? I'm in the right city.

So starting at the beginning with premodern society, that refers to really what we know as the medieval ages. A premodern society depends upon revelation for its spiritual founts. It's a given. In terms of both Islam and Christianity you have a given revelation which is then believed in, and because of the structure of a dogma it demands that you can only have very few people interpreting it. If you have too many interpretations then you start getting what later happens, a reformation. So you have to control the power and it fitted in well with the whole idea of Christianity at that time of establishing on earth a society, a static society which would be ready for the second coming.

It was actually during the 12th century thereabouts that the idea that the second coming wasn't going to happen or was going to happen in a different way began to arise. So what the medievalists tried to do was set up a society in which people knew exactly where they were and you had both the temporal and the spiritual and it was very hierarchical. You know, the serfs just rising up through the lords, king, and finally the emperor. And in the spiritual realm, the ordinary punters are down below, and then the priests, bishops, and then finally the pope.

It was never really a question of questioning the revelation itself. It was always the idea of supporting it, even when it didn't make complete sense. So Tertullian, who was a great theologian, said that we believe because it is absurd. What he meant wasn't our sense of being ridiculous, but that it was beyond rationality. It was something you had to believe, full stop. And the spiritual path was totally dependent upon a practice which took that for granted.

So it demanded what we would call a certain faith, a certain unquestioning faith. That as your basis you then either practice good works or prayer and you would make sanctity. So I think the archetypal saint may be somebody like Saint Francis. Just a total belief, no questioning of the actual revelation as such, but a total giving of oneself to the practice. And even today you might say that somebody like Mother Teresa of Calcutta fits into that mold. When you hear her talk, there's no question that the revelation might not be true or anything of that nature.

So what does that produce in terms of a teacher-student relationship? It's one of hierarchy, isn't it? The teacher is in authority as well as being an authority. He has authority over and the student is one who listens and follows the teacher. There's no question about it. You don't question the teacher, the teacher knows. It's that relationship.

And there are character types in Buddhism based upon the three basic roots of greed, hatred and delusion: greedy types, hateful types and deluded types and the opposite of that. This is later commentary, this isn't so much in the original scriptures: the person of faith, the person of intelligence and the speculative type. And they're positive.

Now, the one who is of faith shares with the person who craves the idea of wanting. But, of course, the wanting here is more skillful, more wholesome. They really want the Dhamma. This is the description of one. This is taken from the *Visuddhimagga*, which is later medieval commentary.

"In one of faithful temperament, there is frequent occurrence of such states as free generosity, desire to see noble ones, desire to hear good dharma, great gladness, ingenuousness, honesty, and trust in things that inspire trust."

So it's the person who just is ready to submit or to give themselves to the teaching without question based on that faith. My experience with Eastern teachers is that that's really your relationship to them. If I were to ask, say, one of my teachers, a sayadaw or somebody, a question as to why are we watching the breath at the nose, he'd be miffed. What do you want an explanation for? Just do it.

And one of the great criticisms of Eastern teachers towards Westerners was that they didn't have faith. And what they meant was this unquestioning reliance upon a teacher. Now, you can imagine, if you're born into a culture, and you're imbued with that culture, and there you have a teacher in front of you, a monk or layperson, whoever, and when they speak, they're part of that tradition, so there's no idea of actually questioning them as such.

The danger, of course, is gullibility. You get led. So many Westerners who fall into the trap of the guru find themselves being led all over the place. Of course, they tell you in Buddhism, in the actual guru tradition of Tibet, that in Tibet people take years to decide whether this person is going to be their guru or not. How true that is, I don't know. But there is a type of westerner who really wants that relationship. Even though we've been through our wonderful enlightenment and arrived at this amazing rationality, there's still a surprising number, surprising to me that is, who actually just wants somebody to tell them what to do. Just do this, do that, and I'll be happy.

Now, to support this in the Buddha's time, of somebody who had just this utter faith, was a man called Cūḷapanthaka. Now, Cūḷapanthaka had a brother called Mahāpanthaka, which means big panthaka. He was Cūḷa, he was lesser, he was a lesser panthaka. And his brother had joined the order, and then asked his younger brother to join him. So his younger brother joined, and after four months, he hadn't learnt a single verse of the Buddha's teachings. So his brother said, you'd better get out. You're wasted time.

When the Buddha heard this, he went to see him, and urged him not to do that. And then he gave him this exercise, some of you will know it. Gave him a piece of cloth, and he told him to wipe his face with the cloth, and keep saying "getting dirty," being aware of the change in the cloth as he's wiping it and looking at it. Remember it's a hot country like we are now and he's wiping his face and he suddenly sees the quality of transience of change and he sees it to such a depth that he becomes enlightened. I tried it. He must have been ready. We can presume he did lots of training in his past life.

But there he was, a person of not particularly bright and just open, just open to the Buddha's suggestion without any question. And there comes that insight. So what I'm saying is that in a society where the truth is being expounded, you may be on a winner just having faith. I mean, if it is the truth, and you have faith and you do the practice, it saves a lot of bother, doesn't it? You don't have to read books, you don't have to argue, you don't have to ask questions, you just do it.

