Faith, Hope, and Aspiration on the Path to Awakening

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 19:15

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa — homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So we're looking at this idea of hope. At the top of my page, I've got faith, hope, aspiration, expectation, disappointment. So the idea is to define all this and to see what the Buddha is actually saying.

Faith, of course, often translated as confidence or trust, is a foundational virtue. It's one of the five spiritual faculties: faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and insight wisdom. For our purposes, there are two pretty obvious enemies. One is to turn it into a belief system, which would then stop you from investigating. So it's the process of investigation, which is the process of liberation. And the subtle one — and now I'm going to use the word hope because that's how it's defined in the scriptures — is sceptical doubt. We'll come to that a little later.

So we've got to make clear what we mean by faith, and then we can understand a bit more the other stuff. Remember that all our problems root back into this idea of a self, which doesn't like to — it likes to know what's going to happen. It's forever planning, organising the future. And once we come across the Buddha Dharma, we hear about this goal, *Nibbāna*. For some of us anyway, we don't have an idea of what Nibbāna is, and yet there's some sort of hazy concept. And we're told it's the end of suffering, the end of compulsive desiring. That doesn't tell us what the actual experience is.

Even when the Buddha's explicit — so-called explicit anyway — talks about a consciousness without boundary, without an object, full of light, we still have to exercise our imagination to come up with something. And then we have an idea that this is what Nibbāna is. So we strive. The yogi sits full throttle, noting diligently the three characteristics of existence — how we create suffering through wrong desire, impermanence, not-self — but subconsciously somewhere trying to achieve the escape from suffering, which is another way of expressing Nibbāna.

Of course, it ends with disappointment, which it has to do because the subtle aim is not true. We're chasing a false idea, a fake idea. And of course, it's exhausting. You're making this great big effort, getting nowhere.

So what we have to understand is that when we're practising, the purpose is just to see these three characteristics. The subtlety of the Buddha's teaching is to distinguish between an aim, which is a bit fuzzy

for us, and the immediate objective which gets us there, which is to observe and examine exactly what's before us, what we're actually experiencing at this moment. And those are the three characteristics.

We've got an example of wrong effort from a monk called Sona. He was desperately trying to get fully liberated and over-efforting. He was about to leave the order when the news came to the Buddha. He goes to see him and talks about tuning a veena — that's an instrument like a lute. Too tight, doesn't work; too loose, you don't get the note. And so ultimately, you've got to get it just right. Getting it right is to do with intention. Once the intention is right, which is just to discover experience, the three characteristics, that's enough. We don't have to worry about the future.

Anyway, you can understand from our life experience that having expectations often leads to disappointment.

Now, in the actual discourses, the word for hope, *asa*, doesn't get good press at all. It seems to be understood as a subtle form of craving. And it's linked to failure and suffering in itself because it's never fulfilled. Somehow it's got to be transcended. So the Buddha talks about *nirāsa*, which we translate as hopelessness. Well, that gets us towards despair. So there must be some misunderstanding here somewhere.

Anyway, I'll give you a flavour of what it says in the discourses. This is one living in hope and one who has abandoned hope. One who is cut off, lost, and one who's at peace. So one who lives in hope is going to be cut off and lost. That doesn't sound so good for us. Then it goes on: hope is suffering in the world. The person who lives with hope is called one who is defeated. When one's hope fails, disappointment arises and it is suffering.

Then we've got a verse from a nun, Mutateri — one of the enlightened nuns of the period — translated by Norman, who's an expert in this. Somehow she says, "That hope which some have here for children and wives and for the love of a woman, such hope does not apply to me." So I don't quite know how that fits her as a woman, but anyway. Again, she's abandoned all worldly hopes, at least.

So you can see that in the scriptures, in the discourses, hope has a shade of yearning for some outcome, slips into expectation.

Now, in the Mahāyāna, it's redeemed, at least in our understanding of hope. But they do use a different word, *praṇidhāna*, which in the Pali, the language of our discourses, is *paṇidhāna*, which means aspiration, a longing. So it fits into the Mahāyāna because of their bodhicitta ideal, which is a heart devoted to awakening through compassion. The Bodhisattva vow, as I think most of you know, is a vow to redeem everyone before yourself. It's a universal awakening rather than a personal attainment. But again, that word — there is a word in Sanskrit, *āśā*, which means hope — it's not used.

So it's all a bit semantic. We have to just work out what this actually means. But of course, in our terms, if there's no hope, then the practice feels as though it's going to run into a cul-de-sac.

If we look at the word aspiration, that I think gets us better on the path. Here we have a word like *chanda*. Chanda is one of the four bases of spiritual power, which I covered in January 2023. I'm sure you all remember it. The other three of the four bases are effort, consciousness, and investigation. We said at the time that these four bases of power can be used in ordinary daily life. You need obviously a desire to attain, to achieve something. And then you need the effort to get there. You need consciousness, of course. And then you need the ability to figure out what to do — the investigation.

So here we have this word chanda, which means a very strong desire. And then we have the word *saṃveg a*. The Buddha goes on about saṃvega. This is a religious fervour. It's a heartfelt desire to attain something.

Now, in the Visuddhimagga, which is the medieval spiritual manual, he points to eight objects which induce this devotion, give us a sense of urgency about our practice. I don't think any of them will come as a surprise. Birth, ageing, sickness and death, of course — contemplating those. Contemplating the idea that if we don't do the practice and we fall into error, we'll end up in one of the *apāya* realms, which is either purgatory — sometimes that's translated as hell, but it's not permanent, remember, thank heavens. And then there's rebirth as an animal or as a hungry ghost, always feeling empty, and in the realm of conflict, the asura realm. And of course, finally, as number eight, there is just being here in this world of *saṃsāra*, the world of onward going led by delusion.

