

Need, Sufficiency and Greed

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 18:01

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble, and fully self-awakened.

This evening, I thought to tackle this business of need, sufficiency and greed. As you know, in the UK here—well, I think it's all over the world, but in Europe and the UK—we've got these huge national debts, and in the UK it's made worse by the wonderful Brexit deal that was made. Everybody's predicting high inflation and a downturn. This is frightening, because you lose your savings, you might lose your work—it can all be very upsetting.

I just thought, well, what we need to do is undermine the fear and anxiety by asking ourselves: what do we actually need? What I want to do is explain to you—and most of you won't know—what the rules for the monks are when it comes to their physical well-being.

The first one is shelter. In the discourse on how to establish right mindfulness, the Buddha said that we should be happy with the wilderness, a root of a tree, or an empty hut. Those reflect the three seasons. You want a hut when it rains, in the rainy season. You want a tree in the hot season. And in the cool season, well, you can sleep anywhere and do your meditation anywhere.

In fact, if I remember rightly, when the Buddha settled down to his meditation which brought about the liberation, the enlightenment, near a place called Uruvela—which is now, of course, Bodh Gaya—it sounds as though it was a cool season, which makes a lot of sense. If you're going to make a big effort, you want it to be cool.

When we look around our houses, our flats, or whatever we're living, you can ask yourself: what do you actually need? Not what you want or even what is sufficient, but what do you actually need? I'm thinking of things like heating. There was a little article where a man had explained that when he called up the electrical company, they told him, "Well, to reduce heating, just heat one room." He seemed to be quite upset by that. He had a great big—he sounded as though he lived on his own. I mean, if he had a family, that's different, of course. But living on his own in a house, he was quite upset that he had now reduced his heating to one room. Well, if you think about what you actually need, it probably is just the room you're generally living in.

I met somebody at Gaia House when I was teaching there—I've known him for a long time. He says during winter, he lives at 12 degrees centigrade. You'd have to—if you really want to know how he does it, I can

always put you in touch with him. But that's what he actually gets down to: 12 degrees. Then he says, if it's under 12, then he starts to lose it. He can feel the body heat really reducing too much. So that's all he needs—just 12 degrees. But of course, we tend to walk around our houses at 25 degrees. In the middle of winter, you find people wearing just a T-shirt walking around the house.

Again, if the price of gas and all this is going to go up, well, it throws us back on ourselves. How much do you actually need? There was an article for people who are really poor, who are really going to have real problems, that they can buy these rather cheap jackets and pullovers that are heated. You just stick the plug in and the batteries fill up and then the body armour gives you heat.

Again, it's just a reflection on—one exercise I was going to suggest at the end was: what would you take with you? What would you need if you were a refugee? Of course, there are people who are homeless. We know that people are living really rough, even in the depths of winter. It's not a case of getting to a point where we're like that, but it's a good question to ask. When it comes to dwelling, what do I actually need?

I lived for quite some time just in a bedsit. It was in the house of my teacher in Birmingham, and she had prepared this room specifically for a monk. It was just a bed, a place to sit next to the fire—a gas fire. On one side was just a small stove, a fridge, and a little cabinet for pots and pans and stuff like that. I was very happy.

So that's to do with dwelling—what do you actually need? Now when it comes to food, the monastic has to go out with his bowl and just accept what's given. There were famines in those days, and often they would have to just make do with whatever was put in the bowl in terms of rice.

The Buddha—well, lay people complained to the Buddha that these monks and nuns were turning up at all times of the day and asking for food and being quite a nuisance. So he made a rule. He said, "Right, well, from now on, you have to go out in the early hours or during the morning on alms round and you have to finish eating and everything else by noon."

There were a lot of monks who rejected that—they got very upset. They would normally have had an evening meal, they would normally have had three meals a day. So there was a bit of a rebellion. The Buddha said, "Look, if you want to belong to this dispensation, then that's what you're going to have to do." For the most part, monks try to keep that rule.

Again, it's a case of: how much food do you actually need? Of course, there's a distinction between good food and food which is not so good for the body. That's the problem, I think, with people on these food banks. When you get a shot of a food bank, some of it tends to be all tins, for heaven's sake.

But again, it's just settling down and thinking to yourself, making up a little menu for yourself which is really basic. When I was in India, the regular food for the ordinary worker, the ordinary person in North India, was dal, vegetable curry, and a chapati. That's what you got every day. You didn't say, "Well, I'm going to have a Chinese today." It was just dal, vegetable curry, and a chapati. That's what you made do

with.

Interestingly enough, when they started to recruit men during conscription for the Second World War, they were really taken aback to find that many of the men weren't having three meals a day at all. They were actually eating really badly and were happy to join the army just to get some decent food.

