Basics of Insight Meditation 04

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 27:38

So I just thought I'd start with, just in case there are some questions about the actual practice. Are there any questions? No? Everybody's perfectly clear and proper. I can't see everybody when I'm on this. You'll have to put your microphone on. No, no questions. Fantastic. Well, that's pretty easy then.

So just the usual reminders. We have to ask ourselves, what was the Buddha's discovery? And when we go back through his life we can see that he tried all the various techniques that were present at the time – very concentrated states that we call absorption; fasting, controlling your food intake on the understanding that the body was the problem and if you could just draw the body down then all the temptations that come with the body would disappear. So he just got very thin and presumably almost died. I don't know, but he definitely got very thin.

So he was a man of his time, even though we see him as extraordinary. There was a time of great ferment. I mean, it's known as the Axial Age. And the Brahminical tradition was producing all these new scriptures. And there was the Jain leader, too, who was a contemporary of the Buddha. And there were six other teachers at the time whom the Buddha had to contend with, one of them being what we would recognise these days as a materialist. So it was in that melee that the Buddha was working.

Now, just as these days, I mean, Trump isn't extraordinary. He's just an expression of our neoliberal situation. Without that situation, Trump would never have appeared. So it's the same with the Buddha. He's the flower of this enormous investigation that was going on at that time into consciousness, into afterlife, all the things that were obsessing people. And what he discovered was that by turning inward – so up until then, seemingly he's trying to escape. He's trying to escape the suffering of life. He's trying to escape rebirth, this problem of constant reincarnation. And when all that fails and he's sitting under a tree, he does have this memory. And as far as I know, this is the only true biographical memory – not biological, autobiographical. This is the only true biographical memory in the whole of the scriptures. Everything else we can presume was made up. All that business about him being a king, the son of a king, and having these three gardens that he would go to and all that stuff. But the one point that seems to be true is this memory.

So it's a kernel memory of him watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony, which opened up the ploughing season. His father was the head man, basically, of a tribe which is situated in North India, now into the border of Nepal. And what he remembers is sitting there, watching his father with that sense of curiosity. And he's absorbed. He's absorbed into that process. He's not thinking about it. He's not reflecting on it. He's just watching. He's just watching. And at the end of that watching, he comes to understand what

his father's doing. So I position him somewhere around about the age of seven, seven, eight, something like that. And somehow that opened up to him a way of looking which was not conceptual.

So that's our real problem. Everything we look at, everything we taste, everything we smell, everything we touch comes with a concept. That concept can be very simple like hot, or it can be huge like democracy. But it's conceptual. It's an idea which we then plunk onto the experience. So we never – I won't say never, but usually, more often than not – we experience things through a concept.

Now, it's not as though we want to get rid of concepts. You need to know when something is hot and when it's cold. But it's drawing that attention back down out of the conceiving mind, out of conceptualising things. It's extraordinarily difficult. And the only way to do it is to drive the attention towards what we're actually experiencing in this present moment.

What the mind does is it gives us a reality that we can live with. Take time, I mean. We have a memory of things past and an idea of things future, and that somehow time is a funnel that we're passing through – we're in time. But actually that's not what's happening, is it? What's happening is things are arising and passing away in this present moment, and there is no past. Whatever there was, even a nanosecond ago, has completely disappeared. And what's coming in the future, I haven't a clue.

Generally speaking, because we're in a situation like ours in the West, which is fairly peaceful, we don't get that sense of insecurity. But if you were living now in one of the war zones in Ukraine, you never know when one of these bombs are just going to blow you to pieces. You're living right on the edge, which brings you right into the present moment when you're like that. And it's this effort to begin to experience things before we have an idea of what it is that allows us to see things like impermanence, because we're right there. The mind is always constructing. It's always constructing.

So that's the purpose of *vipassanā*. *Vipassanā*, remember, means to see things as they really are. The *passa nā* means to see – *passanā*, *passati*. And the vi is just a strengthener, to really see it. And just that effort to keep the attention on exactly what we're feeling, exactly what we're experiencing – the breath. Take the breath, for instance – to stay with it and to drive the attention right into it with that sense of curiosity, which is asking, am I actually seeing this as it really is or is there some conceiving going on?

In the Zen tradition of Korea they have this thing called the Hwadu which just means what is it? What is this? What is this? And it's just a way of centering that attention, constantly asking ourselves, am I seeing this the way it is?

Now when I say constantly asking ourselves, I'm not saying that we should be there asking ourselves constantly, "What is this?" That is just driving you potty. It's an attitude. It's an attitude that we're trying to develop of a radical doubt about ourselves as to our ability to see what's actually happening. It's an honest doubt. It's asking ourselves, am I seeing this as it really is? On a grander scale, am I understanding the world as it really is? Do I understand where we are historically, where we are economically? It's like a

general interest question. But in terms of the practice of ourselves, am I actually seeing myself as I really am? That's the question.

