New Year Reflections

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 31:45

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambuddhasa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambuddhasa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sambha Sambuddhasa

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

First, I want to make sure that everybody understands that after this talk, the rest of the day until five o'clock is really for you. It's meant to be a time for doing some reflection about your life, about the past year, trying to make some of those resolutions for the next year which we never keep. But they're there—it's part of our good intentions. I wanted to say a few things and then perhaps contemplate the life of Saddam Hussein as a point of reflection.

First, I want to talk about what are actually monastic vows coming more clearly from the Christian tradition, but I think it might be better to just call them spiritual undertakings or communal undertakings. I've called them S to the power of four.

The first one is sufficiency, sometimes simplicity—what in the old days they used to call poverty. The second one is surrender, what in the old days they used to call obedience, but nobody likes that word these days. It's too hard for the ego. Don't want to be obedient. The third one is celibacy. Say no more. And the fourth one is service. So these are four things that we can contemplate about our lives.

The first one, this sufficiency thing—that's a nice word. What is sufficient? It brings us into this ecological business and the way the world is at this present time. What is sufficient? You just go through your wardrobe and ask yourself, well, what's actually sufficient? That doesn't mean to say you have to be rigorous to the point of self-denial or self-mortification so you end up with one pair of shoes or something. It's more the sense of recognizing that at certain times of our lives we need different shoes.

Even I have a pair of pumps, proper walking shoes. I've got a pair of ordinary shoes. I've got slippers. Now I would say that's sufficient for me. So it's not a case of having some sort of absolute standard, but just to look at what one has. Go around the house, go around your flat, your house, and just keep asking yourself, is this sufficient? Is this enough?

I remember when I sold my house just before I joined the order, I had four garden forks. I don't know how I ended up with four garden forks. But I must have just gone into a shop and thought, that's a nice garden fork, and bought it, and come back and I've got this stock of garden forks. I had lots of knives, massive amount of plates, don't know where they came from. Well, of course, I heaved them all off onto poor friends. I don't know what they've done with them.

So this idea of simplicity, sufficiency. If you look at the monastic order, going back to the Buddha's time himself, taking into consideration the climate—housing was under a tree during the dry season, in a hut during the wet season, and you built it just out of local grass. So that's how simple you can get. In this climate I suppose you need a shed with some cladding.

When you look at your house, most of us have nice houses, nice flats, and when you realize that you've got more than sufficiency, then we should relax into that. We should say, oh yeah, I'm lucky, I've got more than I actually need. If you feel guilty about it, sell your house. But I don't think you should. What I'm saying is that sometimes we get into this consumerism where we're always going for the next thing, for the next big house, the next fashion. But actually, if you keep asking yourself what's sufficient, then contentment arises easily. You're just content with that. And then you're thankful that you've got more than you feel is sufficient. So it's just a nice little reflection on the simplicity of life, sufficiency.

In the early days, the monks and nuns were happy with just rag robes taken off corpses left on the charnel grounds. That's what they did—just the animals would come and eat the corpses, or they'd just corrupt. And they sewed them together. But the Buddha wasn't happy with that. He didn't like when he saw groups of monks just in rag robes, just tied higgledy-piggledy, washed but obviously dirtied. He didn't like that at all, did he? So he ended up by asking them to sew them in a way that reminded them of paddy fields. So these robes are like paddy fields—I've got strips—and then he said to dye them with this particular nut, give them a browny colour so there was a sense of beauty or orderliness about it.

And it's for us to decide individually where that line is for us. It's an interesting question, isn't it? Because he himself probably would have lived like that for quite a long time. And then suddenly there's this idea of getting everybody to dress the same and having some sort of uniformed appearance.

In Plato's understanding, if I get it right, please correct me otherwise, these three come together—wisdom, goodness and beauty. Beauty. It's interesting that in the Abhidhamma, all those mental states that are unwholesome they actually call unskillful, but the ones that are wholesome they use the word beautiful, *sober*. So you have to be careful not to grow yourself into a rigorous prune-like existence, dried prune existence. There has to be a certain levity about the spiritual life. There has to be a certain seasoning to it.