So that's premodern in the sense of that ethos, which we have, of course, still here. I mean, the Catholic Church is very much like that. And as I say, Buddhism in the East, for Easterners, is very much like that. The younger generation who are brought up in the horror of rationalizing do question, very disconcerting.

Now, the rejection of that, of course, was modernism. And the core of the modernist movement was the Enlightenment. I suppose the glory of the modernist movement was the ending of slavery, the demand for equality amongst people, and the turning towards people, towards society as a measure of truth rather than revelation. And therefore reason, being able to reason with people and come to a reasonable outcome was the mark of a modernist approach.

Perhaps one of the glories of it is the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in which I'm pretty sure God is not mentioned. Revelation is not mentioned. It's a document which human beings have agreed upon totally through their rational understanding. You know, the French Revolution: equality, fraternity, liberty. Equality, liberty, freedom from, freedom, as we have now, freedom to vote for any political party,

freedom of speech. All these freedoms that we enjoy were a huge reaction to the very strict, autocratic, premodern society. A huge revolution, really.

And the downside, of course, was that rationality then became its own servant. It couldn't look beyond the rational. And as we know, anything which is rational is always based on a premise. So if the premise, no matter how wonderful the rationality, no matter how much the argument is, the premise is wrong, then in a sense you're moving towards a peculiar situation. So communism, Nazism, although Nazism had a romantic streak about it. So you can see how eventually people became disillusioned.

The other, of course, great gift of modernism was investigation, just that opening of the universe to investigation, our science and eventually our technology. So all these were the products of that modern mind. I don't think the premodern mind could have done it because they weren't interested. What they were interested in was just stabilizing society.

The idea of progress. As far as I've read, I picked up this little bit of information about a monk called Joachim de Fiore, a Calabrian, who came up with the idea, and this was how this idea of progress crept into the West, the idea that we were going somewhere, that we weren't actually static. He talked about the three ages. The age of the Father, which was the Old Testament. The age of the Son, which is the present age. And we're moving towards the age of the Spirit. Everybody will be saved. Here on Earth.

Now, in that society, in terms of your spiritual development, that ethos, the teacher takes a different role and the student has a different role. Because here we have much more of a Socratic approach, where everything that is given to the student, the student is understood to question. It must become their knowledge.

Now, I don't know, I've tried to find somebody whom you might look upon who achieved some sort of enlightenment in the West who might have been brought up with that. Maybe, I don't know, does anybody? You see, because the whole of human effort came off the spiritual. I mean, the whole medieval ages was moving up to the spiritual all the time. All the music, all the art, all the philosophy and theology was all around Christianity was all facing up that way. With modernism, our whole effort flattened out. It wasn't so much interested in the spiritual, but more in this investigation. Not that philosophers like Spinoza and people like that didn't have a spiritual element to it. Would anyone like to mention somebody they think belongs to a modernist ethos who might have achieved? What about Darwin? Well, no, I'm thinking of sainthood. Somebody who's achieved a spiritual, you would recognize a spiritual. The founder of the Quakers maybe. He started off from a personal revelation. So I'm stuck there. I shall wait for your response afterwards.

Now this relates to the second character type, which is translated as intelligent, but you'll see from the actual quote that it's not quite the intelligence that we expect.

"In one of intelligent temperament, there is frequent occurrence of such states as readiness to be spoken

to, possession of good friends, knowledge of the right amount of eating, mindfulness and full awareness, devotion to wakefulness. A sense of urgency about things that should inspire a sense of urgency. And wisely directed endeavour."

So here you get the impression that this person is constantly reflecting wisely upon their lives. They're actually engaged. They're not there with a teacher who says, do this, do that. They're turning upon themselves as, in a sense, the source of their own wisdom. Not without the help of the teacher, because they go and visit people. Possession of good friends. Readiness to be spoken to. There's no actual teacher mentioned as such. I suppose readiness to be spoken to. I suppose that's it.

So such a person has that inner reasoning to be able to understand their own position and has a confidence in it. In the scriptures, the Buddha is often in that position where he actually takes on a Socratic role where he asks, what do you think, what do you think? He said, does everything arise and pass away? Yes, Bhante. If it arises and passes away, is that satisfactory? No, Bhante. It's all pretty simple stuff from our point of view, but it's there as a dialogue. He's not saying everything passes away. And it's that part of the scripture that seems to come across to Westerners. So we tend to think of Buddhism as very highly rational in that sense.

There is an example of somebody and he was called by the Buddha Tuccha Pothila. And Tuccha means empty. Now Pothila was a teacher and somebody who was recognized and understood the Buddha's teaching. He could really talk about it. But he hadn't experienced anything. So the Buddha called him empty. Empty Pothila. And he got rather worried that the people whom he taught were all becoming enlightened and he wasn't.

So, swallowing the bitter pill of humility, he went off to his students and they saw him coming and immediately saw this intellectual conceit. They thought, well, there's no way I can get through this. So they passed him on down the line saying, well, I'm not really the right one. And he ended up with a young novice boy, a little monk. And again swallowing his pride he went and followed this little fellow who took him to an anthill and he said to him:

If there are six holes in this anthill, and there's a lizard or a snake in there, if an anthill's vacated, in the East, lizards, sometimes snakes, live in anthills, how would you get the snake out?