Another little exercise you might set yourself for a little while is to have a day as if you were poor—as if you couldn't just buy the food you need. What would you eat? What would sustain you for that day?

Again, it's just taking away this fear that if we become very poor for one reason or another, that's not the end of the world. You just make do. I'm old enough to have memories of just after the war. I remember going to my aunt's for food. On the toast, you see, you put the butter on the toast and then you scraped it off, and what you were left with was just a suggestion. Then they did the same with the jam. I couldn't believe it—I was only a kid, I must have been about six or seven, just looking at this. You put jam on the bread and then scraped it all off and then stuck it on another piece. All these were considered luxury. The food was the bread itself.

When it comes to clothing, again, the Buddha noticed that people were coming away with huge amounts of cloth from the laypeople. So he actually set out one night, on a cold night—this would have been the cold season—to actually decide how many robes you actually need. In the beginning of the night, he had his lower robe and the top robe, this one here. Then as the night got colder, he needed another robe, so he took another robe. Then towards the end of the night—the coldest hour is just before dawn—he felt he needed one more, so he put the last two together. Those are your three robes: the lower robe, the upper robe, and the *saṅghāti*, the one that you see monks putting over their shoulder. That was it. That was the rule then—that's all you could have.

Of course, rules are rules, and you get ways around it by having extra cloth, which is a bit cheeky, I know. But it was just coming down to what do you actually need? I mean, of course we're talking about the tropics, but what do you actually need? How many coats do you need? How many pair of shoes do you need?

It's just drawing ourselves down to that basic need that I think gets rid of a lot of the fear that comes from a loss of wealth—whatever that wealth is—a loss of your job and so on and so forth.

Just as an aside, of course, it does make us more aware of where we're getting our clothes from. I met somebody and they showed me this—I was in Shropshire and they showed me this jumper they just bought. They said they bought it for three or four pounds or something. They'd gone to this other shop, probably Marks and Spencer's, and it was a similar jumper—it was 12 pounds. When I said to them, "Yeah, but this is probably made in one of those satanic sweatshops in Bangladesh," it took them by surprise. It hadn't even occurred to them to think that way.

Now the final one—so we've done shelter, food, clothing. The final one is medicine. The Buddha said that

we should be contented with fermented cow's urine. That might come as a big surprise. But in fact, it's a very well-known Ayurvedic medicine. It's an antibiotic, anti-fungal, and if you take it regularly, it maintains the homeostasis of the body to lower cholesterol, relieve tension, enhance liver function, and slow down aging. So tomorrow morning, you need to get out there and get your bottle of fermented cow's urine.

That's what we're supposed to be happy with. Now, frankly, I've never tried it. So I don't want to say whether it's any good or not. But it's definitely Ayurvedic medicine, and people do drink it.

Here we have this whole business of really asking ourselves what we need—what we actually need to sustain life. This is only the physical needs. I mean, there's also the other side—our cultural needs, our heart needs and things like that. In the Buddha's instructions to the monks, basically the day was to be spent meditating and remembering and studying and understanding the Dharma. In those days, of course, you had to memorise the teaching—they didn't have clever little gadgets like we've got to remember things.

One exercise you can just set yourself is to live one day—one day—with just what you need and just find out for yourself.

The second one is more to do with just lifting the level of it to sufficiency. That depends, I think, a lot on our culture. For instance, when it comes to clothes, people need a set of clothes for work, they need a set of clothes for leisure, a set of clothes for climbing mountains and things like that. So it's not a case of making ourselves miserable, but just being clear in ourselves as to what we actually need.

I think that if you spend just one day with need, that undermines a lot of the fear and anxiety that comes about with the loss of wealth—no matter how much or how little wealth you had—to suddenly find yourself unemployed and on the dole, which is pretty miserable. You just find you can live with it, at least at a physical level.

Then, of course, there's a final one of greed. Well, that takes us to another step. I think most of us know when we're being greedy. I don't think I need to go into that too much.

So, a couple of exercises there. When it comes to food, just to have one day with what you feel is the cheapest and most sustainable food that you could have that was good for the body. Just one day a week, just to remind ourselves.

When it comes to clothes, just go through the wardrobe and just see how much of clothes you're not wearing. I remember somebody was in the habit of, in their wardrobe, if they used a piece from it—a shirt or some sort of dress—they would put it at one end. Then over the year, they would see all the clothes they hadn't actually used and they would take them down to the charity shop.

There's all sorts of little tricks that we can play on ourselves in order to actually just come down to

sufficiency. Eventually it saves a lot of money. When it comes to heating, that's really quite crucial for us these days. Our heating bill is going to go up something awful. But just by being careful with it and wearing jumpers, it won't be that heavy on us, I don't think.

Very good. So, I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused any confusion, and that by your devotion to practice and the practice of poverty—simplicity, that's the word, simplicity—you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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