

The Divine Abodes

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 28:27

Foundation Course 2, Talk 5, The Divine Abodes

The First Noble Truth states that life itself is suffering. A great deal of conversation and talks from monks, nuns and lay people in Buddhism tend to concentrate on the problem of suffering, physical pain, mental anguish or social injustice and so on, and how we are to overcome it. But too little is said of life after you do overcome these tribulations, or what life is like when all suffering is dispelled. Is life without pleasure-seeking and without mental anguish just a bland existence, a sort of grey emotional life where nothing happens?

The Buddha grew up in a society where the dominant beliefs were known as Brahmanism. The chief priests of this society were known as Brahmins, meaning followers of Brahma. In fact, the early followers of the Buddha did not call themselves Buddhists, but Sadamins, followers of the real truth. Brahma was the highest god and the purpose of life for Brahmanism was the summation of all their endeavour was to be one with Brahma.

Since the Buddha declared there was no personality god or creator or divine being, Brahma was demoted to being the chief inhabitant of the highest heavenly plane, or Brahma was seen as the highest mind achievable by human beings before *Nibbāna*. So when the Buddha was asked what was it like to be a Brahma realm dweller, a being whose mind was so highly developed, he replied that such a being was always within one of four mental states: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, or equanimity. In other words, the greatest God, or the highest mind in all the universe, dwelt in those sorts of mental states all the time.

The enlightened mind, the Buddha, the saint, or *Arahant*, while alive, dwells always within these states. So this is the end product mentally of all our training. All this work we are doing on ourselves in meditation sitting and mindfulness in meditative life. This is what we as meditators are aiming to achieve. A mind continually in states of friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy or equanimity.

Unlike *Nibbāna*, unlike transcendental insight, which is beyond our power to control, these four dwelling places of Brahma, the *Brahmavihāra*, or the divine abodes, as they are called, can actually be developed by us in a positive and active way. As these states of mind become more and more developed in us, we will scotch the myth that Buddhism is a selfish path, teaching a way of detachment and cold indifference.

The highest of the four states is equanimity. Equanimity means a balanced mind, a mind that is impartial, does not get caught up in opinions and views. It is the mind within which the intuition has full freedom,

unencumbered by prejudice, bias or any delusion, a mind that is at peace with itself and with the world. Equanimity is the peaceful heart, calm, untroubled, like a placid lake, in whose waters the sky is mirrored perfectly without distortion.

We can test our own equanimity in the way we react to what the Buddha calls the eight worldly conditions. These are gain and loss, fame and loss of fame, praise and blame, happiness and pain. True equanimity does not arise out of indifference, a what does it matter anyway, a carelessness, an apathy. This attitude is actually callousness, a hardening of the heart. True equanimity arises out of wisdom insight, the personal experiential knowledge that everything is passing, the personal experiential knowledge that there is no permanent self in the body and mind. There is nothing that constitutes a permanent ego, a substantial self. Nothing in reality belongs to a me, is mine.

Whether we win a million on the pools or lose it all on the dogs, we remain equanimous, even-minded, calm. Sometimes we have many friends, many parties to go to. Other times we seem to be alone, unwanted, devoid of friendship. Yet we remain even-minded, calm-hearted. Sometimes at work, in the family, everyone is praising us, saying how wonderful we are, what successes. Other times we can't seem to do anything right, the boss breathing down our necks, the husband, the wife, the kids all complaining. Praise or blame, we remain even, unruffled, our hearts calm and peaceful.

Many is the time we wake up happy, life's wonderful, we're going on holiday. Many is the time we wake up dreadful, life's terrible, we're going to work. What does it matter to the even-minded, the calm-hearted? Whatever happens, in the person whose equanimity is highly developed, she remains balanced in mind, clear-sighted. He remains calm in heart, peaceful within himself.

This mental quality of equanimity is extremely important in our meditation practice. Awareness is the brightness of the mind, that knowing what is happening. Equanimity is the ability of the mind to stay with the object of meditation without getting caught up in it, without reacting to it. When we are meditating we can occasionally make a mental check. Am I really aware? Am I really awake? Am I really equanimous? Am I really still, deep inside? Is my awareness sitting in the stillness of equanimity, or is it desperately trying to hold its own, fighting against the onslaughts of emotion and thoughts?