He said, well, you stop up five holes.

And the little boy said to him, that's what you must do. You must stop up the five senses and observe the mind, observe the heart.

Well, as the story always goes, in no length of time Tuccha Pothila became one of the arahats.

One of the paradoxes, no, one of the actual straight contradictions that you'll find people get into in Buddhism is this especially on the monastic side because what makes the monastic order is the rule, it's an

institution. So it's the rules of the institution that make you a monastic.

And I've come across this quite a few times in the East, mainly Westerners. Easterners don't seem to have a problem with it. It's the case of this. In order to be enlightened, you have to be pure of heart. But you can't be pure of heart totally unless you're fully enlightened. So people get themselves into this corner and if they've been meditating for some time, then they think that it must be because they're not keeping the rule strictly. In other words, they're not pure in the rule. So they get tighter and tighter and tighter around the rule. And we had one case in Sri Lanka. An Australian fellow. And he went back to the original text.

And he realized that the robes that we're wearing now, these robes, were not the robes that the Buddha had started with all those many years ago. The top robe was just like a shawl you put over your shoulders when you went into a city, sort of like a modesty thing. Generally speaking, you just used the lower robe. So he went to see a very famous teacher. Some of you will know him: Ananda Maitreya of Balangoda. Some of you know him. He died at 150.

And he was a Bodhisattva. During one of his meditations at the monastery I was at in Khandaboda, as you progress there comes a point where some deep memory may arise, and he remembered being in the Buddha's time and making the vow to become a Buddha. So he was known as the Bodhisattva. He said he could remember the faces of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, the two main disciples of the Buddha, but he couldn't remember the Buddha's face unfortunately. When you make that sort of determination in Theravāda Buddhism, I don't know about Mahāyāna, it means you can't progress. You've got to keep building up your virtues until you're right on the point of enlightenment. And then, when you take your next re-roll, you have to do it all in that one go, in that one lifetime.

So this particular monk went to see him, and Ananda Maitreya agreed that, in fact, the lower robe was that. And the bowl was wrong. If you've seen monks' bowls, they're pretty big, you know. And, in fact, they're supposed to be just... I had a little embarrassing moment over that. I was in India and I was at Goenkaji's centre in Dhamma Giri, near Bombay. And we were lining up for food, and with me there was a Jain monk. And he had a bowl, it was very small, like that. And I made a rather foolish comment and said, "Bhante, that's a very small bowl." And he looked at me and he said, "This is the size of my stomach." And I was there. So I made this sort of limp excuse about it also being the place I put my robes in because it's my luggage case. Yes, he didn't look all that convinced.

And he turned up, this particular monk, at the Kaṭhina ceremony, which is the ceremony at the end of the Rains retreat that monks do where they have to stay in one monastery. At the end all the lay people come offering gifts for what the monastery and the monks might need. And he turned up with this twee little cape tied up around his neck, looked like a bullfighter, and a biscuit tin sweet bowl. And the general opinion was that he'd gone mad. And he eventually drove himself out of the order. So you know, rationality.

But it would seem from the story of Cūḷa Panṭhaka that if a person is completely locked into a way of being

in the world which is so totally rational, so totally conceptual, that somehow the person has the intelligence to become enlightened. That's not the problem. The problem is to evacuate that situation of intelligence.

And one of the things that, for instance, Dzogchen... We had Sogyal Rinpoche come down to Gaia House to give a retreat. One of the things that he was trying to do was just to relax people, make them feel so happy, make them feel so... that with a couple of exercises, this original mind would just pop out from that embeddedness in rationality. And the person might just realize their true self, you see. We do it the hard way in Theravāda.

Sweat. So that's the modern society, based on reason. Whether... I mean, most of us are brought up with that mindset. So that's our problem when we start training in the spiritual life: to find a way of coming out of conceptual thinking.

So, for instance, in the methodology that I personally teach, which is the Mahāsi, my own particular practice too, we try to trick the mind by refusing to allow it to think about something, save in the simplest of concepts. So we engage that intellect through a noting technique: rising, falling. So when there's only one word there, at least there can't be a thinking about the object. At least there's only one, shall we say, concept between that intelligence and the direct perception of what it's trying to experience.

And then as the concentration grows, you see, and the ability of that mind to stay absolutely within the present moment, there isn't the time for thought, because thought's always an afterthought, always a comment. And by force of that practice and concentration, suddenly, that intellect will just stop. And then you have that brightness of pure awareness. And hopefully, in no length of time, we join the Arahats.

So now, we come to postmodernism. Now, I haven't a clue. I've read little bits about it. As far as I understand it, postmodernism is a rejection of modernism. And actually, historically speaking, the first rejection of modernism was romanticism. It was people like, I suppose, Rousseau and Wordsworth and all our poets who sort of went back to feeling and sensual experience, took that as the basis of truth. Not thought: "I think therefore I am." "I feel, I sense, therefore I am."

And the problem with romanticism is, of course, that it couldn't accept the present. It looked back into the past for its inspiration. The noble savage idea, Garden of Eden, you see. And in present day, you know, there's certain feminists who look back to a matriarchal age as being... as being better, would have been better than a patriarchal age, a sort of reaching into the past, a sort of nostalgia. I read somewhere that the masculine... Then there was some sort of deep ecology, that's in inverted commas, going back to hunters and gatherers, you know. But the idea of running around with a sort of dog pelt around one's privates chasing rabbits didn't particularly appeal.