So we can look at that, the idea of sufficiency in our lives, the idea of simplicity, and just check it out. You go back, see what you've got. It's not only with what you have, but how you live. So spiritually speaking, we have this core, we have this aim, this objective, which we call *nibbāna*. Now whether we have an idea of *Nibbāna* or what it is, the fact is that it's a matter of purifying the heart—the purification of the heart that has to go on.

So you look at your activities and ask yourself why am I doing that—to the simplest of things like why am I watching this program? Remembering that anything I attend to is an act of intention and therefore it's conditioning me. So if I attend to a program which is just silly, just nothing—it comes under wrong speech in the sense of *samphappalāpa*. How do you translate that? Gossip, useless speech. So you're watching a

program which is basically useless.

And that's time. We talk about this word *saṃvega*, which means a sense of urgency about the spiritual life. When we consider the brevity of our life, sickness, old age and death, to pull ourselves up short and ask ourselves, why am I watching that program? Why am I going to that show? Why am I going to that film? Why am I with these friends? They might not be the right friends anymore.

A lot of people who begin to move spiritually find they leave old friendships. It's not that they blame them or criticize them or anything like that. It's just that they don't draw them anymore and there's a shift over to another type of friend. That can be a conscious thing. Often it's quite unconscious in the spiritual life. You do things not fully aware that in fact you're moving. And then you realize your friends aren't calling you up because they got fed up with you and all your Buddhist stuff.

So there's that simplicity, that sufficiency, drives its flavour into all areas of our lives. All you have to keep saying is, is this sufficient? Is this simplicity? And it just clarifies life. It makes life very simple. Life itself takes a lot of stress away. Because if you're doing things which are against the flow, against the flow of your spiritual life, it's always drawing energy away. Unnecessary energy loss.

The second one is surrender, which in the old days was called obedience. So surrender in the spiritual life is abandoning one's own ideas and lending oneself to the teachings. So every time you feel that resistance to what the spiritual life is calling you to, you see it as something which is negative, drawing you away. So you have to make that act of surrender, yield. I think they have that in the States, don't they? When you go to a crossroad, yield. What a lovely word. So you have to surrender to what the spiritual life is asking you to do.

So we've got these basic rules, these basic precepts like not to kill people. But they always have their opposites. So when the first rule is not to harm any living being, that moves quickly towards to take care of all living beings. Not to take what is not freely given moves very easily into to give what is not being asked for. That's not quite right, is it? To give when asked but to give when you're not asked, where you see a need. So if you take all those negative sides, the way that you don't do things, you've only got to see that actually not doing those things—because we're in time, because we're in time and space and events have to happen—they're always beckoning you to do the opposite.

So at all times, Sunday morning when you wake up and there's that desire just to turn over, roast the other side, and then the call comes, get up and meditate. Resistance. And then just to do as the old sailors did on the hammocks, you show a leg. You shake it out and get a feel of the air out there and then shake it off and say to yourself, God, I've got to surrender to the path. I've got to be obedient to it.

We find ourselves in situations that demand that we follow a certain rule—even coming here, just following the rota, going into a workplace with their rules and regulations, going to see a friend and washing the pots like they wash the pots. Can be enormously annoying, can't it, when somebody comes in

and washes the pots in a different way than you wash? And it's just using those little situations where you're going against your own conditioning just to loosen you up a bit.

That's one of the benefits of coming on a retreat, especially a strong retreat, because it snaps some of the old habits. And then you know it gives you strength. You know that you don't have to behave like that. Even not eating after lunch. Then you realize, oh yeah, nothing happens when I don't eat after lunch. Nothing happens. And then to take a day's fast and realize that nothing happens either. And that allows us just to be more easy with life, be able to move and shift with things. Not to get upset—you get on a train and it's late. That's the way it is.

