

Buddhist View of Christ's Teaching

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 29:40

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa — Homage to the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

The reason I'm recording this is because I'd like to know what I have to say for myself, because I haven't given this sort of talk before, specifically anyway, and Jim has asked me to do a little biography and to talk about the Buddhist perspective on some of Jesus Christ's teachings.

Just so that you're sure I'm not coming in from a completely blank space, I was brought up as a Roman Catholic. My mother was Italian and my father was English. They met as he came up from Africa in the RAF and was billeted on her building, on her home. He fell immediately in love, but I think she took a bit more time. And on his side, going back to his grandfather on his maternal side, his grandfather came from Milan and his wife was Irish. So here I am, an Italian Irish Catholic. You can't get more Catholic than that.

My experience of Catholicism is very different from some experiences that I've heard from people of my generation, mainly because of my mother. The whole centre of my Christian practice was the love of Jesus. I mean, I knew full well that if I missed church on Sunday and unfortunately died before I could get to confession, I would definitely spend an eternity in hell. But that was never particularly stressed. It was always the love of Jesus. So I was very devotional as a young boy, and I must have been a very rare young boy that I actually enjoyed going to Mass.

This manifested later, around about the age of 11 and 12, of suddenly having a vocation to become a missionary priest. And I joined a junior seminary, which was run by the Society of the Divine Word, near Birmingham, and I spent four years in a junior seminary. When I think of the regime and the training I had there, I can't imagine any modern kid even coming near it. I mean, we were up at 6 o'clock in the morning, we were out there in the cold doing exercises, we were back in for mass, then we had breakfast, and then we had clean-up for an hour, and then we started school. And then after school, there was another religious gathering, and then we had one hour off for games. That was it. And the rest of the day was in silence.

Interestingly enough, I look back upon the first two years as the halcyon days of my life. I was extraordinarily happy. I was in a continuous state of ecstasy. Then unfortunately, puberty entered. If I could have stayed as a 13-year-old, I'd have been happy for the rest of my life. Then something... the practice was, and this is where the reason why I wanted to start with Vipassanā meditation, the practice was really much to do with what we would call *samatha*, which is the development of the beautiful mind.

And it's done through imageries, through repetitive prayer, where you can lift the heart into a lovely ecstasy.

And if you think of very empowered business people, how they lift themselves up to this tremendous energy, and from the moment they wake up to the moment they fall asleep, they're right there on that plane of existence. They never drop, they just keep going, going, going, and it's always up, up, up, and get, get, get. And that's what happens when you can train yourself to lift your heart into a beautiful ecstasy. It will remain with you all day. And even if people say something rude to you, it doesn't affect you, it just comes off you like water on the duck's back. Nothing can touch you because the heart itself is lifted into this lovely state of ecstasy.

Now, as I say, once that had passed, and then I left, and I went to school, to the sixth form in school and then went to college. And then something which, as always, slightly amazed me, something quite peculiar happened. I was lying in bed on a Sunday morning, and I said to myself, "I wonder what will happen if I don't go to church." So remember, this is hellfire we're talking about now. And nothing happened by the end of Sunday, nothing had happened, and I never went again. Just like that. Having been consistent with all my practice, I lay in bed and said, "What will happen if I don't go to church?" Nothing happened, so I never went again. There is no... people talk about guilt especially in Catholicism, and Holy Mother Church and how could you leave. No guilt, no sorrow, no nothing. It just cut like that.

And I spent the next 10 years looking like a hippie, but actually I was an existentialist. I didn't know what it meant, but it felt good to be an existentialist. I thought, well, I wasn't a nothing, I was an existentialist. I just felt it was so much better than being a socialist. It launched me into hours of discussion and talk.

Now then, as life has it, it comes with its tribulations, and having hit a very low point, I then sought some help. And at the time, there was Zen Buddhism in the air. This was back in the 70s, middle, late 70s. And so I wrote to the Buddhist Society, and eventually, through this and that, I ended up going to a Zen Buddhist meeting, which was held not very far from where I was living, in Birmingham.

And I remember Vajra, whom I look upon as my spiritual mother, inviting me in. And her instructions were very simple. In Zen you sit facing the wall. Because Bodhidharma, that's what I'm called. I'm called out of this particular... I'll come to that in a bit. And sit facing the wall and she said, "Just sit here and just watch whatever arises, whatever comes up." That was it. That was the instructions. None of this was about watch the breath, all I've done for you now. None of that. Just sit here and watch whatever comes up.