So what happened there was there was no particular practice to go back to. It sort of expressed itself more in terms of art. I don't know whether it produced any... I can't think of anybody it produced whom you

might look to as a spiritual figure as such, although it was spiritually directed.

As that faded out, the reaction to romanticism, but also in a sense a reaction to pure reason, was the idealists: people like Hegel and Fichte. And the bits I've read of these philosophers, they definitely had a very highly tuned idea of the growth of consciousness. It seems to relate in many ways to Buddhism. But I think the downfall for those people seems to have been they didn't have a practice. The philosopher Fichte said to his students to face a wall and become aware of the observer, and then to become aware of that. That doesn't sound so bad, actually. But that was it. It was all very heady. It was all wonderful ideas and very inspirational, but there was no practice to it. So it seems as though people got fed up with that.

So then, of course, modernism really took hold. And that's where we ended up with the Second World War and all that sort of stuff. So after the Second World War and communism and all that, then we have this other modern strain of rejection of modernism, which we call postmodern. It comes to be called postmodern anyway.

And I don't know whether you'd agree with me, but the crucial position for a postmodernist is interpretation. So before, it was revelation: it was out there, it was it, it was given. Then it was we, as rational beings, conversing to come to understand the truth together. Since both of those have failed, I'm now reverting to me. So I am now the fount of my own truth, and you are for you. And if we don't agree, that's fine, you see. What's true for you is true for you. Doesn't have to be true for me. And so we move towards a sort of absolute relativism. So there's no objective truth at all. It's just what's true for you. So Noddy is as important as Shakespeare. The books on Noddy, because it depends where you are, you see.

There's no objective reality. I read an article which said that the 9-11 collapse of the Twin Towers put an end to postmodernism because there was no doubt there, from a societal point of view, that that was something which was objective and it did happen. It was through this postmodernist thinking that people could undermine the idea that there was ever a holocaust. Because it's your take on reality. It's your narrative. That's the word, isn't it? It's your narrative. And a society builds up its own narrative for its own purposes. And once you catch that, in fact there's no objective truth to it, then of course it collapses as science, as truth.

In society, it's very strange. When I went to Gaia House, it was a very strange place for me because I'd always been brought up in modernist societies, and the order is almost pre-modern really, in many aspects in terms of its authority structure. But when I got to Gaia, I found that there were these centres of authority who were making decisions without others knowing. It was a sort of... It was all very strange. Things happened, you know. Just recently, for instance, a huge armchair arrived in the lounge, and the managing director, the executive manager, didn't know about it. It just... this big thing arrived, and she looked around. I was in the room with her. So what happens is that since I am now the centre of authority, we're all centres of authority. And when a society has no centre, you can do what you do because it's right for you, and I can do what I do because it's right for me, and you've no right to stop me at all. It's a sort of

movement towards anarchism in its absolute true sense.

And a friend of mine told me about a lovely postmodern situation that they found themselves in. They'd been invited to a meal with two friends, and they went there to the house, he and his partner, to this couple's house. And while they were having a meal... sorry, after the meal, they were sitting in the lounge, just enjoying the postprandial discussions and all that sort of stuff, when the lodger, a woman, came down, started doing yoga right there in the nude. And they said to her, you know, "Is this appropriate?" "Well, you do what you do, and I'll do what I like." And it's that me generation, you know.

I've noticed that at Gaia, anybody in their 30s is very different from somebody in their 50s, which is, of course, where I am. In their 50s, you'll still get people talking about responsibility. In their 30s, they're talking about rights. My rights. It's weird. And, of course, the clash is wonderful.

I went on a walk with the managers at Gaia, who tend to be postmodern in this sense. Because, and it's understandable in one sense, because they come from anywhere to offer a year of their lives to the Dharma and end up with people whom they would normally not choose to live with. And so you have a group of people who have to live communally, but the structure there doesn't really allow a community because people are moving in and out so often. Every six months it's like being at a railway station.

So living in that sort of community, you tend to get people who are very fierce about their position and try to come to a consensuality. And the problem with consensuality is that if everybody has a right, then everybody has a right to veto. So even though seven people say they'll do it, if somebody says no, you've had it. You can't move. So they came to an agreement that nobody has an actual veto. They can have a majority rule, I think.

And we went out for a walk. I went out for a walk with a few of them, and we were going to go to this riverside which somebody said was absolutely beautiful, and we'd have a picnic there. And on the way, over a dell down in the bottom, we came across a very delightful little stream. And one of the party said, "I want to stay here," you see. And everybody else said, "Well, we were going over there." "No." This is where the group begins to control the individual. That's what they felt: controlled individual, you see. So we went, "Well, fine. You stay here." So then we had to share the food, and she ended up with the orange juice. And we had to do without the orange juice. Because we all had it in one bottle. Wonderful.

