

25 Reflections for an Harmonious Society

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 26:39

I trust you had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, but I hope it has been happy.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

I'm afraid I did a silly thing. Every evening or in the morning I cut the little bit out that's a talk, or as it was last night questions and answers, and I save it. Without going into details, I went and wiped out the whole thing, so there's a lesson there somewhere. However, I will tag the actual statements onto whatever we say tonight, whatever questions we come across tonight, so they won't be lost.

So let's see if we can carry on here. Unfortunately, I don't know which statement I ended up on, but I think I ended off with a society driven by economics of sharing and healing. I think that was the one.

Before I start, let me remind you that when we hear somebody's statement, we either fully agree with it, reinforcing our conceit, or we disagree with it, which is reinforcing our conceit. Remember, views and opinions come with, first of all, the view itself, which is never—it might be right, but it's never total. It's never the full perspective, you might say. And secondly, there's an identity with it. This is what I believe. This is my understanding. And with that, there comes a cleaving to it, a clinging to it, and that's your attachment. And that's why people find it so difficult to change their opinions, because they are changing this sense of I. So we have to be open to other people's opinions, and it may affect us, it may not. But just because we hear somebody's opinion doesn't mean that we have to be converted.

So with that in mind, I'll read first, catch your reaction, and then I'll read it again. I think the world would be improved if humans did not believe they were superior to the rest of nature, but realized they were just part of it, that no one is more or less important than another.

I think the world would be improved if humans did not believe they were superior to the rest of nature, but realized they were just part of it, that no one being is more or less important than another.

This is a tricky one, actually. From beings' point of view, I think it would be difficult to disagree with that. In other words, the way a cow or a pig that people eat feel about their lives, how they treasure their lives, how they want to live, no matter how nebulous that is, is much the same as ours. They don't particularly want to be slaughtered.

But in terms of more or less important, I suppose that's true in the general, but I think Buddhism or the

Buddha would eventually put human life above that of animal life. So if it came to a choice between me and a cow, it would be me. I would have—it would be difficult to say this—I would have the right to preserve my life. And the cow wouldn't have the same right on the grounds of it being a higher life form.

Now, I'm on dodgy ground here, I know, and a lot of people would disagree. But there is something very precious about the human existence. And in terms of full liberation, this is the place you want to be.

Now, I'll give you a little story. I was in Thailand, and I was with a group of monks. And a group of them were introduced to me as Korean monks. And after a little bit of conversation, I said, are you from Japan? And they said, no, Korea, Korea. Anyway, I was traveling to the south of Thailand to go to Suan Mokkh, which is a famous monastery down there of the teacher Buddhādāsa, who was very famous in his time. One of these monks was on the train, and while we're on a train a mosquito landed on his hand and he swatted it.

So I said to him, mosquitoes? And they said, better life, dengue fever, and all the other illnesses that mosquitoes can carry. So I suppose it's a call really for the dignity of all life, which people would be able to relate to.

Yes, I think we had a similar one come up before, not to harm living beings. And we talked about what it would be like if all people stopped. And the need to protect animals, especially these days with all this climate crisis going on.

There is an extreme nature with which we keep animals that really is not supported. In Powys, this is a county which runs alongside the border with Wales—it's a big agricultural county, there's not many people live here—they have, because farmers are now asking to diversify partly because of Brexit, Powys has 116 intensive poultry units. Each one of these has 40,000 birds approximately, and you can check it—I did it on a calculator—four and a half million chickens per year are slaughtered in those houses. And in 2018, I picked up this bit of information: in the UK, just short of one billion farm animals are slaughtered. One billion. That's a thousand million. It's an enormous figure, of which 40,000 die on the way to the slaughterhouse, in which case they're just dumped. The bodies just dumped.

So there's a huge callousness about it, of which people don't know, not interested anyway, and they want their chicken and that's the end of it. But again, how we treat animals is often a mirror to how we treat ourselves and how we treat other human beings. And this huge poverty that we have in the West, and of course it gets even worse when you move out of the West.