People get very upset about that. Well, I must say, the British aren't so bad. Usually a joke runs around the place. You're used to it, especially when they very truthfully announce to you that the train's been delayed because there's a cow on the line. Great announcements are made—leaves on the line, things like that. I must say, it's all got much better now. But you're driving along and you're in a traffic jam. What are you going to do? So that's when you surrender to the situation. The situation is asking you to let go of what you want and to see the situation as it is. And of course with that surrendering to the situation, yielding to the way it is, all that stress just evaporates. This is it. This is the way it is.

So that sense of surrender, of yielding, once we're in the habit of that, life just becomes a little easier for us. Even our own self-expectations. I remember somebody came to visit me in London and they got lost. Normally it would only take them so much, but for some reason they took a turn off before they knew it. A one-hour journey took something like two or three hours. And when they came, they said to me, it was amazing. In the old days, they'd have got really ratty with themselves. They'd have punched themselves in the nose and butted a wall or something. But this time, they just took it as a different way to come and visit me.

And it's that. That sense of surrendering also to ourselves, just giving up on our own dictates, little dictates that we give to ourselves. So there's that whole area of looking at your life from the point of view of surrendering, yielding to situations. Of course we draw a line—we draw a line at the point of unskillfulness, at the point where we're doing harm. Sometimes that's not such an easy line to see, but as long as we don't mean to do harm, remember there's that stress in the Buddha's teaching that to do harm which is going to lead away from the awakening, away from the path, is that harm that we intend, not that harm that we end up doing without us knowing.

In fact, the story that goes with the *Dhammapada* verse that I read out last night, the opening about everything is mind made, is a story about if you do evil, it follows you like the wheel of a cart, the hoof of an ox. And the story with that is of this *Arahant* who's doing walking meditation, and he's crunching all these ants, so there's blood all over the place. And the monks say to the Buddha, well, look what he's done. He's done this terrible harm to all these ants. The Buddha says, well, he's blind. He doesn't know what he's doing. He doesn't see where he's going. And then there's always these little add-ons, these bolt-ons that

they put about in the past life—he killed so many ants or something that it's all coming back to him.

But that aside, it's a case of recognizing that when we come across those shady areas where we don't quite know if it's right or wrong because of circumstance, not to be afraid to make decisions which you're not clear about, but intend at least to do what's for the benefit of others, benefit of oneself. And that's something the Buddha always says—for the benefit of oneself, for the benefit of the other, both for the benefit of oneself and the other. So there are times that you do things for your own benefit. That's not being selfish, that's self-caring. That's another area where we sometimes become confused.

The third one, celibacy. I always like to coin a phrase from Churchill: some are born celibate, some become celibate, and others have celibacy thrust upon them. So there's always times in our lives where we find that we're not in a relationship. So those are times to see what the role of sexuality and romance and friendship and certain types of friendships play in our lives. And to recognize that that's an option. It's not a necessity. Ever since Freud, sex has taken the role of food. But I mean, it's not. You can live without it.

So when we find ourselves in situations where there isn't that sort of relationship about, well, that's the time to really just open up to that situation and relax into it. If one wants to go there, then one makes the intention to move that way. But if it becomes an obsession, then it creates a lot of suffering, doesn't it?

Now the question is, why is celibacy seen as always part of a direct path in terms of the spiritual life, especially in Buddhism? Was it because the Buddha himself was celibate and he was just bitter about it? He didn't want anybody else to have a good time. Hell, I'm going to not do it, nobody else is going to do it. And it's because, of course, of the attachment. It's always this business of seeking happiness in the wrong place. So we can see that seeking happiness in just the physicality of a relationship, just the sexual act by itself, is empty, it doesn't go anywhere.

I usually quote Woody Allen when he says sex is an empty experience, but as empty experiences go... So that aside, romance involves a very strong connection with a person, which comes and goes of course, leading to a deeper friendship. There's that mistake of making one's own happiness dependent on that person. That's where the suffering is, because when that person leaves or dies, there's this huge hole in one's heart—grief and all that.

So you know, to see it as a time—if you find yourself not in a relationship and you want a relationship—to see that actual desire for relationship as actually seeking happiness there. So the question is, how can you have that sort of relationship without that sort of dependency? That's the conundrum.