And by the end of that 40 minutes, I just knew that this was going to get me out of my problems. I just had that intuitive feeling that this was the path that was going to get me out of my emotional state. And over a period of time, that's exactly what happened.

I stayed with Zen Buddhism, there's a monastery up in Northumberland, for three years, and then I became involved with the Theravāda type of Buddhism, which you find in Southeast Asia, Thailand,

Burma, Sri Lanka, those sorts of places. And it was in that that I met my teacher of this particular tradition that I've taught you, who was a disciple of the Mahāsi Sayādaw, a very famous teacher from Burma. And shortly after that, after a bit of a struggle, I decided to spend three years in the order to develop meditation. And it's been 20 years, I've just not been able to get out. So it's just one of those things. I only joined up for three, and here I am.

The reason for telling you these little things is because one of my struggles was, of course, to accommodate what I had learned in Christianity into my Buddhism. It wasn't a case of me saying that that was all the past and it was all rubbish and I didn't want anything to do with it. It was... within my heart there's always been this very intimate connection with Jesus Christ because I developed it for the first 15 years of my life for heaven's sake, so it wasn't a case of trying to deny that. That would have been ridiculous. So I had to come to terms and find an explanation for the teachings of Christ through this new prism that I'd found in Buddhism, which had worked for me.

And, of course, I reminded myself that in the early days, Christianity had worked for me. The form that I had had actually given me the basis for all the spirituality that came afterwards. The basis was, first of all, a moral understanding of life, clear moral understanding of life, and secondly, an understanding that there was an interior life. I mean, these days, so many people have no idea of what religious emotions are. No idea whatsoever. They confuse it with rock and stuff like that.

On that sort of basis, when I came to Buddhism, and I found what Buddhism was doing was to investigate this whole phenomena, which I call myself, this psychophysical organism, I had to meld them together and bring them away from what was a feeling of contradiction to a feeling of complementarity.

And so I've chosen here three or four quotations just to give you an idea of what that has meant for me personally. This isn't the Buddhist interpretation of the works of Jesus, you understand. This is a particular person's perspective on his words.

So the first one I'd like to point to is the very rich young man who comes to him and says, "I followed the law perfectly." And he says, "What must I do now to enter the kingdom of heaven?" And Jesus' reply is, "Go sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have the treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me." So this business of go sell everything. In other words, give everything up.

Now, he then goes on to another place which is in... these are two different gospels, the first is in Mark, second in Luke, where he says something which is very hard for us to take, which is, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate their father and mother, their wife and children, their brothers and sisters, yet even their own life, they cannot be my disciple." That's pretty heavy, isn't it?

And if you remember there's one point where, I can't remember the details, I'm sure you'll remind me, where he says to his mother, "I have no mother." Yeah, I have no mother. Now the fact of the matter is that he had a mother. So what was he saying? What did he mean by saying I have no mother? What does he

mean by saying those who hate their father and mother, what does he mean by giving up everything?

Now, one of the core teachings of the Buddha is the teaching around detachment and what detachment actually means. In the meditation here, I asked you to catch how you were relating to what was arising, how everything which you were perceiving as pleasant, you were moving towards and trying to develop it. Even if you didn't catch it here in your meditation, just consider how you gravitate towards a cup of tea. And what it feels like when there is no tea. Can you imagine waking up in the morning and finding there's no tea in the house? That's pure misery. So that attachment, that gravitation, that holding on to things, what are we actually doing when we do that? What are we doing when we say, I have to have my tea? Clinging on to relationships, my wife, my children, my family. What are we doing?

In Buddhist understanding, we're seeking happiness right there. That's what we're doing. We are investing in something which is phenomenal, something which is arising and passing away, and demanding that it makes us happy. Now the problem is that when you attach like that, when you demand something like that, anything in this phenomenal world is going to let you down. Because the first thing I asked you to notice was that everything is arising and passing away.

So the Buddha's statement on "go sell everything you have" is, there is nothing in this world worth holding on to. That's what would be the Buddha's commentary on Jesus' "go sell everything."