So now we have a big problem, you see. Oh yes, sorry, that's right. I've got a lovely description of art, which gives you an idea: "A rejection of a consistent, coherent aesthetic in favour of a playful, eclectic style which draws on many sources." So in other words, the artist feels free to use whatever, however they want. And often, as I'm sure some of you have experienced, especially in modern art, very modern art, the artist is really looking to symbols which often make sense to them, but they don't have that objective position where people can relate to it in this way.

So it's Eliot who said art was objective correlative. So I have an experience, I want to relate it to you, and I

choose an object through which we can make that communication. Now if I choose an object which is meaningless to you but full of meaning to me, then the communication stops. Although the artist could argue, "Well, you should make the effort, you know, to come towards me, to try and understand this symbology," you see.

So now we have the problem of the role of the teacher. Well, you can see that there can't be a teacher. Because if a teacher says to you, "Listen, I think you ought to do..." you know, like they're saying, "Well, your meditation's not so good, and it's because, you know, you're not working on this particular..." See, the student will reply, "Well, that's true for you. But that's not the way I see things." How do you get anywhere with that sort of relationship?

So, and the student, of course, feels an authority unto themselves, only taking little bits from what they want from different traditions. Building up their own little eclectic style. Yeah? You've all come across those, eh? So you have a bit of yoga and a bit of taijiquan and a bit of *vipassanā*, a bit of Dzogchen. Get it all in, you see. And you decide what you're going to do. And unless you're very, very spiritually inclined, unless there's a clarity in your mind, then you end up with quite a lot of confusion in your spiritual practice.

Now in these character types, there's what's called the confused or the speculative type. And this is the description: "In one of speculative temperament, there is a frequent occurrence of such states as talkativeness, sociability, boredom with devotion to the profitable, failure to finish undertakings, scheming by night and flaming by day, and mental running hither and thither." The scheming by night is planning and scheming. Flaming by day is running around doing. Does that sound... so that's the speculative type, and perhaps also open to skepticism because of that. Open to skepticism, which is that inability to commit yourself entirely to a particular way or path because you know, you've only got your own reason, your own particular experience to go on. You're not prepared to put faith either in a person or in a tradition, either to revelation or to somebody else's guidance. So there's a huge danger there.

And yet, we have in Buddhism this idea of a *Paccekabuddha*. Now, a *Paccekabuddha* is translated as a private Buddha. What it's saying is that some people become enlightened but can't teach. There's a hint that people become enlightened there in other forms, in other traditions. But it's this kernel thing that they can't teach. That's very postmodern, isn't it? Because this person has made their way through their own paths, and in a sense, because it's not part of a tradition, because they've ended up, in a sense, in their own private way... how far they can't teach, I don't know, but it says they can't teach.

Now, one of the amazing things about the spiritual scene today, these days, is the arrival of these independently enlightened beings. Rajneesh, Krishnamurti. Recently the flavour of the month is Eckhart Tolle, Stephen... who am I thinking of... What Is Enlightenment magazine, Andrew Cohen, Ken Wilber. Interesting, isn't it? These people, of course, do have a teaching. Da Free John.

So these people do have, and if you read their stuff, they've obviously had some experience, but not within

a particular tradition, or at least they might have touched upon a tradition, but they've had something which is peculiar to them. And then somehow, in their sense, of course, they do have a following. But I dare say there are some people who are enlightened, but simply can't get it across or maybe don't even want it, just happy being enlightened.

So now having discussed these three types of societies, these types of ethos—call it what you wish—premodern, modern and postmodern, I want to try and see what the Buddha's teaching is in terms of the practice. There are two occasions where he's talking to Ānanda. The first one is when he's dying during his last few days. And Ānanda's getting a bit worried as to who will lead the order. So he asks the Buddha who will he appoint to lead the order. And his two main disciples have died. Sāriputta died shortly before his own death and Moggallāna was murdered by thieves on some path or other, so his two main disciples who he perhaps might have handed on his leadership to had died. But his response is, "I'm not going to leave anybody. You should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge with no one else as your refuge." That's very postmodern, isn't it? But then in the same breath he says, "You should live with the *Dhamma* as an island, with the *Dhamma* as your refuge, with no other refuge." Now that's revelation—that's his revelation to the world, he revealed that to the world. That's very premodern, isn't it?

And then there's another occasion where Ānanda is walking with him—he seems to be doing this all the time. Ānanda always says to him, "I think I've understood this," and the Buddha says no he doesn't. It's humorous really. And there's one occasion when he says to the Buddha, "In my opinion, half the spiritual life is good friendship, is good community." And the Buddha says, "Oh no, the whole of the spiritual life is good companionship, good community." In other words, to be with people who can, as it were, balance your own views. Which would suggest a very modern approach. And when you couple that with the way he would teach, this Socratic way, then you can see he's also got the modernist perspective in there.

So I don't quite know where that leaves us, really. It's really just open to people to have some thoughts around that.

There's also here I've written the *Kālāma Sutta*, which is almost a declaration of free thought, where he turns up at a village, at the Kālāmas, and they complain. They say, "Look, this guru comes along and he says this, and then the next guru comes and says, well, he's a load of rubbish, this is what the truth is. What are we supposed to believe?" And he goes through a whole list of things: don't believe something just because it's tradition, because it makes sense rationally, because somebody with great authority has said so and so on and so forth, but only when you've experienced it as being true for yourself.