If we see in our meditation that we are losing this balance, this calmness, we should go back to the breath until we re-establish the equanimous calm base. When we realise the role of equanimity in meditation, how important it is to establish a calm, balanced mind, we also come to know how important it is in our daily lives. No matter what negativity we feel in ourselves, we just observe it and keep that still centre within us. No matter what negativity we are facing from another, we don't lose our balance. We are aware of our reactions but we don't entertain them and act from that point. We don't react to outside stimuli, outside causes. We act from, we move outward from the centre of balance, the equipoise, the calm heart and mind.

But how do we move out? How do we respond from this centre of inward balance? The way we will

respond will be in the three other modes, the three other divine abodes. If our response to ourselves and to others is coming from that inner stillness where intuitive wisdom resides, we will always respond with loving kindness, or compassion, or sympathetic joy, as the situation warrants. And where these reactions are inappropriate, we will simply remain calm, balanced, equanimous. Equanimity is our home base.

Before we go further, I'd like to introduce you to a very important work. Once the Buddha died, there grew up an industry of commentary and commentary upon the commentaries. The original commentaries are also considered very much part of the Theravada teaching, and other schools of Buddhism also have their own commentaries. One of the principal figures, the most famous, was a monk, Buddhaghosa, who came from Buddhagaya, the place of Buddha's enlightenment. To prove his competence, he set about writing a summary of all the Buddha's teachings. The work is known as the *Visuddhimagga*, the Path of Freedom, and it is recognised as one of the greatest books on spiritual development ever produced. A lot of what I say here is taken from that book.

Unfortunately, I don't recommend it to the beginner because it is a scholarly work, full of technical language and very dry, very dry indeed. Words are defined in this book in a way which seems strange to us, but actually illuminates a lot for us. That may be obscure. It's done like this. Take a flame, a flame of a match. The characteristic mark of a flame is heat. The function is to consume the wood. Its manifestation is light, and its near cause is the material to be burnt. It also has an inner enemy, damp in the material, and an outer enemy, an unexpected gust of wind. So a word is defined by its characteristic mark, its function, its manifestation, its near cause, its inner enemy and its outer enemy.

Sympathetic joy, *muditā*, has as its characteristic mark the gladdening of others. When one is joyful, that joy is infective. How different it is when you work with someone who's happy, happy at their work and even happy by nature. Even when such a person is with someone who is depressed or angry, that inner joy undermines the despair, the hatred of the other. Its function is to do away with envy and jealousy so that it manifests itself as joy and happiness in others' success. Its near cause is the ability to rejoice in the success of others.

How do we react when an acquaintance buys a better car than we have, when others get the promotion we wanted? You can see that this joy, like equanimity, rests on non-attachment, that understanding of self, me, mine, as only conventional truths. If we can only be joyful for ourselves and expect others to be happy at our success, our capacity for joy is greatly diminished, for we shall be overcome by envy and jealousy of others. This is the inner enemy, only being able to rejoice in oneself. That's why *muditā* is termed sympathetic joy, because our sense of joy should be universal. When it is universal, it will lack its outer edges of aversion, envy, jealousy and boredom, and naturally rejoice in others.

Cultivating this sympathetic joy is also important for meditators. No matter how we feel inside, depressed, anxious, frustrated and so on, our hearts are turned outwards to be with others in a joyful way. Some people think this is false, that it's two-faced, but it's only two-faced if we pretend to be joyful. What we

need to do is determine to put our attention into being with the other, to be with the other in a sympathetic, supportive and friendly way as the occasion demands. As to our internal moods, we can put them to the side for the time being and look at them later in meditation.

It comes as a great surprise to those who practise this that the energy being absorbed by our negativity is displaced, drawn out of there into our positive disposition by the very will, the very intention to be positive, in this case joyful. This is the power of positive thinking. What's more, this joy turns up as one of the factors of enlightenment, here called *pīti*. This is the joy of interest. As you determine to meditate, to cut through the moods and really concentrate, as you become absorbed, then that watchful interest will arise. That interest comes with joy and both are factors that need to be there for the intuitive faculty to activate and intuit *Nibbāna*. So here, we also have a solution for our boredom and depression. We find something to do, wholesome of course, we put our minds to it, and lo and behold, just by making the effort, interest and joy arise.

Friendliness, open-heartedness, goodwill, loving-kindness, love in this sense is *mettā*. All these qualities are its characteristic mark, and its function is to promote and develop these very qualities. The near cause that makes such a mind arise is the ability to see the lovable-ness in all beings. Here we come up against the problem of non-attachment. If I'm not supposed to be attached to anything, how can I love it? But attachment is when the object of love is defined as mine, belonging to me, or therefore my satisfaction. This is why affection and lust are the inner enemies.