So it's this whole business of really reestablishing a proper relationship with animals. In the West, they didn't do very well because Aristotle started off by saying they have no rights. An animal has no rights because it has no responsibilities. But he also said that of women. So it is a view. And then in the Christian era, St. Thomas said they didn't have any souls, which means that they just died, and that was it. They didn't go on like human beings. And then when Descartes came along, he said they were just machines.

They acted as if they felt something, but they didn't. They were just machines.

And that reminds me of a little quip in Sri Lanka. When I got to the monastery, one of the monks said to me, we're vegetarians. And I said, that's wonderful. Anyway, that very same day or the next day, they serve fish. And when I mentioned this to the other Western monk who was there, he said, well, in Sri Lanka, they think fish are self-propelling animated vegetables. So that's a beautiful thing. And I think that's what most people think animals are—self-propelling animated vegetables.

So there's something that I think we need—we need a sea change when it comes to the use of animals. And now, of course, they're producing meat from cells. That was an interesting thing, isn't it? That they can take a cell, a muscle cell from an animal and they just put it in chemical vats and it grows. So eventually, hopefully, there will be other ways of eating meat which don't actually include a living being. Who knows?

I believe one needed value for the world to function correctly is a sense of harmony. We wish every evening all sentient beings to be in harmony with the world. If every thinking being centered their decisions while integrating just this notion—how is this action impacting the world around me?—I believe huge change could happen. The current societal movements around climate crisis and the growing number of vegetarians are a movement in this direction, I believe.

When the Buddha talks about actions, he always says to reflect wisely that this is something wholesome for me, that it's wholesome for the other, and that sometimes it's wholesome and skillful for both me and the other. So yes, it's a case of being sensitive, isn't it, to the other.

There was another case in the scriptures where the Buddha comes across three monks—the three of them are Arahats—and they're referred to as Anuruddha because he was the chief monk amongst them. And he asked them, how is it that they live so peacefully together? And Anuruddha said, well, when I get up in the morning, I say to myself, what if I put aside what I want to do and do what the others want to do?

Now, if the three of them said that, you can see there's going to be a lot of harmony because there'll be a bit of give and take. But if you try it with people whom you're living with, you might find that you're saying that and the others aren't. And then it doesn't really work because they take advantage of you. But if the attitude within a group or within two people—partners or married people—if they have that attitude, what if I put aside what I want to do and do what the other wants to do? Then obviously there's that lovely way of living with each other.

And harmony always presumes that you are empathic with the other person or with, as we just talked about, with animals around us.

How about moderation, undertaking the rule of training not to take too much, not to take more than is given, more than is needed? Any ideas I have will be based, I hope, on responsibility and the belief that most folk are responsible and reasonable. I've always believed that if you take too much, you probably owe too much in return.

Yeah, well, that resonates, doesn't it, with the Buddha's teaching about restraint. If you remember, overcoming the taints, the oozings with restraint. It's one of his big teachings, really, just not giving in to desires, just to please oneself.

I think there's also a sense of gratitude, I think. Even with food, when you actually just recollect how the food came to you on the plate and the enormous amount of work that goes into it and the energy needed for it, then I think that sense of gratitude comes and a certain respect, a certain desire not to abuse it, not to take too much. And that's probably true for everything, especially when you think about how the garments that we wear are all made for peanuts in the East. The garment factories of Bangladesh come to mind.

And I think if you take too much, you probably will owe too much later. I think if you know you're taking too much, that you're taking advantage, that you're being greedy with anything, there's always that sense of guilt, which we might hide from ourselves for a very long time, but at some point in the spiritual practice, the heart's got to be purified, and you've got to, as it were, pay back. You've got to find some way of paying back for the greed.

And that's—that would be my understanding of probably owe too much in return. So you have to, if you've taken too much, then at some point you're going to feel bad about it. You're going to feel that you shouldn't have done it. There's going to be a sense of shame. And to get rid of that, you have to pay something back.