Now the last thought that I had was whenever society or whenever we make one of these three things the end all and be all of our spiritual practice—whether it be the written statement or revelation, whether it be reason, or whether it be my own personal experience—it always subordinates the other two to that one. So if you're going to believe in what the Buddha said, then reason is subdued, it goes out the window

almost, and your own self goes out. If you say that you've got to be reasonable, then in a sense there comes an undermining of faith in the revelation. And if you put yourself first, then you've almost undermined everything in a sense, because you yourself become the centre of authority. So if a person is deluding themselves into a statement, a belief, it's very difficult for them to get out of that little box they've put themselves into.

So it's only when we have something which reaches beyond the revelation, the rationality and self, where I think we might be able to get this balance of these three. So there's the Buddha's word, which is a touchstone. Then there's our reasoning. And then there's our own personal experience. And that personal experience can only come through actual practice, not through thought, through a basic personal practice. And this is the way the Buddha actually puts the growth of wisdom. First of all you gain wisdom by what you've heard. Then as you take that wisdom in and you think about it, it becomes your understanding, your own thought understanding, but it's still at the thought level. And it's only then when you turn to the practice and you directly experience the truth that the Buddha is talking about, that it becomes *vipassanā*, insight knowledge.

So I suppose it's a case of not leaning too heavily on these three things, either the Buddha word or rationality or oneself as a central authority.

Now's the time for tomatoes and eggs. I spoke for one hour. That's terrible. Anybody got any thoughts around that? I suppose really what led me to think about this was, you know, what happens after postmodernism? Where do you go after that? I suppose you have to wait and see.

"Well, that's what happens, isn't it? It's too scary, so they become fundamentalists."

Yeah, that is scary. Do your own thing in your own way in your own time.

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's what attracts a lot of people. I think that's what attracts a lot of people in the West. It's surprising how many people don't want to call themselves Buddhists. They don't want the label. And what it suggests to me is they don't want to be part of that tradition as well. They don't want to be labelled. They're happy to be called socialists. When it comes to spirituality, it's like putting on—they feel like a straitjacket or something. Something happens to them. It's as though they give up their autonomy or something.

"Who doesn't like to call themselves a Buddhist but does Buddhist practice? Perhaps you can explain. So why don't you call yourself a Buddhist?"

"I think because for me it's like then I'd have to accept all these things and I'd have to believe them all."

That's very interesting because the whole of the Buddha's position was that you don't believe a word he says. And that's his basis, that everything is up for grabs. You've got to prove it true to yourself. Actually, the early Buddhists never called themselves Buddhists. That's a Christian West thing that we think, like we

used to call them Mohammedans. We called them Mohammedanism. The early Buddhists called themselves Saddammikas, followers of the true law. They didn't—I mean the Buddha himself said, "Who sees the *Dhamma* sees me, who sees me sees the *Dhamma*." He was constantly pulling himself out as a personality and laying down the law as he saw it, the truth as he saw it. But it's interesting that you should feel that because sometimes that's how Buddhism comes across, especially in its outer form.

"Sometimes I think there is a bit of a contradiction between you've got to test everything for yourself and you only believe it if you've experienced it. And on the other hand, well, these are the teachings and really just to keep on experiencing until you too agree that the teachings are right. So what's the point in testing?"

No, it's a very good point because I went through a stage when I thought, "Hold on, I'm being brainwashed." Because every teacher was saying, "Impermanence, impermanence," and I'm thinking, "Whoa, yeah, impermanence," and I think, "Well, hold on." Yeah, I suppose it's a case of trusting eventually in the experience of your own meditation. And that will bring you to a direct experience which you don't feel has been conditioned by thought. That's the important thing. If the person has an experience which they think has been conditioned by thought, then that has to be brainwashing. But if the experience is of such a nature that it only reflects, it only realises in a really true way the thought which happens only to be a reflection of the truth, then the tables are turned. Then one realises actually it was a direction—it was somebody pointing and not pushing.

"What do you refer to as practice? What do you think a mark of a practice is?"

Getting out of that—well it's the methodology whereby you prove, this is in Buddhism, it's the methodology whereby you prove that the concept or theory is right. So the scientific method, you know, H2O and all that. How do you prove that? What's the methodology? What's the practice? The practice is the experiment. So in a sense we are the experiment. There is an enlightenment, so who's going to experience that? How are you going to get there? Do you know what I mean? That would be the practice. Well, that's all you can pass on because in a very postmodern sense, the enlightenment is very personal, which is you. And if somebody says they're enlightened, you can't disprove it. I thought I might try and get more followers, you know. It's amazing what people can believe.

For myself, I don't know, I haven't reflected on that entirely. It's more in the sense of Buddhism coming from an alien culture into this one and it's being picked up by certain historical waves coming through individuals. So Buddhism as a guru-based thing through, say, the Tibetan traditions has a lot of, you know, Buddhism coming through as a very rational approach and investigative through Theravāda. And it attracts—I mean, when I walk into a community of Tibetan Buddhists, it's a totally different feel to a Theravāda community. There's a different feel about it. The people look different as well. It's funny. I can always know—I'm pretty sure that I can always know when somebody's in Zen. It's just the way they hold themselves. They've got this thing about them.