Your child comes home with a black eye. All hell's let loose. You want to know who did it. Why wasn't it stopped? You feel it terribly. When Jack the lad, the neighbour's son, comes home with a black eye, it's what he deserves. That'll teach him. That love of someone or something that we define as belonging to me is what attached love is, attached to a definition of me. Because of this, we love only what pleases us.

If Victoria sees herself as a yuppie and has to walk down the street with a man dressed like a tramp, she'll keep a distance to make sure that everyone knows that he's not really with her. Such a man can never be her man, her boyfriend, her husband. This is why snobbery and classism are so destructive to relationships. Other people are turned into objects that signify a person's status. Just like cars, owning a Jaguar or a Mini says something about the owner.

If a man has a Clint Eastwood complex, he doesn't want to be seen with a woman who doesn't look like Miss World. If he is with a woman who looks like Miss World, he feels wonderful. But if he's with a Miss Universe, he feels threatened and humiliated. He loves women only in that they enhance his image of himself. This is why sexism is so destructive to relationship. It turns the other into an object, an object which is there to please. If all these objects fail to please, then we hate them.

When two people fall in love in sweet infatuation, what's happening? It's ego meet ego. On the physical, emotional and mental level, for those few precious days, weeks or months, it seems that two are one. The other looks supremely beautiful, is totally loving and kind and so intelligent. Then the charm begins to

wear off. Suddenly, ego doesn't mirror ego. Before they know it, these two lovebirds are bickering and biting each other. If they break up, they say in a bewildered way, I don't know what attracted me. Of course, in a long-lasting relationship, these times are overcome, but through a higher love not based on sensual attraction.

This higher love, *mettā*, will manifest as acceptance, goodwill, commitment, friendliness, care, and so on. If a partnership ever gets into a position of ill will and hatred, then it is consorting with the outer enemy. Lust and affection, or ill will, destroy true friendship. Lust centres on the personal physical satisfaction, the body beautiful, to the detriment of communication through touch and tenderness. Affection centres on the ego desires, what pleases me, without taking the other into consideration, and so feels to the other like an imprisonment. Ill will blocks any attempt of the other to approach or to make reconciliation.

If we look at it another way, usually our attachments are first and foremost to our closest family, then relatives and friends, then place of birth, our country, then to the ethnic group or so-called race, and finally to all human beings. So long as our attachments always take this order, everything up the scale undermines, contradicts what's below. If my friend asks me for something, I don't see his request as independent, but in relation to these attachments. I only do that thing for close family. If someone of another ethnic group has success, I moan. I say our group should have it.

These attitudes reverse themselves and our hearts open up when we define ourselves first and foremost as human beings, then belonging to the different subgroups. This is one way to approach unbranded, impartial, universal, boundless love. This is what the Buddha meant by *mettā*.

Finally, there is compassion. According to the *Visuddhimagga*, the path of freedom, compassion has the characteristic of wanting to alleviate suffering. Its function is to make us unable to bear another person's suffering so that we are motivated to do something about it. Its near cause is the seeing of the helplessness in the sufferer. And when we act compassionately, it manifests as the opposite of cruelty, a caring concern. Cruelty itself is seen as the outer enemy. If we are cruel of heart, we enjoy inflicting pain on another. The exact opposite. The inner enemy, and this is difficult for us in the West to accept at first, is grief.

To illustrate all this, I'd like to take a story from the magnificent Winnie the Pooh, Pooh Bear herself. No doubt, in my mind, a very enlightened being, even if only a bear of little brain. The story I'd like to centre on is Eeyore's birthday. When Pooh happens upon Eeyore, he's a very sad donkey indeed. Everyone's forgotten his birthday. Pooh, once he's realised what is wrong, it takes him a little while, decides to tackle the problem at heart. Even though he too had forgotten Eeyore's birthday, at least he could still get him a present and put things aright.

He rushes off home, only to find Piglet knocking on his door. When Piglet finds out it's Eeyore's birthday, he wants to share Pooh's present. Pooh tells him that that's not a good idea, so Piglet rushes off to get a present of his own. Pooh decides to give Eeyore a jar of honey. Unfortunately on the way, none too

mindful, he gets a little peckish and eats the honey. When he realises what he's done, he saves the day by realising he can give the empty jar to Eeyore as a useful pot.