And this effort to draw ourselves into the present moment opens up the possibility of really experiencing the fact that we are totally momentary. Totally momentary. The whole thing – the whole body, mind, everything – it's arising and passing away at the moment. This has a systemic effect because it makes us realise that the whole thing about holding on to something, keeping it, trying to stop things moving, trying to stop things changing is a fool's game. It just creates frustration. It creates sorrow.

Even in relationships, to try and hold a relationship as it is – "you're not the person I began to live with, you're not the person I married" and all that. Those statements don't make any sense within a situation which is in a state of continuous change. So that trying to hold ourselves as we are, where we feel comfortable, trying to hold the other person where they are, that sense of trying to control. And underneath that, what do you find? You find fear. Fear. At the fundamental base of our existence, you'll find fear. Fear of what? Fear of death. It's always underneath everything we're doing, this fear of death.

And death, in all its aspects of loss – every moment is a momentary death. Every time you lose something, you've lost something that was part of you. Even if you only owned it, you didn't describe yourself by it, you didn't identify by it, but it was part of you. It's a little death, a mini death. And that fear, if it's not brought into our lives, begins to affect us in all these peculiar ways.

During the pandemic, you'll notice – I'm sure some of you noticed or read about it – everybody went out and bought loads of toilet paper. What an amazing thing. I met somebody and they'd actually – I think it was a bit cheeky. There was this elderly woman and she walked out with a whole tray full, a whole one of those trolleys full of toilet paper. And he made a big comment on it. There were all sorts of people around and made a comment on it. Why? Well, if you read about what the suppression, the repression of death does to us, you'll notice that we make these connections with excrement, excuse the word, with money. That's why money is dirty. Somehow we construe money as being part of death, a part of loss. And so not bringing that death into our lives is really undermining us. It's not opening us up. It's making us clamp down with fear.

So that in the morning, if you were to say to yourself, "I might not live the whole of this day. I might actually die, or I might see the first signs of a terminal illness." Now at first you might think, well if I do that I'm just going to get depressed. But actually the opposite happens. By bringing death as a possibility in our lives at all times – we don't know the hour or the day, as Jesus Christ said – as soon as we bring that into our life, the effect is to make us realise how amazing life is, how we have this consciousness in the first place. How is it there is something anyway?

The fact that there is this – I'm looking out onto a scene where there's the sun shining and the snow is full of this whiteness and it's a rare occasion these days. And there's beauty out there. One can feel it. And that beauty and the joys of life become more accented when you recognise that everything's transient and that

ultimately it'll all disappear and I'll disappear.

So all these things, when you're looking into your practice, when you're actually diving in to your feelings, to your sensations, to your breath, and getting down there to see that it's just made up of little bits and pieces, little sensations arising and passing away – all this is part of seeing impermanence. And as we go deeper into this impermanence and see what the suffering arises by not accepting impermanence, we're getting down to that deep level of fear. And that fear is pointing to something. It's pointing to a concept about who I am. And that the deepest fundamental problem of our existence is identity.

And I've noticed that now – some of you will know Sutta Central on the website. It's a great site. He's done this – Sujato, this Ajahn Sujato. He's done all the scriptures now, which he seems to have translated. Some of his translations are a little bit, as you would say, inventive. But they're good. They're good. And I've noticed that he's now translating delusion as identity. Finally. Actually pointing to it. That's the root of it.

That's the whole discourse that the Buddha gives, his second discourse, which allows his other – which allows the five companions of his to become fully liberated. Now, that's not magic. Remember, they'd been practising like him for years with these absorption states and with the more self-mortification things about not eating and all that. And they all become liberated after this talk. And what's the talk on? It's the talk about not self. And what that talk is simply saying is, is the idea of me as a person, is that real? Can I substantiate it?

And the first thing he points to is control. So as you're doing your meditation inside yourself, you can see that things are just happening. You're not telling the breath to breathe. You're not telling your heart to express its sadnesses or its happinesses. You're not saying to your mind, "Now think about this, think about that." It's just all happening. And that sense of not control begins to take away this idea that I must be this psychophysical organism. That's what you're undermining. And then when you look at impermanence, you can see that whenever you hold on to something, it's going to cause suffering because it's not going to be there. It's going to change. Something's going to happen.

So it's this process of *vipassanā*, which, the more we can really devote ourselves to doing it properly – often in our practice, we get lazy. And I'm just as much guilty of that as anybody else, where you sit and you start off with a good intention, but then the mind wanders. And before you know it, you're worrying about this and you're thinking about that. So that opening gambit where we sit and we really talk to ourselves and say, "Come on, settle down, calm, be peaceful, draw your attention into the breath," and be aware of what mental state you're beginning with. If it's a very agitated state, perhaps a scan through the body might be very helpful. Going down if you are agitated, coming up if you're slothful – it raises energy. And if we acknowledge the mental state that we start with and work with it, and then we have that steadiness of attention to actually turn it into something we're investigating. So that's what we're actually practising.