"Do you know why we do something unbalanced? Like if I lived in Tibet, I'd have no choice. I'd have to go—we're in the West, holding to our personality types."

Yeah. In the East, in the Theravāda tradition, you get a whole range of personality types. But when I see Western Theravāda, it's a lot narrower. I think that's true. We've become stereotypical in a particular vein. I think Theravāda Buddhism, because it's only that one Buddhism in a country, tends to have to open up to all these different personalities. So you've got people who just meditate. I mean, like the Mahāsi, you know, he cuts through all that ritual stuff and everything, wouldn't allow any of it. And yet on the other side, the devotional type, there are places they can go to to make these offerings and light candles and all that. Yes, you're right.

But in another society like China, where different strains of Buddhism went, I don't know what it's like there in terms of the different forms. The same as Japan, of course. Sōtō, Rinzai, Shingon. Shingon is the Tantra. Maybe in a place like Japan, there are these different forms which attract a certain type, but they all live, as it were, within this idea of Buddhism. It's an umbrella idea, I don't know.

"My experience is a bit different. Although Theravāda's form, I've always said to myself, I've always been quite surprised at the different personalities. The teachings are different. Each personality teaches a different way, in a way. My experience is that there's quite a range of types of people in one tradition."

Well, I think to a point, but if you look at Europe-wide, Theravādins attract Germans, Anglo-Saxons and Jews. It's very rare to find French, Spanish, Italians. Don't get them. I think I've known one Italian monk who didn't last. A couple of French.

"Where did they go?"

I don't know. I don't know what happened to him. He disappeared in a puff of spaghetti. Yeah, it's a mindset. It's very interesting. The French are huge into Tibetan Buddhism and the Spaniards and Italians too. It's really—it's interesting, you know, because of that Catholicism, perhaps open to it, whereas our more Protestant North... I mean, I'll give you a lovely example.

The vihāra that I used to go to in Birmingham, just up the street, it was a Tibetan vihāra. And I would occasionally go up there just to chat to the monk who was there. I was ordained then myself. And I turned to the kitchen—he was a younger man than myself and he was talking about the Dalai Lama and his visit and he was talking to me. He obviously knew I was Theravādin and he was talking to me and it was just straight, you know, "He came and he gave this very good talk about this." And then just at that moment a Tibetan nun came in, English Tibetan nun. And he got up to greet her and for a moment forgot I was there, as it were. "And the Dalai Lama came and he passed me. I put up my hand and he touched my hand like that." And then he saw me. Classic.

"You said that whatever tradition, you need to be aware of these various, you know, the fallacies that go on."

That's a good point, yes. The way this is put in the commentaries is that you are that type. I mean you can balance it a bit but in the sense you do have to see yourself as clearly as you can and where your fault line is, and then when you recognise that to work gently against it, you know.

"It was a bit, wasn't it?"

I agree with that. It was a bit. Well, this is Buddhaghosa, you know. Some of you might know him. A great commentarian. Well, it was a bit negative. I have to agree. Where am I? "In one of speculative temperament, there's frequent occurrence of such states as talkativeness, sociability, boredom with devotion to the profitable, failure to finish undertaking, smoking by night, flaming by day and mental running hither and thither."

Yeah, not much hope there, is there? The opposite is just this utter delusion. Yeah, I don't know.

"So what happens then between a teacher and a student in the West? How does it differ? Oh, between a Westerner and a Western teacher?"

Oh, it varies, it varies. I mean, generally speaking, of course, just as this is only my personal experience, but I think it's true for everybody. If somebody, you know, is a law unto themselves, you know, they think, they either don't come at all, or if they do come, it's to prove you're wrong. It's because they've had something niggling in their head and they want to come along and test it and say, "Well, you know."

Most people, well, you've got various levels. I mean, the beginner will always be reliant on the teacher, much more so. But as a person becomes more confident and all that, of course, they don't come. And that's the whole idea, of course. The whole idea is to make a meditator autonomous, isn't it? So they have that inner confidence, they know what they're doing, you know? They don't have to come. I mean, it's a bad teacher who always makes the student feel that they're dependent on them. I think that's terrible. I mean, I always make the open desire at the end that they become enlightened in this very lifetime. But not before me. I consider that unjust.

"I've got more to run still, and one of the things that I've got from postmodernism is not this 'me generation' thing that I agree with what you say about how that comes up, so philosophically it can deconstruct all sorts of things including core aspects of identity, and it's the first time in the West that we've got anything that chimes with *anattā* at all."

And sometimes it's the opposite.

It's actually a generation that sort of can deconstruct the self and can be in touch with experience.

Yeah, no, thanks for pointing that out. Definitely one of the processes that the Buddha's constantly doing is deconstructing the human being. I mean, that's his main avenue of investigation, where he splits you up into the five *khandhas* and the six sense spaces and all that sort of stuff. Yeah, absolutely. That process, definitely.

It's a very radical thinking, and perhaps I was a bit too negative on it. It's a very radical thinking because I heard a program in which there were some very clear distinctions to prove that democracy was definitely not the best form of government, which we're completely sold on because of our modernism. Such examples, the fact that Hitler was voted in, and Berlusconi. And Tony Blair, somebody would say.