Little Piglet, meanwhile, went to get a balloon left over from a party and is racing towards Eeyore, hoping to get there before Pooh to give Eeyore the impression that he'd remembered his birthday without anyone telling him. Unfortunately, he slips and bursts the balloon. In the end, Piglet arrives with the burst balloon and Pooh with his useful pot. After a heart-rending scene, they leave Eeyore as happy as a donkey could be, for Eeyore, though disappointed with the balloon being burst, has now found a wonderful pastime, putting it in and pulling it out of his useful pot. To get the full delight of the story, please read the originals.

The conversation is very funny. Anyway, the point of my retelling the story here is to point out what compassion is, and how Pooh Bear here is without doubt a very compassionate little being.

When Pooh sees Eeyore and hears his tale, he doesn't do what we would likely do. He doesn't collude and build up a world of woe. "Yes, you're right, Eeyore, the world's terrible. Nobody remembers birthdays. People aren't kind anymore. It's rotten. The world, the people in it," and so on and so on. We think that this indulgence of self-pity and righteous indignation is a way of consoling someone. But in fact, this sort of self-indulgent whinging simply adds to the overall feelings of depression and sorrow. It's bad enough for Eeyore to realise that everyone's forgotten his birthday without being told that that's how the world really is.

The other course we would take is the "oh come on, pull your socks up, Eeyore," and the kick-in-the-pants routine. No pity here, but anger and aversion at others' depression and self-pity. Of course, such an action would be to oppress poor Eeyore the more, seeing that no one understands his sorrow and actually blames him for it.

No, Pooh Bear does neither. They had all forgotten Eeyore's birthday. That's the problem. What to do? Off he goes to get a present, thereby turning the situation into one of joy. That's compassion: treating the problem, allaying the suffering.

Piglet, of course, wants to do that also, but he also wants to give Eeyore the wrong impression that he's remembered his birthday. He wants to be Eeyore's best friend. It's still compassion, all right, but compassion with ego added.

We can test our compassion in ordinary daily life. What is our reaction to other people's suffering? Do we ignore it? Do we get irritated by it? Do we want to do something about it purely, or for recognition? Unfortunately, until our hearts are totally purified, all our compassionate actions will have some small ingredient of ego in there somewhere. Whenever we help someone, we need to be aware — just aware — of such reactions: the wholesome one of compassion, and the unwholesome ones of indifference, aversion, selfishness, pride, and so on.

Just notice the unwholesome ones. Don't entertain them, don't pay any attention to them, don't give them

any importance, don't entertain any feelings of guilt. Realise that all such thoughts and feelings are just products of past unwholesome conditioning. Put all the energy we have into solving the problem. Solving the problem is what compassion is.

While solving the problem, we may need to console, to empathise, to say encouraging things, but the real motivation is to solve the problem. If after our action we feel good, we notice how much we esteem ourselves, how good we think we are — that's just the product of the ego-added ingredient to our good actions. Let it be. For if we entertain such thoughts, we shall find ourselves doing good in order to feel good ourselves. That's the do-gooder complex. If you've ever been the object of the attentions of a do-gooder, you'll understand what I mean when I say that the sufferer becomes a patient, an object to be taken care of. It can be quite stifling.

It is impossible to be totally compassionate so long as there is ego, selfishness within us. But we still have to strive. In the striving, we will discover selfish attitudes underlying our compassion — the inner enemies. Slowly, this wisdom will lead to separating out those selfish elements until they become isolated. In their isolation, they will lose their influence over us and seem like cheeky flies to be gently wafted away.

Doing what we can to alleviate another's suffering is enough. We can only do what we can do. What's the point of grief? Pooh does not grieve over Eeyore's plight. Pooh doesn't start to cry over it.

If I go to the doctor to find out the results of an X-ray, and he pulls it out, holds it to the light, points tremblingly at the dark spot, and collapses into a heap of sobs while telling me I only have three weeks to live, how does that make me feel? Here am I, trying to come to terms with this traumatic news, while a part of me wants to comfort the doctor, is embarrassed by the doctor, is angry that the doctor isn't consoling me, giving me some hope.

Now, I'm not saying here that we have to repress our grief — not at all. If we feel grief and sorrow, we have to let it out. It's most necessary to do so. But we also have to recognise that it is not a wholesome state of mind. If we think we have to grieve, then we may very well be reinforcing the grief and find ourselves grieving all our lives over a mistake or a loss of someone dear. It can become an illness.