But you can see that these realms are also quite obvious to us right here and now in the world. This desire, this eagerness to become liberated, you have to be careful that it doesn't corrupt into expectation. And this is where faith comes in really. We've got faith, which — remember — not a belief. It's a sense of trust, of confidence. Without that, of course, you don't do anything. I mean, the obvious enemy here is sceptical doubt, which is obviously based on, or usually based on, some sort of fear — fear of failure, fear of being fooled and so on.

If we don't have that faith, then you don't make a decision. You can't make a decision. You can't act. And this is true in daily life. It can become a bit destructive. If a person can't make up their mind about someone they're attracted to, a job they've applied for, well, the opportunity just slips away. I had a student actually for a while who couldn't decide whether to get out of bed or not. It can become a bit of a mental illness, I think.

So even if we have this great confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha and the Eightfold Path, it doesn't mean it's unshakeable until we reach first path and fruit. That's when we have such a clear insight into one of those three characteristics of existence that our faith becomes unshakeable. We just know it's right. But until then, there's always a danger of losing it. And one of them is the bad behaviour of monks. Everybody goes around saying it's hypocritical. But the other, of course, is that we have this unrealistic aim. That's the expectation. And then we drop out and we try something else.

Now for some people who achieve liberation, faith is their dominant quality. It doesn't mean to say they

don't have to understand or experience the three characteristics of existence. It just means that it doesn't have to be so penetrative. They're driven on by a sense of devotion. The Buddha qualifies that. He says there are two people: those who are driven by faith and those who are driven by curiosity and usually have a better intelligence in order to achieve a deeper insight.

We have somebody called Puna. He comes up in the Dhammapada. Puna, he was a monk. He said of himself, whenever he learned a verse, a new verse from the Buddha, it kicked the one he just learned out of his head. So he didn't have a very good memory. And his brother told him, "Well, you know, you're just not going to understand the Dharma and you may as well leave and do something useful in lay life."

When the Buddha heard about this, he went to see him. And he knew of the devotion that this Puna had towards himself and towards the practice, that he trusted him implicitly. So he gave him a cloth to rub. And while he's rubbing the cloth, he's supposed to be saying "impermanence, impermanence," just watching impermanence. Well, he became fully liberated. And I don't think it works for everybody, but you can have a go.

So that means that we don't have to have any big intellect to become liberated. It's really to do with opening up the intuitive intelligence, which is the active side of awareness. Remember that *sati* is *satipañña*. It's a passive awareness, observing awareness — feeling, letting the information come. And then that moment of grasping — that's the intelligence working, the intuitive, grasping intelligence.

What of hope as such, and where does this aspiration come from? We have to understand that there's always going to be a subtle desire of trying to attain something for me. And that's, of course, this *taṇhā*, which translates as thirst. It's a different type of taṇhā.

Secondly, we see the impermanence. While we're meditating, while we're actually practising, we can see the role of this taṇhā, this desire, and how that's a direct agent of creating suffering for ourselves. While we're practising we see impermanence, we can see things that are insubstantial — they're just arising and passing away, there's nothing that remains. And so every so often by being in that position we come across a hint as to what Nibbāna is.

And here's where our real hope is grounded. It's not in some future attainment. It's grounded in the fact that we can see these three characteristics more and more clearly. And then there comes that patience to await for the great day of awakening.

Just as two asides — because we're embedded in society and the way we live, the way we interact, the way we work, it affects others. So even on a day when we feel depressed, when things aren't going our way, there's the ability to rest somewhere within ourselves in the assurance of the Dharma that gives us an air of acceptance. This is the way it is. And calmness — this too will pass. And so as we're heading along the path, there comes more and more acceptance, more and more contentment. That's how it works.

It's also of great value when we come to die. To believe on our deathbed that we're dying into some sort of

annihilation — it's not a particularly comforting thought. A poor return for a life that's generally done the best it can for the better of ourselves and others. Some say they are accepting this as humanist, but that's, of course, before the dying process.

I struggled myself with this contemplation in my twenties. But of course, at that time, you never believe you're going to die. That's the presumption of youth. Even so, it did lead me to an understanding or to an experience that proved to me personally that death wasn't an end and that it was, in fact, another beginning.

Similarly, when somebody is dying, it makes it easier for us to know that there is a purpose to life and that we don't have to rely on an outer power or a miracle to stop the process, but more accepting of it. We have the example of the Buddha, of course, in his death, that we call the *parinibbāna*, total Nibbāna, which gives us an example of someone who reaches the goal just ready to let go of life. Even as he's dying, he's asking people around him if they've got any last questions. And then he says, "Don't be shy in asking and then regret that you didn't take this opportunity to do so."

So in the actual discourses, when you read it and you come across the word hope and it says it's an absolute waste of time, it's a terrible thing to have, I think it's better to translate it as expectation. And that there is an aspiration, a real grounded hope through the practice. That's where the hope is grounded. That we can see clearly that this desire is the direct cause of attachment, which creates suffering, et cetera. And that we can actually get rid of it. We just don't empower it and it just disappears. And it's doing that until we finally get down to the core desire which arises out of that sense of self — the core desire of wanting to become, wanting to become a person. That's your core, that's the core desire that we're really working with.

So it energises our practice if we do it that way. You just have to be careful it doesn't corrupt into expectation. It's really putting our attention on process and abandoning any — I dare say hope — just not thinking about progress. Abandon progress and put your full attention upon process. That's it.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that by your practice you will find that path to liberation sooner, of course, rather than later.

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