So it's like there's a trust in a sort of common reason and goodwill, but obviously there are situations when even that... I think it was Gandhi, wasn't it? Truth can be in a minority of one. I think he said that.

And I think also the little bit that I understand about deconstruction and looking at the text and this idea that there are subtexts going on of which we are not aware, that whole, it's a sort of Freudianism really, isn't it, coming in, the whole idea that when you read a book or anything, a poem or anything, there's stuff going on underneath which you're not actually aware of. And that's giving your interpretation.

So, in terms of spiritual practice, the Buddha talks about these *anusaya*, these latent tendencies, which are sort of almost like these turbulences deep in the mind. We don't know they're there. It's like Jung might have called it the shadow, the part of us we're not aware. Often other people are, of course. And it's just coming through, puts nuances into our speech, gives it a twist. It gives us a shape of the body that we're not aware of, things like that.

They talk about seeing things as they really are, often interlinked with the opening of the heart. And particularly in the Tibetan traditions, they talk about balancing wisdom and compassion, and in the Theravāda traditions, *mettā* and so forth. How is the heart addressed in Buddhism, which is not romanticized? In the West, we have this head-heart split. But there's very much, though, this knowing things as really are. It isn't a kind of transcendence of a mere intellectual experience.

No, no. No, that phrase, seeing things as they really are, one understanding of that is to see these three characteristics. I mean, that's where the Buddha's always pointing his effort. This idea that everything's transient, there's nothing that can exist of itself, there's no such thing as an entity as such, and that if you have a wrong relationship with the sensual world, that some form of dissatisfaction arises.

Wrong relationship of identity and possession. Once the intelligence, this intuitive intelligence, has grasped that, then the way it expresses itself through the phenomena of the body and personality changes. So whereas before one might have thought that it was good to help others, but the subtext, as it were, in the postmodern sense is, I feel very happy when I do this. And you're not aware of it. So then you only help people because it makes you feel happy. And then you only do things for people that make you feel happy. So when somebody says, can you clean the toilet? You don't want to do it. It's not a real compassion. It's a compassion with this underlying label.

When one sees the dependency upon compassion to make oneself happy and what that's actually doing in the sense of corrupting compassion and making the other one feel uncomfortable in some ways, not good for me, not good for the other, and all that, when one sees that and it becomes open and there's a

clarification of that thought, a purification of the heart, then you get that pure compassion coming through. Isn't that right? Something like that?

Yeah, and that's why he rates this as right understanding, right attitude, why it comes down the Eightfold Path. See? And then, right attitude, and then right speech, right action, right livelihood. See, it flows downward from right understanding. I mean, it's not as though you can split those two, split those three. I mean, obviously, if you're doing something, then it's right livelihood. You're saying something or it's right like that and by being aware one understands, so the understanding comes out of the action, as it were. The right heart. So it's those three things feed on each other really, but the kernel of the practice is this awakening of that awareness, that ability to catch these little thoughts that come up that tell us what we're really thinking, which are often embarrassing or we don't want to see. Making that very plain to us. And then we see, ah, that's the underlying, that's the subtext, that's the bit of deconstruction I've got to do there. And that's when you bow to Derrida.

Yeah, definitely. Yeah, yeah. I think Oxford refused to give him a PhD, didn't they? An honorary PhD, didn't they? Remember that? Cambridge, Cambridge! There we are. Dreadful, dreadful. Very recondite, that one.

Are we somewhat caught up in Western thinking, Western dichotomising? Because I think these three types of ethos that you've been talking about, I suppose what you're saying in a way is that these should be all accepted, they all have some value. It's very difficult for us to listen to that without choosing one or the other rather than seeing that they're perhaps all part of the whole thing.

Well, I suppose if I were to... Well, I suppose it's an individual thing. It's balancing those three things within yourself. It's recognizing that there has been a revelation in terms of Buddhism. The Buddha discovered, didn't invent, remember, he discovered these particular things and he revealed them. So it is a revelation. Secondly, so that in a sense is an opening of our hearts to it, an opening of that possibility that revelation is actually true. That would be a pre-modern thing. Putting your trust in it. And that's what, remember, this word *saddhā* means, as one of the five spiritual faculties, putting one's trust in, having a confidence in that.

And then there's this business of really making it, just making it sure that it makes sense to you inwardly. So there's your rationality. It's not a case of just accepting it without question. And then finally, it has to become our personal take on reality through the practice.

So, yeah, I would say it's this recognition, making sure that we're not unbalanced, that we're looking just simply to ourselves, that it has to be fully rational before we'll believe something. Not thinking that everything has to fit into some rational form. Because the Buddha warns us, he says, this stuff is beyond reason. It's subtle, it's beyond reason. You can't reason *Nibbāna*. Because it's beyond words. He says, words only go so far, then they stop.

On the other hand, he's constantly urging us to investigate and to argue with him in a sort of dialogue. And some of the scriptures, remember, people come to him and they don't agree. They go away tutting, as it says, clicking their tongues. Rubbish. He's not unhappy thereby. That's what he says. But when somebody actually receives the Dharma and becomes a follower, he's full of joy.

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