The fact is that the amount of grief we feel is proportionate to our attachment to that thing or person. If my mother is suffering, I feel terrible. If it's your mother, I feel sad for you. If it's Mrs. Bloggs, I don't feel anything — I don't know Mrs. Bloggs. If a doctor weeps over the suffering of her husband, we think that's right and proper. But if she does it over a patient, we think that's unprofessional.

Furthermore, if I myself am grieving, if I'm upset, that hinders my ability to be compassionate. I was once in an accident. I ran over a dog. When I went into the pub opposite to ask whose it was, the landlady rushed out, shrieked, picked up the dog, and stood there wailing and shouting. The dog was in its death throes, with blood pouring out of its mouth. She was absolutely grief-stricken — so stricken she could do

nothing at all for the dog, and probably added to the dog's suffering by handling it.

It's difficult for us to grasp this point about grief. We need to ponder over it. Once we realise that grief doesn't help, once we realise that a lot of our grief can be caused by the fact that we think we ought to grieve and feel guilty if we don't, we can let go of a lot of our grief, not give it importance, just let it die out.

There's a famous story from the scriptures illustrating this point. *Kisagotami* brought her dead child to the Buddha. She was absolutely distraught with grief. She had heard of his powers and wanted him to perform some ceremony or other to bring the child back to life. The Buddha realised that talking would not help. He asked her instead to leave the child with him and go in search of a mustard seed. Now mustard seeds are a thousand a penny in India. *Kisagotami* ran off full of joy thinking that the Buddha would now bring her child back to life. But the Buddha had put a condition on it. He had said the seed must come from a house where there had been no death.

Every house she visited, they were only too glad to give her handfuls of mustard seeds. But to the last they all had a death to report: a grandfather, a grandmother, a parent, a child. Slowly, slowly, it dawned on *Kisagotami* that death was inevitable and inescapable. As her insight came, the madness of her grief passed. She returned, praising the Buddha, and later joined the Order. Eventually, she achieved full enlightenment.

Anyone who has done bereavement counselling knows that the hardest thing for the grieved to accept is that the beloved one has died. It's so difficult to say, "John's dead," "Mary's dead." The Great Compassionate One, the Buddha, the helper of humankind, is asking us to see things as they really are. It's painful to let go of our cherished notions, but when we do, we experience liberation.

Like *Kisagotami*, we need to liberate ourselves from wrong views, wrong understandings. I'm sure she went on to help many another in grief.

I hope that all this has gone a long way to scotch the idea that Buddhism is a cold religion, that Buddha was teaching some cold indifference, that non-attachment means not to care. In the *Metta Sutta*, the Discourse on Loving Kindness, the Buddha urges people to live always in the mind of universal love. He asks us to cultivate a love like a mother who is not possessive. Children are in the care of parents. They don't belong to them. People are in our care. They don't belong to us.

If we can cultivate this attitude, then we will be like the mother who is equanimous with the leaving of the eldest. She has gone on and is doing well. There's no sorrow in the parting. The job's done. The child, now adult, must go her own way. The second child has just passed his exams and she feels sympathetic joy at his success. She encourages him to succeed the more. The third is at school and young. She takes care to support the child, guiding her as a true friend. The youngest is in bed with a bad sore throat and cold. To that child she feels nothing but compassion, devoting herself to alleviating his suffering. This mother lives in the divine abodes. Her heart is forever in loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, or equanimity.

The Buddha tells us to develop these states of mind. It is the measure of our personal growth in the meditative life, the more we live in these states. He asks us to practise sending out our loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and peace in all directions: east, south, west, north, below and above, to cover the whole universe with these thoughts. These were his instructions:

"Here a disciple dwells, pervading in one direction with heart filled with love, likewise in the second, the third, the fourth direction, so above, below, and around. He dwells pervading the entire world everywhere, and equally with heart filled with love, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from hatred, and free from distress." And this is done again with compassion, and then with sympathetic joy, and lastly with equanimity.

This is how we should end any *vipassana* insight meditation we do. What mental energy we have purified is thereby transformed, re-educated, re-conditioned into one of those sublime states. Our training continues. These states deepen and broaden until, like all the Buddhas and *Arahats*, we shall live continually in these four divine abodes.

Worth striving for, don't you think? So I hope this talk has been interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the *nirvanic* peace within.

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