The fact that the Buddha, having attained enlightenment, did not go back to the married life is a bit of a downer, because it then might have suggested that having attained that enlightenment, there was still that sort of re-engagement in life. But there's a suggestion there that in the Buddha's life and within the tradition that that's not possible.

Now in later Buddhism, of course, there was a movement against that, wasn't there? The lay life as being

the way that one could also attain full liberation. And I think that in the lay life, one has to look at that and see the possibility. I don't see it as something which necessarily has to be against the spiritual life at all.

I much prefer the Hindus on this one, their way of approaching the whole spiritual life through a total engagement in communal life. So the Brahminical way—I mean, it is a bit patriarchal about the man, but equally so for the woman. The first 25 years, a student, around that. Then you're supposed to marry, and you have children and go through all that. And then round about 60 or so, when all the children have grown up and all that's done, you remove yourself from society with your wife and try to live more separately, letting go of life—a renunciation, post-renunciation. And then when you're 75, you kick your wife out. It happens to your wife. But presumably she's kicked the bloke out as well. But the point is that separation at the end of life—meeting, trying to go beyond that attachment to the world.

So that, I think, is a very fruitful image to have in one's mind about the process of renunciation in the lay life.

And of course, the next bit—the next I'll talk about is service. So that's where this slips into—all these things come out in that outward flow. The sufficiency, the surrender, the celibacy is something which is internal. Of course, it affects our relationships. But then somehow there has to be an outward flowing of that, and that's the sense of service.

So it's just one of these paradoxes that we're most happy when we're giving. As soon as that giving becomes self-conscious and we're doing it in order to feel happy, in order to feel worthy, for fame and all that stuff, then it becomes cancerous. Then demands are put on that service. We only do certain things that make us happy. And you end up being a do-gooder, don't you?

A working definition of a do-gooder is the person who does you the good they want to do you, whether you want it or not. The usual example I give is if you know somebody's sick and you go along with your chicken soup, and they say, "Well, I'm just too sick. I can't have that. I'm terribly sorry." Well, of course, you understand that. You're a bit disappointed, but you understand that. And they say, "But listen, you could do something for me." You say, "Sure, what's that?" "Could you clean my toilet?" You had all these highfalutin ideas about how to help somebody. All you do is clean the toilet.

So that sense of service is giving up one's own desires for the benefit of others, looking at the world from the other's point of view.

Now, there's a scripture in which the Buddha visits these three Arahants. Now, fair enough, they're fully enlightened and haven't got any selfishness left, and they're living together perfectly peacefully. The Buddha's with them, and he asks them, he says, "How do you do it? How do you live peacefully like this?" And of course, living out in the forest, in your hut, I mean, it's very simple. But Anuruddha says, "Well, we get up in the morning, go on Pindapat—we go on our alms round—and whoever's last out prepares the stuff for people coming back. And then we all come back with our food and we share it out, and whoever's

last eating clears up." That's it. There's no—once your attention is on the other, what the other wants, life becomes very easy, isn't it? Because people are always looking out for you and you're always looking out for them.

So it becomes a sort of society based on this idea of generosity, on *dana*. As soon as you're playing your part and you're putting the other first, and then you see the other ones actually putting themselves first, then you get that shaking, don't you? So it needs a communal effort for everybody to live on behalf of the other. And because everybody's looking out for the other, then you have this harmony. At least that's the theory.

But as soon as somebody holds a position, you've had it. In the Buddhist order, there are these rules of how to work with disputes. So there are those disputes that have to be put under the mat and just leave it alone because you just get so caught up in what's right, what's wrong.

But keeping that in mind, I suppose the danger of putting the other first, especially with others who aren't doing that, is that they can abuse you. But generosity doesn't demand that you find yourself being abused, being used. You yourself have to be sensitive to that.

So these are four ways that you can look back on the years—on what you have and what you do with your life. The idea of sufficiency, the idea of surrendering to the path, doing what the path asks, that whole area of relationship—what sort of relationships do you want to cultivate—and the idea of service. It's just four points of recollection.

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