Now, in his lifetime, if you remember, if you know the story, he comes to what I would call an existential crisis. He gets to the age of 25, middle 20s, when most people come to recognise that youth is over and they'd better start taking life a bit more seriously. And they get married, get a job, and the pension comes a bit later. And then, in that seriousness, the Buddha's own experience is put in mythological form. So he's guarded from the certain realities of life, and he's out hunting on three occasions. And in each occasion, respectively, he sees somebody who's very sick, like a leper, somebody who is very, very old and crotchety and hardly able to move, and a corpse. And each time his question is, "Well, what is this?" And then he's told, "Well, this is a human being. This is what happens to people." And then he says the crucial question, "Does this happen to me?"

So here we have the existential crisis. And it was with this that he left his wife and his child was just born. Now some people think that's very, very selfish, but then a man's got to do what a man's got to do. He leaves his child, he cuts his hair off. He goes to the river with his assistant, Channa. He goes with his horse, his lovely horse that he loves, and the horse loves him, Kanthaka. He goes to the river, remember the Rubicon, over the river, it's all mythological, cuts his hair off, throws all his robes and finery away, puts on rag robes and crosses the river. And his horse is so upset he dies of grief. So then he spends his years training.

So here you see, "One who comes to me and does not hate their mother, hate their father, wife." If you define the word hate as some sort of negativity towards these people, then obviously I think you've misunderstood here the teachings of Christ. And I've read somewhere that this is a very strong Jewish way

of saying to be detached. To be detached. In other words, not to find happiness in that other person.

Now, this whole process of letting go, if you get into Buddhist circles, you come across these little pat phrases like letting go, let it go, let it pass, don't own it. Now, when you are in yourself in the way that you were instructed a minute ago, you were detached. That's what the Buddhist understanding is.

Most times, when you feel depression, when you feel depressed, what do you say to yourself? You say, "I am depressed." So how are you going to get out of that? "I am depressed." That's it. So all you can do now is get depressed about being depressed. And then you get angry about being depressed, and you get very afraid of being depressed, and it goes down into a spiral, and you end up in Prozac.

Now, if you were to sit inside yourself as I instructed there, and you notice that there is depression, not I am depressed, there, then of course you don't have the reaction of being depressed about being depressed. And you've discovered a place within yourself which cannot be touched by depression.

When you have pain, should we say, the sitting posture there, you might have got some pain discomfort, or you've got a headache sometimes. Instead of saying, "I have a headache," owning the headache, so you immediately form a relationship of attachment. If you sit there quietly and feel the sensations of your headache, there's the headache, there. And that which actually is experiencing that headache comes to understand that it itself does not have a headache.

Now these are very deep insights because there is something in us which is experiencing directly everything that we call ourselves to be a human being, which is our sensations, which is our actions, which is our feelings and emotions, which is our thought and which is our images, and yet which isn't that. So what is it?

Now, if that within us is not the body, if that within us is not the heart with its emotional states, if it's not thought, then it is detached from the very psychophysical phenomena that we call a human being. Now that detachment is then confused with being some sort of callous, unregarding, unlovable way of being. But then, when you discover that position of yourself of being with your body, heart and mind, you begin to realise that you can now use it, as it were, or you can have a relationship with it, which is kind, which is generous, which is compassionate, and yet, somehow, because you're detached, you're no longer upset by what it's actually doing.

So if this body is something that this within us is in, we would call it something like the Buddha nature, when the body gets sick, there's a compassionate movement towards the body. Why fear it? Why should you fear the sickness of the body when it's not you?

And when an emotion comes, why should you be so concerned about it when it's not you? So somehow this detaching is a process of liberating ourselves. And that's exactly what the Buddha means by detaching, and that's exactly what we mean by *Nibbāna*.

Nibbāna translates as unshackling. What is it that's being unshackled? What is it that's being liberated? It's that within us which knows, which experiences. And once we can develop this attitude towards ourselves, we develop the same attitude towards others.

So at the end of this particular period, I'll do a loving-kindness meditation. And the loving-kindness meditation, or the meditation of goodwill, is taking what we feel about somebody for whom we like. It's easy to love somebody you like. So you take somebody whom you like, whom you have a warm relationship with anyway, and then you keep displacing that image with people whom you hardly know, to all beings, so that this love that we are developing is not dependent on the object that's standing before us.

So whoever is before me, if I was doing this practice properly, whether it be somebody whom I know intimately, somebody belonging to my own family, or somebody whom I've never met in my life before, or somebody who stinks, or somebody who hates me, I still have that attitude towards them. That attitude of love, compassion, sympathetic joy is what we mean by detached joy. Because it's not attached to the object. It's an attitude which we have within our own hearts, which is developed within our own hearts, not dependent on the object.