That's why, of course, the Buddha says that these qualities of shame and dread of consequences, guilt, are guardians of society. In the Abhidhamma, they put them as wholesome attitudes. But they're only wholesome once they are rested in us as little wake-up calls. Don't do that. You'll feel shame. You'll feel that. But actually, the feelings of shame and guilt we experience when we do something which we see is unskillful or unwholesome, that's obviously not wholesome. We want to get rid of that. Often you have to sit through that sort of stuff in our sitting.

So yeah. Moderation in all things.

Care, which implies empathy and doing something. When my concern or care stems from a feeling of kindness and manifests in actions, I'm both being insightful and a good human being.

Yes, I much prefer the word care to love. Love has so many meanings and so many undertones and overtones. But the sense of care is a lovely word—to care for somebody and to care for things, to care for your mobile. It's an attitude, isn't it? It's a wonderful attitude. Taking care of, to be careful.

It's one of the meanings of one of the Buddha's favorite words, *appamādo*—heedlessness, not to be heedless, to be diligent—but it also has that sense of care, caring. I think this is what the Buddha means when, or part of what the Buddha means when we read during the discourse on loving-kindness, that we should develop this awareness, this mindfulness. It's a mindfulness which is imbued with care, with

kindness. It's an affectionate mindfulness, to go around with an affectionate mindfulness.

Responsibility. I am responsible for my actions. My decisions and actions will affect myself and others. If I cause harm to others, I will be harmed sooner or later. I'm responsible for my own happiness. I should not depend on others. I can make a change, a positive change in myself.

So that's of course the teaching of *kamma*. When we do something—whatever an action of speech or the body and of course the mind itself, because the mind eventually expresses itself through the way we speak and what we do—remember there are two waves of energy that go out: out into the world which has an effect, but also into our own inner psychology, into our own inner world.

And just as we don't know the effect of what we say and do will have outwardly, although we can say generally speaking, if I do something good, good will come of it. If I do something with a bad intention, something not so good will come from it. But that also works inside myself as well.

And it's beginning to realize that if I can just empower myself—those thoughts—it always begins with thoughts. If I can empower those thoughts that express beautiful attitudes, then very slowly my heart will grow. And that runs in tandem with—it runs at the same time as purifying the heart. Remember, behaving in a beautiful way, in a very wholesome way, doesn't actually purify the heart. What it does is it extends those virtues, but then you still got to deal with the gunge, with the taints, the oozings.

Responsibility. It's interesting, responsibility. The word duty went out of fashion, I think, after the First World War, where people didn't even question their sense of—they had to do it because they were told to do it. The word responsibility probably fits easier with the modern person, to be responsible. And it's something that is not so—

Um, should we say, so popular as the word rights. You know, "my right" – everybody's about, everybody wants their rights to be respected. And often that sense of responsibility doesn't come up so high on the list. But it really is the Buddha's – the Buddha's really all about taking responsibility for ourselves. And the understanding is that when you change yourself, you change people around you. You affect people around you. And so it has a flowing outwards of effect upon the world.

You know, you can't take upon ourselves to change somebody else. That's an absolutely no-no, that is. You know, you don't get anywhere with that. But when you change, you find the other person changes. Perhaps you've experienced that, yeah?

I once used to talk about something I read. She was a journalist, and she went to see how dolphins were trained. And what the trainers did was they say they were training the dolphin to jump through a hoop. Whenever it jumped through a hoop and it did it well, it was always full of praise, right? Clapping or something, so the dolphin knew how wonderful it was. When it failed, nothing was said at all – nothing. There was no sense of even acknowledging it in a way.

And she went home and she did this with her husband. Every time her husband did something wonderful or something that she was pleased with, she would praise him. And when he did something that she didn't like, she didn't say anything. And of course he changed, you see.

And then she very foolishly told him the trick. I think probably all hell let loose, because often you don't want to feel you've been manipulated. But that's an interesting thing, that is. Criticism of somebody else who's not taking responsibility often backfires.

Oh dear, time moves on. And I've still got a few to go, which is good, actually, because it just gives me time to think about these things for myself. Very good.

So we shall leave it there for this evening. I hope you found that, I don't know, of value. Peace and joy.

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