So the practice and an ordinary daily life – they shave into each other. They move into each other. So that,

for instance, at the end of a piece of work, or you've done a bit of gardening, or you've done this, or you've made a cup of tea, just to stop for a moment and just recognise that's gone, that's finished. That's the end. It's not there anymore. And then just to relax into this present moment, just to stop. And then the next intention comes. And you empower that intention. And that way, there's a sense of at least guiding your life. I don't want to use the word control. You're not controlled. You're guiding your life in a way that is going to lead to greater happiness, greater contentment.

There's a section in the Dhammapada, which is a collection of all these verses that the Buddha made up. It's totally devoted to making the self happy. This self that we feel, it can actually make itself happy. That's why we practise *mettā*, we practise joy, we practise compassion. The practice is to make ourselves happy, but not excited. There's another confusion we get into. So excitement is that level of agitation that comes when we're feeding into a desire and the unfortunate consequence of that is that you can't feed it enough and it keeps coming back, keeps coming back. So one of the things about happiness and joy which is coming from the goodness of the heart is that once it goes there's no hankering after it and it always comes with a sense of calmness.

So there are all these indications in the Buddha's teachings that our practice is supposed to actually make us more contented and happy in all of our daily life. And that's taken over time. You can't measure it by week by week, because some weeks are awful and some weeks are pretty good. But over a measure of time, you can see that your life is becoming more settled, more calm, more peaceful, more joyful. And the practice is what is, shall we say, pushing you a little, just pushing you a little to look a bit more deeply.

And if we can bring that sense of just being, just stopping every so often, and then noting that intention, making sure the intention is, as the Buddha would say, to our own benefit, for the benefit of ourselves, for the benefit of someone else, or for both our benefits. And that's what makes work so meaningful is when you can see it as a benefit, when you can see it as a service.

I've just watched a wonderful film. It's by the German director, Wim Wenders. It's called Perfect Days. And it's basically about this man. I mean, we find out more about him when he goes, but he basically cleans toilets and he fills his day. He fills his part-time day with a bit of photography, a bit of music, looking after trees. And you can get the feeling that here is someone who has dropped his...

dropped out of a type of life which was stressful and has now found a way of just being. And he's taken a very simple job to maintain that sort of connectedness with society. By the way, the toilets in Japan are amazing. I mean, they are architectural beauties. It tells you a lot about the Japanese. And their toilets are something else. So you have to look that up on AI to find out what the Japanese toilets are like.

So just to recap, we're practicing to see the three characteristics of existence. That's what they're called. The first one is to see the process of desire. And it's a wrong type of desire. It's the desire that wants to cling, that wants to have it all, that wants more. In our society, that word "more" — before it used to be more of something. You know, I want more chocolate. I want more ice cream. But now it's just more.

There's more. More of everything I've got and more of what I haven't got.

And then there's this process of seeing impermanence and to bring that into our daily lives all the time, to see that everything comes to an end, everything comes to an end. And then finally, this idea of self, not-self, of constantly questioning who this person is, who am I, what am I. Just constantly questioning that.

Now, in that process, unwittingly — well, or in fact, quite self-consciously — we're drawing something away from its confusion with this psychophysical organism. And it's this awareness. Every time you're aware of something, you're pushing it away from your awareness. You're becoming more aware of what the awareness is. And it might be that at some point in your practice, either on retreat or even in daily life, if the attention is quite clear, you might just become aware of being that awareness. So you're up here, as it were, and you're being aware of being aware.

And you can glance back in, glance back into that awareness. And when you come out, you can ask yourself, what's it made of? What do I see there? What did I feel? What did I know? And you might surprise yourself to find out what that is. That's just a little exercise that I've culled from the Mahāyāna tradition.

So our practice is onward leading. That's the important thing. And even though we have dips in it, even though sometimes you look back and you think, well, I haven't changed that much — that's only because of expectation, of expecting the practice to be a magical thing. But the Buddha said — he didn't disguise it. He didn't say it was easy.

And I always like to quote this person who asked him. He said, you know, this training you're giving us is very hard. And the Buddha said, well, yeah, he said, but in the end, you achieve *nibbāna*, which is variously described. But one description would be without that unwholesome desire. And he says, yeah, but then you get to nibbāna. And then the guy says, yeah, but so what? So what's this nibbāna business? He says, when you get there, he says, you are contented and with it happy. You are contented and with it happy. And the word for that, the words for that are *tutti succuahati*. So I always say tutti frutti and succuahati.

So our practice is leading us towards a contentment with life, a general happiness, and eventually this understanding of a transcendental state, this experience of a transcendental state that we call *nibbāna*. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused even greater confusion, and that by your practice you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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