Now, to get to that level, you've got to go and sell everything and hate your mother and father. So now, do you have to do that? I mean, if you take these words literally, if you take the words literally, then you're really going to have to sell everything. And if you take the words hate, then you're really going to have to hate.

But it's not that at all. What Jesus, in the Buddhist point of view, is pointing to here is forming a completely different relationship to those things that you own. And a completely different relationship to those people who you relate to. And the underlying movement in the psychology, the underlying movement in, rather than psychology, the philosophy behind it all, is that whatever happiness is, you're not going to find it in the sensual world. And you're not going to find it in somebody else.

Other people can't make you happy. When you grasp that, then you'll stop demanding that they do so. And it feels very liberating on those people around you, I can tell you.

So, leaving that, I now want to get a little bit more mystical. The third quote was, my commandment is this, to love each other as I have loved you. Now, that is in stark contrast to hate your mother, hate your father. You're not going to understand this love business unless you understand clearly this other statement about hating your mother and father. That's what I was pointing to there.

So those two statements go together. If anyone comes to me and does not hate their father, their mother, their wife, their children, their brothers and sisters, yet even their own life, they cannot be my disciple. But my commandment to you is this, to love one another as I love you. If you can get beyond that paradox, then you've understood the true message of the spiritual life. And you'll find that in every religion through

its mystics.

Now I want to get a bit more mystical. So there's this commandment. Well, Jesus says, I am the father of one. I am in my father and you are in me and I am in you. Now, this was the real struggle that I had. Remember that in Catholicism, the host at Mass is changed into the veritable body of Jesus Christ. So the bread is the body, even though it's under the species of bread. It tastes like bread and everything, but actually it is the body. And the wine is actually the blood. Even though it tastes like wine, it is actually the blood. And this, of course, is the separation of substance from attributes.

Now, that really just didn't make sense to me. If I wanted to give you a critique of that from one of the greatest philosophers of the human race, Nagarjuna, who, in a sense, brought philosophy to an end when we're talking about metaphysical philosophy, he simply states, if the substance of a thing is different from the attributes, how do you know it exists? Because the only way you know something exists is from its attributes. Whether it's hard or soft, or whether you can see it's yellow or blue. And then he says, if the substance and the attributes are the same, why make a difference? So, this problem around substance and attributes is a philosophical problem.

Jesus says, unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Something like that. But it's eat my body, and of course people were disgusted and they all walked away. Then just before his passion, he instigates this ritual, which is, to my mind, the loveliest of rituals that you'll come across in any religion, which is the sharing of the bread and the wine. And he says of the bread, this is my body, take of this, and of the wine, this is the blood I shed for the new covenant.

So he's equated flesh and blood with the bread and the wine. And he's always referring to himself. Now, I long struggled with this, and it was only because I visited a friend of mine who was an elderly Sri Lankan man, and I must tell you, in truth, I went there for toast. While I was eating my toast, I was able to have long conversations with him about this business.

And for him it was not a problem, because he was brought up a Catholic and then became a Hindu. And he also accepted all the stuff that Catholicism had taught him in that mystical way, in the way of metaphor. And it was funny how long it took for me for the penny to drop. And it was the way of looking, it was the way of thinking that every time Jesus Christ talked about himself, he was actually talking about the phenomena that we call Jesus. Meaning the body, heart and mind that you've just been looking at. And that was where my confusion lay. And that was coming to me through a little bit, I have to say, my Catholic upbringing.

It was only when I realized that when he talked about flesh and blood, when he talked about bread and wine, he wasn't talking about that at all. What he was talking about was the Christ within him. I am the Father of one, and I am in the Father, you are in me, I am in you. I mean, you can't get more deep than saying I am in you and you are in me.

So now, what is it that is the bread and what is it that is the wine within that nature that he's pointing to, which is that which is in me, in you, me and the Father one. And when you meditate, when you begin to do this form of meditation I've taught you, you will begin to abstract, you'll begin to disembed from the mass that you call yourself, this peculiar quality of intuitive intelligence.

And it begins with an awareness. It begins now. It's not as though awareness is not always with you. It's not as though consciousness is not always with you. It's always there. It's even there when you're asleep. Somebody turns you over. Somebody pulls a blanket over you when you feel cold. And somebody wakes up. Somebody hears the bell, the alarm clock, and then there you are. Normally we associate awareness with just, here I am. I mean, you go to sleep, and where are you?

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